



Flock And Roll

Author: Vicki Hilton

Category: Romance

Description: Rowena Swan, Tuft Swallow's reigning crochet queen, is living her best life—or so she thinks. She's got a thriving Etsy store, her independence, and a firm resolve NOT to pine over her brother's hockey-playing best friend, Brody Flockhart. But when he returns to their quirky small town, sidelined by injury and questioning his future, long forgotten sparks reignite.

In a move to spend more time with the woman he's always loved, Brody convinces Rowena to join a roller derby tryout—with him as her coach. The snag? Rowena sets her own challenge, and he has to learn to crochet.

As they navigate the ups and downs of small-town life, roller rinks and crafting circles, will Brody realize he can't find true happiness in fame and fortune? And will Rowena see that she's worthy of love, just as she is?

Total Pages (Source): 82

1

RO

“Shit, shit, shit!” My voice mixed with the sizzle of the eggs in the pan, oil spitting furiously. Damn Gran’s rickety stove. Even after my brother stacked some coasters under one of its feet, the old dinosaur still leaned like the titanic.

The oil had made it through my T-shirt, and I fanned at my chest, wafting a hand over my boobs as if it would relieve the burn. My night wasn’t exactly turning out how I planned. I was already up way later than I’d wanted, and adding laundry to my pre-bed to-do list made my shoulders sink. I’d deal with stains in the morning. It was safe to say nobody would ever utter the words “domestic goddess” and Rowena Swan in the same sentence.

After checking the oil hadn’t left burns, I picked up my giant slushy cup from the counter. The paper straw sagged a little as I took a slug.

I’d spent the evening over at Eve’s place. What was supposed to be a late afternoon coffee had turned into a Bridgerton marathon. Season one, of course. The Duke of Hastings was a sight that never got old. I’d left Eve’s house just in time to get a raspberry ice at the Plume ‘n Zoom on the way home. Free slushies were one perk of being an employee at Tuft Swallow’s only gas station.

I gripped the cup, inhaling the smell of the eggs as I pushed them around the pan. The house was quiet. The only light illuminating the kitchen was the bulb over the range hood. Coop and Gran must already be in bed. It usually took a stampede of

wildebeest to wake my brother, but I didn't like to chance it. He was great as big brothers went, but could be grumpy as hell if he didn't get his sleep.

I completed another lap of the pan with my spatula when a tingle at the back of my neck froze me mid-sweep. The hair at the base of my ponytail lifted as if someone traced ghostly fingers along my nape. I wrapped my hand tighter around the plastic in my palm. Had somebody got into the house?

Craning my neck, I listened for footsteps or heavy breathing. Maybe the grind of an ax being dragged along floorboards.

Nothing. I shook my head. I was being ridiculous. If someone had gotten in, surely I would've noticed. Besides, I had no hope of defending myself with just a plastic flipper. And this was Tuft Swallow, not the Bronx. We'd won the safest town in Hawthorne County fourteen years in a row. As far as I knew, there'd never been a murder here. Particularly one in which the victim had been unalived frying eggs.

I relaxed my grip on the spatula, but a creak of wood and a low, husky voice sounded behind me.

"Hello, Ro."

My heart somersaulted, and I sucked in a quick breath as I whirled around with the flipper raised high, poised for action. The next second, icy cold hit my chest. I gasped, glancing down. In my terror, I'd squeezed my slushie cup in a death grip. Instead of fending off an ax murderer, all I'd done was send a dripping pool of red ice down my front.

Ignoring the cold at my chest, not to mention the mess, I narrowed my eyes into the gloom. There was a figure in the doorway. A large silhouette. The light from the range hood didn't reach that far, but when the husky voice came again, a prickling of

recognition spread across my skin.

“Are you authorized to handle that spatula, or will I have to disarm you, ma’am?”

The familiar deep voice caressed my ears, all easy and laced with a smile. My heart stuttered against my ribs.

It couldn’t be.

I lowered my hand, and the figure stepped forward. Two sparkling blue eyes and a handsome face emerged out of the shadows. The thin light above the stove cast a line along cheekbones so sharp they could carve a masterpiece. As he drew closer, a long-forgotten scent, a soapy mix of lemons and mint, reached my nose.

With a jackhammer going off in my chest, I put down the crushed slushie cup and groped blindly for the light switch on the wall behind me. My fingers flitted over the cold tiles of the wall, and I almost knocked over a jar of pickles before I found the switch.

I blinked, my eyes adjusting to the light. “Brody?”

I swept my gaze over his mussed-up fair hair, bare chest, and the hint of a smile on his lips.

His smirk grew wider, though, as he looked at my hand. “I’m not sure a spatula is much of a defense, but I like your spirit. You planning on murdering someone?”

I steadied my breath. “You frightened the life out of me. You can’t just go creeping up on people in the dark.”

Especially people whose hearts you’d crushed five years ago without a backward

glance.

He raked his eyes over my face and down to my chest, where they lingered. I followed his gaze. My white T-shirt now had a pink, raspberry-scented splotch right in its center, and my hardened nipples strained against the soggy cotton. With my cheeks on fire, I crossed one arm over my chest, covering my breasts.

Brody's eyes traveled back to my face, and I mentally eye-rolled. Yay for my lack of makeup and super-shiny skin. Eve had suggested we try face packs, and I wasn't sure the remnants weren't still mingling in my hairline.

My heart sank. This wasn't how I wanted him to see me. Not after all these years. I'd followed his career on TV and in the papers, but we hadn't seen each other in person for ages.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

He smirked, and a dimple lit up one side of his face. "I could ask you the same thing. Isn't it a bit late to be cooking? He took in my old tote bag and the pair of Converse that lay abandoned near the kitchen door. "I hope your date walked you home?"

I scoffed and shifted on my bare feet. He sounded like my brother right about now. "I was with Eve, watching TV."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:47 pm

His lips curved even further as if remembering my best friend. “Well, I hope you paid more attention to the show than your dinner.”

“Sorry?”

Brody nodded toward the stove. The bitter smell of charred eggs filled the kitchen.

“Oh, crap!” I spun back around and moved the pan to the back burner with a loud squeak of metal.

Brody moved in closer, peering over my shoulder. “What are you making?”

A fresh wave of lemon and mint washed over me, and I turned back to Brody, my gaze resting on his chiseled chest. “Pecs.”

His eyes widened. “Pardon?”

“Eggs! I’m making eggs.” My face burned anew at the almost squeal of my voice and the smug grin on his lips. Pecs? Wonderful. Freud would have a field day with me. But, I could rescue the situation. Get my composure back. Act breezy. “Do you want some?”

Brody quirked a fair brow. “I’m not sure that’s the sort of question you should ask when you’re dressed like a contestant in a satanic wet T-shirt competition.”

He chuckled at his joke, a gravelly sound that vibrated in the air between us, and I swallowed hard. Did he think this was a time for laughter? I mean, why was he even

smiling? Or here, for that matter? He'd practically given me a heart attack, criticized my timekeeping and my cooking skills, and now he was laughing at me?

I couldn't blame him, though. "Do you want some?" was hardly the best question to ask anyone when your boobs were practically on display. Particularly when the man standing eight inches away was a heartbreaker. One of the NHL's most famous pin-up boys. One of its brightest stars, with the ego to match.

I closed my mouth, and he gave me a wink. The corners of his eyes crinkled, and I swear the angels sang in heaven at the sight.

"It's nice to see you, Ro."

The gravel left his voice, replaced by an easy lilt, and hell if I didn't smile, too. Brody still had the power to melt my insides with one simple gesture. But before I could correct my poor choice of words. Take back my questionable question. A harsh light barreled into us as the kitchen lit up.

"What's all the noise? Oh, hey, Brody. I see you found Ro. What the hell happened?"

My brother rubbed the back of his neck as he padded toward the kitchen counter. I swear, Brody couldn't have moved away from me any faster, even if he'd worn his skates. Losing his closeness was like stepping into a draft. Chilly.

"I had an accident," I said, clutching the yellow spatula tighter, hoping Coop wouldn't see the trembling in my fingers. A small furrow appeared between his brows, and I sighed. His big brother alarm had gone off. I was almost twenty-four, but in his eyes, I may as well have still been in middle school.

Maybe I could have come up with a more impressive response. A better explanation for why I was in the kitchen standing beside his half-naked best friend, wielding a

kitchen utensil. For goodness' sake, my T-shirt resembled a scene from a horror movie. But admitting that Brody Flockhart had damn near taken my breath away over a pan of cremated eggs wasn't something Cooper needed to know.

I looked at Coop. "Why is Brody here?"

Before he could reply, a second voice carried down the hallway. "Cooper? Ro?"

I sucked my lips in. Great. Now Gran was awake, too. She'd been sick last month and needed her sleep. She shuffled into the kitchen in fluffy slippers and a dressing gown, curlers nestling into her silver hair at unruly angles.

"What's going on?" she asked, her gaze settling on my chest. I looked down at the red mess on my front.

"Ro said she had an accident," Coop's voice was flat, and his eyebrows raised. He pointed to the towel that hung off the stove door. "You better clean yourself up." His gaze swung to Brody and then back to me. Surely, he couldn't hear the hammering in my heart from Brody winking at me, but I felt every accusation in his stare. Every question. Coop loved to play the alpha-male of the house.

I finally put down the yellow spatula. "I had some trouble with my slushie cup. Someone should complain to the manufacturer. Ask them to make the cardboard thicker. Again, though, what is Brody doing here?" And why was nobody else surprised?

"Is that all?" Gran gave a half-yawn. "What's burning?"

Brody huffed a laugh, and the corners of his mouth trembled. The urge to smack him over the head with the frying pan filled my entire body.

“It’s my fault, Mrs. Swan. I gave Rowena a fright. She wasn’t expecting to see me. I probably freaked her out.” All heads turned to Brody now. He leaned against the counter, massive arms folded across his bare chest, his gray sweatpants clinging to his muscled thighs like a second skin. I swallowed. Just like the Duke of Hastings, the sight of Brody Flockhart never got old.

“Nonsense. I’m sure Rowena is pleased to see you. It hasn’t been that long since your last visit.”

“Nearly five years,” I murmured before Gran’s probing eyes had me scrambling for words. “I think. Something like that. Oh, I don’t know, I haven’t been counting.” I was terrible at lying, and I swear Brody’s stare burned into my profile. I turned my head toward him. “Why are you back? And in our house?”

He cleared his throat and unwound his arms. “It was a last-minute thing. I’m here for a visit. Kind of like a holiday.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:47 pm

“And when he called your brother to say he was in town, I invited Brody to stay here at the house.” Gran reached out an arm and moved toward Brody, tucking herself in at his side. She gazed up at him, the apples of her cheeks glowing. She’d always had a soft spot for my brother’s best friend. Most of the town did.

“A visit?” I cringed at the high pitch of my voice.

“Yes, and I would’ve told you, Ro, but you were at Eve’s, and you had your phone switched off.” Gran flicked her brows skyward.

Guilty as charged. My phone being off was probably for the best. If I’d learned Brody was here, I would’ve camped at Eve’s until he left.

He was fresh out of rehab. Everybody knew that. A leg injury took him out of the game for months. He was due back to histeam soon to start the new season. But, if that was the case, what was he doing in Tuft Swallow? He should be training, not taking a holiday.

I wrung my hands. “And you’ll be staying here? Not the Owls Inn? You know they did a renovation recently to get rid of the damp. The rooms are beautiful, and they’ve added a gym. I think you’d like it.”

Gran tutted. “Rowena Swan, he’ll do no such thing.”

My heart plummeted. I could kiss goodbye any peace of mind or wholesome thoughts then.

“Brody will stay with us.” She patted him on his chest. “I’ve set him up in the den. He doesn’t have anyone in town anymore, so we’re the nearest thing he has to family.”

I stifled a sigh. She was probably right. But it brought little comfort knowing that the only man I’d ever loved would be sleeping under the same roof as me.

“But the couch in there is terrible. Lumpy. And what about the gophers? I think I heard them in the walls last week. They’ll keep him awake.”

Coop huffed a flat laugh. “We don’t have gophers. If you’re so worried about his comfort, how about you offer Brody your bed? You can move into the den instead.”

No. Just no. I shook my head. There was no way I’d have him poking around in my room. What if he found the scrapbook I’d kept of him when I was a kid? Stumbled across my old diaries and the countless entries I’d written about him. I sighed. “The den will be fine, I guess.”

“Brody is staying with us, and that’s that,” said Gran.

“I do really appreciate it, Mrs. Swan,” Brody said, dipping his head to kiss the top of Gran’s.

“Call me Maggie. You’re all grown up now.”

If I remembered correctly, the last time I saw Brody, he’d already grown up.

“Do you know how long you’ll stay?” I asked, my gaze traveling to meet him.

A look crossed his face like a cloud moving over the sun. “I’m not sure yet. It could be a week. Maybe more.”

My body sagged. I could survive for a few days. A week at the absolute max, but anything longer would be sheer torture. While Brody was in town, staying in my house, I needed to keep as far away from him as possible. But knowing my luck, he'd move in permanently. Add his name to the mailbox and buy his own pipe and slippers. And worst of all, run ragged over my heart for a second time.

2

RO

Each step up to bed dragged on as if I were marching up Everest. It was as if all the years of heartache and regret since Brody left town were strapped to my back, and I was running out of oxygen.

How had the evening gone so awry? All I wanted to do was snack on some eggs before showering and hitting the sack. But then, the one man who could turn me inside out sauntered up in the dark and whispered, "Hello, Ro."

Brody had been a permanent presence in my house for as long as I could remember. Ever since the third grade, he and Coop were inseparable. As the youngest in the family, I'd hero-worshiped him just as much as I did my brother. If not more, because Brody shined the brightest. He took all the dares, pulled the best pranks, and laughed the hardest. Even though he was only four years older than me, he probably viewed me as nothing more than an irritation, always trailing him and my brother around town. But when he'd grin at me, call me "small fry," and gently pull my braids, I'd adore him all the more for it.

The boys in town used to call him "The Chosen One." "The Golden Boy of Tuft Swallow." And I believed it too, trekking out to Robin Springs with my brothers to watch his hockey games. As he carved up the county's only ice rink, he was a god in my eyes.

I reached the top of the stairs, then turned into the landing, stopping to run my fingers over one crispy leaf on Mom's favorite peace lily. It stood on the side table, constantly reminding me she wasn't around anymore. I didn't inherit her green thumb, but I'd kept the plant alive in the seven years since she passed away. Just. I'd given it some water this morning, but it struck me as poetic. Maybe I was the parched leaf, and Brody's arrival in town would bring me back to life. Or drown me.

I sucked on my lips and dismissed the notion. Why did Brody always turn my thoughts all melodramatic? He didn't know the hours I'd spent mooning over him. The times I'd replayed our old conversations in my head. And besides, I was doing just fine without him, wasn't I? I huffed a bitter laugh. More like I was trying to convince myself. Trying to trick myself into believing I hadn't walked around town for the last five years with a Brody-shaped hole in my heart.

When I was little, I'd seen him as another brother. Like Gran said—family. But as I got older, things became awkward between us. Like I just woke up one day, and his smile suddenly could make my stomach flip like a pancake. He was the only boy in town who wielded that superpower over me. Only he could make me feel all tingly and giggly inside.

And whenever Brody threw his drop-dead grin my way, I'd held the secret feeling close to my heart. Nobody knew, not even Eve.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:47 pm

“Ro? You okay, honey?” Gran’s soft voice interrupted my thoughts, her lavender scent tickling my nose. She’d come up the stairs without me even noticing. She, too, stared at the droopy leaf in my fingers. “It’ll bounce back with some TLC.” She understood. Since mum passed away, she knew how much the plant meant to me. She had given it a home along with me and my brothers.

I nodded, the corners of my mouth ticking up a little.

“Are you okay with Brody staying?” Her brow furrowed as she spoke. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

I honestly didn’t know what to say. I wasn’t sure how I felt. Trepidation? Regret? How could I explain to Gran what had happened all those years ago? About the one kiss we’d shared that turned my world upside down.

“I thought you two were good friends.”

I worried my bottom lip at the word “friends.”

“We were. We still are, I guess. It’s just I wasn’t expecting to see him.” And certainly not half naked in my kitchen. “He frightened the life out of me, but I’m sure I’ll recover.”

Gran placed her tiny hand on my arm, her touch featherlight on my skin. “I think he needs some friends right now. He’s having a tough time since his injury.”

My gut pulled. Brody broke his leg in a game months ago. When it happened, I’d

only shown a friendly interest around my family. Then I'd scoured the news alone in my room, lapping up any information I could find. He'd spent time in physical rehab. I meant to send him a text. A get-well-soon note. Flowers. Something. But as time went on, that window closed, and I didn't contact him. Now any concern or well wishes would be a little too late.

"He looks just fine to me." A simmering heat hit my cheeks. Brody looked better than fine. His legs looked as solid as the oaks standing in the town square. As rock hard as the statue of Jericho Tuft that enjoyed their shade. If that was what an injured leg looked like, then...

"Rowena!" The furrow at Gran's brow deepened. "Are you even listening to me?"

Damn, I needed to keep my thoughts on track and above the waistband. "Sorry. I'm just concerned, I guess." The lie slipped out far too easily for my liking. What was happening to me? In the space of half an hour, I'd almost committed assault with a spatula, had impure thoughts about the legs of the man I'd crushed on for years and lied to the woman I loved most in the world.

Gran cleared her throat. "I'm just saying that looks can deceive. I want you to make sure Brody feels welcome."

I took a breath, letting it out in a slow blow of air. "Okay, Gran. I promise I'll be nice."

"Thank you, darling." She leaned in to kiss my cheek, and I gave her a half-hearted smile. I couldn't muster the enthusiasm for anything more. Maybe I was still in shock from my late-night kitchen jump-scare.

"Good night, Gran," I said, turning toward my bedroom. I slept down the hall from the rest of the family. When all my brothers lived at home, I'd have gone mad

without my little slice of peace tucked away at the back of the house.

I pushed open the door and settled on my bed, picking up the crochet project I was working on. The pattern had bothered me for days now. Who knew a set of little owls could be so troublesome? Four orders for this item were waiting in my Etsy store. The pressure was on. I picked at the stitches, examining their structure. Usually, crocheting was my passion, my distraction. But tonight, my brain swam.

Brody Flockhart, “Flock” to his adoring fans, was back in town and staying in my house for the foreseeable future.

I flung myself back on the mattress, arms above my head, the little plastic stars on the ceiling glowing a tepid green in the low lighting. They matched the age of the feelings I’d buried deep within my heart. Ever since hockey took Brody away from Tuft Swallow. Away from me.

Brody always planned to leave. To reach for his dreams. For as long as I could remember, his whole life revolved around hockey. It still did, but something about Brody had changed. He was as tall and broad as I remembered, but his shoulders and chest were bigger and leaner. Any puppy fat melted away to be replaced with hard, chiseled muscle.

If he’d looked the same five years ago, I would never have had the guts to kiss him like I did. Like a fine wine, he’d matured nicely and how I wished I could sample a taste of him now. In the interests of staying Brody-sober, though, I’d keep our contact to a minimum.

My phone pinged in my pocket. I sat up, pulling it out. An irrational part of me entertained the fantasy that it could be him, but it turned out to be Eve, asking if I got home before my slushie melted. I looked down at the sticky stain on my shirt, and butterflies took flight in my tummy.

I tapped out a quick response.

Ro: I have news.

Maybe telling Eve about Brody being in town wasn't the best idea, but I couldn't keep the fizzing in my chest to myself. Besides, she was Flock's biggest super-fan. She'd want to know.

I stood, but as the old springs of the bed creaked under me, I froze, shoulders lifting. Could Brody hear that? The den was right below my room. A flush rose in my chest. If he could hear every sound I made, I'd have to keep creaking to a minimum. Particularly any bed creaking. I didn't want him to think I was up to anything naughty.

The buzz of Eve's reply jolted me back to the here and now.

Eve: What news? Don't tell me you've found some of your boss's old movies online? Was Bessie's hair even bigger than it is now? Does Bart have a giant [eggplant emoji]?

Despite my dour mood, a giggle escaped my lips. My bosses, the Flubbergeists, were often the subject of gossip around town. The rumor mill said they were eighties porn stars. Eve and I frequently made up crazy stories about their misspent youths and the naughty films they'd possibly starred in.

Ro: Ew! Eve!

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:47 pm

Eve: What then?

I tapped out a quick reply and took a breath, letting it out through pursed lips. My thumb hovered over the send button. Was I ready for the third degree from my best friend? She'd be very thorough, and I wasn't sure I'd have all the answers.

I crossed to the bathroom door, text unsent and phone still in my hand. The latch gave a satisfying click as it opened. With three older brothers in the house growing up, Gran gave me the only room with an en-suite. I'd never waited in line for the shower.

I turned on the light, propped my phone on the counter, and stripped off my sticky top. The lurid pink stain on its front offended my eyes, and a strong smell of raspberry syrup hung in the air. Unhooking my bra, I threw it into the laundry hamper with my shirt. I narrowed my eyes and examined myself in the mirror, twisting and turning to study my body. If Brody had changed. Turned into a proper man. What about me? Had I suddenly become all womanly?

Eve would know. She'd be honest. Tell me whether I'd blossomed into a small-town version of Taylor Swift or if I remained the awkward girl next door. I picked up my phone and pressed send.

Ro: Brody Flockhart is back in town. Staying at my house.

My phone buzzed against the tiles, and with my breath in my throat, I read Eve's predictably rapid reply.

Eve: What the hell? Are you serious? Be still my beating heart!

Then, almost immediately:

Eve: How does he look?

My chuckle bounced off the walls as I put the phone back down. I'd wait to reply. I was still busy examining my curves, or lack thereof. Besides, Eve wasn't going anywhere. I almost expected to hear her throwing stones at my window, demanding information.

I pulled my shorts off, kicked them in the corner, and studied myself again. I looked the same. Only my hair was longer. Maybe my breasts were a little bigger, but if I was Brody, and I was seeing me for the first time in years, there was nothing new and impressive. He was probably used to the cream of the crop. He'd have the best-looking girls with banging bodies lining up to date him.

I ignored the buzz of my phone. Instead, I placed my palms on either side of the sink, pulling close to the mirror to examine my face. To Brody, I must still look like the naïve eighteen-year-old who practically threw herself at him the night of her senior prom.

The same naïve eighteen-year-old stood dressed and ready to head out the door with Tommy Dovehill. The same girl Brody found on the porch, waiting for Tommy to arrive. Whose hand he'd taken, brushing his thumb over her knuckles. The girl he asked to be careful. Not to drink too much or get too crazy. And the one he'd raked his eyes over with a look of hunger that drew her in and sealed her fate.

Buzz.

With a sigh, I swallowed away a bitter taste. At that moment, all those years ago in the dark, I swore Brody had wanted to say something. Do something more. So I'd been captain of my own destiny and I'd gone on tiptoes and pressed my lips to his.

Buzz.

And he'd kissed me back. Melted my insides. Gave me sparks that fizzed on my skin, swirled in my brain, and stole my burgeoning heart. No other kiss ever lived up to Brody's. It would be impossible.

I shook my head and picked up my phone to check Eve's messages.

Eve: Details, please.

Eve: Please.

Eve: Rowena!

I let out a breath and tapped out a response. Eve was still crazy about Brody. Of course, she was. She hadn't been the one to make the biggest fool of herself in front of him.

Ro: Sorry. Just jumping in the shower. Will fill you in tomorrow. Breakfast? Usual time?

Three balls bounced in the text box before Eve's reply arrived.

Eve: Okay—but I want it noted you're sending me to bed completely dissatisfied. I can't find anything online about Brody being here. Only some pictures of him out with a model. They could be old, though. Will show you in the morning.

I'd rather she didn't, but I sent her a thumbs up and turned on the faucet, running my toothbrush under its torrent of water. As the water gurgled in the drain, my thoughts raced back to Brody and my prom night humiliation.

About ten seconds into our kiss, he tensed, let go of me, and pulled away. The next moment, Coop stepped onto the deck with Tommy dressed in his tux. I never even heard him arrive.

I'd posed for the obligatory photos, cheeks ablaze and my body a squirming mess of need. I waited for Brody to catch my eye. To say something. Ask me not to go to the dance. To stay with him. Instead, he only stared at his feet.

When I stepped inside that limo, it was the last time I saw him in the flesh.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:47 pm

I dropped a note in his mailbox the next day. The prospect of Brody leaving to start college that week left me in a chokehold. I couldn't let him go thinking I was a desperate teenager. So, I apologized for putting him in an awkward situation. I wished him well for his scholarship and spent the next few days licking my wounds in my room, hoping for a message or a call from him that never came.

I opened my mouth and dragged my toothbrush over my teeth, almost punishing myself with the ferocity of my strokes. A nagging feeling played in my chest. If you'd have asked me yesterday if I was over Brody Flockhart, I'd have said absolutely. But tonight, downstairs in the kitchen, when his breath hit my neck, a familiar tickle of energy played in my stomach.

I tried to get over him. I was one of Tuft Swallow's most eligible spinsters, after all. But even after five long years, I couldn't shake the memory of that night. And that kiss.

I finished my teeth and bent over to spit the bubbles down the drain. On the way back up, I caught my reflection. My eyes burned bright, almost feverish. Eve's words about the photos with a model whirled around in my head. I wasn't an idiot. Coop told me about their exploits when he visited Brody in Denver. The nights out. The women.

Surely Brody hadn't thought of me once in the last five years? At least not in the way I wanted. And now he was back, handsome as all hell, and sleeping ten feet below me.

BRODY

Thin morning light filtered through the blinds as I shifted my body for the hundredth time. Ro had it right. The couch was lumpy, alright. But, I was low on agreeable options. Staying at the local inn, Tuft Swallow's answer to the Bates Motel hadn't appealed. It wasn't the money. I had more than enough. But the owners were old friends of my dad. I didn't want them to recognize me. They'd be all up in my face, asking questions, wanting to know why I was back.

I asked myself the same damn thing when I rolled into town.

I let out a puff of air. Who was I kidding? I knew exactly why I'd come back to Tuft Swallow. When it looked like my world could come crashing down along with my hockey career, I craved comfort, pure and simple, with no conditions. I needed a friendly smile. A smile I'd never forgotten. From the only person who still sparked a glow in my heart. The girl I'd avoided for far too long.

Ro.

She'd grown into a woman in my absence. Standing next to her in the kitchen last night reminded me of all the reasons I'd hated leaving her.

I sighed. Being near Ro couldn't change reality, though. The result would be the same. My fate was at the mercy of my damn stupid bones and one stubborn doctor.

I flipped onto my back, trying to get comfortable. My lower leg ached like a beast. I could almost picture the loose chips of bone going ten rounds under my skin, grumbling to each other about how they'd been so rudely dislodged from their homes. Right now, I'd give anything to show them the way back.

I threw my arms over my head, and they hit the pillow with a soft thump. When I'd

signed my life over to hockey, I knew what it could mean. I understood the damage that playing could wreak on my body. As a defenseman, I prided myself on being notoriously tough. Fast and flash. I wasn't called the "Denver Dominator" for nothing.

But for one split second, I'd let my guard down. Turned my back at the wrong moment. Lowered my stick just enough for a tank of a guy to check me from behind. In that one crazy move, he'd sent me barreling into the boards, feet first. I'd never forget the sickening crack.

The moment the pain ripped through me, I prayed for a clean break. But no. A freak of a break, the doc had called it. A one-in-a-million smash that left my bone looking like a shower of confetti. He'd done his best to pin me back together. And I'd done my part. Stayed at the rehab center. Spent hours in P.T.

Initially, the staff had to turn visitors away. The press, enthusiastic puck bunnies, even my teammates. They couldn't cope with the numbers. But over time, the well-wishers dwindled, along with my optimism.

I moved again. The starched sheets scratched against my skin, and a low groan escaped my mouth. I couldn't stand the dull throb any longer, so I moved my stiff body and sat.

A creak from the ceiling hit my ears, and I looked up, my breath in my throat. After a beat, I let it go. What was I expecting to see? A Ro-shaped imprint on the ceiling? A map of her room, complete with a neon X marking the spot where she might be standing? I went to sleep last night wondering the same thing, imagining how much distance lay between us.

I shifted off the couch and walked to the window, lifting one slat of the blind. A couple of kids rode their bikes in circles in the street, the ring of their laughter making it through the window's glass. A frowning woman hurried past on the

sidewalk, clutching a stack of books, and a shaggy white goat chewed on a wooden chair in the garden next door.

Hang on, a goat? I squinted into the sunlight. It looked like a goat, but someone had dressed it in a green sweater, complete with large wooden buttons and a shiny bell around its neck. No passers-by lifted a brow. Like a goat dressed in knitwear was an everyday sight. The corners of my mouth lifted. Tuft Swallow hadn't lost its "crazy."

I moved about the den, trying to loosen my dumb leg. Stretching usually helped, but one night on Maggie Swan's couch had been like a stint on a medieval torture rack.

The team physio called me the model patient. I'd hit the gym, put in the hours, prayed to whatever gods would listen, and even played in some non-contact practices. But the speed and movement left me in agony. I'd run out of options with my contract coming up for renewal in a couple of weeks.

Now, any decision was down to fate, and...and... muffins? Chocolate muffins. I breathed in the buttery aroma, and my belly rumbled. I couldn't remember the last time I'd woken up to the smell of baking.

After a quick shower, I dried off, threw on jeans and a shirt, and headed to the kitchen. The scene of last night's T-shirt massacre. It'd been a dramatic way to run into Rowena Swan again. Still, the memory of her standing in front of me, pink-stained, holding a plastic spatula over her head, made me chuckle.

"Good morning," Maggie said with a smile. She picked up a cloth and bent down to remove the source of the incredible smell from the oven. "You hungry? I remember you boys always waking up ravenous. Sometimes, my cooking was the only thing that got you out of bed. How are your folks, honey?"

I sat at the old wooden table opposite the stove and ran a hand through my hair.

“They’re doing just fine.”

Maggie placed a steaming tin of muffins on the counter and stood with one hand on her hip. “Are they happy down in The Keys? The move was very sudden.”

I huffed a laugh. “They had their reasons.” The moment opportunity struck, my parents couldn’t get out of town fast enough. Tuft Swallow was a great place to grow up, but my folks weren’t born and bred here like Maggie.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:47 pm

Dad always considered himself an outsider. After a bitter battle with the cornhole team captain about pre-game rituals, Dad had banned our family from taking part in any town activities. He couldn't understand why his suggestions for yoga at dawn and rap battles before every match didn't catch on. His decision meant no more three-legged chocolate pudding-eating festivals, no more National Kissing Day - an enormous loss for me - and not even Walk-on-Stilts Day.

Mom and Dad lived in Florida now. When I was a kid, we were dirt poor, but they supported my career dreams. They scrimped and saved to get me through junior hockey and into college. As soon as I signed up for my first pro team, I helped them buy the house of their dreams and sent them off to enjoy it.

The coffee pot gurgled on the counter, and I stood to grab a cup, filling it to the top. The sweet, earthy blend filled my nostrils. But as I tipped it back, a soft voice from the hallway got my attention.

"You have clothes on today, then? I didn't recognize you in daylight, not creeping around and all."

Ro.

I smiled. She was one to talk. Last night, her shirt clung to her chest like something from a teenage fantasy. Still, traces of the cheeky little kid I'd grown up with lingered in her words and smirk.

But she wasn't a kid anymore. Like a breath of fresh summer air, she'd drifted into the room, long legs and floral shampoo. And now she was all I could focus on.

She dropped her bag on the kitchen table and wandered over to kiss her Gran and smell the muffins. It would take a monk not to notice how her shorts slightly lifted as she bent over. I dragged my eyes away.

Maggie let out a chuckle. “Now, Rowena. You promised you’d be nice to Brody.”

Ro stood back up, side-eying me. “He knows I’m only teasing. What are you up to today, Gran?”

Maggie rattled on about pottery wheels and checking on cornhole rule books. She could have been speaking in tongues for all I understood. Instead of listening, I leaned back against the counter and watched Ro.

Unlike last night, she wore a little makeup. She’d pulled her long, dark hair into a ponytail on the top of her head and wore the tightest T-shirt imaginable. The words Plume ‘n Zoom were printed across the front. Coop had told me she’d gotten a job at the town’s gas station.

Ro yawned, reaching her arms over her head. The shirt clung to her breasts even more, and I chewed my bottom lip. Mercy.

My arrival shocked her last night, but the blush on her cheeks when I teased her felt like old times. No. Not completely like old times. Old times meant piggybacks around the yard. Trick ortreating in old, white sheets and fishing in the lake. A lifetime of memories. Nope.

Ro wasn’t Coop’s kid sister anymore, not with those endless legs and cinched-in waist.

She picked up an apple from the fruit bowl on the counter and took a bite, surveying me through narrowed eyes. “I’m sure Brody can help you.”

“Wait, what?” Damn, why hadn’t I listened to their conversation instead of letting my thoughts run south?

“Dismantle a dance floor. It’s set up in the town square.”

I laughed. “Dare I ask why?”

Ro widened her eyes as if I’d just announced I’d be singing at the next Super Bowl. “For the lindy-hoppers.”

As if that made any sense.

“Now Ro, Brody’s been a bit out of the loop with town life.” Maggie lifted a hand to rest on my shoulder. “Last week was national lindy-hop day, so we had ourselves a contest. A little dance-a-thon. I oversaw the decorations.”

“Lindy-hop?” Were these women mad?

“Of course,” said Maggie. “The Wainscotts lasted fourteen hours straight. I’m surprised they didn’t wear their feet down to the stumps.”

I chuckled, taking a last sip of my coffee. “Nice visual. But sure, of course. Whatever you need. I have a few calls to make, but after that, I’m at your service.”

“Aren’t you accommodating?” Ro murmured, taking one of the hot muffins from the tin, bouncing it from one hand to the other. She blew on it a little, her lips forming a small “O.” Finally, she wrapped it in some kitchen towel and popped it into her bag.

“I need caffeine.” With a swing of her ponytail, she reached up to the cupboard to get a cup. At the stretch, her T-shirt rose just a little, and my eyes found the creamy skin on her waist like a guided missile.

I swallowed. I was acting like a dog in heat, my gaze clinging to Ro like Saran Wrap.

This wasn't the first time I felt this way. We'd shared one last idyllic summer together before I left to start my hockey scholarship. Back then, we bantered and joked, just like always, but as the summer heated up, so did we.

I held my breath, remembering our furtive glances across the room as we watched movies with Coop. The blush on her cheeks that appeared far more often than before. The difference in how she carried herself like she'd left her tomboy era way, way behind. And then there was that last night. The one where we'd almost boiled over. The one I messed up badly.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:47 pm

I'd never forget. Prom nights were the best. Exciting. But I'd found Ro alone on the deck. As the heat of summer and the chirp of crickets buzzed around us, I'd lost all control of my good sense. She'd looked so good, so damn beautiful, so different from my best friend's tag-along little sister. All dark hair spilling over her shoulders. And those glossy pink lips. Pure temptation.

I told her to be careful, hating the thought of someone else dancing close to her, breathing in her perfume. And then she kissed me. A sweet, innocent kiss. One that I never earned. One I didn't deserve. Selfishly, I'd kissed her back.

The corners of my lips peaked at the memory.

"You okay, Brody?" Maggie asked, putting the muffins on a plate. "Want to try one?"

She held out a dark brown pastry. But as I went to take it, someone else snatched it away.

"Sorry, but I'm hungry, and I'm in a hurry." With a raise of her brows, Ro took an enormous bite of the cake, chocolate crumbs coating her lips. She closed her eyes and let out a tiny moan of appreciation. "Mm. These are delicious."

I shook my head slowly. No. It was Ro who was all kinds of delicious. But I couldn't think like this. I had to keep my feelings to myself. Cooper could never know how much I'd thought about his little sister over the years. He'd freak. Besides, I wasn't good enough for her. I wasn't the man she needed.

“What are you doing today?” The words slipped out before I could stop them.

“Work,” she said, popping the last bit of muffin into her mouth. “But first, I’ve gotta meet Eve.”

“The two of you still hang out all the time?” They’d been inseparable as kids.

“We sure do. Get together every Wednesday for breakfast.” She nodded, her words forming around the mouthful of chocolate.

“Easy Swallow?”

She huffed a laugh, a glint in her eyes. “I don’t know if I should answer that, but yes, that’s where we meet. Eve works there. Does the early shift.”

A fizzy feeling sprung low in my gut. Was she flirting with me, or did I just have my mind too far in my pants for my own good this morning? I tightened my eyes. She was smiling at me. It didn’t matter, though. I wasn’t about to upset my best friend by hitting on his sister for a second time. The fact I’d hidden our kiss from him didn’t sit well with me to this day.

It wasn’t just Coop. Ro had two older and much bigger brothers who lived out of town. The three of them looked out for their sister. They were a little too caveman when it came to Ro for my liking, but they loved her and trusted me. If I got on the wrong side of her brothers, a busted leg would be the least of my worries.

“Do they still have the best fries on Earth?” I asked. Ro’s smile faded. She gave me a blank look, and I swallowed. Damn, I was desperate to keep this conversation going. Murky comments about swallowing and lame questions about fries. I was acting like a nervous teenager who’d never spoken to a girl before.

“I wouldn’t know anymore. I mean, you’ve been out in the big wide world, Brody. I don’t know if the charms of Tuft Swallow can live up to your big city expectations.”

At the quirk in her brow and the sassy cock of her shoulder, I tamped down the burn low in my stomach. No. Ro wasn’t flirting with me. She was just standing in her kitchen, eating a muffin and swinging her ponytail as if she didn’t have a care in the world. Just like any other Wednesday. But the way her nose wrinkled when she smiled, and the scatter of freckles on her cheeks had me wishing I was wrong.

“Do you mind if I walk you?”

At my question, her eyes widened. “Where’s Coop?”

He was still in bed, but she didn’t need to know that. Didn’t need an excuse to turn my suggestion down. I don’t know why, but I didn’t want to leave her. Not yet. “I think he had an early start.”

Her brow furrowed a little, and she paused, her hand hovering over her bag. And then she nodded.

“I’ll be riding my bike, but sure.”

Fuck, if the biggest grin didn’t spread on my lips. Nothing like playing it cool. “Great – I’ll grab my stuff. I’m going to check out the gym. Can’t let myself go.” As I spoke, I stood and lifted my T-shirt a little, tapping the solid stomach I’d spent countless hours building. It was an amateur move, but I wanted her attention.

Ro just looked at me, glanced down at my abs, and then rolled her eyes. “I’d say you’re okay for a while, Brody.”

RO

Seven minutes after almost dying at the sight of Brody's abs, I cycled on my old cruiser along the pristine sidewalks of Tuft Swallow. He walked beside me as the early sun beat down on our backs and the green lawns that lined the asphalt shone with dew. Brody walked faster than I expected for someone with a busted leg.

At least with him striding out, I didn't wobble too much. If I went too slow, I risked veering into a garden and ending up face-first in a flowerbed. The two times I did get ahead, I swung out onto the road and double-backed in a circle to rejoin him.

"What happened to Daisy One and Two?" he asked.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:47 pm

“Sorry?”

“This is Daisy three.” He moved a hand toward my bike. “What happened to the others?”

I followed his gaze to the sign hanging off the back of my saddle and my cheeks heated. He’d probably taken a hefty eyeful of my ass while he examined it. I’d painted the plaque myself, but I hung back when Brody’s eyes drifted toward it again. My work shorts were high cut, and I couldn’t remember if I’d de-fluffed my thighs this week.

“OG Daisy met a terrible end,” I told him.

“This, I’ve gotta hear.”

Under his blue-eyed gaze, how could I resist? “I was at the medieval fair and got a bit carried away in the bicycle jousting. Daisy ended up wrapped around a lamppost after my trash can lid got tangled in her spokes.”

He huffed a gentle laugh, his brows raising.

“Don’t worry, it’s fine. I put her to good use in the community garden. She’s currently growing chives out of her handlebars.”

Brody grinned at me. “A trash can lid? Chives? Only you, Ro.”

“The lid was part of my weaponry. You know, like a shield.”

He chuckled, and the sound made my insides flip in delight. “Listen, buddy, when someone’s charging at you with a vacuum nozzle, you’re grateful for anything solid. I was just unlucky, and it slipped out of my hands.”

He shook his head, running a hand over the back of his neck. “Okay, point taken. So how about Daisy Two?”

I gave a theatrical sigh. “Losing Daisy Two was a little more traumatic.”

The corners of his eyes did that crinkling thing they did when he smirked. “Dare I ask why?”

“They kidnapped her.”

“What? Kidnapped her? Who?”

A breeze whipped the end of my ponytail into my mouth, and I blew a raspberry to get rid of it. “Coop and a couple of friends played a trick on me. They stole her after a night at the CrowBar. Wrote me a ransom note and everything.” Nights out at the Crow, Tuft Swallow’s only watering hole, often ended in shenanigans.

Brody curled a perfect, fair brow at me. “What did they demand?”

“Three cases of beer, the phone number of one of my friends, and breakfast in bed for a week.”

“For all three of them? Wouldn’t that involve a lot of cooking? A lot of coordination? Did they assign you a schedule for overnight stays? Kind of like a timeshare plan?”

I tried hard to glare at Brody, but his grin had my lips tugging at the corners.

“The breakfast was just for Coop. Anyway, I caught the measles and had to stay in bed for days, so I forgot. I figured Coop would get bored and bring her back.”

“And he didn’t?”

“No. I found her chained up in the branches of a tree two weeks later, covered in rust.”

Brody scoffed. “Did you make her useful as well?”

“Not really. I couldn’t think of a safe way to get her down on my own, so I abandoned her. It’s okay, though. A family of Woodpeckers made a nest in her basket, so the town council declared her a site of ornithological importance. No doubt she’ll be up in that tree until the apocalypse.”

As I circled around him, Brody’s shoulders shook with laughter, straining against his T-shirt. Powerful, solid, and impressive. I sucked in my lower lip. How the hell had he even created them? Surely carrying a wooden stick around for a living didn’t result in the natural equivalent of a suit of armor?

When his shuddering subsided, he ran his hand through his hair and turned his eyes back on me. “I’ve missed you, Ro.”

The softness of his voice and those four simple words kicked my heart up a notch, and I sucked in a breath. Something stirred in the air between us, and I planted my eyes firmly on the road ahead. Could he hear my heart beating from the sidewalk? It was deafening to me.

He drew up closer alongside me, all lemon and mint. “Ro...”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:47 pm

“Flock!” A jolly voice rang out from across the road.

We’d made it into town, and Tuft Swallow was alive with people going about their business. Popping in and out of the shops lining Main Street and swapping gossip on corners.

We both looked up. Wally Hawkshank, one of the oldest residents in town, strode over, his hand outstretched in greeting.

“Flock, son, so good to see you. Heard about the leg. Just wanted to wish you a speedy recovery.” The grizzled old man pumped Brody’s hand like he was drawing water from a standpipe. I stopped and put my toes on the ground to balance my bike.

Brody’s cheeks glowed. “Thanks, man. I’ve got it under control. But I appreciate it.”

“Well, I just wanted to say hello. Let you know we’ve all been rooting for you. I’ll be seeing you around.”

The old man stepped away, and I winked at Brody. “Look at you. We better be careful in case you get mobbed. Maybe you should hire a bodyguard while you’re here.”

Brody flipped a look at me. It was a cross between “I know, right?” and “Don’t mock me.”

I snickered, picking up one pedal with the top of my foot before setting off again.

“Ro...” he said, more quietly this time, and my gut clenched at the gentle roll of my name on his tongue.

“Look! It’s Flock!” came another, younger voice. Some whoops and a couple of howls followed it. A group of school kids that were gathered in the town square rushed over to join us, their backpacks bashing against their spines as they ran.

“Way to go in the cup last year,” said one.

“Didn’t know you were back in town,” said another. “My dad’ll be buzzed. He’s followed you for years.”

“When you heading back to Denver?” asked a third, giving him a solid high-five. “You here to watch the game in Robin Springs?”

They all looked at Brody like he was the second coming, jostling to have their chance to speak to him. Their eyes glowed with adoration. As the kids squabbled to be near him, one pretty young girl fought her way to the front of the group, waving a black Sharpie in her hand.

“Sign my shirt?” she asked, presenting her surprisingly ample chest to him. She batted her eyelashes like a pro. She couldn’t be older than sixteen.

Brody studied her with a cheeky smile. “I think you should turn around, don’t you? I’ll sign the back.” With a dramatic eye-roll, the girl flounced around, sticking her tongue out at a giggling friend. Brody still had the power to break young hearts.

I sucked in a breath, allowing the scent of the spring tulips in the park to wash over me. I loved spring. It was a chance for rebirth, a bit like Brody’s career. He’d been on hiatus with his leg, and now he was ready to return to the big time. If this fan club was anything to go by, he had the full support of the town behind him.

It'd always been this way, though. There wasn't a day growing up that I hadn't seen him somewhere, somehow. Or heard people talking about him. The small-town boy done good. He was Tuft Swallow's answer to Wayne Gretzky. There'd always been posters up in town before his matches in the junior league. And the screenings of his NHL matches in the Crow were always full. He was a titan in our little town. A treasure.

If I was honest, though, I had it as bad as everyone else. I'd stopped filling my Flock scrapbook around the time he left, but my heart still jumped when I saw him on the news or in the paper. Or when Coop talked about him.

The high-pitched giggle of Sharpie girl jarred me out of my thoughts. She was showing off the newly signed back of her school shirt to the crowd. Brody was busy penning his signature onto the caps of a few other boys, and as he leaned down, the girl, full of bravado now, closed in, giving him a peck on the cheek. She blushed fuchsia and ran away to shrieks of delight from her friends.

I grinned. I couldn't help myself. It was seriously like cycling down the street with Elvis or Harry Styles.

Brody brought his gaze to mine, and the crinkles I adored spread from the corners of his eyes. The girl wasn't the only one blushing. His cheeks wore a healthy pink glow. As the surrounding gaggle dissipated, I shook my head slowly.

"What?" He bowed his head a little.

"Wow. It's like taking a puppy for a walk. You can't go five feet without someone stopping to pet you. Do you think we'll make it to the Easy Swallow before dusk?"

His chuckle carried in the crisp air around us. "Are you jealous? Would you like to tickle my tummy, Ro? I might growl, but I promise I won't bite."

I ran my eyes over his sexy smirk and the dimple on his cheek. Damn him and his teasing. He wouldn't bite, huh? Well, wasn't that a pity? Not that I subscribed to anything kinky, but allowing Brody Flockhart to bite me might just be the exception.

5

RO

Brody left me and headed off to find the gym downtown. I leaned Daisy Three against the wall and stepped into the Easy Swallow, the town's oldest but best-loved diner. A little bell tinkled above the door, and the smell of fried food and milkshakes rolled into my nostrils. I closed the door behind me, the steady hum of chatter competing with the music playing on the radio.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:47 pm

The counter was a hodge-podge of sauce bottles, and cutlery stands. I spotted the top of Eve's head in the middle of it all. She leaned over, writing something on her order pad. I never had trouble finding my best friend. Her hair was candyfloss pink for spring. She changed it every season. Next would be green for summer, orange for fall, and blue for winter. With the amount of peroxide it took to fulfill her technicolor whims, I was surprised her hair hadn't snapped off.

Hearing the bell, she glanced up, then threw me a grin and a wave. I smiled, too. Eve and I had been through a lot together. First dates, first kisses, first disastrous attempts at losing our virginity. But I'd never told her about the kiss with Brody. Or about him leaving town without even saying goodbye. I trusted Eve, but I didn't want her asking questions. Or prodding and poking at my long-buried feelings.

She held up a palm to me, five fingers outstretched. We'd kept our Wednesday breakfast meets for almost two years, even before Eve started working here. With a nod, I wandered to the other side of the diner.

A family of four sat in our usual booth, making their way through a jumbo pancake stack. The one next to it was free, so I popped my bag on the table and slid in. The cushion on the seat had seen better days, and the second I settled, a loud farting noise ripped through the hum of the diner.

At least three heads bobbed up, their eyes finding me like magnets. Awesome! A pocket of air must be trapped under the leatherette, and now everyone was going to think I needed a solid dose of Pepto Bismol. I could have brazened it out, looking to nearby diners to shift the suspicion onto them. Instead, I rummaged in my bag, cheeks ablaze. Typical of me to pick the one booth in the joint that had a flatulence

problem.

“Hello, Dita Von Tease!”

My head lifted. Eve grinned as she approached the table. She balanced a big plate of cinnamon rolls on the inside of one arm and, in each hand, clutched a pink metallic cup loaded with vanilla milkshake.

“It’s nice to see you’re not tempting the customers this morning. Not accidentally tipping the water jug over yourself so they can see what amazing boobs you have.” Her eyes glowed with mischief.

“Eve,” I pleaded. I’d had enough of being teased already this morning. Even the upholstery was mocking me.

She put the drinks and buns on the table with a soft clunk. “No, really, I didn’t know if I’d have to pass out horse blinkers before you arrived. Can’t have you distracting the customers from their food.”

Eve wiggled her eyebrows, and I rolled my eyes. I’d given in to temptation after my shower and texted her again last night. Told her all about my DIY kitchen dousing-by-slushie incident. She’d asked a million questions that I’d been too tired or too stunned to answer, so our breakfast was likely to be on par with the Spanish Inquisition. I omitted the part about Brody’s tight, very low-slung track pants. I didn’t think she needed the visual stimulation.

Eve took the seat opposite, with no fart noises. Of course not. It was the kind of thing that only happened to me. As the only owner of a tooting seat in the vicinity, I’d have to keep any movement to a minimum.

I looked down at the rolls, my belly rumbling. I’d already had two of Gran’s

chocolate muffins, but the Swallow's cinna-rolls were legendary.

"I added extra icing sugar today. Figured you could do with a boost after your shock last night."

I grinned at Eve, picked up a bun, and took a huge bite, coating my lips in sweetness. The buttery, cinnamon goodness melted onto my tongue, and I swiped the back of my hand across my mouth.

"So?" Eve asked. Her eyes were wide, and she laid her hands flat on the table as if getting a manicure.

"Yeah, the extra sugar's amazing."

"No! Not the sugar, silly. I want to know what it's like to have the hottest man in the NHL sleeping in your house? Waking up next to you?"

I huffed, sending a fine spray of said sugar into the air. "Evie, he's not waking up next to me." Technically, he was waking up under me. I mean, it counted for something.

She shrugged, helping herself to a bun. "Well, almost. What's a few stairs between friends?"

"And he's here to see Coop, not me."

Eve chuckled around a mouthful of bun. "Sounds like Flock's seen enough of you already."

I scrunched up a napkin and threw it at her grinning face. It was weird to hear her call him by his team name. For me, he'd always be Brody.

“He’s not here because of his injury, though, right? He’ll be going back to train for the new season soon?” Eve was hockey-mad. More specifically, Flock-mad. She would know about his leg.

But honestly, what was the big deal? Hockey players were always picking up injuries, weren’t they? “I guess so. He doesn’t look unfit to play.” Quite the opposite.

Eve swallowed her mouthful. “I read some clickbaity article online that said his bones haven’t mended. Like the smash weakened his leg or something.”

I scoffed. “People can say anything they want online. I’ve seen Brody’s legs.” Eve’s eyes widened. “In clothes, Eve. And they look anything but weak.”

She slumped back in the booth, again, fart-noise free. “Well, I want to get to the bottom of it. A mega sports star doesn’t just arrive in a pokey town like this without a reason.”

“Well, feel free. You know where he’s staying.”

Far too close for comfort.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:47 pm

I followed Eve's gaze as it drifted across the diner to the giant window in the front. A group of neon lycra-clad senior citizens rolled past on inline skates, and the corners of my mouth lifted. Anything went in Tuft Swallow.

"Oh, hey!" she said, slapping her hands on the table. I jumped a mile, and so did the pancake family in the booth beside us. "That reminds me..." She dug her hand underneath her pink apron, into her bra, and pulled out a folded piece of paper before handing it to me. "Somebody pinned this on the notice board. I kept it for you before it got defaced."

I drew my brows together. What did she mean, defaced? Tuft Swallow had a very low vandalism rate.

"I thought you might be interested."

I unfolded the warm paper and smiled. Now I knew what she meant. The words Spitz Hollow Scalpers screamed from the top, along with a picture of some fierce-looking women on roller skates. Anything found in Tuft Swallow mentioning Spitz Hollow risked destruction. Though close in proximity, the two towns had a long-running feud to rival the Montagues and the Capulets.

The rivalry between the cornhole teams even made the national press a few years back with reports of a doping scandal. Someone found the captain of the Spitz Hollow Chokers lurking around the Mighty Swallows dressing room with a whole bottle of laxatives.

"Roller derby? Really?"

Eve pulled apart one of the sugar-coated swirls, dangling a piece above her mouth like a baby bird. “Why not? You’ve got skills, girl.”

I mean, she wasn’t wrong. My mum had been a champion roller dance skater in her youth. She’d taught me a thing or two, but dancing on skates was different from battling your way around a track wearing what looked like full body armor.

“You run the roller discos at the school. Policing those kids must be tricky, and you can skate in a circle. How much different can roller derby be?”

I suspected a lot different, but I’d be lying if I said the idea didn’t intrigue me. I hadn’t done anything challenging since the Halloween pizza-eating contest last year. For that, I’d trained hard and won, but I’d never be able to look at mozzarella the same way again.

The tiniest tingle sprung in my chest at the idea of having a goal. A new interest. Something exciting to get my blood pumping. My Etsy store was ticking along nicely, and life in Tuft Swallow was all kinds of fun, but a part of me needed something more. Something that wasn’t just reliable old Ro showing up and ticking the boxes. An aspiration to work toward. To remind me I wasn’t being left behind. With a nod, I refolded the paper and stowed it away in my bag for later. “I’ll think about it.”

“Oh, come on, Ro! Besides, your mom would be so proud.”

My chest tugged. I missed my mom so much, but I wasn’t sure a derby-playing daughter was what she had in mind as a legacy. “But it’s in Spitz Hollow. They wouldn’t take me because of where I live.”

Eve grinned. “Or they’d give you a top spot and install you with a wiretap to get our cornhole secrets.”

I giggled. “Well, that’s true. Being head of the cheerleading squad, I have access to privileged information. I don’t know if I can risk it.”

“Okay, you think about it,” Eve said, reaching out to give my arm a squeeze.

I nodded, tightening my ponytail with a tug.

Eve sat up straight again. “So, subject change. I’ve done some digging online, and... Flock’s currently single.” She literally sang the last three words.

“What?”

Eve leaned in, placing her elbows on the table and resting her chin in her hands. “I know, right? That deity of a man who you aren’t sleeping next to is up for grabs.”

I grimaced. “Why do I need to know that?”

“You could start a support group.”

“Why would I start a support group? I’m sure he can handle his own love life.”

Eve shook her head like I was stupid. “Not for him. For us. Flock being on the market means that while he’s in town, there’s hope for us desperate, sex-starved women of Tuft Swallow.”

I snorted, again startling the pancake family. “Speak for yourself. I’m not desperate, and it would be weird. He’s like a brother to me.”

Eve lifted one eyebrow. “Oh, come on, Ro. You can’t let the opportunity pass. The nearest we get to such a quality specimen of manhood in this town is the new chiropractor. I can’t get an appointment with him for love or money. He’s totally

booked out. Have you seen the throngs of women in his waiting room? The atmosphere in there is like a crowd waiting for a Magic Mike show.”

“What do you need a chiropractor for?” I asked, trying not to choke on my last mouthful of pastry.

“Maybe I need some adjusting. Maybe I want some hands-on attention.”

I barely covered my giggles with a napkin.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:47 pm

“Just promise you’ll keep your eye on Flock for me,” she said. “Report back on anything of interest while I think of a way to kidnap him, lock him in my basement, and force him to be my sex slave.”

From the stories Coop had told me, Brody wouldn’t need much forcing. He didn’t believe in abstinence.

“Who’s a sex slave?”

A smooth, familiar voice washed over us, and both Eve and I turned. I took a slow breath. There stood Brody Flockhart in all his glory. He had a sexy smirk and looked like he just stepped out of a movie. What the hell was he doing here?

My cheeks heated like molten lava. Eve just grinned. “Ro is. A slave to her insatiable libido. She’s Tuft Swallow’s answer to Taylor Swift. A notorious serial dater.”

“No, I’m not,” I squealed, my voice far louder than I expected. “And neither is Taylor. It’s just a case of optics and people being mean.”

Brody’s eyes met mine, and something glinted in them, like mischief or delight. My protests weren’t enough to divert Eve from her course, though.

“Call it what you like, Bestie, but you’ve had more dates than most.”

Brody leaned against the side of the booth and tipped his head to one side. “You popular, Small Fry?”

I blinked. He hadn't called me that in years. Not since we were kids. Back then, he'd towered over me, too. Took great delight in making me the butt of his jokes.

Eve turned to Brody, warming to her subject. "Last summer, I swear Ro's dating life was like a season of Love Island."

Brody chuckled. "This I have to hear. Do you mind?" He gestured to the space next to Eve. She patted the spot beside her, inviting him to take a seat. Brody edged into the booth, struggling to squeeze into the tight space. Just like Eve before him, he sat down without a squeak.

"No. You don't need to hear this." I threw Eve a look, trying to channel a condemned man pleading for his life.

"But I do," said Brody. "I need to know If I'm staying under the same roof as a notorious maneater. There could be a clause in my contract against living with loose women. I may need to claim danger money. What do you think, Eve? Should I wedge a chair up against my door at night?"

My mouth hung open. Who was he to call me a loose woman?

Eve grinned at him, resting her chin in a palm and gazing at him with goo-goo eyes. "Well, last summer, old Mrs. Woodcock..."

"The crazy bird lady?" asked Brody.

"She's not crazy," I said. "Just a little old school. People call her odd, but she does great things for the town. Plus, she runs her bird-watching group voluntarily."

Brody raised his eyebrows. "Anyone who goes around with binoculars trained on the locals is odd in my book."

Eve nodded so fast I thought her head might pop off. “So, Mrs. Woodcock and Ro’s Gran took it upon themselves to fix her up with someone...anyone.”

“Why?” Brody’s brow furrowed.

Eve leaned into him, pretending to talk behind her hand. “I recall hearing the words ‘ticking clock’ and ‘spinster’ being bandied around.”

“I’m only twenty-three!”

Eve continued, waving me off like an annoying fly. “The two of them ran Ro through a rigorous dating program. Anyone single and under thirty was fair game.”

My pulse throbbed in my ears, and I swear my insides and my dignity curled up and died. Why didn’t Eve stop? Whose side was she on anyway? Now Brody would think I’m even more tragic than he already did after my solo wet T-shirt competition last night.

Brody turned to me, a sizzling grin on his gorgeous lips. “How many dates did you go on?”

Damn. It was too late to feign innocence. “Fifteen,” I mumbled, cheeks warming.

His eyes widened to the size of our cinnamon rolls. Awesome.

“And nothing to show for it? No heartbroken men throwing roses at your feet? No proposals?”

I narrowed my eyes at him, attempting a withering glare.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:47 pm

“No. She’s too fussy,” quipped Eve. “I’d have had no problem locking down a suitable man myself.”

“Why haven’t you, then, Eve?” Brody leaned back against the shiny seat cushion and draped his arm around the back of the bench.

Eve shrugged. “They all want Ro.”

Brody tipped his head to the side as if he were contemplating the solution to world poverty. “So, there aren’t any single men in town who haven’t taken Ro Swan on a date?”

“Exactly,” beamed Eve. “I swear you could make a romance book from her dating life.”

A tragedy more like. “I am here, you know. Can we change the subject? I’d rather my tragic love life wasn’t up for public discussion.” What was Eve trying to achieve? I wasn’t interested in having a love life.

“Eve!” A man’s voice cut through the thick chatter of the diner. We all looked back to the counter to see the grim-faced chef beckoning her like a madman.

“Oops! Looks like I overstayed my break time. I’ll see you later, Ro.” I scowled at the saccharine grin on Eve’s face. She stood, and Brody made to move out of the way. “No need,” Eve said before bobbing down under the table.

Was she about to crawl out of the booth on her hands and knees? “I’m so sorry,” I

murmured to Brody before leaning down to track my friend's progress. She'd ogled Brody until halfway out. She turned her head to me, gave me a thumbs-up, and mouthed the words "great legs." I sat bolt upright, cheeks afire, fighting the urge to kick her. If Brody guessed Eve was checking out his body, I didn't want him to think I was in any way involved.

When she finally extracted herself from under the table, Eve stood and gave Brody a flirty smile. "It's good to see you, Flock. Don't be a stranger." She backed away toward the counter, colliding with a table on her way. Setting a vase of plastic flowers back upright, she giggled and gave Brody a little wave. Man, she had it bad.

Brody and I turned back to stare at each other across the table. His blue eyes burned into mine, roaming over my face as if taking in every feature. Under his ocular onslaught, I fought to keep my breath steady. I wished I could tell what was going through his mind. But every molecule in the air between us hummed. Vibrated.

"Ro," he said, his voice soft. "Can I do something?"

Before I could answer, he leaned in a little, and my breath hitched in my throat. A burning rose in my chest as flashbacks from prom night barreled into my brain. The memory of his mouth and hands on me. Was he going to kiss me again? Right here in the diner? I swallowed hard and nodded, praying that he didn't have an allergy to cinnamon. But instead of leaning across the table to claim my lips, he lifted his hand to my face and brushed my cheek with his thumb.

"Icing," he murmured. "We can't have you looking as dirty as your reputation."

The wink that accompanied his words had my panties melting on the spot. I had the strangest urge to turn my cheek into his hand. It was ridiculous! He wasn't about to kiss me and I shouldn't be feeling like this. Not again. Brody was my brother's best friend. Not to mention, he was way out of my league, and he'd broken my heart once

already. Why would I chance that happening again?

I shook my head, dislodging my thoughts. “So, how is it being back?” I asked with far too much enthusiasm.

“It’s odd, with my folks not being here and all.” Brody licked the tip of his index finger and ran it around the plate Eve left, capturing the remnants of cinnamon sugar before popping it into his mouth. I swear I licked my own lips. Oh, holy crap, what else could his tongue do?

“It must seem like nothing’s changed,” I persisted, willing him to sit on his hands.

He paused, his gaze fixed on mine. “That’s not true. Not everything’s stayed the same.”

His words hung between us like someone who’d overstayed their welcome, and a clammy feeling sprung in my palms.

“You really don’t have a boyfriend? How is that even possible?”

I blinked and struggled to find words, my cheeks heating. Was he being serious, or was he still playing with me? “I think my hobbies and three older brothers might have something to do with it.”

He chuckled. “The older brothers, I get. I’ve seen Cooper defend your honor before. But what I don’t get is what you could possibly do to frighten a man away? Don’t tell me you’ve taken up grave robbing? Human sacrifice in the town square?”

“I crochet.”

The corners of his mouth trembled the second the words left my lips.

“The hottest date in town crochets? Isn’t that what old ladies do?” He shook his head slowly. “That Mrs. Woodcock has really done a number on you. You’ll be dyeing your hair gray soon. Wearing slacks.”

I huffed. “Stop, don’t knock it. Crochet makes me money.”

His smile grew. “Do people pay to watch you stitching live on Only Fans?”

“Oh, ha-ha. I have an Etsy store. People buy the stuff I make.”

“I see.” Brody rubbed his chin as if contemplating dropping a cool million on a new jet. “So you’re talented with your hands, then. When do you plan to leave town and live on the French Riviera with your profits?”

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:47 pm

“It’s a passion, Brody. Something you’d know nothing about.”

He raised his brows. Hang on, had I just said that? Accused one of the most dedicated and intense players in the NHL of not understanding passion? Those raised brows had now descended and drew together in a scowl. It was time to make my escape before I said something I’d regret even more.

“Anyway, I have to go. Cars to clean and windshields to fill.”

He stared at me like I had two heads, and my cheeks simmered. Had the power of sensible speech left me, too?

I fumbled for my bag and stood. But no sooner had I left the seat than a loud “thrrrrrruppp” emanated from the cushion beneath me. Brody’s eyes widened, and the whole pancake family turned to glare.

“Disgusting,” the dad muttered.

At that moment, my heart and pride withered away to a crust.

Brody fought a smile. “Are you okay? Do you need to get some air?”

“I swear, it’s the seat,” I ground out, sending an angry “thank you very much” to St Teresa, patron saint of upholsterers, for her lack of care.

Brody stood, too. “If you say so, but maybe you want to cut back on the cinnamon.”

With my cheeks on fire, I twisted away from him, but the slightest touch to my arm turned me back around. A rush of goosebumps streaked across my skin.

“Will I see you later?” he asked.

Ignoring the shiver that ran through me, I struck what I hoped was a nonchalant air. “Maybe, if you’re home.” I threw my bag over my shoulder, weighing up whether I should just garotte him with the handles and be done with it.

“Great. Your gran was talking about making something special for dinner tonight. Kind of like a welcome home meal for the returning hero.”

I exited the booth and headed for the door. But not before throwing a remark over my shoulder. “What did she have in mind? Humble pie?”

“Ouch,” Brody hissed behind me.

Eve had positioned herself at the end of the counter to get the best vantage point of the “farty” booth. As we passed, she gave Brody a ridiculous wave, then gestured to me, holding a fictitious phone to her ear. I nodded back. I didn’t doubt Eve would want a full debrief, farts and all. She gave me a thumbs up before doing a little happy dance, almost knocking over a stack of napkins.

Yep, it was definitely time to leave.

Brody stepped forward and held the door open for me. He trailed me to where I’d left Daisy Three leaning against the wall. I righted her, then threw my leg over the high crossbar. It was hardly a delicate move, but Daisy was a man’s bike. Gran always said I should get something a little more feminine, but I didn’t wear skirts, and lowly gas pump attendants couldn’t be choosers.

“Goodbye, Brody.” I made to pull away, but his lemony scent carried on the air, and suddenly, his proximity was all I could focus on. I dared a quick peek at him, my breath running shallow in my chest. Why did he have to look so gorgeous all the time? It was hard to be pissed at someone with such great cheekbones.

He didn’t reply, but before I set off, he reached out and held onto my front basket, stopping me in my tracks.

Brody leveled me with one of his drop-dead stares. “Before you go, I just want to get something straight in my mind. You crocheta~~nd~~date all the single men in town?”

I cocked what I hoped was a challenging eyebrow at him.

One side of his lips peaked. “I thought I had a reputation. But something’s just occurred to me. I’m single, and I’m in town right now. When can I expect my invitation?”

The tiniest smirk danced on his lips. Gently mocking but oh so sexy. What I wouldn’t give to kiss it away. “You don’t count, Brody.”

I tugged Daisy Three backward, breaking the hold he had on her. He stepped back, chuckling and holding his hands up in mock submission.

Clamping my jaw tight, I pulled onto the road. Three rotations of my pedals later, I turned back over my shoulder to check he wasn’t following. I’m not sure what I expected. He would hardly sprint along the road beside me, declaring his undying love in front of the whole town.

No. He was leaning against the wall of the diner. He had his hands in his pockets, massive forearms glowing in the sun, and the sexiest grin known to man all over his mouth.

An ache sprung low, low down in my gut, but I stifled the feeling and turned my eyes back to the road. He was just a friend. A childhood crush and a tease. And no matter how heavenly he looked or how much I liked the idea, there was no way I could trust myself on a date with Brody Flockhart. Not ever.

BRODY

I walked down Main Street, my lower leg nagging like a kid on a long journey. After two more nights on Maggie Swan's lumpy couch, I was almost ready to pack up and move to the Owls Inn. Damp or not. I'd tossed and turned each night, battling knobbly foam and springs intent on impaling my limbs. But every time the idea of leaving for a solid bed and crisp white sheets gripped me, my mind drifted back to Ro. To the way I'd flirted with her at the diner.

I shouldn't have done it. Teased her so hard. I promised myself I'd keep things strictly business between us. That I'd keep Ro completely in the "best friend's sister" zone. Still, that morning, I'd found myself back at the Swallow, knowing she'd be there. I couldn't help myself. She was just too cute to resist with the way her cheeks fired pink as we bantered.

I had the distinct impression that she'd been avoiding me since the diner. In fact, I hadn't seen Ro for over ten minutes in total these last couple of days. The idea left a nasty taste.

Even a night out with Coop at the Crow Bar hadn't sweetened my homecoming. I'd made the right noises, smiled, and cracked on the charm when he introduced me to a couple of women, but my heart wasn't into meeting anyone. I had bigger things to worry about.

Taking a sip of downtown air, I stepped onto the curb, crossing the road to the Town Square. I always found the little park there oddly comforting. Sometimes, it was full of activities, with kids practicing their cornhole toss and old boys playing Kerplunk

on the little stone tables. Other times, it was quiet, like today.

I stepped onto the gravel path, and my phone vibrated in my pocket. I pulled it out. The word Alex lit the screen. My mouth ran dry. Alex Marshall was an old friend. We dated for a while, back in college, but I'd signed with the NHL, and she moved into sports journalism. Since then, we'd had a mutually beneficial and purely professional relationship. Scratched each other's backs. She fed the publicity machine, and I gave her exclusives. An all-round win-win.

I found a bench under the oaks that wasn't coated with pigeon crap and took a seat. Alex contacted me a few times since I'd smashed my leg. She'd wanted a quote or news on my recovery, but lately, she'd only asked about my contract status. And why there'd been no official statements. I pushed a breath out through my teeth. I guess Alex had a nose for bad news.

I opened her text.

Alex: Where are you? I've heard some rumblings on the grapevine about your contract. I can't get hold of your agent, and your team management is as tight-lipped as a clam. Call me.

I swallowed. I hadn't heard from my agent either. Not even the big-wigs back in Denver. Nobody returned my calls. It'd be pretty tragic for a sports reporter to have information that could affect my whole life before I did. A prickling hit the back of my neck, spreading down my arms. If only I could talk some sense into the doctor. Get him to clear me to play. Once I returned to the action, I'm sure my leg would hold up just fine.

Sighing, I pocketed my phone and looked at the canopy overhead. The late afternoon sun was trying its hardest to break through the thick branches, and the only sound, apart from the light hum of traffic, was the wind coming through the leaves. Or was

it? I cocked my ear to listen. Was that a faint scraping noise? Or a grinding? I checked the seat underneath me. If termites were at work, I needed to move. I couldn't afford to fall on my ass if the bench gave way.

But the noise wasn't coming from under me. It came from the other side of the park. I stood and headed in its direction. Maybe a couple of residents were out practicing their moonwalking. I saw a poster for a Dance like Michael Jackson festival next month. But there was no singing. No high notes.

The scraping noise got louder as I walked past the playground and across the lawn. Before long, movement caught my attention through the trees. A flash of color.

I broke through the foliage onto the tiny performance space toward the lake, and there she was. She didn't see me, though. Rowena Swan had her eyes shut, pink headphones hugging her ears as she spun in a tight circle. The wheels of her roller skates scraped on the smooth concrete beneath her.

The tiniest denim shorts topped her toned brown legs, and the dark hair of her ponytail snaked around her body in centrifugal abandon. As she spun out, she lifted her arms above her head and turned faster. My mouth hung open. Man, she had talent.

And then she tipped her head back, her ponytail whipping the cream skin of her waist. Wrapping around her high breasts. My dick nudged the fly of my jeans at the sight. "Get a grip," I mumbled. Remember, this was Coop's little sister.

I'd already spent the last couple of days battling unholy thoughts about Ro. Ever since the moment I'd seen her in the dark, in the kitchen, tight up against the cooker, her ass softly jiggling as she worked the eggs in the pan.

That night brought back clear memories of her prom. I'd never made such a stupid,

selfish move as kissing Ro, and the hopeful look in her eyes on the porch still haunted me. I suspected she had a crush. She'd hung out with Coop and me that whole summer. But when the chips were down, I'd acted like an a-hole and kissed her anyway. Ignored my good sense and followed my hormones.

I'd felt something that summer. That night. A pull between the two of us. I'd put it down to anticipation. Excitement for my future. But now, seeing her again reminded me of why I'd been so reckless. And if I was really honest, I never regretted the kiss. Not once. Only the way I'd left her. High and dry, without explanation. Without an apology.

My vision snapped back into focus as Ro slowed, never once opening her eyes. When her rotation stopped, she executed a sweeping arc. She skated backward in a circle, her hands as graceful as a ballerina. How the hell was she not crashing into something? I'd give my eyeteeth for some of her skills. Sure, ice skates and roller skates were a little different, but there was no mistaking her expertise.

Ro changed her lead foot and switched back to face forward, coming to rest in the middle of the space, opening her eyes. I stepped onto the concrete, fresh grass cuttings clinging to my sneakers.

"Hi, Ro," I shouted so she could hear me over the music that must be playing in her ears.

She snapped her gaze in my direction and found me. "Brody," she said, pulling away some hair that clung to her cheek.

Her chest heaved as she sucked in air, and I struggled to drag my eyes away. "I hope you don't think I'm stalking you. More like spying. No, scratch that. Spying sounds even worse." At the blank look on her face, I decided to quit word vomiting while still slightly ahead. "You're incredible on skates, Ro."

Her eyes narrowed, and she rolled closer, stopping in a tight circle. “Sorry?” She pulled her headphones from around her ears, bringing them to rest around her neck. “I didn’t hear a word of that.”

Thank fuck. “You’re great. On your skates, I mean. I had no idea.”

She gave me a half smile, her cheeks glowing the lightest pink. With a flip of her ponytail, she skated to the stone bench serving as the front row of Tuft Swallow’s outdoor theater. Putting her weight on a stopper, she sat down and crossed one leg over the other. She looked so prim and proper with her pink wheels still turning in the air.

I joined her, brushing a few stray leaves from my shirt. I didn’t want her to think I made lurking in bushes a regular thing. I had no idea what to say. What I should talk about. The flowery smell of her perfume had me leaning in a little. “Why didn’t you tell me you could skate like that? I know your mum gave you some lessons back in the day, but that was awesome. Next level.”

Her cheeks blushed a darker rose now. “I found some old tapes of her performances. Took them to be converted to DVD. I’d forgotten how good she was.”

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:47 pm

“How goodyouare,” I said, trying hard not to sound like a crushing fanboy. “With moves like that, you could be famous.”

She chuckled, a light little laugh that lifted the corners of my mouth.

“I’m nothing special.” She turned on me, poking a finger into my shoulder with a grin. “Butyouare. You made the paper!”

That was nothing new. There weren’t many weeks when I didn’t make some or other sports sections. “Which one?”

“The only one that matters.” Ro’s sing-song voice had me on high alert. She dug a hand into the pocket of her shorts. My eyes followed the long indent of her thigh muscle, and I chewed on my bottom lip. After a beat, she pulled out a folded piece of paper and then spread it against her leg, running her hands over its surface. It took all my strength not to reach out and help.

Once smoothed, she held it up. The words “The Nosey Pecker” ran across the top. I’d forgotten about Tuft Swallow’s popular gossip rag. It came out intermittently, and nobody knew who printed it. But if you wanted to know any of the town gossip, you could find it there.

Ro cleared her throat theatrically and read it out loud.

“Small town hero returns! Form an orderly queue, ladies. Brody ‘Flock’ Flockhart is back in town and will surely break a few hearts. Watch this space for updates.”

I laughed. “What the hell? I can’t believe the whole Pecker thing is still going. It’s been years. Has anyone worked out who writes it yet?”

Ro shook her head, refolding the paper. “My mum used to read these to me for my bedtime stories. Better than fairy tales, she’d say.”

“You still miss her?” The ridiculous question didn’t even deserve a response, but Ro sucked in a heavy breath and hung her head a little. My gut twisted at the tiny furrow that appeared on her brow.

“Every single day.”

I frowned, wanting to kiss her trembling lips. Pull her into my arms and take some of the sadness away. Instead, I fumbled for conversation.

“She skated professionally, right?”

Her mouth lifted a little, and she brought her eyes to mine. “State dance champion 1989.”

I ran my fingertips over the gritty stone seat. “You could do something with your skating, too.”

A scoff left her lips. “I teach roller dance to the local kids on a Sunday. It’s hardly the same thing.”

“Really?” I grinned, thinking of her surrounded by a gaggle of out-of-control kids on skates. “I hate to tell you, teaching roller skating and crocheting won’t make your fortune.”

Again, her brow furrowed a little. “Does that matter? Why do I need to be rich?”

“Okay, so you don’t want to be rich. But what do you want to do with your life? Pulling gas pumps isn’t going to get you out of Tuft Swallow, either.”

Ro shrugged as if to shake off my questions. “I have no clue. I know I should be full of ideas. Full of dreams. But I love this little town. I don’t wanna leave. It’s weird. It’s ridiculous sometimes. But I can’t imagine living anywhere else. In Tuft Swallow, the little things make a difference.”

“So, no grand plans at all?” Like moving nearer to Denver?

“Not currently. I love working at the Plume. I get free rein over the slushie machine and plenty of crochet time. Besides, why does everyone have to want something bigger and better?”

I pulled my lips together and brought a hand to the back of my neck. “Like me, you mean?”

Her mouth dropped a little, and she sucked in some air as if realizing how her words might have stung. Countless news articles described me as laser-focused, verging on obsessive. Flock Flockhart went after what he wanted. And he got it.

“I didn’t mean that. You have a talent. Worked hard. You followed your dreams.”

“Yeah, and now look at me.” The bitter edge in my voice grated on my ears.

Ro shifted on the seat, threading her ponytail around her fingers. “Eve told me about your leg being worse than everyone thinks. How bad is it?”

A slow burn crept up my chest. “How does Eve know about my leg?” As far as I knew, there’d been nothing in the press outside official statements. No leaks from the rehab care staff or the doctor’s office.

“She read about it online somewhere. Eve hero worships you. Everyone does around here.”

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:47 pm

Normally, I'd throw out a cheeky comeback. A question about whether Ro hero worshiped me too, but a heaviness settled over my body. "It's bad. I shattered some bone in the fall. Like a freak break, and there was no pinning it back together."

A bitter taste filled my mouth. I'd only admitted the truth out loud to my parents and Coop. Speaking those words into the universe and in front of Ro made it more real. Exposed my weakness. "I've worked hard to strengthen the leg back up. I've done everything I can, but the worst of it is, whatever happens, is out of my control."

My chest heaved a little heavier. Why couldn't I stop the words from tumbling out? A lump sat in my throat, and I couldn't swallow it away. Fuck, I couldn't guarantee I wouldn't burst into tears any second. "Any decision about my future depends on one examination. One opinion."

Ro turned into me. "What do you mean?"

"My contract is coming up for renewal, but if the surgeon says it doesn't look good," I met her dark brown eyes, "It's over." My voice wavered as I spoke. "I have to get back on the ice, Ro. I don't know what else I'll do."

A line etched between her brows. "But it'll be okay, right?"

I shrugged. "Best case, I get everything clear and go back to my team."

"And the worst?"

I paused, steadying my breath. What the hell was wrong with me? "They'll say I'm

unfit to play. If that happens, Denver won't re-sign me, and neither will anyone else. There'd be no hushing it up. No team in their right mind would hire me again."

Ro raked her eyes over my face, the line between her brows deepening. An ache hit my chest, and my head throbbed. I wanted her to hold me so much it hurt. To press into my body. Wind her arms around me and help me forget about my leg. My career. The air between us compressed, and all I could focus on were the freckles on her nose.

As if feeling the pull, Ro looked away. Shoving her hands against the concrete, she shifted back on the bench, bringing one of her legs up, knee to chin. She pulled at the laces of her skate. "We should get back. Gran's making pot roast tonight."

Her words were so pedestrian, so ordinary. Why, then, did they leave a gaping wound in my chest? I closed my eyes. The last thing Ro needed was to witness my pity party in the park. I forced a smile. "Sure."

Ro tugged her skate from her foot. After placing it on the floor, she leaned down to haul her bag off the concrete. Stowing it on the seat next to me, a bright piece of paper poked out of the top. The word *Scalpers* caught my eye. "What's this? "

She stopped unlacing her other skate, following my eyeline. "Ha! Just a dumb idea. Eve gave it to me."

"May I?" My hand hovered over the paper. Ro shrugged, and I picked it up, scanning the words on the flier. My eyes widened, an energy building up in my body. "A derby try-out? You should totally do it! You'd be great."

She looked at me as if I'd suggested she take up jello wrestling.

"Hey, I know a little about skating."

She scoffed, pulling on the laces of her skates extra hard. “You know abouticeskating, Brody.”

I shook my head. “Are you doubting me? Ro, you have skills.”

“Yeah, but being on wheels is different.”

I folded the flier in half then half again. “Not necessarily. You’d make a great jammer.”

She paused, crinkling her nose. “A what?”

“A jammer. That’s the person who scores the points in derby. You could skate rings around the blockers with your maneuvers.”

Ro giggled. The sound had fingers curled around my gut, giving it a gentle squeeze. “How do you know so much about roller derby?”

There was no point lying about it. She knew I wasn’t a monk. “I dated a derby player. Maybe two or three. Not together, and not for long, but I went to a few bouts. Learned a little. Enough to know you’d be more than useful.”

Ro eyed me, and the warm breeze ruffled through the stray strands of her ponytail. After a long beat, she shook her head. “Maybe. I don’t know. I’ll think about it.”

She was crazy to doubt her talent, but I wasn’t about to strong-arm her. If I remembered right, Ro didn’t like to be told what to do. She liked to find her own way to a decision. I turned my face into the breeze, and a glint of light in the distance made it through the trees. Sunlight on water. “Do they still have boats for hire out on the lake?”

“Yes. Why?” Ro pulled off her other skate, massaging her foot through its thick woolen sock.

“Nothing,” I lied. “I guess I’m just feeling nostalgic.”

“You remember the lake?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:47 pm

Oh, I remembered the lake, alright. I remembered that last summer in town, and the day me, Coop and a couple of friends stole a rowboat tethered by the jetty. We headed onto the water and laid low in the hull so the crazy bird watchers wouldn't spot us. They were always hanging around whenever we were out to have fun. We bobbed around for a while, drinking beer and talking about girls, when Ro poked her soaking wet head unannounced over the side.

She'd swum out to find us. Coop wanted to send her right back, but she refused. She'd dragged out a backpack loaded with beer cans from lord only knew where, so we'd let her stay. Who knew beer cans floated? We'd spent the entire afternoon in the bottom of that boat, drinking, playing poker, and laughing until sunset.

By the time we got back to shore, it was dusk, and Ro had had her first taste of beer. Probably more of it than she should have. Coop had a date, so I'd seen Ro home. Even held her hair when she'd vomited in the neighbor's hedge. I'd held her upright as she fought waves of nausea and I covered up for her when I finally got her home. I made sure she got into bed okay. Just like any big brother would.

But that day, and that night, was the first time I'd seen Rowena as anything other than a little sister. The memory of her reaching out for me as I tucked her into bed stayed with me. Her heavy-lidded eyes glazed with something other than booze.

“Brody, are you ready?”

My head snapped back to the present. Ro stood beside me, skates slung over her shoulder, their faded, pink wheels a little discolored. “Your skates are pretty old.”

She chewed on the inside of her cheek. “They were Mom’s.”

My gut plummeted. Awesome. Just nominate me for the Nobel sensitivity prize. Reaching out, I touched her arm, fingertips brushing her soft skin. “I’m sorry. I guess it never gets easier.”

She stared at my hand, and I counted her breaths. Four.

Her mouth opened to speak, but a tinkling, followed by a clatter and a nudging at my back, demanded my attention. I whipped around to see two beady, rectangular eyes staring back at me. A goat? It stood on the rock bench behind me. It had to be the one I’d seen the other morning. Today, it had on a yellow sweater, but before I could ask why, it bit into my sweatshirt, chewing down hard.

“Winston!” Ro squealed, grabbing the material and pulling hard. After a few tugs, the animal loosened its grip and let out a strangled bleat.

“Er, why is there a goat here? In the park?”

Ro chuckled. “Oh, that’s just Winston. He loves to hang out here. Maybe it’s the height of the benches. Must remind him of the mountains or life in the wild.” Her infectious grin had me smiling.

“He doesn’t look very wild. And he has terrible taste in knitwear. Yellow isn’t his color.” Winston ground a hoof into the stone behind me, and his nostrils flared as if annoyed we’d removed his meal. “Is he getting angry?”

“No. You just have to know how to handle him.” She ran a hand through the shaggy hair on his head.

“Who owns him? He just seems to wander around. Like the town is his own petting

zoo.”

“Ha! We have one of those, too, now. It’s especially for animals on the more portly side.”

From the earnest look on her face, I guessed she wasn’t kidding. “I’m not even going to ask.”

Ro turned to leave, and I followed suit, sticking my tongue out at Winston like a toddler. My sweatshirt was expensive.

“Nobody knows the actual name of his owner. He runs the auto shop,” she said over her shoulder. “Nice guy.”

“And what’s with all the sweaters? I’ve seen two, and I haven’t been in town long.”

She grinned. “Winston has a substantial wardrobe. His dad is a member of the Dirty Hookers.”

“The what?”

“Keep up. It’s the knitting group I belong to.”

“Knitting group?”

Ro looked at me and rolled her eyes. “Yes, silly. Like I told you. I crochet. And also help Mrs. Woodcock run the group. It’s fun.”

My lips trembled as I tethered up the grin I wanted to unleash. “Just like I said, you’re going to be old before your time. This town is sucking away your youth.”

She looked at me from under her lashes, and my gut tugged low.

“I mean it. You should be out raising hell, Ro, not picking up dropped stitches.”

We were almost at the road now, the grass giving way to asphalt. We waited for a rusty old tractor to roll by before we crossed.

“You should try it,” she said.

“Driving farm vehicles?”

“No, silly. Crochet. It’s therapeutic. Might take your mind off your leg problems.”

I smiled, swallowing a protest. For months, my “leg problems” monopolized my thoughts. Filled every waking hour. But that was how it should be. My goal was to get back on to the ice, not kick around in small towns, knitting sweaters.

I had a goal, a life to get back to. But as I ran my eyes over Ro, I chuckled to myself. Even if crochet was therapeutic, and smalltowns had their charm, the only thing I needed to take my mind off my troubles was standing right next to me.

7

RO

I hung the pump back in the slot and wiped the sweat off my forehead. The weather was as hot as Hades. I tapped on the hood of Mr. Bigstaff’s car, sending him off with a jaunty salute like a pirate captain. Time to head inside to the cool of the store. We’d only had a trickle of customers this morning. Just the way I liked it. Slow days gave me more crochet time, and I was still struggling with my potato-like owls.

On my way to the counter, I grabbed a snack from the shelves. There was something satisfying about the doughy-sugar-fest only a Twinkie could provide, and today, I needed the buzz. I headed behind the counter and brought out my crochet bag.

“Rowena.” A silky voice rolled over me. Mrs. Flubbergeist. My boss hovered in the aisle, her long, red talons gripping the shelf. “Can you hold the fort for a while? Bertie and I have some vital stocktaking to attend to.” Her eyes flashed with something that didn’t involve counting bags of chips, and the corners of my mouth lifted.

Knowing the town’s suspicions about their “adult” acting past, the two of them had done nothing to lead me to a different conclusion. In fact, they spent a worrying amount of time locked in each other’s arms amongst the magazines and chocolate bars. And really, who soundproofed their stockroom with egg boxes?

“That’s fine,” I said, giving her a cheery wave. I was better left out of whatever happened in that storeroom. She grinned and turned away with a jangle of gold bracelets. Her teased bottle blonde hair didn’t move as if she wore a helmet of peroxide and hairspray.

I picked up my daddy potato owl and contemplated unwinding his yarn. Again. Why was this project such a struggle?

Probably because I couldn’t keep my brain off Brody.

Almost every waking thought involved my brother’s best friend and how to avoid him. Because I couldn’t keep my mind above his neck, steering clear was basic self-preservation. But the whole avoiding him thing wasn’t going too well.

At Gran’s pot roast feast, I’d complained of a headache and gone to bed early. I don’t know why I bothered. I’d spent most of the evening listening for signs that Brody was in residence below me.

Twice, I’d walked in on him in the bathroom when I popped in to replace some towels and refill the hand soap. He’d been brushing his teeth the first time - nothing

too controversial there. But the second time, he'd exited the shower just as I opened the door. Only quick reactions and a dripping curtain saved my getting to know him a whole lot better.

I'd spent way more time at work than necessary, too. Had even offered to help at the Heavy Petting Zoo just to stay out of the house. The owner was light on staff and offered me a try-out shift. Unfortunately, I gave what I thought were feed pellets to an overweight raccoon. It turned out to be bedding material for the mice, and one sizable vet bill later, I was officially "let go" before my new career even started.

I unwrapped the Twinkie and took a bite. As I chewed, I leaned over the owl to work out what I was doing wrong when a rude clank made me jump out of my skin.

I lifted my head to see Brody Flockhart's grinning face, along with a smart green bag he'd dropped on the counter. I hadn't even heard him come in. "Holy crap! You don't believe in subtle entrances, do you?"

His eyes flashed, and he curled a brow. Damn! Why had I used the word "entrances?" Now, anything that followed would be weird.

"I got you something."

I glanced down at the counter. "A bag? You shouldn't have." It was a snippy comment, but honestly, he'd almost given me a heart attack. Surely, the shock warranted some penalty.

"Open it," he said, gesturing to the zipper lying temptingly close to my fingertips.

With an eye roll any teenager would be proud of, I set down the owl and gripped the metal slider, dragging it over the teeth. Brody leaned in closer, his face glowing like a kid on Christmas morning. I nudged the bag open. A pair of skates nestled inside, not

like Mom's, though. These had no ankle, no high-top, and they didn't have the sparkle stickers or the rainbows I'd painted on last year. They were black and white with efficient stitching. These were sneakers on wheels, and they meant business.

"They're derby skates. For you," he said, dimples popping.

"For me? I...I..." I looked up into Brody's beautiful blue eyes. They burned with excitement. "I can't take these."

He scowled, the resulting line on his forehead briefly marring its smooth perfection. "Why not?"

Did I need to go into detail? Explain that accepting a gift from him meant he'd have some sort of power over me? That I'd owe him something in return? Of course, he'd never collect. Wouldn't expect anything from me. Still, I didn't like the churn in my gut at the thought of being in his debt. In anyone's debt, for that matter.

"It's so kind of you, it really is, but I can't go around accepting skates from single men. People will talk." I gave him a glib smile, hoping he'd see the humor I was aiming for. It was my usual go-to defense mechanism.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:47 pm

Brody scoffed. “Ro, this is hardly Victorian times. I’d think handsome men delivering presents to your door would fit perfectly with your heartbreaker status. Plus, it’s only a pair of skates.”

They didn’t look like a pair of “only skates.” Their leather screamed quality and as I picked one up and tested the wheel with my index finger, there was no friction to lessen its slick rotation. I let out a breath. Man, they would have cost him a bomb. The idea of at least trying them out on the carpet, of course, had my lips bowing.

“But I didn’t say I would try out for the derby team. Spitz Hollow is so far away, and I’d have to go incognito on account of my Tuft Swallow-ness.”

A sulky pout took up residence on Brody’s lips. He gave me pure puppy-dog eyes, and my resolve wavered a little. He should add “a talent for guilt-tripping” to his Hockey Card statistics. I tutted and returned the skate to the bag.

“I’m gonna take my break now,” I called out into the shop, aware that the Flubbergeists wouldn’t hear me in the egg-box-lined store room.

The dazzling grin from a minute ago reappeared on Brody’s face, and he watched me as I shouldered the bag and came out from behind the counter. “Wait for me outside,” I said, holding the door open for him. “Raspberry or cola?”

One of his brows tipped heavenward.

“Slushie flavor. It’s hot.”

“Raspberry,” he said before I pushed him outside and gently closed the door on him. I didn’t need him to see how fast my chest was moving. Brody backed outside and took a seat at the old wooden picnic table that sometimes served as my office. A huge plaster model of a tufted titmouse dwarfed the bench. It was one of the town’s most famous feathered residents.

From the slushie machine, I had a bird's-eye view through the window. Brody’s giant biceps fired as he settled onto the wooden planks. The bulk of his muscle cast a shadow on the table to rival a solar eclipse and he’d styled his fair hair in a scruffy “I didn’t spend twenty minutes in front of the mirror” kind of way. I chewed at my bottom lip as I ran my eyes over his jeans. They hugged the bulk of his thighs like their life depended on it. Oh, yes, Brody had it going on today.

When I’d finished pouring slushies, I gripped the flimsy cups and pushed the door open with my shoulder.

Brody was looking into the slightly crazed face of the plaster bird as I approached.

“This thing worries me.”

With its orange eyes, it did have a touch of the “undead” about it.

“I feel like it’s gonna take a chunk out of me at any second.”

I giggled, putting the drinks down on the tabletop. I stepped one leg over the bench. If I left the other one free, I had a quick means of escape should I get too jittery to feign disinterest in Brody’s presence. I slipped the bag's handles off my shoulder and placed the skates alongside the cups.

“So, are you in?” he asked, tipping his chin at the bag. “The derby? They’re your size.”

Electricity prickled at my fingertips, and I couldn't help but reach over and peek inside again. "I don't know. I'm not sure if I'm ready to deal with the ostracism."

"What do you mean?"

I took out one skate and cradled it in my lap. "If I represent Spitz Hollow, even if it's only for roller derby, nobody here would ever talk to me again."

Brody scowled and shifted on the bench, the vibration of the movement hitting me right between my legs. "Tuft Swallow doesn't have their own team. It makes no sense."

"It doesn't have to. The rivalry goes back generations, you know that. The residents would drum me out of town. Mark me with a letter 'T' for traitor."

Brody ran a finger down the outside of the slushie cup, leaving a line in the drops of condensation clustered there. And did I imagine that finger running along something else more pleasing? You bet I did.

"Come on. It'll be fun," he said.

I didn't disagree, but I was pretty sure we weren't talking about the same thing.

"What do you have to lose?"

I huffed, then took a pull on the straw of my drink. "Just my head, my teeth, my dignity, and my social standing in the Tuft Swallow community."

He scoffed. "What social standing do you have? You're already earmarked as a scarlet woman."

“Well...” Think, Ro, think. “I’m captain of the cornhole cheer squad.” At my words, Brody laughed. “Hey, it’s an important job. And then there’s the responsibility of playing a literal icon at Christmas each year. I’m always cast as the Virgin Mary in the nativity play. Not everyone has what it takes to carry off a realistic immaculate conception.”

Brody’s shoulders shook, and the crinkles at the corners of his eyes grew deeper.

“What’s so funny?”

Eventually, he recovered himself enough to drag out some words. “I know they say you should watch out for the quietones, but crochet and cornhole? Cheerleading and community theater? You’re not leaving me much to work with.”

I scowled. At least, I hoped I did. I wanted him to see how much I didn’t appreciate his mockery. “I’ll have you know, some folks don’t consider me boring. Besides, I can be wild.”

His eyebrows lifted, and his lips settled into a smirk. “Really?”

My blood simmered, and I fought the impulse to stamp my foot. “Yes! I’ve had sex with almost strangers.”

His eyes widened, but his stubborn smile remained. “You have?”

“Yes. Twice.”

As the glee danced in his eyes, I swear my insides curled up and died.

“Just twice?”

I leveled a glare at him. “I suppose you’ve had lots of sex with people you’ve only just met, Mr. Bigshot.”

Brody ground out a laugh. “Perhaps more than twice.”

A twinge tugged at my gut, and I swallowed away a nasty taste. I had no right to be jealous. No matter how much my body disagreed, I shouldn't be thinking about Brody in anything other than a sisterly way.

I played with the thin lace of the skate in my lap and dared a glance at him. His eyes were still full on me, the corners of his mouth wearing little indents where they turned up.

"You're too cute," he said.

Instead of pleasing me, his words heated my blood to a simmer. How patronizing. "I'm not cute. I'm kick-ass."

"Prove it," he said, giving the table a gentle slap. "Try out for the derby team."

A fizzing bubbled up my chest. "I already have a lot going on." Did I really expect him to believe that? We'd spent almost a week in the same house. He'd know I had the social presence of a hermit crab.

"Come on, Ro. Get out of your comfort zone. Live a little."

The wink he gave me put my back up even more. Ramrod straight.

"Meget out of my comfort zone? What about you?"

"What about me?" he countered, holding his palms up as if pleading his innocence.

"You're cruising, Brody. Since your return, people can't do enough for you." I put on a comical voice. "Oh, Flock, you're amazing. Oh, Flock, can I name my firstborn after you? Oh, Flock, please give me your babies. You're like the prodigal son on steroids."

He let out a roar of laughter, and the pure joy on his face drew me in closer. “I agree, none of that sounds too uncomfortable, particularly the babies part.”

I mulled over his casual attitude. The way he expected me to go out on a limb with little inconvenience to himself. I mean, I’d halfway talked myself into trying out already, but his cocky grin and the arrogant turn of his jaw made me see crimson. “Okay, buddy, here’s what’s gonna happen. If I’m going to try out for the derby team, you have to do something for me in return.”

He chewed on the edge of his lip, and something flickered in his eyes. “Okay. I’m listening.”

I nodded once. “If I try out for the Spitz Hollow Scalpers, you have to learn to crochet.”

The corners of Brody’s mouth twitched anew, and my toes curled in my Chucks. Damn, those lips of his.

“I’m sure I can learn a few stitches,” he said, stretching his arms behind his head. “It can’t be that hard.”

Little did he know. “Don’t be so sure. Holding a fine hook is a little different from holding a hockey stick. Can those big, manlyhands cope?” I cocked an eyebrow at his substantial paws. Wait, was I flirting?

“I think I can handle it,” he said, his voice a little tighter than before.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

“Not just a few stitches. You actually have to make something. Something difficult. In fact,” I said, glancing at my own much daintier hands, “I need new gloves. If I try out for the derby team, you have to learn crochet and then make a pair for me.”

I could almost hear the cogs in his head whirring as he weighed up whether he’d take the challenge. “In two colors,” I added. No harm in upping the ante.

Brody placed an elbow on the table and rested his chin on his upturned palm. “Just the two?”

“Harder than it looks.”

After the longest beat, he sat upright. “Deal.”

A wave of something passed over me. I couldn’t tell if it was delight or terror. “Good. I’ll find you a hook and some yarn.”

“Sounds fantastic,” Brody said, moving his legs from under the bench before he stood, dwarfing me. “Looks like we’ve got some work to do.”

I held up a hand, shielding my eyes from the sun. “We?”

“Oh, didn’t I mention? I’m your new coach.”

My stomach flipped, and my breath ran shallower than before. “Wait, what?”

“Yep.” The grin on his face twisted up my insides. “It’ll be fun. And I know my

stuff.”

Well, he was right there. He was a genius on his blades. Roller skates couldn’t be that different. But him coaching me meant we’d be spending a lot more time together. We’d already lived in the same house for less than a week, and I was fighting a losing battle with my wayward thoughts. I looked up at the angular planes of Brody’s face and swallowed.

Any misguided notion that I’d lost my crush on him disintegrated. He was going to coach me for derby. And I didn’t like to admit there were plenty of other skills I’d happily learn from him.

8

RO

Isat cross-legged on Gran’s sofa, nursing a strong coffee. I’d spent the last ten minutes unraveling the bundle of wool I picked up at The Twitch ‘n Stitch, Tuft Swallow’s only craft shop. Book lovers often described a sense of bliss, a heavenly calm, when they stepped inside a library. I felt the same when I pottered along the cluttered aisles of needles, hooks, and buttons. Currently, I was battling with a large spool of baby pink 12-ply that’d over-mingled with a green cashmere blend.

I frowned, pulling a stubborn thread of the green, tightening up the knot I was trying to loosen. “Mother f...”

“Careful what you say. Even yarn has feelings.”

My head snapped up. Brody. He’d come into the room, his blue T-shirt matching his eyes, and holy hell, did he know how good those jeans looked? With a side glance, I skimmed over his whole body. To check for consistency, of course. Yep. The entire

package was up to scratch.

Brody headed across the green rug to the kitchen but stopped halfway, squinting at my top.

“Show me your pecker?” He gave a little laugh. “I know I’m not known for my shyness, but I didn’t expect you to be so forward.”

I followed his gaze to land on my chest. I’d thrown on the first thing I saw this morning, which was a red T-shirt displaying those exact words.

“So, peckers, eh?” He’d stopped at the kitchen door now, his mocking grin making my teeth clamp together. “No wonder you’re so popular if you go out wearing slogans like that.”

My cheeks blazed, and I looked at him, mouth flapping like a beached fish. “Stop! I bought it at the bird festival fundraiser last year. Practically everyone in town owns one.”

“Then you’re all equally filthy.” He chuckled, changing direction and sitting on the other end of the couch.

As he landed, the velvet cushions gave a little beneath me.

“Does the council still run that bird festival?”

“They sure do. It gets bigger every year.”

He wrinkled his nose and smiled. The soft light from the netted window lit up the highlights in his hair. “This town is so weird.”

“Maybe, but it’s home. You just have to enter the spirit of it.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

He turned his body toward me, and I pulled the yarn through my fingers a little faster.

“So, how has your training been going?” he asked.

“What training?”

“For the tryout. As your coach, I have a vested interest.”

I’d checked out the rules online and watched a few videos. Did that count as training?

“Don’t I just have to show up and skate around?”

He threw one brow to the ceiling. “You have seen roller derby, haven’t you?”

“No, well, kind of.” It was more of a question than a statement, and the slight sneer on his lips confirmed he was unimpressed with my honesty.

“Derby is almost on a par with hockey. You need to be strong. Have good stamina.” He ran his eyes over my legs and then the rest of me. My insides squirmed. “Show me your guns.”

I scoffed. “Oh, come on! What is this, Miss Olympia?”

He cocked his head to the side. “No, really... Show me what you’ve got.”

My fingers burned to grab one of Gran’s embroidered cushions and throw it at him. Even so, I lifted my arms and pulled a theatrical flex, channeling my inner Dwayne Johnson.

Brody's lips curved, and he scooped closer to me, reaching up to encircle my entire upper arm with one gigantic hand. The touch of his palm on my skin had fireflies jumping in my tummy as if each fingertip would leave a trace of him behind. I daredn't look at him, afraid of what my eyes would reveal. Instead, I stared resolutely at his wrist and the expensive watch he wore.

He let out a kind of growl, or something. It was a sound I'd never heard before, and one that had my heart racing in overtime. "Working on that pump has given you a good base, but the women you'll be going up against are badass. They mean business."

Finally, he let go of my arm, my skin craving the return of his fingers. A breath stuttered in my chest. I had to act cool. Brody didn't need to know that just one touch had me yearning for more. Much more. "Are you suggesting I'm not a badass?"

Brody raked his eyes over me again, a smirk growing on his mouth. "Quite the contrary, particularly in that shirt, but some of the fresh meat will have trained for weeks. Maybe months."

"Fresh meat?"

"That's what they call a new intake."

I ran my hands along my thighs. He really did know a lot about roller derby.

"Are you working today?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Okay. What time do you get off? I'll pick you up."

“What for?”

“We’re going to the gym.”

I gazed down at the bundle in my lap. My racing thoughts and heart tangled just like the yarn. “Seriously? I’ve never set foot in a gym.”

Brody grinned and stood. “Exactly. We need to build you up a bit. So I’ll pick you up?”

At a flash of those ocean blue eyes, I’d happily sign up for pilates, jiu-jitsu, cardio, or full-on weight-lifting. I didn’t care. Getting sweaty with Brody sounded a little forbidden and all kinds of interesting. “Not from work, though. Meet me at the school gym. Seven p.m.”

“Sounds intriguing.”

“Not really. You’ll see.”

He nodded, backing into the kitchen, pointing his fingers at me like a couple of pistols. “I’ll be there. And bring your A-game. I’m going to drive you hard.”

When he left the room, I let out a breath. Promises, promises.

BRODY

I arrived at the back of the school at six forty-five. The warm, sticky air kissed my skin, and the doors to the gym hung wide open. Thumping music echoed inside, and I stopped to listen for a second, holding my breath. I didn't want to appear too keen. Tonight wasn't a date or anything. Still, an air of nonchalance never hurt. The music stopped, and the sound of high-pitched voices and giggles rang out.

I neared the doors, and a familiar voice rose above the others. I could only make out the odd word, but its sing-song tone was unmistakable. The corners of my lips peaked as I walked into the gym, keeping to the shadows.

The sight greeting me was the last thing I expected. Ro stood in the middle of the basketball court with a group of young girls and kids arranged in a pyramid formation around her. She had her back to the door, but all eyes were on her, including mine. The harsh overhead lighting bounced off her glossy hair and lit her tan shoulders, sending a smile to my lips.

Not wanting to interrupt, I headed to the stand at the side of the room. I hadn't sat on these particular bleachers for nearly ten years. But almost on autopilot, I found my old spot, four rows up. The smell of floor polish and gym shoes in the room hadn't changed either.

My sneakers squeaked on the wood, and Ro's head spun to find the source of the noise. Her eyes widened a little when she saw me, and the glow that hit her cheeks

filled my belly with a burn all its own. She gave me a wave, and I grinned back. She looked adorable.

They all did. All ten of them had matching outfits. White tank tops with a picture of a swallow embroidered on the front and the word “Tuftettes” on the back. They each wore a short turquoise and orange skirt, white knee-high socks, and sneakers. Ro was head and shoulders above the little ones, but her pigtails bounced just as free as theirs.

“Okay, we’re gonna take it from the top again. Full-out this time. It’s a new routine, so watch your timing.” Ro’s voice reverberated off the walls. The kids nodded and scattered, picking up turquoise pom-poms from the floor. Ro leaned down to gather her set, and my gaze lingered at the smooth gap between her socks and her little skirt. I chuckled to myself. The last time we’d been in the gym together, she still had braces.

So, this was the cheerleading squad she’d told me about. I’d figured she might’ve been joking, but here I was, in the middle of the Mickey Mouse Club, about to get a sample of their new material. Ro hit a button on the old speaker at the side and raced back to take her position at the point of the pyramid before the music started.

The thumping beat began, but instead of the Dallas Cowboys or the Colts grinding and high-energy cheer routines, the Mighty Swallow’s Tuftettes skipped and hopped around each other as if country dancing at the state fair. I stifled a giggle. The entire squad was so cute, with their sassy smiles and age-appropriate swagger. And Ro was in the thick of it, shaking her hips with the others, looking anything but PG.

Everyone stayed in formation and on the beat, pom-poms rolling like tumbleweeds, until one girl took a wrong turn, bumped into another, and fell to the ground with a thump. I winced, ready to jump up and help, but Ro was already there. She crouched down, taking the little one into her arms. The rest of the kids gathered around, too,

and helped get her back to her feet. Ro ran her hand over the girl's hair. She whispered words to her, soothing the kid's trembling bottom lip.

The entire team's attention was on Ro now, and their looks of pure adoration brought a rock-sized lump to my throat. She murmured something to the group, and they nodded before coming together in a team hug. They all dropped their pom-poms into a large pile. I guess practice was over, but honestly, I could've sat here all night, just watching my old friend being incredible.

I shook my head slowly. Coop would string me up and run me through if he thought his wingman had any ideas about his sister. He knew too much about my reputation to risk her heart. But at night, shifting around on Maggie's couch, I'd wondered what might have happened if he hadn't interrupted us the night of Ro's prom.

Louder voices roused me from my thoughts. The parents were arriving to pick up their kids. I recognized a couple of faces, but nobody paid me any attention. I ambled down the steps that ran up the aisle of the stand. Ro was sitting on the speaker, checking her phone. When I reached her, she looked up, giving me a closed-mouthed smile.

"Pigtails? Really?"

I'd hoped she'd see my words as a gentle ribbing, but a tiny frown creased her brow, and she brought a hand up to touch the ties that held her hair in place. My gut pulled. I hadn't meant to offend her or make her self-conscious. She didn't know how amazing she looked. How much I wanted to touch her hair. Tangle my fingers through its dark strands. I opened my mouth to speak and apologize.

"It's Flock!" a voice rang out before I could say anything, and within seconds, not just one, but about six kids took up a group squeal. They raced to where I stood, swamping me like a tidal wave. Their hands reached up to me, and my brain

scrambled to make sense of their questions. They all talked at once, their voices galloping over each other.

“Watch out, kids, you don’t want to break him,” laughed Ro. The glow in her eyes matched theirs.

I laughed, too, giving them all high-fives. “How do they know who I am? Did you prep them? Tell them I was coming?”

She shook her head, those damn pigtails whipping the skin of her neck. “No, Brody. Haven’t you noticed? You’re a hometown hero. Everyone loves you around here.”

Her smile made me bold. “Everyone?”

She narrowed her eyes, but her lips didn’t drop. “Don’t push it.”

The gaggle of kids dissipated when they saw their parents. I hung out by the speaker as Ro chatted to a few of them.

“Brody!”

A voice rang out before a hand clapped me on my shoulder. I turned to face a man with piercing blue eyes and cropped fair hair. “Finn? What the hell are you doing here?”

He grinned and pulled me in for a hug. Finn was the older brother I’d never had. The voice of reason who saved me from going off the rails as a teen. Another one of Tuft Swallow’s escapees. Though he had a few years on me, I’d been proud that we looked kind of similar growing up. He’d introduced me to body conditioning. Helped me build the basics of my hockey physique. I hero-worshiped him then. Hell, I’d wanted to be Leo Finnegan.

He finally let me go. “It’s awesome to see you, man. I heard you were back. Just passing through?”

“Something like that,” I murmured, running a hand through my hair. “More’s the point. What are you doing here?”

“I’ve got a daughter now. Thought Tuft Swallow would be a good place to raise her.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

Thinking about all the quirky shit that happened in this town, I hoped he was right.

“I teach Phys Ed at the school. Started just recently.”

“I forgot you two know each other,” Ro said, heading over with one of the older Tuftettes in tow.

Finn’s face lit up when he saw the girl, bringing her close to his body. “Brody, this is Lexie. My little girl.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said.

“You, too.” She assessed me through brown eyes as only a pre-teen could.

I grinned. She was pretty tall, to be called little. “Hey, you did great out there.”

“Thanks.” She looked like she’d rather be anywhere than talking with the grownups. In her shoes, I’d have felt the same.

“I’ll be right back,” Ro said, giving a thumbs up to a parent who waved at her.

Finn watched her go, then grinned at me. “How long has it been? I’ve been following your career, but I wanna find out what you’ve been up to in real life. How are your folks?”

Warmth ignited in my chest. When I met people in Denver or when the team traveled, everyone asked questions about the games, my opinions on the other players, and the

other teams, Never about me. In Denver, I was always Flock but never Brody. Here, everyone asked how I was. They treated me like family.

I glanced around at the whitewashed walls with their flags and pennants, and the kernel of an idea sprouted in my brain. “Do you have access to this gym?”

“Sure do.”

“Would it be okay to use it a couple of times? In the evenings.”

Finn tipped his head to the side. “Of course, man. But why?”

“Ro’s looking to try out for roller derby. Might need some space to work on her skills. Her speed.”

Finn coughed. “The Spitz Hollow Scalpers?” He shook his head. “They’ll eat her alive.”

I huffed a laugh. “Don’t underestimate a Swan.”

We both turned to find her. And find her we did. Standing alongside one of the smaller Tuftettes, arms above her head, demonstrating a pirouette like one of those rotating jewelry box ballerinas.

I grimaced. “We may need more than a couple of nights.”

Finn snickered. “Sure, whatever you want.”

Lexie grabbed her dad’s hand, practically pulling him away. “Dad, I have to get home. I’ve got math homework to finish for tomorrow.”

“Okay, okay,” Finn said to his daughter before turning back to me. “Let’s catch up, man.”

“You bet.” My smile grew as he walked away. He looked happy.

I let out a breath, looking around for Ro. When I spotted her, a wave of heat passed over me, and something tugged inside my chest. I wanted to be near her. Breathe the same air as her. Was that the real reason I’d offered to coach her? I’d tried to convince myself it was my civic duty or that I was being a supportive friend, but deep down, I knew differently.

She waved off the last of the parents and hurried over, all knee-high socks and toned thighs.

“You ready?” I asked.

She nodded. “I’m still not sure it’s necessary, though.”

“I am,” I ground out, trying hard to ignore the movement of her breasts against the embroidered swallow on her chest.

“Do I really need muscles? Surely, there’s more to roller derby than being tough. It can’t be everything.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

“No, it’s not. You have to be a team player. You’re a wonderful coach to those kids, Ro.”

Her face flushed, and she looked up at me from under her lashes. “Okay, let’s go. Ladies first.” She gestured to the door.

I snickered. “Careful, Small Fry. It doesn’t pay to be cheeky to this coach. Remember, you’re at my mercy tonight.”

She smirked, switching off the lights and closing the doors behind us with a slam. “We’ll see.”

I hovered outside the door as the thick evening air wrapped around us. “Ro?” I kicked an imaginary stone with my toe. “Did you ever date Finn? Eve made it sound like you’d dated the whole town.”

A faint line hit her brow, then her lips curved in a glorious arc. “You should know better than to ask a lady about her past. But no. I didn’t.”

With a flick of her pigtails, she took off toward the front of the school, leaving me grinning in her wake. The burn in my chest and the unsettling creep of my mind lifted. The thought of her and Finn together, even for a drink, didn’t sit well. But when my heartbeat picked up, I checked myself.

I was a man on a mission. A coach. Nothing more. I needed to keep all thoughts about Ro above my belt and out of my heart. But sweating it out in the gym together for the next hour would be on par with eternity in hell.

RO

The smell of leather and, well, men hit my nostrils as Brody held open the door to the Put Up Your Ducks fight gym. I breathed in the thick, muggy air, and my heartbeat kicked up a level.

“Where is everybody?” I wasn’t expecting an aerobics class or anything. Still, one or two sweaty boxers would’ve settled the gentle rolling in my gut.

“Odd Duck said we could have the place to ourselves for an hour.”

I wagged my head and chuckled. I’d have a word with the owner. Nicholas “Odd Duck” D’onofrio had no idea he’d opened his gym to an egomaniac and an inappropriately dressed cheerleader for the evening.

Going straight for humor, I turned in a circle as I walked past the giant mural on the wall and the boxing ring. “I see. Worried there’ll be a lineup of adoring fangirls at the door trying to get a peek at you?”

Brody shrugged, lifting a brow. “I could say the same. Although I’ve seen little evidence of hopeful men hanging around. Eve made it sound like you were fighting them off with a pitchfork.”

I scoffed and tucked a stray hair behind my ear. “Remember. Three brothers?”

Brody winced and nodded. “Point taken.”

He glanced over at the mural on the wall and stopped short. He looked back at me before stepping toward one of the little ducks in the painting. Rubber ducks were

Nick's thing. "I just realized. That's you." He pointed at a duck holding a row of knitting in its wing. It had on a pair of rollerskates and wore braids.

I grinned. "Sure is. You'll find a lot of residents here. Having a spot on Nick's wall is like a badge of honor. You may even get your own picture one day. I can just imagine your duck. He'd have a hockey stick and skates, but I'm not sure there's enough room on the wall to fit your ego."

"Damn," he murmured, raking his eyes over me. "I think hanging out with you will fix that. I'm gonna need to put you through your paces. Iron out your insubordination with a bit of hard work. We wouldn't want your coach to up and quit now, would we?"

I raised a brow. "I'm ready to work. What did you have in mind?"

"Let's start with some free weights." He glanced at my outfit. "Do you wanna change?"

Honestly, yes. I'd had the misguided idea that if my cheer outfit was okay for a dance workout, it would be alright for a gym visit. Then, I saw myself in one of the wall mirrors. I looked ridiculous. I should be grateful nobody else was here. But I didn't want to show weakness. Brody already thought I needed toughening up. I put on my most breezy voice. "I kind of like the look. Where do you want me?"

His eyes flared with something I hoped was humor. "That's an interesting question. I think over here."

Brody led me to a stand of metal dumbbells set next to an enormous mirror. I hung back just long enough to glimpse his thick, sun-kissed neck as he leaned in to check the rack. I ran my hand over the icy surfaces of the nearest weights, desperate for something to cool me off. Ever since he'd sat in the stands at the school and watched

me dance, I'd struggled to keep an even body temperature.

Of course, he wasn't helping. Instead, he ran his eyes over me from bottom to top, lingering at my thighs. I'd be lying if I didn't admit the intensity of his stare ignited the smallest tingle, low, low down in my belly.

"Your legs look just fine." Was he okay? His voice had dropped to a gravelly rasp, but as soon as it faded, his smile returned. "We'll start with your arms."

He picked up a weight from the rack with a satisfying clunk. The dumbbell looked heavy enough to sink a rowboat. "Two major muscle groups power your arm. The biceps and the triceps."

With those words, Brody extended his arm, then curled the weight close to his chest. I swallowed. If the colossal mound of tan skin on the inside of his arm was a bicep, then sign me up to buy a dozen. Preferably his.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

Then, at the word tricep, he uncurled his arm, bringing the weight behind him like a feather. This time, a smaller bulge kicked under his T-shirt. I pulled the hem of my top away from my neck, allowing my skin to breathe. Was it me, or did Odd Duck need to invest in air conditioning?

“These muscles work in harmony to control your arm’s flexion and extension.”

I chewed on my bottom lip. Flexion, extension, I really didn’t care which. Right now, I was more immersed in fascination, with a healthy dose of satisfaction on the side. I hadn’t seen anything as impressive since Eve sent me one of Henry Cavil’s viral workout videos. Maybe they had the same trainer.

Brody turned in the mirror, repeating the movements with his other arm. “You need to keep your focus on proper form, gradually increase resistance, and most of all, listen to your body.”

I’d rather listen to Brody’s body in that tight white T and gray track pants. But I had to admit his knowledge of muscles and movement gave me faith that I wasn’t about to pull an arm or break a ligament.

He continued to work his muscles, and I shamelessly stood and admired him. The man in front of me wasn’t the playful Brody I remembered growing up. This man oozed focus. Intensity. Faint lines appeared on his forehead as he studied his body in the mirror.

The Brody I knew would’ve pulled my pigtails or chucked me under the chin by now. Would probably have dropped a dumbbell on my foot just to get a laugh.

“Okay, your turn,” Brody said, breaking the spell and laying the weights he’d used on the rack. He picked up a far lighter set. “We’ll start with triceps. You’re going to need those. For elbowing.”

“Sorry, what?”

“Roller derby isn’t a non-contact sport. You’ll face some pretty tough competition, and you need to rough-in with the best.”

“Like you, you mean?” Even one minute of watching Brody Flockhart on the ice told how tough he was. An impenetrable wall of a man. No amount of pushing weights would give me shoulders or arms like his.

He grinned and rubbed his chin. “If you were built like me, you wouldn’t look so cute in that outfit.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks. Damn silly idea of mine not to bring a change of clothes.

Brody sat me down on the edge of an abs board, its plastic sticking to the back of my bare legs. He handed me a lighter set of weights, and under his guidance, I attempted to recreate the tricep exercise. No matter how I tried, though, I couldn’t lift the dumbbell behind me. Instead, my arm wobbled and shook like the San Andreas fault on a bad day.

“I need lighter weights,” I said, dropping them on the floor beside me.

“Those are the lightest ones.”

A quick scan of the rack confirmed his statement. “Is there anything else I can use? A water bottle or maybe a couple of cans of soup?”

He grinned and reached behind the rack, bringing out a thick, green elastic band like they used for PT. “You can try this, but really, I wasn’t sure we’d have to resort to using overgrown hair ties.” He was joking, of course, wasn’t he?

Brody took up position behind me, standing and straddling the bench. He had my complete focus in the mirror. When he passed me the band, I gripped one end near my shoulder and the opposite end with my other hand. Then, I replicated his motion by kicking my arm out behind me.

I completed three extensions. As long as I concentrated, it wasn’t tricky. Or at least I thought it wasn’t. But then Brody stretched out his shoulder, bringing one solid arm down and across his body. My eyes followed his movement, and my breath skittered in my chest. His hips were about twelve inches from the back of my head. Thanks to basic anatomical organization, that meant so was his...

Holy crap! What kind of thought was that? Had I suddenly turned into some sort of gym pervert? Why was I even thinking about his package? I let out a slow breath, timing it with the extension of my arm. I needed to look professional or, at the very least, competent.

But damn him, Brody wouldn’t play along. Satisfied he’d sufficiently stretched his shoulder, he brought both arms over his head, bending backward to extend his spine. His hips moved even closer, and I widened my eyes in the mirror as the bottom of his T-shirt inched above his waistband. A fine line of golden hair and the first set of his abs peeked out from underneath.

I hissed a breath in through my teeth, and at the sound, our eyes met in the mirror. Fire immediately lit my cheeks, and one corner of his lips peaked. The smirk on his face and the realization that he knew I was ogling him brought on a sudden loss of muscle control. With a gasp, I let go of the band, landing a fast elbow directly into his groin.

With a dull “Oof,” Brody crumpled over like a controlled explosion had collapsed his insides.

“Oh, shit! I’m so sorry!” I squealed, dropping the band and jumping to my feet. By now, he’d sat on the bench, doubled over and groaning. “Can I help?” I mean, I could offer to rub it better, but it probably wasn’t the best suggestion, considering we were alone, and I was already struggling to control my still-raging crush on him.

“No!” His voice was a rasp. “I need to lie flat.” I stepped out of the way, and he reclined backward on the bench, pale-faced and with his hands cupping his groin

I cast my eyes around the gym, looking for an oxygen tank or ice. A hydration station stood in the corner. “I’ll get you some water,” I said, sprinting to the cooler. I pushed down on the pump, filling a paper cup. Satisfied I’d got as much as possible, I raced back to Brody. He lay out like a corpse on the bench, hands above his head.

I made it to his side okay but got totally distracted by his abs again, tripping on the dumbbells I’d left on the floor.

Like a slo-mo sequence from a movie, the entire contents of the cup took flight, landing all over him. As soon as it hit, the liquid soaked into the fabric of his top, rendering it transparent in milliseconds.

“Oh hell, I’m so sorry,” I lied, my hands hovering over the now clearly outlined grooves that made up his armor-plated stomach. Would it be a bad time to ask for an explanation of the workings of the abdominal muscles? At least he’d forgotten about the accidental elbowing in all the chaos.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

Brody groaned and pushed up to sit. “Don’t worry,” he ground out before looking down to check the damage. “It could happen to anyone.” With a quick shake of his head, he took the bottom of his T-shirt and peeled it off over his head.

I swear my eyeballs nearly popped out and landed on the floor. A million women would pay a fortune to swap places with me. The words “Instagram” and “Live” crossed my mind, but I dismissed them as tacky and exploitative.

His T-shirt was off now, and although I’d seen him shirtless before, the low light of the gym did crazy things to the planes of his chest. A furnace lit in my face, and my mouth hung open. He bundled up his sodden T-shirt in one giant hand and tossed it to the floor.

“A few women have wanted me to lose some clothes in my time, but they just came out and asked, Ro.” He winked, and I swallowed. Hard. Brody stood and stepped back over the bench, pulling up at the weights rack again. “Now that you have me almost naked, let’s work on your biceps.”

There was no awkwardness in his face. No nervous tic in his cheek or clamped jaw. He was just going to carry on, half wet, half naked, and so very close to me. I took a breath, the gentlest hint of mint and lemon mingling in my nose. The scent woke me from my stupor. I hadn’t uttered a word for about thirty seconds. He’d think I was a nitwit or that his superior muscle definition had dazzled away all my good sense. I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction.

“Okay, let’s get to it,” I said with a whole lot of optimism I didn’t feel. With a half-hearted smile, I took the weight Brody offered me.

“Your biceps can carry a heavier load than your triceps,” he said.

How about the burden of guilt? I’d blatantly ogled a man in obvious pain. That sort of behavior wouldn’t get me into heaven.

I held the weight in one hand and brought it to my chest, just like he’d done. Fine, my wrist may have wobbled a little at the top, but when he stepped in behind to assist me, there was no way I’d refuse his help.

His warm fingers gripped the outside of my arm, taking a little of the weight, and our eyes met in the mirror. Mine were wide and feverish, and I tried so hard not to look at his body. Brody’s were cool, calm, and just a little too mischievous for my liking. The heat pulsed off his skin, and it took herculean strength not to lean back into him.

“Keep your elbow at your waist.” His lips were just inches from my ear, and his breath tickled down the side of my neck, sending a scatter of goosebumps down my arm. His hand closed over my arm, guiding my movement in the mirror. “It’s all about having the correct form. The discipline.”

With his enormous chest at my back and his breath on my shoulder, I couldn’t give a rat’s ass about the correct form. The two of us moved together in the mirror and the tiniest of smirks returned to his lips. I let out a shuddering breath and I swear they curled a little more. I only hoped he’d think the tremble in my arm was because of a lack of exercise. But as our eyes met again, his face clouded, suddenly serious.

“Ro,” he whispered before the rude ring of a cell phone shattered the tension in the air. He didn’t answer it at first, but when the shrill tone became impossible to ignore, he rolled his eyes and let go of my arm, stepping away.

Brody dug his hand into his pocket, bringing out his phone. He looked at the screen, a crease fixing on his brow. “I have to take this.”

“Oh, don’t worry, go ahead. I’ll just be over here, pumping iron.” The grin on my face and the cheery pitch of my voice clashed with the stiffness in my body.

With a nod, Brody turned away. He headed over to the boxing ring in the center of the room. Every step, every ripple of muscle under his skin, reflected in the mirror in front of me. He leaned against the ropes, and I wished I’d applied myself more in Girl Scouts. I couldn’t precisely recall there being a badge for lipreading. His mouth moved and thanks to great acoustics, I caught most of his words.

“Alex. What’s up? Did you hear something?” The scowl grew on Brody’s brow. “Okay, sure. Want to meet?”

The clock ticked on the wall. Or was it my heart? I lowered the weight to my thigh, straining to hear while attempting to look as if I was adjusting my discipline, flexion, or something.

“Okay. I’m still in Tuft Swallow.” He chuckled, a low, throaty sound that had my toes curling inside my sneakers. “I know, right? I wouldn’t trust your sat nav. Okay. I’ll see you then. Look forward to it.”

The faintest smile passed over his lips as he hung up the call, and after a long beat, he turned back, strolling over as if he wasn’t half naked and drop-dead devastating. Our eyes met in the mirror, and by the time he made it to my side, mine were as wide as dinner plates.

“I’ll take that.” Brody lifted the weight out of my hand, putting it back on the rack. He narrowed his eyes as if mulling something over. “Can you box?”

I mean, probably. I’d got into a fight once, in grade school, when someone picked on Eve. I’d landed a few skin scratches. Pulled some hair. Did that count? “I think I can handle myself.”

“Okay, then. Let’s spar.”

The mischievous grin on his face made my teeth grind. “Brody, you’re about twice the size of me.”

He moved toward the ring, and I trailed him like a stray puppy. “Don’t think you can take me, Small Fry?”

We reached the ring, and Brody examined a pile of old boxing gloves. They were much bigger than I expected. I’d followed him willingly, but now that the moment had arrived, the thought of being whacked in the face by leather oven gloves had lost its appeal.

I chewed the inside of my cheek. “I don’t want to break my nose. I quite like it.”

Brody’s eyebrows shot up. “Hey, don’t worry. I’m really careful. I’ll make sure it’s a clean break.” My mouth dropped open, and he chuckled. “Ro. I’ll be catching your punches, not throwing them.”

He handed me a pair of large red gloves, and I slipped them on, their soft lining a little damp. I tried not to think about who’d last used them. I could always bleach my hands when I got home. He picked up a couple of black catching pads and pulled apart the ropes lining the ring, ushering me inside. Brody sucked in a breath as he climbed up behind me. It was only a small step. Either his leg was acting up, or he had a delayed reaction to me, almost spearing him in the genitals.

In the ring, any notion of becoming Rocky Balboa or Muhammad Ali deserted me. Instead, in the harsh overhead light, I felt ridiculous. I wore a cheerleader’s outfit and had on a pair of oversized mittens. Brody swaggered over to me in the center, lifting his arms and bringing his thick catching pads to eye level. I’d hoped to hide behind the bank of black foam, but being taller than me, I could still see the smug curl of his

lips over the top.

“Jab,” he said.

“Sorry?”

“Jab. Turn into the pad and punch straight out in front.” To make his point, Brody demonstrated. His stomach muscles rippled under his tanned skin. I hoped I wasn’t dribbling.

I followed suit, hitting the catching mitt with a soft thump. I swear Brody growled. “Harder.”

“What?”

“Do it again, but this time like you mean it.”

I sucked in my lips and hit him again. Twice. I was a little offended he thought my efforts were sub-par. “Look, I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t want to send you back to your team with a black eye and a groin injury.”

Brody huffed a laugh, moving his feet like a real boxer, his sneakers scuffing against the surface under our feet. “You won’t hurt me, Small Fry. Like you said. I’m about twice your size.”

A flare of fire sparked in my gut. Arrogant asshole. But he had a point. It was like one of the kids from *Stranger Things* going up against The Rock. But as requested, I punched him harder. Three times. Still, that self-satisfied smile stayed on his lips.

“Who was that on the phone?” I asked, my curiosity getting the better of me.

“Huh?”

I punched. Harder. “An adoring fan?”

Another punch. “One more heart trampled on by Flock the Feckless?”

This time, I followed my jab up with a second in quick succession. His eyes widened for a beat before I landed a third blow. I grinned. Who knew hitting lumps of foam could be so enjoyable? Or was it Brody I was trying to pummel?

I rounded on him again, stepping right into my jab this time. “Flock the fuck boy back in town?”

Brody’s jaw tightened behind his pads, and his brows drew together. “What? No.”

I jabbed again, moving him backward with every punch. I was enjoying hitting him a little too much. Did that make me some kind of psychopath?

“It was a journalist,” he gritted out.

“Coming to see you in Tuft Swallow? Nobody comes here.” I gave him a right hook this time, throwing my weight behind it.

Under the impact, Brody shuffled back a little.

“To what do we owe the pleasure?”

One corner of his lips peaked. “Why do you care so much?”

“I don’t,” I lied. Of course, I wanted to know who he’d spoken to. The person on the phone made him frown.

Another of my hits connected, edging him further back toward the ropes.

He sucked in a breath between his teeth and narrowed his eyes. “Doesn’t seem that way to me. Perhaps you’re a little more interested in my life than you care to admit.”

Shit, was I that obvious? He had it right, though. I wanted to know about his life. His thoughts on the polar ice caps melting. Who would win the Super Bowl? And most of all, how he’d felt after the kiss we’d shared. I wrinkled my nose and punched the pads, surprising myself at the jolt when the shots landed.

Again, Brody shuffled back. “Breathe,” he ground out.

I scowled.

“You’re holding your breath. You’ll tire that way.”

I hit even harder to prove him wrong, stumbling a little as we connected. Brody’s back was almost at the ropes, and I glanced down at my feet.

“Eyes on me, Ro.”

The grind in his voice, the gravelly sound, had me following his order, and when I found his blue eyes, they blazed with fire. Something licked in my gut. An odd mix of ire and irrational desire. I drew my lips together. “You always wanted my eyes on you.”

We were so close now Brody was almost trapped against the ropes. “And you were always happy to oblige.” He threw me a lopsided smile.

Damn, I hated it when he was right. I quickly delivered three jabs, stepping into him, driving him back, the thwack of leather hitting leather. As I unleashed a fourth, he grinned and dropped his catching pads to the floor. Brody wrapped a hand around my redundant wrist. At the gentle pressure, my temper flared, and I drew my other arm back for one final blow, catching pad or not. I didn’t connect, though. In a move faster than The Flash could manage, Brody caught my other wrist, stopping my glove in front of his face.

“So violent, Rowena. So much pent-up aggression.” His voice was lower. Even more gravelly than before. Guttural. But there was no threat on his face. He enjoyed goading me. I bit my lip hard, and his eyes flashed before he brought my gloved hand down and twisted us both around, pressing me against the ropes, one hand behind my back and my chest hard against his.

I sucked in oxygen. I was pinned against his solid pecs. Our bodies fit together perfectly. An ache filled my ribs.

“I told you to breathe.” His words were at my ear, his voice playful, low, and lilting.

Unable to resist, I lifted my chin. I was greeted by his unreasonably high cheekbones, a hint of stubble, and the slight cleft in his jaw. I wanted to kiss it. Wanted to kiss all of him. Taste him again. Nobody had a right to be this handsome or make my heart hammer so hard.

Our lips hovered inches away, and a sudden urge to close the gap gripped me. To stand on my tiptoes and bring my mouth to his. Blood screamed in my ears at the thought, and I parted my lips. Brody saw the movement, and his eyes darkened as if someone had pulled a hood over them.

As we stood there against the ropes, hearts beating together, quick breaths matching each other, he stared hard at my lips. Finally, he spoke, his breath grazing against the skin of my cheek.

“Ro. About that night...”

I swear my heart did a round of double dutch as his eyes met mine.

“It’s just that...”

Before he could finish, a door slammed somewhere behind us. A rough voice filled the heated air. “Okay, kids. Playtime’s over.” I let out a shuddering breath. Odd Duck was the nicest MMA fighter in the country.

Brody didn’t flinch, though. Didn’t move a muscle. He still had his gaze locked onto mine. My body screamed to be closer to his. My brain screamed to know what he’d been about to say. Was he about to say it should never have happened? He’d be right. But pressed up against him now, I’d give anything for a repeat performance.

“I need to shut the place up.” Odd Duck’s voice was more insistent now, more pressing. He strolled into my field of vision, hands on hips and wagging his head slowly. “Look, I don’t know what sort of kinky shit I’ve walked in on, but I have to close up. I’ve got a date.”

Brody’s eyebrow cocked. “Not with you, I hope, Small Fry,” he murmured.

I bit my lip and shook my head. With a hint of a smile, Brody relaxed his grip, and I stepped away, my brain spinning.

“Then I’ll get you home. I think one of us has punched above our weight tonight, anyway.”

With a flourish like a royal courtier, he held the ropes open for me to exit. As I leaned down to step through the gap, he gave me his big, sexy, damn irritating Brody Flockhart grin, and I couldn’t help but wonder if he meant him or me?

11

RO

After a restless night, my crochet still refused to behave or come together in any semblance of owl-ness. With a tut, I pulled at the yarn more vigorously than necessary. My entire body ached.

I’d woken at dawn with my sheets wrapped around my legs as if I’d been tossed around in a dryer of delicious anguish. While the pale morning light had crept through my window, I’d run through scenarios in my head. Outlined what could have happened had Odd Duck not interrupted Brody’s and my spontaneous bout in the ring. None had ended with a happily ever after.

I now sat on my bed with unpicked orange yarn spread over my legs. I hadn't yet left my room in case I ran into Brody. Facing him wasn't something I wanted to risk. Not until I'd settled my brain and traitorous body into a calmer state. One that ran less chance of me making a total fool of myself.

The door to my room thumped open, hitting the wall.

"Do we need to write an obituary?" Eve erupted into my room, all candy floss hair and sparkly hair clips. "I assume it was a mercy killing." She gestured to the carnage in my lap.

I scoffed. "It was supposed to be an owl, but it looked more like a hand grenade."

She slipped her bag from her shoulder and plopped down on the patchwork quilt. The sun streamed in through my curtains casting her in vivid technicolor. "What's got you so annoyed?"

I threw her an eyebrow. "I don't know what you mean."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

“Oh, come on, Ro. I haven’t seen a jaw as tight as yours since that dude from The Vampire Diaries was on TV. You forget I know you very well, and today, you are the epitome of tension.”

There was no point lying to Eve. Pretending that it was only my crochet that had me frowning. I gathered up and tossed the bird nest of yarn to the side, throwing myself back on my pillows. “If you must know, it’s Brody Flockhart.”

Eve’s eyes lit up like sparklers, and she crossed her legs like a yogi. “Oooh. My favorite subject. What intel have you got for me? Any nighttime comings and goings? Any hints about his movements? His kinks?”

I huffed out a breath, coming back up to sit. How could I tell my best friend that most of his movements seemed to involve me at the moment? She’d read far too much into the situation.

“Are you serious? Are you really interested in Brody? In that way?”

Eve tossed her eyeballs heavenward. “Alas, I don’t think I’m what Flock is into.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I bumped into him at the diner earlier.”

Something pricked the skin at the back of my neck. It was Wednesday. I’d told him Eve and I met at the Easy Swallow every Wednesday for breakfast. I hadn’t mentioned that we’d agreed to meet at my place today. Yet, according to Eve, he’d

been at the Swallow right when he expected me to be there. I ran a hand through my sleep-mussed hair.

“Bumped?” My voice rang out into the room, its tone unnaturally high.

Eve grinned. “Well, I may or may not have faked a trip into his arms, and although he caught me, there was nothing but genuine concern for my safety in his eyes. Even when I suggested I might need mouth-to-mouth, he just laughed.”

I snorted a laugh, too, shaking my head. My best friend was all kinds of crazy.

“Hey, I had to try. But I’ve given up on my hopeless quest now. I’ve decided that Brody Flockhart and I won’t be a thing. I’ve moved on. But when I fell, man, those arms. I swear he could fold me into a pretzel in one move.”

Heat steadily crept up my face as my mind drifted back to the gym last night. The achingly vivid memory of him grappling me into hot submission at the ropes. His breath on my neck. I swallowed, afraid of what would come out of my mouth if I opened it.

Eve leaned over to retrieve the brown paper bag she’d placed on the bed. The sweet smell of warm cinnamon filled the air when she opened it. She tore open the sides and laid it between us. As she pulled apart one sticky bun, her brow creased like I’d asked a calculus question in Swahili. “You must have noticed how unnaturally big he is?”

Indeed, I had. He was so large I swear he cast a shadow almost as big as Mount Condor, Tuft Swallows’ only hill. I weighed my words carefully, hoping not to give too much away. I couldn’t help it, though. For some insane reason, all I wanted to do was talk about Brody. “I probably shouldn’t say this because he’s staying here, and we’re old friends, but he is quite impressive. Physically.”

Eve's eyes widened, and I reached for a bun. Perhaps I could use it to cram any more revealing words back down my throat.

"That's an understatement. I never remember him being that big before, but I guess that's what playing professional sports will do for you."

Again, memories of the gym torpedoed into my brain. The jabs, the taunting, the fire in his eyes as he'd pulled me into his chest. I took a breath.

"He works out. A lot."

Eve's eyes glowed, and a grin spread on her sugary lips as she scooped herself closer. "You've seen him? In all his sweaty glory, I mean."

I crinkled my nose. "Eve, that's gross."

"Not when it's shissweat. Have you? Seen him working out, I mean." She sucked in a breath with a little "whoosh." "Oh, please tell me you've installed a spy camera down in the basement. Coop has a gym set up down there, right?"

Okay, so things were taking a slightly darker tone. "No spy camera, but I have seen him in the gym. At Odd Duck's place."

Eve tipped her head to one side. "What on earth were you doing there? Fighting's hardly your scene. You're such a pacifist. You're the one who's always rescuing bugs from the sidewalk or keeping the peace at the town bake-offs. Who knew brownies could be so controversial? I swear you saved lives last fall."

I weighed my options. I could lie and make up a story about researching crochet boxing gloves or I could tell the truth.

“Brody’s training me.”

She took a bite of her bun. “What for? MMA? I admire your spirit, but I don’t think you have the shoulders for it.”

Brody had hinted at the same thing. “No. For the roller derby.”

She stopped mid-chew. “Why would he do that?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

Well, obviously, Eve didn't suspect Brody had any ulterior motive. "I don't know. He found your flier, and when I told him what it was for, he thought I should try out."

"But how did you get from that to him training you?"

I shrugged, feigning innocence. "I hadn't exactly agreed to anything, but then he turned up at the Plume, presented me with a pair of skates, told me he was going to coach me, and marched me off to the gym."

Eve's mouth dropped. "Holy hell, girl. You and Brody Flockhart went to the gymtogether?"

It was as if she'd heard no other part of my explanation.

"And what happened?"

"You know, nothing. Much. Just gym stuff."

She shook her head, pink curls dancing around her face. "Details, please. You don't get to go to the gym with a certified 'sex god' and not tell meeverything." Eve reached up and wrapped air quotes around the words sex-god.

I giggled. Talking about Brody felt a little naughty and a little forbidden, as if I was admitting my first crush to my best friend. In fact, wasn't that exactly what I was doing? Only a long time after the fact.

"Well, he showed me some exercises and..."

“And?”

“And then I elbowed him in the balls and threw water over him.”

Eve’s face moved from shock to delight. From open mouth to wide grin.

“What the hell?”

“I know.” My half-eaten bun stuck at the back of my throat, and I hung my head a little. “I couldn’t have made more of a fool of myself.”

“What did he say? What did he do?”

Did I dare tell her? I was already wading through a deep pool of humiliation, but Gran always said go big or go home. “He took his top off and asked me to punch him.”

“What?” Eve squealed at the top of her lungs as if someone had stabbed her with a cattle prod.

Before I could explain and make his actions seem reasonable, Gran busted into the room with a frown on her wrinkled brow.

“You okay, ladies?”

I held a breath. What had she heard? Thinking as fast as Usain Bolt on a sprint, Eve spun around with a grin on her face. “Yes, thank you. I was just telling Ro I’ve volunteered for the yodeling choir. We’re going to sing at the Oktoberfest party. I was showing Ro what I’d learned so far.”

Gran raised her eyebrows as if digesting the information. “Lovely. But if you don’t

mind me saying so, you sounded pitchy, dear. I'd suggest gargling salt and less starch in your diet. Works for me." With a wave of her hand, Gran backed out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Eve giggled. "Your Gran is wonderful."

My heart warmed. "Isn't she?"

"So," she said, returning to her questioning. "You punched him?"

I bit into my bottom lip. "A little."

"And how did it feel?"

How could I describe it? Forbidden, sexy, confusing. No. None of those adjectives covered how strangely exciting punching him had felt. "He's big and hard, and..."

"And?" She paused and narrowed her eyes at me. "Ro, you're blushing. Holy crap! Don't tell me you're drinking the Flock Kool-Aid now, too?"

"No!" The word came out like a yelp. "But it's hard not to notice him. I mean, he's around a lot, and he's hardly an eyesore."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

Eve whistled. “No, indeed, he’s not.”

“But he’s still Brody, you know? The guy who patched up my knees when I scraped them climbing trees. The guy who teased me when I got braces.”

“Ro, you’re only human.” Her lips curved. “And being in the face of such human perfection, even Mother Theresa would be tempted. It’s okay to have a crush on him. A temporary infatuation. He’ll be gone soon and you can go back to normal. But If you need anyone to hold your hand and talk through this traumatic experience, I’m here for you any time. And do you mind if I bring a pen and paper? Hearing about your close encounters with Brody is the nearest I’ll ever get to touching him myself.”

I sighed, smoothing down the patchwork quilt where I’d gripped it. Eve was right. Brody was just a temptation. A temporary distraction from my small-town life. But try as I might, he kept creeping into my thoughts regularly. Creeping and settling in. Nudging out the idea that I shouldn’t be lusting after him. It looked like it wasn’t just my body that needed strengthening. It was my resolve.

12

RO

I loitered outside the entrance to the school gym, shifting from foot to foot, psyching myself up to meet Brody. He’d left a note pinned to the fridge that morning asking me to meet him at seven for some skating practice. I’d been like a cat on hot tiles all day.

The warm breeze whipped around me, blowing tendrils of hair across my face. I'd only seen him fleetingly over the last two days. Once, he'd passed me at the front door, coming in as I'd been going out. We'd only exchanged a look and an awkward smile. The other time, he and Coop had been deep in conversation at the dining table and I'd hung around in the kitchen trying to look busy, desperate to hear what they were talking about.

While making a completely unwanted batch of butter cookies, I'd learned he'd met with his friend, Alex, and had visited an old contact in Robin Springs. Brody used to play for the Robin Springs Rockets junior hockey team back in the day.

I'd clanked baking trays and beat the cookie batter with abandon, but Brody didn't give me more than a perfunctory glance. He obviously hadn't resorted to stalk-baking, like me. Hadn't dwelled on thoughts of our bodies pressed together in the gym. Nope. He probably had a million and one other things on his mind, like his leg, the doctor's verdict, and most likely, a woman or three.

I checked my watch. Ten past seven. Officially fashionably late. Eve always said appearing too keen for a man wasn't a good idea. Not that this was a date or anything. Still, she'd say an air of mystery did no harm. Sucking in a breath, I strode around the corner of the building and through the open gym doors.

The overhead lights made a dazzling contrast to the darkness outside. As I entered, at least a hundred bugs followed me, lured in by the artificial brightness. The minute I stepped inside, Brody looked up. He stood in the middle of the gym, straightening a small orange cone with his foot. At least another dozen marked out a circuit. His eyes matched the light blue of his T-shirt, and, teamed with his beaten-up jeans and his tan, he looked magazine-cover ready. Deep breath, Ro. It was only Brody.

"You got my note." An easy grin grew on his lips, threatening to weaken my thighs and melt my calves to jello. "I wasn't sure if you'd had a better offer. Stood me up."

Impossible. “Well, I had a couple of things on, but I know how you went to the trouble getting access to the gym, so I declined.” It was a barefaced lie. More like a long evening of crocheting in front of the TV with Gran lay ahead of me. My owls were finally behaving - ish. But in the circumstances, I’d chosen a night with my girlhood crush over a night of hooking stitches and wondering what he was doing.

I walked toward the stand, finding Brody’s jacket on the lowest bench. With his eyes on me, I sat down, slipped off my Cons, and put on my trusty neon pink knee pads, wrist guards, and new skates. I’d spent a lot of time in the park wearing my new wheels in. Getting a feel for them.

Brody watched me as I pulled them onto my feet, and damn if my fumbling fingers hadn’t forgotten how to tie shoelaces. Resorting to bunny ears, it took me three goes before I could stand and meet his eyes. He stepped toward me, and a rush of heat ran through my body. With a forced grin, I took off for the other side of the hall.

“Got to warm up,” I yelled over my shoulder, my voice echoing off the plain brick walls. Only the school banners broke up the monotonous masonry. I circled back, getting any skittish wobbles out of my knees. Brody was back in the middle of the hall, and I pulled up alongside him.

“Looking good, Ro.” He ran his eyes up and down my legs like he did the other night, and my cheeks warmed. Why the hell had I worn such tiny shorts? But of course, he’d be talking about the skates, not me.

Brody sent me off for another warm-up lap around his makeshift circuit, and I concentrated on keeping my feet going in the right direction under his scrutiny. Halfway around, he beckoned me back. “Okay, tonight we’re going to focus on speed and agility. Two essential things on the derby track.”

I tilted my head to the side. I had speed and agility. Didn’t I?

“To get a spot in the team, you need to skate twenty-seven laps of the track in under five minutes.”

“That’s very specific, but it doesn’t sound too hard.”

Brody lifted his eyebrows, then his phone. “Let’s see, shall we? Let’s start with a few practice laps.”

He counted me down, and I set off around his track. I started off just fine, pulling some tight corners and keeping to a reasonable speed. The slick floor of the gym made it easier. Brody counted down the laps with a shout when I rolled past him, and each time I pushed harder. At lap eight, he waved for me to stop, which I did, pulling in hard breaths.

Brody looked at his phone, a furrow forming between his brows. “You need to go faster. Stay low, get your shoulders back, and push your crossovers really hard. Don’t hug the inside line. Skate an ellipse. You’ll use less energy that way.”

Nowmybrow creased. “You’ve put a lot of thought into this, haven’t you?”

One corner of his mouth ticked up. “Rowena, when I want something, I go after it. I do nothing by halves.”

I bet he didn’t. Despite any natural talent, nobody got to his level in professional sports without mammoth effort. Why he’d made me his current project, I wasn’t sure. He was probably bored kicking his heels in Tuft Swallow. Life in his hometown must be quite a comedown compared to the opportunities he’d have in Denver.

“Ok, here’s what we’re gonna do.” He rested one hand on his hip. “We’ll go for the full five minutes. If you don’t make the required number of laps, you make me breakfast in bed. For a week.”

In bed? My jaw practically hit the floor. I had no problem throwing together some eggs or a bowl of cereal for him every day. But bedside delivery? I couldn't imagine he'd make it easy for me. There had to be a catch.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

“What if I make the time? What do I get?”

Brody chuckled, a low throaty sound from somewhere deep in his chest. “That’s the Ro I know. Name your price.”

Was he serious? I could demand anything of him? How did more time in the boxing ring and a shirt-free policy in the house sound? I settled my raggedy breath, unsure if it was the exertion or the crackle in the air between us that made it tremble. “I’ll settle for those crocheted gloves. Have you even started?”

A grin spread like warm honey over his lips. “I’m still in the research phase.”

My heart sank a little. He hadn’t done a thing. I’d left out some yarn and a couple of crochet hooks a few days ago. The last time I’d checked, they were still there. All he had to do was look up a tutorial on YouTube.

With a sigh, I skated an arc around him. “Shall we, then?”

I stopped opposite Brody on the very inside of his cone-ringed track. He counted down from three, and at his echoing, “GO!” I pushed off and skated as if my life and my chastity depended on it. I mean, a whole week of delivering breakfast in bed to Brody had to be a bad idea, right? There’s no way he slept in full-body pajamas.

Every time I sped past him, he shouted out the lap number, and each time I dug down and pushed harder, the grind of my wheels drove me on. I hadn’t skated this hard for years. Not since Mom passed. Back then, I’d trashed my pair of boots skating the long, straight road between Tuft Swallow and Spitz Hollow over and over. Spent

hours trying to drive away my sadness with the movement.

My lungs were on fire now, and when Brody called “twenty-five,” I drove even harder. I wasn’t sure what I was trying to forget this time, but even the thunderous hammer of my heart couldn’t drown out thoughts of the achingly gorgeous man timing my laps.

“Twenty-Seven. Stop!”

I slowed up, sucking in deep lungfuls of stale school gym air. I skated toward Brody, and judging from the smile on his face, I hadn’t made the required time. He was no doubt planning his breakfast menu for the next week. When I reached him, my breath was coming under control, but my body dripped with sweat. I cursed my decision to put on some mascara before I left work. By now, I’d probably be wearing it around my knees.

One of his eyebrows quirked as I came to a stop, and he dragged his eyes over my face. “You look hot.” He followed the line with a wink. Damn him. I’d just slugged my guts out for five solid minutes, and all he could do was throw me a cheap, flirty line.

“Stop it, Brody. Either you take this seriously, or I’m out of here.”

He shrugged. “I can’t help it. You’re too cute when you get mad.”

I threw him a filthy glare, my chest still rising and falling like a rolling ocean. “Just give me the verdict.”

He held his phone out to me so I could read the screen. Four minutes, thirty-seven seconds. I’d made it with time to spare. I brought my eyes up to meet Brody’s, matching his grin.

“I knew you were fast enough. Your legs are pretty solid.” He must have caught my grimace. “In a good way, I mean.”

Brody brought a hand to the back of his neck, and I was almost sure a blush of pink hit his cheeks. But no. Brody Flockhart would never blush. He’d more likely parade down Main Street in a furry chipmunk suit than show weakness. Reveal any chink in his macho armor.

“Did you watch the videos I sent you?” he asked.

He’d showered me with derby videos all day, the laser focus he talked about in full evidence. “There were quite a few to get through, but yes.”

Some of the clips had scared the crap out of me, but others? They were exciting. The women wore their passion like a badge of honor. I envied them for their drive. Coming up with new cheerleading routines didn’t quite give me the same buzz.

“So, you understand the rules?” he asked.

“Kinda.” It was a half-truth. There was a structure and a set of rules, but the clips he sent me looked like a big jumble of people most of the time. With a lot of shoving

“And?”

I huffed a laugh. “There seemed to be a lot of falling over.” Seriously, with some of the accidents in the clips, I feared for my teeth.

“Right. It’s full contact, so you must know how to protect yourself. But not just you. You need to protect your jammer and block the jammer on the other team.”

The videos he’d sent talked about the difference between the jammers, who scored

the points, and the blockers who tried to stop them. I drew my brows together. “So, lots of falling over?”

Brody grinned, shaking his head. “Only if you let yourself get taken down. As a defenseman, my job on the ice is to block people. Stop them from getting through to score. Derby is just as brutal.”

“But with less padding.”

Brody snickered, the sound curling gentle fingers around my heart. “You’ll be fine, Ro. With that speed and your skills, you’ll be out of the pack and scoring before you know it. The manager is gonna snap you up.”

I wish I had Brody's confidence.

He chewed at one side of his lips. "Look, if you're really worried about the close contact. How about I give you a taste?"

My head snapped around. "Sorry, what?" He looked back at me, a neutral expression on his face. I wasn't trying to read more into his question than he intended, but the words close, contact, and taste, all in the same sentence, made my head whirl and my breath thin.

"Try to get around me. I'll show you how the other skaters will block you."

The suggestion on its own didn't sound too tricky. Brody reached out his arms for me to skate toward him, which I did, but when I pulled up, my body filled with heat. Gran always described him as "strapping," but every time we got this close, he dwarfed me even with the extra height of my skates. He wasn't on par with the Hulk, but he'd give your average lumberjack a run for their money. At least I just about cleared his pecs this time, so they wouldn't be a distraction.

Brody turned his back, sending a wave of mint and lemon straight into me. I breathed in and tried hard not to focus on the nape of his thick neck and the fine blond hair that formed a V at its base.

"Okay, see if you can get past me."

I hesitated, not sure which way to move. Theoretically, I should be able to get around him. I was faster on my skates than he was on his feet, wasn't I? But his back

presented an impenetrable wall of muscle, and...damn, I could feel the heat of him through his T-shirt.

“Come on, Ro. What are you scared of?”

Oh, I don't know. Making a fool of myself? Getting my heart broken again? Just the usual.

His eyes met mine over his shoulder. The deep tone of his voice caressed my ears, and the slightest hint of a smile plumped out the profile of his cheeks. Why, oh, why, did he have to look so pretty? I took a breath and moved off, heading to his right, the opposite direction to his turned head.

As soon as I did, though, he moved in the same direction as if he'd sensed what I was going to do. It wasn't clear air or empty track that greeted me, but one of Brody's outsized shoulders. I narrowed my eyes before pushing off in the other direction. I had the speed to outmaneuver him. He had other ideas, though, and no sooner had I gone a few inches than his back brushed up against my chest. I sucked in a breath, not sure if I was startled by his speed or the fact that my nipples hardened immediately at the contact.

I didn't have time to dwell on the thought, though, as each time I tried to move, to escape the wall of his body, he penned me in. At this rate, I'd have to reverse and skate right around him. I clamped my teeth together, perspiration clinging to my top lip. With a dummy move to my right again, I brought my heels apart and off the floor, forming a V with my toes, ready to push backward.

Brody must have mind-reading powers, too. As soon as I steadied myself to move off and leave him for dust, he whipped around the side of my body, blocking my exit, his solid chest at my back. I couldn't even push off forward with my feet in this position. How the hell could he move so fast? Wasn't he supposed to be injured?

Hot breath and a distinct chuckle licked at my neck, then a slight pressure squeezed my middle as two warm hands circled my waist, stopping me from tipping forward.

“Careful, you don’t want to fall.” Brody’s silky voice washed over me, and I closed my eyes. I already had. Years ago.

“I can see how you get your reputation.”

Brody tightened his grip a little. “What reputation?”

His words were barely more than a whisper, and a shiver ran over my body, kicking up the racing of my heart. I wobbled a little before lowering my heels to the gym floor. Wheels or not, I was at serious risk of fainting with desire right now. But the lilt in his voice told me it was all play for him. Just like always.

“Your reputation for being annoying.”

His breathy laugh skittered across the skin of my ear, and a tingling nudged somewhere far too low for my peace of mind. “Is that what I am?”

How could I tell him how much more he was to me? How much his very presence in my house, in my town, consumed my every thought. How I lay awake at night touching myself in the dark, dreaming it was Brody’s hands instead. For my sanity, he could never know. Besides, we were in the middle of a brightly lit school gym. It was hardly the place for secret confessions. A change of subject was a much better idea.

“You’re quick on your feet and annoying. Aren’t you supposed to be injured?”

“I can still move when I have to.” And move he did. Brody removed his hands from my waist, sending another shiver across my skin.

I sighed, a mixture of relief and frustration. “And you’re not even on skates. I’ll be hopeless at the trial.” I took advantage of my freedom with a reluctant push forward and spun around in an arc to face him. His signature smile gave no hint that he’d been conscious of our closeness. No change in his breathing hinted that he’d struggled to sleep at night in the room below me.

“You won’t. The coach, the other skaters, they’ll see your speed and love it.”

I rolled my eyes. “How do you know?”

“I have some contacts.”

I scoffed. “So you told me before. And you’ve probably slept with them all.”

Brody’s face dropped like somebody had switched off a light, and a furrow at his brow replaced his smile. Crap, why the hell could I not apply a filter to my racing brain?

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

I pinned a grin on my face, trying to dig myself out of the hole my harsh words had dug. “Hey, come on. Tell me it’s not true. Coop has told me stories over the years. His trips out to Denver. The parties. The women. Who can resist Flock, eh? Those poor ladies are only human, after all.” Every word was like spitting pins, and a bitter taste filled my mouth.

The bravado, the swagger I expected in return, didn’t come, though. Instead, Brody dipped his head a little. In the bright light of the gym, he reminded me of a much younger version of himself. “I’ll admit I’ve had my fun, but that’s not where my head, or any part of me, has been these last six months. Being injured takes its toll. There’s insecurity. The anxiety. The pressure to stay at the top.”

“So why do it to yourself?” My voice was softer now, my grin replaced by a gentle smile.

He closed his eyes for a long beat. “I’m not good at anything else. I have to keep playing. Without hockey, if I’m not ‘Flock,’ who am I?”

At the tremble in his voice, my heart lurched. I hadn’t considered he’d ever feel vulnerable. I’d always thought of Brody as bulletproof. Invincible. My brother’s exasperating, larger-than-life best friend who cruised his way through challenges on his looks and his skill on the ice. I’d never seen this side of him. Or been allowed to see it.

Brody bunched his hands at his sides and the skin at my palms prickled to touch him. To undo the knots of his fingers. I took the tiniest roll forward, my skate clattering on the polished wood below my wheels.

“Brody...”

As I moved toward him, his eyes widened, and he turned away, running his hands through his unruly hair.

“Okay. Let me see you stop.”

I blinked. “Sorry?”

“Show me how you stop.”

Did he think I was a beginner? That I didn’t know how to stop in a pair of rollerskates? At a loss for anything sensible to say, I skated out a little, turning back in his direction. Before I hit him, I executed a tight turn, spinning on the spot with my arms above my head like a ballerina.

After a few rotations, I slowed, but just before I stilled, his hands were at my waist, stalling my momentum. But this time, there was no playfulness in his eyes, no laughter in his voice. “As beautiful as your dancing is, you can’t turn like that on a derby track. You’ll get pulverized. Use a hockey stop.”

“A what?”

“You need to change direction and move off as fast as you can.” Brody demonstrated, keeping his feet parallel before bringing them to a right angle like a skier. “It’s probably harder on skates without blades, but I think you could do it. Stopping like this will give you a better chance of keeping ahead of everyone else.”

I tried the move, standing still. I almost tripped over.

Brody scowled, then kicked off his sneakers, leaving him standing in white socks.

“This’ll give you more of an idea. Hold my hips.”

I swallowed. “You want me to hold your hips?” I had to check I’d heard him right.

“Yep. Come around back, and you can feel their movement.”

Holy hell, was he serious? He wanted me to feel the movement in his hips? Brody didn’t know how many times I’d dreamed of feeling any movement in his hips, let alone in my hands. But my fantasies took place in entirely different circumstances. I hung back, hoping the neutral expression I was going for wasn’t coming across as uptight.

His smirk made a welcome return as he studied me. “It’s okay. This isn’t a pickup line. I just want you to see what I mean.”

With a mental eye-roll, I cursed myself. Message received loud and clear.

I pushed off and stood behind him, my trembling fingers hovering at his sides. He brought his hands to the outside of mine and pulled them down to rest on his hips. The hard outline of his bones fit nicely into my palms. I held my breath, desperate to release it, but huffing and puffing would signal I wasn’t entirely at ease. I wanted Brody to think I manhandled sex gods all the time.

Before I was ready, he twisted his feet around on the floor, bringing them to a right angle with ease. At the end of the maneuver, he kicked his glorious hips out to the side. “Do you feel that?”

Did I ever. It was all I could do to hang on for dear life. Seemingly satisfied that I’d “felt” enough, Brody released my hands and stepped back, a glint of something a little worrying in his eyes. “Okay, your turn. Skate out, turn around, and come at me. Just stop before you hit me.”

My gut churned at the thought. “Seriously. What if I miss? Plow into you?”

Brody shrugged. “Then my team won’t renew my contract, and you’ll have to look after me til the end of my days.”

I swallowed away a fist-sized lump in my throat. I’d happily sign up to look after him. Breakfast in bed forever, but a life of eating scrambled eggs with me in Tuft Swallow was probably the furthest thing from his mind.

He cocked his head, hands back on hips. “Come on. I trust you.”

“But what if I don’t trust me?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

“Ro. You’re incredible on those wheels. It’ll be fine. Just get a good run-up. It’s harder if you’re going slow.” Well, if Brody would risk it, who was I to argue?

I skated about ten meters out before turning and glancing heavenward. The bugs that followed me inside earlier darted and played in the overhead strip lights. I took a breath. I just had to be brave, skate as fast as possible toward the only man who had ever left me breathless, and make sure I stopped before I ruined his ice hockey career. No problem.

My heart battered against my ribs. I had this. With a silent prayer to St. Lidwina, patron saint of skaters, I took off in Brody’s direction, my legs feeling as if they were encased in thick treacle. With each stride, his face drew nearer, and blood rushed around my body even faster. But he didn’t flinch. Kept his eyes on me the whole way. Wide open and trusting.

I got halfway before I realized I had to think about stopping. But with all the hip-holding and the talk of his reputation as a womanizer, I couldn’t remember what he’d shown me. Something to do with parallel legs. Or was it ankles? Feet made more sense, but surely moving my feet would have me going over on my ankles. I’d end up mangling both of us.

A bead of sweat raced between my shoulder blades, and, about to do something parallel with some part of my lower anatomy, I hesitated. The thought of ruining his career sat front and center in my mind.

Instinctively, I put out a foot, scuffing the floor with my toe stopper. But being a derby skate, it wasn’t the same size as the one on my usual skates. I faltered, tripping

over the front of my wheels.

With a loud, “No!” I scrambled to regain my balance, but the last thing I saw was Brody’s wide eyes and his hands lifting to catch me.

The impact when I hit him took the air out of my lungs. I flew like Superwoman. In just his socks, Brody had no traction on the polished floor, so he flew with me. Perhaps a little less like Superwoman, though.

Within seconds, we came to a messy halt, the hard floor and my jawbone connecting with a solid clunk. I closed my eyes, only vaguely aware that I had hold of Brody’s thighs. Like an explosion had perforated my ear drums, all sound muffled, squealed, and the lights had gone out. Had I dislodged my eyeballs?

I dragged my eyes open and lifted my head to check. Nope, they worked. When I looked up, Brody mouthed something at me, his eyes as wide as windows. I moved to take in the full damage of the crash, but a sharp pain tore into the back of my head.

I had a helmet on, so it was unlikely to be a concussion, and although my chin had made contact with the floor, I’d had whiplash before, and it didn’t feel like this. Before I could think, Brody’s hands were down at my neck, undoing my helmet strap.

“Don’t move.”

His words made no sense. I had to move. I couldn’t just lay here on the floor between his legs. My face was far too close to his groin for comfort. I must’ve landed almost cheek to zipper. I attempted to push up for a second time, but again, a tearing pain hit the back of my head, and my wrist guards slid on the wooden floor, sending me down again.

“Ro. Stay still.” Brody scooted in closer, leaving me between his solid thighs. I let

out a shuddering breath when he gently lifted off my helmet. “Are you okay?” He ran his hands down the bare skin of my arms, then back up to my face, cupping my chin. “I think you’re alive, but I’m not sure how we’re going to untangle you.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

Brody gave a gentle tug to my ponytail, and I followed his fingers with my eyes. Holy hell. In a freak act of nature or the superhuman powers of St Lidwina, my hair was snagged in the zipper of Brody’s jeans.

Heat filled my body. Neither of us was likely to be carrying scissors, and the prospect of being joined to Brody’s crotch for eternity, though somewhat tempting, wasn’t practical.

“What can I do?”

He was up and sitting now while I was still face-planted between his legs. “I’m trying to work it out, but it’s like untangling fishing wire.”

I sucked in my lips. “Oh, gee, thank you. I know I’m overdue for a conditioning treatment, but that’s a little harsh.” His fingers stopped their work for a beat before he chuckled and carried on, trying to release me.

A minute later, we were still in the same predicament, and judging from Brody’s little growls, the tangle was getting worse. The only alternative to slow torture, face to package, was to release the actual problem. His zipper. A squeak of rubber against the varnished floor caught my attention for a second, but with more pressing matters on my mind, I dismissed it. I took a breath, dying a little inside with what I was about to suggest.

“Just undo it. Undo your zipper.” I swear the corners of Brody’s mouth twitched a

little. Of course, he'd be finding this hilarious. He was still living through his third-grade comedy era.

"Okay," he ground out. "But let me know if it hurts. If it gets too much."

He worked away a little longer, trying to un-snag my hair, when the whine of his zipper rang out in the hall, announcing its opening. I held my breath.

By now, the muscles in my back burned with the effort of keeping up and clear of Brody's crotch. Couldn't I just rest my head on the top of his thigh and wait for rescue? "Oh, it hurts!" I whined.

"I'm almost there." His voice was tight and urgent. "Just move your head so I can get a better angle."

A couple of grunts later, the tightness at the back of my neck released as Brody freed my hair.

"Oh, that feels so good," I said, my groan ringing around the hall.

"I'm thrilled for you," said a voice, "but I hope what I just walked in on was more innocent than it looked and sounded."

Both Brody and I turned our heads to see Finn. He stood by the doors, hands on hips with an enormous grin on his face.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

Heat flooded my body, and I scrambled like a demented crab to get as far away from Brody as I could.

“Oh, man.” Brody let out a belly laugh and lay back on the floor, his hands gripping his head.

I’m glad he thought it was funny. I took a second to think back to what Finn may have actually heard, and the blood in my veins ran cold. He would’ve heard me telling Brody to undo his zipper. Not to mention a whole lot of grunting and questionable chatter.

“I had some trouble stopping, and I tripped and fell into Brody’s, well, you know, and then my hair got tangled in his zipper...and...”

Finn chuckled. “I really don’t want to know, but I have to lock up. I’ll leave you two to sort yourselves out, only next time, get a room.”

He winked and turned to leave. I shook my head and stared down at Brody, still lying on the ground, his ribs shaking with laughter. “It’s not funny. Unlike you, I have my good name and a reputation to maintain in this town.”

Brody pushed up to his elbows, lime green trunks still poking out of his zipper. “You forget, I know all about your reputation. This little adventure would only add to your popularity.”

I narrowed my eyes and brought my hand to my chin, sucking a breath in through my teeth as I touched it.

Brody sprang up to a full sit. “Are you okay?”

“I think I grazed it when I fell.”

He scooted across the floor. I was on all fours, but when he reached me, I sat back on my heels, my wheels digging into my butt cheeks. He lifted his hands to my face, his thumbs gliding over my jawline. I’d always imagined his skin would be rough, manly, and calloused, but the soft sweep of his fingers had me holding my breath and pressing my thighs together.

Meeting my gaze, Brody gave me the tiniest smile before he tilted my chin up a little, checking for injury. “Yep, you scuffed your skin. Like a friction burn. You may get a bruise.”

“I don’t know about a bruise, but I feel like I shattered my teeth.”

“Smile for me.”

“Sorry?”

“Smile, Ro.” Brody’s soft blue eyes drilled into mine, but I opened my mouth and smiled despite myself. He ran his eyes over my mouth before letting go of my face and bringing his hands to his thighs. “Perfect.” His voice was almost a whisper, and my heart jumped in my chest. “Your teeth, I mean. Your teeth look perfect. Intact.”

I closed my eyes, and my lips curled. Of course, he meant my teeth. Why was I looking for meaning in every word he spoke? Every gesture. Brody was my friend, nothing else. The sooner I remembered that, the better.

“I’m so sorry, Ro. I didn’t mean for you to get hurt.”

My heart lurched. He'd already hurt me. He just didn't know it. Five long years ago, when he never replied to my note. "I'm more worried about you. I hope I didn't snap anything new."

He winced. "I'm fine, but I think we should stop for now." Brody got to his feet, his movements stiff. "And I think we should get you a mouthguard."

He reached down to help me up. I took his hand. "I thought we'd be here all night. What happened to 'no surrender,' Mr. 'I always get what I want'?"

Brody threw me a side-eye before letting go of my hand. "Never doubt my dedication, but I have to look after my assets, too. And right now, that's you, Ro."

I dusted down the top of my thighs, grateful for my faithful old knee pads. "I'm tougher than I look. I didn't get to be Captain of the Cockettes without ruffling a few feathers."

His laughter filled the gym. "That's a terrible joke."

I smiled. Right now, in the middle of the gym floor, standing in his socks, he was the old Brody. The relaxed guy I'd adored so much. Who I still adored. No bravado. No hunger to win. To achieve. No sexy swagger. Just utterly gorgeous.

I swept my eyes over his face and ran my tongue over my bottom lip. My heart raced like it was in NASCAR. This was the Brody I wanted to remember when he left for Denver. Unfortunately, this version of him ran the highest risk of wrecking my heart again. "Let's go home."

He nodded with a grin before gathering his discarded sneakers.

"And do your fly up," I said. "I don't want anyone else getting the wrong idea."

BRODY

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

“Damn. I’d forgotten how much attention you get.” Coop shook his head at me, its slow wag hypnotic, and the grin on his face grew wider by the second.

The steady chatter in the Crow Bar fought for supremacy with the nineties rock tunes playing from the speakers. I hadn’t seen Cooper for more than thirty minutes for days. He worked long shifts at the loggers in Robin Springs, and I’d holed myself up in his gran’s den, trying not to run into Ro.

Since our night at the school gym, I’ve been having full-on flashbacks. Vivid memories of her crashing into me. Initially, I’d found it amusing, but thoughts of her head in my lap took on a less PG tone when I thought about it later in the dark. Hanging out with Ro played havoc on my peace of mind. Giving her a wide berth seemed the best thing to do, considering the circumstances.

“What do you mean?” I waved off his observation with a laugh. “You get your fair share of attention from being on the Robin Springs woodchopping team. I bet you have to fight the ladies off with a stick.” It still made me smile to think that my street-tough best friend had a small but faithful social media following where women liked to watch him split wood in tight T-shirts. He didn’t want his gran or sister to find out, though, so he swore me to secrecy.

“It’s hardly the same. I haven’t had this much female interest since we last hung out. How do you do it, man?”

I chuckled. Maybe the oversized bank balance and the arrogant swagger I’d made my own personal brand?

“It’s just like old days,” he continued. “It’s been too long.” Coop cocked his head toward two women who sat at the long oak bar. They’d arrived shortly after us and had thrown enough flirty smiles to the two of us to make a charm bracelet.

I took a mouthful of my beer. Coop and I weren’t on the same wavelength. Two pretty women were grinning at us, but I felt nothing. Each time I scanned the bar, I couldn’t help but ponder whether any of the guys shooting pool or honing their cornhole skills had dated Ro. Had touched her. Kissed her.

My hand tightened around the icy bottleneck. I had to get a hold of myself. Aside from thoughts of her ending up between my legs, I’d contemplated my accident. That stupid tackle by a stranger may have ruined my career. What If I’d hurt Ro? What if, aside from a grazed chin, she’d broken something? I ran my fingers through my hair. My motives for training her for the derby tryout were a little murky, but the last thing I wanted was to see her in traction.

Still, when I’d made the deal with her about the timed laps and the breakfast in bed, had I hoped she’d fail? You bet. I’d never want her to feel bad about herself, but the idea of Ro turning up at my door every morning gave me a warm glow inside my chest. Hell, she could even turn up empty-handed. Just the thought of starting each day talking to her had the corners of my mouth lifting.

“You okay, man?” Coop’s voice snapped me back to reality. “You want another beer?”

I nodded. Why the hell not? I hadn’t let loose in a long time. Cooper stood, heading straight for the two women at the bar. One had dark hair, the other blonde, and they both turned and gave me a huge grin after he reached them and spoke a few words. I gave a half-hearted, close-lipped smile.

I wasn’t in the mood to get up close and personal with strangers. Or indulging in a

drunken night of fun. Six months ago, I would've been all over it, but right now, the thought made my gut churn. I just wanted to get back to Maggie's lumpy couch and hang out with Ro. To watch her endless stitching while she watched old reruns of Gilmore Girls. To study how she popped her tongue between her teeth while working on a tricky section. It'd come to where being around my best friend's sister was all I looked forward to. And she had no idea.

Sure, we joked around and had fun together. But this morning, when we saw each other briefly, she called me her other brother. It was clear how she felt. She was happy the way things were, and me barging into her life was the last thing she needed. Hell, I didn't know where my life was headed and what I needed.

Coop came back from the bar, an enormous grin on his face. He sat back down in the leather booth and slapped the table. "Man, those two are hot for you and, by extension, hot for me. You should move back to town. Give an old friend a leg up with the local ladies."

I huffed a laugh. Coop had never been subtle about his love of a good time. He glanced back over at the women. "I'm just sayin' we could do worse. I don't have plans tonight."

I followed his gaze. They were both pretty but too keen. A little obvious. Perhaps it was the kiss the blonde one blew in my direction. Flirty fun might distract me from my leg. But all I could think of was Ro's reaction if she found out. She'd out and out accused me at the gym of being a womanizer. Called me a "Flock-boy." Joining Coop would confirm all the things she thought about me.

I let out a heavy breath. A major news outlet first coined that phrase after a notorious week-long stay in a Vegas hotel with some teammates. We'd raised hell. With few people around to tell us "No," we'd embraced all that being in the spotlight offered.

“I’m not really feeling it tonight, Coop.” I put my beer down with a gentle thud.

Cooper grimaced, leaning into me across the table. “Come on, man, just like old times. It’s been ages since we’ve had a night out. You’ve been too busy hanging out with my sister.”

As soon as his words registered, an icy shiver ran over my body. Had he noticed? Taken note of our comings and goings?

“And what’s up with her chin? She said she scuffed it while skating. That she fell. Ro never falls.”

I shifted in my seat, hoping the low lighting covered up the result of the burn in my cheeks. “It was just a minor accident. She’s still getting used to derby skates.”

“And about that. Who’s idea was roller derby?”

“That crazy friend of hers, Eve. She found a flier in the diner. Ro asked me about it, and I offered to help.” My lie slipped out seamlessly but didn’t sit well. I’d pushed her on the idea, not the other way around. I suggested the training. I hated to give Coop a half-truth, but I wasn’t about to tell my best friend that the derby trial gave me the perfect excuse to hang out with his sister. Or that I couldn’t stop thinking about her.

Coop curled a brow at me. “But do you need to help her so often? I’ve hardly seen you, man.”

Icy fingers gripped the back of my neck. “I’m sorry. The whole leg thing. I can’t just turn off the worry. I guess this derby thing gave me a distraction.” Cooper knew the full extent of my injury and what was riding on the doctor’s examination.

He shrugged. “More reason to let your hair down. Have some fun.”

His broad grin would have disarmed most people. He may be right, but why the hell did the idea feel so wrong? “I don’t know. I’m kind of preoccupied.”

Coop let out a loud breath and lay his palms on the table. He’d clamped his jaw tight and wore a furrow on his brow. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was about to propose.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

“Okay. I hate to ask this. You’re like a brother to me, but you’re not hanging out with Ro for reasons other than the roller derby, right?”

I blinked at him. That was exactly what I’d been doing. I had no plans to act on my feelings, but that didn’t change the fact that I’d kiss her again in a heartbeat. “I’m just helping her out. It’s nice to see her again, that’s all.” That much was true, but damn, the words tasted bitter in my mouth.

“Good. I don’t want her to get the wrong idea. I’ve seen the way she looks at you.”

My head snapped up. Ro looked at me?

“She’s always been sweet on you.”

A rage of heat torched my face. Had she? Was she? I had no words.

“And you’re leaving town soon, Brody. I don’t want her to get hurt.”

I didn’t need reminding. As the decision on my leg loomed closer, so did my inevitable departure from Ro. “Coop. I’m all about getting back on the ice, not your sister.”

His face cleared, and the crease between his brows dropped. “How is the leg? Any news?”

I shook my head. “I met with Alex Marshall.”

Coop pulled up, drawing a pattern on the old wooden table with his thumb. “You still tapping that?”

I rolled my eyes. If Alex heard his words, she’d likely punch him. “C’mon man, that’s not a nice way to speak. We’re friends. We help each other out.”

“So, why’d you meet?”

“Alex has an inside track sometimes. She heard on the grapevine that the top brass in Denver had already made a decision about my contract.”

Coop let out a low whistle. “And nobody told you?”

My heart sunk in my chest. “She could be wrong. It may just be a rumor, but it doesn’t look good, does it?”

He tipped his head to one side, his intense brown eyes studying me. They were the same as Ro’s.

”Unless they’re not telling you because thereisno drama. They’ll keep you on, and you can get back on the ice. Maybe they’re considering loaning you to the AHL until you get your fitness back.”

I sat back in the booth. Coop had a point. If I was in Denver, I’d be more involved. In the loop. But the thought of going back right now made my gut churn. I’d made a promise to Ro. No. I’d see the derby trial through with her, then I’d head back to the city. Find out what the hell was going on.

A giggle rang out as I tipped back the last of my beer. The two women from the bar approached. Coop’s face brightened the second he saw them. The brunette trailed a hand along his shoulders and leaned against the booth.

“So, do you want to have a drink? We’re free tomorrow night.” She nudged her friend, who offered me a sweet smile.

“Sounds perfect.” Coop turned to me and raised his brows. He widened his eyes like a pleading puppy when I didn’t answer.

“Tomorrow night? No. I mean, I can’t. Not tomorrow.” My words were almost a mumble.

“Why not, man?”

Ro left me a note on the fridge this morning. It gave an address, a time, and instructions on where to bring the yarn and hooks she’d left me last week. If I admitted to Coop that I was going to Ro’s knitting club, he’d never let me forget it. I had some sort of reputation to maintain.

“I have a call I need to take. It’s not something I can get out of.” My conscience pricked. Since when had lying become so easy?

“How about Friday?” asked the brunette. I’d give her top marks for persistence. “The bar hired a mechanical bull. A fundraiser to buy some new scenery for the nativity play. Winston went on a rampage last year and ate the door to the stable, half the manger, and the shepherd’s crooks. The town council took it as a sign to upgrade Bethlehem.”

I had to chuckle. That little goat was quite a character. A mechanical bull contest could be fun, though. Not that I could ride with my leg, but watching people think they could hold on to a bucking robot always made me smile. I looked over at Coop. He still had puppy eyes, and I caved like a tower of sand in high tide. I could be his wingman one last time as long as the action didn’t involve me.

BRODY

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

The high-pitched whine of cicadas drilled into my eardrums as I leaned against the white picket fence of Mr. and Mrs. Woodcock's place. I hadn't been there for ages. The last time would've been Halloween, maybe fifteen years ago. Coop and I had set off some fireworks in their drainpipe. After being caught in the act, we had to pick up litter in the town square for a week.

I rechecked my watch. Ro must be running late. She hadn't messaged me today, and I wasn't in the habit of hanging on street corners waiting for girls. But as she came around the corner on Daisy Three, the edges of my mouth curled. For this girl, I'd make an exception.

With a grin, Ro applied her squeaky brakes and stopped in front of me. She slipped off her bike, cocking her leg over the crossbar. Leaning its frame against her hip, she removed her helmet and shook out her long, dark braids. A healthy slug of floral shampoo tickled at my nostrils, and I breathed it in.

"You made it," she said, surveying me with a sweep of her brown eyes. "Where did you tell Coop you were going?"

She knew I wouldn't admit to her brother why I missed dinner. "I said I had a phone meeting. Needed some privacy."

She chuckled. "Privacy is the last thing you'll get tonight. The minute the group realizes they're in the presence of greatness, they'll all be fighting to sit next to you." Ro tucked her helmet into the basket at the front of her handlebars. She pulled out her bag, shouldering it in one swift motion.

At the slight curve of her lips, I couldn't resist teasing her. "I thought you were responsible for me this evening? I'm a virgin. Remember? That makes me vulnerable. Open to suggestions. What if I get performance anxiety in front of a crowd?"

Instead of the flirty look that most women would throw me, Ro puffed out air. "You'd never have performance anxiety. You're too cocky for your own good."

She wasn't wrong. I swallowed down a million smutty comebacks as I followed Ro down the driveway toward the old house. The building was just as I remembered, although someone had replaced the drainpipe we'd obliterated. The green and white painted timber was the same. As was the ivy clinging to its surface.

"So tell me again, why are we meeting here? I mean, it's someone's house. Are we casing the joint? Do the Woodcocks own some kind of rare yarn?" I sucked in a theatrical breath. "Maybe they have a collection of golden crochet hooks inside. We could sell them to the highest bidder and run off to Mexico together."

With a roll of her eyes, Ro propped her bike against the wall just before the steps to the front door. "This is the HQ of the Dirty Hookers."

"You don't meet at the wool shop?" Tuft Swallow had a haberdashery called The Knotty Nester. The owner, Ruth Barfoffen, spent hours knitting clothes for the trees in the town square.

"Nope. A house is far more in keeping with the spirit of the group."

"How d'ya mean? Keep your friends close, and your crochet hooks closer?"

"No Brody, more that we're like a family."

"Closeknit?"

Ro groaned at my terrible joke, and her eyes sparkled in the porch lamplight above us.

“I’m worried about how your wooly family will welcome a stranger. Will Mrs. Woodcock frisk me on my way in?” I lifted one corner of my mouth. “Will you?”

Ro sighed, her tank top stretching across her breasts as she took in a breath and let it out. “I know crafting isn’t your scene, but remember why you’re here, and please be polite. I don’t want to be thrown out of the group for inviting a troublemaker.”

I threw my palms up in submission. “I promise I’ll play nicely. So, does Mrs. Woodcock lead this group, too? I should have guessed. That woman practically runs the town. Always has.”

Ro let out a low, throaty giggle, its sound going straight to my jocks. I wetted my bottom lip with my tongue.

“You were right when you said nothing ever changes in Tuft Swallow.” Her freckled nose wrinkled, and my breath ran a little shallower.

“Some things have,” I murmured.

As I spoke the words, I reached out and ran my fingers along her forearm. I don’t know what possessed me. It was the wrong thing to say. The worst thing to do. A momentary lapse of judgment. And I shouldn’t have touched her, but the way Ro’s eyes burned into mine, wide and alive, I was ready to throw caution to the wind and take up cross-stitch if it meant I could touch her again.

A low grunt rang out in the air between us, and a rugged man built like GI Joe pushed past, heading up the steps to the front door. Ro and I looked at each other, and her lips quirked a little. An uncomfortable burn sparked in my chest.

“Have you dated him?” Damn, I sounded like a jealous boyfriend. I’d already asked the same question about Finn and Nick. Ro was at liberty to date whoever she wanted.

She tipped her head to one side before shaking it, dismissing my ridiculous inquiry. “I don’t even know his real name. We call him Winston’s Hot Daddy. Comes every week. Makes the most adorable sweaters.”

“He wears sweaters?”

“No, they’re for Winston.”

“The goat?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

“The Mayor, you mean. We elected him last year after a nasty campaign. We all figured he’d do a better job than the human candidates.”

I stared at Ro. What the hell was she talking about?

She rolled her eyes at me. “That guy is his owner. Winston’s Hot Daddy.” She spelled out the words like I was a kindergartner.

I snickered into my chest. He may be “hot,” but I wondered if he’d happily dig into his pockets to buy a new manger for Jesus?

I followed Ro up the steps and onto Mrs. Woodcock’s enormous porch. The glow from the lamps above bathed the wooden platform in light, and patchwork quilts covered an array of chairs and benches. The hot daddy GI Joe guy had already settled in. He whistled tunelessly as he pulled handfuls of roughly spun yarn from a bag.

Another woman grinned and waved a hand at Ro. She had an arm full of pretty tattoos and a blue streak in her hair. She had a giant blanket spread on her lap made of turquoise and orangesquares. I turned to find a chair, but Ro stopped me, gripping my wrist. The warmth of her fingers infused my skin.

“Rowena!” A voice came from inside the house before the screen over the front door opened. Mrs. Woodcock reversed out onto the porch, carrying a tray of glasses. The sight of her buttoned-up floral dress transported me back in time, and I shifted my feet as if I’d broken one of her garden ornaments or ruined one of the town festivals. It’d happened before.

“Mrs. Woodcock.” Ro’s face lit up when she saw our hostess. She moved to take the tray from the old lady, but I beat her to it. “I brought someone new along tonight. To learn to crochet.”

Our hostess swung her steely eyes toward me and gave me a full top-to-toe assessment. The corners of her mouth tilted up when she made it back up to my face.

“Well, I never. Young Brody Flockhart has returned to Tuft Swallow.”

I opened my mouth to point out that I wasn’t exactly young anymore, but before I could speak, she turned to Ro.

“This is a delightful surprise. You should have told me, Rowena. I knew Brody was staying with you, but I didn’t know he had an interest in yarn work.”

Maggie must’ve told Mrs. Woodcock about my visit, but she wouldn’t have known about the deal between me and Ro. About the roller derby, or the gloves.

“I didn’t know you were bringing a date,” she continued.

Ro’s eyes widened, and she looked on the verge of choking, her cheeks reddening.

“It’s not a date,” I said, earning a quick glance and what I judged as a grateful smile from Ro.

She let out a breath. “No. Not a date. Not at all. Never.”

Mrs. Woodcock smiled. “Well, then you must be looking for something or someone to keep you busy until you return to the big time. I’m sure Rowena can help you with that.” The old lady lifted her brow, and damn if I didn’t feel my cheeks heat. What was she insinuating?

Ro nodded. “Yes, Brody needs a project. To occupy his mind. I thought of crochet.”

Mrs. Woodcock’s eyes gleamed. “Ah, yes. Idle minds and hands are the devil’s workshop, and I know what a prankster you can be, young man. Rowena, why don’t you get yourself set up while Brody helps me with the lemonade?”

With a half-smile, Ro took a seat on a small bench on one side of the porch. I followed Mrs. Woodcock to a table set against the wall. It already held a jug of icy lemonade and a plate of cookies. I placed the tray down with a clink and moved off to join Ro, but the old lady put a wizened hand on my forearm. “It’s lovely to see you. And with Rowena, too. Sometimes I worry about that girl. So sweet. So naïve. Tell me, are you making yourself at home at Maggie’s place?”

The skin on the back of my neck prickled. In lightning-quick time, our conversation had moved from worrying about a sweet, innocent girl to whether I had my feet well and truly under the table at Maggie’s. Potentially making myself a little too comfortable. Did she mean with Ro? I know I had a reputation, but I was hardly Ted Bundy.

“I’m mostly trying not to get in the way. I have a lot of things on my mind at the moment.”

She sighed, examining my face. “Of course you do. I’ve read all about your injury, but I’m sure you’ll be back on the ice soon.” Mrs. Woodcock leveled her gaze at me. “But just remember, when you return to the big time, there’s still a lot to love about your hometown. A lot of warmth for you here. People who think of you often. Who care about you, very much.”

I blinked. Who was she talking about? Since my folks moved away, the Swans were the only people I had an actual connection with. Cooper, Maggie, and... Ro? No, she couldn’t be talking about Ro. We’d hardly spoken in five years. We weren’t even

close anymore. But the idea of my best friend's sister thinking of me at all wrapped around me like a warm hug.

I drew my brows together before glancing back at Ro. She sat cross-legged on the bench, her yarn in neat bundles, chatting to the lady with the blue in her hair. She had a crochet hook tucked into one of her long braids and an array of little brown crochet spheres scattered around her on the cushions. I had to smile. She hadn't been joking about her owls looking more like potatoes.

Mrs. Woodcock gently squeezed my arm, and I looked back at her smiling face. "As I say, a lot of warmth. Now, let's get you organized."

I followed her to the seats, the crickets in the grass accompanying the beat of our steps. A few latecomers had arrived now, and judging by their sheepish smiles and waved greetings, they'd recognized me.

"Thank you, Brody," Mrs. Woodcock said before placing a hand on the small of my back. "Everyone, I want you to say hello to our newest Dirty Hooker. Some of you may know him as Denver Snow Storm's 'Flock' Flockhart, but we know him as plain old Brody when he's here in Tuft Swallow. He's one of the town's brightest success stories."

I fought a laugh. Or its most oversized ego. I wasn't sure everyone saw my on-ice swagger as success.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

“Brody will join us tonight, courtesy of Rowena.” All heads swung to Ro, and her cheeks fired pink. The corners of my mouth lifted. The color suited her. “Okay, Hookers, let’s get to work.”

I moved to join Ro on her bench, but Mrs. Woodcock took my hand and led me to the opposite side of the porch, sitting me down in the chair next to hers. The wicker creaked as I settled into its cushions. She handed me a crochet hook and tied a slipknot in a length of neon green yarn. “I’m going to teach you the basics, then you can join your friend.”

I glanced up again, but Ro wasn’t looking at us. Instead, she had her tongue clamped between her teeth as she set about working with a large ball of crimson wool. The skin of her long thighs glowed in the soft lamplight. I’d much rather she teach me the basics.

“Brody! Pay attention.”

“Sorry. I was just seeing what everyone else was working on.”

She huffed a little laugh. “So I noticed, but while I’m teaching you a basic chain stitch, I want your attention on me.” Her eyes had a bright glow as they roamed over my face. She lifted a silver eyebrow, and I considered myself well and truly busted for sneaking a peek at my housemate.

After the longest forty-five minutes of my life, Mrs. Woodcock declared that I had practiced enough in the art of basic crochet to be set free from her tutelage. More than once during my crash course, I’d looked up to find Ro watching me. Her mouth

twitched at the corners as I battled not to use every curse word under the sun when my yarn fell off the hook and unraveled.

I thanked Mrs. Woodcock and gathered my materials, heading to join Ro on her bench. When I reached it, however, there wasn't much room. She still sat cross-legged in the same spot, deep in concentration. Her collection of brown balls had multiplied and was now threatening to spill over onto the rug.

"I didn't know crochet potatoes were so popular." Ro's head snapped up, but her frown turned into a big grin, and my heart all but melted on the spot.

"You're alive then?"

Instead of turfing the balls off the bench, I grabbed a beanbag from the corner and brought it close to the seat before sinking into it at her feet. The polystyrene pebbles shifted and jostled under me as I settled. "Barely. Old Mrs. Woodcock is brutal. I swear she might've stabbed me in the back of my hand with her hook if I'd dropped any more stitches."

I nodded toward Ro's heap of brown balls. "How are the mutant owls going?"

"I can't decide whether I should rebrand them as crochet root vegetables or hang up my hook and call it quits."

"I'd offer to help, but I can only do straight lines at the moment. Between us, we could join forces. Make them into a ball and chain?"

Her giggle tinkled in the muggy air, bathing me in warmth. I could listen to it all night. Instead, I struggled on with the scraggy string of stitches I'd started.

After a few minutes of working together in silence, I missed yet another stitch and

threw my hook down into my lap. “I thought you said crochet was therapeutic. It’s stressful. Are you sure you definitely want gloves? Couldn’t I just make you a long string instead? It could come in useful. Tie your hair back. Lace up your skates.”

Ro narrowed her eyes for a beat. “No. You promised me gloves. I’ve fulfilled my end of the bargain so far.”

And she had. Ro had worked hard. Left the house early to practice her skating in the park. Visited Odd Duck’s gym a few times on her own. “Fine. But I need my fingers to grip my hockey stick. I don’t want to have worn them out with all this picking and pulling.”

“And I need fingers to the work outside at the Plume. We have harsh winters. I require gloves.”

I couldn’t resist the challenge in her eyes. “So, you need me to keep you warm? I’m sure I can arrange something.”

A corner of her mouth quivered, and I gave her the benefit of what one sports commentator had described as my show-stopping smile. She didn’t return it, though.

“Tell me about life on a hockey team.” The lady with the blue streak asked from across the porch. She was knitting a bright orange sweater with mismatched arm lengths.

“Brody, this is Callie. Callie, Brody. Callie’s a teacher at the school.”

I nodded a greeting, then stretched my legs out straight and threw my arms behind my head, leaning back. “Well, what can I say? It’s a charmed life. I have a butler, a PA, and a masseuse. All I have to do is turn up twice a week and play a couple of hockey games. Wave to some fans.”

The woman leaned forward in her chair as if she would cross-examine me.

“He’s only joking, Callie.” Ro looked down at me. “He works hard, and I know he’s at the rink most days.”

“You’ve been checking, Small Fry? Hired a PI? Keeping tabs on me?”

Ro sent her eyes heavenward. “Don’t flatter yourself. Being best friends with your ultimate super fan has its advantages.”

“I won’t say I’m not disappointed. You really haven’t scoured the internet for news of me? And there I was, thinking you’d been saving yourself for the day I returned to Tuft Swallow.”

A glow crept over her cheeks, and she lowered her eyes, a tiny furrow appearing between her brows. I sat back up. Was she pissed at me?

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

Hot GI Joe Goat Daddy, or whatever Ro had called him, shifted in the corner, laying down his knitting. A thick “humph” escaped his lips. “I heard you keep yourself plenty busy when you’re off the ice, too. I wanna hear about that, Flock Boy.” He chuckled, and Mrs. Woodcock’s head bobbed up.

Even though Ro didn’t look at me, the air crackled between us, and I chewed on my bottom lip, considering my words.

“I’ll admit I’ve had my fun. Dated some women. Maybe broken a few hearts.” One elderly lady with lilac-rinsed hair gasped, and Callie giggled. “But I confess, I lost my heart to a woman years ago.”

It was as if all the crickets went on strike and stopped simultaneously. I’d heard of pregnant pauses before, but this one was expecting octuplets. The only thing I heard was the gentlest intake of breath from Ro.

“Really, tell me more?” Hot GI Joe wasn’t giving up.

“I don’t want to give the lady’s name away, but she’s very special. Always looked out for me. Been there for me when it mattered. Even though our circumstances aren’t ideal, I struggle to keep my feelings to myself when I’m near her.”

“Won’t you tell us who it is?” asked Callie as if I was retelling Romeo and Juliet.

I gave a theatrical sigh. “I suppose one day, I must confess. Why not here? Tonight on this porch. Amongst friends.” I dared to look up at Ro. Her chest rose and fell a little faster than I remembered, and she’d clamped her lips tight. What I wouldn’t

give to kiss them. To soften her brow and have her smile again.

“Look, I’m sorry if this puts you in an uncomfortable position, Mrs. Woodcock, but I have to say, if you ever decide you’d had enough of life with your husband, I’m yours. I can mow lawns, cook, and I’ll even take up cornhole if I have to. And, of course, practice my crochet.”

Almost everyone, including Mrs. Woodcock, giggled. I’d always known how to play to a crowd. Only Ro remained silent, her face unreadable. She’d unwound her legs, and I gently pressed my shoulder against one of her thighs, the need to touch her, to have contact with her, overwhelming. At first, she met my gesture with nothing, only silence. Stillness. But eventually, the softest pressure nudged back against me, and I thought my heart might explode.

The surrounding conversation had moved on, with chatter about a shortage of green wool and the havoc it would create for the town’s St Patrick’s Day pet parade. Ro had returned to her owls, and I struggled to keep my mind on my hopeless crochet chain. She was so close, her warmth pulsing through my T-shirt, and as the scent of her perfume nestled into my nose, there was no way I could concentrate.

“Ro. Can you look at my stitches? I think they’re loose.”

She glanced at the chain in my hands, put her work to the side, and bent down. Violets. She smelled of violets, and as she leaned in, one soft braid brushed my cheek. I gripped my hook tighter, fighting the urge to reach up, wind it around my fingers, and gently pull her in to kiss me.

The sound of a throat clearing took my attention, and I glanced up to see Winston’s Hot Daddy’s piercing blue eyes on me. One of his brows quirked to the sky. I gave him a disarming smile and shifted on the beanbag with a crunch. He wasn’t the only one looking at us, though. As I glanced around, at least three other Hookers were

watching. It was like being on a first date with your family. As if Ro had her own team of bodyguards looking out for her. Keeping her safe from the Flock Boy.

I loved them for it. The thought that she'd always have folk protecting her lit a glow in my chest, but damn, I wished it was my job.

"We should go," I said, my voice barely a whisper. "My leg's kinda sore from sitting on the beanbag. I need to stretch it." It wasn't a lie, but what I truly wanted was Ro, all to myself.

Her eyes widened. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't think. You could've had my seat."

"No. You needed the space for your family of mutant balls."

She chuckled and gathered the spheres up, stuffing them into her bag. I held out my yarn and hook toward her like I was offering my firstborn to a deity.

"No way, buddy. If you don't take responsibility for your own yarn, those gloves may never get made." She stood and looked at me.

"Where am I supposed to keep it? I patted myself down to emphasize my point. "I'm traveling light."

"In your pocket. It's what they're for."

I grinned at her, compressing my yarn into a tight ball before stuffing the wool and my hook into a pocket. Once satisfied I'd sufficiently wedged them into my jeans, I held up a hand. "Help an injured man up?" I didn't relish the thought of getting out of the beanbag unassisted. And with a crochet hook so near to my package.

After three attempts and a little snickering from Winston's Hot Army Daddy, Ro

hauled me from the bowels of the beanbag. I put my hands on my hips and glanced down. The wool I'd crammed into my jeans had behaved just as I'd hoped, giving me an impressive lump at my groin.

Ro looked down, too, at my straining zipper. You couldn't miss the bulge. "Oh, good lord," she said, holding her palm up. "There's nothing like making your point. Come on, I haven't got all night."

I dug into my pocket, feigning innocence. "Only if you're sure. I don't want to weigh you down. Besides, the yarn might be warm by now." I winked, and Ro rolled her eyes before popping my cargo into her bag.

"You're always so dramatic." She turned back to the rest of the folk on the porch. "I'm afraid Brody has a sore leg. We're going to have to call it a night."

I faced our hostess. "Thanks for having us, Mrs. Woodcock, and for your instruction. Remember, if you ever tire of your husband, you know where to find me." I gave her a grin, and she giggled like a schoolgirl.

"You always were one to put a smile on an old lady's face. Thank you for coming, Brody, but just make sure you look after Ro. Get her home safely."

I glanced at Ro. She was elbow-deep in her bag, digging for something. A loose strand of hair fell over her face, and I practically glued my hands to my sides to stop myself from brushing it away.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

“I will.” I just wasn’t sure in what way yet. “Ready?” She nodded, pulling her hand out from the depths of her tote.

We waved and said goodbye to the other Hookers before heading back down the front step. I swear half a dozen stares branded into my back. At the bottom, Ro stowed her bag in Daisy Three’s basket and pulled her away from the wall, wheeling her down the path to the street. “I suppose I should offer you the wheels with your leg and all.”

Even with all my bravado and joker tendencies, there was no way I’d expect Ro to walk. “No, I’m fine. It’s just stiff. It’ll loosen up.”

She glanced down at my leg and the subtle limp an hour in a beanbag had left me with. “I have a better idea.” She stopped, and I followed suit, the soft breeze ruffling through my hair. “I can ride us both home.”

“No, you can’t.”

Ro’s eyes narrowed. “Why not?”

“The two of us won’t fit if you’re in the saddle. And I don’t think my leg will hold up if I stand on the axle at the back. I’m not exactly lightweight.”

She looked at the rear wheel, then raked her eyes slowly over me, and damn if my traitorous body didn’t respond with a stirring at my fly. “I can see that, Brody.” Her words were hushed and throaty. The stirring in my jeans increased.

“I’ll drive,” I said.

She looked as if I asked her the square root of pi. “How’s that going to work? Where will I go if you’re too big for me to pedal?”

“Sit on the crossbar.”

“Sorry?”

“You have a man’s bike with a high crossbar. Unless you’ve developed some BMX skills recently, I’d say it’s our best bet.”

Ro’s brow creased. “Won’t that be uncomfortable?”

It certainly wouldn’t be for me. Ro nestled between my arms sounded just perfect.

“Let’s try it.” I moved toward Daisy Three and took the handlebars. Ro stepped back, and I threw my good leg over the crossbar to sit on the saddle. I shoved as far back as possible and patted the metal between my legs.

With a wavering smile, Ro shifted from foot to foot at my side as if she were deciding on the best way to climb on. After a long beat, she committed and hopped on, wobbling a little as she rode sidesaddle. The scent of violets overtook my senses, sending my head into a spin. “Lean back into me. I promise I won’t let you fall.” I was already well on my way.

She did, gently at first, but soon, when she realized I was trying to help, she relaxed into my chest. Having Ro so close, the heat of her body against mine was so right, so natural. “Put one hand around my waist.” My words tumbled out. Hurried and mumbled. I held my breath as I waited for her to comply. When she did, a shiver of something electric jolted through me, and my heart raced at the touch of her fingers against my ribs.

I gripped the handlebars and looked down at Ro, tucked between my arms. Damn, if I didn't want to freeze time and stay here forever. I had the only woman I wanted held close in my grasp, and Lord only knew how I'd survive the journey back to Maggie's.

15

RO

Brody pulled into Gran's driveway, and my heart sank. I'd never been so reluctant to see the porch lights shining in the dark before. The only way I could describe the last few minutes would be exquisite torture. Every single lump and bump in the road jostled Brody and me closer in the dark. And just maybe, I'd hung on to him a little tighter than necessary.

With a squeak of the breaks, Brody brought us to a stop, placing his feet on the ground to steady the sway of the bike. "Hop off."

His breathy whisper, right beside my ear, sent a tiny shiver down my neck. He released one arm, giving me a clear exit, and I slipped off the crossbar, hoping he missed my sigh. I could've stayed balanced between his arms all night.

Once I was clear, Brody climbed off the bike with a low groan. He must be in pain. I knew this man well enough to know he hated to show weakness. "You okay?"

He grinned at me, his teeth glowing white in the porch light. "I'm fine. I guess I'm not built for beanbags anymore."

He handed me Daisy Three, and I gently laid her on the dewy grass.

Brody huffed a breath. "I miss being able to do that. Knowing nobody's going to come along and steal your stuff."

“I wouldn’t be so sure. Have you seen the size of some of the local possums? They make pro-wrestlers look small.” I cocked a smile at him. “Don’t worry, big city boy. You’ll be back there soon, away from us weird country folk with our crazy ways.”

His brows drew together for a second, then relaxed again. I headed up the stairs to the front entrance, the lemony scent of his cologne following behind as he matched my steps. At the door, I paused and took a breath. I wasn’t sure what I was waiting for. For Brody to lean in and find my neck with his mouth? For him to slide an arm around my waist, turn me around, and claim my lips? Neither was likely to happen, but my body ached for his touch.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

I shook my head, throwing off my thoughts, and turned the door handle. It swung open with a low creak, and once we'd stepped inside, I shut it again. We both stood in the dark, our breath mingling. He was the first to speak.

"I guess everyone is asleep."

"Yep. Gran most likely fell asleep reading one of her murder mysteries, and Coop probably has an early start at work."

Brody just nodded, and I gripped my lip with my teeth. You could slice the air in the hallway with a knife, but neither of us moved or said a word. The porch light coming through the door glass highlighted his lashes, and I could sense his eyes on me.

Damn, we were old friends. Why did this goodnight feel so awkward? Like we were on a first date.

At a loss for anything scintillating to say and worried I'd blurt out something silly, I stepped away, moving down the hallway to the stairs. Brody fell into step behind me, but when we got to the den door, he reached out and touched my arm. I held my breath and froze with my back to him.

"Well, this is me." His voice was barely louder than the whir of the refrigerator in the kitchen beyond, and its gentle lilt soothed the drumming of my heart.

I turned my head to see him leaning against the door frame, every glorious inch of him outlined in the moonlight. I slowly let out my breath. "Goodnight, Brody. Thank you for coming with me tonight."

He shrugged, and the balls of his cheeks lifted. “My pleasure. Goodnight, Ro.”

I hesitated a long beat, waiting for him to say something, anything else. To draw the moment out. To give me a reason to stay and hang out with him a little longer, but when he remained silent, I turned and headed to the stairs, taking one slow step at a time. A clunk rang out in the stillness behind me. It was the sound the den doorknob made when it was twisted. I’d heard it a thousand times before, but when I looked down to see if he’d gone inside, Brody stood in the hallway, watching me, too.

16

RO

After precisely thirty seconds of pacing around my bedroom, I threw off my clothes and climbed into a comfortable old T-shirt and panties. My skin was on fire, and so was my need for Brody. He'd sent me into turmoil when he walked back into my life just two weeks ago. I'd worked so hard to lock up my feelings, but I'd failed miserably, and now I was paying the price. I should never have played with his fire. Never agreed to try out for the derby.

I flung myself back on the bed with a groan and undid the bands around my braids. What the hell was I going to do for the rest of his stay? Outside of our training, trying to avoid him became harder and harder. The thought of him being so close yet so out of reach maddened me. Wasn't this evening a perfect example?

Every night, the memory of his beautiful body lingered in the back of my mind. The lovely heart he'd always shown me. I fought images of his slow, sexy grin. The glow in his eyes when we laughed together. But mostly, I battled with the urge to touch myself, knowing he lay just meters away from me, twisted in his sheets, golden skin bathed in the moonlight we shared through our windows.

Well, now I was about ready to give up the fight. Total capitulation. I let out a slow breath and brought my hand down to my panties, tracing a finger along their soft cotton before nudging the waistband aside, eager to quell the ache at my center.

Seconds later, a gentle knocking at the door froze me in place. What if it was Gran, or worse still, Coop? What if they just walked in and caught me red-handed, or busy-handed? I held my breath, listening for any clue as to who stood outside my door.

Silence. Maybe I'd imagined the knock. Consequences of a guilty conscience. My shoulders loosened a little, but no sooner had I relaxed back into my mattress than the knocking came again, only this time louder.

"Yes?" My voice was almost a squeak, laced with panic.

"Ro? You okay?" Brody's soft lilt was unmistakable, and I sucked in a stiff breath before reorganizing my underwear and scrambling to my bedroom door.

I made it to the knob in record quick time and, with little thought, twisted it open. Brody stood out in the dim light of the hallway. He wore a battered old T-shirt and that pair of gray sweatpants that hugged him in all the right places.

After a leisurely roam around his body, my gaze landed on his hands. In them lay his ball of neon green yarn, his crochet hook, and the string of stitches that he'd completed at the Dirty Hookers meeting. He had a sheepish smile, and his perfectly disheveled fair hair fell across his forehead in damp shards.

"I need some help with my stitches," he said.

I blinked.

"Ro?"

The edge in his voice roused me from my stupor. “Oh, crap. Come in.” I practically manhandled him through the doorway, sticking my head out into the hall, listening for signs of us being discovered. Sure that neither Gran nor Cooper was about to batter down my door with a baseball bat, I shut it, turning the old key. With three brothers who loved to play tricks on me, I’d insisted on a lock in my early teens.

Brody stood in the lamplight, his solid bulk oddly out of place with my patchwork quilts and floral wallpaper. I met his eyes for the first time since he’d knocked. “What are you doing here?”

He held out his crochet, its vibrant hue paling in the low light. “I just can’t work out how I’m going to manage the fingers.”

The corners of my mouth twitched. He meant the gloves, but I’d had similar thoughts only minutes ago for entirely different reasons.

I took the yarn and checked it, examining his loose stitches. “Don’t run before you can walk. You need to think about your tension first. Tighten it up.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

He stepped up behind me, all lemon cologne and shower gel and warm breath on my shoulder. “Can you show me?”

What a question. Since he’d arrived back in our house, my every waking hour involved “tension,” and my long-gone eighteen-year-old self would have given away her entire collection of One Direction CDs for the chance to show him anything.

“Sure.” I sat down on the bed, teasing the yarn through my fingers. Brody joined me, the mattress sinking under his weight, our arms almost touching.

“It’s terrible, isn’t it? You can be honest. I think my hands are too big.”

I turned my head to see him wearing one of his glorious grins, the corners of his eyes wrinkling, just the way I liked it.

“Stop it.”

“Stop what?” His face was all feigned innocence, his voice husky.

The heat from Brody’s body pulsed through the thin cotton of my top, and my mouth ran dry as I stared at his oversized biceps straining against his sky-blue T-shirt. He was playing with me, teasing me, just as he always had. But make no mistake, I was here for it. Front and center.

I turned to face him, a flash of boldness settling low in my gut. “What do you really want, Brody?”

He narrowed his eyes briefly before bringing them to meet mine, his teeth worrying his bottom lip. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“Why? Did you hear something from your team or that journalist?”

After the longest beat, he answered. “I think you know why.”

I swallowed, the lump in my throat firmly staying put. His voice was thick and low, and each sonorous decibel went straight to my core. What the hell was going on? Surely, I hadn’t imagined the tightness in his throat, though it was hard to tell with the thundering of my heart.

Nope, I was just going to call it. Brody Flockhart, my brother’s best friend, the man I’d lusted after, crushed on through my entire young adult life, was sitting on my bed, dialing the heat to one hundred.

“I, I...” I had no words. He was the only man with the superpower to render me speechless.

Brody took the crochet from my hands and put it on the mattress. With a soft sigh, he intertwined his fingers through mine, the warmth of his skin imprinting on me. “I know it’s too late for apologies, and I acted like a complete dick back then, but I can’t stop thinking about the night we kissed.” His blue eyes bored into me, a glow of something forbidden deep within them. “Did you ever tell anyone?”

At his question, my heart hammered louder than a kettledrum, and blood sang in my ears. “Nobody knows.” Silence hung in the air. The one answer I’d wanted these last five years was mine for the taking. “I left you a note. You never replied.”

He sighed, the hiss racing into the room, and a burn crept up my chest. A small crease had formed between his brows. After the longest pause, he brought his eyes to mine.

“I got your note, and I’m sorry I never responded, but there were...complications.”

I huffed a soft breath. “Cooper?”

Brody nodded, and his head dipped a little. “My career, too. I had commitments that would take me away from town. From you. And we were so young. You were only eighteen, Ro.”

And didn’t I know it? Eighteen, totally in love, and totally what he wasn’t looking for.

He squeezed my hands, bringing them together, his fingers sliding over my knuckles. “But not everything you said in your note was right.”

At his words and the softness in his eyes, my heart cranked up a notch, and my pulse stuttered in my chest.

“You said you’d made a mistake. That kissing me, that me kissing you back, was wrong. And I know our lives have followed different paths.” Brody lifted my knuckles to his lips, his featherlight breath glancing across my skin. “But I want you to know, I never regretted that kiss. Not for a second.”

I loosened a breath. No matter what I’d told myself over the years, I hadn’t either. Nothing and nobody else had ever come close to nudging their way into my heart since that night on the porch.

Brody brought my hands back into my lap, loosening his grip. “And seeing you again reminds me of all the reasons I kissed you back.”

He lifted a hand to my braid, winding his fingers through its end, working the hair loose to hang in dark tendrils. “And all the reasons I still want you.”

I closed my eyes, my stomach doing a backflip. Brody wanted me as much as I wanted him. His words were all I'd dreamed of. All I'd waited for. My skin fizzed as five long years of buried regret and hidden desire threatened to bubble over. I burned for his touch.

Brody moved his fingers up to the base of my braid, his thumb hovering next to my cheek. Desperate to be nearer to him, I turned into his palm, kissing its skin softly. I dared to open my eyes and found him looking back at me, his gaze full of fire. Sweet, glorious, Brody-shaped temptation.

Everything he'd said about the past made sense even now. I was still his best friend's little sister. He still had his career and a fantastic life far from Tuft Swallow. And worst of all, he could break my heart. But this time, I wasn't going in blind. Naïve. I could draw a line under anything that happened between us, couldn't I? Maybe if I finally quenched my thirst for Brody, I could move on.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

Swallowing a wavering breath, I ran my eyes over the sleek planes of his face, the fair eyelashes brushing his cheeks and his soft, full lips. I'd never forgotten their taste.

I slowly leaned my body toward Brody's before placing the softest kiss on his mouth. Initially, he didn't move, but after a heartbeat, he returned my pressure. Gentle at first. Tentative. But then, when he gave my bottom lip the slightest of bites, I parted my lips, and he slid his tongue inside.

A wave of need engulfed me. A thick, years old, pulsing bank of hunger. As he kissed me harder, I couldn't contain my thirst any longer. I had to drink him in.

The action took all my weight, but I pushed Brody down onto my mattress, hands splayed across his chest, fingers digging into his hard muscles. And he let me. Pulled me into him, our tongues chasing each other in a crazy dance. My core throbbed with desire. No kiss could ever have lived up to the one I was drowning in now. I'd been a fool to even try with anyone else.

Brody was the first to break away, his hot breath on my neck. "Are you sure? Do you really want to do this? I'd give anything to pick up where we left off, but I don't want you to have regrets."

He lay a kiss behind my ear, and the corners of my lips bowed. I'd never been surer. "Why think about regrets?"

His eyes glowed hard, emboldening me.

“I just need you.” I reached down and found his solid length, gripping him through the fabric of his sweatpants.

At my touch, Brody arched, throwing his head back. “Fuck, Ro,” the growl in his voice tightened something inside me, and I sat up to straddle him, pinning his arms above his head, grinding against him in slow, delicious circles.

His breath came hard, his eyes laced with desire. “You’re incredible,” was all he said before I claimed his mouth once more. Brody worked his hands free and brought them to grip my buttocks, pulling me into him, matching the rhythm I set.

Our bodies met each other at every rotation of my hips, but before long, he tightened under me. “Stop, Ro. Please, stop.” His words rasped in my mouth, and I pulled away, my heart battering against my ribs. With a lump in my throat, I searched his eyes for remorse, for regret, but found only craving. I didn’t understand.

He didn’t look like a man who wanted me to stop. Still, the abruptness of his plea set my teeth on edge. My stomach churned. Had I completely humiliated myself all over again? What must he think of me? That I was some sex-starved nymphomaniac who thought writhing around on top of him was sexy? Desirable?

I pulled in a breath, rolling off his hips and curling onto my side. I’d told him the extent of my sexual experience that first morning in the diner. And though he hadn’t laughed, he must have thought me a liability instead of a worthy bed partner for the great Brody “Flock Boy” Flockhart. A naïve pretender compared to his usual conquests.

I hugged my knees, my racing pulse slowly returning to normal as a dull ache settled in my chest.

Within a heartbeat, though, Brody was at my back, his lips at my ear. “What

happened?” He wove a warm hand over my hip and across my belly, a million goosebumps bursting to life in its wake.

“You don’t want me.” My words were barely a whisper.

Brody huffed a laugh into my neck, and my nipples hardened against my shirt. “You have no idea how much I want you, but I would’ve exploded if we’d carried on, and I can think of much better places to be when that happens.” He nudged the hair of my now disheveled braid away with his nose and lay feathery kisses at my neck. “You surprised me. I didn’t expect you to be so... committed. So amazing.”

My lips curved a little. “I’m not as sweet as people think.” Particularly when I had Brody Flockhart between my thighs.

He snickered, the vibration of his laughter going straight to my center. “I’m glad for it, but I want to take things a little slower. Find out all about you.”

Oh, believe me, I was ready to take him on a guided tour, sell him a map, and buy him a souvenir. Brody kissed my neck and gently nudged my thighs down, encouraging my legs to straighten. Finally, he returned his hand back to my waist, stroking the skin there.

“You’re sure you want this? Me?”

With a wavering breath, I gave the tiniest nod, and Brody brought his mouth to my neck, peppering it with kisses. He found my breast, playing with its stiff peak through the thin cotton of my top, rolling it between his fingertips. The sensation, the tug of need at my center, stole my breath, and I let out a low moan. It was like a siren call to Brody’s body because he immediately pressed his solid length against my buttocks, laying his hand across the front of my panties and pulling me against him.

Now, it was his turn to act like a desperate teenager, but the pressure from the heel of his palm so close to the bundle of nerves between my legs had me chasing the sensation. The harder he pressed, the stronger the ache and the harsher my breath became.

“Touch me,” I whispered, sure I was the one about to explode. With a guttural growl, Brody pulled the fabric of my panties away, his thumb gently circling my heat before dipping two fingers deep inside me. I sucked in a quick breath. The feeling was exquisite as he moved in torturous glacial circles over the bundle of nerves between my thighs. Each stroke of his skin against mine led me higher, leaving me hotter. Desperate for the feel of him inside me.

Brody kissed me. Whispered words against my neck, but I didn’t know what they were. Lost in sensation, I brought my hand down to his, gripping him in place. Rocking into him, taking my pleasure. I was about to unravel around his fingers, and nothing could stop the waves of intense bliss that crashed over me, wrecking me on the rocks of sensation.

Brody must have sensed the tightening inside my body because he pinched harder at my nipple and drove his fingers deeper. With a cry I hardly recognized, my whole body shuddered before the most sublime sweetness engulfed my entire being, and I came, bringing his free hand to my mouth to quell the moan that someone would surely hear.

I sucked in ragged breaths, releasing the fingers still buried between my legs. Within a beat, Brody pulled my panties back up and wrapped an arm around my body, turning me toward him and laying kisses on the top of my head. A smile laced his voice. “I could do that to you all night.”

I might never walk again if he did, but I’d happily submit to the experiment. I reached up to touch his face, the hint of scruff at his jaw scratching against my fingers. “I

want to make you feel the same way, too.”

Brody looked down at me, the smallest furrow appearing between his brows. He shook his head, and my heart almost cracked in two. What had I done wrong? Had I disappointed him? Something passed over his face like a shadow, and he let out a sigh. Pulling me even closer, his fingertips trailed over my shoulder.

“Ro. I’ve waited a long time to touch you. To please you. But I won’t make you lie.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

My gut lurched. “What do you mean? Why would I lie?” It wasn’t as if I hadn’t already laid myself bare. Literally.

I looked up into Brody’s eyes and swallowed, realization dawning over me. This wasn’t about me. This was about him. “You don’t want to lie to Cooper. Or to Gran.”

He nodded slowly, the corners of his mouth down-turned. “And I don’t want you to have to, either. I know how much your family means to you. If we go any further. If we slept together tonight, I couldn’t look them in the eye tomorrow. I’d lose their trust if they found out we’d gone behind their backs. I don’t think either of us wants that.”

He wasn’t wrong. The thought of sneaking around, pretending to my family that Brody and I were anything other than friends, made my stomach roil. I looked up at him, and his eyes widened.

“Oh, please don’t think I don’t want you. I do. So much. But if anything is going to happen between us, we need to tell the truth.”

I clamped my jaw shut, picturing the look on Cooper’s face if we fronted up tomorrow morning, declaring that we wanted to sleep with each other, but only if we had his blessing. He’d blow his top.

My brother was already on the protective side. He’d frightened off plenty of potential boyfriends over the years, but he knew Brody better than anyone else. Knew all about his past. The women he’d dated. His one-night stands. Coop had always hinted at the adventures the two of them had whenever he paid Brody a visit. Every time, I’d

swallow down bitter feelings. Feign disinterest, while my gut twisted into knots inside.

My stomach pulled a little now. What on earth made me think Brody was going to change? He wasn't about to become a monk after one quick fumble with me.

"What are you thinking about?" Brody's voice washed over me in the room's quiet. I could hardly tell him I was wondering what made me any different from a thousand other women he could meet. He'd left me high and dry before, after all. Hadn't seen fit to reply to my note. What was to stop him from doing it again?

"What are you proposing we do?" My voice was small. Quiet.

He sighed, shifting against my pillows and pulling me into his chest. "I think I should talk to Cooper."

I swallowed. Hard. Tell him what, exactly? His inexperienced little sister had almost thrown caution to the wind and slept with the notorious womanizer who was his trusted best friend? Not to mention him being on the verge of leaving town. I didn't know if Coop would be more likely to laugh or run Brody out of town himself!

But as Brody stroked my arm, his rhythmic caress dancing over my skin, I'd agree to almost anything. Lying here in his arms was all I'd ever dreamed of. All I'd ever wanted from him. The thought of asking the universe for more unleashed butterflies in my stomach.

We lay together in silence for what seemed like forever, and my eyes grew heavy, my lids giving in to the hypnotic rise and fall of his chest. The endless caress of his fingers along my arm.

"Ro?" Brody's voice was hushed and tight. "Will I speak to Coop?"

If he did, there'd be no going back. No stuffing the cat back into the bag. Was I really ready for my brother's judgment? But if we didn't tell Cooper we had feelings for each other, even if only physically, we'd be living a lie, and I didn't want that either. Brody was right. We needed to talk to my family. I sucked in a breath, nodding my head.

Brody's arms tightened around me, bringing his lips down to the top of my head and gently kissing my hair. "Thank you."

Something fired deep in my belly. For better or worse, we would confess all in the morning. I shut my eyes, giving in to the lure of sleep, but my last waking thought was how I didn't want to be in Brody's shoes when he fronted up to my brother.

17

RO

I woke with a jolt, my body damp with perspiration. My eyelids fluttered madly until, finally, the room became less like a silent movie and more like my bedroom. Pressure around my waist and heat at my back brought me back to the moment. I looked down at the corded forearm resting across my stomach. The massive hand with the finest coating of blond hair on its back. Brody.

I'd imagined waking up in his arms like this a million times, but a burn ignited my chest as last night came back to me. His lips on mine. His fingers deep inside me.

I'd dreamed of Brody. Brody and me. In the nightmarish world my subconscious created, he'd invited me up to Denver after my family kicked me out for lying to them. He'd opened the door to his apartment, all smiles. But an assortment of gorgeous, naked women lay around, calling out his name. I'd reached out to pull him away, but he'd just shrugged his shoulders. Smirked and winked.

The unpleasant vision matched with the fitful night I'd had. Every time he'd stirred in his sleep, I'd woken, a feeling of impending doom hovering over me like a black cloud. The glow of my pleasure was tainted by the burn low in my gut.

Pale light filtered through the window, and a moth bashed softly against the glass. Maybe it hoped to make its escape after a night held prisoner in my room. The beat of my heart matched its fluttering.

Brody's breath warmed the back of my neck, and I slowly shifted around to face him. He stirred a little at the movement, his eyelids trembling as he dreamed. Despite the bubble of nausea in my stomach, the corners of my lips lifted. He still had a scattering of faint freckles across his nose. Coop used to call him Pippy Long Stocking, but his youthful face now had a leaner, harder look. The purple smudges under his eyes told a story of worry, and I tamped down the urge to reach out and trace them with my fingertips.

In the golden light of morning, Brody looked like a God. A superhero. Apollo incarnate. A fantasy.

The ache in my chest deepened. That's exactly what last night had been. A fantasy. A memory to be stored away somewhere safe. No gods were racing around in togas, marching up and down the streets of Tuft Swallow. No superheroes in crochet capes. And no matter how much I'd wanted Brody last night, giving in to desire would end in tears.

Mine.

Brody would be gone soon, and he'd leave me to deal with the fallout of my heart all over again.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

With a soft moan, his eyes opened, and I held a breath.

“Morning, beautiful,” he murmured. The tiniest of smiles nudged Brody’s mouth, and he leaned in and kissed my forehead, his lips lingering on my skin. I closed my eyes tight. His words were all I’d ever craved. But how many other women had he greeted like that? I could picture them so clearly. Theones from my dream, the few I’d seen him with online. I could never live up to any of them.

I swallowed and pushed away, coming to face him on the pillow. “We need to talk.”

The moment the words left my lips, Brody’s jaw tightened, and a crease appeared between his brows. “We do?”

I nodded, biting down on my bottom lip.

“What is it?”

I stared into his ocean-blue eyes, nausea rising at the thought of what I was about to say. “Last night can’t ever happen again. You know that, right?”

Brody blinked four times in quick succession. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but when I curled my arms around my body, he sighed and rolled onto his back. “I thought last night was what you wanted. Wewere what you wanted. Was it that disappointing?” His voice was tight and quiet, and all I desired was to cling to his chest. Tell him I’d got it wrong. Tell him how much I’d loved having him touch me. But I had to be sensible. Smart.

“I thought we were what I wanted too, but I don’t think I can hurt Cooper. And that’s just what any confessions from either of us would do. He trusts us both. I’m scared how he’ll react.”

It was the truth. I didn’t want to be responsible for any trouble between Brody and my brother, and any “I want to sleep with your sister” revelations would mean just that. No matter how close they were, he’d worry I’d get hurt. That Brody’s intentions weren’t good. Hell, I didn’t even know if they were, myself. He hardly had the best track record.

And if, in some fictional world, Brody and I got together and then split up, things between the two of them would never be the same. I couldn’t live with that. Brody was Coop’s oldest friend.

Judging from the bob at Brody’s throat and the quickness of his breath, similar thoughts crossed his mind, too. I gave a tinyshake of my head. Any bad feeling between the two of them was something I couldn’t bear.

Brody cleared his throat. “Let me get this straight. You want to return to both of us pretending we don’t want each other?”

My chest pulled, and I bunched my hands. “Yes.” Every nerve in my body screamed out against the lie.

Brody’s brows furrowed tight together, and seconds passed before he spoke, his words harsher than before. “I’m not sure if I’m amused or offended.”

I dared to reach out a hand, touching the solid wall of his abs through his T-shirt. “Neither. I’m not trying to make any sort of point here. I care about you, I really do, but I just think keeping things simple is for the best. Neither of us needs any drama in our lives right now.”

He huffed a breath into the still of the room. Emotions ran over his face, and a muscle pulsed in his jaw. After what felt like an age, he turned his head on the pillow, his eyes meeting mine. They were unsure and wide. So unlike Brody. “You still want me to come to the derby tryout?”

“Of course. Who else is going to polish my knee pads?” My attempt at humor was pitiful, but when his brows unfurrowed, I could have somersaulted around the room.

Brody reached for the hand I still had against his stomach, touching its back with his warm fingers. “I don’t really understand. And I don’t like it, but if pretending I don’t want to kiss the life out of you every minute is what you want, I’ll comply.” Bringing his other arm down to his side, he flipped toward me and leaned in to kiss me on the forehead again. “I’ll honor your wishes. But I want you to know how good last night was for me. How much it meant.”

Breath skittered around in my chest, and my heart fired louder than a cannon as I stared at his beautiful face, desperate to take all my words back. Instead, I bit down on my tongue and nodded. I was really doing this. Shattering my girlhood dreams, crushing my heart, and ruining my chance with Brody. I could never take back my words, and the dull ache in my chest checked in and reserved a room for the foreseeable future.

“It’s early,” I whispered. “We should get up.”

Brody let out a long sigh, nodded, then pushed up to step off the bed. He was still in his sweatpants and crumpled blue T-shirt. Never had plain and simple looked so delicious.

I rolled off the bed and grabbed a pair of shorts that lay on a chair, pulling them up over my hips, aware of his eyes on me. When I’d fastened them, I lifted my hand to touch his arm. “I’m sorry, Brody.”

He shook his head before bringing his forehead to meet mine, eyes closed. “Me too.”

We stood together for the longest time, our breath mingling, before I pulled away and opened the door.

Brody followed me into the hallway, and no sooner had we crept along the carpet than Gran rounded the corner. I don’t know who was more shocked.

“Oh!” she squeaked, her eyes roaming over the two of us.

I froze like a deer in headlights, but from behind me, Brody stepped forward, bringing one hand to the small of my back, his touch as light as featherdown.

“You shouldn’t have any more problems, Ro. Just let me know if you need anything else.” I nodded dumbly, and he gave me a tight smile before looking at Gran. “Morning, Maggie.”

Without another word, Brody headed past Gran and down the stairs.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

After watching him descend, she turned to me. “Ro?”

I met Gran’s questioning gaze, grasping for excuses as to why Brody would leave my room so early on a Wednesday morning. “What? My lamp was flickering. It bothered me, and Brody offered to help.”

Her crepey brow furrowed. “In the daylight?”

My heart lurched. Perhaps I should book a course in creating more believable, feeble excuses. All I could do was nod and head back into the sanctuary of my room, Gran’s eyes hard on my back.

I shut the door and leaned against its cool wood surface, fighting the tears that pricked my eyes. The hot wash of guilt at my lie and the regret that crashed over me was everything I wanted to avoid. Based on the thudding of my chest, I’d made the right choice.

Quashing any idea of Brody and me together was the right thing to do, but until he left town, I’d be in absolute torment.

18

RO

Eve and I walked into town, my sneakers scuffing against the pavement. She chattered away at my side about the mechanical bull night coming up at the Crow Bar. Once she’d convinced me to attend, reluctantly, she moved on to musings on the

town's hot new chiropractor and whether she should apply for a second job as a receptionist at Wingspan, the new yoga studio. The idea of my crazy friend huffing and puffing while she aligned her chakras had me grinning. Eve was anything but Zen.

I dipped in and out of her words, more occupied with where Brody was and what he was doing. He'd honored my request and, based on my run-of-the-mill interactions with Coop, hadn't said a word about the other night. Besides Gran returning from the store with new light bulbs and Brody completely avoiding me, life had returned to the status quo.

"Are you listening to me, Ro?"

I snapped my head toward Eve. She was holding up the latest edition of the Nosey Pecker, reading it out like a hammy actor.

"Sorry. I'm listening."

"Good. I've hardly seen you these last few days."

I sighed. She wasn't wrong. I'd kept a low profile while I licked my Brody-shaped wounds.

"So apart from a hilarious review of Verona Morley's nonsensical poetry and mime evening, the only other tidbit of interest is this little snippet about our mutual friend, the skating love god."

My stomach lurched. Had Brody made it into the Nosey Pecker again? "Oh?" I asked, my voice wavering just a little.

Eve bounced along next to me. "Yes!" She cleared her throat and read aloud.

“Local hero down on his luck seen out with his glamorous young lady, yet again. Spotted deep in conversation and with more than a few looks exchanged, watch this space for updates. Who knows, love could be in the air.”

Eve turned to me, grinning. “Well, what do you think? Who could it be? I’ve heard no gossip in the diner. Maybe it’s someone from out of town. Apart from Lily Cooley or Wade Biddescombe, with all the pastel knits, I can’t think of anyone glamorous around here.”

A hot burn climbed up my chest. The young lady in the report had to be me. Were we spotted at The Easy Swallow? At Odd Duck’s gym? I’d hardly call my cheerleading outfit or skating gear glamorous, but this was Tuft Swallow, not Paris. As far as I knew, Brody hadn’t hung out with any other women while in town. He’d said few people even knew he was here.

“You know, I think whoever writes this has a bit of a crush on Flock,” Eve continued. “I mean, I can’t blame her.”

“Could be a man.”

She looked at me as if I’d found the cure for wrinkles. “That’s true. I never thought of that. Damn.”

“What?”

“That opens up a whole new group of people who could be responsible. One day, I’ll track the writer down, if only to shake their hand. Thank them for the hours of amusement. Particularly if the stories about your housemate keep coming.”

At another mention of Brody, I tried hard to smile. I really did. But as I trudged along rejector’s remorse had kicked in. I’d made my no-Brody-bed, and now I had to lie in

it. Alone and miserable.

I reset my drooping shoulders, and Mrs. Woodcock rounded the corner in a flurry of turquoise nylon. A pair of shiny binoculars hung around her neck, and she clutched a collection of clipboards to her chest. She eyed us through her orange sun visor.

“Rowena. Eve. So lovely to see the youth of our town out and about, taking a little exercise.” As she spoke, Eve rolled her eyes and stuffed her copy of the Nosey Pecker into her bag.

Without waiting for a response, Mrs. Woodcock continued. “It’s a beautiful morning for a stroll. I’m just off to lead a guided bird-spotting session for some out-of-towners. There’s been a sighting of a Lesser-fluffed Kink Tit in the woods. It’s drummed up some interest among the bird community. There are a lot of ornithologists with a particular interest in tits.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

Eve guffawed into the air, but I nudged her in the side, and she turned her laughter into a convincing fake cough. Maybe she'd be competition for me when it was time to cast the nativity play this year.

"Nice," I said, wishing I was anywhere else.

Mrs. Woodcock touched my arm. "Speaking of nice, it was wonderful to see you and Brody together at the Dirty Hookers meeting the other night. How is his stitching going? Such a polite young man. Never in my life thought he'd want to learn crochet. I hope he comes again."

Heat rushed to my cheeks. If things had gone my way, he'd have come that night, but Brody had played the gentleman, and then I'd kiboshed the whole notion of us ever having sex. "I'm not sure. He'll be heading back to Denver soon."

Mrs. Woodcock's slightly narrowed eyes ran over my face. "Yes. Yes, that's true. It's a shame, though. He lends a certain something to any gathering, eh, ladies?" The smile reappeared on her face. "Well, I best be off. You're most welcome to join us, Rowena. I believe a few single gentlemen are coming on the tour today." She winked at me and turned on her silver Nikes.

It took precisely three seconds for Eve to grab my arm, her mouth hanging open. "What the actual hell? Brody went to your crochet club?" The squeal of her voice could rival any Lesser-fluffed Kink Tit that Mrs. Woodcock and her friends might spot.

"Only as a bet. I told him if I had to try out for the derby team, he had to learn to

crochet.”

“Are you serious? Flock would never go to a nerdy knitting group for just anyone.”

My chest fizzed. I had to be careful. Eve knew me so well. It would only take one awkward blush for her to guess there was a little more to his sudden interest in crafting than I’d let on.

“We’re old friends, Eve. Brody was probably worried I’d pull a muscle or break a leg on the bike ride home. As he always says, he gets what he wants, and he wants me to get on that roller derby team.”

Eve tilted her head like a curious puppy, eying me steadily. “Pulled muscle, huh? Well, I’d keep myself limber if I were you. Just in case he has any other motive. Anyhoo, I have to get to work. I’ll see you later.” Eve gave me a wiggle of her fingers and sprinted across the road toward the Easy Swallow.

I carried on along the sidewalk, not entirely sure of my destination. Maybe I’d pop into the park for some R&R, but as I skirted the town square, I spotted something blue out of the corner of my eye. I squinted into the brightness across the street, and my stomach lurched. The flash of topaz I’d seen was Brody. He wore the T-shirt he’d had on the other night. The one that matched his eyes.

He sat at one of the metal tables outside Wings and Pizza. The skin at the back of my neck prickled. He wasn’t alone. He was with a woman. She had her back to me, but thick red curls cascaded around her shoulders, and she waved one hand gracefully in the air as she spoke.

Brody had on the casual, sexy smile I’d become re-accustomed to, but the curve of his lips didn’t quite meet the edges of his mouth. I stepped backward, disappearing behind one of Tuft Swallow’s old-fashioned streetlights. I couldn’t let Brody see me.

He'd think I was stalking him. Keeping tabs on his coffee activities.

I dared to pop my head out for a second, and as I did, the red-haired woman leaned in and touched his arm. My gut twisted like a pretzel. Was my perennial crush enjoying a tender tête-à-tête with a flame-haired temptress? Just two days after reducing me to a quivering mess on my bed? Slinking back behind the lamppost, I fought to bring my breath under control. They were only having coffee, right? I could cope with that.

I peeked out again, and my gut sunk right to the sidewalk. The woman had her hand on Brody's shoulder, her fingers sliding over his muscles, and he wasn't fighting her off.

A chill washed over my entire body. Brody was out with another woman just forty-eight hours after hearing me cry out his name

Maybe the Nosey Pecker article wasn't about me at all. It shouldn't surprise me. The word "abstinence" wasn't in his vocabulary. But whowasthe woman with her manicured fingers on my almost hook-up? She wasn't local. Her mane of hair was far too memorable. Perhaps Brody had a harem of women whofollowed him around the country. If only I could get a better view.

A sudden arrival of jostling people in turquoise windbreakers stole my attention. Mrs. Woodcock was leading The Tit Peeper bird-watching group to the park directly opposite the cafe. The melee of bodies would be a perfect hiding spot to observe Brody and his date.

I stepped in line with the bird watchers and donned the turquoise windbreaker and set of binoculars that were offered to me. A volunteer thrust a sheet of paper listing possible bird sightings into my hand. I read it, my mouth gaping. The Glorious Orb-Fiddler? The Full-Breasted Bobby-Dazzler? The Dusty Swamp Tit? Seriously. Who named these birds?

“Goodness, Ro, I thought you weren’t interested in joining the Peepers,” Mrs. Woodcock’s voice grated over me.

Technically, I wasn’t. More like I was interested in peeping on the man sitting over the road. The one chatting cozily with his own turtle dove. “A woman can change her mind.”

Mrs. Woodcock beamed. “Wonderful! Let me see if I can find a suitable young man for you to peep alongside.” She disappeared into the cluster of turquoise bodies, and I picked up the binoculars I’d slung around my neck, training them directly on Brody.

I adjusted the focus, and my view snapped into clarity. Just as Brody touched the pale, smooth hand of the woman with the red hair. The tan of his skin contrasted with the pink of her long nails. I sucked in a breath and moved the binoculars to find his face. His forehead came into view, followed by his gorgeous blue eyes. They crinkled at the corners, just like when he smiled at me.

Somebody jostled me from behind, but I kept my sights straight on Brody. He and his lady-friend stood up. She turned around, and my field of vision filled with her face. All sunshine and peaches and cream. Nausea rolled in my belly. This mystery lady was far more Brody’s type than I could hope to be.

I pulled my binoculars away from my eyes, cursing my plain face and my thicker waist. Compared to mine, this woman’s figure resembled a Barbie doll.

The group of birdwatchers had moved nearer to the park now. Only a few stragglers shielded me, so I stepped behind a large bush on the edge of the grass. Avoiding some particularly vicious twigs, I peeped out from behind the foliage, re-training my goggles on Brody.

He and the woman were just chatting, but when an errant branch scuffed my cheek, I

side-stepped further into the street. In a freak of nature or something out of an Indiana Jones movie, the sun aligned perfectly with the lenses of my binoculars. The combination created a bright disc of light that hit Brody straight in his eyes.

His head snapped up, and in a heartbeat, he located the bush next to me. A searing burn rose in my gullet, and I darted back under cover of its leaves.

Amongst the twigs, my heart thundered in my chest. I must've dazzled him right in the eyes. Some top spy I'd make! I only hoped he hadn't seen me. Recognized me. Surely, I looked like at least twenty other people in the street. One body in a large huddle of turquoise and orange.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

I closed my eyes and waited for my breath to release from the back of my throat. Maybe if I couldn't see Brody, he wouldn't see me either. It was a toddler's reasoning, but right now, I was happy to subscribe to the theory.

In a cruel twist of fate, the chatter of voices around me lessened, and I opened my eyes. Almost all the Tit Peepers had moved away to the statue of Jerico Tuft. I still stood behind the bush, a bright turquoise beacon amongst the green and brown of downtown Tuft Swallow.

I had to move. Step out into the street. Rejoin the huddle of tit-fans and resume my covert operation. But I risked being spotted out in the open. I had my hair in my signature braids, and nobody else in town wore glittery Converse. No. I'd have to hold my binoculars back up to my face and channel Clark Kent. Nobody ever recognized he was Superman when he wore his glasses.

Three deep breaths later, I swallowed, took a leap of faith, and stepped out onto the sidewalk.

Straight into Brody's chest.

After a little wobble and a yelp, I pulled my binoculars away and lowered them as if popping out of bushes was the sort of thing I did all the time.

One side of his mouth curved, and his eyes ranged over me and my jacket. "What are you doing?"

A burn crept over my face. "Oh, you know, casually spying on you and your new

lover”probably didn’t have the breezy, non-stalker-ish tone I was aiming for.

I swallowed down the lump in my throat. “Nothing!”

Brody’s gaze roamed over the turquoise jacket I wore, resting on the Tit Peepers logo currently emblazoned across my right boob. His eyes narrowed a touch before his mouth cracked into a full grin. “I’ll be honest, I really didn’t have you down as being into tits.”

My blood simmered. “No? I suppose that’s more your thing.”

He pulled air in through his cheeks, holding it there for a second, looking like a hamster that’d overindulged at the buffet table.

“Ouch. I know you like the Tuft Swallow way of life, but do you do this often? Stand around behind bushes, blinding innocent bystanders, I mean?”

It remained to be seen just how innocent Brody’s “by-standing” coffee date had been. Still, I had to stay calm and maintain my innocent facade. If not, he’d know how pitiful and desperate I was to keep tabs on him. “Yes. I join the gang most weeks. It’s fascinating, really. One learns so much with a pair of binoculars in one’s hand.” Had he noticed the edge in my voice?

Brody’s brows rose, but before he could speak, Mrs. Woodcock appeared at his side.

“Brody! How lovely to see you again! Have you come to join us? This is Rowena’s first time, too.”

My soul withered in my chest as a slow, mocking grin grew on Brody’s mouth. He turned his eyes on me.

“Most weeks, huh?” A thick heat crawled up my body. He’d well and truly busted me for lying.

Brody folded his arms across his chest, addressing Mrs. Woodcock. “I thought I might give bird watching a go. Tell me, do I get to wear one of your jackets if I join?”

She giggled like a schoolgirl and clutched her clipboard to her chest. “I’m not sure we’ll have a jacket big enough for your shoulders.”

“For his ego, more like,” I said under my breath.

At my words, Brody’s eyes flared for just a moment. “I’m happy to tag along,” he said, sending his high-beam smile Mrs. Woodcock’s way. “I can hold Ro’s binoculars when she’s not peeping on anyone.”

I tightened my eyes. Despite my interest in Brody’s coffee date, the last thing I wanted was him tagging along and teasing me for lying. Searching for Tufted Tits hadn’t been on my to-do list, and even the prospect of hanging out with one of the NHL’s hottest stars couldn’t persuade me. Quite the opposite.

Mercifully, one of the out-of-town bird watchers called Mrs. Woodcock over. With a cheery wave, she granted me a stay of execution. I turned to face my tormentor, heart in my mouth.

“Please. I don’t think we should spend much time together. Not after... well, the other night.”

Brody sucked on his bottom lip and wedged his hands into his pockets. He looked down at his feet and kicked a pebble into the gutter like a disgruntled schoolboy.

My chest pulled. He looked so dejected, but I had to think of myself. Surely, he could

see that giving each other a wide berth made sense. Self-preservation was the order of the day. We should keep our interactions strictly on a coach and player level. If I had to spend a morning wandering around the woods with Brody, even a trail of breadcrumbs couldn't lead my heart safely back home in one piece.

His brow furrowed. "I'll be honest, Ro. I don't know if I can pretend the other night didn't happen." His voice was hushed, and he searched my face for a reaction. Reassurance, perhaps.

I clamped my jaw tight, unsure what would come out if I opened my mouth.

After the longest beat, he nodded and shrugged. "But I get it. I'll stay away."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

Brody turned to leave, and it took all my resolve not to grab his hand and pull him back. I bit my lip as he walked away, all giant shoulders, lean hips, and lemon cologne. I bunched my hands. All I wanted to do was chase after him, wrestle him to the ground, and kiss the life out of him.

“So, exactly what is it we’re looking for?” one of the bird watchers asked me, their voice ringing clearly through the spring air. I didn’t know about the rest of the Tit Peepers, but all I wanted to find was my heart intact by the end of Brody’s stay.

19

BRODY

Isucked back on the cool beer in my hand and glanced around the Crow. It was good to see the old place so full and lively. The scrum at the bar was three people thick, and the hot air pulsed with energy.

Coop let out a raucous laugh. He sat in the booth with the girls we met the other day. They were stationed on either side of him. We were all supposedly on a “date,” but I’d barely said a word. I was just a reluctant passenger along for the ride.

The girl Cooper set me up with threw yet another flirty smile. She’d spent a lot of the evening clinging to my arm. In the end, I’d invented a story about a frozen shoulder to keep her at a distance. She was sweet, pretty, and hanging on my every word. But all I could think of was Ro. The blush on her cheeks yesterday afternoon as she’d stepped out from behind the bush in that ridiculous turquoise jacket.

I hadn't expected to see her. Alex had driven into town with news. She'd heard my team was in high-level meetings and called in the doctor who treated my leg. After my injury, I'd signed a waiver for the the management team to discuss my recovery with the doc. However, after Alex's heads up, I stillcouldn't get hold of anyone. Not even my agent. My gut had resembled a churning mess ever since.

It had taken all my strength not to tell Ro. Fill her in on what Alex had said and share my worries. But she'd said we shouldn't spend unnecessary time together, and although I didn't like it, I'd honored her wishes.

I tipped the last of my beer down my throat and wiped my lips with the back of my hand. The same feeling I'd had the morning after our night together sat at the back of my throat. A kind of strangled tightness. Ro had rejected me for the second time. Made me feel like a mistake she'd rather forget.

The first time, all those years ago, after her prom night, she'd sent me a note. A sweet apology for putting me in an awkward position, but she'd made it clear that I was leaving town and should focus on my career, not any fumbled kisses we'd shared. I'd seen the sense of her words, but they'd cut me deep. I'd replied, writing her a note telling her how I felt, but like a coward, I'd never sent it.

This time, her reasons were all about Cooper and me, her gran, and that I didn't need any complications before returning to Denver. I sighed. If only she knew how tenuous my comeback prospects were. I huffed a wry laugh. At least she'd turned me down to my face this time.

A raucous cheer from one end of the bar disrupted my thoughts. The emcee had introduced the next rider to take a turn on the mechanical bull. It was Ginger, one of the waitresses at the Crow. With her gyrations, most men in the place stopped to watch. After a giggling start, within ten seconds, the bull tipped her off unceremoniously into the crash pads on the floor.

As the crowd laughed and cheered, a movement of people and a buzz of conversation at the door caught my attention. I craned my neck around the long oak bar, tightening my eyes into the gloom to see what or who had caused the noise and the low whistles.

Within three heartbeats, Eve wiggled into the center of the bar, giving Daisy Duke a run for her money. The corners of my mouth lifted. I could see why Ro loved her so much. Her infectious smile and zest for life radiated into the surrounding air.

I killed my smile, though, when Ro followed her into the bar. Her eyes darted around, and she looked like she'd rather be anywhere than the Crow. She had on a cream cowboy hat, her long, dark hair pulled into pigtails, and a cropped white top with a pair of tiny denim shorts. The largest thing about her outfit was her silver cowboy boots and the outsized bag that no doubt held her current crochet project. I swallowed.

Every eye followed her as she trailed Eve to the bar and I clamped my teeth together. Three or four guys stepped forward. I assumed they offered the girls a drink, and a low growl on the other side of my so-called date sounded out.

“What the actual hell is my sister wearing?” Coop sat forward, poised like a coiled spring. I reached over and put a hand on his arm. I'd be a hypocrite if I denied thinking the same thing but for entirely different reasons.

The cowgirl outfit was so un-Ro, but so incredibly hot and tight and ...

“Calm down,” I ground out. “She's with her friend. It's a bull riding night. They couldn't exactly come in tea dresses and pearls.”

Cooper let out another low growl. “Damn, Eve. She's nothing but a bad influence. Next thing we know, Ro will join a motorcycle club and get herself a tattoo.”

I huffed a laugh. “I don’t think Ro’s about to get a dragon across her chest or anything.”

Though a little quad skate on her butt cheek would look amazing.

Cooper shook his head, running a hand through his hair. “But she’s not experienced. Not worldly like Eve. She won’t know what’s going on in those guys’ heads.” I didn’t like to point out that his sister was anything but a child and that she didn’t need Cooper’s, my, or anyone’s permission to be out and looking so damn sexy. Although it came from a place of love, my best friend was too protective of his younger sister.

“I’ll tell you what. Enjoy your night. I’ll keep an eye on Ro, I promise. Make sure nobody steps out of line.” I furrowed my brow. I hated how Neanderthal I sounded, but if Coop thought I was watching out for his sister, I’d have an excuse to be near her without questions.

He nodded. “I appreciate it, man. You’re a good friend to her.” Cooper returned to his date, and a bitter taste crept into my mouth. If only he knew just how far Ro and I had taken our friendship. My chest ached at the thought of our night together. The way she’d clung to me, cried out my name as she came undone around me. The way I’d held her all night.

I searched for her in the crowd. She was at the bar now. The multicolored lights that hung over its top cast soft colors on her skin. She and Eve tipped back shots, and the glow in her eyes as she grinned at her friend twisted my heart. I wanted her to look at me like that—carefree, able to smile at me without worrying what her gran or her brother would think.

A group of men huddled around the two of them, vying for attention, and I wondered how many of those guys she’d dated thanks to Mrs. Woodcock. As if she sensed me watching her, she lifted her gaze and found me across the room.

Her eyes widened for a second before her cheeks glowed pink, and she pulled down at the bottom of her top. Damn. I wanted to tell her she didn't need to. Didn't need to be self-conscious. She looked adorable just the way she was.

Ro's eyes drifted to the woman between Coop and me. She was a little drunk now, cackling loudly with her friend. Ro's face was unreadable, but she returned her eyes to mine, and a slight furrow cleaved her brows before she turned her back on me.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

I stifled the impulse to jump up and race over to her side of the bar. To tell her how amazing she looked and how much I missed her. It had only been twenty-four hours since we'd spoken, but being unable to talk to Ro killed me. If I had my way, I'd sweep her into my arms and take her back to... back to... where, exactly? I was crashing on her family's couch. It was hardly impressive. I grabbed my beer, tipping the rest of my bottle down my throat. How the mighty had fallen.

20

RO

The air in the Crow was thick and hot, and beads of perspiration formed on my lower back. At least my tiny top let my skin breathe. When Eve had challenged me to dress rodeo-ready, I thought she'd meant flannels and stetsons. It turned out she had other ideas. Her vision of rodeo-ready was more akin to Spitz Hollow's seedier strip bars.

I nibbled at my bottom lip and tucked a stray strand of hair back beneath my silly cowboy hat. This outfit went completely against my instincts. I only wore shorts this small if I was skating or home alone. It hadn't taken Eve much to persuade me, though.

I'd known Brody would be here tonight. After seeing him with his redhead yesterday morning, an irrational urge to show him what he was missing overtook me. Even though my situation was self-inflicted, I'd donned my cowboy boots along with my best friend and channeled my inner sexy cowgirl.

The minute we walked in, I regretted my decision. The furrow in Cooper's brow was

almost enough to make me high-tail it back home. He'd probably want me to stop at the yarn shop on the way. Borrow a kaftan from Ruth Barfaffen. Something roomy and long enough to maintain my modesty. Coop still saw me as a kid. Someone to be protected. He probably thought I was a virgin.

Then there'd been Brody's face when he'd seen my outfit. Completely unreadable, his jaw tight and chiseled, and damn, even from across the bar, I could feel his eyes on my back right now. I could almost taste what was surely his disapproval. Why, then, did I crave the opposite so much? I sighed. No matter how much I wanted Brody's validation, he wasn't giving me a second thought. I could picture him wearing the blonde at his side like a jacket.

I'd last seen Eve heading toward the pool table. The group we stood with were laying into the beers, and a man at my side jostled into me. I turned away, sneaking a look at Brody. Our gazes locked the instant they met. But it wasn't disapproval I saw. No judgment on my outfit. Instead, his eyes were full of warmth, like a big hug, and all I wanted was to fall straight into him.

I took a breath. What the hell was I doing? I'd spent the last thirty-six hours building Brody into some kind of ogre in my head. Someone I couldn't trust. The "Flock Boy" persona that followed him around. He had the right to meet anyone he liked for a coffee.

And that was exactly what I'd seen. A coffee. No kissing. No make-out session on the sidewalk. Not even a handhold. Just two people chatting over a coffee. That they'd both be at home on the cover of a Vogue magazine and that one of them was a little touchy-feely wasn't the point. The woman sitting with him now was pretty, too, but the way he moved his body away from her when she leaned in to take a drink had my heart happy-dancing.

Another person bumped me, and the dull thump of music battered my ears. Bull

riding nights at the Crow were always sorowdy. They didn't happen often, but when they did, the place almost burst at the seams.

I looked back across the bar. Brody was gone, but the blonde girl was still there. That had to be a good sign, right?

"Can I buy you a drink, Ma'am?" A deep Texan drawl behind me made the hairs on my neck stand on end. I turned to find the only smirk I ever wanted to see. Brody. The glorious curve of his lips nestled amongst blond scruff, and the smattering of light freckles spread over his nose. He had that accent down pat. All Matthew McConaughey on steroids. I swallowed before giving him a little smile and tipping my cowboy hat in his direction.

Brody chuckled, its throaty sound cutting through the bar's noise. "I didn't know you were coming tonight."

If only I were. And at his hands. "Eve was keen, and you know when she sets her sights on something, she doesn't do it by halves."

Brody stepped back, the crowd parting around him. He raked his eyes up and down my body, setting a heat that prickled under my skin. "I like the results."

The fire in his eyes set my cheeks to a full inferno, and I gaped, struggling to find words. I thought he'd hate my outfit.

"How did the bird watching go?" he asked.

I died a little inside. Was he really going to do this? Torture me? I only had two choices. I could either admit I'd blatantly spied on him and his redhead supermodel friend or pretend I had a sudden case of amnesia and had no idea what he was talking about.

When I didn't respond, Brody's smirk turned to a grin. "Please tell me Mrs. Woodcock found the Majestic Tits she was looking for?"

I couldn't help myself. I dissolved into giggles as he wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't help it," he continued. "But I'm disappointed you're not wearing that turquoise jacket tonight. It might go with the boots."

I opened my mouth to serve Brody a witty comeback, but again, someone in the crowd bumped into me, knocking me straight into him. His hands closed around my waist, and the hot skin of his palms burned into my sides. His lemony cologne tickled my nose, and I took a long breath.

"Steady, now," Brody breathed into my ear. A faint tingle sprung between my legs, and the room swam at the edge of my vision. How could just two words and a quick touch turn me into a wobbly wreck of desire?

Before I had time to find out, Eve came toward us through the crowd. "Flock! You're just in time. You gonna ride the bull?"

Brody let me go. My skin missed the heat of his fingers. He cocked his head and rubbed his chin as if he was considering a life or death decision and not whether he'd take a ride on a piece of spinning metal. "Not tonight. I'm still looking after my leg."

Eve's eyes widened. "Of course! Sorry. No matter, you just sit back and enjoy." She cracked a grin at Brody. "Ro's up next."

An icy shiver washed over me. "What do you mean I'm up next? I can't ride that thing!"

Eve put a hand on my arm like she was soothing a fractious child. “It’s fine. I’ll have a turn, too, but I thought you could stay on longer with your balance. There’s a big cash prize for the winner. I thought we could split it.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. The money could come in handy. I needed some new dance skates, and I wanted to get some ribbons for the cheer squad. And did I mention I may have priced some flights to Denver? Mechanical bull riding wasn't the sort of thing I'd normally dream of doing, though. I wasn't like Ginger. I wasn't a show-woman.

The bull stood riderless on the other side of the room, its padded hulk looking more like an elephant than a cow. "I've never ridden anything so big."

I turned back around to see Brody's sparkling eyes on my face. "Way to make guys feel inadequate."

I pulled in a breath at the husky growl of his voice. Before I could defend my poor choice of words, my name rang out loud and clear over the speaker. Cheers rang out, along with some whistles and a couple of "yee-has." The surrounding crowd magically turned into a bustling mass that pushed me closer to the bull. Eve giggled beside me all the way, giving me tips on how to stay on longer. I heard the words "thighs," "grip," and "trajectory," but everything else got mixed with the hammering of my heart.

Midway to the leather-clad hunk of metal, a hand tugged at my wrist, pulling me back. I turned around to find Brody's grinning face. He'd followed me this far, and after giving me a wink and a nod, he reached up and took the cowboy hat from my head, putting it on his own.

"Go get 'em," he yelled before the crowd swallowed him whole.

The second I faced the bull, my mouth ran dry. I had serious reservations about my choices. There were plenty of ways to earn money that didn't involve voluntarily being thrown from a lurching metal lump masquerading as a cow. If I really needed the skates, I could always take out a loan from Tuft Swallow's only mobster. Wade Biddescombe may impersonate a pastel-wearing realtor, but everyone knew he had a shadowy past that probably involved a few horseheads and the odd pair of concrete boots. Still, the prospect of being knee-capped for non-repayment had to be better than making an absolute fool of myself in front of half the town.

I searched the crowd for Coop but couldn't see his face amongst the onlookers. At least he wouldn't witness my humiliation. I wasn't sure I could say the same for the rest of the onlookers.

A couple of burly helpers hot enough to join the cast of Brokeback Mountain hoisted me up onto the bull, and I gripped the rough surface of the saddle with my thighs. The material rubbed against my bare skin already. At this rate, I'd be a mass of friction burns before I fell off. After some concerningly brief safety instructions, I tightened my grip on the bull's rope with one hand and held the other above my head, just as they'd shown me.

Far too soon, the bull began to buck and spin, its movements unpredictable and wild. The people who constructed these contraptions allowed no time to warm up, then? The grinning faces of the crowd whirled and pitched in front of me, holding still for a second, then shifting again with every sweep of the bull. Each time the two of us made a rotation, the onlookers cheered.

I clenched my jaw, hoping the gesture came across as an adventurous smile and not just a way to keep my teeth embedded in my gums. With every movement, though, the bull got faster until the world around me blurred into a chaotic whirlwind. Each sudden jerk of momentum threw me forward, then yanked me backward, my butt hitting the saddle with a "whomp" every time.

But I stayed on, and a breathless rush of excitement surged through my body. Maybe I was good at this. The mechanism clunked and ground underneath me, and I pressed my thighs in tighter.

At the undulating movement under my hips, my mind flew back to my night with Brody. The way I'd ground against him as we kissed. How I luxuriated at his solid hips between my legs. A tingle of delight hit me down below, and I sucked in a breath. This was hardly the time to be having impure thoughts of my almost fantasy hook-up. I was practically dry-humping a piece of machinery in a room full of people who knew my grandmother!

On the verge of letting go of the rope, a brief lull in the bull's movement gave me time to find Brody's face in the crowd. His darkened eyes glowed with desire, laden with hot intentions. Hungry and glued only on me. Despite my current predicament, I grinned. He was enjoying watching me up here, and my chest pulsed at the thought.

Just then, the bull surged forward, and it was all I could do to stay in the saddle. Like one of the last passengers on the Titanic, I hung on. I clutched the slippery plastic of its nose as my butt left the seat. A roar of approval sounded from the crowd, but as polished white horns rushed past my eyes, I gasped. Eve had said the bulls had foam horns, but these looked way too shiny, too plastic, and one was alarmingly close to the bottom of my left boob.

As quickly as the bull pitched forward, though, it tipped back. Through a feat of surprising finger strength, I kept my grip on the rope, landing in the saddle with a thigh-wobbling slap of skin against leather.

I scanned the crowd, awaiting the cheers at my staying on through such a wild ride, but this time, something was different. No smiling eyes stared back at me. Only wide ones, accompanied by open mouths and a sudden chill of air on my skin.

The chatter in the room had died, and a low whistle rang out from somewhere near the bar, followed by a few more. I drew my brows together. What the hell was going on? Bodies moved in my peripheral vision, and Eve's voice wrenched me out of my stupor as the bull beneath me continued to buck and pitch.

“Ro!”

I found her in the crowd. Her eyes were as wide as everyone else's and firmly fixed on my chest. Like time stood still, I followed the direction of her stare straight to my breasts and the lacy red bra I wore.

Wait, what? Why was my bra showing? I'd never normally contemplate such frivolous underwear. Anything so flirty. But in a moment of rebellion against my norm, I'd thrown caution to the wind and worn it underneath my tiny crop top. The same crop top the decidedly not-made-of-foam bull horn had torn down the middle. It must've hooked onto the horn with that last crazy movement.

My face torched as, mercifully, the bull's movement lessened to a standstill. The hush of the bar lifted a little, but as a few giggles and snickers rang out, my whole body joined my face at the bonfire party.

Within milliseconds, I moved, scrambling to get off the bull. My boots squeaked against its leather as I shoved at its slippery sides, but I made little progress.

I opened my mouth to scream with sheer frustration, but nothing came out. My breath skittered in my chest. What would everyone think of me? What would Coop think of me? I had to get off this bull.

I blinked the hot prick of tears away, but in answer to my prayers, out of nowhere, solid hands gripped my waist. I left the seat, taking off into the air like a tornado had picked me up. Then, within a heartbeat, a wall of solid warmth enveloped me and

cradled me like a baby. Hot breath and lips at my ear.

“I’ve got you.”

At Brody’s words, I relaxed, and in a whirl of lemon and hot, hard pecs, I buried my face into his chest while he carried me out of the Crow.

The cool air hit my skin as Brody pushed through the bar's back door toward the parking lot. By the time he got me outside, tears welled in my eyes, and humiliation burned in my chest. He set me down gently at the corner of the building, the wall casting me in shadow. Despite my undress, the delicious slide down his body was all I could focus on.

With a pull of his breath, Brody stepped away and peeled off his top, handing it to me. He looked at anything but my chest, turning away after giving me a tight smile. I climbed into his T-shirt, pulling the loose fabric around me. I admired his chivalry, but I had to chuckle. Just two days ago, his eyes and hands were all over me.

I tugged down on his shirt, where it skimmed my thighs. “Thank you.” I shook my head, my pigtails brushing my cheeks with the movement. “I’m such a klutz. If an impromptu strip was going to happen to anyone, it would happen to me.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

Brody turned round and met my gaze. “Are you kidding? You were freakin’ awesome up there. You stayed on way longer than anyone else.”

I rolled my eyes and leaned back against the cool brick wall at my back. “But everyone else kept their clothes on. Someone should complain to the manufacturer. Those horns are a death trap.”

The corners of his mouth twitched. “True, but I have to say, if anyone was going to get semi-naked on the bull tonight, I’d rather it was you.” His voice had dropped to a low husky burr, and all the molecules in the air between us sped up, jostling against each other in a tension-filled frenzy.

My breath thinned in my chest at the fire in his eyes. “Is that meant to make me feel better?”

He shrugged his glorious shoulders, the soft light from the bar casting shadows over his chest. “Take it how you will, but just know how incredible you look tonight.” With his teeth at his bottom lip, Brody leaned in and stroked my cheek with the back of his fingers. “And you rode that bull in style.”

The heat from his body pulsed into me, and my heart skittered in my chest. He was so close, so beautiful, so tempting. So magnetic. His fingers stayed on my cheek as if he was waiting for me to say or do something. I had a track record with spontaneous gestures. After the other night, I’d told him we could never be together. But with his soft lips swimming in my vision, all logical thought left the parking lot, and I didn’t care if he’d met a hundred gorgeous redheads for coffee.

Sucking in a shuddering breath, I took Brody's wrist and pulled his hand to the back of my neck. No shy eighteen-year-old kiss for me tonight. His eyes widened a touch before he let out a guttural groan and brought his mouth to mine. The press of his lips was sweet bliss, and as our tongues danced, I threaded my hands around him, pulling him closer.

The soft skin underneath my fingers belied the solid wall of his back, each muscle moving together in perfect harmony. To be locked together like this was all I'd craved, and right now, I couldn't get enough of him.

Brody tangled his fingers through one pigtail, guiding me to him, his knee moving between my legs. I met his pressure, pushing back to quell the ache at my core. After the longest beat, he broke the kiss, his breath coming fast against my neck. "I know you said to stay away from you, but I can't. It's impossible."

A million goosebumps broke out across my body. I leaned my head back against the wall, and Brody brought his lips to mine again. I swear I moaned into his mouth. The urgency in my body consumed me. How could kissing him hurt anybody when the two of us together felt so right? Damn Cooper and his unrealistic expectations. Damn Brody's career that would take him away from me again. And most of all, damn the throbbing between my legs.

I brought my hands down from around his neck, dragging them over the hard muscles of his chest, about to lose myself completely in his body when a loud bang and voices hit my ears. Brody must've heard it, too, because his body stiffened.

"Calm down, Coop. She'll be out here. Flock was looking after her."

At the sound of Eve's voice, Brody and I broke apart, eyes wide.

"Cooper!" Eve shouted, her voice ringing crisp and clear in the muggy air.

The next moment, Brody's hand left my neck, and he turned away. Coop and Eve rounded the corner. My brother had a face like thunder, and Eve looked like she was about to throttle him. They stopped as soon as they saw Brody standing in the light. He was in just his jeans and had his hands on his hips.

"Where's Ro?" barked Cooper.

On instinct, I crouched down. The action was a flashback to my seven-year-old self when I used to hide from my brother. Not everything reminded me of the past, though. From the height I was at, all I could focus on was the bulge in Brody's pants. Thank goodness Eve and Cooper could only see his back.

He turned his head, looking down at me, and my brother followed his gaze. Coop tightened his eyes as he looked into the surrounding darkness.

"What are you doing down there?"

I pulled in a breath. Channeling all the acting skills six years as Mary of Nazareth had taught me, I reached out a hand to grope around on the floor. "I lost a contact."

"You don't wear contacts," Coop ground out.

A bitter taste pooled in the back of my mouth, and I grasped for words. How could I explain why I was crouched down on the floor of the Crow Bar's parking lot?

Eve stepped forward, kneeling beside me, her hand on my shoulder. "You mean one of the false eyelashes? I'm sorry for making you wear them. But don't worry. I can get more." Eve stood and pulled me up after her. I'd never been so grateful in my life. I swear, if left to my own devices, my jelly-like legs would've collapsed underneath me.

I met her eyes in the gloom, and something shone within them. An understanding that only best friends could have. A silent agreement of sisterhood and solidarity. The slightest tilt of her lips told me that Eve guessed exactly what she and Coop had interrupted. Her eyes flipped to Brody's solid back, and she reached out to take my hand, giving it a tiny squeeze. "Are you okay, Ro?"

"What the hell happened?" Cooper asked, stepping toward me. Brody turned around to face us, his "downstairs situation" having presumably deflated. I let out a wavering breath. Cooper hadn't seen my humiliation?

I looked at Eve, and she gave a tiny nod. "Coop was in the john. Missed the whole thing. I filled him in as best I could."

I let out an audible sigh, my tight shoulders sinking. The rodeo gods must be smiling down on me. I could only imagine what my brother would make of my impromptu strip in the middle of a crowded bar. He'd once threatened an ex for taking me skinny dipping. Aged twenty-one.

"I'm fine. It was a silly accident. I mean, it's just typical of me, right? I think someone should write to the bull company about the design of their horns."

Cooper huffed out a breath. "Well, if you had more clothes on..."

Brody's brow furrowed, and he made to step forward, but I lifted an arm, waving him away. I could take care of myself. "Coop, I don't need a lecture. I'm tired, and in case you hadn't noticed, I'm not a child."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

My brother's face dropped, and a sudden breeze ran a chill over my skin. "I'm just looking out for you. Someone has to."

"And I appreciate it, but please, don't judge me. I can wear what I want. I'm not hurting anyone." He looked stunned like I'd slapped him in the face and taken away his manhood with my words. My heart tugged, but I wouldn't take it back. Ease his conscience. "I have to go," I mumbled.

"You should probably give Brody his shirt back first." Coop's words were softer now. "You can wear mine instead." He unbuttoned his flannel, handing it to Eve before glancing at his best friend. "Thanks for looking after her."

Oh, he'd been well on his way to looking after me, alright, but in a totally different way. I swear Brody's cheeks fired red in the dark, and he sucked in his lips. He looked over at me, eyes full of regret, yearning, and everything I knew would keep me awake later.

I gripped the hem of his shirt, lifting it as far as my ribs, taking in the lemon scent that clung to its fibers. Coop turned around, giving me privacy, but Brody just stood there, his eyes on mine.

"Brody! Come on, man. Give her some space," said Coop.

He shook his head as if waking up from a sleep. "Sorry." He turned away, too, and I pulled his shirt over my head, handing it to Eve. She gave it back to Brody as I fed my arms into Cooper's flannel.

“I’m decent now,” I said, trying to keep the pitch of my voice even. Both Coop and Brody turned back, the latter searching my face, his jaw tight.

“Thanks for your help,” I said to him, willing him not to reply. Not to add to my brother’s suspicions. Unfortunately, he didn’t get the memo.

“Any time. See you tomorrow?”

It was the derby try-out tomorrow. I could hardly back out now. I nodded at him with a tight smile, and Cooper’s head snapped to Brody, a line scoring the space between his brows.

Oh, great. I knew that look. He normally reserved it for anyone who dared flirt with me or took more than a passing interest. I didn’t doubt I’d face a barrage of questions in the morning. An interrogation about why I’d spent so much time with his friend lately and just what’d happened when he’d carried me outside. I made a mental note to steer clear of my brother tomorrow.

Brody and Coop left and headed back into the Crow, leaving Eve and me standing in the shadows. “I held your brother off as long as I could. He was in the bathroom while you were on the bull, but he overheard a couple of guys making a joke about what happened. I thought he was going to start a fight.”

He would. “Thanks. Eve. And thank you for the eyelash distraction.”

The corners of her mouth twitched. “Anything for my bestie, but you have to tell me what the hell is going on.”

I pulled Coop’s shirt tighter around my body. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not blind. And I’m sure Coop isn’t either.”

I swallowed, my body a hot mess of jitters.

“You and Brody are always looking at each other.”

“Stop.”

“It’s true. I can almost feel the magnetic field between the two of you. Like all my jewelry would fly off and cling to you both if I undid it.”

“Eve,” I pleaded, my cheeks on fire.

“Just tell me.”

With the whine in her voice and the glow in her eyes, all I wanted to do was unload. Unleash the Brody-shaped desire I’d locked inside my chest for so long. I took a breath, shaking my head. “I don’t even know where to start.”

A grin spread over Eve’s face, and I swear she almost jumped up and down on the spot. “See! I knew it. You are well and truly drinking the Flock Kool-aid now, my friend.” She clutched her hands at her chest like a Disney princess of old. “Holy hell, I have so many questions. Have you kissed him?”

I couldn’t lie to her, but I wasn’t even ready to admit my feelings to myself, let alone anyone else. Say everything out loud. Instead, I nodded.

Eve squealed like a child on Christmas morning. “Yay! Oh my goodness! Please tell me you’ve touched him.”

She hung onto my silence like I was announcing this year’s Oscar winner. I nodded again.

This time, she jumped into the air, clapping her hands together. “Holy crap! This is amazing.” She reached for my arm, her fingers gripping Coop’s shirt, her eyes as wide as hockey pucks. “Have the two of you, well, you know, done the deed?”

I looked back at Eve. “No.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

Her brow furrowed for a second before she smiled again, looping her arm through mine and pulling me back inside the bar. “There’s plenty of time for that, I guess. Still, I need to know everything.”

21

RO

Isat on the old wooden bench, swinging my feet, taking in the lake's sparkle at the bottom of the hill. I loved the solitude of the graveyard. It was the place I came to think. The place where I felt at peace. The place I came to talk to Mom.

We had quite a conversation this morning. I’d told her all about Brody. About him creeping up on me when I stood at the stove. About him buying me derby skates. His injury, my elbowing him in the balls, the boxing ring, the gym, my hair in his zipper, and finally, my accidental strip show in the Crow. I couldn’t believe so much had happened in the space of a few weeks.

She’d giggled. Well, in my head, she had. But when I’d told her about Brody and me kissing, about his hands on me in my room, she fell silent. I explained how being with him made me feel. She knew how hard I’d tried to forget him over the years. How the whole situation crushed my heart.

But then I’d told her how much he’d changed. How sweet and thoughtful he was. And she’d smiled, her voice threading through the soft rustle of the leaves in the trees. Mom had given me her blessing. Her approval of Brody and I. She understood.

Still, just like any mom would, she'd given me a word of caution. She'd told me not to jump in too soon. To speak to Brody before I decided about my future. Our future. I wanted to make sure things were right for me before I even considered anus.

With a sigh, I rubbed my eyes. I'd been up late taking part in a full debrief with Eve. She was so thorough; I suggested she call Officer Brad Pecker at the station. Get herself on the Tuft Swallow police force. I always considered Brad a good match for Eve. Besides, she'd look great in the uniform.

Of course, she thought I was mad to have turned Brody down after the Dirty Hookers night, but she understood my reasoning. And frankly, she'd been more interested in details about his body and the way he kissed. I smiled to myself. If Brody and I ever got together, Eve and I would have to set some solid ground rules for our girl talk.

I fished my phone out of my pocket, the gentle breeze ruffling my bangs. My finger hovered over the home button for a heartbeat before I pressed it, bringing the screen to life. Aside from the selfie of me and Eve dressed as Elves at the Christmas fair, the only thing on the screen was an unopened text from Brody. One word that spoke volumes. Asked so many questions.

Brody: So?

We hadn't spoken, hadn't seen each other since last night. I'd snuck in after midnight, being sure not to wake anybody. He and Cooper had made it home safely. When I crept down to the kitchen at dawn, I'd found a couple of abandoned beers on the counter and an empty packet of Cheetos. They were Brody's favorite.

I sucked in my lips and opened the message, typing a reply with trembling thumbs.

Ro: So? I think we should talk, but after the try-out. My coach wouldn't approve of distractions.

I hit the send button, and nausea churned in my gut. Mom was right. I needed to look after myself first. Try for the spot on the derby team. Challenge myself, just like Brody had said. Only then could I think about the two of us.

I glanced down at the phone in my hand. The corners of my mouth lifted as three little balls danced in the window below my message. The wait for Brody's reply was torture, like waiting for a broken heart to heal. Finally, my cell vibrated, and I pulled in a breath before I looked at the screen.

Brody: Agreed. Business as usual this afternoon. Tonight, we talk. Coach's orders.

22

RO

I drew in my brows as we pulled into the parking lot of Spitz Hollow's Spitz Shine Sports Complex. As a Tuft Swallow, I was in enemy territory now. Surprisingly, nobody frisked me at the edge of town and patted me down to make sure I wasn't carrying recording equipment. Both Tuft Swallow and Spitz Hollow guarded their cornhole tactics fiercely.

I looked over at Brody as he brought his Mustang to a stop. He looked glorious in the early afternoon light, his profile all hard lines mixed with a softness at the apple of his cheeks. His full lips set in a half smile. We'd hardly spoken in the car and never had the drive between the two towns seemed so long.

We'd made an agreement in the kitchen at home that we wouldn't mention last night until the drive back, and the thought of just what we'd say and do had my stomach in knots.

Brody turned off the engine and reached out a hand. His warm fingers threaded

through mine, and my breath tottered in my chest.

“You’ve got this, Ro. Just remember your skills and wear that badass attitude of yours.” The corners of my mouth lifted. He’d called me badass the morning I’d worn the “Show me your Pecker” T-shirt.

Brody picked my hand up, pressing it to his lips. “Remember what I said. Use your speed.”

I nodded. The only break in our virtual silence in the car was to talk about the tryout and the best way to showcase my skills. He’d talked about me like I was a gladiator or a superhero. That he had such faith in me weighed heavy on my chest.

“You ready?”

I let out a thick breath. “I am. And Brody, thank you for coaching me.”

A lazy smile grew on his lips. “Believe me, the pleasure’s been all mine.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

After leaving the car, we stepped inside the “Derby Stadium,” and I smiled. I think someone on Spitz Hollow’s town council had ideas of grandeur the day they named it. The space was only a little bigger than our high school gym. It also had wooden bleachers, and its red skating track markings wove with those from countless other sports. The polished wooden floor looked like someone had spilled a bowl of rainbow noodles on it.

The noise of chatter mingled with the squeak of rubber soles, echoing in the clammy room. Two giant fans slowly whirled overhead, barely shifting the air.

As Brody and I walked onto the floor, a few jaws dropped. People who stood around talking or lacing their skates, nudged each other and smirked. Brody didn’t seem to notice. He was probably used to grabbing attention wherever he went. Then the same folk saw me, standing behind him in my green tank top and jeans, looking like nobody in particular.

Smartly kitted-out skaters assessed me, their eyes sweeping over my body. I swear I’d never felt so short and scruffy. Eve had been right. I should have dressed to make a good firstimpression. Wowed my competition. Maybe I should’ve worn my rodeo outfit. Added some sequins.

A tall, wiry man with curls and a glittering smile stepped toward us, extending a hand. “Brody Flockhart! How long has it been? You’re looking great.”

Brody straightened his shoulders, taking the man’s hand and pumping it up and down. “Dean. It’s good to see you too, man.” He turned to me like an indulgent parent, with the biggest grin on his face. “This is Ro. The one I told you about.”

A tiny gnawing pang pulled at my gut. That the two of them knew each other was obvious, but they'd talked about me? Why?

The man extended his hand. "Nice to meet you, Ro. Brody told me all about your skating. I'm excited to see what you can do." He swept an arm around the track. "The girls will make you feel right at home." Based on some glares aimed my way, I highly doubted that. They'd more likely lock me in a cupboard or loosen my wheel nuts.

"This is Dean Millan. He manages the derby team," said Brody.

The man grinned, shaking his head. "Not just the Derby. I manage the junior hockey team in Robin Springs, too. The one where Brody cut his skating teeth."

Brody huffed a laugh and shifted on his feet.

"And I'm trying to get him to come back. Convince him to leave the bright lights of the NHL behind."

Brody looked at me, then gestured at Dean. "Dean thinks I should coach when I burn out of the pros. Help get his team to the state finals."

"There are a lot of juniors on my team that could benefit from Brody's experience. I just need to sweeten the deal somehow. I'll get him one day." Dean turned to me now, guiding me forward into the hall. "So you want to be a Scalper, eh?" He glanced over his shoulder at Brody. "Maybe I can take you both on. Kind of like a double deal."

The gentle tug in my gut morphed into a full-on lurch. Was he kidding? Did Brody know about this? Had the two of them talked about Millan putting both of us on his teams? When I'd agreed to him helping me train, it was as a friend, not a potential

deal sweetener. I was here to try out on my own merits, not because of Brody.

I tried to meet his eyes to get some clue what the hell was going on, but a jiggling kid with a bright red face had asked the almighty Flock for an autograph.

Someone blew a whistle, making me jump. “Looks like we’re about to get started,” Dean said. “You better get yourself ready to knock my socks off.” He strode away, calling out to a gruff-looking woman in a Scalpers sweatshirt.

A second later, Brody was at my shoulder, but I didn’t have time to ask questions about any “deal” with Millan.

“Do you have my kit bag?” I asked.

“What?”

“My bag. With my clothes. My pads and helmet.” Eve and I had planned what I’d wear today and as well as my green skate bag containing my crochet, we’d packed a special hold-all with my pads, some red gym shorts, red knee-high socks, and a fitted black T-shirt. Nothing flashy, but something that showed I meant business.

Brody grimaced, and my heart dropped. “Fuck! I left it behind in the hallway at your Gran’s.”

“What?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “It’s on the side. I had it all ready to go, but I got a text.”

I rolled my eyes, and my blood rose to a gentle simmer. “Oh, that’s okay then, so long as you got your text. No need to worry about me.” At least I’d carried my skates.

“That’s hardly fair.” His face took on an odd, distant look, and a furrow etched the space between his brows.

At any other moment, I would have asked him if he was okay, but today wasn’t about him. It was about me. “What the hell am I going to do? I can’t go out like this. I look like I’m going on a hike. And they won’t let me skate without a helmet.”

Brody scowled, and then his face cleared. “Hang on! I’ll be back. Wait for me outside the locker room.” With a squeak of his sneakers on the floor, he turned and headed back out to his car.

The other fresh meat had already changed and stood in groups, waiting for the trial to start. As I crossed the track to the locker room, I hung my head low, feeling every eye that must surely be on me. I was the reason for the delay. Some nobody.

When I got to the locker room door and explained my predicament, one of the team assistants helped me find some pads and wrist guards. They were all different colors and had seen far better days, but I couldn’t have been more grateful. Mis-matched gear beat broken wrists or missing kneecaps any day.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

“I’m so sorry,” I said, taking the armful of gear the man offered me.

“No problem. Any friend of Flock is a friend of mine,” he said with a wink, and once more, my gut tottered. Was this whole tryout one big Flock love-fest?

I looked over at the girls in the Scalper uniforms. They stood in a line, ready to start, mumbling to each other, eyes narrowed in my direction. Their sour looks gave me flashbacks to high school, waiting to be picked for a team in gym class. I’d always been one of the last chosen.

The line of women straightened up, and I glanced over my shoulder, following their gaze. Brody had arrived back with a hockey helmet in his arms. “Here. You can wear this.” He handed it over, its silver paint shining in the overhead strip lights. The word FLOCK shouted loud and proud on its back. It’d show everyone I was here with him if I wore it. They’d probably think I was his girl, proudly wearing his helmet like a tattoo of ownership. The idea made my stomach roll, but I was out of options.

I crinkled my nose, pushed the helmet onto my head, and turned around to face him. He stood in front of me, adjusting the straps as I stared at him through its clear half-shield. When he was happy with the fit, he stood back and grinned. “It looks great on you.”

I brought my lips together in a tight line. Damn him for being all attractive and thoughtful when I wanted to be pissed at him.

I undid the straps, took it off, and thanked him before disappearing into the locker room with my cargo. I put everything down on a red bench on the far side of the

room, tucked around from the showers. The smell of antiperspirant and leather filled the air. With a sigh, I dug through the skate bag, desperate to find something I could wear instead of my jeans. I was sure I'd left some shorts in there after a hot shift at the Plume the other day.

As I groped around, my hand closed around the soft fabric, and my lips curved. With a smile, I pulled it out of the bag, but the moment I held it up, my heart plummeted. I wasn't holding a pair of work shorts, but one of my mum's old competition skating dresses. I slumped down on the bench. The dress wasn't just old; it was ancient. I used it to protect my crochet projects if I needed to transport them. I'd brought my latest mis-shaped owl along to day in case I felt anxious and fidgety.

I unwrapped my yarn, setting it safely on the side before holding up the dress. Its lemon nylon sagged where the age-old spandex had withered, but what choice did I have? At least it would allow me to move. I quickly stripped off my clothes and stepped into Mom's dress, carefully feeding my arms into its sleeves without putting my fingers through the hole at one armpit.

I looked in the mirror at the end of the lockers, spinning around on my skates. The dress had three dark patches of ink where one of my pens had leaked. There was a big hole in one side of my waist where the stitching had come away and a rip in the lacy underskirt. Any sequins had long gone. Mum had worn the dress for a Peter Pan routine, but with the ladders and scuffs in the fabric, I looked more Stinkerbelle than Tinkerbelle. I shrugged. At least with all the holes, I'd be air-conditioned.

23

RO

I wiped the sweat from my top lip with the back of my hand. The roller derby tryout was in full swing. I'd cruised through the speed trial, shaving seconds off my best

time. Who knew getting your hair caught in your coach's zipper was such an effective training method? As I'd crossed the line, Brody whooped and hollered like I'd won Olympic gold, and his performance garnered a few sneers from the girls on the team.

One particular woman, with the words "Crazy Cassie" written on her back, tutted extra hard, shaking her curly purple hair at Brody's fist pumps.

She was the captain of the Scalpers and had a skull and crossbones painted on the back of her helmet, like a pirate flag. From the looks she threw at me, she didn't have pieces of eight. More like daggers of hate.

We'd now moved onto the main part of the trial, and the coach instructed us on positions and ran us through real game scenarios. He'd mixed the fresh meat in with the team players, and I took my place as a blocker for the first bout. I swallowed down a golfball-sized lump. Never had nine women looked so imposing and so big. I'd never considered myself short, but I belonged in Oz or Willy Wonka's factory compared to some of these girls.

A whistle blew to start the play. As blockers, our job was to stop the other side's jammer from scoring. In the middle of the scrum of bodies, the cloying smell of perfume and sweat hung in the air. We huddled together, our shoulders and bodies grating against each other, fighting for position as if being put through a meat grinder.

Crazy Cassie was the jammer for the other side, and after a decent battle, she found a way through our line, catching one of my braids as she went by and giving it a yank. She'd skated well ahead of us and looked back at our pack with a smug grin on her face. My skin prickled. She'd pulled my hair on purpose. What was this? Third grade?

We reset and ran through the play again. For the second time, Crazy Cassie battled

through our line as our pivot player shouted instructions in an ear-splitting yell that echoed around the hall. Stuck at the back of the hustle, a sharp pain hit my side, and a flash of pale skin, elbow pads, and purple hair flew past me.

I let out a slew of curse words against the rubber of my gum shield. I'd expected a rough game, but the rules Brody had given me said players couldn't use elbows as a weapon.

I threw up my arms, waving at the nearest ref. He spotted me and blew the whistle.

"What's up? You okay?"

I spat my gum shield out into my palm. "I took a definite elbow there, and you didn't blow a foul."

He looked at me as if I'd spoken in ancient Sanskrit. Cassie cruised up, stopping in a scrape of wheels against wood. "It's a tough sport. Accidents happen."

"That wasn't an accident," I ground out, returning her glare with one of my own.

She rested her hands on her hips. "Just what are you insinuating? You can always audition for the circus if you can't handle the hustle. You'd have an excellent shot in that outfit."

I opened my mouth, struggling to find a scathing comeback, but she huffed a laugh and waved her arms at me like I was a half-wit. A few of the other girls snickered, too. I drew my brows together. Just what was her problem? I knew the Spitz Hollowers hated Tuft Swallowers, but this was ridiculous.

The ref shook his head. "Ladies, let's be civil. Cassie, keep your elbows to yourself. And Flock, if you need to take a break, don't stop the play. Just take a knee."

Cassie cackled. “Flock? More like Schlock. But you’re probably used to getting on your knees.” She nodded at Brody, who sat in the first row of the bleachers. He was deep in conversation with Dean Millan, not paying any attention to the action. With a smirk, Cassie glanced back at me before winking and skating off around the track.

Blood simmered in my veins, but before I could take off after her, find out why the hell she was being such a bitch, the ref blew his whistle. He swapped up the positions and reset the gameplay. Another player handed me the Jammer helmet cover, which had a white star on it. My lips bowed. I’d be in the driver’s seat this time.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

We took our positions, and I waited in the Jammer's spot behind the pack. The minute the whistle blew, I skated forward into a wall of women. I'd never known the meaning of the expression "log jam," but being wedged behind the skaters had to be pretty close. Crazy Cassie was there in the thick of it, yelling instructions to her team. Ordering them to shut me down. I pushed and battled as hard as I could, but the Jammer from the other team got free first and skated out, doing a lap of the track just to rub in my inadequacy.

The ref blew his whistle again, and we lined up for another play. One of the other newbies turned to face me, a sneer on her lips. "I heard you're from Tuft-Town." It was one of Spitz Hollow's names for my home. "You're brave to come here. Why don't you have your own team?"

"Yeah!" shouted Cassie. She'd organized her pack, positioning herself nearest to me. "You could call yourself the Tuft Swallow Turnips."

I clamped my teeth shut, refusing to give her the satisfaction of a response. Ms. Crazy was plain mean, but I wasn't about to let her rattle me. Put me off my game. I was here to show the manager what I could do. Showmyselfwhat I could do.

The whistle blew again, and the game was on. Immediately, Cassie was up in my face, blocking every attempt to get past. It was like going up against an octopus with eight arms. She was everywhere at once. A low growl brewed in my chest, and after sucking in a breath, I stopped, pulled away, and skated backward for one stride. Once I'd cleared the pack, Cassie eyed me, heading straight in my direction. I waited until she was almost on me before stepping to my left, spinning out, and leaving the other players for dust as I whipped around the huddle. I hadn't had to usemyelbows.

The squeal of the whistle reset the play. Cassie had lost her smirk, replacing it with a tight jaw. A second time, I waited until the tiniest gap presented itself. Then, like a shot, I took advantage, skating backward before executing a tight pirouette and pulling out of the scrum of bodies.

At the scrape of my wheels on the floor, I grinned. Even Mom would've loved that move. I turned to find Brody, pumping a fist in his direction, but he wasn't looking. He just sat in the bleachers on his phone. His face was ashen and drawn.

My chest ached at the sight. He wasn't watching me. Wasn't he proud? Gritting my teeth, I almost set off across the rink to ask him, but a shout went out, pulling my attention. All heads flipped to Dean Millan. He strode toward us across the track, all sports jacket and glossy curls. If I got onto the team, I'd have to ask him what conditioner he used.

"I want Rowena on the offense again. She's got some impressive skills. Cassie, cover her. One on one."

My breath skittered in my chest. Millan wanted me and roller derby's answer to Blackbeard to go up against each other? Cassie gave me a surly scoff and took up a position in front of me. Her eyes burned with something I couldn't place, but as soon as the whistle sounded, she took off in my direction, looking like she'd plow into me and trail my insides all the way to the door.

With my heart thundering in my chest, I waited until the last second before I took a stride, pulled away, and then used one of Brody's hockey stops. Cassie grinned. She had two choices, left or right, and I had to guess which way she'd turn to chase me down. Cassie chose left, so I pushed off to the right just in time to clear her and her trailing leg with a sweet single-axle jump. As I landed, I threw in some ballerina arms. Was I being a show pony? You bet I was. This girl was next-level vindictive, and I had no idea why.

The second I landed the jump, cheers and a couple of whistles rang out from the new intake, and I turned to them with a grin. Dean Millan stood looking on, a huge smile on his face. He clapped his hands together as if they were on fire. I looked to find Brody at the side of the bleachers, but he was gone. I raked my eyes over the room. There was no sign of him anywhere.

The coach blew his whistle, and the whirr of the fans replaced the chatter in the room. “Okay, ladies. I think we have all we need. Thanks for coming out today. You’ve all done a great job. Now, head to the showers. We’ll be in contact.”

Pockets of skaters formed as they headed toward the locker room, talking about the trial. I stood on the outskirts of the action and removed Brody’s helmet. I didn’t want to be in the thick of things just yet. Pirate wench Cassie had given me a solid eye roll after my stunt, and if hanging back meant I wouldn’t run into her, I’d happily stand here in a sweaty puddle.

Besides, I didn’t have any soap or a towel, thanks to Brody’s text-induced memory lapse. If I wanted to wash off, I’d have to rely on good old-fashioned water and toilet paper. It’s not the best look when trying to win over a tough crowd.

When the other skaters cleared out of the arena, I took a slow roll across to the locker room. Gripping the door frame, I craned my neck to assess the action inside. I couldn’t see anyone. Hopefully, the other ladies hit the showers or were smartening up in the mirrors. All I wanted to do was get out of my grungy outfit without being spotted.

I skated back to the bench where I’d left my bag. As I sat, the sweat-slicked back of my legs slid against the wood. With a sigh, I ripped at the velcro of my borrowed pads, shedding them on the side. The thrum of water drumming on tiles vibrated through the air, but after a time, my ears adjusted to hear voices punctuating the sound of the deluge.

“Well, you’d think she’d be a bit more subtle.”

I froze, and an icy shiver ran over my body.

“I know, right? And to wear his helmet. She wasn’t exactly flying under the radar.” Whoever spoke put on a childish voice. “Sign me up. I’m Brody Flockhart’s girl. I’ll get the team more publicity.” Giggles followed the words. “Millan’s so transparent.”

“Maybe that’s what you get when you hold Flock’s helmet.”

A mass of cackles reverberated around the locker room, and I clamped my jaw. I’d recognize the loudest anywhere. It belonged to Cassie. I swallowed a bitter taste and glanced down at Brody’s silver headgear. I didn’t want her, or anyone, to think the only reason I’d earn a spot was because he’d come along with me today.

The noise of the water lessened, and another voice joined the chatter. “It looks like we have ourselves a new member in the A-team.”

“What do you mean?” asked another.

“I just spoke to Millan. He said he wanted to sign the one in the tatty dress. The Tuft Swallow chick. Said she could skip the reserve teams. He wants her in with us straight away.”

I sucked in a breath. Had I impressed him that much? I’d done well, but I expected to work my way up if I got a spot. A warm glow made its way up my body. Getting signed to the first team was crazy!

“Well, it’s no surprise how she got there.” The voice was Cassie’s. “Didn’t you see Millan swooning over Flockhart? They must have worked something out. He must have got her on the team. Sure, she has a few skills, but it’s obvious she’s being

signed because she's the Flock Boy's latest Flock."

Laughter filled the air once more, and my face burned hot. I needed to speak to Brody. See if what they said was true. Millan had hinted he was after a new coach. After Brody. Was I really the deal sweetener? He'd never give up his spot in Denver, but who knew what he'd do in a few years?

Without changing out of Mom's dress, I shouldered my bag and picked up Brody's helmet, coming to stand on my wheels before hearing yet another voice.

"Well, she can add her name to a long list of others. My friend has flocked him, too." A stream of laughter bounced off the tiles, tearing holes in my chest.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

“And I have a cousin in Denver that’s been in his bed. I guess he flocked her as well.”

My gut tugged, and beads of perspiration pebbled on my top lip. Hearing those words just about tore my heart out. They were talking about my friend. About the man who’d rocked my world only nights ago. The one I couldn’t get out of my head or my heart.

I didn’t want to hear what they were saying. Didn’t want to know. But was I really surprised? I was under no illusion about Brody’s past, but I couldn’t be on a team with someone whose friends or family had “flocked” the guy I wanted to flock.

Ignoring another burst of conversation, I skated back out to the arena. Only a few stragglers remained, Mr. Millan being one of them, but I still couldn’t see Brody. Where the hell was he? I completed a circuit of the track before heading back toward the parking lot.

A cry of “Rowena” followed me. It was Millan. But I didn’t have time to chat. I needed to find Brody. Get some answers.

I stepped over the lip of the door. The heat of the day barreled into me like a freight train. My front wheels hit a stone, and I skittered a little, holding onto the wall for support. Why had I thought keeping my skates on was a good idea? I guess I could blame extenuating circumstances, but a perfectly good pair of sneakers sat in the bottom of my bag.

I dug a hand deep inside my tote, searching for my kicks, but something on the other side of the lot grabbed my attention. Leaning in, I squinted into the sunlight.

It was Brody. He stood next to his blue Mustang, deep in conversation with someone. He flung his arms wide as if describing something, but when the other person shook their head, a deep-red mass of curls followed it.

All the breath left my body. It was the same woman he'd met in Tuft Swallow. The touchy-feely one with the perfect skin. I stepped back into the doorway, out of sight. I didn't want Brody to think I was keeping tabs on who he talked to. And that's all they were really doing, right? Chatting. Just like before. Still, I couldn't lose the burn in my throat at seeing him with another woman.

I watched them for what felt like a lifetime. His brow furrowed, and his shoulders slumped as she patted his arm. I mean, it was all very PG, but the minute he brought his eyes up to meet hers and she reached out and touched him, a wave of nausea crashed over me.

I sucked in a shuddering breath, holding it tight in my throat, willing the bile pooling in my mouth to stay in my stomach. I wanted to scream out. Tell him to fight her off, but he threaded his arms around the woman's body and pulled her into a tight hug.

What the actual hell? Brody. MyBrody was holding another woman the way he'd held me less than twenty-four hours ago. On the same day we were supposed to finally talk about our feelings for each other. I could sprint over and pry the two of them apart. After all he'd said, surely he couldn't want her? But as I stood alone at the door, Brody lifted his head and pressed his lips to her forehead, closing his long, fair lashes.

24

BRODY

Alex pulled away from the parking lot, her tires kicking up a flurry of dust that clung

to the back of my throat. The thick, suffocating feeling matched the one in my chest. Like someone had sat on my ribs. She called me earlier, during Ro's derby trial. Had driven out especially to see me. To deliver the news.

I swallowed hard as her taillights disappeared into the street. A reliable source had informed her that Denver wouldn't renew my contract.

When she'd told me, a numbness had settled into every fiber of my body. A kind of spongy feeling of nothingness. Like I was in a dream, insulated from the world around me.

All the years I'd worked my butt off. All the sacrifices I'd made. Was my career over? If Denver announced I was unfit, nobody else would sign me. I pushed out my breath with a slow hiss.

What the hell would I do? I hadn't allowed myself to consider this outcome. To examine the reality. I'd woken up drenched in sweat more times than I cared to admit, but I'd always shoved the notion of my not returning to the ice way back in my brain. Retirement wasn't something I allowed myself to think about. Not until I absolutely had to.

The skin of my palms prickled, and I rubbed them together. My agent hadn't called. If there was news, he'd be straight on the line, wouldn't he? I took my phone out of my pocket and dialed his number, each trill of the unanswered ringtone taunting me. Bile pooled in my throat. He'd worked hard for me over the years. Negotiated some great deals and endorsements. I thought we were friends, too.

I checked my watch before calling the team manager in Denver. By now, he'd be out of practice, sitting in his shiny office, polishing his trophies. Again, the call went unanswered. I tugged on a breath. Maybe he had a lunch or a coaching meeting to attend. I'd try again later. Message his PA. But I couldn't ignore that when my star

had been on the rise, he'd never taken longer than three rings to pick up.

Ro. I had to find Ro. Hers was the only face I wanted to see. The only arms I wanted to feel around me. She'd take away some of the hard burn in my chest.

Through a haze of racing thoughts, I stumbled back into the arena, but she was nowhere to be seen, only a collection of damp-haired women. They side-eyed me as I scanned their faces, and the sickly scent of their perfume assaulted my nose. Ro would be out of the shower too, by now. I stepped further into the hall, almost bumping straight into Dean Millan's chest.

"Whoa, slow down, Brody." He placed a hand on each of my shoulders. "Your girl did good. Didn't she tell you?"

I had no words. Instead, I shook my head, eyes darting around the arena behind him. "Well, she did great. I want her on the team. She comes across as a little kooky, but we can work with her."

I tightened my eyes. "What do you mean, kooky?"

He huffed a laugh into the air. "I think she should get herself a new skating outfit. And I just saw her leaving the parking lot on her wheels."

My words stuttered as a wash of cold crept over my skin. "W...where was she going?"

"I have no idea, but she looked in a hurry."

"Dean. Which way did she go?"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

The volume of my voice made Millan lean back a little. He thumbed over his shoulder. "Toward Tuft Swallow."

With just a nod, I shrugged out of his hold and turned for the door, dialing Ro's number with trembling fingers. By the time I got to my car, she still hadn't picked up. I threw my phone onto the passenger seat and climbed in, gunning the engine. Had something happened? Did she get some bad news and need to get home fast? No. If that was the case, she'd find me. My car would be her quickest way home. Where the hell had she gone?

With my heart in my mouth, I raced out of the lot and headed for the road back home.

I used the drive out of Spitz Hollow to get a grip on my racing thoughts. I was smart. Level-headed. I didn't give in to knee-jerk reactions.

I'd only allow myself to worry about Alex's information when I had confirmation. Right now, all I cared about was tracking Ro down.

About halfway along the road, I caught a flash of lemon ahead. My heartbeat ticked up, and I put my foot down on the gas, the wind rippling through my hair. With the top down, I had a clear view ahead, and the word "FLOCK" came into focus on the back of a silver helmet. I loosened my grip on the wheel. Ro still wore her mum's dress and had her green bag thrown across her back. Her arms pumped up and down as she skated.

I caught up and eased my foot onto the brake, pulling up level alongside her. She didn't stop. Didn't even look at me. Just clamped her jaw tight while a furious red

burned on her cheeks. Despite the roll in my gut at her expression, she looked incredible, with her long braids flying behind her like Medusa's snakes. But what was she doing out here? Why hadn't she waited for me?

"Stop! You'll ruin your bearings."

Again, she ignored me, only giving me the slightest glance from the corner of her eyes.

"Ro! Stop." My voice fought for supremacy with the car's engine.

She sent me a glare that could strip the bark off a tree. "I don't care about my bearings!" Her voice was high and tight.

I slowed the car down to match her speed, trying to stay in a straight line as I shouted to her across the asphalt. "What's wrong? Did something happen? You just left me there. I thought we were a team?"

A line appeared between her brows. "Like a double deal, you mean? That's what Millan thinks we are."

I narrowed my eyes and wrangled to understand what she was talking about. "Sorry?"

"Oh, you missed that? He wants you to coach his team... and I'm the sweetener. He gives me a spot on the Scalpers, and you come along as part of the package."

My gut tugged. Millan had said something similar at the arena, but I hadn't taken him seriously. He'd been joking. Besides, Ro had more than enough skills to get a place on his derby team, fair and square. "He meant nothing by it. Did he say you had a spot?"

“It doesn’t matter. I’m still mad at you.”

I shook my head. “Why are you mad at me?”

“You told me to get out of my comfort zone. Change my boring little life and do something for myself. So I did, Brody. And you went and ruined it.”

The grind of her wheels on the road matched the scream of blood racing through my ears. “I never called your life boring. And how did I ruin anything? I thought my coaching helped?”

Ro slowed a little, her hands bunched into fists. “Don’t you get it? The coaching, the training, the trial. None of it was about me. Never about what I could do. Once Millan made the connection between us, it became about you. A way to get ‘Flock the Almighty’ to coach his team.”

I opened my mouth to defend myself, but the words caught in my throat. Maybe contacting Dean before the trial had been a dumb idea. He’d messaged me a few times over the years. I thought he might like to hear a bit about Ro before he saw what she could do.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think...”

“No, you didn’t. And frankly, if he’s trying to tempt you onto his staff, he can’t have much faith in your leg coming good.”

Her words hit me like a ten-ton truck straight in the chest. Of course. Ro had no idea what the conversation I’d just had with Alex was about. Of the rumors she’d heard. I hadn’t confessed to anyone quite how close to being washed up I was. And if I told Ro now, she’d think I was trying to divert attention away from her suspicions.

“That’s unfair, and I don’t know what you’re talking about with Millan.”

She huffed and picked up her pace again. I matched her speed, the passenger door of my car almost nudging her hip as we rolled past the tall trees lining the road. “Well, the rest of the Scalpers did.”

“Sorry?”

“Locker room talk, Brody. Surely, you’d know all about that. And the ladies in this locker room had a lot to say. About how Flock’s girl got herself a place on the team. I’m sure you can imagine what they meant.”

I swallowed, trying to eliminate the bitter taste that flooded my mouth. I had a good idea of what they meant. That Ro slept with me to get on the Scalpers.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

“Look, yes, Millan knows we’re friends, but you won that spot fair and square. I had nothing to do with it.”

“Are you sure? And while we’re at it. We’re friends again?”

The steel in her voice at the word “friends” set my teeth on edge. My thoughts flew back to the night in her room and our kiss outside the Crow. We’d agreed to discuss any future for the two of us after the derby trial.

“We are friends. That’ll never change. But you know I want us to be more.”

Ro sucked in her lips for a second, her dark plaits whipping in the air behind her. “Well, it sounded like half the derby team knew somebody who’s been more than just your friend.”

My stomach lurched. I hadn’t recognized any of the women, but there was no avoiding the fact I had a reputation. Just like a lot of people would, I’d made the most of my status.

“I don’t know what to say. I’m no saint. I have a past. But so do you.”

She scoffed. “They’re hardly comparable. But even if I took the spot with the Scalpers, do you think I could stand hearing about you and your conquests? Perhaps the girls and I could compare notes. Turn the situation into some weird female bonding exercise. Sing Kumbaya at the track. Swap war stories.” Ro paused. “Damn, I’m so dumb.”

I drove over a series of small potholes that made my teeth rattle in my head. “You’re anything but dumb.” I understood, though. Hadn’t my blood simmered when I’d seen the men hanging around her at the Crow? But my jealousy had nothing to do with the two of us. What I hoped we’d have together. I trusted her. “Ro, this is crazy!”

“Don’t call me crazy!”

Her words cut through the rush of air between us, their force stinging my ears. Ro shortened her strides and dug in, speeding up just like she’d done in the school gym.

“I saw you, Flock.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. She never called me that. Always Brody. “What do you mean you saw me?”

“I saw you and the woman you met at Wings and Pizza. The redhead. In the parking lot, back at the complex.”

Did she mean Alex? Ro must’ve recognized her from the other day when she pretended to have a sudden interest in spotting tits in the woods.

“She’s pretty, by the way.”

I rolled my eyes. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“She’s right up your alley. Not quite so ‘small town’ as me. More like the women you’re used to.”

A wave of exhaustion swept over me. “Ro, what is this about?”

Within a beat, she pulled into the hockey stop I’d shown her, the scrape of her skates

audible over my car engine. I matched her move, slamming on my own brakes. We'd made it into town by the square, and Ro stood still in the dappled light of the trees above. Her chest rose and fell fast.

"I saw you kiss her."

My mind raced back to the meeting with Alex in the parking lot. Yes, I'd kissed her. But it was just a kiss for an old friend. "On the forehead! Is that against the rules?"

Ro glared at me, and her cheeks glowed almost crimson. "It looked like a little more than a kiss on the forehead."

I sighed. I'd hugged Alex, too, but again, it was nothing more than a hug of friendship. Of support. The problem was, Ro didn't know that, and based on my track record, she'd think the worst. "The woman in the parking lot, at Pizza and Wings, that's Alex. I've known her for years."

Ro narrowed her eyes at me. "So that's your journalist friend? Alex? She's a woman?" She gave a tiny wag of her head. "How convenient she's so 'Flockable.' Had she come to tell you it was time to head back to your real life?"

I pulled on the handbrake and threw my hands up. "Now you're being paranoid."

Ro's eyebrows raised slightly, and I flinched at my words. She had every right to ask.

"Have you slept with her, Brody?"

Her question was like a dagger to my heart. How could I tell her the truth when she already doubted me? Instead, I gripped the steering wheel and stared straight ahead. "Like I said, we both have pasts."

“Have you slept with her?” she repeated, her tone as cold as ice.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

I swallowed away the vicious burn that had crept up my chest. “Yes.” There was no point lying. “We were in college together. Things were over a long time ago.”

Ro huffed out a breath and brought her hands to her hips. “Yet here she is, hanging around in your hour of need.”

Alex was here for me when I needed her, but she was doing me a favor. Looking out for me. Just like she always had. I got why Ro might misunderstand. We hadn’t talked much about my injury, and I hadn’t told her about Alex and the information she’d given to me the last few weeks.

Nevertheless, her doubt set my teeth on edge. “And you immediately assume that there’s something between Alex and me? That I couldn’t possibly resist temptation? That I’d up and leave with her?”

Ro shrugged her shoulders. Her face was drawn, and her brow wore furrows I’m sure hadn’t been there before I pulled into town. Her silence spoke volumes.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

She gave a wry smile and a shake of her head. “Brody, it wouldn’t be the first time you left town without a word.”

My gut hit the asphalt. Of course. She meant when I’d never replied to her note all those years ago. She probably thought I’d do the same again. But circumstances were different now. I was different. We’d both changed so much, and I’d do anything to prove how much she meant to me.

I turned off my engine, ready to talk. To tell her how much I needed her. To confess that my career could be over. But as soon as I opened my mouth, my cell rang. I pulled it out of my pocket and checked the screen. It was my agent.

A wave of nausea rolled through me, and my fingertips prickled to pick up the call. I wanted to find out if he knew the decision on my contract. I looked up at Ro. She didn't know what'd happened. Why Alex had been at the sports complex. Her eyes bored into me and I shifted on the leather of my seat.

“Hadn't you better get that? It might be one of your girls or maybe another team with a better offer.”

The acid in her voice froze me in place. My phone rang out regardless, and I ran my eyes over her face, hoping she'd see the conflict in mine. But why would she? I'd told her nothing. Kept secrets from the woman I most wanted to trust me. I'd been right before. I didn't deserve her. My words stuttered on my lips. “I, I...”

At my hesitation, Ro sent her eyes heavenward, and with one last glance at my phone, she turned on her wheels and skated off toward home, yelling, “I'll see you around, Brody,” over her shoulder.

As she glided away, I slapped one hand down on the steering wheel. I wanted nothing more than to chase after her and tell her how much she meant to me, but I needed to speak to my agent. I had to know if everything I'd ever worked for was over.

With a shaky breath, I touched the screen and picked up the call.

Iskated into the square. Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes, blurring my vision through the plastic of Brody's visor. I found a bench and sat down, tugging at his helmet straps. When I ripped it from my head, a warm breeze rippled through my hair. Just like the warmth of Brody's breath that night in my room.

I wished I could go back there. Say something different. Give the two of us a chance. But he probably thought I was nuts after my runaway skate back to Tuft Swallow and my ridiculous jealousy. That he'd been lucky to escape.

I spun my wheels back and forth along the paving stones beneath me, and my watery eyes gave up the fight. Large tears rolled down my cheeks. Brody coming back to town had caused a whirlwind. A rollercoaster of highs and lows. I was trying to hang on for dear life.

I sucked in a shuddering breath just as something at my elbow gave a little tug. I ignored it. Knowing my luck, it was one of the town's kids asking for skating tips. I didn't want to scare anyone. I must look like a mascara-stained horror show by now.

The little tug came again with a tinkling sound, and I parted my fingers to see a pale blue eye looking at me. I dropped my hands. "Winston? What are you doing here, buddy?"

Today, our town mayor wore a blue and white striped sweater. It had a collar which gave him the look of a sailor. I ran my fingers over the stitching on its back. Winston's Hot Daddy was a great yarn worker. Maybe he could help me with my owls.

I dragged the back of one hand across my nose, turning back to the goat. "What's up? Did somebody make you walk the plank today? I know the feeling."

Winston gave the tiniest bleat and butted his head against my arm. One corner of my

mouth lifted. “Who was it? I’ll keel-haul them for you.” Winston blinked and chewed on his lip. “I don’t think you’d return the favor, though. And I don’t think Brody deserves a keel-hauling. Not this time.” I ran my hand over the goat’s cheek and gave it a scratch. “I think I’ve gone and made a fool of myself. Said some things I shouldn’t have.”

Winston bumped into my shoulder this time, nestling against me. “I know, I know. Life’s messy. It’s just that I accused Brody of so much with no proof. Just circumstance and the words of some mean women.” It was true. I’d only seen him hug what I now knew to be a friend, and was I really going to let the words of some girls who wished me miles away make me so sad?

Winston gave another soft bleat, this time pushing his head against the damp top of my dress. Either he was a “boob-goat,” or he was after a hug. Carrie, from the Dirty Hookers, was a Winston hugger. I’d seen her hop off her bike and lean in for a snuggle. Maybe she had the right idea.

I wiped away the tears from my eyes. No amount of crying could fix what I’d said to Brody. I should apologize, but what was the point? He’d think I was a lunatic, and no matter how I wished it wasn’t true, he’d leave town soon, just like before. Only this time, it wouldn’t be a girlhood crush he’d leave me with. Nope, this time, I was all in. Hopelessly in love with my brother’s best friend, and I had no idea how I’d put myself back together.

Winston jostled against me again, and I scratched the top of his head. “No offense, but I think I need to talk to a human.” I planted a massive kiss on his wiry cheek before digging into my bag to find my phone.

I looked at the screen, a lead-like weight settling in my chest. Brody hadn’t called. Hadn’t messaged. Eve had, though, six times. I chewed on my lip and returned one of her missed calls, nudging away a group of pigeons that’d settled around my feet.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

“Hello? Ro. Where have you been? Are you with Flock?”

“No. I’m in the square, alone. But I need my bestie and a therapy slushie. Maybe a cinnamon roll. I’m feeling a little sad.”

Eve’s sharp intake of breath sounded down the phone. “You heard the news then?”

What news? I had my brain so wrapped up in Brody and skating that I hadn’t listened to the radio this morning.

“Flock’s contract.”

Eve’s words made my stomach churn, and a burn crept up my body. “What about his contract?”

“It’s all over the cable news.”

I swallowed away a solid lump. “Eve. What happened?”

“His team dropped him, and from what people are saying, he’s unfit to play at a professional level at all. Nobody’s gonna take him on now. They say he’s too vulnerable to injury.”

My breath caught in my throat. A canceled contract? Unfit to play? Vulnerable? I shook my head. This was crazy. Brody would’ve told me, wouldn’t he? “When did you hear this?”

“The news broke about an hour ago while I was at the diner. We all watched it on the flatscreen.”

I pulled in a breath before letting it out slowly. An hour ago Brody and I were at the derby track. I would have been storming out of the locker room, and he would’ve been... in the parkinglot. With his journalist friend. A friend who covered ice hockey. They’d hugged, and now, when I pictured it, he’d looked so sad. Did he know then? Why hadn’t he said anything?

I closed my eyes.

Because I hadn’t given him a chance. I’d gone all gung-ho on him. Accused him of all sorts. I let out a groan.

“Are you okay, Ro?”

I wasn’t sure yet. I’d potentially made the biggest mistake of my life.

“Eve, can I stay at yours tonight? I think I need some advice.”

26

BRODY

I closed my eyes, tipping back my head. The summer sun washed over my face, and the smell of coffee drifted over from the other side of the street. A murmur of traffic and chatter filled my ears. Just Tuft Swallow on a Sunday morning. Everyone was going about their business as if my life hadn’t fallen apart overnight.

I’d had the worst sleep yet on Maggie Swan’s couch. The call with my agent had left me numb. Drained like a flat battery. He’d apologized for the radio silence. Blamed

work. Other clients. But then he'd delivered the body blow. The words I'd dreaded to hear. Denver Snow Storm wouldn't renew my contract. He hadn't even pretended to have other opportunities lined up for me. Other offers. I was dead in the water, and we both knew it.

I let out a breath, hissing into the air like a boiling kettle. When I'd run out of steam, the bench sank a little beside me, and I turned to see Mrs. Woodcock's rheumy blue eyes staring back at me. She'd dressed in one of her awful turquoise windbreakers and wore a cap printed with the slogan "Tit Peepers Do It Better."

The corners of her eyes crinkled. "Not with your friend today?"

I shifted on the bench. "Coop? No, he's at work."

She tutted. "Not Cooper, young man. Rowena."

At the mention of her name, a searing burn hit my chest. I'd not seen Ro since she'd skated away from me yesterday. She'd left my helmet outside the den door at some point. I'd almost tripped over it as I came out of my room this morning. "No. She's busy."

Mrs. Woodcock cleared her throat, her jowls wobbling with the effort. "Well, from what I hear, you could do with a friend right now."

Could I ever. Aside from my agent, I hadn't spoken to anyone. Not team management, not Cooper, not Alex, not my parents, and not the one person I desperately wanted to talk to. Instead, I'd turned off my phone and lay awake all night, wondering what Ro was doing above me. Was she sleeping? Dreaming? Or was she tossing and turning like I was?

I'd fought the urge to creep up the stairs and knock on her door. Fall into her arms.

Savor her warmth. But I feared the welcome I'd get.

“Do you want to talk about it? I know I'm not ‘hip and groovy’ like your fancy friends.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

Mrs. Woodcock lifted her fingers, wrapping her words in air quotes, and I chuckled.

Her cheeks glowed the softest pink. “Am I showing my age? Well, a friendly ear today is the same as it always was.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek. Why not? I had to get my thoughts out somehow; to someone. Currently, they swirled around in my head, tripping over each other and making no sense.

“My career is over.” There. I said the words I’d avoided even thinking. Out loud and to another person.

“Oh, yes. I heard something on the news about your situation.”

I stared at her.

“Oh, you’d be surprised what I watch. What I see. There’s not much I don’t know about this town. About what goes on here.”

I swallowed hard under her intense gaze. It was like Mrs. Woodcock had gone all witchy and looked into my soul. Like she’d swap her visor for a pointed hat and take off on a Swiffer at any moment.

“Then you’d know that my team dropped me.” Admitting it out loud was like swallowing razor blades. “It’s done. I’m out.”

“Meaning?”

I let out a heavy breath, running a hand over the back of my neck. “Meaning, what am I gonna do? I’m no good at anything else. Just Hockey. I don’t want to start over again.”

Mrs. Woodcock ran a palm over her fawn slacks. “I see. So without this big contract, there’s nothing you can do?”

“No. Well, I had an offer to coach the junior team in Robin Springs.”

Her eyes lit up. “Oh. The Rockets? So many of our townsmen have played for them.”

“Yeah. I played for them too. But coaching a kid’s team isn’t the same as playing in the NHL.”

She huffed a breath. “No, it’s not. There are no sponsors to puff you up in Robin Springs. No news crews following you around, hanging on your every word. No ego to carry with you. When all that’s stripped back, young man, what do you have left?”

I closed my eyes for a long beat before meeting hers. “Nothing.”

Mrs. Woodcock shook her head slowly. “That’s not true now, is it? There’s far more for you in this little town than you realize.”

“More?” I ran my eyes over her face. Why did I feel like she was talking about Ro?

“I’ve known you since you were a little boy, Brody. I see how much your career has meant to you. I’m not saying I’m not proud of you. We all are, but there’s more to life than being in the spotlight. The pressure. It must be all-consuming. Wouldn’t it be nice to have a break? Knowing how far you’ve come?”

A sudden chilly wind rustled the leaves above us. Damn, Mrs. Woodcock was wise.

How did she know about the grinding pressure to perform? The sick feeling that filled my gut when I had a poor game. “It is all-consuming.”

“And what are you really doing it for? The team? The competition?” I nodded, and she smiled. “And you’d still have all that at Robin Springs, just not quite how you pictured. Can you imagine what those kids would say if you took them on?”

I shrugged. “They’d probably hate being coached by someone whose leg let them down. Who’d failed.”

She tutted again. “They’d move heaven and Earth to make you proud. Think. You were just like them once. Full of dreams. It’d be like giving back to everyone who helped you get where you are today.”

I cocked a brow in her direction.

“Well, yesterday, anyway,” she said.

“But it’s not the same. Everyone will forget Flock. Me.”

Mrs. Woodcock placed a small, blue-veined hand on my arm. “No. You’re right. It can’t be the same, and there’s nothing you can do about that. But why can’t it be different? You can’t change what’s happened, but you can grow into it. And the townsfolk would never forget you. Tuft Swallow has a long memory, and we look after our own. Think of the town motto—‘Swallowers always come together.’ As I say, I’ve known you a long time, and I watched you rise from the bottom when you were just a kid running your paper route. But I think you need to see the bigger picture.”

I paused. “And you’re going to help me?”

“No, dear. You need to do that for yourself. I’m just going to ask you one question. What if everything you ever needed is right here in Tuft Swallow?”

I tugged my brows together.

“A life in a town like this is what you make it. The people around you. Think of the good you could do here. Every little kid idolizes you. Everyone respects you. Some people never have your gifts. And if you do it right and stop feeling sorry for yourself, you can make a difference.”

“Give back to the community, you mean?”

“Exactly, Brody.”

A prickle ran over my skin at her words, and my breath ran a little shallower than before. That’s what Ro had said about the little things making the difference.

I stared at the back of my hands as they lay in my lap. If I was honest, I hadn’t missed walking out on the street and being mobbed for autographs or selfies or the people staring at me in restaurants or bars. Any initial excitement about my arrival in Tuft Swallow had faded. Now, folks just wanted to hear how I was. Chat about life. Football.

And then there was Ro. Her smile, her kisses. Since I’d rolled back into town, I’d laughed more than I had in years. I looked up and ran my eyes over the square. The old men playing Kerplunk. The glimpse of Main Street and the banners celebrating the latest cornhole victory hanging from the lampposts.

A warm glow spread across my chest. Tuft Swallow felt like home. Rowena felt like home. She was home.

If I had to go back to my team, would I really be able to leave her behind? The idea gave me a gnawing, gaping hole in my heart. Not seeing her every day, crochet hooks tucked in her hair, her freckled nose wrinkled in concentration, was unthinkable. No. There was no way I could say goodbye to her.

She was the light in my life. All the hope. I wish it hadn't taken me so long to see it.

But would I, not Flock, just Brody, be enough for her? Would we be enough for each other? I turned to Mrs. Woodcock. She had the tiniest smile on her mouth, and her eyes crinkled at the corners like she'd read my mind.

"The two of you would be enough." And with those words, she patted my knee, stood, and headed toward town.

After my "intervention" at the hands of Mrs. Woodcock, I took a walk around Tuft Swallow, thinking long and hard about my future. What would my life look like, and who would I be without my career. Based on the sympathetic smiles from the folks I saw, news about my being dropped traveled fast.

But nobody bothered me or pestered me for a comment. They just clapped me on the back and commiserated, wishing me well. One little kid even hugged me and offered me half his sandwich.

The bird watchers were out again, in all their turquoise glory. The blonde lady I met at the crochet club came up to hug the goat. He was eating primroses near the Swallow, his little bell jingling. I smiled. This town was nuts. Crazy. But right now, it was the only place I wanted to be. The place I could breathe. And Ro was the only person I wanted to be with.

Unfortunately, a few things were standing between us being together. Namely, her feelings on the matter, plus three strapping and protective brothers. I sucked in a

breath and pulled my phone from my pocket. It was time to tackle the largest one.

I tapped out a message...

Brody: Coop, can you meet me at the Crow?

27

BRODY

I ran my fingers down my icy beer glass, wondering if I'd survive the conversation I was about to have. Cooper Swan was my oldest friend and the man who meant the most to Ro. He'd been her rock when their mum passed and had looked after her when her brothers left town to start new lives away from Tuft Swallow. Without his approval, my hopes of a future with his sister were dead in the water.

The fundamental problem? Coop knew me too well. At least he knew one version of me. The one that came with a reputation. We'd had more than a few wild nights out. But he had no idea I was hopelessly in love with his sister. And that's what I was.

I'd always loved her, but these last few weeks had well and truly sealed my heart. She'd opened my eyes to what was missing in my life. Home. Family. Belonging. I'd focused on myself for so long that I'd forgotten the important things.

I just hoped he thought I was good enough for her. I wasn't even sure myself. But Ro deserved the best. To be cherished. Treated like a princess. And I was determined to be the one to have the honor.

Coop's arrival at the table brought me solidly back to the present. Music thumped from the speakers behind the bar as Ginger and the crew set up for the lunch crowd. My best friend slipped into the booth opposite me with a squeak of denim on leather.

“Where’ve you been, man? You didn’t answer your phone. I’ve been worried.”

I held up my hands in defense.

His frown was deeper than the Grand Canyon, and his dark eyes swept over my face. “The news is all around town. Your contract, I mean. I’m so sorry, man.”

“It’s okay. I’ll be okay.” Was I trying to convince myself? “Once the dust settles, I’ll rethink my options.”

Coop viewed me through narrowed eyes and took a pull on the beer I shoved toward him. “If there’s anything we can do, man... You can stay at the house as long as you need.” He paused, picking at the label on the drink bottle. “Have you seen Ro?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

A pulse of electricity passed through my body. “No.” I mean, it wasn’t a lie. I’d kept out of her way until I had my thoughts in order. Talking to Coop was my first step on that journey, but the tight clamp of his jaw made the hair on the back of my neck stand to attention. “Is she okay? Did something happen?” Other than the man who wanted to make her happy acting like a complete idiot.

He cleared his throat. “I wanted to ask you the same thing. I’ve never seen her look so miserable. She stayed out last night, but not before I caught her crying in the kitchen. This morning, I found her moping around the house like someone had hidden her hair straighteners. She isn’t answering my calls. What happened at the derby trial? Did she get knocked back?”

If only it were that simple. I gripped the edges of my beer mat, spinning it around in the pool of condensation from my bottle. I took a deep breath. “Look, man. I need to tell you something.” I dragged my gaze up to his face, and his eyes were glued to mine. “Something about me and Ro.”

He blinked for the longest moment, a wry smile on his lips. “I know.”

I gave my head a tiny shake. “Know what?”

“Brody. I’m not stupid. I know that you and Ro are into each other.”

I sucked in a breath, but it didn’t make it to my lungs as if someone were sitting on my chest.

Coop eyed me steadily. “I’ve hardly seen you these past few weeks, and the two of

you have spent way too much time together for just nostalgia's sake."

He had that right. If I wasn't physically with Ro, I'd spend all my mental and emotional time with her, too.

"And there's the sneaky looks and both of you casually asking me what the other is up to. And that move of yours at the Crow. While I appreciate you pulling her off the bull, that ridiculous show over the lost contact lens was a little obvious. By the time we found you, you were almost wearing as much lip gloss as she was."

My whole body heated. Apparently, subtlety wasn't our M.O. "I was trying to look out for her."

"Evidently." He sighed and leaned back in his seat. "She's been through a lot. Ro's not as bulletproof as she looks."

"Coop, I want you to know how much I value your friendship and trust, but your sister means the world to me, too. The way I feel, it's not a phase. An infatuation. Ro deserves the best and if I didn't think I could give it to her, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

He watched me through narrowed eyes, chewing on his bottom lip.

"Deep down, do you trust me, Coop? We both know I've had my wild times, but when all's said and done, if she wanted me, would you trust me with her heart?"

Cooper tipped his head to one side. He didn't exactly have a smile on his face, but I figured if he hadn't knocked my block off by now, there was a chance of his approval. Finally, he spoke.

"I do trust you, but..."

“But what? You know I’d never cause her any harm. I’d do nothing to hurt her. I promise.”

He leaned in. “Damn right, you wouldn’t, or me and my brothers would cut your balls off.” Coop shook his head slowly. “I’m not ecstatic you went behind my back, but you’re my best friend. A solid guy. And I think I know how much you care for Ro. But...” He leveled his gaze at me. “I’d hold you to your promise.”

The tiniest spark lit up my heart. “I’d expect you to.”

Coop shook his head slowly, then took another swallow of his beer. “Can I ask something? When did it start? You and Ro, I mean. If this is just a flash or a rebound after your contract got dropped...”

“No.” The ferocity of my response made his eyebrows rise. “It’s not. I think I’ve always loved her. I’ll be honest. We kissed once. Just before I left for college.”

His body tensed, and he gripped the edge of the table. “You serious?”

I put a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry I never told you. She said it was a mistake, but I’d never forgotten.”

Coop rubbed the back of his neck. “Man, I have no idea what’s been going on, and I probably don’t want to, but I know the two of you can’t stop staring at each other when you come within twenty feet.”

I grimaced. “That obvious?”

Cooper raised his brows. “Gran noticed first. I thought the two of you were getting along just like old times, but then she told me about Ro’s flickering lamp. I was about to go out and buy her a new one, but she had her suspicions about why you were

conveniently on hand to help so early in the morning. I disagreed. Said you were a stand-up guy. Maybe I should've listened to her."

My eyes stung, and I rubbed them with the balls of my palms. "I'm sorry. I don't know what to say. Ro and I, we haven't..."

"I don't wanna know," he said, eyes wide and voice sounding like Ariana Grande hitting her high notes. Coop slumped back into his chair. "Why didn't you talk to me?"

I scoffed. "Because of the ball-cutting thing?" What part of him being intimidating didn't he get?

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

“Okay, I’ll level with you. I’m disappointed you didn’t feel you could tell me before, but I value your friendship, too. And I want Ro to be happy. All her family does.”

“So do I.”

Coop nodded and tipped back his beer. “So whatever’s going on, whatever has made her miserable, fix it.”

My heartbeat ticked up to a gallop. “Are you sure you’re cool? You’re like a brother.”

“Likewise. I just hope that doesn’t change. And I’ll miss my trips to Denver.”

I chuckled. “I’ll miss my wingman.”

“Listen, you couldn’t do any better than my sister.”

“I know that. And her?”

Coop sucked a breath in through his teeth. “That remains to be seen, but remember, for the foreseeable future, I own your balls. And I’m not the one you should talk to, am I?”

Coop was right. I had to find Ro. Speak to her. Convince her we were a good idea. “Do you know where she is?”

Coop shook his head. “I haven’t seen her. But ask Eve. She’ll know.”

RO

The scent of spring flowers weaved around the gravestones at the cemetery, tickling my nose as a single crow watched me from the branches above. The cemetery was one of the most peaceful places in town and this afternoon, in stillness, Mom and I put the world to rights. Found some answers to my Brody-sized questions.

I'd said some awful words to him. Accused him of things he hadn't done. Of being with women he hadn't been with. Mom reminded me that I hadn't sworn myself off men over the years. Not that I'd had the same opportunities as Brody, but I hadn't exactly shut myself away in a convent, either. He had just as much right to bring up my past. But he hadn't. I'd been the only one acting like a child, and now I had to put it right. Let him know how sorry I was for not trusting him.

The thought of losing him again gave me the dullest ache in my chest. I didn't expect him to welcome me back with open arms, though. I hadn't gone to find him when I heard about his contract. It was hardly the act of a friend, but even if he couldn't forgive me, I'd still love him. Always.

I stood and moved over to Mom's grave, crouching down to run my fingers over the soft petals of the flowers I'd brought. "Bye, Mom. Talk soon."

With a sigh, I turned and walked up the sloping path that led back to the road. The gravel path crunched beneath my feet, and I passed through the old steel gates, closing them behind me. When I turned back toward town, a flash of white caught my eye under the big oak tree. I squinted into the low, late afternoon sun, and my breath tottered in my chest.

Brody leaned against the old gnarled trunk, his arms folded against his chest, the

smallest of smiles on his lips. He looked clean and gorgeous, and everything that had my heart wringing itself inside out yesterday. The cut of his jaw and the lean bulk of him never failed to make my breath skitter.

When he saw me, he straightened, and his blue eyes glowed. Glowed like I was the most wonderful thing he'd ever seen. Like I was a freshly glazed donut when he hadn't eaten in days. Even from twenty paces, my cheeks heated.

I moved toward him, the faint, purple smudges under his eyes coming into focus. "You're tired."

He half grimaced, half smiled. "You could say that."

I cringed. My words were woefully inadequate. The guy had just lost his career. Of course, he'd be tired and in the pits of depression, no doubt. It wasn't as if a solid eight hours would solve all his problems.

I'd caught up on the news earlier. Brody's team had well and truly dropped him, and most likely, his endorsements would disappear, too.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

He gave the tiniest shake of his head. Oh, holy crap, what was wrong with me? Why was I suddenly incapable of using sensible, sophisticated words instead of awkward small talk?

"I'll be honest. I'm not doing my best." He cast his eyes down to his feet before bringing them back up to fix on mine. "But I have an idea what would make me feel better."

Again, his eyes glowed with something I couldn't quite place, and my heart pounded

at their intensity.

Brody stepped toward me and took one of my hands, stroking his thumb over my knuckles.

“What?” I asked, my voice barely a whisper. The corners of his lips curved, tempting me with all the unholy dreams I’d ever had for us.

Page 73

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

He pulled me into him. “I’m gonna explain, and I want you to listen to me. All the way to the end, okay?”

I nodded. Right now, I’d do anything he asked.

Brody smiled and closed his hand around mine. “First, we walk.”

Brody led me down the gentle hill that ran to the lake. The only sound was our footsteps on the path, but after a time, he spoke. “How was your mom?”

I smiled. “She was fine. A little salty. It’s been a few days since my last visit. She likes to gossip more regularly than my derby training schedule allows.”

Brody chuckled, and the sound made my toes curl. I cleared my throat. “How did you know where to find me?”

“Eve.”

I rolled my eyes. Of course. I’d asked her not to tell anyone where I was hiding out, not even Coop. I’d wanted time to myself, and lately, all my brother had were questions about what I was doing and whether I was doing it with Brody. “Where are we going?”

Brody squeezed my hand. “You’ll see.”

As we reached the bottom of the hill, the lake water sparkled through the trees like jewels. I’d forgotten how pretty it was down here. Tuft Swallow’s answer to Lake

Como. Maybe GeorgeClooney would buy a holiday house here, too. Take up cornhole or bird watching.

At the bottom of the hill, we stepped onto the grass that led to the jetty. “What are we doing down here?”

Brody grinned. “Do you remember when we used to come to the lake? To fish?”

“Party, more like! And I distinctly remember not being invited on those occasions.”

Again, he squeezed my hand. “We didn’t want to lead you astray.”

“Butyou did,” I whispered.

His head swung to me, and at the fire that flashed in his eyes, I bit my lower lip.

We walked past the boathouse and down along the creaky wooden jetty that stuck out into the lake. Someone had tied a couple of old rowboats to the pylons, and they knocked against each other in the soft breeze.

When we reached the end of the pier, Brody pulled off his jacket and laid it flat on the planks. “Take a seat.”

I searched his face. Was he serious? Didn’t he know the gauntlet I’d run if I sat anywhere near water at sunset? I’d attract every mosquito for miles around. Still, as he stood there, hands on his hips and ripples of light from the water dappling his jaw, I couldn’t think of anything I’d rather do. Besides, Gran had a well-stocked medicine cabinet. What were a few welts between lovers?

Oh, how I hoped we’d be lovers. Even just once. I’d take any opportunity to quell the yearning to have him inside me.

As I settled on Brody's jacket, I pulled in the smell of pine and freshwater. "So. What now?"

"Now, we talk." He stared out over the water for a long beat before settling in next to me, the old wood creaking a little under his weight. "Let's take our shoes off. Dip our toes."

Brody reached down to pull off his sneakers. He sucked in a long breath before letting it out slowly.

"Are you okay?" I pulled off my own sneakers and lay them next to me on the pier as the cool water licked at my toes. "I'm so sorry about your team..."

Brody lay a hand on my arm. "Please, just listen. I need to get out what I have to say in one go. I've waited a long time to let you know how I feel about you. About us."

I tipped my head to one side. What did he mean for a long time? He'd only been back in town a few weeks.

He pulled at a frayed strand of cotton on his jeans. "Ever since I can remember, my life revolved around hockey. Around what I wanted. The pursuit of my dreams. It's all I've known. And now, everything's over." His bottom lip trembled as he spoke. "When a presence, a focus you've always had in your life, vanishes, it leaves you reeling."

"I understand." It wasn't the same, but when Mom passed, the anchor in my world disappeared.

A choir of frogs took up singing in the rushes beneath us, and a muscle ticked in Brody's jaw. He kept his eyes firmly on the horizon. "When I came back here, I wasn't sure what would happen. If I would keep or lose my contract. How I'd feel.

And I tried to be the same old Brody Flockhart everyone expected. The joker. Unshakeable. But inside,” he shook his head, “I was terrified.” He turned toward me. “And then you happened. Again. Only this time, it was different. I’m different. These last few weeks with you, I’ve realized what’s important. What truly makes me happy isn’t winning or being the best. It’s home, family and friends. And being near somebody who makes my heart so happy, I think it might burst.”

My breath skittered, and I swallowed away a peach-sized lump in my throat as his hand moved closer to mine.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

“You’ve always made me happy, Ro. When you kissed me all those years ago, it felt so right. So perfect.” His eyes darkened a little. “So hot. But then worries and voices came crashing into my head, telling me I had to be smart. Stay focused. So many people pinned their dreams on me, too. Mum, Dad, my coach. And then there was Coop. I knew how protective he was of you. All your brothers. Your gran. And I’d never want them to think I’d taken advantage of you.”

Brody shifted a little beside me and dipped his head. “And then I got your note. You called the kiss a mistake. Something never to be repeated. Talked about our lives and the different paths we’d follow. Gave all the reasons we shouldn’t be anything more than friends. I’ll admit, your words hurt.”

My heart skipped, and a bitter taste rushed into my mouth. “I’m sorry.” If only he knew how much. In one hasty note, I’d never given the two of us a chance. But I hadn’t known how much my heart would rip when he left.

Brody brought his head back up. “Don’t be. On some levels, you were right. I had to leave town. I had people’s hopes riding on me. My own dreams to shoot for. And say we’d taken things further, dated even. College and hockey consumed me. I spent all my time training. We’d hardly have seen each other. It wouldn’t have been fair to you, and I never wanted you to feel you played second fiddle to my career.” Brody ran his fingers over the back of my hand. “I never wanted you to feel that you weren’t enough. That I didn’t care enough to be around.”

“But that’s just what you did. You never replied to my note. Even if you’d said you agreed with me, it would have been better than me not knowing how you felt.”

“Fuck.” Brody’s voice tottered, like there was a crease that needed ironing out. “I replied. I just never sent it. Call me a coward, but I was too scared to tell you how much I cared. Howmuch you meant to me.” He turned, his blue eyes boring into what felt like my soul. “And I’ll always regret it.”

His brow creased, and he let go of my hand, searching his pocket. After a long beat, he brought out his wallet. He opened it and pulled out a small folded piece of paper. It looked like it’d been there since the dinosaurs roamed the earth. He handed it to me. “I kept the note I wrote you. I’ve carried it around with me. I want you to take it and read it when you’re alone. And if you ever doubt how much I care, just remember the words inside.” He pressed the square of paper into my palm and closed my hand around it.

I nodded and, with a tiny smile, slipped the note into my pocket. It would burn a hole in my shorts until I opened it.

“Have you said everything you want to?” I asked, my heart thumping like a kettledrum in my chest.

He huffed a breath and nudged his giant shoulder gently into mine. “I’ve only just started. I’m in awe of you, Ro. You bring the sunshine into the day. Please give me another chance. I’ll be whatever you need me to be. Do whatever you want me to do. Just say we can try. Even if I had my contract back tomorrow, I’d ask for the same thing.”

I looked up at Brody, and he tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. The tenderness, the soft glow in his eyes, made my chest contract.

“This feels like home.” He nodded to the lake and the roofs of the town that peeped over the treetops. “You’re my home, and I can’t think of anywhere I’d rather be.”

As I drowned in his eyes, I chewed at my lip. It would be so easy to tuck my fears away, ask no questions, and kiss the living crap out of him right here on the jetty. But Mom had said that I should get the answers I needed before I fully opened my heart to Brody. “Now it’s my turn.”

Brody gave the smallest of nods before intertwining his fingers through mine. With blood screaming in my ears, I began. “I’m sorry for not trusting you yesterday. For assuming the worst. I think deep down, you’d never knowingly hurt me.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Still. I had no right to question who you saw and what you were doing. Even if it was with that unspeakably gorgeous supermodel journalist friend of yours.”

The corners of his mouth ticked up a little. Thank goodness he’d seen the humor in my words. I’d thought long and hard about what I’d seen them do together, and it was nothing more than having a coffee and a hug. Things I’d do with my close friends, male or female. Hell, I’d even hugged a goat in the town square. That his friend had pore-free skin and perfect brows didn’t mean he’d automatically succumb to any of her other charms.

Brody brushed his thumb over my knuckles. “Nobody is as beautiful as you. You’re perfect.”

At those words, my heart almost exploded into a giant confetti ball on the spot. It was all I’d ever wanted to hear, but Mom sat on my shoulder, being all wise and practical. Not wanting me to fall for pretty words. She wanted me to finish the speech we’d prepared together. As I steeled myself, a gentle breeze kissed my cheeks from across the lake.

“And with Millan and the Scalpers. I’m guessing you didn’t make a deal.”

He shook his head. “Honestly, I hadn’t. I called and told him about you, but only because I was so proud of what you could do. Any offer Millan made to you had nothing to do with me. You’re incredible, Ro. Everything you do. I wish you’d see that.”

“Incredible? With my cheer team? My silly Etsy store?”

“It’s not silly.”

“I’m sure that’s what you called it back in the diner when you first arrived.”

“That was unfair of me. I’m sorry. I was trying to make you laugh.”

I tutted, “Well, even if my store isn’t silly, there’s someone out there in the world waiting for four sets of owls that still look like mutated Christmas puddings.”

Brody chuckled. “They won’t mind.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. Customers can be demanding! Someone’s paid for those owls.”

“I promise, they won’t mind.”

I tightened my brows. Who was he to be giving business advice? “You can’t possibly know that.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

He looked away before the smallest frown marred his forehead. “I do know.”

I scoffed. “Go ahead, Mr. Bigshot moneymaker. Tell me how.”

Brody closed his eyes. “Because I ordered them.” His voice was barely a whisper.

“Sorry, what?”

“I bought your owls.”

My mind swam. “Why would you buy four sets of owls?”

He opened his eyes back up, and I’d be damned if his cheeks weren’t lit pink. The coolest guy, the biggest dude in the NHL, was blushing like a virgin over crochet birds. “I’ve bought a couple of things before that, too.”

My mouth hung open. “Are you serious?”

Brody shrugged.

“Oh, holy crap. You are! Why the hell?”

“It’s simple. I missed you. We didn’t speak after I left, so I’d ask Coop what you were up to. One day, he mentioned you’d opened an online store, so I checked it out.”

“And you bought something?”

A grin spread across Brody's lips. "A penguin. With purple eyes." He chuckled. "It looked a little crazy. Reminded me of you."

I batted at him with the hand he wasn't holding.

"When I felt lonely or a little down, I'd go online and check out what you'd made. I have no idea why. I mean, I wanted to see you do well. Succeed. But maybe I wanted a little part of you with me, too. Either way, I kept buying. First, there was a little robin, then a duck, and an emu. Your birds have their own drawer in my bedside cabinet. I'm a regular customer."

I shook my head, a slow burn of energy moving across my chest. "That can't be right. I don't have any orders from an address in Denver."

"I use a post office box in Tennessee. Get the packages forwarded on."

I widened my eyes. "That's you? I just thought it was some old lady who had a lot of grandkids to buy for."

He laughed and gave me a sheepish smile. "I knew you'd probably think I was buying them for some weird reason. Like I felt sorry for you. But truly? Buying your birds made me feel good. They were the nearest thing I had to you."

It wasn't quite a stalker move, though his revelation did verge on worrying. If he was the customer I was thinking of, he'd kept me afloat for a few months last year. He said it wasn't a pity move, and when I looked up into his azure eyes, I really didn't care. It was the sweetest thing anyone had ever done for me.

As the last warm rays of sun dipped behind the trees, I turned into Brody, tracing my fingers down the lean shadow of his cheekbone. I reached up and gently pressed my lips against his, just like I'd done all those years ago. When he returned their

pressure, my heart sang, and I let out a tiny sigh. At the sound, he opened his mouth to me, and our tongues met.

He'd said I felt like home to him, but if that was the case, his kiss was where I wanted to move in and take up residence. It was unhurried, deep, and blissful. I curled one hand around the back of his neck, drawing him in. He tasted so good, so perfect, that I almost cried out when he pulled away from me.

"I almost forgot!" Brody took his hands from my face and fumbled around in his pockets again. This time, he brought out a little package tied with a green ribbon. "I need to explain something before you open it, though."

He looked deep into my eyes. "I know you wanted a pair of crochet gloves. And I tried. I mean, really tried. But after I'd started, then unpicked the stitches for the eighth time, I was about ready to burn every ball of yarn in the county. And please, never tell your brother I picked up a crochet hook, but I made you this." He reached for my hand and placed the gift in my palm, closing his hand over the top.

Coop. In my happiness, I'd forgotten all about him. What would he say about Brody and me? "We have to tell him. Not about the gloves, but about us."

Brody smiled. "It's okay. I spoke to Coop. Told him everything. He threatened to cut off my balls if I ever hurt you, but apart from that, he was okay with the two of us. Happy. I just hope he can convince your other brothers I'm a solid guy. I'd rather not have to grow a beard and go on the run."

A huge searing burn of energy rushed through my chest, and my heart almost burst out of my mouth, as if it would break out and dance for joy right there in the water. Coop was our last obstacle. If he was happy for the two of us, Gran would be, too. Besides, she loved Brody almost as much as my brother and I.

I smiled and looked up at him from under my lashes. “Thank you for talking to him. He didn’t think the two of us together would be weird? Like it would interrupt the bromance the two of you’ve had all these years.”

Brody huffed. “No weirder than me doing crochet. I promise he was fine. Please. Open the package.”

I tugged at the little ribbon, then unwrapped the pink tissue paper it bound. Inside lay a single crochet chain in pink yarn. I looked at Brody. “What is it?”

Page 76

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

He rubbed a hand across the back of his neck. “I went to see the scary dude at the crash repair shop today. GI Joe. He’s actually a really nice guy. Not big on conversation, but it surprised me you never dated him. Did Mrs. Woodcock have something against his biceps? Too corrupting?”

I gave Brody a stiff nudge with my elbow. “Stop it!”

He grinned back at me. “I’ve missed the way you say that. I asked him for some yarn from his goat to make you a gift.”

“From Winston?”

“Yes. That little fella is kind of growing on me.”

I brought my brows together and smoothed out the chain against my palm to examine the stitches.

“Each link in the chain represents one year that I’ve known you.”

I tightened my eyes, running them over the yarn. There were twenty. Even though I’d known him for most of my life, Brody had moved to town after I was born. Twenty stitches, each one of a different size. I lifted the corners of my mouth. “I suggest you check your tension.”

Brody leaned further into me, bringing his lips near to my ear. The warmth of his body pulsed through the thin fabric of my T-shirt. “Believe me, I’ve been feeling nothing but tension around you, but...” He picked up the chain and took my hand

again, holding it out in front of me. “Hold still,” he whispered.

Brody took the knotted links and carefully tied the chain around my middle finger.

I sucked in a wavering breath. Just this simple gesture was a promise. A bond.

He cleared his throat, the noise a low burr that made my toes curl in the water. “I know it’s not quite what I promised, but I want you to know how much I love you.”

At his words, my heart pulsed like an exploding supernova. I looked up at him, my gaze bouncing from one blue eye to the other. They were full of that special glow he always had when he looked at me. But they held something else, too. Something deeper, truer. Solid.

“I’ve loved you since I can remember, Ro, but I’ve been selfish. Please, let me make it up to you. Let me show you we’re better when we’re together. If you’ll have me, I want to stay here with you, in Tuft Swallow. I want us to grow old together, watching birds and tossing cornhole sacks until the end of our days.”

I chewed on my bottom lip. Who cared about making anything up to me? This gorgeous man. My friend. He was offering me everything I’d ever dreamed of. But there had to be a catch. Surely, he couldn’t just forget hockey like that. It’d been his life for so long. “What about...?”

Brody brought his hand to my cheek, brushing his thumb along its plane. He made a sound like he was calming a baby. “We have our whole lives to work out the details. I just care about right now. Where we are today.” The corners of his lips trembled. “And considering I’m the only single man under thirty in town who hasn’t been on a date with you. I’d kind of like to sign up for the club.”

I grinned, turning into his hand as it rested on my cheek. “I don’t know. The

membership is pretty exclusive. There's a heavy vetting process to go through."

His smile matched my own, the corners of his eyes crinkling tight. "Oh, I think I'm ready to get heavy with you."

With a chuckle, I shifted my body, bringing my feet out of the water. I turned into him and gripped his massive shoulders before pulling myself onto his lap. For the longest beat, I stayed there, straddling him, our breath mingling, until finally, I closed my eyes and kissed him.

This time, though, there was no room for gentleness or hesitation. I needed to claim him. Taste him. Own him. The second my lips crashed into his, my world erupted into stars, fireworks, and pure hunger.

Just like that night in my room, my body became its own mistress, and all I could do was hang on for dear life and follow. As our tongues played together, blood sang in my ears, and my lungs struggled to pull in enough air. A slow ache hit low in my belly, and I ground against him to satisfy the tug. The need.

I wound my arms around his neck, and he pulled me in close, his hard chest strong and protective. The skin at my fingertips prickled to touch him, and I ran my hands across his chest, finding his neck with my lips.

"Fuck, Ro," he gasped as I shifted on top of him, his voice husky and tight. He dragged his hands down my arms to settle at my waist. "Wait. We have to wait."

I begged to differ. "We've waited long enough," I ground out, my mouth at his throat.

Brody tugged in a breath as I gently bit the soft flesh there. "Oh, believe me, I know. But I wouldn't put it past old Mrs. Woodcock and her gang of crazed bird stalkers to have their binoculars trained on us right now."

“I don’t care.” My fingertips were at the lean muscles of his waist. I pulled at his T-shirt, tugging it away from his jeans.

He gave the tiniest of moans, bringing his hands down to grasp mine. “You may not care, but according to your brother, I need to uphold your good name around town. I’m not sure open-air jetty sex is on his list of acceptable activities.”

He tensed underneath me. “Please, Ro. I really don’t want to mess up our being together in Coop’s eyes. I need to play by his rules. Just a little.”

I let out a sigh against his skin. Why, oh why, had I chosen to fall for my slightly overprotective brother’s chivalrous best friend?

I sighed. At least Brody wanted to do the right thing, no matter how frustrating. I didn’t know many men who would have such scruples in the circumstances. I pulled away from him. “You’re a cruel man, Brody Flockhart.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

His brow creased, but then a flash of something passed over his face like he'd discovered the secret of eternal youth. "Hold up, I have an idea."

Brody gripped the outside of my arms and lifted me gently away to the side. He placed me down on the gnarled wood of the jetty and ran his eyes over my face. I raised my hand to touch his cheek, but before I could, he gave me the cheekiest grin I'd ever seen. Then he leaned in, kissed my forehead, and disappeared over the side with a gentle splash.

29

RO

The second Brody disappeared from view, I scrambled to the jetty's edge, my damp feet slipping against the timber. There was no sign of him. He couldn't have drowned. From memory, he was a superb swimmer, and the water here was only waist deep. I scanned the surface until a scraping sound came from below me. Wood on wood.

As I leaned out to peek under the jetty, a blond head emerged from the gloom. Within a heartbeat, Brody strode out, pulling an old rowboat behind him. The water caused his jeans to cling to his slim hips, and I wet my bottom lip.

"Are you crazy?" I giggled. "You're gonna get soaked."

He shrugged, tipping his head to one side and sending me a look that a thousand women would kill for. All smoldering and delicious. "I remember some crazy girl

swimming out to our boat once. She didn't mind getting soaked."

I pulled in the tiniest breath. "You remember that?"

"I've never forgotten. In fact, I think that was the day I fell in love with you.."

My cheeks fired hot. "I'm not sure how I'm supposed to feel about that? It was hardly my best moment." From my hazy recollection, he'd held my hair for me as I'd puked my guts up after my first taste of beer.

"But it was one of mine, and I'm so sorry it's taken me this long to admit how I feel." With a slosh of water, Brody brought the boat to rest in the water below. "Will you join me?"

I met his eyes, finding nothing but love and mischief in them. Just as I always remembered. I swallowed. He did love me, and maybe he was right. He always had. Hadn't it been the same for me? I'd been all-in with Brody as long as I could remember. And now we could be together.

There was no way I would lower myself into anything gently, let alone this boat. Nope. If I was going to cast myself adrift with this man, I would go feet first. Make a splash. Immerse myself in everything we could be together.

A soft breeze rustled through my ponytail, and I grinned before slipping off the side of the jetty. The moment I hit the water, the rude crash of chill hit my skin, and I almost went under. A muscular arm circled around me, though, and I gasped as Brody brought me into his chest. Steadying myself against him, I looked into his eyes, his smile, and those soft, soft lips of his. Without a word, he dipped down and picked me up with one arm. He brushed his lips against mine before pulling the boat closer, leaning his weight on one side and gently tipping me in.

I clambered across the old tarps in the hull and scooted to sit on the little plank seat toward the back. My wet skin slapped against the worn wood. The boat lurched alarmingly to one side, and I gripped the edge of the hull as Brody climbed in after me. His jeans were saturated now, and his T-shirt clung to him like a second skin. He leaned over the side, sculling one large hand through the water.

The boat slowly pulled away from the jetty, and we moved out into the center of the lake. Not only did this man come with a killer smile and the body of Adonis, but he had oars for hands. I could only imagine what that meant for other parts of his physique.

“What are you grinning at?” he asked, mid-stroke.

“You.” How could I explain to him how perfect everything was? I moved my fingers to touch the band of stitches around my finger. My leap into the lake left them soaked, but the gift was so simple and so sweet. “I was just wondering what your fans would say if they could see you now. Crocheting, hanging out with nerdy girls in boats.” Brody winked at me, and my gut tugged low down.

We stopped in the middle of the lake, and he kneeled in the hull. The gentle lapping of water caressed the boat’s sides. “Do you think Mrs. Woodcock can see us here?”

I giggled. “Unless she has a submarine hidden in the reeds, I’d say we’re safe.”

Brody lifted a brow and shifted his position, moving the tarps around to make a little nest at the pointy end of the boat. He brushed at the canvas. “It’s dirty.”

My cheeks lit hot. “Then let’s join it.”

His eyes darkened, and one corner of his mouth lifted. Brody gave me just enough time to suck in a breath before he moved toward me. With his eyes full of fire, he

lifted me off the seat and laid me on the tarps with a crunch of brittle canvas. It was hardly a five-star hotel bed or a cozy blanket in a cornfield for our first time, but even with the smell of dust tickling my nostrils, I wouldn't swap this little row boat for the world.

Brody kneeled above me, running his eyes over my face and then my T-shirt. "You're wet."

If only he knew. I squirmed a little under his gaze, keenly aware of every flaw in my body. He'd be used to drop-dead gorgeous women. Women who didn't have bruises on their shins from skating. Women who always waxed within an inch of their lives. I swallowed.

"And you also look terrified," he said.

"I'm just cold," I lied. I mean, it was partially true. My T-shirt was more than a little damp, and even I could see my hardened nipples straining against the cotton.

Brody shifted a little. Maybe his kneeling on the bottom of the boat hurt his leg. Even so, the corners of his mouth lifted, and his voice dropped to a husky whisper. "I can warm you up if you like." He gripped the bottom of his T-shirt and pulled it over his head, peeling it off slowly. The muscles of his chest rippled at the movement, and my eyes traveled straight to the chiseled slab of his stomach, and the trail of fair hair disappearing beneath his waistband.

I must have laid there with my mouth hanging open because Brody lifted a brow and smirked. "Something wrong?"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

My chest thudded. He knew the effect his body had on me. I may as well hang a neon sign around my neck that said, “Not used to having hot sports gods strip for her.”

“Nothing’s wrong. Everything is perfect.” Was it just me, or was my voice a little too squeaky?

He threw his shirt down and edged closer. The boat wobbled a little, and I rolled into him as he settled at my side. At least with the tarp, neither of us were at risk of getting splinters. Brody rested his head in his palm, and his blue eyes drilled into mine. With the softest smile, he brought his hand to my face, brushing my cheek with his thumb. “How about we start where we left off?”

My heart boomed in my chest. From memory, we’d left off just as I’d come embarrassingly fast and hard against his hand. Still, I’d gladly give it another go-around, just for old times’ sake. I nodded, and the corners of his eyes crinkled.

He took a long breath, then trailed his fingertips along the pale skin at my waist. “I remember you asking me to touch you.” Brody dragged his fingers higher, nudging at the bottom of my T-shirt, shifting it further up my ribs. “Do you want me to touch you again?”

Practically squirming under his hand, I chewed at my lip. He was teasing me! Taking his time on purpose. Of course, he was. This was Brody. I’d expect nothing less, but it didn’t mean I had to play along.

“I remember things differently. I touched you first.” With my words, I brought my hand down to grip his hard length through his wet jeans. Just like before, in my room,

he tipped his head back and groaned. I moved again, stroking him through the denim. “Do you remember this, Brody?”

He nodded, touching my neck, kissing the skin there, and sending a shiver through my body. “How could I forget?” With those words, he shifted to move over me, the bulge of his cock grazing against the zipper of my shorts. At the contact, my core tugged, and it was all I could do to stop my hips from chasing the sensation. From slamming into him. I reached out to grip one hard buttock. In response, Brody passed his tongue gently across my bottom lip, his breath in my mouth. “This time, I want to taste you.”

My pulse combusted in my veins, and I fought to steady my breath at the thought of Brody’s mouth on me. I could think of nothing more perfect. “I’d like that.”

Brody pushed up on his arms with the tiniest smile, muscles firing and tensing underneath his skin. The buzz of crickets on the shore scorched the thick early summer air as he raked his eyes over me, over my damp top, and across my breasts. His chest moved faster and harder than before. “Damn,” was all he rasped out before he joined me back on the canvas. His mouth crashed against mine, his wall of a rib cage pressing against me.

A whirlwind of sensations ran through my body, need, desperation, and a pulsing ache low down in my belly. I wanted this man so damn much. Wanted all of him. And fast, before I exploded and scattered in a shower of debris to float on the lake.

With a shift of his weight, Brody nudged up my T-shirt and took one breast into his mouth. He circled his tongue around its hardened peak. At the same time, his fingertips played with the other, teasing and pinching until I thought I’d go mad with desire. I let out a tiny moan and at the sound, he traced a pathway down my ribs with his tongue.

Slowly, far too slowly, Brody undid my buttons. He punctuated each pop of metal against cotton with kisses that traveled lower and lower. The skin of my stomach tingled, and by the time he'd undone the last, I was a quivering mess, ready to agree to anything he suggested.

With the graze of his scruff on my hip, Brody tugged my shorts down, their damp cotton heavy and clinging to my skin. He stripped them off, along with my panties, and our eyes met for the briefest of moments before he gently nudged my thighs apart.

The second his tongue found my center, I was a lost cause. His persistent strokes, the glorious feel of him against my heat, rendered me a hopeless wreck. Completely lost at sea.

I tangled my fingers in his hair as time and time again he sent me higher. Rocketed me to the stars. Launched me soaring into a free fall of sensation and crazy need. A need to own Brody. To feel him inside me. To never let him go.

“Brody, I...please...” I had no idea what I was going to say. What I was even asking for, but at that moment, I looked down, and our eyes met. At the flash of white-hot flames, the touch paper he'd lit reached its destination, and an exquisite pulse of pure bliss washed over me. Years of pent-up desire. Countless hours of dreaming about moments just like this swept under me, over me, carrying my body and my heart to the edge before shattering me against the rocks.

I cried out his name, just as I had in my room, only this time I didn't care who heard.

When, finally, my waves of pleasure subsided, Brody brought his lips to my inner thigh, his gaze still smoldering. He grinned. “You don't know how long I've wanted to do that. I want to make you as happy as you make me.”

The look of pure joy on his face tugged at my heart. I had to say something. Tell him just how I felt. Finally, confess how much he meant to me.

“I love you,” I whispered, bringing my hand down to cup his face. “With all my heart. No questions, no reservations. No regrets. I’m yours.”

He ran his eyes over my face, as if, searching for a sign I was lying or joking. For the longest beat, he waited, but then his grin returned. “Mine. In all senses? I mean, I have to ask. What exactly does that cover?”

“Sorry?”

He nudged onto his elbows. “I mean, do I get the first choice of cinnamon rolls in the diner on Wednesdays? Do I get to hold your pom-poms when you’re in between routines at the cornhole games? Do I get to tell everyone you’re the only woman I could ever love?”

My heart swelled in my chest. “I’m not sure I can extend my affection to the cinnamon rolls, but the rest of your demands seem reasonable. I may have a demand or two to add into the mix.”

Brody leaned in and kissed my inner thigh again. “I’m all ears.”

I smiled. “I want more than your ears. I want everything about you. Every part.” He kissed my skin again, eyes firmly on mine. But he didn’t move, didn’t say a word. Was he seriously not taking my hint? “Brody. I’m not playing. I’d happily go over the last few minutes on repeat, but I need you inside me. Please don’t make me beg.”

He glanced over his shoulder, looking back toward the town. Was he looking for an escape route?

“What are you doing?”

Brody shimmied up and landed a kiss just above my belly button. “I was just making sure Mrs. Woodcock wasn’t lurking on the bank. Hadn’t strapped a listening device to a frog. I’m not sure she would approve of such a request from her protégé. It would mark the end of your stretch as the Virgin Mary.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

“Oh, ha-ha.” He always had to tease me, but I could hardly contain my smile. “If you don’t want me, there’s plenty of hot bird watchers or bull riding fans who might.”

His brow furrowed for a moment before he moved up to join me, rocking the boat alarmingly. “Oh, believe me, I want you. In fact, I want you so bad it hurts. Like, it literally hurts.”

I sat up. “What do you mean?” Did he have a malfunction in his equipment downstairs? Had our little aquatic adventure given him a case of barnacles?

He lay on his back, eyeing me from beneath half-closed lashes. “All this crawling on deck has sent my leg into a world of pain.” He wiggled his eyebrows. “I may need a stiff massage to get everything working again. And I know you’re the only woman who can bring me back to life.”

Well, call me a nurse and put me in charge of resuscitation. If Brody needed help to bring any body part back to life, I’d happily oblige. I reached down, my fingers sliding up his inner thigh before running them along his zipper. A solid bulge greeted my touch, and as I trailed my hand along its length, he closed his eyes and sucked in a breath through his teeth.

“Are you sure you need help? You seem just fine to me.”

“You can’t blame a man for trying, and I intend never to miss an opportunity to feel your hands on me.”

“You’re nuts.” I giggled.

“For you? I am.”

He reached up and threaded a hand around my neck, pulling me gently into him, bringing my lips to his. Their softness pressed against me until he slowly traced a line along my lower lip, and I opened my mouth to him. Our tongues circled as we explored each other. Kissing Brody was still a novelty, and I wanted to know everything. Make up for wasted time.

With blood pulsing in my ears, he slid his other arm around my back and under my T-shirt. His fingers sent a shiver of goosebumps over my skin. Holding me tight, Brody lifted me a little and guided me onto his lap, straddling his hips.

After a beat, I broke our kiss, coming to stillness with my hands on his abs, tracing the lines of his muscles. Now, it was my turn to tease him. “Are you sure your leg is up to this? I mean, I don’t want to injure you any further.” As I spoke, I ran my fingers up his pecs, dragging my nails gently across their planes.

Tiny muscles danced under his skin at my touch, and he tugged on his bottom lip. “I want this just as much as you, but you’ll need to drive.”

A smile grew on my lips. “Not a problem. I have my license.”

He huffed a gentle laugh. “Perfect, but I’m going to have to ask you to exit the vehicle while I make sure all safety measures are in place.”

I stared at him until realization dawned on me. He was talking about protection. Damn, it hadn’t even crossed my mind. I mean, rowboat sex hadn’t been on today’s to-do list. “Oh, yes. I’m sorry, I didn’t bring anything. I wasn’t exactly expecting to find myself in this situation.”

Again, he chuckled, gently shifting under me as I moved off him. The minute I’d

settled on the boat floor, he unzipped his fly. “A little help, please.”

With a giggle, I reached over to tug on his waistband. Just like my shorts, his jeans clung to him like ivy on a tree. Still, I nudged the fabric down until his extremely solid, extremely large dick sprung free. I widened my eyes. “Oh, my.”

The words just came out, like I had no control over my brain or my mouth. Given the size of his oar-like hands, I should’ve guessed he’d have a package to rival the mechanical bull I’d ridden at the Crow. When I continued to stare, Brody cleared his throat.

“Feeling a little vulnerable here,” he mumbled.

Him and me, both. Should he come with some sort of health warning? Would he even fit inside me? “Oh crap, sorry,” I whispered. “I got...distracted.”

Brody quirked a brow. “Well, if you’ll help me out of my clothes, I’ll find something to keep you focused. On point.”

He winked and, trying very hard not to look at anything below his waist, we tugged his jeans down to his thighs. When we’d freed him, I sat back. Brody kicked his denim off and retrieved something from the pocket. The tiniest tear of foil hit my ears, and I swallowed.

The muscles of his back moved and flexed in front of me. After what felt like forever, he glanced over his shoulder, a wolfish grin on his face. “Let’s take this baby for a spin.”

His voice was low and throaty, and holy hell, this was really going to happen. I was going to have sex with the man I loved. The man I’d been in love with for years.

Brody inched back up to me, and I threaded my arm around his neck. The scent of his cologne and the heat of his body engulfed my senses, and the minute he leaned back to rest on the tarp, I kissed him. It was twilight now, but the faintest glow from the town's distant street lamps lit his beautiful body with an eerie amber glow.

As our lips collided, I crawled back on top of him, coming to rest on his hips. He held me in place with both hands at my waist, and I moved against him a little. His breath caught in a hiss, and he closed his eyes.

"Oh crap, did I hurt something?"

"No," he ground out. "Touch me, Ro. Please. I'm gonna explode." I brought my hand to just below Brody's belly button, and his eyes opened, burning into me. I took his length in my palm. He let out a deep groan, and my insides coiled and curled, spreading fingers of need down to my core. The media often described him as a handful on the ice, but this was ridiculous.

"Ro," he whispered, "I want to see you. I mean, all of you." His heavy-lidded eyes hung on me, and I pulled in a breath. Of course! He'd delivered me two very impressive orgasms, but he hadn't seen me fully naked yet. My lips curved and letting go of my grip on him, I slowly peeled off my T-shirt.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

The minute I'd finished, his eyes raked over my body, full of wonder. Awe. He reached out and untethered my ponytail, allowing my hair to settle around my shoulders. After a beat, he touched the underside of one breast, running his thumb over its hard bud before cupping it in his hand. "I always knew you'd be beautiful. I'm going to enjoy the rest of my life with you."

At his words, butterflies the size of seagulls took flight in my chest, their wings beating against my ribs. My heartbeat kicked up into overdrive. The rest of his life?

I opened my mouth, but before I could ask what he meant, he pushed up to sitting, kissing me hard, pulling me closer. The tickle of his chest against my nipples and the pull of his breath set my insides on fire, igniting the low pulsing I'd come to love.

I ground into him to relieve the pressure, and his breath came in ever-increasing rasps against my lips. I dragged my nails over his back, tempting him to come closer, to envelop me completely. But, as our movements became wilder, Brody closed a hand around one of my buttocks.

"Please, can we...will you..."

He laced every word with tortured breath, but I didn't give him time to finish. Instead, a grin spread across my lips. "Oh, hell yes." I needed no persuading.

I brought my palm flat against Brody's chest, pushing him back so he rested on his elbows. Then, with my eyes nailed to his, I shifted my weight off a little before taking him in my hand and sliding onto him. The drag of his cock inside me, filling me, took my breath away. My gasp fought for supremacy with his guttural growl.

Brody tipped his head back, and I moved in slow circles, chasing every sensation, every pull of pleasure. The soft skin of his thick neck stretched before me as if begging me to kiss it. I obliged, and once again, my breasts nudged against the light dusting of hair on his chest. With every movement, every rotation I made, I wanted him more. Like I was an addict, he was my drug, and I'd never get enough.

As I moved on top of him, Brody gripped my buttocks. He tipped his hips into me and followed my movements, chasing my strokes. If I paused, he paused. If I sped up or ground harder into him, he matched my rhythm. I was in full control, and damn, it felt good. The slide of Brody inside me, his hands clamping me in place and his mouth on my breasts, was all I could ever imagine.

Repeatedly, we met together in a slap of skin until neither of us could bear it. Grinding out my name, Brody pushed up to sit. He bent his knees behind me, and I leaned back slightly, crashing into him hard as he met me with strokes of his own. The relentless rhythm of our bodies coming together was hypnotizing. Magical. Blissful. With each tip of my hips, he sucked in a breath, his mouth at my breasts. Senseless words tripped off his tongue.

As fireflies danced around us, the first nudges of paradise tickled low down in my core. The first tugs of ecstasy. The creeping onset of a feeling that would take over, consume me, and then leave my body wracked and heavy. Sated. It was all I craved. He was all I craved.

"Brody," I rasped, "I want you."

At the sound of my voice, his grip around my hips tightened, and his lips found my neck. "You have me. Just like you said, no questions, no reservations. No regrets. I'm yours."

His words filled my soul, and as I tangled my fingers through his hair, waves of want

and pure ecstasy bubbled up inside of me. Each thrust of his hips drove me higher. Each shuddering breath at my ear pulled me in. He was dragging me over searing coals of delight, and I was a willing victim. My head spun until finally, Brody groaned my name one last time, and rocking together, we dissolved in a mess of hopeless desire.

30

RO

Aslap of skin roused me from my sleep. The humming of insects filled the air, and as I opened my eyes, my vision snapped into focus. The weathered wood of the boat, the grass and trees lining the bank, and Brody Flockhart bringing his hand down against his hip. Repeatedly.

“Mother f...” He stopped when he noticed me lift my head.

“Are you okay? What’s up?” I reached out a hand to touch his arm and recoiled a little at the feel of his skin. It was like touching a sheet of bubble wrap. A canvas of nasty red lumps. I tightened my eyes. Mosquito bites covered every inch of him. After the little suckers had targeted me last night, he’d given me the tarp to cover up. The flying assassins had obviously decided that any blood was better than none. They’d feasted on him instead.

I sat up and took in the braille-like bumps that spread over his back. “Oh, crap! They really went to town on you.”

Brody grimaced. “Yep. I swear I read somewhere that mosquitoes don’t bite men.” He rubbed at his arm. “I may have to ask you a favor. Can you crochet me a pair of mittens? I swear I’m going to scratch my skin to the bone at this rate.” He wagged his head and offered his fists to me like he wanted me to slap him in cuffs.

I gave him a lopsided smile. “At least you had the foresight to put your boxers on at some point. I wouldn’t want your package to have suffered any damage.” His grin made my heart skip, and my insides melt.

A shiver ran over my body as the mist on the water turned to minute drops of dew on my skin. We must’ve fallen asleep last night. We’d had every intention of returning to the jetty, but our post-pleasure snuggles had been too tempting. The last thing I remember was Brody telling me the whole truth about his injury and the worry he’d gone through these last few months. I’d had no idea.

I shoved over to one side of the hull and opened the old canvas. “Come here under the tarp. The bugs’ll disappear once the sun warms up.”

Brody came to join me, wincing a little as he moved his leg. We’d certainly tested its resilience last night. If DIY rowing and boat-sex had been on the list for his physical with the Denver doctor, he’d have passed with flying colors.

I settled on Brody’s chest as the dawn light hit our faces. I sighed, tracing my fingertips through the smattering of hair. The last time we’d lain like this, I’d been full of doubt. My stomach had resembled a tangled ball of yarn at the thought of talking to Coop about me and Brody. Now, I could barely contain the jitters in my chest and the smile on my face.

Thank goodness I hadn’t dreamed last night and chalked the countless orgasms he’d given me down to imagination. No. He was here, hard and warm underneath me. All my tomorrows at my fingertips.

“Let’s start again. Good morning,” he said, kissing the top of my head. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“I’m just sorry I made you stay out in the bug-infested air. Why didn’t you wake me?”

I'm sure the tarp would've covered us both."

"Let's just say I took one for the team." The warm air of his chuckle ruffled my hair, and he ran his fingers over my shoulder blade. "Do you think anyone would miss us if we stayed out here?"

I looked at him and giggled. “What?”

“We could message Eve. Get her to bring down some muffins and coffee. Send them over to us on one of Coop’s old toy boats. I think we could last about a week before anyone noticed.”

I shook my head, settling back on his chest. “Are you kidding? I bet you have a barrage of messages waiting for you. Interview requests.”

Brody tensed under me. He admitted last night that he dreaded the media questions sure to follow the announcement. The details of his misfortune would be played repeatedly, reminding him of what he’d lost.

The gurgle of the water against the boat was the only sound until, finally, he spoke. “If it’s okay with you, I want to give an exclusive to Alex.”

Now, it was my turn to tense up. Brody must have sensed the shift in my body because he touched my chin gently, tipping my face to look at him. “Hey, I meant what I said. Alex is just a friend and a professional one at that. We’ve always looked out for each other, and if she hadn’t come down to the derby arena the other day, the news would’ve blindsided me.”

I swallowed. He was telling the truth, but I hated the idea of him seeing her again. Of them sharing such an intimate past.

I gave him a brief nod. “Instead, you had to chase some crazy woman all the way into town in your car. I’m so sorry.”

The corners of his mouth nudged up. “Don’t be sorry. Listen, I had the best view in the house, trailing after you. You don’t know how hot you looked in that tiny little dress.”

I chuckled, then kissed his chest. “So now what?”

Brody pulled me closer as if I’d float away at any moment. “I don’t know what’s going to happen or how this is going to work, but I do know we’ll be fine if we do it together.”

I reached below the tarp and curled my fingers around his waist. “Well, as a starter, I expect you to keep up your crochet. I think you show promise.”

He brought his hand to mine, finding the chain of stitches I still wore on my finger. “Next time, I might even make a square. Perhaps I’ll hang out with Winston’s Hot Daddy. Start our own secret knitting group. Kind of like Fight Club. Call ourselves the Stichin’ Studs.”

I huffed a laugh. “Today a square, tomorrow the world!”

Brody grinned and kissed the tip of my nose before pulling me closer. “And what about the derby? You were amazing out there. I was so proud.”

The single cry of a hawk rent the still air, and I let out a long breath. “Thank you. But I’m not sure I want to be a Scalper. Those girls were just plain mean.” Brody opened his mouth, perhaps to convince me to give the team a go, but I shook my head. “Mom and I had a good chat yesterday. Kicked around some ideas. Let’s just say the trial won’t be my last flirtation with roller derby.”

Brody’s face lit up. “I’m glad. You have some serious skills.”

I giggled, moving my hand down to rest just below his belly button. “Oh, yeah?”

Brody sucked in a breath, then met my eyes. The hunger, the desire, the love that burned there sent my heart skittering.

“Oh yeah, I meanseriousskills. And as your coach, I intend to help you perfect every single one.”

The End

EPILOGUE

My hammock rocked gently in the breeze as the scent of Gran’s roses jostled for supremacy with the smell of baking inside the house. I had one eye on the paper in my hand and another on the road. Brody was coming over tonight. We were heading out for a beer at the Crow, then pizza.

Eve had dropped in on her way home from work. I’d offered for her to join us, but she’d declined. Said she didn’t have the stomach for the tide of gooey couple stuff she’d get caught in.

I got it. Brody and I were sickeningly happy. She’d laughed and snipped at me a little, saying I’d pushed her down the ranks of his adoring admirers, but Eve was happy for me. For us. She was the best friend I could ever have.

She’d left me in possession of the latest edition of the Nosey Pecker and a heavy case of the butterflies. I just prayed Brody hadn’t set eyes on it before he arrived.

He came over most nights. Even if he’d bought one of the prettiest houses in town, he still found his way to mine. Perhaps it was the lure of Gran’s baking skills. I smiled to myself, a bubble of energy bouncing in my chest. Maybe not. True to his promise on

the lake, Brody and I had put in the hours, perfecting our skills. And they didn't involve flour and mixing bowls.

Tuneless whistling carried through the open window from inside. Coop. He's been surprisingly good about Brody and me so far. The two of them made sure they had plenty of hang-out time together. Still, my brother was a little disappointed not to cash in on his friend's fame or reputation anymore. He'd joked that his love life had never been so quiet.

Still, he'd found some new hobbies to fill his time. He'd flirted with cornhole and, no doubt, all the single female players, and stepped up his wood-chopping commitments. He'd even helped Brody out with his new team in Robin Springs. Most surprisingly, he'd hung out with Eve a little. Just as friends, of course. She'd got an idea in her head to become an influencer and said Coop knew all about the technology she needed.

A crunch of gravel and the growl of an engine broke my thoughts as Brody pulled into the drive. He turned off his car and pushed his sunglasses to the top of his head, emitting enough James Dean vibes to leave me craving a life in black and white. He grinned at me, then got out of his car.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:48 pm

My eyes followed him as he climbed up to the porch, dripping with sex appeal. All solid pecs and pants that hugged him in all the right places. I still had to pinch myself every time I saw him.

Brody had taken the job with Millan in the end, coaching his junior team. They'd made him an offer he couldn't refuse, and as Brody said, it was the only way he could stay on the ice. I think he had ulterior motives, though. He'd gotten used to a heavy dollop of hero worship in Denver, and there was only so much ego-stroking that I was willing to offer. I didn't want him to get arrogant. Similar to my cheer squad, though, the kids on the team idolized Brody. In their eyes, he was a legend.

He made it all the way to the hammock before leaning in for a kiss. His lips were just as soft as always. With a smile, he handed me a tote bag covered in pictures of kittens. "I picked up the yarn you requested, m'lady. I hope it's to your satisfaction." He gave me a wink, and my insides churned in delight.

With a grin, Brody leaned back against the porch post, arms folded across his chest. "Do you need someone to rock your hammock?"

The corners of my lips ticked up, too. "You might be able to persuade me."

Under his gaze, I scooted up to sit and picked up the Nosey Pecker that Eve had left behind. "People have been talking about you again."

He tipped his head to one side. "In a good way, I hope."

I shrugged and swung my legs to the ground. "That depends." His blue eyes followed

me all the way over to where he stood. “And as much as I love a hammock, I could think of other places I’d rather sit.” Brody’s eyes darkened a little. I took his hand and led him to one of the enormous wicker chairs Gran kept on the porch.

I pushed him down and settled across his lap. As he threaded his arms around me, his rock-hard thighs shifted, and I’d be damned if I didn’t feel the slightest hint of hardness in his jeans.

“I need you to brace yourself,” I said.

He curled a brow, and I held up the paper, ready to read aloud like a royal proclamation from some old-fashioned fairy tale.

“It seems wedding bells may soon ring in Tuft Swallow. Local hero Brody Flockhart and Rowena Swan were spotted out in town again last night. Although I can’t divulge my sources, the grapevine is buzzing that somebody may have booked the chapel in the fall.

This news follows the latest victory of the Tuft Swallow Talons, who are holding their second intake trial on Friday. We recommend all hopefuls polish their wheels. Coach Flockhart and Captain Ro Swan are a formidable team. They mean to make their mark on the local derby scene with another win over the Spitz Hollow Scalpers next month.

Aside from Coach Flockhart’s duties to the Robin Springs Rockets, Miss Swan is keeping our local boy very busy, if you know what I mean.”

With a racing heart, I folded the paper and tucked it into my pocket. I met Brody’s eyes, and my cheeks heated at the glow there. At the smile on his face. He looked as if he’d just won the lottery.

“So, what do you think?” His voice was low and husky, and my belly tugged.

“I swear I don’t know where they get their information. I haven’t talked about chapels or bookings with anyone.” We’d only dated for six months, and even though I’d happily sign my life away to this man, I didn’t want him to feel pressured. Once the rumor mill churned into action, things could get a little crazy in a town like Tuft Swallow.

He chuckled. “But do you think the Pecker has it right this time? Are you ready to make an honest man out of me, Miss Swan?” He chewed at his bottom lip before continuing. “I mean, we could take a chance. Get out of our comfort zones. Only this time, we’d do it together. As a team. I don’t know about you, but I couldn’t think of anyone I’d rather spend my life with.” Brody leaned in and brought his lips to mine. “I love you so much, Ro. Please say you’ll have me.”

Breath caught in my throat, and I looked into his clear blue eyes and smiled. He was exactly the man I wanted to get uncomfortable with. The one whose arms I craved. He was the only one I ever wanted to show me his hockey stop.

I gave a little chuckle at the memory of the two of us laid out on the floor of the school gym. Honestly, I’d been almost as head over heels in love with him then as I was now.

I ran my fingertips along his jaw, marveling at the happiness he’d gifted me. The promise of the future we’d have.

Brody was mine, and I was his. Simple.

I gently kissed his lips, his breath mingling with mine as I spoke.

“Like I said earlier, Brody. You might be able to persuade me.”