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About 1,000 words

## **DAMAGED GOODS**

by Tammi Lea

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A tapping at my window jolts me out a deep sleep. I slide out of bed and nudge the curtain aside to peek out my bedroom window. My breath catches at the sight of the tall, dark figure standing below me. Fear grips me, but then I catch a few of his shaggy blonde strands twinkling under the streetlight. I smile. I throw on some clothes and smooth my fingers over my tangled mess of curls. In my rush to get to him I miscalculate my step and the floor creaks. I wince. My heart is a sounding drum in my ears as I listen for any sign of my parents. When my dad's soft snores caress my ears I tiptoe down the stairs.

I step out into the night and the icy wind cuts right through my denim jeans. I shiver. The streetlight flickers with the beat of my heart and trickles down onto the garbage-speckled asphalt. His long, lean frame is bathed in a rustic glow against the slate sky. It illuminates his long, narrow nose and sharp, angular jaw. He's art, a canvas of hard lines and rough edges. But it's the bottle in his hand that almost brings me to my knees. I sigh.

I stare into the deep, dark depths of his brown eyes. "What are you doing here, Jimmy?"

He holds out his hand. "Come with me," he says.

I cross my arms over my chest. "No, you're drunk."

"I'm not drunk," he says. "I just needed a beer, okay?"

"You should have chosen me, instead." I shake my head.

He sways on his feet. "I'm here aren't I?"

I turn to go back inside. "Go home, Jimmy," I say over my shoulder.

“You’re my home,” he says.

I pause. “Say that again when you’re sober.”

Police sirens scream in the distance and goose bumps prickle my skin.

He fists his hands at his sides and his jaw ticks. “I almost killed him tonight.” His voice breaks and my heart sinks.

“Who?”

He takes a swig. “My dad.” He rubs his hand down his face and then grips the back of his neck. “He took me on one of his hunting trips.” His hands form quotation marks around ‘hunting trips.’

The light casts dancing shadows off his sunken cheeks and hooded eyes. His hair is matted, and his scruffy jeans hang loosely off his narrow waist. His elbows and knees jut out at awkward angles and are a reminder of how long he’s been avoiding me.

I stare at him in confusion. “I thought that’s what you wanted?”

“He hunts people, Emily.”

I gasp. “What?”

He says nothing.

“I mean everyone knows your dad is bad news but a murderer?”

“Yeah, anyone that is Muslim is a primary target.”

He leans against the streetlight and the beer bottle tumbles from his hand. “I held a gun against some kids temple while my dad held one at my back. He was primed and ready to kill me if I failed. In that moment I realized I was a tool, and a weapon to him. Nothing more.”

He looks right through me, and his voice dips. "So, I told the kid to run, swiped the other gun out of my dad's hand and held them both against my dad's forehead. He called me damaged goods and I called him a monster. The only thing stopping me from pulling the trigger was you, Emily. I couldn't handle you looking at me the way you look at him." He pounds his fist into his chest. "What does that make me?"

"It makes you human." I take a step forward.

He steps back and continues. "On the drive home he blindfolded me and put me in hand cuffs."

He shoves his hands in his pocket and I wrap my arms around my stomach. "The car slams to a halt and the next thing I know the gun goes off. He yanks me out of the car and shoves me forward. A homeless guy lay motionless in a box with a crown of blood spilling onto the grimy concrete and a hole in his head. His blood is on my hands, Em."

I shake my head at his words. "You let that boy live, you gave him a chance. Your father took that man's life and that's on him." I grab his chin and force him to look at me. "You are not your father."

He looses a breath and then his large frame sinks to the ground in a guttural sob. He throws his head back and screams. My heart cracks as I watch him break apart at the seams. It wounds me and echoes in my chest.

I run to him, but he pushes me away. I shove him back and wrap my legs and arms around him. His shoulders shake and tears pool in my eyes when he folds himself

into me. The chill in the air clings to my clothes, and seeps under my skin until it settles in my bones.

“Let’s get out of here,” he says.

“Where to?”

“Anywhere.” He stares down at the ground and then looks beyond me. “Doesn’t matter.”

“It matters,” Jimmy. I fist the collar of his shirt. “You matter to me.”

He swivels his head, and when our eyes connect even the air holds its breath at the intensity. My cheeks heat, but we are running out of time.

I grab his cell phone out of his pocket and place it in his hands. “We owe it to that man to do the right thing.” I place it against his chest. “I’m not going anywhere. “I’ll be right here.”

He nods.

“I came here to give you a goodbye.” His fingertips trace a path from the shell of my ear, to the curve of my jaw, and down to the soft spot on my neck. “But, you’ve given me hope instead.”