

A woman with dark hair styled in a bun is shown from the back and side, looking down thoughtfully with her hand near her chin. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the contours of her back and shoulder.

ALL THE

Pretty

LIES

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

M. LEIGHTON

Her...

Sloane Locke has led a sheltered life. However, with a history like hers, she can understand why her brothers and her father want so much to protect her. She has gone along with it for twenty long years, but those days are over. For the girl who never makes promises, Sloane has made a pact with herself that things will change on her twenty-first birthday. So when the clock strikes midnight, Sloane strikes out to spread her wings and break a few rules.

Him...

In addition to inking skin, Hemi Spencer possesses many talents. Controlling himself has never been one of them. It's never had to be. He's lived a life of indulgence for as long as he can remember. Right up until tragedy struck. Now, he's nothing *but* controlled. He's a man on a mission, one who will let nothing and no one stand in his way.

Them...

Nothing in their lives could've prepared Sloane and Hemi for what they'd find in each other—distraction and obsession, love and possession. But the one thing they can't find is a future. Neither one has been totally honest. And they'll soon learn that the devil is in the details. In the details and in the lies.

How far will two people go to live in the now when the now is all they've got?

ALL THE PRETTY LIES

A Novel

By

M. Leighton

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This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to any person, living or dead, any place, events or occurrences, is purely coincidental. The characters and storylines are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Live every day like it's your last. None of us are promised a tomorrow.

Boast not thyself of tomorrow, for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.

Proverbs 27:1

“Ohmigod, I can’t believe you’re going through with this,” my best friend Sarah says as I pull open the glass door to the tattoo parlor.

Although I would never admit it to her, I actually get a little chill when I step over the threshold. I’ve never been into a tattoo shop before, so I don’t know what the others are like, but this one is pretty intimidating. The music is loud, the counter is black and every fixture in sight is chrome. I swallow my sudden burst of nerves and push myself forward.

It’s reassuring that this place, The Ink Stain, comes very highly recommended. And it’s easy to see why when I let my eyes run over the amazing art work that covers the walls.

Somebody’s got some talent!

“Are you sure you want to do this, Sloane? I mean, your dad will kick your ass if he finds out,” Sarah continues. When I stop suddenly to look back at her, she nearly runs into me. “Shit!” she exclaims, pulling up before we bump chests. She was busy examining the walls, too.

“Number one, Dad can’t kick my ass. As of ...” I glance around the neon-lighted interior of the shop, looking for a clock. When I find one that’s in the shape of a skull with cross bones for hands, I squint to read what it says. “Seven minutes ago, I’m officially beyond the control of the thick-headed Locke men. And this is my first act of independence.”

“More like rebellion,” Sarah snorts.

“Semantics,” I say with a dismissive wave of my hand. “Either way, I’m getting this damn tattoo and nobody’s gonna stop me.”

“Are you sure it’s...safe? I mean...”

I see the concern in her eyes and I love her for it.

I give her my softest smile. “It’s fine, Sarah. Seriously.”

With one final, reassuring nod to her, I move forward to approach the shiny black counter. I ring the bell for assistance.

While we wait for someone to come to the front, I walk along the borders of the room, admiring the sketches on display. As someone with the heart of an artist, I can even better appreciate the skill of the hand and eye behind the charcoal renderings.

A deep voice interrupts my study. “Can I help you?”

I turn toward it, ready to explain what it is that I want, but the words die on my tongue. Of all the works of art on the walls, none compares to the one I’m staring at now.

I see his features in separate bursts, like strobes of light striking the backs of my eyes. Angular, masculine features seem to be carved in stone—slashing brows; luminous eyes; high cheekbones; a chiseled mouth. And it’s that mouth that I’m looking at when his lips curl up at the corners. I’m staring. I know it and he knows it. “See anything you like?”

My eyes fly to his. They’re dark and teasing, and I blush accordingly. “No,” I say automatically. When I see one pierced brow shoot up, I realize how my answer must’ve sounded. “I mean, I already know what I want.”

His other eyebrow rises to meet the first and I feel my cheeks burn. I have no doubt they’re the color of ripe apples by now.

“I love a woman who knows what she wants.”

My mouth drops open. No one has ever flirted with me. All the guys I’ve ever known have been terrified of my family, so I have no clue how to react to banter like this. Other than to blush, much to my dismay.

Frick!

Obviously amused by my discombobulation, he chuckles. The sound is like black silk, sliding over

my skin in one cool, smooth swipe.

More heat rushes to my face. I'm honestly afraid of what I must look like at the moment. I don't know what to do other than look away, so that's what I do. I glance down, breaking contact with his disconcerting eyes as I reach into my purse for my sketch. I take a deep breath, using the search as an excuse to regain some modicum of composure. When I locate the piece of paper I'm after, I walk wordlessly toward him and hand him the folded square.

He takes it from me, his eyes touching mine for a fraction of a second before he turns his attention to the paper. I watch as he unfolds it then studies it for a heartbeat before he notices that it's upside down. After he rights it, he pulls it in for closer examination.

The overhead light shines down on his face, hiding much of his expression. His long, thick lashes cast a shadow over his eyes and his brow is puckered in concentration. I wait patiently for him to finish.

With a single nod of his head, he glances back up, his eyes clicking to a stop on mine. From across the room, I couldn't see what color they were, only that they were dark and compelling. But now I can see them clearly. They are the deepest blue I've ever seen. They pierce me like steel and leave me breathless as midnight.

"This is good. Who drew it?"

My heart swells and flutters around inside my rib cage. "I did."

For an instant, I see appreciation flit over his face, but it disappears quickly as he fires off more questions. "Is this to scale? And are these the colors you'd like used?" he asks as he turns to walk back toward the shiny countertop. "I'm Hemi by the way."

Hemi.

What an odd name. "Hemi? Isn't that something on an engine?" I blurt.

When he glances back at me, I get the impression that he's amused again. "Something like that."

Hemi. Like a big engine. I can see that. He seems fast. And powerful.

"I'm Sloane. And yes, the sketch is to scale and in the colors I'd like used."

Hemi nods again as he steps behind the counter, reaching beneath it for some papers. "And when did you want it?"

I don't know why I feel like blushing again, but I do. "Ummm, I'd like to have the half-open oyster shell on my right hip, toward the back and have the butterflies coming out of it and flying up my side. Sort of around toward the front."

He's still nodding, but now frowning as well. "Hmmm," he murmurs. "Let's get these forms filled out and then I'll take you back and have a look. I'm not working on anybody else right now."

"O-okay."

Hemi explains to me what I'm signing—waiver, release and consent to tattoo. It's their way of saying, *Hey, if we screw up, you're screwed! You're eighteen or over and have given us permission to permanently mark your body. If you don't like it, tough shit. Thanks and have a nice day.* But still, I don't hesitate to sign them. I know what I'm doing. I experienced a little chill when I first walked in, but now, after meeting Hemi, I feel like I'm in good hands. Warm, capable hands.

Or maybe I'm just bedazzled.

Either way, I sign them quickly. I'm anxious to get to the next part.

I slide the papers back across the counter to Hemi and lay down the pen. He takes them, shuffles them into a neat pile and then sets them aside before he looks back up at me.

"Ready?" he asks. He might not know it, but that question holds so much more meaning than simply whether I'm ready to get a tattoo.

And so does my answer. With a single, emphatic nod, I reply, "Yes."

He tips his head toward the doorway through which he came. "Then let's do this thing."

He starts toward the next room and I turn to grab Sarah's hand. I meet with resistance.

~~"Oh, no, no, no! You're not dragging me into this. I'll pass out, sure as shit."~~

"What? *I'm* the one getting poked with a needle a zillion times. Why would *you* pass out?"

"Sympathy. That's why."

I tilt my head to the side. "Sarah, don't be ridiculous. I want you to come back with me while I do it."

She twists her hand free of my grip. "I love you, Sloane, but this floor is probably the perfect place to get Hepatitis. *You'll* be in the chair. *I* won't. If I go down, it'll be face first in someone else's blood. So thanks, but no thanks."

"Sarah, there's no blood on the floor. It's not like that."

"How do you know? This is the first tattoo parlor you've ever been to."

"So? Look at this place. It's spotless. It even *smells* clean, and you know that can't be easy with all the drunk, smelly people that no doubt come through here."

"You're just making my point for me. Nope. No way. I'll be waiting for you right..." she says backing away from me toward one of the chrome-and-leather chairs that line one small section of the wall. "Over...here."

"Fine. Miss this significant life moment. It's all right. I'll still love you."

With a heavy, loud-as-I-can-make-it sigh, I turn toward the door. Hemi has already disappeared into the next room, so I make my way slowly forward.

I hear a frustrated growl from behind me. "Fine." The word is followed by the *clomp clomp clomp* of platform-shod feet stomping toward me. "So help me, if I pass out and get some sort of face fungus, you're paying for all my doctor bills and any necessary plastic surgery."

I smile broadly and loop my arm through hers when she stops at my side. "I won't let your face touch the floor. I promise."

"You don't promise. You never promise," she observes, eyeing me skeptically as we enter the next room.

"No, I just don't make promises I can't keep. This one, I can keep."

We stop and look around the room. There are two other people getting tattoos. They both look up at us. They don't look like they're being tortured. In fact, one of them looks kind of sleepy. Or drunk. Either way, it makes me feel a little more at ease about the pain I just signed up for.

I tug Sarah forward and we make our way through the room. The overhead lights are still bright, but they are strategically placed over the three reclining tattoo chairs. It makes the rest of the space look intimately dim.

I walk toward Hemi where he's standing at a little cubby against the back wall. It's occupied by a small cabinet with a mirror over it, a rolling cart of some sort, and an empty tattoo chair.

I start to climb into it, but he stops me. "Wait. Show me exactly where you want the oyster shell before you sit down. I might have to put you on your stomach or your side, depending."

Feeling heat rise to my face yet again, I turn my right hip toward Hemi and pat the place where I want the shell. "Here."

Hemi squats beside me, reaches forward and raises the hem of my cami then drags his fingers up my side. "With the butterflies up through here?"

I feel chills break out behind the warm path of his touch and I bite my lip. When he looks up at me with those amazing blue eyes of his, I nod.

"Okay, then let's start with you on your stomach," he says, stepping on a pedal on the floor that raises the foot and lowers the back of the chair, making it flat enough to lie prone. "Hop up there and unbutton your shorts," he says casually.

"Pardon?"

Hemi's laughing eyes meet mine. "Which part didn't you get?"

"You need me to take off my pants? In here?"

"No, I just need you to unbutton and unzip them a little. Just enough that I can comfortably get the area you want inked."

"Oh," I say, feeling like an ass. "Okay."

I climb up onto the flat surface and reach for my button and zipper. I loosen them and then turn and stretch out on my stomach. I feel like burying my face in my crossed arms, but I don't. I stare straight ahead until I see Sarah enter my vision and plop down in the chair across from me, promptly ignoring me for the phone in her hands. I watch her for a few seconds, but I'm far too interested in who's at the other end of me to pay her attention for long. Finally, I turn my head to look down at Hemi, resting my cheek against my folded arms. He's sitting on a chair with wheels now, facing me at the level of my waist, with a long-necked lamp aimed at my lower body.

I catch and hold my breath when he reaches out and curls his fingers into the waistband of my shorts. Hemi tugs the material down, wiggling it over my hips and lowering it just enough that he can easily access the whole area. The only thing between him and my skin now is my underwear.

I watch as he slips a finger under the lacy elastic of my panties and pulls them down as well, leaving nothing between us but the heat of his hand. Slowly, he rubs his palm over my hip. Back and forth, he does this several times before he looks back at the sketch and then starts to trace one fingertip over my skin, as if he's drawing it out in his head.

"You know," he says, looking up at me, his palm coming to a rest, his thumb making an absent arc on my hip. "I think it would be better if we came up a little farther toward your waist with the shell and then let the butterflies spill out, curving to run up your side in a loose serpentine pattern, like this," he says, moving his fingers up over my ribs in a languid snaking path. "I think it would look better than a straight line."

In my head, I can see exactly what he's saying. And I agree. It's just that I'm having a hard time thinking and responding with his hands on me like they are.

"Sounds good. Whatever you think. You're the expert."

Hemi grins and winks at me. "Oh, I like the sound of that." He reaches back to the table that sits behind him, grabs a little prep kit, a marker and my sketch. He lays the drawing up on my butt. "This is your first time, isn't it?" He's not watching me when he asks; therefore he can't see the color that burns in my cheeks. He has no idea how right he is. In many ways. Being the daughter of a cop and the little sister to three more makes dating a challenge to say the least. Add to that all that happened when I was little, and you get a twenty-one year old virgin. To tattoos as well as most everything else, too.

"Yes," I reply in a small voice.

At this, Hemi finally looks back up at me. "Don't worry. I'll take good care of you." And for some reason, I believe him. "We may have to break this up into two or three sessions, though. I don't want to overwhelm you, and there's quite a few butterflies to do. Plus, ribs can be a little more tender and tricky."

"So you won't do it all tonight?"

"I don't think so. Let's start with the shell and one or two butterflies, and see how you're doing. Then we can go from there. We don't want you in the chair too long. You can make an appointment to come back another time to get the rest."

See him again? Yes, please.

"Sounds good."

Hemi pauses, with no grin on his lips and no teasing in his eyes. This time they seem just...warning.
"Are you always this easy?"

Before I have to try to formulate some pithy or flirtatious (or stupid) reply, Sarah speaks up for the

first time since I laid down. “Hell no! She’s stubborn as a mule.”

~~“So it’s just me then.” He stares at me for several seconds before his grin returns. “Just easy for me. I like that.”~~

The next thing I feel, aside from the damnable heat in my face, is the cool swipe of an alcohol prep pad as Hemi preps my skin for what’s to come. I barely notice the moisture. All my attention is riveted to the warm hand resting against my hip, holding me still. Keeping me steady.

I try to ignore the soft, warm skin that feels like satin under my palm. I try to ignore the way the girl watches me, like she can see me taking her shorts off the rest of the way. I try to ignore the fact that, if she *did* let me take them off, I'd do things to her that would make her blush every time she thought about them for the rest of her life. And I try to ignore how much it irritates me that I don't have time to explore someone like her.

Since the ripe old age of fourteen, when I nailed my first piece of cougar ass, I've always preferred experienced women. The wilder the better. I've never taken a girl's virginity, nor do I want to. I want a woman who knows what she wants and how to get it. And one who knows where the door is before she gets out of the bathroom. They're the kind I've always sought out, and the only kind I have room for in my life. And, until today, they're the only kind I've ever really been interested in. So what is it about this girl, with her innocent, brown eyes and her perfectly-formed ass, that's making my dick throb so damn hard?

You need to get laid, brother! I think to myself, tracing the outline of an oyster shell on pale, flawless skin. *And you need to do it fast.*

For an instant, it makes me miss the selfish prick that I've always been. Before I became so driven

“What time did you get in last night?” my older brother, Sigmond (Sig, as we call him) asks.

“Late.”

“No shit, smart ass. I went to Cuff’s with the boys after shift last night. I got in at almost one thirty and you still weren’t here.”

“So? I’m twenty-one years old. I don’t owe you an explanation.”

I watch Sig’s dark brown eyes, so much like mine, widen. “Damn! Touchy, aren’t we? I didn’t mean anything by it. I was just askin’.”

I sigh. “I know. I’m just tired. Sorry.”

Sig is only two years older than me and I’ve always been closer to him than either of my other brothers, Scout and Steven. Sig is the fun-loving one, and he’s never “fathered” me quite as much as everyone else. Scout is bad, but Steven is the worst. Being the oldest, he and Dad took it upon themselves to see that I’m as protected and sheltered as a princess, and that I was raised like a lady even without one in the house. For that reason, they keep a close eye on me, terrify my would-be friends and suitors, and punish me every time I use the F word. That’s why my only friend is Sara. I’m still a virgin and my favorite word is “frick.” It was either get used to that or spend my entire childhood grounded. What the men in my house never understood was that, lady or not, it’s hard to listen to four potty-mouthed cops day in and day out and not pick up a potty mouth myself. But I learned. Eventually.

“Hand me the creamer,” Sig says, nudging me with his elbow. I rise up on my toes and reach into the cabinet to get down the creamer. Sig turns, his gun holster grazing my hip. I hiss, sucking in air through my teeth. “What was that for?”

“What was what for?”

“You made a noise. Like I hurt you.”

“Did not.”

“Did, too.”

“It’s nothing. Your holster just poked me.”

Sig frowns, looking down at his holster and over at my hip. When his eyes rise to mine, he narrows them on me. “So what? That shouldn’t have hurt. Are you sore? Why are you sore?”

I see concern light his eyes and I know there’s no way I’m getting out of this without confessing what I did. Otherwise, he’ll have the whole family freaked out before I can eat my breakfast.

“I got a tattoo,” I admit. When Sig opens his mouth to fuss, I rush to continue before he can get off the first word. “And I don’t need to hear any bitching about it. And you’d better not tell a soul, or help me God, I’ll tell Bear every embarrassing secret I can think of.”

That gets his attention. Bear is Sig’s partner. Sig knows he’d never hear the end of it if I told Bear anything worth hearing. Giving a cop any information he can use to rib, blackmail or otherwise embarrass the shit out of another cop with is like handing him a loaded gun and a target. Sig knows this. And so do I.

His lips thin and I know I’ve won. “You know, Sloane, you really *should* be more careful.”

“I *am* careful, Sig. I’m always careful. I’ve always *been* careful. This wasn’t *not* careful. It was just something I wanted to do. I want to enjoy the next few years as much as I can—”

“Stop right there,” he says, holding up his hand. “Don’t even finish that sentence. I don’t want to hear it.” I snap my mouth shut. I should’ve known better than to say something like that, dredging up painful thoughts and memories. Even though it’s true. “Let me see it.”

“It’s still got plastic on it.”

“So? You think I can’t see through plastic wrap?”

Reluctantly, I ease my pajama bottoms over the film taped to my hip. Sig looks at it, a disapproving expression clouding his face.

“An oyster shell and two butterflies? What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“That’s not all there is to it. That’s the base of it. There will be more butterflies.”

“Where?”

“Going up my side.”

“Sloane,” he begins warningly.

“Sig,” I respond eyeing him right back. “It’s my body, my life, my choice.”

“But you’re—”

“But nothing. Y’all have *got to* let me live.”

He rolls his eyes. “You still haven’t answered my question. What’s it mean?”

“I feel like I’ve lived inside a tight shell my whole life. And now, finally, after all these years, I’m gonna get to crack it open and spread my wings a little.”

“But you know why they—”

“I know why, Sig. And I love y’all for it. But it’s time for me to live a little. To make my own choices and do my own thing. Mom was Mom. But *I’m* me. Y’all can’t keep me locked away, safe from the world, in a shell for the rest of my days. Besides, there are some things you can’t protect me from, no matter how hard you try.”

Sig doesn’t say anything for a long time. “When are you getting the rest?”

“I go back tonight.”

“Well,” he says, stirring a heaping spoon full of creamer into his coffee. “Just don’t let Dad catch you coming in. Or Steven.”

“Yeah,” I say with a heavy sigh. “I’d forgotten what a pisser it is having him around.”

“He probably won’t be here for long. I feel sure coming back here is cramping his style. I mean, it’s not like he really *chose* it. Things just didn’t work out with him and Duncan. Mark my words, he’ll be moved back out before Christmas.”

“You think?”

“Hell yeah! He’s already looking for places cheap enough for him to make rent on his own.”

“Why don’t you go live with him? That would help him out a lot.”

Sig’s eyes get wide and his mouth drops open. “Bite your damn tongue, devil woman! I’d rather eat a plate full of cat shit than live with Steven for the rest of my life.”

“It wouldn’t be for the rest of your life. One of you is bound to get married eventually.”

“Living with Steven, without anyone else as a buffer? Trust me, it might as well *be* the rest of my life. It sure would *feel* like it.”

I can’t help but giggle. Poor Steven. He’s a great guy, but he takes life very seriously and tends to be the resident wet blanket in most cases. He takes after Dad. So does Scout. Well, a little bit. He’s more of a split between both parents, I guess, whereas Sig and I are both fun-loving. More like Mom. But in fairness, Steven was older when Mom got sick, so he was affected more profoundly. Not that we all weren’t devastated, but he and Dad seemed to get the worst of it. Her sickness and consequent death seemed to drain the life right out of them, at least the part that makes people enjoy living.

“He’s had a tough life, Sig. Cut him some slack.”

“You have, too.”

“We all have.”

“Yet no one uses it as an excuse to be an asshole except Steven.”

“It’s just the way he deals, Sig.”

“Well, whatever the reason, I’ll be damned if I’d subject myself to that shit on a daily basis for an extended period of time. Growing up with him was bad enough.”

“Yeah, but he made a great target for pranks, didn’t he?”

Sig looks down at me from his imposing six-six height and grins. “Hell yeah, he did! You remember that time we put laxatives in his birthday brownies?”

I can’t help but laugh as I think of it. “He couldn’t leave the house for two days. Thought he’d never come out of the bathroom.”

“Good times,” Sig says, carefully sipping his coffee as he looks wistfully out the kitchen window. “Good times.”

And they were. There were always good times, even among the bad. There usually are. I’ve just learned that you have to look for them.

I leave the dark of the night behind me as I enter the shop. The first thing I notice when I open the door to The Ink Stain is the music. It’s an old song I’ve heard before, one by Stone Temple Pilots called *Still Remains*. There’s something intimate and...sexy about it. I don’t know if I’ve ever thought of it that way before. But I do now. Tonight, I feel like it vibrates, *resonates* somewhere deep within me.

The reception area is empty, just like it was last night. So I walk over to ring the bell, just like I did last night. Only this time, I don’t get that far. Hemi appears in the doorway to the tattooing room. He’s wearing a snug black t-shirt, snug black jeans and dull black boots. He looks dangerous. And delicious.

When he smiles at me, my heart trips over itself for a beat or two before righting its rhythm. “Welcome back,” Hemi says with a smile before he peeks around my shoulder. “You by yourself?”

“I am,” I reply.

“Your timing is perfect. I was getting really bored.”

“Slow night?”

“Uncharacteristically,” he explains, tipping his head for me to follow him, which I do.

In the back room, all the overhead lights are turned off except for one set—the ones over the chair that Hemi uses. The room seems more intimate this way, and the fact that we are alone only accentuates that.

“Are *you* by *yourself*?” I ask, turning his question back on him.

“Yep. Everyone else is gone.”

“I could’ve come earlier. You didn’t have to stay late just for me.” I assumed when he made the appointment it was either more convenient for him or the only opening he had.

He turns to look at me, patting the flattened chair that I’ll be lying upon. “I prefer to work the late shift. The world seems quieter at night. This probably won’t make sense to you, but it’s like I can *feel* my artwork better. Sort of get lost in it. Especially when I’m doing something freehand, like I’m doing on you.”

“Actually, I understand that perfectly,” I admit, scooting up onto the table. “I’m an art major, so I totally get where you’re coming from.”

He smiles and, for a second, it’s like my soul connects with his in a way that transcends words. I can almost daresay only an artist would understand what he means. And I do. I most definitely do. For me, drawing or sketching is the perfect combination of escapism and therapy. It’s consuming. It’s cathartic. It makes me wonder what scars he needs to escape, what wounds he needs to heal.

“I’m gonna get you to start out on your stomach again. I’ll do the first few butterflies and then have you roll up onto your side to do the rest. Now, let me warn you, this hurts more over bone, so the tattoos over your ribs aren’t going to be very comfortable for you.”

I nod. “That’s fine. I understand.”

“Still worth it?”

I nod again. ~~The butterflies are more significant than what I've told anyone else, so I can honestly say that the pain is worth it for me.~~ “Yes,” I answer.

Hemi's eyes delve deep into mine, like he's trying to see where the butterflies live, where they were born and what they've been through. After a few seconds, he says simply, enigmatically, “The important ones always are.”

I stretch out on my stomach, folding my arms under my head and resting my chin against my shoulder so I can look down at Hemi as he works. I see him reach for my waistband, just like he did last night. He smiles and glances up at me. “Smart choice,” he states, tucking his finger inside the elastic band of my yoga pants. “You know the drill,” he says. “Lift.”

I lift my hips and he eases my pants and panties down to expose my hip. Gently, like the wings of the butterflies he drew on my body, his fingers drift over the first part of the tattoo. Chills spread over my stomach and onto my lower back.

He nods. “Looks good. How 'bout a few more?”

I nod, too. “Ready when you are.”

I take a deep breath when I hear the buzz as he fires up the tattoo gun.

Having my hands on this girl does nothing to help my concentration. The way her body feels under my palms—like she responds to my slightest touch—and the way she watches me, like she’s wishing I was doing much more to her, is kicking the shit out of my peace, peace that I *need*, especially when I’m freehanding.

The thing I think that’s bothering me the most, though, is that there’s something in her eyes, something in the sadness that always seems to be hanging around them, that makes me suspect she’s hiding wounds that only someone like me can see. Someone who understands, someone who has been there. But what the hell could a girl like this, a girl so young, so innocent, possibly know about tragedy?

“So, you’re an art major,” I say conversationally, anything to keep me from concentrating too much on the feel of her.

“Yes.”

“You going to State?”

She nods. University of Georgia has a pretty kick ass art program.

“Nice. What is it that you want to do when you graduate?”

I hear her sigh as I ink a butterfly wing onto her porcelain skin.

“I don’t really know.” I glance up at her. She looks troubled over it. “I know I’m *supposed* to know exactly what I want to do, but all I know is that I want to draw. To create something beautiful that will last forever.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“There is if you’re supposed to be able to make a living doing it.”

“Hey, look at me,” I say, holding up my gun. “I make a damn fine living doing what I love, which is basically drawing. The canvas is just a little different than what you’ve probably learned on.”

I see her brow wrinkle as she considers me. “I never thought of it that way.”

“Most people don’t,” I tell her, thinking specifically of my father.

“How did you get started doing this? I mean, is this what you *wanted* to do?”

“Not specifically, no. I floundered for a while, like most people, I suppose. Then, a few years back I met someone. I went in for a tattoo. Like you, I had my own sketch of what I wanted. She admired my work, asked me if I’d consider sketching a few more. After that, she sort of took me under her wing and showed me the ropes. Didn’t take me long to realize that I loved it. Been doing it ever since.”

Why the hell are you telling this girl your life story? That’s more than you’ve told anybody since you moved here.

I make a conscious effort to rein it in. I don’t normally tell people much about myself. That could lead to someone finding out who I am. And I can’t let that happen.

“She?”

“Yeah, she.”

“So there are women tattoo artists?”

“Of course there are. This is America after all, right? Equal opportunity and all that shit?”

“That’s not...I mean I...That came out wrong.”

I laugh at her stammering. “Yes, there are women tattoo artists. Some damn fine ones, too.”

“Is it hard to learn?”

“No. Technique is something that’s developed over time. The art part is the hardest. There are some things you can’t teach. That can’t really be learned. At least not well. You either have it or you don’t. The rest you can find over time.”

“So the actual tattooing part can be learned...”

“Sure.”

“...as long as the art work is good enough?”

“Right.”

I’m not paying attention to what she’s getting at until she just lays it out there.

“You said my sketch was good. Would someone like you be able to teach me the rest?”

My head snaps up and I fall headlong into her deep, soulful, *hopeful* eyes. “Someone *like* me, sure.

“But not you *specifically*?”

“No.”

“Why not? You’re very good at this.”

“But I don’t teach.”

“Have you ever tried?”

“No. I’ve never wanted to.”

“But you—”

“And I still don’t.”

“Oh,” she says flatly.

I make the outline of yet another butterfly, drawing closer to the edge of her shirt. A big part of me salivates at the thought of teaching her to tattoo, at the thought of what could come from such close and frequent contact. There’s no question that I’d like to discover every inch of this tight little body. Two or three times. If I were the selfish asshole I used to be, I’d do exactly that, consequences be damned. But I’m not that guy anymore. I’m focused, and that part of me knows it would be a mistake. I don’t need any distractions right now. I have one mission, and bedding a girl like this isn’t one of them.

We fall quiet. In the silence, the buzz of the needle seems louder than ever.

I lie still and quiet as Hemi draws the outlines of butterflies along the curve of my waist. Then he goes back and does the shading. I don't really know what to say now. I'm feeling a little uncomfortable, a little stung over his reaction. It felt dismissive. Dangerously close to rejection.

While he's working, I give myself a pep talk, reminding myself that life is short and that, in most cases (like this one for instance), it's now or never. All I could do was ask. Which I did. Now, I can move on.

But the longer I lie here and think about it, the more I wish Hemi had agreed. I would love the opportunity to learn how to place my art on skin, to etch it permanently onto someone's body, onto their soul.

I hear the buzz of the gun die and I glance down at Hemi. "You're gonna need to lift your shirt up a little farther and turn up onto your side."

He's matter of fact, which is good. I wouldn't want him acting differently. That would be humiliating, like I'd offered up something *else* to him and been shot down. It makes me think of a gift that I'd *like* to offer up to him, but that would be too risky. Too brave. Too brazen.

But life is short, a quiet voice reminds from somewhere deep inside me.

It gives me chills to think of how a scene like that might play out, especially if Hemi were agreeable to my...offer.

"Are you cold?" Hemi asks, interrupting my thoughts.

I glance down at him, meeting his eyes. "No, why?"

"You've got chills," he says, stroking my side with his warm palm, making my flesh pebble even more.

His gaze doesn't leave mine as he drags his hand back and forth over my side, as if to test the temperature of my skin. But I told him I'm not cold. So why? Why touch me this way?

I can't help but wonder what he's thinking behind those indigo orbs.

Ignoring his observation, I ask, "Which way do you want me to turn?"

He doesn't look away and he doesn't move his hand as he answers me. "Turn to face me."

I roll onto my left side, facing Hemi. When I'm comfortably situated, he lowers the table a little more, bringing my side down to a manageable height for him. "Come toward me some more."

I scoot closer, close enough that I can feel the heat of his body against the part of my stomach that's bared to him. I will my skin not to react, not to shrivel up in goosebumps. "Is that close enough?" I ask, suddenly feeling breathless being this close to him. The situation isn't helping any—him sitting near the curve of my body, the studio empty but for us, the lighting dim everywhere else, midnight hovering just beyond the walls.

Hemi leans in as if to check the comfort and his ability to work in this position before he nods. "Yes, that's fine. Now, your shirt."

I reach between us to raise my shirt, pulling it up along my ribs, exposing the area where he'll be drawing. I lie still, waiting, waiting for him to touch me. Unable to help myself, I inhale when I feel his hands on me again. Heat floods me from head to toe and everywhere in between.

"How far do you want to go?" he asks in a husky voice.

My eyes fly to his. He's looking at me, no hint of playfulness in his expression. "Pardon?"

"How far do you want me to go? Up your side? Where do you want me to stop?"

My pulse is skittering along at a rapid pace and I try my best to jerk my wayward mind back to the present, to the situation, and get it out of the gutter.

"Umm, maybe up to here," I say, pointing to what feels about right, high up on my side.

"You'll need to unhook your bra so I can get under the strap then," he tells me.

I feel the blood rush to my cheeks, hoping he doesn't think this was what I was getting at, that I'm hitting on him or something.

"Oh, well, that's okay. You can just stop at the edge then."

"I want you to be satisfied," he says, his words playing right into a game that I'm not even sure he's aware of.

Or is he?

"I'll be satisfied either way."

"I think it would look good if you took them all the way up. But that's just me. It's up to you. If you don't feel comfortable..."

Is that challenge in his voice, in his eyes? He's just looking at me. There's no change in his expression... But still, there's a subtle undercurrent here, running between us like churning river water. At least I think there is. But I can't be certain it's *real* and not imagined.

"It's not that," I begin.

"Good," he says, his lips curving at the corners. "You don't have to take it off, just unfasten it so you can move it up a little."

My breathing is shallow as I lever myself up on my elbow and reach around to unsnap my bra.

Thank God I didn't wear one that opens in the front!

The band around my torso loosens and I get back into position, bending my arms and folding both hands under my cheek as I scoot back toward Hemi again.

He wheels his chair in as close as he can get and, without a word, lays one arm across me and fires up the gun to freehand another string of beautiful butterflies.

Positioned like I am, there's really nowhere to look but at Hemi, which is fine by me. His eyes are sharp in concentration, his brow slightly furrowed. His tongue is caught between his teeth, barely visible at the edge of his sculpted lips. It makes me wonder what it would taste like—his tongue against the inside of his mouth.

"You doing all right?" he asks, not looking away from what he's doing.

"I'm fine."

"The higher I get onto your ribs, the more it will sting."

"I know. I'm prepared. It'll be worth it."

Hemi *does* glance up at me this time. He studies me curiously for a few seconds. His lips move as though he might say something, but he changes his mind and turns his attention back to his task. "Good," he finally says. "Just let me know if I need to stop."

I watch him as he works. I watch his face, I watch the competent way his hand holds me, the controlled way his fingers grip the gun. I watch the subtle shift of muscle beneath the skin in his forearms. I watch the way the light glints off his shiny dark brown hair. I admire the way the ends curl up on the longer pieces. My guess is that if Hemi didn't keep his hair short, it would have a wave to it. I can just imagine running my fingers through it, feeling the texture of it tickling my palms.

Hemi weaves up and down along my side, giving me a lazy ribbon of butterflies that winds ever higher toward my arm pit. When he reaches the place where my bra strap rests, he slips his fingers under the edge and pushes it up out of the way.

He inks a butterfly right at the edge of my bra line and then dips down, closer to the underside of my breast to do another. I feel my nipples tighten in response to the brush of his hand as he holds the material out of his way. I close my eyes and try to concentrate on something else. I focus on the painful sting of the needle as it penetrates my skin, leaving only beautiful color behind.

When the prickling stops, I open my eyes, confused. Hemi is watching me. He doesn't move. Not one muscle. He just looks at me. For a few seconds, I'm lost to everything but him—the look in his eyes, the way his hand feels hot as fire where it rests against my skin, the way my breast aches for him.

to slide his fingers up just a fraction of an inch.

After at least a full disconcerting minute of watching me without saying a single word, Hemi finally speaks, surprising me. "Maybe we should give you a rest and finish up later." I see him glance at the place above my head. "You've been here nearly two hours. That's a long time under the needle."

I'm shocked. It feels like I've been here only a few minutes. Or a lifetime. I'm not sure which. Kind of like the way I feel about Hemi. On the one hand, he's a perfect stranger who gives me butterflies of a different kind every time he looks at me. But on the other hand, in a way I feel like I know him. Like we're...connected. But not in the way one might think. I feel as though there's a tug of war going on between us as well as within us. I'm the sheltered girl trying to break free and really *live* for the first time in her life. I'm striving to put fear and reservation and hesitation aside in favor of seizing the moment.

But not Hemi.

I get the feeling that he's lived that way for a long time, that he seized all of life's moments until something happened to make him stop. Stop and take notice. And slow down. And distance himself.

I could be way off base. But if I'm not, how do two people like that meet in the middle? Or do they? Is that even possible?

Maybe I'm overthinking something that's merely fleeting. I mean, he's giving me a tattoo. He didn't ask me to move in, for God's sake.

But still...

I'm sure it's psychotic as hell that I don't want the night to end, that I'm willing to endure such discomfort to stay here a little longer.

You're pathetic. And desperate.

But that other voice inside me pipes up again, reminding me that there's no time like the present. No one is promised a tomorrow. We have today. Right now. Nothing more.

Hemi's hand over my ribs, rocking me gently back and forth, shakes me out of my stupor. I don't know how long I've been watching him, thinking, saying nothing, but I'm guessing too long. I nod and smile, pushing myself up into a sitting position, protectively holding one arm over my chest.

"Oh, sorry," Hemi says, whirling around in his chair to tend his equipment so he can give me a little privacy.

With my eyes glued to his broad shoulders, I right my bra and fasten it. I pull down my shirt then reach for my pants, tugging them up to where they belong.

Hemi stands to throw something into the garbage. When he turns back toward me, our eyes collide. That's when the impulse hits me. It slams into me like a gust of wind going ninety miles an hour. It steals my breath and makes my heart beat so hard that I can hear it in my ears. And for once in my life, I put thought aside. I don't overthink it. In fact, I don't think about it at all. Before I can change my mind, I slide off the table and step toward him. He doesn't move, doesn't back up, just stands tall and perfectly still. Watching me. I wonder if he knows what I'm thinking, how I'm feeling. What I'm about to do. And I wonder if he'll stop me.

But I don't overthink that either. If I do, I'll chicken out. And I can't afford to chicken out on him anymore.

I take another step toward him, building up the nerve to just do it, just kiss him. But Hemi surprises me when *he* takes the step that will bring us near enough to touch.

He's so close, my chest almost brushes his every time I inhale. I sway toward him the tiniest bit, craving the contact. With him. A perfect stranger.

"Sloane," he whispers, the sound of my name on his lips bringing chills to my arms again. He reaches out to push my hair back over my shoulder. His fingertips linger on the skin of my neck before they fall away.

“Hemi,” I sigh, melting into the heat of his eyes. I knew there was something between us. Well, I hoped. Hoped I wasn’t imagining it. But now I know I wasn’t. It’s there, staring out at me from behind his hooded midnight eyes. Blatant and unabashed, he wants me. And I want him, too.

“You need to walk out that door and never come back.”

My heart stops. Of all the things I thought he might say, this came out of nowhere. “What?” I ask in a small, uncertain voice.

“You need to leave. And don’t look back.”

I scramble to recover. “But...but what about the rest of my tattoo?”

“I’m not talking about your tattoo and you know it.”

“Then what *are* you talking about?” I inquire, playing dumb to save what’s left of my crumbling pride.

“I’m talking about you. And me. This. Us.”

“There *is no* us.”

“There will be in about thirty seconds if you don’t get the hell out of here.”

“What if I don’t want to leave?” I’m confused. Is he saying that he wants me? Or that he wants me to go?

“I’m not asking.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do you want me to go?”

“Because guys like me change girls like you.”

“Girls like me?”

“Innocent girls.”

“What if I’m not that innocent?”

His lips quirk in a wry grin. “Oh, you’re *exactly* that innocent. I can practically smell it on you. Sweet, pure, untouched. And, if I’m being honest, I’d like nothing better than to taste that on the tip of my tongue.”

“Then what’s stopping you?”

I watch him wrestle with...something. “I don’t have the time or the inclination to get involved in ruining someone else’s life.”

“What makes you think you’d ruin my life?”

“Oh, trust me. I would.”

“But—”

“But nothing. For tonight, I’ll be the good guy you need me to be. Whether you know you need it or not. I’m asking you to leave, Sloane. But I promise you—*promise you*—that if you so much as darken my doorway again, I won’t let you walk back out again.”

I’m torn between heady elation and harsh rejection. “Hemi—”

“Go, little girl,” he says softly. “Go before I change my mind.”

A persistent buzzing wakes me. I swat toward the sound and hear my phone clatter as it hits the floor. With bleary eyes, I lean over the side of the bed to look down at it. I have to blink three times before I can focus on the lighted screen. I note two things. Number one, it's only fifteen minutes until eleven. It's too damn early for anyone to be calling me. Everyone that has my phone number knows I work at night and sleep late in the morning. Number two, it's my older brother, Reese. Wanting an update, I'm sure.

I curse under my breath when my head pounds as I lean over the side of the bed to reach for the phone. I roll back up quickly, throwing an arm over my eyes as I slide my thumb across the screen to answer it.

"What?"

"You're still in bed?"

"Hell yes, I'm still in bed. You know I don't get in until after three most nights."

"You've got more than seven hours already, you pussy. You'll be fine."

"I didn't go straight to sleep, asshole."

"Damn, you're grouchy. You must've been drinking."

Reese has always complained that drinking makes me pissy. I guess maybe he's right. I feel like I could drive my fist through a solid steel wall.

"What do you want?" I ask, ignoring his observation. Lucky for him, he lets it go.

"Just checking on...things."

"'Things' are fine. No change."

"Are you *any* closer?"

"You say that like it's easy to get close to these people when it's anything *but* easy. They're naturally suspicious. It's what they do, who they are."

"And I'm sure *you* don't inspire confidence as a trustworthy guy."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You ink skin. You're a step up from a criminal in some people's eyes."

"Oh, right," I say drolly. "This sounds familiar."

"I didn't say *I* feel that way, just that some people do."

"Well then 'some people' can kiss my puckered ass."

"Look, I didn't call to pick a fight. Just...just keep me posted."

"I will," I squeeze through my gritted teeth.

"And lay off the sauce."

"Suck it, dickweed," I murmur before I hang up.

I peek out from under my arm long enough to hit the disconnect button. I'm sure once I get sober and up, I'll feel like shit about this conversation, but right now, I'm just ill.

Reese is a good guy and I love him. We actually get along pretty well. Normally. Our relationship has just been a little strained since I moved to the Atlanta area. We've all been under a lot of pressure and stress. Losing Ollie changed everything.

Already tired of my thoughts, I sit up quickly. Too quickly. My head spins and throbs. I press my palms to my temples and squeeze, wishing I could make it stop.

"Damn you, Sloane," I mutter into the emptiness of my bedroom.

I blame her. One hundred percent. What the hell was she thinking, coming into the shop, looking so sweet and innocent?

But I know it's not that. The sweet and innocent I can handle. That's never appealed to me. It's the sweet and innocent *combined* with this innate sexiness that she has that's tempting me. Tempting me

bad. There's a little gleam in her eye that says she wants me to show her naughty rather than nice. And oh, how I could show her naughty. I could show her naughty like she's never even dreamed before.

But a girl like her deserves nice, too. And naughty's all I've got. It's all I'm interested in. Especially now. Which means I need to stay away from her. I need to deny myself the pleasure of her. And I'm not used to denying myself *anything* that I want. Including women.

Sloane might have to be the first.

And I like it even less than I thought I would.

Ignoring the still-drunk swim behind my eyes, I get up and head for the shower. For the cool shower.

The only good thing I can think of when I open my eyes is that it's Thursday. Which means tomorrow is Friday. Which means no classes. Which means I can sleep in.

I roll over and look at the clock. Three minutes until my alarm goes off. This is the fourth morning I've awakened before it sounds its annoying buzz. And it's the *fourteenth* morning I've awakened thinking of Hemi.

I haven't seen him or talked to him since three Saturdays ago. When he told me to leave. I did. Even though I didn't want to. I wanted to stay, to explore what I saw in his eyes, felt in his touch. Explore all the things he hinted at but didn't say.

But I didn't. I left. And now I get to wake up every morning with the regret of my decision.

Throwing back the covers, I head for the shower.

Less than an hour later, I'm climbing into the passenger side seat of Sarah's truck.

"Good gawd, couldn't you find anything with bigger tires?" I gripe as I struggle to pull myself through the door.

"I'm a country girl. It's what we country girls do."

"I'm a country girl, too, and I don't have a big-ass truck."

"That's because your dad doesn't think a lady ought to drive a truck."

She shifts into gear and zooms away from the curb. She's got me there. That's precisely what my dad thinks.

"Like he knows. I think he just googled 'how to be a lady' when Mom died and took bits and pieces from every article he could find and foisted it all on me."

Sarah turns her curly blonde head and narrows her black-lined, powder-blue eyes on me. "You're probably right, but he still did a good job with you. You're a lady, that's for sure."

"Maybe I'm tired of being a lady."

She grins. "Now that's what I'm talkin' about!"

I laugh. "I think you're enjoying my rebellion more than I am."

"Oh, I'm enjoying it all right. Finally...*finally* we get to live a little."

"You could've been living all this time."

"And leave my best friend behind? Not a chance."

"You're all talk. You weren't gonna do *anything* until I did it first."

"Nuh-huh."

"Yuh-huh."

"Hey, I'm not the virgin here."

"No, but I didn't see *you* getting a tattoo."

"That's not my idea of wild. Besides, look how that turned out."

"What do you mean? It hasn't 'turned out' at all yet. I just haven't decided what I'm going to do."

"Yes, you have. You just won't admit it."

"Won't admit what?"

"That you're too chicken shit to go back in there and put him to the test."

"I'm not too chicken shit. I'm just giving it some time."

"Time to what? Ferment? This is sex, not wine, Sloane."

"I know, but..."

"But nothing. What happened to all this 'spread my wings' and 'seize the day' and 'no regrets' shit?"

"Nothing happened to it. It's just that...I mean, he asked me to leave. It's not easy to come back after something like that."

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