



The Biker's Forbidden Craving (Chaos Brothers MC #1)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Can this older mountain biker find love with his best friends sister?

Abby

I need a change of pace,

A life outside of Texas.

So I do the only reckless thing I've ever dared and follow my brother's best friend into the mountains, chasing a life that isn't mine.

Trouble is, I didn't expect my brother to tag along too.

I don't like chasing impossible things and I don't particularly love danger,

But Hank is the ruin I crave.

And I have to have him.

Hank

Every man holds his own set of universal rules.

Mine?

Don't touch what isn't yours. Don't want what you can't keep.

But Abby makes a liar out of me.

She's forbidden, wrapped in innocence and temptation.

I shouldn't want her. I shouldn't need her the way I do.

But when her friend goes missing

Abby needs me more than ever

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:00 pm

Abby

The road ahead twists and turns like a poorly kept secret.

Thankfully, I love me some shadowy intrigue.

Maybe that's why I've always been drawn to this place.

The tall, rugged mountains, the scent of pine, and the small-town charm.

Oh, and the big, rough men—can't forget them.

I swear they grow differently here. I've never seen so many tall, built men before.

Rugged Mountain is a fantasy come to life. I can't believe it's my new home.

It's not that I don't like Texas, I do. It's cute, in its own oppressively hot, pokey cactus, blank beauty kind of way, but I can't picture one desert sunset that could beat the view of snow-capped mountains spilling into a turquoise lake. That, and Hank is here.

Hank. The man I've been in love with for as long as I can remember.

That said, nothing will ever come of the relationship.

My brother would never have it. They've been best friends all their lives.

I'm pretty sure he'd view a relationship between Hank and I as a personal stab in the throat.

That, and Hank isn't into me. He's a six-and-a-half-foot monster of a man.

He could have any woman he wants. And though I could fantasize about him wanting me, reality says that my round shape isn't as genetically preferred as an hourglass or even a triangle.

Why are we all reduced to shapes? I'm so much more than a circle. I'm a person with thoughts and ideas, and given the chance, I think I have a lot to offer.

I pull into a cute little diner set on the main street of town.

It's nearly dark, so there's only a few people out and about.

I've noticed that since I got here, most folks are inside by dinner time, except for Saturday nights when they head down to Mullet's bar for a drink and live music.

I've never been much of a late-night person anyway, so the early nights are fine by me.

In fact, this seven p.m. meetup with my friend Maci is as late as I've been out in a long while.

"You're lookin' cute!" She sneaks up from behind me, poking me in the ribs. She means it playfully, but I jump anyhow. I've always been easily scared. I like to blame it on my overactive imagination.

When I was a kid, I was convinced ghostly stalkers were just waiting for me to let my guard down. I slept with a flashlight until I was fourteen. That's a lie... I still sleep

with a flashlight. Hell, I won't even think about entering a basement without a legally binding escape plan.

"Shit! You scared the hell outta me." I twist back quickly, holding my hand over my stomach as though letting go would mean it falling on the ground. "Why aren't you inside ordering us milkshakes? You texted and asked me what I wanted."

"I did! Then I ran across the street to grab this record before the store closed. It's your birthday, and birthdays require gifts." She grins ear to ear and holds up the square shaped prize covered by a white plastic bag.

"I thought I said no gifts."

"I know," she strings her fingers through her long brown hair and hands the record toward me, "but you only turn twenty-five once. Plus, you can't skip candles, cake, and gifts on your birthday. I'm pretty sure that's bad luck or something. Come on... take it!"

Tilting my head to the side, I sigh with a soft smile and reach for the gift. "Thank you. You didn't have to do that."

"I know!" She leans forward and tears down the plastic bag excitedly. "It's the new Morgan Waylon album! It just came out last week. Your boss said you were holding it to buy for yourself next paycheck."

Oh, man. This is a thoughtful gift too. "Awe," I lean and wrap her for a quick squeeze, "thank you. I love it. You really shouldn't have, though."

"I'm glad you like it. We should get inside for the ice cream. I watched our waitress set the glasses at our table thirty seconds ago and my stomach his growling." Maci smiles wide and reaches for the diner door, pulling it open as the scent of freshly

baked pie comes spilling out.

It's not the first time I've been inside the diner, but it's the first time I've seen the place nearly empty.

It's now dark outside, so even the mountain views are hushed.

Instead, the diner illuminates itself. The red canvas booths, the shiny silver tables, the posters hung promoting the summer festival coming to Rugged Mountain.

It's like a scene from a small-town movie.

Usually, I'm too focused on faces and random conversations about someone's family drama to notice the décor.

Eavesdropping has turned into a very entertaining pastime.

I've learned all kinds of things—like Uncle Joe's affair with the night waitress, Grandma Helen's secret stash of lottery winnings, and a few conversations about folks falling for people they shouldn't be falling for.

That one hits too close to home.

“So... what's with the whole avoiding your birthday thing?

” Maci dips into her green mint milkshake with a french fry.

“I love my birthday! I make people celebrate me all week long. The more attention, the better! My boyfriend likes to call it the ‘week-long festival of forced enthusiasm’ but I think of it more like a birthday queen type of situation.”

I twist my straw around in the strawberry shake before grabbing a fry to dip. “I don’t know, just never liked birthdays.”

“Okay.” Maci narrows her brows, and I half expect her to press me for more details.

Details I don’t want to give. It’s not that I don’t trust her.

It’s that I don’t know her. I only got to town a month ago.

Sure, I met Maci that same day, but it takes a lot more than a month to know someone, especially to tell them all your secrets.

“But why? Birthdays are fun! They’re a celebration of your life. ”

I go back to eating, desperate to change the subject. I should’ve just said no to this. Avoidance is a heck of a lot easier than pretending. “Yeah, that’s... I should... next year, maybe. What’s up with you? How’s that piece going you were working on?”

She lowers her head, and the smile she’s usually wearing turns down.

It’s momentary, and she recovers quickly, but I gather I’ve struck an unintentional nerve.

“It’s okay... I’m just sick of the fluff pieces.

I mean, I interviewed Mrs. Robinson last week about the playground project finally being finished, I talked to Josie about her bakery being ruined by that bear last year, and I interview about half a dozen people a week about their small business ideas or their birthdays, but I really want to be taken more seriously, ya know?

I need a real story, with grit and stakes.

I'm thinking about focusing in on the biker gang that moved into town.

"She nods toward the back booth. "I think those guys over there are a part of it."

I glance back at the table in the corner where two giant men in leather sit eating burgers and fries. They're covered in tattoos, and while they don't currently look menacing, I know the kinds of things these types of guys are into.

"You okay?" Maci reaches toward my hand. "They're not gonna hurt us. They aren't random violence bikers... I don't think."

"I know," I sigh, "my brother is their Prez."

Maci's eyes widen as a smile lifts her cheeks. "What? You've been holding out! We have an in. Is he over there? We should go say hi."

"No. I haven't talked to my brother in over a year. I didn't even know he was in charge of this thing until recently. If I did, I wouldn't have come out here."

She narrows her brows and stares at me with anticipation, as though I'm holding her back from her dreams. "Why don't you talk to your brother?"

"Umm... Duke's an overprotective psychopath. That's the first reason. There are quite a few others, though. You don't want to mess with him or the people he knows."

The kitchen quiets, and for a second, I can hear every word being spoken, every toe being tapped.

'The Prez has to go. He's a traitor.'

My heart pounds hard as I try to rationalize what I've heard. That can't be right. I must have heard wrong. I hate this.

I hate that he's involved with this MC, but what can I do? I've begged him to change his life. He doesn't listen.

"Okay... you heard that too, right?" Maci's face looks paler than before. She leans in slowly and says, "They're totally after your brother, aren't they?"

I glance back at the two men sitting in the corner booth, noticing more details than before so I can describe them to the police if I need to. Buzzed hair, dark black ink, a scorpion on one of their hands... or maybe it's a spider.

What the hell is going on? What did Duke get himself wrapped in this time?

I lean in closer, trying to hear more of the men's conversation, but the kitchen noise has picked up again. I'm staring when one of the men glances toward me, making direct eye contact.

Oh shit!

"We gotta go," I announce to Maci, who's seemingly unphased by the amount of danger she's in.

"Why? This is just getting good. I need a juicy story, and this is the most interesting thing that's ever happened here.

Trust me, I've been on this mountain since the day I was born.

Twenty-seven years and nothing. Now, all the sudden, some action, and you want to leave?

Girl, you're from Texas! Aren't there shoot-outs all the time there? ”

“Shoot-outs? It's not the wild west anymore.

Not to mention that these guys probably won't shoot either.

They'll kidnap us, take us back to their secret lair, and we'll never be seen again.

Don't you ever watch crime dramas? This is the beginning of every episode.

A quiet night at the diner, an innocent bystander, and bam...

back of a blacked-out van with nothing but a six foot hole on the horizon. ”

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Maci laughs as she dips another fry into her milkshake.

“Let them. I need some excitement in my life. Last week, I wrote two stories about farm animals, and one about a local woman who lost her wallet at the candle shop, but had it returned to her by another shopper. Do you know how boring that is? A kidnapping might make me feel alive again.”

“Fantastically alive, then wishing you had boring,” I say, pulling a twenty from my purse. “We should go.”

“Why? They aren’t even looking at us anymore.”

“What if they recognize my face? He’s my brother.”

She rolls her eyes and waves a floppy fry at me. “You said you don’t talk to your brother.”

“Yeah, but people still know things.” I stand from the booth.

“I’m going, and you should come too.” I’ve barely stood when the man on the right with the scorpion tattoo fixes his stare at me.

I’m probably drawing attention to myself.

If I’d just sat still and pretended I didn’t hear them, none of this would matter.

Instead, I’m in full panic mode like an idiot.

What was I thinking coming out here? Well, I know what I was thinking.

I was thinking I needed a fresh start, and what better way to start than living in a fantasy land with my brother's best friend.

We'd be in a new place, we'd both be starting over, and we'd be tempted to talk and spend time together.

I'm delusional.

"I'm heading out. I highly suggest you follow me." I speak the words to deaf ears. Maci is in full-on journalist mode. That, or she really is desperate for an adventure. Truthfully, I've been known to novelty seek myself, so I get the allure, but still.

"Nope!" She grins wide and twists her long, dark hair to the side. "I'm totally good. If they take me, I don't owe rent this month, right? Silver linings everywhere."

"Silver linings," I repeat, shaking my head as I step out into the street. Truthfully, I'm probably being ridiculous. One look doesn't mean anything. They don't know me, I don't know them, and they don't know I heard anything.

I step out into the street and climb up into the red Ram truck I drove all the way here from Texas.

I couldn't leave it behind. It's the one thing my father left for me when he passed.

I think he knew how much I loved the full-length mountain decal he had put on the tail gate.

It's true, I do, and every time I see it, I think of him and all the cowboy movies he used to love to watch.

If I see one on TV, I leave it on in the background just to feel closer to him.

Letting out a sigh, I turn the engine over, but it doesn't start. Shit! Of course, it doesn't start. The lights aren't automatic. I've forgotten that twice now.

Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!

A heavy knock hits the side window, and I do my famous jump-scream duo. I should really work on an attack more menacing. I don't think the jump-scream move is going to stop anyone.

"Sorry." Hank's voice is low and graveled, sending waves of serotonin through every cell. "I know you're scared of your own shadow. I should've thought that through."

I draw in a deep breath, letting it out slowly as my heart does something that feels like a flip and a flop in my chest. On one hand, my body is trained to release endorphins when I see him.

On the other hand, he's a part of the biker gang I'm not sure can be trusted. "What... what are you doing here?"

"On my way back from the club meeting, and I saw your truck. I know it's your birthday, so I wanted to say hi."

My brows narrow as I stare at him. "Your club meeting?"

"Yeah, we had a meeting tonight. Housekeeping shit."

"What? Wait... how can you have a club meeting when two members are missing?"

Hank laughs under his breath as he scrubs his hand down over his salt and pepper

beard. “We weren’t missing anyone. You keeping track on us?”

I glance into the diner, expecting to see the bikers and Maci right where I left them, but they’re gone.

“Maci.” I straighten, and my tone goes panicked as I say, “She was... we were having milkshakes, there were these bikers, and they were talking about Duke.” I want to say everything as quickly as possible, but air won’t filter through my lungs.

Hank opens the truck door and reaches for me, pulling me down and out of the truck and into his big, inked up arms. “What are you talking about? Calm down.”

“No! I was in the diner, and Maci was right there, and now she’s gone.”

“Maybe she went to the bathroom.”

The bathroom. I guess that’s a reasonable conclusion. “I should check.”

“No, I’ll check. You get on the back of my bike, and be ready to go.” There’s a sternness in his voice as he moves toward the diner that lets me know he’s not playing games.

Maybe he knows these guys, and maybe he’s just being cautious. Dear God, please let Maci be in the bathroom.

A moment later, he returns, climbing up onto the bike in front of me.

“What are you doing? Where’s Maci? Was she there?”

“No.” He reaches for his phone and sends a quick text before tucking it back in the pocket of his cut. “We’ll talk more when we’re back at the clubhouse.”

“What? No, we have to find her. She’s... those guys took her!”

“I just text one of my men. They’ll look into it and get your truck back to the house. You’re my priority right now. I need to get you safe. It’s going to be okay. We’ll find her.” His calloused hand rubs over my bare leg as he kicks up the kickstand and peels out of the parking lot.

I’ve been around biker gangs most of my adult life, thanks to my brother. In my experience, they’re always up to no good. Poor Maci. I highly doubt she meant it when she said she wanted to be kidnapped.

Ugh, why didn’t I make her come with me?

We wind up the mountainside, leaning into the curves as the dark road stretches out ahead of us. I’ve dreamt of being on the back of Hank’s bike for as long as I can remember, though I didn’t picture it being like this.

What am I doing? I should’ve called the cops. As much as I adore Hank, he’s still part of the same biker group that my brother runs, and they aren’t doing good things...clearly.

I have no idea how Hank got wrapped up in this stuff.

He’s not that guy. He’s not like Duke. Hank has a vibe about him.

A quiet confidence that’s always drawn me in, even though he’s nearly two decades older.

Heck, even that made him cooler. He’s always been more mature, wiser, and more attractive than guys my age.

Exhausted, I lean forward and rest my head on his solid back, wrapping my arms around his waist. His hand slides up the side of my bare leg and rests on my hand in comfort.

A shiver runs through me. I'm not sure if it's from the cool mountain air, the way his fingers brush against mine, or the fear still lingering over Maci's disappearance. All I know for sure is that this moment is dangerous in more ways than one.

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Hank

The night sprawls out in front of me as I try to make sense of what's happening.

A missing girl, a rival gang, and my buddy's kid sister on the back of my bike...

holding my waist, leaned against my back.

I think the missing girl should be the most shocking, but it's Abby's tiny hands wrapped around my waist that have me most unnerved.

I've thought about moments like this for years, but I never thought I'd ever be this close to her.

God damn, I need to get my priorities straight.

We pull into the bike shop tucked between pines at the top of the mountain. It's a huge place with four stalls for bike repairs in the front and a house in the back. We had it custom-built a few months back to give us all a place to work and crash while we're here.

"I hear people talking about this place," Abby says, landing her hands on top of my shoulders to pivot off the bike. "People were confused about why you bought all the way up here." Damn, she smells good. Like berries or flowers... something sweet.

I don't answer her because the truth isn't worth lying about. I'd never lie to Abby. "We need to get you inside and calm you down. You've had a hell of a day. I got a

text back from Ghost. He's gonna update me as soon as he hears anything about Maci."

A raccoon scatters away from the trash bin by the garage door as I unlock the front door to the attached house in the back of the shop.

Usually, I'd go right through the garage, but for some reason, I'm trying to make a good impression.

I tell myself it's because I don't have anyone else to show the shop off too, but I know deep down it's more about Abby liking me than I want it to be.

I need to get a fucking grip.

"I don't know what happened." She holds her hands around her waist, shaking.

"She was right there telling me about her dreams and her goals. She wants to be a journalist, so she was trying to listen to what the guys were talking about, but then I got scared because... I'm scared of everything.

I went to the truck to leave, look back, and she's gone. How could she just disappear?"

Possibilities of why the girl could've disappeared rattle through my head as I push the front door open, but I'm distracted by the fucking mess of this place before I get very far.

Why do I even care that the place is a mess? This isn't about impressing a woman I have no business impressing. It's about finding the missing girl.

That said, I start cleaning. "Sorry. This place is a disaster. Keep talking, I'm just

gonna clean up quick. Can I get you a drink or anything?"

She shakes her head and moves around the house with me, picking up beer bottles and random bags of half-eaten chips that the guys didn't bother with before they left for the bar. Truth be told, I think she's holding my beer bottle.

Fuck, I didn't realize how messy we were.

"What are we going to do about Maci, Hank? I'm scared." She sets the bottles by the sink and leans against the counter, her breath picking up as she talks. "I know Duke knows all kinds of bad people. What if they hurt Maci?"

I toss the bags of chips on the counter and turn toward Abby. "Is there a chance she left on her own?"

"No. Her car was still in the parking lot. They took her! Are you even listening to me?"

"I'm listening. Just trying to get all the facts."

"I know the facts. My brother is involved with some kind of crime and the guys he worked with are after him. They took Maci as ransom or something."

"But why would they do that? Maci has no tie to your brother. He can't—"

She drags in a deep breath and screams deep in her chest, before burying her face in her hands. "What if that were me? What if I'd been taken? We need to treat this the same way you would if it were me... or would you default to cleaning your house then, too?"

"Abby! Stop. I called the guys. They're looking into it. Besides, there's still a chance

she took off on her own. She is an adult.”

Her brows narrow as though I’ve said the wrong thing. “You really do have a way with words.”

“I’m just saying... it’s highly unlikely these bikers were targeting her. They’d have no reason.”

Abby turns and leans against the counter, slightly exposing the small of her back as her short T-shirt stretches with her arms.

Jesus Christ. I’ve never had my cock twitch from the sight of a back before, but here I am, mouth watering over the inch of bare skin above her waist. That, or maybe it’s the tiny skirt she’s wearing.

What the hell is wrong with me? She’s scared and grieving, and I’m getting a fucking erection.

Shaking my head at my own stupidity, I land my hand on her back and tell myself the action is for comfort, though I doubt you’d notice how smooth someone’s skin was if comfort were on the top of your mind. Also, why did I rub beneath the shirt? I could’ve stayed above the fabric.

Fucking hell. I’m a mess.

The tiniest sigh leaves her lips. “That feels good. Thank you.”

I’m not sure if the thank you means stop, or keep going, but I keep going. “You’re stressed. I can feel the knots in your back.”

“I know.” She sighs. “My friend was out celebrating my birthday, and I left her there

like a bitch.”

“You’re not a bitch. We’ll find her.” I squeeze the base of her back as I continue to rub.

“And why do you hate celebrating your birthday all the sudden? You used to love it. I remember you making these huge lists, and your brother would spend all this time getting your party together. It was a thing. Remember that one party you had... I think it was your twentieth. It was a total rager, and my leather jacket disappeared. I still miss that thing.”

“Oh,” she shifts against my touch, “that sucks. I, ugh, I don’t know why I don’t celebrate anymore. It just seemed weird after the accident, ya know? Duke was a different guy. He was angrier.”

I massage into her muscles deeper with the pad of my thumb, attempting to untie the knot at the base of her neck without breaking her delicate frame. “The accident was a rough time for both of you. He should’ve been more present.”

She laughs under her breath and turns toward me, cutting the touch off at a second’s notice. “I know we were both doing the best we could. I... just wish I hadn’t lost him that day, too.”

I land my hand on her shoulder. Apparently, I’m taking liberties with how easily I touch her now. That escalated quickly. “If it’s any consolation, I know he misses you.”

Her eyes roll to the side and back again.

“If he missed me, he’d stop killing people and go back to full time ranching.

It wasn't great pay, but it was respectable work.

What you guys do now is," her gaze meets mine with pain, "it's sick.

I'm not sure I've even wrapped my head around you being a part of it. "

I drag in a deep breath and let it out slowly. I knew this conversation was coming, but I never got around to preparing for it. "We don't kill people. We put down animals. There's a difference."

"Oh my God!" Her eyes widen, and her arms cross over her chest. "You sound just like him. You don't get to decide who should live and who should die, Hank. That's not up to you guys. That's what courts and God are for."

"Look, I struggled with this for a long time. It wasn't my first choice of careers, but then I saw what we were doing for people."

"You need to stop!" She gasps and shakes her head as she turns toward the fridge, grabbing out a beer of her own. "You're delusional."

"We kill bad people." I scrub my hand down over my beard and stare toward her, desperate for her to understand that I'm not the terrible guy she thinks I am.

"I used to think this was awful. I... I didn't want to do it.

I took one job with Duke because the money was good. One week of work paid off my house."

"Then what? You got addicted to killing, so you kept going? Money isn't everything, Hank."

“It’s not about the money. It’s about what we give people.

The last kill we did out in Texas was for a mother who’d lost her child to a human trafficker.

The man had taken at least ten kids and sold them on the black market.

He was evading the police, but we don’t have the restrictions the law has. Those are the jobs we take.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night.” Abby pops the cap off the beer and takes a long swig. I’ve never seen her drink before. She always orders a diet coke no matter what.

“Look, I know you can’t see the good in what we do, and I don’t expect you to, but I think you should at least talk to Duke. He’s—”

“I didn’t even know he’d be here. I thought I’d move to the mountains, frolic in the wildflowers, get a small-town job to meet some people, and fall in love with a big, giant mountain man. If I’d have known Texas was following me here, I’d have looked for my mountain man on a different mountain.”

I hate the idea of her falling in love with anyone but me, but I know that’s not realistic. “You knew I was coming.”

A visible lump slides down her throat, and she glances away as she takes a sip of beer. “I did. I thought it made sense to have someone around that I knew, but that was before I learned what you did.”

“So, I’m a bad guy now?”

“You’re not a good guy. ”

I'm pretty sure I'd give anything to have Abby look at me like I was a good person, but I'm not sure that's possible now.

"You remember helping Duke and I out at the shop when you were younger?"

She huffs out a sigh and rolls her eyes. "I wasn't that much younger. That was only five years ago. I was twenty."

"Well... you were eager to learn. The shop was swamped, and you were all about helping. Duke was outside talking to the parts guy, and I was teaching you how to unlock a stuck bolt."

She bites back a grin, then hides the remnants behind the amber bottle as she takes another sip. "You told me to use more leverage, then grabbed the wrench from my hand, and got your filthy, grease smudged hands on mine. I learned all about that orange pumice lotion that day."

I remember that moment so clearly because it was the first time we touched.

It was just a brush, but I was so close to her body I could smell the scent of her shampoo, the muffin she'd had for breakfast, the leather on her boots.

We weren't doing anything wrong. I was just showing her how to leverage the stubborn bolt.

But still, my heart slammed against my chest like I was out in the field, about to take a shot.

It's the one and only time that's ever happened to me.

"I remember." Our eyes meet, and for a solid second, my body lights on fire with a

need that I worry is getting out of control. Maybe it was wrong to bring her back here. Maybe it was wrong to trust myself. How could it not be wrong when every fantasy I have has her in it?

The front door swings open, halting any feelings I have in their tracks. Thankfully, it's not Duke. It's Ghost, and he looks like he might have some answers.

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Abby

I think I might be the first person ever to have soaking wet panties the same night her friend disappears into oblivion.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Ghost stands in the doorway, wide and tall, like a strong Viking who's come in from battle with news.

I've never met the man before, but he starts talking like we've known each other forever.

"Tennessee and Red are out looking for the bikers. I think we've got a lead.

There's a hideout on the east side of the mountain by the quarry.

We're pretty sure that's where they went.

We should have the girl back in a few hours.

"His brows wrinkle as he stares at me. "You try texting her, or maybe call?"

I tilt my head to the side as though he's an idiot for mentioning something so basic, though it's not really that basic at all. "No. I should, though."

"It's worth a try. If our guys roll up accusing them of a kidnapping and your friend

went out back with them for a good time, then we're fucked out of luck, kid. Try her cell."

Rolling my eyes, I pull out my phone and dial her number. "It went straight to voicemail."

"Okay, send a text." Ghost might be more demanding than Hank, and Hank is pretty damn demanding.

That said, if trying to call her isn't the worst idea ever, neither is texting. He's right. There could've been a simple answer to her disappearance.

Me: There are like five bikers looking for you right now. If you're okay, please let me know ASAP!

I send the text, and say a silent prayer, hoping that she sends me a message back telling me how she followed a strange animal into the woods and she's currently in the middle of a torrid one-night stand with a wolf shifter. Something tells me that's not going to happen.

"I'll let you know if I hear anything."

Ghost nods and kicks off his boots before tossing himself onto the couch with a grunt. "Your brother know you're here?"

"No. I was just heading out, anyway." I glance toward Hank, who's in the kitchen cleaning up the mess the guys made from earlier. I'm not surprised this place is a disaster. How could five hitmen possibly have time to clean when they're so busy taking people out and collecting paychecks?

"You're not going home tonight," Hank says. "You need to be here so I can keep an

eye on you.”

As much as I’ve loved him and his eye on me, my brother will be back soon, and I don’t want to see him.

We haven’t spoken in a year, and I’d like to keep the streak going.

Besides, I’m not sure how much longer I can contain myself around Hank.

His big, rough hands on my back a few minutes ago almost killed me.

“I’m good. It sounds like your men are on their way to grab the bad guys, and I’m sure Maci will be back in her own bed anytime now.”

“Not how it works, Sunny. You know that as well as I do.”

Sunny. I laugh to myself at the thought of that name.

“I haven’t been ‘Sunny’ in years. You realize they called me that because of all the color I wore, right? I’ve been in solid black the last three years straight.”

He grins wide and steps into the living room, his gaze on mine soft but firm. “You’ll always be Sunny to me. That said, I like black too. It’s classic. Besides, the name was never about your clothes. It was about that smile.”

Oh wow, he just said that. I can’t tell right away if it’s an innocuous random comment or if it’s something deeper. If I were betting, I’d say he’s just being nice.

“Thanks,” I manage, blowing out a breath, “but I don’t feel so sunny lately.”

“It’s in there.” Hank steps toward me. “Come on... let’s go get your room fixed up.”

My room?

I could keep fighting to go home but I don't know how I'd sleep thinking about every creak and crack of the old cabin I'm renting. Besides that, I know Hank well enough to know that he's not going to let me go tonight. It's easier to give in now.

He pushes open the last door in a long hallway and steps inside, flicking on the light before opening a closet door.

The room itself is cleaner than the rest of the place, with a queen-sized bed in the center of the room.

To the left is a television on an old, hand-built dresser and an attached bath with shower and toilet.

It's nice, but there's no décor whatsoever.

These men really need help making this place a home.

“You can toss this on for the night. I'll have you out of here before Duke gets up if that's what you want.

” He hands me a black T-shirt from his closet and stands at the edge of the bed as though he isn't sure what to say next.

“Oh, and the shower, feel free to use anything you need. Make yourself at home.”

“You think they'll have Maci back by morning, right?”

“I can wake you up when my guys have her.”

“Or you can stay here with me until then.” I’m not sure what I’m saying or why I’m saying it.

Hank and I haven’t hung out like this since...

ever. We’ve never hung out like this. Sure, I’d help him in my brother’s old garage.

He’d show me how to loosen a bolt or change the oil in a bike, and we’d have dinner together or go to the county fair, but Duke was always in attendance.

Truthfully most of that time was spent listening to their war stories.

All five of the guys in the club were in an infantry together and they’ve got chronicles to last a lifetime, though Duke and Hank were the only two I ever talked to personally.

The rest of the men were spread out all over the country.

When I was younger, I thought the stories were lame, but the older I got, the more I appreciated how those events represented the brotherhood they’d built.

He glances toward me, then away again quickly. It’s a special move of ours that’s been around forever now. He holds his stare with mine as though he wants to devour me, and I wonder if I’m imagining the meaning of his stare in my head.

Surely, I am.

“We could play.” He opens the closet door and pulls out a deck of cards. “You used to like Rummy.”

Rummy. I haven’t played Rummy in years, probably since the last time we played

together.

“Sure, but we need some stakes. What does the winner get?”

He laughs and tosses his massive frame sideways onto the creaking bed as he pulls the deck from the little card box that’s decorated with mountains at sunset. “Okay, stakes. Umm... if I win, you have to tell me the truth about what happened to my leather jacket a few years back.”

I stagger in a deep breath and try to hide the grin that’s sneaking onto my face. “What? What makes you think I know what happened to your jacket?”

He narrows his gaze and lifts his brows as though he knows I know. “What do you want if you win?”

My heart slams against my chest. “Jeez... if I win, you have to tell me the truth about something.”

“Something? What’s something?”

I shrug, unable to say the thing that I want the truth about. Hell, I’ll never have the balls to ask him if he likes me, mostly because I already know the answer. “It’s random.”

“Seems dangerous,” he laughs, “but I get high on danger. Let’s do it.”

Grinning, I sit next to him on the bed and take another swig of the warming beer I’d grabbed from the fridge an hour ago. This stuff is nasty.

Hank scuffs his big, rough hand against each card as he tosses them one by one onto the rumpled blankets between us. I take a second to organize them in my hand by

suit, then watch him over the top and smirk as he lifts his own.

“You’re a terrible bluffer,” he laughs. “Always have been.”

“Oh yeah?” I roll my eyes and study the card laid out in front of me. Suddenly the stakes are higher than they’d been a moment ago. Everything is real now. Besides, I don’t want to tell him about what happened to his leather jacket. How does he know I had something to do with that?

Hand after hand go on and on with very little talk. We’re both competitive and extremely focused on the game in front of us. That and I’m not sure I’ve ever felt so much tension in my life.

Maybe I’m imagining it. Maybe it’s my own horny way of thinking. My desire to be loved and valued. My desperation to be fucked hard by this massive, hot, masculine man.

That has to be it because there’s no way a guy like Hank would be thinking about me the same way I’m thinking about him.

I hold the last card I needed in my hand, anxious to go out, frantic to hold my secret in forever, but there it is, like a beacon of reality laid out in front of me, the ace of spades... straight to my heart.

“Well, looks like you owe me an explanation.” His gaze sticks on mine as I take another swig of beer. I’m gonna need it.

“What are you talking about? No, let’s do two out of three.”

“Not the deal we made, Sunny. You owe me an explanation. What happened to my leather jacket?”

Considering it's hanging in my closet next to my latest black dress, I should have a good explanation for him.

"Two out of three. Come on. It's how all bets are done. Plus, it's my birthday!"

"No way." He gathers all the cards in his giant hand and smiles wide and gorgeous.

"I'm certain you know something good now.

Plus, you don't celebrate your birthday.

I wouldn't want to insult you." He grins playfully and my heart does something that feels like a hard slam and a bunch of skipped beats.

How do I tell him that I took the jacket to wear... so I'd feel close to him? That sounds insane. More than insane, that might blend into stalker territory.

I swallow hard and lay back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling fan whirring above us. "Okay... so I was twenty, and I wasn't thinking straight yet." I'm stammering like I've never completed a sentence in my life.

"That was five years ago, so you weren't that much younger, but go ahead," he laughs.

I slap his shoulder playfully. "Shut up and listen."

He laughs again. "I am caught up. You were so much younger and you..."

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I roll my eyes and sit up just enough to take another sip of courage. “I liked your jacket, so I took it. The end.”

He laughs under his breath and rolls toward me. “You took my jacket because you liked it? It had my name on it. My patches. What did you like about that?”

That it smelled like you. That when I pulled it on, it felt like a big warm hug. That when I was masturbating, I could almost feel your arms around me.

“I don’t know, it was warm. It was a good jacket.”

He tilts his head to the side and narrows his brows. “This is a truth bet. You’re not telling the whole truth. Why did you take my jacket?”

I draw in a deep breath and let it out slowly, wondering what it would mean to tell him the truth. What the words would sound like slipping from my lips. What reality would be if he knew I wanted to be with him.

I’m pretty sure it would be awful. My brother would lose a best friend, and I’d give Duke a reason to hate me, and that’s not the way this dynamic works. I hate him... and I imagine that he feels bad for being a fuck up. It’s our thing, and it can’t be reversed.

“Come on.” Hank grins, lifting his hand with a menacing smile as though he’s going to do something awful. “If you don’t play by the rules, you have to take the punishment.”

“Punishment? No, now you’re making up new rules.”

“No, those are the standing rules. Everyone knows that.” His hand stretches closer toward my ribs.

“What’s the punishment?”

“Tickles,” he groans, leaning up from the bed. “Everyone knows the punishment is tickles.”

“Tickles?” I question as seriously as possible. “Are we twelve? Why isn’t the punishment a twenty-dollar bill or a bunch of weird demands? Maybe you should make me clean this room.”

He narrows his gaze. “Oh, please. This room is clean.”

“Clean-ish.” I smile.

He draws his hand back with a grin. “The punishment should be that you have to tell me one truth on top of the jacket story. Your loss and my win all combined into one. I’ll take a twenty too, if you have it.”

I huff out a laugh that I’m tamping down and roll my eyes, taking another swig of beer. The bottle is almost gone now, and I’m buzzed. I’ve never finished a beer in my life. I see why people like it—not so much the taste, but how loose you feel after drinking it.

I’m not drunk. I’m just... relaxed. “I’m not sure which is worse. Tickles or the truth.”

“I’m pretty sure tickles are off the table now. You made a good point about the money and the truth. I’d much rather know your deepest darkest secrets. It’s your

birthday so I'm cutting you a deal."

I laugh and roll onto my stomach, safeguarding my ribs from a surprise attack.

"A deal? No, I need to know your deepest darkest secrets before you can know mine." Cards stick to my stomach as I roll into place.

I'm close enough that his arm brushes against mine unintentionally, sending a shock to my clit.

"Okay," he relents. "Tell me why you took the jacket, and we'll see."

"We'll see?"

"We'll see. I want to see how honest you can be."

I close my eyes and open them slowly. "I took your jacket because I couldn't stop thinking about you." The words come out soft and clear, my gaze locked with his.

"What?" He's saying what, but I get the feeling he already knows the answer.

"Yeah, I couldn't stop thinking about you. You were this big, strong, older man, and you had the answers to everything. It was a phase... and it passed. So, yeah, I took your jacket."

"It passed?"

"Yeah. It passed," I lie. "You know how crushes work. A harmless little infatuation that passed really quickly, but your jacket was an unexpected casualty. I'm sorry." My heart hammers in my chest as I talk.

“What did you do with it?”

“Huh?” Why won’t he stop talking?

“Well, that’s part of the question, right? I need the whole thing. Why did you take it?”

“Because it reminded me of you... and I wanted to be reminded of you. It was stupid, and I was young. I already said this.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t tell me what you did with the jacket. Surely you didn’t take it to hang it in your closet. I never saw you wearing it.”

“I did. I wore it... at home.”

He narrows his gaze. “Okay. Just to be clear, you took my jacket to wear at home because you had a little crush, but that’s over now?”

“Yeah.” I shrug and roll back onto my back. Cards stick to my thighs, but I ignore them. “So, there ya go. Should we play another hand? This time, I’m betting money. Not—”

“No way. You still owe me a random truth, or you take the tickles. There’s no way around it.”

“The truth about what? I held up my side of the bet. I told you what I did with the jacket.”

“Yeah, and now you’re taking advantage.”

“I’m not saying jack shit until you tell me something about you first, like what

happened to that girl you were seeing in Texas. I thought you guys were getting close?”

He shakes his head and lays next to me, resting his head in his inked-up hand. “You know how it goes. Women are all the same.”

“Are we now?”

He rolls his eyes to the side and smiles. “I guess you’re not all the same, but that one was demanding. She was ready to move herself in two weeks after we met.”

“She was gorgeous. Maybe you should’ve let her.”

“She wasn’t really my type.”

“If she isn’t your type, who is?”

He scrubs his hand against the back of his neck and looks away. “There’s this one girl that I can’t get out of my head.”

My heart falls to the ground with a thud so heavy I’m pretty sure Ghost can hear it in the next room. “Who is she?”

“It doesn’t matter. Could never make it work, anyway.” He sits up and straightens his T-shirt. “Enough about me. You lost, and somehow you’ve lost with penalty, so... you have another truth coming at you.”

My brows narrow at the ridiculous thought process. “I’m not sure that’s how this works. I need to hear more about this girl that’s stuck in your head. Is she hot? What does she do? Why can’t you have her?”

I'm gutted by the fact that he looks at other women or has thoughts about anyone other than me. Gutted! That said, there's a sick, depraved part of me that needs to know who this woman is. Probably so I can compare myself to her for the rest of eternity. I mean, that's the next logical step, right?

"I told you nothing can come of it, so it doesn't matter."

"So, what harm does it do to tell me? I want to know. Does she still live in Texas? Is she a criminal too? You two have a lot in common? Is she Catwoman to your Batman? I think that could work." I'm joking about the feelings they have, but in reality, I don't think I can handle this.

I should stop asking. I don't want to know that he's into some tight waisted woman with agile jumping skills.

That might be more torture than my heart can handle.

"Nope. I told you something about myself. Now it's your turn."

"You told me a half a truth. That doesn't count."

"It counts." He exhales slowly and rolls onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. Our arms touch and brush against one another. He's there for a solid minute before he rolls back again, his gaze on mine, studying me as though he's about to make a human lie detector out of himself.

"What are you doing?" I laugh, still buzzed from the beer. "You know I'm not one of your kills, right? You can't look straight through me for answers like you do those guys."

His expression remains unreadable. No smile or flicker of emotion. He just stares,

searching me for an answer. “Are you really over me?”

“What?”

“The crush. Have you really gotten over me? You can’t lie. I can tell if you’re lying.”

“How can you tell that I’m lying?”

“Easy. When people lie, they either stop moving their eyes completely, or they move them more to overcompensate for trying to look natural. That, and there’s a slight change in their tone of voice, which you’re already exhibiting.”

“I’m drunk.”

“And you’re also uncomfortable.” His giant hand lands on the top of my head. “Do I make you uncomfortable?”

“No. You’re a douche. You’ve always been a douche.”

He grins. “Not true. Your voice says your uncomfortable.”

“And yours says you’re a douche,” I say again, enjoying the weight of his body against my frame.

“It’s no big deal. You don’t have to tell me. I’ll gladly tickle you. I’m guessing you’re most ticklish on the back of the neck and the ribs. Am I right?”

I do hate to be tickled, though I wouldn’t mind his big body all over me as I squirm beneath his touch.

“I’m getting desperately close to choosing tickles.”

“Is that your final decision?”

I drag in a deep breath and let it out slowly, staring up into his dark brown eyes.

He’s hovered over me, and though we’re not feeling the same things, I can’t help but feel a sexual charge between us.

Unfortunately, there isn’t one, not in reality.

Clearly, he’s into some other woman. A Catwoman.

A sexy, little bitch with a lean, agile body and red lipstick.

I’m none of those things. Not even one. In fact, I’m sure I’ve just embarrassed the hell out of my sober self by telling the jacket story.

“Tickle me,” I finally say, realizing in the moment that a desire not to answer his question about us is in fact an omission of guilt, but I realize it too late.

His hands are already on my frame. He’s already rolling me back and forth, I’m already giggling like a crazy person, and we’re already touching... everywhere.

His big, rough, inked-up hands tickle my ribs, my stomach, the back of my neck, and my thighs as I roll back and forth, hysterically laughing like a hyena.

It’s not a good look, I’m sure. My stomach is all squished up, I’m sure I’ve got ten chins, and the laugh is anything but cute and adorable, but I don’t care.

For a second, his heavy weight is on my body, and the more he presses, the more I love it.

I lift up and run my hands over his hard body, tickling him beneath his arms.

Jesus, he's firm. These biceps are crazy. I mean, I've looked at him, but I've never touched him like this before. It's just as great as I thought it would be.

He laughs, though it's not as gregarious as mine. A second later, I feel a poke. A distinct, hard poke that drives into the side of my stomach.

Oh, God. Is he hard?

He's hard.

My eyes widen and I wonder for a second if maybe I'm dreaming. The slight haze, the touching, the laughing, the fact that Hank is at the center of it all. The vibe is screaming 'dream.' Then again, maybe it's the alcohol. Maybe one beer gets me more drunk than I thought.

My brother's big, hot, best friend is sitting over me, touching me, and he's erect.

This is definitely a dream, right?

When he realizes what's happening, he stops tickling me and pulls away. "Fuck! Sorry! Jesus Christ!" I can't gauge what his reaction means. There's too much going on. All the blood has drained to my thighs and they're aching for relief.

The room is quiet, and I can't think of anything good to say, but I'm pretty sure my eyes are saying something. They must be because he stares back at me. He stares back at me so hard that my entire body erupts with pure, hot, glorious fire.

Then all at once, without another word, he grabs me, pulls me close, and presses his lips against mine.

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Hank

I have no fucking clue what's happening, but the world is turning as though there's a plan being set into motion. A plan that's always been written. A plan that's playing out whether it's right or not.

Our lips meet with quick, hard energy, pressing together as though we've held back for too long. Moments later, my hands are in her hair, on her skin, touching places I know I shouldn't touch.

My tongue slides against hers, and a moan escapes her lips as she wraps her legs around my waist and thrusts upward against my cock.

I slide my hand down over her curves, taking my time to memorize the way her thick hips curve to her thighs.

Jesus. I've spent too many fucking nights dreaming about this. Too many nights masturbating to thoughts of this. Too many nights plotting how to make this happen, only to feel like a perverted monster for even thinking these thoughts to begin with.

Hell, if Duke knew the places I was touching his little sister right now, he'd send a hit out after me. We've seen so much together that we're like brothers, but that wouldn't matter for a split second. He would murder me on sight.

What the hell am I doing?

Abby grips the back of my neck and stares up at me, lips swollen, eyes intense. "I

took your jacket, and I wore it when I touched myself.”

Fuck! What the fuck is happening? That’s the hottest thing I’ve ever heard! She wore my fucking jacket when she touched herself?

“Jesus, that’s hot. You’re... fuck, baby. What about it did you like?”

“It smelled like you... all leather and motor oil. I would just get lost in the jacket, the leather, ugh, it was like laying in your arms.”

I slide my hand between her thighs, rubbing over her soft cotton panties that have soaked through. I’m not sure there’s blood going to my brain anymore because all I want to do is pet her, lick her, taste her, and thrust inside her tight little pussy regardless of the consequences.

“I need to see that someday.”

“What?”

“You masterbating with my jacket on. I bet that would be a lot better than me jerking off to all the dirty pictures I took of you.”

She narrows her brows and stares up at me with hooded lids. “What?”

“You were bent over a bike, wearing these tight little pants that showed everything, and I snapped a picture to use for later.” I push her panties to the side and slide into the sticky wet heat, desperate to be inside of her.

“I’d come so hard thinking about how you didn’t know I’d taken the photos. ”

She whines and scrubs her pussy up against my hand as she hooks around the back of

my neck and thrusts upward over and over again.

“I lied to you, Hank,” she whispers, continuing to thrust. “I’m not over you.

I still think about you all the time. You’re part of the reason I came out here. You’re the man I want.”

Thrusting my finger into her tight little pussy, I lean into her lips and kiss them gently. “And you’re the girl I want but know I can’t have.”

Our eyes meet, and for a second, there’s nothing more than a series of tones that won’t leave.

There’s a ringing so loud that I feel urges rolling over me that never have before.

I tug her breast from the shirt she’s wearing and scrape my teeth against her nipple, suckling like I’m desperate for milk.

Fuck, I’d love to milk her. I’d love to fill her with my babies and watch her body grow.

I’d love to suck the milk from her tits and lay on her lap as she feeds me.

Wow, you’re a sick fuck!

My cock drives against her hip as I try to work another finger into her tight core. It’s been a long while since I’ve been with a woman, but even then, I don’t remember anyone being this tight.

Another finger slides into her core as she stares back at me, panting and releasing a wince. It’s a sharp, defined wince as I try to put another inch inside of her.

“Oh,” she cries. “Your fingers are huge.”

“You’re really tight, Sunny.”

“I’m, yeah... well.” She stalls her words, and though she hasn’t said anything yet, I get a feeling I know what’s coming next. “I... I’m a virgin.”

A virgin? She’s a virgin. Her little pussy has never been touched. Never been claimed. Never been used. She’s mine. All mine. Every inch of her. Every inch of her forbidden body is mine, though I know I can’t actually have any of it.

Fuck!

My cock drives harder against the zipper of my jeans, and though I know for sure now more than ever we’re not fucking tonight, I reach down and free him from his misery anyway, rubbing my soaking fingers against my shaft. It’s probably the closest I’ll ever get to knowing what her juices feel like.

My God, I want to fuck her.

“Why did you stop?” she pants, staring up at me.

“I... you... you’re a virgin, honey. I... I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Hurt me! I want to be hurt, Hank. Seriously. Don’t stop.”

“No, I mean... I have to stop. Look, I knew that I needed you before we started. Hell, I’ve needed you for years. But now... I know more than ever I couldn’t take you once and give you back.”

She rolls me onto my back, lifts off her skirt, and drives her soft virgin pussy against

my cock, soaking wetness down over my shaft. I'm pretty sure I could come just like this.

"We don't have to make this a thing. I know this doesn't work forever. It works right now, and that's enough for me."

"But you can't lose your virginity to me.

It's not right. You should give that to someone you can spend forever with.

Besides, I'm... I don't know how I don't keep you for myself, Sunny.

I'd wreck the whole fucking world to get into that pussy again.

"I pet over the top of her soft lips with a groan. "I know it."

Humping over me slowly, she drives her tight, little core over my stomach and down over the head again before sliding between my legs, her hot mouth on my cock, her tongue swirling around the head, her hair flowing around down my thighs. Over and over, her head bobs as she slurps and sucks.

Oh my fucking God!

Mechanically, it's novice, but there's something special about it. Something innocent and sweet that has my cock ready to explode in her throat.

Damn it, I'm a sick fuck. A sick fucking fuck.

I dig my fingers into her hair and direct her back and forth as she moans on my cock.

Where the fuck am I? How the hell is this happening?

I could come in her mouth. I feel it coming, but I won't. I refuse. I refuse until I've had her, until I've made her come first.

“Up here, sweetheart. Sit on my face. Scrub that little pussy against my beard. I need it.”

She lowers her head onto my cock one last time before she lifts her body and shimmers up toward my face, lowering onto my beard.

I breathe her in, the soft scent of berries on her thighs.

I figure now it must be her body wash or the lotion she wears.

Whatever it is, it blends perfectly with the sweet taste of her juicy wet pussy.

She scrubs against my beard, spreading her lips against my face as she moves and shifts, thrusting against me.

My hands land on her back as she braces against the wall with a moan. “Oh my God, right there. Please!”

Blood rushes up my cock, and I swear I'm going to explode without a single touch, but I grip it anyway, jerking slowly as Abby rides my face.

“We need to fuckin' talk,” Duke groans through the door, erasing my last thought.

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

My cock is rock hard, and I know she's close. I can taste it in the consistency of her come. I can feel it in the way she's moving her hips against my face.

I can't speak. I think I locked the door.

I jerk my cock to the thought of all the things that could go wrong. He could swing the door open. He could see his sister on my face. She could come, and her screams could be too loud.

I love Abby for a lot of reasons. She's sweet as hell, kind, caring, hardworking, afraid of her own shadow, and she wears a sundress like no one I've ever seen.

Never once did I think to act on it because touching her was wrong.

Yet now, with Duke on the other side of the door, I'm somehow harder.

Harder with the thought of getting caught.

Harder at the thought of owning her when he can't do a thing about it.

Another knock hits the door, but nothing is bringing me back to reality. I need her on my cock. I need to fill her up. I need to spread her little, virgin pussy wide and make her mine. I need a lot of things, and I need it all right now.

She grinds faster and harder, working her way over my tongue like she can't take any more, like the world will end if she doesn't get more right now. Then suddenly, without warning, she bellows out a cry so loud that there's no way in hell he doesn't hear it. It's then that reality sets in.

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Abby

“What the fuck is going on in here?” Duke stands in the doorway with a grimace on his face that could scare away a death angel.

It’s been a while since we’ve been in the same room.

He’s aged a lot in a few years. Grey hair lines his temples and the front of his beard.

He’s gotten more jacked too, with biceps on top of his biceps, though that seems to be a prerequisite for these Chaos Brothers.

“Nothing. We’re playing cards,” I lie, holding up a stack of cards that I dug up out of the sheets as I was tossing on my clothes.

“You scream out when you’re playing cards?” Duke knows what he heard. He’s old enough to know what he heard.

“Yeah, I was excited. I had a handful of Aces. You’re messing up the game. What’s up?”

My brother stares down at me. “I’m messing up the game? You’re locked in a bedroom with my best friend. That’s weird. You don’t need to lock the door to play cards.”

“Sorry, man.” Hank stands from the bed and walks toward him, shoulders wide. “It wasn’t purposeful. We’re just keeping her mind off things while we wait for an

update from the guys. You hear anything?"

"That's what I'm here about." He clears his throat. "You sent the guys out without my permission."

"Do I need your permission?"

"I'm the president of the club, so I gather you do."

"I'm the vice and it was an emergency. Anything could've happened tonight. You know there's not much time after a kidnapping. Maci could be in trouble."

Duke glances toward me with the stare of death, then drives it back toward Hank. "Anything else needs to go through me. Got it? We're lying low. We're not taking jobs. That was the plan."

"Wait," I turn toward my brother, "you're not taking jobs right now?"

"We own a bike repair shop. That's all that's going on here. Don't run your mouth all over town. You hear me?" He leans in a little as though he's trying to intimidate me, but I'm so relaxed right now he could say just about anything and I'm pretty sure it would roll right off my shoulders.

Hank thinks otherwise.

"Okay," Hank steps between us, his focus on Duke, "that's enough. She's had a rough night. We need to take it easy on her right now."

"Now you're her protector?" Duke shakes his head. "Thought that was my job."

"Well, you're not doing it lately, are you? Your head is somewhere else. I tried to get

ahold of you about these bikers and this missing girl, but you weren't answering my calls. Where were you all day?"

"Doing shit that's none of your fuckin' business. Don't let me catch you locked in a room with my sister again." Duke leans up off the door frame, heads down the hall, and out the front door again with a slam.

"This is why we can't talk anymore. It's a nightmare getting him to listen or understand anything. He's not who he used to be." I sit on the edge of the bed and stare up at Hank, who's left the door wide open.

I want him to close it again. I want us to go back to touching each other. I want us to kiss and thrust and ride like we were. I want us to disappear into the realm we were in thirty minutes ago, and I never want to come out.

"That wasn't the Duke I know either. Something is going on." Hank leans down and kisses the top of my head. "You felt really good tonight, Sunny. Sorry it ended like that."

"I don't want you to go. Stay here with me tonight. He's not here, and who knows when he'll be back. He might not come back at all."

"He'll be back, and when he does, he'll be checking this door. Trust me. He's acting odd, but I know that guy cares about you. He'll be making sure nothing is going on here."

"Is anything going on here?" I stare up at him, desperate for his lips on mine again and again. Desperate for his warmth against my body. Desperate for whatever he'll give me.

He kisses my head again. "How would we work that out?"

“I don’t know, but we could have fun trying.” I smile and wrap my arms around his waist, leaning my head against his stomach as I breathe him in.

“We could, and I’d love to finish what we started, but we should give it a second. You need a good night’s rest. I want to know you’re making this decision when you’re in the right headspace.”

I nod because he’s speaking responsibly, and I know how important responsible thinking is to a guy like Hank, but deep down, I want him to grab me and do dirty, filthy things again.

“I’ve gotta do some damage control with Ghost. You should lay down, and we’ll figure out the next step in the morning. Okay?”

“I’m supposed to work tomorrow morning. I have a nine to five at the record store.”

“Good.” He rubs his big hand over my cheek and pulls me up from the bed.

“You should go to work. You need to keep things as normal as possible. Whoever took Maci could be looking at you too. You don’t want to draw any attention to yourself.

I’ll stick around the area to keep an eye on you tomorrow and ask around to see if anyone saw anything weird tonight.

” He pulls me against his chest and stares down at me. “Everything will be okay, I promise.”

His comfort is genuine and warm, and truthfully, going to work sounds kind of nice. My job is simple, but I love it. There’s something soothing about unwrapping the records and categorizing them one by one while music plays in the background.

“Sounds good. You sure you can’t stay in here tonight?” I pout my lip playfully.
“What if I have a bad dream?”

He growls low under his breath, checks behind him, then leans in for a kiss, savoring my bottom lip. “You have a bad dream... come get me. I’ll do what I can. Okay?”

“Okay,” I say with a grin, my stomach sinking as he walks out of the room and closes the door behind him.

I tug off my clothes and pull on the T-shirt he left for me earlier. It’s been washed and the scent of his body no longer lingers on it. Instead, it’s been replaced by something that smells more like soft rain or fresh cut grass.

Either way, his pillow still smells like him. I cuddle into the soft bed replaying everything that just happened.

I sat on his face. A spark of electricity rolls through me at the memory of his hands on my ass as I came.

What’s wrong with me? My friend went missing tonight and I’m playing fantasy life with a guy twenty years older than me.

I pick up my phone and pull up the text chain Maci and I have had going since we met at the record store.

Me: Don’t think I’m a terrible friend but your disappearance has somehow led me into bed with Hank.

Me: I sat on his face. I had no idea a beard could feel so good scrubbing and tickling everything.

I pause, wondering who could be reading this. Her captors, or maybe the police. Hell, my brother or his men after they find her. Shit, hopefully it's just her.

Me: Please tell me you're okay.

My stomach ties in knots as I watch the message sit on delivered. She's usually so quick with responses.

Laying back on Hank's pillow, I breathe in the scent of him that lingers on the fabric.

He's so masculine. Everything about him.

His shaggy beard, the gruff way he talks, his big, sandpaper palms, his strength, his weight, his voice, the dark ink that streaks up and down his arms and across his neck.

Ugh... what the hell is happening to me and how will I ever keep any of this from my brother?

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:00 pm

Hank

Ghost had already fallen asleep by the time I made it out to the couch last night, so I did my best to drift off, though I did check Abby multiple times in hopes of ‘bad dreams’ I could soothe.

Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, she was passed the fuck out.

She needed sleep. Yesterday was a nightmare, and I’m sure her body needed time to repair itself.

“You’re up early,” Ghost groans as he flips on the coffee pot. “I’ve got a job out in the Springs today. A marital thing. I’ve gotta do some research, follow this dude for a while, and get a feel. What about you?”

“Taking Abby to work. Gonna check on a few things in town. But, ugh, thought we weren’t taking jobs right now. I mean, Duke is pissed I’m helping with this kidnapping thing.”

“This isn’t a job. It’s a hobby. I don’t think it’ll result in a hit. More... a gentle reminder.”

I laugh under my breath at the thought of what our gentle reminders look like.

Last year out in Texas, we had to give multiple ‘gentle reminders’ to a biker gang that had come into town looking for a war.

“You should take the break, man. You were pretty close to snapping back in Texas. That last job wore you out.”

He shakes his head and grabs a mug down from the cabinet. “You remember those days when we were out in the desert? Those blisteringly hot days when there wasn’t enough water to keep us satisfied, and the fuckin’ dust was so far up your nose you couldn’t breathe right?”

I nod, half knowing where this conversation is going. “I miss the stakes, too. Not knowing where the day would go, getting jacked on adrenaline, not sleeping for days because the high was so high, but it’s not sustainable, man.”

“It’s not, but I don’t need a break. I need a challenge. I need to feel alive again.”

I drag in a deep breath and let it out slowly as the back-room door creaks open.

“Morning!” Abby’s voice is bright and happy despite the fact that she’s wearing the classic all black outfit.

“Morning!” Ghost grunts, pouring himself coffee before carrying the mug with him toward the front door. “I gotta get moving. Take care today.”

“He okay?” Abby says, pulling herself up onto the stool in front of the kitchen counter. “Am I wrecking the vibe you guys have here? I’m sure this is a no girls allowed kind of clubhouse.”

“Kind of,” I say, chuckling. “He’s been struggling since he got out of the military. Nothing gets him going anymore.”

“Maybe his nervous system is stuck. I bet he could benefit from one of those chakra rebalancing things. My boss, Nicole, she does them in her spare time. I could see if

she's available."

I laugh and stand from the stool, grabbing two granola bars from the bowl in front of us. "Sure. I'll let him know you offered."

"Well... I'm just saying his nervous system is probably out of whack. He needs a reset, and maybe a woman." She rubs the back of her neck, following me out the door. "Maybe you all need women. Something to ground you."

Leaning in, I kiss the top of her head. "I agree. I do need a woman. Last night was torture without you."

She smiles wide and turns toward me, tipping up onto her toes. "Then let's not torture each other anymore."

"That would mean telling Duke we're a thing."

"I laugh as I say, "We both know how that would go." I wrap her against my chest and stare down at her light brown eyes, trying not to fantasize about a little cabin in the woods, our kids, the way we'd huddle around a Christmas tree together, the way she'd snuggle in with me every night at bed.

Jesus, that's perfection, but I can't have those thoughts. They're more dangerous than thoughts of her body. Sure, acting on either could get me mauled by her brother, but the mind fuck of losing her from my life far outweighs the idea of never touching her again. It's devastating.

"I know," she finally says, breathing me in, "but it's fun to pretend."

I hook into her hand and guide her out the front door toward my bike. Duke's Harley is still gone. I'm not sure where the hell he went last night. It's not like him to stay

away overnight.

The ride down the mountain is smooth and quick with the breeze blowing through our hair, the sun on our shoulders, and the scent of pine surrounding us. I loved Texas, but the mountains are next level incredible, especially with Abby on the bike behind me.

Main Street is just as charmed. The small-town street unfolds within the mountainside like a storybook with pages sprawled out, ready to be enjoyed.

There's the diner, an inn, a little bar, a grocery store, a pizza parlor, a few clothing shops, and at the end of the street, a tall brick building with the words Rugged Mountain Ink.

I decide to check that place out first once I get Abby dropped off at the record store.

We pull up to the record store and Abby climbs off the bike, using my shoulders again as a guide for her frame as she lifts off. I anchor the bike and climb off with her, noticeably careful about where I touch her and how we interact in public.

"I'll be right on Main Street all day. I'll come check on you periodically. You text me if anyone comes to look for you or if you get any weird feeling about anything. Okay? Don't hesitate. You're better safe than sorry."

She nods, and though I want to lean in and kiss her lips, I can't. Duke could be anywhere, perched and watching, ready to take us both down.

Fuck. I hate this so fucking much.

"I wish your lips were mine," I say, brushing my thumb against the outer edge of her hand.

“I’m pretty sure they’re yours.” She grins, biting the lower lip as she tips up onto her toes and then down again.

“I’ll see you this afternoon. I have lunch at noon.

We could go back to the diner. They have a lunch special with sky high apple pie.

It’s pretty damn good. They make it with this hundred-year-old recipe. I hear it’s top secret.”

“Deal.” I grin, aching to touch her. I’m not sure what favors I’m doing myself, following her around like this. I should’ve asked one of the other guys to take care of this detail and kept myself as far away as possible. This is torture for both of us, and I reckon it’s also confusing.

When she’s safe inside the record store, I make my way toward the tattoo shop at the end of the street. There aren’t many folks inside, but there’s one truck parked out front. Maybe they know someone I can talk to. It’s the only shot I have right now. Besides, I’m killing time until the bar opens.

Inside, an older man with a long, white beard stands against the back wall. He wears long-sleeved flannel rolled to the elbows, and though he’s older, his muscle tone is still well defined. You can tell he’s no stranger to hard work.

“How’s it going? Here for some work?” The man turns toward me and smiles. “We’ve got some talented folks here.”

“It has been a while since I’ve had ink, though I could do some flash art. You do good work?”

“Oh fuck no.” He rubs his shaking, calloused hands together. “I used to own this

place. My pride and joy. You wouldn't want a tattoo from me anymore. My hands aren't what they were back in the day. Used to be the best around, though." He holds out his hand. "Name's Henry. You?"

"Hank." I brace myself for the incoming storm as I say, "Henry, as in Henry Baxter? Your family is royalty around here, right?"

"Not quite. People have a skewed view of what royalty is these days. My family owned this mountain. We've built it up, and the people came.

Rugged Mountain Ink had a lot to do with that.

My daughter and her husband work here now with a lot of other great folks.

"He narrows his brows. "Hank... you're with that biker group that bought a plot of land up near the mines, aren't you? You guys own that bike repair shop."

I nod. "It's a work in progress, but we're trying."

"Kind of a ways out there for folks that need repairs, ain't it?"

The man owns the mountain. His family has been here for generations. Of course, he has a load of things he wants to say about the hitmen that moved in.

"We wanted something off the beaten path. Hoping to catch travelers coming in from the west too," I lie, realizing how terrible the lie sounds, and how little I can ask him about the men who took Maci now. He's got us pegged. I can't draw attention to the fact that we're looking for anyone.

He lays a book out in front of me with small sketches of skulls, flowers, and other various art.

“Well, pick what you’d like and I’ll set the booth up.

Raven should be in soon. She’s getting the kids on the bus.

I usually cover for her most mornings. Truth be told, we’re not actually open until eleven.”

I glance up at the clock that says a little after nine.

“Shit. I’m sorry. I blew right past it. I pulled on the door, and it was open. So... I can head out and stop in later. I wanted to—”

“There’s a lot of people that come into this town, Hank.

Some of them are looking for a fresh start and others have family that tell them how nice the mountains are.

Most though, are looking for the same thing...

peace and quiet. I do what I can to make sure that peace and quiet stays intact.

” He brushes his wrinkled, tattooed hand down over his beard.

“Do you catch my drift? Whatever it is you’re doing up there is none of my business until it affects my mountain and the people living on it.

Then,” his gaze meets mine, “I’ll make sure you never set foot in this town again. Understood?”

Fuck. I’ve heard people talk about this guy, and he’s still got it, even at his age.

“Understood,” I say, hearing Duke’s voice reverberate in my head. This isn’t lying low. In fact, it’s the opposite. I nod toward the old mountain man in front of me, suddenly realizing what I’ve done. “I think I’ll pass on the ink. Have a good day.”

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:00 pm

Abby

It's nearly eleven when Nicole walks in with two cups of coffee and a box of donuts from the bakery.

"Oh... it's a donut day! What's the occasion?"

A wide, friendly smile lifts her cheeks. "I forgot your birthday yesterday, so I figured you deserved a 'please forgive me' treat!" She hands me a cup and sets the box on the counter. "How was your night? Do anything fun?"

"I had dinner with Maci last night. You hear from her this morning? I tried texting, but she hasn't gotten back to me yet."

"No. We don't really text, though. She's a little high-strung for me." Nicole laughs and pulls a donut from the box. "I say that, but I spent all morning researching bow and arrows."

"You want to be a hunter?"

"I want to shoot arrows."

"At what?"

"Targets," she laughs. "I don't know... just sounds fun. I need to mix things up, ya know? I mean, I'm twenty-seven this year, and what do I have to show for it?"

I glance around the shop she opened not that long ago. “You own this record store. I mean, that’s a pretty big one.”

She shrugs. “It’s cool, but I don’t know. Lately... I want to do something wilder, like have sex hanging off a mountain side, or I don’t know, something that doesn’t involve being in bed by eight o’clock and teaching my cat how to sit.”

“Your cat can sit?”

“Yeah. He can lay too.”

My brows narrow. “I didn’t realize you could teach tricks to cats.”

“They’re really smart, but you have to work on their timetable. Mr. Mellow doesn’t have the best attention span. Anyway,” she huffs, “what else did you do last night?”

I want to tell her about Maci’s disappearance, but I can’t cause alarm, so I divert the story to the one about my night with Hank.

“Oh nothing... I just hunk out with this biker guy I know.” The words come out in a sing-song pattern.

“The biker? Your brother’s best friend... the biker ? Did you... oh God, this is exactly the type of excitement I’m talking about. A big, rough, bad boy who’s desperate to teach me a lesson.” She moans as she bites into her donut. “Yes. That’s what I need. Where do I get one?”

“Still having trouble with Aaron?” Her boyfriend is a complete idiot. I still don’t understand why they’re together.

She rolls her eyes and takes a sip of coffee.

“I don’t know what his deal is. He’s totally distracted by his phone twenty-four hours a day, and when I try to initiate any type of love at all, he acts preoccupied and weird.

Then, when I say I’m going to leave, he all the sudden acts like the best guy ever for a month.

I’m completely confused about who he is and what he wants.

It sucks because he was great at first, and part of me wonders if maybe he’s just going through something, but I don’t know any more what he wants. ”

“What do you want?”

She sighs. “I want to not think about dating ever again. I want a big, giant man to show me a good time. We can leave it at that. One night of fun. Maybe two.”

“Maybe I know a guy.” I grin, thinking about Ghost and the chakra healing he’s in need of.

Hey, maybe I’m the new clubhouse matchmaker. Lord, no wonder Duke is always mad at me.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. I know some biker dudes, but they’re all kind of weird. I don’t know if I’d even be messing with Hank if I hadn’t known him forever, but now that I am, I don’t know how I’m going to stop. He’s addicting.”

“Addicting how?” Nicole presses. “Like... he’s really good at his job?”

“Yeah.” I wipe my hands on a towel and grab a stack of records off the inventory

shelf behind me, talking as I work. “He’s so good with his hands. Like, all that practice loosening up bolts was good for him... ya know what I mean?”

She grins and narrows her brows. “Why do you think I wouldn’t want a man like that? These other bikers, they good with bolts too?”

I laugh. “I imagine. I met one last night, but I don’t know him very well. I can get more info for you, though. Hank and I are going to lunch today.”

“Come back with pictures and a full work up,” she says with a laugh. “Not that any one of those guys would be interested in me. I mean, I spend all my time running this business, playing with my cat, and shuffling tarot cards. Which reminds me, you’re due for a reading.”

My stomach tightens at the thought of the tarot cards knowing the future for the first time ever. Usually, I love the things. It’s fun to ask silly questions and get silly responses. Now though, everything feels so real.

“Yeah.” I swallow hard and walk toward the counter where she’s shuffling. I’m not sure there’s another boss on Earth as great as Nicole. I mean, who else’s employer gives them complimentary tarot readings over coffee and donuts?

“Okay.” Nicole smiles gently, showing off her gorgeously bright smile. The girl is beautiful, and I know she’d be a great catch to so many people in town. I can’t figure out why she hasn’t had her pick of whomever she wanted. “What’s the question today?”

“Umm... give me a second.” I mull over the hundred questions rattling through my mind. She’s looking for a yes or no type of thing, nothing complex. I can’t ask if we’ll find Maci, or if the guys who took her are still nearby. I have to ask something light. “Okay... will Hank and I end up together?”

Not exactly light, girl.

She giggles and shuffles through the cards as the music playing over the speakers shuffles to the next song.

We try to play local artists as much as possible.

There's so much talent up here, but every now then we'll play a record that's more mainstream.

Right now, Morgan Waylon is playing. I haven't listened to the whole record yet, but so far it's not too bad.

"Okay... will you and Hank end up together?" She lands the cards out flat on the counter, flipping them over one at a time.

The Fool, the High Priestess, and the Tower.

"Hmm... they're all facing you, which means good things, but the last card, the Tower, says that you'll see some chaos," she grins, "which is kind of fitting, all things considered."

The doorbell over the front door rings and a man steps inside as though the tarot has sent an omen of chaos straight through the universe. It's my brother, and he doesn't look happy, though what else is new?

I consider calling Hank, but it's quarter to twelve and he should be walking in any minute. I can handle fifteen minutes of Duke, right?

Nicole nods toward me, picks up her cards, and heads toward her back office, leaving my brother and I at the front of the store. God, this is embarrassing, and I'm really

dreading whatever this is about to be.

“What’s up?” I swallow hard, holding the coffee cup in my hand for warmth and comfort.

He glances down at the ground and up again. “We haven’t talked in almost a year.”

My eyes widen. “Because you’re insane. Anything else?”

“I’m insane, but Hank isn’t?” He laughs. “You don’t even know the kind of shit that dude has done.”

I probably don’t, and I don’t want to either.

“Hank is helping me.”

“I’d have helped you, if you called.”

“Well, I’m sorry I didn’t call. I didn’t think you’d be interested. Besides, last night you sounded against the whole thing.”

“What’s going on with you and Hank? I know the noises I heard last night weren’t cards.”

I shrug, my stomach tied in knots. I know my brother. I know who he’s become. He’s not the guy I thought he was. He’s different. Rougher and more judgmental. “We were watching a movie while we played cards. Maybe you heard that.”

His jaw clenches tight. “Why are you lying to me? You really think I’m that dumb?”

“Dumb? No one said you were dumb. Are you okay? You’re acting so weird.

Please tell me you haven't gotten yourself messed up in something crazy.

You've got the ranch, this biker thing, and the whole killing people for money schtick.

You can't be messing around with the law too.

What would Dad think? You used to care what he thought about you. ”

He narrows his brows, and his eyebrow twitches. “Dad would've wanted justice.”

“No, Dad would've wanted you to be happy and safe. He would've wanted us to be a family. You're stuck, Duke. Let me help you!”

“Everything okay?” Hank steps into the shop and glances toward me then toward Duke, he hasn't said anything, but he's expecting the worst. I can sense it in his shoulders.

“I don't know, man. Is everything okay? ” We both know what my brother means by the inflection, though neither of us cop to it.

“What?” Hank tucks his hand into his pocket. “If you're talking about the guys who kidnapped Maci, my guys... our guys, found them. They don't have the girl.”

My stomach twists into a tight knot, and my heart squeezes so hard the air is sucked out of my lungs. “What? What do you mean they don't have her? Where would she be? She has to be with them. They took her. She left at the same time.”

I grab my phone out of my back pocket and text her again and again.

Me: Where are you?

Me: Pick up!

My brother groans under his breath and shakes his head. “We’re not here for a fuckin’ kidnapping. We’re here to lie low. This isn’t lying low. I want the guys off the bikers, now ! Get your head out of your ass and start fixing those bikes we have piled up in the shop.”

Hank draws in a heavy breath and lets it out slowly before he speaks. “What the hell is your problem, man? You don’t answer your phone, you’re barking out demands, and you’re acting like a lunatic. I thought you wanted to help your sister.”

Duke steps forward, his fists clenched. “You seem to want to help her an awful lot too, don’t you? The two of you locked in a room, making all kinds of noises. Sounded like she was getting all the help she could need.”

“I love him!” I blurt the words out as though they’re going to fix what’s happening. As though the power of love itself would save us all from this argument.

Surprise... the words don’t help. Not one bit. Also, I’m a little embarrassed that I said them. Hank and I only had one night together. We just now confessed our attraction. He never said anything about loving me.

My brother’s face turns dark red and a haze of something dark and sinister waves over him. “I’m sorry... you what?”

“I know it’s not easy to hear,” I shrug and stare at him, “but I love Hank. I’ve loved him for a while now and I know it’s—”

“I’m gonna fuckin’ kill you.” He steps toward Hank, his fists balled, his jaw locked. “You were fuckin’ her last night, weren’t you? My best friend? Some fuckin’ best friend! She’s twenty-five!”

“Stop!” I step between them, desperate for him to calm down, but he’s on fire. “Come on, it’s not that big of a deal. It’s... I’m sorry. I can’t... I don’t want to be without him, Duke.”

My brother stops in his tracks and turns toward me with a clenched jaw.

I’m not sure he’s ever looked this scary.

“You have a choice, little sister. You want him in your life, or me? You’ve got twenty-four hours.

” He glances toward Hank. “I expect your stuff out of the clubhouse by morning. I’ll stay away until then.

If I see you again, I’ll fuckin’ kill you. ”

My stomach turns as he steps outside into the warm afternoon sun. Who the hell is that guy? I don’t know him.

Hank leans into my side and holds me close to his chest as Nicole returns to the room.

“Hey, darling, why don’t you take your lunch. I’ll see you in a bit.”

I hate making a scene more than anything in the world. Nicole is the nicest person ever, and she doesn’t need this shit in her shop, but here I am, spreading my weird everywhere I go.

I hate my brother.

“Thanks, babe.” I lean into Nicole and hug her tight before heading out the front door with Hank, desperate to figure all this out for real this time.

Hank

“What’s going on with the biker thing?” Abby leans in as the waitress delivers two cokes to the table. We ordered a few appetizers as well, though I’m not sure either of us are that hungry.

“Red and Tennessee found them in a hotel room out by the highway. No hideout, no plan, no nothing. One was on a bike, the other in a truck. No sign of the girl on either. The hotel room was clear too. They said they saw you two last night, but didn’t notice you’d left.”

“But they were talking about Duke. I know they were talking about Duke. I heard them. They sounded angry like they had a personal vendetta against him.”

“Maybe they do. A lot of bikers around here hate Duke. He’s stirred bad blood with everyone, but I don’t think these guys took Maci.”

Abby blows out a heavy breath and leans back in the booth. “You really don’t think they have her?”

“No, I don’t. The guys are pretty good at this stuff. They could find a spaded snowflake in a blizzard.”

Abby leans forward, holding her head in her hands. “So then where the hell is she? It doesn’t make sense. She couldn’t have just disappeared. People don’t just disappear.”

“No, they don’t. We’ll figure it out. Maybe she wanted a break and left town for a

bit.”

She tilts her head to the side and wets her full lips. “She wouldn’t, though. The waitress said she didn’t even pay the bill. That’s not like her. People love her in this town. She writes all those good doer articles.”

A dish clanks in the kitchen and the distinct smell of apple pie wafts through the air as though someone has just taken a sky high pie out of the oven.

“She’s a grown woman, Sunny. If she wants to disappear, she can disappear for a while. Tell ya what, I’ll see if I can get Ghost to hack into her phone records. Maybe he can get a trajectory on her cell tower pings. It’ll take a couple of days, though.”

She nods and grabs a cheese stick, dipping it into the marinara before taking a bite. “Okay, sounds like the next logical step. Now we just have to figure out what to do with my brother. My psychopath of a brother.”

“ I think we need to talk about how you said you love me.” I watch her fidget with her straw as she thinks over her response.

“Yeah, I—”

“I love you too, Sunny.” I reach across the table for her hand. “I’ve loved you as long as I can remember.”

“You have?”

I nod, brushing my thumb against the back of her hand. “I think about you all the time. We can work this out.”

A tear spills down her cheek. “And what if we can’t? Duke keeps rattling on about

justice. I don't know... I think he's lost it."

She stares at me, takes a sip of her coke, and stands from the booth, glancing toward me as though something has clicked, something that needs to be addressed right now.

"Where are you going?"

She doesn't answer, so I throw down some cash, and follow as she flies out the front door of the diner and into the street toward her brother's bike still parked at the end of the road.

Fuck!

"Abby!" I shout through the small crowd of people gathered on Main Street. "Abby, stop!"

She doesn't stop. She doesn't even turn around. She keeps going and going until Duke catches her eye and they're standing face to face. "You're an asshole!"

He stands tall, flexing his bicep as he crosses his arms over one another in the early afternoon light. "I'm sorry?"

"You heard me. You say you want to help me, but you don't. You say you love me, but you really just want to control me. You don't care about me at all. You don't even see me, Duke. You can't because you're going after the guys that ran Mom and Dad off the road, aren't you?"

He rolls his eyes. "Jesus Christ, Abby. Get a grip. I'm busy because I'm moving the entire ranch out here.

It's a ton of fuckin' work. We came out here for a fresh start, and so far, no one is

fuckin' listening, and my best friend is sleeping with my baby sister who I haven't spoken to in a year. So... shit sucks."

Abby stares down at the sidewalk before glancing up again. I want to console her, but I know that's only going to cause more drama. "You could communicate your thoughts, then I'd know this stuff. We could talk it out."

"I am," he laughs sarcastically. "Don't fuck my best friend. That's pretty fuckin' clear communication."

"Ugh!" She tugs at her hair and spins away from him. "You're impossible!"

"No, you just have selective hearing."

"Look, I love you, Duke. I miss what we used to be. Maybe when you come to your senses, we can—"

"I'm never going to be okay with you and my buddy.

He's way too fuckin' old for you. He should know better.

I meant it when I said twenty-four hours to be out of that clubhouse.

If I see you two together, there's going to be problems." He pauses for a moment, letting his words sink in before he climbs on his bike and kicks up the stand, leaving us both in a cloud of musty, acrid exhaust.

I pull Abby into my chest and hold her close, unsure of what to say to fix any of this, but I know what I'm doing is wrong.

I can't hold her life hostage. She's too young for me.

Dragging in a deep breath, I stare down at the only woman I've ever really loved.

"Sunny, I want to take you home and make you mine. I want to hide you away until you belong to me for good, but what the fuck am I supposed to do? Your brother isn't wrong.

You have your whole life ahead of you and I'm in a different stage.

" Fuck. I hate saying this. "You need someone who'll still be around for you in thirty years.

Someone who can take care of you until the day you die. "

She shakes her head back and forth quickly, pleading in her voice as she says, "I don't want someone else, Hank.

I want you. I don't want some younger guy who's going to stumble all over his words and treat me like shit because he doesn't understand life yet.

I want you. I want your worn hands, your strong body, your knowing lips.

I want us. Maybe I misunderstood what last night was. I—"

"You didn't misunderstand anything, Sunny. I want you. I want us." I rub my hand over her stomach. "I want that belly filled with my babies. I want your heart next to mine every night. I want a life with you. I want it more than anything."

She steps forward, her stare heavy on me. "Then take that life. Take me . It doesn't matter what Duke thinks."

I huff out a heavy breath, my hands digging into her hips as though she'll disappear if

I let go. “You don’t understand. If I let myself believe for even a second that you’re mine, I can’t go back. You’ll belong to me, and then we have a Duke problem.”

“I’m not afraid of him,” she says, her heartbeat thumping against her throat.

“You should be.”

Her fingertips draw up my chest slowly and deliberate. “I’m afraid of losing you more.” She glances down at her phone vibrating in her hand. “That’s my lunch break. I need to get back to the record shop.”

Fuck. I don’t want her to leave, not like this.

“When are you off?”

“Four.”

“Okay.” We walk back toward the record shop in silence, her tiny hand brushing against mine as we pass by shoppers and folks around town. I don’t know many people yet, but I know they’d be disgusted if they knew a man my age was in love with a twenty-five-year-old girl.

When we reach the record shop, she looks at me, her gaze soft but broken. “I’ll be okay here for the afternoon.”

“I know, and I want to stay, but I’ll be back in a bit.”

She nods and turns toward the steps inside. And though I know I have to let her get back to work, every sense inside of me screams to grip her tight and hold her safe from the world instead.

The responsible thing to do is let her go. I'll see her again in a few hours. Whatever I'm feeling can wait, right?

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:00 pm

Abby

“How was lunch?” Nicole carries a handful of records to the back of the store as I walk in.

“Sorry for all the drama. Turns out, everyone is crazy!”

She laughs as she tucks a few records into their rightful slots. “I figured with the way your brother walked in. How’d it go?”

“I don’t know. He’s overbearing, just like I knew he’d be, but Hank,” I sigh, “I don’t understand what he wants. It’s like he says he wants me but he’s trying to respect my brother too. So now, I’m... I don’t know. I just wish he’d take me.”

“He sounds like a nice guy. I’d be worried if he just railed you without thought.”

I know that’s the right answer, but I’ve never been hornier in my life. Not only that, but I’ve wanted Hank for so long. The fact that he actually wants me too... I can’t know that and not do anything about it.

“Maybe he’s waiting for the right time,” Nicole continues. “There’re so many layers to this. He probably wants you for more than one night.”

“Okay, why do you sound so mature and well adjusted? You’re making me feel bad.”

She joins me at the desk and leans in for a hug, the scent of coconut in her hair.

“You shouldn’t feel bad. I got into a huge fight with Aaron and spent the rest of the afternoon fantasizing about rough sex with my big, bad, biker book boyfriend.

” She wets her lips. “Is it sad that I’m nearly thirty and I don’t know what it feels like to be touched like someone wants me? ”

“Not at all.” I lean into her and offer a hug. I hate that she’s having issues with her boyfriend. She is the most attentive partner. She doesn’t deserve whatever he’s throwing at her. “You should feel wanted. Ditch Aaron and go on the prowl. You’re gorgeous. You’ll find someone so much better.”

She shrugs. “You know that feeling like you’re standing the doorway of your own life, but you can’t walk through?”

“Like you’re waiting for the universe to shove you forward?”

“Exactly! It’s this restless feeling, like you know you deserve more but you have no idea where the map is to find it.”

“Maybe you write the map yourself,” I say, oddly seeing how all this identifies to Hank and I. We’ve been looking for a map, but there isn’t one. We either leap or stay stuck in our doorways forever.

She reaches out for my hand and offers a soft smile. “Or maybe the map is there and I’m too scared to read it.”

In the silence of Nicole’s profound statement, the door swings open and Hank steps inside, his jaw locked, his gaze narrowed. He looks like a beast. A wild animal about to attack.

“What’s wrong?” I step toward him. “Did something happen?”

He glances toward Nicole. “Could you give us a second?”

“Of course.” She grins and winks toward me as she walks out the front door. “This... this is what I want. Take it! Have fun!”

Apparently, I’m slow because I haven’t caught onto what’s happening yet. Hank looks hungry, like he’s going to tear me limb from limb and eat me alive.

Wait... maybe that’s what I want.

He stalks toward me, his gaze intent with mine as his thick, calloused hand lands against my throat and pushes me against the back wall.

My clit throbs and I whimper against his touch. Dear God, I see what’s happening now. The man is an animal. A starving, feral beast who’s come to take what he wants... finally.

“I just got here five minutes ago,” I pant.

“I can’t wait any longer.” He stares down at me, his voice ragged, his lids hooded with need. “Tell me you want me. Tell me you understand how hard this will be at times. My hands are dirty, Sunny, and this’ll be messy.”

I lift his calloused hand and land it on my face. “I love your dirty hands, Hank. And even if I wanted too, I couldn’t walk away.”

For a long second, he holds his gaze with mine, then suddenly and all at once, his lips are on mine as he growls into my throat.

The leather on his cut rubs against my chest as he kisses me.

“Strip off your clothes. I want to see you naked.”

“Right here? In the store? Nicole could come back. We could get a customer.”

“Take off your clothes, now, ” he presses. “I need to see you. All of you.”

I’m not a super confident girl. I also didn’t think I was an exhibitionist. Turns out, when Hank is sending out orders, I’m taking them... willingly.

My clit throbs as I pull my shirt off my shoulders and my skirt off my hips. The thin fabric falls easily to the floor, exposing my bra and the soaked cotton panties.

“Good girl. Take the rest off for me.”

Hank leans against the counter, watching me strip for him, staring at me with a straight face as though he’s studying every inch of my body. I don’t know if he likes it or hates it, but I figure the fact that he keeps telling me to strip is a good thing.

I unclip my bra, my heart pounding as I check the side door for customers. No one is on the street, but it’s midafternoon. We could get a customer any second now.

“Eyes on me,” he growls. “Take those panties off. I want to see that virgin pussy.”

Oh God. My thighs tremble as I tug my panties to the ground. I’m not sure I’ve ever been this wet in my life.

“Fucking hell, you’re a good girl,” he groans, stepping toward me. His sandpaper hands roam my body with gentle pressure, pushing through my hair, tugging gently as the other wanders down my frame, pinches my nipples, and lifts me up onto the countertop.

He kisses my thighs one at a time, licking his way up toward my aching pussy before burying his face against my wetness with a groan.

My entire body lights on fire. Tingles rush over my skin, and I bury my hands in his hair as the world around me disappears.

Flick after flick of his hot tongue presses against my throbbing clit. I might die, right here, right now, with nothing left of me but a puddle of sticky, wet come.

He slides a finger inside of me, maybe two, thrusting as he licks in a slow, rhythmic motion that sends my eyes rolling back into my head. My legs curl up around his waist and my thighs tense.

Dear fucking God, someone save me. I'm going to come on the same counter I cashed out Mrs. Robinson last week.

She's the sweetest, oldest woman in Rugged Mountain.

What would she think of me if she knew I was losing my virginity right here on the countertop?

Not only that, but at any second anyone could come rolling in the door.

All of this is severely wrong. We live in a small town. I'd be burned at the stake, forever known as the little whore at the record shop.

These thoughts flutter through momentarily, but they're squashed as he sucks my clit and pulls off with a quick pop.

"You taste just as good as you did last night, but my cock is aching. I need that little pussy."

“Take me,” I pant. “I need you.”

“I don’t have a condom.”

“You don’t need one.” I pant louder as I say, “Hank... please!” I’ve never felt more desperate in my life.

He unzips his jeans and tugs them down haphazardly, as he holds his hand over my pussy. His gaze reminds me of a drunken man. His lids are hooded, and his brain has gone offline. Whatever’s happening now, is purely instinctual... and I love it.

He needs me, and I need him.

“You tell me if it hurts and I’ll slow down,”

I agree, though I would never tell him to slow down. I want his massive cock stuffed so deep inside of me that I’m gasping for air.

Opening my thighs wider, I let him pull me to the edge of the counter and shove his cock inside.

My eyes widen with shock as the pressure of his dick impales me. It’s a sharp, burning pain that fills me up in the most glorious of ways. I’m pretty sure this is the definition of something ‘hurting so good.’

“You alright?” he groans, thrusting in slowly. I’m not sure he’s even fully penetrated yet, or if he ever could be.

“Yeah,” I pant. “Don’t stop!”

“Good girl. You take my cock like a good little girl.” His jaw locks and he thrusts

into me harder and faster, as a bead of sweat collects on his forehead and trickles down.

Thankfully, the counter is smooth, and I glide back and forth quite easily.

“You’re soaking wet, Sunny. You like this cock, don’t you? ”

“I love it. You’re so big!”

“And you’re so fuckin’ tight. My fucking God.”

He pounds in harder as I grip onto his forearms, feeling the flexing muscles as he moves his frame closer to my breast and skates his teeth over each nipple, biting down as he fucks me harder and harder.

I whimper and jump with each nip, but I love it. I love it so much.

“Tell me how it feels,” he groans. “That’s all I need. Just tell me how it feels.”

I love his demands.

“Tell me!”

“You’re filling me up,” I pant. “It’s like you’re stretching me wide. Like... if you go any deeper, you’ll be in my stomach.”

“Good fucking girl,” he growls, thrusting in harder and faster. “Come for me. Soak my cock. You know how long I’ve thought about you? Tell me your mine.”

“I’m yours,” I pant as he hits a spot near the back of my canal that feels like nothing else I’ve ever felt. It’s instant, mind-numbing pleasure, like a bomb he’s set off.

My muscles squeeze tight around his cock, and I bellow out the loudest sigh of relief as I come on his dick.

“Coat my cock. Be loud! I love those sounds you make.” He thrusts in harder, but my mind is offline. He could be doing cartwheels while fucking me and I’m not sure I’d comprehend what’s happening.

“Fuck, I want to fill you up. I can’t pull out, Sunny. Fuck!” He’s frantic, sounding like he wants to deposit his seed inside of me, like it gets him off, like he needs it.

“Do it. Come inside of me,” I beg, desperate to feel his warm come in my womb. Desperate to raise his babies and grow a life together.

He grips my hips tighter, thrusts one final time, and grunts out as he comes inside of me.

“My fucking God,” he moans, pumping slowly in and out as he helps me into a sitting position. “Sorry if I got out of control there. You felt so damn good. Are you feeling okay? I didn’t hurt you, right?”

“No,” I smile, pressing against his chest, “you didn’t hurt me. That was... so much fun!”

“Good. I, umm... I can’t wait to do it again.”

We’re both smiling ear to ear, and I’m on top of the world until the bell above the door rings and my brother is standing in the doorway.

“What the fuck?” He turns away quickly, his fists clenched. I don’t know how much he’s seen as there are a few cardboard cutouts in front of us, but we’re still nude and Hank is still inside of me. So... there’s that.

Hank grabs my shirt and tugs it over the top of me as he pulls up his jeans and buckles them into place. I'm not sure there are words to get us out of this one.

"Dude, I—"

"Save it," Duke groans. "Just fuckin' save it."

I don't want to know why you're fuckin' my sister in the fuckin' middle of the day in a god damn record store.

I don't want to know why neither of you respect me enough to respect my wishes, and I don't want to fuckin' know anything else.

Just tell me you'll be out by morning 'cause I can't fuckin' look at you anymore."

"Yeah," Hank groans, "I got it."

"Duke," I hop off the counter and step toward him, "I'm sorry. It's my fault, I—"

"Look, I love you, but what the hell is happening? You wanted a family. You wanted kids, and he's old, Abby."

Jesus! You're not going to have any of that with him.

"Duke lowers his head and glares up at Hank before glancing back at me.

"You're all I have, and I hate this. I fuckin' hate it."

You're making a huge mistake, and I really do want him out of the clubhouse, but...

I don't know if me forbidding everything is helping.

I came back to apologize—which I regret. ”

“Please don’t regret it. I don’t usually do things like this.”

“Good to know.” He groans and looks away, folding his massive arms over one another. “I’ve gotta go out of town for a while. I’m putting Ghost in charge of things while I’m gone.”

“What?” My brows narrow. “Where are you going?”

“I’ve got some shit with the ranch I have to take care of. I trust Hank will take care of you. I’ll be back in a month or so.” He turns back toward the door. “I’d say don’t do anything else stupid, but you two are beyond that.”

It’s not the happy-go-lucky sweetness I was hoping for, but he also didn’t murder us, so I’m calling this a win.

When he’s outside again, Hank looks toward me. “Well, that’s something, I guess. He’ll come back with a fresh head.”

I’m not sure I believe that, but I know talking to him isn’t going to make much of a difference.

So, I find happiness in small victories, lean against Hank’s shoulder, and find calm in the one thing in life that’s going well, though it doesn’t last long.

Nicole is heading back from the pizza shop with a box in her hand.

“I should probably let you get back to work,” Hank groans, kissing the top of my head, “unless you want to be sick the rest of the day.”

I smile and lean into his lips as my cell phone beeps. “As much as I’d love that, I need to do some damage control here. Plus, I think this countertop could use a solid scrubbing.”

He smiles and brushes his thumb against my bottom lip. “I’ll be back at four.”

I nod and reach for my phone, checking the message that just came in. I don’t know why but I’m half hoping it’s my brother with the rest of the apology he’d started a few minutes ago.

“It’s Maci!” I shout, my stomach clenching. I scan the messages quickly as I hold my phone out for both of us to read.

Maci: You go girl! I’m glad my disappearance brought you two closer together. I’d have totally taken that chance.

Me: Where the hell are you?

Maci: On the road. I’ll be back soon. I think I’m onto something good.

What the hell? How do I know it’s really her? In those crime dramas they answer for the people they’ve kidnapped so no one thinks anything bad happened.

Me: What do you mean you’re onto something good? Also, what record did you buy me at the shop yesterday?

Maci: Morgan Waylon. Are you losing your mind? I’m roaming in and out of service, though. Have fun with Hank. Do everything you can with him, and don’t worry about me. I have a good story coming.

Oh my God, this is about a story? I glance toward Hank. “How did she get out of the

diner at the same time the bikers left?”

“Maybe it had nothing to do with the bikers. You said she was desperate for a good story. She’s being wild and young. That’s... good for her.”

The amount of stress I’ve felt over the past few days over her disappearance has led me into the arms of my brother’s best friend, so I don’t hate that she pulled this, and I am happy that she’s found something to write about. Besides, I’m about to write a pretty decent story of my own.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:00 pm

Hank

Five Years Later

The sun is high, and the kids run back and forth along the lake shore.

They've been chasing each other for at least thirty minutes.

People say this age is hard, but I love having two three-year-olds.

They play so well together and everything amuses them.

Plus, they still like our company. I hear that ends sooner than later.

"Did you remember the pineapple?" Abby digs through the picnic basket next to me before pulling out a container of cut watermelon.

"Oh, I think I packed this instead. Never mind." She's pregnant with our third, a baby girl.

I think Noah and Allen are happy they're having a baby sister, but we won't know for sure until she gets here a few months from now.

"I'm craving the pineapple, though. What's with that? "

"Not sure. Want me to Google it?"

“No. I’m sure it’s some weird hormonal thing. Plus, I like our no phone policy when we’re by the water. It’s nice to get a break from everything. You’ve been swamped at the bike shop lately. I still can’t believe my brother asked you back.”

“He grew a soft spot for the kids is what happened. He’s taking the boys camping this weekend so that gives us some time to ourselves.”

She drags in a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “About that... I don’t know if I can leave the boys that long. He wants to take them to the creek. They’re little still and they run fast.”

“They’ll be fine. It’s good for Duke and the kids.

They need to bond with other people.” I tug her into my arms. “Besides, it’s our wedding anniversary.

Four years. That’s a pretty big deal. I thought we could look at the wedding album, eat some cake, and then each other.

” I grin wide. “I’d take you out for a ride, but I think that’s on pause until our baby girl gets here. ”

“You had me at eating each other.” She smiles sweetly and leans against my chest as we watch the kids splash back and forth in the waves.

“I can’t believe it’s been four years since we were here getting married.

You in that black button up, me in that little pink sundress.

” She smiles sweetly and shakes her head. “You make me want to wear pink again.”

“ Me? What did I do?”

She smiles. “Hmm... I think it has something to do with the massive cock.”

“Oh.” I dig my feet into the warm sand as waves lap against the shore and the scent of sunscreen and fresh fruit lingers in the air. “That makes sense. I do remember reading somewhere that a good fucking can change a woman’s life.”

She laughs hard. “Well, you gave so much good dick that I’m wearing pink again, so that’s a pretty big deal. I didn’t think that would ever happen.”

“Well, I love you no matter the color you’re in. Black, green, pink, orange, stripes, cream, putrid yellow—”

“I do love putrid yellow.” She grins laying back on the blanket. Her stomach curves upward, and she circles her hand over the top of it, searching for a kick. “Oh, there she is.”

I join her, holding my hand over the same spot. “I think she’s dancing. With all those records you’re playing every day, it’s no wonder. You think any more about taking a break from the store after she’s born?”

“I don’t know yet. Part of me wants to be home all the time, but the other part loves the time off from mom duties. Plus, work is fun with Nicole, and the record store is so busy.”

I drag my hand over her stomach, and lean in, kissing our baby girl. “Your mama is the sweetest, most hardworking woman around. You’re about to be a lucky little human.”

Abby smiles and holds her hand over the top of mine.

I've tried searching back over the years for the exact moment that my life changed for the better, but I can't figure which one it was.

Was it the moment I sat next to Abby and taught her how to tighten bolts, was it the moment I watched her take my leather jacket off the back of a chair at her party, or was it the moment when we laid together playing cards that night at the clubhouse?

I guess it's good that there are so many to choose from.

My sunny girl nestles against my side as the boys grab their pails and dash back toward the shore.

The lake shimmers under the afternoon sun, reflecting a life I never thought I'd have.

A wife, three kids, and a little cabin tucked away by the water.

I don't know what I did to deserve this.

God knows I'm no saint. But as I watch my family, laughter spilling into the air, I know one thing for certain.

Whatever mistakes I've made, whatever paths I've roamed, they led me here. And for that, I'll forever be grateful.

THANK YOU FOR READING.

READ NICOLE'S STORY HERE .

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 1:00 pm

Nicole

The scent of old vinyl clings to my skin.

It's a sweet musky smell that reminds me of playing at my grandma's house as a kid.

I used to love watching her records spin.

The needle rotating smoothly over the grooves, coaxing warm, crackling melodies into the air.

She loved those afternoons together as much as I did.

We'd hum along to the music while we baked banana bread or danced in the living room.

Even then, I remember loving those days when music was more than a sound.

It was a bridge that connected people together.

Some things never change.

I run my fingers over the edges of a Fleetwood Mac sleeve. The plastic has been worn with time, but the overall condition of the record is nearly perfect. It's original, and the last one I have in stock. I have a buyer coming this morning interested in purchasing it... maybe.

What was I thinking, opening a record store in a small town like this, or opening a record store at all for that matter? People love coming in to browse the bins, but no one ever buys.

I stare aimlessly through the large picture window at the front of the shop. The mountain town I love hums its usual slow, predictable, suffocating rhythm.

Yeah, I said it. Suffocating.

I don't know when the feeling took hold, but it's rampant now and nearly impossible to ignore. The white-capped mountains I loved so much have become a backdrop to my restlessness. Towering reminders of a life that once felt so expansive, now feels so small.

Lord, I'm dramatic today.

My fingers tap against the counter as I try to figure what kind of fun I can make out of the day, but I already know exactly how it'll play out. I'll tend the store until this collector comes in, visit with my friend Sienna around lunch time, then I'll go home with Aaron.

Most people would be grateful to be in my spot. I have my own business, and despite the fact that I'm not thriving, I do bring home a paycheck. I also have a nice cabin to go home to, and I have a very consistent boyfriend.

What's my problem? Seriously, what's my problem?

Who cares that his kisses come at the same time every day?

Who cares that his texts and calls arrive in perfect intervals, as if his heart beats to a preset reminder?

Who cares that he unwinds with computer games while I sit on the couch, unraveling piece by piece from the inside out?

Who cares that we listen to the same playlist on the way home, sing the same words, talk about the same things at dinner... every night?

I need to get a grip. This is life. It's the life I chose.

I blow out a breath I didn't realize I was holding as the bell above the door rings. It's my friend Sienna. She's early, and she comes bearing gifts.

"Damn. Just when I thought life was a predictable and dull cycle of blah, you save the day."

She smiles wide and lands a pink box from Josie's bakery on the counter before smoothing down her pale pink dress.

She's so good at putting together these ultra feminine outfits.

I've always been terrible at dressing myself.

Most days, I'm lucky to throw on a simple sundress or a romper.

"Croissants... with chocolate sauce inside. Don't say I never give you anything. "

"Oh damn, you just made my day. I went by there yesterday to see if they had any left and she was cleaned out. I guess I should've been a baker."

"That bad?" Sienna sets two cups on the counter next to the box.

I assume it's coffee. "Maybe you should run a sale or something." She opens the box

of pastries and snags one out, taking a bite as she talks.

“Since I started my event’s business, I’ve been at my wits end trying to stay afloat.

The only thing that made a difference was the two weddings I planned for free next year.

Word of mouth is the best advertising around. ”

“That’s bold, but it’s good that it worked.”

“Yeah,” Sienna shrugs, “you’ve gotta make people think they need a record. Like getting a record from your store makes their whole week.”

“And how do I do that? “

She glances around my shop, taking in the neatly lined shelves, every record carefully displayed. “I love your shop. It’s nice, but it doesn’t really tell your story.”

“My story? How is the shop supposed to tell a story?”

She shrugs, biting into her croissant. “Don’t know. That’s for you to figure out.”

I make a mental note to grab a notebook on the way home to brainstorm ideas. At least it’ll give me something to think about while Aaron is playing computer games tonight. “Well,” I sigh, “you are killing it over there. You should be proud of yourself.”

“Try telling my family that. My mom never shuts up about how much money I wasted on the place. She can’t figure out why I need a physical location for events planning.

” She sighs. “My cousin has me planning her wedding and I’m nervous as hell something is gonna go wrong and I’ll never hear the end of it.

Plus, I’m currently searching for a fake boyfriend to play the other fake boyfriend I told them all I was madly in love with. ”

“What?” I laugh. “Why’d you do that?”

She glances toward me with downturned eyes. “Are you kidding? My mother is relentless. That’s why. To her, I’m not valid until I have a man by my side.”

“Why don’t you call one of the roster boys. You’ve got a list of them in waiting.”

“Umm... no. The roster has only boy scouts. I want a big, rough and tough guy. Someone no one will dare question.”

“You and me both.” I roll my eyes. “Did I say that out loud?”

“You did.” She smiles and leans in. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know.” I laugh under my breath as I try to figure out how to put my feelings into words. “Aaron is a good guy, he’s just...”

“Boring, emotionally unavailable, predictable... should I keep going?” She takes a sip of coffee and sets the cup back on the counter.

“He’s just very regimented.”

“Transactional, you mean.”

“Transactional?”

“Yeah, like he does the things you need him to do on a schedule because he knows that’s the price he pays to be in the relationship, instead of having any kind of passion.”

I’ve never heard of this concept before. “Yeah, but I don’t know... maybe it’s not transactional. Maybe it’s something else. Maybe he wants to connect, but he doesn’t know how.”

She tilts her head to the side as she swallows down another bite of flaky pastry.

I’ve known Sienna for about five years now, and she’s always been a very straightforward person.

Some days, it’s nice. Others, it’s hard to swallow.

“I don’t know about that,” she sighs. “I’ve seen the way you two interact.

Sure, he remembers your birthday, never forgets to ask how your day went, and he kisses you when he sees you, but does he have the passion you’re looking for?

” She clears her throat and glances away before leaning in.

“I love you, but you’re stuck. I get it.

I used to be stuck, too. Guys like Aaron look good on paper, but in reality, you’re left wondering why he doesn’t see how badly you need be bent over and fucked like some wild animal.

I mean, when was the last time you saw him do anything spontaneous? ”

I shrug. I’ve known the man for nearly two years, and I’ve got nothing. “Well, he did

order a different salad dressing at lunch on Sunday. Even the waitress was confused.”

“Groundbreaking!” Sienna says, plastering an exaggerated smile.

I huff out a laugh, shaking my head. “He’s stable. I should appreciate that. The last thing I want is some asshole who’s wild and fun but spends every night at the bar.”

“Stable is great... for houseplants. You’re not a houseplant, girl. Plus, he’s not that stable. I mean, he is responsibly steady, but you forgot the part where he’s emotionally inept. You’re complaining about how insensitive he is all the time.”

I drag in a deep breath, thinking back to our last conversation.

The one where I asked him to be a little less predictable.

Instead of listening, he took it as a personal attack.

It spiraled fast. Words sharpened, voices rose, and by the end of it, I was curled up on the couch, crying into the silence while he sat there, unmoved.

Still, for one fleeting second, we felt something. We were alive .

“Babe,” Sienna reaches her hand out for mine, “I get it. I do. My ex was a total nightmare. One second, super sweet and predictable. The next, he was a raging lunatic. It confused me for years. I know you think Aaron isn’t that bad, but looking at you right now, I’d say he’s not good for you, and that’s enough for you to leave. ”

“I don’t know what leaving means. What if I don’t know what happy looks like? What if I’ve been lying to myself?”

“I think that’s your answer.” Sienna squeezes my hand. “You should eat another

croissant. I find that the flakier the pastry, the clearer my head gets.”

I take her advice and reach for the golden croissant in the back, though I’m not sure that’s going to help much. Lately, not even food is doing the trick. It’s like I’m numb and I can’t feel anything.

“So,” I say, leaning over the box as I take a bite, “who’s the local bad boy you’re bringing to your cousin’s wedding?”

“No idea. I don’t know any bad boys. I guess I have to—”

The bell over the door rings and a giant steps through the frame as though someone somewhere is listening to our prayers.

He wears dark faded jeans with tears above one knee, a tight black T-shirt and a motorcycle cut with patches sewn into the front.

I don’t usually see guys like this in here.

He looks out of place, but why is my heart slamming against my chest like he’s part human, part feral beast.

Clearly, he’s not here to murder me, right? Truth be told, I might be down for a chase.

He steps into the store, one heavy foot after the other. I should say hello. I say hello to everyone. Why aren’t I saying hello?

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“Hi!” I finally manage in a tone that’s much, much, much too bright for the current vibe.

Sienna glares toward me as though I’m an embarrassment, then leans in. “He looks like he’d be trouble. Go talk to him.”

“No!”

“Yes! At least sell him a record.”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” We’re whispering back and forth as the man steps in behind Sienna, towering over her like a Viking back from war. He’s not only tall, but broad as well with wide shoulders and tattoos streaking down his arms.

“I’m here about a record.”

“Okay,” I manage, trying to remember to breathe. “What kind of record are you looking for?”

“I emailed about the Fleetwood Mac album.”

My brows narrow as I try to wrap my head around this big, gruff guy settling in after a murder spree to listen to Rumors.

The whole vibe of that record screams emotional solitude, not what I'd expect for a guy like this, but I shouldn't judge.

I listen to heavy metal sometimes. I'm not sure anyone would guess that by looking at me.

"Oh, ugh, yeah." I brush the crumbs off my shirt and reach back behind the counter, handing him the record. "Sorry, it's been a weird morning. The record is in great condition, like new really."

Why am I repeating myself? I already told him this through the email.

I watch his big, rough hand slide across the plastic coating then pull the record from the sleeve. Thick silver rings catch the dim light. They're worn like armor, a contrast to the delicate precision in which he handles the album.

Damn he's hot. He's the kind of hot that the world bends around, like space is shifting to make room for him. His leather jacket creaks as he moves, and his eyes scan the record slow and deliberate as though he's looking for cracks.

Why am I staring?

Sienna has stepped away from the counter and gone to browsing records, though I see her glance up multiple times to look his way. He'd be a good wedding guest for her. He's definitely the rough and tough type she's looking for.

"Where did you get this from?" the man asks, tucking the record back into the sleeve.

"A buyer out in Tennessee purchased it at an estate sale. The original owner was selling it after his wife died."

He nods slowly, dragging his eyes up toward me. "That's too bad. Natural causes I

hope.”

“As far as I know.”

Why is he asking me this? Also , why do I feel like a teenager and the hottest boy in the school is talking to me?

It’s ridiculous! I’m twenty-seven, not thirteen, and this guy is a decade older than me... at least. What the hell is wrong with me?

He steps closer to the counter, bringing with him the scent of leather and motor oil, but there’s something darker beneath it. “I’ll take it.”

My eyes widen in surprise. He’s looked at something he’s actually going to buy.

“You mind if I look around for a second? I want to check out the other records you have. I’ve been looking for an old Black Sabbath album.”

“Oh, yeah!” I tuck around the counter, suddenly questioning the outfit I chose for today.

It’s a black dress with an A-line cut that doesn’t do much for me, but it’s quick and easy.

Usually that’s enough. “Of course, we have that album.” I avoid eye contact with Sienna as I pass through the bins toward the back, then pull the record up. “Here you go!”

He nods and holds the record in his hand. “Just checking your credibility.”

I slide their second album out from the shelf and hold it up. “How’s this for credibility?”

“Respectable.” His eyes flicker over the psychedelic album cover. “You’re getting cocky now. I like it.”

“Sabbath is the foundation of everything that came after this album. What’s your favorite track?”

“You’re bullshitting. There’s no way you’re listening to Black Sabbath.”

“Why not? I like all kinds of music.”

That earns me a deeper laugh, the kind that rumbles in his chest. “Okay, what’s your favorite track.”

“War Pigs.”

“Nice,” he murmurs with a laugh in his throat. “You love protest songs buried in heavy riffs?”

“I like music that says something. I don’t discriminate about what it’s saying.”

His smirk fades into something softer, more thoughtful before he hardens again. “I like that. I’ll take all three.”

I try not to jump up and down.

“I’ll take a record player too if you have one.”

“You don’t have a player?”

“Nah, just moved into town.”

“Oh! Where from?” I walk toward the stack of record players at the back of the store,

grabbing one off the pile before handing it to him.

“Texas.”

I don’t know why I expected more of an answer after the little connection we made over War Pigs, but clearly I was mistaken.

“Nice, you should like it here. Everyone is great.” I purse my lips as I scan his items into the register. “And umm... yeah. If you like apple pie, this place is your jam.”

“Don’t much care for it. Always preferred cherry.” He holds his stare far too long. “What time do you get off work?”

Something tightens in my chest. His tone is casual, but there’s an undercurrent of something I can’t quite place. I glance toward Sienna, desperate for her to confirm that this is actually happening.

She nods, eyes gleaming with excitement, gesturing me forward as though she wants me to be reckless and say yes... but I can’t do that to Aaron. Besides, maybe this guy wants to see what time I get off work so he can murder me. “I work every day until four.”

Wow! Maybe I should hand him my entire schedule while I’m at it. Maybe he needs my social security number too.

“I get hungry around four. You want to show me around town?”

My cheeks blaze with heat and my heart pounds against my chest. “Oh, I have a boyfriend. He’s a banker down at the bank. We, ugh, we’ve been together for a while and I’m really happy.”

“Good for you.” The man holds his stare with mine. “I didn’t ask if you wanted to

cheat on him. I asked if you'd show me around town."

Oh shit! Am I that dumb? Did I not see that? How did I not see that? Of course it's not a request for sex.

"I'm sorry. I thought you were asking me out. I'm so dumb. I don't get out much." My heart slams against my chest. How freaking embarrassing!

He leans back as though he's slightly amused. "You sound like you've been tempted." His smirk is criminal, as though he knows exactly how he's affecting me.

"That's not—" I scramble for words as heat builds in my cheeks.

He chuckles and glances toward the street. "Relax. No high stakes questions. Point me to the best coffee shop in town, and you can keep your complicated banker boyfriend."

"He's not complicated," I say, taking the man's cash. Who pays in cash?

"Okay, so he's not complicated, and you just like making it sound like he is?"

"No, he's actually the least complicated person. He's always on time, hardworking, and he makes a lot of money, so..."

The man tilts his head back. "Ah, there it is. You like the money."

"No!" I hand him back his change. "I... I like him. He's a good person."

"Cool. Sounds like you've got it all figured out."

"I do," I lie.

“Good for you. He like music too?”

“No, he’s not a music guy, but that’s okay. People are allowed to like different things.”

He hums, like the answer makes perfect sense, but there’s something in the way he lingers that makes me feel like he’s not entirely done.

“Yeah,” he finally says, grabbing his bag off the counter, “people are allowed to like different things.” His tone is easy and unaffected as though this conversation hasn’t bothered him in the slightest.

I should be relieved, but I catch myself wishing he’d say something else, wishing he’d turn back toward me as he makes his way toward the door.

Finally, he does. “Not a music guy, though. That’s a shame.” He says it like a verdict, like he’s somehow figured out that I’m making terrible life choices without me offering a single confession. Then again, maybe I did say a word or two. “Which way to the best coffee shop in town?”

I point across the street to Josie’s bakery, though I’m feeling oddly defensive about what he’s said under his breath. He glances toward me with a small smirk before pushing through the door. “Thanks for the help. See you around.”

Then, just like that, the world dulls. The spark, the tension, the unspoken weight of something out of reach. Now, I’m left standing in the aftermath, pulse uneven, wondering what the hell just happened.