



Possessive Cowboy

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Category: Erotic, Romance

Description: It was supposed to be a one-night stand. But in a small town where everybody knows everybody, there's no such thing as an anonymous fling. And my alpha cowboy wants more than one night. Much more.

Maverick When I see her photos on that app, I know I have to have her. Know that I have to claim those curves as mine. She's an angel wrapped up in temptation, pure innocence begging to be corrupted. I'm not the kind of man to commit. Not the type to settle down. But a man can change for the right woman. And Raina? She's as right as I am wrong.

Raina When I went out that night, I was looking for a quick hookup. Something short term. I even used a fake name. The last thing I'm thinking about is commitment. My alpha cowboy turns out to be just what I needed – a night of passion. When I leave the next morning, my plan is to forget him. The only problem? He's not ready to forget me.

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1

Raina

“This is insane. I don’t know how I let you talk me into this.”

“Oh, would you relax?” Abby, my best friend, says through the phone. “It’s not like you’ve never gone on a first date before.”

“This is different,” I say, glancing around the crowded bar.

I’m looking for Maverick, the larger-than-life cowboy who said he’d meet me at ten o’clock and who is now...ten minutes late.

“How is it different?” Abby asks. “You’ve used dating apps before.”

“Datingapps, Abby,” I say. “And you and I both know that Hush isn’t a regular dating app. It’s a...”

I glance around to make sure nobody is eavesdropping on my conversation. But of course, no one is. The bar is too crowded and loud anyway, and aside from that, nobody is looking my way. As usual. Which is why I got into this stupid Hush app situation in the first place.

“It’s a what?” Abby asks impatiently.

“It’s a...sex app,” I whisper into the phone.

“Oh please,” Abby says. “They’re all sex apps, Raina. This one is just more honest about it than the others are. Personally, I feel like it’s nicer that way. Refreshingly straightforward.”

“Straightforward. Yeah. That’s one way of putting it,” I say.

I think about the Hush’s crude process of asking you to complete a checklist of physical attributes you prefer in a sexual partner. Tall, short, skinny, fat, muscular, hairy...and a few other metrics about a certain male appendage that made me feel like I was online shopping for a dildo instead of searching for a sexual partner, an actual human being to interact with.

“Objectifying” doesn’t even begin to describe the whole ordeal. Worse? I had to upload details of my own physical attributes.

That’s right. Down to my height, dress size, and the cup size of my bra. Along with photos of myself in my underwear. Sure, my face wasn’t in any of the photos, and no actual nudity was in them either. But I’m not exactly confident in my body as it is. Taking photos in bright lighting, documenting every inch of myself for strangers on an app to judge?

Yikes.

Ordinarily I hide beneath baggy clothing, happy to be a wallflower. But Hush’s process doesn’t lie. It forces you to put everything out there - the good, the bad, and everything in between.

No photo filters allowed, either.

Look at me, internet strangers! Do you like what you see? These dimpled thighs, this stomach roll, these faded stretch marks on my boobs?

“Look at it this way,” Abby says. “At least you know for a fact that this Maverick guy likes what he saw.”

“Apparently,” I reply.

“And you liked what you saw, right?” Abby asks.

I laugh.

“What’s not to like? He’s tall and buff. He looks like he could pick me up and toss me around with one arm. Assuming that his photos are real, of course.”

“They looked pretty authentic to me,” Abby says.

I shift in my seat, looking around the bar for the man named Maverick.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I keep wondering if maybe he’s some guy who enjoys matching with fat girls on the app using a fake identity, and then standing them up for dates just to mess with them. I mean, why the hell would a man who looks like that want to hook up with me?”

“Oh, would you stop it?” Abby sighs. “Raina, I know your confidence is totally shot since you and John broke up last year...but it’s getting tiring listening to you beat yourself up constantly. I mean, don’t get me wrong: I love you, and I’m here for you always. But I also think you need a kick in the pants right now. You’re in a rut and you need something, or someone, to help you get out of it.”

“I’m sorry, Abby,” I reply guiltily. “I’m not trying to be a Debbie Downer. I’m just so nervous.”

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“I know. And I don’t blame you. But can you do me a favor tonight?”

“Sure,” I say.

“Try to fake it until you make it. Okay? Even if you don’t feel confident, just pretend,” Abby says. “Sit up straight, look this guy in the eye, and play the part of a confident, sexually empowered woman who knows what she wants. You’re an actress tonight, just playing the role of someone else. You’re not Raina tonight, you’re Bridget. Remember?”

I cringe, remembering the fake name I used on the app. Why Bridget? Because I downloaded the app while watching Bridget Jones’s Diary and binging chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream.

You know. Typical post-breakup behavior. Except my breakup was over a year ago and for some reason I’m still in a rut in my life, just like Abby said.

“Right. You’re Bridget tonight,” Abby continues firmly. “Your alter ego. And Bridget is confident. Sexually empowered. Not afraid to go after what she wants. Got it?”

“Got it,” I say faintly.

“Now, get off the phone with me. You don’t want to be hunched over talking to your friend on the phone when he gets here. Hang up, order a drink, try to act like you’re having a good time in a bar.”

“I never have a good time in bars,” I reply. “I hate bars.”

“Yeah? Well, Bridget loves bars. And she loves meeting random hot guys in bars and taking them back to a hotel for a one-night stand.”

“Okay, okay,” I reply. “Damn, you’re really serious about this Bridget thing, aren’t you?”

“Yes I am,” Abby says firmly. “You have the rest of your life to be Raina. Resume your life as Raina on Monday. But tonight? You downloaded that app for a reason, didn’t you? Don’t forget that. Don’t back down. You always chicken out. Not tonight. Okay?”

“Okay but -”

The phone cuts out before I can finish my sentence. Guess she wasn’t kidding when she said I need to get off the phone.

I glance at the time on the screen. It’s now twenty past ten. I check my Hush notifications and see I’ve got a message from Maverick. My heart drops, preparing to see a last-minute cancellation. But when I pull up the message, the little blue text bubble tells me Maverick is only a few minutes away and is apologetic about his lateness.

This softens me a little. He’s late, but at least he bothered to check in. That counts for something. Right?

“Are you sure I can’t get you a drink?” the female bartender asks, coming my way and nodding at my untouched glass of water.

I think of Abby’s command that I fake it until I make it.

What would Bridget do?

“Actually yes,” I say. “Two shots of tequila.”

The bartender nods and seconds later two shot glasses full of the fragrant liquid are in front of me. Before I can think about it too hard, I down the first shot and grimace as the liquid burns my throat and nostrils, making my eyes water.

Okay. That wasn't too bad.

I consider the second shot for a moment before picking it up. I'm lifting it to my lips, bracing myself for the second shot of burning liquid, when I feel a large, heavy hand on the back of my neck.

“You might want to slow down,” says a deep, rumbling voice. “By the look on your face, I have a feeling you're not used to that much liquor.”

2

Maverick

Figuresthat the one night I'm supposed to meet a woman, something goes wrong at the ranch.

Damned if I do, damned if I don't. That's how it always goes.

This is the life I accepted when I took on my family's ranch full time after my dad passed. I try not to complain about it too much. No sense in whining and moaning about something I can't change. And even if I could change it, I wouldn't. Life on the ranch is the only life for me.

But it's hard work. Backbreaking work, even. And it's rare that I get a night off this time of year. So I intend to use it well. Very well.

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Bridget is even better to look at in person. My eyes go to her tits pretty much right away.

Ordinarily I'd try to at least pretend to be interested in making eye contact with a date, with getting to know her before trying to sleep with her. But this isn't an ordinary date, and she knows that.

I only suggested that we meet at a bar because it seemed wrong to go straight to a hotel. But now that I've gotten a look at Bridget up close, I'm regretting this. I'm wondering how long she'll want to stay here, how long she'll want to talk before she lets me take her to bed. Therealreason we're both here tonight.

"You must be Maverick," Bridget says, twisting on the barstool to look at me.

"Mav," I reply curtly.

I take the shot glass from her hand, my fingers briefly brushing against hers, and bring the drink under my nose to smell. Tequila. Not my favorite, but a stiff drink of any kind will help me shift from working mode to relaxing. I down the shot and put the glass on the bar.

"Would you like another?" she offers politely. "I have a tab open."

Shit. This girl is talking to me like we're at a job interview or something. I'm surprised she didn't try to shake my hand. And what the hell is she doing, offering to buy me a drink?

“You don’t need to buy me a drink,” I say gruffly. “I’ll pick up that tab, too. When you’re with me, you’ll spend my money, not yours.”

“That’s...that’s really not necessary. But thank you.”

For the first time, I tear my eyes away from her body and look at her face.

The app doesn’t let you share photos of your face - I guess to prevent creeps from identifying women or something like that. And to be honest, I didn’t even wonder what Bridget’s face would look like. I saw her body, and that was enough for me.

I’m a cowboy on his night off looking to blow off some steam. I’m not looking for my goddamn soul mate or something.

Hell. I don’t even believe in soul mates.

But now I’m looking at Bridget’s face and see that she’s pretty. Really fucking pretty. Girl-next-door kind of pretty, with large blue eyes and soft brown hair framing her face. She’s got freckles across her cheeks and her nose, and her lips are pale pink. Young looking, younger than I expected, and way too innocent for a guy like me.

“No makeup,” I mutter absent-mindedly, taking her in.

“Excuse me?” she raises a brow, the polite smile dropping from her face.

Nice one, Mav. Took you 5 seconds and you’ve already offended her. That’s got to be a world record.

“You’re not wearing makeup,” I say a little louder. “Not much of it, anyway. Don’t worry. I like that. I hate when females wear all that gooey shit on your lips.”

There. That should fix it. Nothing to be offended about now, right?

Wrong.

“Females,” she repeats, her brow furrowing.

“I meant that as a compliment,” I say, shifting back on my heels and putting my hands in my pockets.

“Glad you approve,” she says.

She’s not looking at me now, fidgeting with the strap of her purse. She looks past me, at the exit.

“Look, I appreciate you coming all this way to meet with me but I’m sorry. I think this was a bad idea. I have to go.”

She stands and I watch her walk to the exit for a moment before following her out.

The parking lot is well lit by the streetlights and neon signs of the bar behind us. I catch up to her in no time.

“Now, wait a damn minute,” I say when I get to her car. She’s digging in her purse, looking for keys, and her back stiffens when she hears my voice. “I say one wrong thing, and you’re leaving?”

She turns and aims her big blue eyes at me. Even when she’s pissed off, they still have an innocent quality about them.

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“Yes,” she says simply. “Is that a problem?”

Aggravation is building in my chest.

“Yeah, it’s a problem,” I say. “Look, I know I’m not the best with words - probably why I’m still single, who the hell knows - but in case you forgot, we didn’t come here to talk. We came here to fuck. So the only thing that matters right now is whether you want to fuck me, and whether I want to fuck you.”

Her eyes widen as I speak. I half expect her to slap me in the face after I finish, but she doesn’t.

A sweet-looking girl like this, I don’t even know why she’s on that app in the first place. Maybe she got confused. Thought she was downloading some cutesy dating app to find her future husband and got lost along the way. Ended up accidentally setting up a one-night stand with a son of a bitch like me.

Yeah. That’s probably it.

“Well...do you?” She asks.

“Do I what?”

“Want to sleep with me?” She whispers, glancing around the deserted parking lot.

“Is that a serious question?” I snap.

She shrugs, looking away from me and folding her arms across her chest. And that's when I realize that Bridget's not fleeing because she's angry at what I said. No. She's fleeing because she feels uncertain of herself.

Afraid. Insecure.

I exhale long and slow for a moment, formulating what I need to say next.

"OfcourseI want to sleep with you," I say through gritted teeth. "That's why I clicked on your pictures. That's why I messaged you. That's why there's a room waiting for us across the street with my name on it."

I jab a finger in the direction of the hotel across the street. She follows my finger to the hotel and then looks back at me.

"You're right," Bridget says with a nod. "We're not here to talk. So let's stop talking and do this. Hurry up, before I change my mind."

3

Raina

Maybe it's the tequila.Or maybe it's the way Mav talks, so crude and gruff. But whatever it is, I decided at the very last minute to join him across the street in hotel room number fifty-four.

Raina would never do this.

But Bridget would.

As soon as we get inside, his hands are all over me. Squeezing my curves through the

thin fabric of my little black dress.

“No underwear,” he says as his hands slide up my skirt, fingers groping my ass greedily as he kisses my neck. “i fucking knew it.”

His stubble scratches my skin roughly as his mouth wanders from my neck to my collarbone and then to the base of my throat. I tilt my head, giving him better access as I close my eyes.

Suddenly I’m lifted off the ground. I open my eyes to see that Mav has picked me up, bringing me over to the bed and throwing me down.

He tugs my dress up and over my head, throwing it aside. Then his hands part my thighs.

“You brought the condoms?” I ask quickly.

“Yeah,” he says, glancing up at me. “But we’re not to that point yet. I want to make you moan before I even get inside of you.”

There’s no time to say anything back to him. Because as nervous as he’s making me with his face between my knees, eyes taking in every naked inch of me, I don’t have time to think about it too hard.

His tongue is on me, licking my clitoris in harsh, heavy circles. It’s as if the contact has a direct line to my brain, shutting off all thoughts of resisting, all possible fear.

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But even if I wanted to stop, which I don't, there's no turning back now. We're in a hotel room together, virtual strangers, and he's got his face between my thighs, licking and sucking on me like I'm the most delicious meal he's ever had.

His large hands are calloused and rough, gripping my hips and pulling me down the bed towards him so he can taste me more deeply, so his tongue can press against me harder, intensifying the building pleasure in my core.

Abby was right. This is exactly what I needed. To be with a man, a real man who knows how to make a woman come.

I'm about to climax when Maverick pulls away from me, dropping his jeans and ripping the condom wrapper open.

Then I see his cock. Thick and hard, rigidly pointing between my thighs as he rolls the condom down the considerable length of his shaft.

"Open those amazing thighs a little wider," he mutters, rubbing the tip of his cock against me. I shiver with pleasure, my climax still not far. When I neglect to obey his directions, his rough hands take hold of my knees and push them apart.

I wince at the slight pain when I feel him pressing into my opening. He's bigger than my ex, the only other man I've been with.

"Now you understand why I wanted to make you moan first," he growls, leaning over me on the bed, his arms on either side of me as his hips slowly move against me. "I need you nice and wet. You're going to take all of me tonight. I'm going to fill you

up. I'm going to fuck you so hard, you'll be feeling me for days after."

He speaks these filthy words in my ear, his stubble scratching against my cheek and neck, his breath hot against me. He smells like faint cologne and fresh tequila. As he slides slowly into me, he takes my hands and pulls them up over my head, stretching my arms high.

I feel so exposed like this, my breasts pushed forward, helpless in his arms and beneath his firm grip. He dips his head, taking my nipple into his mouth and flicking his tongue over the hardened tip. Then he does the same with the other before biting it gently.

Then he leans back, sliding his hands down my body until they rest on my thighs, and lets his hips push against me harder, his cock stretching me until he's all the way in.

When he's fully inside of me, he pauses, taking in the sight of me, my breasts, our bodies joined together. As though he's taking a mental snapshot of the moment to keep for later, a souvenir of our Hush app hookup.

"You're better than I even imagined," he says, letting a hand roam up my torso, squeezing each breast before wandering back down the middle of my body, past my belly button, finding my clit and circling it with his thumb, reigniting the intense pleasure between my legs. "You don't belong on that app. But I'm damned glad you were on it when I found you."

He says all of this more to himself than to me, his eyes still greedily taking in my body. His thumb strokes me faster, harder now, finally giving me what I want and so badly need, the release that I came here for in the first place.

I arc my back and close my eyes, my hips rocking against his hand. With his cock inside of me like this, his touch feels even more intense, like every nerve ending is on

fire with pleasure.

“That’s right,” he murmurs, stroking me harder while his hips begin to rock against me, his cock pushing in and out of me in a gentle slow rhythm. “Close your eyes and feel me inside of you. It feels good doesn’t it, getting fucked like this?”

“Yes,” I breathe.

“I’m going to watch you come,” he says. “You’re going to come on my cock while I fuck you, Bridget, and then I’m going to fuck you again. And again. I’ve got this hotel room all night and I intend to get use out of it. You understand?”

I’m gasping for air, hardly able to even listen to the words he’s saying. All I feel is electric pleasure between my legs, his cock shoving roughly inside of me again and again, his pace quickening.

“Let go,” he says. “Let go, Bridget. Let it all go, and come on my cock.”

His gruff voice speaks the name of my fake alter ego, reminding me of who I am tonight. Or, more accurately, who I’m not.

I’m not Raina tonight, the chubby wallflower who can’t get over her nasty breakup from over a year ago. No. Instead, I’m Bridget.

Bridget, who meets random hot guys on a hookup app and has dirty sex with them in a hotel room across from a bar. Bridget, who doesn’t give a single shit what she looks like naked with the lights on, and only cares about having fun—about having orgasms.

“Let go,” he says again, more harshly this time, as his hips slam into me with ever-increasing force and speed. I can tell he’s close to his own climax, his jaw tense as his eyes bore into me, commanding my body to obey.

I close my eyes and toss my head back, riding the wave higher and higher.

“Harder,” I beg, hardly believing the bold words coming out of my mouth. “I’m almost there. Don’t stop.”

“Fuck,” he growls as his hands dig into my hips, holding them in place while he slams against me.

It should hurt, but it doesn’t. Or maybe it does...but it feels so good at the same time that I don’t care. I don’t even know. I keep talking to him as I reach the peak, hardly aware that I’m doing it. I’m begging him – sobbing, almost – not to stop.

And then I come, legs shaking, back arching, wrapping my arms around him and clinging to him with desperation.

I don’t know I’m screaming his name until he clamps a hand over my mouth to muffle the noise, kissing my neck at the same time as he rides me harder and harder, coming into me as I squeeze his cock with need.

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When we're done, I fall back limply against the sheets, breathing heavily. My eyes are closed but I open them when I feel Maverick's fingers brushing against my forehead. He's sweeping my hair out of my face.

Such a gentle gesture from a large, rough man.

"That was unexpected," he says.

"What was?" I ask.

"You've got an inner freak," he says. "I didn't expect that. When I saw you at the bar you seemed so..."

He hesitates and my mind fills in the blanks for him. What is he going to say?

Dull? Mousy? Plain? Nerdy?

All of those and more, I heard from my ex boyfriend on a regular basis when he would put me down. When he broke up with me, he cited my lack of adventurous spirit as a reason for moving on. I guess being a homebody who'd rather drink cocoa and read novels on a Saturday night wasn't enough excitement for him.

Maverick is probably the same.

"I seemed so what?" I ask.

"...Innocent," he completes the sentence.

“Oh,” I say.

Huh. That’s not as bad as nerdy, I guess. Or mousy. But what’s it mean, to “look” innocent? Like I don’t know what I’m doing when it comes to sex? Like I wouldn’t know how to make him feel good?

“Don’t overthink it,” Maverick says in a low voice. He’s leaning over me, his fingers still playing with my hair. “I like it. Feels like I’m corrupting you. Teaching you new things.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

What would Bridget do right now? I wonder.

“Well,” I say, reaching a hand out to unbutton his shirt. “You said you have the hotel room all night. What else can you teach me before the sun rises, cowboy?”

4

Maverick

I haven’t gone four rounds in one night since I was a teenager. That kind of stamina left me a long time ago, especially with the added physical labor of working on the ranch.

But Bridget had me under her spell last night, something I still can’t get my fucking head wrapped around.

She’s like this beautiful angel. A beautiful angel who isn’t afraid to get freaky in bed.

Last night I told her to let go and to my surprise she did. All the shyness and insecurity melted away last night with every orgasm until eventually she was just this...goddess.

This amazing, confident goddess.

The sun is soaking through the hotel curtains and even though I don't want to, I open my eyes, prepared to say goodbye to Bridget and head back to the ranch where a whole lot of work is waiting for me.

There's just one problem with this: when I open my eyes, Bridget is nowhere to be seen.

Fuck. What the hell?

I stand and walk to the bathroom. Maybe she's in there freshening up, brushing her hair or something.

But no.

I walk the length of the little hotel room twice, even checking in the coat closet for some damned reason.

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It's obvious that Bridget is gone, but my brain doesn't want to accept it. I wasn't ready to say goodbye; I wasn't ready for this abrupt ending.

I don't even remember falling asleep last night. It's not like I gave her a peck on the cheek and told her, "Goodnight sweetheart, see you in the morning!"

All I remember is our bodies tangled together. Making love again and again until we fell back wearily against the pillows and passed out together.

At least...I think she passed out, too. Then again, there's no proof of that. Maybe she waited for me to fall asleep and then left.

Suddenly my mind jumps to a news segment I saw years ago on TV. Something about women in the city tricking unsuspecting men, sleeping with them and then robbing them blind after they fell asleep. My eyes fall to my discarded jeans on the floor and I dart for them, digging in the pockets.

Phone.

Keys.

Wallet.

I open the wallet and sigh in relief when I see my ID, credit cards, and cash still there.

God dammit Maverick. Get your shit together. It was a one-night stand, isn't that what you said? You met up at a bar, went to the hotel, fucked her brains out, and she

left afterwards. That's how these things work. What do you want? For her to send flowers and a card?

I go to the bathroom and splash some water on my face, trying to shake myself out of this weird fucking mood that I'm in. That's when I see the note beside the sink.

Her handwriting is exactly what you'd expect from a woman like that – loopy, neat, cute. Nothing like my chicken scratch.

Thank you for showing me a great time last night. It was exactly what I needed.

Much love,

R

I read the short note a couple of times and frown.

R? Who the hell is R? Maybe it's a mistake. The letter R isn't that different from the letter B, I guess. She must have been in a hurry, and picked up her pen before she could finish the bottom loop of the letter.

This explanation would make sense, except that the note overall is written so neatly, so deliberately, as though typed and printed from a computer rather than written in pen by a human hand.

I read the note one more time, running my thumb over the shallow imprint of the letters that the pen made.

When did she write this? Was it last night, or only minutes ago? If I looked outside, would I see her walking across the parking lot, back to the bar, getting into her car to go home?

...And if I did, would I run out to try to catch her, to stop her?

No. It's called a one-night stand for a reason. I came out last night to get laid, to blow off some steam and release the stress that's been burdening my shoulders for these last few months, ever since my brother Tex took off and left me to do everything around the ranch.

Now that it's out of my system, it's time to go back to the real world. Last night was fun. And that's all it was. Fun is the reason I downloaded that dirty app in the first place. Fun is also something that I've learned to enjoy in small doses, temporary breaks in between back-breaking work that never seems to end.

As though summoned by my thoughts, my phone rings. It's Levi, my neighbor from up the road.

"Bad news," he says in a clipped tone when I answer. "Your cows got out. I've rounded up a couple of them, but they've scattered both north and south. Gonna need you to end your romantic date early and come home."

"It wasn't a romantic date, it -"

"I don't give a shit what it was," he cuts in. "Whether it was a romantic date, a hookup with an old flame, an orgy, or a shotgun wedding to a stripper you met in Vegas, just end it early and get the hell home."

I begin to answer, to ask him whether the new calf is safely inside the fence, but Levi hangs the phone up without giving me a chance to respond. Typical of him.

Levi is a mean son of a bitch. Worse than me, which is saying something. But he's also got my back and I've got his; a helpful thing now that I'm a one-man operation.

Tucking Bridget's note in my pocket, I check out of the hotel and climb into my old truck. Pulling out onto the two-lane road in the direction that leads back to the little town of Faith, away from neon lights and loud music, away from Bridget and the night I'll never forget.

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5

Raina

Abby wastes no time in bombarding me with questions when I get back to our little house.

“Let me have some coffee at least,” I groan, ducking around her when she greets me at the door to walk to the kitchen in the back.

This little house is falling apart, without question. It belonged to Abby’s mother before she passed away, and as the only child, Abby inherited the entire estate. A bit of cash, a drained retirement account, a rusty old pickup truck that doesn’t run, and...the house.

When we moved in, we intended to fix it up and restore it to its proper glory. A little farmhouse like this deserves it. But on our modest incomes as new college graduates, we soon found out that it’s expensive to maintain a house, even a house that we don’t have to pay rent or a mortgage on.

So we keep things in basic working order. The water runs, the toilet flushes, and the roof only slightly caved in last winter when we got some heavy snow.

It works...but it’s not pretty. That’s the best way to sum it up.

I open the creaky kitchen cabinet and pull down the bag of coffee grounds, measuring a few scoops out and dumping them into the coffeemaker. I can feel Abby behind me,

watching me with narrowed green eyes.

“What?” I sigh, without looking back at her.

“You know what,” she says. “I want to hear all about you and the mysterious sex cowboy!”

“What do you want to know?” I ask.

I flip the switch on the coffeemaker and it begins to sputter to life, warming the water in the tank. Finally there’s nothing left to do except wait for the coffee, leaving me no choice but to turn around and face my best friend and her inquisitive eyes.

She stares at me when I turn back to her and then, after a moment, claps her hands together and smiles.

“Yep,” she says. “You’ve got it.”

“I’ve got what?”

“A post-orgasm glow,” she announces with satisfaction. “A good one, too. He must have given you the time of your life last night!”

She lets out a loud whoop.

“Calm down,” I sigh. “Yes, he did. But...”

“But what?”

I bite my lip.

“I don’t know,” I say. “Maybe I’m just not good at this sort of thing, but it felt...wrong, almost?”

“That’s the best,” Abby says dreamily. “When it feels so good that it’s wrong. Kind of dirty, right, like a fantasy?”

“Not that kind of wrong,” I laugh a little. “I mean, it felt wrong to just...hook up with this complete stranger, I guess? I mean, that’s the entire point of the Hush app, obviously, but it still doesn’t make it natural to me to do that.”

“Did you have a drink like I told you to?”

“One drink,” I say. “A shot of tequila.”

“Good choice,” she says. “Tequila makes you brave.”

“Until you wake up the next morning to a perfect stranger and question your life choices,” I reply.

I turn back to the coffeemaker, grabbing my favorite purple mug and filling it with steaming hot caffeine. Abby follows my lead, filling a mug of her own, and we both go to the shabby kitchen table to continue our talk.

“So you regret it,” Abby says.

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I think about this.

“No,” I say. “I don’t know. Maybe? I guess it’s just that, when I woke up beside him this morning, I felt like I wanted more. More than just a hookup. I think I might be ready to date again, Abby. Like, really ready.”

She nods.

“And last night made you realize that?”

“Yeah,” I reply. “I mean, last night was fun. Unbelievable, really. ;I didn’t know sex could be that good! But it also felt empty, waking up to Mav and knowing that no matter what, it could never be more than that between us. That he found me on an app based on photos of my tits and ass and that he doesn’t even see me as dating material, just this anonymous sex buddy to use and then forget.”

“Ouch,” Abby winces.

“I’m not trying to be dramatic,” I shrug. “I mean, it’s not his fault. We both knew what the situation was going into it. I thought that I could handle it emotionally but...I don’t know. Maybe I needed to do something like last night to realize that it’s not for me. And now I know.”

“Now you know,” Abby nods. “And you also realized you’re ready to date again. That’s huge, Raina.”

“It is,” I reply, thinking of the months of agony after my breakup with John, the

sleepless nights, feeling so numb and so skeptical of anything remotely resembling love or connection to the opposite sex.

“Okay. So. Now that we’ve discussed that, tell me everything about the sex. Spare no detail.”

“It’s ten in the morning,” I groan.

“And? Come on now, take pity on me. I haven’t gotten laid in forever.”

“Whose fault is that?” I counter. “Go out and find yourself a hookup on the Hush app if you’re so desperate for dick!”

“I told you,” she rolls her eyes. “I’m saving myself for Levi.”

“Not this again,” I sigh, getting up from the table to pour myself another cup.

“Levi and Abby,” she continues in a dreamy voice. “It has a nice ring to it. If we got married, my name would be Abigail Henderson. It just flows.”

“Sure,” I say. “Abigail goes well with lots of last names, though. Not just Henderson.”

She frowns at me when I return to the table.

“You think I’m delusional, don’t you?”

“A bit,” I shrug. “But I thought you were delusional long before this obsession with Levi ever entered the picture. He’s just the latest thing.”

“He’s perfect,” she says with a shrug. “And we’re meant to be together. He just

doesn't know it yet."

"You've been saying that ever since you moved back to Faith," I point out.

"Because it's the truth," she says, her voice determined. "It's just that Levi is too hard-headed to realize. But I'll make him see the truth eventually."

"You seem so sure of yourself," I say. "I don't know whether I envy you or..."

I don't finish the sentence. I was about to say or feel sorry for you but I don't want to rain on Abby's good mood. Besides...if she thinks this thing with the grumpy cowboy she met at the grocery store is meant to be, who am I to tell her she's wrong? I don't know the first thing about love or fate or anything like that.

My luck in the love department has never been too good.

"One day maybe you'll feel this sure about something," Abby continues. "And then you'll understand what I'm going through."

I nod, but I don't believe it. Abby really is delusional at times, with a childlike sense of faith and wonder, the belief that things will simply work themselves out. Even when her mother passed away suddenly from late stage breast cancer, Abby kept her faith, believing that all things – even sad things like the death of a parent – happen in life for reasons we can't know.

Now she thinks that she and Levi Henderson are meant to be. And maybe she's right. And who am I, as her best friend, to tell her that she's wrong and stomp all over her dream of happily ever after?

"You don't believe me," Abby says with a small smile. "And that's okay. But one day, I hope you see."

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“See what?”

“See how powerful you are,” she says. “Powerful enough to change your life. Powerful enough to set your mind to things, to decide on what you want, and then to get it.”

“Well,” I say slowly. “I guess last night was a good step in the right direction...I decided I needed a night of hot sex. And that’s exactly what I got.”

Abby bounces in her seat a little, a ball of energy even on a Sunday morning after a late night. I envy her spirit, her energy, most of all her optimism.

“That’s more like it,” she says, leaning forward. “So...go on. Tell me all the details. I have to know everything.”

6

Maverick

It’s a brutal Monday morning. Last night we got frost. Frost this time of the year isn’t unheard of, but it’s unusual enough that I wasn’t prepared.

My fault. My responsibility. Being prepared for anything is the only way to survive this life. You don’t let yourself be caught off guard. Always have supplies on hand. Always be ready.

Ever since I hooked up with Bridget, my mind has been all fucked up. Even Levi has

noticed, and that guy doesn't notice shit unless it's right in front of him.

"Hey. I have a question. Don't take it the wrong way though."

I raise a brow at him. We're in his stable, just finishing up with the horses. This is how we work; as neighbors, it's customary to look out for one another. That's how it is in the country. You don't have a lot of people nearby. So you make friends with your neighbors. You do them favors, with the understanding that they'll repay you eventually. It's the way of life out here.

Today Levi called in a favor of his own, asking me to help feed the horses, clean out their hooves from the mud, and get the blankets ready for nightfall.

If it's going to be an early winter, that means we have to start preparing now.

"What's your question?" I ask.

"Why are you so fucking stupid lately?"

"Thanks, man. No way I could take a question like that the wrong way."

Levi grunts in response, his back to me as he tends to a horse in the farthest stall.

"You know what I mean by stupid. Don't get your panties in a wad," Levi says eventually. "You're forgetful. You're slipping up, and you know it. Hell, I hardly have time to take care of my own chores, with as often as you've been calling me to bail you out of whatever mess you're in."

"I'm fine," I say.

"Bullshit," Levi says. "You've got something going on in that head of yours. I'm not

going to sit here and play the shrink. In fact I'd rather not know what kind of twisted up shit you've got going on in your mind. I just need you to sharpen up. You're not you lately, and I need you on your game if we're going to partner on a business together."

"I'm on my game," I answer.

In truth though? I'm not.

When Levi brought the idea of the food co-op to me a few months ago, I was all for it. I need the supplemental income if I'm ever going to be able to hire a ranch hand, and it sounded like minimal effort for maximum reward.

But that was before. Before Bridget came into my life and showed me how empty and lonely it is.

Now I'm not sleeping right, can't eat, can't get my chores done around the ranch. By the end of the day I'm tired. Not the kind of bone tired exhausted that I've become accustomed to, thanks to working the ranch on my own since my good for nothing brother Tex left me here alone.

No. That's a kind of tired that I can deal with. I can pull through that kind of exhaustion, the kind that only permeates your muscles and bone, the kind that's purely physical. All I have to do is shut my brain off, that voice that says "you're tired, you should stop", and keep my tired, aching body in motion.

But now?

Now my mind is tired. My mind and my heart.

I didn't realize how fucking lonely I was until that night with Bridget. She was

supposed to be a quick roll in the hay, a hookup to get the sex urges out of my system so that I could go through another cold, quiet winter without the comfort of a woman by my side.

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But instead of quieting that need, it magnified it.

She wasn't what I expected her to be. She was innocent and sweet, warm and kind. Way too good for a guy like me, and that's exactly why I can't get her out of my damn mind.

It's been a month. A whole fucking month since our hookup and I still think about her every fucking night. Every time I'm in the shower, or in bed.

Pretty much any time I have some solitude...and as a solo cowboy on a massive ranch, I tend to have plenty of solitude.

Plenty of time for my mind to wander from the task at hand and think back to that night, those big beautiful eyes, the way she tilted her head back and sighed when I touched her. The warmth of her embrace, her fingers raking through my hair and waking up every nerve ending on my scalp, her soft thighs squeezing my hips, welcoming me inside of her...

"Hello? Maverick, liven up, dude," Levi claps his hands in front of my face. "See? It's this right here that I'm talking about. You're out of it. You're not here. Abigail will be here any minute, and she needs to see two competent men in front of her. Not you and that stupid vacant drooling expression you've got on your face."

"I wasn't drooling," is all that I say in reply.

"I don't know what's wrong with you lately," Levi shakes his head. "But you need to fix it. You're fucked up. You need to un-fuck yourself, and you need to do it...right

now.”

Levi is looking past my shoulder, out of the stable doors. I hear the distant sound of a small engine and look in the direction he’s staring to see a small Volkswagen Beetle meandering over the uneven ground. It’s one of the older types, with the bubble-like shape, and the chipped paint is lime green.

“Jesus Christ,” Levi groans. “Why the hell is she riding in that thing? She’s going to get stuck in the mud, no question about it.”

“This is your business partner?” I ask flatly, watching as the little green car drives slowly over the rocky trail that leads to the large red barn next to the horse stable.

“Abigail Henderson,” Levi says. “She’s a little nutty, I know, but give her a chance. She’s got some good ideas. And she has a head for business. Went and got her MBA from some fancy city college.”

“Right,” I say, still eyeing the green car, which has crawled to a stop, still about twenty feet away from the barn. “Well, she might have a fancy MBA, but I take it she’s not a mechanic. Sounds like her car just died.”

“Better than getting stuck in the mud,” Levi sighs, striding out of the horse stable. I trail after him.

A red-haired woman gets out of the driver’s seat, all smiles, as though she’s completely unaware of the potential plight she’s in.

“Hey handsome,” she says to Levi with a megawatt grin. “I think my battery just died – again, ugh – you don’t mind giving me a jump start when it’s time for me to leave, right?”

“You shouldn’t even be driving this thing all the way out here,” Levi grunts in reply. “How many times have I told you to get that damn truck of yours fixed?”

He strides to the little car and pops the hood as if he’s done this many times before, surveying the slightly steaming engine parts with a furrowed brow.

Abigail leans against the side of the car and shrugs.

“Like I said before,” she replies. “The shop told me it’ll be four thousand dollars just to get it running.”

“That’s bullshit,” Levi mutters, still looking at the engine. “They’re ripping you off. They see a pretty girl come into the shop all by herself, they see dollar signs.”

“So now I’m a pretty girl, huh?”

Abigail looks at me now for the first time and winks.

“I’ll come by your place later and get the truck,” Levi says, shutting the hood and standing up straight. “Tow it back here to the ranch. See what I can do.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Abigail says quickly.

“Yeah. I do,” Levi says. He gestures to the little green car. “This thing is a road hazard. I don’t want to see you in it anymore.”

Abigail’s cheeks are pink now, looking bashful for the first time. She busies herself by turning back to the car, talking to someone in the passenger’s side that I didn’t realize was there. They appear to be a blonde-haired woman, but it’s hard to tell with her ducking her head down, her hand over her face.

“Come on Raina, don’t be shy,” she says, beckoning her towards us. “You already know Levi, and now you can meet...what did you say your name was?”

“Maverick,” I say. “But you can call me Mav.”

Abigail’s eyes widen, the smile sliding away from her face.

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“He’s just up the road,” Levi says as I come forward to shake Abigail’s hand. “Known him for a while now. Mostly cattle, but he’s getting started with some crops next season. He’s also got connections in town.”

“Oh,” Abigail says faintly, shaking my hand. “That’s great. Maybe you can help us find a location. The mayor is being a real pain in the ass about zoning.”

“I can see what I can do,” I say.

But I’m looking past Abigail now, having finally seen the face of the anonymous blonde in the passenger’s seat of the little green car.

I think I have to be hallucinating. Maybe the loneliness has finally driven me insane. It was only a matter of time, I guess. Because right now I see her. Not this Raina person Abigail is referring to, but Bridget.

Her wide, innocent eyes are looking at me through the glass of the car window. And those luscious pink lips that I remember so well are parted in shock.

7

Raina

Sitting across from Mav at Levi’s well-worn kitchen table is the most surreal experience. I can’t look at him, but even though I’m not looking at him I can feel his eyes on me. He hasn’t taken them off of me since I got out of the car. As though nothing else matters, nothing else is visible to him but me.

It's intense.

As intense as it was the night we spent together.

All of the memories and sensations from that night have come flooding back to me. I press my thighs together beneath the kitchen table as Levi and Abby talk through the details of the business plan that Abby's drafted. I know I'm supposed to be listening, but I can't even concentrate on the words they're saying.

"What do you think, Raina?" Abby asks. The mention of my name catches my attention and I finally look up from the worn out wooden tabletop to meet her eyes.

Being best friends for as long as we've been, Abby and I have a somewhat telepathic way of communicating without ever having to speak the words.

Right now her eyes are saying Holy shit, it's Maverick, THE Maverick from the Hush app! And he's smoking hot! And he lives right next door to Levi? Holy fucking shit.

"What do I think about what?" I echo the question.

Abby gives me a sympathetic look.

"You taking a stab at a logo for the co-op?" she asks. She turns to Levi. "She had a great idea for images for the website too, taking some photos of the ranch to show where everything is grown and raised."

"Sounds good," Levi nods. "Show people that we're the real deal. Local and natural. People eat that stuff up. You can take pictures?"

"Raina is the best," Abby assures him, mercifully saving me from having to answer the question myself. As it is, my thoughts are sluggish and my tongue will barely

cooperate.

I can still feel Mav's eyes boring into me from across the table, and I steal a glance at him for a fraction of a second to see what his expression is like.

Still intense. Maybe even angry?

But what does he have to be angry about? Angry about the way I left? Angry that I used a fake name? It's all to be expected isn't it, with an app like Hush?

We had an arrangement.

It's not my fault that he happens to be the neighbor and business partner of Levi, the man who my best friend has been in love with for years now, the same man she's convinced to go into business with her to open a food co-op in town.

What are the odds? Slim to none. Which is just my luck. The one time I try to get away with a no strings attached hook up, something I'd never normally do, is the one time I hook up with the wrong man, the man in this town that I shouldn't have hooked up with.

Well, he can be angry if he wants. He has no right to be upset with me. No right at all.

"We should get started as soon as possible," Maverick says, speaking for the first time. "We won't open the store for months, but that gives us a lot of lead time to market this thing and get the word out. Let's get our branding figured out, get the website up, and start generating excitement. The sooner the better."

"Agreed," Levi says while Abby nods.

"We'll take photos in the south pasture of my ranch," Mav continues. "More

picturesque than Levi's place – no offense to Levi.”

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“No offense taken,” Levi shrugs. “I’m not running one of those prissy dude ranches. This is a place where actual work happens.”

Maverick shoots him a look at this, and Levi raises a brow, apparently enjoying getting a rise out of his business partner. He seems to be the only one at the table who doesn’t know about the elephant in the room, and as a result, seems the most at ease.

“We’ll go now,” Maverick says, standing up abruptly. “The sun is about to set. Pictures will look best in the next half hour or so.”

“Now?” I ask in surprise. “Right now?”

“That’s perfect,” Abby nods. “Raina took her camera today, just in case we could get started on the photography. Why don’t you two go to Iron Road and get some photos for the website? Levi and I will hang back and discuss business plans.”

I look at Abby with wide eyes, wondering what the hell has come over her and why she’s trying to send me out with Maverick by myself. But then I get a sight of the goo-goo eyes Abby is aiming at Levi and realize her only strategy right now seems to be getting Levi and herself alone together at all costs.

“Great,” Mav says, looking at me. “Let’s go. We’re running out of daylight fast.”

“We can always get photos later this week,” I begin to say, but Mav shakes his head, aiming his intense steely gaze at me.

“It’s now or never,” he says. “It’s looking like an early winter. This might be the last

clear day we have in a while.”

I bite my lip and look back at Abby, but she’s huddled next to Levi now, pouring over her business plans with him and talking animatedly about launch parties and social media strategy while the stone-faced cowboy nods along.

I feel Mav’s lips brushing against my ear as he leans over and whispers.

“Let’s go,” he says. “I have a few things I need to talk to you about, Bridget.”

Chills run up my spine and I walk obediently out of the sprawling ranch house. Once outside, Mav puts a hand on the back of my neck and steers me towards his truck, the same one I recognize from the night we hooked up, opening the passenger door.

“I can get in by myself,” I say as he guides me by the lower back into the truck.

He doesn’t answer, just shuts my door and walks around to get in on the driver’s side. He turns to me, glowering at me.

“Look,” I sigh. “If you’re upset about the way I left things then I’m sorry. But –”

There is no finishing this sentence, though. Because the strong cowboy pulls me roughly by the wrist, sliding me across the bench seat until I’m nearly in his lap. Then he grips my face in his hands and kisses me roughly, passionately, stealing my breath as his tongue caresses mine.

When he comes up for air, finally releasing me from his harsh grip, he glares down at me.

“Upset doesn’t even begin to cover it,” he says. “But I’m not upset with you.”

“You’re not?” I ask numbly.

“I’m upset with myself,” he says. “I should have never let a thing like you slip through my hands like I did. But now that you’re back, I’m not letting that happen again. I know your real name now. And like it or not, it seems like we’re going to be working together for the foreseeable future. One thing you need to learn about me, sweetheart. I’m a simple man; I don’t need or want a lot of things. But when I do want something, I don’t stop working for it until it’s mine.”

“Is that a fact?” I ask faintly.

He nods, his face serious.

“Another thing. I might appear to be a gentleman in public,” he says. “But I think you know that’s not the case based on what we did that night in the hotel. So believe me when I say that if you run out on me like that again, I’ll tie you to my bed and punish-fuck you until everyone in this sleepy old town knows that you’re mine.”

8

Maverick

Maybe I’m being a little much, but I’m beyond caring at this point. The moment I saw her get out of the car, that’s when I knew.

Hell, maybe part of me knew the night that we met. I just didn’t want to accept it. But now?

Seeing her in those skin-tight jeans and soft light blue sweater, her hair pulled up in that messy way that women sometimes do...it did something to me, something different to me than the night we slept together.

She's real. Really real.

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And this whole time, she's been in my town. How did I not know who she was? People drive into those shitty dive bars from all over because they're the only place to drink. Out here in Faith, there's little more than the General Store and a few shops here and there, the local library, the post office, and of course, ranches. Ranches as far as the eye can see.

How would I miss a rare flower like her in a town with such a small population?

When I finally stop kissing her, she looks at me with wide, bewildered eyes and swollen lips. I like that. I like the way that I can leave my mark on her.

"Raina, huh?" I ask.

"Yeah," she says in a small voice.

"I like it better than Bridget," I say. "It suits you."

It does.

Raina, like the rain that hammers the tin roof of my back porch lately, chilly autumn mornings where it's just me, my cup of coffee, and the rain. Rain is needed and cleansing. With the ability to soothe and calm...and at the same time, with the potential to come down in heavy sheets, threatening to sweep you away and upend your life.

I can already tell that for me, Raina is dangerous in all of the best kinds of ways. I've been a solitary cowboy for far too long, and since our one night stand I haven't been

able to forget about her, haven't been able to ignore the loneliness that gnaws at me from within, reminding me that I'm not supposed to be alone like this, that there's something missing from my life.

That thing? A woman.

Not just any woman, but a woman like her.

Nurturing, innocent, sweet. All the things I'm not. A ray of sunshine, the softness that I sorely lack and can't provide.

I spot Levi looking at us through the window and wonder how much of this scene he saw. There's so much more I want to do to Raina, but not here.

"Let's go," I growl, starting the truck. "You've got some explaining to do."

"Explaining?" she asks as we pull out of the long, winding driveway of Levi's ranch and onto the dirt road.

"Yes," I say. "Why'd you leave like that?"

"I'm sorry," she says. She tugs at the sleeves of her sweater, hiding her hands as though to hide from me. Nervous. She's nervous.

"Don't be sorry," I say. "I just want to know...why? Was our night together that bad that you needed to get away as quickly as possible?"

She shakes her head and I hear her sigh – a soft, breathy sigh. I can barely keep my damn eyes on the road for the short trip from Levi's ranch to mine, and the sounds she's making don't help matters. I steal a long look at her and see her looking right at me, those big innocent eyes watchful and wary.

“No,” she says. “It wasn’t like that at all, really. That night was incredible. It was...exactly what I needed.”

“What you needed?” I repeat.

“I needed a night of fun,” she says. “Abby says I’m in a funk, and it’s true. Well, it was true. I think our night together shook me out of that funk, though. Which is exactly why I needed it.”

“What kind of funk?” I ask. “What do you mean?”

“I had a bad breakup,” she says slowly. “He dumped me, to be exact about it. It’s been over a year now. When we met, for some reason I just couldn’t get out of my post-breakup gloom.”

I don’t say anything, my eyes back on the road. I’m trying to mentally picture the kind of man who would break up with Raina, the kind of fool who would throw a good thing like her away.

“I’m over him though,” Raina follows up quickly. “I’ve been over him for a long time.”

I look over at her and see that she’s watching me absorb her words carefully, needing me to believe her.

And of course I fucking believe her.

“Darling,” I say. “If I thought there was even a chance that you were thinking about another man that night, I would have left on the spot. The only guy you were thinking about that night was the one burying his cock deep inside of you.”

She bites her lip.

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“Well...yes. That’s very true,” she says with a small smile.

We pull into the drive of my ranch, and although I usually park in the back next to the barn where I keep my equipment, I pull the truck up to the front entrance, away from the mud and the mess.

Make a good impression, Mav.

“Oh wow,” Raina sighs. She’s looking out her window, surveying the large ranch house with wonder. “This is amazing!”

“Could use a coat of paint,” I grunt, unbuckling my seatbelt.

“And some landscaping,” she grins, nodding at the overgrown rose bushes in the front. “But even so...Maverick, this is the most amazing house. I know this house!”

“You do?”

“Abby and I drive by it all the time,” she says, turning to me. “The ranches on this road are so picturesque. But this one...this one is my favorite.”

“Why’s that?”

She points to the pond in the distance.

“That,” she says. “There’s a time of day, about eight o’clock lately. The sun hits the water at just the right angle and it shimmers. With the willow trees around it...it just

looks like a painting, you know? Too beautiful to be real.”

I look at her quietly and consider this. Truth be told, my ranch house is nothing special. It’s a little smaller than the others down the road, and it’s more than a little bit neglected; especially since Tex ran off and left me to handle things on my own.

The selfish bastard.

But...if I squint, I guess I can see what Raina is saying.

“I guess it’s kind of pretty,” I shrug.

“It’s gorgeous,” she assures me. “Especially at that time of the day. Right now it’s too cloudy...but trust me.”

“I trust you,” I nod.

She looks at me and shakes her head.

“You don’t see it,” she says. “What a shame. You live here! You get to see it every single day.”

“Not really,” I say. “I work here. I’m working from sun up to sun down lately, sometimes longer. Not a lot of time to watch sunsets in my world lately.”

She tilts her head and gives me a sympathetic look, and I kick myself for being so damn negative. I’m sitting in my truck next to a beautiful woman who won’t stop gushing about my house.

“But,” I say. “I could change that. Tomorrow it’s supposed to be a little clearer. What about you come over for dinner? We’ll sit on the back porch and watch the sun go

down over the pond. You can show me exactly what you mean.”

“You know, that sounds amazing...” Raina says.

“But?”

“But it also sounds like a date,” she continues. “And...knowing how we met, I know you probably expect a different kind of relationship with me. That night we hooked up, I was thinking strictly short term. I was in a different place...needed different things from a man. But now? I think I’m ready to begin thinking long term again.”

Good god, it’s like she’s personally granting my fucking wish list, one wish at a time.

“Thinking long term,” I nod. “That sounds good to me, sweetheart. Because one night with you wasn’t enough. Not nearly enough.”

Before she can respond, I’m getting out of the truck and coming round to her side, unbuckling her seatbelt and sweeping her into my arms.

“First date is tomorrow,” I say, carrying her to the porch.

“Where are you taking me?” she asks. “We’re supposed to be taking photos of the grounds, not of the house!”

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I don't answer her, climbing the porch steps until we arrive at the oversized porch swing. I built it months ago, back when I couldn't stand the lonely emptiness of the house and preferred to sleep outside. It's large and cushioned, and sheltered from the elements beneath the roof of the porch and screened windows.

Dropping her gently on the padded swing's surface, I don't waste any time going for the waistband of those snug jeans, pulling them down her thick thighs. She squirms in response but she doesn't move to pull away, instead helping me remove her underwear, lifting her hips as I slide them down her legs and toss them aside.

I unbuckle my belt and then my own jeans, dropping them just low enough to pull my cock out. Then I remember the condom I keep in my wallet, rolling it onto my shaft.

"Always prepared?" Raina asks lightly.

"A man can hope," I say, looking her in the eye. "But believe me, this condom was never intended for a woman other than you. I've been hoping I'd run into you for a while now. Been by that dirty old bar more times than I can count thinking you'd show up wanting a second round."

"Have you really?" she asks softly.

I don't answer her, too embarrassed to say much more. Yeah, I've been looking for her. Seeking her out like a hunter looking for prey, never guessing that the thing I'd been looking for would land in my lap so easily one random afternoon.

Lining the head of my cock up with her entrance, I grip the base of the porch swing

and pull her towards me, guiding her hips to mine, savoring every inch of her until I've filled her all the way up.

"Fuck," I growl, pausing in place just to take it all in. Then I lift a hand to my mouth, wetting my fingertips before bringing them back to her clit and stroking it gently.

"I want you to come on my cock," I say to her, using the porch swing to rock her gently up and down my shaft while I continue stroking her to orgasm. "You're mine, Raina, and all of your pleasure is mine too. I'm going to make you come hard, and then I'm going to keep fucking you until you can't take it anymore. Until you're so overwhelmed with sensation that you're on the verge of insanity. That's how you made me feel when you left that morning. That's how I've felt ever since. Like I'm losing my mind with need."

I don't say much more. Can't say much more. Waiting for her to climax, I'm holding back my own. It's not easy; I'm dying to release into her, having fantasized about a moment like this for weeks.

Raina moans and rocks against me, wrapping her legs around me and crossing her ankles behind my back, pulling me closer into her, encouraging me to go deeper.

"Harder," she whispers. Her eyes are closed and her head is tilted back, luscious lips barely parted as she begs me to fuck her harder, stronger.

I do as she says and when I do, she seizes, her pussy clenching hard around my cock as the tidal wave of pleasure radiates through her body.

Finally I let myself come too, pounding furiously into her body. She cries out, my name sounding so sweet on her lips. Then we collapse on the porch swing together, exhausted and sated...for now.

Raina

Mav drops me off at Abby's little cottage long after the sun goes down, long after he introduced me to his house. Not just the porch and its swing – which I'm dying to visit again as soon as possible – but the interior of the house too.

Needing a coat of paint is an understatement. The inside of the old ranch house sits under a thin layer of dust, feeling like a home that's been sitting idle for too long. It's dark, too, with more than a couple of light bulbs completely burned out. Mav himself seemed surprised as he flipped light switches to show me around, raising his brows at the burned out bulbs as though taken aback.

"Guess I haven't been in this part of the house in a while," he mumbled at the time, ushering me out of the pitch black dining room to move onto other parts of the house.

This little tour made my heart hurt. I'm only beginning to understand Mav's whole story. He explained that his younger brother, Tex, left last year, leaving him to manage the house by himself. Certain things fell off after that – when you're running a ranch all by yourself, things like indoor cleaning aren't exactly the top priority, I guess.

The poor man has been alone for too long. On his own, without a helper or even a friend. He explained that the night we were together, that night we hooked up on the Hush app, was the first time another person had touched his skin in months.

Months.

No physical touch with another person. Not even a hug.

Thinking of this lonely cowboy, eating microwaved dinners in a darkened, dusty house at the end of a long day of work makes me feel...well, it makes me feel a lot of things, to be very honest.

And some of these things I don't even know how to describe. I don't have a label for the way that I feel about Maverick yet.

"What the heck are you doing?" Abby watches me the next morning as I pack a large reusable grocery bag with supplies.

"Getting ready for our date," I say brightly, turning to Abby and smiling broadly. The velcro hair roller on top of my head wobbles a little. I reposition it carefully before returning to the cabinet, where I'm currently raiding our spice rack. "You don't mind if I borrow the turmeric tonight, do you?"

"Oh no," Abby says, folding her arms over her chest. "Not the turmeric. I draw the line at the turmeric. How can I go a whole night without it?"

"You're joking, right?" I ask, glancing over my shoulder.

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She throws her hands up in exasperation. I take the jar of turmeric and toss it in the grocery bag on top of the other ingredients.

“So I take it you’re cooking him dinner,” she continues.

“Yep,” I say.

Abby walks to the kitchen island and peeks into the other bag that I’ve packed.

“Wait,” she says. “I get cooking for a man. But why are you bringing Windex? And...Raina there’s toilet bowl cleaner in here! Why the hell are you bringing toilet bowl cleaner on a date? What exactly do you think is going to happen?”

“You should see his place,” I say sadly. “Oh Abby...it’s so sad.”

“He’s a bachelor,” she shrugs. “Single men are gross. What else is new?”

I shake my head.

“I wouldn’t say that his house is gross,” I reply. “Just neglected. And...dark.”

“Dark?” Abby asks. “Like a vampire’s house?”

“Basically,” I say. “He has all of these dark rooms with burned out light bulbs. It’s like ninety percent of his house just sits dormant all the time. And it’s such a shame because it’s a beautiful house...”

I turn back to the cabinet, checking my recipe card one last time and making sure I've got everything. Judging by the state of Mav's house, I doubt he has many things in his own kitchen. I'm even bringing my own salt and pepper, and my best cast iron pan.

When I turn back around, I see Abby still holding the bottle of Windex, a frown on her face.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing," she says.

I raise a brow. My best friend can't keep a thing from me, and she knows it. So for her to even attempt to hide her thoughts from me feels like a major red flag.

"Fine," she sighs. "Not nothing. I'm worried about you. All of this is..."

She gestures to the bags of cooking and cleaning supplies.

"It's a lot," she says. "And I don't want to poop on your parade -"

"Isn't the expression 'rain on your parade?'" I wonder.

"-But this feels like going from zero to a hundred overnight," she says. "First you're in a funk and need a one night stand. Then you're ready to date again. Now you're dating Maverick which you know I'm highly supportive of. But going over to the man's house and cooking and cleaning? For the first date?"

"You think it's desperate?" I ask, biting my lip.

"No," she says quickly. "I think it's really, really kind. And I'm worried that he's not

going to appreciate it. I know you like Maverick, and I know that when you like someone you want to do nice things for them. But what if it's too...too soon?"

I lean against the counter, facing my friend.

"Never thought I'd see the day that you're retelling me that I might be moving too fast with a man," I say in wonder.

"You know I love you," she says, putting the blue-colored cleaner back into the grocery bag. "And you're right, I'm not one to be giving advice out to anyone about moving too fast. I'm just protective of you, you know? I don't want another man stomping all over your heart, taking you for granted. You deserve someone who is going to match your kindness with equal or greater kindness. Maverick seems amazing, but I don't know him. So I'm..."

"Guarded?" I ask.

"Yeah," she shrugs. "Guarded on your behalf. But if you feel that this is right for you, I think you need to follow your heart."

I frown and look down, contemplating my freshly painted toes – the color pink, picked out with Maverick in mind.

Am I trying too hard?

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Will Mav appreciate it? Or will he take it for granted?

Will he hurt me?

He said he was ready to think long-term about us. Of course, maybe he was just saying that get into my pants. At the time I didn't consider that possibility. I was really caught up in the moment.

And Mav seemed so sincere...

"I wish I hadn't said anything," Abby says softly. "Look! I've gone and burst your bubble."

"You haven't," I say with a shake of my head. Telling a lie of my own to my best friend now. Truthfully, my "bubble" definitely feels at least slightly deflated...maybe not popped altogether, but certainly less full than before.

I glance at the clock. It's five o'clock. If I'm going to clean Mav's kitchen and cook him a meal, I need to leave now.

"Forget I said anything," Abby says. "Seriously. Forget what I said. I'm probably just feeling wounded today. Yesterday I thought I was really getting somewhere with Levi. But then he brushed me off at the end of the night. Every time I think I'm breaking through with him, he pushes me away. Now I'm projecting my bad mood onto the good thing you and Mav are building together."

"It's okay," I say. "You're looking out for me. That's what friends do."

“Are we okay?” Abby says with a nervous smile.

“Of course,” I say.

“And areyouokay?”

“Definitely,” I say.

To mask this fib, I turn back to the pantry and pretend to look for another item.

10

Maverick

I open the door, half dressed. I’m expecting to see Levi, so before the door is all the way open I’m already growling expletives at the person whose knock summoned me.

“For fuck’s sake Levi, I told you I’ve got a girl coming over,” I’m saying as I swing the door open.

It takes me a moment to realize it’s not Levi on the porch, but Raina.

“Oh,” I say. “Hey.”

“You’ve got a girl coming over?” she asks, raising a brow with a small smile. “You said that as though you’ve got a rotation of them coming over regularly.”

She says this in jest, but her feelings are all over her face. In case she needs any more assurance, I step outside and shut the door behind me. Then I grab her by the shoulders, turning her around and pushing her roughly back against the door.

“You’re the only woman for me,” I say. “I thought I made that clear yesterday.”

“You might have,” she breathes. “But we’ve slept since then. Maybe you had time to think about it. And maybe you changed your mind.”

She’s speaking pure nonsense. She has no idea, truly no idea, how insane she makes me.

In fact, I did have time to think last night. And the more I thought about it, the more sure I felt that Raina is the only woman for me. The One. She’s The One.

I’m not a believer in soul mates...or at least, I wasn’t until I met her. But now that we’ve met, how could I not? How the fuck can I not believe in soul mates now, what else could explain this magnetic pull that she has on me?

It’s not the kind of thing that you can make sense of. It’s not logical. This isn’t something I decided, not something my brain guided. Instead it’s my heart making all of the decisions, driving this thing forward at a speed that scares me a little.

Scares me because I don’t want to scare her.

If Raina is The One then I can’t afford to fuck things up. And when it comes to women, fucking things up is all I do. I don’t know any other way.

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“Change my mind?” I ask. “Why the hell would I change my mind?”

“I don’t know.”

“I haven’t changed my mind. Have you changed your mind?” I ask.

She smiles, then tilts her head to the side and taps her chin, pretending to ponder.

I lift her off the ground, pulling her thick thighs on either side of me so that she’s straddling my waist, and slam her roughly back against the door again.

“Don’t play games with me, sweetheart,” I say against her throat. “You won’t win.”

Her fingers tangle deeply into the hair on the back of my head, pressing me closer to her.

“So I’ll ask you again. Have you changed your mind?”

“No,” she gasps.

“I should take you again, right here,” I say. I begin to slide my hand up her shirt when she squirms.

“Wait,” she says. “The ice cream will melt!”

“The...ice cream?” I ask, pulled out of my lust by my pure confusion.

I let her slide down the door and regain her balance on her feet.

“The ice cream,” she explains. “I’m early because I brought...brought some supplies.”

“What supplies?” I ask.

She walks down the porch to the rickety green car in front of the house, pulling several large, heavy looking bags from the backseat. I rush forward to help her, taking the bags from her hands.

“You look like you’re moving in,” I comment, glancing at some of the items in the bags. “Is that a skillet?”

“Is it okay?” she asks with a frown.

I don’t say anything, looking at the bags more closely. There are all kinds of things in here. The skillet is the tip of the iceberg; it looks like she’s packed a whole grocery trip’s worth of food in here. And then in the other bag there are...cleaning supplies.

Cleaning supplies.

“You came to our date early to clean my house?” I ask flatly.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I just...I wanted to make you dinner, and then when I thought about it, I realized your kitchen is probably...”

She doesn’t finish the sentence but I know what she’s thinking. My kitchen is probably dirty. Dusty and untouched. And she’s correct in her thinking. I hardly use my kitchen anymore. It’s more of a storage room than anything else.

Thinking about this makes me feel...prickly.

Embarrassed. That's how I feel. Embarrassed at the way my house looks. I should have cleaned it up last night after Raina left. But I didn't think she'd want to use the kitchen, for fuck's sake! I thought we'd watch the sunset, and then if I'm lucky, go to bed together. So I cleaned the few needed areas of my home needed for that limited agenda, and nothing more.

Now she wants to cook me dinner.

Of course she does. Because she's a god-damned angel. And for some reason, this angel is falling for a messed up, grouchy asshole of a cowboy like me.

"I'm sorry," Raina groans, trying to tug one of the bags out of my hand. "Forget all about this, Mav. I got carried away thinking about tonight and wanted to do something nice for you."

"Yeah," I say.

That's all I can think to say right now. I'm stuck, frozen, feeling embarrassed and unsure of myself.

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It's not like I didn't know Raina was too good for a guy like me. I've known that since the moment I laid eyes on her. But it's only now, in this moment, with these bags in my hands that I'm realizing just how out of my league this woman might be.

She's the one? How can she be The One when nothing about this match makes a damn bit of sense? If this is fate, it's fate playing a prank on me.

"I'm sorry," Raina says again. She tries to tug the bags out of my hands but I hold onto them absentmindedly, frowning down at her. "Abby tried to warn me...said this might not be a great idea...I did too, thought it might make me seem desperate. I should have listened to my gut."

"Wait," I say slowly. "Desperate? You think bringing this stuff over makes you seem desperate?"

"Doesn't it?" she asks.

"How would it make you look desperate?" I ask.

"Because," she shrugs. "This is the kind of thing a long term girlfriend might do. Or a wife. I don't even know you, I don't live here, I...I guess I'm coming on a little strong."

All of my inner turmoil melts away as I listen to her speak. Suddenly I'm focused on her again, solely her, realizing that once again, she's worried about how she's coming across to me. That strong confidence that I see shine through her is wavering.

She's uncertain of herself yet again, which is ridiculous. Because she should be absolutely, positively sure of one thing – that I am fucking crazy about her. Her and only her. The only woman for me.

“You're right,” I say quietly. “This is stuff a wife might do for a man. And you know what? I like it.”

“You don't seem to,” she says.

“I like the idea of you playing housewife tonight,” I say. “Especially if you wear one of those sexy little aprons. But I don't love the idea of you cleaning my house. You're not my maid, you're my...”

My what? My girlfriend? No. That word doesn't feel right. It feels too casual, too juvenile, not enough to convey the depth of what I'm feeling for her.

“You're my woman,” I finish.

“Your woman,” she repeats, smiling a little. “That sounds kind of...possessive.”

“Not kind of,” I say. “It's absolutely possessive. How many times am I going to have to show you that before it sinks in?”

“Not sure,” she says. “I really like when you show me...it's so much fun, I might have to pretend to forget so that you don't forget to show me.”

I put the bags on the ground and step to her, embracing her again. No furious kisses this time; I just hold her to my chest, smoothing the hair down her back.

She has no idea. No fucking clue. If she did, she'd know that I have no intention of ever forgetting. As long as she belongs to me, she'll know.

“Well if it’s not too desperate...” Raina says against my chest. “I’d like to get inside quickly. I need to get the chicken in the oven in an hour, and I wasn’t kidding when I said the ice cream is going to melt.”

I don’t want to let her go. I want her. My cock is throbbing with need right now, and her soft body feels so good against mine.

But I release her and pick the bags up.

“If you’re going to do wife stuff for me,” I say slowly. “You’re going to have to let me do husband stuff for you. That way we’re breaking even.”

“I’m not keeping score,” Raina laughs. “But fine. Feel free. What kind of ‘husband stuff’ did you have in mind though?”

“You’ll know when I show you,” I say confidently, already forming the plan in my mind.

Epilogue

Raina

It’s only been six months since I met Mav, but I feel like I’ve known him for much longer.

Getting him to open up to me hasn’t been easy. Maverick is the kind of man who’d rather use actions than words. He doesn’t talk about his feelings – not unless I make him. And whenever we fight, he’d prefer to work things out in the bedroom, naked body to naked body, over talking things out.

Truth be told, I kind of like his way of working things out, too.

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Maybe it's because Mav avoids discussing his feelings so much that I was so surprised when he invited me on a romantic night in together tonight.

Although I don't live with Mav, I'm at his ranch house so often that I might as well. I've moved in a lot of my clothes, my shampoo, my makeup...that cast iron pan that I brought over to the ranch on our first date still lives there, in the now-tidy and dust-free kitchen where I make frequent dinners.

He's always appreciative.

Always.

He looks at me like I'm a prize. Like he can't quite believe he won me.

But that's how I feel about him.

I've never known happiness like this before. Didn't realize things could be so good. That a man could make me feel so safe, so protected. Is he too much sometimes? Too possessive, too protective?

Yes.

But in a way, I kind of like that. I like being taken care of by a man more than I ever believed I could.

Of course, I still stay busy with my work. Faith's first food co-op officially opens in a few weeks, and Abby and I have been busy marketing it, getting the word out,

scattering beautifully designed flyers fifty miles in every directions in the hopes that it will be a smashing success.

My work brings me to Mav and his ranch too, though. These days, everything seems to. Nearly every single night, I curl up in that king sized bed in the upstairs bedroom, the one with the killer view, inhaling the smell of his shampoo, running my palm over his naked chest where I can feel his heart beat.

Except last night, Maverick insisted that I sleep at Abby's place. He said he wanted to surprise me for our six month "anniversary."

Surprise me with what, I don't know.

I drive up to the house and Maverick greets me quickly at my car, stopping me before I can even get out of the driver's side seat.

"Wait," he says.

"Wait?" I laugh, trying to step out of the car. "Wait on what? You said you'd finally tell me what you've been up to when I got here tonight."

"And I'm going to," he says, fishing a piece of black cloth from his pocket. "But first I need to blindfold you."

"I figured that kinky sex would be on the menu tonight," I grin. "But I didn't realize we'd be doing that first."

He shakes his head.

"Don't give me ideas," he says darkly. "No – I'm blindfolding you so I don't ruin the surprise."

“What is the surprise?” I ask, looking up to the house. “Is it out here somewhere?”

Mav ignores me, bringing the cloth to my eyes and then tying it behind my head. I feel his hand on mine, pulling me out of the car and shutting the door. Then he’s picking me up off the ground, cradling me in his arms as he walks us to the side somewhere. I feel no stairs beneath us, telling me that we’re not going into the house but staying on the grounds.

What is his plan?

“I know how much you like watching the sunset out here,” Maverick says. “So I thought this would be the best time and place. I’m glad you were on time; the angle is perfect right now. Sparkling off the water. Just like you like it.”

I pretend to look out to the sunset, the blindfold still over my eyes.

“It’s beautiful!” I exclaim. “The best one yet! It’s soo wonderful of you to let me watch the sunset!”

“Very funny,” he growls. “Keep it up. Maybe I’ll leave this blindfold on you all night long. Would be a shame to have to spank you in here instead of what I had planned.”

“In here?” I repeat in confusion. “In where?”

I feel the ground beneath us change, Mav’s boots stepping off of the uneven grass and onto something flat, the surface sounding solid beneath his boots. But even while the surface beneath us sounds solid, I feel us rock gentle to the side, as though on a boat.

He lets me down, guiding me to a chair.

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“Can I take this thing off yet?” I ask, pointing to the blindfold.

“You can take it off.”

I rip the blindfold away, blinking while my eyes adjust to the warm orange sun. It’s bright, too bright, and once my eyes adjust I realize why.

We’re floating on the pond, with the sunset sparkling off the surface of the water that surrounds us. I look around us, at the chair I’m sitting on and below, and see that we’re floating on a platform, empty except for a couple of chairs, with a low railing around the perimeter. The entire thing is painted white, with bunches of sunflowers and daisies decorating the posts. Looking closer, I see little white candles scattered here and there, casting a flickering glow onto the platform.

“Mav, is this...is this the barge from the storage shed?” I ask, remembering the old rusty thing that I’d glimpsed months before.

“Don’t recognize it?” he asks, putting his hands in his pockets.

“I don’t,” I say in amazement. “When have you been doing this? Wait...is this what you and Levi were doing when you said he was helping you repair the shed?”

“Could be,” he grins. “I knew you wouldn’t suspect anything if Levi was involved. He’s not the romantic gesture type.”

“He’s not,” I agree, thinking of the foul-tempered cowboy that my best friend can’t stop chasing. “Maverick, I don’t know what to say. This is so beautiful. But it’s so

much. If this is what you do for our six month dating anniversary, I don't even know what you'd do for a year."

"You'll never find out," he replies.

"What? Why not?"

"Relax, sweetheart," he says, stepping forward and taking my hands in his. "You'll never find out because the only kind of anniversary I want to have with you is a wedding anniversary. If I have anything to say about it, six months from now you're going to be my wife. None of this just dating stuff."

My eyes are wide. I must be hallucinating, because I think Maverick just said he wants to marry me.

He drops to one knee and now I know I'm not hallucinating. Surely not.

"We've only been together six months," I whisper.

"I don't give a shit," he says, his fiery eyes gazing into mine. "Six months is long enough for me to make up my mind. Hell, I had my mind made up a while ago. I just needed some time to find a ring and plan how I was going to ask you."

He pulls a small velvet box from his pocket and I can't believe what I'm seeing. My gruff and possessive cowboy on one knee, pulling off this entire romantic gesture, hiding his plans in secret right under my nose for months.

"How can you be so sure about this?" I ask.

"Because I am. Are you?"

“No,” I say honestly. “I’m scared. I’m scared of trying to make something work forever. I’m scared that you’ll change your mind. I’m scared that once we settle down, once we’re married, you’ll get bored.”

“Why the hell would I get bored being with you?” he asks. “Raina, you’re something special. And you ought to know that but you don’t. Which is lucky for a bastard like me, because if you really knew how special you are, you’d realize you can do a hell of a lot better than me.”

“No!” I say.

“Yes,” he says firmly.

He looks down and opens the box, pulling a diamond ring from it and guiding it to my left finger. I haven’t even said yes yet, but in the most Maverick way, he doesn’t wait for my answer, he decides for the both of us that this is how it will be. We’re engaged, and I belong to him. It’s that simple. For him.

“You’re something special,” I say to him.

He ignores me, holding my hand in his and tilting it from side to side, watching the diamond catch the sunlight.

“I like this,” he says, giving my hand a firm squeeze. “This is right. This is what your hand was missing all this time. Now everyone will know you belong to me. It’s just as well, too, with the co-op opening soon. All of those customers coming in and out, seeing you with a ring on your finger.”

“We haven’t even opened for business yet and you’re already thinking about guarding me from men who come into the store,” I shake my head. “So jealous.”

“Not jealous,” he shakes his head. “Jealous is when you want something that doesn't belong to you. I think we've established already that you do belong to me. Or is this ring not a good enough reminder of that?”

“Reminder of what again?” I ask in a playful tone. “Aw, shoot. I forgot what I was supposed to remember!”

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His eyes grow dangerous and dark. He pulls me from the chair, removing his jacket and spreading it out over the floor of the barge beneath us. Then he pushes me down, back against the jacket. Still standing, he slowly unbuckles his belt and then his jeans too.

He takes his cock out and before I know it, he's on the ground too, crouching above me. His hands push my skirt up my thighs, pulling my underwear to the side, and then he's driving inside of me, rough and hard.

"Now do you remember?" he says harshly in my ear. "Do you remember who you belong to?"

"Yes," I gasp.

"Who do you belong to?"

"You."

"Damn straight."