



# Bear Strength

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** I Want Nothing To Do With These Bikers, But Wants Are One Thing, And Reality Is Something Else.

If you're running from something, Swallow Springs seems to be the perfect place.

It looks like everyone there has a secret, and everyone just minds their own business.

This little town is ruled by an iron fist of a biker gang, who are at the same time, bear shifters.

No one dares defy them, even though they themselves aren't strangers to trouble.

My son and I settle in there easily, but one bad decision on his part, turns our whole life upside down again.

The leader and two other bikers find their way into our lives slowly but surely, becoming a more important part of it with each passing day.

Will my secret tear us apart in the end?

**Total Pages (Source):** 29

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:18 pm*

“I swear, this is the last time you do this to me,” I growl at Dominick, my fingers clutching the steering wheel of the old clunker which barely got us to his school.

He doesn’t even look at me. He doesn’t need to. We both know he’s guilty, but we also know that I don’t have the time to deal with this now. I’m already late as it is. Really fucking late.

He turns to go, his hand on the door already, his backpack hanging loosely on his left shoulder, and I always think how all of his books are just going to come spilling out of it.

“Hey!” I shout a little less angrily this time. “Didn’t you forget something?”

He sighs, facing me again, with that annoyed teenage look of angst. Crap. And, he’s only 11. I thought I had at least a year, hopefully two, before that starts.

“Aren’t you upset?” he snorts.

“Take it as part of your punishment, being nice to your mom in front of your new friends,” I grin, turning my cheek to him.

He sneaks a glance around, to make sure no one is watching, then plants a quick peck on my cheek.

“Sloppy, but it’ll do. Now, get out. I need to get to work,” I add. “If I still have a job, that is.”

He doesn't show any concern over this. I mean, why would he? Kids generally tend to think money grows on trees. I wait a few seconds for him to cross the street. Then, I roll down the window, and peek out of it.

"Hey, Dom!" I shout as loud as I can. "Love you!"

I can't see it from here, but I know he's rolling his eyes at me. That kid is really going to be the death of me, but I can't think about that right now. I press on the gas pedal, and rush across town.

In about half an hour, maybe a little more, I'm pushing the door open to a small diner. It's one of those old school places, which seems like some lost remnant from the 1950s. Surprisingly, there are still people out there who actually enjoy this ambiance, with the red tiles, retro posters on the wall and Jerry Lewis rocking from the old, light up jukebox.

I myself don't have a particular preference for it. It's a nice enough place. More importantly, it's a place that was hiring when I needed a job a few months ago, when Dominick and I first moved here. The owner, Bill Warrington, just took one look at me, and he seemed to read right through me.

"You runnin' from somethin'?" he asked me, as if that's the most common interview question anyone could get asked.

"What makes you say that?" I replied, all nonchalant.

"No one moves to Swallow Springs unless they got somethin' to hide."

"Well, not me," I lied just like that. Didn't even blush. Blushing would reveal the truth, and the truth was too dangerous to share. "My husband passed away, and I just couldn't stay in our old apartment, with all those memories of him around. Plus, it'd

be nice for my son to grow up in a small place. Different values, you know?" I rounded up my little monologue, as Old Bill, as others here referred to him, eyed me from behind his thick rimmed glasses.

That was how I got the job, the same job I'm now not so sure I have any longer, because I'm over an hour late and I didn't have any way of calling in.

"Is Bill in?" I ask Susie, the girl who's usually working the second shift, and she just nods.

I'm surprised to see her in. She should be arriving after 2. I leave that question unanswered for now, and rush over to Bill's office, or the slightly larger storage place which he likes to refer to as his office.

When I open the door, he is sitting at his desk, his balding head bowed down. A moment later, and he's aware of my presence there.

"Bill, I'm so..." I start.

"Sorry?" he asks, and I can just nod to that. "I'm sure you are. But, you should be tellin' that to Susie as well, because I had to call her to come in hours before her own shift starts, to cover for you."

"I know, and I'm really -"

"Sorry, yes. This is the second time this happened. Why didn't you just call to let me know?" he doesn't sound angry, just trying to understand.

Susie told me his own daughter died in a car accident when she was 21, and he never really got over that. His wife died shortly after, and now it's just him, running this place on his own. So, he's always been understanding, even compassionate, as if he's

looking for his daughter in every young woman that crosses his path, trying to help her somehow.

But, how can I tell him that my son hid my car keys because he doesn't want to go to school and that it took me half an hour to get him to fess up about it? It sounds ridiculous. Also, I don't have a cell phone. It's safer that way. So, there was no means of me calling ahead of time to let him know I'd be late.

"I know I screwed up," I press my lips tightly together. "Please, don't fire me. Please. I need this job."

I start fidgeting on my feet, as if the floor is lava, like that game Dom and I used to play when he was little. It seems like a whole lifetime ago.

Bill gives me a hard look, still trying to figure out what to do with me. I know that if I were him, I'd fire me. Of course I would. But, I'm hoping for one more chance. Just one. Dom has to start taking responsibility for his actions, too. That kid...

"This is the last time," Bill shakes his index finger at me, but there is no threat behind it. At least, I don't feel it. "Also, sort it out with Susie. Do her shift or something. I don't want you girls to give each other the evil eye over this for the rest of my days."

"Of course," I nod quickly, realizing that he just said that he wants me to stay here indefinitely. "I'll cover whatever shift she needs me to. You can be sure of that."

"I really hope we won't have this conversation again, Danica."

His words linger in the air around us. I wait a moment for them to be fully absorbed.

"I promise, Bill."

He just makes that shoo, shoo sound to get me out of his office, and I'm thankful for the clean slate. When I emerge back at the bar, I see Susie's smiling face, greeting me. I doubt that girl even knows the meaning behind the word angry, being so mellow, but I'd rather not try and find out.

"Listen, Suse..." I start, and she just stops me right there, shaking her head.

"It's fine," she says it so simply, so sweetly, and I know there is no arguing with that. Why would I?

"Whenever you need a shift covered, or even if you need me to work the whole day, I'm here, OK?" I just add, wanting her to be sure that I really appreciate this and I don't plan on taking advantage of her kindness.

"I have kids, too, Danny," she nods gently. "I know how that can be. And, I have no idea how one can do it alone."

We don't say anything after that. Instead, we just exchange a deeply meaningful glance, which fortified our growing friendship.

In a new place, making new friends is hard. Anyone will tell you that. But, making friends when you're a single mother trying to make ends meet... well, that's downright mission impossible. And yet, I managed to make a friend right off the bat. A part of me wanted to scream at him that I am worthy of being loved, I am worthy of being someone's friend, someone's confidant, even someone's partner and lover, but those wishes are only momentary. Reason takes over quickly enough, and I know what I need to do, and what I must never do.

I look around and I see that the place is still empty. It'll be packed by lunchtime, but there are still 2 hours until then.

“You can go home, if you’d like,” I hear Susie say. “Come back around 2? We can just say we switched shifts today.”

“Nah, that’s not fair,” I shake my head. “I’ll stay to help you out, and I won’t ask Bill for overtime, of course. You take off whenever you want, Suse. I really owe you for this one.”

But, before she could say anything to that, we both hear the sound of the bell, which signals the entrance of a customer. We turn to the door, and the first thing I see is the leather jacket.

Whores and bikers. Birds of a feather.

I try to drown that voice in my head, and focus on the man, who is now approaching me. He gets comfortable on one of the bar stools. It’s hot in here. The air conditioning has been giving us some trouble lately, but he doesn’t take off his jacket. It is old and worn out,

It takes me a second to walk over to him, and slide the laminated menu over to him. He doesn’t even look at it. Instead, his eyes travel up and down my body, giving me a strange feeling, focusing on my name tag.

“Danica?” he asks.

“Yes,” I nod.

I glance over at Susie, but she’s already disappeared back in the kitchen. I don’t really need her help, but a gut feeling tells me I want her here, with me.

“Is that Jewish?” he asks, and I can see the yellow stains on his teeth, on his fingers. A smoker. A heavy smoker.

“It’s Eastern European,” I explain, with no particular gusto to discuss my name origins. I grab a kitchen towel and pretend to wipe a glass.

“So, you’re an immigrant?”

He continues with the questions, and I feel less and less comfortable. But, I can’t throw him out. I can’t ask him to leave. He hasn’t really done anything. So, I just continue to shrink underneath his stare, hoping that either Susie or Bill will eventually show up. Or, that he’ll finally order his food, eat it and be gone. But, life is rarely that simple.

“Weren’t all Americans immigrants at some point?” I snort back at him, feeling irritated. “So, what can I getcha?” I ask, hinting that this conversation is, hopefully, over.

“Well, what are you recommending?” he inquires, but doesn’t even look at the menu in front of him.

“Anything on the menu,” I shrug. “The apple pie is fresh.”

I can feel my nerves doing a number on me, and I know it’s not him. He hasn’t done anything apart from being an asshole. It’s a free world. People can be assholes, if they want to. But, it’s something else. Something that always starts from somewhere deep inside, and it surfaces no matter what I do. Fear is always the same. It just wears a different cape.

“What about your pie?” he asks.

For a second, I want to give him the benefit of the doubt. I really do. But, the way he’s looking at me, the way he’s talking... I know I’m not wrong.



“Excuse me?” I ask, in a non-threatening manner, as if I really just overheard.

“I asked what about your - “

“Doyle!”

A voice hits my ears like lightning, and my eyes immediately roll over to where it’s coming from. I didn’t even hear the doorbell ring this time. I was too focused on this asshole in front of me, asking about my pie. He turns around at the same moment I do, and I see his cockiness just ooze out of him.

“We need to go.”

The man at the door has a calm voice, but at the same time, demanding. There is no negotiation with men like that. I swallow heavily as I watch the biker get up from his stool, and with a lowered head, lumber out of the diner. The kitchen towel still in my hands, that glass now sparkling clean. My eyes are still on the man, who is holding the door open.

Only now do I realize that he is wearing the same jacket, with the same red patch on the left shoulder. It’s too far away for me to see what it is, so I don’t even try. His jeans are torn at the knees, brown at the bottom hems, where the jeans disappear into his black, ankle high boots. He’s wearing a black bandana on his head, and he looks like he hasn’t seen a razor in days. But, he makes it work. It’s just the right amount of civilized with a touch of a lumberjack.

He throws a casual glance my way, and it expels the air right out of my lungs.

“Tell Bill the poker game’s on for Tuesday,” he throws at me, then slams the door on his way out.

I have no idea why I'm shaking so much. I quickly put the glass down on the counter, just in case I drop it. A moment later, Susie manifests out of the kitchen. She scans the room quickly, then looks at me, all puzzled.

"Didn't I just hear the bell?"

I take a deep breath, my heart panting.

"You OK, hun?" she asks, walking over to me, and placing a matronly hand on my shoulder.

"Fine," I smile. "It was just a biker and he was just asking me all these questions. Then, another biker opened the door, called him, and said to tell Bill the poker game's on for Tuesday."

"Oh, the Hellraisers," Susie replies, with a mixture of emotions all intertwined in her voice, indistinguishable one from the other.

"Hellraisers?" I repeat.

"Don't tell me you haven't heard of them?" Susie seems not just surprised, but downright shocked. "They practically run this town. And, all the towns around us."

"You mean, like the mafia?" I ask, and we both chuckle.

"Something like that, yeah," she nods. "Just like the mafia. Only, they aren't just plain old criminals. They help the community, they renovated the old school. They build playgrounds, for God's sake. That's why it's so hard to hate them."

"So, they're like criminals with a heart of gold?" I wonder.

“All joking aside, it’s wisest to just stay out of their way, if you can.”

I glance at the door, and the image of that rugged biker came to me again. Goosebumps travel up my body, just once. Then, they settled down.

“I don’t plan on rocking anyone’s boat,” I assure her. “I’ve got enough waves of my own to take care of.”

We both smile at each other. The doorbell is heard again, and I realize that it’ll be lunchtime soon.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:18 pm*

I rake my fingers through my hair, nervously. I'm trembling for a cigarette, but I promised myself I won't start smoking again, no matter how hard it gets. And, it got pretty hard.

I turn my gaze to Dominick. He's sitting on the chair next to me, and he's not even half as nervous as I am. That pisses me off even more. We already had this conversation, more than once. I thought he understood that we both need to make some sacrifices, swallow some heavy words, and turn a few blind eyes. We need to make this work, no matter what. And, here I am, with him, waiting for his teacher to call me in, so she can explain what happened.

I look down the long hallway to my left. It's empty. It's after school hours. Luckily, I was working morning shift today, so when Dominick returned home with a note from his teacher for both of us to meet her at 5 pm, I was flooded by a whole avalanche of emotions. Worse yet, the only explanation to the reason behind him fighting with another boy was that he started it.

Dominick's head is bowed down. I can see his fingers crossed in his lap, his feet firmly pressed to the tiled floor. His body is slumped forward, like there is a heavy burden pressing hard on him, and he is finding it increasingly difficult to keep on.

I lift my hand and gently caress his curly head. He immediately looks up, puzzled.

"You need a haircut," I tell him, feeling the safety of this unbinding statement that has no relevance to our current situation.

He doesn't say anything, and yet, I know he appreciates it. A rush of tears threatens

to flood my eyes, and I quickly look up, as if that very motion would just make them return where they came from. Only two single tears slide down and I quickly wipe them with my sleeve, hoping that Dominick won't notice them.

A moment later, the door opens, and a blond bobbed head peers at us.

"Mrs. Brunswick?" she asks, and I get up. "Please, come in. You can wait outside, Dominick. We won't be long."

I turn back to him, tapping him gently on the shoulder. He doesn't look at me.

Slowly, I trudge into the well illuminated classroom. It's surprisingly neat and tidy, with all the chairs pushed together, the whiteboard squeaky clean. The walls are covered with maps, diagrams, children's drawings. I notice there is a small herb garden on the sill of the window, with brightly colored labels. Thyme. Basil. Coriander. I smile at it. I always wanted a little herb garden of my own. The feel of the fresh soil underneath my fingers, as I press the seeds deep into the ground. The anticipation of the growing plant. The gentle care you shower it with.

"Mrs. Brunswick?" I hear the teacher's voice again, and it brings me back to reality.

She gestures at the seat in front of her, and I lower my body a little hesitantly.

"Thank you," I manage a weak smile.

"I wish that the circumstances of our first meeting would be more pleasant," she starts.

I glance over at her desk. Her name is Miss Fleur. I smile again. How perfect for a teacher.

“I don’t know if Dominick has mentioned what happened?” Miss Fleur inquires politely, her long eyelashes batting.

She is wearing a few pounds extra, but she hides them well in a puffy blouse and long, crease cut pants. There is a small brooch on her right breast. A miniature ladybug.

“Not much,” I shake my head, forgetting all about the ladybug. “He just said that the other boy started it first.”

“Well, you can imagine that Terry said the same thing,” she smiled.

“Of course,” I nod, but I don’t feel like smiling.

Dominick has been reluctant to mention anything regarding this incident. And besides, if there are no bruises, was it really so bad? Was this meeting really necessary? But, of course, I remain respectfully silent.

“Now, I know that you and Dominick moved here only a short while ago, and you are a single mother. Those are two things that make a new school a particularly difficult affair. We’ve received Dominick’s transcripts from his previous school, and in all honesty, I was surprised to see him get C’s.”

“He’s been under a lot of stress,” I nod, wondering what someone with the surname of flower could know about hardship. Not that I was willing to disclose anything. But, if she starts telling me that my boy is going down the wrong path, she’s got another think coming. Dominick is a good boy. But, any good boy can stray occasionally. Especially a boy who’s been through...

“Oh, I’m not saying Dominick is guilty here,” Miss Fleur interrupts my train of thought once more. “I simply wanted to talk to you, one on one, and ask you if there

is anything I could help you with.”

I raise my eyebrow at her, because this isn’t what I was expecting. I guess I was expecting her to blame it all on Dominick, get him detention or some after school crap he wouldn’t particularly enjoy, and that’d be all. But, offering to help?

“I appreciate the offer, Miss Fleur,” I reply, a little more curtly than I planned on. “I really do. But, Dominick is fine. He isn’t a straight A student, but he’s smart as a whip. I’m sure this was just an isolated incident. I mean, boys will be boys, right?” I chuckle nervously.

I just want to go back home, hug my boy and watch a movie with him. Sometimes, the easiest solutions truly are the most effective ones. Ever since we moved here, I’ve been busting my ass off at the diner, and I guess I haven’t been around as much as before, and it shows. That’s probably why he’s acting out. To get my attention. That, and...

“Well, I’m sure that’s true,” Miss Fleur nods at me sweetly, her fingers crossed in front of her, resting on the desk. “But, I still want you to know that you and Dominick can come to me for help. We’re here to be there for one another.”

While that sounded like some cult crap shit, I still clench my teeth together and smile. I push the chair back slowly, signaling that I’ll be off. Luckily, she does the same.

“I appreciate you coming down to talk,” she rounds up this little meeting, and we shake hands. Her hands are cold, soft, but her handshake is firm.

“I promise you that something like this won’t happen again,” I try to assure her, but I’m not sure if I’m lying to myself.

She escorts me out of the classroom, and both Dominick and I say goodbye to her.

Our car ride home is silent. I allow him that time to gather his thoughts. Maybe even come up with a plausible lie about what happened. But, I'm hoping that he will choose to tell me the truth.

When we open the door to our little rented house, he just brushes past me.

"Hey, hey!" I shout at him, and he stops just before the door to his room.

He gives me a pained look, and I feel it at the bottom of my heart. I know that whatever hurt he is feeling, I'm responsible for that. I'm supposed to keep him safe, and I barely managed to do that.

"Can we talk about this?" I ask, closing the entrance door behind me.

I can barely stand, my legs are all swollen from a busy morning shift at the diner, rushing over to the grocery store and a few other places. But, this is more important than any physical pain I might be feeling, or the overwhelming sensation of sleep that is threatening to take over me.

"There's nothing to talk about," he shrugs.

There is no animosity in his voice. He just sounds tired. Tired of all this. I know how he feels, but we both know we can't go back. We can never go back.

"Why did you hit that boy?" I ask him again. "Violence is not the answer."

He looks down at his feet, as he always does when he tries to avoid the question. I sigh, putting down my bag. I walk over to him slowly, and get down to my knees. This way, he's a little taller than I am, but I don't mind. This has always been my approach, when we've discussed something important. It's crucial for him to see us as equals, as partners who can deal with anything together.



“What happened, Dom?” I ask again, gentler this time. “You know you can tell me.”

I see the thin outlines of his Adam’s apple tremble as he swallows. His gaze is still fixated on an invisible spot on the carpet that is begging for a deep clean. As if I can afford it right now.

“He said something,” I finally hear his voice, as he raises his eyes to mine. “I wanted to make him eat his words.”

“What did he say?”

Suddenly, a wave of redness washes over him. My mind starts racing. What could that kid have asked him? Was it something sexual? Do I need to report it? A few moments of this, and I can barely think straight.

“Please, Dom,” I plead. “Did he threaten you? Did he want to do something to you... you know... something - “

“It’s not me,” he interrupts me. “It’s you.”

I’m taken aback by this. Me? What the Hell do those kids know about me?

“He called you a...” he stops, and even though he can’t say that word, I know what he means. My precious boy. He was just defending my honor.

I cup his cheeks in the palms of my hands, making him look at me. His cheeks are still blazing red. His eyelashes look a little wet. My sweet, precious boy.

“Whatever he said, isn’t worth you getting in trouble,” I assure him.

“But, he can’t say that about you,” he speaks, and I feel the gentle vibrations on his

face as he does so.

“People can say whatever they want about other people,” I smile at him. “You can’t control that. But, you know what you can control?”

I pause, to let him shake his head.

“Your own reaction to it,” I press my nose gently against his, as I used to do when he was a little boy. “Just walk away next time.”

“But...”

“I know it’s hard, just try, OK?” He nods, and I know he’ll try. “Now, I got some microwave popcorn for us, and we could put on some Harry Potter, what do you say?”

His face lights up at the offer, and it breaks my heart that we can’t do it all the time.

“You finished all your school work for tomorrow?” I ask, and the fact that he looks down at his feet, tells me all I need to know. “Come on. Whatever it is, I’ll help you, so you can finish it in time to watch the movie. I don’t want a cranky morning cookie on my hands tomorrow.”

We both chuckle, and the moment I raise my arms to wrap them around his little body, I feel his own hands around my neck. I bury my nose into his soft neck, and close my eyes. His scar is still there, right behind his left ear. I doubt it’ll ever pale enough to be invisible. But, at least he can’t see it. He asked me about it once, and I said he fell. In a way, I didn’t lie. I just didn’t tell him the whole truth. I can only hope that I will never need to.

It takes us a few moments to unwrap each other from our bear hug, and he quickly

disappears in his room. At least he didn't close the door, I think to myself. I walk over to the kitchen, my heart full of hope that this was just an isolated incident.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:18 pm*

Mason

“So, you’re telling me we’re short?” I grunt at Wagner.

We’re both bending over the papers, but no matter what way you look at it, we’re short. That means someone’s legs might get broken, and for that, I need to be sure whose. Can’t go around breaking innocent legs left and right. Though, few legs are totally innocent in this line of work.

“Adrian and I counted. Twice.”

I sigh. If Wagner says he’s sure, then it’s a sure deal. He’s my right hand man, just like Adrian, and there’s no one else I’d trust with control over my business and the cash flow.

“Fuck,” I grunt again, stepping away from the piles of papers on my desk. “The route was the same?”

I don’t really know why I’m even asking. The route’s been the same for the last few years. We’ve established the path, paid off everyone who needed to be paid off, closed all the eyes, tied all the loose ends. And now, after periods of successful transport, we’re short.

“Pablo swears he sent exactly what we agreed. As always,” Wagner assures me, but I need no reassurance.

Pablo, our contact down South, is trustworthy enough. My father did business with

his father, and I value his friendship, because he belongs to the old way of things. His word is his bond. If he says something, then I'm taking it at face value.

"That means someone skimmed off the top along the way somewhere," I'm thinking out loud here.

I glance over at Wagner. My brother from another mother. My friend and confidant. The three of us started this business. We resurrected this shithole and made it what it is today. A little town with its own set of rules, a town that is off the map, but functions perfectly. We make sure of that every single day. At first, they frowned on our money. Pretending to be all chaste and innocent. Money doesn't grow on fucking trees. It's earned with blood and toil. But, eventually, they came around. Once they saw what our money could do for them, for their children. It helps, too, that this little townlet is a hidden gem in the mountains, so we're safe here. It's easy to receive all the shipments, and then just send them further on their way.

"Adrian and I could drive to the border. Talk to Alex. He'd know," Wagner suggests.

"I'd come, too, but I need to sort out the mess over in Little Rock."

"Adrian and I can handle it, don't worry."

I smile at him, squeezing his shoulder with my hand.

"Just be careful, OK?"

"We always are," he nods, patting me on the back, then leaving.

Once again alone in my office, I sit in my recliner, enjoying the sight from the window. My bike is parked there, in plain sight. Behind it, the view of the mountains spreads out before me, promising the unattainable. I guess that's what I'm looking

for. Something that seems far away, always out of reach. But, with my trusty bike, I'll always keep searching for it, always keep driving after it.

I finally reach the conclusion that there is no point dwelling on the deficit. Adrian and Wagner would get to the bottom of it. I'm sure. They'd come back in a few days, and if they aren't bringing the deficit with them, they'd surely have the info on who's to blame. And, that's more than I need to settle the score.

So, I jump out of my chair, exit my office and enter straight into the workshop. Even with the doors completely closed, I can still hear the clinking, the clanking, the drills and chatter of my gang. It keeps me going. They keep me going. Alone, I wouldn't be what I am. I'm myself, because they are around me, they make me their leader with their every action, their every decision.

I see Rock to my right, fixing the exhaust. Thor and Leo are checking the rear shocks. Our bikes always need to be in perfect condition, always ready for a long ride. Because, sometimes, our rides seem endless. So is the work we do.

At that point, I see Toke push the front door open, his hand gripping a kid's upper arm tightly.

"Let go of me!" the kid kicks and screams, as he's being brought before me.

I'm slightly amused by what's happening, waiting for the explanation. Toke shoves the kid with brute force. He's not used to dealing with kids, obviously. Neither am I, I guess. I watch curiously as the kid rubs his upper arm, but doesn't say anything. The tips of his fingers are blue, and there is a faint smell of spray paint about him. I bet if I took his backpack and emptied it, there'd be a few spray paint cans still in there. So, the mystery is solved, but let's make him squirm a little more. I look over at Toke, whose arms are crossed now in the line of his chest. His tattoos are clearly visible. He's had them ever since I've known him, and he keeps adding more to the

collection.

“So, what’s with the kid?” I ask, and everyone around me stops working on their bikes. They’re as amused as I am probably.

We’re not used to having kids around here. Sure, they dare one another occasionally to prank us in one way or another, but that was before. I thought they got tired of it. That suited everyone. Whoever this kid is, he must be new in town and doesn’t know whose property he found himself on.

“The little shit spray painted the back wall,” Toke moaned. “He even got some on my fuckin’ bike!”

I want to smile, but I don’t. Either kid’s got balls or he has no idea where he is. Either way, he should be taught a lesson.

“What’s your name, kid?” I ask, eyeing him from head to toe.

Disheveled hair. T-shirt with Led Zeppelin on it. Pair of worn out jeans. Converse sneakers so old you’d think Chuck Taylor played basketball in those. I give him a second, but he doesn’t reply. So, Toke slaps him on the back of the head, and the kid almost flops forward, to the ground.

“Answer the question, you little shit!” Toke shouts.

“Why don’t you go check on Adrian?” I tell him.

He frowns. I guess he wants to see what I’d do with the kid, but I still don’t know that myself.

“Now, Toke,” I repeat.

“Sure,” he murmurs, then leaves.

“You wanna tell me your name now?” I ask the kid again.

“Dom,” he whispers. “Dominick.”

“Alright, Dom-Dominick,” I reply, and a few guys around me chuckle. “You wanna tell me why Toke was all pissed at you?”

Dominick lifts his head, and I notice blue on his forehead, too. So, he’s been busy. I wonder what that wall looks like. I just hope I don’t have a blue dick on my back wall.

“Actually, I have a better idea,” it hits me suddenly. “Why don’t you go show me what you did instead?”

Everyone’s face suddenly turns grave, and I know what they’re thinking. The boy obviously thinks it at the same time, as his face darkens and turns pale.

“Don’t worry, I won’t kill you and throw your body in a ditch somewhere,” I reply, laughing. “Well, actually, that depends on what you spray painted on my wall.”

I stare him down, and if he had any balls before, they are all gone now. He’s just a kid who wants to go home, to his mom and dad. A part of me wants to remember that feeling, but I can’t. It’s tough when your dad was always gone, on some shady business, and your mom disappeared with the first guy who offered her a ride. Still, my dad did the best that he could, under the circumstances. That’s gotta count for something.

“Come on,” I tell him, as my hand gently falls on his shoulder.



We walk over to the back wall, and he stops first, his eyes looking down. The back wall's always been shitty. Paint peeling everywhere, even rats started gnawing on the corners. You can never get fully rid of that vermin. I keep telling Wagner to get it in line, but I guess there's always something more important to take care of.

I walk over to the wall, inspecting it. It's not a dick. It's not even some shitty graffiti writing, which no one can read. It's a man's face, with curly hair and a moustache, and there is a raven perched on his shoulder. I see he started writing something too, but I can read only the first word. Suddenly, I burst out into laughter. He looks up, surprised.

"I thought I'd see a dick," I reply, still laughing. "But, this shit right here is art."

"So, I'm off the hook?" Dominick replies, and I start laughing even more.

"Fat chance, kid," I shake my head. "I just won't kill you and throw your body in a ditch somewhere. But, I will talk to your parents."

"Can't I just pay you for the wall?" Dominick whined, his eyes ready to tear up. So, the punishment doesn't scare him, but his parents do. That's good to know. "Or paint it?" he adds.

"You know what?" I eye him. "That's actually a great idea. I need this shit painted and I need it like yesterday. My boys have no time. So, you can do it for me. Think of it as payback."

"And, you'll keep my mom out of it?"

"You're quite the joker, you know that?" I grin. "I'm taking you home."

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:18 pm*

I take a sip of my coffee, and enjoy the warmth as it slides down my throat. It's that time of the month again. Even though I've done it so many times before, I still find it nerve-wrecking. I can barely type out the name I'm looking for, even though you'd think my fingers would get used to it by now. I guess they never will. It will always be a name connected with Hell.

The screen welcomes me cheerfully, as if what I'm doing is some happy affair. After I click enter, a sheet filled with basic information opens up. I don't need to read that. I know all that by heart. It skips a beat every time I have to read that name, or see that photo that is etched inside my mind, as if branded with hot iron. I check the date. It's still the same as before. I guess he wasn't good enough, yet, at least. But, a part of me is always afraid that he'll get out sooner and I won't know. He'll find me. He'll find us.

I click on the little X in the upper right corner, and try to forget about it. But, it's impossible. My wrist hasn't healed well, and every once in a while makes a sort of a click sound, like an old, worn out cuckoo clock, which chimes in at its own accord, just to remind you that it's still working. Not that I need reminders anyway.

With my cup still in my hand, I get up, and walk over to the little bookshelf. I see that one of my albums is poking out, as if someone recently pulled him out, then didn't put it back properly. I reach out for it, and sit on the sofa, with the album in my lap. Dominick must have skimmed through it, because I'm sure I didn't. It's my childhood photo album, one that shouldn't be of particular interest to him, unless I'm there to explain who all these people were.

I open the first page. It's me as a baby, cradled in my mother's arms. My father is

watching over us, his hand resting on my mother's shoulder, as he hovers above me. They're both smiling. She has that horrible frizzy hair which was so popular back then. But, she is radiant. The next page reveals my first birthday. It's a chocolate cake, with a pink candle, number 1. She is holding me over the cake, my dad pouting his cheeks to show me to how blow out the candle. My mom's hair is in a bun now, slightly less frizzy. Her cheeks are flushed. She is beaming. The third photo is me on my trike. My dad is pushing me towards my mom. I'm wearing some horrible looking mustard yellow overalls and my pigtails are uneven. But, I'm laughing with the few teeth I have, fully visible. My dad is like a tower, strong and mighty. My mom like the morning star.

I turn over the next page, my throat already dry because I know what I will see. A part of me hopes that it might be a movie with a different ending, but it never is. The ending is always the same. My parents always die in a car crash that same year. And, my aunt always takes me in after that.

I was too little to remember much of it. I wasn't in the car, and everyone said it was so lucky. I'm not so sure of that myself. My parents went out to celebrate their wedding anniversary, and my grandma convinced them to go out to dinner, just the two of them. I don't know if it took much convincing or not, but they were a beautiful young couple with so much life left in them. Of course they wanted to go just the two of them. They were sure I was safe, with grandma. And, I was. It was themselves they should have been worried about. And, that truck driver who looked down at his map for only a single second, before he slammed right into them.

They didn't tell me anything about it for a very long time. I had to find the newspaper clippings on my own, even though it wasn't big news. A couple dies as truck slams into them. Tragedy over at Higgins Bridge. Couple dies in horrible accident, leaves daughter behind. The first time I read them, I cried. Next time, it was easier. Grandma told me what happened. I wanted to blame her, but I couldn't.

There were other people to blame, and one of them was my aunt. She shouldn't have taken me in. That I will never forgive her for. She should have left me with grandma, but she went out of her way to prove that grandma was unfit to take care of a toddler, and that she would be better. Better to take government money for caring for a foster child. Because, she wouldn't even adopt me. Said I'm not her child, but I'm family. My little mind at first couldn't distinguish between the two, but eventually it did. It matured into this idea, slowly but surely.

She was never abusive. I had to emphasize that a few times. She simply didn't care, and that was more than enough. She relied on the Bible. Whores and bikers. She said those were the two worst kinds of people. I guess I can understand whores. But, bikers? I never had any desire to ask for an explanation. I simply tried to escape any way I could. I rebelled. I smoked. I snuck out of my room on numerous occasions. She'd lock me in, so I learned to pick a lock with a hairpin. Something I'm still proud of today. Trouble is the mother of necessity... or something like that.

That's when he came along. I was young and naive. It was easy to do what he did.

Angrily, I slammed the photo album shut. I don't know why I always do this to myself. There is no point in making sense of nonsense. I pushed the album as far into the bookshelf as I could, then lay down on the sofa. That photo of my first birthday lingered on in my mind, and I was grateful for this image.

Slowly, I fell asleep, nestling on my sofa, listening to the sound of my late mother's sweet laughter.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:18 pm*

A loud knock on the door wakes me up. I jump from the sofa, rubbing my eyes. The knocking continues, slightly more agitated this time.

“I’m coming!” I shout back. “Can’t you wait a little...?” I murmur to myself, sliding into my slippers.

Still drowsy, I drag myself to the front door, and look through the keyhole. What I see, wakes me up immediately.

“You forgot the key again?” I ask Dominick, opening the door wide, but the moment I open them, my eyes fall on someone I know I’ve seen before.

The three of us stand like that, in silence for a few more seconds, then the man speaks first, and it’s the voice I recognize.

“Good afternoon, is this your son?” he asks, his hand gently resting on Dominick’s back.

I grit my teeth in anger. What has he done now?

“Yes,” I nod, extending my hand towards Dominick, urging him to come inside.

“Would you mind if I come in?” the man asks me, with that same authority, that same dominance, and I know that I can’t refuse.

I move to the side, allowing him in. I glance around, realizing it’s a mess. I worked morning shift again, helped Dominick with a few school things in the afternoon, did

my round of grocery shopping, and he promised he'd stay out of trouble. I swear...

"Can I get you anything, Mr....?" I wait expectantly, as he follows me inside, to the kitchen.

"Mason Towers," he replied. "Mason is fine."

"Mason," I repeat. "Coffee?"

"No, thank you. I won't take much of your time, Mrs....?"

"Brunswick. Danica is fine."

"That's a beautiful name, Danica."

"Thank you," I smile, a little nervously.

I turn to Dominick. He's standing in the doorway. I try to read him, but nothing prepares a mother for this. A stranger bringing her child home.

"Alright then," I sigh. "Has my son done something?"

Mason walks over to the kitchen table, and sits on one of the chairs. He's not wearing that bandana from last time, and his curly hair spills all over his face, framing it perfectly. His square jaw is slightly rugged, his beard black, neatly trimmed this time. A little golden earring glimmers in the darkness of his hair. He's wearing a black checkered shirt, with rolled up sleeves. I wonder what happened to his leather jacket. Bikers never go anywhere without those.

He rests his fingers on the table, long and thick. Burned by the sun, just like his cheeks. His eyes are like the sky, endless and blue. No one can stare into them long

enough, without getting lost. I think of Amelia Earhart and her love for the sky. It cost her dearly. She paid for it with her life.

“Maybe we should discuss this with both parents present,” he tells me, and my cheeks flare up immediately at the mention of Dominick’s father.

“My husband passed away,” I say, just like I practiced.

“Oh, my condolences,” he bows his head down quickly.

“Thank you, but it’s been a while, and we’ve learned to live with it,” I say again, this time also like I practiced. I think it actually sounds more convincing now. The thought makes me smile. Who knew I’d become such a good liar? I guess, when your life depends on it, you can get good at just about anything. “So, please go on.”

“Well, I suppose I should start from the beginning,” he sighs, and I already have a headache. “Your son, Dominick, trespassed on my property, and he spray painted my wall.”

“What!?” I storm at Dominick. “Are you fucking kidding me!?”

I am furious beyond belief. I just want to shout at my son and ground him until the end of time, but I can’t because this stranger is in my home, and I have to be careful with any stranger around us. People with skeletons in their closet can never be too sure of anyone.

“I’m sorry,” I tell Mason. “I’m just...”

“Super pissed?” he asks.

“Yes,” I nod, hiding a grin. None of this is funny. And, yet, I’m hiding a grin. What’s

wrong with me?

“I was, too, at first.”

He pauses, glancing over at Dominick, who’s looking at his feet, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, then back. He knows he’s wrong. Just, does he know how wrong he is? I swear, I’ll ground him until he’s too old to even think of doing something like this again.

Then, I think it’s probably all my fault. I haven’t been paying attention to him lately like before. What with the new home, new job, and everything. He started a new school as well, and I should have been there for him. Fuck. This is all my fault.

“Then, it hit me,” Mason continues, oblivious to the storm of emotions taking place inside my mind. “There wasn’t much damage. One of my friends caught him in time. And, besides, that old wall is just begging for a decent paint job.”

He looks over at me, as if he’s expecting me to read his mind. I stare back at him, still not comprehending.

“We could forget all this happened if he repaints the whole house,” Mason rounds up his offer.

“What!?” Dominick interferes, with a furious look on his face. “He said just that one wall!”

“Dominick!” I shout at him again, threatening him with my index finger. Although that has lost its power ages ago. Maybe around the time when he was 4.

“Actually, he’s right,” Mason chuckles. “Don’t get mad at the boy.”



I'm still seething with anger, and I want to get this over with now, but it seems this guy is having fun. At my fucking expense.

"I did say just that one wall. But, the thing is, the whole place could use a good paint job. He can do that one wall as punishment, and I'll pay him for the other three."

I could see Dominick's eyes flash at the thought of doing it for payment, but I couldn't accept it. This can't be a reward in any way. It has to be punishment, all the way.

"Not a chance," I shake my head. "He'll do it all for free."

"But, mom - "

"You've done enough," I cut him off. "Now, maybe for once you'll do what you're told."

Dominick grunts, and our guest's eyes keep sliding from me to Dom, then back at me again. I don't trust him for some reason. I guess I don't trust any man with such deep, beautiful eyes. They're too dangerous.

"If I may say, Danica," he interferes. "Your son actually did me a favor."

"A favor?" I ask.

"Me and the guys have been neglecting to do it for ages, but now we have to. And, I have your son to thank for it."

"Well, that's a nice way of looking at it, Mr. Towers - "

"Mason."

“Mason,” I repeat. “And, I appreciate your kindness. I really do. That’s why my son will be happy to do it all for nothing.” I turn to Dominick. “Am I right?”

“Yeah...” he replies, sounding a little annoyed, but aware that he lost this battle.

“I’m sure we’ll be done in two weekends,” Mason tells me. “I wouldn’t want it to interfere with his school work.”

“Thank you,” I try a smile.

“Well, I won’t take up more of your time,” he stands up, then pushes the chair back to where it was. This surprises me. He looks like the kind of person who expects others to do those kind of things for him. “Someone will come pick him up on Saturday at, say 8 am?”

Dominick snorts, but before he can say anything I just nod.

“Perfect,” I solidify the deal.

“Thank you for your understanding,” he offers me his hand.

I swallow heavily, as I take it into mine, trying to give him a manly squeeze. His hand is warm, calloused, twice as big as mine. His thumb traces an invisible line on mine, then I quickly pull back.

“No, thank you,” I correct him.

Dominick and I walk him out of the house, and he just waves at us as he sits on his bike, and drives down the street. His broad back blends in perfectly with his bike, as the sound of the angry, revving engine dissipates all around us. Then, something hits me.

“Did he drive you on his bike back here?”

“Yeah, it was so cool, mom, you should have seen - “

“I’ll come pick you up next time,” I grind my teeth. “And, I can take you there on Saturday morning.”

The very thought of my boy on that bike, being recklessly driven by any of those biker guys sends shivers down my spine. We came here because this little town seemed to offer a safe haven. We didn’t come here for my boy to end up at the hospital because some idiot drove him on his bike, without all the necessary safety precautions.

The very idea of the hospital hits me like a ton of bricks. For others, it was a place of healing.

“But, why? He can just...”

“No!” I snap back. “It’s dangerous.”

“He wasn’t driving fast.”

“I don’t care,” I turn around, signaling that this conversation is over, at least for the time being. “Let’s get some dinner now.”

My stomach refuses any idea of food, but Dominick wolfs down the mac and cheese I whip him up quickly, and surprisingly, agrees to being grounded without a single word of defiance.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:18 pm*

It's a slow afternoon at the diner. The guests are the usual faces, and I know what they're going to order even before they greet me. I have nothing against that. Routine may be boring, but it lulls you into a cradle of safety. But, I know what lies beneath all that. The question that Old Bill asked me during our initial interview. What are you running away from?

Just as I bring over a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon, with a fresh cup of coffee to Joan and her sister, I hear the bell ring. As always, my eyes fly over there. It's already become an instinctual response. I don't hide my surprise when I see Susie.

"What are you doing here?" I smile at her, as we both walk over to the counter. This time, I go behind it, and she stays in front. "You miss this place so much you need to come here even when it's not your shift?"

"It sure ain't the food!"

I hear the voice of George Jefferson, one of the oldest living people in town. He's 92, or so I'm told, and still able to hold a knife and fork perfectly. His secret? Yard work. We always laugh at that, no matter how many times he swears it's true.

Both Susie and I chuckle at his comment, as he gobbles down on his food, as he does every single day. Susie told me before that his wife died about 10 years earlier, and he just kept on going, thinking every subsequent year would be his last. But, the last one is still yet to come.

I wonder what his wife was like. Was she a smiling image of an old lady with a green thumb, and together, they'd spend mornings chipping away at the weeds in their

garden, and afternoons with a cold drink of lemonade, in their rocking chairs? The simple life is something I always wanted. Perhaps because my life has always been anything but simple. Anything but normal. I figured, at least once I'm an adult and am the master of my own destiny, I'll be able to have things as I want them. I'll prevent car accidents that might steal loved ones from me. I'll be able to say what I really believe, what I really feel. I will be able to protect myself and those I love from what I feel is unfair.

How deluded I've been, thinking all this. I can't protect anyone. I can barely protect myself. But, I know I must try. Dominick is all I have, and I'll be damned if I'll let anyone hurt him.

"I just dropped by for a cup of Joe," Susie tells me, with a glow on her face I haven't seen before.

"I can hardly believe that," I wink at her. "You look too nice for just a coffee at our place."

"Well," I hear her say, as she looks around, to make sure that no one is listening. In these places, you could never be sure. "Hunter finally asked me out."

It's a little strange, hearing a woman of almost 40 talk about dating and someone asking her out. You expect women of her age to be married, with kids in school. But, Susie isn't. In a way, I understand her. Slim pickings in this place. Those that are worth anything are already taken. As it is everywhere. And the rest of us, left single, are alone for a reason. Broken. Who'd want to fix us?

"Well, about time," I reply, trying to imagine Susie and Hunter on a date.

I've only seen him once, when he stumbled into the diner, thinking it was Susie's shift. He saw me, greeted me politely enough, but got all confused, finally replying

that he'll come back later to eat. I chuckled only after he left the diner, and understood when Susie explained it that afternoon. They are both somewhat awkward, and I could only hope that their awkwardness would be of the same kind, so they could get warm next to each other, during cold nights. Lord knows I miss that.

Sometimes, I'd still wake up, for a single breathless moment thinking he's there. Fear would merge with excitement, my blood would run hot then cold. It would take my mind a fraction of a second to remind itself that my bed is empty, save for my own palpitating body. The other one would be sound asleep in his own room, and occasionally, I'd tiptoe to his room, open the door just a little, to make sure everything's alright. It's difficult to convince your heart of this, when you know that danger is out there. It is always out there, for as long as it lives. And, you can't kill it.

"He asked me out to a movie. You know, the drive in, in Rock Falls?"

"I've heard of it," I nod. "Haven't been, though. You must tell me if it's worth any. I'm thinking of taking Dom there while the weather's nice."

"How is he doing?" she asks considerately, as always.

"Oh, you know," I nod, glancing at the door, even though I didn't hear the bell ring. The diner is half empty, and I'm guessing the guests that are finishing their dinners would be our last customers for the day. "Boys." I sigh heavily, more heavily than I intended to.

"Did something happen?" she asks again, reading me like an open book.

I've never been a good liar, even though you'd think that life has taught me better. I just can't. Especially not when I know someone isn't asking just out of politeness, but out of genuine interest and concern, as Susie always does.

“He got into a fight at school,” I reply, wiping the counter with a kitchen towel, just after I serve her the coffee she wanted.

“A fight?” she repeats, waving her hand dismissively. “That’s nothing to worry about. I’d be worried if my son didn’t get into an occasional fight at school. I mean, if I had one, of course.”

“Well, we sorted that out,” I continue, putting the kitchen towel back, then leaning closer to her. “But, then, a few days ago, someone knocks on my door. It was late afternoon, and I dozed off. So, I drag myself to the door, and what do I see? My son being brought home by one of those bikers.”

“The Hellraisers?” she says that name, and I can’t help but see the glow on her face turn to fear.

“I think so,” I nod. “What’s the guy’s name?” I pause for a moment. “M something.”

“Mason?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

Susie doesn’t say anything to this. A strange sensation starts creeping up my back, all the way to the nape of my neck.

“What happened?” she inquires, but that fear is still there. As if she knows something, but isn’t sure if she should share it.

“Well, apparently, Dom spray painted their wall or something. Seriously, that boy... I don’t know what to do anymore.”

“What did Mason say?” she asks quickly, as if she’s afraid that something terrible

happened.

“Um, nothing really,” I shrug. “He was actually very nice. A bit arrogant though. And, those bikes. Just horrible. But, he was very reasonable, and offered to let Dom work off the damage by painting the house.”

“I see,” Susie’s voice is quiet, her lips pressed tightly together.

My eyes search for hers, but she is unwilling to look at me properly. As if I can read something in them, something she’s trying to keep a secret.

“Is there anything I should know, Suse?” I lean even more towards her as I speak.

I remember Mason’s voice. His stature. How he could crush my hand inside of his, without blinking. He makes a Hell of a nightmare to those who wrong him, I’m sure of that. But, I haven’t wronged him. And, Dom is just a kid who spray painted a stupid wall.

“You know I’m not the one to spread any gossip, Danny,” she tells me, wearily.

“Then, don’t, Suse. Just tell me what you know for sure.”

My voice is sharp, demanding. If there’s anything I need to know about the men my son will be spending weekends with, then she better tell me now.

“You don’t know Sam Michaels, do you?”

“Should I?”

I pause, as I wave at Jane and her sister who point at their table, to let me know that they left their money there. I nod, just opening my mouth for a silent thank you. I



gesture at Susie to hold it for a moment, and I go over to clean up the table. I do it with trembling fingers. I've never heard of Sam Michaels, but obviously Susie seems to think I should know about him.

A few minutes later, I return to the counter, sitting opposite Susie. The fear on her face has given way to simple worry, but that glow was gone. I could only hope it'd resurface once she meets up with Hunter.

"So, Sam Michaels?" I remind her, but we both know she needs no reminders.

She looks down at the counter, her fingers drumming the laminated surface. Her glance quickly comes back up again.

"He's... he was Hunter's friend," she says, as if her own correction is supposed to foreshadow the ominous tone of the story. "He used to be in business with those bikers. Something went wrong, and... Sam disappeared. That happened a few years back. No one knows what happened to him."

"Come on, Suse," I try a smile, but her story lingers on. It's impossible to forget. "That sounds like something out of a noir novel. A small town crook killed by the big mafia boss. It's probably embellished a little. Not like much happens here, anyway. So, when something actually does happen, everyone adds a little to the story they pass on, and poof. You've got a mystery worthy of Sherlock Holmes." I say all this so quickly and out of breath, that I almost don't see the look on her face. She isn't upset or insulted. She's genuinely concerned. "Sorry, Suse, you know I don't mean anything by it. I'm just cranky. Forget I said anything."

I smile at her, cupping her hands with my own, across the counter. Hers are cold, as she tries to muster a smile.

"You're probably right," she finally says, and I'm not sure if I believe her or not.

I know she's only looking out for me. She's proven this more than once. She's a person you can trust. So, did she really mention all this and now agrees with me because she really believes I'm right, or she's just unwilling to discuss it further? My bet is the second one. But, I agree with her. Fear leads nowhere. Or, in my case, it leads you very, very far away. As far as your car would go. And, then on foot a little further away.

"Just don't get too friendly with those guys," she adds, just in case.

"Friendly with bikers?" I snort. "No way in Hell."

Whores and bikers. Bikers and whores.

I don't go so far as to explain where my dislike and fear of bikers, and whores for that matter, but that has no relation to this story, comes from. Neither of us is all that eager to continue this conversation, but I don't want her to leave on a bad note.

"So, what movie are you and Hunter gonna see?" I switch topic to something more pleasant, but I've already made up my mind. Not only am I driving Dom over to the bikers and back, but I'm staying there until I need to get to work as well.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:18 pm*

Wagner

The ride down South is easy. Quick. The wind in your hair. The smell of tires burning the highway. There's nothing like it. I see Adrian a little in front of me. He doesn't turn around to see if I'm there or not. We never do. We just expect you to be there. If you're not? Well, you'll catch up. You better. If you can't, then maybe you don't deserve to ride with the Hellraisers.

I know this road by heart. I'd been beaten and left for dead by the side more times than I can remember. The animal in me never wanted to retaliate. Probably because I kept it subdued for so long. It's fucked up when you're the only one of something. The only member of a species, of a breed that exists nowhere else. Or, at least, you live half your life believing this. So, you end up not caring. You pick fights just for the heck of it. You fuck chicks because... well, just because. Is there ever a reason for fucking, other than the sense of instant gratification? I'd say the fuck not.

A life led in murky bars, head between smelly tits of some sleazy stripper, mouth drowning in cheap booze. You'd think you'd get tired of it eventually. But, you don't. You're the only one of something, something horrible, something not even fully human, but something else completely. Something others are afraid of. So, you stop showing them this side of you. Because, all you'd ever get in return is violence, hate, fear. Hell, there's more of that shit in the world than necessary. Why create more?

One night, you pick a fight with the wrong guy. You slap his girl's ass. You squeeze her fake tit. Whatever. You're too drunk to know what you're doing, anyway. But, they don't care. They take you out of the bar, dragging you by your feet. You can barely stay awake. The booze is cheap. It does you in quick and hard. Hell, you doubt

you could even stand up straight. But, they don't even give you the chance to try.

Three guys to one. Is it fair? Shit, I guess not. Three guys to one animal, though? More fair? Probably. But, you're too fucked up to transform. That shit takes focus, concentrated effort. So, instead, I feel the blows to my belly, to my side. My inner organs shift to adapt to the blows, to make them less painful, to make my innards less hurt, less sore the following day.

Three guys to one. No one pays any attention. People just pass by, in broad circle, pretending they don't see. It's alright. I'd pretend not to see, too. Easier that way. They spit at me, they throw their cigar butts. I don't even feel the burns. Warm liquid oozes out of the corner of my mouth. It tastes like copper wire. I spit it out.

I have no idea how long it lasts. Long enough for me to lose consciousness. When I open my eyes, one of them at least, the sun is high up in the sky, like a torch. But, it's not my victory it celebrates. My other eye is beaten shut. I can't press my lips together. That copper taste is gone from my mouth. I can taste grains of sand between my teeth. I try to move, but my whole body hurts, like I was pulled apart by horses, to all four sides of the world.

I'm parched. Somewhere far away, seems miles away, I hear the sound of traffic. Cars. Trucks. Bikes. I can recognize a Harley anywhere. It stops somewhere close. Closer than the rest of the traffic. I hear crunching of the gravel underneath heavy boots. It stops just by my earshot. I try to focus my eyes on the figure looming above me, but I can't. Whoever he is, he's just a shadow. Death? Welcome, death.

"Damn, you look like shit, man," I hear a voice, as the figure bends down closer to me. I smell heavy cologne. Motor oil.

"Had better days," I manage to cough. If I die, at least I'll die saying something funny.

The figure whistles to someone behind us. Then, the same sound of crunching gravel. Suddenly, I'm pulled up by several pairs of hands. My feet drag along the ground, as they take me to their Harleys.

I still don't know how I ended up at their place. All I know is I wake up in a soft bed, all stitched and bandaged. My eye still closed, but I can see silhouettes better. I can make out faces. And, I make out the face that approached me first. He recognizes the sign, the mark I always took great care in hiding. He notices it from the moment he lays his eyes on me. He tells me I'm home. Truer words were never spoken.

When Adrian and I finally reach the little farmhouse where Alex has conveniently stashed his little operation, we both get off our bikes simultaneously. My boots sink in the ground, as dust twirls around us, like the promise of a tornado that will never happen.

I see Adrian eyeing the little farmhouse. I remember that he wasn't with me last time. Mason was. So, Adrian is on the lookout. Apart from Mason, Adrian is the next guy in line I'd allow to watch my back. Silent and deadly, he's like a nighthawk. You'll escape him, only if he lets you. But, those days are long gone. We don't hunt anymore, even though we all miss those days occasionally. Civilization is a bit too restraining for someone who's got more animal than human inside. But, we try to accommodate to the new world order.

"So, what do ya think?" I spit to the side, feeling the dust crunch between my teeth. Fucking desert. Give me the woods any day. Crisp air. Clean water. What more could you ask for?

Adrian doesn't reply straightaway. I can see his eyes twitching, quickly examining our surroundings. I give him all the time he needs. It might pay off later, if we need to make a run for it. It wouldn't be the first time someone tried to screw us over.

“Two doors, barred windows,” he tells me.

How the fuck can he see that? I take off my Ray Ban’s, but the sun angrily responds, and I immediately put them back on. I’ll let him handle the outside. I’ll be doing the talking with my fists anyway, if necessary. Usually, it is. Nothing makes people talk like some physical encouragement. Jogs their memory.

“One room inside, maybe separated in two,” he adds.

“How many people?”

Adrian lifts his nose in the air, and smells it. I can almost see his nostrils opening and closing, like a fish’s mouth on dry land, gasping.

“One, two,” he pauses. “Two.”

“That’s unfair,” I chuckle. “Too easy.”

“One’s a wolf shifter.”

Adrian’s final conclusion changes things. Bear shifters haven’t been on good terms with wolf shifters for ages. It all started about 150 years ago, maybe more, when the wolves overtook a part of our sacred land, even though the unspoken agreement claims we do not hunt in the territory that belongs to the others. They not only started to hunt on our grounds, but they overtook a part of it. Mason’s father lost his life in the battle that took place high up in the mountains. Not only him. Many others, too. We won the war, but we lost the battle. Our sacred ground has soaked up so much blood, that I doubt anything good could ever come out of it again. That was partly why we settled in this shithole, but if Mason says it’s worth it, then it’s worth it. Maybe a little more civilization would do us all some good.

“So, a human and a shifter?” I ask, for confirmation, and Adrian nods. “Alright then. Let’s go ask some questions.”

Slowly, we walk over to the front door. I push it slightly with my foot, and it opens, with a squeal. I take a step back, expecting an attack of some sort, guns or teeth, it doesn’t matter. I’m usually ready for both. But, there’s nothing.

The inside of the farmhouse is dirty. There is a strange smell lingering in the air, and I can’t quite put my finger on it. Adrian probably could, but neither of us speaks. There is a table in the corner, a few knives and bubble wrap are on it. The chair is pushed to the side, as if someone got up in a haste.

We both look around, trying to suppress the loudness of our breathing. Adrian leads the way, heading to the little table. He traces a line of something on it, then brings it to his nose. He nods at me.

I look around again, expecting an attack. Adrian smells human presence. I can smell it, too, even though my sense of smell isn’t as developed as his. There’s a door right in front of us. Adrian starts first. I keep a lookout. The door we came through is still open. Someone could sneak from behind. Wolves are stealthy. I’m not afraid of that human. Alex is a pussy. But, he obviously knows what his best line of defense would be. Hiring a wolf shifter.

Adrian disappears through the door in front of us, and I follow immediately behind. Within seconds, something explodes in the far end corner, raising dust all around us. I hear the clanking of nails underneath my boots, and I bend down, my eyes searching for Adrian.

Some commotion is heard to my right, and I rub my eyes, but the fucking smoke is everywhere. Suddenly, a sharp pang of pain cuts right through my left side. I growl loudly, falling to the floor. I feel a burning sensation where pain used to be. Hot and

sticky wetness spreads underneath me.

“Fuck,” I blink heavily, pressing my hand to my sides. “The motherfucker cut me...”

In a flash, I feel the familiar presence of Adrian loom over me. I only hear swooning noises, like claws flying through the air with lightning speed. I try to get up, but the pain is unbearable. The smoke slowly starts to dissolve, and I see a black puddle underneath me. I’m probably bleeding like a pig. I take off my shirt and wrap it around my abdomen. Hot, throbbing pain hits me like a ton of bricks, but I know I need to get up.

A body drops right before me, like a puppet. I recognize Alex’s face. I press my fingers onto his neck.

“Good, the motherfucker’s still breathing...” I manage to muster.

I get up, fighting the pain. The smoke is almost all gone now. Adrian is on his knees, in the corner, head bowed down. A crazed wolf is hawking over him, his claws extended, aiming for Adrian’s neck. I muster all my strength, and throw myself at him. We roll over to the side, my abdomen burning with the rage of a thousand Devils, but I don’t let go. I need to focus to shift, so there’s no time for that. I need to take this mother fucker out, human style.

A wolf’s only weapon is its mouth. It can either bite or scratch. Nothing more. It’d be easiest to just kick him in the ribs while they break and perforate his lungs, but my position doesn’t allow that. Instead, I grab him under his jaws, at the bottom of his ears, shaking his head wildly left and right, knowing this will make any animal dizzy. I quickly climb on top of his back, avoiding his legs, which are trying to kick me off. Using my own legs, I spread his rear legs, standing on them. I know by the time this ends, I’ll be covered in scratches, but the wolf shifter will be way worse off. My fingers take hold of his neck, and I just squeeze until I can’t feel that kicking



anymore, until my own fingers feel all white and trembling, until I can't feel that heat in my sides.

I don't know how long that lasts, but I stop only when Adrian approaches me and puts his hand on my shoulder. My fingers unclasp and a dead wolf body tumbles down onto the floor.

Adrian and I glance over at Alex.

"He alive?" I ask.

"Should be."

We walk over to him, and Adrian kicks him with his foot, not too hard, though. Alex whines, opening his eyes.

"Get up, you fucker," I hiss.

Alex gets onto his knees, then slowly, stands up. His whole body is shaking. I look down and I see he's fucking pissed himself.

"Where is it?" I ask, pressing my side. The pain is back, and I wanna get the fuck outta here, so I can tend to my wound.

Alex lifts his trembling finger at a metal box in the corner. Adrian immediately jumps over there and tries to unlock it. It doesn't budge.

"The com-combination is three, seven, nine, z-z-zero..." Alex moans. The son of a bitch should be glad he's alive.

Adrian turns the little dial following this code and the door clicks open. He gently

extracts two black, wooden boxes.

“Do I need to open them to make sure it’s all in there?” I glare at Alex. He just shakes his head. “What the fuck do I do with you now?” I sigh, raking my fingers through my hair.

Adrian gives me a meaningful look. I know what he’s saying. Mason urged for less killing. Unless it’s completely necessary. We got what we came here for. And, the wolf’s dead. Is this piece of shit really worth another kill? Adrian shakes his head.

“You’re one lucky motherfucker,” I spit at Alex, who cowers in fear, thinking I’m about to strike him down.

Luckily for him, I take no more pleasure in killing. None of us do. Gone are the days. We simply demand respect, and sometimes, you had to smash your fist against the table if you want to be heard.

“So, this is what you’re gonna do now,” I aim my index finger at Alex. “You’re gonna disappear somewhere, in some shithole, change your name, your appearance, whatever the fuck you wanna do. I just want you gone, off the face of the earth. You dig? Cuz, if I see you again, Adrian won’t be here to save your sorry ass.”

“Y-yes, yes... T-thank you...” Alex bows down, and I swear I can’t look at him anymore.

“Now, get the fuck outta here.”

Alex drags his beaten body out of the little farmhouse, as I do the same, over to the chair.

“Fuck, those claws are sharp,” I hiss, breathing in through clenched teeth.

“Wait,” Adrian tells me, then runs out.

He comes back a few moments later with a bunch of yellow flowers in his hand and a bottle of water in the other.

“You came to ask for my hand in marriage with that bouquet?” I ask, snorting, and a pang of pain punishes my effort at humor.

“Witch hazel,” he kneels down to my side, rips a part of his shirt, and wraps the flowers in it. He spills some water on it, then presses it to my wound.

“This is going to hurt,” he tells me, and I have to close my eyes when he tries to wipe away the already crusted blood.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:18 pm*

It's six o'clock on Saturday. I wake up easily, almost effortlessly even before the alarm goes off. Susie was kind enough to let me take the afternoon shift, so I could drop Dominick off at the bikers' place. Our agreement is for him to call the diner when he's done, and I'll just ask Bill to let me off for an hour so I can drop him off. The cook's there, plus Susie's and mine shift might be still overlapping when he calls. In any case, I'm not letting him sit on that dark bike again.

Sam's name surfaces in my mind, and I remember Susie's story. People disappear when they get too close to the bikers. They're criminals. But, you can't hate them because they wash their hands with some do gooder actions in the town. A cold claw of fear taps me on the nape of my neck, just to remind me it's there. Don't let your guard down. Keep an eye on Dominick. They can't be good people.

"Shit..." I whisper to myself. "Why did he have to spray paint their wall!?"

I hit the pillow with my fist angrily, knowing well that it won't make any difference. What's done is done. Now, I need to make Dominick's stay with them as short as possible. And, just keep out of their way afterwards.

Figuring there is no point in lying in bed if I'm not sleeping, I get up and head over to the kitchen. I make myself some coffee, and a bowl of porridge for Dominick. Neither of us are fans, but he's grounded. That includes eating foods that are good for him, even if he doesn't like them.

I drink my coffee on the go, picking up stray items of clothing that couldn't find their own way to the hamper, toys and books, too. At 6:30, I knock on his door. It takes him a while to even stir at the noise, so I go over and sit on the edge of his bed. His

face is buried in the pillow, his back slowly rising then falling. I almost feel bad waking him up. But, I remember what he did, and I shake him gently.

“Hey, Dom?” I call. “Come on. It’s breakfast time. We need to get going soon.”

“No... mom... where...” he murmurs, hiding his head under the blankets.

I pull them forcefully off of him, and his eyes immediately pop open.

“Mom...” he whines again.

“Come on,” I repeat, walking out of the room.

To my surprise, he comes downstairs in 5 minutes, dressed. He glances at the clock on the kitchen wall. The look of puzzlement and confusion washes over his still drowsy face.

“Why so early?” he wonders, covering his mouth as he yawns. “Didn’t Mason say he’ll pick me up at 8?”

“You’re not going with that man,” I reply calmly, placing the bowl on the table. “I’m driving you, remember?”

He frowns, but doesn’t say anything.

“So, we need to get going well before 8,” I explain.

He takes only a few bites of the porridge, claiming he’s not hungry. Instead, he grabs a banana, so I let it go. I’ve got other cares on my mind today. If he doesn’t want more breakfast, so be it. He’s not a baby. Sometimes, I need to remind myself of that. He needs to be allowed to make his own mistakes, but it’s so gosh darn hard to let

him.

“You ready?” I ask him around 7:30.

We both head over to the car, and he explains where I need to drive. He’s silent during the ride, but that’s not unusual for him.

“Try to end it as soon as you can, OK?” I ask him, gripping the steering wheel a little tighter than I usually do.

I’m jumpy and on edge, and I know exactly why. But, I want those bikers to see that my boy has someone who will look out for him, no matter what. I’m scared, and I can feel my heart in my heels, urging me turn the car around and just tell them to go fuck themselves with their plan, but I know I can’t. Dominick needs to learn his lesson. And, apparently, it’s not a good idea to tell those guys to go fuck themselves.

We get there before 8. I get out of the car first, Dominick quickly after. I scan the place as we walk over to the door. It’s an old house, but with promise. If someone renovated it, it could be a real gem. But, none of the people I see there look interested in interior design. Harley bikes are parked to the side, dripping trails of motor oil leading all the way to the doors. Like a breadcrumb trail. So they wouldn’t lose their bikes, I suppose. I want to chuckle to myself, but I suppress the desire.

My hand firmly grips Dom’s shoulder, as I feel the burning gazes of those around us. Do they even know why we’re here? Dom seems more at ease. In a way, that makes me glad. He’s the one who will need to stay here, after all.

We reach the door, but before I can reach for the handle, I hear a voice behind us.

“Hey, lady! Can I help you?”

I turn around. The voice belongs to a young man, maybe not even twenty. He's only wearing a pair of jeans. His upper body is naked and covered in tattoos. He's scrawny, but muscular. I try to focus on his face, even though he's too far away for me to see him properly.

"I'm looking for Mason," I say, as confidently as I can.

He grins looking at the guy next to him, then whispers something to him. They both stare at me again, and chuckle loudly. I swallow heavily, feeling my hands getting clammy. These are the people I need to leave my kid with? Is this a fucking joke?

At that moment, I'm determined to leave and never come back. Mason can really go fuck himself. I take Dominick by the hand, his is cold but dry, and I turn to leave, but the sound of the opening door stops me.

"You're early," I hear the voice that makes my heart skip a beat, as I turn around. I know my cheeks are burning red, but I won't be made fun of. "I like that. But, wasn't I supposed to send someone for the kid?"

At the sound of those words, Dominick lets go of my hand. I feel my fingers trembling, deserted like that, in thin air, but I see he's not afraid. My boy is not afraid.

"I don't think it's a good idea for you or anyone here to be driving my child," I speak slowly, trying to sound dignified and full of self-confidence. Whether I actually managed to do that, is a whole different affair. "These bikes are way too dangerous for a child. So, I'll be driving him here and back home, when you're done."

I feel his stare on me, like I'm naked. I want him to stop looking at me that way, but I don't say anything. I just endure it.

"I see," Mason nods, leaning onto the doorway, casually.

His shirt is half-unbuttoned, and he's barefoot, in jeans. Little dark hairs emerge out of his shirt, covering his chest. His beard is bushier than last time, his hair curlier, darker. Everything about him seems more overpowering in broad daylight. For a moment, he reminds me of Captain Ahab, the one who kept going against Nature, in an effort to catch the elusive white whale. Unfortunately, that didn't end that well for him.

"I hope we can agree on that," I round up my little monologue.

"I don't see why not?" he shrugs with a smile.

For a moment, I can't connect this guy to anything bad everyone claims the bikers are involved in. I mean, how? He doesn't look like he has a single crooked bone in his body. He looks like those rich playboys who only care about sex and money. He's just not dressing the part, but he sure acts it. Then, I remember how that guy in the diner jumped up when Mason called. He just called. Nothing else. No threats. No intimidation. Just a simple order was enough. Not even said in a raised voice.

"Also, I'd like to stay here, while my son is with you" I add.

"What?" Dominick turns to me. "Mom, no..."

"I'm not leaving you alone with these... men."

I look up defiantly at Mason, but he seems simply amused by this. Far from annoyed.

"If the kid's OK with that..." he shrugs again, as if he doesn't care the least bit.

"Mom," Dominick hisses at me, pulling me to the side. "What are you doing?"

I bend down a little as he talks, and I know we look ridiculous. I'm making my son



look ridiculous, but I can't help it. It's what moms do. They make their kids look ridiculous with their behavior and they also keep their kids safe.

"Just go," he orders me. "I'll be fine."

I sense the desperation in his voice. He wants me gone. I'm cramping his style. I remember what it was like to be a girl, wanting to impress those older than me. But, these are the wrong kind of people to impress, and I want him to be fully aware of that. He's staying only until this job is done, and then we're keeping away from them. The last thing I want is to be put in the same basket with some criminals.

"You don't know these people, Dom," I whisper, placing my hands on his shoulder protectively.

"If they wanted to hurt me, they would have done it already, no?" he asks me, and it hits me that he's right.

People know my son is there now. What can they do to him? Apart from making him pay off the damages through painting, nothing. I bite my lower lip in helplessness. I don't want to leave him here, but it looks like I'll have to. I'm fuming mad. However, I don't show it.

"Fine," I whisper again, clenching the words through bared teeth. "But, if you need help, or anything, call me at the diner, alright?"

"Yeah," he nods, and I see that he feels even more embarrassed.

Together, we return to Mason. He has a victorious look on his face, as if things ended up exactly the way he wanted them to, and he didn't have to lift a single finger to do it. I want to wipe that smug smirk off his face, but what can I do?

“When should I come back to pick him up?” I ask, politely. There’s no point in making enemies of these people. At least, not while I’m in the position of leaving my son with them, unsupervised.

“No idea,” Mason shrugs again, and I swear, I want to punch him in the face. One can take only so much shrugging in 5 minutes’ time. “When it starts to get dark?”

“Fine,” I hiss. “I’ll pick him up a little after 7.”

“Sure thing,” Mason nods.

I look at Dominick. I want to wrap my arms around him, to tell him that everything will be alright. He’s still my little boy. All I’ve ever done and will do is for him to be safe. But, I don’t hug him. Instead, I just squeeze his right shoulder, smile at him, then turn around and walk back over to the car. When I look in their direction again, there is no sign of either Dominick or Mason. The rest of the bikers went back to their business, whatever it is.

Suppressing a bout of tears, I step on the gas pedal and rush back home. It’s hard to look through the windshield when you’ve got eyes full of tears, so I try to calm myself down. I guess it’s just one of those things that is bound to happen. Kids grow up. They don’t want their parents around as often as before. But, that doesn’t mean that I can stop worrying.

I stop by a small store to get some water. I see a book by the register. It’s an old Agatha Christie novel, in cheap paperback version. I add it to my bill. Books have always been my go to when I needed to unwind and de-stress. Now, with work and everything, it’s been increasingly hard to fit some reading time into my hectic schedule, but I figured this would be a good time to start. It might take my mind off of everything, and calm me down a little.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:18 pm*

The afternoon at the diner is slow, so Fred doesn't mind me slipping out for half an hour, just to pick up Dominick. I'm not sure what Bill would say, but he's not here anyway. If he comes back, Fred promised to say I just went out for a moment. Hiding like this doesn't make me feel good about myself, but I'll be damned if I let Dominick sit on that bike again. The very thought makes me furious and frightened at the same time. The worst mixture of emotions.

On the way there, I decide to drop by our place, to pick up some more money, just to have it on me. I know having all your savings on you, hiding inside the pillowcase, so to speak, is a bad idea. Once, a long time ago, I had my money in a safe place. The safest place, you'd say. It was in a bank, in a joint account. We both had access to it. We could both use it as we wished. Then, one day, a smiling clerk told me that I couldn't access it anymore. No matter what I'd say, she would just shrug her shoulders, her smile remaining the same. My hands are tied, she seemed to say, not caring one bit why this happened or how. She pretended not to see the dark circles underneath my eyes, the bruises on my wrists which peeked out of my long-sleeve t-shirt.

So, now, I keep my money close, so close that I can see it whenever I feel the need to. And, if someone tries to rob me... well, they can try. I'm determined to protect what is mine, what I love, to the death.

Feeling a little stressed out, but surprisingly less than this morning, I drive home. The traffic is light, and for a brief moment, I can forget about everything that has been bearing down onto me, like the heaviest burden.

"Eye of a hurricane, listen to yourself churn..." the radio sings, and I joyfully sing

along.

“World serves its own needs, don’t mis-serve your own needs, speed it up a notch, speed, grunt, no, strength, the ladder starts to clatter with a fear of height, down, height, wire in a fire...”

I remember how Dom and I would dance to REM, back when I thought everything would be alright, no matter what. But, I finally realized that my wishful thinking can’t change someone. It can’t change the outcome that is inevitable.

I turn into our street, and the sight before me makes me as mad as a hornet. A dark, shiny Harley bike rests in my yard, and I know what that means. He’s in my house. Alone with Dominick.

I step on the gas and park like a madman, straight in front. I rush out of the car, almost forgetting to lock it. Breathless, I slam the door open, expecting to see, I don’t know what. Blood? Mayhem? No one? But, I see none of that.

Dominick is in the living room, sitting on the floor. Mason sits a little above him, on the sofa. His hands are resting in his lap, holding a joystick. They’re playing PS. The sound of gunshots and people shouting is heard from the TV. They both look over at me.

The look on their face is one of puzzlement. I probably look like a mess. My cheeks are blushing, I can feel the heat rising from somewhere deep inside of me. The keys jangle in my hands, breaking the silence.

“Oh, hey mom,” Dominick greets me casually.

Mason just grins. He knows what he did. Oh yes. He must know. After we agreed on this, he still goes ahead and does whatever he wants.

“What is the meaning of this?” These are the only words that manage to form an actual thought inside my mind.

I stare Mason down, but instead of looking away, he locks his eyes with mine. They look like the blue lagoon, the deepest hue of cerulean. You want to dive into those eyes, you want them to envelop you from all sides, you want to see only azure around you and never wake up.

“We finished earlier,” Dominick explains, wondering why I look so upset.

“Didn’t I tell you to call me when you’re done?” I ask, trying to sound calm, but I’m boiling inside.

I don’t want my boy to spend more time with these people than necessary. Why is this man even in my house now? Who invited him in?

“I offered to call you,” Mason suddenly interferes, with the voice of a psychologist who seems to know exactly what’s wrong with you and how to cure you. Condescending. “But, apparently you’re the only living person who doesn’t own a cell phone.”

He looks over at Dominick, and they both exchange a smile. This enrages me. Who the Hell does he think he is, lecturing me on how I lead my life? But, I can’t get upset. These men are dangerous, and they have my son two days a week for God knows how long. I need to stay calm. The last thing I should do was argue with any of them.

“We don’t have a cell phone, yes,” I confirm. “I told Dominick to call me at the diner.”

“I did call you,” Dominick shoots his reply at me. “No one was picking up.”

That catches me off guard. I try to remember if I heard the phone ring, but I can't. It's possible, though. I can't be sure. Mason nods, in cahoots with my son.

"I drove really slowly," Mason grins. "Ask him."

"Yeah, mom, he really did," Dominick assures me. As if that will change my mind about anything.

"At least that," I mumble, more to myself than to them.

"Why don't you join us?" Mason suddenly asks me, patting the empty place next to him on the sofa.

My blood reaches the point of boiling, and I feel hot in my own skin. Losing my clothes wouldn't help even if I tried it. I blush even more, and I feel weak in the knees. I have no idea why this man's presence is making me feel this way. Sure, he's handsome, but in that I-know-you-want-me way, and I hate that. Always did.

"Um, I... I can't," I manage to muster, taking a step back. "I need to get back to the diner. You need me to leave you some money for pizza?" I ask Dominick.

"I already ate," he informs me. "We ordered a pizza before Mason brought me home."

"Well... " I glance at Mason. "Thank you. You didn't have to do that."

"You've got a really hard working boy here, Danica," he replies, his voice sweet as honey, and for a moment, I almost think he's going to ask something of me, a favor of some sort. But, he doesn't. "You don't think I'd leave him hungry, do you?"

"Of course not," I answer quickly.

I want to ask him to leave. But, I don't say anything. I look at both of them for a few moments longer, then Dominick turns to the TV first.

"Come on, Mason," he says, all fueled up. "We need to reach the tower before the wolves get there."

Mason shrugs his shoulders at me, with that same grin, and I'm defenseless. There is nothing I can say or do. I can't throw him out of my home. I can't even ask him to leave. It's too risky. It's too rude. I'm afraid what he might do as retaliation. So, I just need to keep calm and endure these few weeks. Then, both me and Dominick can steer clear of them, just like we did so far.

"I actually have to get going," Mason suddenly says, putting the joystick away. "I just wanted to make sure you got home safe and sound."

I snort hearing him say that, and the irony behind it, but Mason pretends not to notice it.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Mason says, patting Dominick on the back.

Dominick just smiles, and a thought occurs to me. I haven't seen him smile like that in years. The thought hurts, as much as it brings me joy.

Mason walks out with me, then waits for me to close the front door.

"You don't really like me, do you?" he asks so matter-of-factly that it almost makes me drop my jaw.

Instead, it takes me only a moment to gather myself, and I smile a genuine smile.

"What makes you say that?" I answer his question with another question.

My body is pointed to the car, and I know I'm just a few steps away from ending this conversation. And yet, I don't move. I stay where I am. So does he.

"Well, I wouldn't be where I am if I didn't learn to read people," he explains, but I hear no ill will behind it.

I'm tempted to mention his line of work, and that this is exactly why I'd rather not hang out with him in any way. The same goes for my son. Unfortunately, my son went ahead and did something extremely stupid, so our paths are forced to cross.

"We just moved here recently, and I - "

"I know," he cuts me. "You've been living here exactly five months and a few days."

"How do you know that?" I frown.

"This is my town," he grins. "Shitty and small, but it's mine. I keep it safe. I provide whatever it needs. No one moves here without me giving a prior consent."

I want to roll my eyes at him, snort, do something to make him aware of the fact that I'm not impressed by his power or stature or money. I'm not like the rest of the townsfolk from around here, who may be swooned by his charm or promises. I see through him, for what he really is, and I can't say I like what I see.

"But, what I couldn't find out was the real reason behind your move here."

His last sentence rings in my mind, like a million church bells, warning me to watch my step. I swallow heavily, thinking of the right thing to say to that.

"Like I told Old Bill when I was applying to that job," I start as calmly as I could, but my fingers are trembling, "Dominick and I are alone. I just wanted him to grow up



somewhere nice.”

“The city isn’t such a nice place to raise a kid, is it?” he asks, as if he knows.

“Not really,” we finally agree on something.

“Thank you for bringing him home,” I force myself to say this, even though the last thing I feel is gratitude. “But, I’ll take over again from tomorrow.”

“I’ll see him tomorrow then,” he smiles a mischievous smile, one that doesn’t make me feel very confident that things would go my way.

He winks at me, then walks over to his bike. He steps over it skillfully, his hands wrapped around the handle bars, his boots still on the ground. Within seconds, he revs the engine. It growls in reply, as he presses harder on the gas pedal. He doesn’t grace me with more attention. Instead, he slides down the street, followed by noise that makes people frown and roll their eyes. But, I don’t do any of that. I take a deep breath, hoping that whatever comes out of this won’t return to bite me in the ass.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:18 pm*

Adrian

I stop in the front of the right house. There is no confusing it with some other. We all know what happened there a long time ago. The whole town knows it. They managed to wash the blood out of the cellar, but the stories will never be silenced.

I couldn't care less about stories. They taught me, a long time ago, that fairy tales don't exist. Not even for little children, and their hearts break the easiest. So, no fairy tales. Just cold, hard facts. That's the only thing you can rely on in this world. You learn to adapt to it, and after a few lashes life gives you, you know how to act. How to react.

And, the facts about this house are that it's a nice house. Plus, because of what happened a long time ago, it's cheap. I'm guessing that's why the woman got it. She's probably renting. Maybe she bought it? Maybe she came here with some savings? But, who comes to Swallow Springs with any savings? A ridiculous notion.

I get off my bike, making sure it's standing sturdy. It's 7 am. The best time of the day. Most people are still inside. Apart from a few of those who need to be somewhere else. This street smells like wildflowers, like flowering dogwood. That's always been my favorite tree. For no particular reason, really. It doesn't remind me of anything. There is no sweet childhood memory connected to it. It simply smells nice. It soothes my mind. It caresses my nostrils. Sometimes, a simple thing like that is more than enough to enjoy something.

I adjust the kid safety helmet hanging from the back of my bike. I consider taking it with me, but I opt against it. I walk over to the door. The pavement is hard, clean. A

few ingrown weeds and grass pierce through it. There is a tree right in the yard, providing pleasant shade.

I lift my finger and press the doorbell. A few moments later, a woman opens the door. She is wearing an oversized t-shirt, which smells like the bed, freshly washed linens and now, fried eggs and bacon.

Her eyes widen when she sees me. She doesn't recognize me. Why should she? I watched her as she went up to the house yesterday morning. She walks with a slight leaning to the left side, but it's not noticeable at all. She has a habit of pushing stray hairs behind her left ear, even when there is no stray hair there. All of it is up in a messy bun. I adjust my glasses before I speak to her.

"Good morning," I tell her.

"Good morning," she replies, but it sounds more like a question.

She probably knows why I'm here. But, she doesn't show it.

"Mason sent me."

At the mention of his name, her face scrunches up a little. I can see a few lines in the corner of her eyes. But, her face is smooth. Sun kissed. Her hair is slightly oily, but not dirty. Her nails are short. Almost cut to the bone. She is barefoot. No nail polish there, either.

She sighs before she replies. She is annoyed. Her nostrils flare up a little, just before she speaks.

"I told him I'd bring Dominick over myself."

Her voice is melodic. A mother's voice. There is no such thing in the world as a mother's voice. I should know.

I don't reply anything to that. Instead, I walk back to the bike, and get the helmet. I return to where she's standing, shyly trying to pull down the hem of her sleep t-shirt, which wouldn't go past the middle of her thighs.

"Does Dominick own a bicycle?" I ask. She gives me a look as if I'm speaking a language belonging to a whole different branch of languages.

"What?" she gives me a startled look.

"Does Dominick own a bicycle?" I repeat, politely. I'm not upset. The point is to get my point across. Sometimes, it takes a little while with some people.

"No," she shakes her head. "I haven't bought one yet."

"Research shows that bicycle injuries account for about 10% of all pediatric traumatic deaths," I reveal something she, as a mother, probably already knows, only its passive knowledge. "Bicycle helmets have proven to decrease morbidity and mortality."

"Alright..." she replies, still sounding confused.

"Research also supports the use of a correctly adjusted helmet, for the purpose of reducing the risk of bicycle-related head injury. This can also be applied to motorcycle related injuries, provided of course, that the speed remains within the necessary safety confines. Now, I've seen your child. From what I've seen, he is at least four feet, nine inches, which is lawfully required for a child to ride on the back of a motorcycle. In other words, he needs to be tall enough to reach motorcycle passenger footrests. I've also witnessed this."

She seems like a confused child, hearing my words.

“If your son wears this,” I offer her the helmet, “there should be no legal or otherwise restrictions imposed on either of us.”

At that moment, Dominick rushes over to her side, and his eyes widen upon seeing me.

“Adrian, right?” he asks. I nod. “Mom, this is Adrian. He showed me how to paint without brush marks.”

“That’s... nice,” she says, not taking her eyes off of me. “I’m Danica.”

She offers me her hand, and I squeeze it. It’s soft and warm. She uses coconut moisturizer on her hands. Her body, too. But, I don’t tell her that. I used to do that, but it turns out people don’t like it when you tell them such things about themselves. Too intimate somehow.

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Danica,” I tell her, shaking her hand.

“Same,” she replies.

“I can wait, if Dominick isn’t ready.”

“Well, we’re still having breakfast,” she sounds apologetic. She hesitates a little. “Would you like to come in while you wait?”

“No, thank you,” I reply. She looks surprised, but relieved. “I can wait outside. It’s a nice day.”

“Well, alright then,” she smiles a little awkwardly, not sure if she should just leave it

at that.

A moment or two pass, and she closes the door. I walk back to the bike and stand by it. A woman and a man walk out of the house across the street. Her dress is slightly above her knees, and she is clutching a bag to her right. The man is wearing a business suit, and the keys jangle in his hands. He doesn't even notice me as he walks over to his car. She does, but pretends not to. I watch them as they drive away a minute or two later.

Her face strikes me as familiar, even though I'm not sure why. I've never seen her before. She looks just like any other woman I see on the streets every day. She doesn't smile when she sees me. None of them do. I'm not even sure I want them to. All I still see before me are the crooked faces, laughing, their teeth stained yellow. The sound of circus music rings inside my mind. Pain. Just pain, from early on.

At that moment, I hear the door open, and Dominick rushes out. His mother follows. Her hands are crossed in front of her breasts. She is still barefoot, so she remains on the doorstep. She gives him a kiss on the head. Quick. Soft. Motherly. Dominick looks a little embarrassed, but he smiles. He rushes over to me.

"Please, don't drive too fast," I hear her say.

Her voice trembles barely noticeably. She thought long and hard whether or not she should say that. She is worried. Of course, she is. Mothers usually are, when they need to let their children go.

"I promise you he will be fine," I tell her.

I'm only being honest, and I think she can tell. I'm not saying it just to make her feel better. I put the helmet on the boy's head. It fits perfectly. I adjust it underneath his chin, making sure it stays on firmly.

“How is it?” I ask him.

“Perfect!” he replies in a way only a child can. Excited. Full of joy.

He waves at his mother as he gets up on the bike. After I made sure he’s safe, I sit as well. I don’t know if his mother is still on the doorstep, but I guess she probably is, as we drive away. Mothers are like that.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:18 pm*

Seeing Dominick off feels easier this morning. Adrian seems strange. He's unlike anyone I've ever met. Especially taking into account how he talks. Almost like he's reading a script inside his mind. But, it's sweet. When he told me that Dominick would be fine, I believed him. I saw him for the first time today, but I believed him, as strange as it may sound.

I walk back into the house and close the door. I make sure to lock it, too. Everyone keeps saying that this is a safe town, a safe neighborhood, but they don't know what I know. They haven't gone through what I have. They don't know that something from the past might come back to haunt them. That is why the door always needs to be locked.

As I pass by the kitchen wall, I check the wall calendar. It's still not that time. I could check, of course, but the results won't be updated yet. I need to be a little more patient.

I clean up the kitchen table quickly. I do the dishes. I prefer not to use the washer. It wastes water. Besides, when there's only two people in a household, there are never that many dishes. I change the water in the little vase, and the flowers immediately perk up. I adjust the curtain on the kitchen window, having a quick glance outside. It overlooks the back part of the house. The yard extends a little more, and then there is the view of another house. I've seen a lady there once. We waved to each other once, but neither of us was all that willing to make the first step towards anything friendlier than that. And, that's alright. The last thing I want to be is pushy in making new friends.

I get dressed quickly, picking the first dress out of my closet. The pickings are slim.



Not that I mind, though. When you need to leave in the middle of the night, you don't really pack a lot of stuff. Just the basics. The stuff you don't want to leave behind, still making sure not to be burdened too heavily by it. Running away is difficult business.

It's a light summer dress, with sunflowers on it. It's long enough to cover my knees, something I used to be especially particular with before. Now, not so much. No one is calling me a whore if I wear something a little shorter or more revealing. But, in all honesty, I don't feel any need for such clothes. I feel perfectly fine in a pair of sweatpants and a plain old t-shirt. Still, can't go to work like that.

I dab a little bit of make up on, just some mascara and lip gloss. When I look at myself in the mirror, I am pleasantly surprised by the result. I actually look presentable, as Susie likes to say.

I grab my bag and keys, and rush outside. If nothing happens on the way there, I'll be right on time. And, I am. I open the diner, turning over the closed sign. I turn on the lights. Fred will be coming in soon. Bill might, as well. He comes in less and less frequently. I can see the exhaustion on his face. He's not a young man any longer. He should rest more. Just stay at home and do something that relaxes him. But, I don't know him that well yet, to share such personal advice. So, I just smile when I see him, leaving the well-mannered advice for Susie and Rocky, who've been working here much longer than I have.

My shift passes quickly. It's busy. I see familiar faces, and even some new ones, passing through our little town. It's strange how I came to call this place our little town in such a short amount of time. I guess that's a good thing. It means I feel at home. I feel safe. Well, as safe as I could ever feel, under these circumstances. I wonder if Dominick feels the same way. We're still close, but he's hitting that age when a boy can't confide only in his mother. We had no issues before, but then, he was a boy. He's slowly becoming a young man, and I fear that a day will come when

I will no longer be enough for him. A boy needs a father. He needs a male role model to guide him through life.

I try not to dwell on it too much though. If he feels safe here, then that is more than enough. We'll deal with whatever comes our way, together.

My shifts ends, and I stay an hour longer to help Susie, even though she assures me there is no need. I still do so. Once the crowd cleared up a little, I head out.

"Thanks for helping out," Susie smiles behind the counter.

"You've helped me out so many times, I should be thanking you every time I see you," I smile back. "See you tomorrow."

"Sure thing, darling!"

I wave at Fred whose head peeps from the kitchen window, and he waves back. He's in his early forties, but due to his weight, he looks at least ten years younger. I've noticed the looks he gives Susie, but she is too smitten by Hunter. Honestly, I doubt she'd even be attracted to Fred if he came forward with his feelings. But, you never know.

I get into my car, with the previously set plan to just go home and do some yard work. The lawn is in desperate need of a trim, and the weeds are trying to occupy my flower bed. However, another plan starts hatching. I want to drive by the bikers' place and see what Dominick is doing. They won't be expecting me, so that's the perfect moment to see what they're really doing and put my mind at ease.

With a determined smile on my face, I head over there. I pass a few streets, a woman with a stroller, a couple of cyclists and a small lever that was lowered, but lifted even without a train having passed. I reach my destination shortly after and park a little

further down the street. I return on foot.

The place is calm. There are less people than last time. Only two bikes are there, settled nicely away from the building. The gravel crunches as I walk over, as confidently as I can. I try not to remember how they laughed at me last time. It doesn't matter. They can laugh at me all they want. I'm not here to be judged or to be liked. I'm here to see if my boy is safe. Nothing else matters.

I walk a little down the road, to the house. I stop behind a pile of rubble. It doesn't hide me fully from plan view, but it's good enough. I see the house. I hear voices behind it. One of them is Dominick's. It sounds like he's laughing. He's joined in by two other voices. They're all laughing now.

I check the time on my watch. It's only 3 pm. He won't be returning for a few hours. Maybe I should just leave before he sees me, and thinks I'm trying to control him. Obviously, he's having fun. I'm probably blowing this way out of proportion. He's just painting the wall, after all. They won't recruit him. I mean... will they?

I turn around to go, but I crash right into someone, who's obviously been standing right behind me for a while. I take a step back, stifling a gasp of shock. I wasn't expecting to see Mason. Not like this, anyway.

"Sorry, I..." I start, fully aware that it's not my place to apologize here.

But, it's ingrained in me. Years of apologizing for something I haven't done have actually made me believe that no matter what happens, I should apologize first.

"Came to see if we're brainwashing your son?" he asks.

I know to him it sounds like he's just joking, but he's closer to the truth than he knows. I swallow heavily, trying to smile.

“I just wanted to see if he’s OK,” I admit.

“You really don’t trust us.”

“I haven’t said that,” I try.

“But, you’re showing it,” he continues. “Even after I sent Adrian with a helmet for Dominick.”

“I really appreciate that...”

“Maybe you’d like to come and see him?”

“No, no,” I shake my head fervently. He seems surprised I’d refuse it so strongly. “I don’t want him to think I don’t trust him.”

“So, it’s him you don’t trust, not us?” he asks.

I sigh heavily, looking around. There is no one.

“It’s actually both,” I answer, feeling a wave of confidence wash over me.

To my surprise, Mason starts laughing. His lips widen, revealing a perfectly straight, white set of teeth. Little lines appear around his mouth, but it only adds to his charm.

“At least you’re honest,” he tells me. “Listen, I know we sound like the worst pieces of shit around here, but trust me. We’re not. I’ll even let you in on a secret...” Now, it’s his turn to lean closer to me, first checking whether there’s anyone around us. “Half of that stuff they say we did isn’t true. It’s just gossip. You know, to make them think we’re horrible pieces of shit.”

I chuckle at the choice of his words, even though I'm not a fan of such humor.

"OK then," I suddenly remember the story Susie told me, and decide to check it from the source. Whether the source will be truthful or not, now that's a whole different ball game. "What about Sam Michaels?"

He recognizes the name. His brow furrows just enough to reveal his surprise. His face changes and he gives me a strange look. It takes him a moment or two to come up with a reply.

"How do you know about Sam Michaels?" he says, not really offering a response at first.

"Like you said, word gets around."

I feel a certain sense of victory. Of course, I'm well aware that Mason will probably lie to me. He'll say that he either doesn't know what happened or that he had nothing to do with it. Whatever of those two choices. Still, something wouldn't let me turn around and just walk away. Deep down, I want to remain here and talk to this man, who awakens so many different, conflicting sensations inside of me. I fear him, and yet I want to remain close to him. He excites me, but I want him at a safe distance from me. For now, I decide to stay, wanting to see where all this will lead.

"Well, since you are asking so nicely..." he starts, then pauses to take something out of his right pocket. It's a used out package of Marlboro's. He offers me one, but I shake my head. "Strange. I'd have pegged you as a smoker. No offense."

"I was," I nod. "And, none taken."

"So, you actually quit successfully?" he chuckles, putting one of those cigarettes in his mouth and lighting it up with a small gold covered lighter. "Well done."

“Thanks,” I reply. I don’t continue to tell him how I managed to do it. Through threats and having a few of them branded into my bare skin. The scars have almost faded. The physical ones, at least.

“Now, Sam,” he starts, takes a deep puff and exhales with great pleasure right in my face. I don’t move, nor do I cough. I know he’s only doing it to get a raise out of me, but I won’t give him the satisfaction. “Sam did some stupid shit, I’ll give you that. But, we sorted it out.”

“People seem to think he’s disappeared,” I correct him, aware that I’m walking a fine line here, but I want to push it til the end.

“How’s that my fault?” he replies, sounding genuinely surprised at my question.

“Apparently, he wronged you and then you killed him,” I say, and realize what I’ve said only once the words already left my lips.

I’m expecting anything at this point. Him drawing a gun. Him pushing me to the ground. Maybe even hitting me. Calling me all sorts of names. But, he does none of that. Instead, he chuckles again, and I realize that for the last few seconds, I’ve been flinching, waiting for a storm to happen. Old habits die hard, I guess. Even when you do your best to erase them from your memory.

“So, you’ve been talking to some people who really hate us,” he says, with a smile still lingering on his lips.

“Everyone seems to think you’re criminals. Is that a wrong assumption?” I wonder.

“Do you think Robin Hood was a criminal?” he asks, and I have to suppress a laugh.

“So, you’re comparing yourself to the legendary heroic outlaw who stole from the

rich and gave to the poor?”

“Would that make you like me?” he asks, so mischievously that my cheeks are immediately fired up, and the answer is written all over my face.

“Why would my opinion matter?” I decide that attack is the best defense, and from the look on his face, I see he enjoys this little banter. Surprisingly, so do I.

“Well, we have to spend some time together, whether we like it or not,” he tells me. “Of course it matters if one side hates the other.”

“Eh, now. Hate.”

“Too strong?” he winks at me.

“Way too strong,” I nod. “I don’t even know you. I don’t tend to hate people just based on what I’ve heard of them.”

“That’s good,” he takes a step back, eyeing me from top to bottom. “You don’t hate me. But, you’re afraid of me.”

I almost gasp at his words. I’ve never met someone so outspoken, someone who wouldn’t give a single damn about social proprieties, giving himself the right to ask all sorts of questions that people usually leave unasked.

I take a deep breath before I reply. We’re in deep, muddy waters now, and I need to tread even more carefully.

“Well, let’s see the facts,” I clear my throat a little. “I am in a situation where I have no other choice but to leave my son unattended, with people who are considered criminals in this town. Wouldn’t you be a little worried and scared if you were me?”

There's that victorious feeling again. I left him speechless. I see him biting his lower lip, trying not to smile, but we both know it. I'm right. And, it's fun.

"Alright, alright," he lifts his arms in a gesture of mock surrender. "You do have a point. See, that's why you need to get to know us. Get to know me. So, you know we're not all Devil's rejects here."

"I do appreciate the movie reference," I smile at him, enjoying his shock at the fact that he's not the only fan of Rob Zombie's flicks. "But, I need to head back home. I don't want my son to think I don't trust him."

"It's us you don't trust," he repeats.

I smile, and leave my comment for myself, even though I'm sure he knows it already.

"Will Adrian be bringing Dominick home?" I ask.

"If that's what you want," he replies.

"Yes."

"Then, it will be so."

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

I try to make my departure casual, so I just lift my hand a little awkwardly in a wave. As I turn, I stumble over a big rock, and almost fall down, but he jumps to my aid, wrapping his arm around my waist and keeping me upright.

"You alright?" he asks, and I can feel the warmth of his breath caressing my cheek.



“Yes, I just...” I quickly regain balance, and remove his hand from my waist.

Him being so close is dangerous. Too dangerous, and I’m not in the mood to be playing with fire. I had enough of that. I’m too clever to recognize when someone is not good for me, and there are signs screaming at me from all sides to just back down.

“Thanks,” I say again, pointing with my index finger at the ground, at the rock, then at myself.

“Sure thing,” he chuckles.

I quickly turn away and rush over to my car. I don’t need to look in his direction to know that he’s still following me with those piercing blue eyes, and he will continue to do so until I disappear from sight. It doesn’t matter. I won’t be returning here again. Dominick will hopefully be finished in a week, and I’ll be able to put all this behind me.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:18 pm*

When I check the time, I see that it's way past 7 pm. I already made dinner, but if it's going to be like the previous day, Dominick will have eaten by the time he comes home. I try not to be nervous, but I can't help it. I'm just one step away from grabbing my car keys and heading over there, to pick him up myself. But, I remind myself that he's probably on his way. I also remind myself that Adrian will be driving him. He understands where I'm coming from. I could hear it in his voice. Unlike Mason. Everything seems to be just amusement to him. I doubt he takes anything seriously in life.

At that moment, I hear the front door open, and I rush over there. Dominick is already inside, and he's taking off his helmet. He offers it to Adrian.

"You keep it," Adrian shakes his head.

It only hits me now that he has no hair. For a moment, I wonder if he's bald or if he shaves it all off. His beard is longer than Mason's. Still dark and bushy. So is his moustache. He is holding a pair of dark sunglasses in his hand, which rests by his thighs.

"Hey, mom!" Dominick waves at me cheerfully.

I see he's totally messy. His clothes are splashed with paint, and he even managed to get some in his hair.

"I see someone needs a thorough bath tonight," I smile.

"Mooom..." Dominick whines, and I know when it's my time to zip it. "Thanks,

Adrian.”

The two bump fists in some weird, elaborate way, which I don’t even try to follow in order to remember. Hopefully, next week will be the last time Adrian will be taking him for a ride. The thought fills me with hope and serenity. Life will go back to what it was.

“Did you guys have dinner?” I ask.

“No, it was only Adrian and me,” Dominick explains. “Mason was there for a little, but he had to go, with the rest of the gang.”

“So, you must be hungry,” I smile, referring only to my son.

But, words tend to be taken out of context, especially when you least want them to be.

“Oh, we are,” Dominick nods at me. “Hey, Adrian, why don’t you stay for dinner?”

I open my mouth to thank Adrian and wish him a good night, but my son’s words make me swallow my own before I even say them. I look at Adrian. I’m confused, expecting him to graciously refuse.

“I haven’t had dinner yet,” he replies. “It makes sense.”

And, with those words he enters our house, making sure to take off his shoes. Dominick rushes after him excitedly, and I hear them talking in the kitchen. I’m still standing by the open door, wondering how the Hell this just happened.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself down. It’s just a dinner guest. No one special. And, besides, better him than Mason. I assure myself that it’ll be all over

quickly. Adrian is practical, led by logic. He'll probably leave the moment he's eaten enough. I smile at the weirdness of the whole situation, because, what else is there to do?

When I enter the kitchen, I see Dominick is sitting next to Adrian. He's busy explaining something about one of his previous school projects, the one about the mill. And, surprisingly, I hear Adrian reply with suggestions on what he can improve next time. The smile on my son's face is priceless. Suddenly, it hits me. He doesn't see these men as I do. To him, they aren't criminals. He isn't afraid of them. Fear is probably the last thing on his mind when he sees them.

I set up plates for all of us, and Adrian's barely audible thank you doesn't escape me. Dominick keeps on talking, and the sight fills me with joy. I take out the chicken and peas, and toast some bread. I put some food on everyone's plates, starting with Dominick's and ending with mine.

"If you need more, feel free to help yourself," I tell Adrian.

"Daily calorie requirement for active males age 31 to 50 is 2,900. I had only 1 serving of meat today, and two servings of vegetables. That leaves one serving of meat and two servings of vegetables."

"I could make you a salad, if the peas aren't enough," I reply all confused, looking at the food before us. Dominick has a sneer on. He's obviously used to Adrian acting this way.

"I see you have apples there," he points at the fruit bowl on the kitchen counter. "May I have one before I go?"

"Of-of course," I mumble, nodding.

Adrian adjusts the napkin on his lap, and aligns his elbows on the table, as he takes the fork and knife. Dominick isn't so attentive to detail. He starts shoving the food into his mouth immediately, while I'm still trying to process if I should go and whip up a quick salad for everyone, in addition to the peas.

Adrian eats slowly, making sure to chew thoroughly. He is a silent eater, unlike my son, but I'm used to it. We all eat without many words exchanged. When he's done, Adrian places the fork and knife aligned in his plate. He takes the napkin and dabs the corner of his lips. A few bread crumbs are stuck in his beard, and I don't know how to tell him.

"You got a little something here," Dominick does me a favor and tells Adrian himself.

He tries to shake it out of his beard, but the crumbs are stubborn. They won't budge. Then, Dominick gets up and picks them out himself. He returns to his seat, and smiles.

"Can I get you a coffee?" I ask Adrian. "There's also ice cream in the freezer."

"Thank you," Adrian shakes his head. "Preliminary research shows that late night caffeine intake affects one internal clock, making you feel tired."

"Something like jet lag?" Dominick asks.

"Exactly," Adrian nods.

"Have you ever flown with an airplane?" Dominick asks him.

"No. Have you?"

“No,” Dominick shakes his head, sounding disappointed.

“There’s time for all of that later,” I get up, clearing the table. “But, you’re right about the coffee thing.”

“It’s not me,” he shrugs. “There is research behind it.”

I look at Dominick and we both smile at each other. A part of me wants to ask if this is how he acts all the time, but that would sound way too rude. He is my guest after all. And, he makes sure my son arrives home safe.

“I can help with that,” Adrian suddenly gets up and tries to take the plates from my hands.

“Oh, no, no,” I smile. “You’re my guest. He should actually be doing this.”

I point at Dominick, and he tries to hide his face in his hands, as if that will make him invisible. I chuckle a little.

“But, it’s alright,” I nod, taking the dishes to the sink.

“I won’t be taking up more of your time then,” I hear Adrian’s voice behind me.

It’s not that late, and I’m tempted to tell him to stay. Anyone who can make my son smile like that is always welcome in our house. But, I don’t say anything. Instead, I wipe my hands with the kitchen towel, and turn to him.

“Thank you for dinner,” he tells me, as his beard shakes a little.

It’s clean now, free of any dinner remnants. His face is smooth, and I realize he must be younger than I originally thought. There are no lines around his eyes, which are

slightly elongated. Then, I see the faint line of a facial scar that starts in the middle of his right cheek, and disappears in his bushy beard. I realize I'm staring, so I quickly look to the side.

"Thank you for making sure my son comes home safe," I smile back. I really mean it.

Dominick and I walk him over to the door together.

"Next Saturday at 7:30?" Adrian asks.

Dominick and I both nod. He just waves quickly, then his motorbike disappears down the street, swallowed by darkness.

"He's a bit weird, isn't he?" I comment, as I close the door.

"Well, you'd be weird, too if you were sold to the circus as a kid," Dominick tells me, and at first, I'm not sure I heard it right.

"Wait, what do you mean?"

I catch up with him in the living room, and we both sit down on the couch.

"The circus?" I repeat. "Like, the real circus?"

"Not the funny clowns we have today."

"Then what?"

"The old circus," he continues to explain. "With the freak shows, where you'd pay to see something strange and unusual."

“But, he’s not that old!”

“Mom,” he takes my hand in his, pausing a little. “These bikers... they are bear shifters.”

“What!?” I jump from the sofa. “You mean I just had a bear shifter in my home?”

“Yeah,” he nods, looking all relaxed.

“But, they’re dangerous!” I shout again. “You’re not going back there again! And... we’re moving... no way we’re staying in this fucked up town!”

I look around, feeling like a caged tiger. I paid for half a year on this place, and I’ve been considering buying it. But, I didn’t know any of this before. We can’t live in a shifter town. They stay away from humans. We stay away from them. It’s been like that ever since we realized that we were all sharing this earth together.

Dominick walks over to me slowly, and he wraps his arms around me. I can feel his still growing chest pressed against mine, his heartbeat slow and steady. Unlike mine. We remain like that for a few moments. He’s waiting for me to calm down. When he lets go of me, I actually do feel a little better.

“Do the rest of the townsfolk know this?” I ask.

“Of course,” he smiles at me. “That’s not a secret they can keep for very long.”

“And, everyone is fine with that?”

“Well, what does it look like to you?” he asks me.

Now, it seems a little clearer. People are afraid. But, at the same time, they are



grateful. They are taken care of. They are protected. Even if that means that the bikers do a little bit of damage here and there. There's always a price to pay.

"Aren't you afraid of them?"

I look at my son, my brave son who has survived more than a child his age should, who has seen more than a child his age should see. I watch him as he grows into a fine young man, who, like many of us, does tend to stray a little. But, if he remains on the right path, that's all that matters.

"They're actually not that bad," Dominick tells me. "They're like you and I. They're normal. They don't transform like every day. It's actually very painful, Mason told me. They do it only if it's utterly necessary."

"That's good," I reply, not really sure what I wanted to say with that.

"And, they are very open. Like, you can ask them anything and they'll tell you, straightforward."

"I see," I nod.

"That's how I know about Adrian and his childhood."

"The circus?" I remember.

"Yeah. Do you want me to tell you?"

"Didn't he share that in confidence?" I wonder.

"I doubt he'll mind. He's not ashamed of it, or anything. But, maybe you'll understand why he's so strange."

And, with those words, I realize the extent of my son's wisdom. I feel a little embarrassed, so I look down. He's right. I judged them based on what I saw, based on what others in town were telling me. I never stopped to think for myself that maybe, just maybe they were just like us, with a human story of their lives that might explain why there are as they are.

"Tell me," I smile, as Dominick leads me back to the sofa.

"Adrian belonged to an old clan of bear shifters. There was a battle and he was the only one who survived, because his mother hid him in the forest. She said she would come back for him, but he waited and waited. When she didn't come, he eventually returned to their village, only to see everyone killed."

Hearing this, I gasp, and I see the same sadness on my son's face.

"He roamed the woods for days, when a poor woodcutter found him. Adrian tried to defend himself, so he transformed into a bear, but he was only a little kid. There wasn't much he could do. So, this woodcutter took him in, fed him, gave him clothes, but he could barely provide for himself, let alone for a kid, so he sold him to a passing circus. The guy who owned the circus was evil. He made Adrian transform every night, even though Adrian kept begging him. It hurt him. But, this guy just wanted money. Adrian grew up in that circus, and one day, he realized he wasn't a helpless child anymore. He didn't want to stay in that place where all he knew was pain and misery. So, he ran away. He didn't want to hurt the guy. But, he told me he was very close to snapping his neck. Still, he didn't. He lived alone for a while, and then he met Mason. Adrian said that his life changed the moment their paths crossed."

"That's quite a story," I take a deep breath, letting it sink in.

"He didn't say it in those words exactly, but I think he feels better when he talks

about facts. You know, like stuff that he has researched well and that is grounded in some scientific knowledge or background. That's probably why he sounds like he's reading from a chemistry book all the time."

We both chuckle at the same time, but not because we were laughing at Adrian. On the contrary, this is the moment that I realized how wrong I've been to take these men for granted. My son is right. So young, and yet, his horizons are much broader than mine, at least in this respect.

But, fear taps me on the shoulder again, reminding me to be careful. Sure they were nice to him. But, they were still dangerous. Yes, it's possible that they could be decent human beings, but I can't let my guard down. It's too dangerous. Still, I could be nicer to them. That's always an option. And, one that shouldn't cost me much.

"I'm happy that he's giving you a ride on his bike, and not Mason," I comment, but a moment later, I realize that I shouldn't have said anything.

Dominick gives me a puzzled look. Of course he has no idea that I was there this afternoon, and that Mason and I had a little chat.

"Adrian just sounds more reasonable, that's all," I shrug my shoulders, trying to lessen the importance of my comment. "And, reasonable people are better drivers. Research shows it."

We both chuckle again at my words, and I enjoy the newly found feeling of closeness with my son. I glance at the watch and realize it's bed time.

"I know, I know," Dominick tells me, getting up. "No TV. Bed time."

"Of course," I nod. "You're still grounded, you know."

“I know,” he smiles back at me, and I realize that maybe, just maybe, things might end OK for us.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:18 pm*

Wagner

I finish running all my errands for the day, and I head back to the house. I take the roundabout way for some reason. Needed some peace and quiet, I guess. There's very little of that left nowadays, especially in this line of work.

Suddenly, something catches my eye. I see an old, run down car, by the end of the road. A back is seen. Then, an ass. A nice looking ass, too, wearing tight jeans.

"Fucking fuck, fuck, fuck!" I hear a woman's voice curse.

I chuckle to myself. The only time you'd hear a decent woman swear like that is when her tire is blown. And, sure enough, I see her stand up straight, face all red with anger and heat, hands resting on her hips, as she looks down at a flat tire.

I stop a little ahead of her, resting my bike by the side of the road. The noise disturbs her, and she turns to face me. There's something familiar about her. Her lips. Her eyes. They remind me of someone. A look of misery drops down on her face, and at that moment, I realize who she is. She's the mom of that kid we've been babysitting since last weekend.

"Flat tire, huh?" I approach her.

She eyes me distrustfully. It takes her a while to nod. Perfectly round face. Big dark eyes. Hair up in a slick ponytail. Flawless skin. She's wearing a tight t-shirt. Her tits are small but they look perky. Her stomach is flat. Probably toned. Those jeans look perfect on her. I'd never say she's anyone's mother. Lookin' like that... The word

milf immediately pops to mind, but I must stay polite. Mason would have my balls on a stick if he hears I disrespected this lady in any way.

“I’m Wagner, by the way,” I offer her my hand. “I’m with the gang.” I point at my bike, behind me.

“Danica,” she accepts my hand. Squeezes it firmly, like a man. I didn’t expect that of her. A pleasant surprise. “I think I’ve seen you when I was dropping off Dominick.”

“Yeah,” I grin.

I kneel down. These fucking jeans are making it hard to do a man’s job in this God forsaken heat. But, I still kneel down.

“Let’s see what we got here,” I grunt.

She remains standing. The wind blows in my direction, and a whiff of her perfume hits me. Something flowery. The girly shit which usually makes me wanna puke. But, on her it smells like Heaven. I get up a moment later.

“Just a good old flat tire. Got a spare?”

I hear her sigh. She doesn’t have to say anything. I can read her like an open book. She isn’t pissed that her tire’s flat. She’s pissed cuz she’s got no spare.

“Listen, I could head back to town, check over at Al’s workshop about that spare. I could bring it back and help you fix it up.”

She’s still distrustful. She’s barely spoken to me since I stopped. Maybe she’s got issues of her own. I’m not the one to judge. Hell, I’m rarely the one to stop and help, but when I see a woman stranded by the road, the little bit of humanity in me

awakens. Plus, she's that kid's mom. Can't just pass her by. That'd be a dick move.

"I wouldn't want to waste your time," she finally says something.

Her voice is whiny. Soft. I wonder if she ever shouts. Probably not, with that pitch. But, she probably moans well. The thought gets me hard, surprisingly hard, and I adjust my stance, hoping my dick will think of ugly old nuns soon and back the fuck down.

"I'm just heading back to the house," I tell her. "The guys won't mind if I'm a little late."

Before she says anything to that, I return to my bike, and step on it.

"Stay here!" I shout, as I pass her by.

Something tells me she might not be there when I get back. That distrust on her face went way deeper than just a mere stranger stopping to help. That was fear. And, I've seen fear. I've felt it. Recognizing it has become second nature.

I wrap it up quickly at Al's, and head on back with a spare tire. To my surprise, she's still there. She's sitting by the side of the road, knees in the air, arms crossed over them. Any woman in that situation would be on the phone. Texting, talking, whatever. But, she'd be on the phone, for sure. This one's not. My curiosity raises a little more, following the sight of her sweet little ass in those jeans. But, I need to focus. Can't risk another boner.

"That was quick," she doesn't smile when she sees me, but I sense relief in her voice.

She gets up, then dusts herself off. Her blue t-shirt has gotten sweaty, but she still smells like a garden. How the Hell is that possible? I get off the bike and take off my

jacket. I doubt I smell like a fuckin' garden, but who the Hell cares. In this heat, there's nowhere I'd rather be but back at the house. Still, the sight of her perky tits calms me down. It may be worth it.

"Al's all about business," I grin. "Get in, pay, get out." She doesn't smile. "Alright, let's see."

I grab the spare tire, and the small toolbox I got from Al, just for the occasion.

"Can I help somehow?" she asks.

Just sit there, looking pretty, I think to myself. Instead, I cough, clearing my throat.

"Just relax. This shouldn't take long."

I'm focused on the tire. I know she's watching my every move, like a hawk. Guess I can't blame her. A woman's gotta be careful these days. You never know who you might run into. It's not the first tire I've changed, so it really doesn't take long. I get up a while later, feeling sweat dripping down my forehead. I'd kill for a beer right now.

"You make it look so easy," she tells me, a little less distrustful now.

She's still not smiling. A part of me wishes I could make her. But, those pretty lips of hers are pressed tightly together. Almost like she's making herself stay serious. Like she's not allowed to smile or laugh.

"There's nothing to it," I smile broadly.

The first thing I'm gonna do when I get to the house is take a nice shower. I got oil everywhere, even on me.



“I really don’t know how to thank you,” she sounds truly grateful.

I could think of a few ways. But, I don’t say that.

“If it weren’t for you, I’d probably be stranded here for hours.”

“I doubt it,” I wave my hand, but she actually might be right.

This isn’t the route people usually take, unless it’s some young couple aiming for the woods for some good time, or if you just want to ride endlessly into the sunset, not caring about the world.

“But, you do know this is the roundabout way to town, right?”

“I know that,” she nods, sounding a little embarrassed. “I’m just getting off work, and with Dominick in school, I figured I’d go do some shopping and if I have time, eat my late lunch and drink my now cold coffee underneath some tree. Sounds silly, doesn’t it?”

She looks down, like a kid caught stealing candy. She knows it’s wrong, but she’s unwilling to give it back because she wants it too much. I know the feeling.

“Nothing silly about it,” I assure her. I really mean it.

She looks up at me again. Her cheeks are red, like poppies in a field. Her eyes brighten.

“Well, silly or not, now I’m not sure if I even have the time for that,” she concludes.

“When’s your boy returning?”

“Not before 6.”

“It’s 4 now,” I check my watch. “Plenty of time left for a quick lunch and soaking in some nature.”

“I don’t know...”

“Listen,” I suddenly remember. “There’s this little lake, it’s a bit tricky to get there, but it’s worth it.”

“A lake?” she wonders. “I haven’t heard of any lake here.”

“Well, it’s nothing big, but you got weeping willows bending over the surface and shit.”

“Bending over the surface and shit?” she repeats, finally showing me a smile. “Yeah, that’s really remarkable.”

I chuckle, and surprisingly, she does the same. I wouldn’t say she’d trust me with her own life, but I’m not a potential rapist or serial killer any longer. That’s a step up on the ladder.

“It’s real pretty,” I emphasize.

“So, where is it?”

“You just follow this road, then you’ll come to a fork. Make sure to take the left left.”

“The left left?” she chuckles again, and I wonder what she would look like making that sound with her clothes off.

I think of old nuns again, and it does the trick.

“Actually, I better take you,” I conclude, surprising even myself with this suggestion.

“Oh, I can’t let you do that,” she shakes her head.

I’m not sure if she’s just being polite or I’m back on the rapist/serial killer level again.

“I can’t let you get lost. Dominick would never forgive me for getting his mother lost in the woods.”

She locks eyes with mine. Blazing dark against her white complexion and red cheeks. The wind ruffles her hair and her hand flies up to remove a stray strand that flutters over her lips.

“So, a quick lunch?” she asks, smiling just a little.

“A quick lunch.”

“But, I only have one coffee and it’s cold.”

“I don’t drink coffee. But, we’ll share the sandwich,” I grin.

I see acceptance in her eyes. She is a doe, a sweet little thing. And, I’m ready to hunt.

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*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:18 pm*

We find the lake easily. I follow him in my car. He offered to take me there with his bike, and then back to the car, but I refused. I'm not a fan of bikes. Never have been. Especially not now that they are driving my son. I just can't trust someone else with my life. Not again.

Wagner gets off his bike, then waits for me to park. He's so different from Mason. Even more different from Adrian. Mason is your regular playboy. Charming, handsome. He's got all the moves. I doubt any woman has ever said no to him. He's the kind of guy painters and sculptors from back in the Renaissance era would fight for, to use him as their muse. And, he'd be happy to oblige.

Adrian is his polar opposite. I wonder when was the last time he was with a woman. He seems clumsy, strange, but so endearing. So sweet. You just want to hug him. Like a big teddy bear, and then tell him all your secrets, because you know he will never ever tell them to another living soul.

But, Wagner... I can't even place him anywhere between these two. He's in a league of his own. Mischievous and naughty, but also brave. He doesn't back down. I can imagine him in a boxing arena, not losing a single fight. He'd end up with a broken nose, but that would be all. I think he'd even look more attractive with a broken nose. That'd give him an edge. Not like he doesn't have an edge now. But, still.

He looks about the same age as Mason. I've heard that shifters' lives are longer, so he could be almost a 100 and look like he's 30. That would be a good question to ask. But, we aren't close. We aren't close at all. What do we talk about? Suddenly, I'm nervous. And, I don't even know what to call this. A date? Just one person thanking another for some help? Yes, that should be alright. Anything but a date.

I take a moment or two to get out of the car, not taking my eyes off of him. He's slightly tanned, his beard is trimmed, and I see tattoos running down his arms. I noticed snakes and skulls when he first stopped to help, and curiosity got the best of me. I have no tattoos of my own, but I've always wanted one. Of course, I was always told that I knew what would happen if I change anything on my body, without prior permission. My own body wasn't my own. Now that it is, I'll probably go ahead with that tattoo at some point. Maybe when Dominick turns 18. I don't want to give him wrong ideas before he comes of age. Once he's old enough, he can make that decision on his own.

"Here we are," Wagner tells me, spreading his arms in front of him.

He looks huge, like a whole mountain of a man. His ripped body bulges underneath his t-shirt, threatening to tear it at the seams. I wouldn't mind witnessing that sight. All three of them are in amazingly good shape. But, I guess that comes easy when you take good care of yourself. I've only started to do this lately, and it feels wonderful when you can finally focus on yourself a little. That inner glow lights up again and you feel like a new and improved version of yourself.

I walk over to him with my tote bag, and just stand there, allowing the view to wash over me. The little lake is glistening softly, the sun sparkling like a million little diamonds on the placid surface. Several weeping willows enshroud the banks, bending over the water, as if truly weeping for the separation of air and water, and an everlasting desire to come together. There is a sandy part underneath every tree, shady enough to nestle yourself there and just enjoy the view. I had no idea that Swallow Springs had such hidden gems around.

He starts there first, and I follow silently, towards the nearest tree. The birds are chirping somewhere in the distance, and the sounds of the forest soothe us both. I feel like taking off my shoes and entering the water, but I feel too embarrassed to do that. I guess I'm still too hung up on what others will think of me. He sits down

underneath the closest tree and takes off his leather jacket, spreading it next to him.

“Here, sit on this.”

I eye him strangely, as if he’s speaking a different language. He has to pat the jacket again for me to finally sit down.

“I wasn’t expecting this from you,” I tell him, putting down my bag and getting the sandwich out.

“Wasn’t expecting what?”

“This gentlemanly gesture.”

“The jacket?” he asks, and I nod. “I may be an asshole most of the time, but there are still some leftovers of my good upbringing.”

I smile to that. I remember Adrian and his story, which explained his eccentric behavior. Anyone who was sold off to the circus was allowed to have a quirk or two. Now, I’m sure that Wagner also probably has something similar lurking in his past. Maybe a tough childhood as well? Family drama? Some betrayal? A broken heart maybe?

But, I won’t ask. Not only is it impolite, but I’m still a little intimidated by him.

I know it’s contradictory. I’m scared, but I agreed to come here with him. Alone. Without anyone around. But, my mind knows the difference. This is not the kind of fear that makes you think someone will hurt you. I know that fear well. It’s an old acquaintance, one that has been trying to become a good friend for years now. But, I won’t allow it. This fear I’m feeling is more intimate. I’m afraid that he might tell me something about himself, something deeply personal, something that will make me

think him more a human and less an animal, something that will make me like him more. Then, more and more. And, there will be no end to this.

I can't let that happen. I can't care for anyone. I can't love anyone. It's too dangerous. My life is still a mess, and even though we're physically far away from the past that haunts us, it is never too far away in my mind. It's just one step behind, and that is too close for comfort. I can't get involved with anyone and put their lives in danger, just like ours are. That would be too selfish.

Trying not to think about the past and just enjoy the present moment, I find the sandwich in my tote bag and I manage to separate it into two unequal parts.

"Here," I offer him the bigger part. "You're the man. You need to eat more. Plus, you deserve the bigger piece for helping me out."

"If you say so," he smiles, taking the sandwich.

We both start eating in silence. I'm looking at the lake, at the sun's reflection on its surface, but I know his gaze is fixated on me. I can feel the heat of his gaze on my cheek, but I dare not turn and face him. I pretend I'm focused on my sandwich. It's less awkward. We finish quickly, and I take out my thermos.

"It's not that cold yet," I say, after taking a sip. "We could share it."

"Not a coffee drinker," he reminds me.

"I thought every biker drank coffee."

"That's beer," he corrects me, with a smile.

"Well, I don't have any beer here unfortunately."

“That’s fine.”

“But, I’d like to treat you to one if you come down by the diner one of these days.”

My own suggestion takes me by surprise. It’s like my heart had its own agenda, and my mouth just followed the orders, without my mind being in on it. I blush slightly, realizing that he’ll probably think I asked him out on a date. And, that’s not what it was. A date, I mean. It’s not a date. No way. He can’t think that. I need to clarify that, and make sure we’re on the same page.

“I’ll do that,” he nods, giving me a mischievous look.

I’m about to clarify that it’s not a date, but nothing along those lines comes out of my mouth. Instead, I just keep smiling this big, stupid smile that seems more appropriate for a school girl in love than a single mom of 32.

“So, you think Dominick will be finished with your wall next weekend?” I ask, trying to keep the conversation revolving around Dominick. It’s safer that way, for everyone.

“Probably,” he nods.

“Good,” I smile.

“Mason found him more work.”

This newfound statement makes me turn to him, with eyes wide open.

“Mason did what?” I repeat, wishing to God that I haven’t heard it right.

“Mason found him more work,” he reiterates, word for word.



“But, why?”

He eyes me strangely, his head tilted a little to the side, like he’s seeing me for the first time.

“Because he likes it there.”

“Who does?”

“Your boy,” he shrugs. “And, we like having him.”

I swallow a little before I speak. Of course Dominick would like them. They’re cool bikers, living the life any rebel teenager would die to live. I’m fully aware of the oxymoron here. But, that’s not the point. The point is that Dominick has managed to find a way to keep going there indefinitely, from the looks of it. To say I don’t like it would be an understatement of the century.

“You don’t like the idea?” Wagner leans back onto his palms, his arms stretched out.

“It’s not that,” I try to weasel my way out of it, without really saying what I mean. “It’s that he’s got school and everything, and we just moved here...”

“That’s only if he keeps his grades good,” his answer surprises me.

“Well, that’s... fine then, I guess....” I cough a little.

“Is it?” he sounds like he’s really wondering. “Because Mason and me, we get the feeling you don’t like us very much.”

“I like Adrian,” I blurt out my answer, and immediately wish that I kept my big mouth shut. But, it’s too late. My answer sends him into a bout of laughter.

“Adrian, huh?” he winks at me. “You’d have to wave a flag at him, stating exactly what you want him to do.”

There is no malice in his voice. Only good old-fashioned amusement. For some reason, I know he means nothing bad by it.

“That’s not nice,” I still frown.

“Adrian would think it’s funny,” he replies, waving his hand dismissively. “And, besides, a good joke is wasted on you women. You always need stuff to be morally right and shit.”

I give him a moment or two to realize what a stupid thing he just said, but instead of apologizing, he just stares into the distance, like some freaking philosopher who just said the smartest thing in the world, but needs to wait a little because no one understands him.

“It’s not my fault I don’t like rude jokes,” I snort, unable to keep my mouth shut and just let it go.

Hearing that, he turns to me. I can feel his stare drilling a hole in my cheek, but I don’t give in. I don’t look at him. That would be the equivalent of me forgiving him for this stupid statement. I keep staring at the same invisible spot in the distance.

“You’re right,” I hear him say. So, I turn to him. “I’ve been hanging out with... women who are very different from you for far too long. I guess I forgot how to act like a gentleman.”

The corner of his lip dances in a charming half-smile. The wind ruffles his hair a little, making him look like a little boy caught doing something he wasn’t supposed to be doing, and now, he was apologizing simply because he got caught.

“Is that your way of apologizing?” I smile, feeling that we’re back on friendly terms again.

“Yeah,” he chuckles. “We good?”

“Yeah, we good,” I nod, laughing.

We spend the rest of the time chatting about unimportant things, but I realize that his presence makes me feel all giddy. There are even a few butterflies that he managed to awake inside of me, as I listen to him talk. He tells me about their adventures, and suddenly, I remember it all. I can’t fall in love with him. I can’t fall in love with any of these three men, even though my heart keeps pushing me back to them. I just can’t. They are criminals. They are shifters. Can I trust such a man? I think not.

“Listen, Wagner...” I start, getting up, and breaking the spell that we both seemed to be under. “This was nice and all, but I’d best head on back.”

“Too bad,” he says. “I was hoping to give you a ride on my bike. There’s an awesome view from up there.” He pauses to point his finger somewhere high up in the air, towards a nearby hill. “The road isn’t bad either. We could be there in 15 minutes.”

“Thanks for the offer,” I shake my head immediately, trying to remain polite, but deep inside detesting the idea. “But, I doubt I’ll ever sit on one of those.” My eyes skip over to his bike, then back at him again.

“Really?” he sounds surprised.

“Uh-huh.”

I look around, making sure I haven’t left any of my stuff behind or any trash.

“Any reason for that?” he asks.

“I’m not a fan of adrenaline rush,” I explain. “I’m more of a stay at home, read a good book kinda gal.”

He laughs at my own description of myself.

“Are you sure it’s only that?” he wonders.

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe it’s that you don’t want to sit on my bike. Maybe Adrian’s?” I see he’s poking around, trying to feel out the territory. But, I’m not having it.

“Neither of you,” I reply with a smile. “You both belong to the same gang.”

“So, it’s that.” His face is expressionless.

“Well, don’t take it personally, but sitting on the bike of a drug dealer wouldn’t be that much fun for me.”

I have no idea what takes over me and makes me say this. Maybe the years of oppression, of walking on eggshells, of carefully watching what I say. Now that I’m finally free, I just can’t keep quiet any longer. And, obviously, if I wish to remove myself and my son from these men, I need to speak up.

“Drug dealer?” he asks, tilting his head a little. “You think we’re dealing drugs?”

“Well, drugs, guns, I don’t know,” I shrug my shoulder as if he just asked me if it was going to rain tomorrow and I told him I didn’t know.

He gives me another puzzled look, then burst out into loud, roaring laughter. I remain there, frozen, not having the slightest clue what it is I said that was so fucking funny.

“Sorry... Sorry...” he keeps on laughing, apologizing for it, bending over, and trying to stop but he can’t.

It takes him a few moments longer to fully return to normal. Then, he walks over to me, with a wide grin still hanging on his face. He cups my chin, bringing his face so close to mine that we are just inches apart. I feel like my heart is going to jump out of my chest, and right into his hands. I try to steady my breathing, but it’s hard. Much harder than I thought it’d be, as I wait to see what he’s up to.

“I’d love to burst that little bubble you’ve created,” he tells me. “But, I won’t. I’ll let Mason do that.” He finishes it off with a pinch on the cheek.

“What do you mean?” I ask him, but he’s already let go of me and starts to head back to his bike.

I wait for a moment or two, just to see if he’ll clarify this mysterious statement, but he does no such thing. He sits on his bike and just drives away. I stay like that, trying to figure out what just happened. What bubble? And, why Mason of all people?

I frown at no one, and slowly get to my car. Maybe I should just forget all this nonsense and focus on what matters. It’ll be that time of the month again, and I need to do my regular check up.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:18 pm*

The alarm clock wakes me up on time, as always. It's another Saturday, and for some reason, I'm dreading it again. Dominick wants to spend more time with those men. I can't allow that to happen.

I get out of bed and slowly drag myself to the bathroom. The face that stares back at me from the mirror is still drowsy. I notice big black circles around my eyes. I press my fingers against them, as if that motion itself would deflate them, but that, of course, doesn't happen. I sigh, not really knowing what else to do, and grab my toothbrush.

Today, I have an agenda. A very important agenda, at that. When Adrian comes to pick up Dominick, I plan on driving there myself to talk to Mason. It's not to clarify what Wagner told me a few days ago. I'd like to say I don't care about that, but it's not true. What is true, however, is the fact that I need him to know that I'm not OK with Dominick spending more time with them, after this stupid wall painting job is done. And, I need to be firm. Put my foot down.

I spit angrily into the sink, then watch as the water dissolves the little foam bubbles and takes them away down the drain. Clean. That's what I've always wanted to be, and yet, it seems I constantly need to deal with dirty things. Dirty people. I'm tired of that.

I sigh deeply again, and put on my bathrobe. I tiptoe down to the kitchen, and make some pancakes. I myself don't feel all that hungry, but I read somewhere that you tend to get angry more easily if you haven't had breakfast. Seeing I'll be having an important conversation a bit later, I didn't want to do anything that'd make me prone to angry outbursts.

About 15 minutes later, I hear Dominick walking down the stairs. He enters the kitchen, his hair all disheveled and with that I don't care look on his face.

"Morning," I chirp, placing a plate of pancakes before him. "Did you brush your teeth?"

"Um, yeah." He's sleepy, but still manages to roll his eyes at me effectively.

"Come on, smart ass," I laugh it away. "Adrian should be picking you up soon."

Dominick picks up a spoon and reaches for the maple syrup. I slide it over to him. There is no thank you, but I'm too lost in having an imaginary conversation with Mason. So, I don't pay attention to it this time and let it go.

"So, how do you like it over at the bikers?" I ask, sitting across from him.

Even now, after all this time, I wonder how I made this sweet child. How did something so beautiful and so perfect come out of a relationship that was so horrible? I try not to remind myself of that, but it's almost impossible. Still, I need to do it, for Dominick.

"It's awesome," he tells me, stuffing his mouth with pancakes.

"You think you'll be finished soon?"

"About that," he starts, taking a napkin and wiping the corner of his mouth.

He has full lips and a small nose. Mine is longer, more pointy, and my lips are thinner. Every time he smiles, he reminds me of the man I once loved. I know that, in time, this memory will fade. Only this young man before me will remain, and I will no longer connect the two of them in my mind. But, it's still too fresh.

My sweet boy smiles at me, those full lips open up and reveal a set of small teeth, with tiny little gaps between them.

“Mason says he has more work for me, if I want to stay on, during weekends.”

I frown at the idea. However, I don't reveal that I know of this already.

“They'd pay me, of course,” he adds quickly, as if that's the most important thing.

“Don't you think it'll be too much of a burden?” I wonder aloud. “With school work and all.”

“I need to keep my grades up,” he explains. “That's their condition.”

“I see,” I turn away from him, putting the plates in the sink, and I can't help but frown again.

“So, can I stay there?” he asks me, and I hear the hope in his voice.

This is a double edged sword right here. If I let him hang out with criminals, I risk turning him into one. And, that's the last thing I want. But, if I refuse him this, I risk him hating me for as long as he remembers this, and it might be a helluva long time.

I release a heavy sigh, not knowing what else to do.

“We'll sit down and talk about this,” I try to wiggle my way out of this one, but I know he won't have it.

I already see the big fight that will ensue, but luckily, the sound of bike tires interrupts us. Dominick jumps up without a single word, and rushes upstairs to get dressed. I walk over to the front door and open it without even hearing anyone knock.



Adrian is already there, and I see him standing with his fist in the air, about to knock.

“Good morning,” I smile.

“Odds are it will be good,” he replies, as he tries to smile.

“The sky looks nice and sunny,” I look up.

“It might rain later. If you go somewhere, take an umbrella.”

“I will, thanks.”

I look at him, as I wait for Dominick to come running back. His cheeks look a little burned, like he spent too much time in the sun the previous days. He notices me looking at him, and he looks a little nervous. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other. I would invite him in, but Dominick should come down any second.

“Will Mason be... at your place?” I ask, not really sure if they call that place home or not.

It looks like a home, but it also looks like it'd fit only a few people. From what I've seen and heard, there's about a dozen of them in the gang.

“He is not there now, but I believe he will be back in an hour.”

“That's great,” I nod. “I need to talk to him.”

Adrian gives me a puzzled look.

“Can I help?” he asks, and suddenly, I'm washed over with a sudden desire to wrap my arms around him and give him a big kiss on the cheek.

“I just need him to clarify a few things,” I explain. “But, thanks.”

At that moment, Dominick comes rushing out, and almost pushes me out of the way.

“Hey!” I shout at him, but I’m not angry. He tries to leave. “You won’t even give your mom a hug?”

He frowns a little, but turns to do as he’s told. I hug him back, inhaling the smell of my still sleepy child, as I let it go out into the world.

“Stay safe!” I shout after both of them, as they leave my porch, and Adrian’s bike disappears down the street.

The moment I’m about to close the door, I hear the sound of the bike again. I turn around, figuring that Dominick probably forgot something. But, it’s not Adrian. It’s not Dominick.

I look at the towering figure, as he gets off his bike. His Ray Ban’s flicker in the sun. His leather jacket ripples sun waves, like the tide. The sound of his boots on the gravel as he walks over to the house fills up the air around me. I stand there, waiting. My heart in my throat.

“Good morning,” he tells me, with a wicked gleam in his eyes, taking off his sunglasses.

“What... are you doing here?” I ask. “Adrian just took Dominick.”

“I know,” he replies. “I came to take you out for some breakfast.”

“Breakfast?” I repeat, taken aback by his offer.

Is it possible that he somehow knew I'd be coming over? Impossible.

"I know you work the afternoon shift, and I figured you'd want to try coffee and eggs somewhere other than the only diner in town," he grins.

"That's nice, but..." I look around, trying to come up with a plausible excuse as to why it's not a good idea to go anywhere with him. But, nothing comes to mind.

"But, you don't want to sit on a bike with a drug dealer, right?" he asks, and for a moment or two, I can't figure out if he's pissed or not. The smile on his face finally tells me he's not.

"Um, you talked to Wagner, right?" I huff.

"Of course."

"Look, it's not - "

"I'm here so we can straighten a few things out," he interrupts me.

I'm shocked that we had the same idea, at the same time. He came here to my doorstep on the same day and almost the same time that I wanted to go to his doorstep. How strange.

"I suggest we go somewhere, but if you'll feel safer staying here at your place, I'm game."

I'm not sure which I dislike better, riding on a bike with him or having him here, alone?

He is waiting for me to reply. He's not in a rush. Patient and calm, he is still smiling.

“I can make us some coffee,” I turn to the side, gesturing at him to come in.

He takes the hint, and walks inside, closing the door behind him. I lead the way to the kitchen, listening to the sound of his footsteps behind me. His presence fills me with a strange mixture of emotions. Adrian makes me calm. The way he handles himself assures me that there are no bad thoughts inside of his head. Wagner is different. He can't seem to stand still in one place, like his feet are constantly itching to do something. Even that ridiculous comment about jokes didn't put me off of him. But, Mason... he's something else. I guess that's why he's their leader. It's so easy to follow him. So easy to do whatever he says. It's because you admire him, you want his approval. At the same time, you also fear him. You fear that you might disappoint him.

We walk into the kitchen together, and he takes a seat at the table. There is still a plate of unfinished pancakes left, and two empty glasses of orange juice.

“Nice breakfast?” he asks.

“Would you like some pancakes?” I answer with a question.

“No, just coffee is fine.”

I turn around to put the coffee on. I don't need to look at him to know that his eyes are glued onto me. I thought that I'd practiced this enough. But, I feel all that courage dissipating, leaving me a frightened little girl in front of what seems to be a big bad wolf.

The coffee is done quickly, and I pour a cup for both of us. I place his before him.

“Thanks,” he smiles.

I sit opposite him, trying to keep a safe distance. I'm not afraid he'll hurt me. I'm sure he won't. I'm sure none of them will. Otherwise, I wouldn't have sent Dominick back. But, I feel like he's overstepping his boundaries. He needs to know where his place is. And, it's away from us.

"So, where do you want to start?" he wonders, taking a sip.

I've practiced this already. Probably a hundred times. I know my lines. I know exactly what I want to say to him. And yet, not a single word comes out of my mouth as I gaze at him sitting in my kitchen. He has taken off his jacket. He's wearing a black t-shirt, which hangs tight on his chiseled body. His neck is thick, as he moves I see his veins straining. His hands are big. For a moment, I wonder what it's like to have them wrapped around you. But, I quickly remove that image from my mind.

"I don't think it's a good idea for Dominick to continue going over to your place," I say calmly, remembering my lines.

"Did he say something?" he wondered politely.

"No," I shake my head. "He hasn't said anything. He likes it there."

"So, what's the problem? Maybe you'd feel better if you saw it as community work."

"Community work?"

"Yeah, you know. He spray painted our wall. He was made to fix it, and wants to keep on helping. So, we focus this extra energy he's got on something productive, instead of letting him wander the streets, trying to figure out what to do with himself."

I have to give it to him. What he's saying is making an awful lot of sense. I'm just not

willing to admit it. So, I just nod.

“But, I think that’s the not the issue here,” he continues. “The issue is your problem with us. With me, my guys.”

I look down. I didn’t think it’d be this hard to have this conversation. It was all so easy in my mind. I glance over at him, and I see no threat in his eyes, no intimidation. I’m still not used to that. He is sitting across from me, towering over my table like a mountain. And yet, I’m not scared. I don’t want to run away and hide in a mouse hole. I stay here, my eyes glued to his.

He talks like a man should talk. His voice is firm, but kind. He is asking questions and waiting for an answer, instead of providing one himself, and I’m just supposed to agree. He wants to know what I think, how I feel about things. I sense he knows Dominick is the most important person in my life, and for some reason, he wants to be there for us. Otherwise, why would he be here? Why would he do any of the things he’s been doing?

“I...” I start, but it’s difficult to continue.

“Danica...” he leans over the table, his hands pressed against mine. “What are you afraid of?”

The shadow of my past hangs over us, and it hangs low. So low I can almost touch it. It can almost taint the life I’ve started to build for myself and my son here. I can’t let that happen. I have to make it go away, and I’m starting to realize that I can’t do it on my own.

“I’m afraid something will happen to Dominick while he’s with you,” I whisper, biting my lower lip.

Saying it out loud makes it even more frightening, and I need to suffocate a gasp.

“Because we’re drug dealers?” he asks, softly.

His hands are still on mine. They are warm, slightly calloused. The hands of a real man. The hands he would only put on a woman in a way that would make her tremble with love and passion, not tremble with fear.

“Yes,” I whisper again.

He smiles, releasing a sigh. I don’t understand. Why is all this so amusing to him? A part of me feels a little insulted, but I don’t show it. I don’t pull my hands away from his. His touch feels too good.

“I will share a secret with you,” he tells me.

My heart starts to race, pounding loudly inside of me. Do I even want to know this secret? What will it do to me? Don’t I have enough secrets of my own? But, I say nothing. I wait, patiently, my heart drumming to the sound of his breathing.

“Your kid’s grown on me,” he says. “I think he’s grown on us all. He’s the reason I will tell you what not many people know.” He pauses, allowing me to nod. “We aren’t drug dealers. We aren’t guns dealers either.”

He says it so gravely that it’s hard to doubt anything he says. I wait a moment or two, allowing this newfound truth to sink in. Slowly, I pull my hands back. I feel like this is the worst moment to do this, but I don’t want him to think I’m falling for him. Despite the fact that I very well may be, but I still don’t want him to think that he can charm me into believing something that’s not true.

I rest my hands in my lap, not taking my eyes off of him. His square jaw seems

darker now, the little hairs have grown into a bush now. His lips are still visible, now pressing tightly against each other. Is he nervous? Does he feel vulnerable opening up before me? I can't read a single thing about him. I guess he's had enough practice hiding his true face from the world. I wish I had, too.

"People assumed it, and we just let them believe it," he continues. "It's easier to control them. If you want to maintain control, just use fear. It never fails."

I swallow heavily, feeling my throat getting parched. But, I have no desire for that coffee in front of me. I want to hear more. I need to hear more.

"What we really do is trade in ancient artefacts."

His confession hits me like a ton of bricks. That's the last thing I ever expected him to tell me.

"Ancient artefacts?" I repeat, trying to persuade myself that I actually did hear it right the first time.

"Yes," he nods, leaning back in his chair. He takes a deep breath, and I see his chiseled chest rise in the tight t-shirt he's wearing. "We get our hands on it, and we sell it on the Dark Web to the highest bidder. Now, sometimes, rarely, but still happens sometimes, we send some of these artefacts to museums and galleries across the world, free of charge and without the package being traced in any way. It soothes the conscience a little, I guess."

He leans forward again and takes a sip of his coffee. A little bit of foam remains on the tip of his upper lip, and he licks it off a moment later.

"Now, as for how we come across it," he says, scratching the back of his head, "it's different. Sometimes we find it, just lying around. You know, no one is watching it,



and in that case, I take it, it's finders keepers. Sometimes, we buy it, and make a little profit in the sales. Sometimes, we steal it. But, it's usually some millionaire asshole who won't even notice it's gone."

"Robin Hood, huh?" This is the first thing that pops to mind and I can't refrain from sharing it.

Hearing me say it, he chuckles a little.

"Something like that, yeah."

"So, let me get this straight," I shake my head. "You actually want people around here to think you're drug dealers and you kill people if they even look at you the wrong way?"

"Like I said, it's easier to keep things under control," he nods, shrugging his shoulders.

"Then, you really didn't kill Sam Michaels," I say, not really sure if I'm just thinking out loud here.

"I told you."

"But, you could be lying about all this," I suddenly add.

That worm of suspicion won't let me be. I was taught, the hard way, not to trust a man. Any man. Especially a man who acts like he cares about me. Those are the most dangerous ones. The ones to be careful with.

"You mean like you're lying to everyone about your husband dying?"

When I hear him say that, I feel like lightning struck right in the middle of my kitchen, leaving me deaf, mute and blind. All my senses perk up, urging me to run away, to pick up Dominick and just drive away, anywhere, until we run out of gas, and then just keep walking until we can't walk anymore. But, I don't do any of that.

I remain seated at the table, with a man who obviously knows everything about me. Fear creeps up on me, its cold hand hugging the back of my neck. It takes all my strength not to scream, not to run away. I think of Dominick. He's counting on me to be strong, for both of us.

"How do you know about that?" I manage to whimper.

"I told you, no one moves to Swallow Springs without me giving the OK," he reminds me.

"Did he send you?" I ask the question I've been dreading all along.

I stare deep into his eyes. Blue and unfathomable, I can't tell if they will be my salvation or my burial.

"No, Danica," he finally replies. "I have no connections with such scum."

I feel like a huge burden was just lifted off my back, as if I'd been holding up the sky and finally, someone took over.

"I came here to tell you there is nothing to fear," he continues, his voice dripping like honey into my ears, filling me with joy I haven't felt in a long time. "You and your boy are safe. No one will harm you, I can promise you that."

He gets up and walks around the kitchen table. He offers me his hands. I take them. I'm afraid to stand, because I doubt my knees will endure the weight of my body. I

feel too weak. My knees have turned to jelly.

But, I stand up. He puts my hands on his chest. He feels rock hard, like his body was chiseled from a mountain and formed into this gorgeous man I see before me. His hands find my waist. The burning sensation of his touch makes me even dizzy.

“We will keep you safe,” he whispers, his lips so close to mine I can taste the coffee he just had. “I will keep you safe.”

With those words, he kisses me softly, his lips a perfect fit against mine. He smells like the forest, like motor oil and black rubber, and it’s a smell I never want to get off of me. I want to enshroud myself in it, bathe in it so that it becomes one with my breath.

I don’t know how long we remain like that, our lips pressed together. I expect tongue, but there is none. His fingers dig into the sides of my body, pressing me harder against him. His chest is pressed against my breasts. I can barely breathe, but I feel like I don’t need to breathe, as long as he’s here, as long as his arms are around me.

When he lets go, I have the sensation of walking on clouds. The place where his fingers were are now devoid of his touch, and I feel emptiness. His hands belong on my body. I know that now. And all this time, I’ve been trying to fight this feeling, but the more I fought it, the stronger it became. It grew, and grew, until it filled all four chambers of my heart. Now, I can’t escape it any longer. I can’t pretend the feeling isn’t there. It’s easier just to give in, to finally believe that when a man says he’ll keep me safe, he will really do it.

“Adrian will bring back Dominick later today,” he smiles at me.

I believe him. I believe everything he says. My mind is asleep, dazed by the enormous amount of happiness I feel right now. My heart is full. It’s fuller than it’s

ever been. For the first time in ages, I finally feel like maybe, just maybe I found my new home. The place I can start growing some roots. The place Dominick will see as home, too.

We both need it. We've been through so much. Too much. Sometimes, the amount of pain I see in his eyes scares me. I just want to hide him away from the world. I want to keep him inside the house and never let him go out. But, I can't do that.

He needs to lead a normal life. We both need it. We both deserve it. Maybe Mason can help us obtain that.

"Thanks," I tell him, feeling my cheeks blush just a little.

He walks out of my house slowly. He doesn't turn around, but he knows I'm right behind him. I wave as he sits on his bike and drives away. When I close the door, my heart is still beating crazily, with no intention of stopping. And, that's OK. We're safe here. Nothing can hurt us.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:18 pm*

Adrian

We reach Dominick's home quickly. He gets off the bike first. He takes off his helmet. The smile on his face tells me he's happy. He likes spending time with us. He doesn't say it, but it shows. He speaks of his mother on occasion. There is tenderness in his voice when he says her name, her title. They are close. As it should be.

He runs to the door and unlocks it. She isn't here. I feel a pang of disappointment that I don't get to give her the book in person. It's nothing really. Not a gift in the real sense of the word. I don't know when her birthday is. Some cultures celebrate name days. We don't, but, maybe she does. It doesn't matter. It's not Christmas either. It's just another day. A Saturday.

Dominick told me about her love of reading. My home library is scarce. I'm sad to say that. I miss the books that burned down with the home we previously lived in. It's difficult traveling on a motorcycle with books. Moving, too.

"Come on in," Dominick tells me, when he sees I'm standing in the doorway. "If you're a vampire, I just invited you in and you're free to feast on me." Dominick laughs.

He told me that his mother read Dracula to him last year. He also told me they both liked it. Of course they would. It's a classic. His mother has good taste in books. People with good taste in books are good people. They aren't judgmental. Evil people can't like good books.

I walk into the house. It smells like fresh flowers. I turn to my left and see a purple,

glass vase filled with a garden bouquet. A pair of gardening gloves and shears are resting next to it. A big, broad-rimmed sun hat rests on the coat rack.

“My mom’s into gardening,” Dominick adds, seeing me watch those items. “You hungry?”

“No, thank you,” I shake my head. “When is your mother coming back?”

“Probably around 9,” he tells me.

I look at the wall clock. It’s close to 8 pm.

“I wanted to give this to your mother,” I tell him, holding the book in my hand.

“What is it?”

“It’s a signed copy of Bram Stoker’s Dracula.”

“Wow,” I hear him whistle, impressed. The sensation brings me joy. If he’s impressed, hopefully, she will be as well. “She’ll love it.”

“Do you think so?” I ask.

“I’m sure,” he nods. “So, you like my mom?”

He sits on the couch, and opens a can of Coke. He drinks it thirstily, then places it down on the little coffee table. I notice there are no coasters. Maybe his mother doesn’t mind.

“She is a lovely woman,” I say, confused. How does one say this to a child? Is this even a conversation the two of us should be having?

“Do you think she’s attractive?” Dominick continues. I see he’s smiling.

“Yes, she is very attractive,” I nod again. “But, I don’t think it’s a topic I should be discussing with you.”

“Fair enough,” he agrees. “Wanna play?”

He grabs the PS console and throws one at me. I react quickly and grab it in my hands. I’ve never played this. He probably sees it on my face.

“Come on, I’ll show you how it works.”

We spend the following hour playing shooter games. I’m not that good at it. I’m better hands on, but I won’t be telling any of that to this boy. I almost envy him for everything he’s got. A life ahead of him. A mother who loves him. He can go places in the world. I’m grateful to Mason, but this is the only road for me. There will never be any other, and that saddens me sometimes.

“Knock, knock!”

We both turn around to face the door the moment we hear the sound of someone’s voice. I recognize it immediately. So does Dominick. A beautiful face appears before us a moment later. She is slightly flushed. She is carrying bags in her hands.

“Let me help you,” I jump up.

“Glad someone will,” she smiles, allowing me to take the bags from her.

I take them to the kitchen, and she follows me there. She smells like burgers and fries. Her hair is up in a ponytail. When she brushes past me, a faint whiff of her flowery perfume is still there, on her perfectly white skin. Flawless.

“Oh, I so need a nice, relaxing shower,” she moans, massaging the back of her neck with her hand, and tilting her head to the side.

I wonder at the sound of water sliding down her perfect skin. But, that is a sight I will never witness. I can’t even hope. I erase the potentially dangerous image from my mind. I doubt I’d even know what to do. It’s been so long. Too long.

I return to the living room to grab the book I brought her. When I come back to the kitchen, I see her putting a few groceries away.

“This... this is for you.”

When she turns to face me, she is surprised. Pleasantly surprised. She looks down at my hands and the book I’m holding.

“For me?” she asks.

“Yes,” I nod. “Here.”

She takes it into her hands, like a trembling little kitten, careful not to hurt it. She opens the first page and sees the scribbles.

“Wait, this....” she gasps when she recognizes the signature. “He signed this!?”

“Yes,” I confirm, happy with the reaction I caused.

“I can’t accept this,” she shakes her head in disbelief. “This is too much. Do you know how much this is worth?”

“I don’t care about the financial worth of a book,” I explain. “To me, a book is worth whatever someone decides it’s worth. And, to you, it is priceless. I can see that.”



“It’s amazing,” she whispers.

Her fingers trail the embossed leather cover, the gold plated title. She opens it and flips through the pages, enjoying the smell. There is no such thing as the smell of old books. It brings me joy that I found someone who enjoys it as much as I do.

“Then, please accept it as a gift.”

She eyes the book again, unable to believe that such a piece of treasure has fallen into her hands. I could watch her expression all day long. I wouldn’t get tired of it.

“Are you sure?” she asks again.

“Of course,” I assure her.

Once this pleasant exchange is done, I can’t but feel somewhat awkward. Wagner often tells me that’s how I make other people feel, but I don’t get that impression. I simply say what is. I don’t beat around the bush. It’s true that I find it difficult to trust someone.

Mason asked me if I trust Danica. My reply was that it’s not whether we trust her. It’s whether she trusts us. He didn’t see it that way at first.

“Well, now I have to get you something, too,” she tells me, blushing.

“I don’t need anything, thank you.”

“Well, none of us really needs anything, apart from food and clean air, right?” she laughs. Her laughter sounds like the chiming of a thousand little church bells, from afar, followed by a choir of song birds. “I’ll come up with something. Are you hungry?”

“No, I should be going. The only reason I stayed longer and enjoyed your hospitality was to make sure Dominick wasn’t alone.”

“That’s sweet of you, thank you, Adrian.”

“My pleasure.”

I say goodbye to both of them, and head over to the door.

“Hey, Adrian?”

I hear her shout after me. I turn around. She comes at me with arms wide open and she hangs them around my neck. She smells like a dying man’s last meal, the one he’s wanted all his life, the one he never wants to finish.

I can feel the tip of her nose pressed to my neck. She squeezes me for a single moment, then lets go. I didn’t even have time to put my arms around her. She’s gone already.

“Thank you,” she repeats. “I mean it.”

“I know you do,” I smile as much as my scar allows me.

Every time I smile, I instinctively reach for it. Like an itch that never goes away, no matter how hard you scratch at it. But, this time I resist the sensation. I let it run its course, while I focus on Danica’s smile, on her perfect teeth, her fully round lips. I haven’t seen her with her hair down yet. She must be even more stunning.

“Good night,” I tell her finally, not wanting to overstay my welcome.

As I walk over to my bike, I hear laughter inside of my head. Fingers are pointing at

me, teeth bared. It's all a game to them. My life. A freak. I've lived in the conviction that no one could ever care for me. No one would ever accept me as I am. And yet, Mason has. Wagner has. I finally belong. Only, there is one thing missing, always missing.

I turn around one last time and raise my hand. She is standing on the doorway, leaning against it. She looks so small. So fragile. I always know when someone carries a burden. We all have our crosses to bear. Hers seems much heavier than she herself can endure. I want to be there for her. I want to take some of that burden away, and make her feel safe again.

I step on the gas and drive away. It's a cold night. It's a fine contrast to the fire that burns inside of me.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:18 pm*

It's a long and unpleasant night for me. I keep tossing and turning in bed, sweating with fear. Nightmares keep changing, never-ending, and even though the story is different, it always boils down to the same thing, to the same enemy. I'm running away, trying to escape, but I'm never fast enough. The faceless, nameless horror always catches up with me, and I know the punishment for what I've done will be swift.

I wake up drenched in sweat. I can feel my nightgown is all wet. My back is soaked with sweat, too. I rake my fingers through my messy, entangled hair. I really need to wash it today. I remember the times when I'd go visit my hairdresser on a regular basis. Now, I'm lucky if I do it once a year.

"Fuck!"

I jump out of bed when I see that it's past 8 am. I'm still a little dizzy. The leftover sensations of fear take longer to disperse. But, the sunlight is a powerful enemy of night time terrors. A few moments later, once my heart has regained its normal beating rhythm, I run downstairs.

"Dom?" I shout his name, but only the empty house replies. "Dom, are you here?"

No reply. I glance over at the kitchen, and then I see a little message pinned to the fridge with one of our little fridge magnets.

Mom,

Adrian came and got me. I let you sleep in. Had breakfast, don't worry.

Love,

D.

I sigh with relief. It's good to know I've got a self-sufficient kid, if nothing else. I drag my feet across the wooden floor, over to the kitchen. Thin strips of sunlight are oozing through the window. My fears are completely gone, but not forgotten. They're always with me, in the back of my head, ready to awaken at any given moment. I open the curtains, letting more sunlight inside.

There is an empty bowl on the table, with the spoon still inside.

"He actually made himself porridge for breakfast," I smirk as I take the bowl and soak it in the sink. "Well, I'll be."

I turn around again, feeling a little peacocky-ish. Now, I don't feel so bad for sleeping in. I could have done without those horrible nightmares, but OK. You win some, you lose some.

I head over to the coffee machine and start making some coffee, but the sound of the doorbell interrupts me. My hand hangs in the air, indecisive.

"Who could that be on a Sunday morning?" I ask myself, unable to offer a reply.

I walk over to the door, and for some reason, I hesitate for a moment. I smile to myself, assuring my brain that there's nothing to be afraid of any longer. The nightmare is over. There's no boogeyman under my bed or in my closet. I've checked there already. We're safe. I'm being jumpy for no reason.

Following this logic, my hand extends to the doorknob and it twists it open. I see Gordon, the mail boy. He's been over at our place a few times, as Dominick and he

go to the same class.

“Good morning, Mrs. Brunswick,” he tells me, his unruly red hair spiking in all directions. I’ve seen that he inherited it from his mother, who’s got the same red curls and a kind looking face full of freckles.

“Good morning, Gordon,” I smile at him. He’s dressed in blue overalls and there’s a bucket and a fishing rod in his hands. He reminds me of Tom Sawyer. I see his bike is leaning against my fence. “Dom isn’t here,” I continue, thinking he must be here for Dominick.

“Oh, I’m not here for him,” he tells me, shaking his head from one side to the other so strongly that his red curls skipped on his head. “I’m here to drop this off.” He reaches into his back pocket and extracts a letter. “This is for you.” He offers it to me almost ceremoniously.

I look at the letter, and the typed out name and address that seem to belong to me. I don’t recognize the handwriting. Also, I’m not expecting any letters, apart from bills. And, I know what they’re supposed to look like.

“I didn’t know you delivered mail on Sunday,” I wonder, accepting the letter a little hesitantly.

“Oh, we don’t,” he shakes his head, and I realize only now that he’s got chewing gum in his mouth, which he is now trying to blow up into a balloon, but unsuccessfully. “But, Mr. Porter told me that someone paid to have this letter delivered on a Sunday morning. Said it couldn’t wait for Monday.”

“Oh, really?” I eye the letter in my hand suspiciously. Apart from the usual bills and occasional ad, I haven’t received a single letter yet. “Thank you, Gordon.”

“Have a nice day, Mrs. Brunswick. Say hi to Dom!”

“I will, thank you,” I reply, waving back, watching as he pushes his bicycle down the road, and jumps on it in motion, catching the downward wave. I look up at the sky. Looks like it’s going to be a nice, sunny day. Gordon will have a nice time fishing. I hope he’s put on sunscreen. The sun can be so treacherous these days.

I close the door, still clutching the letter. It’s probably nothing. Just a letter. My mind is trying to remain calm, but it’s hard. People get letters all the time.

“I know!” I shout out loud to no one really. But, the sound that filled the house comforted me, if only for a moment.

Just open it and you’ll see it’s nothing. Just an ad or one of those pesky phone companies trying to get you to change your plan and pay more than you really need to.

These thoughts calm me down. I’m probably overreacting. I’m definitely overreacting.

I sit on the sofa in the living room, with no more thoughts of that morning coffee. I’m wide awake now. My fingers are trembling as I fumble with the opening. I’ve already seen that there is no sender information on the other side. Only my name and address and a vast, empty whiteness. When I open it, I unfold the piece of paper I found inside.

I blink heavily a few times, trying to clear my vision. But, when I stare at the paper in front of me, it’s still the same. It’s still empty. There is nothing written on it. It’s just a damn piece of paper.

I swallow heavily. I jump up from the sofa, and look around me, expecting someone

to lunge at me from the darkest corner of the room, from the kitchen, from upstairs. I wait, expectant. Ready to act, like a cocked gun. But, there is no one. The house is still empty and silent, save for the beating of my terrified heart.

I run upstairs and change into a dress, throwing my wet nightgown onto the floor. I don't bother to pick it up. I run back downstairs, stopping only to grab my car keys from the little bowl, and my purse. I fumble with the keys in my trembling hand as I try to lock the door. It takes me twice as long now.

When I get into the car, I blink heavily again. I see dark stars, twisting and turning. Dark mushrooms bloom somewhere in the distance, and I feel like I'm on some heavy LSD trip. I try to breathe slowly, but nothing works. It's the same shit, both with my eyes closed and open. I'm equally terrified. I'm equally unable to do anything to make myself feel better.

It takes me a few moments to realize that I'm out of the house. I'm in the street. If anything happens to me, the neighbors will see it. They will rush to help me. At least, I hope they will. That thought manages to calm down my distorted nerves a little.

I convince myself that the best course of action is to go see Mr. Porter and ask him who sent the letter, and when. Then, I can run and pick up Dominick, and we can get the heck out of here. We won't have time to pack. I know he'll hate me for it, but it's better to have him hate me alive, then love me dead or for him to be taken away from me.

I drive like a maniac through the still sleepy streets of Swallow Springs. Luckily, there are very few people out, and I reach Mr. Porter's house without an incident. I get out of the car and run to his door. I knock with a full fist, heavy, like thunder. I repeat the sound several times.

"Alright, alright," I hear from inside.



First, footsteps, then the heavy door opening, with a creaking sound.

“What in the name of... oh, it’s you, Mrs. Brunswick!” His expression changes the moment he sees me, but there is still a perplexing look on his face.

“I’m really sorry to bother you so early on a Sunday morning, Mr. Porter,” I tell him quickly and out of breath, “but, you need to tell me who mailed this letter.”

I show him the letter in my hand. He takes it, and inspects it for just a moment, then he offers it back.

“We found it in the big mailbox yesterday morning,” he adjusts his thick-rimmed glasses as he replies. “With it, there was a \$10 bill and instructions to deliver it by hand first thing Sunday morning. I asked Gordon if he’d seen anyone, but neither of us know who mailed it,” he ended his explanation with an indifferent shrug of his shoulders. “Is there a problem?”

“No, no, everything’s fine,” I manage to smile, crumpling the letter in my hand and stuffing it back into my purse. “I’m sorry again.”

He says something else, but I’m already half-across the street, and unlocking my car. When I sit back inside, my whole body starts to shake. Tears start rolling down my face, and I know I can’t stop them. I know I can’t stop him. The only thing I can do is just keep on running, like I’ve been doing so far. Unable to do anything else, I bury my face into my hands, and just let the tears flow.

I have no idea how long I was sitting like that, but once the tears stopped, I felt better. I’m able to breathe again, to think again. I even regained a bit of my courage. The moment I’m about to put the key in the ignition, I hear the revving of a familiar motorcycle. I turn to my left and see Wagner.

I roll down the window, and he leans over, with a smile.

“Early morning?” he asks me.

Somehow, seeing him calms me down a little. But, not enough.

“Helluva morning,” I nod.

“Everything OK?” I hear worry in his voice. For a moment, I’m tempted to tell him everything.

“Yeah, just... you know... running errands,” I say stupidly, unable to come up with a more plausible excuse.

“On a Sunday morning?” he frowns.

“Well, those who don’t do what they’re supposed to during the week, need to wrap it up on the weekends.”

“Aha,” he nods, but he doesn’t sound convinced. “You wanna tell me what’s really going on?”

This time, he gets off his bike and rests his elbows on my open car window. He’s shifted his glasses to his forehead. His eyes are dark, you’re not sure if he’s to be trusted. But, there’s something about him that tells you that he’ll keep you safe. If he wants to, of course. Would he?

“I need to get my son and leave this place,” I tell him, sounding broken.

“Wait, what?” he exclaims, opening the door, and almost dragging me out of the car.

“What are you talking about, Danica?”

“This,” I shove the letter in his hand.

He opens it, looks at it, and then lifts his gaze to meet mine. He doesn’t understand. Of course he doesn’t. But, I believe he can guess.

“What are you running from?” he asks me again.

“He will find me,” I whisper, looking around.

The usually pleasant and calm little town of Swallow Springs looks ominous now. Every tree hides a shadow, every bush is large enough for a man to conceal in it. Even the sun seems to have found a cloud to shield itself from what will undoubtedly happen.

“Who will find you?” Wagner asks me.

I can feel his hands on my shoulders, squeezing me gently. He’s standing in front of me, like he’s guarding me. I want to lay my head on his chest, and fall asleep to the sound of his heartbeat. I want to listen to Adrian read me excerpts from Dracula. I want Mason to be his macho self and make me laugh, as we banter playfully. I want them to keep me and Dominick safe, but can they? Can anyone? Or, am I just involving everyone in grave danger?

“I need to go,” I extract myself from his grasp, unwilling to go, but forcing myself.

“You’re not going anywhere until you tell me exactly what’s going on,” I hear determination in his voice and I know he means it. “We promised we’d keep you safe, and we all meant it.”

“I know,” I look down at my feet, biting my lower lip.

He wraps his arms around me. I feel like a tiny little cave at the bottom of an enormous mountain. A cave that knows it's protected as long as it remains there, safely nestled in the boulders.

“Let's head over to your house,” I tell him.

“Alright,” he agrees immediately. “You know the way?”

I just nod. He jumps on the bike, and I start right after him. I need to get to Dominick. Fast. The thought that Dominick might be in danger sends shivers down my spine. I step on the gas pedal and rush past Wagner. My baby might need me.

Hold on, sweetie. Momma's coming.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:18 pm*

When we reach the bikers' place, I park the car and rush outside. But, before I can reach Dominick, Wagner grabs me by the hand. I turn to him, my heart beating wildly. I'm about to push him away for trying to prevent me from seeing my son, but I realize that's not what he wants.

"Come," he tells me.

He lets go of my elbow, and I follow closely behind. We start hearing voices, coming from the back of the house. Wagner is in front of me, his body leading the way. His shoulders are broad, a towering monument of manhood. He reminds me of a falcon, with his wings spread wide open, gliding through the air, becoming one with the universe around him.

I envy the falcon. I envy Wagner. And, Mason. And, Adrian. They found what they were looking for. One another. They created a safe haven for themselves, from all those who are different, who want to hurt them. They protect one another. They are brothers, if not by blood, then by mere desire to keep one another safe, at all cost. I am yet to find that. And, from the looks of it, I'm not doing a damn good job of it.

The voices are growing louder. It's laughter. I hear a boy's laughter, and I recognize it immediately. How could I not? That is the voice that has kept me up at night, from the moment they put him in my arms. He is laughing. I hear merriment and amusement. Is it possible that he is safe, that I've created all of this in my mind, out of nothing?

Wagner presses his index finger against his lips. I join him, and the view behind the house opens up before us. Whatever bad thing I thought they were doing there, comes

crashing down. I see my son, a huge smile on his face, with a paintbrush in his hand. He is dipping it into the paint. Adrian is standing next to him. He is showing him proper brush strokes. Mason and another guy are standing next to them. They are all covered with paint splatter, as if they'd been throwing paint at one another. The wall also suffered some of it. They are shouting and chuckling. Cracking up.

Wagner isn't holding me any longer, but I have no desire to walk over to them. Dominick hasn't seen me yet, so I take a few steps back and hide behind the wall. Wagner follows.

"You see?" he tells me. "Your son is safe with us. Safer than anywhere else. Trust me."

I sigh. Maybe he's right. But, we can't stay here forever.

"Why don't we have some coffee, and you can tell me all about it?"

He takes me to one of the nearby houses, and opens the door for me. I almost gasp when I walk inside. It looks nothing like the outside. It's a miniature home. All comfy and cozy. I see a slightly worn out carpet underneath my feet. The curtains are bright, pulled to the side. The windows are sparkling clean. We walk over to the kitchen. It reminds me of a country kitchen, all wooden and rustic, with yellow, sunny elements that make you never want to leave this room.

"I love this place," I say, as I turn around, soaking up the view.

"Everyone does," Wagner chuckles. "It's all Violet's doing."

"Violet?" I wonder.

The mention of a woman's name awakens the green eyed monster in me. I've never

been a jealous person. Hell, I promised myself I'll never be a jealous person. What's mine is mine and no one else's. The words bring back a shudder of a time past, and I close my eyes for a moment, trying to make the oncoming tidal wave of horrible memories go away.

"Mason's sister," he explains. "She's one of those, whaddya call 'em, interior decorators. She lives in the city. But, comes here for a visit every once in a while, with her family. It's nice to have a place for guests to stay."

"It is," I nod, smiling.

I'm still overwhelmed by the feeling of home that this place evokes in me. A safe haven.

He whips up a cup of coffee quickly, and soon after, I'm holding a soothing cup of liquid courage in my hands. I've stopped trembling. That in itself is a small victory. But, I'm not counting the battles I've won. Not until I win the war.

"So, you wanna tell me now?" he asks, as he sits across from me.

I glance over to my side. There is a vase with fresh forest flowers. A nice touch. She must have been here recently, Mason's sister. I can't help but think how this is the kitchen I've always wanted for myself. A little housewife. The image of me staying here with Dominick permeates my mind. I can see it clearly. We could stay here. I could cook some nice food. Clean. Wash up. I'd feel safe here. I would know I was safe.

The deep gaze of Wagner's eyes brings me back to reality. He reaches over the table and places his hands on mine. He is smiling. I want to smile, too, but the very knowledge that I need to open the doors which I've been keeping closed desperately, makes me want to cry. Still, he deserves to know. Mason and Adrian do, too.

“I was married once,” I start, slowly, painfully, hoping that once I get the story rolling I will just lose myself in it and it won’t hurt as much. “Technically, I’m still married. My husband, Dominick’s father, is a horrible human being. I honestly don’t know how else to explain it. He has hurt us more times than I can remember, promising that every time was the last. That he would change. He would look me in the eyes, just like you are doing now, and he would lie, without blinking. That’s how horrible he is,” I say all this in one go, breathless. It takes me a moment or two to regain composure, and continue. “The last time he raised his hands to me was the time he sent me to the hospital. He sent us both to the hospital, Dominick and me. That’s when I knew that it’s not only me. He won’t refrain from hurting Dominick, just to hurt me more. So, while I was in hospital, I spoke to the police. I told them everything that happened. They helped us hide in a shelter for battered women.”

I lower my head and close my eyes. I still remember that house. Those women who, like me, had nowhere else to go. So, they wandered those hallways aimlessly, while their little kids were safely asleep in their assigned beds. Because, they themselves couldn’t sleep. How can you sleep when you know that only one single, flimsy door is what stands between you and certain death? But, I don’t say any of this. It doesn’t matter to my story.

“We stayed in the shelter exactly 47 days. That’s how long it took them to put my husband behind bars. It’s actually much faster than many other similar cases, which get dragged into infinity. So, I’m not complaining.”

At this point, my hands start to tremble. My fingers feel the itch for that good old familiar sensation of a cigarette between them. Wagner recognizes it. Only another smoker could.

He reaches into his jacket pocket and extracts a half empty box of Lucky’s. I grab at one, desperate for that soothing poison to fill my lungs again. I put it between my lips, dry and cracked, as I see Wagner light it up. I inhale deeply, like it’s the last



breath I'll ever take, so I better make it count. I hold it in for a moment, then exhale, wheezing loudly. I put my fingers on the table. They're light as air. There is no trembling. Only heaviness that will never go away.

"He got 3 years. Three measly years for the life of trauma that he has caused. Can you imagine?" I take another puff, coughing it out this time. I need to take it easy. My lungs forgot the feeling. "The last time I saw him, he made a promise to me. A promise that he will find me no matter where I go, and he will finish what he started."

Wagner gets up to bring me an ashtray, and I extinguish the leftover half of my cigarette. I watch closely as the fire burns out, turning to nothingness.

"I've been checking his prison records. You can check online to see if an inmate is out earlier or not. I haven't checked last month. I've been checking all this time, ritualistically, but not last month. Is it possible that he got out without me noticing?"

"Do you want to check now?" Wagner asks me.

"I don't know," I reply honestly. "If I see that he's out, I'll lose my mind."

"Is living in ignorance better?"

"It's easier."

"You think he sent you the letter?" he wonders.

"Who else could it be?" I whimper, feeling all courage leak out of me.

"Do you like living here in Swallow Springs?" he suddenly asks me.

"I... I do," I nod.

He gets up and walks around the table. He helps me get up, and holds my hands in his.

“Then, you can’t let anyone run you out of your home.”

His words almost make me cry, but before a single tear manages to escape my eyes, I feel his lips against mine. Soft, tender, hopeful.

“Hey, W. you need to - “

We are both interrupted by a voice that belongs to someone who also makes my heart go aflutter. I pull away from Wagner, wiping the corner of my lips. I blush wildly, looking at my feet, so I almost miss seeing the wide grin on Mason’s face.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt,” Mason lifts his hands in a mock gesture of surrender. “But, Guns needs you. His exhaust pipe isn’t working right.”

I see Wagner nod at me, as his fingers caress the side of my cheek, then he leaves me alone with Mason. We both hear the front door open, then close. I wonder how come I didn’t hear it before. Probably because I was too busy kissing Wagner.

“I’m sorry, I...” I start.

“What are you sorry for?” Mason wonders, looking puzzled.

“We just...”

“Kissed?” Mason ends my sentence, chuckling sweetly. “Is that what you’re apologizing for?”

“Well...” I feel so confused, like a school girl talking to her long time crush.

“Oh,” he suddenly nods, “you think because we kissed, I’d be upset with you?”

“Um, you aren’t?”

I swallow heavily. What kind of a game is he playing?

“Not one bit. I sometimes forget you’re just human.”

“Just human?” I take offense at this, but I try not to show it. It shows. My cheeks reveal it all too plainly.

“Don’t take it as an insult, darling,” he laughs heartily. “Humans are still enforcing monogamy onto each other. I mean, there’s nothing wrong with that, if both parties agree. Usually, only one party agrees, and the other wants to explore more.”

“So, you like to be free to fool around?” I snort, still offended.

“Fool around? Absolutely not,” he shakes his head fervently. “I think you’re missing my point completely.”

“Then, do explain,” I snort again.

“Alright,” he is still chuckling softly. “I’m not talking about fooling around, as you called it. I’m talking about polygamy, as opposed to monogamy. It’s non-constraining, allowing you to be with other people at the same time, loving them all equally, and no one feels like they are being cheated on.”

Somewhere deep down, my heart reacts wildly to his words. This is what I want. Unable to make a decision between these three men, these three shifters who all seem to fill a different void in me, wouldn’t it be the best decision just to be with all of them at the same time, loving them, sharing my all with them?

But, that's not right. That's not what I've been taught. What would others think of me?

"You're having a battle of morals, aren't you?" Mason winks at me.

"What do you mean?" I ask, but I know well what he's referring to.

"You were taught to only love one person. All humans are taught this. Some of you figure it out on your own that it's perfectly alright to love more people, as long as everyone knows exactly what's going on."

I blush even more hearing his words. He's right. That is exactly how I'm feeling.

He walks over to me, cupping my chin with the tips of his fingers.

"So, don't worry," he smiles. "If you were mine, I would love you, but you would be free to be who you want to be. No restraints."

With those words, he kisses me passionately, my lips parting, our tongue twirling, dancing. My fingers clutch at him, desperately. I never want him to let go. I never want to let go. We kiss for what seems to be a small eternity, when his hands suddenly pull away.

"If we keep this up, I can't promise to stop," he tells me.

I don't want him to stop. Ever. But, instead of saying this, I just nod. He's right. This isn't the time or the place.

"Let's see what Dom and Adrian are up to," I hear him say, and I rush to follow him outside.

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:18 pm*

Mason

“I knew something was up,” I reply, feeling like smacking the shit out of the wall right behind me. “I was too stupid to connect the dots.”

“She kept moving so many times that it was impossible to track down where she came from,” Wagner explains.

He gave me the short version of her story. I should have been there for her. I should have been there when she was telling it. It doesn’t matter now. What matters is keeping her and the boy safe.

“I pulled a few strings,” Wagner says. “They say this guy’s been out since Monday.”

“So, that’s at least a week.”

“I guess.”

“Is it possible he knows where she is?” I wonder.

Of course it is. Why am I even asking these fucking idiotic questions?

“It is possible,” Wagner nods.

“We have to keep her here.”

“Will she stay?”

“Why wouldn’t she?” I ask. “We’ll keep her safe. We’ll show that guy what happens to fucking cowards who beat up defenseless women and children.”

I can see the little hairs on Wagner’s neck stand up. He’s pissed. I know he’d transform right this minute and go to hunt down that son of a bitch. I know the feeling. I want to give him a piece of my mind, too. But, we have to wait. We can set up a trap, teach him a lesson he’ll never forget. Make him leave Danica and Dominick forever. No one deserves to live in fear. We all know that. We’ve all tasted it.

“She’s in Violet’s shack,” he tells me.

“Good,” I nod. “Keep her there.”

“She’ll need her stuff.”

“Then, we’ll go get it. But, she’s not to be let out of sight. It could be nothing. Someone from town could be just messing with her. But, she’s worried and that’s all we need to believe her that there actually might be something to it.”

Wagner just nods. I’d feel better having Adrian here with us, during this conversation, but he’s with Danica and her son. Strangely, he’s the best at this type of situation. I guess it’s his calm nature. And you know this for sure, once he trusts you, once he starts caring for you, there isn’t better protection you’d ever wish for, other than him.

“Alright then, I’ll go tell her this. You come with me. Then, you’ll go to her place, pick up whatever she needs.”

“Of course.”

I rush over to the shack. When I open the door, a pleasant smell of pancakes hits my nostrils, and I remember that I haven't eaten since 8 am. It's 8 pm now. Adrian and Dominick are sitting at the little table in the kitchen, and Danica is making pancakes.

"Just in time!" she smiles at me.

I clench my jaw tightly. I don't remember the last time a woman smiled at me like that. Sure, one night stands are fine. You get the juices going, you get them out. But, pancakes. Smiles. Hugs. A man needs those, too. No matter how hard and rugged he might be.

"Any for me?" I wonder.

"Just sit anywhere," she tell us, and Adrian and Dominick scoot to make room for us.

Like a small whirlwind, Danica places plates and glasses before us, then pancakes follow shortly after.

"I don't remember the last time I had pancakes at 8 pm," Wagner says, stuffing his face with food.

I watch Danica. She looks happy. Relieved. If she is scared, she is hiding it well. Every once in a while, I see it in her eyes. Fear that all this might be taken away from her, just like that. So, she is trying to enjoy the moment for as long as she can. I want to tell her not to be afraid. Maybe she already knows that. Maybe that's why she's agreed to stay.

"Listen," I start, "the guys and I've been thinking, and we decided it might be best for you and your mom to stay here, with us."

"For real!?" Dominick jumps up from the table, almost dropping the plate.

“Hey, hey!” Danica smiles at him. “Watch it.”

“Sorry, I’m just excited,” Dominick explains. “Can we stay here, mom? Can we?”

“Well, I’m not sure...” I see her looking at me, for confirmation, so I just nod. “I guess we could stay for a while.”

“That’s awesome!” Dominick exclaims. “Wagner promised to show me how to pull a whole bike apart and then put it back together again!”

Wagner gives her a look, and she just smiles.

“That’s fine,” she assures him. “As long as you guys are careful.”

“Of course,” Dominick nods, taking another bite of his pancake.

“Why don’t you take that plate over to the other room and watch some TV?” Danica asks Dominick.

He looks confused for a moment, but seems to get it immediately. The adults need to speak. He smiles, picks up his plate, and disappears, as he’s instructed. Danica looks at me, her face a tapestry of love and concern. I guess that’s what every mother looks like all the time. But, I want to remind her that she doesn’t need to worry about a thing. We’re here.

“I hope you don’t mind,” I start, once sure the three of us are alone, “Wagner shared with us what you told him.”

“I just wanted - “ Wagner starts, but she interrupts him.

“That’s OK,” she nods. “I doubt I’d be able to tell that story again. Every time I talk



about him, I feel like a little part of me dies. And, I'm tired of slowly dying on the inside."

She glances over at the door, as if afraid that Dominick might pop his little head out, but there is no one. She continues, with a lowered tone of voice.

"I'm really grateful that you guys offered us to stay here."

"That offer is unconditional," Adrian replies this time.

"I agree," I confirm.

"It is possible that the letter in question was just a benign example of a kid's prank. But, it could just as well be something much more sinister," Adrian speaks again, and we all seem to shudder at the thought of that sinister something.

Still, none of us is afraid. We've lived several lifetimes, and we've met more than one such character. Men who think it's alright to raise their hand to a woman get a special treatment with us. I remember one of Violet's previous boyfriends. He needed to be straightened out a little. We were more than happy to oblige. Luckily, he was smart enough to know to leave her alone after we were done with him. This guy obviously isn't so smart. That's alright. There are ways to teach obedience to a stupid dog.

"Honestly," Danica suddenly starts, taking a seat at the table, "I don't want to leave Swallow Springs." She looks at each of us, her gaze lingering long enough to assure us that she cares for us, that we are all in this together, no matter what. "I've made friends here. I found people who care about Dominick and me. I found a job I like. I know it's nothing much, but I like it, and that's more than enough for me, right now. This place feels like home, after so many places that just felt like stops on a never ending journey to nowhere."

She places her hands on the table, palms upward. Adrian, to her left, puts his hand in hers. Wagner to her right, does the same. Together, we form a circle of hands. A unity. An alliance. Harmony.

“You have no idea how much this means to me,” she whispers.

I can see little tears sparkling in her eyes. Her beautiful eyes that won't be crying anymore. I'll make sure of that. We'll all make sure of that.

“You can stay here as long as you want,” I continue. “Once we're sure it's safe for you to return home, you will do so.”

I didn't say that I'd rather she didn't return. I'd rather have her stay here. I'm sure the guys feel the same way. But, none of us says anything. We just enjoy the moment.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:18 pm*

I wake up, and check the time. It's 2 am. I try to get comfortable, but I always found it difficult to sleep in a new bed. I slowly get up, hoping that Dominick has no such troubles. I pass by the little room which he's sleeping in, and I hear steady breathing through the door which is slightly ajar. Happy that at least he's able to get a good night's rest, I tip toe out of the little shack.

When I open the door, I almost jump in fright, at seeing the shadow of a man, standing right before me.

"Hey, hey..."

My first instinct is to rush back inside, but hearing his voice calms me down. It's only Mason.

"Can't sleep?" he asks me.

"Mhm," I nod, feeling the chill of the night air blow right through me. "I'm not sure if it's only the new bed or there's something more."

"It's OK," he tells me. "Fear is good. It's what keeps you on your toes. And, it's good to be on your toes."

"I guess," I sigh. "I'm just tired of constantly being on my toes, you know?"

"I know what can cure that," he smiles at me a little too mischievously, and at first, I'm not sure what exactly he means. "It's not the girliest drink, but I've got some Johnnie Walker Black Label over at the big kitchen. I could get some and we can go

back inside.”

I chuckle at the idea, feeling like a teenager who’s snuck out of her bedroom, without her parents knowing, so she can drink and make out with her boyfriend. Or, maybe boyfriends? I like that option better.

“I don’t remember the last time I had some hard liquor in me,” I sigh.

“Then, it’s time you got some,” he winks. “I’ll go get it.”

And, before I can say another word, he disappears in one of the nearby shacks. A few moments later, I hear footsteps. I turn to the side, quickly, ready to react, my heart pounding like crazy. But, it takes me only a moment to recognize two familiar faces.

“Is this the night of the full Moon or something, so no one’s getting any sleep?” I wonder, as Adrian and Wagner walk over to me.

“Adrian sleeps maybe 3 hours every night,” Wagner explains. “Then, he takes walks. I guess after years of bunking with him in the same shack, I’ve overtaken his routines.”

“That’s not so bad,” I smile. “Is 3 hours enough?”

“You can train your body to function with even less. As long as you make up for the lost energy in some other way, like good nutrients.”

“I see,” I nod.

At that moment, Mason returns with the bottle, and two glasses.

“I didn’t know we had more guests,” he sneered at the guys.

After about 10 minutes, all of us found ourselves in the shack I was staying at with Dominick. The guys promised they would behave and be quiet. Although, I'm not sure I trusted them. Still, I went along with it. As I get comfortable, I jump to make sure that Dominick's door is closed. He's sleeping. My little angel.

I return to the kitchen, where Mason has already served our drinks, and they are waiting on the kitchen table. I sit down, and despite all logic, I look at these three men around me, and I feel safe. I feel invincible. I don't even care about that letter any longer. Maybe it would be best to finally end this chapter. I can't constantly keep running away. The path would eventually end. Better make it end under my own terms, than under his.

"You OK?" I hear Mason ask, after a while. "You look lost in your own thoughts."

"It's a little bit of that, and a little bit of this," I raise my empty glass. "It really hits the spot."

We all chuckle, trying to be as silent as we can, but it's hard when we're having fun.

I don't know how much time has passed, but I know that I never want this night to end. I listen to the guys' banter, and I enjoy the looks they give me. Everything about tonight has a dreamy quality. I feel like I conjured up this whole scene, like they are just a figment of my poor, stressed out imagination. Occasionally, my hand reaches out to touch them, just to make sure they are here, they are real. A brush of the hand here. A pat on the shoulder there.

When I glance at the bottle a bit later, I realize it's half empty. How much have I had to drink? I stopped counting ages ago. But, only because it feels so good. Luckily, I called Old Bill and asked for a day off. He was nice enough to agree. Susie mentioned that he's hired another girl, so hopefully, it'll be easier to arrange shifts now. That also means we'll work longer hours, as Old Bill wants to keep it open an

hour or two later than usual. That's fine. I don't mind. I like working there. I like him, and I like Susie. I like Adrian, despite his social awkwardness. I like Wagner, despite his overly manly ways. And, I like Mason, despite his need to turn everything into a joke. Or, maybe I like them all exactly because of those things, and not despite them.

I'm babbling now. I feel like there is a balmy veil covering my eyes, and I see colors stronger, more vibrant. Wagner's laughter is boisterous. Adrian's face is like a sculpture, perfectly preserved in time. Mason is... well, Mason. There is so much to say about him, and yet, I could probably spill millions of epithets that wouldn't even come close to describing him exactly the way he is.

I take another glance at my empty glass. My lips are dry. Itching to be kissed. That alcohol only awoke the sleeping monster with the libido of 3 men. That familiar warmth washes over me. I know I'm blushing. I don't care. My body always finds a way to betray my innermost thoughts and desire. I should probably be used to it by now.

I'm not even sure what the guys are talking about. It's something funny. Must be. They're all laughing. I want to glide my fingers along their skin. I want to feel the touch of their lips on my burning flesh. But, I can't make the first move. I'm frozen in the same spot where I'm sitting. I dare not move. I can just watch these beautiful, gorgeous men before me, and dream of the moment they might touch me.

"Danica, you look tired," Adrian is the first to say something.

"Oh, maybe just a little," I giggle, pressing my index finger against my lips. "But, shhhh."

"I think you're tired and a little bit drunk," Wagner chuckles.

He gets up and offers me his hand.

“I can walk by myself, you know,” I pretend to be offended. “Despite what I may look like, I know exactly what I’m doing. I’m not drunk.”

I get up, and try to lean against the chair in front of me, but instead of leaning against it, I push it forward and almost lose my balance. An action that sends all of us into a bout of suppressed laughter.

“Yeah, totally not drunk,” Mason shakes his head incredulously, pressing his hand against his lips, but it’s hard for all of us to remain quiet.

Mason takes me by the hand, and leads me to the bedroom. I can’t hear any footsteps behind me. But, I’m hoping Wagner and Adrian are following. My room is pleasantly dark. Only thin strips of moonlight are oozing through the window, spilling all over the room like tiny little crystals. It takes my eyes just a second to adjust to the darkness.

It’s a small room, with only one bed, and a single closet in the corner. A small nightstand rests by the bed. The lamp is off. I don’t need it. I’m standing by the bed. Mason is next to me. My blood is hot to the point of boiling. My lips are dry. And yet, I’m sure I didn’t drink that much. Damn liquor.

I glance over at the door. Wagner and Adrian are here, too. I smile when I notice that they closed the door shut.

“Let’s get you to bed,” I hear Mason whisper.

I sit down on the bed. My heart is thumping in my chest. I’m not prepared for the sensation their presence awakens in me. Not this close. This intimate. I want them to dominate me. I want to be a plaything in their hands. I want to feel the heat of Mason’s palms against my skin. I want to take Wagner’s hand between my legs. I want to ride Adrian’s fingers until none of us can stand it any longer, and we need

more. Is it the alcohol talking or is it me? Does it really matter?

I know they feel the same. I can see it in their eyes. My desire has given me night vision, and I know their skin itches to be touched, to be caressed, like mine does.

Wagner and Adrian walk up to us. Adrian's hand brushes against my shoulder. Wagner reaches out to me, but he is still in the air around me.

Slowly, I lift my arms over my head, and take off the oversized t-shirt I've been sleeping in. Now, I'm left only in a small, barely there pair of panties. A few crickets are heard from outside. Apart from that, we are all silent, hoping that Dominick is a heavy sleeper.

"You should be sleeping," I hear Mason whisper right into my ear.

It sends a million little goosebumps on a never ending quest up and down my body.

"We could play the pillow biting game," I whisper back, and I hear Wagner suppress a chuckle.

He approaches me from behind, nibbling on my earlobe gently. I feel a heavy heat rushing down my spine, exploding somewhere between my legs. Excitement burns inside of me.

"Are you sure you want this?" Adrian takes my hand. His voice is so sweet, like dripping honey. He's got me so hot for him.

"I'm not drunk, if that's what you guys mean," I whisper a little louder, having no idea that wanting to raise your voice while still whispering would be so strenuous to your throat. "I want this. I've wanted this since the moment I laid eyes on you. On all of you."



I have no idea where all this courage comes from, but I welcome it.

“We need to be very quiet,” Mason instructs.

He takes me over to the bed, and lays me down on it. The thunder in my heart is relentless. I know what will happen. I want it to happen. I can't remember the last time I wanted something this bad.

I bite my lower lip, as I hear the sound of clothes being taken off. The room is still dark. I see only outlines, silhouettes of the men I've desired for so long. I don't need to see them to know I want them.

I feel two strong hands spread my legs. The heat of Adrian's breath hits my pussy. I stifle a moan. And, we haven't even started. I press my hands to my lips, not to make the same mistake. His tongue takes its first swipe, and pleasure erupts deep within me, spreading from head to toe. He parts my wet folds. I surrender immediately. My legs are hooked over his shoulders. He can do whatever he wants with me. He licks and sucks with perfect skill, pulling my clit into his mouth with just the right amount of pressure. The buildup is slow, fiery.

Mason stands over me, looming with his size. I open my mouth to wrap my lips around his cock. I cup his balls, as I slowly slide my hand up his length. Then, down. I lick the tip, following Adrian's moves between my legs. It's hard to focus on something when I'm about to explode. To come completely undone. I fight the urge, the sheer necessity to let go and be consumed with this orgasm immediately.

I try to focus on Mason's cock. I search for Wagner in the darkness. I find his throbbing dick to my right. I start jerking him off, my lips switching hungrily between their two cocks. But, whatever I do it's not even close to what Adrian's devil tongue is doing to me. Licking, sucking, biting gently, he's using his fingers now, sliding into me, pumping, leading me closer and closer to that point.

Wagner's cock in my mouth takes us to the peak. I'm still walking that fine line, but I can't breathe any longer. I can't keep away the inevitable. A few moments later, Wagner grabs a handful of my hair, and shoves himself into my mouth, his dick throbbing and spraying right into my mouth. I keep sucking at it, my hand still playing with his balls, gently, trying to accentuate the sensation.

He wheezes heavily, pulling out. I wipe the corner of my mouth just a split second before ecstasy washes over me, and my mind goes blank. The pressure inside of me unfolds, explodes, splitting me into a million little pieces. I turn to the side, grabbing the pillow and pressing it against my lips. My body convulses, still from the remnants of that powerful orgasm.

Still shaking, I get up, my mouth agape, burning with desire. I pull myself down on the bed, on all fours. Adrian grabs me from behind, and slides in effortlessly. I've never had a double orgasm. Never.

Mason comes over to the front, dispersing all my doubts, my fears with his kiss. I know now that I could never be satisfied with just one of them. It's all or nothing. Always has been.

I'm kissing him back hungrily, in dire need of his tongue. He pulls himself up in full. The fresh sight of his cock revives me. Adrenaline surges through me again, assuring me that we're not done. I take him into my mouth again, full on. Absolute perfection. Wagner is relaxing, stroking my tits, as Adrian's cock edges my pussy. None of us lets go. These men fill me completely, and I feel I'm shining, I'm sparkling from the inside, where this fire burns. It destroys me and restores me again, all in one go.

Adrian quickens his thrusts, crashing into my ass hard. Strong. Harder every subsequent time. I want to scream, but my mouth is filled with Mason's cock. My screams are muffled, as we all just keep fucking to infinity.

The momentum grows, overtaking us all, threatening to devour and destroy everything in its path. But for us, nothing else exists. Only this moment. Only our bodies and how we weave the tapestry of desire. Higher and higher, for now, there is nowhere else to go. We will come down crashing, if we must.

At the same time, our bodies stiffen, rock hard, every muscle inside of us tight, purposeful, desperate. My pussy grips, as I mold my lips around Mason's enormous, palpitating cock. One more thrust, and we're all done. Finished. Hotter, brighter, more desperate than ever before.

We all need to scream our release to the world, but none of us does it. Adrian's cock pulsates inside of me, spilling his seed. I can feel his balls heaving. Mason's aftermath is the same. His release is quick, salty, succulent.

Still breathing heavily, lightning suddenly rips the sky apart somewhere in the distance. I jump, my muscles still tense, like an animal.

"See, we got an applause," Mason chuckles, and I punch him playfully on the shoulder.

He suffocates his laughter, and we all wait a moment or two, just to make sure Dominick is still asleep. The silence calms us down.

Without another word, I watch them as they get dressed. One by one, they walk over to me, and give me a kiss. I smile after each one. I mean, there's nothing to say, is there?

Sleep takes over me easily. I watch them leave my room, and I'm still awake when I hear the front door close, with a lock I know can be opened only from the inside. I close my eyes. I expect my thoughts to awaken with a mad need to rationalize what just happened, but none of that happens. It was magic. And, no one tries to rationalize

magic, do they?

I shuffle a little under the covers, and find the right position. The alcohol has evaporated from my system. I'm just left with the courage and knowledge that what happened just now was exactly what I wanted to happen. Nothing more. Nothing less.

My mind a blank, I'm lulled to sleep mere moments after the guys left.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:18 pm*

The following morning, I wake up with a slight headache. It starts right at my temples, and then spreads like thorns of angry bush roses around my head, poking any place it reaches, creating thousands of little pain fountains. But, that's not what I'm focused on.

I grab at my cover and pull it over my head, in a futile effort to hide myself from the world. I can't believe what I did. I seriously can't believe I did that. I had sex with Mason. And, Adrian. And, Wagner. What on Earth was I thinking?!

I'm so upset with myself that I can't even feel the headache any longer. How will I be able to look at them, at any of them? Maybe it's best just to gather my stuff, get Dominick and get out of here before anyone...

"Knock, knock..." I hear a voice through the closed doors, at the same time that I actually hear the sound of knocking.

"Yeah?" I mumble, my voice hoarse and unpleasant.

"Whoa, you sound like an 80 year old heavy smoker when you wake up," Mason peeps through the door.

"It's the alcohol from last night," I try to explain, but the more I speak, the worse I sound.

I'm still hiding underneath the covers, but I feel Mason sit on the edge of the bed. He doesn't try to get me to come out. For a few moments, he just sits there next to me. I wonder what the time is. Is Dominick up already? Has he had breakfast?

“Adrian said this will help,” Mason says, then I hear the sound of something being put down on the little nightstand next to the bed.

I peek through a small opening from underneath the cover, and see it’s a cup of some steaming, yellowish liquid.

“It’s peppermint tea, with a little bit of honey,” he explains. “According to Adrian, people have been using peppermint tea for centuries as a cure for hangover. He said, ahem, lemme see if I can quote him, it both counteracts the nauseating effect of a hangover, and relaxes tense nerves and muscles.”

“That was pretty good,” I smile, still not coming out.

“Sounds enough like him, right?” I can hear him laugh this time.

“It really does.”

“You know, in his entire lifetime, he’s only loved one woman,” he suddenly starts telling me a story. “She was some countess or shit. I forget. Real looker. Men’s jaws would drop to the ground when she would pass by. And, for some reason she had eyes only for him. This was shortly after he escaped the circus, before he joined us. Our paths still hadn’t crossed at that point. So, anyway, he found work doing some odd jobs. He would send her things he carved from wood, as presents. She loved them. And, she loved him. He wanted to marry her, and after a few months of courting her secretly, he asked her to marry him. She said yes. But, he had to ask her father for her hand, and a blessing from him was something he wouldn’t be getting that easily, because her father had already arranged a marriage with one of his friends, who was much older than his daughter. I guess that’s how things were done back in the day. As you can guess, the proposal didn’t go that well. Adrian was thrown out of her house. He almost ended up in prison. He wasn’t allowed to come near her. On the morning of her wedding day, she was found dead. She swallowed

deadly nightshade berries. A few were still left in a little bowl. He was crushed. I think he never even looked at another woman, until you came into our lives.”

A few tears rolled down my face as I was listening to his story. I press my face against the pillow, to wipe it. Then, I slide the cover down, revealing myself.

“I didn’t know that,” I whisper, my voice trembling.

“I told you this story to show you that for him, for us, for me and Wagner as well, this isn’t just a fling. If it’s just that to you, then all you need to do is say so, and we won’t stand in your way, if you want to leave, or whatever else you want to do. I - “

“I know,” it feels good to be the one who interrupts him this time.

I take his hands into mine, and place a kiss on them.

“Thank you for sharing this story with me,” I smile. “I know how different all three of you are. And yet, you are the same in so many ways. The three of you aren’t one perfect man. You are three perfect men and I consider myself so lucky, so grateful to be loved and cherished by you.”

“We’re far from perfect,” he shakes his head. “And, honestly, I don’t want you to think we are. You might get disappointed that way.”

“I’d never be disappointed by anything you do or you did.”

“You say that now,” he smiles, caressing my cheek. “Just, believe that we are good men. That’s enough.”

“I know that, I really do.”

“Because, we’ve all done something in our lives we’re not proud of. Wagner’s been in more fights than you can remember. He’s also fucked about a thousand women, in his youth. He had problems with alcohol, with rage, but that’s all behind him. He’s learned from it. He is the man he is today exactly because of those mistakes from the past.”

I look down, trying to make sense of his words. He’s right. We should learn from our mistakes. Otherwise, we are doomed to repeat them over and over again.

“Adrian believes that he has become weaker because of his past. They’ve broken him so many times, and yet, he’s still standing. That in itself, is victory.”

“What about you?” I dare to ask, managing only a slight whisper.

“Me?” he smiles weakly. “I’m no different. I cheated. I fought where there was no need to fight. My father was the clan leader, and like I already mentioned, we have slightly different rules here. We’re civilized, but we’re not ready to give up our connection with the old way of things. That’s what my father believed. I myself am willing to modernize the clan, as you can see. But, he wasn’t. That is what was eventually his downfall. We made the mistake of making an alliance with the wrong clan, a clan which didn’t share the same ideals as us. They betrayed us, and many of us died as a result.”

“Oh, I’m sorry...” I gasp.

“I don’t like to talk about it,” he nods. “I guess, you and I are the same like that. Adrian and Wagner, too. We all have different stories, but one thing binds us, and that is that we became who we are because we overcame what happened. No one is perfect. No is errorless. This is a word Adrian would use,” he chuckles to himself, and I join in. “You just keep going. You face your fear. You fight it. You don’t surrender your whole life to it. Because then, it will swallow you whole. It will



swallow you alive, Danica.”

I hear him sigh heavily, as if the weight of the world is pressing upon his shoulders, and there is no one to share the burden with.

“We’re all having breakfast down at the big kitchen. Come join us, when you’re ready.”

“I’ll be there in a second,” I smile.

He just nods, then exits the room. I take the tea and drink it slowly. Adrian was right. My throat immediately felt better. As for my voice, that’ll take longer. My headache subsided as well. Maybe I could actually grab something to eat.

Wagner

“I really appreciate you taking me home to get my stuff,” Danica tells me.

She is standing outside her shack. Well, Violet’s really, but from the looks of it, Danica will be staying here a while. That’s great. Having her here is great. Fuck. Sometimes, you need Adrian to expand your vocabulary a little. It’s not only great. It’s fucking amazing having her here.

“Mason said he checked the place out a few times since you’ve been here, but there was no suspicious activity,” I assure her. “Still, better be safe.”

“I think so, too,” she smiles.

Her pony tail sways to the left, then to the right, as she starts to walk over to her car. Those jeans don’t do her ass justice.

“Where are you going?” I shout after her.

“Um, to my car?” she turns around. “Where else?”

I point to my bike.

“Are you kidding me!?” Her eyes widen in shock. She might be a little pissed, too. But, it suits her so well. Nothing prettier than a mad woman. “I’m not riding that coffin on wheels.”

I chuckle at her comment.

“You’re lucky I like you, so I’ll let that one slide,” I slap her butt, and she quickly looks around to make sure no one saw us. “What are you so afraid of?”

She sighs. Her cheeks are blazing red. The sun bathes in her eyes, as she tries to turn away from it. But, it follows her wherever she goes, desperate for her attention. I know the feeling.

“That we’ll crash?”

“What if I drive slowly?” I ask, as gently as I can. Even though gentle isn’t my suit. That’s Adrian’s department. But, he’s not here. And, I’m not riding in no car. “Do you trust me?” I ask, extending my hand to her.

She looks at it. I know she’s thinking. Weighing. Should she do it? The corner of her lip dances in a smile.

“I do,” she nods.

“You know I’d never do anything to scare you or hurt you, right?”

“Yes,” she nods again.

“We’ll go slow. Promise. You just hold onto me.”

She comes over and wraps her arms around me. Her hair smells like apples. Her body is so little. You’d want to put her in your pocket and always take her with you, wherever you go. Is that what love feels like? I’ve only known desire. Need. Fucking. Then, afterwards, nothing. With her, it’s different. It’s so different. I want her to stay. Before, during and after. I want her lips to keep moving, I want her voice to be heard,

I want her body to always be close. Is that how the guys feel, too?

“And, you’ll stop if it’s too much?” she whispers in my neck.

My dick gets hard at the thought of her kissing me, of stopping somewhere along the way for a quickie in the woods.

“Of course,” I grin, adjusting my hard cock in my pants, hoping that she couldn’t feel it.

I take her over to the bike. She stops. She’s looking at it. Inspecting it, like it’s an enemy she’ll be fighting soon. So, she needs to know its weaknesses. I smile. Sometimes, she’s like a child, and that’s why she needs to be protected. Women like her are so rare. So fucking beautiful, like a dying breed. Like us. That’s why she belongs with us. She and the boy.

I sit down first, adjusting my weight.

“You ready?” I ask her.

She sighs, her lips parting only slightly. I’d take her closer, but she needs to do it on her own. She feels the leather seat first. Her fingers dance on the cover. She inspects every part of it, as if she knows exactly what it is and what it does. I allow her. She needs time. We’re in no rush.

It takes her a few moments to finally sit down. First, she adjusts her helmet. Her body presses to mine. Her tits flatten against my back. The soft midsection between her legs pinned down to my lower back. This is where she belongs. I show her where to put her feet. She does it, obediently. Her arms wrap around my waist, tight. Her fingers dig into my jacket. I smile.

“Can we start?” I ask, my foot ready.

“Yes,” she replies, louder than I expected.

I press on the gas pedal. The machine roars wildly. It takes off, through the dirty outback and into the neat streets of the town that we’ve made into our home. Slowly, her grip loosens. But, she’s still pressed close to me. I can feel her breathing.

“We good?” I ask, every once in a while.

“Good,” she’d reply back.

I take the roundabout way, to the lake. When we reach it, I expect her to jump off the bike. Instead, she gets off slowly. One leg at a time. Confidently. With a smile on her face.

It’s still sunny. It’ll be a warm night. One for open windows. I hear crickets already. A few birds chirping in the nearby trees. I started noticing these things only recently. Like I have a new reason to look at the world differently. I wonder if it’s an inside change that provoked this.

“It wasn’t so bad, was it?” I ask, grinning.

She fits into this serene scene perfectly. She’s like a water nymph, from one of those old mythological tales. Adrian’s got all kinds of obscure books on his shelf, and sometimes, when I’m very bored, I browse them. Not too often, though.

“Not at all,” she shakes her head, gazing at the lake. “I don’t know what I was so afraid of.”

“Fear,” I reply. “You convinced yourself you were scared of it. And, there’s nothing

more frightening than the fear we create for ourselves.”

She looks like she didn't hear me. She doesn't react. She seems lost in the view around her.

“Do you think it's possible to live without fear?” she suddenly asks. Her eyes are still glued to the surface of the lake, as if she's expecting something to happen to it, and she doesn't want to miss it.

“Would you want to?”

“What do you mean?” she finally turns to me. I see confusion in her eyes.

“Adrian once told me, he read in one of those books of his, light wouldn't exist without darkness. So, everything you appreciate wouldn't be as valuable if you got it easily, without fear, or hard work, or some kind of sacrifice.”

“You know what, I never saw it like that,” she smiles.

“Yeah, that's what we have Adrian for,” I smile back. “Smart ass.”

She chuckles. We both gaze into the distance. Who knows? Maybe we see the same thing?

We remain like that for a while. She gets closer to me. I wrap my arms around her. I remember wanting to fuck her on the way to her place, but all need and desire for that are gone. My dick is asleep. Not because it doesn't want her. Hell, it wants her all the time. But, it's calm. My body is calm. My mind is calm. All I need is her presence to be truly happy. I know that now.

We reach her home quickly afterwards. We didn't even notice that it's starting to get

dark slowly. Exactly what we've been trying to avoid.

When she gets off the bike, her face changes. There is sadness. No fear. Just deep, deep sadness.

"Everything OK?" I ask her. My hand rests on her shoulder, as she gazes at her home. I wonder does she even see it as her home anymore.

"Just wondering when we'll be able to get back here," she replies.

"You don't like it at our place?"

"Oh, no, it's not that," she immediately turns to me. I feel the scalding touch of her palm against my cheek. "I feel very welcome at your place. It's just, this was the first place where I truly felt like I did everything right. I got a job. Dominick started school. I haven't been late on any of my bills. I feel like my old self again. And now, I'm afraid I'll have that taken away from me again."

"Look here," I cup her chin, making her look at me. "No one can take that away from you, unless you let them."

"Do you think so?"

"Absolutely," I nod.

"I must admit, it feels nice to hold onto hope that Dom and I will eventually be returning here. I like this little house, despite its not so nice history. I feel like we're both broken in a way, and we finally found each other. Perfectly broken. Perfectly aligned in that way."

"Sounds very poetic," I smile.

“Sounds like a waste of time, is what Mason would say,” she replies. “Let’s do what we came here to do.”

She takes a step first. She unlocks the door, and opens it. It’s pitch dark inside. Almost like there’s no electricity. But, she switches on the light, and all’s well again. That little worm of doubt is gone. The fucker. I hate when he does that.

“I’ll just go upstairs and grab a few things from my room. Can you get everything from Dom’s list?” she asks, giving me a little piece of paper.

I take it. Blue sweatshirt. Jeans. Socks. Underwear. Toothbrush. Cologne. PS. I chuckle. Adrian told me he played with Dominick. I bet the kid whopped his ass.

“It’s the first one to the left, upstairs,” she tells me.

I follow her upstairs. The stairs creak. Annoyingly so. But, I endure it. We’ll be out of here in a jiffy. She disappears in a room down the small hallway. I enter the one I was instructed to.

The moment I enter, I recognize it for what it is. A teenage boy’s room. A room that would eventually have one of those do not disturb signs pinned to the door. Dirty socks on the floor. Open books still lying on the table. The window over it open.

I glance over at the closed wardrobe in the corner. This is the moment where, in horror movies, the killer jumps out and takes me out. Well, not in my movie, buddy. I rush over there, opening the wardrobe with a vengeance.

My heart in my heels, I chuckle. It’s empty. Of course it’s fucking empty. I feel stupid for even thinking something like that. There’s bad mojo in this house. I’ll just grab the stuff from the list and....



At that moment, I hear the sound of shattered glass. Instinctively, I look at the window. Still open. Untouched.

“Danica?” I shout.

I hear running. Scurrying feet. Then she bursts through the open door. She is flushed. Her eyes are wide. She’s still holding the red lacy bra in her hand. The sound stopped her mid-packing.

“What was that?” she asks, shivering. “That sounded like someone broke my window.”

“I’ll go check it out,” I reply, worried. But, I don’t let it show. “You stay here.”

“I can’t stay here alone.... Please, let me come with you.”

“If we stumble onto someone, they might attack you. So, instead of attacking them, I’ll be defending you. Trust me, you’ll be much safer here. Just close the door, prop it with a chair or something, and hide. Don’t make a sound. When I come back, I’ll call out. Got it?”

“Mhm,” she nods. She’s even more frightened now than before.

I know she doesn't like the idea of staying alone. But, coming with me is the worst thing she can do. She just needs to stay put, and hide.

“Good girl,” I lean over and kiss her on the forehead.

I close the door behind me, hoping it’s nothing, but I can’t find a good explanation for a broken window in the evening.

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The moment Wagner leaves the room, I push Dominick's chair under the doorknob, but I know that won't do much. I need to hide. But, where? Under the bed and in the closet are the only options, one worse than the other. As I try to come up with a more original solution to my problem, I can feel my engorged heart palpitating in my throat, making it increasingly harder to breathe.

I look around the room. It's completely dark. The street lamps outside shed barely any light through the open window. I wonder why it's open. Did I leave it open? That doesn't sound like me. Maybe Dominick left it open, but I doubt he concerns himself with either opening it or closing it.

Suddenly, I hear some commotion outside. I can't recognize the sound. All I know is that it's an unwelcome one. Adrenaline surges through my veins. My heart beats like it's trying to escape the cage of my chest. I crouch down, feeling every muscle in my body tighten. I know what my body wants to do. It wants to run. It wants to run the Hell out of this house. But, that's not an option. The only thing I can do is stay where I am. Like Wagner told me.

I listen to the sound of silence intently. Expectant. Hopeful for God knows what. My adrenaline rushes through my system so hard this time that I almost vomit. Saliva thickens in the back of my throat, returning, with the acidic remnants of my lunch. Sweat trickles down my forehead, down my temples. I'm trying to calm down my breathing, but that's impossible.

I feel frozen in time and space. I know that at some point I'll need to move. I'll need to awaken my sleeping muscles. I can try to tell myself that fear is just a concoction of brain chemicals. I'm creating it for myself. It's probably nothing. Wagner will be

back any minute. He's probably coming up the stairs now.

As if responding to the unspoken wishes of my amygdala, all of a sudden I hear noise on the staircase. I almost gasp, but I manage to suffocate the sound. It remains inside my tightly pressed lips, hiding behind the palm of my right hand. I scuttle over to the corner of the room, crouching like a wounded animal. Is there a point in hiding underneath the bed? Or in the closet? This way, I'll know straightforward who it is. I'll see them. They'll see me, too. But, that's a risk I'm willing to take.

A moment passes. A moment as long as the day. Then, another one. It seems even longer. The sound of the creaking staircase has ceased. The house is silent again. Eerily silent. Threateningly silent. The only thing I'm grateful for is that Dominick isn't here.

The doorknob jiggles, as if someone is trying to open it. It's not locked. All they need to do is push it harder, and the chair will move. It will give way. The moment the door opens, it'll all be over. Wouldn't Wagner just open the door straightforward? Would he call out to me? Should I call out to him? He said not to, but...

I open my mouth, but no sound comes out. Only hot air oozes out of it, my life force, my courage. I'm growing weaker by the second. What's happened to Wagner? He should be back by now.

The doorknob relaxes. It stops moving. I stop breathing for a few moments. Dark silence fills my chest. I feel like my heart followed suit and it stopped beating. Is this it?

The door suddenly flies open. There is a shadow in the doorway. It's tall, muscular, lean. Why isn't Wagner talking? Why isn't he calling out to me, like we agreed?

"Come out, come out, wherever you are..."

Those words just poured gasoline onto the spark deep inside my mind. It can't be. It just can't be. I feel icy, liquid metal in my mouth. My brain remembering the taste of my own blood. More times than I can remember. I clench my fists. My fingers are trembling. I know he sees me.

I fight the impulse to lunge at him, despite knowing that I've got nothing on him. He'll smash me against the wall, like so many times before. That paralyzing hurt will awaken again, and I won't know what to do. How to act. My throat is refusing to cooperate and scream. My jaw is tight. I feel the fiery iciness of the tears I'm trying to suppress. Reality finally taps its way back into my brain. I'm not who I used to be anymore. I'm not helpless.

I stand up, my body filling a void.

"Why don't you turn on the lights so I can see you better?" he growls. I remember Little Red Riding Hood. All the better to eat you with.

"What... are you doing here?" I ask, my voice still not my own, but I make it work.

"No hug?" he chuckles grimly. In the darkness, I see a flash of his white teeth. Bleached to perfection. That smile I fell in love with the moment I saw it. "No welcome home?"

"Answer my question," I order, creating a facade of bravery, which stands on overly flimsy feet.

"You're in no position to make any demands, Danny."

"Don't you dare call me that!" I hiss.

There is still a distance between us, but it is by no means safe. I know his hands could

be squeezing my neck in less than a second. Then, it hits me. If he's here, then that means that... I gasp silently. It can't be. It just can't.

"I know you have another guy who calls you sweet pet names now, but you gotta admit, we were so good together, Danny. And, we're a family. You can't deny that."

"We are not your family!" I hiss again.

"Of course you are."

The dark enshrouded figure takes a step towards me. My palms open up to the wall. There is nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. And, he knows it.

"My blood runs through that boy's veins. I will always be his father. You can't take a son away from his father."

Somehow, he is still calm. Before, he would have exploded into one his infamous angry fits, and I'd be black and blue all over, already. And yet, he hasn't laid a single finger on me. Not yet, anyway.

A crazy thought pops to mind. Maybe I can take him by surprise. Run into him. Push him aside. Rush out the door and down the stairs. The moment I'm out on the street means I'm safe. But, I know it's impossible. He's twice my weight. It'd be like a feather crashing into a boulder. Impossible. Better not agitate him even more.

"You know why we left you," I mumble.

"We're not having this conversation here," he suddenly rushes over to me, and grabs me by the wrist. The familiar pang of pain shoots through my body. A broken bone always remembers it was once broken. It also remembers who broke it.

“I’m not going anywhere with you!” I growl.

“You can walk there, or I can knock you out and take you there. Your choice.”

My mind frantically tries to come up with a solution to this. But, I know he means it. He’ll probably enjoy it if I choose the second version. Maybe it’s good he only came to get me, and not Dominick. So many maybe’s...

He tightens the grip on my wrist, to remind me that the clock is ticking. I remember Wagner again. I want to ask him what he did to him, but I’m too frightened of what the response might be.

“I’ll go, Russ,” I finally tell him.

The mention of his name does something to him. I haven’t called him that in ages. Only Russel. Only when I need to. Russ takes us both to a time before. A time that was probably just a figment of my imagination, as I was trying to make excuses for his behavior.

“Where’s your car?” he asks.

“It’s not here.”

“Fuck!” he kicks the other chair so hard that he breaks two of its legs. “Fine, we’ll fuckin’ walk then.”

He pulls me close to him, so close I can smell his bitter sweat mixed with alcohol. His t-shirt has soaked up all of his secretions, and is now hanging on him like the sign of the dead. It brings back painful memories, but I try not to dwell on them right now.

“If you try anything, and I do mean anything, I’ll break your fuckin’ neck, you hear?”

he grumbles into my face, his breath acetose and sharp. I just nod, unable to say anything. Fear has taken over me, completely. “Move!”

He shoves me out of the room and down the stairs. As I exit my home, I wonder if I’ll ever enter it again.

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Mason

That feeling won't let me be. It's like eating some bad meat, which doesn't sit right. Only you know you ate no meat. It's more than that. It's an ancient calling that only a few of us share. It's the ability to call upon a member of your pack with just the strength of your mind. Nothing else.

I enter Violet's shack. Adrian's been watching Dominick. They're sitting on the sofa, with a movie on. They both jump up when they see me. I guess they recognize the look on my face.

"What's wrong?" Dominick asks first.

"We need to go," I pretend like I didn't hear the question.

How do I tell the kid that I think, no, I know that his mother is in danger and we need to get there fast?

Hearing me say that, Adrian recognizes the urgency of the situation. He gets up, and puts the popcorn bowl down on the table.

"I'm ready," he says.

"I wanna come, too!" Dominick shouts after us.

"It's too dangerous, kid," I tell him.



“She’s my mom!”

“And that’s why you need to let us handle this, so no one gets hurt, alright?” I’m not good at explaining things to kids, especially when the situation calls for urgency.

“If he says you need to stay, then stay. I would trust Mason with my life,” Adrian interferences, just in time.

Dominick sits back on the couch, feeling stupefied. I remember that feeling. That horrible feeling of knowing someone you love is in danger, but there is jack shit you can do about it.

“I promise we’ll bring her back, OK?” I add. He doesn’t reply.

On the way out, we stumble onto Rock. I instruct him to keep an eye on Dominick until we get back. In the meantime, Adrian and I jump on our motorbikes and rush over to Danica’s place. When we approach the house, I notice the door is ajar.

“They were here,” Adrian tells me.

He has his nose up in the air, like a hound dog. If anyone can find a lost person, it’s Adrian. Especially if it’s someone he spent time with. I shouldn’t be worried. But, I am. The open door confuses me. Why would they leave it like that? Unless they left in a hurry? And, if they left in a hurry, why weren’t they back at the house?

Adrian goes in first. I watch his back. He looks around, as if he’s here for the first time. Anything might be a clue for him.

“Anything?” I ask, impatient. He just shakes his head. Can’t rush a genius. I know that. But, the clock is ticking.

He starts climbing the stairs, and I follow. We try to switch on the lights. But, nothing works. He takes me to what seems to be Dominick's room. A bra is left on the floor. A sweatshirt on the bed. The window is open. We both try to listen, to hear something, but there is only silence. Oppressive silence. Silence which mocks your inability to do something.

"She was here," Adrian finally tells me.

"OK, we know that, but where is she now? And, where's W?"

Adrian lifts his index finger in the air. I know it takes him time to do his magic, but this is taking too fucking long.

"He left," he whispers.

"Who? W?"

"Yes," Adrian nods.

"She was taken by someone else."

"What!?" His words sear my brain in two. "Are you sure?? Are you fucking sure of what you're saying??"

"Of course," he nods again, calmly.

"So, where the Hell are they!?"

"He..." he pauses again, his nose making loud noises, breathing in deeply then exhaling, "smells like gas. Evap canister is defective." He quickly turns back to the door. "He's locked in a car trunk!"

I don't say anything to that. The fact that one of my closest friends, someone I consider a brother, is in danger and I have no idea where he is, is killing me. My fists clench in anger. I feel like punching the fucking wall, but that'll do no good. I'll leave the punching for the bastard that caused all this. I'll clean the fucking floor with him.

"Follow me," Adrian tells me.

I do it, without a single doubt in my mind that he knows where he's going, that he knows where Wagner is. If anyone can find him, it's Adrian. Ever since the three of us got together, I've felt like we're more than friends. We're brothers in other ways than just what is considered by the term brother. I would lay my life down for either of them, and I know they would do the same. No holding back.

Adrian rushes out of the house, and I follow. His body is slim, moving through the darkness easily. You'd think you'd beat him easily in a fight, but you'd be wrong. He might not look strong, but he's feisty and wiry, even though he doesn't look it. He can take a punch better than many men out there, and still keep on his feet. You just can't keep him down. To have that outlook on life, after everything he's been through... I can't even imagine. But, I consider myself goddamn lucky to have him on my side.

I try to keep up as he swerves and makes sudden turns. I know he's not purposefully making it look more complicated. He's following Wagner's smell. I've tried it so many times. It's like I can catch a whiff, and I recognize who it belongs to, but I lose it as quickly as I found it. And, it's gone. Just like that. Adrian seems to be able to keep it. He doesn't lose it. He owns it.

It's the animal in him. The animal in all of us. But, despite the fact that we change into the same animal, we all seem to have different senses heightened. Adrian's sense of smell is unparalleled. Wagner has the strength of ten men. That's why I'm surprised that he went down. I'm guessing whoever attacked him, was a fucking

coward. He attacked him by surprise, or from behind. Wagner couldn't react properly. He was too focused on Danica. As we all are. We all care about her so deeply, we'd rather die than let anything happen to either her or Dominick. They've become family. And, you keep family safe. No matter what.

Adrian turns into a small alley. This town's full of those. But, we're not scared. If anything, whoever's there, should be scared of us. After a quick glance, we see it's empty. The street is calm. Free from strife. But, the night isn't. It's a night of battle. My nose isn't as good as Adrian's, but even I can smell that.

He points to a car at the end, hidden from plain sight by a huge trash container. We both rush over there. It's an old Mustang, still in good condition. Under the light of the streetlamps, I can't tell if it's blood red or wine red. Not that it matters. Adrian puts his palm on the trunk, then tries to jiggle it open. Immediately after, someone bangs loudly from the inside.

"Get me the fuck outta here!!!"

We hear muffled sounds, but we both recognize who the voice belongs to.

"Move back!" I shout.

Adrian moves as well. I lift my leg and kick the lock of the trunk as hard as I can with the wooden sole of my boot. That always comes in handy. Wagner kicks it from the inside. Once. Twice. That does the job, and the trunk pops open like a firecracker.

We help him out. He looks like shit. His nose is busted, and his lip's bleeding. I see a cut to the side of his temple. That must be where the guy hit him and knocked him out. I couldn't see Wagner going down any other way.

"Fucking asshole caught me by surprise," Wagner grunts, trying to find his balance.

He looks like he's having some trouble with it. "Where's Danica? Is she with you?"

Neither me nor Adrian reply. The answer is written on our faces. We failed. We failed her miserably. We promised we would keep her safe and we couldn't do it.

"We need to find her," he says what we're all thinking.

"He went in the house to get her," Adrian reveals, but I'm sure Wagner already figured that out. "He took her with him."

"Can you find her?" Wagner growls.

"I can try," Adrian replies.

"You can't just try, Ade," I mumble. "We have to find her. We just have to."

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When we reach our destination, I realize it's some crappy, run down house in the middle of nowhere. It's on the outskirts of the town. I wonder how the heck he found it. He must have planned this for a while.

"Get in!" he shoves me inside.

The house looks even more dilapidated on the inside. A few rats scurry in the corner, disappearing into a hole in the wall. The floor is filled with beer cans, old, yellow-stained newspapers, and there's even a disgusting old mattress in the corner. Just the sight of it makes me sick. A few junkies died on it probably. Who knows what kind of diseases it has?

"Sit over there," he instructs me, pointing at a wooden chair in the center of the room.

I look around. The windows are all there, except for one. No glass on that one. A few even have blinds on, which I doubt could be pulled up. This whole place reeks of death and despair. Right now, I'm just praying that I don't die in a place like this. Anywhere but here.

I do as I'm told. I sit on the chair, not taking my eyes off the gun he has pointed at me. It's almost laughable. As if he ever needed a gun to hurt me, to make me do whatever he wanted. Another thought occurs to me. Maybe he knows he needs more now. I'm not the weak, fragile little thing I was before. He can't take me down with just a clenched fist. Sure, he can hurt me, but he can never break my spirit. Not ever again.

I watch him as he moves around me, tying me up. The ropes dig into my flesh, but I

don't say anything. The chair underneath me is slightly wobbly. Maybe luck would serve me and it'll be flimsy, too. I might try it, if I see an opportunity to escape. But, if I don't make it, I'm done for. I know that. He didn't bring me here to discuss parental rights and joint custody. He came here to finish what he started. Just like he promised.

As soon as he's sure that I'm securely tied up, he places his gun onto a small cardboard box, which I'm guessing served as a coffee table, nightstand, whatever. He buries his face into his hands, and only now, in clear light do I see him well.

He hasn't changed. Well, not much. He's still got that rugged, bad boy look that used to get all the women hot and wet. He loved pointing that out. That, if I didn't take good care of myself, he'd easily find someone who would. He deserved a good woman. A sexy woman. A lady in the streets. A whore in the sheets. He used to say that a lot.

His beard's grown a little. It also looks like he's lost some weight. Still, he looks good. Fucking good for a sadist.

"So, are you gonna tell me now what you want from me?" I take the chance to start the conversation.

Fear has nestled deep inside my heart, my mind, my veins. It is filling up my entire body, but I'm still not allowing it to fully take over. A small part of myself is still reasonable, still logical. I need to buy some time. Maybe the guys will find me. It's a long shot, but I'm still holding onto hope. Fear won't break me. This asshole might, but it won't be the fear I've created of him.

He lifts his gaze from his palms, and looks at me like he's seeing me for the first time. I've never spoken this way to him. It was always yes, dear. Just different versions of agreement. Because, a good woman always agrees with her man. Even

when he's wrong. And, she takes damn good care she doesn't point that out when it happens.

I swallow heavily, enduring his gaze. I feel like I could melt into a puddle and just disappear, but I hold on. I don't look away.

"Are you scared of me?" he suddenly asks me something that he hasn't asked once, in all this time.

At first, I'm not sure what to answer. Should I tell him the truth? I'm fucking petrified. I'm shaking. I might piss my pants any moment, but my bladder is still under control. So far. I'm wondering how come he doesn't see that?

He walks over to me and places his hand on my cheek. He feels cold. My cheek is burning. It's like throwing a hot coal into an icy lake. I don't flinch. He was usually kind only while he was apologetic for what he'd done, or when he was about to explode. I guess this is a combination of both.

"I am," I finally say, opting for the truth.

"I know I haven't treated you well some of the time..."

Some of the time!? I want to scream in his face that I can't believe how deluded someone can be, but I keep my mouth shut. I keep reminding myself. I need to buy time. Not antagonize him. Just keep him talking. Conversing.

"But, you have to admit, you were being a bitch to me," he continues. I have to bite my lip again. I look down. He probably takes it as remorse. So, he goes on. "I think it's safe to say we both made mistakes. You acted badly, so I reacted badly. But, that can all be changed."



Suddenly, he kneels down in front of me. He's not drunk anymore, but there's still that whiff of alcohol on his breath. I smell it now more than before, with him so close to me, his lips almost touching mine.

"All you have to do is tell me you're still my baby girl," he whispers.

He says it in a way he used to say it before. When we made love, it could never be referred to that. He liked it rough. Rougher than I ever imagined sex could be. And, it was always baby girl when something hurt more than it should have.

I feel my lip numb from all the times I bit on it, in an effort to prevent myself from saying something stupid, which might make him explode. I don't say anything. I keep looking at my feet, bound to the chair legs. I wonder if the legs would break if I jump backwards and land on the chair? But, not with him so close.

"I know it's hard to forgive me," he tells me. "But, I've already forgiven you. You should try it."

The more he talks, the more I want to scream at him. It's getting harder to resist the urge to blow up in his face. Then, face the wrath of the consequences.

"There is nothing to forgive," I hear myself say. He smiles at my words. His hands rest on my knees, squeezing them softly. "Because, what you've done is unforgivable."

I watch as the smile drains from his face. He pulls away. His face scrunches up, his eyebrows furrow. He takes a walk around the room, like a caged tiger. If I'm going to die here, so be it. But, I won't die telling this poor excuse of a human being that I forgive him.

"You shouldn't talk like that," he warns me, still calm.

“What? You want me to tell you I love you, that I love every bruise you left me with, every broken bone, every scar that will never heal? Is that what you want me to tell you?”

“Those were nothing, just minor scrapes. You had to go all drama queen and claim I abused you. You sent me to fucking prison, Danica!” He is slowly raising his voice now. He approaches me, kneels down before me again, but I know there won’t be any petting. His hands are already clenching. I’ve learned to recognize the signs. “Do you know what they do to guys like me there? Do you!?”

His voice echoes all around us. Here he is. The real Russel. The one I’ve been fearing. The one I’ve been waiting for.

“But, I forgave you. I fucking forgave you, Danica, because we are a family, we can still rebuild our life together. You just have to stop being such a stuck up bitch!”

He suddenly turns to the wall and punches a hole in it. I hear him breathing heavily, wheezing. Memories flood me, and adrenaline surges through my blood. A forgotten sensation that the mind tried to bury, but it can never be done. His fist is bleeding. But, he doesn’t care. He doesn’t feel it. He is too enraged. Adrenaline is hitting him hard, too. Only it affects us both differently.

“And, you took my boy away from me. You took him away from his father. And, I still fucking forgave you!”

“I took a boy away from a father who would get drunk and try to hurt him,” I explain something that I’ve explained so many times, that it lost any real meaning. It’s like talking to a brick wall.

“That’s all... that’s all going to change,” he falls down to his knees again, his palms in the air, reaching for me, cupping my face. “You just have to say so.”

I look at him and I wonder, how could someone be so stupid? This man has betrayed my affections more than a million times. He is the one responsible for the shattered disarray of my heart. He has stolen so many parts of me that I doubted I would ever be a whole person again. However, slowly, I've regained the pieces that were taken from me. Little by little, and no thanks to him. Now, he's back for more. As he always would be, coming back for more. And no matter how much you give, how much he steals from you, it'll never be enough. Some people are just like that. Some people just have an icy heart. They are incapable of loving anyone but themselves. Unworthy of someone's love, they can never return what someone shares with them. They are simply unable to. He has left ashes in my heart. He enjoyed the fire, the flames. And now, he wants to stomp and dance in the ashes, too. Blow them away in the wind, until there is nothing left of me, but a broken shell of a woman that could have been happy, if she had never met him.

But, I have. I lit that match that destroyed me. Now, I'm the one responsible for keeping the ashes safe, and rising out of them like a Phoenix, reborn. I owe that to myself. I owe that to Dominick. I owe that to the three men who have accepted me as I am, broken and imperfect.

"You know I'll never say that," I tell him. "Otherwise you wouldn't keep me bound here, in the middle of nowhere. You know you're a piece of shit, and people like you never change. I'll make sure Dominick forgets all about you, and once I get out of here, I'll make sure you rot in prison for as many years as I can pin on you!" I blurt out all those things in one go, spewing out all the poison he has planted inside of me during the previous years, finally ridding myself of it.

"It's not smart to talk like that," he hisses.

"So, what? You're going to beat the crap out of me? Can't you be a little more original than that?"

I have no idea where all this is coming from. These words are just flowing out of my mouth, like a strange, wild force has overtaken my mind and it's finally saying all the things I should have said, ages ago. Better late than never, I guess.

He clenches his fist at me, as if he's going to hit me. I close my eyes, waiting for the searing pain to spread through my body. A few moments pass, and nothing happens. I open my eyes and see him smiling.

"You thought I'd hit you?" he chuckles. "I won't do that. I'm better than that. I'll hit you where it really hurts." he elongates that sound, making him all serpentine like.

"What are you talking about?" That icy cold claw of fear taps me on the shoulder again. It's back. Maybe, it never really went away, it just hid, ready to come out when needed again.

"Dominick," he replies menacingly.

"I won't let you hurt him!" I scream at him, like a rabid dog, baring my teeth.

"Who says I'll hurt him?" that grin is still on his face, and I want to rip it off of him. "I'll take him away from you. It doesn't look like you're doing a good job of providing for him, keeping him on the right track. He's not doing well at school. He's acting out. It must be those biker drug dealers he hangs out with."

These words shock me to my very core. He's been here all this time. He did send that letter. It was all him. I was never paranoid. I just felt his presence.

"No judge would ever take a child away from his mother and give him to a father who just got out of prison on assault and family battering charges," I scoff, sure of myself.

“A good lawyer can make miracles happen,” he winks at me, all the malice in his voice taking a frightening, tangible form. “All you need to do is grease the wheels a little, if you know what I mean. I got money, Danny. And, from what I hear, you got shit. So, while I can afford a fancy lawyer who’s gonna take you for all you’ve got, you’ll get some crackhead shaking for his next fix.”

The more I think about it, the more I know he might be right. Justice doesn’t care about right or wrong. It has no morals. It leans towards whoever offers more towards their side. And, in that kind of game, I wouldn’t win. I don’t have two cents to my name. Whatever Russ has, he’s obtained it after I left him, and probably through illegal means. Still, that gives him leverage.

“You’re starting to realize I’m right, admit it,” he scoffs, standing right in front of me, with his hands resting cockily on his hips. The stance of authority.

“They’ll lock you up as soon as I get out of here. I’ll press kidnapping and assault charges on you so fast your head will spin,” I spit at him venomously.

“That is, if you get out of here, darling,” he corrects me softly, almost lovingly, and his voice makes the little hairs on my back stand on end. “I’ve offered you a way out. And, a pretty reasonable one. We get back together and be one big happy family again. That’s your first option. Your second option isn’t nearly as nice.”

I swallow heavily. I know what he’s hinting at. He won’t have any guilt trips over killing and hiding my body somewhere in the woods, where animals will get to me before any people ever do. The thought of being buried in the woods makes me feel even weaker. If by some miracle I do manage to free myself from these restraints, I doubt I’d be standing on my own two feet. I feel too weak. Too frightened.

I glance around for something, anything that might rekindle my hopes. But, I see nothing. Just the man in front of me whose presence threatens my very existence.

“The clock is ticking, Danny,” he reminds me. “What’s it gonna be?”

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:18 pm*

Adrian

The air is heavy. There is moisture from a nearby lake, and that diminishes my capabilities. I need to focus. The guys are behind me. They are counting on me, now more than ever. I can smell Danica's apple shampoo. There's another smell, mixed with hers. It's pungent, offensive. It's the smell of cheap liquor intertwined with diseased sweat. It makes me nauseous. I want it to disappear, to go away, but I can't separate it from Danica's. That means only one thing.

"Do you know where we're going?" I hear Mason growl behind me, as we trek through the woods.

We parked our bikes, knowing we can't continue like that. Only on foot. That might also buy us the element of surprise.

We keep on walking. I lead, Mason is right behind me, and Wagner is in the back. With three sets of eyes, no one can sneak up on us. This is our territory. The fact that someone had the audacity to come here and do this is just ludicrous. I would find my way around these woods even with my eyes closed shut. The guys, too. Whoever this guy is, he chose the wrong people to mess with, and the wrong place to do it.

The night is dark, but the Moon is full. It's lighting up the way. The woods always awakens the animal inside, and it doesn't need a guide. It just needs to listen and it will find its way. Or, in this case, its prey.

After some time of walking, I stop. The guys do the same immediately, crouching down. They wait for my signal.

“There,” I whisper.

I point to a small house in the middle of a huddle of trees and bushes. If you’re not looking for it, you won’t be able to see it. I can understand why he chose this place. No one’s been here in ages. And, it shows. The hole in the roof. The broken window. The bared bricks in the wall. That place is a safety hazard and should have been torn down ages ago. But, the owner doesn’t care. So, the local youths use it as a hangout place. Nothing new and unexpected about that. It’s one of those places that awakens a sense of nightmare in you, and you want to steer clear of it.

“Is she there?” Mason leans over to me and whispers. I just nod. “One guy?”

I don’t nod. I don’t shake my head either. The mold in this house is so overpowering, I can barely smell anything else. Danica is so close, I can almost reach out and touch her, but to my nose she feels like she’s miles away.

“Are there more?” Mason asks impatiently.

He wants me to be sure. He needs me to be sure. If I don’t reply, I know he’s ready to jump in there and break the door down. Maybe it’s a trap. It’s too easy. Is this guy really that stupid?

I look around. My nose high up in the air. All I smell is wet wood and mud. Apple shampoo. A city man’s putrid sweat.

“I only smell the two of them.”

“Then, we waste no time. I say we go in now,” Mason says.

We’re all crouching down, like soldiers in Vietnam. I remember those days well. Squeezing your gun. Hiding in the rice paddies. Wondering if you’ll ever get home.



But, I could have died then and there, and I wouldn't have cared. Now, I'm glad I didn't.

"I agree," Wagner whispers. I just nod.

"On my mark," Mason instructs.

We are all familiar with the drill. We are familiar with it all too well. Our eyes are focused on Mason, his body tensing under the moonlight. He raises his hand, then pats an invisible shoulder in the air. That's our cue to go.

Still crouching, we rush in. Mason, Wagner, and then me. A heavy feeling of suspicion grabs my throat. This is too easy. We found them without much effort. And, if it really is only the two of them inside, then we'll be back home soon, sipping tea and dozing off.

When we barge into the room, we see a seated Danica, her kidnapper standing close to her, his gun pointed right at her head. Mason raises his hand, and we all come to a halt. We can't risk Danica getting shot. Mason is too far away from the guy to lunge at him. No calculations of velocity and distance could make it a successful endeavor. So, we remain standing where we are.

"And so, the cavalry arrives," the man chuckles.

"I've never seen him before". The look on Mason and Wagner's face tells me they haven't either. But, obviously he knows us.

"I know your names, but I'm not sure who's who," he continues.

Danica is breathing heavily. She is pale and weak.

“So, before we continue this little get together, let’s properly introduce ourselves. I’m Russell, but I guess you all know me by name at least. My guess would be you’re Mason, the ring leader.” He stops to point at Mason. None of us nods. But, that doesn’t stop him from continuing. “Wagner and Adrian. The fighter and the smart ass. Just can’t figure out which one’s which.”

He looks like he’s having a good time. I look at Mason. Knowing him, he’s doing his best not to allow himself to transform and tear this man to pieces. We all feel that way. But, it’s too risky.

“Why don’t you put that gun down and we can show you,” Wagner growls.

Russel scoffs. “I guess I have my answer now. But, I’m rude. You’re probably wondering how I tracked her down. How I tracked everyone down, and why I made you all come here.”

“We’re not wondering shit,” Mason hisses, taking a step towards Russel.

“Na-ha-ha,” Russell shakes his head, pressing the gun on Danica’s forehead now. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“You can’t kill us all,” Mason says.

“I can’t, but I can kill her before any of you get to me.”

He’s right. We’re all painfully aware of that fact. It would be easier if he was pointing that gun at any of us. We’d all gladly sacrifice ourselves to keep our brothers alive. But, Danica is too precious to lose.

“I know you’re all dying to see what’ll happen next, so I won’t keep you in anticipation any longer.”

Russell takes out his phone, and makes a quick call. “Now.”

Those words ring in my ears, like a distant echo of some long forgotten order. Who is it addressed to?

“Russ, please, you don’t have to - “

“Shut up!” Russell cuts off Danica faster than a Japanese sword cuts through bodies.

She obviously doesn’t need to be told twice. I look at her again, to make sure she’s not bleeding. Apart from looking like a frightened rabbit who accidentally fell into a fox hole, she seems fine. No cuts or bruises. A silver lining.

Suddenly, we all hear footsteps. We turn to face the door, and what we see there shocks us to the very core.

“Took you long enough,” Rock coughs with a vicious smile on his face, his hand on Dominick’s shoulder.

The boy looks even more frightened than his mother. They look like two little rabbits who fell down a hole, and they just keep falling in deeper and deeper.

“Dominick!” Danica screams.

“Mom!” Dominick mirrors her scream, as he tries to wiggle free from Rock’s grasp, but he remains unsuccessful. “Dad, what are you doing?”

“Your mom is a bitch who’s been trying to keep you away from me, can’t you see?” Russell shakes his gun at Danica, and every time he does that, I see her flinch. “So, I had to find you. Your mine as much as you are hers.”

“You lost your rights to him the moment you decided to raise your hand to him, you fucking bastard!” Danica shouts, convulsing in that chair like she’s been possessed by a demon.

“You shut up! I’m not talking to you now!” Russell tells her menacingly.

Rock walks over to him, still keeping a firm grasp on Dominick. He glances over at Mason, shrugging his shoulders, in a what-can-you-do stance.

I see anger seething on Mason’s face. I know he can’t control the urge much longer. All three of us know that we could take both of them out easily. We just need to make Russell point his gun somewhere else. Just for a moment. That would be enough for us to act, and maybe sort this whole mess out.

An owl hoots somewhere outside, and we all tense. But, Russell doesn’t lose control. He is holding that gun as if his life depends on it, and for all he knows, it really does. Without it, he would be a dead man by now.

“Now, I’m just trying to figure out what to do, kill all of you and just disappear somewhere with my boy, or just keep my unfaithful wife alive and give her another chance?” Russell pretends to think. A smile lingers on his face, like a haunting death mask.

“Dad, no, you can’t! You can’t hurt mom!” Dominick shouts so loudly that it breaks your heart.

A child defending his mother. The purest love there is. A love that can move mountains, separate rivers, and destroy anything in its path that threatens to jeopardize that bond.

Suddenly, I know I can’t control myself any longer. I drop down to my knees, feeling

the oncoming of that familiar cough. My inner organs are readjusting and it always expels all the air out of my lungs.

“What the fuck’s going on!?” Russel screeches, his eyes bulging out of his sockets.

Mason realizes it immediately. So do Wagner and Rock. Mason drops down, and grabs a big rock that we all noticed to his side. It fills up his entire hand, as he lifts it up and aims straight for the gun in Russell’s hand. We all know he’ll hit it. Mason never misses. The rock hits bull’s eye. Russell loses control of his hand, and drops the gun to the ground.

In that instant, my body explodes, tearing my clothes, my flesh, my skin, my jaw protruding, elongating, my teeth rising out of my gums in the most painful of ways. But, nothing would be nearly as painful as losing Danica and Dominick. It all happens in an instant, and then my mind is overcome by rage.

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I can barely believe my eyes. It all looks like something that happens in dark, mystical fairy tales of Brothers Grimm, but not the Disney version. The version where the little German kid actually gets his thumb cut off or where stepmothers kill their pretty step daughters because they fear they will grow up to be more beautiful.

There is blood everywhere, but it's not from someone dying. I've witnessed something extraordinary, and that is the transformation of a bear shifter. I thought it was something that happens seamlessly, almost by magic. That there isn't anything painful or gruesome about it. But, in fact, it looks agonizing. For a moment there, I thought Adrian was dying. He was coughing out blood, and I could actually see how the bones in his body changed, twisted and broke to accommodate the new form. I wanted to look away, but I couldn't, I kept my eyes open throughout the whole thing, as I watched Mason throw that rock and hit Russell right on the hand, making him drop it.

The rest of the scene happens in a single long instant. Adrian jumps on Russell, growling. His nails have turned into claws, and he is using them to tear pieces of Russell's flesh off of his body. Mason and Wagner have kept their human form, but that doesn't save Rock from their wrath. Fists fly through the air, blood spurts all around me.

My only worry is Dominick, but he seems more composed than me. He is already at my side, untangling the knots on my hands and my feet. Once he manages to do that, we huddle together in the corner, waiting for the storm to pass.

I place my hand protectively over his eyes, and he hides in my chest. I wrap my arms around him, keeping him safe. Vowing to myself that this would be the last time I

failed him. Never again.

I still can't look away. Russell is down on the ground, his arms flailing in the air madly, but it's all in vain. He can't even defend himself. I see Rock lying unconscious. I wonder if he's dead. With Mason and the old way of doing things, you never know. But, I don't care. He willingly took part in a scheme that almost ended up hurting my son. He could die for all I care, son of a bitch.

Mason takes his time walking over to the manic Adrian, whose teeth are now digging deeply into Russell's lower arm.

"Ade," Mason says softly, and that seems to awake him.

Adrian lets go of Russell's arm, lifting himself on his hind legs. Wagner joins them, still huffing a little. His arms rest on his hips, as he looks at the body on the ground with obvious disgust.

"You're lucky Dominick is here," Wagner spits venomously. "Otherwise you wouldn't leave this house alive."

Mason looks over my way. He is beckoning for me to come. I let go of Dominick. He raises his head. There are a few tears still in his eyes. I smile at him, kissing his forehead.

"It's gonna be alright, sweetie, I promise," I tell him.

He remains there, in the corner, as I walk over to them. To my surprise, Wagner immediately goes over there and wraps his arms around my son. The sight almost makes me cry, but I manage to remain composed. I need to deal with this piece of shit lying on the floor.

I stand next to Adrian. He looks at me. Our eyes lock. They are the only connection he has right now to the world of humans. I touch his muzzle with the tips of my fingers. I'm not scared. I'm in awe. This man has transformed to help me. To save me. To save my son. How could I ever repay him for that? How could I ever repay any of them?

Adrian nuzzles me softly, allowing me to pet his soft fuzzy fur. I still can't believe what just happened. It seems like one crazy dream, with a few episodes of a nightmare, and I'm just waiting for the moment I'll wake up, and tell Dominick all about this insane dream I had. Only, it isn't a dream.

"What do you want us to do with him?" Mason asks. "We'd gladly finish the job if you don't have the stomach for it."

I remember the first time I heard his voice. The first time I saw him. How authoritative he was. How assertive. Masterly. This is the same Mason I see now. In control of what's happening. And, the surprising part is that he is relinquishing a part of that control, handing it over to me. I know he would like nothing better than to finish Russell. But, he stopped Adrian in time. Dominick has had more trauma than any kid his age. We don't need to add seeing his father getting mauled by a bear shifter to all that.

"Do you think he's learned his lesson?" I wonder, looking at Russell.

It's amazing how pitiful he looks now, that he doesn't have his gun and he isn't threatening a woman and a child. Facing someone his own size is much different. He's testified to that.

"Why don't you ask him?" Mason replies.

I feel like beating him up a little more, but it's not my cup of tea to beat a dead horse.



No point. I can only hope that he's learned his lesson and that he will finally let us be, away from him.

"I... learned... my lesson..." Russell manages to cough, his lip cracked and nose broken in more than one place.

"You are the worst piece of shit I've ever had the misfortune to come across," I spit at him. "I doubt I will ever meet anyone even remotely as horrible as you. But, you gave me Dominick. So, for his sake, I won't send you back to prison. I will let you go, on condition that you never contact me or Dominick again. You don't try to find us. You don't follow us on fucking Facebook or Twitter. You don't even breathe the air in the same state as we do. You disappear. You become a decent citizen and do whatever the hell you want. Just as long as it's far away from us." I pause a little, thinking if maybe I'm being too lenient. But, I remember that he is still Dominick's father. And, if it wasn't for all that shit I had to endure with him, I wouldn't have him by my side. So, I felt like I owed him a little bit of kindness, only if he obeys the rules I've stated. "If you disagree, I'll call the cops and we send you back to prison so fast your head will spin. Or, maybe the third option, I just let the guys have their way with you, while we go back home."

At that moment, Adrian growls menacingly, baring his teeth.

"No, no!" Russell screams in fear, lifting his arms in the air, in front of his face, trying to defend himself from a possible attack. "I'll leave you alone, I'll do anything, just please don't kill me, please..." he keeps on bawling.

He looks so pitiful that none of us wants anything to do with him.

"Then, you disappear, you got it?" I ask, just to make it all clear.

"Yes, yes," he nods as quickly as he can.

“What about him?” I glance over at Rock. “Is he - “

“Dead?” Mason asks. “No. He deserves to be. But, he saved my life once. I don’t know what this asshole here offered him to betray us, but I’ll let him go. If I see him again, then that’s a different story, of course.”

“Let’s go back,” I walk over to Wagner and Dominick, and I see that Dominick has fallen asleep in Wagner’s arms. “My angel.”

Slowly, we find our way back to home, all of us lost in our own thoughts. Adrian transformed back into his human form, and despite the gravity of the situation, we all chuckled at his nudity. When he was transforming, he should have taken off his clothes first, but there was no time for such niceties. And, now he has to walk his white ass naked all the way back. Luckily, it’s pitch black.

Little town of Swallow Springs is fast asleep. I wonder if they know what happens deep in those woods that they only walk in during the day. I remember what Mason told me once. They just let them think they’re drug dealers. It’s easier to keep things and people under control that way.

My body is still shaking, under the impression of what just happened. For a moment there, I thought I wouldn’t make it out alive. I’m still wondering if I did the right thing by letting Russell just walk away. But, I just can’t take a life. It’s not in my blood. I know I wouldn’t be able to sleep, I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself for such a trespass. It’s not mine to take a life. Mine is only to give.

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All four of us reach my house fairly quickly. I see the still open door, but there is no trace of that fear anymore. I'm finally free. I faced the horror that has been plaguing my life for the last few years, and now, the world has taken on a new hue of hope and positivity.

"Are you sure you want to stay here?" Mason asks.

I glance over at Wagner, with my sleeping boy in his arms. "Positive."

We all enter slowly, as if walking into scared grounds. This is where I died. This is where I was reborn. This is my home now. We go upstairs, making sure to lock the front door this time. Wagner puts Dominick on the bed gently. I watch as Wagner covers him lovingly, then places a soft kiss on his forehead. Mason does the same, then Adrian. My heart feels so full that it's about to burst. I press my hand to my chest, subconsciously trying to keep it inside, to keeping it from imploding. Finally, I plant a soft kiss on my son's sleepy cheek.

This stirs him from his sleep. His eyes open, still dreamy, still with that thin veil that separates dream from reality.

"Go back to sleep, baby," I tell him.

He looks at me, then tries to get up. I lay my hand on his chest, gently pushing him back.

"Is it... over?" he whispers, barely audibly.

“It is, baby,” I smile.

My other hand finds his cheek, still warm.

“We don’t have to be afraid anymore?”

“Not anymore, no.”

He looks like there is another question lingering on his mind. I just want him to go back to sleep. He’s had his fair share of life threatening adventures for one night. Hell, he’s had enough of those for a whole lifetime. But, I know he’s not a baby anymore. If he has any questions, I must be here for him. I must respond honestly.

“Will we ever see dad again?”

There it is. The question I’ve been fearing, because I myself don’t have the answer to that. I glance over at Adrian. He is smiling at me. I wonder what he would say. Probably some research based psychology that assures me we’ll all be fine, but we’ll all lead different lives. Or, something like that. I guess the best answer in this case is the one that comes straight from the heart.

“I honestly don’t know,” I sit down on the bed, next to him. The guys have all exited the room, giving us some privacy. I appreciate that. And, that’s not all I appreciate. “I don’t think your father is a bad man. I think he is a sick man. A horribly sick man, and he needs to deal with it somehow.”

“How?”

“I don’t know,” I feel like a broken record at this point, but if Dominick wants to talk like a grown up, he should learn by now that many things are simply unknowable. You play it by ear, hoping it’ll all turn out well in the end. “Unfortunately, he’s the

only one who knows. We can't help him. He needs to want to change. He needs to want to become a better person. No one can do that for him."

"Is that why he's been so mean to us?"

"Yes, it's the sickness. He loves us, I'm sure he does. But, the sickness has taken over him. And, I guess he forgot how to properly express that love. Now, as for your question whether we'll see him ever again, I told him I don't want to. He's hurt me too much. I doubt I will ever be able to forgive him. But, maybe, just maybe, many years from now, we might all sit down and talk. If he proves to us that he's changed."

"Will you get back together with him?" he sounds almost frightened by this thought.

"No, baby," I shake my head. "I will never get back together with your father. Still, that doesn't mean I don't care about him. Despite all the shit he put me through," we both chuckle at my use of the term shit, "he gave me you. And, that's more than I ever thought I could get, more than I ever thought I deserved. Someone like you."

He smiles at me. His eyes are slowly drooping, and I know he'll doze off any minute.

"I like it here, in Swallow Springs," he suddenly tells me.

"Well, that's great, because I like it here, too."

"Do you think we could stay here?"

"I think that's doable," I nod. "Under one condition."

"What?"

"That you stop spray painting stuff on other people's walls." We both chuckle again.

“But, seriously. I don’t want to have to deal with your teacher or the principal again. I know that what’s happened is a lot to handle, and if you don’t know what to do, just come to me. We can figure it out together. But, acting out or fighting in school doesn’t solve anything.”

“But, I told you why I was in a fight that time.”

“I know, you were defending my honor,” I smile. “And, I do appreciate that. But, there are a lot of mean people out there, who just want to get a rise out of you. They will say mean, hurtful things, expecting you to explode and start a fight, just so you could get in trouble. Don’t give them the satisfaction. It takes more effort and shows more dignity to just walk away, than to retaliate. Always remember that.”

“I will, mom,” he takes my hand and presses it against his lips. A small, almost invisible tear rolls down my left cheek. “You can count on me from now on. I promise you.”

“I know I can.”

I wrap my arms around him, pressing his little body against mine. I still remember when he was a tiny baby, perfectly fitting in my arms. When did he grow up? I guess I’m still not ready to let go of him being my little boy. He will always be that, whether he likes it or not.

“Mom?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“Can the guys stay the night? Just in case.”

“Sure.”

I tuck him in, as he turns to the other side. I watch him, until his breathing becomes steady, then unhurriedly tiptoe out of the room. I walk downstairs to the living room. Mason is reclining on the sofa. Adrian is slumped down into the armchair, and Wagner has found a seat on a semi-comfortable chair in the corner. I take my seat next to Mason.

None of us speaks. We're just letting the after moment sink in, consume us fully. I listen to the sound of our breathing. Slow, deliberate. It's amazing how alive you feel after a brush with death. The adrenaline is almost unbearable. But, we survived. We all survived.

"I don't know about you guys, but I could use a beer," I finally stand up.

I doubt I'd be able to fall asleep after tonight's ordeal, so I might as well celebrate the fact that we're all alive and well.

"Bring it on," Wagner grins.

I return from the kitchen with a cold beer for everyone. I sit down on the sofa, and take a long, thirsty sip. It travels down my throat, cooling down the inner fire, finally settling in my stomach.

"I don't know how to thank you all," I tell them.

Whatever I say sounds too weak. They just saved my life. More importantly, they saved my son's life. There is nothing I could do to ever return that favor.

"Don't leave Swallow Springs," Adrian tells me.

Wagner and Mason are looking at me, with the same message written all over their faces. Don't leave. Stay. Stay with us.

“I couldn’t leave now even if I wanted to,” I assure them, with a smile.

“I know this is a strange arrangement,” Mason takes over. “But, you know how we feel about you. You know how we feel about Dominick, too. We’ve taken you into our family, but you are still free to make your own choices. If Swallow Springs is too small for you, you can leave. We don’t know what your plans are, maybe you are ambitious and you want to make something of your life, or maybe you’d be happy in a little town, where everyone knows everyone.”

“My wrist might get stiff from all that waving, but I think I could handle that,” I grin. “All I ever wanted was a family, a partner who understands and loves me. Now, I found three. What more could a girl ask for?”

I feel dizzy, and I know it’s not the alcohol. I barely had any. It’s something else, something much more powerful, much more lasting. I take Mason by the hand. We both get up. I take Adrian with my other hand, and he, in turn, takes Wagner’s hand. Together, we walk upstairs, like intruders in someone else’s house.

We reach my bedroom, then close the door. I don’t know why I’m so turned on. I feel like a giddy 16 year old, about to do it in her boyfriend’s car, after the drive in. Mason kisses me first. It’s as hungrily as the previous time, but there is even more raw passion now. More impatience. I feel bliss sear through my skin, as two more pairs of hands start to explore my body.

One item at a time, our clothes end up on the floor. I gasp at the way they make me feel. I’ve never felt this beautiful, this wanted, this loved. Adrian showers my neck with soft, butterfly kisses, then a moment later, I’m lying on the bed, my legs spread apart. Mason mounts me first, as my lips are covered by kisses from Wagner, and Adrian plays with my hardened nipples.

Mason dives right into me with a low growl of pleasure, and I breathe out heavily,



right into Wagner's mouth. His cock is so big, it hits exactly the right spot. He is fucking me hard, mercilessly, without any preparation, and I'm loving it. I'm about to shatter into a million little pieces by the time he's done with me. He slides in and out effortlessly, as my pussy juices leak out of me. My clit is swollen and needy. He senses it, and his thumb starts rubbing against it. I muffle my scream with my own hand, my inhibitions all undone before these three men whom I've vowed to love now and forever more. They own this little town, and I now I feel like they own me, too. That's exactly what I want.

Mason's wet fingers keep playing with my clit, as Adrian's devil tongue toys around with my nipple. I find Wagner's cock with my right hand, and start jerking it off. We're all covered in sweat, our juices mixing. This is how I want to spend the rest of my days.

I watch as Mason's face grimaces in pangs of pleasure that seem to wash over him in tidal waves. He slams hard into me a few more times, and I feel his throbbing cock ejaculate right into me. He thrusts a few more times, squeezing the last remaining drops into me, then slides out. My pussy is all wet, covered in my own juices and his sticky cum. He leans over to me and kisses me softly on the lips.

"I love you," I hear him say.

Suddenly, he gets off the bed and slumps down into the armchair in the corner of the room, not paying any attention to a few items of clothing that were resting there carelessly. His cock is glistening in the lamplight, as he crosses his leg over the opposite knee, like some boss, expecting a show.

For a moment, I'm not sure what he expects me to do. But, Adrian's lips fly over mine and land with his tongue protruding. Wagner's cock separates the wet folds of my still throbbing pussy, and I know the fun isn't over yet.

“Turn over,” I hear Adrian whisper, and his voice sends goosebumps all over my body.

I get down on my knees, propped with my arms, with my butt high up in the air. Adrian slides in underneath me, managing to take a gentle bite of my nipple, as it hangs over his head.

“Ouch!” I giggle, remembering that we need to be quiet.

Wagner’s cock spreads sticky warmth all over my pussy, then a little up as well. I’ve never done that before. I’ve always considered it the forbidden hole, even though Russel expressed a desire for it more than once. Of course, there was no way in Hell I’d give it to him. But, now, the situation is completely different. I’m curious. Still feeling like that 16 year old, about to get her titties sucked and then fucked for the first time. I don’t know what it is with these guys, but they make me feel so horny.

My wetness soaks Wagner’s cock. Adrian slides into me in one effortless push, making me moan softly. I never knew how difficult it is to be silent while having the best sex of your life. Wagner grabs my wrists, as the tip of his cock finds its rightful place. I’m shaking in anticipation of what’s to come. Adrian’s dick is already inside of me, filling me up slowly, keeping up the rhythm. Wagner’s cock presses into me, it fights to come inside. I’m tight, but slowly I start to relax.

“That’s right,” Wagner whispers into my ear, and I swear I come a little right there and then. He stretches me out slowly, carefully for it not to hurt. At least, not to hurt too much. But, the intense mixture of pleasure and pain feels amazing. I cling to them both, my pussy and asshole adjusting to the foreign bodies inside of them. Gently, we pick up a unified rhythm. I cling to them both, as two cocks glide in and out of me. Adrian’s lips find mine easily, and he makes sure to hold me tight. Otherwise, I might lose my balance. I’d be shaking too much.

I glance upward, and see Mason on the armchair. He is jerking himself off, watching us fuck. I shiver with the intensity of the pleasure inside of me. I never thought such ecstasy was ever possible. I thought you could only find it in romance novels and movies with a happily ever after. Never in real life. Never for me.

We all hasten our pace, and I can no longer sustain this. It's too much. Too intense. I cum all over Adrian's cock, trembling like an epileptic under attack. Adrian follows immediately. I hear him groan, then pulse deep inside of me. His eruption is as strong as Mason's, leaking out of me, merging with my own pussy juices. He slams one last time, hitting my cervix. This sets me off again, immediately after the first one, my head slumps down onto Adrian's face, as Wagner's fingers dig into my ass, still filling me up.

"I loved you from the moment I saw you," Adrian whispers into my ear.

My body can't stop quivering. Wagner holds himself still, deeper than ever before, as his cum sprays into me. Every pulse of his seed intensifies my own delight. He is pressing tightly into my ass, his balls dangling before my pussy lips, grazing them occasionally.

"I will always love you," Wagner's voice fills my ears with a honeyed sound.

When he finally pulls out, we all fall down onto the bed, like a house of cards in the wind. Mason join us, and his still wet cock brushes against my lower belly. Did he cum just from watching us? I bite my lower lip. Thank God it's dark in the room, the little lamplight sheds only a soft glow. My cheeks must be blazing red.

We nestle all together. It doesn't matter whose arm is where, as long as we're all hugging one another. Shortly after, all I hear is soft breathing. Men always fall asleep like babies after sex. Women - they want to talk. But, of course, I can't ask that of them. They deserve their rest.

I get up slowly, making sure not to make too much noise. I wash myself off in the bathroom sink quickly, then put on my silk bathrobe. I tiptoe out of the room, and onto the porch. There, I sit down on a little wicker chair, and look out into the night.

Crickets fill the air with noise. The stars above me are scattered throughout the night sky. An owl hoots somewhere in the distance. I see a thick blanket on the other chair, and cover myself with it.

I take a deep breath. The night smells clean, fresh. Like a new start.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:18 pm*

5 years later

The first sound that I hear upon opening my eyes is the sound of birds chirping outside, hiding in the trees. I have no idea what time it is. In a way, it doesn't matter. I've got an alarm clock which never fails, so I'm sure if it was time to get up, I'd hear it.

I stretch a little in bed, grateful for the little privileges in life, like waking up on your own. I turn to the other side. The cradle is by the bedside, closed on all sides apart from the one next to me. I reach out towards the little pink bundle, and place my hand gently on her tummy. I can feel it slowly rising up, then going down. Her chubby little face is turned away from me. She is sleeping, my little angel. Our princess. Ivy.

I check the time. She should be getting up in less than an hour. It's feeding time. I gaze outside the window. I can't really see anything, but I'm still trying to catch any familiar sounds. Apart from the birds, it's quiet. Beautifully peaceful and soothing.

I love this place. I think no place on Earth is as wonderful as Swallow Springs. Or, maybe, I'm being biased. It might not be the place so much, as the people. Swallow Springs wouldn't be the Swallow Springs I know without the bikers, without Mason, without Adrian, without Wagner. But, with them, it's home. It's the place where I finally managed to face my darkest fears and come out victorious. I doubt I would ever be able to do it without them. In more ways than one, they saved me. They saved both me and Dominick, and I think he himself is aware of it. He has accepted them into his life, and into his heart, and despite everything I believed so far, I think I've finally found my happiness, my family.

Sometimes, I still think I don't deserve all this joy. Like, I'm not worthy. I guess there is still a little bit of Russell's poison inside of me. When I feel it rise, I take a deep breath. Adrian has been teaching me yoga, and how to handle myself when I feel a wave of past memories about to crash into me. He's taught me to accept it, and more importantly, to let go. I'm not perfect. None of us are. We all make mistakes. That is why I try not to hate Russell. Wherever he is, I hope he is well. He's in the past, and I intend on keeping him there.

The only thing I'm grateful to him for is that he's kept his promise. He hasn't been contacting us. Wagner and Adrian did manage to track him down, somewhere south. He signed the divorce papers without a single word. I doubt he had anything to say to the man who almost killed him.

When I look at myself in the mirror, I see a new woman. I see a woman who isn't a stranger to happiness, who is smiling all the time, without fear that her happiness will be taken the wrong way and she might be punished for it. I am allowed to express my feelings. I am free to laugh or cry, whatever I feel like doing at any given moment. And, this is a freedom no one will ever take away from me. I won't let them. Never again. I almost lost it once, and now I value it much more than before. It's so sad that one needs to lose something, to realize how important it is.

Ivy stirs a little in her sleep, and then turns to face me. She is still asleep. Her little pouty mouth is partly open. She is breathing slowly, steadily. Her cheeks are so chubby and cute, I feel like pinching them all the time.

Sometimes, when I look at her, I try to see who she looks like the most. As she grows, I find that I see a little bit of all four of us in her. Her eyes are definitely Mason's. She has Adrian's big forehead. She's got my lips, and let's just hope that she won't get Wagner's feisty nature. I guess we'll have to wait and see.

Finally, she opens her eyes, those beautiful eyes that seem to carry every wisdom of the world inside of them. She looks at you as if she wants to reveal everything to you,

but she can't. You don't understand her. After a while, she stops trying and realizes, actually you both realize, that her smile is enough for you. You will do everything for it.

She reaches out to me and I jump to take her in my arms. She feels light as a feather. I place a gentle kiss on her forehead.

"Are you hungry, my little baby?" I coo, as I adjust myself comfortably on the bed, for our feeding session.

Ivy hungrily finds my nipple and starts to suck. I pet her head a little, enjoying the sensation. A few more birds chirp right outside the window. Ivy looks up, curious.

"We'll go look at the birds after you're done eating," I tell her, with a smile. "Just eat now, baby."

As she continues, I wonder where the guys are. Adrian sometimes takes Dominick fishing. They always throw the fish back, and the whole point of their fishing is to talk about philosophy and other deep issues. When Dominick told me this, I almost didn't believe him. Then, Adrian confirmed it. I never thought my son would ever discuss philosophy with anyone, but here we are.

Mason takes him on long walks, when he goes into town. What makes me prouder than ever is the fact that he agreed to change his profession, and now, instead of selling ancient artefacts on the Dark Web, the guys opened a bike shop. Sure, the money isn't nearly as good, but they've all agreed that they like the change of pace. Plus, they all have some money put aside, so finances aren't an issue, we're fortunate.

Wagner teaches him all sorts of things, like working with motorcycles, cars, pipes. He's very handy. I guess, you could call him a Jack of all trades, even though he didn't like it when I mentioned it jokingly a while back. I doubt there is anything he can't fix. After all, he fixed my broken heart. He, alongside Adrian and Mason. And,

I myself thought I was a lost cause. But, he showed me otherwise. They all did.

Dominick respects them and loves them all equally. His time with each of them individually makes him grow and develop in ways I could never offer him. Sometimes, a boy needs a father's hand, and he is lucky that now, he has three father figures who have taken him under his wing.

Ivy finishes with her milk, and I check her diaper.

"Dry as a whistle," I chuckle. "You know what that means? We can go outside, see where our boys are."

I take her into my arms, and we go out into the morning sunshine. I adjust her little sunhat, as her eyes google everything around her. It's so wonderful seeing the way a baby is introduced to the world. She looks at it as if every single thing is a miracle. It's an ability we lose as we grow up. To an adult, nothing is a miracle. We get lost in the dull waters of life and we forget what really matters.

We walk around the shacks, waving at familiar faces, but none of them are the ones we're looking for. Finally, Mason jumps out in front of us.

"My queens," he smiles at us, then kisses the tip of Ivy's nose. It tickles her, and she releases the sweetest giggle. "Where are you off to on this fine morning?"

"Actually, looking for you guys," I tell him.

"Adrian took Dominick to the lake, to fish. And, Wagner decided to join them, last minute," he explains.

"Well, it is Saturday," I laugh. "Maybe we could all go there, and have a picnic?"

"That's a great idea," his face beams. "I just need to give Swayze a heads up on the



bike we're working on, and then I'm all yours."

"Lucky me," I smile, blushing.

He seizes the opportunity and kisses me on the lips. He tastes salty and sweet at the same time. He's one big contradiction, as always.

"Us girls will go and ready the food," I tell him.

"Alright, I'll come by the shack when I'm done, and we'll head on over to the lake."

"Deal," I smile.

I slowly walk back to the shack, thinking whether to make a salad or some sandwiches for everyone. Ivy coos softly, like a little kitten, purring in my arms. Tears fill my eyes, and I have to stop to wipe them. I know it's silly. It's downright ridiculous to cry because you're happy. But, I can't stop myself. I guess, in the end, it doesn't matter if others believe you're worthy of being loved, cherished and respected. What matters is that you believe you are.

With a heart filled with joy and love, I head over to the kitchen to make some sandwiches.

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