



Rough Ride (Sweetheart County Fair #6)

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Category: Romance

Description: Tank

I came to Sweetheart County for one reason: to protect my sister from her stalker ex-boyfriend.

I sure as hell didn't come looking for Katty, my baby sister's curvy best friend with those knowing green eyes that see right through me. She's nothing like the women I'm used to. Smart, strong, and not intimidated by the cut on my back or the violence in my blood.

She's off-limits. She's my sister's best friend, ten years younger, with roots in this small town I'm just passing through.

But one night on a Ferris wheel under the stars changes everything. Now I'm thinking about things I've never considered before: staying, building something new, making her mine.

And if there's one thing the Iron Blood MC taught me, it's when you find something worth fighting for, you hold on with both hands and never let go.

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The wind tears at my leather cut as I push the Harley harder down the county road. My patch "TANK" over my heart and the Iron & Blood insignia covering my back have seen better days, but they're still intact. Just like me.

The rustic wooden sign welcoming me to Sweetheart County seems like a bad joke as I roar past it. Nothing sweet about why I'm here. The text message from my baby sister Lilly still burns in my mind: *He won't leave me alone, Tank. I'm scared.*

That's all it took. Twenty hours on the road, stopping only for gas and the occasional protein bar. The club understood. Family first, always.

The fairgrounds appear ahead, a patchwork of colored tents and flashing rides against the afternoon sky. I can smell the mixture of fried dough, livestock, and cotton candy from here, precisely the kind of place Lilly loves and exactly the kind of place I'd normally avoid.

I ease off the throttle as I approach the entrance, ignoring the stares my bike and appearance attract. The parking attendant, a teenager with acne and a nervous smile, points me to a spot near the entrance.

"Five dollars," he stammers, trying not to stare at my tattoos or the visible outline of the knife strapped to my leg.

I hand him a ten.

"Keep it," I grunt, not waiting for his thanks as I swing my leg over the bike.

My boots hit the dirt, and I roll my shoulders to work out the kinks from the long ride. The fairground buzzes with activity —families with children, teenagers on dates, farmers showing prize livestock. Everyone seems carefree. Everyone except me.

I check my phone for the hundredth time. Lilly's last message reads: *Meet me by the ferris wheel at 3. Bringing Katty.*

Katty. Lilly's best friend since high school. I've heard the name for years but never met her. Lilly says she's the only one who believes her about her ex, Dylan. That makes Katty good people in my book.

The ferris wheel isn't hard to find. It towers over everything else, its colored lights already blinking despite the daylight.

As I make my way through the crowd, people part like the Red Sea.

I'm used to it. Six-foot-four, two-forty, covered in ink, with a face that hasn't smiled in years. I'm not exactly county fair material.

I spot Lilly before she sees me. My little sister, all grown up at twenty-three, her blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, wearing a sundress that makes her look younger than she is. She's laughing at something, her head thrown back, and for a second, I see the kid she used to be.

Then I see who's making her laugh, and my steps falter.

The woman beside Lilly is nothing like I imagined. In my mind, Katty was a carbon copy of my sister—small, blonde, delicate. The reality is something else entirely.

She's tall, with curves that her jeans and tank top don't hide, and wild dark hair that falls past her shoulders. When she turns, I catch sight of a half-sleeve tattoo on her

right arm, intricate roses and thorns disappearing beneath her shirt.

But it's her smile that hits me the hardest. Wide and genuine, lighting up her whole face. I've seen a lot of smiles in my time, most of them fake or fear-based. Hers is neither.

Lilly spots me then, her face breaking into relief. "Tank!" she shouts, waving frantically.

I close the distance between us, and she launches herself at me. I catch her easily, holding her tight, feeling how small she still is in my arms.

"You came," she whispers against my chest.

"Of course I came," I reply, setting her back on her feet. "That's what big brothers do."

When I look up, Katty is watching us, her expression unreadable. Up close, she's even more striking—green eyes that seem to see right through me, a small scar bisecting her left eyebrow, full lips pressed together in assessment.

"So, you're the famous Tank," she says, her voice lower than I expected, a slight rasp to it. "Lilly said you'd come. I told her you'd probably break the sound barrier getting here."

There's no fear in her face as she looks at me, just calm appraisal. It's... unsettling.

"Katty," I acknowledge with a nod, extending my hand. "Thanks for looking out for my sister."

She takes my hand, her grip firm. "She'd do the same for me."

Lilly looks between us, something like relief in her eyes. "Now that you're both here, I feel better already." Her voice drops. "Dylan said he might show up today. That's why I wanted to meet here. Plenty of witnesses."

My jaw tightens. "Tell me everything about this asshole."

"Not here," Katty interrupts, scanning the crowd. "Too many ears. Let's walk."

As we start moving through the fair, I notice how Katty positions herself. Always on Lilly's outside, eyes constantly roaming the crowd. She's protecting my sister.

And just like that, in the middle of the Sweetheart County Fair, with the smell of funnel cakes in the air and children screaming on rides, I feel something I haven't felt in years.

Interest. Dangerous, unexpected interest in a woman who clearly has her own kind of strength.

I push the feeling down, lock it away. I'm not here for that. I'm here for Lilly, to handle a problem that needs handling.

"So, this Dylan character," I say as we weave through a cluster of teenagers. "What's his deal? Lilly hasn't told me much besides that he won't leave her alone."

Katty's eyes meet mine over Lilly's head. There's a heaviness there, a silent communication that my sister is downplaying things.

"Dylan Thomas," Katty says, her voice dropping to ensure only we hear. "Local boy who thinks the town belongs to him because his daddy's the biggest real estate developer in the county. Dated Lilly for six months. When she broke it off, he didn't take it well."

"Didn't take it well is an understatement," Lilly mutters, her earlier cheerfulness fading. "He shows up everywhere. My work, my apartment, even followed me to yoga class. Left notes on my car saying we're 'meant to be together.'"

My fists clench at my sides. "You file a restraining order?"

"Tried," Katty answers for her. "Sheriff's office said there wasn't enough evidence of an actual threat. Plus, Dylan's father plays golf with the sheriff every Sunday."

Of course. Small town bullshit. Some things never change.

We stop at a food stand, and Lilly insists on buying us all lemonades. I watch as she chatters with the vendor, putting on her brave face. She's always been good at that, pretending everything's fine when it isn't.

"She didn't tell you the worst parts," Katty says, standing close enough that her arm brushes mine. "He slashed her tires twice. Broke into her apartment while she was at work and rearranged all her furniture. Left a dead rose on her pillow."

Heat floods my system, that familiar rage building. "Why the hell am I just hearing about this now?"

"Because she knew what you'd do," Katty replies, her eyes steady on mine. "And she was trying to handle it herself. She only called you when she found out he bought a gun last week."

The cup in my hand crumples slightly. "A gun."

"Yeah." Katty takes a sip of her lemonade, her throat working as she swallows. "That's when I told her she needed to call you. Some situations require a... specialized approach."

There's something in the way she says it. Not judgmental, not fearful, but matter-of-fact. Like she understands exactly what kind of man I am and what I'm capable of.

Lilly returns with her lemonade, forcing a smile. "They added extra sugar for me. The guy remembered from last year."

I drape my arm around her shoulders. "You always did have a sweet tooth."

We continue walking, passing game booths where carnies try to entice passersby to throw darts at balloons or knock down milk bottles. The fairground is getting more crowded as evening approaches, the lights of the rides growing brighter against the darkening sky.

"He texted this morning. Said we needed to 'talk things through' and that the fair would be 'the perfect romantic setting to reconnect.'" Lilly tells me.

"That's why we're here," Katty adds. "Plus..." She hesitates.

"Plus what?" I ask.

"Plus I knew you were coming," Lilly finishes. "And I wanted him to see that I'm not alone anymore."

Using me as a deterrent. Smart. But if Dylan's unstable enough to buy a gun, seeing me might just push him over the edge.

"What does he look like?" I scan the crowds with new purpose.

"Tall, but not as tall as you," Lilly describes. "Dark blonde hair. Usually wears polo shirts. Has a small scar above his lip from a fishing accident."

"He'll be easy to spot," Katty adds. "He sticks out here like—"

"Like a biker at a county fair?" I finish for her, the corner of my mouth lifting slightly.

For the first time, Katty smiles directly at me—a real smile that reaches her eyes. "Exactly like that."

She looks gorgeous. Damn it.

We approach the livestock area, and Lilly brightens at the sight of baby goats in a pen.

"Oh! Can we?" she asks, already pulling us toward them.

Some things never change. My baby sister, tough enough to leave home at eighteen and make her own way, still turns into a kid around animals. I can't help but smile as she leans over the fence, cooing at a black and white kid that prances toward her.

"She needed this," Katty says beside me as we hang back. "Something normal. She hasn't been sleeping well."

I study her profile in the glow of the string lights overhead. "How long have you two been friends?"

"Since tenth grade chemistry. We were lab partners," she explains. "I accidentally set her notebook on fire the first day."

"And she still wanted to be your friend?" I raise an eyebrow.

Katty shrugs. "I put it out before the teacher noticed. Lilly said anyone who could

handle a crisis that calmly was someone she wanted in her corner."

My sister's always been a good judge of character. As I watch Katty watching Lilly, I see the protective instinct there, similar to my own but different. Softer around the edges, maybe, but no less fierce.

"What's your plan?" Katty asks, turning those green eyes on me. "For Dylan."

"Depends," I say honestly. "I need to see what kind of man he is. Some back down when confronted. Others need more... convincing."

She nods, unsurprised. "Just so we're clear, I'm not opposed to whatever needs to happen. Lilly's tried doing things the right way. It didn't work."

Before I can respond, Lilly's head snaps up, her body going rigid. She backs away from the goat pen slowly, her eyes fixed on something, or someone, across the pavilion.

"He's here," she whispers when we reach her.

I follow her gaze and spot him immediately—exactly as described. Polo shirt, khakis, that pretty-boy look that always makes my teeth itch. He hasn't seen us yet, but he's scanning the crowd, hunting.

"Stay with Lilly," I tell Katty, already moving forward.

Her hand catches my arm, surprisingly strong. "Wait." When I look back, her expression is fierce. "Together. We do this together."

We stand side by side in the glow of the fair lights, ready to protect what matters. And as Dylan's searching gaze finally finds us, I realize this Sweetheart County Fair

just got a lot more interesting.

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I feel the exact moment Dylan spots us.

It's like a cold finger tracing down my spine, the same feeling I've had since this whole nightmare started. Lilly freezes beside me, her earlier joy evaporating like morning dew under a harsh sun.

But this time, something's different. This time, we're not alone.

Tank stands at my side, a human fortress of muscle and intent.

The carnival lights play across his tattooed forearms and the hard planes of his face.

I've known him for all of thirty minutes, and already I understand why Lilly speaks of her brother with such confidence.

He radiates controlled violence. The kind that doesn't explode randomly but strikes with precision when needed.

"That's him," I murmur unnecessarily. "Coming this way."

Tank gives a nearly imperceptible nod. "Got him."

Dylan weaves through the crowd, his face lighting up with that fake smile I've grown to hate—the one that never reaches his eyes. Those eyes only show one thing when he looks at Lilly: possession.

"Should we move?" Lilly whispers, her hand finding mine and squeezing.

"No," Tank and I answer simultaneously. I clear my throat. "We stand our ground. You've done nothing wrong."

Tank shifts slightly, positioning himself half a step in front of us, but not completely blocking our view. It's a protective stance but not possessive, a distinction that doesn't escape my notice.

"Lilly!" Dylan calls out, his voice carrying that forced cheerfulness that makes my skin crawl. "I've been looking everywhere for you!"

He slows as he approaches, finally registering Tank's presence. The hesitation is brief but telling. A predator recognizing a larger threat.

"Who's your friend?" he asks, eyes narrowing as he takes in Tank's cut and patches.

Before Lilly can answer, I step forward. "This is Tank, Lilly's brother. He's visiting for a few days."

I don't miss the way Dylan's Adam's apple bobs as he swallows hard. Good. Let him be nervous.

"Brother?" Dylan recovers quickly, extending his hand. "Great to meet you, man. I'm Dylan Thomas, Lilly's boyfriend."

"Ex-boyfriend," Lilly says firmly. "We broke up three months ago, Dylan."

Tank doesn't take the offered hand. His face remains impassive as he stares Dylan down, saying nothing. I've never seen silence used as a weapon before, but Tank wields it masterfully. Dylan's hand eventually drops, his confident facade cracking slightly.

"Right, well, we're just taking a break," Dylan says with a forced laugh. "Working through some things."

"No, we're not," Lilly counters, her voice stronger with her brother beside her. "I've told you repeatedly it's over."

Dylan's eyes harden for a split second before the mask slips back into place. "Baby, you're confused. We belong together." He steps forward, reaching for her arm.

Tank moves so fast I barely register it. Suddenly he's between them, Dylan's wrist caught in his massive hand before it can touch Lilly.

"She said no," Tank says, his voice deceptively quiet. "Where I come from, that means something."

The nearby fairgoers sense the tension and give our little group a wider berth. The sounds of the carnival continue around us—the calliope music, children laughing, barkers calling out to play games—but it all seems to fade into background noise as these two men square off.

"Look, I don't know what Lilly's told you," Dylan starts, trying to pull his wrist free. Tank releases him with such suddenness that Dylan stumbles back. "But we had a misunderstanding. I love your sister."

"Love doesn't slash tires," I interject, my voice steady despite the adrenaline coursing through me. "Love doesn't break into someone's home. And love definitely doesn't leave dead roses on pillows."

Dylan's face darkens. "You should stay out of this, Katty. You've been poisoning her against me from the beginning."

"No, I've been witnessing what you've been doing to her," I counter. "There's a difference."

I feel Tank's gaze shift to me briefly, assessing. I've been dealing with Dylan's bullshit for months, standing beside Lilly when the sheriff dismissed her concerns, when the locksmith came to change her locks, when she cried herself to sleep on my couch. I'm done being polite about it.

"You bought a gun, Dylan," Lilly says, her voice trembling slightly. "Why would you do that if you love me?"

Dylan's expression changes, becomes almost boyish. "For protection, baby. This county's getting dangerous. I want to keep you safe."

"Safe from what?" Tank asks, his voice rumbling like distant thunder.

"You know, just... things happen." Dylan shifts uncomfortably. "Anyway, Lilly, I came to invite you to the fireworks tonight. They're setting up by the lake. Remember last year? How perfect it was?"

The manipulation is so transparent it makes me want to scream. Last year at the fair, they had just started dating. Before the control issues emerged. Before the stalking began.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," Lilly states firmly. "Not tonight, not ever."

Dylan's face twists for a moment before he controls it. "You're making a scene, Lil. Let's talk privately."

"No," I say at the same time Tank says, "Not happening."

Dylan finally seems to realize the situation isn't going his way. His eyes meet mine, and the hatred there sends a chill through me. Then he looks at Tank, sizing him up with a newfound calculation.

"Fine," he says eventually, hands raised in mock surrender. "I get it. Bad timing with your... brother in town." He manages to make the word sound like a question. "I'll catch you later, Lilly. When you're not surrounded by your guard dogs."

He backs away, that plastic smile returning. "Enjoy the fair. The Ferris wheel's running all night." His eyes linger on Lilly. "Our spot will be waiting."

With that parting shot, he turns and disappears into the crowd.

"Jesus," Lilly breathes once he's gone, her shoulders sagging. "That was—"

"That was him on his best behavior," I finish for her. "Because Tank was here."

Tank's eyes are still tracking Dylan through the crowd. "He's circling back," he observes. "Watching from the ring toss booth."

I'm impressed by his awareness. Most people wouldn't have noticed.

"He'll keep his distance for now," I say. "He doesn't like confrontation where he might not win."

Tank turns to me, his dark eyes intense. "Tell me everything. Not the sanitized version. Everything."

For a moment, I'm caught off guard by the directness of his gaze.

Tank is nothing like I expected. From Lilly's stories, I'd pieced together an image of a

rough biker with more muscle than sense.

The man before me is certainly dangerous, but there's an intelligence in his eyes that surprises me—a calculating awareness that misses nothing.

"Maybe we should get something to eat?" Lilly suggests, looking between us. "I'm starving, and we can fill you in while we eat."

It's her way of trying to normalize the situation, to reclaim some of the fair experience that Dylan just tainted. I know this because it's what we've been doing for months, finding moments of normalcy in between the chaos he creates.

"Food sounds good," I agree. "The BBQ stand by the auction barn is decent."

Tank nods, but his eyes sweep the crowd one more time. "Lead the way. But stay close."

As we walk through the fairgrounds, I can't help but notice how people react to Tank. Some stare openly, others avert their eyes. A few men puff up as if preparing for confrontation, then think better of it. It's like watching wildlife respond to an apex predator.

"Your town isn't used to visitors like me," Tank observes quietly, close enough that only I can hear.

"Sweetheart County likes to think it's all sunshine and apple pie," I reply. "But trust me, there's plenty of darkness here. It just wears polo shirts and has family names on buildings."

His mouth quirks slightly. Not quite a smile, but close enough that I feel oddly accomplished for causing it.

At the BBQ stand, Tank insists on paying despite Lilly's protests. We find a picnic table somewhat removed from the main crowd, giving us privacy to talk. I watch as Tank positions himself with his back to the solid wall of the auction barn, eyes still scanning periodically.

"Always aware of exits and sight lines," I observe as I sit across from him. "Military?"

He looks mildly surprised at my question. "Four years. Marines. How'd you know?"

"My dad was Army," I explain. "Same habits."

Lilly returns with extra napkins and sits beside me.

Tank's gaze lingers on me a moment longer before he turns to his food. "So. Dylan Thomas. Start from the beginning."

As we eat, Lilly recounts the relationship, with me filling in details she glosses over. How Dylan seemed perfect at first. Charming, attentive, generous. How things changed gradually. First with texts checking her whereabouts, then "surprise" visits at work, then accusations about male friends.

"Classic isolation tactics," I add. "He even convinced her to switch yoga studios because her instructor was male."

Tank listens intently, his expression darkening with each new detail. When Lilly mentions finding Dylan sitting in her apartment when she got home from work—despite having never given him a key—his knuckles whiten around his plastic fork.

"The police said there was no sign of forced entry," Lilly explains. "They suggested I

might have left the door unlocked."

"Or he made a copy of your key earlier in the relationship," Tank counters.

"That's what I said," I agree, meeting his eyes.

The connection is brief but potent. Two people seeing the same threat clearly.

By the time we finish eating, the sun has set completely, and the fairgrounds are transformed by thousands of twinkling lights. In another circumstance, it might be magical. Tonight, the shadows between those lights seem deeper, more threatening.

"The gun is what worries me most," I admit. "Dylan's always been about control, but that's escalation."

Tank nods. "Where does he live?"

"About fifteen minutes from here," Lilly answers. "One of his father's properties, a condo development on the lake."

"And his daily routine?"

I raise an eyebrow. "Gathering intel?"

Tank's expression doesn't change. "Information is always useful."

Before I can respond, fireworks explode overhead, the first test shots before the main show. The boom resonates in my chest, and I notice how both Tank and Lilly tense at the sound, though likely for different reasons.

"Speaking of useful information," I say, "the fireworks mean it's almost nine. They'll

be starting the main show in about twenty minutes, down by the lake."

"Dylan mentioned the fireworks specifically," Lilly says nervously. "Should we leave?"

I glance at Tank, curious about his assessment.

"No," he says finally. "We stay. But we watch the fireworks from somewhere with clear sight lines and multiple exits."

"I know just the place," I offer. "The hill by the 4-H building. We can see everything from there, and there's a service road behind it if we need to leave quickly."

Tank's eyes lock with mine again, and this time there's something beyond tactical appreciation in them. Something that makes my pulse quicken in a way that has nothing to do with the possible danger.

"Smart thinking," is all he says, but the weight of his gaze carries more.

As we stand to leave, I catch movement in my peripheral vision. Dylan, standing near the Ferris wheel, watching us. He doesn't try to hide this time, just stares openly, his face illuminated by another burst of test fireworks.

Tank notices my distraction and follows my gaze. His body shifts, angling between us and Dylan.

"He's not going to give up easily," I say quietly.

"Neither am I," Tank responds, his voice a low rumble that I feel more than hear.

And as we make our way toward the hill, I realize I'm caught between two

immovable forces. Dylan's obsession and Tank's protection. One fills me with dread, the other with something dangerously close to hope.

The night is far from over, and as another firework explodes overhead, I can't shake the feeling that it's not the only thing about to ignite at the Sweetheart County Fair.

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Elevated ground with clear visibility in all directions. Strategic. As we settle onto the grassy slope, I position myself slightly behind Lilly and Katty, giving me a full view of the fairgrounds below while keeping them both in my peripheral vision.

Another test firework bursts overhead, illuminating the fairgrounds in flashes of blue and silver. In those brief moments of clarity, I scan the crowds, looking for Dylan. He's down there somewhere, watching, waiting. Like a jackal circling a campfire.

"You want some?" Katty offers, holding out a bag of kettle corn she bought on our way up the hill.

I take a handful. "Thanks."

As she settles back down, I can't help but look at her in the intermittent light.

There's something about her that doesn't fit the small-town best friend mold.

She carries herself with a quiet confidence I've rarely seen outside the club or the military—people who've faced real danger and come through it.

Either she's one hell of an actress, or she's genuinely as strong as she appears. I'm betting on the latter, and it's more appealing than it should be.

"You're staring," she says without looking at me, a small smile playing in the corner of her mouth.

"Assessing," I correct her, not embarrassed about being caught.

Now she does turn, those green eyes meeting mine directly. "And what's your assessment?"

"That you're either the best liar I've ever met, or you're exactly what you appear to be."

"And what do I appear to be?" she challenges, one eyebrow raised.

"Someone who doesn't back down. Someone who's seen enough shit to know how the world really works." I pause, then add, "Someone who's a lot stronger than most."

Her expression shifts subtly—surprise, maybe even appreciation. "Most people just see the small-town girl who works at the library."

"I'm not most people."

"No," she agrees, her eyes traveling over the tattoos on my neck, the scars on my knuckles. "You're definitely not."

It's dangerous, this pull toward her. I'm not here for this. I'm here for Lilly, to deal with a problem, then get back to the club. Anything else is a complication.

And yet...

"Oh, it's starting!" Lilly exclaims as the first real firework erupts overhead, a massive red and gold that reflects in Katty's eyes.

For the next few minutes, we watch in silence as the sky fills with light and thunder.

I've never been a fan of fireworks—too similar to other explosions I've experienced—but I find myself watching Katty's reactions more than the display

itself.

The way she smiles at the larger bursts, the slight intake of breath at an unexpected pattern.

It's during a particularly loud sequence that I spot them. Four figures making their way up the service road toward our position. The lead figure is unmistakable even in the darkness. Dylan. And he's brought backup.

"We've got company," I say quietly, rising to my feet. "Four of them coming up the back way."

Katty is on her feet instantly, pulling Lilly up beside her. "Dylan?"

"And friends." I step forward, positioning myself between them and the approaching group. "Stay behind me."

"Like hell," Katty mutters, moving to stand beside me. "I'm not cowering while you handle this alone."

Before I can argue, Dylan and his entourage crest the hill. In the flashing light from the fireworks, I see he's brought three guys who look like they've just stepped out of a college fraternity. Young, soft, with that entitled look I've seen a thousand times.

"Lilly!" Dylan calls out, ignoring me completely. "I need to talk to you. Just for a few minutes."

"She doesn't want to talk to you," I respond, my voice carrying easily despite the fireworks overhead. "Time for you to leave."

Dylan's eyes finally flick to me, dismissive. "This is between me and my girlfriend."

"Ex-girlfriend," Katty corrects, her stance wide and confident beside me. "And she already told you it's over."

One of Dylan's friends—a stocky kid with a backwards baseball cap—laughs. "Dude, your girl's got a bodyguard now? Two of them?"

"Go away, Dylan," Lilly says from behind us, her voice trembling but determined. "I've told you a hundred times, we're done."

Dylan's face hardens, the mask of charm slipping. "Look, I've tried to be reasonable. I've given you space. But we need to talk, and we're going to do that now. Either the easy way or the hard way."

His friends spread out slightly, trying to look intimidating. It would be laughable if the situation weren't so potentially volatile. These boys have no idea what they're stepping into.

"You threatening my sister?" I ask, a dangerous calm settling over me. It's the same feeling I get before any confrontation—a cold clarity that slows everything down.

"I'm saying," Dylan enunciates slowly, "that I'm going to have five minutes alone with Lilly. You and the librarian can wait right here."

"That's not happening," I state simply.

Dylan's eyes narrow. "Look, I don't know what kind of tough guy act you think you're pulling with your little biker costume, but in Sweetheart County, the Thomas family gets what it wants."

The club isn't a costume. It's family. Brotherhood. The only place I've belonged since coming back from overseas. The patches I wear were earned through blood and

loyalty.

"If you take one step toward my sister," I say, my voice dropping to that quiet register that makes smarter men back away, "you're declaring war. Not just on me, but on the entire Iron & Blood MC."

Dylan actually laughs. "I don't give a shit about a bunch of guys playing pretend bikers in some nowhere town."

And just like that, the decision is made.

I smile. Not a pleasant expression based on how Dylan's friends take a half-step back. "Wrong answer."

My first punch connects with Dylan's jaw with a satisfying crack. He doesn't even have time to raise his hands before he crumples, unconscious before he hits the ground.

The other three stand frozen for a heartbeat, staring at their fallen friend. Then baseball cap guy lunges forward with a wild swing that I don't even bother dodging. His fist connects with my cheekbone, and I barely feel it. Nothing compared to what I've taken before.

"That all you got?" I ask him calmly.

His eyes widen in fear just before my counterpunch takes him in the solar plexus, doubling him over. A knee to the face finishes him off.

The other two come at me together, which shows slightly more intelligence but ultimately makes no difference.

One grabs for my arms while the other tries to land a punch.

I pivot, using the momentum of the grabber to send him sprawling into his friend.

They tangle together, giving me the opening to stomp one's knee—not hard enough to break, but enough to take him out of the fight—while delivering a precise strike to the other's throat that leaves him gagging and clutching his neck.

In less than thirty seconds, all four are down.

None of them even knew how to throw a proper punch.

Just kids playing at being tough, who probably hit the gym twice a week and think that makes them fighters.

They've never been in a real battle, never understood that true fighting isn't about muscles or bravado. It's about will and experience.

And I have plenty of both.

I turn back to Lilly and Katty, the adrenaline still coursing through me. My sister is pressed against Katty's chest, crying softly.

"Lil," I say, my voice gentler now. "I'm sorry. I should have kept my cool."

The last thing I wanted was to scare her. To make her see the violence I'm capable of. It's why I've always kept my two lives separate—the brother and the club member.

But Katty meets my eyes over Lilly's head, and what I see there isn't fear or disgust. It's approval. Maybe even admiration.

"You did what needed to be done," she says firmly. "They weren't going to back down with words."

Lilly pulls away from Katty, wiping her eyes.

"I'm not crying because I'm scared of you, Tank," she explains, her voice steadier now. "I'm crying because I hate that it came to this. That you had to deal with my problem."

"That's what brothers do, Lil. We handle problems."

The fireworks continue overhead, the booms covering the groans of the men at our feet. Dylan is still out cold.

"We need to go," Katty says, practical as ever. "When these idiots wake up, they're going to be pissed, and Dylan's dad has enough pull in this town to make things difficult."

I look at the four men on the ground, then at the fairgrounds below us, still alive with lights and music and laughter. The night is young, and the adrenaline from the fight has left me feeling more alive than I have in months.

"No," I say firmly.

Katty and Lilly both stare at me.

"No?" Katty repeats, her eyebrows drawing together.

"We're not running." I step closer to them both. "We're not letting some entitled prick and his frat boy backup dancers ruin our night."

Lilly blinks, confusion replacing her tears. "But—"

"But nothing," I cut her off gently. "You've been letting this asshole control your life for months, Lil. Making you afraid, changing your routines, keeping you looking over your shoulder. It stops tonight."

I turn to baseball cap guy, who's regained consciousness and is watching me with terrified eyes.

"You and your buddies are going to drag sleeping beauty here back to wherever you came from.

And you're going to tell him when he wakes up that if he shows his face near any of us again, next time I won't be so gentle. "

The guy nods frantically, already scrambling to help his friends up.

I turn back to Lilly and Katty. "Now, I rode twenty hours straight to get here. I haven't seen my baby sister in eight months. And I've been told this fair has the best funnel cakes in three counties."

A slow smile spreads across Lilly's face. The first genuine one I've seen since I arrived. "Are you serious?"

"Dead serious." I glance at Katty, whose expression has shifted from concern to something more complex. "Unless you two are too scared of a few unconscious rich boys?"

Katty's eyes narrow at the challenge, but I can see the corner of her mouth twitching. "I'm not scared of anything in this county."

"Prove it," I reply, holding her gaze.

The air between us practically crackles, and I realize that Lilly is looking back and forth between us with growing interest.

"Fine," Katty concedes, tossing her head. "But if we're staying, we're doing this right."

"Meaning?" I ask.

"Meaning we're getting the full Sweetheart County Fair experience." She grins suddenly, "Starting with the Ferris wheel."

Lilly claps her hands together. "Yes! Tank, you have to. It's tradition!"

I'm about to argue—riding a rickety carnival ride isn't exactly my idea of a good time—but the enthusiasm on my sister's face stops me.

"Lead the way," I say instead.

As we make our way down the hill, leaving Dylan's friends to manage their fallen leader, I notice Katty watching me.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing," she replies, but then adds, "Just surprised. Most men who can fight like you do would be all about getting out of here, cleaning up, planning the next move."

"I'm not most men."

"No," she agrees, echoing our earlier conversation. "You're definitely not."

The fairgrounds are still packed despite the late hour, families and couples wandering between game booths and food stalls. The main fireworks display has finished, leaving the night sky clear above the colorful lights of the midway.

As we walk, I keep Lilly between Katty and me, my eyes constantly scanning for threats. But there's no sign of Dylan or his friends. Just the normal crowd enjoying a summer night at the fair.

"There it is!" Lilly points ahead to where the Ferris wheel towers over everything, a giant circle of light slowly turning against the night sky.

The line isn't long. Most people are focused on the games and food now that the fireworks are over. As we approach, I can see that each gondola is shaped like a swan, painted white with garish red hearts along the sides.

"You've got to be kidding me," I mutter.

Katty laughs, the sound rich and genuine. "Welcome to Sweetheart County, where everything is designed to be as corny as humanly possible."

"It's charming," Lilly defends, but she's smiling too.

The operator is an older man with a weathered face and a carnival worker's permanent squint. He eyes my cut and tattoos but says nothing as we pay and wait for our turn.

"Three to a swan?" he asks when we reach the front of the line.

"Actually," Lilly says with a mischievous glint in her eye, "I think I'll ride alone. I get motion sick easily."

Before I can protest, she's climbing into a swan by herself, leaving Katty and me to take the next one.

"Your sister's about as subtle as a freight train," Katty murmurs as we slide into our own swan, the metal creaking under our weight.

The seats are narrower than they look from the ground, forcing us to sit close enough that our thighs press together. I can feel the warmth of her body through my jeans, smell the faint scent of something floral in her hair.

"She's always been a terrible wingman," I agree as the operator secures the safety bar across our laps.

Katty raises an eyebrow. "Is that what's happening here? You need a wingman?"

The wheel jerks into motion before I can answer, lifting us slowly into the night air. Below us, the fair spreads out in colored lights and movement. Above, stars pepper the clear night sky.

And beside me sits a woman who continues to surprise me at every turn—strong enough to stand her ground against threats, smart enough to recognize the tactical advantages of high ground, and beautiful enough that I'm finding it increasingly difficult to remember why I came to Sweetheart County in the first place.

"Maybe I do," I finally answer, turning to face her fully as our swan climbs higher into the night sky.

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"Maybe I do," he says, turning to face me as our swan-shaped gondola climbs higher into the night sky.

The carnival lights dance across his features, softening the hard edges that made Dylan and his friends crumple like paper. Up here, with the fair spreading beneath us and stars scattered above, Tank looks almost like a different person. Still dangerous, still intense, but somehow more human.

"I doubt that," I reply, adjusting slightly in the narrow seat. Our thighs press together, "Something tells me you don't have trouble getting women's attention."

"Getting attention and finding someone worth paying attention to are different things."

The Ferris wheel continues its slow ascent, each gondola rocking gently as we climb higher. From this elevation, Sweetheart County Fair looks almost magical, a kaleidoscope of lights and movement below us. No sign of Dylan or his friends. No hint of the violence that erupted just minutes ago.

"So," I say, watching his profile against the night sky, "Iron & Blood MC. How does a Marine end up in a motorcycle club?"

His eyebrow raises slightly. "You don't beat around the bush, do you?"

"Life's too short for small talk." I shrug. "Besides, you just knocked out four guys for insulting your club. Seems like it means something to you."

He nods slowly, his gaze drifting out over the fairgrounds before returning to me. "When I got out of the Corps, I was... lost. Four years of having a purpose, a mission, brothers who had my back. Then suddenly, nothing."

Our gondola reaches the top of the wheel and pauses, suspended at the highest point. The breeze up here is cooler, carrying the mingled scents of funnel cake and summer grass.

"I drifted for a while," Tank continues, his deep voice almost gentle in the relative quiet. "Worked odd jobs, moved around. Nothing felt right. Then my bike broke down outside of Cedar Falls."

"And that's where you found the club," I guess.

He nods. "The president, Hellfire, helped me get her running again. Invited me to stay for a while." His mouth quirks up at the corner. "Years later, I'm still there."

"What is it about the club?" I ask, genuinely curious. "What makes it home?"

Tank seems to consider this, like no one's ever asked him to articulate it before.

"Brotherhood," he finally says. "Structure.

Purpose. After the Marines, civilian life felt.

.. hollow. No code, no honor. The club has rules, hierarchy, expectations.

When you've lived with that framework your whole life, trying to exist without it is like trying to build a house with no foundation. "

The Ferris wheel lurches back into motion, beginning its slow descent. I find myself

wishing it would stop again, keep us suspended in this bubble where conversations like this seem possible.

"My dad was the same after he left the Army," I confess. "Never could quite adjust to civilian rules, or lack thereof."

"You mentioned he was a drill sergeant. That must have been an interesting childhood."

I laugh, the sound carrying away on the breeze. "That's one word for it. Everything was a training exercise. Bedtime was 'lights out.' Breakfast was 'chow.' My bedroom was my 'barracks' and it better pass inspection every morning."

"Sounds intense for a kid."

"It was." I look down at my hands, the memories washing over me. "But it was also... secure, in a way. I always knew exactly what was expected of me, what the consequences would be. There was comfort in that certainty."

We're silent for a moment as our gondola continues its descent, then begins climbing again a second time.

"Is that why you're not afraid of me?" Tank asks suddenly. "Because you grew up around military men?"

The question catches me off guard with its directness. "I never said I wasn't afraid of you."

"You didn't have to." His eyes, dark and perceptive, hold mine. "Most people get nervous around men like me. You stood your ground from the first moment. Why?"

I consider deflecting, giving a superficial answer, but something about the night and the heights and the man beside me pulls the truth from me instead.

"After my dad died, my mom remarried quickly.

Too quickly." I watch the lights of the fair spin below us, focusing on them rather than the memories.

"My stepfather was... not a good man. Military on the outside, but none of the honor or discipline my father had.

Just the violence and the need for control. "

Tank's body tenses beside me, but he remains silent, waiting.

"He wasn't physically abusive, not exactly.

But he was... cruel. Psychologically. Especially after my mom got sick.

" The words feel strange in my mouth, truths I rarely speak aloud.

"I learned pretty quickly how to read dangerous men—when to stand firm and when to retreat, when to speak and when to stay silent. It's a survival skill."

His hand covers mine where it rests on the safety bar, warm and unexpectedly gentle.

"I'm sorry that happened to you."

"It was a long time ago." I turn my hand beneath his, a silent acknowledgment. "But to answer your question, I'm not afraid of you because I can tell the difference between men who use their strength to control and men who use it to protect."

The Ferris wheel carries us to the pinnacle again, and this time when it pauses, I feel suspended in more ways than one. Between earth and sky, between stranger and something more, between caution and trust.

"And which am I?" Tank asks, his voice a low rumble that seems to vibrate through our connected hands.

"You're a protector," I say without hesitation. "The way you are with Lilly, the way you held back with those boys even though you could have done real damage. You have control over your power. That's rare."

"Most people only see the patches and the tattoos. They make assumptions."

"Most people are idiots," I respond, drawing a genuine laugh from him.

"So a drill sergeant's daughter becomes a librarian in Sweetheart County," Tank muses as our gondola moves again. "How did that happen?"

It's my turn to laugh. "You think that's a strange trajectory? I came here for college. Sweetheart U has a good literature program. Planned to stay one semester. That was eight years ago."

"What made you stay?"

I tilt my head, considering. "At first it was Lilly. We clicked immediately, became inseparable. Then I got the job at the library, and I discovered I loved it—helping people find the right book, running the children's reading program, organizing the local history archives."

"And now?" he asks, unexpectedly perceptive. "What keeps you here now?"

The question hits closer to home than I'd like. I stare out at the twinkling lights of the small town spread beneath us.

"Habit, maybe," I admit. "Comfort. The devil you know." I turn back to him. "I've been thinking about leaving, actually. Before all this Dylan drama started. There's a position at a university library up north that I've been eyeing."

"But you stayed for Lilly."

I nod. "I couldn't leave her alone with this. Not when no one else was taking it seriously."

His eyes soften, and I see in them a recognition, of loyalty, of putting others before yourself. It's a quality we share, apparently.

"The Iron & Blood MC is lucky to have you," I say, changing the subject. "What exactly do you do there?"

A corner of his mouth lifts. "You asking about club business?"

"I'm asking about you," I clarify. "There's a difference."

He stares at me for a few seconds, seeming to weigh how much to share. "Officially, I help run security for the club's legitimate businesses—a garage, a few bars. Unofficially..."

"You're an enforcer," I finish for him, putting the pieces together. "The ones they send when there's trouble."

He doesn't confirm or deny, but his silence is answer enough.

"Does it bother you?" I ask. "The violence?"

The wheel turns again, carrying us toward the ground before rising once more. Our third climb. The ride will end soon.

"Not the way it should," he answers honestly. "I'm good at it. Have been since I was a kid defending Lilly from playground bullies. In the Marines, that capability had purpose, direction. The club gives me the same."

"But?"

His eyebrow raises. "What makes you think there's a 'but'?"

"There's always a 'but' when someone's that self-aware about their relationship with violence."

Tank's laugh is soft, almost rueful. "But... sometimes I wonder what it would be like to use those skills differently. To build something instead of just protecting it or destroying threats."

The vulnerability in his admission catches me off guard. This man, who exudes danger and capability, harbors the same doubts and questions as anyone else. It makes him suddenly, startlingly human.

"What would you build?" I ask, genuinely curious.

He shakes his head. "I don't know. Never let myself think about it too deeply."

Our gondola reaches the top again, and the wheel stops once more, keeping us suspended at the highest point. Below us, I can see Lilly in her own swan several gondolas ahead, chatting animatedly with a little girl in the gondola next to hers.

"Maybe you should," I suggest softly. "Think about it, I mean."

His eyes find mine in the carnival lights, searching for something. Whatever he sees makes him shift closer, the line of his body warm against mine in the cool night air.

"Maybe I should," he agrees, voice low. His gaze drops to my mouth for just a second, then back to my eyes. "You're not what I expected, Katty."

"What did you expect?"

"Someone... softer. More like Lilly."

I smile at that. "Disappointed?"

"The opposite." His hand still covers mine on the safety bar, and now his thumb traces a small circle on my skin. "You're a surprise. I don't get many of those in my life."

The simple touch sends electricity up my arm, more potent than any carnival ride static. This is dangerous territory, this pull toward him. He's Lilly's brother. He's temporary—here to solve a problem, then gone back to his club and his life. He's exactly the kind of complicated I've been avoiding.

And yet, suspended high above the fairgrounds with the stars as witnesses, I find myself leaning slightly toward him anyway.

"Good surprise or bad surprise?" I ask, my voice huskier than intended.

"Definitely good," he murmurs, closing the distance between us by another inch. "But complicated."

"Complicated," I agree, not pulling away. "You're leaving once Dylan's handled."

"I am."

"And I'm Lilly's best friend."

"You are."

We're close enough now that I can feel his warm breath on my face, see the faint scar that runs through his right eyebrow, count the individual lashes framing his dark eyes.

"So, this is probably a bad idea," I whisper.

"Probably," he agrees, his free hand coming up to brush a strand of hair from my face. The gesture is so gentle it almost hurts. "I've never been known for my good ideas."

The Ferris wheel jerks back into motion, breaking the moment. We both straighten slightly as our gondola begins its final descent toward the platform.

"For what it's worth," Tank says as the ground comes back into focus below us, "I'm glad Lilly has you. Not many people would stand by a friend through something like this."

"She'd do the same for me," I reply, but the warmth in his eyes makes me feel like I've done something extraordinary instead of just what any decent person would do.

As our swan-shaped gondola glides to a stop at the platform, I realize something has shifted between us during this ride—boundaries crossed, defenses lowered. For better or worse, Tank is no longer just Lilly's intimidating older brother or the dangerous biker who arrived to save the day.

He's becoming something else entirely. Something far more complicated and potentially far more devastating to my own peace.

The operator unlocks the safety bar, and Tank rises first, extending his hand to help me from the gondola. His palm is warm and calloused against mine, his grip strong but controlled like everything else about him.

"Thank you for the ride," he says, and something in his tone suggests he's thanking me for more than just accompanying him on the Ferris wheel.

"Anytime," I reply, and find that I mean it more than I probably should.

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"Anytime," Katty says, and something in her voice makes me believe she means it.

I release her hand reluctantly as Lilly bounces over to us, her eyes bright with excitement and mischief.

"How was your ride?" she asks, looking between us with barely concealed interest.

"Illuminating," I answer, catching Katty's eye. The hint of a smile plays at the corner of her mouth.

"Uh-huh," Lilly says, clearly not buying my casual tone. "You two seemed pretty deep in conversation up there."

I should shut this down now. Katty isn't just my sister's best friend.

She's also at least ten years younger than me, based on what she said about college.

She lives here in Sweetheart County; I have responsibilities back in Cedar Falls.

In a few days, once this Dylan situation is handled, I'll be gone.

But then Katty looks at me with those green eyes that see too much, and logical thought becomes surprisingly difficult.

"Just getting to know each other," Katty explains smoothly. "Since I've heard about the famous Tank for years but never met him."

"Famous, huh?" I raise an eyebrow at my sister. "What exactly have you been saying about me?"

Lilly grins. "Only the good stuff. Like how you used to let me ride on your shoulders at the state fair when I was little. Or how you taught me to change a tire when I was twelve."

"Or how you once punched Billy Miller in the face for calling her Silly Lilly in seventh grade?" Katty adds with a smirk.

I wince. "You told her about that?"

"I tell Katty everything," Lilly says pointedly, and there's a warning in her tone that doesn't escape me. She's protective of her friend—making sure I know that whatever happened on that Ferris wheel, Katty isn't just some random woman.

Message received, little sister.

"It's getting late," I say, checking my watch. Nearly midnight. "We should probably head out."

Lilly's face falls slightly. "Already? But you just got here, and we haven't even had hot chocolate yet!"

"Hot chocolate?" I repeat.

"It's tradition," Katty explains. "Can't leave the Sweetheart County Fair without having Ma Calloway's hot chocolate. It's kind of famous around here."

"The best in the state," Lilly adds. "Please, Tank? Just one more thing before we go?"

I look between them. My sister's pleading expression and Katty's challenging one. I've never been good at denying Lilly anything, and apparently, I'm developing the same weakness when it comes to Katty.

"Fine," I concede. "One hot chocolate, then we're leaving."

Lilly claps her hands together in victory before linking her arm through mine. "This way. Ma's stand is by the craft barn."

As we navigate through the thinning crowd, I keep alert for any sign of Dylan or his friends, but the fairgrounds seem peaceful. Most families with young children have already left, leaving mostly teenagers and couples enjoying the late-night atmosphere of the midway.

The hot chocolate stand is a small wooden structure with a hand-painted sign and Christmas lights strung along its awning despite it being the middle of summer. An elderly woman with white hair piled high on her head presides over a row of simmering pots.

"Lilly Parker!" she calls out when she spots us. "I was wondering if you'd make it by tonight."

"Wouldn't miss it, Ma," Lilly responds warmly. "Three of your specials, please."

"Coming right up, honey." Ma's eyes travel over me curiously. "And who's this strapping young man? Don't think I've seen you around these parts before."

"This is my brother, Tank," Lilly introduces.

Ma surveys me with shrewd eyes that miss nothing. Not the cuts on my knuckles, not the patch on my back, not the way I position myself to keep sight lines clear.

"Well, anyone who's kin to our Lilly is welcome here," she finally says. "First cup's on the house."

Before I can protest, she's already pouring thick, dark chocolate into three oversized mugs, topping each with a generous swirl of whipped cream and a dusting of cinnamon.

"Best enjoyed while it's hot," Ma advises as she hands them over.

We move to a nearby picnic table, the last patrons at this quiet corner of the fairgrounds. The first sip of hot chocolate is a revelation—rich and velvety, with hints of something deeper than just cocoa.

"She adds cayenne," Katty explains, noticing my surprised expression. "And a splash of something stronger, though she'll never admit it."

"It's good," I acknowledge, taking another sip. The heat and spice cut through the sweetness, creating a perfect balance.

"Told you," Lilly says smugly, already sporting a whipped cream mustache. "Worth staying for, right?"

I have to admit it is, though I'm not sure if that's because of the hot chocolate or the company.

Sitting here in the glow of the Christmas lights with Lilly happy and relaxed beside me and Katty across from me, her face softened by the golden light, I feel something unfamiliar—a moment of peace, maybe. Or belonging.

It's dangerous to get used to this feeling. I have responsibilities waiting for me. As the newest member of the inner circle, I'm in charge of training the prospects, showing

them the ropes, making sure they understand what it means to wear the patch. The club is counting on me.

"You've got a little..." Katty points to her upper lip, looking at me with amusement.

I swipe at my mouth with the back of my hand, but based on her laugh, I've missed it.

"No, it's—here," she says, leaning forward across the table.

Before I can react, her thumb brushes across my upper lip, wiping away the whipped cream I'd apparently been sporting. The casual touch shouldn't affect me the way it does—a jolt of electricity running through my face directly into my throbbing bulge.

"Thanks," I manage.

Her eyes linger on mine a beat too long before she sits back. "Can't have the big bad biker looking less than intimidating," she teases.

Lilly snorts into her hot chocolate. "Too late for that. You should see him at Christmas. He wears this ridiculous sweater our grandma knitted him with reindeer on it."

"Lil," I warn, but there's no heat behind it.

"What?" she asks innocently. "It's cute! You're not always scary, you know."

Katty's watching this exchange with a small smile, whipped cream dotting her upper lip now. Without thinking, I reach across the table and brush it away with my thumb, the same way she did for me.

Her skin is soft under my touch, her lips parting slightly in surprise. I let my thumb

linger perhaps a second longer than necessary, memorizing the feel of her.

"Can't have the badass librarian looking less than intimidating," I echo her words back to her, my voice low.

Lilly makes a choking sound.

"Oh my God," she sputters. "Did you just...? You never do that. For anyone."

"Shut it, Lil," I mutter, withdrawing my hand.

"No, I'm serious," my sister continues, clearly enjoying my discomfort. "He's like, allergic to PDA. One time his ex-girlfriend tried to fix his collar in public and he practically short-circuited."

"Different circumstances," I say through gritted teeth.

Katty's eyes dance with amusement. She leans toward Lilly. "So what you're saying is, I should be honored?"

"Absolutely," Lilly confirms with exaggerated seriousness.

"Well then," Katty turns to me and winks—actually winks—"thank you for the mustache assistance, Tank. I'm deeply honored."

Goddamn it. The playful teasing, that wink, the way she says my name... It's a sin wrapped in a smile. I drain the rest of my hot chocolate, needing something to do with my hands that doesn't involve reaching for her again.

"If you two are done," I say, setting down my empty mug, "we should get going. It's late, and we need to figure out our next move with Dylan."

The mention of his name sobers the mood instantly. Lilly's smile fades, and Katty straightens, the playfulness in her eyes replaced by resolve.

"You're right," Katty agrees. "And he knows where Lilly lives, so she shouldn't go back to her apartment tonight."

"She can stay with me at the motel," I offer.

Katty shakes her head.

"Dylan's dad owns it. Not safe." She gathers our empty mugs. "You can both stay at my place. I've got a spare bedroom and a couch. It's outside town limits, like I mentioned before."

Part of me knows I should decline—spending the night under the same roof as Katty is testing whatever restraint I might have left. But the tactical assessment is sound. Her place is unknown to Dylan and off his radar.

"If you're sure," I say cautiously.

"I am." She returns the mugs to Ma with a wave of thanks, then turns back to us. "Besides, safety in numbers, right?"

"Right," I agree, though safety isn't what I'm feeling when I look at her.

We make our way back through the fairgrounds toward the exit. The crowd has thinned considerably, with vendors beginning to close up their booths. The carnival rides still run, but with fewer riders now, their colored lights spinning against the night sky.

At the parking lot, Lilly yawns widely. The adrenaline crash from the confrontation

with Dylan is clearly hitting her.

"I'll ride with Katty," she says, leaning against me briefly. "You can follow us on your bike."

I nod, scanning the parking lot for any sign of Dylan or his friends. "Stay alert. If you notice anyone following, honk twice and I'll move in front of you."

Katty pulls out her keys. "It's about fifteen minutes from here. Mostly back roads."

"I'll be right behind you," I assure them.

As they walk toward Katty's truck, an older model Ford that looks surprisingly well-maintained, I head for my Harley.

The night air has cooled considerably, but I barely notice as I kick the bike to life.

My mind is too full of green eyes and challenging smiles and the feel of soft skin beneath my thumb.

I follow the red taillights of Katty's truck out of the fairgrounds and onto the country roads that wind through Sweetheart County. True to her word, she takes us along back routes, avoiding the main roads where we might be spotted.

The rhythm of the ride usually centers me, clears my head. Tonight, it fails. All I can think about is what's waiting at the end of this road—a night under Katty's roof, the promise of her presence just a room away.

I'm leaving in a few days. I have responsibilities, commitments. A life built around the club and the brotherhood I've found there. Getting tangled up with Katty, no matter how appealing the prospect, is a complication I don't need.

The truck stops in front of a small but well-kept farmhouse, just as Katty described—wraparound porch, blue door, set back from the road among a cluster of oak trees. Light spills from the windows she must have left on, casting a warm glow onto the porch steps.

As I park my bike beside her truck and kill the engine, I take a deep breath of the cool night air. One problem at a time. First, keep Lilly safe from Dylan. Then worry about keeping myself safe from whatever spell Katty seems to be casting over me.

Based on tonight's evidence, I suspect the first challenge will prove far easier than the second.

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"It's not much," I say, pushing open the front door and flicking on the lights, "but it's home."

I wince as the overhead light reveals the state of my living room.

Clothes draped over the arm of the couch, books stacked on the coffee table, a half-empty mug of yesterday's tea sitting on the side table.

I'd left in a rush this morning, not expecting company, especially not company in the form of Lilly's intimidating older brother.

"Sorry for the mess," I add, quickly gathering an armful of scattered clothing. "I wasn't exactly planning on houseguests tonight."

Tank steps inside, his large frame making my modest farmhouse seem suddenly smaller. His eyes sweep the room—tactical assessment, I realize, noting exits and entry points before he even thinks about the décor.

"No need to apologize," Lilly yawns, dropping her purse on the entryway table. "You should see my apartment. This is practically a magazine spread compared to my disaster zone."

I toss the armload of clothes into a nearby basket and kick off my boots by the door. "Make yourselves at home. Anyone want tea? Coffee?"

Lilly yawns again, stretching her arms overhead. "Honestly, I'm dead on my feet. That adrenaline crash is no joke."

Looking at her more closely, I can see the exhaustion etched into her face. The confrontation with Dylan, the emotional roller coaster of the day. It's all catching up with her.

"You can take my bed," I offer immediately. "I'll crash on the couch."

"No way," Lilly protests. "I'm not kicking you out of your own bed. The couch is fine for me."

"It's a lumpy old thing," I argue. "And you've had a rough day. I insist."

Tank watches our back-and-forth with quiet amusement, still standing near the door like he's not quite sure of his place in this domestic scene.

"How about I give you both a quick tour," I suggest, "and then we can figure out sleeping arrangements?"

I lead them through the small house—kitchen with its vintage appliances and mismatched mugs, the bathroom with the clawfoot tub I refinished myself, the spare room currently serving as my home office with a fold-out futon.

"Tank, you can take the futon," I say, gesturing to the room. "It's surprisingly comfortable. I crash there sometimes when I'm up late working."

He nods, setting his small duffel bag on the floor beside it. "It's perfect. Thanks."

Finally, we reach my bedroom at the end of the hall. I hesitate before opening the door, suddenly self-conscious. My bedroom has always been more functional than personal—a place to sleep, not much more.

"And this is where you'll be staying," I tell Lilly, pushing open the door.

The room is sparse, just a queen bed with plain navy sheets, a simple wooden nightstand, and a lamp. No pictures on the walls, no knickknacks, no personal touches. It's practical, efficient, and utterly lacking in character.

I see Tank notice this, his eyes taking in the room's emptiness. A flicker of something—recognition, maybe?—crosses his face before his expression returns to neutral.

"It's not exactly HGTV material," I joke weakly, trying to cover my sudden discomfort. "I never really learned how to make a place feel like home. Military brat and all. We moved so often that 'home' was wherever we unpacked our bags that year."

"It's perfect," Lilly says, sitting on the edge of the bed and bouncing slightly. "And the bed feels amazing after the day we've had."

"Bathroom's stocked with fresh towels," I tell her. "And there should be an unused toothbrush in the medicine cabinet."

"You're the best," Lilly says through another yawn. She looks between Tank and me with sudden mischief in her eyes, despite her exhaustion. "You two going to behave yourselves while I sleep?"

"Lilly," Tank warns.

"What?" she asks innocently. "I saw you two on that Ferris wheel. And the hot chocolate thing? Please."

I feel heat creeping up my neck. "Go to sleep, Lil."

"I'm just saying," she continues, clearly enjoying our discomfort, "if you guys want

to—"

"Good night, Lilly," Tank cuts her off firmly, though I catch the hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth.

"Fine, fine," she concedes, flopping back onto my bed. "I'm going. But remember. These walls are probably thin."

"We're leaving," I point to the door, fighting my own smile. "Before I change my mind about the bed."

She giggles as she grabs her small overnight bag and disappears into the bathroom, leaving Tank and me alone in the hallway.

The silence stretches between us, different from the comfortable quiet we shared on the Ferris wheel. Here, in my home, with the prospect of the night ahead, everything feels more intimate, more charged.

"She's always been a brat," Tank finally says, breaking the tension.

I laugh softly. "She means well. In her own meddling way."

"That's what makes her dangerous," he agrees with a wry smile.

We stand there for a moment longer, neither quite ready to separate for the night.

"Are you tired?" I ask. "Or would you like something to drink? Water, beer, tea?"

"Water would be good," he answers. "It's been a long day."

I lead the way back to the kitchen. In the fluorescent light of my small kitchen, I grab

two glasses from the cabinet and fill them from the tap.

"Fighting four guys really works up a thirst, huh?" I tease, handing him a glass.

"That was nothing. Barely even a workout."

I lean against the counter, studying him over the rim of my glass. "You've had worse, I take it?"

"Much," he confirms, taking a long drink. "Those boys were amateurs. All gym muscles and no actual experience."

"And you enjoy it?" I ask, the question slipping out before I can reconsider. "Living a life of danger, I mean."

"Not enjoy, exactly," he says, setting his glass down. "It's more that I understand it. Danger, violence, risk. They follow rules. There's a clarity in those moments that's hard to find elsewhere."

"The certainty you mentioned on the Ferris wheel," I observe. "Like what my father gave me growing up."

He nods, leaning against the opposite counter. The kitchen is small enough that even with this arrangement, we're only a few feet apart.

"Exactly. In a fight, everything simplifies. Objective, threat, action. No gray areas, no moral ambiguity, no second-guessing." His eyes find mine in the harsh kitchen light. "But enjoy? No. I respect it. I'm good at it. It's not the same thing."

The answer surprises me with its thoughtfulness. Most men I've known who live the kind of life Tank does romanticize the violence, wear it like a badge of honor. His

self-awareness is unexpected and, frankly, appealing.

"What about you?" he asks, turning the question back on me. "This is a pretty isolated spot for someone who claims not to like being alone."

"I never said I don't like being alone," I correct him. "I said I never learned how to make a place feel like home. There's a difference."

His eyes flick to the empty walls, the functional furniture, the lack of personal touches. "Your bedroom," he says. "It's like a way station. Somewhere to sleep, not somewhere to live."

The observation is so accurate it makes me uncomfortable. "Hazard of moving every year or two as a kid," I say with forced lightness. "You learn to travel light."

"That's not it," he counters, his voice gentle but certain. "My room at the club is the same way. It's not about how much stuff you have. It's about not allowing yourself to put down roots."

I look away, uncomfortable with how easily he's read me. "Maybe. Or maybe I just have minimalist taste."

He doesn't push, just takes another sip of his water, allowing the silence to settle between us again. It's one of the things I'm coming to appreciate about Tank. He doesn't fill empty spaces with needless words. He's comfortable with silence in a way few people are.

He sets his glass down and stretches his arms overhead, his shoulders rolling as he works out the kinks from the long ride and the eventful day.

The movement pulls his t-shirt taut across his chest and arms, and I can't help but

notice just how powerfully built he is.

The definition in his biceps, the breadth of his shoulders, the solid wall of his chest.

It's almost unreal, like something carved from stone rather than flesh and blood.

I take a quick sip of water, trying to cool the sudden heat rising within me. Good lord, this man is dangerous in more ways than one.

"So, your stepfather," he says, dropping his arms. "You still have to deal with him?"

"He died a few years ago," I reply. "Liver failure."

"I'm sorry," Tank offers, though there's a question in his tone.

I shrug. "Don't be. He never apologized, never expressed any regret for how he treated me or my mom. Never even acknowledged it." I trace the rim of my glass with my finger. "That's just how it goes sometimes. Not every story gets a neat resolution."

Tank nods, understanding in his eyes. "Life rarely ties things up with a bow."

There's something in his expression that makes me wonder about his own unresolved stories. Taking a chance, I ask, "What about you and Lilly? I know your dad left when you were young. Did that shape who you became?"

He wrinkles his nose slightly—a surprisingly boyish gesture on such a formidable man—and considers the question.

"Maybe," he finally admits. "After he left, I was suddenly the 'man of the house' at twelve years old. Mom worked two jobs, so I was responsible for Lilly most of the

time." He shakes his head slightly. "Probably gave me some kind of hero complex. Military was a natural fit for that."

"Did you like it? The military?" I lean forward, genuinely curious.

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"For a while, yeah," he answers, his eyes growing distant with memory.

"The structure, the brotherhood, the clear chain of command.

All of it made sense to me. It was good for a long time.

" His expression shifts. "But eventually I started to question the objectives.

The endless deployments with no clear endgame, the political bullshit that got good men killed. "

"And the biker club is different?" I ask.

"In the club, there's no violence without purpose," he explains. "We don't move against someone unless there's a clear reason, a clear objective. It's more... honest, in a way."

I nod slowly, thinking about Dylan and his friends, about how the "proper channels" failed Lilly completely.

"Sometimes I wish Sweetheart County had something like that," I admit. "Not necessarily an MC, but... people who could actually protect those who need it. People who wouldn't let someone like Dylan walk free just because his daddy plays golf with the sheriff."

"A town like this might not be ready for an MC," Tank says with a small smile. "We tend to upset the status quo."

"I'm ready for someone to upset the status quo," I counter. "And I'm not the only one. There are people here who need protection. Real protection, not just empty promises from authorities who are in the pockets of men like Thomas senior."

"Sounds like you're trying to convince me to stay."

The question catches me off guard, forcing me to examine my own motivations. Am I trying to convince him to stay? This man I've known for less than a day, who represents everything I've avoided in my small-town life?

He's older, harder, dangerous in ways I can't even fully comprehend.

But there's something between us... A recognition, a pull that I can't deny.

Something I'd like to explore if circumstances were different, if he wasn't just passing through on his way back to a life that has no place for someone like me.

"I don't know," I answer honestly, meeting his gaze directly. "Maybe I'm just thinking out loud about what this town needs. Or maybe..." I hesitate.

"Maybe?" he prompts, his voice lower now, rougher around the edges.

"Maybe I'm just not ready to say goodbye to someone I've barely had time to say hello to," I finish quietly.

Tank pushes away from the counter, closing some of the distance between us. Not crowding me but making his presence impossible to ignore.

"Katty," he says my name like he's testing the feel of it. "This isn't a good idea."

"I know," I acknowledge. "You're leaving in a few days. You have responsibilities

back home. I have a life here. And Lilly is right down the hall."

"All excellent reasons to keep things simple," he agrees, but he makes no move to step back.

"You started it," I point out, a smile tugging at my lips despite the tension.

"Did I?" His eyebrow raises.

"The Ferris wheel," I remind him. "The hot chocolate."

A ghost of a smile touches his mouth. "If I remember correctly, you're the one who wiped whipped cream off my lip first."

"A purely practical gesture," I defend, but my voice betrays me with its breathiness.

"Of course," he agrees, his eyes dropping to my mouth for just a second. "And mine was equally practical."

We're playing with fire here, dancing around something that can only lead to complications. I should step back, put more distance between us, suggest we both get some sleep and face tomorrow with clear heads.

Instead, I find myself leaning slightly toward him, drawn by whatever gravitational pull he exerts.

"We should probably get some sleep," I say, not moving away. "It's late."

"Probably," he agrees, not moving either.

The kitchen clock ticks loudly in the silence, counting seconds that stretch like hours.

Outside, a night bird calls, the sound carrying through the slightly open window. The house settles around us with the familiar creaks and sighs of an old structure.

"Tank," I start, not sure what I'm going to say next.

I never get to find out because a phone rings shrilly, shattering the moment. Tank steps back, pulling his cell from his pocket.

"It's the club," he says, checking the screen. "I should take this."

I nod, both relieved and disappointed by the interruption. "Of course. I'll just..." I gesture vaguely toward the living room. "Give you some privacy."

As I move past him, he catches my wrist gently, just for a moment.

"This conversation isn't over," he says.

"I know," I reply, then slip out of the kitchen, leaving him to his call.

In the living room, I sink onto the couch, heart racing like I've just run a mile.

What am I doing? Getting involved with Tank—even considering it—is complicated at best, foolish at worst. He's passing through, dealing with Dylan, then gone back to his world of motorcycles and brotherhood that has no place for a small-town librarian with commitment issues.

And yet, as I listen to the low murmur of his voice from the kitchen, discussing whatever club business couldn't wait until morning, I can't help but wonder: what if? What if he stayed? What if I went with him? What if we found some middle ground between his world and mine?

Dangerous thoughts. Impractical thoughts. The kind that lead to exactly the messiness I've tried avoiding in my adult life.

I pull the throw blanket off the back of the couch and wrap it around my shoulders, suddenly cold despite the mild summer night. Through the window, I can see Tank's Harley parked beside my truck—a visual representation of just how different our worlds are.

And yet, something in me recognizes something in him. The guardedness, the reluctance to put down roots, the understanding of what it means to stand your ground when necessary. Maybe we're not so different after all.

As I settle deeper into the couch, waiting for him to finish his call, I can't shake the feeling that whatever happens next will change things—for better or worse, I'm not yet sure.

But when Tank returns, we'll have to decide: pursue this spark between us, knowing it has an expiration date, or snuff it out before it can truly ignite.

Either way, I suspect neither of us will emerge from this unscathed.

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The call from the club comes at the worst possible moment. Just as something was building between Katty and me—something I shouldn't want but can't seem to resist—reality intrudes.

I check the screen. Hellfire. The president himself. Fuck.

"It's the club," I tell Katty. "I should take this."

She nods, slipping past me. "Of course. I'll just... give you some privacy."

I catch her wrist briefly as she passes, unable to let her go without some acknowledgment of what's happening between us. "This conversation isn't over," I say quietly.

"I know," she replies, then she's gone, leaving me alone in the kitchen with a ringing phone and a sense of interrupted potential.

I swipe to answer. "Tank here."

"Where the hell are you?" Hellfire's rough voice comes through the speaker, decades of cigarettes and whiskey having turned it to gravel. "You get to your sister's town yet? Everything alright?"

I should have called when I arrived. Club protocol is clear—check in when you reach your destination, especially when traveling alone. But between meeting Lilly at the fair, encountering Dylan, and... everything with Katty, it slipped my mind.

"Yeah, I'm here," I confirm, leaning against the counter. "Got here this afternoon. Sorry I didn't call earlier."

"You had me worried, brother," Hellfire says, and beneath the gruffness, I can hear genuine concern. The club might be tough as nails in most respects, but we look out for our own. "What's the situation with your sister?"

I fill him in quickly. Dylan's stalking, the ineffective local law enforcement, tonight's confrontation at the fair.

"Got him to back off for now," I conclude. "But it's temporary. Guy like that, with his daddy's money and influence behind him, he'll be back with a new approach."

Hellfire hums thoughtfully. "Sounds like you might need a few days to sort this out proper."

"Yeah. I hate to be away from the club, but—"

"Family comes first," he cuts me off. "Always has, always will. You need backup? I can send Wrath and Crow your way. They can be there by tomorrow afternoon."

The offer is tempting. Wrath and Crow are two of our most intimidating members, capable of making problems disappear with brutal efficiency. Having them here would certainly send a message to Dylan and his father.

But something holds me back. Maybe it's not wanting to escalate this beyond what's necessary.

Maybe it's not wanting to bring club business directly into Lilly's life.

Or maybe, if I'm honest with myself, it's not wanting to complicate whatever's

happening with Katty by introducing her to more MC members.

"I appreciate the offer," I say sincerely. "But I think I need to handle this myself for now. If things escalate, I'll make the call."

"Your call, brother," Hellfire agrees. "But remember, the club stands with you. One phone call, and we'll rain hell down on anyone who threatens your family."

"I know," I say, gratitude warming my voice. "And I appreciate it more than I can say."

"How's your sister holding up?" he asks.

I think of Lilly. Her bravery in the face of Dylan's intimidation, her relief when I showed up, her exhaustion as she finally felt safe enough to sleep.

"She's tough," I answer. "Tougher than she gives herself credit for. She'll be okay once this is resolved."

"Good." There's a pause. "Anything else I should know?"

My mind flashes to Katty. Her green eyes challenging me on the Ferris wheel, her steady presence beside me when confronting Dylan, the way she looked at me in this very kitchen just minutes ago.

Should I tell him? Hellfire's been like a father to me since I joined the club, has guided me through more than I can count. But what would I even say? That I've known this woman for less than a day and she's already gotten under my skin in ways I can't explain?

No. I don't need to look like some lovesick prospect falling for the first pretty smile

thrown my way.

Besides, what future could there possibly be?

Katty is younger. At least ten years by my estimate.

She belongs in this town with its fairs and traditions and simple rhythms. Not in Cedar Falls with its competing clubs, territorial disputes, and the constant undercurrent of danger that comes with MC life.

"Nothing else to report," I say finally. "I'll check in tomorrow with an update."

"See that you do," Hellfire responds. "And Tank? Take care of yourself along with your sister. You're important to the club."

"Thanks, boss."

The call ends, leaving me alone in the quiet kitchen. I run a hand through my hair, suddenly tired from the day's events and the weight of responsibilities—to my sister, to the club, and now, somehow, to the woman waiting in the next room.

I take a deep breath and head back to the living room, moving slowly, trying to organize my thoughts. What am I going to say to Katty? How do I explain that whatever's happening between us, however real it feels, has nowhere to go?

I turn the corner into the living room and stop dead in my tracks.

Katty stands by the bookshelf, her back partially to me.

She's changed clothes, or rather, removed some.

The button-up shirt she wore at the fair is gone, replaced by a simple black tank top that clings to every curve of her body.

Her arms are bare, revealing the full sleeve tattoo I'd only glimpsed earlier—intricate roses and thorns that wind from her shoulder to just above her elbow.

But it's the shape of her that stops my breath. The generous curve of her hips, and breasts that strain against the thin fabric of her top. She turns at the sound of my footsteps, and the movement sends a subtle bounce through her chest that makes my mouth go dry.

"Everything okay?" she asks, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

For a moment, I can't speak. Can't think. Can barely remember my own name, let alone whatever I was planning to say about keeping distance between us.

"Yeah," I manage finally, my voice rougher than intended. "Club checking in."

She nods, apparently unaware of the effect she's having on me. "Good. I was just getting some extra blankets for the couch." She gestures to a stack of folded linens on the coffee table. "The house gets chilly at night."

I force my eyes to stay on her face. "You don't have to take the couch. I'm fine with it."

"Absolutely not," she argues. "You're too big for this couch. Your feet would hang off the end by a foot. Besides, I fall asleep here half the time anyway."

She bends to arrange the blankets, and the movement pulls her tank top tighter across her back. I can see now that the tattoo extends beyond her arm, curling slightly onto her shoulder blade—a delicate bird of some kind emerging from the tangle of thorns.

"Your tattoo," I say, desperate for something neutral to focus on. "It's beautiful work."

She glances back over her shoulder, a smile touching her lips. "Thanks. Five different artists over three years. Each rose represents something or someone important."

"And the bird?" I ask, stepping closer without fully intending to.

"Freedom," she answers simply, straightening up to face me. "Or the pursuit of it, anyway."

We're standing closer now, the stack of blankets between us the only barrier. In the dim light of the single lamp, her eyes seem darker, more mysterious.

"Your call," she says after a moment of charged silence. "Is everything okay? Really?"

"Yes. My president wanted to know if I needed backup."

Her eyebrows raise slightly. "And do you?"

"For handling Dylan? No." I shift my weight, suddenly aware of how small the room feels with both of us in it. "I can manage one entitled rich boy and his frat brothers."

"I believe that," she says, and there's something in her tone that sends heat coursing through me. "After watching you tonight, I believe you could handle a lot more than that if necessary."

The admiration in her voice is dangerous, addictive. Makes me want to show her exactly what I'm capable of, in every respect.

"Katty," I start, not even sure what I'm going to say next.

"It's late," she interrupts gently. "And it's been a long day. We both should probably get some sleep."

She's right, of course. Sleep is the sensible option. Tomorrow we need to figure out next steps for handling Dylan, keeping Lilly safe, resolving this situation so I can get back to the club.

"Right," I agree, taking a deliberate step back. "Sleep."

"The bathroom's all yours if you need it," she offers. "I already brushed my teeth while you were on the phone."

I nod, grateful for the practical suggestion that might help cool my thoughts. "Thanks. I'll just be a minute."

In the small bathroom, I splash cold water on my face and stare at my reflection in the mirror. The man looking back at me seems both familiar and strange. The same face I've seen for years, but with something new in the eyes. Something dangerously close to hope.

What the hell am I doing? I came here for Lilly, to handle her problem, then return to my life. Not to get tangled up with her best friend, no matter how compelling that friend might be.

I dry my face and return to the living room, prepared to say goodnight and retreat to the spare room. But Katty is still there, now seated on the couch with her legs tucked under her, a book open in her lap.

"Find everything you needed?" she asks, looking up.

"Yeah, thanks." I hover awkwardly, caught between staying and going. "I should let you get some sleep."

"In a bit," she says, closing her book. "I never fall asleep right away. Too many thoughts."

"What are you reading?" I ask, nodding toward the book, unable to make myself leave just yet.

She holds it up—a well-worn paperback with a cracked spine. "Hemingway. 'The Old Man and the Sea.' Not exactly bedtime reading, but it helps me think."

"About what?"

She considers the question, her head tilting slightly. "Life, I guess. Choices. The things we fight for and the things we let go."

There's something in her expression, a vulnerability beneath the strength, that draws me in. Before I can think better of it, I find myself sitting on the other end of the couch.

"Heavy thoughts for late night," I observe.

She smiles, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes. "That's when they tend to visit. When everything else is quiet."

I understand that all too well. The thoughts that only surface in the dark, when defenses are lower and truths harder to ignore.

"What about you?" she asks. "What keeps Tank up at night?"

The question is innocent enough, but the way she says my name, not like a nickname but like it's actually who I am, makes it feel more intimate.

"Responsibility, mostly," I answer honestly. "To the club, to Lilly, to the promises I've made."

"And to yourself?" she probes gently.

I consider this. "Not sure I know how to separate myself from those responsibilities anymore. They've become who I am."

She nods like she understands completely. "That happens, doesn't it? We become what others need us to be, until one day we look in the mirror and wonder who we'd be if all those expectations disappeared."

The insight strikes closer to home than I'm comfortable with. This woman sees too much, cuts through my defenses too easily.

"Would you be different?" I ask. "If you could be anything, with no expectations?"

She draws her knees to her chest, considering. "I don't know. Maybe bolder. Less cautious. I've spent so much of my life being careful. Careful not to rock the boat with my stepfather, careful not to put down roots I'd just have to tear up again, careful not to want things I can't have."

Our eyes meet across the couch.

"And what do you want, Katty?" I ask, my voice lower now.

She holds my gaze, her chest rising and falling with a deep breath.

"Things I probably shouldn't," she admits quietly. "People I probably shouldn't."

The plural is there, but her eyes never leave mine, making her meaning unmistakable.

I should get up now. Walk away. Go to the spare room and close the door on this conversation, on this possibility, on this woman who's somehow slipped past defenses I thought impenetrable.

Instead, I find myself shifting closer on the couch, drawn by a force I can't—or won't—resist.

"I'm leaving in a few days," I remind her, though whether I'm trying to convince her or myself, I'm not sure.

"I know," she says simply.

"I'm too old for you," I add, another feeble attempt at reason.

She almost smiles at that. "I'm twenty-seven, Tank. Not exactly a child."

The revelation surprises me. I had her pegged for early twenties based on what she'd said about college.

"Took me a while to finish school," she explains, reading my expression. "Had to work my way through. Not all of us had the Marines paying our way."

"Still," I persist, "my life is complicated. Dangerous. Not something to get mixed up in."

"Maybe I like complicated," she counters softly. "Maybe I'm tired of the simple, predictable existence I've carved out here."

We're close enough now that I can smell her strawberry shampoo. Close enough that I can see the faint freckles across the bridge of her nose, almost invisible except in this proximity.

"Katty," I say her name like a warning, a last attempt at restraint.

"Tank," she responds, my name on her lips a challenge.

And just like that, whatever resolve I had crumbles.

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And just like that, I'm lost.

His muscular arm wraps around my shoulder, pulling me closer with surprising gentleness despite the urgency I can feel radiating from him. When his lips find mine, he kisses me like a man dying of thirst who's finally found water.

Everything narrows to sensations. The press of his mouth against mine, the scratch of his stubble against my skin, the solid warmth of his body as he draws me even closer.

I respond instantly, instinctively, my hands reaching up to grip his shoulders, feeling the coiled strength beneath my fingertips.

The kiss deepens, his tongue seeking mine, and I open to him willingly. A small sound escapes my throat, half surprise and half pleasure. It's been so long since I've been kissed like this, with purpose, with hunger, with a need that matches my own.

When we finally part for breath, his eyes are darker, pupils expanded with desire. He looks at me like he's seeing straight through every wall I've ever built.

"You have no idea how much I've wanted to do that," he murmurs, his voice a low rumble that I feel more than hear.

"Since when?" I ask, my own voice barely a whisper.

"Since you stood beside me facing down Dylan," he admits, one hand coming up to trace the curve of my cheek. "Standing your ground without flinching. Looking like you were ready to fight alongside me if necessary."

His honesty catches me off guard, touches something deep inside me. It wasn't my appearance that first attracted him. It was my courage, my strength. The realization is unexpectedly moving.

"Your turn," he says, thumb tracing my lower lip. "When did you know you wanted this?"

"The Ferris wheel," I confess. "When you talked about finding purpose, about belonging. When I realized you understand what it's like to never quite fit anywhere."

He nods, recognition in his eyes. "We're the same, you and I. Different circumstances, same core."

His hand slides down to my neck, then lower, hesitating at the strap of my tank top.

"Is this okay?" he asks, his restraint evident in the tension of his body.

The consideration in the question, this powerful man pausing to ensure my comfort, makes my decision easy.

"Yes," I breathe, and guide his hand to the curve of my breast.

He groans softly as his palm covers me, his touch gentle at first, then more confident as I arch into his hand. His thumb brushes across my nipple through the thin fabric, causing it to harden instantly.

"You're beautiful," he says, eyes roaming over me with frank appreciation. "These curves..." His hands span my waist, then slide to my hips. "Perfect. Something to hold onto."

The raw admiration in his voice makes me flush with pleasure. I've never been rail-

thin, have always carried extra weight in my breasts and hips. Previous partners have either politely ignored this fact or fetishized it. Tank simply appreciates it, his large hands mapping my body inch by inch.

He kisses me again as he eases me back onto the couch. I go willingly, letting him cover me with his body, feeling the hard planes of his chest press against my softness. His weight should feel confining, but instead it's grounding, secure.

His lips leave mine to trail down my neck, finding sensitive spots that make me gasp. When he reaches the swell of my breasts above my tank top, he glances up, seeking permission again.

"Please," I whisper, beyond caring about anything but his touch.

He hooks his fingers under the hem of my top and slowly draws it upward, exposing my skin inch by inch. When he pulls it over my head and tosses it aside, his sharp intake of breath is gratifying.

"Christ," he murmurs, taking in the sight of me. "You're fucking perfect."

His hands cup my breasts, testing their weight, thumbs circling my nipples until I'm arching into his touch, desperate for more. When his mouth replaces his hand, hot and wet around my nipple, I have to bite my lip to keep from crying out.

"Shh," he whispers against my skin, a smile in his voice. "Don't want to wake your friend."

The reminder of Lilly sleeping down the hall should be sobering, but somehow it only adds to the forbidden thrill of this moment.

His mouth continues its exploration, trailing kisses down my stomach to the

waistband of my jeans. He looks up, eyes seeking mine. "May I?"

I nod, lifting my hips to help as he slides the pants down my legs. Now I'm left in just my underwear, feeling more exposed and more desired than I can remember ever feeling.

"These too?" he asks, fingers tracing the edge of my panties.

"Yes," I breathe, past the point of hesitation.

He draws them down slowly, eyes darkening as he reveals me completely. The cool air kisses my heated skin, making me shiver, or maybe it's the look of raw hunger on his face that causes the tremor.

"Spread your legs for me," he says, voice rough with desire.

I comply, letting my knees fall open. His large hands cup my thighs, thumbs tracing circles on the sensitive skin there.

"You're already wet," he observes, a note of satisfaction in his voice as he slides one finger through my folds.

The touch sends electricity through me, making me lift my hips seeking more. He obliges, slipping first one finger and then two inside me while his thumb finds and circles my clit.

"Oh god," I whisper, hands fisting in the cushions beneath me.

"That's it," he encourages, watching my face as he works his fingers in and out.
"Show me what you like."

Before I can form a coherent response, he lowers his head, replacing his thumb with his tongue. The first touch of his mouth against my sensitive wet pussy nearly undoes me. I clap a hand over my mouth to stifle the moan that threatens to escape.

He's skilled and attentive, reading my body's responses and adjusting his rhythm accordingly. Two fingers curl inside me, finding the spot that makes my back arch while his tongue works magic on my clit. The combination is overwhelming, building pressure low in my belly with alarming speed.

"Tank," I gasp, one hand moving to tangle in his hair. "I'm close."

He hums against me, the vibration adding another layer of sensation, and increases his pace slightly. His free hand slides up to cover my breast, pinching my nipple lightly in time with the thrust of his fingers.

The multiple points of contact push me over the edge. My climax crashes through me in waves, and I have to bite down hard on my palm to keep from crying out. He stays with me through it, gentling his touch as the aftershocks ripple through me, only pulling away when I tug lightly at his hair.

When I can focus again, he's looking up at me from between my thighs with satisfaction.

"You're magnificent," he says, placing one last kiss on my inner thigh before rising to his knees.

I reach for him, suddenly desperate to feel his skin against mine. "Take these off," I command, tugging at his t-shirt.

He complies, pulling the shirt over his head to reveal a torso that's a masterpiece of muscle and ink.

Tattoos cover much of his chest and arms, some I recognize as military symbols, others more personal designs I'll need time to decipher.

But it's the sheer power of his physique that takes my breath away.

Broad shoulders tapering to a narrow waist, defined abs, and arms that could easily lift me without strain.

"Your turn," I say, reaching for the button of his jeans.

He helps me, shucking the denim down his powerful thighs and kicking them aside. Now he's left in just black briefs that do little to hide his impressive arousal.

I reach out, palming his hard cock through the fabric. He's big. Bigger than I've ever experienced before.

"See something you like?" he asks, voice strained as I continue to stroke him through his briefs.

"Very much," I answer honestly, hooking my fingers in the waistband. "May I?"

He nods, a muscle in his jaw ticking as I slowly lower the last barrier between us. His cock springs free, thick and hard, curving slightly toward his stomach.

I wrap both hands around him, marveling at the contrast between the velvet-soft skin and the steel hardness beneath. He groans as I give him a few experimental strokes, his eyes closing briefly in pleasure.

Acting on instinct, I lean forward and spit into my palm, then spread the moisture along his length, making my movements slicker, smoother. His breath hisses between his teeth at the added sensation.

A surge of boldness overtakes me. I turn on the couch, positioning myself on all fours, looking back at him over my shoulder.

"Fuck me like this," I ask him, feeling powerful in my vulnerability.

His eyes darken, hands coming to grip my hips. "You're sure?"

"Absolutely," I confirm. "Please, Tank. I want to feel you inside me."

"I've never been with anyone like you," he confesses as he positions himself behind me. "So hot, so sure of what you want." His hands caress my ass, my sides, my hips. "I fucking love it."

The blunt head of his cock presses against my entrance, seeking but not yet entering. I push back against him, impatient now, and he responds by sliding just the tip inside me.

"Oh," I gasp at the stretch, the fullness.

"Too much?" he asks immediately, freezing in place.

"No," I assure him, pressing back further. "More. Please."

He obliges, pushing forward in a slow, steady thrust until he's fully inside me.

"You feel incredible," he murmurs, leaning forward to press kisses between my shoulder blades. "So tight, so perfect around me."

When he begins to move, it's with measured control, each thrust deliberate and deep. I match his rhythm, pushing back to meet him, taking him fully each time. His hands grip my hips, guiding my movements, occasionally sliding up to slap my ass or

around to cup my swinging breasts.

The angle allows him to hit spots inside me that send sparks of pleasure up my spine. I lower my head to the cushion, changing the angle slightly, and his next thrust hits perfectly against my g-spot.

"There," I gasp. "Right there."

He maintains the position, driving into me with increasing force but never losing control.

He leans over me, chest to my back, and whispers in my ear, "You take me so well.

" One hand tangles in my hair, gathering it gently but firmly, then pulls just enough to create a delicious tension. "I hope you like this."

"God, yes," I breathe, the slight sting only enhancing every other sensation.

We move together in perfect synchrony, the only sounds our heavy breathing and the muted slap of skin against skin. I'm getting close again, teetering on the edge of another climax, when Tank suddenly stills.

"Wait," he says, voice strained with the effort of control. "I want... I need to see your face."

He pulls out, his cock glistening with my arousal, and I turn to face him, momentarily confused by the interruption but trusting that he has something equally good in mind.

He scoops me up like I weigh nothing, strong arms securing me against his chest. I wrap my legs around his waist, my arms encircling his neck.

"Now I can see you," he murmurs, adjusting our position so the head of his cock aligns with my entrance again. "Watch your face while I'm inside you."

With a slight flex of his hips, he enters me again, filling me completely. In this position, with gravity helping, he reaches even deeper than before. The sensation pulls a gasp from my throat.

"Shh," he reminds me gently, capturing my lips in a kiss that swallows any sounds I might make.

He begins to move, using his incredible strength to lift and lower me on his cock with seemingly minimal effort. His muscles flex beneath my hands, solid and secure. I have no fear of being dropped, no doubt in his ability to support me completely.

I can see the concentration in his gaze, the restraint as he measures each thrust to bring me maximum pleasure.

"You're so beautiful," he murmurs against my lips. "So perfect. The way you feel around me..."

His words, combined with the fullness of him inside me and the friction against my clit as our bodies press together, push me rapidly toward another climax.

"I'm going to come," I warn him, already feeling the first tremors starting.

"Yes," he encourages, increasing his pace slightly. "Let go for me. I want to feel you."

When the orgasm hits, it's overwhelming—radiating outward from where we're joined, sending waves of pleasure through my entire body. I bite down on his shoulder to muffle my cry, tasting salt and skin as my inner muscles clench around

him.

The sensation of my climax triggers his own. With a few final, powerful thrusts, he buries himself to the hilt inside me, his body tensing as he follows me over the edge. I feel the pulse of his load, his arms tightening around me as he shudders through his completion.

For several moments afterward, we remain locked together, my legs still around his waist, his arms supporting me, our foreheads pressed together as we catch our breath.

The vulnerability of the position—so open, so exposed—should make me uncomfortable, but instead I feel utterly safe, completely held.

Eventually, reluctantly, he lowers me to the couch, slipping from my body with a mutual sigh of loss. He stretches out beside me, pulling me against his chest.

"That was..." he begins, then falls silent, apparently unable to find adequate words.

"Yeah," I agree, understanding perfectly.

His fingers trace lazy patterns on my back, following the lines of my tattoo. The simple intimacy of the touch is almost as affecting as what we just shared.

"We should probably get dressed," I murmur after a while, though I make no move to do so. "In case Lilly wakes up."

"Probably," he agrees, but his arms tighten around me slightly, keeping me close.

The logical part of my brain knows this is complicated. He's leaving soon, we live in different worlds, getting attached can only lead to heartache. But lying here in his arms, skin to skin, heartbeat to heartbeat, I find it impossible to regret what just

happened.

Whatever comes next—whatever reality we have to face in the morning—this moment is perfect, complete. And for now, that's enough.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:06 am

I hold Katty against my chest, her skin still flushed and warm from our lovemaking, and I'm struck by a thought that should terrify me: I've never lost control like this before.

Control has been the cornerstone of my existence since childhood—controlling my temper when Lilly was bullied, controlling my reactions through military training, controlling the violence that comes so naturally to me in service of the club. Control is what makes me valuable, reliable, trusted.

Yet tonight, with this woman I've known barely a day, I willingly surrendered that control, let myself be guided by something other than calculated reason. Dangerous, by any measure.

And yet, as I trace the patterns of her tattoo and feel her heart beating against mine, I can't bring myself to regret it. She's worth the risk. Worth everything.

"What are you thinking about?" she asks, her fingers drawing small circles on my chest.

"How quickly things can change," I answer honestly. "Yesterday morning, I was in Cedar Falls preparing for a routine ride to help my sister. Now I'm here, with you, and nothing feels routine anymore."

She shifts slightly to look up at me, those green eyes searching mine. "Do you regret it?"

"No," I say without hesitation. "Do you?"

"Not even a little." Her smile is soft, intimate. "But I am wondering what happens now."

What does happen now? I'm supposed to handle Dylan, ensure Lilly's safety, then return to the club and my responsibilities there. That was the plan. Simple, straightforward.

But now there's Katty to consider, and nothing about what I feel for her is simple or straightforward.

"I need to make sure Lilly is safe," I begin, thinking aloud. "Dylan needs to understand, permanently, that she's off-limits."

Katty nods, her expression serious. "And after that?"

"After that..." I trail off, considering possibilities I'd never entertained before. "I go back to my town. To the club."

I feel her tense slightly against me, though she tries to hide it. "Of course," she says, too casually. "That's your life."

"It has been," I agree, stroking her hair. "But lives can change. Routes can be adjusted."

She props herself up on my chest, studying my face with cautious hope. "What are you saying, Tank?"

I take a deep breath, organizing thoughts that are still forming as I speak them. "I'm saying I don't want this—us—to end when I leave Sweetheart County."

"So what, we date long-distance?" she asks skeptically. "You ride in for weekends

when you can get away from club business?"

"Maybe at first," I admit. "But there might be another option."

Her eyebrows raise, encouraging me to continue.

"Sweetheart County has a problem," I say, sitting up slightly against the arm of the couch, keeping her cradled against me. "Dylan is just a symptom of a larger issue. Money and influence trumping justice. People like Lilly have no real protection when the system fails them."

Katty nods slowly, recognition dawning in her eyes. "You're thinking about what I said earlier. About this town needing something to upset the status quo."

"An MC chapter," I confirm. "A legitimate one, with roots in the community but the strength to stand against corruption when necessary."

"You'd start a new chapter here?" She sounds both intrigued and skeptical. "Would your president even allow that?"

It's a valid question. Expansion isn't something MCs take lightly. New territories mean new responsibilities, new potential for conflict.

"Hellfire has been talking about expansion for a while," I explain. "He believes we're strong enough now to establish presence in neighboring counties. It would take convincing, but with a solid business plan and local support, it could work."

"A business plan?" she repeats, a smile tugging at her lips. "You sound more like an entrepreneur than an outlaw biker."

I return her smile. "The best MCs are both. We run legitimate businesses that serve

the community. Auto shops, security firms, sometimes bars or tattoo parlors. The protection aspect is... supplementary."

She considers this, her analytical mind clearly working through the implications. "And you'd want to lead this new chapter? Leave the main club?"

"Maybe," I acknowledge. "Have to prove I can build something from the ground up, not just enforce rules others have established. But yes, eventually, that would be the goal."

Her hand comes up to cup my cheek, her touch gentle but grounding. "That's a big change to consider based on one night together, Tank."

"It's not just about us," I assure her, though she's not entirely wrong. "It's about Lilly too. About not having to ride twenty hours every time she needs help. About creating something that serves a purpose beyond just surviving."

I can see she's not fully convinced, and I appreciate her caution. It's one of the things I already admire about her. She doesn't get swept away by grand gestures or impulsive promises.

"Let me ask you something," she says after a moment. "If I weren't in the picture at all, if last night hadn't happened between us, would you still be considering this?"

The question gives me pause. I want to reassure her, to say of course I would, but she deserves honesty.

"Probably not right now," I admit. "But the seed would be planted. The need is real, whether or not we happened."

She nods, accepting this. "And what would this look like, practically speaking? You'd

need members, a base of operations..."

"I'd bring in a few trusted brothers from Cedar Falls to start. Men who are ready for more responsibility but blocked by the club's hierarchy. One or two prospects. We'd establish a clubhouse, probably connected to a business—a garage makes the most sense given our skills."

As I speak, the idea becomes more concrete, more plausible. I've always been good at tactical planning, at seeing the steps needed to achieve an objective.

"It would take time," I continue. "Six months, maybe a year to establish properly. There would be resistance, not just from the Thomas family but from other power structures in town. Change is never easy."

"No, it isn't," she agrees softly.

Outside, the first hints of dawn lighten the sky through the curtains. We've talked through the night, naked on her couch, planning a future that seemed impossible twenty-four hours ago.

"What about you?" I ask finally. "You mentioned that university position up north. Would you still want that?"

She's quiet for a moment, considering. "I applied because I was restless.

Because I felt like I was just existing here, not really living.

" Her eyes meet mine, clear and direct. "But if there was something worth staying for—something that mattered, something that could make a difference—I might reconsider. "

"And us?" I press gently. "What do you want from that?"

Her smile turns wry. "You mean beyond mind-blowing sex on my couch?"

I chuckle, appreciating her ability to lighten the moment. "Beyond that, yes. Though I'm certainly not opposed to more of that too."

She grows serious again. "I want honesty.

I want partnership. I want someone who sees me for who I am and values that, not despite my strength but because of it.

" Her hand finds mine, fingers intertwining.

"I think you could be that person. I think we could build something real.

But I don't want to be a fantasy you're chasing, or a reason you change your life only to resent later. "

Her wisdom strikes me again. This woman sees so clearly, cuts through pretense and bravado to the heart of things.

"I've never been good with pretty words or romantic promises," I tell her, bringing our joined hands to my lips. "But I know what feels right, what feels true. And this—you, us, the possibility of building something here—feels more right than anything has in a long time."

"Okay then. Let's try. But step by step, not all at once. You handle Dylan, talk to your president about the possibility of expansion, see if it's even viable. I'll hold off on the university application, keep my options open."

Her practicality makes me smile. "Always the planner."

"Someone has to be," she teases. "I'm guessing the Iron & Blood MC doesn't run on impulsive decisions and hope."

"You'd be surprised," I reply, thinking of some of the club's more colorful episodes. "But point taken. We do this smart, strategic."

"And in the meantime?" she asks, her body shifting subtly against mine in a way that rekindles the heat between us.

"In the meantime," I murmur, pulling her closer, "we make the most of the time we have now."

Her lips find mine in a kiss that promises more, but before we can get carried away again, the sound of a door opening down the hall freezes us both.

"Shit," Katty whispers, eyes wide. "Lilly's up."

We scramble for our clothes, trying to dress with minimal noise and maximum speed. I've just pulled on my jeans and Katty has wrapped herself in a throw blanket when Lilly appears in the doorway, hair mussed from sleep.

She takes one look at us. Katty's flushed face, my bare chest, the scattered clothing, and breaks into a knowing grin.

"Well, well," she says, leaning against the doorframe. "Looks like you two found a way to pass the time after all."

"Lilly," I warn, but there's no real heat behind it. I can't find it in me to be embarrassed, not when what happened between Katty and me feels so significant.

"Don't 'Lilly' me," my sister laughs. "I knew it from the moment you two met at the fair. The way you looked at each other... it was just a matter of time."

Katty pulls the blanket tighter around herself, but she's smiling too. "How about you put on some coffee while your brother and I get dressed, and then we can all talk like civilized adults?"

"Fine, fine," Lilly agrees, turning toward the kitchen. "But just so you know, I'm totally okay with this. More than okay. Actually, it's kind of perfect."

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After she disappears into the kitchen, Katty and I exchange a look that turns into shared laughter—quiet, intimate, a release of tension and a celebration of possibility.

"She's never going to let us live this down," I observe, pulling on my shirt.

"Probably not," Katty agrees, gathering her scattered clothing. "But I think we can handle it."

We dress quickly, stealing kisses between articles of clothing, reluctant to break the connection we've established. When we're finally presentable, Katty pauses before we join Lilly in the kitchen.

"Just so you know," she says, looking up at me with those clear, direct eyes, "whatever happens with the club, with Dylan, with all of it. I'm glad you came to Sweetheart County. I'm glad we found each other."

I draw her close, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "Me too. And I'm not letting go easily."

"Good," she says simply. "Because neither am I."

Three Months Later

The sign above the garage reads "Iron Hammer and Thunder, finding new purpose in building rather than just enforcing; the prospects, eager to prove themselves worthy of the patch they'll eventually earn; and Katty, brilliant and strong beside me.

I'm struck by how much has changed since that day at the Sweetheart County Fair.

"Earth to Tank," Katty nudges me, using the name that now belongs more to family than to club business. "Where'd you go?"

"Just thinking," I reply, squeezing her hand under the table. "About how sometimes the roads we take lead us exactly where we need to be, even when we had no idea that's where we were heading."

Her eyes soften, understanding perfectly what I mean. "Some roads are worth following, even when the map says they lead nowhere."

After lunch, as the others return to work, Katty and I take a moment for ourselves on the small balcony off the office that overlooks Main Street. The town stretches before us, bathed in autumn light, familiar now in ways I never expected it to be.

"Any regrets?" she asks, fitting herself against my side as we look out over what has become our domain, our responsibility, our home.

I think about the question seriously. About the greater freedom I had with the main chapter, the simpler life of following orders rather than giving them. About the challenges still ahead as we establish ourselves in this community.

"Not one," I answer truthfully. "You?"

She shakes her head, her hair catching the sunlight. "The university position is still open. They call every few months to see if I've changed my mind."

"And have you?" I ask, though I already know the answer.

"Changed my mind about leaving?" She turns to face me fully, arms wrapping around

my waist. "No. I finally found somewhere—someone—worth putting down roots for."

I pull her close, still marveling at how perfectly she fits against me, how completely she understands the man I am and the man I'm trying to become.

"I love you," I tell her, words that once seemed foreign to me now flowing easily. "Thank you for taking a chance on us."

"I love you too," she replies. "Thank you for giving me something worth staying for."

As we seal the promise with a kiss, the patch on my back—the new Iron & Heart MC insignia, a fist gripping a blooming rose—catches the sun. It represents everything we're building here: strength and beauty, protection and growth, the hard and the soft existing in perfect balance.

Just like us.

When we came together that night at the Sweetheart County Fair, neither of us could have predicted where the road would lead. But standing here now, with the woman I love in my arms and a future spreading out before us like an open highway, I know one thing for certain:

Sometimes the most unexpected detours lead exactly where you're meant to be.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:06 am

Two years to the day since Tank rode into the Sweetheart County Fair and changed my life forever, I stand at the edge of the same fairgrounds, watching him direct his prospects on setting up the Iron & Heart booth. The muscles in his arms flex as he hefts a heavy banner, and even after all this time, the sight still makes my panties wet.

The club has grown in ways we never imagined. Three new patched members and three prospects. Our garage now employs six people, and the mobile library program reaches four counties.

But it's the change in the town itself that amazes me most. The balance of power has shifted gradually but unmistakably. The Thomas family still has money and influence, but they're no longer untouchable. People know there's an alternative now—somewhere to turn when traditional channels fail them.

I rest my hand discreetly over my still-flat stomach, our secret nestled safely beneath my fingers. A secret that Tank knows nothing about yet. The test showed positive three days ago, and it's been the hardest thing in the world not to tell him immediately.

Only Lilly knows so far. She was with me when I bought the test, pacing outside the bathroom door until I emerged, test in hand, tears in my eyes. Her shriek of joy had nearly deafened me before she'd switched to immediate panic about keeping it from her brother. Tank can read me like a book, she'd warned. He'll know something's up.

"You look suspicious," Lilly says now, appearing beside me with two lemonades. "Stop touching your stomach or he'll figure it out before the announcement."

I drop my hand quickly, accepting the drink. "I'm nervous. What if he's not ready? We've talked about kids, but always someday, not now."

Lilly snorts. "Are you kidding? He's going to be over the moon. Insufferable, probably, but thrilled."

I take a sip of lemonade, watching as Tank finishes with the tent and steps back to inspect it. The stern set of his shoulders, the authoritative way he directs the prospects, all melt away when he turns and catches sight of me. His whole face softens, and I fall in love all over again.

"The booth looks great," I tell him as he reaches us.

"Should work," he says, ever the perfectionist. "First fair where we have an official presence. I want to make a good impression."

The Iron & Heart MC is officially sponsoring the children's area this year—bounce houses, face painting, and a bike safety demonstration. It's part of our ongoing effort to integrate with the community, to be seen as protectors rather than outsiders.

"Members should start arriving soon for the meeting," Tank continues, checking his watch. "They're ten minutes out."

My heartbeat quickens. I planned this. Our announcement at the pre-fair meeting when all members and prospects will be present. A celebration of our club's growth, capped with news of its newest future member.

"I need to check on the refreshments," I say, needing a moment to collect myself.

Tank's eyes narrow slightly. "You okay? You've been quiet today."

Damn his perceptiveness. "Just excited about the fair," I deflect. "Lots of memories

here."

He pulls me close for a brief kiss. "Good ones, I hope."

"The best," I assure him, thinking of that first night on the Ferris wheel, the hot chocolate, the confrontation with Dylan that set everything in motion.

An hour later, all members of the Iron & Heart MC have gathered in the private area behind our booth. Wrath and Crow, from the original Iron & Blood, and who helped establish our chapter before returning to the main club, are catching up with the newer members. Two of the new prospects, Jake and Nate, are setting up chairs under Lilly's direction.

Tank stands at the center, the natural leader he was always meant to be. Pride swells in my chest as I watch him. This man who reshaped his entire life to build something that matters, something that protects the vulnerable and stands against corruption.

"Alright, let's get started," Tank calls, and the chatter dies down immediately. "First, thanks to everyone for the work on the booth. We're making history today. First time an MC has officially sponsored part of the Sweetheart County Fair."

Appreciative nods and murmurs follow this announcement.

"Two years ago," he continues, "I rode into this fair as a member from another chapter, here to handle a problem and leave. Now we've built something permanent. Something that matters."

His eyes find mine across the circle, full of meaning only we fully understand.

"The Iron & Heart has grown beyond what any of us imagined," he says. "And I'm proud of every one of you for making that happen."

There's a round of applause, and as it dies down, I know it's time. My heart hammers against my ribs as I step forward.

"And speaking of growth," I say, my voice surprisingly steady despite my nerves, "I have an announcement to make."

Tank's eyebrows lift slightly, curiosity replacing his usual composure.

I take a deep breath and place both hands on my stomach, making my meaning clear. "The Iron & Heart family will be expanding again in about seven months."

For a moment, the entire group is frozen in silence. Tank stares at me, his expression shifting from confusion to understanding to absolute wonder in the span of heartbeats.

"You're pregnant?" he asks, his voice barely above a whisper.

I nod, tears threatening. "Found out three days ago. Wanted to tell you like this, with our family around us."

The silence breaks as Wrath lets out a whoop of congratulations, followed by an eruption of cheers and applause from the rest of the club. But I barely register it, because Tank is moving toward me, his eyes never leaving mine.

He reaches me in three strides, cups my face in his hands with infinite tenderness, and kisses me with such reverence it brings fresh tears to my eyes.

"A baby," he whispers against my lips when we part. "Our baby."

"Is that okay?" I ask, searching his face. "I know we hadn't planned—"

"It's perfect," he interrupts, one hand moving to rest over mine on my stomach.

"You're perfect. God, I love you."

The vulnerability in his voice, the naked emotion on his face... It's a side of him only I get to see, though increasingly he allows others glimpses of the man behind the president's patch.

We're surrounded then by congratulations and good-natured teasing. Wrath pounds Tank on the back, declaring himself the baby's honorary uncle. Lilly hugs us both, finally able to express her excitement openly. The prospects look simultaneously terrified and awed at the news of their president becoming a father.

"Hellfire's going to lose his mind," Crow predicts with a grin. "First Iron & Heart baby. He'll probably insist on custom leather for the carrier."

As the celebration continues around us, Tank keeps me close, his arm secure around my waist.

"Were you worried to tell me?" he asks, his perception as sharp as ever.

"A little," I admit. "We're still building so much with the club, the garage..."

"Hey," he turns me to face him. "Nothing—nothing—is more important than you and this baby. The club, the businesses, all of it exists to protect what matters. And you matter most."

The conviction in his voice washes away my lingering uncertainty. This man—once a wanderer like me, once as rootless and guarded—has become the solid center of my world. And now we're creating a new life together, a perfect blend of both of us.

As the sun begins to set over the fairgrounds and the first visitors arrive for the evening's festivities, I look around at the family we've built. Blood and chosen, leather-clad and tattooed, fierce and loyal. Our child will grow up surrounded by

protectors, by people who understand that family transcends blood, that strength means standing up for those who can't defend themselves.

Tank's hand finds mine, squeezing gently as if reading my thoughts.

"Ready for this next ride?" he asks, a hint of the mischievous boy he must have been in his smile.

"With you?" I lean into his solid warmth. "Always."

Sometimes the most unexpected detours really do lead exactly where you're meant to be.

Thank you for reading it!