

## Conscience

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“**F**uck,” Joseph grumbled when he stopped the truck and looked in the rearview mirror. He should just keep going. Everyone who was dumb enough to go out in this snowstorm deserved whatever happened to them. The form lying in the snow didn’t move anymore. What if this was just an ambush? Some fucked up plan to rob good Samaritans? People were monsters, he knew that better than anyone else, but the person still didn’t move...

“Fuck,” he cursed again under his breath and put the truck in reverse, slowly backing up until he was right next to the form that got slowly covered by a thick layer of snow. If he concentrated, he could make out the clouds of warm breath leaving their lips, small clouds from shallow breaths. Joseph glanced at Moose who only gave him one of his cold stares. This dog was a beacon of morality.

“I hate you sometimes.”

Moose only yipped uncharacteristically high for a German Shepherd and used his snout to push Joseph closer to the truck door.

He pulled the zipper of his heavy parka up roughly and

unlocked the door before sliding out into the biting cold. It was poison for his stiff leg, but Moose was right, he couldn't simply let this stranger freeze to death. In the end, he was just a good Samaritan at heart. With a groan Joseph bent down and shook the person, a woman it seemed. She didn't react.

"Fuck," he muttered a third time and tried pulling her upright. "Hey, wake up! You can't stay out here or you—"

He stopped in the middle of the sentence when he saw the heavy bruises and blood covering her pale face. Jesus, whatever had happened to her had been bad, very bad. Joseph used his teeth to pull his glove off and checked for a pulse. It was there but hardly detectable. Warmth. She needed warmth as quickly as possible.

He grunted as he hoisted her snow-laden body up over his broad shoulder and carried her to the backdoor of his truck. This close his nose picked up on her sweet, albeit distressed, scent and he closed his eyes with a silent curse. An Omega. Just what he needed.

Carefully, he placed her over the backbench under the watchful eyes of Moose. Joseph looked at her for a second and decided he didn't need his parka as much as she did. Shrugging it off, he placed it over her like a blanket—her small form drowning in the thick material—before climbing into the driver's seat. He locked the doors again and pumped up the heater, letting it blast out of the vents to help her warmup. Moose never stopped staring at her while Joseph cautiously drove the last two miles home. He didn't intend on leaving the safety of his log house for at least two weeks. Having made the last necessary purchases today, before the storm would reach its peak tomorrow night, he had been positive he'd get some work done undisturbed. He could probably throw that plan out the window now with his unexpected guest. Joseph glanced over his shoulder to the Omega, her breath still leaving her lips in shallow puffs and

one side of her face so beaten up that she hardly looked human from this angle.

His chest clenched and he needed to look away and roll his shoulders to work against the tension creeping into his muscles. She had obviously had a very good reason to be out here in this storm, he thought, as anger pooled in the pit of his stomach and seeped into his scent. Joseph remembered what it felt like to be a victim.

Moose nudged him with his head, drawing his attention back to the here and now before his master could slip too deeply into the painful memories that would haunt him for the rest of his days. Joseph ruffled his thick fur around his neck with a half-smile before leaving the road to drive the last bit up the winding driveway toward his secluded home. He didn't look forward to carrying her up the couple of stairs to the porch, but he couldn't leave her in his truck either. So, biting the bullet, he made the first trip without her, bringing in his groceries and leaving the door open for his second round.

She let out a soft cry when Joseph pulled her out of the back of the truck. He checked if she was awake, but she didn't react to his words. With another grunt, he lifted her bridal style and clenched his jaws tightly every time he needed to put both their weights on his stiff leg. She wasn't heavy by any means, but his own weight was often already too much to walk longer distances.

Joseph brought her into his bedroom and was pleased to see that the fire he had left burning in the fireplace was still glimmering. He added another log, retrieved a small bowl with warm water and a cloth, before he began pulling her wet and cold clothes off, mindful of any injuries that might still be hidden underneath those thin layers. Why had she not put on something warmer? She must have been on the run, panicked, he decided and clenched his jaw tightly.

Moose sat beside them, watching attentively for any indicator

that she might wake up. Surely, he wanted to be the first one to say hi. This dog was just a giant teddy bear sometimes.

Joseph shook his head and concentrated back on the task at hand. He checked her breathing and pulse before proceeding with undressing, and washing the blood off her face to see if she was still bleeding. Some still seeped out from a cut in her eyebrow which he quickly patched with a few butterfly closures. First, her blood-soaked sweater, then her tight and equally thin leggings, which provided absolutely no protection against the cold, ended up in a soggy pile on the floor. Joseph frowned at the developing and already almost healed bruises covering her chest, arms, and legs.

“Who treated you like this?” he asked in a whisper and traced the clear outline of a handprint wrapped around her upper arm. Somebody hated her.

Her low grunt startled him and he checked once again if she had woken up, but she remained in her deep slumber, shivering now that she was left in only her underwear. La Perla and Victoria Secret. too expensive for someone who wouldn't be missed soon. Joseph glanced at the tag on the inside of her coat. Armani. What was someone able to afford all these things doing in the middle of a snowstorm?

He would ask her when she woke up. Now it was still most important to warm her. But before that happened, he needed to gather evidence. He would not let anyone accuse him of beating up a much smaller Omega, so he retrieved his phone from the mudroom and snapped plenty of photographs of her injuries, holding a quarter next to them for scale references. Since he wanted to get her into warm clothes as quickly as possible, he didn't bother climbing up the stairs into his office to search for a proper ruler.

After he was satisfied with the number of pictures he had, Joseph limped over to his dresser and pulled out a sweater that would easily reach her mid-thigh, but to make sure, he also

maneuvered a pair of oversized sweats around her bottom half. The more layers, the better. He examined her feet for any signs of frostbite and was relieved to find none before slipping on heavy wool socks he usually used when he would be outside the whole day. Before leaving, he draped two blankets and a comforter over her and fed the fire another log.

He would check on her over the next few hours and see if she developed a fever. She looked troubled in her unconscious state, a frown pulling on her eyebrows and the corners of her mouth.

“You are safe now,” Joseph told her from the door, knowing she wasn’t hearing him. He motioned for Moose to follow him out of the room. The dog refused at first, wanting to stay and watch over her, but he eventually followed his master out of the room. Joseph understood his desire to stay close to her. He couldn’t give in though. He lived alone for a reason after all.