



# Big Dog (Lonesome Garage #2)

**Author:** *Lizzie Quick*

**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Romy: What does a woman have to do to get an older man who's good with his hands to jump her bones? After one memorable night when I get Bishop exactly where I want him, he turns all noble and tells me it can never happen again. I don't want him to be my babysitter I want him to be my partner. But the man is determined to stay far away from me. Why did I move to Lonesome again?

Bishop: Romy is practically family, and I have no business falling for somebody so young, especially when there are other men her age in town who can take care of her. When one tries, I realize what a mistake I've made. And when he doesn't give up, I know I need to protect what's mine. I may not have done right by Romy the first time, but I won't lose her twice.

If youre looking for a one-night stand gone wrong, age gap ,oopsie baby instalove romance, youve found it.

**Total Pages (Source):** 12

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

## Chapter One

It's mine. All mine. I'm now an official resident of the greater Lonesome area. Me, Rosemary Turner, landowner and business proprietress. My little girl self who dreamed of being a hairdresser would be so proud.

My sister, who has been handing out paper cups with some cheap, not-from-the-Champagne-region-of-France bubbly, gives me a bump when she comes to stand beside me.

"Attention, everyone. To Romy. Congratulations on your purchase of Camp Sunny-Lu. I know the Crosses are happy that it's moved into such good hands.

We wish you all the haircuts and manicures in the world," Violet says loyally as she hands me a glass.

She doesn't mention herself or the woman standing with her. They are two of my silent partners; nobody but me and the lawyers know about them for now. As of today, I am the face of the Sunny-Lu Salon and Spa.

"Thank you very much, Violet, and thank you, everybody for coming out today. I hope to see everyone back at the Sunny-Lu Salon for a haircut when we open. Not that you all don't already look amazing.

I'll just help bring you up to the next level," I say with a laugh.

The small crowd laughs too. I've already unofficially claimed the title of local

hairdresser since I've been giving kitchen chair haircuts to half the women in Lonesome while I looked for a place to set up shop.

Now, with a little help from my friends and family, I'll have an official place to do it.

The empty building is warm despite the open windows because air-conditioning is non-existent.

Since the entire interior is about to be thoroughly renovated and all my guests know it, nobody complains.

Some of them may be questioning my decision to open a salon and spa in an abandoned children's summer camp but I know what I'm doing. I hope.

I continue my rounds, making sure to greet all the ladies from town and get introductions to the women I don't know from the surrounding areas.

There are also a surprising number of men in attendance.

I don't expect to see all of them in my chair for haircuts, but Violet lets me know that a few of them have approached her asking if I intend to offer gift cards for salon services.

I sure as hell am planning on it now. Nothing sounds better than making it easy for men to give me money while providing the perfect present to the women in their lives.

I whip out my phone and add "Gift Cards" to my endless to do list before I forget it.

Deep male laughter erupts from across the room.

I look up and see my future brother-in-law, Deacon, talking to his brother.

They both have brown hair and green eyes but that's where the similarity ends.

His older brother, Bishop Dobermann, is a retired Army Ranger who is a few inches taller, a few inches wider across the chest, and a few degrees hotter.

I'd happily put him on my to-do list too.

Violet says Bishop is a lot more straight-laced than Deacon and is constantly pulling the pranksters in the garage back in line.

She makes solid and dependable sound boring.

I think it's sexy as hell that he's mature enough that he doesn't need to swing his dick around to be respected.

We have met once before, but I don't really remember it.

I blame the concussion. I have a vague memory of rough hands and soft touches, but that's it.

I'm dying to know if the reality matches the hazy dream, but Bishop seems to be avoiding me.

Seeing him, I realize that I haven't even seen him at a distance since that night.

Deacon gives me a chance to get close when he calls me over to join him and the other men from the Lonesome Garage. When I get there, Deke pulls a piece of paper from his pocket and waves it in my face. "What is this?" he demands.

“I don’t know. Hold it still.” When the letters stop moving, I frown. “That’s my flyer requesting contractor referrals. I posted it on the bulletin board in Carol’s Laundrette. It’s not doing me any good in your pocket, Deacon.”

“I took it down to save you time. Why deal with all the trouble of talking to every contractor in the state when one man can set you up with the best of the best?”

I need somebody to check the roofs of the buildings, another to fix cracked and broken windowpanes, an electrician, and a plumber to go over long unused utilities. That’s just to start. “Why? Do you know somebody?”

“God, you’re a ballbuster. I’m surprised you don’t try to do everything yourself. Yes, I know somebody. You know him too.” Then he points to Bishop. “He’s your man.”

Bishop chokes on his mouthful of Prosecco and turns an alarming shade of red.

I was looking for an excuse. The man is gorgeous, smart, and drama-free.

Plus, he’s former military so I know he’s trained and self-sufficient enough to take care of himself.

Bishop is precisely my type without the problem of a chain of command to consider.

And, thanks to my awesome almost-brother-in-law, he’s being served up on a silver platter. “Excellent,” I say.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

### Chapter Two

O ur mother will miss my baby brother dearly, but she'll never be able to prove it was me.

The little shit has me between a rock and a hard dick, and he knows it.

Ever since Romy Turner came to town, I've been trying my fucking hardest to stay away from her.

I've been doing a good job of it too. Now Deke is feeding me like chum to a shark.

I'd be really pissed if I wasn't a little excited at the prospect.

The first and only time I spent any time with Romy, she was sporting a black eye and a split lip from trying to fight off the home invader who kidnapped her niece.

She was in rough shape. Not too rough, though.

She patted me on the cheek and called me handsome while I was getting her cleaned up before the medic got there.

That one word has caused a lot of sleepless nights on my part.

Ninety-nine percent of me railed at seeing such a sweet young thing beat to hell.

She looked like a teenaged babysitter who went three rounds with a boxer.

The last percent was impressed that someone barely into her twenties got some licks in against a trained Navy SEAL with over a decade of experience.

It's that one percent that has me dodging her at every turn.

I'm only thirty-eight, but that's a lifetime compared to an innocent like her.

She doesn't look old enough to drink in the snug jeans and fitted top that she's wearing.

If her big blue eyes weren't enough of a draw, according to Deacon and Violet, she's naïve enough to think she can make a go of a spa in rural North Dakota.

It would be cute except for the fact that she's going to lose her shirt.

I can't comprehend why my brother is encouraging her to invest in an already doomed venture.

We know what it's like to own a private business.

Romy is too nice. She's going to be eaten alive.

"I have some guys who will do a quality job, but they're expensive.

The cheap guys are even more expensive since you'll have to spend the money twice after their cut corners bite you in the ass.

"If I'm obligated to participate in this travesty, maybe I can limit her losses.

"Isn't it a good thing that I'll have you to advise me on my choices then. Want to discuss my options over breakfast, tomorrow?" Romy asks.

“He’s free,” Deacon pipes up.

“Fantastic. I’m buying,” she offers.

“Like hell,” I say before I can stop myself. As if I’d take anything from her besides that sweet smile. Fuck, now I’m committed. “Breakfast tomorrow at the Halfway Café. Eight o’clock.”

“Looking forward to it!” Romy gives me a bright smile like I’m not going to break her heart with what I have to tell her. Then she moves on to the next group of party guests.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I demand of Deacon. He’s never set me up with a woman before—we Dobermanns have never needed the help—and I can’t imagine he wants to start with his sister-in-law.

“Romy is practically my little sister now. Unfortunately, she’s a knock-out, and she’s a new business owner.

She needs somebody in her corner who isn’t some horny fuck trying to hit on her.

Violet says she’s not worried about Romy’s business, and I don’t want her to be.

So, be a good big brother and set Romy up with the best guys you know, would you?  
”

Fuck me, Deacon’s right. Every contractor I know is going to hit on her.

Hell, everybody in my contacts list will be calling me for an introduction to the perky brunette.



I'm going to have to vet everybody, not just send a few emails to set up some meetings.

Exactly what I need while I'm in the middle of trying to find new staff for the garage.

"I do have a full-time job, you know. And interviews booked for the new mechanic that you insist we need."

"She doesn't bite, Bish." Then Deacon roars with laughter. "Well, according to Violet, she does, but not since they were kids. Just give her some names so she can get started on these renos. How hard could that be?"

I don't know. Spending time with his big, blue-eyed, innocent sister-in-law who he has slapped a "Do Not Touch" sign on?

I'm thinking pretty fucking hard.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

### Chapter Three

I'm hangry. It's twenty after, and my supper guest was supposed to arrive at seven.

If he's much later, I'm going to run out of vodka for the Chicken a la Vodka I have planned because I'll have drunk it all.

It's taking more than a little liquid courage to find the nerve to seduce Bishop Dobermann.

I've been working up to it. Ever since last month when Deacon volunteered him to help me find some contractors, Bishop has been on site at Sunny-Lu almost every day.

He's been very careful not to take over when it comes to what needs to be done but he's the first to offer a hand for any of the physical stuff.

He also stepped in with the creepy windows guy, which was unnecessary but appreciated.

Tonight is my turn to show that appreciation.

Now that all the contractors have been booked, I've invited Bishop over for a formal thank-you supper.

I'm sure he'll show up and act like the perfect gentleman.

Dammit. I'm not sure where he got the impression that I'm a virginal princess who waved a wand and magically came up with the idea for a beauty salon, but I haven't been able to shake his cool. It's now or never.

I've got my third best date outfit on: a body-hugging but demure dress with a peekaboo neckline and three-quarter length sleeves.

It looks like it reveals a lot more than it does.

The blue is a shade darker than my eyes, which are perfectly made-up for maximum effect.

He's not getting my top tier stuff until he officially asks me out.

The only thing not up to my usual knock 'em dead standards is that I'm in ballet flats rather than heels, but I can't pull those off when I'm working in the kitchen. I tried.

I'm ready to go. Wine and beer are cooling in the fridge. I have a specially curated classic rock playlist running in the living room that is heavy on ballads and light on guitar and drum solos. All I'm missing now is my date.

Finally, at seven thirty, I hear a vehicle pull into the driveway.

Dear God, that man just keeps getting better looking.

Bishop apparently did note the formal part of my text invitation because he's in a buttoned-down collared shirt with a tie.

I have whipped cream in the fridge to go with my homemade pumpkin pie, but I should have bought a second container because I could eat Bishop up with a spoon.

The smile he was wearing when he climbed out of his truck doesn't change when I open the door.

“Wow, Romy, you look pretty.” It sounds like a compliment, but what the fuck?

Pretty? What am I, his niece? I look spectacular.

The only hint that I might be having any effect at all is the finger he runs under his collar.

“You're not bad yourself. Come in. Is that for me?

” I gesture at the long gift bag he's holding.

He hands it over and I pull the bottle from the bag on my way to the kitchen.

I stop dead in the middle of the hallway.

I expected a decent bottle of white or red.

He brought champagne. I don't recognize the name, but the label looks fancy and is written in French, and thick foil wraps the metal cage around the cork. “Bishop!” I exclaim.

“We're celebrating, right? You have all the contractors booked that you need to open the salon now.”

I had just signed with the construction company that afternoon. Insulation and drywall are disgustingly expensive, but once I get the salon and spa portion finished, I can earn the money I need to branch into phases two and three for my Sunny-Lu empire. “How did you know that?”

“Bobby called to thank me for the referral. You’re on your way. So, congratulations!”

I know Bishop was invested in what I was doing but I had no idea that he was tracking things so closely. “I wouldn’t be nearly as settled into Lonesome as I am if it wasn’t for your help. I don’t know how I can thank you.”

I sit on the edge of my leather club chair and slowly cross my legs. I’m working it with everything I have. The last tool in my arsenal is to accidentally-on-purpose have my dress unzip itself and fall to the floor while I’m walking to the kitchen. I’m considering it.

Bishop blinks, then stands to look at my framed photos on the fireplace mantle.

Wow. Damn, but, wow. The man is not interested in me.

At all. I’m not the “hide from my mistakes” type.

I acknowledge them and move the fuck on like a fucking adult.

“You know, Bishop, I thought I was reading some attraction coming from you, tempered by a little reluctance. To be clear, I was trying to encourage it. I was hoping to get something rolling tonight because I think I could seriously like you. But if you are that uninterested in me romantically, I will back off and we’ll just have a straight up thank-you supper between almost in-laws and never mention it again.

” I mean it. It’ll be a goddamn tragedy but I’m not going to fuck up my family over some unrequited crush.

Me and my battery assisted boyfriend will get over it.

His back stiffens as I start to speak, but his shoulders slump when I finish like I’ve

taken him off the rack. Which is an answer in itself.

“Message received. I won’t mention it again.

Thank you for the champagne. It’s very thoughtful.

I think I even have proper champagne glasses in the cupboard from when I passed my last aesthetician class.

Will you pour while I get the chicken dished up?

” I put both feet on the floor to stand, but before I can move, Bishop has crossed the room and is crouched in front of me.

He places a warm hand on my knee, then waits for me to meet his stunning green eyes.

“I was wrong,” he says.

“You’re entitled to your feelings, Bishop. I meant it. No harm, no foul.”

“You don’t look pretty, Romy. You look fucking edible. Like a gift waiting to be unwrapped. But this gift can’t be for me. I am much too old for you. You are fourteen years younger than me. That’s practically a lifetime.” His deep voice drops so much by the end I have to strain to hear him.

“Bishop, I’m not a kid. We both know that fourteen years by the calendar doesn’t always equal the same thing when it comes to life experience.

I left home at eighteen. I served four years in the navy.

I have a mortgage. I'm a business owner like you.

I think we have more in common than you're willing to admit. The only thing stopping us is you."

"It's too much for me. I have to take you at your word and tell you that I'm not interested." He's practically panting as he huffs out the last words.

I lean closer until I can feel his breath on my face. Our lips are only inches apart when I say, "I'd believe you more if your hand hadn't slipped up my thigh and under my skirt. They're satin, by the way, which you'd know if you move your thumb a little to the left."

"Goddammit!" Bishop jerks away from me.

"At least I know that my radar isn't broken."

"This isn't right," he tells me from his position back at the fireplace. "I'm too old for you."

"I told you age doesn't matter to me."

"Deacon would have a fit."

"Deacon doesn't want to be with me. If he does, Violet will have more to say about it than I will."

Bishop glares at me, but the corners of his mouth turn up the tiniest bit before his frown returns. "You know what I mean."

"You don't want to fuck it up for our families," I say.

“Exactly. What if we try and it goes south?”

“What if it doesn’t?” I counter.

“I’m not willing to risk it. You said you’d accept that. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t wear that dress again, though, to help me along.” I see the tension across his broad shoulders. He’s determined, much to my sorrow.

“I’m not going to change my clothes tonight, but you have my word that I’ll treat you like family.

” Thank God for Peony. My little niece will be a wonderful distraction at Thanksgiving dinner.

“As for the rest of what I said...I do need to deal with the chicken, and the champagne does need opening. I’d love to pick your brain about advertising options in the area.

” Business was a safe topic. If I can’t get what I want from Bishop Dobermann, I can at least get something useful.



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

### Chapter Four

I need a beer. I need several. I don't want to think about Romy and the look that flashed across her face and her potentially hurt feelings.

Since I turned her down, she's been true to her word.

She dialled it way the hell back at supper and was totally platonic as she talked about her business ideas and commiserated about how hard it was not to buy out the toy store for an adorable two-year-old niece.

I declined supper at Deacon and Violet's that weekend.

Romy called in sick to supper the weekend after that.

The following Monday, Violet said that Romy had been down with the bug that had taken out Peony the week before, so her absence wasn't retaliatory. She was everything she promised to be.

I don't want Romy Turner's fucking friendship.

I want her in my bed. I want the secret smiles she sent me when a contractor was trying to pull one over on her and failing.

I want the breathless sighs like after she'd taken a big gulp of the champagne I gave her.

I want to wear her like a hat with her legs spread wantonly in front of me.

But every part of me except my dick is convinced it's a bad idea.

Besides, I couldn't be with her even if I wanted to.

Which I decidedly don't. Hell, I don't have time to breathe these days.

Ever since the only other garage in a twenty mile radius shut down, the Lonesome Garage has been picking up the slack.

The extra business is great, but we don't have the staff to keep up.

I'm supposed to be interviewing someone today, so we have some more help.

A second person has finally responded to our online ad for a licensed mechanic.

The first applicant - Jordan Pratt - is local.

He looks okay on paper, but he didn't impress me or Deacon.

Since we are two of the three owners, and JD wasn't in on the interview, that doesn't bode well.

This second guy is new to the area. His references are impeccable, but nobody knows him personally. It's a toss-up, but I'm hopeful.

I'm arm-deep in an oil change when I feel a presence at my back. Fortunately, the person has the good enough sense to announce himself. "Mr. Dobermann. I'm Hartley Weston. Call me Hart. We have an interview scheduled?"

Crap, it's that time already. I was going to meet him in the office and be all professional and shit, but there is so much to do.

"Do you want to make this a practical interview? Check out my tire rotation technique while we talk?" he continues.

"That's what I had planned," I lie. At least if he's a bust, I won't have wasted any time.

He's efficient, adept, and noticeably a lefty.

But his work is as good as anything I can do.

I like the fact that he's ex-military. We know how to work with that.

Hart says that he left his hometown in Oklahoma because he didn't want his folks to shoehorn a place for him into the family ranch.

He wanted to have a job that was a good fit from the start.

When I quiz him on why he picked Lonesome of all places to apply, he said that friends of friends had spoken well of the place.

Honestly, I don't care that much. He knows his shit and doesn't seem like an asshole, which already puts him in the lead for the position.

A familiar engine approaches, and Romy's little car pulls up to the garage. "Hey, Bishop. I'm here to pick up Violet for supper and book club. Hello, new person," she adds, looking over my shoulder.

Violet comes out of the office, her purse over her shoulder. When the women stand

next to each other, it's obvious that they're sisters. "Did I miss an appointment?" Violet asks.

"Ladies, this is Hart Weston. He's interviewing for a mechanic position."

I see Violet and Romy look at Hart, then share a glance.

He's clean-cut and fit. I'm sure women find him attractive.

I'm not worried Violet will try anything.

She's completely into Deacon. As for Romy, she can like whatever type she wants.

Two weeks ago, taller and beefier was her type.

If she wants to move to skinny jeans and a baby-face a decade younger than me, that is her business.

"Payroll is done, and I'll see you on Monday," Violet says. "Have a good weekend, and good luck, Hart."

I'm dying to ask about Romy but I'm not going to.

As long as she's at book club with the girls, my imagination doesn't have to worry about what she might be doing with Hart or any other guy.

Deacon has a daddy-daughter date with Peony tonight while Violet is out, leaving me on my own.

It feels like a great night to head to the bar and grill and have some beers with JD and his boys.

If I have enough, I can stumble back to the garage and sleep it off on the sofa in the apartment upstairs and not dream of Romy.

Four beers and a double-cheese burger and fries later, my plan is not working.

It's early so people are still arriving to see our hometown country band, Low Bar, play.

Local real estate agent Curtis Cort and Jordan Pratt are at least two pitchers in and seem to be looking for targets.

I know that the Lost Souls on bar duty will take care of them if they take their crap too far.

Still, I don't want to have to keep one eye on a pair of yahoos to make sure they don't knock over my beer...

oh my fucking God, I'm a grumpy old man!

When the hell did that happen? And why does Romy think it is attractive?

My mood does not improve when Romy, Violet, and sisters Maya and April Green burst through the bar doors, giggling and grabbing each other like their laughter might knock them off their feet.

April is in a little black number while Maya has a similar dress in purple.

Violet has a cute polka dot blouse and jeans on.

Romy, however, is wearing a ridiculously short skirt, killer heels and a red sweater that is so tight it might as well be a second skin.

“Barbarian,” April insists.

“Pirate,” I hear Romy say as they pass me on the way to an empty table on the other side of the dance floor.

“Definitely barbarian,” Maya agrees. “No seasickness. Better hygiene because they have fresh water for bathing. And better booze.”

“Wait, barbarians have better booze than pirates? I’m going to need you to cite your source,” Romy says before they move too far away for eavesdropping.

I hope that conversation is a continuation of their book club meeting, but that raises new questions.

Does Romy not like boats? Should I have showered after work?

Why is Curtis Cort, of Cort Leasing and Real Estate, heading to their table?

Deacon and Violet have both mentioned that Romy dealt with a female real estate agent when she bought Camp Sunny-Lu.

He can’t have any business with her. Curtis is notorious for hitting on every single woman in a hundred-mile radius.

Four divorces later, he must have some initial charm, but it seems to wear off fast.

Curtis chats up all the women, pointing at the band on stage and receiving unanimous head shakes. He says something to Romy. She shakes her head again, and he leans in closer.

Beside me, JD slams his bottle on the table. “Seriously?” he snarls, just before he

stands up so quickly that his stool wobbles.

“What?”

“Violet just waved me over.” He stalks over to the table. I follow because I’ve always got my cousin’s back. And because I want to see what shit Romy is stirring up this time.

“You okay, Violet?” he asks, wrapping his arm around Violet’s shoulder.

“I’m fine. Curtis was just offering to show Romy around town. She declined.”

“As I said, thanks but no, Curtis. You have a good night,” Romy says. She watches him walk away until he’s out of sight.

“Can you please not flirt with the local businessmen? It’s going to give you a bad name.

” The accusation slips out of my mouth before I can stop it.

It’s not like I have any input into who Romy sees.

Or does anything else with. “It’ll make things awkward when you need to look for a house or whatever. ”

“First of all, fuck you, Bishop. Second, I did not flirt with him,” she insists. Like she isn’t batting her baby blues at every man in the joint.

“It looked like it.”

“Then get your eyes fucking checked.”

“My eyes are fine.”

“Funny, they can’t seem to see the big picture here.

This isn’t about me flirting or not flirting with Curtis.

The real problem is that you got mad when you thought I was flirting with anybody.

In a bar. When I’m out with the girls. Like you have a fucking say.

” Romy glares at me. “We’re friends, Bishop.

Remember? Nothing more, and if you don’t get your temper leashed, a fuck of a lot less. ”

The ice in her voice gives me pause. She’s absolutely right. This is what I said I wanted. I’ll live with it.

My resolution lasts a whole minute before Jules carries over a new tray of drinks. “Don’t worry about it,” the waitress tells JD when he reaches for his wallet. “These are compliments of Jordan, as is the invitation for Romy to join him.”

Everybody at the table turns to stare at the tall, beanpole of a man on the dance floor. He holds out a hand and beckons Romy to join him.

When she laughs, I snap. Curtis Cort doesn’t get that. Neither does Jordan Pratt. Nobody does. But me.

I’ve been living in a world of regret since I told Romy I wasn’t interested. I wasn’t staying there a second longer. We need to come to a new arrangement. “Can we talk?”



“Nope. I’m going to dance,” she says. She stands and turns to the dance floor.

“No, you’re not.” I crouch, catch her waist on my shoulder, and wrap my arms around her legs as I stand straight. She’s yelling her damn head off, but I don’t hesitate.

I hear someone shout, “Barbarian!” as I head for the door.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

### Chapter Five

Hanging upside down over Bishop's shoulder, I have a great view of his ass. For the first time ever, I don't care. "What the fuck do you think you're doing, Dobermann?"

"Taking you someplace where you can't cause any more problems."

"I wasn't causing problems. You were. Put me the fuck down."

He moves like a man on a mission. His long stride eats the pavement as he crosses the bar and grill's parking lot. "Not until we talk."

"Your drunk ass better not think it's getting behind the wheel," I shout.

I kick to no avail. It's my own fault. Self-defence is a lot less effective when you trust a person enough to let them get close to you.

When Bishop grabbed me, he pinned my legs.

There's not a lot I can do with no leverage and no weapon.

The worst I can accomplish is to aim a two-fisted punch at his kidney.

When that fails, I yank on his belt and try to give him an atomic wedgie.

I'm not proud. I'm pissed that I'm so ineffectual.

Bishop bypasses his truck and heads for the garage next door. “Friends don’t kidnap other friends, dude!”

“I don’t want to be your friend,” he yells back.

I have to keep my head down when we go through the door at the back of the building.

I stay still as Bishop mounts a flight of stairs to the space above the office.

I’ve never been up here. I don’t really have time to look around before he unceremoniously dumps me, and I fall onto a couch.

“Then be my fucking enemy, I don’t care. Just stop with this bullshit.”

“I don’t want to be your enemy either.”

“Then what do you want?” I ask.

I’m not prepared when he kneels in front of me to give me his answer. “Everything.” He lowers his hands until his fingertips brush the hem of my skirt.

“You are worried about our age difference.”

His voice is rough when he says, “You’re not, and I shouldn’t be making decisions for you.”

I like this answer. I like the fact that Bishop now knows today’s undies are made of lace better. “You said Deacon would disapprove.” The last syllable comes out on a gasp as his touch finds my skin, hot and wanting.

“Deacon who?”

Cool air hits my hips as Bishop slides my skirt up to my waist. I look down at his hands and cover them with mine. “Slow down, big guy. I’m not having casual sex with you.” The words catch in my throat. I want to be more than a quick fuck.

He leans forward to drop a quick kiss on my neck. His breath is hot and damp against my skin. “There is nothing casual about this. I haven’t gotten you out of my head since the night Russo attacked you. Then you invited me over for dinner and offered me the world. Now I’m saying yes.”

“Do you think I should let you just change your mind?”

His thumbs pull the sides of my panties tight before he yanks them down. “How about I convince you?” Then Bishop fucking Dobermann goes to town going down on me.

His tongue takes little licks of my waxed pussy.

The fire is unbelievable. I try to squirm, but his massive hands hold me in place.

When his fingers slide under my ass to lift me to a better position, my head falls back, and I stop pretending like I have any control left.

I thread my fingers into his thick hair, not to guide him anywhere specific but to hold on for the ride.

The little licks become laps. It takes seconds for my orgasm to hit. I reward him with a full body shiver.

“Now that we’re on the same page, it’s my turn,” Bishop says.

His magic fingers move. Suddenly, he's standing.

A second later, his belt flaps and his jeans are unbuttoned.

Foil crinkles, and the heat of his thighs against mine moves for a second while he rolls on the condom.

I twist on the sofa and he's on top of me. "Tell me you're ready," he orders.

"Absolutely, Bishop. Please," I beg.

His thick cock feels even better than it looks as it slides into my heat, which was especially impressive since it looked like one out of a dream.

He braces one leg on the floor as he glides in and out, letting me get used to him, but the friction starts to build something else and soon I'm gasping again.

Bishop pumps harder and I hang on for dear life.

'Magnificent,' he whispers as he buries his face in my neck.

I want a man who knows how to fuck, and Bishop Dobermann has a goddamn masters in the subject.

He grinds against me on the downstroke and hits the spot exactly.

I clench all over. Bishop stills for a fraction of a second, then groans as he moves and finishes. "Fuck me, Romy."

He freezes again when he pulls out. "Oh, shit."

I haven't been concerned about anything till that second. "What?"

"The condom split."

"Do I have anything to worry about? Because I'm also on the pill.

"I say. I was on antibiotics for a while, which urban legends says may make the pill less effective for a time.

But according to the medical sites I checked a couple weeks ago when I had tried unsuccessfully to seduce Bishop, it should have been long enough for it to kick back in.

At this point, I'm ninety-nine percent sure I'm fine, which is as effective as the pills are anyway.

"I'll switch brands," he says. "Don't go anywhere. I'll be right back."

I scoot upright when he comes out of the bathroom. "My turn." When I return to the small living room after cleaning up, Bishop is standing, facing the bathroom door. "Not that this wasn't terrific, but I need to know. What just happened?" I ask.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

### Chapter Six

“ I got my head out of my ass,” I say. I know this isn’t going to be easy.

I didn’t just accidentally burn the bridge between us, I deliberately went after it with a blow torch.

But the last two weeks have been absolute shit for a multitude of reasons.

The funny thing is that I know Romy is the one person in town who can understand.

My sibling is sickeningly, drowning-in-syrupy-sweetness in love on the family side.

I’m up to my eyeballs in staffing and business problems on the work side.

I don’t have time for a personal side, whether it is taking care of myself physically or emotionally.

I could really use somebody to lean on to catch my breath.

I didn’t even know how much I needed it until Romy offered it to me and I turned it down.

It’s funny how the fourteen year gap in our ages becomes less and less important the more I realize how much we have in common.

Now that I’ve finally clued in, I need to find out if we are both on the same page or if

she's moved on to a new chapter without me.

"You were right," I continue. "When it comes to calendar versus character, it seems like we're closer than we are far apart. I want the chance to explore that with you beyond..." I wave my hand at the tiny apartment. "This was fantastic, but I want more than the physical side with you."

A soft smile slowly spreads across her face. "I'm not arguing. Please continue."

I'll grovel more if I have to. A little more anyway. "You said that, if I was interested, you'd like to see where this goes. I'm interested. I think a real date would be a good first step, don't you?"

She doesn't have time to answer. The apartment door bursts open and Deacon storms into the room, followed by Violet. "What the fuck are you doing?"

Thank God he hadn't been five minutes earlier. "I was about to ask Romy if eight o'clock on Thursday was a good night to take her to Jameson's."

"When I asked you to help her, I specifically said that it was to stop all the local shitheads from hitting on her. You weren't supposed to clear the deck for yourself."

Romy's expression starts off shocked, but it doesn't stay that way for long.

It quickly morphs to angry, then a subtle shift to pissed off.

I see her pinch her lips together so hard they turn white.

"I'm going to assume you thought you were acting in my best interest, but you don't get to dictate who I do or don't date, Deacon."



“He’s a decade and a half older than you, for fuck’s sake!”

“I know.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. If Romy says that she’s decided on me, nothing is going to change her mind.

This time her stubbornness is in my favor and I’ve never been more grateful.

“Deke, if the lady says she’s not worried about it, I’m going to take her at her word.

You know I’m not going to fuck around with this.

” I would have never given in to what I feel for her if I thought that was a possibility.

Romy nods. “With love to Violet, because I know she’d say the same thing, I’ve been looking after myself for a very long time. I’m a big girl and I say I’m going out with Bishop.”

“You’re still my baby sister,” Violet says. It would be a protest if it came from anybody else.

Violet’s sweetness is not enough to diffuse the situation.

I see Romy’s back getting stiffer by the minute.

I don’t want her to be pressured into justifying her choice.

She might change her mind. “Romy has spoken. Everybody else shuts up,” I say.

“I’m sure you two have somewhere else to be. I’ll make sure Romy gets home.”

“We are all grown-ups,” Romy continues. “We will all handle what happens here, whatever happens here, respectfully. Or you will deal with me. Now take Violet home, Deke. I know you stuck JD with Peony duty even if she is asleep. Bishop and I have more date details to work out.”

Violet gives her little sister a hard look, then grabs Deacon’s hand and hauls him out the door and down the steps. I always knew I liked her. Now it’s back to just Romy and me. “Tell me more about Jameson’s. How dressy do I have to be?”

“Not that dressy or we won’t make it out of the driveway,” I tell her honestly.

She changes subjects so quickly my head spins. “So, we’re definitely doing this, right?”

Romy doesn’t specify what “this” is. I know it’s too early to use labels; we haven’t even had a real date yet. But we both know what “this” will be once we decide to acknowledge it. “You and me? Yes, we’re doing this.”

“And we’re adults, and we’ll take it as it comes?” she presses.

“I’m not going in with the end in sight, but yes. Go hard or go home.”

This earns me a smile that will haunt my dreams. “I came hard and now I’m going home. But you can pick me up on Thursday at...”

“Six,” I say. “It’s about a forty-five minute drive.”

“See you then.”

She leaves me standing alone in the garage apartment. I smile when I think of what we did on the sofa. Thursday is a long time to wait to replace that memory with a new

one we'll make in my bedroom.

But I'm sure Romy will be worth it.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

### Chapter Seven

After twenty-four hours of radio silence, Violet invites me to coffee at the Halfway Café on Sunday to feel me out about what I'm doing with Bishop.

I have no answers for her beyond "I like him" and "It feels right." Considering how she started with Bishop's brother, there's not too much she can say to warn me off a Dobermann.

When I tell her that I'd like her support on this, she swallows all trepidation and promises to have my back when it comes to Deacon.

I expect nothing less. She also promises to gut Bishop like a fish if he hurts me, but I'm willing to risk it.

I can distract myself from thoughts of Bishop during the day, especially when I have a shitty night's sleep.

I need to be on my game with contractors showing up daily.

The arts and crafts cabin is starting to take shape.

I clear a space for work permits to be displayed in the new window, next to the security surveillance notices and "Coming Soon" signs.

Thankfully when the roofing crew and the plumber do arrive, they work at different locations and keep out of each other's way.

I don't expect a third car to pull up on Tuesday.

Curtis Cort steps out of a bronze BMW that costs more than my downpayment and saunters toward the front door, carrying a bouquet of grocery store flowers.

I am not impressed. If me, politely but definitely turning him down at the bar and grill wasn't enough of a no, Bishop's barbarian impression should have made it clear that I wasn't on the market.

"Rosemary, I'm glad to find you here today."

"I'm here every day. I work here. But why are you here if you thought I wouldn't be?" I ask. My voice is a fraction more friendly than cool.

"I was hoping to take a look around the property."

"Why? It's not for sale." I'm getting a bad feeling.

Camp Sunny-Lu had been on the market for two months before I got to town, with zero interest according to the real estate representative I used.

Then, suddenly, after I arranged a second viewing, the owners received a lowball offer from someone else.

Since it was the best place I'd found, I made a better offer and got the property in a quick sale.

There's no reason for anybody to be checking out the place, especially before I'm open for business.

"I represent another party who was interested in this place," Curtis says.

“Their initial offer was rejected, and you snapped it up before they could counteroffer. They are still interested and are hoping to make a deal with you. They’re good people, Rosemary.

I’ve met with them again, and they really regret not being able to reopen this place as a camp for local children.

They’re offering whatever you paid including legal fees, plus whatever you’ve invested in renovations to date, and five thousand dollars for your trouble so you can support yourself while you find a new location. ”

I can smell the bullshit from ten feet away.

His clients were desperate to refurbish a decades old campground to reopen it for its original purpose in the middle of a recession?

Curtis probably also has a listing for some nice South Dakota ocean view properties in his briefcase.

“I’m not interested in selling, Curtis. The Sunny-Lu Salon and Spa has found its permanent home.

But you’ll be welcome back as a client once we’re open. ”

“I strongly encourage you to reconsider, Rosemary.” I wasn’t surprised at how fast the nice guy demeanor melted away.

“I’ve made myself clear, Curtis. You have a good day. Don’t pick up any nails in your tires on the way out. This is an active construction site, you know.”

“I’ll pass that on.” As he drives away, I make a mental note to call Katrina to verify

that there hadn't been any hiccups with the property transfer. Curtis gives me the feeling that he'll be reviewing the purchase agreement with a magnifying glass.

When I taught self-defence at the community center after I resigned from the navy, I stressed two rules to all my students.

The second was that running away is a smart defence move.

The first was recognizing when a situation had the potential to turn dangerous. This feels like that kind of situation.

The plumber has a bucket and is thrilled to take home a bouquet for his wife. I'm about to text Bishop to find out more about Curtis Cort but before I can call up his contact, I see his truck pulling down the lane. I wave my phone at him, then wait for him to park. "I was about to call you," I say.

"About anything in particular?"

"Curtis Cort came by and made me an offer." When clouds roll across Bishop's face, I realize he's not over the scene at the bar. "He's got a hard-on for my property, not for me."

"Oh, he definitely has one for you too," Bishop mutters barely loud enough for me to hear. "What did he want?"

"To buy Camp Sunny-Lu. Not only will he cover the original price and fees, but his clients will also reimburse me for all contractor fees and kick in a cash bonus to help till I find a new place because they really, really want to reopen it as a summer camp." I start to smile at the beginning of my explanation.

By the time I finish, it's a full-fledged grin.

“Have you ever heard a lamer explanation?”

“No.”

He's not smiling back. I feel a pinprick of hurt on my heart. Isn't this something that we should be able to laugh about together? “What's wrong?”

Bishop steps forward, hooks his finger under my jaw, and tips my face up for a kiss.

“Nothing with you,” he says, and the pain fades.

“I'm having a flashback of an unwelcome guest showing up for Violet when she arrived.

I have no desire to repeat that night. Especially considering how it turned out for you the last time. ”

I wince in understanding. We got lucky. “Exactly. We weren't expecting trouble, and we got blindsided. This time I'm telling you what's happening so we can be on guard for it.”

Bishop flexes those big paws of his. He takes and holds a deep breath before he asks, “Do you think he got the hint this time?”

Look at him, fighting his instinct to pound Curtis into paste because he doesn't want to overstep with the woman who he called fully competent on the weekend.

I'm so proud. I let him off the hook because I was going to ask him for help anyway.

“I thought I spoke plainly on Friday night before you carried me off. The fact he showed up again and was uncomfortably insistent makes me think that there is more



to this than I understand. Any suggestions?”

“I could have a quiet word with him.”

“It doesn’t have to be quiet. He seems pretty tone-deaf.” Worryingly so. “But nothing that could result in him pressing charges.”

Bishop grins adorably at me for giving him permission to beat the shit out of someone showing interest in his woman.

I anticipate good things as a reward after our date.

This big man, instinct-driven bullshit from my new book club is a lot more endearing than I first argued against. “I’ll take care of it. Any tips?”

I know he can handle Curtis. There is no doubt in my mind. But forewarned is forearmed, so I give it serious thought. “He’s working with somebody. He’s not the buyer, or I think he would have upped the offer instead of saying he would pass my decision on when I told him that I wasn’t interested.”

I move closer. “I am, however, very interested in you. Any chance of a pre-date tonight?” I want to see what else those hands can do besides flex.

His groan is real. “I can’t. Deke finally agreed to have a beer with me, so I’d like to make sure we’re good before I rub it in that I’ll be taking his future sister-in-law home with me on Thursday night.”

“Ugh. Common sense ruins another good night of wild sex and debauchery,” I tease. I give him a shoulder bump as I steer him back to his car. I’m glad they’re working it out. It’ll make family dinners much easier.

“Wild sex and debauchery? I can shotgun a can and be home by quarter after seven,” Bishop offers.

“Too bad. We’ll just have to wait until Thursday.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

### Chapter Eight

I 'm good, Deacon's good, Violet's good, Romy's good. The garage is good because it looks like Hart Weston will be filling the new mechanic position, which takes some pressure off me. I have no reason to be stressing about an evening out with Romy and a night with her in my bed.

But the hair on the back of my neck is standing on end.

My time in the Rangers left me with a highly developed sense of knowing when something was lurking out of sight, and it is fucking dark out there right now.

The garage isn't the problem. The shadows only lengthen when I'm around Romy, so I'm spending as much time with her as possible.

I'm not clueing her into the fact that I'm doing daily drive-bys of her construction site to shine some light into the corners to make hiding harder.

My beer with Deke included letting him know about Curtis Cort's continued interest in Romy and her property.

We agreed something was up with him. Deke offered to put out his own feelers.

We grew up in Lonesome. There is absolutely nothing to make that former campground interesting.

Both Romy and Violet are new to the area and have no ties beyond me, Deacon and

JD, so the trouble's not coming from them.

The only thing that has changed is ownership of the property and my woman is right in the middle of it.

At least tonight, I can keep an eye on her. Jameson's is an out-of-town steakhouse that has stayed in business despite the odds simply because the food is just that good. Taking her there is a statement I'm ready to make.

When I show up at her front door, I see that Romy is making her own statement, and she's saying, "Fuck me now, Bishop."

"You're killing me in that dress, Romy," I say after I catch my breath.

"Thank you. It doesn't have any underwear lines. See?" She spins around to prove she's not lying.

"Do you expect me to be able to climb behind the wheel after doing that?"

"You need to fuel up, Bishop. We have plans for tonight."

We now have plans through Friday as well. I'll call in sick and Romy can let her contractors go unsupervised for a day. "We should go. The faster we eat supper, the faster I can eat something else."

I catch a glimpse of her face before she turns to lock the door, and I bite back a laugh. Romy Turner is blushing. This bodes well as to what I can expect in the bedroom. I'm looking forward to it.

The drive to the restaurant passes in a blink as we talk about the problems of staffing a business in rural North Dakota. As we pull up to Jameson's, she tells me she's

looking for a local Christmas tree farm and asks if I have any recommendations.

“It’s August,” I say.

“I know. I’m so late.”

She’s not joking. I never have a tree. I have a string of lights for outside the house, and some Christmas towels for the kitchen if I can remember where I put them. I foresee a garage wall lined with half a dozen boxes of ornaments and holiday decorations in my future. I like it.

Jameson’s is a nice restaurant, about as high end as you can get out of a city. Tablecloths and linen napkins, wait staff in button-down white shirts, wine glasses as part of the standard place setting. It says that tonight is something special.

Every course is a revelation, from learning that Romy will avoid olives at all costs to the fact that she considers a steak made from sliced cauliflower to be an abomination of an entrée.

I’m eagerly awaiting what she has to say about dessert when the hair on my neck prickles and a literal shadow falls across our booth.

“Rosemary, what a nice surprise. I didn’t expect to see you here.” It’s Curtis Cort in a suit that costs more than I make in a month. Romy’s mouth turns down into a frown but that doesn’t stop him from plowing ahead. “Perhaps I could have a minute to talk a little business with you.”

She exhales through her nose. Then she reclines into her chair and waves her hand, giving me the go-ahead to deal with this clown once and for all.

I rise. I’m a good four inches taller and eight inches wider than Cort.

When he looks up at me, we both understand that I could take him with one hand tied behind my back.

For the sake of a nice evening out with my woman, I give him one last message.

I stick out my hand, with a loud and jovial “Cort!” and crush his fingers with a long-lasting and over-enthusiastic shake.

“Sorry that Romy turned down your offer on the property, but as the lady said, she just isn’t interested in entertaining any offers.

You gave it your best shot. As you can see, we’re on a very special date here, and I’m sure you are too, so let’s not let business interrupt our nights any more than it has, okay, good buddy?

” I slap his back heartily as I turn him around, and he jerks under the blows.

“I’ll see you around town, Cort. Have a good night. ”

He has no place to go except away. Romy has her face buried in her water glass. When she lifts it, I can see it’s purple from holding her breath trying not to laugh. “Good buddy?” she repeats.

“He went away and we didn’t get ejected from the restaurant or arrested, so the rest of our evening is still on,” I say.

I try to match her humor but I know I only postponed the inevitable.

Romy is right; there must be much more to her property purchase than meets the eye.

Whether she wants to admit it or not, she needs somebody to watch her back. I only

hope she lets me have the job.

“Speaking of the rest of the evening, the cheesecake looks amazing, but we should save it for next time. I think you told me that you had dessert waiting back at your house.”

“I did?”

“Maybe it was me. Maybe I’m telling you that you have dessert waiting back at your place.” Her tongue darts out between her cherry red lips.

I’ve tasted those lips. I’ve had to wait a week to taste the rest of her again. “Oh, that dessert. I’ll get the check.”

The drive home is seven minutes shorter than the drive there and it has nothing to do with traffic. “Nice place, Mr. Dobermann,” she says as we pull up.

“You should see the bedroom.”

“I’m trying!”

### Chapter Nine

I 've never been inside Bishop's place. I know the American foursquare-style house is a block off Lonesome's Main Street, with a Hollywood standard front yard that includes a pair of mirror-image flower beds and an apple tree.

He holds my hand as he pulls me up a front walk that is set with perfectly level concrete pavers. "Come in. What do you think?"

"I think it's nicer than anywhere I've ever lived in my entire life.

" When we get inside, I know that it is.

I have been stereotyping Bishop Dobermann as a simple mechanic.

My mistake. His living room is straight out of a magazine, with stunning wildlife prints on the walls and a pair of leather sofas that look like they were designed for naps.

I spy a pair of tuxedo cats napping on a dog bed which lays in front of a fireplace.

I kick off my heels and throw my purse on a sofa as we move past it. Then Bishop scoops me over his shoulder and sprints to a door at the end of the hall.

His bedroom is an oasis of forest green and cream, with a chocolate brown bedspread flowing over a king-size mattress that I bounce on once. Then Bishop is on top of me. I worried that I'd never be here again, but I welcome his weight. His mouth meets



mine, and I feast on the taste of him.

I nearly strangle him trying to get his tie off before he helps.

I want unhindered access to his jaw. I can't get enough of him.

His shirt and pants quickly follow. The skirt of my dress slides up over my hips.

I fumble the buttons and then lift it over my head and throw it to the floor.

It had a bra shelf, so the only thing I'm left wearing is a smile.

The curtain behind his headboard is open.

When I arch my back after Bishop sucks my nipple into his mouth, I see the moon through the large window.

The stars twinkling in the sky are smaller than the flashes going off in my head as cool air hits my damp nipple when Bishop switches his attention to the other side.

My fingers roam across his broad shoulders.

I moan when he rolls off me to reach for his nightstand and pull a condom from the drawer.

At least the view is spectacular. His tan doesn't start to fade till it hits his belt line, then starts again just above his knees.

When he sees me staring, he traces a line down my body. The pale band around my breasts reveals my preference for bandeau tops, and the skinny lines across my hips give away the string bikini bottoms. "I can't wait to see you in that bathing suit."

“We’ll take a trip someplace hot.” I know I’m jumping the gun, assuming we’ll still be together and in a place where we’re vacationing as a couple six months from now, but I can dream.

“Sounds good. For now, let’s enjoy something else hot and sweaty without the sand problem.

” Bishop presses his hand between my thighs and feels that I’m ready for him.

His thick finger slides into me, a tease of what’s to come.

I brace my foot on the mattress, then push, rolling us across the massive bed until I’m on top, straddling him.

I look down at his impressive dick, take a breath, then raise hips above it and lower myself slowly.

Bishop fills me beyond my wildest dreams. He places his hands on my waist, encouraging me to move.

Fuck but this man sets me off like a firework with a short fuse.

After I explode a few strokes later, Bishop grabs my hips and works me up and down until he jolts, sighs, and settles.

“If you keep this up, you’re going to kill me,” he mutters.

“Likewise, but at least we’ll both go out happy.

” I drop a kiss on his nose, then slide off and head to the bathroom that I spied in the hall to get cleaned up.

I see Bishop rolling off the bed to head to an en-suite.

I come out ready for a quick breather and then another round of pure Bishop, but he's sitting on the end of the bed holding my purse. "I know you're not kicking me out."

"Your purse is both beeping and ringing," he says.

I dig out my cell phone and see a screen full of alerts. "It's from the security system at Sunny-Lu. Somebody tried to breach the building." I press a few buttons to call up the security camera feed. "There's nobody there now but they left the door open."

Bishop reaches for a pair of jeans hanging over the back of his laundry hamper. "I'll drive."

I want to whine like a toddler that I don't want to go.

"They'd better be gone when we get there or I'm going to shove one ball up each nostril and cover their mouths until they pass out," I grumble.

I pull the panties I'd hopefully packed out of my purse, then pull my dress back over my head.

"I was really hoping to stay here until you offered to make me breakfast."

"Or I could have a not-so-quiet word with whoever it is, because that was graphic as fuck and now my balls are twitchy," he offers. "As for food, I have Poptarts. Army food kind of turned me off breakfasts, so I usually grab something from the café on the way to work."

"I'm a whiz at breakfasts," I brag. I'm not kidding.

“I make some kick-ass suppers. Sounds like a match.”

Once we're fully dressed, I look back at the rumpled bed. I'm sad to admit that I'm looking at it with dismay more because I'm exhausted and want a nap than because I want an immediate round two.

“Don't worry. We'll be right back.” Bishop ushers me back the hall. This time I have a chance to admire his kitchen. It has miles of custom cabinetry and gleaming white countertops, terminating at a round breakfast table in a nook with a bay window that overlooks his backyard.

The street is quiet as we climb back into his truck, although I can hear faint music from the direction of the bar and grill a street over if I listen hard enough.

“We haven't gotten this far yet, because we keep getting interrupted, but you should know that I'm a cuddler,” Bishop tells me once I'm buckled into his passenger seat.

“You are?”

“I am. I'm usually the big spoon, but I like being the little spoon on occasion too.”

I grin. He's being silly, but he's sharing something of himself in his joke. He's taking a risk with me. “I can do that,” I promise. “Next time, come hell or security alarms, there will be cuddling.”

“I'll hold you to that.”

### Chapter Ten

The night's buzz vanishes the second we turn off the highway and my truck's high beams shine across Camp Sunny-Lu.

Somebody worked overtime to trash the site.

Shit has been pulled from the garbage bin and scattered all over the parking area.

Two of the brand-new windows have been broken and at least one more is cracked.

The vandals also tipped over the Port-a-pottie. What a fucking mess.

I'm armed. Romy is not. I'm surprised when she doesn't put up an argument about me going in first. Thankfully with all the walls down, it takes all of two seconds to clear the interior. "They've left."

We walk the perimeter. Romy balances carefully on shoes that shouldn't be anywhere near an active construction site. We find a message spray painted on the far side of the building.

"Go home, bitch!" Romy reads. "Well, at least they can spell and use proper grammar."

"Aren't you concerned?" I ask. I am. I'm ready to remove heads.

"Yes, but I can't do anything about it right now," Romy says. "The alarm did its job."

Now I have to review the footage and see if we can identify whoever did this. Then the ass-kicking will begin.”

Between us, we take a ton of photos and video. Romy uncovers a hammer that one of the construction guys left behind, and we nail a couple of boards across the back of the busted door.

“Can you take me home? After this, I just want a shower and bed. You’re welcome to join me.”

As much as I’d like a part two of the night with her, Romy is done. I’m in slightly better shape, but since she won’t enjoy it like I would, I put a pin in it. “Sure,” I agree.

“There could be cuddling.”

“Now you’re just being a tease.” But it gets both of us smiling.

Deacon’s rental is clean and tidy but sparse.

There is very little of Romy anywhere. She told me that she lived in tiny, rented quarters when she was in the navy, trying to save money, but aside from some photos and two bookcases, I’m pretty sure all the furniture in the living room is left over from when Violet lived here.

She points me toward the bedroom while she ducks into the bathroom. When she comes out, her face is freshly scrubbed, and her hair is off her face in a hairband. She looks utterly exhausted. “I’m crashing. Are you joining me or not?”

I notice that her mattress is firm and that the sheets smell lightly of lavender.

The next thing I know, I'm waking up to a room full of sunshine beaming through the open curtains.

It's also incredibly hot, like I'm wrapped in an electric blanket.

Which tightens around me and whispers, "Good morning."

Holy fuck, Romy is spooning me. I stop shifting under the covers, enjoying the warmth. I could get used to this. "Good morning."

She groans. "It's too early. I'll start coffee then hit the shower to give you a couple more minutes in bed. If you want to go home, I'm still starting coffee." She shifts to roll away, then moves backward and drops a kiss on my shoulder. "Coffee," she repeats.

I'm in yesterday's clothes. They'll do. I don't want to give up my first morning with Romy by going home to change. Especially not after she bragged about her breakfasts. Even if it's only cereal, it'll be with her.

She starts the coffee before taking her shower. By the time I'm done mine, there's a frying pan on the stove and a container of batter beside it. "Pancakes?" she asks.

"On a Friday morning?"

"Every morning," Romy says. "Life is too short to save pancakes for special occasions. They don't take much longer than toast if you have batter in the fridge. So?"

"Sure."

The woman is serious about her pancakes. She drops fresh blueberries into the batter,

then ladles them into the sizzling pan. A choice of three syrups awaits my decision on the counter. Plus a steaming cup of black coffee. God, I might be in love.

“I’m on call tonight with the tow-truck. I can’t promise we’ll have an uninterrupted evening.”

“We can try, if you want to.”

“I’ll hit the grocery store after work. Get something to barbecue,” I say.

“I’ll bring the wine.”

“And something to wear on Saturday,” I add. I’m going to keep her in that bed all night, even if I’m not there.

After breakfast, which in fact did not take much longer than toast, we go our separate ways. Romy has to file a report with the police, and she needs to be on site for the day’s contractors anyway. I have a new employee to welcome.

Hart Weston is on time on his first day, which is a good start. He and Grayson Masak put a local farmer’s truck onto the lift and get to work replacing brake pads. When Violet calls me to the office to sign off on a parts order, I’m surprised to see Deacon lying in wait.

“How was your date?”

“Fine. Good, even.”

“Are you going to see Romy again?” At this point, Violet glares at Deacon and excuses herself. At least I have one person on my side.



“Yes.”

“Are you sure?” Deacon asks. “Moving kind of fast, aren’t you?”

“Says the man that moved Violet and Peony into his house two months after they arrived in Lonesome.”

“That’s different.”

“No, it’s not. When you know, you know. You know?”

If I have my way, I won’t waste as much time as you did.

” I haven’t spoken to Romy about it yet but even as I acknowledge the thought, something settles deep in my gut.

I know I don’t want to fuck around. Romy is in a rental, and I have a spare room and an unfinished basement.

There’s lots of room for her stuff, and to move mine around to make changes so it’s home for both of us.

This is it. We have no reason to waste time and wait around.

My annoying little brother is not letting this go. “It must have been a very good night if you’re showing up to work in yesterday’s clothes. She’s worth the walk of shame in front of the boys?”

There’s one thing I can do to get him on my side, but I’m hesitant to play the card.

Then I realize it will make him a permanent ally of Team Bishop and Romy.

“Fuck, yes, but that’s not the only reason.

They’re the first clothes I grabbed after Romy got a security alert that someone broke into her Camp Sunny-Lu building.

The alarm scared them off, but they’d been there long enough to do some damage,” I tell him, cutting off any further remarks.

Deacon goes sheet white. I know the feeling. The Turner sisters attract that kind of trouble. And loyalty. “Is Romy okay?”

“She’s fine. We cleaned up as much as we had to. She’s reporting it this morning. I might go over later to see how she’s doing.” I can bring her lunch, maybe walk along the lakeshore with her. Tell her I’m falling hopelessly in love with her.

My phone beeps. The message garners a one-word answer. “Shit.”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

### Chapter Eleven

Today is the day I get to go hog-wild with the painter's tape, blocking out chairs and areas on the plywood subfloor for the layout of the salon.

I have four rolls of green tape and four of blue, a tape measure, and a calculator.

The Sunny-Lu Salon and Spa is going to be a tropical relaxation destination with hints of industrial decor by the time I'm done.

It's going to take me a while though; I'm fucking exhausted.

I know it's been a while since I was getting laid on the regular, but Bishop is wearing me out more than I expected. I could use a nap in my car.

I'd get to have one if real estate people got the fucking message.

I recognize the BMW pulling up in front of the building.

I can handle this prick, but I don't want anyone else to be blindsided by his arrival.

I half expect Bishop to stop by sometime today even though we've already made plans for later.

He will be even more unhappy than I am to see Curtis Cort again, so I text him a heads-up.

I ignore him for as long as I can as I finish my current set of measurements. When I can't wait any longer, I head over to send him on his way for two reasons: one, I'm not selling, and two, the window guy is coming to replace the glass sometime today and Curtis parked his BMW in the way.

"Was there something new I can help you with?" I ask Curtis as soon as he gets out of the car.

"I'm pleased to say that my clients have upped their offer to ten thousand more than their original offer, to compensate you for having to find a new property."

God, he just didn't get it. "I'm not interested, Curtis. I'm not going to be interested even if you come back with six figures."

"This property isn't even worth the ten," Curtis says. "My clients are being incredibly generous, Rosemary. You're new to Lonesome. You don't get how this works. They are politely trying to ease you out of town to some place you'll fit in better. Soon they'll stop being polite."

"Now they think they can run me out of town?" I repeat. "My sister is here. My niece is here. My—" I pause. Yes, it's the right word. "—boyfriend is here. I'm not going anywhere."

"Look at this place. Busted windows, buildings that need more work than their worth. Graffiti all over the exteriors."

I freeze. "How could you possibly know about the graffiti on the back of this building when you just pulled up to the front?"

"You stupid bitch." He grunts and lunges at me.

It's the last thing he does. I grab his extended arm and yank it across his body, pulling him off balance. I'm not in heels today. Curtis learns that fact when my steel-toed boots make impact.

He's sitting on his ass in the dirt, wheezing after all the breath has been knocked out of his lungs.

I'm breathing hard too, but I'm upright and ready for a second round.

I lose sight of Curtis for a minute when Bishop's truck roars up the dirt road and slides to a stop on the gravel parking pad.

A cloud of dust wafts over me. I take a step back to give myself extra time and distance to whatever may come out of the fog.

When it clears, I see Bishop holding Curtis upright by his tie and front of his shirt.

What a nice guy, Bishop, helping Curtis up like that , I practice in my head in case I need to give testimony.

I'm glad he's here. I'm confident that I could take Curtis if I had to, but I wouldn't have come out of it unscathed.

If Bishop wants to handle it for me this time, I'm happy to step aside.

"Romy?" Bishop asks. There are a host of questions in that one word.

I answer them all. "I'm okay. I expressed clearly to Mr. Cort again that I am not and will not be interested in selling my property to his clients.

He reacted violently. I am ordering him off the property now.

Mr. Cort, go away. Don't come back again or I will charge you with trespassing.

Also, you aren't welcome in any of my businesses either.

Bishop, if you could ensure Mr. Cort finds his way back to the highway, I'd appreciate it.

I have to discuss some measurements with the framers.

"I don't shout. I don't rant. Nobody will be able to accuse me of being hysterical, or even emotional.

"Bye, Cort. Can you see yourself out, or do I need to help you?" Bishop asks.

My chill and Bishop's flat tone seem to trigger something in Curtis. He doesn't say a word when he climbs back into his BMW and races away. I don't relax until his wheels hit the highway. "What the fuck?" I ask, mostly to myself.

Bishop looks like he wants to hug me, but he's hesitant with the contractors peering through the busted window. I have no qualms. I step closer until I can lean against his chest. "Hold me," I order.

His arms are heaven. "What am I going to do with you, Romy Turner? You're a trouble magnet."

"Does that mean you and your protective streak are attracted to me?" I counter.

"Me and my protective streak are fucking in love with you and your trouble magnet." Bishop's words are blunt and loud and everything I want to hear.

He squeezes me tighter. "I can't tell you how happy I am that you called me when

Cort showed up.

I saw that you had it handled but you still called me. We are the perfect team.”

I tilt my face to answer, but he captures my lips in a kiss that sets me tingling all over. “I’d tell you that I’m not one to say “I told you so” but I’m totally telling you so. For the record, me and my trouble magnet are in love with you and your protective streak, Bishop Dobermann.”

“Where does that leave us?” he asks after kissing me stupid again.

“In a state of confusion about why Cort won’t let this property go. In a state of soon-to-be sexual bliss about us being on the same page. And in a state of frustration about not being able to do anything about either right now because we both have jobs we need to be working.”

“I do have to get back to the garage.”

“My framer is tapping his watch telling me that he needs me,” I admit. But the framer is grinning. I think he enjoyed the show, so he won’t be too mad.

“Supper, and tonight on call. Then Saturday?” Bishop asks.

“All weekend, maybe. If you don’t think you’ll get bored with me.”

“Not a chance. You’re going to keep me busy beyond one weekend, aren’t you?”

“Maybe. A young, strapping man like yourself should be able to keep up, don’t you think?”

“Bring it, Turner. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

*Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:09 am*

We have a routine. It's only been three weeks, but it works. Romy sets an alarm for the coffeepot in the morning, then takes the first cup into the bathroom with her. She comes out, I go in, and when I come out again, there are pancakes started. It's great.

Until this morning. Romy went into the bathroom twenty minutes ago and she's still there. Twenty minutes isn't excessively long for a woman to take to put on make-up and do her hair and shit, but Romy's a fifteen-minute woman in the mornings.

At twenty-five, I knock on the door. "Are you okay? You're late."

"Tell me about it." There's a long pause, but she doesn't open the door. "You know when you asked me to move in and you said I could have a spare room for myself?"

I've been trying to get her to move in for two weeks already. "Yes."

"Can I have it for somebody else?"

"Like who? Did you want to get a cat?"

Romy opens the door. She's dressed and ready for work. She's holding a narrow, white plastic case in her hand. "I haven't given notice at my rental yet, so I'm okay either way."

I'm still stuck on the white plastic case. "Are you contagious?"

"No."



The other option is, “Are you pregnant?”

“Apparently.” I’ve never seen Romy anything but confident. The shadows in her blue eyes scare me. “I’ll make a doctor’s appointment to be sure. That’ll give you some time.”

“Time for what?”

“Time to see if you’re good with this. If I am pregnant, and all signs point towards yes, I’m good.

I have insurance and everybody always needs a hairdresser.

The timing will be tricky with the salon opening but I’ll see if I can work out some split babysitting time with Violet. If not, the daycare?—”

“I’m good with it!” I yell. “Romy, I’m good with a baby.

I’m great with a baby. I’m great with twins or however many you’re carrying.

” I never expected this, but I’m not sorry.

I was jealous of Deacon and Violet having a family already.

Being older than both of them, I was starting to give up hope of one of my own.

“We’ve been together for a month. I don’t want you to think you’re obliged.”

“What part of “I love you” are you having problems with, sweetheart? I told you I was planning on a future with you. We haven’t talked about it, but I had hoped that a baby—our baby—could be part of that one day.”

Romy snuffles, then throws herself into my arms. “I love you too. I didn’t do this on purpose. I need you to know.”

That never entered my mind. “Pretty sure I was the one wearing the busted condom.” After she stops crying, she tosses the test onto the bathroom vanity and grips my shirt with both fists. “Are you sure you’re okay with this? I know it’s fast.”

“Romy, I may be slow to catch up with you sometimes, but, baby, I am with you forever.”

THE END