

By the time Rayner bolted through the door, Faith had gotten her ducks back in a row. She had fallen asleep briefly, only to be woken up by a nightmare. The man who had kidnapped her hovered above her bed, telling her she was never going to wake up. She had eventually woken up, proving him wrong, and proceeded to have a serious meltdown that constituted her trying to find the light switch, hitting a bunch of buttons on the phone and somehow reaching Rayner.

“I’m sorry,” she said when he flew through the door. “I’m sorry. I-I had a nightmare...”

He stared at her, breathing hard, his dark eyes scanning the room.

Faith crossed her arms over her chest and looked at the floor, as if by doing so she could keep from throwing herself at Rayner and begging him to like her. She looked him over. He stood before her, the most perfect man she had ever seen. His huge chest and his feet were bare, his jeans barely hanging on to his hips. His blond hair fell around his face, and he pushed it back with his hand. The hoops in his ears glittered, along with the hoops in each of his nipples. And, good God, there was something so terribly sexy about them.

The flush of embarrassment crept up her face, and she wished she had waited even a minute before calling him.

“You’re okay,” he said gruffly.

She nodded, tears stinging her eyes again.

“Faith?”

The tears burst forward, as did her anger, angst, and fear. “You know, I thought that while I was trapped in that hell, that maybe, just maybe, we shared something. The way you acted like you cared was a very real performance, Rayner. Oscar worthy.”

His silence only made her angrier.

“You told me to hold on. For you, Rayner! You told me to hold on for you, and I did. And then once I was back among the living, you put as much distance between us as you could!” She began pacing, the tears of anger flowing freely now. She stopped and met his eyes. “Was it all a big trick? Just to make sure I lived? And if it was, then why did you do it? To make yourself feel better for not letting someone die?”

When he didn’t answer, she yelled, “Okay, if that wasn’t it, then what was it,

Rayner? Am I that awful to you? Do I disgust you that much?"

She knew she was very close to hysteria, and she needed him to leave.

"Get out!" she screamed. She listened to the shrill in her voice and realized that, no, she wasn't close to hysteria, but it had arrived at full throttle. "Get the fuck out!" she screamed. "I hate you, Rayner! I hate you for making me feel this way!"

The tears were streaming down her face, and she felt like hitting something. She saw through the waterfalls from her eyes that Rayner stood at the door staring at her like she was some strange, new animal he had just encountered at the zoo. He didn't say anything for a moment, but then quietly asked, "How do I make you feel, Faith?"

Somehow, this angered her even more. How dare he ask that? Why did he care? He'd made it pretty clear that he didn't. He'd thrown her in this pretty room all by herself and done his best to keep his distance from her, sometimes acting as if she didn't exist.

"How dare you!" she said, marching over to him. "How dare you ask that?"

She brought her fist back and launched it forward, but Rayner caught her fist before it made contact.

They stood at an impasse. Faith ready to let loose all of her aggression, anger, and sorrow, but Rayner not letting her.

Their eyes locked, and neither moved or spoke for a moment.

"You listen to me, Faith," he said in a quiet controlled voice laced with anger. "You think I don't find you attractive?"

She didn't say anything.

"You're wrong," he bit out. He stepped closer so that their bodies were almost touching. He picked up a lock of hair and ran it through his fingers, his eyes never leaving hers. He dropped it, then ran his hand over her cheek. As he loomed over her, touching her tenderly, he looked angry—wickedly angry. His dark eyes glared at her as though they had fire burning in the center of them. "You, Faith Cloudfoot, are the most beautiful thing I have ever laid eyes on." He took her fist and slowly opened it so her palm was flat. He then took her hand and placed it on the front of his jeans.

"You feel that, Faith?"

Oh, yes, she felt it. It was long and thick, and her body exploded in a primal need and desire. Her mouth went dry and she was certain she wasn't breathing.

“That has been my constant companion since the second I laid eyes on you.”

He took her hand away and curled it into a fist again, holding it in his hand in the exact way he had caught it.

“I'm achingly aware of how beautiful you are, Faith. I fucking *ache*,” he practically hissed. He took his thumb and ran it over her bottom lip.

“It's taken everything I have in me to not make love to you, not to *fuck* you,” he said in almost a whisper. He leaned his head down so that their mouths were close, and she swore she was going to get the kiss she so desperately wanted.

Just before their lips met, he moved to the side and kissed her cheek. “But I can't,” he whispered fiercely. He took her earlobe between his lips and bit it softly. Chills shimmied up her spine, and she felt her knees ready to buckle. She tried to pull her hand from his, but he only held on tighter. “It's too dangerous for both of us,” he whispered slowly into her ear. “You could end up killed, and that, my beautiful Faith, is something I'm not willing to let happen.”

He looked down at her, and she finally found her voice. “How?” she whispered, “How could I end up dead?”

Rayner knew what he was doing was wrong, but he simply couldn't help himself. He should have left the room a while back, but seeing Faith standing in the middle of the room in that little blue nightshirt and watching her get angry at him had jacked him up to levels he had never known before. Holy Christ, he wanted her even more when she yelled at him, and when she had come at him with that little fist, oblivious to their size difference...it had sent him right to the edge. He would have to explore the psychiatry of that later. Right now, he was busy teetering on a very dangerous slope. He just wanted Faith. He didn't care about consequences, what would happen later, or what would happen in three minutes. He was only in the moment, and the moment consisted of Faith's hand on his raging erection.

He wanted those lips, but he knew if he kissed her, he would be a goner. A total goner. Game over, hit the lights because his party would be over. So he kissed her cheek,

which was soft and warm and just a little damp from all those tears that had ripped at his heart. He hadn't meant to actually nip at her earlobe.

He needed to disengage and get away from her.

Instead he placed his hand at the nape of her neck and pulled her forward—the only thing separating them was their hands, her little fist wrapped in his big paw.

"Rayner—"

"Don't say another word, Faith," he whispered. "Just don't."

He closed his eyes and brought a lock of her hair up to his nose, smelling the fresh mountain breeze scent he had come to associate with Faith. His chest grew tight, his breathing became more labored as the silky strands whispered across his skin. He wanted her with a ferocity that bordered on insanity. What beat within him now was nothing but raw male need, all pretenses of manners and gentlemanly etiquette long gone.

When he felt her hand lay flat on his chest, and she turned her head and rested her cheek on his chest, he thought back to his dream and how good it felt to have Faith touch him, to be near her. To have it happen in real life was a zillion and one times better than the dream.

"I think I'm in love with you, Rayner," she whispered.

He knew that from the ceremony to get her spirit back in her body. It still shook him to his core to hear her say it. His skin developed goose bumps; his knees went weak at her words.

"You can't love me, Faith," he said into her hair.

"It's too late," she breathed into his chest. "Too late."

He knew what he had to do. He needed this to end, to come to a halt, a full stop with brakes screeching. He thought his heart might break, crack, or just fucking stop with his next words. "But it's not too late to let me go," he whispered. He let go of her neck and hand and stepped away. He didn't meet her eyes as he opened the door and stepped out.