



My Wild Mountain Man

(Summer in the Pines #15)

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Category: Romance

Description: This wild mountain man is up a creek without a paddle!

She's my best friend's little sister. That alone makes her off limits. She's too young and too innocent for an untamed man like me. I've kept my distance, even though it kills me.

My hands are calloused from my past. I'm too wild for someone who looks at me like I'm some kind of knight in shining armor coming to her rescue.

She's the light to my dark.

There's nothing but sunshine and love when it comes to my beauty named Raven. She makes me want more, stirring emotions I'm not used to feeling. Things I've ignored but are getting harder and harder to turn a blind eye to.

Temperatures are rising this summer in the Pines. Everywhere I turn, she's there. Tempting me with everything I could ever want. Can a wild mountain man with darker needs like me give her everything she deserves?

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sebastian 'bash' ledesma

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I walked into the backroom and rested my head against the wall.

“Fuck,” I growled, the sound of my voice deep as my eyes shut tightly. I tried to ignore the way my dick throbbed. The fucker had its own pulse behind my thick denim jeans, but I would be damned if he won.

Not today.

Not now.

I had all but thought the fucker had stopped working when I returned to Moonlit Pines after my time in the Marines.

With my head screwed up, I had resigned myself to a life of bachelorhood.

I didn't mind. What kind of woman would want me, anyways?

Not only did my dick not work, I had a love for the extreme.

An adrenaline junkie through and through.

For some fun here and there, I'd probably be okay for some. It wasn't like my hands and mouth didn't work. But for the long term? I wasn't that man.

No. I didn't need love and all the messy complications it brought.

My life was full enough. I might have had to leave the Marines earlier than I wanted after getting injured, but I was alive. I had good friends and opened a brewery with two of the best friends a guy could have.

I was fine. Content. I had enough in my life to make me happy.

Brewing beer, running a business in the town where I grew up, where others came to have a good time, that was good enough.

I didn't need hearts and flowers and a woman.

Hell no. I'd had front row tickets to my parents' tumultuous marriage and the disaster it had turned into before they cut their losses and split up.

I didn't want that. I didn't need the headache or inconvenience.

I'd been fine with what my life was going to be like.

I was thirty and could see it all clearly.

But what's the saying? Tell God your plans, and he'll laugh? Well, fuck, he must have had a good time at my expense when little Raven Trejo walked into my life six months ago and knocked me on my ass.

I'd met her a couple of times in the past when I came back from college and stayed with the Trejos on college summer breaks here and there.

But back then, she had been nothing but a kid.

All I remembered was big glasses, braces, and frizzy hair.

The little squirt would sit at the end of the driveway when Austin, Onyx, and I would play basketball, her nose stuck in one book or another, blushing so hard she turned pink whenever I talked to her.

But when I came back, she'd been off to school, some beauty college in San Francisco.

Onyx would tell me things here and there about her.

Maybe because she was the youngest, he kept a closer eye on her, worried about her being so far from home.

Austin and he had even gone out to the Bay Area for her birthday, but I had chosen to stay behind.

Six months ago, I saw her again for the first time.

I had been covered in saw dust, shirtless and sweaty, in the middle of the renovation for the brewery.

She'd walked in, and when our eyes connected, it had felt like I had been sucker-punched.

I'd climbed off the ladder slowly, wondering if I was imagining things.

No one but the construction crew was allowed inside the building, yet this little, fairy-like creature was sauntering toward me with a knowing smile.

And she didn't stop until she was right in front of me.

With the way the light filtered through, I remember thinking her eyes were the prettiest brown I had ever seen. Dark chocolate with swirls of caramel.

I hadn't recognized her.

Who could have blamed me? She'd been about twelve the last time I'd seen her. The dark-haired beauty in front of me was all woman with soft curves and silky-smooth hair that made my hands ache to touch.

And just like that, my cock started to come alive for the first time in a year.

Everything around me stopped. The sounds of the construction crew faded away to nothing. The only hammering I heard was that of my heart beating against my ribcage trying to pounce out and land right in her delicate hands.

I felt like I had been struck by lightning.

Even more when she excitedly said, "Hi!" Her voice was sweeter than anything I'd ever heard in my life.

She wrapped her little curvy body around mine with a big hug, a hug I happily returned.

My head dipped down, and I breathed in her scent.

But before I could make out the notes, I pulled away.

Her smile was so bright and beautiful as she stared at me, her hands still touching my bare skin, I wondered if I'd died.

Is the angel in my arms the one who will walk me through the Pearly Gates of

Heaven?

But it wasn't to be so.

I was about to ask who she was when Onyx walked in with a scowl on his face, yelling at Raven to leave me alone and stop bugging.

Raven. My best friend's baby sister.

The door to the storage room opened, and Austin stood there, looking at me, unknowingly snapping me out of the memory that haunted me daily.

"You okay, Bash?"

"Fine," I gritted through my teeth.

"Yeah?" With his assessing gaze, I knew he didn't miss shit, but he had yet to call me out on anything. "That why you're hiding back here?" he asked, knowingly pressing my buttons.

"Yup," I clipped, pushing off the wall.

"Man," he sighed, stopping me from exiting and hiding in the small office we shared. "You gotta get a hold of this."

"Hold of what?" I dared him to call me out on it. To tell me to stop crushing on our friend's little sister like some perv. Jesus, our age difference alone was enough reason not to go there. To keep my hands to myself.

"You really think I don't see what's going on?"

“I don’t know what?—“

“That’s Onyx’ little sister, man.”

“Which one?” I pretended to act stupid, but by the way Austin stared back at me, I wasn’t fooling anyone. I sighed and swallowed. My Adam’s apple bobbed heavily as everything I felt for her stuck to me, clung tightly.

I tried to avoid her after that day, and it had hurt her feelings.

She had even skipped the New Year’s party we had thrown, claiming she was sick, but I had seen her that morning in the woods, in the spot where she liked to go sit and read.

She had been fine. She had skipped it because she had come by earlier that day to drop off something for her brother.

Raven was gorgeous, but subtle wasn’t one of her strong suits.

I saw the way she watched me. Looked at me with interest in her eyes.

Like I could be one of the men in the books she liked to read.

So, I’d stupidly flirted with the photographer right in front of her.

It was bad enough how much I wanted my tempting little morsel!

Knowing she wanted me back, I’d reacted stupidly.

Afraid that she would make some kind of move, one I’d known I wouldn’t be able to resist, I’d needed to do something, and I had.

But it backfired on me.

Now she hardly looked at me when she came in, and it made me feel like hell. I missed the way she would seek me out to talk here and there about shit she knew I liked.

I miss her.

“Earth to Bash,” Austin clipped. “Get your shit together and come back when that”—he pointed down at my crotch—“isn’t waving hello like a goddamn Walmart greeter.”

“Fuck you,” I clipped, shaking my head.

“Look, man.” He ran his fingers through his light hair. “I don’t want to come off like a dick?—“

“Then maybe you shouldn’t say whatever has you looking like that.”

“We’re all partners here.” He wasn’t going to take my advice, and I was stuck having to hear his. “If you go there and mess around with his sister? That could mess it up if it ends badly. You get what I’m saying?”

“Yeah, man,” I rasped, clearing my throat. “You don’t shit where you eat,” I clarified, and he nodded. It wasn’t something I hadn’t thought about.

“Yeah... exactly. Look, I’m glad the little general is up and working again, but don’t go there. Not unless you know it’s for real.”

“Unless I know it’s...” I chuckled and shook my head. “That shocks the shit out of me coming from you and spending how many years listening to you spew all that

cursed in love shit.”

“I’m a Hart,” he reminded me, and I rolled my eyes.

“Curses aren’t real, Austin.” I groaned. I had no idea how many times I had to say that, but it felt like it would never get through his thick skull.

“I don’t know, man... You’ve seen the men in my family. All of them cursed as fuck.” I rolled my eyes because no matter how much I tried to tell him that shit didn’t exist, he wasn’t going to listen to me.

“Just get your shit together, man. Okay? Keep your hands off little sisters.” He pointed at me, and I made a face.

“Man,” I groaned, “don’t make it sound like that!” I grimaced, and the asshole laughed.

“I’m just saying?—“

“Say less. Just give me a minute. I’ll be right out there.”

“How about Wednesday, we go a couple towns over to Serendipity and find us some women we can have some fun with now that the general is up and saluting again? Which again, congrats.” He grinned. We were close, so they’d known about my situation after being discharged.

“Austin,” I warned, but the shit-eating grin on his face told me it wasn’t going to be that easy to make him drop it.

“What’s that saying Oli and Onyx are always yapping? The best way to get over someone is to get on top of someone else?” The guy was insufferable. Just the

thought of touching someone else made my gut tighten and left a sour taste in my mouth.

I shook my head yet still agreed. “Sure.” Not that my general, like Austin had called my dick, would wake up for anyone but Raven.

Thankfully, that seemed to placate him enough to salute me and walk out.

Left alone in the dark storage room, I shut my eyes, but that didn’t help.

Not when all I could see behind my eyelids was Raven Trejo and her smooth tan skin with that dark chocolate-and-caramel-eyed gaze staring right back at me, with so much hope and feelings I felt it right through me like the best kind of whiskey.

I shook my head and ran my fingers through my hair.

What the fuck am I going to do about my best friend’s little sister?

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raven

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My ponytail swished back and forth behind me as I trudged through the forest. One I had taken more times than I could count. I hardly recognized the path because even though I knew better and had been told to pay closer attention, my nose was stuck in a book.

Again.

But who could blame me? It was hard to put a book down when you needed to know what was going to happen next!

How the characters were going to end up together despite the countless things standing in their way.

I sighed and looked around, hoping to find something that would give me a clue of where I was.

I frowned when it seemed like I might have truly gone off the trail.

The ground below me wasn't even well worn. Shit!

It wasn't the first time I'd done this. I chewed on my bottom lip and straightened my shoulders. The worst thing I could do was panic.

I had been born and raised in Moonlit Pines; even as introverted as I was, there wasn't a trail I didn't know.

My parents had made sure of it, even when I had whined and complained about going outdoors where bugs flew about and the sun was too bright, they had pushed for me to explore. I secretly loved it. It's why I hit the trails every chance I got.

That and the fact it reminded me so much of Bash.

My older brother's best friend and completely off limits.

If only my heart could get the memo! I was a twenty-one-year-old never-kissed virgin because of my stupid little crush on my brother's best friend!

What could I say? I'd fallen madly, deeply in love with the guy from the very first day my brother had brought him home.

My sisters teased me over my crush. There was no way I could have denied it.

Not when I blushed any time he was close by.

But time went by, and life moved on like it tended to do.

He left for college and then the Marines. I'd thought somehow, distance and years would make those feelings go away. And maybe I had tricked myself to think that when I'd left to attend beauty school. But that first day, when I'd walked into the brewery and laid eyes on him, I knew it wasn't so.

I shook away the thought as I brushed a strand of hair out of my face and tried to figure out where I was.

That's when I heard it. Water! I was close to the waterfall!

Suddenly, the hot summer sun felt a tinge warmer.

I could go to the waterfall, take a break, maybe swim, finish my book, then find my way back from there!

With a plan in mind, I headed towards it.

Just as it started to come into view, I stopped in my tracks.

My mouth went bone dry at the sight of the man who I was always thinking about in the water.

His bare chest was glistening from the water that was sluicing down his muscular, inked-up, hairy chest. My tongue felt too big for my mouth.

He was what every wet dream was made of.

He had always seemed bigger than life to me, but right then and there, he was incredibly masculine.

The epitome of the species. And all I wanted to do was climb him like a spider monkey.

My feet felt like they were nailed to the mountain ground while I stood rooted in place, accidentally hiding in the lush greenery, unable to look away while he swam around the river. Before I knew it, he was getting out of the water, and my eyes were going to jump out of their socket.

He wasn't just swimming. Bash Ledesma was skinny dipping!

I knew he was big, I mean tall! But the thick appendage between his muscular thighs seemed almost fake.

Men can be that big?! I had no idea. I would definitely be asking Olive.

Out of the girls, she was the one who had the most experience.

Maybe I wouldn't! I knew Olive; she would ask why I wanted to know, and there was no way I would tell her it was because I'd seen Sebastian, Bash, the one man in the whole wide world who had ever called my interest naked!

Knowing my sister, she would want a peek!

Not that she knew just how deep my love ran for him. She didn't. No one did. She just thought I found him pretty to look at. If she knew, she wouldn't ever think of trying anything with him. Oli was a girl's girl through and through.

All thoughts of my sister, or anything really, were wiped from my mind as my attention moved back to my very own Adonis.

Bash sat on a rock, wiping away the excess water from his face as he stared out at the waterfall.

The muscles of his back bunched and flexed, making me wish I had an ounce of artistic talent so I could go back to my place and sketch out how beautiful he was.

Instead, I quietly stood there watching him while I battled to remind myself to breathe.

He looked like he was deep in thought. Like he was torn about something.

Something I wanted to see if I could help out with.

But I couldn't. I hadn't spoken to him since New Year's.

Not really. Not like I used to. Simple hellos and byes were all I limited myself to since that day.

Just the reminder of watching him flirt with the drop-dead gorgeous photographer made me queasy.

It was stupid. Lame, really. Bash wasn't mine. Not even close. But it had been a bruise to my ego. No matter how much I'd changed since being a dorky kid, I would never be the kind of woman Bash Ledesma would ever look at twice. I'd never be his type.

The sad reminder made my shoulders hunch over before I quickly stepped back, away from the waterfall and back towards the trail. I took a step but didn't notice a rock, and I slipped.

"Shit!" I cried out a little too loudly as a searing pain vibrated through my knee. "Crap," I mumbled, brushing off the dirt.

"Hello?" Bash's voice called out. "Someone out there?" I quickly tried to consider my options.

Crawling through the thick forest popped into my head.

A huge black hole swallowing me was another thought.

But since those only existed in cartoons, and I had chosen to wear shorts on my little walk, I figured crawling would get me even more scratched up.

I stood up slowly, and thankfully, when I did and our eyes connected, he had already pulled on a pair of shorts.

“Hey! It’s just me!” I called out.

“Rave? Shit.” He hurried towards me as I stood there like a bump on a log. “You okay?” he asked. The moment he reached me, his hands were on me. Checking my legs and arms. Unknowingly leaving a trail of heat in their wake.

“I’m okay,” I squeaked. “I just, umm, got turned around because I was reading and, umm, slipped on a rock and fell, but I’m fine. See?” I shook my leg for him as if that was going to prove I wasn’t in pain. “I’ll just be on my way! I’m sorry to, umm—“

“Breathe for me, Raven,” he ordered, placing my hand on his bare chest. His skin was wet and warm. The muscles beneath were solid. God, he is sexy !

He breathed in deeply, and I followed, my eyes unable to move from his dark ones, soaking in everything I could while being this close to him. The small dark freckles across his cheeks, the golden hues that swirled in the darkness of his gaze. The way the bridge of his nose had a slight bump to it.

God, he was beautiful.

“Better?” he asked, snapping me out of my delusional thoughts.

I simply nodded, ignoring the fact I was probably three shades of red.

I hated how much I blushed. Especially when it came to him.

It felt like my heart was about to jump out of my chest and my knees could buckle beneath me in the blink of an eye.

“You were reading while walking?” I chewed on my bottom lip. Those dark eyes of his searched mine, and all I could do was stare back. “What am I going to do with you, pretty girl?” He tucked a strand of hair that had come loose from my ponytail behind my ear.

Pretty girl. If only he actually meant it.

“I’m sorry I interrupted your swim,” I whispered. “I should get going.”

“Let me get my stuff, and I’ll head out with you.” Head out with me? I knew the walk back would be at least an hour, and as much as I wanted to spend time with him, I really didn’t think it was a good idea.

I am trying to get over him, not fall harder!

“Oh, you don’t have to—“

“Yeah, I do. I want to.”

“You do?” I asked. His gaze never wavered from mine as he took a step closer, and his Adam’s apple bobbed.

“I do.” Something was happening. There was something about the way he was looking at me that felt... different.

“Oh.” My lips parted as my chest rose and fell. I watched as his eyes dropped to said chest, and I could have sworn my nipples tightened to impossible peaks at that very moment. Can he see them? He moved a little closer, and I found myself swaying towards him, too.

“You want to come with me?” I asked, my tone way too breathy. I shook my head. “I

mean walk back?” I asked again. My hand ached to touch his bare chest again. His nose flared, and then he frowned.

“I do.” His voice sounded deeper. Thicker. “I mean, what if you get to reading and wander off again? Your brother would kick my ass if you got lost.” My brother. Right.

I was an idiot.

Whatever felt different about that moment had been some stupid figment of my imagination. Bash didn’t want me. He wanted me to be safe. For my brother.

“Onyx. Right.” Whatever hope I had that he wanted to hang out with me faded away, making me feel like a deflated balloon. “You really don’t have to worry. I’ll be fine.”

“Why have you been avoiding me, Rave?”

“Avoiding you?” I snorted and shook my head. “Someone thinks a lot of themselves.”

“Don’t do that. Talk to me.”

“Why would you think that?”

“We haven’t talked in a while,” he pointed out. The fact he noticed made me want to swoon. God, I was hopeless.

His hand took mine, and I loved the way they fit. Just looking down at mine in his muddled my brain. “So?” he prompted, and my eyes roamed up to lock with his.

“What? I’m sorry, what was the question?”

“You’ve been avoiding me,” he said, and because I was me and suddenly a smartass, I responded like one.

“That’s not a question,” I pointed out. “That’s a statement.”

“Shit.” His lips twitched, and I saw it. That little dimple of his popped out and made me want to swoon. It was seriously unfair how cute he was. “Stay here,” he ordered before he jogged back to where his things were.

“You know, I’m not a dog!” I yelled back, but for some reason, I did just as he asked.

I watched as he tossed his backpack on and grabbed his water bottle before jogging back to me. “Ready?” he asked, and I shrugged.

I walked close to him as we walked side by side in silence for the longest while.

Usually, with anyone else, I would have been tempted to fill the silence or even pull out a book, but with Bash, I didn’t feel that need.

It might have been quiet, but it was a comfortable silence.

One that was outlived too quickly when he spoke.

“How’s work been?” he asked, and I glanced up at him.

“It’s been okay.” I shrugged. “I got a couple new clients.”

“That’s good,” he grunted before silence fell between us again.

“Any new events planned out for the brewery?” I asked, making my own attempt at small talk.

“Not really. Austin wants to host a couple of paint and sips. We will see, though.”

“You don’t like the idea?” He shrugged, raising and dropping one of his boulder-looking shoulders.

“It’s not a bad idea. I just don’t think we need all the extra hoopla. The new chef your brother hired is great, and our beers are going to be exclusively served at the ski resort starting this fall. I just don’t want us to be spread ourselves too thin.”

“That makes sense.”

“So... that book you were reading when you got lost.” He pointed to the paperback still in my hand.

“I wasn’t lost , lost exactly,” I mumbled.

“How was it?”

“It was good.”

“Hmm,” he grunted. “You need to be more careful. What if some weirdo had been out here?”

“Weirdo?” I giggled. “This is Moonlit Pines, Bash. Nothing bad happens here.”

“Bad shit happens everywhere, Raven. I just... promise me you’ll be more careful.”

“God, you sound like my brother. ‘ Stop reading those books, Raven,’ ” I lowered my voice to mimic Onyx’.

Bash surprised me, taking my wrist and pulling me into him.

So close, I could feel his body heat, and when he leaned in, his head dipping low enough that his breath tickled my lips, a deep warmth coiled up low in my belly.

“I never said to stop reading. I just want you to promise me you’ll pay more attention. Especially when you come out here alone.”

“Why? Do you pay extra close attention when you’re out here alone?”

“Raven.”

“Bash,” I countered. I had no idea why I was poking the bear in him. Pushing buttons I had no right to push.

“I swear to god, little girl, you’re making it hard for me to not pull you over my knee and spank you,” he growled, and the whole world froze.

Right in that moment, nothing moved.

I mean, the birds still sang and the breeze blew, but I felt like I was frozen solid while his probably empty threat painted itself out in my head. And I liked it. A lot.

“Shit! I didn’t mean... fuck!” He lifted his hand like he was going to touch me but stopped mid-air before it dropped to his side. With his hands clenched, he started to walk ahead of me, and I blinked for a moment.

Swear to god, little girl, you’re making it hard for me to not pull you over my knee and spank you. His words replayed in my head, painting an image that made my toes curl inside my shoes.

“Catch up!” he yelled, and it got me moving. Behind him, I watched his body move with grace and ease, making me wonder if he did everything that way.

We didn't say another word.

Which worked for me since I couldn't seem to get my thoughts together. His words kept bouncing around in my head. Spank me. Did that mean what I thought it meant? Was he into BDSM? Or was he just trying to be funny and got embarrassed.

Sweat slicked my skin, but I didn't complain. When my stomach growled, he must have heard it, because Bash stopped and handed me a granola bar from his backpack and an extra water bottle.

Suddenly, all too quickly, we were back at the clearing that headed to the parking area of the trail. He stopped and turned to look at me. The moment our eyes locked, I opened my mouth to say something, anything, but nothing came out. So, I did what I was good at and avoided him.

"Thanks for leading the way," I mumbled with an awkward wave. I walked past him, my focus on anything but his eyes, and hurried straight towards my little blue SUV. I was too flustered by what he had said that I never realized he knew where I'd parked.

And because I didn't look at him, I didn't notice he was staring at me with so much longing it would have knocked the wind out of me.

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bash

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I was in the back office, staring at the Excel spreadsheets, but all I could see was Raven and her wide eyes filled with intrigue after I threatened to pull her up over my knee.

“Fuck!” I cursed, scrubbing my face. She had been watching me while I swam naked in the creek. I’d felt her gaze like a touch from afar. “Fucking hell,” I repeated, shutting my eyes as I threw my head back and stared at the ceiling.

“Do I want to know what your problem is?” Austin asked. I shook my head.

“You really don’t,” I grunted.

“Please don’t tell me this has to do with someone’s little sister,” he whispered, and I rolled my eyes.

“Shut up, Austin.”

“No, I’m serious, Bash. Onyx will lose his shit if he finds out you’re trying to seduce—”

“Seduce!” I hissed. “I’m not seducing anyone! I didn’t do anything. Not really .” Keep telling yourself that, and maybe you’ll believe it, a little voice in my head mumbled. I’d threatened to spank her, and my innocent pretty girl looked intrigued

by it. “I found her on the trail by the waterfall.”

“You found her...”

“She was reading and got turned around. I helped her back to her car,” I explained. Never mind the fact that I was out there because I knew it was her day off and she usually liked going for a hike.

“And that’s it?” he asked, clearly suspicious.

“Yup.” I nodded, glancing at him from over my shoulder, omitting the fact I had been fighting tooth and nail from stopping myself from kissing her.

“Good. So, we going to Sugarloaf to do a little bar hopping?” he asked. The offer was there, clear as day. He’d be my wingman. I could hook up with some random woman, and in his head, that would fix the situation. Reality was, just the thought made my dick want to curl up on itself.

“I don’t think so, man.” I shook my head. “But how about a beer at The Clover?” Austin shot me a look like it was most definitely not his first choice, but it would do.

“Fine. Better than nothing. Meet you there about nine?” he asked.

“Sounds good.”

He walked out of my small office space, and I continued to stare at the screen in front of me.

The Clover was a biker bar just on the outskirts of town.

It was a hole-in-the-wall spot, but they had great food and ice-cold beer.

And more importantly, from what I knew, the Trejo girls didn't go there.

The rest of the day went by in a blur.

My mind was too busy and mucked up with thoughts of Raven and how damn cute she looked out there on the trail. The way she'd been watching me skinny dip. How prettily she blushed for me, and the perfect way her hand had fit into mine.

Damn, I had it bad for her. The problem was, I didn't know what to do about it. Liar, a little voice in the back of my head piped up. You know what to do. You just don't know how Onyx will take it.

"Hey, you going to Clover with Austin?" Onyx asked the moment I got to the bar. I grunted, and the asshole had the nerve to grin at me. "Thank fuck. Keep an eye on Rave for me, yeah?"

"What?" I asked. My brows bunched as something in my gut twisted. Keep an eye on her? It was impossible not to when she was around.

"Heard she's going there tonight with some people from work." I swallowed hard at the information.

"You know she's an adult, right? She can make her own decisions."

"She thinks life is like some kinda romance novel. You know the bikers there are okay guys, but can you imagine one of the young ones trying to sweep her off her feet? She would fall for it hook, line, and sinker." I had to shove my hands into the front pockets of my jeans.

I didn't like the idea of some other guy hitting on her.

Or looking at her. Or breathing the same air as her.

“She’s smarter than you give her credit for,” I muttered, and he stared at me. For a second, I worried I had shown how I felt about her, or that he had some kind of inkling about it.

“It’s your night off. I get it.” He sighed, and I looked closer. Something was up with him by the dark circles under his eyes. “Look, I’m not asking you to babysit. I’m just saying—“ I didn’t need him to spell it out.

“Yeah, I get it. Keep an eye on her.” Though, an eye wasn’t exactly all I wanted to keep on her.

“Thanks, man, I owe you.”

“Sure,” I mumbled, feeling like a shit friend. I waved goodbye to him and hurried out. Knowing she was there or heading to the biker bar lit a fire under my ass. I didn’t even head home to change. I walked into the bar just as I got a text from Austin.

Austin: Sorry, change in plans. Can’t go tonight.

Fuck. This was the last thing I needed.

Austin cancelling and knowing I was going to have to keep an eye on her was going to make keeping my hands off her even harder. I ran my fingers through my overgrown hair. I hadn’t cut it because the idea of anyone but Raven taking care of it felt wrong. Like cheating.

It was crazy. She wasn’t mine. She was off limits.

Raven Trejo was the sweetest forbidden fruit.

I looked around and spotted her right away.

Like a beacon of light, she shone brightly in the old, dimly lit, dingy bar.

Sure enough, she was with some girls I recognized from the salon.

Raven was the youngest of the group. While she laughed and smiled at something one of her coworkers said, I slid onto a barstool far enough from her that she wouldn't spot me right away yet close enough that I could keep an eye on her.

"Look what the cat dragged in." Hillary, the bartender, grinned at me, leaning in close. "What can I get you, Bash?"

"Whatever your special is tonight and a Bud Light."

"That I can do." She winked and went to put my order into the kitchen after handing me a bottle of Bud.

I sipped my beer slowly, trying to avoid the temptation that was kitty corner from me.

I could hear the girls laughing and having a good time.

Before I knew it, Hillary brought me a brisket burger with a side of coleslaw and fries.

I dug in while I pretended to care about the baseball game happening on the TV above the bar.

Before I knew it, I was finished eating, and a group of bikers walked in. A couple of them made a beeline for the girls from the salon, and I felt like every nerve ending in my body went on high alert.

That's when I felt it.

The air changed in the bar as she walked closer.

"Hey, darlin', what can I do you for?" Hillary asked.

"Can I close out my tab?" Her sweet voice was like a balm over my soul.

"Sure thing, hun!" I turned, and when our eyes connected, I could see her thinking about ignoring me, avoiding me again. I wasn't sure if it was half the beer I'd drunk or the fact I was so damn tired of staying away from her, but I smiled.

"Didn't see you there, pretty girl. You having a good time?" I forced her to acknowledge me.

"Hey, Bash. You're away from the brewery."

"Hmm," I grunted. "Having fun?" I asked, pointing at the group. Some of the girls were being led out to the small makeshift dance floor just as a slow country song started to play from the old jukebox.

"Yeah, the girls are a lot of fun."

"You guys don't come hang at the brewery like this," I noted, and she shrugged shyly. She went with her sisters but hardly ever with friends.

"You know how Onyx can be." I nodded. Her eyes left mine as she watched her friends dance with a soft smile on her face.

I could see one of the local bikers, a guy named Tray, staring in our direction.

The guy was closer to her age than me, about my height and build, with two sleeves of tattoos.

I knew if I let her walk away back to her friends, she would be in his arms on that dance floor before I could blink.

Fuck, I could bet the deed to my house on it.

“Wanna dance, pretty girl?” The offer slipped past my lips along with the term of endearment without thinking and ended up surprising the two of us.

“You want to dance?” she repeated. “With me?” Her eyes wide and her attention on me made me feel like I wanted to puff up my chest.

“Yeah,” I hoarsely answered. My skin felt tight. My overheated body worked triple time as I watched her closely. In that moment, it was just the two of us. Nothing else mattered. Everything around us felt like it disappeared.

“Oh.” Her pretty lips parted into a perfect O. It made my filthy, dirty mind wander in so many damn directions. My dick jerked to life as I thought about how those pretty lips would look wrapped around my cock.

“That mean you want to dance or—“

“Yeah!” She nodded with youthful enthusiasm. Jesus, that smile of hers made me feel a hell of a lot younger than I was.

“Good girl. Let’s dance.” I hopped off the tall barstool, and without stopping to think about the consequences of my actions, I took her hand in mine. Small and delicate yet strong. It felt right. Like the best thing in the world. And all I was doing was holding her hand.

Quietly, I led her straight to the small dance floor, where she stopped a step away and looked up at me with so much trust and innocence, every sane thought in my head vanished. I was a bastard. I should have turned right around and run the hell out of the bar.

But I didn't. I had no intention to.

Maybe if I gave myself one night?

One really fucking great night with her. I could work her out of my system and out of my skin. Or maybe the road to hell was paved with nothing but good intentions?

I extended my hand instead of reaching around her waist. I needed this to be her choice.

My pretty girl didn't hesitate and placed her soft hand in mine, unknowingly sealing her fate.

Our fate. I pulled her closer and heard a soft little gasp.

The sound went straight through me like a shot of great whiskey, warming me up from the inside out and making my cock throb.

We started to move to the slow sexy beat of the song, our bodies in sync with one another. Holding her in my arms, looking into her eyes was a stupid thing for me to do. With every beat of my heart, those gorgeous, soulful eyes chipped away at my self-control. Her smile filled my soul with warmth.

One song bled into another. The tempo picking up speed as I twirled her around the floor.

Our laughter mingled with the usual noise of the bar.

Sweaty and exhausted, I held her waist, her front flush up against mine when the song slowed down again to something slower and sultrier than before.

Her own hands found their way around my neck as my neck bent down to press my forehead against hers.

“Bash,” she breathed, and goose bumps flared over my skin. Fuck, I loved hearing her say my name. “You’re a good dancer.”

“I’m good a lot more than dancing,” I flirted, and her smile grew.

“Are you now?” She giggled as she pressed closer against me. There was no doubt in my mind she could feel how hard I was.

“Hmm,” I grunted, my hand rising to touch her cheek. “Yeah.”

“Like what?”

“A lot of things.” I knew I was skating on thin ice and playing with fire.

“You wanna show me?” she taunted, and I stilled. This wasn’t just harmless flirting. We could both get scorched.

“Rave.” Her name sounded like a prayer. Raven’s hand moved, stroking the back of my head.

“Please.” That one little six-letter word would be my downfall. If that wasn’t enough, the little minx kept talking. “One night,” she whispered low enough for my ears only. “One night, and no one has to find out.”

Fucking hell, she was saying all the right things.

“How much did you have to drink?” I rasped.

“A Coke.”

“What?” I frowned.

“I don’t drink when I have to drive,” she shared.

“That’s good, baby. Smart.”

“So?”

“Raven—“

“One night,” she quickly repeated, pulling away a little more so her eyes could connect better with mine. “I need to get over you,” she blurted, and I stilled. Everything inside of me turned cold.

“Excuse me?” I asked and watched as she stepped back, her shoulders dropped.

“You know how I feel about you. I’ve had a crush on your forever and—“

“That was little kid stuff, Rave.”

“No.” She stubbornly shook her head, making her even more beautiful.

“It wasn’t. It’s real. And I need to move on.

I’m twenty-one, and I’ve never... I’ve never even been on a date or kissed someone.

All because I keep thinking about you. It's like my heart is the most stubborn thing in the world!

"She was clearly frustrated. Her words left me momentarily tongue tied. She wanted to get over me?

"Raven—"

"You know what? Forget it!" She laughed awkwardly. I hated how pale she looked. "Forget what I said. Please, forget it. Oh god, I can't believe I just said that! It was stupid. I got caught up in the moment," she rambled, but her words replayed in my head. Bouncing around like a ping pong ball.

"I'll see you around, okay?" She turned around and headed towards where she'd been with her friends. She grabbed her purse and quickly waved bye to her friends and awkwardly waved at me before walking out of the bar.

I was stunned by her confession.

I need to get over you. I need to move on. I've never even been on a date or kissed...

Fuck. I'd known she was innocent, but Raven Trejo was completely untouched like fresh fallen snow because she wanted me. Me? A wild mountain man with not a whole bunch to offer her?

"You let her go, stud, you're stupider than I gave you credit for," Hillary suddenly said next to me.

"Hill," I rasped. She didn't understand. She didn't get how Raven was too good for me. Too young. Too forbidden. "Hillary." She shook her head, her eyes wise from her time on earth and everything she'd seen in her life.

“If you don’t go after her today, you’re going to regret it. Go,” she ordered before walking away, carrying empties on her tray.

I did the only thing a rational red-blooded man would do in that moment.

I went after my girl.

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raven

...

I dropped my keys on the ground and growled with a little stomp. I bent to reach for them.

I couldn't believe what I'd just done! I had actually said it! Suggested he show me everything he was good at.

Oh god! Why did I do that?

I was going to have to hide in my apartment and salon for the rest of my life.

There was no way I could go anywhere else when it would risk bumping into Bash.

My hands shook and my body felt like it wasn't my own.

I was definitely a never-been-kissed virgin if a couple of dances got me all hot and bothered and got my tongue all loose!

Loose enough to ask him to do me, so I could get him out of my system! I'd actually done that!

I felt him before I heard the heavy sound of his footsteps. He stopped and stood behind me as I stood up, my car keys in hand. His energy palpitated against me. Or maybe that is wishful thinking on my part?

“Raven.” My name sounded like a plea, and my eyes shut.

He’d come after me. Why? Was it because he knew my older brother and wanted me to be safe or something else?

“Pretty girl, please turn around and look at me,” he urged. I shook my head with my eyes pinned on the car window. It was too dark for me to see his form behind me, but I couldn’t get myself to face him.

“You really don’t have to do this,” I squeaked. The shuffle of his heavy footstep sounded, and I felt the heat of his front against my back even closer. Almost like a blanket of warmth. His body basically caged me against my vehicle.

“Please look at me, baby girl.” At the term, even sweeter than when he called me his pretty girl, my thighs pressed together to alleviate some of the pressure. Doesn’t he know his words get me all hot and bothered?!

“Raven, please.” This time, I couldn’t keep ignoring him. I wasn’t a little kid. I was a grown woman. It was time to put my big girl panties on and face the consequences of my actions. I turned around, my gaze moving up to look at him.

Bash was so big. Tall and broad. And just like that, my mind went into the gutter remembering just how big he was.

“What?” I whispered. I pinned my eyes to his broad shoulder, still not able to make eye contact.

“You told me to forget what you said,” he rasped, and I couldn’t help myself. Our eyes connected, and that’s when I noticed it. The darkness in his gaze. The quickening in his breath. The way his muscular chest rose and fell like he had been working out.

“I did.” I swallowed, and if I hadn’t felt like my heart was about to burst out of me, I would have noticed something was off with him.

“I can’t do that,” he rasped, stepping between my legs, leaning his body a little closer.

“What? Why not?” I asked, but he didn’t respond.

He simply caged me against my car. One hand rested against the driver’s side door while the other rose slowly.

Almost like he was daring me, silently challenging me to flinch or back away from his touch.

But like a moth to a flame, I stood still until the tips of his fingers caressed the side of my face, and I leaned into his touch.

“So soft,” he mumbled, almost like he was talking to himself. “I shouldn’t be doing this.”

“Wha—” I didn’t get to finish saying what before he was leaning in again, but this time he didn’t stop until his mouth was on mine.

Ohmygod! I was kissing Bash!

Bash Ledesma, the man of my dreams, the one I had been crushing on since the first time I met him, was kissing me!

The realization hit, and natural instinct kicked in.

My lips moved slowly against his. And he let me.

It surprised me. Bash wasn't the kind of man to hand over the reins, but there he was, silently leaving it to me to explore.

Tentatively. Slowly. He tasted like beer and something I knew deep down in my soul was uniquely him.

I could see the hype with kissing when you kissed someone like Bash.

My hands fell to his chest, not to push him away but to hold on for dear life.

His tongue peeked out, gliding against my lower lip, wordlessly requesting permission I was more than happy to give.

My lips parted, and when I moaned as his tongue dove into mine, his hold on me tightened.

Suddenly, my feet were no longer on the ground but around his waist.

“Shit,” he cursed, breathing heavily the moment he pulled away. “One weekend. A long one. Next weekend,” he panted, and I blinked. My head swam with wanting to go back to kissing him.

“What?”

“Stays between us,” he laid out, and I swallowed hard.

Was he really suggesting what I thought he was?

“Why not now?” I asked boldly. “I could just follow you home, or you could come back to my—“

“Don’t finish that sentence, pretty girl, or I’ll take you up on it.” I pressed my lips together. “Next weekend. Think about it. You change your mind, it’s okay. No wrong, no foul.” Nothing happened? He kissed me and unequivocally changed me.

“But if I don’t? I mean, if I don’t change my mind?”

“Then you’re mine,” he answered honestly and confidently.

The promise clung to the air between us.

My knees would have given out on me if he hadn’t been carrying me.

Slowly, with the utmost care, Bash set me down, making sure I felt his body and just how hard it was for him to step away.

Holy crap! Bash Ledesma is hard! Because of me!

He felt as big and menacing as he’d looked out by the water a couple days ago.

“Bash—“ His fingers lightly pressed against my lips.

“Baby, you say anything right now, I’ll literally pick you up and drag you into my truck,” he threatened, his gaze on my mouth before connecting with mine.

“You make that sound like a bad thing,” I breathed, unable to keep the words to myself.

“Fuck.” His forehead dropped and rested against mine. “You’re making this so damn hard.” Something came over me, and my hand boldly moved down his chest to his waistband and didn’t stop until I was right up against the length of him.

“Something’s already hard,” I pointed out, loving the way his nose flared. Bash looked like he was barely holding on to control, and I liked it. I might have been seriously inexperienced, but that didn’t mean I didn’t know about things. I read a lot, and romance novels were my go-to.

“Raven,” he growled, and I didn’t get a chance to say one other word because he kissed me again.

This wasn’t the sweet and slow kiss like the first one.

It was urgent. Passionate and so damn needy it made my toes curl.

Breathless and panting, I was dizzy with a throbbing need that coursed throughout my entire body.

“Bash.” His name was a whispered prayer. One that he wanted to give in to, but I could tell by the look in his gaze he was stubborn enough to deny the two of us.

“Get in your car,” he ordered gently. “Think about it.” His words were short and precise. “Friday, five o’ clock. My place.” He nodded before kissing me one more time. “If you change your mind, it’s okay,” he whispered against my lips so softly.

I leaned in closer, melting against him.

Especially when the tips of his fingers moved into my hair.

His dark eyes were unreadable, but there was something in them.

Something that made hope bloom inside of me.

So many things were running through my head and sat on the tip of my tongue, but I

didn't say a word.

Not when he pulled back and opened the door for me and got me in my SUV.

“Drive safe. I'm gonna follow you home, make sure you get there safe.”

“You don't—“ I started to say, but the look he shot me had me thinking I shouldn't argue. “Okay.” I shrugged.

A breath escaped me when he leaned in close, pulling my seat belt on before clicking it into place. I could smell the scent of his cologne and skin. His face stopped right in front of mine, then his hand rose and stroked my face.

“Be safe, baby girl,” he rasped before kissing me one more time.

Sweet and slow. So damn smooth and romantic it took my breath away long before he pulled away. With one last long look, he shut the door and walked away. I sat in my car for a moment. My head spun with everything that had happened and the possibility of everything that would happen in a week.

Because no matter what the week would bring, I knew exactly where I would be on Friday at five.

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bash

. . .

“What’s going on with you?” Onyx asked, patting my shoulder before taking the seat next to me.

“What?” I asked, my brows bunched together in a frown.

“What’s going on with you? You burnt out?” The concern was clear in his features.

“Nah,” I denied, my voice thick with lies. “Nothing like that.”

“Let me guess, you met someone? At Clover?” he asked.

“What?”

“You went there Friday, and now, two days later, you’re sitting here looking like the weight of the world’s on your shoulders when, and I’m sorry to say this, my man, you should just go out and get a haircut.”

“Yeah,” I chuckled, knowing my smile didn’t reach my eyes as I ran my fingers through my hair. “I do need a cut.”

“You should go see Rave,” he suggested. I wasn’t sure if it was the guilt or what, but I felt like he watched me closer anytime he mentioned his little sister’s name.

“Rave’s probably busy with shit more important than—“

“To cut hair? A stylist?” he cut me off and rolled his eyes. ““You just need to hit her up, Bash. I’m sure she would squeeze you into her calendar.”

“I’m okay.” I cleared my throat, hating how tempting it was to do what he wanted.

I missed her.

I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about her since following her home.

How the hell I’d stayed in my truck, I had no fucking clue, but I had.

Even when she stood at her door and waved good night.

Everything inside of me had wanted to run out and bang on her door and beg her to let me in.

I glanced out at the floor. It wasn’t busy; it was Sunday and usually on the quieter side.

“You need sleep, man. You have huge circles under your eyes.”

“Thanks. Nothing better than your best friend telling you, you look like shit,” I muttered just as he shrugged.

“I’m just calling it like it is. I really thought you met someone, maybe some biker baddie.” He winked, and I rolled my eyes.

“No biker baddies,” I mumbled. Only one bookworm baddie.

“Shame. Maybe next time,” he muttered encouragingly before patting me on the back. “I think I’m going to head out, though.” I glanced at him wondering what the hell was going on.

“You are?”

“Yeah. I still have a kitchen sink to install when I get home.” The fucker had gone off and bought a complete fixer upper, doing most of the work on his own. It didn’t surprise me he wanted to finally focus on the kitchen, yet it did at the same time.

“Alright, man.” I started to stand when the two front doors opened and in like a fucking vision she walked in with her sisters.

“Speaking of the devil.” He laughed, taking the words right off my tongue. “Look, I’ll ask her for you.”

“Onyx—“

“Rave!” he shouted. I could feel people staring at us, but that wasn’t anything out of the usual.

Onyx was usually a loudmouth when his sisters were around. I watched the group of five women walk over to us. All of them were beautiful, but only one of them made me feel like I saw forever in her eyes.

“Onyx,” I growled, but he ignored me. Her eyes widened slightly, almost like she hadn’t expected me to be there.

“What’s up?” she asked. Her voice was like a balm to my soul. Her dark eyes bounced from her brother to me then quickly back to her brother. My hands fisted at my sides, so I shoved them into the front pockets of my jeans to stop myself from

doing something stupid, like touch her.

“Can you help my guy out here, please?”

“Excuse me?” she asked.

“Do something with all this hair?” Onyx put his hand on top of my head. I moved out of the way, but my gaze never wavered from Raven’s.

Today, she matched her name. Probably coming straight from work, my pretty girl was in a black scoop-necked top and black flared jeans with matching boots. And even though she was in all black, she radiated so much light it made my chest feel full.

“Be nice, Onyx. He probably doesn’t want me to do it.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” I spoke up, fucking up any chances to keep my distance. Raven’s eyes widened with surprise. Then a smile that made her so damn pretty adorned her face and made me think of flower fields and sunshine.

“She does good work. You should go to her.” He patted me on the back before something caught his attention. “Hey, I’ll see you guys later.” He didn’t even glance in my direction before he hugged Raven and hurried out.

“Hi,” she said softly the moment he was gone.

“Hey. You here with your sisters for dinner?”

“We were just thinking about getting some apps and drinks.”

“Nice.” I nodded.

“I should probably go to their table.” She pointed behind her.

I opened and shut my mouth. I wanted to ask her to stay but couldn’t.

“Umm, I know Onyx can get pushy, but if you wanted a cut...” Her shoulder rose and fell as she licked her lips.

My eyes were drawn to them and my body started to feel all too warm. “I could do it.”

“My hours here are a little crazy.”

“What time are you off tonight?” she asked.

“Tonight?” I felt myself getting drawn in. With a mind of their own, my feet had closed some of the distance between us, and I was suddenly less than a foot from her.

“Tonight.” She smiled. “I mean, if you want to. I have the keys to the salon.” She jingled said keys between us.

“That’s.... convenient.”

“Isn’t it?” She giggled, and a pretty blush painted her cheeks. “Either way, I’ll see you Friday,” she whispered bravely, just low enough for me to hear.

“Raven.” I took my hand out of my pockets. My fingers brushed hers at her side. I wanted to tell her not to show up, take away the offer I’d made, but I knew I’d rather burn in hell than rescind it.

“I close tomorrow, too,” she put out there, and just as quickly as she’d showed up, she walked away, making her way to her sisters’ table. Fuck.

Temptation was calling, and I was wild enough to freaking answer.

I returned to the bar and tried to focus on work. Serving customers and making sure our wait staff was taken care of was usually a breeze. Muscle memory now that I'd been doing this for the last seven months.

But I kept getting distracted.

Especially when a group of rowdy college-aged guys came in and started to flirt with the Trejo sisters while they were out on the dance floor.

Olive was a knockout and always got tons of attention, but my girl in that outfit was the one getting chatted up.

A tall, young fucker was getting too touchy feely for my tastes, and it fucking killed me to stand off to the side.

"Hey, Bash," Coral said as she sat at the bar. "Can I get a cherry Coke, extra cherries?"

"Of course. How's it been?" I asked, making small talk while I watched the guy lean in and say something to Raven.

"I should be asking you that."

"What?" I frowned.

"You know she's an adult now, yeah?" My eyes connected with hers.

"What?" I asked again because there was no way she could know how I felt. Could she?

“Raven,” Coral pointed out.

“What about Raven?” My voice sounded scratchy in my own ears while I tried to play dumb in front of the oldest Trejo sibling.

“If you have to ask that, then maybe never mind.” She shook her head while taking a sip of the cherry Coke I put in front of her.

“Coral—“

“You know, maybe one of those frat boys is what she needs.” She shrugged. “But I can tell you for a certainty that’s not what my little sister wants.”

“I’m too...” I swallowed.

“You should step in.”

“What?”

“He’s going to ask her out, and then what? You lose your chance?” The question hung heavily between us.

“No disrespect, Cora, but I might not be the right guy for Raven.” Too old and jaded with sexual tastes that leaned towards the darker end. But as I watched the guy give her his number, I knew I didn’t want her with anyone else. It was selfish of me but fucking true.

I hopped over the bar and headed straight towards her without a plan in mind.

Almost like she felt me get closer, her eyes rose and met mine. The moment I was within reach, I took her hand.

“Dude?” the college kid called out, but I didn’t listen. I held her hand and brought her right against me as we started to dance way too slowly for the song that was playing.

“Bash?” she gasped, and my cock, fuck, it was hard just from feeling her in my arms and breathing in her sexy, soft scent.

“Just... dance with me, pretty girl,” I whispered against the shell of her ear and felt her body relax in my arms.

I was playing with fire.

Dancing with her again. This time in front of everyone.

Testing my self-control. My hand pressed against on the small of her back.

It shocked me how much smaller she was than me.

How much of my hand covered her. The images it created only made me harder.

My balls ached for a release I knew I wasn’t going to find in that moment, but I didn’t care.

I would take any spare second she’d give me.

We danced, our bodies pressed so close I doubted a sheet of paper fit between us.

I knew I was fucking up. There would be hell to pay if Onyx returned to the bar, if someone told him I’d slow danced with his baby sister.

But fuck, I couldn’t stop. The only reason I had to tear myself away from her after two songs was because my bartender needed help after a bit of a dinner rush.

The night went by too fast, and before I knew it, Raven and the rest of the Trejos were gone.

A longing ache in my chest settled deep, making me wish for more.

Minutes felt like hours the moment Raven left with her sisters.

Time dragged on until it was finally time for me to head home.

It was late, and I'd just locked up the brewery.

My employees were gone, the parking lot basically empty.

That's when I saw her.

Standing next to my truck, under the streetlamp and moonlight. My steps faltered as her face turned to look at me, that sweet innocent smile that haunted my dreams pointed in my direction.

"Raven?" I called out her name when I was standing right in front of her.

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“Hi.” She licked her lips, leaving that plump lower lip glossy and shiny. “I...” She chewed on her bottom lip. “I didn’t want to leave,” she shared. “Should I go home?” she asked, slightly louder than the sound of my very own heart pounding in my ears.

I reached for her hand, tangling our fingers together. “Don’t leave.”

“You sure?” I nodded, leaning in closer. Close enough my nose brushed against hers.

“I didn’t mean to sound like a dick, pretty girl. You have no idea how happy I was when I saw you over here. It’s just late, and it’s not safe for you to be out here in the dark.”

“Safe,” she whispered, her lips quirked upward. “You act like this is Gotham.”

“And you act like you have nine lives to live,” I mumbled, but some of the worry filtered out of me with the sound of her soft little giggle.

“Does that make us Cat Woman and Batman?”

“Fuck, I hope not,” I gruffed, loving the sneaky little twinkle in her eye.

“Nothing bad happens here,” she said. It set my teeth on edge, the fact she actually believed that. Bad shit happened anywhere.

“Rave—“

“Okay, fine. I just...” When she chewed on her bottom lip again, my free hand

popped up to carefully pull it away.

“Why didn’t you want to go home?” I asked, knowing I was playing with a live wire. Sparks were flying between us that I couldn’t ignore.

“You know why,” she whispered, moving in a little closer. Her free hand moved between us, resting in the middle of my chest. “I was thinking about you and our kiss.”

“Rave.” My breathing slowly started to turn unsteady. Shallow. The heat of her tiny delicate palm permeated through the material of my shirt and seared the skin below.

“My first kiss.”

“Baby girl,” I drawled slowly. The heat of her body seeped into mine, and I knew whatever she said, whatever she asked for would be hers.

“Will you kiss me again?” Any self-control I might have had went out the window.

I didn’t just kiss her, though.

I picked her up, loving the natural way her legs wrapped around my waist, pressing those perfect more than-a-handful tits against my chest.

“You want me to kiss you again, little girl?” I growled against her plump lips.

“Bash,” she whispered my name, and my dick twitched against the zipper of my pants.

“Tell me, pretty girl. Tell me what you want.” I had no idea why I was goading her, pressing her to ask for a kiss.

Maybe because part of me wanted her to be sure.

This wasn't what the week was supposed to be like.

But fuck if I could give up the living, breathing temptation that was my sweet little Raven.

"Please kiss me." That soft little word shot through me and settled straight in my rock-hard cock. I didn't think.

My lips dropped and met hers as if we had been kissing for a lifetime instead of the second time.

Deep and wet. My free hand roamed into her dark strands before tugging the back of her head, making her extend her neck for me.

My lips peppered kisses from her lips to her chin and down to her jaw.

I felt her shiver. Her fingernails dug into my shoulder as my lips skimmed against the line of her lithe neck.

"Fuck, baby girl. You smell so damn good," I growled.

I felt like a caged feral animal ready to pounce all while my mouth watered for a taste.

Will she taste this sweet when I get to her tits and pull those tightened little nipples into my mouth?

Will her cherry-tight pussy be as sugary?

I set her against the hood of my car, and when she gasped, I knew why.

She could feel exactly what she did to me.

“Bash,” she whispered, and I smiled against her neck.

“So responsive,” I mumbled, loving the way her skin turned to gooseflesh. I kissed my way back to her lips, but this time, it wasn’t slow.

It was deeper.

Hungrier.

The animal inside of me rattled against its cage. Her taste, the feel of her sweet body wrapped around me was too much for a wild mountain man like me to handle without taking it further.

“Fuck,” I cursed, panting against her mouth. “I should take you home,” I rasped, staring at her. Her eyes still shut, I could see the idea wasn’t something she wanted.

“Why?” she pouted, and I watched, completely captivated as her eyes fluttered open, lust and desire hazing her vision.

“Because you got work early in the morning tomorrow.” The excuse was flimsy at best. “And if I kiss you any longer, I’m going to fuck you out here under the moon against my truck,” I laid out honestly, hoping it would frighten her away.

But my pretty girl was too bold and too brave for her own good.

Her kiss-swollen lips parted, and her pretty, brown eyes widened with surprise and something else. Something that looked a lot like the need to take on the challenge I

had unknowingly set down.

My girl wasn't as innocent as she seemed.

It was obvious she liked the idea of being naughty out in public.

"My pretty girl likes that idea," I rumbled, and she bit her lip. She didn't answer me, but she didn't have to. Those dark eyes of hers gave her away.

"I should get you home."

"Or—"

"Don't finish that sentence, Raven," I warned, swallowing hard enough to feel my prominent Adam's apple bob up and down. "I can only say no so many times. We have a plan. One long weekend," I spit out. One long weekend. Will it be enough?

"One long... right," she whispered, and for a moment, I lost her eyes. They dropped to the ground, and I could hear her thinking loud and intrusive thoughts. "Because of Onyx." She wasn't asking but stating a fact.

"Raven—"

"I get it. I do. Will you put me down, please?" A muscle at my jaw twitched before I did as she asked, slowly setting her back down on the ground. "I shouldn't have waited around; it was stupid." She shook her head before combing her fingers through her shiny dark locks.

"Baby—"

"It's okay." She smiled up at me. Too brightly. Too fake. I hated it. I wanted that

sweet real smile back.

“You’re right. Friday.” She started to walk away, and I frowned as I reached for her hand, pulling her back in front of me.

“I’ll take you home.”

“I don’t think that’s a great idea.”

“Why?” I rasped. She looked up at me, confused, and who could blame her? I was giving her mixed signals. Fucking hell. What the hell had I done by opening this can of worms?

“I just... maybe you were right.”

“About?”

“I don’t know.” She frowned. Her gaze dropped to the ground as if she found the tips of our shoes the most interesting thing in the world.

“Talk to me.”

“You want to wait till this weekend so we can... screw each other out of our systems.” Again, not a question but a statement. And even though it was true, I fucking hated how it sounded.

“Raven,” I started to say, but my brave girl simply shrugged.

“It’s good to know that. To remind me of that because I think not having dated as much, I get things mixed up in my head and my—” She pressed her hand over her heart.

My teeth gritted down, biting my tongue on purpose to keep me from saying something stupid. Something like no, she wasn't mixing anything up. She was mine. But no matter how much I wanted her, I couldn't claim her. Not when it meant losing one of my best friends

"I'll drive you home," I forced myself to say, but she shook her head.

"My car's just right down the street."

"Baby—"

"I'll see you Friday. Maybe," she said, leaning towards me, and before I knew what she was doing, she rose on the tips of her toes and kissed me on the cheek. It lingered for a moment, but before I could react and turn my head to have her mouth meet mine, she pulled back and hurried away.

I stood as I watched her walk to her car, hidden in the shadows of the street right outside the parking lot. I didn't move for a long moment, even after she was gone. The night replayed in the back of head. Dancing with her again. Kissing her again and knowing how fucking forbidden it was.

With a shake of my head, I got into my truck and drove off.

But instead of going home, I drove to her place and parked across the street.

Her car was in her driveway. She was safe.

But I sat there, watching the light of her bedroom like I could somehow look through walls.

I could see the shadow of her form as she walked through the room, then the light in

the living room turned on.

Her curtains were sheer in there. The blinds hadn't been drawn back, so I could make out her form a little better.

My heart ached.

Everything in my body, every fucking molecule, was shouting at me to storm to her door and beg her to let me in.

But I didn't. I kept my ass planted in the driver's seat, watching what I couldn't have.

Not the way I wanted, at least. What I assumed was her bedroom was lit.

I could see her shadowy form on the other side.

I wanted to knock and beg for her to let me in so I could fucking kiss her from head to toe.

But I didn't. Instead, I started my truck back up and drove home to a frustrating night of tossing and turning.

I'll see you Friday. Maybe . Her words replayed in my head like a ping pong game.

I get it. Because of Onyx. What she didn't get, what she didn't know, was it wasn't all on my friendship with her brother.

My tastes, the things I enjoyed and wanted to do to her, were too much for a sweet, innocent like Raven to handle. The way I wanted to manhandle her, dominate and watch her break under me over and over would be too much. Maybe it would be better for both of us if she didn't show up on Friday.

Liar , a voice in my head called me out before I fell asleep thinking about all the dark and twisted things I'd do to my pretty girl if I had the chance.

In my dreams, no one would know. No one would get upset. And maybe that's the closest I would ever get to claiming Raven Trejo as my own.

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raven

. . .

I swept up the hair from my last job, my mind full of things I should definitely not be thinking about.

Mainly Bash Ledesma.

Bash and those strong arms that made me feel safe and delicate when I was in them. Bash and his way too talented mouth. I shook my head, my heart heavy and torn about what to do. It was Wednesday, and it wasn't a surprise to me that he hadn't come in for a haircut like I offered.

I hadn't seen him. I was avoiding life. Something that, according to my sisters, I was excellent at doing.

"Hey, Raven!" Claire, my coworker, called out. "That cut looked great," she complimented.

"Thanks."

"I'm going to get going. Chelly just texted. Practice got out early. You okay closing up on your own?" Claire wasn't just awesome to work with, she was also raising her younger sister, Chelly, who was a junior at the local high school.

"Don't worry about it. I got it."

“Thanks! I owe you! I’ll bring you your favorite coffee from Pine and Grind,” she offered, giving me a hug before she rushed out.

I didn’t turn her down because I had a feeling if she didn’t go get us coffee, I would have anyways with how badly I’d been sleeping. I headed to the back to get the dustpan I had forgotten when I heard the bell over the front door chime.

“I’ll be right with you!” I called out. It wasn’t unusual for someone to come in just before closing. What I didn’t expect was the man I had been so busy thinking about to be standing by my station.

Not only standing there but with a bag of what smelled like incredible food and a coffee drink in his hands.

“Hey,” he called out, and my head tilted. “I know it’s late, but you said, well... Maybe you can squeeze me in before you close?”

“Bash...” I said his name but didn’t know what else to say.

“You’ve been avoiding me,” he called me out. “You haven’t come in all week.”

“Three days,” I corrected. “And it’s been busy here. By the time I get out, I’m pretty wiped,” I found myself explaining.

“Shit.” He ran his fingers through his overgrown hair. He seriously needed a haircut. “I brought you food and a coffee,” he finally spoke, lifting the bag and cup. “The kind you like,” he added, and I frowned.

“How would you know?” I wasn’t sure if it was the lighting in the salon or what, but I could have sworn he’d blushed.

“I asked Molly,” he confessed, and something in me begrudgingly softened. Molly was one of my best friends and co-owners of Pine and Grind. She was the only one who knew just how infatuated I was with Bash.

“Coffee orders should be kept confidential. Like medical records,” I muttered under my breath, but he heard it. My sassy comment earned me a sexy gruff chuckle. He stepped forward and handed it to me. And for some reason, I took it.

“You don’t have to cut my hair if you’re too tired. Just take the drink and food, yeah?”

“Fine,” I muttered. “Thanks. You really didn’t have to do this.”

“I did.” His jaw clenched when our eyes connected. I wanted to ask him why. Why does he feel the need to feed me, take care of me? The words were on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn’t ask them.

Don’t ask questions you’re not ready to have honestly answered , a little voice chimed in the back of my head. For all I knew, this was some kind of stupid gesture to apologize for kissing me because he regretted it, and that would kill. Maybe he was going to rescind his offer for a long weekend.

“I wish I could hear what was going on in your head,” he said, breaking the momentary silence.

“You really don’t,” I muttered, taking a sip of the coffee. I glanced down at the drink order label. Thankfully, Molly knew me and had given me a decaf.

“Is it okay?”

“Perfect, thank you.”

“Want to eat with me?” I could have sworn Bash Ledesma almost seemed nervous. But why? It was just me. I opened and shut my mouth, trying to get my thoughts together.

“Where is this going, Bash?”

“What?” I could have laughed at how instantaneously pale he turned.

“I’m not talking about us. I mean tonight. This whole food thing. What’s the game plan here? Because I’ll be honest with you, it almost looks like a date.”

“There isn’t one,” he blurted. “I mean, there isn’t a plan.” I stared at him, challenging him to double down. “I missed you, okay? Is that what you wanted to hear?” He ran his fingers through his hair.

“You know, Morris at the barbershop is open later than the salon.”

“I know.” He swallowed. “I missed you. Not the haircut you could give me or anything else. Just you. I can’t stop thinking about you. Have you eaten? Did you sleep okay? I even wonder what book you’re reading.”

“Bash... you said?—“

“Please?” His brown eyes pleaded with me, and I sighed. I glanced at the watch on my wrist.

“I guess I can close a couple minutes early. Let me just lock and finish here, and I’ll get us set up to eat in the break room.” I pointed to the back area of the salon.

“I can help,” he offered, and I was too tired and too confused to argue.

When I walked back from locking up the front door, I suddenly realized I was in the salon, alone with the guy of my dreams. Too bad that in his eyes, I was forbidden fruit. He had finished sweeping and wiping down my station.

“How did you know you have to do all that?” I asked, slightly impressed. He shrugged.

“My grandma was a cosmetologist,” he shared.

“She was?” Something softened inside of me.

“Yeah.” He scratched the back of his neck. “My parents... well, they were a mess and a half. Always fighting. Maybe that’s why my grandma insisted I visit her during school breaks. She would always put me to work at the end of the day because her back would be killing her.”

“It happens. Being on your feet all day will definitely do that to you.” I nodded. I hated how close I felt to him in that moment. I had a feeling it wasn’t something he shared with other people usually. “Come on, let’s go eat.” I waved, and he picked up the bag of food.

We set up and sat down in the break room. I was shocked at how comfortable it was to sit and share a meal with him. A real one and not just one where I ate and he stood on the other side of a bar.

“This is really good.”

“Barrett, the new chef, knows his stuff,” he mumbled.

“Onyx hired him, right?”

“Yeah.” Bash nodded. His eyes connected with mine, and suddenly, his hand reached across the table to take mine.

“How was your day?” he asked. My lips suddenly felt dry.

I licked them quickly before I went on to share about the cuts and colors I’d done through the day.

Not to mention how I’d been booked for hair and makeup for an upcoming wedding out at the resort.

“That’s awesome. That’s what you like to do, right? Special events?”

“Mostly,” I mumbled, not sure how he knew that.

“I heard you talking to Olive one day,” he started to explain, almost like he could read my thoughts. “About what you missed from being in San Fran.”

“Oh.” I blushed. He accidentally overheard?

Or did he snoop? Could Bash like me the way I liked him?

Could this be a mutual thing? “I love helping people get ready for special events and maybe with the resort reopening after all the restorations, more weddings and things will be held there.” Or at least, that was my hope.

“You should talk to the event manager. Show them your work and what you can do so they can refer you,” he suggested as we ate.

“You think so?” It had been something I’d thought about, but maybe because of my age, I still felt like a newbie. Too young to ask for something like that.

“You never know what someone might say if you don’t and ask, and you never lose anything by asking.” His thumb stroked the top of my hand absentmindedly.

Just like I’d asked him to kiss me.

To give me a night so I could get him out of my system and move on.

“Thanks for dinner,” I said, pulling my hand away. “This was really good.” I smiled politely. “It hit the spot. I didn’t have lunch.”

“I know.” I could have sworn he muttered those words, but there was no way he’d know something like that unless he’d been watching me.

I shook the thought away as I stood and took my container to the trash.

I didn’t hear him move. For a big guy, Bash was stealthy.

But I felt him. Right behind me. His hands rested at my hips, and everything in my body was yelling at me to lean against him.

To press my back against his front and let him wrap his arms around me and melt my day away.

“Thanks for having dinner with me, Raven,” he whispered against my cheek. “Best date I’ve had in a long time.”

“This was a date?” I turned around. My eyes widened at just how close he was and how far up I had to look up to find his gaze.

“Dinner and candlelight aren’t a date?”

“Candlelight?” I laughed, and he pointed at the little battery operated tealight Claire had left behind. “That doesn’t count—“

“It counts in my book,” he muttered, dipping his head down lower, so close his breath fanned against my mouth, making my body buzz with anticipation. “I missed you.”

“You’re just saying that,” I rasped, my eyes suddenly heavy and ready to flutter shut. God, I wanted him to kiss me so badly. The warmth pooled between my legs made me more than aware of how much I wanted him.

“Why would I say something I didn’t mean?”

“You want a free haircut?” I guessed, knowing I was wrong.

He chuckled and brushed his nose against mine.

A breathy little moan escaped from my lips as my hands rose to his shoulders.

Then, as if they had a mind of their own, they searched for the ends of the hair at the back of his head. “You do need a cut, you know.”

“You offering, pretty girl?” I nodded, pressing my forehead against his. It was comfortable and exciting.

But mostly, it was a stupidly dangerous game we were playing.

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I pulled away, suddenly feeling a little bolder than I could have ever thought possible. When I took his hand in mine, Bash wordlessly let me lead him towards the hair washing station. I started the water, making sure it was just the right temperature before I made him sit down.

“Lean back,” I whispered even though it was just the two of us in the empty salon. He did as I asked.

With him in the low chair, we were almost at eye level.

He dipped his head back into the sink. I carefully sprayed him with the cool water and pumped shampoo into the palm of my hand.

The moment I started to run my fingers through his hair, working the shampoo through his thick, dark strands, he groaned.

The sound shot through me, making me break out into goose bumps.

I loved the sounds he made while he relaxed into my touch.

They were lethal, immediately ruining my panties.

I’d never been happier about wearing a low-cut top than in that moment.

He turned his dark eyes somehow darker, his pupils blown as his attention moved to my front.

I licked my lips and maybe pressed my body closer against his.

So close, I could feel the exhale of his breath on my flesh.

His breathing was slightly jagged as his head turned and one big hand, the closest to me, that had been on the armrest moved to my hip.

“You’re tall,” I said, breaking the silence. “A lot taller than my usual clients.” He grunted as I leaned forward to wash out the shampoo I had just so diligently worked in. I reached over, accidentally putting my breasts in his face, and the hand on my hip tightened.

“Let me help you,” he mumbled low, but in my heightened state, it felt like his deep voice vibrated against the walls of the salon. I had no idea how he did it, but suddenly, my feet were no longer on the ground. His hands swept me up by my hips and settled me on his lap.

“Bash,” I whispered, setting a hand on the middle of his chest as I looked around then at the precarious position I was in. Somehow, he had not only set me on his lap but had me straddling him, with my thighs just outside of his.

“Conditioner,” he reminded me, his eyes pinned on mine.

“Conditioner,” I whispered back.

I glanced behind me, but even if someone was walking past the salon, there was no way they could see what was happening in the washing station. I leaned forward and continued rubbing his wet hair without my gaze wavering from his. The air around us thickened.

The moment was electric. Intimate.

My hips rolled on their own, grinding against his very impressive length, but he didn't complain. His eyes just heated up more. Sweat started to form on the back of my neck.

"If I knew this is how you washed hair here, I'd be here daily." I giggled at his words despite the roughness in his tone.

"You never know when you'll get special treatment around here." I gasped, my eyes fluttering shut as he rolled his own hips, moving up against me. He might have been under me, but there was no denying who had the power between the two of us.

"Hmm." His nose flared. "I better be the only one that gets this kind of treatment." I shrugged because there was no way I'd even think twice about straddling someone, much less grinding against their length like I was with him.

Not that I was ready to admit that. I had a feeling if I did, he'd lose his nerve and run out of here.

"Fuck." His gaze dropped to my chest. My nipples were more than aware of his eyes and straining, tight and achy for his attention.

"Look at you," he rasped. "Take out your tits for me, Raven. Let me see you. Let me taste you." I trembled as I pulled back.

My wet hands moved to the neckline of my dress and pulled it down, dragging the cups of my bra down as well, exposing myself to him, making Bash the first to see me topless.

His eyes hooded, and before I knew it, the hands that had been on my hips moved to my back, pulling me closer.

“Fuck! Look at you.” His voice dropped a couple of octaves. His nose brushed against my nipple, and he breathed in and growled. The sound made me throb. “You smell sweet. I bet you taste sweeter.”

“Bash.”

“I know, baby girl. I know what you want.” I felt hot and cold all at the same time.

It might only have been a couple of seconds, but it felt like forever.

“Jesus. I feel like I’ve died and gone to heaven, you’re so fucking beautiful.

” His praise went to my head faster than bubbles in champagne.

“Pretty little chocolate chips for me.” His big hands moved and cupped my breasts, brushing his thumbs against the turgid peaks.

A soft moan escaped from me. His hands, calloused and rough, felt so good on my overheated skin.

“Look at you. So fucking pretty. So damn good, I don’t know where to start. ”

“Please, Bash,” I whined, needing more. What exactly I was asking for, I wasn’t sure. I was new to everything, but I needed it. Needed more.

“I know, baby.” He kissed the top of my left breast before moving to the top of the right one. “So soft. Sweet. Mine,” he rumbled. I knew they were only words said in the heat of the moment, but I knew those words would be swimming in my head for the rest of my life. Mine.

His kisses deepened. Pulling my skin deeper into his mouth rougher, making me want

him to take more.

His teeth scraped, and before I could say a word, his lips were wrapped around my nipple.

My brain went blank. The sensations of his mouth sucking and pulling were too much for me to string any kind of coherent words together.

My hands moved to his face, holding him in place, afraid he'd stop.

But he didn't. Deep guttural sounds vibrated against my flesh as he moved from one side to the other.

Every pull of his mouth felt like a string connected to the pulsing ache between my legs, building the need higher and higher.

"Bash. Oh god, Bash!" I panted. His hand slipped between us and into the waistband of my pants and stopped. His eyes locked with mine.

"Tell me to stop, Rave. If you don't want me to touch you, you need to say something right now." He breathed heavily against the center of my chest.

"Please."

"Please what, pretty girl?" His Adam's apple caught my attention. The way it rose and fell. I wanted to lick him so badly.

"Please touch me." The moment I said those words, his hand slid down into my pants and underwear.

"Fuck," he cursed, his hooded gaze firmly locked with mine. "You're so fucking

wet.” He licked his lips. “Has anyone every touched you, Rave?” I shook my head because I felt like I was going to shatter in the blink of an eye. My heart felt like it was going to burst out of my chest.

“Jesus. Untouched. Unkissed. All these firsts you’re giving me, baby girl. I don’t deserve them, but fuck if I’m going to turn them down.”

“Oh,” I gasped as the pad of his middle finger brushed against my swollen clit.

“Look how fucking needy my pretty girl is. Jesus. Fucking soaked.”

“Bash,” I whispered, my breath jagged. It felt like my lungs were going to seize up if he didn’t get to it.

“I got you,” he growled a moment before his lips connected with mine and the world literally disappeared.

His fingers slid between my folds, touching the very spot, the bundle of nerves that was swollen and greedy.

My hips bucked against the palm of his hand and my lips parted for him to deepen the kiss.

He’d ruined me with a kiss, and now, now there needed to be a better word for ruin, because that’s what I was.

So far gone for this man, this beautiful man I had a feeling would always own me, body and soul.

He was fingering me, and I knew that getting him out of my system wasn’t going to be as easy as I thought.

“Bash! Oh god, Bash!”

“Good girl. Look at you, so fucking greedy and wet for your man. Fuck!” His lips moved from mine and down to the column of my neck while his fingers teased me, driving the anticipation so much higher. I moaned a soft little sound that switched something. His movements became harder, rougher.

“That’s my girl. All mine. Fucking hell, baby, this little kitty’s fucking cherry tight,” he rasped.

Sweat shined on his forehead. The tip of his middle finger skimmed my entrance, and I gasped.

My fingers dug deeper into his shoulders.

“That’s my girl. Give it to me, Raven.” He slid his finger inside of me, stretching me, filling me so beautifully I had no idea how he did it, but I was on the cusp of coming so much faster and harder than I ever got myself off.

His attention was gentle but dominating. Tender but powerful. My thighs began to shake as pleasure started to tighten and coil in my belly. My eyes fluttered shut, and with his free hand, he cupped my chin.

“Open those eyes. Look at me when you get off, baby girl. I need you to know exactly who is making you feel like this.” I forced my eyes to open and look at him.

He looked so damn handsome and fierce. His attention was intense and solely on me. I knew an asteroid could fall from the sky a couple of feet from us, and he wouldn’t look away.

“Good girl.” His praise made me wetter. “Look at me, baby. Just like that. You’re

fucking perfect, feel so damn good. Pussy's getting even tighter."

"Bash." My lips parted, and my head tilted back just a smidge, but I kept my eyes on him. My wild mountain man's talented fingers were working me up, making a come-hither motion inside of me.

"Keep going. You're close," he noted, his nose flaring, and I trembled. "Show me how you're going to milk my dick when I get inside that tight little kitty. Show me how you come on your man's fingers."

"Bash! Oh god." And that's when I exploded.

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Fireworks lit up behind my eyes, and I threw my head back as I panted.

Pleasure ripped through me. Wave after wave of orgasmic relief washed over me, leaving me boneless on top of him.

Not that he stopped touching me. It was just lighter, sweeter.

I brushed away my hair and watched as he brought his fingers up between us.

Without breaking eye contact, he slid them inside his mouth and tasted me.

A deep animalistic sound vibrated through his chest, and I felt my face heat up. He was tasting me. Why was that so hot?

“You taste incredible, baby.” His tone was deep and rough.

“Bash.” I only whispered his name before both his hands held my face and he kissed me. Deep and passionate, leaving me breathless by the time he pulled away and both our lungs burned for oxygen.

“You still going to cut my hair?” He gently brought us back to reality. I glanced down and licked my lips.

“What about you?” My hand dipped down below us, but before I could touch him, he grabbed my wrist and stopped me.

“No.” He shook his head, and I frowned.

“No? Why?”

“Because if you touch me, we need privacy for all the things that will happen after.”

“But—“

“My hair?” he interrupted, clearly trying to change the subject.

I chewed on my bottom lip. “You let me take care of that ache, and I got a lot more off on that than you could even imagine, beautiful girl. But please, have mercy on me,” he groaned.

“You touch me right now after watching you while I can taste your sugary sweetness in my mouth, I won’t be able to hold back,” he admitted, and as much as I loved what he was saying, the question slipped past my lips without thinking.

“Why do we have to?”

“This weekend.” He brought up, and I stilled.

Was this still only going to be a three-day thing?

He’d called himself my man in the heat of the moment. I frowned and slipped off his lap, my legs still a little wobbly after the bliss I’d felt. Bash held my hand, and I licked my lips.

“This weekend. Right.” I felt like the stupidest girl in the world. I shook away the disappointment that felt like it was going to take me under and moved to turn the water back on. “Let’s make sure we got all the conditioner off.”

This time, I moved my body to the side of the sink.

He stared at me for a long moment. I could see he wanted to say something, but he didn't say a word.

He simply sat back and let me rinse off the conditioner that had been left over in his hair before I got distracted by his mouth on my breasts.

I glanced down at his body, and there was no denying the effect of my hands on him.

He was hard, his length pressed snugly against the front of his jeans.

"Okay," I broke the silence that had fallen between us. "All done. Let's go to my chair," I said after toweling off his hair. As he followed me to my chair, I could feel his gaze on my ass, and I couldn't help but sway my hips with a little more oomph. He sat down, and I adjusted the chair.

"What do you want?" I asked, our eyes connected in the mirror as I stood behind him.

"That's a loaded question, isn't it." His voice sounded scratchy. I chewed on my bottom lip. I loved the way he looked at me, but this push and pull, hot and cold stuff wasn't going to work for me.

I wasn't stupid.

I knew he thought I was too young for him, not to mention the fact he was my brother's best friend, but I knew what I wanted and what I didn't.

I didn't like games. It was one of the big reasons I'd rather read than hang out with people.

The hot and cold from Bash made my head spin.

Maybe all he really wanted was just a chance to screw me out of his system?

“I meant for your hair,” I clarified, my tone colder than I’d intended.

“Oh.” His eyes darkened. “That’s an easier question.” He smiled, but I didn’t give him anything as I stared back at him. “Just a make it look good.”

“Make it look good,” I repeated, my lips quirked upward. I hated that even as confusing as he was, I still didn’t think there was a way for him to look bad. “I can do that,” I promised and got to work.

My fingers running through the overgrown strands of his hair felt too good to rush with clippers, so I used my scissors.

I pressed and brushed against him, but he didn’t move to touch me again the way he had while I’d washed his hair.

I was relieved and disappointed at the same time.

Before I knew it, I was all done with his haircut.

“What do you think?” I asked, still standing behind him.

“I love it.” His eyes locked with mine in the mirror. It didn’t go over my head that he didn’t bother to look at his hair. His gaze never wavered from mine.

“Good.” I smiled carefully, pulling the cape off him and shaking it off. “I’m glad you like it,” I said softly, reaching for the broom that rested by my side.

“How much do I owe you?” he asked as he stood up slowly. I shook my head.

“Nothing. You brought me dinner. We can call it even.” I shrugged, but he stood right in front of me. Bash took the broom from my hand, and I stilled.

“Please look at me, pretty girl.”

“You should stop calling me that,” I whispered, my eyes set on the ground.

“Why?”

“Because...” I hated the way my voice cracked with emotion before I shook my head.

“Raven, please look at me,” he urged. My eyes roamed up his strong muscular body until our eyes connected.

“Not paying you doesn’t feel right.”

“Why not? Friends do this kinda stuff for each other all the time.” He scowled.

“Friends,” he repeated in a soft growl.

“That’s what we are, right? All we can be because of... Onyx,” I laid out. I didn’t want my head to be more mixed up than it already was. It was bad enough that I knew no matter what he said, I’d still be at his door come Friday.

“That’s not the only reason, pretty girl.”

“Bash—“

“I’m older than you, Raven.”

“Age is just a number,” I argued. A muscle under his eye twitched.

“With age comes experience and—“ he started to say, and I winced

“And I’m a virgin,” I interrupted. “I get it.” I turned around, but he grabbed my wrist and turned me around.

“You don’t get it, baby girl. I know myself. I know what I like and…” He swallowed. The unanswered question weighed heavily between us.

“And I’m not it,” I whispered.

“Baby—“

“I get it.” I might have smiled, but we both knew it was fake. “I hate to rush you out, but I still have to finish cleaning up here, and it’s getting kinda of late.”

“I’ll help—“

“You don’t need to, but thanks.” There was no missing the way I was dismissing him.

“Baby—“

“We should really think about Friday,” I said out loud, hating the words, but my head was mixed up. If I wasn’t what he wanted, and he knew it, what was the point? “I think you should rethink this. I don’t want you to do anything you don’t—“

“Jesus, Raven, what’s in your head right now?” His question ticked me off.

“You don’t want me!” I slightly shouted from frustration.

“Baby—“

“You already think we’re not sexually compatible, so what’s—“

“Fuck.” He pulled me up against him and pressed his forehead against mine. “We’re so fucking compatible we could be explosive,” he rasped, his voice full of emotion.

“Bash—“

“I fucking want you more than you can imagine. When I say I know what I want, what I like, it just means my tastes veer towards... something darker. Wilder.”

“Bash—“ My lips parted.

“I want to make love to you on a bed of roses and then turn to have you crawl to me and kneel in front of me, handing me your full submission for me to play with you until your voice is hoarse from begging me to let you come.” A deep-rooted quiver washed through me, turning the blood in my veins even warmer. But that’s when my eyes narrowed.

“I might be a virgin, Sebastian Ledesma, but I’m not some blushing little girl.”

“Raven—“

“I know all about BDSM, and most of it’s about communication. That’s’ what safe words are for! What is it you think? That you’re going to what? Corrupt me? Corrupt your best friend’s little sister? Is that what you’re having a hard time with?”

“Baby—“

“Then you missed the whole concept about your tastes. We talk about it. We have a safe word—“ He groaned and pulled me closer.

“Shit! This is what I’m talking about. I already corrupted you, pretty girl. What do you know about safe words?”

“I read. A lot.” I might have been blushing, but I didn’t look away from him. I stood my ground. “I want this. I want you. I want to explore and learn but…” I paused to get my words right. “I need you to be sure you want me the same way.”

“Pretty girl, giving me your first time,” he rasped. “That’s a big deal.”

“I know that,” I whispered. “Would you rather I give it to someone else? Walk into a random bar and hand it over to a complete stranger? Would that make you feel better?”

“Fuck, no.”

“Then what?” I asked, but Bash didn’t say a word. He just stood there and stared at me until I rolled my eyes. “That’s what I thought,” I muttered, stepping away from his hold. I shivered as the AC kicked in, the vent right above me. “You think about what you want.”

“You should, too.” His words almost sounded like a warning, and I rolled my eyes.

“I already know I want you.”

“Raven, you don’t get what you’re signing up for if you come over Friday.”

“Maybe not completely, but I’m willing to explore. Learn.”

“Baby—“

“I know if I told you to stop or give me a moment or that something wasn’t working

for me, you would give me what I needed. You'd never hurt me. But these games? The hot and cold? It's giving me whiplash. I'm not stupid. I know what this weekend will be. It'll be us scratching an itch."

"Scratching an itch?" he growled, but I ignored him.

"If you think I have some misconception that you're going to confess you're everlasting love for me, trust me, I'm not."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Look, forget it." I turned, but his hand on my wrist pulled me back.

"No, what do you mean by that?"

"That you would rather lose me than somehow mess up your friendship with my brother. And I respect that. You two run a business together. I understand."

"But?"

"But the man I want in my life, the man I want to spend the rest of my life with, would be a real man. One who wants me forever. He'd fight for me. Chase me. Win me. He wouldn't give two shits about what people might or might not say."

"Raven—"

"And it's okay if that's not you."

"I never said that," he clipped. I simply shrugged.

"It is what it is. And right now, it's late and I'm tired, and I should close up and get

home.”

“I’ll help you close up.”

“Fine.” I handed him the broom. “If you can sweep up, I’ll go fold the towels, and we can get out of here.”

“Okay.” He took the broom and got to work. As I walked to the back room, where the washer and dryer were, I felt like I walked with my head held up a little higher.

I knew everyone saw me as a bookworm. Shy and reserved, slightly introverted.

Out of all our siblings, I was the most un confrontational one, but it felt good standing up and telling Bash how I felt.

I might be half in love with him, but it didn’t mean I would let myself be his little doormat. And I’d made that abundantly clear.

bash

...

Sleep wasn't easy. I tossed and turned until I gave up trying to sleep and got up and headed to the gym to try and burn off some of the excess energy that couldn't let my brain shut off.

It was a little after four in the morning when I pulled up to Moonlit Muscle's parking lot. Even though it was early and the sun still hadn't risen, the lot was far from empty. I got my duffle and water bottle out when I saw her through the glass walls.

Raven.

The very woman who had put me in my place and made me rethink what the fuck I was doing. Not about my invitation to have her over for the long weekend but about how I was going about shit with her brother.

I knew in my heart, gut, and soul that Raven was mine.

Had I really thought it would be that easy to steal a taste of her, to know her completely and walk away?

Almost like the universe was setting up against me, I watched as the new sheriff, a good-looking guy about my age, walked up to her.

When she smiled brightly at him, like they knew each other, something in my gut

tightened.

Just because she'd had a crush on me didn't mean no one out there had noticed what a beauty she was.

And by the way his blue eyes soaked her in, I knew he appreciated the subtle beauty that lay just beneath the surface.

Raven was gorgeous, but it wasn't a loud, boisterous beauty.

She was classy. Reserved. Even at the gym, she might have been wearing leggings that looked like they were painted on her, showing off the curves of her ass and hips and toned legs, but she was wearing an oversized shirt that made you wonder what was underneath.

And now, I knew.

My eyes shut, and I could see her in front of me, topless, her pretty, dark nipples standing at attention just for me. Fuck, I could smell her skin if I tried hard enough.

Just because I'm a virgin doesn't mean I'm some blushing little girl.

Her words floated in my head, and I frowned.

I opened my eyes just in time to watch the shiny new sheriff say something that made her laugh.

And even though I knew how much of an unevolved Neanderthal it made me, I didn't like it.

I wanted to be the man who made her laugh and smile.

But I couldn't be.

I wasn't the right guy for her, no matter what she or I felt.

I was too old, too wild, too much. Things would be too complicated if I really let her roll the dice on us.

My hands fisted at my sides as I watched the Sheriff lean closer, his features turning a little serious, and I knew he'd just asked her out. There was no doubt about it. And maybe that was what she needed to do.

Explore.

Learn.

From someone else? What the fuck are you doing? a voice in my head shouted as I walked back towards my truck. I got to the door and immediately turned the hell back around.

Fuck that.

Fuck the consequences of whatever the hell I was about to do.

I jogged towards the door and walked in, scanning my app at the entrance as I sauntered straight to her.

Her eyes moved and widened as she watched me approach.

"Hey." I winked, pulling her by the waist and right to my side before kissing the top of her head.

“Sorry I was late.”

“Bash?”

“Bash Ledesma, from the brewery, right?” The good ol’ Sheriff said with an easy smile.

“That’s right, Sheriff. How’s it going? Arm day?” I asked. He nodded as his gaze bounced from me to Raven with a small smile on his face.

“It was. I’m about to head out.”

“Shame. I would have liked to ask you for some tips.”

“Maybe next time.” He smirked before his eyes moved to Raven. “So, you’ll do me that favor?”

“Luke,” she giggled, and I had to stifle a growl. My hands fisted at my sides, aching to pull her to my side and wrapping them around her waist. Instead, I looked at him.

“What favor?” I asked, curiosity getting the best of me. I crossed my arms in front of my chest.

“He wants me to talk to my sister for him,” she shared before turning her attention and pretty brown eyes towards the sheriff.

“I’ll try.” Raven shrugged. “But you know how Oli can be.” She made a face, and they both laughed.

I had to bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from saying something snarky.

I'd never thought I could be the jealous type.

In the past, the green-eyed monster had never made an appearance, but since meeting Raven, or re-meeting her as a grown woman, I couldn't seem to shake it off.

Thankfully, the Sheriff waved and walked towards the exit.

"You're here early," she noticed quietly, and I felt her pretty gaze on me.

"You, too." I turned, but she simply shook her head and smiled.

"Not really. This is the time I'm usually here." She stepped back and bent to pick up her water bottle. The stickers on it were all about books.

"Really? You're a morning person?" I asked.

"I'd just rather get my workout over and done with. Plus, it helps set me up for the rest of the day." I nodded. I hated being up early, but for her, I would switch up my schedule. Shit, there wouldn't be anything I wouldn't do for her. I swallowed hard, letting myself drown in her eyes.

"You okay, Bash?" She stepped closer. I felt her hand move closer to mine then felt the loss of her not taking it in hers.

The man I want in my life, the man I want to spend the rest of my life with, would be a real man who wants me forever. He'd fight for me. Chase me. Win me. Her words replayed in my head, and the words that tumbled out couldn't be stopped.

"Would you like to go get breakfast?" I blurted. I just wanted more time with her. I wanted to show her just how important she was to me.

“Right now?” she asked, surprised when I took her hand in mine. Our fingers tangled together. She glanced around us, probably worried about who would see us. “Bash, Onyx—“

“I don’t care,” I rasped honestly. “Breakfast?” I offered again, wanting so badly to be alone with her.

She stared at me for a long moment, and I was almost positive she was going to turn me down and send me to hell.

And who could have blamed her for how I had put my foot in my mouth the night before?

She had called me out on it, and I fucking loved that about her.

As I stared at her, wearing those leggings and oversized shirt, her dark hair tossed up in a high messy bun and her face flushed and fresh of makeup, I didn’t think she could be more beautiful.

My sweet bookworm was ballsy. Brave and beautiful.

Mine. The word repeated in my head like a caveman obsessed, and there was no denying it.

Raven was mine. I just had to figure out how to make that happen.

Have I already fucked things up before they ever really started?

“Raven.” I cleared my throat, but whatever was going to come out died on my tongue with the way she smiled up at me.

“You haven’t even worked out yet, and you want to go eat?” She had no fucking idea what I wanted to eat. She giggled, almost like she could hear my thoughts. Not that she called me out on it. Cheekily, Raven hip-checked me and pulled me towards the treadmill.

“Let’s just do a thirty-minute run, and we can go for breakfast.” She winked with her sexy little compromise, and I nodded. I felt like a lost little puppy, more than happy to follow her anywhere.

Our jog was great, and breakfast at the local diner was even better.

Usually mundane things were brighter, lighter when I was by her side.

I was in trouble. Deep trouble. My pretty girl had swept me up and held my heart in her hands.

But who the hell was I kidding? She’d owned it from the moment she stepped into the brewery after returning from school.

One look, and I had been a goner. I’d known it then, no matter how hard I had tried to fight it these last couple of months.

“This was fun.” She smiled up at me. “Pancakes made by someone else always taste a million times better than cooking them for yourself,” she adorably said as we stood outside the diner.

From where we were standing, I could see her car. A sinking feeling started to settle in the pit of my belly. Our time together this morning was coming to an end.

“They are.” I stepped closer, not bearing to be too far away from her. When I took her hand, her eyes widened. We were out in public where anyone could see us, including

her brother or someone who could go back to tell him something.

“Bash,” she whispered. My cock hardened beneath my gym shorts at the sound of my name off her tongue.

“Tell me I’ll see you tomorrow.” Shit, I was looking for trouble, digging myself into a deeper fucking hole. One I had no plans of getting out of. Raven was mine. She’d been mine since I’d first laid eyes on her.

“Tomorrow,” she repeated and chewed on her bottom lip. “Bash—“

“Give me a chance.”

“A chance for what?” she asked without judgment. I swallowed. “Look, Bash, I just... I need to know if this is sex or...”

“Or,” I cut her off and squeezed her hand.

“Bash.” Her eyes widened.

“It’s more, Raven.”

“More what?” an all-too-familiar masculine voice asked behind me, but I didn’t pull my hand away from hers. I turned and fought like hell from wincing.

I felt like the world’s crappiest friend.

There was Onyx, his dark almost black eyes bouncing from his baby sister to me. Looking at the two of us like he didn’t know what to make of us.

“Pancakes,” Raven quickly said, pulling her hand away from mine and crossing her

arms in front of her. “I came into the diner for pancakes.” She pointed at the diner behind her. “And I saw Bash there, so I made him join me,” she shared like it hadn’t been the other way around.

“You were eating pancakes?” he asked incredulously. He knew me too fucking well, but I simply shrugged, not wanting to outright lie. “You hate pancakes.” I breathed in and cleared my throat.

“What can I say? I needed a little bit of a comfort meal.”

“Huh.” He noted, looking at me for a little too long; a suspicious brow rose. “I see Raven cut your hair. Finally.” The fucker didn’t miss a thing. I nodded, running my fingers through the short strands.

“Best haircut I’ve ever had,” I said honestly.

My gaze drifted to Raven. She was already looking at me with those fathomless dark eyes.

Her lips parted with a heated stare. I knew exactly what she was thinking about.

My gaze dropped to her chest before looking at my best friend.

“What are you doing out and about? I thought you were working on your kitchen?” I asked, hoping it was enough to change the focus from us.

He shrugged, but something about the way he wouldn’t meet my gaze made me think he was hiding something. “I had to get some supplies at the hardware store.”

“The hardware store, huh?” I muttered.

“You really taking three days off this weekend, or you going to show up at the brewery?”

“Three-day weekend, Bash?” the little brat asked, as if it was brand-new news to her. “That sounds fun.”

“Yeah. I need a break. And no.” I turned to Onyx. “You won’t see me popping into the brewery. Why?” The last word slipped past my lips.

“Just wondering.” He smirked, turning towards Raven. “This guy always says he’s going to take time off but goes for a hike and straight back to work. You know what? Thinking about it, you guys should go for a hike this weekend,” he suggested.

“What?” we both simultaneously asked, but the jerk just chuckled.

“Raven loves to read in between the trees, and honestly, Rave, Bash knows all the great hidden parts of Moonlit Pines.”

“You want me to take your sister on a hike?” I asked incredulously. Raven looked at both of us, but I couldn’t read her thoughts. I just needed to be honest with Onyx. “Actually, Onyx, I need to talk to you,” I started to say, and Raven’s alarm went off.

“Shit! I gotta go and get ready, or I’ll be late for my appointment. It was... nice to see you guys.” She went and hugged her brother before turning, and just as she was about to hug me, she stepped back. “Bye. Thanks again for breakfast.”

“Right.” My voice sounded scratchy. I hated to watch her leave, but fuck me, it was a fucking show to watch her go.

“What did you need to talk to me about?” Onyx asked, and I turned to look at him.

“Umm...” I swallowed. “I think I’m going to do an early inventory today. You know, to close out the month, get shit ordered. That way, nothing’s delayed.”

“Cool.” He scratched the back of his neck, glancing towards the hardware store. “That’s cool.”

“You good, man?” I asked. He muttered something incoherent under his breath.

“You and Raven,” he said, pinning me with his eyes. “You guys good?”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I sensed something off, and the way she rushed away right now...”

“She has to get ready for work,” I pointed out.

“Hmm,” he grunted. “Right. Well, if you end up changing your mind about taking time off this weekend, I’ll swap with you for next weekend.” The three of us had decided we deserved some time off and each were taking turns to take our own three-day weekend off.

“Something going on?” When he wouldn’t meet my eyes, I had a feeling something was up. “Big plans?”

“Na,” he chuckled, his attention wavering once again to the shop at the end of the street. “Nothing like that.” He shook his head.

“You sure, Onyx?” I asked, and he frowned. His eyes met mine. We were about the same height and weight.

“I’m sure. I’ll see you later?”

“Yeah, I’m just going to go shower and get ready for the day.”

“Cool. I better get going,” he muttered, already moving to head to the hardware store.

Whatever was going on with him was going to be interesting to watch unfold. If he was talking to me at the time. Because I knew I was going to need to have a serious conversation with my best friend.

It wasn’t if but when we got together. Raven was mine. I didn’t want whatever friendship I had with her brother to blow up in my face, but And even if that was the only option, I’d still take a go at things with Raven.

She was right.

My pretty girl deserved someone who would chase and fight for her. And I was more than ready to go ten rounds if it meant spending the rest of my life with her.

raven

...

My feet were aching by the end of my day as I worked on Olive's hair. She'd surprised me by calling me a couple of hours ago to see if I could fit her in for a blowout. Since she's my sister, I would have squeezed her in even if I didn't have time.

Oli was the closest to me age-wise and a wild card. You never knew what she was going to say. A wild child out of the five of us, and that was saying something because as the only boy, Onyx gave her a run for her money.

"Are you okay?" my sister asked, her voice snapping me out of my Bash-induced thoughts over the noise from the blow dryer.

"Yeah, why?" I asked, somehow pretending like I wasn't keeping a secret.

"No reason. You're just quiet."

"I'm always quiet," I teased, "But I could say the same about you." I smirked, ready to change the subject. "Does this have anything to do with a certain new sheriff?" She rolled her eyes like I knew she would.

"Pfft. Sheriff Luke wouldn't know what to do with me," she huffed and I pressed my lips together. "Can you believe he went to the farmer's market this morning?"

“Did he?” I knew that because I’d been the one who told him she was going to be there.

“He stopped at my booth and asked about my permit. Never, not even that first year I started my booth, did someone come ask about my permit,” she huffed.

“But he did?” I asked.

“Yes. And it wasn’t even like he was in uniform! He was off duty! Then, do you know what he did?”

“Hmm?” I tilted my head and watched her closely.

“He stuck around after I showed it to him. Sat down in some chair he brought and talked to me.”

“You let him go behind the tables and sit with you?” I asked, surprised that she would let that happen. She didn’t even let us help her.

“Pfft.” She rolled her eyes. “Not exactly.” My brows narrowed.

“What do you mean, not exactly?”

“I didn’t let him. He just plopped his folding chair next to mine and kept...” Her voice drifted off to nothing as a scowl grew on her pretty face.

“What?” I turned the blow dryer off, worried that maybe Sheriff Luke wasn’t the good guy I thought he was.

“He just kept... talking to me,” she exhaled. “And talking to the customers. Telling him how my cookies are the best and—” She shook her head. Her body language

might have been saying she was annoyed, but there was no denying the blush on her cheeks.

“You like him,” I noted with a half-smile. I’d hoped she would. Luke was a nice guy, and Oli needed a good guy.

“He’s okay,” she answered nonchalantly, but I laughed. I knew her! She was trying to bullshit me.

“No! You like , like him.” I giggled, and she rolled her eyes.

“Who gave you that hickey?” she asked, and my eyes widened. My hands moved to my neck, and she giggled, pointing at my chest, and my eyes dropped.

“What the... it’s...”

“It’s what?” she asked with a self-satisfied smile on her face that she had brought the attention back on me.

“It’s not a hickey,” I muttered, but I was horrible liar.

“Really? Because from here, it looks like a hickey.” I opened and shut my mouth.

“It’—“

“It’s a burn,” Claire stepped in and wrapped her arm around my shoulders.

“Can you believe she came in rushing, running late, and started to do her hair and the curling iron fell! Thankfully, it dropped to the ground and not in your shirt, or that would have been worse! Were you able to get aloe for it?” I nodded, hoping that the gratitude in my eyes was clear.

“Shit. Really? That must have hurt! I’m sorry, Rave.” Olive turned her chair and looked at my chest and winced. “Shit! Coral did that when she was in high school. Remember how the whole barrel fell into her cleavage?”

With that, the subject was changed. Claire walked away with a wink, and I got back to work.

“You sure you’re okay?” my sister asked again as we walked to the car.

“Oli...”

“I saw you two,” she blurted out, and my eyes widened.

“You saw who two? I mean, which you two? Ugh, you know what I mean.”

“I saw you and Bash,” she said quietly as we reached her car, which was parked next to mine. I leaned against my driver’s door.

“Where?” I asked, trying to school my expression, but I wasn’t sure I was that good of an actress. Not when my heartrate started to pick up nervously.

“Look.” Her hands moved up between us. “It’s none of my business, unless you want to talk or... you know, some advice about anything.”

“Oli!” I groaned.

“He’s a good guy,” she said softly.

“The best,” I answered softly.

“And I know you. You’ve been crushing hard... I just don’t want to see you get

hurt.”

“Hurt from talking to him?” I acted like she wasn’t onto me. But my sister wasn’t going to sweep this under the rug. Olive rolled her eyes and reached for my hand.

“I see the way you look at him.” My face heated. “How you’ve always looked at him. But since you came back from school, it’s different.”

“How do I look at him?”

“You look at him like he put each and every star up in the sky just for you.”

“That’s not true,” I argued, feeling a little defensive.

“Hey.” Her eyes softened in a way I hadn’t seen in a long time. “It’s okay because he looks like he wants to put each and every star up there for you. And only you.”

“I just... he does?” I licked my lips, and she nodded.

“But he’s older and complicated. Not to mention, Onyx would shit a brick if he found out from anyone else than you two. He’s his best friend and business partner.”

“I’m not... we haven’t...” I stuttered, stumbling on my lies. “I haven’t done anything... yet.”

“That ‘burn’”—she used air quotes—“says differently.”

“Olive.” I probably looked like a fish out of water with the way my mouth opened and shut. “I love him.” She smiled and looked away for a moment before our gazes locked.

“I think he’s in love with you, too,” she whispered.

“He’s not.” I shook my head. I didn’t want to let myself hope for the impossible. “He wants me but...”

“Onyx?” she guessed, and I nodded.

“I’m spending the long weekend with him at his place,” I blurted out and wish I’d had a camera ready. Not much shocked Olive, but I’d just left her stunned! Me! The youngest sister, who was always too busy reading to deal with the real world.

“Wow. How... how did that happen?” she asked and then made a face. “Or do I not wanna know?”

“It’s complicated,” I mumbled, not wanting to share everything with her. Not yet at least. “I know I have to be careful, and I’m trying to be smart. He’s not the kind of guy who...” I glanced down at the floor.

“Who what, Rave?” Her hand squeezed mine, silently encouraging me to share a little more with her.

“Who would pick me? Who would fight for me?”

“You read a lot, babe. Sometimes, men in the real world—“

“Don’t say they’re not like that,” I said softly, meeting her green eyes head on. “Dad would burn the world down for Mom.”

“He would,” she confirmed, “but not everyone is the same.”

“Luke would help you hide a body if you ever needed him to, if you gave him a

chance,” I noted, accidentally giving myself away.

“It was you!” Her eyes widened before she started to laugh. “You gave him my number and told him about the farmer’s market?” She looked at me like she was seriously impressed with me.

“I see him at the gym sometimes, and he’s always asking about you.”

“He could be a creep,” she muttered, dropping her hand from mine and crossing them in front of her chest.

“But he’s not. He’s a really good guy.”

“Too good of a guy.” She rolled her eyes. “Guys like that are...”

“Are what?”

“Boring.” I snorted and rolled my eyes.

“He’s not boring. You always tell me I’m waiting for some hero from a book, but you know what I think your problem is?”

“No, but I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”

“You date losers on purpose. After... After Nathan,”—her first love—“broke your heart, you dated guys who wouldn’t be able to get that from you. Guys that might be fun but you know deep down have no chance at getting to you.” Olive might have made a face, but what she didn’t do was deny the facts.

“It’s okay,” I said, my tone softer. “I get it. Why do you think I like books more than people?” She giggled and leaned against her car, her body relaxing.

“So, what are we going to do? You going to let Bash pop your cherry?” she asked with a shit-eating grin, and I giggled.

“Maybe. Are you going to give Luke a chance, a real one?” She grimaced like she was in pain, but I knew she was playing by the way her eyes glittered.

“Maybe.” She pushed off her car. “Do you need anything for your... play date?”

“Oh my god, don’t call it that.” I laughed.

“I mean... is it not a play date?” She wagged her perfectly plucked brows.

“Oli!” I groaned.

“Okay!” She grinned then turned serious. “For reals, though, do you need anything? Condoms, or wanna go shopping?”

“Shopping? For what?”

“Oh god.” She laughed. “For, like, cute clothes.”

“I have cute clothes.” I frowned.

“I mean lacy clothes... you know, lingerie.”

“Yes.” I was pretty sure I was beet red. “I know. I like lingerie.”

“Well, well, well. Guess my baby sister’s not so innocent, huh?” she teased, bumping her shoulder against mine.

“Whatever. I think I’m okay. I just...” I chewed on my bottom lip.

“You just what?”

“I’ve never done much, you know that.”

“Right.”

“What if...” I wasn’t sure how to bring it up without telling her he was huge. Because if I did, I’d have to explain the whole watching him in the woods while he skinny dipped, and I didn’t want her to think I was some kind of stalker.

“What if what?” She leaned in closer, dropping her voice to make sure it wasn’t a conversation anyone walking past could overhear.

“What if I can’t, like, go down on him? Like, I mean, what if he’s too big?” Her eyes rose to mine.

“You think he might be too big, or you know?” she asked with curiosity.

“Umm...”

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“You know,” she guessed. “Okay... just go slow. Take your time. Don’t rush, and worst case, use your hand.

Stroke him while you’re licking or have the tip in your mouth.

And be careful of your teeth,” she advised, and I found myself relaxing.

“Honestly, if you don’t want to go down on him, it’s okay.

Don’t do anything you’re not absolutely okay with, alright? ”

“Right.” I nodded, and she hugged me.

“If you have any questions, no matter when or what time, I’m here.”

“I know,” I whispered. “Thank you. And, umm, I don’t mean to put you in a weird place but?—“

“I won’t say a thing. Not to anyone,” she promised, and I believed her. “Promise.”

“Pinkies?” She winked, bringing her pinky between us, and I did the same. Hooking it, we kissed our thumb before our hands dropped.

“I should get going. I have my last shift at the resort.”

“Last shift? Wait, does that mean you’re going to get that spot off Main Street? For the bakery?”

“No.” She shook her head. “It’s just time.”

“Wow. All of a sudden? Did something happen?” She looked at me for a moment and shook her head. I couldn’t tell if she was telling the truth or lying. That was the problem with my sister. She might have been the wild, outrageous one, but she played her cards close to the chest.

“Nothing like that. It’s just time.”

“We should celebrate.”

“Maybe next weekend. This weekend, you have serious plans! And as payment for keeping your secrets, you’re going to have to tell me all the dirty deeds.”

“Shut up.” I laughed. “I’m not even sure if I’ll go.”

“Liar,” Olive gently called me out. “I love you, babe, but remember, doing things is always better than not doing things. And Bash, well... he looks like he’d be fun to do! So, have fun, just... just protect your heart. Okay?”

“Yeah.” I shrugged like it was no big deal. We hugged, and she rounded her car and left. I watched her car disappear while standing outside my little SUV.

Antsy nerves rushed through me.

I didn’t want to go home.

If I went home, I felt like I was going to be climbing the walls, overthinking if I headed there.

But I couldn’t exactly show up at the brewery for karaoke night, either.

A small little bookstore had just opened at the end of Main Street I hadn't had a chance to check out yet.

I decided that even though all I wanted to do was go home and put my feet up, I'd head there instead.

Walking around town in the middle of summer should have been stifling.

Luckily for me, there was a cool breeze coming from the lake.

So many different things were in my head, all of them about Bash and what we were going to do.

The uncertainty made me anxious. What if I couldn't get into what he liked?

What if he changed his mind? I reached for the front door and was surprised when it opened. I looked up.

"Bash," I whispered. His hand was already on my hip. Our eyes connected, and like usual, it felt like the world around us started to disappear.

"Rave." His gaze dropped to my mouth and then my chest. I knew the moment he noticed the little love bite I wasn't sure he'd left on purpose or by accident.

With the way his nose flared and his eyes darkened, I had a feeling it had been on purpose.

My thighs pressed together for relief. Overwhelming need washed over me.

"It's nice to see you." Bash smiled at me, and I felt like I was going to melt into a puddle of goo. It was genuine and real.

“You, too,” I whispered, unable to look at anyone else, not that there were too many people around. There we were, staring at one another while blocking the entrance to the bookstore.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“I got out of work a little early and hadn’t had time to check out Pine and Prose.”

“Really? You?”

“Yeah.” I laughed softly. “Life’s been busy. Umm—“

“Excuse me,” someone said behind me, and I moved to the side. Bash followed me.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I came to pick up a surprise for my pretty girl.” He lifted a bag between us.

“A surprise for me?” I guessed, and he nodded. He handed me the bag.

“It’s a blind date.”

“A blind—“

“With a book,” he cleared up. “They had a bunch of books wrapped up under a sign that said Blind Date with a Book , and I figured you might like it. I just hope you haven’t read it yet.

” I opened the bag and smiled at the beautifully wrapped book with a pocket filled with stickers and little sticky notes and a cute pink pen that said in my reading era in gold.

“Steamy mountain man romance,” I read and grinned up at him.

“Maybe I was trying to stack the odds in my favor,” he muttered.

His eyes dropped to my mouth and then behind me as he looked around.

Before I could ask what it was, he took my hand and pulled me into the alley between the buildings.

The sun had started to slowly set, and in that alley alone and together, his body blocked me from anyone walking on Main Street.

“Hi,” he breathed. His hand moved to caress the side of my face. I leaned into his tender touch. It surprised me that someone his size with his strength could be so gentle.

“Hi,” I repeated like some kind of nervous parrot, but I couldn’t help it. My face hurt from the smile I had on my face as I stared up at him, fighting the need to let my eyes flutter shut.

I’d just told Olive I was going to be smart. This was anything but smart. His sweet, soft touches were messing with my head, giving my heart permission to hope for more. And damn if I was going to stop myself.

I was in love with him.

No one else would do for me. This weekend would be what would sustain me for the rest of my days if he decided once was enough.

“Raven.” The way he said my name sent shivers down my spine, making my skin break out in goose bumps. “Why can’t I stop thinking about you?” he asked roughly,

almost like he was talking to himself. “Jesus, you’re so fucking beautiful.”

“You’re not so bad yourself,” I whispered, resting my hand in the center of his chest. It felt like we were in the middle of a hurricane, something otherworldly pulling us closer, drawing us together like two magnets who couldn’t resist one another.

I rose on the tips of my toes just as he dropped down, and our lips touched.

I’d thought his kiss would match his touch.

But it didn’t, not even close.

It was like throwing gasoline on a fire.

We burned hot and bright. Wild and free.

I didn’t think. I didn’t know my name. All I could do was hold on and let him take the lead as his tongue plundered my mouth, mimicking what my body ached for.

When his scruffy cheeks scraped against my jaw, moving down my neck, making my hands move to the back of his hair, my fingers dug into the back of his skull.

“That feels so good,” I whimpered a little too loudly and loved the heated way his chuckle made me feel.

“This is nothing. You have no idea how good I am going to make you feel, pretty girl.”

“Bash,” I moaned his name, and he nipped at me. His teeth scraped against my neck.

The world felt like it was upside down, inside out, but the one thing that made sense

was his lips on my skin and my body in his arms. “Jesus,” he rumbled.

The vibrations against my flesh made my knees buckle.

Not that I had to worry with the way he was holding me up.

He pulled away and held me, making sure I felt exactly just how much he’d enjoyed that stolen kiss.

“Fuck, baby girl.”

“Bash.”

“I don’t want to leave you right now, but I’m closing the bar tonight.”

“Oh,” I mumbled, my lips parted, still tingling from his mouth on mine. I didn’t want him to leave, either, but for some reason, I kept it to myself. I didn’t want him to think I was some kind of clingy virgin. “Maybe I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow.” His nose flared. “My house,” he rasped, and I shrugged. I had no idea why I was playing hard to get by not giving him a clear answer.

“We’ll see.”

“Raven.” The warning was clear, and for some reason, it made me laugh. His gaze softened and his hand rose and brushed a stray strand of hair behind my ear. “What are you doing tonight?”

“I have a hot date with two of my favorite guys.” I smirked, and his brow rose. “Ben and Jerry,” I shared. “And a new book.” I lifted the bag between us. “Well, probably a couple of books.” I pointed to the shop behind us.

“Lucky book and ice cream.” He rested his forehead against mine, and for a moment, we just stared at one another. He had somewhere to be, and we both had a huge decision to make. Who was I kidding? He had an important one to make.

“You should come to my place,” I quickly blurted before I changed my mind.

“What?”

“I know what I want, Bash. If all I can have are the next three days with you, I’ll take them.”

“Rave,”

“But you should come to me. Come by my house, I mean. Because honestly...” My gaze dropped to the ground. But a moment later, the tips of his fingers carefully tipped my chin upward.

“Because why, Raven?”

“You’re the one that needs to be sure.” My voice softened. “If Onyx—“ I swallowed hard, guilt eating at me for even thinking of jeopardizing their friendship. “If my brother finds out, I’m honestly not sure how he’ll take it. You have more to lose than I do.”

“He’d be mad at both of us,” he noted, and I nodded.

“You’re right. He would be. But I’m his sister. Eventually, he’d have to get over it. You two have a thriving business and a lifelong friendship.” I swallowed.

“Would you care?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Would you care if he got pissed?” My brows bunched together.

“Of course, I would. I don’t want you two to fight—“

“No, I mean, if this was more than a little fling? If you and I could try and see if we had what it takes to make it work, would him not talking to me make you not want to be with me?”

“No,” I answered without having to think it over. “I’d want this. I mean...” I chewed my bottom lip, and his eyes dropped to it, turning his gaze molten. “I mean, in case you weren’t sure.”

“Fuck, pretty girl,” he groaned, pulling me against him, wrapping those strong arms of his around me and hugging me tighter. “You’re too good for me.”

“That’s not true,” I spoke into his chest. “You’re a good man. A little wild but good, nonetheless.” His hold on me tightened.

“I’ll see you soon,” he whispered against the top of my head. I felt him kiss my hair before pulling back. “Be safe getting home today, yeah?”

“Always,” I whispered. His hand found mine, and before I knew it, almost like I was floating on air, he led me to the front of the bookstore.

“Text me when you get home,” he gently ordered, and somehow, I didn’t feel the need to roll my eyes. How could I when he looked at me that way? With genuine concern and care.

“Okay,” I agreed all too easily.

“See you soon,” he promised again and opened the door for me. I stepped away from him, and the cool air from the air-conditioned bookstore felt like a relief against my overheated skin. I turned and watched as he waved one last time before he shut the door, then turned to walk towards his truck.

I forced myself to smile at the cashier, who said hello, and looked around. I wanted to chase after him and get back in his arms or cuddle up on his lap. I could picture the future together so easily. Too easily. Too naively.

I found the romance section and looked at book after book, hoping something would catch my eye while I tried not to be stuck too deep in my thoughts even though I knew I would be diving into the one he’d bought me, even if I had already read it or not.

I’d always told myself I wouldn’t be one of those girls who wore their heart on their sleeve. That I’d be a tough nut to crack. A woman a man had to chase and earn. Like a super cool heroine in one of the books I read.

But reality looked a lot different. Agreeing all willy nilly to anything the man of my dreams wanted from me and didn’t feel any remorse about it. At least not yet.

See you soon. His words replayed over and over as I added one book after another to my pile to buy. See you soon. He hadn’t said he’d come over. For all I knew, that kiss had been the last one.

I shook the thought away, knowing I’d feel like I was holding my breath when the clock struck midnight, waiting for the doorbell to ring.

bash

...

Like an idiot, I kept staring at the clock on the main wall of the brewery, and when I wasn't, my attention would move to my phone to check the time.

I was a fucking goner for Raven. One kiss had changed it, crumbled all the self-control I had held on to so fucking tightly, my hands ached from unclenching.

"Got plans?" Austin asked. I grunted, serving a beer to a customer. "You meet someone?" Because I knew Austin, I cut him off, shooting him a look, one that admitted my guilt. And he wasn't stupid. He knew exactly what I had done. Or was planning to do.

"You have got to be shitting me," he hissed, looking over his shoulder to find a distracted Onyx not paying us any attention. "He will?—"

"Breathe," I ordered, walking away knowing he would be hot on my heels.

"What the fuck?" he asked the moment we were alone in the back office. "When the hell did this happen?"

"The night you cancelled on me," I admitted, though if I was honest, it had started a long time before that.

"What the..." He ran his fingers through his hair and sighed. "Shit." A muscle in his

jaw twitched. “This is going to be a fucking mess.”

“It’s not.” I shook my head. “I’m going to talk to him.”

“Oh! You are, huh? What exactly are you going to say? Hey, buddy, I fucked your little sister, by the way. Oops, sorry.”

“Shut the fuck up,” I growled, stepping closer to him, not shying away from my natural height. “Don’t ever talk about her like that.” I pointed my finger at his chest. “I haven’t touched her.” Technically, it was true.

“Wait. Nothing’s happened?”

“No. Not really.” He stared at me for a moment, then suddenly, his gaze grew hopeful, and I knew I wasn’t going to like what he had to say. “Great! No harm, no foul! All you have to do is keep your hands off her and keep them to yourself. Easy peasy.”

“It’s not that easy, Austin,” I groaned, and he rolled his blue eyes.

“Man, I don’t know how many times I have to tell you, there are literally apps for this. All you need to do is get laid. You swipe?—“

“I love her,” I blurted out, my eyes unwavering from his. He stared at me for a long moment before dramatically sitting down on the couch we kept back there. “For real, genuine love. She’s the one for me, Austin.”

“Fuck,” he groaned. I could tell he believed me.

“I’m going to talk to him,” I rasped, knowing in my bones I had to do it sooner than later. It was risky. I hadn’t even taken Raven out on a date. Not a real one. Shit, we

might not even be compatible. For all I knew, the things I liked that I wanted to do to her would scare her off.

“When?” he asked.

“Monday morning,” I answered. She would know by then. Or have an idea whether she actually wanted me and not whatever version of me she’d made up in her head all these years.

“Man...” He shook his head, and I saw him slow down before his gaze moved up to mine, his arms resting on his knees. “Please tell me this isn’t why you agreed so easily to the whole us each getting some time off?”

“I was going to come in here and ask for the three days off. You guys bringing it up out of nowhere, honestly, the whole thing was dumb luck.”

“Shit...” He stared at me. “What the hell happened last week?” I opened and shut my mouth.

“I couldn’t keep watching her from afar anymore. This week... it’s like she’s there. Everywhere I look. Not only physically but in my head.”

“Have you ever thought that maybe she’s playing you?”

“Raven?” I chuckled because she didn’t play games.

“Hey, women play all sorts of games, even when they might not know they are,” he argued. I rolled my eyes.

“That’s the stupidest thing I have ever heard,” I muttered. “She’s mine, Austin.” I stared at one of my two best friends. “I don’t know how she will feel about me when

she gets to know me a little better, but”—I shrugged—“I need to try and see where it goes.”

“Why?” he asked, completely dumbfounded.

“Because if I don’t, I know I’ll regret it for the rest of my life.”

“Even if it means fucking up what we have? Our friendship? Our brotherhood? Our business?”

“Honestly? This is going to sound like a dick thing to say, but yeah.”

“What the hell,” he groaned dramatically. His head fell back.

“Austin, you know me. You know I wouldn’t do something like this if... if I genuinely could help it. But the idea of letting her go, seeing her with someone else?”

“What?” His attention slowly returned to me. I sighed.

“It fucking kills me.”

“What if you do try shit out? See where it goes, but it fucking blows up in your face and you still end up seeing her with someone else?”

“Then at least I can say that I tried.” I shrugged, answering so fucking honestly, it surprised myself. I wasn’t an emotional guy. Fuck, I wasn’t a relationship guy. But Raven changed that in me.

“Fine,” he muttered before he stood up, just as the door opened. “But you need to talk to him.”

“Talk to whom?” Onyx asked, showing up out of nowhere.

“The hops vendor. They keep doing their deliveries a day or two later than they say,” Austin quickly answered, and Onyx frowned.

“Why would Bash need to talk to him? Isn’t that your shit to deal with?”

“I get along with the guy.” I shrugged. Onyx shrugged and looked at us.

“You guys going to be back here all night, or what? It’s pretty busy with karaoke and shit.”

“We’ll be right there.”

“Yeah,” Austin muttered, patting Onyx on the back before hurrying the hell out to the bar.

“You good, man?” Onyx asked me. I nodded and rubbed the back of my neck.

“Yeah, man, just looking forward to a couple days off.”

“Right. I don’t blame you. I’m looking forward to my time off next week, too.”

“You finish the kitchen?” He shook his head. “Almost. The paint was off. I gotta redo it.”

“Really? Buddy usually doesn’t fuck up with paint.” Buddy was the old-timer who ran the hardware store in town.

“It wasn’t Buddy who mixed it,” he mumbled under his breath. “It’s not a big deal?—“

“What was wrong with it?”

“It had glitter.” My eyes widened.

“Glitter?” I repeated.

“It’s fine. The new paint should be in next week.” I wanted to ask if that was why he had been in such a hurry after finding me and Raven outside the diner, but I didn’t want to fuck shit up.

I wanted to talk to him.

To tell him that not only did I want to date his sister, but that I was fucking in love with her. I had no idea how the hell it was possible this crush, this infatuation, had grown the way it had, but there was no denying it. Monday, a little voice in my head muttered.

“Right.” I nodded and scratched the back of my neck.

“Any big plans this weekend? You’ve been staring at the clock and your phone like you’re trying to will it to move faster.”

“Nothing huge.” Just going to take your sister’s virginity.

I shook my head and cleared my throat. I didn’t need to think about that.

And I really didn’t need to start getting hard around my best friend while thinking about his little sister.

“I’ll probably just be home,” I muttered. At least that wasn’t a lie.

“Nice. Maybe do some laundry.” I chuckled and shoulder-checked him before heading back to the bar. He knew how much I hated doing laundry. I walked through the bar and saw him head towards the stage.

I loved this place.

Well, I usually did.

Yet when I got to my spot behind the bar, I started to think.

I wasn’t as comfortable as I’d first been.

Women smiled and batted their eyes at me, leaning over as they ordered their espresso martinis or beer on tap so I could scope out their cleavage.

Not that I looked. For the first time since we’d opened, the place felt too much.

Too loud.

Too crowded.

It was like my body craved Raven’s comfortable quiet ways. I could picture us on the couch. Her reading and me staring at her, never tiring of looking at her. Or waking her up with breakfast in bed and eating her after she ate every bit I cooked for her.

I was in deep trouble. I wanted that and more. It wasn’t just sex and lust. What I felt for Raven ran deeper than I thought possible.

Logistically, I didn’t know how I’d make it work.

We had different schedules work wise. When the hell would I see her?

Running the brewery took long hours, and we'd have opposing schedules.

I couldn't exactly ask her to come to the bar every single night just so I could see her, talk to her. Could I?

I wasn't sure, but I did know one thing: I'd make it work. I had to. Because as the clock ticked away, too slowly for my taste, I knew one thing: Raven Trejo was going to be mine and only mine, and I would do my damndest to make her happy for the rest of our lives.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:37 am

raven

. . .

I stretched my legs and yawned. The sugar high from the Ben that was a given. But there was maturity to him. Even if he was still wild in his own ways.

My wild mountain man , I thought to myself and shook my head.

The image of his bare back, his body on display by the waterfall that day a little over a week ago popped up in my head, and just like that, I felt warm.

I glanced down at myself. His love mark was still there.

He'd marked me. And like a weirdo, I freaking loved it.

God, I was a hopeless romantic. Not to mention the blind date with a book he'd picked up for me.

I stood, and just as I stretched my arms up in the air, my tank rode up my stomach.

I glanced at the reflection of myself and dropped my arms. White fitted tank top that didn't hide my hard nipples and short-short pink satin sleep shorts with black lace trim.

My hair was loose and in waves. Messy and rumped and cute.

I was never going to be the kind of woman who was a knockout bombshell. Not like Cora and Olive were.

A soft knock sounded at the door. The skin on my arms turned into gooseflesh at the sound.

It had to be one of my sisters. It wasn't out of the norm that one of them stopped by after midnight.

The reminder made my shoulders slump. Another knock sounded, this time a little louder than before.

I could imagine Scarlett, Coral, and Olive on the other side, drunk off their butts, swaying from side to side.

They'd probably decided to head to karaoke night after all and knew I wouldn't want to go.

I hadn't had time to go to a new bookstore in town, much less some much-needed reading time.

When another knock sounded, I rolled my eyes with disappointment in my belly it more than likely wasn't the man of my dreams showing up unexpected.

"I'm coming!" I shouted. Hurrying to the door, I turned the front porch light on. Without checking the peephole, I opened the door. "Geez, you guys—" I didn't say another word.

How could I when there he was?

His hand on the frame, he leaned in like the hero always did in one of my books. He

was so tall, and I was barefoot as I stood at the door, staring up at him. We didn't say a word for a moment. How long, I couldn't tell you. I wasn't capable of it.

All I could think about was the fact he'd shown up, obviously right after work.

"It's officially Friday, pretty girl," he finally spoke, breaking the silence. I smiled up at him.

"You're here." I licked my lips, leaning my body closer to him, enough to feel the warmth of his body heat pound against me and smell the scent of his cologne and whatever body wash he used that still lingered on his skin.

"Does that mean..." I let the words drift away.

I couldn't let them out. Not because I was ashamed or even embarrassed but because I felt like I was so close to the edge I was ready to fall and trust that he'd catch me.

"Only if you're sure, Raven," he rasped, leaning closer, moving his head closer to mine. "Be sure, pretty girl," he warned, his tone deep and scratchy and deliciously sinful. "Because the moment I kiss you again, I'm not going to stop. I'm not strong enough?—"

"Bullshit," I called out, interrupting his sweet little moment.

Bash's gaze narrowed. "You wouldn't hurt me," I clarified.

"I know you, Bash. If I said stop, you would. You wouldn't even think twice," I confidently pushed, and he swallowed.

His Adam's apple bobbed as he leaned close enough to rest his forehead against mine.

“Baby,” he groaned like he was torn. Almost tortured.

“I’m sure,” I said softly, needing him to know. My hand rose from the center of his chest, stopping right above his heart.

“You feel that, Raven? You feel what you do to me?”

“Bash,” I whispered, licking my lips. I didn’t have a lick of makeup on, I was standing in front of him like a hot mess, but he looked at me like I was the most beautiful thing he’d seen in his life. Which was crazy, knowing all the places he’d traveled.

“It beats like this, like it’s trying to jump out of my chest so it can fall into your sweet little hands, baby girl,” he confessed. Hope wasn’t cautious inside of me anymore; it was full blown. Right or wrong, tonight was going to happen. We were going to happen.

“Please, come inside.” I needed us to be in a space where no one could see us. Where no one could judge just what I knew was inevitable. My hand moved from his heart up to his face, loving the slight scruff on his cheeks, wanting to feel his kisses on my skin all over again.

“Fuck,” he cursed, and suddenly, I was no longer standing in front of him. His hands moved to my waist. As if I weighed nothing, he picked me up, and my legs wrapped around his waist.

“Bash,” I breathed, holding on to his shoulders.

“I love how you say my name, Raven,” he growled, and I lost sight of him.

His lips crashed on mine, and it was like we were racing for some kind of finish line.

His kiss was deep and animalistic. Each deep guttural sound he made settled inside of me, feeding something inside of me I didn't know I had.

I felt it as he moved. Shutting the door behind him.

I heard the clear click of the lock as his mouth pulled my bottom lip roughly, and I moaned.

My wild mountain man pressed me against the door itself, pulling back to look at me.

His eyes skimmed down my face to my neck, and I saw the moment he noticed the little love bite on my chest.

“This is going to make me sound like some barbaric fuck, but I love seeing my mark on you, pretty girl,” he rasped, his mouth finding mine once again.

He pulled us back and carried me through my small apartment. My hands ran through the back of his head, through the soft short strands, making me miss the longer locks I'd cut. He kicked open my bedroom door and walked us into the darkened space.

“Tell me to stop. Tell me you don't want me, and this can stop right here.”

“I want you.”

“You're going to be the death of me, pretty girl,” he groaned, slowly setting me down. He licked his lips, and I couldn't help myself. I leaned forward, moving to the tips of my toes to kiss him.

Bash pulled me into him, flush up against his hard body. And oh my, was he hard everywhere! This time, the kiss was slower. Unrushed. His hands dropped to my bare shoulders. I moaned, loving the firm touch.

“You deserve a bed of roses.”

“Rose petals are overrated,” I mumbled, not bothering to end the kiss. I gasped when his talented mouth moved down to my jaw then my neck. Sparks tingled throughout my body, making it feel like I was lit from the inside out.

“Bash, please.”

“Fuck. I’m not going to take that sweet little cherry you saved for me tonight. Tomorrow.”

“But—“

“But nothing.” He pulled away. Tenderly holding my chin tipped up just enough for our eyes to connect. “Tonight, I’m going to make you come. I need to watch that again more than I need to breathe.”

“Bash—“

“I won’t lie to you. I want your body to get addicted to how good I can make you feel.” I nodded, totally on board with his plan. Hell, his mouth on my neck in the spot that drew sparks and warmth between my legs had me addicted already.

“Please,” I whispered. His eyes shut. When he opened them, my knees almost buckled at what I saw reflecting back at me.

Desire and lust were clear, but it was more than that.

Something darker. Headier. And he didn’t disappoint.

His thumb stroked the side of my neck, spreading the cool saliva of his mouth

around.

“You’re going to need a safe word.”

“Pizza,” I said instantly, and his lips twitched.

“Pizza,” he repeated. “Anytime you need to stop, or something’s too much, you say pizza and we do.

We talk, work out what you didn’t like or what was too much.

Understood?” I loved the dominating tone in his voice.

I nodded, but he shook his head. “I need the words, Raven. I need to be clear that you get what’s happening. ”

“I understand. I say pizza if I need to stop or need a moment. If something’s too much.”

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“Good girl,” he praised, and I felt his words wash through me. “Such a good girl for me, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I whispered. My breath came in shallow pants, jagged and heavy like I had been running a mile.

“I need to see you,” he said, his gaze soaking me in. “Fuck, you look so damn cute like this.” I pressed my lips and thighs together. He hadn’t really done much, but I was soaked.

His hands roamed down my neck over my shoulders and arm until they stopped at the thin hem of my tank.

His eyes locked with mine, and I nodded.

Carefully, and crazy slow, he lifted my tank top over my head, keeping it in his hands when he had me topless in front of him.

His arm shot behind him, and with a flick of the wrist, my bedroom flooded with light.

I didn’t move.

I didn’t look away.

Too afraid I’d miss something, an expression of his as he looked back down at me.

“Jesus, Raven.” He swallowed hard. With a shaky hand, he stroked my arm with the edges of his fingers.

Goose bumps flared to life on my skin, like every part of me strained to get closer to him.

His eyes dropped to the mark just above my right breast, and his fingers skimmed over the hickey. “Did you like my mark on you?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Was it a nice little reminder of what we did when you washed my hair?”

“Yes.” My body felt like it was on fire. I loved his touch, but it wasn’t nearly enough. It was too light, drifting over my flesh.

“Good.” He grinned wolfishly. He dropped to his knees, kneeling in front of me before his hands moved to the waistband of my little satin sleep shorts.

“These are fucking sweet, baby girl. I’m going to need you to wear these again for me down the road, but right now, they gotta go.”

“Bash.” I shuddered, feeling his fingers slide just a smidge beneath the waistband. “Please.” He slowly tugged them down.

My whole body felt like an inferno. I’d never been naked in front of anyone but a medical professional.

My cheeks burned with uncertainty that he might not like what he saw.

I hadn’t been wearing panties, and now I was standing completely nude in front of

him.

I heard him swallow, then a deep uncoherent sound emanated from him.

“Baby,” I whispered, and it was almost like that snapped him out of whatever thoughts he had.

“You’re waxed.” I chewed on my lower lip.

“I did it for you,” I shared, ignoring the way my voice trembled.

“Fucking hell, baby.” He stood with his arms crossed now, not touching me at all. It was the last thing I expected him to do. “Turn for me. Let me see you,” he ordered without any allowance for me to argue.

I did as he asked, slowly turning around. Letting him see all of me.

“I knew you were beautiful, but I had no idea. Standing in front of you, I realize I’m a fucking simple man and don’t have a creative bone in my body, pretty girl.”

“Bash.”

“You’re stunning. Beautiful.” His compliments felt real. Honest. In a way that they bled into my skin and fed my soul. “There isn’t a word for how exquisite you are.” He moved then.

In the blink of an eye, his hands were on me.

skimming the sides of my bare breasts. My eyes fluttered shut at his touch.

His rough, calloused hands made me shiver.

I felt hot and cold all at the same time, and when his thumb brushed against my nipples, I moaned out his name.

I opened my eyes and felt like I was going to melt into a puddle with the way he looked at me.

Completely exposed in front of not just a man but Bash, the one man who had claimed my heart so long ago with a puppy love crush.

I should have felt shy, maybe embarrassed, but I didn't.

Not with the genuine lust and desire that swirled in his gaze.

His hands moved slowly down to my belly, his thumbs tracing my navel before moving to my hips. My stomach dipped with anticipation. He reached around to hold my cheeks before he lifted me up once again. And it felt right, even though he was still wearing all his clothes.

"I'm going to taste you now, baby," he shared just as he laid me down on my bed.

I trembled and my knees shut. He noticed it right away, and I felt the blush that painted my cheeks.

Suddenly, I was worried about what I would taste like.

Do I smell? Will he like it? Will I look okay to him down there?

Almost like he could feel my nerves and read my mind, he put my anxiety to rest. Instead of diving right in, Bash lay in bed with me.

On his side, he leaned his powerful body, and his lips touched mine.

Sweetly. So slow it almost took my breath away.

We kissed for a long while. Seconds melted into minutes.

Before I knew it, his body was on top of mine, my legs around his waist. All I could feel, all I could taste, was Bash.

I loved the easy way he handled me. The way he knew what I needed without having to say a word.

I might have been at his mercy, but I wasn't afraid.

There was no rushing him. It wasn't until I was squirming under him that his lips moved from mine, down my chin and jawline and then neck

"Oh god!" I groaned.

"Not god, baby. Just your man," he rumbled.

Just your man. His words floated in my head.

I could get dizzy off them. I loved how he said things like that.

It was probably dangerous for me to go falling like that, but I was going to trust the journey.

Taking a leap of faith on yourself, much less someone else, was never easy, but that's exactly what I was going to do.

His lips kissed the swell of my breast, tongue licking the hickey.

“Going to leave more of these all over you,” he darkly promised.

His lips worked my body while his hands explored. Before I knew it, his mouth just above my pelvic bone, his body between my thighs. My knees bent, feet planted on the mattress.

“Look at you. Such a pretty girl for her man, aren’t you? So fucking wet and tight. Pink. Fuck, this is my new favorite color right here,” he growled. His fingers slid between my folds, and the touch made me buck off the bed.

“Bash! Fuck!” He leaned closer, close enough to feel his breath on my skin warm and slightly ticklish. He breathed in, and I fought the urge to shut my legs.

“Jesus, you smell amazing,” he rasped. “I could bottle this and become a billionaire. But I don’t share. I’m a greedy bastard like that,” he growled.

His lips touched the inside of my thighs.

First the right then the left. I trembled under his mouth, and then I felt it.

His wide tongue licking me up. Slowly at first, but before I knew it, I was sweating and bucking beneath his attention.

His finger slowly moved to my entrance. In and out with shallow touches.

Just enough to take the edge off, but I still needed more.

“Please,” I whimpered incoherently.

“Please what, pretty girl?” he growled before his tongue circled my clit.

“More, oh please, Bash, more,” I panted. “I feel empty. Fill me up.”

“Fuck. How can I say no when you beg me so beautifully?” he cursed.

A second finger joined in and pushed in a little deeper.

With that, I felt myself coming closer and closer to the edge.

“My girl wants more, doesn’t she?” he muttered against my pussy.

His tongue frantic between my folds as my back arched off the mattress.

“More.” My voice cracked, and he licked my clit rougher.

Over and over while his fingers worked me up, in and out as they stretched me. Not completely but enough. His mouth closed over my clit, the pressure just enough, and I shattered. Euphoric pleasure washed through me, and fireworks set off behind my eyes lids as I bucked beneath him.

Not that he let me go far.

His arm draped over me, holding me in place as he languidly licked me up. I lay boneless beneath him. Everything in my body felt heavy yet exhilarated at the same time. Sated but ready to go again.

“Look at me, Raven,” he ordered, and like his good girl, I did his bidding. “There you are.” His lips quirked up just as his hand caressed the side of my face. “You didn’t say pizza.”

“I didn’t need to,” I whispered. Bash’s gaze softened before he leaned down and kissed me.

Deep and wet, dominating. I could taste myself on his lips, and it didn't turn me off.

Even though I felt like Jello, I wanted more.

Lifting my body on my elbows, straining to be closer, I was surprised when he pulled away.

Cool air hit my naked body as I watched him pull his shirt off in that complicated way men did before tossing it behind him.

“Bash—“ I didn't get a chance to say another word.

He lay in bed, carefully pulling me against his body.

I curled up next to him, my arm draped over his waist and my face at his side.

“What about you?” I asked, glancing down at the hard bulge that strained against his pants.

My mouth watered for my own taste of him.

“Baby, that was for me.” I could hear a smile in his voice.

“But you didn't... you know.” I glanced up at him. His hooded gaze on me moved. From my lips down my body. I shivered. My body warmed up at the way he was looking at me before he pulled the blanket over us.

“Falling asleep with the taste of you in my mouth and your sweet body tucked against me is definitely for me,” he murmured before kissing the top of my head, pulling me closer. “Rest. We have a busy weekend ahead of us,” he promised. My eyes grew heavy.

The anticipation of whether this would or wouldn't happen and the sleepless nights of the week got to me, not to mention the mind-blowing orgasm he'd just given me. My eyes grew heavier with every beat of his heart I heard beneath my ear, and before I knew it, I was soundly asleep.

raven

...

Waking up with someone in your bed for the first time should have been weird.

Instead, as my back was curled into his front, a very hard bulge pressed against my butt and warm breath at my neck, I'd never felt more comfortable. I felt his lips against my shoulder. The wetness of his mouth made something between my legs start to throb.

"Morning, pretty girl."

"Morning," I whispered. His arms tightened around me, and I felt his lips move up my neck.

"I like waking up with you," he murmured sweetly, and I felt a smile grow on my face.

"I like it, too," I admitted.

"What do you want to do today?" he asked, and I answered without thinking and hesitation.

"You." He stilled, and suddenly, we were both laughing.

I turned in his arms to look at him. Bash had always been hot in my eyes, but there

was a whole other level of hotness seeing him in my bed just waking up.

It felt intimate and real. And something came over me.

I didn't care that I probably looked like a hot mess just waking up, my hair a mess without makeup in the light of a new day.

Instantly, I realized I didn't feel self-conscious or anything.

If anything, with the way he was looking at me, I felt beautiful and sexy. Seen.

I pulled myself up, and he sat up, then carefully brought me onto his lap, placing my thighs outside of his while I straddled him, and I kissed him.

He let me lead the kiss, something I didn't even know was a possibility.

But there I was, learning all sorts of things, so many more I wanted to learn.

I shifted, and when I sat back down, I felt him.

Hard and thick. Impossibly long between my thighs.

I instantly hated all the layers that lay between us.

"I want you, Bash."

"Baby, please." His hands held my face. The pads of his thumbs caressed my face. "I want you, too, but?—"

"But?" I cut him off, and he groaned.

“Don’t pout with me, pretty girl, or I’m going to pull you over my knee and spank you until you listen.” I trembled at the threat. Not in fear but sincere anticipation. “You like that,” he noticed, his nose flaring. I could have bet he got even harder beneath me.

“I’m not sure if I would but... I think I would like to try.”

“Fuck.” His lips crashed onto mine. The kisses turned into an inferno in a split second. He tossed me over, hovering his body over mine, and before I knew it, we were both naked. Not a stitch of fabric lay between us. “Fucking hell.” His nose nuzzled my neck and lower before he glanced up at me.

His dark gaze was intense as the muscles in his chorded neck moved. “I wanted to take things slow. Romance you. Rose-petal-covered bed and a million candles. Make it special for you.”

“It already is special,” I whimpered against his lips. “It’s special because it’s with you. Please, Bash, I’ve waited so long.”

“You can’t say shit like that, or this ends before it starts.” I looked at him slightly confused. When he swallowed, his Adam’s apple mesmerized me. “You’re going to make me lose my load before I get inside of you, pretty girl, with that dirty little mouth of yours.” My eyes widened.

“But I haven’t done anything.”

“Shit,” he hissed, and I felt him throb against my thigh. “Give me a minute.” He closed his eyes, somehow holding his large masculine body over mine. “We should wait.”

“Please, Bash. I want you. I want to see if... if we’re compatible.”

“We are,” he stated, opening his eyes. “You’re mine.”

“For the weekend, sure. But?—“

“No.” He shook his head. “You’re mine forever.”

“But my brother.”

“I’ll talk to him,” he said in a way I had a feeling he’d come to this decision before this moment. “I can’t give you up.”

“What if... what if I don’t like what you’re into? I mean, it’s always called me, and I’ve gotten off on it before when I read?—“

“Shit,” he rasped. “Baby, I’m holding on to be a thread here. Trying to be the good guy and give you what you deserve. But you keep talking like that, I’m going to hand you a book and make you show me how you played with yourself.”

“We can do that later,” I promised and meant it. “I want you, Bash. Please. Make me yours.” The words were heavy and so damn stupid. Wearing my heart on my sleeve, handing it over to the one man who could literally destroy me, heart and soul.

“I can’t say no to you,” he murmured. His lips danced over mine. Slow and easy. “We do anything you don’t like?—“

“I say pizza .” He grunted. His lips were on mine, and I felt as his fingers moved down the outside of my torso and then between my legs. I spread them wider, relishing in the deep moan he made when he found me more than ready for him.

“You’re fucking soaking wet, baby girl. This for me?”

“Yes, sir,” I whispered, and he growled.

“That pretty, innocent mouth is going to get you in trouble,” he threatened, but it didn’t feel like a threat; it sounded like a promise.

One I was more than ready for him to make good on.

He worked his fingers inside of me deeper this time, two, then three.

I was so wet there was a squelching sound that felt like it vibrated against the walls of my bedroom.

I was a writhing mess about to come when he pulled them out.

I looked at him, confused, ready for him to give me back his fingers, when I felt him line himself up against my entrance.

“Jesus, Raven, you undo me,” he mumbled, his lips touching mine. “You sure you want this? We start, I don’t think I can stop.”

“Positive. I waited so long.”

“I know, pretty girl. I know.” He swallowed.

“I’m here now. I got you.” The thick red mottled crown of his cock bumped my entrance, and when I looked down just as he did, I watched as he stretched me slowly.

The sight was one of the most erotic things I’d ever witnessed.

When the sensations became too much and my eyes shut, my back arched off the

mattress.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he rasped.” Please tell me I’m not hurting you.”

“You’re not.” I felt like I couldn’t catch my breath. Like I was coming apart yet in the strangest way, in the safest place possible.

“Thank fuck. Jesus, Rave, you feel good. I’m trying to go slow.”

“Fuck me, please, Bash,” I whimpered. Need boiled in my veins. “Please.”

“Shit.” He pushed a little deeper and pulled out. Slowly and in sync, he did that for a while. Feeding my pussy little by little before pulling out.

“Bash!” I cried out when in one long unexpected thrust, he slid inside completely, connecting us and making me whole all at the same time.

A slight pinch of pain melted away, creating nothing but pleasure.

“Bash! Yes!” I wrapped my arms around his shoulders as he fucked me. nice and slow at the start.

Pulling completely out before pushing his way inside of me, filling and stretching me in a way I didn’t know was possible.

It felt nothing like the toy I kept in my nightstand.

My nails dug into his shoulders as he picked up speed.

His eyes locked with mine, sweat covered our bodies, and before I knew what was happening, a tidal wave of pleasure washed through me.

I felt like I could feel colors brighter while his deep guttural sounds echoed in my ears.

“Fuck, Raven! Raven, you’re squeezing me so damn tight. So fucking wet. Jesus, you feel good.”

“Bash!” I cried out.

“Baby girl, I don’t think I can hold back.”

“Come,” I whispered, squeezing around him. My hips moved off the bed to met him thrust for thrust. “Come inside of me.”

“I come in you, I’ll knock you up.” His voice sounded deeper. Scratchier. His hold on my hips grew firmer without being painful. Possessive.

“I don’t care. Please, Bash! Make me yours.”

“You are, pretty girl. You’re all mine,” he grunted.

“I want to feel you fill me up,” I whimpered. Need unlike anything I’ve ever felt swept over me. I’d just come, but I had a feeling I was on the verge of another orgasm. This one stronger than the last.

“You on the pill?” He panted, his stare glazed over with lust. His body never stopped moving in and out of mine.

I shook my head honestly. It was obvious he liked that.

Reading romance, I knew all about dirty talk.

I pushed on his chest, and he took the hint.

We rolled over. Bash on his back with me straddling him, never losing our connection.

My lips parted. In this position, he felt longer, thicker. Deeper.

“Look at you. My pretty girl wants to ride her man.”

“Yes, sir.” I moaned as my body naturally started to move. “Fuck me. Please,” I begged. grinding against him. We found our rhythm easily, and when his fingers started to dig deeper into my hips, his feet planted on the mattress as he bucked up, I knew he was getting closer.

“So fucking pretty riding me. Raven.” His breathing was off, words clipped.

“Bash! I think... I think... oh god!” This time, my orgasm slammed through me! My eyes shut and body buckled below as my pussy quivered and spasmed around his length.

“Raven!” he shouted, pushing up into me, and liquid warmth filled me.

I felt ribbon after ribbon spilled from him and filling me up.

The sensation felt intoxicating. His arms wrapped around me, pulling me down to his chest. We stayed that way for a while.

Long after the sweat on our skin dried. His hands were rubbing patterns on my back.

“You okay?” He broke the comfortable silence.

“I’m more than okay,” I responded, kissing his chest before I glanced up at him.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“Raven.” My name sounded hoarse.

“I know there are no promises of more but?—“

“Shut it.” He carefully rolled us over and slipped out of me. I watched him as his eyes skated down to where we’d been connected. And that’s when I felt it. His release started to trickle out of me. “You feel that? My come dripping out of your perfect little pussy?”

“Bash—“

“Ask me how many times I’ve taken someone bare like I did you?”

“Baby—“

“Only you, pretty girl. There is the promise of forever, if you want it. Shit.” His forehead dropped and rested against mine while he stroked my folds. “Even if you didn’t, I’d figure out a way to get you to agree.”

“So sure of yourself, mountain man.” My voice hitched as he slid inside, fingering me all over again. I had no idea how he did it, but he made me delirious for more. It was my first time, but I was already addicted.

“Let me show you.” Sitting up, he flipped me around.

“Bash, what are you?—“

“Look at us in the mirror,” he ordered. He put my legs over his, spreading me open. My head fell back on his shoulder, and I watched him as he fingered me.

“Bash!” I writhed against his half-hard cock, but he didn’t budge, using two hands to give my body attention. One, his fingers inside my pussy, while the other started at my breasts, cupping each one, taking turns on pinching my nipples before his hand moved down and started to rub my clit.

“Bash!”

“You’re mine, pretty girl. Not just today,” he clipped. “Always. All mine. Tell me what I need to hear,” he demanded, making me wetter.

“I’m yours.”

“I love you, Raven. I think I fell in love with you when you returned. So fucking pretty and sweet. I knew you were mine. Fought it, but you and I were inevitable.”

“Bash!” Everything he said and everything his talented hands did to me was too much. “Baby!” I squealed, fisting the sheets at my sides.

“Come for me, Raven. Come for your mountain man,” he demanded, and like his good girl, I did.

I thrashed against him as euphoria threatened to drown me.

Wetness seeped out of me, and his hands slowed down.

“Look at my sweet innocent Raven, squirting for her man.” I half laughed because I refused to be mortified over something that had felt so good.

Slowly, my body returned down to Earth, and I relaxed against his hold.

“Did you mean that?” I asked once my heartrate didn’t match a hummibird’s.

“That I love you?” he asked against my ear, my eyes on his in the mirror. I nodded and watched him lean over and kiss my cheek. “With all my heart, pretty girl. I love you in a way I know no matter what I have to do, I’m going to keep you forever.”

“Keep me.” I giggled and sighed. “I love you, too. I’ve loved you forever.”

“I know.” He kissed me again. “I’m sorry it took me so long to catch up,” he rumbled. I felt all warm and mushy on the inside. Safe and protected.

“I hate to kill the mood, but... how is this going to work out?” I asked once we were lazily lying in bed, Bash’s fingers mindlessly stroking my arm.

“I’m going to talk to Onyx and your parents.”

“Wait, you’re going to what?” I sat up, not bothering to bring the sheet up with me.

“I said?—“

“I heard you, but why?”

“They both deserve to know how serious I am about you.”

“But—“

“No buts, Rave. This weekend is just the beginning of something beautiful. I promise.”

“What if...” I hated thinking it, but I was realistic. “What if Onyx doesn’t like the idea?” His hands moved to my face.

“He’ll have to eventually deal with it.”

“But—“

“Trust me?”

“Of course, I trust you.”

“Good.” His smile turned brighter, almost excited. So big his dimple made an appearance. “Let’s shower and grab something to eat. We got stuff to do.” He grinned, and I didn’t even ask what.

I was okay with letting him surprise me.

Suddenly, the future felt a little brighter, and with hope that grew with every step I took while I followed him to the bathroom.

I was excited about the future, our future, together in a way that even though it had the potential to be messy, I knew everything would be okay.

bash

...

Our hike to the spot where she had found me had been great. Our conversation had been both heavy and lighthearted. We'd laughed and shared. And when we reached the waterfall, we had gone skinny dipping.

The image of my shy, sweet, innocent, pretty girl in the nude with the sun shining and breeze in her hair would be ingrained in my memory for a lifetime.

We'd returned to my place, where I made dinner, and we'd sat outside in my backyard and made s'mores over the little firepit I had. The night had been perfect. I didn't take her again. I knew she was sore, and I wanted to let her body rest. It didn't take long for her to fall asleep.

I lay there for a moment. Staring at the ceiling fan as it whirled around and around. How many times since I'd seen her back from school had I lain there thinking about that very situation? Now, my daydreams were reality and so much better than I could have ever imagined.

But there was one thing hanging over me.

Onyx.

He needed to know what was going on, and he needed to hear it from me.

I glanced at the alarm clock on my nightstand.

Carefully, I slipped out of bed and left Raven a note in case she woke up.

I texted Austin to see if they were both at the brewery, and he responded they were.

Dressed in gym shorts and a shirt, I drove out to them.

It was already closed to the public, but they were cleaning up.

“Hey, Bash!” “Night, Bash!” a couple of employees said as they walked out, and I waved goodbye to them.

Both Austin and Onyx were sitting at a table when they spotted me. Onyx started to chuckle.

“Jesus. Not even two days off, and you came back? Worried we’d set the place on fire or something?”

“Something like that,” I muttered, taking a seat in front of Onyx. Austin was weirdly quiet, probably sensing why I was there.

“What’s up?” he asked. His eyes bounced from me to Austin, then back to me. Automatically, he could tell something was off as he sat up straighter. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing’s the matter.”

“I think I should get—“ Austin started to say, but I shook my head and pointed at him.

“Stay.” We’d always discussed things as a group, and if me being with Onyx’ sister was going to change things, Austin would need to be here. “I need to talk to you.”

“To me or us?” Onyx asked. I could see him putting a mask over his face, making him unreadable. It was a quality that served us well when we were negotiating with the ski resort but one I really didn’t like in that moment. He’d never given me that look.

“You. But Austin should hear this, too.” Austin cursed under his breath, and Onyx crossed his arms over his chest. Tension mounted for a moment, and I sat up, linking my fingers on the table.

“We’ve been friends for a long?—“

“Cut the bullshit and say whatever it is,” Onyx cut me off, his voice clipped and deep. My eyes bounced to Austin for a second, and I breathed in deep. My dark gaze locked with Onyx’. “I want to talk to you about Raven.”

“Raven? he repeated. “Raven. My baby sister, Raven?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay...” he said slowly. “What about Rave?”

“I want you to know that I’m in love with her,” I stated. My body immediately braced, completely expecting Onyx to toss his body across the table and deck me.

But he didn’t.

He simply stared at me with that unreadable gaze.

“And?”

“And I’m going to start seeing her.”

“You are?” he asked. “Just like that? You don’t give a shit that she’s my sister?” His tone grew harsher by the syllable.

“I do. That’s why I’m talking to you before it goes any further. You’re like a brother to me, Onyx. Closer to you than my own family. I respect you.”

“But not enough to let her go?” I cleared my throat.

“No. I can’t do anything that means letting her go.”

“What if I say I don’t wanna do this with you anymore? The business or being friends or both?”

“Well, you two can buy me out, and I’ll figure something out and hope with time, you can figure out a way to at least be amicable since you’re going to see me at family events and one day be the uncle to the kids we bring into the world.”

“Kids?” Austin coughed, but neither of us looked at him.

“You’d put it all on the line for my sister?” I nodded. Without blinking an eye or hesitating, I responded honestly. When he stood, Austin and I automatically joined him.

Me waiting for the punch or shove I knew was coming my way and Austin probably ready in case he needed to pull us apart. He stepped closer, then suddenly, his expression changed.

“Good,” he muttered with a shit-eating grin. For a moment, my brain couldn’t process what was happening.

“Good?” I repeated. He laughed, leaning in capturing me in a hug.

“Fucking finally.” He patted me on the back. “It took you a moment to fucking make a move, dumbass. But glad you did.” He pulled away, and both Austin and I looked at him like he had just grown three heads.

“What?”

“You two think I don’t pay attention?”

“What the fuck?” Austin whispered under his breath.

”The way this one“—he pointed at me—“gets all googly eyed whenever Rave comes in? How she’s been trying to avoid talking to you, but anytime she doesn’t think any one is paying attention, she’s looking at you like...”

“Like what?” I frowned.

“Like you’re all she needs for the world to makes sense.

I won’t bullshit you. When she came back, and I noticed you two talking before the New Year’s party, it kinda ticked me off.

She’s young and has always had a little crush on you, even when she was a kid.

Part of me thought she’d get over it. But when she started to look at you like that? I worried for a whole other reason.”

“What?” Austin took the word out of my mouth.

“That this dumbass wouldn’t take a chance. Why do you think I suggested you get a hair cut from her or you take her hiking?” Suddenly, my shoulders sagged, and I chuckled.

Hell, the three of us did.

But then Onyx turned serious, his attention solely set on me. “If you hurt her—“ he started to say, but I cut him off.

“I’d kick myself in the balls. You know I wouldn’t risk our friendship if she didn’t mean something to me. She’s it for me, Onyx.”

“Good.” He hugged me, and when I pulled away, Austin was already walking towards the bar.

“You guys stress me the fuck out.”

“He knew, didn’t he?”

“Yup,” I admitted, surprised to hear Onyx laugh.

“You really love her?” Onyx asked as we took a barstool in front of Austin, who poured each of us a drink.

“With all my heart, man.”

“How did you know?” he asked, his gaze sincere, and that made my eyes widen.

“I mean...” Austin and I glanced at one another, and I was surprised to hear Austin

clear his throat, his voice deeper than usual.

“I think it’s when the idea of never being around them, of seeing them with someone else makes you burn from the inside out.

” He shrugged and chugged the whiskey he’d poured.

“I can’t imagine my life without her. I want to... make her happy. I want to make her life easier. See her smile. Love her for the rest of my life,” I admitted, and Onyx nodded.

“Even with the age difference?” he asked, and I felt Austin’s attention.

These two had something going on, and I had obviously been too caught up with Raven to notice.

“No matter what, I wanna be with her. In any way she will let me,” I admitted before hopping off the barstool before I turned to Onyx. “We’re good?” He nodded.

“Always, brother.”

“I gotta get going.”

“To my sister?” he asked then winced. “That’s going to take a moment to get used to.” I laughed and hurried back to my place because I was more than ready to slip back into bed with my pretty girl.

Without anything hanging over my head, I knew this was exactly where life was supposed to take me. I’d always heard people say everything happened for a reason but had never believed it, until I’d noticed Raven all grown up.

Suddenly, all the highs and lows of my life made sense. I'd do each and every thing all over again if it meant finding Raven and spending the rest of it with her.

Raven

Bash walked me to my door and took the keys from my hands. His body caged me against the doorway of my apartment, and my hands moved up to his chest, holding on to the soft thermal material of the blue, long-sleeved henley he wore.

We had been together for a little over four months, and there hadn't been a day we'd spent apart.

We'd just come home from Thanksgiving dinner at my parents' house.

Who, surprisingly enough, unlike my brother, had taken a moment to adjust to the idea of their youngest child dating their son's older best friend.

Not that they hadn't come around.

They'd known Bash for years and knew what kind of man her was.

When they saw how he treated me, how his number one priority was me, they'd fallen in love with him in a whole other way just like they had with my sisters' guys.

Even tonight, my dad and Bash had been thick as thieves outside, deep frying a turkey with Onyx.

"You okay?" he asked, and I nodded.

"Yeah," I whispered. "You wanna come in?" I asked, giving him a little wink.

“I always wanna go in,” he growled. His lips touched the shell of my ear. “But I think we need to talk first.” He pulled back, taking me slightly off guard.

“Talk?” I smiled, but when he didn’t, it died on my face.

“Uh-oh.” I tried to keep my tone light as worry crept up my neck, “Sounds serious. What’s up?”

” I noticed how he not only pulled away, but he shoved his hands into the front pockets of his cargo pants.

“Bash?” I called out. My voice trembled.

When we were together, there was never a moment he wasn’t touching me in one way or another.

“I wanted to do this a whole other way,” he blurted, and I frowned, my brows narrowed.

“A whole other way?” I repeated quietly, my mind spinning with what he could possibly be talking about.

“I love you, Raven. You know how much I love you.” I didn’t say a word because I was so scared he was about to say something like I love you but...

“The last four months, hands down, have been the best four months of my life, pretty girl. Today, I just... I feel so fucking grateful for you.”

“Grateful,” I repeated. “Okay,” I said slowly, not sure where this conversation was going. His hand slipped out of his pocket, my keys in hand before he moved to unlock the door.

“Go in.”

“Bash, you just said we need to talk—“ I turned, and when the lights inside my apartment caught my attention, I froze.

My brain couldn’t catch up with the scene in front of me.

My apartment was still dark, but what looked like a million warm twinkle lights lit the living room beautifully. Pink and red rose petals littered the floor. My hand moved to cover my mouth as I slowly walked into the space.

“Bash...” I turned around, and tears hit my eyes. He was down on one knee, holding a ring box in his hands. “Ohmygod!” I blurted. His hand reached for mine, and I looked at him.

“I love you. I’m so grateful for you. Every day you’ve given me feels like a blessing.

I don’t want another day to go by when you don’t know exactly where I want this to go.

I want you to marry me. I want us to be our own family.

Whether we have kids or not. You’re young and you have a career you want?—“

“Yes!” I blurted, cutting him off mid spiel. “Yes!” I jumped. “I want everything with you.” My voice trembled as I fell to my own knees. He held both my hands.

“Yes?” he asked, as if needing me to confirm.

“Yes,” I answered confidently. It was the easiest question I had ever been asked to answer.

The last four months had been amazing. Both of us learning what we liked and what we didn't. Turned out he had nothing to worry about because I liked almost everything he was into.

And we'd tried a lot.

Lucky for me, my mountain man was creative.

"Fuck." He slipped the ring on my finger, and I laughed. Suddenly, we were both standing up, and then I was being carried through my place, straight to my bedroom.

"We didn't close the front door." I giggled.

"I don't fucking care," he growled. My laughter rang around us. I knew that tone. It was possessive and dominating, and I knew he was in a mood to play.

And play we did.

All weekend long.

It wasn't until Sunday that I called my family to share the news they already knew. It turned out that when my dad and Bash had been talking, he'd asked for my dad's blessing. My dad, having five daughters and a wife who liked to talk, knew there was no way he could hold on to that kind of secret.

That's when my sister Scarlet and her guy snuck out, allegedly to go for ice, but in reality had headed to help set up the surprise in my living room.

My wild mountain man said I'd tamed him, but I didn't agree with him. I felt like he showed me that with him by my side, I could be wild and free while still being myself.

Ready for Olive's story with sexy Sheriff Luke?

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I should have gone straight home after Karaoke night.

It wasn't even the drinks that got me where I am now.

Nope!

I was stone-cold sober when I sashayed my way up the sexy sheriff's porch at one in the morning.

Like a dirty little secret, I knocked on his door, my heart at my throat.

My head couldn't decide if I hoped he would be up and open the door or if he would sleep through it so I could slink off into the night and never admit to anyone what I'd done.

Not that I got a chance to think about which one I was leaning more towards.

How could I when the door opened and like a dirty sexy wet dream filled with promise, there he was.

Standing in front of me, shirtless with jeans tossed on that weren't buttoned all the way.

His muscled body looked like it had been sculpted from the prettiest marble.

Smooth and slightly tanned with freckles all over his broad shoulders.

Freckles I wanted to get up close and personal with so I could count each and every one. With my tongue.

“Olive.” He smirked and I just like that the lusty haze I’d been in popped and I rolled my eyes. That smirk of his had probably melted panties away by the dozens.

Mine included.

It’s okay. We don’t want forever! A little voice in my head muttered, lying to both of us.

“Something I can help you with?” he asked as he stepped closer. The porch light was dim, casting the two of us under a soft golden hue.

Luck favors the bold. That little voice encouraged like it usually did to get me moving and get what I wanted.

And what I wanted was the man in front of me.

I craved him like I’d never craved anything in my life and that included the chocolate chip cookies I was famous for and couldn’t live without.

It was a glitch.

It had to be! I didn’t do relationships. Not since high school.

“Hopefully, sheriff. I mean, a girl can only hope.” I smiled innocently as I made sure to be as obvious as possible as I checked him out. I had no idea how a man could be that damn good looking. One night. One hot and heavy and hopefully long swety night and he would be out of my system.

“And what’s that Miss Trejo.” Miss Trejo.

It felt like a bucket of ice cold water dumped on my overheated body.

That little name for me had started a week ago.

I didn't like it. I had no idea why the Sheriff got under my skin the way he did.

Maybe my sister, Raven, was right? Maybe it was because I had a feeling Luke as different.

"Olive." I corrected before clearing and softening my voice a little, "Or you can call me Oli." I added and it was obvious he found that weird. His surprise flashed for a split second before his brows bunched up.

"Have you been drinking?" He asked, his hand moved between us, and he tipped my head back, making our height and size different very obvious with that little move.

Usually, that wasn't my thing. Dominance wasn't what made me weak in the knees but like everything else the law-abiding man in front of me did seemed to make me wobble just a little.

Okay, a lot.

"No." I answered honestly looking up at his blue eyes. Eyes I could float off in and let the world disappear around me. The thought made me frown and step out of his hold.

"This was a mistake." I said out loud and he stepped forward, grasping my wrist.

"What was?" he asked, those intense azure eyes searched my face for a clue, for something. Something I was too afraid he could see.

"This." I repeated. "Coming here. I'm sorry I woke you up.

I'll go—" I started to turn but Luke was bigger and faster than me. Somehow, he grabbed me by the waist and pulled my back flushed up against his front. The warmth of his strong body seeped into me making me feel weak. No weak wasn't the right word.

Needy. Warm. Melty. His head dipped down and I felt like I was being held by some kind of predator.

His nose skimmed the side of my head and then my hair.

I could have sworn he'd even sniffed me, a deep guttural sound almost vibrated around us.

"Where do you think you're going?" He rumbled against the shell of my ear.

"Sheriff." I whispered my breath hitched when I felt it. Or felt him, I should say.

"I told you, to be careful." He reminded me of something he'd said at the farmer's market when he had insisted on sitting down next to me and talk up my cookies to anyone who passed by.

I'd sold out before noon, and he'd helped me pack up.

"I told you all sorts of shit happens, even in this little sleepy mountain town."

"It's Moonlit Pines," I whispered unsure of why I wasn't pulling away from his hold on me. "Nothing bad happens here."

"Hmm," he grunted against my ear, the deep sound made me shiver. "bad people are everywhere. "You're not bad, Luke." I said. I might not know a lot about the man who infuriated me as much as drew me in, but I knew he was good.

“You might not know what you’re talking about little girl.”

“Little girl?” I repeated. I wasn’t a teenager. I was twenty three!

“You make me feel like the big bad wolf ready to pounce and eat you up.” I couldn’t tell if that was a promise or a warning but either way, I trembled. Wet heat pooled between my legs as a dull ever growing ache started. I wanted him more than I wanted to breathe.

The sassy woman I had been up until I met him would have pounced at his offer. The words felt like they were on the tip of my tongue. Eat me, Sheriff. Devour me. But I couldn’t get myself to say anything.

“If you knew, if you had an inkling of what’s going on in my head, of what I want to do to you, little girl—“ he scoffed— “You wouldn’t be standing at my door dressed like that looking like a sacrificial little lamb.” He shared and before I could process it, he stepped back.

The cold night air hit as I glanced up at him over my shoulder as he stepped back into the darkness of his house.

“Drive home safe.” He ordered, his voice deeper, darker than I had ever heard it.

And just like that I had been dismissed.

I couldn’t believe it. The annoying frustrating Sheriff had been chasing me for weeks. Talking to me. Calling and texting me.

Making his interest more than clear.

Only to turn out it had all been a game. Cat say hi to the mouse! He’d gotten under my skin, made me want the impossible made me think maybe he could be more than

any other guy I had ever gone out with. And for what? All so he could brush me away?

Well fuck him! I didn't want to be the Sheriff's dirty little secret anyhow!