



Stripped Down at the Fair (Sweetheart County Fair #2)

Author: *Lilah Hart*

Category: Romance

Description: One gust of wind. One unexpected spark. She's only in town for the fair, so why does leaving him feel impossible?

How can a man make even a caricature look hot?

That's what I'm wondering as I draw the guy repairing the broken-down ride across from me. I'm at the fair to make some money drawing fun pictures of people. But suddenly, I can't concentrate on work.

When a strong wind blows my drawing straight over to the guy, I'm mortified. But he's amused. And the next time I see him, he asks me to have lunch with him.

It can only be temporary, though. I live four hours away, and I can't afford to move to this small town. But walking away from this guy when the fair is over will be the hardest thing I've ever done.

Stripped Down at the Fair is an OTT age-gap romance featuring an alpha hero and V-card heroine. It's a forced proximity lumberjack romance with lots of steam that's designed to be read in only 90 minutes. If you like short, steamy instalove novellas, you'll love the entire *My Fair Lady* series.

Total Pages (Source): 10

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CATE

Even in caricature form, the carnival worker was hot—hotter than any man I'd ever seen, caricature or otherwise.

I sat back and set down my pencil so I could gather the loose tendrils that had fallen from my messy bun. I pretended to stare at my work, but behind my large-framed sunglasses, my eyes were on the hottie directly in front of me.

There was a problem with the Tilt-a-Whirl.

They'd been working on it all morning. I didn't know much about repairing Tilt-a-Whirls, but from where I sat, it seemed like the gorgeous dark-haired guy with major muscles was the only one who knew what he was doing.

And now the other two guys had left him there alone.

He stood, wiping his brow and looking around. It might be my imagination, but it sure seemed like his gaze went everywhere but my direction. In fact, I'd been gawking at him all morning, and he hadn't even glanced my way.

Suddenly, he looked toward the sky, and I realized something I should have noticed earlier. The skies had turned very, very dark. When had that happened? I'd been so focused on him, I hadn't noticed.

It was going to rain, and my easel was unsheltered. On top of it sat my large drawing pad.

Gasping, I stood and turned. Rain was exactly not what I needed right now.

The table next to me had a large tablecloth that draped all the way to the ground.

I could slide my drawing pad under there.

The cupcake vendors using it might not appreciate it so much, but they were busy covering their cupcake displays.

A giant burst of wind threatened to knock some more strands out of my messy bun. The wind had picked up significantly. It might even blow my easel away without me sitting there to hold it down. But as I walked toward it, I realized the easel was the least of my worries.

As I clamped my hand over my mouth, the wind caught the pages and pulled up on the corners. Luckily, most of them were still attached to the large pad. Unfortunately, one page wasn't attached, and it was the most important page of all.

It was the drawing I'd done of the hot guy fixing the Tilt-a-Whirl.

I lunged forward, hands outstretched in front of me.

My fingertips were within inches of the page when the entire thing whipped off, the wind carrying it over the top of the easel and across the small walkway that separated us.

If the wind had taken it to the right, I could have rushed off to grab it.

Since the hot guy seemed determined not to look in my direction, I doubted he'd even notice the page was blowing around.

But no, the wind was my enemy. It carried the sketch directly toward its subject, and that definitely got his attention. It landed several feet from him, but there was no way I could get there before he did.

Making matters worse, as I moved to step around my easel, I felt a big drop of rain.

Crap. I couldn't let the pages get wet. It was the only pad I had, and it needed to last the rest of the weekend.

This town was so small, it didn't even have an art supply store.

I'd stocked up on everything before I made the four-hour drive here.

I snatched up the easel and slid it under the covered table without even asking permission. I didn't glance at the women selling cupcakes as I did. If I didn't make eye contact, I could ignore any scowls they might send my way.

I was already twisting around as I moved from a squatting to a standing position, sketchpad safe beneath the table.

Suddenly, I found myself face-to-face with the subject of my caricature.

Well, face-to-face in the sense that he was now looking at me.

He still stood in the same spot, holding the page that had blown his way.

Was it my imagination, or was a smile tugging at the corners of his lips?

"Is this how you see me?"

I had the urge to look over my shoulder to check whether the cupcake vendors were

watching us.

If so, it was probably pure entertainment for them.

But I couldn't take my eyes off the gorgeous guy with the muscles, especially now that I saw he had ice-blue eyes that seemed to bore right through me.

How was it possible that he was even hotter when he was looking at me?

"It's a caricature," I said. "It's meant to be a little goofy."

His gaze slid over to my easel and the big sign mounted to the plywood above it. Caricatures , it read. Simple and straight to the point. Yeah, I probably should have come up with something better, but my cousin told me about this event just days ago.

It wasn't like I'd ever tried to sell my drawings, although I had a portfolio full of them. These days, I made my living as a cashier at a grocery store. I spent my days beneath a lit-up sign with a number on it.

"The head's kind of big," the hot guy said. "I don't guess I've ever had a caricature made of me before."

He looked down at it. Was that admiration in his stare? Why did I care so much what this guy thought? Was it possible staring at him so long had led to me developing a crush on him?

For most of my teen years, I'd basically lived in a fantasy world, and I thought I'd outgrown that phase of my life. But this guy was better than anything I'd imagined. And he was looking at me like he might actually be interested in me.

"I was between customers," I said. "It was practice. I have to keep my skills sharp,

you know?”

That was my way of explaining why I was sketching him.

I couldn't tell if the explanation was landing.

He was still staring at me, and something in his eyes sent heat rushing through my body.

Suddenly, I was imagining what it might be like to have his hands moving over my bare skin as he kissed me, his tongue parting my lips.

I shifted and bit my lip to suppress a groan. This wasn't the first time I'd fantasized about a guy. It probably wasn't even the hundredth. But this particular fantasy was so vivid, it did things to my body.

Even weirder? I had the feeling he was having the exact same fantasy. Maybe it was the way his eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched. That could mean any number of things, but right now, my brain translated it as desire.

“Can I keep it?” he asked.

I frowned. “Keep what?”

He didn't take his eyes off me, but he shifted his hands to rustle the paper a little. That was the exact moment a big raindrop hit my forehead, and I realized all around us, people were preparing for a storm while we just stood there, staring at each other.

“Sure,” I said. “That one's on me.”

His eyebrows rose, but he said nothing. Instead, he smiled as he began rolling up the

page.

Then he slapped it against his hand before walking off, leaving me standing on the dirt-covered walkway between the broken-down Tilt-a-Whirl and the cupcake table, trying to process exactly what had just happened.

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DUSTIN

The Tilt-A-Whirl hadn't malfunctioned. Two whole days, and it was plugging along just fine.

I'd been tempted to go back and break it again, just to have a reason to hang out near the beautiful artist's booth.

Her picture of me might have been on the goofy side, but I'd glanced at some of the other caricatures fairgoers were carrying around.

She'd definitely drawn me more attractively than she drew anyone else.

She'd made my body less wimpy with well-defined muscles and a squared jaw.

Did that mean she was attracted to me? Was she drawing me as she saw me? I sure as hell hoped so.

"Dustin, we need you."

The voice of my boss rang out, reminding me I was on the job. This guy was my boss on the construction crew where I normally worked. I'd volunteered to help out with the carnival for a change of scenery.

If I had to be honest, life in Sweetheart Bend had me pretty restless. Something was missing. I just wasn't sure what, but I traced it back to my military days. I'd moved from place to place, never quite putting down roots anywhere, so I was

uncomfortable with things being so...predictable.

“Yes, sir,” I said, standing up and turning to face him.

That was me—always jumping to attention. That also had to do with my military training. Old habits died hard.

“Tilt-a-Whirl’s acting up again,” he said.

My boss’s wife was on the city council, and that was exactly why he’d volunteered to help out here, and I’d jumped in to help him. To his credit, he’d done his fair share of the work, but he heavily relied on me for things he saw as beneath his pay grade.

“You fixed it the other day, didn’t you?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yup.”

I’d fixed it, alright. Worked on it for a couple of hours. Finally got it up and running again. The workers who’d been assigned to the task didn’t seem to know what they were doing, and that slowed me down considerably. Once they got out of my way, I finished the job in less than fifteen minutes.

“I’m on it,” I said, hoping my excitement didn’t show on my face.

This would give me a good reason to see the caricature artist again.

Those plump pink lips had stayed on my mind since the first time I saw her.

I pretended not to notice her, but I’d kept an eye on her while I worked.

When I found out she’d been drawing me all along, I was happier than I should’ve

been.

I'd done everything I could to see her again, but our timing was off. Every time I breezed by her booth, she was gone. The one time I found her in her seat, she was deep in her work, drawing a young girl seated across from her.

But today, I was in luck. As I approached the Tilt-A-Whirl, I saw her sitting, staring down at her phone. Nobody was around, aside from the cupcake vendors to her right and someone selling vapes to her left.

I shifted my toolbelt and kept my gaze focused on the ride I'd be fixing. It was broken down, with a line of about twenty people jutting out from its entrance.

"I bet that guy can fix it," someone called out as I approached.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the beautiful artist look up. Her hair was in a ponytail today—not pulled back in a bun like the first time I'd seen her. It looked like she'd curled it, which made it bounce as she turned in my direction.

"I'll see what I can do," I called out to the guy.

Now everyone in line was looking at me. How did I break the bad news to them?

"It might be a while," I blurted. "Maybe go ride something else and come back."

Or don't. I wanted as few people around as possible. That might give me a reason to strike up a conversation with the caricaturist.

I was all too aware of her as I knelt to check out the very spot I'd fixed just two days ago.

Sure enough, the bolt had wiggled its way loose again.

I tightened it within an inch of its life, but that was only a temporary fix.

It would probably work its way out again. No, I needed to get to the root cause.

And that was how I ended up spending a good hour tooling around with the mechanics of the Tilt-A-Whirl. The beauty was nearby, which meant I was battling distraction every step of the way.

Finally, the repairs were done, and I stood, sliding the wrench back into its slot on my belt. That was when I turned and made direct eye contact with her for the first time since our initial meeting.

“Hi,” she said.

“Between customers again?”

I dropped my gaze to her easel. Part of me wanted her to have been drawing me the whole time I was working.

“It’s blank.” She lifted the oversized notepad as if she needed to prove that to me.

I couldn’t help but smile. “I thought you liked to practice between customers.”

I had to admit I was disappointed that she’d been staring down at her phone the whole time, not even paying attention to me. Okay, so I’d given the appearance of being so absorbed in my work that I’d forgotten she was over there, but I’d been all too aware.

I crossed the small distance between the Tilt-A-Whirl and where she sat. No sign of my boss in either direction, but I didn’t want to linger too long. Word would get out.

“You travel around with the fair?” I asked.

I really had no idea how this sort of thing worked. I’d gone straight from a military base to a cabin in the woods. The only interaction I got most days was with the others on my crew, and they weren’t exactly talkers.

“I was going to ask you the same thing,” she said. “No, I live a few hours away, and my cousin told me about this fair when I saw her last winter. She has a friend who lives here.”

That was a lot of information. None of it really answered the question, but I figured she’d get to it in time.

“I’ve been looking for a way to make money off my art. We don’t have anything like this in Springfield.”

That surprised me. “You don’t? I figured fairs like this went through every town.”

“I guess not.” She shrugged. “What about you?”

“I’m a local. Work on one of the construction crews. My boss had this opportunity to make a little extra money.”

Actually, it wasn’t extra money. I’d make the same working at one of our regular sites in town. But it was too complicated to explain why I needed a change of scenery.

She pointed to the Tilt-A-Whirl. “It looks like they might need your help full-time with that thing.”

I turned to look at it. One of the workers had gotten it fired up again, and a line was

already forming.

“I think I got it fixed,” I said. “For now.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “So, you’re going for a ride on it?”

“Hell, no. I wouldn’t ride on any of these.”

“Well, that doesn’t give me much confidence.”

She was still seated in front of that easel, but there was a twinkle in her eye. She was definitely flirting with me, and that had my entire body standing at attention—especially one particular part.

“I wouldn’t want anyone I cared about to go on these portable rides,” I said. “All it takes is one missed screw, and the whole thing...”

I shuddered. No point in going any further. She knew exactly what I was saying.

After verifying my boss wasn’t nearby, I returned my attention to her. “Do you get a lunch break?”

She shrugged. “I don’t have a boss. I’m paying for this space. I’ve already broken even on that. I’m just hoping the weekend will bring the crowds.”

Yeah, I knew what she meant. Despite the line for the Tilt-A-Whirl, this place had been dead during its first three days. Not many people went to the fair on weekdays, I guessed.

“I only get thirty minutes for lunch,” I said. “There’s a kebab truck near the entrance. Best chicken you’ll ever put in your mouth.”

I held in a wince at my own words. I hung out on construction crews all day, so it wasn't like it was unusual for me to have my mind in the gutter, but this went beyond that. I was actually having thoughts about her with something in her mouth that wasn't chicken on a stick.

This time, I actually winced at the thought. That was a little much, even for me. It didn't surprise me, though, considering I was long overdue for some action.

But this woman was far more than that. I wanted to get to know her. To spend time with her. To pull her into my arms and hold her all night while we slept. On a more primal level, I wanted to make her mine. To make sure no other man could claim her as his.

"Kebabs sound perfect," she said. "I'm starving. Where do I meet you?"

"Just past the ring toss, there's an alleyway. I'll grab the food and see you over there in ten minutes."

And then, without waiting for her response, I turned and started toward the food truck. I'd text my boss and let him know the Tilt-A-Whirl was fixed as soon as I was in line. I didn't want to waste a second of my break that could be spent with my blue-eyed blonde beauty.

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CATE

O ur kids would have blue eyes. That was the weird thought I had as I sat on the grass, enjoying the most delicious piece of meat I'd ever put in my mouth.

Delicious piece of meat. That thought made me blush. What was wrong with me? I kept having thoughts that weren't like me at all. My fantasies had always been PG-rated at worst, but this guy had taken me all the way to X-rated. Maybe I was just long overdue for turning into a pervert.

"This is great," I said, staring at the kebab, which was loaded with chicken and veggies. "How did you know I hadn't already tried it?"

"You bring your lunch."

Those words widened my eyes as I looked over at him. Had I heard what I thought I had?

"I haven't been stalking you," he said. "I just noticed the first day when I was fixing the Tilt-a-Whirl that you pulled out a lunch bag and ate a sandwich between customers."

Holy cow, that was a lot of noticing. "I didn't think you even saw me over there. You seemed pretty absorbed in your work."

"My peripheral vision is alive and well."

Funny, considering he wasn't looking at me now. He was staring straight ahead. Did that mean he was watching me slide chunks of meat into my mouth?

There I went again. My mind was firmly in the gutter.

"I'm trying to save money," I said.

Why had I admitted that? It wasn't something I was proud of, but I shouldn't be embarrassed either.

I was twenty-three, and I'd never been college material.

I just didn't like being shut in a room for hours at a time.

I barely made it through high school without losing my mind.

Unfortunately, that limited my career options.

"Yeah, I know the feeling," he said. "I had to start working when I was fourteen to support my family after my dad died. The military was the only thing that saved me. Even now, I would scramble to pay the bills if the cost of living here wasn't next to nothing."

I felt bad about how much better that made me feel.

I didn't have to struggle at all as a kid—financially, anyway—but growing up in an abusive household was no walk in the park.

Finally, Mom left, and even though we had no money for daily expenses, let alone college, our lives were so much happier when we didn't have to live in constant fear.

“There’s a farmer’s market,” he said.

He looked over at me, his eyes filled with that intensity again. This time, it wasn’t the fiery passion I’d seen before. No, I saw excitement. It was barely a glimmer in his eye. Someone walking by probably wouldn’t have noticed, but I was homed in on him right now.

“Farmer’s market?” I asked.

Why would he be so excited about that? I must be missing something.

“Every Saturday, on the square,” he said. “Lots of fresh produce and home-baked bread. But they allow other booths too. It might not be worth the drive, but if you have family here...”

He let his voice trail off as he turned his attention back to his food. I set my kebab down.

“We may have something like that in Springfield,” I said. “I’m sure the booth fees are really high, though. I should check out the one here.”

Really, I just wanted a reason to come back to Sweetheart Bend. The problem was, I didn’t have family here. Just the friend of my cousin’s who’d agreed to let me stay with her for the week. She definitely wouldn’t want me back. She didn’t seem to want me here now.

But I liked the idea of drawing caricatures at the farmer’s market. Any excuse to return to this town. The change of scenery would be good for me, especially if I could make some money.

“Do you have any grocery stores here?” I asked.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a strange expression flit across his face. It was almost a frown of confusion, but not quite.

“Yes,” he said. “We don’t live off the land like some people think mountain folk do.”

Mountain folk. That was an interesting way to put it. It was exactly the way someone who lived in the mountains would word it, actually.

“I work as a cashier in a grocery store,” I said. “I figure I can always get a job doing that while I wait for...”

My voice drifted off there. Wait for what? I had no idea. Waiting for my “caricature artist” ship to come in? That was unlikely to happen.

I was so caught up in my thoughts, it took me a second to realize he was looking at me. And now, it was like he was seeing me for the first time.

“If you don’t want to stay with family, I have a spare bedroom,” he said. “You could stay with me. If, that is, you wouldn’t feel...uncomfortable.”

I laughed. “My dad would roll over in his grave if he knew I was staying with a guy who wasn’t my husband.”

“Oh,” he said. And that one syllable gave away his disappointment. “Sorry about your dad.”

I shook my head. “No, trust me. It’s not a big loss.” That sounded cold, so I rushed to cover it up. “It was just that he was super strict. I kind of like the idea of rebelling. I should have tried it when I was younger.”

“So do it,” he said.

I met his stare straight on. “Do what?”

“Stay with me. Starting tonight. Give your family a break.”

I wasn’t staying with family, but I didn’t know how to explain my situation. My cousin’s friend had been so cold to me, I’d been avoiding her. Every night, I made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and sat in my bedroom alone, watching TV on my phone.

I shook my head. “I couldn’t impose.”

“I insist.” He picked up his phone, which was on the ground next to him, and programmed in my phone number. “I’m texting you directions to my place. I’ll grill steaks for dinner.”

My stomach jumped to attention, despite the fact that it was full right now from the chicken kebabs. How long had it been since I’d had a decent meal? I’d been living on mostly peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for months.

“Are you sure?” I asked, still having serious doubts about imposing.

He was a gentleman, so of course he’d offer to help out, but the last thing I’d want to be was an inconvenience. Even though I was clearly inconveniencing the woman I was staying with.

“Positive,” he said. “And if you need my help scandalizing your family, I’m here for you.” He tossed his empty wooden skewer in the bag and pushed himself to his feet. “I have to get back to work. I’ll walk you to your post.”

I shook my head. “I’m going to finish up first. I’m kind of enjoying hiding out back here.”

In truth, I just needed to get my thoughts under control before I returned to work. Because what this guy was doing to me would make it hard to focus, and I had to focus. One way or another, I needed to shore up enough money to move to this adorable small town for good.

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DUSTIN

I heard the crunch of gravel beneath tires from where I stood on my back patio. It was so quiet out here in the middle of the woods, even the slightest noise seemed to carry for miles.

The gravel-crunching stopped, replaced by silence.

I closed the grill cover and headed around the outside of the cabin to greet my houseguest. As I rounded the corner, I spotted the car parked next to my much larger pickup.

Even though I was no car expert, I could tell at a glance that the small sedan was an older model.

I noticed a sizable dent in the front fender as I approached the driveway.

One thing was clear. She'd been struggling financially for a while. I was almost overwhelmed with the need to make sure she never had to worry about money again.

When the door opened, revealing another dent on the side along with some scratches, I spotted those familiar sneakers beneath the doorframe. Slowly, she stood, revealing her upper half.

I nearly tripped over my own feet as I took in her long blonde hair. It was the first time I'd seen it down, and it made her even more jaw-droppingly gorgeous—something I didn't even think was possible.

“Hi,” she said. “So sorry I’m late. A woman wanted a caricature of her and her dog. She came up right as the fair was closing down. I told her I’d stay late. It was a gift for her husband.”

She closed the door, then looked back at her car with a strange expression. At first, I thought something might be wrong with it, but then she shifted her stare to me. She wore a grimace.

“I should have brought something,” she said. “Wine, beer, dessert...”

I shook my head. “I have all that.”

I’d stopped by the store for a bottle of wine.

I didn’t even know if she’d like it, but it felt like I should have some on hand.

I also grabbed some ice cream and an apple pie from the bakery.

Something told me this woman had been sacrificing good food for a while, and I fully intended to spoil her.

“You’ve done too much,” she said. “I can’t thank you enough.”

“Do you have your stuff?”

She looked at her car again and nodded. “Packed it all up. I didn’t tell the person I’m staying with. I want to make sure you don’t change your mind.”

“You can go ahead and text her now. Unless you think you’ll change your mind.”

Our eyes met, and my first thought was that maybe I was making a mistake.

Not because I didn't want her to stay with me.

No, I wanted that more than I wanted my next breath.

My biggest concern was that having her stay with me would push me even deeper.

And it would be impossible to ever let her go... if she decided she wanted to leave.

What choice did I have? I'd never felt anything like this. I had to have her in my life. I couldn't go another day knowing she was out there somewhere and I couldn't be with her.

"Come on in," I said. "The front door's open. I need to run around and check on the steaks."

It wasn't necessary. They'd be fine for a few minutes. But she might want to unpack without me hovering around. So I turned and headed toward my backyard patio without even glancing back at her.

Cate. Her beautiful face stayed on my mind as I moved the steaks from the grill to a platter. She'd spelled her name out to me earlier as I tapped it into my phone. C-A-T-E. A unique spelling for a unique woman.

I'd included my name when I texted her the directions. I liked to picture her saving my number into her phone, including my name. Maybe she even smiled as she typed it. I'd live in that fantasy as long as I could.

I'd just turned off the grill when the patio door opened and she peeked outside and asked, "Need help out here?"

"I think I've got it."

I closed the grill and powered it off, then started toward the door. But she was still standing there, looking around.

“Wow, this is nice,” she said. “It’s so private.”

“Yeah, no mountain view, but when I look out any of my windows, all I see is green. That’s the way I like it.”

“Me too.”

She nodded, then stepped back, pushing the door open wider.

As she did so, she disappeared into the house and I followed her inside.

She was standing just inside the door, looking around.

I waited on her to comment on the size of the interior of my cabin, but then I realized she’d already seen it when she breezed through to get to the back patio.

“I left my stuff by the front door,” she said. “I didn’t know... I mean, I could sleep on the couch.”

“I have a guest bedroom.”

Hadn’t I mentioned that already? Probably. She was no doubt trying to be polite.

“Of course, you could always sleep in my bed,” I said. “It’s a king. It’s so big, you’d never even come in contact with me.”

That was probably way too forward. But it helped that I wasn’t making eye contact with her as I said the words. I had my back to her as I strode toward the kitchen,

steaks in hand. I set them on the stove, then opened the oven and pulled out the potatoes I'd tossed in.

It had been a long time since I'd cooked for anyone. Years, actually. But sometimes I made a steak and baked potato just for myself. I was glad I did. It kept my cooking skills sharp.

"I'll just move my belongings to the guest bedroom," she said. "Thank you so much for letting me stay with you."

"It's in there."

I gestured toward the door on the other side of the dining room table.

My place wasn't big, but it had two bedrooms. I kept a full bed in the guest room for when my mom visited.

It was rare, though. She was married to a guy with a good government pension.

They were all the way on the other side of the country, so I flew back and forth for Thanksgiving and Christmas.

By the time Cate emerged, I had the steaks and potatoes on the table. I was grabbing forks from the drawer, but when I turned to walk back to the table, I nearly tripped over my own feet again as my gaze landed on her. She was just so damn beautiful.

She'd kicked off her shoes at the door, probably to be polite, and her pink-painted toenails and dainty little feet made me wonder if I had a foot fetish. That sort of thing had never gotten to me before, so I assumed it was more about my attraction to Cate than anything else.

“I’m just glad to have company,” I said. “Gets kind of lonely up here.”

Why had I told her that? My pride should have kicked in at some point before the words were out of my mouth. But I found that I wanted to open up to her. For the first time in my life, I wanted to share everything.

I gestured toward the seat across from me without saying a word. She had to sit first. I’d wait here until she did. Luckily, she didn’t delay long, but by then, I realized I’d forgotten to grab drinks.

If she didn’t like the type of white wine I’d bought, she didn’t show it. She just gave me a big smile and thanked me as I filled up the tumbler. Then she took a dainty sip before setting it down.

“I’ve never owned wine glasses,” I said. “I guess that makes me a less-than-ideal host.”

“It’s perfect. In college, I had a friend who insisted on having the right type of wine glass everywhere we went.” She rolled her eyes. “She dragged me to a wine tasting, but I was so out of my element. I like the sweeter stuff.” She lifted the tumbler. “Like this.”

I didn’t even know it was sweet. It had a decorative bottle that looked like something she’d like, but I knew absolutely nothing about wine.

I’d barely sat down when I realized I’d forgotten the steak knives and had to get up again. I was going to need a couple more swigs of beer before I could relax. I was working so hard to impress her, but it felt like I was just making a mess of things.

“This looks so good,” she said, picking up her fork.

She reached out to take the knife from me. My focus was on protecting her from the blade. That meant I didn't realize until too late that our hands were going to touch.

I nearly dropped the knife at the electricity that shot through me—starting at my fingertips and going straight to a place that had been on high alert since I first saw her this morning.

Her eyes met mine, and she let out a gasp. Yes, she'd felt it too. What did that mean? It meant I was spending the night under the same roof as a woman I wanted. A woman who wanted me back.

"Thanks," she said, quickly lowering her gaze to her plate. It was almost a nervous move, like she was shy.

"Do I make you nervous?" I asked.

I couldn't believe how bold I was being. But again, I just felt comfortable being open with her. That didn't mean she was comfortable being open with me, though. I had to keep that in mind.

"You do," she said. "I guess I'm just not all that used to being around guys like you."

I pretended I was more interested in slicing my steak than the conversation. "Guys like me?"

"You know, all muscles and good looks. You can have any woman you want."

"And you can have any man you want," I said with a shrug.

Now she was slicing. Her knife hovered just above the fatty part she was removing.

“That hasn’t proven to be true,” she said.

How was that possible? Any man with eyes would see her obvious beauty. Maybe she’d been a late bloomer. Or someone had done a number on her. Maybe wherever she was from, guys liked super skinny women and had no appreciation for eye-popping curves.

“Well, the men in your life need to get their eyes checked,” I said. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

She was fully looking at me now, her head raised and her eyes wide. She believed me. That was one thing I took from her expression. She definitely believed me. I, meanwhile, was fighting an almost overwhelming urge to shove my chair back, stand, and walk around to where she sat.

“You think so?” she asked.

“I really think so.”

How was it possible she didn’t know how beautiful she was? I didn’t get it.

She smiled and looked down at her plate again. “Nobody’s ever looked at me like that.”

“Well, that’s a damn shame.”

“It is?”

I nodded. “Some man should have been giving you serious attention.”

Not that she needed a man’s attention. It was just a damn shame, as I’d said.

“The men you’ve dated must all be complete idiots. You’ve had guys fall in love with you, right?”

She set down her fork, lifted her napkin from her lap, and daintily wiped her mouth. Only when she’d returned the scrap of white paper to her lap and taken several seconds to straighten it did she lift her head and meet my stare straight on.

“I’ve never really dated,” she said. “Not anything that led to more than a second date, anyway. I had friends who fixed me up. We’d double-date or go out in groups, but it never worked out. Either I wasn’t into him or he wasn’t into me. I guess I’m too picky for my own good.”

“You should be picky.”

But my mind was spinning. She just said she hadn’t dated anyone. Not really. I had to know.

“You have experience though,” I said.

I didn’t know how else to put it without coming across as crude. But I couldn’t go without asking.

“No,” she said. “I’ve never been with a man. Some disappointing kisses is as far as I’ve gotten.”

Disappointing kisses. That was an even bigger shame than men not appreciating her. She deserved so much more.

“I can do something about that,” I said. “Tonight. If you want.”

That last part wasn’t said in the same deep, lusty tone as the first part. I wouldn’t help

her with her first real kiss unless she was ready. And it would take everything in me not to go beyond kissing her once my lips touched hers...

“I don’t have protection,” she said. “I’m not on birth control or anything. I guess I should be...”

She dropped her fork with a clang and sat back, taking a deep breath. She was nervous. But more importantly, she’d gone beyond what I was even thinking. She was going straight to losing her virginity tonight, not just kissing.

No way was I going to argue with her. Whatever my girl wanted, my girl got.

I couldn’t finish my dinner fast enough.

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CATE

Nothing in my suitcase was suitable for a first time. Not a darn thing.

I had plain white panties, plain black panties, and even pale pink panties with flowers. Not a single one would qualify as worthy of a first time with a man like Dustin.

Finally, I decided to stick with the dark gray briefs I was already wearing. I removed my shorts and bra, though. I had no idea if it was customary to leave everything on and let the guy do most of the undressing. All I knew was I'd told him I'd be right back and rushed in here.

I grabbed my toothpaste and toothbrush and looked around. No bathroom. Of course, there wasn't. I'd have to exit the guest bedroom and go to the small bath I hoped was directly outside. I hadn't noticed another door, though, so my hopes weren't exactly high.

Slowly, I cracked open the bedroom door and peeked outside. The kitchen was empty, the table cleared, and the lights off. How did he clean up so fast? My guess was he tossed everything in the sink and called it a day.

That meant he was in his bedroom. I pulled my door open and stepped out, tiptoeing for no good reason. Sure enough, the only other door was closed.

I weighed my options. I could brush my teeth in the kitchen sink, but that seemed wrong somehow. So instead, I lowered myself off tiptoe and started toward the other

door, my heart hammering and my breaths coming in shallow spurts.

I stopped in front of the door and listened for any signs of life on the other side. Nothing. Finally, I shifted my toiletries to my non-dominant hand and knocked.

“Come in,” the male voice said.

I opened the door a crack and peeked inside. The room was dark, but enough light streamed in from the window next to the bed that he’d be able to at least make out my form. He wouldn’t see the color of my panties, though. That was a good thing.

“I was going to brush my teeth before bed,” I said.

Normally, I’d hold up the toothbrush and toothpaste to demonstrate, but I was trying to stay in the dark. I stared at the outline of the lump on the bed, assuming that was him. What if it wasn’t? What if he was in the bathroom and I was talking to an empty room?

“Go ahead,” he said.

I breathed a sigh of relief before realizing I had to open this door to go inside. My arm was shaky. I elbowed the door open, then with an equally shaky hand, I pulled it closed.

It was still a little too bright for my taste. He’d be able to make out every curve as I crossed the room. I had to remind myself that didn’t mean he could see the color or cut of my cotton briefs.

The trembling had spread to my legs. I noticed that as I crossed the room. I just hoped my legs would hold me up until I was safely tucked behind the closed door. Having your date collapse to the floor was definitely not a turn-on.

Date. The word stuck in my mind as I stared at myself in the mirror and twisted the faucet to turn on the cold water.

Was that what this was? I was about to sleep with him.

He'd fed me a pretty expensive meal—ribeye, which was a pricey cut of meat.

But men had bought more expensive meals than that in the name of getting laid.

Would that be what this turned into? A one-night stand? He'd delete my number from his phone afterward and never speak to me again...after making sure I was safely back with my disgruntled, miserable roommate.

I suddenly snapped out of my unproductive thoughts and wondered how long I'd been standing there, cold water running, toothbrush and toothpaste in my left hand. Was this a panic attack, or just the usual worry?

It was a big move. But even if it turned out to be a one-time thing, it would be worth it. I would have lost my virginity to the most interesting, best-looking guy I'd ever seen. It would be a memory I could relive for the rest of my life.

That thought snapped me out of it. At this point, I was just delaying the moment. Time to get started. Time to get out there and lose my virginity.

I brushed my teeth and set the toothbrush and toothpaste neatly on the counter next to the sink. Then I doubted myself. Maybe I should take them back to my room. I didn't want him to see them and panic, thinking I was trying to move in or something. Didn't guys get weird about stuff like that?

Finally, I rolled my eyes at myself. If he jumped to that conclusion, that was his problem. I wasn't going back to my room to store my dental supplies to avoid scaring

a grown-ass man.

“You’re beautiful. You’re confident. You can do this.”

With that whispered pep talk, I turned and yanked open the door. And that was when I realized I’d forgotten to switch off the bathroom light.

I was standing in the doorway, my entire body on full display. I may as well have been standing in a spotlight.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful,” he said.

Those words slashed through every fear I’d been having. Every piece of negative self-talk from years of being ignored—by men and everyone else, really—dropped like a heavy, dark cloak I hadn’t even realized I was wearing.

I leaned back and reached over to flip off the light switch, but his voice froze me. “Leave it on. I want to see you. All of you.”

So much for hiding my bargain-basement undies. But I had a feeling they’d be off soon enough. Maybe I should’ve taken them off in the bathroom. Would that have been weird? I wished someone taught a class on this stuff.

Taking a deep breath, I started across the room. My heart was hammering against the wall of my chest as I crossed to the bed. Only as I got closer could I see Dustin’s face. I couldn’t make out any details, and maybe that was a good thing. It meant he couldn’t make out my details either.

“Take off your shirt,” he said.

My heart skipped a beat. I should feel a sinking sense of dread. I was standing there

in boring underwear, with my shirt off. But instead, there was a catch in his voice that changed everything. It made me excited to get naked in front of him. He wanted my clothes gone as quickly as possible.

That was why I confidently jerked the T-shirt over my head. As I did so, I kept my gaze focused on him, resisting the temptation to look down and try to see myself as he saw me.

I'd been gifted in the chest area, which wasn't all that great until I got older and my hips filled out too. But even as a teenager, guys didn't seem to like that as much. At least not the guys in my school. Dustin seemed to appreciate them just fine.

"Now what?" I asked. "Do I just get in bed?"

I felt so awkward, but he knew I was new to all this. Seconds ticked by as I waited patiently for him to answer.

"What do you want to do?" he finally asked.

Oh, crap. That was a good question. He was putting the ball in my court.

"I want to feel your hands on me."

The words flowed out of me like they were the most natural thing in the world. Was that how I felt? Yes, definitely. Since when did I have the courage to say it to a man? Especially a man like Dustin?

"Well then, get under here," he said.

Warmth spread to the area between my legs at his words. It had little to do with the words themselves and everything to do with the way he said them.

Funny, but my hands weren't trembling as I pulled back the covers and climbed in. Somewhere along the way, I'd gotten my nerves under control. His nearness did that.

I immediately felt intense warmth. Heat was emanating from him. Was that something I brought out in him? I sure as hell hoped so.

Whatever the case, I'd barely gotten under the covers when his arms went around me, pulling me toward him. And that was when I truly felt like I'd come home. Like this was what I'd lived my entire life to experience. Everything up until now had just been preparing me for him.

His hand moved up my lower back as his lips touched mine. I closed my eyes, my entire body sighing as I savored my first real kiss. It started out tender at first, but I deepened it. I couldn't get enough of him. It would never be enough.

God, I hoped this wasn't a one-night stand because there was no way I'd walk away unscathed. I was already falling for Dustin, and if he didn't feel the same, it would definitely break my heart.

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DUSTIN

G o slowly.

The two-word mantra ran through my head over and over as I pressed my lips to hers. It was our first real kiss, and I wanted to make it exactly what she deserved. But that was a lot of pressure.

When Cate deepened the kiss, it told me I was on the right track. It also told me she wanted me as much as I wanted her, which was comforting to realize.

It was a gift just being here with her—let alone having the privilege of being her first time. I almost felt like thanking every man who'd come before. Men who hadn't realized what they were missing. Thanks to their idiocy, I now had this amazing gift lying next to me in bed.

My hands slid over her back, but I restrained myself from going further. She wasn't touching me yet. Her left hand was on my right bicep, but she wasn't moving her fingers along my arm. I wanted to let her set the pace. She had to be comfortable before I'd take it to the next level.

Suddenly, she broke the kiss. "We forgot something important."

Oh, crap. Unless it was an emergency, it was going to have to wait, whatever it was.

"What's that?" I asked.

“Protection. I’m not on birth control. I mean, you know I’m safe, but I don’t think you want me getting pregnant.”

Where had she gotten that idea? Wait—did I want her getting pregnant? I didn’t...right?

“I have condoms,” I said. “They’re in my drawer over there. Do you want me to get them?”

I couldn’t make out her expression as she said, “Not yet. I mean...you wouldn’t put that on yet, would you?”

She was so innocent to all of this, and I was looking forward to showing her the best physical pleasure she’d ever had. I’d show her every day for the rest of her life if she let me.

“No,” I said. “We can wait a little longer.”

“I don’t have sexy panties,” she blurted.

I blinked in surprise. What the hell? Where had that come from?

“They’re kind of boring,” she continued when I didn’t speak.

“I bought them in a bag on clearance a couple of years ago. They’re different colors, but they’re not really granny panties.

More like bikini briefs, which aren’t all that bad, I guess.

But you deserve something better. Sexy lingerie or something.”

I deserved sexy lingerie? I was still trying to figure out what I'd done to deserve this beautiful woman in my bed.

“Darling, you could be wearing a trash bag and you'd still be the sexiest woman in the world to me.”

Was that relief that flashed across her face? She'd really been worried about the underwear thing. All I cared about was getting them off her as fast as possible, and any man in my position would feel the same.

“You could always take them off,” I said. “There's nothing sexier than bare skin.”

“Do you want me to take them off, or do you want to take them off me?”

I groaned. “I'll take them off you.”

Then I lowered my head and captured her lips in a long, passionate kiss. There was no tenderness to this one. The desire I'd been holding back since I first saw her came pouring out in one big burst.

It was tough. My hands wandered as I kissed her, and finally, I had to gently nudge her onto her back so I could have full access to her body. That was when her hands started wandering.

Nothing had ever felt better than her fingertips moving down my spine. Finally, they settled on my ass, moving over my cotton boxer briefs, which I'd also gotten out of a bag full of multiple sets. Only mine were all the same color. I'd tell her that, but my mouth was a little busy right now.

Eventually, I broke the kiss, but not to speak. Instead, I planted kisses along her chest, my hands settling on her waist. When I captured her left nipple in my mouth, she

cried out and arched her back.

I looked up at her as I ran my tongue around her nipple, then flicked it over the beaded tip.

At the same time, I let one of my hands roam around behind her, but the positioning was too awkward for me to move to her inner thigh like I wanted.

She didn't seem to have a problem with it, though.

Her hands dove beneath my underwear, running over my ass cheeks and making me realize just how hard it would be to keep holding out.

When I began moving down her body, her hand slipped out of my underwear and settled onto my back.

I kissed my way over her stomach as my fingers worked the elastic waistband of her underwear.

They were bikini briefs made from a thin cotton material.

As far as I was concerned, they were sexy as hell, but I could only make out a faint outline.

I looked up at her again. Her head was tilted upward, eyes closed. At least, I was pretty sure they were closed.

I needed her help to get the panties off, but I didn't want to kill the mood. So I settled for keeping them around her thighs and sliding my finger inside her as I moved above her, looking down at her face.

Even in this lighting, the view took my breath away. Her eyes were closed, her lips parted, and her chest dramatically rose and fell. I settled my finger on her clit and began moving quickly over it, smiling that she was so damn wet for me.

It wasn't enough, though. I needed to do more than touch her. So I moved to one side of her and took the panties all the way off. Once I got to her calf, she seemed to realize what was going on and helped, kicking them off, then reaching for me.

It was that last move that just about did me in. I never imagined that having a woman reach for me could be such a turn-on. But then everything about her was a turn-on, so I shouldn't be surprised.

I settled back into place, but this time, instead of hovering above her, I moved my head between her legs.

She looked down at me and I held her gaze, wishing the room were more brightly lit.

I wanted to see the fire in her eyes, the heat.

All I could make out was slight curiosity.

She probably knew what I was about to do, but she wouldn't truly know until I got started.

Sure enough, as soon as my tongue made contact with her clit, her eyes slammed shut and her head tilted back again. I waited for her back to come off the bed, but she held perfectly still—like she was taking in every sensation.

I closed my eyes and focused on the task at hand, taking in her heavy breaths and occasional sighs. I wanted to tell her she didn't have to make an effort to be quiet. Nobody could hear out here. Not inside this well-insulated cabin.

She seemed to get that point without me even saying it. Or maybe she was enjoying herself so much, her restraints melted away.

But finally, she spoke. “Oh, fuck, Dustin. That feels so good.”

Hearing her use the F-word jerked my dick to attention. Okay, I was already hard as a rock, but now the throb was almost painful. I needed release, and I needed it soon. I didn’t let up, accelerating my movements until she was gasping and writhing beneath me.

“Oh, oh, oh!” she cried out, letting me know my hard work was paying off.

She hadn’t said for sure, but I wanted to believe this was her first orgasm ever. If not, it was definitely the first a man had given her. The look on her face when she finally stilled confirmed it.

“Wow,” she said. “I’m going to have to catch my breath after that. Did I make too much noise?”

I rose above her so I could get a better look at that flushed face, then I planted a kiss on those swollen lips. “You were perfect. But feel free to make all the noise you want. I sure will.”

She looked down. At first, I thought she was admiring my chest, but then I realized her attention was below that.

“Can I see it?” she asked.

I started to ask what, but I knew exactly what she wanted to see. “Sure.”

I moved to climb off her so I could remove my underwear, but her hands on my waist

stopped me. I froze as she slid her thumbs underneath the elastic and pushed.

It was almost a relief when my cock was free, even though my underwear wasn't all that restrictive. When I felt her hand around me, I realized just how tough this would be. I had to hold out. I had to come inside her—not all over her stomach.

I nearly lost it at that thought. It was a dirty one, and no way would I share it with her, but damn, the image of my cum on her soft, perfect skin did things to me.

“Does it dull the sensation?” she asked, frowning.

Dull sensations? There was nothing dull about the sensations I was feeling right now.

“The condom,” she prompted. “When you put it on, will you feel less?”

Oh, that. Yes, it dulled sensations, which could be welcome in this case. But it also meant I wouldn't fully feel her surrounding me. Plus, I wouldn't be able to fill her with my seed.

“Yeah, but it's never bothered me before,” I said. “If it kept me from getting a woman pregnant, it was worth it.”

She tilted her head, brow furrowing, making that cute little wrinkle at the top of her nose. “You're speaking in past tense. You don't want to avoid getting a woman pregnant anymore?”

I opened my mouth to say hell no, but the words didn't come out. I wanted to get a woman pregnant. I wanted to get this woman pregnant. I wanted to fill this cabin with kids—or hell, maybe we'd have to get a bigger cabin. This only had two bedrooms and one bathroom, after all.

I loved this cabin, though. I thought I was going to spend the rest of my life alone here. But meeting her had done something to me. It had changed everything.

I wanted a baby. I wanted a baby with her. And I wanted to go through this life with her by my side.

“Do you want kids?” she asked.

That was when I realized she’d mistaken my silence for something it wasn’t. “I want kids,” I rushed to answer. “At least two. But only if I can have them with you.”

I held my breath in the silence that followed, trying to grab anything I could from her expression. It was too soon. She’d freak out. And I wouldn’t blame her. If any other woman had said words like that to me, I would’ve been looking for the exit sign and sprinting my way out of her life.

But not Cate. And that made her the one woman in history who could totally and completely crush me.

But as I watched her face, fear wasn’t what I saw there. If anything, she seemed to relax. That was a good sign, right? It could’ve been a trick of the lighting, but I was close enough to her that I could make out detail a little better, so I doubted it.

“Me too,” she finally said. “I didn’t think I’d want kids this soon. Eventually, yeah, but since meeting you, I see everything differently. With you and this town, I’ve realized what I’ve been missing all my life. This sense of community. Family. People taking care of each other.”

“I’d never ask you to move here unless you want to.”

“I want to.” She bit her lip, then added, “But I don’t want to scare you off.”

“Nothing you could do or say would scare me off,” I said. “Unless you have a husband hiding somewhere, and I know that’s not the case.”

She laughed. “I couldn’t even rustle up a good ex-boyfriend if I needed to. I’m all yours.”

“I’ll get the condom,” I said, moving away from her.

She reached out, placing her hand on my forearm. “As long as you’re clean, I want to do this without it. If you’re on board with that, of course. If we make a baby tonight, I’d be the happiest woman in the world.”

“I’m clean, alright,” I said.

I didn’t want to tell her how long it had been since I’d had a woman in my bed. Or any bed, for that matter. And when I was active, I’d always been extra safe.

But what surprised me most was that I was okay with us making a baby tonight. Beyond okay. In fact, I couldn’t imagine anything that would make me happier.

A smile briefly flashed across her face before she clenched her jaw and closed her eyes. “Let’s do this.”

I frowned down at her for who knew how long before I finally said, “It’s not a root canal. It’ll hurt, but I’ll go as slowly as possible.”

Her eyes popped open. “There’s no way it won’t hurt like hell.”

I looked down, then reached over and took her right hand, placing it between us. “Have you ever done that before? Touched yourself?”

I looked up at her. Her eyes were wide. She shook her head.

“No,” she said. “I mean, I knew I could. I just never...I don’t know.”

“Trust me?”

Again, our eyes met and held. This wasn’t just about getting through her first time. This was about her knowing that she could always trust me to look out for her. Her safety and happiness would be my top priority for the rest of my life.

Finally, she nodded. Her eyes slid closed. I knew then that she was touching herself, which meant my eyes had to close too. I couldn’t watch. Just knowing what she was doing had me fighting to restrain myself.

As I entered her, one thought flew across my mind. This was it. This would change everything. And the funny part was, she was the one losing her virginity, but I felt like it was my first time.

The first time that counted, anyway.

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CATE

It wasn't as bad as I expected.

Okay, so I'd expected it to feel like a knife was stabbing me in that part of my body. Instead, it was a sharp pain. It hurt, but it wasn't excruciating.

Maybe touching myself helped. I found the small nub that had brought me so much pleasure minutes ago.

My clit. I knew what it was called, and I probably should've explored it on my own.

It at least would've prepared me for what an orgasm felt like.

But now, I was glad I waited. I was glad Dustin had given me my first-ever orgasm.

Trust me.

Those two words had gone straight to my heart. They were about more than reducing the pain by touching myself. They were about believing that he'd keep me safe, no matter what.

And yes, I trusted him. With all my heart.

My mind drifted back to the present—to what he was doing to me and what I was doing to myself. It didn't feel good yet, but the pain was making it hard to feel anything else.

I wasn't sure which came first, the pain getting easier or the pleasure intensifying. All I knew was things were starting to tingle again. How was it already a familiar feeling when it had only happened once before? I didn't know, but I couldn't wait for it to happen again.

When I dared to open my eyes briefly, I saw Dustin above me, his expression a mask of complete concentration. That was when I knew he was doing everything in his power to keep from coming too soon.

Surely, he wasn't waiting for me. Was he waiting for me? I couldn't come again, especially not when I was in pain.

Or maybe I could. I closed my eyes and focused on the feel of him moving in and out of me. The sound of his heavy breathing and the woodsy smell of him. Everything about Dustin just screamed masculinity, and I found it sexier than anything I could imagine.

Sounds were coming from somewhere, and finally a part of me registered that I was the one making them. Whimpers and cries as my pussy clenched around his shaft. Then my entire body was on fire as I rode the wave of my second-ever orgasm.

I let out one long cry, then went silent as my body came back down. That was when I peeked again and found him staring at me, eyes wide open, a heat like nothing I had ever seen from him darkening that steely stare.

I wrapped my legs around him, pushing him deeper, which brought a fresh wave of pain, but I didn't care. This was all about him. All about making him feel as good as he'd made me feel.

I kept my eyes on him as he thrust in and out, still careful not to go too deep, even though I knew he wanted to. His clenched jaw and deep breaths would fuel my

fantasies for years.

But I wouldn't have to fantasize. He'd be there, making love to me as often as I wanted. He'd be the only person I made love to for the rest of time.

He let out a cry so loud, I was sure everyone within a twenty-mile radius could hear it. Out here, in the middle of nowhere, people would probably assume it was a wild animal, and they wouldn't be all that wrong. I brought out the wild animal in my man, and I was proud of it.

Finally, we collapsed onto the bed, both out of breath and exhausted. He reached over and took my hand in his, entwining his fingers with mine.

And that was how we drifted off to sleep. Hand in hand, smiles on our faces, exhausted from lovemaking. Two people who managed to find each other, despite being from completely different worlds.

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DUSTIN

“I’ve got a job for you.”

Crap. I’d been hoping to get out of here and have dinner with my girlfriend. Yes, I was already calling Cate my girlfriend after only two nights together.

But my boss’s voice as I packed up my tools said no such luck. I couldn’t imagine what else he’d need me to do, though. Most everything had been packed up and driven off on big trucks. I was helping two of the drivers load the last of the ticket booth before Sam approached.

“Yes, sir,” I said, straightening and turning to look at my boss.

“We won the bid to build some cabins in a town called Wildwood Valley, about six hours away. I know it’s a distance, but it’s a two-month job, and I’ll double your wage. Don’t worry, I’ll put you up. Got a deal with the developer for you and the guys to stay in the only inn in town.”

My smile faltered—probably something he’d notice because it was so unlike me. Before meeting Cate, I would’ve jumped at the opportunity to live somewhere else for a couple of months. With the pay being double, it would’ve been a no-brainer. What had changed?

The answer to that was simple. Cate had me wanting to put down roots.

“If you don’t mind, I’d rather just stay here,” I said.

The surprise immediately registered on my boss's face. "I'm afraid that's not an option. I need you to lead up the team. You're my best man. Don't let me down."

Fuck. I'd just met Cate. I couldn't leave her for two months. Sure, she could stay in my cabin here, but six hours was a long drive for weekend visits.

Still, I needed this job. I'd learned from an early age not to let down the people depending on me, and besides, we'd need my paycheck. Even after Cate was making a decent living on her own, I'd always be there for her. Just like I'd been there for my mom when she needed me.

"I'm your man," I said, forcing a smile that showed enthusiasm I didn't have.

Although he still didn't smile, there was a slight flicker in his eyes and a twitch at each corner of his mouth. "I knew I could count on you, Dustin."

He gestured to indicate less chaotic surroundings. While we'd been standing there, the last truck had started up, carrying the last of the equipment off. I supposed that was a relief, at least.

"Finish up here and meet me at the office tomorrow at nine," Sam said. "We'll come up with a plan. Be packed and ready to leave after our meeting."

Without waiting for a response from me, he turned and headed toward the employee parking lot.

I couldn't go home just yet. Cate was waiting for me. We'd planned to ride home together, so she was killing time at her easel until I came and got her.

Home. I'd already started to think of it that way. I'd even been daydreaming about building a bigger place once we were ready. Maybe closer to town to make it easier

to get our kids back and forth to school once they were old enough.

I took a deep breath and walked slowly in Cate's direction. I could see her, off in the distance, sitting alone in front of her easel. But even walking slowly, I made it to her all too soon. It wasn't that big a fairground.

She was so absorbed in whatever she was drawing, she didn't look up at first. I stood there, watching her. I'd give up everything I had for her, including my job, but we needed money to live. I'd never put the burden on her to support us. Not even for a little while.

I cleared my throat. When she looked up, her expression brightened immediately. It broke my heart that I had to give her bad news. When her smile fell slightly, I realized I couldn't delay any longer.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Shit. How was I going to tell her this? Would she mind? Would it be a deal-breaker? God, please don't let it be a deal-breaker.

"I have to go out of town," I said. "Starting tomorrow. For two months."

Her smile completely vanished. She looked down at her easel for a long moment, then set her pencil in the attached holder. Finally, when she looked up at me, I saw something different on her face. Determination. Strength. She was steeling herself to be dumped.

That wasn't what was happening here at all.

"It pays double my normal hourly wage," I said. "I'll understand if you don't want to wait for me, but I can't risk my job. And double pay for two months would get us

way ahead as we start our life together.”

Her eyebrows rose and a hint of a smile returned. Just a hint, but I grabbed onto it.

“So, you want me to wait for you?” she asked.

She was full-on smiling now, which I assumed was a good thing. I’d ask if she wanted to wait for me, but that was clear.

“I want you to wait for me,” I said. “Here in Sweetheart Bend. You can stay in my cabin.”

“Like house-sitting?”

I shook my head. “Like you live there. It’s your home too. When I come back, we’ll get married. If that’s what you want.”

I waited to make sure, but her smile grew even bigger. She was full-on beaming.

“You want to marry me?” she asked.

“Are you kidding? I’d marry you right this second, but I have to head out of town tomorrow. When we do get married, I want to spend every night with you in our bed.”

She stood, pushing her chair back, and I started around the easel to help her fold it up. But she stepped in front of me.

“You’ll spoil the surprise,” she said.

“Surprise?”

I looked around. There was nothing but her chair and easel. Just land with no sign of the fair that had once stood around her. The crew had packed up everything and left, and pretty soon, we'd be gone too, leaving it abandoned until the next big event.

"Close your eyes," she said.

That command had my mind automatically sliding into the gutter. I knew what I wanted the surprise to be, but that kind of surprise would have to wait until a little later, when we weren't standing in the middle of a big, empty field.

I felt her move. Somehow, I knew she was standing next to her easel. A light swishing noise told me she was lifting the pad from it.

"Okay, open them," she said.

My eyes popped open. In front of me was a large drawing. Not a caricature, but a regular drawing of the two of us. In it, we were standing side by side, arms around each other, gazing into each other's eyes. The image showed exactly how I felt about her in ways I couldn't put into words.

"That's us." I lifted my gaze from the drawing to her face. "We're going to hang it somewhere in the house."

She looked down at it. "You think so? I don't know if it's gallery-worthy, but I've been working on it between customers the past couple of days."

"So you started working on this before we..."

She nodded. "I guess I've been fantasizing about you since the first day I saw you. As it turned out, the reality was better than..."

She didn't finish the sentence. She didn't have to. The drawing said it all.

"Let's go get some dinner and have the best night of our lives."

As we walked to the car, though, I knew it would only be the first of many. Even distance couldn't separate us.

But no way could I make it two months without seeing her. I'd find a way to sneak in a weekend here and there. Even if I had to drive an entire day just to see her for one day, it would be worth it.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:07 am

CATE

My heart raced as I pulled into the parking lot of the Wildwood Valley Inn.

We'd made it to the seven-week mark, but the guys on Dustin's crew were getting restless.

The bad news was that two weeks had been tacked onto the end of the project, which meant we had another three weeks to go, and nobody was sure that would be the end.

The good news was that some of Dustin's guys had started going home on weekends.

One of those guys was a married father of two who'd been rooming with Dustin in a double queen bed room throughout the project.

When Dustin told me we'd have the room to ourselves all weekend, I'd almost jumped in the car right then and there, but I had to wait until Friday when their work was done.

I pulled into a parking lot of a large Tudor-style building just off the interstate.

I didn't know what I'd expected in a small town like this one, but I was pleasantly surprised.

The landscaping was clean and impressive, and the surrounding businesses were equally charming, including a pancake restaurant next door.

I had two surprises for Dustin. One would be delivered to the room any minute. He thought we were going out for dinner, but based on his visits to Sweetheart Bend the past six weekends, we wouldn't want to leave bed until morning—if then.

There were more vehicles in the parking lot than I thought there would be, but one of them was Dustin's black pickup, and that was all that mattered.

I hadn't set up a plan for getting to his room before he was off work for the day.

Sure, I could have gone by the work site and gotten a room key, but I was counting on him getting off work in plenty of time for my arrival.

"Well, hello," a woman at the front desk called out as I walked in. "You must be Cate. It's so nice to finally meet you."

I froze halfway across the lobby, my thumb hitched under the strap of my overnight bag.

I blinked, surprised this woman knew my name.

It was a small town, sure, but I didn't live here.

That meant Dustin had been talking about me, and it looked like what he'd been saying was enough to make this woman enthusiastic to meet me.

I felt like a celebrity for the first time in my life.

"I'm Bobbie," she said. "I run this place. Your boys have been great company the past couple of months. Thanks to your town for loaning them to us."

I didn't think of them as my boys or Sweetheart Bend as my town. Not yet. Not until

Dustin came home for good and made everything feel...right.

“Anyway, your man’s up there waiting for you,” she said. “Room 243. Have fun...but not too much fun.”

She gave me a little wink, and I couldn’t help but smile as I headed toward the stairs. This place may have had an elevator, but I couldn’t see it from where I stood. It was just easier to take the stairs than wander the lobby, looking for the right signs.

My heart was racing by the time I reached the top of the steps, and not because of the exertion.

It had only been five days since Dustin had headed back to Wildwood Valley after we’d spent the entire weekend together, mostly in bed.

I had a feeling my excitement over seeing him would be the same even if it had only been eight hours.

I raised my hand to knock, but the door burst open before my knuckles could even make contact. I was face-to-face with the man I loved, and he couldn’t have looked happier to see me.

“Damn, I’ve missed you,” he said. “Get in here.”

That last part sounded bossy, but it was just the kind of bossy I liked. We couldn’t do anything just yet, though. We still had dinner coming. But there was always time for a kiss.

I wrapped my arms around him, drawing him toward me. His mouth was on mine before our bodies even made contact, his tongue parting my lips. He had a way of distracting me.

When his hands began fumbling with my T-shirt, I pulled back. “I have a surprise for you.”

His eyes were heavy as he straightened. He seemed to be trying to get his bearings.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Dinner delivered to the room.”

He frowned. “This place doesn’t have room service.”

“Right. Restaurant delivery to the rescue.”

He frowned. “There’s no delivery in this town.”

“There is when you know someone who knows someone.” I smiled. “My friend back in Springfield does restaurant delivery. She got me in touch with a friend of hers in the next town over. She’s going to leave everything outside the door.”

I turned to take a couple of steps toward the door, but I’d barely started moving when I heard three taps. Once I got to the door, I looked through the peephole and verified nobody was standing out there before lowering from tiptoe and reaching for the lock.

“Hold up,” he said. “Do you mind if I do that? Just in case, you know.”

He was protecting me. I knew there were no dangers lurking in the hallway of this charming inn, but I was so touched. Just the fact that he cared enough warmed my heart.

I stepped back just far enough to let Dustin get to the door. He grabbed everything, handing some of it off to me, and we carried it to the table together. It was small, with

a big cushy chair on either side that made me feel almost like royalty as I sat.

Once that was all unloaded, Dustin crossed the room and opened the minifridge, kneeling to peer inside. When he stood, he had a bottle in his hand.

“Wine for you and beer for me,” he said.

Oh crap. I hadn’t planned on revealing my second surprise quite this early. But it looked like I’d have no other choice. He knew my favorite wine, and I definitely would have drank at least one glass any other night.

“You know what?” I asked. “I think I’m in the mood for water tonight. Do you have any?”

He looked confused. “No, I didn’t buy any bottled water. I could get you some from the tap. Or they sell them at the reception desk downstairs.”

I should’ve added drinks when I ordered all the food. What was I thinking? I was just so excited to see him, it totally slipped my mind.

“I’ll call down there,” I said. “Maybe they could send one up.”

“No. You stay right there.”

He grabbed the room key and was out the door before I could say a word.

I stared down at the containers full of food.

I’d ordered a cheeseburger and onion rings for me and a ribeye with baked potato for him.

My work at a grocery store near Sweetheart Bend paid enough that I could handle my own expenses, along with little things like this.

But I wasn't fooling myself. If I hadn't been able to stay in his cabin for free, I definitely would've been strapped for cash right now.

A few minutes later, I heard the loud click that indicated he'd waved his keycard in front of it. When the door popped open, he held two bottles of water.

Then and there, the decision was made. I was going to tell him, and I was going to tell him now.

"I'm pregnant," I blurted.

The silence that followed terrified me. I hadn't expected that.

I'd imagined that he would grab me, pull me into his arms, and kiss me.

Then he'd be ready to call everyone we knew, but I'd have to hold him off, telling him we had to wait until the second trimester.

That's what the internet advised, anyway.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

I nodded. The door had closed behind him, but he was still standing there, holding those bottles of water and staring at me with a completely blank expression.

"I'm going to be a father?" he asked.

I nodded. "In seven months—give or take a week or two in either direction."

“I’m going to be a father.”

His face broke into a smile. Then he made up for lost time, transitioning from frowning to nearly jumping for joy in milliseconds.

“I’m going to be a father!” he called out.

“You’re going to be a father. And I’m going to be a mother. We’re going to be the best parents ever.”

That did it. He closed the remaining distance between us and pulled me to my feet.

Then he wrapped his arms around me and tugged me toward him, the bottles of water chilling my back.

I didn’t care, though. I was in the arms of the man I loved—a man who would become my husband soon enough. And we were going to start a family.

Life was good. And it would only get better from here.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:07 am

DUSTIN

The funhouse was broken down. How could the funhouse be broken down? It wasn't even a ride.

But I knew the answer to that even as I started toward it.

This was my seventh year helping out at the county fair, but it was the first year my wife wasn't on site.

She'd continued to draw caricatures here until last year, even though her career as a freelance illustrator was already taking off by then.

But she'd landed a couple of big contracts, and now she simply didn't have time to sit out here in the heat, day after day. Even for fun. Even though she wanted to be out here.

The funhouse looked deserted. It was still lit up, but nobody was around. My guess was the mechanism that made the floor move had malfunctioned somehow. It hadn't happened in my seven years of doing this, but there was a first time for everything.

I climbed the steps and entered a building I'd never been in before. I passed a large Out of order sign on the way. I'd enjoyed a couple of funhouses as a kid, but it had been so long, I didn't even remember much about them.

"I'm in here."

Those words brought me to a stop. That sounded like Cate's voice. That was impossible. She was at home with Cook, our surprise baby that came from our first time. And two years later, we'd followed with Cruz, then a couple of years ago, Camille.

The kids were a handful, but we loved every second of our life.

We'd even been able to stay in the same cabin, just adding two bedrooms and a bathroom onto the back.

It was tough to find a piece of land like that in Sweetheart Bend, so we made do with what we had.

Besides, we both loved that little cabin. It was home.

"Cate?" I called out.

Silence. I immediately started doubting my own ears. I'd imagined it. Or maybe a fairgoer was trapped somewhere, and she was waiting for me to rescue her.

"I'm in here."

That was definitely my wife's voice. What was she doing here? Had she shown up to surprise me?

It took a couple more shouts from her to track her down to the mirror maze. Not at all where I would have expected to find her. We'd never even discussed the funhouse.

But the second I spotted her, I knew exactly what she had in mind. My wife was buck naked. Not a scrap of clothes on her. I didn't even see her clothes anywhere nearby, and thanks to the mirrors surrounding her, I was getting a look at her from just about every angle.

“The funhouse is out of order until further notice,” she said.

That explained it. No repairs were necessary, but the sign out front would give us the privacy we needed.

I unbuckled my toolbelt and set it on the ground, then straightened. “I could get fired for this, you know.”

“You’re the boss,” she said, stepping toward me.

My wife was unbelievably beautiful. More beautiful than the day we met. That banging body had birthed all three of our kids and as a result, her curves had filled out even more. It was tough to keep my hands off her most of the time. But tonight, I wouldn’t have to fight it.

“Yes, but I have clients,” I said.

“Well, we could call it off and go home. We’ll have the house to ourselves. Jude and Sonya are watching the kids tonight.”

Jude was my little brother—the one who’d cut ties with me and Mom when he got married. I’d invited him and his wife, Sonya, to our very small mountain wedding, and he’d surprised me by showing up.

Turned out, once his kids got older, he realized what he’d lost in cutting me out of his life. They moved to Sweetheart Bend a couple of years ago, and our kids were growing up together, even though his kids were older than ours. They loved spending the night with their Uncle Jude.

No, I didn’t want to call it off and go home. I showed her as much by yanking off my T-shirt and tossing it to the ground. I then worked the fastening on my shorts until they dropped.

We'd had a few adventures like this in recent years. She'd visit me on construction sites after my crew had gone home. We'd gotten naked on my desk in the trailer and in the new construction itself.

I never imagined marriage could be so full of adventure. But I'd also never imagined meeting someone like Cate.

By the time I got to her, all my clothes were on the ground too. I didn't normally like looking at myself in the mirror, but tonight would be a different matter. Tonight, I'd be all about seeing the two of us in the reflections that surrounded us.

"Surprised?" she asked as I came toward her. "Ready for a kiss?"

More than ready. I'd been thinking about it since I realized that was, in fact, her voice. She seemed to have an even greater longing, because she put a lot into the kiss, nearly knocking me on my ass with her intensity.

My hands settled into the small of her back as I pulled her toward me, settling my erection against her stomach. The feel of her large, round tits against the hard wall of my chest would never get old. It still turned me on as much today as it did the first time.

She let out a moan as I slid my hands over her waist. Then she broke the kiss. Her eyes were heavy-lidded, but she looked over to the left. She was watching us. I'd give her something to watch.

"Put your hands on the mirror," I said, separating our bodies.

She looked confused for a second as her eyes opened wide. But she did exactly as I commanded, trusting me as usual. I hadn't let her down yet. I never would.

She put both palms against the mirror to her right, keeping her fingers crumpled at

first. But soon enough, she spread them out.

I watched as I ran my hands over her body, settling them on her breasts while sliding my hard-as-steel shaft between her legs.

I was sending the message to spread her legs wider, but when she let out a groan and lowered her head, I realized she liked that.

So I did it again. I began sliding back and forth, coating my shaft with her juices.

Then I was the one letting out a groan. It just felt so damn good. And part of it was knowing my girl was this wet for me.

We were surrounded by images of us—our bodies on full display. And when Cate opened her eyes slightly, I knew she was peeking. She was getting even more turned on by our reflection.

I maneuvered her around, edging her toward the mirror a little so I could easily get my right hand between her legs, my left hand still cupping her breast. When she straightened, her stance was wider, making it easy for me to guide my tip toward her entrance.

Then we settled into an easy rhythm, and from there, it was simple. My fingers found that swollen nub I knew too well, and I moved over it in rhythmic circles as I slid deep inside her, going slowly and taking in every deep breath and moan.

I watched her watching us—her head tilted to the right, her eyes fixed on our reflection as I thrust in and out. Finally, her eyes drifted closed, and that was the sexiest sight of all—her, lost in the feel of my hands and my cock.

As my fingers moved over her most sensitive spots—not just her clit, but the beaded tip of her nipple—she kept her noises to a minimum. But I could still hear her. The

sounds of her rapid, heavy breaths echoed throughout the small hallway of mirrors where we stood.

When she came, she let out a whimper, and I knew the sound snuck past her fierce determination to stay quiet. That brought a smile to my face. But that smile quickly faded when I realized there was no need to hold out any longer.

That was when I took in the same image that had captured her attention off to her right. Fuck, we were hot. Her perfect, curvy body. My hips thrusting as she finished her orgasm and I fell headlong into mine...

I had to bite my lip to keep from crying out as a series of sensations threatened to knock me off my feet.

It just felt too damn good. Even though we rarely missed a day, every time I came inside her, I wondered why we didn't do this more often.

Maybe four or five times a day. Without kids, we very well might have.

"We probably should get out of here," I said as we both stood, still trying to catch our breath. "Someone might wonder why the funhouse has been out of order so long."

"It's not a busy night," she said, straightening and separating our bodies. "I figured this would be the best night to surprise you."

"You've been planning this for a while, huh?"

I smiled at her as she turned and rose on tiptoe, clasping her hands behind my neck and pulling me toward her. Her lips met mine in a kiss that was slow and sweet. A kiss that had me almost heating up again.

How was it possible this was even hotter than what we'd just done? It definitely

threatened to ramp up my erection again, and that couldn't happen just yet. We had to get dressed and get out of here. Once we were home, we could start this all over again.

"You know," she said, "I was thinking I could go for one of those kebabs."

My underwear was on and I was working my shorts into place, but her words paused my movements. "That actually sounds good. I had dinner, but I could go for a late-night snack."

"It's only eight-thirty," she said, smiling as she glanced at the fitness watch she was still wearing. "But yeah, I guess that qualifies as a late night these days."

"Sure does."

I watched as she put on her bra. The sight of her doing that made it tough to concentrate on getting dressed, but I somehow managed. I didn't take my eyes off her the entire time, though. No way. I wanted to keep every second of tonight imprinted on my memory forever.

"Let's go get a kebab," I said. "The boss says I can take off early tonight."

"You're the boss," she reminded me.

"Oh yeah." I smiled down at her. "Well, I'm ordering me to grab that closed sign and open up this funhouse before the customers start to revolt."

"That sounds like a good idea," she said. "I'll go grab the kebabs."

We kissed one more time before parting, and it struck me, as always, that walking away from her was almost painful. I wanted her by my side night and day. But we'd come back together in a few minutes, and as always, it would only make me

appreciate the time we spent together more.