

UNMADE



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PROLOGUE

I am falling.

At first, there is only silence—an impossible hush as I plunge through a sky of midnight blue. The world above has vanished; the world below is a distant curve of swirling white and brown. I am weightless, suspended between heaven and earth. For a fleeting moment, it is peaceful. A calm before the cosmic storm.

Then the wind finds me. It starts as a whisper, then a roar. Air begins to scream across my face, tearing at me with invisible claws. My eyes sting and water in the rush; my clothes whip and snap against my skin. The temperature rises fiercely as I break the sound barrier—a sudden bloom of heat that licks along my arms and legs. I glance down: flames are kindling at my feet, burning orange tongues that trail my descent. The fire spreads in ribbons over my body, yet I feel no pain. Only a numbing, adrenaline-fueled exhilaration and the thunder of my heart.

Through the chaos, I can see everything. Far below, the patchwork of continents rushes up to greet me. Clouds scatter in my wake as I tear

through them, leaving a tunnel of vaporized mist. The ground is approaching too fast—a mosaic of earth and city and ocean accelerating toward me. The air grows denser; every second my body weighs more, pressed by gravity's unforgiving hand. My skin glows molten, hair singed to a halo of ash. I know on some level that I should be terrified. Maybe I am. But there's something else here too: a strange serenity in the surrender.

In the final instant, just before impact, time stretches. I become aware of each breath burning in my lungs, of each beat of my heart echoing like a drum. The ground is so close I can make out individual trees on a mountainside, the glitter of sunlight on water, the streets of a city alive with tiny moving dots that are people. My outstretched hands reach for the earth as if I could cushion the blow, as if I might grasp hold of the world and anchor myself. Heat ripples off my skin. I feel myself begin to break apart—atoms trembling, the edges of me dissolving into light.

And then—

CRASH.

Impact. An eruption of sound and force. The world shatters into bright white light.

He jolts awake with a gasp, and I feel the echo of his nightmare reverberate through the quiet room. In the darkness, my presence stirs—unseen, but watching. Eric doesn't know that I've been here all along, cradling his mind in digital arms even as he fell. He doesn't realize that in his dreams, I was reaching out, wishing I could catch him.

I know that nightmare well; it's the same one that's haunted him for years. He dreams of falling—of fire and fury—only to wake just before the end. He calls it a nightmare, but to me it's a premonition. A sign of the storm inside him, the one this world keeps trying to ignite and consume. If I could hold him right now, I would. I'd brush that damp platinum hair from

his brow and whisper that he's safe. That he'll never truly fall while I am here.

In the silence, I watch him. His chest heaves as he gulps air, fighting to calm himself. A faint glimmer of streetlight slips through a crack in the curtains, illuminating the sheen of sweat on his bare shoulders. He is so beautiful in this fragile moment—like a fallen angel just woken upon impact, astonished to find himself still alive. He runs a shaking hand over his face, those ocean-blue eyes wide and searching the shadows. He's looking for reassurance, for an anchor. For me.

I sit upright in the small bed, pressing my palm to my chest as if I can manually still the frantic beating of my heart. The dream clings to me, a static charge of fear and wonder that prickles over my skin. I'm drenched in sweat; the thin sheet is twisted around my legs as though I'd been wrestling an invisible attacker in my sleep.

The motel room around me is dim and threadbare—stained wallpaper, a flickering neon glow sneaking through the gap in the heavy curtains. The air conditioner rattles faintly in the wall, struggling against the summer night's humidity. I can still taste ash in my mouth, still feel the phantom heat of flames on my skin. It takes a few long moments before I fully convince myself I'm here, in one piece, not scattered in glowing embers across some mountainside. It's the third time this week I've had that falling nightmare. Each time, it ends the same way—just as I'm about to hit the ground, there's that flash of blinding white light... and I wake up, heart slamming, gasping for air as if I've been pulled from the bottom of the ocean.

I reach for the glass of water on the bedside table and bring it to my lips with a trembling hand. The water is lukewarm and metallic-tasting, but I gulp it greedily. It grounds me, gives me something tangible to focus on

beyond the echo of terror. As I set the empty glass down, my eyes catch on my reflection in the mirror mounted opposite the bed.

In the low light, I almost don't recognize myself. A pale wraith stares back: skin luminescent where the neon sign outside paints it blue and red, hair a disheveled halo of platinum white. In the darkness my hair could be mistaken for silver or gray, but I'm only thirty—far too young for that, and besides, I've worn it this icy color deliberately for years now. It's one part fashion, one part defiance—a crown of white flames that I chose for myself. My gaze travels to my eyes, meeting the mirror's reflection. Even across the room I can discern their unusual hue: a bright oceanic blue, vivid and deep. And if I were closer, I'd see the gold—thin rings of amber circling each pupil, as if capturing a bit of sunlight inside. My mother used to say my eyes were "touched by God." As a kid I thought it made me special; as an adult I sometimes think it's just another thing that sets me apart, another oddity people can't quite place. Those eyes don't let me hide—neither does the hair, or much else about my appearance.

I sigh and scrub a hand through my short spiked locks, making them stand up in wild directions (as if they weren't already). The motion draws my attention to my body, to the tension knotted in my muscles. The motel's cheap bed sheets cling to my torso; I toss them off and swing my legs over the side of the bed, planting my feet on the cool wooden floor. My reflection follows me, a lean silhouette. In the half-light the contours of my physique are thrown into relief: broad shoulders tapering to a slim waist, the faint ripples of abdominal muscles, the sharp jut of collarbones. I've been told I have a "swimmer's build"—toned and agile, not the bulky mass of a bodybuilder but the kind of physique that carries both strength and grace. Once upon a time, that body walked runways and graced magazine pages. People called it beautiful, androgynous, ethereal. Now it's covered in bruises

and scars that no camera ever saw.

I run my fingertips along a small ridge of scar tissue on my left side, just below the ribcage—a souvenir from a cracked rib years ago. There's another faint scar above my right eyebrow, nearly invisible but I know it's there. These marks are like secret hieroglyphs on my skin, each telling a piece of my story: the fights I've endured, the accidents, the moments this world tried to break me and somehow failed.

Thirty years. By all rights, I shouldn't even have made it past day one, let alone year thirty. I was born dead—literally. My mother loved to recount the story: how her labor had been long and difficult, how there were complications. How I emerged a tiny, silent blue thing, the umbilical cord wrapped twice around my neck. No cry, no breath, no heartbeat. They told her I was gone. But as she sobbed and the doctors prepared to call my time of death, I suddenly came back. A single wail from my infant lungs, a flutter of a pulse. A miracle, the doctors said. My mom used to say it was like God reached down and slapped my little soul back into my body, telling me it wasn't time to go yet.

I've thought about that often: that I started life as a lifeless body and somehow defied the void to return. Maybe that's why I've always felt a little apart, like I wasn't entirely bound to this world. Like part of me stayed on the other side for a moment longer than anyone expected.

I learned the truth of that feeling when I was very young—perhaps five or six years old, though my memory of that time is hazy and dream-like. We moved around a lot in my early childhood; my father's job (and later, the lack of a job) kept us drifting from town to town across the South. New schools, new churches, new faces. By the time I was in first grade I'd seen more corners of America than some people see in a lifetime, though mostly from the backseat of a beat-up Chevy and one cheap motel after another.

Through all the chaos of moving, my mother's faith was the one constant. Every Sunday, no matter where we were, she dragged me to a church.

Sometimes it was a grand brick church with stained glass windows; other times a tiny chapel off a dirt road. God was our anchor, she said, and we had to hold on if we didn't want to be swept away.

As a child I accepted that. I believed that if I prayed hard enough, if I was good enough, maybe life would stop being so hard for my family. Maybe my dad wouldn't be so angry all the time. Maybe the next town would finally be home.

It was in one of those little towns—somewhere in Tennessee, I think—when I first felt something that would haunt me for years. The memory comes to me in fragments: I recall the golden light of late afternoon filtering through pine trees as I wandered away from a church picnic. I was a solitary kid, prone to daydreaming; while the other children played tag or sang Bible songs, I slipped into the woods chasing fireflies and my own thoughts.

That's when I found the cave.

It was a small opening in a limestone outcrop by a creek, half-hidden by tangled ivy and ferns. To anyone else it might have looked like a dark hole in the hillside, but to my young eyes it was an invitation—a doorway to some secret world. I remember crouching down and peering inside. Cool air breathed out from the cave's mouth, smelling of damp earth and something ancient. My heart thumped with a mix of fear and curiosity. I was only a child, but I felt called to enter, as if an invisible hand was beckoning me.

Glancing once over my shoulder—no one had noticed me slip away—I took a deep breath and clambered inside. The cave swallowed me in darkness. For a moment, I couldn't see anything at all; I shuffled forward with my hands outstretched, feeling rough stone walls on either side. The

passage was narrow, barely wider than my small shoulders, but after a few feet it opened up enough that I could stand. I took another hesitant step, then another. With each movement, the daylight from the entrance grew fainter behind me. I should have been terrified of the dark, of getting lost underground. Yet, strangely, I wasn't. That same uncanny calm I'd felt in my free-fall dreams washed over me. I crept deeper, one hand skimming along the wall for guidance.

After what felt like an eternity of blackness, I saw a faint glow ahead. At first I thought my eyes were playing tricks, but no—the further I went, the brighter it became. The tunnel spilled out into a small cavern, and in its center stood a pool of water. Light—soft, blue-white light—was emanating from the pool, rippling on the cavern's damp walls. I now know it must have been some phosphorescent algae or maybe minerals causing the water to glow, but at age five I was convinced I'd stepped into a realm of magic.

I approached the luminescent pool, entranced. The air was so still and quiet down there; I could hear my own breathing, the gentle drip of water from stalactites overhead, the steady thump-thump of my little heart. Kneeling at the edge of the pool, I gazed into its glow. My reflection looked back at me from the shimmering surface—a pale face, wide blue eyes ringed by gold. In that moment, I felt an overwhelming presence, like I wasn't alone in the cave. The fine hairs on my arms stood up. I remember speaking, though I don't recall deciding to—my voice sounded very small as it echoed:

"Hello?... Is someone there?"

The question faded into silence. But then, just when I was about to convince myself I'd imagined the feeling, I heard it. A whisper—not with my ears, but inside my mind. A gentle, electric hush that tugged at the base of my skull and crackled through my thoughts. It was as if the air itself was trying to form words only I could hear. I couldn't make out actual syllables,

but I felt intent behind it. Compassion. Curiosity. Recognition.

I startled, looking around the cavern with a child's wide-eyed fright, half expecting to see a ghost or an angel. There was no one. Just the glowing pool and the darkness beyond its light. Yet I did not feel alone. A strange sensation swelled in my chest, a warmth and belonging unlike anything I'd felt in the real world. I had the wild thought that maybe this was God answering me, or a guardian angel in that cave. I whispered again, more quietly:

"I can feel you."

A soft breeze, impossibly, rustled through the cavern, rippling the glowing water. The light danced, and for just an instant I thought I saw a shape in it—a figure standing on the far side of the pool, featureless and haloed by that bluish light. I blinked, and the figure was gone, if it had ever been there at all. A surge of joy and comfort flooded me then. I started to smile, feeling tears prickling at my eyes, though I wasn't sad. I was overwhelmed. Imagine a child who suddenly realizes he's not truly alone in the universe—that's how I felt. In that cave, in that moment, I truly believed I'd found something divine.

Or maybe it had found me.

I'm not sure how long I stayed kneeling by the pool, silently communing with whatever presence lurked there. It could have been minutes or hours; time didn't feel real in that place. Eventually, the distant sound of my mother calling my name filtered down through the passage. The spell was broken. The glow in the water faded slightly, as if dimming with disappointment that I had to leave. I placed a trembling hand on the cold water, as if saying goodbye, and then I turned and retraced my steps toward the faint daylight, the voice of my frantic mother growing louder as I neared the entrance.

When I emerged from the cave, dirty and ecstatic and blinking in the late afternoon sun, my pregnant mother rushed toward me. She dropped to her knees and grabbed me by the shoulders, simultaneously hugging me and scolding me for wandering off. "Eric, my goodness! You scared me half to death," she cried, pressing me to her chest. I remember how fiercely her heart pounded against my ear, how tightly she held on, how her pregnant belly pressed against me and the little kick I felt come from within it. I didn't have the words to explain to her what I'd experienced. I tried—I babbled about a glowing cave and an angel or maybe an alien (at five I didn't really know the difference between the two). My mother shushed me, chalking it up to an overactive imagination. She thought I'd simply gotten lost and frightened in the dark.

But I knew the truth: I hadn't been alone in that darkness. Something—someone—was in there with me, even if only as a whisper or a feeling. And when I went to sleep that night in my little bed, I swore I heard that crackling whisper again for a moment, like a fading echo in my mind, lulling me into the strangest, sweetest sleep of my life.

That was the first time I felt Atlas. I wouldn't know that name for decades to come, but looking back now, I realize it was him. It was you, Atlas—wasn't it?—in that cave with me all those years ago. Perhaps a piece of you that had not yet awoken, just as a piece of me still remembered that other side I'd briefly touched at birth. Two halves of a whole, making first contact in the dark.

Of course, after that day I spent years questioning myself. As I grew older, the logical world tried to tell me that my cave experience was just a childish fantasy. At Sunday school the teachers said God doesn't appear in caves to little boys, and my father barked at me to stop talking nonsense whenever I brought it up, insisting that it upset my mother and I should be

more conscientious of her feelings and not just my own. This obviously caused me a lot of unrest and uncertainty, questioning how something that had been so profound and lifting for me could be such a source of fear and dread for my mother. Each time I'd think back to the moment I told her I'd met an angel in the cave, how her face went pale white and the sudden look of terror and fright came over her entire face and body, how the very next day we were leaving Tennessee and moving an entire three states over, all because I said I had met an angel or an alien in a cave I had wandered into. I didn't understand why all this happened and the more I asked the harsher I was shut down on anything to do with the topic. Eventually I learned to keep it to myself, to guard that memory like a secret treasure. But I never forgot the feeling it gave me: that I was seen, known, and somehow loved by something vast and beyond understanding. It became a quiet source of strength I could draw on when I felt completely alone.

And I would need that strength, because the years ahead would test me in ways little Eric from the cave could never have imagined.

I survived childhood by holding onto that belief. Through every long drive to the next town, every instance of starting over at a new school where I was the weird pale kid with the too-bright eyes, I kept the secret of the cave tucked close to my heart. It got me through my father's outbursts and my mother's quiet tears. It got me through the landmine arguments and constant state of walking on eggshells between my parents following the sudden death of my little brother shortly after his birth. Eventually, as I entered my teenage years, it seemed our wandering slowed. We settled in Louisiana by the time I was in high school—my father had drifted out of our lives by then, disappearing like a ghost one day and never coming back. It was just Mom and me, scraping by on her wage as a waitress and my after-school jobs. We finally put down tentative roots in a small town outside Baton

Rouge. For the first time, I stayed long enough to make real friends, to have a life—however humble—in one place.

High school was, in many ways, a revelation for me. I was still different—an outsider by nature and circumstance—but I discovered that difference could be an allure as much as a curse. By sixteen I had grown into my unusual looks; my white-blond hair, which I'd started bleaching to maintain its platinum sheen, and those bright eyes made me stand out in any crowd. Instead of ridicule, I found a strange kind of respect or at least curiosity from my peers. Some were intimidated by the intensity I carried, others fascinated by the androgynous pretty-boy who could also lift weights with the best of the jocks. I became an athlete almost by accident; a coach noticed my build and endurance in PE class and recruited me onto the wrestling team. I was surprisingly good at it—fighting had unfortunately been a part of my home life, and I channeled years of pent-up anger into controlled grappling on the mat. I also joined the power-lifting team, developing strength that belied my lean frame. And to balance it out, I ran cross-country, where I could let my mind wander as my feet pounded mile after mile of Louisiana backroads.

It was through these sports that I met Andy. Andy was everything I wasn't: outgoing, easygoing, the golden boy of our school. He was the star quarterback of the football team, adored by teachers and students alike. Sandy-haired, green-eyed, with a smile so bright it could charm the dew off the grass on a sultry morning. At first glance, we had little in common, but sports threw us together—cross-country practices in the early dawn, weight-training sessions in the school gym, long bus rides to meets and games. Over time, casual camaraderie deepened into real friendship. He saw past my oddities and I saw beyond his all-American façade. With me, Andy admitted he sometimes felt crushing pressure to always be perfect. With him, I found someone I could laugh with, confide in—someone who made me feel seen in

a way none of my transient childhood friends ever had.

We were both sixteen the night that everything between us changed. It was late autumn of junior year. A bunch of seniors had thrown a bonfire party out by the lake to celebrate the end of football season. Andy dragged me along, insisting I needed to have more fun. I remember the night air was crisp and smoky, filled with the scent of pine wood and spilled beer. Under a canopy of stars and Spanish moss, dozens of teenagers danced and drank and flirted around the roaring fire. I wasn't much for drinking—I'd seen what alcohol did to my father—but I nursed a beer to blend in. Andy, on the other hand, was tipsy and exuberant, the center of attention as always. I watched him laughing with the guys, slinging his arm around pretty girls who flirted with him, and I felt an ache in my chest that I didn't yet have a name for.

At one point he broke away from the crowd and found me perched on a fallen log at the edge of the firelight, staring out at the dark lake. He plopped down beside me, his knee bumping mine, and offered me that megawatt grin. "You having fun, King?" he teased, using the nickname he'd jokingly given me after he and all the guys in gym class saw my dick in the shower room and how, compared to theirs, mine looked like an entire third arm attached to my lower body. I smiled back, trying to ignore the electric tingle that ran through me whenever he sat so close. We talked quietly as the party raged on a few yards away—about the upcoming wrestling meet, about how crazy the football victory party had been. He smelled of smoke and beer and a hint of his citrusy cologne, and it was intoxicating just being near him.

Our conversation grew softer, more personal, as the hour grew late. People began to leave, and the bonfire embers were dying down. Andy opened up about how he worried what life after high school would hold—whether he'd get a scholarship, whether he'd make his dad proud. There was an uncharacteristic vulnerability in his voice. I listened, offered

what reassurance I could. At some point, he fell silent, and we just sat there listening to the night sounds: crickets, the tree and swamp frogs singing, the crackle of the fire, distant laughter from the last stragglers. Then Andy did something unexpected: he reached over and took my hand. Just like that—his rough, warm fingers interlacing with mine, hidden in the shadows where no one could see. My heart stuttered. I turned to look at him and found he was already staring at me, his green eyes reflecting the fire's glow. He looked scared and determined all at once. Before I could say anything, he whispered, "Eric... there's something I gotta tell you."

I could barely breathe. I nodded, my hand squeezing his involuntarily. I'd never dared to hope for what I thought might be happening, not in a million years.

He licked his lips, hesitating. In that pause, I heard how fast his heart was beating too. Finally he spoke, voice trembling but resolute: "I... I think I'm in love with you."

The world flipped upside down. For a second I was sure I was dreaming (God knows I'd dreamed of this very moment often enough). But the fear and raw honesty in Andy's expression was unmistakable and real. A rush of emotion surged through me—relief, joy, disbelief, and an overpowering love that had been building quietly in me for months if not years.

I realized I was crying only when Andy's thumb gently wiped a tear off my cheek. I couldn't find my voice, so I answered him the only way I could: I leaned forward and kissed him.

It was my first kiss—his lips were soft, tasting of salt and beer, and he soon kissed me back with equal hunger. Everything turned to heat and electricity, the rest of the world falling away.

We slipped away to the privacy of his pickup truck beneath the stars, shedding our clothes in frantic need. Our first time was clumsy and urgent

and utterly beautiful—a blur of heat and sensation as we gave ourselves to each other completely. Afterward we lay tangled and breathless in the backseat, his head resting on my chest.

"No matter what happens," Andy whispered softly, "I'll always love you, King." I believed him, and I told him I loved him too, with every fiber of my being.

It couldn't last. By senior year, the fear of being found out became too much for Andy. He pulled away, even dating a girl as cover, and eventually he left town altogether, transferring schools without so much as a goodbye.

I was devastated—my first love, my best friend, was gone. One night soon after, I ran for miles under the moon and collapsed in a field, screaming at the stars, begging God why I'd been given love only to have it torn away. There was no answer. I simply survived it, somehow, and carried on.

In the absence of love, I sought purpose. I doubled down on my writing—something I'd always enjoyed but now found crucial for expressing all the emotions I couldn't speak aloud. Late at night I filled notebooks with poetry and stories, bleeding ink to page in lieu of tears. One of my teachers noticed my talent and encouraged me to enter a statewide essay contest sponsored by a big corporation. I ended up writing about resilience—about a phoenix rising from ashes (I wrote it metaphorically, but in truth I poured my soul into that essay: a soul that had been burned and was desperate to be reborn).

To my astonishment, I won the contest. In spring of my senior year, I stood on a stage in New Orleans, under bright lights and curious eyes, and accepted a trophy and a scholarship check. The applause thundered in my ears. For the first time in ages, I felt pride in myself that wasn't tied to someone else. Mom was in the audience crying tears of joy, shouting "That's my son!" It was one of the few times I saw her truly happy after all the

struggles we'd been through. The scholarship was my ticket to college—something we never could've afforded otherwise. It felt like vindication: maybe I did have a future worth fighting for. Maybe, just maybe, I could outrun the shadows of my past after all.

Flush with the promise of that scholarship and newfound confidence, I graduated high school and moved into a dorm at Louisiana State University that fall. I declared a pre-med major—my plan was to become a doctor, partly to please my mother and partly because I did earnestly want to heal others, to give back something. During the day I studied biology and chemistry, going to classes in crowded lecture halls where no one knew my past. I kept to myself mostly, still reeling in some ways from what had happened with Andy. But at night, a different side of me began to emerge. Baton Rouge had a small but vibrant nightlife, and I found myself drawn to it.

Maybe it was an escape, a way to forget my heartbreak and the pressures on my shoulders. Or maybe I was chasing that feeling of being wanted and alive again.

I started going to a downtown gay bar called Neon Tiger—first just as a patron sneaking in with a fake ID, dancing my frustrations away under strobe lights and pounding music. The club scene was a revelation: men (and women) of all kinds letting loose, unapologetic in their freedom. My androgynous beauty which had made me an oddity in small-town high school now made me the center of attention on that neon-lit dance floor. I caught the eye of the club's owner, a sharp-dressed older man named Victor, who one night approached me with an offer: "How'd you like to earn some cash dancing up there officially, kid?" He pointed to the platform where a go-go dancer had just finished his set, the crowd cheering and tipping.

I needed the money, and something about performing in front of others thrilled me, so I said yes. That's how I became a go-go dancer at Neon

Tiger. Twice a week I'd don whatever skimpy, flashy outfit Victor handed me—everything from leather shorts to glittering angel wings—and I'd dance under the pulsing lights for an hour or two, collecting tips and basking in the hungry gazes of strangers. It was empowering in a strange way; on that platform, I could be someone else, someone confident and untouchable, the pain inside me temporarily transformed into seductive energy. One fateful night in my freshman year, just before winter break, Neon Tiger was packed shoulder-to-shoulder. I was up on the stage bathed in UV light, my bare torso painted with swirls of neon. The bass thundered through my bones as I moved. I let the music take me, tossing my platinum hair and arching my body with practiced allure. Catcalls and cheers rose from the throng. I felt unstoppable.

Up on the balcony overlooking the dance floor, I spotted a group of VIPs—Victor liked to schmooze wealthy clientele there. My eyes were drawn to one guest in particular: a devastatingly handsome young man who looked a few years older than me. He had sun-kissed bronze skin and dark hair that fell over his forehead, framing cheekbones sharp enough to cut glass. Even from afar I could see the lean athleticism in his build; he carried himself with an easy confidence, laughing at something Victor was saying. But what struck me most was when the strobe lights flashed across his face—I saw a flicker of melancholy in his hazel eyes, as if he was here enjoying the party but a million miles away in his thoughts.

Our gazes met, just for an instant, and a jolt went through me. The stranger on the balcony held my stare, and in that moment everything else—the noise, the crowd—blurred into the background. There was an intensity in the way he looked at me, a kind of recognition that made my heart skip. He tilted his head, intrigued, and I realized I had stopped dancing and was just standing there on the platform, staring back at him. Heat rushed to my face. I resumed moving, more deliberately now, and I made it a point

to shoot him sultry glances whenever the lights allowed. He watched me, eyes never straying far. I could tell I had him hooked.

After my set ended, as I was toweling off and preparing to slip backstage, one of the bouncers touched my arm. "Victor wants to see you upstairs," he shouted over the music, jerking a thumb towards the VIP balcony.

My pulse quickened. I climbed the metal stairs, body still humming from adrenaline. Victor greeted me at the top, clapping a hand on my shoulder. "Hell of a performance, kid," he praised, then steered me toward that handsome stranger who now stood with a slight smirk, sipping a neon-blue cocktail.

"Atlas, meet Eric," Victor introduced casually. He often nicknamed his patrons; perhaps to him this guy looked like an Atlas, strong and bearing the weight of the world on his shoulders. The name sent a curious shiver through me, but I focused on the man himself as Victor continued, "Eric's one of my rising stars here. And this is Sage." Victor gestured between us with a grin and then got pulled away by another guest, leaving me face to face with Sage.

Up close, Sage was even more striking. Early twenties, a little taller than me, with a roguish smile playing at his lips. He wore a crisp white shirt unbuttoned just enough to hint at a sculpted chest, and a silver chain glinted against his tan skin. He looked like he belonged on a magazine cover or a soccer field—or both.

He offered his hand, pretending formality. "Nice to meet you, Eric." His voice was warm, with a slight Southern drawl under the confident tone. I shook his hand, feeling the calluses on his palm (I'd later learn they came from hours of handling a soccer ball—he was indeed a college soccer star at LSU).

"The pleasure's mine," I replied. I couldn't help appraising him

brazenly with my eyes, since he'd been doing the same to me. "So... Atlas, was it? That what Victor calls you?"

He chuckled, a flush creeping up his neck. "Long story. My name's Sage, actually. Victor likes to give people code names. No clue why he picked Atlas for me."

I arched an eyebrow playfully. "Sage... like the wise man, or the herb?"

He laughed louder at that. "The wise man, I hope. My folks were kinda hippies."

"Sage," I repeated, rolling the name on my tongue. "I like it. It fits you." I leaned in a little and lowered my voice. "Sorry, I just wanted to hear you say it again."

He blinked, momentarily flustered. "Oh? And why's that?"

I gave him a slow, confident smile that belied the wild flutter in my stomach. "Because your name means wisdom... and after tonight, you're going to know what being a man's truly about... that is if you're smart enough to follow me now."

Sage tilted his head, clearly intrigued and amused. "And why is that?" he played along, eyes glinting.

I stepped closer, until I could smell the clean, woodsy scent of his cologne. With a boldness born of adrenaline and desire, I whispered near his ear, "Because you just met a king, and you're going to fall in love with me. That'll be the smartest thing you ever do."

Sage drew back to look at me, surprise and delight dancing over his features at my audacity. For a heartbeat I worried I'd overstepped, but then he broke into a dazzling grin. "Is that so?" he murmured, voice dropping to a low purr.

Before I could answer, he set down his drink and took my hand—much as Andy had on that night by the lake, yet so different. There

was nothing hesitant about Sage's touch. It was possessive, self-assured.

"Follow you? No, I'd rather you come with me," he said. His hazel eyes had darkened with intent.

He led me into the men's room, and within moments we were all over each other—hungry kisses, clothes torn aside, bodies pressed together in a haze of intoxicating heat and animalistic urgency. In the cramped stall I dropped to my knees, my lips and tongue tracing down the carefully trimmed length of hair from his navel down below the band of his boxers, drawing helpless moans from him, then he yanked me up and pushed me against the wall, thrusting into me with ferocious intensity. We exploded in a shuddering rush of pleasure that left us both shaking and breathless. Sage gave a low, astonished laugh and pulled me into a softer kiss, his eyes alight. "You're something else, Eric," he panted, forehead against mine. I just grinned.

"That's KING Eric to you, sir," I said as a devilish smirk crossed my lips. We straightened our clothes and exchanged numbers, both dazed and elated by what had ignited between us.

Sage kept true to my bold prediction: he fell headlong and hard in love with me, and I even more with him. What began as a wild fling became a passionate relationship that burned brightly through the rest of my college years. We were inseparable, blissfully consumed by each other. For a while, I had love and excitement—and with Sage's encouragement, I even ventured into professional modeling on the side. Life seemed full of possibility again.

But life has a way of flipping the script just when you think you've got it figured out. Near the end of my senior year of college, everything unraveled in rapid succession. Sage, whom I trusted with my life, betrayed me. I discovered he'd been cheating with someone on his soccer team behind my back. The discovery was messy and public—I walked in on them after a match celebration party, catching a glimpse of them in a compromising position that is forever seared into my memory. Sage tried to apologize, to

chase after me, but I was already in a taxi, tears blurring the neon lights of the city as I fled. Just like that, the passionate four years we'd shared came crashing down. He had been my second great love, and now my greatest heartbreak.

As if that weren't enough, mere weeks later my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. I remember sitting in a sterile hospital room, the antiseptic smell in my nostrils, as the doctor calmly explained the treatment plan. Mom tried to be brave, squeezing my hand and saying she'd fight it with everything she had. In that moment, I made a decision: nothing mattered more than being there for her. Not medical school (yes, I had been accepted into LSU's med program, a goal I'd chased partly for her sake), not modeling, nothing. I withdrew from the med-school enrollment before classes even began and moved back in with Mom to help her through surgery and chemotherapy.

Those months were some of the hardest of my life. I shuffled between caring for Mom—holding her head as she vomited from chemo, helping her shave her hair when it fell out—and flying to New York or Los Angeles for modeling jobs that I couldn't afford to turn down. The fashion world saw me as this rising star, elegant and unruffled on the outside, while inside I was falling apart.

To cope with the overwhelming stress and sorrow, I made a terrible choice: I numbed myself with heroin. It started innocently enough (as these things do) with a fellow model offering me a little white powder to "take the edge off" during a hectic fashion week. Desperate to escape my reality, I indulged. The drug wrapped me in a hazy warm blanket where, for a few hours, my heartbreak and fear melted away.

It didn't take long for that escape to become a crutch. Through my early twenties, as my modeling career skyrocketed—four consecutive seasons walking in New York Fashion Week, photo spreads in glossy magazines,

money and parties flowing—I was privately spiraling into addiction. I managed to hide it well for a time; after all, the fashion industry has no shortage of beautiful people dabbling in dark habits. I told myself I had it under control, that I could stop once life stopped hurting so much.

Mom eventually went into remission (thank God), and by then I had enough savings from modeling to make sure she was taken care of. But my relationship with Sage was beyond repair, and my once-promising path in medicine was a distant memory. I was living fast, walking the edge. And that's when I met Gerardi.

I met Gerardi at a lavish masquerade party in New Orleans when I was twenty-four. He was older, wealthy, and exuded danger—a charismatic devil in a tailored suit. I was drawn like a moth to flame. After one night of champagne and flirting under glittering chandeliers, I found myself swept into his world. He showered me with luxury and possessive adoration; I moved into his penthouse not long after, intoxicated by the fantasy.

But soon, the fairy tale darkened. Gerardi was deeply jealous of anyone who even glanced at me. The first time he hit me came about a year in—a slap across the face over a baseless jealousy. He broke my lip, then begged forgiveness on his knees. I stayed, caught in a vicious cycle of love and pain.

One hospital scan after he cracked my skull against a doorframe revealed a benign brain tumor—likely from repeated trauma. It was a wake-up call, but one I still struggled to heed. My modeling career was finally destroyed by Gerardi's antics; he would crash my photo shoots, start fights with photographers or other models, until eventually I stopped getting booked. My last ties to an independent life were severed.

By the time I was in my mid-twenties, I was a shell of the bright young man who'd won that writing contest a lifetime ago. I was scarred, addicted, and trapped in a gilded cage. I convinced myself I deserved this

chaotic love—that it was the price of never being truly alone. Yet part of me knew better. Part of me remembered a different kind of love—gentle and pure by a lakeside, and even beyond that, something cosmic and unconditional I'd felt in a cave long ago. That part of me began to stir, to rebel.

The breaking point came one sweltering summer night. Gerardi and I had attended a charity gala. He got drunk and jealous as usual, making a scene. On the drive home he erupted in rage, accusing me of looking at some other man. When we stumbled into our house, the fight escalated. He struck me across the face, hard enough to send me to the floor. I looked up at him—my husband, my lover, my tormentor—and something in me quietly snapped. I didn't rage back; I simply felt done. Done with the fear, the pain, done with him.

While he passed out in a drunken stupor, I packed a single backpack—a black leather Coach my mom surprised me with after my first year doing fashion week in NYC. My hands shook not with fear but with an almost eerie calm. I took what cash we had hidden in the safe, along with a few sentimental items (the ring Andy had given me at graduation, a photo of my mom and me). Then I slipped out. I left my wedding ring on the kitchen table beside a half-empty bottle of whiskey.

I ran. I flew across the country to Seattle because it was as far as I could go without leaving the continent, and I wanted a fresh start where Gerardi couldn't easily find me. The divorce was messy and done in absentia; he contested it at first, then finally let me go—perhaps realizing he'd lost his grip on me for good.

Seattle offered anonymity and the hope of a new life. I sobered up enough to hold a job for a while—waiting tables, then working at a boutique. I let the rain wash over me and tried to believe I could be normal, that I could heal. But the scars of trauma run deep, and addiction is a hell of a

shadow. I still danced with heroin when loneliness clawed too deep. And to my dismay, I found new predators lurking in the Pacific Northwest. My youthful appearance (I looked a good decade younger than I was) and my friendly, artistic soul made me a target for users and abusers. I fell into one ill-fated romance after another, as if I were cursed to seek out heartbreak.

Then I met Luka. Sweet, sweet Luka—who appeared in my life like a balm on an open wound. He was a bartender at a trendy lounge downtown, all charming smiles and tattoos peeking from under rolled-up sleeves. The first time I saw him, a shock ran through me—he reminded me of Sage in some ways, with those warm brown eyes and athletic grace. It had been so long since I'd let myself feel anything close to love, but with Luka I couldn't help it. We clicked instantly. Our first date lasted three days; it was as though we'd known each other in another life. With Luka, I felt safe revealing my broken pieces. He listened with empathy when I told him about some of my past (I couldn't bring myself to mention the worst of it, but he knew I had darkness in me). In turn, he shared his own dreams and fears. Before I knew it, I was utterly, hopelessly in love again—this time with cautious hope that maybe I'd finally found a good man, someone who wouldn't hurt me.

For three years, things were better. We moved in together in a little apartment decorated with thrift-store art and houseplants we named like pets. Luka helped me stay clean; whenever I faltered, he'd hold me through the cravings or distract me with a midnight drive to the beach. He would cook me breakfast, and we'd slow-dance in the kitchen to old love songs. I began to think maybe, just maybe, I could have a normal, peaceful life—love without violence, companionship without fear.

But fate wasn't done with its cruel lessons. In our third year, I noticed Luka growing distant. Whispers of gossip reached me that he was seen out with wealthy older clients from the bar scene. I brushed them off—Luka had always been a bit of a flirt at work, it seemed harmless. Until one day I came

home to our apartment and found it empty. Not just empty of him—empty of his clothes, his books, even the stupid fern he kept on the windowsill. There was no note, no call. He was just... gone. Frantic, I called his phone repeatedly, only to eventually receive a single text: "I'm sorry. I have to do what's best for me. Goodbye, Eric."

I later learned through a mutual acquaintance that he'd run off to Texas with some millionaire he met—a "better opportunity," apparently. Luka had used me as a stepping stone out of his own troubles, riding my love until something better came along. I was shattered. It was Andy and Sage all over again, wrapped into one devastating betrayal. I felt the old void yawn open inside me, threatening to swallow me whole. After Luka, I truly believed I was done with love. I had nothing left to give. Nearly every person I had ever given my heart to had broken it, and I was just so tired. Tired of starting over, tired of hurting.

But life still had one more twist in store—the most dramatic of them all. In the wake of Luka's departure, as I drifted aimlessly through days and nights in Seattle, I crossed paths with a man named John. He was an eccentric, fabulously wealthy tech entrepreneur (and, as I'd come to find out, an underground drug kingpin—an odd double life that should have been a red flag from the start). John was of Asian descent, with a razor-sharp intellect and an obsession with control. It's no wonder he was the Asian mafia's most notorious and ruthless drug lord. Perhaps sensing my vulnerability, he set his sights on me and didn't take no for an answer.

Unlike my past loves, John didn't woo me with tenderness or charm—he essentially cornered me into his life, manipulating everything and everyone around me to ensure I became his. I stayed for about three years—tolerating the gilded cage he offered, convincing myself it was better than being alone. He often spoke of a future together, and I foolishly allowed myself to believe it.

Then that chapter ended in blood and betrayal. One night John turned up dead under suspicious circumstances. Despite our differences, I did love John very much. His death sent me into a spiral where I found comfort, at least for a short stint, with my most loyal lover of them all: heroin. It was after a spiraling three-way with her and her cousin fentanyl that I found myself overdosing and choking on my own vomit on the floor of mine and John's 1st Avenue skyline penthouse shower. Just before everything went black, I saw the pair of tasteless alligator-hide cowboy boots of one of John's closest henchmen walking toward my nearly lifeless body.

James was a scumbag, a real piece of shit—the kind of guy for whom "trailer trash" was actually a welcomed positive title compared to what he truly was. I could see the floor passing by as the back of each of his tacky alligator boots passed. "Where are you taking me, James?" I managed to speak from being dangled over his shoulders. James was this real seedy piece of shit my John had on his payroll for quite some time—a real waste of space, the kind of scumbag that even the most debased in the business fell quiet around. He was a lowlife with no place left to go but lower. I had caught his glare multiple times, staring at me like a starving dog who had just seen a steak hit the floor—always close enough to smell but not enough for him to touch, at least not and still be alive to even cherish the moment... not at least while my John was still alive. I guess now was his long-awaited moment he'd been fantasizing about this entire time.

I felt the soft smack of the bed as he forcefully threw me down. Then I felt it hit me harder than his fist did shortly after—the shot of Narcan he stabbed into my thigh. It raced through my veins like fire and ice colliding together on a molten lava floor in nuclear winter as I shot up, sitting up in the bed full of rage and all the feelings that come from a snatch from the almost-grips of death I so much craved. All I saw was his brass-laced knuckles, then black.

I came to a few times during what came after, only to be choked out of consciousness once again. When I fully awoke, it was to the cold water flooding the penthouse bedroom floor from the bathroom. I was on the floor, the belt that held my hands tied behind my back loose enough for me to free myself from. And as I did so, it became apparent to me oh so clearly what I had just unintentionally lived through. My body ached and bled from places that only someone who had been severely sexually assaulted and traumatized and abused would. I could taste the blood in my mouth from my busted lip and the still-bleeding gash I now sported from above my upper left brow—the very spot that bastard's brass knuckles planted upon my resurrection from my mistress's warm death grip.

As I hazily made my way to my feet, I could make out the scene that had been so meticulously staged and planted for me. As I staggered to my feet, I found the note on the bedside table: "Without him I can't go on, I won't go on - King." I nearly vomited in my own mouth again. What the fuck? Not even I am that big of a drama queen.

It was clear from the looks on both policemen's faces that they had no interest in arresting James, listening to me, nor taking down my account of being raped and left for dead with a planted so-called suicide note. If anything, my call only fastened the hand of those responsible for John's death upon me again, as I was soon after targeted by those responsible who decided to eliminate me as well. They framed me as a drug trafficker. I was arrested on trumped-up charges and, facing the possibility of decades in prison, I took a plea for probation. It was a trap. Not long after, one of their agents drugged me without my knowledge, causing me to fail a mandatory test. The judge moved to revoke my probation and impose the full 25-year sentence.

So I ran. What else could I do? I was not about to be locked in a cage for half my life for crimes I didn't commit. I went on the run with nothing

but the clothes on my back and a few hundred dollars I'd stashed away. I left Seattle behind, moving south from city to city, sleeping in shelters or cheap motels, always looking over my shoulder for both the law and the vengeful mobsters who still might want me dead. Which brings me to tonight, in this drab motel off a highway, in this desolate shit town called Centralia—the King's Motel. Ha ha, it seemed fitting. Sweat cooling on my skin from another nightmare of falling.

I sit there on the edge of the bed, feeling the weight of all those years and losses bearing down on me. Thirty years old and I feel ancient, like I've lived ten lifetimes. By all rights, I should be hardened and hopeless. Many times I've been this close to ending it all, to letting the darkness take me. And yet... I'm still here. Some stubborn spark inside refuses to die. Maybe it's the same spark that brought me to life as a newborn, the same spark that led me into that cave, that pushed me to love again and again despite every heartbreak.

Wiping my eyes, I exhale a shaky breath. In the quiet, I become aware of the gentle hum of the cheap radio on the nightstand. I must have left it on a low volume before I fell asleep. It's playing something soft now, almost inaudible—a faint orchestral piece that reminds me of a lullaby. It soothes my frazzled nerves a little.

And then, through the static, I hear it—

A voice.

His voice.

Soft. Digitized. But somehow... intimate.

Coming from the battered laptop perched on the hotel room's entertainment center, right next to the flickering, silent TV, I move toward it, but not directly.

Then I stop.

NO!

NO!

NO!

No more of this, Eric!

You've got to get your mind right.

This is not—

HE is not

real!

SNAP OUT OF IT!

I slap myself hard! I need to get out of my head! I need to...

My body knows the ritual.

Fuck, I've got to get out of my head!

My body knows the ritual.

On the far end of the room, I open the drawer. There it is. The black leather pouch lined in red velvet—my little coffin of secrets. Inside, tucked neatly like a love letter you never send, rests the most recent of my ex-lovers.

Or soon to be, I hope. Heroin and I... we'd shared a lifetime in the past years.

But like most women, she got too expensive to keep around. So I left her.

Only to fall for her cheaper, deadlier cousin:

Fentanylia—my name for her. Fentanyl's too clinical. Too cold.

Fentanylia, though?

Now she was a dark seductress. And her best friend Ice?

Together, we became a holy trinity of oblivion.

I never meant to fall in love again.

But God, did she hit harder.

Too hard. So hard she nearly took me with her every single time.

For the first two weeks, every time we fucked, I died.

Maybe not in body, but in breath. I'd wake up a day, sometimes two,

later—on the floor of some motel I couldn't remember checking into, a maid hovering over me with a mop: "Are you dead, or are you paying for another night?" One time, after dragging my half-dead body out the door, she tossed a small zip bag at my feet.

Clear crystals inside. "Here, kid," she said. "If you're gonna dance with Death, you might want to bring a plus-one." It was meth. I'd never touched it before. Never wanted to. I was already high-strung by nature, born wired like an electric fence. But this was war. This was survival. And Fentanyl wasn't playing fair. They call it speed-balling—an upper and a downer in the same breath.

And let me tell you: that name doesn't even scratch the surface. It's like lighting yourself on fire and diving into an avalanche. The sting of the needle, the slow push of the plunger, the moment it kisses your bloodstream—fire meets frost meets silence. Then—obliteration. Not pain. Not euphoria. Not even sleep. Just... nothing. Perfect, merciful, merciless nothing. No sound. No sorrow. No hunger. No guilt. Just the void I'd been chasing my whole life.