

My eyes shot open. How long had I been asleep? I looked around the dark street out the car window, sitting up in the seat. I illuminated the face of my phone to discover it was after two o'clock in the morning. I could feel the tension in my back from sitting for so long. I twisted my torso and extended my arms above my head, attempting to stretch out the discomfort.

With my arms over my head, I stopped, slowly lowering them when I caught sight of the silhouette. I couldn't believe I missed it. I opened the car door and ran to the house with adrenaline surging through me. The engine was still warm; she couldn't have been here for too long. Without thinking about what I was doing, or what I might find when I got there, I ran to the back of the house. The door was slightly open. The pounding in my chest kept me moving forward, but I approached cautiously, listening, looking for any movement.

I eased into the dark kitchen. The only sound I could hear was the thud of my accelerated heartbeat. I stiffened when I heard the footsteps on the stairs. The blur of a man ran into the room at the end of the hall... her room. The light flicked on, spreading in the shadows of the hallway.

“Carol! What are you doing?! Get off of her!”

I ran down the hall, entering the small room. The thick framed man was pulling at the hands of the slender woman kneeling on the bed. My eyes widened when I realized what her hands were clasping. With a force that I couldn't restrain, I pushed the man out of the way, and grabbed the woman from behind, pinning her arms to her sides. I tossed her to the floor without giving a thought to how she would land.

Carol grunted when she collided with the carpeted floor. I could feel him staring at me, but I didn't give him a glance. I crawled onto the bed next to her still body, removing the pillow from over her face. I didn't know what to do first. My hands were shaking; my breathing quickened from

the adrenaline, and now panic. The purple bruises were already apparent around her delicate neck. I shuddered.

“Give me the key!” I yelled at her. Carol looked up at me with a frozen stare, quivering, and blubbering incoherently.

“Carol, where is the key?!” George demanded. When she didn’t answer, he aggressively rummaged through the pockets of her pants, pulling out the small silver key.

I seized it from between his fingers and fumbled with the cuffs. I’d never unlocked handcuffs before, and hoped that the release was as easy as turning the key in the right direction. My trembling hands were making the insertion into the small hole a frustrating task. I turned it, and found the resistance that opened the latch, sliding the cuff open.

Her arms collapsed onto the mattress above her head. I eased the tape from her mouth, leaving a sticky, red trail behind. I put my head to her mouth – she wasn’t breathing.

“Call 911!” I yelled to the man staring at me with his mouth ajar. He ran from the room. I faintly heard him talking frantically in the distance.

*You have to breathe, you cannot die on me!* I tilted her head back, pinching her nose, and exhaled forcefully into her mouth. I watched her chest rise, then collapse when I released. I breathed again. I placed my fingers on her neck. It didn’t matter; I couldn’t feel anything besides my wild pulse.

How long had she been like this? Her skin was still warm, but pale. Her temple was still moist from her tears. I pushed the long strands of her dark brown hair from her face, begging her eyes to open.

I breathed into her mouth. *You have to breathe!* I forced air into her lungs again. My sight was blurred as I blinked away the moisture. This was not how it was supposed to happen. I should've been here. I was supposed to protect her.

“Em, please breathe. I need you to breathe for me.” I begged her limp body to give me some sign that it was fighting to live. I clutched her to my chest, rocking her. “Please, please... You have to – just breathe.”

She gasped. I inhaled quickly, welling in my eyes spilled down my cheeks. Her wheezing breaths were faint, but they were there. I exhaled a quivering breath in relief at the sound.

“They should be here any minute,” George reported lowly from the end of the bed. “Is she breathing?”

“Barely,” I growled. I folded her arms over her chest, the cuff hung loosely on her one wrist. Her shoulder slumped into me. I could tell something was wrong. My eyes stretched wide at the realization that she was hurt beyond the restricted breathing. I glared at the frail figure still cowering on the floor.

“What did you do?!” I screamed.

The woman couldn't look at me. Carol remained curled on the tan carpet, lost in her hysterical sobs and incoherent whimpering.

Fearing I was hurting her more, I eased her onto the bed, stroking the hair along her forehead and gently kissed her soft skin. The moisture from my face dripped on her cheek.

That's when my eye caught the glint of silver on the bed, recognizing the hammer. I was suddenly motionless, my breath frozen in my lungs, examining her right foot that hung at an

awkward angle. I clenched my teeth, tightening my jaw. My breath was labored, trying to remain on the bed so I wouldn't grab the pathetic creature on the floor. I couldn't stop the shaking as every muscle in my body hardened. George saw the fury in my eyes and stepped in-between me and the woman.

I heard the sirens approaching, distracting me from my rage. I looked back down at her quiet, smooth face. Her full lips were parted, drawing in small bouts of rasping air. I recognized her beauty even in her brokenness. My eyes softened, letting the pain of her condition crush me.

I ran my hand down her cheek, leaning over to whisper in her ear, "I love you. I promise no one will ever hurt you again."