



UnScripted

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult

Description: When she told me Sons of Anarchy was her favorite show, I knew I was in trouble. When she said I'm what Jax would look like if he didn't die, I knew I was screwed. I was her fantasy man... all grown up. But I'm no pretty boy acting in a show. This is real life sweetheart. It's ugly. It's raw. Unscripted.

Meat a.k.a. Roger spent his life protecting the secrets of his motorcycle club while being a bodyguard to the princess who grew up in its shadow. But when she finds her king and her happy ending: Roger rides alone. Devon walks into his bar looking for a job. But, one look at the tatted, silver fox and she knows she's found her man. But Meat wants nothing to do with a girl half his age.

He calls her jailbait. She calls him her dream man. Sometimes the best things are unplanned. They are UnScripted.

Total Pages (Source): 88

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Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:24 am

IT'S COLDER HERE THAN I thought it would be. Where I'm from, the air doesn't bite with a chill until September. Throwing an old sweatshirt on, I bend down to tie my sneakers and head out for my morning run.

At least the air here smells clean. I breathe it in deeply, letting my lungs fill as I work my legs through several stretches.

I could run for miles through scenery like this. It's nothing but woods full of the largest evergreens you could ever imagine, lush moss on boulders littering the forest floor and air so clean—you want to bottle and drink it instead of breathing it.

But I didn't come here for nature. I came to Springdale to dig into the past and find out who my parents were.

My mother was a whore.

There's no sugarcoating that fact.

She gave me up, but luckily, I was adopted as a baby. Although, she did fill out some paperwork just in case when I turned eighteen—I would want to know who she was.

I did want to know.

There's nothing I wanted more.

But now I wish I didn't. My adoptive parents never told me any of this until my thirtieth birthday last year.

Over a decade.

I lost over ten years waiting for answers, and I didn't want to wait one more day. So, I tracked down the town of my birth: Springdale, Oregon and started making plans. It took almost a year, but when I was ready—I booked a one-way ticket from Chicago O'Hare Airport despite the pleas from my adoptive mother not to go.

With my bag slung over my shoulder, I walked through security, ticket in hand gripped so tight it turned to mush from the sweat from my palm.

Have you ever seen the look in someone's eyes the moment their heart gets ripped to shreds?

I have.

The instant I turned around locking eyes with the woman who raised me through the glass wall separating us. I shook my head mouthing, "I'm sorry." The tears streaked down her face as she clutched her gloves wringing them in her hands like a wet dishrag.

She said she thought she was protecting me.

Protecting me from what?

Turning left down the road that leads into town, my feet make quick work of the same route I take every day.

Up the hill, I climb, stopping at the top to catch my breath. The rusted metal gate swings open at my touch. I slowly make my way through the headstones finding the one I'm looking for.

“Hello, Ma.”

My finger traces her name carved in stone, Dee Dee Stanton where someone spray-painted where in neon green on it a long time ago. It’s faded, but it’s still there.

It was a punch to the gut the first time I came here, and I tried in vain to scrub it off. I even complained to the caregivers, but they just asked if I’d like to buy a new headstone, not giving a shit in the least that it had been defaced.

Sitting for a minute, I wipe the sweat from my brow and begin the story from where I left off yesterday. I’ve decided to tell her all of them. Every last one she missed out on since she gave me away. But it doesn’t even matter since she died a few years after putting me up for adoption. She would’ve missed my life regardless.

“... then in kindergarten, I met my best friend, Lucy. She was an only child and said we could be “sisters.” We’re still BFF's today, and she thinks I’m crazy for coming here when there’s nothing left. But that’s the thing Dee Dee, she shares the same blood as her parents and knows her whole history.” I hang my head, toeing the overgrown grass with my sneaker, feeling guilty.

“I’m obsessed with history. I had told her. She knows this. I became a high school history teacher for Christ sakes.”

Glancing at my sports watch, I check the time. “Shit. I gotta go, Dee. Good talk.”

I stand, brushing the leaves and twisted sticks clinging to my sweaty legs, then walk a few rows over. “Good morning, Dad. I’m going to find out if you even knew that you fathered me. The answer has to be here somewhere.”

His grave is the complete opposite of Dee’s. It’s freshly kept. The grass around is watered and manicured, fresh flowers fill the urns on both sides, and little American

flags stick into the ground. My fingers trace his name just like I did with Dee's.

John Masters.

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A blackbird caws so loud, it makes me jump, “What in the hell?”

There’s a huge man riding a beast of a bike coasting in, parking right by Dee’s grave. I can’t help watching his big frame moving gracefully amongst the headstones. He stops, putting one knee down in fresh dirt a few graves down from hers.

He shakes his head, taking a flask from his leather jacket, does a mock toast and takes a swig before pouring the rest on the ground. Then he gets up walking away but not before stopping at Dee’s stone. “Crazy bitch,” he mutters out loud.

I’m a runner, but my feet feel like lead. He climbs on his ride; I’m screwing up my chance to find answers.

“Hey! Wait! She was my mom! You—asshole!”

But the roar of his engine as he rides off like a devil, drowns me out.

“Crap,” I mutter to the ghosts, “any of you feel like telling me who the hell that was?”

“Meat.”

“Eeek!” I shriek, “You scared the crap out of me.”

The man laughs, “Shit. I wouldn’t work here if the dead talked.”

“So, who is he?”

“I told ya’. That was Meat. He’s practically the mayor.”

“Um, okay, so where can I find him?”

“The Sassy Wench Tavern.”

“Come again? I’ve been in town for a few weeks now. I’d think I’d know if there was a place with a name like that around here.”

“Google it,” he replies walking away.

The rest of my run forgotten I head back toward the road, tapping my phone like a mad woman.

“Holy shit.”

Not only does this place exist, but according to the website this Meat guy is the owner, and he just posted a job opening for a new waitress. Hitting the number, I instantly call leaving a message that I’m interested and qualified. Heck, I waitressed throughout college. If I can handle serving drunk frat boys during pledge week, I can manage the clientele in this wooded town.

My phone rings in my hand, catching me off-guard for the second time in fifteen minutes.

“H-hello?”

“Is this Devon?” A voice as rough as concrete asks.

“Y-yes.”

“You have a speech problem? It’d be hard to wait tables if you can’t talk.”

“I can speak just fine,” I respond with an edge of bitchiness.

“This is Roger. Can you be at the Sassy Wench at 11:30 for an interview?”

“Sure. I can make that.”

His answer is a grunt.

“Goodbye—” But the click in my ear tells me he never heard me say it.

I kick a pile of dirt, watching a pebble roll down the street. So far today has not gotten off to a good start.

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It takes a second for my eyes to adjust to the dim light. It's bright as hell outside, but in here, it's dark as night. It feels like this is a place where time gets lost.

“Hello?”

My sneakers cut across the floor to the bar. It's gorgeous, all dark gleaming wood and ruby leather seats. My eyes roam over the pictures hanging on the wall. One's a black and white photo of an older man beaming proudly outside a bar that looks like this one. Then there's one of a man with a little girl on his lap as he sits on his motorcycle outside the same bar. But the last picture, makes me want for something I've never had. There's a stunning brunette who is staring straight into the camera with a look that's almost a taunt... but the man... he's staring at her like she's the only woman in the world. His huge tatted arms circle her waist, his mouth by her ear and then I notice they seem to be standing right here. In the same spot, I'm in.

“You showed.”

Shrieking, I turn around, with a hand over my rapidly beating heart. My first thought is: He's huge. My second thought is: He's that asshole. My third thought is: Damn, he's fine. My fourth thought is: I'm gonna march him to the cemetery and make him apologize.

Be cool Dev, be cool. My fingernails dig into my palms. I'm trying to hold back my anger—bite my tongue, and rein in my swirling emotions. I can't make an enemy of this man when he could be the key to solving so many of the answers of my past.

“Y-yes.”

He smirks, slowly coming forward and my breath catches before I burst out in a fit of laughter. He's a beast; a giant with ink covering both arms but in that white apron he's wearing over a pair of worn jeans—he looks like any woman's wet dream who's over forty.

“What?” He barks.

“It's just. It's just that... I'm sorry,” I gasp out swiping tears of laughter. “You look hot. I mean, for an old guy and all... in that apron,” I gesture with one hand, trying to charm him with the truth.

His lips don't twitch. He stares me down with eyes that seem to glow in the dark. Fascinated, I slowly walk forward. I've never seen eyes that color before. They're light blue like arctic ice caps, bobbing in a frigid sea. And his hair... it's light brown streaked with gray. His beard looks soft, the kind you could run a hand over before you cuddle in, listening to the sound of your man's steady heart.

What the fuck?

I shake my head and clear my throat. “I'm sorry. You caught me off guard.”

“Follow me,” he grunts.

He leads me down a hall towards the kitchen where the smells wafting towards us makes my tummy growl. I know he heard, but he doesn't crack a joke at my expense.

My eyes lower to his ass, and I bite my lip. He's built. His ass is firm and meaty like he used to power lift or something. I kind of feel like a freak for even looking at a man who's got to be twice my age at least—but I'm fascinated. I'm fascinated that he's in such good shape and intrigued that he knows who Dee was. I need to make sure I get this job. It might be the key to solving everything.

He pushes open the swinging doors, and my knees buckle. My nose lifts appreciating the aroma flirting with it.

“Mmmm,” I inhale closing my eyes.

“Here.”

My eyes pop open wide. He’s standing right in front of me holding a spoon to my mouth. My lips part, our eyes lock as he presses the spoon gently in. I moan again, it’s a bomb of rich spices, warm and hearty and has just enough zing to make your eyes water.

He grunts again, shifting his hips.

This is the most unconventional job interview I’ve ever had.

“It’s good, right?”

“I’ve never tasted anything like it.”

“It’s my special Fra Diavolo sauce.”

“Devil monk.”

“Come again?”

“Fra Diavolo, it means “devil monk” in Italian.”

This time I’m stunned as he throws his head back and laughs and then leans in close. “Christ, that’s me alright. The devil monk. Haven’t gotten laid in so long,” he mutters mostly to himself as he rinses the spoon in the sink.

My eyebrows rise at his confession before I can stop myself I blurt out, “I find that hard to believe.”

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He grunts again turning his back, ignoring me. He picks up a long wooden spoon and starts stirring his sauce, turns down the heat to a simmer and takes off his apron.

“My office,” he motions for me to follow.

“Do you actually talk or just generally grunt, giving orders?”

He stops abruptly and stares intently at me. “You have waitressing experience?”

“Yes sir, paid my way through college.”

“You’re hired.”

“That’s it?”

He studies me, “You remind me of someone... you’ve got the same sass and grit she had. You’ll do well here. Your shift starts at five.”

“Oh, okay... then. So, who was the girl?”

“Here.” He shoves an apron with the Sassy Wench logo on it and practically shoos me out his office door without answering my question.

“That’s it? Don’t you need my name and address... and for me to fill out paperwork?”

“Nope. That’s it, Devon St. John.”

“H-how—?”

“I own the building that you're renting a unit in,” he answers cutting me off.

“Are you always this grumpy?”

“Grumpy? Hell, sugar, I’m having a good day.”

My eyebrows raise, “Well, okay then. I’ll see you at five, Meat.”

He grunts, “Roger. You can call me Roger. Only family calls me by my nickname.”

Swallowing my questions, I duck my head and grab a menu. I’ll need to look it over a few times to familiarize myself with all the dishes and types of beer they offer.

“Devon,” he says in a voice rough but soft, like velvet.

My head jerks up, and we lock eyes.

“We don’t have a uniform here. But daisy dukes or short shorts are the way to go if you wanna make decent tips.”

“Roger that,” I answer with a wink enjoying the moment his eyes leave my face and slide down my body.

He’s a damnsilver fox.

Hot as fuck.

He’s a man’s man: confident and gruff without apologizing for being rough around the edges. I need to get a grip. Falling for him would be a disaster.

I need to find a way to get close to him, just enough to get answers. Small towns like this don't trust outsiders especially one determined to dig into the past. And I've waited my whole life to find the answers, and I'm not leaving without them. Even if some badass giant wearing an apron and who cooks like a celebrity chef tries to get in my way.

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MY EYES FOLLOW HER as she walks across the lot. She can't see me even if she turned around. The glass on my office window is tinted and bulletproof.

I'm old as shit but when push comes to shove—I ride with my brothers in Creed, the motorcycle club I've been in practically my whole damn life. Back in the day, I was the Sergeant in Arms, the muscle, the enforcer tracking down our enemies and settling scores. I'm still the best at what I do running circles around these young-ass punks thinkin' that they are hot shit. I was the original shit-starter raising hell in Springdale, well me, and two other guys.

My best friend Colin Flynn was the Prez, and together we ruled the Pacific Northwest riding our bikes like two bad-asses straight outta hell. Nothing mattered but the club and the code of friendship. But shit changed fast. With the money and power, came women who wanted a piece. And nothing screws up a man's head more than a pussy tighter than a glove and a pair of sugar tits that melt on your tongue.

These days the bar keeps me busy, but I'm a man who is connected, and I always watch my back. Trash has a way of coming back long after you take it out and I'm not taking any chances on letting its stink touch me anymore.

Unfortunately for Colin and my other buddy, John Masters—the two of them tangled over more than one broad—while I kept my both my dick and heart away from club chicks.

Until, her.

Fuck. Colin never knew how I loved the woman he married and how much it tore me

up to watch her belly swell with his child. I'd leave this very bar and drink until I couldn't see straight. 'Course back then this place was called Stan's and was a friggin' dump.

She was young and beautiful. Layla Flynn was a classy broad. She was smart too, but she changed when she got mixed-up with Colin and John. She was Colin's wife, John's side-piece, and the love of my life.

Shit was already too fucked-up for me to get involved. Leaving town was the best thing she could've done for herself. But she left her baby girl behind. That tiny hellion had a hold on my heart just like her mama did. I protected her every day of her life. Now, Shanna belongs to Duke. He's the club's previous Prez, and no one gets near her. But she's still connected to this place. Her grandfather started this business, and her father turned this bar into Creed's clubhouse. Her man, Duke, burned it to the ground and then re-built it with me. This building is a landmark, just as important as the town hall.

On this soil blood's been spilled, men have been made, heck maybe even a few babies too. This bar is the lifeblood of the people here. Springdale would feel hollow without it. It's a place to gather and drink, remember the past and celebrate the present. It might have had a shady start, but today The Sassy Wench and Tavern's a legit business. I won't launder club money through my bar, and our enemies are still out there. Every window has shatter-proof glass, the camera system is tight, and I'm always packin' heat.

Sighing, I turn from the window. My office chair creaks as I sit and open her file.

Name: Devon St. John

Age: 30

Previous Address: 26 Valley Lane Naperville, IL

My eyes skim the notes Federico wrote up. He started as the bouncer, but he pledged to Creed and Duke gave him his patch. He's Duke's eyes and ears in Springdale, and she's been sniffing around—asking questions. It's suspicious as hell. “Who are you darlin’?” But the picture Federico snapped of her jogging in the park doesn't answer. Her long dark hair is in a ponytail off her face, her eyes the color of a stormy sea, hide secrets.

My hands grip the edge of my desk. Christ, she's hot as fuck, and I'm a sick pervert for noticing how tight her ass was when she walked in.

Hell, the way she moaned when tasting my sauce made me wonder if that's how she moans when her man's making her come. I had to turn away and pretend to stir the pot until my hard-on calmed down. I've got no business checking her out. She's my employee, and although I've fucked a patron or two, never someone whose paycheck has my signature on it.

I almost fell over when she called askin' for work. I'd hire her sweet butt just to keep an eye on it. I knew within an hour of her moving to town that Devon was gonna be trouble. Good lookin' women always are. I need to keep myself in check. Hell, I've had plenty of top-shelf women back in my prime. Some might say—I could bag even more now. But ever since I've opened Sassy's, I've calmed down my ways. When this used to be Stan's Place, I came in about every night. I'd grab a meal and stay until closing. And if I got shit-faced enough on a night when the band brought in the crowds—I often found myself in a dark corner with my hand up a skirt or in the back lot with my zipper down. Shit, they always came to me. I don't remember the last time I pursued a hook-up.

I pinch the bridge of my nose feeling a headache coming on. There's something damn familiar about that girl. It's in my head somewhere—I just can't find the missing

puzzle piece of where she fits.

“I’m so fucked, Lucy,” I grab a bottle of cold water and slam the fridge door.

“I told you it was a bad idea to go live there. I can’t believe you left when I have a summer share at the lake. Although most of the guys are engaged or married.”

“Yeah, I do miss Chicago in August... but you don’t understand,” I reply flopping down on the lumpy bed.

“What happened?”

“I took a waitressing job.”

“What? Why? Doesn’t your job at the school start in less than a month?”

“Yeah, it does. But there’s this guy, Roger. He definitely knows who my mother was.”

“Good. Just ask him straight out. Get your answers and get your ass back home. I miss you Dev.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Of course it is.”

“It’s not, I think he might hate her. And it’s more... god, I can’t explain it. This town—it’s wild. The trees are so tall it’s like they block out the sun leaving everything underneath covered in streaks of sunlight. The air smells like cars were never invented and the men—they are huge! Picture this: hot as hell lumberjacks meet the Sons of Anarchy.”

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“Holy shit. You found heaven girl, and I’m booking my ticket.”

“Seriously? You’ll come for a visit?”

“Hells yeah. You better not be lying about the men. I need to see this for myself.”

“I’m not,” I laugh feeling so much better about everything. “But Lucy, the guy I was telling you about, Roger... he’s like in his fifties or something.”

“Get out.”

“I know. Is it weird that I’m so attracted to him?”

“No. Not if he’s as hot as you say he is.”

“He looks like Charlie Hunnam, that guy who played Jax in Sons.... if you added ten years—okay, maybe fifteen, tops.”

“Damn. I’m definitely coming now.”

“Heck, the principal just called me, the music teacher met some guy in Cabo on her summer break, and she’s not coming back. If you like Springdale, maybe you could stay?”

“Um, one thing at a time Dev,” she laughs hanging up.

Feeling much better, I spring up from my bed and open my closet. My hands slide

each hanger until I find what I'm looking for—my hot pink tube top that I bought for my vacation with Luce a few years back. With a good push-up bra underneath, it raises my cleavage a good three inches. Shuffling over to my dresser, my hands search through each drawer until I find my denim cut-offs. I'm going to look damn hot tonight. Putting the clothes on my bed, I enter the bathroom and get to work. Turning the shower on, I get in thinking about how I can't wait to see the look on Roger's face. I wonder if he'll play it cool pretending not to notice me, or if his ice-blue eyes will burn with heat.

But most of all I wonder: Why do I even care?

“What are you staring at, girl?”

“You old man. You're hot as fuck.”

“Get back to work.”

“Gladly,” I smirk, bending down to pick up a napkin that had fallen on the floor.

“Jesus H Christ,” he mutters under his breath.

I grin, feeling his hot eyes on my body. There's no dress code at the Sassy Wench, and every day I come to work wearing just a little less. My friends back home think I'm whack lusting after some man twenty years my senior, but damn the man is fine. He has more muscles than a street fighter and when he puts on his glasses to do paperwork; I instantly get wet.

He must have a story. And I'm going to find out what it is. But there's no way in hell—he's going to find out mine.

It's my third day working here, but it already feels as if I've worked here forever. Not

because the job is hard but because it seems so familiar. With a grin, I finish setting the tables and pretend to ignore him seated at the bar reading a stack of invoices with those sexy rims on. My thighs tingle. He's so fuckin' hot, such a jerk only speaking in grunts, but damn his huge body covered in ink makes me want to trace each line with my tongue and make him go insane for me. Then when he's at my mercy—begging me to put him out of his misery and sink down on him, riding us both to ecstasy—I'd stop. I'd make him beg for me and not let him come until he apologizes and tells me everything he knows.

"I'll have the Wellington salad with the chicken on the side....," the cool tip of the metal pen slides between my lips. I work it in and out between my plump lips staring at Rog over the head of the businesswoman ordering lunch, before taking it out and jotting down their order.

His hands move down under the bar as if he's adjusting his pants. I can't make out what he's muttering, and I smirk raising my eyebrows at him.

"... and I'll have the Cobb salad and a glass of iced-tea," the other customer tells me.

"Sure. I'll grab your drinks and be right back."

My eyes meet Roger's, and everything they ordered goes right out my head. I look down at the pad I was writing their order on, stunned at what's there.

I didn't write down a damn thing.

It's just a bunch of quick scribbles and doodles with a few words written in nonsensical script.

With a red face and a rapidly beating heart, I slip the pad into the back pocket of my snug shorts and walk to the bar ordering two iced-teas trying to ignore the delicious

smell and body heat radiating from Rog sittin' there.

I'm not even looking at him, my teeth sink into my lip, and I stifle a moan feeling my nipples tighten under his watchful gaze. I feel his eyes on me. I feel him looking at me all the time, but whenever I look back, he looks away.

I can't tell if he's watchin' me because I'm new and he wants to make sure I'm not screwing up or if it's something more.

Damn, I hope it's something more.

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THURSDAY NIGHTS CAN GO either way. Some are slow and others fast. I should've known there was gonna be trouble tonight the second she walked in as if she owned the goddamn place instead of me. She's only been here a few days, but she already fits like she's worked here ages. Not that I'll ever tell her that.

Her hips swung from side to side; her smooth, tan skin glowed under the light. She wore the apron like a dress; it ended at the top of her toned thighs. Her hair swung around her like a cloud. She curled it, and the silky strands hung almost down to that itty-bitty waist. The bubble-gum pink lipstick she wore hit me like a punch to the gut.

She walked straight towards me. She was an arrow, and I was her target.

But she is far from the first to try to play this game with me. Breaking eye contact, I turned back to the cash register with a twenty in my hand, fingers jabbing the keys until the cash drawer spit open. I handed Big Jim his change. But he didn't even notice as I placed the money in front of his drink. He was turned in his seat with his mouth hanging open staring at my new waitress like she was a piece of candy.

"Who is that?" He whistled through his teeth.

"Dev. Come here sugar and meet Big Jim," I gesture like I don't give a shit, but the tick I feel pulsing in my cheek betrays me as he leers at the rounded curves of her cleavage poppin' out of a turquoise top.

She winks at him, holds out her hand but he picks her up in a bear hug instead, welcoming her to "the family."

“Not yet. She needs to prove herself. It’s only her first week,” I tell Jim.

“Oh, I’ll prove myself all right,” she answers leaning an elbow on the bar, expecting my eyes to dip to her chest.

I don’t.

Her eyebrows raise slightly in surprise that I didn’t even take a peek at her ripe breasts spilling from her top.

“Tina will be in soon. She’ll show ya’ the supply closet in case we get slammed and run out of stock up front. The band is playing tonight, and we’re gonna get busy. Can you handle taking tables one through twelve and serving the bar orders from the kitchen?”

“Of course. If you even bothered to interview me, you’d know I waited at Hooters in downtown Chicago for four years.”

“Be careful sugar. The men in these parts won’t hesitate to take what you put in front of them. They’re as wild as the woods and just as rough; not city-slicking suits with manicured hands. You’re sending out signals, girl. You better make damn sure ya’ know what you’re about,” I finish slappin’ my hands down on the bar in front of her hoping to scare her good. I’m not worried about people getting fresh with her. I’m concerned about my own damn hands itching to feel her soft skin and my thumb dying to run across her lower lip. Shaking my head, I turn away and do something I haven’t done in months—drink on the job. My hands reach for the glass automatically, pouring a shot of Jack Daniels.

She grins, turning around to take a drink order. My hand grips the bar hard. Her jean shorts barely cover her butt, ending where her glutes and hamstrings meet leaving her long legs on display for everyone to see. Her calves are muscular and tight, the line

from her quads visible from the side. Damn, she must lift weights too.

I raise the glass to my lips, swallowing hard. It goes down like fire in the back of my throat.

Hiring her was stupid. It was impulsive, and now I'm gonna pay the price thinkin' about her in ways I shouldn't. Shit, I was burning through women, riding like a demon in the dark, getting rich and high when she was still a speck in the stars. But now she's standing right in front of me with eyes sayin' things she can't possibly mean. And if she does—I'm already lost and half-way to hell for thinkin' about all the ways I could take her with me.

His eyes have me hypnotized as he warns me about the big, bad, dangerous men I've seen around town. "I can handle myself," I answer with a shiver. But it's not one of fear; it's all anticipation. My last boyfriend, Jeff, was the gym teacher at the high school in Naperville where I worked.

After weeks of flirting in the hallways and hot looks across the teacher's lounge lunch table, we hooked up, both being drunk at happy hour. Our first sloppy kiss turned into actual dates. Each was hotter than the next. My mouth watered the first time he peeled his shirt over his head, and my hand traced down his chiseled chest, his cut abs and inside his boxers. Jeff had it all—charm, golden looks and a body ripped like a cage fighter and between his legs he was well-endowed. I thought I had won the boyfriend lottery.

Jeff was sweet and treated me good.

Until he didn't.

So, that leaves me at three. I've only had sex with three men; none of which were the strong woodsy type who took what they wanted.

I raise the pen to my lips, staring off in space as I wait for him to place the beers on my tray. The last time I was with Jeff was on our disastrous date on Valentine's Day, when he asked me to move out.

I thought he might propose since we'd been together for years. But instead of getting engaged—I got dumped.

I'm too young to give up on the hope for finding the catch of a lifetime. I have a fleeting thought that I'm standing in front of one, but I have a feeling more than one woman tried to catch this shark. Sharks are dangerous, silently circling until they come up out of nowhere to rip you apart. There's no wedding band on his finger, in fact, there's no pale skin telling a story he ever wore one.

"Hello? Doll? You still with us?" Roger asks tapping me gently on the head.

"Yep. I was just replaying all my super ninja moves. Like I was saying, I can handle anyone who gets fresh with me."

"Uh-huh," he grunts. "If anyone gives you trouble, you come to Federico or me. He's the big guy at the door. You haven't met him yet since the weekdays have been slow. If anyone gets drunk and handsy with you, let him know."

"Roger, that."

He grunts and nods over to the window outside the kitchen, "Food's up. Get to work, doll."

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And I do. The regulars greet me like a long-lost friend. Tina the other waitress is nice, and before I know it, half my shift is gone. I work fast clearing tables and wiping them clean with a wet rag.

“What brings ya’ here darlin’?”

I spin around, heart pounding and my head tips back meeting the stranger’s intense gaze.

“I’m sorry. You startled me.”

“Didn’t mean to do that.”

“Smith? What in the hell are you doin’ here brotha?” Meat calls out.

I can’t hear his reply over the motorcade of bikes tearing into the lot. The engines roar to a stop and my mouth hangs open as twenty men enter the bar each hotter and more bad ass than the next.

“Hot damn. Get your ass in gear girl, because we just might make a month’s worth of tips tonight,” Tina informs me tugging down her top and applying a fresh coat of lip gloss.

“Who’s this?”

I try to act cool but damn these men are terrifying. Hot, but terrifying.

“Oh, that’s Devon. She’s the new girl. Whatcha drinkin’?” Tina asks flirting with them.

“Let’s break her in then. Get on the bar and lay flat.”

I look back and forth between the two unsmiling giants that pushed the glasses aside, expecting me to obey their command.

“Uh, I-uh...,” I stammer feeling unsure of myself for the first time in years.

“We’re just fuckin’ with you sugar,” the two men laugh.

“Oh yeah?” I answer hopping up and planting my butt down on the bar. Raising an eyebrow, my hand snakes behind me and grabs a bottle of Tequila. I place it next to me and grab the salt and lime, lift my shirt to prep for body shots. Just as I’m about to tip the bottle and pour, it’s yanked from my grasp.

“Get up,” Roger growls, yanking down my shirt. I try to sit up, feeling my cheeks burn. He pulls me off the bar. Toe-to-toe he leans down, the irises of his blue eyes burn like a spark of a flame before the fire ignites. “My office. NOW.”

I gulp, feeling like he’s swallowed me.

With a hanging head, I follow him as he raises the swing counter of the bar and walks out holding it up. I duck under his arm catching a whiff of laundry detergent and cigar smoke. It’s a weird combination but damn if it doesn’t affect me. I’ve dated too many men wearing suits and designer cologne, each more groomed and metro-sexual than the next. But Roger, he’s all man, with muscles and hands made strong by labor, not personal trainers. I felt the calluses covering his palms when he firmly grasped my arm.

His hand jerks the knob of his door, the tip of his boot kicks it open, and I feel like a kid entering the principal's office.

He's wound tight, refusing to look at me as he walks over to a wet bar and pours himself a drink. He raises it to his lips and pauses as if he just realized he's holding a drink in his hands.

"Fuckin' hell." He slams the drink down uncaring that it spills over the rim onto the floor.

Unsure of what to do or say, I move over to a wall where a row of pictures hang. One, in particular, catches my eye; it's of him, an older man with a breathing tube running through his nose and the same woman and man I saw in a pic out front. I snort, reading the banner hanging above their heads, "Happy 60th Birthday Meat."

A waft of cigar smoke reaches me, and I turn finding him seated behind his desk, with snakeskin boots crossed at the ankles on top of a pile of papers. The cigar rests between two fingers as he puffs out the smoke in rings.

"I'll pierce my left tit if you're a day over fifty."

His eyes drop to my breasts, and he smirks, "Don't make that bet darlin'."

"No way. I don't believe it."

"I'm not sixty," he shrugs. "They wouldn't let me pledge to Creed unless I was twenty-one."

"So, you lied?"

"Yep."

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“How old were you?”

His chair creaks as he shifts his weight, placing his feet back on the floor. “Doesn’t matter.”

It does to me.

“Are you firing me?”

He assesses me, flicking the ash from his cigar in a tray. “Nope. But if you pull a stunt like that, I’ll make you wash dishes for a week.”

My shoulders straighten. “I’d quit first.”

He ignores my statement. “All kinds of shit used to go down on this premises. I won’t lie, even I did some stupid shit. But times are changing. Families come in here on occasion, in case you haven’t noticed—my cooking is damn good. If you want to flirt, make extra tips—fine but don’t pull shit like that again unless it’s after midnight on a weekend. Ya’ hear me?”

“Yes, sir.”

He grunts. “Get back out there and take care of my men.”

A few quick taps sound on his door. “Come in,” Roger barks.

The man he called Smith stands in the doorway. He looks right at me, with cold silver

eyes. Damn, the man looks like he could be a ruthless killer, snapping my neck with one flick of his wrist. He's tall too, well over six feet. His hair's shaved close to his head, and his leather cut can't hide the bulging muscles underneath.

"Stop eye fucking Smith and get your sweet butt back on the floor. You know how to make drinks, Dev?"

I don't stop looking at Smith. "Sure do."

Smith moves aside as I brush past him, the door closes firmly behind me, and all the air in my lungs comes out with a whoosh.

"What was that about?"

"Nothing. Just personnel shit."

"Uh huh," Smith replies not believin' a word.

"Fuck!" I curse, picking up my drink and pouring one for Smith.

"Salúd, brotha. I wasn't expectin' you this week."

Smith sits across from me and takes the drink, "We've got trouble."

"We?"

"Yep. Zach's brother is outta jail. He wants vengeance."

"Shit." I run a hand through my hair, a million thoughts running through my head. I always knew this day might come, and started prepping for it the day my best friend Colin Flynn shot the ex-Prez of Creed dead in his kitchen several years back.

“You got a tail on him?”

“We did. He slipped it last week.”

“Where was he?”

“San Diego.”

“Shit. He’s heading north.”

“That’s what we’re thinking. Duke’s not taking any chances with Shanna. He packed her up and took her to the cabin with a few men for protection.”

I snuff out my cigar, “If I had my way I would’ve taken Zach out to the woods for the animals to scavenge. But Duke didn’t. Do you remember how he wanted to do shit by the book?”

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“Yep. Gregory, Zach’s brother, knows you were involved that night. It was in the police report. I’ll leave a few men here to cover you until we can flush him out.”

“Good. Leave one by the back door and another to help Federico out front.”

“Do you need a man for your house?”

“Fuck no. I can handle myself.”

“Just checkin’ brother... you know being over sixty and all.”

“Fuck you. You know I ain’t sixty.”

Smith grins like a mother fucker. “She’s hot as fuck, eh?”

“My girls are off-limits.”

“Your girls... ?”

“This is my place of business. My employees ain’t club skanks.”

“Noted.”

“We good here?” Smith asks getting up.

“Not quite. I need one more thing. I need a man to tail Devon. I need to know what the hell that girl is up to. No one moves from a suburb in Chicago to the backwoods

of Oregon without a damn good reason, and I'm gonna find out what hers is."

"Done."

"You got big boots to fill Smith. Duke straightened out the club. Keep it that way. Don't let this shit with Zach's brother go south."

"I don't intend to."

He gets up and walks out shutting the door softly behind him.

I finish my drink, pissed as hell I let that girl get in my head. I stare at my empty glass shaking my head at how I broke my self-imposed rule not to drink on the clock. But that damn girl, Devon, had me seeing red when I looked over my shoulder and saw her spread out on my bar, offering herself up for the men to enjoy.

Hell no.

If I can't enjoy her, no one will.

My fists clench. I don't even know her goddamn story and I sure as shit know better than to fuck an employee but there's something about her that draws me in. But I'm slammin' the door on that shit. I've never made a fool out of myself over a woman and I sure as hell won't start now.

Shit. She probably only flirted with me 'cause I'm her boss. A woman like her could have any man she wanted. Hell, maybe she'll go home tonight with one of the men that rode out with Smith from California.

I wouldn't give a shit.

Yeah, right.

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“SORRY, I HAVEN’T BEEN BY in a week. Roger has some meathead tailing me, but I took a different route, cutting between a few buildings giving him the slip. Tina said it’s club business. I feel like I’m living in an episode of Sons of Anarchy.” I bend down to pull a few weeds from the ground. “I ordered you a new headstone, and if anyone defaces it, I’m going to cut their balls off. Don’t worry Dee. I’ll make sure you rest in peace.”

Shit.

I duck low, crouching behind her headstone, hearing the steady sound of a motorcycle engine humming before coming to a stop. Peeking my head out an inch, my eyes widen as Roger walks down to the same grave he was visiting last week. His hands touch the stone that wasn’t there last time I saw him here. He bows his head for a few minutes before leaving. I wait an extra few minutes myself, then gently tread across the grass between graves, to the one he was at.

The name Colin Flynn is etched along with the dates of his birth and death. Creed’s emblem is also etched on the back of the stone with a Prez patch.

“You know him?”

“Huh?” I jump, startled at the stranger standing three feet behind me.

“I asked if you knew him.”

“Sorry, I didn’t.”

“Really? Why are you here then?”

“I’m a psychic. His soul was calling to me.”

“Oh, yeah what was the old bastard sayin’?”

“He was saying fuck you!” I spring forward kicking him in the balls, then sprint down the path through the woods.

He gave me the creeps. He was standing too close... and his hand was reaching into his back pocket. I wasn’t going to wait to see what he was about to pull out. He looked wild; crazy like he hadn’t slept or showered for days.

I don’t look back, my feet jumping over rocks, my hands force the branches back as I race down towards the road. Stumbling, I cry out and tumble for a bit before I’m able to grab a fallen branch and stop the momentum of my body.

“Fuck,” I hiss feeling the pain of scratches and bruises forming all over. Crawling behind a tree, I catch my breath and listen for any sounds that he might be following. He whistles, that creepy whistle the Savivors do in *The Walking Dead*. It echoes through the trees and I know I need to get the heck out of here.

Standing up, I’m grateful both ankles aren’t injured as I race down the reminder of the hill to the road.

“Get on!”

I don’t question the man I recognize as the one who has been assigned to tail me. I take his hand and climb on the back of the bike. He zips through town and tears into the lot behind Sassy’s, leaving a cloud of dust in our wake.

Shit.

The door bangs open, and men rush out with guns drawn.

I'm helped off the bike and surrounded, each of the men forming a human shield with me in the middle as they lead me inside.

I'm marched straight back to Roger's office. The man guarding the door looks down at me with eyes full of pity before opening it and motioning me to go inside.

"Sit," he sharply commands without even looking up from his desk. One hand shuffles through some papers while the other taps a silver pen on the desk. He's wearing a pair of black horn-rimmed glasses that are sexy as fuck. My breath catches, noticing how his white T-shirt stretches over his chest. His biceps are huge; as thick as my thigh and covered in tats.

I sigh, just wishing it wasn't him; that he wasn't so effing hot. I wish he didn't know Dee and that he was ten years younger, maybe then he might look at me as more than just a cute employee.

"I'm sorry."

"W-what?"

"I should have never hired you. But I did. Did you know I was in a motorcycle club?"

"Was? I thought you still were?"

His pen drops on the stack of papers and he sits back crossing his arms behind his head. I don't even bother trying to hide how my eyes fall to his muscular arms. But he doesn't even look at me, he turns his body and looks out the window.

“I was the first Sergeant in Arms when Creed was formed here in Springdale. But some shit went down twenty years ago... that broke up the chapter here. I never officially left Creed, but all the other guys scattered, most joined the Los Angeles chapter. Anyway, I suppose you never really get out. Some shit went down a few years back, and now the blowback is coming.”

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“Am I in danger? Is that why some guy’s been tailing me?”

“Yes. You can’t give him the slip like that again. Toad’s a good fella. He’ll keep ya’ safe when you ain’t here. I need you to do everything I say. Is that clear Devon?”

I swallow, “What kind of shit are you mixed up in?”

“It’s club business,” he answers, finally looking at me. “Christ! What in the hell happened to you?” He roars springing out of his chair.

I look down noticing the angry red scratches covering my arms. “It’s nothing, I was out jogging and took a shortcut.”

“Cut the shit. I need to know what happened right mother fucking now!”

“Nothing. I went for my morning run and decided to cut through the cemetery.”

He hisses through his teeth, “Follow me.”

He leads me out of his office and down a hall off-limits to anyone who’s not a member of Creed. He opens a door, and I gasp as he lifts a storm trap door built into the floor revealing a wooden staircase that goes down to the dark.

“No. No way,” I shake my head as he gestures for me to go down.

A hand gently nudges my hip.

“I-I’m claustrophobic.”

“In. Or I’ll carry you down.”

I gulp, knowing he’s serious.

One foot hesitantly steps forward, he’s right behind me, the heat coming from his body warming my back.

I close my eyes, walking down the stairs step by step. His large arm wraps around my waist pulling me back against the front of his large frame. His head dips low by mine as he bends over me and reaches forward with one hand to pull on a hanging light.

“You doin’ okay?”

“Fine,” I squeak out, freaking out that he’s actually touching me. But freaking out even more at how my body’s reacting to the feel of his. A thousand sparks crackle and ignite, leaping across my skin and it makes no sense. Why this man? Why here? Why now?

I shake my head, moving forward, taking that last step onto a concrete floor.

“What is this place? A bunker?”

“I suppose so,” he shrugs moving past me down another small hall. It’s a maze of halls and rooms, like a modern-day underground hideout but this one is filled with food and ammo. He leads me to a small bathroom and flips on the light. “Sit.”

He opens the cabinet taking out antiseptic and cotton balls. My eyes follow as his huge hands dab each wound tenderly. But it still stings as the liquid antiseptic touches my skin. He leans down, blowing softly on my skin then dabs some ointment and

places Band-Aids on top.

“There. All better. Now, are you gonna tell me what happened?”

“Some guy freaked me out. I got spooked and ran through the woods down to the road.”

“I figured,” he takes my chin in his hand, “don’t lie to me again. I can’t protect ya’ if you don’t tell me the truth.” He takes a deep breath, “Did he hurt ya’? Try anything?”

“N-no. But he had a gun. He was reaching behind his back, and I ran.”

He grips the sink so hard I wouldn’t be surprised if it rips right off the wall. “If anything like that happens again, you come to me? Got it?”

I swallow hard, knowing how many secrets I’m hiding from him and wishing I could just let myself fall forward to feel his strong arms around me again. Just one more time, before he learns the truth about who I am and why I’m here and stops looking at me like something he wishes he could have.

“Rog?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you single?”

“It ain’t gonna happen, sweetheart.”

“Why not?” I bite back, wondering what’s wrong with me.

“You’re jailbait, too young for me sugar. Besides, I don’t dip my stick where I work,

especially in employees.”

“I’m over thirty and I won’t be your employee past the rest of summer,” I reply swinging my hips as I walk away.

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TODAY'S MY DAY OFF, and I'm not quite sure what to do with myself. I've taken my phone out a dozen times, fingers hovering over Mom's name, but I can't bring myself to tap call. I know nothing I say can make it better. I'm afraid if I tell her how much Springdale feels like coming home—it would break a piece of her heart that would never heal.

The coffee maker beeps, and my flip-flops clack across the worn linoleum floor as I reach for my favorite chipped mug I received as a teacher's gift my very first year from Bradley Jenkins.

Its heavy ceramic handle always felt sturdy in my hand, and it's oversized; one cup is more like two. That boy had a mouthful of braces and copper hair that flopped over his face.

I'll never forget that kid.

He had the goofiest grin and carried his favorite worn comic book with him everywhere. Last I heard, he was in Silicon Valley at some tech startup.

The kid did good.

I pour the coffee into my mug closing my eyes at the heavenly aroma wafting from it. I bring it to my lips, taking a tiny sip. It's burning hot, but I needed that first taste of morning and it's a beautiful one. On a whim, I pick up my phone and library book and take them outside. My feet practically hop down the steps to the back deck overlooking the grassy yard.

I fell in love with this place the second I clicked on it online. It's cheap compared to Chicago, is on the outskirts of Springdale, and felt wild. Like if I took one step off the lawn, I'd fall into the mystical forest turning into the wood nymphs I used to read about.

I laugh out loud, why not take a stroll and find out if I would? Feeling silly, like the little girl I once was, I kick off my flip-flops, feel the dew on the bare feet, and smile. The steam from my mug rises in front of me, leading the way across the yard. The sounds of morning greet me. Birds chirping, leaves rustle in the wind, as my feet sink into the damp earth covered with grass as green as sparkling emeralds glittering in the morning sun.

A twig snaps and my eyes cut towards the sound expecting to see one of the many deer that venture out looking for the apples I've been sneaking from Roger's kitchen.

A scream bubbles up from my throat, but never makes it out.

I'm walking straight towards him.

The man from the cemetery.

He's standing just beyond the clearing, hiding behind the brush. I pretend not to see him and drop my hand in the grass pretending to pluck a wildflower. Turning around slowly, I pretend to drink my coffee.

Feeling afraid for the first time, I understand this MC stuff isn't from a TV show. But is this actually happening in real life? I take my phone from my shorts and call Roger on his cell.

"What?" He asks sounding like he's out of breath.

“Rog... he’s here. I can see him standing out in the woods looking at the house.”

“Toad still with you?”

“No. I don’t run on Saturdays.”

I feel his sharp intake of breath coming through the phone. He’s breathing hard. “Bolt your doors. I’m coming sugar. And stay the hell away from the windows in case he decides to start shooting.”

“Rog?”

“Yeah, sugar?”

“D-don’t hang up. S-stay on the line with me?”

“It’s gonna be okay sweetheart. I won’t let that piece of slime get near ya’.”

I shriek hearing more twigs snap. He comes out of the woods standing in plain sight.

“What do you want with me?” I yell.

He doesn’t answer but smiles slowly. His eyes telling me everything I need to know. This sick fuck wants to hurt me.

Badly.

The mug falls from my hands, shattering on the cement walk as I run for the door.

“Dev?” Roger roars in my ear. But I can’t answer him. I’m running for my life.

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I make it up the stairs to my apartment bolting the door. I drag a chair over and place the back under the handle.

“ANSWER ME GODDAMMIT DEVON!” He roars as I hear the engine of his truck start up. I nod as if he could see me and sink to the floor. Crawling on my hands and knees down the hall, to the bathroom door, I turn the knob and crawl in.

“Dev? What’s going on sugar?”

“I’m in the bathroom. He has a gun.”

“Good. Stay put, I’m on my way.”

A hard pounding starts on my apartment door.

“Open up sweet thing. It’s the big bad wolf sweetheart. Come out now, and I’ll go easy on ya’.”

“He’s trying to get in.”

“I’ll be right there sweetheart. I swear to you—you’ll be safe. He can’t get in. There’s no going through that door and I installed the best locks money can buy on all my properties.”

My breath comes out in pants; I’m sweating as if I worked out. Huddled, in the far corner of the bathroom next to the toilet—I pray he’s right.

I can't talk.

I can barely think, I'm so terrified.

My heart's pounding, adrenaline coursing—it's a terrible rush of panic welling inside, wondering if this is how my story is going to end. At the hands of some crazy ass biker using me as payback for something I know nothing about?

Minutes tick by.

The pounding ends.

I rock back and forth trying not to cry. Either he found his way in, or he's waiting to ambush Rog.

"Be careful..."

The phone call ends, muffled cursing and yelling comes from outside. I jump to my feet hearing quick pops of gunfire followed by squealing tires.

Without thinking, I bolt up from the floor unlock the door and run to the front window just in time to see Roger charging like a grizzly bear, gun in hand, running into the woods.

Heart pumping, I unbolt the door, dash down the steps—grab the garden shovel leaning against the side wall and race across the field after him, shrieking as more gunfire erupts from the woods.

Before I can cross the yard, he's back.

"Get back inside," he roars.

I sink to the ground instead, hands still gripping the shovel hard. He strides towards me, tucking his gun into the back of his pants.

“What were you gonna do with that sugar?”

He pries the shovel from my grasp and tosses it aside. He swoops down picking me up and swings me into his arms. My head falls to his shoulder. The heavy patter of his heart comforts me as much as his embrace. He climbs the stairs, kicks the door open and carries me inside.

I'm in shock.

I can't speak.

My body trembles and shakes.

The sob that's been trapped finally breaks free. My hands cling to his soft cotton shirt, my nose buried in his chest. I breathe him in wishing he'd hold me like this forever.

He mumbles sweet nothings and strokes my hair. He sighs, sits down on my couch, stroking my back and my heart stops as he buries his nose in my hair and his arms tighten their hold on me.

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I'm not sure how much time goes by, and I don't care.

Neither of us speaks. I'm afraid if I do—the spell will be broken, and he'll realize his touch has changed from comforting to caressing. My legs shift. I pull back searching his face as my hands cup his cheeks and softly strokes his beard. His erection boldly nudges me, and I move to straddle him, letting it press against my core. His eyes briefly close feeling the contact. I bring my face down to his and stop, hovering above his lips.

My eyes beg his for this kiss.

“Devon girl...,” he groans pulling back. He lifts my hand off his cheek and places a rough kiss in my palm, “we can't sugar.”

He lifts me off his lap and takes out his phone. “Smith? That bastard was at Dev's. He showed up threatening her. Yeah, she's okay, but I want a guard on her 24/7. He got away, had his ride stashed in the woods on the old logging road... yeah, that's what I was thinkin' too sounds good brotha.”

He hangs up, pacing and takes a deep breath. Hands on his hips, he stops and stares at me for what seems like minutes. His gaze is burning hot, cheeks taunt and jaw ticks as he breathes hard.

“What?”

“Dammit, girl. Either way, you ain't gonna walk for days.”

“Excuse me?” I squeak.

“I can’t decide if I’m gonna spank ya’ or bend you over that couch till you scream for me to stop, just because you want me to keep going.”

His words make me wet in an instant. My nipples tighten, begging for his mouth on them as he lowers his gaze.

“But I ain’t gonna do any of it,” he mutters slamming his fist into the drywall. I gasp as pieces crumble to the floor. “I told ya’ to stay put. You put yourself at risk going out there—with a goddamn shovel, no less.”

“I-I needed to help you.”

“It’s my job to handle the bad guys, not you. Christ, he could’ve taken a shot at you from his position in the tree line.”

The door slams in his wake, rattling so hard the pictures on my wall shake.

“Hot damn,” I breathe, “he does want me.”

My heart leaps in my chest, and I have this sudden urge to come clean and tell him everything.

After a few minutes, I pull myself out of my stupor and run after him. My hair flies all around me, as I reach the landing. I stop short seeing Smith and Toad standing right next to him. Three sets of heads swivel in my direction, each looking at me like I’m something to be protected. But Roger looks at me with eyes full of scorn. He shakes his head, climbs into his truck and slams the door. “Make sure she doesn’t get into any trouble.”

Confused, I stare at the dust his tires kick up, as he pulls out onto the road. His eyes don't check the rearview. Not even once. But I know what I felt. We have a connection... it was in the way he touched me, the way he spoke my name in my ear as his hands stroked my back.

I'm under his skin. A man like Roger doesn't get easily affected. If he doesn't hate me for that, he will soon when he finds out whose daughter I am.

Damn the man. He's just not under my skin; he's snaking along inching his way closer to the center of my heart.

My hands grip the wheel. If I let go, I'll turn this truck around and race back there, haul her in my arms and take her straight to my bed. I'd lay her down gently but make love to her hard. I'd pin her hands above her head, and my lips would burn a trail of fire across her skin.

I shake my head, foot slamming on the brakes at the stop sign.

She's too young for me and too good for a quick fuck. Which means it's never gonna happen. I need to get these dirty thoughts out of my head right motherfucking now.

My eyes glance to the broken pieces of the mug I found in the grass. I traced her steps, seeing the scene play out in my head as that pencil-dick terrorized her. The rage I felt still sings in my blood. I need to hit something; fuckin' punch something until my knuckles break open and bleed. But it's too early. The gym doesn't open till noon. I'll go home and chop wood. There are at least three logs that need to be corded for winter. I'll swing my ax down pretending it's that fucker's face.

My hands clench the wheel, and I shut my eyes for a few seconds. I know these roads so well; I could drive them half blind and half in the bag. The oversized tires on my Dodge RAM easily churn through the mud as I turn right onto a dirt road barely

visible from view.

Overgrown pine trees hug the curb, their long flowing branches hanging low. A mile and a half of bumps, rocks, and potholes would deter anyone from driving down here. It's black as shit at night. I never put up any lights, not even solar ones. I value my privacy and never have people over. Hell, it was always safer this way when I was the MC's enforcer. They can't kill ya' if they can't get to ya'.

My small log cabin by the pond comes into view. I turn the truck around and back it into the converted horse barn made into a triple wide garage. Climbing out of my truck, I inhale deeply letting my lil' slice of paradise, calm me down. My cabin sits in the middle of a small clearing, the porch wrapping around to face a small pond I fill with trout. Tucked away within seventy acres of buffer; there's nothing out here but me and the wild.

My boots trudge up the steps and I unlock the door. The inside of my home is simple, rustic, earthy... just like me. No woman's ever been inside, except Shanna, the girl I helped raise. I had the kitchen and bathrooms renovated a few years back after she joked I was livin' like a grandma. I told her, grandmas don't have balls of steel and a back full of ink. She shook her head and bought me a few design magazines.

Opening the fridge, I get my kale and greens out and place them on the counter next to my juicer. I hate this shit but damn if I don't feel better after sucking it all down.

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My cell rings from the back of my pants.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Dev was pretty shaken up. I left Toad with her. The bastard got away.”

“Think he’s going north?”

“Yeah, I’d bet my left nut he’s going to Canada. The Prez there was always sympathetic to Zach.”

“Yeah, probably ‘cause his girl eye fucks Duke every time he goes up there.”

“Shit. They all do. Can’t hold that against him when he only has eyes for his woman.”

“True. But last time he was in the clubhouse in Vancouver, the Prez’s old lady got drunk and broke into Duke’s room. She was already naked and slithering on him before he came to. They came to blows, and we left. That was the last straw for Duke. He never wanted the Prez patch anyway.”

“I know. But Zach attacked Shanna, in the founding member of Creed’s home. That shit couldn’t fly.”

“I know brother and now Zach’s six feet under.”

“Well, hell if anyone else is going to be too. We need to shut his brother down. Go to

Canada and make our case.”

“I’m already on it. I’m putting shit together on my end.”

“Good,” I grunt, “this shit can’t stand.”

“Agreed.”

We disconnect, and my eyes stare into the backwoods. Once Dev is safe, I’ll be able to put some distance between myself and the girl and get the answers that I was originally lookin’ for.

Who is she?

And why did she come to Springdale?

More importantly, why does the thought of her leavin’ someday make me feel like I just got sucker punched in the gut? She signed a six-month lease; maybe I’ll apply some pressure and get six more.

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Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:24 am

IF ANYONE TELLS YOU the backcountry wooded towns of Oregon are boring, they're a liar. I haven't seen "creepy guy" since that morning a few days ago. I lace up my sneakers and stretch, feeling my hamstrings pull looking up with a grin hearing Toad pull up to the curb. I shake my head.

"What?"

"Do you own anything besides that leather jacket, jeans, and boots?"

"Why? Don't I look damn sexy?"

"Maybe you would, if you didn't smell," I answer wrinkling my nose.

"Come run with me," I ask trying to make friends with the man who has been appointed my bodyguard.

"Hell no. I smoke and drink too damn much to keep up with you. My damn lungs are full of tar."

"That shit will kill you."

"I know. But it's my way of life."

"Why did you join Creed?"

He shrugs, "You running today or what?"

My feet pound the pavement, earbuds in place, I run against traffic, turn up the volume high to drown out the engine of Toad's bike coming up behind me. I've been avoiding the cemetery, trying to figure out how to broach the subject with Roger. I wasn't expecting to like him, or for him to be so damned hot.

After a few miles, I turn into the small shopping center in town. Sweat drips down my back, and I lift my shirt to wipe some from my brow.

"What's up?" Toad asks climbing off his bike.

"Come on," I command circling my hand in the air. I lead him inside the sports store. Picking out a T-shirt, athletic socks and shorts turning to him, "What's your shoe size? Twelve?" I don't wait for him to answer but pick up a box of Nikes and dump everything on the cashier's counter. Taking out a damp hundred-dollar bill from my sock, I slap it down.

"I can't let you do this."

"Too late I just did," I answer swinging the bag off the counter and placing it in his arms.

He shakes his head and lifts his sunglasses up. Toad's actually kind of hot when he smiles. "Thank you. It's been a long time since anyone's bought me anything."

"How old are you Toad?"

"Twenty," he answers looking down.

"You have any family here?"

"No. The club's my family."

“I see. Come on, we’re not done yet.” His cheeks turn pink as I lead him next door to Supercuts.

“I’m not sure about this.” He drags his feet, eyes downcast looking anywhere but at me.

“Well, I am. How do you see? You’ve got longer bangs than me.” I grab his arm yanking him inside.

“Jesus. I’m not an intervention. The guys are gonna laugh their asses off.”

“No, they won’t. Especially when you get all the bunnies at the bar this weekend.”

He perks up and doesn’t say shit when I direct the hairdresser to crop it close to his head.

“Level two okay?”

“Make it a level three,” I answer as she holds the buzzing clippers in her hands.

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Toad doesn't flinch as inches of overgrown hair is shorn right off his head. I don't know what his story is, but I can tell by the hard look in his eyes, that there is one.

"You need me to hold your hand?"

"Hell, no," but his voice cracks.

"What's goin' on?"

The vibration from his rich velvet voice moves through me straight down to the apex between my thighs.

"Hey," I turn around, pretending he's just my boss.

One eyebrow is raised, waiting for an answer.

Toad's face is as red as the clay desert I drove through coming out here from Chicago.

"Nothing. What are you up to?" I ask playing it cool. Like it's normal for me to be hanging out at Supercuts at a little after nine in the morning with a young motorcycle club gangster with a sleeve full of tats and a gun tucked in the back pocket of his jeans.

His lips try not to tip up. I wait for him to lose the battle, just when I think he might actually crack a smile—he stares me down hard whipping off his aviator lenses.

"Guess I wasn't clear enough the other day?"

“You were. Am I not allowed to go for my daily run anymore? Toad here has been my shadow.”

“Looks like he’s more of a goddamn lapdog than a guard dog,” he turns away swiping a hand across his face muttering, “she’s leading more than one dog around by the collar.”

“What’s that?” I ask with a sweet smile.

“Nothing. Hurry this shit up and go shower. I need you to work the lunch shift today. Tina’s out sick.”

“You mean she’s hungover?” I ask elbowing Toad in the side. We both saw her making out with one of Smith’s boys from Creed last night after closing.

“Whatever, just be there,” he grunts putting his sunglasses down to shield his eyes, turning to walk out.

“I can’t.”

“Excuse me?”

“I have plans.”

“Break them.”

“You don’t own me. So, no I won’t. I’ll show up at six like the schedule says.”

He stalks towards me stopping an inch away. He leans down, the whiskers from his beard gently brushes against my ear as he whispers, “I do own you sugar. You just don’t know it yet.”

“No man will ever own me.”

“That’s quite a statement. But I wouldn’t bet on that sugar. You just haven’t met the one who will,yet.”

Or maybe I have, and I’m fighting like hell to pretend otherwise. Since you don’t look twice at me anyway.

He smacks the door open so hard the bells jangle for minutes after it shuts. His bike roars out onto the road kicking up dust and turns right towards the cemetery.

“Hey Toad.”

“Yeah?”

“Whose grave does he go visit?”

“Colin. He was the original founder of Creed, and our first Prez. He died a month ago. He and Meat were tight.”

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“Huh. Have you heard of a woman named Dee Dee Stanton?”

He jumps off the chair like his pants are on fire, pulls a twenty from his wallet and slaps it down on the counter. “That’s a cursed name. Don’t ever say it.”

“Toad? Spill. I smell a story here...,” my foot taps, my cheeks are red, but I bite my tongue. I’m pissed as hell that he just disrespected Dee.

“Hey, Dev... you better show up for Tina’s lunch shift or my ass will be on the line,” he answers, choosing to ignore me.

I turn around meeting his gaze. “Fine. But I’m not done with you yet.”

“Jesus H. Christ. What’s next?”

“You’ll see,” I answer with a wink.

“How many more bags?”

“Ten.”

“Christ.”

I just smile and point to the heavy bag filled with gardening soil and watch as he loads it all onto the cart.

“I need tools too.”

He rolls his eyes but does whatever I tell him to. Toad's a good guy and I'm working this whole bodyguard thing to my advantage. Besides, it's a lot less creepy than having him following me all day without speaking.

He rolls the heavy cart over to the checkout, and I swipe my card feeling giddy. I can't wait to dig my hands into the earth and plant my bulbs for spring, line the rows with my favorite herbs that I bought last week, and watch as the flowers bloom with bursts of color.

The total reads over two-hundred dollars because I kept adding shit on top of the already packed cart.

"Hey, Dev?"

"Yeah?"

"You're crazy," he shakes his head eyeing the bill.

"I know. But guess what? You are going to be my lawn boy."

"Fuck no."

"Yep."

"I'm toast. I'm never gonna live this shit down if anyone catches me out in your yard with a friggin' sunhat and a pair of gloves on."

"Don't give me any ideas."

I lift the gate of my Subaru, and together we load my treasure in.

“You’re gonna be late for your shift.”

I shrug, “We better drive fast then, because you stink.”

I make quick work getting back to my rental. He takes the keys from me and gets his Glock out, checking the door like an actor in a film as he unlocks the main entrance and climbs the stairs to my second-floor walk-up.

He unlocks my door motioning for me to wait until he checks out my apartment.

“It’s clear.”

“Well, yeah. I’d hope so.”

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I brush past him and open the fridge taking a cold bottle of water for myself and one for him.

“Strip.”

“Excuse me?” He chokes on his water.

I roll my eyes. “The bathroom’s the third door on the right. Leave your clothes on the floor outside so I can wash them.” I hand him the bag with the sport clothes I bought him.

“Jesus. Is this what having a girlfriend feels like? You sure are damn bossy.”

“Just do it,” I snort pulling out cold cuts and bread to make lunch for us.

“You have no intention of showing up at Sassy’s do you?”

“Nope,” I reply slamming the jar of mustard down on the counter.

“Fuckin’ hell. It’s gonna be my ass.”

“No, it won’t.”

“You don’t get it, do you? Meat’s word is law. Literally. He runs the whole goddamn town.”

“I’m not a mindless sheep.”

“Huh?”

“It’s like an expression. I have my own mind and won’t be led by him.”

“He’s gonna come lookin’ for you.”

“Oh, I count on that,” I answer taking out a bag of chips and munching on one.

“Dev?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I eat before I shower?”

He looks at me sheepishly, and my heart hurts. In this moment I see the lost boy in him, not the ruthless man he’s morphed into.

I take out two plates and set them on the small oak table by the window. The window is halfway open and the breeze ruffles the red plaid gingham curtains. I take a seat across from him, and we each make our own sandwiches.

“Umm, this is good,” he says through a mouthful of food.

“Slow down. Damn, I forgot how a man can eat.”

“I haven’t eaten since yesterday afternoon. Meat had me run an errand during your shift last night.”

“Oh?”

“Club shit. You know I can’t talk about it.”

“Why do they call you Toad?”

He shrugs, “I tried kissing Chrissy Tate. She’s the sister of the Prez up in Canada. I was a pledge at the time, and she said she only kisses princes not toads.”

“She sounds mature.”

“She was fifteen.”

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“What? What in the hell is wrong with you?”

“I was sixteen at the time.”

“Wait... I thought you had to be twenty-one to pledge.”

“Nope. Not anymore.”

I shake my head, the teacher in me coming out. “What’s your real name?”

“Mac.”

“Okay, that’s better. So, Mac... what were you thinking getting mixed up in an MC when you were still a kid yourself?”

“I was thinkin’ I was safer in Creed’s clubhouse than in my foster home.”

Stunned, I sit back in my seat and chew my food.

“Damn, you sure like to talk a lot. I’m gonna take you up on that shower now.” He throws down his napkin, suddenly seeming irritated.

“Hey, Mac... I was adopted. My mother gave me up the second she pushed me out of her body.”

“That sucks. Is your adopted family good to you?”

“Yeah, they are. I should call my mom.”

“What are you doing in Springdale anyway?”

“I needed a job. They were cutting teachers back in Chicago, budget cuts and all,” I lie through my teeth.

“Huh.”

“Which reminds me, after we plant my garden we got to get to work setting up my classroom at the high school.”

“Christ.”

“Towels are in the linen closet. Don’t use my expensive shampoo. And if you use my razor, I’ll cut ya’,” I say mimicking the slang that’s so common here.

He shakes his head, laughing as he shuffles down the hall.

I like Mac, I really do.

My motive at first was to see what info I could get from him about Dee, Creed, and Roger but now I genuinely like him. He’s only ten years my junior and with his lean muscles definitely not a kid anymore, but I’ve never been into younger guys. I’ve never had a type per se, but if I were to close my eyes and think of my dream man—I’d see a tatted beast with a beard, pale blue eyes that would chill you to the bone wearing a pair of glasses that gives him a sexy edge as he whispers dirty things in my ear while doing them with his hands.

The dishes clatter in the sink. I rinse my hands catching a glimpse of something outside, just at the edge of the woods at the end of the yard. My pulse races and I feel

uneasy. I shut the sink off and stand behind the fluttering curtains.

My nerves are getting the best of me. There's nothing there but a baby deer munching on a patch of wildflowers. This MC business has me spooked. The only crime that happens in my neighborhood in Chicago is when your parked car gets dinged, and the person who did it gives you the finger as they drive off.

Turning away from the window, I walk down the hall snatching up Mac's pile of clothes that smell like beer, cigarettes, and exhaust. I put them in the wash, adding an extra cup of detergent. With a smirk, I add my lavender scented fabric softener. The poor guy has probably never had a drop touch his clothing before.

Humming to myself, I do a quick clean up and water my houseplants.

"Why aren't you ready? He's gonna kill me."

"We have to wait for your jeans to dry. It'll be fine. He doesn't really need me there he's just blowing smoke."

"Girl, you are in for a world of hurt."

"Don't I know it," I mutter walking past him as the dryer buzzes. "Here. All done. Try to keep yourself up. I can't have my tail hungry and smelling like some homeless guy."

“Dev, I am homeless.”

“What?” My head whips up so fast I bang it on the dryer door.

“I’m livin’ in the basement of Sassy’s. There ain’t no washer and dryer there.”

“That place gives me the creeps,” I shudder horrified for him.

“It’s not that bad... compared to some of the places I slept as a kid.”

I walk towards him placing the warm jeans in his hands. “I want you to stay here with me. Meat has you following me everywhere anyway. You can take the couch and wash your clothes and eat here.”

“That’s... that’s,” he swallows hard.

“Don’t cry on me.”

“Shut up. I’m not cryin’. It’s just no one’s been this kind to me in a long time. But I can’t. The boys are my brothers. I’ll stay with them. Besides, when we catch that creep Gregory, we’ll be riding back to LA.”

“Okay,” I shrug, “but if you change your mind, my offer stands.”

He nods taking his jeans and closing the bathroom door.

My phone buzzes in my pocket.

Silver Fox:10 minutes.

Me:Or what? I'm not afraid of you...

Silver Fox:You should be.

Me:Oh yeah? What are you gonna do?

Silver Fox: Everything.

“What?” I squeak, partly in shock he’s flirting with me like this. That man is a trip. Hot one minute, cold the next.

“Who is silver fox? Meat?”

“Shut up. Don’t you dare!” I squeal trying to grab my phone that Mac grabbed right out of my hands.

“It’s your fault for squealing like a sorority girl.”

“Was not.”

“Was too.”

“Oh my god, is this what it’s like to have a brother?”

He hands me back my phone, “Probably. Let’s go sugar. Your silver fox is waitin’.”

I tuck my phone into my waitressing apron with a red face. “He so is. What’s his story anyway?”

“Meat’s? I dunno. He’s never taken an old lady.”

“How old do you think he is?”

“Christ, Dev... I’m not a girl. I don’t do gossip.”

“Whatever. In my experience, men are the worst gossips.” Swinging my purse around, I grab my keys and walk out with him chuckling behind me.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:24 am

Three wooden spoons. That's how many I've snapped already stirring the pot of sauce simmering on the stove. She defies my every command. Shoots daggers at me when she thinks I'm not looking while other times... looks at me in ways a girl like her shouldn't.

I know I look damn good for my age. It's part good luck, part hard work. I drank and smoked my nights away for years, but I always ate clean, organic even. The boys give me shit. I used to get high, drink a half bottle of whiskey then go home and make sauce from scratch out of the tomatoes I'd pick up at the farmer's market. But I never stopped powerlifting. I started at eighteen and never missed a day at the gym.

Lifting the spoon to my lips, I blow softly before taking a taste. It needs more salt.

"Boss? She's here."

Grunting, I add more salt and stir the pot again. "Motherfucker!" Spoon number four snaps. With a sigh, I untie my apron and chuck the broken pieces in the trash.

"Watch my sauce. If it burns, I'll have your ass."

Federico grins, takes another spoon and dons his apron. "It needs more basil."

"Bullshit. It's perfecto."

"Nah, I'm tellin' ya it needs more basil."

I spin around taking a fresh spoon and dip it in, "You're full of shit. Too much basil

will ruin it.”

Before he can reply, I’m nudged over. The smell of her hair sweeter than honey fills the air as she brushes against my arm. She takes the spoon right outta my hands and dips it in the pot. Federico and I stare at her like two dumb fucks as she brings it to her mouth blowing on it.

“Garlic. It needs more garlic.”

She drops the spoon and sashays back out. My eyes are glued to her ass and legs. She’s wearing a black mini skirt tonight. It’s leather, tight, and hot as fuck.

“Damn, she’s fine. Mind if I tap that?”

“Employees are off limits,” I growl.

“I thought that rule only applied to you...”

He breaks off seeing the rage brewing inside me. I pulverize him with one look.

“Understood,” he nods backing slowly away.

“Damn right, you do. Garlic? The freakin’ princess just strolls in here tellin’ me my sauce needs more garlic? Who in the hell does she think she is?” I mutter swatting pots and pans with my hands as I walk to the fridge.

“She’s right.”

“Fuck. Of course, she is,” I reply taking my knife and mincing more garlic for my sauce. “Send Toad in,” I tell Federico before he leaves.

“Will do.”

“You wanted to see me, boss?”

Ignoring him, I sauté the chopped garlic in some olive oil. It’s an old tactic of intimidation, but it works every time. “I asked you to tail her not be her goddamn girlfriend. Shopping? Going to the salon? Christ, did you get matching mani and pedi’s too?”

“No, we had lunch and shared a piece of apple pie instead—with one fork.”

The little shit is baiting me.

“Switch with Federico. You’re on the door, and he’s on her ass.”

He steps forward, hands inching towards the basket of fresh baked rolls that just came out of the oven.

I close my eyes and count to ten, feeling the wooden spoon splinter in my hand. “You wanna explain why you smell like her?” I walk closer sniffing the lavender scent coming off his shirt. “Jesus H. Christ what else did you do besides lunch?”

“Nothing,” he holds his palms out backing away.

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“Get the hell out of my sight—NOW,” I bark. “Shit!” I mutter seeing my sauce bubbling and burning in the pot. “FUCKIN’ WOMEN!”

“Another one? Boss, you need to chill.” Federico walks in seeing the fifth spoon on the ground snapped in two.

“Did Toad speak to you?”

“No. He just told me to come in here and deal with you. What’s goin’ on you’re acting like a grumpy old man.”

“He’s whipped. He’s losing focus the way she’s getting in his head. The two of you are switching duties.”

His coal eyes assess me, he takes a toothpick and places it between his lips squinting like he’s trying to solve some mathematical equation. “She’s not in his head. She’s in yours, and I don’t like it. I haven’t seen you touch a woman since you opened up this place. You should ride up north with Smith, visit the ladies in Canada and take the edge off. I can run shit here.”

I bow my head, angry with myself. I hate how she’s makin’ me feel. I wish I could stop it. But my body responds to her, plain and simple. It’s not something you can control. It’s purely chemical, instinctual, and I’ve always been able to control it.

Until now.

Until her.

I place a dishrag over one shoulder. “Thanks, brother. I just might do that. Tell Tina she’s tending bar tonight. I’m running the kitchen then heading home early. You’re up Federico. I’m putting you in charge. Don’t blow it.”

“I won’t.”

I get busy taking orders and cleaning tables waiting for him to bellow my name at any second. But he never does. He doesn’t come out of the kitchen to tend bar either. Tina’s eyebrows rose, but she seemed happy to be in charge of the bar all night.

Something is up. Mac won’t look me in the eye and stands just outside the door taking Federico’s place as the watch guard. The men are somber tonight; something is definitely going down. Something big. Smith checks his phone, smiles faintly at me as I take his empty away and stands up. He saunters to the door, motions Mac inside and flips the sign to closed as his fingers lock the inside bolt.

It’s only nine thirty.

“Federico will drive you home,” he says softly to me before raising his hand in the air, “Boys, it’s time to ride.”

The men thump their fists on the tables, finish their drinks and stand.

“Tina?” I hiss leaning across the bar, “What in the hell is going on?”

“I don’t know. Don’t ask questions and keep your head down.”

A tingly feeling starts at the base of my spine and quickly moves upwards. I know he’s watching me. My hands shake as I lift the empty glasses off my tray and place them on the bar. My head swivels in his direction. But he’s not there. The door to the kitchen rocks on its hinges. He might’ve vanished, but his presence lingers. One by

one, the men of Creed come down the hall carrying roll bags.

“Don’t do anything stupid.”

“What’s going on Mac?” He takes me by the elbow, and I walk with him down the hall to the back door.

“We’re riding north. Word is that’s where he went.”

“The guy who’s a threat?”

“Yep.”

“Be safe,” I reach up kissing him on the cheek.

He walks out, and my eyes find Roger. He’s out in front with Smith leading a delegation of thirty bikes. He revs his engine and tears out without even glancing my way.

It cuts.

It’s for the best.

I need answers not orgasms from the man.

But damn if I don’t want both anyway.

Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:25 am

IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE I've been out on the open road. Nothing makes a man feel more alive than cuttin' through the wind, becoming one with your bike as you navigate the turns while moonlight streaks through the trees. The motor buzzes like chainsaw as I shift gears. God, I needed this.

Sometimes I let my mind go numb, letting my trained muscles take over. But tonight, my mind is mulling over the past.

History.

My history with the club, my friend Colin who just died, and my history with women. Shit, I barely remember the sound of my last girlfriend's voice. The last person I did on the regular was Jackie. She swore she was just lookin' to take the edge off and have fun; especially since she had just gone through a nasty divorce.

Bullshit.

After we did it ten times, she started acting like she was entitled to more than my dick. She wanted to chill together on holidays, sleepover and stay for the weekend when her ex had her kids. Christ, I only fucked her when I was drunk or high. I shake my head as the wind cuts across my back. Hell, maybe I should send her a bouquet of flowers. Jackie helped me sober up. I was scared of sticking my dick in her after the time she showed up at Sassy's high one night last fall. She left her two kids at home with a sitter and came out that Saturday night to party. I told Tina not to serve her more than two drinks. I went to the supply closet to grab another bottle of Scotch, and when I turned around, she was down on all fours, hands on my fly, yanking my zipper down.

My hands were full of liquor, and I told her to stop.

Christ, I'll never forget how she looked up at me with eyes begging me to let her suck me off. In her eyes, I saw some shit that scared me: the crazy look of a woman who is high and willing to do whatever it takes. I was half-expecting her to sink her teeth into my dick when I told her to stop.

She started cryin' that I broke her damn heart. Bitch was crazy; high on drugs, so I threatened to call social services on her if she didn't clean herself up, it wasn't right or fair to her kids.

She hasn't been by in months, thank fuck.

Damn, that girl Devon is nothing like any of the women I've wasted time with. She's quality. Educated. Enchanting. Sassy as hell with wit to match. My fingers clench the handlebars hard. It's just my damn luck the first woman to make me want more is not right for me.

The air is chilly with a hint of dampness, but I welcome it. Need it to cool off after she heated me up. Devon is dangerous. Because she does more than set my blood on fire. She's like a wisp of smoke, traveling through the air, clinging to your lungs, sneakin' into every part of your body.

But smoke is deadly.

On the other hand, I've never backed away from lethal shit. There's a pit churning in my gut, telling me that if I lose my head over Devon—there will be no remission. No recovering. It'll be a fatal blow to my heart and at this stage in the game of my life it's either take the walk or swing for the fences.

Damn, that girl makes me wanna swing for the fences. Switching gears on my bike, I

let her run, buzzing by my men so fast—I'm gone before they even realize it. My bike eats up the open road, roaring like a beast, I need to get to Canada and put to bed any strife that could blow back on all of us.

I take a beer from the fridge and walk out the screen door to the fire pit. Taking a seat on an old log, I take a few sips watching the flames and smoke. We rode all night and slept most of the day. We're sixty miles south of the border staying at a cheap rental we picked up a few years back to have a place to crash on runs. We should roll in by nine if the border patrol agents don't give us any shit.

"What's up?" I nod to Toad who sits on an opposite log sipping his own beer.

"Nothing Silver Fox."

"Come again?"

The rest of the men snicker like I'm the punch line to some joke I've never heard.

"Yeah, Silver Fox, show us your guns?" Smith goads raising his arms and flexing his biceps.

"Fuck you all," I mutter getting up and walking back towards the river snaking through the trees.

"She likes you, you know."

I grunt, picking up a stone and watching it skip over the water after I throw it.

"When I was at her place the other day, I saw her phone. She has you in her contacts as 'Silver Fox'. Sorry, I might've mentioned it to a few guys, I was pissed that you took me off duty as her guard."

“You like her?”

“Yes, but not like th-that,” he stutters, and I pin him with a hard gaze.

“She’s too young for me. Besides, she’s my employee.”

“So? Who gives a fuck? If you like her, go for it.”

I turn to face Toad fully, cocking an eyebrow. “Since when do you give a fuck about my love life?”

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Source Creation Date: July 6, 2025, 6:25 am

“I don’t. But I care about her. She’s cool as hell and you’d be a fool not to go for it,” he answers walking back to the fire. I bend down and pick up another stone, bringing my arm back, I let it fly.

Plunk, plunk, plunk.

It skips three times before falling to the bottom. Just like my heart did when he told me she thinks I’m fine.

“I’d be a fool to go for it,” I shake my head.

“Should we change your nickname from Meat to Silver Fox?”

“Shut up Smith.” I reach out and grab his shoulder, shoving him towards the embankment. I caught him off-guard and he stumbles, catching himself just before his ass was about to plant in the freezing cold water.

“Ass-wipe,” he mutters climbing up.

I shrug, sip my beer, feeling my lips curl into a smile.

“I don’t believe it. Half your wrinkles are from frowning all the time, not age. Damn, Meat, she might be good for you.”

“Nah, she’s jailbait.”

“What? She’s thirty.”

“True. But she’s jailbait. It’s not her age that would get me thrown in the slammer... it’s what I’d do. How far I’d go to keep her safe if she were mine. If she were mine...,” I gulp, just thinking about it makes me burn. “... I’d skin a man alive for puttin’ one finger on her. I’d chop his nuts off for runnin’ his mouth. She makes me feel shit, I haven’t felt in years, if I ever did at all.”

“Hell, first Duke and now you?” He shakes his head, “Christ. I hope I’m not next.”

Shoving his hands in his pockets, he walks past me, “We’re ridin’ in twenty. Get your shit together.”

I grunt, take out my phone and find Devon in my contacts. Grinning like an idiot, I change her name to Jailbait.

TWO DAYS.

It's been two days since Rog rode out with the men from Creed. I try not to think about him every friggin' second. I'm worried as hell. Lord knows why when he's prickly as a cactus and gruff as an ornery bear.

But I sigh, remembering how it felt to have his arms around me. Sassy's is closed until they come back, and I miss the place; the smells, the people, the sound of clinking glasses. In a short time, it's become more than a job, it's become a place I feel happy.

My hands grasp the shovel, plunging it into the rich earth.

"You could help you know. Instead of just standing there staring at my ass." I wipe my brow with the back of my dirt stained glove. I'm almost done with the small square garden I plan to fill with as much as I can cram in.

Federico doesn't even move one muscle. How the man stands still like a damn statue all day is mystifying. He's watched me break soil and dig up rocks until my back aches not even offering to get me a bottle of water.

"What's your story anyway?" I glance up leaning my hands on the top of the shovel. He's standing with his arms crossed accentuating his thick biceps and Ray Bans cover his dark eyes making him look like a Secret Service agent. Well, one with tats.

"You know you'd be pretty hot if you didn't scowl constantly. Have you heard from any of them? Because I'm going nuts worrying about Toad." And Roger.

He grunts, pressing his lips into a thin line.

“Shut up Federico. I can’t concentrate with all the talking you’re doing.”

“Yes! Finally. Hallelujah!” I exclaim letting the shovel fall from my hands when he finally cracks a grin.

“I don’t have some infectious disease. You could at least talk to me.”

“No. You drive all the men loco. Especialmente jefe.”

“Jefe?”

“Lo siento, ‘boss man’ in Spanish.”

“I don’t drive him crazy,” I snort, “he drives me insane. He’s always grunting at me, staring at me like I’m a worm shitting dirt out of my ass or he just plain ignores me.”

“Damn girl, you’ve got it bad...”

“No, I don’t,” I answer, bending down to pick up my water bottle. “No way would I ever fall for a guy like him. He’s too bossy and stubborn and—” I stop realizing what a fool I’m sounding like.

“Fine. So, maybe I like him like this much,” I measure an inch with my fingers. “but you won’t say anything. Right Fed? I mean, you barely speak.”

He shakes his head at me, “I think you need a break. Maybe you have sun-stroke or something.”

I pick up my shovel and stride towards him, “Excellent suggestion. Here you go.” I

lean the shovel against him and head up to the apartment calling out behind me, “Turkey sandwiches with chips good with you?”

He doesn’t answer but I watch as he walks to my garden to finish where I left off.

These men are all the same. They might look like they will crush you with their bare hands but inside they are all gooey and soft like cookies fresh out of the oven. The only thing they crush is women’s hearts.

“Let’s call it a day.” It’s past five and the summer evenings here greet you with a chill as soon as the sun starts sinking low. I’m satisfied. We busted our asses for the rest of the day and Federico was able to lay down the cedar logs and posts around my bed. All that’s left is to attach the chicken coop wire and gate to keep the critters out and I can start planting.

“You gotjefe’s permission to do this right?”

I freeze, my pause giving me away. “Shit. I didn’t think I needed it. It’s just a garden.”

“Yeah, on his rental property.”

“Whatever,” I shrug, “so tell him to sue me.”

“Damn sugar, he’ll collect in other ways. I’m sure.”

“Pfft, let him try.”

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He raises an eyebrow at me but doesn't say another word. Can't say I'm surprised. The sound of a car coming down the road has us both tensing, his hand instinctively resting on his hip where his gun holster resides.

"What the hell?" I murmur at the yellow cab barreling down the gravel drive. Federico strides towards it gesturing me to stay behind him.

"Surprise!" Lucy yells, flinging the cab door open, climbing out.

"Luce?!" I screech running towards her. We meet in the middle of the lawn giggling, shrieking and clutching each other's hands as we jump up and down. Federico comes up behind me and picks her bags off the ground muttering something about women being, "bat-shit crazy."

"Come on, I need a drink," I lead Luce up the stairs into my apartment.

"Who's that?" She whispers still clutching my hand.

"Oh him? That's Federico. He's just my bodyguard slash gardener."

She arcs an eyebrow, "Girl, we're going to need a bottle of wine for this story..."

"I know," I smirk.

I showed Luce my small but homey apartment and then took a quick shower. I grinned remembering the stunned look on Federico's face as Luce started firing questions at him. His eyes pleaded with me not to leave him alone with her. But I had

just shrugged my shoulders in response and left.

Padding across the floor in bare feet, with a towel wrapped around my head I look around.

“Where’s Federico?”

“I sent him for Chinese.”

“What? The nearest Chinese food place is in Exton two towns over.”

“Oops,” she shrugs tucking her feet up underneath her.

“No way. There’s no way he would leave. Roger would kill him.”

“Oh, yeah... he did get a call on his cell. He cursed before answering; something about jefe? Anyway, it seemed to be good news because all that man said was ‘hells yeah,’ and ‘that gringo bastard’s gonna burn,’” she finishes with air quotes.

I shuffle over to my phone where it’s charging on the counter. Sure enough, there’s a text from Toad telling me they came to an understanding and Creed’s riding back home. My heart thumps in my chest.

Rog is coming back and I need to be honest with myself—he’s doing dangerous things to me. Making me want more than we both should have. I crave his touch, dream about his kiss, but know once he finds out whose blood runs in my veins, he’d freeze me out. Hell, Creed might ride me out of town, literally. He’d kick me out of my apartment, pack my shit and shove a plane ticket in my hand—if I’m lucky. Depending on his mood, he’s more likely to plant the tip of his snakeskin boot on my butt and kick me into the patch of mud out front.

“So, where’s all these, tatted, flannel wearing, bad-ass hotties you were bragging about?”

“First off—it’s still summer. I never mentioned anything about flannel. But yeah, they’re riding back from Canada. My guess is they’ll be back in the next day or two.”

“Good. We have time to do something about your hair.”

My hand automatically goes to my towel covered head. “There’s nothing wrong with my hair.”

“Fine. Your nails. Definitely your nails.”

I bring my hands down from my head and hold them out. They’re jagged and beat after digging in the soil for days. But damn if I’ll let her have the last word.

“Whatever. Fine. My nails can be fixed, but what are we going to do about the ten extra pounds you put on your ass?”

“Bitch!” She yells jumping off the couch and grabbing me by the waist trying to rip both towel and hair from my head.

We fall on the floor in a heap of giggles just like we did in our teen years when Federico busts in with his gun drawn.

“Oh great. You’re just in time to save me from the wedgie Luce was about to give me.”

He stops, in stunned disbelief at what he’s seeing: two grown ass women shrieking like teens and fighting on the floor.

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Holstering his gun, he mutters dropping the bag of delicious smelling food on my table and turns walking back out.

“Wait you’re not going to join us?”

He shakes his head, “Nah, I’m done babysittin’ your ass Dev. As nice as it is, I gotta bounce.”

“O-kay,” I stammer feeling slightly disappointed that the big shadow that’s been behind me for the past few days is suddenly leaving. “Hey... wait!” I scramble to my feet as he’s about to shut the door. “I just wanted to say thank you, for helping me in the garden.”

He grunts, nodding his head with one hand on the knob about to shut the door in my face. I stick a foot out, “I just need one tiny little favor...”

He cocks an eyebrow at me.

“Can you bring some wood up for the fireplace?”

“You want to light a fire in the middle of August?”

I bite my lip, “It gets cold at night and Luce is sleeping on the couch.”

He shakes his head, muttering something under his breath in Spanish.

I turn back to Luce who gets busy opening the cartons and getting out the chopsticks.

Unwrapping, the towel from my head, I shake my damp hair out and reach into my cupboard for the bottle of Merlot I've been saving for a special occasion. Having my best friend fly in to surprise me from Chicago definitely is one.

Pouring two wine glasses more than half way, I offer one to Luce and sit across from her at my table. She's staring at Federico down in the yard, carrying an armful of wood.

"Are the rest as fine as him?"

"Yep."

She takes a long sip from her glass and sighs. "So, who else lives here anyway?"

"Some guy lives above me. I've only seen him in passing since he works third-shift and sleeps all day. He's nice enough. Widowed, I think. And supposedly the teacher who went to Cabo on spring break last year and never came back lives on the first floor. Toad told me she keeps paying rent and all her things are still there."

"Toad?"

"Yeah, you'll meet him soon. I really like him."

"What? I thought you had the hots for that Silver Fox, Roger."

My cheeks turn as red as my wine as Federico nudges the door open with the tip of his boot, eyebrows to the roof overhearing Luce.

"Shut up," I mouth, picking up a dumpling with my chopstick.

We eat in silence as Federico arranges the logs on top of some smaller sticks, opens

the flue and lights us a fire. A few twigs crackle as they catch, shooting sparks up the chimney.

“You sure you can’t stay and eat with us?”

“Nah, I’m good. I’ll see you at Sassy’s tomorrow night.”

“What?”

“Your Silver Fox called when I was out back. They’ll be back by sundown and he wants his bar open.”

“Oh my god,” I groan burying my face in my hands, “I’m never going to live this down, am I?”

“Not a chance,” he laughs shutting the door behind him.

“Sorry.”

“Yeah, you’re dead.”

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She gestures with her chopsticks, “I’ll pay for your manicure and blow out tomorrow.”

“Yeah, you will,” I mutter chugging my Merlot.

We finish quickly and take our wine to the couch by the fire.

Luce chooses to sit cross-legged on the floor with her wine next to her. “I ran into Jeff at Whole Foods. He asked about you.”

I grimace. Talking about my ex is the last thing I want to do.

“He was floored when I told him you moved to Oregon. I almost texted you, because I swear the man started losing his shit.”

“What? That’s crazy. He dumped me.”

“Yeah... I guess knowing you weren’t within arm’s reach anymore really got under his skin.”

“Well, I was within arm reach. Every damn day, for five years. And where did that get me? Dumped on Valentine’s Day, because he felt like being with me was ‘settling’.”

“Douchebag,” she mutters.

“Douchebag,” I agree.

“So,” she leans back on her elbows, “Roger a.k.a. Silver Fox—what’s his story?”

“I don’t know. The man is a damn enigma. He barely speaks to me. He won’t even tell me how old he is.”

“Why does that matter?”

I shrug. “Do you think it’s weird I’m attracted to somebody at least twenty years older?”

“No. Hell-o, Brad Pitt, George Clooney? They’re all over fifty and hot as fuck. Besides, I think love is love. If you believe gay people can love who they want: Why shouldn’t you? Age is just a number and all that.”

“True. And they have nothing on Rog. Nothing. The man is finer than Charlie Hunnam was in *Sons*.”

“Get the fuck out.”

“I swear. But the thing is, he was around when Dee was alive and living here. He knew her Luce. What if finding out the answers to my past jeopardizes what I want for my future?”

“I don’t know Dev. But if he was meant to be your future, he won’t hold her sins against you. She wasn’t your mom anyway. Your mom is in Chicago wringing her damn hands and calling me every ten minutes.”

“She knows you’re here?”

She nods. “Since you’ve been gone, I’ve stopped by several times a week. She’s hurt Dev. More hurt that you haven’t contacted her than because you came here.”

My face falls; I stare into my wine like it holds all the answers I'm looking for. "I just don't know what to say..."

"Bullshit. How about, 'Hey Ma, I miss you. How you been?'."

I swallow my wine, feeling the guilt hit the back of my throat along with the heady alcohol and tell myself I'll call her tomorrow, knowing I won't. I'll text instead.

"Enough about me. Tell me about the guys you met at the shore this summer."

She twirls a few tendrils between her fingers and shrugs, staring at the fire. "There's nothing to tell. It was a total bust. None of them were interested in anything but scoring weekend ass. I swear to god, Dev, it's a lost cause. I'm more likely to own a herd of cats than get married at this point," she grumbles standing up to refill her wine.

"I don't have the answer to that either," I groan, staring at my ring finger remembering a time when I thought for sure that by now I'd be wearing Jeff's ring. I thought by thirty, we'd be married with a baby on the way. But here I am, on the other side of the country, starting a new life and dreaming of a man with the devil's smile.

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NOTHING MAKES SHIT CLEARER than sitting on an old log, sippin' a beer and staring into the flames of a campfire.

“What’s eatin’ at ya’?”

I shrug, not meeting his gaze. How do you explain the ball of wadded up shit rumbling around inside of you—tangled up in knots of memories and emotions. Choking your heart, fuckin’ with your head, and squeezing all the air out of your lungs?

“Take a walk with me.”

Reluctantly, I stand and follow Smith out the back door of the Canada chapter of Creed’s clubhouse. Shit went better than expected but I still have my back up and eyes open.

We both nod at the men drinking by the fire and keep walking to the edge of the woods where no one can hear us. He takes out a cigarette offering me one. I shake my head and watch in envy as he cups his hands around his mouth lighting it.

“You haven’t been right in weeks.”

“I know,” I sigh, hands fisted in the pockets of my jeans, I throw my head back looking up at the night sky. “I haven’t been right since Colin died. I miss that fucker so goddamn much. He really was a brother to me.”

“I know,” he clasps my shoulder with one palm, “that shit’s gonna take time.”

“His death’s fucked me up more than I thought. I mean... it felt like a sucker punch, I won’t lie. Sometimes I look up realizing I drove myself to his house; checking on him was such a routine for me. My truck idles in the driveway and I stare at the house that holds so many memories. But the fucked-up part? It was never my life—it was his.”

“What are you getting at?”

“It was his house, his wife, his daughter—”

“Damn, Rog. If you wanted a life like that for yourself, you could’ve had it. Hell, you still can.”

“I don’t know. I’m set in my ways now. I’ve got the club, my bar... finding someone now—seems like it would only mess me up more.”

“What about Devon? I think you should see where that goes... ”

“Yeah, I know where that’ll go, straight to my damn bed till she can’t walk straight,” I mutter.

“What’s wrong with that? Sounds like a solid plan to me.”

I rub the back of my neck with one hand, kick the dirt and look up. “What the fuck? Why is everyone getting in my face about her. Since when has the club become a friggin’ Oprah episode?”

“Jesus, calm down Rog. I care about you, brother. I know Colin’s death hit you hard. Take some time off if you need to. Federico can run Sassy’s.”

“No. I can’t. Time off is the last thing I need. Along with an empty house with nothing but memories and ghosts for company? No,” I shake my head feeling my

chest tighten I can't breathe. I'm choking on all the emotions I keep stuffing deep inside.

"Dammit Rog, all I'm sayin' is that you've spent the last twenty years taking care of everyone but yourself. Shanna's all grown and has Duke now. Colin's gone. His pain and suffering—over. Snatch that girl up quick before someone else does."

Images of Devon fill my head. How it could be—us, tangled up in my oversized king bed, making love all night, then again in the morning while the snow falls softly on my cabin. I'd keep her warm, tucked to my body as I'd cherish her, taking her again and again, till we fall back asleep. I'd wake up make coffee and we'd snuggle back in bed.

Christ.

Is Smith right? Could I be lucky enough to find something good at this stage of my life? I spent so many years loving people who weren't mine, I've forgotten what's it's like to have someone for myself.

My lips twitch. Under Devon's smooth skin is a girl with fire in her blood. Hell, we've been dancing around our mutual attraction for weeks. The two of us are a keg full of gunpowder ready to explode. And damn, I could use some heat.

My balls are full and aching. I moan, feeling it rumble around my chest. Once I touch the girl, there's no going back. In my gut, I know she'd feel so fine, I'd never let her go. Or let another man touch her.

Maybe it's time I take an old lady after all.

The question is: Does Dev have what it takes to be my bride?

Hells yeah, she does. That girl has more spunk than both pledges combined. But we'll take it slow. I crave something solid, something I could build years on. It ain't gonna work if she's only here temporarily. I just need to make her fall in love with Springdale, and the old badger who will never leave.

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“WAKE UP, SUNSHINE.” I pull the comforter off Luce and snap open the blinds.

“Evil bitch,” she groans throwing an arm over her eyes.

“No, you don’t,” I tell her in a singsong voice as she replaces her arm with a pillow and buries her head. “We need to get a move on before they ride back. I need to visit the cemetery now that my bodyguards are gone and you’re treating me to that manicure.”

“Ughhhh, what time is it?” She moans.

“Seven. Come on. Coffee’s done,” I slap her butt hard.

“Oww!”

I shake my head in envy at how Luce doesn’t need to work out to have a killer bod. She’s petite, naturally slim and I’ve seen her eat half a pizza and still have a flat stomach the next day. Her honey colored hair is naturally wavy and she’s tan from spending her weekends at the lake.

“Someday.”

“What?” She asks.

“Someday your prince is gonna come, Luce.”

“He better,” she grumbles sitting up. “And then, I’m gonna come.”

“Dirty slut.”

“You know it,” she winks.

“I’m so sorry.” Her hand comes up to my shoulder.

“It’s stupid. I don’t even know why I’m crying.”

“Yes, you do. She was... she gave you, life.”

“Then she gave me up,” I mutter wiping my face. “The new stone looks good though. No one’s been here to deface it,” I half-joke drying the rest of my tears on the bottom of my T-shirt. “You know what? I think you’re right and I’m going to call mymothertoday.”

“Good. What are you going to do about Roger? Are you going to tell him who you are?”

Hands twisting the ends of my shirt up I answer on a whisper, “I don’t know. I’m afraid. I’m afraid he won’t look at me the same way.”

“Like he wants to devour you?”

I nod.

She sucks in a breath. “I can’t wait to meet this guy. Come on, the nail salon opens at nine.”

“Hold on, I need to visit my father’s grave first.”

Luce shakes her head. “What tragic lives they had. Did you find out anything about

him?”

“No. Not yet. I thought it might be suspicious if I started asking about them both at the same time.”

“I just hope that if... when... you reveal your identity, it doesn’t blow up in your face.”

“Me too. But if it does, it does. I need to keep reminding myself that I came here for answers not romance.”

“There’s nothing wrong with finding both.”

“I wish it were that simple. But I’m not sure Rog is going to understand.”

“I’ll kick his ass if he doesn’t.”

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“Yeah, okay,” I snort. “You haven’t seen the man yet. Ten men couldn’t bring him down. He’s built like a tank.”

“Fine. I’ll mess him up somehow. No one hurts you, Dev. Ever.”

“I’m so glad you’re here. It means so much to me that you came. Not just to see Springdale, but to see why I don’t think I’ll leave.”

“Whoa. What? I thought the plan was to stay a year then come back. Hell, half your stuff is in my basement.”

“I don’t know. It’s only been a month but somewhere, somehow, this town feels more like home than Chicago ever did.”

“Yeah, until Creed boots your ass out.”

“No way. No way am I going to let them. You’ll see they might be as large and menacing as a Scottish army in the highlands but they’re all softies at heart.”

“Scottish army?”

“What? You now I like my Regency Romances.... men in kilts, with long hair and cocks as big as a horse. Hells yeah, sign me up for that shit.”

Luce rolls her eyes, “You need to get laid.”

“Probably,” I answer with a laugh as we walk toward the only nail salon in town.

My bike glides into the back lot. I climb off feeling my heart pound like a goddamn teen about to pick up his date for prom. She's already here. I checked in with Federico every day I was gone. I almost fell off my damn bike when he told me she's hot for me. I mean women throw themselves at me on the regular but they're mostly drunk. Devon... with Dev, I wasn't sure if she was just flirting with me because I'm her boss or if there was something more.

God damn, there's something more.

I wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans. I'm not sure how to act around her now. Do I pretend that I don't know? Do I haul her in my office and kiss the breath out of her? Maybe I should just do it the good old-fashioned way and ask her on a date.

I open the back door and walk silently down the back hall leading to the main room of the bar and restaurant.

She's bending over a long table wiping it down, the back of her white shorts riding high, showing miles of tan leg. Her hair's down her back hanging in long loose curls. If I close my eyes I can still remember the way it smelled when I held her and the scent of it filled my nostrils. My fingers itch to rub the silky strands, my dick's swelling in my jeans wanting an introduction to the honey pot between her thighs.

Fuck the good old-fashioned way, I'm gonna go all caveman on her ass. My breath comes out in hiss, my thoughts causing all the blood to pump south. I'm fully engorged and harder than I was the first time I felt a woman's hand stroke my cock.

Shit.

I force myself to look away from the heaven of her existence for my own sanity. My eyes flick to the heavy watch on my left wrist. Ten a.m. It's only ten a.m. and I can't function. Thoughts of touching her have me all jacked up. I either need to go rub one

out in the showers downstairs or hit the gym until I can't breathe.

I'm not a fumbling boy, far from it. I'll push through my desire harnessing it into a different kind of pain. Instead of pounding into her sweet pussy, my fists will pound the hell outta the punching bag. I'll throw down until my fists bleed if that's what it takes.

I want Devon, but I refuse to lose my head over it. I need to get my shit under control. I can't make a move when I'm high from her presence alone.

She already has me by the balls, but I'll be damned before I ever show it. The boys would never let me live it down. I shrug out of my leather cut, holding it over an arm in front of me in an effort to disguise my eleven-inch boner. My lips twitch, remembering the look in every woman's eye who has seen it. I groan, picturing Dev's soft brown eyes staring at my cock dying to feel it sooth the ache deep inside her. I'd hit her sweet G-spot until her eyes roll back in her head, and then I'd hit it some more while I'd play with the nub between her silken folds and suck on those sweet ass tits.

Her back stiffens as she looks at me from the corner of her eye. Muttering under my breath, I ignore her, walking on legs as stiff as my dick and slap the swinging doors to the kitchen open. Ignoring Federico helping himself to leftovers, I open the stainless steel walk-in freezer trying to freeze my libido. But all it does is burn. My damn dick is hard and frozen. Jesus, in this state—only an orgy or a three-day fuck is going to calm this beast down.

"Son of a bitch!" I groan punching the wall encrusted with a thin layer of ice. My knuckles split, spilling drops of blood on my boot.

"That didn't take long."

"Shut up, Federico or the next punch will smash your face."

His answer is a howl of laughter followed by something he didn't think I caught when he uttered it under his breath.

“What did you call me?”

“Nothing,” he denies holding his hands up as I stalk out of the freezer towards him.

“Say it again.”

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He darts around the butcher's block mouthing, "Silver Fox."

I close my eyes and count to ten, hands clenching to fists, as I pant like a bull looking for a fight, needing to release the anger and lust burning me up on the inside.

"Calm down, Rog. She likes you. Why are you so pissed, man?"

"I'm not pissed. I'm fuckin' horny you idiot."

My hand swipes out knocking pans to the floor, they clang so loud my head pounds.

The doors swing open and she rushes in, my head swings her way, our eyes lock. I don't look away but stare at her... hard. Telling her with my eyes what my hands and body are gonna do to hers. She swallows hard, the pulse in her neck beating so fast, I can see it from twenty feet away.

She brings a hand to her hair, nervously pushing a strand behind her ear, "Is everything okay in here?" She glances quickly between me and Federico who is grinning like a bastard at the fool I'm making outta myself.

I grunt, wrapping a kitchen towel around my knuckles. In an instant she's right in front of me, cooing all sorts of nonsense. Her tiny hands unwrap the towel to inspect my cuts. My body trembles as I lower my head to inhale the fragrance of her hair. She leads me over to the sink and turns on the cold tap. "Get out," I snap at Federico.

She bites her lip, dabbing my cut. Her pink tongue darts out to lick her lips and I snap, shutting off the sink and lifting her by the waist in one move. She gasps as her

ass slams down on the counter. My hands spread her thighs for me to stand between, my rough hands cup her face gently. My fingers stroke her soft cheeks, I sigh, my breath falling on her face. “Dev,” I groan pressing my erection against the sweet apex of her thighs. I press my forehead to hers reveling in the friction and heat of her pressed tightly against me. “I’m gonna kiss you baby. Kiss you like the world is ending.”

Her lips part on a sigh, my hands cup her chin as my lips explore hers, softly, courting them. My lips grab hers, I pull her bottom lip, slip my tongue in a bit then back out. She scoots closer, wrapping her legs around my waist and throws her head back as my lips travel down the side of her neck and across her collarbone. She clutches the back of my head, my dick pulses, but I can’t take more than a kiss.

“Miss me, baby?”

“Just shut up and kiss me, Rog.”

My hands cup her face, her eyes close. I take a second to savor this moment, my mind taking a screenshot of her face in this moment before we dive deep and see where this thing goes.

This time, it’s a kiss.

Our lips meet, our bodies a frenzy of sighs and groans and roaming hands. My tongue strokes hers, it’s a sweet torment of twists and thrusts, sucks and nips of teeth. My heart slams against my ribcage. She’s makin’ me feel the kinds of shit women pay to watch on the big screen between actors. But this isn’t a script and I’m not acting. I’m falling fast for this girl and for the first time in years—I let my control slip and give in to the fall.

Damn the man knows how to kiss. He didn’t dive straight into it. He took his time

savoring the taste of me. His giant hands cupped my face like it was made of china and his eyes burned into mine with that light blue flamed gaze of his that haunts my dreams as he groaned my name—as if just saying it aloud was a release.

I raise a hand to my lips swollen from his kisses. My thighs rub together sticky and swollen, remembering the feel of him pressed up there.

My hands shake as I straighten my clothing and fix my hair. I moan, in agony not knowing how in the hell I'm gonna work my double shift with wet panties and eyes with stars in them that he put there.

We must've kissed for at least ten minutes before his cell rang and we reluctantly broke apart. He whispered, "Later baby," pressed a lingering kiss on my mouth as his hand dropped from my face and he walked out, presumably to his office.

He was just as affected as I am. I grin, at least there's that. We're both miserable and horny. We lit a fire that can only go out one way.

Checking my reflection in the mirror for any lingering evidence that I just made-out with the boss, I tidy up. But there's nothing I can do about the red flush staining my cheeks or the sheen of desire in my eyes.

My underpants are soaked. The wetness uncomfortable. Entering a stall, I wipe myself up and slide my thong down throwing it the trash.

"Hell," I moan walking out feeling the seam of my shorts rub against my bare clit with every step I take.

The door to Roger's office opens at the same time I walk out of the restroom. Our eyes meet in the dim hall. I slow, biting my lip. He growls and barrels forward. He's on me in an instant, pinning my arms over my head and backing me up against the

rough wood paneling.

“We got interrupted before, love,” he rasps seconds before claiming my mouth in a kiss full of passion and promise.

“Rog,” I answer in between breaths.

He pulls back searching my eyes, grabs my hand in his, and leads me into his office. The door shuts behind us with a firm click.

He rakes a hand through his hair and smooths his beard, staring at me like I’m his next meal.

“I-I’m sorry for being all over you like that,” he sighs placing his hands in his pockets and walking behind his desk. Putting it between us like an obstacle. Lord knows we need it, if we’re going to talk not touch.

“In case you couldn’t tell—I liked it.”

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He smiles faintly, then looks down tapping his fingertips on the desk. “Still—I shouldn’t have done that. Especially here, when we’re both working. A few years ago, I wouldn’t have given a damn. I’d have hauled you in here or downstairs and would be eleven inches deep—ten-minutes ago,” he stops shaking his head as if to clear it, “I’m different now. I’m sober, quit smoking and I swore to myself I wouldn’t do shit like that here anymore now that I own this place.”

My stomach sours at the thought of him kissing, touching—god—fucking someone else.

“I should go,” I whisper, turning placing my hand on the doorknob. He made me forget why I’m even here. I lost myself in the moment... in the hope of what could start between us. But we can’t move forward without dealing with my past. And I’m not ready to tell him who I am before I find out who John and Dee were first.

“Dev, sugar... wait.”

He walks around the desk stopping two feet behind me. The heat from his body radiates forward as if he’s pressed up flat against me.

“I want to do this right with you. The club... we’re having our end of summer cookout on Saturday. It’s at a lake at the base of a mountain thirty minutes from here. Would you go with me as my date?”

My shoulders drop. I’m screaming inside. It’s the chance I’ve wanted, with the man I’ve wanted, and I can’t say yes.

“My best friend’s in town. She flew in to visit me. Actually, she’s coming in for dinner tonight.”

“I heard. All about it,” he teases.

“Federico has a big mouth,” I mutter.

“Bring her. It’s a large crowd, she’ll have fun.”

“O-okay. We’ll meet you there,” I reply darting out his door before he either hauls me in his arms again, or I cave and tell him all the secrets I’m hiding.

Somehow, I manage to take orders from the steady stream of customers without spilling a drink or tripping over my feet. Thoughts of Rog and his kiss are going to stick with me for a long time.

Maybe forever.

I saw him tear out of the lot shortly after I left his office and he hasn’t come back. I overheard that he and Federico went to the gym. In a way I’m glad he left, he sucks all the air out of the room when he’s around as it is. Now that I know what his body feels like under my hands and how he tastes... there’s no way I could work efficiently if he was here watching right now.

“Hey.”

I throw down the tray I was holding and spin around, throwing my arms around his neck.

“Toad! I missed you. Federico was okay, but you’re my fist pick for a babysitter.”

“Ah, it’s good to be back.”

“You might not say that when you find out what I have planned...,” I tell him picking up the tray and heading for the kitchen.

“Yeah... wait until you hear what he’s calling you.”

“My break is in five. Meet me out back? I’ll fix some sandwiches.”

The chef looks at me suspiciously as I run around his kitchen grabbing what I need. He’s skinny. Too skinny for a cook and doesn’t talk much either.

The feeling of mistrust seems mutual as he stops what he was doing and shakes his head.

“If ya’ wanted to eat all you have to do is ask and I’d fix ya’ something. I don’t like people messin’ in my kitchen.”

“Not even Rog?”

“Not even jefe.”

“I’ll remember that next time. Just making sandwiches.”

“You better,” he emphasizes picking up his butcher’s knife and waving it before he slices more onions for the soup he’s preparing.

With a grin, I place all the food on a tray and walk out the back door of the kitchen over to a picnic table placed under a tree in the corner of the back lot.

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Toad's already there relaxing with a cigarette burning between his lips curled in a smirk.

“What?”

“Silver Fox? Rog went nuts. I thought he was gonna have a heart attack or beat the shit out of one of us on the trip. He got razzed the whole way back. Especially when Federico called Smith, telling him how he walked-in on you telling Luce how hot Rog is.”

I place the tray down in the center of the table and take a bite out of an apple. “Federico's going to pay. He has a bigger mouth than I thought.”

“Yeah, well I'm sure Rog is sparring with him at the gym. He'll probably give him a few good blows.”

I raise an eyebrow and take another bite, chewing before I drop my bomb. “He asked me out after we necked like fifteen-year-olds this morning.”

Beer spews from his mouth onto the grass, he snuffs out his butt, eyes wide. “No shit? Meat's never dated. Like ever.”

“I like him. More than I should,” I whisper.

“What's up with the long face, doll? He likes you too. We're all waiting for the big romance to unfold.”

“I thought Creed was a Motorcycle Club of badass biker guys. Seems you all are a bunch of girls after all.”

He grins, “Shhh, don’t tell. I secretly love drama.”

“Speaking of drama. Am I safe from that creep now?”

“We didn’t catch him. But he won’t find the sanctuary he was looking for up north. We have a man on the inside at the border. He definitely crossed into Canada. If he comes back south, we’ll be notified with plenty of time to set a trap.”

“Huh. O-kay. I don’t feel safe knowing he’s still out there.”

Toad’s eyes go flat, deadly. I shiver. It’s a reminder he’s not just a man who’s carefree and full of gossip. He’s a killer if the situation warrants one.

“That ain’t gonna happen sweetheart. I don’t want you to even think about it.” He comes around the table and takes me into a quick hug. The sound of tires rolling over the gravel makes me look up. My eyes meet Rog’s through the windshield of his truck. His lips press into a firm line as he cuts the engine and climbs out.

I push Toad away feeling like my lover caught me in an innocent embrace he won’t believe.

He stalks past us without a word, with eyes that don’t look my way again. “Was that just as awkward for you?”

“Nah, Rog knows I’d never stab him in the back like that.”

“Well, why do I feel like I did something wrong?” I ask picking the crust of my sandwich and throwing the crumbs to the birds waiting in the grass.

“Because you got it bad.”

I don't reply. My mind is confused by all the emotions my heart has grown for these men. Rog, Federico, Toad... they've all become family and I know they'd all take a bullet to protect me if it came down to it. I feel as if my very DNA is a betrayal of that loyalty. I swallow hard.

“Toad?”

“Yeah?”

“Promise me you'll understand.”

“Understand what?”

“If the time ever comes when you might mistake what my intentions were.”

He nods, thinking I'm talking about Rog.

“I better get back inside before Rog has my ass.”

“I think he's gonna have that real soon anyway.”

“Men,” I grumble with a red face leaving him staring at my backside as I walk back in the bar.

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“IF YOU DON’T FUCK HIM—I will.”

My head turns.

Rog has come from the back and surveys the room, nodding to the regulars and a few of the men from Creed still lingering.

“You weren’t kidding. He’s... damn,” Luce whistles between her teeth leaning her head closer to mine, “he’s a friggin’ specimen. He’s huge Dev.” Her eyes widen, “I bet he’s huge everywhere.”

“Stop staring,” I hiss, “he’s going to think we’re talking about how we kissed in the kitchen.”

“What?!” She says loud enough that a few people whip their heads around.

“Calm, down Luce. You’re embarrassing me.”

“Details. I’m waiting up for you tonight and you are going to tell me everything. I want to hear everything.” With that she snaps up her purse and winks getting ready to leave.

“You don’t want to meet him?”

“Oh, I’m sure I will eventually... like when I pound on your bedroom wall when the sound of your sex permeates the apartment.”

“Shut up,” I laugh flicking her butt with the end of the dish towel I was using to clean the table with.

She waves at Rog like a cheerleader, all bright smiles with a toothy grin. I shake my head clearing the next table, wishing I could be more like her. She’s always in a good mood, always positive. Her days are sunshine and rainbows, while I often feel like I’m living under a rain cloud. Picking up my heavy tray filled with empty dinner plates, I look up, eyes instantly finding him. But he’s talking to Big Jim and tending bar. I sigh, knowing the night is far from over. Luce will go to bed and set an alarm for two a.m. just to interrogate my ass on everything that went down today.

There’s a shift between us. Rog didn’t speak one word to me for the rest of the night, but I found him instead of Toad or Federico waiting to walk me to my car. He took the keys from me and placed his hand at the small of my back. The lights flicked, and the sound of my locks unclicking had me reaching for the handle on the door. But his arm shot out and I found myself pinned between my car and his hard body.

“Don’t play with me,” he warned as he pulled me back in his arms and his mouth found the sweet spot behind my ear before travelling down the side of my neck. I leaned back in his arms, sighing as his hands ran down the front of my thighs, I tried to turn around seeking his kiss, but he held me firmly with my ass pressed up against his hips.

“I’ll see you at the lake, sugar.” He released me, opened my car and as I sat turning the key in the ignition, I felt the brush of his fingertips travel down my face just before he softly shut the door. I sighed feeling tingly all over as my eyes met his in the rearview. His fists were buried in the pocket of his jeans, in his eyes a look that made me think he was debating following me home.

But he didn’t.

I barely slept last night tormented by the way his lips and hands felt on me.

Sighing, I rest my face on my hand remembering how his eyes can turn from lava to ice depending on his mood.

I had told him that I needed a few days off to set up my classroom. He nodded and smiled softly, telling me what a great teacher I must be. But his face darkened like a thundercloud when I asked if I could have Toad's help. It's hard work and I don't know what I'm working with yet. He stilled, arms resting on the roof of my car, but he nodded his head.

A lock of hair slips from my ponytail, falling in front of my face. Blowing out my breath, I swipe it back in place, leaning over, the razor blade in my hand cutting effortlessly through the tape holding the box together.

"Knock, knock, teach." Toad's arrival breaks the spell of the man constantly running through my mind.

"Thanks for coming. I'll owe you a beer."

"Where's Luce? Shouldn't she be the one doing this?"

"Yeah right. This job requires muscle. Besides, she's sleeping off her hangover. She's not used to drinking every night. She's been having too much fun at Sassy's."

"She's cute as hell," he smirks.

"And too old for you," I answer handing him a soda and popping the top of my own.

"Actually, I've been thinking..." he trails off and I glance up. His cheeks have turned pink. "That I want to graduate. Would you help me get my GED? I mean I

know you're busy with this job and Sassy's—"

"Of course, I will. I'd be honored and I'm so happy for you Toad. I get why you love Creed—I do. I see it now; how you're all family. But there's so much more out there for you if you want it. We can get started next week. I'll get everything we need from the student counselor's office."

"Thanks, Dev. Where do we get started here?"

I motion over to the stack of boxes the janitor pulled from storage. He whips a knife out from his back pocket and gets to work.

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“You excited for the lake this weekend?”

“Sure,” I shrug.

“Doesn’t sound like you are.”

“Toad...,” I break off wanting to tell him everything. But I stop short knowing his loyalty is with Rog and Creed no matter how close we’ve become.

“Yeah?”

“I’m worried about my students. I’m sure word has spread around that the new high school history teacher waits tables at the biker bar in town. I need to know what kind of crap they’re gonna say behind my back.”

“You don’t need to worry. That ain’t gonna happen.”

“Yeah, right. You don’t know teenagers like I do. I want to know everything about Springdale.... and Creed so I can be prepared.”

“Does Rog know you’re worried about this?”

“N-no. I don’t want to bother him with high school bullshit.”

“I don’t know Dev. The club is a brotherhood. One we don’t talk about. You’re not an undercover cop, are you?” He jokes but his eyes are serious.

“No! Me a cop? That’s comical. I can’t even handle violence. I’ve never been as close to it as I was when that guy threatened me and I’m not asking you to snitch. I don’t need to know club shit. I just need to know about the people.”

“Okay,” he shrugs. “Where do you want to start?”

“At the beginning.”

“Well... there were these two guys. They were best friends. John Masters and Colin Flynn. They founded Creed. For a while they rode these streets like kings. But then it all turned to shit.”

“What happened?”

“A woman. That’s what. Her name was Dee Dee Stanton.”

My fingers reach in a box, run over the spine of a few books while pretending that name’s not important. I sit back on a desk chair, take a sip of my Diet Coke and wait.

“Apparently, she was beautiful, crazy in bed, and played them both for fools. They both fell in love with the woman despite the fact that each of them were married with kids. The worst part is... Dee was the sister of John’s wife. But that didn’t stop him. Don’t get me wrong—John and Colin were both in the wrong for stepping out, but Dee liked the power she had over them and would pit them against one another every chance she could. Shit got worse, the club made a ton of money back in the eighties drug running for the cartels from Mexico to Canada. We don’t do that shit anymore. But Colin and John got rich, expanded Creed into Southern Cali, and stopped even the charade of pretending that they both weren’t having an affair with the same woman.

Dee got hooked on drugs. It was a goddamn mess. They all tore each other’s hearts

out. She overdosed. It was tragic as hell, but her death brought shit to a head. Colin and John almost killed one another in the back lot behind Sassy's. They threw punch after punch, blow after blow, until neither of them could stand. No one interfered. It was understood to stay out of it. They needed to do what they needed to do. Anyway, their bond was broken. Each of them wanting to see the other dead, but that would mean the one who did—would get to be with Dee and neither could stomach that. So they ended it, each of them walking away a bloody mess with broken bones.”

“That’s... so tragic and yet so incredibly romantic.”

He shrugs. “I guess. I can’t imagine being in lust or love like that. Anyway, they called a truce of sorts, disbanded the Springdale chapter of Creed since they were both Co-Presidents and never spoke again despite the fact they lived ten miles from each other.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it was hard on Rog. Colin was like family to him and so was John. He was caught in the middle. But Colin had a little girl, Shanna, that had Rog wrapped around her little finger.”

I smile, picturing it. But the little girl in my head has Roger’s blue eyes and my dark hair. My womb clenches and I yearn for something I never did before: a baby.

Roger’s baby.

I take another sip of my soda trying to get a grip. I must have lost it. The man hasn’t done more than kiss me and I’m already picturing our imaginary child? Hell, I don’t even know if Rog wants to be a dad.

“The Springdale chapter of Creed broke up. The men either rode north to Canada,

forming a chapter there or south to LA. Rog stayed here. He couldn't leave Shanna. She was only three."

"Where's Shanna now?"

"Married to Duke, John's son. He was Prez for the past few years but handed that patch over to Smith. How's that for karma? Their dads were bitter enemies and they married each other. Actually, the two of them are part owners in Sassy's. It used to be called Stan's Place before it burned to the ground. Roger and Duke rebuilt the place and gave it a new name."

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My mind is spinning...I have a brother.

“Is Duke... Dee and John’s?”

“No. I don’t think so, anyway.”

“Wow... that’s some story. It’s crazy—almost like it was scripted for a TV show.”

“It was a wild time. Shit wasn’t so easily traceable like it is now. There was no digital surveillance. Money and woman rolled in like it was nothing. It went to all the men’s heads. The remaining men in Creed made a pact, never to let another woman bring the club down. We don’t speak her name, it’s cursed. And every year on the anniversary of her death, we ride out to the lake and have a drink in honor of Colin and John, to the brotherhood they started...”

“You celebrate Dee Dee Stanton’s death?” I ask incredulously.

“No. It’s not a celebration. More like a remembrance of who we are. What we want to be... it’s a night of solidarity. No women allowed. We drink, play cards... shoot the shit.”

“O-okay,” I look down swigging the last drops of my soda feeling sick. How can I ever come clean about who I am now? Will my brother hate me too? My mother was his father’s whore... and probably the reason his own mother left. But I want to know him. I crave having a blood relative alive. A brother? God, I want him to love me. Want him to be my family so badly. Turning away from Toad, I pretend to dig through a box. My eyes squeeze shut, my fists clench, nails digging into my palms so

hard, they leave crescent marks.

I've backed myself into one hell of a corner. Am I selfish for wanting it all? Roger, my brother, a life here and my adoptive family back in Chicago?

With my head bowed, I make a vow and say a prayer: I will find a way. Find a way to prove to Rog what's happening between us is real, meet my brother and have a relationship with him, and set my past free so I can claim my future.

I didn't drive straight back to the apartment, I texted Luce that I had an errand to run. She texted back that she was binging on Netflix and Doritos and that she'd be fine. I didn't know where I was going. I just knew that I needed to drive—needed to think—needed to feel the emotions tearing through me.

I sat in the school parking lot and brought up the town of Springdale's website. In under three minutes I was able to access the town's property records. It was so simple that I felt stupid for not thinking to do it before. In under ten-minutes my car rolled down the street where my brother, Duke grew up. My heart felt bruised and battered but I still managed to smile when I saw the three kids riding their bikes out front of a simple white ranch. The one my father owned and maybe the spot of my creation. One child played with a bubble wand, eyes bright with happiness as the wind picked up the bubbles high into the sky.

The cycle's been broken. At least those kids are together and happy, I had thought as I smiled and waved through my open window.

But I still needed to drive. I found my way back to a main road and went north. I've become friends with a few regulars at Sassy's over these past few weeks and when they found out I'm an avid runner they insisted I hit the trails.

Springdale's northside is full of old logging roads that the town maintains as

recreational trails. I sigh, putting my car in park. It's a runner's paradise. Huge evergreens grow up to the baby blue sky, towering over the trail giving it shade. Lush grass and thick moss line a riverbank at the trail's entrance. Huge wildflowers dance in the wind. I slowly feel the fist squeezing my heart ease up a bit as I climb out of my car and become a part of nature.

The water looks so clear, so peaceful that I give in to temptation and slip my sandals off and dip my feet in. Taking my phone out of my pocket, my hands fiddle with it but I know what I need to do. It's time I called my mother and beg for forgiveness but also seek her wisdom. I swipe, unlocking my phone noticing a new text message. Figuring it's from Luce, I tap it open gasping at this words.

Jeff:I fucked up. Miss you. Come back home babe.

“Arghhh!” I shout, frustrated to hell. My voice echoes through the trees traveling back to me. Just when I finally meet someone else that makes my pulse race, the man I thought was it for me tries to pull me back.

How did he freakin' know?

It's like a curse how exes always seem to know when you're ready to let go of the last remnants of old love.

I sink back on the riverbank, letting the rays of the sun hit my upturned face. Sighing, I hug my knees and make the call.

“Dev? Sweetie?”

“Mom,” I gulp feeling my throat thicken, “I'm sorry. Sorry, I haven't called sooner—sorry for hurting you so much when you didn't deserve it.”

“Hush. I’m sorry too,” she whispers. “I should’ve let you know I knew everything about Dee, years ago. I waited too long to give you her letter. It was selfish and wrong of me. You deserved to know she loved you too.”

“Yeah, but she loved the drugs more.”

“Addiction is a terrible thing, Dev. When you get in so deep, it takes too much strength to fight it. Forgive her,” she answers softly.

“I have. She gave me up and I got you as a mom.”

“Does this mean you’re ready to come home?”

My toes dig into the grass. “No. The weird thing is... I kind of love it here. I’ve made some incredible friends. I’ve met someone.”

“Oh?”

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“Yeah. He’s nothing like Jeff. He’s older, more self-assured. He’s settled in his ways though...”

“There’s nothing wrong with that. A man who knows what he wants can be such a relief. There’s no bullshit. No headaches when they tell you they need space to ‘find themselves.’ ”

I laugh, “Mom?”

“Yeah?”

“Care to elaborate?”

“No. Dad and I are fine. But I flipped my shit when he came home with that toy car of his without even asking me.”

I laugh remembering when Dad turned forty-five and wiggled out. He started dying his hair and tanning. Mom thought he was having an affair with her best friend Betty.

He wasn’t.

He was just having his mid-life crisis. And he topped it off by buying an Audi convertible two-seater.

“So, tell me about the guy?”

I sigh, “It’s complicated. Dee... she’s not well-liked in Springdale.”

“What? She died years ago. People need to let bygones be bygones.”

“I agree. But she... she came between two men who loved one another like brothers. It tore families apart. Brought down a motorcycle club and Mom, did you know I have a half-brother?”

“No. No I didn’t. God, Dev, I’m so happy for you—” She breaks off and I hear the tears in her voice. She’s crying for me.

“I’m scared. What if he hates me? What if he wants nothing to do with me because of who my mother is?”

“Nonsense. I’m your goddamned mother and you are beautiful, inside and out Dev. He’s gonna be lucky and grateful to know you’re his sister.”

I bite my lip feeling the phone slip in my sweaty hands. “I hope so. God, I hope so, Mom.”

“Take care of yourself, honey. I’m always here. I-I miss you so much. But I understand that you needed this. Can I come visit soon?”

“I’d love that. Luce is here now. School starts in ten days. I’m setting up my classroom. Roger, that’s the guy I like, he invited me to an end of summer celebration at a lake house this weekend.”

“You sound so happy. That’s all I could want for you.”

“I just hope it lasts. How am I going to tell them?”

“You’ll know in your heart when the moment is right. I have faith in you sweetie and if anyone thinks they are going to give you shit for something that was out of your

control—I'll fly across the country to kick some biker ass."

I snort, wiping tears that I didn't even realize I was shedding at the picture of my petite mother going toe-to-toe with Rog and Federico.

"I love you, Mom."

"Love you too, sweetie. Maybe I'll come in a few weeks."

"I'd love that."

"Oh... I almost forgot. Jeff's been coming around."

"What?"

"Yeah. He invited your father to golf with him in a charity tournament."

"No?!"

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“Don’t worry. Your father told him to get the hell out.”

“Seriously?”

“No. In my mind he did. But he declined the invite. Jeff had his chance and blew it.”

“He just texted me. Said he was sorry—”

“Don’t. Don’t you dare, Dev. Be strong. He cut and ran when he should’ve committed.”

“I know.”

“Don’t respond. Ignore him and he’ll go away.”

“Okay. We’ll talk soon.”

“We better. Love you, bye.”

“Bye.”

I pick the blades of grass out that cling to my toes. Standing up, I stretch and slip my sandals back on. I might not run here today, but I want to at least investigate the trails.

It’s quiet. There’s nothing but chirping birds, the sound of wind in the trees and the water running over rocks in the creek.

It's a paradise.

My heart feels clear. Talking to Mom really helped and I feel foolish for not calling sooner. I walk for a bit, each step taking me deeper into the woods. My phone pings with a text. What the hell?

Jeff: We were so good together baby. Come back, I'm ready to give you the world.

My hand grips the phone so hard, I'm shocked it doesn't crack.

Me: You had your chance. I'm done waiting for your empty promises. Move on. I have.

The sound of my ringing phone is so loud in the woods, I almost drop it. My exes name flashes across the screen. I hit ignore, sending him to voicemail. Head bent down, it looks like I'm stretching when I'm trying really hard not to cry, I'm so angry.

Someone's coming.

Heavy feet pound on the ground so hard, it vibrates.

Twigs snap.

My heart races, remembering the last time I was caught by the woods alone.

I straighten, preparing to face whatever's coming.

A man's running around the bend in the trail, racing towards me. He's wearing a hoodie with the sleeves cut. Every muscle in his arms pops as he pumps them. I can't see his face, but his eyes are so blue they glow from under the shadow of his hood.

My eyes take in his form, traveling down to the muscle in his thick legs. They're huge, tan and covered in tats.

Holy fuck.

My knees shake.

My body trembles.

I freeze. Like prey and he's the predator, barreling down on me. I'm in his sights and I don't care if he catches me. I want to be caught.

He reaches me, arms snaking out, grabbing me by the waist. He pushes me up against a tree, hard thighs pressing into mine.

He growls, breathing hard against my neck, "Fair game. Out in the woods alone... a sweet thing like you is fair game."

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He kisses my collarbone and I breathe him in.

His skin is slick with a light coat of sweat. He smells like pine, the woods and... Rog.

My legs wrap around his waist. The rough bark digs into my back. I grunt feeling his heavy cock between my thighs. His nose dips and rubs between my cleavage. He lowers my legs to the ground, lifts my shirt, quick hands unclasping my bra. I mewl like a kitten feeling his hot mouth suckle a nipple before rolling it between his tongue.

“So fuckin’ sweet,” he murmurs, moving his mouth to my other breast. I groan looking down at him loving me with his mouth. The sweet tingle between my thighs turns to a pounding ache. I groan pushing my hips forward needing relief.

His hand unzips my jean shorts, fingers brushing inside, pulling my panties to the side to slide through my slick folds.

“Dev,” he groans finding my clit with his index finger.

I cry out, as he circles it, plays with it while his lips nibble on my nipple before he takes it in his mouth suckling hard.

“Come for me baby. I want to feel it,” he says hoarsely shoving his thick fingers in.

My head falls back against the tree with a thump, he has me. All of me in his hands and I’m coming apart at the seams for this man. He’s not only commanding my body, he’s ruling my wounded heart. Re-building it and tearing it apart at the same time.

“Rog,” I groan, pulling at him, needing his kiss.

He lets my nipple go only to claim my mouth. Our kiss is as wild and rough as the Pacific Northwest woods, his fingers slip through my wetness finding my clit and stroking inside. His kiss sucks my soul from my body to fuse with his as I feel the waves of my release crash over me into his waiting hands.

He grunts, pressing harder into me, determined to coax every last bit of pleasure from my body.

I shake in his embrace, gasping into the air around us, his hands holding me firmly as I lose my mind to the pleasure he gave me.

When it’s over he rests his forehead against mine. His heart beating harder now than it was from his workout.

I did this to him—made his heart race.

A few joggers come around the same bend he did, and I jerk in embarrassment at how close I came to coming in front of complete strangers. Thank god, they are wearing earbuds, because my breathy moans and shouts echoed for a mile I’m sure.

My skin’s flushed, pieces of bark cling to my hair. He did this to me—made me forget the world. For one moment, I forgot all the lies and secrets I’m keeping—ready to burst and ruin what we’re building at any second.

The joggers pass by and my hands reach out clinging to the front of him as I jerk him close for one more reckless kiss. I need to get them now, while he burns for me because it won’t be much longer until he learns the truth.

The air’s thick between us.

So much is understood but left unsaid. I hang my head afraid of what he'll see in my eyes. Rog is astute—he'll know I'm hiding something.

His fingers thread through mine, he gives me a firm tug and we walk down the trail back to the parking area. He stares down anyone who even thinks about glancing towards me. I feel so... protected, as if this giant man holding my hand in his, would slay anyone who dared to hurt me in anyway.

We reach my car, my head tips back, his fingers trail down my cheek before he cups my chin and plants the sweetest kiss full of promise on my lips.

“See you at the lake, sugar.”

He opens my door, eyes hungrily devouring every inch of my tan legs up to where my shorts hug the top of my thighs.

I see it all over his face, he wants to make me his, most likely at the lake this weekend. I won't be able to hold him off without exposing myself.

I gulp, needing him, wanting him so much. But he'll hate me if we come together only for my lies to rip us apart.

I nod my head as he shuts the door. Driving back to the apartment my thoughts are all over the place, but it's funny how life unravels; meeting Rog was so unscripted. Thank God Jeff dumped me. Rog's touch makes me burn more than Jeff's ever did. I can't believe there was a time when I thought that man was it for me. In a fucked-up way, finding the road Dee walked brought me Rog. And I want to keep on going, excited but scared as hell to see where it will lead.

I drive home on auto-pilot, my thoughts and emotions wrecked. I'm a pendulum swinging in a different direction at every new revelation that unfolds.

It's quiet as I pull down the lane to the apartment house. The outside light shines in the twilight. Crickets and grasshoppers sing, the brightest stars can be seen as the sun sinks so low—all that's left is the dull pink of its wake in the sky.

My tired feet climb the stairs, finally I fumble the key in the lock and open the door. Luce already has a bottle of wine uncorked and a full glass waiting.

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She arches an eyebrow, “Damn, please tell me some insanely hot mountain man ravaged you in the woods and now you can’t walk straight.” She gets up walking closer smirking, “You have sticks in your hair and a hickey on your neck.”

“H-he didn’t.”

“He did. Damn, was it the Silver Fox? ‘Cause he just marked you as his woman judging by that love bite. Oh, god, please tell me it was him,” she sighs, walking back to the couch fanning herself with one hand while picking up her wine glass with the other.

I groan slumping down beside her and practically guzzling mine. “It was him. It’s a glorious hot mess, Luce.”

“I’ll bet. Did you really do it in the woods? I knew you had it in you, you dirty slut!” She practically shrieks.

“NO! God, no Luce. I drove out to the old logging roads to clear my head. It’s a trail area now, where people workout. He was running and we kinda collided.”

“Yeah, collisions don’t leave love bites and the smell of sex behind.”

I whiff my shirt. “I don’t smell like sex!”

She rolls her eyes. “Was he huge? Did you feel him? Did you come?”

“Calm down, Luce. What the heck?”

“It’s been a long time for me. So long, I feel like a virgin.”

“Well, it’s been a long time for me too. That’s probably why I came screaming like a banshee when he had me pinned up against the tree.”

“Jesus. I’m so glad the shop next to the tattoo parlor sold vibrators.”

“W-what?” I stutter.

“Don’t worry. I got one for you too. And hopefully after this weekend, you won’t need it because you’ll have that Silver Fox’s big dick in you every night.”

“I’m not so sure about that. Toad told me what happened with the club. My birth mother brought it down. Her name is cursed by them.”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Dev. Men are dumb shits—always losing their head over what we got between our legs.”

“Yeah? Well Jeff fell out of love with mine. But he did text me all afternoon.”

“Shut up?”

“Yep. He wants me back.”

“Did you tell him to go to hell?”

“No. I-I didn’t dignify him.”

“That probably pissed him right off,” she snorts, digging her hands into a bag of chips she left next to the remote, “he’s got an ego the size of the city of Chicago itself.”

“Tell me how you really feel?” I mutter grabbing a handful of chips myself.

“He’s a prick. He probably would’ve cheated on you if you did marry him and it would’ve been a trainwreck.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Cheer up, Dev. You’ve caught the big bad wolf.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m afraid of. It all started years ago with these two men, Colin Flynn and John Masters. Oh, before I forget—I have a brother.”

She chokes motioning me to continue.

So, I do. I tell her every sordid detail while we pass the bottle of wine back and forth. Twenty minutes into the story, we stop using glasses and chug straight from the bottle.

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“You need to tell him Dev. Now before it’s too late. If he’s catching feelings for you and you sleep with him—then he finds out. Damn, I’d hate to see that man angry. He’ll cut you out for sure. Not because of who you are but because you didn’t trust him with the truth.”

I shiver, “I know. I like him so much,” my hands crumple the empty bag twisting it in a ball, “I’m so afraid that once I tell him... the way he looks at me is going to change and I won’t be able to do anything about it.”

“I know sweetie,” she hugs me and strokes my hair, “but you owe him the truth. What he decides is up to him. But I know you’re a woman worth knowing, Dev. Fuck him if he holds your DNA against you.”

“I hope he thinks so, too.”

We decide to order delivery and snuggle under a blanket watching Sons of Anarchy all night until we can’t keep our eyes open, despite how hot Jax is and we turn it off.

The last thought I have as my head hits my pillow is of the way his eyes glowed like a predator as he rounded that curve in the woods and came for me.

I shiver under the covers, close my eyes and slip my hand between my thighs. It doesn’t feel as good as he did. Groaning, I open my eyes confused for a second at the hot pink dildo sitting on my dresser. Shoving the covers away, I bound out of bed and grab it. It hums loudly, I press another button and the head of it vibrates like a jack hammer.

Biting my lip, I fall back into bed, pinch my nipples and moan as I slip it in. “Rog,” I gasp, throwing my head from side to side, pretending it’s him hitting my G-spot, not a pink plastic dick. My phone pings with a text disrupting me.

Rog:Can’t stop thinkin’ ‘bout you sugar.

I was so close to coming, I decide to text him back when I’m done. My hand slaps the phone away as I pick up where I left off.

My hand pumps it in and out, I rise, sitting on it reverse cowgirl, so it goes deeper. It hits my G-spot with the speed of a jackrabbit. The old bed that came with the rental squeaks loudly in rhythm to my hips fucking the toy. I moan, arching my back coming and gasping his name, “Rog.”

“Yes, sugar,” he chuckles in the dark.

My eyes pop open, I’m still having aftershocks as my eyes fall to my cell where it says I’ve got an open call going on for over a minute.

Yelping, I hit end call and fall back on the bed mortified.

He texts:

Rog:I’m so fuckin’ hard right now. It’s all your fault. Pick up your phone and make it right.

Me:I have no clue what you are taking about.

My phone rings. I answer but don’t speak.

“Hearing you say my name when you came right now was the sweetest thing I ever

heard. Don't you dare deny what you were doing, Dev. And don't do it again. The next time you come, it's gonna be with my dick inside you. I want to hear you say it Dev. I want to hear you scream my name in my ear as my dick drives into you so deep—you'll remember it for the rest of your life."

I gasp, unable to stop the sound from tearing out of my mouth.

He chuckles, "That's right, sugar. You're gonna come for daddy. Real soon."

My breath comes out in gasps. I still haven't uttered one word.

"I can see you Dev, sittin' in the dark, biting that lip, thighs still slick where you imagined it was me touching you. It's all right love, I'm stroking my thick cock right now, wishing it was you. I'm gonna come hard tonight knowing the next time that I do it will be between your thighs."

My thighs clench, and I stay on the line as hearing him stroke himself, groaning my name. Despite his warning not to, my hand slips back down to my swollen clit and I make myself come again just as he does.

"Good night sugar. Your quick little breaths on the line told me everything I needed. I'm gonna punish you for taking two orgasms away from me tonight. Don't disobey me again," he disconnects.

Holy shit. Is Rog a DOM? Jeff was good in bed, but he never wanted to deviate. I can't fuck this up. A tear streaks down my face. Why? Why did I have to be her daughter? I just know there would be no obstacle to him loving me and keeping me forever if I was just born to someone else, anyone else.

I cry softly under my covers, drained from the three orgasms I had today and from too many truths that were uncovered. I fall into a fitful sleep, dreaming of seeing his

eyes burn as they bore into mine right before his powerful hips surge forward and he claims me as his woman.

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SHE'S NOT HERE YET. I'm keyed up. I'm gonna have to keep my hands fisted in my pockets so I don't grab her and haul her deep into the woods. We cleaned the camp up good. The club bought it on the cheap five years back. We needed someplace to blow off steam where no eyes could look. A hundred acres of wild woods and mountains in southern Oregon fitted the bill. It used to be a summer camp for kids but now it's Creed's playground. I've spent days out here, getting everything ready. I'm chomping at the bit for my girl to show. Christ, listening to her pant as she came into the phone calling my name had me harder than granite.

She makes me feel re-energized as if the best sex of my life is yet to come—with her. I'm pacing like a damned idiot, checking my phone every five minutes in case she calls saying she's lost. I should've driven her and Luce out here, but they wouldn't let me. I know she's embarrassed at the intimacy we shared. We haven't had sex yet, but damn if it already doesn't feel like we're lovers.

"Damn, Rog. What's eating at you?"

"It's good to see you," we clasp hands before pulling each other in for man hugs. But I drop him like a stone to pick up the brunette standing behind him. I spin her around in a circle like I've done a million times before. She has the same eyes, but her hair used to have little bows.

"Shanna, girl. I've missed you."

"Me, too. Meat. Or can I call you Silver Fox, too?" She goads sticking a finger into my chest. My face turns red, all the feelings I have for Dev, turning me into a fool. I swipe a hand over my face as Duke and Shanna link hands grinning like idiots.

“No one calls me Meat anymore. Jesus, I have so many damn names...Jefe, Rog, Silver Fox, I’m having a goddamn identity crisis,” I joke taking the beer Smith hands me as he walks over to greet Duke and Shanna.

“So... where is she?” Shanna asks her eyes full of mischief.

“Not here yet,” I rub the back of my neck with one hand irritated at myself for feeling like a teen dying for his first crush.

“You look good.”

“Thanks baby girl. I feel good. I miss your pops like hell. Sometimes, I forget...”

“I know. Me too. I-I can’t go back to Springdale. It’s too raw knowing he’s not there. But the lake... this is as far as I can go to home. I’m just not ready yet.”

“I understand. I do. I miss you like hell. He still taking good care of you?” I nudge the tip of my boot in Duke’s direction.

“He takes the best care of me. Life came full-circle when we met. I believe everything happens for a reason. I know that sounds cheesy but... who would’ve ever thought twenty years ago that Colin Flynn’s daughter and John Masters’ son would be soulmates?”

“Not me. Shit. I remember how they fought. The two of them were like rabid dogs fightin’ over that bitch in heat.”

“Why did you bring up my aunt? Damn, Rog... that’s a very sore topic for me.”

I shrug, “Sorry man. That bitch was...”

“A homewrecker, for one. She ruined my eighteenth birthday. I’ll never forget it or forgive her even though she’s dead. My old man promised me we’d go out riding. He helped me re-build my first Ducati. He taught me everything I know about engines... but he forgot. She brought over coke and condoms and they had their own party,” he breaks off bitterly, taking a drag of his smoke.

I shake my head and raise my beer, “To the brotherhood. To Creed decades later, we’re still going strong despite that woman,” I raise my bottle feeling my heart trip and fall. Dev’s standing ten feet away. She’s as pale as a ghost and shaking like a leaf.

My friends forgotten, I stride straight for her. “Who hurt you? I’ll kill them.” My fists clench ready to tear the devil himself apart if need be.”

She looks at the ground, refusing to meet my eyes. I tip her chin up with my finger. My eyes hungrily roam over her face, her eyes hold a thousand secrets that I’m determined to discover.

She clutches my plaid shirt with her hands moving into my arms.

“I’m so sorry, Rog.”

“Shhhh, shhh,” I stroke her hair wondering what the hell she’s apologizing for, but know she’s in no state for me to pry it out of her... yet.

“I’m fine really. I just... my ex has been calling and texting a lot lately. Seeing you reminded how much I don’t want him anymore. I want...you.”

I pull back, hands cupping her face and kiss her like I’m her master and commander. No one is taking this woman from me. The thought of another man being where I’m going to go—has me seeing red. I don’t care that we have an audience. I’m staking

my claim here and now in front of everyone—Dev is mine and under my protection. I'm trembling with desire, high on her words telling me she wants to be my woman as much as I want to make it happen.

I rest my forehead against hers, it's not even noon yet and I vowed to woo her but I've already broken that vow when I touched her in the woods a few days ago.

“Come meet my family,” gently tugging her hand I lead her over to where Duke and Shanna stand with Smith. The three of them do a poor job pretending that they weren't watching me and Dev like a movie.

Her feet move slowly, her head lowered. I'm puzzled. Dev's never been shy. I must've embarrassed her. Shanna's the first to break the ice.

“Hey. It's about time someone beat some sense into Roger's thick skull. I'm Shanna, nice to meet you.”

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“Devon,” she replies nervously, eyes bouncing around like a skittish alley cat. I put an arm around her, pulling her tightly to my side.

“And this is my silver fox, Duke.” The men standing behind us all snicker at the joke.

Dev’s face turns redder than a beet as Duke pauses for a second not sure if he heard his woman right. He arches an eyebrow, puts his beer down and picks her up fireman style. She shrieks as he shouts out over his shoulder, “Nice to meet ya’ Devon. Sorry, but I need to prove to my old lady that I still have stamina for an old guy.” He smacks her ass playfully, but hard enough the slap is clearly heard.

Shanna half-heartily pounds her fists against his broad back. I smirk, sipping my beer. She hates being called an “old lady.” He set her afire on purpose and now they’re going to go burn it out in the cabins behind the lake.

Lucky bastard.

Dev sags against me seeming relieved they’ve left. I frown, wanting her to fit in with them. Shanna’s practically my niece and Duke, well, Duke is more like a brother since he’s been with Shanna, the girl I spent my life loving and protecting like she’s my own blood.

I half expect Smith to shout out some smart-ass remark to them but he’s standing still as a statue, eyes lookin’ hard across the picnic tables and string lights at, Luce.

“Who’s your friend?” He asks Dev, eyes never leaving the pixie blond who’s staring back at him just as boldly.

“That’s my best friend, Lucille. She’s visiting from Chicago, she’s supposed to leave on Monday.”

“We’ll see if she makes that flight,” he smirks taking a swig of his beer heading straight for her. He doesn’t even stop but brushes against Luce with his shoulder, grabbing her hand like he already owns her. She doesn’t put up a fight. But goes with him without even knowing his name.

I look down at Dev, tucked against me, “Guess it’s just you and me,” I whisper kissing the top of her head.

I’m torn.

My tongue hurts from all the times I bit it today. The words were on the tip of it, on the brink of tumbling out a thousand times. I wanted to tell him I was Duke’s sister, that Dee was my birthmother, that I needed him to stand by me through the storm my truth would start. But then he’d touch me. Butterfly touches, pushing a lock of hair off my face, skimming his fingertips up and down my bare arm as we sat side-by-side listening to the band the club hired play or feeding me bites of food, fingers brushing the crumbs from my lips.

Rog is a master of seduction. Each touch is a secret caress, slowly breaking me down wanting him to do to me what Duke did to Shanna: Carry me off to one of the secluded cabins and fuck my brains out. Their cries echoed across the lake and through the trees. They obviously didn’t realize the windows were open in their little log cabin. No one seemed to care. Rog did signal to the band to hurry the hell up and get on the makeshift stage. As soon as they started playing they drowned out the shouts of ecstasy coming from all directions.

It was my turn to smirk when I recognized Luce’s shout of “Oh, god!” coming from somewhere beyond the trees.

I've been drinking vodka and club soda for hours. It occurred to me; today was not the time or place. I can't tell Rog here with the men all around celebrating the club's version of Christmas.

I almost died when I got here and overheard Duke talking about Dee. The way they toasted one another in solidarity was a slap in the face that as soon as they find out who I am—I'd be on the outside of this family who have taken me in.

But seeing Duke in the flesh was the biggest shock. I didn't know he was going to be here. For some reason I thought it would be just the Springdale crew, but damn, there's over a hundred men here—some from LA and others from Canada.

Duke is... huge. I'd be scared of him if I didn't hear through Rog and Toad what a standup guy he is. He's got eyes as dark as the devil, a full beard but it's trimmed, and wild dark hair that has a hint of curl—just like me. I've been avoiding him since he came back to the party after his lovefest with Shanna. I'm terrified of standing too close to him, that someone might see how similar we are if they look close enough.

"Having fun?" Mac casually asks, walking over.

"I am.

"Really? Then why are you sitting here all by yourself looking like someone stole your lunch?"

I shrug, watching Rog play cornhole with Duke and Federico. "I like the view."

"Uh-huh. I know it's a lot. Hundreds of us gathered in one spot. But you're one of us Dev. Don't be shy. Come on, we're playing the winner."

I let him help me up and I down my drink only to go mix another. After five of them,

I loosen up and become myself. As much myself as I can be since my life's become a pressure cooker.

"Toad and I are playing the winner," I boldly announce, placing an arm around Rog's waist and placing a kiss on his cheek.

"You good?"

"Yeah, I'm good," I answer hugging his back and resting the side of my face against him.

Crazy thoughts spin through my head. Maybe I can just let it all go. I have my answers, I have my adopted family... I could have Rog, too and never wound him with the truth.

What's the point?

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The man is so good... why should I hurt him? The past has been buried for decades, I should let it stay that way.

Feeling wise, like that's the right decision, I slam the door down on my guilt, let the alcohol loosen me even further and my hands rake down his taunt abs and back up again.

He groans, catching my wrists. "I promised myself I'd be good."

"I don't want good, Rog. I want you to be bad, very bad," I whisper stepping up on my tippy toes to tease the back of his neck with my tongue.

"Christ," he mutters, "not here. I'm not taking you for the first time here like an animal with all my men around."

"Why not? Everyone else is getting it on."

He spins in my embrace. "You are not everyone else, Dev. You're special... deserve the moon and the sun."

I swallow, "O-okay. We're up. If Toad and I win, you are mine tonight to do whatever I want with...."

"When you lose," he answers walking back a step drink in hand, "I'm taking you on a proper date. I say when, I say where and you aren't gonna say shit about it. Got it?" He finishes tapping the end of my nose.

“Not a problem. Since I’m not gonna lose,” I answer noticing Smith and Luce walking hand in hand out into the clearing. She’s following behind him like he has her on a leash. She’s grins at me as I mouth, “What the fuck?”

Toad comes up next to me beanbags in hand, “You ready?”

“Yup. Let’s whoop some ass,” I respond taking them from him getting ready to make my first throw. I grin. I was a pitcher in high school. Throwing underhand and hitting a target is something I practiced for years.

Rog doesn’t have a chance in hell of winning our wager.

My knees shake as I picture all the ways I could drive him crazy... later in one of these cabins. My first throw lands on the wooden board with a thud, an inch from falling into the hole. Roger’s brow arches, he’s impressed.

“I’ve got mad skills,” I call out. My second throw arcs in the air, sailing right into the hole.

“Damn, girl. I should’ve made a wager, too.” Toad says swigging his beer. I grin, take a large sip of my cocktail and wait for Rog’s return throws.

It’s a close one. We’re up by three points, when Federico lands an ace in the hole, tying it up.

I’ve racked up points but damn, I wasn’t expecting these guys to be so good. Federico laughs, “Don’t look so pissed, Dev. What did ya’ think we do? We drive out here or up north, drink and play lawn games.”

I roll my eyes, “Uh huh. Yep, that’s all you guys do.” Not one of them has an inch of fat on them. They’re ripped, beefcakes, every last one of them. It’s easy to see how

Luce turned into a slut at just one hot look from Smith. I'm close to grabbing Rog's hand and whispering in his ear how I'm going to tie him up while I strip and grind my naked body all over his.

Rog finishes his beer, places it down in the grass and winks. With one easy toss, the game's over.

He won.

I can't say I'm disappointed. Being pursued by him is hardly a punishment. In fact, it's the most exciting thing that's ever happened in my life.

"Come on sugar. Don't take the loss too hard. Let's get some food."

I grin, "It was a fair game. We would've kicked your ass though if I wasn't so buzzed."

He takes the plastic cup from my hands, chucks it in the garbage and takes a bottle of water from an ice bucket.

"Here."

"Thanks," I whisper noticing it's getting dark. A few bonfires are going on the small beach. Smoke wafts from the charcoal grills where burgers and hot dogs are cooking. It smells like beer and cook out: a real American summer. Romance is in the air, Rog is by my side and in this moment—I believe in happy endings. The kind you always read about but never get to experience yourself.

We fix plates and sit in Adirondack chairs on the beach by the fire. Toad has a guitar in his lap and strums a few cords. Someone else places some twigs they gathered from the woods on the flames and as they catch fire, sparks shoot up with a few

crackling pops.

I sigh in contentment.

For a moment my world is perfect.

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I feel heavy, drowsy. Being in the sun all day drinking is something I haven't done in a long time. I sigh, yawning into my hand, listening to the chatter all around us. Rog is talking to Smith who's practically feeding Luce off his plate. She's acting like a freakin' submissive. I need to figure out what the hell is going on.

"I'll be right back," I tell Rog touching his arm lightly. Standing up, I step over to Luce and grab her by the hand, she moves to get up, but Smith stops mid-sentence to look at me. His eyes are full of alpha man shit.

"Sorry. She was my best friend long before you ever laid eyes on her."

He grunts, nods his consent and allows her to go with me.

"What the fuck, Luce? Smith is acting crazy."

"I know," she sighs, "but I like it."

I shake my head as we walk to the camp restrooms. We both enter stalls and I wait for her when I'm done. There are other women in here who I don't know so I grab her hand and we sneak out when our men aren't looking this way.

Running in the dark down a trail, I keep looking behind, half-expecting Smith to chase us. Pulling her behind a huge pine tree, we catch our breaths for a minute.

"Spill, Luce. Now."

She swallows, the pulse in her throat is racing as she excitedly starts talking. "He's.

He's... on a whole other level. I mean, he took one look at me and I felt... claimed.Owned. Completely."

"What? Did you smoke a joint this morning before we left?"

"No. I'm high on him though, that's for sure."

"Did you sleep with him?"

"N-no..."

"Luce?" I warn.

"No. But we did make out like teenagers. It was so hot. I didn't even know his name for three hours. He led me to a meadow, took off his shirt, laid it down and spread me across it. The man went down on me for an hour. He pinned me down, wouldn't let me up and made me come over and over again."

"No way."

She nods, "Then he kissed me. After... after all that. Then he ripped my shirt off and sucked my tits for another hour. H-he said I had a body he could feast on for days. He never asked me my name."

"That's because I told him."

"Well, he said my name was, "Taken" and made me repeat it."

"I don't know Luce. I've seen Smith at Sassy's and he seemed like an okay guy. Damn, don't you think this is weird?"

“I don’t care. It makes me feel so good. So—wanted, that a man like him could want me so much, so viscerally; instantly. It’s like my existence makes him go insane—just kidding Dev,” she cracks up. “The look on your face right now is priceless. He did take me to a meadow and we just drank and chilled. We talked a lot. It was nice to have a guy actually interested in me without rushing to get my clothes off.”

“Well, I would believe it after I heard you calling out “oh, god” from the woods.

“We saw a snake. No lie. I’m a city girl. I freaked the fuck out, okay? I don’t do wilderness, but I do—do wild men,” she winks.

On cue, a bear comes tearing ass through the brush. But of course, it’s not a bear. It’s Smith. He taps his watch. “You were gone over ten minutes. I was concerned. Especially after how you almost fainted when you saw that garden snake earlier. Bats come out this time of night.”

“Uh huh,” I roll my eyes, and jab my finger into his chest. “I’m watching you. You are on my radar. If you pull any psycho shit on her, I’m gonna gobat-shitcrazy on your ass.”

“Easy there. We’re just getting to know each other. Come,” he says holding a hand out to her, “the bands playing again.”

Across the distance, a soft ballad weaves through the air. She takes his hand leaving me behind. I shake my head at my petite best friend clutching the President of Creed’s hand like she’ll never let go.

I sigh moving closer into him, if that’s even possible. The string lights and fireflies dance above our heads, the stars a pouch of spilled diamonds littering the sky, as Rog holds me in his arms song after song, our bodies barely moving but our hearts going a

hundred miles an hour. His arms press me tightly against him, resting an inch away from my ass. He nuzzles the side of my face, kisses me behind the ear, while whispering how long it's been since anyone's made him feel like this.

I'm drunk on him and never want to sober up.

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“Dev,” he moans claiming my lips. I sigh, mouth opening for his kiss feeling his hard length urgently pressing into me.

“Stay with me tonight,” he asks, eyes reflecting the moonlight.

“I thought you wanted to take it slow?”

“Fuck slow,” he growls, hands cupping my ass, bringing me tighter against his hard cock stuck inside his jeans.

I blow out a breath. I’m standing on the edge of a cliff, do I jump? Can I knowing we’ll both fall but the only thing that could kill us is my secret?

He senses me hesitate.

“Never mind, sugar. It’s okay. I’ll wait forever to have you.”

“God, I don’t deserve you,” I whisper cupping the side of his face. His soft beard in my palm.

“No. You’ve got it all wrong girl. An old bastard like me can’t believe I found someone like you. Come on, the night is winding down. I have a cabin on the other side of the lake. Even if we just sleep... I want to hold you. All night, even if it’s just this once.”

“How can I say no to that? Especially since there’s nothing I want more than to be with you... but Rog. I-I’m... there’s things about me that you don’t know.”

We stop swaying to the fading notes still clinging in the air around us. Both hands come up to hold my face. “I’m no prince, Dev. I’ve done bad things. But it’s not who I am. You hear, me? You get what I’m sayin’?”

I nod, feeling a tear slip down my cheek. “I’m not who my parents were. I might share their DNA but they didn’t shape who I am.”

He nods, eyes full of understanding. “You’re perfect Dev.”

“Hardly,” I laugh biting my lip.

“Well, I think you might be perfect for me.”

He slips his hand in mine and leads me through the couples still softly grinding against one another. I pause seeing Luce swept up in Smith’s arms. Her eyes are closed as she leans into him. He nods at me over the top of her head; a silent understanding between us that he’ll take care of her and keep her safe tonight.

I’m not sure where the hours ahead are going to lead, but I know I don’t want to turn back now. Rog leads me through the trail in the woods winding around the lake past a row of cabins to a solitary one nestled under huge evergreens. It’s a cozy and private, a place to make love in with no one to hear you through the thick log construction.

He gestures for me to get comfortable while he busies himself lighting a fire. A huge king four poster bed sits across the back wall. It’s made-up with thick flannel sheets and lined with rows of pillows. The light from the flames he lit throws shadows across the room. It’s then that I notice my overnight bag sitting on the floor.

“You were that sure of me, huh?”

“Nah, I was going to sleep in the bunkhouse and give you and Luce the cabin. But I

won't lie. I'm glad it's me and you, sugar."

He holds a hand out and I take it, moving forward on shaky legs.

"I know I promised that I'd court ya', but it's too much Dev. This is too much," he gestures between us with his free hand. I nod, completely understanding what he's saying.

He holds me close as if we're still dancing outside under the stars. But no one can see us now. His hands come up slowly, lifting my shirt. I raise my arms for him to sweep it over my head. I'm left in my black lace bra, the light of the flames from the fire flicker over my skin. But his gaze burns blue flame as he takes me in from the waist up.

"Do you trust me, sugar?"

"Yes," I whisper.

He stills, "I need control. I need to set the pace. But most of all I need you to trust me. I'd never hurt you love, but I'm gonna do things to you—dirty, naughty things, that good girls like you can't even think of." He unsnaps my bra and holds it in his hands.

I gasp as he moves to stand behind me. He sweeps my hair to one side and kisses the back of my neck. My arms come out to hold the mantel. He presses up behind me. I hear his jeans fall to the floor. His warm fingers come around front to cup and mold me. He holds my sex firmly in his palm. "I own this pussy now, Dev," he growls cupping it harder and biting my neck.

I'm combusting. The heat between us ignites.

His fingers unzip my jean shorts and he breathes deeply as his fingers boldly delve

between my thighs. He pushes my soaked thong to the side, fingers moving up and down my folds. The pad of his index finger circles my clit before moving over it in lazy circles.

“Christ, Dev, you’re fuckin’ soaked for me.”

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I cry out as he withdraws his hands from me to yank my shorts all the way down my legs. I step out of them with a shiver. He grunts, nudging my knees apart with his thigh. His hands cup my breasts, thumb and index finger playing with my nipples. He rolls them between his fingers, massages them, cups them, memorizes them with his hands as his mouth kisses and sucks my neck.

He drops a hand to free himself from his boxers. I gasp feeling the hot shaft press between my buttocks. It's thick as fuck and hot pre-cum drips on me.

He places one hand on top of mine. The side of my head grazes his forearm as he guides himself home.

He grunts, holding the thick mushroom tip in his hand working it in.

“Christ, Dev. You're so tight. I can't get in sugar.”

“I'm not tight. You're so fuckin' huge,” I moan as he releases my hands from his grip, so he can take me by one hip and guide himself in with his other.

“Relax. You are gonna take all of me,” he hisses surging forward with one long hard thrust.

“Ah,” I gasp, feeling so full. So fuckin' full.

His cock pulses with triumph finally seated fully inside me.

Rog sighs, his hands come up to cup my breasts, “Mine,” he growls pulling back and

thrusting in again. “Say it. Say it Dev,” he warns.

“Y-yours,” I gasp as his fingers suddenly slide through my sex looking for the tiny bud screaming for his touch.

He grunts in response. My head rolls back as his fingers stroke me just as the monstrous head of his cock starts pounding on my G-spot steadily.

“I’ve been hard for you for weeks,” he pulls out to smack my ass, “... you know what you’ve been doing to me—teasing me with this hot little body as you wipe the tables down.”

“I know. I did in on p-purpose,” I moan, “I needed to break you. Make you want me... want this,” I gasp.

“You dirty little minx,” he roars biting my neck. He pulls out spinning me around and slapping my sex before picking me up and setting me down at the foot of the bed moving behind me.

“Ah,” I cry as he grabs a fistful of hair and bends me over the bed, entering me in one long thrust. My eyes roll back in my head. My pussy throbs with pain and pleasure. It’s hard to tell when one sensation begins and the other ends.

He swells inside me. The earthy, raw smell of our sex fills my nose, his heavy balls slap against my ass as he pounds into me relentlessly. My hands press down on the edge of the bed and every time he thrusts the pressure makes the bedsprings creak.

His fingers reach around gently rubbing my swollen nub. “I’m gonna come, Rog.”

“Only when I say you can,” he warns.

“Please,” I moan.

“Not yet. I need to feel you take me some more.”

“W-what?”

“I didn’t even go fully in yet, sugar.”

I’m stunned. He’s so fuckin’ huge that I couldn’t tell that wasn’t all of him taking me to the edge.

“You were too tight. I needed you to relax. Open like a flower for me, love. ‘Cause I’m coming all the way in.”

“Rog,” I moan as his hips rock fully into me. The tip of him bruising my womb. “It hurts so good,” I moan rocking back to meet him.

After that there’s no talking. It’s just our bodies fighting to find nirvana.

He grunts filling me again and again, stuffing me so full I can’t move. He buries his head against my shoulder, finds my clit, growling, “Now. Now you may come, sugar.”

“Rog!” I cry as his hands and cock demand I fall.

My walls tighten, spasming on him.

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“That’s right baby. Come on my cock. I want to feel it.”

“You’re so dirty, Rog,” I moan,

“You think this is dirty, baby? Christ, you’re sweet,” he pants on the verge of his own release.

I can’t answer as the crest of the wave comes and crashes over me before pulling me under.

“Dev...,” he calls out hoarsely a few seconds before I feel the hot gush of his come unleash like a tidal wave.

The extra wetness makes his monster cock slip further into me than I thought was possible. He pumps hard and fast and I cry out as aftershocks rip through me.

He falls against me. He’s heavy as hell but I love it. We lay on the bed, in a twisted heap of pants and limbs, hearts racing as one as the sound of hooting owls and crickets replace our heavy breathing as we recover from the greatest fuck of our lives.

At least it was for me.

“Rog?” I finally ask when I can speak.

“Yeah, babe?”

“You came in me.”

“And you loved it,” he replies slipping out causing us both to moan. We’re still sensitive from coming.

“I’m clean sugar and I trust you.”

My heart clenches. He trusts me.

“B-but...”

“I had a vasectomy. A few years back after some whack chick tried to trap me.”

Stunned, I rollover to look at him.

“Don’t worry. It’s reversible,” he winks walking buck ass naked into the bathroom to clean up.

“Thanks for the cuddle,” I call out after him “just so you know—I’m a girl who needs to spoon after sex!”

“Oh, Dev,” his head peeks out of the doorway, “I’m gonna hold you all night and probably half of the day tomorrow. I told ya’ you’re mine.”

I’m spent. He did most of the work, but my legs feel like rubber. I turn down the comforter and crawl underneath. It’s almost fall, and the nights here feel like it.

Rog is back, peeling back the blankets and pressing a lukewarm cloth between my legs. I try to press my legs together feeling shy, but his mouth takes mine as he cleans me. And somehow, it feels more intimate and naughty than what we just shared.

He tosses the cloth to the floor, hauls me into his arms and throws a thick thigh over me.

“Sleep,” he commands.

I snuggle back into his thick chest, sigh and do what he says.

I feel soft hands cup my cheeks, petting my beard.

“Good morning.” My angel murmurs, her soft hands still cupping my jaw.

“Mmm,” I answer holding her closer, one hand holding a breast like I own it.

I grin, because I do.

Birds chirp, the fire’s gone out and the air is damp with a chill. It’s not quite dawn yet. I slept like a rock after coming in here like a freight train. My dick’s wide awake; anxious to go again.

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I'm not a man of many words, never have been. But there's something about her that makes me want to say all kinds of kink into her ear as my dick slips into her. And after I do that, shit, I could see myself telling her everything I've done in my life, hoping she'll still want me.

I didn't always own a legit business. In fact, for most of my life—I was the criminal running drugs and guns, causing mayhem and burying the evidence when I needed to.

But her hands move south, running down my arms and stomach.

Talking can wait. Being inside her can't.

Rolling, I pull her under me to pin her hands above her head with one hand. My mouth finds a soft nipple, tongue coming out to trace it lazily while my other hand parts her folds and my finger glides up and down through her damp core.

She moans, hips coming off the bed seeking more of my touch. I chuckle low in my throat at how she comes undone for me.

Just me.

I pick her leg up and wrap it around my waist. In one smooth move, I bury my thick cock deep inside her, planting myself in to the hilt.

I close my eyes, riding her, feeling her tight cunt taking all of me.

The bed groans and creaks under my thrusts, the head board bangs against the wall as

I sink deeper into the scorching silk of her heat.

I don't remember the last time I fucked in a bed. The past few years, hell decades, have been quick fucks behind the bar. I was almost always half-cocked or half-baked to boot. But there's no cloud in my head dulling the sensation of being raw inside my angel.

Hell, half of me wishes I would get her pregnant. There's nothing like planting the seed of life in a woman to mark her as your own.

I grit my teeth hissing at how good she feels gripping my dick as I slip in and out of her imagining my full-load finding a home in her womb. But if that day ever comes, my ring will be on her finger and all her shit will be in my house—for good.

“Rog,” she groans, fingers threading in my hair.

My left hand grips the headboard, steadying me so I can pump in harder; faster. Her tits bounce to the rhythm of my thrusts, nipples still wet from my kiss.

I smell myself on her skin.

It's too much.

She's too much.

I grit my teeth trying to hold back. My woman needs to come first: always.

“You close, baby?” I rasp in her ear.

“I-I need.”

“Tell me what you need,” I command, pausing mid-stroke.

Her cheeks redden. Damn if she doesn’t look like a blushin’ bride. And here inside our cozy cabin, I can pretend she is and that this is our honeymoon.

She bites her lip, eyes not meeting mine as she snakes a hand down between her legs.

“Say it.”

“I-I want you to touch me there.”

“Where?” I command.

“My-my clit.”

“Your wish is my command, sugar.”

My fingers touch her gently, she’s still swollen from last night. Her back’s taut, body quivering on the precipice of the release she needs.

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All it will take is a few more strokes and she's mine. I still, pausing to grin wickedly at her.

"What?"

"Nothing," I answer leaning on my elbows, "you feel so good. I might want to stay here all damn day," I reply, dick twitching so hard there's no way she doesn't feel it.

"Stop talking and make me come already, old man," she replies smacking my arm.

"You're gonna pay for that."

"Uh-huh. Make me pay, big boy," she purrs raking her hot pink nails down my back. My hips pump between her thighs as I resume working myself in and out of the sweetest pussy God ever made. The thought of any other man being where I am now makes me see red. My hands grip the headboard again and pump so hard—if the walls were plaster I know there would be holes from where the bed frame hits.

She cries out as I pound into her, shattering in a million pieces in my arms as I let go of the headboard to hold her.

I groan, spilling myself and collapse onto her for the second time.

She's still tired and now sated and needs more sleep. I finally move off her when I can think again and spoon her like she told me she needs.

She's out in ten minutes.

I hold her for another ten, then gently ease out of bed. I should be spent. Instead I feel as if I could run for miles. I take a quick shower and put on my workout clothes. I know Dev runs too, I can't wait for the mornings when we exercise in bed then outside in these woods.

Grinning like a bastard, I lace up my sneakers and gently close the cabin door. It's crisp out. Dew clings to the leaves just starting to turn. Fall comes early here. Despite partying till dawn, the camp's been cleaned up. Smith was military and runs the club much in the same way. There's not one empty beer can littering the ground. All the trash bins have been emptied, too. Good thing since the bears are out looking to gorge themselves before winter.

I thought I was the only one up, but I catch Smith's eye as he drinks coffee and smokes. His clothes are rumpled, his hair looks as if he's run his hands through it all night.

"Smith?" I ask jogging over.

He takes a long drag muttering something about stubborn women and I try not to grin.

"Luce?"

He exhales. "She's got me all twisted in knots and I just met the girl eighteen hours ago."

I clap his back, jogging backwards past him down the trail, "If she's anything like Dev, you're in for one hell of a ride," I finish with a wink before turning back around.

"Fuck," he groans.

My sneakers deftly move through the rugged terrain as the trail winds deeper into the woods. Cutting to the right away from the lake down an offshoot trail, my hands push back branches, my legs hurdle over fallen logs; I feel like a fuckin' champion. I laugh at the fool I'm makin' of myself proving to no one that I'm still fit enough, strong enough to be her man. I keep going until I reach the clearing off to the left that I remembered. It's still here. It's an island of wild grass and colorful wildflowers hidden by the woods surrounding it on all sides. I stop, breathing hard and full of sweat. I've never been a romantic man, shit I don't even know how to do romance, but Dev makes me want to learn all about it.

I reach down picking a perfect purple flower for her. This seems like a good place to start. I make a note to come back here with my chainsaw and a few men to clear the trail and slow to a jog as I turn around going back the way I came, going back to her probably still curled up in bed with my scent on her skin.

I groan rolling over. He's not here. But there's a single flower placed where his head was with a note scratched out in his hand about meeting at the campsite for coffee.

I still feel him, deep inside in a secret place so deep I can't even touch. He's the most well-endowed lover I've ever had and definitely the most skilled. I sigh, snuggling deeper under the coverlet remembering how he sounded, how he felt thrusting into me as he came. Light scratches and burns mark my neck and breasts left by his beard when he kissed me all over.

I shiver, feeling like a virgin bride waking up the next day, no longer a virgin, deliciously sore, and giddy on the high of being taken by her lover.

I pick up my phone to text Luce, but the service is poor, and my text won't go through. It's ten thirty. I haven't slept this long in years. By the time I shower and dress, I'll be lucky to make lunch.

His broad back faces me. He's talking to Smith and the guys. I duck my head, cheeks burning since everyone must know where I spent the night. A hand links through my arm, I look up expecting to see Luce but meet Shanna's dark eyes instead.

"Come with me for a minute." It's not a question, it's a soft-spoken demand.

She leads me into a small building that once must have been the camp's cafeteria. She grabs a cup of steaming coffee generously adding creamer and I take the hint and fix my own. We walk back outside to a bench facing the water.

"I'm so happy Meat met someone like you."

"Really? I was scared-shitless this was going to be an interrogation."

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“Oh, it is,” she answers smiling and taking a sip from her mug.

The pit’s back in my stomach and I feel queasy. She’s just not the girl Rog spent his life protecting, she’s my brother’s wife.

My hands shake as I bring my mug to my lips.

“I hear you’re working at my bar.”

I nod, still sipping, needing the caffeine to sooth my nerves.

“I practically grew up in those walls, until they all burned down, and Duke and Roger re-built them for me.”

“I heard about the fire. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was the best thing that could’ve happened. Listen, Roger is like a father to me. Especially now that my dad’s gone,” she breaks off swiping a tear, “if he gets hurt...,” she breaks off in a warning.

“Who’s to say he won’t be the one to hurt me?”

She swallows, looking out at the water. “Duke and I hurt each other. There were so many times I thought we’d never happen, there were too many roadblocks in our way. But he proved me wrong, loved me when I thought he didn’t. I thank God every day for bringing him into my life. He’s been hurt. His family was shit to him and he left Springdale at eighteen and enlisted. He served a few tours in Iraq. It fucked him

up more than his family did.”

“Why are you telling me all this? When I barely know you?”

“Because... Roger’s been in my life since before I was even born. He helped raise me when my mother left. I don’t remember a day in my life where he wasn’t in it. And in all those years, I’ve never seen him look or touch a woman the way he did with you last night.”

“My mother left me too. I’m adopted,” I whisper holding back from spilling everything. I’m panicked feeling like a liar. Betraying the man who almost gave me his heart last night along with his body. “I never want to hurt, Rog. He’s the most unexpected surprise, meeting and falling for him was so unplanned.”

“Is it his age?”

“No. I’m almost thirty-one. What’s twenty years in the scope of time? It’s nothing but a particle of dust.”

She grins, “I’m twenty-five and Duke’s forty-one. But I always felt old. Probably because I started working at the bar so young.”

“I know what you mean. My best friend Luce, she should be around here somewhere, always said I had an ‘old soul’.”

“I saw her coming out of Smith’s cabin,” she grins.

We sit in silence drinking our coffee until it’s time to get a refill.

“This was nice.”

“It was,” she replies.

“There you are,” Roger breathes into my hair, hugging me from behind, “is Shanna bothering ya’ with all the bad stories about me?”

“Actually, no. She was telling me what an old softie you are.”

“There’s nothing soft about me, sugar. You know that.” He winks lifting up his shirt and showing us his six-pack abs.

“Ugh,” Shanna turns away, “didn’t need to see that.”

“That’s ‘cause you know I’ve got the hardest body, right babe?” Duke kisses the top of her head.

He looks over and nods his head at me, “Good morning.”

“Morning,” I croak out, stunned every time he’s near. Knowing I’m the bomb he dodged in Iraq, ready to explode in his face.

“I meant to mention it yesterday, but have we met before? You seem familiar?”

“No. We’ve never met,” I answer softly looking anywhere but in his eyes.

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Seeing Luce appear is the excuse I need to run away.

“I’ll be right back,” I whisper, turning in Rog’s arms and kissing him lightly. His hands tighten around my waist, not wanting to let go.

“I promise,” I tell him kissing him again.

“You better, sugar. Now that I know what it feels like to have you in my arms, you ain’t getting away.”

I smile, letting our hands brush until we can no longer reach each other as I walk away. Luce makes a bee line for me and we meet in the middle.

“You okay? I’m sorry for leaving you behind last night.”

“Don’t be. It’s about time you rode that stallion.”

“Luce,” I smack her arm, “you are so bad.”

“Not as bad as you. I wanna hear everything.”

“Fine. But first you are going to tell me what the hell is going on with you and Smith.”

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SOMETHING HAPPENED BETWEEN Luce and Smith. She won't look at him and he won't stop looking at her. He's staring at her like she's his lost princess. His eyes burning so hot, I'm even getting weak knees. She's ignoring him, helping the other women pack up the kitchen while he stands by the screen door watching over her like a guard dog.

Roger's loving has turned me soft in all the places I was hard. It's almost time to pack up and go home to Springdale. I turn away before I'm caught looking at the two of them. Rog is with Mac checking and locking up the cabins.

Tomorrow is my first in-service. A boring day to listen to all the school's policies and meet all the teacher's that I'll be working with this year. Sighing, I walk back outside smiling shyly as I pass new friends and take in the view one more time as my feet lightly tread on the path back to Rog's cabin to get my things.

I finish stuffing my backpack and sigh, looking at the bed. I hope we come back here, soon. But Rog says the snow makes the roads impassable. And there won't be many weekends left since none of the cabins are winterized.

A sharp knock at the door has me looking up, as Shanna opens the door and breezes in.

"Hey."

"Hey. I wanted to give you my number. Call me whenever Rog gets a thick head."

"Yeah, I might have to put you on speed dial," I laugh. After unlocking my phone, I

hand it over.

“There. I hope you and Rog can come visit us in California.”

“I’d like that,” I answer taking my phone back.

I strip the sheets and place them in a bag to be washed.

“I’ll take care of this baby.”

“I want to help. I haven’t lifted a finger this weekend while all the other women have pitched in in the kitchen.”

“You’re off the clock, sweetheart. Besides, I’ve put you to work in my bed.”

And he did.

We spend the afternoon wrapped up in each other’s arms. Last night we fucked. Today Roger made love to me, softly, tenderly. Don’t get me wrong, the man is so huge and powerful, a gentle fuck for him would be a moderate one for any other man. We laid side by side, gazing into each other’s eyes as he pumped slowly, but forcefully inside. It went on for at least an hour. Damn that man has stamina. I came at least three times.

“Ride back with me.”

“What about my car?”

“I’ll have one of the boys drive it,” he shrugs.

“We need to grab Luce.”

He raises his eyebrows and looks away.

“What?”

“Don’t get upset, Dev.”

“Whenever someone tells me that—I instantly get upset.”

“Smith’s claimed her as his. She’ll ride in his truck.”

“And what does Luce have to say about this.”

“It doesn’t matter. It won’t matter. He’s the Prez. His word is law.”

“No,” I shake my head, “this is not some script. She has a say.”

“Some shit is just like TV. We don’t take threats lightly or say a woman is our old lady if she isn’t.”

“I knew he was looking at her all crazy last night. I never should’ve left her with him by the fire.”

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“He’s a good man Dev. He’d never hurt her.”

I snort, “They always say that.”

Picking up my bag, I head toward the door.

“Where you going sugar?”

“To save my best friend.”

“Who says she wants to be rescued?”

I falter, bag slipping on my shoulder. “Maybe you’re right. But I at least need to check.”

“Okay. But don’t put me in a bad spot between you and Smith.”

“Who? Who, would you choose?”

He closes his eyes, hands fisted by his sides, “You. I’d choose you, Dev.”

I gulp. He’s known Smith for years and me weeks. He’s the most loyal man I’ve ever met. And now he’s giving that loyalty to me. I turn away before he can see the tear slipping down my cheek as I open the door on the hunt for Smith and Luce.

“Thank God you’re here. I barged in every cabin looking for you and Smith. Caught an eyeful in more than a few, too.”

Luce lounges on the couch, remote in hand watching One Tree Hill. “What the hell is going on?”

“My cell’s dead. I forgot my charger.”

“And no one at the lake had one you could borrow?”

She shrugs, “As if he would let me.”

“Smith?”

She nods grinning wide. “Did you miss the two guards out back?”

“They must have seen it was Rog’s truck pulling up.”

“Where is your Silver Fox anyway?”

“Sassy’s. He said he needs to check on things. Besides, I need to actually sleep tonight.”

“So, he was good?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe. I’m so screwed. He doesn’t know and holy shit, did you meet my brother, Duke?”

“I did. He’s fine. If he wasn’t with Shanna—”

“As if Smith would ever let that happen.”

“He makes my toes curl.”

“Who? Smith or Duke?”

“Both.”

“Shanna’s gonna kick your ass.”

She shrugs, “Smith thinks I’m old lady material.”

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My mouth drops. “And this is a bad thing?”

“No. It’s... so romantic how he looks at me. I melt.”

“Did you sleep with him?”

“No,” she sighs, “but it was hard to hold out.”

“Then what’s up?”

“I can’t make it too easy for him. Can I? Besides, once he gets what he wants he’ll probably be like every other guy. It won’t last. It never does.”

I sit down beside her. “You can’t think like that.”

“I can’t help it. I’m thirty. Do you know how many bridesmaid dresses I have hanging in my closet? Twelve. Twelve times a bridesmaid, never a bride.”

“So? No one’s ever asked me to be in their wedding. You are so loved Luce. Look at how many people asked you.”

Her shoulders sag, fingers picking the frayed ends of the blanket on her lap, “I’m afraid. I’m a big-talker but when it comes down to it, I’m afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

“Being left like my mom.”

“Oh, Luce.”

“Do you really think he looked at me all crazy?”

“Yes,” I snort, “the man had stars in his eyes.”

“He makes me feel like it could be real.”

“What?”

“Love at first sight.”

I pick up a pillow and bonk her in the head. “You’re just as daft as he is.”

“Chinese food and wine?”

“Sounds like the perfect ending to the weekend to me.”

My phone pings with a text.

Roger: Miss you already, sugar. Sleep tight.

Me: Miss my big bear.

Roger: Come to Poppa, sugar. You know where I am.

I bite my lip.

Me: Can’t. Hanging with Luce.

Roger: I’ll see you at Sassy’s then. Wear something pretty for me. No panties.

Me:I'll try.

Roger:That's an order darlin'. I'll know if you lie about it.

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My fingers hover over the phone. “Holy hell. Roger is a DOM, too?” Luce blurts looking over my shoulder at the messages.

“Too?”

“Smith was very upfront about it. Must be an MC thing. The type of men who join are all badasses.”

“We need to Google this. I don’t know much about it at all.”

“Didn’t you read Fifty Shades? I gave you my copy.”

My face turns red. “I did. But that was a book. It was scripted.”

“Hmmm... I’m on it.” She taps on her phone a minute later her eyes widen.

“What?”

“Road trip next weekend? There’s a BDSM club in San Francisco. We could drive.”

“No.”

“Why not? It’s Labor Day. We have three days off and sightseeing is the perfect cover.”

“Why are you always getting me into trouble Luce?”

“I’m your best friend. It’s my job.”

“They’ll tail us. You have two guards and a man saying you’re his property after knowing you for two days.”

“Yeah, Rog seems like he’s cut from the same cloth. We’ll do a bait n’ switch.”

“Stop. You’re serious about this?”

“It’ll be fun, Dev. Think of it as our last hooray before we both get too deep in relationships that won’t be easy.”

“Okay. But what are you going to do about your plane ticket back to Chicago?”

“I already changed it. Besides, you aren’t the only one going to Springdale High tomorrow morning. I have an interview.”

“Seriously?”

“Yup.” A grin lights up her face, “You were right about this town and the men in it.”

“But Smith lives in California.”

“So? It’s a hell of a lot closer than Chicago. Besides, I’m overdue for a change of scenery.”

“You’ll get the job. Rog told me the downstairs apartment is fully furnished, too. All that’s there are clothes and boxes that still belong to the other tenant.”

“I know. It’s going to be awesome. We can take turns cooking and driving to work.”

“I can’t believe it. I’ve never been so happy. I have a home here in Springdale, my new family at Sassy’s, Rog and now you. Something bad is going to happen.”

“Shut-up, Dev. Don’t jinx it.”

“I don’t have to. What I need to do is stop being a chicken shit and tell Rog everything.”

“Okay. Fine. But you’ve only been with him forty-eight hours. Give your relationship time to grow.”

We’re interrupted by a knock at the door. I get out some bills and open it stunned to see the pledge from California standing there with two bags of takeout.”

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“Put your money away. You’re both women of Creed now. And our women don’t pay.”

I take the food just to get rid of him and shut the door. “I’m not sure if I like this. I like being independent,” my fingers lift a few of the blinds up, just enough to peek through. There’s three men now standing guard outside. Two of Smith’s and one of Roger’s.

“I told you. That’s why we need to go to San Fran. It’s our last shot.”

Placing the food down in the kitchen, I pour two glasses of wine handing her one. “To our last getaway...,” I toast drinking deeply.

Rog is gonna lose his shit when he finds out we’re gone. But that’s a week away and he doesn’t own me. It’ll be good to set my own boundaries with him; teach him I’ll be his but on my terms. I grin picturing the look on his face and the growl that will erupt from his chest. He’s gonna go crazy looking for me. I’m a bitch too, because the thought of driving him insane turns me on. I want him to come after me. Hell, I’ll even leave breadcrumbs for him to follow.

Smith’s a wildcard.

I wouldn’t be surprised if he takes her straight to Vegas. Maybe, I’ll have my chance to be a bridesmaid sooner than I thought.

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“What are you doing here?”

She can't see the way my eyes devour her standing there at the curb. The wind plays with her hair and plays with the hem of her dress, bowing it up around her tan legs. I've never seen her in heels and damn... they make her already lean legs shapelier than I thought was possible.

Teen girls giggle and point at me on my old Harley, leaning on one foot with the engine idling.

“Waitin' to pick up my girl,” I finally say.

She shakes her head and with pink cheeks takes the helmet and bouquet of roses from my hands.

“You didn't think I'd forget my doll's first day of school, did you?”

“Thank you,” she inhales the flowers and leans down to kiss me.

“The new teach has a boyfriend!” Someone singsongs.

“Yeah, she does. And if any one of you punks gives her a hard time. I'll have your asses!”

“Rog!” she cries in embarrassment, “Let's get out of here. You can't speak to them like that.”

“The hell I can’t.”

Her arms clutch me, one holding the flowers, and I take off. It feels good to finally have her riding behind me, hands hugging my waist, thighs clutching around as we zip through the streets.

I wanna date her right, and not just meet after dark for nights full of passion. Although, we’ll have plenty of those too.

I called Shanna, red-faced, askin’ her how to plan a romantic date in Springdale. She came through like I knew she would.

We ride to the other side of town to the logging mill restaurant. Some couple from Seattle bought it a few years back and turned the pond, mill, and barn into a hoity venue for weddings.

It’s a Tuesday night and they had nothing goin’ on. When I called explaining I was taking someone special out on a first date, they were more than eager to help. They said there were even leftover flowers and decorations from last weekend’s wedding between two “high society” types from Washington. I laughed because Springdale’s a tight community. We protect our own and don’t put up with any bullshit from outsiders.

I turn into the long drive, abs clenching as she breathes in my ear, “Oh, Rog.”

They must’ve installed a sprinkler system since the expansive lawn looks like a damn country club. The apple trees are almost in season and rows of them sway in the late summer breeze.

The drive is lined with a white picket fence and maples. My palms start to sweat making my grip on the handle bars slip.

My heart's pounding not even knowing why.

I've bedded her already and yet, there's so much romance going on here I can taste it on my tongue.

We reach the end and I park helping my lady dismount and I don't let her hand go.

"I know it's early for dinner yet. But I thought we could have some wine and crackers and walk the grounds?"

"Sounds perfect," she whispers, "but first I need to do this." Her hands land on either side of my face stroking my beard. Her soft pink lips part, I growl, closing the distance between us, parting her lips with mine and thrusting my tongue.

I moan, shifting my lips closer, high on feeling in her in my arms again. I can't stop thinking about the night we shared three days ago.

"Hmmm, who needs wine? I'm drunk on you, sugar."

She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, cheeks flushed, lips swollen from my kiss. I sigh linking our hands. This dating shit is gonna be damn hard when all I want to do is be inside her 24/7.

We walk hand in hand through an arbor with vines twisted over it, down a gravel path to a pavilion in back by a man-made lake with a fountain bubbling in the center.

I hold a seat out for her to sit and pour her a glass of the ice-cold Chardonnay that I know is her favorite. I called ahead to make sure everything would be all set for wooing my woman.

"This is the nicest surprise," she murmurs taking a sip and closing her eyes. My eyes

follow her every move, the way her throat works as she swallows.

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Dirty thoughts fill my head. I imagine the way her lips would look wrapped around my cock, how her throat would work to swallow the come she milks from me.

Smiling faintly, I swirl the wine in my glass and raise it to hers. “To surprises,” I toast wondering why she sputters but finally swallows, managing to give me a tight smile.

The silence is comfortable as we sip our wine, shaded from the late afternoon sun that still manages to be quite hot.

“What’s your story, Dev? I could list a million adjectives to describe you, startin’ with sexy, but I don’t really, know your story.”

She sits back averting her eyes, her sip turns into a chug before she places her glass down.

“The story of my life is actually boring. I want to know all about yours—in Creed.”

“Nothing about you is boring, sugar.”

“You’re not going to let this go, are you?”

“Not a chance, darlin’.”

“Fine,” she sighs, “but could you pour me another glass?”

I pour, trying not to press, not wanting to pressure her, but damn if I’m about to lose the heart I’ve guarded for all these years—I need to know more about the woman

stealing it.

“I’ve lived just outside Chicago my whole life in a classic All-American town.”

“Naperville, right?”

“That’s the one.”

“I’m an only child, never owned any pets and when I met Luce in kindergarten; we became best friends and never stopped. My childhood was filled with the average things, I guess,” she shrugs, stopping to pick up a piece of cheese from the plate a server just left in between us.

“I had a few boyfriends in high school, a few more in college and my last relationship ended last winter.”

I raise my eyebrows, cup my large hands around my wineglass, silently urging her to continue.

“I thought I’d marry him.”

“What happened?” My gut churns imagining some dumbfuck’s hands on her, his dick in what belongs to me now.

“He said being with me was ‘settling’.”

“Bullshit,” I half-yell before I can stop myself.

“Yeah, well Jeff, he doesn’t think that anymore. Or so he says—but it’s too late. And frankly, I’m glad he dumped me because here I am in Springdale—with you.”

“Amen, sugar,” I toast again.

“Why haven’t you ever married, Rog?”

I shrug picking up a cracker, “I suppose I just never found anyone that made me want to.”

“Surely, there must have been someone, you loved along the way?”

“Maybe once. A lifetime ago. But you know what? Looking back, I realize maybe it was just wanting what I couldn’t have that made it ache more than it should’ve.”

“You’re talking about Shanna’s mom, aren’t you?”

I nod, looking away for a second. “But that’s all ancient history, babe. And there’s no one else I want to spend today with more than you doll.”

“Me too,” she answers softly.

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“Come on, lets tour the grounds. Thy left a bag of feed if you wanna feed the ducks over in the pond.”

“For a man who doesn’t do romance—you’re doing pretty good.”

“I might’ve had some help.”

“Shanna?”

“Yup.”

“She did good.”

I take her hand in mine and we walk down the soft grass trails past the orchard fields to another pond at the properties edge. We feed the ducks quacking at our feet, laugh and hold hands.

It feels better than good.

This curvy brunette full of sass and fire fits me better than I ever could’ve imagined.

“Dev?”

“Yeah?” She turns to me, the sun’s setting behind her casting rays of gold through her hair.

“Stay. Stay in Springdale. You only signed a six-months lease and three months have

almost gone by. I don't even want your rent money."

"I'm planning on staying through the end of the school year and probably beyond. But I'm paying rent, Rog. It'll feel weird to not pay. It's just how I am. Besides, you might take that offer back anyway... I kinda dug up half the backyard and made a garden," she swallows nervously.

It's cute as hell.

"... and I got carried away. I added a full enclosure with a gate and netted roof."

"I know sugar. I snuck in at dawn and stole some vine tomatoes for my sauce," I wink.

"Oh, okay," she laughs, "just don't do it again. My garden is my baby."

"And you're mine," I answer pulling her in for a quick kiss that in no time turns into more. Our tongues dance, my heart sings, my body hungers to feel her under me again.

She pulls back smiling coyly. "I'm hot. There's no air conditioning at the school and I feel sticky." In one brisk movement she unzips the back of her dress and my mouth goes dry as it falls to the ground.

"Baby," I moan, seeing her in broad daylight in a matching ivory lace bra and panty set. The rosy buds of her nipples play peek-a-boo through the lace. The pink petals of her sex wink at me.

"Just remember, I tried so hard to be good."

"You've been very good. So good, you deserve a treat."

She sinks to her knees, I breathe in hard as she unzips my fly and takes me out. I usually fly commando since everything feels tight on my cock and balls, like they're being choked all day. The fresh air feels good as I spring free into her waiting hands.

"Christ," I shudder at the first flick of her tongue on my head. There's no way any woman could take me whole and go deep. But I might come just from the sight of my goddess taking me into her hot little mouth.

The sensations coming from my dick and traveling to my brain are too much. A grunt rumbles from my chest as she takes me five inches in and wraps her hands around the rest. She focuses on my swollen tip and the sensitive spot just underneath. She rubs it back and forth with her tongue, it feels so fuckin' good my eyes roll back in my head, tingles shoot from balls to brain and my hands clench her hair.

"Fuck, yeah, baby. Work me good. You're so fuckin' hot darlin' Do you know that?" My balls are heavy needing to release. I try to stop it but pre-cum oozes from me into her mouth. But Dev's been a good girl too and I don't want this to be all about me.

I pull back and she stares up at me with a question in her eyes. I jerk my shirt over my head and toss it. Stepping out of my jeans, I lie back, "Come here, sugar. Feel like goin' for a ride?"

Head tossed back, my huge cock boldly sticks out from between my thick thighs.

She bites her lip and comes forward. "Sit on me sugar."

"Is-is this gonna hurt?"

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I toss my head in a bark of laughter, “We already know we fit baby, climb on. We’ll work it slow.”

She moves between my spread legs and I clasp my arms around to unhook her bra. “Finally,” I moan pulling a nipple into my hungry mouth. I roll it between my tongue, alternating between sucking hard and tugging on it with my lips. My other hand jerks her thong aside and my fingers run through her.

“Ah,” she gasps, planting her weight on her palms planted in the grass on either side of my head.

“Don’t be afraid sugar, let go. I paid them not to bother us. There’s no one to hear you come but me and the birds.”

Her hips hover above my cock, “Easy girl,” I moan as she starts to sit, slowly impaling herself of my shaft.

“Ahh,” she groans, “you feel so good, Rog. So—good.” Her eyes squeeze shut as she takes me in inch by agonizing inch until she sits back fully seated and fully stuffed with me.

My hand grasps her hip and I help guide her up and down.

“You’re so wet, sweetheart. You been thinkin’ about me?”

“Y-yes. God,” she cries as my other hand grasp the top of her thigh, thumb raised to hit her clit on her down stroke. I feel my thick tip hit her G-spot at the same time my

thumb strokes her.

“That’s it baby. Only I can make you feel this good. Keep goin’ doll. I wanna see your tits bounce in my face.”

She obliges finding her rhythm and taking me deep into her honeypot. “Fuck yeah, baby,” I grunt jerking my hips up to meet her.

“Rog,” she pants as my thrust force her to take more of me. I don’t stop, knowing she can take it, but more importantly knowing it’s what she needs.

“That’ s it baby, ride me,” I grunt smacking her ass urging her on.

My head comes up, straining to reach her tits. My mouth latches on at the same time my thumb circles through her folds zeroing in on the tiny nub nestled there.

“Rog!” She gasps, coming.

She falls apart in my arms going limp and I take control grabbing her by the hips and moving her body up and down my length; grunting at how good this woman feels on my cock. The last coherent thought I have before my own release roars through me is: I’m never letting this angel go.

Our hearts pounding, bodies slick with sweat, I pull her down on my chest feeling her soft lips kiss my neck. My hands stroke her soft back, I’m reluctant to pull out; wanting to stay in her forever.

“Where you goin’, sugar?” I grunt as she slips off me grinning mischievously.

“You made me so hot and dirty,” she pouts.

“Dev?”

I can only watch as she turns. My hands clench at her firm ass running towards the water. Damn, I need to get my hands on that some more....

She laughs, her long legs flying across the dock past the paddleboats tied up and then she sails through the air executing a perfect swan dive into the lake. I shake my head knowing at any second, she’s gonna come shrieking back out. It might be warm out right now, but the nights have been damn cold.

“How’s the water?” I grin as her head bobs up.

“Divine.”

“Uh huh,” I grin putting my jeans on.

“Come in, Rog. Swim with me.”

“Not a chance sweetheart. I can smell a con a mile away.”

“That’s too bad. I’ve always wanted to have sex in the water...”

I shake my head at the vixen taunting me. “You think you can handle more of me already, doll?”

“Oh, I know I can,” she purrs, “but can you handle more of me? I mean I know men your age might have stamina issues...”

My nostrils flare, stalking down the dock, I shuck my jeans back off. “You’re gonna pay for that, sweetheart,” I warn a second before I dive in towards her.

She yelps, splashing water at me as I swim towards her. I dive under. She was right. The water feels good. It's not as cold as I thought. I feel invigorated as I grab her legs under the water pulling her down.

She looks like a goddess with her hair floating out behind her. My lips press to hers. Under the water with the sun's rays lighting the water next to us: I experience the best five second kiss of my life.

And in this moment—I fall. Weightless, my heart bursts with all the new love flowing inside. I love this woman. I never saw her coming and having her suddenly show up in my life was the greatest gift God could give me. I hold her close as we surface. I'll keep her safe, I'll cherish her and if she'll let me—I'll be her man forever.

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HUMMING UNDER MY BREATH, scurrying down the hall, coffee in hand I get ready for first period. Rog stayed over last night. Luce already texted that she's going to buy ear plugs after school gets out today. She moved into the apartment below us but claims we're so loud it's like she's in the same room.

That man is insatiable.

Ever since the romantic date we shared a few weeks ago—we've been inseparable. Luce and I never did make it down to San Francisco to the BDSM club. I remember the first night he stayed over. I had told him that if we were going to see each other during the week that I'd need to go back to the apartment at night. I couldn't do the walk of shame to school as a teacher. I love my job and making a good impression on the staff and students is very important to me. He said I make him so horny that he needs me every night. September passed quickly. My days were filled by learning new students and a new school, and my nights were filled by him; literally.

Truthfully, I'm addicted to the man.

One night, after he had taken me to the movies where we necked like teens in the back of the theater, he took me home where we didn't even make it to the bedroom.

I half-jokingly asked him straight out if he was DOM after he demanded I strip and get ready for him.

“A DOM? I don't know sugar. All I know is that I want everything you can give me. Every damn thing,” he muttered stripping his clothes and stalking towards me. “But if I was a DOM—I'd tell you to turn around, place your hands on the counter and don't

move until I tell you to.”

I did. I placed my hands on the cold granite counter in the kitchen, felt him at my back and waited, getting wetter and hotter by the second as I wondered what he was going to do to me.

“Ah,” I had gasped as he dropped to his knees spread my ass cheeks, tongue and mouth finding me from behind. His soft beard made my inner thighs tingle as the hairs brushed in and out between my legs.

It was dirty.

Decadent.

And hot AF.

He pulled back slapping my cheeks and said, “I told you not to move. If you do it again, I won’t let you come.”

My hands slid to grip the edge of the counter, my teeth sank into my lip so hard I tasted blood. But I didn’t move as I swallowed my cries of ecstasy, coming all over his face.

“I don’t remember giving you permission to come,” he told me gruffly. Somehow, I managed to escape being pinned between the counter and his body. I had walked to the fridge needing an ice-cold drink. “I-I didn’t think I needed it. Maybe Luce is right, and we should go to San Francisco,” I half-muttered.

“What’s that doll?”

“I said, me and Luce have plans to go to San Francisco soon.”

“The hell you do. Tell me. Tell me why you wanna go.”

“Too see Alcatraz,” I deadpanned sipping my water.

“Dev...,” he warned coming closer.

“Luce found a BDSM club there. We want to go. She thinks Smith might be a DOM too.”

“Fuckin’ Christ,” he rasped closing his eyes, clenching his fists. “Do you know what they’d do to sweet naive girls like the two of you? Once you’re in, they wouldn’t let you out. If you’re not wearing a collar signifying that you’re already taken by DOM—any male or female, would consider you fair game to be their submissive.

That’s not a club for first timer’s sugar. It’s the real deal. Hardcore people into that lifestyle fly in from all over the world to go there. How in the hell did she find out about it?”

I had shrugged, “It’s Luce. She has ways.”

“Fuckin’ hell, I need to call Smith. He needs to get a handle on her real quick,” he had replied.

“Yeah, you do that,” I had laughed, knowing Luce was pissed to hell at Smith. He had come on so hard—so fast, only to disappear after a week or two of intense texts and phone calls.

He took the drink right outta my hands, “Maybe I’ll show you what they’d do. You wanna be with a DOM, sugar? Well here I am.”

He lifted me like a sack of flour carrying me into the bedroom. He grabbed a pair of

winter socks from my drawer and blindfolded me with them. He took my hands placing them above my head. I felt the worn leather of his belt binding them tighter and tighter together.

“Nice improvising,” I had taunted.

“This is fifty shades of BDSM; backwoods style,” he answered. I could hear the affection in his voice as his words floated through the dark.

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“You still trust me, sugar?”

“With my life,” I had answered.

The dip in the bed eased and I sensed his presence leaving the room. I only he knew was back by the sound of ice cubes rolling around in an empty glass.

“What the fuck?” I had screamed as I felt the ice burning on my clit at the same time hot drops of wax dripped on my skin.

The dueling sensations had me yearning so good. He removed the ice, grabbed my legs, pulling them apart entering me in one full thrust. He didn’t ease in like he normally does but stuffed me good and full, easing the ache he created with the ice.

I gasped as one hand held an ice cube and trailed it over my skin where the wax landed, before he placed it on my clit letting it melt from the heat of our bodies.

“You kinky old man,” I had moaned.

“Come for Poppa, sugar,” he replied taking my mouth captive and thrusting in again.

And I did, boy, did I come for Poppa.

“Ms. St. John?”

“Hmmm?”

“Uh, the bell rang five minutes ago...,” my student shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

Shit.

I was lost in remembering that night with Rog, staring out the window drinking coffee like a lovesick idiot, not even noticing the class filling in behind me.

“I was just thinking about what your first essay of the year will be. I’ve decided it’s going to be the history of Springdale and it’ll be due next Friday. Now open up your laptops, it’s time we start talking about one of the greatest most tragic wars of all time: The Civil War. Brother fought against brother; father against son. Can any of you find a topic or subject in today’s time where you can imagine killing your own family over?”

Hands shoot up in the air. “Yes, Rachel?”

“I’d kill my brother over deleting my picks on NETFLIX.”

The class snickers and I roll my eyes, “Very funny. I just moved the due date of your essays to Monday.”

The class groans and I hide my smile behind my coffee cup. That’ll teach them to raz me again.

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“Jefe? Can I come in?”

I lift my eyes from the paperwork on my desk finding him hesitating outside my office door. I motion with my hand watching him walk in like he’s about to deliver a death blow.

“What’s up?”

He shifts his weight, rolls back on his heels and shakes his head. He starts to talk but closes his mouth as soon as it opened.

“Just spit it out already.”

He looks up, eyes full of remorse. “It was Devon.”

“That makes no goddamn sense.”

“I saw the paperwork and the credit card receipt. It was her signature.”

I let out a deep breath, my chest closes like a fist. I can’t breathe.

“I’m sorry. She paid for Dee’s new headstone. I slipped the cemetery worker a few bills and he sang. Said she jogged through the cemetery every morning this summer stopping at Dee’s grave first then John Masters’.”

“What the fuck?” I lean back in my chair, arms behind my head while every cell in my body rebels that it isn’t true but my gut knows it is.

A thousand fragmented pieces of the puzzle click together. Her transplanting to Springdale for one. How she looked that night when we danced under the moonlight spilling through the trees—like someone I swore I had met before. I chalked it up to pure romance, like the old fool I am.

Does she even have feelings for me or was that all a lie too?

My eyes close, fingers lightly rest on the old wood, centering me as I let the dreams die. All the ones I had of me and her.

My heart turns to stone.

My life's been full of disappointments. I can take one more. It'll just be one more scar on this old heart of mine that no one will see.

I knew she was trouble the minute she stepped into the bar and walked into my life. I just wish she didn't carve up my heart and put it on a platter.

"So, what do you want to do?"

"Nothing. I don't want to do anything. This dies with us. You hear me?"

"Yeah. Loud and clear," he answers, leaving.

My eyes fall to my wrist. She's supposed to be here in an hour for her shift. I haven't seen her all week since she's been busy setting up her classroom. We mutually agreed she'd only work weekend shifts. Since summer's over, the weekends are the only time we're busy anyway.

My hand shakes as I sit back in my chair picking up the heavy desk phone. My fingers punch in the number.

“Rog? What’s going on man?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, closing my eyes. “There’s no easy way to say this Duke. So I’m just gonna say it.”

“O-okay. Just give me a sec. You caught me rebuilding an engine.”

The sound of clattering tools and voices fill the line followed by running water as he washes his hands.

“What’s up? I’m back.”

“There’s a strong possibility you have a half-sister.”

“Come again?” His voice quiet and deadly.

“You remember the girl I introduced you to at the lake?”

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“The one you were sucking face with when you thought no one was looking?”

“Yeah,” I mutter. “Devon. She’s been paying respects to both Dee and your father’s grave. Just about every damn day since she rolled into town.”

“How old is she?”

“Around thirty.”

“Christ.”

“I know.”

“We’ll need to do a DNA test on the down-low. I’ll get a sample from Dev.”

“Jesus, I’m getting flashbacks from when I thought Shanna could be my half-sister.”

“I know. Me too. We’ll use the same lab from last time and I’ll call you when the results come back.”

“Will do. I’ll send Smith down with my sample. Shanna... Colin’s passing is still too raw for her to come back to Springdale.”

“I understand. Be well, brotha.”

“You too.”

I replace the phone in the receiver with a click. Alone, I sit in the chair mourning a relationship that never got off the ground. The sun sets leaving me sitting in the dark where no one can see the sheen of tears in my eyes or the lump in my throat.

At half past seven, I finally get up, grab my leather cut, and leave closing the door quietly behind me. I don't tell a soul I left. The only thing I need right now is the freedom of the open road and the cold wind whipping at my back. I'll take a long ride down to the coast. It's been a while since I've seen the ocean.

I text Federico that he's in charge tonight and if Dev asks, to tell her I had club business.

The ride will clear my head and I'll be able to get right, somehow, with a way to move forward.

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I TEXTED ROG IN between periods but he never texted back; I'm worried. He usually calls me before work every morning. It's so unlike him. Something is up. But the last thing I want to do is hound him, annoying him especially if he's dealing with club business. When the bell rings marking the end of the last period, I wait till each student shuffles out before checking my phone again.

Still nothing.

I gather up the papers on my desk, my laptop and lesson plan book, and grab my duffle bag. After changing in the locker room to my running gear, I walk out into the warm late afternoon sun determined to feel better.

Climbing in my old Subaru I decide to run at the old logging trail. Usually, I walk here from my apartment, but the mornings have been chilly where the afternoons warm.

I park in the lot and get out, doing a few stretches before starting out at a light jog. I prefer to listen to music when I run but ever since that run in with the creep earlier this summer, I don't run with anything that could dull my senses anymore.

I control my breathing as my pace quickens. My movements are light and quick, the only sounds are the twigs snapping under my feet, my steady breath and the rush of water over the rocks as I near the stream.

I see a figure running towards me ahead. My lips curve in a smile recognizing the hoodie and the man wearing it. If a million years passed between me seeing him; I'd never forget every line, every inch of his face. It's beloved to me. He's beloved to

me. I can't believe how hard and fast we fell.

We run towards each other and I slow down, expecting him to catch me in his arms. My heart beats faster as he picks up his pace, coming straight at me giving me déjà vu. I feel better. It makes sense now why he didn't text. He really gets in the zone when he works out.

“Hey!”

His steps don't falter. His eyes cut to the right. He brushes by me.

Without a word.

Without a glance.

He froze me out.

Ghosted me.

My head turns, eyes following his figure until I can't see him anymore. My hands clutch my sides. I can't breathe. It hurts so bad, like I just got sucker-punched in the gut and the wind's knocked out of me.

He knows.

Somehow, he knows.

I fall to the ground, crying like a lost child screaming for her mommy. But I don't want my mommy. I want Rog.

He just slayed me.

That man knows every part of my body in ways no one else ever did. I thought he saw me; really saw me. God, could I be wrong? I thought Rog would look past DNA to the most important parts of me: my heart and soul. Surely those are untainted enough for him to keep?

I need to find a way to make this right.

I just hope he's angry because I didn't trust him enough to tell him who I was, and I hope he can still love me despite whose DNA makes up every fiber of my being. Like he told me at the lake, I'm more than who my parents were.

I get up, brush myself off and keep running.

I will find a way to get him back. I didn't come this far, just to lose everything I've found.

I will win the heart of my Silver Fox and keep it till the end of time. I only need to figure out how.

My heart starts beating again as I see him standing by my car. Arms crossed over his chest, hood still pulled down, legs planted apart, I can tell he's still pissed. But at least he's there.

"Rog," I sob running for him, throwing myself into his arms.

They don't hold me back.

He pushes my hands away, rubbing a few strands of hair between his fingers, "I just needed this." He gently pulls a few pieces out and puts them in a zip lock bag.

"I already know what it'll say. I have a birth certificate."

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“That doesn’t mean shit,” he answers walking away, “Dee could’ve put anyone down. She was a goddamn liar.”

His words punch me in the gut as he climbs in his truck peeling out so fast, rocks fly from under his tires.

He better be wrong. I didn’t realize how badly I wanted Duke to be my brother until the thought that he might not be enters my head.

“Mac?”

My hands clutch the doorframe, eyes blinking up at him.

“Jesus, Dev. You look like shit.”

I turn, leading him inside. He flicks on the lights and I wince.

I went on a bender.

His eyes sweep the room taking in the half-eaten boxes of takeout next to the two empty bottles of wine I downed with it on my small coffee table. Crumpled tissues litter the floor next to the couch. I climb back in, burrowing back under the blanket I’ve been under all weekend.

“What the fuck happened?”

“You honestly don’t know? Rog didn’t tell you?”

He shakes his head. “Did you forget already? I’ve been coming here every Sunday at four.”

“Shit. I did I-I’m sorry. Let me just get this cleaned up and the books out,” I start frantically picking up trash.

“Whoa, easy there, girl. What in the hell is going on,” he asks placing a hand on my arm.

“It’s better if you don’t know,” I break free from his hold, dumping everything in the kitchen trash.

“Did you know he met up with Duke at the California border a few days ago?”

My head snaps up.

“He left me and Federico in charge.”

“I feel like a zombie. All I’ve done this past week is sleep and go to work. I can barely eat—”

“Talk to me Dev. We’re friends.”

“Are we? You better think about that answer. If you had to choose between me and Creed: Who would win?”

“Whoa... is that what you asked Meat?”

“No. Ironically Creed has everything and nothing to do with what’s going on,” I snort.

“Where’s Luce, anyway?” He asks looking around.

“We have a three-day weekend for Columbus Day. She went back to Chicago to ship the rest of her things here. She didn’t want to go but I made her. It’s our last break until the holidays.”

“Is she still with Smith?”

“I-I don’t know if they were actually even together. Why?”

“No reason... “

“Mac?”

“Fine. But if I’m snitchin’ so are you.” He sits down on my couch, propping his boots up on the coffee table that I just cleared. I hand him a beer. “She caught more than Smith’s eye at the lake party. Let’s just say if she’s moving here... she has more options.”

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“You’re too young for her, Mac.”

“Not me. The Sergeant in Arms of the Vancouver chapter. He’s a bad-ass motherfucker, too. Smith better get his shit together.”

“I think I’m done with men from the MC. I hope Luce is too.”

“Ah, come on Dev. What in the hell could Rog have done? That man’s twisted over you.”

“Was.”

“Dev?” He warns.

“I’m Dee Dee Stanton and John Masters’ biological child.”

His beer spews all over my couch and floor, “WHAT!?”

“Tell me about it,” I sink into the arm chair, “... that’s why I came to Springdale. I was looking for answers about me. About my past. I never thought I’d find all of you; that Creed would become family—that Rog would rip my heart out when he found out.”

“How did you tell him?”

“That’s the thing... I didn’t,” I reply looking down, picking at the fuzz from the worn plaid recliner.

“Dev,” he breathes, “that’s... damn, that’s some bomb you just dropped. I can only imagine Rog was pissed he found out second-hand.”

“I don’t know how he knows. I just know that he does, and it wrecked everything. He barely looked at me... barely spoke to me. It’s like I’m some sort of she-devil.”

“Look. It’s fine if you can’t tutor me today. We’ll do this some other time.” He moves standing up.

“Don’t go. Actually, maybe helping you study for the GED will take my mind off things... that’s if you don’t think I’ll put a curse on you with my mad voodoo skills that I inherited from my whack mother?”

“Shut up, Dev. I wasn’t even born when that shit happened. I think that’s why Rog might be taking this hard. He was here, he lived it.”

“I know,” I whisper.

“Fine. I’ll stay but I will state on the record, that I think it’s fucked-up that you didn’t tell him who you were.”

“I was scared. Every time I wanted to; I chickened out. I’m not a big, bad-ass biker with tats in a gang.”

“No. But maybe we can take a break after and get you some ink? How’d you like that? Nothing like a fresh tat to cheer you up.”

“Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack.”

I shake my head, “Luce would stuff me with ice cream and wine.”

“No. Trust me. My way is better. Think about what you might want to get, and we’ll do it this week.”

“Okay.” Hopping up I grab the heavy texts and my laptop from the other room. I’m glad he’s here. It beats wallowing alone in the dark.

“Hey Dev?” He shouts.

“What?”

“Wipe your face. The streaked mascara all over your cheeks is damn distracting.”

Pausing in the hallway, I flip on the bathroom switch and peek in. “Gah,” I mutter in disgust.

My hair hangs, limp and greasy. Days old make-up is caked on my face. I really do look like a zombie in *The Walking Dead*.

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“Here,” I dump the books on his lap and walk back down the hallway needing a hot shower and a fresh pot of coffee to feel human again.

After a few hours we decide to take a break and go out to eat. Toad offered to take me on his bike, but I couldn't. I can't wrap my arms around anyone but Rog. So, we drove in my Subaru a few towns over to a Mexican restaurant where I continued stuffing myself with loaded up nachos and Margaritas until I burped so loud a few heads turned.

“Oops,” I muttered sheepishly.

“Christ, Dev. Gimme your keys.”

I hand them over and order another round. The cell vibrates on the table next to my decimated plate and what's left of my fifth drink.

We both stare at the name flashing across the screen.

“Shanna?”

“Hey. The test results came back. The lab says with 99.9% accuracy you are related to Duke.”

“Yeah, I already knew that.”

“It's a lot Dev. The two of them aren't handling it well. I'm sorry. They told me to call.”

“T-thank you. T-tell Duke... that I’m sorry he’s hurting and that—I hope someday... we can talk. He might not be happy to have a sister. But someday if he’ll let me, I’d love to be one,” I break off with a sob.

“I will.”

“And Shanna... tell Rog. Oh God, tell Rog—I’m nothing like her.”

“I know that Dev. Hell, everyone does, just give them some time. They both have thick heads.”

“Okay. Wait, before you hang up, can you tell me how he found out?”

She’s silent for a minute. “The headstone. They found out you paid for it and put the pieces together from there.”

“Right. Well, you tell them they can be mad as hell at me but if anyone from Creed thinks about writing whore on her grave again... I’ll take a Louisville slugger to their bikes. I don’t care what she did, she still deserves to rest in peace.”

“Noted. I’ll call you soon,” she promises hanging up.

“Damn girl, you’ve got some balls. Way to turn the tables, Dev.” He holds a palm up for a high-five.

“I feel like I’m gonna puke.” I’m trembling, stomach churning. “I just hope they both come around. I really want a brother and my boyfriend back.”

“They will Dev. In the meantime, you still have me and in case you haven’t noticed—I’m a goddamn ball of fun. Let’s get out of here I feel like shooting some pool.”

“You’re a good man Toad. Someday your princess will come.”

“Christ. If this is what heartache looks like I don’t want to wear it.” He slaps a few twenties down insisting it’s his treat and takes my hand helping me slide out of the booth.

“Promise something, Mac?”

“What’s that.”

I lean heavily on him, buzzed to hell but needing to say this, “When you get your GED. Pack up your shit and go far. I know Creed was a way out for you once, but you don’t need to think it’s your only option. I mean I get it now—they’re your family. So, they should understand you wanting to ride as far as you can go. Do you hear what I’m sayin’?”

“I do. Thank you,” he whispers pulling me against his side.

“Hey Dev, just so you know—you’re a good friend too.”

I smile, grateful for the friendship of this scarred man working to set himself free.

“I love you, Mac. I do. I can’t imagine never knowing any of you.”

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“Shhh,” he kisses the top of my head, “if Rog doesn’t come around on his own. I’ll kick the shit outta him for you.”

“I know you would. But I can fight my own battles. Have you seen my Kung-Fu moves?” I raise my leg and make a karate chop with my hands but lose my balance falling on my drunk butt.

“Yeah, impressive,” he smirks helping me up.

He opens the door helping me in and walks around to the driver’s side. “Wanna hit up Dairy Queen on the way to the pool hall?”

“There’s a DQ here?”

“Yup”

“Well it’s a good thing I didn’t know that before or I’d have to run ten miles a day. Damn, I’d drive an hour for that shit.”

“You’re a cute drunk, Dev.”

“Gee, thanks. Now get me ice cream before I go insane.”

And for a one drunken moment I feel a ray of sunshine pierce through the clouds. I know both Rog and Duke will come around and just need to figure out which spade to bash their heads with: My planting spade or my Kate Spade spiky heels?

“Hey Mac. Change of plans,” I grin.

“Oh yeah? You re-thinkin’ all the calories you havin’ today?”

“Fuck, no. In my drunken state—it just came to me.”

“What?”

“What I want my tattoo to be.”

“No. No—way. It’s permanent babe. I won’t take you drunk.”

“I disagree. It’s the perfect time. I’m too buzzed to feel pain. Well, except the pain in here,” I place a finger on my heart.

He shakes his head, “Promise you won’t kill me in the morning?”

“Pinky-promise.”

“Hell no. I ain’t makin’ fuckin’ pinky-promises.”

“Just shut up and drive,” I roll my eyes as he pulls out on the main road. I’m getting a tattoo tonight and then I’m going to find a way to make Rog love me again.

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I CAN'T REMEMBER A TIME in my life when I felt like this. She hit me so hard; my heart's become a twisted piece of metal only suitable for a junk yard.

Maybe it's my fault for going all in; for believing I finally deserved something good after all the shit I've done in my life.

I never saw this coming.

Shit, who could've?

I take the steaks I had marinating out of the fridge. I can't go to Sassy's tonight. It'll hurt too much.

Dev got in everywhere.

I can't escape her at work, on my favorite jogging trail, hell I can't even sleep since she invades my dreams.

How am I gonna escape this heartache?

The screen door slams behind me as I carry my dinner out to the grill.

Love's a bitch and now I remember why I always ran from it. My cell rings and I tense half, wishing it's her and half hoping it's not.

"Shanna?"

“You okay?”

“I’m just peachy darlin’.”

“You understand why she didn’t tell you, right?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and close my eyes. “No. Actually, I don’t have a goddamn clue.”

“Men never do,” she sighs.

“Watch it, girl. I taught you how to ride a bike.”

“Duke—he’s not taking it well.”

I grunt, “Then me and him are in the same boat.”

“Just don’t do anything, stupid, Rog. See what she has to say.”

I’m silent and she knows.

“You didn’t give her a chance, did you?” She exhales, “I have enough on my hands dealing with Duke. I can’t hold your hand too. Come on Rog. Stop being a pussy and go for it for once. You think I don’t know that you are using this as an excuse to push her out? I think I just figured out why you’ve stayed single your whole life.”

“You don’t know jack shit, girl,” I bite out, hands clenched as I pace barefoot across my back deck, “I loved your mother. Loved her more than anyone but she never saw me.”

Shanna’s startled gasp stops me in my tracks. I’m a bastard taking out my frustration

on her.

“I’m sorry, baby girl. I’m being an idiot.”

“Yeah, you kinda are. Is it true?”

“Yeah. I was young. She was my unrequited first love. If she had looked at me—I would’ve given her the world. But she didn’t. Life here was hard for her; it broke me to watch her fall apart. She loved you baby girl, but she needed to go. She couldn’t fly here. And she knew Pops would never let you go, too.”

“I-I’m sorry Rog. I just don’t see you with my mom. I see you with Devon. Make this right or I’m gonna kick your ass.”

“I’m not sure how. Trust is something I don’t give lightly. I gave it to Dev without question. I lost my head and I don’t like the way it feels.”

“I know. But look at me and Duke. No one had more obstacles to cross than the two of us.”

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“I need you to keep this between you and Duke. I can’t have Dev getting any blowback from the boys.”

“Of course, Rog. I like her. We’ll talk soon, okay?”

“Yeah,” I mutter disconnecting.

“Fuck!” I yell noticing my charred steaks on the grill. I was so lost in the past and the present that I forgot all about them.

Turning the grill off, I chuck the steak in the trash and grab my keys, guess I’m heading to Sassy’s for dinner anyway. So much for avoiding the ghosts tonight—not just Dev, but Dee and Pops, too.

It was slow as shit tonight. I polished all the bottles behind the bar just to keep my hands busy—smashed a few too.

That’s when Federico stepped in and kicked my ass to the backrooms. I almost swung at him.

“It’s my goddamn bar. I can break shit if I want to,” I had told him.

“Jefe. You need to chill,” he said placing a hand on my arm.

“Fuck off,” I turned holding the bottle up ready to smash it on the side of his head. Big Jim lumbered off his stool and grabbed my arm, “Dude, fuckin’ chill.”

“Whatever, I want you two assholes out of my bar.”

“I’m the bouncer, jefe. You can’t bounce the bouncer.”

“The hell I can’t,” I roared so loud the veins in my neck popped out. A few women grabbed their purses and ran for the door.

“Christ, I’m a mess. Take over for me behind the bar.”

“Who me?” Big Jim asked shocked.

“Not you, asshole. You’ll drink yourself under the bar.”

Federico takes my place and I head down the back hall to my office. Her last paycheck sits on top of my desk. Sighing, I sit down heavily, causing the springs to creak. I reach for my cigar box and put one between my lips savoring the taste and feel of it before snipping the end and lighting it.

Alone in the dark, I grieve for the girl I had a chance of forever with. My hands shuffle and reshuffle the invoices and bills on my desk. The smell from my cigar comforts me. I open my drawer reaching for my reading glass that Dev always found sexy and put them on. My lips twitch remembering the night she wanted me to wear them to bed but I told her I leave them here in my office.

She pouted.

I spanked her and promised I’d bring them next time.

But there never was a next time.

My dick and heart both wilt, wishing things turned out differently.

My fingers pull the chain on my desk lamp and I get to work, doing the business I blew off when I rode out to Cali to meet Duke with Dev's DNA sample. I fire up my laptop and login, shaking my head at how torn up Duke was about it all; half-wishin' it was true, half-hoping it wasn't. All kinds of shit resurfaced for him—shit that he buried a long time ago. But this situation opened old wounds. Dee Dee Stanton fucked up Duke's childhood, broke-up his home, turned his father into a raging alcoholic asshole and Duke bore the brunt of all that.

None of it has anything to do with Dev, but yet everything to do with Dev.

It's a head and heart trip no one was prepared for. I work until my eyes blur from staring at the glow from the computer screen.

Sighing, I shut everything down and take my glasses off, rubbing my eyes. Grabbing my leather cut from the back of my chair, I shut my lamp off and walk out locking my office door behind me.

"I'm headin' out. You good to lock-up?"

"Sí,jefe.You go. I got this," Federico waves to the handful of patrons lingering till closing.

Hands bunched in my jeans, I make my way over to my truck parked out back. Lost in my thoughts of the long, lonely night ahead, I don't see her waiting until I'm five feet away.

Her beautiful long locks fly in the wind. Her eyes look haunted.

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“I-I didn’t want to come inside,” she shrugs folding her arms over her chest.

“Your paycheck is on my desk. Federico can get it for you,” I reply moving to open the door she’s leaning on.

“I didn’t come here for money.”

“Well, what did you come here for then? There’s nothing here for you other than that.”

Her shoulders slump, “How was I so wrong about you?”

“No. How was I so wrong about you?” I snarl ripping my door open, forcing her outta the way. My head turns in her direction, but I can’t look at her as I bite out, “You didn’t trust me. I was your man, darlin’. You should’ve told me,” I shake my head.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers looking at her feet, “but I’m nothing like her. I’m just me. I’m still me, Rog.” She places a pleading hand on the sleeve of my coat.

“Really? ‘Cause lookin’ me in the eye while I moved inside you, lookin’ at you like you were my new world—and you, YOU—just kept your secrets to yourself. Hell, I was bearin’ my soul to ya’ girl. I gave you more than any woman while you just took my heart and crushed it.”

“You’ve got it all wrong, Rog. You wrecked me. You just ran past me, like I meant NOTHING?! Like we meant, nothing.”

“That’s because we are NOTHING, now, baby girl. Whatever we were startin’—it’s done—over.”

“Don’t say that. We can fix this.”

“We shouldn’t need to. We’ve just begun, and we need to fix this?” I gesture between us, “That’s the thing, darlin’ I learned that lesson a long time ago... hell maybe that’s why I never had many relationships—when there are problems early—you fold. No sense in playin’ a losin’ hand.”

“Just let me in. Don’t shut me out.”

I look down at her beautiful face still full of hope. I shake my head sadly. “I can’t darlin’. Trust and loyalty mean everything to me. I’ve built my life on those two things. Creed lives by it. I’d be dead by now if I gave everyone a second chance. It’s just how I am. I don’t do them. No matter how much I might want to,” I tell her softening the blow by cupping her cheek one last time.

“Look, I admit I fucked-up. I didn’t know you when we first met. I didn’t know any of you—but what I did know was how much all of you still held onto your bitterness decades after she died. Why can’t you just let it go?”

“I did. I have. It’s not about her, sugar. It’s about you; knowing your secrets, keeping them while makin’ me fall in love with you. I’m sorry but I can’t do this anymore.”

“I don’t need a promise for forever. I just need you to promise me tonight,” she whispers cupping my jaw, stroking my soft beard in her tiny hands.

“You don’t know what you are saying. I can look past who you are but there might be others who can’t. There’s still a lot of people in this town with long memories and hard hearts where Dee Dee Stanton’s concerned. Besides, maybe I just wasn’t meant

for love. I've gone so long without it and survived. The only thing that's ahead for me are harsh winters and lonely nights. But in a way; I welcome them. It's what I know. It's who I am."

"You might think that the best years are behind you but that doesn't mean they actually are. What if... what if we are each other's happy ending?"

"Life isn't a fairy tale sweetheart and I ain't no prince."

"No, it's not. That's why I'm choosing to take what's right in front of me. I'm not afraid and I don't care if people talk. Let them talk. YOU. You make me so goddamn happy. My heart sings every time you smile and the lines crinkle from the corner of your eyes. Every time you laugh low in your throat, my tummy flutters and when you look at me when you don't think I'm looking—my knees get weak. No, you're not a prince, you—are an ogre. A grumpy old toad with a kick ass body and heart of gold. So, what's it going to be? Are you afraid of this because I have the genes of a she-devil in my blood?" She gestures between us, "Are we going to go our separate ways... never knowing what could be?"

"Don't. Don't do this sweetheart...", I break off in gruff whisper.

"Whatever. You stubborn fool."

She turns to leave, but I grab her hand, "I don't want you mixed up in the life I chose to live. The club... we still got enemies. You would be a target, sugar. I can't—won't see you get hurt. For what? A fling? A love affair doomed from the start?"

"How can you say that? You don't know that. And we were more than a fling. We could be so much more...." She breaks off.

"I do know. I'm too old for you Devon. Christ, you deserve a man with the best years

ahead of him not the worst. When I look at you, I see a woman who deserves a goddamn picket fence and a golden retriever.”

“I’m allergic to dogs.”

I laugh pulling her close. She feels so sweet; so right. I sigh, closing my eyes and savoring the moment because I know I can’t let it last. I breathe her in, she smells like lavender and honey and feels like home.

“Ah, Devon, girl. If things were different—you’d be in my bed tonight.”

A tear leaks from her eye and runs down her cheek. “No one ever wants me. Why should I be surprised? My own damn mother never gave a shit. I quit. I can’t work for you anymore.”

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I nod my head, “I figured that’d be best for everyone.”

“Do-does the club know?”

“No, sugar. I told ya’ I protect what’s mine. Only Duke and Shanna know, plus Federico. He was the one who gathered intel from the cemetery workers. I won’t put you through that baby girl, even though whatever we were building collapsed between us.”

“Someday you’re going to regret this moment. The moment you watched me walk away. It might be in twenty days or twenty years but mark my words, Rog. You’re gonna be alone with nothing but a heart full of memories and the bitter taste of regret on your tongue as you wonder how in the fuck you ended up alone in that secret cabin of yours without even a goddamn pet for company,” she mutters turning on her heel and walking away in the moonlight.

She doesn’t turn back to look at me, not even once, for if she did—she’d see tears leaking from my eyes. I laugh bitterly tasting them. I don’t ever remember crying—even as a kid.

She’s right—so goddamn right, but my feet won’t move. I’ve made my choice, knowing I’ll live with it.

Somehow.

I can’t sleep. I didn’t want to shower before bed, wanting to leave his smell on me until it fades on its own. He smelled of leather and bourbon and felt like home. I can’t

sleep in my bed without remembering how it felt to sleep with him in it.

I sigh snuggling under the thick comforter, my back aching from lying on this worn couch for a week.

My cell rings on the coffee table and I reach for it without even checking the caller. Only Luce would call me at 2 a.m. anyway.

“Lo?”

My stomach clenches at the voice I know as well as my own, “Dev?”

“Jeff? Are you out of your mind? Why are you calling me?”

“Please, don’t hang up. Please... I’m begging you. I know I screwed up. I just need to get this off my chest...”

“I’m not interested in the ‘whys’ months later.”

“I know. I j-just miss you. You were such a big part of my life.”

“Yeah, well, that’s what happens when people break-up Jeff. They go their separate ways and you forget about all that.”

“I can’t. She doesn’t understand me like you do.”

She?

“Look Jeff, I don’t know what’s going on with you but I have enough on my plate right now. Please don’t call me again.”

“She’s pregnant.”

“Who? Who’s pregnant Jeff?”

“My new girlfriend. The entire time she was telling me... all I could think about is that it should’ve been you. It should’ve been us having a baby.”

“You’re right it could’ve been. But it’s not. I-I’m sorry I can’t be the one you talk to about this,” I groan burying my head under the duvet wishing this past week was all just a hellacious dream. I don’t hang up. I don’t even know why. I’m just silent as he talks in hushed tones; filling me in on his life since we parted ways. His voice is like an old pair of jeans: sometimes they’re worn and comfortable, other times, the fit is just too tight—either way you’ll always love them.

Listening to him takes my mind of my own heartache as he tells me about Evelyn: A shy soft-spoken girl who’s blonde and blue eyed and nothing at all like me.

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I don’t love her. Not in the way I loved you.”

“If you really loved me, you wouldn’t have let me go. I think you should try to at least work things out with her. Especially since she’s keeping the baby.”

I wait for jealousy to come, it’s fleeting then it’s gone. I don’t want Jeff anymore but talking to him reminds me how strong a bond we had before we pulled the plug.

“Okay, so maybe I do want to hear what happened between us.”

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“Dev,” he sighs, “I panicked. I saw my friends going out, dating a different chick each week, talking shit about wild weekends at the Lake, while you and I were playing house.”

“Playing house?” I warn.

“Come on, Dev. You know what I’m trying to say.”

“Yeah, I do. You wanted to go fuck random girls rather than have a real relationship, with me.”

“Hell, it sounded good at the time. I’m sorry. It ended up sucking, to tell you the truth—that’s how I ended up with Evelyn. She was cute and quiet, practically had ‘relationship’ stamped on her forehead.”

“Yeah, well now she has ‘baby momma’ stamped across it.”

“Ouch.”

“Sorry. So, not sorry,” I whisper teasingly.

“Do you still love me?”

“I-I’m sorry. I don’t. I actually met someone too...”

“Oh?”

“He’s incredible.”

“Well, I know he’s a lucky man. Thanks for talking to me Dev. I needed to hear your voice.”

“I get it. We were together a long time, but now we’re on separate roads. Good luck to you.”

“You, too.”

A steady fall of rain begins to pelt against my window, the constant beat oddly lulls me slowly to sleep where I dream of Rog and I at the lake chasing a pair of toddlers down the small beach. The boy has his father’s build while the girl looks like me.

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“IT’S A GODDAMN MONSOON OUT THERE,” I mutter debating whether I even want to open Sassy’s today. Saturdays are usually slammed but I doubt many are gonna venture out today, no matter how damn good my cookin’ is. Grabbing the remote, I find the local weather channel whistling through my teeth. Storms are rare out here and some front came down from Canada to fuck with us. High winds, mudslides and power outages are expected as well as over six inches of hard rain.

Grabbing my cell, I text Federico not to open today. It’s an easy call to make. I love that goddamn place but without seeing Dev’s saucy grin and smart mouth telling me what’s wrong with my cooking the place seems lonely despite being full most of the day.

The rain falls so hard I can barely see out my back window where it slams into it with such force it sounds like a million pellets scattering.

“Smith? You’re up early?” I taunt answering his call. Smith isn’t known for being an early bird.

“Yeah, couldn’t sleep. Shit’s goin’ sideways down here in Cali.”

“What’s up, brotha.”

“Guess who started a new MC?”

“Fuckin’ hell. Gregory?”

“Yeah. He’s ridin’ with a bad crew. Picking up ex-convicts and parolees as soon as

they're cut loose. He's offering a place in his bunkhouse, food and fresh ink. Somehow he slipped through the Canadian border and made it here."

"Fuck."

"Exactly. I needed every man I have back here. Please tell me you left a guard on the girls?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose, cursing like a fool.

"Dev and I are over. I heard Luce is back in Chicago getting her stuff boxed up to ship out here."

"Fuck," he sighs. "She's safe for now. I'll have a man pick her up at the airport and fly another one to Chicago to get her car."

"Damn. You make her your old lady already?"

"No. But she will be as soon as I figure out how to neutralize these fuckers. What happened with Dev? She seemed like old lady material herself."

"She is. But she hid shit from me. Shit she should've trusted me with. I've been alone so long, I can't get in deep with someone who lies at the start. You feel me?"

"Yeah, I do. Damn, I'm sorry, Rog."

"Not as sorry as I am. Listen, I'll keep an eye on shit here. I'll post a man at every frickin' road that leads to Springdale if I need to. The new deputy is an old friend. I'll have him watch our backs too."

"Sounds good. And Rog—if anything happens to Luce on your watch—"

“I get it. It won’t,” I vow ending the call.

My heart’s racing. Dev—I need to get to Dev. Fuck the storm and our break-up. I’m the shelter she needs right now. Phone still in hand, I call.

“Fuck!” It goes straight to her voicemail. Lightning flashes followed by a boom of thunder so loud my walls rattle. Then the power goes out.

Grabbing the keys to my truck off the counter I open the door fighting the wind and rain and barrel down the stairs to my driveway. My truck’s mostly dry, parked under the wide upper deck that acts as a portico.

Firing up my engine, I tear off, driving like mad to get to Dev and prayin’ like hell she’s alright.

The pounding is so loud I wake up with a start; bolting up from the old couch; confused.

The power’s out.

A branch from the large maple tree slaps against the window.

Then I realize the pounding is the rain coming down in buckets. On bare feet, I cross to the front window, not even able to see my car through the downpour.

“Ahhhh,” I shriek watching a heavy limb from a tall tree fall to the ground with a loud thud. Scurrying back over to the couch I look for my phone tangled up in the bedding. But my shoulders slump when I finally find it.

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It's dead.

Talking to Jeff last night took what juice was left and I never hooked it up to the charger.

Shit.

I was too depressed to grocery shop so it's not like much food will go bad until the power comes on.

Trudging to the bathroom, I strip quickly hoping there's enough warm water left in the tank to give me two minutes to wash the sleep from my eyes.

"Ugh, what I wouldn't give for a mug of hot coffee and my Kindle," I groan wondering what I'm going to do with myself stuck inside all day.

"What the fuck?" I scream hearing the crash of glass coming from somewhere close. Grabbing my towel, I wrap it around myself running out of the bathroom half-expecting to see the tree crashed through the window.

"Hello sweetheart. Miss me? You and I have unfinished business," he says with satisfaction, watching me slowly inching back. He creeps closer, brushing shards of glass from his skin. A thousand pricks of blood coat his face and arms from where he crashed through my front window next to the door.

If I can stall him, maybe he won't realize I'm only three steps from being able to lock myself in my bedroom.

“W-what do you mean? I’ve got nothing to do with the club or anyone in it.”

He smiles faintly, “Always lyin’. Why do they all continue to lie all the way till the end? That’s right sugar, I’m gonna be the last face you see as I squeeze the breath right outta ya’. But don’t worry, I’m also gonna be the last man to ever see that sweet body you’re so carefully trying to cover with that towel.”

Screaming, I run, barely shutting the door before he’s there. I bolt it. Thank God, Rog has bolts on his rental doors instead of the regular locks. But I know I don’t have much time. If he went through my window, I know his heavy boots will kick my door open. All it did was buy me some time.

I slide my dresser across the door and move the bed away from the window to anchor my barricade.

Dropping my towel, I only have time to put on a T-Shirt.

Boom.

Boom.

Boom.

The wood door starts to splinter from his kicks.

There’s only one thing left to do.

I need to save myself.

High on fear and adrenalin, a million thoughts race through my head.

Why didn't I call my mother more?

Why did I waste so many years on Jeff?

God, I hope Luce finds my vibrator before anyone else does if I don't make it through this.

My keys, purse, shoes—everything is on the other side of that door. Knowing there's only one way out of this room alive, I open my window, crouching through and step out into the pouring rain.

Barefoot, I carefully make my way across the roof, hands holding onto the gutters. Being on the middle floor, if I'm lucky—I can make it to the side of the building and jump down on the roof of the first-floor deck, shimmy down the railing and make it to the ground before that creep figures out my plan.

The wind and rain are so strong, I almost lose my balance and fall, breaking my own neck. But I'd rather die that way than be abused and tortured by the sick fuck breaking into my bedroom.

"Almost there, Dev. You can do this," I whisper not even hearing my own words as the wind rips them away and carries them up into the storm.

More thunder booms over head followed by the hiss and crack of lightening striking something close by.

Foot by foot, step by step, I make it to the corner of the roof, crouching low, I spring like a stunt double in an action film and land perfectly on the roof above the small covered porch that runs along the side of the first floor.

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Shimmying down the wooden railing, I jump down, run down the porch steps, and onto the wet grass. I run like I've never run before. Long legs flying and leaping over fallen trees and branches, I can barely see; rain smacks my face, but I'm alive and running the race as if my life depends on it, because it does.

Arms pumping, feet sinking into mud now, I keep going down the road hoping I can reach town before that asshole figures out I ran and comes for me in his car.

Headlights cut through the rain, coming straight towards me.

"HELP! Please stop! HELP!" I yell waving my arms as I run in the middle of the road, the driver sees me and swerves wildly to the left.

"ROG?!" I cry, moving towards the truck.

"DEVON?!" He roars opening his door uncaring rain pummels inside his cab as he meets me in the road.

"H-he's back there. That guy... he threatened to rape and kill me," I pant out clutching my sides. I must've sprinted over a half a mile.

"HE'S DEAD!" Roger roars taking my trembling body in his arms and carrying me into his truck. He carefully places me inside on the passenger seat as if I'm made of glass, kisses the top of my head and slides the strap of the seatbelt gingerly across my chest to buckle me in. He turns his head, hot eyes meeting mine telling me what's in his heart. His aqua eyes burn with the light of love and my hands cup the side of his jaw, "I thought I was going to die back there," I whisper feeling the aftershock rip

through me at how close I came to never seeing this beautiful man's face again.

"But you didn't baby. You're strong—so strong Dev. I'm so proud of you for getting away."

He pulls back, body getting soaked and shuts my door. I expect him to turn around, but his heavy boots press down on the gas throwing me back in the seat as the massive truck races back to the place I just escaped from.

He hands me his cell, "Call Federico and tell him what's going on."

With clumsy hands I do what he says through chattering teeth. He turns the heat on full blast and reaches behind him with one hand to grab his club cut and drape it over my thighs.

"Federico and Toad are on their way."

His eyes never leave the road as we pull off to the side of the road outside the triple-decker apartment house that's become home.

"Stay here. No matter what happens, no matter what you hear. If I'm not the man who comes back out—I need you to drive like hell. You hear me?"

"I-I won't leave you."

"Now is not the time, Dev. This is an order ya' hear me? If I die—it's so you can live."

"Rog!" I scream seeing the assailant coming out of my apartment. Rog's thick arm reaches across me to the glovebox where he takes out a large handgun. Bullets start hitting the truck before he can even put the clip in. He pushes my head down, "I love

you.”

I almost didn’t hear his words over the spray of bullets and rain pelting the truck.

Before I can say the words back; he’s gone.

Flashes of fire erupt from the nozzle of his gun, but Gregory uses his own truck for cover and fires round after round.

Rog is gonna get hit. He refuses to use this truck as cover and I know it’s because I’m in it.

I won’t let him die for me. I want him to live for me. For us. For the chance of what could be. Without even thinking, I slide over to the driver’s seat, buckle up and move his seat. Head low over the steering wheel, my muddy foot presses the gas and I maneuver the truck hard to the right cutting off the two men.

“Goddamn it Devon!” He roars using the truck for cover now as he fires round after round. He opens the door, hauls me out and orders me to lay flat in the back of the truck bed.

Soaking wet, chilled to the bone the pops of gunfire mixes with thunder as the storm gets worse.

The two of them re-load. Both trucks are shot to shit.

“Thank God,” I whisper, huddled in a wet ball as I hear Federico and Toad arrive. The two of them shout to Rog. Gregory knows he’s outgunned.

POP.

POP. POP. POP. POP.

Silence.

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“ROG!” I scream needing to know he’s okay.

“You hit baby?”—

“N-no. A-a-r-e you?”

“No. You stuttering again babe? Kinda like the day we first met, huh?” He tries to joke, coming into view.

On a sob, my arms wrap around his neck, “I-I’m cold Rog, so cold.”

“Don’t look baby,” he pulls back, cupping my face, “only look at me.”

“Is it Federico or Toad?”

“No, baby. It’s done. Finished.”

“I-I need to see. He threatened to do things—”

“I know, sugar. But don’t look,” he grabs my chin, forcing me to look at him. “I don’t want you seeing things, you can’t un-see.”

“Okay,” I answer, trusting him. Knowing he’s right.

“We need to get you home and out of the rain. Dev—you were never here. You spent the night with me. Got it?”

“Y-yes,” I answer determined to prove my loyalty to him—to Creed.

He lifts me into his arms, carries me to Federico’s truck parked behind us. He folds me inside, “I’ll be right back.”

I hear him telling Federico to “call it in,” before he rounds the hood and climbs in the driver’s side.

The heat blasts through the vents as I cuddle up to his side. He’s just as wet as I am but the body heat coming off his muscular body soothes me.

“Dev? DEV! DEV! Don’t you dare fall asleep. You have hypothermia, babe. Hold on. I’ll get you home and take care of you, love.”

My hands clutch his soaked shirt. “How can you see?”

“I know these roads, like I know every curve of your body. We’ll be home in no time.”

“Home? That word with you sounds so good.”

“Yeah,” he answers gruffly placing a brawny hand on my naked thigh. “Christ, Dev. No underwear?”

“I was in the shower when he broke in.”

“That motherfucker,” Rog’s hands clench the wheel, “did he touch you, sugar?”

“No. I was able to get away and barricade myself in the bedroom. I climbed out the window and went across the roof to the other side and was able to get down to the porch.”

His eyes flit over to me, “Goddamn, you were made for me, woman.” His eyes fill with heat and pride, my fingers laced in his; despite almost being killed—today feels like a new beginning for us both.

The truck sticks and slides, bumps, and swerves but somehow, we make it down a long drive through the woods to a clearing where a log cabin sits next to a pond. Trees have fallen all around us but none on the house.

Rog parks under a portico and before my frozen hands can even reach for the door handle he’s there lifting me in his arms and carrying me up the stairs inside.

We’re soaking wet and freezing, the adrenaline that coursed through our blood still there, but fading.

He strips his soggy clothes off and reaches for me. Taking me by the hand, he kneels in front of a large hearth and makes a fire. “Take your shirt off, Dev. We both need to raise our body temps.”

“I can’t. My arms don’t seem to work.” I tried to lift them, but they feel heavy and weak.

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He curses, takes my shirt off, wrapping a plaid blanket around me. “Sit by the fire. I’m gonna hook up the generator and brew some coffee. I’ll be right back.”

He kisses me hard and firm, walks over to a small bar and pours two brandies into low ball glasses. “Sip this. It’ll warm your blood.”

I nod my head taking the stiff drink, eyes staring into the flames; I know I’m a different woman than I was two hours ago. I’m in the club now. I witnessed things that can’t be talked about. I want to know what will happen now, but afraid to ask.

Rog comes back wearing sweat pants and a parka. “Just a few more minutes, baby. I have a generator that will power the whole house I just need to flip the transfer switch.

My eyelids droop, hand slips, I almost drop the glass, but I force myself to jerk my head back and drink. I can’t fall asleep.

Rog’s cell rings on the mantel where he left it. Without even thinking I answer.

“Dev?”

“Yeah, Rog is hooking up the generator. You okay Mac?”

“I’m fine. I was worried as hell about you, girl.”

“I-I’m okay. Is he d-dead?”

“Yes. Dev... I need you to listen to me. You were never home. We fixed your apartment, covered your tracks. You hear me?”

“Y-yes.”

“Good. Gregory has friends. You can’t be anywhere near this.”

“Did you bury him in the woods?”

“Fuck no,” he snorts, “this isn’t TV sweetheart. We called it in... it’s self-defense. He just started shooting up our truck when we went to check on the rental property.”

“The cops bought that?”

“Of course, they did. We run this town, remember?”

Rog opens the door behind me bringing wind and rain inside with him.

“Here, it’s Mac.”

He takes the phone from my hand at the same time the lights come on and the generator’s engines churn like a locomotive.

Shivering violently, I sip my drink. “Come,” he holds a hand out. I take it as he links our hands together, phone to his ear as he talks to Mac in low tones until he’s satisfied all loose ends are tied.

He leads me to the back of his house where in a four-season sunroom sits a large hot tub. He presses a few buttons and lifts the top. Steam comes from the frothy water. He strips, takes the blanket from me, lifting me in his arms, “It’s gonna burn at first. But then your body will warm. When it stops burning it’ll be okay to sleep. I’ll hold

you.”

I nod my head trusting him to take care of me. He steps up and places a foot in the swirling water hissing at the contact, but he powers through until both feet are in the tub, “I’m gonna lower you slowly babe. It’s gonna hurt like a bitch since your ice cold. But it’s what you need, okay?”

“It’s okay. Sometimes the things you need hurt you the most,” I answer looking him straight in the eye, palm on his cheek.

His eyes shut, “I know baby. I know. We’ll talk about us later. Let me just hold you now.” He lowers me inch by inch into the water, my bottom teeth sink into my lip as I try not to cry out in pain as my frozen limbs meet water that feels like hot lava on my skin. Whimpering, my arms cling to his neck.

“I know, baby girl. But it’s the only way,” he croons in my ear stroking locks of hair off my face. “What’s this?” His fingers brush the soaked bandage on my lower back. He peels it down so he can read the ink Mac took me to get. His finger gently touches the outlines around the puckered, red skin. “It’s beautiful, sugar. Classy and elegant, just like you.”

“I love you, Rog,” I whisper against his neck.

He inhales sharply hands stilling, “Love you more, baby girl.”

“I was so scared that I wouldn’t have a chance to say it to you.”

His strong body trembles under me, “Don’t think I’m gonna forget that stunt you pulled. Never disobey me again, Dev.”

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“I can’t promise you that. I didn’t want to live in a world without you in it. I know it’s soon and I have my regrets for keeping things from you, but I swear on my soul, Rog—I’ll never lie to you again—about anything.”

“Dev, “he moans shifting me into his lap, his cock jutting out of the water, nudging against my sex.

My lips nibble against his neck, my arms still clinging around his broad back as I lift my hips, impaling myself at once.

We don’t speak, lost in our devastating reunion and the knowledge that one of us could have been killed and we would never know the bliss of being together like this; coiled around each other flesh molding and yielding giving and taking—bonds being forged that the end of time can’t break.

Water sloshes over the side of the tub, Rog’s hand falls, fingers finding my clit, rubbing it soft then hard. His lips capture a nipple, whiskers from his beard feeling decadent as they brush against me at the same time the bulbous tip of his cock hits my G-Spot. My eyes roll back in my head, I’m coming apart at the seams and don’t care. I want to fall, knowing he’s going to catch me. I come hard, riding him to the finish, he lets go, hands cupping my face as I feel him spill inside me, “Mine,” he growls, eyes feral at what Gregory almost took from him, “Say it, Dev.”

“Yours,” I pant crying and falling against his chest.

He grunts, satisfied and lifts me up still nestled inside me and steps out of the hot tub, through the house to the master bedroom where he reluctantly sets me down to turn

on the massive walk-in shower.

He sets the temperature, carries me in, lovingly washing me. His hands caress soap over my skin, he peppers kisses on my neck, washes my hair, whispering words of love.

Sated, warm and tired, I fall asleep under the warm spray of the jets, the last words I hear are his saying he's gonna love me forever.

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“THANKS FOR MEETING ME.”

He slips into the booth across from me. Eyes identical to mine look back at me like a mirror.

“I’ve wanted to meet you for a long time,” I answer feeling tears prick my eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he looks down clenching a fist on the table, “This isn’t about you. But I—I had a fucked-up childhood.”

“I know. I’m sorry,” I simply say placing my hand over his. “Duke... I’d like to invite you and Shanna to spend Thanksgiving with me and Rog. I want us to be family... please give me a chance?”

He shakes his head, “Damn, you are incredible. I came here to ask your forgiveness and for you to give me a chance,” he smiles warmly at me and in that moment, I know everything is going to truly be all right.

“How’s Shanna?”

“Good. Mad as hell at me for being thick-headed. She went to visit Rog over at Sassy’s.”

“That must be hard on her. It’s her first trip back to Springdale since her father died, right?”

“It is. But it’s time. She realized that she still has family here. You and Rog.”

“Me?”

“Yup, she always wanted a sister. Shanna grew up a club princess and hated every second of it. She never had movie nights, slumber parties or prom dates. Get ready ‘cause I think she already has a spa day or some shit planned for you and Luce.”

“I can’t wait,” I grin feeling warmth spreading through me, “I already love her.”

“Good. I want you to be a part of our lives, Devon. Now, tell me everything, starting with your first birthday party.”

I sit back sipping my soda, the fizz settling warmly in my stomach, “Now that’s a story. My dad’s cousin got drunk and belted out the National Anthem instead of singing Happy Birthday complete with a belch at the end. Let’s just say the next year only half of the girls in my class showed up at my birthday party...”

“Your adoptive family is large?”

“No—not really. Although, their personalities are huge. My mom almost decked my dad when he came home with a new sportscar without telling her. They’re both coming for the holidays. They want to meet Rog and well—Creed.”

“They cool with you being a pledge.”

“What? I’m not a pledge.”

“I know. You’re already in.” He slips something out of the inside corner of his jacket and slides it across the table.

My hands tentatively reach for the patch. It’s old and worn and smells like old cigars. It reads “CREED PREZ.”

“It was his.”

“Our father’s?”

He nods, “I wanted you to have it. I’m sorry Dev. I’ve read all his old journals and went through his papers when he died. There’s no indication that Dee ever told him. I think she might’ve been using your existence for leverage against him if she ever needed it. She died carrying the secret of you with her.”

“Until I showed up thirty years later.”

“That you did.”

“So, you must’ve been around ten when I was born?”

“Eleven. I think Dee told my Ma about you. Our old man was a stubborn son of a bitch and wouldn’t let her go. But the affair broke her. She eventually left, and I never heard from her again. I’ve tried finding her but haven’t had any luck so far.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Our dad was just as guilty as Dee. But as Shanna pointed at—no one blamed him for the way it all went down. They blamed her.”

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“Wait. I’m confused. My adopted Mom, Carol, said Dee died when I was two. That can’t be right.”

“No. Dee died when I was twenty. I remember that well.”

“Why would she lie to me?”

“Carol?”

“Yeah, hold on I need to make a call.” Picking up my phone I call home.

“Mom?”

“Hey, sweetie! How did it go? I know you were nervous about meeting your brother.”

“It’s going well. I’m still with him. Listen, I need to ask you something. I’ll forgive you if you lied but I need to know—did Dee die when I was two or ten?”

She sucks in a breath, “I’ve never lied to you honey. I received a phone call when you were two from a woman who said she was with the adoptive agency. She told me Dee had died and asked for our address to send you the letter.”

“Okay. That’s weird. I’ll call you later and we can talk more about Thanksgiving.”

“Sounds good, sweetie. I’m sorry I wish I could tell you more.”

“That’s okay. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

Shrugging my shoulders, eyes meeting Duke’s puzzled ones I tell him, “She’s telling the truth. So, who called her telling her Dee was dead? And why?”

“Some secrets will never be uncovered,” he shrugs, “but we found each other and that’s all that matters now. Come on there’s something I want to show you.”

“Okay.”

He helps me out of the booth dropping a twenty and ushers me out the door of the diner. Zipping up my jacket, I throw my head back giggling at the first flakes of snow falling all around us.

“Didn’t they have snow in Chicago?”

“Yeah. There was plenty, but the flakes were never this light or fresh.”

“You love Springdale. Don’t you?”

“I do.”

He opens the passenger door for me and rounds the truck sliding in. “It’s ironic. I couldn’t wait to leave. But now I’m seeing it all again through your eyes. Most people can’t wait to leave and go to some big city.”

“I hate cities. There’s nothing fresher than the air of Springdale in late spring.”

He smiles, turning on the car. Warm air blows through the vents as he drives through town, up the hill and through the gates of the cemetery.

“Duke?”

He doesn't answer but parks on the side of the road getting out. I open my door without waiting for him. He takes my hand and leads me over to Dee's grave.

“It's beautiful,” I gasp placing a gloved hand over my mouth in shock.

Behind her headstone is a beautiful angel carved from stone, arms outstretched, wings open as she looks down.

“Maybe she was an angel after all. She gave me a sister and that counts for something. Maybe you were her saving grace; proof that she did something good with her life that cancels out the bad. Hell, I know I've done unforgivable things. It's time Creed and the boys forgive Dee Dee Stanton.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, swiping tears.

“Rog and Shanna have been lighting up my phone wondering how we're doing.”

“Well, you can text back that we're doing just fine. Actually, we are doing fantastic.”

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SMITH'S LARGE HANDS REACH for the gavel smacking it down, signaling the meeting to start.

All fifty of us are in the clubhouse in Cali, wearing our cuts with somber faces. We have a lot of shit to discuss tonight. Shit that once said is never spoken of again or tongues will get cut.

“Gregory has been dealt with. He’s six feet under, but the MC he started is still going strong. They’re voting next week on who their new Prez will be. I need all eyes and ears to the ground—they’re coming for us—make no mistake about it. We need to be diligent; lay off the hash and alcohol. We need to be alert and sober—I’m not losing one man to those thugs. They know we killed Gregory and they want payback.

I want all families moved to safehouses until further notice. We’ll homeschool if we have to. Make sure your women keep the location off-limits to anyone not in the club or the consequences could be our women and kids getting caught in the crossfire. Am I clear?”

“Aye,” the room resounds.

Smith slides the gavel over to me signaling it’s my turn to speak.

“Some of you have been here since the beginning and know our history. Others are newer members and were not. But it’s time to re-write our history. Life is unscribed, we don’t know what’s gonna hit us from one day to the next—that’s why we’re loyal to the brotherhood, love our women and protect those in our family to the death. I’m officially claiming Dee Dee Stanton’s daughter, Devon St. John as my woman; my

old lady. Any attack on her or on her kin is an attack on us. Is that clear?"

Stunned faces stare back at me.

"I said, is that clear?" my voice low and deadly.

"Dev's been one of us since the day she put herself in the line of fire to cover our ass," Mac speaks up.

"Aye," Federico chimes in, glaring at everyone to comply.

"AYE. Devon St. John is Creed," my men repeat one by one. When the last member speaks, I lift the gavel smacking it down.

It's done.

Dev's mine in the eyes of my club. The words spoken by all here; a vow they'll all protect her with their lives. It's a pledge stronger than the vows of marriage although someday I'll say those to her, as well.

"What are you waitin' for, Silver Fox? Go back to Springdale and claim your woman."

I grin at Smith, "When are you gonna come back? Still scared of Luce, ripping your balls off?"

He pales, gets up and stalks off without a word.

Guess him and Luce still haven't made-up, whistling I walk out and climb on my bike. It's about time Smith knows what it's like to burn for a woman. They way Duke and I do.

My bike climbs through the California hills, north towards Oregon, eating up miles of highway. I'll be home by dawn, to slip under the covers and take my girl in my arms, make love to her until she tells me she's mine over and over again.

I'm a lucky bastard. I never saw her coming or think that I'd ever find a love like ours. But I did. Year after lonely year went by, and I gave up ever looking for her.

Thank God, she came looking forme.

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Fifteen months later...

ALTHOUGH I CAME TO SPRINGDALE in the peak of summer where it stood in all it's wild glory full of soft ferns under dense evergreens stretching to the sky; I love winters here the most.

I snuggle under the heavy down comforter pressing my lips to his shoulder. He grunts, continuing to read the news on the e-reader I bought him last Christmas. His hair is wild and sexy and he's wearing those black-rimmed reading glasses that make me so damn horny.

Shirtless, he winks at me, knowing damn well what he's doing.

"Are they awake?" I ask snaking my hand down to stroke him.

"Not yet. But we better be quick about it just in case."

He puts his device down but leaves his glasses on. I smile, head falling back, as he climbs over me and settles between my thighs. He nips my lips, back arching so he can lean over and take a warm breast in his mouth.

"Damn girl, these taste just as good as the first time I took them in my mouth."

I'm swollen, wet and hot, aching for him to fill me up like he does. "So, good, Rog. You feel so good," I moan as the head of his hot, thick, cock slowly enters me. I never feel like it's enough. Everyday I crave his touch just as much as I did before ever knowing what it felt like.

He thrusts slowly between my thighs, rocking me deeper into the bed. Morning sex is my favorite. I'm already wet after dreaming about him and waking up to the real thing is pure bliss.

I'm so slick for him, he glides between my thighs effortlessly.

"God baby," he groans pulsing inside me. He's still stubborn as hell and never finishes unless I come first.

I feel his finger play with my clit, knowing exactly what I need. "That's it babe. I wanna feel you come," he moans rolling my other nipple into his mouth.

"Rog!" I groan coming on demand.

He groans, pumping into me, spilling his seed deep into my womb.

"Rog?"

Puzzled by the force of his climax, my walls tremble more feeling wave after wave of his orgasm as he empties into me.

"I reversed my vasectomy babe," he winks. "It won't be long until my babe suckles from these sweet tits," he groans sucking on them himself.

I yelp, feeling a wet tongue lick my toes a second before Bean and Birdie hop on the bed.

We found the two dogs running loose after the storm last year. I lied when I told Rog I was allergic. The two of them were cold, hungry and shivering. I went back inside, smuggling a few pieces of Rog's home-smoked beef jerky out of the kitchen and went back to the woods calling softly to them.

Once they tasted Rog's cooking; they were hooked, just like me. He didn't say a word when their muddy paws marked his pristine floors or when they chewed his favorite pair of slippers. He said every lost soul needs a home. And I fell in love with him even more.

"I'll take them out," I giggle as they jump around us still locked together.

"No. You're gonna stay right here, so my swimmers can make that baby," he pulls out, playfully smacking my rump.

"Come on, hell hounds, time to go pee."

I laugh, the two dogs are small mutts each under thirty pounds—hardly hell hounds. My eyes devour Rog as he pulls on his hoodie and sweats. Eyes turning towards the window at the mounds of snow outside, I know it'll be a good day to read by the fire drinking coffee with Rog while our dogs sleep at our feet.

After a few minutes, I reluctantly get out of our warm bed, slip on my robe and UGG slippers and pad into the kitchen where Rog already has my favorite blend of coffee brewing. Reaching into the cabinet, I smile taking my favorite coffee mug down. It's covered in new chips and cracks but Rog put every broken shard back together, just like we put us back together; piece by piece—until we were stronger than before.

Sighing, my hands reach for the pot and pour. Holding the steaming mug to my lips, I smile looking out the window at Rog playing with the two dogs in the fresh snow. I've changed him just as much as he's changed me. He's still bossy and sexy as hell, but he laughs more and his eyes are always lit with the same contentment that I feel in my heart. I came to this town looking for answers but found much more than that. I've found my forever family, a new home and a sense of peace that I'll never take for granted.

I've become quite the backwoods woman and I love every minute of my life here.

Uttering a silent prayer, I thank Dee for taking a chance and having me. Patting my tummy, I imagine my own child that might grow inside me someday. One thing's for sure: I'll always tell them to be proud of who they are and where they came from. Even if their parents are from a motorcycle club where the men are giants and the women, fierce warriors.