



# My Casanova (Iron Fiends #7)

**Author:** *Winter Travers*

**Category:** Action&Adventure

**Description:** Smoke didn't expect to land—literally—at the feet of Dani. From the moment he laid eyes on her, the spark between them is impossible to ignore. Dani knows the rough-around-the-edges biker with danger chasing him doesn't fit into her world, but she can't deny the pull to him.

When the club's reality show starts filming again, Smoke pulls back from Dani and is convinced he's protecting her from his chaotic world. But Dani wonders if he's hiding her instead.

With danger closing in and their worlds colliding, Smoke and Dani must decide if they're willing to fight for a future together or quit before they even begin.

**Total Pages (Source):** 30

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:53 am*

Dani

It was dead.

Not literally, of course, but it might as well have been. Mondays were usually slow, but today seemed worse. I had Stan to thank for that.

Stan was amazing. Truly, he was. He'd worked all weekend, restocked shelves, cleaned, and organized everything to perfection. He made running the Wine and Cheese Me so much easier, but on Mondays like this, his overachieving left me with nothing to do.

The bottles of wine were dusted, the kegs of imported olive oil were full, and the cheese display looked like it belonged in a glossy magazine. I had a small delivery of olives and dried fruits coming later, but it would barely take fifteen minutes to unpack and stash in the back.

So there I was, scrolling through my phone behind the counter and hoping for a customer to walk in.

I sighed, opened my podcast app, and hunted for something new to listen to. My options were getting slim. I settled on a true crime episode about the murder of Lesly Palacio and let it play as I leaned against the counter.

About ten minutes in, the whole building shook.

Like, shook .

The cheese case rattled violently, and I dropped to the ground behind the counter with a yelp. My heart was racing as I whispered, “What the hell?”

Texas wasn’t earthquake country, but lately, it felt like nothing was off the table anymore. For a second, I stayed crouched and listened to the unsettling creaks of the building. Then I peeked over the counter, and my stomach lurched.

There was a man lying just outside my front door.

Smoke filled the parking lot, and the scent of burning metal and debris wafted in. I didn’t know what had just happened, but I knew one thing—I needed to check on the guy lying in front of my shop.

I ran to the door, pushed it open just enough to slip through, and dropped to my knees beside him.

“Hey,” I said as my voice trembled when I pressed two fingers to the side of his neck. “Come on, come on...” My brief stint as an EMT when I was twenty was paying off.

Relief washed over me when I found a pulse—steady, strong. “Thank god,” I whispered.

The man was sprawled on the concrete, face half-turned into the ground. He was tall, broad, and muscular, with scrapes and dirt smeared across his arms. His leather vest caught my attention—worn and faded, with the name Smoke embroidered on the lapel. Beneath that was a patch I recognized: the Iron Fiends, a local motorcycle club.

I’d seen them around town before. Their roaring bikes were impossible to miss, but I’d never spoken to any of them. They weren’t exactly my target demographic. The moms and single women who frequented my shop didn’t typically mix with the biker crowd.

“Hey, Smoke,” I said softly and tapped his shoulder. My fingers brushed the leather of his cut, and the fabric was scorched. “Can you hear me?”

A faint groan escaped him, and his head twitched ever so slightly. Relief flooded through me; at least he was alive. I crouched closer, and my knees pressed into the cracked pavement.

“Smoke,” I whispered again, a little more urgently. His eyes fluttered open, and his glassy haze locked onto mine for a moment before his head rolled to the side.

“What the fuck?” he croaked, his voice rough like gravel being dragged over metal.

I sat back on my heels. “Yeah,” I murmured. “What the fuck is right.” The explosion that had rocked the little strip mall still reverberated in my ears. Maybe it was a gas line or something. What else could it have been?

Smoke shifted and tried to push himself up. His arm trembled under the effort, and he collapsed back with a hiss of pain. I reached out instinctively and steadied him by the shoulder. “I think you should stay put until help comes,” I suggested, my voice firm now.

He grunted and shook his head. “I don’t need help. I need to make sure everyone else is okay.”

“Everyone else?” I repeated, confused. My gaze darted around the deserted parking lot. The strip mall was small—just my shop, Wine and Cheese Me, a dry cleaner, an exotic fish store, and a couple of empty units. Hardly the kind of place you’d expect a biker gang to congregate at.

“I need to get up,” Smoke said, his tone more insistent.

“Look, you’re not going anywhere right now,” I told him and planted a hand on his chest to keep him down. It wasn’t like I could stop him if he were at full strength, but right now, he wasn’t much of a match. “I’m sure your friends are fine. Just... stay still, okay?”

His eyes fluttered shut again, and his breathing was shallow. “Angel,” he murmured, the word barely audible.

I frowned. “Huh?”

He didn’t answer. My heart kicked up a notch. His stillness terrified me. What if he’d passed out? Or worse—what if he was dying? My mind raced through worst-case scenarios, and each one was worse than the last.

“Smoke?” I leaned over him and shook his shoulder gently. His skin was warm beneath my fingertips, and up close, I could see the fine details of his face. The scruff on his jaw was rough, and tattoos crawled up his neck from his collar. By his ear was a monarch butterfly, delicate and out of place against the gritty aura he gave off. His arms and hands were covered in more ink—symbols and intricate designs that told stories I couldn’t even begin to understand. Black gauges filled his earlobes. He was handsome in that bad-boy way that made good girls like me contemplate doing reckless things.

Focus, Dani.

“Smoke, come on. Wake up,” I urged and shook him again. “You gotta stay awake for me.”

His eyes cracked open, their dark depths meeting mine. “I’m tired, angel,” he whispered.

There it was again—angel. Was he talking to me? “Uh, well, you can’t fall asleep, okay? You might have a concussion. Or worse. Just... stay with me.”

He nodded faintly, though his eyelids drooped alarmingly. My nerves were frayed. I had no idea how he’d ended up sprawled in front of my shop, but I could guess it involved whatever explosion had rocked the strip mall.

“Smoke!” a booming voice called out and made me jump.

I turned toward the sound and saw two men sprinting toward us. Their figures were outlined against the backdrop of rising smoke and flames. They were tall and intimidating, both wearing similar vests to Smoke’s.

The first man dropped to his knees beside us, his beard flecked with soot. “What the fuck, man?” he asked, his voice rough with concern. “You good?”

“I think he’s okay, but I’m not sure if he has internal injuries or something,” I explained and shifted back slightly to make room.

The bearded man’s eyes snapped to mine, sharp and assessing. “Who the hell are you?”

“Uh...” I stammered, caught off guard. “I own the shop your friend landed in front of.”

He grunted, clearly unimpressed with my answer. His name patch caught my eye—Yarder. It was oddly convenient that these guys wore their names on their chests. The second man, who stood watchfully behind Yarder, had Fade stitched onto his vest.

“What happened?” Smoke rasped, drawing the attention back to him.

“Building blew,” Yarder growled, his expression dark.

“Fucking O’Hara,” Fade spat, and his tone was laced with venom.

O’Hara? I blinked, my confusion deepening. Another name I didn’t recognize. My questions were piling up fast, but I had no answers.

“What about the girls?” Smoke asked, his voice weak but insistent.

“We’re all good, man,” Yarder assured him. “Can’t say the same for O’Hara, though. Compass is with her.”

I frowned. O’Hara was a woman? And who was Compass? The mystery surrounding these men grew with every passing second.

In the distance, the wail of sirens cut through the air.

“Cops?” Smoke asked, his tone wary.

“Fucking blast shook at least three blocks’ worth,” Yarder growled. “None of us called, though. I’m sure other people did.”

Both men turned their eyes on me. Suspicion flared in their gazes.

I held up my hands defensively. “I didn’t call the police! I’m no snitch.” The words tumbled out before I could think them through, like I needed to prove myself to them.

Fade chuckled behind me.

More like I hadn’t had time to call the police. The second I saw Smoke lying in front of my shop, I didn’t think of anything other than to help him.

“Should we split?” Smoke asked, his voice tight with strain as he leaned against Yarder for support.

Yarder shook his head. “We run, and it’ll look like we did this.”

“Third fucking explosion with us present,” Fade muttered, his tone laced with frustration.

Yarder turned a sharp glare on him. “Shut the fuck up.”

I froze. Ope. They must have realized I was standing right there and quietly absorbed every word.

Smoke shifted and tried to sit up straighter with a grimace. Yarder moved quickly to help him and slipped an arm under his shoulder.

“Fucking hell,” Smoke groaned, and he pressed a hand to his ribs.

Fade let out a low whistle. “Pretty sure you flew like forty feet, man. Fucking low-flying bird.”

Despite the pain, Smoke chuckled weakly before wincing. “Pretty sure I cracked a few ribs on the landing.”

“Hopefully, that’s all you cracked,” Yarder said, his tone gruff but not without concern. He gently touched the back of Smoke’s head and pulled his hand away to inspect the blood. “How’s your head feel?”

“Like I flew forty feet and landed on it,” Smoke replied with a pained laugh.

“Yeah, you’re gonna feel this in the morning,” Yarder said and shook his head.



Smoke groaned softly. “I much prefer you being the one blown up.”

Yarder didn’t seem amused. Instead, he glanced at me, and his eyes narrowed, assessing whether I was a threat.

“She’s cool,” Fade said.

“How the fuck do you know that?” Yarder asked, his brow furrowed.

Fade motioned toward my shop. “Because she’s into wine and cheese, man. Almost as good as beer and cheese.”

I jumped in and hoped to ease the tension. Fade was right; I was cool in whatever sense that he wanted me to be, so I didn’t get on the wrong side of the Iron Fiends. “I have a few imported beers, actually. They pair well with cheese. Uh, you guys should check them out... sometime when you didn’t just get blown up,” I ended softly.

Fade grinned. “See? Cool.”

Yarder rolled his eyes but didn’t argue further.

The sound of sirens grew louder, and the shrill wail signaled that help was almost here. Moments later, fire trucks, an ambulance, and four squad cars pulled into the parking lot with their lights flashing brightly.

“Let the fun begin,” Yarder muttered under his breath. “Everyone stick to what we were doing.”

Curiosity got the better of me. “And what were you doing?” I asked, my voice quieter than intended. “I mean... just so I know.” Did snitches ask people what they were doing? They probably did. Maybe asking wasn’t my best choice.

Yarder's sharp glare returned, and I immediately regretted speaking up. Yeah, snitches do not ask questions.

"We were looking at the empty space to rent," Fade said quickly and saved me from Yarder's scorn. "Building fucking blew before we even opened the door."

"Wow, that's... crazy," I said. My words felt stilted. It was crazy, but these guys didn't seem to think it was too crazy, seeing as this was the third time they had apparently been blown up. "Maybe it was a gas line or something? The gas company was out here a couple of days ago, working on something." I vaguely remember seeing a truck parked in front of the empty storefront earlier in the week.

Yarder's expression softened, if only slightly. "Yeah?"

I nodded and held onto the detail like it might clear me of any suspicion.

Smoke shifted again and groaned softly. "Get me up."

Fade moved to his other side, and together with Yarder, they helped Smoke to his feet. He swayed unsteadily between them and looked like he might collapse at any moment.

"Thanks for your help..." Yarder said and trailed off, waiting for me to fill in the blank.

"Uh, Dani. I'm Dani Marie." It felt strange to say my name out loud. I hadn't used my last name in years—too many bad memories tied to it. After my divorce, I'd simply dropped it altogether and just used my first and middle name.

"Thanks for your help, Dani Marie." Yarder gave a curt nod before the three of them started toward the cops and firefighters. Firefighters were already working on

assessing the building, while four cops looked like they were trying to figure out where to start first.

I stayed back and watched them go. Smoke glanced over his shoulder at me, and his eyes met mine for a fleeting moment. He didn't say anything, but the look he gave me was... well, I don't know exactly what it was, but it was something. A thank you, maybe, but it was more than that.

I folded my arms over my chest and gave him a small nod in return. Seemed like a safe thing to do.

The morning had started off boring as hell, but now? Now, it had been explosive, and I still had no idea what had happened.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:53 am*

Smoke

God damn, I was going to be sore as hell tomorrow.

Every part of me felt like it had been put through a meat grinder and then set on fire for good measure. I leaned heavily on the bar and let my weight sink into the stool beneath me. It wasn't much relief, but it beat standing.

"I think you need one of these or twenty." Pirate set a beer in front of me with a grin.

I glanced at it and grunted, "Something stronger."

Pirate chuckled and shook his head as he grabbed a shot glass. "That bad?" He filled the glass with whiskey and slid it over.

I grabbed the shot and tossed it back. The liquor burned a clean trail down my throat. "Right now? Not bad, but I know it's going to get a hell of a lot worse." I tapped the empty glass. "I plan on passing out before that happens."

Pirate smirked and poured another shot. Before I could down it, Yarder dropped onto the stool next to me, his movements stiff but not nearly as wrecked as mine.

"How ya doing?" he asked, his voice heavy with shared misery.

I shrugged and tossed back the second shot. The burn didn't feel as sharp this time, but it was a welcome distraction from the deep aches spreading through my body. "Been better."

Yarder chuckled darkly and shook his head as he motioned for Pirate to bring him something. “Yeah, I hear that. You never forget what it’s like being blown up.”

Pirate slid a beer to him, and the cap had already popped. “So, I’m the bartender tonight?” he asked and raised an eyebrow at the two of us.

“Seems to be,” Yarder replied with a shrug and glanced around the room. “Though I think you’ll have it pretty easy. Just amaretto sours and popping beer tops. Not like we’re having some rager.”

“Did you say amaretto sour?” Sloane’s voice rang out from the corner, loud enough to catch everyone’s attention.

“Jesus,” Pirate muttered under his breath. “Now I’m never going to get out from behind this bar with the girls wanting drinks.”

“Oh!” Olive called, her voice sweet but insistent. “Can you stone mine?”

“What’s stone? Just amaretto on the rocks?” Fallon asked, lounging on the couch with Compass’ arm draped over her shoulders.

“Add orange juice!” Sloane and Dove shouted in unison from across the room, both of them looking far too entertained.

Pirate sighed and leaned against the counter. “All I’m doing is amaretto, sour, and ice. If you want something more than that, then you can get your asses back here and make it yourself.”

Yarder smirked and tipped his head to the side like he was considering something. “What if I want something more in an amaretto sour?”

Pirate shot him a look. “You’re kidding me, right? The only thing I’ve ever seen you drink is whiskey and beer. You’re telling me you suddenly have a taste for some sweet, weak-ass drink?”

“Oh boy,” Poppy giggled from her spot near the jukebox. “Seems like you might have poked the bear, Pirate.”

“Well,” Pirate said to Yarder, “you want a fancy drink, or are you gonna stick to your usual?”

Yarder chuckled and held up the beer Pirate had given him. “I’ll stick to this. No point messing with perfection. But you can get one of those Amaretto Stone Sours for each of the girls.”

“Jesus,” Pirate muttered, rolling his eyes as he grabbed the amaretto bottle and got to work on the drinks.

I shifted on the stool, and a groan slipped past my lips as a dull ache shot through my ribs.

Yarder glanced at me. “You either need another shot or just to lie down.”

“I’ll take four more shots, and you giving me the rundown of what’s going on.” Then, I planned to lie down.

Yarder shrugged. “Don’t know shit, man.”

“Kate still in the hospital?” I asked.

Yarder nodded. “Yup, but shit doesn’t look good for her.”

“That’s because she took the brunt of that explosion,” Pirate added, pouring the drinks. “Which I’m sure was not a coincidence. She was the bait to get us there, and they knew they would need to get rid of her.” He grabbed my empty shot glass and filled it before sliding it toward me.

“We thinking she was in on all of this?” I asked.

Yarder shook his head. “Nah. She was just a pawn.”

“Fucking Boone and Gibbs,” Pirate muttered.

“Boone and Gibbs, who we can’t get fucking close to, but they seem to be able to get to us whenever they want,” Yarder sighed.

I grabbed the shot and tossed it back, feeling the burn. At first, I was drinking to dull the pain, but now I was drinking because of Boone and Gibbs. Those two fuckers were gunning for the club, and every time they made a move, they got closer. “I think I’m just going to get drunk and not think about Boone and Gibbs. They’ve fucked up my day enough.”

“Truth,” Pirate grunted. He finished off the drinks for the girls and called out, “Come and get your girl drinks!” He refilled my shot, and I tossed it back.

Sloane, Poppy, and Fallon came up to the bar to grab their drinks.

“Thank you, Pirate,” Poppy cooed. Yarder grabbed her around the waist and pulled her into his lap.

“You can thank me too for having him make them,” Yarder growled.

Poppy reached up and patted his cheek. “Thank you for being the big bad president.

There are other ways I can show you thanks later.”

“Oh, get it, girl!” Sloane called as she juggled two drinks in her hands.

Fallon grabbed the remaining glasses and passed them to Olive and Dove while Sloane handed the last one to Adalee.

“Let’s talk about The Cakery and not Boone and Gibbs,” Adalee suggested as she sipped her drink. “I know we didn’t get to see the space today before it got a hole blown in it, but from the pictures I saw, it would have been perfect.”

“I bet we could get that space for pennies on the dollar and have input on how it’s fixed,” Fallon added. “I mean, you gotta think the landlord is freaking out about having to make all of those repairs on a space they don’t even know who is going to rent.”

Sloane stretched out her arms like an airplane and soared around the room. “I think maybe the Iron Fiends could swoop on in and help them out.”

“Is that you swooping?” Aero laughed as Sloane landed in his lap. He wrapped his arm around her and pressed a kiss to her lips. “Perfect landing.”

“Uh, that sounds like a good plan, but how do we find out who the landlord is? Our connection was Kate O’Hara, and she’s laid up in a hospital bed,” Throttle pointed out.

“What about the wine chick?” Fade asked. “She might be able to help hook us up with the landlord.”

“Wine chick?” Adalee asked.



“Wine and Cheese Me,” I grunted. “She helped pick me up off the ground after I landed in front of her shop.”

“There’s a wine and cheese store in Mt. Pleasant?” Sloane asked. “That sounds like my kind of store.”

“Oh, please,” Dove laughed. “The only wine you like is Boone’s Farm or a wine cooler. I don’t think a snooty wine place is going to have either of those.”

“Chick wasn’t snooty from what I could tell,” Yarder shrugged.

“She did tell us she wasn’t a snitch when we were talking about the cops coming,” Fade laughed.

“I like her already,” Dove cackled.

“We’ll wait for shit to settle for a couple of days, and then we can hit her up,” Yarder said.

“Was her place damaged in the explosion?” Poppy asked.

“Didn’t seem like it, at least not from what we could see. I think she was far enough down from the explosion that it just rattled the hell out of her store.” Yarder pressed a kiss to the side of Poppy’s head. “We’ll check on that too when we talk to her.”

“We’re coming with!” Fallon, Adalee, Dove, and Sloane all called in unison.

Poppy perked up. “Me too.”

“Jesus,” Yarder grunted. “This isn’t some girls’ day out.”

“Uh, yeah it is. You really think you’re going to go to a wine and cheese place without us coming along? You get the information, and we can get some wine and cheese for girls’ night.”

Pirate poured four more shots and pushed two toward me. “I think we both need to get blackout drunk from the sound of the way that conversation is going.”

I grabbed the shot and tossed it back. The alcohol was finally working its magic, dulling the pain and fuzzing the edges of my thoughts. The room around me blurred into a comfortable haze, voices floating in and out without really sticking. I grabbed the other shot and knew I was just about ready to pass the hell out.

“It’s times like this we should be glad we don’t have ol’ ladies, Pirate. No one to tell us we can’t drink, and we don’t have to worry about no girls’ nights.”

Pirate saluted his drink to me and tossed it back. “A-fucking-men, brother.”

I felt the warmth of the booze spread through me, and the pain subsided to a distant throb. Laughter and conversation swirled around me, but I didn’t register much of it anymore. I pushed myself to my feet and swayed slightly. Yarder caught my gaze.

“You good?” he asked.

I nodded. “I will be in about two minutes when I pass out.”

Yarder chuckled and shook his head.

I stumbled my way down the hallway, stopped in front of my door, and fumbled with my key. After a few tries, I got the door open, stepped inside, and kicked it shut behind me. I barely managed to make it to the bed before flopping face-first onto it.

The drunken haze took over completely, and the day's events floated around in my mind—the explosion, the goddamn cops, so much pain. But through it all, one face lingered longer than the rest.

Dani.

Her face was the last thing I saw before everything went black.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:53 am*

Smoke

“You should have called me.”

I rolled my eyes and cradled the phone between my shoulder and ear. “By the time I called you, Stan, you’d have already seen it on the news.” I was standing at the stove, stirring a pot of Rice-A-Roni while sipping my favorite Pinot Noir. Yeah, I liked good wine, but I also liked comfort food. “I’m fine, and the shop is fine as far as I can tell.” A few bottles of wine had shattered, but everything else seemed just a little shaken up.

“You need to have Tim come in and check everything over.”

I groaned and took another sip of wine. “I don’t need Tim to come in. He’s already got enough on his plate with that giant hole in his building.” Tim owned the strip mall, and while he seemed like an okay guy, the last thing I wanted was him poking around my shop. If he found something wrong, I’d have to close while it was fixed, and shutting down Wine and Cheese Me was not an option.

Business was good—great, even—but not so good that I could afford to close the doors.

“I’ll come in tomorrow and look around,” Stan insisted. “If there’s anything wrong, I can be the one to fix it.”

“Stan,” I said and dragged out his name. “You’re not on the schedule until Thursday. Enjoy your days off and don’t even think about Wine and Cheese Me.” I turned off

the burner and moved the pot to the kitchen island.

Stan scoffed. “Fine. I’ll just watch Jeopardy , meditate, and try that Manchego we got in last week.”

“And the goat cheese,” I added. “We still need to figure out the best pairing for it.” Stan loved trying out new products and figuring out pairings. I liked it too, but for him, it was almost a sport.

“I’ll let you know on Thursday,” he said before he hung up.

I grabbed a fork from the drawer and leaned against the counter. I ate straight from the pot. Sure, I could grab a plate and sit down like a proper adult, but what was the point? I was the only one eating, and there was no reason to dirty more dishes.

I had stuck around the shop until six when the cops and fire department finally left, and by six-thirty, I was home eating half a pot of Rice-A-Roni. My plan for the night? Plopping on the couch and binging more of The Equalizer . Queen Latifah was everything, and I was hoping—no, rooting —for her and the hot cop to finally hook up. I was only halfway through season one, but my hopes were high.

I needed the distraction tonight.

I still hadn’t wrapped my head around everything that had happened earlier. My brain kept replaying it, over and over, and the same face stuck front and center.

Smoke.

I didn’t know why, but something about that man wouldn’t let me go.

Sure, he was handsome—like ruggedly, unfairly handsome—with that bad-boy air.

Then again, all his friends had that vibe. But there was something about him in particular. Something that wouldn't leave me alone.

I chalked it up to how chaotic the day had been. Hot, tattooed bikers didn't just fall out of the sky and into my life every day.

I took another bite and chewed slowly as I mulled it over. That had to be it.

When I finished, I stashed the leftovers in the fridge, topped off my wine, and headed for the couch. My favorite blanket was waiting for me, and I draped it over my legs as I queued up the next episode of *The Equalizer*.

This was exactly what I needed: just me, my wine, and Queen Latifah.

No Smoke.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:53 am*

Smoke

I laid in bed and stared at the ceiling. My body felt like one big bruise even three days after the explosion. Every breath came with a dull ache in my ribs. It was a brutal reminder that I wasn't as indestructible as I liked to think. My arms and face itched from the scabbing cuts, and my muscles screamed every time I shifted even a little.

Thursday.

The past three days had been a blur of painkillers, restless sleep, and the low murmur of voices outside my room. The club was laying low and keeping things quiet, which was for the best. The cops didn't think we were behind the explosion, but they sure as hell wondered why we always seemed to be in the middle of shit when things went south.

The ceiling fan spun lazily overhead, and the rhythmic creak of its motor was the only sound in the room. My cut hung over the back of the chair in the corner, and my boots were neatly tucked beneath it.

I needed to get up.

Sitting here feeling sorry for myself wasn't going to make the soreness go away, and if I didn't start moving, I'd be stiff for weeks.

"Fuck it," I muttered and forced myself to move. I gritted my teeth against the sharp protest of my ribs and planted my feet on the floor.

I moved slowly as I pulled a black shirt over my tattooed torso and winced as the fabric dragged across healing wounds. I shrugged on my cut and felt better with the weight of the leather, reminding me who the hell I was. My boots went on next, and each movement was still painful but better than the last. Finally, I grabbed my motorcycle keys off the nightstand and headed out.

The clubhouse was quiet, with only the low hum of the TV filling the space. Dice was sprawled on the couch, one arm draped over the back with his eyes half-watching whatever mindless shit was on. He barely glanced up as I walked in.

“Where you going?” he asked, his voice scratchy like he’d been up all night.

“Ride.”

His eyebrows lifted slightly. “Where to?”

“Just around. I need to get the hell out of here,” I said and ran a hand through my hair. Three days stuck in my room made the walls feel too damn close. I needed the open road and the wind to clear my head.

Dice smirked. “I’ll come with.”

I hesitated. I wanted to be alone and to get lost in the ride, but I wasn’t stupid. Boone and Gibbs were still out there somewhere, and if they wanted to finish what they started, I wouldn’t stand much of a chance on my own. “Fine, then let’s go.”

The sun was blinding outside, and I had to squint as we walked toward the bikes. The air smelled like fresh sawdust and hot asphalt. Yarder, Throttle, and Compass stood near the new garage and watched as the crew put up the last of the siding.

I whistled low. “Shit. We’ve got a fucking building.” The last time I’d seen it, it had



been nothing but a concrete slab and a half-finished frame. Now, the walls were up, and a metal roof stretched over it. “When the hell did this happen?”

Dice chuckled and kicked at a stray nail on the ground. “Yeah, man. The world keeps spinning even when you’re laid up in bed. Yarder says we should be back in business in a month or so.”

“Damn,” I muttered and eyed the structure with a mix of pride and frustration. We were moving forward, even though Boone and Gibbs were still out there.

Crazy.

Nothing and no one was going to stop us.

The second I swung my leg over my bike, pain lanced through my ribs and stole my breath for a second. I cranked it up and gripped the handlebars tight while the familiar vibration of the engine settled me. Fuck, I was sore, but the rumble beneath me was worth it.

Yarder glanced over his shoulder at us. I gave him a two-finger salute, and he nodded before turning back to the work crew.

Dice revved his engine and grinned. “You know he’s only cool with you leaving because I’m going with you.”

I shrugged and pulled my sunglasses down over my eyes. “Yeah, well, I’m good with it.”

We all knew the risks. Boone and Gibbs were still out there, watching, waiting. The only way to stay ahead of the shitstorm brewing was to keep moving, stay sharp, and be ready when it came crashing down.

I glanced at Dice, and he gave me a nod.

Time to ride.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:53 am*

Dani

“Go.”

“We’re open for another two hours, Stan.”

“And I can handle the next two hours by myself,” he replied. “You just worked the past three days by yourself, so I can handle working two hours by myself. You look tired, honey. Go home and get some rest.”

I folded my arms over my chest. “Don’t you know it’s rude to tell a woman she looks tired, Stan? Now you got me thinking I look like Godzilla after a three-day binge tearing up Tokyo.”

Stan gave a big belly laugh, and his face shone with amusement. “You got a way with words, Dani.”

“Coming from the man who just told me I looked tired,” I sassed and arched an eyebrow.

“Come on,” he sighed, his tone gentle. “You know what I mean. I can tell since the explosion that you’re on edge. I only worked with you today, and you jumped about ten feet in the air when I set a case of cheese on the counter.”

“Dropped,” I pointed out. “You dropped that case of cheese, and it was loud.”

“I didn’t do anything different than I normally do, Dani. Just admit you’re a little on

edge. Go home and start your night a little early,” he reasoned and gave me a look that told me he wasn’t going to back down.

I sighed and ran my fingers through the tangled strands of my hair. “I mean, I am fine, but if you’re okay with closing up tonight, I won’t argue.”

“You did argue,” he laughed, “I just won.”

I rolled my eyes and grabbed my purse from behind the counter. I hitched it over my shoulder and pulled out my keys. “I will see you bright and early in the morning, okay?” I may be taking off a couple of hours early tonight, but I won’t be taking off any more time.

Stan nodded and gave me a reassuring smile. “You got it.”

“Goodnight, Stan,” I called over my shoulder and pushed through the door.

The late afternoon heat slammed into me like a wall the second I stepped outside. The parking lot was nearly empty, and the asphalt radiated waves of heat under the relentless Texas sun. My car sat toward the back and shimmered in the golden light like an oven waiting to swallow me whole. Why did I decide a black car was a good idea?

I unlocked the door, tossed my purse into the passenger seat, and slid behind the wheel with a tired groan. The leather seat burned against my skin, and I quickly turned on the AC. The vents blasted hot air before finally cooling down. I put on my sunglasses and tapped my fingers on the screen to put on music.

Fleetwood Mac drifted through the speakers as I pulled out of the lot, and Stevie Nicks’ voice wrapped around me like a familiar embrace. Just as she started singing about taking her love down, the tire pressure light on my dash blinked rapidly.

“What the hell?” I muttered and frowned as I glanced at the display. The car felt fine—no pulling, no odd noises. Maybe the sensor was acting up. I pressed a few buttons and brought up the tire pressure screen to make sure everything was fine.

It wasn't.

The number for the right rear tire was dropping fast. A heartbeat later, the car started to shudder beneath me, and the steering wheel vibrated in my hands.

“No, no, no,” I cried, and my pulse kicked up as I scanned the road for a safe place to pull over.

Stan was right—I was exhausted. The past three nights had been a blur of restless sleep and nightmares about the explosion. The last thing I needed was a damn flat tire on top of it.

Frustration bubbled up in my chest, but I swallowed it down as I eased the car onto the gravel shoulder of the road. My fingers clenched the wheel as the car came to a stop, and dust swirled around me.

“Just great,” I muttered and rested my head back against the seat. “This sucks.”

I opened the door and stepped out into the sweltering heat, the wave of it slapping me in the face like an oven door left open too long. The thick scent of hot rubber filled my nostrils, acrid and unmistakable. Walking around to the back of the car, I crouched down, brushing the dust off my hands onto my jeans before inspecting the damage.

The tire was completely shot—torn to shreds like it had gone through a blender. Long, jagged gashes ran across the rubber, and bits of it flapped limply in the breeze.

“Perfect,” I mumbled under my breath and wiped sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand. There went my extra two hours at home. So much for Stan’s insistence that I needed rest.

I sighed heavily. The day had been long, and now this? Great. Just great.

At least I wasn’t stuck on a busy road. The side road I had taken was quiet, with barely any traffic in sight—just a few passing cars.

I moved to the trunk and popped it open. The heat trapped inside rolled over me like a furnace blast as I pushed aside the mess of reusable grocery bags and an old sweatshirt to uncover the spare tire nestled in its compartment.

I tugged at it, but the damn thing didn’t want to budge. “Come on, you piece of shit.” I gave it another hard yank, but it didn’t budge.

Just as I was working up a sweat wrestling with the stubborn tire, the low rumble of an approaching engine echoed through the stillness. The sound vibrated through the air, and I paused to glance over my shoulder. Two bikes rolled to a stop a few feet away, and dust kicked up around them. The riders swung their legs over, and their boots crunched against the gravel as they dismounted.

I shielded my eyes with my hand and stared at the two figures. I recognized one of them almost immediately.

Smoke.

Jesus.

Even under the relentless sun, he looked as effortlessly cool as ever. His black T-shirt clung to his tattooed arms, and his leather cut fit him like it was made for him. I

swallowed hard and felt an odd mix of relief and nervousness in my stomach.

“You okay?” Smoke called out.

I pushed my hair out of my sweaty face and forced a tight smile. “Uh, well, I’ve been better.”

He stepped closer, and his gaze locked onto mine. I could see the flicker of recognition pass over his face.

Yep. He knew who I was now.

I’m sure I looked about as shocked as he did.

“I guess it’s my turn to help you,” he smirked, his lips tugging up in that way that made it impossible to tell if he was being cocky or just charming.

“You two know each other?” the other man asked and glanced between us with mild curiosity.

Smoke smirked and pushed his sunglasses on top of his head. His dark eyes met mine again. “This is Dani Marie. She owns the wine shop.” He gestured to the other guy. “Dani, meet Dice.”

I gave an awkward wave to Dice and felt suddenly very out of place in my dusty jeans and sweat-soaked T-shirt. “Uh, hi.”

Dice grinned wide. “Wine chick,” he chuckled. “The girls are gonna be pissed that I got to meet you before them.”

Wine chick? Girls? My mind scrambled to catch up.

“Uh, well...” I stammered, unsure of what to say. I always felt a little clueless when these guys talked like there was some inside joke I wasn’t privy to.

“You call for a tow or anything?” Smoke asked and dragged his gaze from me to the mangled tire.

I shook my head, brushing my damp hands on my thighs. “Uh, no. I was just going to put the spare on.”

Smoke crouched down beside the tire and ran his hand over the tattered rubber. “Damn,” he muttered and inspected the damage more closely. “You run over a couple of axes or something, angel?”

I blinked. Angel?

It took me a second to reply because my brain was still short-circuiting over that one little word. It was probably nothing—just something he called every woman, right? But still, hearing it again in his rough voice did something weird to my insides.

“Uh, not that I noticed,” I stuttered.

I moved next to him; the heat rolled off the pavement in waves as I took him in up close. Tattoos crawled up his arms, black ink curling around defined muscles, and disappeared beneath the sleeves of his shirt. The butterfly peeked out from his collar, and the wings hugged the side of his neck. His leather cut sat snug over his shoulders, and the worn patches stitched onto the back were proudly displayed.

Even in the miserable Texas heat with a flat tire and sweat sticking to my skin, I couldn’t ignore just how handsome Smoke was.

“You come from the shop?” he asked, his deep voice cutting through the quiet hum of



cicadas in the distance.

I nodded and wiped my forehead with the back of my hand. “Uh, yeah. I was just headed home when all of a sudden, my tire pressure warning light went off.”

“Good thing you pulled over when you did.”

Smoke stood up, and suddenly, we were too close. The scent of leather and motor oil mixed with the heat, wrapped around me. He bumped into me slightly, and before I could stumble back, his hands shot out and gripped my arms to steady me. A flush of heat crept up my neck at his touch, and for a moment, we just stood there, eyes locked. His fingers were warm, steady, and lingered a little too long.

“You good, angel?” he asked, and his lips curved into a smirk.

There was that name again. It had to be something he called everyone. He had said it the day of the explosion, and he had called me it twice today.

“I’ll get the spare,” Dice said, breaking whatever weird spell Smoke and I had fallen into.

I cleared my throat and took a step back. Smoke let his hands fall, and I immediately missed their warmth.

“Uh, I couldn’t get it out.” I pushed my damp hair behind my ear and felt a little ridiculous. “It’s stuck.”

Smoke and Dice moved to the open trunk and peered inside.

“It’s bolted in.” Dice leaned over, his hands moving quickly, and within seconds, he held up a small nut. “Just a wingnut to keep the tire from bouncing all over the

place.”

Smoke grabbed the spare and the jack underneath with barely an effort.

“Oh, uh, well...” I stammered and felt my face heat up. I would have liked to have said I knew that there was a nut holding it in, but obviously, I didn’t.

“It’s all good, angel. A lot of people don’t know how to change a tire. That’s good for our line of business.” Smoke leaned the spare against the car by the flat tire and flashed me another smirk.

“I know how to change a tire. My ex showed me how,” I insisted and crossed my arms defensively. And I did. “I just have never had to get it out of the car.” I motioned to the open trunk. “He left out how to get the tire out.”

Smoke chuckled and kneeled in front of the shredded tire. “Just a small detail he forgot.”

I watched as he and Dice got to work, their movements quick and efficient. Smoke loosened the lug nuts with ease. Dice slid the jack under the car, pumping it up steadily while they exchanged a few words I couldn’t quite hear. It didn’t take long before the old tire was off, and the spare was in place. Dice handed Smoke the lug nuts, and he secured them tightly.

Before I knew it, the job was done. Smoke tossed the destroyed tire into my trunk and slammed it shut.

“Come over to the clubhouse tomorrow, and we’ll get you a new tire.”

“Oh, no. You don’t need to do that. You guys have already done enough for me,” I insisted and shook my head.

Smoke leaned against my car, his dark eyes fixed on mine. “You probably picked up something in the parking lot from the explosion. This goes back to me and the club. I’ll take care of your tire.”

I rolled my eyes. “I could have picked up something anywhere, Smoke. I don’t think you can really blame yourself for this.” I stepped closer and met his gaze. “And besides, you guys made it sound like the explosion wasn’t your fault, so this isn’t your fault.”

Smoke glanced at Dice, and something unspoken passed between them.

The Iron Fiends hadn’t been the ones to blow up the strip mall, but something told me they had been the ones the explosion was targeting.

“Come to the clubhouse,” Smoke said again, and his tone left no room for argument. “I’ll take care of your tire.”

I looked up at him and searched his face. “We’ll see. I have to work tomorrow.”

Smoke’s lips thinned in a way that told me he wasn’t a man who liked hearing ‘we’ll see.’

I stepped back and smiled at Dice. “Thank you for stopping to help. I would still be trying to get the tire out if you guys hadn’t stopped.”

Dice grinned and tipped an imaginary hat. “No problem, doll.” He walked back to his bike and left me alone with Smoke.

Smoke was still leaning against my car, and his hands were shoved deep in his pockets. “I’ll see you tomorrow, angel.” It wasn’t a question. It was a statement.

I wrinkled my nose and shrugged. “Later, Smoke.” I took a few steps toward the driver’s door.

“We’ll follow you to your house to make sure the spare holds.”

My step faltered. “I, uh, you do—”

“We’ll follow you,” he repeated firmly, and his tone made it clear I wasn’t getting out of it.

I nodded. “Uh, thank you.” No sense in wasting time arguing when I had a feeling I wasn’t going to win.

I slid into my car and tossed a glance in the rearview mirror just in time to see Smoke straddle his bike. He slid his sunglasses over his eyes and cranked the engine as a deep rumble vibrated through the air.

I couldn’t see his eyes, but somehow, I knew he was looking right at me through the mirror.

Why was this man suddenly in my life? And why, whenever I looked at him, did I get butterflies in my stomach?

With a sigh, I rolled my eyes and started the car. As I merged back onto the road, I couldn’t help but glance in the mirror every few seconds. Smoke rode behind me; his motorcycle kept pace with my little sedan. The deep growl of his engine was a steady presence behind me and a constant reminder that he was watching out for me.

The sun was starting to dip. The road stretched out ahead, but all I could focus on was the gleam of chrome and the figure riding behind me.

I turned onto my street and then into my driveway to my usual spot. My little one-story house looked tiny on the outside and was tiny on the inside, but it was home. It was what I could afford after the divorce, and it was enough.

Smoke and Dice stopped at the end of my driveway with their bikes idling.

I stepped out and waved my hand in thanks. I was torn between wanting Smoke to get off his bike and hoping he would just drive off.

Smoke gave a small nod. "I'll see you tomorrow, Dani Marie." He glanced at Dice, and without another word, they revved their engines and took off down the street.

I watched them go until the glow of their taillights disappeared around the corner. I ran my fingers through my hair and let out a heavy sigh.

That was unexpected.

I hadn't thought I would ever see Smoke again after the explosion, but here he was, swooping in to help me this afternoon. And, apparently, I was going to see him again tomorrow.

I glanced at the spare tire on my car.

I didn't think it was Smoke's fault I got a flat. He didn't need to be the one to help me get a new tire. And I had to work tomorrow.

I knew the spare would be fine for a couple of days, and I could get it fixed on my next day off, which wouldn't be until Sunday. Smoke had done enough for me.

I could handle my tire.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:53 am*

Smoke

“Nice to see you finally got out of bed.”

I rolled my eyes and sipped my coffee. “Getting blown up will make ya stay in bed for a couple of days.”

Yarder chuckled and opened the door wide to let Harley and Davidson out. The dogs bolted into the backyard and ran around like maniacs before finding a spot to do their business. Yarder grabbed a ball from their toy bucket and played fetch with Harley while Davidson found a bone to chew on in the shade.

It was Friday morning, and it had taken everything in me to get out of bed. My ride and then helping Dani with her tire had been a little too much for my first day upright. The aches and bruises from the explosion weren’t going away as quickly as I had hoped.

“Got plans for today?” Yarder asked and tossed the ball lazily across the yard.

“Whatever comes my way,” I shrugged.

Yarder glanced at me. “Dice mentioned you guys helped the wine chick with a flat tire last night.”

Leave it to Dice to open his big mouth. I wasn’t trying to hide last night from Yarder, but I wasn’t looking to run to him with every little detail either. “Yeah, we helped her.”

“You happen to ask her about who her landlord is?”

I leveled my gaze on him. “Yeah, you know that’s normal conversation when I’m on the side of the road changing her tire. ‘By the way, who is your landlord?’” I shook my head. “I can ask her when she comes over today.”

Yarder chuckled and threw the ball again to Harley. “She’s coming over today?”

I nodded. “Told her to come over so I could get her tire fixed.”

“That might be hard to do, seeing as the garage is just an empty building,” Yarder pointed out.

“I was gonna take her to Mac’s.” Mac’s was a town over and was just as good a garage as we were. They could easily get her a new tire, and she would be good as new.

“What time is she coming?” Yarder asked.

“You keeping an eye on me, Yarder?” I asked, slightly annoyed with his fifty questions.

He shook his head. “Nah. I just planned on heading over to her shop today to talk to her, and I figured if she was coming over here, I didn’t need to take all the girls with me to her shop. I’m really just looking out for myself in the hopes I don’t have to spend an hour at the wine shop with all the ol’ ladies.”

I chuckled and shook my head. “Now that I believe. And I don’t know what time she is coming over. She mentioned she had to work.”

“You really think she is going to come?”

I finished my coffee and sat back in my chair. “Not really sure. I figured if she wasn’t here by this afternoon, I would head over to her. She shouldn’t be driving around on a spare for too long.”

Yarder nodded. “You’re not wrong.” Harley dropped the ball expectantly at his feet. Yarder picked it up and tossed it the full length of the backyard. “If she’s not here by two, we can head to her.”

I nodded. “Sounds like a plan to me.” Yarder and the girls could check out the shop while I took care of her tire. I figured if she was busy with work, I could take her car to Mac’s by myself.

Harley came galloping back happily with the ball in his mouth, and his tail wagged furiously.

“You think there’s a chance we cannot have all of the girls with us?” I asked.

Yarder chuckled and shook his head. “Pretty sure that will not happen, brother. The girls are going stir-crazy with us keeping a close eye on them. They’re clinging on to going to the wine shop like it’s Christmas morning.”

I grunted and stood. I stretched my arms over my head to loosen my stiff muscles. “I guess you’re not wrong. I can’t wait until all of this Boone and Gibbs shit blows over. I miss the days of just living without having to look over our shoulders at every turn.”

“You and everyone else feel that, too, Smoke.” He grabbed the ball Harley had dropped at his feet. “We’ll get back to that soon.”

“Hear anything from Russ?”

Yarder shook his head and tossed the ball. “Not a word.”



I watched Harley chase after the ball and jump over Davidson to get it. “Maybe they’ll forget about us.”

Yarder side-eyed me. “Yeah, that would be great, but I don’t see that happening.”

“They’re gonna eventually mess up. They can’t keep coming after us like this and not expect that someone is going to catch on.” They were making huge moves against us—explosions, involving innocent people. They were bound to screw up.

“We’ll get them. Until then, we keep moving forward. The garage will be done in a month, and today we can talk to Dani about who the landlord of the strip mall is to get the bakery going.”

I nodded. “Sounds like a plan to me.”

Dani had until two this afternoon to come to the clubhouse. If she didn’t, I was going to find her.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:53 am*

Dani

“We had a run on the garlic olive oil. Can you grab a few more bottles from the back?” I asked Stan and brushed my hair back from my face as I rang up a customer at the register.

“You got it,” he called from across the store. “I’ll grab a couple of the Tuscan, too. I’ve been pushing the sample and sold a few bottles this morning.”

I nodded and flashed a polite smile at the older woman in front of me as I bagged her wine and cheese. “Enjoy your weekend, Mrs. Collins.”

She grinned. “Oh, I will, dear. You know how my book club gets.”

I chuckled. “Absolutely. See you next week.”

With a final wave, she walked out, and the bell above the door chimed softly in her wake. The afternoon sun streamed through the large front windows and cast golden streaks across the polished wood floors. Friday afternoons were always like this—busy, lively, and filled with the low hum of conversation as customers stocked up for the weekend.

For a second, I’d almost called Stan this morning to let him know I’d be late and headed to the Iron Fiends’ clubhouse instead, but I hadn’t. The shop needed me, and besides, I figured the tire could wait.

I moved around the store and straightened a row of wine bottles, my fingers trailing

lightly over the labels, making sure they were all straight. I checked the cheese case and rearranged a few wedges to make the display more appealing. Two customers wandered through the shelves, debating on whether to go with a red or a white, and I gave them space while pretending not to listen in on their conversation. They should go with a white with the cheese they had picked, but I could always help steer them that way if they asked.

Stan emerged from the back room with the olive oil bottles in hand. “Got ‘em.”

“Thanks,” I said and took them. “Can you also grab a few bottles of the balsamic? Mrs. Collins just bought two. And we need to think about topping off the sun-dried tomato olive oil keg.”

Stan nodded and headed back to grab them. I put the bottles of olive oil on display and barely had time to get behind the register before the bell above the door chimed again.

I looked up, and my heart nearly stopped.

Yarder walked in first, tall and broad-shouldered, and his presence filled the space like he owned it. But that wasn’t what had my pulse jumping—it was who walked in behind him. Smoke.

And they weren’t alone.

A group of six women followed them inside, all of them chatting excitedly as they fanned out into the shop.

“Oh, this place is so cute,” one of them gushed and twirled in place to take it all in.

“Cheese,” another whispered excitedly.

“So much cheese,” her friend agreed with wide eyes and made a beeline for the display case.

And then there was Smoke.

He moved toward the counter with that easy, confident stride, like he belonged here just as much as I did. His dark jeans fit just right, and his white T-shirt stretched across his chest in a way that made it impossible to ignore. Over it, his black leather cut hung open. My eyes drifted to his hands that rested on the counter—RIDE FREE—inked boldly across his knuckles with the dark letters standing out against his tanned skin.

I swallowed hard and crossed my arms as I tried to calm my racing heart. I had not expected him to show up here with his friends. I figured I had a day or two before he decided to track me down.

“You didn’t show up,” Smoke said. His voice was low and rough that cut straight through the noise of the store.

I forced a casual shrug. “I had to work.”

He arched a brow and was clearly not impressed with my excuse. “Figured.” He glanced around and watched the women as they poked at cheese samples and chattered about pairing options. “Busy day?”

“Always is.” I leaned against the counter.

Smoke wasn’t one to let things slide, though. He looked back at me. “Told you I’d take care of the tire, angel.”

My stomach flipped at the way that nickname rolled off his tongue like it was second

nature. I crossed my arms tighter. “I appreciate it, but I can handle it. It’s just a tire, Smoke.”

He smirked, and his dark eyes locked onto mine. “You say that like you don’t know me.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know you.”

His smirk widened. “Fair.” He leaned in slightly, his voice dropping lower. “But I don’t let things slide, especially when they shouldn’t have happened in the first place. That blowout? It was from debris from the explosion, Dani. That’s on us.”

I exhaled slowly and felt the weight of his words settle deep in my chest. “You don’t have to—”

“I do,” he interrupted, and his eyes held mine. “And I will.”

Before I could argue, one of the women—long hair, tall, and wearing ripped jeans and a tank top—bounded over and held a block of brie in one hand and a wedge of gouda in the other.

“Dani, right?” she asked with a grin.

I nodded. “Yeah, that’s me.”

“I’m Sloane,” she said and placed the cheese down. “This place is amazing. I’ve been dying to check it out ever since Yarder mentioned it.”

I smiled politely. “Thanks.”

Sloane leaned in with a grin. “I’ll take these, but I think I need to grab a basket for

everything else we are going to get.”

I shot a look at Smoke, who just shook his head, clearly amused. “These are great choices,” I said as I looked at the cheese. “Grab a bottle of Chenin Blanc to go with the brie.”

“I will!” Sloane winked before wandering off again and leaving me alone with Smoke once more.

He tapped his fingers against the counter. “Your tire gonna make it home tonight?”

The man was relentless. I met his gaze and tried not to let him see how much his concern affected me. “Yeah, it’ll be fine.” I didn’t really have anyone who cared about me. I mean, I had Stan, but he probably just cared about me because I was the one who signed his paychecks.

Smoke didn’t look convinced. “Right.” He nodded toward the women now happily browsing through the store. “Looks like we’ll be here a while. You might as well let me fix it while you help the girls figure out what they want.”

I sighed and realized I wasn’t going to win this battle. “Fine,” I muttered. “But I don’t know how you are going to fix it with it sitting in the parking lot.”

He held his hand out to me. “Keys.”

I rolled my eyes but dug into my purse to fish out my keys. With a sigh, I slapped them into Smoke’s waiting hand, expecting him to just take them and go. But instead, his fingers curled around mine and held my hand in his warm, steady grip.

A slow, satisfied smile spread across his face, and it sent a shiver down my spine. “Good call, angel.”

I swallowed, suddenly very aware of how close he was and how his voice seemed to wrap around me like a warm blanket. “You aren’t really giving me much choice,” I whispered, my voice betraying more than I wanted it to.

Smoke’s dark eyes locked onto mine, and a flicker of something dangerous and thrilling danced in them. “You’ll always have a choice with me, angel,” he said as his thumb grazed the inside of my palm before he finally let go. “Just... some of the time, I’m really going to let you know which choice you should make.”

His words hit me like a slow burn, sinking in and settling deep. Smoke had this way of getting under my skin—he was intoxicating and infuriating all at once. He could take control without even trying, and damn it, I was letting him.

“And what if I still don’t want to make that choice?” I asked and tilted my chin up defiantly.

Smoke’s smirk widened. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get there.”

And just like that, he let go of my hand, pushed off the counter, and strode toward the door without another word. I watched him go with my heart pounding wildly in my chest, and I hated how easily he could mess with my head.

“Whoa!” Stan’s voice cut through my thoughts as he came out of the back room with his eyes wide at the sudden crowd in the shop. “When did we become the weekend hangout spot?”

I smirked and shook off the lingering heat from my encounter with Smoke. “Looks like we got invaded.”

Before Stan could respond, one of the women in the group—tall and curvy—walked up to him with a block of cheese. “Hey, what would I do with a dill Havarti?”

Another woman held up a bottle of garlic olive oil and chimed in. “Is olive oil good to drink every morning? I like garlic. Can I drink this?” She stared at Stan earnestly.

I sighed and moved to help him before he got overwhelmed.

Before I could help, a loud whistle rang through the shop.

Everyone turned to Yarder, even the poor customer who was by the jarred olives and crackers.

“You guys are giving me a goddamn headache,” Yarder said and pointed at the olive oil woman. “You’re not drinking olive oil, Poppy. No way in hell you’re kissing me after drinking that.”

Poppy wrinkled her nose and pouted. “But what if it’s good for my health, Yarder? We could drink it together.”

Yarder turned his exasperated gaze to me and silently begged for help.

I cleared my throat, stepping toward Poppy. “Uh, well... I’m not too sure about it being good for your health, but if it is, I don’t think this is the one you should be drinking. Unless, of course, you’re trying to keep vampires away.”

“I Googled it,” another woman interjected and held up her phone. She looked at me with a grin. “I’m Olive, by the way.”

I blinked. Olive. Of course, the woman researching olive oil was named Olive.

Sloane, who had been inspecting the cheeses, pointed at the rest of the group. “That’s Dove, Adalee, and Fallon.”



I wasn't sure I was going to be able to remember all of those names.

"Olive oil is good for your health," Olive continued, oblivious to my amusement. "You should have one and a half tablespoons a day. Though, you don't have to drink it straight—cooking with it works too. It helps lower the risk of coronary heart disease."

Poppy turned to Yarder with her eyebrows raised in victory. "Look who's wrong."

Yarder crossed his arms over his chest, scowling. "I can cut this little field trip short, babe."

Poppy smirked. "You're just mad because you were wrong."

"What about cheese?" Adalee piped up with a mischievous grin. "Will that lower my risk of... anything?"

Fallon laughed and grabbed a wedge of sharp cheddar. "It'll help lower your risk of being sad. I don't think I've ever been sad while eating cheese."

Dove bumped Fallon's hip playfully. "True that, girlfriend. I know I'm gonna be a happy duck while I eat my blueberry white cheddar." She held up her prize. "I mean, if I die, guys, just bury me in cheddar, okay?"

Laughter rippled through the group, and despite myself, I found my lips tugging up in a smile.

Stan, ever the salesman, pointed at Dove's cheese. "I'd pair that with a Lambrusco."

Dove tilted her head. "You say that like I know what that means." She slipped her arm through his and grinned. "Show me the way, wine man. Point me in the direction

of the Lambrusco.”

Stan laughed but obligingly led her toward the wine section.

I leaned against the counter and watched the chaos unfold. The shop was packed, louder than I was used to, but there was something... nice about it.

Yarder caught my eye from across the room, walked over, and rubbed the back of his neck. “Sorry about the crowd. They’ve been cooped up too long, and when I said I was coming here, they practically tackled me.”

I waved a hand. “It’s fine. I don’t mind... as long as they don’t actually start drinking olive oil.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, well, this is your warning that things are never normal when all of the girls are together.”

I glanced toward the front of the shop, where Smoke had disappeared out the door. “I’m surprised you didn’t go with Smoke to work on my tire.”

Yarder shook his head. “Someone had to stay back with the girls, and Dice was going with him.”

I looked around. “I didn’t even notice Dice with you guys.”

“He stayed outside. Said there was a lesser chance of losing his hearing from all of the squawking.”

“Dani!”

Yarder held up his finger. “That would be the squawking.”

I smiled wide. I kind of liked it. “You can hang out behind the register if you want. There is a stool back there.”

Yarder nodded. “Thanks.” He made his way behind the counter and sat on the stool. He made the space back there look much smaller than it did when Stan or I was back there.

“I don’t like olives, but I want to like them,” Fallon called. “Do you think I would like the blue cheese stuffed ones?”

I wrinkled my nose. “Only if you like blue cheese.” I myself could not handle blue cheese, but Stan could. He had been the one to taste-test those foul things.

“Never had it,” Fallon replied. She looked at the jar closely. “I mean, they look good.”

“Do feet look good to you? Because that is exactly what blue cheese tastes like,” Adalee laughed.

“Oh, come on,” Stan protested. “You got to give blue cheese a chance.”

“It’s mold,” Adalee insisted. “Not a fan.”

Stan wagged his finger at Adalee. “I would like to challenge you.” He walked over to the wines and looked for a beat. “Aha! I think this will change your mind.” He grabbed a bottle and came back over to Adalee. “A ruby port always pairs well with blue cheese. The sweetness counteracts the strong cheese.”

“Or you could just not eat the strong cheese,” Adalee laughed, winking at Stan. “But I do have an open mind. I’ll let you try to blue cheese me, wine man.”

Stan chuckled and shook his head as he moved behind the counter with Yarder. “It’s Stan, and that is all I ask.”

The girls gathered around the front counter and leaned in as Stan grabbed the bottle of Ferreira and began working on the cork with practiced ease. Fallon, standing closest, held up the jar of blue cheese-stuffed olives and wiggled it at me.

“Can I open these?” she asked, and her eyes sparkled with curiosity.

I nodded. “Have at it.”

“I promise I’ll buy them,” she added quickly, and twisted off the lid with a satisfying pop.

“Only if you like them,” I said and held up a hand. “I’m not going to force those things on anyone unless they actually enjoy them. If you hate them, Stan can take them home. I’d rather you buy something you love and come back for more than buy something you don’t and never step foot in here again.”

Fallon smiled warmly. “I like you. I can see why your shop is popular.”

I laughed and shook my head. “Popular might not be the right word. It’s probably more because I’m the only place like this within fifty miles.” I winked and started toward the back room. “I’ll grab some toothpicks.”

I walked into the back room, and the familiar scent of aged cheese filled the air. I found the sample tray we had set up for tastings—neatly arranged with toothpicks, small tasting glasses, napkins, and the mini trash bin we used for discarded picks.

I hadn’t been lying earlier. Stan and I prided ourselves on letting customers sample before buying. We wanted people to love what they were getting, not just tolerate it.

Stan always said an honest experience kept people coming back, and so far, it had worked.

I balanced the tray on one hand and walked back out into the shop. The lively chatter of the girls filled the space, and as I approached, the rich aroma of the pungent blue cheese hit me immediately.

Stan had the bottle of Ferreira open and carefully poured small servings into the tasting glasses. Fallon had already fished an olive out of the jar and was eyeing it skeptically.

I set the tray down and resisted the urge to scrunch my nose at the overwhelming scent. “Alright, ladies,” I said, grabbed a toothpick, and gestured toward the tray. “Let’s see who’s brave enough.”

Fallon popped the olive into her mouth and chewed thoughtfully. Her eyes widened, and she made a face as she struggled to swallow. “Oh no. No, no, no. That’s... wow. That’s strong.” She grabbed a glass of wine and downed it. “Oh, that is so much better than that foul little thing. I like the wine, but the olive can kick it to the curb.”

Poppy stood next to her and cautiously took one. She sniffed it and nibbled at the edge. “Ugh!” She groaned, wrinkling her nose. “It tastes like... feet.”

Sloane, already regretting her decision, swallowed hers with a shudder. “Oh my god, why? Who thought blue cheese inside an olive was a good idea?”

Dove laughed, took a hesitant bite, and grimaced. “Nope. Absolutely not. I need to cleanse my mouth with, like, an entire baguette.”

Olive, on the other hand, chewed slowly, contemplating. “I mean... it’s not awful. It’s kind of... interesting. But I wouldn’t go out of my way to eat it.” She took a sip of her

wine. “I mean, the wine made it more than good. I would eat that again only if I had Stan serving me a ruby port.”

Stan winked at Olive. “See, you’re seeing things my way.” He popped an olive in his mouth. “Delicious.”

Dove raised an eyebrow. “Olive, your name is literally Olive. Of course you think it’s interesting.”

Adalee popped one in her mouth and closed her eyes, savoring it. “This... this is fantastic.” She picked up her wine glass and took a sip, and her face lit up. “Oh wow. That’s actually amazing together.”

Dove watched her and hesitantly followed suit. She bit into the olive and washed it down with the Ferreira. Her expression changed instantly. “Oh. Okay. That... actually makes it better. I might be converted.”

I shook my head and laughed. “I’ll stick to the wine, thanks. Stan’s been trying to turn me into a blue cheese lover for a year, and I’m still holding firm.”

“Because you have no taste,” Stan teased and raised his glass in a mock salute.

Fallon pointed at me with her toothpick. “You’re right, though. If I’d bought this without tasting, I would have been pissed.” She grinned. “Now I know to avoid it like the plague.”

Before I could respond, Yarder reached over, grabbed an olive, and popped it into his mouth without hesitation.

Poppy gasped. “You’re supposed to eat it with the wine, you heathen.”

Yarder shrugged and chewed easily. “Not into wine, and I’m driving.”

Poppy rolled her eyes and reached up to gently caress his cheek. “I don’t think a little shot of wine is going to mess up your driving, babe.”

He leaned down and pressed a kiss to her lips. “I’m sure you’re right, but I’m not looking to test it. Precious cargo.”

Sloane clutched her hand to her heart. “Yarder thinks we’re precious, girls. Here, I always thought I was just annoying.”

Yarder glared at Sloane. “You are annoying.”

The girls giggled, and I couldn’t help but smile. Despite their wild energy and loud opinions, they were a fun bunch.

Stan poured another round of wine and raised his glass. “To trying new things. Even if some of them taste like feet.”

Everyone laughed, clinking their glasses together before taking another sip.

“Alright, ladies, what’s next? Are we feeling brave enough for the pickled okra or honeycomb?”

Fallon groaned. “Why do I feel like you’re just trying to torture us now? I’m in for the honey, but the okra does not sound good.”

I grinned and headed to the shelf to grab the pickled okra and honeycomb. “It’s part of the experience.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:53 am*

Smoke

“They’re all drunk,” I muttered and eyed the group gathered around the cheese case.

Yarder nodded and crossed his arms over his chest. “Yeah, that would be an accurate assumption.”

I tilted my head toward the older guy behind the case—Stan, I thought his name was. “Even he is drunk.”

Yarder smirked. “He’s the one poppin’ the bottles, man. As soon as he does, Dani grabs some other cheese, crackers, or whatever to pair with it. They’ve been at this for three hours.”

I exhaled and rubbed the back of my neck. Fixing Dani’s tire had taken longer than expected—Mac’s shop had to squeeze me in, which meant I was stuck waiting. Not that I minded, but standing here now, watching this circus, I wondered if I should’ve just left the damn spare on.

“Dice leave?” Yarder asked.

I nodded. “He could hear the laughing from the parking lot. Was out of the car and on his bike before I could even shut my door.”

Yarder chuckled. “Yeah, sounds like Dice. Pretty sure any kind of commitment other than to the club is not what he wants.”



I leaned against the counter with my arms braced as I watched the girls crowd around Stan. He was handing out something white with a streak of red running through it.

“Manchego with plum jam,” Poppy called and waved a slice in the air. “You want one, babe?” she asked Yarder.

Yarder shook his head. “I’m good.”

I smirked. “They eat too much cheese and no one’s gonna poop for days.”

Yarder snorted. “Pretty sure the wine and olive oil they’ve been downing will help with that.”

I raised an eyebrow. “They’re drinking olive oil?”

Yarder nodded. “Yeah, but I wouldn’t ask any more questions if I were you. Your stomach might not be able to handle it. They started with blue cheese, and things have just gotten more interesting as they go on.”

The girls peeled off into another fit of laughter, with their voices rising and falling like a chaotic melody. And right in the middle of it all was Dani.

She stood there with her cheeks flushed from the wine and her eyes sparkling with mischief. Her light brown hair framed her face perfectly, curling slightly at the ends, and that smile—hell, that smile could light up the whole damn shop. She had curves that didn’t quit that filled out that purple T-shirt in all the right places. Her light-colored jeans hugged her hips like they were made just for her. She was beautiful in a way that hit me square in the chest and knocked the wind out of me every damn time.

Yarder nodded toward the cheese case where Stan was leaning heavily against it. “I can get the girls home, but I think you’re gonna have to handle Dani and Stan. I gotta

say, for a guy well into his sixties, he's kept up with the girls."

I shook my head in disbelief. "That's a feat. I don't know how they do it, but these girls can throw back some alcohol. They actually buy anything?"

Yarder motioned to the overflowing baskets at his feet. "Oh, they're buying, alright. I had to cut Poppy off from throwing more stuff on the counter. Swear to God, they've got four hundred bucks worth of shit."

I chuckled, running a hand through my hair. "Hell, we might be begging the network to pick up Tread for another season if they keep this up."

Yarder groaned. "Don't even say that shit. We still need to finish this season."

I shot him a glance. "Any idea when it's happening?"

Yarder grunted. "Monday."

"Jesus," I muttered. "Any idea who they're sending?"

Yarder shrugged. "Not a who. A them."

I frowned. "They're sending more than one person?" That wasn't like Don. Maybe he was finally getting his act together and decided this show was going to be shot come hell or high water.

Yarder nodded. "Saylor and Max."

I snorted. "What the hell kind of name is Saylor?"

Yarder smirked. "I don't know, man."

“Does Adalee know them?”

“Nope. Seems things have changed since she got fired. They’re bringing in fresh blood.”

I nodded slowly. “You talk to the Fallen Lords lately? How are they doing with filming?”

“Not really sure. I reached out to Wrecker a few weeks back, and he said they weren’t filming yet. Didn’t know exactly when it would start.”

“Wish that was us.”

“Yeah, well, hopefully, in a couple of weeks, we’ll be done. I told Don to just send whoever the hell he needed to, and let’s get this shit wrapped up.”

I glanced up at the clock and noticed it was quarter to six. “The sign on the door says they’re open till six. Maybe we should start wrangling the girls?”

Yarder nodded in agreement. “Yeah.” He let out a sharp, shrill whistle that cut through the chatter.

Everyone froze and looked at him.

“Do you have to do that?” Poppy slurred and rubbed her ear.

Yarder whirled his finger in the air. “Let’s wrap this up, girls. Shop closes in fifteen minutes.”

“What?” Dani gasped, eyes wide. “How the heck did the time go?” She looked at me, her expression dazed, and shook her head. “I mean...” She waved her hand vaguely

in the air. “I don’t really know what I mean.”

Yeah, she was well in the bag.

Sloane and Dove collapsed into each other and giggled uncontrollably.

Adalee clapped Dani on the shoulder. “I got you, girl. The time has wheezed by.”

“Whizzed,” I corrected.

Dani pointed a finger at me and narrowed her eyes. “That’s what I said. I mean she.”

I just shook my head and fought back a grin. “Sure, angel.”

Fallon was stuffing more cheese into her mouth and nodded approvingly. “I think we should just live here. This is my dream house.”

Sloane raised a half-empty wine glass. “To the dream house!”

“Alright, that’s enough,” Yarder sighed and tossed the baskets on the counter. “Ladies, start gathering your crap. We’re out.”

Stan, who had been leaning against the counter, blinked at me. “Hey, new guy, you ever tried this cheese? It’s damn good, man.”

I eyed him warily. “Uh, no, I haven’t. Maybe next time.”

He grinned and held up a cracker stacked with cheese and jam. “One more for the road, huh?”

I took the cracker out of his hand before he could drop it. “Alright, I’ll try it.”

Dani grinned and leaned on the counter next to me. “It’s yummy. The fig jam and the goat cheese are good. They should be married.” She reached out and laid her hand on my chest. “You’re spinning.”

I looked down at her, my gaze lingering on the way her lips curled up at the edges. “Pretty sure just your head is spinning, angel. We need to get you home and in bed. You are going to be hungover tomorrow.”

She giggled and poked me in the chest. “I don’t get hangovers.”

I smirked. “Famous last words.”

Yarder clapped me on the back. “I’ll take care of the girls. You got Dani and Stan?”

“Yeah, I got her.”

Yarder grinned. “Good luck, brother.”

The girls finally started heading toward the door, arms loaded with bags and bottles, while laughing and stumbling over each other.

Dani watched them go with a dreamy smile. “We should do this more often,” she called.

“I slipped some money in the till. Let me know if we owe you any more,” Yarder called to Dani.

She waved her hand in the air. “It’s all on the house.”

Yeah, all the shit the girls were carrying out was not on the house. “I’ll remind her tomorrow.”

Yarder smirked. “Sounds good. Be careful.”

I nodded as Yarder turned his attention to the group of women who were still laughing and chatting and completely oblivious to the world outside their little cheese-and-wine-fueled bubble. Yarder herded Poppy, Sloane, Dove, Olive, Adalee, and Fallon out of the shop, which was like wrangling a pack of wild puppies. They moved in different directions, stopped to giggle about something, or grabbed another jar of olives. Yarder guided them with the patience of a saint and steered them toward the door with a call over his shoulder to add a jar of olives to his tab. Fallon tried to slip back in to grab a bottle of wine by the door, but Yarder caught her by the elbow and dragged her out.

“You’re not going with them?” Dani asked as she leaned against the register and twirled a strand of her hair between her fingers.

I shook my head. “I’ve got my hands full here.”

Stan was half-lying on the cheese case while munching on a piece of cheese like he didn’t have a care in the world. Yeah, I definitely had my hands full.

“You guys need to do anything before we lock up?” I asked.

Dani quirked her lips. “I mean, I don’t think so.” She turned to Stan. “Close the cheese door.”

Stan blinked. “We have a cheese door?”

Dani rolled her eyes. “The door your foot is in right now.”

Stan looked down at his foot, which was indeed propped inside the cheese case. “Oh, the cheese door.” He slid his feet off and shut it with a flourish. “You should have

said the cheese door.”

Dani looked at me, exasperated. “Didn’t I say cheese door?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “The drunk talking to the drunk is always amusing. Anything else we need to do, or can the rest wait until tomorrow?”

“Just turn off the lights,” Dani said and pushed her hair out of her face. “I just want you to know this is not normal.”

I chuckled and headed to the back room to turn off the lights. “Oh, trust me. I know this isn’t normal. This is the ol’ lady effect. Those six go somewhere together, and all hell breaks loose.”

Stan moved away from the cheese case and smoothed his hand down his chest. “I think I might need to walk home.”

I shook my head. “You’re not walking. I’ll take both of you home. We’ll figure out your car tomorrow.”

Dani grabbed her purse from under the counter and slung it over her shoulder.

Stan patted his chest. “I don’t have a purse.”

Dani and Stan fell into a fit of laughter.

“You have a wallet,” she wheezed.

“Oh,” Stan laughed. “My brain is dizzy, so I was just copying you.”

Dani patted him on the shoulder. “Let’s get you home to Donald.”

“Oh, yeah. I’m sure he’s hungry.”

“You married, Stan?” I asked, curious.

Stan let out a big belly laugh. “God, no.”

Dani smirked. “Donald is his bulldog.”

I shook my head and herded them toward the front door. “Well, in that case, let’s get you home to Donald.”

We stepped out of the shop, and I held my hand out to Dani. “Keys.”

She slapped them into my palm with a grin. “There ya go, biker man.”

I locked the door and pocketed the keys.

“Do you have my other keys?” she asked.

I nodded, and we walked toward her car. “Yeah.”

“Did you find a tire?” she asked and glanced over at me.

“I did. You’re good to go.”

“You lost a tire?” Stan asked. “You didn’t tell me.”

“It was just a flat,” Dani explained. “And Rick Savvy fixed it.”

Stan squinted at me. “I thought your name was Smoke.”



Dani laughed.

“I think she meant Rico Suave, Stan.”

“How about Casanova?” Dani suggested. “You’re all suave and sexy. You can be Casanova because I can’t say Ricky Sausage.” She shook her head. “You know what I mean.”

I had no idea what she was going on about. “Let’s just get you both home so you can sleep this off.”

Getting Stan into the backseat of Dani’s car was an ordeal. The man was like a wet noodle, flopping into the seat and then deciding halfway in that he wasn’t ready to sit yet. “Wait, wait,” he said, holding up a hand dramatically. “I forgot my cheese!”

“You didn’t buy any,” Dani reminded him.

Stan blinked at her. “Oh. Then carry on.”

Dani snorted and managed to slide into the passenger seat with a loopy smile on her face.

I climbed into the driver’s seat and glanced over at her. “What you thinking about, angel?”

She sighed happily. “That was fun.”

“You mean profitable,” Stan said from the back and leaned his head against the seat. “You need to bring your friends around more often, Smoke.”

Dani shook her head. “No, no. I’m talking about the other customers that came in

while they were there. Sloane, Dove, and Adalee were salesmen. No matter who it was, they had them sample everything and walk out with at least four or five things. We haven't had that good of a Friday... ever."

I chuckled as I pulled out of the parking lot. "Maybe you should hire them full-time."

"Oh no," Dani cried.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I didn't get any of their phone numbers."

I shook my head. "I'll get them for you, angel. Don't worry about it. Where do you live, Stan?" I asked.

He rattled off his address, and I glanced in the rearview mirror to see he was falling over in his seat, and his eyes were closed. "I'm just going to take a nap," he muttered.

"Is it true you guys are going to open up a shop in the strip mall?" Dani asked.

I nodded. "I think so. Did Yarder, by chance, ask you about your landlord, or was he too busy wrangling the girls?"

Dani laughed. "He asked me. I gave him his phone number."

I turned onto Stan's street. "You don't live far from the shop, Stan."

Stan startled awake at his name. "Two large cheese pizzas and an order of breadsticks," he mumbled.

"What?" Dani laughed.

Stan shook his head and leaned forward between the front seats. “Huh? I was ordering pizza.”

I mean, he was, but I didn’t know why he was doing it.

“Oh, I bet Donald would love pizza.” Dani patted his cheek.

At least these two were nice and funny drunks.

I pulled into Stan’s driveway. He fumbled with the door handle and swayed away from the door in his seat. “Okay, Stan, let’s get you inside before you start ordering dessert too.”

I got out of the car and jogged around to his side. He was still wrestling with the door handle and muttered under his breath about how it was “stuck on stupid.” I opened it for him and helped him swing his legs out onto the driveway.

“Whoa,” Stan mumbled and gripped my arm as he tried to stand. “The ground is extra ground-y tonight.”

“Yeah, it’s got that effect after a few bottles of wine,” I said and steadied him.

Stan threw an arm around my shoulder, and together we made our way to his front door. He dug into his pocket and pulled out a keyring that jingled with what seemed like a hundred keys. He squinted at them and mumbled, “Cheese door... no, wait, front door.”

Inside the house, Donald, his bulldog, started barking and scratching at the door. “I’m coming, buddy!” Stan hollered and nearly dropped his keys. “My keys are broke.”

“They’re not broken, man. Here, let me help,” I said, took them from his shaking

hands, and unlocked the door in one smooth motion.

Stan leaned heavily against the doorframe and patted my shoulder. “I am more than good, Casanova. I’ve got Donald and two cheese pizzas waiting for me. I ordered them on the way home.”

I tipped my head to the side. “Uh, yeah, you did, Stan. Enjoy your night.”

He smiled loopy and stepped inside. “Later, Casanova.” He shut the door behind him, and I could hear him calling for Donald, saying, “Daddy’s home, and we got pizza coming!”

I shook my head and pulled out my phone. I made my way back to the car and dialed the local pizza place. I got into the car and ordered two large cheese pizzas and breadsticks to be delivered to Stan’s place.

Dani giggled beside me. “You’re a good guy, Smoke,” she said after I hung up.

“Yeah, well, I didn’t have the patience to explain to him that he didn’t actually order pizza.”

Dani leaned her head against the window, and her eyes were half-lidded. “You’re nice. You always take care of everyone, huh?”

I started the car and glanced at her. “Everyone needs someone looking out for them when they need it. And it was just a couple of pizzas I ordered for him, Dani. Not like I paid off his mortgage or something.”

She smiled, a soft, dreamy look on her face. “Good man who does good things.”

I shook my head and pulled out of Stan’s driveway and steered toward Dani’s place.

“You got me wondering what kind of people you’ve had in your life if you think me ordering a pizza for a drunk dude is a good thing.”

She giggled. “Just an asshole ex-husband.” She looked over at me, and her nose wrinkled in that cute way she did when something annoyed her. “And there’s a reason why he’s my ex. He was a sleazy man who slept with the neighbor.”

A slow burn of anger settled in my chest. I tightened my grip on the wheel and forced myself to keep my expression neutral. No use letting her see how much that pissed me off. “Good choice on getting rid of him, angel.”

She nodded smugly. “Darn tootin’. I mean, he did keep all of our friends and the house, but whatever.”

I frowned. “He cheated on you, and he got the house?”

She shrugged as her fingers traced patterns on her thigh. “At the time, I didn’t have a job, so making the house payment wasn’t something I could handle. He did pay me a nice little sum, though. Helped me buy my house now and start up Wine and Cheese Me.”

“So it all worked out in the end,” I said, though it still didn’t sit right with me.

“At the time, it didn’t feel like things were working out, but yeah, I guess now it did.”

I pulled into her driveway and parked in front of her garage. Before I could say anything, she reached for the door handle.

“I can get it from here. I’m not drunk anymore,” she declared confidently.

I knew better. I was out of the car in an instant and rounded the front before she could

even get one foot on the ground. She blinked up at me, surprised. “Oh, hey there,” she said with a little laugh.

“Hey there,” I replied and watched her attempt to stand. She was moving in slow motion, like she was thinking really hard about how legs were supposed to work.

The second she straightened, her knees wobbled like they were made of Jell-O. She swayed dangerously, and I lunged forward to grab her before she could collapse. She clung to my arm and giggled. “Ope, you know, I might be a little tipsy,” she admitted.

“Yeah, no kidding,” I muttered and steadied her against my side. “Come on, angel. Let’s get you inside before you faceplant into your hydrangeas.”

“You know your flowers,” she teased as I guided her up the short path to her front porch.

“I know enough to keep you from wrecking them,” I said and fished her keys out of my pocket.

She leaned against the porch railing and sighed like she’d just run a marathon. “You have my keys,” she pointed out.

“I do,” I said and unlocked the door. The second I got the door open, I heard a gasp behind me.

“Oh no,” she said, and I turned just in time to see her sway, and her arms flailed dramatically as she tipped backward toward the bushes.

“Shit!” I lunged and wrapped an arm around her waist and yanked her forward just before she could disappear into the foliage. Instead of falling into the bushes, she

crashed right into my chest with a surprised squeak.

“Wow,” she murmured and looked up at me. “You’re fast. I just was almost tea kettle over ass.” She tipped her head to the side.

“Ass over tea kettle, angel,” I said and bit back a laugh as she gripped my shirt to steady herself. “Let’s try this again. With fewer near-death experiences.”

She beamed up at me, clearly not nearly as concerned as I was. “You saved me, Casanova.”

I sighed and scooped Dani into my arms and carried her inside. “Let’s get you some water, angel. Maybe something greasy, too. And maybe you could stop calling me Casanova.”

“Oh, I stand by that,” she whispered, resting her head against my shoulder. “My Casanova,” she muttered.

I couldn’t help but grin as I nudged the door shut behind us with my foot. The house smelled faintly of vanilla and something floral, like one of those candles women always had around. It was cozy, decorated with mismatched furniture and soft blankets draped over the couch and chairs.

“It’s tiny,” Dani murmured.

I looked down at her. “What?”

“My house,” she explained, her words a little slurred. “It’s tiny.”

I glanced around. Yeah, it was small, but who really cared? As long as Dani liked it, that was all that mattered. “I’ve only got a bedroom, angel. You’re doing better than

me.”

She squinted up at me. “You rent a bedroom?”

I carried her over to the couch and gently set her down. “I live at the clubhouse. The only space that’s really mine is my bedroom. It’s about the size of your living room.”

Dani looked around her living room like she was seeing it for the first time. “Where do you go to the bathroom?”

I chuckled and ran a hand through my hair. “I also have a bathroom.”

She shrugged. “Then I think you’re fine. The more space you have, the more junk you buy.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I guess you’re right, angel.”

She flopped back against the couch cushions. “You didn’t, by chance, order a pizza to be delivered here, did you?”

I shook my head and pulled out my phone. “I didn’t, but that can be easily remedied.”

“Order from Mario’s,” she mumbled and waved her hand in the air. “Thin crust, garlic sauce, pesto, mozzarella, tomatoes, green peppers, onions, sausage, and balsamic glaze drizzle.”

I cocked my head to the side. “Am I supposed to remember all of that?”

She snuggled into one of the couch pillows. “Just tell them you’re ordering for Dani. They’ll know what to bring.” She yawned. “I’m going to take a nap. Just for a minute.”



I grabbed the blanket draped over the recliner and tucked it around her. She let out a content sigh and curled up like a cat. Within ten seconds, soft snores filled the room.

“You’re also a sleepy drunk,” I whispered and watched her with a small smile.

Something about Dani drew me in. She was funny, smart, and easy on the eyes. It was pretty simple to see why I was so attracted to her. She had this effortless charm, the kind that made you want to stick around just to hear what she’d say next.

I stepped back and made my way into the kitchen and dialed Mario’s. “Hey, I need to order a pizza. A fancy one for Dani.” I rattled off her address.

“Dani?” the guy on the other end chuckled. “Got it. You want the usual?”

“Yeah. And add a plain sausage one too, in case all that fancy shit isn’t my style.”

They said they would have it over soon, and I hung up. I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and went into the bathroom. I rummaged through the cabinets until I found a bottle of aspirin. She was going to need it when she woke up, or tomorrow was going to be rough.

I headed back to the living room and settled into the recliner across from the couch.

I watched her sleep.

Her breathing was soft and even.

This wasn’t how I thought my day was going to go, but I wasn’t upset with the way it ended. Being here, with Dani snoring under a blanket and waiting for pizza, felt oddly right.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:53 am*

Dani

I woke up to the crushing weight of a pounding headache that made me groan into the couch cushions. My face was smushed into the rough fabric, and I could feel the scratchy pillow wedged over my head like some kind of shade against the world. Every breath sent a fresh wave of pain through my skull, and my mouth tasted like a vineyard had died in it.

“Uh, I am never drinking again,” I mumbled into the couch.

A low, familiar chuckle floated through the room. “That might be kind of hard to do, seeing as you own a wine shop, angel.”

I froze, and my entire body seized.

Smoke.

What the hell? My sluggish brain struggled to piece together the puzzle of the past twelve hours. He left last night. Right? I squeezed my eyes shut tighter and tried to wade through the fog of my memories. Smoke had driven me and Stan home, that much I remembered. He’d brought me inside, and, oh yeah, he’d ordered pizza. I had a hazy memory of eating said pizza, and Smoke was definitely there... but after that? Blank.

“You’re here,” I croaked into the couch.

“What?” His voice was amused, and closer now. “You’ve got a pillow over you and

your face buried in the couch.”

Yeah, I knew. That was kind of the point.

With slow, deliberate movements of someone trying not to disturb anything, I rolled over onto my back. The pillow tumbled off my head and hit the floor with a soft thud. I kept my eyes closed and focused on breathing through the nausea that lurched in my stomach with every tiny shift.

“You okay, angel?” Smoke’s voice was back, laced with a surprising amount of concern.

I held up a hand in his general direction in a silent plea for him to stop talking. I couldn’t handle anything right now other than breathing.

In and out.

Nice and slow.

Wine hangovers were the absolute worst. Normally, I avoided them by not mixing my wines, but yesterday? Yesterday, I had thrown all caution to the wind. We drank everything and anything, and now I was paying the price.

I felt Smoke shift beside me, and the air around me shifted subtly. He was crouching next to the couch. I could sense it.

“Coffee?” he asked simply.

I took a second to consider the question and let the thought of coffee sit with me. My stomach didn’t revolt at the idea, so I rasped out, “Yes, please.”

His low chuckle rumbled through me. “Black, or do you fancy it up?”

“Black,” I muttered. My throat felt like sandpaper.

“Purist. I like it.”

I heard him move away, and he was back in less than a minute. The rich aroma of coffee hit me first, and for the first time since waking up, something in my body stirred that wasn’t pure misery.

“You’re going to have to sit up a bit, angel, unless you want me to just pour it into your mouth.”

A soft smile tugged at my lips despite the throbbing in my skull. “That might be messy.”

“Whatever you want.”

I cracked open one eye and squinted at him. Smoke crouched beside me, held out a steaming cup of coffee, and looked entirely too put-together for someone who supposedly spent the night here.

That seemed to be how things went when Smoke was around. He wasn’t the kind of guy you could push around, but he had this way of just rolling with whatever came his way.

Still, pouring coffee directly into my mouth was not exactly the vibe I was going for this morning.

I braced myself and slowly—so slowly—pushed myself upright. Each movement was careful and deliberate to avoid triggering another wave of nausea. My head swam a

little, but I breathed through it and blinked until my vision cleared. Smoke was still crouched next to me, and he held the coffee out like an offering.

I took it with a shaky hand and finally took a good look at him. He was wearing the same clothes from last night—dark jeans and a worn T-shirt with his leather cut—but somehow, he looked annoyingly good. His dark hair was a little mussed, but in that intentional way, it looked even better. His scruff was perfectly rugged, and his eyes watched me with something like amusement.

“Why do you look so handsome?” I blurted. My filter was clearly still asleep.

Smoke’s lips curled into a smug grin. “I slept in your uncomfortable-as-fuck recliner all night, angel. You might need to get your eyes checked.”

It may have been uncomfortable for him, but it hadn’t physically affected him at all.

The man was just downright handsome. “I have 20/20 vision. I see just fine.” I took a sip of the coffee and sighed. “What time is it?” I asked.

“Uh, half past nine. Stan called ten minutes ago.”

I looked at Smoke expectantly. I was trying not to freak out by the fact that I needed to work in half an hour, and I wasn’t even sure if I would make it. I assumed Stan was having the same predicament.

“He’s going to be late. He said he can’t stand at the moment.”

I looked at my legs. “I don’t know if I can either.”

Smoke chuckled.

Yeah, see, the man was downright gorgeous when he smiled. I knew I was a bit shaky being hungover, but it was a good thing I was sitting because that smile would have knocked me right off of my feet.

“Why don’t you finish your coffee? Then we can see how your legs are doing,” he suggested.

“Why are you being nice to me?” I asked.

He tipped his head to the side. “I’m just being me, angel.”

“You tend to all hungover women who can’t hang with the ol’ ladies.” I had learned that is what the girls were called yesterday. It sounded badass and suited all of them.

“You’re the first.”

“I’m the first what?”

He chuckled. “The first woman the ol’ ladies have gotten drunk in the middle of the day.” He leaned back. “Though, from the sound of it from Yarder, you and Stan were popping bottles and cutting cheese like it was a party.”

I groaned and took a sip of my coffee. “I will say I got a little caught up in all of the fun. Normally, we only sample two or three bottles of wine on a good day. I think we went through at least ten bottles yesterday.” Don’t get me wrong, it wasn’t like they were putting a gun to my head to open the bottles. I did that all of my own free will, but it would not be happening again. At least not when I was working.

“Happens to the best of us.” He stood and headed into the kitchen.

I watched him. Confident in the way he walked. Tall. Strong.

I shook my head. I needed to get going. If Stan was going to be late, that meant I needed to be on time.

I finished my coffee, gingerly got up, and stood. The world swayed a bit, but it was manageable.

“You good?” Smoke leaned against the entryway into the kitchen with a cup of coffee in his hands. It was odd seeing my dainty coffee cup in his large, tattooed hand.

I steadied myself and nodded. “I think I’ll be fine as long as I don’t move too fast.” I pasted a smile on my face. “I need to shower and get to the shop.”

“Need help?” he asked.

I leveled him with my gaze. “I think I can manage washing my back.”

Smoke shrugged. “I was meaning do you need help at the shop, but I am willing to help with whatever you need.”

Cue me being hungover and now embarrassed. “Uh, I should be fine.” I shuffled toward the kitchen. Smoke moved in front of me.

“I can take that, angel.” He took the empty cup from me. His fingers brushed against mine, and I tried to ignore the warmth rushing through me.

“Um, thank you. I’m just going to shower and head to work.”

He nodded. “I’ll be waiting.”

I looked up at him. “Huh?”

He smiled sexily. “My bike is at your shop.”

Oh, duh. “Right, right. Um, just give me ten minutes and we’ll be out of here.”

He nodded. “Take your time.”

I nodded and fled down the hallway to my bedroom. Once inside, I shut the door and leaned against it. “My god,” I whispered.

Why was that man so handsome? And to top it off, he was nice. So freaking nice to me. And it wasn’t like the wimpy nice, you know? The man was manly, rough, and gruff, but still nice. How?

I ran my fingers through my hair and sighed.

I didn’t have time to figure out how that was possible.

I needed to get my butt in gear and get to the shop.

I grabbed clean clothes, slipped into the bathroom, and took a quick shower. After getting dressed with wet hair, I headed back out to the kitchen.

Smoke was there.

Still hot.

“I’m ready,” I announced. And I was surprisingly feeling better. A hot, steamy shower worked wonders.

Smoke held out a travel cup of coffee. “Let’s hit it, angel.”



Smoke

“It’s five after ten.”

I glanced at the clock on the wall behind the counter as its antique hands ticked steadily forward. “Yup.”

The bell above the door of Wine and Cheese Me dinged.

I turned toward the entrance just in time to see Stan push through the door. He juggled three cups of coffee in one hand and clutched a bottle of Pepto-Bismol in the other. His sunglasses sat low on his nose and barely hid the dark circles and red-rimmed eyes beneath them.

“I thought you said you were going to be late,” Dani laughed and leaned against the counter.

Stan trudged over, his boots scuffling against the hardwood floors, as he set the coffee down with a heavy sigh. He pushed his sunglasses onto the top of his head, revealing eyes so bloodshot they practically matched the red accents of the shop’s decor. “I am late.”

Dani raised an eyebrow and tilted her head slightly. “Are you late because you stopped for coffee?”

Stan shrugged and seemed unbothered. “I mean, yes, but I was late picking up the coffee because I am hungover. I haven’t drunk that much in twenty years. I’m

surprised my old body is even upright now.”

“I don’t know if you’re old, Stan,” Dani teased. “Even at fifty-nine, you managed to keep up with the girls.” She groaned and rubbed her temples. “I, on the other hand, was fighting for my life this morning.”

“Thought you couldn’t feel your legs when you called this morning?” I chuckled.

Stan shrugged again and stretched his back with a grimace. “It passed. Got my butt out of bed, showered off our bender, and decided to head to Gloria’s to get some caffeine for us.”

Dani pointed at him with mock sternness. “A bender that we are not going to do again, right?”

Stan lifted his hands in surrender. “I plead the fifth. And you should really be mad at that one there.” He nodded toward me with a smirk, tugging at the corners of his mouth. “He’s the one who brought in the girls. They should come with a billboard warning.”

I let out a low chuckle. “I’ll let them know you said that, though I’m pretty sure they’ll be proud.”

Stan pointed a finger at me with a knowing grin. “And that is why I love those girls.” He grabbed one of the coffees and held it like a lifeline. “I’m going to sit in the back room for a second and let this caffeine do its job. I’ll be out if the bell chimes.”

Dani laughed and shook her head. “Okay.”

I reached for a cup of coffee, and a sharp pang shot through my ribs. I couldn’t hide my wince.

“You okay?” Dani asked.

I nodded and rolled my shoulder. “Yeah. Just a little sore.”

A smirk drifted across her lips. “Oh, come on, my recliner isn’t that uncomfortable.”

I took a careful sip of the coffee and let the warmth settle. “No, under normal circumstances, it wouldn’t be, but seeing as I was blown up a few days ago, I’m sore.”

Her face fell. “Oh god,” she groaned. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know how I forgot about that.”

I chuckled and shook my head. “Because it feels like it happened a lifetime ago. That’s pretty much how my life goes. Something crazy happens, and then it gets forgotten when the next crazy thing happens.”

Dani let out a small laugh. “I don’t think anything crazy happened since the explosion.”

I shrugged and looked around at the brightly lit shop filled with delicate shelves of wines and artisan cheeses. “That depends on your definition of crazy.” I gestured around us. “Me stepping foot in a wine and cheese place is pretty crazy. The past twenty-four hours were even crazier.”

She grinned, but there was a flicker of something else in her eyes—curiosity, maybe. “I don’t know if that is a good thing.”

“I mean, you don’t think things have been crazy. You told me something like last night had never happened before.”

She quirked her lips, the corner of her mouth tugging upward in a lopsided grin. “I mean, yes.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “See, the crazy just keeps coming.” I downed the last of my coffee and tossed the empty cup into the trash with a flick of my wrist. “Since Stan is here, I’m going to head to the clubhouse.”

Dani tilted her head to the side, and her hair fell over one shoulder. “Don’t let me keep you from the club. You really could have just dropped me off and left. I work by myself often.”

I shook my head and slid my hands into my pockets. “You didn’t keep me from the club, and I don’t like the idea of you being here all by yourself.”

She rolled her eyes, and a small huff escaped her lips. “Yeah, well, unfortunately, Stan can’t work every day of the week, and hiring someone else is not in the cards at the moment. I have to work by myself sometimes. Stan does, too.”

I nodded. I understood the struggle of money not growing on trees, and small businesses like hers were always walking a tightrope. I slid my sunglasses over my eyes. “I get it, angel, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it. You gonna be around later?”

She brushed a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “I’m always around. If I’m not working, I’m at home.”

“Good. I’ll see you later, angel. Try to stay out of trouble.”

I turned toward the door and felt her gaze on me with every step I took. It was like a lingering heat on my back, and no matter how much I tried to shake it off, it stayed with me. The soft chime of the bell above the door echoed behind me as I stepped out

into the late morning air.

Before the door swung shut, I heard Stan holler from inside, his voice carrying through the quiet street. “I’m coming!”

I shook my head with a smirk on my lips and made my way over to my bike. The sun beat down on the chrome and made it gleam under the light. I swung a leg over the seat and settled in with a sigh.

I leaned forward and watched the shop for a few seconds. My sunglasses slid down my nose just enough to give me a clear look. Through the window, Dani moved behind the counter, and her hair caught the sunlight streaming through the glass. She was something else, that was for damn sure.

This had been the craziest week.

Blown up.

Laid up.

On the mend.

And then Dani.

I shook my head and tried to push the whirlwind of thoughts aside and cranked up the bike. The engine roared to life beneath me, and the familiar rumble drowned out the noise in my head.

I revved it a few times and felt the power pulse through my hands before kicking up the stand. With a deep breath, I rolled out of the parking lot, and the tires crunched over the loose gravel as I hit the pavement and pointed toward the clubhouse.

As I rode, the wind whipped past me, and I thought about what I'd told Dani earlier—how crazy shit was always happening in my life. And it was true. My life had been one mess after another for as long as I could remember, and I'd gotten used to it. Expected it, even. But something about the way things were now made me want to keep them exactly how they were.

Crazy needed to stay the hell away.

Dani

I stared at my hydrangeas and smiled. The soft pink and purple blooms seemed almost to glow in the fading light of the evening. There was a gentle breeze in the air—not too hot, yet not too cool—just perfect for sitting outside and relaxing. I had decided to eat dinner on the front porch. The sun had dipped low enough to cast long shadows across the front yard, and I hadn't broken a sweat yet, which was a rare and welcome relief in the Texas heat.

It was a little past seven. The day had been busy at the store. Not as busy as yesterday, but still steady enough to keep me on my toes. Stan and I had managed to calculate the sales from the day before during a lull, and it had been crazy—one of the best days the store had ever had in the three years we'd been open. I couldn't help but grin at the thought.

Stan had thrown out the idea of getting the girls to come in once or twice a month to help drum up business. It was a good idea, but I had been toying with another idea—one I'd been mulling over for a while but hadn't been sure if it was a good one.

Paint and Sip.

I'd seen those events pop up online, and they always looked like a blast. We already had the wine, and we would just have to find someone who wouldn't mind teaching a bunch of tipsy women how to paint. It would be the perfect way to bring in new customers and add something fresh to the shop.

I knew we could rearrange the space in the store to make it work. We could set up

easels and drop cloths and have lots of snacks and wine. If it went well, it could become a regular thing. I just needed to talk to Stan about it and see what he thought.

I sipped my iced tea, and my phone buzzed on the small table beside me. I picked it up and saw Smoke's name on the screen. A flutter of excitement immediately tickled my chest.

Smoke.

The one person who, for reasons I couldn't entirely understand, always seemed to make me feel like a giddy schoolgirl. I was twenty-nine, not fifteen.

I stared at his name on the screen for a moment and wondered how in the world he had gotten my number. I pressed accept and brought the phone to my ear.

"Hello?" I said, feeling a little breathless, and my pulse quickened.

"Angel," came his voice, low and warm. My heart skipped a beat.

"Casanova," I teased and tried to act like I wasn't completely swooning at the sound of his voice. "How did you get my phone number, and why is your phone number programmed into my phone?"

There was a chuckle on the other end, and I could practically hear the smile in his voice. "You passed out before eight last night, Dani. I had some time on my hands."

I laughed and was a little surprised by his honesty. "So you broke into my phone?"

"I don't think you could say 'broke in,'" he said with another laugh. "Your password was all zeros. A two-year-old could've gotten into your phone."



I rolled my eyes and tried to act cool. “I guess that’s okay, seeing as I don’t have anything important on my phone other than my mom’s banana split torte recipe.”

“Banana split torte, huh?” He sounded genuinely interested. “Never had that before. I bet it’s good.”

I had to fight back a grin at the thought of him getting so interested in a dessert. I tapped my foot nervously like a little girl trying to act calm when a crush was calling. “It is good.”

“Well, maybe you can make it for me sometime,” he said. His voice lowered a little.

“Maybe,” I replied coyly and felt a rush of heat spread across my face. Was I really flirting with Smoke? Apparently, yes, yes, I was.

There was a slight pause, and then he asked, “What are you doing tomorrow?”

I shifted my weight on the chair. “Uh, well, tomorrow’s my day off, as long as Stan recovered fully from yesterday. He seemed to be doing much better when we closed up tonight.”

“What do you normally do on your day off?” he asked.

“Not a whole lot,” I shrugged. The truth was, my days off were usually spent in the quiet of my house while I caught up on a few things and just binged-watched TV. It wasn’t like I was doing anything crazy and fun on my off time.

“Well,” he continued, “what would you say if I showed up around four? We go for a ride, get some dinner, and then come back to your place for some banana split torte?”

My heart literally skipped a beat at his words. A ride? Dinner? And then—he actually

wanted to come over and try my mom's banana split torte? I could feel my face flush with excitement, but I forced myself to keep it together. "I would say... I might be up for that," I said, my voice soft and slightly breathless. "I'd have to run to the store to get everything, but I did plan to go to the store anyway."

"Then let's call it a date then, angel," he said, his words confident and smooth. "I'll be over at four."

"Okay," I whispered.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Dani."

"Bye," I sighed. It felt like my heart might leap out of my chest.

The line clicked as he ended the call, and I dropped my phone on the small table beside me. I let out a squeal and was unable to contain my excitement. My hands shook slightly as I pressed them to my cheeks and tried to keep my wide grin from spreading too much.

Smoke was coming over tomorrow.

Hot damn.

Smoke

“Church!”

I heard the shout clear across the room, and I couldn’t help but grin.

“Hell,” Aero grunted. I glanced over at the TV where the girls were absorbed in the latest Twisters movie along with Aero and Cue Ball. “Does he really have to yell it? He sent a text a minute ago.”

I shrugged and finished off the rest of my beer. “Guess he’s just covering all his bases,” I said with a laugh and pushed myself off the stool.

It was Sunday morning.

It had been a pretty chill morning for the most part. Adalee and Fallon had made breakfast and were in the kitchen cleaning up while the rest of us chilled.

“Think he would wait until the movie’s over?” Cue Ball asked as he stretched and got up from the couch.

Olive smiled up at him and patted his butt as he rose. “I think you shouldn’t even ask him that, honey.”

I snorted. Yeah, asking Yarder to postpone church was not a good idea.

I walked in, and Yarder sat at the head of the long table like he always did—serious,

intense, and looking like he wasn't going to take anyone's shit. The rest of the guys filtered in behind me. We all took our usual places around the table. I settled into my chair and stretched my legs out, ready for whatever was about to go down.

But there was one empty chair.

Stretch's chair.

Yarder didn't miss it.

"Where the hell is Stretch?" Yarder demanded, and his eyes narrowed as he scanned the group.

"I assume he's sleeping," Compass replied as he took a seat and leaned back. He always had that laid-back air about him, but I knew better. He never took anything lightly.

"Would one of you assholes go wake him up?" Yarder grumbled.

"I got him," Pirate muttered and pushed his chair back as he headed for the door.

"It's fucking eleven o'clock," Yarder growled and shook his head as he rubbed his face with his hands.

A minute later, Pirate came back in, Stretch behind him, and stumbled a bit as he rubbed his eyes. He was wearing nothing but a pair of boxers and pulled a wrinkled T-shirt over his head as he sat down. He didn't even acknowledge the fact that we were all staring at him. Typical Stretch.

"You couldn't even put some clothes on?" Aero laughed and shook his head.

Stretch just shot him a halfhearted glare as he plopped down into the chair next to mine. “Fuck you, man,” he muttered and looked a little more awake now, but still grumpy.

“Fucking circus,” Yarder muttered under his breath, but his annoyance didn’t quite hide the amusement in his eyes. He was trying to stay in control, but anyone could see that we all liked to push him just a little too far.

“Yeah, it is a circus,” Dice chimed in with a grin. “And you’re the ringleader, Yarder.”

The laughter spread through the group like wildfire, and even Yarder had to hide a smirk. He couldn’t help himself.

But of course, Stretch wasn’t done yet.

“If you would give us some notice before calling church, I would’ve been here,” he said and leaned back in his chair with a stretch of his own.

Yarder’s glare could have set Stretch on fire. “Sure, Stretch, I’ll work on a detailed schedule for you so it doesn’t mess with sleeping all day,” he replied, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

The rest of the table laughed again, but you could tell Yarder’s patience was starting to wear thin. Stretch, on the other hand, didn’t even flinch.

If Yarder’s glare could kill, Stretch would’ve been dead by now.

But Stretch just shrugged and was totally unbothered. “No one told me church was going to be at eleven today. I’m just doing me, man. No harm in that.”

“You know the drill, Stretch,” Pirate grinned. “Church is when Yarder says it’s church, and that’s that.”

“Yeah, I know,” Stretch muttered and yawned as he rubbed his face.

“You’re lucky I didn’t leave you to sleep through this whole thing,” Yarder said and crossed his arms over his chest. “We got stuff to talk about, and I don’t want to waste time.”

“I’m here, okay,” Stretch said. He was wide awake now, and his usual smirk spread across his face. “Let’s get this over with then.”

I leaned back in my chair. Now, we were ready to get down to business.

Stretch fiddled with his shirt to smooth out the wrinkles.

Yarder cleared his throat, and the room quieted.

“Alright, let’s get started,” Yarder said and leaned forward with purpose.

I gave Stretch one last glance before I focused on Yarder.

“Filming starts again tomorrow.”

Everyone groaned.

We all knew it, but hearing it out loud still sucked.

“How do they not have enough footage?” Throttle asked and shook his head.

“Yeah,” Aero chimed in. “They have to be able to piece together what they’ve got

and call it good.”

Yarder shrugged. “I don’t know, guys. Don says they need more, and we have to give them more.”

“Garage and Cakery,” Compass said.

Yarder nodded. “That is the plan. We just need to make sure it’s interesting enough so they don’t go sniffing around and asking questions we don’t want them to know the answers to.”

“We got a theory as to why Don is sending two people this time?” I asked and leaned back in my chair.

“Probably because he’s not fucking around anymore,” Fade laughed. “He lost Adalee and then Clay. He’s burning through all of his producers.”

“I think you had something to do with Adalee,” Pirate said with a smirk.

Fade shrugged and grinned. “She’s way better off here than working for the TV show. She hated that shit and only did it because of her dad.”

“I wonder how Don is going to spin that in the final cut of the show,” Dice pondered and rubbed his chin.

“Guess we’ll find out if they ever wrap up filming.” Yarder slowly looked around the table, and his eyes locked with each of us in turn. “We need to make sure the crew gets their footage, and then they leave. They can’t mess around anymore.”

Throttle held up his hands. “I mean, I don’t think we’re the problem; at least last time, we weren’t. Don needs to look at himself for sending that tool Clay here.”

Compass scoffed. "Calling him a tool is nice. Guy was a fucking moron."

The guys all chuckled, and the tension eased for a moment.

"You know, just because we all agree to let the filming happen and whatnot doesn't mean that Boone and Gibbs aren't going to strike again," Cue Ball pointed out. "I mean, if you really look at things, they are the reason why filming has been taking so long."

Yarder nodded. "I know."

"We all know," Fade sighed. "What the hell are we going to do about it?"

"We just stay ready." Yarder sighed and ran his hand down his face. "We've got our ear to the ground, and we aren't hearing anything. Boone and Gibbs have their moves locked down, but they'll mess up eventually."

"And when they do," Pirate cut in, "we'll take them down."

Yarder nodded, his expression grim.

"So we're just sitting ducks until then?" Stretch asked, frustrated.

Yarder glared at Stretch. "Haven't heard you come up with another plan."

Stretch glowered at him, and his jaw tightened.

"Brother, I think you need to get some more sleep," Pirate laughed. "We're going up against some major political people here. It's not like we can just shoot them point blank."



“We’re doing nothing,” Stretch growled. “There has to be something we can do. They keep hitting us, and we just do nothing. They killed fucking Faye right in the parking lot, blew the fucking garage up, and now they blew up the strip mall. When is enough going to be enough?”

Yarder sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. “I am open to whatever you say, Stretch. Thing is, you haven’t said anything other than we need to do something.”

I looked from Yarder to Stretch. We were all restless and itching for some kind of action, but Yarder was right. We couldn’t rush into this without a plan. Boone and Gibbs were too smart and too connected.

“Look,” I said and leaned forward. “We focus on the filming for now. Keep our heads down and make sure Don’s people don’t have a reason to stick around longer than they need to. Meanwhile, we stay sharp and keep watching. When Boone and Gibbs slip up, we’ll be ready.”

Yarder nodded. “Exactly. We don’t let them catch us off guard. Everyone sticks around the clubhouse when the camera crew is here.”

“Only when the camera crew is here?” I asked.

Yarder nodded. “Yeah. And when they aren’t, just keep your eyes open. Boone and Gibbs aren’t going away.”

Throttle sighed. “Fine. But if they start sniffing around again, we’re not playing nice.”

“Agreed,” Compass said, his tone leaving no room for argument.

We sat in silence for a moment. Tomorrow and the next couple of weeks were going

to be long days, but if it meant the cameras would finally be gone, it would be worth it.

Dani

I closed the fridge and smiled. I was pretty sure I had made the best banana split torte of my life. The layers were perfect, the bananas perfectly ripe, and the cherries lined up like little red jewels on top. Now I just had to wait for Smoke to get here.

With an hour to kill, I figured I might as well clean up the kitchen. I wiped down the counters, rinsed the dishes, and then stacked the mixing bowls in the dishwasher.

I headed to my bedroom to figure out what to wear. Smoke had mentioned a motorcycle ride, so I knew I had to wear pants. I pulled out a few options, but my eyes kept drifting back to my dark-washed jeans with a few rips at the knees. They fit me just right and were comfortable enough for a ride. I paired them with a lavender tank top that had a delicate spray of flowers along the scoop neckline. My black boots were a no-brainer, sturdy enough for the ride but stylish enough for wherever we ended up. I also grabbed a zip-up sweatshirt to bring along in case it was chilly on the ride. Texas was hot, but it did cool down a little in the evening.

Satisfied with my outfit, I headed for the shower. The hot water streamed down my back and relaxed the tension I hadn't even realized I was carrying. I shampooed my hair, and my thoughts drifted to Smoke. Five years ago, after my divorce, I never could have imagined getting ready for a date with a man like him. He was the exact opposite of Vince.

Vince had been clean-cut and handsome in that preppy golfer way—an all-American boy, I suppose. But that hadn't stopped him from cheating on me with the neighbor. I scrubbed a little harder as if washing away the memories of that painful chapter.

Thank God that part of my life was over.

Now, there was Smoke. He knew what he wanted, but it wasn't like he took it without a care for anyone else. Somehow, he managed to be gruff and firm but also kind. I didn't know how he did it, but it made me feel safe in a way I hadn't in years.

I quickly conditioned my hair, shut off the water, and wrapped myself in a plush towel. I stood in front of the mirror and contemplated whether to put my hair up, but I figured there was no point. I'd likely be wearing a helmet on the bike anyway. Instead, I blow-dried it and added a few loose curls to give it some shape.

I kept my makeup simple—just a swipe of lip gloss, a little eyeshadow, and some eyeliner to make my eyes pop. There was no sense in getting all made up when that wasn't me at all. One of the things I learned after the divorce was to stop trying to be anyone other than myself.

Satisfied with how I looked, I smiled at my reflection and tried to settle the butterflies in my stomach.

The low, rumbling growl of a motorcycle echoed through the neighborhood and sent a jolt of anticipation straight through me.

He was here.

I hurried to my bedroom, slipped on my black boots, and glanced down at myself. This would have to do. I took a deep breath and sprinted to the front door. I flung it open just as the doorbell rang.

“Angel.” Smoke's voice was smooth, rich, and effortlessly sexy when I saw him. His eyes traveled up and down my body.

My stomach did an entire gymnastics routine. “Hi,” I whispered and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. The man had seen me at my worst—drunk off my butt, carried me inside, and fed me pizza—but standing at my doorstep now, ready for our date, I felt like a giddy schoolgirl.

“Ready?” he asked and held out a sleek black helmet.

I nodded and took it from him.

“Gotta keep you safe, angel.”

He stepped back and gave me room to lock the door behind me. My fingers fumbled with the keys for a second before I turned and followed him to his bike.

“Ever ridden before?” he asked as we reached his motorcycle.

I nodded. “Yeah, but not since I was a kid. My dad had a dirt bike he let me drive when I was a teenager.”

“No shit.” He looked genuinely impressed.

I plopped the helmet on my head and grinned. “Well, you seem impressed by that, so I won’t tell you about the time I crashed it into the LP tank.”

Smoke reached out, and his fingers brushed against my skin as he snapped the strap under my chin. His smirk widened. “We’ve all had our crashes in life, angel. Though crashing into an LP tank seems pretty dangerous.”

I laughed. “Thankfully, it was old and didn’t have any fuel in it. I just bonged off of it like a pinball.”

He chuckled and shook his head. “Thank God for that.”

Smoke swung a leg over the bike with ease and settled into the seat like he was born for it. I climbed on behind him, adjusted myself until I was comfortable, and rested my hands tentatively on the sides of his waist.

“You’re gonna need to hold on,” he called over his shoulder as he cranked up the bike. The engine roared to life beneath us and sent a thrilling vibration up my legs.

I splayed my hands out and felt the strength of him beneath my touch.

“No, angel, really hold on.” He grabbed my hands and wrapped my arms securely around his waist. “Hold on.”

I swallowed hard and gripped him tighter as he kicked up the stand and revved the bike.

I might have told him I’d been on a bike before, but nothing compared to this. The rumble of the motor vibrated through my entire body and stirred something deep inside me.

We shot down the driveway, and soon, the town blurred by. Street signs flickered past us, and the afternoon air kissed my skin as we sped down the road. I pressed my cheek against his back and felt the steady rhythm of his breathing.

We drove until the town faded behind us. At a four-way stop, he slowed, and one boot pressed against the pavement to steady us.

“Where are we going?” I hollered over the roar of the bike.

He glanced over his shoulder, and a smirk played on his lips. “We’re just gonna ride,

angel.”

Smoke

Having Dani on the back of my bike was fucking perfect.

The guys had always said having an ol' lady to warm your back on rides was where it was at. They were right.

We drove for over an hour and just enjoyed the wind and the road beneath me. Ever since the whole Gibbs and Boone shit had started, I hadn't been able to ride like this. I was still looking over my shoulder and making sure we weren't in danger, but for the first time in a while, I was enjoying a bit of freedom from worry.

I pulled into the parking lot of Carter's Steakhouse and weaved between the rows of parked cars with practiced ease. I spotted a small open space near the front that was too tight for anything but a bike. I slid in smoothly and killed the engine. I felt Dani shift behind me.

"I see the perk of driving a motorcycle. Anywhere can be a parking spot," she laughed.

I glanced down at the white lines I'd just ignored and smirked. "Whatever works, angel."

Dani swung her leg over and handed me the helmet. I took it and hung it on the handlebars before getting off myself.

She looked damn fine windblown from the ride. Her hair was all tousled, cheeks



flushed, and there was a shine in her eyes that made my chest tighten. She had felt even better pressed up against me the entire ride.

“Are we in Oklahoma?” she asked, looking around.

I nodded and tipped my head toward the Carter’s Steakhouse sign. “Yeah, Broken Bow. You’re about to have the best steak of your life.”

She wrinkled her nose and made my stomach drop to my damn feet. “I’m a vegetarian.”

My jaw damn near hit the pavement. “Oh, shit.”

She waited just long enough for me to panic before a big smile spread across her face. “Kidding,” she laughed.

Relief flooded through me, and I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. “Jesus, woman.” I pushed my sunglasses up on top of my head and reached for her hand. “You about gave me a heart attack.”

I pulled her into my arms, and she came willingly. She fit against me like she belonged there.

“You should have seen your face,” she laughed. “You went white as snow.” She placed her hand on my chest and looked up at me with her eyes dancing with amusement.

The world around us faded. The distant hum of traffic, the chatter of people coming and going from the restaurant—none of it mattered. It was just me and Dani.

I wrapped my arm tighter around her waist. “You don’t play fair, angel.”

She smiled softly with a teasing glint in her eyes. “Yeah, well, you’re too smooth. You are Casanova, after all.”

I frowned slightly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about with that.”

She tapped her fingers against my chest. “And that is what makes me know this isn’t a game or something with you.”

I pulled her even closer. So close I could feel her heartbeat against my chest. “I never play games, angel.”

The air between us thickened and charged with something I couldn’t quite put into words.

“Are you going to kiss me?” Dani asked. Her voice was barely above a whisper.

“Do you want me to?”

“Pretty sure I’ll die if you don’t,” she confessed.

“Can’t let that happen.”

I leaned in, and she rose up on her toes to meet me. Our lips met in a slow, deliberate kiss. She tasted like something sweet and addictive. The feel of her soft mouth moved against mine and made my blood heat. I slid my hand up to cup the back of her neck and held her there. I deepened the kiss just enough to leave her breathless.

A loud horn blared from the street and shattered the moment. I opened my eyes to find her looking up at me with her cheeks flushed and her lips parted.

“Wow,” she murmured.

Wow was right.

“Let’s get some dinner,” I suggested and stepped back reluctantly. As much as I wanted to take her right then and there, I didn’t think the parking lot was the best place.

I took her hand and led her inside the steakhouse. The place was buzzing with conversation, and the smell of sizzling steaks filled the air. Leather and cowhide decorated the walls and gave the place a rugged charm. A long bar stretched across one side while secluded booths lined the opposite wall, offering privacy. Tables filled the center and were packed with hungry customers.

We approached the hostess station.

“Welcome to Carter’s,” the hostess chirped and flashed a bright smile. “Just the two of you?”

I nodded.

“Would you like a booth or a table?”

“Booth,” I requested without hesitation.

She tapped on her tablet. “It’s going to be about a five-minute wait while we clear a table. What’s the name I can put down?”

“Smoke.”

The woman glanced up at me, surprised. “Okay. You guys can wait here or grab a drink at the bar.”

I looked at Dani. “Want a drink?”

She nodded. “Sure.”

I led her to the bar, which was crowded but manageable. I managed to wedge myself in, maneuvered her into the open space, and stood behind her. My front pressed against her back as I wrapped an arm around her waist and leaned down to whisper in her ear. “What do you want to drink, angel?”

She tilted her head slightly, and her gaze met mine. “I’ll just have a glass of Pinot Noir.”

I signaled the bartender. “Pinot Noir for the lady and a beer for me.”

The bartender nodded and set to work. Dani turned in my arms and leaned back against the bar as her eyes scanned the place. “This place is nice. I’ve never been here before.”

“Broken Bow is nice. Small town, but still things to do.” I didn’t need to look around the restaurant. I just wanted to watch her.

She eyed me curiously. “You know that how?”

I hesitated for a beat before answering. “I was raised here.”

Before she could ask more, the bartender returned with our drinks. I handed her the wine, and she accepted it with a small smile. “Thank you.”

The hostess appeared at our side. “I have your booth all ready for you two.”

I stepped to the side and took Dani’s hand in mine as we followed the hostess through

the restaurant. She led us to a booth tucked in the corner that offered a perfect vantage point of the entire dining area. Dani slid in first, and I followed on the other side with a clear view of the restaurant.

“Your waitress will be over in a minute. Enjoy your meal.” The hostess left us alone.

Dani sipped her wine and watched me curiously. “Tell me more about this being your hometown.”

I shrugged and took a sip of my beer. “Not much to tell. Born and raised here. Had a few run-ins with the local police before I took off at eighteen. My parents left a couple of years after I did. They’re in Maine now.”

“Are you close with them?” she asked.

I shrugged again. “I call them a couple of times a month. Try to visit when I can. Things have been pretty busy with the club lately, though.”

She nodded thoughtfully.

My eyes scanned the restaurant as my old habits kicked in. Dani and I may have slipped away from Mt. Pleasant, but I still needed to keep an eye out. We really didn’t know when or how Boone and Gibbs would strike again.

“Everything okay?” she asked as she noticed my shift in focus.

I nodded and took another sip of my beer. “Just keeping an eye on things.”

She followed my gaze and laughed softly. “What are we keeping an eye out for? We’re in a restaurant.”

I smirked. “You never know who might walk through that door.”

Dani rolled her eyes. “You’re always on edge, aren’t you?”

I leaned back against the booth and looked at her. “Comes with the territory, angel.”

Before she could respond, the waitress arrived with a notepad in hand. “Hey there, folks. What can I get you tonight?”

I glanced at Dani. “You ready? We didn’t even look at the menus.”

She nodded and smiled at the waitress. “It’s a steakhouse, right? I’ll have the sirloin, medium, with a baked potato and a side salad.”

The waitress turned to me. “And for you?”

“Ribeye, rare, fries on the side.”

“Salad?” the waitress asked.

I shook my head. “Not into rabbit food. You got Brussels sprouts?”

The waitress nodded. “Parmesan garlic ones.”

I nodded. “I’ll take those, too.”

“Got it. Drinks okay for now?”

We both nodded, and the waitress left us alone.

Dani leaned forward, resting her chin in her hand. “You don’t eat rabbit food, but you

eat Brussels sprouts?” she laughed. “That’s a bit of a contradiction.”

I shrugged. “I like them, and when you cover them with parmesan cheese, anything is good.”

She laughed. “I will remember that. So, what made you come back here after all these years?”

I studied her for a moment before answering. “The club. It was all by chance. Met Yarder and Compass, and then decided to go on the ride of being a part of the club.” I leaned back and spread my arms across the back of the booth. “It seems to be working out so far, minus a few hiccups.”

“Hiccups like being blown up?” she laughed.

I shrugged. “I mean, that even seems to be working out for me. Landed in front of your shop, and now I’m here with you, aren’t I?”

She nodded. “I suppose, though I do tend to wonder why you and the club were blown up. That’s not really a normal thing that happens, Smoke,” she pointed out.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

She tipped her head to the side. “That’s all you have to say?”

“There’s not much I can say, angel. You’re asking about club business.”

She furrowed her brow. “What does that mean?”

“It means I’m part of the Iron Fiends, and things that happen with the club stay with the club.”

“You were literally blown up, Smoke, and that wasn’t the first time from what you guys said. That is insane.” She looked around the restaurant. “Is that why you’re constantly looking around? Are we going to get blown up?”

“Shh, shh,” I whispered. I didn’t need her freaking out in the middle of the restaurant. “We’re not going to be blown up, angel. Nothing is going to happen to us tonight,” I promised.

“I’m trying not to let my mind run crazy here, Smoke, but you’re kind of freaking me out here.”

The waitress came up to the table with Dani’s salad. “House salad,” she declared. “Anything else I can get you before your mains come out?”

Dani looked like she was ready to bolt.

“No, we’re good right now.” I needed to calm Dani down.

The waitress left.

She looked at me expectantly.

“I don’t know what is going through your mind right now, angel. Part of you looks like you want to run, but you’re still sitting here.”

“Don’t be suave with me, Smoke. I’m not stupid, and you can trust me. The only person I talk to really is Stan, and you’ve got another thing coming if you think I am going to tell him anything you say to me. I can keep a secret.”

“Tell me what you want to know, and I’ll see what I can tell you.” I did trust Dani, but I wasn’t sure she was ready for the whole crazy story.



She looked around the restaurant. If she wanted to leave, we would leave right now. I didn't want to mess up whatever was happening between Dani and me.

Eventually, Boone and Gibbs would be out of the picture, and I wanted her to stay in the picture.

"Who tried to kill you?" she asked.

I leaned toward her. "Lower your voice, angel."

Her eyes darted around. "Sorry."

"Eat, and I'll talk."

"I have a lot of questions, Smoke."

I nodded and pushed her salad toward her. "And I will give you the answers you can have."

She rolled her eyes but picked up her fork. "I don't start eating until you start talking."

"You're a feisty one, angel."

She leveled her gaze on me.

"Fine, fine," I chuckled. "Start eating, and I will tell you a story."

"True story, right?" She wasn't going to let anything by her.

I nodded. "A true story."

Dani

My mind was blown.

Our plates were clean, and I was reeling from the story Smoke had just told me. It was like something straight out of a book—crooked politicians, crazy exes, shootings, explosions.

It was a lot.

“All done?” The waitress’s voice pulled me from my thoughts.

I blinked and looked up at her. “Uh, yeah.”

“Could I interest you guys in some dessert? The banana cream pie is amazing,” she suggested.

Smoke looked at me, and his dark eyes were filled with something I couldn’t quite place. “Are we having dessert here, angel?”

I knew what he was asking. I hadn’t told him I made the banana split torte this morning, and honestly, I didn’t know if I was going to. I needed to make a choice.

Even after everything he’d just shared, I wasn’t scared. Not of him and not of the life he led. Even sitting in this crowded restaurant, not knowing what could happen in the next second, I felt safe with him.

“I made banana split torte this morning,” I said with a little teasing smile playing on my lips.

A sexy grin spread across Smoke’s face. “We’ll skip dessert and just take the check.” He reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet, and handed the waitress a handful of bills without even glancing at the total. “Let’s go, angel.”

I slid out of the booth, but before I could get far, Smoke was at my side with his warm hand closing around mine. He tugged me gently and led me through the restaurant and out into the cool night air. My heart pounded, and I wasn’t sure if it was from the story he had told me or the way his touch made me feel.

At his bike, he grabbed my helmet and placed it on my head. He snapped the buckle under my chin with a smirk.

“I didn’t think we were going to leave that quickly when I said I made banana split torte,” I laughed and adjusted the helmet slightly.

Smoke leaned down and pressed a soft, lingering kiss to my lips. “We’ve still got a long ride in front of us, angel, and I’m ready for dessert right now.”

I felt a blush creep up my neck. “How about you have a taste of a different kind of dessert?” I teased and let my fingers trail down the front of his leather cut.

His eyes darkened, and his voice dropped to a low, husky murmur. “And you say I’m the smooth one, angel.”

Before I could respond, his lips crashed against mine in a kiss that was anything but soft. It was hot, urgent, and sent a fire coursing through me. My fingers gripped his cut, pulled him closer, and felt the hard lines of his body pressed against mine. His hands roamed down my back and gripped my waist as he deepened the kiss.

I melted into him and savored the taste of him. He claimed me with just his mouth. My heart raced, and my knees felt weak as his tongue slid against mine. He took his time and tasted me like I was his favorite meal.

We finally pulled apart, and we were both breathless. I bit my lower lip and tried to steady myself.

“Whoa,” Smoke gasped and ran his thumb over his bottom lip. “I think that beats banana split torte any day.”

I laughed and felt dizzy under his spell. “I think we should head back to my place, and we can compare the two.”

He pressed one last short kiss to my lips that was packed with promise. “Hop on, angel.”

Without hesitation, I climbed onto the back of his bike and wrapped my arms around his waist. The rumble of the engine vibrated through me as I pressed closer to him. I felt his strength as he maneuvered us out of the parking lot onto the road.

The night air whipped around us as we sped down the road, but all I could think about was the man in front of me and what was waiting for us when we got back to my place. The roar of the engine vibrated through my chest, and I pressed myself closer to Smoke. The dark countryside stretched out around us, and the moonlight cast a soft glow over the open road.

I closed my eyes for a moment, letting the ride consume me. The cool breeze, the rhythmic rumble of the bike, and the intoxicating scent of leather mixed with Smoke’s cologne—it was perfection. I had never felt so free and so safe at the same time.

As we neared town, the streetlights flickered to life and cast golden pools of light on the pavement. Smoke maneuvered the bike through the familiar streets with ease, and soon enough, we pulled into my driveway. The bike rumbled to a stop, and he killed the engine. The sudden silence settled around us like a blanket.

I reached up, unbuckled my helmet, and slid it off before I handed it to Smoke. I slid off from behind him and shook out my hair. I caught him watching me with a slow smile, tugging at his lips.

“What are you looking at?” I asked and felt suddenly self-conscious under his gaze.

“Just taking in how beautiful you are,” he said. His voice was low and sincere.

I rolled my eyes with a laugh. “There’s Casanova.”

Smoke chuckled and hung the helmet on the handlebars. “Just saying the truth, angel.”

I watched as he swung his leg over the bike and stood to his full height. The streetlights cast shadows that highlighted the sharp angles of his face. He was so damn good-looking it should be illegal. The way his jeans hugged his hips, and the way his T-shirt clung to his chest—it was a sight I could appreciate all night.

He reached his hand out to me, and his fingers were warm as they curled around mine. “Ready for dessert?” he asked. His tone suggested he wasn’t just talking about the banana split torte waiting inside.

My stomach flipped. “Let’s go find out,” I said and led him toward the front door.

I unlocked the door, pushed it open, and stepped inside. I flipped on the living room light and didn’t pause. I led Smoke straight to the kitchen, where I opened the fridge

and pulled out the banana split torte. I set it on the counter like a proud mom showing off her kid.

Smoke came over and leaned in to inspect it. “That looks damn good, angel.”

I smiled and reached for a knife from the drawer. “It tastes even better than it looks,” I promised.

I grabbed two plates from the cabinet and sliced one generous piece. Just as I went to cut another, Smoke’s hand gently covered mine and stopped me.

“You and I can share, angel,” he said as his eyes locked onto mine. They were full of something dark and delicious.

I swallowed hard and felt the heat of his gaze. “Share, huh?”

Smoke grinned and slid the plate closer. “Yeah. I like the idea of feeding you.”

A nervous laugh escaped me, but I nodded and grabbed a fork. I handed it to him. “Alright, let’s see what you think, Casanova.”

He took the fork, scooped up a bite, and held it out to me. “You first, angel.”

I parted my lips and let him slide the fork into my mouth. The rich, creamy dessert melted on my tongue, and I moaned softly. “Mmm, told you it was good.”

Smoke’s eyes darkened as he watched me. “Damn, angel. Watching you enjoy that might be better than eating it myself.”

I felt a blush creep up my neck. “Your turn,” I said, grabbed the fork, and scooped up another bite. I held it to his lips, and he smirked before taking it in.

His eyes fluttered shut as he savored it. “You weren’t lying. This is incredible.”

We continued taking turns. I wiped a smudge of cream from his lip, and his eyes watched me as I sucked my finger into my mouth.

Smoke set the fork down and leaned in till his face was just inches from mine. “You know, angel, I think I might like your kind of dessert better than anything I’ve ever had.”

I swallowed, and my heart raced. “I did say it was the best.”

“You weren’t wrong,” he murmured, and his lips brushed against mine.

My fork clattered to the floor as I melted into him. My hands gripped the counter behind me as his arms caged me in. The kiss was slow and teasing while his lips tasted of the sweetness we had just shared. I sighed into him, and his body pressed closer.

When we finally pulled apart, I was breathless, and my eyes locked onto his. “Wow.”

Smoke’s gaze darkened, and his lips curved into that signature smirk that always sent shivers down my spine. “Wow is right, angel,” he murmured, his eyes dropping to my lips. “Now, how about we take this dessert somewhere more comfortable?”

I nodded with my heart hammering against my ribs as he reached for the half-eaten plate of banana split torte. Without another word, he took my hand and led me through the house. His confident stride made my knees weak. The warmth of his fingers wrapped around mine, and I followed him willingly.

The moment we stepped into my bedroom, he set the plate down on the bedside table and turned to me. His hands found my waist and pulled me flush against him. My

breath caught in my throat as his lips descended on mine. My arms wrapped around his neck, and my fingers tangled in his hair as I melted into him.

His hands roamed up my back and slipped beneath my shirt, and the roughness of his palms sent sparks across my skin. In one smooth motion, he pulled the fabric over my head and tossed it aside. I felt the cool air whisper against my bare skin, but it was nothing compared to the heat radiating from him.

I reached for his shirt in return and slid it over his head to reveal the hard planes of muscle I had dreamed about. His boots thudded against the floor as he kicked them off, and his hands worked the button on my jeans and panties. I shimmied out of them and stood in front of him naked.

“You’re so damn beautiful,” he whispered. His voice was husky and sent a delicious shiver down my spine.

He nudged me gently onto the bed, and his strong frame hovered over me. He grabbed the plate of dessert with a wicked glint in his eyes. He scooped up a bit of the whipped cream with his finger, and he traced it across my collarbone. His touch was feather-light, and I gasped at the cold cream.

His lips followed, warm and soft, and he licked away the sweetness. His tongue trailed lower and left a heated path in its wake. I arched into him, and my hands fisted in the sheets as he pressed open-mouthed kisses down my chest.

“Smoke,” I breathed out. My voice trembled with need. “Please.”

He chuckled as he placed the plate back on the nightstand. In one fluid motion, he stood and shucked off his jeans and boxers, but his gaze never left mine. My pulse quickened, and heat pooled low in my belly as he reached for my legs. He gently pulled me to the edge of the bed.



I spread my legs and opened myself to him. My body hummed with anticipation. He knelt before me, and his hands slid up my thighs to part them further. His lips brushed against the sensitive skin of my inner thigh with a slow, torturous tease that left me breathless.

I tangled my fingers in his hair and urged him closer. My body ached for him. “Smoke,” I murmured. It was a plea wrapped in desire.

He looked up at me. His eyes were dark and filled with something deeper than lust. “I’ve got you, angel,” he promised before he lowered his mouth to me.

The moment his tongue touched me, I gasped. My back arched off the bed and a shudder wracked my body as he licked me. His mouth was hot and eager, but there was something more to it—something tender. It wasn’t just about pleasure; it was about worship and about him wanting to show me exactly how much he wanted me.

Needed me.

His hands gripped my thighs and held me in place as his tongue flicked and teased. Each flick sent waves of bliss through my entire body.

“Smoke...” I breathed as my fingers threaded through his dark hair and held on as if I might levitate off the bed. I felt myself teetering on the edge faster than I’d ever thought possible.

“I’ve got you,” he murmured against me. His voice was thick and husky before he dove back in, and his tongue delved deep. His lips sucked and teased until the pleasure built into something overwhelming.

I came apart with a cry. My entire body trembled as I rode out the waves of pleasure rolling through me. He stayed there and worked me through it. Drank me in like I was

the sweetest thing he'd ever tasted. When he finally pulled away, he wiped his mouth with the back of his arm, and his eyes locked onto mine.

Satisfied and smug.

I was completely undone.

No one had ever made me feel like this. Like I was the most treasured thing in their world. With Smoke, it wasn't just about physical need; it was about connection, about being wanted in a way I'd never experienced before.

He stood, and his strong arms pulled me toward the center of the bed as he hovered over me. Our lips met, and I could taste myself on him. A mix of sweetness and heat that only made me want him more. My hands roamed over his chest and traced every scar and tattoo.

His body was warm and solid against mine, and when I reached between us, I wrapped my fingers around his thick, hard length. He groaned against my mouth.

"Careful with that, angel," he warned, and his voice was strained.

I smiled and stroked him slowly. "Or what?"

His dark eyes burned into mine. "Or you're going to get a handful."

I bit my lip and felt a thrill rush through me. "Maybe that's exactly what I want."

Smoke let out a low growl and kissed me deeply. His hands gripped my hips before he positioned himself between my legs. The anticipation was electric, and every nerve in my body was on fire as I felt the blunt head of him pressing against me. Slowly, and inch by inch, he filled me. Stretched me in the most delicious way.

“Dani,” he groaned, and his forehead rested against mine as he buried himself to the hilt. “You feel so damn good.”

I gasped and clung to him as he began to move. Slow and deep at first. Each thrust sent shivers of pleasure racing through me. My hands roamed over his back and dug into his shoulders as he picked up the pace. Our bodies moving together in perfect sync.

“Smoke,” I moaned as my nails raked down his back. The sound of our bodies moving together filled the room with gasps, groans, and whispered pleas.

He kissed me fiercely as his tongue tangled with mine. His hands were everywhere at once.

My waist.

My thighs.

My breasts.

Each touch set me ablaze and pushed me closer and closer to the edge once more.

“Come again for me,” he urged. His voice was rough and commanding. “Come for me, angel.”

And I did.

My body shattered around him as waves of ecstasy crashed over me. Smoke followed right after. His groans vibrated against my skin as he drove into me one last time and spilled himself deep inside me.

He collapsed on top of me. I wrapped my arms around him and held him close. I felt the steady beat of his heart against my chest.

“Wow,” I whispered, and my lips brushed against his temple.

Smoke let out a low chuckle, and his breath was warm against my neck. “Wow is right, angel.”

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:53 am*

Smoke

I was awake.

The sun streamed through the window, and a bird whistled somewhere outside.

Last night had been fucking amazing.

Dani lay beside me, passed out on her stomach, with her face half-buried in the pillow. Her soft snoring filled the quiet room. Her hair was a tousled mess and spread out around her like a halo. My chest tightened as I watched her and felt something I wasn't sure I could name.

Satisfaction? Yeah.

Something more? Maybe.

My phone dinged from where my jeans were crumpled on the floor.

Dani stirred, and a soft murmur escaped her lips. Slowly, she pushed her hair out of her face, and her eyes blinked open. They landed on me.

“Morning, angel,” I whispered.

A sleepy smile tugged at her lips. “Morning, Casanova.”

I leaned in and pressed a lingering kiss to her lips. She sighed against me, and her

fingers curled into my hair. I could have stayed like that forever.

My phone dinged again.

Dani pulled back with a chuckle. “You’re popular early in the morning.”

Another ding.

Her brow furrowed. “Maybe you should get that.”

I groaned but gave her one last kiss before I rolled away. As I sat up, I watched Dani roll into the warm spot I’d left behind and bury her face in my pillow. A contented sigh slipped from her, and the sight made me grin.

I shook my head and reached down to fish my phone out of my jeans. A string of messages lit up the screen.

“Fuck,” I muttered.

Dani lifted her head, and her hair was a wild mess around her face. “What’s wrong?”

I ran a hand through my hair and grabbed my jeans. “I’ve got to go, angel.”

She pressed up off the mattress and adjusted to sit on her haunches. “Did something happen?”

I pulled my jeans on and buttoned them up. “Nothing yet, but I’m pretty sure Yarder will flip his shit if I’m not at the clubhouse now. The camera crew is coming this morning.”

Dani’s brows drew together in confusion. “There’s a ton of you. I think it’s okay if

you're not there the second they pull up."

I tugged my shirt over my head. "We didn't really talk much about the TV show last night, but my ass needs to be there. It's not just about me; it's about the club. We all agreed to do everything we can to get the filming done. Pretty sure if I miss the first day of filming, Yarder will kick my ass out of the club."

She stood, wrapped the comforter around her, and walked over to me. "I get it," she said softly and ran her fingers lightly down my arm. "You have responsibilities."

I leaned down and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I'll make it up to you later."

"You better," she teased, though there was a flicker of something in her eyes. Disappointment? Maybe.

I grabbed my boots and sat on the edge of the bed to pull them on. Dani watched me, and her expression was unreadable.

"You'll call later?" she asked.

I nodded. "Promise."

She smiled, though it didn't quite reach her eyes. "Go. Do your thing. I need to get ready for work anyway."

I stood and pulled her into one last embrace. I inhaled the scent of her hair and took a beat to memorize the feel of her body against mine. It took everything in me to step away.

"Lock the door behind me, angel."

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, Casanova.”

With one last grin, I grabbed my keys from the dresser and headed out. The morning air hit me as I stepped outside. I glanced behind me and watched Dani lean against the open door with the blanket still wrapped around her. “Have a good,” she called.

“I will once you shut that door and lock it,” I called.

She rolled her eyes and made me grin despite myself. She shut it with a soft but firm thud. I didn’t move for a second and just listened. The click of the lock sounded. That was when I called out, “Bye, angel.”

I swear I heard something. Her voice floated back to me, soft but too low to catch the words. It sounded like she was saying something—maybe a curse or something else—hell, I couldn’t be sure. But it made me chuckle.

I took one last glance at the house and then turned on my heel.

I tucked Dani’s helmet in my saddlebag and then swung my leg over the bike. The engine growled to life when I turned the key.

My eyes flicked back to the house as I revved the engine. My gaze lingered on the windows, and I wondered if she was watching me through the blinds.

I kicked the stand up and headed down the driveway and onto the road. The sun was still climbing the sky, and a big part of me wished I was still in bed with Dani.

The wind hit my face as I picked up speed, and the cool morning air was sharp and fresh. My mind was already on the clubhouse and what was waiting for me there.

The camera crew.



I was going to do everything I could to make sure they got their footage and then got the hell out of Dodge.

Dani

“You look like you’re floating on cloud nine.”

I glanced at Stan and smiled. “I’m not even doing anything,” I laughed.

“Honey, you haven’t stopped smiling since you waltzed through the door.” Stan held up the coffee I had brought him, and his eyes twinkled. “And you even splurged on the fancy coffee today. I can’t tell you the last time I had a double-shot vanilla latte.”

I shrugged and reached under the counter to grab the feather duster. “I thought you deserved it after working by yourself yesterday.” I made my way over to the racks of wine and gently brushed away the fine layer of dust that had settled on them.

Stan hummed as he took a sip. “And what did you do on your day off?” He paused, and his voice turned to tease. “Maybe spend some time with a handsome biker?”

I rolled my eyes and kept my back to him. I really couldn’t stop smiling. Even though Smoke had left rather quickly this morning, it hadn’t dampened the lingering warmth in my chest.

“Um, I did some grocery shopping and made one of my mom’s desserts...”

“And?” Stan urged.

I turned to face him and was unable to hide the sparkle in my eyes. “And then Smoke came over to take me on a motorcycle ride to dinner, and then he came back to my

place for... dessert. He didn't leave until this morning."

Stan threw his hands in the air, and his voice rang through the shop. "Praise Jesus," he sang. "I was hoping that man would put the moves on you."

I laughed and shook my head. I turned back to the wine rack and ran the duster over the bottles with a soft touch. "You're impossible, Stan."

"I'm invested, honey," he shot back and took another sip of his coffee. "I want you to be happy, but I also want those girls to come back to the shop. You hooking up with one of those biker men is exactly what we need to lock the girls in."

"Are you using my relationship to get more business into the shop?" I laughed.

Stan laughed. "Yes, but you know I just want you to be happy. I haven't seen you date... ever."

I bit my lip and tried to fight the heat rising to my cheeks. "I really like him, Stan. He's nice, but he's also..."

Stan leveled his gaze on me. "He's a man, Dani. I'm too old to be looking at anyone, but you would have to be blind to not be able to see the appeal that man has. I'm going to need more details other than he's nice."

I shook my head and focused on the rows of Merlot in front of me. "It was more than nice, okay? It was amazing. The ride, the dinner, just... everything." My voice softened, and I could almost feel the way the wind had whipped around me as I held onto Smoke and the rumble of his bike beneath us.

Stan grinned. "A man like that can't just be 'nice.'"

I chuckled, placing the duster back under the counter and leaning against it. “Yeah, well, he’s something else, but also nice for sure.”

Stan raised an eyebrow. “And? Will there be a repeat performance?”

I shrugged, but my smile gave me away. “I hope so. He had something to do with the club today, but he promised to call later.” I didn’t want to tell Stan everything about Smoke. He had told me the whole crazy story last night because I promised I wouldn’t tell anyone.

“Dani,” he sighed dramatically. “You’re killing me here. What things did that man have to do instead of being with you?”

“The man is allowed to have a life that doesn’t involve me, Stan. We just started whatever this is between us.” I reached for a notepad to check the inventory. “I’m not trying to overthink it and just let things happen.”

“Sweetheart, you deserve to enjoy it. That man looks at you like you’re the best thing he’s ever seen.”

I felt my stomach flip at Stan’s words. “Yeah,” I admitted softly. “He kind of does, doesn’t he?”

“Damn right he does,” Stan said with a wink. “I’m going to go fill the Italian herb olive oil keg. You need anything?”

I shook my head. “I’m just going to go over inventory and see if there’s anything we need to order.”

Stan nodded and disappeared into the back room.

I grabbed the clipboard from under the counter, scanned the shelves, and made notes here and there. But my focus kept drifting. I couldn't stop thinking about the way Smoke had smiled at me last night and the way his voice softened just enough when he called me "angel."

The lingering scent of leather and engine oil from his jacket still clung to my memory, and I found myself smiling all over again.

I shook my head and laughed softly to myself. "Get it together, Dani."

Smoke

“You think Don did this on purpose?”

Yarder shrugged. “Could have.”

We had met the two new producers for Tread , and we were all... shocked. Saylor and Mac were the complete opposite of Adalee and Clay. Saylor was likely in her late twenties, with black hair and lots of piercings, and was just straight-up goth. Mac, on the other hand, was likely in her forties and looked like June Cleaver.

“It’s just odd. Is he wanting us to like them, or what? Maybe Saylor would turn Pirate’s head, but I don’t think Mac is going to be the type of producer that gets the job done.”

Yarder folded his arms over his chest. “Maybe he was thinking of targeting you with Mac.”

I shook my head. “Not me.”

Yarder glanced at me. “That got anything to do with you not coming back to the clubhouse last night and me having to light up your phone to get your ass here?”

“I need to let you know my every move?” I asked.

“When Boone and Gibbs are out there, yeah. A quick text letting me know you wouldn’t be back last night would have been enough. Don’t need details, just need to

know you're good."

I slid my sunglasses over my eyes and watched the construction crew put the shingles on the garage. "I'm good."

Saylor and Mac were closer to the garage, getting footage with Mark and Drew.

"You gonna bring her around the cameras?" Yarder asked.

I folded my arms over my chest. "I'd rather not. Since filming should be wrapping up soon, I was hoping to just leave her out of it. I don't need that complication on top of starting something with Dani."

Yarder nodded. "Don't blame ya. Would have been nice if I had that chance, but I wasn't lucky. Hell, none of the guys were that lucky. Aero and Sloane got married in front of the cameras," he laughed.

"Yeah, I am not looking to have that happen."

"We've got two weeks of filming, Smoke. You think you can keep her away for that long?"

I hoped I could. "Two weeks isn't that long. And I can always find time to go see her. Dani didn't sign up for being on a TV show. Hell, I think she's still adjusting to me landing in front of her shop a week ago and the club. I think leaving the cameras and the show out of it is a good idea."

"Whatever you think," Yarder said. "Just know I want everyone here when the cameras are rolling."

"You mean the camera crew."

Yarder shook his head. “All cameras, man. Even the ones in the clubhouse.”

“Yarder,” I protested. “I’m not going to be able to leave then.”

Yarder shrugged. “I’m done with the show, man. We need to get it done. Once that happens, we can hammer down on Boone and Gibbs hard.”

“I’m not going to be able to see Dani, then.”

“Yeah, you can. Just have her come to the clubhouse.” Yarder winked and pulled his sunglasses over his eyes. “You got a choice, Smoke. Bring Dani here or wait two weeks.”

Yarder walked away and left me standing there, pissed.

I didn’t want to bring Dani into the TV show. Adjusting to club life was going to be hard enough. I didn’t want her to have to deal with the cameras in her face on top of that.

It was going to be a long two weeks.



Dani

I sat at the kitchen counter and swirled the deep red wine in my glass. I stared at my phone that sat just inches away. I hadn't heard from Smoke all day, and it gnawed at me more than I wanted to admit.

I took another sip and let the warmth settle in my chest.

"You can call him, Dani. He's the one who put his number in your phone," I reminded myself out loud.

I stared at the phone and willed it to ring.

"Just call him," I muttered, but my fingers didn't move.

Instead, I turned toward the fridge. "First I'll make dinner," I reasoned. Just as I opened the door, the sudden buzz of my phone made me jump. I spun around and dove for it with my heart pounding when I saw Smoke's name lighting up the screen.

I answered quickly. "Hello?"

"Angel." His voice purred through the line and sent a shiver down my spine. "Miss me?"

"Oh, maybe," I teased. "It was pretty slow at the store today."

"So you had time to think about me?" he asked.

“Did you call just to see if I missed you?” I laughed.

“Yeah, but I also needed to talk to you.”

Something in his tone made my stomach twist. “Okay, what’s up? Why don’t you come over and we can talk?” I sounded a little too eager, but why should I act like I didn’t want to see him? I wasn’t into playing hard to get.

“Uh, that’s what I want to talk to you about, angel. Things are happening with the club, and I won’t be able to come over for a bit.”

My heart sank. “Is everything okay?”

“It’s just the whole TV show thing. Yarder wants everyone here twenty-four-seven.”

“Oh,” I said and felt disappointment settle in my chest. “Well, what if I came there?”

“No, no,” Smoke protested quickly. “You don’t need to do that, angel. Having a camera in your face is not fun.”

I leaned against the counter. “We can sneak away to your room.” A part of me was excited by the idea of slipping away unnoticed, just the two of us.

“There are cameras everywhere, Dani. You really want to be a part of the TV show?”

I chewed my lip. “I mean, I never really thought about it before.” Being on a reality TV show was not a normal thing.

“It’s not great, angel. Just let me get the show wrapped up, okay? I don’t want you to have to deal with it.”

I heard what he was saying, but I also heard what he wasn't saying. "I mean, okay, but if you wan—"

Shouts erupted in the background, followed by a loud crash.

"Shit," Smoke muttered. "I gotta go, angel. I'll call you in a couple of days, okay?"

"Sure, sure," I muttered as the line went dead.

I set the phone down on the counter and stared at it like it might ring again. I grabbed my glass of wine and took a long sip. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and sighed.

"That is not how I thought that was going to go," I muttered to myself and looked around the empty kitchen.

It wasn't like he had broken up with me or anything, but it kind of felt that way. He said he was trying to keep me from dealing with the camera crew, but could it really be that bad?

I drained my glass and refilled it with a heavy sigh.

I wasn't going to find out because Smoke didn't want to see me for two weeks.

Looked like I was going to go back to working and spending my nights with Queen Latifah.

Smoke

“It’s been three days since the cameras turned on, and I can’t play pool anymore.”

I chuckled and grabbed a beer from behind the bar. “You could go with Yarder and the girls today to talk to the landlord of the strip mall,” I suggested.

Dice grunted. “I’m looking for something to do other than play pool, not be tortured.”

I cracked open the beer and tossed the top in the trash. It was Wednesday, and we were all pretty much climbing the walls.

“You really think this is the shit the cameras want?” Pirate bellied up to the bar and nodded to the camera.

I shrugged. “Yarder seems to think so. The crew has been spending most of their time by the garage, so maybe they are going to focus on that.”

Compass walked into the common room and looked around. He saw us at the bar and made his way over.

“You seen Yarder?” he asked.

Pirate chuckled. “Probably in his bedroom with Poppy. Haven’t seen either of them today.”

“So he can hide away from the cameras, but we have to be out here all of the damn

time?” Dice complained.

“I guess that is one of the perks of being prez,” Compass laughed.

“What’s a perk of being prez?”

Dice, Compass, and Pirate turned to see Yarder in the entry to the common room.

“Where the hell have you been?” Compass demanded. “Mac had some questions about the garage, and I didn’t know the answers.”

Yarder groaned. “That chick is on my dick all of the time.”

Poppy came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist. “Whose ass am I going to have to kick? This is my dick,” she asked.

“Mac,” Dice laughed. “I think you can take her, Poppy. Always go for the kneecaps.”

“Oh, but I like Mac. She knows you’re in charge, Yarder, so of course she is going to stick to you. And I also like her because she calls me miss.” Poppy moved around Yarder and looked up at him. “Be nice to Mac. Maybe Pirate, Dice, Stretch, or Smoke might make her their ol’ lady.”

“Oh, hell no!” Pirate called. “She reminds me of my mom, and not in a mama kind of way.”

Dice held up his beer. “It’s a no from me.”

Everyone looked at me. “Uh, I am otherwise occupied.”

“Otherwise occupied?” Poppy laughed. “What does that mean?”

“Means he’s been seeing Dani. Well, he was before he told her he couldn’t see her for two weeks because the camera crew is here.”

I glared at Yarder. Seemed he was rather talkative when Poppy was around.

“Oh, we can go there after we talk to the landlord.” Poppy smiled at me. “You can come with.”

That was not what I wanted to do. Yes, I wanted to see Dani, but I didn’t want the cameras there. “I think I’ll skip that field trip.”

“So, you’re seeing Dani, but you actually don’t want to see her?” Poppy laughed. “I’m sure that makes sense in your biker brain.”

“She doesn’t need to be a part of the TV show. It’s not a big deal,” I insisted. This was not something Dani wanted. The club and I had signed on to be a part of the show. They were showing the biker lifestyle, not my specific lifestyle.

“But is it a big deal to Dani?” Poppy asked.

“Babe,” Yarder called. “Go easy on him. He’s still trying to figure shit out with her.”

“Well, I can tell you there won’t be any shit if he keeps hiding her.” Poppy reached up on her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his cheek. “I’m going to see if Adalee and Fallon are ready.”

Yarder nodded.

Poppy turned on her heel and headed back down the hallway.

“You sure you don’t want to come with?” Yarder asked me. “We can wander down to

the wine shop if you want to see Dani. No pressure from any of us.”

It was tempting as hell. I hadn’t talked to Dani since Monday when I told her to just hang back for two weeks. I could tell that she was disappointed she wasn’t going to see me for a while, but it would be fine. I shook my head. “I’m good here.” I nodded to Dice. “Pretty sure we’re gonna play pool for best of five.”

Dice groaned. “God, no. Let’s play cards or something. Fucking Yahtzee will be better than pool.”

“Fine,” Yarder said. “I’ll take Pirate with me.”

“Fucking hell,” Pirate grumbled. “Aren’t Fade and Compass going with you?”

Yarder nodded. “Yeah, but I’m pretty sure Mac is going to get some riding shots on the way over, so the more of us riding, the better.”

Pirate shook his head but got off his stool. “I can’t freaking wait until this shit is over.”

Dice looked at me. “We are not playing fucking pool.”

I chuckled and rounded the bar. “Then cards it is, fucker. Deal ‘em.”

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:53 am*

Dani

“Did you order more of the Kalamata olives?” Stan’s voice broke through my daze.

I nodded and didn’t look up from the book I was reading. “Yeah. They should be here tomorrow.”

He exhaled in relief. “Good, because we’ve only got two jars left, and I planned on sampling them on Friday.”

I nodded absently again, but my thoughts were far away. My attention was only half on the conversation.

“Dani.”

I looked up at Stan. “Yeah?”

“What did I just say?” He raised an eyebrow and leaned against the counter like he was waiting for something.

I furrowed my brow. “Uh, you asked if I ordered Kalamatas. I did.”

Stan sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “And then what did I say after that?”

Something. I know he said something, but it slipped through the cracks. “Uh... well...” I stared at him and tried to piece it together.



I had no clue.

My mind had been elsewhere for the past few days. I had been trying to read my book all morning, but just kept reading the same page over and over.

“Dani,” Stan said in a firm tone. I could tell he wasn’t letting it go.

I blinked at him and then sighed in defeat. “I don’t know, Stan. I’m... I’m off today.”

Stan pushed off the counter, and his face softened. “Hey, you’re okay. But something’s up with you, isn’t it?”

I nodded absently again and rubbed my thumb over the edge of the book. I wanted to just be left alone, but I knew Stan wouldn’t let that happen.

“I’m going to the clubhouse and kicking Smoke’s ass,” Stan muttered, mostly to himself but loud enough for me to hear. “They can put that on their damn TV show.”

I couldn’t help but snort. “You’re not going to the clubhouse, Stan,” I laughed lightly, though it came out strained. “It’s fine.”

“It is not fine to sweep a woman off her feet and then tell her he’ll see her in two weeks because he’s busy filming a TV show. This is Texas, Dani, not Hollywood. The man can give you some of his time.”

I didn’t want to admit it, but Stan was right. Smoke had practically disappeared from my life this week. And it wasn’t because he was too busy with anything other than the show. He didn’t want me around the cameras. He didn’t want me on TV with him, and that hurt. He had never said it out loud, but it was in the way he refused to let me visit him while they were filming.

It made me feel small. Like I didn't matter enough for him to share that part of his life with me, even though everyone else seemed to be included.

I wanted to argue, but the words wouldn't come.

"It's not like that," I said finally, my voice almost a whisper. "He doesn't want me on TV. He doesn't want me to be part of it."

Stan stared at me with his brow furrowed in confusion. "What do you mean? All the other girls are on the damn show. Yarder probably has Poppy and Adalee doing all sorts of shit on there, but Smoke won't let you near it?"

I nodded and bit my lip. My stomach twisted with a mix of confusion and hurt. I didn't get it. All the other girls seemed to be fine with it. But Smoke... he didn't even give me a choice.

Which wasn't like him.

I could feel Stan's anger on my behalf, but it only made me feel worse. It was as if I wasn't enough for him, and maybe that was the truth. Maybe I wasn't what Smoke wanted, and that stung more than I cared to admit.

Stan waved his hand in front of my face and snapped me out of my spiral. "Honey," he said, his voice gentle now.

I blinked rapidly and realized I had zoned out again.

I tried to shake it off, but the worry inside me wouldn't settle.

The bell above the door chimed, and the sound jerked me back to reality. A group of people walked into the shop, and I immediately recognized them.

Yarder, Adalee, Poppy, Fallon, Fade, Compass, and some guy I didn't know.

And trailing behind them? A camera crew.

Oh, boy.

Yarder gave me a lazy smile as he approached the counter. "You good with us filming in here?"

Stan was already putting on his showman act and strutted over to the door with his arms wide open. "Sure, sure, of course," he said with exaggerated enthusiasm. "Please, please, come on in and experience Wine and Cheese Me!"

I rolled my eyes at his antics. Stan was laying it on thick. He could be such a drama king, but it worked for him.

"Hey!" Fallon and Adalee called out in unison. They made their way over to the counter, with Poppy following behind them.

"We were just down the way talking to the landlord about the open space," Adalee explained and looked excited.

"Open space is right," Fallon added with a laugh. "There's a damn hole in the ceiling."

Poppy leaned against the counter, and her eyes flicked to me briefly. "Which is why he's giving you guys such a great deal on rent."

I couldn't help but chuckle. I had seen the hole in the ceiling when I passed by earlier. The landlord must've been desperate if he was offering them a deal.

“So, you guys are going to do it?” I asked and leaned against the counter.

“We still need to discuss it,” Yarder butted in, and he crossed his arms over his chest.

“We’re not saying yes to anything until we put it up for a vote.”

Adalee shot him a look. “You mean a vote I don’t get a vote in?” She tipped her head to the side, and a smirk played on her lips. “That doesn’t sound right, but I know that it’s right.”

Fade stood behind Adalee and rubbed her shoulders. “Chill, babe. I get a vote, and you know I’m going to vote yes.”

Adalee turned and pressed a kiss to his cheek. “That’s sweet, honey, but I would still like my own vote.”

“Same,” Fallon called and raised her hand like she was in a classroom.

I tried to ignore the big camera that was weaving through the shop and trying to capture everything. It was pretty distracting and had flicked toward me a few times but never lingered long. I doubted anything going on here was exciting enough for the audience.

“I know what your vote is,” Yarder sighed and ran a hand down his face. “I just need to run it by the rest of the guys, okay? The club is who is going to help you get this off the ground.”

“Fine,” Adalee grumbled and crossed her arms. “But I would like it to be put on the record that I am not down with us not having an official vote.”

“It is noted,” Yarder growled, clearly over the conversation.

“What are we doing here?” the guy I didn’t know asked and glanced around the shop with a skeptical expression.

Poppy pushed off the counter with a grin. “We’re surrounded by cheese and wine, Pirate. Just enjoy it.”

Pirate scoffed and shook his head. “Yeah, no thanks. I’m not into wine, and cheese just belongs on pizza and burgers.”

“Oh, no, no, no,” Stan called dramatically and swooped in like a hawk. He hooked his arm through Pirate’s. “I think you need a little education, biker man. And I will be your guide on this journey.”

“Hey, hey,” Yarder called to Stan and pointed a warning finger at him. “Take it easy on the samples today, okay? We got some shit we need to do when we get back to the clubhouse.”

“Sure, sure,” Stan called back and grabbed two bottles of wine before heading to the cheese case with Pirate in tow. “I just want to show Bootlegger some things.”

“Bootlegger?” Compass laughed from the door.

“It’s Pirate,” Pirate growled with a scowl.

Stan moved behind the cheese case, completely unfazed. “Oh, yeah. You’re right.” He grabbed a wedge of aged white cheddar and held it up dramatically. “At least I knew it wasn’t Jack Sparrow.”

God, I loved Stan.

Most people would be intimidated by a bunch of bikers and their ol’ ladies.

Not Stan.

Not one bit.

Adalee and Fallon wandered over to the cheese case and laughed as they watched Stan work his magic on Pirate. Compass and Fade stayed by the door, leaned against the frame, and just watched everyone.

The camera crew knew where the excitement was and followed Stan and Pirate, which meant they were finally off me. Thank goodness.

“How have you been?” Poppy asked as she turned her attention back to me.

“Oh, uh, I’ve been good. Business has been steady since our little party. At least ten people have come back in and mentioned you guys.”

Poppy beamed. “That’s great. I hope they bought something when they came back in.”

I nodded. “Oh, yeah. They totally did.”

Poppy hesitated, then asked, “Has Smoke been in?”

“Poppy,” Yarder groaned. “Do not do this.”

“Do what?” she asked innocently.

“Act like you don’t know what’s going on.”

I leaned forward, my curiosity piqued. “Um, what is going on? I would like to know from you guys what is going on.” Any insight I could get about what Smoke was

thinking would be great. I knew what he had said to me, but I was twisting it all in my head and second-guessing every word.

Yarder shook his head. "I'm not going to get in the middle of this."

"I will," Poppy grinned mischievously. She leaned toward me. "The whole club thinks the show is so annoying."

"We have never said 'so annoying,'" Yarder interjected.

Poppy waved him off. "No one likes the show. Smoke thinks he is saving you from it or something."

I glanced at the camera crew. "I mean, it doesn't seem that bad."

Poppy smacked Yarder on the shoulder. "I say the same thing. It isn't that bad. Sure, it's a little annoying when you're trying to have a private conversation, but just go in your room or to church if you don't want the cameras around."

"Yeah, sure, I'll just send a message to Boone and Gibbs to try to only kill us when we're in our bedrooms or church," Yarder muttered and shook his head.

I froze. Boone and Gibbs? Those names sounded... familiar. Politician familiar. The only Boone I knew of was the US Attorney General. If that was who was messing with the Iron Fiends, that was serious as hell.

"You know what I mean," Poppy said and waved off Yarder's annoyed look. "And besides, it's almost over. I hear Mac say they're getting a lot of footage. Hopefully, they'll be done sooner."

"That would be a fucking miracle," Yarder muttered under his breath.

Poppy turned her attention back to me. “What I’m trying to say is the guys are dramatic when it comes to the cameras.”

I glanced at Yarder with a smirk. “Dramatic, huh?”

Yarder pushed off the counter and was clearly done with the conversation. “Okay,” he called to the rest of the crew. “Let’s wrap this shit up.”

“Oops,” Poppy laughed. “I might have pissed off the prez.”

Yarder narrowed his eyes at her. “Oh, you sure as shit did.”

She stepped closer to him, her voice dropping suggestively. “Will I be punished later? In our bedroom?”

Good lord. The sexual tension between those two was enough to make me blush.

Stan, oblivious to the flirting, pulled out the wedge of Stilton. “Ten more minutes, Yardman. I’m about to get the Stilton out. Johnny Depp says he’s not afraid of the funk.”

“Oh god,” I groaned. “You’re going to stink up the whole shop, Stan. You know my rule with the Stilton.”

Stan held up the pungent cheese with pride. “Five seconds, I promise.”

I clamped a hand over my nose. “This is going to be horrible. We’re all going to smell feet for the next two days.”

Stan quickly unwrapped the cheese, slicing off a small wedge with the precision of a surgeon, then rewrapped it just as fast.



“Holy shit,” Fade called from the door, as his face twisted in disgust.

“Whoa,” Adalee gasped and fled the cheese case to take refuge next to Fade.

Pirate, of all people, leaned in and inhaled deeply. “That smells kinda good.”

“Good?!” Fallon exclaimed. “That smells like dead feet smothered in mold. Are you insane?”

Stan grinned like a mad scientist and handed Pirate the tiny wedge. “Try that.”

Pirate popped it into his mouth without hesitation, and chewed thoughtfully.

Stan hustled to grab a bottle of port wine and uncorked it as he walked back. “Here, swirl this around before you swallow.”

Pirate took the glass, swished it around like an expert, and then swallowed. He nodded and handed the cup back. “Yeah, that’s pretty good.”

Stan threw his hands in the air. “It’s a miracle! I’ve finally found another person who likes Stilton!”

I still had my hand over my nose. “I bought that Stilton three months ago. Stan’s been dying for someone to come in and sample it.”

“Figures Pirate would be the one to like it,” Yarder muttered and shook his head.

The camera crew had backed up a few feet, and we also covered their noses. Even they had their limits, it seemed.

“Grab what you guys want, and let’s go,” Yarder ordered. “Five minutes.”

Poppy sighed. “Sometimes that man is a stick in the mud.” She glanced at me. “It’s a good thing I like his stick.”

“Woman!” Yarder hollered.

She rolled her eyes and moved over to the jarred olives. “If I buy you blue cheese-stuffed olives, will you be less cranky?” she asked Yarder.

“I’m not cranky, but yes. Two jars,” Yarder called from across the room.

I smirked and called over to Stan. “Wrap up a piece of the Stilton for Yarder.”

“Way ahead of you,” Stan said with a grin. He handed Poppy a small plastic bag. “Don’t open this anywhere without good ventilation.”

Poppy wrinkled her nose and held the bag like it was radioactive. “Please don’t make me pay for this,” she whispered.

“On the house,” Stan chuckled. “From one blue cheese lover to another.”

Poppy shuddered. “I am not kissing you for two days after you eat this, Yarder.”

Yarder only chuckled. “We’ll see about that.”

Adalee browsed the shelves and grabbed a jar of Kalamata olives and a bottle of garlic olive oil. Fallon picked out stuffed grape leaves, a bottle of Grenache, and a six-pack of Belgian pale ale. Pirate, on the other hand, took four jars of blue cheese-stuffed olives.

The man was insane.

I rang everyone up as the cameras tracked our every move. Yarder paid in cash, nodded at me, and gestured to the door. “Let’s move.”

Adalee and Fallon waved goodbye on their way out, with Fade and Compass following closely. Pirate clutched his jars like treasure and exited with them.

“Bye, Dani,” Poppy called. “See you soon?”

“See ya!” I replied, even though I knew it’d probably be ten days before I saw them again.

The cameras followed them out, and finally, silence settled over the shop.

Stan came over and wiped his hands on a paper towel. “I like them.”

I smiled. “Yeah, I do too.” I pointed at him. “Now go prop open that door. I can’t believe you opened the Stilton. We’ve got five hours until closing.”

Stan chuckled. “Yeah, probably not my best idea.”

I settled behind the counter and watched him move toward the door. Seeing everyone had been a nice surprise, and it was good to get some clarity about Smoke.

Maybe he’d call me tonight, and we could talk. That seemed like a good plan.

Hell, I’d give Smoke until Friday to call me. If he didn’t, I’d figure out my plan B.

Smoke

Pirate held up the empty bag of cheese and inhaled deeply. “It smells good,” he insisted.

“You’re sick,” I muttered and shook my head.

“Were you dropped as a baby?” Fade asked him and eyed the offending cheese bag with pure disgust.

“Maybe punched in the nose fifty times, which affected your sense of smell?” Compass suggested and leaned away as if the stench was still lingering.

Pirate shook his head with a grin. “Nope. Just good taste.”

“Why does it smell like feet in here?” Sloane walked into the common room and wrinkled her nose. She sniffed the air cautiously. “Gross.”

Without hesitation, Fade and Compass pointed at Pirate. “Him,” they said in unison.

I sat at the bar with Yarder and Poppy. The rest of the girls, minus Sloane, were curled up on the couches watching a movie. The TV crew had cleared out a couple of hours ago, but the cameras around the clubhouse still captured what Mac called “background footage.”

“It was nice seeing Dani today,” Poppy said casually and took a sip of her drink.

Yarder groaned and dropped his head into his hands. “My god. Why are you doing this?”

Poppy shrugged, and an innocent smile spread on her lips. “I guess I’m just doing the lord’s work today.” She turned to me, her eyes full of something I couldn’t quite place. “You should call Dani. She thinks you don’t like her.”

“She did not say that,” Yarder cut in before I could even react.

“Fine, she didn’t say it, but she seemed sad that you won’t let her come to the clubhouse.” Poppy tipped her head and studied me. “You shouldn’t make your ol’ lady sad. Rule number one.”

“There are rules for ol’ ladies?” I raised an eyebrow.

Poppy nodded firmly. “Rule one: keep her happy as a clam.”

“Do I know these rules?” Yarder asked and turned toward her.

She patted his arm with an exaggerated look of patience. “You’re pretty good at following the rules. It’s when you get grumpy that you stray a bit, but you’re normally good.”

Yarder glanced at me with a smirk. “I have no idea what she’s talking about.”

I chuckled and took a swig of my beer. “Seems to be typical when the ol’ ladies are around.”

“Amen to that,” Yarder agreed and clinked his bottle against mine.

Poppy rolled her eyes. “You guys are ridiculous.” She pointed at me. “I’m just going

to say one thing.”

I braced myself. “Let’s hear it.”

“Call her.” She slid off her stool and strutted toward the TV area like she hadn’t just delivered a direct order. She flopped onto the floor beside the girls and blended in like nothing had happened.

I sighed and stared down at my beer. “You should.”

Yarder’s voice pulled me from my thoughts. I looked over at him. “What, are you both therapists now?”

Yarder chuckled, finished his beer, and set the empty bottle down. “Nah, man. I just know what it’s like to keep an ol’ lady happy.” He nodded toward Poppy, who laughed at something on the screen. “And since that ol’ lady just told you what to do, then I think you should do it.”

He stood up and stretched before walking over to Poppy. Without hesitation, he dropped down onto the floor beside her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. She leaned into him like it was the most natural thing in the world.

And just like that, I was alone.

I stared at the beer bottle in my hand and rolled it between my palms. The thing was, I wanted to talk to Dani. But somehow, the longer I put it off, the harder it became to pick up the phone. It wasn’t that I didn’t want her here. Hell, I did. I just didn’t know how to explain it to her.

Yarder made it seem easy—like keeping an ol’ lady happy was just following a few rules. But Dani wasn’t like Poppy. She was different. She was... complicated.

Or maybe I was the one who was making this complicated.

I took a slow sip and let the burn of the alcohol slide down my throat.

Tomorrow.

I would call her tomorrow.

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:53 am*

It was Thursday, and he didn't call.

Look out, Queen Latifah, here I come.



Dani

I stared at Stan. My phone sat on the counter between us like a ticking time bomb.

“Call him,” he repeated and crossed his arms over his chest.

I sighed. “If he wanted to talk to me, he would have called.”

Stan thinned his lips and shook his head. “Yeah, but he’s a man. You need to be the one to call him. You guys are acting like high schoolers.”

“High schoolers?” I squeaked. “And it’s not me. He’s the one who said he’d call, and he hasn’t.”

Without warning, Stan snatched my phone off the counter and tapped away at the screen. A second later, the shop phone rang, and he looked at me expectantly.

I picked up the receiver. “Hello, Wine and Cheese Me.”

Stan held my phone up to his ear. “Call him,” he declared into it, and his voice echoed back through the shop phone.

“What are you doing?” I laughed.

Stan ended the call and tossed my phone back onto the counter. “Just checking to see if your phone was broken or something. Turns out, it works. You’re just avoiding it.”

I rolled my eyes and hung up the shop phone. “You’re ridiculous.”

“No, you and Smoke are ridiculous.” He shook his head dramatically. “Love makes people stupid sometimes. You two are made for each other, and instead of running together like two puffins, you’re acting like hummingbirds.”

I blinked at him. “Stan, you’re gonna have to explain that one.”

“Atlantic puffins mate for life, Dani,” he said as if it was common knowledge. “Hummingbirds, on the other hand... well, they’re promiscuous.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Are you calling Smoke promiscuous?”

“No!” he groaned and rubbed his face. “I meant you’re both flitting around instead of settling in. Don’t twist my words.”

My mind betrayed me and drifted to Vince—my ex-husband and a prime example of a promiscuous hummingbird.

“Don’t go there,” Stan warned as he read me too well. “Smoke is not Vince.”

“Then why doesn’t he want me at the clubhouse?” I demanded.

“Because he doesn’t want you to deal with the cameras and attention. He’s trying to protect you.”

I squinted at him. “No one has said that.”

“You don’t know that, honey. This show could take off, and you could all become famous. Hell, someone might write a book about you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Never going to happen.”

“Just like Smoke cheating on you is never going to happen,” Stan countered.

My mind knew he was right, but my heart still tripped over the past. “But what if he does?”

“And what if he doesn’t?” He moved in front of me and rested his hands on my shoulders. “You can’t live in fear of what Vince did to you. Smoke isn’t him.”

“I know that,” I whispered.

“Good. Then stop sabotaging yourself and call him.”

I glanced at the clock. “What if I went there instead?”

Stan’s face lit up. “Went where?”

“The clubhouse.”

His arms shot up. “Hallelujah!” He grabbed my purse and shoved it into my arms. “Go get your man, honey.”

Smoke

“Did you call her?”

I glanced at Poppy, who stood behind the bar with six glasses filled with ice in front of her. “Have you always been this pushy?” I asked and arched an eyebrow at her.

Poppy shrugged, and her lips quirked up into a small smirk. “I think so.”

I leaned against the counter and watched her grab a bottle of amaretto. “You think so? That doesn’t sound very convincing.”

She poured two shots of the amaretto into each cup, and her eyes flicked up to meet mine. “I mean, yes, but I don’t think I was ever comfortable with it.” She gestured around the clubhouse. “Being here has helped me sit in it.” She set the bottle down. “So, did you call her?” she pressed, her voice laced with curiosity.

I shook my head and took a slow sip of my beer. “No. I’m thinking of slipping away later. Screw Yarder. I might need a distraction, though.”

Poppy grinned, and mischief danced in her eyes. “That’s my job, and I can do that later to help distract him.”

I held up my hands in surrender. “I will take the distraction, but I would not like any details, thank you very much.”

She laughed as she added a splash of orange juice to each cup, followed by a dash of

simple syrup. The combination of scents filled the air with a sweet, nutty aroma.

“Getting the girls drunk tonight?” I asked and nodded to the drinks.

Poppy shrugged and slid the cups across the counter. “It’s Friday, and we’re all stuck here. Might as well drink.”

I smirked. “That should be entertaining for the cameras.”

She grabbed three of the glasses and called out, “Dove, come get the drinks.”

Dove popped up from the card table and hurried over to grab the remaining drinks with a grin. “Come on. We’re all set up to kick Aero’s ass.”

“In what?” I asked.

“Uno,” Poppy and Dove said in perfect unison.

I chuckled and shook my head. “Yeah, the cameras are definitely going to be entertained tonight.”

If America was hoping to see a gritty and tough motorcycle club, they were in for a rude awakening. The Iron Fiends segments would be full of drunk Uno games, hasty weddings, pool matches, and endless garage renovations.

Yeah, there was no way the show was getting renewed for another season. We needed to get the garage up and running and The Cakery operating if we wanted to have any money coming in.

Poppy and Dove sauntered back to the card table, where the rest of the girls were gathered with Aero included. Yarder and Compass were at the pool table while

everyone but Stretch lounged in the common area, watching TV. Stretch hadn't been very social the past couple of days. It seemed the longer we went without any movement from Boone and Gibbs, the more on edge he got.

Sloane started dealing cards when a sharp knock echoed through the room and made everyone freeze.

Yarder slowly moved toward the door, and his expression hardened. He pulled his gun from his waistband with practiced ease.

"A knock on the door after six o'clock is never good," Fade muttered, and his eyes narrowed as he instinctively reached for his own weapon.

One by one, the guys drew their guns and kept them low but ready. Tension coiled through the room like a live wire, and every gaze was locked on the door.

Yarder shot a glance over his shoulder and ensured we were all set before he reached for the lock. The metal clicked, and he hesitated for just a beat before pulling the door open.

"Fucking hell," Yarder muttered under his breath and stepped aside.

There in the doorway was Dani. She held up her hands defensively. "Don't shoot. I'm not here to blow you up."

Yarder turned to Poppy. "Did you do this?" he asked.

Poppy shook her head, but she had a huge smile on her face. "I did nothing, but I am damn glad that someone did."

Yarder motioned for Dani to come in. She hesitated for only a second before she

stepped inside. The heavy door clicked shut behind her, and Yarder twisted the lock before moving back toward the pool table without another glance.

“Did you bring cheese?” Olive called.

“What about wine?” Adalee added with a hopeful tilt in her voice.

Dani nervously shook her head and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Uh, no. I didn’t think to bring anything. I just brought myself.”

I stood frozen.

Stunned.

I had told her not to come. I had made it clear. But there wasn’t one bit of me that was mad that she was here.

“I’ll make you a drink,” Poppy declared as she moved back around the bar. Her hands moved swiftly as she grabbed bottles. Ice clinked in the glass, amaretto in, a splash of orange juice, and a dash of simple syrup. Even I could make the girls their drinks now.

My feet felt glued to the floor as I watched Dani. She looked nervous as she shifted from foot to foot.

“Are you going to move, Smoke, or just stare at her?” Poppy’s voice pulled me out of my daze from behind the bar.

I finally managed to move, and for each step I took, Dani took a step toward me. We met in the middle of the room, and she tipped her head back to look me in the eyes.

“Hi.”

“Hi,” I replied, my voice quieter than I intended.

“Uh, I probably should have called before I came over, but I probably would have chickened out,” she confessed as her fingers nervously played with the hem of her jacket.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

She tucked her hair behind her ear again. “No, I mean, yes, but also no.”

I couldn’t help but smile at her fumbling. “Is it yes or no, angel?”

She looked around nervously, then took another small step closer. “Yes.”

My stomach tightened. Something was wrong. Had Boone and Gibbs gotten to her? Was something wrong with the shop? “What is it?” I demanded.

Dani exhaled shakily. “You didn’t call me, and I don’t want a hummingbird.”

I blinked and tried to process her words. Not calling her. Okay, I got that. But a hummingbird?

“I want Casanova.”

“Angel,” I started, but she cut me off.

“And I want that, too. I want to be your Angel.” She motioned around the common room. “And I don’t care who knows it. I know you and I just started, but I’m not wanting it to end anytime soon. I want my puffin.”



Sloane cleared her throat from the card table. “I don’t mean to interrupt what I think is a romantic moment, but I have to ask if maybe you dipped into the wine samples before you came over.”

“Did she say puffin?” Dove asked from behind the bar. “I can’t quite hear back here.”

“I’m going to Google this,” Olive announced and was already typing. “Why would you want a puffin?” she mumbled.

Dani laughed nervously. “I guess I do sound a bit tipsy. I was talking to Stan before I came over.”

“Oh,” Adalee and Fallon said in unison.

“I could see how things could get crazy when you talk to him,” Adalee said with a grin. “He is the keeper of the stinky cheese.”

Fallon wrinkled her nose. “Odd.”

“Puffins mate for life. They are also mongooses.” Dani frowned. “Oops, I mean monogamous.” She glanced down at the drink Poppy handed her. “How strong did you make this?”

“Strong, but you haven’t even taken a sip yet,” Poppy laughed. She finished the drink for Dani and handed it to her.

Dani took a cautious sip and looked pleasantly surprised. “That’s delicious.”

Poppy grinned. “I know.” She waved her hand. “Carry on with the hummingbird and puffin talk.”

Olive, still typing, muttered, “Why don’t you want to be a hummingbird?”

“Does anyone else think this shit is weird?” Aero asked.

Sloane shushed him. “This is great info for Winter. I should be taking notes.”

“I think Winter has plenty of stories to write without you emailing her everything we say,” Cue Ball muttered.

Sloane rolled her eyes. “She asks me to send her this stuff, and for your information, I’m not going to email this to her. We are going to Frisco in a couple of months to see her at the next Motorcycle, Mobsters, and Mayhem book signing.”

“Oh hell no,” Pirate called. “You are not dragging me to that bullshit again.”

Sloane scoffed. “I wasn’t asking you to come. I figured Aero and I could go together. That is where we met.”

Aero leaned toward Sloane and pressed a kiss to her lips. “We can go, baby. We can reenact us meeting.”

Dove pointed at Cue Ball. “That is where we met too, but I’m pretty sure we hated each other back then.”

Cue Ball nodded. “Yeah, we did.”

“Hummingbirds have a highly specialized diet and constantly need nectar,” Olive announced. She looked up. “Girl, do you have stomach problems?”

Dani tilted her head. “Um, no.”

“Hold on, let me word this differently.” Olive typed quickly, then grinned. “Yeah, I got you. Hummingbirds are promiscuous.”

“Aww,” Sloane sighed. “You want a puffin, not a sleazy hummingbird.”

“Hummingbirds are so pretty,” Fallon sighed. “Why do they have to be cheaters?”

“Puffins are cute, too,” Olive pointed out. “We’re all puffins at this table.”

Yarder let out a loud whistle. “Everyone shut the fuck up about hummingbirds and puffins unless you are Smoke or Dani.”

Poppy wiggled her finger in her ear. “I really don’t like when you do that,” she mumbled.

“Then stop talking so Smoke and Dani can talk.” Yarder motioned to us. “Or better yet, take this to your room. Otherwise, it’s going to take you two hours to have a ten-minute conversation.”

I looked at Dani. “You good with taking this someplace more quiet?”

“Uh, I mean, yeah.”

That was all I needed.

I swooped her up into my arms and stalked down the hallway to my room. The feel of her in my arms felt right, and the way she curled into me sent a heat through my chest.

I reached my door, opened it with one hand, and stepped inside before setting her down gently. The door clicked shut behind me, and I twisted the lock to make sure

we wouldn't be interrupted.

We stood toe to toe now, and her wide eyes locked onto mine.

“Now we're really going to talk, angel.”

## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 2:53 am*

Dani

This was real now.

It was just me and Smoke.

Not even any cameras. At least, I didn't think there were.

"Are there cameras in here?" I asked.

Smoke shook his head. "Nothing in the bedrooms or the bathrooms, angel."

I had been told that, but I wanted to make sure. "Okie dokie," I whispered.

"You want to start this from the beginning?" he asked.

"Uh, well, we probably should, but I really doubt I am going to make any better sense. At least we had Olive Googling stuff for you, so you weren't confused."

"Is what she said about the birds and shit right?"

I nodded. "Well, about the mating for life and promiscuous hummingbirds. I'm not really sure about the specialized diet." That had been news to me, though it wasn't like I knew about the puffins and hummingbirds before Stan had told me. I chuckled.

"Leave it to the girls to throw in some crazy info."

"Yeah," he laughed. "They sure do make things interesting."

We stood there awkwardly for a beat.

“You go first, angel.”

I nodded and licked my lips. “Uh, I’m just going to go off the top of my head and hope I don’t confuse you. I’ll try to keep the birds out of it this time.”

Smoke chuckled and nodded.

“Um, when I got divorced, I learned a lot about myself. I mean, pretty basic things, but I learned them nonetheless.”

“Like what, angel?” he asked.

“Uh, well, I learned what I liked. I also learned to not be ashamed of what I liked.” I held up a finger. “Wine, for example. And also cheese. I loved them both and decided to make them my job.”

He nodded.

“Um, I also learned I like to be by myself. I never really had that before Vince. Not saying I want to be forever alone, but I learned how to be okay alone.” I shook my head. “That isn’t a really good thing to point out when I’m trying to explain why I’m here.”

“It’s good you’re okay being alone. There are going to be times when I can’t be right next to you.”

I nodded. I tried not to get excited about the fact he talking about being around in the future.

“Um, another thing I learned about myself is that I... deserve more.” I ran my fingers through my hair. “And I know what that more is. I had so less when I was with Vince, that more is the only thing I’ll take.”

Smoke nodded. “You deserve the whole world, Dani.”

I smiled softly. “And that is why I am here. I know you said to give it two weeks until you were done filming, but that doesn’t feel like more. That felt like you were hiding me away. Like you didn’t want anyone who watched the show to know about me.”

“That’s not it at all, angel.”

I held up my hand. “That might not have meant how you wanted me to feel, but that is what I felt.”

“Can I touch you?” he asked.

I nodded.

He reached out and wrapped his arm around my waist. He pulled me close. “I’m sorry you felt that way. I was just trying to keep you away from the whole circus of the show. I didn’t want to keep you a secret. It’s just a lot, and I didn’t want you to feel like you had to be a part of it. Hell, none of us really want to be a part of it.”

I laughed. “Half of me understood that, but then there was half of me that figured you didn’t want all of America to know that we were together.”

“Are,” he corrected. “We are together.”

My heart melted at his words. I reached up on my tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his lips. “I like that.”

“Me, too, angel,” he whispered against my lips.

Our lips met again, and suddenly, we were both reaching for each other. Our hands roamed, touched, and needed more. Clothes started to come off piece by piece—my T-shirt tugged over my head, his shirt tossed away, boots kicked off with a thud, and our pants pooled on the floor.

Smoke lifted me up and carried me to the bed. He gently laid me down and hovered over me. His eyes searched mine before he pressed his lips to my neck and down to my collarbone. Every touch felt electric, and every kiss sealed something deeper between us. Smoke fit perfectly between my legs, and his body pressed against mine. His lips trailed a slow, deliberate path down my neck, across my collarbone, and lower until they found my breasts. He took his time. Kissing, licking, and teasing until I was squirming beneath him.

I let my hands slide between us and found his rock-hard cock. I wrapped my fingers around his cock and stroked him slowly. I enjoyed the way his breath hitched and his muscles tensed under my touch.

“Remember what I said last time?” he growled against my skin.

I grinned and bit my lip. “I’m going to get a handful?”

He chuckled low in his throat and pressed a searing kiss to my lips. “Yes.”

He pulled back slightly, and his weight shifted as he leaned up just enough to look down at me. His dark eyes blazed with desire, and he guided himself into me. With one slow, deliberate thrust, he filled me completely.

A moan slipped past my lips as my head tilted back, and I felt the stretch and perfect fit of him inside me. He filled me so full, and yet it felt so right—like we were made



for this and made for each other.

Smoke's hands gripped my hips and held me steady as he began to move. His rhythm was slow and purposeful at first and then built up with each deep thrust. Each time he thrust, it sent waves of pleasure coursing through my body. My nails scraped down his back and urged him on. I needed him deeper, harder.

"God, Dani," he groaned as his forehead pressed against mine. "You feel so damn good."

"So do you," I breathed. My voice was shaky as the pleasure built to an almost unbearable height.

His thrusts grew more urgent and more desperate. The passion between us surged to new levels. I could feel the tight coil in my belly winding tighter, and the pressure mounted as I clung to him. My legs wrapped around his waist and pulled him closer.

"Get there, angel," he growled as his lips brushed against my ear.

Oh, I was there.

My body arched into his as my orgasm crashed over me and a sharp cry escaped my lips. Wave after wave of pleasure consumed me. Smoke followed right behind. His groan rumbled deep in his chest as he buried himself in me, and his release shuddered through both of us.

We stayed like that for a long moment. Our bodies tangled, and our ragged breaths mingled.

Slowly, he lifted his head, and his lips brushed over my forehead before meeting my gaze.

“Wow.”

Smoke chuckled. “You always say that, angel.”

“That’s because whenever we are together, it is wow,” I laughed. “There isn’t another word for it.”

He pressed a kiss to my temple and pulled the covers over us. “I guess wow works for me.”

I cradled his cheek and trailed my fingers down. “Not everyone can be a Casanova like you,” I teased.

He rolled his eyes and pressed a kiss to my lips. “That’s just being nice, angel. You’re going to have to get used to that. I plan on being nice to you, and only you, for the rest of my life.”

“Well, well,” I sighed. “I think I can handle that. My Casanova.”

“Only yours.”

Smoke

“I gotta take this call, angel.”

Dani shooed me with her hand. “Go, go. I don’t even know why you’re staying all day.”

“You know the answer to that,” I drawled.

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t think B&G are interested in my wine shop.” I stepped out the back door of Cheese and Wine Me as I connected the call and put the phone to my ear.

“Yo,” I called into the phone.

“You all good?” Yarder asked.

I ran my fingers through my hair and scanned up and down the back alleyway. “I’m all good here.”

Yarder grunted. “Good.”

“What is going on?” I asked.

“Fucking Stretch. Can’t find him anywhere, and he left his phone in his room.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

I was the only one who was good for leaving the clubhouse with the camera crew there. We all knew that anyone connected to the Iron Fiends was a target of Boone and Gibbs, so I was stuck to Dani's side until we got them.

"He is fucking gone," Yarder growled. "I didn't see him yesterday, and from what I can figure, no one else did either. We all just assumed he was sulking in his bedroom." A loud thud echoed through the phone like something heavy had been thrown against a wall. "Now his fucking room is empty."

My mind raced. "Do we think he left on his own, or..." I couldn't finish the thought. The idea that Boone and Gibbs had gotten to him made my stomach churn.

"Yo!" Compass hollered in the background. "I found some shit."

I wished I could be there to help, but I needed to be here with Dani. "What is it?" I asked Yarder.

"Hold on," he muttered. I heard the distinct rustling sound of the phone being put on speaker, followed by the noise of guys moving around Stretch's room. "Maps, paperwork," Yarder said. "Shit that makes no sense for him to have."

"Is his bike still there?" I asked.

"No," Pirate called. "Dice is working on pulling up the cameras to see when he left."

"The club cameras," I called. "If he left or someone took him, they have to be on them."

"Aero is talking to Mac and Saylor to see if they can pull the footage from the past two days," Yarder said. "Not sure how hard that is going to be. Adalee said all of that is on a feed back in Los Angeles."

Jesus.

I knew Stretch had been pissed off the past couple of weeks, but we were all frustrated. We wanted to strike on Boone and Gibbs, but it was hard to look and find them with the cameras rolling.

We all kept telling ourselves to wait until the filming was done, but maybe Stretch didn't want to wait any longer.

"Smoke?" Dani's voice cut through my thoughts as she opened the back door and held a folded piece of paper in her hand.

"What is it, angel?" I asked and stepped toward her.

She held the paper out to me. "Stan left this in the cash drawer."

I took it from her, and my fingers brushed hers as I unfolded it. My eyes locked onto the words scribbled across it: Iron Fiends .

"Hold on, Yarder," I called into the phone, pulling it away from my ear to put it on speaker.

Dani moved to my side and read the paper out loud. "Call off your dog, or he's going to find his answers six feet under. We're watching."

"What the fuck?" Yarder shouted through the speaker.

"That is terrifying, but who are they talking about? They don't mean literal dogs, right?" Dani asked with her brow furrowed.

I shook my head. "I think they're talking about Stretch." I met her worried gaze. "We

can't find him right now. No one has seen him for days."

"Oh no," Dani gasped.

I slipped my arm around her shoulders and pulled her into my side. Her warmth grounded me, but it didn't stop the storm brewing in my head.

"Where did the letter come from?" Yarder demanded.

"Uh, I don't know," Dani replied. "Stan must have gotten it on my day off yesterday. Do you want me to ask him?"

"Yes," Yarder barked.

Dani pulled her phone from her pocket and quickly dialed Stan. He picked up on the first ring.

"Hello," he answered.

"Stan," Dani said.

"Hey, honey. What's going on? You sound a little stressed."

Dani rolled her eyes. "Uh, not really. There was a note left in the till. Who gave it to you?"

"Note?" Stan asked, and the confusion was clear in his tone. "I don't know what you're talking about, honey. I didn't put a note in the register."

Dani's eyes snapped to mine, and her lips parted slightly. If Stan didn't put that note there, who did? And when did they even do it?

“You’re one hundred percent sure you didn’t put the note in there?” Dani asked again.

“I’m getting old, Dani, but I would remember putting a note in the register. I remember counting the till and then shutting it. Nothing but money was in there. What did the note say that has you so freaked out?”

I shook my head at Dani and signaled her not to tell him too much.

“Uh, it has an order scribbled on it.” She glanced at me and shrugged. “Maybe I put it in there, and it got stuck.”

“Are you sure you’re okay, Dani?” he asked. “I can come to the store if you want.”

“No, no,” she called. “Smoke is here with me all day. It was just a little weird to see that note. I’m sure it’s nothing.”

“Well, if it’s an order, then I’m sure it’s nothing. At least you have Smoke there if you need anything.”

“Yeah,” she smiled. “I’ll let you go. Just call me if you remember anything.”

“Will do, honey.” Dani hung up and turned back to me.

“You hear all of that?” I called to Yarder, who was still on speaker.

“Yeah, I fucking did,” he grunted. “How the hell did that note get in your register?”

Neither of us knew.

“Does the landlord have cameras?” I asked.

“He does,” Dani said. “I can call him and see if there is anything recorded.”

“We had him check for the explosion, and he didn’t get anything. Whoever blew it up knew where the cameras were. There are blind spots all around that building.”

That was not reassuring.

I sighed heavily and ran a hand through my hair. “What do you want me to do?”

“Shut the store down and get to the clubhouse. We’re going on lockdown until we find Stretch.”

The line went dead before I could respond. I stuffed the phone in my pocket and turned to Dani to pull her fully into my arms.

“I hate to say it, but he’s right, Dani. We need to shut down the store. We’re not safe here.”

She nodded without hesitation and tipped her head back to meet my gaze. The worry in her eyes twisted something in my chest. “Whatever you think we need to do. How are you going to find Stretch?”

I exhaled slowly and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “I don’t know, angel, but whatever happens, you’ll always be safe with me.”

Her body softened against mine, and she let out a sigh as her fingers curled into the back of my shirt. “I know. I just hope Stretch is safe, too.”



Saylor

I stumbled into the blue tiny house with my vision blurry and braced myself on the coatrack. I didn't know how much longer I would be able to stand.

"Saylor? Is that you?" Mac's voice echoed from the loft above. "I thought you were coming over earlier."

I tipped my head back and swallowed a mouthful of blood that slid down my throat like acid. "I th-th-th..." I couldn't get my mouth to work.

I heard the creak of the stairs, and then she appeared at the top of the stairway. Her eyes scanned me and widened as they took in the state I was in.

I knew I was a sight to see—blood streaked across my face, my clothes torn, and my whole body felt like it had been through hell. And somehow, I'd managed to drag myself back here.

"Oh my god!" Mac screeched and rushed down the stairs in a blur. "What happened to you?"

I closed my eyes and leaned against the wall as the world tilted. My pulse pounded in my ears, and all I could do was try to breathe. My throat felt tight with my words stuck, but I managed to force them out.

"I think... I think I killed someone."

Dolly

I stood in the produce section, my fingers moving absentmindedly over the bananas as I stocked them on the shelf. The routine was second nature by now—lifting the yellow bunches, placing them neatly in rows, making sure none were bruised. My mind wasn't on the task, though. It rarely was when I was doing something so monotonous.

Magnolia Mart had been in my family for four generations, and I was the latest to take over. My great-grandfather had started the store, and it had passed down through the years to my grandfather, then my father, and now me. It was a point of pride, really—having something like this stay in the family for so long. But it also meant I spent a lot of time doing things like stocking bananas.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, pulling me from my trance-like state. I wiped my hands on my apron and fished it out. A small smile already tugged at my lips when I saw who the message was from.

Can I go to James' house after school?

Oh, Nash.

I quickly typed my response. Do you have any homework? You know the deal.

Not five seconds later, my phone buzzed again.

I just have to read a chapter for English. I can do that after dinner.

I smiled, shaking my head. Fine, but you better be home by six. I typed back, feeling a warmth spread through me as I thought about how easy it was to be Nash's mom. He wasn't perfect, but he didn't give me much trouble. At fourteen, that was saying something.

Thanks, Mom!

I tucked my phone back into my pocket and chuckled softly to myself. Nash always said thanks, too. That boy had his manners nailed down.

I turned back to the bananas and grabbed the two empty boxes from the floor. I stood up just in time to hear the bell above the front door jingle. That sound was a constant in my life—people coming in and out, living their lives, needing groceries, catching up on gossip. It was small-town life at its finest.

Magnolia Grove was the epitome of Southern charm. Oak trees lined the streets, their branches hanging low like they were welcoming every passerby. The churches were historical, each with a story older than most of the town's residents. And the people? Friendly as all get out. Everyone knew everyone's business, which could be both a blessing and a curse, depending on the day.

But Magnolia Grove was home. It always had been. I'd been born and raised here, went to the same high school Nash was in now, and Magnolia Mart had been part of my life for as long as I could remember. I couldn't picture myself anywhere else. This place was my life.

"Afternoon, Dolly!" a voice called from the front.

I turned to see Mrs. Linda, one of the town's unofficial gossip queens, and she was making her way toward me with her cart. She was pushing it with the same authority she pushed her opinions on everyone.

“Afternoon, Mrs. Linda. How are you?” I asked, stepping around the display to greet her properly.

“Oh, just fine, honey,” she said, pausing to peer into her cart. “I was just pickin’ up a few things for dinner. I saw you had cinnamon buns on sale. I had to grab some even though my hips don’t need them. You know how it is,” she said with a wink.

I did know. I had a pan in the back that was missing two rolls from my breakfast this morning.

“You been keepin’ busy with store?” she asked, her eyes glinting with a curiosity that never dimmed, no matter how old she got.

“Always,” I replied with a smile. “There’s always something to do here.”

Mrs. Linda leaned in slightly, lowering her voice like she was sharing a state secret, though we were the only two in the store. “Did you hear about Olivia and Landon?”

I nodded with a small smile. “I certainly did.” I was a bit surprised, but I liked it. Landon could use someone like Olivia to shake things up in his life. He’d always been a bit rough around the edges, and from what I’d heard, Olivia was nothing but sweet. A good match if you asked me.

Mrs. Linda tsked, pushing her cart further into the produce section. “Not too sure how I feel about it, but they seem to be very much in love. He’s got that look in his eye, you know, the one that means he’s a goner.”

I chuckled softly. “Love’ll do that to you.”

The truth was, I didn’t know Olivia all that well. She’d only recently moved back to Magnolia Grove, and I hadn’t spent any time around Landon since high school. He

and I ran in different circles—always had. But it wasn't just that. I tended to keep to myself, especially in a town where everyone knew your business.

Sure, Nash was in school, and I did all the usual parent things—sports practices, school events, and the like—but I was always on the fringes and never dove too deep into the social side of things. I preferred it that way. The less I put myself out there, the less likely people were to ask questions or, worse, talk about me.

Because heaven knew I'd had my fair share of gossip back when I was pregnant with Nash. Fourteen years ago, the whole town had buzzed with whispers about me and who the father was. It wasn't something I ever wanted to relive.

"Are the nectarines ripe?" Mrs. Linda asked, cutting into my thoughts.

I nodded, gesturing to the bin. "Yep, they're good to go."

Just as I spoke, the bell above the door jingled again. I glanced at the clock—getting close to four o'clock. The after-school rush was about to start, and the store usually picked up around this time.

"Welcome to Magnolia Mart," I called, though I didn't bother looking up. I had banana boxes to drop off, so I headed to the back room. With the empty boxes out of the way, I made my way to the register, knowing I'd have to get ready for the small crowd that was bound to trickle in.

As predicted, a few more people wandered into the store. I smiled and greeted them out of habit, though I stayed behind the counter. I grabbed the latest issue of *People* magazine from the stack we kept up front and began flipping through it. One of the perks of running Magnolia Mart was staying up to date on all the celebrity gossip without having to pay for it.

I thumbed through the pages, half-reading the headlines. Some movie star had gotten divorced. Again. Someone else was caught in a scandal. Typical Hollywood drama. I chuckled softly to myself, thinking how different the problems in that world were from what we dealt with in Magnolia Grove.

Here, scandal was more about who was dating whom and whether or not someone had stepped out of line at Sunday service. It was simpler, though, it didn't always feel that way when you were the center of the gossip.

The bell jingled again, and I glanced up just in time to see two kids I recognized from Nash's school walk in. I gave them a polite nod, but they didn't seem too interested in chatting, which was fine by me.

I returned to my magazine, letting myself get lost in the celebrity drama for a while. It was a nice escape, even if it was just for a few minutes. There was something comforting about knowing that no matter how messy things got in my own life, someone out there in California was probably having a worse day than me.

The door chimed again, and I quickly tucked the magazine under the counter, putting on my practiced smile as I sensed someone approaching the register.

My heart skipped a beat, and I felt the blood drain from my face. It was like staring at a ghost—one I never thought I'd see again, not here. Not in Magnolia Grove.

He didn't belong in this town anymore. He'd left years ago to become a famous bull rider. And now, here he was, looking older but just as rugged, his dark hair a little longer, his beard a shadow on his face. His eyes, though, were the same—sharp, intense, the kind of eyes that could pull you in and leave you wondering what the hell you were doing.

Boone West stood at the register and placed a case of beer and a loaf of bread on the

conveyor belt.

Boone-freaking-West.

Meg

How did just stopping quickly to get dog food and shampoo turn into an overflowing basket and a surplus pack of paper towels?

“Put the paper towels down and back away slowly,” I mumbled to myself as I walked past a display of air fresheners and wondered if I needed any.

“Oh dear. Oh, my. I ... Ah ... Oh, my.”

I tore my thoughts away from air fresheners and looked down the aisle to an elderly woman who was leaning against the shelf, fanning herself. “Are you ok, ma’am?”

“Oh dear. I just ... I just got a little ... dizzy. ” I looked at the woman and saw her hands shaking as she brushed her white hair out of her face. The woman had on denim capris, a white button-down short-sleeve shirt, and, surprisingly, three-inch wedge heels.

“Ok, well, why don’t we try to find you a place to sit down until you get your bearings?” I shifted the basket and paper towels under one arm to help her to the bench that I had seen by the shoe rack two aisles over. “Are you here with anyone?” I asked as I guided her down the aisle.

“Oh no. I’m here by myself. I just needed a few things.”

“I only needed two things, and now my basket is overflowing, and I still haven’t gotten the things I came in for.”



The woman plopped down on the bench, chuckling, shaking her head. “Tell me about it. Happens to me every time too.”

“Is there something I can do for you? Has this happened to you before?” She really was looking rather pale.

“Unfortunately, yes. I ran out of the house today without eating breakfast. I’m diabetic. I should know by now that I can’t do that.” My mom was also diabetic, so I knew exactly what the woman was talking about. Luckily, I also knew what to do to help.

“Just sit right here, and I’ll be right back. Is there someone you want to call to give you a ride home? Driving right now probably isn’t the best idea.” I set the basket and towels on the floor, keeping my wallet in my hand.

“I suppose I should call my son. He should be able to give me a ride,” the woman said as she dug her phone out of her purse.

I left the woman to her phone call and headed to the candy aisle that I had been trying to ignore. I grabbed a bag of licorice, chips, and a diet soda and went to the checkout. The dollar store didn’t actually offer a healthy selection, but this would do in a pinch. The woman just needed to get her blood sugars back up.

I grabbed my things after paying and headed back to the bench. I ripped open the bag and handed it to the woman. “Oh dear, you didn’t have to buy that. I could have given you money.”

“Don’t worry about it. I hope if this happened to my mom there would be someone to help her if I wasn’t around.”

“Well, that’s awfully nice of you. My names Ethel Birch by the way.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Ethel. I’m Meg Grain. I also got you some chips and soda.” I popped opened the soda and handed it to Ethel.

“Oh thank you, honey. My son is on the way here, should be only five minutes. You can get going if you want to, you don’t need to sit with an old woman,” Ethel said as she ate a piece of candy and took a slug of soda.

“No problem. The only plans I had today was to take a nap before work tonight. Delaying my plans by ten minutes won’t be a problem.”

“Well, in that case, you can help me eat this licorice. It’s my favorite, but I shouldn’t eat this all by myself. Where do you work at?” Ethel asked as she offered the bag to me.

“The factory right outside of town. I work in the warehouse, second shift.” I grabbed a piece and sat down on the floor. If I was going to wait for Ethel’s son to show up, might as well be comfortable while I waited for him.

“Really? Never would have thought that. Figured you would have said a nurse or something like that. Seems like you would have to be tough to work in a warehouse, sounds like a man’s job.”

I laughed. “Honestly, Ethel that is not the first time I have heard that, and it probably won’t be the last. You definitely need a certain attitude to deal with those truckers walking through the door. I have an awesome co-worker, so he helps out when truckers have a problem with a woman loading their truck.”

“Sounds like you give them hell. My Tim was a trucker before he passed. I know exactly what you are talking about.” Ethel took another drink of her soda and set it on the bench next to her.

“Feeling better?”

“Surprisingly, yes. It’s a wonder what a little candy can do. How much do I owe you?” Ethel asked as she reached for her purse by her feet.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m just glad that I was here to help.”

“Mom! Where are you?” Someone yelled from the front of the store.

“Oh good, Lo’s here. You’ll have to meet him.” Ethel cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled to him she was in the back.

I started getting up off the floor and remembered I wasn’t exactly as flexible as I use to be while struggling to get up.

“Ma, you ok?” I was halfway to standing with my butt in the air when his voice made me pause.

It sounded like the man was gurgling broken glass when he spoke. Raspy and so sexy. Those three words he spoke sent shocks to my core. Lord knows the last time I felt anything in my core.

“Yes, I’m fine. I forgot to eat breakfast this morning and started to get dizzy when Meg here was nice enough to help me out until you could get here.” Ethel turned to me. “Lo, this is Meg, Meg this is Lo.”

Oh lord.

I couldn’t talk. The man standing in front of me was ... oh, lord. I couldn’t even think of a word to describe him.

I looked him up and down, and I’m sure my mouth was hanging wide open. I took in his scuffed up motorcycle boots and faded, stained ripped jeans that hugged his thighs and made me want to ask the man to spin so I could see what those jeans were doing

for his ass. I moved my eyes up to his t-shirt that was tight around his shoulders and chest and showed he worked out.

I couldn't remember the last time I worked out. Did walking to the mailbox count as exercise? Of course, I only remembered to get the mail about twice a week, so that probably didn't count.

His arms were covered in tattoos. I could see them peeking out from the collar of his shirt and could only imagine what he looked like with his shirt off. Tattoos were my ultimate addiction on a man. Even one tattoo added at least 10 points to a man's hotness. This guy was off the fucking charts.

My eyes locked with his after my fantastic voyage up his body, and I stopped breathing.

"Hey, Meg. See something you like, darlin'?" Lo rumbled at me with a smirk on his face.

Busted. I sucked air back into my lungs and tried to remember how to breathe.

Lo's eyes were the color of fresh cut grass, bright green. His hair was jet black and cut close to his head with a pair of kick ass aviators sitting on top of his head. He was golden tan and gorgeous. The man was sex on a stick. Plain and simple.

"Uh, hey," I choked out.

Lo's lips curved up into a grin, and I looked down to see if my panties fell off. The man had a panty-dropping smile, and he wasn't even smiling that big. I would have to take cover or risk fainting if he smiled any bigger.

"Thanks for looking after my ma for me. I'm glad I was in town today and not out on a run," Lo said.

Ok. Get it together Meg. You are a 36-year-old woman, and this man has rendered you speechless like a sixteen-year-old girl. I needed to say something.

“Say something,” I blurted out. Good Lord did I really just say that. Lo quirked his eyebrow, and his smirk returned.

“Ugh, I mean no problem. I didn’t really do that much. No problem.” I looked at Ethel while Lo was smirking at me; Ethel had a full-blown smile on her face and was beaming at me.

“You were a life saver, Meg! I don’t know what I would have done if you weren’t here.” Ethel looked at Lo and grinned even bigger. “You should have seen her, Lo. She knew just what to do to help me. I could have sworn she was a nurse the way she took charge. She’s not, though, just has a good head on her shoulders and decided to help this old lady out.”

“That’s good, Ma. You got all your shit you need so we can get going? I got some stuff going on at the garage that I dropped to get over here fast.”

I took that as my cue to leave and ripped my eyes off Lo and bent over to get my basket and paper towels.

“Yes son, that’s my stuff right here. I just want to get Meg’s number before she leaves.”

“Why do you need my number?” I asked as I juggled my basket and towels.

Ethel grabbed her purse off the ground and started digging through it again. “Well, you won’t let me pay you back for the snacks you got for me so I figured I could pay you back by inviting you over for dinner sometime. So what’s your number, sweetheart?”

“I don’t eat dinner,” I blurted out. I was really going to have to have a talk with my brain and mouth when I got home. They needed to get their shit together and start working in unison so I wouldn’t sound like such an idiot.

“You don’t eat dinner? Please don’t tell me you’re on a diet.” Lo said as he looked me up and down.

“No,” I said. Lord knew I should be.

Lo and Ethel just stared at me.

“So, no, you don’t eat dinner?” Lo asked again.

“Yes. I mean no, I’m not on a diet. Yes, I eat dinner. I just work at night, so I meant that I wouldn’t be able to come to dinner.” I looked at Lo and blushed about ten shades of red. “Why is this so hard?”

“What’s hard, sweetheart? Can’t remember your phone number? I can barely remember mine too. Don’t worry about not being able to make it to dinner; I can have you over for lunch. You eat lunch right?” Ethel asked with a smirk on her face. Lo had a full-blown smile on his face, even his eyes were smiling at me. That smile ought to be illegal.

I could see where Lo got his looks from. With Lo and Ethel standing next to each other, I could totally see the resemblance. Especially when they were both smirking.

I had to get out of here. I’m normally the one with the one-liners and making everyone laugh, now I couldn’t even put two words together.

“Lunch would be good.” I rattled off my number, and Ethel jotted it down.

“Ok, sweetheart, I’ll let you get your nap. I’ll give you a call later, and we can figure

out a day we can get together.” Ethel shoved the pen and paper back in her bag and leaned into me for a hug.

I awkwardly hugged her back and patted her on the shoulder. “Sounds good. Have a good day Ethel. Uh, it was nice meeting you, Lo,” I mumbled as my gaze wandered over Lo again.

“You too Meg. See you around,” Lo replied.

I gave them both a jaunty wave and booked it to the checkout. Thankfully there wasn’t a line, and I quickly made my escape to my car. I threw my things in the trunk and hopped in. I grabbed my phone out of my pocket, plugged it into the radio, and turned on my chill playlist, the soothing sounds of Fleetwood Mac filled the car.

Music was the one thing in my life that had gotten me through so much shit. Good or bad, there was always a song that I could play, and it would make everything better. Right now I just needed to unscramble my brain and get my bearings. Fleetwood Mac singing “Landslide” was helping.

I pulled out of the parking lot and headed home. All I needed was to forget about today. If Ethel called for lunch, I would say yes because she did remind me so much of mom, but I wasn’t going to let Lo enter my thoughts anymore. A woman like me definitely did not register on his radar, he was better just forgotten.

When I was halfway home, I realized I forgot dog food and shampoo.

Shit.

=====

Lo

I helped mom finish her shopping and loaded all her crap into the truck. I looked around the parking lot for Meg, hoping she hadn't left yet so I could get another look at her. As soon as I saw her ass waving in the air as she struggled to stand up, I knew I had to be inside her.

It took all my willpower to not get a hard-on as her eyes ran over my body. Fucking chick was smoking' hot and didn't even know it.

"Thanks for coming to get me, Lo," Ma said as she interrupted my thoughts about Meg.

"No problem, Ma. I'll get one of the guys to bring your car to you later. Make sure it's locked." Ma dug her keys out of her huge ass purse and beeped the locks. We both got into the shop truck, and I started it up.

"Sure was nice of that Meg to help out. I don't know what I would have done without her."

"Yup, definitely nice of her." I shifted the truck into drive, keeping my foot on the brake, knowing exactly where mom was headed with this.

"You should ask her out." All I could do was shake my head and laugh.

"Straight to the point huh, Ma?"

"I'm old, I can say what I want. Meg is just the thing you need."

"I didn't know I needed anything." I pulled out of the parking lot and headed to Ma's house.

"You need someone in your life besides that club." My mom grabbed her phone out of her purse and started fiddling with it.



“We’ll see, ma. Meg didn’t seem too thrilled with me.” She definitely liked what she saw, but it was like she couldn’t get away from me quick enough when she saw that Ma was going to be ok.

“Well, you are pretty intimidating, Lo. Thank goodness you didn’t wear your cut.”

My leather vest with my club rockers and patches was a part of me. “What the hell is wrong with my cut? If some bitch can’t handle me in my cut, she sure as shit doesn’t belong with me,” I growled.

“Not what I meant Lo. That girl has been hurt, you can see it in her eyes. You’ll have to be gentle with her.”

My phone dinged. I dug it out of my pocket and saw my mom had texted me. “You texted me her number, ma?”

“Use it, Logan, fix her,” she insisted.

I sighed and pulled into mom’s driveway. “Maybe she doesn’t want to be fixed, ma. Maybe she has a boyfriend.”

“She doesn’t. Call her, or I’ll do it for you,” she ordered.

I knew my mom’s threat wasn’t idle. She totally would call Meg and ask her out for me. Fuck. “I’ll help you get your shit inside ma.”

“I’ll make you lunch, and then you can call Meg,” Ma said, as she jumped out of the truck and grabbed some bags.

I watched her walk into her house and looked at the message she had sent me. I saved Meg’s number to my phone and grabbed the rest of Ma’s shit and headed into the house.

Looked like I was calling Meg.