



Infected by Virus (Royal Bastards MC: Provo Chapter #3)

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Description: VIRUS

Relationships fall apart; it happens, but when you tear one down yourself, it hits differently.

Seven years ago, Darrin Westbrook's life was on track, until one selfishly stupid decision derailed it into a spectacular disaster. After the dust settles, it's Virus who emerges from the wreckage.

RAE

Missing someone won't kill you, but it can make you wish it did.

Broken. That was the only word that came to mind to describe Rae's existence after losing the man she loved more than life itself. She's finally moving on with her so-called life when the past calls.

What you don't know can in fact hurt you, but what you refuse to see can destroy you.

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VIRUS

“Yo, ?”

“What’s up, Heidi?”

“We need some technical support. You got a sec?”

Looking up, he spotted Heidi with laptop in hand and Nova by her side. However, it was Devin trailing behind them, laughing her ass off, that gave him pause.

“Depends. Does it involve me in any capacity other than technical support?” The question was directed more toward Nova instead. She liked to needle him for the fucking sport of it.

“Nope,” she answered, but turned toward Devin with the devil in her eyes.

When Hook’s ol’ lady and Prez’s ol’ lady got together, it was trouble with a capital T. But when they teamed up with Croon’s sister, well, that spelled big fucking trouble in all caps with extraneous exclamation points.

Heidi plopped down next to him on the sofa and handed over the laptop, while Nova and Devin shared the love seat chair across from them.

“We posted a video of Croon on that one app, and it went viral.”

That explained why Devin was involved with such glee. While Nova never missed a

chance to razz him, Devin never tired of ribbing her brother. Between the two of them, they'd been the victims of Devin or Nova's extortion more times than he could count. Do this or that for us or we'll post this.

Croon's relationship with his sister has been rocky since she'd arrived from Nebraska under less-than-ideal circumstances. For a while, was convinced Hook had a thing for her, but it turned out they were just friends. He did notice another brother who was all gooey-eyed over her for real, but not his circus, not his cryptid, or however the saying went.

He could only hope that they worked out their sibling shit before it spread out and impacted the club.

"Turns out, the ladies of the world are more pervy than men. Go figure," Nova remarked.

"Especially in the romance book community," Devin added. She read those things like they were going out of style. Since she arrived, Zombie had to make a new rule about her leaving her books lying around. There were shirtless men on damn near every surface of their clubhouse and attached businesses.

shuddered.

"We're a fucking MC, not a Desperate Housewives of Provo book club, damn it," Zombie had said as he tossed a handful of the books in question across the table toward Croon during a recent come to Jesus. "Get your sister under control or I'll bust you back to prospect and see how much shit you can take before you tuck tail and run." It was an empty threat. Zombie wasn't an asshole, but it worked ... somewhat.

Nova's laughter drew his attention back. "Yeah, some of the things in the comments

about what they'd let Croon, and the other guys, do to them are illegal in at least eight countries."

"Umhm," Heidi agreed. "If I tell Zom the offers he's gotten, he may just beg to add a third or a fourth to our relationship. If he tried that, I'd have to castrate him, and nobody wants that."

Santa and Outlaw were shooting pool behind the ladies on the love seat, and both made different protective maneuvers as if imagining being castrated.

"Damn, woman. You got a vicious streak," Santa said after he recovered. "I like it." He winked.

Santa was harmless when it came to Zombie's ol' lady, but he was an unapologetic flirt and the ladies always ate that shit up with a spoon.

"You got game, old man, but you better watch who you're running lines on," Outlaw scolded with zero heat.

"Who are you calling old man, you fucking bottom-feeder? Old my ass, I'll show you old." He only had a decade on the youngest of the guys at most, but everyone likes to remind him of that.

"That's VP bottom-feeder to you, old man. You're just still salty because if it wasn't for me, you'd be running your lines in cell block C for the biggest, ugliest motherfucker in there."

The ladies had turned away from their problem at hand to watch the exchange happening at the pool table.

Santa stuck out his tongue like a petulant child and laid the pool cue on the felt.

“You’re just jealous because I’ve got three inches on you in the way that counts most.” Santa grabbed his crotch in case anyone watching didn’t understand his reference. “Not to mention with all the cold-ass shark blood running through your veins, you probably can’t even get it up, can you, counselor ?”

“As far as inches go, you must be talking about height because you damn sure don’t have it in your pants.”

Outlaw dropped his cue next to Santa’s and reached into his wallet. He pulled out a couple of bills, then slapped them on the felt.

“Put your money where your mouth is, old man .” He put a hard emphasis on the last two words.

“Fuck yeah, I could use the scratch.” When Santa tossed his money down next to Outlaw’s, Sherry stepped up and trailed her finger down his arm.

“You boys wanna follow me and we can settle this?”

They didn’t need any more encouragement than that. The three of them headed toward the rooms.

It wasn’t the first time and it damn sure wouldn’t be the last time brothers shared, nor the last time measurements would be taken and bragged about for weeks to come.

What struck as wholly out of place was when Heidi turned back around—she was smiling . Actually smiling ... about Sherry.

She and Sherry had a rocky start, to say the least. The club chick had tried to come between Zombie and Heidi, damn near succeeded too. The club voted to send her packing but gave Heidi the final say. Heidi opted to keep her around and made her

pay for the deception. Smart move on her part. As the Prez's ol' lady, she needed to establish her place if she wanted to earn everyone's respect.

She'd damn sure done that, in spades.

Heidi gave him a puzzled look. "What?"

"What do you mean what?"

He gestured to her face, then down the hall.

"Soooo?"

"We're good. She knows her place and we've come to an understanding." She tapped the laptop. "Now, back to the problem at hand."

Understanding was an understatement. They looked almost like friends, but was not about to mine for more info. Every time he did so with one of the ladies, they dug back, and he had a lot that he'd rather keep buried, thank-you-very-much.

"Okay, viral video, so what's the problem?"

"I'm trying to add it to the club site and leave it linked to the original post. But when I try, it only shows the link and I want visitors to be able to play the video from the app on site. Not a video I upload, but directly play that one. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, I can fix it, but it'll cost you."

They all narrowed their eyes at him with similar expressions. If he didn't know better, he'd wonder if they'd known each other for years. They blended better than anyone could've predicted.

“What?” they said in unison.

“Nothing too steep, just a promise of no videos of me on the site or social media for a year.”

“Six months?” Nova countered.

“Ten.”

“, you are the second favorite Bastard online,” Devin whined.

“Behind who?” Did he really care if he wasn’t the most popular? Maybe just a touch.

Heidi made a locking motion on her mouth and tossed the key.

“How about eight of nothing and an additional two of only cool pics or vids—nothing embarrassing?”

It was hard negotiating three to one, because the ladies would pack up like feral raccoons and their target was a tasty snack, but he was determined to win this one, damn it.

“Seven of nothing, two of cool, plus you tell me who’s ahead of me, and your link is as good as done.”

The ol’ ladies and Devin put their heads together like they are conferring in a courtroom. They must’ve learned that from Outlaw.

“Done,” Devin announced gleefully.

A few taps of the keyboard and bingo-bango, problem solved. He handed the laptop

over to Heidi.

“Who?”

“Well, that’s my cue to skedaddle,” Nova said. “I gotta grab June from school for an appointment.” She left, and Heidi stood to follow.

“Who?” he called after her.

“For the past two months, that would be Santa. All the ladies want to sit on his lap.” She giggled. “Thanks Vi .”

He hated the nickname, but he adored his president’s ol’ lady, so he let it slide.

“You’re welcome, Hi .”

The back-and-forth between them reminded him of someone else he had an easy-going relationship with once upon a time, and his mind started slipping back to the past.

Devin, who had yet to rise, must’ve noticed his contemplativeness because she got up and sat on the coffee table directly in front of him. So close it would’ve been intimate if they had anything other than platonic affection for each other. She really needed to learn the concept of personal space.

“A penny for your thoughts?”

“Sweetheart, they aren’t worth a fucking penny.”

“They have to be worth a hell of a lot more to have you looking like that.” She gestured to his face.

“Like what?”

“Like someone just stole your puppy, your shiny balloon just floated into the sky, and you dropped the top scoop of your cone all at the same time.”

He may or may not have felt a bit defensive about her assessment of his look .

“I don’t want a dog, I hate fucking balloons, and I’m lactose intolerant.” crossed his arms like he’d just won the war, and leaned back into the couch cushion, but Devin was relentless.

“First off, everyone wants a dog, so whatever.” She adopted his victorious look somewhat. “Then it has to be a woman, so spill.”

avoided talking about her . Partly because she was and will always be the love of his life, but mostly because he was the one who’d fucked it all to hell and back.

“Just someone I knew a long time ago that crosses my mind more often than not. But especially on this date,” trailed off, not really wanting to admit any more. He hated that he’d said as much as he had. Pouring himself another whiskey, he downed it with gusto.

“What’s today?” Devin’s voice was gentle and concerned. He answered the best he could without sharing his shame.

“The day the old me died, but at her expense.” Yeah, it was cryptic as hell, but there wasn’t any other way he could be.

His new family, his Bastards family, only know the current version of him. He had their respect. If they knew what he’d done, especially the ol’ ladies, he’d lose that and so much more. Devin damn sure wouldn’t sit there all concerned for him. More

likely, she'd kick him in the balls every time they crossed paths.

"Any hope of a reconciliation?" she asked as she stood.

"No." Another drink down.

"Is she still alive?"

looked up at her and it dawned on him that she thought he'd killed her.

"No. Nothing like that, jeez." His voice held a bit of horror mixed with some what the hell . "More like I'm dead to her."

Devin bent down, bringing them eye to eye. Her face held no judgment, only love.

"As long as you're both still breathing, there's always hope." With that, she kissed him on the forehead, more like a mom than a sister figure, and left.

Devin was Croon's sister by blood, but since she'd arrived, she'd become like a sister to all of them. Well, he suspected one brother had zero sisterly thoughts toward her, but that was his business.

It wasn't just Devin, Heidi had become like a little sister to them too, ever since they rescued her from the trunk of a car and she fell hard for their Prez. Same with Nova for that matter, and her little girl, June.

That one would never get to date before she could collect retirement and maybe not even then. She basically had one scary dad, and a full club of badass uncles wrapped around her finger that would kill to protect her. Just as they'd kill or die for their brothers and the ol' ladies.

That line of thinking punched him in the gut. His first thought was how it would be the same with his Sun Rae and she'd love the hell out of Heidi, Nova, and June. But especially Devin, they would be thick as thieves, he just knew they would.

She wasn't his anything—not anymore.

“Fuck,” he shouted and scrubbed his hands down his face. Gwen sauntered up to him, swiping his glass off the table, filling it up and handing it to him. He slammed it back. She immediately went to her knees, hands working his buckle.

As tempting as getting his balls drained sounded, he wasn't rising to the occasion. He never did on that particular day or even the months surrounding it.

Sure, he'd had sex since Rae, but he had to drink and smoke to quiet her pain that he could still hear. It was never anything more than a physical need ... hollow. It was simple as that.

“Get up, sweetheart. I appreciate the offer, but I'm not in the mood.” That was all he had to say, and she backed off. Sherry would've kept pushing, but Gwen never did.

Besides, he'd developed a reputation for being selfish in the bedroom, so she was probably relieved. He'd heard the whispers about his performance. Even the guys razzed the fuck out of him over it, but it was what it was. Nothing could change the past. deserved whatever was said about him.

It seemed over the years, he could drink enough to get off, but it was a rare occasion when he could smoke enough to go above and beyond with anyone in bed and put in the effort to get them off. That's why he stuck to club girls, no expectations beyond the benefits the club offered the regulars.

If he were honest with himself, it was because he felt he owed it to her not to pleasure

another woman. It destroyed Rae when she caught him face down in a snatch that didn't belong to her. Cries of pleasure that came from another woman still haunted him, so no, he just couldn't bring himself to do it.

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RAE

“Here you go, hun, burger and fries.” The waitress set the plate in front of , then ruffled Adam’s hair. “And pancakes for my most handsome customer today,” she announced as she set the plate in front of Adam.

reached over to cut his food for him, only to see that it was already done. She smiled up at the older lady in the uniform. “Thank you.”

“Of course, hun. Raised three boys. One thing I learned was men, even the young ones, have zero patience. If it’s in front of them, they’re gonna grab it and stuff it in their mouth, no matter if it fits or not. My youngest used to pick the whole thing up and bite it. Bigger than his head, didn’t matter.”

Sure enough, Adam was already on his third bite by the time she finished talking.

The waitress, Nana, according to her name tag, gave a sympathetic look. “Besides, you seem a little overwhelmed.”

That was the understatement of the century.

“Raising kids is the best part of life, but it’s tough. I imagine doing it all by yourself is even harder.”

had no intention of raising Adam all by herself , as Nana put it. She looked at Adam instead of providing any sort of answer. He reminded her of her greatest love and greatest pain. Of course, she wasn’t going to spill her life story to a waitress she’d

just met. Instead, she smiled and thanked her again.

“I’ll swing back by and check on you in a few. Just holler if you need anything else.”

She took a bite of her burger and looked over at Adam as she chewed. He gave her the biggest smile she’d ever seen, and her heart swelled and broke in half at the same time.

Her stomach roiled and her appetite fled. Adam was the spitting image of his father.

That innocent face was how she found herself back in Utah. When she drove away years ago, she silently swore she’d never cross that state line again. A promise she’d broken, and it wouldn’t be the last one on this trip either. She’d also come face-to-face with Darrin.

She’d already been in Provo for too long without getting up the nerve to break that promise, but she had no choice. She had to do it—and soon. Running around town with his carbon copy was dicey.

In her delusional mind, she thought she’d get to Provo, meet with Darrin, hammer out the terms about Adam, and settle things between them once and for all. Get some closure so she could finally, truly move on emotionally.

Who was she kidding? Things would never be settled between them. Some things could never be settled. People just found a way to live around the pain and deal with life.

Sadly, ’s way had included locking her heart away from everyone and anyone for the first few years, including a string of way too many meaningless sexual encounters. But that got old real fast. Then she had a failed halfhearted attempt at a relationship with someone she never viewed as more than a good friend. That crashed and burned

in spectacular fashion.

Yeah, that's a healthy way to cope.

Tracking Darrin down hadn't been too hard, he was all over social media. Her friend Harmon, who she was staying with indefinitely, knew exactly where to find the RBMC too. Seemed he'd made himself unforgettable on the internet to throngs of thirsty women. He'd joined the Royal Bastards shortly after she hightailed it out of the state.

"I'm just stalling the inevitable, huh, Adam?"

"Umhm." He made a sound of agreement, or maybe it was the child equivalent of damn, these pancakes are fire. He didn't know what was going on in her head. All he knew was he'd be meeting his dad soon. For being hit with all that, he seemed to be coping better than her.

Even so, she wasn't really asking a six-year-old for life advice, was she?

Wetting the napkin in a water glass, she wiped away some syrup on his mouth.

"Of course, at this point you couldn't do any worse at adulting than me, huh, cutie pie? You had the brilliant idea to have a breakfast food for lunch. I'd say that was a great choice." Looking down at the syrup on his shirt, blew out a breath. "Where did the napkin I tucked in there go?"

"It fell," Adam proclaimed and pointed under the table before shoveling in another bite.

She tried every stretch and yoga technique Harmon taught her to retrieve said napkin with dignity, to no avail. "You owe me big time, little buddy."

Ass all the way in the air with her head under the table, she finally touched the sticky cloth with her fingertip.

“Ah, ha, I got it,” she shouted from under the table.

“Damn, I got something too, sweetheart,” a deep voice proclaimed loudly. Lower, that same voice said, “Keep wiggling it just like that and Santa’ll put you on the naughty list.”

hit her head on the bottom of the table.

“Shit,” she ground out.

Strong hands grabbed her around the waist and helped maneuver her back out from under the table without further injury.

When she turned to see who’d caused her injury and also gave her assistance, she was face-to-face with a bearded hottie. One who still held her hips with a little too much familiarity.

“Thanks for the assist, um ...” she trailed off, waiting for him to offer up a name.

“Santa, sweetheart, but you can call me whatever you like.”

“Oh.” She snorted inelegantly, “The naughty list comment makes sense now. Clever. I’m Alaine. Thanks again,” she said nervously and glanced down at his hands, which still rested on her hips, but the older gentleman made no move to let her go.

“How’s your head?”

“‘Tis but a scratch,” she said in her best over-the-top British accent. Santa just stared

at her. She always answered that way in similar situations before remembering not everyone loved Monty as much as her.

“A scratch? Your arm’s off,” someone else responded. She laughed and looked around for who said it. She got a wave from behind Santa as the person attached to the tattooed hand that took credit for the comment continued past, toward a booth further down.

She mumbled to Santa, who still looked confused by the exchange, knowing he wouldn’t get it. “I’ve had worse.”

“Take your hands off the lady, Santa, and let her get back to her kid, and possibly the kid’s father .” Another voice from behind Santa spoke with an upward inflection at the end of the statement, making it more of a question.

Santa finally released her and took a step back.

“Oh, I um ...” Why was she tempted to explain her life to strangers for a second time? The stress of what was to come was really taking its toll on her today.

She veered again. “Anyway, thanks.” She nodded and sat back down.

Santa still stood there, just behind Adam’s shoulder.

The other men behind him, including the one who’d told him to let her go, inclined their chins or nodded as they passed, heading toward where the only cool one, in her book, sat waiting. Santa pulled a card from his pocket and handed it to her.

“Call me sometime, mama. I promise to show you a good time.” She bristled at the mama , but let it go.

“I’m just passing through, so ...” Which wasn’t exactly true, but he would never know that. A harmless white lie on her part, hoping he would get the hint and join his buddies, but nope.

A sharp whistle pierced the air, and she looked in that direction. All the men had managed to slide into a large booth down the way. They were all turned toward her and Santa, staring at their exchange, while one motioned for Santa to join them.

“That’s even better. Since you didn’t lead with married, I’ll assume you’re single.” He winked, ruffled Adam’s hair, and left to join his companions.

That’s when her blood froze in her veins, and she had trouble taking in oxygen.

The men at the table were trading money and proclaiming, everything from I thought he could close the deal, to old man has lost his touch . Obviously betting on if he could get her number, but that’s not what made it hard to breathe or cause her to panic. It was the big fucking skull wearing a crown on Santa’s back that did that. He was a Royal Bastard; they all were now that she paid attention.

sat there paralyzed as their conversation drifted her way.

“How does it feel to be shot down so much, Santa?”

“Fan-fucking-tastic, because you can’t catch a pretty fish if your line ain’t even in the water. For every no, I got a shot at a yes.”

She heard groaning and razzing coming from the other men, but it started to blur together when her brain caught up to what all that meant.

If a single one of them had bothered to look Adam in the face, and for all she knew, one had, she wouldn’t get the chance to tell Darrin he had a kid, they’d do it for her.

There was no way to deny Adam's DNA.

"No more procrastinating, , you have to ovary up and see Darrin today," she said under her breath and slapped a couple of twenties down before grabbing Adam. "Let's go, big guy."

She tried to carry him for a quick escape, but he was having none of it. "I can walk." He pouted.

had no choice but to go slow. She may not have this whole raising a kid thing down, but she did know he had to do things on his own. Grabbing his still sticky hand, she made her way out of the restaurant and to the car.

As she backed out of her spot, she noticed the slew of bikes by the door. How had she not heard them pull up? Just being in Darrin's zip code frazzled her brain.

When she glanced up once again, she noticed Santa in the window waving at her. She didn't wave back, but he held his hand to his face in a call me gesture. Despite the situation, she found herself laughing and gave him a smile before pulling away and heading back to Harmon's.

In a different world, if she didn't have a past with Darrin and didn't have Adam, she would've jumped at the chance to go out with a man like Santa. Harmon would've called him a BILR, beard I'd like to ride. It was wrong to be ogling one of Darrin's friends, and it was hella wrong to keep Adam a secret for another minute.

Not that either one of them owed the other anything, but he would hear about his child from her—no one else. Then she'd drown the pain of seeing him again for as long as it took. After that was done, she'd pull on her big girl panties and figure out a way to live with their new reality of co-parenting a child.

The sooner it was done, the sooner she could try to pick up the pieces of her heart and duct tape them back together. Then maybe, just maybe, by the time she was ready to join AARP, she'd be healed enough to move on for real. Have an actual functional relationship that didn't crash and burn.

The entire drive to Harmon's house she tried to prepare herself for seeing him again after all this time. If she were honest with herself, her anger died out long ago. It was the heartbreak of it all that drove her away, and her pride that kept her away. It wasn't fear that she'd hate him that was riding her hard now, it was fear that she wouldn't.

The thought of seeing him and remembering their good times and not the bad is what terrified her. If she fell back into his arms and he broke her heart again, she was afraid there wasn't enough Duct Tape and Super Glue on the planet to fix it. Being betrayed by the two people who meant the most to her really obliterated her ability to trust, even herself.

At Harmon's, she put Adam down for a nap and sat with Harmon for a cup of coffee and a chat. She wished for something stronger, but it wouldn't do for her to be drinking and driving. A few hours had passed, and she was still nursing a cold coffee and chatting with Harmon when Barker came over.

Barker and Harmon had been the two people who got her through the worst of the worst. They packed up her place and moved it to Vegas for her. They visited regularly and Barker had been her one attempt at a relationship since Darrin. Thank God they both realized what a colossal mistake it was and remained friends. She wouldn't know what she'd do without either of them. Harmon was her sister and Barker was her brother—no blood needed.

Adam woke an hour ago and was currently playing video games in the living room with Barker.

It was time, she'd procrastinated long enough.

"Thanks for keeping an eye on Adam for me, Harmon."

"Anytime and remember to give him a chance to speak this time."

As much as she hated it, Harmon was right. He deserved to say his piece. When she'd caught him in bed with Celeste, she turned around and left. Ignoring his begging and pleading until his tactic changed.

The shots he took at her that day still haunted her, but not as much as the one she took at him in retaliation. Everyone deserved their day in court, so to speak, and she'd denied Darrin that.

She was so hurt at the time; she couldn't speak to him. Then she deflected any attempt at contact from them both ever since. That was on her.

"What could he possibly say to make it right?" she asked Harmon in desperation rather than anger. She honestly wanted to know.

"Nothing can change the past, but making it right and getting closure are not the same thing. Besides, if he could make it right, would it make a difference to how you've felt this whole time? How he felt?"

"No, of course not." Feelings once felt never changed. They can change moving forward, but not backward.

"Exactly, but it can change how you feel about him now, and in the future, if you want it to. If you guys are going to be successful at this whole parenting gig, there has to be forgiveness. Or at the very least, acceptance."

Harmon was right, but her questions only mirrored the ones had been asking herself for more than six years.

With a deep sigh, she grabbed the folder and headed for the door. “Wish me luck.” veered through the living room to give Adam a goodbye kiss.

“What about me?” Barker teased and tapped his cheek. rolled her eyes and kissed him there.

“Thanks for being a good friend, and teaching Adam how to play whatever game it is you're playing.”

She turned to go, and Barker grabbed her free hand. “I could be more than just a friend, .”

She smiled indulgently, kind of how she did with Adam. Barker always faux flirted with her. “We tried that, Barker, it just wasn’t us. Besides, you already are more than a friend. You’re like my brother.”

Something crossed his eyes that felt ... wrong. It wasn’t like his typical teasing look. Before she could name it, his expression became concerned.

“Do you want back up or moral support? I’m there for you, . You know that, right?”

She nodded, but he still held her hand.

“I mean it, don’t fall for his lies again. You can’t trust him. He never deserved you.”

She recoiled at the vehemence in his voice. It was a new side to him; she wasn’t sure she liked. chalked it up to him being overprotective as he tended to be, especially where Darrin was concerned. He’d had a front-row seat to her heartbreak, so she

supposed he had a right to be angry about it too.

“Thanks again, Barker. You’re going to make some lady very happy one day.”

“Just not you, huh?”

His look when he spoke was a little unsettling. He finally dropped her hand and turned his attention back toward the game on the screen.

With that, she headed to the Royal Bastards clubhouse.

Harmon had told her that Darrin worked at a place called Royal Guard. Her plan had been to meet him there in the middle of the day in hopes that he’d not lose his temper at his place of employment. It was also a little bit for her.

The thought of being surrounded by bikers on their turf didn’t seem ideal. Even less ideal was if she ambushed him at home. He was easy to track down, he still lived at the same place.

Harmon had become a little, no, a lot obsessed with bikers since that TV series, while didn’t know diddly squat about MCs or their culture. Even with her limited knowledge, facing Darrin elsewhere sounded a far sight better than walking into a clubhouse full of bikers.

“Well, at least the clubhouse was attached to a business. Maybe they could keep it civil for the sake of customers, if there were any.”

She had been doing that since she left Harmon’s, talking to herself. couldn’t even count how many times she was a gnat fart away from making a U-turn and just mailing the info to Darrin and have the lawyers settle things.

She pulled in front of the salvage yard office and killed the engine. “Well, there’s nothing now but to just do it.”

She grabbed the folder from the passenger seat with a sigh. In her mind, she brought the image of Darrin and Celeste to the fore as she opened the door, finally exiting the car after sitting there for God knew how long.

Getting out of the car was only half the battle. On frozen legs, she stood beside her car, just staring at the building but not really seeing it.

“I can’t do this,” she mumbled and reached for the door handle with every intention of fleeing like the coward she was.

Harmon’s voice echoed in her head.

“You did nothing wrong; you did what was best for your own sanity at the time, and as soon as he understands that it’ll go smooth as silk. Someone told me repeatedly over the years, after her heart break had dulled a bit that is, that Darrin’s a good man who happened to do a bad thing once, and she was right.”

At the time, rolled her eyes at having her words tossed back into her face, but now she was thankful for it . “Plus, he deserves to know his own child.”

“He’s a good man who did a bad thing, he deserves to know his child.” She took a step, not really watching where she was going, but repeating that phrase. “He’s a good man who did a bad thing, he deserves to know his child.” Before she knew it, she was at the door marked OFFICE.

“It’s okay,” she muttered to herself as she reached for the handle. The words offered a strange sense of comfort as it was what Dean said to Sam when it was time to let him go.

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VIRUS

The guys were hanging out in the rec area when Hook came through the office door looking for Santa.

“What’s up?”

“Squatch says to tell you that chick from the diner just pulled up. The camera feed must be fucked because when she got out of the car, dayum, she’s too hot for you, old man.”

laughed at the same time Santa dropped the pool cue and rubbed his hands together.

“What would your ol’ lady say about you checking out women through the security cameras?” Outlaw asked Hook.

“My ol’ lady knows I only have eyes for her, besides, she’d be the first to point out a pretty lady. I just don’t understand what they all see in him.” Hook nodded toward Santa, who was making his way to the office.

“I’ve been telling you boys I’ve got more game in my little finger than any damn one of you got in your whole body. And for the last fucking time, I’m not that damn old.”

“I gotta see this.” Vice dropped his pool cue on the felt too and followed Santa out.

With the men in the office, the rec area was eerily silent. If he were in a scary movie, that would’ve been the moment before the jump scare.

There was no smack of pool balls, no raucous laughter, no sounds of sex. Their club had really changed over the last few years, especially since the president and enforcer got domesticated and Croon's sister had taken up residence.

Now when it was loud, most days included ol' ladies chatting and a kid's laughter. They even had a schedule. Yep, an MC with a fucking schedule of when the club girls could be out and about scantily clad and the men could do whatever they fucking wanted in their own common areas.

It irritated to no end, not because of the obvious reason, but because it made him think about Rae. He wasn't ashamed of his club or his lifestyle, but he'd definitely want a schedule in place if she were around. Watching Santa getting blown wasn't something anyone should have to witness.

smiled in spite of himself. Instead of remembering the last time he saw her with tears streaming down her face, the last time he'd told her he loved her came to mind.

It had been a great night in the bed of his truck. They'd made love under the stars, and it had felt perfect. With both their bodies spent, he held her close and sleepily whispered words of love as she drifted asleep in his arms. If he'd had known then that would be the last time they'd share those words, he would've said them louder, more decisively. Shouted them until she was deaf.

Those three syllables hadn't crossed his lips since. That was another thing he felt was only for her. Rae still owned his heart ... and she always would.

"Right this way."

He heard Santa say from behind him. He leaned further over the coffee table, typing on his computer, tuning Santa out. He had no interest in seeing Santa's latest conquest or whatever else was going on. But another voice was the next to pierce his

brain.

“Um, Darrin.”

froze. It had to be all in his head. It had to be. There was no way Rae was there. It wasn't the first time he'd heard her voice; however, it was the first time he'd heard it normal and not laced with tears. Not to mention the first time stone-cold sober.

After waiting for another second or two, she didn't speak again. Satisfied it was all in his head, he began to type again. Someone reached over his shoulder and slapped his laptop closed.

“What the hell?” He jumped up from the sofa.

“Show some respect. The lady was speaking to you.”

When he turned around, his world came to a crashing halt. It was so abrupt he damn near swayed on his feet.

Rae stood there looking as beautiful as he remembered. Curvy and delicious. Her soulful blue eyes watched him with a mix of emotions that were hard to sort through. He didn't know what to say. A million things swarmed him all at once, but he dismissed them all as inadequate.

“You changed your hair.”

Of all the things he could've ... should've said, that wasn't even top one hundred. The fact she had added purple to her blonde hair and undercut the sides with designs shouldn't even matter. What mattered was, she was there, in front of him.

She'd finally come back.

He remembered a friend telling him that old saying about if you love something, set it free. He'd done just that, for her, not for himself, but she came back. That meant she was his.

His to cherish and love.

leaped over the back of the couch to be in her orbit. She smelled the same as he remembered, soft musk perfume and coconut shampoo. A smile crossed his lips unbidden.

It was really her. She was real, not a dream.

reached up to brush a lock of hair from her face and stopped when she gasped so hard he felt the intake of air on his wrist. His hand froze and he followed her gaze. It had landed on his wrist and the bracelet she'd made him.

It was unclear if she was impressed or appalled, so he pulled his hand back and shoved it in his jean pocket.

For good measure, he did the same with the other one so he wouldn't be tempted to reach for her again. If he did manage to wrap her in his arms, he didn't know what he'd do then. What he did know was he would never be able to let go.

"I like it ... your hair, I mean."

He sounded like an idiot. He'd broken her heart, and she finally stood in front of him after all that time, and he said something about her hair.

He should be apologizing and begging ... groveling, not commenting on her fucking hair.

His ray of sunshine tilted her head to the side and down while tucking her hair behind her ear. It was a habit he recognized all too well.

It reminded him of how she used to react when he told her how stunning she was. The motion drew attention to a facial piercing she didn't have before, above her lip. His Rae had changed, become more edgy and less innocent. He liked it ... a lot.

"Yeah, well ... it's been a while and a lot of things have changed." She raised her chin and looked around, then scrutinized him. Up and down, she raked him with her gaze, lingering on his cut, more specifically his patches. "For both of us, it seems." She sounded matter of fact, not angry or judgmental. That was a good sign.

It was all he could do not to ask her what she was doing there and if there was a snowball's chance in hell for them after everything. Instead, he offered her a seat and a drink.

Motioning with his fingers, a prospect brought a bottle and two glasses, setting them on the coffee table and leaving without another word. Fucker might get his patch soon after all. Knowing when to stay silent and make yourself scarce was a skill that would serve whatshisname well.

She accepted the seat but rejected the drink. He however, couldn't. He was shaking like a virgin on prom night. poured a full fucking glass and downed it all at once. One wasn't enough, so he did the same thing two more times while Rae just sat watching him nervously and glancing around the clubhouse.

He could always tell exactly what she was feeling. She had the most expressive face known to man. If she didn't like you, you'd damn sure know it.

That thought had him kicking himself. He should've known the shit he was told about her was bullshit, but no use rehashing past thoughts when Rae sat right in front of

him.

“Rae.” He spoke her name softly, like an invocation.

“Alaine. You lost the right to call me ...” Her discomfort was rising, he could hear it. She took a deep breath, drawing his gaze to her chest. He loved every inch of her body and with her sitting in front of him, he remembered what her skin tasted like, for fuck’s sake.

When she spoke again, all traces of her discomfort were suppressed.

“Sorry, what name you call me doesn’t matter. We have some very important things to discuss.”

There was a sharp intake of breath from some of the guys pretending to shoot pool and socialize. They must’ve snuck in behind Rae. Hell, the entire 1 st Division could’ve followed her in and he wouldn’t have noticed—he only had eyes for her. He slammed another drink.

She was really fucking there.

Rae—he’d be damned if he’d think of her as Ailene—noticed too and turned in their direction. Santa gave her a knowing smile and that raised ’s hackles.

“Can we have a little privacy, Darrin?”

Her voice wavered faintly, and she looked slightly panicked. He didn’t have a clue what was going on until he made the connection in his brain between what Hook had said earlier and Santa.

He stood abruptly with his fist balled and shouted.

“You were hitting on my woman, old man?”

Rae slapped a folder down on the coffee table and stood across from him, blocking his view of a smirking Santa.

“I’m not your anything anymore.”

Her voice sliced his heart to ribbons.

There was no shouting on her part or anger, just an old wound that still wasn’t scabbed over. A wound he’d given her. That thought deflated him and he sank back down on the sofa and downed more glasses of scotch. He wasn’t even sure how many, but he was definitely starting to feel it.

“Do you guys mind giving us a minute?” He was knocked out and he never even stepped in the ring. Rae wasn’t there to reconcile, and that made him reach straight for the bottle and bypass the glass.

Rae sat back down too. All but his Prez and vice left the common area. Wall Street raised his beer to her as he passed, and she gave a grin. A fucking grin, like they had an inside joke. But when she turned her attention back to him, all traces of the smile were gone.

“He’s the Monty Python fan,” she mumbled to herself. While he heard the words not intended for him, he didn’t have a clue what they meant. Rae had always been obsessed with Monty Python.

Before Santa retreated, Outlaw whispered something to Zombie and his eyes widened and landed on Rae, and then him before he nodded. Zombie said something to Santa and he scurried off.

Within seconds, Squatch and Hook returned but hung back with his Prez.

The three of them lingered by the pool table, while Outlaw stepped closer and parked his ass on a barstool within earshot. Had it been another member he would've protested, but since it was his vice, he zipped his lips.

His attention pulled away from the eavesdropper. "Sorry, that's about as private as it's gonna get."

He couldn't stop drinking her in. She was even more captivating than she was in his memories. His hands itched to touch her.

Finally, Rae's sweet voice broke the stare down.

"Do you always drink like this?" she inquired in a soft tone. More concern than judgment laced her words.

"Only when I think of you." He took another swig. "So, yeah. I guess so." It wasn't all true. He didn't drink all day and night, just when the pain got to be too much.

"Anyway, I have some things to tell you, and they are going to come as a shock."

He could've sworn she mumbled something about her too, but he wasn't sure. The combination of seeing Rae and fine single malt had his head swimming.

She reached for the folder and Outlaw came into their little tête-à-tête.

"Alaine? Hi, we met briefly in the office, but I saw you ... at the diner earlier." He halted as if he almost said something else but pulled back. "Do you mind if I join you? I may be of some help to Darrin. I'm an attorney."

It took 's brain a while to sort through the scene. Outlaw had called him by his birth name and announced he was a lawyer. Not to mention when he'd done so, Rae looked relieved.

“Yes, um, Outlaw,” she agreed. “Please.”

She even sounded relieved too.

“You can call me Brad if you prefer.”

Whoa. How much scotch had he had? Brad?

“What the fuck is going on?” He could tell he was starting to talk in cursive already. Fuck. He needed— wanted —a clear head for however much time he had with her. But it was too late, that ship had sailed and probably hit a fucking iceberg already.

Rae pulled some squares from the folder and extended them toward him. set his drink down and took them.

“There is no delicate way to say this, so I'll just come out with it.” She took a heavy breath. “You have a son.”

's gaze landed on the first picture and it was like looking into a mirror, just one that was decades in the past. He could tell Rae had taken the picture. He didn't know how, he just could.

Wait.

He was looking at his child.

Her words penetrated the alcohol fog. “I have a son?” He spoke with wonder.

He shared a son with the woman he loved. It was like a dream.

“His name is Adam, and he’s absolutely adorable. My?—”

No, not a dream.

exploded to his feet. “I had a son and you kept him from me?” All he could see was red.

“I—” Rae spoke, but he cut her off.

“How could you? I know I hurt you back then, but keeping my child a secret? That’s a hell of a way to get back at me.”

Rae shrank back as if he’d punched her in the face. He knew his words hurt her, but he couldn’t stop them. They were out of his mouth before he had a moment for his brain to catch up.

It wasn’t her he wanted to hurt; it was himself. Since no one could hurt him like she could, she’d just become collateral damage in his bid to punish himself.

Hook and Squatch approached, one stood next to Rae’s chair, and the other took up residence at his side, opposite of Outlaw.

Of course that’s why the biggest motherfuckers in the club stayed—muscle. He would never hit a woman, especially Rae. Why would they think such a thing?

As he posed the question to himself, he knew the answer. It was in his posturing against her and clenched jaw and balled fists.

“, calm down and let her talk,” Outlaw reasoned.

Rae stood and raised her chin in that defiant way that was familiar to him as the back of his own hand. Now she would let him have it. The pain he deserved was coming, but not in the way he expected.

“Is that really what you think of me, Darrin? That I would get back at you by using a child, your child, to do it?”

The hurt in her eyes, in her tone, was palpable. He would give anything to rip those words back and swallow them, but he couldn't.

Maybe it was the alcohol or maybe it was his own shame that had the hateful words falling from his lips. He wanted to scream, no, that's not what I think, I love you, and let her explain, but the part of him that'd missed years with his son wouldn't let him.

The beastly part of him he'd been growing since they parted ways didn't do logic. It didn't know what did about Rae; it ran on pure animal instinct. knew better. Somewhere that was being suppressed by hurt and anger, he knew there had to be an explanation. His Rae would never do something like that without a damn good reason.

But it wasn't in control of his mouth at the moment.

“Wasn't it you who always said revenge is a dish best served cold? Well, I'd say damn near seven years is pretty fucking cold.”

“, I advise you to sit down and shut the fuck up.” Vice yanked at his arm, but he didn't budge.

He saw the minute the flames of anger rose in her perfect blue eyes. He both hated and loved it. It told him he'd really screwed the pooch this time, but it also meant that when she'd walked in that door, she'd still loved him, or he couldn't have gotten

under her skin.

Loved—past tense. She might've been able to forgive him for the past, but she wouldn't forgive him for the present.

Fuuuuuck. He was falling right back into their old ways toward the end. The constant suspicion and hurt. The back-and-forth accusations and mistrust.

If the look in her eyes were any indication, well, he'd dragged her right back there to that painful place too.

His anger fled in an instant. She didn't deserve more of the same from him, but he'd already wound her up. There was nothing but to let her go then—and go she did.

“I see your nickname suits you. .” She nodded down at his name patch. “I get it now. That's exactly what you are, Darrin, a virus. You infect everyone you come in contact with. Making them sick and contagious. Lucky for me, I'm immune to you. I already caught that particular strain once and it damn near killed me. It'll be a cold day in hell before you get a chance to infect me again.”

Even though he'd purposely provoked her and deserved every word, they still flayed him alive, but he was lost in her eyes. The pain there was crippling to him. He wanted to kick his own ass and rip out his tongue.

He wished she was immune to him, oh how he wished she was. Seeing her hurt like that killed him, knowing he'd done it, annihilated every cell in his body.

Yep, repeating their last few months together in his memory over the years wasn't enough. No, he had to play it out in live action.

He'd put them in this loop of pain years before by landing in another woman's bed.

Actually, their troubles started months before he'd slept with another woman. He'd allowed someone else to guide his thoughts and write the narrative in his head. Plant seeds of suspicion.

Even though Rae had robbed him of years with his son, he still didn't want to cause more hurt. He'd done enough of that, damn it.

He wanted to love her and spoil her, not fuck it all up again and again, but that seemed to be his factory default setting when it came to Rae. The harder he loved, the more he fucked up.

just stared at her, trying to figure out a way to put the past where it belonged, stop repeating the pain, but he was at a loss. She leafed through the folder and removed some papers.

"Rae. I'm?—"

She slapped the folder against his chest, cutting off his wholly inadequate apology.

"Here, look over this when you're sober and have your lawyer call mine. After seeing your behavior today, I guess we will do this a different way because I don't have it in me to do it the way I wanted to for Adam."

With that, she turned to leave.

"Rae, please ..." he trailed off. It was déjà vu. Rae leaving and him screaming after her. The situation may be similar, but he'd be damned if he would repeat his actions. As much as the heartbreak inside him wanted to lash out, he refused.

She'd just walked out of his life again, and he didn't know what to do with that.

Someone took the folder from him, but still he stood, staring at the empty space in front of him she'd vacated. She had been close enough to kiss. Why didn't he kiss her instead of insulting her?

was still standing when a voice called to him.

"Sit," his vice ordered. When he complied, he realized the room had cleared except for Outlaw.

"What happened between you and her?"

"I fucked up our relationship, and she dumped me. I landed in another woman's bed, and she got a front-row seat to that. So, she walked out of my life, was apparently pregnant, and hid it from me. The end."

He had zero desire to air his dirty laundry in front of his brother. Sure, he could justify it, but to what end? The damage was done.

"Her sister?" Outlaw sounded appalled.

"How the fuck do you know that?"

Outlaw held out a piece of paper. snatched it and gave it a quick scan.

"FUCK!"

With his curse, Outlaw patted him on the back, set the folder on the table, and left. was alone with his thoughts. And those thoughts were like razor blades soaked in lemon juice slicing across his heart.

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RAE

cried all the way to Harmon's. It seemed crying and driving had become the norm for her.

When she arrived, she sat in the driveway, attempting to get her emotions under control before she went inside to Adam. She knew it would be hard seeing Darrin, but she didn't expect it to be brutal.

"Damn you, Celeste, for putting me in that position." She cursed.

After she did some deep breathing techniques that Harmon taught her, a realization smacked her in the face.

Darrin's, no, Virus's words had cut her to the quick, to think she would've kept his child from him as some sort of sick revenge made her want to wretch, but what else did she expect? She'd earned his doubt years ago.

Their relationship had been a fairytale until it wasn't. Doubts and accusations plagued them toward the end. It caused fractures in their relationship that Celeste was more than happy to exploit. It wasn't all Celeste's fault. needed to own her part in their demise, but so did Darrin.

Of course, after all the water under the bridge, it was stupid to expect him to magically trust her now when she hadn't extended him the same courtesy years ago.

She'd broken up with him on the word of another, not even giving him a chance to

explain. When you love someone, you don't let someone else get in your head—you trust them. You give them the benefit of the doubt. It was like neither one understood that back in the day.

But rather than talk to Darrin when he'd started pulling away from her, she'd let Celeste convince her to end things with him. Saying he flirted with her mercilessly. Even propositioned her when wasn't around. At the time, she'd thought Celeste was just being a protective older sister, but in hindsight, it seemed she'd played like a fiddle.

Exploiting her insecurities and making her doubt her ability to please a man like Darrin. God, she'd been so naïve.

had known it practically from the moment they'd broken up. It had been a few months since she'd seen Darrin. At the time, they were both working full time and she was taking classes at night. Celeste called her to come over and she'd rushed there.

's plan that night had been ready to call Celeste on her bullshit, then find Darrin and beg him to take her back.

She'd finally gotten a backbone and was ready to tell Celeste to get fucked with her constant negativity, and well, that was the night everything changed.

The look Darrin had directed her way at the clubhouse, after his anger waned, was the exact one he'd turned to her when she took his ring off and placed it in his palm with the words.

"I can't do this anymore. If you want someone else, go for it. Now you're free to have Celeste or anyone else you want."

Maybe if Darrin had tried to stop her or said ... something that night, things could've been different, but he hadn't done any of that. He'd just stood there at their spot by the lake, staring at his hand that was closed around the ring. Maybe if she hadn't constantly accused him of wanting her sister over her, he wouldn't have slept with Celeste just a few short months later.

They were technically broken up, but in her heart, they weren't. She'd realized her mistakes, but it was too late. Darrin didn't know what was in her heart. As much as she wished he had, he didn't.

Funny how certain details get seared in the mind when confronted with something so horrible you can't even fathom it. When she'd caught them together a few months later, it wasn't their nudity or the look on Celeste's face that stood out the most, it was when Darrin jumped out of bed, with her ring bouncing against his chest as it swung from a chain around his neck. Her ring had been right there, touching her sister's body.

When she'd run from the house, from the truth, his words had chased her. Begging and pleading that she'd refused to hear. He should've offered her his words before he fell dick first into her sister.

Before she'd even got to the end of her sister's street, she had their numbers blocked. She fled Provo that night and stayed at a fleabag motel with just the clothes on her back.

It had been Harmon who she called to go to her place and grab enough stuff for a few weeks. She stayed there until she decided where she would land.

It had been Harmon, with the help of Barker, who rented a truck once she found a place in Vegas and the rest was history.

Yeah, she'd been immature as fuck and handled it all wrong. It was years before she acknowledged her insecurities played a huge part in driving Darrin to her sister's bed. She could admit that now, but by the time she realized that fact, years had passed, and she didn't know how to face the past, or face him.

It had only been recently that had finally, finally gotten to a place in her life where she hadn't exactly made peace with the past and everyone's part in it, including hers, but a place of neutral resignation.

Facts, it had happened, they all handled it wrong and played a role in the devastation that followed, and they all had to deal with it in their own ways and move on with their lives.

The moving on with her life ship had steered into a storm when she answered the phone to Celeste on the other end, claiming she had Darrin's son, and it fucking ran around the minute she'd laid eyes on Darrin.

Still gripping the steering wheel, she banged her head against the back of her hands and growled.

"Why did I let him get under my skin? I knew that's how he'd react. Ugghhhhhh!" She was so frustrated, but it wasn't really him she was irritated with, it was herself.

She knew, from recent experience, that she needed to lead with the important info.

herself had been seconds from ending the call when Celeste's voice broke the silence with, "I'm dying, and I have Darrin's son, and he needs you. Please, don't hang up, sis."

That information had kept from hitting the end call button that day just a few weeks ago, and she listened to the rest of what Celeste had to say.

And boy oh boy, did Celeste have a lot to say. dropped everything and left Vegas for Garden Grove, California, which was apparently where her sister had landed when she found herself pregnant.

She'd arrived just in time to spend less than a week with her sister. Most of that was signing papers with a lawyer and listening to Celeste's confessions and apologies. Then getting to know Adam.

Now, she was back in Provo with Darrin's son and kicking herself over not following her sister's example by walking in that clubhouse and saying, "You have a son, he's not mine and I didn't know about him either."

Then Darrin wouldn't have believed she'd deceived him and said those awful things.

With a deep breath, she exited the car and entered the house. Adam was sitting at the table as Harmon was cleaning up the remnants of his meal. After depositing her purse on the counter, she walked over and kissed him on the top of his head, breathing him in. Funny how after mere weeks, she couldn't imagine her life without him, and that brought a new onslaught of tears.

When she first saw Adam, it hurt to even look at him, and sometimes, it was still hard, but she loved him already beyond explanation. It didn't just hurt because of Darrin or that he was a product of the night that damn near broke her, but because of Celeste.

She lost her sister that night too. Honestly, she'd never really had her. While her sister confessed and apologized as she lay dying, it was all so would take care of Adam and Darrin, not for any genuine remorse on her part. Realizing her sister was never more than someone she shared DNA with hurt almost more than losing the love of her life.

That was yet more information that she would have to pile on Darrin, that Celeste had orchestrated the whole thing, and they were just unwitting targets. She'd alluded to having a cohort but said it would serve no purpose to dime them out. She was the one dying, not them.

Needless to say, it wasn't a tear-filled happy family reunion before she passed. still cried though. She cried for what her machinations had cost her and Darrin, and she cried for the sister she was denied by fate, and for Adam. He was an unwitting player in a game of adults.

That was a promise she made to herself the second he became her responsibility, that he was just an innocent kid. No matter what her sister's wishes or what passed between herself and Darrin, she would act in Adam's best interest, even if it cost her very soul.

It just might at that.

"Go get changed into your play clothes, chica, we are taking little man out back to wear him out for the night. Then, we'll do some yoga, get centered, and you can tell me all about your visit while we rewatch Supernatural. I've already got the wine chilling, and I ordered your favorite." Harmon drawled out the last word.

Harmon was a lifesaver who knew exactly what needed. A lot of chardonnay, a double-double protein style with grilled onions with animal style fries minus cheese, a good stretch, and a shoulder to cry one.

Barker and Harmon had visited her all the time in Vegas. Not to mention Harmon and she had talked like every other day. But it was like no time had passed between them. They even had a platonic domestic life partner pact. If they weren't married by fifty, they'd get hitched and enjoy life together. Of course, they didn't know about Adam then, or her sister's wishes.

She had serious doubts about fulfilling her sister's dying wish, but she would do her best for part of it and unite Adam and Darrin.

"You're a goddess, Harmon," she said as she passed her to slip down the hall.

"I know. It's so nice to have the recognition of my loyal subjects. Meet you outside and bring some wine."

"Where's Barker?" Since she'd been back, Barker spent all his free time with them.

"He picked up an extra shift. Now, scoot."

After donning yoga pants and her favorite Imagine Dragons shirt, she headed to the kitchen and grabbed one of the chilled bottles. She knew Harmon meant for her to bring a small pour while they watched Adam play, not to chug the bottle, which she was tempted to do.

had just finished pouring when there was a soft knock on the door. Abandoning her task, she headed to the door, rubbing her hands together. She could practically taste the burger.

As she opened the door, she proclaimed, "I think I might just love you." The last syllable died on her lips abruptly when she saw who was standing there.

It was not a delivery driver with an In 'n Out bag, but Outlaw with a big bag of candy.

Before he could address her declaration, started spewing words nervously.

"I didn't mean ... I mean, I obviously thought you were someone else. Not that I'm in love with anyone, or?—"

“I completely understand.”

“I thought you were food.” She said the way Adam might if he were disappointed.

She mentally kicked herself in the ass for declaring her love, albeit accidentally, to her ex’s lawyer slash biker buddy. Looking down, she added with an internal groan, Vice President.

“Well, I’ve never been confused with food before?—”

“I didn’t—” He held up his hand, halting her nervous word vomit.

“I know what you meant. Sorry to disappoint you, but I do have food, if you can call,” he held the back of the package up and read from it. “Four types of sugar and red dye forty food. I also come bearing an apology.” He held out the bag.

In spite of everything, smiled. Watermelon Sour Patch, her favorite.

“Virus, uh, Darrin sent these, along with his deepest apologies. He’d like to meet with you, when he’s sobered of course. Wherever and whenever you’re comfortable. Your terms.”

She wanted to be snarky, but she just didn’t have it in her.

“Candy and words aren’t going to repair what’s between us,” she said, defeated. “But it will go a long way to coming to an agreement on what’s best for Adam. One we can both live with.”

The fact Darrin remembered her favorite candy dampened so much of the pain that was just there under the surface, lurking, waiting to strike. He’d never forgotten that minor detail after all the years and distance. Plus, all of the bullshit and pain, and he

still held on to that minute detail. The candy wasn't just candy; it was hope that they could exist in each other's orbit for Adam's sake and not rip each other to shreds ... maybe.

"If it's okay with you, I'd like to meet Adam, maybe take some video for, uh ..."

"You can call him Virus. I promise not to make any more digs about his nickname." motioned for him to follow her.

"Road name," he corrected.

"I promise not to take anymore digs at his road name. However, I won't promise not to think them, and I reserve the right to whisper disparaging thoughts about him outside of Adam's range of hearing whenever the mood strikes."

"Deal," Outlaw agreed.

"Wine?"

"No thanks."

"Your loss." She grabbed both glasses and headed out back. "We're playing outside with Adam before I put him to bed. We have girl time planned."

She turned to him conspiratorially. "We're calling it girl time, but it's really an excuse to eat like teenagers, drink cheap wine and bash Darrin with enthusiasm to get it out of my system."

Maybe she was making a mistake speaking all that aloud to his lawyer, but honestly, she didn't even know if he was a real lawyer. Plus, Darrin's display earlier was bad too, so hers was simply balance.

Outlaw slid the door open for her since her hands were full and motioned for her to precede him.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have told you that. Seeing as how you’re his lawyer and may use it against me.”

“Not at all, feel free to speak your mind. I’m not here in any legal capacity. Just as his brother.”

“Noted.” Adam’s laughter drifted through the air as they stepped outside.

“Besides, I read the folder, and Virus filled in a few blanks, so I’d say he has a little bashing coming.” He closed the door behind him. “I’m sorry, by the way. For everything.”

“Yeah, so am I.” No matter what transpired, she didn’t want Darrin’s support systems thinking bad about him.

“For the record, he’s not a cheater. We were broken up when he ... well, you know.” felt it was important that Darrin’s indiscretion be viewed in the proper context. Cheater, even though it felt that way, wasn’t a brand he deserved to wear unjustly.

led him to the picnic table. They sat and watched Harmon pushing Adam on the swing. After a swig of wine, she spoke.

“I shouldn’t have ambushed him like that. I’ve been in town for a while working on what the best approach would be for something like that, but I rejected every plan I came up with. You know, they don’t make a Hallmark for hey, you knocked up the sister of your ex-girlfriend years ago, congratulations, it’s a boy and he’s already in kindergarten .”

They shared a metered laugh at her attempt to lighten the mood.

“Then earlier I was at the diner. Santa and some of the other guys came in and when I realized they were Bastards, I panicked. I mean, look at him.” She waved her hand toward Adam. She’d finished her wine and started on Harmon’s glass.

Outlaw leaned around her to get a better view. “I see what you mean. Put a cut on him and no one would know the difference.” For some reason she laughed hysterically at that.

“Right? I was expecting Darrin would be pissed even after I explained, just not at me per se, but I knew if someone else spilled the beans, I’d never even get a chance to explain.”

She turned and looked over at Harmon and Adam with a lump in her throat.

“You know, he also looks a little like you. So, I could see it would be easy to mistake him for yours too,” he said cautiously.

When she didn’t speak, Outlaw apologized. “Sorry, that wasn’t very sensitive of me. I just ...” He trailed off.

“No need to apologize. Celeste and I looked more like twins rather than sisters with three years between us.” She didn’t turn back his way as she spoke. It wasn’t lost on her that Adam could be her and Darrin’s.

Speaking to Outlaw but not looking at his intense eyes that seemed to read people so well was easier, so she continued.

“He’s always been that way, you know, Darrin. Spur of the moment. With everything. He feels things at light speed and makes some crappy decisions because

of it. But he's also quick to love and quick to forgive. He doesn't hold grudges, or he didn't use to. It's one of the things I love about him."

wanted to kick herself. No doubt the lawyer would pick up on the tense of her last statement. She finished Harmon's glass too and turned back to Outlaw. Yep, there it was. He was smirking and his eyes were smiling. He'd understood the weight of her words.

"Me, on the other hand, well, I'm the opposite. I'm slow and methodical about everything. Only one time in my life did I act without thinking, and that was when I ran from Darrin. But my overthinking is how we ended up where we are now. Sometimes I'm too slow with my actions and it costs me."

That was the understatement of the century. Had she not been so slow, she would've called Darrin sooner, confronted Celeste, hell, moved back home and maybe things would've turned out so different.

"I bet that's what made y'all so good together. Opposites I mean. It's all about balance."

A sad smile crossed her face.

"She wasn't always that way," her sneaky friend said from right behind her. Harmon rounded the table and sat next to Outlaw, keeping one eye on Adam, who was playing just a few feet away.

shot her a look and she stuck her tongue out. Apparently, Harmon had been standing behind her for a while before making her presence known.

gave Outlaw a stern look.

“You couldn’t have warned me we had an eavesdropper?”

He gave her a shrug, but his attention was on Harmon.

“You drank my wine. The least you could do is offer me an introduction,” her friend snarked.

rolled her eyes. While her friend was watching Adam, she was also clearly checking out the man next to her.

Great.

“Outlaw, Harmon. Harmon, Outlaw.”

feigned irritation, but she was grateful to her friend for interrupting them. was telling Outlaw way too much.

She turned her attention to Adam since the two across the table from her only had eyes for each other.

When held out her arms, Adam came running into them with enthusiasm. turned with Adam in her arms. They’d achieved their goal, he was clearly tuckered out, but his eyes widened at the sight of Outlaw.

“Adam, this is your ...” She hesitated for a moment but decided to go for it. She wanted Adam to have a sense of family and Outlaw was obviously family to Virus because he took up where she left off.

“I’m your Uncle Brad, but you can call me Uncle Outlaw.” He offered his hand across the table and Adam took it and shook it with the enthusiasm only a six-year-old could.

It was so adorable an ache formed in her heart that she couldn't shrug off. If she had to give him over completely to Darrin and move back to Vegas, her heart would break.

"Do you think I could take some pictures of you to show your other uncles?"

was relieved he didn't add Dad to that list. She was so lost how to approach that information. Besides, that wasn't her place or even Outlaw's. It was Darrin's right and obligation as his father how to open that can of worms.

Adam knew they were going to meet his dad when they left California. However, he had no real timeline or who that man would be. She believed that right now the concept of his dad was just a vague notion.

Adam was a natural-born ham, so Outlaw giving him the spotlight was perfect. After a few minutes, it was clear that Adam was beyond tired, and his ham got a little less hammy. After his third yawn in as many minutes, it was time to cut the visit short.

"I'm gonna give this little guy a bath and put him to bed," Harmon said before taking him from her. Outlaw stood too.

"It was nice to meet you, Adam."

Sleepyhead murmured a soft response, but she couldn't make it out.

"And you too, Harmon."

didn't miss the sexual tension between those two, nor the way his eyes tracked her all the way into the house. Much lower than where she held Adam.

"Are you checking out my friend's ass?"

With zero shame or hesitation, he answered, “Yeah. She single?”

“Ugh.” rolled her eyes. “Yes.”

Outlaw’s mouth split into a grin that transformed his whole face. It was almost disarming.

They sat in awkward silence. It was like he was waiting on her to talk first, and of course she did because she really didn’t need to sit there with her thoughts so loud they were driving her crazy.

“So, how has Darr ... I mean Virus been?” She groaned internally. Why ask that? She could’ve just talked about the weather in Provo or traffic. Anything but Darrin.

“Good, but honestly, it’s always felt as if he’s been missing something. Now I see that I was right.”

wanted to roll her eyes, but she really couldn’t. People had said almost the exact same thing about her.

A small smile tickled her lips. The first time Darrin had told her he loved her, he said he was missing a piece of his soul the exact shape of her. That’s why it’d hurt so much to see him with Celeste.

“Me too.” She hadn’t realized she spoke aloud until his voice cut through the memory she was immersed in.

“I know you were hurt, but why didn’t you tell him he had a child? He had a right to know, no matter what passed between the two of you.” Outlaw sounded like he felt Darrin’s pain of not knowing.

She rocked back as if he'd smacked her.

“Because I didn't know. Adam was as big of a surprise to me as were her other secrets.”

“What?”

“Yeah. I left that day when I found Darrin and Celeste together and cut off all contact with them. Only two people knew where I was. It wasn't until Celeste called me from an unknown number that I knew she was dying or about Adam.”

Harmon appeared silently, refilled 's wine glass and left the bottle. She squeezed her shoulder before disappearing back into the house.

God bless that woman.

“Wow. You should tell Virus that, he thought, well, you know what he thought.”

Outlaw had the good sense to look apologetic. “He owes you an apology for one thing, but it'll also go a long way in fixing things between you two.”

“He owes me one regardless of when I knew, but yeah. I should've led with the fact I didn't know about Adam. Hindsight and all.” She gulped some wine. “I'll talk to him; I just need to be ready to see him again. I owe him some apologies as well.”

“Do those apologies have to do with your sister's other secrets , as you put it?” He sounded hopeful as he reached for the bottle and poured himself a glass of wine.

“Yes, and some realizations of my own, but those are things I should discuss with Darrin first. I owe him that. But also, just in general. I never gave him a chance to explain anything—I just left and pretended like he didn't exist. No matter what, no

one deserves that.”

Outlaw nodded understandably as he sipped the chardonnay.

“Not that catching your boyfriend, well, ex-boyfriend, face down in your sister’s snatch can be explained in any other way.”

Outlaw shot wine across the table, and laughed. It was the first time since it’d happened that she actually felt any other way about it than overwhelming pain and anger. She’d actually laughed about it.

“Understandable.” He seemed to visibly compose himself. “Can I ask you something else?”

She nodded cautiously.

“What did you take out of the folder?”

And there it was, something she didn’t think she could share with anyone.

“A letter to me from Celeste that I had thought to share with him, but I changed my mind.”

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VIRUS

In the time since Rae had walked back into his life, he'd pored over the documents in the file folder again and again.

He'd practically worn out the pictures Rae took. He could tell they were hers. Her style was as unique as a fingerprint. It was as known to him as every pore of her body had once been.

The videos Outlaw took captivated him, too. He watched them repeatedly. Adam with his little voice and his chubby cheeks, all of it.

I have a son.

It was surreal and all too real at the same time. Seeing his son in Rae's arms put his heart in an industrial vice grip. He wished, not for the first time since he'd been made aware of Adam's existence, that Rae had been his mother, she was supposed to have been. It would be a connection between them and not a reminder of his betrayal.

Not for the first time, or the last, he hated who he'd used to be. Selfish was the nicest way to describe who he was.

He loved Rae more than anything back then, but himself. His pleasure, his happiness, his everything was priority number one. His ego had been the size of Texas and Alaska combined. At the time, he'd thought he was always putting her first, but sadly, she'd always been second. That wasn't a realization he'd come to easily or until just the last year or two.

Even though he'd jumped into bed with Celeste because he believed all the bullshit about Rae, it boiled down to he did it because he wanted to. Plain and simple. He was horny and hadn't had sex since Rae had broken up with him. Celeste was there and teasing him. As much as he'd wished there was an excuse, there wasn't.

He'd shown up at Celeste's place for Rae, or so he thought. Instead, her sister was there, wearing nothing but a towel fresh from the shower. She'd regaled him with all the things Rae had been doing since they'd broken up, including his ex-best friend. That was all it took to respond to Celeste when she threw her leg over his lap and started dry humping him.

He'd had to own that fact, that it was his behavior that ruined their relationship. It was his choices that landed him wherever he was at any given time. That had been the hardest of pills to swallow.

But swallow it, he did—eventually.

When Rae left, he was searching for ... something. Somewhere to belong, and that led him right to the RBMC doorstep. Good thing too, because he would've never become a better person had he kept blaming other people for his situations. Being a prospect was the largest period of personal growth in his entire life.

It uncovered a better version of himself than he'd been when he'd lost Rae. Hell, he was better than he was just two years ago, better than last month. He prided himself on being able to grow. He could only hope that Rae could see that and understand that the other day had been a one off.

He just didn't know how to show her that. Apologies could only go so far. She was a woman of actions and deeds. Her love language was not gifts and apologies, it was actions. They'd once been able to communicate without words. That's where he needed to get them back to. Even if that only landed him in the friend zone, he'd take

it as long as she was happy and knew that she wasn't responsible for him cheating as he'd hurled at her as she drove off that night.

To be honest, he wanted so much more than friendship with her, god did he want more.

shook those thoughts off. It would do him no good to go there. At least, not until he could finally tell Rae everything he'd wanted to say since the day they'd broken up. Even if it didn't make a difference in their future, she deserved the whole ugly truth, along with his profuse apologies.

Outlaw had been tight-lipped for the most part since returning from Harmon's, where Rae was staying. Stating only that they needed to speak to each other, and that needed to listen more than he talked. That Rae had left the ball in his court as to when to call and start spending time with Adam. And always adding in that her friend Harmon was smokin' hot.

was finally ready to make the call. He'd spent a few days trying to decide which to do first, make amends with Rae or get to know his son?

Why not do both at the same time? Hook had asked him. It was solid advice considering Hook wooed Nova while wrapped around little June's finger. He'd won them both over. The major difference being Adam wasn't Rae's, he was her sister's.

He'd taken that bit of advice to heart and dialed Rae's number before he had time to stop himself. She'd agreed to bring Adam and meet him at the pizza place downtown with all the games. It seemed like a solid plan to get to know his son and reacquaint himself with Rae on neutral, non-romantic territory.

"You guys ready?" he asked nervously.

“Always,” a few of them answered at the same time. No way he could go meet his kid for the first time without his brothers. They were family. Santa wouldn’t stop bragging about having met Adam first. If by meeting him first meant hitting on Rae and ruffling Adam’s hair.

He was still salty about that, but it was filed away to deal with later.

What a sight they made pulling up at the pizza place. An array of motorcycles and an SUV with a total of six tatted up men, two ol’ ladies, and a cute little blond that Hook hefted up into his arms after he donned his cut.

Zombie slapped on the back as they entered the noisy establishment. “It’ll be fine, .” Yeah, he wasn’t hiding his nervousness very well.

“Just be yourself, man. It’s your kid, he’s gonna love you.” That pearl coming from Hook just as June squirmed down from his arms and bolted for what looked like a hamster cage for kids with colorful and clear tubes and slides.

spotted Rae right away, standing next to one of those tubes, just outside the netted wall that contained the balls.

When she turned, their eyes clashed. He couldn’t help the smile that stormed his face. She was beautiful in her disarray. Her hair, mostly contained in a low pony, was staticky, with bits and pieces standing out and dancing. He thought how amazing she looked without makeup. She used to hate it when he said that, but it was true. She didn’t need all that crap. Rae was and had always been the most beautiful woman in any room as far as he was concerned.

His eyes dragged down her body and his mouth went dry. Her shapely legs were on full display. pushed away the memory of how they felt wrapped around his hips. That line of thinking would get him branded a perv for sporting wood in a kids’ play place.

He had just noticed some new-to-him ink on her leg when the head of his son raced into his field of vision, and his whole world shrunk down to the two of them. Rae squatted down and said something to Adam and pointed at . Whatever she said had him turning his head 's way and waving.

Rae had said she'd follow his lead about how he wanted to be introduced to Adam. Neither of them had a clue as to what the proper approach was. A few of his brothers had opinions on the best way for him to approach the situation, but the majority just shrugged and told him to do what felt right.

Ultimately, that's what he chose to do. He opted to wing it. When Rae grasped the little boy's hand and walked his way, he blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

“Hi, Adam, I'm your dad.”

Only after the words were floating on the air did he take a moment to think or question his approach. He had a moment of fear that Adam would shrink behind Rae and be scared.

Everyone else seemed stunned silent at his proclamation, except Adam.

“Hi.” His little voice spoke with enthusiasm. Turning to Rae. “Auntie Rae, can I have pizza now?”

“Of course.” As soon as she answered, Nova appeared in his peripheral vision.

“Hi, Adam, I'm Nova, and this is June. She's dying for a slice too. Can we join you?”

Adam nodded but seemed to lean into Rae for reassurance. He both loved and hated it. Loved that he had a bond that he obviously relied on, but was jealous because he was denied those years with Adam.

“Let’s go,” she reassured him and offered an apologetic smile and led Adam toward the table everyone else had gathered at.

, still kneeling, turned and watched them walk away when Adam turned around. “Are you coming, Dad?” His little man didn’t even hesitate to accept him as Dad.

said who he was, and Adam had just accepted it. He figured he owed someone a thank-you for that.

His heart stalled in his chest and then burst outward. He was already so in love.

“Hell yeah,” he said as he stood and every woman in his line of sight shot him a scolding look.

“Sorry,” he murmured his apologies into the room at large and joined them at the table.

He watched Adam eat and chatter with June and his brothers. didn’t speak to his son much, he was just enjoying watching everything about him.

was enamored with Adam’s crooked little smile when June said something he found amusing. When he wiped his mouth on his sleeve, then halfway down he looked to Rae, stopped and grabbed a napkin, it amused him to no end.

He didn’t feel left out, but he’d be lying to himself if he didn’t admit he was a little jealous of his son’s relationship with Rae, but he didn’t feel like an outsider even though he kind of was. She’d gotten time with his son that was denied him. But instead of anger, he was glad for it because it meant his son knew love. He doubted Celeste’s ability to do so.

They clearly adored each other. That boded well for his plan to get Rae to stay in

Provo.

Everyone, including Adam and Rae, turned to him every so often, although he didn't add to the conversation, he couldn't. He was too enamored of the little boy to speak intelligently, so he nodded and smiled at appropriate moments.

His little boy.

He vowed to himself right then and there that Adam would feel nothing but love and never want for anything, including his attention. 's world had just shrunk down and grew at the same time. There was a purpose bigger than himself. So much bigger than anything else in his life.

When Adam turned to instead of Rae to ask if he could go play with June, tears sprang to his eyes. When he nodded his agreement, Adam flung himself at and then Rae before disappearing with June, hand in hand. Both under the watchful eyes of Nova, Heidi, Zombie, and Hook, who also stood and followed the group toward the ball pit.

No way anything would happen to them. breathed a sigh of relief and turned back around.

He shot a look at the men remaining at the table, stuffing their gobs with pizza. There was some eye rolling before they got up and found another table.

"Rae," spoke her name.

She responded with his in a shy manner, "."

.

She'd said . He hated and loved it at the same time. She was the only person in a handful of years who called him Darrin. But Darrin was also the man, no, boy, who broke her heart.

That was a difference, a connection to his past behavior that just clicked. He'd been an adult, but not a man.

"I didn't—" Rae spoke at the same time; he spoke almost the same words.

"Wait, , let me go first, please? I should've said it the other day."

He wanted to scream it's all water under the bridge, that she didn't need to explain anything, but instead he nodded, because he could see how important it was to her.

"First, let me apologize for how I approached things the other day. I went about it all wrong and that led you to make assumptions, rightfully so. So, I should've told you then that I didn't know about Adam. I found out when Celeste was dying less than a month ago."

When the words penetrated his brain, his jaw dropped.

"How?"

She dropped her gaze and tucked her hair behind her ear, staring at her lap.

"I gave her the same treatment I gave you. I blocked you both when I left that night. I drove until I was too tired to do anything else. I found a hotel to hole up and cry. After a few days, I had a plan, and I put it into action and refused to look back."

She looked repentant.

“Hey.” When she didn’t meet his gaze, he used one knuckle to lift her chin. “Sun Rae, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have assumed. Should have given you a chance to explain.”

She gave him a watery smile. “I guess we’re even because I didn’t?—”

“Don’t.”

“Don’t what—speak the truth?”

“Just ... don’t.”

“No. I did don’t for over six years and it damn near killed me. It’s time we lay it all out on the table. Time we, I, accept it for what it was and what it wasn’t.”

“What it was and wasn’t?” He didn’t mean to raise his voice. Outlaw clearing his throat from a nearby table alerted him to that fact.

“Do you really want to do this here and now, Rae? Would you prefer some place more private? I have a lot to atone for.”

She grasped his hand in both of hers and the touch sent a zing through his bloodstream. He’d touched her, but this was the first time in years that she’d touched him voluntarily.

“That’s just it, Darrin. It’s the perfect time and place because neither of us can run away, and you aren’t the only one needing to apologize.”

His scoff seemed to spark a fire in her eyes.

“Do you remember what happened back then?”

gave her an incredulous look. “How could I not?”

“No, I mean really remember it?”

Was she really going to make him say it out loud? He would, if that’s what she needed.

“Yea, Sunny, I do.” He didn’t mean to call her that, it just slipped out, but he didn’t want to take it back. “I cheated on you. With your sister of all people. Then I said some ugly things as you ran away crying. I could give you a million excuses, but it doesn’t matter. I did what I did, and I’ll be sorry about it for every second of my life. There’s no number of apologies or candy or anything that can make up for it or change it.”

His eyes drifted to the ball pit where his son was playing and laughing with June.

“For years I thought if I could only change things, done things differently ... but now, because of Adam, I wouldn’t want to change it.”

He felt guilty and disloyal to her for even saying those words aloud, but they were true.

“That’s just it, Darrin. You didn’t cheat on me.”

“The hell.” He looked around, remembering where he was. “The hell I didn’t. The proof is right over there. Not to mention, you saw it with your own two eyes.”

The memory made him gag.

“Yeah, don’t remind me.” She spoke with a touch of levity, but a lot of sadness. “It took me years to make peace with it, and I didn’t think I ever would have if not for

Celeste, of all people.” She tossed his words back at him.

“How so?” Did he really want the answer? He wasn’t sure he did.

“When she was laying there looking vulnerable and frail, she admitted some things. Mainly her part in what happened between us. My head was spinning, having just learned about Adam and her dying and all, but I told her I forgave her for cheating with my boyfriend, among other things.” shot her a look. He would never forgive her.

“Don’t give me that look. I did it for me and for Adam, not for her. It was what she said back that changed my perspective on everything. She said she accepted my forgiveness for everything else but rejected my forgiveness for that because you weren’t my boyfriend at the time.”

He yanked his hand from between hers and stood. Pacing back and forth by the table.

That night was seared into his brain. He’d gone there looking for Rae to beg her forgiveness when Celeste answered the door in a towel. She’d offered him a drink, then another and another. Pills and joints were involved and the next thing he knew, Rae was standing there crying.

When Rae had fled, he grabbed his boxers, shouting at her the whole time to stop, but she didn’t. When he got to the door, he heard Celeste behind him goading him on, saying all manner of things about Rae. Instead of listening to Rae’s tears, he just couldn’t hear them anymore—they cut too deep—he hurled her words back at her. “You said I was free to see who I wanted.” He remembered the look on her face when she turned at those words, hands on her door handle.

He’d fucking broken her, the woman he loved, he’d hurt her on purpose. But at that moment, he couldn’t take responsibility for it. He couldn’t handle it, so he drove the point home because he deserved her hate. Then he slammed the door in an attempt to

block out Rae's heartbreak. He'd never forgiven himself for that.

Broken up or not, he'd still considered her his, so it was still cheating.

"Darrin, please sit down."

He was reeling but complied. Out of habit, he corrected her. ". It's now."

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:21 pm

RAE

A sad smile crossed her lips. As much as they needed to get it all out, it wasn't going to be easy.

"You said Celeste admitted a part in our demise. Is she the reason you broke up with me?" He sounded stunned.

"Yes and no." shook her head and broke eye contact with him. "It wasn't one thing, it was an accumulation of a million little things, none of it was your fault. Celeste always wanted you, she admitted as much, even back then, but I always wrote it off as joking, you know?"

"Yeah, she was a little relentless." He spoke low.

The way he said it, there was so much more to the story. She loved her sister, or who she wanted her sister to be, even though it was obvious to everyone else that Celeste never cared for as a sister should, apparently even Virus, though he'd never said anything.

"Anyway, I let her get in my head. I never even saw it coming because it was so slow. I don't even remember when it started, but I remember the final straw."

Virus took her hand in his, interlacing their fingers and laid them on the top of the table. stared down at their hand, and he stared at her.

"Remember the day when she conned you into flipping her mattress, and I walked in

to find you on top of her on her bed?”

He shuddered. “Of course I remember. But I explained that I was moving the mattress and fell, and you laughed because Celeste was laughing—” He looked confused.

“I know, and I believed you. But later that day, Celeste told me a different story. One where you were both willing participants, and I walked in, so you came up with the moving mattress story on the fly. I didn’t want to believe her, but her hands were between you, and it looked pretty damning, but I was stupid and naive.”

“Sunny, I never told you the whole story, and that’s on me. Maybe if I’d told you everything back then, she couldn’t have poisoned the well. As I was reaching for the mattress, Celeste ducked under my arm and got between me and the bed. I was shocked, so I didn’t really react. She pulled me on top of her and laughed like a hyena. That’s when you walked in.”

She gave him a sad smile. “That sounds about par for the course.”

Virus raised their joined hands and placed a kiss on the back of hers.

“I should’ve trusted you, not her. But at the time, it all fell into place. What I saw with my eyes aligned with her version.”

“I understand why you didn’t though, . I get it. It looked really bad; I can see that now. I wish I could’ve seen it back then.”

“Again, I should’ve trusted you, not her. Celeste may have planted the seeds, but I cultivated and nurtured them.”

“Stop saying that.” He seemed disproportionately angry.

“Why? It’s the truth. When you love someone, you trust them.”

“Because.” He paused and his hold on her hand tightened. “I ... could see you pulling away. You were practically begging for me to reassure you, and I didn’t. I thought, well, it doesn’t matter what I thought. I should’ve trusted you too.”

She nodded. What else could she do? It was true; he had been so distant, and his behavior made every word Celeste had to say seem true. Of course, wasn’t going to start pointing fingers. That would get them nowhere.

“I’m so fucking sorry, babe. I should’ve said something. Told you how I felt and maybe ...”

She squeezed his hand. “That’s enough of that for now. Can we agree on that?”

He didn’t answer.

As much as she wanted all the answers. Needed to hear everything, she was just too emotionally drained in that department to comprehend any more truths for the day.

pulled her hand free. Not just to dash her tears, but to create a touch of distance. She would fall back into him and never come up for air if she wasn’t careful. She’d been there, done that, and got the emotional trauma.

“Let’s just accept that we were both immature and stupid. We both played parts in the demise of us, even though I was the one who ran away, so let’s go with seventy-five,” she pointed to herself. “Twenty-five.” She pointed to him. It was her attempt at deflection. Too many emotions too fast. Just one after another for the last month.

“Don’t downplay what I did, . I betrayed you.”

“Well, yeah, you could’ve slept with anyone else after we broke up, and it would’ve been an easier hurdle, but when did we ever do anything the easy way?”

He laughed. It lightened the past just a little.

“Virus, I’m not making excuses. I’m just trying to look at this through the lens of truth that I either didn’t have back then or maybe the lack of maturity to see my part too.”

Darrin, um, Virus, rolled his eyes.

“Still, I was wrong, and I’m so fucking sorry.”

“And I forgive you.”

It was almost comical how wide his hazel eyes got. The hard edges of his face softened as her words sank in.

Virus quirked a brow at her again in that way he used to when he was being challenging and fun. She got lost for a minute in his gaze. It vacillated between happy and hopeful. It was nothing like the gooey-eyed look he’d given Adam, but it was warm and familiar all the same. He knew her so well; knew she had something to say.

“I want to preface this with, I forgave you a long time ago, even unblocked your number last year. I hoped you’d call, but I understand why you didn’t.”

His lips quirked up on one side, and it took years off his appearance. It made the scruff on his face move in such a way she didn’t resist the urge to reach up and stoke his cheek.

When his eyes closed and he rubbed against her hand, it was her undoing. leaned

forward and kissed him. It was chaste as far as kisses go, but it was powerful and held more emotion than any kiss she could remember.

She pulled away before Darrin took over, and boy was he trying. His hands were already on her face, trying to hold her there. A touch that felt achingly familiar. Even after all the time and distance, it was like nothing had changed and everything had. Hesitantly, she leaned back, and he allowed her retreat.

“I pulled up your number more times than I can count over the years, . At first, I’d let it ring through. After a year or so, I quit hitting the call button, just pulled up the contact and stared.” He reached into his pocket and retrieved his phone. Swiping and tapping. “I still pull it up almost weekly, but I was too much of a chicken shit to ever try to connect the call after that.”

He sounded like he could kick himself. For what, she could only assume.

Virus slid the phone across the table to her. When she looked down, there was a picture of them, smiling and happy. An ache formed in her heart.

“Is that ...?”

“Yeah, the Taylor concert.”

“One of the last times we were truly happy and not suspicious of each other or hurling accusations,” she mumbled, not meaning to speak the words aloud.

“Yeah. It was a magical night.”

It sure was. The night he’d lifted her hand and quietly slid the ring on her finger during the line, “baby just say yes.” She’d nodded and that was that. They were engaged. No one knee or waiting for a yes. It just was.

The next day was when she started to freak out. Celeste—in hindsight—ramped up her efforts with planting doubts. Her sister was a real piece of work. took a deep breath.

B ut I'm the one who believed her.

“At least you got rid of the other photo.” She quipped in an attempt to shake off the wave of sadness and ownership that washed over her as she handed his phone back.

“Oh, you mean ...” Virus swiped a few times and flipped the screen in her direction. “This one?”

She was met with her face, but younger and more carefree. Tongue out and eyes crossed, making a goofy face.

“Oh my god, delete that right now.” She reached for the phone, and he lifted it over his head.

“Darrin Allen Westbrook.”

“Are we pulling out government names now Ailene Nicole Jordon?” shot him a withering look before crossing her arms in a pout.

“I look awful in that picture. I don't know why you love it so much.” He did too.

She regretted taking goofy pictures every time he left his phone unattended after he'd saved that one to a secret location. She'd spent months trying to find it whenever he stepped away to go to the bathroom or grab a drink.

That should have been her first clue Celeste had been lying about him. He never hid his phone from her. Don't cheaters always do that? Change the passcode so their

girlfriends don't accidentally find texts and stuff they shouldn't? Darrin never did that. He handed it over freely, left it unattended, and had the same passcode forever.

"No, you didn't, . You looked perfect in it. You were happy and beaming ... and you were mine." His voice trailed to a barely there whisper on the last three words.

looked at him with a new perspective, one that should've been standard, and the full force of her foolishness hit her like a sledge to the face. She was an idiot. Not only had he not cheated, she'd actually driven him to her sister's bed.

"Darrin, I'm so sorry. I should've given you the benefit of the doubt. You deserved it. Earned it. Instead, I let?—"

"No. Stop, . You apologized for that so many times in the last hour, I lost count. It wasn't your fault. I made the choices I made, regardless of what you said and did."

"But—"

"No buts, Sunny. No regrets, right? Just a past that is what it is. We can't go back and change it. As much as both of us wish we could, we can't. All we can do is move forward."

Virus cupped her cheek, stroking it rhythmically with his thumb.

"But how can we? There's so much there, so much you don't know and should. Just so much ... everything."

Virus gently turned her face toward the ball pit. "That's how. It's not about you or even me, it's about Adam. I don't want him for one second to think I regret him. You may not have known about him for long, but longer than me. He clearly adores you. I'm scared shitless and would really appreciate it if we could make this as smooth for

him as possible. He's already lost a lot."

He let his words hang on the air. She filled in the blanks and she recoiled.

At some point, she had to tell him about Celeste's wishes. Even if they weren't made official, she'd do what she could to honor them, although she was afraid she'd lose herself in the process. That's what happened before. Darrin was such a dominant presence that she became his girlfriend, then his fiancée, and people barely called her by her name. That was why she let Celeste into her head. She had been feeling like she was losing herself, and it left her vulnerable.

Hell, she was already slipping back toward Darrin with less resistance than she expected. In theory, she'd had a backbone and prepped herself up not to fall back into his arms, but five minutes in his presence and her heart was home. It had never really left.

Fuck, she was so screwed.

All her well-laid plans to avoid any emotional attachments flew out the window with the first sight of him.

Now he was being ... just perfect. Was it even possible for them to pick back up where they started? No.

"Darrin, we can't just pick back up where we left off. It would be an exercise in futility. And like you said, it's about Adam. He doesn't need the toxicity that was us near the end."

"I know." Again, he sounded so defeated.

"But then again, I wouldn't want to go backward. I wasn't a great person back then."

“Ditto.”

“Then why don’t we start over instead? Not as Darrin and Sunny, because that’s not who we are anymore.”

He stood, took two steps back, then turned her way, striding back right where he came from.

“Hey, pretty lady. Is this seat taken?” He indicated the place on the bench seat next to her.

giggled. An air of lightness encompassed her for the first time in years. “Nope, it’s all yours.”

“I’m Virus.”

She studied his movements as he tossed a denim clad leg over the bench. They were tight and she could see the play of his muscles. Yum.

Rein it in, you hornball.

“I’m Ailene, but my friends call me .” She extended her hand.

“It’s nice to meet you, .” He took her hand in his, but instead of shaking it, or even kissing the back of it, he lifted it to his mouth and licked her palm, snaking his tongue between her fingers before she snatched it back.

“Really.” She laughed. “Is that how you greet someone you’ve never met?”

He gave her that schoolboy smile, the same one that dropped her panties for him years ago. “No.” He admitted. “I just went with it. Sorry, let’s try again.”

Virus tugged his cut, cleared his throat, and sat up straighter. “So, , tell me a little about yourself?”

“What do you want to know?”

“What do you do for work?”

“I shoot people for a living. How about you?”

A loud burst of masculine laughter came from her left and she looked over at the next table. Virus’s club was seated there and had scooted to the end of the table closest to them, obviously eavesdropping.

“You sure you don’t wanna give Santa a try? I promise I deliver more than once a year.” His words drew a scowl from Virus.

“No can do, Santa. I have a strict policy about not dating anyone who refers to themselves in the third person.”

The laughter that followed was the perfect remedy to lift some of the tension that had formed.

Virus was leaned toward her, invading her personal space. Elbow on the table with the back of his index finger rhythmically stroking her bare bicep. It was the slightest of touches, but it felt intimate ... familiar. It seemed as if he didn’t even realize he was doing it.

He gazed deep into her eyes, and she saw genuine happiness there. “You did it.”

“Yep, I did.” She didn’t need to ask what he meant any more than he needed to ask her about shooting people. He knew exactly what she’d meant by it.

“I’m so proud of you. I never doubted you for a minute. Who do you shoot for?”

“Myself.” The way his eyes widened in shock was comical. “I carved out my own niche. I do mostly book covers. However, I do get some fun commissions every now and then, but it’s mostly the independent romance authors that keep me fed.”

A scowl replaced his smile, but when she raised a brow in question, he smoothed out his look. “Sorry, we just met, I forgot.”

“We can get back to being near perfect strangers after you explain that.” She indicated his face. In doing so, she dislodged his touch to her bicep, and she missed it.

Virus just stared at her, not answering.

“Shirtless men.” The big guy from the other table called. She wasn’t introduced to him, so she didn’t know his name, but he was the biggest of all Virus’s friends.

Santa piped in an exasperated tone, like she was clueless, and she kind of was. “He don’t like the idea of you oiling up Fabio’s chest for them covers.”

It was ’s turn to laugh so loud it drowned out the constant buzz of kids having fun.

“There is so much wrong with that statement I don’t even know where to start.” Shaking her head, she turned her attention back to Virus.

He looked apologetic. “I have no right to be jealous, but ...” The words trailed off, and she knew he was as uncomfortable with the thought as she would be if it were reversed. Hell, it kinda had been.

No matter the time and events that had passed between them, there were still a lot of emotions there.

“Yeah,” was all she could say. An uncomfortable silence took over.

She couldn't take it anymore, so she went back to their game of having just met.

“What about you? What do you do?”

“I work in security. Mostly on the cyber side, but some real-world shit, too.”

“Interesting.”

“Oh, and I got a kid. He's six, and I fell in love with him the second I saw him.”

's heart melted at that. She'd always known he'd be an amazing dad. They'd talked about their family plans enough to know he wanted a whole passel of kids, at least back then. She's always told him her uterine limit was three. After that, they'd have to adopt.

“That's awesome. I always knew you'd make a great dad.” Oops, she hadn't meant to say that. It seemed so much safer to stick to the just met scenario. Safer and easier.

“Gave you that impression since I sat down, huh?” Apparently for him too.

“Yeah, of course, since I've never met you before. It was the hand lick that did it. Anyone who will lick a stranger's hand can handle a walking petri dish with a perpetual runny nose and an attitude, but also the most chewable cheeks in the world.”

They shared a laugh, and the tension eased yet another notch.

“Do you wanna go to dinner sometime?” Virus asked.

Again, with that swoon-worthy smile.

Could she? Sure, they were starting over, but could she trust herself not to just fall into bed with him?

Before she could answer, a human torpedo ran into both their backs, wrapping his arms around them as much as he could manage.

“Can I stay with June?”

Adam swung his head back and forth between and Virus, waiting for permission.

“Sorry to put you on the spot. The kids hatched the plot in the ball pit. I didn’t get a chance to warn you. It’s no trouble though. The kids want to pitch a tent in the living room and camp in.”

Nova must’ve seen the look of panic on her face because she hurriedly added, “You’re invited too.”

really wanted Virus to spend time with Adam. He needed to get to know him before he took on single father duties full time. Her chest ached at the thought of not seeing Adam every morning. It had only been a few weeks, but he was a part of her life she didn’t know how to give up.

“What about Virus? Can you make room for him, too?” She didn’t realize he had his hand on her knee until he squeezed it. The look shimmering in his hazel eyes almost did her in. It was gratitude mixed with some emotions she couldn’t or wouldn’t name.

“You bet,” Hook added, “We just upgraded June’s twin to a double.”

Oh, fuck.

She could barely resist him in a pizza place for kids. How was she to keep him at

arm's length in the same bed?

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:21 pm

VIRUS

When arrived at Hook's place, Adam and June were playing video games. He'd gone by his place and grabbed a change of clothes.

"She's not here yet," Nova answered his unasked question.

"I didn't ask."

"Your mouth didn't, but your body did."

"Whatever." He dropped his bag in June's room before heading back out to the living room. Hook had already pushed the couch back against the wall and set up a tent for the kids.

It was downright weird how quickly Nova had domesticated him.

"Beer?" Hook offered, but declined. Rae had already seen him at his worst, so he wanted to put his best foot forward. Not just for her, but for Adam. He wanted to get to know him and remember every second of it. One beer wouldn't be enough. It would be six or more with the nerves that were plaguing him, so he wouldn't take that chance.

Virgin on prom night level jitters, and alcohol wouldn't help. He needed to be sharp, especially since he would be sharing a bed with Rae. Sharing a bed and not touching her. Hell, he needed a whole truckload of beer to keep his dick down, and one or two would just make him hornier.

No. He was not going to blow his chances with either one of them. They both deserved the best version of him he could give them.

Adam turned, noticing him for the first time since he walked in. “Dad,” he squealed and dropped the controller.

Adam ran into his arms like he’d known him his whole life. Then, he plopped up on the couch between and Hook and started chattering away.

was floored. He never expected Adam to just take to him. He made a mental note to ask Rae about it. had no love whatsoever for Celeste, but she’d apparently done one good thing in her life, and he had to acknowledge that. His son seemed like a well-adjusted kid.

Adam was telling him all about June and his plans for the night. didn’t have the heart to tell him there weren’t enough hours to fit all those things in. Why crush his dream?

“Adam, come on, it’s time to make puppets,” June called from the kitchen table. Nova was setting out all kinds of colored paper, markers, brown sacks, and a whole host of glitter.

Adam catapulted off the couch and bolted for the table.

“Dude, you need to get your ol’ lady under control. Glitter? That shit’s like lice, we’ll all be infested with it. The Bastards will be sparkling like fucking strippers,” whispered to Hook.

Before Hook could answer, Nova came around the table, hands on her hips. “I heard that. One, little ears, mind the language. Two, big ears,”—she pointed to hers—“will not be controlled.” She stuck her tongue out at him like a child and returned to her glitter.

“Fudge, if I ain’t the luckiest man alive,” Hook proclaimed.

“Dad, come make a puppet with me,” June called to Hook. No sooner than she said it and he was standing to obey.

“You bet, Flower.”

chuckled. “Pussy,” he whispered, but way lower this time so as not to trigger Nova’s bat hearing.

“Nah, just so in love with those two that nothing else matters but making them happy. You’ll see. You’ll do anything to see them smile.”

Them?

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell Hook there was no them , just him . Rae wasn’t his and he wouldn’t blame her if she never was his again, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t try.

Hook was already seated at the table, gluing googly eyes on a brown paper bag when Adam called out.

“Yeah, Dad. Come make a puppet with me.”

He was striding toward the table before he knew it.

Fuck if Hook wasn’t right. He didn’t even hesitate when Adam summoned.

had just finished taping on pipe cleaner arms and legs when Adam was waving his sack puppet in his face. shoved his hand into his puppet and gave its mouth a try.

“My name is Chomper and I like to chomp things,” Adam declared in a fake deep voice while chomping his puppet at ’s.

adopted a similar tone. “Well, my name is Stomper, and I like to stomp things.” He proceeded to stomp on Chomper with his flimsy pipe cleaner legs while Chomper tried to chomp down on him. The sound of Adam’s laughter was the sweetest sound he’d ever heard.

His son’s laughter.

He had a son, and he just couldn’t wrap his head around it.

Adam got up and ran away screaming, “Stomper noooooo.”

jumped up to give chase and there she was, Rae. Looking at him the way she used to, like he was the maker of miracles. Like she was in awe of him. He didn’t realize how much he craved that look until right then and there.

He finally pulled his gaze away from the captivating blue eyes that held him hostage and saw Chomper peek around from behind her.

“I smell ...” He made his puppet sniff the air. “Chomper. He’s here somewhere, I just know it, and he’s about to get a ... STOMPING.” ’s puppet lunged around Rae, but Chomper fainted right. When he went right, Chomper went left. A few more rounds of that and Rae was laughing so hard she started snorting, Adam seized the opportunity to run.

“Hurry up, Chomper. This way,” June’s puppet called, and they ran toward the bedrooms. Her puppet had a pink tutu, but he didn’t know the name. It didn’t matter because his focus was stuck on Rae.

“You still do that, huh?” Stomper noted.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She tweaked the puppet’s nose before crossing her arms in challenge.

“Yes, you do. You snort when you laugh,” Stomper accused.

“Do not.”

“Do too. But I like it. It means you’re genuinely happy. And that makes me happy.” Stomper’s voice had started sounding a lot more like ’s.

“You’re beautiful when you laugh.” That was all . He couldn’t not tell her in that moment.

“Thank you, Stomper .” She kissed the puppet, and he ached for it to be him.

“What about me, don’t I get a kiss?”

Rae stared at him for so long, was convinced she would deny him.

Finally, after what felt like forever, she dropped a chaste but lingering kiss on his lips.

“Thank you, .”

“What for?”

“For just being you.”

Before he could ask her what that meant, she picked up her duffel and headed for the room.

Standing there in a daze with a puppet still stuck on his hand is where he stayed until the bustle around him got to be too much. Rae was back and helping Nova clean up the craft supplies.

“Why don’t you two take these and join the kiddos? Go grab a seat, the movie’s starting. I’ll be in as soon as the popcorn’s done.” Nova handed them cans of soda and shoed them away.

Sure enough, June and Adam were planted in front of the TV. opened the soda and handed it to Adam, while Rae did the same for June.

“Thanks, Dad,” he said, but didn’t spare a second glance. He was watching a lamp jump on a letter. Again, he found himself thinking, holy shit, I have a son.

He tore his attention away from Adam when he heard Rae’s melodic voice.

“Wow. These are ... stunning. Who’s the photographer?”

“Guilty.” He heard Hook reply humbly.

“They really are captivating.” watched as she reached to touch them. Tracing them with her finger hovering above, without touching the picture itself. “The color and shadows are amazing. Everything looks so alive.”

Hook mumbled a thanks then stepped away, but ’s attention was riveted to Rae. She was in her element with photography; it was written in every micro expression she made.

He watched as an array of emotions crossed her face, while she inventoried elements of a picture. Then her expression settled into bliss as she then took in the picture as a whole.

stepped up beside her, needing to see her better, to be closer to her when she was like that.

It felt like a lifetime since he saw her that way. Radiant with euphoria. There were two things that put her in that state—photography and sex. She was a woman who gave herself over completely to both. God, he fucking missed her. When, no, if, she left again, he wouldn't survive it.

It wasn't just a case of loving and wanting her. He needed her. He'd just shut that need down in order to live without her. It wasn't going to be possible anymore. But he'd fucked up so bad, he didn't know how to make her stay. Sure, she'd agreed to start over, but he would never forget the look in her eyes when she'd seen him with Celeste. No matter what she said, she'd never completely get over that—how could she?

How could he even ask her to try? Especially when there was a living, breathing reminder of what he'd done and who he'd done it with. Even though they'd been broken up at the time, it was still a betrayal.

drank in her blissful expression, because he feared he'd never induce that look for her again.

When she shifted her attention down and to the right, her hand flew to her mouth in shock.

“Is that—?” she asked no one in particular, but the kids shushed her.

“Yeah, it is,” whispered so as not to receive another scolding from the ankle biters.

“How?”

“I put it there.”

“Why?” Her voice was breathy, and it tugged at his heart.

hesitated to answer because the answer would make him sound like a pussy in front of Hook, who sat just a few feet away, but he made a promise to himself after that night to be completely honest with Rae if she ever spoke to him again.

“When I saw Hook’s love of photography, I felt like it belonged there. A nice contrast to his, like you always tried to explain to me.” He understood the words but the way Rae would speak about it in terms of photography made her light up and so he used to pretend not to quite grasp the concept just to watch her beam.

“I never thought you’d see it, to be honest, but in my heart, I knew you’d be happy, at least in theory.” He added the last mostly to himself.

Rae turned to him with unshed tears shimmering in her eyes, but before he could ask her why, Hook piped in.

“That’s yours?” She turned away and nodded at Hook.

“It packs a lot of punch for the size. I dare to say it’s the biggest picture on the wall.” knew that was a massive compliment for Rae. She’d always tried to tell the most with the least. That’s why he’d had it framed in inner beveled reclaimed wood, measuring three inches on all sides. The picture itself was only a four-inch square. Even with that, it only took up ten inches of real estate on Hook’s wall. Most of his photos were easily twice that size.

“I have to say, I’ve been jealous of the photographer of that picture since I met Nova.”

“What? Why?”

“Because the first time she was here, it was that picture that captivated her. Mine were chopped liver as soon as she saw yours.”

Nova playfully slapped his bicep.

“That’s not how it was at all. Hook’s pictures have a very human quality, even though there isn’t a single one with a person. I knew yours was different the second I saw it. More gritty and raw. Kinda dark feeling. That’s what had my attention, not that I didn’t love his too.”

Nova leaned her head on Hook’s shoulder, and it seemed to placate the enforcer. was struck again by how different his friend was with June and Nova. The man would torture a fucker if he had to, but he was all gooey for those two.

Not for the first time, wondered if that was how people would see him when he looked at Rae.

“Hey Rae, maybe you can help me out with something I’ve always been curious about?” Hook asked.

“Sure, if I can?” She turned her attention fully toward Hook, and was at her back. A place he wouldn’t mind being, metaphorically speaking.

“When hung that there among my pictures, he said it was because my wall needed a touch of sunshine.” Hook stood and came to the wall, gesturing to various shots. “I never understood because mine are colorful, and yours is a black and white extreme close-up. I literally have a shot of the sun.” He pointed to one picture in particular. “So, what gives?”

Rae wasn't looking at Hook. Hell, she wasn't even facing his direction any longer. She'd spun around to face as soon as the word sunshine left Hook's mouth.

When she didn't answer, did. "Because she's Sun Rae, Sunny, my very own ray of sunshine." He may have directed his words at Hook, but Rae held his undivided attention.

He hadn't uttered that phrase in so long it tasted odd. Not wrong, just different than it used to.

Rae gasped again.

Neither moving except for their breaths sawing in and out. watched the roller coaster of emotions play out in her perfect blue eyes, and still, they didn't move.

"What is he holding?" Nova's voice floated through the charged air.

"My heart." Rae breathed, and he knew in that moment that she would either be his long-awaited redemption or his well-deserved ruin—there was no other option. Because once upon a time, he had held her heart, but he'd thrown it away, and she still held his and always would, even when she didn't want it anymore.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:21 pm

RAE

One second, she was drowning in his hazel gaze, the next, panic struck. Darrin's voice from the past broke through her daze, teleporting her back in time.

He'd ask her to meet him at their spot after work. It wasn't anywhere special to anyone else, but to them, it had been magical. The first place they kissed, said the L-word, and later, the first place they'd made love.

Nothing more than a little hidden pond almost completely shaded by three trees. Technically on someone else's property, but they still trespassed to be there.

Darrin was sitting on the tailgate of his truck. Looking damn near irresistible in faded jeans and a tight-fitting tee. The makeshift bed in the back was sprinkled with petals from the nearby wildflowers.

In hindsight, he was making the effort she'd craved, begged for.

He hopped down as she got out of her car.

didn't appreciate the beauty of it at the time .

She'd been cross with Darrin for weeks, and it was time for it to come to a head. His flirtations with Celeste were out of control.

When she approached him with arms crossed, he held his hands out, but she didn't take them. Darrin didn't notice, and instead, he peeled her hands away from her body

and interlaced their fingers.

When she tried to give him an earful, he shushed her.

“Can we not do this again, Sunny? You know I love you.” She raised an eyebrow as he played with her hand before slipping a finger into his mouth. God, she hated when he did that, because it always led to sex and then they never settled anything.

Snatching her hands back, she crossed her arms. “You say you do, but every time I turn around, you’re flirting with anything in a skirt.”

“That’s unfair and you know it. I’ve been nothing but loyal to you, so I don’t know where this keeps coming from. But I can tell you I’m getting tired of being accused of things I haven’t done.”

His voice started out hurt and exhausted, but finished with a hard edge.

“Really?”

“Yeah, fucking really.”

“So, you lying on top of my sister with her hand practically on your dick or you rubbing sunscreen on her back with her top untied is a study in loyalty? All that is typical behavior of a man in love with someone else?”

His eyes completely shut down. No emotion left, not even anger. They just went cold. She knew the end was near and she couldn’t do anything to stop it. She was just so tired of hating herself and blaming him. didn’t want them to end, but the exact opposite—she expected Darrin to reassure her, but he didn’t even try.

“What about you, ? You think I flirt, well, pot meet kettle. I may not see you in

action, but I hear all fucking about it. Fuck if I don't get a detailed rundown every fucking time he sees you."

She was stunned. Not only did she not flirt, but she also barely even talked to other men because she was so wrapped up in Darrin. Hell, she didn't even notice other men the way she did him. They all paled in comparison.

"What? Who are you talking about?"

"It doesn't fucking matter, . Do you really believe I want someone else?"

"How else do you ex ? —"

"Don't throw questions back at me, . Just answer me truthfully, once and for all. Do you think I want someone else?"

She didn't want to say it, because she knew where it was leading, but she was honest if nothing else.

"Yes."

He raked his hand through his hair and stared at her with those emotionless eyes again.

"Then why are you here with me? You obviously think I'm an unfaithful, lying asshole who wants to fuck anyone and everyone. So why lower yourself to be with someone like me?"

His words hurt. All she wanted was a little reassurance, and he couldn't even give her that. He never really denied the incidents with Celeste. Just explained them away at the time and listened. Celeste's accounts were worlds different from Darrin's.

did the only thing she could. It was effectively over. There was no way she could go on with constant doubts.

She removed her ring and placed it in his hand.

It could've ended there, but her hurt wouldn't let her run away crying. She raised her chin and said the words she regretted before they were even said.

“Fine. Now you're free to be with anyone you want. So go screw Celeste's brains out for all I care.”

Turning to go, she held out one tiny thread of hope he'd stop her and they'd end up in the back of his truck making love, but he dashed that within two steps.

“Maybe I should, since I've already paid the price for it.”

And that was it. She didn't see him again until he was in Celeste's bed.

Virus's hands rubbing up and down her arms pulled her back into the present.

“Darrin, I ...” She what, was sorry she couldn't open her heart? Couldn't move on from the past? Couldn't stay and raise Adam with Darrin, per Celeste's dying wishes?

“It's okay, .” He spoke words of acceptance, but his voice held defeat.

She couldn't do it. It was too much. Going back to Vegas and leaving Adam was damn near unthinkable, but staying with Dar—Virus—was just as impossible. It wasn't even him; it was her. felt more unworthy of him than she did back in the day. The difference was she'd burned that bridge with her own matches this time.

Unbeknownst to him, she wasn't even mad about him sleeping with Celeste. She was

over that the minute Adam called her Auntie . The thought of a world without him was crippling. Funny how she'd just learned of his existence less than a month ago, but would kill to protect him.

From the look in Virus's eyes when he looked at his son, he would too. So would any of the Royal Bastards, she'd bet. She was extraneous. Adam didn't need her, and Darrin would be better off without her.

"Um, I'm really tired, so I'm going to call it a night." She was running away again, but old habits and all that. It would be easier on her if she just signed all the paperwork and left as soon as possible. Adam could adjust and so could Virus. Maybe someday he'd find a woman who loved him as he'd deserved to be loved.

A sad smile was all she could manage before dropping a kiss on the top of Adam's head and fleeing. The difference this time was she honestly didn't want Virus to chase her. She wanted him to curl up and finish the movie with his son.

After changing into her pajama shorts and a tank, she crawled into bed. Staying as far to one side as possible. She even bunched up the comforter so there would be some sort of barrier between them.

Surprisingly, she didn't cry herself to sleep over Virus. She was resigned to the fact that the era of them was over. She'd effectively ended it years ago; she had just been fooling herself with dreams that could never be. She cursed Celeste, not for the first or last time either. had given up the dreams of her and Darrin reconciling until Celeste not only sprang Adam on her, but made her promise to raise her son with him.

"Fuck you, Celeste," she breathed. She'd done everything she could to tear them apart and then, out of the blue, she tried to cobble them back together.

Forced proximity only worked in romance novels and movies. In reality, it sucked for both parties. She was an emotional wreck, and she'd seen the hurt in Darrin's eyes, too. Even from the grave, the woman was torturing them.

She did shed a few tears, but they were for Adam. She'd bought in to Celeste's notion that she could be his mother and for twenty-seven days, it had been amazing.

He was an amazing kid, and she would be the luckiest woman alive if someday she had a kid half as awesome as he was.

She needed some reassurance from an outside source. So, she texted Harmon to see if she was awake. When her phone rang, she answered it immediately.

"Hey."

"Hey, Chica. So, who did it this time?"

"Did what?"

"Make you cry, was it Virus or was it you?"

Heck if Harmon didn't know her better than she knew herself.

"Me. Darrin has been awesome. I hurt my own feelings."

"Give me the condensed version and I'll decide if you need my verbal ass-kicking, girl-power pep talk, or men-suck-balls solidarity speech."

sighed. Yeah, Harmon was her girl.

"He's been perfect, better than perfect. All ... let's start fresh like we just met, no

water under the bridge. Then he gave my picture to Hook, and everyone gushed over it because of the way he'd described it to them. He apparently told them his wall needed a ray of sunshine. Can you believe that?"

"Wow, what an asshole. He should be taken out back and shot," Harmon quipped sarcastically.

"Harmon."

"Don't Harmon me. You are the biggest chicken-shit on the planet. It made sense to be scared and tangled up in past pain when you had zero idea of what you were walking into. Or even after that first meeting with how that went. I had the men suck speech all cued up and ready to go. But now? Now, girlfriend, it's all you."

She loved Harmon because she was a straight shooter, but she also hated her a little bit for it.

"But I was awful to him and he's being amazing."

"Exactly, even more reason for you to hike up those boy shorts you love so much, woman the fuck up, and get over it. I would say apologize and move on, but if I know you, and I do, you've already apologized ad nauseam. So, get to the move-on part and decide which is stronger."

"Which what is stronger?"

"Your need to continue punishing yourself and him for who you both used to be, or if your love for the man he is, yourself, and Adam are stronger than the past."

And there it was in a nutshell.

Her issue with the past had never really been about him, it had been about herself. Harmon was right about so many things. would've been so lost without her and even more so the last month.

“Thanks, Harmon. You're the absolute best.”

“I know, I accept thank-yous in size six, especially those amazing black boots from that one online store. I'll send you a link. Although I am already missing the plans I had for us as platonic domestic partners.”

“Is that ?” heard Barker's voice.

“Yeah, what do you wanna say to our girl?” She heard Harmon switch to speakerphone. “Any advice on s-e-x?” She spelled it like there were children around and couldn't help but laugh. She had zero intention of sleeping with Darrin in a child's bed at his brother's house with Adam in the living room.

“Tell me she's kidding, . You are not getting back together with that asshole after everything he did to you?” His voice was unlike she'd ever heard it before. Angry was an understatement, and she didn't like it one bit.

“Whoa, dude, take it down a notch or ten,” Harmon scolded. From the sound in her best friend's voice, she was just as taken aback by Barker's venom as was.

“If you must know, we are not back together, but I think we may give it another try. I think he wants it, and to be honest, I do too.”

heard a bump, like a fist hitting something. “Bro, what did my counter ever do to you?” Harmon's words painted a picture and one she didn't care for.

“What the hell, . I've been there for you for years, begging for your crumbs. I never

once hurt you like he did, but you drop me for no reason and refuse to give me another shot—but you’ll give him one?” The way he was raging put on edge. But Barker wasn’t finished with his tirade.

“Did you forget all the tears? The women he fucked. I saw you, remember? I remember how he broke you, even if you’ve conveniently forgotten. I was there to pick up the pieces, but I won’t stand by and watch you with him again.” Barker finally took a breath.

“Harmon, take me off speaker.”

When Harmon complied, spoke again.

“Get him out of your house now. That is not the Barker we know. He doesn’t sound safe.”

“Uh.” heard a door slam and Harmon squealed.

“Shit. That was ... intense. He stormed off, and I locked the door.”

“Is he gone gone ?”

“Yeah, he’s backing out of the drive now and ... yep. He sprayed gravel as he sped off. What the hell was that about, ? Did you know he felt that way?”

“No, I mean, he’s said a few things, especially after our disastrous attempt at a relationship. But he’d never been like ... that.”

“Okay, well, we may need to redefine the parameters of our association with him after this, but we’ll let him cool off and explain first.”

“Same. But he’s quick to forgive and forget, so hopefully he’ll come around and we can have the whole gang back together. Anyway, thanks for the woman-up talk before Barker got intense.”

“You’re welcome. And forgive yourself already. I’ve been telling you for years to forgive him, but you need to forgive yourself, too. Love you, chica.”

“Love you too.”

hung up the phone and curled up under the covers. Things were kind of aligning for once. She could maybe have all the people she cared about in her life.

She drifted off to sleep with visions of them being one big, happy family and putting her roots in Provo. Step one, seduction. In the past, Darrin had been the one to do the wooing, so she dreamed of ways to turn the tables and show him what it feels like to have someone pursue him with the intensity that he once pursued her.

Someone who wanted him more than they wanted their next breath.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:21 pm

VIRUS

The urge to follow Rae was damn near a compulsion, but she needed to be alone. Besides, his son deserved his attention.

forced himself to focus on the movie. One ended, and the kids begged for another, so they started another. He plopped himself on the floor next to Adam and before long, his son was leaning against his arm.

The feeling was indescribable. 's heart was firmly clutched in Adam's chubby little hands. Never ever to be returned, and he was so fucking okay with that.

The ogre on the screen wished away his family and both Adam and June gasped.

June got up and climbed onto Hook's lap on the couch. He knew how much stock Hook and his Flower put into wishes.

Adam shifted against , before climbing onto his lap. Shyly, he asked, "Would you ever wish me away?" His insecurity damn near killed .

"Never." He bit out with such force; he felt every cell of his body tense around his son. Forcing himself to relax, he spoke with less force, but no less intensity. "Not in a million years, son. Not in a million years." He kissed the crown of his head, taking in his scent.

"Mom said God made a mistake." The anger rose in so fast; he was afraid he wouldn't be able to control it. The feel of his son in his arms was the only thing that

kept him from jumping to his feet and punching something.

Celeste was cruel, that was a fact he knew all too well, but to tell her own son such bullshit was just beyond cruel. He wanted to go to California, dig her up, and kill her again with his bare hands.

As he was thinking of ways to desecrate Celeste's rotting body in a way that would make a psychopath cringe, Adam's voice reached him.

"She said I was meant for you and Auntie Rae, but the stork delivered me to the wrong place because he didn't know where Auntie Rae moved to."

"Yeah?" he asked with a lump in his throat that felt like a baseball lodged there.

"Yeah. She said he trusted her to love me until you and Auntie Rae could find me and take me home. And she was right—Auntie Rae showed up just as Mommy promised she would before Mommy had to go to tell God all about it."

Tears flowed unexpectedly from his very soul. They fell for so many reasons. Of all the shit Celeste had done, she'd done right by Adam.

Adam's words caused him to view Celeste in a different light. Yes, she'd done some fucked-up shit to both him and Rae, and he was sure to others, but that was history. He'd accepted that neither he nor Rae was the same person they were then, but he never thought to see that possibly her sister wasn't either.

Obviously, she'd been a good mom to Adam and even prepared him for the changes she must've known were coming for some time.

Guilt swarmed him, not only for not giving her the benefit of the doubt, but for thinking of digging her up for all the wrong reasons.

“She was right, you know. Auntie Rae and I both love you more than anything, but she’ll always be your mom, you know, even though she’s not here with you.”

“I know, she told me. But she also said it’s okay to call Auntie Rae mommy too.”

It amazed how matter of fact he was about losing his mom. He owed Celeste for that; he knew that with every fiber of his being. She’d done everything she could to make up for her past mistakes.

When he’d read her letter, he scoffed at everything in it, because he was seeing through the lens of the past. He needed to re-read it with the glasses removed, so to speak.

Silently, he vowed he’d always put Adam and Rae above all else, including his own wants and desires. He swallowed the lump in his throat.

He leaned in to a sleepy Adam’s ear and asked a question he didn’t want the answer to but needed. “If Auntie Rae can’t stay here, would you miss her too much to be happy here?” He was careful to say can’t, not want. He also didn’t want to frame it as Adam picking Rae over him. Adam freely accepted as his, but they’d just met. He’d known Rae longer, and she’d been with both him and his mom when he lost her. That was a bond he would never want to sever between them.

Adam answered with the unrestrained honesty of a child. “Yes. I want to be with Auntie Rae forever and ever—she’d my bonus mom.”

Once more, his heart swelled and broke at the same time. He knew what he must do, but he didn’t know how he was going to let his son go back to Vegas with Rae, only seeing him on weekends and holidays. But it was what was best for Adam, so he steeled his resolve.

Before he knew it, Adam's breathing had become steady and deep. He held his sleeping son just like that, for how long, he didn't know. He would soak up every millisecond of the time he had with him.

When Hook and Nova tucked a sleeping June into the makeshift tent beside him, he reluctantly followed suit.

After a round of good nights, he headed to the bedroom that was to be his and Rae's for the night.

Nova moved past him and kissed his cheek with a sisterly affection. "It'll all work out," she whispered before disappearing down the hall.

"?" Hook called before he exited the room.

"Yeah?"

"You deserve it."

"What?" He wasn't asking what he deserved, but more, why the hell he'd said it.

"Don't fuck it up on purpose because you think you don't deserve it or that they don't deserve you, because you do, and they do."

turned to him and crossed his arms. Ready to tell Hook to shut the fuck up. His words cut way deeper than was ready to admit.

"You can drop the stance. It's just us, and I know what you're doing."

"Yeah, and what is that?" Fuck Hook for being ... well, Hook.

“You’re going to send him away with your woman because you think you’re not good enough for them.”

What the hell? How did that fucker know what was in his head?

Hook crossed his arms across his chest. “Tell me I’m wrong and I’ll apologize and go to bed.”

couldn’t tell him that, because Hook was one hundred percent correct. He couldn’t pursue Rae after all that had passed between him. On the other hand, he couldn’t ask his son to give her up. The only solution was to honor half of Celeste’s wishes, and give Adam Rae.

At first, he’d wondered why Rae hadn’t told him of her sister’s wishes to raise Adam together. Celeste’s letter said she’d made her wishes known to Rae. It took him no time to puzzle out that she didn’t want to be with him. Earlier, he’d thought maybe she could give him another chance. The way she’d looked at him, it felt like home, but maybe it was just wishful thinking on his part.

“Tell me,” Hook taunted.

“I fucking can’t.” He growled and raked his hand through his close-cropped hair. shifted his gaze toward the tent and detected no movement. He lowered his voice.

“I can’t say it because it’s true. I’m going to share custody with Rae, and I’ll visit him in Vegas. They’re better off without me.”

“That’s fucking bullshit, and you know it. You’re scared and you’re looking to punish yourself for every mistake you’ve ever made. And what better way to inflict pain on yourself than to give up everything you love?”

stared slack jawed at his enforcer.

“What the hell makes you think that?” He tried to sound as incredulous as possible but failed.

“Because.” Hook pointed to his freshest ink, a dandelion. “I thought the exact same thing about them. I was scared to hope or wish for the likes of them because I was convinced I didn’t deserve it. My past made me unlovable, or so I thought. But this—” he indicated the tattoo once again—“was a fresh start. A clean slate. They didn’t see my past, they saw me.”

Hook slapped his hand over his heart. “They saw me, and when I accepted the love that was offered, I saw myself the way they did.”

His smile was wistful and not at all what most would expect on a tattooed face like his. “It changed my whole life, they changed it.”

“But Rae saw my past, Hook, that’s the difference. My past is sleeping right there.” The hurt and longing in his heart was bleeding into his voice.

“Saw is past tense, my brother. The way she looked at you tonight was not like she was seeing your past, but her future. Her future with you and Germ.”

The gravity of his words didn’t sink in before the last word did. “Germ?”

“Yeah, a little version of a virus—Germ.” Hook practically beamed. The man seemed to pride himself on the nicknames he gave people. Hell, he was the reason Bigfoot’s road name had officially been changed about a year back to Sasquatch. It started casually , but before everyone knew it, even Prez was calling him that, and so were other chapters, so they’d made the change official.

just shook his head.

“But seriously.” He clapped him on the shoulder. “You deserve to be happy, and I promise you, sending them away won’t do that for any of you. Fight, . Fight for your family, even if that fight is with yourself.”

With that, Hook vanished down the hall in the same direction Nova had earlier.

walked to the room in a daze, mulling over not just Hook’s words, but Adam’s as well. It would be easier to cut off a limb than send either one of them away. Dare he hope?

After stripping down as far as he dared, he crawled into bed with Rae. She turned into him almost immediately and a feeling of rightness slid over him. As gingerly as possible, he wrapped his arms around her and buried his nose in her hair. The last thing he wanted to do was scare her away again. She’d fled from him earlier in the living room because she either couldn’t handle his need for her or didn’t want to. He wouldn’t push her.

Even if he killed him, and it might well do just that, he’d move at her pace if they were going to try this thing. He prayed Hook was right about everything he’d said. God, how he prayed.

Rae mumbled something he couldn’t make out in her sleep, and he stroked her back to calm her. When it worked it did something to his hopes, it floated them up into an almost physical existence.

She slipped her knee up, stroking his cock with it, and he groaned at the sensations that rocketed through his bloodstream. Fuck if he didn’t go instantly hard to the point of pain. But he wouldn’t roll her over and bury himself in her, no matter how much he wanted to.

Her pace, her pace, her pace. That was what he chanted over and over in his head because he damn sure couldn't sleep with a hard dick and the woman he loved right there, touching his dick regardless of her intention.

With a regret so profound, he lowered one hand under the covers and adjusted her knee off his throbbing dick. It protested the loss of contact, as did he, but he had to let her call the shots. If he did what his body was screaming to do and she regretted it, it would kill him. If he thought he couldn't live without her and Adam, he would perish if he had to do so after causing her more heartache.

He kissed her head and said what he'd wanted to say since she walked back into his life. Something he'd repeated to her more times than he could count, even if her proclamation wouldn't follow.

"I love you, Sunny, and nothing in this world or the next will ever change that." He said it exactly the way he used to.

"I love you too, Darrin, through all time and across any galaxy."

He swallowed a gasp at her response and tried not to wake her. He never thought he'd hear it again, never dreamed. Her words, words he heard in his head over the last years, had finally left her mouth once again, but she was asleep.

Did she mean them, or was it habit? Fuck if he didn't want to shake her awake and asked her. But, if he were honest with himself, he was too much of a coward to do that. Nothing much in this life scared him, but her taking those words back—that terrified him.

He closed his eyes tight, willing himself to sleep with those words in his heart. Just as he thought he'd be successful in the attempt, Rae's breathing changed.

feigned sleep. Yes, they needed to talk, but they could do that tomorrow. He needed those to be the last words in his heart for the night.

Please , he begged any deity listening. Please, let her drift off again.

It was not meant to be because she spoke against his chest after wrapping her arm around him tight.

“Can we do it? Can we raise that sweet little boy together and not shred each other’s hearts again in the process?”

One question answered—Celeste must’ve told Rae her wishes. Of course she would’ve.

wasn’t sure if she was actually asking him or was speaking her truth to his sleeping form, kind of how he had when he proclaimed his love to her. He didn’t expect her to hear and wasn’t in a place to do so when she was awake.

Before he could decide if to answer or just let her get it out, she spoke again.

“I’m scared, .”

Again, he remained silent.

“I mean, I love you both so much, but ... we’re two people with a history of toxic behavior who bring out the worst in each other. Is that really what’s best for Adam or us?”

’s brain practically short-circuited after she proclaimed not only her love for him, but for his son, too. While she was obviously awake.

Whether she wanted an answer or not, she was going to get a definitive, unmistakable one. Plans to let her lead the way unintentionally flew right out the window.

He rolled them over, hovering above her. Her gorgeous blue eyes flew open in shock. So she did think he was sleeping.

“Fuck yes, it is.” He kissed her lips with a buildup of passion that had been brewing for years and he was powerless to stop it from overflowing from his lips to hers and back again.

Pulling back just enough to speak was damn near impossible.

“There is no one on the whole fucking planet I’d rather raise him with than you, Sunny. You have to feel that.”

“But—”

He was done with her protests.

“But nothing. You never brought out the worst in me, sweetheart, I did. I loved but didn’t care the way I should’ve. I’m sorry, but that’s the last time either one of us will say that word about shit that’s over and done with. We are fucking finished with apologizing for the past and beating ourselves up for what we can’t change.”

He saw the argument brewing in her eyes, so he kissed her silent again before pulling back far enough to look deep into her eyes.

“Just answer this, Rae. Do you want to stay and build a family with me?”

When she inhaled, he placed a finger on her lips.

“Don’t get bogged down in the details. We can work on anything we need to, and we can grow together, as long as we both want it. So, it’s a simple yes or no, Rae. Do you want to?”

The longer she stared without answering, the more his hope died a slow death. When a tear leaked from a corner of her eye, his soul shriveled. He was about to roll off her and just accept his life as it would be, without her or even the hope of her. If it weren’t for Adam, he wouldn’t, couldn’t, keep going.

Rae’s arms rose shakily to wrap around his neck, and she nodded her head.

’s brain was processing the actions when she whispered one syllable.

“Yes.”

That one word was everything. It could sustain his soul for a lifetime.

“But—” she started to amend.

“But nothing. You love me, I love you, and we both love Adam—the rest is just noise, Sunshine.”

When he dropped his lips to hers in a kiss, it was a little different from just moments before. It was the kiss of years in the making, a kiss of promise, a taste of the future.

It was an exchange of more than passion or longing, or even love, it was a promise of life. With Rae, he could finally live again, not just exist.

The sealing of a bond.

groaned at the taste of her. The sensation of her in his arms was borderline

overwhelming. When she ground up against him, the heat of her pussy against his rock-hard dick sent his body into overdrive. Fuck, he would perish if he didn't get inside her.

reached toward the nightstand out of habit and reality crashed into him.

Not that they'd ever used one in the past, but they weren't the same stupid kids anymore. had religiously used protection ever since Rae. Even with Celeste, but there was a mishap that time. But when he encountered something fluffy on the nightstand instead of his wallet, he remembered where he was.

"Shit," he cursed. "We can't do this."

"Why?"

He dropped his forehead to hers with a half laugh, half groan. "Because, Sunny, we're in a little girl's bed."

Her laugh was like a balm to his soul. It was like no time and so much time had passed all at once.

"Are you opposed to a little girl's floor?" She wiggled under him, and he reared back to stare.

"You want me to make love to you after years apart on the floor?" Why the idea shocked him, he didn't know. Rae had never been shy about what she wanted and how she wanted it, at least when it came to sex.

"No, I want you to fuck me like you haven't fucked me in years on the floor. We can make love later. Right now, I just need you."

wanted their reunion to be more romantic for Rae than a frantic encounter where someone was definitely going to catch a case of rug burn, but it was impossible to say no to her.

Especially when she shoved her hands in his boxers and stroked his cock.

With very little grace, he wrapped one arm around her back and lifted her a few inches off the bed as her legs wrapped around his waist. Still at an angle, he managed to maneuver them over the edge of the bed with minimal discomfort. His socked foot on the floor slipped on the carpet. Turning their bodies, he took the brunt of the impact when he failed to catch his balance.

The wind was knocked out of him, but he still managed to laugh, and so did Rae. Usually, a woman's laughter at such a moment was a bad sign, but not with them. He felt like he was teleported back in time.

Rae glanced down at his feet, or more accurately, his colorful socks. When she turned back to him with a raised eyebrow, he smiled.

"Still wearing loud socks, I see." Yeah, it was something he still did, mostly because of her. She had bought him a new pair anytime she found a crazy-looking pair.

"Yep, they remind me of you."

Rae's laughs turned to sexy moans as she rubbed against him. Pulling his cock free from his boxers, Rae used it to slide her shorts and underwear to the side and sink down on him.

"Fuck," he shouted, and she slapped her hand over his mouth. Shushing him between her moans and dying bouts of laughter.

“Home,” he chanted against her hand as he grabbed her hips and thrust up into her.

Home.

RAE

Virus mumbled against her hand as she rode him, but she couldn't make out what he was saying. And at the moment, it didn't matter. All that mattered were their bodies, pushing ever closer to that feeling she hadn't felt in almost seven long and agonizing years.

Not just pleasure, she'd enjoyed plenty of that. More than was proper for a young lady, according to society. There was pleasure, and then there was pleasure . The feeling of joining bodies with someone your heart called to is unlike anything else.

No matter the time and distance between them. No matter what the future held, it was all irrelevant and insignificant in the moment. Being with Darrin was like her heart beating, her lungs expanding and contracting, the blood coursing through her body and returning again and again and again.

It just was. Without thought or conscience prompting.

It.

Just.

Was.

When her orgasm slammed into her, the scream was perched on her lips. It was Darrin's turn to silence her. Releasing her hips, he gripped her throat tight enough to block her voice. He fucked her through the stars that closed in on her vision.

Somehow, he still knew. Knew her body with an intimacy no one else ever had or ever will. Just as the darkness crept in from the periphery, he loosened his hold on her throat and rolled their bodies. He then powered into her with a force that inched her along the carpet borderline painfully.

Luckily, she still had her underwear and sleep set on. She'd been in such a hurry to feel him in her body, she'd simply slid them aside. Another friction point that wouldn't be pleasant in the light of day.

His thrust got sporadic, untamed, and she could feel the signs of his impending orgasm.

“, now,” he grit out as he tilted his head back.

She returned the favor he'd extended her earlier and wrapped her hands around his throat. His neck seemed a lot more corded than she remembered and it took some extra umph before his eyes tilted skyward right before he came with such force, she thought he'd never stop.

When Virus was spent, he collapsed to the side, snagging the blanket from the bed and covering them. grabbed a pillow for him, then burrowed into his chest.

Neither spoke, but his hand never stopped its rhythmic stroking of her back through the fabric of her tank.

It made her ache for the years they'd missed together because of emotional immaturity and careless mistakes.

“That was amazing, .”

She couldn't hold back the little sarcastic laugh that bubbled up.

“That was never an issue between us. It was when we weren’t naked that was the problem.”

“It may have escaped your notice, my sunshine.” He tapped her nose with a finger and spoke in a teasing tone. “But we are both still dressed.”

slapped his chest. “You know what I mean, asshole.” She faux snarked.

“Yeah, baby. I do. But we’ve both changed, and I think we got a real shot this time as long as we let go of the past and tackle the future as a team.”

His words burrowed into her heart. Whether she knew it or not, those were the words she’d needed. More than apologies and forgiveness. More than an explanation of why Celeste or why he didn’t chase after her when they broke up.

That had been the line of questions that had plagued her over the years, but she finally realized they didn’t matter.

It was like a weight lifted off her body. So physical in nature that she sagged more into him.

“What was that?”

When Virus asked, she sat up and shot a glance toward the door, assuming he must’ve heard something.

“What was what?” She turned back and forth from him to the door. Instead of answering, he reached for her tank and pulled it over her head.

watched in fascination as he worked his boxers off.

“ That , as in—in that beautiful head of yours? Your whole body changed. What thought had that effect on you?”

She knew it felt different but never dreamed that it translated to him feeling it, too.

followed suit and lay back down, lifting her hips to remove the rest of her clothes.

“Just letting go of things that no longer matter, I guess.”

His grin turned so wicked that if it were possible to orgasm from just a look, that would’ve done it.

Fuck if the man wasn’t a walking hate crime against all other men in existence. When he smiled, he might as well be the only man on the planet that women notice.

Watching the play of his muscles as he reclined back was mesmerizing. He turned on his side to face her.

Virus grabbed one of her legs and placed it over his hip. Staring into her eyes, he rubbed the head of his cock against her clit.

“Good, because there is no room for anything else between us when we’re like this.” Slowly he entered her aching body. Inch by torturously slow inch.

His eyes never left hers. Even when they kissed, his eyes stayed open and focused on her.

It wasn’t the frantic, oxygen depriving fucking that had happened earlier. No, this was love making. Something she had only ever done with him. A body was just a vessel, capable of a physical euphoria that wore off as fast as it came upon you, but opening your soul to another person was transcendent.

was still terrified of giving in to the all-encompassing them again. Terrified of being a mom to a little boy who she loved but barely knew. Terrified of leaving her life in Vegas behind for a shot, not a guarantee. She also knew she'd never forgive herself if she turned tail and ran without even trying.

"I forgive you, ," she mumbled as they came together.

That thought changed everything. Forgiving yourself is a different level of acceptance.

She was really doing it.

She was giving up everything to gain so much more. Virus was still buried inside her when she spoke.

"I think we should date."

"Yeah, baby. Whatever you want," he answered sleepily.

"I mean it. If we're going to restart this?—"

"No if." The sleepy tone was all but gone. "We are doing it, ." Her eyes rolled when he wiggled his hips. Causing him to slip from her body.

"Not this. I mean, not only this, not always this. You said it yourself, we've both changed. And while we are still good at this, we need to be solid in other areas. If not for ourselves, then for Adam." Lower, she added, "I want my best friend back."

"So, you want to be wooed?" He kissed her breast, tugging on the nipple before looking up at her with a mischievous grin. No way he was ready to go again, but the look in his wicked green-gold eyes said he'd give it the good ole college try.

“No more running, . I won’t survive if you run again.” His words damn near broke her. “If shit gets sideways, we talk about it, we don’t run.” His voice had a hard edge she’d rarely heard from him. “Promise me, ?”

“I promise.”

Virus smiled, then kissed his way down her body, nipping in random places as he went. When he settled between her legs and threw her knee over his shoulder, she forgot how to speak.

The first touch of his tongue to her clit seared her skin, branded her as his. He tongue-fucked her until she came apart on his face. was spent. Virus had successfully derailed any and all thoughts in her head.

“How’s that for wooing?” he asked. She felt every syllable against her overheated flesh.

“Not just me, Darrin. You deserve to be wooed too.”

“All right then,” he agreed. “Woo me.” He shot up from between her legs to lie beside her on the floor so fast, she got dizzy. He sprawled there, hands behind his head, a shit-eating grin on his face, and glancing from his growing cock to her and back again.

It was a ridiculous picture that got even more so when he wagged his eyebrows.

The laugh bubbled up from inside her unbidden. “That’s not what I meant by dating and wooing, idjit.”

His eyes widened, and he cupped her cheek at her use of a familiar but unconventional term of endearment. It was obvious what shows and movies shaped

their relationship.

“It’s been too long since you’ve said that to me.” His voice cracked a little before he went back to his previous demeanor. “But you’re just trying to get out of wooing me now that you’ve gotten yours. That’s low, Sunny. Low, low, low to deny a man whose cock is begging for your touch.” He played the woe is me card like a champ.

Her eyes rolled again, this time even harder at his teasing tone and attempt to look oh so distraught.

“Never let it be said that I don’t reciprocate.” She loved sucking his cock. She’d not given another blow job since Darrin. Somehow, deep down, she knew she wouldn’t enjoy it with anyone else.

Positioning herself between his legs, she gave his cock one long, slow lick before speaking. “Just so you know, this is not what I meant by wooing or dating.”

With that, she swallowed him down as far as she could manage. Stroking what she couldn’t fit in her mouth with her hand.

“Fuck, . I’ve always loved your mouth.” He grated out before he took over and fucked her face.

“Always. Loved. You.” He growled as he came down her throat. He held her on his cock as it pulsed and pulsed.

“Fuck yeah, babe. Swallow it. Swallow it all. Don’t waste a fucking drop.”

His words combined with her finger on her clit caused her to come yet again. This time, she was well and truly spent. There was no way she could go again, even if her life depended on it.

Sleepily, she climbed up his body and snuggled into the crook of his arm as he dropped kisses on her head.

As his breathing started to slow, she explored his body. So much was new to her as he'd add a whole lot of muscle and a hell of a lot of tattoos.

With a feather soft touch, she traced the ridges of each ab before moving her attention upward. inventoried every line of ink along the way she could.

With fingers dancing past his pecs. She reached the cords in his neck. She paused there to feel his pulse hidden behind more tattoos, and she smiled.

Physically comparing the Darrin of years ago with the Virus softly snoring next to her was fascinating. The same, but not the same.

His jawline was still sharp, but now it was hidden behind a close-cropped beard. Suddenly a thought popped into her head—Virus was who Darrin had always been destined to be.

It suited him. She couldn't explain why she felt that way, she just did. It felt right, him the way he was now as opposed to who he used to be. Their time apart even started to feel right. Darrin, her Darrin, would've never found the Bastards and everything that came along with that. On the same hand, she would've never landed in Vegas and lucked into her perfect dream job.

Breaking up, in a weird way, was best for them all in the long run. Even Celeste, who had a void she needed to fill and, in the attempt, gave them Adam— all felt meant to be.

If she were being honest with herself, and she was doing just that, brutally so, if she and Darrin had stayed together then, there was a good chance they would be divorced

by now, and irreconcilably at that. The path they were on was doomed.

was thoroughly convinced that breaking up is what saved them to have a shot later ... now.

's heart was damn near bursting. She choked back a sob, a happy one. When she shifted a rush of liquid left her body.

Shit.

They'd just had sex, more than once, without an adult discussion or protection. She was on the pill but had a recent course of anti-biotics for an ear infection. She wasn't ready to be a mother ... um, have a baby, because she kinda already was in a mother role. If—no, when—she stayed, she would be firmly in a mom role, but they didn't need a baby, that was for damn sure.

Then she started to panic. Babies weren't her biggest concern. Virus rode a motorcycle, was bearded, and heavily tattooed, and that was the triple crown of the panty dropping Olympics. He was hot as hell. She wasn't as delusional as to believe he'd been celibate since her, or rather Celeste.

Did he forgo protection with all the women he'd been with since her? She knew of at least one. Not that she'd been a saint, but she never, never had sex without protection. Darrin had been the only one she'd ever forgone protection with. She tried to dislodge all the information about the club girls that Harmon had put in her head. That woman was obsessed with biker shows and movies.

That line of thought made her feel dirty. She needed to get cleaned up and stop before she spiraled.

Slowly disentangling from Virus so as not to wake him, she grabbed her clothes and

toiletory kit and made her way to the bathroom.

did her best thinking in the shower.

Yes, she was going to give it her all and woo the hell out of him.

No, she was not bringing the past into their future.

But she wouldn't let their dating interfere with him getting to know his son.

Besides, if she were staying, she had a lot of arrangements to make, and she'd rather make them herself or she was afraid she'd let Virus take the lead. If she did that, she knew he'd move at warp speed. He was convinced all they needed was love. was a little more practical.

Dressed and ready to go, she stared down at Virus. It ached how much she loved him, but they had to be smart this time.

"Virus. Wake up, idjit." She shook him and he pulled her down on top of him.

"I'm awake, and ... you're dressed?"

"Yes, I'm going to head back to Harmon's. I have some things to handle and you have a son to spend some time with." He rolled them over and hovered over her.

"NO! No more running, Sunny. You promised." He choked on the words and her heart broke.

Cupping his cheeks, she brought her forehead to him. "I'm not running. I'll be at Harmon's planning for my new life."

“You’ll stay with me and Adam. Problem solved.” He smiled. “Now, get naked.”

She loved that he automatically included Adam in his life but hated that what she was afraid of was already rearing its head. Darrin was like a tornado, he just swept everything up. She’d let that happen once, and it ended horribly. They’d been given a second chance, and she would not make the same mistakes.

“No. We are in the getting to know each other phase, remember. That means we aren’t fucking like rabbits twenty-four seven. And we most certainly aren’t shacking up. You need to get to know Adam, and you and I need to get reacquainted. Besides, I have a wooing to plan,” she added giddily.

Virus waggled his eyebrows and rolled over, but not before kissing her soundly.

“For the record, if you’re planning on wooing me, my love language is fucking twenty-four seven.” laughed before dropping a kiss on his lips and standing.

With his eyes twinkling with amusement he looked ten years younger. She’d always loved the playful side of him.

“That, and tit pics. Lots and lots of tit pics.”

His laughter followed her from the room. Stopping by the tent in the living room, she kissed Adam goodbye. He woke enough for her to explain she’d be busy the next day or so, but was only a phone call away and he’d have a ton of fun with his dad.

All the way to Harmon’s, she thought about wooing her man.

VIRUS

wasn't thrilled with the idea of not seeing Rae every moment of every day, but in hindsight, she was right. He needed to focus on Adam. He was priority number one.

Besides, they were very different than they had been almost seven years ago. While he had every confidence in the world they were meant to be and it would work itself out, Rae needed to see he was different.

He understood that. What he'd done hurt her beyond comprehension, shaped the way she viewed things from then on. She said she loved him, but the kind of trust they needed to make it work would take time. He would never give her a reason not to trust him ever again.

He'd swapped his motorcycle for his truck as soon as Rae had left so he could take Adam back to his place. But Nova wouldn't let him leave without a booster seat. She had an extra one in her car, so Hook showed him how they worked.

"Who knew kids would be so complicated? Back in my day, Dad just tossed us in the back seat and told us to buckle up and shut up."

Hook laughed at his puzzlement. "Yeah, but we vow to do better than they did, no matter how great your parent or parental figure was or wasn't. It's part of being a dad, man. You want so much more for them than you can ever achieve, but you'll never stop trying to make it so."

There was happiness and sadness in the enforcer's voice. knew Hook'd never had a

father figure worth a damn. Between the system and being a street kid with a psycho acting as his brother being all he knew before unspeakable abuse; Hook had turned into an amazing father to little June.

admired him so much. “Well, I’ll consider it a success if I turn out to be half the fucking father you are, brother.”

The glitter in his eyes that indicated his words had struck a chord didn’t escape ’s notice, but he played it off.

“Now, if you have any advice on being wooed, I’m all ears.” When a grin split Hook’s tattooed face, knew he’d fucked up. He was just trying to deflect from the overly emotional moment he caused, and now he’d be teased relentlessly.

“Being wooed, you say?”

“I mean, wooing. Any advice on wooing a woman you fucked up with but is giving you a second chance.”

“No, that’s some grade A bullshit, that’s what that is. The I know doesn’t mix shit up. You are getting fucking wooed, brother.”

Hook laughed his fucking ass off at ’s expense.

“Whenever you’re done, big guy, let me know and we can have a mature conversation about love and relationships.”

That scolding just made the fucker laugh more.

Nova came outside with a few bottles of water and handed one to each of them. “I just came out to see what was taking you two so long, but now I feel I need details if

something is that funny.”

“Don’t—” started, but his words fell on deaf ears.

“Rae is wooing ,” Hook answered between laughs and air quoted wooing.

Instead of laughing, Nova clapped her hands together.

“Oh, how romantic and very progressive.” She wrapped her arms around before pulling back and planting a kiss on her husband. “I’m so happy for you. She’s a keeper, you know that, right? We’ve already voted her in to the Royal Ol’ Ladies Club, so you can’t fuck it up. You’re not allowed.” She crossed her arms.

“Noted. But what if ...” He trailed off. What could he say? What if she doesn’t ever look at me like she used to? What if I always see the hurt I caused her hidden in her blue eyes somewhere? No, he couldn’t give those thoughts a voice. “What if I don’t know how to be wooed?”

It was a valid question. He was a take charge kind of guy. He did the wooing; he made decisions that needed to be made. He didn’t make a lot of friends because he was direct to the point of rudeness sometimes. He had never been a passive participant in any aspect of his life but one, and that resulted in letting Celeste manipulate a situation.

“I think it’s just like anything else in life—if you want it, you figure it out. Besides, you definitely seem like the type to enjoy a woman lavishing her attention on you. So, I say enjoy the process.”

She headed toward the door and spoke right before she entered. “I know the followers will,” she singsonged as she closed it.

Fuck, the ol' ladies and their social media. He was about to be fodder for the masses.

"Cheer up," Hook said, as if he could read his mind. "You know you love the attention."

He did ... or had until Rae walked back into his life. How would she feel about women on the internet asking about his dick size? vowed to not feed any of that moving forward, or anything that might hurt Rae.

It was well after lunch by the time Adam and he pulled away from Hook's place.

"Are you hungry, buddy?" asked in the rear-view mirror.

"Yes." His son cheered.

"What do you want to eat?"

"Pancakes." Nova had made them pancakes for breakfast, but if that's what his kid wanted, that's what he'd get. He made a mental note to Google if it was bad nutrition wise to eat so many pancakes.

"Pancakes it is, if you promise to eat some fruit too. Deal?" He was pretty sure fruit was relatively healthy.

"Deal."

may have mentally patted himself on the back. He'd just achieved a fruit promise, that had to be some sort of milestone. He'd missed so many firsts with Adam that he'd have to start a new set of firsts.

Today was his first successful fruit negotiation.

let Adam pick their booth and he looked so proud of himself.

He felt like that was another dad first for him. His son looked so thrilled to get to decide where they sat.

“Hello again,” Nana said to Adam, and he waved to her. “Let me guess, pancakes and apple juice?” Adam nodded enthusiastically.

“And fruit, please,” he added with the level of enthusiasm only a kid could muster.

“You got it, cutie.” She turned to . “And I should’ve realized he was yours the other day. Carbon copy, that one. What about you, hun?”

“I’ll take the lunch special with a Dr Pepper.”

Nana smiled and wrote on her pad, turning back to Adam. “So, where’s Mom today?” Before he answered, she turned back to and raised an eyebrow. He felt the scolding as if she’d let him have it.

Yeah, he’d have some explaining to do sooner or later. Nana treated the club like family.

“Mom died,” Adam answered matter-of-factly.

She gasped and turned to , looking for an explanation.

“I’m sorry for your loss. That was so sudden, they were just here a few days ...” She trailed off and laid her wrinkled hand on ’s shoulder.

“Oh, no.” He kept his tone low because he didn’t want Adam confused. “Rae’s his aunt and very much still alive. His mother passed a while back and she wasn’t my ...

I mean ... thank you for the sentiment, Nana. The young woman he was with was his aunt, and she's fine."

It rubbed him the wrong way to refer to Rae as Adam's aunt. She was, for all intents and purposes, his mother. She'd had more experience being a mother than he had at being a father, so she'd earned it.

"I feel like I've missed out on some key points. You'll have to fill me in sometime." She retreated back to the kitchen.

looked at his son who was staring out the window almost expressionless. Was he sad about having mentioned his mom? He had no clue how kids were supposed to express themselves other than a screaming tantrum or raucous laughter. Those were easy to read.

"Do you miss your mom, buddy?"

He shrugged his shoulders before nodding. What did that mean? Adam had already told him last night about how Celeste had prepared him for the transition. Shit, if he still didn't feel guilt for having murderous thoughts about her.

She really had done a great job with Adam, even if she'd never bothered to tell he had a son.

"Would you like to talk about her?"

Adam hesitated, seemingly pondering his answer. "Auntie Rae is pretty like Mom is." Okay, not what he was expecting, but it was a start.

"Yeah, she was," he agreed. Many people confused them from a distance. But where Celeste had a cold feel about her, Rae was all sunshine and warmth.

“Does it make you sad that she’s gone?”

“A little because I can’t see her every day, but she said if I close my eyes and wish for her, she’ll come even if I can’t see her.” Adam’s words choked him up a little. Then it hit him maybe Adam didn’t fully grasp the concept of death and permanence. But did he need to right now?

He seemed perfectly content with his perception of things, who was to steal that comfort from him with harsh truths.

Nana returned with a plate of pancakes all cut up and an apple juice for Adam. “And ... fruit as ordered,” she declared as she set a bowl with cut grapes and melon next to the pancake Adam was already stuffing into his mouth.

“Yours is coming up right away. As always, holler if you need anything.”

got lost watching his son eat with enthusiasm when a voice interrupted his observation.

“Hey little man, how you doin’?”

His son squealed. “Uncle Barks.” He watched as his son fist bumped a man with a very familiar face. One he hadn’t seen in years.

“Darrin,” he said tightly.

could tolerate a lot, but his ex-best friend having an apparent relationship with his son wasn’t fucking one of them.

“What the fuck do you want?” winced when he failed to control his language. Barker crossed his arms over his chest.

“I am saying hello to my favorite nephew, ain’t that right, Adam?” he proclaimed smugly, then he sat next to Adam.

Adam nodded.

“He’s not your anything, and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t speak to my son.” did his best to keep his voice low as Adam was paying more attention to his pancakes than their conversation. The last thing he needed or wanted was for Adam to see him being mean to someone he apparently liked.

“Well, his aunt is something to me, so that makes him something.” The bastard hadn’t changed one fucking bit. Still trying to get with Rae. She’d been clueless back then and was apparently still blind when it came to Barker. A major wedge between them back then was sitting there smirking.

Before the words left his mouth, knew he shouldn’t have said them, but his fucking filter was stuck open. “Is that so? She didn’t mention you when I had her on her back all night.”

Why? Why did he say it? He wanted to take it back. It was disrespectful and a violation of their relationship, but he let that fucker get under his skin, as always. Some things never change.

Barker’s face was red as fuck. He looked ready to explode. “Just because you fucked her doesn’t make her yours. It never did.”

was one point two seconds from punching the fucker in the nose when a plate appeared in front of him.

When he looked up, there was a pretty young woman with her tits spilling from her top. She looked vaguely familiar, but he didn’t bother giving it much thought until

she practically squealed when he murmured his thanks.

“Oh my god, ?” She scooted into the booth next to him before he could protest. “I thought I’d never see you again.”

That makes two of us , he thought, as he couldn’t remember seeing her in the first place. But Barker seemed to hang on every word. wanted to punch that smug look off his face.

She pouted and wrapped her arms around his bicep as he lifted his sandwich toward his mouth. “You don’t remember me, do you?”

The whiny, nasally voice was starting to tickle a foggy memory from the back of his head, but he didn’t admit to it either way.

“Carrie. We spent an amazing night together last summer.” When he didn’t acknowledge her one way or another, she practically rubbed her tits against him and lowered her voice. “I did that thing with my tongue that you loved? You said no one did it quite like me?”

Choking on the bite he’d just taken. He placed the sandwich back on the plate, then slapped his chest until he managed to swallow the bite.

Yep, he remembered her now. Fuck, he did remember her. Hard to forget who tossed your fucking salad in the alleyway behind a bar before she dragged your drunk ass back to her place and did more than that all night.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. If he’d known she worked at one of their regular spots, he wouldn’t have touched her, no matter how drunk he was.

You don’t shit where you eat, so to speak. Not to mention, Nana would give him the

business for it when she found out.

Plus, Adam's eyes were pinging back and forth between himself and Carrie while he continued eating. He remembered Hook saying that kids made the best spies because they don't miss a thing, and in June's case, blurts it out to the exact wrong person at the wrong time. Not to mention fucking Barker was eating the shit up with a spoon.

When she snaked her arm around him to stroke his opposite shoulder, he shifted farther down the booth and Carrie followed. He was pinned against the wall, and she was practically sitting in his fucking lap.

was trying to think of a way to extract himself without making it more memorable to Adam when her other hand found his dick.

"Shit." He jumped, bumping the table and toppling his soda.

Carrie just sat there smiling as the puddle spread toward Adam. Barker jumped up and fled not only the seat, but the diner, at the threat of getting wet.

He threw his arm across the table to stop the puddles from spreading. Still, she wouldn't budge away from him. "A little help, please?" he shouted at her louder than he intended. Carrie just rolled her eyes and slowly slid from the booth.

"Good heavens." He heard Nana exclaim before she slapped some bar mops down and slid the puddle of ice and soda into a bowl.

The older waitress thrust the bowl into Carrie's arms, and she huffed. Nana produced a clean towel for . With another, she finished drying the table.

"Go on, get that to the back and take care of those dishes." Carrie eyed Nana with obvious disdain, then cut her gaze to . All traces of anything other than seduction

were gone.

“But I’m?—”

“I know what you’re about, and I’ll have none of that here, especially while you’re on the clock. Now go, or you can leave and not come back.”

Carrie waited only a second before she turned and stomped back toward the kitchen.

“I’m sorry about that, . New hire. I don’t think she’s going to last.”

A small bit of relief coursed through him. He hadn’t broken his rules about who he engaged with. She hadn’t worked there when they’d had their one and only drunken encounter.

“Not on you, Nana. That one’s totally on me.” It didn’t escape how tired she was looking.

“Why don’t you stop doing this? Make good on that threat you’re always tossing around and retire?”

“Retire? If I retire, people like her will run this place into the ground. Milton didn’t build this place from the ground up to have me abandon it for a life of leisure just because he’s not with us anymore.”

A sad smile crossed his lips remembering Milton. The club gave him a hell of a sendoff. He’d been like an honorary Bastard—and Nana, she was family.

“Besides, if I’d retired when I first threatened to, I’d be in Florida right now wondering why flamingos stand on one leg, and I would’ve missed meeting this precious young man.”

Nana slipped into the booth next to Adam and just stared at him as if he were the most fascinating human in the world, and didn't disagree.

"So, you gonna tell me about the deal with his ...?" She covered his ears and whispered, "Not-the-mom aunt, or do I have to guess?"

gave her the PG-rated version of Rae was an ex, Adam wasn't hers, but she was caring for him, and that he loved her still.

"I hope it's the lifetime kind of deal like you and Milton had."

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RAE

Harmon was the best. She'd sprang into action the second arrived back at her place that morning.

It was already evening, and they were still at it. They were devising a plan to woo her man that Harmon had dubbed, How to Catch a Virus. Not the best name ever, but the name didn't matter as much as the advice and support.

Oh, and the whiteboard.

Yep, bitch brought out a whiteboard with color coded dry-erase markers.

provided Virus's likes and dislikes as she knew them anyway, and Harmon was coming up with the plan. They needed a male perspective, so they'd called Barker what felt like ages ago.

got up and grabbed them another beer each. "Where the hell is Barker with the takeout? I'm starving."

"Who the hell knows? He sounded a little off when I called him earlier."

"He's been a little off for a while now, or at least with me." It was the first time had voiced a concern over Barker's behavior. She'd really overlooked a lot since they'd tried and failed to date each other. She felt responsible for the awkwardness between them and so she shrugged off his comments and opinions.

However, he had taken it to a whole new level since she'd come back to Provo. He was absolutely amazing with Adam, and Adam adored him. Chances were, would've let their friendship slowly die if it hadn't been for Adam.

She also felt she owed him a bit of loyalty. He was a steady friend during her most unsteady of times, but they needed to have a talk.

was done with forcing a fit where one didn't exist. She'd have a calm and rational talk with him about boundaries and respect, especially where Virus was concerned. She understood he was protective because he witnessed her heartbreak last time up close, however it was happening and if he wanted to remain her friend, he had to accept Virus, too. At least he'd apologized for earlier, so when the talk came, she believed he'd handle it okay.

In her mind, he'd be happy for them both as soon as he realized that Virus wasn't the same person he knew back then. Hell, none of them were.

"Yeah, so how about this?"

The dry-erase marker squeaked against the surface of the whiteboard.

Above step one of the How to Catch a Virus plan, she wrote ...

STEP 0.5–Friendtervention. Hug it out, eat pizza, drink beer. Repeat as needed then proceed to step 1.

"Perfect."

When Barker barged in the door, they were both still hopeful it would work out perfectly. One look at his face, and that hope died.

“Oh my god, Barker. What happened? Are you okay?” She jumped up and asked as he practically threw the bags of takeout across the table.

“Did you fuck him, ? Tell me you didn’t fuck him.”

“Whoa. Slow down.”

He was seething. The anger rolling off him was palpable. In all the years they’d known each other, she had never seen him like that. Hell, she would’ve sworn he never got mad- mad , but this was beyond that. He was livid. Then his words hit her.

“Why are ... where did ... that’s none of your business.” She crossed her arms. Why would she even need to explain herself to him?

It was clear from this display of volatility that their friendship was coming to an end. And she’d be damned if she’d allow what she was witnessing around Adam.

She watched as the anger was overtaken by a stricken look. “Oh god, you did. You let him put his filthy hands on you.” He raked his hand through his hair and started pacing and mumbling to himself. She felt Harmon at her back. She did not recognize the man before her.

“You barely let me kiss you, like you were too good for me, but you let that Bastard stick his dick in you.”

She reared back as if she’d been struck. This was not the Barker who fed her ice cream and listened to her cry. Who held her hair back when she went way too hard at the bar, or the honorary uncle who was so gentle and sweet with Adam. No, that was not the same person at all.

Harmon grabbed her hand from behind and whispered. “, he is scaring the shit out of

me. I'm gonna call 9-1-1."

agreed but looked back at the counter next to where he paced ... to where both their phones sat.

He pinned them both with a look and glanced to see what they were looking at, as if he read their minds.

"Barker, will you please just calm down and we can talk about this? We've been friends a long time so we can get through this."

It was complete and utter bullshit. Their friendship was so fucking over, but she needed to de-escalate the situation.

"Friends? Fucking friends? I never wanted to be your friend . I wanted so much more with you, . I would've given you everything. Fuck, he always got everything, and I got nothing. What the fuck is so special about Darrin anyway, hmm? He may have fucked you last night for old time's sake or whatever, but he already had another one all over him today." She must've been unable to control her expression as tears threatened to spill because Barker smiled and went for the throat.

"Oh." He chuckled threateningly. "Sweet na?ve , oh yeah. Saw them with my own two eyes, and right in front of Adam too. Why don't you ask him about Carrie and what her tongue does? It must've been pretty special because she was practically in his lap and whatever she was doing to him under the table spilled his drink. So why don't you ask Adam when you see him? He'll tell you the same thing."

The tears that had been waiting sprang from her eyes. Barker may be bat shit crazy in the moment, but he wouldn't lie about that, especially involving Adam because the kid had zero guile and didn't know how to lie.

She refused to give in to doubts about Virus so soon after promising herself she would trust him. It was hard, but she would trust, but verify, the first chance she got. Using her free hand, she thumbed away her tears as Harmon spoke. Her voice was shaky.

“Barker, you need to leave and don’t come back.”

The look he gave her was murderous, before he turned his attention back to .

“Really, ? After everything I did to have you, you’re going to let her send me away while you welcome him back into your bed, after he fucked your sister?”

“Yes. Leave. Now.”

“I’m going because I can’t bear to look at you right now. You wanna shack up with him and play the happy little family with his bastard, go ahead. But mark my words, Sunny, that’ll never last. Someone will come along and end that little dream.”

With those menacing words, he turned and stomped toward the door. Right before he slammed it behind him, he spoke. “Remember, ask him about Carrie and her magic tongue. I’ll see you and Adam soon, .”

Then he slammed the door. When they heard his car start, they both scrambled to the door to lock the deadbolt and peek to see him drive away.

“Fuck,” said as she shakily slid down the door to land on her ass. Harmon joined her on the floor and just held her.

“Yeah, fuck,” Harmon agreed.

Once they both stopped shaking, they made their way back to the kitchen. Harmon

handed her phone and grabbed the eraser.

She watched her erase step 0.5. “Well, that’s toast,” she joked, but could tell Harmon was just as shaken up by what happened as she was. But that was Harmon. She handles things like a champ. A lot of people thought she was cold and unfeeling, but that was the furthest thing from the truth. Harmon felt things deep, deeper than most, and she just compartmentalized in a way most people couldn’t.

Harmon turned and motioned to the phone in her hand. “Call him.”

“Harmon, I think seduction can wait.”

“First off, no it can’t, but second, that’s not why I said to call him.”

“Ah, Carrie and her magic tongue, right? As curious as I am, I don’t want to start our relationship off with suspicions and accusations. That’s what landed us here in the first place, remember?” She set the phone down and picked up her half-drunk beer.

“Dear god, woman. You are focused on the wrong things. I mean, call him and tell him you lost a friend today and shit got weird. Maybe invite him over or go see him. Not for seduction and hanky-panky, but for support and comfort, besides building the type of bond between you two that was lacking the first go around. And, in case Barker really meant his words as a threat. Especially since his anger seems to stem from his past with Virus, not yours. He deserves to know. If for no other reason than to know he’s not good for Adam since he had an apparent run-in with them already. And also, to maybe get the tea. You can’t tell me you haven’t been dying to know what happened between them.”

Harmon wasn’t wrong, and if they were starting over, they needed to start differently. That meant clinging to each other, confiding in each other instead of other people. To be each other’s best friend.

“Hey, Sunshine. Miss me already?”

His voice soothed her with just five words. It was right to make that call, for her too.

“You know it,” she teased. “I had something I wanted to?—”

“Is that Auntie ? Let me talk to her,” Adam said excitedly. She wanted to protest, but Virus already had her on speaker.

“Hey, buddy. Are you having fun with Daddy?”

“Yeah. We got pancakes.”

“Yum, sounds delicious.”

“They were, and Uncle Barks came by while I was eating and I met a girl named Carrie but she wasn’t as pretty as you.” Adam spoke in a long, excited drawn-out run-on sentence. was sure he was still going, but she heard nothing after Carrie.

“Here little man, play this and let me talk to Auntie . You can tell her about the rest later.”

“Sunny.” She could tell she was off speaker as the background noise faded. “Honey, listen, I can explain. It’s not like it sounded, I promise. I didn’t introduce him to her. She was at the diner and sat down and?—”

“Virus?” she interrupted his spiel. She realized the old her would’ve needed his explanation to reassure her. That was not the relationship she wanted with Virus. Her accusing, him explaining, and somehow neither was satisfied with the outcome.

It was killing her not to hear every detail and obsess over it, but trust started with

small acts. With a steadying breath, she spoke.

“I don’t need your explanation. If you say she’s just someone from the diner, then I believe you.”

“Really?” He sounded so relieved and happy. She hated to spoil the mood, but she’d have to. That’s why she called after all. “That means so much to me, Sunny. I fucking love you, but in the spirit of full disclosure, she was someone I had a one-time thing with months ago, and I had no idea she’d started working at the diner.”

His words made her cringe. The thought of him with another woman, one she might run into at that, wasn’t palatable at all, but that was a worry for another time.

“And your honesty means just as much to me. Seeing as how Barker mentioned it, I can’t lie and say I wasn’t curious, but new leaf and all that.” She gave a humorless laugh.

“Yeah, don’t get me started on that son of a bitch.” He lowered his voice, sounding as if he was covering the phone and his mouth with his hand.

Such a dad move.

“I don’t want to tell you who you can and can’t be friends with, but ...” The sound changed again, and she heard a door close. “Damn it, . Why him?—”

“Virus?”

“No, . Don’t Virus me, I can’t do this. I can’t let it go. You don’t know him like I do, and I can’t, won’t?—”

“VIRUS! Take a breath and listen.”

“You’re not going to change my mind on him, . It’s nonnegotiable.”

She wanted to be annoyed with his high handedness, but he was right, and to be honest, it felt kinda nice.

“He’s actually the reason I called.” Her voice broke and it all finally hit her.

“Shit, . What happened? Are you all right?” She heard the door whoosh open through the phone and a small flurry of activity while she tried to recompose herself. When she heard the car door close, she realized he was rushing to her side.

“I’m fine, Virus. Just a little shaken up.”

“You don’t fucking sound fine,” he shouted so loud she pulled the phone from her ear.

“Virus, where’s Adam?”

“He’s in the truck and I’m pacing here trying to calm down because I don’t know what the fuck is going on.”

“Virus, calm down. I’m fine. Barker was here and we had words. Enough so Harmon and I felt you needed to know, especially since Adam loves him so much. He never laid hands on either of us, but it’s safe to say the friendship is over.”

“What the fuck? There’s something you’re not saying.” She heard the car door slam and an engine start. “I’m on my way, sweetheart. You’ll tell me every single detail and then ... then ... he’ll pay.”

“Virus, no. We can talk about it tonight at dinner. Enjoy some time with Adam and I’ll see you two around seven, okay?”

“Fine.” His voice didn’t hide the fact that he wasn’t happy at all about it. “But I want every word and your promise that you’ll let me handle it.”

“Handle it? There’s nothing?—”

“, your promise.”

“Fine.” She mirrored his reluctant compliance. “But I want to know what happened between you two that drove you apart.”

“Fine.”

That word seemed to sum up the conversation.

After a prolonged silence where neither spoke, they just sat together on the phone in their feelings.

“?”

“Yeah.”

They both sounded exhausted.

“I love you.”

She smiled in spite of the situation.

“I love you too.”

“Don’t make me wait too long with this seduction plan of yours or I’m taking over, and babe, I guarantee you ain’t ready for my plan.”

His voice still held concern and anger and all the intense emotions that were pervasive over the course of the call, but that wicked playfulness laced with cockiness crept in.

Flutters started in her stomach and traveled south. He was right; she was not ready for his seduction plan.

Damn.

VIRUS

“Okay, little man.” Unstrapping Adam from his booster seat, he led him into the clubhouse. “Let’s go see your uncles.”

had barely managed to control his rage. If it weren’t for Adam, he would’ve hopped on his bike and hunted that fucker down.

It was all he could do not to leave Adam with his brothers and do exactly that, but Rae asked him not to, so he would hold off until he had all the information.

He wasn’t convinced that Barker hadn’t put his hands on them. Rae sounded terrified, more so than just an exchange of words as she’d put it.

He would not get the chance to hurt anyone he cared about. He’d been obsessed with Rae for as long as he could remember. When he tried to convince that Rae had flirted with him, he blew it off to just harmless jealousy. He’d never told Rae about Barker, mostly because he didn’t want to give any thought to what he’d said, and a little because he started doubting it was all lie whenever he’d catch them with their heads together laughing when he wasn’t around.

When Barker claimed he’d come this close to fucking her but they were interrupted, had beat the shit out of him and never spoke to him again.

He’d tried not to believe it, he’d tried so hard, but then Barker mentioned her birthmark. The one that could only be seen when she was naked with her gorgeous peach of an ass in the air, and that’s when he’d broken his fucking nose, but things

had never been the same between Rae and him after that.

He told himself Barker was lying, but a sliver of doubt had remained and poisoned their relationship.

Shame washed over him at having never asked her, instead he refused to comfort her or ease her insecurities about Celeste because he was battling his own. Even more shame pelted him that he hadn't confessed that to her when they were trying to start over, especially when she'd mentioned him. In all honesty, he'd forgotten the depths of it until he'd seen him today.

But he refused to ask Rae now, especially when she'd just accepted his explanation about Carrie and didn't ask for details. He owed her the same, especially about the past.

He didn't, however, owe Barker a goddamn thing. It seemed to ; he was up to old tricks and still trying to get Rae. Over his fucking dead body.

"Oh my god, look at that face," Heidi gushed when she saw Adam. Before he could take his next breath, all the ladies had whisked Adam away and were promising goodies and movies and a million things couldn't track. His soul focus was on his president.

"Can we have a word?"

"Sure, just us, or ..." He trailed off before asking club business or private without saying it.

"Everyone." He nodded toward church.

Zombie whistled and pointed, causing all brothers present to follow.

Zombie banged the table and turned the floor over to .

“Barker Langdon. He and I used to be tight back in the day, but he became obsessed with Rae. I ignored the noise and, well, you see how well that worked out for us. Anyway, apparently, he wormed his way into her life pretty deep after we split. She calls him, or called him, her best friend—until today when he threatened her and Harmon at their place. Adam even calls him Uncle Barks.”

Outlaw shot up from his seat. “What the fuck? They all right?”

Zombie silenced him with a raised hand. “Go on, .”

“That’s really all I know for now. She claims he didn’t put hands on them, but she sounded terrified, so?—”

Hook piped in. “She’s either trying to keep you in check by downplaying any physical altercation or he threw down a pretty scary threat.”

“Exactly. I had a run-in with him in the diner earlier and he rubbed me the wrong way. Said I may have fucked her, but she wasn’t mine. Shit like that.”

“And you didn’t feed him his teeth?” Santa asked incredulously.

“No, he was sitting next to Adam, and then this waitress sat down. One I fucked once and, well ... look, I didn’t give him the message and that’s on me. But I don’t like it. The way he looked when he spoke about her was just off, coupled with the past and whatever transpired today with the girls, well, I’ve got a bad feeling.”

“Care to elaborate on what you mean by obsessed with Rae in the past?”

It wasn’t pleasant to talk about.

“It started as little comments disguised as compliments about her body or jokes. Then they seemed to always be together. Heads together laughing and whatnot. It built inside me and one day he claimed they would’ve fucked if not interrupted, so I beat his ass. He backed off after that, but the damage was done. I had doubts, and because of Celeste, she had doubts, and ...”

“Poisoned the well,” one of his brothers whispered with a little too much knowledge lacing the words.

“I hate to ask, but was there anything to the claim?” Squatch asked.

turned a murderous glare to his brother. “That’s my ol’ lady you’re talking about.” He didn’t miss the fact that no one questioned his claim on her.

“We just need all the facts, man.”

The reality of his words deflated ’s anger a little, at least any directed at his brothers for asking the hard questions.

“At the time I thought maybe, but the more I think about it, the more I don’t believe it. Rae isn’t like that, never was.”

“Then why would you doubt your girl like that based on just the word of another man? Men lie when it comes to getting what they want, especially women.”

He wanted to be pissed at Santa for asking the question, but there was a wisdom in it.

“He mentioned a physical trait that can only be seen naked. But honestly, it was more because I was an idiot back then.”

Silence prevailed for a few moments. The only sounds were his brothers’ breathing

and the clacking of a keyboard. His gaze followed the source of the latter sound.

Wall Street was tapping away at the club's laptop. His head snapped up.

“Do you think he and Celeste were in cahoots to break you guys up? She wanted you; he wanted Rae. Two heads are better than one, especially two as close to you two as they were. Feeding information back and forth that helps their cause. Including physical traits that a sister would know about.”

Stunned silent. That was the best description of what was experiencing. He sat there unmoving as the past pelted him. It was like staring out of the front of a spaceship, moving at warp speed. All the stars flying at him were little bits of the past.

“Damn,” declared in awe. “That makes so much sense. Everything fits. All the shit he would tell me about Rae that would get under my skin and make me doubt her.” His voice started to rise. “All the shit Celeste knew about me. It was like she was operating out of a playbook I wrote.”

He stood and paced, raking his hands through his hair. God, he'd been so stupid not to see it.

“Wall, you're a genius,” Squatch praised.

“Wow, you don't have to act so shocked.” Wall Street's nose was out of joint because he was constantly being underestimated.

knew what Wall was capable of. He'd been working at Royal Guard longer than . So, had been working closely with him, upping his computer skills and hated to admit it, but he might even be better than him. But he'd be damn if he'd ever say that aloud. Wall Street was still better at the physical security side of things, and , the cyber, but they each could hold their own on the other side if needed.

“Get all that from a computer search, did ya?” Santa asked.

“No, that was a hunch, old man. It was him being on her old cell phone plan that made me ask it though.

“Is there more to your history with this son of a bitch other than him wanting your girl?”

“Just high school shit. I took his spot on the soccer team, and his prom date ... on prom night, oh, and I fucked his sister.” He didn’t speak in a bragging tone, just a matter of fact one.

“If you’d done that to me, I would’ve kicked your ass, then fucked your next three girls as revenge.” Outlaw declared.

“Dude, you weren’t a very stand-up guy back then, were you?” It bristled to hear the disappointment and shock in Squatch’s tone, but it was a true statement.

“No, man. I wasn’t. I didn’t give a shit about anyone above myself. As much as I hate to admit it, Rae dumping me was the catalyst to me growing the fuck up and finding the Bastards. If not for this family, I’d be dead in a ditch somewhere because I messed with the wrong man’s woman or wallet.” Yeah, he wasn’t just an asshole to women, he’d swindle anyone in a pool game just for fun.

“Well, good thing I didn’t meet you back then. I never would’ve given you the nod.” Coming from Santa, that fucking burned.

“Yeah,” he agreed. What else could he do? “But it was high school—would he really be holding on to that? Not that it makes me sound any better, but it’s not like I can sound worse at this point. The truth was, we changed girls and shit more than we cleaned our rides. We were still tight after all that, or so I thought. We didn’t even

meet Rae until years later. So why wouldn't he have moved on by now?"

"Some dudes never graduate, if you know what I mean. Plus, you fucked the man's girl and his sister, brother. You don't get over that. Just ask Croon when he comes in. He doesn't even know who or if, and it's been eating away at him for months now."

"Fuck. I don't even remember that chick's name. Hell, I don't even remember his sister's name."

After a few moments of silence, Wall Street spoke. "Tricia Langdon. Oh. Her and her mother were killed in a suspicious single vehicle accident across the state line," he drew out the last word as he typed. "Thirteen years ago."

"Suspicious?"

"Yeah, police believed they were run off the road, but there were no witnesses and tire tracks were plentiful and generic, etcetera."

Something scratched at the back of his mind. "What month was that?"

"January," Wall Street answered.

"Why?" Outlaw asked.

He couldn't even wrap his mind around what he was thinking. It was too impossible. He must be misremembering. Barker was a dick, but surely he wasn't—

"Why?" Outlaw now demanded.

"It was the Christmas formal where I was with his sister in the bathroom. He caught us and took her home. It was heading into Christmas break, so I gave no thought to

not seeing him until January. When he came back, he and I were fine, but he was acting weird. Even bailed on soccer practice. Told the coach he had a cold, but he told me the truth.” Or what he believed was the truth back then.

“Said his mom took the sister and left while his dad was on a run, long haul driver, and when he came back to find his wife and daughter gone, he took it out on Barker. He begged me not to say anything, and I felt bad for him, and also for sleeping with his sister, so I didn’t say a damn word. I was just grateful we were still good.”

When he wondered why Barker never said anything about losing them, a pit formed in his stomach.

“You don’t think ...”

“That Barker ran his mother and sister off the road?” Outlaw spoke with his lawyer voice.

nodded—he couldn’t voice it.

“I don’t know, man, but the truths that come out in court make me believe anything is possible. I think no matter what, needs extra eyes watching Harmon’s, and a couple of stealths on Barker.”

“You got it, Vice. I’ll grab Teach and Home,” Santa said and exited the room.

“, why don’t you get level before you head to your girl’s? Be sure to update us as needed. Either way, your boy’s safe here.”

“I’ll call Nova and have her and Flower come stay too. It’ll make him more comfortable.” Hook was a lifesaver, and Prez was right. As much as he wanted Adam to see Rae and she missed him, it was best if he stayed where he was at.

“I’ll take Rae to my place. Not sure if I can convince Harmon to come, she’s always been stubborn.”

“Leave Harmon to me. I’ll tell her where she’ll be sleeping tonight.” Outlaw smiled.

would rather stick his hand in a bear trap than tell Harmon to do anything. Outlaw was welcomed to try, but he might draw back a nub.

With that, they filed out of the room and dispersed. knew his brothers wouldn’t fail him. If any new information came to light, he’d know. And depending on what it was, Zombie would act accordingly. If he put a hand on either Harmon or Rae, they’d take a pound of flesh. No one hurts family and gets away with it. If it turns out he had something to do with more than that, as was starting to believe, they take more than that.

Hurting women and especially family was a cardinal sin, and you could say the Bastards were not so divine retribution.

RAE

Every time she heard a motorcycle, she peeked out the blinds. Santa leaning against his bike, smoking a cigarette across the street didn't escape her notice.

She would take it up with Virus as soon as he arrived, and they were away from gooey-eyed Harmon. She'd practically melted into a puddle when they spotted Santa. Not because Harmon was enamored with him, but the notion of him. "It's so romantic." She'd declared.

Harmon was obsessed with her Hollywood version of the broody but protective biker. didn't point out that every fictional biker she'd ever watched was not just hot as fuck for his woman, he spread the love around.

much preferred romance novel bikers. They didn't cheat, and they didn't run drugs that could end up in the hands of children. They had a tough exterior but were all squishy inside, but only for their woman. No one else.

Yeah, book biker beat TV bikers hands down. Especially the series that were set in Vegas. Those were her favorites.

"Okay, so how do I look?" She twirled for her friend as if she were wearing five-inch heels and the fuck-me dress she'd planned. Instead, she was in ripped jeans, boots, her favorite Fallin In Reverse tee, and a dupe of Dean's jacket from season one of Supernatural .

"Like a perfect ol' lady to me. I love it, but I thought the plan was to cook together

here. You look like you're dressed for a ride."

"As I was strapping on my heels, I remembered we cooked together once when we first started dating and I was trying to impress him. I forgot the main ingredient in spaghetti."

"The actual spaghetti?"

"Yep. So, he offered to drive me to the store to pick it up. On the way, we took a detour and happened upon the pond. It was so perfect; we ended up having sex in his old truck. We made it to the store like five seconds before they closed. We ended up sitting on the floor, eating spaghetti at the coffee table, Lady and the Tramp style. It was a perfect night."

"So, your plan is to take him to the pond, bang him, and then come back here and slurp spaghetti. I gotta say I feel like I failed you as the sex sensei."

"No. No sex, but I want to tap into that happy memory for us. I want us to get to know each other before we start having sex as our main form of communication. Been there, done that, didn't work out."

"First, the best way to tap into good memories is letting him tap it. Second, you two know each other better than anyone else I know. Third, you just banged him last night, so there's that. Fourth, you are still not all in. You're trying to hold back a bit of yourself because you're afraid to get hurt again. Love is about risks, honey. Without the risk, you can't fall all the way. And if you're not careful, you'll cause history to repeat itself by holding back."

stared at Harmon for what felt like a lifetime. In reality, it was mere seconds, she was sure.

“You’re right,” she breathed. really thought she was all in. She wholeheartedly believed she wasn’t holding back but she was. If she wasn’t careful, she would push him away again.

She launched herself into Harmon’s arms. “You’re the best.”

“I know.”

“I love you so much.”

“Ditto girlie pop.” Harmon tried to end the hug. She played cocky but was uncomfortable with too much appreciation. “Now, go answer the door before he kicks it in.”

It had totally escaped ’s notice that someone was knocking. For a moment she jumped, thinking it might be Barker, but Santa wouldn’t have let that happen, plus she heard Virus call her name.

After disentangling from Harmon, she flung the door open and lost her breath. Virus stood there looking downright book boyfriend swoon-worthy. Black Henley under his cut. Jeans that hugged him like a second skin, scuffed boots, and a panty-melting smile on his face.

In his hand, he held a single dandelion that was missing some wisps.

Awkwardly, he spoke. “June told me before I left I had to pick a dandelion, the perfect dandelion, and tell you to make a wish. She guaranteed it was the way to any mom’s heart or, and I quote, unless they don’t have one, like Cinderella’s stepmom.”

held back her laughter, Harmon not so much.

“So, you’re taking dating advice from children?”

“If it works, I’ll try it.” He gave her a crooked smile and raised his eyebrow in question. reached for the less than perfect dandelion, closed her eyes and made a wish ... and blew.

“What did you wish for?” Virus asked, and she was ready to tell him when Harmon interrupted.

“Well, we know it wasn’t dick, that’s for sure.”

“Harmon,” she scolded.

“What, I am a truth speaker. You won’t give it up and he’s bringing weeds and following children for dating advice. I can’t work with this. Sensei out.” She said with faux exhaustion. “Besides, I’ve been summoned to the clubhouse. My escort should arrive any second now.”

Harmon reached for her purse and they both stared at her in stunned silence.

“Um, since when do you answer summons ?”

She copped a look that said anything but docile compliance.

“Since I want to go and maybe knock a certain biker down a peg or two.”

As if on cue, Outlaw pulled up and Harmon bounded out of the house before he could even get off his bike.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” expressed.

“Yeah, bad for Outlaw.”

agreed, but they were both adults, and she had her own relationship to worry over.

“So, would you believe me if I said I forgot the spaghetti?”

watched as a look of understanding crossed his face and his smile grew impossibly wide.

“No, but I’d still take you to the store to get some.”

“Great, let’s go.” Her enthusiasm was hard to contain.

She noticed him wave to Santa across the street, and he pulled away.

“What was that?”

“I sent him home since I’ve got you covered for the night.”

Before he helped her with the helmet, he kissed her until her knees went jelly mode
“You look fine as hell, Sunny.” He raked her with his gaze, and she felt it like a physical touch. “Fine as hell,” he reiterated.

“You don’t look so bad yourself.”

Before they pulled off, he shouted, “Hold on tight, babe.”

understood the fascination with motorcycles within two minutes of leaving Harmon’s. There was something so intoxicating about it. Something so ... free.

They could’ve ridden forever, and wouldn’t have complained one single bit, but

Virus slowed the bike to a crawl and was maneuvering a familiar but overgrown trail.

Their pond.

Driving his shiny bike on a trail on someone else's property wasn't part of the plan. She'd wanted to tap into that feeling they had that night, not trespass, but apparently, Virus had taken their role-playing to heart.

Although, she should've known; he'd taken the whole starting over thing literally, too.

Butterflies flapped around in her stomach, a whole freaking swarm of them, when the water came into sight, and he turned off the engine.

Virus doffed his helmet as she got off the bike. He helped with her buckle and when her helmet was free, and he pulled her to his lap. Guiding one leg over his hips to straddle him.

"Ooof." The air left her lungs, but not from the suddenness of the movement—it was from the reaction of her body being spread across his. It was instantaneous. It always had been, and obviously, it always would be.

Virus didn't say a word, he just stared into her eyes while rhythmically rocking her body against his. The heat generated from their bodies and the friction of their denim damn near ignited a fire between them.

"Fuck, Sunny," he declared as shrugged her jacket off, ripped her shirt over her head, then shoved her bra to her neck. He devoured one breast, then the next. His mouth was frenzied and oh so hot. Nipping his way up to her mouth, he took her bottom lip between his teeth and held it there to the point of pain before sucking it into his mouth.

“Ahhhh.” A moan escaped her mouth but was born in her soul.

Her hands slid up under his shirt without conscious direction from her brain. Virus stops rocking her against him to stop her hands. He sheds his cut and hangs it with care on his handlebars, then tosses his shirt somewhere to the ground behind him.

smiled at the difference in the care he took. It hit her then, she’d read about that in one of her favorite MC romances, Virus respected his cut.

All thoughts fled when he grabbed her ass and slid her back against him, grinding their bodies together. The seam of the denim hitting her just right. He bent down and bit her breast, and a rush of desire flooded her entire being.

“How long do we have to date before we can fuck again?” Virus chuckled at her question. How the tables have turned.

“That was your idea, babe. I was all about going all in. It was you who wanted to date.”

He licked from one breast to the other before dragging his tongue up across her collarbone and all the way to her ear. After licking the shell, he nipped the lobe before uttering a harsh whisper.

“As much as I wanna fuck you right here, the ground is unstable. So, I’m gonna need you to stand up.”

He bit down on her lobe hard, while patting her ass.

“No,” she protested. She was burning for him. She’d be damned if she’d let him stop.
“Please, Virus.”

He released her ear and slid her off his lap enough to break contact.

“Up,” he ordered.

She complied but pouted. Staring into his eyes, glittering in the moonlight, she cupped her own breasts, tweaking the nipples. He may tell her no because of her stupid ideas of dating, but she would not make it easy on him.

Moaning for effect, she held his gaze. Smiling internally as he stared at her hands with undivided attention.

He threw his leg over the bike and started toeing off his boots. When he reached for the button on his pants, he looked up at her. “Pants off, now.”

“But I thought—” He stood and was already shoving his jeans down his thighs.

“Stop thinking and get naked.”

“But you said no?—”

He stood before her naked, dick in hand, slowly stroking.

“The fuck I did.” He grabbed his shirt and turned back to see she was complying and smiled that wicked grin of his that turned her knees to ramen noodles.

Virus walked back into her personal space when she was naked. Wrapping the arm with his shirt around her waist, she followed the silent command to wrap her legs around him. When she did, he strode them over to the tree closest to the water. One they knew well.

Her heart melted when he placed the shirt behind her back before pushing her up

against the tree with his body. Even with the lust that was riding him, he'd thought of her comfort.

Virus kissed her soundly before dropping his mouth to her shoulder. The heat of his mouth was rivaled only by the heat of his cock that was lodged between her thighs. With each thrust of his hips, it slid between her lips and dragged against her clit on his retreat.

"Put me inside you, Sunny. Welcome me home." It was more of a plea than an order. The need in his voice was too much. couldn't have denied him even if she wanted to. To be clear, she most certainly didn't want to.

Reaching between them, she angled his cock so on the next thrust he slid home. had heard some people refer to sex as if it were a religious experience. Harmon certainly did. Personally, she never understood it, until right that second.

"I love you, Virus." At her words, he pounded into her harder and faster until his name flew from her lips and echoed off the water.

He grasped her chin and kissed her harshly. A tooth-clashing, tongue-tangling kiss that dragged her orgasm out.

Virus ripped his mouth from hers and his grip on her chin increased. Without slowing his thrusts, he ordered in a guttural voice. "Say it again."

"I love you. I love you. I love you." Each syllable punctuated by his thrusts.

When he came, he didn't roar words of love. Instead, it was a single syllable growled into the night. One four-letter word that held their entire future.

"Mine."

Time hung suspended, and they stayed there against the tree, forehead to forehead until he slid from her body.

“Look.”

“What?” She dropped her legs and turned in his arms. Facing the tree, searching where he was pointing above her head.

Reaching up, she traced her fingers along the heart with the initials DW+AJ.

“It’s still here.” She hadn’t thought about that in years.

“Yeah, babe. And so are we.” He kissed her head. “Let’s get dressed and go grab that pasta, huh?”

“Um, no thank you,” she answered as she picked up her clothes from around the clearing. “Not my idea of fun to search for farfalle on aisle nine while your,” she indicated her crotch, “you know, oozes out with every step.”

Virus started laughing so hard, she thought he’d pass out. Once they were dressed and he was recovered, he caught her in his arms.

“I never thought you could make anything about what we did sound so unsexy, but I swear if you ever use the word ooze again when it comes to your junk or mine, I’ll have to spank your ass raw.”

Their kiss was intimate, but not carnal. “Yeah, well, if you ever call it junk again, I’ll spank yours.”

“The fuck you will.”

He helped put her helmet on and they made their way back to Harmon's.

Virus walked her to the door like a gentleman, but when he tried to come in, she held him back.

"What? I thought this was a dinner date. You're not gonna feed me now? You're a spaghetti tease, that's what you are."

"Well, maybe if you hadn't fucked me senseless in the woods, we'd have had time for dinner. How about we save the dinner for tomorrow and make it a family thing? You, me, and Adam."

The smile that crossed his face transformed his whole essence. She didn't realize what she'd said that made him so happy until he spoke.

"Family." He kissed her hard and loud before dancing back off the porch. "Fuck yeah."

stood with her hands on her hips long after his taillight disappeared.

When she turned to go into the house, a hand covered her mouth from behind and she felt what she suspected was a gun against her back.

"If you fight, I'll kill the brat."

Barker? No way he had Adam. He was safe with Virus's friends. Wasn't he?

"Adam's not with you." It came out with less confidence than she'd hoped.

"You sure about that, Sunny?" He sneered the nickname Darrin had given her years ago. "Do you wanna take that chance? Come with me, and I'll send him back to his

father. Alive and kicking. If not ...” He left the threat unspoken.

was ninety-nine-point-nine percent sure that Adam was safe with Hook and Nova, but it was the point one percent that had her nodding and allowing him to lead her away.

VIRUS

was on cloud nine as he left Sunny standing there looking thoroughly ravished. She'd called him and Adam family, claimed them, and it did something to his very soul. She could've told him the winning lotto numbers of every state and he wouldn't have heard. Everything after family was just noise.

Taking the long way back to his place at blinding speeds wasn't the best idea, but it felt fucking fantastic. He had the woman, his son, his club, and the open road. What more could a man want in life?

His baby started handling wonky and at the pace he was going, he damn near ate the blacktop. He skid out pretty badly but managed to maintain control to get stopped.

Dismounting, he cursed when he saw the state of the tire. "Fuck." He counted his blessings she didn't fucking blow. He would've been toast for sure.

Pulling his cell from his pocket, he dialed Squatch.

"Talk to me."

"Squatch, it's . I need the flatbed out on Simmons, northbound around mile marker twelve.

"You got it. You need anything else?" It was his way of asking if he was hurt or needed backup.

“Nah. Just the assist.”

“On my way.” ended the call and texted Rae. She was dying for a bath, so he figured she was naked and soapy right about then.

VIRUS: Send nudes.

He laughed and thought he was clever. She’d been in the right mood to enjoy the playful text, or so he thought. But when she hadn’t responded by the time the tow truck came into view, he thought he’d overplayed his hand.

VIRUS: Just kidding, babe ... unless you want to. Had an amazing night tonight. Already planning for our family day tomorrow. Love you and good night.

There, better.

“Whoa, didja get a flat?” Squatch asked with a whistle.

“No, that one was like that. The other one actually inflated while I was driving, so I thought I’d pull over and then call you so you could ask me that exact question.” was in a playfully snarky mood. Even though it had bothered him that Rae hadn’t answered his text.

“Give me a hand, smartass.”

hopped in the cab with Squatch after they got his bike loaded.

“Struck out, huh?”

“What?” had no idea what Squatch was on about.

“With your ol’ lady. I thought you were sleeping over.” He waggled his eyebrows.

Yeah, that had been the plan, but after the perfect night by the lake and the goodnight kiss at the door, Rae sent him packing. Not in a bad way. He was riding such a high that he didn’t really fight it. The thought of a long, fast ride sounded amazing, but apparently, his bike had different ideas.

“You let Santa know?” Now Squatch really had him confused.

“Why would it be any of his business where I fucking sleep?”

Squatch slowed the vehicle to a crawl coming up on a stop sign and just stared at him.

“Dude, pussy done addled your brain. You sent her cover home because you were on her.”

Squatch’s words chilled him to the marrow of his bones. “FUCK,” he shouted and dragged his hand through his hair. “Turn here—my place is less than two blocks. I can grab my truck and be back there before Santa can.”

He started a flurry of texts to Rae with no response.

“Nothing?” Squatch asked with concern.

“Not yet, but she’d probably just be asleep already.”

“Wore her out, did ya?” Squatch teased, but didn’t play along. He was too busy worrying about Rae and kicking his own ass for forgetting he’d waved Santa off earlier.

leaped from the cab of the truck before he came to a complete stop. He didn’t bother

with goodbyes. No time.

“You want me to call Prez?” Squatch shouted through the open window.

“Not yet but stand by.”

The last thing he wanted to do was put the club on alert twice in the same day, but his gut was screaming at him.

“Pick up, damn it,” he cursed to himself as he hit redial yet again and got no answer.

Tossing the useless phone to the seat next to him, he accelerated. Hating himself more than anyone could possibly imagine. How could he have forgotten she’d been threatened just hours prior? He was supposed to get all the details on that too. Just another failure he’d have to live with.

“FUCK!” He slammed his fists against the steering wheel. “Why do I still continue to fuck up when it comes to Rae?”

He had his shit together, he really did. After they’d split, it was like a crash course in maturity for him. turned his life around. Got a great job that springboarded him to join the Bastards. Decent apartment, paid-off transportation, in relatively good health. Everything but a successful relationship.

But the minute Rae walked back into his life, it was like his brain walked out.

Silently vowing to do better, he throws the truck in park and sprinted up the porch.

“Rae, sweetheart, open up.” He knocked, but no answer. Maybe she was still in the tub. He jostled the handle, not expecting to find it unlocked, but the door opened.

Rushing in, he called her name. “Sunny, babe, answer me,” he begged desperately as he opened every door in the house.

No Rae. He grabbed his phone and called his prez. Waiting for him to answer, he looked around for any clue as to what happened. His gut told him the answer, but he fought the realization.

“You got her?” His prez’s greeting shocked him until he realized Squatch had put out the alert.

“No. Door was unlocked but nothing out of ...” The last word didn’t come as he stepped back onto the porch and saw Dean and Sam looking up at him from the dirt of the dead plant by the door.

“What is it, ?”

“Rae’s phone is in the planter by the door.” He noted one corner of it dug into the dirt like it was casually dropped in.

There were ambient sounds of the clubhouse coming through the phone. He felt guilty that his Prez was there and not at home with his ol’ lady. Another failure on his part. Just one more thing he’d have to make up for when this was all over.

“Sorry, Prez—” He didn’t get the inadequate apology out.

“No more apologies, brother. You’ve been doing that since the day I met you. We’re family. When are you going to accept that family doesn’t need a million thank-yous and apologies?”

Zombie wasn’t wrong. was more than grateful to his club for everything, and he did feel the need to apologize constantly.

“What about Teach and Home? They still have eyes on Barker?”

“Teach is sitting on his place, no activity. His car is still there. Home is following a hunch. Saw a man in a hoodie get into another car and had a gut feeling.”

Home had good instincts, so thought there might be something to it, but they needed to check his place.

“I’ll meet Teach and we’ll get a look inside. I’ll check in after that. In the meantime, get Outlaw to pick Harmon’s brain on where Barker would go besides his place.”

“Will do. I’ll try Home again and see where he’s at.”

They ended the call and raced to the address they’d found earlier for Barker. He parked a block away and jogged up to where Teach sat on his bike. Teach saw him coming in his mirror and stood.

“Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

Making their way around back, Teach popped the lock with ease and they snuck inside.

“No sign of Barker.”

“No sign of basic human hygiene either,” Teach quipped as they practically waded through pizza boxes, fast food bags, beer bottles, and dirty laundry.

“Yeah, it smells like the fucker hasn’t taken the trash out in weeks.” Something was definitely up with Barker. Not only threatening Rae and Harmon, but this place

looked like every psychopathic perp's place in half the episodes of Law he jogged back to his truck. He had a gut feeling that was exactly where they were.

He heard Teach's voice as it faded. "Ah Fuck, Prez, he's ..." There was more, but he couldn't make out the words.

Peeling out, he drove like a bat out of hell. He noticed Teach tailing him. Pulling in at the studio, he didn't bother with stealth, nor did he wait for Teach to dismount or for the brothers Zombie sent.

He sprinted around back, almost wiping out by the dumpster. Lifting a booted foot to the back door, Teach slipped between him and his target. "Fuck, brother. Calm down."

"I can't calm down. My woman is in there with that fucker, I just know she is."

"I get it, but if you kick it in, he could hurt her out of surprise or intention. Let me handle the door."

"Hurry then or I'm going in my way."

Teach was taking forever to pick the three locks, but when Teach finally stood tall, he knew they were in.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:21 pm

RAE

Apparently, she didn't learn a single thing from hours of binge-watching true crime dramas.

Not only did she allow Barker to take her to a secondary location, but she'd also gone eagerly into Harmon's studio.

He'd told her he had Adam tied up in the back and that he'd been crying for his Auntie . So, when Barker had unlocked the door, she'd bolted straight to the back, calling for Adam.

"Adam? Auntie 's here."

As she suspected, there was no Adam, but she simply wouldn't risk that there may have been a chance. When she turned to give him a piece of her mind, he slapped handcuffs on her before she could even react.

"What the fuck?" It didn't register in her mind what Barker was capable of and how much danger she was in until then.

He shoved her to the ground hard and loomed over her. Smashing the gun to her lips so hard it rammed them into her teeth.

"What the fuck indeed. Now, you can cooperate like a good girl." He stroked her hair with his free hand. "Or I can make you. I prefer the latter, but I guarantee that you won't."

Holy shit. The Barker she'd known was nowhere to be found in the cold eyes that stared down at her with a repulsive mix of lust and violence.

"What will it be, ?"

She couldn't speak, but she nodded ever so slightly, however it still ground her lips between the barrel of the gun and her teeth.

Disappointment marred his brow before he pulled the gun away and shrugged.

"Up." He lifted her by her tethered hands, causing the metal to bite into her flesh.
"Sit."

Compliance wasn't an option; it was forced when he made her sit. When he bent down to zip tie her leg to the chair, she kicked him in the face. As blood dripped from his lip, she bolted toward the front part of the studio, but she didn't make it far before he tackled her to the floor.

"Do that again, and when I'm done with you, I'll put a bullet between Darrin's eyes." The threat stilled her flailing legs. He obviously couldn't get his hands on Adam, and after this, they'd protect that precious child with the full force of the Royal Bastards, but Virus? He thought he was invincible, and that made him vulnerable. Not to mention distracted, because she had no doubt he would seek revenge.

"Now." He levered off her. "Get in the fucking chair," he screamed.

managed to get to her feet. Instead of sitting, she thrust her chin up in defiance.

"Just go ahead and shoot me, Barker, because there's no way I'll willingly let you tie me to that chair."

If she thought there was insanity in his eyes before, she was wrong. Rage and insanity and a million other menacing emotions flared to life in his eyes.

“Oh sweet, na?ve . There are so many worse things I can do to you than shoot you.” His calm tone scared her worse than his screaming anger did.

“Now, get in the fucking chair right now, or I’ll make sure that as I carve Harmon into pieces, she knows it’s because of you.”

Ice shards sliced her veins to ribbons. “You wouldn’t.” She spoke in disbelief.

“I hadn’t planned on it, no. I like Harmon and wouldn’t want to hurt her, but if you don’t get in the chair, I will do that and worse.”

There was so much honesty in his tone that she woodenly walked to the chair. Barker stayed at a distance this time. “Reach down and hook the zip tie on your legs for me.”

held up her handcuffed hands.

“They’re not useless, now do it.”

Deciding it was better her than him, she complied. First one, then the other, but left them as loose as she dared around her boots without his notice. At least that gave her some wiggle room that might come in handy to free herself.

“Now what, Barker? What’s the big plan here? They’re going to know I’m gone. Come looking for me. Hell, Harmon will call the police and the first place they’ll check is our homes and where we work.”

It was like talking to herself, Barker wasn’t listening to her. He was sitting on a yoga mat watching his phone.

When he hadn't paid any attention to her for the last thirty minutes or so, she took advantage of his distraction.

Trying to puzzle a way out of her situation, took inventory of her restrictions. There was nothing to do with her handcuffed hands. They were tight and the only way out was with a key.

Wiggling her feet in her boots, she managed to get one heel above the shoe part, but it was pointed and awkward when he looked up at her and she ceased all motion.

"You call out his name every time. Did you know that?"

What the fuck was he talking about? He must've read the look on her face.

"When you touch yourself. You call out his name. For seven fucking years. Every damn time you fingered the pussy you wouldn't let me near; you called his fucking name. I was right there, begging like a damn dog for the scraps of your attention. And the whole time it was still ALL ABOUT DARRIN."

leaned back because he stood and shouted the last into her face.

"How would you know?"

"How would I know? Because I had a front-row seat to it every fucking time," he whined in a distraught voice.

That tone morphed into one of fury as he thrust his phone in front of her face with both hands. The gun abandoned on the mat.

"This was the night I took you home after our last date. I offered myself up to you on a platter and you gave me a halfhearted kiss and sent me away. Within the hour, you

were fingering yourself and calling his name.”

Gun forgotten, stared down in horror at herself masturbating in her bed back in Vegas. Writhing with one hand at her clit and the other pinching her nipple and Darrin’s name on her lips as she came undone.

The entire meaning of what she saw hit her when he swiped to another video and another and ...

“Every fucking time, . Every time you called his name. I watched it all. Even when you were with another man, you mouthed it. Darrin.”

“You ... cameras ... in my home? How long?”

Barker ignored her.

“How long?” Her voice was meek sounding, and she hated it.

He pushed a lock of hair out of her face. She reached up with her cuffed hands and shoved his hand away. “How fucking long have those been in my house?” At least her voice sounded stronger, if still wavering.

“Since before you moved in.”

She never questioned him installing her security cameras before she moved in. She’d given him the key. She never imagined he would’ve put an extra one in her bedroom.

“Where? Where was it?” Morbid curiosity had to be the only reason to ask. She’d never felt so violated in her life. To think she’d been friends with him for years, tried to date him. “Oh my god,” she whispered. She’d left Adam in his care. Trusted him with Darrin’s son. Bile rose in her throat at the thought.

“This one.” He pointed to the video on the phone. “In the dresser mirror. This one.” He swiped to a page with multiple stills. “Above the bathtub.” He pointed to another. “In the Impala model.” And on and on he went. Five in total. In her tiny apartment. There wasn’t a single place of privacy.

In her own fucking home.

The horror had passed, replaced by pure, unadulterated rage. He hadn’t just violated her once, oh no, he had violated her for years. Every second of every minute of every hour of every day for almost seven fucking years.

had never experienced such fury. Not even when she saw Darrin with her sister or when Celeste confessed conspiring to get Darrin into her bed. None of that felt like what Barker had done.

That fury became a living, breathing thing, and it took over. She balled both her fists and swung up into his face as hard as she could. Standing to put her body weight behind it, forgetting that she was attached to a chair.

Toppling in a heap, Barker, her, and the chair, she punched as best she could. Which wasn’t very well with her hands cuffed together, but she wouldn’t stop. Couldn’t stop. She wanted to beat him to death. She wanted to get the gun and end him.

Barker managed to swap their positions, the chair holding her legs at an awkward angle. He straddled her waist and held her hands still. She was completely at his mercy, but still livid.

“How could you?”

“How could I? How could you? How could you go back to him after everything? He fucked your sister; she had his son, for Christ’s sake. And you still came crawling

back here to spread your legs for him. He took everything from me. EVERYTHING.”

“What did he ever take from you?” She’d heard they had a friendly rivalry back in high school, and then they had that blowout, but that was all she knew.

“More girlfriends than I care to count. He got everything I ever wanted. You, Celeste, everything.”

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Pump the brakes.

“Me? Celeste? You never had either of us.” At least not to her knowledge.

He leaned down with their noses almost touching. “I saw you first, but when we walked up to you and he opened his mouth, you didn’t even see me. Then Celeste, she promised we’d be together if I helped break you two up, but that was a lie. She just wanted him for herself. Got herself knocked up on purpose.”

There was so much to unpack in what he’d just said. didn’t have time to process it. Because as soon as the last syllable left his mouth, he pulled his body and his fist back.

If the rage in his eyes was any indication, she wouldn’t come out of the other side of the coming blow the same.

shut her eyes tight and waited ...

Waited for a blow that didn’t come.

Barker’s weight was shoved off her with such force it broke the legs of the chair. She was sure her legs would be bruised from it. She heard flesh against flesh, but before she could turn in that direction, a man she didn’t recognize was sliding her away. She

was still cuffed and attached to one leg of the broken chair.

“We got you, . I’ll get you loose in a minute.”

With that, he stood at Virus’s back, partially blocking her view of the two men on the floor. She could see enough to know Virus had Barker pinned on the ground.

Virus was landing blow after blow.

“Pull it back, brother, if you want any answers.”

Virus shrugged off the other man’s hand on his shoulder.

“I don’t need no fucking answers. I got all the answers I needed when he took my woman.” He answered the other man casually, but never stopped looking down at Barker, slowly lowering his face to hover above him.

“And when I saw those pictures in your apartment. You’re fucking sick. Pics of my woman when she was alone. My son with an X on his face. I know all I need to know.”

Virus’s voice was cold and calm. He glanced ’s way, and she held her breath.

“Look away, sweetheart.”

His tender tone was a direct contradiction to the rage that simmered in his green eyes.

There wasn’t a doubt in her mind that Barker wouldn’t be walking out of the yoga studio. Oddly, it didn’t disturb her as much as she expected it to. No. Not when he laid out his plan for her. Not when he threatened Adam and Harmon. Coupled with what Virus was saying, Barker was a bigger threat than she ever imagined.

Virus landed a few more punches.

“How dare you put your fucking hands on what’s mine?” he spit out and punctuated his fury with another punch. The tenderness of just a second ago was gone. Barker’s head snapping to the side was sickening, but she didn’t feel the least bit sorry for him. If she could get up, she’d do that and worse.

“You think everything is yours.” Barker’s words were garbled by the blood pouring from his mouth and nose, not to mention the swelling that had already set in.

Virus’s only answer was with his fist.

Barker didn’t know when to stop.

“She was mine in Vegas, you know. I put my hands all?—”

Virus’s action halted his words. He’d extracted a knife from somewhere and was waving it in his face.

was frantically trying to free herself; she didn’t know if it was to run or to join Virus, she just couldn’t lay there helpless attached to a broken chair.

“You touched what’s mine once. I’m going to fix it so it doesn’t happen again.”

Time slowed, or at least her perception of it. Virus lowered the knife to Barker’s wrist. He started screaming before the first drop of blood welled up where the blade met skin.

“Shit, Virus.” The other man cursed as he squatted in front of , and drew her upper body into his chest, smashing her face to him. “She doesn’t need to see that shit.”

Barker's screams grew louder and louder, but they couldn't drown out a more sickening sound. One that reminded her of parting a whole chicken. After that, his screams became whimpers.

A few seconds later, they started again, but died rather quickly. The only sound left was panting.

Lots of panting. From her, from behind the man holding her, they came from everywhere.

The next sound was Virus's voice. Low but audible. "You'll never touch anyone ever again, you sick fuck." Then she heard him spit.

"Fuck." A new voice came from behind her, followed by the sounds of boots striking the floor.

She could only see legs as they rushed past because the stranger held her so tightly against his chest she couldn't turn her head.

"Fucking, Virus."

That voice she recognized, Hook. Arms gripped her from behind and the man holding her stood with her. "Come on, , let's move, sweetheart." The two of them lifted her up and backed out of the room.

She felt like she was abandoning Virus. "No. Virus. I can't leave him." But she was moved against her will. "No," she shouted louder. "Let me go."

"Sweetheart, we will. We're not leaving your man, just moving you away from ..."
Hook's voice trailed off before he let go, but the other man still held her aloft, chair and all. Only the toes of one foot grazed the floor. Hook bent down and cut the zip

ties and tossed the remains of the chair away. The man holding her head finally set her on her feet and Hook turned her to him.

“Let’s get these off you, hmm?” He produced a handcuff key from God knows where and released her.

After rubbing her wrist, she turned and ran back to where Virus was. She slid to a halt when she spotted a heap that must’ve been Barker under a pile of yoga towels. Blood was everywhere. And one of Barker’s hands was ... she gagged.

“Get her out of here,” Virus spat.

Hook dragged her back toward the front as Virus looked at her with such sadness it was a living, breathing thing in the room. He was covered in blood, as was everything. So much blood.

Hook stopped at Virus’s approach. He stood in front of her but didn’t reach for her. “Babe, go with Hook, please. I’ll be along soon, promise. I love you, Sunny.” With that, he nodded, and Hook was on the move again.

“I love you too,” she whispered as he disappeared from her sight.

“Take her to my place.” That was the last Virus said to her before there were other voices taking over.

“You go get cleaned up and meet Prez. I’ll call the crew and get this cleaned up.”

The voices faded as Hook escorted her out of the back door.

The ride to Virus’s place was a blur. Once inside, Hook set her on the couch and disappeared down the hall. A few minutes later, he came back.

“Go get in the tub, it always helps Nova after a rough day. I’ll wait out here until your man gets back. You’re safe.”

“Adam?” Obviously, Barker didn’t have him, but she needed reassurance that he was okay.

“He’s fine. My little Flower was teaching him how to make his own pancakes, well, Nova was, but she let her enjoy the illusion of head chef. They went to bed at nine and have been out ever since. And before you ask, Harmon is fine too. Outlaw hasn’t let her out of his sight.”

She finally took a deep breath for the first time since Virus had kissed her good night.

Standing, she placed a hand on Hook’s cheek and murmured her thanks before disappearing to the bath.

There was a lot to process for the night, but one thing she did know was she was done waiting, taking things slow and waiting to see if they were perfect before dipping a toe. No, waiting was what got her into every predicament she’d been in, so action was called for.

Waiting almost cost her everything ... again. She knew in her heart that Barker would’ve killed her, and he wouldn’t have stopped there. He was going after Virus, and what better way to hurt him than Adam?

She wasn’t sad about Barker, but she was sad about the friend she thought he was. Then she remembered the cameras and any feelings other than disgust for him fled.

VIRUS

Instead of leaving the cleaning up to Santa and Iron, stayed to help. They were the professionals at crime scene clean up, but he felt a bit of obligation. If you remove someone from the census, you should finish the dirty work.

On his last trip to the Eureka Cleaning van that was parked around back, Santa cornered him.

“Get the fuck out of here.”

“I will, as soon as it’s done.”

“Fuck it, youngin’, just because it looks clean doesn’t mean it is. We’ve still got a few more hours to obliterate the evidence.”

snapped his head up. First, because Santa argued about being old, but used it when he needed an air of superiority. Second, because was stunned. It looked pristine in the studio to him. Like nothing had ever happened. At that moment, he appreciated the fact that the club owned the crime scene cleaning service like he hadn’t before.

“Besides, you need to get to your woman. She’s gonna need you after this.” He tossed his thumb over his shoulder toward the back of the studio.

pulled his shirt over his head and scrubbed his face with it the best he could, as Santa tossed him a plain black tee. He was nowhere near clean, but from a distance, he’d look it through the window of his truck if he happened to pass anyone on the way.

When he pulled up, Croon and Wall Street had the burn barrel blazing.

barely noticed Croon's limp from the shot to his leg he took while with the brothers in Montreal. "Leg all good now?"

wanted to talk about anything but what had happened.

"Ninety-nine-point-nine percent."

"Maybe keep it that way for a while, milk it just a little longer."

"Milk what?" Croon seemed genuinely confused. How could he not know?

"I don't know, Marilyn . Maybe ask yourself why a certain video hasn't been posted yet?"

He stripped all the way down, tossing everything into the burn barrel. "I hear Sway made Squatch promise to lay off until you healed. I'd say by the way you're walking, the end of the truce is imminent."

Croon cursed while Wall Street followed over to the grate and hosed him down, then filled his hands with the soap that came from Eureka.

didn't touch anything but the towel he dried off with, which went straight to the barrel.

was shivering like a motherfucker. Cold as fuck after being pelted with cold water.

He could smell the chemicals Croon was dumping down the grate as Wall Street walked ahead of , opening each door and adjusting the knobs of his shower. didn't understand the extra caution since he cleaned outside, but he did as told to do.

“Hotter.”

Wall Street closed the shower door behind him and left. A few seconds later, he returned with some clothes. “Need anything else, brother?”

“No. Thanks.”

Left to the silence of his mind as the water pelted his back, ’s shoulders slumped. He’d taken a life. One that wasn’t worth a shit, but the weight of that was still resting heavy on him.

The heavier it got, the more pissed off he got. Punching the tile, he cursed. “Fuck.” His knuckles were raw and the special soap from outside still fucking stung.

The fucker was planning on killing his son. The one he’d just found out about, but Barker had apparently known about from before he was even born. He wished he’d asked Barker about that before he killed him. But what good would it have done?

Everything that he’d learned made him sick. The things he planned to do, the things he’d already done.

“Sunny.”

Fuck, he was wasting time feeling sorry for himself while his sunshine was alone in his bed with all that had happened.

Finishing up his shower, he grabbed the clothes that Wall Street had left for him and went in search of his president. He wanted to get to Rae as soon as humanly possible.

Zombie and Outlaw had mercy on him, but it was still pretty fucking late before he unlocked his front door.

didn't get two steps into the house before he had a gun in his face. "Jesus," he yelped before Hook pulled it back.

"Welcome home," he teased.

"That didn't feel very welcoming. How are you not asleep?"

"I was, but then I heard you." Yeah, knew not to question Hook's ability to pull from a dead sleep to caffeinated squirrel in two point five seconds. There was a reason he was Enforcer.

"Adam?" He knew his son was good, he'd asked and Zombie had told him. He wanted to bust into that room and hold him tight, but he was in Hook's old bed at the clubhouse. Along with Hook's daughter and ol' lady. As much as he thought Hook would understand, he wasn't willing to chance catching Nova in a state that would send Hook over the edge.

So, he had to content himself with pressing his forehead to the door.

"Snoozing. Nova put him down after the kids gorged themselves on pancakes that they made themselves." He sounded like a proud dad. hoped that's what he sounded like when he talked about Adam.

"Thanks, brother."

"Don't mention it."

stalked to the fridge and pulled out two bottles of beer, handing one to Hook.

"The breakfast of champions."

“So, how’s she holding up?” He needed an insight into how she was, what he’d find in his bedroom.

If Rae saw him differently after what she’d witnessed, he didn’t know if he could live with it. However, he could live with that a whole lot better than if he’d broken her ... again.

didn’t wait for Hook’s answer. “He violated her.” At Hook’s puzzled look, clarified.

“Not like that. For years he watched her. He had cameras in her apartment. He had all these stills, and he used them to ...” His voice trailed off. He couldn’t even say it, he could barely think about it. Of course, he didn’t have to, Hook would’ve been kept abreast of everything step by step. Their club was efficient like that. Every cog turning in time. It was why their brotherhood was so tight.

“I failed her, man. And Adam, he ... he—” He choked back his own tears.

“I know, brother, but he didn’t, and he never will.”

“I know but?—”

“But nothing. He had cameras, but he didn’t have her. With time and help, she can take back what he tried to steal. Adam is none the wiser to what someone he loved planned.”

“But, my Sunny,” he practically sobbed.

“But nothing. Do not underestimate the mama bear instinct. Women are not as delicate as you think, especially when it comes to their kids, and make no mistake, that boy is as much hers as Flower is mine.”

looked up into his enforcer's eyes. It was hard to let him see him at his most vulnerable, but if anyone understood, it was Hook. The tables had been turned just months before when Nova's ex tried some similar shit with Nova and June.

"Now, I'm going to go collect my family and Adam. Take 'em back to my place. Then show my woman just how much she means to me. I suggest you do the same."

With that, Hook set down his still full bottle, embraced him for what would be considered a too-long hug, and left.

Stripping along the way, climbed into bed behind Rae and held her tight and slept.

The nightmares he expected didn't come. Instead, he dreamed of a future with Rae and Adam. A future that was bright and happy because he had his personal ray of sunshine with him.

Soft moans brought him to the upper stages of sleep, and a curvy ass rhythmically rubbed against his growing erection. Sun Rae, her name floated through his mind like an invocation. The hand that rested against a soft belly was guided downward until it encountered heaven.

shook off the last vestiges of sleep when the small hand left his and reached around for his cock.

"Sunny," he breathed at her neck. Nipping and sucking as she guided him home.

Home.

He was finally home, and he'd be damned if he gave anyone another chance to destroy his home.

There was nothing hurried about their lovemaking. It wasn't even about reaching their climax, it was about connection. He could feel it. Rae didn't wake him up because she wanted to get off. No, she needed reassurance. She needed home, too.

"Stay with me, Rae," he begged one last time before his pleas became orders.

"No dating. No dragging your feet. We're a family and that's final."

The slow rhythm of his hips remained steady despite the emotions welling up inside of him.

"I mean it, Ailene. I won't ... can't lose you or Adam. I won't survive it. Say yes."

Rae said nothing, just continued pushing her ass toward him as he languidly pushed forward. The woman was maddening.

With the arm tucked under her, he gripped her throat, pulling her head back against him roughly. Pulling back his hips, he pistoned them forward, burying himself to the hilt and stilling there, holding her against him with the hand on her pussy.

"Fucking say it, Rae. You're not moving an inch until you admit you belong with me." He growled.

"Please?" she begged. He held her tighter with both hands, not sure what she was begging for. Begging to keep going, begging them to let her go. He'd be damned if either was going to happen. He needed her to say it more than he needed to breathe.

"Stop being so damn stubborn and fucking say it." He pulled back and thrust violently into her and stilled again. She gasped.

"You love my stubborn streak." She panted.

“Not right now, I don’t. Tell me, Rae.” He was back to begging.

Finally, she put him out of his misery with one word.

“Family.”

Relief flooded his entire body like an adrenaline dump. Pulling back enough to shift their position, he came up on his knees, pulling her hips up with the arm at her waist.

Repositioning himself, he thrust into her again. With a hand at her head keeping her upper body pinned down, and one at her hip, he pummeled into her with such force he feared he might hurt her, but he couldn’t stop.

When Rae cried out in pleasure, he followed her. Collapsing in a heap, he rolled off her and she curled into him in that familiar way that made his chest swell.

Lazily rubbing the smooth skin of her bare back was second nature to him. This—all of this—was. Thinking back, he didn’t know how he managed without her for almost seven years.

He dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “Do you still think I infect everything I touch?” That statement had stuck with him because she wasn’t wrong. He had infected everything he touched back then.

“Yes,” she answered a little too quickly for his liking. “But not in a bad way like mono, but in a good way like ... um, well.”

“Yeah, well, what?” he teased. “There is no good way to infect something, Rae,” he said with feigned annoyance.

“Yes, there is.” Rae levered up from his chest and looked at him. Those eyes, those

deep blue eyes, held him prisoner. “Laughter is infectious. So is happiness and?—”

“And?”

“And love.” Rae always knew what he needed to hear.

“So, I’m a love ?”

Her answer was a laugh and a slap to his chest.

Pulling her on top of him, he entered her with a single thrust.

“Well then, sweetheart, I’d say you’re due for another exposure. I gotta make sure you’re good and infected.”

“Gross. Add referring to sex as exposure therapy to the list.”

“What list?”

“The list of words and phrases not to use for our sexy adult fun time or our,”—she air quoted—“private parts.”

She laughed as she pushed against his chest and rode him to bliss. He lost count of how many times they made love. At some point, sleep claimed them both.

When they woke, both were eager to see Adam.

He leaned against the archway, watching Rae brush her teeth. The act had him feeling strangely at peace. Rae in his place like she lived there. Fuck, she would too. He smiled at the reminder of how he convinced her of it.

Multiple times and in damn near every room of the place.

She met his gaze in the mirror. “What?” Her question garbled from the toothpaste dribbling down her chin. Was it weird that he found that sexy?

Stalking to her, he wrapped his arms around her waist, maintaining eye contact in the mirror.

“Just thinking, it’s a shame we didn’t test out this counter yet.” He dropped a kiss on her head as she rolled her eyes, then spit. gave her a little space to finish up. But she was moving too slow for his liking.

“Come on, come on.” He did his best to imitate Adam when he was excited. He hadn’t had much time with his kid yet, but his excited dance was already seared into his mind.

“I wanna go get our son.” ’s heart was damn near ready to burst.

Rae turned and gave him the same, albeit fake, indulgent smile she gave Adam. That sunshine that radiated from her when she was happy was back. He thought he’d never see it again, but there it was, directed at him.

They were taking Adam for pancakes to tell him the good news. Rae was staying too.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:21 pm

“Do I have to wear this blindfold the whole way?” asked for what felt like the millionth time since Virus put it on her before he helped her into the truck.

He didn’t hesitate uprooting his entire life for her and Adam, and that thought still gave her tingles every single morning when she woke up.

When Celeste died and dropped Adam in her lap just six short months ago, she never dreamed things would turn out how they did. For one, she never expected to love him so fiercely from first sight, but she would endure anything for him. As far as she was concerned, he was hers.

Celeste wasn’t a good person, or at least the Celeste she knew, but she’d done one thing right, Adam.

The smile that crossed her lips when she thought of Adam’s reaction when they’d told him they were a family was priceless.

“We always were.” He’d said matter-of-factly. And then repeated a variation of what he’d told her since Celeste died. How she’d told him he was meant for them, and that God trusted him to his other mom until that time came.

But it was those three words said with such confidence between bites of pancakes that did her in.

We always were.

It was their first outing without Adam since she decided to move in with Virus.

They'd spent almost every waking moment when Virus wasn't working or Adam in school, building the bonds they were denied all those years. Virus and , however, spent every night after Adam was in bed, rebuilding their own bonds.

The truck coming to a stop barely registered, so she jumped when Virus's lips grazed her cheek.

"Um," he purred as he lightly dragged a finger down her cheek and across her collarbone. Without thinking, she tilted her head back. Just the slightest touch from that man, and she was ready to throw her clothes off and ride his cock.

When his hand gripped the front of her throat and tightened ever so slightly, a whimper escaped her, and her panties flooded.

"Fuck, sunshine. You respond like that and it's all I can do not to drag you over here and spear you on my cock for anyone passing by to see." He tightened his hand a degree and she almost lost it, shoving her hand down the front of her jeans for some relief.

"Please." She wasn't begging him to stop, she was begging him to continue. had no idea where they were, and she didn't care. The whole world could watch, hell televise it live for all she gave a fuck—she just needed him.

"Fuck," he growled and released her throat, grabbing her hand and yanking it from her pants. The next thing she felt was his warm wet mouth around her fingers, and she whimpered again.

With one last lick, he pulled her fingers free and she damn near cried.

"Hold that thought, babe." His voice was rough. She could hear that he was barely holding it together, just like her.

Good.

His door opened and closed. A few seconds later, hers opened, and he reached around her.

“Thank fuck,” she breathed at the thought of him touching her, but instead he undid her seat belt and took her hand in his.

“Come on, sweetheart. Let’s get inside before my cock gets shredded against my zipper.”

Unsteadily, she exited the truck with Virus’s help.

“Inside where?”

“You’ll see my impatient sex goddess.”

“Goddess, I like the sound of that.” The ground was even and hard, and she could hear traffic and people. She surmised they were in a parking lot. She could also smell fast food, like french fries or something.

“I’m not hungry ... for food anyway,” she grouched.

“Good, neither am I.”

“Then where the hell are you taking me?” She could hear the whine in her voice, but she couldn’t help herself. “Virus, if you don’t fuck me soon, I’m ripping this damn thing off and getting myself off.”

She heard a familiar snicker before Virus growled.

“Don’t say a fucking word, Wall. Just open the door and leave.”

Wall Street must've complied because a wave of air conditioning hit her. When Virus led her on, the sound of her footsteps changed from that of striking concrete.

Virus turned his upper body next to her, then she heard a lock snick. The ambient outdoor sounds were deadened to almost nonexistence.

After a few more steps, he dropped her hand.

She felt him right in front of her, crowding her.

"I love you."

Before she could say it back, he kissed her so thoroughly she wobbled. His arm around her back held her upright. With his other hand, he peeled the blindfold off, but still he kissed her.

Just when she thought he'd never stop, not that she wanted him to, he did. Her lips still sought his as he pulled away.

"Hook helped me with the design, but let me know if you want anything changed."

"Design of wh..." She was asking when he stepped out of her way, and she saw for the first time where they were.

It was a shop or office of some sort. There was a small reception table sitting catty-corner to her left. Turning, the room had a glass door and a glass front, definitely a shop. There was an intimate seating area in front, down from the entrance.

"I don't understand." It came out more as a question as she wandered around, noticing framed pictures on the wall.

"Are these?—"

“Yes, they’re yours. All except that one.” He pointed at one on the very back wall by a door. She couldn’t make it out from where she stood.

Turning to see him standing right behind her with his hands behind his back, looking like he’d been caught shaking Christmas presents but also looking nervous.

“How?” was all she could manage to get out. She was overwhelmed and not quite understanding.

“A lot of help. Harmon let us into your storage to gather the pictures. The layout and studio space in the back was all Hook’s concept. He chose the paint and backdrops to complement your style of photography. The club owns the space. Bought it and the one on the other side when they opened Royal Guard so we could pick the neighbors.”

The pieces started to fall into place. She could feel the smile spreading across her face as it was setting in.

“It’s a photography studio.”

“Your photography studio.”

She spun around, seeing it in a new light.

Her studio.

leaped into his arms, knowing he would catch her. He would always catch her; she trusted that without hesitation now and it changed everything.

“You did this for me?” she cried.

“I’d do anything for you, . Everything for you.” She kissed him and tasted her own

tears, but she didn't care.

Ending the kiss, Virus set her on her feet.

"Why don't you check out Hook's picture back there?" Confusion hit her.

"I can look at it in a minute. Right now, I want to suck your cock." She rubbed him through his jeans, and he groaned.

Virus caught her when she tried to go to her knees. "Fuck, honey, you're killing me here. Please, just go look at the picture."

"Fine," she grouched, but it seemed important to him, and if it meant that much to him, she'd make it mean that much to her.

As she got closer, she could make out two people, which struck her as odd. Hook didn't have a single shot of people on his wall.

When she stood in front of it, her mouth dropped open and more tears sprang to her eyes.

It was of Virus holding Adam by a tree, their tree. Adam was pointing at a new carving under their old initials.

Will you marry me?

Her hands flew to her mouth, and she spun around, only to find Virus down on one knee holding a ring.

just stood there, mouth agape, slowly nodding for what felt like an eternity.

"Is that a yes?"

“Yes.”

Virus slid the ring on her finger and caught her up in his arms, kissing her soundly.

Speaking against her lips, he asked, “You wanna check out the back?”

Words still failed her, so she nodded ... again.

“Thank fuck.” Virus reached into his pocket and produced a small remote and pressed a button. All without letting her feet touch. When the sounds of Motionless in White floated on the air, he dropped the remote to the floor.

“What, no Taylor Swift this time?” she quipped as he reached for the knob.

“No. We’ve changed. We’re different now. Plus, this time I asked instead of just giving you a ring.”

Carrying her into the back, he kicked the door closed behind him.

“Technically, you didn’t ask. It was implied in a picture. I turned around, and boom, ring. Sounds pretty similar, if you ask me?”

Virus set her down and she glanced around. Each wall was a different color and texture and there were props and clothes and?—

Her inventory was cut off by his voice.

“Fine. How about I ask you while you’re giving me that head you promised?” He winked and reached for the button on his jeans.

“How about you ask me while you’re giving me head.”

“Even better.”

Virus dropped to his knees and reached for her shoes while she doffed her shirt. Pulling her pants and underwear off together, he tossed them aside.

“Yes, even bet?—”

The t came out a squeak as he latched onto her clit. Sucking it hard before holding it with his teeth and flicking it vigorously with the tip of his tongue.

When she came, she came hard and fast.

Virus stood, unzipping his jeans and shoving them to his thighs. Turning her around, he bent her over the large rectangular table.

“Please,” she begged. “I need more exposure therapy. I want to make sure I’m good and infected.”

“I thought we weren’t allowed to call it that?” He argued and entered her with one snap of his hips.

“Just this once, I’m allowing it.”

“Fine.” He snapped his hips again, ripping another moan from her. “Then I’m calling it junk.”

He pummeled into her.

“I don’t care what you call it as long as you don’t stop.”

“Never, Sunshine. Never.” He came with her name on his lips, and she followed.

He rained small kisses on her back and neck. She not only heard his words, but felt them.

“I’ll never stop, . Never stop loving you, we’re family now.”

We always were.

THE

OMGICANTFUCKINGBELEIVEIT

END

* * *

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