



The Biker's Secret Claim (Chaos Brothers MC #2)

Author: *Khloe Summers*

Category: Romance

Description: When a forbidden age-gap romance ignites between a reckless soul and an older inked-up biker sparks do more than flythey burn.

Nicole

I need danger.

Something raw and reckless.

I need the kind of awakening I've only read about in books.

The kind of love that leaves me so intoxicated I can't see anything else.

Trouble is, I'm stuck in a dead-end relationship playing house with man that won't let me go.

Then, I see him.

A biker with sin carved into his skin.

I shouldn't want him—I shouldn't crave the ruin he offers.

But when he looks at me, I forget every red flag that's waving.

And when he touches me, I forget how to say no.

Ghost

Living fast means never looking back.

No attachments. No regrets. No mercy.

One look at Nicole and I know I've found my newest addiction.

She's trapped, locked in a love that leaves her craving something real.

I should walk away, let her choose a safer path, let her pretend she

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:55 am

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 lunchtime, 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 to 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.

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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?

"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 with 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 slowly and deliberately 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 very regimented, 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.

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Ghost

When I get back to the clubhouse, Tennessee is on the front deck grilling in jeans and a T-shirt, a beer in his hand. I haven't seen much of him lately, so it'll be a good opportunity to catch up.

"How the hell did you ride back with all that shit?" He nods toward the record player.

"Bungee cord to the back seat. How the hell'd you think?"

He shakes his head and grins as he lifts the lid and flips a few steaks. "Made enough for everybody. You hungry?"

"Starved." I grab a beer from the cooler and settle down in the chair next to him on the porch. It's a gorgeous day out. Sun and heat, but there's a nice breeze that keeps it from ever feeling too warm outside. "Where you been lately, man?"

"In the garage, doing work, like you should be." Not unlike myself, Tennessee is a man of few words.

He's also very dedicated to getting things finished in a timely manner.

Once those things are done, he's much more pleasant to be around.

Though as our club doc, he's the voice of reason under most circumstances, which is both annoying and needed.

“You finally back off that hit you were circling?”

I don't even like the word hit anymore. Something about it stirs up a hunger, like a dog hearing the crinkle of a treat bag, tail already twitching.

It's not that I enjoy murder, I don't. I enjoy freeing the world of evil people. People who have no business breathing. People whose existence tilts everything off balance. Turns out, there are a lot of them.

“The guy was on the up. I think the wife was paranoid or something.”

“And you're done taking jobs like this, right? If Duke comes back and finds out you're fucking around with all this, he'll extradite you.”

Duke is our unhinged Prez, who's taken sabbatical but told none of us how long he'll be gone. He says he went back to Texas to clean up some loose strings, but who knows with that guy? He's not acting right lately.

“I'll worry about that when it happens. I can't lie low, man. I don't know how. I've got two more jobs on the horizon. I need to go check them out after I drop this shit off.”

For a second, I think about the girl at the record store. The one with the dark brown hair and flecks of yellow in her eyes. She was hiding something, but I can't put my finger on what it is, though I get the feeling it's about the banker boyfriend. It's always the boyfriend.

“Dude,” Tennessee groans, “you're fucking up. Don't let your demons get in the way of making a real life. You were messed up for weeks after the last hit. You should talk to someone.”

“And what? Lay down on the big, long therapy couch and unload my deep, sick, perverted desire to throw every asshole off the face of the planet?”

“I was thinking you could talk about how you got that scar on your neck.”

I run my hand over the mark just beneath my chin, pushing away thoughts of that night.

“No,” I squeeze my eyes shut and open them again, “I don’t want to talk about it.

It’s the past, and the past is over. Besides, a doctor would toss me on a bunch of meds I don’t need, and I’ll sit comatose in the corner of a room for eternity. Lord knows that’s no way to live.”

“I’m not sure it’s much different from the way we were living.

All that death takes its toll.” He sighs as he says, “You’re not alone.

We were all feeling it, and that’s why we slowed down.

No one can push that hard for that long and not start making mistakes, and those mistakes get the wrong people killed. ”

“I hear ya, man.” I stand from the rocker and lean against the front porch, staring out at the mountain range that sprawls out in front of the cabin.

The air is crisp, carrying the scent of pine and earth.

I know there’s truth to what he says, but I don’t know how to stop.

Violence has been pressing against my ribs from the inside out since the day I was

born.

What does a man do when all he's ever been good at is fighting?

I tap the glass bottle against the railing and stare out into the abyss, thinking over every life decision I've ever made, when all at once the girl from the record store drifts back into my mind.

Her face seeps in first, unbidden. A quiet presence, slipping through the cracks before I even realize it's there.

She doesn't belong in my world. She's far too fucking sweet and I don't believe for a second that she listens to War Pigs.

That said, there was something off about her, something that stuck with me.

That doesn't happen often. Maybe I should go back into town, catch her before she gets off for the day.

Better yet, maybe I should follow her and see what this banker boyfriend is really all about. Something tells me he's a fucking tool.

"Dude, you're getting lost again," Tennessee laughs from the grill and adjusts his hat back. "What the fuck is going on?"

I contemplate how a conversation about the girl would go. I'd tell him I saw her and felt something weird. He'd tell me I shouldn't be messing around with anyone with a head this fucked up, and I'd agree... which is exactly why I'm not talking about it.

"Nothing, man, just figuring out what the hell someone does with their life when they aren't stalking people."

“I think we fix bikes and try to settle down.”

“What kind of settling down? Find someone and then sit behind a white picket fence for the rest of my life?”

“Yeah, that would be good for you. Look at all it did for Hank. He’s a new man with Abby. He’s pleased as fuck to fix a few bikes and then head home for the night. All he talks about is having babies and doing all this family shit now. I didn’t think that would happen for him, or any of us.”

I almost don’t believe what I’m hearing. “Don’t you think that’s a little fucked up?”

“How so?” Tennessee pulls the steaks off the charcoal grill to let the meat rest. “You don’t want a family?”

“No, man. I’m fucked up. Why would I want to drag all that shit onto someone else? Kinda figured you were gonna be the one to tell me that.”

“You’re not fucked up. You’ve just been burying the damn past so long it’s weighing you down. You need to find a way to come to peace with who you are and then figure out what to do with yourself afterwards.”

I exhale hard, watching the smoke from the grill swirl into the afternoon air. “You trying to sell me that settling down makes all the weight go away?”

“Nah, but it gives you another reason to live instead of chasing highs.”

I don’t say anything because I’m not sure what to say, and I’m definitely not ready to admit he has a point.

“You got quiet,” Tennessee laughs. “That mean I’m makin’ sense?”

“Nope,” I lie. “Thought you went to medical school, not the psycho-babble clown tent.”

He laughs under his breath. “I did, but I learned to adapt to this circus.”

“What the fuck ever.” I narrow my eyes playfully. “I’m not crazy. I’m dealing with real life shit. I have no idea how the rest of you don’t feel like we’re all ticking time bombs. Why would I want a family? They’d be in constant danger. Who knows when all the shit we’ve done will catch up with us?”

Tennessee exhales slowly and leans forward. “You ever let yourself think that maybe none of this has to catch up with us?”

I scoff. “That’s a pretty idea, man, but we both know that’s not how things work.”

He tilts his beer bottle back as though he’s thinking over his words carefully. “You’re already walking, man. We left the jobs, and we left the heat. We’re here, starting over. All you gotta do is let it happen.”

“I don’t even know where to start with that comment. I’ve never let anything ‘just happen ’ in my life. It’s not how I’m wired. I know you aren’t either.”

“Didn’t used to be, but I want something slower. I need it. We all do.” A warm breeze blows past as he talks.

There’s bravery in what he’s saying. There has to be because I don’t know how a man that’s seen the things we’ve seen ever lets down his guard again. Lord knows I’m not going to acknowledge it to him, though.

As I stare out into the horizon, my mind is pulled to the girl at the record store again.

I can't put my finger on what it is that's drawing me in.

Of course she's gorgeous. There's no denying that, but there's something more.

Maybe it's the way she talked about her boyfriend, the way she read off his credentials like a resume, like she was convincing herself that the banker was a decent guy.

It's either that or I'm a sick fuck who clings to whatever drama is within reach, and right now, the girl that's off limits is blinking like a beacon.

Tennessee slides a plate toward me with a perfectly medium rare steak. "What's really on your mind, man?"

I pick the warm steak up with my bare hands and take a bite, thinking over how I can tell him what I'm thinking without telling him what I'm thinking. "This person I ran into at the record store was acting weird. I'm wondering if I should circle back."

"The way you've said 'this person' leads me to believe it's a woman."

"So what if it was?"

He smirks. "Just asking. Why do you think she was acting weird?"

"Don't know. She was talking about her boyfriend, and I got a vibe."

He tilts his head back slowly as though he's ready to be judgmental but decides against it. "Yeah? What kind of vibe?"

"Like he's a piece of shit."

“Dude,” he leans in, taking a swig of his beer, “she has a boyfriend. You should stay away.”

“I’m going to. I’m here, aren’t I? I just,” I stare off into the horizon again, watching a pine tree sway back and forth in the wind, “I keep thinking something bad is happening behind the scenes. I can’t put my finger on it.”

“So, you’re going to stalk her and the boyfriend, see what you can find?”

It’s like he’s reading my mind.

“No. What the fuck, dude?”

“Then what is it? You going to convince her to leave him? I’m not sure that’s the type of healing I was talking about.”

I huff out a breath. “It’s not like that.”

“Okay, then what’s it like?”

I don’t have a good answer, just a gut feeling. A lingering itch that won’t go away. “Just feels off,” I finally say, taking another bite of steak.

Tennessee laughs, stretching his hands up over his head. “Dude, if you’re this fucked up after one conversation with her, you’re already in trouble.”

“I’m not fucked up.”

“Sure,” he says, laughter threading through his voice, “whatever you say.”

I roll my eyes, but the irritation slips away before it can take hold. The truth is... that

record store conversation fucked me up, and something tells me I won't stop until I figure out why.

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Nicole

Aaron's car rolls up outside the record shop right on schedule. I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. I should be happy to see him. I am happy to see him, right?

I love him. He loves me. We're building a life together. We're happy.

I force a smile as I step toward the car, my movements automatic, rehearsed. This is the routine. The safe, steady rhythm of my life, yet all afternoon my pulse has been humming with something that has nothing to do with him.

The big biker guy with the rough hands and sharp eyes. The kind of guy I shouldn't be thinking about, but I am.

I slide into the passenger seat, forcing my fingers to settle against the fabric of my jeans, trying to smooth out the restless energy buzzing beneath my skin. Aaron is talking, his voice steady, the same way it always is. I nod, pretending I'm listening, but my mind is slipping elsewhere.

God what's wrong with me? Focus, Nicole!

"How was your day?" I turn toward Aaron as he drives, hands on the wheel at ten and two, his knuckles slightly white from how steady he grips the wheel.

"Quite a productive day. I closed two loans and assisted the accounting team with the month-end financials. Of course, there was some disruption. A farmer barged in,

ranting about his mortgage rates. It's always the same story.

They take out loans they can barely manage, then act surprised when the numbers don't work in their favor. Frankly, if they can't keep up with their payments, that's not my problem. That's just how the system works."

"I'm sure his land is all he has." My tone is sharper than I intend. "I mean, this mountain is built on hardworking people like that farmer. Hell, your bank is funded by those farmers and ranchers, and—"

"We sorted it out." He flips on the windshield wipers to wick away the early evening rain that's begun to fall.

"I always sort things out." The way he says it makes my stomach turn, like it's all a puzzle he's effortlessly piecing together instead of human lives.

This is how he is with every emotion... unaffected.

Completely, undeniably, inexplicably unmoved by any show of feeling.

After years of reckless choices and men who were nothing but heartbreak wrapped in charm, Aaron was the answer to the chaos. He had routines, plans, a future that didn't teeter on the edge of uncertainty. He showed up. He remembered important things, and he felt steady.

I'm not asking for the turmoil back, but it turns out... steadiness is a cage.

I stare at the water beading against the windshield, watching how the wipers erase each droplet in one smooth sweep as Aaron pulls into the diner.

I'm not sure how I forgot that tonight was diner night, but I did.

Every Friday, we sit in the corner booth in the back, stare out onto Main Street, and watch the world pass by.

Aaron orders the bacon cheeseburger and a strawberry milkshake, and I order grilled cheese and fries. For dessert, we do sky high apple pie.

I consider asking him to try the new farm to table place that opened up on Highway Twenty. The owners turned their barn into a really cute café with reclaimed wood and warm lighting. I hear they serve southern dishes family style. I bet Aaron would like the place, but I hesitate to ask.

I don't feel like an argument. The last time we had a talk about routine change, he damn near lost his mind. So, I let the thought filter into the back of my head unspoken, and instead head into the diner for our usual booth in the back.

Who knew predictability could be so exhausting? You'd think it would be easy. Every decision is already made. There's no brain power in reordering the same meals, wearing the same clothes, having the same conversations, living the same life day after day after day.

"I was thinking we could take a ride out to the lake this weekend. There's going to be fireworks on the pier and a bunch of food trucks from the Springs." I twist my straw around in the bubbles of my Coke the waitress delivered without asking. "I think it sounds fun."

He tilts his head to the side and drags in a slow, deep breath.

"I guess, but I was hoping to finish up the game I've been working on.

Plus, you know how much I hate crowds at places like that.

A bunch of assholes will get drinking, start acting stupid, and it'll be a whole thing.

I'd rather you not go either. It's not safe. ”

I press my lips together and watch the ice shift and pop bubbles in my glass as pressure builds in my ribcage. Safe? It's kind of hard to imagine he wants to keep me safe when he backs me into a corner screaming every time we get into an argument.

This isn't about keeping me safe. It's never been about keeping me safe. This is about keeping me under his thumb. It's about control. Because when the world is controlled, Aaron feels secure.

“Why do you keep doing this?”

“Doing what?” he groans, taking a sip of his water.

“The same things, all the time. I tell you I want to see something new, or even just try something new, and you immediately turn it down.” I fold my arms over my chest and lean in trying to keep my voice low.

“You don't just turn it down, you make up all these crazy reasons and get angry. It's the same way with sex.”

“Damn it, Nicole. This isn't a conversation we should be having in public.”

“Really? Should I save it for home so you can scream at me then put me back in my place?”

He rolls his eyes to the side and darts me a stare so dark that I swear he's contemplating my murder. “Knock it off.”

I laugh under my breath. “No, I won’t knock it off. Not anymore. I... I can’t do this!” The words slip from my lips and into the air like a leash I’ve finally untethered from.

“Always with the dramatics.”

I grip the cold cup, trying to ground myself in the moment, but my mind is fraying quickly. “Is it dramatic to want to feel something?” My tone is ragged, and way louder than I intended it to be. I need to get out of here before I make a scene this tiny little town will remember forever.

“Are you saying we’re through,” Aaron manages through clenched teeth, “because you can’t do that, Nicole. We’ve spent two years building a life together. We have a home, a routine, a plan.”

“That’s the problem. You need a routine.

You like the routine. You want to eat at the same place every Friday and play computer games every night.

You want to kiss me on the cheek every day at five p.m. and again at seven thirty.

You like the same boring, predictable sex every Saturday night, but I don’t!

” My voice shakes, and though I’m trying to keep it down, I know I’m causing a scene.

“I’m sorry.” My gaze flicks toward the window, toward the dim glow of Main Street where a couple passes by wrapped in each other’s arms.

Why is it so hard to see other people happy? To see a man look at a woman like he wants her, like he needs her? I know why it’s hard. It’s hard because they have what

I'm craving.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, opening them just in time to see a figure standing near a parked bike. He's shadowed and blurred by the faint drizzle clinging to the glass. It's too dark to make out his face, too distorted by the reflection of diner lights to be sure... but I know.

The pressure in my chest shifts, twisting into something hot and restless. I need to move. I need to get out of here.

Why do I feel guilty? I haven't done anything wrong. The biker and I only talked. I only sold him records and sent him on his way. I only pointed to the best coffee shop in town. I didn't follow him there, and every thought I had about him after our meeting was PG rated, mostly.

I push up from the booth too fast, bumping my knee and rattling the silverware. Aaron reaches for my arm, his reaction landing somewhere between confusion and irritation. "Nicole—"

"I need air," I mutter, pulling away from him as I melt into the clamor of plates and the hum of diners talking amongst themselves.

What am I running from? Why am I freaking out?

The biker isn't here for me. He's just here.

It's a public place. He doesn't even know I'm inside.

Even if he did, he wouldn't care. He didn't seem like the kind of guy that cares about anything.

The door swings open and the cool night air washes over me as the hair on my arms lifts. I know I should leave. I should go to the car or go for a walk. Clearly, I need to get my head on straight, but my feet falter.

I glance up. I let myself look.

Why do I let myself look?

I shouldn't look.

I know I shouldn't look.

Looking shows interest. I'm not interested. Even if Aaron and I aren't a thing anymore, I'm still not interested... except, I am.

I am interested, and now the man is staring at me.

I step further into the night, pulse hammering as a light rain splashes into puddles lit with the neon glow of the diner. The reflections distort reality, stretching the width and length of everything they reflect. Maybe that's what I'm doing—distorting reality.

The biker shifts his stance and watches me closely as though he's waiting to see what I'll do next.

I wish I knew what I was doing next. I'm not thinking this through. It's like something deep inside of me has taken over and my body has gone on autopilot.

"Nicole!" Aaron grabs my arm firmly and yanks me back.

It's not the first time he's grabbed me, but it's the first time he's done it in public.

“Where are you going?” His tone is firm and controlled, though I sense the frustration in the way his fingers wrap tight around my wrist. “Get in the car. We’re going home.”

I try to pull back, but his fingers dig in, sending a wave of heat and anger through my chest. Before I can respond, I notice the biker from the corner of my eye. He looks menacing when I see the tattoos streaking up and down both of his thick arms.

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He strides forward, cutting through the damp evening air, boots scuffing against wet pavement. There's something calming about the way he moves. There's no panic in it, like he's in complete control.

His expression, though... his expression is anything but calm. "Let her go," he barks deep and raspy.

Aaron stiffens, barely glancing toward him before directing his gaze at me. "Nicole, in the car! Now!"

"I said, let her go." This time, the man steps in closer. Not threateningly, just there . The scent of oil, leather, and something unmistakably him cuts through the air, sending my pulse into overdrive.

Aaron's fingers weaken, and in that split second, the man reaches out. Not yanking, not forcing, just... freeing .

What the hell just happened?

My heart rattles against my chest as I stare up at the giant biker, unsure of what to do or say.

Do I thank him for the help, or do I make a scene about how rude it is that he interjected himself into something that wasn't his to fix?

"Can I help you?" Aaron stares up at the man, frustration shaking his usually stable voice.

“No.” I see now the biker has his name on his jacket. How did I miss that earlier, and why is his name Ghost? What kind of name is that?

“Then I think we’re going to head out.” Aaron grips my arm again, dragging me toward the car as rain continues its effort to soak my hair.

For a second, I allow him to drag me. I allow him to dictate how this will go. I’m not sure why. Then all at once, I snap.

“I’m not going back to the house!” I pull my arm away from him, realizing Ghost has followed.

“Let’s do this at home.” Aaron leans in toward me, pushing his glasses back up onto his face. “You need a warm shower and some relaxation. You’ll feel better.”

“No!” The word spits from my lips as though I’ve been holding it back for years and my body is involuntarily reacting. “I don’t want to go back to the house to get warm. I don’t want to relax! I want to live.”

“Is this living?” He narrows his brows and stares toward the giant biker.

I don’t answer. I don’t answer because I don’t know.

I don’t have any intention of going after the biker, I just...

I need some space to figure out who I am.

Besides, I don’t know if the man behind me is out to kill me, imprison me, befriend me, or fuck me.

Maybe that’s the point. Maybe that’s the fun of it all.

That said, there are no words that I could ever conjure that would make Aaron understand any of what I'm feeling.

"It's over," I finally say, heart slamming against my chest.

What am I doing? I have nowhere to go, nowhere to sleep. Every dollar I have goes into the shop.

"What?" Aaron steps forward, his hand on my shoulder. "Get in the car."

"She said it's over," Ghost's voice echoes in from behind, dark and rumbling.

"You're one of those guys, aren't you?" Aaron steps around me toward the giant man who won't leave well enough alone.

"Those guys?"

"Everyone in town is talking about you assholes." Aaron holds his stare heavy on Ghost. "You're one of those hitmen. You're here lying low or hiding out or something."

Hitmen?

Ghost doesn't flinch. He doesn't step back. He doesn't even blink.

Instead, a slow, dangerous smile tugs at the corner of his mouth just enough to unsettle, just enough to send a sharp pulse through my chest.

"Hitmen?" Ghost repeats, voice low, edged with something unreadable. "That's what people are saying?"

Aaron scoffs, pulling me another step toward the car. “You think I don’t hear things? Small towns talk. There’s a group of you, all rolling in on those damn bikes like you own the place. Everyone’s onto your shit. Patterns don’t lie. The five of you have been fucking up since you got here.”

Ghost’s gaze flicks between us, assessing, deciding. “I hear you like your patterns, don’t you?”

Aaron’s grip tightens instinctively as he glances toward me, flecks of anger in his gaze. “You know him? Have you told him about me?”

“Not, really. No . I mean, we met at the record store earlier. I said you liked your routine is all. It’s,” I glance toward Ghost, “this isn’t your business.”

Ghost tilts his head slightly, like he’s amused. “Nope.”

I feel the weight of the moment. The pressure thick in the damp air, curling around my chest like a second skin. How did I let this get so out of control? I’ve known for a while I wasn’t happy. I should’ve left then.

Aaron shifts closer, lowering his voice as he says, “You think she wants this? You think she wants you ? She doesn’t know what the hell she wants. Every day it’s something new.”

Ghost’s gaze drops to mine then, rain catching on the edges of his jacket. “I think she wants out, and you’re not listening.”

Finally! Someone who hears me! Why is the massive, scary hitman the only one who’s hearing me?

My heart slams against my chest as I glance toward Aaron. “I’m sorry. I’m going to

call Sienna. I need to clear my head.”

Aaron doesn't say a word. Instead, he shrugs, shakes his head, gets into the car, and drives off into the night, leaving me standing beside a man who calls himself a Ghost.

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Ghost

Rain pounds the pavement, soaking through my jacket, but it doesn't bother me. What does, is the way Nicole stands there, arms wrapped around herself, looking lost.

I shouldn't have stepped in. I should've let her sort it out and kept my distance. None of this is my business, but the way that guy had his hands on her boiled my fucking blood. I couldn't let it slide.

Now she's staring at me, wide-eyed, still shivering. What the fuck do I do with this? If it were up to me, I'd lift her up, haul her onto my bike, and give her a night she won't forget, but I'm sure I'm reading her wrong.

I grit my teeth. She's waiting for something.

An explanation? Comfort?

She won't get either from me. I have no fucking clue what I'm doing.

"Where you going?" My voice is gruff, deliberately uninviting.

"My friend's house." Her voice is small, barely louder than the rain. "She's over on Birchwood."

I exhale hard, rolling my shoulders, trying to shake off the irritation crawling under my skin.

I should've walked away. I should've kept this clean, but there's something about the way she looks at me, like I'm something worth looking at.

It's been a while since I've felt that way. Hell, I may have never felt this way.

"Fine. Get on," I grumble, as though I'm perturbed by her existence, though my thoughts are the complete opposite.

She hesitates, eyes flicking to the bike like she's not sure. Maybe it was the hitman conversation. Can't blame her for that one. Truth is, if she knew the shit I've done, she'd probably be three counties over by now.

Selfish and desperate to spend more time with her, I scoff and head toward my bike, climbing as the rain pours down heavily. "You coming?"

She climbs on tentatively, as though she's still unsure of her decision, but we both know she knows what she wants. I saw it in her eyes. I felt it in her stare. She wants to see where this night with me will take her, and that makes two of us.

When she's on the bike, I shove the helmet back into her hands and fire up the engine. "Hold on tight."

"Wait." She taps my shoulder. "Why don't we ride over to my shop? We can hole up in there until the rain clears."

"You don't like getting slammed by rain while you ride? Where's the fun in that?"

She lets out a breathy laugh. "Fun isn't exactly what I'd call that."

I smirk, revving the engine. "Then you've been riding wrong."

She doesn't respond, and I'm not sure what I should do. Her friend's house was the plan, but the idea of heading over to her shop sticks. Maybe because it makes sense or maybe because it means a little more time with her, even if I don't know why I want it like I do.

"Shop's closer," I say, like it's more logical. "Less time in the rain."

She hesitates, fingers tightening slightly around my waist. "Okay."

I don't give myself time to think about why I suddenly feel lighter. I just kick the bike into gear and tear out of the lot, the rain slicing across my face as the engine roars. In less than two minutes, we're pulling up next to her record store and she's hurrying up the steps to unlock the door.

She's shivering, her fingers fumbling in the slight light as she works the key into the lock. The rain drips from her hair, sliding down her face, catching in the hollow of her throat.

I should just leave. I should let her go inside, dry off, and disappear into whatever life she's got waiting beyond these doors...

but I don't. I continue on with the delusion rattling in my head.

The one where she and I spend a night together doing all the filthy things I'm sure the banker wouldn't do.

I kill the engine and swing off the bike, the scent of rain and asphalt thick in the air. She gets the door open, pushes it inward, and the warm glow from inside spills onto the wet pavement. Hesitating in the doorway, she looks back at me like she's got something to say but doesn't say it.

I nod toward the inside. “You gonna stand there all night?”

A flash of a smile flickers across her lips. It’s fleeting, barely there. “I could say the same to you.”

I’m not sure why I’m hesitating. Maybe I’m afraid to ruin her. She’s so sweet, so innocent, so perfect. I’d bet she’s never seen a dark day in her life. What business do I have showing her mine?

Unfortunately for her, that doesn’t stop me.

When I’m finally inside, I shut the door behind me and peel off my jacket as Nicole fumbles in the back for something.

“I’ve got some spare clothes back here. I know I do. Not sure I have anything your size, though.”

“I don’t need spare clothes. The rain will quit soon enough, and we’ll be out on the road again.”

There’s quiet for a moment before she returns wearing an oversized flannel with her bare legs on display, taunting me.

Fuck! Now this is just cruel!

“I have this.” She hands me a dry pair of pajama bottoms and a T-shirt. “Everything is new. I’ve been stockpiling for Christmas.”

“And who were these supposed to go to? Tell me I’m wearing the banker’s Christmas gift. That might get me off.” I laugh, already feeling the weight of my terrible sense of humor.

“Oh, wow.” She narrows her gaze in what looks like disgust, but I swear there’s a hidden smile. “That’s just wrong.” She pauses. “These were for donations. I try and give to the shelter every year, so I grab things on sale when I can. You can use the backroom to change.”

Of course she’s so sweet she’s collecting donations year-round. I really should save her from me and leave right now.

“I don’t need the clothes. It’ll stop raining soon. Plus, you ever peel off a pair of wet jeans then try to put them back on?”

She smiles. “You can ride over to Sienna’s in the flannel bottoms. No one will see you. It’s dark outside.”

“I’ve got an image to uphold.”

“You’re in the mountains. The town’s image is flannel. You’ll fit right in. Plus,” she glances down at the puddle I’m making on her floor, “you’re ruining my flooring.”

I’ve always been a sucker for reason, and I am in fact, making a puddle on the floor.

“Okay,” I manage, following the hallway toward the backroom where an office door hangs open.

I step inside, studying the small space for any sign of more information.

I’m not sure why. There’s nothing serious between Nicole and I.

There can’t be. I’ve already decided that.

Unable to suppress my need to know, I scan the area, looking for anything that gives

me more detail about her.

A small desk sits in the corner of the room staring at a hanging calendar with monthly kittens.

She has a few days highlighted in red with little x's marked next to the date.

On her desk is a stack of paperwork that looks like invoices, a romance book, and a few travel guides.

Fuck, this all sucks. You can see the longing for a life she wants, but you can tell she isn't pushing for it.

Because I'm a nosy fuck who needs to know more, I open the first two drawers. There's nothing in the first, but the second is a jackpot.

A fucking dildo. It's not small either. Ten inches.

I'd say good for her, but the thing is still wrapped in the packaging.

I wonder if this is more of an effort to experience something outside of this boring fuck she's been with for years.

I can only figure that's why you'd leave it tucked away in a cabinet at work.

My cock grows stiff at the thought of her using it, though I think we're both fantasizing about that part considering it's never been opened.

I peel off the wet clothes and pull on the loose flannel bottoms and the black T-shirt. The whole thing is a little small, but it'll do for now. I'm sort of thankful for the change in clothes. Turns out I was pretty fucking wet.

“I was starting to think you’d left out the backdoor,” she says, leaning over the front counter with her long dark hair draped over her shoulder.

It’s crazy that a woman like her isn’t being treated like a fucking queen.

More so, that she isn’t being pursued and given everything she needs.

If she was with me, I’d hold on to her tight enough that she felt me there, and we’d have wild sex everywhere and anywhere, all the fucking time.

“Sorry,” I groan. “I was going through your shit.”

Her face turns dark red, and she gasps. “What?”

“Don’t worry, I’m not judging you.” I hold my palms up.

“So this is what hitmen do? They go through your things? I’m not your next hit, am I?”

I laugh under my breath. “No. You’re not my next hit. I don’t even know you. Besides, I’m not currently working. We’re lying low.”

She shuts her notebook and leans against the back counter, crossing her arms over one another. “So, it’s true? You and your biker friends are hitmen?”

“Not anymore. Now we own a cute little bike shop up in the mountains.”

She laughs under her breath. “You say it like you’re not happy about your cute little bike shop in the mountains.”

“I’m not.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t answer questions, baby girl. I ask them.”

Her brows narrow. “I’m not your baby girl.”

“By the looks of the things in your desk, you want to be someone’s baby girl.”

“Oh my God! What are you even saying?”

“I’m saying you’ve got a lot going on back there,” I laugh. “I shouldn’t have gone through your shit, but I’m a little fucked up that way.”

Her eyes roll to the side. “I’m gathering that. What’s the deal?”

“Can I blame it on the military? People do that, right?”

She bites back a smile. “Were you actually in the military?”

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“Yeah, all the guys up at the clubhouse were.” I shake my head.

“We kept order where there was none. Law enforcement, anti-terrorism, security. You name it, we did it. Most of the time, we handled threats before people even knew they were there.” My fingers twitch, phantom muscle memory from years spent gripping a rifle.

I exhale, dragging a hand down my face, debating how much truth I want to give her.

“When the uniform comes off, the world doesn’t stop needing men like me.

People pay for help, and problems still need to be eliminated. ”

I meet her eyes, watching for judgment. Instead, I see curiosity. Maybe she understands more than I thought she would.

“What kind of kills do you do?”

“We kill the kind of men that feed off the world, like roaches. It’s not the kill that gets me, it’s the chase. Now I’ve got a question for you. Why do you have the red x’s on your calendar?”

She rolls her eyes to the side and back again. “You really didn’t have any right to go through my stuff.”

“You’re telling me you’ve never opened anyone’s drawers before?”

She shuffles her feet and glances up at me. “I would never talk about it.”

“So, I’m an asshole for telling you I went through your things?”

She pauses, deciding whether or not this adds up, then finally says, “The marks are days that Aaron and I had sex.”

“You’ve only had sex once this month? Damn... I thought that’s what relationships were for.”

She raises her brows as though I’ve gotten that one wrong.

“I’m pretty sure they’re for more than sex, but yeah, it’s actually worse than that.

There’s only one ‘x’ on that calendar in the last three months, and the sex we did have was really underwhelming.

We had countless discussions about it, but they always ended in arguments. ”

My eyes widen. “Forgive me, but I’d gather it’d be a fucking travesty to have a woman like you next to me every night and not...” I blow out a breath, catching myself before I say something stupid. “I gather that’s why you’ve got the romance books and the gummy worm?”

“Gummy worm?”

“Sorry,” I clear my throat, “the rubber cock.”

“Oh my God!” Her cheeks blaze and she spins away. “You’re insane.”

“A little, yeah. Still though, why haven’t you taken it out of the package?”

“I’m not talking about this with a complete stranger!”

“You clearly want an adventure. This is adventurous, right?”

“Change the subject!”

I don’t want to change the subject. I like her squirming and uncomfortable. I like the rosy cheeks and the way her nipples have hardened beneath the thin flannel. She’s so damn cute, but I pretend to be a gentleman. “Okay, what’s in the notebook?”

She glances down at the small, pink, spiral-ringed book in her hands.

“My friend Sienna told me the shop could use a facelift. So, I’m brainstorming how I can make things more personal.

She thinks I need to make people feel like they need a record every week.

I think I’d do that by giving them an experience. ”

“Interesting.” I tilt my head back, trying to shift from thoughts of her on that thick dildo to thoughts of her redecorating the shop. It’s a surprisingly difficult transition. “That’s smart. What’s the connection with records? How’d you start all this?”

“Really?” She narrows her gaze. “You want to know the answer to this boring question.”

“Is it a boring question?”

“For a guy like you? Yeah.”

“What does that mean, a guy like me?”

“It means... a guy like you. A sharp-shooting, snooping, sex-talking weirdo. A guy like that doesn’t want to hear about my emotional connection to records.”

“I’m a complicated man, baby girl. Tell me the story.”

She stares toward me for a long moment, her lips parting slightly like she’s about to speak, but she doesn’t, not right away.

She exhales like she’s settling into her words.

“My grandma left me her collection when she passed. There were over four hundred records. I used to spend days at her house after school baking and listening with her. She loved the album covers, and she’d display them like art on her living room wall.”

“Grandma had style.”

“Sure did! I kept every record she left me and started collecting my own as a way to keep her memory alive. Soon I had so many records I didn’t know what to do with them.

I made a decent living off resale on eBay, then decided I’d try my chances in a brick and mortar. Turns out... should’ve stuck with eBay.”

“So you’re already taking risks.”

“How so?”

“You bought this store, and that’s huge. I think you could really make something out of people coming here after work once or twice a week. Keep telling me about the days after school with your grandma.”

“There’s not much more to tell. She’d bake banana bread, and I’d spin in circles. Then we’d eat said banana bread and sing along to the records.”

“She have a crocheted blanket on the back of her couch?”

She nods and smiles. “How’d you know?”

“All the good ones do.” I pause for a moment, looking over her store.

It’s a completely different world than mine, but the concept is similar.

She’s building a brand that people can rely on.

I clear my throat before saying, “What if you rebranded to give off an ‘after school at Grandma’s’ type of vibe?”

You could get a vintage couch, toss the blanket over the back, play records, and serve baked goods.

You’d have half the town in here socializing and buying anything they could get their hands on. ”

She stares toward me with a slow smile as though she likes the idea. “I don’t hate it. I could bring in some houseplants and organize the records on the wall like Grandma did. The part that sucks, though, is that people love browsing, but no one wants to buy.”

“Maybe you feature a record every week. People buy things that are showcased. Maybe not everyone, but probably more than enough. They’ll want to support a place that feels like family.

Trust me on this one. The guys and I did the same thing with our shop out in Texas, except we held a party welcoming bikers.

It had music and drinks, all the bullshit.

All the sudden, we had more repairs than we could have dreamed of.

We thought about doing the same up here, but we haven't had the best reception.

"I let out a heavy breath. "There you go. Solved all your problems... except the one about the gummy worm still being locked away."

Her eyes roll to the side as she jots down the ideas we've just conjured in her notebook. "I can't figure why you don't have a girlfriend. You seem very romantic."

"Am I supposed to be romantic right now?"

A blush of pink covers her cheeks as she darts her gaze away. "No."

"Was your ex romantic when you met him?"

"Very much. He was the sweetest guy ever. Roses, little notes, presents galore."

"And look how that turned out."

Her mouth drops open as though she wasn't expecting my response. I get that a lot. "You're saying I shouldn't look for romance?"

"Don't know what I'm saying." I step toward her slow and steady, watching her carefully.

She shifts her weight as though she's deciding whether to stay or walk away as her fingers toy with the hem of the flannel.

The flicker in her gaze isn't fear, but it's something close.

Wariness maybe. She bites the inside of her cheek almost imperceptibly, as though she's trying not to make any sudden moves.

"What is it that you really want?" I continue.

"The good thing about this conversation is that we're only here until the rain stops.

We don't have to hold back. You can tell me everything you've never told anyone, and I'll be gone before you have to worry how embarrassing it is. "

She exhales, eyes darting to the window like she's weighing her words. "I want adventure. Something different. Something that wakes me up, ya know? I feel like I've been sleeping, watching life from the outside, not really experiencing any of it."

I grin. "Hence the gummy worm."

She grins back. "Hence the gummy worm. I dream about a life where I can travel and feel like I'm a prize to someone. I just don't know how to make any of those things happen."

"I think you just go online and pick a place you want to see. That one is easy. Money and time equals travel. And men, we're everywhere. Keep baiting your line and you'll catch what you're looking for. From what I've seen, you just need to learn which ones to throw back."

"Yeah, well... if it were that easy, I'd have done it."

“So it wasn’t the banker holding you back?”

“I only broke up with him two hours ago!”

“Then time is wasting. Which of these adventures are you checking off first? Where have you always wanted to go?”

“I don’t have the money to go anywhere,” she laughs. “Isn’t that funny? I think the wildest thing I’ve done in years was get on the back of your bike, followed closely by this conversation. You’re kind of unhinged.”

“I guess I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“I’m sure you will. You seem like that kind of guy.” She pauses, and her fingers trace the edge of the counter absentmindedly. “You ever have a moment where you did something completely reckless? Something that felt like a bad idea, but you did it anyway?”

I could list half a dozen right now, but none she’d want to hear. Combat stories, close calls, the kind of shit that strains your mind long after it’s over.

She pauses for a long moment as though she’s checking herself, then says, “What’s the craziest sex you’ve ever had?”

Damn, this is going to be disappointing! Why couldn’t she have asked me about the military or kills? I have a million crazy stories for those categories. “Not sure I’m going to be much entertainment there. It’s been years since I’ve been with anyone, and it was an in and out kind of thing.”

“Seriously? I’d have pegged you for a player. The kind that shows up with whips and chains.”

She's bringing up sex for a reason, right?

"What's the fantasy in your head? You, the novel, and the gummy worm? The three of you light a candle and go slow, or is it more animalistic than that?" I force back a grin of amusement.

She glares toward me and laughs as she grabs two Cokes from the fridge.

"I like the idea of a guy being all sweet and doting, what girl doesn't, but...

there's this fantasy where a man completely takes me over that really gets me going.

I don't care about where we are, I just want passion, ya know?

I can't remember the last time I've felt desired or had something raw and wild.

"She tilts her head to the side and sweeps her hair back. "Oh wait, it was never."

I shouldn't take this as an invitation. It's not an invitation, though my cock hardens against the side of my leg. I shouldn't be here. She's young, really fucking young, and I'm not. This is sick. It's really fucking sick.

"What about that turns you on?" I shouldn't be asking.

She shrugs and hands a Coke toward me, our fingertips brushing as she lets go of the can. "Giving up control, setting a scene, and letting him make all the decisions. I don't know what the fantasy is called but..."

"And why the dildo?"

"Oh," her cheeks blaze pink again, "that just looked fun. Aaron wasn't very well..."

he wasn't working with anything sizeable, and I always wondered what a big one would feel like."

Jesus Christ. If this isn't a fucking trap, I don't know what is.

I exhale, my jaw tight, the words slipping from my lips before I can catch them as I say, "What if we played the scene out right here and now?"

Her eyes narrow. "Like we have sex? No way! I don't even know you."

"We don't have to have sex. I'll be your dominant and I'll use that lightning rod however you want."

My cock throbs as she thinks over my words.

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"One hundred percent. Second you say yes, I'll make sure you get the experience you're looking for. If you want me to stop, tell me, and we're done."

Her brows narrow and I watch a hard swallow slide down her throat. "And this doesn't have to mean anything? This is just an adventure?"

"Just an adventure," I lie, knowing full well whatever happens here tonight I'll crave more of. "Nothing we do leaves this room."

Rain drums a steady rhythm that fills the silence between us. She stares, uncertainty flickering in her expression, her fingers twisting into her soft hair as though she's weighing the decision.

Her breath hitches. "Umm... I'll be right back."

She turns, disappearing into the back room, and my pulse pounds with the same rush it does when a rifle's strapped to my shoulder, tracking a target, waiting for the right moment .

But this isn't war. This isn't a mission . And for the first time in a long time, I wonder if I'm walking into something I won't make it out of unscathed.

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Nicole

“I think I’m losing my mind.” I stand in the back room whispering into my phone at Sienna, “Tell me I shouldn’t do this.”

“No way! This is exactly what you need. A fun night with a stranger. You said half a million times how badly you wanted a big, rough, bad boy to play around with. Here he is... your gift from the heavens.”

“I don’t think the heavens are sending gifts like this. Besides, it’s weird. He’s a real bad boy, not a fake one. He used to be a hitman or is a hitman. I don’t know which. Either way, he’s killed people!”

“Nicole,” Sienna says my name slowly as though she’s trying to recenter me, “is he going to kill you?”

I think over her question carefully. He’s weird and chaotic but I don’t get a killer vibe. “No, but the women Jeffery Dahmer killed didn’t think he was going to kill them either.”

“True... so maybe you should leave,” she pauses, “or you give into that wild side of you that needs adventure and live your life. You said you broke up with Aaron, so you’re free. Act like it.”

“We broke up two hours ago!”

“Then you’ve already wasted an hour. Besides, you’ve been disconnected from

Aaron for months! I'll be right here to rescue you if the biker turns into a monster."

The weird thing is, I don't see Ghost as a monster.

Sure, he's unhinged, and he's done some violent things, but I don't think he'd hurt me.

In fact, no one has ever protected me like he did earlier, and I've never felt more seen.

Clearly, there's another side to him. A side that's made up of more than all the terrible things he's ever done.

That, or I'm rationalizing him so my body and brain can do the things it's been dying to do.

I drag in a deep breath and let it out slowly. I'm not sure what I'm doing yet, but clearly, Sienna is team one-night stand. "Okay, I'll be over as soon as the weather clears."

"Or you'll take your time and have the night you'll think back on five years from now when you're married with three kids, wondering how your life got so boring again."

I shake my head and smile. "Love you."

"Love you, too!"

Maybe she's right. One night with a big, rough, hot, bad boy won't kill me, right?

The irony in that statement is hilarious.

Lingering for a moment, I stare at the calendar of kittens hanging above my desk, trying not to focus on the single 'x' from nearly thirty days ago. Instead, I stare at the cutest calico with bright blue eyes and a fuzzy white tail. I feel like she's trying to tell me what a bad idea all this is.

Sorry, kitty. I need a break from the chains.

I let out a breath and pause, fighting the responsible part of me away. I don't want to be safe and sound anymore. I want to be wild and free.

Stepping forward, I push past the uncertainty and grab the dildo out of the bottom drawer, carrying it into the front where Ghost sits in the chair in the center of the room.

He's put on a record, something instrumental, and there are a few blankets from the storage closet scattered out in front of him.

The flannel pajamas look even better without his shirt on.

Damn, the man is fit. Firm shoulders, huge biceps, and freaking abs! Why is he interested in me? The only sit-ups I do are when I'm sitting up out of bed, and most mornings my breakfast comes with a side of chocolate chip cookies. Sometimes, that's the whole breakfast.

Ghost glares at me with the look of a man who's clearly turned up. His eyes are hooded and his hand rubs at the bulge growing down the side of his flannel covered leg.

I'm such a novice. I have no idea what to do or where to be.

With Aaron sex was, get this, predictable.

He asked me if I wanted to have sex and we went into the bedroom, kissed, and had sex.

Sure, there was oral, and we'd rotate the same few positions, but there was no pageantry.

He certainly never sat in a chair, staring at me the way Ghost is staring at me.

I'm pretty sure the stare alone is worth this possible mistake. It's sharp and deliberate like he's mapping every inch of me, like he's committing this moment to memory in a way that feels possessive and real.

I can't start thinking this is real.

He strokes his hand through his salt and pepper beard. "Take off your clothes."

My brows narrow. "What?"

"You said I'm in charge, right? Take off your clothes."

Oh God, what have I gotten myself into? "Yeah, you're in charge, but I thought you were just going to be a guide, not so demanding."

He leans forward in the chair, a piece of his soaking black hair dropping forward. "I'm not sure we went over the rules, baby girl."

"Rules?" My thighs squeeze together at the mere thought of the way he's looking at me. It's something between a lion chasing a gazelle and a gorilla staking his territory.

"Rules. If you want this, you're going to have to ask me nicely when you want something. Use your manners and remember your polite words. Can you do that?"

I want to laugh, come, and die all at once. For not ever doing this before, he's presenting himself pretty well.

I'm sure he's done this a million times, and probably told the story about how he hasn't a million more. "And what happens if I don't listen?"

"Well, then you get punished."

"Punished?" A hard lump rolls down my throat. "What kind of punishment?"

"A few good old-fashioned spankings will work just fine, but I'm thinking you'd like that too much, so we're going with denial."

"Denial?"

He stands from the chair and steps toward me, his body heavy over mine, carrying quiet authority. His presence feels like gravity itself, impossible to ignore or step away from. "Strip down for me, or I'll take you to the edge and I won't let you finish."

My clit throbs as the heat from his rough breath touches my collarbone.

He takes a step back, the wood creaking under his weight before he leans against the counter in the hazy light of the room.

Fingers shaking, I unbutton the flannel slowly and let the fabric fall to the ground. The cool air prickles against my skin as my pulse quickens.

Who is this girl?

Ghost watches carefully, the dim light cutting sharp angles across his face. "Good

girl. You should see how good you look right now.”

“Please!” I exhale with embarrassment over the shape of my body. “I’m—”

“Don’t do that. You’re beautiful.” He steps toward me and circles me like prey, running his big, calloused hand down over my frame. “Focus on how this feels.”

I’m not sure my heart could beat any faster. I’ve never been touched like this, never been admired like this, never been so focused on. It’s both insanely uncomfortable and pleasurable.

“You’re nervous.” His hand lands on my chest before climbing up to my throat.

“You don’t have to be. I’ll take care of you.

” The pad of his thumb brushes against the vein in my neck, and he leans in slowly, kissing my collarbone, then my neck and my ears, as a low growl leaves his throat. “Are you open to anything?”

I’m not sure what anything means, but this is supposed to be an adventure, so I nod, despite the air leaving my lungs as I do it.

“Good. Then sit in that chair and spread your legs for me. I need a taste.”

Oh, damn!

I sit back in the chair and stare up at him, spreading my legs as though I’ve done this a million times, but I sure as hell haven’t—not like this.

“Good girl. But when I ask you to do something, I need you to answer me with, ‘yes, sir.’ Understand?”

I swallow hard as my clit throbs against the lips of my pussy. “Yes, sir.”

Oh my God, why is this so hot?

He kneels down and kisses my thighs, brushing his beard against my skin, tickling my outer lips.

It’s soft and gentle at first, but after he’s breathed me in, he’s more aggressive, burying his face against me as he licks and sucks with a growl so deep that my hands instinctively dig into his hair and my hips grind up against his face.

Every groan and thrust of his tongue sends me closer and closer to an ecstasy I’ve never felt. He’s measured and precise, yet hungry and wild. I’ve never felt anything like it.

“Don’t stop!” I moan out my request, but he finishes and stands, licking his lips with a growl.

“No, you don’t make demands. I do. I tell you when to come, what to do, and what to taste.” His voice is deep and raspy, as though he’s been gargling rocks.

I fix my gaze up toward him, completely at his mercy, desperate for his permission to release, excited for his commands.

“You taste like you’re ready.”

“Ready for what?” I squeeze my legs together instinctively as he nods toward the dildo.

“That big cock.”

I've changed my mind. I don't want that thing anymore. I want him. I want to feel whatever he's working with. I want him in my mouth, in my ass, on my face, in my pussy. There isn't a place I don't want it.

I can feel the redness in my face. I've never been good at this kind of thing. "Actually, I... I want you instead."

"You want me?" He smiles coyly as he walks toward the counter. "If you want my cock, you're going to have to prove you can take that one first."

The dildo I bought is ten inches. Ghost is a big guy, and a big man has a big cock, but there's no way he's bigger than ten inches, right?

"Crawl to me." He bends his fingers in a come-hither motion where he holds the massive, fake cock I've been too shy to use for nearly a year now.

"Crawl? What? No. I'm not gonna crawl to you."

"That's one punishment." His gaze is sharp with intent. "Wanna go for two?" He lowers his head, letting the darkness fill his face before his voice deepens as he says, "Crawl to me. I want to see that pretty ass in the air."

What the hell is happening and why do I want to crawl to him? I need to stop fighting this. I wanted him to take me over, and he's doing it... effortlessly.

"Yes, sir," I manage, climbing down onto my hands and knees to crawl toward him, one knee in front of the other until I'm staring even further up at the biggest man I've ever seen.

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“Good fucking girl.” He scrubs his hand against his hard cock as he watches me move. “Tell me again how badly you want my cock.”

“I want it so bad,” I say, my hands at his feet. “Let me taste you. I want to feel you in my mouth.”

He groans. “I could let you do that. Can you take both of us at the same time, baby girl?”

“What?”

“Can you sit on that rod while you suck me off?”

I swallow hard and look up at him, excited as hell to feel every inch of him in my throat while taking that cock. Partly because it turns me on and partly because I feel it’s turning him on too. “Yes, sir.”

“Good fucking girl.” He takes the dildo off the counter and hands it toward me. “Put it in your mouth. Get it nice and wet.” He holds the rubber cock to my lips as he unbuckles his jeans and lets them fall to the floor.

My lips are on the tip of the rubber imposter, but I can’t keep my eyes off the massive dick that falls from his jeans. He’s long and thick, and I swear to God it’s the biggest cock I’ve ever seen in my life—porn included.

“Come on, take that cock in your throat. Get it nice and wet.” He pushes the dildo through my lips until I’m sucking on the rubbery length with a moan. “Good girl.

Work that cock, just like that. I'm so proud of you. Take it deep." He watches intently with rumbling enthusiasm as I work.

When he's had his fill of watching, he pulls the dildo out of my mouth. "Spread those thick thighs for me. I'm gonna slide this in. I want you bouncing while you suck my cock. Tell me you understand."

"I understand," I pant, leaning back to spread my legs.

His words alone set me on fire.

Bending down, he places the head of the dick at my entrance. "Look at the pretty red pussy. You're so excited for me." He slides the cock in slowly, watching every inch. "Fuck, you're tight. You should see the way your little pussy devours this thing."

Fuck my life ! It's huge. I feel myself stretch and widen around the thick shaft of the dildo. Turns out, I didn't even know what a cock felt like until now. I can't imagine how Ghost would feel. He's by far bigger than this.

"We don't have a condom, baby girl. You okay with that?"

I've always been a responsible person. Every day of my life I do the right thing. Today, I don't want to. Today, I'm irresponsible and reckless. I'm going with the flow and letting life happen. "That's okay," I pant. "Don't stop."

"Okay, on your knees, straddle that cock, and bounce while you take me into that pretty throat."

Dear Lord, I know I'm making bad decisions, but they feel so fucking good!

Being face to face with his goliath dick is significantly different than looking at it

from a distance.

I can't get my fist around it, and it hurts to stretch my mouth wide enough, so I start with my tongue, licking up the shaft and over the top before stretching my mouth and taking him in as deep as I can, which isn't very far before I'm gagging, and my jaw is sore.

I don't let that stop me, though. I work him in deeper, and eventually my mouth stretches to fit him more comfortably.

Holy hell, life has never felt so good. Who knew being filled up like this would be so satisfying? I feel complete, stretched, and full, like every inch of me is being used.

I love it!

"Tell me you like the way all these cocks fill you up, baby girl."

I pull off his cock, still stroking as I bounce. "I love it so fucking much."

"That's 'cause you're my greedy girl, aren't you? I bet you're so fucking wet for me."

Damn it! Everything he says sounds so good! And why do I love that he called me his? This isn't permanent. This is one night. One night in the rain. That's all.

His words make me work harder, and soon his fists are dug into my hair and he's guiding my mouth back and forth onto his cock over and over again.

"You've got me so hard, baby. Keep going."

I bounce faster, sucking his dick at the same speed as I'm bouncing. I'm so close to

coming, but I slow down and hold back. I don't want to come all over this dildo and miss out on the feeling of sliding onto Ghost's big, warm dick.

I have to know what his massive body feels like slamming up against me. I have to feel the pressure of his body stretching mine open. I have to hear the sounds he'd make as he slides inside of me.

I'm contemplating this scenario when a heavy bang hits my front door, sending a shriek of anxiety through me at who the hell might be standing outside.

Anyone in town could've wandered by and got concerned that a motorcycle is parked outside my shop this late at night.

The townspeople of Rugged Mountain are thoughtful like that.

I pull off Ghost's cock in a panic and turn back to see Aaron standing outside, banging on the window.

Oh my God! Oh, my fucking God.

What the hell is he doing here?

Ghost stares down at me, breath measured, gaze wild, his hand under my chin redirecting my focus back to him. "You're coming for me, baby girl. Don't stop. That's an order."

"What?" My eyes narrow and my pulse kicks up a notch. "Aaron can see us." The words tumble out sharp with alarm.

I should stop. I should rethink this... but I don't.

Amusement darkens the edges of Ghost's expression, and his posture shifts. He's still relaxed, yet undeniably commanding. That slick smile he's so good at shows up again. "You're not with him. You're with me... so don't stop."

Maybe I should be repulsed, but I'm not.

The thought of being seen, of being watched, sends a jolt through me, an excitement I hadn't expected, a temptation I don't know how to name.

My pussy swells and I swear I bounce faster.

I swear I suck his cock harder. I swear we both get off on knowing he's watching.

We both get off to the reckless electricity of it all.

Something is wrong with me. I'm a maniac. A very horny, very terrible person. I convince myself that maybe Ghost is right. Aaron doesn't have a right to wreck another one of my nights. I have every right in the world to keep going.

I bounce faster on the dildo, and suck harder on Ghost's cock as he moans louder.

The rhythm is relentless, heat curling in my stomach. Everything is sharp, raw, and unbearable in the best possible way, and the banging on the door turns distant as though it's all part of the storm raging outside.

"Good girl," Ghost growls, fingers digging into my skin, voice thick with control. "Let him watch you get what he never had the balls to give you."

Oh, my fucking God, I'm going to come, and it's going to wreck me.

"Let him see how you should've been treated."

My thighs ache, the pleasure winding impossibly tight. I'm so close.

A splintering. A crack. A crash. Shattered glass skidding across the floor. Everything stops, as my pulse slams against my ribs.

"The hell is this?" Aaron's voice roars, cutting through the haze like a gunshot.

The air shifts, and a cold awareness floods through my veins as the gravity of the moment slams into me hard, dragging me out of whatever reckless thrill had been keeping me afloat.

This is real, this is happening, and the adventure I've been chasing comes to a crashing halt.

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Ghost

Apparently, I haven't been clear enough about who the fuck I am, because this stupid fucker comes at me with a baseball bat like I'm a sane man.

I'm not.

I crave violence. I crave it like he craves routine, and I don't like the way he grabbed my girl. I don't like the way he just broke her fucking door. I don't like the way he ruined our night.

Cock swinging, I take the bat from his tiny little hands and smash it against his shoulder. It's a light swing and he'll walk away from it. "You come at me again, I'll knock your fucking head off your shoulders."

I glance back at Nicole who's tugging the T-shirt I left on the counter down over her pretty curved frame. I hate that tonight went like this. She deserves more. "Go to the back room, baby, and get my pistol. I left it on your desk."

"Your pistol? You have a gun? You don't need a gun. He's just an asshole. He's leaving and he'll be back tomorrow with the money for this very expensive door. Right, Aaron?" She steps toward the banker slowly. "What the hell is your problem?"

"You wanted something outside of routine. Here it is!" The scrawny guy with buzzed hair and a suit turns red.

"Plus, I came to check on you because I left you in the rain. I didn't think you'd be on

the town hitman the second I drove away, or has this been going on?

You two seemed to know each other pretty well earlier. ”

She tilts her head to the side and crosses her arms over her chest. “We weren’t a thing while we were together. Nothing else is any of your business.”

The banker glances toward me, running his gaze down over my frame and locking at my cock. It’s fair. My cock is sizeable and deserves recognition. “You could put some pants on.”

“Don’t think I need to. You’re leaving, and I’m not finished just yet.”

He lets out a breath and sizes me up again before glancing toward Nicole. It’s still raining outside and there’s a cool breeze whipping in with it. I’ve never had the urge to pull a woman close for the sake of keeping her warm before, but here it is, barreling at me like an uncontrollable urge.

I reach out for her, wrapping her trembling frame against the heat of my naked body.

“She’s cold, and we’re done with this conversation. You had your chance with her. Two years, and what did you do with it?”

I’d slam the door in his face, but there isn’t one, so I lift the bat onto my shoulder instead. “Get the fuck out and get us that money by morning, with interest, or you’ll have problems.”

He tilts his head to the side and smiles coyly as though he’s got the upper hand. “I’ll bring the money for the door, but I know things about you, hitman, and I’ll make sure everyone in town knows them too. Nicole should know who’s she’s messing with.”

I laugh him off. “Something tells me you don’t know shit about fuck, little boy. And if you think you do, you should know you’re fucking with five grown men who hunt people for a living. Stay the fuck away or you’ll see what happens when you play games with the wrong people.”

The silence stretches unbelievably long. This dude is such a fucking asshole. His jaw tightens, and his fingers twitch. They’re small tells, but they’re enough to let me know he’s weighing his options, deciding how much this moment is truly worth.

He hesitates, just for a second, but I catch the moment. The flicker of doubt racing through his head. The realization that he never cared about Nicole enough to risk his own life or routine for any of it. And just like that, I know he won’t be a problem anymore.

The tension lingers as he steps back into the night. “Whatever! Good luck with this fucking bitch.”

I should murder him for that statement alone. The urge manifests fast and instinctively. My fists tighten, but I let him leave.

Not because he doesn’t deserve it, or because it wouldn’t be easy, but because Nicole is watching. If I do what I’ve done so many times before, I know exactly what she’ll see, and I refuse to look like a monster in her eyes.

“Oh my God.” Nicole grabs the flannel bottoms off the floor and hands them toward me. “You really like showing that thing off, don’t you?”

I grin and tug them on slowly. “I mean, if the opportunity presents itself.”

I’m not sure where to go from here. I’m terrible with emotions and relationship shit, but I want to get better at it for her. That said, I have no right dragging her into my

world of depravity. She's young. She's got her whole life ahead of her.

"I'm gonna text my buddies. They'll come fix the door tonight."

"No, it's okay. I mean, where would we even get a new door?"

"It's just the glass that needs replacing. We've got a bunch of it up at the shop. Tennessee will cut a piece for me, and we'll get this sealed back up. You'll have every bear and raccoon for miles in here if you don't."

I see hesitation in her eyes, but we both know what she needs, and I plan on taking care of it.

She stares up at me, pinches her lips together, and narrows her gaze. "What exactly are we doing here?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, we were supposed to be a one-night thing. An adventure. You don't need to fix my door or my shop."

"I want to. I also want to finish what we started. You still deserve your adventure." I'm trying to speak it into existence, though I'm getting the sense that the vibe has changed.

"So, you're the guy who helps me with home repairs and services my engine?" She exhales as though she's been holding everything in. "I can't make any promises right now, Ghost."

"Okay, I'm not asking for one." My jaw tenses with the weight of whatever's happening between us. I fully understand the concept of a one-night adventure, it's

what we agreed on, but if that's all this was, we're standing too close, and the words are hanging with far too much fucking weight.

She glances at the broken door then back at me as something enters her gaze that pulls my chest tight. I sit back on the chair and pull her onto my lap, settling my hands on her hips, holding her... like I have no right to do.

"I'm an idiot. I mean, Aaron is a dick but—"

"No, don't do that. Don't justify him. He left you in the pouring rain after years of acting like an idiot. You're not to blame here."

"I should've seen that we weren't meant to be a long time ago. He doesn't want kids. He doesn't want anything."

"You want kids?"

She nods slowly. "Yeah, a houseful. I have this fantasy where I'm mother of the century and my kids all know it."

I laugh under my breath. "That is a fantasy. I don't think kids ever realize the sacrifices their moms make for them. My mom was great, worked herself ragged keeping life together for us, but she passed away when I was young. I don't think she got half the things she wanted. She deserved better."

"I'm sorry. That must've been hard. Sounds like she made an impact on you, though." She scratches lightly at the back of my head as we talk. "You want kids of your own someday?"

I should say no. I should steer the conversation elsewhere, but I don't.

“I wager I’m too damn old now. But truthfully, I’ve never thought much past survival.”

“Maybe you should.” Her expression doesn’t change, like she already knew the answer before I said it. Then all at once, she presses her forehead against my shoulder, exhaling deeply, her weight settling in like she’s finally letting herself relax, finally letting herself be held.

I shouldn’t be thinking about how she fits against me, how she sounds, how badly I want to protect her from everyone and everything.

I can’t overcomplicate the night.

Her fingertip grazes over the scar on my neck. “How did you get this? One of your grand adventures?”

“My father used to be in the business. He was one of the best.” The words come out steadily, but there’s weight behind them I don’t usually let surface.

“He knew how to move, and he was ruthless. At a very young age, he taught me how to see a threat before it becomes a problem. Then one day, he became the problem.” I tap my thumb absentmindedly against the back of her hand.

“He set me up, gave me a mark, told me the job would be easy.” I huff out a laugh. “He lied.”

She exhales, eyes flickering to mine. “Why would he do that?”

“Because he wanted to teach me a lesson. He wanted to prove to me I wasn’t smart enough, wasn’t fast enough, wasn’t as good as him.”

“So what happened? How’d you get the scar?”

“The mark had protection I wasn’t expecting. He slicked a knife quick across my neck before I could take him out. It was a close call, an eighth of an inch away from my artery.”

She draws her finger across the scar as though she’s trying to understand me. “It looks like it hurt in more ways than one. I’m sorry your dad was so... awful.”

The room is still, except for the cool air slipping in from the broken door.

I inhale slowly, breathing in the coconut scent in her hair.

“I mean, it could have been worse. He could have let me play video games. Seriously though, that scar reminds me that trust should never be given blindly and that I’m not as invincible as I’d like to be.” I let out a heavy breath.

“And yet you keep going.” Her eyes lift to mine, uncertain of what this all means.

My voice is rougher than I’d like as I say, “Some things you don’t walk away from.”

Her fingers linger a second longer then fall away as though she knows how dangerous this moment is, but neither of us move.

Neither of us take the out we both know we should.

Instead, the space between us crackles with something dangerous, something inevitable, something that scares the living hell out of me.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:55 am

Nicole

“What did he say when he was dropping you off?” Sienna stares at me with wide eyes as though this is the most entertainment she’s had in a while.

I know the feeling.

“Nothing.”

“I watched him walk you to the door. His lips moved, so he said something. What did he say?”

I shake my head, still trying to make sense of the night. “He said he...”

“What? What did he say?” Sienna takes a quick sip of her tea. “You’re killing me!”

“He said he had an interesting night.”

Her eyes widen to the size of saucers. “Okay! Interesting... like interesting good?”

“Who knows? This guy is weird as fuck, and he’s a hitman. Did I tell you that yet?”

“I get that it’s not ideal.” She takes a sip of her tea and widens her expression. “However, he is very hot. Hot people are weird sometimes. Probably because they have all that hotness. And... he was a hitman. He’s not a hitman anymore. Plus, he was doing it for good reasons so... it makes sense.”

I laugh. “Yeah, complete sense. I should totally plan a whole life with him.” I’m laughing but I’ve been planning a life with him in my head since I got up off his lap earlier.

What’s wrong with me? It’s so unrealistic, yet I see it.

A cabin in the woods. His motorcycle in the driveway. Me riding him every single night.

I need help!

“I bet he’d be a good partner. He’d be really protective, and he’d definitely teach your kids some useful skills.”

“Right!” I laugh. “On that note, I think I’m going to bed. It’s been a long ass day.”

“What’s going on with the shop?” she presses, ignoring my bid for a cozy, warm bed.

“He insisted on me getting some rest while he and his friends fix the door. I’m going to pay them as soon as Aaron pays me back.”

Sienna stands from the leather chair that’s snuggled up next to the unlit fireplace.

“You’re insane. If I were you, I’d have shoved that boy in the back room and rode him ‘til the sun came up. You wanted to take chances, well here they are, waving themselves in front of your face, like a huge, thick cock should. Take them!”

“We’re talking an awful lot about me, but aren’t you looking for a big, bad boy to take to this wedding in a few weeks? There’s at least one extra at my shop right now. Maybe you should go say hi. I’m sure one of them is crazy enough to put up with a night with your family.”

“Maybe I should. If I go, will you give Ghost another chance?”

I swallow hard, thinking about all the filthy ways he talked to me tonight. I’d love to twist and turn them until they sound pretty and romantic in my head, but that’s not what tonight was. Tonight was about adventure.

One night in the rain. That’s it, no matter how good it felt laying against his chest.

“I’m going to bed now,” I say leaning into my friend for a hug.

She squeezes me tight. “Seriously, are you okay? I imagine tonight was a mind fuck.”

I drag in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I had mentally left Aaron so long ago. Tonight felt more freeing than anything.”

“And what about Ghost?”

“I don’t want to like him.”

“But you do?”

I pinch my lips together and nod. “I do. He’s mysterious, brutally straightforward, and comes off like this super tough guy, but the sex was so passionate.

I really felt wanted. Not only that, but he gave me all this insight about my shop, protected me multiple times when Aaron was acting stupid, and he pulled me onto his lap and we talked about life for like an hour straight.

It felt natural,” I sigh, “but he’s still a criminal. ”

“I’m sure he’s complex, like everyone else. Sounds like you two need another

conversation.”

I push my hand back through my hair and glance down at her phone on the table in front of me. There’s a notification about that local girl everyone thought was missing.

“Hey, you ever hear anything else about that girl Maci?”

Sienna narrows her gaze. “Yeah, I was scrolling through the Rugged Mountain page on Facebook, and I saw she was posting all these cryptic messages recently. She’s working some story, and it’s been taking her all over the mountain.”

“Last I heard it had something to do with bikers. Maybe she knows something I don’t about Ghost.”

“I could call her if you want, but she hasn’t answered my texts in weeks.”

“No, that’s okay. I just... I don’t know. I think I’m trying to find a loophole.”

“How so?” Sienna lifts the cup of tea to her lips and holds it there as though she’s about to take a sip.

“Ghost isn’t perfect, but he’s,” I pause, not knowing how to explain what I’m feeling, “he’s the kind of man that owns the room without saying a word.

I don’t want to get sucked into another man’s orbit and find out two years from now I made another mistake.

Anyway, I thought if Maci’s story was about the bikers, you’d know. ”

“I mean it wouldn’t surprise me if it was, but does that really matter? You know what kind of past Ghost has and you like him anyway.”

“But should I?”

Sienna tilts her head to the side, watching me carefully. “That’s the question.”

I exhale, rubbing my palm against my knee. “I shouldn’t trust him. I already know that.”

“Yet, you do. I can feel it in your voice.”

“I don’t know. Logically none of this makes sense, but when I think about him, like the way he held me in the chair before he brought me here, it’s different. It almost feels like I should be running away and toward him at the same time.”

Sienna crosses her arms over her chest and exhales softly. “Oh, girl... that’s a pickle. What are you gonna do about it?”

I shrug. “I’m not sure. Ignore it, maybe? I don’t know. I need some sleep. I’m not making any sense.”

“Whatever road you take, I’m right there next to you.

” Sienna lands a kiss on my forehead and tucks into the side room behind the kitchen before closing the door softly.

She has a small place right off Main Street with two bedrooms and one bath.

Her parents bought it for her when she graduated college.

They’re rich like that, though Sienna has tried to make a path of her own with the wedding business.

I should ask Ghost if he knows anyone who'd be interested in going to the wedding with her. I bet he knows someone, and it would give me another chance to talk to him without it looking too obvious, right?

Or is that the most obvious trick in the book?

I slip into the back bedroom and shut the door quietly, sucking in a deep breath of peonies Sienna cut from her garden.

She's so good at things like that. Wearing cute clothes, gardening, makeup, all the things I suck at.

Even the decorations in the room are nice.

She somehow matched the comforter with the curtains and the side chair perfectly.

It's not a mainstream shade of pink, either.

It's a pale, off-tone pink that reminds me of the colors in my grandma's color block quilt.

That thought should remind me of Grandma, though right now, it's reminding me of Ghost. God, I hope this lamenting doesn't last long. Ghost isn't the kind of guy you hold on to.

I know that. Yet, I feel him here.

I lean back on the bed, exhaling slowly. This has to pass, because I'm not built for longing. Not like this.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:55 am

Ghost

I lean against the wall in the backroom of Nicole's office, jerking my cock hard and fast as I breathe in the honey sweet scent of her still on my beard. I've got at least ten minutes before Tennessee shows up, so I've gotta get this out of my system now.

What the hell was I thinking letting myself touch her, letting myself feel anything? Fucking hell. I thought I could leave it all there, one moment and nothing more. Now suddenly, ten minutes away from her feels like a lifetime.

This is why I don't do shit like this!

I'm not sure I'm ever going to get the vision of her crawling to me out of my head. And that view of her riding that rubber dick while she sucked me off... fuck!

I grit my teeth as come spills from my cock and onto my hand. I need to get a fucking grip and get her out of my head. I'm here to fix the door because she's in a pinch. There's nothing more to it. Never will be.

I tell myself that again and again as I wash my hands in the bathroom just left of the office. She keeps a fruity soap that also reminds me of her.

Damn it! I need to nip this right here and now. There's no reason for her voice to linger in my head, no reason for me to think about her ever again.

She's too damn sweet, too damn young, too damn everything I shouldn't fucking want. Besides, where would this go? Sure, we could have a few fun nights, but I have

no intention of settling down. I wouldn't even know what the fuck to do with any of that.

She deserves more than me. She said she wanted more than what I have to offer.

I splash some of the cool water on my face then step out of the bathroom and into the shop where Tennessee stands with a plate of glass. He's a big guy, maybe even a little bigger than me.

"Dude, you said you weren't going to fuck with her. She has a boyfriend."

I drag in a heavy breath. "They broke up. It... things got a little wild but I'm fixing it."

Tennessee lowers his head and stares toward me with a look that says I should know better. "Duke would lose his fucking shit if he were here."

"We've already talked about how Prez isn't here. They put me in charge for a reason."

Tennessee shakes his head. "Don't know the fuck why. You're acting like you don't have a brain in your head."

"I had an off-night. You know I don't do this shit."

"Let's keep it to just one off-night." He shifts the weight of the glass panel in his hand. He's measured it to size and cut it down before he came up here. "You got that side?"

I grab the other end, steadying it before we slide it into place against the front grooves in the door. It's a perfect fit, and I owe him one for making the cut and

meeting me out here so late at night.

“So, what’s with this girl,” he finally says. “You’re right. It ain’t like you to lose focus over a woman, or anything for that matter. Whoever this is has you all twisted up.”

I clench my jaw, over-tightening the screws into the frame with more force than necessary. “It’s one night, man. That’s it. It’s over now.”

Tennessee lifts an eyebrow, checking the frame. “Yeah? One night that got the door to her shop busted out. Something tells me it was one to remember.”

“That it was.” I roll my shoulders back.

“But still, just one night. It’s not gonna mean anything tomorrow.

” The second I say the words, I know it’s a lie.

Her face will be branded into my memory forever.

It’ll be etched somewhere I won’t be able to reach, taunting me like a future I could’ve had for the rest of my life.

I hate this.

Tennessee wipes his hands on his jeans before flashing me a knowing look. “That’s a fucking lie and we both know it. I’ve known you the better part of twenty years. I’ve never seen you act so fucking messy.”

“It is what it is.” I pace back to the toolbox he sat by the door, then back again.

As much as I'd love to admit that I fell head-over-heels or whatever for Nicole tonight, I know it's not real.

It's hormones. It's a combination of life events.

It's weird shit that led us here. Not love, and not feelings.

They were just actions. The second I start believing otherwise, I'm a fool.

I run my hand over my beard, breathing in the damp musk that's made its way into the shop. "She's twenty something, man. She's got her whole life ahead. I'm not gonna be the ship that sinks her."

"But you want to be," Tennessee says with a grin.

"It ain't that deep, man. What about you? If you're giving me all this shit advice, you should give yourself some. Maybe you're transferring your thoughts on to me."

"Look who's spent some time in the crazy clown tent."

"Well," I grab a Coke from the little fridge and hand one to my buddy, "why are you alone?"

He huffs out a laugh and stands straighter. "Ain't met no one worth marrying yet. Besides, I've got other shit to focus on. All you assholes keep me busy."

"Has seeing Hank get a girl made you see the light?"

He rolls his eyes and grabs his toolbox off the ground. "You're ridiculous. There's no girl out there looking for a guy like me. I don't have that pretty boy face you've got."

“Pretty face?” I laugh. “Damn, man. You’re coming on pretty strong tonight. First the favor, and now this.”

Shaking his head, he pushes the door open and steps out into the drizzling night as I lock the shop up behind us.

“How you giving those keys back?” he groans, climbing up into his truck.

“Told her I’d leave ‘em in the mailbox at the town hall. She said she’s got extra.”

He grins, tugging the brim of his cap as he says, “Or you could take them back yourself and make sure she gets ‘em.”

I glance down at the sidewalk, watching the water slide in thin streams toward the gutter. “It’s late, and I told you a thousand times. It was one night. No need to see her again.”

The lie sits between us, heavy and knowing.

He nods slowly, but he doesn’t respond. Maybe it’s because deep down we both know who I am.

I’m the kind of man who doesn’t let people linger. Never have, and never will .

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:55 am

Nicole

“Where are you off to?” Sienna pours herself a cup of coffee and leans against the counter as the morning sun filters through the shades. She’s already dressed to the nines in the cutest, pink summer dress. “Please tell me you’re going to hunt down Mr. Crazy-Sexy Biker for more good times.”

“Ha! I’m pretty sure that’ll never happen. He had all weekend to come back and profess his undying love to me, and he didn’t.”

“It’s been two days. Don’t be so dramatic.”

“Two days! That’s a really long time.”

Sienna dramatically grips her chest and gasps. “So let me get this straight. You didn’t give him your number, and you’re mad that he hasn’t magically tracked you down and professed his love to you?”

“Yes, exactly. Thank you for understanding!” I grin playfully and grab my purse off the hook by the door, hiding the reality of what I’m feeling. I’m not sure why it bothers me so much that Ghost didn’t come back. We agreed on the one-night thing.

We had one night. One secret night. Well, a sort of secret night.

Now, I go on with life and do all the fun things I’ve been wanting to do, except for some reason I can’t help but want Ghost there with me while I do them. I shake the thoughts out of my head. “I need some fresh air. You need anything downtown?”

“No, but I’ll come with. Give me like—”

A heavy knock hits the front door. Sienna and I glance at each other like we’re two teenage girls caught out past curfew.

She sets her coffee down slowly and lowers her voice to a whisper as she says, “Who the hell is here on Sunday morning? God, I hope it’s not my cousin.

She said she was coming to town next week to talk about the wedding and visit the venues, but she never got back to me on when.” Sienna smirks. “Or… it’s him .”

I roll my eyes, though my heart jumps at the thought. “It’s not. He had all weekend to come after me. I doubt a big, bad biker is out at eight o’clock in the morning. Aren’t they like night-time creatures?”

The knock comes again. It’s heavier this time.

“Pretty high knock for my cousin. She’s like five feet tall.”

I groan and make my way toward the door, waving Sienna’s absurd hypothesis off as nonsense. “Relax. I’m sure it’s something ridiculous.”

She follows behind me, practically vibrating with excitement. She’s going to be really disappointed when she finds out it’s someone with a misdelivered package.

Sadly, part of me will be disappointed too. I know it’s not Ghost. That would be silly, but I hope it is. There’s something about the way he looks at me that lights me up inside, that stirs me awake from my life’s slumber.

I hesitate over the knob before finally turning and pulling the door open.

Please, please, please!

And there he is... Ghost.

Sienna lets out a breath. "See, I told you! It's not my cousin!"

He shuffles his feet, glancing back at Sienna before redirecting his gaze toward me. "Can I take you for a ride?"

Straight forward as always.

My heart slams against my chest as Sienna gasps.

"Yes, she'd love a ride," Sienna announces.

"And Sienna would love a date to her cousin's wedding if you know anyone." I tighten my lips and stare back at her with playful frustration.

"Actually, I would. It's just a few weeks away and I need to hook some big, bad, biker man who'll scare my whole family into submission."

Ghost narrows his brows and laughs. "Well, my buddy Tennessee's been looking for a family. I'll tell him he's got one on the hook."

"Cool." Sienna hands Ghost one of her business cards and offers me a smirk. "Now get this girl out of here and show her a good time."

As we make our way outside, I whisper, "Sorry for that. She's a little high-strung."

"That's okay. A buddy of mine's been needing to get out more, anyway. A nice family wedding will be good for him."

I glance down at the ground and wonder what the hell this ride is all about, but I don't ask. Instead, I let him take my hand and guide me out toward his motorcycle that's gleaming in the light of the morning sun.

How the hell did we not hear this thing roll up?

Maybe this is all a dream. It has to be a dream. I just woke up, and I haven't even finished my coffee. We barely had a conversation, he disappeared for days, and now I'm climbing onto his bike like I'm okay with that.

I'm not.

I require phone calls, and communication, and proper amounts of energy, and romantic gestures. That said, I climb onto the bike like I've been desperate for this visit all weekend long.

It's the truest feeling I've ever felt. I have been desperate for this visit. I spent all day Saturday wondering if he was really gone for good, wondering if I'd ever feel that much passion again.

The bike growls as he revs it before taking off. We're slow at first, then quickly I feel the wind whip against my face. I lean into his back and hold him tight, as his hand rests on the outside of my leg.

I'm not sure if I should read into it or not. Maybe he does this with loads of women. I was sure of it the other night... until he held me. There was something about that moment that made me realize this kind of connection was new for him.

I try not to let my mind reminisce, instead focusing on the crisp morning air and the scent of damp pavement.

It doesn't last long. With one whiff of the leather on his back, I'm locked into the filthy places we were Friday night.

I let myself linger there, clit throbbing as I imagine the way he dug his thick fingers into my hair as I sucked him off.

Oh Lord, I'm a bigger mess than I thought.

Ghost keeps his eyes on the road ahead, his posture relaxed but purposeful, as sunlight filters through the dense forest lining the road. There aren't many people out and about yet, though it's like this most mornings up here.

We ride past rustic cabins to the west of the woods, and I tighten my grip around him as he leans into a curve that lines the turquoise river rushing ahead.

It's by far one of the prettiest spots on Rugged Mountain.

On the far bank, thick pines grow close, their roots gripping the edge as though they're bracing against the flow.

The water is clear, like glass, and you can see straight through to the colorful pebbles that line the riverbed.

Ghost steers the bike to a quiet clearing near the river and cuts the engine, replacing the rumble with the quiet rushing of water. It's a private little spot surrounded by boulders and trees, and you can tell that it isn't frequently traveled.

I swing my leg over the bike and stretch the stiffness out of my body before glancing up at the giant man in front of me. Even in the middle of the forest with trees towering thirty feet high, this man looks huge.

He's still silent. Something is off. I'm probably about to be murdered.

I open my mouth to ask him what's up or tease him about acting so funny, but before I can, he exhales sharply and steps toward me, running his hand through my hair.

His eyes catch mine, and though we're staring at each other, I get the feeling that part of him is ready to run headfirst toward the river.

What's with this guy?

I open my mouth to speak, but before words come out, he leans in and kisses me. It's fast and rough like he acted before he finished thinking it through, like he's been fighting with himself for days.

When he pulls back, he exhales, shaking his head like he's frustrated. "I can't stop thinking about you."

I stare at him, heart hammering, the weight of his hands still on my waist.

He exhales slowly. "This is stupid."

"What's stupid?"

"The fact that I can't stop thinking about you. All fucking night and every fucking day. You're there, on my mind, with that cute little fucking smile, and it's driving me fucking insane."

I can't help but smile. "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

"Don't know," he groans. "So far it's just been overwhelming."

I tilt my head, watching him. “Maybe you should just forget about me then.”

“I tried. It didn’t work. That’s why I’m here.” He huffs out a breath. “Tell me you’re feeling the same way.”

I stagger in a heavy breath and let it out slowly, speaking without hesitation, though maybe I should have some. “I am.”

Ghost looks toward me, jaw tense, his expression unreadable like he’s searching for anything to make this moment less real. A piece of knowledge or a reason that can dig him out of what he’s feeling. “This is a mess,” he finally says.

“You kissed me!”

“And I want to do it again,” he growls.

“Then do it!” I pant, desperate to feel his hands all over me again and again.

He exhales sharply and pulls me into another rough kiss as his fingers press into my hips. Though he’s moving all over me, his body is tense like he’s still fighting with himself for feeling something.

I clutch his shirt and pull back. “You still think this is stupid?”

“Yeah,” he growls before leaning into me again, this time softer with a gentler look in his eyes. “It’s so fucking stupid.” His teeth scrape against my neck with a growl as his hands work to strip my clothes off. “I want you naked. I need to feel you.”

This is everything I’ve needed. Everything.

There’s something about his struggle with emotions that makes this feel real. More

real than anything I've ever felt in my life. It's raw and unrehearsed. I feel it in the way he touches me, in the way he growls, like the admission burns despite how badly he needs it.

Standing on the river rocks, I let him wrap me into his arms and hold me against his chest.

"I'm going to make you mine, and it's gonna be hard, but I need you."

I twist my lips to the side playfully. "Are we talking about your massive cock or our newfound life together?"

He rolls his eyes and bites back a grin. "Both. Now bend over that boulder for me. I want to see how wet all this gets you."

"Yes, sir." I bend over the rock and glance back at him, watching as he studies my every move.

"You're such a good girl. Look at those pink lips. You're ready."

"I'm so ready," I beg, pushing my ass up into the air as my breasts press against the cool stone.

After years of having the most programmed sex imaginable, this is downright insanity.

We're outside, in the wide-open air, and for the second time in two days I'm about to have mad, wild, incredible sex.

I'm half expecting the cops to show up or a fisherman to work his way down the waterway and catch us on the riverbank.

Either way, nothing could stop me right now. I'd put on a show for all of them. I need this man more than I've ever needed anything.

The zipper of his jeans splits and his pants fall to the floor before he grips my waist and edges into my pussy. There's no foreplay. There's no sweet talk. It's just raw need. Raw desire.

I'm soaking wet for it.

"Fuck," he groans as he presses into me. "You're tight, baby girl."

My pussy soaks at the sound of his deep voice reverberating in my ear as his giant cock spreads me wide.

"You're so damn sexy," he growls into my ear, "and you're taking me well."

Thump after thump of his thick cock spreads me wider as I press against the boulder, grunting and moaning like a wild animal.

I never thought I'd ever come with penetration alone, but he's hitting spots I didn't know existed.

"You like my cock deep inside of you, baby girl?" His hand grips my throat as he drives himself in further.

"Yeah," I pant. "Yes, sir."

"Good fucking girl. Moan for me. Open your pretty little mouth and let me hear those sounds."

I moan out louder and louder as he drives his thick cock deeper and deeper.

“I’m gonna come.”

“Tell me how bad you need it.”

“I need to come. You feel so good! Oh my God... you feel so damn good!”

His cock somehow feels harder than it was five seconds ago, and all at once like a train barreling into the station, I release, screaming out as my tits bounce and scrub against the boulder.

Ghost growls into my ear, lifting me slightly as he drives into me. “You’re such a dirty girl. Fuck... I love how hard you try for me!”

His hold is tight and masculine. He’s moving me, putting me exactly where he wants me. “I need you, Nicole. Tell me you’re mine for good.” He thrusts into me over and over again. “Say it loud.”

“I’m yours,” I pant, desperate for this to never end.

Desperate to have trillions of morning fucks by the river, and wild, dominant sex every single evening for eternity.

It turns out, this is what life is about.

Not vacations, not fancy houses, not what you do for a living.

Life is about passion. It’s about passionate sex with a giant man that whispers sexy things in your ear.

He thrusts into me again and again until he spills his seed, filling me up with warm parts of him that make me feel whole.

“Fuck,” he groans, pulling out slowly, “that was good.”

“Really good,” I pant, staring up at the sky, trying to get the dizziness to calm itself. “You’re really good at that.”

“Only with you. I’ve never felt like this in my life.” He leans in and kisses my forehead, pulling me close. “I don’t know what it is, I just... I want to hold you and protect you, and I don’t know... you make me like this.”

My heart slams against my chest as I lean against his.

He brushes his rough hand over the side of my face, his gaze heavy on mine. “Tell me you meant what you said. Tell me you’ll stay. I know you have all the choices in the world. You’re young and you just got your freedom, but I need you. I need you so fucking bad. It’s sick.”

I swallow hard, searching his eyes as I feel the raw honesty of his words. “I meant every word.”

He leans down and kisses the top of my head before glancing out at the river. “Damn shame. You know what’s missing?”

“No, what?”

“That we don’t have any speakers. This seems like the perfect moment for some Sabbath. Maybe War Pigs.”

I laugh and widen my gaze. “I may have exaggerated how much I liked that song. I’m more of a country girl. The new Morgan Waylon album just came out, and it’s a ten out of ten.”

He grins that slick grin I've come to love.

"Kinda like that album too. To be honest, I haven't listened to Sabbath in years and War Pigs was never my favorite, but it's the cool thing to like for a guy like me, right?"

I'm pretty sure liking country music is a big no-no in the hitman code of ethics.

Too many emotions, and not enough killing. "

I raise an entertained brow. "The hitman code of ethics? Is that a real thing?"

"Sure is. It's right between ' never leave loose ends' and ' don't get attached ."

"Guess you're breaking all the rules then."

He exhales as though that's the hopeless truth, then squeezes my hand lightly. "I think you're worth breaking rules for."

In that moment, everything shifts into place, and the adventure I'd been chasing officially finds me.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:55 am

Nicole

Five Years Later

I shift slightly on the velvet sofa tucked into the back corner of the record shop.

It's not as new as the day we brought it into the store, but that makes it better somehow, like it's a living story that's been here with us over the past five years.

The cushions remember conversations had by folks in town after a long day's work, and it remembers moments of my life.

Ghost settles in next to me, stretching his arm behind my back. The shop isn't open today, but we're here hanging out and unpacking a few boxes of records we bought at a flea market last weekend. His giant hand rubs over my expanded stomach. "How are my girls feeling?"

"Better now that you're here. You think we're about done for the day? My back is starting to ache."

He nods and turns toward me, brushing his hand back through his thick, graying hair. "Yeah, but ugh... you still love it here, baby girl? You're not bored, are you?"

I narrow my brows and push my lips to the side. "Bored? What? No. How could I be bored?"

"You never know. You were bored as hell when I met you. Maybe you're feeling it

again.”

I shake my head and twist toward him. “I could never get bored with you and our family. You’ve had me laid out in the garden, eating my pussy after midnight.

Who does that?” I wet my lips and lean into his chest. “Besides, Tyler and Betsy are a handful. How does someone get bored with two kids under three?”

“Okay.” He exhales and holds my head against his chest. “I just love you. I don’t ever want to do any of this without you.”

“Same. It’s crazy when I think about how lucky I am that you rescued me from myself. I’d probably be heading to the diner again tonight if you hadn’t.”

Ghost squeezes me closer. “Well, lucky for you, I’m a bulldozer.”

“And I’m thankful for that.” I nestle in closer as the outside light turns golden, slanting through the dust-speckled windows. “I like that you bulldozed your way in. You even planted flowers once you got here.”

He sighs hopelessly. “Oh, dear God, she’s getting poetic again.”

I grin. “You started it!”

“I don’t think I’ve ever started a poem a day in my life.”

“Well, you started the one in my heart.” I can’t keep a straight face.

Apparently, our little girl can’t either, because she’s suddenly kicking hard against something uncomfortable that I can’t identify.

This is our third kid, and I still marvel at the way a woman's body creates life.

I mean, how is there an actual human life inside of me?

Growing. Kicking. Breathing.

"We really need a name for this little girl," he groans, rubbing his hand in circles as though he's chasing the baby's feet.

"I think we should put it up for a vote tonight after we pick the kids up from the clubhouse."

"And let two kids under three decide the name of their sister?" He shakes his head.
"We should just name her Lily 'cause we like it."

I really do like the name Lily. It's sweet, beautiful, and I can already hear myself hollering for her to come inside for dinner after playing with Tyler and Betsy in the yard behind the cabin.

I love that cabin. It's a hand-built place with a creek running behind it.

In the summer, there are all kinds of wildflowers in bloom, and in the fall, the leaves turn gold and red.

The guys from the clubhouse met up with Rugged Mountain MC and they worked together to get the place built by our first fall as a couple.

We even married on that property. It's hard to believe that was four years ago.

Ghost wore his cut and a pair of dark wash jeans.

Sienna found me this cute little white dress with lace on the hem.

We handpicked our own flowers, and the guys from the clubhouse wove a wooden arch together.

It was simple, but it was everything we needed, and I love how it represented the growth and integration the guys have had with the other folks on the mountain.

“Let’s name her Lily,” I finally say, cuddling into his leather scented warmth.

Ghost tugs Grandma’s blanket off the back of the couch, wrapping it over me gently.

I swear its frayed edges and pink circles with green squares have been the good luck charm of the shop.

That, or maybe it’s the banana bread we bake once a week.

Either way, people can’t get enough of the after school special here at Grandma’s Records.

Ghost tucks the blanket beneath my chin, and I breathe in the scent of lavender and cherry cough drops infused into the yarn.

“I think Grandma had a hand in all of this, don’t you think?”

” I glance around at the mismatched records hanging on the wall, the houseplants bending toward the windows, and the pictures the kids drew and left taped to the front door.

The shop really is like a scene from her living room after school.

“I like to think Grandma brought you to me too.”

He grins that coy smile that I can't get enough of. The one that says something good is on the way. “Oh, I don't think Grandma would approve of the things I do to you.”

My cheeks heat. “I don't know. I think Grandma had a wild side. Plus, she'd be happy you found me and woke me up.”

His hand finds mine. “Oh yeah? Well, you woke me up too. Who the hell knows where I'd be without you?”

I roll my eyes to the side with a playful tone in my voice as I say, “Umm... probably obsessed with some hit you know deep down you shouldn't take.”

He laughs. “You're trouble.”

“Only for you!”

“I gotta say, this whole two kids, pregnant wife, and a record store fueled by banana bread and yarn, is by far the best chaos I've ever had.

” His voice is rich with gravel-like warmth as he leans into my ear.

“Plus, I'm gonna carry you out of here, take you home, and do dirty, filthy things to you tonight. ”

My eyes darken and my clit throbs as I stare up at the man I'm endlessly in love with. “Mmm... like what?”

He resituates himself on the couch and stares at me. “Well, for starters, those tits look pretty full.” He leans in and tugs the top of my dress down, exposing my hard breasts.

“You’re gonna let me suck them dry.”

I’m not sure if I’m just extra horny during this pregnancy or if I’ve discovered a new kink. Either way, I can’t get enough of him talking like this.

He leans into my breast, licks the nipple, and scrapes his teeth gently across my flesh. “Tell me you belong to me, baby girl.”

“I belong to you,” I pant, watching his eyes turn dark and feral.

“Good girl.” He suckles at my breast for a moment, letting the milk drip from the corners of his mouth as he swallows. “Now let’s get that pretty little ass home. I’ve gotta help you relax.” He stands and lifts me up from the couch, his biceps flexing the dark tattoos on his arm as he moves.

Good people aren’t always good. Sometimes, they break things to survive.

They lie to protect, and they stumble under the weight of choices no one else can see.

Thankfully, goodness isn’t about being flawless.

It’s about choosing love after you’ve been broken.

It’s about believing you deserve more than the life you’ve been given.

Ghost lived in survival mode for years, but somehow, he brought me to life. And for that, I’ll forever be grateful. I lean in close, a smile on my lips as he pushes open the front door. “I love you, babe.”

He kisses the top of my head, his warm breath against my hair. “Love you, more.”

THANK YOU FOR READING.

READ SIENNA'S STORY HERE .

Sienna

“My buddy says you’re looking for a date.” A giant biker with a long beard and tattoos stands at the front door of my shop. He looks like the type of guy you’d hire as personal security, but who also moonlights as a stripper on the weekends.

I’m not sure I’ve ever seen a man this built. His biceps are the size of... well, bigger than anything I can think of at the moment. He steps inside and suddenly the thousand square feet I’ve been using as an event shop shrinks.

His eyes lock onto mine. They’re sharp and dark, as though he’s waiting on a response.

Oh yeah, I need to talk back.

“Umm... yeah.” I smooth down the fabric of the floral dress I ordered a few months back. I haven’t had a chance to wear it yet, and I’m not sure how I feel about the A-line cut, but it’s rocking every shade of pink, which makes it my new favorite dress. “I wasn’t aware that you’d be dropping by.”

“Well, I was down here grabbing a few things and figured I’d stop in and say hello.” He drags his massive hand down over his face and stares at me with the same hardened look he was rocking before.

“Yeah. I... you’re here, so lets...” I have no idea why I’m stammering.

I’m not a stammerer. I’m a talker. Ask anyone.

I'll talk a stranger's ear off about anything. Heck, I once spent twenty minutes in line at the grocery store talking to the woman in front of me about ketchup brands. She was impressed by how much I knew, and truthfully, so was I. Apparently, it's not mainstream knowledge that ketchup is used for polishing metal and the rest can be used to bake a cake.

"Is this a bad time?" the giant continues.

"No, not at all. It's not a bad time. It's... I'm a little shook up this morning is all. My cousin sent all these texts last night with last-minute changes to the guest list, and there's a fountain issue. So... distracted."

"Is this the same wedding you're looking for a date to?"

Somehow, this idea sounded less humiliating when I was abstractly talking about it with a friend and thinking about finally losing my virginity instead of valuing rational decision making. Now, in real life, it's just ... weird .

"I mean," I pause and close my eyes, trying to conjure up the words to answer his question without sounding like a complete loser, though I'm thinking that's exactly what I'm looking like, "I guess I don't really need a date. I was just being crazy and weird. I'll... it'll be fine."

The giant watches me closely, weighing my words as though he's deciding whether I mean them or not.

His stance is relaxed, but the way he stares at me makes me feel all kinds of gooey inside.

"So you were looking for a date, and the second you see me, you're not?"

" He laughs under his breath as he crosses his massive arms over one another.

“You’re giving me a complex.”

“No, I’m sorry. You’re great. I mean, look at you. You’re so big. I mean... you’re good looking.” Why am I still talking? “You see like a nice guy, but, ugh, I’m... I don’t think I need a date. It’s complicated.”

Wow! What the hell was that? I never act like this.

He pulls a chair out from the table and lowers himself down carefully until the seat disappears and it looks like he’s floating in thin air. “I’ve got time.”

Oh, great. He’s got time.

I don’t know why I thought maybe he’d be a little less attractive. This guy is like action-movie attractive.

I lean back against the counter awkwardly.

“Umm... weddings are weird. My assistant quit a few days ago to run off to California, I’m missing a bunch of flowers, I have an issue with a fountain, and my family...

especially my mother. She didn’t believe in this whole business venture thing of mine, and now I’m putting on my cousin’s wedding and everything is going wrong.

I didn’t want to show up without a date too.

So, I figured a big, rough, tough, biker dude would keep her quiet.

But... I was overthinking it. She’ll see straight through all this, anyway. I’m better off just biting the bullet.”

He grins and I swear I hear the smirk in his voice as he says, “You sure? I’ve been told I clean up really nicely.”

I’d love to see how well this man cleans up, but going to a wedding together would mean acting normal around each other, and clearly I’m not as capable of that as I thought I was.

“Trust me, you wouldn’t want to deal with my mother. She’s an evil witch from Planet Zargo, and she has no remorse for anything or anyone.”

The man laughs. “Planet Zargo, huh? Sounds like a challenge.”

I widen my gaze. “More than a challenge. She’s got a perfected side-eye that destroys souls on contact. It’s a mess.”

“No offense, but I’ve handled far worse than a perfected side-eye.”

I wrinkle my nose and glance toward the action star at the front of the store. “Oh, you haven’t felt her side-eye. It’s deadly, trust me.”

“Look,” he stands from the chair and steps toward me, one heavy boot at a time, until he’s so close that I can smell the motor oil and leather that surrounds him, “I gotta be honest with you. I’m backed up on good deeds, and this one’ll count for like eight...

at least. You gotta let me do this.” He shifts his weight to the right and flexes his arm, showing off a horseshoe tattoo with an eagle in the center.

“Think of me like an assistant. These are workin’ muscles.

I can lift and carry whatever you need, including your mother, to the door if necessary. ”

I smile and stare down at the ground at thoughts of this massive man protecting me from everything, especially my mother, but now I'm a little concerned by the hard sell.

I mean, why does he want to be at this wedding so badly?

I know who these bikers are. There's chatter all over town that these guys are ex-hitmen. That said, I really could use the help.

"I don't know... you have a reputation."

"My buddy told me that's why you wanted me there. I'm here to scare the questions away."

That is true. I did say those exact words.

"Besides," he continues, "I thrive in chaos. Point me to the soul-crushing side-eying mother from Planet Zargo, and I'll perform accordingly."

I narrow my brows. "Accordingly... how? I'm not sure we have the same idea of accordingly."

A flicker of a smirk lifts his face. "Intimidation is a language I speak fluently. Also, for your personal knowledge, I'm more than whatever shit this town is saying."

"Oh yeah?"

He nods and readjusts his baseball cap. "I was a military medic for years."

I tilt my head to the side, studying this big, rough, massive man in front of me. That wasn't in the rumors going around town. Truthfully, it's hard to believe. I can't imagine this guy wanting to save anyone from anything, except from a wedding,

apparently.

“So... when did you change out the scalpel for a switchblade?”

“Oh, you’re a smart-mouthed one. I like it.”

A shock of energy presses between my legs as his deep voice rumbles through the air. What the hell is wrong with me? This man is in his late forties and he’s clearly a liar. I need to steer clear. Really, really clear. Or... jump on him now, get it out of my system, and move on with my life.

I think I like the second option better.

“I have family that was in the military. What branch did you serve?” This should make him nervous.

“Army.” He says it with a pause, and I swear his shoulders tighten. Maybe I’ve caught him in a lie. “I started in pursuit of medical school but it didn’t go as planned.”

“Medical school?” My face says it all as my phone rings, interrupting my full-scale operation to catch this guy in a lie. I glance down at the screen instinctively. It’s my cousin. I’m sure she’s freaking out.

We’re two days from her wedding, and I know what’s on the other end of that line is a bomb.

A bomb I need to let explode over the phone or it’ll come crashing into my shop.

“Sorry, it’s my cousin. I have to take this. ”

“You do your thing.” He scratches his number down on the back of a pamphlet for the inn that I keep sitting on the counter. “Text me later and we’ll work all these

details out.”

I answer my phone as I stare the man down. I knew he was a big, rough guy when I asked my friend to set me up with him. This is what I wanted. But now that he’s standing here, this whole thing is a little more intense than I expected.

“Hey, Mae. What’s up?” I say, as the giant who scribbled Tennessee over his number leaves the building. Is that his name or is he telling me what state he’s from?

This guy is weird.

“Have you gotten any of my texts?” Her voice is biting, and though it’s not an abnormal sound to hear from a bride two days before a wedding, I’m not as prepared for it this morning as I should be.

“Yeah, sorry. This morning was weird. I had this guy in here and—”

“I don’t care!” she shouts. “I just need you to tell me that everything is going to be okay.”

“Why wouldn’t everything be okay?”

“Because I’m making so many last-minute changes, my dress won’t be ready from the tailor until the morning of the wedding, and I have like three hundred million things on my mind. Not to mention your assistant quit, didn’t she?”

“What?”

“You weren’t going to tell me?”

“How do you know?”

“She sent me an apology text last night.”

My cheeks heat with fire. “It’s not that I wasn’t going to tell you. I just hadn’t gotten around to it yet. Plus—”

“No! I don’t want you to wrap this in some pretty little bow, Sienna! This is bad. Really bad.”

It’s not great that I don’t have an assistant anymore. In fact, it’s kind of horrible. Now I’m responsible for everything all at once, at the most important event of my career, and since I stepped away from my parents’ fortune, I have a whole lot of nothing, with everything to prove.

My heart hammers hard against my chest and my throat goes dry. What the hell am I going to do?

“Hello?” Mae presses. “I can call your mom. She’ll hire someone to help and—”

“No!” My mother is the last person I’d ask for help. She’s sitting on her mountaintop waiting for me to fail. I glance down at the number the biker scratched on the pamphlet for the inn. “I just hired someone. That’s who I was talking to.”

I can almost hear the wrinkle in her forehead. “What?”

“Yeah. It’s a, ugh, my boyfriend. He’s really big and strong, and he offered to pick up the job for me. So... we’re good.”

“Your boyfriend? This is the same biker guy you’ve been talking about for a month now?”

“Yup. Same guy. He’s the best!” Why is my voice so sunny? “I’ve gone over everything with him this morning and we’re solid gold.” I clear my throat to make

room for another lie. “He’s on his way to fix that fountain issue right now.”

“Seriously?” Mae’s voice finally relaxes. “Oh my God, I love you! I’m sorry. There’s just so much going on.”

“It’s cool. Trust me. It’s tough being a bride, but I’ve got everything under control. Okay?”

“Okay,” she sighs. “Thank you. I appreciate you so much. Sorry for the way I—”

“Girl, don’t worry about it. I’ll update you later, okay?”

“Okay,” she echoes. “Thanks again.”

The second she’s off the line, I stare blankly at the wall, and my lungs seize like they’ve forgotten how oxygen works. Why did I lie? What was I thinking? What the hell am I going to do?

I stare down at the biker’s number that’s daring me, begging me to press it, taunting me to set this whole circus into motion.

My thumb hovers over the call button. Maybe he won’t answer. Maybe he walked outside and felt like he dodged a bullet. Then again, maybe that would be for the best. Maybe that’s the universe’s way of throwing a wrench into my chaos before I get the chance to mess everything up.

That said, he answers on the first ring.

“Damn. You cracked fast. I thought I’d have to show up again tomorrow.” His voice is impossibly deep, and the gritty rasp behind it only lends to more throbbing between my legs.

Clearly, I need to get a grip.

“I need to hire you. You said you’d be my assistant. I need that.” Complete sentences would be nice, but like I said, my brain isn’t functioning right now.

“Assistant. Sure. You tell me what to do and I’ll do it.”

“There’s pay involved. It’s not much,” I sigh. I should’ve thought all this through before I picked up the phone. “It’s about five hundred for the event. I can go over the details with you tomorrow if you have time.”

“Sounds good.” He pauses for a second and I hear the low hum of an engine on his end of the line. “Breakfast by the lake? I’ll bring the pastries. You can tell me everything you need.”

The lake? I love the lake, but this is a business transaction... sort of.

“Breakfast here at the shop is probably best. I need all my materials to show you. You do coffee?”

“Black with two sugars... if you’re trying to butter me up.”

That was easy enough. Maybe I should tell him he’s my date, too. It’ll be a lot easier to say that over the phone than to explain it in person. Then again, I can’t summon boldness more than once a day.

“Two sugars it is. I’m thinking eight a.m.”

“Perfect.” He settles into the role steadily without teasing or commentary, easing the anxiety that’s been sitting on my chest since this morning. “I’ll be there.”

The line disconnects, and I sit there, my phone still pressed against my ear with silent

anticipation. What kind of hell did I just summon?

I only know it wears leather and boots, and tomorrow morning, it's walking through my door.