



Atlas (Satan's Angels MC #6)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: She's my ride or die. Even if she don't know it yet.

Willa's my best friend—sweet, sassy, and the kinda light a bastard like me don't deserve.

She laughs like life aint heavy, loves like it don't scar, and looks at me like I ain't a patched-up wreck.

And that scares the hell outta me. 'Cause once you let someone in... they can walk. And I know that sting all too well.

Thing is—she ain't just my bestie.

She's Bullet's ol' lady's little sister. Club family. Off-limits since day one.

No way I was ever supposed to cross that line.

I helped her build her dream, kept her close, but never let her see the cracks underneath my cut.

Already lost one woman when she found out I couldn't give her a kid.

No way I'm lettin' Willa carry that pain. She deserves more.

But damn... she makes me want everything I thought I'd buried for good.

Now she could be in danger, and all this bottled-up feelin's about to blow.

She's always been mine.

And I ain't pretendin' anymore.

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Willa

This man sitting beside me, hating every minute of this truck ride, has turned into my absolute everything and he'll never, ever know it.

I've never met anyone who hates vehicles more than Atlas. I suppose bikers call them cages for a reason. He sits ramrod straight in the passenger seat of my truck, both hands grasping his knees, eyes roving the road ahead of us like we've gone back to the time of dinosaurs and a big behemoth is about to come out of nowhere and crush us. If we were in my pink station wagon, I'd have us handled, but this old truck isn't made for sharp corners and speeding.

The silence between us isn't forced, ominous, or oppressive. It's easy. It's always easy.

Even in his discomfort, he's still the most beautiful human. It's his riot of sun-streaked naturally blond hair, eyes as deep blue as the summer sky, and perfectly sculpted features. He has cheekbones and a jawline to die for, sandy brows that seem to anchor his endlessly long eyelashes, a strong nose, and a sinful mouth. He's perfectly sculpted, tall and muscular, but he has that streamlined build of a born athlete.

The real secret to Atlas' beauty isn't his Hollywood good looks or that he belongs to a biker club. It's not his inked arms or the cocky grins he loves to give.

His secret is on the inside .

His heart. His kindness. Atlas loves his family deeply. He's fiercely loyal to anyone he calls a friend. Men who look like he does are usually so arrogant you can't get within twenty feet of them before they start churning your stomach with how much they're obviously in love with themselves, but not Atlas.

He'd do anything for anyone. Case in point, why he's death gripping his legs right now. He's riding in my truck for me . He was just at Lynette and Bullet's house for me . He bought the old factory that we renovated so that I could chase my dreams. He's poured every ounce of his free time into transforming that building, but also my world. He got his club on board with the whole thing. The grand opening today is as much theirs as it is mine.

There's going to be a cookout, and the big silver beast of a grill in the back of the truck creaks ominously with the next turn.

Atlas starts, his hand whipping out like he can grab it from in here and set it upright. He points quickly at the side of the road. "You can pull over up there and I'll check the straps."

We're still not even out of the residential area where Bullet and Lynette live. My antique store is on the other side of Hart. It might not be a big city, but it's still a fifteen to twenty minute hike without traffic.

I guide the truck over to the curb, but I barely have it in park before Atlas throws open the door and bails. I can literally hear his deep breathing, like he's trying not to barf, before he shuts the door and leaps up into the box of the truck using the tire in the most artistic display of athletic ease and male virility that I've ever seen.

Stop it. Do not. Do not turn around and look at his ass.

Of course I do, but the grill is pressed right up against the glass, so I can't see

anything from this angle and the side mirrors don't help.

I unbuckle and get out. The truck hums away. It's an old gas one ton, which was all I could afford. Lynette lent me money to buy it, since my line of credit that she also co-signed for to get the business up and running was pretty much maxed after I used it to buy the enclosed trailer for picks and filled the store up with antiques. Sure, I found them at a bargain because that's what picking is about, but they weren't free, and the store is huge. It took a lot to fill it up.

Atlas is tightening one of the bright green ratchet straps that Bullet let us borrow along with their gas grill.

"Do you need some help?"

"I've got it. I think we were just a little bit distracted putting it in."

Right. While he and Bullet were loading it up, that's when Lynette got sick.

It's all hands on deck this morning for my grand opening. Instead of doing the stuff he probably wanted to be doing, Atlas was at Bullet and Lynette's house at the freaking crack of dawn to load this up and help me get set up before his club brothers start arriving. It makes my eyes hot and my throat tight that Atlas' club is that amazing. Lynette is my older sister and she's Bullet's old lady, but other than that, I really don't have a connection to the club. Atlas and I are just friends, and even that was born of necessity.

He started as my bodyguard when Lynette and I were forced to move to Hart because we got tangled up with the club's crazy ex-lawyer who tried to extort money from them. We weren't safe in Seattle and the club offered us protection. Atlas was assigned as my bodyguard. I started college and so did he. I hated it. He loved it.

We're opposites in every way, but for some reason, we just fit.

I drag in a deep breath and let it out in increments, a deep, stabbing pain twisting my insides. That's just the thing. Atlas is my friend, maybe even my best friend, but he's not mine .

Just. Friends. I know my sister thinks we've slept together, but we haven't. We've never even kissed.

We'll probably always be just friends . He's not ready for anything more. It doesn't matter that I've been pathetically in love with him for months now, spiraling down out of friendship into a deeper abyss of endless longing and heartsickness.

That's a me problem.

Atlas tightens the strap a little more, then loops the end over the taut part and ties a knot. "That should do it." He pats the top. "You've still got work to do in the form of cooking twenty gazillion hot dogs."

My hands grip the rough plastic along the top of the truck box. Atlas turns and checks the other straps, though I can tell they're obviously tight.

I want to ask him if he's okay.

He's the kind of person who doesn't seem to have a jealous or mean bone in their body, but he also feels everything deeply.

I've seen a lot of Atlas' private heartbreak this past year. He's confessed things to me on those late nights we spent on renovations or studying for classes I didn't even want to be taking.

I open my mouth, but the words won't come.

My sister just found out that she and Bullet are going to have a baby. It was supposed to be a private moment, but she was freaking out and I was freaking out, and Atlas was there to see the whole thing. Of course, he appeared thrilled for them, but I can't help but think that it has to be triggering for him. He was in love with someone, and she ended things because he couldn't have children. At least not easily. To Jodie, he wasn't worth fighting for.

I'm so overjoyed that my sister found happiness with a good man and that now they're going to be a family. The prospect of being an auntie scares me half to death and is also the most thrilling, amazing thing in the world, but I can't stop thinking about how much Atlas must be hurting.

Atlas vaults over the side of the truck, his big boots hitting the pavement right beside me. Those cerulean eyes map my face, and his brows knit together. "Whoa. You look... off. Are you okay? If you're nervous, don't be. Today's gonna be awesome. You've worked so hard to make this happen."

Just of course . Of course he says nothing about himself or the crazy long hours he put into this.

He sets his hand on my shoulder and squeezes it like an older brother would. I bet he learned that from his Prez. Tyrant is fairly young himself, but he has an old soul, and the few times I've been at the club or gone to club events, I've seen him knock shoulders with his club brothers or give one of those reassuring shoulder clenches more than a few times. I've noted how immediately calming it is when he does it, but Atlas' touch sends a volley of shivers and fiery electricity through my limbs.

"I- I'm okay. The morning's just been a little bit shocking."

I realize something as Atlas smiles at me. There's nothing sad about it, no shadows in his eyes. Every single time we've talked in the past, he's guarded part of himself. Everyone does that. Everyone has good shields. Well, except me because I'm notoriously open and unfiltered and all over the place. I just never realized how much he intentionally hides. I always felt that it was different between us.

I don't like that I can't see any emotion now. There should be something there. His smile doesn't appear any less genuine. Maybe he's just truly happy. He has a big heart. It's possible.

"They're going to be great parents."

"I'm so glad that they have the club as family. There are lots of other old ladies and guys with kids. She can go to any of them for advice. Not that she needs it. She had to raise my ungrateful ass."

Atlas snorts. "Not ungrateful."

"There were many times when I was. Kids are brats. They never appreciate what their parents have done for them."

He frowns. "I've tried to always appreciate my mom and dad."

I'm the one who fist bumps him in his solid shoulder, right on his worn leather jacket. "You're the only one then, Mr. Perfect." He blocks the blow, his hand curling around mine. He drops it easily, stepping away laughing. His arms flex in the jacket, his abs bunch under his tight black t-shirt, and his jeans hug his granite ass. He fucking is perfect. So, so perfect.

My mouth goes dry, and I nearly stroke out on the spot. My heart practically falls out and flops all over the asphalt. I try very hard to block my emotions from my face, but

I've never been particularly good at that.

Let it be known that before moving to Hart, I made some extremely questionable decisions. Lynette had her hands full with me. It wasn't just because I had no filter. I was just... wild. Always looking for something. I didn't even know what it was.

I know now.

Atlas was and will always be my best decision, even if knowing him is also the greatest test I have ever been given.

I never meant to be selfish, but I was. I dated guys who were assholes. I wouldn't listen to my older sister's wisdom. I took her for granted so many times. I was irresponsible. I worked since I was sixteen, but I never offered to contribute to the bills. I let Lynette pay for everything, because by then, she was a fancy ass lawyer making the big bucks. I lived in her house but rarely obeyed her rules. I loved her more than anyone in the world, but I did a piss poor job of showing it.

In the last year, I've grown the fuck up. It's been a painful, humbling process. I want to be good to my sister. I never want to hurt another person who loves me again. I want to be the kind of person that others can rely on, who they come to for advice, who they know will be at their side no matter what.

That's what I want to be for Atlas. The kind of friend we can both be proud to know.

Even if it kills me.

We're both just standing here staring at each other. I laugh when I realize it. "You're doing this all for me, including riding in this truck when you hate it so much. That means everything, Atlas. Thank you doesn't even begin to cover it."

His cheeks pink slightly, which is utterly adorable and completely disarming. He's at a loss for words, so I spare him.

"It's only fifteen more minutes to get the store. We'll dump the grill out front and then I have something I've been dying to show you. Do you want to drive the rest of the way?"

"Nah." He leans against the truck, though his casual pose is forced. I can tell how tense he is. "It's all good."

"Okay. I promise I'll drive as fast as possible so you can spend less time in the truck, earn at least eight speeding tickets, upend the grill, and nearly cause three separate accidents so that we get there faster."

He knows I'm kidding. The one thing I've never done is drive like an asshole.

He still white-knuckles his knees when we get back into the truck, but at least his voice has an undercurrent of humor. "Make it nearly four accidents and earn at least ten tickets or it's not worth it."

I unroll my window and let the crisp morning air rush in. It smells like spring, sunshine, and my old oily truck. It smells like the promise of everything I've ever wanted within my grasp.

Well... almost everything.

I choke out a response and focus extra hard on the road. "Deal."

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Willa

After we unload the grill near the front grassy patch where others will join it soon as some of Atlas' club brothers arrive to set up, I beg and plead for him to come back into the store with me. To be fair, it doesn't take much begging or pleading. I know Atlas hates surprises and he can tell that I pretty much have pure devilment in mind.

I get behind the front sales counter and dig my favorite find ever out of the box on one of the shelves. I pull Pearl from the tissue paper I wrapped her in to keep her safe.

Atlas jerks back. All six foot two inches of his glorious sun-kissed body recoils in horror. He's a full patched in member of his club, a biker through and through. No one would dare call him anything but a badass, but little old Pearl scares him shitless.

"Gah! What the fuck is that thing?"

I stroke Pearl's not so fuzzy head. She used to be flocked, but most of the fuzz has been loved smooth over the years. She's missing an eye, but I don't hold that against her. She lived a few turbulent years where someone either loved her to decapitation, or some punk kid decided she'd be better off parted from her head. A few crusty lines of yellowed tape now hold it onto her moldering body.

"She's a monkey. Can't you tell?"

A shudder ripples through him. "Looks like an instrument of the devil."

"Says a man who proudly calls himself a member of the Satan's Angels."

“I didn’t pick the name! And our logo is a fallen stone angel.” He whips around, pointing over his shoulder at the large patch on his leather jacket.

I try to focus on the details of the angel’s bowed face and her furled, lifelike wings, and not on the rippling muscle just below that jacket, or the rock hard ass in a pair of jeans that I’d like to remove with my teeth before running my tongue over the twin moons and delving between them.

No, salad isn’t my favorite meal, but there’s something about this god of a man who is so damn beautiful that he could easily bring masses of women to their knees and spontaneously soak panties everywhere, that makes me want to do dark, dirty, sinful things.

“I know you love the cursed things, the uglier the better, but that is too much. Hold on.” He grabs his phone out of his pocket. “Let me call up a priest to come perform an exorcism.”

I kiss Pearl’s worn, horrific face and Atlas gags for real. “Don’t listen to him,” I tell her. “I love you just the way you are.” Aaaargh, don’t say things like that. He’s right there and he’s going to know you don’t just mean the damn monkey. “Besides, when you have no soul, you don’t have to worry about demons entering your body and taking it over.”

Thankfully, he’s distracted by that. “Pretty sure that’s not how it works.”

“She’s going to join my collection of homely things.”

The weird and wonderful shit that I find doesn’t usually make the sales floor. Not when it’s so much more joyful to fill up my new, sprawling, two thousand square apartment on the top floor of this warehouse.

I tuck Pearl back into her box, covering her reverently with the tissue paper to keep her fragile body safe. She's almost a hundred years old. Atlas would probably say she looks more like centuries old, something dug up by grave robbers.

"You have that look on your face. That sappy, soft, slightly sad, indiscernible look that borderline freaks me out," he accuses.

"That would be witchcraft, darling," I return, going for my best stage actress dramatic flair impression.

He snorts. "Seriously, though. Are you thinking about Lynette?"

Atlas is one of those people who masks his pain and pushes forward no matter what. I don't know if he's talked to anyone in his club about Jodie in the ten months since they split. I have a feeling he hasn't really. If he'd talk to anyone, it would be his parents or maybe even his older sister. They're a close knit family. A happy, middle-class, average, white picket fence style mom and dad who rounded up the two point two kids to three, and had more than one family dog growing up and a few cats.

You'd think that they wouldn't be happy with their son's chosen path, but I've met Josephine and Darwin a few times and they're good people. Salt of the earth, wonderful, sweet, people who adore their children. They're proud that he's a part of the club. They supported Atlas' older sister through college—she's a teacher in Seattle now, and when his younger brother wanted to be a surfer down in California, they paid for him to go and bought him his board and everything. I don't know if he's going to make it any professional sense, but according to Atlas, Clem loves living down there and he's happy working at a surf shop not far from the beach.

"What am I thinking about?" I busy myself with the antique cash register, pretending to check it one more time to make sure it's functioning correctly. It would be a

disaster if it failed to function on a day when I hope to make serious sales. “Hmm. I was just... going back through all the memories from the past ten months.”

“Hmph.”

Lynette would say I have no filter, and that’s true for the most part. I’m not used to being unable to push out the words in my head. Lynette is also so prim and proper and sweet.

Anyway, I never have been like my sister. Prim, proper, dignified, professional, and controlled aren’t words that I’d apply to myself. Before I met Atlas, I can’t remember a time when my face ever got hot. I know my cheeks are pink right now, which is discomfiting.

“None of this would be possible if I’d never met you.” I’m usually fearless, but I have to keep fiddling with the register. I crank the handle, and the drawer pings open loudly, right at the end of that statement.

“Oh my god, Willa, yes it would have.”

“No. I know your parents helped you buy the building, and you’ve put in so many hours renovating it.”

“I’m your landlord. You can’t make money off a property if it’s unusable. You pay me rent. My help wasn’t charity. This is a good income source.”

He’s downplaying this. All the days we spent together here, the massive effort he put into doing most of the demolition and construction himself when he’d never done any of that sort of thing before. For the first few months, it was just us, often camping out in the massive shell of a building in sleeping bags, then going to classes during the day at the community college and coming right back here.

“You hadn’t even done this before and yet, you figured it all out. You got the club to help too, which was amazing.”

There isn’t a single member of the Satan’s Angels that didn’t have a hand in making this dream a reality. From the drawings to the manpower, they had my apartment ready to live in by January, as promised, and had the store down below ready for June. For the past few weeks, they’ve been helping me move furniture into place, arrange clothes, even set out toys and old books. It wasn’t just the men either, but their old ladies and families who were here, helping me put the finishing touches on this place so that I could meet my grand opening date.

“I did, because if you can’t make money, then I won’t get paid either. I’d have to evict you, and do you have any idea how much effort that would be?”

I shut the drawer and look up. Staring at Atlas used to be like looking directly into the sun. I got over that fast, but today, it’s like seeing him for the first time. “There’s no way you can downplay this, Simon Backun. You’re a good man. Selfless and kind.” Gorgeous. Off-limits. Enough to drive a woman mad. Literally the best score on this planet. Your ex was an idiot who didn’t appreciate what she had. “And I’ll be thankful to my dying day for the help you’ve given me, and for being my friend when I didn’t know a single person here.”

“I had to be your friend. I was forced, remember?”

I snort. “Don’t make me get Pearl out and extract a confession. You loved taking me to college so much that you’re doing a degree now.”

“I’m doing a degree because I love studying. Taking you was torture.”

I race out from behind the counter and punch him playfully in his huge, leather-clad shoulder. His face twists up and he pretends to be injured.

“Ouch, Willa. That hurt . This, after all I’ve done for you.”

I’m mentally five, so I pull a face far worse than Pearl’s monkey grimace. “I thought you just said you didn’t do anything.”

He grows serious fast, and for a second, I’m afraid that he’s seen straight through to my heart. I’m naturally flirty, silly, fun loving, and easy going. Half of the people I meet probably don’t assume I have a brain in my head. It comes with the territory of being blonde, blue eyed, and curvy. No one would suspect that underneath my casual, playful exterior, I’m actually capable of deep thoughts and feelings.

“Mom and Dad wanted to know if you’d like to come for dinner tomorrow. I told them it was a bad time with the opening, but they’re not going to let it go. They’re going to come this afternoon, so they’ll probably ask you themselves. I didn’t want you to be surprised.”

“It’s not the first time I’ve gone with you.”

I search his face, trying to figure out what’s different this time. If people assume things about me, they also assume that Atlas is just a stupid jock with stupid jock tendencies.

That’s the last thing he is.

“I just wanted to tell you.”

Atlas is wicked smart. He plays himself off like he’s not emotionally intelligent either, but I know that’s not true. Whatever is going on in his big, beautiful, downplayed brain, he’s not going to let me in on it. I give him my brightest smile. “Okay. I’d love to come. And I’m super excited to see them this afternoon.”

“Georgia’s coming from Seattle too.”

“Oh!” I’ve never met his big sister. Should I feel pressure?

He’s seen me sweat enough times in the past to recognize that I’m starting to stew in my anxiety right now. “She’s sweet. You’ll love her.” He grins at me. “Everything will be perfect today. We’re all so proud of you, Willa.”

When he walks over and hugs me, platonically , it sets my heart racing. I have no right to long for more, but as I drag a deep breath of his citrusy, motor oil scent in, my chest tightens. He uses hair product that smells like coconuts, and whatever is in it brings out the golden streaks. He has the kind of hair that any woman would be jealous of.

“Thanks,” I murmur near his ear.

I force myself to release him and when I step away, there’s a bright smile in place that masks everything that’s in my head and heart.

Story of my fucking life.

There are different kinds of love. I’m in every one of them. I’m not exactly a fan of wrecking myself either, so I’ll forever be careful to keep my feelings hidden. We can be playful. Friendly. Confidants. Business associates. I can treat Atlas like an obnoxious older brother whom I secretly adore, and he can treat me like his pesky younger sister. Anything else would ruin what we have, and that would be a tragedy.

He’s had enough tragedy this past year.

Atlas’s heart is still broken beyond repair. If I respect one thing, it’s a person’s pain, and Atlas isn’t ready. I might have been okay with being his rebound at first, but then

I got to know him, and to know him is to love him and to love him means doing what's best for him, even while I die a slow death on the inside.

Page 3

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Atlas

“That’s not a regular human being, baby bro. That’s a force of nature. Beautiful. Sweet. Kind. Smart. A rocking body and a kick-ass mind.” Outside, Georgia leans in against me and shoves her elbow into the meat just below my ribs. “Are you sure you’re just friends?”

Georgia lives in Seattle and it’s only an hour away, but her job pretty much consumes her. She takes teaching seriously because it’s her passion. Personally, I’d rather go up against a room full of the world’s most hardened criminals than have to be responsible for keeping a bunch of ten year olds alive, but she loves it. Her job keeps her so busy that she rarely gets out to Hart except for holidays, and this is the first time she’s met Willa.

When Georgia got here, she beat our parents, but she didn’t let that deter her. She slipped inside to catch a glimpse of Willa, then immediately parted the crowds to get to me. I was helping work the grills, but she demanded that I show her around the store. Battle Axe, Odin, Tyrant, and Raiden, were only too happy to let me go. They brought grills as well, but Raiden did me a solid and promised he’d cover mine.

Bullet and Lynette showed up an hour before the official opening at noon, and were closely followed by most of my club brothers. Bullet’s been standing guard at the door to prevent any theft, since Willa can’t keep eyes on the entire store. Though Bullet is here helping with security, Wizard is back at the club monitoring the cameras around the store from every angle. He wired the whole place up, but after today, he’ll teach Willa how to hook them to her computer. He can’t possibly take on one more job. I’m not sure how he doesn’t lose his mind as it is.

Everyone from the club is here except Wizard and a few of the prospects who had to stay back on guard duty.

I stare longingly at the grills lining the front sidewalk along the freshly laid grass that will hopefully soon become a vibrant lawn.

Georgia isn't going to let me resume flipping burgers and churning out hotdogs until she's debriefed me. Her patience is legendary, but apparently not when it comes to Willa.

"Everyone seems to think that we're more, but we're not. It's weird how no one wants to believe the truth. I wonder if we should try reverse psychology."

"That sounds like it would be a bunch of trouble." Her eyes flick over to Bullet by the door. He's not so scary, not compared to some of the other guys. He has less visible ink and scars, but his huge beard and all black attire give him some serious tough biker vibes. "But you do know that if you wanted to date someone again, you could. Getting hurt sucks, but sometimes things do actually work out."

"You've had one relationship, and the guy was a tool bag." I still wish I could hunt down Hepner Radcliffe to rearrange his limbs. I met the guy once a few years ago, when Georgia was finishing up her degree in Seattle. He was an asshole then and he treated my sister like shit. After he cheated on her, he wisely disappeared.

"One relationship, yes. That doesn't mean that I've been a saint. I just choose not to talk about it."

What the fuck? Now my protective brother instincts are screaming for blood. "I need an immediate list. Right now. Names. Addresses. What their greatest and oddest fears are so that I can haunt them."

Georgia rolls her eyes. They're darker than mine, bordering on indigo. She has no idea that it's her beauty that intimidates guys into not even being able to talk to her or ask her out. Thank fuck. "And you wonder why I like to keep my business to myself."

"Any and all boyfriends shouldn't just pass the brother test. They should pass my club brother test too."

Her laughter tells me that she's not taking me seriously, even though I mean it. "You don't need to worry about me. Just because I'm not two hundred and some pounds of muscle doesn't mean that I can't take care of myself." She studies my face long and hard. "Besides, everyone knows the squishiest parts of a person are on the inside and that makes you no less vulnerable than me."

"I'm happy you're here." I'm shit at deflecting, but Georgia allows it. For now. "You need to come back more often. Seattle's only an hour away."

"An hour? No. There's always at least three hours of sitting in traffic to even get out of the city. It's hard when I work Monday to Friday and have to spend all weekend prepping lessons and marking."

"It's summer. Come camp out at Mom and Dad's."

"Maybe for a few days."

The store hours are noon until five Tuesday to Friday, open all day Saturday, closed Sunday and Monday. Georgia told me first thing that she's staying until Monday morning since our parents begged her to make it a family dinner tomorrow night. It's not lost on me that they pointedly also invited Willa.

"Willa's going to go out picking tomorrow." She's already asked me if I want to

come with her. Code for, ‘will you come and do the heavy lifting and nasty sifting, battle rabid raccoons and evil spiders’ for me?’

“Ahh. And you’re absolutely going.”

“She’s going to pay me for my time. I don’t have to ride in her truck either. I can follow behind on my bike. She’s still freaked out about the size of the truck and backing the trailer up and stuff like that, so I should be there to help her.”

“Are you telling me this because you want to drive home just how much you sound like the sweetest couple ever, or because you want me to come with you?”

I treat my sister to a sigh that comes from the very bottom of my exhausted soul. She just grins in response. “I thought you might like to come.”

“Because you’re secretly in love with Willa and looking for family approval?”

Cue sigh number two with a hint of dramatic flair. “Because everyone could always use more friends. She’s a nice person. So passionate about all the old junk. She loves the most horrific things. You should see this devil monkey she has behind the counter in there. It’s going to join her collection of dolls that are always watching.”

Georgia claps her hands. “I’ll have to go back in and ask to see it. I was debating about a few of those paintings for the condo. It’s a travesty that I moved in a year ago and the walls are still mostly bare. If she has time, which I doubt she will, I would love to see her creepy dolls.”

“Come picking tomorrow and you’ll probably find something a whole lot cheaper, although I’m sure Willa would give you the family discount.” I wince as soon as I say it. I might look like a big dumb jock who only knows endless lists of football stats and walks around reliving high school glory days, but I normally think before I speak.

“You could ask to see her collection of weird stuff before we go out. She has the horror show upstairs in her apartment.”

One of Georgia’s light blond brows arches up.

Fuck. Walked straight into a trap again.

“I’m her landlord,” I remind her. “I also renovated the whole place and that included spending hours hanging art and putting up shelves for her collections because I’m a good friend and I can take one for the team like that.”

Georgia never was the kind of older sister who laid into her two poor little brothers. We had an unspoken truce, as well as real affection when we were older. Even as young kids, Clem and I didn’t torment her—much—and she was never bossy. She lets the Willa line of questioning drop.

“Picking sounds kind of fun.”

“There might be raccoons and rats. Mutated ones, she’s got this thing for roadkill taxidermy.”

She shuffles in place like she’s in a hurry to get going right this second. “I grew up here, you know. I’m not technically a city girl. I know the rats and raccoons are just regular ones. And anyway, as long as you offer yourself as a sacrifice first, I think it should be alright. It sounds sort of fun to go through piles of treasure.”

“I think you mean junk.”

“I’m sure Willa would have your balls for calling it that.”

“Nah. She hears it often enough. It’s a standing joke now. As for the raccoons, I

promise I'll always be your first line of defense.”

“My realistic stipulation is that you let me ride behind you on your bike. Not because I'm afraid to talk to Willa the whole way, but because I spend my days teaching fifth graders. I want some adventure in my life.” She reads my hesitation wrong. “Don't say that Mom and Dad would freak. You and Clem shouldn't gatekeep on the exciting danger.”

“It's not that. My bike only seats one.”

“No it doesn't!” She crosses her arms. “Since when?”

“Since I sold the other. Last year.”

“Oh. After...”

“Yeah.” After Jodie . I didn't like the reminder of it. Too many memories. I'd been toying with getting something classic and restoring it. On one of Willa's picks, I found an old Harley just sitting under someone's tarp in a barn. A forty-four Harley WLA. “I'm riding a bike I restored.” I point towards the sidewalk, at the current love of my life. The bike sits proudly parked along the row of others belonging to my club brothers. Her flat green paint doesn't glisten in the sun. She's not all chrome and shiny metal. With her camel colored leather seat and saddle bags, she looks like she's been transplanted straight from history. She stands out from all the others because she's nothing like them. “She's glorious, isn't she?”

“Looks uncomfortable,” Georgia deadpans.

“Maybe a little, but her soul makes up for it. She deserves to be ridden.”

“I didn't know you knew how to do something like that. Sure, you've been working

at the club's garage for years, but I thought you just did cars."

I can't help but beam with a small amount of pride. "Pretty much. But the internet is great, and there are guys there that have been doing mechanics for decades. They helped me."

"You should restore another and put it into shows or something. You could make a nice business for yourself that way."

"Haven't you heard? I'm now a landlord." I sweep my hand over the massive brick building. "Property only begets more property."

"Sage, little bro. But in all seriousness, I'm glad to see you happy again. We always used to bug you about being the golden child in the family. We're all golden children, but you deserve to have the sun shine on you. Jodie was... she was kind of difficult, you know?"

A pang shoots through my chest so brutal that I nearly reach up to bang it away like people thump their chest after accidentally swallowing water wrong. My family loved Jodie for my sake, or at least they made a real effort to. It didn't matter to them that she'd been a dancer when I met her in Seattle, or that I was smitten from the first. I thought it was love at first sight, but a few months ago, my mom asked me if that's really what it was. I had to admit, with the pain and power of hindsight, that it might have been more lust than love and turned into me trying real hard to make something work when it was never destined to be a true relationship.

"Yeah." I toe the grass while the crowd around us grows, as people drive up to park, or walk up in pairs and groups.

I took Jodie right off that stage and set her on the back of my bike. I thought we were riding off into the sunset, but sunsets don't last forever. There's real life to be lived,

and it was tough for her. She wasn't ready to settle down with someone. She talked about babies, but only because she needed a child to save her. To save us. I knew that, but I damn well would have given her whatever she wanted.

Maybe the universe was trying to save me from making a terrible mistake by fucking with my body.

"Mom was really worried about you. She's never share private conversations you guys had, but we've been hurting with you ." Georgia's compassion sinks into my bones. Her eyes search my face for some sign that I'm okay.

For months after, I was sure that the best parts of me left with Jodie. I was hollowed out and going through the motions, numbing myself so that I didn't have to feel the rage and pain.

"It's hard to be a shell forever when you're surrounded by guys who give a real shit about you." Guys who have been through far worse and come out the other side. Even if they don't say anything, you just know they've got you, and that means something.

"You seem happier. Like you're not just faking it. You suck at that, by the way. At Christmas, we could all tell that you weren't yourself."

"No you couldn't. I was fine at Christmas." If only they knew.

I was not fine at Christmas. I have never been fine. There's regular people and then there's me. By age fucking ten I knew that something was wrong. The way the world seemed to close up and become a dark and scary place for no reason at all. I was surrounded by love, but I still felt nauseous all the time. I've lived with anxiety for so long that the near constant adrenaline, lack of sleep, the churning stomach, and the racing thoughts that match my unsettled heartrate are like a second skin. That's my

real home. I have no notion of what it is to be normal, but I've never wanted my family to worry about me. That's not the only reason I got good at pasting a smile on my face and turning my life into something of a facade, but it was the start. and it snowballed from there.

"Simon." She pointedly uses my given name.

As far as I'm concerned, my family can call me whatever they want. We're one of those rare families who didn't wind up hating each other. There were rough patches here and there, but we've stuck together, and they've earned the right to the name they knew me as for most of my life.

"I thought Jodie took my heart, my hopes, my dreams, and my ability to ever be truly happy or love again," I admit on a grunt. Sometimes it's easier to give part of the truth so that no one will ever look beneath that to the festering wounds underneath.

"But the wounded parts have started to close up?" she asks hopefully.

"It's been almost a year."

"Time might heal things, but I think it's all relative. Some people might need a decade."

I shake my head firmly. "I'm doing better. I can admit that the parts that make love last weren't there." Physically, we always worked, but maybe that's exactly why we couldn't work in the end. You need more than that to cement you together.

I'm very blessed to have a wonderful family, a biker family, and a town full of good friends at my back. I know that I'm blessed and despite the shit that eats away at me most days, I know that it's nothing compared to what others have had to survive.

Most of the guys in the club haven't had a tenth of what I've been given, but they've endured.

"Mom!" Georgia suddenly shouts, blasting me right in the ear. "Dad!" She waves frantically through the crowd which has probably swelled to five times what it was at noon, though it's probably not even one yet.

My chest does some welling of its own. I'm happy the town turned out for Willa. Hopefully, she makes some sales today and they aren't just coming for the prospect of free burgers, but even if that's true, it's still great publicity. The local radio stations will probably both stop by later.

Wizard helped Willa run an advertising campaign online, and my club brothers put up grand opening flyers all over the city like they usually do for our clubhouse cookouts. Between that and word of mouth, news seems to have reached every part of Hart.

The crowd is a mix of young and old, and comprised of people from all walks of life. Ella probably recruited the entire college to come. Crow's old lady Tarynn works at a salon now and likely told each and every person who walked in the door. Lark worked her magic with Penny's teachers and the parents. What she couldn't cover, Raiden probably handled. Raiden and Lark, as well as Tyrant, are as homegrown as me, but we went to different schools and know different people. I myself have spread the word every chance I got, and I've had chances for six months.

"Come on! Mom and Dad will want you to show them around inside!" Georgia grabs my elbow and eagerly tugs me through the sea of bodies.

My throat closes up, but I force myself to take a few deep breaths. It's not the amount of people here that triggers the sensation. I have no triggers. The panic that sometimes completely debilitates me is completely random. It strikes without warning. Not only have I become good at hiding the anxiety, but I'm really good at

pretending that I don't have panic attacks. That might seem impossible, but it's not.

Except if I had one now.

I couldn't exactly feign that I'd run too hard or got the wind knocked out of me.

The sun is bright and hot overhead. I suppose sunstroke could be an option. I know this is fucking pathetic. Believe me, nothing gives me more anxiety than knowing that I'm not in control of the anxiety.

I don't even get a chance to open my mouth after a round of hugs, before Mom starts asking about dinner tomorrow night. Have I asked Willa? Is she coming? Does she like beef roast? What kind of dessert does Georgia want her to make?

My dad stands there and lets her get it out of her system, the softest look of love on his face, even after all these years, his hand resting lightly on the small of her back in unspoken communication that he's there .

I can't say I appreciated my parents love all that much growing up. As a kid, I often was pretty immature about it, but as a grown man, I'm learning. I watch. I listen. I soak it in with different eyes. They've been together for twenty-nine years, and that's no small deal.

"Mom!" I cut off her endless questions, laughing. I often have to act because of the fact that I'm not 'normal,' but I feel good today. Despite the crowds, despite having to jam myself into Willa's truck this morning, despite the stress of getting everything ready for today, the heavy sensation that usually sits hard on my shoulders is a much lighter mantel. "Let's go inside. We'll look around and you can ask Willa anything you need."

"Oh." Mom waves her hand, but what she really wants is for me to convince her. "I

don't want to bother her. She's probably busy."

"She is busy, but she'll be so happy to see you and talk to you."

"She's the best, Simon. Just an absolute sweetheart." My mom, like Georgia, isn't exactly subtle.

My throat thickens and something in my chest burns. I know they're right, but it's not that simple. What Willa and I have is a good thing. Losing Jodie crushed me but breaking the trust the guys—especially Bullet—have put in me, as well as possibly fucking things up and ruining a friendship that has been responsible for getting me through the hardest time of my life and bringing me through to the other side, isn't an option.

Feelings are messy. They're dangerous.

Even if I could untangle mine, Willa's her own person. A force of nature, Georgia called her. That's pretty much the truest description I've ever heard.

Then there's the fact that some days, I tend to wig out and even though those are the bad ones, the good ones are still generally baddish. How would it be fair to saddle someone else with that? I tried to tell Jodie, and she told me exactly what I already thought. That no grown man should be this weak. I never really thought of myself as pathetic until she used that exact word.

"I know, Mom," I mumble.

Alongside Georgia, we thread through the crowd to take my parents inside. They've already walked this building countless times throughout renovations, but they haven't seen it all put together, and though this is Willa's day, that swell of pride swamps my chest again.

It's not just the parts that I'm responsible for, like the construction and grunt work, but how my club brothers and their families made this a reality. And above all, at how the dreams and hard work of a woman, beautiful in every way, culminated in this incredible day.

I get another twinge in my chest, this one unwelcome, but I refuse to let anything ruin this. I've become a master at breathing, though subtly, and I do that now, smiling as I exhale and using my natural charm on the inhales so that no one would ever suspect that the golden boy is so, so tarnished.

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Willa

“Put the mask on, Atlas. Barns are dirty and dusty. There could be mouse shit, bird shit, other shit. All of that could carry disease.”

Atlas crosses his arms and tilts his face in such a way that his long hair falls forward in waves that shimmer in the sun. His stubborn expression only highlights the chiseled planes of his face, and his eyes spark with defiance.

The sun is unrelenting today. We’re in a June heatwave, which is pretty much unheard of with Hart’s more temperate climate. Staring at the man right in front of me who is nothing short of sports magazine cover gorgeous, my skin breaks out in goosebumps while sweat trickles down the back of my neck and beads at my temples.

“I don’t think a little mask is going to help.”

He flicks the N95 back at me so that it sways in my outstretched hand.

“Don’t be a donkey’s ass,” Georgia snaps, grabbing the mask from me and forcing it at her brother. “Put it on Simon.”

I try very hard not to smile. Watching these two together is pure magic. People expect Atlas’ ego to be the size of this entire fucking state because he looks the way he does, but he’s actually soft spoken and kindhearted. The guys at the club rib him good and he jokes around with them, giving as good as he gets, but with his sister, he’s much softer.

He rolls his eyes at her, takes the mask, and walks it over to the Harley he restored. He hangs it on the handlebars next to his helmet. “There. I know where to find it if I need it.”

I swallow back the urge to curse at him for his stubbornness and angle myself towards the ramshackle cedar barn instead.

As far as old barns go, it’s about as decrepit as they come, but looks like it won’t fall in on us when we venture inside. The farmhouse at the top of the circular driveway which loops around the whole yard and encompasses several other outbuildings and sheds, is in a little better shape, but not much. At least some of the house’s white paint remains, but the barn’s red has long stripped away, leaving fuzzy graying boards behind.

“Are you sure she said it was okay to just take out whatever we want?”

I drove around this whole area a few months ago, in search of places that might be hidden gems when it came to picking. I had this one on the list, and a few weeks ago, I knocked on the door of that little white farmhouse.

Agatha is lovely. She asked me in for tea, and when I explained to her what it was I wanted, she said that I was welcome to come back.

“She gave us the go ahead. I told her that I’d make a pile outside the barn, and she could come inspect everything to make sure she’s okay with selling it, and then she could give me a price. I thought that was fair.”

“And she said the whole barn is full?”

“To the rafters.”

Georgia rubs her hands in glee, then slips on her white mask, snapping the yellow elastic straps around her messy bun. Her dark blue eyes peek out over the top, long lashes sweeping up and down.

“Safety glasses?” I produce a set from my bag. I have bottles of water, my first aid kit, gloves for all of us, as well as extra masks. I like to come prepared.

“And a hard hat probably,” she quips, eyeing the barn. “I’m kidding. I don’t think the roof will come down on us.”

“It’s not a bad idea for next time.”

Georgia borrowed some old clothes from her mom and a pair of ancient sneakers. I have my steel toed boots on, old jeans, and a hoodie. I’m going to swelter in it and I’m already sweating, but being protected from insects, vermin, scrapes, and rusty nails is important.

I take the lead, Georgia behind me, Atlas grumbling good naturedly in the rear. He wasn’t grouching so much when he found the motorcycle love of his life a while ago.

That day is pretty much the epitome of even if I live to be a hundred, his joy at uncovering that bike will live rent free in my head forever and always.

He and Jodie broke up right as Lynette and I moved to Hart. I’ve known the Atlas he gives to the world and more, because he’s let me in at times, but I’d never seen him happy the way he was that day. Enraptured. Enthralled. Captivated. I watched the life rush into his eyes and was breathless at the transformation. Maybe also a little bit irrationally jealous of the bike, because it brought him such joy.

I don’t know what it would take to have him look at me that way.

When I pry the heavy wooden main door open, a cloud of dust and a swarm of flies hits me straight in the face. I duck, screaming into the mask, waving my hands frantically.

Atlas shoves past his sister and puts up his fists, ready to fight whatever just scared the shit out of me.

“Motherfucking raccoons!” He yells. “Come out and fight like men!”

“It was just flies.” My face gets hot. I can’t believe I lost my mind like that. “I just didn’t expect to get nailed with a swarm in the face like a cloud of bats blasting out of a cave.”

“That’s still really gross,” Georgia says sympathetically. She blinks into the gloom.

I sweep my gaze around behind the safety glasses. They make me feel vaguely nauseous, but they’re tight to my face and prevent a lot of the dust from getting in my eyes. The boards either were never pressed tightly together, or they’ve warped with time, leaving large cracks that let in a decent amount of sunlight into the whole barn.

The thing is packed. Not to the roof, at least. We can still start from the front and work our way back, clearing paths.

I’m aware that this is fodder for most people’s nightmare, but to me, it’s a simple equation. Piles of junk equals happy place. I’m pretty much salivating here. Every step I take into the barn raises enough dust to choke on.

I set my hand on Atlas’ arm. His skin is warm, baked from the sun, but that’s not why it scorches my palm. “It’s really dusty. Want to wait by the door so I can pass things out to you?” His face softens just a little and I press my luck, giving him big puppy dog eyes probably magnified by the safety glasses. “Please?”

“I think unless you’re wearing the mask, you shouldn’t be in here,” Georgia agrees. “You have to make it in one piece for dinner tonight or Mom will be so disappointed.”

“We also don’t need you getting mouse or bird poo viruses.”

“Are you sure?” He’s ready to play the hero and defend us from the horrors of this place, but the only horrifying thing I can see is about forty-two years of accumulated grime.

“I’m sure.”

“Scream again if you need me.” He throws back his head and laughs, the slanting sunlight playing over his golden mane, sparkling like his eyes really are the sea.

I’m temporarily mesmerized by his mouth, watching the strong column of his bronzed throat vibrate, captivated by the way the sound rolls through his shoulders and chest, all the way down to abs you could literally scrub clothes on.

I’d be the clothes. I’d love to volunteer. Just saying.

Fuck .

I need to stop looking at him like that, or Georgia is going to notice it’s not just all the old junk that I’m drooling over.

He retreats to the door and steps outside, probably relieved to get out of here so he can breathe, though he’d never say so. He might not have a big ego, but he does have his pride.

“Boys and their dumb pride,” Georgia mutters, echoing my thoughts exactly.

Okay, not exactly. If she knew my real musings about Atlas, she'd puke right into that mask she has on and that would be a true catastrophe.

We make a path, pushing and piling things to the side to reveal boxes, crates, suitcases, and old trunks.

"This is so overwhelming," Georgia mutters, moving a stack of old magazines that I'm going to look through when I get a chance.

"It's a lot to take in. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Not overheating?"

"No. I really like it. It's dirty and kind of gross, and totally overstimulating, but I can see how exciting it would be to find that one special thing. Even just rescuing a bunch of the regular stuff from rotting is so amazing."

"It's a time capsule for sure. Agatha said she hasn't been in here for decades. A lot of this stuff belonged to her parents and her siblings, as well as extended family. When someone died, they just moved it all in and forgot about it."

"I hope unearthing it doesn't bring back bad memories for her. Or good ones, but they're sad too."

That's the last thing I want to do. Agatha is so sweet. "Nostalgia is tricky. It's so wild how something might look like trash to one person, but if another had that item growing up, finding it again becomes priceless to them."

She nods so hard that her mask half slips off and she has to adjust it. "My parents

have this super ugly old clock on the wall in their kitchen. I guess you probably saw it when you've been at the house. It was a wedding present, so it's been there forever. If they ever got rid of it, I'd have to say that I'd miss it, but I didn't even realize that until right now."

"That's exactly what I'm talking about." I give her a quick scan to make sure that she truly is doing okay. We're into the thick of the dust, and the air is close to the point of stifling. I'm soaking wet, and she has to be feeling it too. "You look lovely, by the way. That's a great vintage sweater."

"It's pretty much going to be a sacrifice after today." She shoves a few boxes aside before reaching for one labelled 'TOYS' to crack it open. She has great instincts. Vintage toys are one of the best things to find, at least in my opinion.

Sure, it would be great to find a piece of art or a random vase or necklace worth millions, but those are unicorns. I'm more about keeping my expectations realistic.

"I'm great with laundry. I can wash them for you if you want."

"Oh goodness, these are just throw-aways." She starts rifling through the box. "She won't be mad. Whoa! Look at this!"

I hustle over and we go through the box together. The whole thing is pure magic . Lots of stuff from the forties and fifties, and a few from the sixties. There are tons of little figures, cast iron, a few plastic pieces that are in surprisingly good condition. The dolls, however immaculate they might be, are still the stuff of nightmares.

"Ooh, look! Here's a monkey like the one you have at the shop." It's true. Pearl could have a friend, although this one is in good shape and flocked all over. "And what are these?" Georgia pulls out a few marionettes. "Oh lord, these are frightening!" She laughs so hard that dust puffs off the front of her mask.

I fold the box back up and carry it to the front of the barn, setting it by the door. Atlas is nowhere in sight, but I'll call him when I have a stack.

That incredible toy find sets the pace. For the next few hours, Georgia and I dig and dig and dig. We find tons of old books and magazines, antique clothes, tools, soft furnishings like lace tablecloths and curtains, hats, gloves, shoes, ancient tins and jars, oil signs, a few radios and clocks, a whole chest of silver flatware, old radios and typewriters, a box with brass décor, lamps, and a bunch of old artwork wrapped in plastic and taped in cardboard so fragile that it flakes away when we handle it.

I uncover a Hoosier cabinet that has seen better days, and find several chairs, end tables, and the pie safe of my dreams. There's even an old jukebox in the corner.

In the end, Atlas has to mask up and help us carry the heavy stuff out. The pile on the lawn grows, transforming into a mountain.

If Agatha is watching us from the house, I hope she's getting a kick out of this.

This is pretty much the best pick of my life. I'm so happy I brought all the spare cash I had on hand.

The hardest part is knowing when to stop, but despite nearly reaching my breaking point for soaking through my clothes and seeing black spots that aren't related to dust or tricks of the sunlight in the barn, I press on.

Behind me, Georgia and Atlas are manhandling a trunk of old clothes.

"Your trailer is going to be full," Atlas calls, his deep, rich voice muffled through the mask but still sending a dark shiver trilling up my spine. "Let's call it."

I know that I have to haggle over price and load yet, plus still drive back to Hart and get cleaned up in time for dinner. We got here early, but we've been at this for hours, and time slips away when you're having fun.

Or not, as Atlas would probably say.

I promised to pay him, and I'll make sure he accepts, even if I have to give the money to his parents or slip it to Bullet.

I do one last sweep of the still crowded area. I could come back here and pick for days. Maybe I will. No, fuck that. No maybes about it. I'm definitely coming back.

The humped top of a gorgeous steamer trunk catches my eye off in the corner at the very back of the barn.

There's a second door back here, and the weird thing is, when I look across the pile of stuff, it appears as though there's been a path cleared recently. Maybe Agatha tried to do a bit of cleaning before I came? She said she hadn't been in here, but maybe she meant other than trying to get the back door open. She might have been worried that I wouldn't even be able to get into the barn.

There isn't the same layer of grime and dust here, but maybe that's because at the back, the boards are gapping far apart, letting in more light than at the front or the sides. Instead of blowing dirt in, the wind could have forced it all to the front.

Apparently, the flies too.

Never forgetting that one either. Shudder.

"Atlas! Georgia! I just want this trunk!" I clear a path to it, so that by the time my help arrives, I can grasp one of the leather handles on the side and tug. I try again, but

the thing won't budge. It must be stuck to the floor. "Oh my god, it's heavy."

"We're not taking that old beast." Atlas circles around it. He's covered in grime and so is Georgia. They still look fabulous, but I can't imagine I look any better than yogurt left out in the sun. For three days. "It's locked." He grasps both handles and tries to lift it, but it doesn't budge. "And it's insanely heavy. There could be a body in there for all we know."

Georgia squeals and starts flapping her arms. "Don't say that!" She snaps. "Eww!"

I work my way to the front, brushing past Atlas. The hairs on my arms stand on end from the contact. I drop down and rub my gloved fingers over the metal lock. It's old. Probably as old as the trunk itself, which is at least a hundred years, though I'd guess more.

"This is a true steamer trunk and she's gorgeous. There's no way I can leave her behind."

"If there was a body in there, I think it would just be bones by now, and a whole lot lighter," Georgia points out.

"That's disgusting. Can you imagine how horrible it would be to cut the lock off and find that?" Atlas makes a fake gagging sound.

Yes. For real. I can't imagine that he's been a saint doing his club stuff. I know some of the men there have had to have killed someone in the past, and that it wasn't in the far distant past, before they joined the Satan's Angels. There's no one I'd trust my big sister with other than Bullet, and he was a soldier for two decades. He's never said so, but I'm positive he's killed people.

It's so crazy that Atlas is shuddering about this old trunk.

“This is a sweet old lady.” I’m not going down the direction of club business. I have to rationalize other ways. “She’s owned this farm for a long time and her parents before her. I’m pretty sure they don’t have skeletons stashed in their barn.”

“You never know. Just because she looks sweet doesn’t mean she’s not a serial killer.”

“Oh Jesus, now it’s more than one body?” Georgia shakes her head. “Come on, Willa, I’ll help you carry it to the trailer.” She takes one handle and motions me to the other.

“No, I’ll do it,” Atlas sighs. “At least it’s not crazy dusty like the rest.”

He bends his legs and in an astounding feat of strength that causes all his muscles to ripple and bulge, as well as the veins running along his forearms to pop, he braces himself and then hefts. The trunk literally groans and grunts, but comes off the ground.

Once he’s got it picked up, Atlas doesn’t waste time. He hurries out with it, bowed under its weight. We race after him and watch him set it down in the middle of the pile.

He straightens, and I’m about to tell Georgia that she should unmask and grab some water while I go get Agatha, but I don’t get a chance.

Atlas goes rigid, but then he sways. I almost think he’s playing when he staggers, it’s that exaggerated, but then he goes down hard, landing on the grass on his side. If he’s playing us, he’s really damn good at not moving.

Georgia and I are both so shocked we can only stare, and then stare at each other.

Fuck. If he jumps up at me after scaring me like this and laughs in my face, I swear I'm going to kill him myself.

Except... he's not jumping up. He's not moving at all.

"Oh my god!" I rip my mask off and go running.

Georgia's right behind me, yelling her brother's name. "Simon!"

I hit the ground right beside Atlas, scooping his head into my lap and cradling it before it occurs to me that maybe I shouldn't have moved him.

I tear the grimy mask off and stroke his beautiful face.

He's clammy, with a dirt ring around his face where the mask was. It's clean underneath, but he was probably telling the truth about not being able to breathe in it and it's hot . He was doing all the heavy lifting out here in the sun and I was just letting him .

"Here!" Georgia drops down beside me with one of the water bottles from the bag. I set it under the tire of the truck, where I could find the most shade. They were chilled before, and now they're not so cold, but she upends it over Atlas' forehead.

He stirs, his eyes flickering before they open. They aren't focused, which is scary as hell, but after another bottle gets dribbled over his face and neck, he blinks and focuses on my face.

"Oh, thank fuck." I tilt his face up, giving him a bit of height so Georgia can tuck the water bottle against his lips and slowly give him some.

I should have made sure that everyone stayed hydrated.

I didn't demand that Atlas do anything, but he would have felt pressured to keep up with us. We at least had the shelter of the barn. It's blisteringly hot out here. Worse than in the barn by far. I can't believe that we're still only an hour from Seattle and not in the damn desert.

"Thank fuck," I whisper again. "You scared the shit out of us."

I can't stop stroking his cheek. I try to force myself to quit, but that only results in me smoothing my fingers over his hair, damp with perspiration and water, gritty from all the dust kicked up in the barn.

"It was the mask," he croaks. "Told you that you can't breathe through those things."

I've known Atlas for just about a year and in all that time, I've seen him sad and mad. I've heard him laugh and I've known him to scowl. I know how loyal he is to the club and how hard he worked on the old factory building he bought, with a single minded devotion. We camped out on the floor in sleeping bags when we worked on renovations long into the night, and went to class together early the next morning. We studied together. Ate packed lunches side by side. Horsed around, sweated, and freaking bled together. But, in all this time, I've never seen him sick.

"I think you have heatstroke, Simon. Just stay down there for a second and catch your breath. I'm going to pour the rest of this water on your head to cool you down and you should drink the last of this bottle."

"Don't breathe a word of this to Mom and Dad," he groans. "The last thing I need is for them to worry more about me than they already do."

"You ride a bike and you patched in with a biker club when you were eighteen. I think they have a right to worry."

He cracks a lopsided grin that makes my heart race. I hope that he can't feel my pulse kick up in my wrists. I'm very aware now just how close I am to him. His head is in my lap.

In. My. Lap.

I'm touching him the way I could only have dreamed.

Yes, it was done out of care and sheer panic, but I'm still holding him and now that he's awake and looking up at me with eyes as deep as twin wells, it hits harder.

I draw in a shuddering breath. Seeing Atlas' big body so silent and still, prone on the ground, scared me senseless. He's normally so full of life, with his magnetic charm and all his vitality. It was horrible seeing him brought to a crashing standstill. Of all people, I know how quickly life can change. My mother died when I was ten. My brain still can't compute what's happening right now. I can't because I don't ever want to go there.

My stomach churns violently just thinking about something ever happening to Atlas.

Honestly, I could watch him fall in love with someone else if that made him happy, even if it killed me, but I could never stand to see him so badly hurt or sick that he wouldn't recover.

I don't cry often, but tears sting my eyes and ache in my nose. I clench my jaw to hold them back. I'd look like an utter imbecile if I let them fall.

"Hey now!"

My head snaps up at the shout from down the driveway. I never saw a more beautiful sight than Agatha hobbling her way carefully over to us, a wooden pail and a ladle

swinging in one hand like we've time warped back into the eighteen hundreds.

She's rocky on her feet and I feel terrible that I wasn't there to help her down the long, twisty gravel driveway. Georgia rushes over, and it's only when I see her take the pail for Agatha that I realize she has a big blue towel in her other hand and it's absolutely sodden.

"It's a brutal hot day," she says in her soft, lisping voice. "I thought you could use this."

Atlas doesn't get to protest, not even politely. I take the towel and slap it onto his forehead. It's a hand towel and covers most of eyes too. He shoves it up, shooting me a dirty look that speaks volumes as to just how much he likes being fussed over. He's embarrassed at what happened, but I don't care that he doesn't like it. He's getting it anyway.

I had this thought that I could wait. That I'd be here, patient, in the background. That our friendship was the most important thing in the world. All of that is true. I know what a risk and a disaster it could be to push towards anything more, but we're both so young that I hadn't lost the concept of immortality.

Georgia passes me the metal soup ladle, full of cold water. I bring it to Atlas' lips. He tries to grab it, but I knock his hand away and pour so that he has to drink. He does. Deeply. It's not the first time I've been transfixed by his mouth. He's clean shaven today, but in the past, he's had a patchy beard that the guys at the club made fun of him for. It didn't look bad on him. I'd wondered what it would feel like, chaffing against my face or between my thighs. There's nothing to detract from his strong jaw, carved cheekbones, or that beguiling mouth.

I could lean forward just a few inches and meet his mouth with mine.

I tip too much water as my hands shake. He nearly chokes, and then gently shoves it aside. He's had enough of us trying to help him. He rolls off me and shoves himself into a sitting position. He immediately presses the wet towel to his forehead, but probably because he's seeing black spots.

Georgia takes the ladle from me, dips it, and drinks gratefully before passing it over. Our water bottles are empty, and I take long mouthfuls. The water is from a well, I'd say, with a distinct metallic taste that reminds me of blood, but the ice cold wet is heaven going down my dusty, dry throat.

I jump up. "I was just going to come up and get you to discuss pricing," I say to Agatha after replacing the ladle in the bucket. I take her arm and guide her over to the giant pile.

We face the pile and I'm about to start listing off items that aren't visible, going through in my head what I think would be a fair price for everything and then give a total, when Agatha drops a bomb on me.

"You should just take it all for free, dear. And go and die off my property." She's got one hell of a poker face before she cackles.

"My goodness, we're not going to sue you. Atlas is fine. He just got overheated and couldn't breathe with the mask on."

"I was just joking. I hope you all live long lives yet."

"You and me both." I get that strange, burning, waterlogged feeling in my chest and tear ducts again. "I couldn't possibly take anything for free. I'd like to come back and pick again. My trailer will be packed full for today."

"It's powerful hot out. A good time to take a break."

“That too.”

“You’re welcome back anytime if you bring your gentleman friend with you. He’s a sight for sore old eyes.” Agatha glances Atlas’ way and cackles again. It grows into a raspy guffaw that starts seesawing in and out and ends on a snort. I have to laugh with her, it’s such a wild sound. “Oh, I know I’m an old crone now, but you should have seen me back in the day. I was quite a catch. You should have seen my late husband too. Whooooooweee!” She laughs so hard again that I swear her dentures are in danger of blowing out of her mouth. “I’m just messing. You’re welcome back anytime. You can pay me then.”

“Oh, no, Agatha, I couldn’t do that. You wouldn’t know what I had this time.”

Her lips scrunch, emphasizing all her wrinkles. “Let’s call it a grand then?”

“Seriously? You’re way undercharging me.”

She smiles so sweetly. “I’m just glad these things will go to people who can use them and love them again. They saw a lot of good memories, and that means more to me than money. I’m well set, sweetie.” She pats my hand. “The place might look rundown, but I only have my son, Phil, to leave it all to, and he’s not interested. He’ll probably bulldoze everything and sell the land. He’s already established. A lawyer in Washington.”

“My sister is a lawyer too.”

“Well, then,” she sighs, and in that sound, I can hear her loneliness.

This farmyard is over an hour from Hart, but I vow to make more time to come out here and visit her, if she’ll have me.

“I’ll be back in a few weeks, if that works?”

“It certainly does. Just give me a call ahead of time and I’ll have cookies waiting for you. I’d offer you some now, but you all look in need of cold water alone, and it was so hot I didn’t dare turn on the oven, so you’re SOL on that front.”

Hearing old people curse is a trip. It’s hilarious. “Thank you.”

I’ve always been a hugger and even though it’s sweltering and I’m filthy and sticky, I open my arms, and Agatha falls into the hug. She’s delicate, her bones frail, her long hair twisted up in a bun so wispy that spots of her scalp shine through, pink and vulnerable. I’m extra careful with her.

“Thank you. You’re a life saver. Literally.”

After I pay Agatha, Georgia and I do most of the loading. We force Atlas to sit in the shade that the big, enclosed beast casts. He grumbles about that until we need him to load the heavy pieces.

After I close it up and slip the locks on, I’m thoroughly exhausted. Forget paying just Atlas, I need to offer Georgia something too. If she won’t take money, I’ll be sure to give her some of those paintings from the shop that she was eying up yesterday, or whatever she’d like from today’s haul.

Atlas walks casually over to his bike. Georgia and I exchange panicked glances. We’re both red faced and streaked with grime and Atlas doesn’t look any better. He might think he’s fine, but there’s no way he’s getting on that bike.

“Simon!” Georgia yells, storming over. “You get in the front seat of that truck right now. Someone else can come back for your bike with you tomorrow.”

Atlas scoffs, slipping his helmet on and rolling his shoulders back stubbornly. “I’m fine. Just got overheated.”

“You passed out! There’s no way you’re driving back home. You could kill someone else, you moron.”

“I know I’m okay. This happened all the time in football games.”

Georgia picks up the bucket, which is still mostly full, storms over to the bike, and douses her brother with it.

I gasp as he sputters. “Georgia Marie!” He leaps off his bike, racing after her. She drops the bucket, screams, and pelts it across the lawn, straight for the truck. She hurtles into the back seat and slams the door on her brother before he can get to her.

By all rights, Atlas should resemble a drowned rat at this point. He’s sopping, sweaty, and dirt encrusted. That just heightens his attraction. He’s not paying attention to me, and I let my guard slip just enough that my eyes roam down his wet black t-shirt. It’s plastered to his muscular shoulders, his abs heaving against the cotton with every breath. His hair is drenched and slicked closer to his face. He looks like he just got out of the shower.

Wet t-shirt competitions shouldn’t just be for women.

My belly cramps and my thighs burn. I can’t blame it on the massive amount of physical labor either.

I tear my eyes away from him with great effort. “I’ll return Agatha’s bucket and the towel. I’ll ask her about leaving the bike.”

Atlas ignores me. There’s no way he’s leaving his bike. So he thinks.

I'm with Georgia on this one, and as I collect the bucket, I snatch the key from the bike. He can probably figure out how to start it without, seeing as he's a mechanic, but I want to make it as hard as possible for him.

After checking with Agatha that it's okay to leave the bike, I make sure I'm wearing my no nonsense face by the time I get back to the truck. I point at the front seat. "Get in, please. If we're going to get back to Hart and get cleaned up before dinner, we have to leave now."

Atlas is still wearing his stubborn face, but Georgia can hear me, and she clicks the locks up so we can get in. I dangle his key from my fingers.

"It's either ride with us or walk back."

I'm in the driver's seat before he can corner me and wrangle the keys from my hand.

As hot as that would be.

Fuck .

I don't know what happened to me today, but it's like someone has been broken up. My resolve, my patience, my reticence, shattered.

I grasp the wheel hard, even though it's hot enough to scorch my palms.

Atlas finally turns and stomps around to the passenger side. "Thank god," Georgia breaths. "Thank freaking god."

I'm not the least bit religious, but I have to agree. I'll get us safely back to Hart. I'll drop Atlas and Georgia off at their parents' house and then go and get cleaned up. A cold shower and a little bit of space and I'll have my head put neatly back together

for dinner.

And every day after.

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Atlas

I don't know what's more frightening. The chances of Georgia telling my parents about me passing out with heatstroke, or that she'll egg my parents into reminiscing about the past. Both prospects are daunting.

Georgia and Willa have never been at my parents' house at the same time, and it adds a new dynamic that's a little bit like staring down the barrel of a gun.

The old wooden table practically groans under the weight of all the dishes. Scalloped potatoes, mashed potatoes, ham, gravy, candied yams, lemon carrots, peas, corn on the cob, fresh baked dinner rolls—Mom's made all my favorites and most of Georgia's too.

“Wow!” Willa rubs her hands together eagerly. “This looks incredible. I'm starved after today.”

“Start passing plates around and we'll get you all squared away.” Mom takes charge, filling everyone's plates to bursting.

I know for a fact that Willa hates yams with a burning passion, but she says nothing when they get added to the side of hers. I know she'll swallow them down and smile all the way through it.

Willa dropped us off earlier, and took the truck and trailer back to park it around the backside of her building, where the old loading docks used to be. We kept one intact, just for that purpose.

She showed up back here fifteen minutes ago, freshly showered, hair blown out in bouncy, streaky blonde waves. Her makeup is always heavy, but still somehow tasteful. She's not tall like her sister, and where Lynette is built rail thin, Willa has curves for days. The black floral dress and kitten heels she arrived in outline every bit of her trim waist, round ass, and generous breasts.

I know I shouldn't be noticing things about her body like that when we're just friends, but I have eyes. I'm a man. I have a dick and hence, I have a man's brain.

Willa and Georgia get their plates first and wait politely until everyone is served before they start eating. They share secret smiles with each other, like they're just waiting to blow my cover over here. They're the fastest friends to ever have existed.

Willa eats all her yams first and downs an entire glass of water before quickly washing them away with a large mouthful of ham.

I stare at her blatantly and she winks at me, wearing her best, there isn't a yam that I've ever met who could best me expression.

Honestly, I'm not sure that anything could get the best of Willa.

Over the past year, we've grown close to the point where she's shared some deeply personal things with me. I know that her mom was murdered in a drug deal gone wrong when she was ten and that Lynette raised her. I know they have different dads, which is why they have strikingly different features. I was the one she first confessed that she hated college and would rather be back working her job at a vintage clothing store in Seattle. We ditched class the same day and I took her out looking at real estate. She fell in love with the factory and since it had been sitting empty for so many years, I got a great deal.

I borrowed a hefty amount of money from my parents, but the largest chunk of cash

came from my savings. I had a good amount of money set aside, hoping to buy Jodie the house of her dreams here in Hart. She just never found the right one.

I know now that it couldn't exist because she never truly wanted to stay here.

Willa doesn't know about any of that. I'll never tell her. The old factory was the best way that money could have been spent.

I'd buy it and put all those hours into renovating all over again in a second, just to see her smile and hear her laugh all the way through it.

She's been giving me weird looks ever since I came to and found my head in her lap, her touch sweeter and more invigorating than that water poured all over me. I was just lucky that I was in no position to pop a hard-on. It could have happened, given that I woke up staring down the swell of her breasts. She should have smelled sweaty and dusty from the barn, but the same tropical coconut vanilla and strawberry sweet scent still clung to her.

She's never looked at me the way she did when I opened my eyes. Worry isn't the right word. More like, if I wasn't in the world, then she wouldn't want to be either.

My mom clears her throat, a soft smile on her face that is a direct cue that she's about to step straight back into the past. She likes to do that when Georgia and Clem are here, talking about old times. We all laugh about it, injecting our memories. It's normally a fun time.

But Willa has never heard any of this.

And Georgia's sassy look says that she's going to share a few choice memories just for Willa's benefit. My sister would never truly hurt me by sharing secrets or wounding me on purpose, but embarrassing childhood stories aren't off limits. She

knows I'll laugh along with her in the end.

"You should have seen Simon," Mom gushes. "When he was six years old, his grandma went into the nursing home here. My mom. Unfortunately, she had Parkinson's, and it was so advanced by that time that she needed full-time care. She was scared to go, but she quickly learned to love it. She made lots of friends there and she wasn't unhappy. There were people who had no family there, and so for Christmas, Simon wanted to make everyone a card so that every single person got a gift. He put a one dollar bill in each, even though it pretty much emptied out his whole piggy bank. It was the sweetest thing."

"Mom. Stop." I duck my head, my face uncharacteristically hot.

"Aww," Willa sighs. "That is super sweet. Even as a kid, you loved helping people."

Mom nods, getting carried away. "That's right. When he was ten, he had a few friends that couldn't go to football camp because they didn't have the money. He begged us to let him go out and do odd jobs around the neighborhood to raise money, and in the end, he made more than enough for them to all go."

"Oh my god." Willa fans her hand in front of her eyes like she's going to cry .

Christ, she doesn't often get teary eyed over anything. Willa is the kind of girl that would have been ridiculously popular in high school, but at the same time, never would have been cruel or unkind to anyone. People of all ages and walks of life would have loved her. Without being in the 'it' crowd, she would have made those girls obscenely jealous. She's athletic and has told me how much she loved softball and volleyball growing up. She was also on her school's debate and chess teams. She's got the kind of body that would make women insanely jealous, and could put a man straight into the grave with just a single look of those cool blue eyes.

On the exterior, Willa is a lot of fun. She's tough too and has the best wit and sense of humor. Underneath though, I know how soft she is. The waters just run deeper than she lets on.

"You were the one who found Kitty Sue in the alley on the way to school," Georgia says, picking the story about our third cat. "You begged to be able to keep her. You were so sure that the answer would be no because we had two cats already. You begged for days and promised you'd pay all her vet bills and for her spay, which you did. Me and Clem felt so bad that you had to spend all your money that we bought you that video game that you'd been saving up for. Oh! And there was that time when those assholes were bullying that poor kid in Clem's grade who was dyslexic and couldn't read properly. You challenged them all to a fight after school. Four against one, and you still kicked their asses."

"This is so embarrassing," I say, hoping she doesn't reveal any more childhood anecdotes.

"The point is, you have a soft, lovely heart," Mom says. Thankfully, I think that we're done talking about me, but then she turns to Willa. "Anyone would be lucky to treasure it. Through friendship, or more."

My dad has been silent this whole time, but he nods sagely now.

They're pretty much giving the parental stamp of approval on something that hasn't happened and won't ever happen. The quickest way to ruin a friendship is to catch feelings and not having her in my life would be a tragedy that I couldn't bear.

I would die if I couldn't see Willa, couldn't talk to her, wasn't held in her highest regard. She trusts me. I would never do anything to jeopardize that. Without her presence, my days would stretch endlessly on. I'd probably still be as numb as I was after Jodie left.

I'd be heartsick in ways that I didn't even know could exist.

An uncomfortable level of confusion swamps my body, deadening my limbs and doing a number on my head. I'm sure it's not related to residual sunstroke symptoms. The anxiety that is always riding at a low level, pumps up until my stomach spins and my palms grow slick, and I wonder if I'm going to pass out for the second time today and land face down in my dinner.

As Mom launches into some stories about Georgia when she was a baby, I notice Willa slanting me a funny look from under her lashes. She thinks that she's been subtle today, constantly watching me when I'm not supposed to notice.

I start shoveling food into my mouth despite how sick I feel, and pretend that my parents didn't just urge us to hook up and keep hooking up. They about as good as came out with a hearty welcome to the family.

I don't want to even think about what that would look like.

Hooking up.

Or the after.

Especially not while I'm at the table with my parents right across from me and my sister beside me, Willa on the end.

I've had enough humiliation for one day, and tomorrow I have to go and get my bike.

I have to say though, I'm not worried about it there. Agatha is a sweet old lady and if she said it would be fine, then I know it will be. I wouldn't mind going back and helping her out with a few things around the farm. I noticed the way the eaves were sagging and the porch needed some repairs. I should ask the guys at the club if they'd

mind lending a hand for an afternoon.

Damn it, this just proves my parents right about my bleeding heart. I've never been embarrassed about that, but it felt like my family was trying to sell Willa on the idea of me.

Do I want that? I shouldn't. I don't. I...

"We're so proud of all that you've accomplished together," Mom suddenly blurts out of nowhere, right on the heels of talking about baby Georgia. "Simon has always been great with his hands. We were so pleased when he got an apprenticeship with the club, even though most parents would be worried sick. We had our doubts, and when he came to us to ask for a loan to buy an old factory, we were even more doubtful, but what a transformation! You've both worked so hard, and you've learned so many skills along the way."

"I can't take any credit for that," Willa protests easily, though I swear I catch a glimpse of red creeping up her neck.

"It's not like it was a huge factory-" I try to say, but Willa speaks at the same time.

"It was all Atlas. I just did the easy stuff, like laying stick-down flooring and painting. He came up with the layout himself, and it was all the guys from the club too, who made it possible. You all did. I'm so thankful." Her eyes are shiny with tears. They're good ones, but they still do something to me that resembles a swarm of insects crawling under my skin.

"We're so happy you moved to Hart and that you're part of this family, Willa." Dad looks towards Mom, and she nods.

"Yeah. Simon has never had a friendship with a woman before." Georgia flicks me a

look of apology. She's going to tell the truth as she sees it, but she doesn't mean to hurt me. She wants to provide context. "He's always gone for that ride or die love where he'd burn down the world for that person. That might appear all well and good, but it's not realistic and the problem with burning love is that it burns itself out."

I sink down a fraction lower in my chair, though what I really want to do is leap up and get out of here.

My mom adds, "You're a wonderful young woman and if you'd like to date our son, whenever you're both ready, you have our wholehearted stamp of approval."

Wow. Yup. There's no way they're pissing around about this. If the subtle shit earlier wasn't enough, then they've just made it ultra clear.

Even Georgia's into it. "I know you'd never hurt my brother. He's a good man and he deserves someone special. When and if you're ever ready."

I clear my throat so loudly that it makes me cough and since my throat is so dry, I almost gag at the end. If I didn't have anxiety issues already, this would sure as fuck cause some.

"Thank you so much for awkwardly trying to determine our future and probably ruining our friendship and working relationship."

Georgia screws up her nose, my dad's face blanks, and my mom's eyes fill up with tears.

Oh no.

Willa salvages the whole thing. "Oh, god no. Nothing's ruined. I'm honored that you all think so highly of me." She blinks rapidly, studying each of my family members

in turn. “Even if we stay friends forever and only friends, I feel so blessed to know you and be welcome in your home.” That pretty much reduces my mom to butter and has my dad grinning while Georgia looks on the verge of happy tears now.

My whole family stares at Willa with stars in their eyes. If anyone else had been put on the spot like that, I’m sure it would have gone badly, but not Willa. She’s not faking it either. If she hated the idea, she’d come straight out and say so. That’s the thing about her.

She has more than enough confidence that she’s not afraid to say what she’s thinking and feeling, but she somehow always does it with tact. I know that Lynette might say different, but I also think that she’s been pretty hard on Willa at times—though Willa told me that she understood why, as she’d been pretty wild when she was younger. To her credit, when Willa told her that she didn’t want to go to college and let her know about our business plans, she didn’t freak out. She’s supported Willa unwaveringly, and she’s tried to be a lot less smothering. More of a big sister and less of a mother.

Willa turns right to me, her face so unexpectedly soft and open, her whole aura so different than it normally is, everything just dropped away and stripped down. She’s not merely beautiful. She’s breathtaking.

It finally hits me. This . This is how she looked at me earlier, when I opened my eyes. Like I’m the center of the universe, and she’d fight hard for me if she had to.

“You’d be anyone’s greatest catch.” She doesn’t whisper. She’s not soft. She’s bold, as though she’s exhausted by having to normally hold back.

Does she mean that?

How long has she meant it?

That pretty much shuts the whole table up. My parents and my sister are lost in a dreamy state where they can hope for a happy ending. I didn't realize just how much this past year has affected my mom and dad and probably Georgia too. Years? How long have they been worried about me without saying it? I've chosen a vastly different path than my parents did. They were high school sweethearts. They dated for years before they married. Everything was carefully planned. It worked for them, and whatever recipe they have for their happiness, it's bang fucking on.

I failed to see just how many times they didn't voice their concerns, even when I thought I was happy. They were always kind to Jodie, but I already know that was for my sake. Did they love her? Or were they always worried that we'd fracture apart and that she'd be the one to break the heart I placed so naively in her hands?

After dinner, my mom is right on top of the dessert and coffee. Thankfully, there's no more talk about my love life, or recounting of embarrassing childhood memories. Georgia never spills about me passing out and having to collect my bike tomorrow.

I know that I'm unnaturally quiet the whole time, but I pass it off as exhaustion. Willa catches on, or maybe she's legit worn out from the whole day of picking, and begs off early, after dessert. She pointedly offers me a ride back to the clubhouse since she dropped me off.

My parents don't even try to press us to stay longer.

They share ridiculously hopeful looks that aren't even subtle. They're so clearly hoping that I'll leave here with Willa tonight and call them tomorrow morning to let them know that we're madly in love.

Fuck .

I expect the ride back to the clubhouse to be tense, but Willa is at ease behind the wheel of her pink station wagon. It's pretty much just the worst car ever, but then again, I hate all cages besides my Mustang. My parents live a good twenty minutes away and for at least ten of those minutes, Willa says nothing.

We need to talk, but the how and what and when are totally confused. I don't know how to start this, because fuck me if I even have a clue what I'm feeling right now.

That's not true.

I feel like my head is the equivalent of getting shoved down and run over by a bike. Followed by the entire club worth of bikes, not to mention my closed up throat, the crawling under my skin and the too tight feeling of being in my own body.

"It's late," I find myself muttering, almost under my breath, though I'm not normally a low talker. "I promised I'd help you unload the trailer in the morning, but without my bike, I won't have a ride. Fuck me if I'm getting in Raiden's old beater or asking Grave for a ride in his stupid jacked up beast. It's probably easier if I stay the night." The whole thing sounds contrived, so I quickly tack on a very casual, "Camp out like we used to."

If she has reservations, she doesn't let on. She doesn't give me a hard time or demand we have this out now, and she sure as fuck doesn't blame me for the dinner from hell and ask me what my family was thinking. She doesn't give me any of those strange looks that lets me see all the way down to the very center of her. She actually doesn't look at me at all .

"What about your Mustang?"

"It's in the shop."

“Oh?” She stops at a red light and waits. We’re the only ones out, though it’s not late yet. We’re a few weeks away from the longest day of the year and there’s still plenty of sun. “Since when?”

“Since I noticed some rust on the trunk. With classic cars, it’s important to keep on top of that. You let it go, and it gets away from you.”

“I can see how that would be bad. The gas tank is back there, right?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it’s not good.”

Is it the truth? Yes. No matter how desperate, I could never lie to Willa. Could I walk to the shop and get it out and drive it? Absolutely. I haven’t started tackling the rust yet. I just parked it out there a few days ago to get it into the shop rotation next week.

The light turns green and the only indication that Willa might not be so chill, is that she basically floors it. “Do you miss it? Camping out?” She takes a right at the next stop sign instead of a left, heading to her place. “Because if you do, I do too. The renovations were so much work. and it was stressful sometimes. The whole moving to Hart thing because of what was going on and that crazy Harold guy, and with Lynette and Bullet—it was all just a lot , but it was fun too.”

“Yeah.” My hands are resting on my thighs. They’re starting to get damp, so I curl my fingers around my kneecaps to encourage airflow.

“It was fun because of you.”

I have no idea how to deal with this. As a friendly statement, sure, but not after this dinner. Thank fuck she’s focused on the road. I don’t want her to give me another one of those looks and watch me unspool over here.

“It would have been a lonely time in my life without you,” she goes on.

I still don’t know what to say, but apparently that’s not a problem for my mouth. It goes spouting off truths I didn’t think beforehand, but as soon as I say them, I know that I’ve felt them for some time now. “It would have been lonely for me too. All the guys at the club, all my friends, my family—I’m thankful for every single one of them, but there was no one like you. I can just be me with you, and that doesn’t even have to be my best version. It can be the worst version and that’s okay.”

She goes radio fucking silent until she pulls up behind the antique store, parking beside her truck and the trailer.

We enter through the backdoor, a static storm of tension flooding the hallway. We have to go through the shop and up to the second floor to get to Willa’s apartment. It probably wasn’t the best planning, but we had to work with what was there.

We don’t make it to the second floor. Willa spins around after flicking on the light in the back, where she’s set up the display of furniture to look like a kitchen and living room, paintings, ceiling lights, and lamps included.

She wears a haunted, desperate expression, her eyes so unnaturally dark that a chill clenches my midsection. She’s so intense that she almost looks like a stranger. “We could hook up without anyone knowing. It could be just for us until we can break the news to Bullet and Lynette gently. They’ve mixed business with pleasure ever since the start. She’s the club’s lawyer and they’re together. I don’t see why we couldn’t be.”

I choke on my saliva and cough roughly. “Because that’s a good way to blow a friendship all to hell,” I wheeze.

You know what’s not choking? What’s not having a hard time about any of this? My

fucking dick. It's rock hard and probably quite visible through my worn jeans.

"I think it makes for a solid foundation to be friends before you become lovers." Willa starts pacing along a woven rug, around a coffee table, between two couches and three chairs. It sounds complicated, because it is. She cuts a deft path, but it's clear she needs to be moving. "It doesn't always have to end in disaster. Or end at all."

"What are you saying?"

She stops, snapping her flashing eyes back to my face. I feel like It's like getting shoved into a floodlight so powerful that it's flaying the skin from my body. "Do you want the honest answer or some bullshit?"

"The honest answer."

"That if I don't get you naked and your cock inside my mouth in the next few minutes, I might die."

I don't need to pass out for a second time today, but I swear it just about happens. "How long?" Right. Because that's the appropriate response to that statement.

"I don't know. Maybe two minutes."

I throw my hand out against the back of the nearest couch so I don't fall over. "No, how long have you felt that way?"

"I don't know." She winces, dropping her eyes. She's suddenly shyer than I've ever seen her. "Months." She doesn't study the floor for long. She summons some of her classic Willa courage. "I thought I could wait. Be friends for as long as you needed. But... then today you scared the shit out of me. What if something happened and I

never got to tell you that I'm here, wanting you?"

"Wanting or more than that?" Want isn't nearly as dangerous as the other stuff that my family pressed on. Willa said hook up. Not fall in love. But then she also said that it didn't have to end, which sounds a lot like feelings.

Feelings scare the shit out of me. Feelings are hard and messy and complicated. You can think you're in love with someone and then it turns out that maybe you weren't at all, and when you trusted in something for years only to be disillusioned, how do you get back up and put faith in your gut again?

"You're scaring the hell out of me," I admit.

I'm not a coward who can't talk. I've done plenty of talking to this woman over this past year. I just never realized that all this time she was falling for me. She hid it so well.

About as good as I'm hiding from myself and everyone else.

"I scare you or the idea of us being more than friends scares you?"

Fuck, Willa gets me.

"I'm afraid of the idea of getting it all wrong again." I have to clench the couch with both hands.

Willa's eyes stop that intense burning, and she gives me the saddest, softest, sweetest smile. I've never thought more about closing these few feet between us and tasting them than I am now. All while protesting.

Because life makes perfect sense. Fucking never.

“You don’t have to get it right for it to have still meant something. There are different kinds of love. Different kinds of people. Each experience is unique.” Willa doesn’t give many physical tells of when she’s nervous, but she rubs her index finger along her thumb blatantly, like she’s searching for a hangnail. I think I’m ready for whatever she’s going to say, but I’m not. “Just because I’ve never said this before and because I might never be brave enough to do it again, I think that the way Jodie left was all wrong. How she blamed it on you and made you feel like you were broken. You’re so- so... not broken, Atlas! She implied that there’s something wrong, something less about you, and that’s so untrue. When you told me, I didn’t know what to say, and then I felt that it wasn’t right to say it, but if she was here now, I’d smack her. Hard . I’d tell her how much I hate her for hurting you. For wounding you and making you think you weren’t enough. But I’d thank her too. Because she could have had everything and she threw it away.” She thumps a fist over her chest so hard it echoes in here. “I’m good at uncovering discarded treasures. I see them. I want them. I cherish them.”

Holy god, this is about so much more than hooking up.

There are definitely feelings involved, and deep ones. Ones that haven’t just cropped up out of nowhere. People think Willa is impulsive, but that’s only because she keeps her thoughts and dreams close to her chest. Only when she’s sure, will she give voice to them.

She’s sure.

She’s fighting for me.

I don’t know where I’m at, but Willa does. She’s dropped her guard and let me into a secret place where I’ve never been allowed. It’s so much softer than her normally boisterous self. Like in her head, it’s not always chaos and noise and high energy. In her head is safety and warmth. She translates it into words for me, spinning a dream

of what we could have if only I was brave enough to face my fears.

And Lynette.

And Bullet.

And probably the whole club.

And my family, if this went wrong.

And herself if it ever didn't work out and we were still locked into a business relationship.

Do I care about all of that? Yes. Am I losing my mind watching Willa walk across the room towards me, her hips gently swaying, face so damn beautiful and soft? Do I care about any of the things I'm supposed to care about when she drops her hand on top of mine and lifts it from the couch and sets it on her hip so that she can curl against my body, her softness hitting the hard angles of me just right? Do I care about how this could all turn into a potential disaster? Yes. I do. I truly do.

But is my brain working properly when Willa angles harder against me, tilts her face up, wraps her arms around my neck, and skates her lips over mine?

It's been more than a year since anyone kissed me. Touched me. Wanted me. Was tender with me.

There's nothing that Willa doesn't do well and that includes this.

She teases my mouth with hers, coaxing me back to life, breathing the fire straight back into me.

I want to control myself. I want to use my brain. I want to be rational and talk this out, go through every option. But there's not enough blood left in my brain to use it for proper thought. My better judgment is nonexistent. Not even my anxiety can stop me from doing this.

I glide my tongue over Willa's bottom lip, and when she sinks her hands into my hair and tugs me down to kiss me hard, losing herself in it, I let go and lose myself too.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:01 pm

Willa

It's hard to believe that this could ever end badly when it feels like paradise to start it, but I'm much more of a realist than anyone suspects, and I know I have to be careful. I need to promise myself here and now that I will always hold Atlas' heart like the treasure it is. It might not be involved yet, but if we ever get there, I'll take care with him, whatever it costs me.

I knew kissing Atlas would be spectacular, but my brain pretty much splinters apart as the deep current of desire flows through me unchecked and unfettered at last, pretty much wrecking me.

"Should we... is this... Willa, are you sure?"

I taste the smoky dark sweetness of his mouth, sweeping my tongue over his lips, eradicating the need for words, but I still feed him the one he needs to hear. "Yes."

He tries to angle me towards the couch, but I grasp his shoulders and tear my mouth from his, panting at the heady pleasure drunk sensation.

"That couch is for sale. If we- uh- well, if we anything on top of it, I can't in good conscience sell it and moving it out of here would be a pain in the ass. It would never make it upstairs, and if I ruin it, I have to keep it forever."

"Not a problem." Atlas hikes me up by my hips. I didn't expect it, especially not how easily he did it. I lock my legs around his waist and let him stumble up the stairs to the second floor, all the way through it, and then up the second set to my apartment.

I shouldn't call it that. Living quarters, more like.

If it was in New York, it's the kind of place that would rent for twelve grand a month or something obscene. It's two thousand square feet, which is more than double the size of the bungalow Lynette and I shared in Seattle before she sold it and moved to Hart for good.

Atlas slams the door shut. I didn't distract him by kissing him. I know he's fine, but I was still worried about him after he passed out earlier. He shouldn't be lifting me.

He flicks on the light. "I'm fine," he growls against my lips before curling his fingers into my ass to prove just how fine he is.

I love his mouth. I've had ten thousand wicked thoughts about his lips. Probably more. My brain has conjured images that came along with a wave of guilt and a small sense of hopelessness. In my defense, I couldn't stop what my head churned up like dust rising in the air after a long, hot summer, but I could control what I did about it.

I've never allowed myself to have a real fantasy about Atlas. Dreams, yes. Hopes, yes. Hopelessness... that too. But I've never touched myself while thinking about him. That would have crossed every line ever.

It makes it so much better to kiss him now. To lick at his lips, to nibble and bite. To stroke his tongue with mine and trap his groans in my mouth.

He's a good kisser. I know that I am too.

I don't know why most women feel the need to say that they don't like sex. The notion that we shouldn't is so antiquated. I was young the first time I did it. I told Lynette that I wanted to, and instead of telling me I couldn't, she got me on the pill. And then she said she'd rather I didn't, but if I was going to, I needed to be safe in

every way. No sneaking around, no places where I could get hurt or taken advantage of, and no risks. She made me take responsibility and I've owned it ever since.

I might have been wild in the past, but that all stopped the day I moved to Hart. A lot of things stopped. I haven't dated anyone. Haven't had sex since arriving here.

The day I moved to Hart was the day I met Atlas. Ever since the first time I saw him in the little rental house where Lynette and I would be staying, helping furnish it with the rest of the club, in all his breathtaking, golden glory, I didn't want anyone else.

And. Now. I. Am. Starved .

I break the kiss and wriggle so that Atlas sets me down. As soon as he does, I shove him against the metal door. He's huge, so when I say shove, he backs up a step, but he gets the idea. He helps me tear his gray t-shirt off.

"Fuck, Willa," he groans as I tear open his belt. The buckle is huge, a big metal bowed angel, probably custom made.

I wrench his jeans open and drop down to my knees on the hardwood floor we spent days and days refinishing.

I pull everything down his thickly muscled thighs. Jeans and boxers. I leave them like that, pretty much tying him in place.

I'm so fucking hungry for him that I'm vibrating. I've never had an adrenaline rush like this. I've never wanted another person like this. I've never wanted to know someone the way I want to know Atlas. I've never loved anyone from the outside in and the inside out, never wanted to plunge into their depths, to stand beside them, to walk in their light and let them luxuriate in my own.

I've never truly wanted a partner or to be someone's partner.

It feels so different with Atlas, so right already, because for once, this isn't about the sex. It's damn well about the sex, but not for the sake of it. I want this because I want his laughter, his trust, his time, his friendship, and his heart. I want to make him feel good because he's special to me, not because there's an expectation of pleasure in return.

His cock is painfully hard. It's long and thick, with a slight bend to the left side. Not a crook or anything weird like that, just a gentle sway. The tip is swollen and already leaking shiny precum in a glistening strand.

I sweep my head low and catch it with my tongue, humming at the sharp salty taste of him before I bring my face right up to him and inhale his scent.

It's animalistic, I know, but I love the scent of him here. How he smells freshly showered, but still manly. He's blond everywhere, though he's excelled at manscaping. I go for the element of surprise and also give into my base desires, running my tongue over his balls, licking a hot path up his shaft, all the way to his tip.

His hands smack the door behind him, hard.

I wrap my hands around him, shucking off my shackled restraints, and dig my fingers into his tight ass while I take his cock all the way to the back of my throat in a single motion. I swallow against the gag reflex, opening my throat and forcing him as far back as he'll go.

I'm not a sword swallower or a miracle worker, but I take at least half of him.

"Fuck!" Atlas's head slams back against the door. His spine collapses against it. I fall back with him those few inches, pulling back and using my hand along the base of his

shaft to work him while I take him to the back of my throat again.

I dare to look up after I work him for a few passes. His eyes are barely blue anymore. They're deep black and burning, his pupils blown out. He has this slack look of amazement that comes from unexpected pleasure. I love that I can give this to him. I love that just for right now, he's given me complete trust.

I drink my fill of his gorgeous, hard face. I don't turn away for so long that eventually his hand peels off the door and strokes my hair, almost reverently before his fingers dip through the strands. His fingertips feel so good pressing into my hair that I almost purr. I change up what I'm doing, licking along the side of his shaft before swirling my tongue around the base of him. I breathe in that deep, raw male scent as I cup his balls in my hand.

My whole body aches to have him buried inside of me. I've never felt so empty. My panties are soaked beneath my dress. When I imagine our positions reversed, me pinned to that door, Atlas on his knees, his hot mouth sealed to my pussy as he eats me like a wild beast, my walls clench in on themselves, aching so brutally that my thighs buzz with electricity. This is for him, though. I'm getting plenty of pleasure from the torture of giving it.

"Atlas," I whisper against his cock. I trace the veins up to the tip, lapping at him, teasing his slit and the underside of his head until my tongue is coated in the salt of him again.

I got rid of my fake nails after moving to Hart, and I keep them trimmed short enough now, but I still love sparkly polish. I scrape them down the inside of his thigh, digging in just hard enough to leave a bright red line along his sensitive skin.

"Willa," he groans, his hands falling back against the door to brace himself. His whole body flexes, his abs standing out stark with every panting breath.

He's more beautiful than any statue I have ever seen, any work of art.

"Yes?" I flutter my lashes and look up at him.

He opens his mouth, but no words come out.

"Did you want me to do this?" I lock my mouth around his cockhead and take him slowly along my tongue, pushing forward until it feels like he's wedged halfway down my throat.

"Fuck. Fuck!"

I can feel him vibrating with the effort to control himself. If he even flexed his hips right now, he'd probably do real damage to me. He stays perfectly still until I've pulled back a safe distance, keeping him on my tongue, but no longer choking myself. A sigh explodes out of him, and he pushes forward just slightly.

"I want to fuck your mouth so badly," he admits, his tone a dark growl.

"I know. I can feel how hard you are. I can feel you throbbing against my tongue when you're in my mouth." I cast my eyes up, finding his on me, his face wrecked by the force of his desire. "Would it make you even harder to know how much I want you in my pussy, Atlas? In my asshole? Does it make you want to lose control knowing that you could do anything to me and I'd fucking love it?"

His jaw slackens in amazement at my words. I don't see my being polite and kind out there in the world and being absolutely depraved in the bedroom as being a bad thing. I've never seen it as wrong or felt ashamed of the things I like.

"Do you like seeing me down here on my knees for you?"

He nods, still not able to say anything.

“I’m so wet right now that I’m going to start dripping down my thighs soon. Would you like to know how I taste?”

“Yes!”

He trembles like a caged animal, still afraid to touch me, afraid to lose himself and let himself go. Afraid to trust again. Afraid that this will ruin us and wreck our world.

“Not yet.” I flatten my hand to his hard abs. The hairs circling his naval and trailing down tickle my palm. “First I want to know what you taste like when you’re coming in my mouth.”

He hesitates, a wounded light flashing in his eyes, doubt crashing down on his brow in a hard frown. “I- you can’t tell just by- by- what it looks like. That’s why I had to have those tests. There’s still... something there.”

I trace my nails down his thigh before I cup his balls gently. I lick along his shaft, sucking the tip of him, teasing him and worshipping him.

“I know you’ve spent a year doubting yourself. It’s been painful and hard. But look at me.”

He is, and I hate the shadows still there, still haunting him.

I lick down the length of his cock and back, sucking his tip before meeting his eyes again. “Perfect,” I hum. “Everyone has their demons. Don’t let this be one of them. I know that it matters to you. It matters so much, and that’s okay, but don’t hate how you were made, because you are perfectly constructed. Your body holds the most gorgeous, generous heart. You’d die for the people you love, but you know how to

live too. There's not a person alive who knows you who wouldn't say that you're one of the best men out there."

"Jesus Christ. Stop that."

"No." I skate my tongue over his cockhead, humming as I take him into my mouth and then releasing him. "You need to hear it. You need to know. I don't just want you because you look the way you do. I want you because, in a world full of good looking men, you're unique. I want you for what's under your skin too."

"Bone and blood. That's all we are."

"Bone and blood and your brain ."

"You can't prove to me that I'm not some version of broken. I know that medically-I- I wasn't put together properly."

I won't scoff at him. I know how deeply this has wounded him. He explained to me, after months of hinting around it, that he was born without a vas deferens. He can have children, but only with medical aid. He told me that it was basically like he'd been given a vasectomy at birth.

And fucking Jodie used that as her excuse to leave him.

"I might feel the same way if it was me," I tell him honestly. "I'd be devastated and ashamed, but then I'd need to find my way past that. Don't let the one percent unhappiness be your world, you deserve to be happy."

I know, on the outside, he doesn't. But the inside is a different story.

He's fighting with himself, and I can't make him believe something overnight. I take

my mouth off him and sit back on my heels, “Look, if you’re having second thoughts and don’t want to do this, that’s okay.”

His lips twitch. He sighs, but there’s humor in it. He’s still half enraptured, and so hard that he’s throbbing right in front of me, but he suddenly looks so very tired. Physically exhausted, and mentally and emotionally too.

I unzip his biker boots and help him step out of them. I peel off his jeans, but slip his boxers back up, tucking his very hard cock in at an awkward angle. I can’t say I’ve ever dressed a man before.

I plant kisses on his abs and up his chest, over his pecs, and up his collarbones to his neck.

I bet that no one has cherished this man’s body before. Not properly.

They might enjoy it, but have they ever paid any attention to anything other than the obvious spots? They probably look at him and think he fucks hard and well. He probably does, but has anyone ever bothered to discover what he likes? To teach him for himself? I went straight for the obvious parts, but what about ticklish spots, a soft whisper of fabric over tender skin, a whisper of lips against his earlobe?

My bed is a queen, but big enough for both of us if we huddle tight. It’s over at the far end of the wide open space, past the living room and kitchen, past my shelves of books, down by the bathroom.

I flick the lights off behind him. One switch controls everything in here but the lamps. Threading my fingers through Atlas’, I guide him straight to my bed.

“What are we doing?” his tone is almost fearful, like he expects me to peel back the blankets and reveal a python that he’s going to have to cuddle up beside.

I pull back the antique crazy quilt. It's too hot for it anyway. The white cotton sheets will be more than enough.

"Sleeping."

"Sleeping?"

"Yeah. Just camping out, but closer."

He gets into the one side almost reluctantly. I slip in beside him. When I snuggle closer, wrapping my arm around his shoulders, the metal bedframe creaks. It's a haunted sound in here, melancholy because the acoustics echo off the brick walls, hardwood floors, and open ceilings.

Gravity is going to fight me. My arm will be numb in a few seconds if I keep it at the height of his shoulders.

I flip around, guiding his hand over my hips until his arm is slung around me. I press back into him, but not hard enough to grind against his cock.

"What are we doing here?"

"Just... just taking a minute."

He goes quiet. We both do. The fridge hums. Loudly. I kind of like the noise. Outside, it's not nearly late enough to be totally quiet, and the sound of vehicles on the street every now and then is comforting. We both breathe together, in a different cadence.

"You're tired," I whisper into the growing dark. I like sleeping with the blinds open to let in the light first thing in the morning and to allow the moonlight to keep me

company. “Don’t worry. I still plan on worshipping every inch of you soon enough.”

“You’re still in your dress,” he protests, voice extra husky.

“That’s okay. It’s comfortable. I like this. Lying next to you. It feels...”

“Hot and sticky.”

The air conditioning doesn’t chill up here the same way it half ass works downstairs. I don’t mind that. I’m always kind of cold anyway.

I snuggle in just a bit tighter. “Hot and sticky, I agree. It’s awesome.”

He’s tense for a few minutes, but then he clearly gives up on the idea of leaving. Whatever storm wages inside of him, calms.

Not more than a few minutes later, he’s asleep. Curled around me protectively, incredibly.

I can’t believe this is real.

I’m tired too, the heat of the day and all the activity have sapped my energy, but there’s no way I’m going to sleep. At least not for hours yet. Maybe not all night. Not until I’ve memorized the pattern and sound of every single one of Atlas’ breaths.

He might be bigger and stronger and the one holding me, but I feel every bit as protective of him.

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Atlas

My arms are stretched overhead. I can feel the slight pull in my shoulders and the strain in my armpits and muscles.

I crack my light into the watery dark, immediately alert.

I'm also aware that I'm tied to the wrought iron gothic shaped headboard. It's a wicked thing, with scary points and beautifully worked designs. It had to be custom fitted to the bedframe to make it work. I know, because I made it work.

I strain against the silk bindings, planting my feet and arching my back to look overhead.

Silk ?

They're bright red, lopped around both my wrists, branching to either side of the headboard.

What the hell is going on, and what the hell is happening with my body? My daily level of anxiety is ten times what I feel right now. I'm not caged or trapped. Tied, yes, but I know that if I wanted to, I could get out of it, or I could call out and Willa would free me. It's weird and unexpected, but it's not... bad.

"Please don't go wild and destroy that headboard."

Willa appears from the bathroom, freshly showered. Her hair is still wet and bunched

together. She's makeup free, and wearing an oversized t-shirt.

Deciding I need to tackle the elephant in the room I ask, "Why am I tied up?" I drop back down instead of straining, easing my legs back to the sheets.

She purses her lips in deep thought, "Experimental purposes."

"What?"

"Not like that." She laughs, and it's hard to stay worried when her eyes twinkle like that. "The point isn't to hurt you. It's to make you feel good. To figure out some things you like that you might not have known."

"I'm sorry, but pegging isn't high up on my list. If other people like it, that's fine. It's just... not that I've done it, but I already know that I don't want to."

I can see her nipples through the t-shirt. She's not wearing a bra, but is she wearing panties? I suddenly get a mental image of her sitting on my face while I'm tied up and letting me feast on her sweet pussy. The sheet is draped over my waist, but when I glance down, I can see the hard outline of my dick straining against my boxers and that thin white cotton.

"Are you hungry?"

"Are you going to feed me tied up?"

"Yes."

"Then no. Choking and dying also isn't high up on my list of fun activities. Also, no candle wax, whips, or chains."

She laughs again, the soft sound coming back even gentler against the walls and ceilings. “Noted. Ice?”

“Your mouth.” I don’t know why I just said that. I really should be demanding she untie me. I should find my clothes and list off all the reasons this can’t happen again.

Instead, I’m lying here, hoping that this ends with me buried balls deep inside her sweet, snug pussy.

“I can give you my mouth. With pleasure.” She walks over to the tall dresser first and starts rummaging through the top drawer. When she leans over, I can see her ass as the fabric of her t-shirt clings to her lush frame. I smile at the thought of what other surprises lie beneath.

The smile drops away quickly when she straightens up and I see the clamps she has in her hand. “No. No way.”

“Relax. These are for me.”

She slips one under her t-shirt, and then the other. It’s so much hotter that I can’t see what she’s doing, but now I know that she’s wearing them. The outline is clear under the thin fabric.

My dick kicks, dampening my boxers so the fabric clings to the head.

Willa walks over silently to the bed and slips on top of me. She straddles me without putting her weight down. It’s a good thing that she tied me up, or I’d end this torture now by notching my cock to her entrance and slamming home.

She arches her back and kisses my abs, her lips shockingly hot even though this room is far from cold. Her ass stays in the air, the t-shirt riding up to reveal a strip of hot

pink lace bisecting the round cheeks.

I recall very vividly what she said about taking my cock in her asshole last night. My muscles tense, a tremble shooting through me.

Her lips skate over my nipple, her tongue circling it. They're far too sensitive to clamp them. I probably would have shot my load right into my boxers if she tried.

She's delighted by that discovery and does it again, lightly, her hot breath painting my skin.

She doesn't focus on them long, but I'm still gritting my teeth against the shivers. She moves to my neck, kissing and licking before she scrapes her teeth against my stubbled jaw. I haven't shaved since yesterday morning. She nuzzles her cheek against it, humming under her breath at the burn.

She licks the shell of my ear before nibbling the lobe. My cock jumps and my balls ache at how hard I am. I suck a deep breath of air and get the tropical coconut of freshly showered Willa.

"Fuck," I groan as her wet hair slips over my chest, panting trails of moisture that she licks up, before going back to using her tongue and hot mouth against my nipple. "Take me out." Great. I've been reduced to practically begging. "I want you to ride me."

"Mmm. Your cock or your face?"

It's so hot that she asks this without even blushing. She's comfortable with her body in a way that I'm not. It sounds insane, I know. Even before I found out about that shit last summer, I was never entirely at home in my own skin. No man would admit that, and it certainly never made me less manly in the sack, but I don't know that I

could say the things Willa does with that same level of confidence.

I'm also insanely fucking nervous about this.

I'm afraid that I'll get it wrong. Not in here, but after. I'm not afraid to admit that I'm terrified of the aftermath. I don't want to live in a world where Willa can't be a friend. I didn't even realize before these past few days, just how deeply she's become a part of me. I didn't realize just how unique she was. If I lose her, it would be a cut so deep that I might bleed out.

"Atlas?" She scrapes her teeth over my nipple. I tremble so hard the whole bed rattles. "One day, you can tie me up. You can fuck my mouth and come all over my breasts and then feed it to me. Every drop."

I gape at her. "Are you serious?"

Her wry smile has just enough of a tilt to it that I honestly don't know, and she's not going to tell me. She's playful, even if she is, and I need that. I need that laughing, sweet side of her.

"I'm serious about sitting on your face."

I could break these ties without much effort, but I enjoy the heady delight that darkens her eyes. I love the shadow of pleasure that creeps over her lovely features at being the one in control right now.

"T-shirt on or off?"

"On." Mostly because if I see her breasts while I'm doing this, there's no way that I'm going to not nut in my boxers.

“Panties on or off?”

“On, but move them to the side after.”

“I’m so wet already,” she whispers as she arranges her legs over my face. She digs her feet in under my shoulders to fit between my spread arms. “I’m already turned on thinking about this that I’ll probably come. Is that okay?”

“Are you going to soak my face?”

She considers that. “Probably.”

“Then yes. Yes, that’s more than okay.”

She sinks down slowly, lifting her t-shirt so that it skims her creamy thighs. I love that she’s so curvy. I love her muscles and the power in her body, her tiny waist and full ass, her heavy breasts.

The scent of her so close, freshly showered but still deliciously her, ramps me up. I get that same burst of adrenaline that I used to get stepping onto the field before a big game.

I should go slow, but I latch my mouth onto the lace of her panties, sucking the wet fabric, pulling at them with my teeth like a beast so that I can get to her bare skin. She’s smooth all over, and when she slips one hand down and brushes her panties aside, parting herself so I can see how swollen and pink she is, drenched for me, my brain pretty much explodes in my skull.

I run my tongue down her slit, lapping at her, so eager to get to her entrance and be inside of her.

She's eager too. She grinds against my face, whimpering. "That feels so good. So incredible. You eating my pussy has just moved up on the list of my top ten favorite things."

"What are the others?" I say against her heated skin.

"Finding a good treasure while picking, fries with extra salty gravy, spending time with family, going for a ride on your bike with you when you get a different one, driving in your mustang, getting up for a beautiful sunrise or staying up late for a spectacular sunset, trying a new flavor of ice cream, having you balls deep inside me in every way..."

"Fucking god, you're going to kill me."

"Yeah," she pants. "Hold on. Can I try something?"

"That sounds dangerous."

She giggles. "I just want to taste you too. I know it's so retro to do that, but I happen to like vintage things."

I finally understand what she's getting at, the good old sixty-nine. "If you do that, there's no way I'm going to last."

My dick is practically tearing out of my boxers to think of her sweet lips wrapped around my shaft, taking me deep into her throat again.

"I'd like to come together," she whispers, like she's not talking about sucking my cock until I blow. She sits down on my face, rubbing her sensitive skin against my stubble. "Mmm. I like the way that feels. Will you bite my thighs and make them burn before you make me come?"

She knows what she wants and she's not afraid to ask me for it. She doesn't make me guess or take the lead. She's not afraid of her desires. I might be scared of the aftermath, but I can't not do this. I couldn't stop it last night. The thought of having wild, exploratory, creative sex with Willa is like a new form of artistry that I haven't explored. The mystery is there, the allure captivating me so that I want to throw everything I am into the discovery and mastery of it.

She's already turning, whipping off her t-shirt.

I groan loudly at the sight of her heavy breasts, her dark nipples squeezed tightly in the clamps.

I nearly die for real as she arches back, her perfect ass so near my face, the lace scrap of her panties bisecting her swollen lips.

"Hold on. I need my hands and you don't have any right now." She shimmies out of those panties carefully, then arches back like a cat to work my boxers down. "Ouch," she sighs in sympathy. "That morning wood looks extremely painful." She makes that same sigh against my cockhead next.

My dick kicks hard in her hand, my balls drawing up tight, all my muscles contracting.

She puts as much of it in her mouth as she can before she glides back to my face.

I abandon caution altogether, doing what she asked and scraping my teeth along her tender skin, rubbing my jaw anywhere I can reach, before latching my mouth to the sweetest pussy I have ever tasted and eating her like a fucking animal.

She rolls her hips while she locks her lips tightly around my dick, her tongue doing things to me that I could only dream of. She fucks my face, rocking back and forth,

her whole body a wave of movement.

“Yeah,” she hisses around my shaft. “Fuck, that feels good. You’re good. Your tongue. I love your mouth. I love the sounds you make.”

I’m not quiet about it, that’s for sure. I’m also not still. My hips arch up off the bed, thrusting into her mouth, but that only intensifies her movements. She hums and whimpers around me, sucking my cock noisily while I eat her just as loudly.

“Oh god,” she cries a few minutes later. “Oh god, oh, oh . I’m going to come. I’m going to come so hard with these clamps on and your cock in my mouth and your tongue buried inside of me. I want to wait for you. Are you close?”

“I’m dying trying to hold back.”

“Don’t hold back. Please come. Come with me. I want to taste you. I’ve been dying all night, fucking aching and throbbing imagining how good this would be.”

Her words tip me over the edge. My balls are like stones and my dick is so hard that when it blows, it’s painful. I can’t control the kick of my hips or pleasure and pain detonating through me. I have to just let it happen, the grenade rippling through me, breaking me apart. I pant and roar and latch my mouth back to her pussy and eat her until she’s writhing and shattering, breaking apart as violently as I’m still breaking. I’m still coming, my cock kicking again and again, until I’m worried that I might actually black out for a second fucking time in two days.

I love the taste of Willa, how she does soak my face, not just my mouth, but drenches my chin too.

I lick her through her climax, unwilling to let her go until she squirms away, whimpering. She falls to the bed beside me, panting.

“Wow. Oh my fucking god, just... wow.” She puts her hand up in the air in that hold on, I’m still alive, I just need a minute, gesture. “I- holy shit, I’m so boneless. Are you okay?”

It’s a funny question, but then I realize that I am. I’m okay. For a few minutes there, I was taken completely out of myself. It was just Willa and me and nothing else existed.

I must look like a hot mess, trussed up, my face slick with her juices, my hair probably a wreck from sleep, my cock... I let my eyes travel down slowly. My cock is still hard, but not like blunt force object hard.

“I’m hungry,” I admit.

“We just ate.” Willa finds her bones, scrambling up and poking me in the side, grinning deviously at her wicked joke. “Okay, well, you just chill and I’ll go make us breakfast.”

She takes the nipple clamps off and scoops up her t-shirt, walking away from the bed, way down to the other side of the big open space, to her kitchen.

“Willa!” I rattle the headboard as I strain on the ties. They’re actually tighter than I thought. I might indeed pull the bed apart before I break them.

She turns, laughing. “I’m just joking. I’m not going to leave you like that.” She skips back, a soft pink blush on her face that I’m responsible for. It looks good on her. Really fucking good. So do her shimmering eyes and her swollen lips.

She bends over me, dragging her breasts right near my face as she unties my hand. As soon as it’s free, I bury my tingling fingers in her hair and drag her face to mine. I kiss her brutally, the salt of me and her musk mingling on our lips. It’s the most

questionable and probably the hottest thing I've ever done. I certainly never thought that tasting myself secondhand would be a turn on.

"Don't do that," she begs against my lips. "I'm not going to leave here and do anything else. Breakfast. Unpacking the truck. I only have so much time today, and we should go and get your bike. The list is long." I kiss her again and despite her protests, she throws herself into it. "Stop!" She rips her mouth from mine, laughing. "I'm serious. If you continue that, I'm going to jump straight on top of you and ride you until I'm chaffing and useless for the day."

"I could always fuck your beautiful ass." I can hardly believe I just said that.

On the dirty talk scale, I have to admit that my game is weak. My face heats just saying it. Second admission- I have never done that .

She leans way over me, untying my other hand. "That sir, will have to wait. For one, I have no lube. For two, I would definitely not be doing any unloading after you wrecked me with that beast you're rocking." My hand finally comes free, and while I rub feeling back into it, she stamps a soft kiss on my mouth. "Feel free to shower while I cook you eggs and bacon."

"I don't have a spare set of boxers."

"Hmm." She lifts a shoulder in a shrug while trying to control her wry grin. "Guess you'll just have to go commando. If your jeans rub you wrong, I can always kiss it better for you later."

My cock visibly kicks at that idea, but thankfully, Willa is already sauntering off. No one should make a t-shirt look that sexy.

I drop my head back to the pillow and cover my face with my hands.

Fuck.

In a single morning, my control has been utterly shattered. The worst part is, I can't even say that I regret this, and if asked, I will certainly do it again. My heart pounds heavily, my chest closing in. It's hard to put yourself in someone's hands after being smashed apart. I know I'm offering glued together pieces, but Willa knows that. I was the one holding her last night, but I have no doubt that the second I fell asleep, she probably stayed up and kept watch over me like danger was barreling down on us. I'm the man, the traditional protector, but last night, Willa offered me comfort. She offered me closeness, intimacy, compassion and understanding.

I don't know if I was ready to give it all up and have so much to lose, but here I am.

I push up from the bed and walk to the bathroom. It was the only actual room in the whole top floor. We renovated it, since it was sporting some horrendous panel board, and of course Willa chose seafoam green salvaged tile and a mint green sink to match. She even found a green toilet, though not in the exact right shade.

I crank the spray on and step into the glass enclosure.

When the emotion hits, it's like a landslide, crashing down on me and crushing me. The inevitable comedown and fallout. My eyes burn and my temples throb. For all intents and purposes, I fucked a very good friend. The best female friend I've ever had. A sister of one of my club brother's old lady. I have trespassed in every single way, when I had no idea I even wanted to do it or that I was ready, and damn me to hell and fucking back again, I'm not sorry. What I'm sorry about is that I did this without her knowing the real me. I've trusted her with many things, but not with what's going on in my head. I feel like throwing up as the weight of it all settles on my shoulders.

Willa raps her knuckles against the closed wood door. Another incredible salvage

item she found, complete with the original glass doorknob.

Everything I touch in here has her touch all over it. Her passion. Her joy.

I want to get out of this shower and lose myself in her again. Fuck her on the floor while the breakfast burns to a crisp.

“Are you freaking out in there, or are you having a nice shower?”

Jesus, how does she know ? I actually crane my head up to check for cameras, but that’s insane. There are none in the bathroom or anywhere in her living space. She was adamant about that with Wizard, when he installed the security around the building.

“I...” I really hope that Wizard was preoccupied and didn’t hear or see anything on the cameras last night until we got up here where it was private. Even if he did, what’s he going to do?

This is only taboo in my own head.

Or until Bullet comes to hang me up by my balls, but if that’s what he feels he needs to do, I’ll hear his threats out.

“It’s okay, Atlas. Everything’ll work out, I promise.”

I lean towards her soft, musical voice. I want to believe her. I really fucking do. The alternative to freaking out would be to put my faith in her and in myself, facing my fears, and building a life together.

This is just a lot in a really short amount of time. I just need a minute, as she said last night.

“Atlas?”

“I’m okay. I haven’t died or anything in here.”

“That’s fucking encouraging.” She could press, but she just proves how much she knows me by leaving it alone for now.

I can be stubborn sometimes and the only way to figure this out is for me to dig down deep and do that for myself. It’s going to take time.

“I just have one more really important question for you.”

I brace myself. “What is it?”

“Do you want your eggs fried or scrambled? I know you like to change it up.”

I put a hand on the glass and rest my forehead on it, but a tiny smile twitches over my lips, shocking the hell out of me. “Surprise me.”

As if she hasn’t already.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:01 pm

Willa

Atlas said surprise him, so I'm making soft boiled eggs. They rumble against each other in the pot on the industrial gas stove. It was hell on earth getting it up here from the main floor, but I couldn't let it die a dusty death where I found it sitting and rusting. A little cleaning up and five guys from Atlas' club to sweat and curse as they moved it, and it was good as new.

Not everything can be made new so simply.

I can't stop thinking about Atlas in the bathroom. I wasn't sure what came over me when I decided to tie him up earlier. Well, I do know. Last night he was getting too inside his head, I saw the look on his face, the way he was retreating into himself. Tying him up was a way of forcing him to be in the moment. If he'd objected, then I'd have released him straight away and probably be mortified. But it seemed to do the trick. However, now I'm worried about what comes next.

I flip the back bacon over, the pink has darkened nicely on both sides, the yellow cornmeal edging turning a golden brown.

Lynette used to tell me that a little bit of self-doubt goes a long way towards self-preservation. It was her nice way of saying stop and think for a change. Unbeknownst to her, I've been doing just that from a very early age. We just think differently.

The eggs reach the end of their seven minutes, and when my phone timer goes off, I drain them, hopefully the yolks will be perfectly jammy. I pop six slices of rye bread into the toaster and press them down.

Should I have waited? Atlas' heart is still a graveyard, haunted by the past. He's not someone who makes a decision overnight. He's no poet, but he is a deep thinker. He needs time to adjust to this, but I also don't want to give him too much space or he'll start second guessing himself and inserting doubts, planting land mines all over what could be good and beautiful.

He emerges, wet hair slicked back behind his ears, walking sin and good enough to eat... again... right as the toast pops up.

"Good timing." I try to sound casual, but the words probably come out sounding anything but.

I put four eggs, the whole pan of bacon, and the six pieces of toast onto his plate. It looks like a feat for twelve, but I noticed how little he ate last night at his parents' house, due to the uncomfortable conversation, no doubt. He worked hard yesterday, and we have metric fuck-ton of work to do unloading that trailer into the back shop area this morning.

"These are still in the shell?" It sounds more like a question than a statement.

"Yeah. Soft boiled."

"That's exciting."

My stomach is a wreckage of butterflies, nerves, and anxiety brought on by all the second guessing, but the storm goes quiet when Atlas steps past the island, bypassing his plate, and covers my hand. I study his fingers, work roughened with short, blunt nails.

Finally, I tear my eyes from our hands, straight to his face. He brushes his other hand over my jaw in a sweet caress that heats my whole body and pebbles my nipples

under my long sleeved black shirt.

“I’ve never told you how sexy those pants look on you.”

“They’re just cargos. Work pants.” Made of duck canvas, they’re thick and durable. I wear them for all my unloading and for at least half of my picks so that I don’t destroy my regular clothes.

“Mmm. I’d love to take them off you.”

My heart explodes. He could be trying to claw his way back behind his walls, but instead, he’s intentionally reaching out to me.

“Sit down and eat before your breakfast gets cold.” I shudder at the thought of goopy, congealed yolks.

“That’s what the microwave is for,” he protests.

“Easy there, slugger. Microwaved eggs explode and toast would turn to leather. Save some strength for unloading. You’ll need it.”

His cock rams into my stomach as he presses closer, tugging my lower lip between his teeth. The thought of him without boxers on under those jeans threatens to turn me into an animal, so I force myself away.

“You’re hungry. Eat. Please.”

He curls around the island reluctantly, pulling out a stool and arching his huge body over his plate, but when he tucks into his food, he eats like he hasn’t had anything for weeks.

He's finished long before I make myself a few slices of bacon and toast, and walks to the fridge like he lives here, gets out the store bought cake in the silver tray, and starts in on that with a fork while leaning casually against the counter.

I know that we still have so much to sort out and talk about, but this gives me hope. It would make me feel a thousand percent better if I knew that he had hope too, a balm to all his inner aches that he disguises so carefully.

After breakfast, Atlas backs the trailer up to the single loading dock door that's left. It opens up to a large space in the back that's closed off from the rest of the store. There are several workbenches back here with carefully arranged tools, as well as a large sorting and storage space. I can work on anything that needs some TLC before it goes out onto the floor. Most antiques need some love, whether it's repair or just cleaning.

Loading always takes forever, but the unloading isn't nearly as bad. The back is getting full, which means that I should start cleaning and pricing and stop worrying about going out picking.

Atlas carries the heavy trunk in for me, even though I beg him to let me help. He sets it down and we both ignore it until the trailer is empty. I close and lock it, and Atlas parks it for me neatly in the side stall in line with my pink station wagon.

The first thing he does when we get back inside is to grab a grinder off the peg on the far wall above the workbench. "We had better cut that lock off."

"What?" I rush to the trunk and throw myself in front of it dramatically. "Never!"

"Willa ." He proffers the grinder menacingly. "You can't use the trunk like that. You won't be able to sell it with the mystery contents inside. Do you think you can find a

key for this thing?”

“No,” I admit. “It’s old and that would take some time, and even then, buying a random one might not work. I’d have to research what they even look like. It could take weeks.”

“Looks like cutting it is the only option.”

“It doesn’t matter if it sits back here for weeks!”

I might be fighting against the idea, but now I’m kind of intrigued by what’s in there. You can buy rustic, antique looking locks online for twenty bucks, and even the real things don’t cost all that much. It’s silly to protest like this.

“You promise that you won’t damage the trunk?”

Atlas sets the grinder down and find a small piece of plywood in the scrap wood crate near the roll up door we just closed. He wedges it between the lock and the trunk with care.

“If I slip off the lock, I’ll hit that wood. I won’t damage the trunk. You have my word.”

“It’s beautiful. One of the nicest ones I’ve ever seen. If it got a few new battle scars, I’d be devastated.”

“I promise.”

He’s basically asking if I trust him. I’d trust him with my life. I’ve wanted to tell him that for so long.

I back away from the trunk, but when he fires up the grinder, I quickly grab a set of safety glasses. He stops for me and puts them on without an argument, even though I know he hates wearing them.

He works through the lock slowly, but still, it takes almost no time at all for the grinder to make quick work of the old metal. A steady stream of sparks shoots over the concrete floor, and then the lock falls apart and drops to the ground .

Atlas kills the grinder. He replaces it and sheds the safety glasses before he points to the trunk. “Do you want to do the honors?”

It’s silly, but my throat is suddenly dry. I’m afraid I’m going to lift that lid and there really will be bodies in there. I grasp the lid and flip it up fast, using more force than necessary because I anticipate that it’ll need some encouragement after being sealed for all those years, but it pries apart easily without sticking or groaning.

“Holy mother fuck!” I yelp, staggering back.

Atlas comes running. He wraps his arms around me and wheels me, acting as a human shield. “Shit!” He slowly releases me, but I grab his hand and hold it in a murderously tight grip as we both stare into the trunk.

“Holy balls, please tell me that’s fake.”

He picks up one brick of bills and sifts through it before pulling one crisp hundred off the top of the stack and checking it over. “I don’t think it’s fake, but I’m no expert.” He inhales sharply after setting the brick back beside all the neatly arranged other stacks of bills. “Fuck. I knew we shouldn’t have taken this.”

“What would something like this be doing stashed in Agatha’s old barn? It hasn’t been touched back there for ages—oh shit .” It makes horrible sense now why the

back part of the barn was blown clean, and it wasn't because Agatha was back there or due to the wind blowing through the slats. "It did look like someone had come through the back. This trunk was only barely covered and not as dirty as the rest of the barn."

Atlas tugs me away like the trunk is doing to implode at any second. "If you were looking to stash a lot of cash for a short time, where would you hide it?"

"Somewhere no one would think to look."

I fall back flat on my ass. "Holy fuck, but why?" I scramble up before Atlas can answer. "We need to get back to Agatha's and warn her!"

Atlas wraps his arms around me and thrusts me in against him, holding me so tight, like that alone can ward off the Pandora's chest we just busted wide open. "We're putting this trunk right the fuck back and going and getting Agatha out of there. This isn't safe. Only a major criminal would have cash like this. There's probably a quarter million there or more."

"We'll just put it back. They'll never know."

"The barn's clearly been gone through. If they don't know it's missing already, they will soon. No one is going to leave this amount of money unchecked. They'll be watching. I'd be surprised if they don't already know it's gone."

"Oh my god."

He clasps my hands, bringing them to his mouth and brushing kisses over my knuckles, a new calm smoothing out his worried features. I know that face. It's his take charge expression.

“Call her. Tell her that we’re coming for her in a few hours and to stay in the house and call us immediately if she sees anyone around her yard. I’d bet they’d come at night and not in bright daylight if they’re going to come at all, and maybe we do still have a bit of time until they realize it’s gone.”

I’m still trying to sort through the how and why of this.

“You can’t just launder that much money at once,” Atlas explains, even though I haven’t spoken out loud. “Whoever put it there was probably being watched, or they didn’t want anyone else to know about it.”

I’m two seconds away from freaking out, but Atlas hugs me. Hard. I know it’s just an illusion, but having his arms locked around me like steel grips makes it seem like nothing is going to get us.

“Shh,” he soothes, though I still haven’t said anything and I’m biting back the sob that wants to burst out. “We’ll go straight to the club.”

“We can’t just leave this here!” I mutter frantically into his shoulder.

His hand smooths over my hair. “You’re right. We’ll have them come to us. I’ll call Bullet right after I call Tyrant.” A horrible hiccup comes out of me, followed by a whimper. Not the sob I’ve been suppressing, but still a sound of unmistakable panic and misery. Atlas turns my face up, so I can drink in his calm. “Wizard has good security around this place, yeah? Trust me. We’re okay.”

“Why didn’t I just listen to you?”

“If you had, whoever put this there might have got scared after seeing us in the barn and they could have attacked Agatha, thinking she knew something about it. It’s better this way. At least we can keep her safe. Plus, if someone’s doing something

illegal around here, the club should know. We've eradicated the smalltime scum, but this is no smalltime shit. We can't have something like this going on right under our noses."

I wish I didn't have to ask, but I can't help it. "Something like what?"

"Drugs or weapons. I don't see another way."

"Maybe it's Agatha's. Maybe it does belong to her. Maybe she put it there and forgot about it."

"The bills are too new. She wouldn't have let you buy the trunk if that was the case, and if she didn't trust the bank, what's wrong with her basement? She has no idea. I'm certain."

What Atlas said about calling Bullet finally sinks like a rock settling at the bottom of my gut. "Lynette's pregnant. This is going to upset her. Oh my god, what if it upsets her so much that—"

"Hey. Hey." He cups my face, and my eyes lock on his, burning like bright cobalt. "Every single one of the old ladies knows what it takes to be with a man who belongs to a club like ours. We might be one of the better clubs, but there's still no end to potential problems and even violence that could arise. Our life isn't for the faint of heart. They know that it could be dangerous."

"Harold kidnapped my sister," I protest, thinking back to that horrible time last year. "I don't want her ever having to go through anything like that again."

"You need to watch out for yourself too," he cautions, as though I'm reckless.

"I will. I can." Something else needles into my brain, inflating that ballooning panic

in my chest again. “But we need to make sure the club is on top of keeping your family safe as well. Anything and anyone this touches. We can’t let anyone become a target. I’d never forgive myself if someone we loved got hurt because I had to have a stupid trunk.”

“Willa.” He pauses. Like he’s not sure what to say.

I put his cell into his palm. “Call the club. We had better get moving on this. At least the bonus is that our going back to Agatha’s doesn’t have to look suspicious. Your bike’s there. We were going to get it anyway.”

“That’s true. But we need to assume that they know, and that they know who took their cash and where we are.”

“If they knew, wouldn’t they be here already? They could have just broken into the trailer last night and I never would have known the difference. Sure, there’s cameras around the place, but they could have worn masks, and we never would have been able to identify them.”

“Good point,” he muses, scrolling through his contacts to find Tyrant’s number. “They might not know yet, but if that’s true, we should make sure they can’t follow us back when we get my bike and pick up Agatha. I’ll get Wizard on that.”

“Wizard does way too much. How come you guys don’t have other IT guys or people who are good at tracking and finding those who don’t want to be found?”

Atlas’ sandy brows crash down over his nose. “That’s a good question. I don’t know. But for a while now, Wizard has been handling way too much. It’s probably time that we find someone else. I’ll bring that to Tyrant too. No doubt they’re going to call church before they make any decisions.”

Atlas' thumb is covering over his contact list and I ask him in the smallest whisper I've ever heard myself utter. "When you call Bullet, please tell him not to leave my sister alone, whatever he does. Take her to the club, or bring her here with him."

He nods firmly.

"And please ask Tyrant to have someone drive past your parents' house regularly from here on out. Maybe... oh fuck, maybe your sister too? I know she's still there—would she be in danger in Seattle?"

"Don't worry. It won't be the first time we've pissed off someone. I know the drill." Despite his reassurance, his jaw tightens. He hates this, but he's trying to control his emotions so that he doesn't scare me. He's my rock now, but the storm is chipping away at him too.

I've never been more thankful to the club in all my life, and there have been so many times already in this past year where they've saved our asses, and made my life here, my dreams, and my business a reality.

They take an oath of loyalty when they join that club, of brotherhood, and I know that every man in the place will have Atlas' back through this, and by extension, mine.

The storm might be intensifying, but we won't have to weather it alone.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:01 pm

Atlas

Tyrant told me before I even hung up, that he wanted me to gather everyone right here, including my parents and my sister. After a long chunk of relative peace, enough shit has gone down with the club in the past few years that I could tell Tyrant wanted to go on the offensive. He won't decide anything until he's had time to think about it, and certainly not before he calls church,

The roar of the bikes fractures the silence long before they appear. We're waiting on the top floor, as per Tyrant's instructions, behind the steel door which is the only entrance. The front door is glass, and the big overhead roll up door could be pried up.

I was vague with my parents because I didn't want them to panic. I asked them to come at eleven, knowing that Tyrant would be here by then. I want him to take the lead on this, not just because he's my Prez, but because I'm in over my head. I also realize how stupid I was to leave my gun in the saddlebag of my bike yesterday. I have nothing now to keep us safe except a few knives from the block on the kitchen counter.

I've been sitting against Willa's headboard, my arms wrapped around her like a safety blanket. She hasn't moved since we came up here. She's sat with her legs drawn up between mine, her arms wrapped around them.

We draw in long, twinned breaths of relief at hearing those bikes coming.

Now is definitely not the time. I was sitting here for over half an hour with her in my arms, but the words come to me at this very moment. I should swallow them down,

but I can't not tell her.

I brush a stray strand of her hair behind her ear, the highlights shimmering like pure gold in the sun coming through all the windows. It strikes me now how stupid it was to position us right beside one.

Fuck .

"It's a dumb question to ask right at this moment, but are you okay? You look like you're going to throw up." I lean down to her, pressing our foreheads together. I cup the back of her head, splaying my fingers protectively over her hair.

"About this situation or about us? I've been telling myself lies for a year now, and I believed most of them. But I'm totally okay with what happened between us."

I kiss her nose, her cheeks, her lips, then give her the full intensity and honesty of my eyes. "I need you to know that I'll be at your side. This morning wasn't a mistake."

"I am scared though, about all this. I know after what happened last year with Lynette and your club's old lawyer I should be used to trouble. But I didn't expect it to come to my door."

"I have every faith that my club will keep you, my family, and Agatha, safe," I say. And I believe it.

"You're going to have to teach me how to shoot. Bullet taught Lynette, and I know there's no range, but I'm sure we can practice somewhere. Anyone gets between you and me, or anyone else I love, and I'm coming for them. I'd tear off their face with my teeth if I had to."

She's not kidding. Willa is different than any other woman I've ever known

romantically. She'd guard and champion me. She's fierce despite her sugar-sweet exterior. She's more giving than she is for taking, relying on her own instincts to drive her happiness. She'd fight for me in every way.

Even ways she never imagined she'd have to.

I could tell her. I could open myself up and bleed myself dry and I know that whatever it was I said, she'd be right there with me.

I'm just... not ready.

She kisses me hard and rough before letting me go. The bikes are starting to roll into the parking lot.

I'm still reeling as we head downstairs and I open the glass front door for Tyrant, Raiden, Crow, and Gunner. They slip inside, their huge leather-clad bodies sucking all the oxygen out of the space. Willa relaxes a fraction behind me. She feels safer too now that my club brothers are here.

"You'd better show us this chest," Tyrant states. "Are we the first ones here?"

"Yes. My parents are on their way."

"Good. I have the start of a plan, but I want to run it by everyone together. Bullet and Lynette are driving over. They were five minutes behind us."

There's no way that Bullet would take Lynette on the back of his bike now that she's pregnant. He's a safe driver, but I know him, and he's also thoughtful and extra cautious.

I'm locking up the front door when Lynette's black sedan pulls up beside all the

bikes. She's driving, and she barely has the car off before she's sprinting across the asphalt with Bullet right behind.

I whip the door open so she doesn't go crashing through it. She wraps Willa in the tightest hug.

Willa tires to wriggle her way free while I clap Bullet on the shoulder. "This was unexpected," he states flatly.

For a second, I think he's giving me a funny look, but he's not. He doesn't mean me and Willa. He means the quarter million dollars or maybe more that we unearthed.

"Tyrant and the rest of the guys are in the back. The trunk's near the loading door. I almost wish whoever it belonged to would jack the door up and come take it away."

"Whoa, I'm okay," Willa says behind us as Lynette tries to smother her. "We're going to get this figured out."

"Tyrant's on it." I try to be helpful, but that just makes Lynette frown at me. She's every bit the tall, goddess ice queen, and right now, in her black blazer and skirt suit, she's intimidating as fuck.

I have this feeling, deep down, that she never liked me. I hate the term, but I'm pretty sure she thinks that I'm a fuck boy. She doesn't like her sister being so close with me. On the upside of that situation, she's always assumed that we've been sleeping together. She's never believed Willa's denials, but to be fair, Willa always answers her questions with snark and a hint of mystery, which could only leave the impression that the situation was up for interpretation.

Bullet doesn't have a kid sister who he raised like his own daughter to protect, which means that he's always taken my denial of being anything more than friends as the

honest truth.

While I'm debating silently whether he'll try and castrate me when I tell him, my parents pull up.

Mom, Dad, and Georgia are mystified as to why they're here. My mom's expression is part hopeful and part worried, and for a moment I think she's expecting me and Willa to make some kind of announcement about our relationship after last night's dinner. One look at our faces and the fact my cub brothers are here, and the hope is replaced by concern.

"What's going on, baby bro?" Georgia asks as she crosses her arms. "There's a lot of bikes here."

"Not many, really," I counter. "But everyone's in the back. You'll find out right away."

"Are you in some kind of trouble, son?" Dad rests his hand lightly on my shoulder. I surpassed him in height by the time I was fifteen, so he has to reach up quite a bit.

Mom bites down on her lip and clutches the strap of her purse tightly.

Willa's already taken Lynette and Bullet to the back. My family is so innocent. Sweet. Civilians. They didn't ask for any of this.

I remind myself that this didn't happen because I patched into Satan's Angels. They're going to be safe because of my club. I could have handled their shame at me doing some below the belt shit, but I couldn't stand bringing trouble to their doorstep.

So far, that hasn't happened, even in the worst of times.

“I think that Tyrant should explain what’s happening. He wanted everyone together to hear it. It’s trouble, but not what you’re thinking, and we’ll all be okay. I promise.”

I’ve been making a lot of promises that I’ll do everything in my power to keep, but I know I shouldn’t keep uttering them when I have no real power to make them a reality.

Dad wraps his arm around mom’s waist and Georgia follows right behind me. She’s practically vibrating with all her questions but clamps down on them. She does look nervously from Tyrant to Raven, then from Gunner to Crow, and over to Bullet.

She grew up here, but she hasn’t been in Hart in quite a few years. Other than the cookout, this is the first time she’s been around my biker family. Anyone would be intimidated by these big, rough looking men and their club vests full of patches.

The trunk is already open. My parents gasp when they get a good look at what’s inside and Georgia groans.

“Wow,” she mutters darkly. “You were right about leaving the trunk, although I still think it’s pretty cool.”

“Is that... is that play money?” Mom asks, but she quickly shakes her head, laughing softly at herself. “No, of course it’s not. How much is that? Enough to buy a house?”

“Enough to buy a house here in Hart and then some,” Tyrant confirms. “And whoever stashed it in that barn is going to be coming back for it. I’ll make this short and simple until I have a better idea of how it’s going to go. We need to go on the defensive. Instead of us trying to locate the owner of this... chest ... we’ll make sure that we leave a trail they can follow. We’ll come to an agreement where they stay far away from Hart, and then we’ll return their money. We’re not going into lockdown again.”

“And if they don’t like that generous offer?” Crow asks darkly.

Scratch the fuck out of that, it’s not Crow. It’s Raven his borderline psychopathic alter ego. He rolls his neck to the side, cracking it like people warm up their knuckles before a fight. If there’s anything Raven loves, it’s his wife Tarynn, and a good beat down. If he’s doing the beating. And sometimes, I’m pretty sure, he even enjoys it if he’s the one taking it.

“That’s the only offer they get. However they got this money, it’s too close to our homes for comfort. How long is it before they bring their shit into Hart? Whatever it is that they’re selling, they’re not welcome here. Hart is ours .”

Raiden raises his voice in a rough shout of agreement and the other men all follow. I give a shout too but tone it down and edge closer to my parents, who are both trembling.

Lynette is standing by Willa, her arm wrapped around her shoulders, her hand stroking her hair over and over, though it appears involuntary. Willa lets her comfort her, though Willa’s stillness might be working the other way around, whether Lynette is aware of that dynamic or not.

“I’m sorry,” Tyrant says, turning to my family. “But until this is settled, you’re going to have to come to the clubhouse. It’s the only way we can keep you safe for certain. I understand this could disrupt your jobs, and one of our men would be happy to drive you to and from work each morning and ensure that you’re safe while you’re there. We’ll drive by your house too, to make certain it’s secure.”

Tyrant might be young, but he’s immediately captivating. He’s magnetic, but he has an immediate aura of trust and capability that sits like a mantle on his broad shoulders. He continues, “We’re not going on lockdown, but the option for families to come to the clubhouse for a few days is definitely there, or we’ll have men driving

by or securing their homes and standing guard.”

“Does that include us?” Lynette asks, clearly meaning Willa and not Bullet. He already obviously will be at the clubhouse.

“I’m sorry, Willa. I know this will interrupt your business when you just opened, but you’re in the thick of this. We’ll move this to the clubhouse immediately and you should definitely come with us.”

Willa doesn’t groan about her business. She doesn’t try and make a plan up and fling it at Tyrant, begging him or acting petulant. “What about Agatha?” she asks, all her worry for that tiny old lady alone in her farmyard, completely vulnerable right now.

My heart twinges so hard that I just about beat it with my fist to get it working properly again, but a heady dose of pride accompanies the tightening. She cares.

Tyrant and Raiden exchange looks. “We think it’s best if we sent two bikes out with you when you drive there. Make a very obvious trail to follow.”

“Follow?” Mom gasps. “What if they ambush them along the way?”

“We could leave a note,” I suggest. “Take the cash out of the trunk and load it into the back of the truck and put it back in the barn. I believe that these people, or maybe it’s just one person, doesn’t want a confrontation. They want this to stay quiet. They’re probably trying to figure out right now how to get that money back if they’ve noticed it’s missing. We could leave the lock off the trunk but put it back exactly as we found it. Leave a phone number or something.”

“That’s a terrible plan,” Georgia groans.

“No.” A sick grin spreads over Raven’s face. “I like it. Leave mine.”

“I’d rather it be one of Wizard’s burners,” Tyrant says, but I can tell he likes the plan otherwise. “The rest makes sense.”

“How are you getting the trunk to the clubhouse?” Willa asks.

It’s a good question, given that everyone came here on bikes and there’s no way it would fit in my parents’ old car or in Lynette’s trunk.

“We’ll bring it,” she states. “In the truck. Atlas will drive and we’ll stuff it into the back seat. It’ll fit, if I put it up. Or we could stuff all the cash into a bunch of suitcases and divide it up between us.”

“No. We’ll do the suitcases and the trunk and take it all to the clubhouse, but there’s no way you’re riding with me for that. You can go with Lynette and Bullet, and my parents will follow you over to the clubhouse. Someone will go with them later to their house to help them pack.”

Willa’s lips thin out. It’s obvious that she hates that idea. Her eyes flash like she’s going to argue, but instead she shuts it down, glances once at Lynette, and nods.

“Okay. I’ll find the suitcases for you, and then I’ll pack a bag. The sooner we get to Agatha, the better. I’ll be fast.”

Tyrant and Raiden share another one of their secret, loaded looks. They have their own silent language, I swear. They’ve been friends since kindergarten and they’re closer than the twins, Grave and Decay. Those guys are meatheads, but Tyrant and Raiden have real working brains.

Tyrant gives me an unexpected nod of approval. What I just did is vastly out of character. I’m not the kind of guy who figures out a course of action. I’m content to sit back and let others in the club take the lead, as their rank denotes that they should.

I'm a younger guy and I've always been okay with following orders. I might have had some ideas of my own in the past, but I never thought it was right to voice them.

"Assuming it's a guy that this cash belongs to," Willa mutters. "I'd really like to throat punch him when he arrives to collect it."

Raven laughs way harder than he should. "I like you."

The urge to throat punch him just grew exponentially.

"I hope that we can get this figured out within a few days and have everyone back to their lives." Tyrant's deep voice booms through the back bay. It's like a call to action and everyone gets moving.

I'm torn between my club, my family, and Willa, but in the end, it's my dad who gives me an encouraging nod, despite his pale, shell shocked expression. "Go help Willa. We're fine." He gathers my mom into his side and Georgia follows, huddling up with them. I hate that she's shaking.

Whoever this fucker is, he came into our lives and terrorized my family. He endangered Willa, and he put my club in a tight, dangerous spot.

Throat punching him is just the beginning of what I'd like to do.

Willa

Even though we brought two extra people with us, who rolled in on thunderous bikes and look like they've been cast up from the bowels of biker hell, Agatha had tea ready.

I don't know Odin or Battle Axe very well. They're both older, burly bikers, probably in their late forties or early fifties. Battle Axe looks like a Viking, with tattoos on his face and visible through his buzzed hair, and a beard that flowed out in both directions like twin streamers while he was riding his bike here. Odin is missing an eye and sports a black patch, a scraggly beard, and a salt and pepper mullet that I believe is an intentional choice of haircut.

I might not know much about either man, but I know they look laughably ridiculous sitting at Agatha's table with the lace covered top, plates of homemade cookies and biscuits, sipping tea out of dainty cups sprigged with flowers.

Atlas is doing his best to explain the situation, and Agatha has gone from shock, to disbelief, and now she's digging in. "I'm not going to be chased off my own property," she vows, getting shakily to her feet. "I've always said that the only way I'll leave this place is in a body bag, and they're only allowed to take me away to burn me up. My ashes will be spread here, on my own land. Let the wind take me where it will at that point."

"It's only for a few days." I set down the half-eaten jam jam cookie. "Atlas' parents will be at the clubhouse, and his sister too. You could stay with me. I'm going to have my own room there."

“You hope it’s only for a few days, but even so, that’s a few days too many.” She puts up a gnarled hand in the air, “Hold on. Wait here.”

She totters off down the hall.

Odin sips his tea loudly, then leans over to Battle Axe. “If she doesn’t come willingly, we’re going to have to chloroform her.”

“Oh my god!” I hiss. “We’re not kidnapping her! Just let me talk to her when she comes back. I’ll convince her. Can’t you see she’s just scared?”

Battle Axe’s frightening face splits into a grin that makes him look even more terrifying. “We’re just joking. Why would we need to drug her when we can just pick her up and stuff her in the truck?”

I cross my arms. “If she’s not going to come willingly, she’s not coming at all.”

“We have Tyrant’s orders.”

“Did he order you to give an old lady a heart attack?” I snap back.

“Do you think she’s climbing out a window right now?” Atlas’ eyes flick nervously to the hallway. “She’s been gone a while.”

“I can go check,” Battle Axe volunteers.

“No. Just... wait. She said she’d be right back. I believe her.”

Odin lowers his voice. “Have we considered that the money actually is hers? She could have criminal connections. She could be running the whole show.”

“Did you see her face when we told her about everything?” Atlas asks under his breath. “She wasn’t faking it. She had no idea.”

“She looked right murderous,” Odin says. He taps his good eye, indicating that nothing escapes him. His senses are heightened with just one eye. “I bet she was a spitfire back in the day.”

We all freeze as Agatha’s shuffling steps scrape down the hall. She teeters into view, a tiny little old lady with a sawed off shotgun and a tactical vest with very real looking grenades strapped to the front.

She pumps the shotgun, holding it up towards the ceiling. Her hair has come loose from her bun, the whips framing her face like a mad scientist. Her eyes glow with absolute unhinged glee.

“Let those bastards come! They can have a taste of this!”

Battle Axe and Odin get up so fast that the table shoots into the wall. The teacups turn over, spilling tea all over the bright white lace tablecloth. Cookies go flying onto the floor. Atlas grasps my hand and shoves me behind his back again.

“What the fuck?” Battle Axe wheezes. “Where did you get grenades from”

“My husband was in ‘Nam. He had a few hookups.”

“Oh my god, they’re old ones too,” Odin sighs. He edges closer, hands out where Agatha can see them. “Let’s get you out of that vest. Those things aren’t safe when they’re that old.”

“You don’t want the house to explode,” Battle Axe coaxes. “I don’t want the house to explode. Let us help you.”

“Agatha,” I plead with her, stepping out from behind Atlas, though he tries to tuck me back in. “We don’t know how many of them there are. They could come in here and overpower you. Take your gun and your... um... grenades.” And whatever else she has stored in this place. My fucking god . What else does she have stashed away? A rocket launcher? Assault rifles? Landmines? “If they get to you and drag you off, you’re going to be forced out of here against your will. If you come with us, we’ll have eyes on the place. We have cameras that we brought with us to hook up so you can see the feed whenever you like. We really hope this will be over within a few days, but we don’t know and that’s the truth. This could be one person acting alone, or it could be a web of people. Either way, it’s dangerous.”

“You don’t happen to have a spare flamethrower lying around, do you?” Battle Axe asks hopefully. “I’ve always wanted to try one of those.”

“I want to learn how to shoot,” I add, hoping to appeal to Agatha’s need to defend her property. “You could show me while we’re at the clubhouse. Or- or somewhere on the outskirts of the city.”

Agatha shakes her head, waving the gun around. We all duck as one. I throw my hands over my face, my clothes soaked in sweat as those grenades bounce against her chest. “No can do. I’m not leaving here. If you want to keep me safe, you’ll have to bring the fight here. They can come and meet up here for the cash.”

I spread my fingers to peek at Atlas’ face through them. He doesn’t like this at all. Neither do Battle Axe or Odin. The three of them exchange loaded looks.

“We’re going to have to call this in,” Battle Axe sighs. “But maybe we can make that work.”

“Let me help you out of that vest,” Odin pleads, edging closer to Agatha. “You don’t have to leave, but for the love of Pete, don’t blow us all up.”

“These are perfectly safe,” Agatha scoffs. “You’d have to pull the pin for it to—”

“Okay!” Odin surges forward, grasps the shoulders of the huge vest, undoes a few buckles, and pops it clean over Agatha’s head. “No need for demonstrations. Let’s save the arsenal for when those assholes come back.”

“I don’t think we should give them their cash. They can go straight to hell,” Agatha bites out, but she allows Battle Axe to help Odin by taking the shotgun from her. He breaks it and slips the bullets into his hand.

At last, I can breathe again, but barely. Atlas’ breath pounds out of him and he sags like he just finished a marathon.

“I don’t have any flamethrowers, but I do have a bow and arrows, and a medieval mace, though that might be just for décor. I haven’t decided yet. I suppose in a pinch, it could work. Oh, and a set of throwing knives!”

“Hold that thought,” Battle Axe commands, while Odin sets the vest and the gun down, exceptionally gently, on a chair in the living room.

Every piece of furniture has frills and flowers, lace and embroidery. I can’t believe that this old lady house is also practically an arsenal .

While Battle Axe gets on the phone, Odin sneaks up behind Agatha. Before I can do anything to stop it, he has a length of black fabric that looks like an extra-long scarf, wrapped around her. He secures her arms at her sides, then picks her up. She thrashes wildly, bucking and wriggling against him, but she’s maybe ninety pounds and he’s a beast of a man.

“I’m sorry,” he tells her, and at least he sounds sincere. “But we can’t risk a shootout. Even if we’re well defended, someone could get hurt or killed this way, and we’re not

having that. If you won't take a vacation, you're going to have a forced one. Don't make me drug you, because I swear that I will, even if it's like disrespecting my own granny, god rest her soul."

"You devil brute!" Agatha shrieks. "I'll put a spell on your cock so that it shrivels and falls off!"

"Sweetheart, you don't scare me," he rejoins with a grin. "My granny was from New Orleans. Now, she really into voodoo and black magic. Kept us all line, she did. But, if you feel the need to utter some curses, you go right ahead. I can take all the abuse you have to hand out."

"Ugh, I'm not sure I can," I mutter, following them out of the house.

Atlas sets his hand on the small of my back, his palm hard and comforting, slowing my rapidly pounding heart just a little. He doesn't let his hand fall away until we're outside, but even then, he's not hiding. He rubs it in a slow circle before slipping it up to my shoulders and guiding me to the truck.

Battle Axe takes longer to come out, probably because he's checking and stashing those weapons.

"I'm so sorry about all this," I whisper to Agatha as I slide into the driver's seat of my truck. I start it and crank the A/C so we don't suffocate in the stifling heat. She's in the back, still trussed, and seat-belted in. Even so, I click the locks down and slip the child safety on so she can't unlock them and turf herself out while I'm driving. "After this is over, we'll bring you back and we'll send people out to clean everything up, and I promise that if anything was broken—even a teacup—I'll pay you or find you the exact match as a replacement."

She stares daggers at me, but she doesn't insult me. All she does is huff.

She can probably see that a single harsh word would cause me to break out in tears. My eyes are already dangerously watery.

“I didn’t know they were going to tie you up, I swear.”

“Well... it’s not like I gave them much choice, did I?”

All I can see right now is Lynette trussed up and tied to a concrete pillar in some warehouse in Seattle almost a year ago. All of us were so helpless, trapped over an hour away. That must be how Agatha feels. Terribly. Helpless.

“I’m going to come back there and take those stupid ties off!”

Her snort is more dismissive than angry. “Might as well just leave them on or I guarantee I’ll be hurtling out of this truck and god knows what will go down after that.” She laughs. Ominously.

I groan and sink down in the driver’s seat.

The tailgate bangs down, scaring the ever living fuck out of me as they start to unload the trunk. Odin take the trunk out to the barn, Atlas trailing after him. They emerge a few minutes later, and Battle Axe closes up the house tight, testing the door. He’s found Agatha’s keys, at least. Maybe that will help her feel better.

The men spend twenty minutes putting up hidden cameras in the barn, on the barn’s exterior, and on the exterior of the house, before they get on their bikes, kick them to life, and roll out in a thunderous cloud.

I give them enough of a head start so we won’t eat their road dust.

I wait a few minutes before I can think of what to say. What on earth is there that

could possibly sound right to someone who's been hogtied and wrangled away from her own home? "I don't know why this is happening. It's unthinkable and unbelievable. It's like a bad nightmare."

"I always wanted a chance to use one of those grenades," Agatha mutters sorrowfully, like she's mourning the missed opportunity more than anything else.

"I'm sure that if you really want to practice with one, the club could set something up for you out in your field that doesn't involve getting life in prison or blowing that lovely cedar barn sky high. I'm still not done picking in there!"

"They're just lucky I didn't go straight for the throwing knives. I doubt that big beggar could have tied such good knots with both his eyes gone."

We're only a few minutes down the road and I'm already wishing that they'd done a more thorough job of searching Agatha for weapons before tumbling strapping her into the truck. I'm starting to think that she could have taken on a whole army by herself if she wanted to.

There's a good portion of this that's probably just angry bluster. The guys were right. We can't chance anyone being there and winding up in the line of fire. No matter how tough they might be, they're still ultimately flesh and bone and that's no match for a bullet.

"You'll be at this prison you're taking me to?" Agatha asks stonily ten minutes later, but her words sound watery at the end as my apology did. She's losing some of her vinegar.

"Yes. Me and a whole bunch of other people. It might not be a luxury spa retreat, but the clubhouse isn't bad, there's a full kitchen and it's in a nice location. It's not a great situation, but we could make it fun if we tried."

“Well...” She sniffs, turns her face to the window, and sighs. “As long as I get a ride on one of those bikes, I suppose it won’t be all that bad.”

I have no doubt that she’s serious. Agatha looks like a harmless sweet old peach of a lady, but underneath that exterior is a warrior with a rebel soul.

“Is that hottie your man? Not the old grizzly vultures. The hunk who overheated last time. Couldn’t handle his own sizzle?” She snickers to herself.

“He- I- it’s complicated.” I stutter. “He’s the best male friend that I’ve ever had. But, yeah... it’s complicated.”

“They seem like they’re the kind of men who don’t know a boring day, at least. There’s something to be said for a good burst of violence every now and then, some action, some danger, some adventuring into the darkness and walking on the wild side.”

Considering Agatha walked out of a room wearing grenades , I now see that her life wasn’t always that sleepy little farmyard. I don’t know what her past was, but I doubt she’s the kind of woman who was born in and will die in, and never leave, the same ten square miles.

“My husband, well. Goodness. I believed in love, but I didn’t know the meaning of the world until we were in it. It snuck up on us, and suddenly, it was there . Two people living one life. Two souls twisted and entwined together.”

There’s such passion in her voice, and such sadness too. She must miss him. Terribly. I know what it’s like to lose someone, to have a hole inside of you that scars over eventually, but the wound acts up, bothering you some days, the grief seemingly insurmountable just when you thought you’d tucked it safely away.

My hands tighten on the wheel.

“Have you told him how you feel?”

“Not in so many words.” I’m a thousand degrees, even with the air blowing right on me, and I have it cold enough to make ice cubes.

“Ahh. Sometimes there aren’t words. Just don’t wait too long to tell him. Death is a thief. It steals from us. I know you’re both young, but don’t take it for granted.”

“I’ve taken a lot of things in my life exactly that way.” The cloud of dust ahead of us reaches the end of the gravel road. It obscures the paved road, but I imagine that the three bikes are starting to turn off onto it. “My sister raised me. I was unkind to her so many times. Difficult. A brat more often than not. I purposely disobeyed her, disappointed her more times than I can count. She still loved me.”

“What happened?”

I think we’re at the point of knowing each other where the sharing of intimate, painful secrets is allowed. A trunk full of ill-gotten money, grenades, and a kidnapping kind of speed up the personalization process.

“I lost my mom young, and I know how fast life changes. You’re right. Death is a thief. It steals people. Opportunity. Lifetimes. Paths that you then can’t choose because they’re closed off.”

“I’m sorry.” For the first time, her voice softens completely. “What about your other family?”

“My mom’s relationship with her parents was... I don’t even really know. It must have been terrible. She left when she was young. She ran away with Lynette’s father.

He stuck around for all of two seconds when he found out she was pregnant. She raised Lynette alone, and then ten years later, I arrived. I don't really remember my dad, but he was pretty much what people would call a shithead. Lynette remembers. She doesn't like to talk about it, but I think he was mean sometimes, especially when he drank. Our mom worked three jobs and so it was Lynette who was always at home with me, even when our mom was alive. After she- after she died, no one bothered to reach out to us. I don't think either of us will ever forgive whatever family is out there for that. Lynette had just turned eighteen. She was old enough to be my legal guardian. I guess they didn't feel like their help was needed. If people aren't interested in being in your life, then fuck them, right?"

"Fuck 'em," Agatha agrees emphatically, lisping through her dentures.

I thought hearing Lynette start to swear was funny. She was pretty uptight before she met Bullet. Very prim, proper, businesslike, and icy. Often, even with me. She's warmed up and chilled out a lot since Bullet.

Love is good for people.

"Family can be chosen too," Agatha points out. "These people are your family?"

"Sort of. Kind of. My sister is dating one of the bikers." Agatha calling them vultures rings through my brain. "Not one of the ones here today. Bullet. He's back at the club with her. She's their lawyer."

"Double dipping."

I nearly choke on my own saliva. "I'm glad. She didn't exactly have a lot of happiness in her life before she met Bullet."

"She'd approve of your choice then."

“In time. Or maybe straight up. I just can’t say anything until I’m sure.”

I turn onto the paved road, the silence so nice after listening to the tires rumbling down that back road. Traction is also a huge bonus. I don’t know how those guys get their bikes safely down all that gravel.

“Are you not sure?” Agatha asks, sloughing off the stillness like the dust whipping off the truck.

“I am- it’s just- maybe not the right time. That doesn’t change how I feel, but it’s a good thing to protect the beautiful, fragile things in life.”

“You don’t plant seeds in the dead of winter. At least not most seeds.”

I nod. “That’s it exactly. Atlas probably doesn’t even know that he loves deep and harder than most people, but he loved someone with his whole heart wide open, and she broke it and broke him. Whether it was real love or not isn’t the point. He thought it was.”

“And you’ve been waiting for him to heal.”

“I was, until I- couldn’t wait anymore.” I know how that sounds, and I wish I could frame it better. “All my life I’ve been in such a hurry for everything. I want to go slow with this. I don’t want him to offer me anything that I might damage, and I have a history of doing that.”

“That’s just life. Growing up. Maturing. Learning from mistakes. Your thoughts sound selfless and mature to me. You might not know if he’s ready, but he put himself between you and a vest full of grenades plus a loaded shotgun. That means something.”

“He was a sort of bodyguard before he was my friend. Old habits die hard.”

She makes a hissing sound, which is probably just wind passing through her dentures. It could also be disgust. “You couldn’t see his face from behind his back, but I did. It wasn’t just old habits.”

“All my life, men have wanted me because I look the way I do. Big ass, big boobs, blonde hair.”

“It’s not just the boobs and the butt,” Agatha insists. “That will only take you so far.”

“Usually just far enough to be in a bad place with all the wrong people.”

“It’s your face, dear. You have the face of an artist.”

“I don’t think so,” I say, laughing. “I can’t draw or paint, and I’m certainly never going to be a sculptor or get into pottery. Atlas is the talented one when it comes to his hands.” And his tongue.

I shiver, breathing hard at the memory of our night, and our morning together.

It was the first time in my life that I woke up next to someone and didn’t regret it.

I guess that’s part of growing up too. Looking hard at your life and figuring out where you keep going wrong and intentionally making changes.

“I meant that you have an interesting face. The kind of face that arrests an artist or would stop a photographer in their tracks. You have that unique shape, those huge blue eyes, that perfect nose and bow lips. It’s your cheeks, I think. They’re so prominent, like two apples. You don’t see that on many people.”

“Thanks,” I respond wryly. “I think.”

“And I think it’s all going to work out. You haven’t just been growing up. You’ve been growing a tender, compassionate, thoughtful heart. A true one of those is about as rare a commodity as your face.”

“Jesus,’ I breathe, my eyes stinging. “I’m starting to rather enjoy your backhanded compliments.”

“Get used to them, dearie. You’re in for more than a few if this drags on.”

Atlas

In the few hours that we've been gone, Tyrant assembled the officers and went into a quick church meeting. Many of the old ladies arrived at the clubhouse with their kids. With my parents here, my sister, and a good portion of the other families, it feels more like a reunion than lockdown.

We're not going into another lockdown. That's the first thing I hear from Bullet when I walk into the crazy, loud fray. It's chaos in here and it certainly isn't controlled, with kids running around all over the place, and a buzz of conversation that would drown out any music anyone turned on, even at full blast.

Willa is right behind me, with a not so reluctant Agatha tottering along beside her. Whatever they talked about in the truck, it seems to have worked. Agatha didn't try to bolt the second we helped her out of the back seat. In her beige, old person comfort shoes, turquoise polyester pants, and a bright purple and pink floral blouse, she stands out like a beacon in the sea of black and leather.

I wish we would have thought to put together a bag for Agatha, including her pills.

I want to facepalm myself for the oversight. I'll have to talk to Tyrant and see what he can do. Adam Archer might be able to put something together. For a plastic surgeon, he's alright. His basement clinic has saved our asses more than a few times, and I have to say, he's pretty much magic with those hands of his. If he could work miracles with a line of stitches and putting broken bones back together, hopefully he can do this solid.

As for clothing, my mom probably has lots that would fit Agatha and she's always willing to lend her things out.

Willa edges up to my side. She takes Agatha's hand in hers, but it's me she questions. "Are you okay?"

I blink into the full on chaos. My mom and dad also stick out, since they're not wearing leather, and Georgia too. They're all in the kitchen with a few of the other old ladies and the kids, following Lynette's instructions.

They're not just making one apple pie.

They look like they're assembling enough to feed an entire army.

With the number of people here, they might just need all those pies. There's only one oven. It'll be cranking them out for hours.

"It's nice to see this place full. It's the loud, crazy days that remind a body that this truly is one big family."

We're just in the lounge right now, but I can see clear across to the open part of the kitchen. Tyrant and Lark's daughter, Penny, picks up a whole apple and gets ready to hurl it at someone who I can't see. I hope they're watching. I open my mouth to shout a warning, but Gunner's old lady, Diletta, uses her teacher's instincts and plucks the apple clean from Penny's hand when she winds up.

Diletta never taught Penny, since she goes to a different school, but it's clear that she knows kids. She says something to Penny, picks up two more apples, and starts juggling them. That's more than enough to help Penny forget her nefarious plans.

"One day, you'll have to bring me to a club party." Willa has never been allowed to

go. Lynette was firm about her not wanting Willa involved with that side of the club.

That was also months ago, and to look at Lynette now, she's lost the rigid posture she used to carry herself with. She's glowing, laughing, animated, and at ease. She's only been to one biker Friday night herself, but she has stayed over at the clubhouse with Bullet a few times, and not because she was forced to either. Ask her, and she wouldn't be afraid to say that she judged Bullet as a criminal when she first met him, a wormy apple who she didn't want to take on as a client, but then she lost her whole holier than thou morality when she fell hard and fast for the man beneath the hard biker exterior.

She's so much more than just the club's lawyer now. She's a part of this family.

Seeing her so in her element and at ease amongst all the old ladies—some of whom are as tough as their men—gives me hope that maybe she'll come around to the idea of Willa being a part of this family as my old lady.

As. My. Old. Lady.

We're a long way away from that yet. How is it that my heart aches when my chest floods with warmth all around it?

"They're making my mom's recipe, if Lynette has anything to do with it, and it looks like she has everything to do with it." Willa takes Agatha's hand in hers. "Would you like to help? There's always room for improvement, even on tried and true recipes."

"I'd love to!" She looks around Willa and gives me the old lady stink eye, her lips puckering in on themselves. "Don't think I've forgotten about that promise to let us use guns, and we had better be able to launch at least one of those grenades when all this is over. That's the price for my silence as to the fact that you tied me up and kidnapped me."

“Grenades?” Just what on earth did Willa promise to get Agatha to fall in line?

Her smile is absolutely all sheepish guilt. “She has lots of land. I’m sure we could set something up. Bullet would know. He’s good at that kind of thing.”

“Grenades?” I repeat.

She just laughs and brushes her hand discreetly up my back. She leans in, glancing around furtively to make sure we’re not being watched. She has that private look on her face, one that I’m coming to know is just for me, and is all devilment.

“Just so you know, I’m going to sneak into your room tonight. You better make sure I know where it is and what your security code is. It would be pretty damn terrible if I got it wrong. The room. Not the code.”

“My god, you can’t do that. You’re going to be sharing a room with Agatha! What if she wakes up and finds you gone, lets herself out of the room, and starts going on a hunt for weapons?”

She laughs. “We’re about to let her into the kitchen. I can’t think of a more deadly room than that. She probably has wooden spoon skills that are absolutely killer, never mind all that talk about throwing knives.”

“I might be old, but my hearing hasn’t gone yet,” Agatha snorts, leaning into both of us, her lips puckering madly as she works her dentures around her mouth. “If you want to sneak out for a few hours to get it on with your man, I promise I’ll be on my best behavior.” She pops her dentures out and pretends to throw them over her shoulder.

“No!” Willa gasps, then laughs when Agatha turns her hand to show her that she still has them. “You have no idea what’s happened on these floors,” she sighs. “If those

landed, we might have had to order up an exorcism before you could put them back into your mouth.”

“Got any hot grandpas around here?” Agatha asks, arranging her teeth back into place deftly. “My husband was the love of my life and that’s never going to change, but it’s been a lot of lonely years. I think a little bed sport might be just the thing.”

My god. We’ve unleashed a monster among us.

“There are plenty of eligible men in Hart, I’m sure,” Willa says hopefully, not the least bit disgusted or scandalized. She’s doing better with this information than I am.

“Don’t look so shocked, young man. One day, you’ll be my age, and you’ll look back on this moment and you’ll understand the concept of old, not dead .”

“The concept is to keep you safe. After the threat has been neutralized, you’re more than welcome to sling grenades on your farm—though I’d really prefer if you didn’t—or find someone to date.”

“Dating?” Agatha spits. “No. Hook up with.” She winks. “I know the lingo.”

“You shouldn’t risk coming to my room” I warn Willa under my breath before Agatha can tug her along to the kitchen. “Not unless you want someone to find out. There are cameras in the hallways and all over this place.”

She just shrugs. Maddeningly.

And even more maddening is the fact that my cock is harder than steel and has been since she mentioned a middle of the night tryst. I don’t know if it’s properly deflated ever since last night.

“I could talk to Wizard.”

“Wizard is busy enough. Too busy.” It’s another reminder that I was going to ask Tyrant about that. He’s probably well aware already, but I won’t be able to stop thinking about it until I put it out there. “It might look like a big happy gathering in here, but people are stressed.” Willa sobers at my words. Her hand falls to the small of my back and presses there in a comforting gesture. “When that asshole comes to get his money and gets the fuck out of Hart, I’ll take you back to your place and give you the fucking of a lifetime.”

“Still right here. Still hearing fine,” Agatha quips.

Willa tries to speak quieter, but it’s hard over the noise in here. “I hope you’ll tie me up this time.” She winks at me before she steers Agatha to the kitchen.

“I hope it’s more fun for you than it was for me,” Agatha drops dryly, just within my hearing.

Willa turns her face and winks again. It’s the last bit of attention she can give me before Lynette spots her and she and Agatha get swallowed into the pie making shenanigans. My mom and dad both look up and locate me, but instead of rushing over and asking me a thousand questions about what’s being done, or begging me to let them go home, they stay right where they are. They’re a part of this life in a way they never have been before.

Georgia waves at me. She palms an apple and strides over. “Hey, baby bro. I just wanted to say that we’re doing okay. You’re wearing your worried face. Either that or you’re constipated.”

My sister and Willa are far too similar while being so vastly different. It’s almost unnerving.

She tosses the apple at me. “One for the road.”

I catch it before it smacks me in the nose. “I’m glad you’re alright.”

“It’s actually fun. Everyone’s been super nice, and our rooms are all set up. Mom and Dad are going to call in sick to work for the next couple days, say they caught a stomach bug. Neither of them ever do that, so they’ll be okay. It’s a believable excuse. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know that we have it handled.”

“I don’t have anything handled. I just got here, and I haven’t even gone for an update yet.”

She grins at me. “As I said, an apple for the road. Or just to the lounge, or wherever those feral looking guys are that run this place. Then again, they’re all feral, aren’t they? You stick out wherever you go, but here more than ever.”

She doesn’t intentionally mean to be cruel, but as she walks away, her words stick with me, worming under my skin. She pressed on something that’s never sat quite right with me. A set of doubts that I’ve never voiced to anyone and barely contemplated myself.

That this might be my family, but I really am nothing like anyone else here.

“Atlas!” Tyrant appears from out of nowhere and claps me on the shoulder so hard he just about winds me, then steers me out into the hall where the conversation is at least somewhat muted. “I talked to Odin and Battle Axe already.”

“I’m sorry we tied Agatha up and pretty much kidnapped her. That was terrible. Luckily, she rode with Willa, and she talked her down.”

“The important thing is that she’s here and she’s okay now and no one got hurt.”

“You mean her or us?”

Tyrant laughs. “I heard about the grenades.”

I shake my head, which only makes Tyrant’s easy smile grow. Despite the danger we’ve found ourselves in and all the duties and responsibilities that lay heavy on his shoulders, he never loses his magnetic smile.

“She wants to go lob grenades in her field when this is all over.”

“Bullet could show her how to do it safely.”

“That’s not a good idea! She’s a granny!”

Tyrant scoffs. “No one is going to be able to tell that lady anything. If she wants to play with grenades, she’s going to do just that. I’d rather she do it safely.”

“I’m sure there are more than a few guys here who would sign up for an afternoon of setting up a safe shelter just to be able to watch her do it. It seems a little like those guys that take an old washer and throw a brick into it until it detonates. Incredibly. Unsafe.”

“And vastly entertaining. If I send men out with her to do it, I’m sure they’ll keep her safe and maybe this whole thing will go from being the worst experience of her life, to the highlight.”

“I need to make sure she doesn’t blow limbs off,” I grumble, hating that anyone thinks this is amusing. Agatha could blow herself up for fuck’s sake. Or someone else. I was in that house today. I shielded Willa and that was my only concern in the moment. I didn’t give a shit about my own life, but that could have been serious.

Willa could have been hurt .

That makes me sick to my stomach. It causes a violent shiver to rip me apart, the truth sinking hooked talons into my stomach and barbs into the meat of me.

All that aside, there's another reason to keep Agatha safe other than the obvious. "Willa's starting to see her as a grandma figure. I can tell." It's Willa's safety I care about, but also her happiness. "She never had one in her life. Agatha might be all bluster, but she's lonely too."

"Everything will work out." Tyrant has this way of saying those words that makes them sound true, even though he can't know that. "We left the number in the trunk. Wizard is monitoring the burner phone. We have a plan in place for where to meet and how to do it. Whenever that call comes in, we're ready."

"Thank you for having our back in this."

"It concerned the club as well." He doesn't need to say that even if it didn't, he and the rest of the guys would have been there just the same. "It concerns our city and that means our families and our homes."

A bead of sweat trickles down the back of my neck and I reach up to scratch it. I've never questioned my Prez. Never put forward a suggestion or an idea. I've never demanded information. "I had this thought..." I break off, too unsure of myself to continue, but Tyrant just looks at me with those soft eyes, encouraging me to go on. "Wizard's getting increasingly busy. He takes on so much. I thought that- I think that someone should help him out. I wouldn't suggest it and not volunteer my time, but I know nothing about tech."

As I thought, such an obvious gap in the club hasn't escaped our Prez. "I'm on it. We haven't brought it forward in church yet, but it's been on our minds as a collective. I

just don't know whether it's going to be a situation where the person we want can prospect for the club, or if it would be a contract situation."

It's extremely clear from that phrasing that he has someone in mind already. If Tyrant hasn't approached whoever this man is and asked him to prospect, it's because he has his doubts that he'd be a good fit. There's a misconception about biker clubs that they'll take anyone. That may be true very few times, and it would never be true for us. We're a family because Tyrant and the rest of the officers are careful about who prospects. If someone very clearly won't fit with us, or with Hart as a whole, then they're not going to be able to join.

"Contracting out is risky." I find myself voicing that instead of just thinking it. "Someone else would know club business and have they wouldn't always be obligated to keep it a secret."

We went through this with Harold Jacobs, the club's old lawyer. He went AWOL and tried to shake the club down for money, and when that didn't work, he kidnapped Lynette. His plan wasn't well thought out. He and his son are both serving jail time. Tyrant let the law have them, like he let the law deal with his father after Zale tried to kill him and take over this club, but that's not always going to be an option.

There are men far more dangerous than Harold out there.

"We'd have to take them at their word and their professionalism."

"Honor amongst thieves and mercenaries is an almost absurd concept." It's not lost on me that people might say that same thing about me, and if not, then for sure about my club brothers.

"Some people would say that we have no honor," Tyrant says, but it's like he's in line with my unspoken thoughts. "But then, some people are judgmental assholes."

I wait for him to continue, not pressing. Even still, I'm astounded when he goes on. I'm not in the kind of position where he offers up club business. I used to be so intimidated, or maybe awestruck, by him and Raiden, despite the fact they weren't that much older than me, that I could barely utter two words in their presence.

"The guy I have in mind is rogue. Ex-military. He has friends who are involved with other clubs, so he knows the world, but isn't a part of it. He probably has good reason to skirt around the fringes. It would be a hard sell for him, more so than it would be for us, but I think that we can trust him. I've been asking around for over six months, and this was the best lead I had."

Six months? He's been on this all that time? I don't know why that should take me aback. Tyrant's grandfather started this club. His dad was Prez for years. He's lived for the club his whole life. It's in his blood.

"He knows how to play the field. He's rough, mind and body. He'd scare the women senseless. There's the kind of man we'd allow to patch in and then there's the kind who we wouldn't be able to sleep at night knowing they walk amongst us."

"We do have a few of those," I deadpan. "He might fit right in."

"I'm talking way beyond the level of anyone here."

"Morally black. I get it."

Tyrant hesitates. It's very clear to me that he's met this man he's considering. Personally. Probably alone. I like that about as much as anyone else here would like it, but Tyrant's stubborn. He's a good man with a great heart, but he's also tough as fuck.

"No morals, more like," he clarifies, his joking tone gone.

We've questioned whether a few of the guys here had some tendencies and leanings towards maybe not having a right and wrong center, but they just liked to keep their cards close to their chests. It's alright to be damaged. This clearly goes well beyond that. The hair on the backs of my arms stand on end.

"I don't even know if he's fully sane," Tyrant admits. "You can't be doing what he does and be able to live with yourself if- well... he's very good at finding people."

"And doing what?" Georgia would probably tell me that's a stupid question and I'm about to get an answer I don't want to hear.

"Making sure they'll never be found by anyone else again."

I don't know how to deal with that or process it. It's a good thing Tyrant isn't waiting for me to find something to say, or we'd be here for a good while. I don't think I'm going to be able to thaw the ice out from the center of my spine for a long time either.

Finding someone who is the best at what they do is one thing.

Living with them is another.

Tyrant would never endanger anyone here. He'd give his life for this club and anyone in it. If he trusts this man enough to hire him, then we'll all trust our Prez's judgment in return.

But patching in?

I hope it doesn't come to it, and if it does, that this guy refuses. Anti-heroes and even villains are all well and good. But this man sounds like the kind of dark that you'd hope you never brushed up against, a soulless shell of forsaken humanity.

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Willa

I've never been very good at following directions.

The club isn't exactly quiet. It strikes me as the kind of place, where even if a banger of a party isn't raging to the dawn, quiet isn't exactly a thing. For one, I know that there are several men rotating on shifts, keeping watch over the clubhouse and in the room where all the security feeds are kept. Wizard might still be awake, but he can't be up twenty-four hours every single day.

Even if this was a regular time, bikers seem more like nocturnal animals than early risers.

I can hear soft voices drifting down the hall from the lounge as I tiptoe along.

Atlas never gave me the code for his room, but he did show me which one it was before he walked me and Agatha to our room like a gentleman. We're across the club, in the section that must be reserved for guests. His is the thick of the action, right in the middle of all the other biker's rooms.

I'm worried that by knocking, I'll raise half the club, but when I get there, I don't have to worry about that. The door is open a crack and the light is on.

Atlas isn't asleep. He's sitting on the bed, back against the black metal headboard, a book in his hands that I can tell he's not reading.

I don't even have to enter the room before he sighs and lowers it. "You had better

come in, but leave the door open. Friends can meet. Friends can talk. But doors closed is asking for a secret to be kept.”

He curls his back away from the headboard, shifting to swing his long legs off the edge of the bed. He rubs his eyes like they’re grainy and tired. Was he waiting for me? Would he have waited all night?

Aware that the door is open, I resist the urge to hug him or kiss him, though the longing for even the smallest touch consumes me.

I sit down beside him. The mattress has almost no give I clasp my hands between my knees. I threw together a bag before I left, but overlooked pajamas, so I’m in leggings and a thrifted crewneck sweater boasting a college logo of a place I didn’t attend.

“You were so quiet tonight. I wanted to make sure that you’re holding up. It’s been a lot in a very short span of time.”

Atlas makes this sound in his throat that I take to mean that he isn’t allowed to be exhausted. He’s a man and men should be tough, always. “You should be equally exhausted.”

“I am. But there are different kinds, and you don’t look like that kind of tired.”

“Do you find me boring?”

“Boring?” Where did that come from? Nothing about this situation is anything less than anxiety inducing, bone chilling, horrible suspenseful. “Like how? I don’t really understand what you mean.”

“I’m the only guy here without a history. Everyone else has done something for this club, sacrificed somehow. Or they did it earlier in their lives, before they came.”

“So, just because you weren’t in the military or your dad wasn’t Prez or you haven’t been to jail, or you’re not so morally gray, you think you’re boring ? Who implied that?”

He studies the wall. “No one.”

“Someone must have!” Fuck the open door. I lean into him and stroke his cheek, turning him back to face me. “Why would you think that there’s anything wrong with the way you were raised?” Anger scorches my throat and bleeds into my words against my will. “Do you know how lucky you were to have a whole family unit? Your parents must have worked so hard to keep their love alive and to provide for you.”

“I’m not- that’s not what I’m saying. I don’t mean that they didn’t.”

“You had what most of the world can only dream of. You still have it.” My hand drops to his and clutches it. I squeeze too hard. “You think killing someone or beating someone up, or having a brain that’s hardwired differently is going to make you more a member of this club?”

His eyes flash and darken. “No.”

“Then what do you mean boring ?”

“Nothing. Forget it.”

He tries to stand up, but I’m faster. I scramble around him, launching myself into his lap and pinning him to the bed. We’re connected now, pressed up tightly to each other, and I feel the shiver work its way through his muscles. His cock kicks beneath my ass. My pulse kicks up, my stomach clenches, and I get violent twinges between my legs that result in the fabric of my leggings growing damp.

I slide my hand to the back of his neck.

“It’s not nothing . I’m sorry.” I grasp his shoulder with my other hand, feeling for the knots beneath his t-shirt. All I can find is rock hard muscle all over, so I rub a small circle at the base of his neck instead. “I shouldn’t be getting annoying with you. I know that you don’t take your family for granted.”

“I try not to.” His eyes drop down to my mouth, not in a sexual way or with hunger, but I still want to surge forward and taste him.

“Everyone feels inadequate sometimes, or like they should be doing something more with their lives. It’s part of personal growth. For the love of freaking god, tell me you’re not planning on doing something stupid just to feel like more of a badass.”

“No.” His gaze shoots back up to mine. “Nothing like that. Although if anyone ever threatened you or tried to hurt someone in my family, I’d always put myself between you and them. I’d do anything to keep you safe. And I’d do anything that Tyrant ever asked me to do.”

“I understand. I don’t need you to be a saint or a devil. I like you the way you are.”

“Bland and boring.”

“You’re not though! Are you thinking that you want to do something more than this club? More than Hart?” I draw in a shaky breath and ask what I need to ask. “More than me?”

“Not more than the club and never more than you.” He shakes his head, truly haunted. He pales, looking almost sick. “I don’t want to leave Hart for good. I’d be fine with going away for a week or two to see other countries. The colleges here are fine. Being forced to take classes with you was a great thing.”

“What’s going on then? You’re saying all the right things, but you’re like stone, which says that something is all wrong.”

“Do you need me to be rougher? Am I unsatisfying? Am I giving you everything you need?”

I don’t want to let my jaw flap around, but it’s very hard not to gape at him. “Are you giving me everything I need?” I repeat the words just to make sure I heard him right. “I- I don’t... We’re just starting to discover each other and build something more. You’re my friend. Probably the greatest friend I’ve ever had or ever will have again.”

The friend zone sucks, but I’m not implying we should stay stuck there. I’ll always value Atlas’ friendship first, because to me, that’s the one thing that can pull people through anything. It’s an unshakable foundation where anything else can be built.

His face blanks, but his body grows more tense.

“Listen to me You’re not responsible for my happiness. You were not created to fill the holes inside of me. Throwing all that dependency on someone isn’t healthy. Doing it all on your own isn’t either. There has to be something in the middle. I’m not saying that being with you doesn’t make me happy. You bring me so much joy. You enhance the best parts of me, some of them I didn’t even know were there, but I’m not just going to give up working on myself because you’re at my side. How would that be fair to you?”

He can’t answer that. The silence stretches on, growing uncomfortable.

“I didn’t mean to make it sound like I don’t trust you or that I won’t come to you if I’m hurting or have a problem, or if I just want to share my joy and laughter. I didn’t mean that I wouldn’t listen and fight for you in return.”

The tension unspools at that, his facade cracking open to allow his regular golden warmth to blaze through. “You’re always fighting for me. Even when you don’t know it. Even when I didn’t know it.”

“We all are. If I’m not getting what you’re trying to say, or I can’t, then let’s figure out who might be able to help. Have you talked to your parents about this? Maybe Tyrant or Raiden?”

“I haven’t talked to anyone. Just you.” His face softens further. He looks sad now, so discouraged, and that kills me. “I don’t even know what I want to say.”

“Can I tell you something then? Will you hear me out?”

He nods.

“I want what most people would consider a boring life. If it’s not boring, that’s okay too because that’s just how it goes some days. I know what a life living with great loss feels like. I know what it is to struggle and be rudderless.”

I can’t imagine what life looked like for Lynette, and the fact that I never truly thought about that until this year shows how insensitive and blind I was. I appreciated her, but not like I have recently.

I run my thumb over Atlas’ bottom lip. I do realize that if anyone saw us in here like this, there’d be some questions we’d need to answer, but I need to be this close to him. I need to be connected with our bodies pressed together, with my hands on his skin, with our hearts beating just a few inches away.

“I don’t need you to be darker or rougher or more... alpha.”

Lynette is all alpha female, and somehow she makes that work with Bullet. I think

people confuse alpha behavior with toxicity, and neither of them are that way with each other.

“I don’t need to be bent or molded. I can find my own way. What I want is a thoughtful, kind, considerate partner. I want to learn to grow with someone and have them teach me and learn with me too. If all of this is about growth, why don’t you talk to Tyrant about maybe taking more responsibility here at the club?”

He’s quiet, but not locked up like before. I can tell that he’s still processing. “If something’s bothering you, let’s figure out what it is. I’ll help.” I grasp his shoulders and kiss along his jawline, barely grazing my lips over his skin. He smells of leather and the minty shower gel he uses.

There’s no noise from the hallway or anywhere else, but Atlas wraps his hands around my waist and picks me up, setting me down on the edge of his bed while he stands. He crosses his arms, eyes raking my face in a hot caress. For a fleeting span of time, I’m not sure if he’s going to harden himself off and shut down again, or if he’s just searching himself and he needs an outlet for his restless energy.

I don’t expect him to tumble to his knees, wrap his arms around my thighs, and set his head in my lap. “You always know what to say,” he groans, tortured. “It’s incredible.”

I stroke his soft hair. Maybe it’s just the apprehension growing into a twisted, smothering anxiety in us. That trunk full of money fell on us like an avalanche, and now we’re here, our lives on pause, waiting for this incredibly strange scenario to play itself out. Whatever Atlas is feeling, whatever’s been bothering him, I know it’s been going on for much longer, but this situation doesn’t help.

I want to make things right for him, and I won’t stop being here, even if it takes a time to set whatever is bothering him to rights.

“You don’t have to be satisfied with life all the time because that’s impossible and change is important, but I do want you to be happy, or at least like you’re moving in the right direction. If I’m not it, if it’s this... we can go back to being just friends. It might hurt me and take some time to adjust, but I’d never just abandon you. I’ll love you any way I can. That might be easier said than done, but even if it takes years, I’ll get there. We both will.”

“No.” His arms lock around my waist. “It’s not that.” He lifts his head, my hand cradling the golden crown of it. “I don’t want that.”

I watch his thoughts race across his face like rapid shadows. “Whatever it is, we’ll figure it out. I’m always here. Always. As a friend, and as... we figure out how to be more. It’s okay to be uncertain.”

If he’s afraid, I am too, but not for all those reasons that I first thought of last night. Truly giving yourself to another person means being vulnerable. It’s opening yourself up, but not just to them. It’s being open with yourself as well. I think that’s what Atlas is doing here. Growing pains.

When you fall in love with someone, you don’t just fall in love with the person they are in that moment. You love them for the past and for the future. You’re locked in a struggle that never stops evolving, but it can be a beautiful battle.

I want to tell him all of that, but it’s too much. Too heady and too soon.

He’s the one who traces my lips this time, before tenderly caressing my jaw. He pulls my face down to him and kisses me chastely, like a gentleman. I think he means to cut it off there, but he can’t. It goes on, his lips parting for mine, deepening until I’m throwing my whole body and soul behind it, giving him access to my heart, which has always been locked to everyone else.

He breaks away with regret and offers his hand as he stands to pull me up. “So how are you coping with all this?”

“Being here?” I say. Assuming he doesn’t mean the fact that I feel like I’m about to spontaneously combust after that kiss.

He nods. “You just got settled into your new place. Just opened the store and now everything’s on hold.”

“I’m adaptable. I have to be, because what else can I do? Actually, as I’ve got some unexpected time to myself, I’ve booked an appointment with Tarynn. I was planning on dragging Agatha along and we can have a girls’ day.”

He nods, smiling encouragingly. “I think she’d adore that.”

“She would. Yeah. I... but would you still like me if I wasn’t... if I didn’t look like this?”

He blanks, but to his credit, his answer is completely genuine. “I’m not sure what you mean, but of course I would still like you! You mean, when you age, or if your body changes?”

I hadn’t even thought about that. It all seems so far away. “I hope so. I’d like you too, even as an old grandpa. You’d be a hot grandpa.” Shit. I need to think before I speak, I know how sensitive that could be for him. “I meant my hair,” I blurt. “I was thinking about going back to being a brunette. I haven’t been one in years. I can’t imagine it wouldn’t be strange.”

“Your hair?” He tucks a strand behind my ear affectionately, caressing the strand.

I swallow the doubt down. What if Atlas is only attracted to blondes? If I made such a

substantial change, would he hate it? Would he think that I was less me? Those are pretty crazy thoughts and probably stupid, but they still cycle through my brain viciously.

“I’d love whatever you do to your hair, Willa. Your body is yours . It’s not for me to tell you what to do with it. Your style, your hair, whether you want piercing or tattoos—it’s all your choice and I’ll happily support you in whatever you want, one hundred percent.”

Wow. He has no idea how monumental that is. How freaking earthshattering and how... how damn kind . I’ve met so many guys who all they want to do is dictate terms and set controls.

I kiss him unhurriedly, wishing I had the whole night to do this with him, but I have to be responsible. He knows why I’m pulling away, and I think he knows too, all the emotion that I poured into that kiss in place of all the words blocked in my throat.

“We can’t leave Agatha alone for too long.”

“She wasn’t asleep when I snuck out. I thought she was, but when I got to the door, she told me to take as much time as I needed. She promised she’d behave and not sneak out to find the weapons cache for a bit of midnight fun. She did ask me to bring her a piece of leftover pie when I came back.”

“I’ll come to the kitchen with you then. I might get one for myself.”

“I noticed you didn’t have any at dinner.”

“I was too preoccupied to eat much of anything. I’m feeling a little bit better now.”

“Try the wonton soup. It was incredible. I don’t know who placed the order at the

Vietnamese takeout, but there's still enough to feed an army."

"I'd rather have you spread out on the table, naked, covered in—"

"Noodles and shrimp?" I laugh, then gasp when he nuzzles my neck, rubbing his rough stubble along the tender skin.

"After this bastard comes to get his cash, I'm taking you back to your place, tying you up—as you requested—and covering you in something that I'm going to lick off you."

"Something? That's ominous."

He grins, tickling me right beneath my ribs, which makes jerk in his arms. I have to clamp my hand over my mouth to smother a squeal. "Not ominous. I just haven't decided what I'm going to use yet. It's a surprise."

"I love surprises."

Sometimes.

Money chest not included.

He kisses me quickly again before walking me to the door of his room. "I know." He makes that sound so dark and mysterious that now I'm extra excited to get back to our lives.

Atlas

Rain drums off the roof of the truck in a steady beat. It washes down the windshield in a torrent and rivers vertically down the side windows. The sun is setting, and with the rainstorm, it's washed the sky in pinks and reds that are magnified on every surface.

"He's ten minutes late," Wizard remarks, checking a stopwatch. "If I had that much money on the line, I think I'd make an effort to be on time."

"Maybe he got lost." I recline in the passenger seat of Wizard's cage.

It's not an old classic like Raiden's, or a big jacked up monstrosity like the twins ride around in. It's just a regular old nineties pickup, beat up and battered because it spent most of its life on a farm as a workhorse.

Raiden and Tyrant are parked together in his truck, though there was a mighty amount of groaning about bringing the classic out in the rain. It's already thoroughly rusty, so not sure what Raiden's point was there. I'd shit myself if I had to take the Mustang out, but that car is flawless. Raiden's truck is so old that's it's more rattletrap than working vehicle. The doors barely close. It's not going to get worse from a little sprinkling.

We're arranged in a semicircle, blocking off a backroad ten minutes east of Hart. I'm glad I wasn't in the truck with Grave and Decay to hear the whining that would have gone on when they turned onto gravel. Grave will probably be under his truck later, examining it for road rash, in a foul, cursing mood for days.

Raven and Odin complete the semi-circle of vehicles.

“We are kind of in the middle of nowhere.”

Wizard rolls his eyes. “Any asshat could use technology. An old fashioned GPS would still find this place with the right coordinates if cell signal was lacking.” He pops his phone out of his black fatigues. “Which it’s fucking not.”

Wizard slides down a few inches in the seat to get his phone situated back in. One of many, probably. His fatigues have a ton of pockets and no doubt each and every one is stuffed full.

Wizard has a sort of geeky look about him. He rocks a set of heavy framed glasses, though whether he needs them or not is a mystery. I think he just likes the look. They’re probably not even prescription. I didn’t come up with that theory, but no one is willing to try and wrangle them away. Wizard is tall and thin, but he’s also wiry with muscle and probably has some serious martial arts training. He’d likely snap anyone’s arm in half if they reached over to his face.

It’s been a few days of a packed clubhouse and though everyone has been good about it, especially my family, I know that everyone is impatient to have things back to normal. Agatha would like to return to her house. Willa is raring to get back to the store. My parents can only call in sick to work for so many days, and Georgia would really like to get back to Seattle, though she’s having a far better time hanging out with the old ladies and their kids than she thought she would.

“I just wanted to put it out there that if you need some help with security sometime, I’d be happy to uh- to get in your way and probably drive you insane with a thousand questions.”

Wizard is a great guy, he truly is, but even at the best of times, and that means the

times when he's not overworked and stressed to the max, he can be touchy.

It seems today that he's in a good mood. Or maybe he just likes me. He's never snapped at me once, but he's taken other guy's heads clean off.

"I appreciate a good distraction every now and then. You did a great job setting up the cameras as Agatha's."

"Just so I'm clear..." I'm embarrassed to ask, but there's no way I can give Willa that surprise I promised if I don't know where all the cameras in her place are. I'd never let another person see her naked, especially not naked, tied up, with me doing filthy things to her. "At Willa's, in the back room, there's only one camera?"

"Yeah." Wizard runs his hand over the key in the ignition. It looks as though he's debating turning on the truck for music. We've been sitting in silence for a while.

"I've been thinking about setting up a few more there too. Just to be sure, with all this shit going down."

"Sounds good. I can show you how to do that."

"Thank you. I know you're busy."

"It's my job in the club. Plus, if you want to help out, being in the field would be a great way to do that. Better than sitting watching screens, but also because I can't be in twelve places at once."

I feel slightly guilty about the deception, but it's also the truth. I'm not going to leave an inch of Willa's space unattended. I won't be able to sleep worrying about her. I'm already planning on asking Tyrant later tonight if I can spend the next few weeks there keeping guard at night.

Ostensibly.

And not so ostensibly.

Wizard strokes the keys again. Not to turn the truck on, but because he's nervous . We're all on edge. But this guy running behind doesn't help.

"Do you think it's weird when he called in that he used a scrambler?"

"Nah. I expected something like that. Just like I knew they'd call from a burner. Anything else would be stupid."

"Something about this feels off," I mutter, stroking the butt end of the 9mm that I have resting on my knee.

"This whole thing is weird as fuck."

"Doesn't it feel too easy?"

"Only because we're making it easy for this guy. It could have gone much worse. We didn't have to give that money back."

We separated it up between all four vehicles so that if anything went down or went sideways, we could scatter in different directions and the fucker would have to track us all down.

I hope it doesn't come to that.

And I hope this guy comes alone.

Because it just rained all day, there's no trail of dust to announce the vehicle that

approaches.

Wizard sits up straight as soon as he catches the flash of black in the distance.

“It’s showtime.” He checks his gun, and I check mine too, even though I’ve done it at least twelve times in the past ten minutes.

No one gets out of their vehicles.

Not even when the black sedan comes to a stop thirty feet away and the headlights go dark as the engine gets killed. The door opens. The car is tinted and there’s no plate on the front—probably not the back either. I can’t see who’s in there until the guy emerges from the interior.

“What the fuck?” Willa would laugh at me for being a chauvinist right now, but fuck me.

That’s no man.

The woman is as tall as Lynette, probably around six feet, and clad for the runway in a tight black dress cut low between her ample breasts and riding up high over a set of long, creamy legs. She’s got at least six inches of heels under her, but she makes walking on wet gravel look like an artform as she catwalks confidently down the middle of the road.

She crosses her arms, tosses back her sleek, black, shoulder-length hair, and slowly peruses the parked vehicles from left to right.

“I want my money!” she yells, her voice thunderous.

The hair on my arms all stand up in an instant.

“Christ,” Wizard hisses, shuddering.

Tyrant, to his credit, rolls out of Raiden’s truck like it’s an ordinary day. He approaches cautiously, his leather jacket bulging where he’s got his gun tucked. He says something to the woman that we can’t hear. It goes on for a few minutes, and then he gestures to us.

One by one, we exit the vehicles, each of us holding a suitcase in hand.

Silently, we creep towards the middle of the road. We set them down in the gravel and edge back, not taking our eyes off Tyrant. He’s wearing a vest under his jacket, but that won’t save a guy from a headshot.

I watch as Wizard, Grave, and Raiden train their guns on the figure.

“I put trackers in the money,” Wizard drops casually. “Wherever she goes, unless she finds them, we’ll know where she is.”

“She’ll find them. She’s got to launder that somewhere.”

“How the hell did she come across almost half a million dollars?”

“Crime family, criminal connections, she could be a Donna in her own right. Or maybe just a really good businesswoman doing some dirty work. It’s the modern age. Women are just as capable of being villains.”

“I don’t know. She’s so... hot,” Grave says.

Laughing right now would be inappropriate.

It’s not funny to watch her tote all those suitcases, two at a time, and set them in the

trunk of her car. It's impressive. She doesn't falter in the wet gravel once.

"How has she not snapped an ankle yet? Those shoes look like murder. I wouldn't mind them wrapped around my waist, though." Grave is still looking at the woman appreciatively.

"If she doesn't find the trackers, you could always look her up. There's been stranger matches made in the club. If she's come into that money through nefarious means, she might need a savior."

"I'll keep that in mind, brother."

Done with the suitcases, the woman gets into the driver's seat and starts the car. She backs up slowly, keeping her eyes on us the same way we watched her. She reverses all the way down the road, until she's down a hill and out of sight, and only then does she do a three point turn and race away. We catch the blur of black speeding into the distance before Tyrant gives us the signal to roll out.

Wizard doesn't mutter anything except curses about the mud and stones that Grave's truck is throwing all over us. Even after we turn off onto the paved road, the gravel pelts us.

"I've seen a lot of weird shit," Wizard states as we pull back into Hart's city limits. "But that was right up there."

I just nod, because that pretty much covers it.

I'm sure that this one will be something the club talks about for years to come.

Willa

It's good to be home.

Agatha just about wept with joy when we drove her back to her farm and installed a whole bunch more cameras. She promised to call us if she saw even the smallest thing out of order or if she so much as had a feeling that something wasn't right.

After we dropped her off and headed back to Hart this morning, Atlas checked in on his parents. They were getting settled back in too, getting ready to go head to work the next day. Georgia had her bags packed into her car, and we were just in time to give her hugs before she got back on the road for Seattle.

The club spent all day yesterday after the weird money exchange, going over security and a plan to keep track of the mysterious woman. It wasn't until this morning that Tyrant decided it would be alright for us to return to our normal lives.

I made the decision to keep the shop closed until Tuesday, to give myself a few days to decompress and get everything sorted. I know it's odd for a business to have a grand opening and then just randomly be closed, but the people of Hart are nice, and my explanation about a plumbing disaster seems to have pacified even the most eager shoppers.

I'm at the front with my laptop open on the counter, updating the store's opening hours on all the social media sites and on the website, when Atlas' steps echo from the back and creak over the worn hardwood.

“Okay, I’ve done a whole sweep of the place and taken the cameras offline for the next few hours while I set up a bunch of others to tie in with the ones you already have. Wizard gave me clear instructions and it’s not so different than what we did at Agatha’s this morning.”

There’s something off about his face right now. I study him boldly, searching for what it is.

He’s way too serious, but his eyes are alive and practically sparkling. “Are you just about done those updates?”

“Uh- if I say yes, what’s going to happen?” I’m half hoping that he’s going to leap over this counter and tackle me over his shoulder, take me upstairs and give me that surprise he promised, but there are only so many hours to set up cameras before Wizard will want us to check in. We should probably be doing that instead of doing filthy things to each other with the desperation of having to wait for the past few days.

Abstinence only makes the heart grow fonder.

Wait. That’s not how that goes.

Abstinence makes the cock grow harder.

“I’d like your opinion on camera placement in the back area. One isn’t nearly enough for the whole loading bay and shop.”

“Okay.” I can’t hide my disappointment. “And here I was hoping you were going to tell me to get on my knees so you could feed me a late lunch.”

His lips twitch. “I’m not up on the terminology, but if I told you to do anything, I

know you'd have something to say about it, and right you should."

"The term you're looking for is brat, but that's for a specific type of thing. I'd get on my knees for you anytime ."

He says something soft under his breath that I don't catch, but I love the way his shoulders heave with a great and ragged sigh, like he's trying to hold the scraps of himself together. His jaw stiffens because he's grinding his teeth against what I hope is the urge to fuck me right here on the counter. And then work on the cameras.

I shut the laptop. Maybe we can be fast with the security and still have time to do something wicked down here before we have to turn them back on.

I'm in such a state of wanton need that I'm pretty sure it would only take me thirty seconds to come anyway.

I walk calmly around the counter. "I'd love to help you with the cameras." The sooner that's done, the sooner this torture can be over. Hopefully.

We walk to the back together. If it was pitch black, I'd be burning so hot that I'd have a trail of fire gliding after me like a comet.

Atlas closes the door to the workroom.

I've only taken two steps before he's on me. He hikes me up by my hips, slanting his mouth over mine to claim my lips. I scrabble at his shoulders and climb up his body, banging my hips against the hard ridge of his cock with every step he takes. He eats the whimpers off my tongue, cupping my ass so hard that I know I'll have red marks from his fingers later.

How the fuck was I worried that he wouldn't find me attractive if I changed my hair?

It just about knocked me right over seeing myself at the end of the appointment, and Agatha hooted and clapped for me, her fresh permed curls so tight they barely even bounced with her enthusiasm. I stepped out of that salon like a new person, feeling more like me than I ever have.

I kiss Atlas too hard, almost clashing our teeth together, but that's not why he lets me down. He sets my feet on the floor and lifts my arms, securing them while I'm in a haze of kissed senseless glory.

What the fuck?

He said he was turning cameras off back here, and he probably did, because there's no way he'd hang straps from the ceiling with black cuffs for my wrists.

I don't know where he got this or when, but these are professional grade, kinky sex type stuff.

He's even secured hooks into the wooden beams above. Strong, thick metallic ones.

I'm basically at his mercy now.

And fuck, I don't think I've ever wanted to be anything more. "Atlas, please, I need your—"

He kisses me, cutting off the word. "Hold that thought," he says, backing away and grinning deviously. His cock is a steel rod in his jeans, the outline of it absolutely clear. "I'll be right back."

I have no idea where he's going unless it's to get whatever other part of this surprise he has planned.

I turn my head up to study the bonds again, tightened around my wrists, but soft and non-abrasive. The hooks gleam in the fluorescent lighting. They make me wonder if other hooks could go up there. Hooks for a swing or something that involves lots of knots. I've never tried it, but I have seen photos.

I want Atlas to get back in here and tear my clothes off. I'm not just aching for him. I can feel my hammering pulse echoed in my groin. My panties are soaked under my jeans.

The door opens and closes fast. "Sorry I took so long." Atlas' beautiful face is pinched with desire. He holds up a jug of orange juice. "I thought you'd have more in the fridge. Why didn't you tell me that groceries were a must before we came back here?"

"You're going to pour that on me and lick it off?" I sound skeptical, but the idea grows on me by the time the words are out.

The floor is concrete back here. I have a shower and a great mop bin. Even if I turn into a sticky mess, it'll be fine.

He sets the juice down and sheds his jacket, carefully setting it on the workbench at the far side of the room, then shucks his t-shirt and works his belt open.

"I didn't bring a change of clothes. It was a vast oversight."

"That's okay. I much prefer you without."

He toes off his boots and strips his jeans and boxers off with easy grace. I'm captivated by the ripple of his muscles under his bronzed skin, by the slight tan lines he's developed already this year, by the swirling trail of blond hair that brackets his belly button and trails down to bisect that prominent V of muscle.

His cock stands out, long and thick, moisture dribbling and trickling down from the tip.

Oh yeah, I'd so go down on my knees right now.

I haven't taken him inside of me yet, and the frustration of not being able to do that over these past few days practically unspools me. I tug at the bindings, eager to go to him.

He comes to me instead. He helps me remove my shoes, since they're not easy to wash. He takes his time stripping me down, every second more torture than I can bear.

He works my jeans off, leaving my black lace panties in place. His hands are maddening, touching me everywhere except where I need him most. Which is buried at least three fingers deep inside of me. Four? I think that might be biting off more than I can chew. Or take.

It's a ridiculous time to giggle, but I can't help it.

"Are you partial to this shirt?"

It's a plain black sleeve cotton long sleeve. "I'm not partial to it at all."

"Good. I've already secured your wrists and I didn't think about taking it off before."

"Tear it off of me."

"I was going to cut it like a gentleman, but if you want the beast, you can have him."

"I want the beast," I pant. "I want your thick cock inside me right now."

He tsks, chiding me, but the massive iron rod that passes for his dick bobs and pulses. I know he wants it too.

He starts at the bottom of my shirt, taking it in his huge hands and tearing the thin cotton easily. It rends all the way up, and a second tear takes care of everything but the sleeves. He studies them, considering, and then he goes and gets the scissors. They're wicked looking things, and very, very sharp.

He's so careful, pulling the fabric up and away from me before he cuts.

It's weirdly erotic. I never knew that scissors could be sexy.

In under a minute, the shirt falls away, useless tattered fabric. He looks at my bra and at the scissors.

"Cut it." It was expensive, but if I don't have his mouth on me, on every part of me immediately, I'm not going to recover.

He does, snipping the straps and undoing the clasp.

The scissors get relocated back on the bench and he returns with the orange juice instead. It's only half full, and I'm about to question what exactly he plans to do with it, when he uncaps it, silencing me.

My mouth goes bone dry while an explosion of wet soaks my panties.

He upends the bottle, and the juice trickles from my shoulder down my chest. It's so cold that my hard nipples pebble further.

He spills another trickle down my other shoulder, bathing my breasts.

His mouth is wickedly hot, almost scorching, after the cold liquid. He licks a trickle from my belly all the way up to my breast before sucking hard on the nipple.

“Atlas!” I nearly lose my grasp on sanity. My legs get watery and my arms strain against the bindings.

“Mmm,” he growls. “I can’t wait to lick this off your pussy.”

He punishes my nipple with his mouth, flicking and rolling his tongue over it in a torturous cadence. He grasps my other one between his fingers and twists them together, pinching hard. Pleasure arrows straight down my belly, strobing in sharp pulses in my burning thighs, before shivering back up to center between my legs.

“Do you like having my mouth on you?”

“I’d like it if you had your cock in me better.”

“In time.”

He palms both my breasts, the heavy orbs overflowing his huge hands. He rubs both rough thumbs over the peaks. It’s so sexy seeing him hold me like that, a look of sheer concentration on his face, that I drop my head back and close my eyes. I let the bindings hold me up when my legs are too rubbery to do it.

He cups me through my lace panties, surprising the hell out of me. My eyes fly open.

“I can’t tell how much of this is juice and how much of it is you, but you’re soaking.” He slips my panties down my legs and brings them to his nose, inhaling deeply. “Mostly you, but it’s hard to say until I taste you straight from the source.”

“Yes!” I pull on the bindings so hard the straps rattle. I want my legs wrapped tight

around his shoulders as he hoists me off the ground and eats his fill.

He reaches for that juice again.

“Atlas! Hurry up.”

“If you insist.” He tips the bottle and spills orange juice all down my front and all down my back at the same time. I can feel the beads trickling down my shoulder blades and spine, trickling like a river over my ass cheeks.

“I hope you’re planning on releasing me and ending this in the shower.”

“Sure. In a minute.”

He starts a trail of burning kisses on my shoulder, then licks the juice off my back with long strokes of his tongue.

This should not be this hot. I’m going to come out of my skin. Out of my mind. My soul is about to leave my body completely.

He explores me like he’s determined to learn every muscle and bone, every nuance of my skin.

“I want to get my back and ass tattooed,” I admit. I currently don’t have any, so that’s a rather bold statement.

“You’d look hot with something like that. Or without. You’d look hot no matter what you did.”

“I hear that. I like your tattoos. I like that you’re not more ink than bare skin, but if you were, you’d be just as gorgeous.”

“You want some work done, I can take you down to Crow’s studio. He has some great artists working there.”

“I- oh fuck!”

He cups my pussy from behind, spreading his fingers around to slick through my folds in the front, holding me open as he slips another inside me.

Now I fully comprehend just how good he is with his hands. That has to take some serious coordination.

He fucks me slow with that finger. It’s nowhere near enough and he knows that. That’s why he works me so leisurely and doesn’t go near my clit.

I try to swivel my hips and buck against his hand, but it’s hard because he’s behind me. All that I can do is push my ass back at him.

“Shower?” I suggest hopefully, so beyond ready to have my hands back so that I can trace and map his body, ending with a little wicked teasing of my own.

“That would wash off all my handiwork,” he complains.

He takes his fingers away and moves back like he’s punishing me for being impatient. I groan, trying to swivel around to face him, but he’s faster. He dodges around me, grasps my hips, and drops down onto his knees. He hikes me up by my ass, planting my legs on his shoulders just like I dreamed about, but the reality is so much better.

He runs his nose through my slit before he traces the same path with his tongue. He shuffles my legs wider on his shoulders, opening me up for him. He latches his mouth to me, filling me with his tongue.

I'd grasp his hair and ride his face if I could, but all I can do is shiver against the restraints. This is the hottest payback.

I was wrong. The hottest is still yet to come, when he swirls his tongue over my clit and notches two fingers at my entrance.

"I want to see you ride my fingers and fuck my face, babe . If you earn it, I might let you come."

"Babe?" I rock my hips, pushing myself onto his fingers. He impales me on a hard stroke, curling them at the end to hit so deep inside of me that my body twinges with shock before pleasure ripples down my legs like hot lava. "That shouldn't be so hot, but coming from you, I almost like it."

"Do you want a third finger, babe?"

"If you babe me one more time I'm going to- to- oh. My. God."

"What were you going to do?" he asks innocently as he adds a third finger, filling me so full that it aches, and pumping them until the stars I see are real in my galaxy, even if they're not actually there in the room with us.

I rattle the bindings at my wrists, tugging and fighting madly, straining so hard that my shoulders ache.

Atlas doubles down, lashing my clit and humming against it, sending sweet vibrations through me while he works his fingers in that steady, brutal rhythm. Just like the last time, I ride his face with zero shame and zero reticence.

There's nothing I'd consider wrong if he wanted to try it.

What Atlas is doing is so good because it's so meaningful. That base of friendship, that emotion, all those days and nights, memories and moments. That's what makes this ten times better than anything I've ever known before.

I never understood why people would want to not have sex. I enjoyed sex very much. I know now that I had no real idea. I enjoyed the physical aspect, but I could give that to myself if I wanted. What Atlas gives me, I can't find in any other person. He's under my skin, in my heart, but he's in my mind too.

All the parts of me cherish all the parts of him.

I couldn't understand that until I experienced it.

I'm experiencing it now, now that he's all around me, inside of me, his scent and his sounds, his aura and his energy surrounding me.

He's fucking me like nothing else in the world exists. He's losing himself in me as I'm losing myself in him. It's that elemental joining that blows my mind, and the next time Atlas sweeps his tongue over my clit, I writhe and whimper, moan and buck, thrash and explode.

The pleasure eviscerates me, a black hole that I let suck me in and own me. I fall into it, and suddenly I'm really falling.

Not metaphorically.

But into air.

Atlas catches me, buffering my fall so that he hits the concrete hard, his arms wrapping around me to shield me from the ground. He takes the blow right in the back so hard that I can practically hear his tailbone grind into dust.

My face is tucked into the crook of his neck and my body is folded at an odd angle, my legs splayed out over him, but I didn't feel the impact at all.

I twist around and stare at the ceiling. The restraints are still tight on my wrists.

I must have gone a little bit too wild because the hook that was holding everything up is no longer in the beam.

"Atlas!" I shove up, pressing down on his chest too hard by accident. He groans as his breath rushes out. I just winded him again. "Are you hurt?"

It takes a second, but a grin slowly works over his face. He runs his tongue along his lower lip, making a sound low in his throat at the taste of me still lingering there. "Just my pride."

"Your pride? You saved me from hitting that floor like an egg and splattering all over it. And you gave me the best orgasm of my life."

"That was better than the last one?" he asks incredulously.

"You were doing things with my g-spot that I didn't know were possible. It was magnificent."

I straighten up, getting my legs arranged on the concrete in a way that's almost comfortable. I'm naked. He's naked. I just had my mind blown, but as I realize that his hard cock is trapped underneath of me, pulsing against my ass, a throbbing need deep inside of me responds at the same time.

I stare down at him. All I'd have to do is shift an inch and his cock would be right there. I could slip him inside of me and we could fuck and it would be glorious . Mind blowing all over again. Ground breaking. Earth shattering. Cosmic realigning.

“If I rode the shit out of you right now, would your spine handle it?”

“My spine can take it. Can your knees?”

“My knees can take it. Can you handle my magic pussy?”

His eyes practically cross and it's the cutest thing to watch a faint pink stain creep up his neck and over his jawline to his cheeks.

“That was a joke, babe . You're my ride or die. I'm going to ride you until you die. You don't stand a chance. You're going to be fucked into oblivion.”

His eyes fix firmly on my sticky breasts, and he groans, but then his smile slowly works its way back into place and he grasps my hips. “I can't think of a better way to die.” His strangled noise as I wrap my hand around the base of his cock sounds like he might do just that. In a good way. “Willa?”

“Yes, Atlas?” I notch him at my entrance, but wait to make sure he's not truly hurt and he also fully wants this.

He doesn't look hesitant. His face is suffused with desire and desperation. “You're really great, you know that?”

“Thank you.” I ease down a little bit, taking his fat cockhead. My eyes practically roll in their sockets at the sensation of him stretching me. “That's incredibly touching given that you haven't experienced the full power of my charms yet.”

I drive myself down in a single movement, impaling me so fully that his balls hit my ass. Now it's his eyes that are rolling back, his head too, his back arched, his whole body shuddering with pleasure, every muscle tense and rock hard.

Now he knows.

Atlas

Above me, Willa shivers, but she's all fire. So tight and hot, wrapped around my cock. She could have been hurt, but I caught her. She rocks her hips taking control, taking me deeper. My dick weeps inside of her, throbbing as she lifts herself and slams back down. She's doing all the work right now. All I can do is stare up at her, completely mesmerized by her beauty.

Her hands clutch my shoulders, one fanning to my throat. She sets it over my Adam's apple, jumping with every breath, but she doesn't press down.

She feels so good. Smells so good. She's panting, dragging air through her nose noisily, her head tipped back, lost in the pleasure herself. My hips finally move, rolling inside her. With every thrust, she feels impossibly tighter, the ripples of her pleasure tracing through her muscles, pouring straight into me.

I want to let myself go, to lose myself in her, but when I close my eyes, the absolute black is there.

No. No, please.

Being with her has only ever brought me peace. Her presence has always been a soothing balm to the torn and flayed skin. She's seen down to the heart of me, but that's not where I've hidden this. It's deeper. In the pit of my stomach, which churns and spins, nausea rising in my chest.

I make a choked sound. I wrench my eyes open, but the black is still there. It's taken

over my vision so that I can see nothing at all. It's thicker than tar and darker than a starless night. There's nothing to guide me, nothing to ground me. I can't stop the cinching of my lungs, the compressing in of my ribs until it feels as though they're going to puncture them. I can't get a single breath.

Willa shifts, slowly sliding forward until I pop out of her. I'm still painfully hard. Muscle memory. The most fucked up thing is that her touch is still heaven, her fingers wrapping around my dick. She grasps me hard in her palm, jacking me a few times before her fingers trace lower, to my balls.

A jolt of pleasure rips through me, but a shard of nausea flashes through it like a frayed bolt of lightning. There's still only dark. I'm lost in it. I. Can't. Breathe.

Willa cups my balls, smoothing one finger over them gently. My body doesn't know what to feel. There's no control. There's nothing in the way of stopping the panic. There's the edge and I'm past it. I didn't even have time to pull myself back.

Willa's hand creeps lower, past my balls. She finds that tight spot between my sack and my asshole and works it with a small circle.

The pleasure of that touch bursts right along with the balloon of panic, detonating like a grenade in my chest. All I know is that I'm trapped. Caged. I'm falling and the roof is crumbling. The ceiling is going to cave in and we're going to be trapped under the wooden beams and bricks. I. Still. Can't. See. Can't. Breathe. Can't. Think.

My body reacts like an animal would when they've just sprung a steel trap around their leg. I'm on my back and Willa is on top of me. I grasp her hips, somehow aware even in the mire of black and with the walls pressing in on me from every angle, the ceiling, the beams, the fucking sky coming down, that I don't want to hurt her.

I tilt her to the side gently, spilling her away from me as I jerk backwards. The

motion sends me reeling along the concrete. It bites in against my naked skin, flaying me, but I barely feel a thing. I tip myself onto my stomach, get my hands under me, and push up onto my knees.

Bile splashes up my throat and I turn, dry heaving to the side, but nothing comes up. My mouth floods with saliva and a bitter taste creeps along my tongue, but that's it.

“Atlas!”

I'm heaving, but there's no oxygen filling my lungs. There's nothing but a crush, the searing burning grasp. I can taste my own end when I flick my tongue out, tasting the air, begging for just the smallest amount.

“Simon!”

Willa's hand is on the small of my back. Stroking. Soft, gentle circles.

“You're hurt. You're bleeding . What's happening. Please tell me!”

I can't. I'm drowning in the black. Dark water sucking me under, filling my lungs. This is how I die. This. Is. How. I. Die.

I'm going to pass out. There's going to be nothing after. I'll never wake up again. Never see the people that I love. This will be Willa's last memory. Me, dying on her floor, right in front of her.

No.

I claw at my throat like I'd claw at the surface of that black water.

“Are you having an asthma attack? Atlas, please tell me what's happening!”

My fingers grasp my jaw. Both hands. I wrench it open, parting it, opening my own airway, but still, there's nothing. Only more black water, rushing in.

"I'm calling an ambulance. Hold on. I need to find my phone." I can hear her, dimly, scrambling around. "Fuck!" Something clatters to the ground. "Just hold on!"

I'm not crushed under the weight of the building. It hasn't collapsed. It's all in my head. My head is doing this to me. There's no lake. No black. There's air. I just have to relax enough to let my muscles expand instead of being clenched so tight they won't release. I don't have to drown. There's no water. I just have to swim. I just have to breathe.

The first gasp is like fire, a sucking, wheezing sound as though I was just kicked straight in the stomach. The second goes down cleaner, and my vision clears just enough that I make out the shape of Willa, phone in hand.

"No!" I stumble to her, knocking it away.

She blinks at me. Hard. Again. There are still black spots dancing all over the room, but my eyes focus on her face, and I can see one thing clearly. Her horror. I've terrified her. She thought I was dying. I wouldn't have. It just felt like that. Didn't it?

I reel from her, ramming myself straight into the bench of tools on the far side of the room and sending them half of them flying with my flailing arm. I look like I'm drunk, completely out of control. That's the truth. I have no control left. Nothing stands between me and the black.

I stumble and surge forward, locating pieces of clothing and ramming them on. Underwear. Jeans. Boots. Shirt. My back screams like a whole host of demons have taken up residence there and are breathing fire all over my skin. I don't know why. I can't stop. I'll worry about it later.

I wheel around, trying to find the damn door so I can wrench it open and get the fuck out of here before my head explodes. Before I lose whatever tenuous grasp I have that's keeping the black at bay.

“Atlas!” Willa doesn't just chase after me. She throws herself at me, wrapping her arms around my waist. “I- I shouldn't have touched you like that. I'm so, so sorry. We clearly weren't ready for that. I should have asked I should have given you some warning.”

I clench my eyes shut against the burning liquid that wants to spill out. Not tears, but blood. Hot, bloody, black streaks. She thinks this is all her fault. Not only was I not put together properly, as any man should be, but there's this . This shit in my head, in my chest. The shit I have to struggle to control, the way some days I feel like I'm constantly going to go out of my skin, out of my head.

She doesn't need this. She's too kind. She'll want to stand by my side and tell me I'm not broken. That this is okay.

I could have hurt her. I scared her. It could be worse next time, or the time after, or the time after that. When I was with Jodie I managed to get a handle on my anxiety—at least most of the time. But the break-up did a number on me. If I didn't feel like shit already, I'd be mortified about losing it while I was having sex with the woman I'm falling for.

Talk about emasculating.

She'll try to convince me that I can be saved. That I'm not half a man for not having a handle on this shit. That I'm not pathetic. She'll tell me that I'm worthy. Worthy of her and of myself. She'll say all the right things and she'll truly believe them.

She'll still be wrong.

“Hey... Earth to Atlas,” Willa’s hands grasp my arms. Her fingers press into my skin. It feels good. Grounding. My whole body aches like I just came out the loser in a fight against five big dudes and a grizzly bear, but her touch is sweet. Sweeter than it’s ever been.

She had nothing to do with that.

I just lost control and the shit I normally have to try so hard to hold back came for me.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers again, so urgently. “Let me help you. You’re bleeding through your t-shirt.”

What the fuck? Right. The floor. I drove myself along the concrete, giving myself a shit ton of road rash.

“Can you sit down while I get something for you?”

I can’t sit down. I can’t stay here. I can’t do this with Willa. I may want her with everything that I am, but everything that I am is not nearly enough. She’s not my mother. She doesn’t deserve to have to babysit this shit like I do.

“Was it... I shouldn’t have done that,” she repeats, latching onto the last thing that happened before I wiggled the fuck out.

I don’t want her to feel like this is her fault, but I know that saving her means driving her away. “No. No, you shouldn’t have done that.” I can’t force any heat behind it. I barely sound convincing even to my own ears.

Her face crumples, her burning eyes filling with tears to replace the frantic shadows. “There’s no shame in pleasure,” she whimpers, her voice shaky and thick. “Nothing

we do between us is wrong. If you didn't like it, I promise I will never do that again. I swear it. But you can't- I- if you..."

She's struggling and I need to help her, but I also need to leave. I need to ensure that she knows that I tried to do this and I can't stick around and watch her ground down, worn down, broken down by who I really am. It's not fair to her. Willa's had enough rough shit and hard times in her life. She deserves happiness, not looking after someone who can't even look after himself.

"It's my job to make you feel good in any way I can," she insists. "There's nothing wrong with having kinks."

"It's not your job," I bark out.

She hangs her head. My heart twists and wrenches. I can't save her without hurting her. This woman who has laughed with me, cried for me, held me, gave me her secrets, trusted me, shared with me, cared for me.

"If you were ever made to feel ashamed about something like this, I- or if you were hurt..."

"No. I wasn't. Not hurt."

"Enjoying backdoor play is exciting, not weird. I love butt stuff. Trust me, it's awesome. If it ends up it's not, then that's okay too." She's trying to find some humor in this, but I can't let her. I can't let her be so damn nice to me.

I can't do it.

I can't twist her words around and hurt her this way.

I can't bring myself to break her, even though that's the only way she's ever going to leave me alone. She'd have to truly hate me.

I'm not strong enough to make that happen. It would hurt her to the point of crippling her and I could never cause her suffering like that. I can't let her think that this is her fault.

"I just need to go. I can't do this, Willa. We should never have gone anything beyond friends and now even that is wrecked."

Of course Willa won't let me go. She's a fighter. She's so damn strong and so determined to save me from myself.

She beats me to the door and stands in front of the glass, arms crossed over her chest. "What the fuck, asshole?" She stabs me in the chest, eyes blazing with real anger, but I can tell she doesn't mean it. She's just trying to get my attention. "You don't get to just bow out like that. Not without a legit reason."

"The reason is that..." I whip my hand towards the back room and then bring it in, jabbing it between us. "This... this isn't real."

My back starts screaming, the wet still seeping into the fabric of my shirt. My stomach spins, the sick feeling rising up again, but not like it normally does.

"What isn't real? Emotions? Feelings? Commitment? Because if that's what you're saying, that's like looking at your parents and implying that their relationship is a farce."

"Very few people find what they have."

"Or my sister and Bullet. Do you think that's fake?"

“I don’t know. That’s their business.”

Willa grasps her arms so hard that her knuckles whiten. Probably so she doesn’t accidentally release a hand and smack me as good and hard as my dumb ass deserves. She’s dressed. The fog in my brain clears off. She must have pulled on her clothes right before coming after me. I notice how skewed they are, and her shirt is on backwards.

“What’s going on?” she demands, eyes raking over me like a scanner, as though she can find the truth hidden beneath my skin, lodged between tissue and bone. “I’ve seen enough of life to know that there’s a crazy amount of shit in the world. No one needs to add any more to it by being a tool bag. If you think that’s how I’m going to react to you telling me what the real issue is, you’re wrong.”

“They’re my truths,” I snap at her. “You have no right to them.”

Anyone else might tell me to go to hell and step out of the way so I can fuck right off until I’m in a better headspace, but not Willa. Never, never this brave, incredible woman. She doesn’t need the golden child version of me that the rest of the world created and bought into. She just wants me. I fucking know that, but it’s so hard to truly believe it. I’d rather self-sabotage and implode to shit instead because that’s safer for both of us.

“You’re right.” She drops her hands, the tension flowing out of her. “I don’t have any right to demand that you tell me anything. This is obviously something more than just what I did. I don’t have any right to demand that you let me in or let me help you. I want to, as a friend and as someone who cares about you. I want to be your partner and have you come to me for help and lean on me when you need it, but I can see why that’s an unattractive option. The world tells men they can’t be soft. Life tells them that they need to be hard hardasses.”

She obviously expects me to say something biting or try to push past her, but when I don't do anything at all, she keeps going. "To me, that looked like a rank panic attack. That doesn't make you broken or weird. Panic attacks are an actual disorder that can be treated. Anxiety is not fucking made up and you do not need to be ashamed."

Forget the dark, the closed throat, the sickness creeping up my esophagus. Forget my bruised lungs, even the endless shame that I've felt at not being the perfect child or teenager or man that everyone wanted and saw and expected... none of that matters more than the way Willa is looking at me.

My eyes get hot and achy, my throat scratchy, my airway tight for a different reason. The banging pain in my temples intensifies, but then Willa is there, fisting her hands in my t-shirt and wrenching me close.

I fall into her, catching her as she breaks against me.

Her arms wrap low around my waist so she doesn't press against the broken skin on my back.

"I'm so mad at you," she seethes under her breath, her cheek pressed to my chest. "I'm so mad that you thought you couldn't tell me this, and at the same time, I'm not mad at you at all, because I know if it was me, I would try to just handle it on my own. I wouldn't like it, and I'd probably even be ashamed that something is not fucking right in my head. I'd be frustrated and I'd feel alone, and if anyone ever said anything to me about it, it would probably make it all worse."

She tilts her face up and the intensity and the love shining there, breaks me. My chest aches, my throat growing even thicker. "My sister would have understood if it had been me and I'd gone to her. So would your parents and your sister, or your brother, or so many of those guys at the club. Why did you think you had to do it alone?"

She pulls me tighter, standing so there's nothing between our bodies, not even air.

I tilt my face down to the crown of her head, lost in the scent of her skin and her hair, of us together . I close my eyes and gravity does the rest. The moisture slicks down my cheeks, bathing her hair, but it's not a violent storm.

All these years, maybe this is what I needed. It's been a painful road to get here and maybe I was wrong, but this will always be my everything moment. The moment where I let go of all of it, where I pour my soul out and set my heart and all its burdens down into a set of capable hands. I needed the gentle rain that is Willa. My heart needed to be crushed and broken and pieced back together with hers.

No matter what I've done, what oaths I've taken, or who I tried to let in, it's always been just me in my head. Alone.

It's so fucking terrifying to finally be seen and so, so right.

This isn't the end of me. This is the start of healing. A new beginning. A path that broadens so I no longer have to walk it alone.

Willa

Seeing the man I love in so much anguish twists my chest. It's like I'm being wrung out until my soul leaves my body.

I can't imagine how he's feeling.

I've never had a panic attack, but I've struggled with anxiety on and off. I'm very lucky that it was mostly situational, and if I worked out, took care with what I was eating, and tried to get enough sleep, it usually went away. I'm extra, extra lucky that I had Lynette there to guide me and help me through all the tough times and the not so tough times. With every passing day, I'm realizing more and more just how much she's done for me that I didn't even consciously realize before.

I slip my hand to Atlas' arm, running it up and down slowly and soothingly. "Can I get you some water?"

He shakes his head, glancing back in the direction we just came.

"What hurts physically? You scraped your back hard . I think we need to go upstairs where I can help you wash it out and bandage it up."

He winces. "Just let me get the cameras online first. The last thing I want is someone from the club showing up."

I run my hand over his arm one more time, stopping at his wrist to flatten my palm over his and thread our fingers together. He doesn't need any more worries right now.

“Can I help you? I’ll make sure the back is cleaned up.” There’s orange juice spilled on the floor and restraints just lying there. I didn’t stop to get my bra on, and that’s an item I really wouldn’t like Wizard to spot when the cameras go back on.

I’m reluctant to let Atlas go. I don’t release him until we reach the back. He seems just as hesitant to drop my hand. While I’m cleaning up, I keep my eyes on him. You’d never know from the outside that something terrible just happened. It’s almost frightening how good he is at hiding, but isn’t that all of us?

The ominous dark spot on the back of his shirt lights a fire under my ass. I have everything clean and tucked away within a few minutes. Atlas is fast with the cameras. Switching them back on is as simple as finishing the adjustments and swiping through the programming on his phone.

After they’re back on, he follows me upstairs. Neither of us have said anything, but I’m no longer melting down on the inside.

He walks straight to the bathroom, shucks his shirt and jeans, and gets in the shower. I give him privacy, getting out the basic first aid kit that Lynette was always so adamant that I kept fully stocked.

Atlas shuts the shower off and wraps a towel around his lean hips. For once, I’m not distracted by his body, but I’m always going to be able to appreciate his beauty. He could be in a totally different body but have that same spirit that makes him him and I’d still find him beautiful.

I cover my mouth quickly when he turns, displaying the torn skin and fresh beads of blood. The cement isn’t exactly smooth or new back there, and it tore him a good one, right from one shoulder to the other and down along his spine.

When I dab on the antiseptic Atlas inhales sharply.

“Sorry!”

“Don’t be. None of this is your fault.”

I’d never been so afraid in my life as when I touched him and he lost it. There’s no worse feeling on earth than knowing that you’ve hurt someone you love and that you’ve hurt them badly . I didn’t realize how much tension I was carrying in my muscles until they turn into jelly and I have to lean against Atlas’ broad back for support.

“Have you- ever hurt yourself before?” I don’t know if I mean accidentally, or if I mean on purpose. I hate that I’m even asking. “You don’t have to answer that. Or anything.”

“No.” His muscles ripple all the way down his back as I move to a new spot with fresh cotton balls, creating a new sting. “Sometimes I’ve wanted to because the illusion of pain is that it offers control, but it doesn’t. Some things make it better. The discipline of sports and of working out often takes the edge off, but not always. It’s completely random. That’s the worst part.”

“Are there things that trigger it or make it worse?”

“If you look it up, everyone says stress is a big one, but for me, that’s never seemed to make a difference.”

There’s a small amount of relief in hearing him say that I didn’t do this to him. We’ve had more than our fair share of stress for the past year, with renovating this place, classes, his club duties, and then finding that mother fucking trunk. Plus, I’m the one who pressed for this. For us.

“If it makes it better, I could tell Lynette that we’re together. She’d talk to Bullet.

We're not hiding, but if this is making things harder for you--"

"I don't think that's making anything worse. You can tell her whenever you think the time is right."

I don't get needy and ask him if he's sure that we're even still an us. I know what he was trying to do downstairs. No one wants to be a burden to anyone else. Atlas doesn't want to be weak. Society tells men that they have to have their shit together and above all, be strong. All. The. Time. He was trying to push me away because he thought it would be better for me, but not having him would be the worst thing I could ever imagine.

"I know that it would be tough, but if we found the right person, do you think you could talk to them? And maybe... try something?" He angles to look at me over his shoulder as I start applying topical ointment to his shredded skin. "No one wants to alter their body chemistry. Drugs, even pharmaceuticals, are scary. It's hard to imagine not feeling like ourselves."

"Believe me, I would enjoy that very much some days," he states without his signature humor.

All I want to do is wrap my arms around him and hold him, but I finish bandaging him up the best I can. It's awkward, given how big the area is. I only have so much gauze. This is for small injuries, not full body road rash.

"Maybe there's something you could take when you need it, just when you're feeling anxious. I had a friend in high school who had major anxiety issues. She got medication and sometimes she took a pill or two a day or a few days in a row, sometimes it was just one pill a month. It was random, but she said that having the power to stop the anxiety before it snowballed was huge. She was the one dictating the terms."

Atlas is silent until I finish bandaging him up. He picks up his shirt, but doesn't put the bloodied thing back on. His eyes have so much sadness in them that it crawls inside of me, fracturing my ribs as my heart throbs. "You shouldn't have to deal with this. All this shit. I hate being more like a problem child than your partner."

I carefully slide my hand to the nape of his neck. He doesn't shy away or shudder at the slightly possessive hold. "If I was only ever here for the good times, that's not a partner. That's not even a good friend. That's very shallow."

He makes a noise in the back of his throat. "That's the last thing I'd ever call you."

"You can come to me with everything. The good things and the bad. I can promise you that I'm strong enough to take it. I care about you. All of you. Not just the select parts. I appreciate how monumental your trust in me is already, and I know that's a huge ask."

He's the one who bends his head and tips mine up, fusing our mouths together. He's not kissing me to shut me up or to avoid talking to me. I can taste just how much he needs it. It's more than just warmth that floods me. Whatever the feeling is, it scalds me. He leans against the sink and pulls me with him with a strong hand at my lower back. A growl tumbles from his lips and I consume it, devouring his sadness and his anger, his darkness and despair. He kisses me like he wants me to climb inside of him.

My heart breaks just a little bit more at his need for connection and assurance. He wants to drink me in, drown in me, fuse himself to me. He's broken right now, and he needs me, even if I can tell that part of him still thinks it's a mercy to try and push me away. He kisses like he wants me to stay, but he still can't believe that I'm not leaving. It's amazement and sorrow, the broken parts of him aching to be seen and swept up, held together in loving hands, and meticulously pieced back into place.

I can't do that for him.

But I'll never give up on finding any and all the ways that he can feel better.

The kiss isn't the slightest bit sexual, but it is deeply intimate.

"It's not a big ask," he groans, breathing harshly as he breaks away. He leaves his hand on my hip, as though he can't bear to not be touching me.

"Do you want some water? I'll put your shirt in the washer and try to get the blood out."

He passes it over. This isn't me backing out of this or changing the subject. I just want to take care of him. It's the small things that say so much.

"Do you have mint tea?"

"I do. I'll make that."

I take his shirt to the washer, apply a shitload of stain remover to it, and throw it in with the other darks that are already in there. I get it going and head to the kitchen to fill the kettle and get the mugs ready, thinking all the while about what he said about being constantly nauseous and how hard it was for him to eat.

We're both quiet as we arrange ourselves on the couch. He sits ramrod straight, not wanting to have his back touch the furniture and risk smearing ointment and blood on it. Two mugs steam on the coffee table, their wispy white tendrils curling into the air like incense.

Atlas' hair is still damp, curling away from his forehead. It's a mess and he's made no attempts to style it. He doesn't need to. He's so effortlessly beautiful. I don't know

if I should tell him that all parts of him are, even the stuff he hates.

He thinks he's made a lifetime out of hiding who he is, but that's just one aspect that has taken over his life. It's not fair to him and I can see how he'd hate it and how the hate would spread and infiltrate him, poisoning the way he sees himself. It's complicated, and I can't heal a lifetime with just a few words. The only way to show him that I'm not afraid of any part of him and that I treasure the entire person he is, is to show him, over and over. As his girlfriend. As his friend.

I'd do anything to fight for him, but I also don't want to crowd him. I've never been clingy. I hate that so much. There's a difference in not letting someone shove you away so they can go die on their own hill of self-sacrifice that doesn't even need to be a damn hill, and not giving them space to breathe.

Right now, he hasn't closed himself off. His expression is softer than I've seen it in a long time. He looks exhausted . That panic attack and all that adrenaline bled out of him and left him spent.

"Honestly," he whispers, studying the steaming cups of tea. "I can't remember the last time I was truly okay, even though I tell everyone that I am."

I rest my hand on his knee, though a little tentatively. He edges it closer, wanting to be touched. "You're not alone in that. Fine is the most universally un-fine word there ever could be."

He covers my hand with his. "I feel like I'm falling apart."

I tighten my grip on him. "You can do that here. It's a safe space."

"I've always had a safe space. My parents are the most loving, open minded people that I know. It's because of them that I never lost hope or spiraled straight out of

control. They were just so... they've always been so proud of me. I didn't want to disappoint them. I didn't want them to find out how flawed I was, all while knowing that they'd love me no matter what. How stupid is that?"

He won't look at me, but I study his face for any inflection, any emotion. He's become very good at hiding it. Right now, the only cracks are in his voice, which is practically sandpaper.

"It's not stupid."

I yelp in surprise as he pulls me into his lap, dragging me when I can't get my legs under me. He grazes his hot lips over my cheek, then over to my nose. I close my eyes and he kisses past them, his beard, his nose, his lashes, all tickling my skin.

"It's how I feel right now. The push and the pull. I want to push you away so you don't have to deal with this shit. Part of me wants to up and leave, go somewhere else for a while until I get myself sorted, but I know that will just hurt everyone and make them worry. I can't just leave my job or my club. My parents would be out of their minds with fear. The idea is so appealing because it's false. Going somewhere else isn't going to fix me."

"You're not defective," I say, too sharply, not angry at him, but for him, that he could ever think or feel that way.

His arms close around me in response and he hugs me as tight as if I'm going to vaporize. "Thanks," he mumbles, releasing a small sigh. "I was supposed to be your bodyguard, but here you are, saving me."

"Not saving you," I insist, kissing his forehead. "Just being here with you."

He shakes his head. "You keep me safe. It's so crazy how the first time I met you,

you just felt that way. Protected . I still kept things from you, but those nights we camped out here? They were some of the only times I've ever slept for more than a few hours at a time."

"Is that why you looked so amazed when you woke up in my bed? I thought it was because it was mine and because I tied you- oh my god. I tied you up . I was just playing. I didn't realize how that could make you feel."

"It didn't." He presses the pad of his thumb to my bottom lip. I flick my tongue against it. He groans, his pupils dilating, his eyes getting heavy. "Nothing you've ever done made the panic worse or better. I've tried to figure out what causes it. It's so damn random. That's the most frustrating part. It comes and goes. There's nothing that makes it worse or better. The small spaces thing, yes. I do hate those. I'm just lucky that usually I have enough warning before the panic hits. That's why no one knows. Because I've always been able to get somewhere private. Or masked it by feigning illness or sports related shit." He paints my bottom lip with my own saliva before leaning in and kissing it off. "You've only ever made me feel better," he growls against my mouth. "Human."

"I've grown so much with you." I feed him the words between kisses. "I know that we've only known each other for a year, but I can't imagine my life without you in it."

"You won't have to." The sorrow and regret in his eyes burns unmistakably bright. "I- think I want... that I- that you're right. I should talk to someone. I need to do something. Nothing that I've done has fixed me."

I don't tell him that he's not broken again. I know that he heard me. I need to hear him now, however he chooses to express himself, even if that's messy. Messy is okay. The fact that he's told me all of this and asked for help is a huge deal. "We could go to Seattle. We could find a doctor, or several doctors, and be discreet. You

could meet with them alone, or I could go with you if you want me to. Whatever you need and however you need it, I'll be there. And just because you talk and you listen, doesn't mean you have to do what they say. You know yourself. They don't. If you don't feel like it helps, we won't give up until you find the right fit."

He gnaws on his bottom lip so hard I'm afraid that he'll draw blood. I press the pad of my thumb and index finger to the spot. He cautiously licks my finger like I did his, but he takes it further, grasping my hand and sucking them into his mouth. He groans. "I'm good at blending in. Too good."

"That's a skill people learn." It's hard to focus when he's sucking on my fingers like that. "They adapt because they have to. That doesn't make you a liar. It doesn't make you less you."

He pulls back, nuzzling my glistening fingers with the side of his face. It's strange, but I happen to like different. "I don't know how to talk about this. It started when I was ten."

Jesus Christ. Ten? I know what it's like to go through a rough time and be exposed to things that no kid should have to live through, but this isn't that. I got through the trauma, and maybe it altered my brain chemistry or changed who I would have been, and not having my mom with me certainly impacted Lynette and I in vastly different ways, but it's not comparable.

My trauma was from exterior forces. Atlas' isn't. I shouldn't call it trauma. What your brain decides for you is not a tragedy. Although, the fact that he's never been able to talk about this or get trust someone enough to get help, is a terrible thing. I don't just hurt for him now. I hurt for every version of him.

"Dealing with stuff as a kid is hard. Being a teenager is rough too. It must have been exhausting."

He bows his head. “The good days were good, but the bad ones were so bad that I just wanted out of my head.”

“I’m sure your head is also a great place. Or, it could be. We just need help getting there. That doesn’t mean fundamentally change who you are. Who you are is wonderful.”

He takes my hand again and presses the back to his forehead, sighing like he would if he was sick. “I don’t even remember what it’s like not to feel bad. Nervous. Edgy. Like I’m crawling in my skin some days, but it’s not bugs. It’s lies.” He brushes his lips over my knuckles and my heart practically tears out of my chest and gushes a river of pain for him. “That’s not true. Since I met you, it’s toned down. Sometimes, I’m even hungry. There are moments of true peace. I’m not saying that you have to be medicine. Just that I feel I have to strain way less to find my center when we’re together.”

“I’m so shattered that you’ve gone this many years dealing with this alone.”

He tucks my hand, pulling me in against him, guiding it straight to his heart. “I didn’t know what to say. I thought I’d scare the fuck out of my parents.” The steady beat throbs against my fingers. “I was afraid as a kid that I’d get put in a mental hospital. I had this image, for a long time, of them being super scary. I still think they’re scary.”

“Is that why you joined the club? For an outlet?”

Was he hoping to find a place where he’d finally fit in, where duty, and sometimes violence, could fill the void. A place where he wouldn’t have to pretend because men are accepted there for who they are, and it’s just a fact that most of them are looking for some sort of family and come with a whole trolley’s worth of baggage.

He keeps my hand pressed to his heart and shakes his head. “Working with my hands

was a way to focus my mind, but that wasn't the promise of getting to work on cars all day wasn't the only reason. I like being on my bike. The Mustang is the only small space I've ever been okay in. I would never get behind the wheel of anything knowing that I might have a panic attack. I trusted myself enough at that point to know what my limits were and like I said, usually I have more than enough time to pull over before it hits. Today was... I don't know. It came out of nowhere. Usually there's more of a lead up to it."

"Maybe it's everything that's happened these past few weeks."

"Maybe." His thumb strokes the pulse point in my wrist. "But that's not on you, you hear me?" His eyes are the deepest blue that I've ever seen, and they sparkle with sincerity.

"I do." I curl into him and drop a kiss on his forehead. I want to take care of him in the big ways, but in the small things too. That's my love language. "Is there something you like to eat all the time, even when you're anxious and you feel sick?"

His brows knit together. "Strawberry ice cream. I love the fruit too, or the yogurt. Not the candy. Never candy." He tilts his face to graze the side of my neck. "You. You smell like ripe berries."

"Do you want me to go get you some strawberry ice cream?"

"As long as it's followed up with you after."

I search his face, hesitant only because I don't want to hurt him. His back is torn up, but so are his insides. He's not burning with desperation or despair, but there is a question there. Is this okay?

"I'll always be here." I find my way to his mouth and skim my lips over his. He's not

the one trembling. I am. I want to tell him how much I love him, but I think I've said enough. He's overwhelmed. I don't want to make it worse. "I'll always be behind you." My hand lands in his head, twisting and pulling him further into me. "Whatever you need, I'm here." His arms wrap around me, pulling me down into his lap. We hold each other tightly, already a part of each other, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, his heart mine and mine his.

If he's wrecked, I'm wrecked. His pain is my pain. His joy my joy.

He knows.

I know.

We don't need any other words, at least for the moment.

Atlas

We're in Seattle at a mid-range motel. Ostensibly, we're here to look at bikes. It's a good cover story because it's true. I want to get something that has another seat for Willa. Something old and junky that I can rebuild. Maybe she'd like to do that with me after hours. I wouldn't be the first guy to have their old lady or even their kids running around the place in the evenings or on a Sunday afternoon. Some of the guys just grunt about the kids thing, but I don't mind. It's good to teach the next generation some skills that will stick with them for a lifetime.

Since we were just going to look and my Mustang is still in the shop, Willa drove. She took the truck, even though driving around Seattle with it isn't the most pleasant experience. She's from the city, so it didn't seem to give her much added stress. At least the cab is spacious, and with the window rolled down all the way, the air sucking and screaming in for the hour long drive, it didn't feel quite as claustrophobic. Willa's been trying to help with my anxiety and has sent me the names of some doctors who I could make an appointment with. She's not being pushy about it, and I'm honestly going to give it a try this time.

I know that if I'd told my parents about this, especially when I was younger, they would have wanted to help me just as badly, but knowing my mom, she would have smothered me with her fixing. And back then, having someone make a big fuss about it would probably be even more anxiety-inducing than the anxiety.

Willa gave me a choice. She would have stood by me in whatever I decided.

I chose this, and I had my first consultation earlier today. Talking to doctors doesn't

mean I have to do what they say. I'm an adult, not a kid, and that means that I make all the decisions for myself.

We're sitting in our motel room at the end of the double bed. It's hard as a rock and at the same time, has enough bounce in the old springs that it's like a diving board. We risk getting launched off whenever we move.

I'm frozen, but the turquoise bottle of pills in my hand seems to burn my palm. The tiny letters on the white label are barely discernable except for my name in the top right corner. That looks huge.

I apply pressure to the lid and pop it open. The tiny white pills stare back up at me. So small. So frightening. I know these are supposed to reduce anxiety, but just the sight of them sends mine through the damn roof. I know that I can't want help and then not try to get better. It's silly to be afraid of this. There are only ten pills in there. Just enough to see if they work. I hate having to think about becoming dependent on something, but how is living the way that I've been living even an option anymore?

Willa slips her hand into mine. "You don't have to take them if you don't want to. The doctor said you could do it just when you need them."

"I don't want my life to be controlled by pills."

"It won't be. These aren't that kind of pill. As needed, the doctor said." She voices exactly what I'm thinking, as she so often does. "She listened. She heard you. I think this is a good place to start. If you don't like them or they don't help, then we can try something else. We'll do our meditating and breathing exercises and anything else you want to try. Running. Painting. Yoga. More blow jobs. Anything."

That last suggestion gets a smile out of me. I shake out one pill and recap the bottle. It's crazy to think that something so small can make such huge changes if you take it.

Then again, that's coming from someone who hasn't done anything other than the natural version of drugs. I've smoked a few cigarettes, some weed, and done mushrooms once. It was all terrible. I thought the weed would calm me down, but it ramped my anxiety so badly I felt like I was literally going to die. Don't even get me started on the mushrooms. That was a high school experience, done completely by mistake. A friend put them on all on the burgers they served and didn't tell anyone they'd mixed those kinds of mushrooms in with the regular kinds.

I need to just do this and get it over with. I set it under my tongue. It's slightly chalky and tastes gross, but I force myself to let it dissolve.

Willa climbs into my lap and knocks me back on the bed. The old springs kick back violently. The whole bed bounces, followed by some not so gentle aftershocks. My upper back protests, the newly healing scabs itching and stretching tight. The yoga this morning hurt too, but I wasn't going to let that stop me. Other than some small twinges, it was surprising how refreshing it was.

She wraps herself around me, her way of keeping watch and keeping me safe. I shouldn't be so damn anxious about taking a fucking anti-anxiety pill. The thought makes me laugh.

"Are you okay, do you feel strange?" Willa asks, all concern.

"I'm fine, it's just the ridiculousness of it all. Maybe I need anti-anxiety meds to take before I take my anti-anxiety meds."

"Do you want to try some of those breathing exercises?" she asks.

She's crushing my chest. I wrap my arms around her and hold her close. "Yeah. That might help." I can barely inhale with her pressing in like this and it's wonderful .

She starts, laughs wryly, and lifts up. “There. Sorry.” She inhales steadily for a few beats and lets the air out through her nose in a measured rhythm and repeats.

We do that for a few beats. It takes me that long to realize that my heart is no longer slamming into my ribs. The blocked bullshit in my throat is missing. My breaths aren’t forced. The oxygen goes straight into my lungs. My muscles are no longer clenched. The most dramatic difference is that my stomach relaxes instead of spinning. I don’t feel high or anything. Just... serene .

I can tell that the anxiety is still there, but it’s background noise instead of driving my life.

The rush of euphoric relief that hits me is so strong that my eyes sting. It’s not so much the anxiety that scared me, but the fear of it, the loss of control to an unknown entity. I thought I was going to be fucked for life and that itself gave me so much anxiety. I can see now how it was at the point where I was getting anxiety about anxiety about anxiety.

Willa isn’t doing her deep breathing anymore. She’s staring down at me, and I can tell that she knows .

“This gives me hope.” My throat is scratchy.

She collapses against me, her body smashed into mine, wrapped so tight that I can’t tell where she starts and I begin. I adjust so that we’re palm to palm, foot to foot, chest to chest.

“Atlas?” Her breath is warm against my throat.

“Hmm?”

“I’d like to tell Lynette about us. She’s going to figure it out anyway, soon enough. It’s not like I can hide that I’m in love with you.”

My mouth opens, my lips part, but I can’t make a sound. My heart is racing, hammering so loudly that it’s all I can hear. It aches too. Violently. So badly that it makes my throat close up, but not with panic.

“I’m sorry,” Willa whispers while I’m over here melting down in my head. “Not for feeling it, but I’m sorry if that scares you or if it’s too soon. You don’t have to say it back. I’ve loved you for so long, in so many ways. Practically from the first second I saw you. It was because of you, that leaving Seattle and going through those classes was bearable. It was you who gave me hope. When we bought the building and started renovating it, I fell into that deep friendship love with you. Over the year, it turned into this passion. Not just physical, but the feeling that if you weren’t in my life, it would hurt so badly that I wouldn’t recover. I love you so much, with so many different kinds of love.” She stops, grasping my shoulders, staring down at me with the most intense expression. “You can tell me if you’re freaking out. I kind of am.”

In my head earlier, when I thought about bringing Willa to the garage, I so easily inserted her into the category of old lady. That’s a huge deal, but it slipped so effortlessly into my brain. I don’t want to call her my girlfriend. Jodie was my girlfriend. I want Willa to be more than that.

I want to tell her that I love her too, but it’s hard for me. She’s so sure of herself and it’s that certainty that makes things look easy for her when I know that they’re not. For me, those words and any commitment are so hard for me to grapple with. Mostly because if you care about someone, you want what’s best for them. Before I talked to Willa about my anxiety issues, it was hard for me to see myself as best for anyone.

Willa must pick up on my thoughts because she looks me in the eyes and says, “You don’t have to be worried about letting me get in your head. I’m already there. It

doesn't scare me. If you want to let me in other places, you don't have to be afraid to do that either, but you don't have to tell me now. I know that you care."

My insides are agony, and not in the worst kind of way. It only hurts because I'm flooded with so much emotion. It's not easy or simple. I know it's just three words, or even a single sentence telling her how much she means to me, but it's like staring up at a tall glass building, wondering how I'll ever get to the top without any climbing equipment.

I'm afraid that I'll start trying to find the right words, I'll just mess it up and crash out. What words are enough for something like this anyway?

"I need you to hear this. You're already the man I love. Not a perfect version. Yes, you're sexy, but this isn't about lust. It's never been about lust for me. I thought you were hot the first time I saw you and had the full body reaction, but when you became my friend, I stopped burning for you and wanted to be near you because you were funny, sweet, hardworking, talented, and so smart. I'd never had that with a guy before. Just someone I could talk to. I want to thank you for that gift."

This isn't simple or easy for her either, but she makes it look that way. Always. Her kindness and goodness is effortless. She's had her own struggles and in her head, I'm sure it's not always a friendly place to be, but she works with it and owns it in ways that I just can't yet.

I give up on the struggle of trying to find perfect words and instead guide her face to mine. I seal my lips to hers, not like a flame burning hot, ready to incinerate us, but sweetly, pouring everything I feel into the gesture so that she can hear everything I can't translate from my heart to my brain, and my brain to my tongue.

She moans, kissing me back so eagerly that my head practically makes an indent in the bed and that thing is hard . I fall into it, losing myself in the kiss, the heat of her

body, and the feel of her lips.

This past year was one of the longest of my life, but it would have been far harder and lonelier without her. I'm the first person who'd tell you that destiny doesn't exist and usually timing is just shit for most things, but this? In this rare instance, it was bang fucking on. She does my head in. She's become so deeply engrained as a part of me and my story, that I can't imagine telling it without her in it.

Willa sinks her teeth into my lower lip, just enough to cause a little bite of pain. She lets go, painting my mouth with her words. "Is this okay? Are you sure?"

She's wearing a vintage dress today. It's short enough that it makes her legs look endless, and just tight enough on top that I haven't been able to tear my eyes off her breasts all day.

"I'm more than sure that this has to come off." I find the zipper in the back and start working it down. It resists because it's old, stopping and starting, but people are right when they say I'm good with my hands.

I want to prove to Willa just how good.

Not because I wiggled out last time and scared her senseless. I know I have nothing to prove in that sense. I want to worship her body and bring her to life because giving her pleasure makes me feel so good. I want to learn every bit of her body. We're still new and I'm excited to discover and map every bit of her skin. I want to learn what she likes. It's no small thing for another person to trust someone else with their body and I'm honored that she's so willing to put her faith in me.

The zipper finally enters her lower back area. Just a little more and I can slip the top of it off her shoulders and down around her waist so she can shimmy out of it, hopefully without getting off of me.

I quite like her right where she is.

“I learned something new today,” I say, getting that damned zipper all the way undone and sliding the top off her shoulders like I envisioned.

She helps me, revealing a red lace bra so sexy that I nearly see stars. Her heavy breasts spill over the top, begging to be freed, and for my palms to cup them, for my mouth to tease them.

“What’s that?” she groans, rocking herself on my hard dick so that the same sound spills out of me.

“That seeing you in tight yoga pants that your ass is practically eating up makes the poses that we were supposed to be doing a whole different level of indecent and painful.”

“Oh my god!” She slaps a hand over her mouth to trap her laughter. “I can imagine that would have been hellish.”

“If you’re ever thinking of buying sexy lingerie for me, don’t bother. Just wear those pants. Or nothing. Nothing is always a great option.”

She shifts off me and stands, easing the dress down her hips. She unzips her platform boots. The dress is a rusty orange. Her boots are black. She was wearing what I thought were red tights underneath, but now I see that they’re these fucking hot stockings where they go around her waist, but are open to her panties and part of her upper thighs. They’re like a garter and thigh highs all in one.

It’s official.

She’s going to slay me.

Especially when she turns around and bends over to set her dress and boots on the chair in the corner where her purse and our backpacks are and I get a full view of little crystal hearts along the back of her panties before they turn into a string that disappears between her round ass cheeks.

Fuck, I want my hands on her ass. I want my mouth on her pussy, my tongue buried deep in her, my cock stretching her until she comes all over it. I want to take her from behind and move those panties aside to get inside of her so I can see those little crystal hearts dancing while I'm buried to the hilt inside of her.

She opens her purse on the table and passes me a little silver packet.

I'm confused. She knows that we don't need that. She would never mock me, so I pick it up and read it. It's not a condom, it's lube.

"I thought I'd bring that just in case. Not for today specifically, but just in case ever. Just in case we went on a hot date, and you wanted to experiment. It's a real mood killer not being able to do something you want to do when you're dying of horniness wanting to do it."

"You mean like..."

"I want you to own all of me, Atlas. I want to take you everywhere . If you want to do that. There's no pressure. Just... if the mood strikes."

"My god." Laughter is top tier wrong right now, but maybe not. Not when she's bending over that table again for no reason other than to give me a show of that hot red lingerie set and all her delicious curves. "You never cease to amaze me, Willa."

She twists over her shoulder and winks at me. "I hope that's in a good way."

“In a very good way.”

She wriggles her hips, dipping one knee in and then the other like she’s warming up for a race. “What was the pose that made you hardest today during yoga? Was it this one?” Hinging at the waist, she leans over and grabs her ankles.

Fuck .

I jackknife off the bed so fast that I just about give myself whiplash. Do I care? Not at all. I snap my shirt off and toss it into the chair with Willa’s clothes. My boots go next, one on each step, and by the next one, my belt is undone.

She straightens and whips around, stopping my frantic undressing. “Save some for me!” Her hands on my jeans, working them open and sliding down the zipper, send all the blood flow in my body straight to my dick. It’s not a surprise that when she strips my jeans and boxers away, it stands straight up, leaking precum against my abs.

She drinks me in, her gaze finally resting on my arms. “I know that you’re pretty meh about tattoos, but the ones you have are so well done. They suit you. Everyone should have two sleeves. I was thinking about starting one of my own.”

“Whatever you want, whenever you want it, it would only enhance how beautiful you are.”

“Whoa. You’re the only guy in the world who would ever not tell a woman what to do with their body.”

“There are plenty of guys in the world who wouldn’t. I have to believe there’s hope for men yet.”

“I still have the best one in the world. Do you realize what a crazy sequence of events

that was to lead us here? If it hadn't been for your club's ex lawyer and me meeting Bullet in the nightclub that night..."

That's just her side of the equation.

Her eyes darken and she runs her hand down her body, starting at her breasts, trailing over her stomach, and dipping under her panties. "I'm really, really glad that we're here now. You naked is the best thing I've ever seen."

"That's impossible, because I know that you own a mirror."

"Corny." Her eyes flutter shut as she touches herself beneath the silky fabric. My dick gives her a standing ovation in the form of still standing straight to attention. "But I like it." She removes her hand, fingers glistening, and paints my bottom lip. I don't give her a chance to pull away. I grasp her wrist lightly and suck her juices off them, the sweet tang of her exploding on my tongue.

Fuck, I need to touch her.

I need to be inside of her.

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She feels the same way. Her other hand grasps my shaft and pumps along my dick. One single stroke and I'm throbbing so badly that I think I'm going to stroke out.

"That feels good," I whisper, the words pulled straight from my gut. "So good."

She runs her fingers over my tip, teasing the head and then working her way to the sensitive opening. She knows exactly what I like. She knows my body, even though we haven't done this many times yet.

I'm half desperate right now because we left things... unfinished last time and it's been days.

I want to tell her thanks being here with me right now, but she knows. I want to tell her I love her, but I can't get the words out. I don't want it to sound lame, and telling someone you love them when they're holding your cock isn't how I want it to go down.

She guides my hand to her breast and I cup it over her bra. With the pushup there, it's more than a handful, so deliciously heavy. She stands on her tiptoes and slants her lips over mine, licking and humming as she tastes herself there. I love that she's not afraid to take the lead, take control, change it up, and be adventurous. It's so hot that she's not afraid to do anything. She's not embarrassed by her appetite for sex and she's comfortable with the things she likes.

That alone helped me relax even though my head threatened to take me out of the moment like it always does. Her boldness has helped me feel at home in my own skin. I've never been insecure about my body. It's a finely tuned machine from all the

working out I do to try to give my brain a hand. It was everything else that I had so much trouble with and that always bled into every part of my life.

Right now, I'm entirely focused. I'm concentrating on nothing except the way her fingers feel threaded through my hair, tugging a little bit too hard so that I can focus on the sensation while she devours my mouth, works my cock, and steps so close that she fuses our bodies together.

I lose myself in the simple and complex pleasure of kissing her. I try not to twin my arms around her or snake them down to touch her. I don't want to hike her up or tumble us onto the bed. I just want to stand, to be, to make this last as long as it possibly can.

I let her set the pace. Eventually, the kissing turns into grinding. She writhes against me, trapping my hard dick between our bodies and rubbing it until the friction drives me mad and the kissing gets more frantic, with teeth and with tongues.

She rubs against me again, angling her hips so that my sensitive cockhead hits lower, her panties instead of her skin. I hiss against the lightning bolt of pleasure that cleaves me in half. She responds by tugging my bottom lip with her teeth, licking away the sting while I groan again. She gyrates her hips, dry humping me with her panties in the way until I'm panting against her mouth.

"Atlas," she whimpers, grabbing my ass and digging her short nails in.

It's all the signal I need to spin her around. I bend her over the bed, spread her palms out and make sure she has a solid foundation before I grasp her hips and drag them high into the air. She lets her legs fall open, giving me a delicious view of her drenched panties.

I brush my fingers over her panties, bumping my knuckles against her clit. She gasps

and thrusts back, riding my hands even though I haven't even dipped them below the fabric.

"Please." She glares at me over her shoulder. "That's please as in, please fist my hair around your hand, sweep my panties to the side, line your cock up with my entrance, and fuck me senseless. "

I love that filthy mouth. I love how Willa is so soft-spoken and sugary, kind and considerate outside of the bedroom, but in it, she turns into a mouthy goddess who's not afraid to be bossy or just ask straight up for what she wants.

It's easy to follow her directions.

She has her hair down, it's loose and easy to wrap several times around my fist. I hold it just tight enough to give a little bit of pressure.

She purposely leans forward in order to cause a little discomfort and thrusts her hips back at me teasingly.

"You're so gorgeous," I scrape out. "You're going to turn me into an animal in ten seconds."

"That's exciting. Can I pick werewolf? I've always wondered about the knotting."

"The what ?"

She laughs darkly. "Nothing. Just something I was reading in a book."

"Can I read that book?"

"Sure. Read it and you can get all jazzed up and then we can bang."

“You read stuff like that?”

“Absolutely.”

“They describe it in detail?”

“Yeah.”

“That sounds...” I search for the right words while I keep stroking my fingers over her slit above her panties, teasing her clit. She freezes like she expects the worst, but she knows me better than that and relaxes before I even get out what I’m trying to come up with. “That sounds like a great date night.”

“A stay in and fuck each other senseless date night? Sounds good to me, babe.”

I sweep her panties aside and tease her bare, hot skin directly. “I thought you didn’t like the word babe?”

“It’s growing on me. Say it while you’re balls deep in me and I think I might change my mind even further and fall head over heels for it.”

I draw my fingers over her slit, circling and tapping her clit before bringing them back to play at her entrance. She jerks against me, breathing hard, begging me to fill her and stop teasing her by driving her hips back onto my fingers. My hand tightens in her hair.

“I can probably manage that.”

“The balls deep or the babe part,” she sasses.

I slip two fingers into her, but only give her the tips. She whimpers and tries to push

back, but I draw them to me. “Probably just the babe part.”

“You’re a pussy tease.”

“I believe it’s called edging.”

“Edging. Pussy teasing. I think that’s just semantics.”

“I’m not giving you what you want?”

“I want you to feast on me. I want your fingers. I want your cock. Since none of that is happening, I suppose I’m going to have to say no.” She’s just being a brat. We both know that.

It’s nice, after days of being serious, booking these appointments, getting ready to come here, me barely sleeping at all because I was a fucking wreck while trying to hold it together, putting in extra hours at the garage to try and distract myself while Willa threw herself into the shop to catch up and prepare to have to close again.

It’s nice to just be able to let go, be playful, and fall into each other.

“Can you please be inside of me?” she begs. “If you need me to say it out loud, that’s what I want. I want you. Right now. Actually no, more like as of yesterday. Please, Atlas.” She tries to shove her hips back again, but I smack her ass lightly.

She practically fucking purrs.

This. Woman.

Anything I’d want to ever do with her, she’d be down. Sex. Life. It seriously sends me back up in my head, asking myself what I ever did to deserve her. The way she

looks at me and how she's been there for me borders around that word that can't even apply to people. Unconditional .

I tilt her face to me using her hair, but unwind my hand and stroke her cheek with tenderness. I guide her face to mine, kissing her because I love it so much. She feasts on my mouth, panting her frustration and excitement over my lips and tongue.

I could kiss her for an eternity, and it still wouldn't be long enough. I thought I was broken from a young age, and then when Jodie left me because I couldn't give her what she needed, I was shattered all over again. It's so astounding to realize that all of that just let me to this exact moment. I needed to make my way here. To getting help. To changing my life. To Willa and the way she's worked her way into my heart, my head, and under my skin.

I still can't make myself say the words. They're too sacred.

I still want to show her.

I want her to watch my face while I'm inside her and see it written all over me.

Her panties are on top of the garter tights. I peel them away. They're hot as fuck, but they have to go. I want her bare and leaking all over me. I want to watch as she takes my cock, bask in the sight of her face while she's riding me.

"I thought you wanted to—" she starts as I spin her around, orienting us on the bed so that I'm below her, my dick standing straight up in the air, soaking my abs and balls with precum. I've been dripping for a while, aching so badly that I'm going to black out from lack of blood flow, but I wasn't paying attention to myself.

"After," I promise. After, I'll give her everything she wants, but first, I want her to come like this. I want to see her taking her pleasure from me. I want a front row seat

to her face as she comes.

She straddles, fists my cock about as eagerly as if we're trying to set a new world record for fastest time to climax, and guides me to her entrance.

"I should tease you like you were teasing me," she hisses, but I know as she slips my crown over her wet folds, shifting so that I mash against her clit and blast of pleasure grenades through me at the contact, she's not going to be able to wait it out.

Honestly? I can't either.

She guides me back to her entrance and we both make animalistic noises of desire when she takes me the first inch inside. She clenches around me immediately, so insanely tight. I dig my hands into her hips, but she grasps my wrists and looks me straight in the face.

"Just watch. Watch me take your cock. Watch it stretch me and fill me."

Well, fuck.

It wasn't like I was going to slam her down, but now I'm absolutely going to let her clutch my hands and take full control. I watch, as she commanded, and she does too. My cock kicks inside of her because she's so bold and deliciously sexy.

I watch until she takes all of me, and then I eat up the rest of her in a scalding perusal upward. Her breasts heave in that sinfully delicious bra. It reminds me of how she put those nipple clamps on herself last time.

I break away from her hips and curl up so that I can peel those bra cups down and grasp her nipples. They're already hard, just begging for me to play with them.

I pinch them between my fingers, but nothing extreme until I look up at her to gauge just how much she wants.

She's biting down on her bottom lip exactly where I want to put my lips, my tongue, and my teeth. She's watching me, not just where I'm stretching her open around my thick length, but at all of me.

I don't know who to explain it, but the way her eyes flick over my body, her pupils dilated and hot with pleasure is the most pleasurable thing about all of this.

My dick throbs inside of her and she rocks forward, slipping me out a little bit before slamming herself down on my length again.

"Fuck!" That's about as coherent as I'm going to get.

She nods, then arches forward, changing the position so that she can take me even deeper as she rides me. "Use your teeth."

She thrusts her breasts in my face, and I suckle her nipple while she rocks against me so hard that her pussy squeezes the shit out of me and her walls keep clenching and clenching, even with the smallest movement.

I nip her around her nipple and use my tongue to ease her. Her hands sink into my shoulders.

"Harder."

I try to do what she says, but these are teeth here, and I'm scared of doing irreparable harm. It would be insane if she moved at the wrong moment and we had to go to the hospital for her to get stitches. I literally shudder at the thought, but she bears down on me at the same time.

“It’s okay. Bite harder. I like it.”

I do, but I’m still ultra careful. Willa throws her head back and does things with her hips that make me wonder if we’ve been transported to a parallel dimension. She sets the pace, riding me slow, and then fast, slowing it down again. She grinds her clit against me on the long forward motion which makes me so wild that I have to jerk my hips upward, driving my dick deep inside of her.

She loves it. It makes her more wild, and when I lick and bite her other nipple, she rolls her hips even harder, until she’s slamming them up and down to meet my thrusts.

She makes the hottest sounds, while I wheeze like a dying instrument, but she clearly likes that too. When she opens her eyes and looks at me and I look up at her, there’s such an intense look of pleasure and desire and love on her face that it rocks me.

She keeps her eyes locked with mine while she fucks me and I fuck back, or the other way around. There’s so much heat there that it floods every limb and cell, all gathering straight at that central point in my chest.

We’ve done this before, but not this . I haven’t been inside of her like this. It feels as though she’s inside of me too.

“You’re gorgeous.” My hands fall to her hips and guide her rhythm to something nearly frantic. “I love seeing you ride me like this. So fucking wild and beautiful. I’m going to love seeing you lose control and shatter all over me.”

“And I love to see you underneath me, so strong and just as wild. I love that we’re both nearly out of control, that it’s messy and loud and it smells like sex in here.”

She rocks forward and back in a way that she hasn’t before, grinding herself over my

balls and mashing her own clit when she comes back.

“God, I’m so full,” she moans. “It feels so good.”

I’m right on the edge, but I want her to come first. I also want to give her what she wants.

She gasps when I pull out and maneuver her so that she’s kneeling on her hands and knees and I can slip out from underneath of her.

My cock is glistening with our combined arousal. I grab the little lube packet that’s still on the bed and tear it open with my teeth. It smells like grape, which makes me want to laugh, but it’s clear. I spread her open and drip the lube onto her asshole, drenching her with it. For a little packet, that thing has a lot.

She whimpers, her fingers churning through the slick mess as it dribbles lower, smearing it over her pussy. Of course she does the unexpected and parts herself for me, so I can see how pink and glistening wet she is.

Fuck.

It’s not like I’m not going to turn down that invitation. I dive forward, latching my mouth to her pussy, eating her messily and loudly. While I’m doing it, she slips two of her own fingers into her channel and fucks them in and out. I taste her juices off her hand, and right from the source. It’s a thousand times hotter when she starts shaking violently and I know that she’s going to come.

“Fuck, Atlas, fuck. Fuck, damn, fuck . Oh my god it’s so good. Fill me with your tongue.” She guides my face there and I eagerly give her what she wants while she mashes her clit with her fingers. “I’m going to come. Oh. Oh my god, I’m coming. Please don’t stop. Please, please...”

She breaks into a wail as she shatters, soaking my face as she writhes all over the place. I eat her all the way through it, until she's whimpering and clawing the bed, and slamming her hand into my face to shove me away for a second as she gets too sensitive.

I rear up behind her and wait for a second, until she turns her face to me, still panting and flushed, eyes glazed over, lips swollen from kissing me. She looks thoroughly ravished. My dick leaks strings of precum all over her back as I wipe my face with my hand then lick every drop of her sweet nectar from it.

"You're going to wreck me now, aren't you?"

"Literally or figuratively? Because I plan to take care with you. I'm not just going to plow into you like a feral beast. I know how much trust you're giving me and how you're surrendering all your control. If you mean wreck you with pleasure, I hope so. Or wreck you for anyone else... I- I hope that too. I want to be it for you."

Is that needy as fuck? Corny as hell? Cheesy with a side of cheese? Probably.

"I think that I love you, Willa." I scrub my hand over my face. "No. Fuck. I know that I do. It's just- I want us to last. I want us to be lovers who love each other more and more, who find respect for each other, who have adventures together, who face the tough shit side by side. Always as best friends, but as souls bound up together too. I want love that grows, changes together, and lasts. And I want that with you."

She doesn't even attempt to blink back tears. They streak down her flushed cheeks, her eyes huge and luminous. "Then, my love, you've already ruined me in the best of all ways. Please don't stop now."

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Willa

I 'm helpless here, drowning. I can't breathe.

It's all wonderful .

My legs are quivering, my heart is on fire, I can barely hold myself up, and Atlas' sweet words drill straight through to my epicenter, causing an emotional earthquake. I'm drunk on him and the hope in his words, the way he looked at me like he was truly alive for the first time.

I get it.

I feel that way too.

I'm here for it. Always.

He smears the lube over my asshole, circling my rim with his index finger before dipping it in up to the first knuckle. A hot wave of molten pleasure rips through me. I vibrate and shake, my arms barely able to hold my weight. I dig my knees into the bed and arch forward before I push back, catlike.

“Holy shit, you're tight. Are you sure this is okay?”

“Yeah.”

I pant through the burn when he pushes his finger the rest of the way in. Even that

feels huge, and his cock is so much larger. Yes, it's going to burn, and it might hurt a little before it feels good, but I'm practically coming out of my skin with my need to feel him there.

He thrusts his finger in and out, going slowly to let me adjust.

"I'm going to come from just watching myself to do this."

My heart thumps and then races. I'm more of a dirty talker than Atlas and he didn't mean it that way, he was just being honest, but I can still feel beads of moisture trickling down my thighs.

He bends over and bites my shoulder while he fucks me with his finger.

"Mmm," I encourage him. "It feels good." It does. The burning has turned into a different kind of heat. I crave that friction, rocking up against him for more.

He withdraws his finger right when really good things are starting to happen and the lube he drips all over me nearly feels cold in comparison.

"Are you absolutely sure about this?" He stresses that because he just asked me.

"I'm sure, sure."

He pulls me to the edge of the bed and guides me off getting my feet flat on the floor. My knees press up against the mattress and my whole top half bends over it. I spread my arms out in front of me for balance.

This is totally the best yoga pose of the day.

He uses the rest of the lube, then slicks his hand down his length. He's so thick and

long, so hard already, but I can practically watch him swelling in his hand as he touches himself. My mouth waters as his cock leaks all over his hand.

He notches himself at my back entrance. As he starts to push in, I realize just how small I am in comparison.

“You’re going to have to talk me through this, Willa. Just say something so I know you’re okay.”

Am I okay? His cock presses in agonizingly slowly, stretching me nearly beyond what I can bear. It’s straight pain, the burn screaming through my limbs. I know it will get better, but holy shit, I don’t know if I can handle the first few minutes. I probably should have asked for more of a warmup, but I’m not going to ask now. I know I’ll be alright.

He freezes. “Willa?”

“I’m okay.” Even to me, my voice is strained. I’m too tense. I relax myself, melting into the bed and breathing. Some of the burn dissipates immediately.

“How okay?”

“Enough okay that I want you to keep going until you explode inside of me and fill me up with your cum.”

He grasps my hips, going so rigid and tense that I know he’s trying to master his control and not plow into me.

He doesn’t say anything, but his breathing slows down. I wonder if he’s counting it out in his head.

It's probably not a good idea to reach between our legs and grab his balls, but I'll do that later, when I'm sure that I'll survive it.

He still hasn't moved, not even when I try to ease back. "I could really use with a good filling before you get to the pounding."

He snorts, laughs, and coughs. "I'm sorry. I'm not laughing at you. I- kind of am, I guess. I hope you meant to be funny."

"You don't have to worry. It feels good. I mean, I feel full , but it's good. It hurts a little bit, but there's this point where it stops feeling like you can't do it, and it switches over to where your whole body is begging for more."

"Play with your clit," he commands, reaching down deep to come up with some of his own bossy. I like it.

I like it even more when I obey him, my fingers circling the swollen bud gently. It sends cool shivers of pleasure out to mingle with the hot heat from my ass.

It only gets hotter as Atlas pushes in a little bit more. I breathe through it, breathe and breathe and breathe until he bottoms out inside of me.

He pants behind me, ready to let loose, but giving me time to adjust. He pulls out as slowly as he pushed inside and then gives me every thick, hard inch of his cock again.

"You have no idea how hot this looks from my point of view. You're taking this cock so well in your tight ass."

"Mmm, very good! You get an A for quick learning. I like your dirty talk game. More."

“I love how your ass swallows my cock.”

I bite down on my lip to keep from laughing, but the filthiest heat also spreads through me.

As he starts to move slowly, I slip my fingers down and play with my soaking folds. It's overstimulating to touch myself like this, but I love it too. I thought I was drunk before, but I had no idea. I'm drunk now. Intoxicated on the delicious grunts and feral sounds that Atlas makes. On the slick slap of our sweaty skin coming together. I want to hear his balls smacking against my ass he's fucking me so hard. I hope he works himself up into that.

My ass is full, but I feel so empty that I slip two fingers into my channel. The one arm I'm balancing on strains with the effort of holding myself up.

“Fuck, babe. Are you... fuck.”

“Am I fucking myself onto my fingers while you fill me from behind? Yes. It's divine. I've never been so full in my life. You know what though? My hand shouldn't have all the fun.”

His heaving breaths turn into wheezes as I grasp his hand on my hip and bring it around. He tries to use just one, but I press two together. His fingers are so much thicker than mine when he buries them inside of me.

I've reached that sweet point where it's all pleasure. Mind numbing, overwhelming, savage pleasure. The friction, the burn, the heady white hot pleasure is almost more than I can stand. It's almost frightening to be this full, knowing that when my climax comes, it's going to hit so hard that it could tear me apart.

“So good, Willa. It's so good.”

“Yes,” I hiss between clamped teeth. “So, so good.”

“I love how tight your ass is. How it clenches all over my dick while you ride my fingers. You’re so gorgeous, taking all of me like that.”

Again, Atlas gets an A. He gets an A for everything he’s doing to me too. All I can do is rock back and forth and meet his every stroke while the pleasure builds and builds. Okay, so maybe I’m thrashing here, pinned down and still trying to move to get to where I need to get, all while fearing arriving there because it’s going to break me the fuck in half.

“You’re such a good girl, should I let you come?”

I’m not sure that he has any say in it. I’m not sure that I do either. It’s going to happen, the heat coiling like smoke off a fire.

He takes me by surprise when he pinches my clit while he’s hammering into me, driving in with his fingers and his cock. My climax hits me like a force that has previously been unknown to me. I can’t even describe it, it’s so powerful. There aren’t words. Just sensation, just wave after wave. I’m drenched in it, ground into dirt and lifted high into the sky. I have no air, no words, no thoughts. Just the pleasure that is so hot and hard and painful and transcendent.

I shake until I could rattle apart with it, until my teeth are knocking together and my bones feel disjointed. My skin is an inferno. I’m slick and drenched with sweat, my muscles aching from my effort to not truly fly apart.

“So perfect,” Atlas hums. I hear him and can piece together his words when I crash back into my body. “So incredible. I’m going to come for you.”

He doesn’t fill up my ass like he said he would do. He pulls out and jacks his cock

before spraying splashes of come all over my back, my hips, my ass, all the way up my neck and into my hair.

We're both sweaty, slicked up, and shaking with the aftershocks of bliss as Atlas picks me up, smearing his come all over the both of us. He carries me honeymoon style into the bathroom and gets the shower going. This motel is okay, which means the shower is solidly midgrade, but I give it props for being just big enough for the both of us to get in together if we squish.

I love being squished up against this man.

He waits for a good while before he dares to set me down on my feet. He intrinsically knows that my legs are basically little better than gummy candies at this point.

The spray feels alarmingly good against my muscles. Atlas made it just hot enough, and he positioned me down in front of him so that I get almost all of it.

I stand under it until my whole body is soaked. Atlas isn't getting much water, but he makes up for it by stripping my soaked bra away and latching his mouth to my nipples one after the other, then licking along my shoulders, collarbones, and neck. I just came harder than I ever have, but his hot mouth on my body makes me want to test the limits of what my body is actually capable. Given that I'd like to be able to walk so that I can operate the store tomorrow, it's probably not a good idea.

As a distraction, I maneuver him around, into the spray. When his hair is soaked, I get the little green bottle of motel shampoo and empty most of it into my hand.

It's labelled green tea and aloe vera, and it smells quite accurate. I apply the whole thing to Atlas' hair, lathering it and massaging my fingers into the scalp until he's practically purring.

“If I had known that showering was this good with you, I would have done it a long time ago.”

I agree, but I tell him with a kiss, stroking my tongue into his mouth until we’re both panting.

“My only regret is that this isn’t your shower and that I’m not going to smell like strawberries, like you always do after we’re done.”

I laugh, dipping him back under the spray to rinse out the suds that are starting to leak onto his face. “You’d go around smelling like strawberries? Just for the record, I think that’s the most ‘secure in your manhood’ statement that I’ve ever heard.”

Just over the noise of the water running, I can hear the faint tinkling sound of my phone. I ignore it and so does Atlas. I conditioner his hair, treating him to the same scalp massage that makes him purr. He turns around after and I get a good view of his healing back, which makes my throat close up and my chest get those painful tingles. I’m so proud of him for doing this. For trusting me, for talking to me, for coming here, for facing this with courage. I hate that he suffered for so long, but I can’t undo that for him. I can only move forward.

My phone goes off again, and this time, it’s joined by Atlas’ phone. His rings for longer and then starts up again.

He frowns. “Shit. That’s probably the club. There could be something wrong if both our phones are going off.”

Worry immediately swamps me. The first thing I think of is Lynette and Bullet. I nearly fall out of the shower, trying to push the glass door out of the way. Atlas catches me, wraps me up in a towel, and tries to fit the other remaining one around his hips. It looks like a hand towel on him, but he ignores it, dripping water all over

the place as he goes to get his phone.

“It’s Wizard,” he tells me, popping back into the doorway with his phone. “I’ll call him back. He was probably just calling you looking for me, but I’ll find out.”

He dials and Wizard must answer right away. “Hey,” Atlas says. “I’m with Willa. We’re in a private place. Are you okay me putting you on speaker?”

Wizard must agree, because Atlas flicks a button and Wizard’s voice fills up the bathroom.

“I was just wondering how long you guys were going to be in Seattle?”

“Uh... I’m not sure. What’s up?”

“The security cameras at Agatha’s place all went out. I called her because that’s a big fucking red flag and she apologized, the power pole in her yard is having issues. She’s called a few times, but the company is being a dog about sending anyone out. if you live rural, no one gives two fucks. I wanted to send someone out there immediately to check on her, but she says she’s fine. Her exact words were, ‘I don’t wish to be kidnapped and taken from my goddamn home whether it’s for my goddamn own good or not.’”

Atlas and I share a loaded look that speaks volumes about what we’d like to do to power companies that ignore little old ladies in distress.

“Do you want us to stop by? We could leave pretty quickly,” Atlas asks.

This . This is the reason that I love him so much. His selflessness. He’s always willing to help others, putting them before himself every single time.

I need to make sure that he knows that selfcare is important too, but I'll also always cherish the goodness that radiates out of him and makes the world a far, far better place for his being here.

I wrap my arms around his waist and lean my chin against his shoulder, hopefully conveying silently just how much I cherish him.

“That would be great. She also told me if it was anyone, send Willa and her attractive young hottie. And then she laughed and said of course she knows your name is Atlas and she's certainly not trying to steal you from Willa, but she wouldn't mind ogling you working those security cameras a little, and asked me if I could blame an old lady for wanting to have a smidge of fun before she expires from her boring, humdrum existence.”

We haven't told anyone that we're together, but there's a good chance that Wizard might have seen us on the security footage from the shop. Even the way we look at each other, or how close we stand together is a dead giveaway. My pulse still kicks up, but Atlas doesn't seem rattled.

“We'll be happy to stop in.”

“I didn't want to interrupt your trip. If it's an issue, I can call her back and convince her to let someone else come out there.”

“It's not an interruption. We were finishing up anyway.”

“Did you find what you were looking for?”

“Yes.” He turns, wraps his arms around me and drops a kiss on my wet hair that just about melts me into a puddle of liquid goo. “Yes, absolutely.”

“Great. Can’t wait to see it.”

It meaning the bike we were supposed to be here buying.

“Yeah. I’ll get it home eventually,” Atlas responds, and that’s the truth. He does want to buy a bike that we can ride together . One day, I know it will be a reality for us.

“Thanks man. I owe you.”

“Not at all.”

“Tyrant mentioned that he has someone who he’s thinking about getting in here to help me with all this. Said you asked him about it.”

“I didn’t mean that you weren’t doing a good job. I just can’t imagine how all that work would do your head in. I—”

“You’re fucking right about that. I’m so overwhelmed I don’t know what’s up or fucking down or sideways, or whatever damn direction.” Wizard laughs tonelessly and for the first time, I can hear the smallest amount of stress creeping into his tone. “Thanks for having my back. This is one part of the club that’s vital, but everyone takes for granted. Thanks for seeing me, kid.”

“I’m not that much younger than you.”

“Right. Well, thanks.”

“Yeah. No problem. I hope you get help soon. Until then, my offer still stands to help out myself. Or even after.”

“Thanks again. Be safe.” That added warning causes the hair to stand up on the back

of my neck, even though it's irrational.

"For sure." Atlas' response is so easy before he hangs up, that I relax. That slightly creepy feeling is nothing. He's always on my wavelength though. He tips my face up. "That be safe probably just meant that an old lady with a bunch of grenades ominously stored away might be a wild time. I'm sorry that I didn't ask you if it was okay with you that we stop there. I just assumed that—"

"It's perfectly okay! I should have driven out before now. We'll get dressed and go."

"But the booking—"

"We already paid upfront, so I'm sure it's okay to check out early. Emergencies happen."

He kisses me and then picks up my soggy bra off the floor and holds it out like an apology.

"I have a change of clothes. It's all good."

He opens his mouth like he wants to say something. Comically, I do too. And we both say nothing. We just give each other soft, connected smiles that speak so much more than even the best of words ever could.

Willa

A gatha's farm looks peaceful. Bracketed by a cloudless blue sky and rolling fields of hay on either side, the little white farmhouse and grayed cedar barn are picturesque. The country air is fresh, scented with clover, and other grasses. I haven't lived in Seattle in almost a year, and when I was living there, I never noticed how loud the city was. Hart's a city too, but a small one. Leaving Seattle to come out here just an hour ago only emphasizes the quiet. The only sounds disturbing the nothingness are melodious birdsong and the rustle of the wind.

As soon as we pulled up, Atlas got out of the truck and opened my door for me, even though I was the one driving. He took my hand like I needed helping out. I didn't, but I still left mine there in his. He brushes a kiss over my knuckles. His smile is small, but it's there. I'm so absurdly thankful to see it.

I sweep my eyes over the yard. "Should we check the cameras in the barn first? Or that pole? The house?"

"Probably the house. If she's having issue with the power pole, I'm not sure there's anything we can do other than to call and make sure someone gets out here sooner rather than later."

"Do you think she heard us pull up? We probably don't want to sneak up on her." I drop my voice, winking at him. It's probably not funny that the stashing of lethal and bizarre weapons like grenades is becoming an inside joke.

"Because she has explosives?"

My heart swells so big that it's pretty much an explosive, all because Atlas grazes his lips over my forehead.

"Something like that, yes."

"I'm sure she heard us pull up." He glances up at the sun, shimmering brightly in the sky with no cloud cover to buffer it. "It's hot out." He starts off toward the house and I fall into stride easily with him because he slows his pace for me. "If they don't get the power on soon, everything in the fridge and freezer will spoil. Senior citizens lived on a fixed income. How can any company let that happen?"

This is the reason I fell in love with him. This is the reason I fall more in love every day. Most people wouldn't even think about something like that.

By the time we reach the porch, I have my phone in my hand. I guess I'm planning on calling that company to rip them a new one, but I have no idea who should get the ripping. I'll have to get that information from Agatha.

I've never had a grandma. I'm pretty much vibrating, but it's not just to give out a verbal tongue lashing to some power company. It's excitement too.

I should have come earlier. Who cares about the drive? I should be making it every few days. I'm pretty much drowning in guilt when the front door opens. Agatha steps out and thankfully it's just her in a floral dress with a pleated skirt and a belt that's cinched at her trim waist. Just her as in, she's not toting out any firearms or bombs. She's not wearing her usual orthopedic shoes, but a pair of old hiking boots.

"Agatha!" I pick up on a slight tremble that shudders through her when I race across the yard, leap up the steps, and hug her. It's probably stress from the whole power situation. "I'm so sorry about all this crap. I pat her shoulder. "Just let me know who I need to call, and we'll call and call and call , until someone gets their buns out here to

fix this for you.”

“Oh, it’s uh...” Her eyes flick to the barn, over to the pole on the far end of the yard, and then to the truck. They linger there, almost longingly. “I can’t remember. Come inside and I’ll get a bill with the company’s name.”

“Okay. We could go for a ride if you want to cool down. I have great AC in there.”

Agatha laughs, but there’s something wrong with the sound. More nerves? Stress? I’ve seen her when she was pretty much trussed and carted off and she wasn’t nervy like that. She was tough and fire breathing throughout it all.

“Maybe in a bit,” she says. I pick up on a sad undertone. Is something else wrong?

I share a quick look with Atlas. He’s standing right behind me on the steps, but he just gives me a one shoulder subtle shrug, as if to say, let’s sit her down and figure this out and she’ll perk right up in no time.

Agatha turns her head and her eyes linger on my face for just a second before she opens the door, but it still sends a weird shiver down my back. I don’t know if Atlas is getting weirded out too, but he strides past me and steps in front of me so fast that I can’t stop him. He’s already through the door before I even have a foot inside.

Even if we’d walked through together, I don’t know that I could have done anything to stop what happens.

A muffled cry from Agatha splits the quiet, as though she’s been roughly shoved aside. Something black wraps around Atlas’ shoulder and he’s twisted around and slammed into the wall, a gun at his temple. I see it all happen as I walk into the house behind him.

My heart slams into my throat and a frigid blast of panic freezes me. The man standing behind Atlas is middle aged, tall and wiry. Physically, he wouldn't be a match for Atlas in any way, but he had the element of surprise and now he has a loaded weapon pressed to the temple of the man I love.

Unbelievable rage blares into my bloodstream like a horn going off right in my ear. I stand on the spot, panting like a trapped animal, growling low in my throat like one too.

Whoever this prick is, he's dressed all in black. From what I can see under the ball cap, he's neatly groomed. Dark hair, dark eyes, average features. He looks so much the same as anyone else. Why the fuck is he doing this?

The money.

That chest.

That's the only explanation I can think of. What if there was more than one person involved? The club gave the money to who they thought was the rightful owner, but what if that woman just got to the chest first? What if she had partners that she cheated, skipping out on them with the whole fucking thing? What if someone else knew about the money after she left and came back because they thought there was something more to be found? What if none of that is true and this has nothing to do with the chest?

I can't actually truck with that idea at all. This guy was clearly hiding out in here. He was waiting for us. That means that he must have had this planned and he used Agatha as part of it. To what? Lure us here? Even badass old ladies can be terrified when some asshat creeps into their home with a loaded gun and tells them they had better cooperate or they'll be a nasty picture with their brains splattered all over the wall for their loved ones to find.

Nausea and dread swirl in a toxic mix in my gut.

“Let’s go,” the guy demands, his voice deep, but scratchy. It doesn’t match his face. He digs the gun harder into Atlas’ temple. I can’t look away from that spot. I can’t move. My whole world is going to crash in and burn.

If this asshole made one wrong move, I know I’d try and wrestle that gun away from him and I wouldn’t be above shooting him somewhere that wouldn’t kill him, but would hurt a lot all the same. I’ve never had a violent fantasy in my life, but I’m fantasizing hard about it now. I want to scratch this fucker’s eyes out for daring to hurt people I care about.

“Now,” he commands. “Living room. Walk there real slow.” He whips his head around to Agatha. Only now can my eyes track to her face. She’s white and trembling. She won’t look up from the floor. “You too,” he tells her. “You go first and then you.”

You. He means me .

Despite how frightened and ill she looks, Agatha moves quickly. She scrambles past us. I can’t look at that gun for a second longer or I’m going to pass out. That would probably just piss this guy off.

I can’t give him a reason to hurt any one of us. I do what he told me to, though every step is biter and jarring. I’m afraid to look behind me, so I don’t. I just trail Agatha.

She sits down on the old floral couch. I hesitate, which causes the guy to bark orders. “Sit down beside her. Take out your phone slowly and throw it into the middle of the room.”

I basically fall down beside Agatha. She’s trembling. So am I. I don’t know if she’s

shaking solely out of fear. I'm certainly not.

I chuck my phone and watch helplessly as the asshole forces Atlas into a wooden chair that's out of place in here. It's from the kitchen. He keeps the gun trained on the back of Atlas' head while he cuffs his hands behind his back and then ties him with thin, tough looking rope.

Seeing it bite into Atlas' bare arms is worse than being tied up myself.

"Phil, please!" Agatha begs.

Phil? This is Phil? As in... her son Phil?

He whips Atlas' phone out and picks mine up. He pops out the SIM cards and breaks them in half, disposing of the batteries after. Once that's done, he snaps his head up, face contorted with rage like this is inconvenient for him .

He points the gun directly at his mother with an expression so unhinged that I take her hand in mine and clench it tightly. She gasps loudly, but only whimpers when Phil directs his rage fest at me.

"I'm going to ask this once and once only before I start maiming him." He whips the gun in Atlas' direction. I still can't look at him, but only because I'm afraid if I do, Phil will keep the gun trained on him, or use it. "Where is my money?"

"I- I- we gave it back to the rightful owner. She claimed it," I stammer.

"I tried to tell you that," Agatha whispers, clearly trying to not antagonize her son further. It doesn't work. His lip curls up in a savage sneer.

"I hid that money. It was mine . We might have stolen it together, but she had no

right to take it.”

“Who?” It’s probably not smart to ask questions, but I can’t think of anything to do other than to buy time. I don’t know if Wizard is tracking Atlas’ phone or not, but there was a signal when we got here and if we haven’t checked in with him, maybe he’ll get suspicious.

If he’s tracking Atlas’ phone.

If he even has time to get suspicious.

Those are big ifs, and then there’s the fact that we’re an hour away from Hart.

“My wife,” Phil snarls, forcing out the words like a glob of spittle.

“She has the money.” That only makes Phil’s face darken and I swallow thickly. “She’s clearly taken it and run. She could be anywhere by now. We don’t have anything more than that. I don’t... we don’t know anything else.”

Phil starts shaking his head. It creeps me right the fuck out when he doesn’t stop doing it. He keeps thrashing it from side to side so violently that his neck groans and creaks.

“No!” He shouts, slamming his way over to me. He picks me up by the front of my shirt and shakes me. Hard.

My teeth knock together and I’m so scared that I can’t move. I can’t kick him in the balls or try and get his gun from him like I should. My own body betrays me.

“You stupid cow. That was my money!”

I have no idea who Phil and his wife stole the money from, or how she was involved, but it's clear from the haunted, crazed light in his eyes that someone expects to be paid, in part or in full, and if not, they're going to exact some kind of retribution. He's all hunted and not the hunter.

"I need to get that money," he yells, beads of spittle landing all over my face. An angry vein throbs in his forehead.

"I'm s-sorry," I stammer, turning my face to the side, my teeth clashing together. "I can't help you. I don't know where it is. We tried to do the right thing and give it back, no questions asked."

"That's what I told him," Agatha whispers again. I turn my face just enough to see her bowed head, the frizzy white hair falling forward and sticking up at all angles. She looks emotionally beaten, a scared little old lady. The kick-ass grandma nowhere in sight.

A hot surge of grief and wrath shoot through me again, followed by a protective urge so strong that it knocks the breath from me.

I cautiously look at Atlas from under lowered lashes. How can blank his face like that and be so composed? He's shutting down and not willing to give Phil anything. He very subtly shakes his head at me, warning me not to do anything crazy like try and defend myself and rescue us all.

Phil shakes me again, but my eyes stay on Atlas' face the whole time. I watch the shadow flash there, a ghost of violence that he can't contain. "Your club is complacent. Pathetic . Who gives back that kind of money with just a warning? If they had any sense, they'd be ruthless and exercise their right to it in order to preserve their own lives. Their goodness will be their downfall. Trying to play the hero only ever makes you one thing and it's not noble."

“Compassion isn’t stupid.”

Phil shoves me back onto the couch and points the gun directly at me. I’ve never gone so stiff or so cold that it happens on a cellular level.

His dark eyes scrape over me, his lips thinning out like his patience. “I don’t believe you. That’s too stupid.”

His hard stare never wavers, but neither does mine. I try to channel Atlas’ flat expression and his unassailable calm. “If you won’t tell me the truth, I’ll have to convince you.”

His hand whips out and cracks brutally against Agatha’s cheek.

“Oh my god!” I throw my arms around her, catching her as her neck snaps to the side and the force of the blow carries her into me. I cradle her face while her hand flies up to her cheek, a nasty red mark standing out livid against her thin, pale skin.

“Stop it!” I wheeze, shock and horror stealing my voice. “How could you do that to your own mother!”

“My mother loved this land more than she ever loved me,” Phil snarls. “And my stupid father. She loved him too. He was the only thing that ever truly mattered to her, and she won’t leave this house. This place is a mausoleum. It’s a shrine to him. No matter how much I begged her to see me, to love me...”

“So just because you have mama issues, you think you can steal a bunch of money, break the law, and come here and terrorize us?”

“No, you stupid whore. That money isn’t mine. I took it for safekeeping and now that there’s no keeping, no one is safe.”

“No one meaning you. They’re coming for you.”

“That’s right.” Phil starts pacing, but the gun remains trained on me. It was probably wise not to antagonize him. I need to keep my head. I can’t lose it like he’s losing control. “I need you to tell me where she went.”

“I don’t know. We don’t know anything ,” I insist. That’s not true, but if I tell him that the club put trackers in the money and they probably do know where his wife is, what will he do to us? The only thing I can think of is time.

We need it. We don’t have it.

Then there’s always the fact that if I tell him what he wants to know, Phil could do anything to us. We’d know more than he’d like. He wouldn’t let us just walk out of here, healthy and happy as we fucking please.

“I’ll tell you exactly what Agatha likely did. We put the club’s phone number in the chest. Your wife called it. She met with them outside of Hart. They gave her the money and advised her to disappear,” I explain patiently. “She didn’t seem to have a problem with that, and she wasn’t afraid to show her face. It didn’t seem suspicious. She knew all about it.” I inhale deeply, knowing full well that I’m going to incite Phil’s ire, but I want to draw his attention away from Agatha and Atlas. She’s old and brittle and he’s tied up . Maybe if Phil comes at me, I should try for his gun. It’s dangerous, but Bullet taught Lynette and I how to use one, and also gave us more than basic self-defense training. “Honestly, this seems more like a problem for you and your wife, rather than involving us.”

The red creeps up Phil’s neck in a matter of seconds. He’s livid to the point of spiraling . Over his shoulder, Atlas grows visibly more agitated. He shoves his arms up and down, trying to shimmy out of the ropes, but it’s going to be impossible for him to free himself from those cuffs.

“No!” Phil pretty much screams, leaning straight into my face. “This your problem. You and your stupid club. You’ll have to pay for giving my money away and for her duplicity.” He grasps my hair, wrenching a handful to the side so fast that pain explodes in my scalp and wrenches sickeningly in my neck. “How much are you worth to your stupid club, hmm?”

Phil tugs me straight off the couch using my hair. He winds it tighter around his fist, and it’s either fall into step with him or let him tear a bloody chunk out of the side of my head.

“You’re worth so much more alive, but that doesn’t mean we can’t have a little fun, hmm?” He snuffles, slurping snot back. I half expect him to spit it out on me, but he swallows it back. My gorge rises at the disgusting sound. He points at the wood stove in the corner of the room. There’s a pile of wood neatly stacked at the side. “Light it.”

My throat closes again as fear prickles over my skin, goosebumps cropping up on my arms. He wheels me to the stove and forces me down onto my knees. I reach for a piece of wood, open the glass door, and shove it in, even as I feel the barrel of the gun press into the back of my head.

I load it up, hoping to hell that it catches when I try and light it.

Light it. With what?

Phil answers that for me before I have to ask. He throws a lighter down onto the floor. I scoop it up, my hands trembling so violently that I have to try several times to get the wheel to turn. Eventually, it sparks and I stick my hand in the stove. The fire licks along the crisp woods, curling little hairs before it wraps around to the bark on the back side. I think I’ll have to do this for hours, but thankfully the bark catches, the flames spreading fast, crawling over the entire surface and spreading to the pieces I’ve stacked above and below.

“It’s nicely seasoned. Pine. It’ll burn hot.”

The heat hits me in the face. I get a terrible image of Phil shoving my head in there, or my hands, or pressing my face to the top or sides while it’s hot. Acid washes over the back of my tongue. I quickly shut the glass door and turn the handle as the flames rush up behind it.

“Phil, please stop this now. They don’t know anything, and they don’t have your money. This is only going to bring the wrath of the entire club down on your head.” Agatha is right behind me suddenly. She has her hand on Phil’s arm, pleading with him.

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He's struck her once, and he's not afraid to do it again. This time, his open palm cracks against her face so hard that it sends her spinning. She hits the couch and slumps to the floor, moaning.

I try to race to her to help her, but Phil shoves the gun right in my face. From this angle, I can see that it's not cocked, but that gives me no measure of comfort.

"Willa!" Atlas yells my name frantically. He strains against the ropes, leaping around in the chair so wildly that it nearly falls over. He gives up and picks the whole thing up, standing with it attached to him.

"Sit the fuck down or I put a bullet in her." Now Phil cocks the gun. He aims it lower, pointing it at my thigh. Still not comforting, but at least I can live with a bullet there.

I hope.

I know there are major arteries in the legs. If he hits one, I could bleed out.

Atlas' face crumples. There's no hiding how seeing me in danger breaks him. I know that he would rather take that bullet any day than see that weapon trained on me.

Our eyes lock. I plead with him silently to just sit down and stay still and quiet and not draw attention to himself. I couldn't bear it if Phil hurt him in any way, especially because all I've done is antagonize him.

Atlas lets the chair drop back to the floor. He pretty much collapses into it, but his eyes stay feral, glaring at Phil with all the black hate in the world. I hope that all he

does is stare. Atlas can't rush him. He can't try and tackle him. He could get seriously hurt if he does that, or Phil might just straight up shoot him.

My life would be over if that happened.

I can't live in this world if Atlas isn't in it.

"Get the poker from the set of tools behind the stove," Phil commands. "Open the door and stick it in. Heat it until it's good and hot."

I follow orders, moving as slowly as possible. I know he's got the gun on me. He wouldn't be stupid enough to take a chance that I'd use the poker on him. I can see myself doing it, even as I take it from the rack and plunge it deep in the fire. I can practically see myself pulling it out and bringing it crashing down on Phil's arm, knocking the gun to the floor.

Could it go off and kill someone then?

What if I smashed him in the face?

The gun could still go off and shoot someone. And then I'd probably go to jail for murder, because taking a poker to the face is serious business.

The hand then.

It's the only chance that we have right now. If Phil wants me to heat this damn thing, then he's obviously got something sinister in mind.

Agatha moans from over by the couch again. Is she seriously hurt? If Phil's not afraid to do that to his own mother, then what the fuck is he willing to do with us? I bite down on my lower lip, sawing my teeth in until I taste blood.

“Don’t think about doing something stupid, girl,” Phil cautions. “Although, you’ve already been plenty dumb. You thought you could lie to me and play me. If it’s going to take some encouragement to help you find your tongue, then so be it.”

My hand grasps the poker until my knuckles go white and I barely have any feeling in my fingers. I can’t stop seeing myself smashing it into Phil’s face. I wouldn’t have to do it hard. Just enough to stun him.

And then what?

Hit the gun out of his hand? Kick it across the room? Run for it? Hit him again, hard enough to knock him out, but not kill him? How hard should one exactly hit someone else with a blunt force object to maim and cause mayhem but not murder them?

“You’re going to pull that poker out of the fire and turn around real fucking slow, or you get a bullet straight between your shoulder blades. Maybe I’ll miss and hit you in the ass and you’ll get lucky. Then again, maybe I’ll fuck up and hit you higher, right in the back of your skull.”

I close my eyes, refusing to give in to the fear. I need adrenaline right now. I need to dig deep into that and let it give me a ferocious kind of strength that I wouldn’t normally have.

I get the poker out, shut the door, and pivot around. Phil does have the gun pointed right at me. A sinister smile spreads over his face like grease on water.

“Good. Walk over to your boyfriend there and put that hot end right onto his face.”

My heart lurches and slams into overdrive, beating painfully fast. It’s like that second where you realize that you narrowly avoided dying and you get those cold chills while your heart is hammering ten times faster than it should be. Everything is so

much clearer. The distance between myself and Phil. Atlas' pained expression. Agatha lying face down, her soft moans creeping up into the quiet.

"He can't tell you anything because he doesn't know anything, but even if he did, he's bound by an oath to his club. He would never betray them." I try one last time to appeal to Phil's rational side.

"Never is a big word," he shoots back, sneering. Right. He doesn't have a rational side. "He might be bound by some misplaced sense of honor, but you aren't. Let's see how much he treasures your face."

"Willa! No!" Atlas shakes his head so hard that the whole chair vibrates beneath him.

"You don't think a man who looks like him would want a woman like you with a fucked up face, do you?"

"Stop it. Please," I plead. "This isn't going to get you anywhere. If it's money you want, the club could get it for you. You don't have to torture us. We've told you everything we know."

His eyes cloud over. There's something wrong with them, something black and evil swimming in their depths. "Maybe you do, maybe you don't. Either way, someone gets their face fucked up because you owe me my money and it's only through your colossal stupidity that I'm even here."

I make the decision right there. I turn the poker in my hand, forcing the tip upward. It's no longer glowing cherry red, but it's still brutally hot. "Me then. I was the one who wanted the trunk. I didn't know what was in it and we tried to do the right thing, but I'm the one who's responsible for taking it."

"Don't you dare touch her!" Atlas screams. He thrashes in his chair, but stills when

Phil whips the gun over at him. “Willa!”

Phil throws back his head and laughs. “No. Not you.” He motions with the gun at Atlas. “Him. Because now I know that will hurt you far worse than if you took that scar for him.”

“Why?” I whimper, trying to appear helpless while all the while my brain is racing, calculating distance. I’d have to knock the gun down first. I can’t hit Phil when he’s pointing it right at Atlas. I could never take that chance.

“Because you both need to be punished for stealing my money. You were naïve and blind and so incredibly stupid to come out here alone. Trust makes you ignorant. Love makes you weak. Pathetic.” I’m frozen and Phil waves his hand. “Go on then. His neck first. Then his ear. If he hasn’t decided to tell me where my money really is by then, or where my fucking wife has gone, then press it to his cheek. If that’s not enough encouragement, take his eyes.”

The tiniest flicker of movement behind Phil catches my attention. Agatha is slowly rising up, getting to her feet. Phil isn’t bothered about her in the least. He’s forgotten her. He’s so fucking jazzed about this torture session that’s about to go down that all his attention is dialed right in on us.

I tear my eyes away and focus on the poker while Agatha creeps past the couch, heading straight for the end table where a large, heavy-looking faux Roman bust stands proudly.

I sure as fuck hope that thing isn’t made of plastic.

“Now!” Phil yells, a cloud of spittle erupting in front of his face again.

I let out a shuddering breath and approach Atlas. His eyes stay on me the whole time,

but I know that he must have seen Agatha going for that bust as well.

“I’m sorry,” I whimper, raising the poker.

He tips his head back, giving me clear access to the side of his neck. “It’ll be okay. Just do it. It’s you , and I’ll proudly take any amount of pain for you. I’ll wear your brand with honor. I love you.”

Phil watches on, lips parted wetly, his breathing now something close to a frothing dog. This guy has something majorly wrong with him. He’s going to watch me cook someone’s skin off their body and the only thing I see on his face is anticipation and glee.

“Please forgive me,” I beg before pressing the hot poker to the side of Atlas’ neck.

Oh god, oh fucking god, I’m going to die. I’m going to be sick.

He yells, loudly . So loud that Phil doesn’t hear Agatha move behind him. He doesn’t sense her raise the heavy bust above her head, her arms trembling with the effort. As her arms start the downward motion, I rip the poker from Atlas’ neck. The smell of his burnt skin is thick in the air, churning my stomach dangerously. That doesn’t matter. I hold it together so that when the bust makes contact with the back of Phil’s skull, I swing the poker straight into his hand, knocking the gun away. It clatters to the floor, but doesn’t go off.

I’m prepared to hit him again to incapacitate him, but he crumples, falling to the side, eyes shut.

I lunge for the gun, put the safety back on, and train it on Phil while Agatha hurriedly checks to make sure he’s still breathing.

She just had to knock her own son unconscious. She loves him. She always will. She's his mother. She sags into herself as soon as she has evidence that he's alive.

"Lordy," Agatha sighs, more herself now that she has been since the second she stepped out of the house. "Wasn't that something? Thank the stars that every single time someone gets knocked out in a book or a movie it's with a statue, a lamp, or a frying pan."

I'm still holding the damn poker.

I toss it aside and run to Atlas. The need to touch him is overwhelming, but my eyes zero straight in on the raised red welt blistered on his neck.

I did that.

I hurt him.

I know I didn't have a choice, but I'm never going to stop thinking about this. The guilt will thread through me and become one with my sinew and bones.

He sees. He knows. "Don't worry about me. Go and find a knife to cut these ropes. We don't know when that asshat is going to wake up."

I was so worried about him that I didn't even think about the danger we're all still in.

"In the kitchen," Agatha whispers as I rush past. She's still kneeling right beside Phil. My heart truly goes out to her. I can't imagine how she's feeling right now. She has one kid, and this is what he turns into?

I find the knife block on the kitchen counter, pull out the largest knife, and test the edge with my finger. Satisfied that it's sharp enough, I carefully carry it back. The

ropes are so tight around Atlas' arms that I don't even try to cut there. I'd probably just hurt him, and I've already done enough of that. I attack the knots, sawing through them. When they give, the whole set of ropes falls away.

"Here." Agatha tosses me a key. "I found that in his pocket."

I slip it into the cuffs and pop them open. They've done a number on Atlas' wrists already, chaffing the skin away, but he doesn't even notice. He picks Phil off the floor like the guy weighs nothing, and positions him in the chair he was just sitting in. He cuffs his wrists and takes up the rope, wrapping it all around Phil's chest, neck, and shoulders. If Phil so much as struggles, he'll probably strangle himself, but I don't blame Atlas. The extra caution is a must.

"This is inadequate, but I found a few things. Some antibacterial ointment and a bandage." Agatha's whisper thin, ultra soft fingers brush over my hand as she passes me the supplies, but Atlas shakes his head.

"Do you have a phone? I can get care later. I'll even go to Archer's clinic if I have to." Archer's a plastic surgeon by trade. He runs a secret clinic in the basement of his real business that's reserved strictly for club members.

"It's on the kitchen counter."

I guide Agatha to the couch and sit down with her, trying not to think about how we were just held here by force. I don't want to go back there in my mind. Not now, not ever. I might clutch Agatha tightly in my arms, smoothing her hair away from her face, but my eye stay fixed on Phil the whole time. He's still unconscious, his head lolling to the side.

Atlas uses Agatha's phone. It might be old, but it works perfectly.

When he walks back into the room, he stops right in front of Agatha. He kneels down, taking her hands and examining her face. “Are you hurt anywhere else?”

She sniffs. “Only my pride in every sense of the word. He came to me begging me to give him the money to pay off the others that he owes. Apparently, he was part of a massive crime ring. This was some big scam that cashed out early. He hid the money until he could figure out a way to get out of the country. Fake IDs take time. He thought he had it, but he didn’t. His wife was a major leader in whatever scam he was running. He didn’t even say, but given that he’s a lawyer, I’m sure he knew the ins and outs. When she went back for all the money, she double-crossed him and everyone else. The guys he’s in deep with are not the patient, forgiving kind of people.”

Atlas and I listen while she continues.

“He wanted me to save him from this mess of his own making and when I refused, he called me a monster and started saying that I’d never loved him. He said I’d only ever loved this place and if I wouldn’t sign it over or give him the money, then he was as good as dead and I cared nothing. I was going to offer him enough money to leave and start over, but that’s when he pulled out his gun. He wanted to know everything, so I told him about the club. I figured a bunch of bikers could take care of themselves and that there wasn’t any harm in it. He was unhinged and this wasn’t what I wanted for my son. I thought he might actually kill me, so I had to give him something. Not for me, but for him. After he found out about the club, he wanted me to make that call to lure someone here that he could hold for ransom. I made it, figuring that they’d sense something was off and would send a lot of someone’s and scare Phil off or tackle that gun away from him. I never thought that you two would show up alone.”

“It’s okay.” Atlas brings her hands to his lips and kisses her knuckles. “It’s going to be okay now, Agatha, but I need you to know that Phil is going to go to jail. Not for what he did here to us, but because he stole money from people. There are victims out

there.” He pauses because Agatha has started sniffing. Huge tears roll down her cheeks, highlighting the livid bruise forming on the right side of her face. I stroke her hair again, searching Atlas’ face, begging him to make this better. “We know where the money is. Wizard put tracking devices in the bills. The club wants to hire this guy who is good at finding people. I mean, he’s good at tech stuff too, which is really what we need him for, but we can make sure that Phil’s wife is also caught and that the money is returned to the rightful owners.”

I follow Agatha’s eyes to Phil. Atlas tipped his head back when he tied him, so he wouldn’t fall forward on that rope and choke himself. There’s no mistaking the tenderness on her face.

“I know that he and his wife are going to have to face what they’ve done. I just can’t believe it. I can’t believe that he’d hold a gun on you, or that he’d hit me, or say those things, or make you hurt Atlas.”

My own tears are hot on my cheeks. I don’t even know how long I’ve been crying.

“It’s okay, Agatha. It all worked out. I’ve had worse sports injuries before. I meant what I said.” How Atlas can kneel down in front of me and cup my face with such reverence, I’ll never know. “I’ll wear any brand or mark Willa leaves on me with pride.”

My throat works violently but I can’t say anything. There’s too much there, all of it jumbled up and stuck in place. I thought I’d reached my capacity for feeling so much all at once, but I was wrong.

“Just let it go, Willa. You had no choice.” Atlas brushes his thumb over my lips, then strokes my chin and makes his way down to my pulse point. It’s throbbing so irregularly that I could black out. “We’re going to be okay. It’s almost all over. I love you.” This time, his arms encompass us both, pressing Agatha and I close together.

He's like an avenging angel blanketing us with his wings, watching over us like that angel on the back of his leather jacket.

"I love you too, Agatha," he whispers, holding us just a little bit tighter."

"Me too." I turn my face and tell her hair, where her ear should be.

Lynette was my only family for most of my life. She found Bullet here and in loving him, she found a family in the club. I found friends, my best friend even, but I was so hesitant to claim anything more because I was afraid it would all crash and burn, wreck and ruin.

Nothing is ruined.

I lean harder into Agatha and let Atlas drape his broad body over us, soaking up his shelter and tender, furious, galvanizing love.

It's not just Lynette who found a family. It's me too. Agatha. The club. Atlas' parents and his siblings. Hart.

Lynette and I spent years searching for home. We had no idea we were so lost until it came crashing right into us.

And now... I'm truly there. I'm truly home .

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:01 pm

Atlas

Tyrant and Raiden were first to arrive. That low, throaty, unmistakable rumble of bikes pulling up was never so welcome.

They took charge, waking up Fucker Phil and going through a round of questions that involved him telling them everything or Raiden doing things with a hot poker to Phil that he wasn't going to like. Of course the fucker is one of those who dishes it out, but can't take it. He pissed himself just looking at Raiden.

And then Crow arrived, but it wasn't Crow at all. It was his other personality, Raven, and he was in full on, gleeful torture mode. Crow must have unleashed him on the drive, because the first thing Raven did after getting off his bike was to crack his neck and knuckles and ask where the fuck the party was at.

Most of it was just talk.

Raiden and Tyrant get no delight out of that part of club business. They try to make sure it happens as little as possible. Tyrant is a good Prez and he has the club's safety and wellbeing at the forefront of his mind at all times. To him, looking after the men who made him their leader and put all their trust in him doesn't mean picking stupid fights or going to war. Now that we have Lynette as our club's lawyer, there's been a big shift to doing things more above board than illegal. The transition is a slow one, but we could all see the benefit in getting out of some of the shit we were doing and transitioning to more passive income, or what we hope will be passive one day.

Wizard, Odin, Grave, Decay, and Gunner rode in maybe ten minutes after Tyrant and

Raiden arrived, but Raven had already intimidated Phil into telling them everything.

I had to take Agatha and Willa into the kitchen and make sure they both knew that no one was going to follow through on the threats getting hurled around the room.

Phil might be a class A fucker, but he's still Agatha's son and she's been through enough already.

Before the other guys even set foot in the house, Phil was already agreeing to turn himself into the police and never mention a thing about the club's involvement. He'd be doing jail time for sure, and they promised him that the thing about jail is that's where criminals thrive. We actually don't have that many guys on the inside—thank fuck for that—but of course we know someone who knows someone, who could make sure someone else winds up dead if there's a fucker who needs to be put to ground.

When the other guys got here, we directed them straight to the already in session faux torture fest, which was pretty much wrapping up, but Wizard stayed. I could tell he had something to say, but he'd been quiet for an eternity.

Willa and Agatha are at the table, holding onto each other's hands, steaming mugs of sweet tea in front of them that I just made. As soon as Bullet and Lynette get here, I'm going to have them load Willa and Agatha up and take them straight to Archer's.

Wizard angles himself towards the kitchen window that overlooks the farmyard and the line of chrome and leather bikes parked in a row.

"I'm sorry I sent you here." His face is a wreck. He's more than sorry. This is eating him up. "I should have known something was up. I should have been able to tell that the power was cut. I was just so fucking sure that if something was wrong, I would have seen it on the feed, but the bastard snuck up on me. I didn't see anything before

he cut power to the pole.”

“He knew exactly where to go because he was raised here. No one would have thought that Agatha’s own son would be involved.” I keep my voice low enough that I hope Agatha can’t hear me.

Willa can. Her eyes fix on me, and she offers the smallest, shaky smile. I give her one right back, my promise that this is all going to be okay.

We’re going to be okay.

We’re alive and, for the most part, uninjured.

“Christ!” Wizard curses. I don’t realize it’s directed at me until he bends to inspect my neck. “That’s a nasty burn.”

Willa pales, and I quickly pass it off. I’m not going to allow her to feel guilty for something that wasn’t her fault. She did what she had to do in order to keep Phil from killing someone. If she hadn’t done it, he would have shot me or Agatha. I told her it was okay and it is.

“It’s not your fault. You were doing the best job you could. You do, every single day, day in and day out. We need help. You’re doing the work of ten or twenty people and it’s not fair or sustainable. This isn’t on you, brother. Not at all. It’s on no one but Phil.”

“I should have been more careful.” He’s not going to let this go easily either. He’s stubborn like Willa that way. “I know where the money is. That guy Tyrant mentioned... Viking—he can find anyone. He’ll find her and she’ll turn herself in just like Phil is going to do. We’ll make sure that the money gets back to the victims.”

“I figured. Tyrant said that Viking isn’t the patching in sort, or maybe the club isn’t the sort that wants him to be a member, but I hope that he sticks around and can help you. If not, we need to press for someone else, even if that means finding the right prospect and training them. You’re a brilliant man, Wizard, but even brilliant men have their limits, and your limits are that you can’t be in three hundred places at once.”

Wizard swipes a hand over his face. I’ve embarrassed him. He’s touched and he’s trying to hide it. I realize it’s not just me who tries to hide what’s going on inside or put on a different face to the world. My club brothers who all look like they have their lives together are probably dealing with stuff I know shit about.

“I’m still sorry that I walked you straight into a trap.”

“Nah.” I clap Wizard on the back. “We’re good, and because this happened, there are people out there who are going to get their lives back. From what Phil said, this was straight scammer money. The people who lost it were the ones that couldn’t afford to. This will make a huge difference for them. A lot of them are probably older folks, like his own mother.”

I still can’t believe Phil hit his own mother. He truly didn’t care. How does a person even get to that point?

Willa said I was secure enough in my manhood to admit that I wouldn’t mind smelling like strawberries. I’m more than secure enough to admit that I want to get home and hug my parents. Hard. My mom and dad know how much I love them and appreciate them, but there’s one thing I’ve been keeping from them and I want to sit down and tell them. I have the chance to do that. It’s not a burden, it’s a privilege. I’m alive. I’m here. Phil could have shot me. He could have killed me right in front of the woman I love.

It's amazing what staring down death does to your brain. That deep sense of shame is no longer rooted at the heart of me. I'm just me and I want my family to know all the bits I've been hiding from them. I know that they'll love me for who I am, as I am. They always have.

Lynette's car creeps down the gravel road silently. It's only because I'm standing by the window that I see it turn off and come down the driveway.

Raiden told us both when he first got here that Lynette was frantic to see her sister, but they needed to make sure the house was secure and the area safe before they let her come. They'd do the same for any of their old ladies, and there was no way Bullet was going to let her come until he was sure there was absolutely no threat. They haven't told anyone about the baby that I know of, but he's got to be just about feral with his prospective instincts right now.

They both knew we were here, and though it was hard to wait those extra few minutes to get the call that they could leave, they both respected Tyrant's and Raiden's authority in the club. Good plans and calm heads keep everyone safe.

Willa's been waiting anxiously for her sister, but she's done a good job of swallowing it and sitting calmly to try and give Agatha her support as she grapples with the fact that her only son assaulted her, would gladly have killed someone, and is going to be going to prison. Her whole life has changed. Her future. Her legacy. No matter what Phil's done, she loves him, and this is breaking her heart.

I walk to the table and set my hands on Agatha's shoulders. "Why don't we all go outside for a breath? Willa's sister just got here, and she'd really like to see her, but she's not going to leave without you."

Willa doesn't rocket out of her chair and go racing through the door to see her sister. She remains perfectly composed, though she's practically vibrating, and her eyes are

shiny. She offers her hand for Agatha and together, we help her out of her chair.

We're not leaving Agatha behind or alone for a second. We're her family now. She'll probably never leave this farm, but we'll find a way to make sure that we're out here as often as we can be, checking in on her.

Wizard clears his throat like the obvious affection between the three of us makes him uncomfortable.

He's a bit of a loner, but I always thought it was because he's so busy with tech and it's a world unto itself. He has to be apart when he's doing his work because he needs his phones, cameras, and computers. Ever since I prospected and patched in with the club, he's been busy enough that he rarely goes out to Patterson's with the guys or attends social events for more than a few minutes.

Maybe that's intentional.

"I'm going to go see if I can get those cameras back up, and if not, I brought a bunch of new ones to install. I wasn't sure how badly the old ones were damaged or if it was just the central power that was cut. Either way, we'll have the power company come right out to connect you back up if that's the issue. Uh, ma'am."

At least that gives Agatha a little bit of color back in her face and some punch back in her punchiness. "The ma'aming isn't necessary, but thank you for your hard work. All of you. It's appreciated."

Wizard nods and trails off towards the living room, probably to confer with Tyrant and Raiden about the security situation.

I wrap my arm around Willa's shoulders, and she clutches Agatha's hand tight. We just about run right into Bullet and Lynette as we open the front door.

He steps back, but Lynette throws herself at Willa, her hands hovering around her face, and dropping to her shoulders, then clenching her hands tightly in one of hers while she uses her free arm to wrangle Agatha in.

“We’re okay,” Willa whispers over and over again, but I can tell she’s trying to convince herself and Agatha as well. She keeps saying it until her voice finds some strength and she can look Lynette in the eye and mean it. “We’re okay, Lynette. Really.”

A little cry tears out of Lynette and she throws herself against her sister, wrapping her up so tight that Willa is pretty much crushed into her with the height difference.

After the hug goes on, Lynette can’t help but look Willa over like a mother does to her toddler who just fell down on the sidewalk. She’s not really checking for scrapes and bruises, but that’s what it appears. I know that Lynette is looking deeper, trying to gauge just what okay really means.

Willa pulls back and lets Lynette hug Agatha. We share a private look, and I dip my head in acknowledgement. Willa threads her hand through mine and gravitates into my side, leaving one hand protectively on Agatha’s arm.

Bullet brackets Lynette’s shoulders protectively. She might have been an ice queen in the past, but now she wears her emotion freely and it’s plain to us how rattled she is. She looks up at Bullet, her face softening with love at his silent support. The crazy thing is watching how his scarred face shifts and suffuses with strong emotion.

Yeah. That’s what love does to people.

There’s never been a point where that’s freaked me out. I was never running from it, just from myself and my own truths and worthiness.

“We have something we want to tell you.” Willa’s voice never wavers despite her obvious emotion. There’s so much of it in her expression that it would be impossible to separate out just one thing. Willa doesn’t do one feeling at a time. She does it all, all at once, to her fullest capability.

It’s extraordinary.

She’s extraordinary.

“We’re... Atlas and I... we’ve made the decision that we’d like to date. That is... we... umm... didn’t decide it lightly or right now. It’s been a work in process...” After struggling to find the right words, she gives up on diplomacy. “Ahh, shit, that’s not me. All of that is true, but what I’m really trying to say is that I love him. I love him so freaking much and I hope that’s okay. Even if it’s not, it’s not going to change my mind about him, but I’d try and give you a respectful amount of time to come to terms with it.”

I wait for the crashing and the crushing, the bomb to drop and take Bullet and Lynette’s faces with it. For the hardening and the steeling, the shuttering off and closing down. The stern looks from Bullet and the doubtful reproach from Lynette.

“I love her,” I add, unable to keep a sappy grin from spreading over my face. “As my best friend and as my partner and the joy of my soul.” That’s still not enough. “I don’t just love her. I’m in love with her.”

Lynette shifts so she and Bullet can exchange another look. Whatever they’re silently communicating, it happens fast.

Lynette folds her hands in front of her while Bullet runs his down her arms. “We know,” she says. She’s not furious. She’s not disappointed. She’s not reproachful or cautious. She looks... happy.

Willa's mouth actually goes slack as she studies her sister and then flicks her eyes to Bullet's face like she didn't hear her correctly.

"You know? No. You always thought we were fooling around, but love?"

Lynette reaches for Willa's hand and brings it up to her heart. "You're the sister of my heart, Wills. I know you used to think that I was trying to run your life, and you were right about me being too pushy, even though I only wanted what was best for you. I still do, and I meant what I said about giving you the freedom to make your own decisions. I also know you. I know you as well as know yourself. I love you so much and that's never going to change. I believed you when you said that you and Atlas were just friends, but I could clearly see how much you adored him and how that turned into something deeper. You look at him the way I look at Bullet."

"So you're not going to attempt to crush Atlas or pound him into oblivion for setting his hands on me?" Willa directs that at Bullet.

He does give me a hard, cold stare down, but then his eyes crinkle at the corners and I know that he approves. "He's my club brother. There are rules about beating the shit out of each other, but even if there wasn't, it's not gonna happen. I know that he'll treat you right and anyone can see he's crazy about you."

"We're happy for both of you," Lynette says, stressing the both. "We're overjoyed to have you as our family not just through the club, but because you're together."

"You're not going to threaten that he should treat me right or you'll break every bone in his body?" This time, it's unclear who Willa's asking.

Bullet and Lynette both shake their heads.

"You're an adult, I can't tell you who you can and can't love, when Bullet and I have

found so much happiness together,” Lynette says, going googly eyed for Bullet. “We know that with anything, there’s always danger and some risk. It’s more than worth it. Just like when you came to me and said you didn’t want to go to college, you wanted to run your own store, and you were surprised that I told you to go for it, this is me telling you to do what feels right. Both of you.”

I know my parents and siblings will be overjoyed when I tell them that we’re dating, but I was genuinely worried about what Bullet and Lynette would say. It’s not that I didn’t trust them, but love can cause people to react in funny ways. I would have taken a beating and then some, more than gladly, if it meant that I could be with Willa in the end.

“We’re excited to grow together.” Lynette clenches Bullet’s hand hard. “And we’re beyond thrilled to see how love transforms you both.”

“Me too!” Willa throws herself at Lynette, hugging her again, and then, she gives Bullet a quick hug. “Thank you for coming. I know it’s rude to just dash out of here and you’re worried, but I need to get Atlas and Agatha over to the clinic. I want Archer to check them both out.”

Bullet just now notices the burn on my neck. His mouth settles into a hard line, and he nods, giving Willa the go ahead to drive, even though I thought he’d make a big fuss over it.

There’s been plenty of surprises today.

I’m sure there will be plenty more before this is all over.

Willa wants to take care of me. It’s about time that I stop protesting and just let her. I can’t expect to take care of her and not let her do anything for me in return. If going to Archer will put her mind at ease, then I’ll gladly do it.

Besides, if I don't go, I know there's no moving Agatha.

She's looking at me now, giving me a good dose of hairy side eye, waiting to see if she should kick up a fuss about this Archer person she's never met.

"I think that's for the best. Besides..." I wink at Agatha, ready to sweeten the deal. "If you're okay with letting him make sure you're all good, I'm sure I can wrangle someone up to take you for a ride we promised you a while back. You might not be in the mood right now, but sometimes a ride is just the thing to clear your head and make everything look better. Once my parents know that we're back in town, they'll want to have us over for dinner, so a homecooked meal that you don't have to make yourself is also on the table."

"Ooh, Willa, you've got yourself a smooth-talker." Agatha cackles, which makes Bullet roar with laughter because it's such a wild sound. "He's a man who knows his way to the heart of a woman. How could I turn down home cooking and good company?"

"You can't." Willa gives me such a look of pure, unfiltered adoration that I swear my heart leaps out of my chest. "You can't resist falling in love with him. I certainly couldn't."

"Well then." Agatha slaps a toothy grin into place and starts steering Willa over to the truck. "We had best get toggging then. In no time at all, I'm going to be powerful hungry, and we've still got a long drive ahead of us. We have a lot to get done before dark so I can get my ride in."

"Don't worry," I tell her as I help her up onto the running board and into truck's back seat. "Riding at night is the most fun there is."

Willa pokes me in the ribs. "I can't wait to give that a try myself."

I know I should have more control, but I just can't help myself. I close Agatha's door, sweep Willa up and kiss her long and hard, right there where everyone can see. They can watch all they like. I have nothing to hide. Willa never did. She's always given me all of herself. It's obvious in the way she kisses me back with enough passion to fuel another sun for the foreseeable future, that she doesn't mind people watching us declare our love.

She doesn't mind it at all.

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Willa

One Year Later

“This is incredible!” I throw my arms out to the side, balancing my chest against Atlas’ back. The bike isn’t huge, and he takes up most of the room, pressing me between the back seat rest and his huge body. I like the small space just fine. The closer I can get to Atlas, the better.

He wasn’t lying about the rides at night thing.

We’ve taken the bike he spent the past few months fixing up on a few rides during the day, but this is our maiden voyage in the dark.

It’s a totally different experience than it is riding under the sun and open skies. The black night seems to come at us from all angles. I can feel the road vibrating beneath us, but it rushes along the sides and over us, creating the sensation of being flipped around. We could almost be riding in the sky.

Until headlights sweep against the purple night, piercing through it from the opposite side of the road.

I’m not sure if Atlas heard me or not over the bike’s roaring engine. I tuck my hands back into place on his rock hard abs, squeezing him tight, hoping that some of my exhilaration will flow into him.

These rides were almost a year in coming, but the best part of restoring this old bike

isn't that it's something rare or worth a lot of money, but that we did it together. It wasn't a flip project, it was a labor of love. I learned so much about myself piecing this old thing back together, as well as about mechanics, and a whole lot about Atlas and some of the other guys at the garage as well.

It's different being an official old lady. The club always treated me well, but now they see me as family. I was friends with the other old ladies long before Atlas claimed me as his, but now I'm officially part of that club in a deeper, more meaningful way.

Atlas turns the bike around after ten minutes or so. We're heading to Patterson's, but I wanted a ride before we even got there.

He pulls into the parking lot, lining up the bike with all the others. Most of the club is here, by the looks of it. Friday nights are busy here before the guys take it back to the clubhouse.

It's still relatively early. Only just past ten. That's basically a biker's morning. Kidding. Kind of.

We won't stay long because I have to be up early to open the store tomorrow, but the sense of camaraderie, even if it's rough and boisterous, is a great way to end the week.

Atlas kills the bike, but the vibrations still rattle through me, even as he leans forward so that I can get off. He balances the bike easily and makes getting off into a new artform.

We've officially been together for almost a year now, but the sight of him in his worn out jeans, biker boots, and leather club vest will always make my mouth water.

He shucks his helmet and helps me with mine, finger combing out his glorious blonde

hair. The wind has whipped his natural waves up so that they flow over his shoulders. He grins at me when he catches me checking him out and my panties practically go up in a cloud of smoke.

We just left Bullet and Lynette's after having dinner with them and seeing Dinah. She's almost three months old now, and everything people say about how quickly time flies is absolutely true. She's the perfect baby. Beautiful like her mama, tall for her age already, with Bullet's eyes. She gave Lynette no small amount of trouble in making her way into the world in the form of over a full day of labor and then an emergency c-section, but she's made up for it by being the quietest, most adorable, placid, wonderful baby.

"We don't have to go in there," Atlas says, snagging me around the waist and bumping me up against his chest. My hands fly out to grasp his shoulders and it's all I can do not to pull his face down and kiss him hungrily, but that would probably result in me grinding on his leg, and just... people . At the windows. Not far away. "We could keep on riding for however long you want. All night, if that's your preference. We could ride and ride and double back and still be here for your shop opening."

"Mmm." I purse my lips, pretending to think about it. "Is that what you want to do?"

We took the bike out for a long ride on Sunday, to spend the day with Agatha. We spent the whole day with her. She's doing well. We've helped her clean up the barn, the guys from the club all pitched in and did some repairs around the place, and Bullet even set up a mini firing range in the back field for her. Not to use grenades. He was quite against those and even convinced her to turn them into him so he could dispose of them properly, much to her disappointment and everyone else's relief. She was mollified by the prospect of going to his newly constructed range in town and shoot any weapon to her heart's content.

Every time she comes to Hart with us, we make sure we go there first. Bullet always gets a kick out of her enthusiasm for firearms.

“Won’t the guys be disappointed if we just pull up, and grope each other like horny teenagers right in their view, and peel away?”

Atlas nuzzles my neck, kissing me softly all along the slope, heading up and over my chin to my mouth. Sure, there might be people watching, but neither of us really care. He kisses me with just as much passion and scorching heat as if we were in private.

“Nah. They get it,” he grunts, breaking the kiss reluctantly.

Every bit of him is reluctant. I’ve always wondered just how uncomfortable it is to ride a bike with a huge hard-on in the way. I can feel his length pressing through his jeans, throbbing against my hip. I angle into him, blocking the view and keeping that private, though my proximity probably doesn’t do much to help the problem.

“Do you want to keep riding?”

“With you?” His eyes twinkle just as bright as the stars overhead. “Always.”

I finally get what Lynette meant when she said that love changes you chemically. It literally alters you at a molecular level. She told me that when I was still a kid and she was talking about me, but I can see how different types of love change different parts of you.

“Because I’m your ride or die?” It’s the corniest biker saying ever, but I can’t help a goofy smile because I love it. I just plain fucking love using it and always will.

“You’re my ride or die.”

“I’m a better ride than that bike, or any bike?”

He snorts and chucks me under the chin, but then he tilts my face up and blisters my lips with the most sensual, toe curling kiss that heats every part of me.

“We’re going to have to get on that bike now. There’s no way you can walk into Patterson’s with a very obvious tent in your pants. Chances of it going away anytime soon are probably zero.”

“Probably,” he agrees. “Guess it’s the bike then.”

“Or a ride and then a ride .”

He swats my ass as he passes me my helmet. He holds his and knocks them together before I lift mine to fit it over my hair. “Here’s a cheers to the open road. To good friends, family, a club full of brothers, and to you, Willa. My ride or die, the love of my life, my best friend in the world, my open road, my freedom, my soul.”

“That’s the best thing I’ve heard. How am I supposed to top that?”

He gives me the widest grin as he guns the bike to life and helps me mount up behind him. “Just hold on tight, always, and never let go.”

I clench my arms around him and kiss his neck, right over the scar tissue where I branded him with the poker. Right underneath, he had Crow ink a lovely tattoo of a heart with wings. It sounds cheesy, but Crow is a master artist and it’s lovely. It doesn’t say anything, but it doesn’t need to. Atlas told me he’d wear that brand with pride, and he has. He does.

Along with the tattoo, which I know he got just for me. That’s my heart right there inked into his skin forever. Property of Willa, until the end of time.

THE END

Hope you enjoyed the book!

The next book in the Satan’s Angels MC

series is Dravin