

ROCK



CHICK

REDEMPTION

ROCK CHICK SERIES BOOK THREE

A ROMANCE NOVEL BY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KRISTEN ASHLEY



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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to
Kathleen “Danae” Den Bachlet
My “Annette”

*I thank the goddess for bringing to me a friend...
who lets me be just who I am.*

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And to my Rock Chicks and Ninja Queen Sisters, Lily-Flower and Blossom, I love you guys. Thanks for Sturgis, the time of my life. **JAK**

And to my Rock Guru, Will...you know how I feel.

And to my new Rock Queen, latest cheerleader and my friend *forever*, Stephanie Redman Smith, thanks for reading, loving it and keeping me on. I love you, Steph, but you still can't have Luke. He's mine.

And to my sister, Erika “Rikki” Wynne and my brother, Gib Moore, we lost our anchor but our bond will never weaken. I would not be who I am if I didn't have you. You are so embedded in my heart, you have become my heart. I miss you every day.

And to my family, friends and readers...welcome back, thank you for coming and hang on tight, the ride is about to begin!

Rock on...

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ONE



LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

I t's happened to me twice, love at first sight.

The first time was Billy Flynn.

The second was Hank Nightingale.

Billy didn't take and he broke my heart.

Hank, well Hank's a heartbreaker, to be certain, but I wasn't g stick around long enough for him to do it to me. It wouldn't be my not sticking around, but that was what was going to happen all the sa probably for the best.

At least for Hank.



BILLY AND HANK are night and day, dark and light, bad and good.

Billy's the former of all those. Hank's the latter.

See, Billy's a criminal. Hank's a cop.

Billy looks like a young Robert Redford, but instead of boy-ne charm he has a bit (okay a lot) of James Dean's *Rebel without a drifting through him.*

I knew Billy well. I'd been with him for seven years, the last t which I tried to break up with him and that didn't take either.

Hank looks like no one I'd ever seen before. To put it simply beautiful. He's tall with thick dark hair, whisky-colored eyes and the well-muscled body of a linebacker.

Hank has a cause. Hank's about justice.

And Hank has more cool in his pinkie finger at any given moment Billy would have in a lifetime.

Don't ask me how I know this because I only knew Hank for a few years. Though it started when I learned he liked Springsteen. Anyone who loves Springsteen, well, enough said.



A LITTLE ABOUT ME.

For some bizarre reason my mom named me Roxanne Giselle Long. Everyone calls me Roxie. I have an older brother named Gilbert (we call him Gil because Gilbert is a shit name) and a younger sister named Esmerelda (we call her Mimi because Esmerelda is a shit name too). Needless to say, we lucked out in the sibling name stakes.

Dad let Mom name us. I think he did this so he could give her a headache for the rest of her life. Dad and Mom love each other, a lot, and show it (too much if you ask me). Growing up with your parents' constant displays of affection was kind of embarrassing. Regardless of this, they were always ribbing each other and arguing...but in a nice way.



Next-door

Cause I DIDN'T GROW up thinking I was going to live essentially on the run (though at first I didn't know that) with a criminal boyfriend, no matter how cute he was.

Three of

I grew up thinking I'd have a great job where I could wear a

y, he's clothes, I'd make a shitload of money and I'd have dozens of
re lean, kowtowing to my every whim.

Before I met Billy, I was on my way.

Don't take that as me being screaming ambitious or anything. I
went through high school and college. I studied enough to make As and Bs

Bs) but it was really all about beer, the occasional bottle of tequila a
few days. 'n' roll. Dad said I was lucky I was a smart girl or I'd be fucked
to like warned if I didn't get smarter, I'd end up fucked. Though Mom didn't
F-word, I knew what she meant.

They were both right, in their own way, though Mom was more rig

Lucky for me, both my mom and dad—and Mom's father a
gran and grandfather—all graduated from Purdue University. My great-grandd
all had his name up on a plaque in the student union because he died in
World War I. So I was grandfathered into Purdue. In other words, my fam
to say, I such a history, and so many members in the Alumni Associatio

couldn't say no. I got my degree no matter how much time I spent at
Chocolate Shop, the bar at Purdue that I'm pretty sure my Mon
it a lot Gramps and great-granddad all spent a lot of time in as well.

public 

they were I MET Billy after I graduated from Purdue. I had a good job. I'd man
get a couple of summer internships at website developing firms and
Indianapolis hired me at graduation. I think this had more to do with

n (even that I was office entertainment than anything else. I could be a little b
ter how (okay, maybe a lot crazy) and the two guys who owned the joir
hilarious, came to work in slogan T-shirts and ripped jeans and had
stock in the local coffee chain, they drank so much coffee.

esigner

peons My colleague, Annette, also told me I got the job because of the
looked. I knew I wasn't anything to sneeze at because I'd won the Tex
Hendricks County Pageant. I didn't go on to the state finals because of
partied with mono and because beauty pageants kind of sucked.

(mostly I look like my mom's side of the family: tall, built like what I
nd rock called a "brick shithouse" (I think this means all boobs and butt but
l. Mom really got the comparison) with dark-blond hair and dark-blue eyes.
use the all of us kids looked like the MacMillan side of the family, all tall, all
blonde, all blue-eyed, and my brother had a russet beard like Grizzly
ght. and like my mom's brother, Tex.



nd her I DIDN'T KNOW Uncle Tex. I'd never met him. He was in Vietnam
ad even checked out (seriously checked out) when he got back. None of the
World ever talked to him again, except me. Though, I didn't really talk to him
ily had wrote to him and he wrote back.
n, they

Harry's I started writing letters when I was young. Don't ask me how I started,
1, Dad, just did. I wrote to anyone whose address I could get my hands on.
putting stamps on letters and I loved getting mail through the post. I wrote
many letters Mom started to buy me monogrammed stationery when I was
aged to twelve, and she still buys me two boxes every birthday, deep lilac
one in embossed RGL at the top and on the envelope flap.

the fact Mom told me not to write Uncle Tex. She told me it was a waste of
it crazy he'd never write back.

it were Talking about Uncle Tex made Mom's face get sad, which didn't
to own very often. Usually only when she talked about Uncle Tex and soon
when she saw me with Billy and thought I wasn't paying attention.

the way I Mom and Uncle Tex were super close growing up, but he went in an army on his eighteenth birthday and went to Vietnam close to the end of a war and that was all she'd heard from him.

Uncle Tex wrote back to me though, surprising everyone. He would write back to Mom or Grams or Mom's two sisters, but he wrote back to me. Even when he was in prison for messing up a drug dealer, he wrote to me. In fact,

Once, when I was fourteen, I caught Mom going through my room reading Uncle Tex's letters and crying. I didn't let her know I caught her. I had the feeling it wasn't the first time she did it either.

From his letters I could tell Uncle Tex was a hilarious guy, crazy, and he (maybe a wee bit crazier). I'd never met him, but I knew why Mom loved him so much, and through our letters I knew I loved him too.



I met Billy when I was twenty-four. I fell for him immediately and I loved him hard.

He was good-looking. He had more energy than anyone I'd ever met. He made me laugh. He treated me like a princess. And he was really, really funny with his mouth in a fast-talking kind of way *and* other kinds of ways with an

Everyone hated him, Mom, Dad, Gil, Mimi and all my friends. I showed them the Cowboy Junkies song, "Misguided Angel" and told them to get over it.

A year into it, Billy was living with me in my apartment and was having the time of our lives, good sex, lots of laughs, tons of partying. I had no idea what Billy did to make his money and I was so lost in him, I didn't even care.

into the Then one day, he said he had an opportunity in St. Louis that he c
l of the pass up. He said, in six months we'd retire and live in St. Tropez,
spend my days sunbathing topless and he'd pour me champagne bef
ouldn't gourmet dinners every night. He told me he'd give me the life I deserv
c to me. life I was meant to have—designer clothes, diamonds and pearls, char
back to breakfasts, the lot.

I believed him (yes, I was twenty-five and yes, I was stupid)
7 stash, though everyone told me not to do it, even Uncle Tex. I quit my job, g
her and my apartment and moved to St. Louis. I moved my shit there, got a jo
and started over.

like me Six months later, Billy told me he had an even better opportunity
n loved moved to Pensacola.

Then to Charleston.

Then to Atlanta.

fell for I should have seen this coming. Before he met me, Billy had gon
Boston (where he grew up), to Philly, to Cincinnati, to Louisv
net. He Indianapolis. I should have been pleased he spent a year in Indy with n

ly good By the time we made it to Chicago, three years into our travels, I v
esides. up. I had a blast in St. Louis, Pensacola, Charleston and Atlanta. I ha
played jobs in all those places and made friends. I hated leaving, I hated being
get over road, packing, moving. Sometimes I had only a week to do it and
week, Billy was long gone, telling me he was “scouting” our locations
re were move. I was spending more and more time writing letters to all the p
g. I had left behind and was going to miss and I was done with being a nomad.

I didn't Furthermore, I was beginning to figure out why Billy was so cage
how he spent his days and where he got his cash. It was always ca

ouldn't never brought home a paycheck. Sometimes it was a lot of cash, most of the time it was none.

ore our At first, I believed in him, believed in his dreams and his future. He convinced me that the life I "deserved" was just around the corner. I wanted to believe, so I didn't ask too many questions. Then I couldn't see how stupid I was for believing in the first place and set myself for denial, which was a good place to be...for a while.

gave up "To hell with him, darlin'," Uncle Tex wrote with his usual honesty. "He sounds no good. Cut him loose and find yourself a real man."



and we CHICAGO WOULD HAVE LASTED LESS time than all the rest if Billy had stayed any longer. He was ready to roll after three months. I'd started my own design business. Annette had moved up from Indianapolis so I had a ready-made friend base and I found a couple of good clients. We'd rented a loft that I loved. I was close to Wrigley Field (what can I say, I'm a Cubs fan) and I was only four hours away from family.

ne from No way was I going anywhere.

ille, to So I told Billy he could go but I was staying.

was fed We got in a big old fight that ended in tears. My tears. I was a mess. I cried all the time. I'd cry at a card with a picture of a cute, little kitty on it. I didn't even have to look at what the card said.

id good Whatever, we stayed.

g on the This happened a lot. Billy would want to go. I'd want to stay. We'd have a rip-roarin' fight, I'd cry, and then we'd stay.

in that Then Billy came home late one night and said we *had* to go. I couldn't see why. He was acting that things I didn't understand, things I'd close

t of the eyes to all those years, were bad. As in really bad.

I didn't care. I dug in my heels. It hadn't been the same between us the first time I refused to go. We'd been in a slow decline and I had wanted Billy to be a good guy and do right by me and himself, but I was beginning to realize this wasn't going to happen. It broke my heart but I knew we'd had good times—no, great times—and I'd miss him. But there was so much a girl could take. I hated it that everyone was right about Billy. It was brutal when you fuck up you have to admit it, deal with it and move on.

I was ready to take Uncle Tex's advice and cut him loose.

When I told him this, Billy backed me up against a wall, his hand against my throat, his pretty-boy face contorted and ugly with a rage I'd never seen before.

He'd hissed at me, "Where I go, you go. You belong to me. We're not going to be apart. You're fuckin' mine...*forever.*"

Needless to say, this scared me. Billy had never acted like this. I didn't like to be scared. I never watched horror movies, ever. I didn't *do* scary things.

I knew at that point it was over. Any residual hope I had for Billy was gone in a blink. Firstly, I didn't like his arm at my throat. Secondly, I didn't like the look on his face. It freaked me out. Lastly, I didn't like anyone's but my own.

In other words, fuck...*that.*

Somehow, we stayed in Chicago and whatever it was that had Billy so worked out. My panic calmed down.

I didn't. I packed his shit, put it in the hall and changed the locks.

This did not go over well. He broke down the door with a sledgehammer. I should tell you I never used my

This did not go over well either. I had a conniption fit.

We had another rip roarin' fight and he talked me into taking him to
Don't think I was stupid or weak. I had no intention of really taking
back. I had long since realized that Billy was exactly what Billy was
didn't want any part of it. I'd loved him, yes, it was true, but he wasn't
thought he was or what I tried to convince myself he was. I was beginning
fear the stink I sensed on him would start to transfer itself to me.

But a sledgehammer was serious business.

I was going to have to be smart, finally.

Therefore, I was building what I liked to call my *Sleeping with the*
Plan.

I started to save money in a new account Billy didn't know a
stashed newly purchased clothes Billy had never seen and would never
at Annette's place and I left.

First, I went to my folks' house.

Billy came and brought me back.

I expected this. I was still stashing money and clothes at Annette's
my time.

Then I went to a girlfriend's in Atlanta.

Billy found me and brought me back.

Again, I waited.

Then I went to a hotel in Dallas.

Billy found me and brought me back.

This plan took a long time and this was unusual for me. I wasn't tl

patient of people, and I felt acutely that my life was ebbing away day
month by month, year by year. I had to see it through though, and I'm
stubborn so I kept at it.

It was the last time to leave Billy, a two-part end of the plan. I wa
to go to the last place he thought I thought he wouldn't look, knowi
all the others when I'd left breadcrumbs, he'd eventually look. Then
brought me back, I'd go there again, having set up the plan before ha
getting help (I hoped) while I was at it.

Though things got kind of fucked up, mainly because Billy's sti
settled on me, just like I'd feared.

Enemy

See, it was then that I went to Denver.

I went to Uncle Tex.

And, unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on how you looked
looked at it both ways—fortunately, because I'd remember it with bitt
clarity for the rest of my life, and unfortunately because it would nev
it was then that I met Hank and my plan got totally fucked.



NOW I'M SITTING on a stinking bathroom floor in a sleazy motel, cuff
sink and, if I can help it, Hank Nightingale will be a memory.

He deserves better than me.

I just hope I can figure out a way to make Hank agree.

re most

patient of people, and I felt acutely that my life was ebbing away day by day, month by month, year by year. I had to see it through though, and I'm kind of stubborn so I kept at it.

It was the last time to leave Billy, a two-part end of the plan. I was going to go to the last place he thought I thought he wouldn't look, knowing, like all the others when I'd left breadcrumbs, he'd eventually look. Then after he brought me back, I'd go there again, having set up the plan beforehand and getting help (I hoped) while I was at it.

Though things got kind of fucked up, mainly because Billy's stink had settled on me, just like I'd feared.

See, it was then that I went to Denver.

I went to Uncle Tex.

And, unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on how you looked at it (I looked at it both ways—fortunately, because I'd remember it with bittersweet clarity for the rest of my life, and unfortunately because it would never last), it was then that I met Hank and my plan got totally fucked.



NOW I'M SITTING on a stinking bathroom floor in a sleazy motel, cuffed to a sink and, if I can help it, Hank Nightingale will be a memory.

He deserves better than me.

I just hope I can figure out a way to make Hank agree.

TWO



WHISKY

This is how it began.



A FEW MONTHS ago Uncle Tex wrote to me about some folks he met, whom gave him his first job since Vietnam. He'd had it rough, real rough when he got back from 'Nam. He spent some time doing time and was meagerly off a small inheritance, including a house he got from a cousin uncle who'd taken a liking to him, supplementing the inheritance sitting.

If you could believe it (I couldn't when I read it), Uncle Tex was making espresso drinks at a used bookstore and coffee house Fortnum's.

My Uncle Tex had been incarcerated for hunting down and then beating a drug dealer to death. Now, several decades later, he was drinking fancy schmancy coffee.

How weird was *that*?

He seemed to like it, and his letters were filled with stories about people that worked there and the regulars who came in, especially the one who owned it, India Savage. But, according to Uncle Tex, folks call

Indy.

In his letters I could tell that Uncle Tex liked everyone, especially and lately another girl named Jet. He said Indy had “spunk,” and Uncle Tex liked spunk. He also liked mettle, which he told me Jet had, even though she didn’t know it. Lastly, he liked sass, which he said another person he worked with, Ally, had, apparently in abundance. In his letters I could tell that this Indy person had kind of adopted Uncle Tex and that was changing him for the good.

So I worked Denver into my plan, thinking maybe this Indy person had performed some magic and Uncle Tex wouldn’t close the door in front of me like he did with my Grams when she tried to visit all those times, and I was justifying my mom, when she and my aunts went with Grams all those years living there. Therefore, I decided to add a second agenda item to my plan: getting Uncle Tex back to the family and killing two birds with one stone.

by cat



IT WAS a Sunday in early October when I arrived. I saw, for the first time, as now Denver’s big, blue skies that went on forever, and the Front Range spread across the west, making the words “purple mountain majesties” a reality for me. But even with the sun there was a nip in the air.

I arrived early in the morning, got a hotel room with cash. I didn’t even know Billy to find me just yet. I showered and did myself up. It was, I was thinking, a special occasion, meeting Uncle Tex for the first time. Furthermore, I loved clothes (well, I loved designer clothes). Mom said that all the my designer threads like armor. Dad said if they were armor, they weren’t working because they acted more like a magnet.

led her Anyhoo.

I wore my hair to just above my shoulders and got it cut at a place in Indy, cost a fortune so it was all soft waves and little flippies at the ends. I wore my face and put on a charcoal-gray wool, to-the-knee skirt that fit like second skin, cupped my ass, straight at the front and flicked out in kick-girl heat the backs of my knees. I wore this with a black, figure-skimming turtleneck sweater and a pair of gorgeous, spike-heeled black boots that it was so much money I feared Billy was going to have a seizure when he saw the price on the side of the box. At my ears, I put in a pair of diamond studs that Billy had bought me, likely with dirty money. But they *were* diamonds, they didn't often help with the rent, so I kept them. On my wrist, I put on a silver Raymond Weil watch with its mother-of-pearl face and finished the ensemble with my black Lalique glass ring.

I couldn't afford all this, not with taking care of Billy and me. To fulfill my passion for labels, I saved and trolled for all my treasures, carefully hoarding money or trawling nearly new shops. Not to mention, I was addicted to browsing auction sites for other people's glamorous castoffs. I did it as a hobby. I did it because I loved nice things and lately, I did it to remind myself of the things I had left behind when I let myself fall in love with Billy. This also served as a reminder of why I had to find a way to get rid of him.

I spritzed with Boucheron, threw my little Fendi bag over my shoulder (bought for a third of its retail price, never used, from a soon-to-be divorcee. And at her pre-divorce yard sale), programmed the address in the sat nav, and headed to Uncle Tex's house.

He wasn't home.

I was surprised. It was Sunday, and for years Uncle Tex had never had a job, but I didn't reckon he was to be gallivanting around Denver.

ace that Though, in his latest letters it sounded like he was doing a fair amount of upgallivanting.

t like a I waited for a while and he didn't come home. So I went to a k-pleats booth, looked up Fortnum's bookstore and programmed the address in g wool nav.

at cost I found a parking spot on Broadway and walked up to the door, saw the opened at the corner of Bayaud and Broadway. It looked like a cool stids that but not in a trendy way, in the way that only long-standing, c and he establishments could be hip. That was, to say, naturally.

on my I walked into the store.

hed the And I loved it immediately. It smelled musty from what looked likeeed my of disorganized books shelved, from what I could see, willy-nilly at thoarding of the store.

online I loved to read. I loved books, libraries and bookstores, and this, I did it tell right away, was one of the best.

life I'd The front of the store was made up of the book counter to the left. ed as aright was a big espresso counter and all through the middle were tab chairs—armchairs and comfy couches, with low tables on which houlder coffees.

ivorcee I'd stopped when I'd entered and then my breath left me when I saw and the couches.

Sitting on the couches, all drinking coffee, were a bunch of men. I any men. It looked like *GQ* was having a convention and all the best left his guys had decided to have a coffee at Fortnum's before going to semioint of how to cope with being really, unbelievably, fucking gorgeous.

ount of There were five of them. Two looked a lot alike, like they were b
But, of the lot, it was only the one with the whisky-colored eyes that
t phone attention.

my sat They were all looking at me, but the minute my eyes hit Whisky
lightheaded and had to stand stock-still or I'd have fallen over in a dea

, which I knew what it was. It had happened before when I saw Billy: th
ore, hipattraction. But either it had been a long time or I didn't remember ho
ool-ass the feeling was, because it hit me like a freight train and I was throw
loop.

To cover this, I looked away and tried to walk calmly up to the e
ce acres counter where a female version of Whisky was serving, and was h
he back feminine brand of gorgeous. She was watching the guys then she lo
me, grinning like something was deeply amusing.

I could “Can I help you?” she asked.

I'd forgotten why I was there, which was looking for my Uncle T
On the did what anyone would do when confronted with an espresso mac
les and ordered a skinny latte with caramel syrup.

to set “Gotcha,” she said then went to work on my drink, and I realize
holding on to the counter for dear life and utilizing all the powers I ha
;canned look back toward the couches to see if Whisky was still checking me o

Please, God, let Whisky still be checking me out, I thought.

Not just Then I gave my head a firm shake to get rid of my idiot thou
looking needed Whisky to be checking me out like I needed someone to drill a
nars on my head. Which was, to say, not at all.

A fantastic redheaded woman, who I knew from Uncle Tex's desc
had to be Indy, walked behind the counter.

rothers. She smiled at me.

got my I smiled back, and as Whisky was no longer in my line of sight (and I could actually feel him in the room), I remembered why I was there. I felt opened my mouth to say something to her when the bell over the door rang and I fainted. “I’m not speaking to you,” a woman said in a voice that was both fatal and obviously full of shit, and I turned to see who had come in.

w huge It was like Fortnum’s was For Gorgeous People Only. They needed a sign for a so normal people wouldn’t wander in unwittingly and develop inferiority complexes.

spresso A tall and tremendously handsome Mexican man with a very dark hair and a blonde woman was entering, obviously in the middle of a light-hearted conversation. I knew this because I’d watched my parents have millions of them.

“You’re so full of shit.” He said what I had thought and grinned like this was a lovable trait.

ex, so I “What’s shakin’?” the brunette behind the counter asked the couple. I “I’ll tell you what’s *not* shakin’. I’m *not* moving in with Eddie.” The blonde replied, glaring at the man at her side.

d I was Holy cow!

d not to I stared.

ut. Tex had told me about Jet, and how Jet had a crush on Eddie, and Eddie was trying to capture Jet’s attention, but even though she had a crush on him, Jet was having none of it. That was in one of my last letters I received it only a few weeks ago.

riptions Now they were talking about moving in together.

Boy, Eddie was a fast one.

“You are,” Eddie retorted, still looking down at Jet.

“Eddie won’t let me work at Smithie’s. Or I should say, Eddie *th* there. I won’t let me work at Smithie’s,” Jet told the brunette.

“I think you should let her work at Smithie’s.”

This came from the couches. I braved a look at them, wondering Smithie’s was. The comment came from a Native American guy with a signblack hair pulled into a ponytail at the base of his neck, cheekbones to die for and a shit-eating grin on his face.

I also noticed Whisky was no longer looking at me, but smiling prettywinking at Jet.

I felt my heart contract.

I tore my eyes away and saw Eddie was raising his brows to Jet like point had been made.

It was a weird feeling, knowing these people and not knowing them at the same time.

“I thought you were moved in with Eddie?” Indy asked, and I turned around to look at her.

“It was temporary,” Jet answered.

She caught my gaze swinging back to her and she gave me a smile and howbefore she stomped behind the counter. The stomping was obviously a crushshow. Still, I could appreciate that she was good at it. My mom would give her a high five for form *and* execution.

This left me looking at Eddie. He noticed me, and his black gaze scanned the length of me. I immediately got the strange sense that he did not like what he saw. Not that every guy who looked at me, especially guys who

obviously *very with* pretty girls, had the instant hots for me, but still
inks he strange. It made me feel wrong, like I was invading, not wanted a
welcome.

I got this sense because his eyes, which were liquid with warm
ig what tenderness when he looked at Jet, turned completely blank when they
h shiny on me, and Eddie didn't strike me as a blank kind of guy.

ies and Then he turned, completely dismissing me, and walked to the couch

I also turned, feeling funny about his reaction. I shook it off, put n
ng and to the couches (because I needed to focus and another glance at 't
would make me lose that focus, I knew this like I knew my favorite d
was Armani) and I faced the espresso counter.

The redhead, brunette and blonde were all talking behind the big
re some machine, looking like the *Witches of Eastwick*, but prettier and scarier
n at the the redhead was Indy and the blonde was Jet, that left the brunette a
and she was most definitely related to the brothers at the couches.
meant (from what I knew from Uncle Tex's letters) Whisky was eitl
turned (which would be bad as I knew he was with Indy) or Hank (which w
bad because Tex told me Hank was a cop, and thus not likely eve
interested in the likes of me—a gangster moll, or whatever I was).

ll smile “I think you should move in with Eddie,” Ally was saying, finisl
isly all my drink.

ld have “I'm trying to break up with him,” Jet returned.

I gasped, because even if he dismissed me, who in their right mind
shifted break up with Eddie? He was gorgeous.

ke what They all looked to me.

io were “Don't worry,” Jet assured me with another smile. She was

l it was normally, but her smile made her spectacular. “I already tried to b
and notwith him, but it didn’t take.”

I nodded.

nth and “I know the feeling,” I said, and I did, but I hoped this Eddie g
locked nothing like Billy because I could tell I’d like Jet. She might have met
she also had spunk.

hes. All their faces got curious at my comment.

ay back “Here’s your coffee,” Ally told me, handing me a paper cup.

Whisky I took it and set it on the counter. “What do I owe you?”

esigner Ally gave me the damage, I gave her the money, and then she
forward and asked, “What did you mean, you know the feeling? Do yo
; coffee a boyfriend you can’t get rid of? I know it’s nosy, but I’m asking ’ca
r. Since brother’s sitting over there and he’s been staring at you since the mom
is Ally, walked in the door like he wants to rip your fancy-ass clothes off.”

Which I bit my lip and just stopped myself from looking over my s
her Lee toward the couches.

ould be I was right. This was Ally, and since Indy was standing there, a
r to be wasn’t likely to point out that Indy’s boyfriend Lee wanted to rip my
hing up off, then we were talking about Hank.

Unattached, as far as I knew, but still a cop.

I didn’t question the fact that Ally would say something like thi
her brother to me. She seemed the kind of girl who called them like s
l would them.

I leaned forward and made my first mistake of many that were to

“Are we talking about Whisky?” I whispered, mainly because I could
pretty

break up myself.

“Whisky?” Indy leaned in.

“The one with the whisky-colored eyes,” I answered.

Indy smiled at the other two, then all three smiled at me.

“That’s him,” Indy confirmed.

“Are you Indy?” I asked, just to be sure.

She blinked, her face registering surprise.

“Yes,” she answered. “Do I know you?”

“I’m looking for Tex MacMillan. He says he works here.”

Her face changed, and I could see she was shifting straight into hen mode.

Yep, I was right. This had to be Indy.

But it was Jet who responded to me. “Who wants to know?” she also, I noted, in mother hen mode.

I looked at Whisky’s sister. She was not in mother hen mode. Ally rocketed straight to lioness mode, ready to tear me limb from limb if even a hint that I was there for anything but a happy purpose.

I decided it was best to tell them quickly that it was a happy purpose. They didn’t need to know about Billy.

“I’m Roxanne Logan. Tex is my uncle.”

The two hens and the lioness disappeared instantly as three dropped open and they stared in frank astonishment at me.

Then Whisky’s sister shouted so loud I could actually feel all their help eyes at the couch area swiveling to look, “You have got to be *fuckin’*

me!” After that, for some bizarre reason, she threw her head back and laughed. Both Indy and Jet were laughing too, Indy so much she wrapped her hands around her middle and leaned over a bit.

“I don’t believe it!” Jet yelled.

What in *the* fuck?

I stared at them like they’d lost their minds, which I feared they had when Ally turned to the couches and shouted, “You are *not* going to tell me who this is!”

“No, don’t...” I said to her, and I looked out the corner of my eye at the couches and saw they were all watching me, most especially Whimpy mother Hank, his eyes somehow managing to look both alert and lazy.

I felt the dizziness hit me again and I quickly looked away.

The bell over the door went just as Ally announced, “This is Roxie, Tex’s fucking *niece!*”

I closed my eyes, took in a deep breath and put my hand on the couch.

She’d “Roxie?”

I gave It was said in a soft boom. I’d never heard a soft boom, but that was the only way to describe it.

use, sort I opened my eyes, turned and stared at an older version of my brother, an older version with a wild-ass beard. He was nearly as tall as he was now, which made him humongous. Barrel-chested, blond-headed with dark eyes and a russet beard. He was wearing a flannel shirt and a pair of jeans and there was a very pretty older woman at his side, leaning heavily in his arms, holding on to him with one arm while the other arm dangled strangely.

shittin’ “Uncle Tex?” I asked quietly but knew it was him, and I felt tears

ck and up my throat. As usual I couldn't control them. Even though I tried to swallow them, they filled my eyes and started sliding down my cheeks

“Jesus Jones! Roxie!” Tex gently disengaged from the woman, who was standing somewhat unsteadily on her two feet with a nod to him and a smile at her. Then he took two gigantic strides towards me.

I put my hands up to give him a hug, but they glanced off his chest. To my shock he bent low, grabbing me around my thighs just above my knees, and he lifted me up and swung me around in a full circle.

“Roxanne Giselle Logan, the most beautiful fuckin’ girl in the fuckin’ world!” he boomed, full on this time.

My nose started stinging and I sucked both my lips in to control them, but it was too late. I was crying flat out.

“Uncle Tex,” I laughed through my tears, holding on to his shirt. “Put me down.”

He did and I landed hard on my high-heeled boots. He put his big hands on either side of my head, yanked me forward and planted a kiss on top of my head. Then he shoved me back, keeping his hands where they were. He stared at me for a long time.

Then his eyes grew soft and even a little misty, and his voice was like a low boom when he said, “Fuckin’ A, girl, you look exactly like your mother.”

I held on to his arms.

“That’s what Dad says,” I told him.

Uncle Tex kept staring.

“Fuckin’ A,” he whispered, and to my total and complete mortification

tried to make one of those loud, crying hiccoughs.

He let go of my head and engulfed me in a hug. I put my arms around him, closed my eyes and pressed my cheek to his chest.

It would seem Uncle Tex wasn't going to close the door on me and like I'd been blessed. I let out a deep breath and allowed myself a massive smile through my tears.

He held me for a long time and I held him right back.

"I'd look forward to your letters every month. I would never have been through prison if it wasn't for you, Roxie darlin'. Never," he said to me, but his voice was still loud.

I just nodded my head against his chest, tears flowing freely now, incapable of controlling it and no longer wanted to. What he said meant the world to me, and that he had the courage to say it meant even more.

"Been waitin' a long time, Roxie, to give you a hug. A long, long handtime."

My arms spasmed around him and I held on tight.

"Me too," I whispered.

His arms pulled me deeper into him and he squeezed the breath out of my lungs.

I opened my eyes and looked straight into Whisky's. I couldn't tell him as Hank, not yet. Right then he had to be just Whisky to me. He was watching me, leaned back in the couch, the sole of one of his boots resting on the edge of a table. But now his expression was different. Laziness was long gone and his eyes were totally alert.

"Uncle Tex," I started, still looking at Whisky, in fact, entirely un-

tear my eyes from his. “I...can’t...breathe.”

around That was when Whisky smiled.

If I thought I couldn’t breathe before, I was wrong. Whisky’s smile and I felt so damn good it made me forget how to breathe entirely.

private “Sorry, darlin’.” Tex let me go, grabbed on to my arms and shook hard my head bobbed back and forth. “Yee ha!” he boomed, looked the room and slung an arm around my shoulders. “This is my niece, I made it he announced to all and sundry (like they didn’t already know).

oftly to He jerked me around and my head snapped back.

“Nance, meet my niece.”

7. I was I let my brain juices calm down and then smiled dazedly at the want the woman who walked in with Uncle Tex.

“Hi, Roxie. I’m Nancy, Jet’s mother.” She shook my hand and then fuckin’ down on the arm of a chair in a way that made me think that if she had would have fallen over.

I glanced worriedly at her and her dangling arm, which appeared useless. I was about to move toward her to ask if she was all right when t of my jerked me around toward the espresso counter and my head snapped again, then again as he yanked me forward.

hink of “Indy, woman, Ally, Loopy Loo, get your asses over here and my was still niece,” he ordered and they came forward.

ted feet I was right about all of them. Ally was Whisky’s sister. Loopy Loo ent, the obviously (for some reason) Tex’s nickname for Jet.

Then I was introduced to Lee and I learned the latest news. Lee was able to Indy’s fiancé and I noticed he had dark-brown eyes. Vance, the

American was next. Then Mace, who I guessed had some native Hawaiian Polynesian in him and he was almost as tall as Tex. He also had fine jade-green eyes. After Mace was Matt, a good-looking blond guy the same height. Last, Eddie. I'd already figured that out, but didn't tell Tex. Luckily the announcement of blood relation to Tex made Eddie's countenance toward me melt a bit.

"And finally, Whisky. Or as Tex introduced him, Hank Nightingale. Roxie!"

Hank Nightingale.

Jesus.

Be still my heart.

"That was a great, fucking name."

Hank's hand came out. I put mine in his and immediately pulled my bottom lip between my teeth when our skin made contact.

"*Shit, Roxie, pull yourself together*, I thought and took a breath, for my teeth to let go of my lip and tried to smile (and failed miserably). Luckily I didn't notice as his eyes were doing a full body scan, and then they came back to Tex and locked on mine just as Tex jerked me in another direction.

Hank's hand let mine go, but instead of moving away, as the other hand his fingers wrapped around my upper arm and he pulled me gently but firmly, away from Uncle Tex and toward him. Then more toward his hand sliding down my arm. Then more, his fingers circling my wrist. Then more, his hand finding and wrapping around mine. And finally, I was on the other side, our shoulders nearly touching.

Uncle Tex looked around, his eyes narrowing on Hank, but before he could speak, Hank did.

“I know you’re excited Roxie’s here,” he said in a low, soft voice. “But maybe you should get a little control so she doesn’t get whiplash.”

My heart fluttered and I leaned into him a bit. I didn’t mean to. I didn’t even want to. My body just did it like it had a mind of its own (it of course, have a mind of its own, it just wasn’t working at that moment).

My shoulder hit Hank’s bicep. The second it did his hand squeeze and my throat closed with fear that he might drop my hand and move away.

He didn’t.

This was good for two reasons. One, if he did, I’d have toppled over like a tree, and two, I liked that he was holding my hand.

Uncle Tex looked at me, then he looked at Hank, then he looked at me. He took a step back and looked at the both of us. We were so close. I could feel the heat from Hank’s arm burning through my sweat-soaked shirt. His hand tight on mine, and I was beginning to feel faint again. My eyes flicked to Uncle Tex’s, and when he saw it he grinned.

“Fuckin’ A, Roxie. Right on!” Uncle Tex boomed, and I stared at him, knowing what in *the hell* he was talking about.

“What?” I asked.

Uncle Tex didn’t answer me. He looked to Mace and Vance and then back at me. “You boys gotta learn to move faster or all the good ones’ll be *gone*.”

To this I heard Hank laugh softly next to me. I looked at him and he looked at me. We were back to lazy, but now they were also amused, and I could swear, there was an intensity that made my heart start to race.

I tore my eyes away and looked back at Uncle Tex.

ice that “What?” I repeated.

you can Again, Uncle Tex ignored me as Nancy moved carefully toward
grabbed on to his arm. She leaned into him and he took her weight na
I didn’t as if this had happened many times before.

did, of She smiled at me. “Why don’t you and Tex come over to my pl
dinner? Maybe we can talk Jet into cooking for us.”

d mine, Without hesitation, Tex turned toward Jet and boomed, “Make
fuckin’ brownies with the caramel, Loopy Loo. It’s a special
occasion!”

ver like I jumped at this latest boom and Hank let go of my hand and
away. I felt his loss like a physical blow and I closed my eyes tight to
back at away.

tanding The last time this had happened to me, I’d lost seven years of my
ater, his Billy.

weakly It wasn’t going to happen to me again, no way.

No...fucking...way.

red not I hadn’t even gotten rid of Billy. I certainly didn’t need the troubl
Hank Nightingale had written all over him.

This trouble was worse. This trouble said loud and clear that Hank
eclared, eventually find out about Billy and realize what a fucking moron I v

Hank would never hold my hand again. Don’t ask me how I knew thi
his eyes knew this like I knew that Manolo Blahnik made the best shoes in hist

behind I opened my eyes again and Nancy was watching me.

“You okay?” she asked softly.

I nodded but replied, just as softly, “I was going to ask you th

thing.”

us and “Stroke,” she answered, without hesitation. “Nearly nine months ago naturally, I moved toward her and then stopped when Eddie came in my per-
vision.

lace for “I’m so sorry,” I whispered, not attempting to get any closer and
weirdly scared of Eddie.

e those “I’m getting better every day,” Nancy told me.

fuckin’ I smiled at her. “That’s fantastic.”

She smiled back. It was a glamorous smile, like her daughter’s.

moved “Holy cow, Nancy. Jet and you have the same smile,” I noted.

push it

“Don’t tell Jet.”

7 life to

“Why not?”

“She won’t believe you.”

Eddie came in close to Nancy and took her weight from Tex when
Indy shout, “Let’s have a big old party!”

ble that Tex moved away and boomed, “Now you’re talkin’, woman!”

I looked at Eddie and he was watching me, his black eyes no longer
but active. I glanced away, feeling that he knew my secrets, and I wanted
to keep them to myself.

s. I just It was then I noticed with alarm that the *Witches of Eastwick* had
cry. themselves wholeheartedly into planning the impromptu party.

I wasn’t sure this was a good idea.

“I’m not getting a good feeling about this,” I said to Nancy and
e same since he was there.

“I’m not either,” Eddie agreed in a tone that made a shiver go across my skin.

Nancy patted my arm quickly then grabbed on to Eddie again.

“It’ll be fine,” she assured, grinning at Tex.

“I’ll make the caramel layer squares,” Jet offered, walking up to linking her arm through his and putting her head on his shoulder, obviously deciding their tiff was over.

“Damn straight, Loopy Loo,” Tex replied.

“I’ll get the booze,” Ally said, also arriving at our group.

“Where are we having it?” Indy asked, coming up beside me. A man materialized next to her and his arm went across her shoulders as he wrapped around his waist. He was looking at me and he kind of scared me too, in a general way and in an Eddie way.

“It can’t be at Tex’s place. We’ll get cat hair in the caramel squares,” I heard her remarked, and I saw Hank come up behind her. He wrapped both of his arms around her neck and yanked her back into his chest, playful and rough. He would do that to me. Heck, Gil *had* done that to me.

They were close, you could tell. All of them, everyone around me. Mace, Vance and Matt, who’d joined our enormous huddle. The whole family, and they’d taken in Uncle Tex as one of their own. This moment I was thrown simultaneously happy for Uncle Tex because he finally had this, and for me because I never would.

“Cats!” Tex boomed and turned to me. “Roxie, darlin’, you got to get rid of Eddie, the cats.”

I looked up at him and grinned. “I can’t wait.” And this was the

ross my Uncle Tex had been talking about his cats for years.

“Nancy, you okay with Jet?” Tex asked.

Nancy nodded.

“Good. You all figure it out, tell us where to be. Roxie and me go
Eddie, catchin’ up to do,” Tex declared, grabbing on to me. “Darlin’ girl
viously goin’ to go meet the cats.”

Then Uncle Tex dragged me out of the store.

I hadn’t taken even a sip of my caramel latte.



ie. Lee I DID HAVE the chance to turn around.

rs went I caught Indy’s eye and I mouthed, “*Thank you.*”

both in She cocked her head and smiled a confused smile before I was
through the door.

s,” Ally She had no idea what I was talking about, but I didn’t care. I had t
is arms all the same, for my Grams, my mom, my aunts and myself.

gh. Gil



I DIDN’T LOOK at Hank.

e, even Hank had ceased to exist for me.

y were He had to.

ade me For his own good and mine.
sad for

to meet

e truth.

Uncle Tex had been talking about his cats for years.

“Nancy, you okay with Jet?” Tex asked.

Nancy nodded.

“Good. You all figure it out, tell us where to be. Roxie and me got some catchin’ up to do,” Tex declared, grabbing on to me. “Darlin’ girl, we’re goin’ to go meet the cats.”

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I DID HAVE the chance to turn around.

I caught Indy’s eye and I mouthed, “*Thank you.*”

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She had no idea what I was talking about, but I didn’t care. I had to say it all the same, for my Grams, my mom, my aunts and myself.



I DIDN’T LOOK at Hank.

Hank had ceased to exist for me.

He had to.

For his own good and mine.

THREE



NAUGHTY GIRL MARTINI

This is how it got better, and worse.



I MET THE CATS.

There were a lot of them. As in *a lot*.

Some of them Uncle Tex was getting paid to watch, most of the Uncle Tex's.

“Is it legal to have this many cats?” I asked, jiggling a laser light wall and watching a cat named Petunia, who had splotches of ginger splotches of white, try to crawl up the wall to get at the red dot.

“Nope,” Tex answered, standing by where I was sitting on his couch gazing at my laser cat play like I was the Master Cat Queen and no one jiggled a laser light as well as me.

I couldn't help myself. Even with all that was on my mind, I liked. After all these years and all our letters, it was good to know Uncle Tex the same way about me as I felt about him.

“I thought Hank and Eddie were cops. Do they know about your case went on.

“Those boys have had bigger fish to fry these past months. Wh

Indy gettin' kidnapped and shot at all the time and Jet wrestlin' with shark carryin' a knife and runnin' from a crazy rapist."

The red dot arrested on the wall as I blinked at Tex.

"Petunia's goin' loco, darlin' girl, jiggle!" Tex ordered, staring wall.

"Kidnapped...shot at...rapist..." I said, or kind of spluttered.

Uncle Tex turned to me. "It's a long story."

"I think we have time."

"It's actually *two* long stories" he amended.

"I still think we have time."

He sat down next to me on the couch, took the laser light away from where and started jiggling it another direction, trying to get a cat named interested.

on the "Rocky's too damn lazy, gettin' fat," he muttered.

ger and "Uncle Tex."

He sighed.

ich and Then he told me two long stories.

e could



"CAN WE CALL MOM?" I asked.

ughed.

Tex felt

I'd gotten over Indy and Jet's stories of murder, gunplay, pot farm club mayhem, knife wielding men, rampant kidnapping and assault by a shot of Uncle Tex's homemade, gut-dissolving hooch (okay, maybe cats?" I two shots, one for each story).

"Not ready for that," Tex answered.

at with

at a loan I nodded. I'd give him time. Hopefully, one day, when my love I sorted out, we'd have all the time in the world. Then I leaned into h put my head on his shoulder and, surprise of surprises, he let me.

at the "You wanna tell me why you're here?" he asked in his soft boom.

I stiffened then sighed.

"Not ready for that," I said. "But soon."

I felt him nod and then he rested his head on top of mine. "Tell thing. You through with him?"

He meant Billy.

I closed my eyes then opened them. "I'm working on it."

from me He nodded against my head. "Good."

Rocky



UNCLE TEX TOOK me to get my car so I could go back to my hotel r rest and get ready for the party. When I got out of his car, he told me Denver people wore jeans.

"Give me your cell phone number so I can get hold of you," talking to him through his open window.

"Don't have a cell."

I stared at him.

is, strip Then he slammed War into the 8-track player (yes, I said *8-track* / taking hurtled down Broadway with "Low Rider" blaring from the speakers: it took bronze El Camino.

Uncle Tex, I realized quickly, was kind of living in the 70s and did like leaving it.

I went to my hotel, asked at reception where the nearest mall w

ife wasdrove to Cherry Creek. I went directly to the nearest phone store and
im andUncle Tex a cell phone. He could have his 8-track, but he was also g
goddamned cell phone. Not having one in this day and age was sheer l

Okay, so Uncle Tex was as close to a functioning lunatic as I l
Billy notwithstanding—but still.

I went back to the hotel, changed out of my fancy Meet-Uncle-Tex
and put on a pair of corduroys that were kind of a cross between gre
me one gray and had a silvery sheen, because Denver might do jeans, but I di
least not at a party. Or, I should say, at least not at a party where
would be. Hank may have ceased to exist for me, but he hadn't a
ceased to exist, and I was relatively certain he was going to be at the p
girl had her pride. I kept the turtleneck and boots and threaded a
ribbon belt through the belt loops.

room to Then I turned on my cell.

that in Nine calls, nine voicemails, all from Billy, all getting steadily ang
angrier until the last one.

I said, "I'll find you Roxie."

I knew he would. I was counting on it.

One more time.

Then freedom.

ck) and



s of hisUNCLE TEX PICKED me up and I gave him the cell phone.

"I've charged it and put my number in it. You can pass it around th
ln't feeland get everyone's numbers," I told him.

as then "You should have saved your money, won't use it," he replied.

bought “Uncle Tex.”
 etting a “Won’t use it.”
 unacy. “Uncle Tex!”
 knew— “Darlin’ girl, that’s sweet but *I won’t use it.*”

I crossed my arms on my chest. “Okay then, I’ll pass it around th
 Outfit and get everyone’s numbers.”
 en and
 dn’t, at “Knock yourself out.”
 Whisky Uncle Tex never seemed stubborn in his letters.
 actually “Bet Nancy has a cell,” I tried.
 party. A I could be stubborn too.
 glittery Uncle Tex didn’t answer.

“So, what were you doing with Nancy this morning?” I asked.
 Uncle Tex still didn’t answer.
 rier and I looked at him. I could see his blush in the dark.
 “You like her!” I shouted (in a happy way).
 “Shee-it,” he muttered.
 “Uncle Tex and Nancy, sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g...” I sang.
 “How old are you?” he asked.
 “Thirty-one,” I told him something he already knew
 “Act it.”
 ie party Hee hee.



WE WENT TO A DUPLEX, the lights blazing on one side. The curtain
 open and there seemed to be a million people, shoulder to shoulder, ins

It was all the folks from that morning at Fortnum's plus Indy's neighbor a gay couple named Stevie and Tod. There was also a very pretty lady who looked a lot, and dressed a lot, like Dolly Parton (including the bodacious) named Daisy.

ie party Into this mix was thrown Indy's dad, Tom, Hank's parents, Malcom, Kitty Sue and Jet's mom's friends, Trixie and Ada.

Add a dash of a Harley guy with long, gray hair in a braid and a roan bandana tied around his forehead named Duke (I'd heard about Uncle Tex's letters, he worked at Fortnum's too), a serious stoner named "Kevster" (The Kevster didn't work at all), a couple of Indy and his girlfriends named Andrea and Marianne, and a bunch of guys, some cops, some of them worked for Lee. (I learned Mace, Vance and Mace worked for Lee at his private investigation service.)

Everyone but Daisy was wearing jeans, though Daisy was wearing a *skirt* encrusted with rhinestones at the hem, the pockets and along the sides.

Little did I know, this was a recipe for disaster for me.

At the time, I thought this party crush was a good thing. In fact, I was having fun. Uncle Tex had good friends. They seemed to like him a lot and I felt comfortable with them immediately. This meant I could enjoy the party. Maybe a bit too much, and maybe a bit too crazily, considering the fact that Daisy told me a story about her, Ally, Jet and Indy stun gunning women in a bar that made me double over laughing and nearly pee myself. Then Tod told me a story about Indy lip-synching with him during a show that made me shove him in the shoulder and shout "*Shut up!*" and everyone turned to stare. This also meant I could easily avoid Hank and his friends at the same time. Well, kind of. It wasn't a big duplex, but I tried real hard. side.

ghbors, I was doing pretty well, for a while.

dy who The trouble was it was a good party—nice, albeit slightly crazy.
ious ta—who enjoyed each other’s company and bowls of cashews, and ev
knew cashews equaled good party. Worse still, Indy was at the martini
lm and she made a mean dirty martini. So good, I had three before
realized it.

lled red Worse than that, and my fatal mistake a couple of hours into the
uke in took a bite of Jet’s chocolate caramel layer squares while Hank was
d “The vicinity.

Ally’s I didn’t know, no one warned me.

of them I bit in.

Matt all I chewed.

I closed my eyes in oblivious pleasure.

g a jean Then, I moaned.
seams.

I couldn’t help myself, they were that good.

, I was When I opened them, the Handsome Troop, including Lee, Eddie
ot and I Vance *and* Hank were all staring at me, and Lee and Eddie had lo
myself. scary looks.

act that Hank was looking at me like he wanted to take a bite out of *me*.

g some My heart skipped a beat and my head went dizzy.

y pants. I covered quickly.

a drag “What?” I asked after I swallowed. “They’re good.”
so loud

κ at the Uncle Tex’s hand went to the top of my head. “You can tel
family.”

Ally came up as Indy whisked empty martini glass number three from my hand and exchanged it with full martini glass number four, better known to all as Naughty Girl Martini.

"Heard you bought Tex a cell phone," Ally said.

"Yeah!" I replied, maybe a bit more excitedly than a new cell phone warranted, and I pulled it out of my pocket. "I'm getting everyone's number for him. What's your number?" I flipped it open, bent my head and pushed in the buttons that would add numbers to the phonebook.

"I'm not gonna use it," Uncle Tex declared.

"Trust me, you'll use it," I told him.

"Waste of good fuckin' money," Uncle Tex replied.

I looked up and scowled at him.

"I'm telling you, Uncle Tex, you'll use it!" It wasn't so much telling him he'd use it as ordering him to use it.

He grinned. "Darlin' girl, you're cute when you're riled."

"And you're annoying when you're stubborn," I shot back and took a sip of martini (okay, maybe it was a gulp), thus catapulting myself into Naughty Girl Martini Land.

Uncle Tex just shook his head at me like I was funny.

My scowl darkened. "What happens when Nancy wants to get you when you're out in the El Camino? Hunh? What then?"

Uncle Tex's face got red, and it wasn't from anger. Or maybe, I don't know, she's say, it wasn't *entirely* from anger.

If I'd been paying attention (which I was not, I was too drunk to pay attention), I'd have noticed that all the women in my vicinity, including

out of Ally, Jet, Daisy and Trixie, smiled, and all the men, including Hank known Vance, Mace and Eddie, tensed.

“Roxie.” I heard a deep voice say from behind me.

It wasn’t a voice that was totally familiar to me, but I knew it anyway. It was Hank.

“Well?” I asked Uncle Tex, ignoring Hank and putting the hand I hit the cell to my hip.

“Roxanne Giselle, you’re cruisin’ for a bruisin’,” Uncle Tex said in boom.

“Ha!” I replied. It wasn’t much of a comeback, but I felt Hank behind and it was all I could come up with.

Tex leaned in. Hank’s hand wrapped around my arm and he pulled me away from Uncle Tex’s threatening pose and back into his body. I was drunk for an evasive maneuver and anyway, I liked the feel of his hand against me.

Tex’s eyes went beyond me. “Nightingale, maybe you should take back and program your number into my new fuckin’ phone.”

“I’m thinkin’ that’s a good idea,” Hank said behind me.

Sanity returned and I was thinking it was a very, very bad idea.

Too late. Hank was steering me sideways, then forward, through the dining room. He grabbed a jacket off the back of a chair and then motioned through the kitchen and out the back door.



THAT’S when it all began.

The beginning of the end.

k, Lee,



THE COLD NIGHT air outside was like a slap in the face.

If I wasn't in Naughty Girl Martini Land, I would have sobered ins
ay. Unfortunately, I was deep in Naughty Girl Martini Land. So deep
skipping dazedly through the Naughty Girl Martini forest and leapin
with the the Naughty Girl Martini streams, completely oblivious to everything.

I shoved the cell phone in my back pocket and turned to face Hank
n a low "Uncle Tex is stubborn," I shared, sounding uppity.

Hank had flipped on the outside light and there was a streetligh
ind me alley behind Indy's house. Both illuminated us and I watched as he
up to me and threw out the jacket. His arm came around one side of
lled me other hand came up on the other side to catch the edge and settle the
was too around my shoulders. Both his hands pulled the jacket closed at my n
is body stayed there.

I warmed up immediately, even as I shivered.

her out "Think that runs in the family," Hank remarked.

"I'm not stubborn!" I retorted, though I knew I was.

"Right," he replied, but his lips were twitching.

"We should go in there, show Uncle Tex how to use his phone. It
igh the for emergencies and if the stories he's been telling me are anything to
ved me there are a fair number of emergencies amongst you all."

Hank's eyes locked on mine. "Gotta admit, that's the truth."

"Whisky, it's not only the truth, it's an understatement."

His hands flexed and he came closer. My body stilled at his
invasion of my space.

“Whisky?” he asked softly, his namesake eyes going languid, a heart skipped in my chest.

I ignored his question, his eyes and my heart and leaned back, I wasn't so far gone into Naughty Girl Martini Land to lose my safety belt over *that* much.

I went on doggedly, “From what I read in his letters, Uncle Tex told you. If *you* told him to use the phone, he might do it.”

“I think it might be a good idea if you leave the phone alone.”

I tilted my head to the side and narrowed my eyes at him. Before I walked say anything, he asked, “Not stubborn?”

“Nope,” I lied immediately.

“Right.” Then he grinned, full on this time.

“Stop grinning at me, Whisky. I'm not stubborn.”

“Next thing, you'll tell me you're not high maintenance.”

I gasped. “I'm not!”

I was. I was totally high maintenance.

His eyes moved over my face. “Jesus. Yesterday, if someone told Tex's niece looked like you, I would've laughed at them. *Acted* like maybe. *Looked* like you, no way.”

“What do you mean by that?” I snapped.

“I mean stubborn, full of attitude, a little crazy.”

“I'm not crazy!” I *was* crazy, though not as crazy as Uncle Tex.

“Right,” Hank said again.

“You've known me, what? Ten seconds? And you think you have

and my figured out.”

“Sweetheart, I had you figured out the minute you walked a bit. I figured you out.”

I felt my breath catch then lock.

With effort, I unlocked it and exhaled. I decided to push the issue and ask me why, it was stupid. Then again, I was a little hammered (okay, a lot hammered).

“And you think I look high maintenance?”

“Eddie called it and Eddie’s right,” he stated.

Good God. They’d been talking about me.

“So that’s why Eddie doesn’t like me,” I said.

His grin faded, his hands fell away and he moved back.

I didn’t like this. I liked his hands where they were. They made me feel warm, and if I was honest, safe.

“Eddie doesn’t have a lot of patience for high maintenance,” he replied.

“Eddie doesn’t know me well enough to throw me, and neither do you,”

“Eddie’ll get to know you and he’ll get over it. I’m already over it.”

I didn’t want him to be over it. I didn’t want him to be anything.

This wasn’t strictly true, but I was trying to go with that thought and hope I could, considering I was highly inebriated.

Hank was watching me and I could tell he was reading my thoughts.

“How long are you staying in Denver?” he asked.

“Awhile,” I answered vaguely.

“How long is awhile?” he pushed.

ed into “I haven’t decided yet.”

“Long enough to have dinner with me?”

Holy cow.

. Don’t I’d read it in Uncle Tex’s letters, but now it was right here in front
maybe When they wanted something, these Denver boys *did not* fuck around.

I blinked at him.

“What?” I asked.

“You heard me.”

I blinked again.

“That isn’t a good idea,” I replied and threw out my arm for empha

me feel Unfortunately, the hand attached to my arm was still carrying a
and it sloshed all over the bricks paving the backyard *and* on Hank’s ja

’ Hank “Shit! I’m sorry,” I said, turning to put the glass on a table and
toward the door, using this as what I considered a golden opportu
execute an escape plan. “I’ll go and get a towel.”

you.” Hank caught my arm and stopped me.

” Escape plan thwarted.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said.

s best I “I got vodka on your jacket.”

“It’ll clean.”

s. I stared at him. “It won’t clean. It’s suede. Dammit, it’s soaking t
I’ll buy you a new one.”

“You aren’t buyin’ me a new jacket.”

“I am, this’ll be ruined,” I told him. “We have to get a towel.”

“You’re avoiding my question,” Hank pointed out.

“You’re avoiding the vodka stain!” I returned.

I was avoiding his question. I was avoiding it with everything I had
of me. He drew me closer to him.

“Let’s get back to dinner. Tomorrow night. I’ll pick you up at six
Where are you staying?”

I shook my head. “Uncle Tex and I’ll be playing with the cats.”

It wasn’t good, but it was the best I had.

He drew me closer.

“Is there a reason you don’t want to have dinner with me?” he asked.

Yes, there was a reason. There were millions of them. None of which
was going to share, the biggest of which was Billy.

“No,” I lied.

“Where are you staying?” Hank, obviously, could be stubborn too.

“Listen, Whisky, I’m here to see my uncle, then I’m gone.”

He drew me even closer, pulling me in front of him so that my
nearly brushed his chest. He looked down at me and smiled.

My mind went blank and I stared.

It might sound stupid, but his smile was breathtaking. He had great

“Sweetheart,” he said in a low voice. “You were here to see you
through, until you stepped into Fortnum’s and saw me and I saw you. You know
I know it. You want me to convince you. I’m prepared to do that.”

Yowza.

My stomach pitched and I could feel my breasts swell. So much so surprised they didn't poke him in the chest.

I wanted him to convince me. I wanted that a lot. Maybe that was said what I said next.

“You have no idea why I'm here.”

His face came closer to mine, and for some reason I didn't move.

I really should have moved.

His eyes looking into mine, he said, “No, I don't. But you'll tell r dinner tomorrow night.”

“I don't think so.”

“I do.”

I started to panic, mainly because I was realizing if I didn't get a was going to kiss me.

I pulled at my arm. “I need to go inside.”

The hand not on my arm came to my hip and his fingers bit in gentle but firm, holding me where I was.

“Where are you staying?” he asked.

My heart started racing. “Let me go.”

“I see I have to convince you.” He said this like it was an advantage turn of events that pleased him a great deal.

I was going to say no. I should have been quicker about it, but his my hip pulled mine into contact with his. His head came down and he it and me.

Good God.

s why I), I was It was true. These Denver boys *did not* fuck around. It wasn't a gentle kiss, a brush or touch of the lips. It was a *kiss* kiss, his mouth c
lover mine, his tongue insistent against my lips until they parted (wh
afraid to admit didn't take a lot of insisting) and then his tongue slid in

His fingers stopped biting into my hip, mainly because I'd lean
him. My arms lifted and slid around his neck and my left hand went
hair. I tilted my head to the side and kissed him back.

ne over I couldn't help it, it was the best kiss I'd ever had. It beat even
finest mouth talents by a mile.

When he lifted his head, I kept my eyes closed and breathed, "Holy
"Where are you staying?" he asked against my mouth.

way, he "Marriott Towneplace Suites on Speer."

"The old Hirschfeld Press building?"

to me, I nodded, still feeling a bit dizzy from the kiss and warm an
pressed up against his hard body, even though the vodka-stained jac
fallen off my shoulders.

"Sunshine, open your eyes," he whispered.

I opened my eyes and he was grinning at me.

tageous "Now I have another question," he continued.

Shit.

hand at I'd already said too much.

e kissed I fought against the Naughty Girl Martini pull and his hand at my
around my waist and held me close. The other one went to my neck.

I lost my fight against the Naughty Girl Martini pull.

soft or “Why’d you thank Indy before you left Fortnum’s?” he queried.
opening I stared at him for a second, not remembering. Then I remembered.
ich I’m As this wasn’t a dangerous question, I answered, “She brought Un
side. to me.”
ed into His arm tightened and his thumb slid across my jaw. “How’s tha
into his two are close.”

Billy’s I shook my head. “Until today, I’d never met him.”
He blinked, slow.

7 cow.” “Seriously?” he asked.

My hands moved to press against his chest, but he didn’t move
gave up and left my hands where they were.

“Seriously,” I answered. “We’ve been writing to each other since
little girl, but we’d never met. He cut the family off after he got back f
id cozy war. He talked only to me and only through letters.”

ket had “Christ,” Hank muttered.

“He’s been writing about you all for months and I know Indy got
his block and gave him a job. I thought it was time to try and see him a
hoping I can get him back to the family.”

His eyes locked on mine. “That why you’re here?”

It wasn’t, not entirely. It was too important to lie about so I didn’t
at all.

hip slid “Have you asked him to go home with you?” Hank went on.

I nodded. “Kind of, but he’s not ready yet.”

“I expect you won’t give up.”

I shook my head.

“Good girl,” he whispered.

His approval felt like he’d wrapped his jacket around me again.

“Will you let me go now?” I requested.

His hand slid along my neck and then into my hair from the bottom the back of my head. “After you promise me you’ll be at the Marriott tomorrow at six thirty when I come to pick you up.”

“I promise,” I fibbed with great remorse.

I was going to be nowhere near the Marriott, even though I was away. I could be.

He shook his head. “You know I’m a cop?”

I nodded.

“You know Lee owns a private investigation service?”

My brows drew together, but I nodded again.

“You know all the boys on his payroll are experienced bounty hunters

My eyes widened. I didn’t know *that*.

“Really?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Hank answered.

“Why are you telling me this?”

answer

“‘Cause you aren’t at the Marriott, I’ll find you, or one of them who they’ll bring you to me.”

Holy cow.

My throat closed with fear and I swallowed hard to open it. “joking.”

“Nope.”

Boy, was I in trouble.

“Why?” I asked.

“You know why.”

1 to cup I did. I knew why. I knew exactly why.

Marriott Fatal attraction.

“Whisky—”

“Sunshine, promise me now and mean it.”

ished I I thought about it. I could have dinner with Hank. Then it would be
Then I’d find a time to tell Uncle Tex my plan, I’d place the breadcrumb
Billy to find me and go back to Chicago with him. Then, I’d get my
clothes and money from Annette, and with Uncle Tex’s help I’d disappear
long enough for Billy to forget me and move on.

In the meantime, I could have a pleasant memory—a nice meal
handsome guy.
ters?”

I sighed. “Okay, I promise to be at the hotel.”

I thought that’d be it, but his lips came down to mine, his hand at the
of my head tilting my face up and he kissed me again. It was a repeat
first, but better, if it could be believed.

When we finished, my arms were around his neck again.

ill, and “I’m gonna have to ask you to stop kissing me,” I whispered, and
myself I didn’t sound very convincing with my request.

He smiled.

‘You’re “I’m not gonna stop kissing you, but I’ll wait until tomorrow night

it again.” His hand fisted gently in my hair and his mouth went to
Then he said, “And, as soon as I can, I’m gonna taste more than your l

Good God. My head went dizzy, my breasts swelled again, my
got hard and my knees went so weak, I had to hold on tight.

“You’re moving too fast,” I breathed.

He kissed my neck then lifted his head and looked at me.

“Sweetheart, I intend to move so fast, you’ll be dizzy,” he promise

It was way too late for that.

e done.
mbs for
stash of
pear for

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he back
t of the

even to

it to do

it again.” His hand fisted gently in my hair and his mouth went to my ear. Then he said, “And, as soon as I can, I’m gonna taste more than your lips.”

Good God. My head went dizzy, my breasts swelled again, my nipples got hard and my knees went so weak, I had to hold on tight.

“You’re moving too fast,” I breathed.

He kissed my neck then lifted his head and looked at me.

“Sweetheart, I intend to move so fast, you’ll be dizzy,” he promised.

It was way too late for that.

FOUR



EYES WIDE OPEN

I was lying on a couch at Fortnum's, feet up on the armrest, knees bent, eyes closed, arm over my face, not caring if the customers thought I was a nutcase.

I was listening to Bruce Springsteen singing "Thunder Road" on my portable CD player, waiting for Uncle Tex to finish work and trying to forget last night.

After Hank took me back inside Indy's house, I accepted martini number five, or Stupid Girl Martini. If memory served, I spent the rest of the evening standing next to Hank, giggling myself silly. And I think I might have even spent some of that time holding his hand.

Good God.

Luckily, before I could get to martini number six, or Puking Girl Martini, Uncle Tex took me back to my hotel. I lay in bed until the room stopped spinning and fell asleep.

I woke up feeling like I'd been run over by a truck. I stood under a hot shower until I could pry open my eyes without them burning gaps into my skull. I did my massive Get Ready Preparations, full-on make-up, and flipped my hair. I opted for jeans, because everything went with jeans, and I didn't have the brain capacity to pull together a complete outfit. It was a Monday, and Hank would be working and I wouldn't run into him. I didn't need

Glamorous High Maintenance Girl until six thirty that night.

I topped the jeans with a fitted, white, collarless shirt that buttoned front and had several rows of miniature ruffles along the chest. I wore this with a Me&Ro choker on my neck and Me&Ro dangly hoops at my ears and a pair of silver ballet flats.

I stumbled into Fortnum's after maneuvering the four lanes of traffic on Broadway, and Uncle Tex, Duke and Indy all looked up at me through the line of customers.

"Shit, girl." Uncle Tex grinned as I made it to the counter, cutting in front of everyone and not giving a good God damn.

"Coffee," I breathed.

"Hey, I'm next," the man at the front of the line said.

I turned to him.

"I had five martinis last night and kissed a seriously hot guy I don't even know. *Twice*," I told him.

"You can go first," he replied.

Indy laughed.

I got my caramel latte and found out why Indy hired Uncle Tex. The coffee was sublime.

"Uncle Tex, this is beautiful," I told him.

"You got foam on your mouth," he said.

I licked it off.

Duke was staring at me.

Then he looked at Tex. "Couldn't we have, like, maybe a week before you get to be

next one rolled in the door?”

l up the “Gotta take life as it comes,” Uncle Tex returned with a shrug.

npleted I looked between them.

ny ears “What are they talking about?” I asked Indy, taking another sip.

ffic on She was digging in her purse. She pulled out a pill bottle, shook (ibuprofens and handed them to me.

ugh the “Tex tell you about Jet’s troubles?” she asked.

in front I sucked down the pills with another gulp of latte. “You mean th and the loan shark and her dad being in the hospital after being thrown moving car?”

The eyes of the customer next to me bugged out of his head.

I ignored him and Indy did too.

barely “Well,” she started, “that all finished up on Friday. You came Sunday. Seein’ as you and Hank, um...seem to be, um—”

I interrupted her, “Yeah, and...?”

“Well, I think Duke’s a little gun shy.”

he latte “Gun shy, hell. Hank is fucked.” He looked at me. “No offense but gonna run him through the mill, I can tell. And no doubt, we’ll all get up with him.”

I blinked.

“I’m only in town for a couple of days,” I said.

“I can see it comin’,” Duke retorted.

fore the “*Hallelujah!*” Uncle Tex boomed. “No lag this time. Keep ’im h darlin’ girl, that’s what I say.”

I looked to Indy.

“I think I might throw up,” I told her.

“Hungover?” she asked.

“That too.”

out two She laughed again, but I couldn’t figure out what was so funny.

At that point, Daisy powered in the door wearing a hot pink, skintight, Juicy Couture track suit with the top’s zipper unzipped to the waist. The outfit could only be called the Cleavage Danger Zone, and a braided terracotta bandana around her forehead, looking like Dolly Parton halfway merged into Jackie Stallone, but younger.

“Hey, Roxie! Popped by to see if you wanted to do a power walk while Tex is working,” she called out.

My stomach roiled. “I’m going to get a cheeseburger,” I replied.

Cheeseburgers with fries were the only hangover cure I knew worked. It only lasted fifteen minutes after the last fry was chewed and swallowed, but it was fifteen minutes of nirvana.

Daisy frowned. “Sugar bunch, cheeseburgers kinda defeat the purpose of a power walk.”

How did these people avoid hangovers? They’d all been right with a drink for drink. It was unreal.

I figured it had to be the altitude.

“Maybe you can power walk to the burger place and back,” she suggested.

“Maybe you can power walk to Siberia and stay there,” Duke put in.

I turned and scowled at Duke.

“Shee-it,” he said when he caught my scowl. “Hank is fucked.”

“Hank’s gonna be fucked, you ask me,” Daisy giggled, and it sounded like tinkling bells.

“I’ve entered a loony bin,” I told another unwitting customer, this one a female.

“It’s always like that around here,” the customer replied. “That’s the way it comes. It’s like walking into a sitcom that could only air on HBO.”

I wasn’t getting a good feeling about this.

Daisy grabbed my arm and power-walked me the few blocks to the food burger joint on the corner of Broadway and Alameda.

While we were standing in line waiting for my order, which consisted of an ultra-sized cheeseburger meal and four extra orders of ultra-sized french fries, the server said to me, “All right, tell Daisy *all* about it.”

“About what?” I asked.

“About whatever’s making your eyes sad.”

Holy cow. Was I that obvious?

“Nothing’s making me sad,” I lied.

She looked at me for a while. The counter guy passed me my burger, then she said, “When you’re ready to talk, I’m here, *comprende?*”

I nodded.

She let it go, left it at that, and I liked her all the more.

“Indy,” she said. “Though not enough to share, but I did feel badly about it.”

We walked back a lot slower, mainly because I was consuming my ultra-sized cheeseburger meal, and Daisy was programming my phone number.

my cell phone (just in case, her words).

ounded When we got to Fortnum's I handed out the fries, sucked down n
Coke (because even if I'd just hoovered through an ultra-sized mea
s one a was a girlie law that said you had to have it with a diet drink) and
another caramel latte.

s why I The customer rush was mostly gone. Daisy and Indy were talkin
book counter, Duke had disappeared and Uncle Tex was alone beh
espresso machine.

a fast- "I'm takin' it that your loser boyfriend is your loser fuckin' ex-bo
since you were holdin' hands with Hank last night," Uncle Tex remark

isted of I sighed. "Can we talk about it later?"

ies, she "Got a lot of respect for Hank. He's good people," Uncle Tex
"Tell me you're done with that weasely motherfucker."

"I'm done with Billy. I've been done with him for a long time. H
not done with me. I'm having dinner with Hank, but only becau
persuasive—"

"I bet," Uncle Tex broke in.

ag and "It's just dinner. Nothing more, not until I can finish up with Billy.

"Dinner may be just dinner in Chicago, but it ain't in Denver. The
don't fuck around, you know what I'm sayin'?" Tex asked.

I'd already learned that.

He went on, "Indy was livin' with Lee after 'bout *a day*. Jet w
Eddie, from my count, after less than a week. The way Hank's lookin'
y ultra-I'm guessin' less than forty-eight hours."

ers into Good God.

He continued, "I'm your fuckin' uncle and I like that boy enough
ny Diet I'd be doin' cartwheels, you end up with him."

l, there Boy, was I in trouble.

ordered "We'll talk about it later, okay?" I requested.

He stared at me awhile then he said, "Hang out in here for a few
g at the then we'll go someplace and talk. I don't want you wanderin' off and
ind the abducted or car bombed." My eyes bugged out and he shrugged. "It
known to happen."

yfriend Good grief.

ed.

I settled into the couch, chose Springsteen and made it through "C
Room," "Incident on 57th Street" and was enjoying "Thunder Roac
shared. though my hangover had come back with a vengeance, when I felt mo
beside me on the couch and something pressed against my hip.

e's just My eyes opened.

se he's Hank was sitting next to me, his hip against mine.

Shit.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

„

se boys For some reason, this made him smile and my stomach clutched.

He plucked the MP3 player out of my hand and turned it to lool
display. His eyes went lazy at what he saw, but he touched it with his
and the mega-blast of music powered down to seriously un-rock
as with levels.

at you, Then he leaned down. His fingers found the cord to the earphones
was resting against my chest. He tugged it and my right earphone pop
of my ear just as his lips made it there.

to say "You're shouting," he whispered.

Goddammit.

I was such a loser.

"Though, Springsteen is worth it," he finished.

hours "Don't you have a job?" I asked when his head came up.

gettin'
's been His hand went away from my chest and settled opposite my body
couch by my hip, making him lean into me all the more.

I was trying to ignore the fact that, although it wasn't even now
made a fool of myself at a used bookstore in Denver at least half a
Dandy's times.

I" even "Came by to get coffee," Hank answered.

vement "Oh."

"Want to have lunch?"

"I'm having lunch with Uncle Tex."

He looked at the coffee counter. I moved my head on the couch so
looked too. There were four people in line and two people waiting at
of the counter for their coffee. Uncle Tex was working the espresso machine
like a mad man, banging and crashing like each coffee needed to be
at the with as much violence as possible.

thumb "He might be delayed," Hank noted, looking back at me.

'n' roll "I just had an ultra-sized cheeseburger meal," I told Hank. "I
hungry."

, which His eyes drifted down my body then up to my face again. It'd been
ped out time since I'd done it, but I was pretty sure I was blushing.

“Then maybe you’ll keep me company while I have lunch,” he sug

“I don’t want to be around food, it’ll make me sick. I’m hu
Probably too hungover even to have dinner. I haven’t been this hu
since Purdue beat IU at Ross-Ade my senior year.”

“Then we’ll have a quiet night.”

r on the He had an answer for everything.

Before I could say anything, he commented, “You’re a Boilermake

on, I’d “Hoosier by birth, Boilermaker by the grace of God.”

a dozen It came out of my mouth by rote. I’d been saying it since I wa
nearly as long as I’d been saying, “Go, Cubbies, go.” I didn’t mean
cute, or flirty, or funny.

Hank’s look told me he took it all three ways.

I sat up, putting my elbows behind me so I was somewhat face-
with him. “Whisky, don’t get any ideas. My reflexes are slow. I’m s
sure about this dinner.”

eat and “You’re sure.”
the end

nachine “I’m *not*. I’m in Denver on personal business, business with Uncle
created don’t need you complicating matters.”

“What kind of personal business?” he queried.

“Business that’s *personal*,” I said in answer.

’m not He grinned. “Why don’t you walk me to my truck and I’ll do som
convincing that you want to carve some time for me out of you
a long schedule,” he pressed.

“No more convincing!” I shouted, and everyone looked ou
customers and all. I lowered my voice and hissed, “You promised, n

gested. tonight.”

ngover. “I can wait until tonight.”

ngover Good God, I’d walked straight into that one.

“You’re an arrogant sonovabitch,” I told him, flat out.

What could I say? I was hungover, and at home, there was another person sleeping in my bed.

er.” Okay, so maybe Billy was on the road, looking for me and not sleeping in my bed. And maybe Billy and I hadn’t had sex in over a year, even though I’d tried and was beginning to get pretty pissed off about my lack of recent sex. But still, I had to sort out Billy before any Hanks entered my future. *definitely* my present.

“Sunshine, you’re sensational even when you’re bein’ a bitch.”

-to-face I gasped.

still not Then I narrowed my eyes. “Don’t call me a bitch.”

“Let me get this straight, you can call me a sonovabitch but I can’t retaliate in kind?”

e Tex. I “That’s right.”

He smiled again.

I was majorly in trouble.

There was no shaking this guy.

ie more Maybe it was because I didn’t really want to shake him.

ir busy All right, it was time to get serious.

“Whisky, you have no idea what you’re getting into with me.”

r way, His other hand came down to the couch and he leaned into me, smiling.

ot until

his face was just an inch away.

“Roxanne, listen closely. One look at you and I knew trouble was on my heels. I’m willin’ to give it time for you to tell me. That doesn’t happen unless you’re willin’ to wade in when that trouble catches up. Right now, I’d be doin’ it for Tex and out of curiosity about you. After tonight, I reckon I’ll be doin’ it for other reasons.”

“Holy cow.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I did the smart thing for once and did nothing.

He went on, “I can understand you protecting yourself, but you know, you’ve no reason to protect me. I have my eyes wide open—”

I was beginning to find it hard to breathe.

“Hank—” I whispered, interrupting him but he kept going.

“And I like what they see.”

“Yowza.”

“I’m in trouble,” I said.

“I already know that.”

“I’m talking about *you*.”

“Good to know you’ve got your eyes open too.”

He didn’t even let that sink in. He kissed my nose, moved away, grabbed his paper cup of coffee off the table and he was gone.

“Holy cow,” I breathed.

“Sugar bunch, you can say that again,” Daisy called. She was sitting at the book counter, legs crossed and leafing through a copy of *Us* magazine.

Though her hands were moving the pages, she was looking at the door. The door had just closed behind Hank.

“Holy cow,” I said again.

“We’re all fucked,” Duke’s gravelly voice came from somewhere in the room.

I had the feeling he wasn’t wrong.



UNCLE TEX GOT off work and took me to a Middle Eastern restaurant on University Boulevard called Jerusalem. We both ordered the combo plate which arrived brimming over with rice, baba ghanoush, hummus, falafel, tabbouleh, stuffed grape leaves, falafel, gyros meat, three kinds of kabobs, and pita bread.

“Holy cow. I’m never going to be able to eat this,” I said, staring at the plate.

Uncle Tex launched right in. “Then don’t eat, talk. What’s going on with you?”

I started eating.

“Roxanne Giselle—” he began.

“Jeez, Uncle Tex, you sound just like Mom.”

His eyes flickered, pain slicing through them, and I wished I’d kept my mouth shut.

“Okay, I’ll talk,” I said, mainly to take his mind off whatever it was hurting him.

I told him about Billy.

Halfway through the story, around about the sledgehammer part,

oor that boomed, pita bread and baba ghanoush flying out of his mouth. “I’m fuckin’ *kill* that *motherfucker!*”

I looked around at our gawking neighbors.

e in the “Uncle Tex, calm down,” I whispered.

He swallowed then he demanded, “Finish it!” and he did this circular fork at me.

I finished the story.

rant on Then Tex said, “You don’t gotta be on the run from that asshole
platter, word to Lee and he’d fix his sorry ass and good.”

attouish, No way. No way in hell.

obs and “No, Uncle Tex, no words to Lee, to Hank, to Eddie, to I
g at my *anybody.*”

on with “Lee’s one badass individual. Lee’d make Hitler shake in his silly
boots, even with the whole German army standin’ at his back.”

“No,” I denied.

“Roxie, darlin’, your plan is shit,” he informed me.

“I’ve been working on this plan for years!”

“It’s still shit.”

cept my I scowled at him. “Uncle Tex, I got myself into this mess. I’m
myself out.”

vas that He shook his head.

“Not gonna fuckin’ happen. I’m talkin’ to the boys,” he said like that
final.

part, he I slammed my palm on the table to get his attention and Uncle Tex

I'm gonna lock on mine.

I took a deep breath and said, "I appreciate your concern and I need help, but I'm fixing this my way."

"Roxie—"

ling his "No!" I closed my eyes and tilted my head to the table. Then I looked again. "Uncle Tex, I have to look myself in the eye in the mirror every morning. After I fucked up seven years of my life, do you honestly think you can just hand over my problems to some guys I barely know and be able to wake up and look in those eyes?"

He stared at me.

ndy, to Finally, he said, "Jesus Jones, but you're a MacMillan."

"Damn right I am," I told him with more than a little bit of pride.

7, shiny He stared at me some more.

"Fine," was all he said.

I felt my body relax. "Thank you."

"One thing, darlin' girl. I get even the niggliest fuckin' inklin' to your shit plan o' yours is goin' south, and mark my words, it's gonna get worse. I'm callin' in the boys."

getting I felt my body get tense again.

"No," I replied.

"That includes Hank."

hat was "No!" I shouted, now ignoring our gawking neighbors.

"I should fuckin' say that especially fuckin' includes Hank," he announced.

z's eyes "You do that, I leave," I threatened.

“You leave, I’m siccin’ Lee on your ass. He’ll send Vance or M
ed your track you down. You won’t even make it to the Colorado border.”

Man, oh man, I was undoubtedly, seriously, officially in trouble.

“Uncle Tex—”

oked up His big, beefy hand came out and enveloped mine. “Just got you
r every life, darlin’ girl, ain’t no weasely-assed motherfucker gonna take yo
think I out. He’ll have to split my skull open with that fuckin’ sledgehammer
able to that happens.”

The fear crawled up my throat again, mainly because I was worried
would do it.

“Uncle Tex—”

“Don’t worry, Roxie. Before he cracked open my skull, he’d
crack open half a dozen other ones. Trust me, I know how these fucki
work. He wouldn’t get through the first wave.”

“I don’t know these people and you barely do,” I reminded him.

hat this “Don’t need to know much more of them to know what they’re n
) south, Seen a lot of it these past months.” He squeezed my hand. “You came
right place.” Then he leaned back in his seat and tipped his head back.
it on!” he boomed.

Good grief.

Yes, I was undoubtedly, seriously, officially in trouble.

ended.

“You leave, I’m siccin’ Lee on your ass. He’ll send Vance or Mace to track you down. You won’t even make it to the Colorado border.”

Man, oh man, I was undoubtedly, seriously, officially in trouble.

“Uncle Tex—”

His big, beefy hand came out and enveloped mine. “Just got you in my life, darlin’ girl, ain’t no weasely-assed motherfucker gonna take you back out. He’ll have to split my skull open with that fuckin’ sledgehammer before that happens.”

The fear crawled up my throat again, mainly because I was worried Billy would do it.

“Uncle Tex—”

“Don’t worry, Roxie. Before he cracked open my skull, he’d have to crack open half a dozen other ones. Trust me, I know how these fuckin’ guys work. He wouldn’t get through the first wave.”

“I don’t know these people and you barely do,” I reminded him.

“Don’t need to know much more of them to know what they’re made of. Seen a lot of it these past months.” He squeezed my hand. “You came to the right place.” Then he leaned back in his seat and tipped his head back. “Bring it on!” he boomed.

Good grief.

Yes, I was undoubtedly, seriously, officially in trouble.

FIVE



PHONE CALLS

Uncle Tex took me to my car. I followed him to his house and I helped clean litter trays. After, we went down to the corner store where I introduced me to Mr. Kumar, his friend and grocery supplier. Then I found out Uncle Tex needed to get ready for his date with Nancy.

On the way back from Mr. Kumar's store, I sang the "Uncle Tex and Nancy, Sitting in a Tree" song again. He picked me up, carried me to his car, set me down on the street, turned around, and without a backward glance walked back into his house.

Hee hee.



I WENT to my hotel and tore through my suitcases.

Yes, I had two. I was high maintenance and high maintenance didn't go anywhere without at least two suitcases.

I was looking for an outfit to wear for my date. I was staring at the exploded suitcases in despair because, even though I had more clothes than those two suitcases than most of the earth's population would own in their lifetimes, I did not have an outfit to wear on my date with Whisky.

My cell phone rang.

I tensed and stared at my purse like it was a living thing out for my and I yanked the phone out of my bag, expecting it to tell me Billy was calling.

Instead, it told me Daisy was calling.

In shock, I flipped it open. "Hello?"

"Hey, sugar bunch, what're you wearin' for your date?" Daisy asked.

I sat on the edge of the bed. I'd known this woman for less than a week and she acted like she'd known me for twenty-four years.

"I've no idea," I told her.

"Call Indy, she'll know. She's good at that stuff. Listen, you gonna be in town awhile?"

"What now?"

"I don't know," I answered.

"Well, me and Marcus are havin' a party, not this Thursday but the next. Would love for you to come."

That was so sweet of her.

"I don't know if I'll be here, but if I am, I'll come," I replied.

"I don't need exact numbers, it's a charity do so it'll be finger food for people comin' from all over Denver. They can afford to fill their stomachs before they show up at The Castle."

"The Castle?"

Daisy went on, "It's black tie. You got something sparkly to wear?"

"Um..." I didn't. Billy and I didn't normally attend black tie affairs.

"Don't worry, Tod will loan you somethin'. He's a drag queen."

er blood, *the best* closet. Oh! Gotta go, my masseuse is here. Ta-ta!”

lly was “Bye,” I said to dead air. She’d already hung up.

I flipped the phone closed and tried to flip off the switch that was
me feel welcome and safe and weirdly at home (the switch didn’t work

I washed my face in order to prepare for my nighttime makeup
ed. and I was drying it when my phone rang. I looked at it on the vanity,
twenty- that it would be Billy. Instead it said it was Tod, Indy’s neighbor.

Holy cow. I knew that Daisy had programmed in Tod *and* Stevi
she was fiddling with my phone. How Tod got my number, I did not know

ia be in I flipped it open. “Hello?”

“Hey, girlie. It’s Tod. Daisy called, said you might need some
wear to her big bash. Come over, we’ll go through my closet,” Tod invited

Oh my God, that was so sweet.

it next. “I’m not sure I’m going to be here,” I told him.

“You *have* to be here! *It’s gonna be the party of the decade*
screached like I just told him I turned down a marriage proposal from
William.

od. The “Um...” I mumbled.

bellies “Come over anyway. I’ll get out a bottle of sparkling wine and
Yahtzee game.”

“I’m going on a date with Hank.”

” Silence.

s. Then, “Shit, those boys don’t fuck around.”

He has He could say that again.

Because I needed help, I took a deep breath and confided, “I’m not sure what to wear.”

making Tod answered immediately, “Tell me what you’ve got.”

3). I described the contents of my suitcases. The whole time I spoke, I muttered, “Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.” Then, when I described my black turtleneck with the wide, scoop neck, he yelled, “That! With jeans and heels and a roll scarf. Do you have a good belt? Forget it. I’m coming over with a belt and scarves. Be there in ten.”

now. Then he disconnected.

I stared at the phone.

hing to Was he serious?

rited. Holy cow.

He couldn’t be serious.

I couldn’t worry about it. Time was ticking by and I’d only just begun my preparations. “!” Tod

Prince I started on my makeup and just got through the first phase of phase production when the phone went again.

My body didn’t tense this time. I could see the display saying CALLING.

I was no longer surprised by this bizarre string of phone calls.

“Hi,” I answered.

“Hey, chickie, Daisy texted me your number. You got an outfit for a date with Hank?”

Good grief.

not sure “No, but I think Tod’s coming over with belts and scarves.”

“Good to hear. Tod’ll sort you out. How long you staying in De
she asked.

oke, he “I don’t know,” I told her.

op with “Well, it’s October and the Haunted Houses are opening and we’re
ock ‘n’ all of us, Indy, Jet, Daisy and me. You gotta go. It’s hilarious.”

belts... “I don’t do scary,” I shared, thinking she’d understand.

She didn’t understand.

“Perfect. Don’t worry. The chainsaw man never has a chain on h
We’ll keep you in the loop. Gotta go. Later.”

Chainsaw man?

Before I could ask, she disconnected.

I was staring at the dead phone in my hand when the hotel phone
gun my walked over and picked it up, this time worried that Billy had found
soon. Or worse, Hank had come early.

a five- “Hello?”

“It’s Tod, what room number are you?”

, ALLY I was silent a second.

He *was* serious. How did he even know where I was?

I didn’t want to know.

“Three thirty-three,” I said.

or your Disconnect.

Good God.

Now I knew how Uncle Tex had been so well, truly and

ensconced in the fold. These people acted as fast as lightning.

Denver?” There was a knock on the door and I opened it. Tod walked in carrying enough scarves and belts to accessorize the entirety of the Purdue Babes Dance Team.

He charged in, tossing everything on the bed.

I closed the door and walked back into the room.

“Tod, he’s going to be here in...” I looked at my watch. Then I let out a little scream.

“Calm, calm,” Tod said, his hands out in front of him, palms pressing the air. “Let’s get crackin’. Finish your face, I’ll sort through your makeup.”

Then, without further ado, he started digging through my suitcases.

I didn’t have time to flip out that some guy I barely knew was digging through my suitcases. Hank was going to be there in twenty minutes. I hadn’t even moved to phase two of makeup.

I was shading and blending through phase four when Tod walked into the bathroom. “Outfit’s on the bed, I unpacked you, because, girlie, I’m getting wrinkles in some of your fab-you-las blouses. So I hung them in the unmentionables and PJs in the drawers. You can return the belt and shoes. Indy and I’m borrowing those Manolo Mary Janes for my act this week if you’re still in town. They fit like they were made for me.”

“Sure,” I replied, even though it wasn’t a request.

We air-kissed and he took off.

I finished the makeup, fluffed out my hair and put on the black top and a black belt of Tod’s, the Manolo Mary Janes and looped once around my neck a thin, long rock ‘n’ roll scarf made entirely out of silver bugle beads. I quickly

stitched together. I put a wide silver cuff on my wrist, my Raymond V
arrying my other wrist and some seriously long hoops dangling at my ears
Boiler spritzing with Boucheron at six twenty-nine and trying to breathe calm
reach my Zen zone (and failing) when my cell rang again.

It said, JET CALLING.

I flipped open the phone. "Hello?"

et out a "Hey, Roxie, Daisy gave me your number."

Daisy was a busy little beaver.

down, "How's your dad?" I asked.

this." Jet's dad had been shot, stabbed and beaten, then thrown out of a
car on Broadway outside of Fortnum's just days before. They moved
digging of ICU that morning and Jet spent the day in the hospital with him.

s and I "A lot better. Breathing, talking, *conscious*," she answered.

I smiled. "I'm glad."

into the "I hear you're going out with Hank tonight. You got something to
you're Cripes! I had four new best friends and I'd known them only a da
em up, thing, Indy was going to be calling, asking me to a slumber party.

scarf to Before I could answer, the hotel phone rang.

skend if I let out another little scream.

I heard Jet laugh.

"Hank's there," she surmised.

, jeans, "Ohmigod, ohmigod," I chanted.

and my "Deep breaths," Jet advised.

e beads "Ohmigod, ohmigod," I chanted.

Weil on “It might help if you answer the phone,” she suggested, but I could
. I was through a smile.

nly and “Hang on” I said to her.

I took the cell from my ear and picked up the room phone.

“Hello?”

“Hey.”

It was Hank.

My legs gave out and I sat on the bed.

“Hey,” I replied.

moving
him out “I’m at reception. What room are you in?”

I did not want Hank in my room. I wanted Hank nowhere near my
In fact, Hank was already nearer to my room than I ever wanted him to

“I’ll come down.”

wear?”
He ignored me.

y. Next “What room are you in?” he repeated.

“I’ll be right down,” I said.

His voice dropped low. “Sunshine, I’m gonna ask one more time
room are you in?”

His voice shivered through me.

“Three thirty-three,” I replied.

Disconnect.

I put the cell back to my ear, “Ohmigod, ohmigod,” I chanted again

She was laughing. “Word of advice?” she offered.

d tell it “Anything.”

“Don’t fight it.”

Shit.

“Jet...there are things...” I stopped. Then I started again, “I can’t—

She interrupted me, “I can’t either, but I really don’t need to l
Eddie can. It, like, *totally* freaks me out,” she confided.

“Eddie adores you. I could tell that the minute I saw you two. And
Tex said so,” I told her.

“Yeah. I’m beginning to believe it. It still, like, totally freaks me out

There was a knock on the door. My eyes swung to the door and I s
y room. it.

be. “Ohmigod, ohmigod,” I chanted yet again.

Jet laughed again. “Get the door.”

I nodded, got off the bed and walked to the door. Then, to fo
something, *anything* that was not what was behind the door, I said,
Tex is taking your mom out tonight.”

e. What “I know,” she replied. “That works out, we could be related.”

I knew in an instant I’d like that.

I opened the door and looked at Hank.

He smiled at me.

My knees went weak and I wasn’t thinking about anything but Har

1 to Jet. “Gotta go,” I said to Jet.

“Tell Hank I said hi.”

“Sure.”

She disconnected and I flipped the phone shut.

Hank's eyes went to the phone.

"Jet," I told him.

—" Without a word he walked forward, even though I was in his way.

because He seemed bigger than I remembered. Taller, broader of shoulder, his presence seemed to invade the room. He was wearing a black leather jacket,

Uncle dark gray turtleneck sweater, jeans and black boots.

He looked fantastic.

at." I quickly moved out of his way. He finished entering and turned. He stared at me in the door.

"She says hi," I shared.

He grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the doorway and then slammed the door behind me. I watched the door close and just barely stopped myself from screaming again.

focus on "Uncle Tex is going out on a date with her mom tonight," I kept sharing.

His hand was still on my arm and now he was pulling me to him. I didn't say anything.

"If this works out, Jet and I could end up related," I went on, completely unable to stop talking.

He pulled me closer. His hand left my arm and went around my neck. The other hand went to the side of my neck.

"We'll be, like, cousins or something," I carried on.

His face came toward mine. His lips weren't smiling but his eyes were.

My lips and eyes weren't smiling. My body was preparing to have

attack.

“Is it cousins? Or would I be her niece? How does that go?” I desperately redesigning my family tree in an effort to avoid what was happening in real time.

ler. His “Sunshine?” he said against my mouth.

acket, a “Yeah?” I breathed.

“Shut up.”

I did.

I stood Then he kissed me.

It was just like the night before. Just as serious. Just as hot. Just a to scramble my brain and make me go dizzy.

shut the He lifted his head.

myself When I could think straight again, I said, “You’re supposed to after the date is over.”

aring. “I’m gonna do it then too,” he returned, his arm still around me, h
He stillstill at my neck.

Holy cow.

pletely “I’m sorry, but you Denver people are nuts. I’ve known you all,
day and I just got calls from Daisy, Ally and Jet. Tod actually cam
7 waist. bringing half of Neiman Marcus’s accessory department with him to h
get dressed. The entire Denver experience is weird. Beyond weird. De
“The Twilight Zone,” I told him.

vere. “We’re friendly.”

a heart “You can say that again.”

He ignored my comment and asked, “You hungry?”

asked, I wasn’t hungry. I’d eaten a mountain of food only a few hours before.
I said no, I wasn’t certain what my options were, and since we were in a room that consisted mainly of furniture on which a girl could or might get into trouble (or in my case more trouble), I lied.

“Starving.”

It was then the smile in his eyes hit his mouth.

Holy cow.

My phone rang.

“Shit!” I cried, pulling out of his arms and lifting the phone to look at the caller ID.
“Who could it be now? It has to be Indy.”

I stopped talking when Hank plucked the phone out of my hand, flipped it open and put it to his ear.

I stared at him in disbelief.

“Yeah?” he said into the phone.

“Whisky, you can’t just answer my phone,” I snapped, sounding a little more like a Jet when she snapped at Eddie. That was, to say, full of shit.

I reached to take it away from him, but he jerked his head away from me and I couldn’t reach.

“Hello?” he repeated, sounding far more serious.

My body froze and my heart stopped.

Billy.

This was not good. I thought it would be Indy, Duke, Stevie, Lee, or half dozen other people I barely knew who were all of a sudden

friends. Not Billy.

ore. He took the phone from his ear and flipped it shut.

were in “Who was it?” I asked, wondering if I should ask for CPR pr
ily findattack and deciding Hank’s lips on mine (again) was not a good idea.

“No answer.”

The phone rang again.

I reached for it, knowing now who it was and feeling panic sp
through my body, but Hank stepped away, flipped it open and put i
ear.

ok at it. “Hello?” he said.

I moved toward him and got in his space. “Hank,” I whispered.

ipped it “Is someone there?” Hank said into the phone.

I closed my eyes.

This was not happening.

I opened my eyes again and Hank was watching me. He took the
lot likefrom his ear and flipped it shut.

“No answer,” Hank informed me. He opened it and started p
om mybuttons.

I knew what he was doing, looking at the received calls. Norr
would have been angry at his nerve, but I was too busy freaking out
he might find.

“Give me my phone, Hank.”

. Eddie, He got to what he was looking for. “It says unknown caller.”

len my Shit.

Billy was on the road and likely his cell had run out of juice.

“Give me the phone,” I repeated.

re-heart It rang again.

Without delay, he flipped it open and put it to his ear.

“Hank!” I yelled, making a play for it, but he caught me, snatched around the waist with his arm and he pulled me up against his body.

reading “This is Detective Hank Nightingale. Who’s calling?” he demanded to his voice that rang with so much authority, if it was me on the other side I have answered in a flash.

Billy was going to have a shit hemorrhage. A man answering my phone. A man with a deep, sexy, authoritative, no-nonsense voice and a police badge.

“Identify yourself,” Hank ordered.

He waited. I waited.

Hank was looking pissed off. I was holding my breath.

phone He pulled the phone from his ear, flipped it shut one-handed and looked at me.

pressing “No answer?” I asked.

He nodded.

nally, I I closed my eyes.

at what His arm tightened.

I opened them.

“Your trouble catching up with you?” he asked.

I bit my lip. Then I let it go.

“Maybe.”

“You ready to tell me about it?” Hank pushed.

I answered immediately. “No.”

This made him look more pissed off.

It might make me a freak, but Hank, normally, was seriously handsome. Hank pissed off was off-the-charts handsome.

“You’re even better looking when you’re angry.”

Now, *why* did I say that?

I would He stared at me and luckily ignored my comment.

Then he shared, “I dated a girl all through high school. She was beautiful, but when she walked in a room, only I noticed her, not every fuckin’ person in the room. She wore normal clothes, not shit that looks like it comes from the pages of a fashion magazine. She never threw attitude at anyone. She never got drunk, never listened to music too loud, never stayed out after midnight, and she wouldn’t know trouble if it bit her in the ass and wouldn’t even know how to keep a secret.”

I looked My heart clenched, definite pre-heart attack for sure. I should have had CPR.

“You should have married her,” I said, sounding uppity.

He let me go, closed his eyes, wiped his hand on his forehead and looked at me, “I should have married her.”

Well!

“If you’ll remember, I didn’t want to have dinner with you,” I reminded him.

He dropped his hand and his eyes locked on mine. “Sunshine, you want to have dinner with me, you want me to kiss you, and later you’re gonna

to do other things to you too.”

I put my hands to my hips even as the blood rushed to very specific parts of my body. “I don’t *think* so, Hank Nightingale. This has officially become the shortest date in history. You want to find your high school girlfriend? Start looking now.”

Quick as a flash he grabbed my waist and hauled me up against his chest.

“You want to pretend you don’t feel what’s between us, be my girlfriend,” he said, his face close to mine. “You’ll admit it soon enough.”

“There’s nothing to feel,” I lied.

His brows drew together. “Honestly?” he asked.

I scowled at him because even I couldn’t utter that lie again.

“You shouldn’t have answered my phone,” I said.

“I thought it’d be Indy, bein’ a pain in the ass, as usual. I didn’t know how to deal with an evil wind was gonna blow through just yet. I was hoping for at least a little time to knock down that guard you got up. Seems I’m gonna have to speed things up a bit.”

Speed things up a bit?

We were going Mach five and I wasn’t even certain Mach five existed.

“Who was on the phone?” he asked.

I kept up the scowl and didn’t answer.

“Tell me one thing. Are you in danger?” he went on.

I lost my scowl and felt my body begin to melt.

Shit.

He was worried about me.

Billy had taken a sledgehammer to the door and he'd put his arm
ic partsthroat—once. Even after years of me running away and more than a
become no sex, he'd never raised a hand to me after the arm incident. He was i
lfriend?that was for certain, but every time I pretended to escape, he brought n
by talking me into it, or at least I let him think that.

body. I didn't think I was in danger. I was just trapped.

est," he "I'm not in danger, I just have...a situation. I'm fixing it," I told H.

"Now isn't the time to lie," Hank told me in his authoritative tone.

"I'm not lying."

At least, I didn't think so. Or, at least, I hoped not.

He watched me for a while. Then he let me go, but grabbed my
tossed the phone on the bed and pulled me toward the door.

ow the "Good, let's get some food."

a little Simple as that.

o speed He trusted me.

Good God.

I yanked hard on his hand and tugged him back into the room. He a
sted. this until my fingers closed around my Fendi bag, then we were off.

Billy had taken a sledgehammer to the door and he'd put his arm to my throat—once. Even after years of me running away and more than a year of no sex, he'd never raised a hand to me after the arm incident. He was intense, that was for certain, but every time I pretended to escape, he brought me back by talking me into it, or at least I let him think that.

I didn't think I was in danger. I was just trapped.

"I'm not in danger, I just have...a situation. I'm fixing it," I told Hank.

"Now isn't the time to lie," Hank told me in his authoritative tone.

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He watched me for a while. Then he let me go, but grabbed my hand, tossed the phone on the bed and pulled me toward the door.

"Good, let's get some food."

Simple as that.

He trusted me.

Good God.

I yanked hard on his hand and tugged him back into the room. He allowed this until my fingers closed around my Fendi bag, then we were off.



HANK SPEEDS THINGS UP

Holding my hand the whole time, he took me to his black Toyota 4Runner. He helped me in, swung in the driver's side and off we went. He drove smoothly, confident, handed and natural, like he was one with the 4Runner. I was beginning to think I was seriously a freak because, for some reason, the way he drove turned me on.

Okay, maybe it was everything about Hank that turned me on.

"Are you a vegetarian?" he asked, thankfully breaking me out of my thoughts of him turning me on.

"I ate three pounds of meat for lunch at Jerusalem's," I answered.

"Combo platter?" Hank guessed.

"Yeah," I confirmed.

"Good choice."

He drove me through what could not be considered the best neighborhoods, though it also wasn't the worst. He parked in a park and I saw Denver's light rail train slide by. The building he took me to looked like it had been yanked right out of a John Wayne western.

"What is this place?" I inquired.

"Buckhorn Exchange, the oldest restaurant in Denver. Great steaks

He held the door for me and I saw that the décor consisted largely of animal heads, but somehow it seemed cozy, romantic and elegant at the time. We sat at an intimate table for two with big, high-backed, leather armchairs. Hank ordered a bottle of wine while I looked at the menu which included rattlesnake, fried alligator tail, Rocky Mountain oysters and eel.

I looked up from my menu to Hank. “Is the ghost of Wyatt Earp going to walk through the door?”

Runner, He grinned at me. “Smartass.”

ve one- “No, seriously.”

ning to The grin deepened to a smile.

e drove I shut up.

“Let me order,” he said, and this surprised me. I’d never met a man who ordered for me before. I didn’t even know men did that anymore.

of my What the hell, when in Denver...

“No Rocky Mountain oysters,” I replied.

He nodded and kept smiling.

“And no alligator tail,” I carried on. “Alligators are cute. I’m not a vegetarian, but I don’t eat cute animals. Like lamb. Lambs are cute. I’ll try the rattlesnake. I think I could eat snake because snakes freak me out.”

best of He stared at me. The smile was gone.

king lot “You think alligators are cute?” he asked.

me to “They always look like they’re smiling. I think alligators are misunderstood. They just want to laze in the sun and swim, but people are bothering them, forcing them to wrestle and stuff. It’s not nice.”

.” He kept staring at me.

of dead “Do you eat cows?” he asked.

ie same “I try not to think of them as cows, like that cute cow, Norman,
comfy *Slickers*. I think of them as bulls. Bulls are scary.”

ie nu. It More staring then, “How about pigs?”

lk. “I heard somewhere that pigs are mean. They aren’t like Babe. But
gonna a toupee.”

His lips twitched.

“You are definitely related to Tex,” he remarked.

“Well...yeah,” I replied.

He ordered. When the wine came, we drank. When the food arriv
ate.

an who It was good food. So good I ate it even though I was still full from
Hank ordered steak and it came in one big hunk of meat, which they
in half at the table and plonked a big old wodge of herbed butter on
each portion so it melted all over. It was heavenly.

All the time in between eating and drinking, we talked.

i not a I was dreading it, but it came easy.

We can I found out that Hank was kind of a second generation Color
ut.” definite third generation cop. His grandfather had been killed in the
duty in New York City, and after, his grandmother had moved the fa
Denver where her sister lived.

rs are Hank had gone to the University of Colorado, studying pre-law, a
le keep the police academy a couple of weeks after he graduated from colle
dad didn’t want him to be a cop. He wanted him to be a lawyer. Bu
had never wanted to be anything else but an officer of the law, so th

go.

in *City* I was learning quickly that Hank kind of did whatever the hell he wanted.

I could tell he was close with his family and he told me he'd know his whole life. Her parents were best friends with his, and when Indy died young Hank's mom promised to take care of Indy and make sure he was raised right. Indy and Lee had been in love as long as anyone could remember, but had only gotten together recently. Eddie had been Lee's friend since third grade and was like a member of the family too.

Hank skied in the winter and played softball in the summer. He liked Bruce Springsteen and had seen him in concert three times, but couldn't name a favorite song or even favorite album. He just liked all that was Springsteen.

This, in itself, said a lot about him.

lunch. He was a Rockies fan, a Broncos fan and it was clear he loved his hometown, Denver and his job.

top of I told Hank that I lived in Chicago and owned a work-at-home interior designing business, but I'd been born and raised in Brownsburg, fifteen miles west of Indianapolis. I told him my parents still lived there, my brother was a park ranger for Indiana State Parks and my sister worked in hospital administration at a medical center in Louisville. I told him I'd never been to the Indianapolis 500, but I'd been to the time trials, like, a few times. I told him I was a Cubs fan, as were all the family, but we stuck staunchly to the Pacers and the Ice for our basketball and hockey respectively. I explained I'd rebelled against my family's devotion to the Colts and the Bears for the Bears.

it Hank I also told him, as was a prerequisite for anyone who lived here you know, I loved REO Speedwagon, though not the power ballads. Just

like “Roll with the Changes” and “Ridin’ the Storm Out.” I further told
wanted. I liked Springsteen, but had never seen him in concert.

Then I’m afraid I got kind of lost in the discussion and admitted that
I loved Springsteen and thought he was a storyteller poet of
proportions (but I didn’t tell him I thought Springsteen had a beautiful
lip designed by the gods because I thought that might be sharing too much

I also waxed lyrical about Mellencamp, maybe a shade too long,
been born in a small town and Mellencamp sang about small towns. I
watched a lot of my minutes turn to memories, life sweeping away
dreams that I had planned, and Mellencamp sang about that too. A girl
Indiana understood those things like no one else. Springsteen might
been able to tear through my heart, but Mellencamp shot straight through
soul.

When I was done talking, Hank was staring again, but this time, his
were soft and lazy and I felt a shiver drift across my skin.

I didn’t tell him about Billy.

When we were done, I declined dessert because the button of my
was digging into my belly. Hank paid and I began to feel relief that that
was soon to be over. If it lasted much longer, I knew I’d lose myself.
I knew I wanted to.

In the end, it wasn’t *that* bad. In fact, it was nice. I could almost pretend
I was on an actual date, a great date, instead of on the run from a
cheered boyfriend who was way too possessive and not afraid of wielding
sledgehammer.

Hank led me out the door and I began to relax thinking he’d take
me home, likely kiss me, which would be a lovely addition to a lovely night.

and then we'd be done.

It would suck, I'd hate it and I'd regret our timing for the rest of my life, but I was trying not to think about that.

Instead of going to the parking lot, he guided me to the light rail platform. I stared at him as he bought tickets from a machine.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Takin' you downtown."

I blinked. "I thought the date was over."

He grabbed my hand and moved me toward the tracks. "The date has definitely not over."

Shit.

I pulled my hand out of his. "I'm full and I'm tired. It was a delicious meal and thank you, but all that wine and food, I need to go to sleep."

What I needed to do was get out of my jeans and get away from him and not in that order.

He was staring down the tracks, partially ignoring me.

"You'll wake up," he said.

"I'm cold. I didn't bring a coat," I tried.

He took off his coat and settled it on my shoulders. He did the close thing again and bent his head to look down at me, standing smack in my space.

"Better?" he asked.

"Better" was not the word for it. "*The fucking best*" were the words.

Cripes, there was *no* shaking this guy.

“You’re in my space,” I pointed out.

my life, He got closer. “Yeah.”

“Whisky, back off,” I warned.

atform. He grinned. “Roxie, relax. We’re goin’ downtown and walkin’
food stupor. That’s it.”

I sighed, or more like harrumphed.

I supposed I could go downtown, see a bit of Denver, walk off th
stupor.

date is “Oh, all right,” I gave in.

He got even closer. Then, I kid you not, he rubbed his nose again
and then he looked me in the eyes and my breath caught.

elicious “It’s after that you need to worry about.”

Shit.

1 Hank, I was in trouble.



WE RODE the light rail downtown and Hank walked me through De
wore his jacket, and at first he held my hand. Then he dropped my ha
pulled me into his side with his arm around my shoulders.

sing the I allowed this because I decided that to get through the night I wa
at me, to pretend to be someone else. I was going to pretend to be the R
Giselle Logan before Billy Flynn, who hadn’t yet made a stupid decis
fucked up her life. The Roxanne Giselle Logan who deserved to be c
date with a tall, handsome guy named Hank Nightingale.

s for it. I was going to give myself this one night of pretend.

“You can walk in those shoes?” Hank asked.

“I can play basketball in these shoes,” I told him, and I wasn’t lying. I had been wearing high heels since my mom bought me those little pink, kiddie go-aheads when I was five.

off the “Your feet hurt, let me know,” he murmured.
Shit.

He was a good guy, through and through.

he food We walked down 16th Street Mall and the streets were packed with people even though it was Monday night. Bars were hopping, restaurants were jammed, lights were shining. It was gorgeous and alive. He walked through Writer Square and down to Wazee Supper Club where he bought me a drink and we talked some more.

We were heading back up 16th Street Mall and I knew the date was about to come to a close. It was getting late and Hank had to go out and do his deeds tomorrow. As for me, I had to sort out my life.

Then I saw the horse-drawn carriages.

I loved horses.

Denver. I
and and Okay, it was safe to say I loved anything with fur.

s going “Just a sec,” I said to Hank. I pulled away from his arm around my shoulders and walked to the driver. “Can I pet your horse?” I asked him with a smile.

Maxanne
ion that “Sure,” the driver replied.

out on a I walked up to the horse and ran my hand down his satin nose. “Hi fella,” I whispered to him.

He lifted his head with a jerk then settled and nuzzled my neck. I couldn’t help but let out a low giggle, mainly because it tickled.

ing. I'd "Likes you," the driver called.

plastic "I smell like food," I told him.

"Likes food too."

I kept stroking and Hank allowed it for a little while and then pulled away. The horse turned his head to watch me go. So I gave him a little and I started up the sidewalk, but Hank guided me toward the carriage.

ed with "What are you—?" I started to ask.

aurants "Get in, we're gonna ride," Hank said.

ked me I stared at him then I stared at the driver.

ight me "No," I whispered.

is about I couldn't take it. An evening with delicious food at a romantic restaurant, wine, good conversation, a walk through the streets of Denver wrapped in Hank's jacket, now a carriage ride. It was too much. I couldn't withdraw. I'd never been in a horse-drawn carriage. I'd begun to believe I'd never have anything romantic happen to me, except in a scary Bonnie and Clyde way where I'd end up riddled with bullets if Billy's stink settled on me.

Billy had never taken me on a horse-drawn carriage ride. Billy had promised a million romantic promises, but he'd never even bought me flowers. Hell, *none* of my boyfriends ever bought me flowers.

"What's the matter?" Hank asked when my body locked and refused to move.

ley, big I felt it happening. I hated it when it happened without warning. My skin was stinging and I was trying to fight it but I just knew I was going to die.

ouldn't Hank turned me to him and looked down at me.

My nostrils were quivering.

Shit!

There was nothing worse than the nostril quiver.

I dropped my head.

lled me His hand came to my neck. He cocked his head and bent low to
le waveme. “Jesus, Roxie, what’s the matter?”

“Let’s just go,” I whispered.

“She okay?” the driver asked.

“Sunshine,” Hank said softly, his hand at my neck sliding arou
shoulders and his other hand going around my waist, pulling me to hin

“Let’s just go,” I repeated, but it was kind of muffled against hi
taurant, because my head was still tilted down and my face was pressed agains

vearing “You want my hankie?” the driver asked.

stand it. One of Hank’s hands went away then came back to my chin and h
er have my head up. This was unfortunate considering the fact that I was no
de type and-out crying.

I slid my eyes to the side so I couldn’t see Hank, because everyon
lly had in an embarrassing situation, if you couldn’t see the person you were
ght me to hide from, they weren’t actually there.

He wiped my face with a blue bandana and didn’t say a word.

used to “Don’t mind me,” I said on a snuffle, still looking to the side. “I cry

Hank didn’t say anything.

fy nose “I cry at commercials,” I told him.
cry.

Hank still didn’t say anything.

“I cry when I watch *Terms of Endearment*, which I’ve seen, like, a

times,” I went on.

Hank stayed quiet.

I took a shuddering breath. “Every time Shirley MacLaine comes
look at has that fit at the nurse’s station about getting Debra Wing
medication...” My throat closed at the memory and I swallowed hard.
me.”

“Are you tellin’ me you’re cryin’ because you’re thinkin’ a
movie?” Hank asked.

ind my I shook my head.

1. “Then why are you crying?”

is chest Finally, I looked at Hank.

t him. Then, don’t ask me why, but I whispered, “Because you’re being
ie tilted to me.”

ow out- For a second, before he could hide it, his head jerked a fraction
face changed. I didn’t get a chance to read it before it went away and h
went perfectly blank.

e knew What I could read scared me, in a lot of different ways.

e trying “Has someone not been nice to you?” he asked, and I could tell hi
was carefully controlled.

r a lot.” “Let’s just go.”

He watched me for a while, one arm still wrapped around my back
he let me go. I thought he was going to give in, but I was wrong. He
over, slid an arm behind my knees, grabbed my shoulders and lifted m

“What are you doing?” I kind of screamed, throwing my arms arou
a dozen to hold on.

“We’re takin’ a carriage ride,” he said, carrying me while climbing the carriage.

This was no mean feat as I wasn’t exactly dainty. Uncle Tex totter her around was one thing. Uncle Tex was Paul Bunyon come alive. The plain crazy.

Hank settled me in the seat without apparent effort and sat beside me. The driver rushed to his perch and we took off.

“There’s just no shaking you, is there?” I asked Hank, my tears were beginning to feel...I didn’t know what I felt.

Hank pulled me into his side. “Nope,” he answered.

I crossed my arms and tried to pretend I wasn’t feeling whatever I felt. Whatever it was felt nice and I couldn’t give in to it. I had too much to lose if I did.

Then I looked up at him. “Is my makeup ruined?”

He looked down and smiled. “Yep.”

Shit.



I FIXED my makeup the best I could with the bandana and my hands and we rode through Denver.

After a while, I settled into Hank’s side and relaxed. I couldn’t help. Then, was solid and warm. Denver was beautiful as I watched it passing by. I leaned back, and the carriage rocked soothingly. Even the most tense, stressed up. neurotic would have relaxed.

After another while, Hank’s hand came to my chin, he tilted my head and he kissed me.

ng into It didn't take a while for me to kiss him back. I just did, right away
He was a great kisser, and on close inspection, I realized he had a
ing melip that even rivaled Springsteen's.

his was That shot straight through my heart *and* my soul.
"Boy, am I in trouble," I whispered, looking at his mouth.

ne. His hand went to the side of my head. "Yep."

Shit.

gone. I



I SAT in Hank's 4Runner watching the streets roll by as he drove me
hotel.

it was I The date was over.

nuch to I was trying not to cry again.

It was the best date I'd ever had. It could even be the best date
history of the world, or at least it had to make the top ten.

I wanted another one just like it. I wanted a dozen of them. I w
lifetime of them.

I was only going to get this one.

mirror I should count myself lucky. Some women never had a single d
this.

lp it, he I didn't feel lucky.

r on the The car stopped and I noticed it was parked in the street.

sed-out I glanced around.

read up We were not at the hotel. We were in a neighborhood. From what
tell, a nice neighborhood.

I looked at Hank. “Where are we?”

bottom “My place.”

“*What?*” I shrieked.

He ignored me and got out.

I stayed rooted to my seat.

This is not happening, this is not happening, I chanted in my head.

My door opened.

I looked at Hank again. “Take me back to my hotel.”

He reached in, undid my seatbelt and grabbed my hand, pulling me to the SUV. “I gotta walk my dog.”

We were several steps up his walk when I halted, yanking on his hand. “You have a dog?”

He stopped too and looked back at me. “Yeah.”

I loved dogs.

anted a “What kind of dog?” I queried.

“A chocolate lab.”

Shit.

ate like I loved labs.

“I’ll wait in the 4Runner,” I told him.

He tugged my hand, pulling me behind him.

“Whisky, I have to get back to the hotel.”

I could I was trying to yank my hand out of his.

I was trying but not succeeding.

He ignored me and kept walking to the house. One story, brick, tended yard, but you could tell no woman lived there. There were no flowers and there weren't any festive autumn decorations in sight. I definitely have put out festive autumn decorations if I lived there.

I was trying not to think about other things I would do if I live when Hank stopped at the door and dropped my hand.

“Whisky...”

He unlocked then opened the door.

A chocolate lab bounded toward us.

e out of

“Oh my God!” I yelled and crouched low. “What a cute dog!”

s hand.

And he was cute. Adorable.

The lab jumped on Hank and he commanded, “Down.”

The lab stopped jumping and head-butted Hank in the thighs, got scratch and then came at me. He knocked me on my ass on the front and started licking my face.

“I hope you don't use him as a guard dog,” I said, trying to scream as he jumped all over me.

“I think you can kiss whatever makeup you had left good-bye,” I noted.

I couldn't help it, I laughed.

Hank went into the house while I got up and played with the dog came back with a lead.

“What's his name?” I asked.

“Shamus.”

, nicely I clapped at Shamus. He came to me and sat on my feet while Hank
pots for the lead on him. The minute the lead snapped into place, Shamus knew
it would drill and was aching for it. He headed for the sidewalk, snuffing the ground.

Hank grabbed my hand and we followed the dog.

and there After half a block, it hit me and I declared, "This is not fair."

"What?" Hank asked.

"Don't play innocent with me, Hank Nightingale. You know what
dog."

Hank dropped my hand and slid his arm along my shoulders.

Then he stopped, and Shamus stopped, though Shamus didn't want to
stop. His "come on you guys" glance over the shoulder said it all.
Shamus stopped.

to an ear Hank bent, kissed my temple and then his lips went to my ear.

it stoop "You try to be difficult and hard, but I can tell you're soft and easy,"
he whispered.

to catch his I jerked my head back and scowled at him.

"I'm not soft!" I snapped.

"Hank "You cry at commercials," he pointed out.

This, unfortunately, was true. Worse, I'd volunteered this information
to him, just like the idiot I was.

and he "Well, then, I'm not easy," I went on stubbornly.

"We'll see."

Shit.



ank put WE WALKED Shamus on a two-block loop.

ew the Then Hank let us into his house.

round.

I stood at the closed front door, trying to be obvious about wanting to leave (although I didn't want to leave, I needed to leave) while Hank lit up on some lamps.

The front door led to one big front room consisting of a living room on the right, dining area to the left, then a bar and set of cabinets that began a U-shaped kitchen.

It had been redone and looked nice. Gleaming hardwood floors, the kitchen completely refitted with oak cabinets and KitchenAid appliances. And I deep-seated, cushiony furniture covered in mocha twill and an old dining room table that looked cool.

It was (somewhat sparsely, but still) decorated in what could be considered "Colorado." A couple of old Colorado license plates with "Colorado" stamped into them over the doorway to a hall, some Native American artifacts on the tables that looked carefully chosen, two framed prints of Belgium Brewery beers ("Fat Tire" and "Skinny Dip") over his twill covered

That was kind of it for decoration. It wasn't like he had an abundance of scented candles and toss pillows, but it was enough to give the room a personality and homey feel. Like he lived there. Like he liked it there. Like he was proud of it and the work he'd done on it.

I thought of it with some nice, sturdy, black iron candleholders, mulberry scented candles and some curtains covering the blinds.

Stop decorating Hank's house, I told myself and crossed my arms to emphasize my thoughts to myself.

"You want a drink?" Hank asked from the kitchen after he'd taken

Shamus's lead.

Through the floor and overhead cabinets, I could only see his waist
reaching to abs.

I turned As with all things Hank, it was a good view.

Shamus sauntered over and sat on my feet again. I uncrossed my
legs and scratched his ears.

in a U- "I want to go back to the hotel," I answered.

"You're spending the night here," Hank informed me, moving to
the edge of the counter that delineated the kitchen from the dining area and leaning
his hip against it then he crossed his arms.

beat-up My mouth dropped open and I stared.

Then I closed it.

only be "I'm not spending the night here," I said.

1 skiers His eyes looked lazy again.

American My heart started beating faster.

of New "Come here," Hank called softly.

ouch. "No, take me back to the hotel."

ance of "Come here and I'll convince you that you don't want to go back
place a "e. Like hotel."

Good God.

rs with He didn't have to convince me. I was already pretty certain I didn't
want to go back to the hotel. But I had to go back to the hotel, for Hank
arms to good, if not for mine.

ken off "Whisky, I have to get a good night's sleep. I have things

tomorrow.”

ist and I didn’t really, but I needed an excuse.

“What things?” he asked.

I kept silent.

ly arms Hank went on, “You can come here or I can go over there and g
Your choice, but I’ll warn you, you should probably come to me.”

I stared at him and he stared back.

the end My heart wasn’t only beating faster, it was tripping in my ches
aning a jackhammer.

We kept staring at each other, one beat leading into two, tw
leading into three.

Then his arms uncrossed and he moved forward.

Shamus saw Hank’s advance and deserted me (damn dog).

I backed up and as I was standing at the door, in half a step my sh
slammed against it.

I lifted my hands to keep him at arm’s length.

“Whisky...” I started, but he avoided my hands by bending
κ to the putting a shoulder to my stomach and lifting me in a fireman’s hold.

Holy Mary, Mother of God.

“Hank!” I shouted at his back, but he’d turned and was walking t
I’t want the dining area.

’s own “Put me down!” I yelled, pushing against his waist, but he kept
through the kitchen and into a dark room.

to do “Goddammit! Put me down!” I kept at it when he turned and walk

another dark room.

He stopped, bent, turned on a lamp and then put my feet on the
would have escaped, but he was right in front of me, and a quick
around showed that there was a huge bed made out of what looked li
behind me. *Right* behind me.

get you.

“Get out of my way,” I demanded. “I’m calling a taxi.”

His arms slid around me.

t like a

“No taxi,” he said, one hand gliding up my back and into my hair
the back of my head and keep it steady. “No hotel,” he went on, the ot
wrapping itself completely around me so his hand was gripping me at t
of my waist, my body pressed the length of his. “Tonight you sleep in
with me.”

o beats

I looked up at him. In his arms I was quickly losing the will to fight

“Please,” I whispered, the last desperate attempt.

oulders

His head bent and, with his lips against mine, he said, “Remember
word. You’re gonna be using it a lot tonight.”

My stomach fluttered. I felt it and I liked it.

double,

Those were my last coherent thoughts.

through

He kissed me, his tongue sliding into my mouth. I went dizzy a
brain scrambled. I kissed him back. I wanted to fight it, but I d
probably could have if I wasn’t weak. But I was. I’d been weak wit
and now I was weak with Hank.

going,

My arms went around his neck, my hand slid into his hair. He ha
hair, thick and soft and just enough wave.

sed into

“You have great hair,” I whispered into his ear as his lips trailed al

cheek to my ear.

floor. I “You’re a nut,” he whispered back, sounding like that was a good glance. Then his mouth touched me behind my ear and I shivered.

ke logs “I’m not a nut,” I went on quietly and turned my head to press my his neck, just above his turtleneck, then I touched my tongue there.

His hand left my waist, went into my shirt and slid up the skin of n I was sensitive there, even ticklish, and I squirmed against him.

to cup “You gonna talk through this?” he asked, lifting his head to look c her armme.

the side “Maybe,” I answered.

my bed He shook his head and he kissed me again.

I had kind of thought the last kiss was serious as it had a serious e t. me. But I was wrong. *This* kiss was serious. If I thought I was dizzy b didn’t know the meaning of dizzy.

per that The kiss was hot and hard and before it was done, I had my hands sweater, roaming the skin of his back and shoulders.

He kissed me again, likely to keep me quiet, and I lost any contro though there wasn’t much to lose.

and my Then again, so did he.

idn’t. I We were all over each other. Hands inside each other’s clothes. T h Billy inside each other’s mouths. He pulled away and unwrapped the sca around my throat and tossed it aside. Before he could come back, I li id greatturtleneck from the waist and pulled it over his head. He shoved me t the bed but followed me there, his body covering one side of me, h ong my going up my shirt, trailing up my belly to cup my breast. He kissed m

and I felt him yank the cup of my bra roughly down and then his hand thing. skin against skin on my breast.

I arched into it and his hand went away but his finger didn't. It lips to lazily around my nipple, his mouth still on mine.

"Let me take my shirt off," I muttered.

ny side. "I'm not done," he said, still circling with his finger and it was driv mad, but in a good way.

lown at I pressed into him. "Whisky, let me take my shirt off," I repeated.

His head lifted and he looked down at me, still circling.

It felt good.

"Why Whisky?" he asked.

ffect on "What?"

efore, I "Why Whisky?"

s up his I tried to scoot away so I could get my clothes off and, I don't maybe attack him, when his thumb joined his finger and he did a roll.

l I had, My body stilled and I felt a spasm between my legs.

"Holy cow," I breathed.

"Why Whisky?" he repeated, going back to circling.

'ongues "Your eyes," I said. "They're the color of whisky."

rf from He smiled.

fted his I felt a spasm between my legs again.

ack on Then his mouth was on mine.

is hand I was dizzy when he finally moved and pulled my shirt off.

e again I would have thanked him, but he covered my body with his and u

nd washands and mouth on me, *all* over me, so I was robbed of speech. E
knew it my bra was gone. He reached down to pull off my shoes
circled yanked down my jeans. Then without warning his hands spread my l
his mouth was on me over my panties.

It was nice. It was better than nice, it was amazing.

ring me Then he whisked away my panties and his mouth was on *me*.

That was even better, *way* better.

In fact, so much better I felt it coming and I knew it was goin
good.

“Hank,” I said, and it sounded like a moan.

Then his mouth was gone and he came back over me. I stared
lifted my hands to his shoulders and pressed down. I wasn’t done
certainly wasn’t done. To my surprise, he resisted and buried his face
neck, touching his tongue there.

I know, “I was close,” I whispered.

“I know,” he answered, still resisting the pressure of my hands.

I blinked at the ceiling.

“Why?” I asked.

“I’m not done with you yet.”

And he wasn’t.

He took me from nearly there to nearly there to nearly there and I
get him nearly there but only got so far as getting his belt unbuckled
top button of his jeans undone. He did pull away to yank off his bo
socks, but that was it.

used his He had his hand between my legs and I had my hand in the back

before I jeans, and I was nearly there again, panting against his mouth with
then his fingers went away and slid up my belly.

My eyes flew open.

“Whisky!” I snapped, bucking and trying to push him to his back to get
some leverage on the situation.

I was so turned on, I’d never been that turned on before, my body
humming with it.

He was smiling.

“Don’t smile at me, you rat. Finish what you start,” I ordered.

He gave me a light kiss. “Ask nice.”

I growled.

Then I attacked.

It got out of hand then. There was a bit of wrestling, and unfortunately
Hank was stronger. I ended up on my back, wrists over my head held
of his hands, his other hand between my legs again and his mouth at my
I was close again and I knew he knew it.

“Let go of my hands, I want to touch you,” I demanded.

He didn’t answer, but instead ran his tongue along my neck.

“Hank.” His name came out kind of whiney.

Okay, maybe a lot whiney.

His hand went from between my legs and my body tensed.

“Please,” I said low.

His head came up and he looked at me.

His eyes were hot and intense and I held my breath.

hen his He rolled completely over me. I opened my legs and his hips fell b
them as he let go of my wrists. His hand worked at the buttons of his f
pushed his jeans down his hips, my mouth at his neck. Then m
κ to get wrapped around him.

“Jesus, Sunshine,” he muttered, but there was a smile in his voice.

dy was I looked him in the eye.

I was trying to guide him into me, but he was having none of it.

“I want you inside me, Whisky. Now.”

He pulled my hand away and then his hands went to my hips,
them, and he stared down at me, but he didn’t come inside.

I gave in. “Please.”

He slid inside.

unately It felt beautiful.

by one My head arched back and my arms wrapped around him.

y neck. “Sweetheart, look at me,” Hank whispered.

I looked at him. He moved inside me and it felt delicious.

“It starts now,” he told me.

I moved with him. I wasn’t really focusing on what he was saying,
because it was building again and I could feel it coming.

“What starts now?” I asked.

“You and me.”

He moved faster, pressed harder, went deeper.

Good God.

“What?” I asked dazedly.

etween “You and me,” he said again.

ly and I “Whisky,” I breathed, “I’m not keeping up with you.”

y hand I was keeping up with him, but not in the way I was talking about
on to him, tilted my hips and he went even deeper.

“God, you feel good,” I breathed.

“Sunshine, try and pay attention,” he replied, sounding amused
blinked at him.

He was still moving and I was getting closer all the time.

lifting “Are you crazy?” I asked, not really caring if he was.

“Starting now, there’s a you and me.”

My arms tightened involuntarily, and other parts of me tig
involuntarily, too.

Hank’s eyes went lazy.

“Now, *that* felt good,” he muttered.

“Hank—”

He slid in deep.

“Be quiet.”

mainly “Hank!”

His mouth met mine.

“Quiet,” he said.

Then he kissed me. He moved. I moved. Pretty soon I said his nam
(in a moan again), but mainly because he finally let me come.

And it was glorious.

. I held

, and I

ghtened

ie again

SEVEN



THE END

After we finished, Hank moved away. He pulled off his jeans, posed me into the bed with the covers over me, slid in beside me and turned the light.

He lay on his back and rolled me into his side.

Throughout all of this, I was silent and compliant, mainly because trying to decide how many types of fool I was.

I was settling on twenty-seven types of fool when Hank spoke, “I prefer you talking.”

“I’m sleepy,” I lied.

“You’re thinking, and the way your mind works, that’s probably a good thing.”

“You don’t know the way my mind works,” I told him.

“You’ve talked yourself into thinking alligators are cute.”

“I didn’t talk myself into it. Have you *looked* at an alligator? They’re not cute,” I retorted.

His body moved with laughter.

“And owls are cute,” I went on, nonsensically, ignoring his laughter more likely *because* of his laughter. “I’ve always wanted to own an owl.”

Florence Nightingale. She carried one in her pocket.”

His body kept moving, except I could tell instinctively the laugh turned deeper.

Then a thought struck me and I got up on an elbow. “Hey, are you to her?”

I felt his eyes on me in the dark. “Not that I know of.”

I settled back down and put my head on his shoulder. “Oh.”

sitioned He rolled into me and I fell to my back.

ned out His hand went into my hair at the side of my head.

“Are you really sleepy?” he asked.

e I was I wasn’t. I was wide awake and scared out of my wits.

“Um,” I mumbled.

think I “Because if you want to talk, we got shit to talk about.”

“I’m sleepy,” I said immediately.

His hand slid out of my hair, down my neck, between my brea
y not a down to circle my waist. Then, he pulled me into him.

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” he decided.

I pushed in closer.

I wasn’t going to think about it. Not then. Maybe not ever.

ney are I wrapped my arms around him and he held me close.

After a few minutes, I whispered, “Hank?”

“Yeah?”

hter, or I pressed my face into his throat. “Thanks for tonight.”

vl. Like His arms went tight.



After I had I WOKE up and something was crushing me.

I lay there in the dark assessing the situation then I remembered.

related I was on my back and Hank was at my side. I could feel his breath on my temple, his bicep was resting on my midriff, his forearm curling up and over my shoulder with his hand resting at the side of my breast. His thigh was thrown over my hip and his head was on top of mine. Adding to this, Shamus was on the other side of me, his head resting on my belly under Hank's arm, like my stomach was a pillow.

Both the human and canine Nightingale boys had me trapped. I had never felt feeling trapped for years, but this kind of trapped felt snug and secure.

It was at this juncture that reason returned.

This was not a good thing.

It was so not a good thing that it might have been a catastrophic thing.

The thing wasn't even about Billy. I had the feeling that Hank understood about Billy. Hank was a good guy and it was pretty clear he liked me (okay, so it was *really* clear he liked me).

I wasn't entirely certain I wanted to test this idea, however.

No, it was about sleeping with Hank on the first date.

I was *such* a slut.

What must he think of me?

I might have been able to explain about Billy if I hadn't slept with him on the first date. Now, he'd just think I was easy. An easy girl from the city who'd fuck criminals and cops without blinking an eye.

I'd even said please.

There was only one solution to this problem.

I had to get out of there.

Immediately.

Not just get out of Hank's house, but out of Denver.

h at my
my ribs
again.

My plan to leave Billy was screwed. I had to abort and start a

er both
resting

I moved and Shamus jerked and sat up.

I froze, listening, but Hank didn't wake.

'd been

"Let's go boy, move out," I whispered to Shamus, shoving him a
he jumped off the bed.

I slid out from under Hank and then stopped again, waiting. He stil
wake so I got out of bed. Shamus thought it was playtime and wag
tail, running to the door of the room and back to me.

ng.
c might
ie liked

"Shh!" I hissed. "Come here. Sit!" Shamus did as he was told and
his tail sweeping the floor with excitement. He thought we were going
a midnight stroll, maybe go to a park and play Frisbee. Crazy dog.

I gave him an ear scratch, wishing I could play Frisbee with him.
that exact moment, of course, but at some moment, eventually, and it
at my heart that I knew I never would.

He licked my hand.

That caught at my heart too.

h Hank
Indianadidn't have a dog. It was hard enough dealing with all that was Hank
dog to the mix and it was nearly impossible.

"Stay," I commanded and Shamus obeyed.

I started searching for my clothes in the dark and tripped over one

Mary Jane's.

"Shit!" I whispered and looked toward the bed.

Hank hadn't moved.

ill over Thank God.

I found my underwear and jeans, but tripped over Hank's boot on t
to my shirt.

"Fuck!" I snapped and gave up, feeling like a fool, rooting around
bit, and in the dark. Much better to root around in the dark partially dressed.

I put on my underwear and Shamus lost patience with waiting and
I didn't over to me. He leaned his furry body into my legs and I could
ged his undulating with the force of his tail wags.

"Sit, Shamus. Be good," I mumbled, doing another head scratch
I heard Shamus settled on my feet.

to take I was straightening from the dog, jeans still in my hand when tl
came on.

. Not at My head snapped up and I looked at the bed.

caught Hank came back from stretching to reach the light and sat up
elbow, his eyes settling on me. He looked sleepy, hair tousled, ches
and my breath caught. He might look handsome normally, kickass ha
angry and melt-in-your-mouth handsome when he casually drove his
sleepy he was a knockout.

g Hank

. Add a "What're you doin'?" he asked.

"You're awake," I pointed out the obvious.

"The neighbors are awake with all your racket. What're you doin'?"

e of my "I'm leaving."

Uh...not good.

One second, he looked sleepy, the next second, he looked pissed off

“What did you say?” he asked.

I looked down, anything not to look at Hank, and pulled my feet out of the way under Shamus.

“I’m gonna call a cab and I’m leaving.”

Deprived of my feet, Shamus got up and pressed his body against me again. This was unfortunate as I was trying to put on my jeans, thus I walked around on one leg and avoiding Shamus at the same time. Not graceful, but I had nothing left to lose.

I shouldn’t have looked down. Without warning, Hank was there while he jerked my arm pulling me off balance. I dropped the jeans and collided with him and Shamus. Shamus scooted out from between us then pressed against both of us.

Hank was naked. I hadn’t had a chance to get a good look at him with being entirely too tuned into how turned on he was making me. He had a great chest but my quick glance showed me he pretty much had great everything else as well.

I ignored his great everything else and snapped, “Hey!” trying to pull my arm away but Hank held on tight. In fact, his free hand came up and grabbed my other arm.

“Get back into bed,” he ordered, looking down at me.

“I’m going,” I told him.

“You’re not going.”

I was still trying to pull away. I was still not succeeding.

“I am,” I replied.

ff. “Why?” Hank asked.

“Does it matter?” I asked back.

ut from “Why?” he repeated.

Jeez, there was just no shaking this guy.

“Let go.” I was getting kind of desperate. I dropped my gaze to his legs, raised my hands there and began to push.

opping He shook me gently to get my attention. It worked. I looked back up exactly

“Tell me why you’re sneakin’ out of my bed in the middle of the night,” he demanded.

ere. He “Hank—”

ed with “Answer me, goddammit!”

against Holy cow.

n, what He wasn’t pissed off anymore, he was angry. I couldn’t only see his face, I knew I could feel it emanating from his body. For some reason, it didn’t hurt. He had it in check. It was entirely controlled. I knew that like there were no other jeans in the world as good as Lucky jeans.

pull my It did make me talk, however. I didn’t like that he was angry, not a grabbed “I’m not a slut,” I blurted out.

His hands on my arms relaxed, but didn’t go away, and he blinked his slow blinks.

“Sorry?” he asked.

“I’m not a slut.”

God, I sounded like an idiot. Now I had to explain.

“I’m not a slut. Never have I slept with a guy on a first date. Never. Never.”

“Roxanne—” he started to say, but I forged ahead.

“Bil...the last guy, it took, like, three weeks to get to third base at least a month before we did it. I swear.”

s chest, “Roxie—” Hank began again, but I kept talking.

ip. “Before him, there was Derek, and we were dating, like, forever we did it and it was unfortunate when we did because he wasn’t very it. Then there was Kenny and I don’t even remember how long it took night,” we did it. He was a jerk. Once we did, he dumped me.”

“Roxie—” Hank said again and started to pull me against his body. He had my arms up between us, and like the total idiot I was, I was counting down my ex-lovers on my fingers.

“Then there was Troy. He was a good kisser, like you, but it still didn’t count. I don’t know, at least *two weeks* before I let him get his hands up me. I wasn’t scared. Wait, Troy doesn’t count because we never did it in the end. I saw I knew I was making out with my friend Kim and I broke up with him. What a idiot. I forgot about her.”

t me. Hank now had his arms around me. Shamus was sitting beside me, his doggie body resting against our legs, and I was oblivious to this because I was on a roll. l one of

“Then there was Scott, he was my first. We dated for at least *a year* before we finally did it. He married the prom queen and now they’ve got a dozen kids, no joke.”

I stopped and looked up at Hank.

Never. He was looking down at me, angry gone, pissed off a memory. I
smiling again with only his eyes engaged in the smile.

Had I just recited all my lovers to Hank?

and at I had.

Shit.

“You finished?” Hank asked.

before “I’m an idiot.”

good at Hank bent his head and rubbed his nose against mine. Then he gav
before light kiss.

That was nice, but I still felt like I was now at least thirty differer
y, but I of fool.

ounting “I’m a slut *and* an idiot,” I told him.

took, I “You aren’t a slut and you aren’t an idiot,” he said authorit
y shirt. making me believe that at least he believed it.

aw him Then his hands came up my back and undid my bra.

bitch. I “No!” I protested. “Don’t do that, I have to go.”

He ignored me, slid the straps down my arms and tossed the bra
us, hisThen his hands went down my back. He bent, I felt them go over my
cause Iand he jerked me up. I threw my arms around him and he turn
deposited me on the bed and he came down on top of me.

ar until His weight felt good on me. Too good.

t half a “Whisky, get off me. I need to go.”

His hands were on me and I liked how they made me feel. I lik
whole lot. His fingers tagged my panties and started to pull them down

He was Against my neck, he said, “You still want to go after I fuck you again, I’ll take you back to the hotel.”

Holy cow.

My stomach did a dip.

I tried to ignore the dip and the subsequent melty feeling. I had to be strong. Or, at least, I had to try to be strong.

“No. No more fucking. I’ve got to sort out my problem, then if I’m still around when it’s done, we’ll try this again, but we’ll take it slow to know each other before we, uh...carry on...er, like this.”

His head came up and he looked at me. I could tell right away he thought I was funny.

“Sunshine, I know you’re crazy, and I have to admit it’s sweet, but I’m not all kinds of crazy if you think I’m waitin’ to get inside you again.”

Holy cow.

The melty feeling graduated to a rolling boil.

“Hank...”

He’d stopped pulling down my underwear at my hips, his hand cupped my pubic bone and he kissed me.

Shit.

I felt the little, itty bit of strength I was clinging to start slipping away. His tongue moved against mine then Hank broke the kiss.

“Open your legs,” he murmured against my mouth.

“I need you to understand,” I said, and I did. In that instant, I decided I was going to tell him everything and I *needed* him to understand.

ain, I'll "You can explain it tomorrow. Now I want you to open your legs."

I kept my legs firmly closed. "What if I explain it to you tomorrow you don't understand?"

In answer, he kissed me until I was dizzy. After the kiss, his lips pressed down my cheek to my ear.

"Roxanne, sweetheart, open your legs for me," he whispered.

I opened my legs.

I was weak and I couldn't help myself, but truly, at that moment, I had never had anyone else have done anything for him.

He rewarded me immediately. Later, I rewarded him.

Even later still, I'd lost all thoughts about leaving. My back was pressed to his chest, his arm was around me, my arm resting on his and our hands were laced.

I was half asleep when he murmured, "Whatever it is, I'll understand it." I

I snuggled deeper and prayed that was true.



MY HAIR WAS MOVED AWAY from my face and then a finger trailed down my neck. That finger turning into a full hand as it slid down my side to my hip.

"Wake up, Sunshine."

I rolled to my back. The hand stayed where it was so it moved against my belly as I opened my eyes.

It was the best wakeup call I'd ever had.

Hank was sitting on the bed, leaning over me. It was still dark outside although a little light was coming through the blinds, and there was a

coming from some other part of the house through the doorway. I could see he was dressed in a Rip Curl T-shirt and pair of dark track pants that had a wide stripe running down the side.

"You're dressed," I mumbled.

"Shamus and I are goin' for a run. We'll come back, shower and I'll get you out for breakfast."

I blinked.

"Run?" I asked.

"Run," he answered.

"As in, exercise?"

His lips twitched. "Yeah."

"Why?"

"I take it you don't run."

"Only when chased by men wielding chainsaws."

The lip twitch turned into a grin. "That happen a lot?"

"No, but Ally says there's one at the Haunted House she wants to tell me about."

The smile died and his brows drew together. "Christ, don't go to the Haunted Houses with Ally and Indy. A few years ago, Indy went berserk and broke through the hay bales they had set up to make the haunted trail. She headed into the cornfields. All the employees chased after her, but since they were dressed like monsters, Indy lost her mind. They had to call the police to settle her down."

I lost him at "cornfields."

so light

uld see “Cornfields?” I whispered.

it had a “Yeah.”

“They have a haunted trail through cornfields?”

“Yeah, up in Thornton. Best Haunted House in Denver. Indy and .
I’ll take every year. Why?”

“Cornfields freak me out,” I admitted.

Hank was silent.

Then he said, “You’re from Indiana. How in *the* fuck can cornfield
you out?”

“Cornfields don’t freak me out. Cornfields at night freak me out. *F*
cornfields at night freak me out,” I clarified.

“You been to many haunted cornfields?”

“Dude,” I said low. “All cornfields are haunted. Trust me. I know
I came up on my elbows so I was closer to him and said quietly,
whisper to you.” Then I gave a shiver because, well, the men
whispering cornfields freaked me out. Indeed, whispering cornfields
freak anybody out.

His arms came around me and he pulled me fully up and pressed m
to the against his. I knew he was laughing. I didn’t hear it, I felt it.

erk and After his body quit shaking he asked, “Did you just call me ‘dude?’

ail and “Yeah. So?”

ce they His hand went into my hair at the side of my head, his fingers
cops to through it. This made my scalp tingle pleasantly. He watched his han
then his eyes came back to me.

“What’s wrong with ‘dude?’” I asked when he didn’t answer.

“We don’t have enough time to get into all that’s wrong with especially when we have more important shit to talk about. And if I stay any longer, I’m gonna want my exercise in an entirely different way that isn’t going to help Shamus keep fit.” He gave me a light kiss, Ally go made my lips tingle even more pleasantly than my scalp. “There’s beans in the freezer, grinder in the cabinet over the coffeemaker yourself, but I’m takin’ you to Dozens for breakfast, so don’t eat a that’ll spoil your appetite.”

Is freak “Okay,” I said, staring at his lower lip, fascinated with watching it while he talked.

launted “Roxie?”

“Hmm?” I was kind of not paying attention. What could I say? His lip was *fine*.

.” Then “You keep lookin’ at my mouth like that, after I’m through with you.”
“They since I’ve been doin’ most of the work, *you’re* gonna have to take Shamus on a run.”

should My eyes moved to his and then they narrowed. “*You’ve* been doin’ of the work?”

ly torso He grinned but didn’t answer.

,” “Well! Do I have to remind you, Hank Nightingale, that you would me touch you the first time and the second time I *tried* to climb on you flipped me over—?”

sliding He kissed me quiet.

d move “You don’t have to remind me,” he said softly when he was done me. “I remember every second.”

‘dude,’ That shut me up, mainly because it took my breath away.

ay here He went on, “I’ll be back in forty-five minutes, an hour at the most, a way for me. We’ll shower together.”

, which I nodded my head. Although somewhere in my psyche it was regretful coffee that he was being supremely bossy, I didn’t care, not even a little bit.

r. Help “I think I might go back to sleep for a while,” I told him. “Wake me up when you get home.”

it move At my words, his eyes got lazy and his arms tightened, bringing me deeper into his. I got the feeling he was losing his motivation for the moment. I looked to the side of the bed and saw Shamus sitting there impatiently with his tongue lolling out, tail starting to wag when he caught my gaze.

s lower I looked back to Hank. “Whisky, Shamus is waiting.”

ou, and Hank kept looking at me. Just that, looking at me, his face close, his eyes staring into mine. I felt my breath turn shallow as his lazy eyes gave way to an intense look behind them.

ig most “What?” I asked.

His hand ran up my side.

“Just thinking of you sleepin’ in my bed,” he said. “It’s a good thing you’re here.”

dn’t let My throat closed and feelings of panic and happiness surged through me. It was strangely thrilling and frightening at the same time. I swallowed. I didn’t open my throat then I put my arms around him and pressed my face against his neck.

kissing “Hank,” I whispered against his skin. “What I have to say at breakfast, I know you aren’t going to like. Please, for me, or for the person you are right now, don’t—”

He interrupted me, "Are you tellin' me you're a different person?"

st. Wait I shook my head, pulled away from his neck and looked into his eyes.
"But once you hear what I have to say, you might think I am."

istering He stared at me a beat then all of a sudden he pulled me completely
from under the covers and slid my naked body across his lap. He yanked
me up covers over me, wrapping them around me to keep me warm, and his
hands went into my hair on either side of my head and held me facing
my body

"Sweetheart, I'm thirty-five years old and I've had a fuck of a long
e run. I've had more lovers than you counted on your one hand last night. I've come to this
patiently, with women that I know what I want when I see it, and I haven't had
anything in a long time that interests me as much as you."

Holy cow.

his eyes I was trying to process that (and struggling with it) when he continued
got that "Not only that, but I've seen a lot of shit in my job and I deal, day
with the filthy crust eating away at the edge of good civilization. I know
people. I know bad people. I know good people who do bad things and
people who do good."

ught." I stared at him, wide-eyed, fascinated and speechless as his face
closer to mine and he kept going.

ugh me. "I know what kind of person you are and nothing you say over
owed to is gonna change the fact that, while I'm runnin', I'm gonna think about
e in his fucking fantastic body naked and asleep in my bed."

akfast I A shiver slid through me.

think I "Wow," I whispered.

"So you can stop worrying," he finished.

I nodded.

his eyes. He watched me for a beat and then his hands went from my head
shoulders and then around my back.

tefully out “One more thing, Roxanne.”

ked the I nodded again, still speechless, still processing, and even th
hen his nodded, I was not entirely sure I could take “one more thing.”

him. “I meant what I said last night, about you and me. I know you’re
ot more—”

ie point “I’m not scared,” I lied, automatically and in self-defense.

it’s seen His arms tightened. “Quiet,” he ordered.

I shut up.

ued. “You think we’re going too fast.”

to day, “*That*, I’ll agree with,” I broke in again.

w good He shook his head and smiled. “What you need to get is that it’
and bad The minute I slid inside you last night, it was done.”

That got a belly quiver.

dipped “You said that last night,” I reminded him.

“I have to know you get it.”

reakfast “Why?”

ut your “’Cause whatever it is you’re gonna tell me in a couple of hours is
make me involved.”

“I’m not sure it means that,” I objected.

“I am.”

“Whisky—”

“I’m already involved.”

, to my “I don’t think so.”

He frowned. “You don’t get it.”

“You have to let me sort it out myself.”

ough I “Been there, done that. I was a bystander the other times and it
fuck isn’t gonna happen with you and me.”

scared He was talking about Indy and Jet and all their problems.

“You’re being very nice, but I have to take care of this my
informed him.

“I’m not being nice. I’m protecting what’s mine,” Hank returned.

My body jerked in shock at his words. I blinked and my
straightened.

“I’m not yours,” I said.

s done. “You’re welcome to think that, but it doesn’t change the fact th
are.”

This was familiar, too familiar, annoyingly familiar.

Men!

“I’m not yours!” I said and my voice was so much louder, Shamus
woof.

s gonna “I get it, Roxie, you’re tryin’ to be independent and strong—”

Oh no, now he was patronizing me. I wasn’t a big fan of
patronized. “Don’t you dare patronize me, Hank Nightingale.
independent,” I said, not claiming to be strong. I knew I wasn’t that
I’m sick to death of men who think they can...”

I stopped. I didn't want to go too far, too soon.

"What?" Hank asked. When I didn't answer he pushed, "Men who can do what?"

I scowled at him and burst out in a flurry of (loud) words, "Possibly. Trap me! Make me be where I don't want to be or go where I don't want to go or feel what I don't want to feel!"

After I was done talking, he twisted, my back hit the bed and he knew it he was on top of me, staring down at me, his eyes intense. "Way," I

"Belonging to me doesn't mean I'll make you do anything, it just means I consider you mine for as long as this lasts. It means I protect you. It means I take care of you. For another man, it might mean something different."

His eyes changed. They went funny, the intensity strengthened. "My back" something that was mesmerizing.

Then he concluded, "Don't confuse me with another man."

His words dealt my defenses a destructive blow. "That you"

Doggedly, I carried on trying to be philosophical, trying to hold onto the ragged remains of what was left of the shield I had around me, protecting myself from Hank.

"They say if you care about something, you have to set it free and when it comes back to you, it was meant to be." "I gave a"

"They're full of shit."

Obviously, I failed spectacularly at being philosophical. "I am"

I gave up on that and went for annoyed. "And"

"Hank!" I snapped.

He smiled, effectively breaking the moment, and gave me a light

“We’ll talk about it over breakfast. I’ll promise to listen to you and you
to think to promise to listen to me. We’ll figure it out.”

If I could have put my hands on my hips, I would have.

ess me! “You’re as stubborn as Uncle Tex.”

want to The smile deepened.

“That means you’re in trouble,” he said.

efore I “I already know that,” I grumbled.

He rolled completely on top of me, his body pressing into mine,
means I my breath away.

means I
, “The minute I saw you walk into Fortnum’s, I knew I’d do what
took to get you right where you are now. And I’m gonna do whatever
ing to to keep you here for as long as both of us get something good out of it.

I bit my lip. What could I say? He was getting to me.

No, if I was honest, he’d already gotten to me.

I couldn’t let him know it.

up the
ting me “And you think *I’m* crazy?” I asked.

“Yeah, I do. If you keep pretendin’ you don’t want to be here,
definitely crazy and you’re lyin’ to yourself.” He kissed my nose and
nd if it at me. “Don’t worry, I’m patient.”

Shit.

He got up, twisted me around until I was right in the bed and bent
kiss my temple.

Then, without waiting for me to come up with an answer (which
finding difficult) he was gone.

ht kiss.

ou have



I HEARD him leave and didn't sleep. How could I? My mind was a f was dizzy and Hank wasn't even in the house.

I mentally tugged at my protective shield but I knew it was useless

Oh well, whatever. So, I had to factor Hank into my plan. It would hard considering I had the feeling that Hank was probably just going over the plan and do it his way.

, taking There were worse things, right?

Anyhoo.

tever it I heard a knock on the door while I was burrowing into Hank's
it takes and I smiled.

” He'd come home, way early.

Poor Shamus. Maybe I'd take him out to play Frisbee later. I didn't if Shamus actually played Frisbee, but he seemed to be a super smart He'd learn.

I thought that Hank probably didn't take his keys because he knew here.

you're I got up, found my panties, tugged them on, grabbed his turtleneck
grinned floor and pulled that on too.

I left his bedroom and entered another room, a big room that length of the house and had two couches running down the sides, : low to wood-burning stove sitting on a stone hearth at the end and a telev walked through the side door, through the kitchen to the front door. \ h I was looking to see who it was, I opened it, a smile still playing on my mou

The minute I saw who was on the threshold, my smile died.

Billy stood there.

hurry. I

.

ldn't be
to take

pillow

't know
art dog.

v I'd be

off the

ran the
, and a
ision. I
Without
th.

Billy stood there.

EIGHT



BILLY AND MY WILD RIDE

That was the end of Hank and me.

Even though I thought it was the beginning, what happened would keep Hank further away from me than any flimsy shield I could come up with.



NOW I'M SITTING CURLED under a sink in a filthy hotel, gagged and handcuffed to the drainpipe. I hurt, everywhere. I've never hurt so much. My body hurts. My face hurts.

My heart hurts.

Everything hurts.

I hurt, but I wasn't scared.

Billy's gone. The men took him away. I don't know who they are, I don't know where they were going and I don't care. Someone would find me, the maid (if they had one in this fucking place) or the manager when they check out. I just have to wait. I wasn't going to die cuffed to a sink.

Though, it was debatable if something important, something deep inside me, something precious, hadn't already died.



BILLY KIDNAPPED ME. There was no other way to put it.

It wasn't an easy kidnapping for him. I fought it.

It was violent, it was destructive and it was ugly.

After I opened the door and the smile died on my face, he surged into Hank's living room, hands on me.

We went back...back...and then he slammed me into the wall. My head cracked against it and I hit with such force one of the New Belgium Bitter prints (the Fat Tire one) fell, crashing down, glass flying everywhere.

And next "Hank fucking Nightingale," Billy spat in my face, telling me I'd throwfound me. He'd looked up Hank.

Shit.

I couldn't talk. Billy's hand was at my throat and it was squeezing. And "I saw him running with his fuckin' dog. A fucking cop. *Detective* fuckin' Nightingale," Billy snarled.

I pushed hard, kicked harder and somehow got him off me.

We wrestled standing. I broke away, starting to run. Billy caught me, whipping me around. More wrestling, a lamp fell, crashing to the floor and overturned. Billy got me on the floor, rolled on top of me, his angry words were. I mine.

And me, "You fuck him?" he asked.

We don't I didn't answer, too scared to speak. I pushed against him, m racing and frightened out of my wits, hoping with everything that I v Hank would come home, and soon. I tried to think of how long he wa He'd said forty-five minutes, an hour. It had probably only been minutes, twenty-five, tops.

“I said, *did you fuck him?*” Billy shouted in my face when I answer, and then he moved.

I heard the snap of a switchblade and he rolled off me, and before it the blade went into Hank’s sweater, slicing through it. I pushed away, caught hold of me by the sweater and it tore more, hanging on me in t pulled free, got up and tried to run, but Billy caught me by the ankle went flying, landing hard on my knees.

I twisted around as he yanked me toward him by my ankle and fight him, but he was too strong. He hit me in the face, one of his silver tearing my flesh open at my cheekbone. I saw stars and tried to shake head clear when he got up, pulling me with him, and dragged me through house, into Hank’s bedroom.

“He fuck you here?” he demanded, pulling me up, slamming me against Hank wall, pushing his body against mine. “Did he fuck you?” he repeated, pressing my face to the side, pressing my bleeding cheek against the wall. “How many times did he make you come? How many times did he fuck you?” He pulled me from the wall and slammed me against it again. “*How many times did you?*” he screamed.

No smooth talk now. No fast-talking, silver tongue.

He was out of control, completely.

“Billy,” I whispered.

He hit me again, so hard my head and body flew to the side and was that down on my hands and knees. Then he kicked me in the ribs, his gone, slamming into my body so hard it pulled me off the floor. Then he came twenty down and rolled me over, tore the remains of the sweater off me and his thigh between my legs until his hips fell between them, his groin p

... didn't against me.

"I should fuck you, right here, in his bed. Leave a present for him. I knew sheets."

y. Billy *God, no. Please, God, no,* I thought.

atters. I I started struggling again. My ribs were burning where he kicked me and I face aching. I could feel the blood there.

Billy didn't notice my struggles.

tried to "I should do it, but we don't have time," he said, and I had just a er rings to thank God before Billy said, "Get dressed."

ake my He got up, jerking me up with him. ugh the

"*Get dressed!*" he screamed.

gainst a Shaking and scared, I got dressed.

pushing



'Did he I TRIED TO ESCAPE.

e away He took me to his car parked out in the street behind Hank's 4Run *he fuck* drove at first like a madman, silent, crazy.

I left him to his thoughts. Mine were of survival, then escape.

Once we left Denver, he seemed to calm.

I decided it was time to try to speak, maybe reason with him, maybe him around. "Billy, I have to go to the bathroom," I said.

I went "Shut your fuckin' mouth."

is boot Okay, so I was wrong about him being calm.

ropped He drove, fast.

forced Close to the Colorado-Nebraska border we stopped at a gas station
ressing

“Billy, I have to go to the bathroom, see to my face,” I said quietly

1 on his He turned to me. He didn't look like my handsome, sweet, dream
anymore. I didn't even know this man.

“You run, I'll catch you. Make no mistake.”

me, my I nodded. I believed him. Still, I was going to try.

He got me the key and I went to the bathroom. There were other
the station and the people in them stared at me, but gave us a wide bert

second I looked at my face in the cloudy, pocked, gas station mirror. The
blood running down my left cheek and it was smeared along my fa
cuts weren't bad, but they were there bleeding a lot and the bruisi
swelling had already started.

I felt my nostrils burn and I took deep breaths to stop the tear
coming. Tears would leak energy and I needed everything I could
forced back the tears, washed my face and stayed in the bathroom as lo
could, hoping someone would call the cops. Hoping I'd hear sirens.

ner. He

A fist pounded on the door.

“Get your ass out here!” Billy yelled.

I tilted my head back, closed my eyes and took a deep breath.
pushed open the door with all my strength and ran straight by Billy, h
/be talk for leather, no destination in mind. I just wanted attention, to get som
help. So I ran, screaming at the top of my lungs.

I saw the surprised stares turn to shock, people filling up their
waiting in them, stunned immobile at the sight of Billy chasing me. T
caught me, dragged me kicking and screaming to the car, shoved me
driver's side, got in with me, and somehow, we rocketed from the
.

even as I was fighting him.

er Billy I saw a man run toward us, but he was too late.

Billy drove wild, fighting me as he drove. I didn't care if we wrecked. I took the damage of an accident to my body far easier than I'd take any damage from Billy.

cars at He pulled over and turned, giving me his full attention.

h. He hit me again, so hard my mind went blank and I slowed to a brain settle. When I blinked away the unconsciousness that was enveloping me Billy was tying my hands together with nylon rope.

ng and When he was done, he yanked me across the emergency brake and my face was an inch from mine.

rs from "You gotta learn, Roxie. You gotta learn."

I get. I I didn't know what he was talking about and didn't want to know.

ong as I "You'll learn," he finished, then he pushed me off him, put the car in gear and we took off.



HE DROVE ERRATICALLY. I thought we were heading toward Chicago. Then I least, but then he went south. We stopped at another gas station on the Kansas border. He chose one that was desolate. No cars this time, no attendant. He tied my hands to the steering wheel when he went in to get

one to brought back cheese puffs and a diet drink and I ate with my hands. I noticed his wallet was full of bills, bulging with them, and I was too scared of what was happening to be even more scared of how he got so much money.

Then he I didn't think of anything. I kept my mind blank, tried to sleep in the station body would be rested, ready to fight, but sleep wouldn't come.

We headed into Kansas, went west for a while, and deep in the night we stopped at a hotel. Billy tied me to the steering wheel again while he checked in. He didn't untie my hands all night, even stood over me while I went to the bathroom.

Lying on my back in the bed, Billy pressed into me, half his body on top of mine, keeping me from breathing. My ribs still hurt and they hurt worse when he put his arm tight around me.

He whispered, "You can't leave me Roxie. You're the only good thing I got. You're the only good thing I ever had. I can't lose you. Don't you understand?"

I didn't understand. "Billy, you have to talk to me. What are you afraid of?"

"We gotta stay clear for a few days. I struck it this time, Roxie. Before you left, I hit it. Now I can take you to France. Now we can go anywhere. We can go to Italy, Bermuda. You can live in a bikini."

"Billy," I whispered. "What have you done?"

"It's all for you, Roxie. Everything I've done is for you."

I felt the tears crawl up my throat, my nostrils quivering, but I fell down and lay there, awake all night, Billy sleeping beside me.

I was lying in the bed I'd made for myself.



THE NEXT DAY, more of the same. The only difference was I didn't get any money. I escaped and I got a tube of chips with my diet drink.

We headed back east, then north, cut back, and then south the next day.

one night, We didn't talk. Billy was beyond fast talk now. Even Billy was checkedenough to know he'd have to talk three miles a minute to bring me to the around.

We were at the Nebraska-Iowa state line when the clock on the dashboard overturned to midnight and we stopped at a filthy motel.

These with The manager looked at me tied to the steering wheel while Billy couldn't move. I didn't make a move, didn't try to communicate my dilemma. The only thing I of escape were gone, for now.

Don't you Like my mom said, I needed to be smart. To escape, I needed people. I needed a place to run, a police station, a fire station, a hospital, an ambulance, a running café. Something. I had to bide my time, not fight. Maybe make Billy think I'd given up. Billy would have to fuck up somewhere along the line, and I'd be waiting.

That was when I'd go. Escape. Find my way home, get my stuff, see Annette and disappear. I'd have to leave the country, maybe go to Canada, Mexico, disappear and stay gone for a good long time, maybe forever.

I was my generation's Uncle Tex. I had to cut myself loose. I understood Uncle Tex now. I understood how it felt to feel dirty even though it wasn't you who jumped in the mud. Instead, you'd been pushed, but you were all the same.

I hadn't taken a shower in three days. My hair was filthy, my face and body still ached from the fight, especially my ribs, and I feared they'd cracked when Billy kicked me. I hurt from being cooped in the car, my head hurt from being tied together for two days. I lay in bed, Billy beside me, and my thoughts drifted to Hank.

I'd succeeded in not thinking about him until then. But I was tired.

s smartfucking tired, I couldn't push the thoughts away.

ie back I wondered what he thought when he came home from his run, t
to find me asleep in his bed. To wake me, shower with me, take
ie dashbreakfast like normal people, like a couple starting out. Instead, h
home to find his house wide open and trashed, me gone.

checked One date and he said there was a him and me. He was so sure about
thoughtswas so fucking sure he'd made me sure. For twenty minutes, I'd fe
and clean and *free*.

people. I God, how I wished that could be true.

ll-night It didn't last, *couldn't* last.

rink I'd Here I was, unshowered, in a stinking motel, on the run with a ci
d I wasmy pretty designer clothes dirty, no longer my armor. Hank would ta
look at me and wonder what in the hell he was thinking. I wasn't v
ff fromthought I was. *I* didn't even know who I was anymore.

Canada, I felt a single tear slide down the side of my eye when the door sp
and crashed open.

erstood Billy jerked awake and came away from the bed. I rolled the other
wasn'tthe lights went on.

e soiled "Fuck, Roxie, *run!*" Billy shouted, but I had no time to run. The
nowhere *to* run. They were in the door, cutting off the only escape rout

ace and There were two men with guns. I felt momentarily stunned. I didn
'd been I'd ever seen a gun, except in a holster carried by a uniformed cop.

y hands Billy charged. I shook free of my daze and tried to make a das
ide me went after Billy, but I didn't see what happened because the other on
after me.

ired, so

Thanks to my fucking, shithead, so-very *ex-boyfriend*, I was hind
hinking tied hands, wrists rubbed raw by being bound for two days.

me to I fought all the same.

e came He easily overpowered me and forced me into the bathroom, cuff
by one wrist to the pipes under the sink. I was shouting and he sho
it it. He handkerchief in my mouth, tying it in place with a cord he ripped
lt good lamp in the bedroom. This all took him less than a minute. He was a pr
hand at this crap.

Then, without looking back, he entered the grunting, scary scuffle
in the other room. No one outside heard me scream before I was gagge
riminal, was the kind of place where they ignored it. The scuffle stopped or
ake one but one way or another, the bedroom went completely silent.

what he I sat under the sink, tense and waiting, but minutes ticked by and
came back for me.

lintered



SO THERE I WAS. My worst fears had come true.

way as Billy's stink had settled on me.

I could even smell it.

ere was

ie.

't think

sh. One

ie came

Thanks to my fucking, shithead, so-very ex-boyfriend, I was hindered by tied hands, wrists rubbed raw by being bound for two days.

I fought all the same.

He easily overpowered me and forced me into the bathroom, cuffing me by one wrist to the pipes under the sink. I was shouting and he shoved his handkerchief in my mouth, tying it in place with a cord he ripped from a lamp in the bedroom. This all took him less than a minute. He was a practiced hand at this crap.

Then, without looking back, he entered the grunting, scary scuffle I heard in the other room. No one outside heard me scream before I was gagged. Or it was the kind of place where they ignored it. The scuffle stopped or moved, but one way or another, the bedroom went completely silent.

I sat under the sink, tense and waiting, but minutes ticked by and no one came back for me.



SO THERE I WAS. My worst fears had come true.

Billy's stink had settled on me.

I could even smell it.



A HIGH PRICE

I heard movement in the other room, barely, just a rustling.

I knew someone was there, maybe someone who wasn't suppose there.

I kept quiet and held my breath, unsure of what to do. I didn't want men who took Billy to come back and get me. I didn't think they were people who were there to explain that Billy had won some mag million dollar sweepstakes and just got really carried away with excitement of it all.

I saw the shadow when it hit the doorway, and without thinking I crawled further under the sink.

"Fuck," the shadow muttered.

Then the bathroom light flipped on.

Vance stood there, Lee's bounty hunter.

I blinked up at him, my eyes adjusting to the light.

It immediately hit me that Vance was a different sort than Ha didn't have control over his reactions, maybe didn't want to, and he did to hide his expression from me. Vance's dark eyes were blazing and his mouth was tight.

He pulled some keys from his pocket and crouched beside me, but never leaving my face even as his hands went to the cuffs. He freed me from the sink within a few seconds, then he went to work on the cord wrapped around my head, all the while looking at me.

After he pulled the handkerchief gently from my mouth, his hands went back to mine and he worked on the nylon rope while he asked, "You okay?"

I wanted to laugh and ask him how many girls he found bearded and gagged and cuffed to sinks in sleazy hotels that answered, "Yeah, peachy." But it was anything but funny and both Vance and I knew it.

Instead, I said, "I think he cracked a couple ribs."

His eyes flared, and again he didn't try to hide it.

He helped me up from the floor, out of the hotel and then helped me into a black Ford Explorer.

Once I was inside, he skirted the car and swung behind the driver's door.

Without delay, he started the truck, hitting some buttons on the sat nav. Then he hit a button on the phone, making it ring inside the truck.

"Yeah?" A voice answered before the second ring.

"Got her. Do you have a lock on my position?" Vance asked, still fiddling with the sat nav.

"Yeah. She okay?" the voice asked back.

"I need the nearest hospital," Vance replied.

Silence, then, "Fuck."

Vance stopped fiddling with the sat nav, reversed the Explorer out of the spot and started driving.

"When you hear the zip code, enter it into the sat nav. Can you do that?"

his eyes Vance asked me.

re from “Yes,” I whispered, then cleared my throat. “Yes,” I said louder.

rapped The male voice gave me the zip code and I entered it. After I c

Vance took over, pressing a couple of buttons. The navigation
ls went calculated the route and Vance swung a u-ie.

kay?” Then the male voice said, “What can I report to Hank and Tex?”

ten up, “She’s safe. Let me get her checked out. Then I’ll call in and you
1, sure, Lee decide,” Vance replied.

“I’m here,” another voice said, a voice I knew was Lee’s.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the window, hum
burning deep into my already exposed mental wounds. I didn’t kno
me into time it was, but it had to be early in the morning, three o’clock, mayl
and Lee and his army were at work for me.

wheel. “Hank there?” Vance asked.

av after My already tense body went rock-solid.

“He’s not in the surveillance room, he’s in my office. Bobby’s
him now,” Lee replied.

iddling I let out a breath.

“Tex?” Vance asked.

“Tex is systematically tearing apart the weight machine in the
room.”

I almost smiled at that. Almost.

t of the Vance started speaking. “Roxie’s been beaten, but looks okay. She
he cracked her ribs. I’m gonna get her checked out. Then we’ll head ho
o that?”

I wrapped my arms around my middle and kept my head against the window. I wanted the conversation to end before Bobby got Hank from the office and he made it to the surveillance room. I didn't know how long

“You get Flynn?” Lee asked, breaking into my thoughts.

“No one was there. She was alone and cuffed to the sink in the bathroom. Signs of a struggle. I didn't ask questions, just got her out.” Vance moved to me. “That struggle yours?”

I shook my head.

“Someone came and took Billy, cuffed me to the sink,” I said quietly.

“Hear that?” Vance asked.

“I'll get Ike on it,” Lee said.

I closed my eyes again. So much for not dragging Lee and his brother in here.

“Roxie?” Lee called my name.

I sat there and didn't answer. I knew this was better than being on a wild ride with Billy but somehow, right then, it felt worse.

“Roxie,” Lee said again, his voice softer.

“Yes?” I replied, responding to his tone and to Vance's coaxing as he sat on my knee.

“Talk to Vance, tell him everything that happened. Everything you can remember. Okay?” Lee ordered, again soft.

“Okay,” I said.

“Vance, I want regular call-ins,” Lee went on.

“Roger that,” Vance replied.

inst the “Get her home,” Lee kept issuing orders.

n Lee’s Disconnect.

I had. I breathed a sigh of relief that I didn’t have to deal with Hank.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I told Vance after I watched him
hroom.button on the phone.

’s eyes “You don’t have to,” he said, not looking at me. “Not now. No
yawns before us. We’ve got time.”

I sat there a second and then whispered, “Thank you.”

ly. I meant about him rescuing me, not about him letting me be quiet.

I think he knew what I meant.



ays into X-RAYS SHOWED I had three cracked ribs. There was nothing they could
but wrap me up, and I thought they did this more for my peace of mind
for my ribs. The cuts on my face would heal, they told me, and didn't
on my stitches.

They didn’t like what they saw and gently asked if I wanted them
in a police officer.

squeeze I said no.

I hadn’t decided what I was going to do next. I was getting by
minute.
ou can

Vance loaded me up and we rolled.

Without asking, he pulled off at an outlet mall.

I could have kissed him, but I didn’t. If there was anything
maintenance girl like me needed after being kidnapped and assaulted
an outlet mall.

We went into the Levi's store where he bought me a pair of low-rise jeans that were just this short of being as good as Lucky's, a great belt that was dark brown, it was nearly black and a dusty-pink Henley. It wasn't DeWalt but it would do in a pinch. Then we went into a Body Gap and I got a pair of press a underwear. Then we went to Designer Shoe Warehouse and Vance got me a pair of Keds so I could change out of Manolo Mary Jane's.

Nebraska Vance pulled off at a hotel, and I would have born his first child if he had asked (though I didn't tell him this) when we checked in and I took a shower using the hotel's shampoo and body wash.

I came out of the bathroom squeaky clean, but still feeling dirty. I threw my clothes in the trash bin, never wanting to see them again (all those Manolos, because even being abducted and on the run couldn't taint me). I could do Blahnik shoes).

And then I looked at Vance who was sitting on the bed.

I don't need "Ready to roll?" he asked, coming up from the bed, all action. I thought though I suspected he'd had about as much sleep as I'd had these past few days to call days.

That was to say, none.

I suspected that Hank or Uncle Tex sicced him on me the minute he was by-found me gone.

"I need you to re-wrap my ribs," I said, holding out the bandages to him.

He came toward me. I lifted my shirt to just under my breasts, feeling a little embarrassment at this point. I mean he found me handcuffed to a sink with a high really bad hair. Embarrassment was now a luxury.

, it was He re-wrapped me, quickly, expertly, no-nonsense, like he'd done it before a hundred times. When he was done, I nodded to him and

se jeans “Ready.”

was so But I didn’t move.

3G, but He watched me for a few beats then stood in my space and looked at me. For the first time I noticed his eyes were shuttered and he was brought back from me.

Then he asked, “You need time? Lee wants you home, but if you need time, we’ll make time. You can get into bed and let sleep heal.”

shower, Shit.

I threw Here I was again with another good fucking guy.

but the I couldn’t cope.

Manolo I swallowed the threatening tears.

“Home is Chicago,” I told him. I decided to focus on that and not think about that I could likely sleep for a hundred years and not be healed.

He kept looking at me but stayed quiet.

ast few “Will you take me to Chicago?” I asked.

He still kept looking at me.

Then he said, “I want to say yes, but I’m gonna say no.”

e Hank I closed my eyes and felt his hands on my arms.

“Girl,” he said softly. I opened my eyes and looked at him. “If I had stayed home and found what Hank found with my woman bein’ gone, and then I went beyond sent lookin’ for her took her further away, there’s no tellin’ what I’d do with sorry, it’s a guy thing. I respect him and I’m not gonna make him shirk what he’ll do.”

done it I’d had a good look in the bathroom mirror. The cuts had scabbed and said,

d down
holding the blood was gone, but the bruising and swelling on my cheeks
around my eye were worse than ever. I had more bruises on my throat,
ribs, hips and wrists. I was an absolute mess. I was hideous. I felt like
a physical thing, inside and out.

ou need “Look at me, Vance. I can’t go back to Hank,” I whispered and it sounded
like a plea, because it was a plea.

Hank was goodness and truth. I was secrets and lies. I had no business
with Hank Nightingale.

Vance watched me for a few more beats, came to a decision and said
“I can give you that. I’ll take you to Tex.”

ell him My relief was so great, I couldn’t help it. I sagged into him. His arms
around me and I pressed my good cheek against his chest.

“Thank you,” I said.

He didn’t respond. We stood there awhile, Vance holding me, until I
was warmer and able to move. The minute my body prepared for action, he
stepped away, took my hand in his and guided me to the car.



I came WE STOPPED ONLY for lunch and dinner and to fill up the gas tank. I didn’t
do much. Vance noticed and made me stay hydrated by buying me bottles of
water and handing them to me every once in a while, making me drink

e man I I tried to sleep, but it wouldn’t come.

do. I’m So when I was ready, on a long stretch of straight road that was
never known of Nebraska (until now—now I knew of a sleazy rehab
hospital with nice people working there and an outlet mall), I told Vance
the story.

As I talked, the cab felt like it was vibrating with the open anger that

me and rolling off him.

t, arms, I just kept talking.

t like a He didn't say anything when I was done. He simply phoned it in to the surveillance room.

ounded



DENVER LOOMED bright in the darkness.

business Before I knew it, we were exiting off I-25 onto Speer Boulevard into the city, when Vance hit a button on the phone and the ring filled the SUV.

“Yeah?”

ms slid “We’re in Denver.”

“I see you,” the voice said. “You’re headin’ the wrong way.”

“I’m takin’ her to Tex,” Vance replied.

il I felt
e felt it

Silence.

Then the voice said, “Hank wants her.”

“She wants to go to her uncle. I’m takin’ her there,” Vance told the

dn’t eat Another beat of silence then, “Your call.”

ttles of Vance hit a button and the phone went dead.

“Are you going to get into trouble?” I asked him.

“No.”

all I’d “You wouldn’t lie?” I asked.

otel, a “I would,” he replied, and I watched his shit-eating grin spread across his handsome face illuminated by the dashboard light. “But I’m not.”

hat was That almost made me smile too. Almost.

He pulled up outside Uncle Tex's house and the front door opened and the Explorer stopped. Uncle Tex came out of the house and into the darkness. The outside light came on and I saw Nancy standing in the doorway.

I opened the cab, got out and Uncle Tex was there.

He looked at me, his face lit by the streetlights, clearly showing a mix between relief and fury. Relief won out and he pulled me into his arms. "Careful, Tex. She's got three cracked ribs," Vance warned as he moved the cabsomewhere close.

Uncle Tex's tight arms loosened.

"I'm okay," I said against his chest.

He didn't answer.

"Uncle Tex. I'm okay," I repeated.

Still no answer.

"She needs rest. I don't think she's slept in days," Vance informed me.

I was kind of getting tired of these men talking about me like I was a piece of property. Unfortunately, I was so dog-tired physically I didn't have the capacity to call them on it. So instead my head, still pressed against Uncle Tex's chest, nodded and I pulled a bit away.

"Don't know how to thank you," Uncle Tex said, obviously to Vance.

"We'll talk about that later," Vance replied.

Uncle Tex let me go and looked at Vance. I saw that Vance and Uncle Tex were staring at each other and the air around us had somehow changed, his

"You got an idea of what you want?" Uncle Tex asked, not beating around the bush, and I hoped that whatever answer Uncle Tex was looking for was the one that Vance gave.

l before “Yeah,” Vance replied.

irkness. “Money?” Tex asked.

Vance’s face got tight, and I could tell right off that wasn’t the right
to say.

a battle So could Uncle Tex and he changed tactics.

“Roxie?” Tex guessed, and he wasn’t addressing me, he was talking
d from Vance.

My eyes got wide and I stared at Vance, waiting for his answer.

I might have been tired and just rescued from a kidnapping, and
certainly thankful to Vance for everything he’d done, and he was cute
(really cute, super cute, actually cute wasn’t the word, hot was my
word), but I sure as hell wasn’t going to be handed over as a gift of gratitude
for saving my hide.

him. And anyway, if anyone could hand me over, it was me and I was
with men. Totally and completely. I was looking forward to a life with
wasn’t a lady. I was going to get a dozen cats and a fucking great vibrator, maybe
mental of those rabbits I heard about, and that was it.

t Uncle Vance’s voice broke into my lonely, but satisfied, plans for the future.

ice. “I’ll get what I want from Lee.”

“Money,” Tex said decisively and he sounded disappointed.

l Uncle Vance looked at me. Then he looked at Tex. He was deciding if he
nged. share.

g about Then, he decided. “I want five minutes in the holding room with
for was Flynn before they turn him over.”

I looked between the two men. I didn’t know what “the holding

was, but it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure it out.

Holy cow.

ht thing I held my breath.

For the first time Uncle Tex smiled and whatever was in evaporated.

king to "You'll have to stand in line," Tex told him.

"I think I've earned one of the first cracks," Vance returned.

Holy cow. Holy cow. Holy cow.

l I was "Vance—" I started, but stopped when his eyes locked on me.

and all He wasn't hiding his reaction again. He looked angry, beyond a
ore the realized immediately that he actually *had* been controlling his reactio
ratitude was his real reaction and it scared the living daylights out of me.

as done "A man raises a hand to a woman, he needs a lesson," Vance decla
is a cat he said was downright, bottom line true.

yre. Vance got in my space and put his hands on my shoulders, and wh
was going to say flew from my brain. He looked down at me and h
changed. The anger was still there, but I watched as whatever was f
for its place was concealed from me.

shouldcontrol and hidden. "Talk to Eddie," he urged, his voice quiet, his expression now
a cop's house. Billy Flynn is fucked."

h Billy He didn't wait for my response, and my heart stopped when he g
my chin, pulled my head to the side and kissed my cheekbone, righ
room"my scabs were. Then he turned, walked around the hood of the E

swung into the driver's seat, and he was gone.

"Let's get her inside." Nancy was there and had her good hand on my shoulder. Her grip was stronger than I expected it to be. She turned me toward the house, her face filled with concern.

Uncle Tex's arm came around my shoulders as I saw lights round the corner down the block.

I froze.

It was dark, but I could see in the streetlamps it was Hank's 4Runner.

"No," I whispered, panic flying through me.

"Roxie?" Uncle Tex asked. He and Nancy stopped with me.

My eyes flew to Tex. "I can't see Hank."

Uncle Tex glanced at the oncoming car. "Darlin' girl..." Tex started. I knew he didn't agree with me.

"No! No, I can't see him and...and he can't see *me*. Not like this. Please, please," I chanted.

The SUV was close. I had no time. I stopped chanting, shook off Nancy's hand and Uncle Tex's arm, and I ran.

fighting



I WENT INTO THE HOUSE, tearing through it, to the room at the back.

I threw the door closed. It was Uncle Tex's bedroom.

I ran to the windows, cats flying everywhere sensing my panic. I pulled the drapes. Then I went back through the dark room to the door, grabbed the knob for a lock but there was none. I put my back to the door and slid down it, sitting with my shoulders pressed against the door.

I heard the voices—Uncle Tex's a soft boom, Hank's deep

controlled and patient, Nancy's butting in every once in a while. The
1 me. It got louder, and then I could tell, even though I couldn't make out the
ise, her that Hank's control slipped.

I put my hands over my ears, pulled my knees up and rested my feet
ling the on them, but I could still hear the voices. I could feel Hank's impatience.
I knew Uncle Tex was trying to protect me.

I started humming.

er. God, I was so tired. So, fucking, tired.

I couldn't give in to the exhaustion.

I hummed, forcing the voices out of my head, and I planned.

Get my clothes from the hotel.

ed, and Get my car.

Go to Chicago.

Please, Go to Annette's.

Get my money, my stuff and escape.

Nancy's There came a soft knock at the door and I stilled.

"Roxie, honey, it's me. Nancy."

I got up slowly from the door and opened it a crack. She was alone.

The voices were gone.

; and I "Where's Hank?" I asked.

e door, "Lee and Eddie are here, they've got him outside. Let me in, baby."
oor and she said gently. I opened the door enough so she could slide in and I c
right behind her.

) voice She switched on a light and then turned to me. "Eddie and Jet "

the boomyour hotel today. It's good having a cop in the family." I watched words, smiled a mother's satisfied smile and my heart wrenched at the sight.

I'd never seen my mom smile at Billy and me like that.

orehead Never.

ice, and Nancy kept talking. "Eddie explained to management and they c you out. Your car's outside. Jet and Indy brought in your stuff. 5 making up the second bedroom right now."

I was leaning against the door trying to hear what was happening c and at the same time trying not to hear.

"We all think you should go home with Hank," Nancy said softly. Tex."

I shook my head, looking at the floor.

"I'm going to sleep for a while, then I'm going to go," I told her.

Nancy got close to me. She leaned against the door with me, more support than moral support, I could tell.

She reached out and grabbed my hand. "Where are you going to go

"I don't know." I was still looking at the floor. "Away."

"You should know Hank wanted to look for you. Jet told me. I Eddie talked him out of it. When he got to his house..." She stopped. doll, look at me."

I looked at her. Her green eyes were kind, and I felt my nostrils y doll," burn and I sucked in deep breaths to control the tears.

losed it She continued talking. "When he got to his house and you were ; wasn't good. Tex knew exactly what had happened and told them ab went to Billy person. Lee was worried what Hank would do if he caught up w

as she and Billy was with you. Tex told me that Lee and his boys can do what Eddie and Hank can't do. Still, it took a lot to talk Hank out of coming with you."

I realized that Nancy thought I was upset that Vance had come and checked out Hank.

They're "It's not that," I told her.

"What is it?" she asked.

outside, I looked at the floor again and swallowed.

She squeezed my hand. "What is it, honey?" she asked, her voice so soft I could barely hear her.

My nose started burning and so did my eyes. I closed them, had to blink the tears away.

"I'm dirty," I whispered in a voice lower than hers. "He's good and wonderful and he deserves better than me."

"Oh, baby doll," she whispered and she moved, sliding across the floor with her hand letting go of mine and her arm coming around me. "You gotta stand for something that's just not true."

I stood there and let her hold me as best she could. She was small and me and she'd had a stroke, but she was still stronger than me. So was Lee and "Baby" was Indy. So was Ally.

start to Everyone was stronger than me.

Hank needed someone like them. Someone who knew good from bad and was strong enough to stand for the good or turn away from the bad.

out this And that was not me.

with you John Mellencamp sang an old adage, "*You gotta stand for something*"

things you're gonna fall for anything."

ing after Mellencamp was right.

Miracle of miracles, I didn't cry, and finally I said, "I have to get to bed, sleep."

She pulled away and looked at me closely. I could tell she did what she saw.

Even so, she sighed and let me be.

"I'll see how Indy and Jet are doing with that bed. You want me to go to bed with them in here?"

"No!" I said it louder than I needed to, but I liked these people, and spending any more time with them would make it harder to leave.

I want to be alone. I haven't been alone in three days."

id clean She nodded, but I could tell she still didn't agree. "I'll knock on the door when the coast is clear."

ie door, I took her hand and gave it a squeeze. "Thank you," I whispered.

a know She reached up, kissed my cheek then slid out the door, not opening any more than she needed to. I found myself hoping, again, that Uncle and Nancy worked out.

Jet. So I turned out the lights and resumed my position on the floor, shoving myself against the door.

I heard Nancy talking to Indy and Jet, their voices a murmur in the background, but I couldn't hear what they said.

Then there was quiet.

I waited.

ing, or A long time passed and there was a knock on the door.

“Roxie?” It was Uncle Tex.

“Yeah?”

“It’s just you and me, girl. Everyone’s gone.”

I didn’t answer.

I closed my eyes and rested my forehead on my knees.

It wasn’t with relief, it was with heartbreak.



I SAT in the dark for a little while longer, and when I felt ready I came

Uncle Tex made me eat half of a frozen pizza and made me drink
shots of hooch. The whole time he watched me silently. I could

“No. I wanted to say something, but he kept his peace.

I left him in front of the huge, old console TV in his living room and
to the second bedroom.

The double bed was made with fresh sheets, an old, mint-green
blanket smoothed over the top. My suitcases were on the floor against
the wall. My pajamas had been cleaned and were folded and resting
on the Texpillow.

I fought back the tears (again), changed into my pj’s and slid into bed
I still had my plan, and tomorrow I was going to carry it out.

I didn’t know what was happening to Billy and I didn’t care. He was
to me.

I didn’t know where Hank was and I tried not to care. He wasn’t
me, but we were over. This I knew like I knew MAC cosmetics were
quality for the price by a long shot.

Finally, I slept.



I WOKE when the covers moved and it wasn't me that moved them.

For a moment, I thought it was one of Uncle Tex's cats. Then it moved in a way that it would have to be the biggest cat in history.

Or a human.

A strong arm slid around me and I was pulled back against a warm body.

out. I froze then I tried to pull away.

ick three "Don't," Hank said to the back of my head.

tell he Shit.

I stopped pulling away, but my body was tense.

nd went "How'd you get in here?" I whispered.

"Tex let me in."

henille I closed my eyes.

inst the Betrayed by my own flesh and blood.

on the "Well, he's certainly not invited to my next birthday party," I stated.

ed. Silence.

"I'm okay, Hank. Really. You can go," I told him, or more like him.

as dead More silence, and he didn't move.

dead to "Actually, I'd rather that you went," I continued. "I'm feeling the
the best be alone."

"That's too bad, 'cause I'm not feelin' that same need."

Jeez, he was stubborn.

“If memory serves, I was the one who was just abducted. I’m not your feelings count about now,” I told him, sounding so uppity the bedborderline bitchy.

His body got as tense as mine. I felt it like a warning.

Then his mouth came to my ear. “I feel the wraps,” he murmured, his hand running gently along my ribs. “And I know the way Vance found me. I’m sorry you went through that, Sunshine.”

I didn’t answer and waited. I expected he wasn’t done.

I wasn’t wrong.

“But I came home from a run the morning after the best date I’d ever had. I had a date with a girl who talked about pigs wearing toupees, who could sing Springsteen lyrics, who whispered to horses and who grew up in Indiana. I was scared of cornfields. I came home thinkin’ that I was gonna make that girl, shower with her, get her breakfast, get her to trust me, and start to get to know her better. Instead, I found my house a disaster, I could only assume was her blood on the wall in my bedroom and she was gone.”

Dear God. How’d my blood get on the wall?

lied to Hank must have been out of his mind. Uncle Tex must have been out of his mind.

I closed my eyes and sucked in a breath.

need to “Was that your blood?” he asked.

I let out my breath. “Well, I tried, but unfortunately I was the one who ended up bleeding.”

I should have stayed silent, or possibly, I shouldn’t have been f

not sure For one reason or the other, the air in the room changed so much I found it hard to breathe and it had nothing to do with his arm tightening around my ribs.

“Hank, my ribs,” I whispered.

Instantly, his arm loosened and his mouth went away from my face. He waited while he got control. The air changed back to normal and he stepped away again.

“I guess I’m sayin’ that my feelings do count about now,” he finished.

“I’m sorry. I’ll pay for any damage or cleaning of your house,” I said.

He ignored my totally stupid comment. “You told me you were in danger.”

Shit.

I had said that.

“I wouldn’t have left you alone if I’d known you were in danger,” he said.

Good God, he thought it was his fault.

“It wasn’t your fault, Hank. I didn’t think I was in danger,” I told him.

And it was true, I didn’t think I was.

I thought Billy loved me. He was crazy and possessive, not to mention crazy possessive, but I never thought he’d even hit me, much less beat me and threaten to rape me on another man’s bed. I never thought he’d chase me across country, on the run from what had to be bad guys, and put me in more danger from them than I had from him.

How lucky was I that they didn’t take me with them or shoot me in the back?

found it How fucking lucky was I that they left me cuffed to a sink?

and my I never thought, growing up with dreams of being a corporate executive with two closets full of clothes and another one dedicated to shoes, I would end up like this.

7 ear. I My tense body started shaking.

he spoke “Oh shit,” I mumbled.

He felt it coming and he turned me. I resisted but he did it anyway.

ied. “Shit,” I repeated as it came over me. “Shit, shit, shit.”

id. I was face-to-face with him, and both Hank’s arms went round my neck. Tears arrived, great, wracking sobs.

Dammit, I *hated* when I cried. I was so fucking weak. And a crying jag hurt my ribs.

I put my hands over my face and, pain or not, had no choice but to cry. “Let go!” he yelled.

“I’m so s-s-stupid,” I stammered between crying hiccoughs, taking my hands away from my face. “Billy scared me, what with the sledgehammer and all, but I was so stupid. I thought I could play games.”

“Sledgehammer?” Hank asked but I ignored him.

“I thought I was smarter than him. Uncle Tex said my plan was to take me up south. It’s so south, it’s in the next fucking galaxy!” I shouted.

“Let’s go back to the sledgehammer,” Hank suggested.

I pulled away and started to roll out of bed. I was nearly out when he tagged the camisole top of my pajamas and pulled me back into bed.

“Let go!” I cried.

“Roxanne, calm down.”

goddess I struggled against him. “Hank, let me go!”

that I’d Surprisingly, I won the struggle. It didn’t occur to me he wasn’t going to wrestle with me when I had three cracked ribs. I jumped out of bed and grabbed my suitcases, my breathing labored with that minimal effort.

“I have to go, like, now,” I announced, even though I was in no sense going to go anywhere.

Hank was out of bed and getting in my space.

he as the “Come back to bed,” he said.

“No, I have to go.”

anyway, He was blocking my way every way I turned and herding me back to bed.

it to let “Get out of my way!” I shouted.

“Where are you going to go?”

ing my I made a split-second decision. “Mexico!”

hammer “Mexico?”

“My money will go further there. I could start a franchise, a convenience store or something. I’ll be the *gringa* queen of my village.”

ould go I was still trying to dodge him when his hands caught my hips and pulled me tight.

“Don’t tell Tex you’re gonna buy a franchise, he’ll go ballistic,” Hank advised.

What he said made me stop and I stared up at him stupidly in the dark.

“What’s wrong with franchises?” I asked.

“They’re the death of America,” Uncle Tex boomed from the next room and both Hank and I froze. “Now, will you two keep it the fuck down! The walls are paper thin and you’re disturbin’ the cats!”

We both stood stock-still for a moment and then I started laughing. I couldn’t help myself. I laughed so hard I thought I’d crack another rib. I started to bend double, but my forehead collided with Hank’s collar. Still, I didn’t stop laughing.

Hank, I noticed vaguely, didn’t laugh at all.

His arms went around me and my laughter quickly turned to tears. I put my arms around him. I didn’t want to, but if I didn’t, I wouldn’t have been able to stay standing.

Finally, when I’d gotten some control, I said quietly, “I thought he was going to kill me.”

Hank’s body had relaxed when I’d wrapped my arms around him. When I said my words it went still again.

“I promise, I didn’t think I was in danger,” I continued.

He began to stroke my back with one hand, holding me with the other like a baby. Something had changed in the way he was holding me, but I wasn’t worn out to notice it.

“I believe you,” he said.

I swallowed because I knew he did and that meant a lot.

” Hank “Thank you,” I whispered, for like the millionth time that day.

“Do you love him?” Hank asked.

ark. I nodded against his chest and the air changed again, and again I was exhausted to notice.

at room I didn't mean that I loved Billy *now*. I meant I had loved him, once
n? Thea time when the fairytale could still turn real.

I didn't love him anymore. I didn't hate him either. I just didn't want
anything. Ianywhere near me. I didn't even want to think about him.

rib. I I stood there in Hank's arms and let the tiredness seep through me.
arbone. It was like he felt it, he was so tuned into me, and he guided me
bed.

I didn't resist.
again. I We both got in and he held me again.
t have

I didn't resist that either.
e loved Sleepily, to take my mind off my thoughts, or maybe to teach me
lesson, I quoted the lyrics to Mellencamp's "Minutes to Memories."

"Mellencamp," Hank muttered.
s, but at "Yeah," I whispered. "I should have listened closer."
Hank's head moved, he kissed my neck and then he settled.

I waited until his breathing evened.
e other
was too Then, when I knew he was asleep, I whispered the part of the song
Mellencamp explains about the wise old man in the song's vision. About
that vision was hard to follow. About how the young man in the song
things his way and paid a high price. About how, years later, he looked
at his conversation with the old man and he knew the old man was right

And oh man, was he right.
I went silent.
was too Then, after a while, it hit me and I started to sing, thinking it was a

re upon my secret, my song. In another life, a life without the last three days
where Hank came home from his run before Billy found me, it could
ant him been Hank's and my song.

Springsteen's words.

I sang so quietly, my voice was barely a whisper and I changed j
e to the of the words.

It was the first verse of Springsteen's "Because the Night."

I hummed the second verse, and in the middle of humming I fell a
Hank's arms.

Because I was asleep, I never realized Hank wasn't.



myself a
IT FELT like I slept for a week.

When I woke up, Hank was gone.

g where
out how
ong did
ed back
it.

i secret,

my secret, my song. In another life, a life without the last three days, a life where Hank came home from his run before Billy found me, it could have been Hank's and my song.

Springsteen's words.

I sang so quietly, my voice was barely a whisper and I changed just two of the words.

It was the first verse of Springsteen's "Because the Night."

I hummed the second verse, and in the middle of humming I fell asleep in Hank's arms.

Because I was asleep, I never realized Hank wasn't.



IT FELT like I slept for a week.

When I woke up, Hank was gone.

TEN



MP3 TORTURE

It was daylight when I rolled out of bed.

My body protested with aches and pains, letting me know exactly how they felt like hanging around for a while.

I didn't know where Hank went, but I figured to work because it was nearly noon.

I went to the bathroom and saw that either Indy or Jet had put my bag on the sink. I crushed down another wave of remorse that the people would not be in my life but for a few treasured memories. I swept the thought aside, brushed my teeth and washed my face.

I surveyed myself in the mirror. The swelling was gone and the bruises were purple, green and yellow. Not a good color combination, and I was doubtful that Calvin Klein would use them in his spring line.

I walked into the living room and saw Uncle Tex on the couch with his feet on the coffee table, a bowl of popcorn resting on his belly and a Bru movie running quiet on the console TV.

He looked at me when I came in. "Hey, darlin' girl. How you doing today?"

"Coffee," I replied.

He grinned. "I can do coffee."

I sat in a loud, green, white and yellow daisy-printed vinyl chair at a kitchen table. He got me a cup of coffee and sat with me.

"Hank still sleepin'?" he asked.

"Hank's gone," I replied.

He looked at me funny. "What do you mean, gone?"

"Probably at work."

He stared at me.

only that

"I didn't hear him go," he noted.

it was

I shrugged and looked out the window.

"You mad at me that I let him in?" he asked.

toilettry

"A little bit," I answered truthfully.

se kind

"You wanna talk about it?"

Then I

I shook my head.

"You wanna talk about anything?"

bruises

I shook my head again.

l I was

"All right, girl. I'll give you today. Tomorrow, we're talkin' about

"I'm leaving town as soon as I shower and get dressed," I said.

feet up

"How's Hank feel about that?"

ice Lee

"I don't know. I don't care." I lied about the second part.

feelin'

Silence.

I looked from the window back to Uncle Tex. He was staring at me.

It appeared he was finding it hard to keep his peace.

Then he said, “So be it.”

r at his I was surprised he gave in so easily. Surprised and relieved, and a little sad. I got up and kissed the top of his head, took my coffee mug, and headed to the shower.



I STOOD ON THE SIDEWALK, Uncle Tex next to me, my suitcases on the either side of him, staring at my car.

“Well, I’ll be,” Uncle Tex said. “Never seen that before.”

I slowly turned my head to look at him. He kept staring at my car.

Then he went on, “Can’t say this is the best neighborhood, but slashed tires? That has to be a record.”

“Uncle Tex—” I started.

“Welp!” he boomed, bending over to pick up my suitcases. “Guys aren’t leavin’ today.”

I had a sneaking suspicion my four slashed tires had nothing to do with this being a bad neighborhood.

Uncle Tex walked into the house with my suitcases and didn’t look at it.” I turned back to my car and stared at it.

After a while, I heaved a huge sigh and I went into the house.



I WAS SITTING on the couch, feet up, watching *Independence Day*, and Smith was seriously kicking some alien ass.

Uncle Tex had been fielding phone calls for the last hour. Jet called again. called. Nancy called. Daisy called. Eddie called. Eddie called again called a third time. Every time, Uncle Tex covered the mouthpiece

boomed out a name, making the covering of the mouthpiece action mo
Maybe a Every time I'd get tense, thinking it was Hank. Worried it was
lug and *Wishing* it was Hank. Then, when it wasn't Hank, I'd shake my he
Uncle Tex would make some ludicrously bad excuse for me and hang

Another phone rang and I knew it was my cell. Uncle Tex was
groundnext to me and he stared at me while I ignored my purse ringing on th
by the side of the couch. Then he got up, grabbed my purse, rooted th
and pulled out my phone just as it stopped ringing and stuck it out at m

I shook my head.

ut *four* "Maybe it was Hank," he said.

Shit.

He knew I was waiting for Hank to call.

ess you I shook my head again.

He flipped open my phone and started pressing buttons. He did th
do withlong time. Then, my phone started making alarming noises and I c
help myself, I yanked it out of his hand.

ck back. "Stop that!" I snapped.

"Find out who phoned," he ordered. "Maybe Hank's tryin' to get
you."

"He knows your number," I pointed out.

nd Will "Maybe he doesn't want to talk to me. Maybe he just wants to
you," Tex suggested.

rd. Indy "Well, I don't want to talk to him," I shot back.

. Eddie Uncle Tex stared down at me and then walked in front of the coffe
nce and his shins pushing my legs aside, forcing me to sit up. He sat on the

ot. table right in front of me, blocking my view of Will Smith and mak
; Hank. worried about the future of the coffee table when his bulk settled on it.

ad and “You’re in my way,” I told him.

up. “Look at me, girl.”

sitting I tried to look around him at the TV.

ne floor “Roxanne Giselle Logan, look at me.”

ough it I looked at him. I’d had years of “Roxanne Giselle Logan.”
ie. conditioned to do what I was told after my full name was uttered
authority figure.

“What?” I clipped, totally uppity.

Okay, so I was conditioned to do what I was told, but I was
enough to do it with ill grace.

He leaned forward and his eyes were bright. So bright, they were f
his for a and something about them scared me.

ouldn’t I held my breath and waited for what was coming next.

“You’re at a crossroads, darlin’. You got two paths to go do
informed me.

hold of I stared at him and he continued.

“I was at your crossroads once. I chose the wrong path. Once
down, it’s fuckin’ impossible to find your way back.”

talk to I let out my breath, but only to suck another deep one in and hold i

His beefy hands settled on my knees and he got closer. “Halfway
my road, a six-year-old girl wrote me a letter.”

e table, Oh shit. Oh shit.

: coffee

ing me “No,” I whispered but the word wasn’t audible, only my mouth m
form of the word but without sound. My breath caught with somethin
and I knew, pretty soon, I was going to lose all control.

With effort, I sucked air in my nose, keeping the tears at bay.

“She didn’t stop me from losin’ my way, but she stopped me from
myself.”

I was “Quit talking,” I whispered, and I heard the words come out this ti
l by an Uncle Tex ignored them.

“Now, I got a chance to return the favor.”

“Please, Uncle Tex, don’t.”

uppity I felt my nostrils quiver.

He still ignored me.

evered, “This life is made of good turns and bad turns. Few months ago,
good turn. I took a bullet for Indy. The last three days, Lee paid me ba

I closed my eyes.

vn,” he “Look at me, darlin’ girl.”

I opened my eyes.

“Lee’d put himself in front of a bullet for his brother, make no n
you go Hank was fuckin’ beside himself when he came home to find you
thought he’d tear Denver apart lookin’ for you. Lee nearly had to lock
t. his safe room to keep him from comin’ after you.”

y down “Please, stop.”

“You had your bad turn, Roxie. Open your fuckin’ heart and let F
the good.”

ade the We stared at each other awhile. Somehow, I didn't cry.

g fierce Then, I nodded and opened my phone.

With shaking hands, I went to my received calls, my heart t
hoping it was Hank.

n losin' It wasn't. It was my friend Annette from Chicago.

"Annette," I told Uncle Tex.

me, but His hands left my knees.

"Not Hank?" he asked, openly surprised.

I shook my head.

He got up and sat down beside me.

"He'll call," he said.



I did a I LAY on the bed in Uncle Tex's extra bedroom and listened to Joni M
ck." on my MP3 player while I stared at the ceiling.

Independence Day was over. Eddie had called again, and so had S
didn't talk to either of them.

Hank had not called.

nistake. Uncle Tex was down at Kumar's buying stuff to make pigs in a
gone. I and macaroni and cheese for dinner.

him in I shut down Joni singing about drinking a case of you because I
was just torturing myself. I picked up my cell and called Annette.

Annette had given up web design to open a head shop in Chicago
Hank be appropriately, "Head." She sold bongos, pipes, incense, blankets with
knots and pictures of Jimi Hendrix printed on them, psychedelic post

dyed T-shirts and hemp clothing.

To her surprise, it was a huge success, most likely because she was the caliber of Tex and it made her store fun to hang out in, just like Fortnum's. After she got too busy and couldn't do it anymore, she hired me to run the website. She sold bongs on five continents.

She had curly, ash-blond hair, milky-green eyes and was tall, taller than me. She was a good friend. She was nice to Billy's face, never letting that she'd once gotten so angry on my behalf (yes, after my recount of the sledgehammer incident), she threw a yard glass at a wall, smashing it into smithereens.

"Yo, bitch!" she answered on the second ring.

This was nothing to be alarmed about. This was how Annette answered the phone all the time.

Mitchell "Hey," I said, quietly.

Then I burst into tears. Then I told her my story, *all* of my story.

Stevie. I "Holy fucking Jesus H. Christ," she said when I was done.

"I know."

"He hasn't *called*?"

blanket "Annette!" I cried. "Billy kidnapped me and beat me up. This is not Hank!"

knew I "Billy's probably been whacked and his worthless, dead body is eaten by red ants on some sand dune in Utah, goddess willing. Bill called, fucking past, this Hank dude is the future, baby."

1 Celtic I told you Annette was a nut.

ers, tie- "I'm coming home as soon as I get my tires fixed," I said, skirt

issue of Hank.

as a nut “When’s that gonna be?”

ist like “Uncle Tex has a friend who’s picking up the car tomorrow. It ca
ired me that long to change four tires. I figure I’ll be on the road tomorrow

Then I’ll pick my stuff up from your place, and if you and Jason ca
er even with me to the loft, just to make sure it’s safe, I’ll close it up. Then I’r
tting onto Mexico.”

ing the “Fuck that shit,” Annette said. “Jason and I were going on
ig it to weekend camping in Michigan. We’ll make it a longer weekend an
your shit to Colorado. We’ll leave tomorrow. What do you want fr
loft?”

iswered “Annette,” I said low. “I’ve made up my mind.”

She ignored my warning tone. “Well, I’m un-making it up.”

“You can’t come out to Colorado. What about Head?”

“I have to beg my staff to leave at the end of the day. I got no pr
with Head coasting along. I could join a commune for six months a
wouldn’t even know I was gone.”

at about This was true. Annette’s staff was like the staff in Nick Hornby
Fidelity. Their whole life was Head. If someone threw a live grena
Head, they’d fight each other for the opportunity to throw themselves
was scary.

s being “You aren’t talking me out of this,” I told her.
ly’s the

“Sure I am. That’s what friends do when their friends turn into idi
make stupid decisions on the fly,” she retorted. Then she shouted,
trip!” and disconnected before I could say another word.
ing the

I flipped my phone shut and stared at the ceiling.

I realized I lived on a small island of sanity while all else around me didn't take bedlam.

That night, I was about to torture myself with "Both Sides Now," or really go to come gusto and switch to Van Morrison's "Into the Mystic" when a knock came on going the door.

"Yeah?" I called.

a long "Dinner's ready," Uncle Tex boomed.

d bring I set aside my MP3, rolled off the bed and headed out of the room.

om the



IT WAS LATE.

Uncle Tex and I had eaten our blanketed pigs and macaroni and
Later, we had some cookies and cream ice cream. Even later, after
drinks of Uncle Tex's moonshine.

problems We finished watching Letterman. I got up from the couch and announced they "I'm going to bed."

I looked down at Uncle Tex. He had the phone (a rotary phone
's *Highway*, its cord strung across the living room) sitting on his lap, and
de into glaring at it so hard I thought laser beams were going to shoot from
on it. It and burn it to cinders.

"Night," I said when he didn't answer.

He looked up at me. "He's gonna call."

ots and I smiled at him. Even I knew it was a sad smile.

"Road

I'd had a short conversation with Nancy, but I figured she'd be safe with her family, so she'd be safe. Eddie had called again, so had Indy. I didn't

either of them.

me was Hank had not called.

I knew what it meant. I'd known it even before I went on my date for the first time.

came at It was dark in my room. He couldn't see me last night, battered and bruised body, but he knew. He could smell it on me. He dealt with me like Billy every day. I was Billy's girl, even if it was once upon a time.

Hank didn't want that stink in his bed.

I bent down and kissed the top of Uncle Tex's head again.

"He's gonna fuckin' call," Uncle Tex growled.

I touched his shoulder and walked away.

cheese. I got into the bed and lay there for a while.

-dinner Then I got out my MP3 player and found the song.

ounced, I listened to "Because the Night" from Springsteen's Live 1975/1985 set.

Then I listened to it again.

by the On the third time around, I started crying. Not huge wracking sobs, but with the paper-thin walls, Uncle Tex would never hear me.

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Then I shut off my player, wiped my face on my pillow and went to sleep.



PRETEND WORLD OF BUBBLE GUM GOODNESS

I rolled out of bed feeling better than I had the day before. The achy pains were subsiding.

The mirror in the bathroom showed me another gruesome concoction of bruising colors on my face, but at least they were fading. The marks on my neck, arms and wrists were still visible, but not nearly as angry.

I wandered into the kitchen, poured myself a cup of coffee and saw Uncle Tex's note saying that he'd gone to work and would be home around noon.

I was wandering back to my bedroom, having visions of a morning of performing more musical self-torture, when I glanced sideways out the picture window in Uncle Tex's living room.

I stopped dead at what I saw, coffee cup arrested halfway to my lips.

A huge truck was stopped in the middle of the street, and hovering in the sky, dangling from what looked like a crane, was my car in straps.

Regardless of the fact that I was wearing nothing but a pair of pajamas (strawberry colored bottoms with cute powder-blue and turquoise red polka dots printed on them and a strawberry camisole with turquoise lace), I threw open the door and ran, barefoot, to the sidewalk.

"Hey!" I shouted at a big, black guy in dirty blue coveralls who was

truck's levers. "That's my car!"

"Taking it in to change the tires," he replied, not stopping from maneuvering of my car, which was floating precariously in the air of a flatbed truck.

"Can't you change the tires here?" I yelled over the noise.

"Tex wants me to do it in the shop. Told me to give it a tune up and while I got it."

I was going to *kill* Uncle Tex.

"It doesn't need a tune up. I had it serviced before I drove out here," I informed him.

He shrugged.

I scowled at him.

He ignored me.

I saw a car approaching and turned to watch as Hank's 4Runner rolled down the street.

I forgot about my no-longer-earthbound car and stood frozen with Hank parked.

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.

Hank got out, his eyes on my car in midair, and walked to me.

He looked good.

He wore jeans, boots and a wine-colored Henley. There was a gold badge attached to his belt. All that was missing was the white hat.

He stopped next to me, eyes still on my car.

“What’s goin’ on?” he asked, not looking at me.

From his I realized, belatedly, that it was warm as a summer’s day outside. I was standing on the sidewalk in my pajamas and I hadn’t done anything about my hair.

Shit.

In detail “That’s my car,” I shared.

Hank looked down at me and I just caught myself from holding my breath.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Uncle Tex slashed my tires.”

Hank stared at me.

“He didn’t want me to leave,” I explained.

Hank stared at me another beat then his eyes moved on my face, up my throat, my arms and my wrists, taking in the bruises. I almost bit my lip but forced myself to stay still under his scrutiny. Then his eyes met mine.

“We have to talk,” he said.

Damn tootin’, we had to talk.

He turned and walked to the porch. I followed him.

He stopped at the porch, not attempting to go inside. I found this odd and stopped with him.

“You want coffee?” I asked.

“I’m not stayin’ that long.”

I blinked at him, confused.

Then it hit me.

Still, I His eyes were all wrong. They weren't sexy-lazy or alert. They were distant and disinterested.

I felt my breath start to come faster, like I'd run a race before I'd even started. And the fact was I wanted to run, run as fast as I could, as far as I could get.

"What's up?" I tried to act like I didn't feel like I wanted to curl up and die.

"You've been dodgin' Eddie," he said.

I blinked, confused again, but he went on.

"You can't protect Flynn, Roxanne. I've already filed. He broke into my house and trashed it."

"Protect?" I said, unable to form a full sentence.

"Eddie's comin' by this morning to take you to the station so you can give your statement, file charges if you want, or not. Your choice. But if you go home, I'm still following through. And since we found out Flynn was wanted in Boston, Pensacola and Charleston, once we find him and bring him here, he's gonna be a busy guy."

I couldn't speak.

I wasn't surprised that Billy was wanted in three different cities, not counting Denver, even though it was news to me.

No, the reason I couldn't speak was because Hank thought I was protecting Billy.

"Hank—"

He interrupted me, "I found your scarf at my house. Indy's got it."

Automatically (and inanely) I said, "It's Tod's."

"Indy has it," he repeated, looking away. He watched the crane
back into position, my car in the flatbed. Then he looked at me, eyes
like Eddie's were the first time he saw me. "Gotta get back to work," he
said. "Take care of yourself."

At his dismissing words, I moved suddenly. It was involuntary,
I jerked back, just at the middle, like he punched me in the stomach.

Immediately, his hand came out to grab my arm and his brow
together.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

I stared at him then nodded my head.

"Fine," I lied.

He watched me a beat, then two. It was my time to say something
I couldn't think of what to say.

"Talk to Eddie," he said.

I just stared at him and didn't say a word.

I watched as his eyes grew hard and he let go of my arm. "Suit you
Then he walked away.

I watched him go, watched the flatbed truck go and watched the street
a good long while before I turned and walked into the house.

I set my cup on the coffee table and stood in the living room.

Petunia, the ginger and white cat, rubbed my legs. I sat down on the
the better position to pet her.

Then I curled up on the floor, on my side, my knees to my chest.

walked on top of me and sat on my hip. Perched there, she cleaned her

e settle This is how Eddie found me when he opened the door.

s blank, “Jesus,” he muttered.

he said. I rolled to my back and Petunia scampered.

I stayed flat on the floor and looked up at Eddie.

y but I “Hi,” I greeted him.

s drew “You okay?”

No, I was not okay. I was anything but okay. I was so far away from that okay was in another dimension.

“Peachy,” I said.

“Why are you lyin’ on the floor?” he asked.

ig but I *Because the best guy I’d ever met thought I was some stupid, idiot who would protect an outlaw even after he’d beaten me and kidnap and dragged me through three states. Because that same guy was goodness and justice and wanted nothing to do with a woman like me. Because that fact broke my heart and pissed me off, and I wasn’t sure of myself.”* one I felt more, I thought.

“I felt like having a rest,” I answered.

reet for Eddie took a second to process this then he asked, “Did you know Hank?”

I nodded my head.

e floor, “I’m here to take you down to the station to file charges against Flynn.

“Okeydoke,” I replied, rolled over and carefully got up, holding my

Petunia When I was up and looked at him, he was staring at me with undi-

foot. surprise.

“Sorry?” he asked.

“I said ‘okeydoke.’ Can you hang on while I get ready?”

He kept staring at me, then, slowly, he nodded.

“It takes a while for me to get ready. Maybe you want to come back

His eyes went guarded. “I’ll wait.”

“That’s cool. Coffee’s in the kitchen,” I told him and then went
m okay shower.



I’D NEVER PRESSED charges against anyone. I’d never even been to a
station except on a fieldtrip in sixth grade. I wasn’t sure what the dre
was.

woman
ped me
s about
ike me.
e which
I took a shower. I blow dried then parted my hair deep on the s
smoothed it into a severe ponytail secured at the nape of my neck. I ca
the makeup to try and hide the bruising (this, for your information,
work). I wore a skintight, camel-colored pencil skirt that came down
below the knee and had a slit up the back, topped with a red jersey
and on my feet, sexy, red, spike-heeled sling backs. Finally, I tied a
scarf around my neck.

talk to
I looked like Faye Dunaway’s Bonnie in *Bonnie and Clyde*, but
the beret or shotgun and with a little more flair for color.

I walked out and Eddie was on the sofa, drinking coffee and wat
ynn.” ballgame.

y ribs.
sguisedoff?”
“Ready,” I announced and went to the TV. “You want me to tu

Uncle Tex's TV had to be thirty years old. It had no remote. It was considered a priceless antique in some circles. It definitely belonged in a museum.

I turned and looked at Eddie. He was giving me the once-over.

k.” “Eddie?” I called when he didn't answer.

His eyes had kind of glazed over, but he came to and looked at me.

t to the “Let's roll,” he said.

I almost didn't get up into his fancy, red truck because my skirt was tight, but I made it.

a police We drove to the station in complete silence.

ss code He parked and I twisted gingerly to undo my seatbelt. He stopped from twisting back around to get out when he put a hand on my arm.

ide and “You should know somethin' about what's happenin' with your boy-
aked on boyfriend,” he said, looking me in the eyes.

, didn't I blinked at him.

l to just “Boyfriend?” I asked.

T-shirt “Flynn,” he replied.

l jaunty My back went up.

without “That would be my *ex*-boyfriend,” I informed him.

He stared at me, then ignored what I said and went on, “You're repeating this in the station, I'll deny it.”

It was my turn to stare at him.

rn this He continued, “Lee's got one of his boys lookin' for him. Not only has he's put a bounty on Flynn so not only is Ike lookin' for him, *and* th

s likely but also every bounty hunter in about eight states. Lee'll probably get ed in a before we do. Hank has given Lee orders and Tex has agreed." He and watched me. "Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

I didn't so I shook my head.

"Flynn's going to the holding room before he's turned over to the Vance has called dibs. Vance gets first crack after Tex has his shot. bowed out but you know that by now," Eddie explained.

Oh, I knew that last bit for certain. Hank had been pretty clear was so morning.

I also understood what Eddie was telling me. Billy was going ped me "holding room" and they were going to beat the shit out of him.

I felt badly for Billy, but I figured what comes around, goes around

"Do you understand now?" Eddie asked. h your

I nodded my head.

"You got anything to say about that, say it now, to me. I won't like I'll put in your word. Right now, it's up to Tex and Vance to take consideration what you have to say."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I'll talk to Lee about havin' Flynn taken directly to the cops, not room. You should know, I doubt he'll listen. It wasn't easy for him to t any of his brother, or Tex, go through that."

Well, poor Lee, I thought.

It wasn't a nice thought, but then again, I wasn't having one of my ly that, days. In fact, I wasn't having one of my better weeks.

ie cops, "Let me get this straight," I started. "You think I'm going to ask

get him protect Billy?”

paused “That’s right,” he replied.

I turned fully to him. It kind of hurt my ribs, but I did it all the wanted to have his full attention.

police. “First off, he tried to strangle me. Then he took a switchblade Hank’s sweater I was wearing. Then he hit me. Then he dragged me through house.”

ear that Eddie’s eyes had been guarded, but the guard slipped at my words.

I ignored it and carried on, “Then he kicked me in the fuckin to this threatened to rape me on Hank’s bed and kidnapped me, bound my drove like a fucking crazy man for two days, tied me to the steering any time he left the car and made me go to the bathroom with my hair while he watched.”

Eddie’s guard was gone.

ie it but Now, his eyes were glittering.

ke into “That’s just plain rude,” I told him. “I won’t even get into the t guys with guns or sitting on a stinking bathroom floor handcuffe fucking sink, not to mention the fact that I didn’t get a shower in three threw away my cutest pair of Lucky jeans because of that guy!”

holding My voice was getting louder. It was filling the cab, and I didn’t car o watch

I threw up my hands and looked at the ceiling of the truck. “I mea I broke up with him, like, I don’t know, *years* ago! A woman locks y better with your suitcases in the hall, get a fucking *clue*!”

Okay, now I was shouting.

you to “Roxanne—” Eddie said.

I ignored him. “Then, Uncle Tex is back here, all freaked out and I
whatever. And Lee’s boys are running all over the fucking Bible I
same. I stopped and looked at him. “Are Nebraska and Kansas in the Bible I
asked but I didn’t wait for an answer. “Anyway, doesn’t matter. I don’t
what this holding room is, but I don’t care. Do whatever. Billy’s a me
to the just don’t want to know.”
Hank’s

Then I turned, opened my door and jumped out of the truck.

It would have been a great exit, except I kind of wobbled on my
little bit when I landed.

big ribs,
wrists,
g wheel “Hang on there, *chica*,” he said, grabbing me by the waistband
nds tied skirt. It was quite a catch since my skirt was so tight. He must have h
of practice doing that.

I stopped and glared at him. “What?”

He looked down at me, his eyes still kind of glittery, and I could
wo bad was making up his mind about something.

ed to a Finally he said, “I think I need to have a chat with Hank.”

days. I “Don’t do me any favors,” I snapped. “Hank’s a memory too. I’n
to file charges, get my car and blow this crazy burg. Denver is Looney
e. Town. I don’t care if it’s October and feels like July and I can
n, jeez! mountains every day. This place is nuts and since I’m half Mac
you out coming from me, that’s saying something.”

Once I finished, I pulled away and stomped into the station.

My mom would have been proud.



Hank...THE ROOM WAS FILLED with desks, chairs, couches and people. Most
Belt,” Ipeople stared at me openly when I arrived. I ignored this, straighter
Belt?” Ishoulders and followed Eddie to a desk. All around me was a hive of
't know—people walking around, talking, phones ringing, doors opening and c
mory. I Eddie sat me next to a desk so I could talk to a nice, older man
Detective Jimmy Marker.

I told my story while Eddie stood beside us, watching and listening
r heel a Every once in a while I'd look at Eddie. Sometimes I scowled
Sometimes I'd raise my brows in the silent question of, “Don't yo
e. anything better to do?” After about the third eyebrow raise, he smile
of mylike I was funny.

ad a lot Fucking crazy, Denver men.

Around about the end of when Detective Marker was taki
statement, I felt Eddie tense.

I tell he I scowled up at him, but he wasn't looking at me. He was looking
the door.

I followed his gaze and stopped breathing.

n going Hank, Lee and Vance were standing in the door, all of them loo
/ Tunesme.

see the Hank's eyes were blank. Lee's were the same.
Millan, Vance grinned at me.

With a superhuman effort I ignored Hank and Lee and grinned
Vance.

“Excuse me,” Eddie murmured and walked away.

I turned to Detective Marker.

t of the “Do you have everything you need?” I asked.

ned my “Yep,” he said, but he was looking at Hank too, and for some activity reason, he was smiling. Smiling huge, like he found something sup closing hilarious.

named I was so totally right about Denver being a loony bin. Everyo crazy.

}. “You have my card?” Detective Marker asked after he’d looked at him.me.

u have I nodded. “I may be on the road. You’ll have to call my cell if yo d at me anything else.”

“You’ll come back to testify?” he asked.

I gave him a look.

ng my “You’ll come back to testify,” he muttered.

toward I got up, shook his hand, hooked my purse over my shoulder and across the room.

Everyone in the room watched.

king at Hank, Lee, Eddie and Vance were in a huddle. Vance broke walked over to me. The other three turned to look.

“Hey, girl,” Vance said when he arrived in my space, seriously space.

I didn’t back away.

back at “Hey. I need a ride back to Tex’s. Can you take me?” I asked him.

“First, I’ll take you to lunch.”

I didn’t want lunch. I hadn’t had breakfast or even any coffee,

stomach was clenched tight knowing Hank's eyes were on me. I was
bizarre between throwing myself at his feet and begging him to understand
remely jumping on him and scratching his eyes out.

Instead, I kept my eyes on Vance and said, "Sounds good."

ne was Vance turned to The Huddle.

"Keys," he called to Lee.

back at Lee threw him a set of keys and Vance caught them. I avoided
gaze. Vance grabbed my hand and we walked out.

ou need I was concentrating so hard on not tripping or doing anything else
that I didn't realize the pulse of the room had changed when Vance grabbed
my hand.

I also didn't catch the look on Hank's face when he saw Vance take
hand, which was good because if I had, I would have tripped for sure.



walked VANCE TOOK me to Lincoln's Road House, a motorcycle bar skirting
road on I-25.

off and He settled me at a high barstool at a table. I glanced around, thinking
perhaps I should have changed my outfit. Denver was definitely a jeans town
and at Lincoln's Road House jeans were practically required.

r in my I noted that optional were black leather chaps.

Vance bought me a beer and a pop for himself. He got some men
sat across from me.

"How're you doin'?" he asked, watching me closely.

but my "My life's a total shambles, my body still aches and I'm pretty
I'm going to have a scar on my face to remind me daily of this precious

was torn in my life,” I told him. “How’re things with you?”

and, and “Better than you.”

“Vance, honey, that isn’t saying much.”

He smiled.

I crossed my legs, looked at my menu, and noticed Vance move out of the corner of my eye. I glanced at him, but he was looking over my shoulder. Hank’s turned around and saw Mace enter the bar from the back.

Mace did a chin lift to Vance, got himself a beer and then came over and sat beside me.

He grabbed He gave me a once-over and remarked, “Nice outfit.”

“Thanks,” I replied.

“I thought you were on a stakeout,” Vance said to Mace.

“Matt relieved me. I hate stakeouts. Fucking boring,” Mace remarked. “Any word from Ike?”

Both Vance and Mace’s eyes slid to me.

I was taking a pull from my beer and I waved my free hand at them. “I know about the holding room in this town, the planned ass-kicking. I’m all right with it.”

Mace looked at Vance. “I think I like her.”

“Take a number,” Vance replied.

Good God.

“Is anyone going to feed me?” I blurted to stop them talking about me.

Vance did his shit-eating grin then we ordered.

My purse rang so I opened it and grabbed my phone. It said, A CALLING. I flipped it open.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey,” she said back.

it of the Oh no.

ulder. I Annette didn’t give her normal greeting. This meant something wrong.

ver and I got tense. Since I got tense, I felt both Mace and Vance get tense.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her.

“Well, Jason and I are on our way out there. We’re in bumfuck goddess almighty. Iowa.”

She stopped, as if there were no words for Iowa, so I prompted, “A returned. “Well, we went by your place and it was kind of trashed.”

I got even tenser. Vance and Mace were watching me.

“Trashed?” I asked.

1. “Yeah. Your laptop was there and it didn’t look like anything om and missing, but a lot of stuff was broken. Your furniture was slashed. expert, but it looked like someone was looking for something. I got your clothes and some other stuff I thought you might want.”

I closed my eyes, put my elbow on the table and head in my “Thanks, Nettie.”

t liking “We’re gonna see if we can power through. We’ll get a h something when we get there. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Okay. Be careful and...thanks.”

NNETTE “Later.” Then she disconnected and I flipped the phone shut.

Vance and Mace were still watching me.

“Trashed?” Vance asked.

“My loft. A friend went by to pick up some of my stuff. She looked like someone was looking for something. She said nothing was missing that she could tell. She even got my laptop so they couldn’t have been there to rob me,” I told him.

Vance looked at Mace.

Mace peeled off mumbling, “Gotta make a call.”

I ignored Mace and asked Vance, “Should I be worried?”

He stared at me.

“I should be worried,” I said.

His hand came out and grabbed mine. “It was probably the people like Flynn. They already proved they have no interest in you. You like nothing to worry about.”

I nodded but I didn’t much appreciate him using the word “likely.”

Then I saw Vance looking over my shoulder again. He let go of my hand but dropped his head and smiled at the table when my phone rang again.

It said, INDY CALLING.

I took a deep breath and answered it.

“Where the fuck are you? I called home a fuckin’ million times,” Uncle Tex boomed.

“Sorry, Uncle Tex, I should have called you. I went with Eddie to the station to press charges against Billy. Now, I’m having lunch at Li

Road House with Vance and Mace.”

I felt the hairs rise on my neck and turned. That was when I saw
standing in the back doorway talking with Lee, Eddie and fucking Hank

said it “Fuck,” I said, turning around.

ng was Vance was smiling at me.

’t have “There’s nothing to smile about!” I hissed at Vance.

Vance’s smile went wide.

“What the fuck are you talkin’ about?” Uncle Tex boomed in my e

“Nothing,” I answered, the hair raise going to goose bumps a
Hank’s eyes on my back. “Where are you?”

“At Fortnum’s. Spent all day listenin’ to fuckin’ Indy, Ally and Jo
on ’bout how you’re still hung up on that stupid, weasely motherfuck
le after kidnapped you. Told ’em they were all fuckin’ nuts,” he said. Then he
ly have “You aren’t, are you?”

I blinked at the table just as the waitress came and set down our fo

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

ny hand “Apparently, Hank told Lee and Lee told Indy, and Indy told
n. fuckin’-body that you’re still in love with that fuckin’ asshole.”

My body went completely still. Then, slowly, I turned around and
at Hank.

’ Uncle Or to put it more truthfully, scowled at him, eyes narrow
everything.

to the Hank caught my scowl and raised his brows.

ncoln’s My eyes narrowed to slits.

Then I turned back to the table.

v Mace “No...I...am...not...in...love...with...Billy...fucking...Flynn,”
lk. enunciated every word.

After I finished, Vance actually threw his head back and lau
scowled at him too.

“Didn’t think so,” Uncle Tex muttered.

“Get my car back, Uncle Tex. I’m leaving the minute I get ho
ar. demanded.

s I felt “No, darlin’. You gotta straighten things out with Hank.”

“Not a fucking chance.”

et goin’ Tex was silent.

ker that “You sure?” he finally asked.

e asked, “Very sure,” I replied.

More silence.

od. Then he inquired, “How’re you feelin’ about Vance?”

Lord have mercy.

every- “Good-bye,” I replied.

looked Before I could hang up, he said on a rush, “You stay the night, w
your mom.”

ed and My breath caught in my throat.

“We?” I asked.

Mace sat down next to me, threw Vance a look and then started eat

Uncle Tex said in my ear, “Yeah, you ’n’ me.”

“You’ll talk to her?” I asked low.

He paused. Then he said, “Yeah.”

I Instantly, I agreed. “I’ll stay the night.”

I felt like doing cartwheels, but Uncle Tex had moved on. “Have finished. Ithe boys. You’re cookin’ dinner tonight.”

“Fine by me. We’ll celebrate. I’ll make something fancy.”

“Sounds good. I’m feelin’ like fat, juicy pork chops with that rice and vermicelli stuff in it, like on TV. The San Francisco treat.”

I watched Vance eat a fry, stuck in a moment of stupefied silence.

Once I tugged myself out of my silence, I asked, “The San Francisco Treat?”

“Yeah,” Uncle Tex said. “I’ll go to the store.”

“I was thinking something fancier, like beef wellington. That’s expensive food, not food you eat after talking to the sister you haven’t spoken to decades.”

“Fuck that. Next thing you’ll want champagne instead of hooch. I’ll go to the store. You get home in time to cook. And since you’re with Vance, give him a good look-over. If you don’t like what you see, have a look at Mace. I don’t know Mace all that well, but he seems a good sort.”

I’ll call “You *are* joking, right?” I asked my uncle.

“Fuck no. Those boys are the shit,” he answered. “Hank would have been my choice, but he fucked it up. Matt and Bobby are taken. Ike’s on the list and he’s a scary motherfucker. You don’t like Mace or Vance, I’ll introduce you to Luke. Lee says Luke’s a serious badass, but he’s been recovering from a gunshot wound so I haven’t seen him in action. Still, I heard Indy say she thinks he’s cute. You’ll just have to go easy on him for a while.”

Good God.

Uncle Tex, the matchmaker.

un with “You’re nuts,” I said.

“That’s what they tell me.” Then he disconnected.

I flipped my phone shut and stared at it for a second. Then I cur
with the fist around it, threw my hands up in a “Goal!” gesture and shouted
loud, “Woo hoo!”

Everyone turned to stare, everyone including Lee, Eddie and Har
ancisco were now standing at the bar.

Whatever.

Nothing could pierce this piece of happiness. Not even Hank.

everyday I grinned at Vance.

n to in “Seems your luck just changed,” Vance commented.

“Dude, Uncle Tex is gonna talk to my mom tonight. First time
ll go to have talked since he got back from Vietnam.”

ce, give Vance’s eyes flashed then they warmed. Then, he reached out and
Mace. I the curve of my ear.

“Good news,” he murmured.

“You better believe it,” I agreed.

ve been I heard the loud thud of a beer bottle hitting a counter. I turned in
he road see Hank’s back as he left.
troduce

n’ from I looked to where Eddie and Lee stood at the bar.

in’ she Eddie was smiling at me. Lee was glowering.

I turned my back on them, trying to pretend none of this affected n

Which it did, like, a lot.

But I'd decided, just then, with the happy news that Uncle Tex was to call my mom, that I was going to live in a pretend world of bubbly goodness.

At least until I drove over the Colorado border, then it was Joni Mitchell and Van Morrison all the way through Nebraska.

ok, who

they'll

I traced

time to

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HANK AND MY WILD RIDE

“Hi, Mom,” I said.

Uncle Tex was sitting across from me at his dining room table, leg bouncing, his hands running up and down his thighs, his eyes wild.

We’d had our pork chops and rice and Tex had had three shots of vodka and two beers. I thought he was primed, but he looked like he was going to spontaneously combust.

“Hey there, honey. What’s up with you?” Mom said in my ear.

I smiled reassuringly at Tex.

“I have two pieces of really good news,” I told her.

“Yeah? I can always use good news.”

“Well...” I drew it out, “Billy and I are done. He’s gone. Really good time.”

My mom was silent.

Then she breathed, “Oh sweet Jesus.” Then, she took the phone from her mouth and I heard her shout, “Herb! Herb, come here! I’m broken up with Billy. Oh sweet Jesus. The sweet Lord Jesus hear my prayers.”

Mom carried on like this for a while.

I waited patiently, mainly because I was accustomed to this behavior from Mom. Mom went to church on Sundays and she was a Christian, sure, but she only invoked the sweet Lord Jesus on special occasions (which there were many) that demanded a bit of a flair for drama.

Such as this one.

The phone was jostled and my dad was there. “Roxie?”

“Hi, Dad.”

“Is it true? Did you finally get rid of that sum a’ bitch?”

ble, his “Yeah.”

I wasn’t going to tell them about my wild ride with Billy. I needed a good time for that, like after they’d had three shots of Uncle Tex’s going to. Anyway, I didn’t want anything to color the upcoming semi-family reunion.

“Thank fuckin’ God. I always hated that bastard,” Dad said.

My dad wasn’t one to hold anything back.

“I know. You didn’t really keep that a secret,” I told him.

“So did your brother,” he went on.

“I know.”

one this “And your sister.”

“I know,” I stressed.

“And your mother.”

e away I rolled my eyes to the ceiling. “Jeez, Dad, I know.”

Roxie’s “And Mrs. Montgomery from down the street. The minute she laid
ard my on him, she told me he was a bad seed.”

Good grief.

ehavior Billy was, of course, a bad seed, but Mrs. Montgomery thought ev
tian forwas a bad seed. She even said Holly Newbury was a bad seed, and Ho
ons (ofSister Holly now and taught at St. Malachy Elementary School.

“Dad,” I said warningly.

“This is good news, Roxie. Good news.”

I decided to change the subject, mainly because Uncle Tex looke
to burst, and if I didn’t get this show on the road, who knew what
happen?

“Is Mom still there?” I asked.

to pick “Yeah. You wanna talk to her?”

hooch. “Dad, listen, is she sitting down?”

inion. Silence then, “No.”

“Well, get her to sit down. Dad, I’m in Denver.”

Silence again.

I went on, “I’m sitting across from Uncle Tex right now. He wants
to her.”

There was a hesitation, then I heard his hand go over the mouthpi
I still could make out the words. “Trish, you need to sit down.”

“What?” my mom asked in the background, and I could hear th
edge of “What Has Roxanne Done Now?” in her tone.

“Roxie’s in Denver, with Tex,” Dad told her.

id eyes I heard a short, but loud scream.

“He wants to talk to you,” Dad continued when Mom finished scre

“Sweet Jesus. Sweet Jesus,” Mom chanted.

everyone I smiled at Uncle Tex.

lly was Tex abruptly stood up, ready to escape. I stood too, prepared for t
carrying the phone with me, I blocked his way. His eyes were wild
ever.

“Uncle Tex, take a deep breath,” I advised.

d about “I’m handing the phone over to your mother,” Dad said in my ear
: wouldready?”

“Yeah,” I told him and looked at Uncle Tex. “You ready?” I asked
He shook his head.

“Tex?” Mom said hesitantly in my ear.

“Hi, Mom, it’s still me. Hang on, here’s Uncle Tex.”

Tex was taking in deep breaths then pursing his lips and blowin
out in quick bursts like he was a woman in labor practicing Lamaze. I
the phone receiver to him and he stared at it like it was a living thing
he took one more deep breath, snatched the receiver from my hand an
to talk to his ear. I set the phone on the dining room table.

“Trish?” Tex said in a soft boom.
ece, but

I felt a melting warmth spread in my belly. I got up close, res
e Mom forehead against my uncle’s big, barrel chest and wrapped my arms
his middle. He may not have needed me to hold him, but I needed it, I
it badly.

“Yeah, it’s me. How’s things?” Tex asked.

I heard my mom talking to Tex. Her voice sounded high and I c
aming. make out what she said. After she talked for a while, I felt Tex’s boc
and he put his hand on the back of my neck.

“Me and Roxie just had chops and rice. We been spendin’ a few
his and gettin’ to know each other. She’s a good kid, Trish. You done good w
er than How’s Herb?”

Mom talked again and I heard a knock at the door. I pulled away,
tiptoe, gave Uncle Tex’s fuzzy cheek a kiss and walked to the door.

r. “You I still had a smile on my face when I opened the door.

The smile faded and my mouth dropped open at what I saw.

. Hank was standing there, still wearing his jeans, boots and wine-
Henley but now he was also wearing his black leather jacket.

“What are you doing here?” I asked but he didn’t answer.

He walked in and I jumped out of his way because if I didn’t he
g them have walked right into me.

handed Hank looked around the room, searching for something.

3. Then Uncle Tex stood holding the phone receiver to his ear, eyes on Har

id put it Then Hank grabbed my purse off the coffee table, came back to m
my hand and dragged me out the door, slamming it behind us.

Through the slam, I could hear Uncle Tex’s booming laughter.

ted my Holy cow.

around What *on earth* was going on?

needed “Hank!” I yelled, trying to pull my hand from his, but he was d
me along the sidewalk toward his 4Runner.

ouldn’t “Hank! Stop! What’s going on?”

ly relax He took me to the driver’s side, opened it, bent, picked me up, a
out a cry.

w days It was like I didn't make a noise. Hank put me on the seat and
with her. entered behind me so I had to scoot over to the passenger side, double

Before I could do a thing, even buckle my safety belt, Hank threw me
got on in my lap, started the car and took off.

“Take me back to Tex’s,” I demanded. He ignored me so I carried on.
“What are you doing? Take me back to Tex’s!”

He still didn't say anything.

colored “We'll just see about this,” I snapped, opened my purse and dragged
my phone. Who I was going to call, I did not know, but I was going to
someone.

I barely got the cell out when Hank plucked it out of my hand and
it on the dash, *his* side of the dash, far away from me.

I stared at it. Then I stared at him.

“Well!” I huffed because I couldn't think of anything else to say.
My heart was hammering in my chest and my mind was in a tizzy.

Then I figured out what to say.

“This is crazy. You're crazy. Denver's crazy. All you boys skipped
over the last century, didn't you? I think even the last million years!
cavemen,” I rattled on. “I do not *believe* you just dragged me out of
Tex's house. He was talking to my mom!”

ragging “Quiet,” Hank finally spoke.

“Fuck quiet. God! Why didn't I get in my car and get the hell out
when I had the chance?”

nd I let “That's a good question,” was Hank's answer.

That shut me up because I seriously didn't want to go there.

and then I buckled my seat belt, crossed my arms on my chest and tried to c
le time.plan.

y purse I was still in my skintight skirt and heels. I couldn't run. I still ha
cracked ribs. I couldn't fight. I didn't want to fight Hank anyway.
ied on,didn't want to run either.

What was I saying? I thought.

Then I forced myself to stop thinking altogether.

ged out Before I knew it, he parked in front of his house. I sat in his 41
; to call arms still crossed, not moving as he walked around the hood of the car

He opened the passenger side door, leaned in, unbuckled me and
I tossed me out. He dragged me up his front walk.

"I want to go back to Uncle Tex's," I told him.

"You're not goin' back to Tex," he replied in his authoritative vo
ay. My opened the door.

Before I could say anything else, Shamus was there and leaping :
Hank and me as Hank pulled me inside.

ed right "Hi, fella. Hey there, boy," I cooed, bending to give him a quick
You're behind the ears. I was pissed off at Hank for abducting me, but I
f Uncle reason to take it out on Shamus.

It was a *very* quick scratch because Hank closed the door beh
locked it, grabbed my hand again and then carried on dragging me, str
of here the bedroom.

That was when I started fighting, pulling at my hand in his. "Hey!
are you going? Let go of me!"

He didn't stop.

lewise a “Hank, goddammit!”

He finally stopped once we’d reached the bedroom. He also let me
id threeswitched on the light by the bed and I turned to run, but he caught me
Hell, I waist, somehow doing this gently, and pulled me around so I was
between him and the bed.

Then he shrugged off his jacket and tugged off his Henley.

My eyes bugged out and I stared at his bared chest.

Runner, Good God.

“What are you—?” I started to say but he interrupted me.

I pulled “In deference to your ribs, you can be on top this time.”

My mouth dropped open.

Then my eyes went back in my head and they narrowed on him.

ice and “I don’t *think* so,” I snapped.

He caught me at the hips, pulled me to him and kissed me.

all over I did resist. I’m not *that* weak. It’s just that my resistance didn’t last

scratch When his mouth left mine to trail down my cheek to my neck

saw no “You’re a jerk.”

He moved away a bit, pulled my T-shirt free of my skirt, yanking
my head and dropping it on the floor.

ight to Then he looked into my eyes.

My hammering heart thundered in a swell and then stuttered to
Where when I saw the look in his eyes. They were not distant or disinterested
were something else, something I’d never seen on him, or anyone, before

“Yeah,” he agreed, and his voice echoed the look in his eye. “I am.

Then he kissed me again.

go. He Needless to say, it went wild after that.

by the What could I say?

pinned This was Hank.

We were all over each other, hands, mouths, tongues. He pulled me up, bunching it at my waist, turned us both around and sat down on top of his arms around me, taking me with him. He fell back, rolled me over carefully then came away, yanked down my panties and tossed them. He bent low, spread my legs and his mouth went there.

“Good God,” I breathed, and I slid my hands into his hair.

He took me to the edge. I was panting, pressing my hands in his hair. I was nearly there when he pulled away. Instantly, I came up. My hands were on his shoulders, pushing him to his back. I undid his buckle, unbuttoned his pants and slid them only as low on his hips as was needed and climbed on top of him. I had my hand wrapped around him to guide him inside, but his hands were not long. my hips. He bucked, ramming into me, and my hand flew away. I said, between us.

My back arched when he filled me. I gasped and Hank kept bucking me.

it over It was Hank and my wild ride and it was far more satisfying.

He didn't make me do all the work. He was strong, his hips were powerful, and I just held on to his shoulders and enjoyed the ride.

to a halt It was delicious.

d. They When I came, his hands slid up my back, pressing me down, and he captured my moans in his mouth.

” A few minutes later, I returned the favor.

Afterward, I had my face pressed into his neck, and he spoke, his voice deep and hoarse, "Say my name."

I hesitated, not sure what he was asking. Did he think I didn't know who he was? Did he think I imagined myself with Billy?

ny skirt "Hank," I whispered, my heart in my throat.

he bed, "That isn't what you call me."

ie over My stomach fluttered but I kept silent.

1 aside. His arms tightened around me and I felt his muscles clench as he taking me with him. He settled on the edge of the bed, me still straddling him, my hands at his shoulders. I looked down at him and he was looking at me. He didn't take his arms from around me.

it to his "I talked to Eddie," he said.

s jeans, "I figured that," I told him.

f him. I He dropped his head and kissed my throat, then kept his face there.

went to

y from "Christ, Roxie, I'm sorry," he said against my throat.

g. I closed my eyes and my arms tightened reflexively but I did nothing. What was there to say? The last twenty minutes had been the best apology in the history of mankind.

is were He tilted his head back again. "You need to call Tex and let him know you're spendin' the night with me."

I shook my head.

and he I was glad he didn't think I was some sad, lost woman in love with an abuser, but I also wasn't ready to pick up again with Hank.

"You need to take me back to Tex's."

s voice His eyes got lazy. “You aren’t goin’ back to Tex’s.”

I stared at him and I figured he was right, mainly because behind t
ow whoin his eyes was the intense, and I knew to get what I was trying to tell
I wanted, I’d have to fight. Since I didn’t really want it anyway, I
prepared to fight.

He rolled me to the side and my head hit the pillow. He reached
me, grabbed his phone and handed it to me.

I called Uncle Tex while Hank moved away and pulled up his jea
sat up, didn’t button them. He then pulled down my skirt.
adding

king up “Yo!” Uncle Tex boomed in answer.

“Hey, Uncle Tex. I’m with Hank.”

I heard a chuckle. “Yeah, I saw that. These boys are *the shit*,” Un
replied.

I sighed. “I’m not coming home tonight.”

“Not surprised. Get Hank to bring you to Fortnum’s tomorrow. I’
n’t say key under the mat if you need to come home.”

he best “How’d it go with Mom?” I asked.

“She and Herb are comin’ out in a few weeks.”

n know Hank was up on an elbow leaning over me, and I couldn’t help it, I
at him. His eyes went soft and his hand went to my neck. He stroked
and I bit my lip.

with an Silently, I shared my happiness and silently, he accepted it.

I mentally shook myself out of the moment.

“That’s good,” I said to Uncle Tex.

“Gotta go, told Nancy I’d call her. She’s not gonna believe this, y
he lazyHank, me calling Trish. Fuckin’ A, but things don’t stay borin’ arou
myselffor long.”

wasn’t “I love you, Uncle Tex,” I blurted then closed my eyes, wondering
was too much for him.

l across There was silence, then, “Darlin’ girl.”

That’s all he said before he disconnected.

ans, but I opened my eyes and hit the off button on the phone. Hank took
me and put it in its cradle.

Then he looked at me. “Have you eaten?”

I nodded.

cle Tex “Did you have dessert?”

I shook my head.

He knifed up, grabbed my hand and pulled me up after him. “Get c
ll put alet’s go.”



HE TOOK me to a place called Gunther Toody’s, a gimmick res
designed for family dining and to give the feel of a 50s style diner
smiledchrome, vinyl and waitresses in white uniforms covered in slogan
my jawwearing shocking red lipstick.

Hank ordered a burger and cheese fries. I got a chocolate malt. T
was the thickest, biggest, best malt I’d ever had in my life.

I was staring out the window, sucking on the straw in my malt, tr
catch a thought. Everything had been happening too fast. I couldn’t ke
didn’t know what to do next, where to go, what to think.

you and The only thing I did know was I needed to slow down, catch my
nd here heal my body and get myself safe. I didn't figure Hank was safe.
 certainly wasn't safe, at least not emotionally. Neither was Chicago, i
g if that honest.

 I felt Hank's foot nudge mine, taking me away from my thoughts.
looked from the window to him.

God, you're handsome, I thought when my eyes settled on him.

it from I sighed and realized I was still seriously in trouble.

 He was done with his food and his plate was pushed away. I
watching me.

 "There are things to say," he told me.

 I supposed there were, but I not only didn't want to say any of
didn't want to hear any of them either.

ressed, I wasn't going to get a choice.

 "You told me that you loved him," Hank said.

 I blinked.

staurant "Loved, loved, deh, deh, deh," I said. "Past tense."

. Neon, Hank leaned forward and took my hand. "Sweetheart, I asked, 'I
buttons love him?' and you nodded, not past tense."

 Oh.

he malt I remembered that.

 Shit.

ying to I leaned forward too. "I'd just been rescued from a crazy man and
ep up. I slept in days. I was so tired, I didn't know what I was saying or doing."

breath, His hand squeezed mine. It was the only acknowledgement he gave Denver he understood and he was sorry, but I knew he understood and he was if I was A man like Hank probably didn't apologize a lot and I'd already gotten straight out from him that night.

s, and I I looked back out the window.

"I'm glad we got that straightened out," I said to the window, and It would be good to have a clean break, leave things settled and good than ugly and bad.

He was His hand gave mine a little tug and I looked back at him.

"We'll go back to where we left it," he stated. "We'll have to deal Flynn when they find him, but you and I can go on from here."

them, I I shook my head. "No, my friend Annette is bringing my stuff to as we speak, and as soon as I get it and my car, I'm going."

"Sunshine—"

"No, Hank. There's no going back. I'm not mad at you for thinking an idiot, because, well, I am an idiot. I'm just not an idiot about that...I have to get my life sorted out and that's going to take a while should...move on."

Do you His eyes flashed dangerously.

"Move on?" he said the words slowly.

I nodded. "Yeah, it's nice that we'll end on a good note and misunderstanding," I told him.

"Roxie, we're not ending."

I hadn't "Yes, we are. You're a good guy..." I stopped and realized that was it.

ive that He was a good guy. I was a nut, my house had been trashed, my e
s sorry.was wanted in four states and still at large, God knew where, and th
got onewe were both skirting around was that I was tainted. He knew it. I k

Even if he knew I didn't love Billy anymore, the fact that Hank wou
think that let me know all I needed to know about what he thought of r

l I was. "It's over," I finished.

l rather "Sorry, wasn't it you that I was fucking an hour ago?" he asked, l
narrowing.

I scowled at him.

al with "It isn't over," he said.

My brows drew together. "It is. I'm leaving tomorrow."

Denver He watched me for a second then let go of my hand, pulled his wa
of his back pocket, threw some bills on the table and got up, shov
wallet back in his pocket. He pulled me out of the booth and, hold
ing I'm hand, guided me to the door with a chin lift to our waitress before w
rat. It's through it.

le. You Once we got outside, he dropped my hand, put his arm arou
shoulders and pulled me into his side.

Well.

He was taking my ending things really well.

l not a Although I knew I should be relieved, it kind of pissed me off.

At the 4Runner, he opened my door for me and I turned to him, d
to keep things on a positive bent and be polite.

vas just "Thank you for understanding."

He looked down at me.

x-lover “I don’t understand,” he said.
ie thing “Excuse me?”
new it. “Roxie, you aren’t going anywhere. I just have to convince you to
ld even I blinked at him.
ne.

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” I said (again).
He moved into my space. I moved back, and he pinned me aga
his eyes inside of the door.

“Then I gotta convince you before tomorrow.”
“You won’t be able to do that. My mind is made up,” I told him, p
on his chest with my hands to push him back.

“A few days ago, you didn’t even want to have dinner with me.
illet out than twenty-four hours you were in my bed. I’ll be able to convince yo
ing his Well!
ing my He was certainly sure of himself.

He was certainly sure of himself.
Of course, what he said was true (all but the convincing me part), b
nd my “Take me back to Uncle Tex’s,” I demanded.

He grinned. “You aren’t going to Tex’s. You’re comin’ home with
I made a huffy noise.
So I guessed this meant he wasn’t taking my ending things w
really well. In fact, he wasn’t taking it at all.

eciding Hank kissed me.
Then, still feeling dizzy, I went home with him.



I WAS ON MY BACK. Hank had lifted my legs at my knees so they were

into his sides. He was up on his elbows so his weight wasn't on me. With legs bent and his leverage, he was sliding deep inside me, deeper than had ever been.

stay.” I had my eyes closed, feeling him move, my arms wrapped tight his back.

I let him seduce me again (honestly, it didn't take much) against the memorizing everything, the smell of him, the feel of him, the taste of his strength of him. I'd need to keep these memories for a long time.

He pulled out and broke his rhythm, his body tense. I could feel his pressing he wasn't coming inside.

My eyes opened. “Hank?”

In less His head dropped and in my ear he murmured, “Stay.”

u.” Holy cow.

My entire body spasmed.

“Don't,” I begged.

out still. “Promise me you'll stay,” he whispered.

I moved, tightening my arms and wrapping my legs around him me.” “Whisky—”

When I used his nickname, he slid deep inside and kept going, finishing with him me off.



AFTER WE WERE DONE, he held me against his side and made me tell what happened with Billy, from the minute he left for his run, to the time he got into bed with me after I came back.

tucked He listened without saying anything, but his body was speaking for

With my getting tense. His hand, which was stroking my back, going still even around anyone and then, sometimes flexing and biting into me.

Then he made me tell him about the sledgehammer incident.

He said something then. "I'm gonna kill that motherfucker."

"That's what Uncle Tex said," I told him.

After that, he made me tell him about my plan to get rid of Billy.

In other words, we had the conversation we were meant to have had at breakfast five days ago.

"That wasn't a very good plan," he said to me.

"I know that *now*," I replied.

He told me he knew my place was trashed. Mace had told me Lincoln's Road House.

"You're not safe to go back there," he said.

"I'm going," I returned.

"We'll see."

Jeez, there was just no shaking this guy.

"You *do* know that there's this little thing called the Nineteenth Amendment giving women the right to vote?" I asked.

"I heard of that," he said, and there was a smile in his voice.

"And there's this whole movement called fem...in...is...im," I said slowly, like he was a dim child. "Where women started working, demanding equal pay for equal work, raising their voices on issues of the day, and so on, back the night, stuff like that."

He rolled into me, which made me roll onto my back. "Sounds far from him,

ry now “Do you have an encyclopedia? Maybe we can look it up. If the wo
too big for you to read, I’ll read it out loud and explain as I go al
offered.

He got up on his elbow. “Only if you do it naked.”

I slapped his shoulder.

He ignored my slap, threw his thigh over mine and settled in.

ve over I sighed.

Shamus jumped up and walked around on the bed like it was the f
a bit, laid down with a loud, doggie groan, his back pressed the lengtl
side.

him at I sighed again. “You Nightingale boys are hard to shake.”

“Remember that,” Hank murmured and wrapped his arm around m
as if to prove the point.

eteenth

said it
standing
taking

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“Do you have an encyclopedia? Maybe we can look it up. If the words are too big for you to read, I’ll read it out loud and explain as I go along,” I offered.

He got up on his elbow. “Only if you do it naked.”

I slapped his shoulder.

He ignored my slap, threw his thigh over mine and settled in.

I sighed.

Shamus jumped up and walked around on the bed like it was the floor for a bit, laid down with a loud, doggie groan, his back pressed the length of my side.

I sighed again. “You Nightingale boys are hard to shake.”

“Remember that,” Hank murmured and wrapped his arm around my waist as if to prove the point.

THIRTEEN



THIS IS GONNA BE FUN

The next morning Hank woke me up and made love to me, catching at my heart by paying special attention with his mouth and hands: fading bruises on my neck, arms, hips, even my wrists, like he could them and their memory with his touch.

Man, was I in trouble or what?

When we were done, both of us still breathing heavy, Shamus whine and moved up and down the side of the bed, not taking his eyes off Hank.

“I gotta let him out,” Hank said, giving me a light kiss on the forehead, moving gently away from me.

I nodded and rolled onto my side, pulling the pillow to my middle.

I watched Hank tug on his Henley and jeans and walk barefoot out the door. I heard a door open and close. Then something weird happened.

I closed my eyes slowly, languidly, coming down from the high of Hank’s lovemaking, and when I opened them, Billy’s face was right in front of me.

I jerked straight up in bed, still holding the pillow to my middle, and screamed Hank’s name. The scream was loud, it was shrill and it went through the house like a gunshot. I scooted up the bed, clutching the pillow.

and getting to my knees. My back hit the headboard when Hank ran in the room.

“Jesus, Roxie,” he said, looking at me. I had no idea I was deathly pale and as wild-eyed as Uncle Tex was last night.

I was staring at nothing. Billy wasn't there. My eyes moved to Hank as he sat on the bed, his hands coming to me, taking the pillow away and pulling me into his warm, solid body.

“Holy fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. I'm seeing things. I could swear Billy was right here,” I told him, and I could feel my body trembling.

He swore under his breath and pulled me across his lap, wrapping the sheet around me and tucking my head in his neck.

“I'm going crazy, or crazier. God, I swear he was right here. I could have sworn I saw him plain as day,” I whispered against his neck, twining my arms around his middle.

“It was a flashback, sweetheart. Victims of violence get them all the time. I was still shaking and I felt the tears crawling up my throat.

“Dammit,” I choked, burrowing into him, trying to get him to absorb some of his strength into me, I didn't know which way the wetness on my cheeks transferring itself to his skin. “I'm so weak.”

“I shouldn't have brought you back here. I was worried about that.” I shook my head, tears still coming. “It's me. I'm weak.”

“It isn't you, it could happen to anyone.”

I knew it wouldn't happen to Indy or Ally or Daisy or anyone here. They were made of sterner stuff than me.

into the “I’m sorry,” I said quietly.

“Why?”

ily pale “I feel stupid.”

“Christ, Sunshine, give yourself a break.”

ank and
pulling I nodded but didn’t agree.

He held me until I quit shaking, his arms tight around me. Then h
up, taking me with him and set me on my feet. He bent and picked
lly was panties from the floor, silently handing them to me. I put them on w
ing the dug in his drawer and pulled out an olive-drab thermal, long-sleeve sh
a kickass skull in tan emblazoned on the back. It was a Lucky therma
was sweet. He yanked it over my head, I shoved my arms through an
uld see over my hips.

und his “Let’s go get Shamus,” he said.

He guided me to the back door, holding my hand the whole tir
me.” opened it. Shamus bolted inside. Then Hank walked me to the kitchen
of my hand and started to make coffee.

orb me, “Feed Shamus, will you?” Hank asked.

h. I felt He told me where to find the stuff. The sleeves of the Lucky therm
fucking over my hands and I wiped the remains of the tears off my face with
Then I pushed them back up my forearms and looked around the living
”

It was tidy. The Fat Tire print was gone. The Skinny Dip print ha
repositioned to center over the couch. Everything was where it was su
to be. The broken lamp hadn’t been replaced, but any remnants of
swept away. It was like Billy hadn’t even been there. Instead, it look
e knew. when I first walked in after Hank’s and my date.

I looked away before I started decorating again, took a deep breath, and made Shamus his breakfast. While I did this, Shamus jumped around with happy anticipation of being fed. When I set his bowl on the floor, he buried his face into the wet food, his body still moving with his wagging tail.

“He’s a happy dog,” I told Hank, staring down at Shamus and wishing my life could be as simple as his. Food, happy. Walk, happy. Hank, happy.

I stood up my while he irt with l and it d it fell
Okay, maybe my life could be like that, or a version of that, but I’m going to go there.

Hank got in front of me and then smack in my space, backing me up until my bottom hit the counter. He got so close I could feel the heat from his body.

His hands came to either side of my neck and he looked into my eyes.

“How you doin’?” he asked.

I nodded. “Better. Sorry about that.”

“If you apologize again—”

“Sorry. Sorry...um, sorry!” Oh God, I couldn’t quit saying sorry.

Hank smiled at me. “Shut up,” he ordered.

“Okay,” I replied.

“Put your arms around me.”

I was so weirded out by that morning’s experience I immediately agreed. I was told.

He got even closer. “How’m I doin’?”

I blinked up at him. “Pardon?”

His hands slid down my shoulders and linked around my back. I

ath and rubbed his nose against mine.

I hated it when he did that, mainly because I loved it when he did that.
I shoved “Convincin’ you to stay,” he went on quietly.

Shit.
I’m leaving today, Hank.”

His eyes got lazy.

I hated it when they did that, mainly because I loved it when they did that.
I gave my foot a little stomp, both to show him I was serious and to
myself.

“You think I’m staying!” I snapped.

“I know you’re stayin’,” he replied.

I rolled my eyes to the ceiling then brought them back to him. “I’m
to have coffee, make you French toast for breakfast and you’re going
me back to Tex’s. Then I’m going to get my car, find Annette and go.”

“French toast sounds good.” He obviously felt like ignoring the
what I said.

Whatever.

“Do you have bread, eggs, maple syrup?” I asked.

His head dipped and went to my neck.

With his lips there, he said, “Probably.”

“Powdered sugar, cream cheese?” I went on.

“Probably not,” he answered, mouth still at my neck.

Oh well, I’d make do. “Move back, I’m going to get started.”

Then he

His head came up and he was grinning at me.

I rolled my eyes at him and heard him laugh softly.

hat. He let me go and stepped away.

I walked to the coffee and pulled open the cabinet above it, figuring it was where the mugs would be because that's where I'd keep the mugs. The mugs were there and I took out two.

"How do you take your coffee?" I asked.

lid that. He came up behind me, pressed my hips against the counter and he went around me, his mouth going back to my neck.

to show

"Black," he answered, just before both his hands went under the shirt.

One went north, one went south.

"Hank!" My body jerked but there was no getting away from him. "Let me go."

n going

to take

,

"Call me Whisky and I'll let you go," he muttered against my neck.

Good God.

rest of

I ignored his request and shouted, "Let me go!"

One hand went into my panties, the other hand cupped my breast.

Oh shit.

Ten minutes later I was pressing my back against his body and holding on to the counter for dear life. My head was tilted back resting on his shoulder, my forehead was pressed into his neck. He'd tilted his head forward and was listening to me gasp.

The fingers on both of his hands did a delicious swirl.

"Call me Whisky," he murmured.

I didn't delay and did what he asked.

Then he took care of me, orgasm number two of the day, and I even been awake as many hours.

ing that He held me, my back to his front, his arms wrapped around my
gs. The while I recovered.

Once my breathing evened he asked, “Scared of my house anymore
My belly melted and I let out a quick breath from my nostrils.

is arms Hank was trying to erase the bad memories by giving me good one
God, he was *such* a nice guy. Though, he was a nice guy in a se
irt. sexy way.

I shook my head.

n. “Let He kissed my neck. “You feel like stayin’ yet?”

Jeez.

He might be a nice guy but he sure was a stubborn one.

I shook my head.

“Stubborn,” he murmured, his mouth behind my ear.

“I was just thinking that about you,” I told him.

I felt his smile rather than saw it.

ding on “This is gonna be fun,” he said.

oulder,
and he I doubted that.



WE HAD FRENCH TOAST. We had a shower. Hank took me to Tex’
heard him on the phone in the kitchen while I did the whole getting
production.

I called Annette and she answered with a sleepy, “Yo, bitch.” She

hadn't Denver and she told me she and Jason were catching up on sleep
arranged to meet later at Fortnum's.

midriff, I called Uncle Tex at the store (he was still not using his cell pho
got the address for where my car was. Then Hank took me to get my c

e?" I thought this was fishy, Hank being so nice, taking me to :
considering I intended to drive off into the sunset with it. But I wasn'
to look a gift horse in the mouth, especially Hank's mouth. His mou
s.
mesmerizing.

riously The guy in dirty blue coveralls was sitting behind the counter, f
through the paper.

"I'm here to pick up my car," I told him when he looked up.

He looked at Hank, then back at me. "Sorry, can't give it to you."

I stared at him. "Why?"

"Some cops came in a while ago, towed it to the impound. Said
evidence in a crime."

My body went still. "What crime?"

He shrugged.

My head turned slowly to look at Hank. He was looking pleas
himself.

That was when my body turned slowly to face Hank. "You
anything about this?"

s and I His lips twitched. "Might do."

dressed My hands fisted at my sides, I stomped my foot and let out st
noise.

was in Hank did a full-on smile, tagged me around the waist and pulled

and wehis body.

“Told you you were stayin’,” he said.

ne) and “I...you...” I stopped and made the strangled noise again.

ar. One of his arms wrapped around my waist, the other one slid i
my car^{hair}.

t going “God, you’re cute,” he said.

ith was “You’re a jerk,” I replied.

ipping He shook his head, then bent it and kissed me dizzy.

I blinked up at him when he was done.

Then he said, “This is fun.”



HANK TOOK me to Fortnum’s and everyone was there—Indy, Lee
Daisy, Uncle Tex, Duke, Jet and Eddie.

l it was It was like they were waiting for the show.

I stomped in and Duke opened his mouth to speak but I put up my

“I don’t want to hear it. So, yeah, you called it. I put you all thro
mill. It wasn’t like I *wanted* to be assaulted and abducted,” I snapped a

ed with “I was just gonna say, good to see you safe,” Duke told me.

l know “Well...” I huffed, the wind out of my sails. “Thank you.”

He shook his head at me like he wondered about my sanity. I coul
I blamed him. I was beginning to wonder about my sanity, too.

rangled “You’re welcome,” he replied.

Hank stood close to my side and I looked up to him. “Don’t you
go to work or something? Interrogate suspects? File reports? Testify ir
me into

That kind of thing,” I asked, sounding uppity.

He put his arm around my shoulders and dipped his face to mine, smiling, his mouth not. “It’s Sunday, I only interrogate suspects on weekends if I can manage it.”

My head jerked. “It’s Sunday?”

“Yeah.”

Shit. I’d been away a week.

“My life’s a shambles,” I whispered.

He squeezed my shoulder, and for some reason I felt reassured.

I had no time to process my feelings of reassurance as Daisy bellied us, looking up at Hank. “Back off, big boy. You’ve had her long enough, Ally, got girl talk.”

Then she grabbed my hand and pulled me into the shelves of books, turned into the P-Q-R-S section, and I noticed Ally, Indy and Jet followed us.

“So, you’re back with Hank.” Indy was smiling.

“I’m leaving town as soon as I can get my car,” I told her.

Her smile faded.

“Where’s your car?” Jet asked.

“Hank had it impounded,” I answered.

Indy’s smile came back.

“He doesn’t want me to leave,” I explained unnecessarily.

“You are so not gonna leave,” Ally said, she was smiling too.

I looked at her. “I’m gonna leave.”

I said it and meant it.

his eyes “You are so not gonna leave,” Ally repeated.

weekdays Indy came closer to me. “Roxie, you should know, once, when I wanted a motorcycle, and his dad told him he’d have to buy it with his own money, Hank got like ten jobs. He worked himself to the bone, got up early, working late nights. He even did it and went to football practice games. In the end, he got that motorcycle.”

“Hank drives a motorcycle?” I asked.

Ally ignored my question and shared her own story, “Yeah, I remember when Hank decided he was going to buy a house in Bonnie Brae. He wanted to be close to where he grew up and have a place in a neighborhood where he could teach his kids how to ride their bikes on the sidewalks without fear of a drive-by. Property values were out the roof. No way to buy there on his salary. Everyone expected he’d give it up. When he found his place, it was a total dump. No one wanted it, except to buy it for the lot and scrape it up. He paid more than it was worth and fixed it up himself.”

I was kind of lost in thoughts of Hank teaching his kids to ride the bikes when Daisy called, “Earth to Roxie.”

“What?” I came to.

“Why do you want to leave?” Daisy asked.

“It’s too complicated to explain,” I told her.

They all looked at each other then looked at me.

“It is!” I cried.

“Whatever,” Ally said, dismissing my life’s complications with a wave of her hand. “Are you gonna go to Frightmare with us tomorrow night?”

Good God.

“Frightmare?” I asked.

Hank “Yeah, the Haunted House in Thornton. It is *the shit*,” Ally shared.

“I’m not good at doing scary,” I replied, thinking I’d had enough of doing up in the last week, thank you very much.

“Oh, it’s all in fun,” Indy coaxed.

I turned to Indy. “Hank told me you went berserk and broke through the bales and they had to call the cops. That doesn’t sound like fun.”

Ally and Indy looked at each other then burst out laughing. They wanted doing it so hard they doubled over with it. Jet, Daisy and I watched the

They finally sobered and straightened.

Ally wiped a tear from her eye and muttered, “I remember that it was a Good times.”

Hank “You’re all nuts,” I declared.

“You got that right, sister,” Jet mumbled.

“Well, I’m going. It sounds like a hoot and you could use a few more. Am I right, sugar?” Daisy asked, looking at me.

She was right. Too right. Scary right.

“Okay, fine,” I gave in. “My friends Annette and Jason are in town, do they come?”

“The more, the merrier,” Ally, clearly the Haunted House ring leader, said.

Again, I knew I was in trouble, but this was a different kind of trouble.

A tall, very thin woman turned the corner at the back of the store.

carrying an armload of books. She jerked to a halt when she saw me. Obviously she'd been in her own world.

"Hi," she said, surprise at the existence of other human beings on earth still on her face.

"Hi," we all said back.

She waited a beat and then said to me, "Glad you're okay."

I blinked at her. I had no idea who this woman was.

"Thanks," I replied.

She shelved a book and wandered away.

"Who was that?" I asked Indy.

"That's Jane. She's worked here for years. She's kind of...odd at first," answered.

Uncle Tex had told me about Jane. Quiet, addicted to roman detective novels. Her life was devoted to Fortnum's, reading, writing books, novels that were never published, and not much else.

Daisy grabbed my hand, taking my mind off Jane. "How's everything else? You hangin' in there?"

Her cornflower-blue eyes were kind but sharp. I knew from just how she didn't miss a trick.

I told them about seeing the vision of Billy in Hank's bedroom the next morning.

I finished with, "Hank said it was a flashback."

Jet, Ally and Indy watched me, all smiles gone. They were all concerned.

aw us. Daisy, on the other hand, nodded. “Yeah, I got those after I was raped.
My hand clenched in hers.

on the “You were raped?” I whispered.

“Long time ago. Flashbacks lasted awhile but they went away. The
heals just like the body, but it takes its time. It’s good you got a doctor
to see you through it. Helped me that during that time I found my Mar
I sighed.

No one believed me when I said I was leaving town, and I knew
wouldn’t believe me when I told them Hank wasn’t my man, so I
silent.

,” Indy We heard a shout from the front of the store.

“Jumpin’ Jehosafats! This place is fuckin’ *great!*”

ice and That would be Annette.

ier own All the girls’ faces were frozen with incredulity at the yell.

“That’s my friend, Annette,” I told them, broke away and walked
rythingfront.

Annette and Jason were standing a few feet inside the door. Jas
ier lookAnnette’s partner, same height as Annette, light-brown hair and dark
eyes. He always smiled like he meant it and was never in a bad mood.

om that Annette and Jason looked at me when I arrived, and I realized
could have bad moods under extreme circumstances because the mi
saw me, his face went hard.

looking Annette stared.

“Hey,” I greeted, smiling at them.

ped.” Annette looked at Jason then turned on her heel and walked out the

On the sidewalk outside, hands clenched and arms straight, she th
head back and screamed at the top of her lungs. Then she started kick
sidewalk like she was kicking dirt and punching the air like she was h
ie mind punching bag, all the while emitting loud, nonsensical, *angry* mutterin;

nt man I turned to all the folks in Fortnum’s. “She’s a little crazy.”

cus.” No one said a word. They were all staring out the door.

ow they Annette walked back in.

stayed “I’m gonna *kill* that motherfucker,” she announced.

“I think that’s the consensus,” I told her.

“No, no, no. I’m gonna rip his dick off, shove it up his nose and
him through the streets naked and dickless, *then* cut his head off.”

The entire store was silent.

“Annette, honey, I thought you were a pacifist,” I reminded h
l to the placating voice.

“Have you *seen* your face?” she shot back.

on was “Um...yeah. It’s already a lot better.”

:-brown At my words, her eyes bugged out.

Holy cow.

l Jason Wrong thing to say.

nute he Quickly, I offered, “Let me introduce you to everybody.”

I did the introductions. Annette gave Uncle Tex a big old hug, and
finished with Hank, she looked him up and down, turned to me and
while she drawled, “Nice.”

the door. Hank's arm slid along my shoulders and he pulled me into his side
rew her Annette and Jason took this in and Annette smiled huge.
ing the Then she said, "Very nice."
itting a I looked up at Hank and his lips were twitching.
gs.

Shit.

Then Jason came forward, took my hand and asked Hank, "I
mind?"

He pulled me away from Hank's arm and into both of his own, gave
tight hug, shoving his face in my neck.

The room, having recovered from Annette's outburst, went silent a
parade I felt the tears hit the backs of my eyes and slid my arms around him
"Jason, I'm okay," I whispered. "I'm fine. I'm here. It's over."

He didn't let me go. I heard Annette give a loud, hiccupping
er in a (Annette was a crier, just like me) then her arms came around both of us

We stood like that for a while and I heard Hank say softly,
Roxie's got three cracked ribs."

Jason's arms loosened and he and Annette stepped away. Immediately
Hank slid his arm across my shoulders again and pulled me tight to his
"Annette tells me you're a cop," Jason noted, looking at Hank.

Hank nodded.

"You'll get him?" Jason asked.

when I Hank nodded again.

noded Jason looked at him for a few beats then he nodded too, and I watched
tension ebb from his body.

Everyone was quiet after that.

“All righty then!” Indy exclaimed into the ensuing silence. “Wh
we all get lunch?”

“That sounds great. I could eat a horse, but gotta unload the car fi
got a boatload of your shit,” Annette said to me. “The old Su
draggin’.”

Do you

“You can take it to my place,” Hank told her.

ve me a

I froze.

No. No way in hell, I thought.

gain.

“No,” I said out loud.

m.

“Cool,” Annette ignored me. “Should we follow you there?”

ng sob

“We’ll all go.” Ally, all of a sudden, was there. “Many hands mal
work.”

is.

“No,” I repeated, slightly louder this time.

“Jason,

“Let’s go, I’m starved. The sooner we get this done, the sooner I c
Eddie said as he and Jet walked up to us.

diately,

He had Jet in a hold much like the one Hank was using on me.

side.

“No,” I said again, even louder.

“Where are we going to lunch? I vote Las Delicias,” Indy put in.

“We had that yesterday,” Lee said.

Indy smiled at him. “Every day is Las Delicias day.”

“No!” I said for the fourth time and it was nearly a shout.

hed the

Daisy linked her arm in mine, pulling me away from Hank. “You c
with me, sugar. We got shit we haven’t talked about yet.”

It was Hank's turn to freeze.

"Don't worry, hunkalicious, we'll be right on your tail," Daisy
him and guided me to the door.

"Don't mind Tex, Jane and me! We'll just stay here and work!
baru isshouted to us as we walked out the door.

"Thanks, you're a doll!" Indy shouted back.

I looked back in dread at Uncle Tex, but he was grinning.

Daisy took me to her Mercedes, which was parked in the back
everyone scattered to their own vehicles.

I sat in the car, staring unseeing out the window while she started t

"Sugar, you look scared as a jackrabbit," Daisy remarked.

"I am scared," I told her. "My car has been impounded and I ca
home. I can't get anywhere. Now my friends are essentially moving
into the house of a man I've known for a week. It's official. As of t
met him a week ago."

"Seems longer," Daisy muttered.

She wasn't wrong.

"Relax," Daisy said. "One thing I learned, this life is a wild ride a
got to just go with it."

I turned to her. "I need a moment to think. I need a moment to
need a moment to myself."

"That's just when it all goes wrong, when you have time to thin
you got an eternity of lyin' alone in your coffin. Now you best be s
your time with good folk and a handsome man. Come when you're
and wonderin' where your life went, you won't thank yourself for

loose and leavin' a good thing behind, *comprende?*"

assured I opened my mouth to say something, but Daisy didn't let me.

"Trust me sugar, I—" then she stopped talking, her eyes got big
" Duke looked beyond me, out the side window.

I turned to see what she was looking at, and in my window was
bent over and looking in.

Not just any man, one of the men who took Billy.

, while He tapped on the window with a gun.

"Get out of the car," he said, looking at me.

he car. "Please tell me that's a flashback," I whispered.

"That ain't no fuckin' flashback," Daisy replied.

an't get She slammed the car in reverse and sped backwards on a vicious
my shitthe wheel, curling sideways. The bad guy jumped out of the way
oday, I bumper and Daisy nearly rammmed into Eddie's truck, which was
down the alley behind us.

The man with the gun ran to a car on Bayaud and got in as Daisy t
turn onto Bayaud. The other man who'd come to take Billy, the one w
nd you me to the sink, was driving the car. They shot away from the curb after

"Oh no. No, no, no. *Shit!*" I shouted.

plan. I I looked behind and saw that they followed and Eddie turned in
them.

ik. And "You know these boys?" Daisy asked.

pendin' "They're the ones who took Billy."

: eighty "Mm-hmm," she mumbled, shifting up and staring in the rearview
cuttin'

as she ran the red and turned onto Broadway.

Cars honked and swerved as we cut into traffic. I held on to the dashboard with one hand, the ceiling with my other, and braced my body as best I could.

When we were rocketing down Broadway, I chanced another glance and saw that the two guys and Eddie had taken the red light, too. In a moment of further despair, I saw a Subaru pulling up the rear, its end dragging a heavy load and two mountain bikes strapped to its roof.

Shit.

Cars were swerving everywhere, honking, and I could see angry faces through windows.

A Crossfire and Hank's 4Runner both zoomed out of parking spot in front of Fortnum's and joined the chase.

Then the bad guy in the passenger seat leaned out the window and pointed the gun at us.

"Holy cow! He's gonna shoot!" I yelled just as we heard gunshot. "ping, ping, ping" as the bullets hit the trunk of our car.

"They shot me! They shot my Mercedes! Those fuckin' bastards!" I screamed and she squealed and she hooked a right down some narrow road with parked cars on either side, barely enough room for us to drive down.

A car was coming toward us and Daisy leaned on the horn.

"Get out of my way, motherfucker!" she shouted, leaning forward and squinting through the windshield like she was nearsighted and nearly dropping her huge bosoms on the steering wheel.

At the last possible moment in our scary game of chicken, the car swerved into an open spot and we flew by. I looked behind us and saw

rest of the cars in our convoy fly by too.

sh with “Drive to a police station,” I said to her.

could. “What?” she asked, still laying on the horn.

behind “Take your hand off the horn and drive to a police station!” I yelled

To my She stopped honking her horn and I heard my purse ringing.

under a “Shit!” I snapped.

“Put your seatbelt on. Fuck the phone. Belt. Now!” she ordered.

y faces I did as Daisy instructed. She hung a left, running a stop sign, and
two blocks down she took another left, thankfully through a green light
got onto a two-lane road. My phone finally quit ringing and Daisy we
s at the and out of traffic, honking her horn liberally and staying out of the li
clean shot.

I aimed We took several more turns. I kept glancing behind us. Eddie’s truck
fallen back. The Crossfire was behind the bad guys, Hank behind
s and a Crossfire.

” Daisy Daisy took another turn and we were in the parking lot of the
station Eddie had taken me to the day before.

cars on I watched out the back window as the bad guys kept going. The Crossfire
stopped on a squeal of tires. Hank’s 4Runner shot past it and kept a
bad guys. Indy jumped out of the Crossfire and the minute she closed
forward door, it took off on another squeal of tires.

resting Then I could look no more.

the car Daisy executed what could only be described as a Bo-and-Luke
saw the General-Lee stop on a squeal with the back half of the Mercedes SUV
around and rocking to a halt. The red truck came in behind us, Ar

Subaru following it.

Two squad cars flew out of another exit, sirens and lights flashing.

Eddie didn't bother to park. He stopped behind us, got out of the Jet getting out the other side. She immediately started running toward the entrance of the police station. Indy was there, holding the door for her as she jogged toward us.

Daisy and I climbed out of the car.

"Get into the station. Now," Eddie ordered, and I realized Jet and I already had their orders.

Daisy and I didn't quibble. She threw her keys to Eddie, he caught them in midair, and we hoofed it into the station, joining Jet and Indy. Anne and Jason came in not a minute later.

"What the fuck just happened?" Jason snapped.

Okay, so I'd learned of another situation that could take away my good mood.

I told them about the bad guys.

"Those fuckers shot my Mercedes," Daisy said when I was done. She was shaking, maybe with rage, but I figured it was something else.

I put my arms around her and she reciprocated the gesture.

"Those fuckers shot my Mercedes," she whispered.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered back, feeling the weight of her fear firmly on my shoulders.

She held on.

Eddie walked in. His dark eyes glittering with anger went first to Daisy, then they came to me.

“You okay?” he asked me.

I nodded.

the truck, “Daisy?” he prompted.

and the She took her cheek from my chest and nodded, but she didn’t let m

: Eddie Eddie watched her a beat and then said, “I’ll call Marcus.”

Something changed in the air. I saw it in Daisy’s face and in Jet’s
didn’t know what it was.

and Indy Eddie looked at me. “You know those guys?”

ht them I shook my head but said, “They took Billy.”

ette and “Billy isn’t with them now,” he noted.

I just stared at him.

“Fuck,” Eddie finished.

Jason’s He could say that again.



I WAS SITTING on a couch in the room where I gave my statement to Detective
Marker.
talking.

Daisy was by the door being held by a good-looking, dark-haired man
that I knew had to be her husband, Marcus. He was ignoring some very
looks he was getting from all the cops in the room.

settling Indy was six feet away, talking to some handsome black man in uniform.
Jason was standing with them. His face still had not morphed back
good-natured Jason I knew.

Jet was sitting on one side of me, Annette on the other, and we were
Jet and holding hands.

Eddie was talking on the phone.

Then, some guy who was on another phone yelled, “Yo, Eddie!”

Eddie put his hand over the receiver and lifted his chin.

ie go. “Hank got ’em,” the guy said.

Eddie’s eyes slid to me.

s, but I “Thank the goddess,” Annette breathed.

I stared at Eddie and felt my chest squeeze.

Before, I thought I was leaving town to guard my heart.

Now, I had to leave town to guard my friends.



WHAT SEEMED LIKE FOREVER LATER, Hank and Ally walked into the
Ally had been in the 4Runner with Hank and he’d taken her with hi
bent on going after the bad guys. This was talked about by the cops
wasn’t a big deal, and I got the impression they all knew Ally was the
girl who could handle herself in a crisis.
etective

I could tell from across the room that Hank’s body was taut, he wa
and he was seriously and completely pissed off.
ed man

He scanned the room until his eyes fell on me and then he came
to me.
y weird

I got up from the couch.
niform.

He stopped in front of me, toe-to-toe, totally in my space.
to the

He tilted his head down and looked me directly in the eye.

“You’re stayin’,” he declared in his authoritative voice.
vere all

Shit.

e room.

m, hell

s like it

kind of

s wired

straight

FOURTEEN



“SHE’S THE ONE”

I was lying on top of the covers of Hank’s bed, wearing my dusty stretchy nightie with the black lace on the bodice and hem. It was risqué for hanging out in Hank-the-guy-who-I-was-telling-myself-trying-to-shake’s bedroom, but fuck it, these days risqué was my name.

Shamus was lying on his belly beside me. His head on my stomach, eyes closed, content as I scratched his ears. “Born to Run” was playing on the stereo in Hank’s bedroom and I’d just finished writing a letter to a friend in Atlanta, but did not share any of the recent goings-on. That would have been a phone call.

I had put my stationery aside. I was staring at the ceiling and trying to decide how my life had descended into such madness and obviously a part of it was blaming myself in an attempt to save what was left of my sanity.

It was like someone in a suit walked up to me and gave me a certificate which stated “Roxanne Giselle Logan, Your Life is Fucked.”



I’D SPENT the afternoon at the police station.

First they took everyone’s statement. Then Daisy and I identified the bad guys in a line up. It gave me a chill up my spine to see Sink Mar

so close he seemed *right there*.

Luckily, Hank was right there too, standing behind me, his strobe warm on the back of my neck.

After that we went back to the big room with the desks and phone people. Hank didn't come with us, but everyone was still there. Vance and Mace had arrived and both were looking grim. Or at least Mace looked like Vance looked pissed off.

They were talking to Lee, but before they peeled off Vance approached me, stared me in the eyes, his burning so deeply I felt the heat on my face.

"Don't worry," he said low.

Then he and Mace took off.

Yowza.

I wasn't certain what he meant. All I knew was that whatever it was, he seriously meant it.

After that, everyone else took off. I tried to follow but Lee caught up to me and held me back.

"You stay here, wait for Hank," he ordered.

Eddie stood beside him. Jet and Indy stood beside their respective desks and looked at them.

"I need to—" I started.

"You need to wait for Hank," Lee cut me off and his tone brooked no argument.

I felt the need to argue, even though Lee scared me a bit.

"You don't understand. Uncle Tex—" I told him.

And again,

“We’ll talk to Tex.” This time Eddie cut in.

I felt another presence behind my back, so I turned and there Malcolm, Hank and Lee’s dad, a handsome older version of them b
met him briefly at Indy and Lee’s party a week ago.

“Come on, Roxie. Let’s get you a cup of coffee,” Malcolm invited.
Shit, shit, shit.

Coffee with Hank’s dad after I’d been chased through the str
Denver and shot at.

Shit.

I gave Lee, Indy, Eddie and Jet one last glance and a small smile.
nodded to Malcolm and went with him.

He got me coffee, or what could loosely be described as coffee. I’
again take coffee for granted after having one of Uncle Tex’s or
creations. We went back to the big room, its activity beginning to fade
with me on the couch.

“Let me tell you what’s goin’ on,” Malcolm said to me.

I looked at him. His eyes were open and unguarded and infinitely
I realized two things straight off. One, this man had raised two pretty f
sons and an amazing daughter, and I could tell the reason for th
because this was a good man. I also realized that he had been dragg
the mess that was the last week of my life right along with everyone el
first thing humbled me, the second embarrassed me.

I tamped down the embarrassment, focused and said quietly, “I’d
know what’s going on.”

His eyes registered approval of my comment and I felt like I pa

important test. Not only that, I got an “A.”

He started talking. “They’re interrogating those men. Jimmy Mar
oth. I’d Danny Rose are doing it. Jimmy and Danny are veterans, good at wh
do, and friends. Hank can’t be involved because of you.”

I nodded.

He continued.

“Hank’s watchin’, two way mirror. First, we want to know
happened to Flynn and if he’s still at large. Then, we want to know
they’re workin’ for and why they came after you.”

I nodded again. I wanted to know all of that too.

“Hank wants you here, where he knows you’re safe and he can get
Will you do that for him?”

I swallowed, wondering if Malcolm knew how huge his question w

Then I nodded again.

He patted my thigh.

“Good girl,” he said.

I did it again, passed another test and got another “A.”

I took a deep breath and he continued.

“This is a family affair, Roxie, in more ways than one. Now, I’ll
explain how that works. No one kidnaps a cop’s girlfriend out of his
then puts her in the path of a bullet. The whole department is gonna
until we get these guys and make you safe. Lee and I’ll do whatever
to that same end. You have my promise on that.”

I tried not to focus on the fact he called me Hank’s girlfriend. In
focused on something that was even scarier. I liked this man. He was

dad and had made Hank into what he was now and what he was to
ker and didn't want him to think badly of me.

at they "I'm sorry all of this is happening," I said to him. "You must think

He squeezed my knee and interrupted me, "No offense, honey, I
don't know what I think."

I waited, quiet, knowing he wasn't done, and for some reason I was
v what more scared.

ow who I might have passed a few tests, but someone had shot at me then
That probably wasn't number one on a father's list of the kind of
wanted his son to be with, especially a son like Hank. It occurred to
to you. could be Hank's "Billy," the girl that made his parents wince and
faces when they saw us together.

was. Malcolm continued, "The only thing I want in this life is a piece of
happiness for those I call my own. I know my boy. He doesn't fuck
when there's somethin' he wants, excuse my language."

I did a hand gesture to excuse his language. It wasn't his using the
"fuck" that was making me freak out.

"It's pretty damn clear Hank wants you and that boy doesn't make
decisions," Malcolm carried on. "He's smart, he's controlled and
I gonna decisive. If he wants you, there's somethin' to want and that's all I
s house know."

a work I looked at him, feeling funny. It wasn't a bad feeling. It was a good
we cana really good one, and that scared me even more.

"You remind me of my dad. He doesn't bullshit either," I told him.

instead I "Sounds like I'll like your dad," Malcolm said, and he said this like
Hank's

o me. I'd done deal that he'd meet my dad.

I had visions of Malcolm meeting Dad and it made my heart skip a
—” Mom and Dad had never met Billy’s parents. Neither had I. Billy
out you even talked about them. He would close up the minute they were mer
I’d learned not to push.

as even My parents would like Malcolm and they’d love Hank. I could hear
calling Sweet Jesus all the way from Brownsburg, Indiana at th
that day. thought of me with a guy like Hank.

girl he “Thank you for telling me all of this,” I said to Malcolm.

to me I He smiled at me and his smile was just as drop-dead gorgeous
get sad son’s. “My pleasure.”

We sat for a while longer, talking about Denver weather, and t
iece of started talking about sports. He told me it took a while for him to warr
around Rockies. He’d been a Mets fan. I teasingly congratulated him for
remaining faithful to the National League. Then I told him I thought
ie word was nothing better in the world than eating a hotdog and drinking a
the humid sun at Wrigley Field. After I finished with that Malcolm g
e stupid another one of his smiles, making me think I’d passed another test.

id he’s Then Hank walked into the room and I stopped talking.

need to His eyes settled on us and he didn’t take them away as he walked
the room.

od one, “What’d they get?” Malcolm asked when Hank arrived.

Hank grabbed my hand, pulled me up, stood close and didn’t d
hand. Malcolm rose as well.

e it was “Not much, they’re not talkin’. I called the Chicago PD yesterday

them check Roxie's apartment. Prints from the apartment match these
beat. and Chicago tells us these boys are linked with a bigger operation.
y never waitin' for reports on the prints they lifted in the hotel in Nebraska to c
tioned. we can place them there too. We don't hold much hope for that. Th
was a shithole. Filthy, prints everywhere. They didn't get much
r Mom partials from around the sink. It'll be Roxie's word that puts t
e mere Nebraska."

After he said that, his mouth got tight at the thought of me and the

I stared at him. I had no idea that anyone had gone back to that l
Nebraska, and I certainly had no idea the cops checked out my
; as his Chicago.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

hen we It was Malcolm that answered. "The minute Vance found you, Ha
n to the Jimmy've been runnin' what's become a three state investigation."
at least

it there Holy cow.

beer in "Well, Hank hasn't been runnin' it, at least not officially," Malcol
ave meon as if I was going to hightail it to Internal Affairs and snitch on
efforts to keep me safe.

Before I could react to what Malcolm said, Hank tugged my hand.

l across "Let's go," Hank said, nodding to his father, obviously done talkin

"Where?" I asked.

He looked down at me. "Home," he answered.

rop my I pulled my hand from his and gave Malcolm a kiss on the cheek.

pulled away, I saw Malcolm's eyes crinkled at the corners in a sm
to have didn't reach his lips and I figured somehow I'd got another "A."

e guys, I turned back to Hank. He grabbed my hand again and we left.
We're When we got in the 4Runner and Hank had it on the road, he
check if "How're you doin'?"
e place "Not good," I answered honestly. "You?"
except "I'm angry," he said, just as honest.
hem in "I can tell." After a beat I sighed, huge and loud, and looked out t
sink. window, trying hard not to cry.
hotel in "Roxie," he called.
loft in "What?" I asked, still looking out the window.
"I'm not angry with you."
"I know."
ank and I believed him. Still, I felt like a total and complete pain in the ass.
"I like your dad," I offered as a change of subject.
"Good," he replied, and for the first time that afternoon I felt som
m went anger had slipped away.

Hank's



HE PARKED in front of his house. There were familiar cars lining the
including Uncle Tex's El Camino.

g. When we walked into the house, we were assaulted by the smell of
the sounds of Led Zeppelin and an overexcited chocolate lab.

When I If that wasn't overwhelming enough, the place was filled. Indy, J
ile that and Annette were sitting at Hank's dining room table playing cards. Ki
(Hank's mom) and Nancy were in the kitchen cooking. I could he
barely, Led Zeppelin was kind of loud) a ballgame playing on the TV
other room.

“Yo, bitch!” Annette greeted when we walked in. “And, um.. asked, Annette went on, looking at Hank.

“Is everything okay?” Kitty Sue asked, her eyes on Hank. She holding up a wooden spoon that looked like it was coated with spaghetti sauce.

the side Nancy moved toward me and gave me a one-armed hug.

“Bet you’re hungry,” she said into my ear.

Hank answered his mom while I relaxed into Nancy’s hug and nod her. She moved away and Uncle Tex was standing behind her.

“For fuck’s sake, girl. We don’t want it borin’ but this ain’t goddamned *French* fuckin’ *Connection*,” he boomed, and I could tell he was trying to make a joke, but he didn’t think the situation was all that funny.

I grinned at him, but it was weak.

He put his big hand on the top of my head for a second then took it away. I grinned at him again, this time it was stronger.

“We got all your stuff in, it’s in the extra bedroom,” Ally announced. I turned to her.

the street, “Nancy and I packed your things at Tex’s and brought them over here. Kitty Sue added, and I looked to her in total shock. I opened my mouth to say something, something like, “Are you fucking insane?” but then Tex saw my look and started booming.

et, Ally “No lip, Roxie. Hank wants you with him, you’re stayin’ with him. Kitty Sue Good God.

ar (just They’d moved me in with Hank.

7 in the Uncle Tex was right. It’d been a week, and there I was, all moved

.dude,”Hank.

Shit.

he was I stared at Jet and she was giving me a look that was half smi
maghetti grimace. She knew my pain. She’d had to move in with Eddie dur
troubles, and even though her problems were through, she still hadn’t
out. I could tell she wasn’t going to do a thing about my current s
though, likely because she agreed with everyone else.

dded to I made a strangled sound and looked back at Tex. I was beginnin
angry.

n’t the “Do I not have a say in this?” I asked Uncle Tex.

he was “Nope,” he responded.

ly. My eyes narrowed. “Excuse me, but I think I do.”

“You can have your say when people aren’t shootin’ at you
: away. returned.

Jason, Lee and Eddie walked in from the TV room to catch wl
ed, and likely to be a more spectacular show as I squared off with Uncle Tex.

“That’s just it. They were shooting at me, but Daisy was with m
,” Kitty could have shot her. They did shoot her car!” I snapped. “Seems
to say everyone would be a heck of a lot safer if I was far away from here.”

caught “You ain’t thinkin’ straight,” Tex said agreeably.
understandable.”

.” I stomped my foot. I was no longer beginning to get angry, I was
out angry.

“I *am* thinking straight. If something happens to someone because
in with I wouldn’t be able to live with myself.”

“Nothing’s going to happen,” Hank said from beside me, cutting in on our conversation.

I turned to him. “Yeah? You sure about that?” I asked.

His eyes got hard.

“Yeah,” he said slowly, staring at me. “Yeah, I’m fuckin’ sure.”

Holy cow.

The way he said it, the way he looked, made me believe him.

Almost.

“Hank, that mouth,” Kitty Sue said in a mother’s tone. Even with the tension flowing between Hank and me, I had to admire Kitty Sue telling her grown-up, super-macho, badass cop son for dropping the F-bomb.

Then she announced, “Spaghetti’s ready, let’s eat.”

The conversation was over, and so was the show.

Even though I didn’t want it to be, I really had no choice.



WE ATE. We did the dishes. We played Scattergories. Uncle Tex took us home. They had sundaes smothered in hot fudge sauce and topped with whipped cream and a cherry. We did the new dishes. Kitty Sue went home. Hank and Lee both walking her to her car.

“That’s what I found so sweet I felt my breath constrict in my chest and Indy’s eye. Her eyes were bright and warm and something flowed from me, like an invitation to a sisterhood that only we two could share. I wanted to accept, more than anything I’d ever wanted in my whole life. I had Corporate Diva-dom, closets stuffed with clothes and a front row seat to the Chanel Winter Runway Show in Paris.

into the Hank and Lee came back and the moment was lost, but the p
remained, and I felt so moved by it I barely said another word the res
night.

We played more Scattergories. We listened to Indy and Ally
stories of Haunted Houses past and I began to get more and more free
at this Haunted House business. It didn't sound fun. It sounded frighte
sounded crazy. It sounded totally out of control.

Hank noticed me getting tense and pointedly put away the Scatte
game.

with the Everyone took the hint. Hugs were exchanged then they all left.

ling off "You've gone quiet," Hank commented after he'd closed and loc
door.

"I was shot at today," I answered, thinking I had a good poi
though I was lying.

He walked up to me. "That's not it."

He was right, that wasn't it. How he knew that don't ask me, bu
: Nancy like he had a cord and he'd plugged it into me the minute he first laid
d with me. It had been that way since the start. This freaked me out and m
t home, feel centered and safe all at the same time. Don't ask me how it dic
couldn't tell you that either.

caught "It's nothing," I said. "I need to call Daisy."

n her to Surprisingly, he let it go saying he had his own calls to make.

wanted I called Daisy and she told me she was fine and not to worry about

e, even "They fucked with the wrong girl when they fucked with me. M
it at the words," she threatened.

promise I marked them. She sounded serious. Daisy might be sweet-as-
t of the cute-as-a-button, but I got the definite sense she could open one major
whoop ass.

telling



ked out HANK'S HOUSE had three bedrooms. The master, at the side of the hou
ning. It to the kitchen with a small, three quarter bathroom attached, and the
two bedrooms at the back off the living room, separated by a full bath.
rgories these rooms was what appeared to be a weight room-slash-junk room
more so by my boxes and suitcases.

Annette and Jason had brought my stashed clothing and had also
ked the up most of my clothes. They'd also got my shoes, my jewelry case, n
school yearbooks, photo albums and some picture frames filled with
of family and friends, and then carted it all out to Denver.

at even

Apparently, they thought I was going to stay for a while.

The other bedroom was Hank's office. It had an old comfy
couch, a table with TV, a desk, his computer and a bag filled with b
t it was was lumpy at the bottom with what appeared to be softballs sitting
eyes on corner. I figured that room was his lair. He'd disappeared there when
ade me Daisy and I didn't disturb him.

l this, I

After I called Daisy, I got undressed and ready for bed. I found
CDs in the TV room, picked "Born to Run" because I was in Hank's
and that demanded Springsteen, and Shamus and I settled in with n
embossed stationery.

her.

I had set aside my stationery. I was amusing myself (not) by thinki
ark my my life was certifiably fucked and "She's the One" had just started
when Hank arrived.

pie and He stopped at the side of the bed and stared down at me. He did th
r can ofwhile. So long, it made me uncomfortable.

“What?” I asked.

“Been waitin’ a long time to meet the girl in this song.”

ise next I felt my body still at the importance of what he just said.
re were

One of So did Shamus. His head came up and he looked over at Hank too.

1, made The lyrics to this song weren’t cryptic. Even so, somehow to n
collided with the thundering, unbelievably cool music that told
packed considered the real story. Starting expectantly, and then exploding, a
ny high drawing out to a beautiful, vibrating climax.

photos Every girl would secretly want to be “the one,” even though she m
to herself that she did not. It was a man’s view of the woman he desir
even loved—bitter, sweet, defiant, admiring and fucking sexy a
looking Regardless of all that, the chorus was a repeat of “she’s the one,”
ats that tense, which said it all.

in the “Whisky,” I said quietly because I didn’t know what else to say.

I called He tugged off his T-shirt, dropped it on the floor and turned out th
I heard rustling in the dark while he took off the rest of his clothes a
Hank’s the bed moved as he got on it.

s house He lay down beside me, but didn’t touch me, and we both stayed
ny lilac the dark.

I waited for him to touch me, turn into me, something, but he did
ng how Shamus settled his head on my belly again.

playing To cover my confusion (and disappointment if I was honest) I
“What’s the deal with Daisy’s husband, Marcus?”

is for a Hank answered, "He's bad news. Runs guns, has a stable of girls, deals drugs as a hobby."

I got up on my elbow and turned, looking down at his shadow in the dark, wondering if I should laugh.

"You're joking," I said, and I really hoped he was.

"Nope," he replied, and my hope died.

ne they Holy cow.

what I I didn't want Daisy to be married to a bad guy. I really liked I
nd then wanted Daisy to be married to someone like Hank.

I asked, "Well, how does that work, with Daisy being one of the closest

light lie "Daisy's a new addition. She's only been around the last few weeks

ed, and I gasped at this piece of news. It was almost as unbelievable as knowing

is hell. her husband was a crime lord.

present "But I thought you'd all known her for ages."

"She took to watchin' out for Jet when she had her problems and
stuck. Marcus isn't a part of it, and somehow it works."

e lamp. Boy, these people were nuts.

nd then "What's the deal with Marcus and Eddie?" I asked.

still in "Eddie wants Marcus in prison and has been workin' to make that
for a long time. Marcus doesn't want to go to prison. They hate each other

n't, and That did not sound good.

asked, "I don't see this working for long," I noted. "What happens when
puts Marcus in jail?"

"Daisy knows the score, and so does Marcus," Hank told me. "

girls and your problem and it isn't mine. When that happens, we'll all deal."

For Hank, it was simple as that. There was something very cool in the dark, that.

Even so.

"I don't think it's that simple," I shared.

He sighed and turned to me, but I noted he still didn't touch me. "Roxanne, I like Daisy, hard not to like her. But she's made her point. I know something happens to Marcus, and she reaches out her hand to 'the crowd'. I expect everyone will take hold."

"Including you?" I asked, needing to know the answer to that as much as I needed oxygen.

"Including me."

I felt something settle in me. It wasn't in my belly, my heart or my mind. It was everywhere. It was in my soul.

Hank got up, walked through the dark room and turned off the lights in the middle of "Jungleland."

He lay down beside me and again didn't touch me.

"Whisky?"

"Yeah?"

"Nothing."

I was stymied. I wanted Hank to touch me. I didn't want to admit there it was.

I'd never touched him. I had, but I'd never made the first move.

I lay there some more.

It's not

Oh, fuck it, I thought and rolled into him.

My hands went to his chest and my lips went to his collarbone. I curled around my waist. Shamus got the hint, jumped off the bed and meandered out of the room.

“Thought you were never gonna do that,” he muttered, and I could hear he sounded relieved.

I didn’t answer. I was busy, or at least my mouth was.

I explored his collarbone and neck with my mouth and tongue, kissed him. He let me taste him, even tease him, allowing me to control the kiss, and it was heady stuff.

Then I moved down slowly, discovering his chest and abs with my mouth, teeth and tongue. The whole time he stroked my hip, buttocks, but otherwise, he didn’t touch me.

I took my time, enjoying the feel and taste of him, and his reaction which consisted of the tightening of muscles, low groans (my favorite), sometimes his fingers would bite into me if I did something he really liked.

I dipped lower, taking him into my hand, and then into my mouth.

His hand slid into my hair.

“Fuck,” he said low.

I knew he liked what I was doing. I could tell and it turned me on so much that I went gung ho, giving him all my best moves and making up my own. All of a sudden his hand left my hair. Both his hands went under my armpits and he yanked me up onto his body.

Mm, seemed it was time to get serious.

I sat up, moving to the side, saying, “Let me take off—” But he pu

back over him and pushed me up so I was straddling him. His hands
his arm my underwear and gave them a vicious tug. My hips jerked forward
ed and material tore and then my panties were gone.

“Whisky,” I whispered, stunned that he just tore off my under
I swear (maybe he *was* part caveman, except a really good-looking one and
all the hair), but I had no time to process this. His hands were at my hips
he pushed down just as his hips lifted up and he slammed into me.

It felt great, unbelievably great, and I nearly lost track of what
then I doing. I bit my lip, controlling my desire to let him take over all
I of the forward, kissing his neck under his ear and asked, “Hank, please. Th
let me.”

Partly I did this because I wanted to give him something, but part
r hands, this because it was fucking well my turn.
om and

His grip loosened at my hips, which I took as his affirmative answer
sponse, I started moving slowly, exploring his neck with my mouth all the
es) and When it was time to stop playing, when I knew we both wanted
iked. pulled up but didn’t go down, thinking to give him a taste of his
medicine.

In his ear I said, “I want my car back.”

“Sunshine,” he groaned, his hands biting into me.

on. So “Promise me Hank.”

He laid still, and just when I thought I had him where I wanted him
up new hands tightened and he flipped me to my back and took over, pushing
der my and then grinding.

“Whisky! It’s my turn!” I cried, wrapping my arms around him and
lled me my hips into his.

went to “Don’t use sex to manipulate,” he told me.

ard, the I stared at him in the dark.

“You do it all the time!” I said.

lerwear “I’m good at it.” He quit grinding and started moving. I couldn’t h
without moved with him. “And I don’t do it with anything that’s important.”
lips and

I ignored his arrogance and the fact he was full of shit. The night
he’d used it to try to manipulate me into staying. If that wasn’t impo
t I was didn’t know what was.
rd bent

I decided, instead, to go back to the matter at hand, or at least one
his time matters at hand. “I want my car back,” I demanded, but it came out
breathy.

ly I did “Quiet,” he returned.

ver, and “I want my car back,” I repeated.

while. He kissed me. I went dizzy. He kept my mouth busy so I would
more, and my body busy so after a while I *couldn’t* talk.

is own Then I felt it. I twisted my head and tensed, breathing into l
“Whisky, I’m going to...” I didn’t finish. He lifted my legs with his
behind my knees, pounded into me and I lost the ability to speak.

When he was done, he rolled to his back, taking me with him. I lay
of him for a while, my head on the pillow next to his, my forehead pre
his jaw.

ium, his Finally I said, “That wasn’t fair.”

in deep “The first time *you* touch *me*, it’s so you can ask me for your car
l lifting can leave me. I didn’t feel much like playin’ fair.”

“Hank—”

He interrupted me, “You were callin’ me Whisky a few minu when you intended to make me do what you wanted by takin’ me mouth.”

elp it, I I realized then that he was angry and I came up on my elbows.

“Are you angry?” I asked, even though I knew he was.

efore “You *are* ‘She’s the One.’”

ortant, I I gasped.

“I am *not* ‘She’s the One,’” I snapped.

e of the “You’re completely ‘She’s the One.’”

kind of “Am not!” I shouted.

“Please tell me we aren’t havin’ this ridiculous conversation,” he sounding exasperated.

“You started it,” I returned.

n’t talk “I see. We *are* having this ridiculous conversation.”

I made a strangled noise.

his ear, He rolled me onto my back, his weight moved and he reached o
s hands switching on the light. He settled on his side, towering over me and lo
me.

r on top Before he could say anything I said, “I want my car.”

essed to “You aren’t leavin’,” he replied.

“No. I’m not. I just want my car.”

so you “Then you aren’t gettin’ it until I know you won’t do anything
Like leave.”

I scowled at him. “I said I wouldn’t leave, I won’t leave.”

tes ago “I hate to say this, Sunshine, but I don’t trust you. You think alliga
in yourcute and you got friends who’ll drop everything to drive across cou
bring you your stuff and that’s because you got a heart bigger than tl
of Colorado, and what happened today flipped you out. Not, I’m g
what happened to you, but what happened to Daisy while she was with
give you back your car and you’re gone.”

He was so right.

I *hated* that.

“It’s *my* car.”

“You’re *my* woman and I don’t want you off on your own with Flynn
God knows who lookin’ for you.”

I asked,

My body froze. “Billy?”

Hank stared at me and I knew he’d said more than he intended.

Then he muttered, “Fuck.”

I felt fear steal through me.

“Hank, talk to me,” I whispered.

ver me,

His thigh moved over mine and he pinned me to the bed.

oked at

“Roxanne, you’re safe. No one’s gonna harm you.”

“Talk to me,” I said, louder and slightly more hysterical this time.

Hank sighed. “Got word before I came into the bedroom. Jimmy
of those boys to talk. Flynn got away from them.”

stupid.

Good God.

My body jerked and Hank’s arm went around me, pulling me into l

“No one’s gonna harm you,” he repeated.

tors are “Hank, he knows where you live. I have to get out of here.”

entry to “Roxanne, listen to me.”

he state I started squirming, totally panicked, trying to escape.

uessin’, “Roxanne, dammit,” he swore, but I didn’t quit struggling.
h you. I

He dropped to his side and rolled me into him, wrapping his arms
me, pinning mine to my body and he tossed a heavy thigh over mine.
so strong, resistance was futile so I stilled.

“He hurt me,” I told Hank’s neck.

ynn and “I know.”

“He’ll do it again.”

“No he won’t.”

I lay there breathing heavily, more from anxiety than my struggles.

“I’m scared,” I admitted, and it took everything I had left to do it.

Hank’s arms and leg tightened. “I know.”

After a few minutes of internal struggle, I relaxed into him and he
reached out and turned off the light. Then he fell to his back, me parti
top, partially in his side, keeping one arm around me.

I tried to keep my mind quiet. Luckily I was exhausted so it work
think about it tomorrow. Or not at all. I was thinking not at all sounde

got one “I’m not your woman,” I said, drowsy.

“You are,” he returned.

Jeez.

him. There really was no shaking this guy.

“I’ll die. I’ll go with Billy. I’ll do whatever so no one gets l

promised.

“It won’t come to that,” he gave me a promise in return.

“I want my car,” I went on, stubborn.

“We’ll talk about it tomorrow night.”

around “I’m going to be at the Haunted House tomorrow night.”

He was I heard his head move on the pillow. Probably he was shaking it l
he thought I was a total idiot.

“You’re a nut.”

Okay, he was shaking it because he thought I was a nut.

“No I’m not,” I said.

He didn’t answer.

I lay there for a long while. I felt the tension leave his body, his ha
relaxed on my hip and I figured he was asleep.

“I didn’t start touching you to get something out of it. I did it be
e let go, wanted to,” I told his sleeping self.

ially on “That’s good to know,” he replied, his voice low and sounding ti
definitely not asleep.

ked. I’d I jerked up on my elbow. “I thought you were asleep!”

l good. “Nope.”

Shit.

I settled back down.

“I really do think you’re a jerk,” I said, though even I could tell
mean one word of it.

hurt,” I “For not being asleep?” Now he sounded both tired *and* amused.

“Well...yeah.”

“I wasn’t asleep when you sang ‘Because the Night’ either.”

Holy cow.

I jerked up on my elbow again. “Please tell me you’re kidding.”

“Nope,” he said again.

because Shit. Shit. Shit.

I rolled away. He rolled with me, caught me around the waist and me back into his body.

“Now, I have to leave,” I said.

“Why?”

“It’s embarrassing. My singing sucks.”

and now “It sounded good to me.”

“That’s because you like me.”

because I He kissed my neck.

red but Then he settled behind me and said, “Yeah.”

I didn’t

“Well...yeah.”

“I wasn’t asleep when you sang ‘Because the Night’ either.”

Holy cow.

I jerked up on my elbow again. “Please tell me you’re kidding.”

“Nope,” he said again.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

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“Why?”

“It’s embarrassing. My singing sucks.”

“It sounded good to me.”

“That’s because you like me.”

He kissed my neck.

Then he settled behind me and said, “Yeah.”



MY DAY WITH THE BOYS

I heard Hank's phone ringing. He muttered an oath and leaned over to pick up his cell from the nightstand.

"Yeah?" he answered, his voice husky with sleep.

My eyes flickered open. It was still really dark.

My eyes shut again and I curled into Hank. Shamus pressed into me.

"Where?" Hank asked.

He seemed resigned, not tense. Since he wasn't tense, I figured my car was not about to come crashing down so I didn't get tense.

Then he said, "Got to take care of somethin' at home, then I'll be back." Another pause then, "Yeah."

I heard the beep of him disconnecting the call.

"Whisky?" I whispered.

There were more beeps. Hank was making a call.

"Just a minute, sweetheart," he answered then he talked into the phone. "Jack? Hank. I need to go out and I need protection for Roxie."

He stopped talking. I got up on my elbow and pulled my hair out of my face. Shamus gave an enormous doggie groan of protest.

“Fuck,” Hank said then paused. “Yeah. I’ll take her there. ’ minutes, tops.”

Another beep as he disconnected.

“What’s going on?” I asked, looking at his shadow in the darkness.

He moved. The light came on and I blinked. Shamus jerked to h and surveyed the scene, preparing for all doggie possibilities open to early walk, early breakfast or some sort of pets and cuddles.

r me to “There’s been a homicide and it’s connected to a case I’m on,” Ha me. “I’ve got to go to the scene. I need to take you to Lee’s offices. Y go back to sleep there. I’ll pick you up later.”

I blinked again, but not because the light burned my eyes.

y back. Lee’s offices?

No way in hell.

y world “I can go to Uncle Tex’s,” I suggested.

He shook his head, pulled away, got out of bed and walked to the c there.” “Please don’t argue. I want to be sure you’re safe and Lee’s bc keep you safe. Get some stuff together. A change of clothes, whatever need for the morning. We have to leave now.”

Was he serious?

phone. “Now” wasn’t an option for me. He knew I was high maintenanc said twenty minutes, and some of that was travel time. I needed to ch outfit. I needed hair stuff, body stuff, makeup. I needed twenty minu for the outfit.

t of my “Now?” I asked.

He pulled on some white boxer shorts, came back to the bed and

Twenty me out of it.

When he was standing in front of me, he bent and kissed my nose.

“Now,” he answered.

Shit.

is belly



him—HANK CARRIED his workout bag that he'd emptied for me to pack at my hand as we walked up some steps to some offices. I had the Hank told Shamus's leash in my other hand.

You can Shamus was beside himself with glee, his doggie body trembling. He was on an adventure.

I was beside myself with despair. I couldn't be left alone without protection.

I'd come without a fight mainly because I'd caused enough work mayhem. I didn't need to have a big argument with Hank when he ne go to work. Furthermore, he was right. Uncle Tex was huge and tou lesser. Lee's boys could be commissioned to keep the Pope safe.

ays can Not to mention, Hank had said please.

ver you

We walked into some offices. The lights were out in the room we e but there was an inside door open. A light from the hallway there lit th and I could tell it was a reception area.

e. He'd

oose an

tes just

Hank and I walked down the hall. It had several doors leading off c A man came out of a room halfway down the hall, but stood in th doorway. He was built like a truck, but perhaps slightly more solid.

“Safe room's open and ready,” he said to Hank. His eyes came briefly, then he went back into the room and the door closed behind hi tugged

Not much of a welcome.

Hank took me toward the end of the hall and into a room. It was sparsely furnished and not decorated. A double bed, a reclining chair, a TV, a bookshelf full of books and DVDs. Another door led off of it.

I let go of Shamus's lead and he got busy exploring his new space.

and held Hank dumped the bag in the chair.

ndle of "Sleep," he said after he turned to me. "I'll be back before you walk

with it. "Okay," I replied. He had things to do, important things that involved crime and justice. I reminded myself that now was not the time to get in a fuss.

without He walked to me. I noticed his eyes were lazy and I held my breath. His hand came to the side of my neck and he gave me a light kiss.

rry and Then he was gone.

eded to I took off my jacket, under which I was wearing a pair of jeans and a lilac nightie. I took off my shoes, the jeans, turned off the light and got into the bed. Shamus got in with me, walked around on the bed for a while getting the lay of the land. He settled on his side, his back pressed to mine, and we both fell asleep.

e space



of it. SHAMUS JERKED and jumped off the bed. I rolled over to see what he was doing, but he was already halfway across the room.

ie open I looked toward the doorway and a man was standing there.

to megoing on. For a second I stared at him, confused, because I didn't know what he was doing.

m. Then I remembered.

Even so, I continued to stare at the man.

It didn't take much to know this was another one of Lee's boys. I
and a Truck Dude. This guy was tall but lean, wearing black cargo pants, a
skintight T-shirt and black boots. He had black hair, cut close, a
absolute best facial hair I'd ever seen on a guy in my life. A thick
mustache that grew across his lip and down the sides of his mouth,
clean and precise. He looked like Harley Man morphed with Just Pl
ce up." Man.

involved "Hey," I said to him.

cause a One side of his mouth went up in a sexy half-grin.

ath. His Good God.

"Dog wants out. Hank's delayed. Go back to sleep."

I nodded, stunned silent at the amount of information he was able to
and my using the fewest words possible.

got into He stepped aside. Shamus walked through the door, tail wagging,
while, closed it.

ny side I laid there for a second, thinking there was no way in hell I was g
get back to sleep.

Then I went back to sleep.

was up



I WOKE UP, again felt confused, again realized what was happening ar
out of bed.

hat was I tried the inner door and found it was a bathroom. I hauled my s
it, did my mega-morning-preparations (even though I forgot my body
found an unopened bar of Irish Spring under the sink, and I forgot n

smoothing lotion so I had to make do with just my finishing wax). I
Not Big done half bad with my outfit, considering I was half asleep. Rich fores
a black, low rider corduroys, oatmeal, shawl-necked cashmere cardigan that
and the without a shell, belted at the waist with a wide chocolate suede b
s, black matching suede flats.

shaved Once I was done, I walked through the other room to the door, r
ain Hot coffee, needing food, needing to check on Shamus and needing to
where Hank was.

I tried to open the door, gave it a yank, my hand slipped off the
and the door didn't move.

I stared at it and tried again.

The handle didn't twist and the door still didn't move.

to share I was locked in.

I felt panic edge through me.

and he "What the fuck?" I whispered.

Then I heard a disembodied, "Roxie."

going to I looked around searching for the source of the sound.

It came back. "This is the control room. Hang tight. We're t
someone in."

"What?" I asked, feeling stupid, talking to the room.

nd I got "We're bringin' someone into the holding room. We need you t
tight. Once he's secured, we'll come and get you."

hit into "Holy cow," I whispered. Then I panicked.

wash, I "It's not—" I started to say.
y hair-

I hadn't "It isn't Flynn," the voice interrupted me.

t green, I let out a deep breath. Then I took in a sharp one, realizing he knew

I wore I was panicked.

elt and *Okay, whatever, it's not like my life being certifiably fucked is a s*
thought.

eeding I sat on the arm of the reclining chair and listened to see if I could
o know them bringing in whoever. I couldn't.

handle Then the door opened and Just Plain Hot Guy was standing there.

I got up.

"Hey again," I greeted.

He did one of his half-grins.

"Hungry?" he asked.

I nodded.

He stepped sideways and did a sweeping gesture of his arm, telling me to
precede him.

Man of few words.

ringin' I walked out. He fell into step beside me and we walked down the hallway.

"I'm Roxie," I told him.

"I know," he replied.

o hang Well, there you go.

"And you are...?" I prompted.

He looked at me. His eyes were dark but I noticed they were also
Indigo.

Good God.

“Luke,” he said.

ew why “Nice to meet you, Luke.”

He did another half-grin.

ecret, I I tripped.

It turned into a full grin.

ld hear Shit, shit, shit.

We made it to the end of the hall. At the door, he stopped and
hand on the handle.

“Our receptionist will go out and get you some food. Whatever
want,” he told me.

I nodded, thinking that was nice, visions of Aunt Bea from “The
Griffith Show” tumbling through my head. He opened the door and I
through and stopped dead.

g me to The woman sitting behind the gleaming reception desk was as far
from Aunt Bea as you could get. She looked like she’d just walked
runway—high cheekbones, shiny blonde hair, ten pounds under
absolutely beautiful.

hall.

“Hi, I’m Dawn,” she said brightly when she saw me. There was
on her face that I noticed didn’t reach her eyes. She did a full body smile
then her smile turned smug.

Bitch, I thought.

“Hi. I’m Roxie,” I replied.

so blue. “I know,” she said this like it was a joke.

“Breakfast,” Luke cut in, clearly having other things to do, and that
not include common niceties like introductions or hanging around lists

Dawn being a bitch.

“Um...” I was feeling funny about giving her my order.

“Coffee?” Luke cued me.

“Yes...a skinny caramel latte?” I asked, unsure.

His eyes moved to Dawn and so did mine. She'd lost her smug sn
looked peeved. It was pretty clear she didn't feel like running out to g
caramel latte.
put his

“What else?” Luke asked, looking back to me.

“I don't know. A scone, a muffin...something like that.”
tremendous pressure. Perhaps I should order plain fruit and unsw
granola and ask them where I could do my morning yoga, though I
practice yoga.
er you
e Andy
walked

“Got that?” Luke asked Dawn. He was done and it was time to mo

She nodded, grabbed her purse out of the drawer and skedaddled, v
like she was on a catwalk, one foot in front of the other, her ass s
under the skirt of her expensive, tailored suit.
ir away
d off a
weight,

Bitch, I thought again, watching her go.

“No comparison,” Luke remarked after the door closed behind Dav
I turned to him.
a smile
can and

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“Dawn's a man eater. You're not. No comparison,” Luke answered
didn't know how to take that.

“Is that good?”

The half-smile came back. “Most men prefer to do the eating.”
ose did
ning to

Holy fucking cow.

“Uncle Tex told me you were shot,” I blurted out, desperate to get subject of Just Plain Hot Guys eating *anything*.

“Yeah,” he replied.

“How’re you feeling?” I asked, although it was a stupid question and I looked healthy and fit, *very* healthy and fit.

“Alive,” he answered.

That kind of said it all.

I felt “Well, I’m glad for that,” I told him because I couldn’t think of a better to say.

I didn’t Before he could answer (not that he was going to answer), the door opened.

I turned and saw Lee and Marcus come in.

“Oh shit,” I muttered before I could stop myself.

Luke got close. I could feel his heat against my back.

I stood stock-still.

Marcus’s eyes settled on me.

“Roxie,” Lee said.

He walked to me and bent to kiss my cheek.

Wow.

A cheek kiss from Lee.

It was a multiple “holy cow” day for sure.

“Hi, Lee,” I whispered.

Lee’s eyes moved to Luke, crinkled at the corners to show

amusement, just like his dad's, and he stepped aside.

off the "Did you meet Marcus yesterday?" Lee asked, his eyes moving to
I shook my head.

"Marcus, this is Roxanne Logan," Lee introduced us.

on. He Marcus put out his hand and I took it.

Before he could say anything, I said quickly, "I'm so sorry I got
shot at. I like Daisy. She's been really nice to me. She's wise and she'
and she has interesting taste in clothes."

nything Marcus looked at me and didn't say anything, so of course, I can
like the idiot I was.

ie door "And I'm sorry about her Mercedes getting bullet holes in it. It was
fault. She's a good driver. I mean, she kept her cool, kind of, except we
were playing chicken and...um...other times."

Oh my God, someone had to stop me from talking.

I went on, "And if she ever gets shot at again, I'm sure she'll probably
away."

Luke's hand settled at the back of my neck.

I shut up.

The hand stayed there.

"Daisy tells me you've had it rough," Marcus noted.

I nodded. Luke's hand tightened.

Marcus stared at me and a shiver slid across my skin. He was handsome
that was certain, but there was a hardness behind his eyes that was chilling

ow his "Your troubles are over," he stated with a finality that caused the

to go into a full body tremble.

me. I blinked at him.

“Let’s go to my office,” Lee cut in. His eyes were now serious and were on Luke.

Marcus still had hold of my hand. He gave it a firm squeeze that I a promise. Then he let go. Lee touched my shoulder and they walked the room.
t Daisy
s funny

Luke’s hand came away from my neck and I turned to him.

ried on “What just happened?” I asked him.

“Marcus entered the picture,” Luke answered.

sn’t her “What?”

hen we “Three things,” Luke said immediately, surprising me. I wasn’t could enumerate three things in Luke Speak. He went on proving he
ably get over. Two, we can do it, your trouble is taken to the holding room, t lesson, then handed to the police and it’s over. Three, Marcus can do trouble is dead. I’m hopin’ for number two.”

I focused on number three.

“Dead as in not-breathing-anymore dead?” I asked.

“That’s the only kind of dead there is,” he replied.

“Holy cow,” I said.

idsome, He stared at me.

ling. “Why?” I asked.

shiver Luke didn’t answer, but I knew why. Marcus didn’t blame me for

happened to Daisy. He blamed Billy and whoever else was involved
mess. I'd seen Marcus holding Daisy the day before. Whatever I
criminal kingpin, gun dealer, pimp, he loved Daisy. Someone put her
danger and that someone was going to pay.

“Maybe I should talk to him,” I suggested to Luke.

The half-grin came back. “Although that would be entertaining,
gonna happen.”

“Why not? Maybe I can persuade—”

“Roxie,” he interrupted me.

“Yeah?”

“Be quiet.”

I stared at him and then heaved a big sigh.

Being quiet might be a good thing.

He put a hand to the small of my back, propelled me toward the
door and then took me to the control room and Shamus.

it, that



“THIS IS COOL!” I shouted when I entered the control room.

Shamus ran to me and jumped up on me, his body a quiver
excitement. I just avoided him cracking three more ribs, gave his head
rub and then gently pushed him off. He sat on my feet, tongue lolling.

“Hi, I’m Monty.” A man with a blond military cut stood and sn
me, offering his hand. I took it, we did a shake and I tried not to winc
nearly all my bones were crushed.

Monty was slightly older than most of Lee’s boys, but no less fit.
also slightly more in tune with social nuances, like saying hello.

in this
ne was, the wall, DVD recorders under them, knobs, buttons and racks of elec
r life inequipment. It looked like they could strap me in and we could go to M

“This is the surveillance room. We run security through here and things,” Monty shared.

it’s not I looked at the monitors.

I gawked at the monitors.

“Hey! That’s Fortnum’s! And so’s that...and that...and...” I traile

Dear God, they had nearly every corner, the front and back of Fo
monitored. I watched Uncle Tex banging away at the espresso machin
same time he seemed to be carrying on an argument with Duke.

Monty flipped a switch and Uncle Tex’s voice boomed into the roc

“I don’t want to listen to no fuckin’ Hank Williams, Jr.! You got
Cash, I’ll listen to Johnny Cash. If not, put Cream back on, turkey!”

Monty flipped off the switch.

“Holy cow,” I breathed.

“We monitor Fortnum’s twenty-four, seven,” Monty said.

er with “Best part of the day, surveillance shift,” Luke put in.

a good I tried to think of the time I’d spent in Fortnum’s. Almost none o
gone without some embarrassing incident.

niled at I looked at Monty and Luke. Luke was wearing his half-grin. Mo
e when smiling flat out.

“Shit,” I said.

He was “Have a seat,” Monty invited, the smile still playing about his face

lves on can eat your breakfast in here. I'll show you what we do."

ctronic "Where's Hank?" I asked, sitting next to Monty, looking back
ars. monitors. Shamus moved to settle at my feet.

...other "Hank's indefinitely delayed," Monty replied, but I wasn't listenin
of the monitors showed a visual of the room I'd slept in.

I turned in horror to Monty.

"Did you watch me sleep?" I asked.

d off. He nodded. "Hank's orders. Constant surveillance. If we aren't wi
rtnum's we're watching you."

e at the "But...I was just down the hall," I said, mortified that they had v
me sleep, and I hoped I hadn't drooled.

m. "One thing I've learned, you can never be too careful," Monty repl

Johnny Okay, so maybe he was right about that.

Monty took my mind off the alarming news that they had watch
sleep and told me what they did in the control room—some security,
investigation. Then Dawn showed with my latte and a blueberry muff
latte was cold and had hazelnut syrup in it. The muffin was crap. I dic
a word and ate the muffin while we listened to the police band ra
Monty taught me some of the codes.

f it had Then he turned down the police band. I sipped my latte and we v
the monitors.

ity was About half an hour later, I was losing the will to live and the contr
had lost its coolness. How could these guys do this day in and day out
stupendously boring.

e. "You The phone rang.

“Thank God!” I yelled before I could stop myself. I was happy to see something, anything, was happening. I didn’t care if it was the dry cleaner calling to say Monty’s shirts were ready to be picked up.

Monty shot me a grin then looked at Luke while he reached for the phone. “These girls like their excitement.”

“Thank fuck,” Luke muttered his reply.

I didn’t know what that meant, but I suspected, at least, that it was about you. “Yeah?” Monty said in the phone. Then he said, “She’s right he turned to me. “Hank.”

I took the phone and put it to my ear.

“Hey,” I said, dipping my head and feeling weird in that little room. Monty and Luke having nothing to do but listen.

“How’re you doin’?” Hank asked and I felt a thrill race through me at the sound of his voice.

“Monty and Luke and I are hanging in the control room.”

Silence.

“Hank?”

“I thought you’d watch a DVD or something.”

“No, they’re teaching me police codes.”

More silence.

“Dawn brought me a latte and muffin. Luke said I could have whatever I want so she ran out to get it for me,” I said this because I didn’t want anything more exciting to say.

“Bet Dawn liked doing that,” Hank replied, apparently knowing Dawn.

py that “She didn’t seem tickled pink,” I told him.
leaners I heard Hank’s soft laugh and another thrill raced through me.
phone. “I’m gonna be a while. You gonna be okay?” he asked.
“Sure,” I said.
“I’ll be there to get you as soon as I can.”
“Okay.”
good. Silence for a beat, and then, “Am I talkin’ to Roxanne Logan?” he
re.” He “Well...yeah. What’s the matter?”
Another beat of silence. “Nothin’, sweetheart. I’ll see you soon.”
m with I got my third thrill and then he disconnected.
I handed the phone to Monty.
e at the He replaced it into the receiver and then he touched a button ar
“Brody, come to the control room.” After that, he settled back in his ch
“Who’s Brody?” I asked.
“Our computer guy. You can go with him for a while. Cha
scenery.”
I gave him a relieved smile.
There was a knock on the door and Luke got up and opened it.
A man walked in wearing black jeans, his dark hair needed a cut
was head to toe in disarray. He wore Buddy Holly glasses and his bo
atever I absolutely *not* the normal lean muscle of one of Lee’s boys. His black
't have said in white lettering, I UPPED MINE, UP YOURS!
awn. “Jeez. This is Roxie. Wow. I’ve wanted to meet you, like, for da
shouted when he saw me.

“Hi,” I said, surprised at his reaction to me.

“You’re, like, famous. It was crazy around here when you kidnapped. Everybody was running around, the phones ringing off the hook. Dawn was in, like, *a total snit*, worse than usual. I was running on my computer check possible. Hotel registrations, airlines, credit cards. Let me tell you, I made me a *bucketload* of overtime. Every time Vance reported in that someone had seen you at a gas station or whatever, the whole place went *wired* and everyone asked. Vance called in that someone saw you tied to a steering wheel, Hank got pissed off he put his fist through the wall in the down room. I saw it and I was *insane*.”

I felt the blood run out of my face.

“Brody,” Monty said, his voice low with warning.

“What?” Brody asked, looking at Monty, completely lost in the excitement of it all. Then he caught the hint, his exhilaration faded and he looked at me. “Oh yeah. Right. Sorry. Well, glad to see you’re ok with everything.”

He didn’t sound glad. He sounded like he would have preferred that I was still to be *wired*.

“Why don’t you take Roxie to your office? Show her what you can do.” Monty suggested.

“None of the confidential stuff, right?” Brody asked. Monty shook his head and it wasn’t hard to read that Brody was trying to be patient.

“Right,” he confirmed.

“Okay. Come on,” Brody said.

I waved to Luke and Monty as I followed Brody out of the control room. They didn't wave back but they did both smile.

Brody took me to another door down the hall and into a room that was every four cubbies in the middle, all of them with computers and filing cabinets. "I do my stuff here. Credit checks, employment checks, stuff like that. I also have other projects that are more fun, but I'm not allowed to talk about them to anyone, even Hank's girlfriend," Brody told me.

I stopped next to what was his cubby. It was decorated profusely with a variety of energy drink cans, big grabs of chips and candy wrappers and an odd action figure thrown in for class.

I looked at Brody. "Did Hank really put his fist through a wall?"

Brody brightened. "Yeah! They haven't fixed it yet. Do you want to see it?"

I bit my lip and shook my head.

Holy motherfucking cow.

Hank, Mr. Control, had put a fist through the wall. For me.

Shit.

Brody went on, "He was real upset. Your uncle was super upset too. He mostly yelled. No offense, but I thought it was cool. See, Dawn's got a thing for Hank now that Lee's taken, and she knows she isn't going anywhere with Vance, Mace or Luke. She's been trying to get something with one or the other of them, like, *forever*. Always flirting, even though she has a boyfriend. She was, like, *totally* pissed when she found out Hank had a girlfriend, especially when he went all ballistic. Me and everyone else was thrilled. Dawn thinks her shit doesn't stink. She may be pretty, but even I know about Dawn stinks. It's great working here, except you can't tell

I room. about the cool stuff you do. Everything's great, but not Dawn. So, we were happy that Hank really likes you, because we like Hank, but what had like Dawn. We weren't happy that you were kidnapped or anything."

ets. Well!

that. I I just *knew* Dawn was a bitch.

k about I didn't share my thoughts and gave him a smile.

"Thanks," I said.

r with a None of the other computers were taken so I asked him, "Can I ch
with the email on one of these computers?"

"Sure. Let me set you up," Brody replied.

I checked a week's worth of email, sending replies, deleting ju
see?" doing a few changes and updates through the administration panels c
of my websites.

A little later, Dawn came in with a couple of pizzas and sodas, and
and Luke took turns joining us, having a break from the monot
surveillance. Monty chatted about his wife and family. Luke didn't say
but Brody and I made up for it. Dawn didn't join us at all, likely for f
oo, but the cheese on the pizza would give her instant cellulite, but she came
's got a set and hard, to clean up afterward.

ma get Once the door closed behind her, Brody gave me a huge grin.

hing on I was logging out of one of my sites when Brody walked behind
ugh she saw what I was doing.

se were "You do websites?" he asked.

rything "Yeah, I'm a designer."

anyone "Cool beans!" he yelled. "Show me one of your sites."

we all He rolled his chair next to me and we trolled through a few of m
e don't Then he showed me a game the computer team had loaded called "Dia
was a role-playing game where you got to be a character and went or
through scary, devastated lands, caves, deserts and cities. You pic
gold, armor, weapons and magical spells and fought bad guys. It was k

Brody networked the game then rolled in his chair back to his c
picked the assassin character because she had the best outfit and we
playing it.

eck my What seemed like minutes later, but was actually hours, we we
battle to the death with a whole bunch of orcs and trolls and I s
"Yeah! Go Brody! Kick his ass!"

nk and "Don't stand there! Move away. He's killing you!" Brody yelled.

of some I chanced a quick glance at my stats. The bad guy *was* killing me.

I panicked.

Monty "I'm out of health potions. Retreat! Retreat! *Give me some of your
ony of potions!*" I screamed.

ear that "I don't have any potions. Run, bitch, *run*," Brody squealed.

in, face The red ran out on my health and my assassin was transported, stri
everything we'd earned, back to the starting camp.

"I'm dead! Fuck, they killed me! They fucking killed me," I
me and jerking my hand from the mouse and rolling my chair back in disgust.

Brody had gone quiet.

I looked at him and saw he was looking at the door.

I turned my gaze to the door, and it was opened. Hank, Lee an
were all standing there in various amused male poses, watching us.

ly sites. Shit.

blo.” It “What?” I asked, deciding to go with uppity.

quests “Enjoying yourself?” Hank asked, his mouth twitching.

ked up “No,” I said angrily. “I’m dead. Now I have to run all the way back
ickass. lifeless body and get my stuff. The orcs and trolls will be hanging around
ubby. I we’ll have to fight them and I can’t do that without my good armor. I
started to use the crappy stuff I have stashed in my trunk. I had a really good
and helmet and now they’re gone. That just plain sucks.”

re in a Hank stared at me.

houted, Then he said, “You do know I don’t know what the fuck you’re
about.”

“Diablo,” I replied, like that explained it all.

Hank just kept staring at me.

health asked. “Nothing. Forget it.” I turned to Brody. “Will this run on my lap

“Sure, if you’ve got a good one,” Brody replied.

pped of I looked back to Hank. “We need to go to the mall. I’ve got to be
game.”

ailed, “Maybe we’ll do that tomorrow, Sunshine.”

“Now!” I snapped.

“Uh-oh,” Brody said. “I’ve seen this before. It’s not pretty. Soon s
playing all night on the Internet.”

d Luke My head swung back to Brody. “You can play on the Inter
breathed.

“Now’s a good time to shut up Brody,” Lee warned.

Hank walked into the room and grabbed my hand. “Let’s go, princess. Time for dinner.”

k to my “I wasn’t a warrior princess, I was an assassin,” I told him.

ind and Hank smiled at me.

’ll have My heart fluttered.

l sword I rallied. “Anyway, we just had lunch,” I said as Hank pulled me the chair.

“Five hours ago,” Luke put in.

talkin’ I stopped and stared at Luke, openmouthed.

“No shit?” I asked.

Luke shook his head, the amused male pose still in full force.

“Holy cow,” I whispered.

stop?” I The game had sucked five hours out of me and it felt like five minutes.

I turned to Brody. “I don’t think Diablo is good for me.”

uy this “Some can take it, some can’t. It’s the will of Diablo,” Brody replied.

I nodded at the profound sageness of his reply.

Hank tugged me toward the door and I could swear he was laughing.

“Later,” Brody called as we walked out.

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net?” I

“Now’s a good time to shut up Brody,” Lee warned.

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Hank smiled at me.

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SIXTEEN



PRAYERS

Hank went to get Shamus and I went to the safe room to pack my stuff.

I was standing at the reclining chair, shoving the last bits into the bag when Shamus ran to my side.

“Hey, boy,” I said, bending at the waist to give him an ear scratch that turned into a hand wash from Shamus’s over-excited tongue. Apparently my last five hours away from me had been doggie-traumatic for my chocolate boy.

“Ooo,” I cooed. “Did Auntie Roxie leave you with the scary, scary dudes in the boring room? Poor fella.”

I felt Hank’s heat at my back before his arm slid around my middle. He straightened. His chin came to my neck and shifted my hair then his lips were there. Shamus sat on my feet.

“Have a good day?” Hank asked against my neck.

I shivered and turned in his arm. His head came up and I looked at him. Shamus shifted to sit with his body leaning against both of us.

“Yeah,” I told Hank, surprising myself because I meant it.

“Good,” he said, and I could tell he meant it too.

I looked at him. He looked his usual handsome but tired. He hadn’t

full night's sleep, interrupted or not. He hadn't had his food delivered by a snotty bitch. He hadn't spent his afternoon being a make-believe kickass assassin and killing make-believe orcs. He'd spent his day as a real life cop and going to ugly crime scenes.

"How was your day?" I asked, knowing the answer.

"Shit," he replied.

Yes, I was right. I knew the answer and I felt something happening. Something drawing me to him, and against the directives of my mind (and my heart), my body leaned into his. His other arm came around me.

"I guess it's not fun, going to the scene of a homicide at three o'clock in the morning," I said softly.

"No. As many times as I've done it, it's still not fun."

As many times as he'd done it.

Before I could stop myself, I lifted my hand and with my middle finger traced the lower edge of his bottom lip. I watched my finger touch his lip, then I looked into his eyes.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

His eyes changed. I couldn't describe it. They warmed, softened, and I felt the change in a physical way, straight to the deepest depths of my lungs.

Then his head bent toward me, my hand slid across the stubble on his cheek and he kissed me, no messing around. It was full-on hot and messy with lots of tongue.

When he was done, his mouth trailed to my ear as I held on tight to recover from the kiss. My hand that was at his lip was around his neck, his fingers in his hair, my other arm was wrapped around his waist.

d, even believe, he murmured, “I want to fuck you right now. I want to slide inside you being aerase this shitty day.”

“Whisky,” I breathed, not intending to say anything more. His words robbed me of speech.

Did he honestly think I could do that for him?

One of his hands went under the hem of my sweater and into my waistband of my corduroys. The other one slid over my behind and pressed me into him. I could feel his hardness against me.

Yes, I guessed he thought I could do that for him.

And that thought overwhelmed me.

It all hit me then. His job, his responsibility, three o’clock phone calls, a gun on his belt, the shit he saw, the people he dealt with. After a day of going home to his house and his dog, and once there, he would be alone and done to talk to about it or just help him forget.

It seemed ludicrous, a man like Hank being alone. He could help anyone he chose.

He probably didn’t even care.

But *I* cared.

Oh shit.

I was seriously in trouble.

Before I could process how much trouble I was in, his tongue traced the curve of my ear and I melted further into him. He twisted, taking my neck, my him. Shamus scurried away from our legs and then moseyed to lie down by the door.

motion, Hank started backing me to the bed.

you and “Hank,” I said, but he didn’t answer. He pushed me away from him and undid my belt. It fell to the floor and we stepped over it. His hands worked my cardigan, opening it and then he pressed my almost naked torso against his.

Then I remembered something and ice shifted into my boiling veins.

“Hank, they have cameras in here.”

“I don’t care,” he replied.

Oh no.

He couldn’t mean that.

Could he?

calls, a “I think they even have microphones,” I went on.

of that, “I don’t care,” he repeated.

me. No He *did* mean it.

me with The backs of my legs hit the bed and I wasn’t prepared for it. I fell and he came down, his knee settling on the bed between my legs. He pressed the top of me a moment and then rolled to the side, pulling me with him, his thigh between my legs as his hand at my ass slid my crotch along his length. His mouth went back to my neck.

Oh my, but it felt good.

Even so.

ced the “I don’t want them watching,” I said.

ne with “They won’t watch. They’ll turn off the cameras.”

own by

I wished that was true, but I’d spent time in that room and after a

you'd watch *anything*.

him and "No they won't," I said. "I know what it's like sitting in there, it's
ent intoas hell. They'll totally watch."

against His head came up and in his authoritative voice, addressing the r
large, he ordered. "Turn off the cameras," and his mouth went back
s. neck, clearly thinking that was that.

Good grief.

"They aren't going to do it," I told him.

His tongue slid down my neck to touch at the base of my throat.

"They'll do it," he said against my throat.

"They won't. You have to go check."

His head came up and he looked at me like I'd just asked him to j
and fetch me some Russian caviar.

"Seriously?" he asked.

all back "Yeah," I answered.

was on He pressed my behind, putting me in intimate contact with his ro
slidingcrotch.

long its "Sunshine, I'm in no condition to go check."

Mm, it would seem he was right.

I thought about it then I made my decision. I'd hate it, but I'd do
conditions.

"Okay, but just in case they're watching, we have to do it with a
clothes on as possible and you have to be on top so they won't see me.

a while, He stared at me a beat before he buried his face in my neck and I

body move with laughter. Then his lips slid along my cheek again
boringkissed me, still laughing.

Then he kept kissing me.

room at I knew two kinds of Hank Kisses. The light kisses and the mal
to mydizzy kisses.

These kisses were a third kind of kiss. His hands roamed my bott
back and I realized these kisses weren't leading anywhere. The
cuddling-with-Hank kisses, softer, sweeter, slower, still lots of tong
mostly just-be-together-and-touch-while-you're-necking kisses. They
me a different kind of dizzy.

After a while, he stopped kissing me and rubbed my nose with his.

pop out Then he said, "Let's go get something to eat."

I looked at him.

"We're not gonna do it?" I asked.

ck-hard "No. I appreciate your sacrifice, Sunshine, but if you're not comf
we're not gonna do it."

I hugged him, grateful, burrowing my face into his neck.

He was *such* a good man.

"Thank you," I whispered.

it, with He kissed the top of my head.

s many "I'll erase your day after I get back from the Haunted House," I off
" His hand went to my chin and lifted it up so I was looking at hi
eyes had that look in them again, the soft, warm look that made my s
felt his pitch.

and he “I’m gonna hold you to that,” he said.

I found I had no problem with that at all.



ke-you-WE DROPPED Shamus off at his house and he took me to a restaurant
Reiver’s that was on a street called Gaylord, which was in Hank’s ’hood
om and sat at the bar and Hank ordered for us. Our beers had just been de
y were when my purse rang.

ue, but I yanked out my phone, flipped it open and put it to my ear. “Hello
y made “Yo, bitch!” Annette yelled into my ear. “Get shot at today?” she a

I looked at Hank and mouthed “Annette.” I watched the sides of
turn up then to Annette I replied, “Not yet.”

“Girl, Jason and I are *in love*,” she said.

I smiled at the phone. “I already know that.”

“No, I mean with Colorado. We’ve been mountain biking all d
ortable,unbelievably amazing,” she told me.

“I’m glad you’re having fun.”

“Fun? This isn’t fun. This is nirvana. The trails here kick...fuckin
Sofa-King *phat*. Bitch, I’m opening Head 2, Electric Boogaloo in I
There’s a store across the street from Fortnum’s that’s for lease. I
fucking joking. I’m calling about it tomorrow.”

ered. Holy cow.

im. His I wasn’t sure this was good. In fact, I was pretty sure this wasn’t
tomach didn’t want Annette moving to Denver.

As for myself, I was in Denver-limbo. I couldn’t leave. I wasn’t g
stay.

I'd had a day without incident, time to settle, get my mind around I'd cleared my email, did some work, felt my life wasn't totally control.

t called And I knew what I eventually had to do.

od. We The signs were all there, the right ones—Lee's cheek kiss, Ki delivered making us spaghetti, Indy's unspoken invitation to the Sacred Sisterl Nightingale Women, me getting straight As on Malcolm's Test.

?" It wasn't that, it was me.

sked. Things with Hank were good. Fucking fantastic actually, but that his lips going to last. I knew that like I knew The Gap's clothing sizes ran : was damaged goods and when things settled down and Hank had a m think, he'd realize just what I was and that he could do better. I wante long gone before that happened.

ay. It's My plan was simple. I was going to ride the wave, get safe and no any (more) trouble, and then I was getting the fuck out of Dodge.

I knew I'd lost my heart, it was too late to protect that, but I wasn' to give it time. I wasn't going to be there when the warm, soft look in g...ass. whisky eyes turned cold.

Denver. I came out of my thoughts and re-entered the phone conversation.

I'm not "Annette—" I started to say in protest.

"No talking me out of it. Jason and I are both agreed. Anyway, w like your friends." good. I

I looked at Hank. "They aren't my friends, they're Hank's."

going to "They're everyone's friends," Annette declared as I watched Hank flicker with controlled frustration. Annette went on, "We're coming do

things. mountain now, then we'll shower and get some food. We're supposed to meet at Ally's at eight thirty. See you there."

She disconnected.

I flipped the phone shut.

My Sue "Annette's thinking of moving to Denver," I told him.

Good of Hank's hand came to my knee, his eyes registered approval. "That's good."

I bit my lip.

It wasn't Hank watched my mouth.

small. I "Shit," Hank muttered.

minute to "What?" I asked.

It had to be "I don't like your look," he said.

It cause "What look?" I asked.

He leaned into me and his hand slid up my thigh to rest at the side of my hip.

Hank's "Rewind," he said, his face close to mine. "Let's go back to the Real Roxie fifteen minutes ago. The sweet one who didn't argue and did what she was told. I like her."

Well!

She really "That isn't the Real Roxie. The Real Roxie argues, never does what she's told and is a pain in the ass. This Roxie is Freaked-Out-Life-in-Chicago Roxie. You don't like the Real Roxie then give me back my car and my home to Chicago," I told him.

His eyes "His eyes went lazy. "I like Real Roxie too."

osed to My eyes narrowed. He grinned.

Then he went on. "I was just enjoyin' the sweet one."

Then he took my hand, lifted it and pressed my middle finger to his lip reminding me what I'd done in the safe room and showing me how about it. I held my breath as his mouth opened and his tongue touched my finger.

"Good God," I whispered, staring at his mouth and completely forgetting about my snit.

"Black bean dip," the bartender announced, oblivious to the foreplay, pulling us out of the moment and putting a bowl of dip and corn chips in between our beers.

My eyes slid to the side and I saw a table of three women. All three staring at us openly. Or more to the point, staring at Hank. Their faces showed identical expressions of sweltering hot lust to the point of my openly carnal.

I yanked my hand away from Hank's and reached for a chip. I collected myself. I heard Hank's soft chuckle before he took a pull on his beer.

Fucking Hank.

My phone rang again.

at she's I grabbed it as I dipped in the chip and flipped it open. "Hello?"

Danger "Hey, girl," Ally said. "Where are you?"

I'll go "I'm at Reiver's with Hank," I replied.

"Excellent! We were all going out to get some food, too late for you. How about Annette and Jason?"

“I’m sure they’d like to go,” then I gave her Annette’s number.

“Cool. I’ll call,” she told me. “Listen, tell Hank not to worry. I know he’s got to work tonight. Tell him Carl is going to be there and so is Jason. He’s got enough stun guns to go around and Daisy’s bringing a bodyguard.”

My body went still.

“Stun guns?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she answered, as if they were accessories akin to a handbag.

“Bodyguard?” I stayed on target.

She laughed. “Just saying, you’re covered. See you at eight thirty something warm and gym shoes. Gotta be prepared to run. Later.”

“Run?” I said into the dead phone.

I sat there a second then flipped the phone shut and slid it on the bar. Hank was watching me.

I put the loaded chip into my mouth. I chewed. My eyes widened. I think I had a mini-culinary-orgasm.

After I swallowed, I breathed, “This stuff is *great*.” Then I did another chip.

Hank’s hand caught my wrist with the chip halfway to my mouth all the way open to receive the chip. My eyes moved to him.

“Stun guns? Bodyguards?” he asked.

I closed my mouth and told him what Ally told me.

He let go of my wrist and sat back. His elbow went to the bar. His hand went to take a swipe at his forehead.

“Christ,” he muttered.

ow he’s I ate my chip and ignored him. Then I ate another one.

We’ve He looked at me. “You wouldn’t feel like going back to Sweet Ag
, Roxie for a while, going to the station with me tonight, hanging out
work?”

That sounded about as fun as sitting in the control room. I wasn’t a
ag or a sure about this haunted house business, but I wasn’t going to ha
watching my nails grow at the station while Hank worked.

I shook my head.

7. Wear “Fuck,” he said.

“We need to go back to your place,” I told him. “I have to change
Which reminds me, I need to call Vance.”

ir. Hank did a slow blink. “Why do you need to call Vance?”

“He bought me some clothes and some Keds. Ally mentioned I
d and I wear gym shoes and the only ones I own are the ones Vance bought
need to pay him back.”

opped in “I’ll pay him back,” Hank answered immediately.

I dipped another chip. “No, I’ll pay him back. Do you hav
ith, my programmed into your phone?” I put the chip into my mouth and held
hand for his phone.

“You aren’t callin’ Vance,” he said, taking his own chip.

“Why not?”

and his He chewed and swallowed. “Because you aren’t.”

I stared at him, thinking I was beginning to get angry. “Why not?”

“Because I don’t like the idea of you talkin’ to Vance.”

Okay, I was definitely beginning to get angry.

“Why not?” I repeated.

“Vance is a player and he’s playin’ you.”

It was my turn to blink.

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“He is.”

“He is not.”

“For Christ’s sake, Roxie,” he said, and I could tell he was beginning to get angry too.

“Don’t ‘for Christ’s sake’ me, Hank Nightingale. Vance is not me.”

“What was happening at Lincoln’s then?”

“Lincoln’s?”

“When he was holdin’ your hand.”

Oh.

That.

“We were having a moment.”

Hank’s control slipped and his eyes went hard.

I watched, scared and fascinated at the same time.

“And when he was touchin’ your ear?” he asked.

Mm, there was that too.

“We were having *another* moment,” I answered.

Hank's control slipped more and his entire face went hard. He looked at the bartender as he slid off the barstool.

"Watch this," he ordered the bartender, motioning with his head toward the stuff on the bar. My purse and phone were sitting there as was our food.

The bartender looked at the gun and badge on Hank's belt and then at me. Hank grabbed my hand and pulled me off the barstool.

"Hey!" I snapped, but he dragged me out, around the corner and down the side of the building. All the while I tried to pull free. All the while I failed.

He pushed me up against the side of the building and I saw I was beginning to panic about Hank's control slipping. One look at him and I realized Hank's control was *gone*.

Any smart girl would have kept her mouth shut. I was not a smart girl. It was an established fact, especially recently, that I was an idiot.

"I cannot believe you just dragged me out of the restaurant," I hissed.

Hank got close. "Remember when I told you that you bein' my girl meant I protected you and kept you safe?"

"Yes," I was still hissing.

"Well, this time that comes in the form of me tellin' you what to do and what you're *not* gonna do is talk to, or see, Vance again."

Holy Mary, Mother of God.

I was no longer beginning to get angry. I was pissed the hell off.

"You *did not* just say that to me."

"I sure the fuck did."

"Take it back!" My voice was rising.

oked to He got closer. One of his hands was at the bricks at the side of m
the other one was at his hip. His chest was nearly against mine and h
l to our was tilted to look down at me.

d. “Vance means something to me,” I told him.

noded. Um...not the right thing to say.

“You barely know him,” he said.

own the “I barely know you,” I retorted angrily.

iled. Strike two. *Definitely* not the right thing to say.

is wrong “I’ve had my cock inside you. I’d say you know me a fuck of a lo
control than you know Vance.”

At that nasty comment, I put my hands to his abs and pushed ha
t girl. It body jerked but moved back into my space instantly.

ed. “Don’t be coarse,” I clipped.

woman “Roxanne—”

“He rescued me from the sink! He took me to the hospital! He
clothes when I had to get rid of the ones I was wearing because I c
bear to keep them on a second longer. He got me a shower because I
do, and had one in *days*.”

“Roxanne—”

“No, Hank—”

“Roxanne, be quiet.”

“No!”

His hand went from his hip to cup my jaw and his face dipped so
was all I could see.

y head, “Don’t you think I wanted to be the one to rescue you from that :
is headsink?” he growled, his voice low and dangerous.

My stomach clenched as I realized what had brought on his anger.

I stared at him and finally kept my mouth shut.

“Do you have any fucking *clue* how hard it was to wait for Vance
in witness reports, every fuckin’ report worse than the one before
runnin’ from a bathroom at a gas station, bloody, screamin’ and fig
get away. Tied to a steering wheel. Eatin’ fuckin’ chips with your
bound. *Christ!*”

it better

The last word was an explosion. I winced and jerked as if it
physical impact on my body.

ird. His

He pulled back and took his hand away from my face but I grabbe
tugged on it.

“Hank, listen to me.”

He was looking at the wall over my shoulder, trying to regain
got me
When I said his name, his eyes moved to lock on mine and I felt a shi
ouldn’t
through me at the anger still there.

hadn’t

I went on, “After he found me, I asked Vance to take me b
Chicago.”

At that, Hank’s eyes flared.

I shook my head and continued, “He wouldn’t do it. He said he w
do it because he respected you and you’d sent him after me. He
wouldn’t do it because he didn’t want to make you show him how
close itreact if he didn’t bring me back to you.”

I watched him work to get control, a muscle moved in his jaw.

fucking while, he kept his beautiful eyes on me.

I felt the burning in my nostrils and took a deep breath to keep the bay.

When I saw he had control, I whispered, "I'm glad it wasn't you to call found me. I couldn't have...I wouldn't have been able to live with it if you saw me that way."

At that, his arms slid around me.

"Fuck, Roxie," he said over my head.

I put my arms around him and sucked back more tears.

I hated it. I hated it with everything I was, but I was so right. The business was going to be between Hank and me forever. I felt anger through my body, and if Billy had walked up just then I would have his head off.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't fucking fair. I hated people who whined about what wasn't fair, but if anything wasn't fair, this sure the hell wasn't.

A fair life would have brought Hank to me without anything between us.

I took a broken breath, the tears still threatening. I closed my eyes and pressed my cheek against Hank's shoulder and prayed. I prayed for it to be over soon so I could go, so I could pick up the pieces of my life.

I prayed for Hank too, so he could move on and find someone who he deserved, someone strong and smart and good. Someone he could talk to about his day. Someone who made him grin. Someone who liked his hair. Someone who put mulberry-scented candles in his house. Someone who had powdered sugar in the cupboard and cream cheese in the fridge so she could make him better French toast than I'd made, the special kind with

sweetened cream cheese spread in the middle.

tears at Someone who didn't get shot at.

Someone who didn't get kidnapped.

ou who Someone who didn't make him put his fist through a wall.

t if you Someone who hadn't spent nearly seven years of their life sleeping
criminal.

Someone better than me.

Hank pulled slightly away but kept his arms around me.

I looked up at him, pushed my prayers deep down where he could
is Billy and I smiled at him.

r shoot "Can I call Vance now?" I asked.

ripped "I'm payin' him back," Hank answered.

d about I sighed.

"Stubborn," I grumbled, giving in.

en us. A hint of a smile came into his eyes and he rested his forehead
y eyes, mine.

is all to "Sunshine?" he called.

"Yeah?"

one he "Whatever I saw you thinkin' just now..."

talk to Shit.

his dog. I hadn't hidden it fast enough.

who had I held my breath.

e could "Get it out of your fuckin' head."

with the "Hank."

“Promise me.”

“Hank!”

“Roxanne,” he used his authoritative voice.

“So. What? Now you’re gonna tell me what to think?” I asked, with my head back and taking my hands from around him and putting them on my hips.

He shook his head.

“You just said—” I started.

“Okay, think whatever you want.”

“Well, thank you,” I said, uppity.

He grinned.

His mouth came to mine. “But consider yourself warned. You wander down that path again, I’ll be forced to turn it to other things.”

Before I could respond, he showed me what he meant.

He kissed me, deep.

My brains scrambled, and then I wasn’t thinking anything at all.

“Promise me.”

“Hank!”

“Roxanne,” he used his authoritative voice.

“So. What? Now you’re gonna tell me what to think?” I asked, pulling my head back and taking my hands from around him and putting them on my hips.

He shook his head.

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SEVENTEEN



“FRIGHTMARE”

Hank took me to his place and I changed my shoes. Then I rooted through his drawers and pulled out a University of Colorado sweatshirt I switched out of my lush cardigan into the sweatshirt.

“I’m confiscating this,” I told him when I walked into the kitchen.

He was leaning, hips against the counter, writing notes on a handheld pad that was sitting on the counter to his right. He looked at me, and his eyes dropped to the sweatshirt, which was so big it was almost a dress.

Then they got lazy.

“Come here,” he said low.

“No, we have to go. I’m gonna be late.”

“Come here,” he repeated.

“No! You have to get to work.”

“You can come here or...” he started.

I knew where this was going.

“Oh, all right,” I gave in.

I went to him.

He kissed me dizzy.

It got heated, there was some groping and we went to Ally's late.



WE WALKED into Ally's and nearly everyone was there but Daisy.

"Yo, bitch!" Annette yelled at me. "Yo, dude!" she yelled at Hank.

Hank smiled at her.

She gawked at him, momentarily stunned by his smile, then turned and nodded her head slowly.

through "Nice," she drawled.

t and I I rolled my eyes.

"Like the sweatshirt," Ally remarked, leaning back and taking me she introduced me to her boyfriend, Carl. He was good-looking, tall, ed on a blue-eyed and grinning at Hank. A knowing grin that made me feel hen his bothered, but weirdly in a good way.

"We need to talk," Hank said to him.

"I figured that," Carl said back.

Hank leaned down and wrapped an arm around my waist side looked up at him and he gave me a light kiss.

"Have fun," he said against my mouth.

Then he and Carl walked out the front door.

"What's that all about?" I asked, watching the closed door as if I ray vision and could see through it.

"That's Hank telling Carl he'll make him into an instant girl if a happens to you," Ally explained.

"Good God," I murmured.

“Don’t worry. Nothing’s gonna happen to you,” Indy said.

The door opened and Daisy arrived. Or, I should say Daisy *arrived*

She was wearing a skintight, faded denim jumpsuit, the crotch to zipper unzipped to maximum cleavage potential, rhinestones adorn outer sides of her legs, up her hips, waist, sides, and down the inside sleeves. She was wearing matching platform, high-heeled, faded denim heavily encrusted with rhinestones. She had a pink chiffon scarf tied her neck and her platinum blonde hair was teased out to peak volume.

“Yo, bitch!” Annette yelled, completely oblivious to the fact that she looked like she was about to step onstage in Vegas.

“Yo, sugar,” Daisy replied.

“I thought I told you to wear gym shoes,” Ally said, peeved that the Haunted House instructions were not carried out to the letter.

“I don’t *do* gym shoes, *comprende?*” Daisy told her, giving her a look.

Yowza.

“It’s your funeral,” Ally shot back, totally unaffected by the squint.

Holy cow.

Daisy’s eyes came to me. “Honey bunches of oats,” she said, “you’re out is outside having an *extreme* conversation with her man.” A toss of her head indicated Ally.

“I know,” I told her.

She nodded and looked around. “All right then, who brought the guns?”

Shit.



! CARL, Ally and Indy rode in Carl's Pathfinder.

bosom If you could believe this, Annette, Jason, Jet, Daisy and I followed
ing the back of Daisy's limousine. Daisy's bodyguard drove.

e of the "I fucking *love* Denver," Annette said, staring out the window
n boots sprawling in the luxurious space, completely at home, as if she rode
aroundback of limousines every day.

"You gotta stay until Thursday, sugar, come to my do. I'm having
t Daisysoiree," Daisy invited.

"We...are...fucking...*there*," Annette accepted.

Jason looked at me and closed his eyes in good-natured frustration
hat herhe opened them I was smiling at him. We'd shared these looks a lot of
years.

squinty Then I turned to Jet. "What's Smithie's?"

"Pardon?" she asked.

"Smithie's. I overheard you say when you came into Fortnum's that
y look. met you that you worked there."

She grinned at me. "Well, officially, I don't work there anymore."

ur man "You let Eddie win," I guessed.

er head "Eddie wins a lot," she confirmed.

I found this sobering information, considering the fact that I
Eddie was a lot like Hank.

he stun "What is it?" I asked.

"A strip club. I was a cocktail waitress there."

“Cool!” Annette cried.

Jet smiled full out to Annette and we all sat in the limo dazzled in the moment by her smile.

“My sister is a stripper there,” Jet went on. “She debuts tomorrow and you can all come if you want. I can get you VIP passes.”

“Sugar! That would be hot!” Daisy screeched with excitement the glance sweeping around all of us. “Her sister is Lottie Mac.”

“Queen of the Corvette Calendar?” Jason asked, clearly intrigued.

“Fuckin’ A,” Daisy replied.

I stared around them. It was like they were talking in a different language.

“You want to come?” Jet asked me.

“Love to,” I answered.

She grabbed my hand, squeezed and let go. Through the hand squeeze I felt something pass between her and me. The hand squeeze wasn’t about going to watch her sister strip. It was her giving me strength. I was remembering the day I that just over a week ago she’d been through a trauma much like mine almost been raped and her dad was still in the hospital. She knew my many different ways. Hers was nearly as fresh.

“I see you took my advice about Hank,” Daisy said, taking me out of my thoughts.

I looked to her. “No, I’m leaving as soon as they find Billy and all this is over.”

The limo went deathly quiet.

“Come again?” Daisy asked into the silence.

I sighed and looked out the window. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try us,” Jason prompted softly.

I sighed again, this time deeper and louder. I explained my deserves-better-than-me philosophy. After I stopped talking there was a night silence.

“Come again?” Daisy repeated.

“I knew you wouldn’t understand,” I returned.

“I understand,” Jet said.

I looked to her.

“Hank doesn’t see shades of gray,” she continued.

I blinked at her. “What?” I asked.

“You think he doesn’t see shades of gray. You think he sees black and white. Good and bad. Crime and justice. He doesn’t see shades of gray. You’re gray.”

I swallowed. That was so *it*.

“Jet, sugar bunch, I don’t think Roxie’s gray,” Daisy put in gently.

“She’s gray. And you’re gray too,” Jet replied, just as gently.

Daisy was silent because Daisy was definitely gray.

I felt my nostrils start to burn, bit my lip and looked out the window. I was trying hard, but I felt tears leak out the sides of my eyes.

“Roxie, you’re about as fucking gray as the fucking sun. I’m sorry, but I’ve known Roxie for years and she isn’t fucking gray,” Annette declared.

“I’m not saying gray is bad or that Roxie’s gray. Just that I understand how she’s feeling and that she *thinks* Hank’ll *think* she’s gray.”

“She isn’t gray,” Annette repeated.

“I know that, but she thinks Hank’ll think she is,” Jet returned.

Hank- “She isn’t fuckin’ gray.” Annette was getting heated.

is more “I know that!” Jet was getting heated right back.

“I’m going to have a talk with Hank,” Jason cut in, and I could tell
tone he meant to do it, and soon.

“Don’t you dare,” I said to Jason, my head swiveling to him.

“Are you crying, sugar bunch?” Daisy asked.

I shook my head even though I was.

“Oh God, I’m sorry. I just wanted you to know I understood.” Jet grabbed
my hand again.

ick and I wiped away my tears with my other hand. “It’s okay. I know you
f gray.mean anything by it.”

“Roxie, look at me,” Jet urged.

I turned to her and tried to give her a smile, but it was weak.

“It’s okay,” I repeated.

“I’m not very pretty,” she said suddenly.

I blinked at her. “Excuse me?” I asked.

indow. I “At least, that’s what I thought,” she carried on like I hadn’t
anything.

ry, Jet, How could she think that? She was flat out pretty.

declared. “Don’t you look in the mirror?” I asked, not meaning to be a bit
erstand seriously.

“I thought once Eddie saved me he’d lose interest in me because
good-looking and I’m...not.”

“You’re loopy,” Annette told her.

I kept staring at her and her hand squeezed mine.

“Eddie saved me a while ago,” she whispered.

I by his I felt my throat close.

“Jet...” My voice was barely audible.

“Hank sees gray. You may think he doesn’t, he may act like he c
he may even say he doesn’t. But he does. I promise.” Her voice was
low.

grabbed “I’m still leaving,” I said.

She nodded. “I understand that too.”

I didn’t “Thank you.”

“Though, you aren’t leaving,” she said.

“I am,” I said back.

“You *think* you are, but you aren’t.”

“I am!” I said, kind of loud.

She just shook her head.

I glanced between Jet and Daisy. They were both grinning at me.

i’t said “Denver people are nuts,” I told Annette and Jason.

“I know. Don’t cha love it?” Annette replied.



tch but WE WERE at the front of the line to the haunted trail, the doors to the
front of us.

he’s so Each side of the door held a flaming torch. A man wearing full
makeup and a big, hooded black cloak was standing in front of th

glaring at us completely “in character.”

It was dark, it was cold and I was already scared out of my mind.

We’d had troubles from the start.

First, the haunted house was out in the middle of nowhere, and it was dark. Only the haze of Denver lights could be seen in the distance.

loesn’t, This totally freaked me out.

just as Daisy’s limo caused a sensation when we pulled into the park. Then Daisy caused a sensation when she alighted from the limo. It was a thing to wear a skintight, rhinestone-encrusted jumpsuit with high-platform boots to a haunted house in the middle of the country. People They didn’t know if she was Dolly Parton, if she was a Dolly impersonator, or if she was some other important personage. Someone approached her and asked her for her autograph.

“Well, aren’t you sweet?” Daisy squealed on a tinkly-bell laugh. She signed the piece of paper and then, before handing it back, she kissed her frosty pink lipstick.

After that, we found out there were no weapons allowed. They confiscate not only the stun guns, but also the full-blown gun Carl was wearing on his belt.

When Carl flashed his badge (Carl was a police officer too), the man who seemed to be head of security got all policy on him. Carl got a headache on his face, took him aside and they had words.

trail in Carl came back and said the worst eight words in the English language for me at that moment, “We’re goin’ to the front of the line.”

I ghouled We walked in front of everyone to the front of the line.
e door,

Due to our *situation* they were giving us a wide berth. Before long, they were waiting longer between the party in front of us and keeping the party behind us well back.

That night Carl had explained my stun gun to me. I had it shoved in the back of my pants under Hank's sweatshirt. It didn't feel comfortable there, but I liked having it, even though I doubted I'd use it.

Indy, Ally, Daisy and Jet all carried one. They'd had only one exchange without a word Jason took it and gave Annette a look. She pouted for a second then pretended she didn't care.

"All right, huddle," Ally ordered.

Parton We all went into a huddle.

That even "Everyone got a partner?" she asked.

Indy linked her arm with mine.

She and I looked at her and then my eyes swung, panicked, to Carl.

He gave me a "don't worry" nod, but I didn't think he got it. I was worried that bad guys would shoot me. No one in their right mind would attack me here. There were hundreds of people all over the place and a very stringent security.

No, I was worried that Indy would go berserk on me.

I didn't have time to switch partners as Ally kept talking. "No, what, stay with your partner."

Oh shit.

Shit, shit, shit.

Ally continued, "We all stick together. Someone gets caught or caught by the hooded hangman or the crazy, bloody surgeon, we all go back together."

ting us save them. Never leave a man behind. Got me?"

ing the Oh shit!

Shit, shit, *shit!*

of my "Got me?" she shouted.

found I We all nodded.

tra, and "Repeat it," Ally ordered.

d for a We all muttered, "Never leave a man behind."

She nodded to us, "Good." Then she linked arms with Carl and said, "We're ready."

The doors creaked open and my heart started beating so hard I could feel it in my throat.

Annette and Jason were partners, and so were Daisy and Jet (with a bodyguard trailing them). Indy was with me. Ally was with Carl. We went in that order.

wasn't It was pretty cool. Scary, but cool. They'd obviously put a lot of thought into it. Great monsters with fantastic makeup, good props, excellent special effects, eerie, scary, dark, and the monsters popped out just in time to give us a thrill. It wasn't as bad as I thought. Indy and I were caught unawares a few of times and we screamed, scooted forward, then giggled our asses off.

matter We hit the open area with the hangman's section, and the character was swinging a noose in his hand like a lasso, cottoned on immediately and scaredy-cats in the bunch. He approached Indy and me and in a guttural voice whispered, "Ooo, I like these girlies."

turned, We both froze, standing stock-still and staring at him and then we screamed at the tops of our lungs. Carl and Ally saved us, pushing us forward.

in front of them, Ally laughing herself silly.

We left some haunted caves and entered an open area that was a cornfield.

“Oh shit,” I said, my heart starting to race again.

Indy had my arm in a vise-like hold and she was glancing around vigilant, trying to prepare for the next scare (a wasted effort—these knew what they were doing).

“What?” she asked.

“I don’t like cornfields.”

She stopped and stared at me.

“But you’re from Indiana,” she said.

Then, out of nowhere, the cornfields moved and Corn Husk Man entered out at us.

He swiped at us with hands made of dry, creepy husks.

We both jumped back in sync, shrieked like raving lunatics, and Indy took off running, *backwards*, dragging me with her. We forged through the cornfield, Carl and Ally, knocking Ally on her ass. Indy was yelling at the top of her lungs and I started laughing so hard, I couldn’t control it. Not only that, but Ally going down on her ass. I was bent over with it, running double time, trying at the same time to pull Indy back.

A monster caught us on the retreat and came out growling. Indy stopped dead then screeched like mad women right in his face. I whirled around, our arms still locked and we went back the way we came.

We rocketed, still screaming, by Carl, who’d followed us then I slammed into Ally on the run and she went down.

her ass again.

I was giggling, looking behind, Indy dragging me forward and I s
breathlessly, “Sorry!”

We both skirted Corn Husk Man and ran flat out, giggling and scre
id, everto the end of the corn maze.

We stopped, doubled over trying to catch our breath, holding on
other but still laughing. My ribs ached, just a little bit, but I didn’t
hadn’t laughed that hard in years and I didn’t remember the last time
that much fun. We were in an open field. The front of our party w
gone. Ally and Carl would catch up, I was certain.

It couldn’t have been a second, or maybe two, later before we he
chainsaw.

And I could say that there was nothing more terrifying, fake haunt
or no, than being in an open field, in the dark, in the middle of nowh
hearing the sound of a chainsaw.

Indy and I looked at each other, and in unison, our heads moved
looked over our shoulders at the chainsaw man who was coming toward

“Run!” I shouted.

At that point, it was every woman for herself.

Indy and I pushed off each other. She went to one side, I went
other. I was watching her when I felt my feet hit something soft. The e
the field were made out of foam rubber. I bounced off it and fell to my
jarring my ribs, my breath still gone, but nevertheless I was twittering
idiot. I got up and ran hell bent toward Indy.

She’d made it a lot further, but then a monster jumped in front of h
flat on

went sideways to avoid him, hit another patch of rubber and bounced
shouted went down rolling straight into the monster.

He toppled over her and it looked like they started wrestling. In
aming, out of control screaming and struggling, half terrified, half laughing
monster was hindered by a big costume that was a lot of shredded n
to each They swiftly got all tangled up, a flurry of arms, legs and costume.

care. I I stopped dead and bent over laughing, holding my stomach, gigg
I'd had hard I was pretty certain I was going to pee my pants. I should have
as long but I couldn't. It was simply too damned funny watching Indy a
monster rolling around in the dirt like that.

ard the Then I was tackled. I went down hard.

I was stunned and winded. The fall jarred my ribs and it hurt. Th
ted trail around me were strong and not messing around. I couldn't imag
ere and monsters were allowed to touch you, much less tackle you. Maybe w
in trouble for running around like crazy people. Maybe we were
and we ejected.

rd us. I struggled, turned and stilled at what I saw.

Billy had me.

Shit!

t to the I screamed, not a giggly scream, a real one and it pierced the night
dges of with genuine terror.

y knees "Shut the fuck up," he ordered, got up, yanking me with him.

like an No way.

No fucking way.

ier. She This wasn't going to happen to me again.

l off it, And anyway, he'd screwed my chances with Hank. I *wanted* Hank
was the best thing that had ever happened to me in my whole, stinking

dy was Fuck Billy.

ig. The I reared back and punched him in the face.

aterial. It hurt my hand, like a lot, but when he staggered back, I didn't hes

gling so I turned and ran.

helped Indy had come untangled with the monster, but he was rolling arou
and the tied up in his costume. Indy was on her hands and knees, looking up
face pale. She'd heard my scream.

She looked back toward where Billy was. I skidded to a halt next to

ie arms "Billy!" I yelled, hauling her up. "Let's go!"

ine the We ran together, holding hands. We got around a corner, anothe
re were into another scene with some hay bales.

e being Billy caught up with us and did another flying tackle. We all wen
and rolled around in bales, both Indy and I fighting, kicking, scratching

"Hey! What're you doing?" A monster came up and yanked Billy
us.

Billy whirled around and nailed him in the nose.

it filled "Hey!" the monster shouted again, but it was muffled as his han
to his nose.

Indy didn't wait. She tugged me along and I heard a scuffle behin
the monster kept on Billy.

We ran through more trail, straight by monsters, and entered a
Billy caught up with us there. He pulled Indy away from me, threw he
and she went flying. He picked me up, starting up some dark stai

κ. Hank carrying me, half pushing me.

life. When we were halfway up, Indy attacked him from behind. He took a
blow of her body hitting him full force, his body jerking forward. He came
me and I fell on the stairs, my lower back crashing against the edge of
my elbows slamming into a stairwell.
situate.

Billy spun around and caught Indy with his arm. She fell back
watched her tumble down.

and still I got up, clawing at Billy to get around him to Indy.
at me, “No!” I shouted.

o her. He kept pushing me up the stairs.

We entered a scene at the top with strobe lights, a surgical table a
blood everywhere, fake severed hands and legs dangling from the ceiling
er one, chains and a man in a bloody lab coat. He came at us to scare us, but
when I planted my feet and rushed Billy, catching him in the belly with
it down shoulder and sending him sprawling back against a wall. I pulled back
3. started pummeling him.

7 off of “You...” I hit him in the face. “Are...” I hit him with my other
“Not...” I hit him again, this time in the body. “Gonna...” I hit him
“Hurt...” I punched him in the jaw. “*My friends!*”

ls went I was wild. Billy was cowering to try and protect himself from my
blows.

id us as The bloody surgeon yanked me off him.

“What the heck...?” he started to say but didn’t finish.

house. Carl came barreling up the stairs at the same time the head of surgeon
er aside came into the room through the exit.
rs, half

Billy saw them and pushed off the wall. He tore through the door, took the surgeon and me and took off, not back to the stairs, not through the door, but he threw himself out a window.

The bloody surgeon ran to the window. Carl and the security guy followed. I ran to the door. I ran to Indy.

She was halfway up the stairs. Ally was with her.

“Are you okay?” I asked when I got to her.

“Fine,” Indy replied.

I stopped, realizing my body was in full tremble and I was struggling to catch my breath.

“Are you okay?” I asked again, staring at her.

She took me into her arms. “Honey, I’m fine.”

I kept trembling.

“You sure you’re okay?” I asked again, tears in my voice, tears in my eyes, tears crawling up my throat.

Ally’s arms came around us both.

“I’m fine, perfectly fine,” Indy assured me.

I kept trembling.

“Shh, girl. You’re safe,” Ally whispered.

The lights came on and we stood there. We heard footsteps and that others were there. Annette joined the huddle then I felt Jet burrow in. I know how we did it, but we managed to do a group hug on the narrow hallway.

All except Daisy and Jason.

“God fucking *dammit*.” I heard Jason yell.

bloody “What the fuck good are you?” Daisy shouted at her bodyguard.

doorway I ignored them and held on to my friends, crying and trembling.



I ran to HANK OPENED the door to his house one-handed, his other one held mi

Shamus came at us, but before he could do his doggie welcome
commanded, “Stay.”

Shamus skidded to a halt and sat, his doggie head swinging in co
back and forth between the two humans.

gling to Hank pulled me inside, locked the door and walked me into the l
Only then did he drop my hand.

He went to the light switch. I went to the freezer.

I grabbed a towel, put ice in it then put it on my hand.

After he turned on the light, Hank shrugged off his jacket and t
burning over a dining room chair, gave Shamus a head scratch and walked to
stopped close, his hand came up and he pulled something from my
came back down and there was a piece of straw between his fingers.

“Wrestling in the hay bales,” I said, staring at the piece of straw.

When I looked to Hank, his mouth was tight.

Billy escaped. It wasn’t hard. It was pandemonium, people ever
milling about and not knowing what was going on as the lights had co
hen the He’d easily slipped away.

I didn’t
stairs. They closed early and the cops came. I talked to the people who
haunted house, including the guy who was head of security. Carl had
told them my story and they were kind and understanding. It was c
closing anyway, they promised me, no harm done. They seemed

worried about me than anything. The monster who got hit in the neck only had it bloodied, not broken.

Malcolm and Detective Marker came together and got there close using a Kojak light.

Malcolm walked right up to me, kissed the side of my head, put his arms around my waist and didn't let go. I was leaning into him when Hank came.

Hank came up to us, interrupting our conversation. He pulled me from his father, turned me into his arms and held me, tight.

"How're your ribs?" he asked.

I nodded that they were okay, but didn't answer verbally. I was lost in his arms, taking what I could, wrapping my own around him.

The rest of the interview went on with Hank's arms around me, my cheek resting against his shoulder.

Lee and Eddie showed simultaneously. There were a lot of meaningful glances with glittering angry eyes between the men.

Indy went home with Lee, Jet with Eddie, and Ally went back with me. He gave Indy, Jet and Ally hugs before they went.

Daisy took Annette and Jason back. Hank and I walked them to the car. People were standing around it, staring at Daisy like she was an unknown rock star, likely mistakenly thinking this fuss and muss was about her. I gave out more hugs and they left. Daisy and Jason still looked pissed. Jason looked worried.

Hank put me in his 4Runner and we drove home without a word exchanged between us, both of us lost in our thoughts.

There, in his kitchen, I looked at Hank.

ose had “He could have hurt Indy,” I said.
“Yeah, but he didn’t,” Hank replied.
quickly, “He could have.”
“He didn’t.”
his arm “Hank—”
arrived. “Let me tell you something about Indy.”
e away I closed my eyes and looked away.
“Look at me, Sunshine.”
st in his I opened them and looked back.
“You said you’d die, you’d go with him, before you let anyone g
and my Remember that?” Hank asked.
I nodded.
ningful “There’s no way in hell India Savage would let that happen.”
“I barely know her,” I whispered.
i Carl. I “You’re wrong about that.” His arms slid around me. “You kn
because she’s just like you,” he said.
ie limo. That was one of the nicest things anyone had ever said to me.
lknown Tears filled my eyes.
. I gave “Whisky.” My voice broke on his name and I shoved my face
Annette chest. I dropped the ice on the floor and clutched onto his sweater a
side of my face.
a word Then it hit me and it hit me hard. I pushed away, out of his ar
stomped my foot.
“*That fucking asshole!*” I screamed.

Shamus woofed.

My eyes turned to the dog. He was standing at the edge of the counter, his body tense, staring at me.

“Sorry, Shamus,” I said.

At his name, his tail started wagging and he came and pressed against me. I leaned down to give him a body rub and picked up the ice. I took the ice underhand into the sink and kept rubbing Shamus’s body but looked at Hank.

“I’m going to fucking *kill* that motherfucker,” I announced.

Hank stared down at me.

get hurt.

“He pushed Indy down the stairs,” I continued.

“Roxie, calm down.”

“I’m not going to fucking calm down. I’m going to hunt that motherfucker down and murder him.”

“Oh fuck,” Hank rocked back on his heels, his eyes went to the ceiling, his hands going to his hips.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothin’.”

“What?” I asked louder.

! in his
it either

His eyes came back to me. “You aren’t huntin’ anyone down.”

“Well...no,” I said, staring at him like he was crazy. “I was just mad that because I’m mad as hell. I wouldn’t begin to know how to hunt that motherfucker down.”

“Let me handle it,” he said.

“Okay.”

abinets, “Seriously.”

I straightened from the Shamus Body Rub and Shamus sat on my
said okay.”

nst me. “Indy comes to you with any bright ideas, you say I’m handling it,
ossed itordered.

d up at “Okay,” I replied.

“Jet, Daisy, my fuckin’ sister, any of them come to you with
schemes, you tell them I’m handling it.”

“Okay,” I repeated, my brows drawing together, thinking mayl
gone a little ’round the bend. “Whisky, are you all right?”

“I know how those women work. You want to get even with
bastardyou’re angry, and they’ll talk you into it.”

“Hank, I said I wasn’t going to—”

ceiling, “It won’t even seem that way. They’ll make it seem like it’s *your* i

“Whisky.”

“Tex either.”

Good God.

“Hank, I said *oh...kay*.”

“Promise me.”

saying Jeez!

mt him “Hank!”

“Just do it, Sunshine.”

I sighed. He *had* gone ’round the bend.

“Okay, I promise.”

He stared at me a beat then took in a breath. Then his fingers slid i feet. “I hair on either side of my head and he did a little shake. Pieces of straw out. Not a lot, four or five, and I watched them float down.

” Hank “I’m sorry,” I whispered as I watched the straw settle on his tiled f

He used his hands on my head to tilt it up to face him. “I don’t hear you say you’re sorry again.”

1 grand He didn’t say this nice or sweet. He said it angry.

I swallowed and stared.

oe he’d Then I said uncertainly, “Hank?”

His hands went to the sides of my neck. “You aren’t the cause Flynn,Flynn is. Got me?”

I nodded.

“I’m not angry at you. I’m just angry,” he explained.

dea.” “Okay,” I said, for like the billionth time in the last five minutes.

He moved on to another subject and I had to admit, I was re “How’s your hand?”

“It hurts like a mother,” I told him.

I watched as his anger slid away and he smiled at me. I smiled ba shared a moment of happiness at the thought of me getting my ow even a little bit, with Billy. His arms came around me and he pullec him, his hands drifting down my back, fitting my body to his.

Shamus backed out from between us and sauntered to his doggie the TV room. He was a smart dog, quickly learning the drill betwee and me.

“How’s everything else?” Hank asked, his voice had changed, so into my slightly husky.

w came I didn’t have to ask what he meant. His hands and tone were doing talking.

loor. I tilted my head back to look at him and slid my arms around his want to “I’m fine.”

“You owe me,” he said.

I blinked at him then remembered.

“Oh. Yeah.”

He gave me a light kiss. “Let’s get you a hot shower, some ibuprofen of this, we’ll go to bed.”

I nodded.

“Then you can erase my day,” he told me, turning and tucking me side, his arm around my shoulders. We started walking to the bedroom

“Maybe you should erase my night,” I suggested.

believed. “No, I’m thinkin’ you should erase my day.”

“My night was worse than your day,” I said.

“I had a full shitty day. You just had a half a shitty night.”

ck. We This was true.

n back, “Okay, I’ll erase your day,” I gave in.

l me to He hit the lights as we walked out of the kitchen.

bed in

n Hank

“How’s everything else?” Hank asked, his voice had changed, sounding slightly husky.

I didn’t have to ask what he meant. His hands and tone were doing the talking.

I tilted my head back to look at him and slid my arms around his waist. “I’m fine.”

“You owe me,” he said.

I blinked at him then remembered.

“Oh. Yeah.”

He gave me a light kiss. “Let’s get you a hot shower, some ibuprofen and we’ll go to bed.”

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“Then you can erase my day,” he told me, turning and tucking me into his side, his arm around my shoulders. We started walking to the bedroom.

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“No, I’m thinkin’ you should erase my day.”

“My night was worse than your day,” I said.

“I had a full shitty day. You just had a half a shitty night.”

This was true.

“Okay, I’ll erase your day,” I gave in.

He hit the lights as we walked out of the kitchen.



TANGERINE AND CHOCOLATE WEDDING

I was lying on my belly, my arms around a pillow, fast asleep, when the sheet slid down my back—low, lower, lowest. It came to rest on top of my behind.

I twisted my head around sleepily and looked at Hank’s shadow on the wall. It was dark.

“Whisky?” I called, still groggy.

“Quiet, sweetheart. I want to check something.”

Then the light went on.

I blinked at him. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, wearing a pair of jeans and nothing else. His eyes were on my back.

“That’s a new one,” he muttered to my back.

I looked over my shoulder. I couldn’t see much of anything.

“What is it?” I asked.

His hand came out and his finger traced something that ran across my lower back. “You were movin’ like you were tender last night. Now you’re why. The mark hadn’t formed then, but now you’ve got another bruise.”

“Oh.” I turned around, snuggled back into the pillow and ex-

“Billy dropped me when Indy jumped him on the stairs. I landed funny

I closed my eyes, thinking that was that and deciding I’d catch a b
shuteye.

Hank had different thoughts.

He tagged me at the waist, gently moved me around and then
across the bed, pulling me upright. I was sitting, facing him, the side
hip against his.

I brought the sheet with me and I pulled it up to cover my breasts.

in I felt
t at the

“What?” I asked when I looked at him.

7 in the

“Don’t get used to this shit. This isn’t your life. After this is over,
back to normal,” he replied.

I watched him and felt my gut twist. It was time to begin to sh
what he would not be missing when I went away.

“Hank,” I said quietly. “I don’t have a ‘normal.’ I’ve been with B
seven years.”

pair of

I thought he’d look at me in disgust, horror, or at the very least,
Instead he wrapped his hand around the back of my head, tipped it do
kissed my forehead. Then he let go and looked me in the eyes.

“Then I’ll show you normal.”

I stopped breathing.

Hank didn’t notice. He got up and went to his dresser.

oss my
I know
”

“Hate to tell you this, Sunshine, but I can’t leave you home so
gonna have to walk Shamus with me. Get dressed, we gotta get thi

plained,

One of the cases I’m working is heatin’ up and I need to get to the stati

Then he sauntered into the bathroom like he hadn’t just rocked my

7.” I stared after him.

it more I still wasn't breathing.

“You have your choice today,” Hank called from the bathroom.
“Fortnum's or Lee's offices. Both are safe, but you can't leave either.”

slid me Then I heard an electric shaver.

of my I let go of my breath.

Shamus ambled over, sat down beside the bed and stared at me, lolling and looking like he was smiling. I grabbed his head, kissed the top of his head and gave him a head rub. He leaned up and licked my cheek.

you go Hank walked out of the bathroom, still shaving, and looked at me.
Shamus.

ow him “Sunshine,” he said, his voice low with warning, telling me to get up.
on.

illy for “All right, all right. I'll get dressed.” I sounded uppity.

I'd think about his complete non-reaction to my dire admission of shock. I had a decision to make. Crazy Fortnum's and what might happen there if Fortnum and Lee's boys were watching, or Lee's offices, meaning Dastardly Davy's boring room and Diablo, better known as eight hours of my life sucked up.

I pulled the sheet with me when I got up and wrapped it around my waist like a voluminous toga. Then I stomped, with a fair bit of attitude (just to point, even though there was no real point to be made) out of the room and into the other bathroom.

you're Shamus followed me.
s done.

ion.” What I didn't know was, so did Hank's eyes.

world. And another thing I didn't know.

He was smiling.



hroom. I PICKED Fortnum's and I regretted it the minute I walked through the c

"Get over here!" Tex boomed at me.

"Shit," I muttered.

Hank's hand slid around my waist and his fingers gripped
tongue reassuringly.

the top of "What?" I snapped at Uncle Tex.

"You know what. People are shootin' at you. A week ago, you
me and kidnapped! What's goin' on in that fuckin' head of yours?" Tex shouted

There were over a dozen people in line, waiting for coffee or sittin'
a move couches and chairs. Duke was behind the espresso counter, and so was
Jane was at the book counter.

They all started to stare.

later. I "It wasn't my fault!" I returned.

the while "Not your...not your fuckin'..." Tex spluttered. "You have no b
wn, the goin' to a goddamned haunted house when you got lunatics chasing y
l away. callin' your mother!"

me in a My body went still.

make a Everyone's eyes turned to me.

n to the "Don't you dare call my mother!" I yelled.

Everyone's eyes went to Tex.

"I'm callin' Trish. No!" Tex's voice blasted across the room
opened my mouth to speak. "Shut your pie hole. I don't wanna hear it.

There was a collective gasp and everyone's gaze came to me.

My eyes narrowed and I leaned forward. Hank's fingers were biting my waist now, not for assurance but to keep me from launching myself at Uncle Tex.

"You did not just tell me to shut my pie hole!" I shouted.

The eye swivel went to Tex.

"You heard me right, girl," Tex boomed.

I turned to Hank.

"Take me to Lee's office," I demanded.

"Don't you do that, Nightingale. I want her here so I can keep an eye on her," Tex bellowed.

Hank was grinning.

"I'm thinkin' I don't have to worry about Tex giving you any ideas," he remarked.

I frowned at him.

He gave my still-frowning mouth a light kiss then started to leave.

"Don't expect me to erase your day tonight!" I shouted at his back.

He turned at the door and winked at me then he was gone.

I turned to the woman nearest me and said, exasperation dripping from my voice. "Men!"

She was staring at me. "Are people really shooting at you?"

I looked at her. "Well...yeah," I admitted.

"Honey," was all she said on a shake of her head, that one word spilling volumes, then she turned back in line.



ing into ANNETTE, Jason and Daisy strolled in two hours later.

yself at I was sitting on a couch, nursing my second coffee. Uncle T experimenting on me. The first one was an almond mocha with cir sprinkled on the coffee grounds before brewing. This one was snicke with a hint of vanilla. Both were divine.

“That space across the street is phat,” Annette announced, th herself on the couch next to me. “We’ve put in an application. I’r jazzed.” She turned to Tex and yelled, “Americano, big man!”

“Gotcha!” Tex boomed back.

eye on He scowled at me, apparently not over it yet, and then started ban the espresso machine.

Daisy sat across from us while Jason went to the espresso counter.

y crazy “There’s some space for let down the street. I’m thinkin’ of st beauty parlor, like in *Steel Magnolias*, except not in a garage,” Daisy “I gotta find somethin’ to do with my time. I thought I’d do charity w I’m doin’ this fundraising party and the women on my committee sticks up their asses. They wouldn’t know fun if someone beat them c head with it, and believe me, I’ve thought about it.”

ig from I believed her. I also believed she might be moved to do it.

Jet came over and sat with us.

“That’s cool,” Annette said to Daisy after she smiled at Jet. “I’d do my hair.”

peaking Jet looked at me with wide, frightened eyes and gave a firm shake head that said clearly, “no, no, *no*.”

I had no time to react as Daisy started talking. “Oh sugar, are you sweet?” Then she gave a tinkly laugh.

The bell over the door went and our eyes turned to see who came in. Luke was standing there. He’d changed nuances of his overall look all black, his T-shirt skintight, except this time with long sleeves. Instead of just plain boots he had on black *motorcycle* boots, and instead of cargo pants he had on jeans.

As a fashion maven, I appreciated the subtlety that still managed to punch.

As a woman, I just appreciated him.

“Jumpin’ Jehosafats, I think I just creamed my pants,” I whispered, staring at Luke.

Luke’s eyes locked on me. He lifted his hand and crooked his finger. “I was wrong about before. Now, I’ve *definitely* creamed my pants.” Annette breathed.

I got up and walked to Luke.

He put a hand in the small of my back and propelled me into the back. We turned right, into the biography section, and stopped.

“Got plans tonight?” he asked.

I blinked at him. “I’m going to a strip club,” I answered.

His eyes flashed, momentarily showing his surprise.

Then he gave me one of his sexy half-grins.

My heart stopped beating for a second.

“Why?” I asked.

n't you "I'm your date," he replied.
My heart stopped beating for five seconds.

n. Then I breathed. "Excuse me?"

ok. Still "You're not on camera, you're with me," he said.
instead of "Excuse me?" I repeated.
o pants,
to pack "Hank called. His case is bustin' open. He's busy. I'm assigned to
I blinked, twice. "Excuse me?" I said yet again.
The grin came on full-fledged and he moved into my space.
"I'm your bodyguard."

Annette Holy cow.
"You don't leave Fortnum's unless you're with me," he said.

er. Holy fucking cow, cow, cow!

pants," I struggled for a second and then decided not to fight it. I would
anyway.

ooks. First off, Lord knew I needed a bodyguard. Second, Hank obviously
this up. Last, no way, *in hell* was I going head to head with Luke.

So, I said, "Okay."
"Outside this store, you don't do anything unless you can see me."
"Okay."
"You aren't anywhere unless I'm close enough for you to touch me."
I gulped at any thought of touching him.
"Okay," I said, but it sounded kind of strangled.
"We straight?" he asked.

I nodded.

“Roxie, listen to me,” Luke ordered.

I stared at him. If I listened any closer my ears would start bleeding.

“I know you’re Hank’s woman and I don’t give a fuck. I also know the stories of the two who came before you, Indy and Jet. You mess around with something stupid, put my ass on the line, you answer to me. Got that?”

I nodded again. I definitely got it.

“You don’t want to answer to me,” he warned.

I suspected he was right, but I had to ask, out of curiosity. “Would you...?” I cleared my throat, “answering to you entail...exactly?”

“You don’t wanna know,” he replied.

I nodded and decided I didn’t.

He got closer and his indigo eyes went funny.

“I’d never raise my hand to a woman,” he assured me.

I nodded again and let out the breath I was holding.

“Therefore, I’d have to get creative,” he finished.

Good God.

“I promise to be good,” I said quickly.

“One more thing.”

“Shit.”

“Yes?” I asked, even though I seriously *did not want to know*.

“For the record, I like Hank,” he told me.

“Um...” I muttered, not knowing where he was leading with this. I still *did not want to know*. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“Things don’t work out with you and Hank...”

I waited while he paused, my eyes wide, my lips parted, my heart thumping.

“You can erase *my* day.”

Oh...my...God.

He smiled at me in a way that I didn’t know if he was serious or not with me. Then he moved out of my space, but lifted his hand and touched his finger to the tip of my nose. I blinked again, shocked at his words, shocked at his touch, shocked that it was gentle and sweet. It didn’t go with his attitude.

Then he was gone.

I stumbled out of the bookshelves like a dying man in a desert, I stumble into an oasis.

“You okay?” Annette asked from across the room.

“No,” I answered.

“Cream your pants?” she asked.

The eyes of the two customers at the espresso counter, both male, circled me in avid curiosity.

“I don’t think so,” I replied.

“Oh, you’d know,” Annette returned.

I bumbled over to the couches and collapsed.

“What’d I tell you about this place?” One customer had turned to the other, they were obviously friends. They were both looking at *Alex* and *Daisy*, *Jet* and me sitting on the couches.

“I don’t even like coffee and I’ve decided I’m a regular,” the other boy heart said.

“I don’t make tea!” Tex boomed threateningly at him and he jumped

I closed my eyes, trying to think positively. At least Monty’s day was going to be boring. Instead of being mortified, I thought of it as my playing paying back Lee’s boys for all the headaches I’d given them.

He shed his “I hope you’re having fun!” I shouted to the room.

I checked at In my head, I heard them laughing.

badass What I didn’t know, in a suite of offices in Lower Downtown I had seen they were laughing.



It would DAISY WENT OUT and got us all bagel sandwiches for lunch. Daisy, Jane, and Jason decided to stay the day with me at Fortnum’s so I would be bored.

We spent the early afternoon helping Jane go through boxes and books. We spent the late afternoon behind the espresso counter while Tex taught us how to make coffee drinks. It wasn’t rocket science, but it came to Tex was a drill sergeant, and Daisy kept gabbing about everything under the sun and over-frothing the milk.

After we learned how to make coffees, Lee and Indy walked in.

Indy smiled at me but I could tell something was wrong.

My first thought was Hank.

I thought of the My heart clutched and my eyes flew to Lee. Hank was his brother, Annette, they were close. If something had happened to Hank in the line of duty because of me, I should be able to tell with one look at Lee.

her one At least I thought so, but Lee's face was closed tight.
I felt like someone put their hand to my throat and squeezed.
ed. They arrived at the espresso counter and Lee looked at me.
wasn't "Can I talk to you, please?" he asked.
way of I swallowed, nodded and walked from behind the espresso counter
on a couch with me and put the sole of his boot up on to the edge of th
I sat with my legs crossed under me, sideways on the couch facing
looked at his posture. He was sitting exactly the way Hank was whe
Denver, laid eyes on him.
 Before I could stop myself, I said, "You're just like your brother."
 "Sorry?" he asked.
Annette "Nothing."
In't get Lee watched me closely and I could swear he was reading my mind
 Finally, he muttered, "Fucking hell." His gaze was still on me.
oxes of "What?" I asked.
e Uncle His eyes crinkled. "I like this," he said, as if to himself, obviously
t Uncle about something, pleased and amused.
ider the "Is Hank okay?" I ignored what he said and got to what I consider
the matter at hand.
 Lee's eyes focused on me again. "Yeah. Why?"
 "You looked serious when you walked in. I was, um, worried."
her and The corners of Lee's lips curled up slightly. "He's fine, busy. He
duty or me to come talk to you."
 I nodded.

“What do you like?” I asked, going back to what he said earlier.

“Sorry?” he repeated.

“You said, ‘I like this.’ What do you like?”

He didn’t hesitate, but said straight out, “You’re in love with Hank

. He sat My eyes bugged out of my head.

ie table. “What?” My voice was high and didn’t sound like my own.

, him. I He leaned into me. “It’s good Roxie.”

n I first I wasn’t sure, but I thought I’d started panting.

Lee went on, “Hank dated a girl in high school. She was sweet, but as hell. Hank’s women have all been boring. You...” he paused, boring.”

Good God.

d. First, I wasn’t sure I wanted to think about Hank’s women. Second second was obvious.

“Please, let’s not talk about this,” I begged.

pleased Lee watched me some more and gave in, but he did it with another crinkle.

red was Then his face got serious. “We’ve got information.”

Shit.

Maybe I wanted to talk some more about me being in love with Hank not being boring, whatever the hell that meant.

wanted “What?” I asked in spite of myself.

“You know a man named Desmond Harper?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“Big player in Chicago. Mostly drugs,” Lee explained. “Flynn was in his very large wheel. Flynn stole from him, big take. Harper is not h

“Shit,” I whispered.

.” “He wants his money back.”

“How much?” I asked.

“Half a million.”

“*Fuck!*” I shouted and everyone at the espresso counter looked over.
“Half a million dollars?”

boring Lee dropped his foot and turned to me. “Roxie, calm down.”

“aren’t” “Half a million dollars and he bought me cheese puffs and took me
sleaze bag motel? I’m gonna fucking *kill* that motherfucker!” I yelled.

“Roxie—”

d, well, I slammed my fists on my knees. “The least he could have done was
my wrists with velvet rope. He sure could have afforded it. Stupid jerk

“Roxie.”

her eye “Do you know...?” I interrupted conversationally. Well, more like
tunes conversationally, but still. “He never paid any rent. Never
groceries. What a *dick!*”

“Roxie.”

ank and “What? Was he selling drugs?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Lee answered. “Listen to me, Roxie—”

I rambled on, “Probably. Probably to little kids. How could I have
so fucking *blind?*”

“Please listen to me.”

s a cog “I’m an idiot. I’m ten times an idiot. God, I could just *die*.” Then I
appy.” ahead because the last comment was too close for comfort these day
die die, as in not-breathing die, but die figuratively, if you know
mean.”

Lee was grinning.

“What?” I asked as if I hadn’t just been on a long-winded rant.

er at us. “Definitely not boring.”

I made a noise that sounded like “harrumph.”

Lee took his opportunity. “I have good news.”

e to that I nodded. I very much wanted to hear good news.

as bind “Marcus set a meeting with Harper. He flew out to Chicago last ni
.” only that, Marcus has warned him off. He’s given you his protecti
whether you, or Hank, want it, it’s now there.”

I took in a deep breath and let it free.

loony- Maybe Marcus was gray too.

bought “Now I have some bad news,” Lee said.

I tensed. I very much did *not* want to hear bad news.

“Vance and Mace have been in the wind.”

“Excuse me?” I asked.

ve been “After the car chase, Vance came to me to tell me he was g
ground, hoping to find out what the fuck was going on with you. I a
Mace to move with him. They’ve been tracking and listening. Prelim
their assignment was to find out as much as they could, and ferret ou
or anyone else who came to town lookin’ for you. They got tun

Desmond Harper at about the same time the police did.”

s. “Not I nodded.

Lee kept going, “Flynn’s been making Harper unhappy for a while. Harper’s not unhappy, he’s angry. When his boys got nabbed, something he’s not pleased about, he assigned two more to come after Flynn.”

I nodded again.

“And Flynn is after you.”

I blinked then asked, “And?”

“They figure they’ll get Flynn when he comes after you again. No matter what Marcus’s warning, Harper isn’t callin’ them off. You could get caught in the crossfire.”

ed. Not “No,” I breathed.

“Don’t worry about it. You’re protected. Luke’s assigned to you. He’s still out there trying to find Flynn. He’s good, Roxie, very good. Because of that, I’ve pulled Mace.”

I started to panic. “Lee, I need to go. I need to get out of here. I can’t stay here with you to—”

“You go, I’ll come after you personally.”

My breath caught at his tone. There was no doubting he meant it.

“But this is a lot, you’re doing too much,” I argued.

ing to “It’s a family thing.”

ssigned I stared at him. “I’m not family.”

inarily, He gave me a look.

t Flynn Then his eyes, dark brown, warmed into melted chocolate. I watched
ed into

mesmerized, and he reached out and playfully tugged a lock of my hair. I got up, walked to Indy, wrapped an arm around her and kissed her upper lips. He spoke softly to her for a second and then he was gone.

e. Now
ing else “Guess we’re done talking,” I said to Indy as she sat beside me.

She put her hand on my leg. “Welcome to the family,” she replied in a teasing voice.

Jeez.

There was no shaking these guys, any of them.

no matter “You okay after last night?” I asked.

it in the “Yeah. You?”

“Yeah. I guess Lee isn’t mad at me for putting you in danger,” I said.

“You didn’t put me in danger, and anyway, Lee likes you. He told me Vance told him you were a rock after he found you. Other women, because had other...” She stopped. “Let’s just say, you impressed them.”

I stared at her, floored.

can’t ask “Want a coffee?” she asked.

“I want a drink,” I answered.

“Whisky?” she teased.

I hit her in the arm jokingly. She got up to get a coffee and I sat with her, not quite able to shove down the warm feeling stealing over me.



IT WAS NEARING closing time when my purse rang.

I was sitting behind the book counter with Duke.

ed him, I grabbed my phone, flipped it open and put it to my ear. “Hello?”

hair. He
turned

“Hey, Sunshine.”
My heart fluttered.

“Hey, Whisky,” I said softly.
“How’s your day?” he asked.

ed in a
“Pure and complete lunacy. But I now know how to make e
drinks. Yours?”

“We’re close to something. I’ve spent the day putting an op
together, we’re goin’ in tonight. It’d be good if you didn’t get shc
attacked in the middle of it.”

I smiled at the phone. “I’ll do my best.”

id.
“Good. Lee and Indy have got a key to my place. Ask her to gi
me thatyou. There isn’t much food in the house but there are delivery menus
they’veof the kitchen drawers.”

“Thanks, but Luke and I are going to Smithie’s tonight. Jet’s
debut. Maybe the gang will go out to dinner before.”

Silence.

Then, “Sorry, I thought I heard you say you were going to Sr
tonight.”

atching
“You did.”

2.
“Roxanne.” His voice was low and discouraging.

“Hank,” I tried to mimic his tone and failed.

More silence while I suspected Hank fought for control. “Did a
Tex said to you this morning penetrate that stubborn fuckin’ brain of y

Hank obviously lost the fight for control.

“I promised Jet I was going,” I told him.

“I’m sure she’ll understand.”

“Hank.”

“You aren’t goin’.”

I ground my teeth.

Then I said, “I’m going, Hank. Billy Flynn is *not* controlling my generation fucking *second* of my life.”

Another beat of silence then, “Shit, you’re stubborn.”

I think I got to him.

“Damn straight,” I replied.

Then he said, “I spent all day tryin’ to concentrate on work, and I wasn’t concentratin’ on work, I was tryin’ to concentrate on handlin’ shit. Instead, I found I spent most of the day concentratin’ on all the sister’s want to fuck you breathless.”

I went breathless at his words and nearly dropped the phone.

“You’re damn lucky you make me hard just rememberin’ the taste or I’d think you were a major pain in the ass,” he declared.

Holy cow.

“Whisky.”

He talked over me as he gave in. “Try not to burn down Smithie. Smithie is a good guy. He doesn’t deserve whatever mayhem he’s got going on tonight.”

I couldn’t help myself, I smiled at the phone. “I promised Luke good.”

“You’re good all right.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant by that, but I found it made me both a and my nipples went hard.

Hank carried on, “You get home before I do, don’t wear anything I won’t be in the mood for obstacles.”

another I was sure what he meant by that and I felt a spasm between my legs. Finally he said, “Stay safe.”

“You too,” I said back, my voice soft even though we’d had an argument. I didn’t know what his “operation” was about, but I didn’t want to hang up the phone with him on angry words.

when I More silence. So much that I got confused.
n’ your “Hank?” I called, wondering if he was gone and didn’t disconnect.
ways I something was wrong with my phone.

“I’m here,” he replied. His voice had changed, gone husky.

of you, “Hank,” I said again, and even though I didn’t mean to let it show, could be heard through my saying his name.

“See you later, sweetheart.” Then he disconnected.

I flipped the phone shut and noticed Duke looking at me.

“You’re all right,” Duke told me on an approving nod.

withie’s. “I am?” I asked.

in store He turned to me, leaned a hip on the counter and crossed his arms. He was wearing his black leather vest.

I’d be “You are. These boys need women who can take the heat without complaining. Like butter, and sometimes that heat is fiery. They need women who can

back their shit so they don't walk all over 'em and get bored out
fucking skulls. And they need women who can go soft when the s
demands, because they get hard knocks on a regular basis, son
literally, and comin' home to somethin' soft is the only way to cope."
to bed.

Holy fucking cow.

gs. "You think I'm a woman like that?" I asked him.

"I think there are a fair few women like that in the whole fuckin'
And yeah, you're one of them."

ument. Um...wow.

ang up "I'm not, you know," I whispered.

He glared at me. "You made a mistake with your old boyfriend
make another one."

"Duke—"

"You told Hank that Flynn wasn't gonna control your life and still,
w, a lot lettin' him."

I felt the wind go out of me, like I'd been punched in the stomach.

He leaned into me. "Get smart girl. You don't, you'll only have y
to blame."

Before I could retort, the bell over the door went and Tod and
waltzed in.

Tod was carrying what looked like a scrapbook gone amok. It w
ns over overstuffed and there were bits of paper and other stuff sticking o
everywhere. He walked to the book counter and slammed it down.

meltin'
an give "Glad you're okay, girlie," he said, giving me an across-the-cou
kiss. Then, obviously on a mission, he yelled, "Indy, get over here!"

of their situation sometimes
Stevie came around the counter and gave me a genuine cheek kiss. I was feeling funny about my conversation with Duke. Where ever else had failed, somehow, what Duke said got to me. No one ever when someone thinks badly of them, and of all the folks I'd met in week, outside Jane, I knew Duke the least. Yet I found this driving n to disappoint him, and I felt I had.

world.
Indy, Daisy, Jet and Annette walked up to the counter. Jason had l disappeared into the bowels of bookshelves and had not returned.

. Don't
Tod flipped open the book. Where he opened it, one page was fabric swatches stapled to it, the other one had only two, an orange brown.

“Ally tells me you settled on pink and ivory for your wedding c
Tod said to Indy accusingly.

, you're
“Yes,” Indy confirmed. “And?”

Tod pointed at the orange and brown swatches. “I thought we'd c
on tangerine and chocolate.”

yourself
I made a gagging noise at the very idea of a tangerine and ch wedding.

. Stevie
Stevie gave me a look that said both, “I agree” and “Not now.”

as way
ut of it
I felt a touch on my shoulder and saw a hand there. I followed t attached to the hand and saw Duke was beside me. He gave me a s squeeze and walked away.

nter air
I felt relief slide through me. Duke wasn't angry with me. I clo eyes and leaned against the counter. I opened them when Tod speaking again.

“I’m calling an Emergency Wedding Summit. Tomorrow night everyone announced then his eyes shifted to Annette. “Who’re you?”

likes it “I’m Roxie’s friend, Annette.”

the last He took her in, top to toe. “You going to Daisy’s gathering?”

eed not She nodded.

“Got something to wear? It’s formal,” Tod went on.

ong ago She shook her head.

full of Tod swung his eyes to me “Do you have something to wear yet? (e and a you had time to shop in between shootouts and running for your life?”

I shook my head too. I wondered how Luke was going to feel shopping tomorrow. I was pretty certain Luke wouldn’t be too happy, colors,” that. Furthermore, according to Luke Rules, I was not to be anywhere I couldn’t see him or wasn’t close enough to touch him. That meant I would have to sit in the dressing room with me.

decided Shit, shit, shit.

I shoved the thought aside, deciding to worry about it later, and I chocolate Annette. “We’ll go shopping tomorrow.”

“Fuck that,” Tod cut in. “You’re shopping at The House of Bui Tomorrow night.” Tod glared at Indy. “They’re coming to the White Arm Summit. After that, we’ll get everyone situated with party outfits. houlder even argue. We have to have a meeting of the minds about this pink and business.”

sed my “It’s *my* wedding, Tod,” Indy pointed out.

started “Girlie, you think I’ve been supplying you with champagne, shoes and accessories for the last God knows for how many years *for my health*”

t,” Tod snapped. “It’s payback time.”

“Oh dear,” Jet said.

Annette laughed.

Daisy emitted a tinkly giggle.

I sent Indy a commiserating look. She didn’t catch my look. She was glaring at Tod.

I figured Luke would probably like the Wedding Summit-slack Queen Closet Trawl a helluva lot less than shopping.

For the first time that day, I smiled.

The bell over the door went and we all turned to see who it was.

Luke was standing there.

“Oh my,” Tod whispered. “I think I just creamed my pants.”

“Tell me about it,” Annette agreed.

“Dinner,” Luke declared in Luke Speak.

“Gotta go,” I said, grabbing my purse.

“We’re meeting at Smithie’s, nine o’clock,” Jet called after me.

I nodded to her, waved at everyone and stopped in front of Luke.

“I’m ready,” I told him.

He did a full body scan.

Then he did his sexy half-grin.

I heard some noises that sounded like moans behind me.

Luke wrapped his fingers around my elbow and propelled me to the door.

“Wear something sparkly!” Daisy yelled as the door swung closed.

“?” Tod

Shit, but I was *in trouble*.

he was

sh-Drag

e door.

Shit, but I was *in trouble*.

NINETEEN



DENVER MEN ARE MEN

Luke took me to Lincoln's Road House (clearly the Night Investigation Team hangout) for dinner, where, not surprisingly, he said not much.

Also not surprisingly, I babbled on enough for the both of us.

Then he took me to Indy's to get Hank's key.

She was in a bit of a dither about the evening's dress code as defined by Daisy, and loath to ask Tod for another loaner for fear her Tangerine Chocolate Wedding would turn into an even bigger nightmare.

We spent half an hour sorting through Indy's closet and drew something "sparkly" for her to wear. We'd almost cracked it when we walked in.

Without a word, he grabbed my hand and dragged me out of the house in the company black Explorer.

Guess he was done waiting.



I, on the other hand, did not have trouble with sparkle.

I was the Sparkle Queen.

At Hank's, I washed my face and put on Drama Night Makeup, he

the charcoal eye shadow and black kohl eye liner, dark-raspberry lips lined lips and glitter dust on my collarbone and shoulders.

I wore a black top that was tight across the midriff and bosom around the waist. The thin sleeves and low, scooped neckline were designed to look torn, not finished. One sleeve fit over my shoulder, the other came off by design. The torn bits were adorned here and there with glitter beads, a hint of sparkle. I put on a pair of tailored, slightly tight, wide-leg low-rider black trousers with a sharp crease. The trousers had a thick black beading all the way around my upper hips. I wore a bunch of silver thin black bracelets and dangly jet earrings. I put my hair up in a messy bun secured with bobby pins on the ends of which were baby black rhinestones and I let lots of tendrils float down. I finished off with a spritz of Bouc

I walked out of the bathroom, all done up, to see Luke's long, lean legs stretched out on Hank's bed, his hands crossed behind his head, eyes closed. Shamus was sprawled and asleep beside him.

"Good God," I whispered.

His eyes opened, his head turned and he did a slow body scan. Then his lids lowered to half-mast.

"Fuck," he murmured low.

I pulled myself sternly into recovery.

"You ready?" I asked.

His eyes went to my feet. "You aren't wearing shoes."

"Damn! I knew I forgot something. Hang on."

I ran to the weight room-slash-junk room and tore through boxes of heavy-duty suitcases until I found what I wanted.

stick on I walked into the living room carrying my shoes, a little red suitcase and a wrap. Into the bag I transferred the necessities—running back to the bathroom for lipstick, lip liner and extra sparkle powder for emergency reapplication—and put in credit cards, money, phone and the VIP pass one fell-gave me.

tery jet I sat on a couch and slid on one of my (four) pairs of sexy, Jimmy Choo side-leg shoes (online auction, brand new, nearly full retail price but worth a line of penny).

pangly, These were pumps. Pointed, red suede toe and matching suede foot with a silk knot, spiked heel. The body of the shoe was red snakeskin.

stones, The shoes were *hot*.

heron. I settled a red pashmina around my shoulders, flipping an end around my neck.

losed. Luke was standing at the door.

“Ready,” I said.

Luke didn’t move.

Then he asked, “You know what I said in the store today?”

“You said a lot in the store,” I told him.

He hadn’t said a lot of words, but all of them had a lot of meaning.

“The last part.”

My eyes got big and I nodded.

“I was fuckin’ with you,” he told me.

aces and I let out a breath.

“I thought so,” I said.

side bag “I’ve changed my mind.”

to the I wasn’t keeping up with him. He wasn’t exactly going fast but
urgency wasn’t keeping up with him.

esses Jet “I don’t understand.”

y Choo “I’ve decided I wasn’t fuckin’ with you.”

1 every Holy Mary, Mother of God.

“Are you *flirting* with me in Hank’s living room?” I asked.

ur-inch “I don’t flirt,” Luke declared.

I crossed my arms on my chest. “Seems like flirting to me.”

und my “Flirtin’ is me tellin’ you that you have pretty eyes. I’m not tell
that. I’m tellin’ you, it doesn’t work with Hank, I want you in my bed
isn’t flirtin’.”

I stared at him.

He was right, that sure as hell wasn’t flirting.

Then I scowled at him.

He was entirely unaffected by the scowl.

I looked to the ceiling.

“Denver men are nuts,” I told the ceiling.

He walked forward, grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the door.

“Denver men are men,” he declared.

Good grief.



THERE WAS a line out the door and around the building when we arrived at Smithie’s. It was controlled by big, black leather jacket-wearing bouncers.

a red velvet rope.

But I still Luke parked illegally right at the front door.

“Hey! You can’t park there,” a bouncer, clearly feeling the need for his life, said to Luke, peeling away from his station to confront us.

I opened my purse to pull out the VIP passes and noticed the bouncer close to me. Luke’s hand went flat against his chest, keeping his distance, while his other hand went to my arm and he moved me closer to the side.

“Don’t,” Luke said, his deep voice sending a shiver down my spine.

I could only see Luke’s profile, but whatever the bouncer saw made me say, “I guess you can park there.”

And that

I pulled out the passes and showed them to the bouncer. He escorted us to the doors and opened them for us.

The minute the doors closed behind us, I rounded on Luke.

“He was only doing his job,” I snapped.

“So am I,” Luke replied.

Not much I could say to that.

“Yoo hoo!” We heard. “Over here!”

Tod was waving at us.

For

I took in the club, thinking it would be seedy and gross.

It was actually nice—clean, new furniture, expensive, flashing lights, shiny, reflective stage, gleaming silver poles, red neon behind the bar and stage. All the male staff were dressed in neck to toe black and looked like they could work for Lee.

There were

The place was packed, wall-to-wall people. There was loud music, dancers on the stage, gorgeous girls with oiled, mostly naked, spectrums of bodies. They were making a killing, bills poking out, willy-nilly from G-strings.

The only women I saw in the room, other than myself (and the dancer) were my friends.

Luke's fingers curled around my hip and he propelled me, part in front of him part beside him, to the tables occupied by our party, situated at the far side of the stage.

Indy, Ally, Daisy, Annette, Jason, Jet, Tod and Stevie were at connected round tables. Nancy, Uncle Tex and Nancy's friends Trixie and Ada were at two others with three people I didn't know. One was a woman with dyed black hair with one-inch, steel-gray roots and a chain of danglers hanging from her lip, the other a huge, hairy man who made Tex look small and civilized. The last was a big black woman with an enormous Afro and tawny-brown eyes.

I pulled the wrap off and Daisy squealed, "Sugar, you sure can sparkle on."

"Thanks." I grinned at her. "So can you."

And she could. She was sitting and all I could see was her head and cleavage, but she was covered in sparkle. Her hair was even sprayed with glitter spray.

"Are those Jimmy Choo's?" Tod asked, staring at my feet.

"Yeah," I told him.

"I have the perfect song for those shoes. I don't know what it is yet, but I know I have it," Tod replied.

sic and “You can borrow them,” I said.

ctacular “Girlie, you are my new best friend.” He sent me an air kiss then a
m their meaningful glance at Indy.

I saw Uncle Tex glaring at me, clearly thinking a night out at a stu
ancers), was also not the chosen pastime for a woman being stalked by a lun
boyfriend.

front of Nancy appeared not to agree. She gave me a wink and a wave.

ne right I called my hellos to everyone else and Jet got up and grabbed my

at two “These are my friends, Lavonne, Bear and Shirleen,” Jet said and
xie and turned to the table. “This is Roxie and Luke.”

a tiny “Holy shit but you girls go for the gusto. Look at this fuckin’ guy
igarette honey but you ain’t hard on the eyes,” Lavonne informed Luke. Th
ok sane squinted toward me through the smoke. “Well done, girlfriend.”

fro and “We’re not together,” I told her.

She blinked. Her eyes lowered to Luke’s hand, which was still
put the waist. Then she squinted back at me.

“You aren’t?” she asked.

“Bodyguard,” Luke said.

l to her Lavonne’s eyes got huge. “You famous?”

ed with “No, I just have a stalker ex-boyfriend who keeps trying to kidnap
bad guys who are after him. Luke’s here to make sure I don’t get ca
the crossfire.”

“You gonna make sure we all don’t get caught in the crossfire?
at, but I asked Luke, butting into the conversation.

“My only focus is Roxie,” Luke answered with brutal honesty.

Bear grunted and rolled his eyes.

aimed a “That’s plain enough to see,” Lavonne said, her lips curling u
grimacing smile, the cigarette still dangling precariously there.

rip club Before I could say anything, Luke’s fingers bit into my hip and he
atic ex-me back and stepped in front of me. Around Luke’s body, I could see
black guy jogging up to us, his eyes on Jet.

“Your sister’s gettin’ cold fuckin’ feet. You gotta go back there a
hand. to her. I got fuckin’ important people here. I got a fuckin’ *senator* he
nd then can’t back out. She can’t...” he trailed off when he caught sight of I
his peripheral vision and he turned, full body, to face Luke. “Who th
are you?”

. Sorry,
ien she “This is Luke. He’s—” Jet started.

“I know who he fuckin’ is. He’s fuckin’ trouble,” the black guy s
taking his eyes off Luke. “Get *the fuck* outta here.”

l at my I could swear I saw the air around Luke start shimmering.

Oh shit.

I stepped around Luke and (do not ask me why) said in a girlie,
voice, in other words, using lingo punctuated by exclamation and q
marks where they did not need to be, “Hi! I’m Roxie! Jet’s friend?” I
arm through Luke’s and leaned into him, resting my head briefly
me and shoulder. “This is my fiancé, Luke? He’s not here to watch the d
ught in Really!” I smiled up at Luke. “Are you, pookie?”

Luke looked down at me and gave one of his half-grins and shi
?” Bear body, so instead of my side leaning into him, half of my chest was
against him.

I pursed my lips, gave him a quick scowl then rearranged my face and looked back at the black guy with a smile.

“We’re just here to watch Lottie’s fantabulous debut!” I announced. The black guy stared at me. “I know who you fuckin’ are too. I’ve been talkin’. Shit, everyone in Denver knows who you are. This ain’t fuckin’ fiancé. You’re sleepin’ with Nightingale. Fuck!” he shouted. I turned to Jet and pointed a finger in her face. “Somethin’ happens, I’ll be there. She’ll love you.”

Then he stalked off.

Jet looked at me. “That’s Smithie. He’s really a big softie.”

Maybe Uncle Tex was right. Maybe Jet was a bit loopy.

Smithie came jogging back with his finger pointed at me.

“You dance?” he asked.

I stared at him. “Dance?”

He jerked a thumb to the stage.

“Holy cow,” I breathed.

“She doesn’t fuckin’ dance,” Luke answered for me.

Smithie threw up his hands and looked at Jet again. “Another fuckin’ of these guys. What’s wrong with strippin’? Fuck!”

Annette called from the table. “I dance! Do you have amateur night or something?”

Smithie turned to her. “You don’t need fuckin’ amateur night, you need to know how to fuckin’ move. You know how to move?”

Jason was looking pale.

ace and “I know how to move,” Annette answered.

“You’ll be drivin’ a Porsche in a month.”

l. “I don’t want a Porsche. I want a condo in Breckenridge,” Anne
Lottie’s him.

i’t your “For that you gotta do lap dances,” Smithie said.

Then he Jason started to look sick.

I blame “I’m not sure I want to do lap dances,” Annette said.

“Suit your-fuckin’-self. You wanna just dance, fuckin’ cc
tomorrow. We’ll get you set *the fuck* up!”

I didn’t know Smithie, like at all, but even I could tell he was excit

I tugged on Luke’s arm and he looked down at me.

“Do something,” I hissed.

“What?” he asked.

“I don’t know. *Something*. Jason looks like he’s going to be sick.”

“Not my problem.”

“This is cool!” Annette yelled.

in’ one forehead on Luke’s shoulder.

light or “Babe,” Luke said low.

My head jerked up.

woman, Shit.

I stepped away from him.

“Good idea,” he mumbled.

I turned to the table and announced, “I need a drink.”

“Get over here and sit next to Shirleen, girl,” the black woman said and I walked over and sat down, throwing my wrap on the back of the chair and my purse on the table.

Luke followed and stood behind me.

“Someone get this girl a drink. What you drinkin’? I got me an appletini. You ever have an appletini? So smooth, get you fucked up before you blink.”

“An appletini sounds good,” I agreed. Fucked up sounded even better.

She started snapping her fingers and, as if by magic, a waitress appeared. The waitress was wearing a cute, black camisole with SMITHIE’S across the front in fancy, red script, a tiny red miniskirt and a pair of black strappy sandals. The outfit was the shit.

“Get my girl an appletini, me too,” Shirleen ordered then swung ’fro back to me and said, totally nosy, but somehow getting away with it. “Jet’s been tellin’ me you got man trouble.”

“You could say that.”

“Tell Shirleen *all* about it.”

“Which man are we talking about? The scary ex-boyfriend who would take me go? The bad guys I don’t know who might accidentally shoot me? Or the good man I have that I’m afraid to lose?”

Shirleen stared at me. “How many men you got, girl?”

“Just those,” I said. I looked up at Luke then back to Shirleen. “So what?”

“Well then, we got all night, unless you’re really here for the show.” I shook my head. “I’m just here for Jet.”

“Start talkin’,” Shirleen demanded.

l to me, So I did.

ie chair



THREE APPLETTINIS LATER, I was definitely feeling loose.

Jet had talked Lottie out of her nerves. Tod had talked me into lett
ppletini. try on my shoes (they fit). We all spent a lot of time talking about whi
ou can he should sing in his drag show while wearing my shoes. No one was
talk Annette out of dancing. Uncle Tex decided he was talking to m
ter. (but just barely). And Shirleen had sorted out all my problems by tell
arrived. she’d known Hank since he was a little boy (what? were there only, li
written dozen people who lived in Denver?) and if I let him go I needed to h
kickass head examined (whatever).

The place was wired. Brody would have been beside himself. The
we waited for Lottie to dance, the more the anticipatory vibe grew u
her big air was electric.
with it.

Then the lights went low.

Smithie took the stage.

“Gentlemen...fuck...” he looked at us, “and ladies. I give you
on’t let *Mac!*”

’ Or the A roar tore through the massive crowd.

Holy cow. If I was Lottie, I’d have had cold feet too.

The lights went out, I heard Smithie mutter another “fuck” while I
far.” to get off the stage in the dark. Then the lights went on and Jet’s sis
.” there.

She was as pretty as Jet, bigger boobs, more makeup and a body

for. She wore a killer gold bikini, heavily embellished with beaded sequins that I'd sell my firstborn child just to touch and a pair of gold sandals that she danced in like she was in bare feet.

And she could *dance*.

To say the girl could move was an understatement of tremendous proportions. She worked her body, she worked the stage, she worked the poles and she worked the crowd. Not like this was her first night on the stage dancing, but like she'd *invented* it.

A hush came over the crowd, total, reverent silence throughout the performance.

When the first song segued into the second, the crowd came out of a stupor. They all started to cheer, to chant, to undulate.

Everyone at our tables was right along with them.

My hands were over my head, I was shouting, "Woo hoo!" and "girl!"

After Lottie executed an upside-down pole slide with one leg up in the air and one leg wrapped around the pole, Shirleen and I turned to each other. Lottie did a high five, such was our excitement for the beauty of the sisterhood.

Lottie was the master. She worked it until the final notes of the song. Then she stood stock-still, reached behind her back and tore off her bra. We got a nanosecond of a glimpse of her magnificent breasts then the lights went out.

When they came back on, the regular girls were there and Lottie was gone.

ng and The crowd went wild. Everyone sitting surged to their feet and scri
strappy,including me.

I barely got my ass back on the chair when I felt something at my
I heard Luke say, “Let’s go.”

endous I turned to him and he was right in my face.

ked the “Did you see that? That was great!” I yelled. “I want to dance. I
ie stage bikini like that. She’s my hero!”

he first The crowd was still roaring, chanting, clapping, begging for L
come back. I could barely hear, they were so loud.

it of its Luke’s fingers curled around my arm. “Let’s go,” he repeated.

“But...I’m having a good time,” I said.

He pulled me out of the chair. “This place isn’t safe. We’re going.”

You go “Luke.”

He pulled me close, probably so I could hear, the roar was still deaf

They were chanting Lottie’s name and had begun stomping their feet.

I looked at Luke and there was no sexy half-grin or flirty look in h
His face was serious.

“You want to answer to me, you keep this shit up. Now, we’re goin

I gulped, nodded, grabbed my bag and wrap and moved to walk aw

ra. You That was when I felt it. The crowd wasn’t only wild, they wer

its went Lottie had whipped them into a frenzy. Two songs weren’t enough. Sh
dance until her feet were bloody and it wouldn’t be enough.

tie was I noticed that the others had realized it too. Tex was already

Nancy out. He glanced back at me and boomed, “Go!” Trixie and Jasc

helping Ada, with Tod and Stevie leading the way. Indy, Jet, A

reamed, Annette were sliding around the stage and heading toward a side door.

Shirleen, Lavonne and Bear were settled in with drinks like the ear and sitting in their living room. I thought they were completely oblivious to the possible danger, except Shirleen yelled to me, "Go with your bodyguard. Shirleen will be okay. This ain't no place for a pretty child like you. They don't want a one look at you, they'll tear you to shreds."

I nodded, really not feeling in the mood to be torn to shreds.

While Luke pulled me with him, I heard Shirleen shout, "Come on, Shirleen! Jet'll bring you. You're welcome any time!"

I noticed the crowd was pressing in. The bouncers pushed through and started lining the stage.

Luke stopped and he bent to my ear. "Get close to my back, hold onto my belt, keep your head down and move with me." I nodded. "Let's go, finished."

My fingers curled into his belt, I fitted my body to his back and he pushed through the men pressing towards the stage. We got halfway to the stage when Luke stopped.

"Where you takin' this sweet thing?" someone I couldn't see asked me.

"Step aside," Luke said in a voice full of warning. I figured they would just step aside. At Luke's tone anyone in their right mind would have stepped *wild* aside.

"Don't feel like—" the guy, voice now belligerent (and to my thinking pretty fucking stupid), started to say, then I felt Luke move swiftly and economically.

He started forward again.

lly and

“Watch your feet,” Luke said to me.

I looked down and we stepped over the man who was now unconscious on the floor.

We didn’t have any trouble going forward then. We were given a berth.

Luke put me in the Explorer, rounded the hood and got in beside me.

While he was starting the car I said, “I’m worried about my friend Lottie. That didn’t feel good.”

“That wasn’t good,” Luke replied, hitting a button on the on-dash panel.

It rang in the cab once and Luke was reversing out of the spot where I heard, “Yeah?”

“Tell Lee his woman is in another situation. Smithie’s.”

“Got it,” the voice confirmed.

“Eddie’s woman too,” Luke said.

“Got it.”

“The sister as well.”

“Check.”

“Out,” Luke finished.

I heard the disconnect.

I stared at the phone.

“That’s it?” I asked.

“My assignment is you, not them,” Luke explained.

“But—”

“Lee’ll take care of it.”

“But—”

unconscious He switched gears and put the Explorer on the road. “Quiet.”

“But, my friend Annette is in there.”

a wide “I thought her man was with her.”

ie. “Yes, but Jason can’t lay out a guy like you!” I yelled, getting paid.
“We have to go back.”

ls. And “We’re not going back.”

“We have to go back.”

phone. No answer.

hen we “Jason’s a pacifist. He’s a liberal. He’s a *vegetarian*. In a normal situation Jason could handle himself, but that wasn’t a normal situation. You’re Superman. You have great facial hair. No one’ll mess with you. We go back!”

“Babe?”

“What?”

“Shut up.”

We stopped at a light and I pulled my phone out of my purse and Annette.

“Yo, bitch!” she answered.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Yeah! Chaos! It’s fuckin’ cool. They, like, *love* Lottie. She’s doing an early encore. I can’t wait. Wasn’t it *the shit*? Lottie told me Daisy show all of her moves. They’re gonna teach me.”

“Are Indy, Jet and Ally okay?”

“Well...yeah. We’re all drinking champagne in the dressing room and Stevie left, not really their gig. Jason just got in. He got Jet’s mom and the old lady to the car. We’re groovin’.”

I closed my eyes with relief then opened them again.

nicked. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” I said.

“Later.” Disconnect.

“They’re fine. They’re drinking champagne in the dressing room, Luke.

No answer.

situation “It sounds like everything’s cool. Maybe you overreacted.”

re, like, Still no answer.

have to I was beginning to feel like I was missing out. All my friends were back there drinking champagne and I was heading home. I wanted to have champagne, or at least have another appetizer. Anyway, I liked Shirley was hilarious.

I called So I said, “Maybe it’s okay. Maybe we should go back and have champagne. Lottie is going to dance again and I’d like to see it. I’m safe.”

That was when I saw two squad cars, lights flashing, sirens wailing, speeding toward Smithie’s.

oin’ and I watched them fly by us and kept turned in my seat, looking out the window, hoping they’d also fly by Smithie’s.

ved her They turned in.

Luke pulled forward through the now green light, and half a block later slowed to let another squad car take a left onto our road and it flew by

m. Tod "Shit," I muttered.
om and "You were sayin'?"
Jeez.



I LET US into Hank's, and Luke made me stand at the door while he c
the house. Once he was done, we flipped on a bunch of lights and he t
" I told to the back door where he let out Shamus. We stood together silently
back door while Shamus did his business and then moseyed back i
house. Luke closed and locked the door and turned to me.

Shit.

Alone with Luke.

ere still "You want coffee?" I asked.

o drink "Yeah," he answered.

en. She We walked back to the kitchen. I ground the beans and made a
coffee.

l drink I had no idea how long Hank was going to be and Luke was ob
ure it'sstaying until Hank got home. It might be a long night. We'd need a
coffee.

hiring, When it was set to brewing, I turned to Luke and he was leanin
hips against the counter, arms crossed on his chest, watching me v
he back eyes half-mast.

Shit.

I decided to start an unsexy conversation.

k up he "Where were you shot?" I asked.

us, too. "Gut," he answered.

Holy cow.

Even I knew a stomach wound was serious business.

“Are you okay now?”

“You already asked me that.”

checked
look me
y at the
nto the

He was right, I had.

I found myself getting angry. I didn't know why.

“Well that just sucks!” I snapped. “They get the guy who shot you?”

“Yeah.”

“Good!” Then I found myself getting mother hen. “You should have some protective stuff, like one of those vests. You should probably be wearing one now. Who knows what could happen in your line of business. It should be a standard issue.”

pot of
viously
a lot of

“I was wearin' a vest. They were armor-piercing bullets.”

I gaped at him. “Aren't those illegal?”

“It wasn't exactly a law-abidin' citizen who shot me.”

After he said that, his eyes dropped to my legs and I realized Shamus was sitting on my feet and I was absently stroking his head.

ing with
with his

“The dog's claimed you,” Luke noted.

“He's a friendly dog, he likes everyone,” I told him.

“He isn't sittin' on my feet.”

This was true, he wasn't.

I looked down at Shamus. Shamus looked up at me. I gave him a head rub with both hands. He licked my wrist then leaned into my legs.

When I straightened and looked at Luke, he had on one of his half-

“What?” I asked.

“Hank doesn’t stand a chance.”

“What does that mean?”

“Not that he’d want to,” Luke went on as if I hadn’t spoken.

“Excuse me?”

Luke pushed away from the counter and came at me.

?” I braced, not knowing what to expect.

He got in my space, reached around me, opened a cupboard and
d wear down a mug. He set it on the counter beside me and tilted his head d
ing one look at me.

ould be I was holding my breath.

“You can go to bed,” he said.

“I can?”

“Yeah.”

“But what about you? What are you going to do?”

ius was No answer.

I went into good hostess mode. “I can’t go to bed with you awa
forced to hang around. That’ll be boring.”

“I’m used to it,” he told me.

“Still,” I replied.

“Go to bed,” he commanded. Definitely commanded, no other way
n a fullit.

· I wasn’t the kind of girl who listened to a command.

grins. “I’ll keep you company,” I offered.

“Babe,” he said, his eyelids lowering again. “Hank’s got no worries movin’ in while things are good between you two. I don’t want to be another man’s woman.”

Well, that was good to hear.

He went on, “If I were you, I wouldn’t push it.”

Good God.

“I’ll go to bed,” I decided.

“Smart decision.”

I pulled
down to

I slid out from in front of him, said goodnight, and Shamus and I went to the bedroom. I took off my clothes and makeup and then was left in a quandary about what to do next.

Hank told me he wanted no clothing obstacles when he got home that way. Hank spoke to me that afternoon, I didn’t want any clothing obstacles either. But I wasn’t sure it was a good idea to be naked while Luke was in the house. What if something happened and he had to come in?

I compromised. I put on my lilac nightie with the black lace underwear.

Luke and

Then Shamus and I got into bed, and after tossing and turning for a while (both of us), we fell asleep.

My to put

“Babe,” he said, his eyelids lowering again. “Hank’s got no worries with me movin’ in while things are good between you two. I don’t move on another man’s woman.”

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I compromised. I put on my lilac nightie with the black lace but no underwear.

Then Shamus and I got into bed, and after tossing and turning for a while (both of us), we fell asleep.



GRAY AS THE NORTH POLE

Shamus jerked and jumped off the bed.

Automatically, I moved into the warm space he left behind and I felt the bed depress when Hank settled into it.

His hands came to my body immediately and pulled me to him.

I felt like I'd been asleep for hours. I opened my eyes a crack and it was pitch dark so I closed them again.

Hank's mouth touched my shoulder.

"Whisky?"

"Yeah," he said, his lips against my shoulder. His hand was at my hip, skimming down the fabric of my nightie to my hip.

"How did your thing go?"

His mouth moved down my shoulder, effectively pushing aside my hair, and his tongue touched the skin at the back of my neck. I trembled and my body warmed.

"We got 'em," he said against my neck.

"That's good," I replied on another tremble.

He pulled the fabric at my hip up and then his hand moved, his

pressing in to tag my underwear, except it wasn't there so his hand slid
my naked hip.

Then it froze.

"Jesus," he muttered.

It didn't freeze for long. His fingers gripped me. He turned me and
me into him with his hand at my bare ass.

Then he kissed me. Not a lazy-necking kiss. He went whole hog.

I was breathing heavy and my body was in full throb when I
just as I disengaged from mine.

He rolled us over, got on top and his hips fell between my legs
opened them.

It was He kept his mouth on mine, making me dizzy with his kisses with
hand slid between us, his fingers finding me, making me dizzier. I wrapped
leg around his waist, my arms around his back, using them as an anchor
press my hips into his hand.

My waist, He touched me as he kissed me, and then one of his fingers slid into
"Hank," I breathed before I nipped his beautiful lower lip gently with
teeth because I could not stop myself. If someone paid me ten million
not to, I would still have done it.

My hair
and my Without warning, his hand slid away and he was inside me.

He started moving, rocking deep, pounding hard. It was unlike anything
before. I got the sense there was control, if there wasn't he might have had
me, but there was just not much of it.

thumb I liked it. No, I *loved* the thought of making him lose control.

I lifted my knees and hips, encouraging him to lose more. I

l acrosspanting, my body jerking with each of his thrusts. I whispered in l
running my hands across the skin of his back, stroking the damp hai
nape.

Then there was no way I could talk.

l pulled We breathed into each other's open mouths until I felt it and every
in my body clenched, even the secret ones, and I moaned against his l
as he groaned against mine.

his lips After, he let his body weight rest on me for half a minute before h
us over, still connected, him on his back, me on top.

when I My face was pressed against his neck and his hands were on my bc
"Holy cow," I whispered against his neck.

hile his His fingers dug into me but he didn't answer.

apped a A little later he asked, "Did I hurt you?"

chor to "Not even close," I responded.

His hands roamed up my back. One wrapped around my waist, c
ide. into my hair.

vith my He turned his head and murmured in my ear, "Jesus, Roxie, yo
dollarsme."

My body stilled, and for once I was silent.

I didn't know how to process this information. I didn't even know
ny time process the fact that Hank would share it. It was an admission of
ve hurt proportions, especially for a man like Hank. It was an admission bigg
the one I'd made that morning. It was the kind of thing that was s
changed lives.

started Finally, I said, "I thought you were just jazzed after catching t

his ear,guys.”

r at his “That’s part of it,” he replied. “Most of it was knowin’ when I wa
I’d come home to you.”

Good God.

muscle “It helped that you weren’t wearing any underwear,” he finished.

ips just That did seem to be the impetus that speeded things up a bit.

e rolled He rolled us to our sides and his hand went to my jaw.

ottom. “We have to talk,” he announced.

“We are talking,” I pointed out.

“Not after-sex talk. We need to have a conversation.”

Oh no.

I wasn’t ready for a conversation, at least not the kind of conversat
seemed to be talking about.

one slid “It’s late. You have to be tired. I don’t—”

“I know you’re pullin’ away even as you get closer,” he told me.

u undo I started shivering because this was getting plain old scary.

He was so tuned into me it was unreal.

“Hank—”

how to He still didn’t let me talk.

f grand “I don’t like sayin’ it just as much as you aren’t gonna like hearin
ger thanI understand one thing about Flynn. I don’t like you pullin’ away.”

aid that My breath caught in my lungs.

“Don’t say that,” I whispered.

the bad His hand gripped my waist. “It’s not that. It’d never be that. The

way I'd ever hurt you, sweetheart."

is done, My body was shivering like I was cold, and Hank's arms wrapped around me.

"We're different, you and me," I told him.

"I know, Sunshine."

Even though he agreed, I kept on. "We're something else."

Something special, I thought but did not say.

"Roxie, I know."

"I've never been with Billy how I am with you."

"Sweetheart—"

"And because of Billy, I can't have you."

ation he It was his body's turn to still. "Sorry?"

I was so freaked out I was on a roll and let my mouth run away from

"This'll always be between us. You knowing about him, what he said to me, how I let him, comparing yourself to him, me comparing us to Billy and I used to have. It'll color us forever. It'll make it go bad."

"Roxanne—"

' it, but "It's too soon. I was meant to have time, after I got rid of Billy, time to feel good about myself, time to feel worthy, time to feel clean again. I saw it, you're in the middle of it now and I *hate* that. I've gotten used to stink on me. I can't allow his stink to settle on you."

"Roxanne, be quiet for a second and—"

I pressed my face in his throat. "It's not just protecting you from me under that fucking sink, Hank. Even without you seeing that, there's no

always know that I'm gray. You'll always be white, and now, for y
ed tight always be gray."

If his body was still before, it was hard as rock now.

"Roxanne." His voice was as solid as his body, solid and sharp. M
cut through the air like a cleaver. It was filled with warning, so fillec
dangerous, but I was lost in making him understand.

I ignored the warning and went on, "We were over before w
began."

I barely finished the sentence when he rolled, his weight settling
and pushing me into the bed.

"Quiet!" The word hit the room like a gunshot, and it shocked
much my mouth snapped shut.

Even in the dark I could feel his eyes on my face.

m me. Then he said, "You've been talkin' to Jet."

's done I nodded but didn't speak.

to what "Jet and I were havin' a conversation about an internal struggle s
having. We were talkin' about some people we know, friends we bo
friends who deal drugs and run games and likely murder other people.'

time to Holy cow.

But you What friends were those?

d to his And what conversation was he talking about?

I didn't have a chance to ask.

seeing Hank continued, "What I said about them in no way...Roxie, h
, you'll right fucking now...in no way does it transfer to you."

ou, I'll "Hank—"

Now he was on a roll and he was angry.

Way angry.

y name "You need to learn to give yourself a goddamned break. Yo
l it was fuckin' hard on yourself, I wouldn't even begin to be able to make you
badly about yourself as you do. Even if I wanted to. *Christ.*"

re even "You don't understand," I told him.

"I think I fucking well do," he fired back.

on me "No you don't!" I pushed at him, but he wouldn't budge, so I car
anyway. "You didn't see us together, when we'd visit my folks, the lo
me so their faces. My friends who'd try to be nice to him even though they k
was a piece of dirt. I knew they wondered about me. Why was I wit
What was wrong with me?"

"What was wrong with you?" he asked.

My head jerked like he smacked me in the face.

he was Then I started struggling. "Get off me, I'm going home!"

th like, He caught my wrists and held them over my head. "Answer my qu
, what was wrong with you? Why were you with him?"

"I thought he loved me!" I shouted. "He promised me everything. I
full of grand dreams. He was going to show me the fucking world
young and stupid and believed him."

ear this "So, you're sayin' that you're stupid because you believed a pack
some shithead fed you?"

"Yes!"

"It's *you* who's wrong in this scenario, just because you loved so

and since you did you trusted him to tell you the truth?”

I blinked in the darkness.

I hadn't thought of it that way.

u're so “That's what love's all about, Roxanne. You love someone, yo
i feel as them always to tell you the truth.”

“Hank, please, get off me,” I begged.

“Did he get you to deal drugs?” Hank asked.

“*What?*” I screeched.

ried on “Did you deal drugs with him? That's what he did. He was a drug
ooks on Smack.”

new he For some reason the last word he said jarred me out of the momen
th him? became confused.

“What's smack?” I asked.

I could almost hear Hank's teeth grinding. “Jesus. You don't even
what it is. How in the fuck can you think you're gray?”

Then it hit me.

uestion, “Oh...*smack*,” I said with dawning understanding.

“What is it?” Hank asked.

He was “Drugs,” I answered.

. I was “What kind of drugs?” he persevered.

of lies I thought about it, trying to remember what they were referring to
TV cop shows when they mentioned it. I didn't want to sound uncoc
didn't know what it was, but I kind of didn't.

meone, For some reason, as I was silent and trying to think, Hank's body

moving like he was laughing. His hands loosened from my wrists buried his face in my neck.

“Sunshine, you’re a nut.”

ou trust Yes, definitely laughing.

“Are you laughing?” I asked just to check.

He rolled off me, to his side, but took me with him, his arms around me.

“Smack is heroin.” Hank’s voice still sounded amused.

dealer. “Oh God. Sid Vicious died of an overdose of that,” I told him.

“Yeah, a lot of people die of overdoses of that.”

it, and I It took me a moment to realize that our conversation had taken a and very weird turn.

I felt it important to keep on target.

n know “I don’t deal drugs, Hank. I design websites.”

“I know,” he replied and lifted a hand to run his fingers through at the side of my head before he tucked it behind my ear, and then locked around me again. “Roxie, people in six different states have been bringing up your name and no one knows who the fuck you are. On Monday I got copies of employment records, apartment leases, phone bills and credit card statements a mile high with your name on them. I can track your movements the last four years and none of it was even a little shady. Whatever Flynn told me they protected you from it. Every piece of paper and every report that could be used to show you’re as pure as snow. You’re about as gray as the North Pole.

Oh...my...God.

started “You checked up on me?” I asked, horrified.

and he “I checked up on Flynn. Doing that meant I had to check on you the only thing we got, except arrest reports and his name linked to pieces of scum, is the trail he left through you.”

I tried to process that, but Hank interrupted my processing by “Did you know he was dealing drugs?”

locking I closed my eyes in despair.

Here we go, I thought.

I took a deep breath and I admitted, “I had no idea. At first I didn’t. Then I knew he wasn’t out all day doing good deeds, but I did ask questions. I just didn’t want to know.”

drastic I thought that said a lot about me and none of it was good.

Hank replied quietly, “You’ve just proved my point, Sunshine.”

“What point?”

“You didn’t work with him. You didn’t even know what he was. The only thing you did was fall in love with an asshole. He lied to you, you believed him because you loved him. It’s easier for other people to believe what kind of guy he was. They didn’t care about him, they only care about you. You haven’t lived a life of crime. You just lived with a criminal who lied to you about who he was. All this time, you’ve been living a normal life for a woman like Roxie. You aren’t to blame for letting the wrong guy into your heart.”

“I didn’t say anything because there was nothing to say.”

“Except he was wrong.”

“He just didn’t get it.”

I didn’t want a cop boyfriend who was forced to run checks on leases and phone bills to track down an ex-lover on the run.

1, since humiliating, pure and simple.

various When I was silent, Hank kept talking.

“Roxie, it would be different if you let him stay in your heart. I asking, didn’t do that. Eddie told me that you tried to turn him out years ago were a woman alone doing the best she could, but sweetheart, you alone now.”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” I said, and all of a sudden I didn’t care. didn’t.

n’t ask Not that I wanted to talk about it before. Just that since we were, I want to do it anymore. I was exhausted. It felt like I’d run a hundred miles without even an energy bar to see me through.

His hands moved to stroke my back. “All right, Sunshine, we won’t talk about it anymore.”

is about. His fingers trailed soothingly up and down my back.

you and Honestly, it was too much. I couldn’t cope.

me to see He was such a good guy and there just seemed nothing I could say about him to back off and leave me be.

ial who It didn’t matter that I didn’t actually want him to back off and leave me alone. I wanted to be.

It was about me caring about him so much that I wanted him to be something better than me.

I prepared to move. “I think I need to be alone. I’m going to go sit on the couch.”

my old His fingers stopped moving and his hands pressed against my back. It was you aren’t.”

“Please, Hank. I need to be alone. I have to think.”

“That’s the last thing you have to do.”

But you “Really Hank—”

so. You “Quiet, go to sleep.”

I’m not “Seriously.”

Sudden I “Roxie, quiet.”

“Oh for God’s sake,” I snapped.

I didn’t I lay there, angry, or trying to convince myself I was angry. What
I know was that my body was wound up and tense.

Hank just kept his arms around me and kept his silence.

I didn’t talk Then I spent some time trying not to think, but everything he said
was tumbling around in my head. All I could do was think.

Through this, Hank kept his arms around me and kept his silence.

When I stopped trying to stop thinking, I stopped thinking altogether
and I fell asleep.

Hank’s arms were still around me.

Save me

to have

sleep on

ok. “No

“Please, Hank. I need to be alone. I have to think.”

“That’s the last thing you have to do.”

“Really Hank—”

“Quiet, go to sleep.”

“Seriously.”

“Roxie, quiet.”

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Hank’s arms were still around me.



THERE WAS JUST NO SHAKING THIS GUY

“Wake up, Sunshine.”

I opened my eyes as the light switched on and I temporarily blinded.

Then I saw Hank’s thighs, upright, at the side of the bed. They were encased in black track pants with three thin stripes running up the side—two white, the inner one dark gray.

I decided no one should be upright, especially Hank. He’d had, like, hours of sleep.

I closed my eyes again.

“No waking up,” I mumbled.

I rubbed my face into the pillow and turned away from the light.

The bed moved when Hank sat on it. Then the covers slid down to my waist and Hank’s hand rested there.

“Get up, sweetheart, Shamus needs his walk.”

I felt his lips touch my shoulder, then the bed moved again and he

I was lying mostly on my side, but partially on my belly. I felt Shamus’ hand on my front of me and I squinted my eyes at him. He saw me squint. I

wagged, he edged up to me and rested his chin on my waist. He blinked and then closed his eyes again.

Since Shamus closed his eyes, I did too.

Clearly Shamus was in no mood to walk. Shamus shared *my* mood was to sleep more and forget my life was a disaster. Though Shamus wasn't a disaster and he probably didn't comprehend that mine was doggie brains could comprehend such complex situations, I felt pretty he would commiserate and let me sleep.

I'd fallen asleep again when I was suddenly pulled across the bed, blinked, and lifted, an arm behind my knees, one at my waist.

"What the hell!" I screeched, grabbing on to Hank's shoulders. They were walked the few steps to the bathroom, carrying me. He dropped my legs, then set me on my feet in the bathroom door.

I tipped my head back and frowned at him. He kept his arm around my waist and was grinning at me.

His hair was damp from a shower and he looked awake, alert, refreshed.

I found this supremely annoying.

"How can you be bright eyed at this hour? You've barely slept," I said to my
I didn't know what hour it was. All I knew was that it wasn't a good
He kept grinning.

"Conditioning," he answered. "Get dressed. I have to get to work before that we have to walk Shamus, have breakfast, and then you and Shamus spend an hour doing whatever it is you do that, in the end, makes you and His tail more cute and sexy than you do right now."

d twice I stared at him.

Was he serious?

“Excuse me?” I asked.

, which “Get dressed, Roxie.”

is’s life

, but if

certain

“I’ll have you know that I’ve spent years honing my getting-ready to a fine and practiced art, and when I’m done with it I look far better do right now.”

flipped

“No you don’t.”

My mouth dropped open.

s as he

He wasn’t only serious, he was insane.

egs and

I’d been perfecting my high maintenance toilette since I was twelve old. My family was always yelling at me to get out of the bathroom.

und my

left the house without at least two coats of mascara, a shimmer of bl one lipstick and one lip gloss, just in case I changed my mind so during the day as to which was more appropriate for my outfit.

ert and

“Yes I do,” I told him. “When I wake up my eyes are all squinty face is all blotchy and my hair is always a mess.”

asked.

rd hour.

He pulled me into his body and tilted his head down so his face inch from mine. “I see you’re in the mood to argue, but I have to ge station, so can we argue while we’re walkin’ the dog?”

Before I could answer, he rubbed his nose along mine. He let rk, but turned me around to face the bathroom, put his hand to my ass and gav have to little shove. I whirled around to glare at him and say something sma look no least say something, but he was already walking away.

Shamus sauntered into the doorway of the bathroom and sat do

wagging and his tongue rolled out.

“Whatever,” I muttered and grabbed my toothbrush.



WE DIDN'T ARGUE while walking Shamus. I pouted and practiced my routine on my shoulder while trying not to think about my life's spiraling descent to the seven depths of hell.

My cold shoulder didn't work literally or figuratively. Hank ignored me completely and slung his arm around my neck, making me walk against his side.

I also managed to think of nothing but my downward life spiral to the depths of hell, and by the time we made it back to his house I had already been there yearsthrough the fourth depth of hell and was careening headlong into the fifth.

I never Hank left me to my thoughts and my getting ready routine. Wash and scrambled eggs and made toast, I showered.

metime I was standing at his bathroom sink applying blusher when he brought coffee and a plate of food. They were good scrambled eggs. A hint of and my and some cheese, and the toast was toasted perfectly—not too light, brown—and with a generous coating of real butter and grape jelly.

was an I found it immensely irritating that Hank was even a good fucking

t to the I ripped off a chunk of toast angrily with my teeth and chewed

Hank watched me. He was leaning against the bathroom doorway, me go, crossed at the ankle, plate in his hand, forking up some eggs.

ve me a “What now?” he asked, his eyes lazy and amused.

rt, or at “Nothing,” I answered with my mouth full.

wn, tail “You have jelly on your face,” he told me.

My eyes flew to the mirror.

Shit.

I rubbed it off, put down my toast and took a sip of coffee.

ly cold
hrough

He walked into the bathroom, kissed the side of my head and walk

Fucking Hank.



ored it
pressed

WE WERE PARKED behind Fortnum's and I had my hand on the door
when Hank stopped me and turned me to him.

hrough
waltzed

"You want to tell me what's buggin' you?" he asked.

"No," I answered.

ft.

His eyes smiled but his mouth didn't.

hile he

How he could smile, I did not know. Even if it wasn't a full-blown
to my mind there was nothing to smile about.

ight me

"Is this about our conversation last night?" he went on.

f garlic

"No," I repeated. This time it was a lie.

not too

It was *totally* about our conversation last night. I couldn't get it out
head, any of it. Last night, he'd made sense. In fact, everyone made
cook. Daisy, Duke, everyone.

l while

I wanted to believe, even tried to believe.

y, feet

In my heart, I couldn't.

Deep down, I knew I had to protect myself from that time. The ti
happens in any relationship when your judgment was called into qu
Then where would I be? What would I say? I didn't have solid moral
to stand on, and Hank was a pillar of solid moral ground. Any relat

had to have equality. Ours did not.

He was clean and good.

I was dirty, and if not bad, then at least dubious.

ed out. Who wanted to be the dubious girlfriend?

Not me.

That said, I spent more of my time thinking about him telling m
handleundid him than my moral dubiousness.

“I can’t believe you can cook,” I snapped, deciding to focus on sor
other than the matter at hand.

His smile went away and he did a slow blink. “Sorry?”

“You’re a good cook,” I said.

1 smile, “You’re angry because I can make eggs?”

“Well...yeah,” I said, not caring, even a little bit, that I s
demented.

Demented was good. No one wanted a demented girlfriend.

t of my “Sunshine, I can scramble eggs and I can cook meat on the grill, th
e sense, extent of my cooking skills,” he told me. “Feel better?”

“You make good toast too.” I made it sound like an accusation.

He stared at me a beat then threw his head back and laughed. Out
laughed. I’d never seen him laugh, not like that. I’d *felt* him laugh,
me that heard him chuckle, but I’d never watched him laugh. He was good-
question. all the time, sometimes better than others, but when he laughed
ground beautiful.

ionship This did not make me happy, so I scowled at him.

He caught sight of my scowl and snatched me across the cab into his arms and buried his face in my neck.

“You’re a nut,” he said there.

Enough was enough. I had to end this. I didn’t want to, I *had* to.

Okay, so Hank didn’t get it. And neither did anyone else. So the people that I thought I was a crazy person and I would disappoint a lot of people if I let it off with Hank. That didn’t matter. What mattered was I knew what I was doing, and what I was doing was for Hank.

He deserved better than me.

I should point out that I didn’t really know what I was doing but I thought I kind of did.

So I announced, “I’m moving back in with Uncle Tex. He’s a big guy and he has a shotgun. He can protect me until this mess is over.”

Hank’s head came up and he was smiling at me like I was being cute and adorable. “You aren’t movin’ back in with Tex.”

“Yes I am.”

“Let’s forget for a second that no way in hell would he let you. I want to protect you. First, I want to make sure you’re safe and the only way to do that is to use me to make you safe. Second, Tex is an ex-con. Something happens, and you want to use that shotgun, there’ll be uncomfortable questions as to why he and I’d use that gun.”

Shit.

I didn’t want Uncle Tex to have to answer uncomfortable questions.

“So I’ll move into the safe room until this is over,” I tried.

“Lee won’t let you.”

his arms “Why not?”

“Because I won’t let him let you.”

I scowled at him some more.

Fucking Hank.

They all There was nothing for it. It was now or never.

I broke “Okay then, I’m breaking up with you. Trust me, Hank, it’s for yo
it I was good. I know you don’t understand, but one day, when you’re with
woman who makes you French toast with sweetened cream cheese sp
the middle, you will.”

But I *And I hope she’s boring, boring, boring*, I thought, but did I
because it wasn’t nice and I didn’t really mean it. I didn’t want Hank
guy. He boring, but if I was honest with myself I didn’t want him to forget me

I made this announcement on a wave of bravado and a seriously
ute and stomach clutch. In fact, I was almost certain I was going to vomit.

He shook his head and his smile didn’t change. Even though
breaking up with him, he *still* was looking at me like I was cute and ad

won’t let “You’re not breakin’ up with me,” he said.

at is for The nausea left me and I blinked at him.

he has “I am,” I told him.

’s got a “You’re not.”

“Hank, I *am*.”

s. “Sunshine, you are not.”

“You can’t tell me I’m not breaking up with you when I’m break
with you!” I said, fairly loudly.

“I think I just did.”

I looked at the ceiling of the cab.

“I *do not* believe this,” I told the ceiling.

There was just no shaking this guy!

Hank’s hand moved to my chin and he forced me to look at him. ‘

our own I have never met a woman more annoyingly stubborn than you.”

at a nice Well!

read in He ignored my flashing eyes (and I was sure they were seriously fl

and went on, “You’ve got some fool idea in your head that you’re pr

not sayme and you’re fired up to keep it there.”

to have “It isn’t a fool idea,” I retorted.

either. “It’s beyond a fool idea,” Hank shot back.

painful *Well!*

He ignored my grinding teeth and his grin came back. “Lucky f

I was I’m as patient as you are stubborn.”

orable. “You’re not patient. You’re more stubborn than me.”

“That works too.”

“Hank, you have to listen to me—”

“On this subject, no I don’t.”

“Hank—”

“Let’s get you inside, I’ve got to work.”

king up “We have to talk.”

“We’ll talk later.”

“We need to talk now.”

His arms tightened and he pulled me out of my seat and across
His arm went around my waist as one hand slid into my hair and til
head down to look at his face. It was a tight fit and we were super clc
face was all I could see.

“When Fortnum’s closes, I’ll come and get you. We’ll go home
“Roxie, make dinner. We’ll make love and afterward you can try and convi
that we’re not gonna work. When that doesn’t happen, I’ll convince
are. Then, we’ll probably make love again and then we’ll sleep. Ho
ashing)that sound?”

otectin’ It sounded fucking great.

Jeez.

I was definitely in trouble. In fact, I was so in trouble you could t
on me.

I gave up.

or you, Temporarily.

“I’m going to Tod and Stevie’s tonight. Emergency Wedding S
and then Tod’s helping me with an outfit for Daisy’s party.”

His body started shaking and I realized, belatedly, he was enjoyi
He actually thought this was fun. My stomach was tied in knots an
was entertained.

“How exactly were you thinkin’ you were going to manage to b
with me and go back to Chicago when you have no car, a car full of y
is in my house and you’ve got a more active social life in Denver
have?” he asked.

“They’re *your* friends,” I snapped.

his lap. “Too late, sweetheart. You can’t scrape them off either. Altho
ltd mywould be amusing to watch you try.”

se. His Good grief.

Whatever.

. We’ll Time to cut my losses.

nce me “Don’t you have to get to work?” I asked, sounding uppity.

you we “Yeah,” he said.

w does

He gave me a light kiss, but the look in his eyes told me he’d hav
to have done more.

He slid me back to my seat. I got out and charged ahead. He ca
with me and grabbed my hand.

tattoo it

I sighed.

We walked into Fortnum’s hand in hand, and it was packed.

Hank tensed. He did a scan of the crowd and relaxed when he de
was safe. He yanked my arm so I fell into him and he kissed me, d
ummit, swift.

Then he grinned down at me with approval while I stared up at h
ng this. body leaning into his, my head completely dizzy.

d Hank

Then he was gone.



reak up

our shit IT WAS a little after noon when she walked in. I wouldn’t have notice
she wasn’t looking around in hopeful expectation. It wasn’t that she
than I pretty, she was. But there was just nothing about her that made yc
looking at her once you first noticed her.

She was wearing a long-sleeved, V-necked blue T-shirt, jeans and

ugh, itShe had strawberry-blonde hair, peaches and cream skin and warm, eyes.

As I'd done while people watching many times before, I n redesigned her outfit so that it would pack a bigger punch, get her r give her some flair. Better belt, definitely. A funky necklace woul Some cleavage for certain. And a different pair of jeans, ones that utilitarian but that made a jeans-like fashion statement. She had a grea and she needed to learn to work it.

ve liked She was looking at Uncle Tex (or kind of staring at him in horro she caught my eye, decided I was the safer bet for whatever was on he ight upwalked up to me and smiled.

“Hi. Do you work here?” she asked.

“I do today,” I answered, smiling back.

I was sitting behind the book counter.

cided it When Hank dropped me off, Indy, Uncle Tex and Jet were the on eep butworking. The place was jammed and there were empty coffe everywhere. They weren't even keeping up with the crowd and had i im, myto clean up. I gathered the dirty dishes and started washing, happy something to take my mind off my thoughts.

Not that I could have thought anything. Lynyrd Skynyrd's “Gimm Steps” was blaring from the radio when I hit the sink, and Skynyrd pla d her ifthe next two hours.

wasn't Once the crowd died down, Indy gave me a quick training sessior u keepbook counter cash register (Uncle Tex was strictly espresso and di book sales) so she and Jet could go see Jet's dad in the hospital. The l boots.going to swing by and get us some lunch on the way back.

brown The girl looked to Tex then back to me.

“Does India Savage still own this store?” she asked.

mentally “Yep. You looking for her?” I replied.

noticed, She blushed and her eyes slid away. “Actually...” she hesitated help. looked back at me. “I’m looking for a friend of hers. Hank Nightingale weren’t he come in here?”

t figure I stared at her.

r), then Holy cow.

r mind, I felt something twist inside me, something painful.

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “Hank comes in here. Do you know him?”

ly ones “We, um...dated a while back. Then I moved to New Mexico. No moved back and I thought I’d look him up. He and Indy, well you they’re close...” Her voice trailed away before she brightened determination. “I’m Beth,” she introduced herself.

e cups “Roxie,” I replied.

no time She looked at me and her eyes did a quick sweep. I was sitting on to have my legs crossed and a bit away from the counter, leaning my elbows was wearing a fitted, boat-necked black sweater and worn-out, e Three Levi’s. I had an intricate, chrome mesh choker around my neck yed for matching wide bracelet over my sweater at the wrist, and round-toed suede, platform wedges with kickass magenta binding and sling-back s

l on the “Have you worked here very long?” she asked.

dn’t do “I don’t really work here, I’m filling in.”

y were I felt badly for her. This couldn’t be easy and she didn’t even know sleeping with her ex-boyfriend. I didn’t know how to tell her, or ev

should. I decided I shouldn't, especially considering the circumstances.

"Listen," I began. "Do you want me to give Hank a message?"

ed then "Um, yeah. Could you tell him—?"

e. Does The bell over the door went. She turned, I looked over and we both saw Hank walk in.

Damn.

His timing was shit.

As he walked in, it hit me even more than normally how good he looked. Jeans that fit so well they might be illegal in a few states. Gun and bad boy killer, dark-brown belt with a heavy, matte silver buckle. An olive green sweater with half zip and a high collar, the hem tucked in behind his legs, untucked around the rest of his waist, sleeves shoved up his forearms.

ow I've
I know,
d with

He could have been in a fucking catalogue, and he didn't have stylists to make him look that way. It came naturally.

His eyes were on me, warm and lazy, the edges of his lips turned up in a sexy smile.

a stool,
on it. I
vintage

Shit, shit, shit.

and a "Hank—" I started, but it came out quiet and croaky. He rounded the counter as I cleared my throat. "Hank," I said, louder this time, but he wasn't there.

l, black
strap.

I'd come away from the counter and tilted my head up to look at her. Even though Beth was standing there, and before I could stop I felt Hank wrapped his hand round the back of my head and gave me a light kiss.

w I was
ven if I

He hadn't even looked at her.

current “Thought I’d take you to lunch,” he said softly, his eyes looking in
his hand still around my head. He’d moved away barely an inch.

Shit.

I cleared my throat again even though I didn’t need to and said,
“Beth saw you remember Beth.” Then my eyes slid to the side.

He let me go and straightened, turning to Beth, and I watched him
in the second he seemed blank, like he didn’t remember her and my breath
in my throat.

Then he smiled. Not the sexy lip turn, but a friendly, genuine smile
I looked. “Beth. Jesus. What’re you doin’ here? I thought you lived in
I got on a brown Mexico.”

he belt, Beth looked between Hank and me. She was blushing, big time.

“I moved back to Denver,” she replied.

the three Hank shifted into my space and his arm went around my shoulder
unconsciously doing a man-brand move, not having any idea why she
was up in there.

She went from just blushing to looking like she’d plunge a knife
into my gut if one was handy. I searched the counter just in case there was
a key opener within reach.

he was “That’s great,” Hank said, still oblivious.

“Hank,” I cut in. “Beth’s here—”

at him. “No!” she interrupted me, her eyes on me and they were huge.
I said, he popped by...um...” She was faltering. It was going to have to be Roxi
rescue.

Quickly I said, “Beth’s here to buy that Dan Brown book. You know

n mine, one about da Vinci?”

Hank looked down at me, likely wondering why I was sharing this information.

“Hank, “I told her we didn’t have it. You wouldn’t know where to get it, you? She wants to read it, like, bad,” I finished lamely.

1. For a God, I was such an idiot.

caught Hank looked at me then at Beth and cottoned on to the situation was just looking for a book, I would hardly know her name or alert his presence.

n New His face softened and he moved away, taking his arm from around shoulders.

“Beth,” he murmured and my heart lurched for Hank, who obviously badly, but especially for Beth, who was humiliated.

oulders, “Maybe I’ll try the Tattered Cover!” she announced gamely then he was at me. “Thanks for your help Roxie.” She looked back at Hank. “Hank to see you. Maybe I’ll see you around.”

e in her She moved to leave and I called out, “Wait!”

a letter I stepped off my stool, bumping into Hank who was still close.

“Why don’t you two go to lunch?” I suggested.

“What?” Beth asked, or kind of expelled in a breath filled with mortification.

“I just “Sorry?” Hank asked, staring at me like I’d lost my mind.

e to the I had an idea. It was a heartbreaking idea, but it was something.

She seemed sweet, she was pretty and she liked him. She liked him enough to come searching for him when she got back to Denver. So

normal and probably never had anyone shoot at her, nor ever would.

absurd So she needed a snazzier wardrobe. Indy would help her out.

Maybe she didn't spread sweetened cream cheese on French toast, would was relatively certain that Shamus would like her. Then again, she seemed to like everyone.

I stepped away from Hank. "It's been busy so I can't leave, and a . If she Indy and Jet are bringing back food. You two go to lunch, catch up n to her know...old friends and all that."

Hank was no longer staring at me like I'd lost my mind. He was staring at me like he wanted to strangle me.

I took another step away from Hank.

isly felt "I don't think—" Beth started.

"Can I talk to you a second?" Hank interrupted her and didn't wait looked to respond. He took my hand, nodded sharply to Beth, said, "Just a minute, great and dragged me out from behind the counter and toward the bookshelves.

While being dragged, I caught a look at Uncle Tex who was shaking his head at me like I'd let down the side.

Hank dragged me past fiction, biography, crime, romance and strategy (math, health, social studies) and had a huge table on it with cartons of up vinyl wedged in them.

He stopped, turned and looked down at me.

I opened my mouth to speak but he said, "Don't say a fucking word."

ed him I closed my mouth.

he was Hmm, seemed Hank was angry.

He took a deep breath through his nostrils, getting control.

Then he said in a soft, dangerous voice, "Please tell me you didn't do it, but I'll fix me up with a woman I used to date."

Shamus "Hank—"

He didn't let me say anything. "I used to be patient. Now I'm finally hard stoppin' myself from shakin' some goddamned sense into you."

Up, you "Hank—"

"Roxanne, I just experienced my *girlfriend* trying to fix me up with another woman."

"I'm not your girlfriend. I broke up with you."

He stepped closer.

I stepped back.

for me
minute,"
res. I'd opened.

"That wasn't nice, doin' that to Beth," he said.

ing his
was doing her a favor," I defended myself.

(travel,
pturned
her way to some job in New Mexico."

Shit.

d." Shit, shit, *shit*.

"I thought she was an ex-girlfriend," I told him.

"She never made it that far and wouldn't have. I was doin' a f

favor, and even if it makes me sound like a bastard, I'll tell you I only
just try knowin' she was soon gonna move to another state."

Oh shit, I thought.

"Damn," I muttered aloud, feeling like a total bitch. It must have been
ndin' it she had to walk into Fortnum's. I looked at Hank. "I'll go talk to her,
him.

"No, you've done enough. I'll take her out to lunch and I'll pick
up with from Tod's when you're done tonight. When we get home, we're gonna
a conversation and put this shit to rest, once and for all."

I didn't like the sound of that.

"Hank—" I started.

"I don't want you goin' to Tod's with anyone but Tex, Duke, Lee
of his boys. Got me?"

e space His eyes were glittering angry, and I had the feeling he was
keeping his temper in check.

I nodded.

efore. I The sleeping tiger had awoken and I was not about to prod him
stick.

a buddy He stared at me angrily. I bit my lip.

and on Then I couldn't help myself. I hated that he was angry with me. I
hand on his chest and leaned into him.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered.

"You can apologize later, after we've talked, when you're naked
my bed."

riend a Holy cow.

y did it “Hank—”

He put a hand to my neck and tipped his head down to get in n
“Roxanne, now’s a good time to be quiet.”

aken all Shit.

” I told He was still angry, and I felt like a total bitch.

I braced, getting ready for him to explode.

you up Then, to my complete surprise, his anger cleared. He gave me a li
na have and squeezed my neck affectionately.

“We’ll talk later,” he said quietly.

Then he was gone.

I stood there. It could have been minutes, it could have been hour
: or one stood there, looking at the space where Hank had been, not quite
process how easy it was to fight with him. Even when he was that an
barely could shift it and kiss me good-bye.

My phone rang.

I pulled it out of my back pocket, flipped it open and put it to my e
with a “Hello?” I said, expecting just about anyone, Annette, Indy,
anyone.

I should have looked before I answered because it wasn’t Annett
put my Daisy or anyone.

It was Billy.

“I saw you walkin’ his fuckin’ dog with him, sittin’ in his goddam
and in in the car, kissin’ him, you fucking *bitch*.”

My breath left me and I stood stock-still.

“You’re gonna learn, Roxie. You’re gonna fucking *learn*.”

my face. Then he disconnected.

I kept the phone to my ear and stood frozen, continuing to stare in space, unseeing, not breathing, scared stiff.

Billy was watching me.

“A little help!” Uncle Tex yelled from the front, jarring me out of my stupor.

I flipped the phone shut, shoved it into my pocket and said, “Coming!”

I’d think about it later. For now, I was protected, safe. The cameras were on me, even now. I was never alone. They’d find him before he could get to me. Vance was out there looking for Billy, and I knew Hank would kill him if he got any closer. I was safe.

I realized what I’d just thought and closed my eyes.

Hank. I should tell him. I should tell Lee. I should tell someone.

I walked to the front and there were half a dozen customers at the counter, two waiting to buy books.

“Girl, get the fuckin’ lead out!” Uncle Tex boomed.

I decided I’d tell Uncle Tex later. I’d think about Hank and the conversation later. I’d kick myself for what I did to poor Beth later.

I walked to the book counter and rang up the books.

my lap

“You’re gonna learn, Roxie. You’re gonna fucking *learn*.”

Then he disconnected.

I kept the phone to my ear and stood frozen, continuing to stare into the space, unseeing, not breathing, scared stiff.

Billy was watching me.

“A little help!” Uncle Tex yelled from the front, jarring me out of my stupor.

I flipped the phone shut, shoved it into my pocket and shouted. “Coming!”

I’d think about it later. For now, I was protected, safe. The cameras were on me, even now. I was never alone. They’d find him before he could get to me. Vance was out there looking for Billy, and I knew Hank would keep me safe.

I realized what I’d just thought and closed my eyes.

Hank. I should tell him. I should tell Lee. I should tell someone.

I walked to the front and there were half a dozen customers at the coffee counter, two waiting to buy books.

“Girl, get the fuckin’ lead out!” Uncle Tex boomed.

I decided I’d tell Uncle Tex later. I’d think about Hank and my conversation later. I’d kick myself for what I did to poor Beth later.

I walked to the book counter and rang up the books.



THE GOOD LORD OVERWHELMS HER ON OCCASION

“**W**hat do you think, Roxie?” Tod asked.

I looked up and noticed everyone was watching me—Indy, Daisy, Annette, Tod, Stevie and Jet. My mind had been elsewhere, because I’d just lived the weirdest fucking day of my life.

Now, I was sitting, drinking a glass of sparkling wine in Tod and Stevie’s living room (black carpeting, dove-gray walls, mauve furniture, glass coffee table, sleek, feminine, stark white, human-sized sculptures here and there—totally gay and cool as shit).

The Emergency Wedding Summit was in full swing.

Strewn everywhere were fabric swatches and ribbons of every color, wedding magazines from four different countries, examples of party menus, glossy brochures from wedding venues, information pamphlets for photographers, bands and DJs and invitation samples. Lining the dining room table were seven (seven!) wedding cake tops ranging from the traditional bride and groom to a teddy bear bride and groom. *The Wedding Planner Scrapbook* was open on the glass coffee table, bursting with even more stuff than it could hold to carry the day before.

Discussion had been hot and heavy. Starting with wedding col-

veering crazily to wedding gowns, churches, bands, you name it. Indy had no definite idea of what she wanted, and every idea she had clashed with the one Tod had.

Throughout all of this Stevie calmly served hot and delicious d'oeuvres.

Also throughout all of this, I alternately wound myself up about coming "conversation" with Hank and thoughts about my weird day.



EARLIER THAT AFTERNOON, about half an hour after Hank left, Duke, Ally, up and Indy and Jet arrived not much later with lunch. While we were mainly I told Uncle Tex about Billy's phone call.

"You've got to be fuckin' shittin' me!" he boomed, tuna sandwich residue flying from his mouth.

I dodged the bits of food and shook my head.

"Have you called Hank?" Jet asked, looking upset.

"Things were kinda busy," I answered.

"I'm callin' Hank. Give me your phone, woman," Uncle Tex demanded, holding out his big hand toward Indy.

Indy knew the drill with Tex and cell phones (as in, he had no clue), so she took out her phone, flipped it open, scrolled to Hank's number and pressed the button before handing it to Uncle Tex.

I turned to Jet as Uncle Tex stormed away, taking his sandwich with him. "Hank and I had a talk last night."

Jet's upset melted immediately and she smiled at me. "That's good. You get everything straightened out?"

y had a “Not exactly,” I said. “Anyway, I just wanted to tell you that I me
iolently something about me being gray, and Hank got a little...angry.”

Jet blinked at me. “Pardon?” she asked.

is hors “He said something about you two having a conversation ar
whatever you two talked about in no way, or, I should say his exact
out the were...” I did a fake, deep voice, ““Roxie, hear this right fucking nov
way does it transfer to you’.”

Jet’s mouth spread in a huge smile. “See! I told you he wouldn
showed you were gray. Now you don’t have anything to worry about.”

eating, Right.

I wished.

ndwich “What’s this about gray?” Indy asked, looking between the two of
Before anyone could answer, Uncle Tex was back. “He wants to
you.”

I closed my eyes for a second, wondering what Hank’s mood w
after lunch with Beth. Then I took the phone.

anded, “Hey,” I said.

“You okay?” he asked, no anger in his tone, only concern.

ie). She I felt a little of my tension ebb away.
pressed

“Freaked out a little bit, but okay,” I answered.

ith him. “I know it doesn’t seem like it but this is good, Roxie. I’ll call I
he’ll tell Vance. We already know Flynn’s been followin’ you, but w
od. Did he’s doin’, he’s been careful. He’s givin’ Vance some trouble and Va
top-notch tracker. Now Flynn is getting desperate, angry and stupid an
good. That means he’ll make a mistake.”

mentioned I nodded. That made sense, and even though Billy getting *more* de-
angry and stupid was pretty fucking scary, getting him didn't sound &
sounded *great*.

id how "Okay," I said into the phone.

t words "He has no idea the kind of protection you have. You're gonna b
v, in noHank assured me.

"Okay," I repeated, believing him.

't think "Make sure you have someone with you when you go to Tod's," I
on.

"Whisky," I said quietly. "You told me that already."

"I know. I wanna make certain you got it."

us. Hank was *such* a good guy.

talk to "I got it," I told him.

"I'll be at Tod's at nine to pick you up."

ould be "Okay," I said, *again*.

"Later, Sunshine," and he disconnected.

I flipped the phone shut and handed it to Indy just as the bell o
door rang. We all turned to see who it was and my eyes widened at
saw.

ee and "Ohmigod!" Indy yelled. "Beth! I thought you were in New Mexic
Shit.

hatever Shit, shit, shit.

nce is a Indy hugged Beth and Beth said to her, "I moved back. I hea
d that's finally hooked up with Lee."

sperate, “Yeah,” Indy showed Beth her left hand, wiggling her fingers. good. Itgetting married.”

“That’s great!” Beth replied, smiling happily at Indy. Then her eyes to me and her face got pink. “Um, Roxie. Can we talk?”

“e fine,” Shit!

Shit, shit, shit!

Indy, Jet, Duke and Uncle Tex all stared at me. Only Uncle Tex went about my earlier idiotic blunder.

“Sure,” I said to Beth.

We were all eating our sandwiches at the book counter. Beth walked over to a couch and sat down.

I turned to her and started quickly, “I’m sorry. It was stu—”

Her eyes were kind as she looked at me and she interrupted softly. “be sorry. Hank told me about your...ordeal.”

I gaped at her. “He did?”

“Yes. I’m so, so sorry you went through that. He told me, because you’re behaving erratically and you have trust issues.” She patted my

“That’s understandable.”

Behaving erratically?

Trust issues?

Good God.

I was going to *kill* Hank.

Beth went on, “Anyway, what I wanted to talk to you about was..” she stopped, looking uncomfortable.

“We’re “Yeah?” I prompted, smiling at her even as I mentally planned untimely demise.

yes slid “You dress really cool,” she blurted. “And I thought...maybe, don’t mind, could you, maybe, um...take me shopping?”

I gaped at her again.

She went on in a rush, “I know, we barely know each other and i x knew really weird that I’d ask but—”

“I’d love that!” I cried excitedly, not thinking before the words f of my mouth.

i and I Then I thought.

Oh shit.

What was I saying? I was leaving as soon as I could get my car. “Don’t need to become Beth’s personal shopper.

“That would be so cool!” she exclaimed while I had a mini flip-c hesitated a second before she hugged me. When she pulled away she of that try, but I can’t really get it together. I’ll try something new and y knee. looking like a freak. I just need a little fashion direction.”

Damn.

I couldn’t back out now.

And she was right. She definitely needed a little fashion direction.

“I can do that,” I said on a smile.

“Thank you,” she hugged me again. “Give me your phone. I’ll p .um... my number in it. Here’s mine.”

We traded phones. We traded numbers. She hugged me again. She to Indy, met Duke, Jet and Tex and then left, happy as a clam.

Hank's Well, at least I didn't feel like a bitch anymore.

That was good, right?

if you "What was that all about?" Indy called to me after Beth left.

"Roxie tried to set Hank up with that girl," Uncle Tex told her.

Indy, Jet and Duke stared at me like Uncle Tex told them I danced
t's like, the middle of Broadway wearing nothing but Mardi Gras beads and a s

"I thought *you* were his girlfriend," Duke said.

lew out "I am and I'm not. I broke up with him," I replied.

Indy, Jet and Duke's stares intensified.

"Why would you do a fool thing like that?" Duke exploded, sounding
lot like Uncle Tex.

I didn't "Don't worry. He didn't really accept my breaking up with him.
thinks we're together," I assured him.

ut. She Indy and Jet smiled at each other knowingly.

said, "I
end up Good Grief.

I closed my eyes and rested my head on the back of the couch.

"Good fuckin' God. These fuckin' girls. I swear, they're gonna
all," Duke announced, and I heard him stomp away, likely in
bookshelves.

I felt the couch move on either side of me.

I opened my eyes and turned my head one way then the other. In
rogram Jet were there.

talked "You wanna talk?" Indy asked.

I closed my eyes again. "No."

“We’re here.” I heard Jet say.

They sat with me for a second in silent moral support then they drifted away.



After closing, both Tex and Duke walked us to Tod and Stevie’s leaving us when we were safe inside. Then they hightailed it home, making clear that was as close as they wanted to get to The Emergency Wedding Summit.

Daisy and Annette were already there. Ally arrived ten minutes after we did.

Annette and Jason had spent part of the day getting over hangovers from the Lottie Strip Club Extravaganza and part of the day mountain biking. Annette told me that Jason opted out of The Emergency Wedding Summit to watch a ballgame with Eddie at his house.

At that moment, I wished I was with them.

“Well?” Tod interrupted my thoughts. “You have style. You wear Choo, Manolo and have a real pashmina. Your opinion counts. So, what do you think?” Tod asked, as if anyone who hadn’t gone the way of five hundred dollar shoes didn’t have the right to an opinion. He went on, giving a thumbs up. “Okay, I’ll grant that maybe chocolate isn’t good for a wedding but we can pull off tangerine. I know we could.”

His stare moved from me and turned into a glare when it settled on me. “Roxie? You okay?” Annette asked, her green eyes both sharp and kind as they looked at me.

Slowly, I put my champagne glass on the coffee table and stood.

“No,” I said to Annette. “No, I don’t think I’m okay.”

by both Annette stood too, preparing. She’d known me a long time, she
what was coming.

“Honey—” she started.

house, I turned from her to Tod. “Tod, you’re sweet but it’s Indy’s wedding
aking it colors are pink and ivory. She’s having a DJ, not a band, so they can
/edding AC/DC or whatever the fuck she wants to hear. If she wants gerbera
she’s going to fucking well have them. And there will be no teddy
fter we anywhere. You of all people know India Savage is not a teddy bear per

Tod blinked at me then said, “Okay, girlie. Sit down, let me get you
rs from champagne.”

3 again. “No,” I continued. “I don’t think I can sit down and I don’t want
nmit to more champagne.” I started pacing. “Oh...my...God! Billy’s out
watching me. I was walking Shamus with Hank and he was watching
talking with Hank in his 4Runner and he was watching. Hank kissed
Jimmy he was fucking watching!”

what do “Honey, come here,” Annette said softly.

undred I ignored her. “I tried to fix Hank up with another woman today
m inch, was I thinking? I cannot believe I did that! I humiliated Beth. It was
e could Even though I didn’t mean to be bitchy, it was still bitchy. Hank was s
with me. He was so angry it hurt. Then he wasn’t angry anymore. Just
Indy. that, poof!” I flicked my hands out in front of me. “He had it under
nd kind and we were, like, normal again. What in the hell is that all about? Fight
supposed to be out of control, ugly and brutal, where you say shit you
take back and behave like idiots and someone, usually me, ends up in
don’t know how to fight like that, where you just say what you have

and get over it. I mean, what the hell is that?"

I knew I was now shouting.

"She gets like this sometimes. You just gotta roll with it," she explained to the room.

I continued to ignore her and ranted on, "Hank wants to have a conversation tonight. We had a conversation last night! I can't have a conversation! He'll say shit that freaks me out because he's, like, in my face. We haven't even known each other for two weeks! How can he be so confident?" *brain? It's unreal!*"

Everyone kept silent and watched me.

"Then he'll kiss me and I'll get dizzy and won't be able to think straight. This is too soon. It's too much, too soon. I need to think. I need to get some air. I need to get...the fuck...out of here."

I started shaking and my nostrils started stinging and I knew I was coming. I couldn't have stopped it even if I tried.

I turned to Annette as the tears fell down my cheeks.

"Nettie," I whispered. "He's out there and he's *watching* me."

Then I couldn't see her anymore because she melted in my tears.

Arms closed around me and I heard Annette murmur in my ear. "Sweetie. Hush now."

"He's watching me," I repeated. "He's watching me with Hank. I want his filthy eyes on Hank."

"Hush," Annette said.

I wrapped my arms around her and held on tight. She held me back. I only moved to stroke my hair.

After a while I heard her say, "Can we use your bathroom?"

"I'll show you," Stevie said, and his hands were light on me. Annette guided me up the stairs.

Annette and Stevie helped me clean up my face in the bathroom. I have myself together, holding Annette's hand as Stevie wiped my face with another warm, wet washcloth.

My brain. "Feel better?" he asked, smiling encouragingly.

"No," I told him, but I was trying to smile too.

He kissed my forehead. "You will," he said, and then looked me in the eyes again. "It may seem like you won't, but you will. I promise."

I nodded, wanting to believe him, and with a hand squeeze from Annette, we walked to the upstairs landing and heard Ally say, "I'm gonna talk to that asshole."

The minute they find that asshole, I want my turn with him in the bedroom. "It was room."

"Ally," Indy said.

"Sugar, I'm talking to Marcus to-night," Daisy broke in. "He's got his shit up. Ain't gonna be no holding room for Billy fucking Flynn, but I have anything to say about it."

"Hush, Daisy," Indy said.

"No fucking way. I want a shot at him first. I'm gonna kill that motherfucker," Ally broke in.

"Ally," Indy said.

"No, I'm gonna kill him," Daisy declared.

"Oh for God's sake, no one's going to kill him!" Indy said, loud and clear. "It was time."

Then Stevie, Annette and I jumped as we heard glass shatter.

as they After a second of loaded silence Indy said, now quietly, “Tod.”

“Seen a lot of shit in my life.” Tod’s voice was vibrating with
I pulled “Lived in a closet for years, hiding who I was. My parents still don’t
with a Had friends die of AIDS, had other friends beaten up in parking l
alleys for no other reason but because of who they are. Never has that
my living room. Never have I seen a sweet, spirited being that
broken. No, I think *I’m* going to kill Billy fucking Flynn.”

in the This announcement was met with silence from downstairs.

I swallowed and looked at Annette and Stevie.

Annette, Then I whispered, “Am I broken?”

to Lee. Stevie’s hand came to my arm. “You’ve been trying so hard to
holdinggirlie, that you haven’t even realized you’ve been through hell. We
been watching, we’ve all been worried. No one can be strong that lo
good this is happening. Go with it. You need it.”

tta step “But,” I began, “I’m not strong. I’m weak.”

not if I Stevie’s brows drew together. “Why would you think that?”

“I cry all the time,” I explained.

His hand went away from my arm and he waved it between us. “O
ill that So does Tod and he’s the strongest person I know. You would n
believe the shit he’s been through in his life.”

I blinked at him.

He linked his arm through mine. “That’s for a different bo
dly this champagne. Let’s get you an outfit for Daisy’s party, hmm?”

He walked me down the stairs and I threw a glance up at Annette.

She stood at the landing staring down. When she caught my eye, she gave me a kiss.

anger. Her eyes were filled with tears.

to know.



ots and WE WERE all upstairs in the second bedroom, known as Burgundy's room. We had all been in (Burgundy Rose was Tod's drag queen alter-ego), and we were all staring at Annette in disbelief.

Her hair was teased out to three times its volume (compliments of a hairdresser) and she was wearing a blood-red, hoop-skirted formal with black feathers drifting about the bodice.

o cope, "This is *phat*. I'm like, Scarlet-fucking-O'Hara," she announced, admiring herself in the mirrored closet door.

e've all I looked to Jet. Jet was obviously struggling to keep her composure. It's noncommittal.

"Don't you think it's a bit much?" I asked.

"No...I...do...not," Annette replied. "It's the shit."

"I love it," Daisy declared. "It's you."

h, well. It was so not Annette that somehow, in some weird way, it worked.

ot even The doorbell rang.

I looked at my watch. It was five after nine.

"Shit!" I yelled, jumping off the daybed. "That's Hank."

I was wearing a Day-Glo yellow, Lycra, strapless mini-dress. It was what I was going to wear to Daisy's. That had been the first thing I had picked out and then carefully packed in a garment bag by Stevie. The dress was just one of the fifteen dresses I'd tried on for the hell of it.

ne blew “I have to get out of this dress.” I was in a dither.

“I’ll get the door,” Stevie said.

Indy gave him a look. “I’ll come with you.”

I didn’t have time to worry about their look. It was nigh on time for
s Room and my “conversation” and I was not ready for it.

aring in I pulled off the dress and hung it on a hanger. I put my clothes b
handed out hugs, blew air kisses, apologized to Tod for not helpin
(Daisy) clean up and ran down the stairs.

arabou Hank, Stevie and Indy were not in the living room or the kit
grabbed my bag and opened the front door to check if they were outsid
ounced,

They were standing halfway down the front walk. Stevie was carry
garment bag. Indy’s arms were wrapped around her middle. Hank h
er face hand at his waist, the other at the back of his neck, rubbing there v
head tilted forward as he listened to Stevie saying something I couldn’t

“What’s going on?” I asked, knowing exactly what was going
walking to them.

Stevie’s back was to me. He stopped talking and turned.

“Nothing, girlie. Get home,” he said leaning into me, and he kis
cheek.

I stared at him, not believing him for a second.

Indy gave me a hug. Stevie handed Hank the garment bag and Ir
wasn’t Stevie walked into the house.

ried on I looked to Hank.

ie mini- “What’s going on?” I asked.

His arm went around my shoulders. “Nothin’. Let’s go.”

I planted my feet, stubborn to the last. “What did they say?”

Hank looked at me. I could see by the outside light that his eyes were but unsettled.

or Hank “We’ll talk in the 4Runner.”

“Hank.”

ack on, He pulled me into his side. “Please Roxie, get in the car. We’re s
ig withexposed on the front walk.”

I realized what he meant, nodded quickly and walked with him to
chen. IHe opened the door for me and closed it when I got in. He threw the g
le. bag in the back seat, rounded the hood and got in beside me.

ring my We didn’t speak until we were on the road.

ad one “Hank—” I started.

vith his He cut in, “They told me you had a bad night. Just that. They’re wo
t hear.

on and I looked out the side window. “I didn’t have a bad night. I just h
struggled to find the word. Finally, I found it. “An episode. I’m fine.”

He didn’t say anything.

I turned to him.

sed my “I’m *fine*,” I repeated, maybe trying to convince myself.

He stopped at a stop sign, turned to me, lifted his hand and ran th
of his fingers down my cheek. Then without a word he looked tow
rdy and road again and we were off.

I was so stunned by his loving touch, feeling the sensation of sor
knit together that had been torn apart in me, that I didn’t say another w
rest of the way to Hank’s.

I was staring out the side window again, lost in thought, when I
ere soft air in the cab of the 4Runner go funny.

I looked to Hank and I knew something was wrong.

“What?” I asked.

Hank drove right by his house and I watched it slide by. The outside
standin’ was on as well as the lights in the living room and kitchen.

“What?” I repeated.

the car. “I didn’t leave any lights on,” he said. “Do you have Lee’s
garment programmed in your phone?” He leaned forward to pull his own out
back pocket.

I felt fear glide down my spine.

“I don’t know,” I answered.

worried.” “Sweetheart, get out your phone. I’ll tell you the number.”

ad...” I With trembling hands I pulled out my phone. As I started to flip it
rang. I jumped, the phone went flying in the air and I fumbled it then
it.

The display said, UNCLE TEX CALLING.

“What the...?” I started to say.

e backs Uncle Tex, to my knowledge, never used the cell phone I bought for
ard the his cell was the only number of his I had programmed in my phone.

I flipped it open. “Hello?”

nething “Why’d you drive by? Saw you doin’ it, fuckin hell,” Uncle Tex re

word the I blinked in the dark cab. “Where are you?”

“Standin’ in Hank’s living room window. Jesus. What’re you, go

felt thefor ice cream?”

I turned to Hank. He was driving and scrolling through his phone
the same time.

“Uncle Tex is in your living room. He saw us drive by,” I told Han
de light Hank glanced at me, flipped his phone shut and at the next crossroc
swung a u-ie.

“We’re coming back,” I told Uncle Tex.

number “See you in a minute,” and Uncle Tex disconnected.

t of his “What’s Uncle Tex doing in your living room?” I asked Hank.

“Don’t know. I gave him a key when you moved in, just in c
obviously used it.”

We skirted a block out of the way so Hank could park in front
house. I got out of the SUV and met him on the sidewalk. We wal
open, it together, Hank holding my hand.

caught He opened the door and dropped my hand, keeping me back at tl
and went in first.

“Sweet Jesus.” I heard my mother say from somewhere inside the l
Holy fucking cow.

him and I pushed in beside Hank.

Shamus came lurching toward us, in full body wag. He head
Hank’s thighs.

plied. That was all I saw. I was staring at my mother and father, wh
sitting on Hank’s couch.

oin’ out My mom looked like an older version of me—tall, curvy. She’d

bit round and her hair was now dyed blonde.

book at My dad looked like a cuddly gnome—redheaded and blue-eyed. I
shorter than my mother (and me) by at least four inches and he sported
k. beer belly.

ads, he Obviously, Uncle Tex had done as he'd threatened and called my r
Shit.

“Sweet Jesus,” my mother repeated, still staring at Hank and
coming up from the couch.

Dad was staring at me.

ase. He “Roxie,” he whispered, and I watched as he also got up.

I took in his face wearing an expression I'd never seen before in r
t of his An expression that could only be described as “ravaged with worry.”

oked up “Dad,” I whispered back.

Dad walked across the room, grabbed my upper arms and pul
he doorroughly to him.

After he hugged me he pushed me away, again with his hands
rouse. arms, and stared at me. Although I knew the swelling on my face w
gone and the bruising was (almost) completely gone, the scabs when
cut me with his rings were healing, but still there.

l-butted “I'm going to fucking *kill* that motherfucker,” Dad said.

I closed my eyes.

io were “Herb!” Mom snapped, and I opened them again. “Not in front of l
young man.”

gone a Good God.

For the first time, Dad's eyes moved to Hank and he let me go.

He was "I'm Herb Logan, Roxie's dad." He put his hand out toward Hank.
and a big Hank took his hand and they shook. "Hank Nightingale."

nom. "Sweet, sweet Jesus," Mom whispered, staring bright-eyed at
shaking hands with Dad.

Dad dropped Hank's hand and backed away.

slowly "This is my wife, Trish. The Good Lord overwhelms her on occa
find it best to just ignore it," Dad advised Hank.

Hank smiled at Mom.

ny life. She stared at him a beat and then her eyes rolled back into her head.
"The Lord our Savior heard my prayers," she told the inside
eyeballs.

"Mom!" I cried, sounding uppity.

led me Her eyes rolled back to normal and then she bugged them out at me.

"What?" Mom asked, sounding just as uppity as me. "He's cute."

at my This was *not* happening. None of it. It was just *not* happening.
as long

re Billy I turned to Hank. "You can kill me now. Just take out your gun and
me. It's okay. I give you permission."

Hank looked like he was trying hard not to laugh. He pulled me
with an arm around my neck.

Roxie's "Sweet Jesus! Sweet, sweet Jesus!" Mom called to the Savior, calling
in the divine intervention that was Hank and me.

I narrowed my eyes at her. "Stop calling Jesus, Mom. Hank's gone
you're weird," I snapped.

“She *is* weird,” Dad said.

“I’m not weird,” Mom returned.

“Trish, you’re a fuckin’ nut. Always were,” Uncle Tex boomed, drawing our attention to him for the first time then he turned to Hank. “It runs side of the family.”

That’s when it hit me.

I saw Mom and Uncle Tex in the same room. Mom and Uncle Tex in the room after years and years of not talking to or seeing each other.

I looked between them. Then I looked again.

I saw her. My eyes filled with tears.

“Mom,” I muttered, staring at her.

Her eyes filled with tears too.

“I know,” she muttered back.

I walked out from Hank’s arm, hugged my mom, then turned my back to Uncle Tex.

“Get over here,” I ordered, my voice shaky with tears.

“Good fucking Lord. I wish Sweet Jesus would come and save me,” Uncle Tex said.

“Get over here!” I demanded.

He came over and his big arms went around us.

“Happy?” he asked over our heads as we repositioned ourselves to include him in the hug.

I looked up at him.

“Yeah,” I whispered.

He was looking down at me and his eyes flickered. He waited a bit then he kissed the top of my head. When he was done, he kissed the Mom's. She and I looked at each other and burst into fresh tears.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Tex groaned.

We ignored him.

We held on for a while then Dad said, "Okay, now that we've done the same family reunion business, maybe we can talk about my daughter kidnapped and stalked. I might want to know a little more about that."

I disengaged from Mom and Uncle Tex, wiping the tears from my face with my hand, and turned to Dad.

"Hank's handling it," I told him.

"Yeah. Tex told me." Dad didn't sound happy and he turned to me. "How 'bout we talk?"

"Dad," I butted in.

Dad interrupted me. "Tex tells me these are good people and they're doing what they're doin'. I believe him. But, Roxanne Giselle Logan, you got a look on your face and fear in the back of your eyes, and I'm your godfather now," fuckin' father and I need to be *briefed* on this fuckin' *situation*. You got

I'd heard that tone before so I kept my mouth shut and nodded.

"Herb. Your language." Mom had heard that tone before too, and she never kept her mouth shut.

Before Dad's head exploded, I suggested, "Why don't I make us some coffee?"

"I don't want no coffee. I want a fuckin' beer." He turned to Hank. "Where's there a bar around here?"

eat and Hank looked at me then to my father and said, his voice quiet, “Top of but there’s also beer in the fridge.”

Dad regarded Hank. “Son, we need to talk away from the women things to say and Trish’s ears can hear what’s happenin’ two doors You get what I’m sayin’ to you?”

one the “What do you have to say that I can’t hear, Herbert Logan?” Mom

being “I’m not leavin’ Roxie.” Hank ignored Mom, and how he said v said stated quite clearly that he was not.

ny face Dad watched Hank a beat and then I saw him smile.

Oh shit.

I thought I was in trouble, official, definite, certifiable trouble
Hank realized that *now* I was really in trouble.

Dad approved of Hank.

I knew he would, but I didn’t know it’d make me feel all wa
y knowsquishy inside.

got cuts “I’ll stay behind,” Uncle Tex offered.

lamned Dad nodded and turned to Hank. “That work for you?”

ot me?”

Hank didn’t look happy, but he also nodded. Then his eyes came
on me.

nd she I heard his non-verbalized request and walked to him.

His arms came around me.

is some “We’ll be quick,” he told me.

nk. “Is “Okay.”

“Lock the door and don’t open it to anyone,” Hank said.

here is, “Okay,” I replied.

“The couch in the office pulls out into a bed. Your parents want
n. I go there, they’re welcome,” he went on.

down. That was *not* okay, but I said, “Okay,” anyway.

He grinned at me and I got the impression he knew my thought
asked. kissed my forehead, let me go and nodded to my dad.

what he Then they were gone.

“He’s *cute*,” Mom said to the closed door.

Shamus came and sat on my feet so I gave him an ear scratch.

“You’re not spending the night here,” I told my mother.

. But I “Your father doesn’t want you out of his sight,” Mom told me.

“He just went to a bar with Hank,” I pointed out.

rm and “Well, you know what I mean,” Mom returned.

“I’ll get you a hotel,” I offered.

“You are not getting us a hotel. We’ve got money. Don’t fight a
parent thing.”

to rest “Mom,” I whined (yes, whined).

“Roxanne Giselle—”

“Trish, for fuck’s sake, she’s sleepin’ with the guy. Get a fuckin’
Uncle Tex boomed.

I stared at Uncle Tex in horror.

Mom was totally unaffected.

“That’s okay. I’m liberated,” Mom announced. “I’ll talk Herb into
liberated too. I don’t think he’ll care though. He likes Hank. I can tell.”

Mom had never been “liberated” before. Billy and I had always to stay separate bedrooms when we visited, and my brother Gil and my sister also had the same arrangements with their girlfriends and boyfriends, had been living with his girlfriend for three years.

hts. He I looked at Uncle Tex. “Please make them stay with you.”

“It’s outta my hands,” Uncle Tex said.

I sighed and gave in. I was too exhausted from my weird day a bouts of crying fits to fight it.

“I like his house,” Mom announced. “It’s cozy, but it needs candle his dog is so cute!” Mom bent over and cooed at Shamus. Shamus sa over to her, smelled her outstretched hand and then gave her a sloppy doggie kiss on her cheek. “Ooo! He’s sweet!”

I turned to Uncle Tex.

“Will you shoot me?” I asked.

He put his big hand on top of my head and smiled.

t, it’s a

’ clue,”

o being

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Mom had never been “liberated” before. Billy and I had always slept in separate bedrooms when we visited, and my brother Gil and my sister Mimi also had the same arrangements with their girlfriends and boyfriends, and Gil had been living with his girlfriend for three years.

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“Will you shoot me?” I asked.

He put his big hand on top of my head and smiled.



GET OVER HERE

When Hank and Dad walked into the living room after going out for a drink, Dad's face didn't look ravaged with worry anymore, and I thought that was a good thing. Also, when Hank and Dad walked into the living room after going out for a drink, they were carrying Mom and Dad's luggage, which I thought was a very, very bad thing.

"Since we were out there, we got the bags from the rental car. As you know, women say men can't multitask," Dad declared, dumping the luggage in the living room.

"Oh dear Lord, he remembers one thing and he wants to be congratulated," Mom sighed and looked at me. "Men."

I wasn't in the mood for Mom and Dad's bickering. I was staring at the luggage.

"You aren't staying here," I declared.

Dad looked at me, confused. "Hank said we could."

I looked at Hank then to Mom, then Dad, then Tex, and then I rolled my eyes.

I just didn't have it in me.

"Oh, all right," I gave in.

Mom and I got the sheets and extra pillows and made up the bed. Mom got beers from the fridge and we all talked. Uncle Tex left. I kissed Mom and Dad goodnight and they went to bed.

Nary a word was said about the sleeping arrangements.

Hank put an arm around my shoulders and walked me to his bedroom, hitting the lights as we walked through the rooms.

"I'm going to have to sleep on the couch," I told him once we'd gotten to his bedroom. I got my nightie from under the pillow and started toward the bathroom while saying, "Do you have another blanket?"

"You aren't sleepin' on the couch," Hank told my back, as if through my luggage. Then he said, "I'll let Shamus out."

I turned around and saw him walk out of the room.

And you Well.

I did not think so.

I got ready for bed and was sitting on it, cross-legged, when Hank came back.

The minute he closed the door, I launched in. "Hank, if I'm not sleeping on the couch, then you're gonna have to sleep on the couch."

He lifted his arms, grabbed his sweater behind his back and pulled it over his head, dropping it on the floor. Then he sat on the bed to take off his shoes.

"I'm not sleepin' on the couch either."

He got up to take off his jeans, putting his gun, badge and phone on the nightstand.

I tried to ignore his (very nice) chest, but kind of failed because Hank has a super nice chest (and great abs too), and hissed. "Hank! My mom and

l. Hank are in the other room.”

om and “So?”

“So my dad’s going to have a conniption if he thinks we’re slee
the same bed under the same roof as him and Mom.”

room, Hank, now naked (and looking *fine* by the way), got in bed.

“He’s all right with it,” Hank said with certainty.

made it I stared at him. “What? Did you two talk about it?”

ard the His hand came out and he pulled me out of my sitting position. I
to my side and he yanked the covers out from under me and flicke
at was over me.

“No,” he answered, looking down at me as I settled on my back.

“Then how do you know?”

“It’s *my* roof,” Hank responded.

“I don’t understand.”

e came Hank reached over me and turned out the light. Then he rolled me,
my back to his front and rested his hand on my thigh. “You wouldn’
leeping guy thing. You’re just gonna have to trust me.”

Shamus jumped up on the bed and walked around a bit. Then he
l it over with a doggie groan on his side, his back pressed into my front.

s boots. Oh well.

Whatever.

on the I was totally exhausted, way too comfy, and I had the human and
Nightingale boys’ warmth seeping into me front and back. I wasn’t g
ank had fight it.

and dad

I was about to fall asleep, mindlessly scratching the soft fur of Shamus's ears, when Hank called, "Sunshine?"

"Yeah?" I mumbled, snuggling a bit deeper into him.

"I'm lettin' you go," he told me.

I thought it was weird that he'd announce this but it didn't matter. Shamus was fending me in.

"That's okay. I'm good," I said. "Even if you do, I have now moved." Shamus is plastered to the front of me and taking half the bed.

He was silent for a second and the air in the room started to feel cold.

Then he said, "That's not what I mean."

I opened my eyes and looked, unseeing (for more reasons than one) into the darkness. "What do you mean?"

"When this is finished, I'll get your car back and you can go with it and Jason to Chicago."

I felt the muscles in my body tighten.

"Excuse me?" I whispered.

"I'm lettin' you go," he repeated.

I felt my lungs contract.

"Are you..." I hesitated, "breaking up with me?"

His hand moved up my thigh and wrapped around my waist. "You already did that, remember?"

I was *such* an idiot.

I felt my breath get shallow.

"Though, I need you to understand something," he continued.

behind I nodded my head on the pillow, but didn't say anything, *could* anything.

"I'm a cop. All I ever wanted was to be a cop. I protect people and keep them safe on a daily basis. Doin' it for someone I care about..." He started talking.

I stopped breathing.

here to He started talking again. "I understand why you didn't want me involved with this business with Flynn." He paused. "But you might not understand that I wouldn't have had it any other way."

I started breathing again, mainly because my body needed oxygen. I didn't think I would have died.

Not that dying would be a bad thing at that moment.

Annette I waited for him to say something else, like he didn't want to let me go like he would have preferred if I didn't go.

But he didn't say anything else.

I let the silence stretch between us.

Then I asked, "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why are you letting me go?"

.. "You His arm tightened. "A while ago, you said if you care about someone, you have to set it free. If it comes back to you—"

"I remember," I whispered.

"I still think it's bullshit."

Even though I felt that thing that had knitted inside me was in da

In't say unraveling, I couldn't help but smile.

"So I go home to Chicago and you hope I'll come back to Denver and keep asked.

stopped "No, you move on, I move on. If there's some way to move on to that'd work for me. In the meantime, I'm not waitin' for you and I don't want you to feel obliged to come back to me."

me to be My smile disappeared, my throat closed and Hank's face went in my hand to back of my hair.

"You've been alone and felt trapped for a long time, Roxie. Soon you'll be free of all this shit. You have good friends and a family that love you. They'll see you through."

I didn't want them to see me through. I wanted Hank to see me through. I wanted to go, Good God.

I was going to start crying again.

How many tears did a body make?

I knew this was good. I knew it was the right thing, but it felt very strange.

"Last thing I want to do, last thing I ever wanted to do, was make you feel trapped," he murmured into my hair. "So, I'm lettin' you go."

That was when I knew.

nothing, I knew why his eyes looked unsettled after he'd talked to Stevie and I knew why his touch on my cheek was so poignant.

He thought he was making me feel trapped.

anger of He wasn't letting me go because he wanted to, because I'd convinced him I wasn't good enough for him, because I was annoyingly stubborn, because I was a nut or because my mother called out to me.

Jesus.

ver?" I He was letting me go so I could...finally...feel free.

Oh...my...*God*.

gether, He was *such* a good guy.

i't want The thing that I thought had started unraveling inside me tightened

Then steel bands slid across it and locked it into place.

nto the "Whisky?" I called.

"Yeah?"

, you'll I took a deep breath.

es you. Then I took a scary plunge.

ough. "I think I've changed my mind," I said.

I felt his body grow tight.

"I think..." I whispered. "I don't want you to let me go."

I'd barely got out the "go" when Hank rolled me over, rolled on to
wrong, and Shamus jerked and jumped off the bed as Hank kissed me.

ou feel He went straight into one of his make-me-dizzy, full-on tongue,
scrambling, hands everywhere Hank Nightingale kisses.

One of my arms wrapped around him and my other hand slid into h
id Indy. I pushed off with a foot and rolled him over, getting on top, laying
down on his neck and collarbone. I started down his chest when he
me up and rolled me back. He got on top of me again and kissed
hands sliding my nightie up to my waist and then beginning to p
finally panties down.

ing and It was then my phone rang.

Sweet

We both stilled.

We listened to it ring until it stopped.

Hank's hands slid back up my hips, slow, not starting anything, wa

My phone rang again.

up. "Fuck," he muttered and shifted, moving to turn on the light.

Still under him, I twisted, grabbed my bag off the nightstand and s
out my phone as the light came on.

It said, UNKNOWN NUMBER.

I flipped it open. "Hello?"

"Were you fuckin' him?"

My body tensed.

Hank was mostly on top of me and looking down at me.

"Billy?" I said.

p of me Instantly, Hank rolled away from me and knifed off the bed. I cam
my elbow and watched as he tagged his phone from the nightstand
, brains same time grabbing his jeans.

Billy talked in my ear.

his hair. "Were you fuckin' him? Is he touchin' you now, you bitch?"

3 kisses "Billy, where are you?"

yanked I was watching Hank. He'd hit a few buttons on the phone and
me, his tucked into his neck while he pulled on his jeans.

ull my "Fuck you, Roxie. Fuck you and fuck *Detective* Hank Nightingale.

"You listening?" I heard Hank say into his phone.

"Is that him? What's he saying, the fuck?" Billy snarled in my ear.

“Billy, you’re in trouble. Desmond Harper’s men are after you,”
him.

iting. Hank looked at me, nodded and gave me an encouraging wink.

I felt relief flood through me. I was doing the right thing by keepi
talking.

natched “Harper’s boys are behind bars,” Billy replied.

“That was the other ones. He’s sent more after you. Billy, you hav
You have to get out of town. Harper wants his money back. He’s g
find you.”

“How do you know this shit? Goddammit! Did Detective Nighting
you?” Billy asked.

“Billy—”

“What else has he been tellin’ you? Don’t believe him, Roxie
believe a thing out of that lyin’ pig’s mouth.”

e up on I sat up straight.

l at the Um...I did not *think* so.

“Don’t you call Hank a pig!” I snapped.

“Don’t defend him to me, you whore.”

Now, *this* was how I was used to fighting.

it was I threw the covers back and shot out of bed.

“Don’t call me a whore!” I yelled.

„ “You left my bed two weeks ago, you bitch. Now you’re fuckin
cop. That’s the goddamned definition of whore!”

“It was *my* bed, you idiot. You were my roommate and for some

"I told you the reason, do *not* ask me why, I let you sleep there."

"You let...you *let* me sleep there? You were beggin' for it when you met me."

"I was begging for it? You have a creative memory, Billy."

Even Billy, completely unhinged, couldn't fight that one.

"I wasn't your fuckin' roommate. You're my woman!"

"I haven't been your woman for three years, you moron!" I shouted.

"How you figure that?"

"Oh, I don't know." I got sarcastic. "Maybe it was when I put you in the hall and changed the locks. Or when I left you, like a *billion* years ago, writing you a note saying it was over. Or, maybe it was when I didn't put your filthy, stinking hands on me for the last eighteen months!"

"Don't you know how I figure it!" I shrieked.

While I was yelling, there was a knock on the door. Hank kept the gun in the crook of his neck, buttoned up his jeans and opened it.

Mom and Dad stood there, Dad wearing his jammies, Mom bundled in a robe. Hank stopped them from saying anything by lifting his hand and they stared at me, their faces worried.

"You don't want to leave me, Roxie. You know you don't, you came back."

"I've been trying to leave you for three years, Billy. You've just been fucking stupid to figure it out."

His voice changed, got quiet, went low. "Don't call me stupid."

"Billy, we're over. O...v...e...r."

"We're not over, Roxie."

“Yes we are.”

1 I first He went silent.

I waited.

Then he said, “Fuck him, Roxie. Fuck him good tonight. Give him of your fine ass he’ll never forget. Go down on him, you’re good at remember your mouth, so fuckin’ sweet.”

3. I swallowed and glanced at Hank. His face was like stone, his completely still, the fury coming off him like a physical thing and clearing the air.

4 r shit in I realized then that Hank was listening. How he was, I didn’t know
5 times, he was listening.
let you

That’s Good God.

“Billy, you’ve got to—”

6 phone Billy cut me off, “‘Cause tomorrow, you’ll be with me. Tomorrow
be lyin’ in bed wondering where your sweet mouth is. And you and me
tightly make you forget him, Roxie. We’ll be gone and you’ll forget and it’ll
a hand you and me.”

“I’ll never go with you,” I said but I said it to nothing. He’d disconnected
always I flipped my phone shut, tossed it on the nightstand and looked at Hank
Hank was staring at me but he talked into the phone. “You get him
been too paused. “Yeah. Keep me informed.” He snapped his phone shut, threw
the nightstand too and said, “He’s in Colorado Springs.”

I stood across the room from Hank and my parents, trembling watching Hank, wondering what he was thinking. Wondering if not hearing what he heard, he’d not only let me go, but ask me to go.

“Colorado Springs?” Mom asked. “What’s he doing there?”

“On the run. He knows Harper’s boys are after him and he’s not anywhere long,” Hank told Mom then looked at me. “Vance is in C S followed him down there. You kept him on the line long enough, the a piece lock on his position. Vance is headin’ there now.” t that. I

I nodded.

is body “Thank the Sweet Lord Jesus,” Mom said.

harging “Atta girl, Roxie,” Dad said.

I ignored Mom and Dad.

ow, but “Were you listening?” I asked Hank.

“Yeah. When I found out about the call this afternoon I told Lee, boys have been monitoring your phone. They put it on speaker. You Hank asked me.

w, he’ll “No,” I said.

ie...I’ll No, no, really just no. He’d heard it and he wasn’t coming to me only be standing across the room in nothing but a nightie, scared and trembli he made no move to me.

nected. I knew this would happen. He didn’t even want to be near me.

Hank. Hank looked angry. He looked so angry he looked about ready to c n?” He murder. He looked like he was expending every effort not to lose cor / his on he’d let go and started ripping the room apart I wouldn’t have been sur

“Are you okay?” I asked Hank.

ng and He didn’t answer for a beat.

w, after Then he spoke.

“I’m gonna kill that motherfucker.” His voice was so low, an edge stayin’ through it.

My head jerked at his words and I winced. I’d heard them many y got afore, but the way Hank said them made me believe him.

“Whisky—”

“Get over here,” he ordered.

I blinked. “What?”

“Get over here,” he repeated.

I stared at him. Then I skirted the bed and walked to him.

The minute I got within arm’s reach, he snatched me to his body and the arms went around me so tight that for the first time in days my ribs hurt okay?”

“Whisky, my ribs,” I breathed.

His arms didn’t loosen.

“He isn’t gonna touch you,” Hank said to the top of my head.

I was “Okay...um, Hank...my ribs.”

ng, and “He isn’t gonna get near you.”

I realized what was happening.

He *had* been making every effort to stay in control. So much so I’d been physically unable to move.

At my realization I melted into him, my arms went around him and tight too.

I leaned back in his arms and looked up at him. “Whisky, we’re gonna be all right.”

He didn’t say anything, but he let me go just a fraction. The

e sliced started to ebb from his body and we stayed there, just hanging on.

“Welp! See you got this under control, son. We’ll see you
a time morning,” Dad announced behind my back.

“Nightie night,” Mom said.

The door closed.

Hank and I just held on.

Shamus sat down and leaned into our legs.

“I’m sorry you had to hear that,” I said quietly.

“Lee plays by different rules than me,” Hank replied, and I
and his confused at the sudden change of subject.

t. I leaned back and looked at him again. “Yes?”

“He recruits men who play by those rules.”

I nodded, having no clue whatsoever what he was talking ab
deciding things were sensitive enough. I should just go with it.

“They work for money. Their lines are blurred. Mostly they do ri
other times they do what they’re paid to do and don’t ask questions.”

I put my hand to the side of his face and let it drift down to his jaw

o, he’d “Okay,” I whispered.

“Sometimes they dispense justice. Their form, which isn’t the s
d I held mine. Sometimes Eddie and I play their game. Sometimes we use then
what we need.”

oing to I thought it was good that he was so handsome, because when
philosophical he made no sense at all.

tension “A while back, a man hit Indy,” Hank told me. “Lee beat the shi

him. He did it purposefully, methodically, leavin' a message. A man' in the twice before he touches Indy."

Oh shit.

I was beginning to see where he was going with this.

I pressed my body to his. "Whisky."

"Those boys don't take people to the holding room to hurt Interrogate them, yes, but as far as I know, no one has been held th harmed on purpose."

became "Maybe we should lie down," I suggested.

Hank ignored me.

out but "Vance was pretty pissed off, the way he found you. Vance comes broken home. A violent one. His dad set him out after the first time stepped between him and Vance's mom when his dad was beatin' her was ten."

ght, but "Oh my God," I whispered, my mind filled with a ten-year-old boy to protect his mom and being kicked out of the house for it. What di then? Was Vance ten years old and out on the street?

Good God.

ame as It didn't bear thinking about, at least not now. I shoved it asi focused on Hank.

n to get It was like he hadn't heard me speak.

he got "Vance asked for a go with Flynn. Payback, instead of overtime, search for you. It would set a precedent, but the way Vance figured woman, you hadn't been given the opportunity to a fair fight. Flynn d t out of the same treatment. Tex jumped on the bandwagon. Lee left it to me.

ll think agree. I was willin' to turn a blind eye, but didn't agree. Indy was a lose a knee when Tex saved her. She'd been kidnapped and they were shoot her to get her to talk. Lee felt obliged to Tex and they agreed to at Flynn, then Vance. Eddie and I stepped up the game to find Flynn Lee in hopes that wouldn't happen."

I had stopped interrupting and let him be.

: them.

"I'm callin' my shot," he said, and I felt my heart spasm.

ere and

I sure as hell interrupted then.

"You can't do that Hank. You're good. Your lines aren't blurred."

"I'm not askin' you, Sunshine. I'm tellin' you, I'm callin' my shot.

from a Holy cow.

Vance "You can't do that for me," I protested.

Vance "I can. I finally understand Lee. Anyone thinks of touchin' yo think of speakin' to you that way, I want it known they should think ag

y trying "Hank, someone finds out you could lose your badge."

d he do "Then I'll work with Lee."

"Hank!"

ide and "I'm only tellin' you so you'll understand. I'm not askin' for per and I'm not lookin' for discussion."

Holy cow, cow, cow.

for his snapped with a stomp of my foot. "You said earlier you never wante it, as a anything but a cop. Now you're saying you're going to put that in je eserved for me. And you think *I'm* nuts?"

I didn't

bout to His face changed. The stillness of anger went out of it, something
gonna came over him, something I was a lot more familiar with.

let Tex He started walking me backwards to the bed.

before “So, you’re staying?” he asked.

I shook my head like I was clearing it. “Excuse me?”

“Denver. You’re staying?”

My eyes narrowed. “Do not even *think* of trying to change the
Hank Nightingale.”

My legs hit the bed and I went down. He came down on top of me.

”
“Are you movin’ to Denver?” Hank asked patiently.

Before I could answer, his lips went to my neck.

“We were talking about you putting your career on the line due t
u, they macho idea of revenge,” I reminded him.
gain.”

“We’re done talkin’ about that. Now we’re talkin’ about you mo
Denver.”

His tongue touched the back of my ear.

My body did a quiver.

mission I jerked my head and neck away from him. “Hank, look at me. W
to finish talking about—”

His head came around and he kissed me.

it it!” I I forgot what we needed to finish talking about.

d to be A little later, I’d gotten his jeans off him, managed to get my mo
opardy him (for a while—it must be said, Hank did like his control, not tha
complaining). He had his hand between my legs and his lips were

ng elsemine when he asked softly, “Are you movin’ to Denver?”

Then his finger slid inside and his thumb did a swirl.

My neck arched.

“Yes,” I breathed.

When I looked at him he was grinning at me.

Fucking Hank.

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mine when he asked softly, “Are you movin’ to Denver?”

Then his finger slid inside and his thumb did a swirl.

My neck arched.

“Yes,” I breathed.

When I looked at him he was grinning at me.

Fucking Hank.

TWENTY-FOUR



BUTTERMILK

Hank's phone rang.

I opened my eyes and it was dark.

Hank was on his back. I was pressed to his side, my head on his shoulder, my thigh thrown over one of his. Half my leg had fallen between his legs, and his hand was resting on his chest.

Shamus had his back pressed to mine.

I'd been fast asleep, my body relaxed, but it went tense instantly at the sound of the phone.

Hank grabbed it and flipped it open one-handed, not disturbing me. His arm around my waist got tight.

"Yeah?" he said into the phone.

He listened. I waited.

"Tell me you're fucking joking," he growled, his voice vibrating with anger.

Shit.

Billy had gotten away.

I twisted my neck and pressed my forehead into his shoulder. M

went around his waist and I held tight.

“Find him,” Hank bit out and flipped the phone shut.

“Whisky,” I whispered, and even I could hear my voice held a trace of fear.

“He’ll get him,” Hank replied.

“Is Vance okay?” I asked.

“Flynn was gone when he got there. Trail’s hot though. Vance is with Roxie, he’ll get him.”

I swallowed.

He tossed the phone onto the nightstand and both of his arms wrapped around me.

“Relax, sweetheart. He’s not gonna hurt you,” Hank murmured.

I nodded and forced the tension from my body. I was able to relax mainly because I had help from Hank’s hand stroking my back.

After a while, I fell asleep.

me, but



“HE HAS NO BUTTERMILK.”

My eyes slowly opened and I could see Hank’s throat in the dawn light.

We were front to front, my thigh thrown over his hip, one of his hands resting lightly on my waist and mine was doing the same on his.

“Of course he doesn’t have buttermilk. Who has buttermilk?”

I blinked.

My arm Mom and Dad were in the kitchen and I could hear them talking as

were in the bedroom.

Hank's house didn't have thin walls. It was just that my parents
remember of loudly.

"Well, if he doesn't have buttermilk, how'm I gonna make but
pancakes?" Mom asked. "Sweet Jesus!" she cried. "He doesn't hav
either!" She said this as if it was a criminal offense.

s on it. "Of course he doesn't have flour! Does he look like a man who l
Dad said in a loud(er) voice.

I looked up Hank's throat just as he tipped down his chin. His eye
s came open.

Damn.

He was awake.

do this I closed my eyes and shoved my face into his neck.

"No, he doesn't look like a man who bakes, but Roxie's been h
she bakes," Mom returned.

"Yeah, like Roxie's been floatin' around makin' cookies while th
a' bitch has been after her. Jesus, Trish."

's early I heard slamming cupboards.

is arms "There's nothing in this house. Eggs. Bread. Milk. Lots of coff
beer. I don't understand. He looks like a healthy boy. It's like he ex
coffee and beer. That can't be. What am I going to do?"

Good God.

My mother just called Hank a "healthy boy."

if they I shoved up closer to Hank's warm, solid body, mortification ove
mine.

Hank's arm tightened.

"Make some fuckin' coffee," Dad answered as if that answer was obvious.

"Don't take that tone with me, Herbert Logan," Mom snapped.

"Don't tell me what tone to take, woman," Dad returned.

Mom ignored Dad's reply. "Go get some buttermilk. And bacon
pancakes?" maple syrup." I heard a cupboard slam. "No, wait, I found some
Mom said.

"Go where and get buttermilk?" Dad asked, his voice now incredulous.

"The grocery store," Mom answered like Dad was a dim bulb.

"Please, God, shut up," I whispered against Hank's neck.

Hank rolled me to my back and came with me, settling with his penis
on top of me and partially up on an elbow. I opened my eyes and
there he was, lazy and amused and his lips were twitching.

"What grocery store? We're in Denver. I have no idea where a
grocery store is," Dad retorted.

"Well, drive around. Denver's a big city. There have to be hundred
grocery stores. You'll run into one eventually," Mom replied.

I took in a deep breath and bit my lip.

Hank's eyes were smiling and his body started shaking.

I scowled at him and his lips spread into a grin.

"Let me get this straight," Dad clipped. "You want me to get in
my car and drive around a city I've never been to in my fuckin' life
to get buttermilk?"

“Well, yeah,” Mom said, as if that was a perfectly normal request.
er was “Fuck that. I’ll find some fuckin’ place that sells donuts,” Dad to
and I heard movement in the other room as if Dad was preparing to lea

“*Don’t you dare buy donuts!*” Mom shrieked. “Hank’s a cop. He’
you’re making some smart remark.”

n. And Hank’s forehead dropped to mine and his body started shaking har
syrup,” “This isn’t funny,” I whispered.

“You’re wrong,” he replied quietly, his voice trembling with laugh
lous.

“People other than cops eat donuts, you know.” We heard Dad
“I’m not a cop and I eat donuts.”

“Buttermilk pancakes are Roxie’s favorite breakfast. I want to
artiallyRoxie’s favorite breakfast,” Mom said.

saw his “I’ll get what I get,” Dad responded, obviously not in the mood to
it anymore.

grocery “You do that. I’ll go get the dog. He’ll probably want out and Ha
Roxie need to sleep in. They had a tough night.”

lreds of Both Hank and my bodies got tense.

“Don’t go near that damn room, Trish,” Dad warned.

“I’m just getting the dog. I won’t peek,” Mom returned.

Hank lifted his forehead from mine.

“Please tell me your mother’s not comin’ in here,” Hank said to me

the car “Trish! Get back here!”

to buy “Herb, relax.”

Mom sounded closer. A lot closer.

My mother was coming in.

old her, “We can hear you!” I shouted, in hopes of waylaying her.

ive. Silence.

ll think Hank and I were both naked and the sheet was around our wai
pulled the sheet up to my chest just as Mom opened the door.

der. Good God.

Hank’s head twisted to look over his shoulder. Other than that he
ter. move, likely trying to shield me further with his body. I put my hand
return. biceps, lifted up and peered over his shoulder.

Mom was standing in the doorway in her robe, her hand over her e
o make “Mornin’, kids. Don’t mind me. Come here Shamus, come on bo
made kissy noises, the whole time she kept her hand over her eyes.

discuss Shamus lurched up, jumped off the bed and jogged out of the roo
wagging.

ink and As he wagged by Mom, she said, “Go back to sleep. I’m
pancakes but Herb’s got to find buttermilk so it’ll take a while. Yo
time for a snooze.”

The whole time she talked, she kept her hand over eyes.

“Yeah, we heard,” I told her. “Mom?”

“Yes, sweetie?” She lifted her head a bit, hand still on her eyes.

a. “Go away.”

“Right, right. Going.” She closed the door.

We heard movements, keys jingling, doors slamming. The whole
lay on my back and watched Hank. His eyes were looking in the vic

my collarbone, his head slightly cocked, listening while a smile played
his mouth.

When the noise died down, I said to him, "I'm sorry."

He dipped his head, rubbed his nose against mine and my belly me
"My parents are a little nutty," I went on.

He looked me in the eye. "Sunshine, first off, Tex is your uncle. A
offense, I mean it as a compliment, but you're anything but normal.
like I wasn't prepared."

"They're nice people," I explained, kind of desperately.

We'd just sorted things out. I'd taken a huge chance on us. I'
promised to move to Denver. I didn't want everything to go balls-up
than a day. I was hoping he wouldn't take what he just heard as an inc
of his future life and run, hell bent for leather to the next state and fa
from me, my mom and my dad.

His hand came up and he trailed a finger down my hairline. He v
his finger, then his hand curled around my neck and his eyes came to r
"I know that," he said.

Obviously, he wasn't in fear of a nutty future life. Or maybe he v
resigned to it.

Either one worked for me.

I lifted up and touched my lips to his then settled on the pillows ag

After I'd done that, I noticed the amusement was out of his eyes. T
was still there, but there was also intensity.

"Any hope that your mom went with your dad to find buttermi
asked, his eyes on my mouth.

d about I knew what he was asking and my melted belly did a funny, but p
twist.

“She was in her robe,” I pointed out.

ltd. His lips came to mine. “Yeah,” he said against my lips and I cou
the regret.

And, no I smiled against his mouth and watched, close up, as his eye
It isn’t languid.

“Kids!” Mom yelled from somewhere in the house.

Hank pulled away a bit, shook his head and smiled. It was a good
’d even hadn’t been called a kid in a very long time.

in less “Yeah?” I yelled back.

lication “I’m taking Shamus for a walk. I got the key from the hook by th
r away and I’m locking you in. You two rest.” Then we heard the door open a
and she was gone.

atched Hank didn’t hesitate. His arms came around me, he rolled me to t
nine. and his face went to my neck.

It was clear we weren’t going to “rest.”

was just “How much time do you think we have?” he asked.

“Not long,” I answered honestly. Mom wasn’t exactly into exercise

Hank’s lips came up my jaw to my mouth.

ain. “We’ll be fast,” he murmured there.

’he lazy “No, Hank, I need to get up. Mom’ll be back—”

lk?” he He took my hand in his and pulled it between us, wrapping my
around him.

pleasant, He was rock-hard.

My belly twist turned into a dip and I felt a spasm between my legs.

“We’ll be fast,” I said.

could hear He grinned and then he kissed me.



As we went WE WERE SITTING around the dining room table. I was wearing my
with Hank’s plaid, flannel bathrobe wrapped tight around me. It
washed, like, a million times and it was huge, soft and snugly. It smelled
like him, and the minute I put it on I decided I never wanted to take it off.

Dad was pointedly eating a donut, glaring at Mom and shunning
buttermilk pancakes.

He *had* found buttermilk, and I suspected this was not only because
he usually gave in to Mom (because he loved her), but also because he
loved it. It was my favorite breakfast (and he loved me too).

Still, the donut was his way of not giving in completely.

In front of me, Mom set down a stack of two of her light and
pancakes, smothered in butter and syrup, with two slices of bacon on top.

She rounded the table carrying a plate and set it in front of Hank.

“There you go, Hank. Eat hearty,” she said, patting him on the shoulder
and returning Dad’s glare.

I looked at Hank’s plate. On it was an enormous stack of five pancakes
and half a dozen rashers of bacon.

Hank stared at it for a second, not quite able to hide his surprise,
his eyes lifted to mine.

I gritted my teeth.

“Mom!” I snapped. “The entire offensive line of the Chicago Bears
s. not eat that much food.”

Dad looked at Hank’s plate then his eyes went to Mom.

“Jesus, Trish. You’re gonna put the boy in a food coma. He’s a
needs to stay alert.”

nightie I looked to Dad. “Would you two quit calling Hank a boy? He’s a
d beenman, for goodness sakes.”

led like “He’s your brother’s age, Roxanne Giselle, therefore he’s a boy
Dad returned in his Dad Voice.

ing her I gave up and looked to Hank.

“You don’t have to eat all that,” I told him.

ause he Mom sat down with her own plate and got all mother on Hank. “Y
knew it do. You need to keep your strength up.”

I frowned at Mom. “He’s not recovering from pneumonia. Trust
does *not* need any help keeping his strength up.”

l fluffy Dad burst out laughing.

he side. Hank sat back in his chair and grinned at me.

“Don’t be lippy,” Mom said to me then turned to Hank. “She’s
houlder been lippy. Came out bawling and never shut up. I’ve spent thirty-on
of my life tearing my hair out because of her lip.”

ancakes “Like mother, like daughter,” Dad mumbled into his donut.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Mom snapped at Dad.

, before “Nothin’.” Dad was still mumbling but his eyes slid to Hank and h
them.

s could “Do not roll your eyes at Hank, Herb. What’s he going to think
Mom clipped.

That’s a good question, I thought.

cop, he “Figure the boy needs to know early what he’s gettin’ himself into
told Mom then looked at Hank. “Take my advice, son. Run. Run
grown hills.”

Mom’s eyes bugged out and her fork clattered to her plate. “Do
to me,” him to run for the hills! Sweet Jesus!” she called to the ceiling and
looked at Hank. “We’ve been waiting a long time for Roxie to get her
good man, a decent man. Thank the Good Sweet Lord you’re sittin’
here. She’s a good girl, Roxie. She’s a little wild, but not anything you
tame, I’m sure of it,” Mom declared with authority.

es you Hank pressed his lips together, likely so he wouldn’t laugh out loud

I noticed Hank’s lip press, but only in a vague way because it was
me, he turn to have my eyes bug out of my head.

“I don’t need Hank to tame me! I don’t need anyone to tame me.
wild!” I snapped at Mom.

Dad let out a belly laugh.

always “Not wild? Girl, you’re too much,” he said to me then turned to
e years “You’d think there wasn’t much trouble to find in a small town. There
wasn’t, but what trouble there was to find, Roxie found it, and if she couldn’t
find it she made her own.”

“Dad!”

e rolled My father ignored me.

“Got good grades, which was a plain miracle considering she spent

of us?”her time beer-drinkin’, joy-ridin’, drag-racin’ and toilet-paperin’
looked back at me. “I don’t even *want* to know what you were doin’
golf course at midnight when the cops found you.”

o,” Dad I put my elbow on the table and my head in my hand.

for the “This is not happening,” I said to my pancakes.

“I told you to try out for the cheerleading squad, but did you listen
not tellNo,” Mom put in, and I knew she was warming into her famous Cheer
id thenSquad Lecture that had been a constant in my life, even though I’d gr
erself afrom high school over a decade before.

ig right When I looked up again, Mom was forking into her pancakes heat

ou can’t “The cheerleaders were good girls, never broke curfew, not once.

because I was friends with their mothers. Had steady boyfriends. Wo
d. preppy clothes. Not Roxie. No. Curfew? What’s that? Going to the ma
was myevery weekend. Her closet had more clothes in it than mine!

flouncing around in miniskirts. Nearly gave her father a heart attack

I’m nottime she walked out of the house.” She looked between Dad and m

lifted half-mast and glaring at us both. “The fights you two would hav
those miniskirts. And, Lord! Those tops! All cut up and falling o
shoulders so you could see your bra straps. Sweet Jesus. What the ne

o Hank. must have thought.”

robably I looked at Hank, certain he was either going to run for the hills o
ouldn’t all to get the hell out.

Instead, his eyes were on me. They were lazy and sweet, and t
winked at me.

I felt something settle inside me, and where it settled, it grew warm

nt most Then I felt my face move. I didn’t smile exactly, but I knew my fa

.” Dadsoft and my lips turned up, and if my parents weren’t there and th
on thatwasn’t between us I would have jumped him and torn his clothes off.

“Sweet Jesus,” Mom whispered and the moment was lost.

I looked to her and she was gazing between Hank and me, her fa
too, but her eyes were bright and happy.

to me? My eyes slid to Dad and he was smiling at the last bite of his donut
leading “Are we done telling Hank about my past as a juvenile delinqu
aduatedasked.

“Yep,” Dad replied. He’d finished his donut and was wiping po
edly. sugar from his lips with his napkin.

I know “You weren’t a juvenile delinquent. Just...spirited,” Mom
re cute,“Though...” she mumbled to her pancakes, “wish you’d have used th
ill, like,to cheer on the football team.”

Always I sighed, heavy and huge, and forked into my pancakes.

k every

ie, fork

e about

ff your

ighbors

“DAMN, TEX, THIS IS FUCKIN’ great!” Dad yelled really loudly, foam f
butterscotch latte coating his upper lip.

“Herb, keep your voice down,” Mom stage-whispered.

We were in Fortnum’s. I was sitting on the book counter and I noti
r tell us Hot Pack, including Hank, Lee, Mace and Luke, all standing arou
couches, had turned to look at my parents when my dad shouted.

then he

I looked over to Indy, who was behind the book counter, and Dais
was standing in front of it. Both of them were grinning at my mom and

l.

“I asked Hank to shoot me last night, but he wouldn’t do it,” I told

ce went

“Oh, sugar, chill. They’re sweet,” Daisy said.

ie table “What do you say you call this? Lah-tay?” Dad, who was not fancy coffee drinks, asked, again loudly, calling our attention back to h
He still hadn’t wiped the foam off his lip.

ace soft “Fuckin’ A, Herb, you need to get to the big city more often,” Un suggested, handing a coffee to one of the two customers standing in t
the counter.

ent?” I “Fuck that.” Dad swiped at his mouth with the back of his hand w caught Mom pointing to her own mouth, giving him a clue. Then he v
wdered talking. “Ain’t nothin’ in the big towns I need. Anyway, I heard they making these eye-talian coffee drinks in Miriam’s Café.” Dad looked
1 said. Indy, Daisy and me. “They got frozen custard there too. That custard b
at spirit pissed off the folks at Dairy Palace, which is right across the street. A cookie shake in the world better than frozen custard. I don’t care double up the cookie crumbles, which was what they started to do.”

“The Dairy Palace doubled up the cookie crumbles?” I asked, fo
to be embarrassed by my father’s behavior.

rom his I loved cookie crumble shakes.

“Damn straight, Roxie,” Dad told me. “You gotta come home. you like your cookie crumble shakes but you’ll fuckin’ flip over thos
ced the sundaes they make at Miriam’s with the frozen custard. Swear to
ind the thought your mother would roll up and die after she got her first taste c

Dad looked at Hank. “Roxie likes her ice cream,” he informed Hank a
y, who was the key to future happiness with me.

l dad. “I’ll remember that,” Hank said.

them. His eyes came to me, and I noticed his trying-hard-not-to-laug because it was now very familiar.

one for In fact, the Hot Pack were all now looking at me, all of them grinning. Except Luke, who was looking down at his boots, but I could tell his smile was in place.

cle Tex I felt their grins in the form of goose bumps running along my skin. I said to the entire room, "Can we stop talking about ice cream?"

That was when Luke's head came up and his eyes sliced to me.

When he "I wanna hear more about ice cream," he said.

went on Damn.

started The bell over the door rang.

over to "I'm not talking to you!" Jet snapped at Eddie as they both walked

business At first I got worried, but then I saw Eddie's lips twitch.

ain't no "What now, Loopy Loo?" Tex boomed.

if they "I don't wanna talk about it," Jet answered, stomping to the bookshelf and slamming her purse into a drawer.

"What's going on?" Indy asked.

Jet glared at Eddie, who was entirely unaffected by the mental beams Jet was directing at his back. He walked up to the espresso counter the last customer moved away.

Christ, "Everything. Lottie's so popular Smithie has to sell tickets. He's given her a raise. She found a house, put in an offer and it was accepted. Mom's moving in with Trixie and the apartment has already been rented to someone else. I want to move in with Lottie but Lottie won't let me. Lottie and Eddie had a *chat*."

gh look Daisy and Indy nodded knowingly.

"What?" I asked.

inning. “Eddie’s kind of famous for his chats,” Indy replied.

is half- “Don’t let Hank *chat* to you,” Jet warned. “Chatting is bad. You agreeing to stuff you never would agree to normally after you’ve had in and I And don’t, under any circumstances, have a chat in bed. You could agreeing to anything during *those* chats.” Jet’s warning turned dire.

The light dawned.

“I think Hank calls them ‘conversations,’” I told her.

Her eyes got big and she nodded to me once slowly, saying, “Unh-

“So what your sayin’, sugar bunch, is that you are now officially in. in with Eddie,” Daisy said.

“Yes. We’ve just beaten the world record for the fastest relationship in history,” Jet replied.

counter Indy and Daisy smiled.

“No, I think I may get that one,” I said.

Jet, Daisy and Indy looked to me.

al laser “I’m moving to Denver,” I announced.

inter as Without hesitation, Daisy threw an arm up, punching the air.

“*Yee-ha!*” she screamed.

already Jet and Indy high-fived.

cepted. Everyone else looked over to us.

nted to “Roxie’s moving to Denver!” Indy yelled across the room to Lee. because

Lee’s eyes crinkled and cut to Hank.

Hank rocked back on his heels and he crossed his arms on his rolled my eyes at him, and when I was done with my eye roll his lip

turned up on the ends.

end up “You’re moving to Denver?” Mom asked, staring at me.

a *chat*. Oh shit.

end up I hadn’t told Mom and Dad yet.

“Um, yeah,” I said.

Mom’s face froze then she blinked.

“You can’t move to Denver,” she protested. “What’re you gonna do about Christmas? Thanksgiving? Oh, Sweet Jesus. Easter! You know we moved have a special honey-baked ham at Easter. You’re the best with the egg dyes too. Mimi and Gil can’t dye eggs like you. Who’s gonna be moving eggs?”

“Mom, I’m thirty-one years old. We haven’t dyed eggs in fifteen years,” I reminded her.

She ignored me and went on, “And do they even have persimmons here? How are you gonna make persimmon pudding? I can’t *mail* that to you. You have to have them fresh or it doesn’t taste right. You know that.”

“Mom, I don’t make persimmon pudding, you do.”

“Well, I can’t mail *that* to you either,” she said and then whirled on me. “We get Christmas!” she told him, as if she was calling shotgun in the kitchen.

“Trish, calm down,” Dad ordered.

“I will *not* calm down. My baby girl is moving halfway across the country,” Mom shot back.

“She’s been moved away before,” Dad pointed out.

chest. I “Yeah, but that was with Billy. We all knew he wouldn’t work out as well as he was,” Mom said. “She’s talking about Hank here. Look at him.” She pointed to Hank. “She’s

coming home. *Never.*”

“She ain’t movin’ to the moon, Trish,” Dad said.

“Might as well be.” Mom turned back to me. “You hear even a hint of a blizzard’s coming, Roxanne Giselle, you go straight to the store and get toilet paper, you hear me? And make a pot of chili or stew. Don’t get out. I don’t want a phone call saying you starved to death, stuck in the house with no stew.” Her eyes moved to Daisy. “I hear the blizzards are bad as hell. People die.”

“That’s usually old people, Mrs. Logan,” Daisy explained. “And normally freeze to death.”

Daisy was trying to help but it was the *wrong* thing to say.

Mom’s eyes got big, then her back went ramrod straight and she grabbed her purse from the espresso counter. “Right. We’re going out to buy blankets. Hank had, like, one extra blanket. He needs blankets. And logs for the back room. We’re getting blankets and logs. Come on, Herb.”

Dad dug in. “Woman, I’m enjoyin’ my lah-tay.”

“*You want your daughter to freeze to death?*” Mom screeched.

Dad shook his head. Mom glared at him.

They settled into a staring contest.

I looked at the Hot Pack. “How many of you have a gun? A gun? Someone shoot me!”

Then I realized that Luke was standing there and what I said was insensitive, considering he’d been shot in the belly a few months before.

“Um...sorry, Luke,” I finished, feeling like an idiot.

Luke crossed his arms on his broad chest and smiled at me, but didn’t

a word, which I decided to take as indication that he bore no ill will.

Hank disengaged from the Hot Pack and walked to me. He walked up between my legs, wrapped an arm around my waist and yanked me toward the counter so I was standing full frontal with him. He tipped his head down and caught my look at me.

“Your mom can have Christmas,” Hank said quietly.

“Thank you!” Mom shouted to Hank’s back.

I shook my head. “You do not even know what you’re saying. They give her Christmas. Christmas is Crazy Land in the Logan household. I think you’ve realized by now that that’s saying a lot!”

“Roxanne Giselle Logan, do not tell tales out of school. So you usually gets drunk and burns the turkey. It’s Christmas!” Mom snapped. “I do not get drunk! And I do not burn the turkey!” Dad yelled. “Crispy. Everyone likes crispy turkey.”

“No one *grills* a turkey, Herb. Standing outside in thirty temperatures with your Budweiser like it’s the Fourth of July.”

“Roxie likes my mesquite turkey. Don’t you Roxie?” Dad called.

I closed my eyes, and when I opened them Hank’s face was all I saw.

“Have you changed your mind yet?” I whispered.

Slowly, he shook his head.

“Give them time,” I finished.

“Well? Roxie? You like my mesquite turkey, don’t you?” Dad asked.

I put my forehead to Hank’s chest for a second then lifted it away.

“Yeah, Dad, I like your turkey.”

It was true. I did. It was great turkey. The best.

The bell over the door went and I peered around Hank's shoulder off the Ally, Malcolm and Kitty Sue walking in.

My eyes widened, my body stilled and I stared at Hank who placing an arm around my neck, holding me reassuringly tight against side.

"Did you call them?" I asked Hank.

"Um...that would be me," Indy said from behind me.

Good God.

"Roxie's movin' to Denver," Daisy told Ally.

Ally's eyes got bright. "Righteous," she said.

Malcolm's gaze settled on me and his eyes crinkled.

"I'm so pleased," Kitty Sue smiled.

"Holy fuckin' shit," Tex boomed.

I looked at him, and his grin was so big it split his face.

"Don't look so damned happy," I snapped at him as he pounded on behind the espresso counter.

"I heard your dad was here," Malcolm said to me as he came close and kissed my cheek.

My eyes lost their scowl and I nodded to him with a weak smile.

"Right here," Uncle Tex said, pushing Mom and Dad forward.

"What's going on?" Mom asked.

"This is the rest of Hank's family. You already met Lee. This is his Ally, and his mother and father, Kitty Sue and Malcolm," Uncle Tex

introductions.

r to see “Sweet Jesus!” Mom called. “Sweet, sweet Jesus. I’m so happy to see you.”

moved, Mom went forward on a rush and gave Kitty Sue a big hug. To my surprise, Kitty Sue didn’t recoil and not only accepted the hug, but hugged Mom in return.

“I’m Herb. This is my wife, Trish,” Dad said, thankfully going to shake hands with Malcolm.

“Good to meet you,” Malcolm replied.

They dropped hands and Dad took Malcolm in.

“Your boys been lookin’ after my girl,” Dad told him.

Malcolm nodded. “That’s right.”

For a few beats Dad and Malcolm just looked at each other. Something passed between them, something I could feel. I felt the tears sting my eyes and I pressed deeper into Hank. Ally’s gaze came to me and she winked and smiled at her and felt the tears subside.

ut from “Means I owe you a beer,” Dad said quietly.

“I’d like that,” Malcolm replied.

ose and “I know. Let’s have a party!” Ally announced.

I was beginning to realize Ally didn’t need much of an excuse for a party.

“My party is tonight,” Daisy pointed out.

“We’ll have it Friday night,” Ally said.

s sister, “Works for me,” Indy put in.

did the “Me too,” Jet said.

“You makin’ those caramel chocolate brownies?” Uncle Tex asked
to meet “What caramel chocolate brownies?” Dad asked.

Uncle Tex turned to Dad. “Loopy Loo’s brownies beat the fuck
’ shock, out of your turtle custard sundaes any day.”

m tight “Them’s big words, big man.” Dad threw down the gauntlet.

“Fuckin’ better believe it,” Uncle Tex declared.

ing the “You’re on,” Dad replied.

“I better make the brownies,” Jet mumbled.

I noticed everyone had drifted over, Lee, Eddie and the rest of the
Pack.

“You boys have tuxedos?” Daisy asked.

All their eyes turned to her.

nething Even Daisy blinked under the force of the Hot Pack Stare.

ay eyes “Okay,” she gave in. “I’ll let you all in with suits.”
nked. I

“Tuxedos?” Mom asked.

“Formal party, my house, tonight,” Daisy announced. “Everyone
invited.”

Mom gasped, then she uttered the immortal feminine words, “I don’t
anything to wear.”
a party.

“That’s okay, Trish. I’ll take you shopping,” Kitty Sue offered,
missed most of the show and not having any idea what she was letting
in for. I should probably have warned her, but there was no time. Mom
forging ahead.

“Herb, we better go now. We need to get you a suit. I hope we can

I Jet. somewhere that does one day tailoring,” she said to Kitty Sue, link
arm through Kitty Sue’s and leading her to the door. “We need
in’ shit somewhere to get logs and blankets. And we need to find a big grocer
Maybe a Kmart, or better yet, a Target. They have ritzier stuff. Hanl
some stocking up.”

“Logs?” Kitty Sue asked.

“I don’t want Roxie freezing to death during one of your blizzards,
explained.

The bell over the door jingled as they walked out, Dad throwing
the Hotroll over his shoulder as he followed, carrying his latte.

Once they’d gone, Hank curled me so I was facing him and I looke

“I gotta go to work,” he said.

I nodded.

“What time’s Daisy’s party?” he asked.

“Seven o’clock. Come with your belly empty, I’m havin’ a secre
in the kitchen for VIPs,” Daisy answered before walking away.

ryone’s I put my arms around Hank as he watched Daisy walking away.

“The Rock Chicks have claimed you. You’re stuck now,” he
i’t have looking down at me.

“Funny, I was thinking that about you. Being stuck, I mean.”

having He rubbed his nose against mine, clearly not feeling stuck.

herself When his head moved away, I said, “I need to talk to Annette,
om was what’s going on, and I need to call my clients. I don’t think I’ll lose
them. I don’t need to be in Chicago to do my work. After I got that
an find recruited clients outside Chicago, in Des Moines and Cincinnati. They

ing herbe cool. I need—”

l to go “Award?” Hank cut in.

y store. I waved my hand between us. “Nothing, it was just some design av

k needs He grinned at me. The way he was grinning made me feel fur
warm inside, like I’d done something great.

,” Mom “Stop grinning at me, Whisky. It wasn’t a big deal.”

“Any award is a big deal.”

an eye “This one wasn’t.”

“Sorry, didn’t you say you recruited two clients because of it?”

id up. “Well, yeah.”

“Then it was a big deal.”

“Whisky—”

“Sunshine, quiet,” he said and gave me a light kiss so I’d do as I w

t buffet “I’ll see you, and your folks, at my house at six thirty.”

“Do you have a suit?”

“Yeah.”

noted, “Okay.”

He gave me a squeeze and started to let go but I held on.

“You hear anything about Billy—” I began.

His eyes locked on mine and he interrupted me, “Yeah.”

tell her I sighed. “For a while there, I forgot about him.”

any of Hank’s arms tightened and his face dipped close. “Sweetheart, I p
award I soon he’ll be a memory.”

should I nodded because I believed him.

My body fitted itself close to his. Hank's head came down the res
way, this time not for a light kiss, but for a deeper one.

vard." When I was dizzy, he let me go, and then he was gone.

my, all

as told.

romise,

My body fitted itself close to his. Hank's head came down the rest of the way, this time not for a light kiss, but for a deeper one.

When I was dizzy, he let me go, and then he was gone.



MOM BOMBED

I was looking out the window of the black Explorer, processing my thoughts and preparing for my night.

I was in Fortnum's when Luke walked in ten minutes ago, eyes wide and he said one word, "Home."

I guessed that meant he was my ride.

Annette and Jason had been spending the day casing the other head office to check out the competition. I called to tell her Hank and I had sorted everything out and I was moving to Denver. She was ecstatic. We'd been trailblazing together for seven years, Indianapolis to Chicago and now to Denver.

"Bitch," she said. "With you and me in the 'hood, Denver isn't going to know what hit it!"

I thought it was more the other way around, but I didn't tell Annette. I'd also called all my clients and my landlord.

My clients were cool. They didn't care where I worked, just as long as I worked.

My landlord was freaked out. The cops had called him about the body and he thought my mutilated body was buried six feet deep in some place somewhere. I calmed him down and convinced him I wasn't a voice for

grave. He wasn't too upset I was leaving, considering he'd never had a
who'd had their furniture torn apart and went missing for two
presumed (by him) dead. Anyway, I was month-to-month and he was
to let me out of the lease at the end of November.

Simple as that.

In fact, everything seemed simple.

All that had to be done was find Billy.

lay and No word from Hank, which I figured meant no good news. Also
was no bad news, so I decided that no bad news was actually good news
on me, went with it.

"Babe," Luke called, pulling me from my thoughts.

I turned to him. "Yeah?"

d shops His chin went up, pointing over my shoulder, and I realized w
l thingsparked in front of Hank's house. I looked toward the house, my hand g
ig eachthe door handle, and I stopped dead.

"Good God," I whispered.

oing to The air in the Explorer changed as Luke went into alert mode.

"What?" he asked.

e that. "Look at the house," I breathed.

"What?" he repeated.

ng as I "Look at the house!" This time, I yelled.

reak in I got out of the car, slammed my door and stood on the sidewalk
at the house.

woods "Roxie," Luke, suddenly beside me, said, his fingers curling i
rom the

a tenant waistband of my cords. "Talk to me. What?"

weeks, "Pumpkins," I replied.

s going He looked at the house.

On the front stoop were two carved pumpkins. Also, resting against the side of the door, was a bunch of dried corn stalks bound together with (these not carved) pumpkins and some gourds nestled at the bottom. On the other side was a decoration attached to the house made up of three wooden slats dangling from wire. The top slat was a witch flying in front of a quarter moon, the middle one said "Happy Halloween" and the bottom was a black cat with its back arched.

I looked to Luke.

"Hank's house has been Mom Bombed," I told him.

re were Luke looked at me for a second then his eyes went to his boots.

going to He wasn't fast enough. I saw the half-grin.

"This is not funny. Hank's going to *freak*."

The door opened and Mom stood there. "Hey there, sweetie. Why are you standing on the sidewalk?" Her eyes went to Luke. "Luke, is it? Come in. I'll make you some cocoa."

"Oh my God," I whispered, horrified that my mom offered hot cocoa to me. "Badass, Super Cool Luke. I turned to Luke. "I've changed my mind. I want you to shoot me. I want you to shoot her."

staring His fingers came out of my waistband and pressed against my lower back, pushing me forward. The half-grin had gone full-fledged.

nto the "I don't know why everyone thinks this is funny. This isn't funny." I grumbled on the way up the walk.

“It isn’t funny because they’re your parents,” Luke explained to everyone else, it’s just fuckin’ funny.”

We walked into the house and Shamus rushed me. He took in Luke and I into a skid and slammed into me, knocking me backwards into Luke’s solid) body. Luke’s hands came to my hips and normally I would have stepped away immediately, considering I was plastered against him, but on the painted too horrified by what I saw.

There were huge, empty, plastic shopping bags everywhere. There were blankets and four fluffy pillows were stacked on the couch. The lamp and I had broken had been replaced by another one, which now threw a glow on the room. In one corner, there was a four-foot-tall wrought-iron candleholder with six, thick green candles in the top, all lit and giving off a scent of bay. There were more candles in black holders on the coffee table, also lit. There were candles on the dining room table, ensconced in decorative corn husks and miniature gourds. On the corner of the bar, separating the dining area from the kitchen, sat an enormous Halloween bowl filled almost overflowing with Halloween candy. I saw a new canister set for sugar and coffee (I had no doubt all of them filled) against the back counter. Last, I could smell something cooking.

“What have you done to Hank’s house?” I asked Mom.

“Just made it cozy. Kind of a thank you gift for letting us stay here taking care of you,” Mom answered and she looked to Luke. “You like cocoa?” she asked.

“No,” he replied.

“Coffee?” Mom went on.

“No,” he said.

d. “To “Tea?” she continued in dogged pursuit of being both a mom and hostess, even though it wasn’t her house. She was now sounding surprised at the idea that Luke drank something as un-macho as tea (like very drink cocoa).

d have “No,” Luke repeated.

it I was “Oh, I know. A beer?” Mom kept going.

Luke shook his head.

ee new I cut in, “Jeez, Mom. He doesn’t want anything. Leave him alone.”

p Billy

v a soft “Roxie, don’t be rude,” Mom told me. Then a buzzer went off. “what he’ll want!” she shouted and she whirled, threw on a (new) oven, opened the oven and took out a cookie tray. “Right here, hot and good roasted pumpkin seeds. Come and get ’em.”

ght iron

orative I looked at Mom as she shook the seeds on the tray to Luke and me

ing the I ignored the seeds.

illed to So did Luke.

r flour, “Where’s Dad?” I asked.

kitchen

“Negotiating with the log man. They say they don’t do deliveries. My father intends on getting those logs delivered. He brought me home and back. He’ll be here in time to get ready.”

and for

u want Dad thought he could negotiate anything with just a hint of good charm and a few off-color jokes. Most of the time, he wasn’t worried. I suspected the logs would be delivered tomorrow.

I threw off thoughts of logs.

Instead, I focused on getting ready. Getting ready sounded like a good idea. It meant escape, and escape was good.

a good slightly ke he'd "I'm going to take a shower," I announced and made to move away slightly. Luke's hand curled into my waistband again. He pulled me deep ke he'd him and his mouth came to my ear.

"Leave me with her, I *will* shoot you," he whispered in my ear.

I looked over my shoulder at him and realized how close we were. My face was less than an inch from mine. I stepped forward and his hand curled away.

Mom, undeterred by us ignoring her offering, tilted the seeds waiting bowl and walked them to the coffee table. Once she set down a bowl, she started to gather up bags.

"Luke, be a sweetheart and get rid of these," she said, shoving them from his arms and starting away before she realized he hadn't actually taken them.

I caught them before they fell to the floor and turned to Mom.

"Mom, I don't mean to alarm you, but Luke's here to protect me, I have to leave him alone so he can do...whatever it is he does. What he doesn't do is clean up, drink cocoa or chitchat. Okay?"

Mom slowly turned and looked at Luke with rounded eyes before she nodded.

I twisted and said to Luke, "Come with me."

I shoved the bags in Mom's arms, gave her a peck on the cheek, and walked by her, through the kitchen and into Hank's room.

Luke followed. So did Shamus.

I closed the door and turned to Luke.

"I'm going to take a shower. You're going to be good, try not to mess up or freak me out or anything like that. I've got to concentrate. Preparing

y. formal party is serious business. I don't need distractions."

er into His eyes went half-mast and his half-grin appeared.

"You're doing it!" I accused.

His eyebrows went up.

re. His I shook my head. "Never mind."

ropped Then I stomped to the shower.



into a OVER AN HOUR LATER, there was a knock on the bathroom door.

own the I'd had my shower, done my formal party makeup and was putt

finishing touches on my hair (loads of soft twists and up in a messy

em into was wearing Hank's bathrobe. My dress, undies, jewelry, purse and

them. had been gathered and were all lying on the bed next to Luke (w

undies were hidden under the dress, Luke didn't need to get any ideas)

so you Luke seemed to have no problem slipping into a Luke Zen Zone

What he stretched on Hank's bed, Shamus at his side, eyes closed, saying noth

seeming totally alert.

ore she I opened the door, expecting it to be Luke.

It wasn't Luke. It was Hank.

Shit.

ek and Before he could open his mouth, I said, "I'm sorry about your hous

"Roxie—"

"I should have called to warn you but I'm running late getting read

"Roxie—"

be sexy "She's doing it to be nice, to say thank you for all you've done."

ig for a

“Roxanne, let me—”

“She can be a little overpowering, I know, but I swear it isn’t n
this bad. I think she’s worried about me but doesn’t want to say.”

“Roxanne—”

“We can move the stuff she bought to my new apartment when I f
and I’ll get rid of the stuff at the front stoop the minute they leave.”

His hands shot out and grabbed me at the waist. He yanked me to h
his mouth came down on mine.

ing the He kissed me deep.

knot). I When he lifted his head I was dizzy and had forgotten my place
d shoesjabbering apologetic explanation of Mom’s craziness.

ell, my “What was that for?” I asked.

· “To shut you up. You wouldn’t stop talking.”

e, lying “Oh.”

ing but I probably should have been angry but I wasn’t. He was a good kis
if I had to be shut up, that was a damn fine way to do it.

“I don’t mind about the house, it looks nice,” he told me.

“Okay.”

ie.” “And I don’t mind your parents. They’re interesting and they car
you.”

“Okay.”

y.” “And we’ll talk about your apartment later.”

I blinked. “What?”

He shifted me to the side and moved into the bathroom. “Are you

the bathroom? I need to shower.”

ormally He bent over and pulled off a boot then twisted to throw it
bedroom.

I watched it go, moving my body as the boot sailed by me. When I
ind one back, he did the same with the other boot.

“What about my apartment?” I asked.

um and “We’ll talk about it later,” he replied.

He started to pull off his sweater but I grabbed his arms and stoppe

He looked at me.

e in my I felt something strange and unpleasant crawl along my skin.

“Don’t you want me to move to Denver?” I asked quietly.

“Yeah, I want you to move to Denver.”

I blinked at him again, confused. “Then, what about my apartm
repeated my question.

ser and “Roxanne, we’ll talk about it later.”

It hit me.

“As in, we’ll have a ‘conversation?’” I asked, thinking about w
said earlier about Eddie’s chats and the fact that she’d moved in wi
e about making them the fastest relationship in history.

Hank stared at me as if he was considering checking my forehead t
I had a fever.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “Two people talking is the same as two
having a conversation.”

done in “Do you mean, a Hank Conversation? The kind with a capital ‘H

capital 'C?'"

in the His brows drew together. "Have you been drinking?" he asked.

"No, I haven't been drinking!"

I turned He sighed and straightened, giving me his full attention. "May should tell me what's on your mind."

I didn't actually have anything on my mind other than what was on

"Nothing's on my mind," I admitted. "Except, when we had him. conversation, we aren't having it in bed."

After I made my declaration, he watched me for a beat then shook his head.

"Jesus, you're a nut," he muttered, pulling off his sweater.

"I'm not a nut!"

He tossed his sweater in the direction of his boots then his arms went around my waist and he pulled me to him again.

He bent his head to mine, and with his lips twitching, he said, "That's not a good way."

"How is calling someone a nut good?" I flashed.

"Sweetheart, are you done in the bathroom?" he asked patiently.

"Yes," I grumbled.

He kissed my forehead, let me go, walked in the bathroom and shut the door.

I turned, straightened his boots, folded his sweater and put it on the bed.

"Your dad is a nut if anyone's a nut. He thinks my parents are interested in me and aInteresting! That's just plain crazy," I told Shamus who sat by the door.

staring at me and wagging his tail. “He hasn’t called *them* nuts and t
nuts.”

I put on my underwear, spritzed with Boucheron and carried on tal
be you Shamus.

“As soon as Billy’s caught, I’m taking you out to play Frisbee.
i his. don’t know how, I’ll teach you. I’m good with Frisbees. Gil and I
ve this play in the front yard all the time. We’ll go and buy, like, ten of them
ook his We’ll enter competitions. They’ll do documentaries about how good
with Frisbees. You’ll be the Frisbee Dog King.”

I figured Shamus was into the Frisbee gig as he got up on all fours
body started shaking with his tail, his excitement was so great.

I leaned over him and gave him a full body doggie rub.

n came “I’d take you tomorrow, but Billy’s still out there and I don’t thin
would like the whole Frisbee idea. He doesn’t seem the Frisbee type,
I mean Shamus.

I heard a noise and turned my head to see Hank standing in the ba
doorway, shoulder leaned against the jamb, belt undone, jeans
undone, socks gone, watching me.

“Frisbee Dog King?” Hank asked.

shut the Oh shit.

Okay, so maybe I was a nut.

e bed. I straightened, looked to Hank and Shamus sat on my feet.

resting. “Come here,” Hank said softly.

ae bed, “No,” I told him. “I have a feeling you’re going to ruin my hair.”

hey are “Come here,” Hank repeated.

“No, Hank. It took me forever to do my hair.”

king to “Sunshine...”

“Oh, all right.”

If you used to I had to go to the other bathroom to fix my hair.



just in ONCE I FINISHED FIXING my hair, I helped Dad tie his new bow tie to l
freaks. tux. This took me six tries. These six tries were interrupted by Mom s
you are my hands away and trying to tie it six times herself. Then, I slap
and his hands away and tied it on the second go of my second attempt.

“Don’t know why I need to own a tux,” Dad grumbled, pulling collar.

“Herb, we talked about this,” Mom said.

ik Luke “We didn’t talk about it,” Dad returned. “You just upped and bo
” I told I’ve worn a tux twice. To my senior prom, and you were my fuckin’ d
to our wedding, and you were my fuckin’ date to that too. I’m fift
throom years old, and counting today I’ve worn a tux three times in my life.
mostly need to own one.”

My dad was as cheap as they come. He’d pinch the last drop of bl
of a penny (if a penny had blood). Unfortunately for him, my mor
money like it grew on trees. I knew that day shopping had been pure
for him. The tux was just plain cruel.

“You have two daughters who, pray to the Sweet Lord Jesus, v
married one day. You’ll need a tux for their weddings,” Mom pointed

“Mimi says she’s gettin’ married in Vegas. I don’t need a tux fo

need a pair of shorts and a Hawaiian shirt and I've got, like, twelve of

Mom whirled on Dad aghast, and she exclaimed, "You are *not* wearing that Hawaiian shirt to Mimi's wedding. I don't care if it's in Vegas."

"I am," Dad said.

"You are *not*," Mom replied.

"Yes...I...am!" Dad repeated.

his new "Guys—" I tried to butt in (and failed).

lapping "Well, Roxie isn't getting married in Vegas. Roxie's going to
ped her designer wedding. You'll need a tux for that," Mom told him.

This was true. I was going to wear Vera Wang and Manolo shoes
; at his going to have shrimp cocktail (not those little, useless shrimps, but the
king prawn ones) and I was going to spend ten thousand dollars on flowers.
There were going to be flowers *everywhere*. I told them about the flow
ught it. shrimps when I was eight. They'd been saving ever since.

ate, and "The way she and Hank're going, Roxie'll be knocked up in
y-eightmonths. It'll be a shotgun wedding and she'll have to get a dress for
I don'tPenny."

Both Mom and I gasped.

ood out "Dad!" I shouted just as Mom yelled, "Take that back, Herb!"

n spent "Well, excuse me, but they practically jumped each other on
torture breakfast table. You were there, Trish, you saw it. Hell, she's livin' with
guy!" Dad defended himself to us both and then turned to me. "No
will get mind, Roxie. I like Hank. And it's your time. You ain't gettin' any y
out. you hear what I'm sayin'? Anyway, Hank's a good-lookin' guy, you
r that. I make beautiful babies."

those.” Good God.

earing a “I am not getting a dress from JC Penny!” I snapped (priori course). “And I’m not going to have a shotgun wedding! And I practically jump Hank over the breakfast table!”

“Right,” Dad said, just a hint of sarcasm in his voice (okay, a sarcasm). “Jesus. I’d like a fuckin’ grandchild before I’m slobberin’ fuckin’ Jell-O. Gil ain’t ever gonna get married, he and Kristy don’t in marriage, whatever the hell that means. Mimi goes through men like have a Roxie’s finally caught herself a live one. Hank’s a man’s man. Ro: way I see it, you and Hank are my only hope,” Dad told me.

s. I was How in *the hell* did we get on this subject?

e meaty I gave up.

lowers. “We’re running late, I’m getting dressed,” I announced, turning n
ers and on them and flouncing out of the room.

a few I stopped dead when I reached the kitchen.

rom JC Hank was standing with his hips against the counter, palms
countertop, an open beer in the fingers of one hand. His head was bent
was looking at his feet.

It was a pose of reflection. A pose that said he’d heard every word.

ver the Mortification that he heard the ridiculous conversation was not
with the stopped dead.

t that I I stopped dead because Hank was wearing a suit. A dark-gray suit
ounger, midnight-blue shirt, no tie, opened at the throat. His hair was dar
1 two’ll curling around his collar, a week or two past needing a cut. He looke
in a suit. He looked better than I’d ever seen him look. He looked so

couldn't even move.

His head came up and his eyes came to me, full-on grin in place, and I didn't think he thought the conversation with my parents was amusing, not in the-hills-scary-as-shit.

I put my hand to the counter to hold on and blurted, "God, handsome."

At my words, the grin left his face and something else came over it. There was no laziness in his eyes, they were just intense.

My legs went weak.

He stared at me for a few seconds then said softly, "You be dressed."

I nodded, mentally shaking off my Hank Stupor and walked to my back bedroom.

I got dressed quickly. We were already late.

The gown Tod loaned me was black satin. The skirt had a bias-cut on the full and had a beautiful drape. The dress was boat-necked, sleeveless, and he seemed elegant but plain...until you saw the back.

It was totally backless, all the way down past the small of my back, barely, but not quite, to indecent level. Tod had explained he'd never seen why it was hard for a drag queen to go backless, even though he tried. He'd bought a whim and tried everything he could think of to pull it off, but it didn't work.

As far as I was concerned (and as far as Stevie, Tod, Jet, Indy, Ally and Daisy were concerned), it worked for me.

I put on a pair of black strappy, high-heeled sandals, the diamond

Billy got me and the diamond tennis bracelet Mom and Dad bought
howingbribe to graduate from Purdue in four years rather than the five I was l
un-for-for in my junior year. I didn't have a wrap or coat so I was just
Hank's 4Runner heated up quickly.

you're I grabbed my bag and ran to the kitchen.

"Ready, ready, I'm ready," I said, looking through my bag. "St
t. There ready."

I'd forgotten my lipstick.

I whirled and ran back through the bedroom to the bathroom and
tter get through my makeup, grabbed my lipstick and liner, shoved it in my b
on the way back through the bedroom collided with Hank.

to the The room was dark but I could see Hank from the light coming fi
kitchen.

"Sorry, I'm ready now," I told him.

ut, was His hands were at my waist and they slid around my back. I fe
ess and leave the satin and hit my skin and I shivered. His fingers trailed the
the material, just above my bottom.

ck, just "We're comin' home early," he said quietly.

worn it, "What? Why?"

ht it on He didn't explain, instead he said, "I'll arrange for someone to bri
t never parents home later." His fingers dipped into the material. "A lot later."

Holy cow.

annette, "Okay," I agreed instantly.

I saw his shadowed grin.

d studs "I take it you like the dress," I said.

me as a “Yeah,” he replied. “I like the dress.”

reading I thought he was going to kiss me, a kiss that would necessitate me
hoping my hair (again), but he moved to the side, one hand coming away a
hand sliding around my waist. We walked into the living room together

Dad and Mom watched us.

dit! Not “She’s still wearin’ the dress,” Dad remarked somewhat bizar
Hank.

Hank didn’t respond.

pawed “I thought you went in there to tell her to change outta that dress
ag, and went on.

“No,” Hank replied.

rom the “Herb—” Mom started, but Dad’s eyes were bugging out of his he

“She can’t wear that dress! It’s indecent. Her ass is hangin’ out.”

lt them I looked behind me. I couldn’t see my ass because Hank’s ar
edge of around me but I was pretty certain it wasn’t hanging out.

I turned back to Dad. “My ass is not hanging out.”

“It’s almost hangin’ out,” Dad replied.

ng your “Almost and hanging are two different things,” I returned, begin
get angry.

“Roxie—” Mom started again.

“Son, take my advice, you gotta get this girl in hand. You can’t let
around with her ass hangin’ out. You allow it once, she’ll do it again
me. I know,” Dad told Hank.

Good grief.

“My ass is *not* hanging out and Hank does *not* have to get me in here fixing flared.

and one Hank’s arm tightened and he pulled me deeper into his side.

r. “Girl, you were almost the death of me runnin’ around almost your underwear showin’. I’m warnin’ your boy here before you become rely to death of him,” Dad flared back.

“Herb—” Mom said again.

“I didn’t run around almost naked!” I snapped.

s,” Dad “That’s not what Mrs. Montgomery said. Mrs. Montgomery said looked loose,” Dad snapped back.

Good God.

ad. “Mrs. Montgomery also said that Ginny Lampard looked loose and was president of the Youth Club at the Christian Church and wore down oxfords with a string tie every day of her life!” I shot back.

m was “Roxie—” Mom said.

“Herb, she isn’t changin’ her dress,” Hank cut in, his deep voice loud not inviting argument.

ning to Dad stared at him, agog.

“She looks beautiful. We’re late. Let’s go,” Hank finished then moved forward and opened the door, stepping away from me so we all could get him.

her run Mom passed me, smiling.

1. Trust Dad passed me, glaring.

I was trying hard not to do a cartwheel of joy.

and," I

naked,
me the

id you

and she
button-

ow and

oved us
precede



DAISY DOESN'T DO BORING

“Holy cow.”

I was standing outside Marcus and Daisy’s house, wondering why it was called “The Castle.” Mainly because it *was* a castle, complete with moat.

Mom stood beside me, staring at the house.

“Is Daisy wealthy?” Mom breathed.

“Her husband must have a real good job. What’s he do?” Dad was standing beside Mom and staring up at a turret.

I looked at Dad, then I looked at Hank who had secured the car as it approached us.

“Um...” I mumbled, not sure how much to share.

“Sales,” Hank replied, stopping at my side.

“He must be a slick talker,” Dad commented, clearly impressed.

I smiled at Hank, laughing under my breath. He grinned and took my hand.

“Sir. You can’t park there.” A valet was jogging up to us and stopping by the 4Runner. Hank had parked beside two other cars, both of which I recognized as Lee’s Crossfire and Eddie’s red Dodge Ram. They were the only cars

were parked near the house.

Hank flashed his badge to the valet.

The valet pursed his lips. “Go on in,” he relented.

“It’s good having a cop in the family,” Mom said, *sotto voce*, to we walked across the bridge over the moat.

“Yeah, good parking anywhere. That’s the reason it’s good havin in the family. Jeez, Trish,” Dad returned.

Hank squeezed my hand. I sighed, and for the first time in a long tanding was a happy sigh.

complete The front door was opened for us by a uniformed butler-type pers we walked down a long hall, the walls made of stone, a deep red, thick runner down the middle. The hall was decorated in “Castle Chic” with armor, torches and crossed swords.

asked, Every once in a while, there was a table displaying a fab expensive necklace or set of earrings, a glossy brochure depicting a nd was vacation spot, a shiny crystal vase or a glass sculpture and all of their silent auction bid sheet next to them. A quick glance showed all of sheets had bids. Some of the tables had elegantly dressed people s around them. They all turned to watch us walk in. Most of them smile or I should say, most of the ladies smiled at Hank. Some of them just wide-eyed and lustful.

ook my At the end of a hall was a huge room with an enormous fireplace t a roaring fire and more people standing around, drinking gla aring at champagne. Uniformed waiters walked around with trays of champag I knew, hors d’oeuvres.

ars that We barely made it into the room when I heard, “Yoo hoo!”

It was Tod and Stevie standing with Indy and Lee, Jet and Eddie and Ally. All the men were dressed like Hank, suits and open-necked shirts. They all looked heart-stoppingly, mouth-wateringly, unbelievably great. Mom had on a deep-green, sheath dress with one shoulder bared. Jet was wearing a pale-pink strapless number with a black ribbon at an empire waist. Ally was in a dark-blue halter dress with a deep slit up the front and serious cleavage. Dad as a cop. Tod and Stevie were in tuxes.

Hugs, air-kisses and handshakes were exchanged. I introduced me to Tod and Stevie, and Eddie stopped a waiter to get us glasses of champagne.

“Girlie, you look *gorgeous*. I’m giving you that dress. It was made for you,” Tod said to me.

I laughed for the second time that night and I hadn’t been there for minutes.

“You can’t give me this dress. It had to cost a fortune,” I told Tod.

“Fortunes come, fortunes go. Gowns are forever and that gown was meant to be yours,” Tod replied.

“Tod, the last time I wore a formal dress was to a frat party Christmas ball. Thank you but, I couldn’t,” I declined, I thought graciously.

“You can, you will, you won’t give me any backtalk,” Tod countered and then turned his eyes to Hank. “See she has somewhere to wear that hat had ordered.”

I looked to Indy for help, not only with the dress, but because I didn’t know how Hank would take being ordered about by a gay man (or a lesbian for that matter).

She was smiling huge.

nd Carl “Don’t fight Tod. You’ll lose,” she advised.

l shirts. “Ha!” Tod barked. “You want to talk about your wedding colors
at. Indy Lee!” Tod turned to Lee. “How do you feel about tangerine and choc
earing a wedding colors?”

lly was “I thought we went over this—” Ally butted in.
eavage.

“Shush, I’m not talking to you,” Tod shushed Ally and his eyes c
to Lee. “Lee?”

ly folks “Don’t ask me, the wedding doesn’t concern me. My job is to si
sses of and I’ll be sure to do that,” Lee answered.

ade for All the female and gay men’s eyes grew round.

Eddie looked at his shoes. Carl grinned. Dad chuckled. Hank’s a
ere ten around my waist but his head turned to the side. He was feigning avid
in a banner with a crest that was attached to the wall.

All this meant Lee was very, very alone.

vn was “I’m sorry?” Indy asked, turning to Lee.

“Do what you want. I don’t care. I’ll be responsible for the honey
ristmas Lee told her.

“That’s it? You *want* to have a tangerine and chocolate wedding’
adicted asked.

it,” he “I don’t even know what that means,” Lee returned, and whe
opened her mouth to speak, Lee went on, his eyes crinkled at the c

l didn’t “And gorgeous, I don’t want to know.”

ny man “I don’t believe this,” Indy hissed under her breath.

“Son, let me tell you something. Even if you don’t care, pretend
Honestly, it’s the best way to go,” Dad, the voice of experience, dec

wade in. “She talks about toss pillows. You don’t care about toss pillows again? You don’t even know what toss pillows are. *Pretend* that toss pillows are your highest priority in life.”

Eddie chuckled under his breath. Carl did it straight out. Lee snickered. Dad. Hank was still memorizing the banner, but he was now biting his lip.

Mom turned to Dad, eyes narrowed, and said, “Excuse me?”

“Trish, just last week we had a forty-five minute discussion about curtains in the living room,” Dad replied. “You think I give a shi about curtains? I care that there’s beer in the fridge and the TV works. I don’t care about curtains. I didn’t hear a word you said about the curtains.”

“You agreed to the curtains with the little trumpets on them! You loved the idea! I already ordered them. I thought it was all done!” Mom cried.

Dad looked back at Lee and nodded sagely.

Mom’s face got red. “Are you saying you don’t like the curtains with the little trumpets?”

“I’m sayin’ I don’t care. Get whatever you want. I don’t even care about the curtains,” Dad replied.

“Guys—” I tried to run interference.

“I just do not believe this,” Mom groused. “I knew I should have gone with the curtains with the little horses and riders on them. The trumpet curtains are going to look silly. What are the neighbors going to think?”

“Mrs. Logan, for what it’s worth, I think the neighbors are going to like the trumpet ones. The little horse and riders...” Stevie offered, wincing.

pillows and shaking his head.

“You sure?” Mom asked.

“I’m sure,” Stevie assured her.

“Well then, thank you.” Mom smiled at Stevie and took a sip of champagne.

I turned into Hank’s body, lifted on tiptoe and whispered in his ear, “I can come back into the room, crisis averted.”

He looked down at me, eyes smiling.

Then he asked, “How much do you care about curtains?”

“Well...” I drew it out, because I cared about curtains, like, a lot. I set the tone for the whole room.

“Okay, let me rephrase that,” Hank went on. “How much do you care about curtains?”

I grinned at him. “Not much.”

His smile hit his mouth. “We’re set then.”

“All my honey bunches of oats!” Daisy yelled behind my back.

I turned to see Daisy approaching, dragging Marcus with her. I hadn’t even noticed how hard, so dazzling was her ensemble. She was head to toe rhinestones, sequins, and beads. Her hair was held up in an enormous updo, fashioned with hair jewelry. She had sequins glued around her right eye, she was worth a fortune in diamonds at her ears and throat, and her V-necked, ice-blue, long-sleeved gown was entirely beaded, every inch of it. It had to weigh a ton.

More hugs, air-kisses and handshakes were exchanged as Daisy and Marcus joined our group. It was only slightly uncomfortable when Ed and Marcus shook hands and only slightly freaky when Marcus looked in

in my eyes, communicating something I didn't really get, before he
my cheek.

After we all settled into our huge huddle, Daisy leaned forward,
of her us in.

All the women, Tod and Stevie leaned in. All the men started talki
r. "You Marcus.

"Do something!" Daisy hissed.

"About what?" Jet asked.

"About this party. It's a dud. Nothing's happening. People a
they set standin' around and talkin'. It's the most borin' party I've ever been to
life. One of you has to do something." Daisy turned to Ally, "You're
are that causing a stir. Start a fight. Do you have your stun gun?"

Again, I blinked at Daisy and this time not because I was dazzled.

Mom gasped.

"You're joking, right?" Ally asked.

"No, I'm not jokin'. What are they gonna say in the society pages
blinked doesn't do boring. Daisy is not a dud. Daisy is all about exci
comprende?"

sequins "Daisy, I think it's a nice party," I offered.

tons of Daisy turned to me, her eyes sharp as knives. "Nice? Nice?"

aring a e, long- Yowza.

on. I backed up a step.

sy and "Jumpin' Jehosafats. This is fuckin' *phat!*" We, and all the other
die and heard shouted from across the room.
intensely

kissed We all turned to see Jason, wearing a rented tux, and Annette, wearing a pretty, sea-green, scoop-necked dress with cap sleeves (obviously waving and/or Tod had intervened in the Scarlet O'Hara fiasco) standing across the room.

ng with “Did you, like, move this place stone for stone from England to something?” Annette asked Daisy when she arrived at our huddle.

More hugs, handshakes and air-kisses were exchanged and a bottle of champagne was brought.

re just “No, Marcus built it for me, sugar. You look sweet,” Daisy replied. Annette smiled at her and then turned to the girlie group at the bar. “This is good at this!” Annette announced. “Smithie hired me to dance. He said I could dance to Bob Marley. He doesn't care, just as long as the customers get it.”

I looked at Jason. He caught my glance and shook his head.

“Lottie and me are gonna work on my routines. I'll do Headliner during the day and be a stripper at night. How fuckin' phat is that?”

? Daisy turned from the boy conversation to the girl one. “She's kidding, right?” Hank murmured in my ear. I hadn't noticed.

I ignored him, focused on helping Jason.

“Annette, maybe you should think about that,” I suggested.

“Sweetie, Smithie loves you,” Annette told me, shocking me with the news. “He said if I could get you to dance with me he'd give me a bonus.”

“That's not gonna happen,” Hank officially entered our conversation.

guests, “Dude,” Annette said. “She'd be *the shit* up there. I bet she'd give me a run for her money.”

“It's not gonna happen,” Hank repeated, turning fully to Annette.

aring a Annette ignored, or was oblivious to, Hank's warning posture.

Stevie "Dude. Seriously. Do you know how much Lottie gets paid?" she
ross theHank.

"Don't see why she shouldn't strip, she's half naked right now," I
and or:in.

"Herb," Mom said.

waiter "I'm not half naked," I snapped at Dad.

"Your ass is hangin' out," Dad returned.

"Is it?" Annette asked, twisting to look at my back. "Let me see."

e. "Get
d dance "My ass is not hanging out," I told Annette.

"Oh," Annette muttered, sounding disappointed.

We'd become the focus of attention of several partygoers wh
ing the standing close to our group.

"Maybe we should keep it down," I suggested.

ed he'd "Oowee, free champagne!" We heard belted from across the room.

We all turned to see Shirleen standing there, Afro huge with
sprayed in it. She looked gorgeous in a deep-peach, square-necked go
orange, latticework, shimmering necklace adorning her throat from c
to chin.

with the
us." She turned and nabbed a glass of champagne off the tray of a
gliding by her.

on.
e Lottie "Well, look at all of you," Shirleen announced when she arrived
group. "Shee-it. It's like someone smacked you all with the beautifu
Ordinary people need not apply. God damn!"

“I want that necklace,” I blurted. “It’s gorgeous. But I want it
e asked Where did you get it?”

Shirleen put her hand to her throat, her long fingernails were pa
Dad put pearlescent coral. “Leon bought it for me about two days before they s
sorry ass. So not only did I get freedom from that stupid motherfucke
me a nice necklace as a keepsake. You can borrow it if you want.”

I stared at her.

Mom stared at her.

Dad stared at her.

“Leon’s my dead husband,” Shirleen explained. “He’s better off de
was a mean sonovabitch. Two days after they put him in the gr
redecorated the entire house then went on a cruise. Do you know how
o were food they serve on those cruises? Food everywhere, all the time. I e
me a piece of my own personal Isaac, you know, from *The Love Bo*
was a cruise ship bartender and Jamaican. Don’t remember his name,
was nice to Shirleen, *real* nice. I gave him a tip he’ll never forget.” T
glitter laughed so hard, her entire body shook with it.

own, an Mom, Dad and I just kept staring at her. Then Mom shuffled up c
leavage Hank and I.

“Are you sure you want to move to Denver?” she whispered.

waiter I looked at Hank.

He ran the tips of his fingers lightly along the edge of my dress
l at our small of my back.

il stick. A shiver went along my skin.

I nodded to Mom. “I’m sure.”

in red. She sighed. I noticed hers wasn't as happy as mine had been.

"Maybe we should mingle," Jet suggested, noticing that we had l
inted at the center of attention for the entire room.

shot his "That's a good idea," Indy agreed.

r, I got "Where's this secret VIP buffet, that's what I wanna know. I'm st
Dad asked loudly, causing some of the other guests' subtle stares to be
lot less subtle.

"Herb, keep your voice down," Mom whispered, also loudly.

"I'll show you, Mr. Logan," Daisy offered, not in the least upset t
ead. Hese
secret buffet was outed by my dad. "Right this way."

ound I Daisy, Mom and Dad peeled off, and Marcus moved close to Han
v much while everyone wandered away.

ven got "We need to talk," Marcus said to Hank.

at? He It was clear by the look on his face and the tensing of Hank's bc
, but he Marcus wasn't proposing idle, party chitchat.
hen she

Hank nodded once. His hand drifted up my back to between my s
close to blades and he curled me to him, front to front. I tilted my head back
face was as serious as Marcus's.

"I'll be a minute," he said.

I nodded.

s at the "Keep Lee, Eddie or Carl in sight. Got me?"

I nodded again.

His hand went away from my back and he ran a finger down my j
he and Marcus were gone.

“I see you sorted some of your man troubles,” Shirleen noted. She became standing beside me but watching Marcus and Hank move through the room.

I noticed Lee, Eddie and Carl watching Hank too. After Hank disappeared, from sight, Lee’s eyes cut to me, he said something to Indy and they came away from the couple they were talking to and closer to me.

Indy caught my eye and smiled reassuringly.

I smiled back.

Then I realized something and it hit me so hard it had a total body effect that her

“I think I’m in love with him,” I said quietly to Shirleen.

“What, child? I couldn’t hear you,” Shirleen replied.

“I barely know him, but I think I’m in love with Hank,” I repeated.

She turned fully to me and her eyes narrowed, mainly because I was beginning to freak out and I was certain it was showing.

“Calm down, girl. This is good. You should be happy. Hank Nighthouderis a good man and he’ll treat you right. I think you and I both know air and hisof men in the world like that. You got a shot at one, you hold on tight, you better fuckin’ well rejoice,” Shirleen advised, her voice serious point of being sharp.

“I think I’m in love with all of them,” I said, ignoring her words beginning to panic.

“All of who?” Shirleen asked.

“*Them.*” I threw my arm out. “Indy, Lee, Ally, Daisy, Eddie, Jeaw then Stevie...all of them,” I answered.

Shirleen nodded. “Far as I can tell, there’s a lot to love.” Her eyes

he was leave me. “Why you lookin’ like you been sentenced to life in prison?”
the big “Billy’s out there, he’s acting crazy. Or, I should say, crazier. The
telling what he’ll do. They might get hurt,” I replied.

appeared I’d felt it days before when Daisy got shot at when she was with r
moved now it had intensified. It was something different, something
immediate, visceral. Something not to be borne.

“They know ’bout Billy?” Shirleen asked, cutting into my thoughts
I nodded.

impact. “All of ’em?” she went on.

I nodded again.

“Then they know what they’re gettin’ into,” Shirleen declared dec
“Trust Shirleen, child. Lotta folk would stand clear from a girl like you
I was you to go it alone, best as you could. And I’m tellin’ it to you straight
Billy is as much of a crazy motherfucker as he sounds and even as st
you are, I’m guessin’ the best you could do would fail. He’d end up
tingale you or turnin’ you and neither of those things are good.”

r’t a lot I felt my blood turn to ice and I stared at Shirleen.

ght and She kept talking.

to the “These folk don’t stand clear. Says a lot. Don’t let it mess with you
rds and From what I hear of your people, you’ll eventually have your chance t
the score.”

I couldn’t say I liked the sound of that.

st, Tod, Shirleen’s eyes had been clear and focused, but something drifted
them and her gaze left me. “I’m not ashamed to tell you, Shirleen has
s didn’t had a soft spot for that boy,” Shirleen murmured, almost as if I wasn’t

' She was staring at the place we last saw Hank and I could
re's no immediately that she'd slipped into another place. I felt something
coming from her, something immensely sad, almost to the point of lon
ne. But I stood stock-still as she continued, "He was a good kid, throu
; more through. Good son to his parents, good brother, good friend to my n
Darius. Things changed, for me, for Darius. Hank never changed. H
; harder 'n' hell, more even than Lee and Eddie, to pull Darius back,
him..."

She stopped on a whoosh of air, as if she'd been sucker punched
gut. I was confused, not knowing what she was talking about, but I
chance to ask and I had the feeling she wouldn't have told me anyway.

isively. Shirleen carried on, "I know where his head's at, so does Dari
u, leave know where he stands. Even so...even so..." Her voice had dropp
; if this whisper so low it was almost like she was chanting. "Even so, I adm
rong as I'd had me a boy of my own, I'd want him to be just like Hank."
hurtin'

I felt her words hit me somewhere private. Somewhere I didn't
know existed. Somewhere that was a place that only women like n
Women like me, which was I suspected, women like Daisy. I was
guessing (correctly, even though I didn't know it at the time), wom
ir head. Shirleen. Women who'd experienced bad things at the hands of men
o settle opened their hearts to and women who hoped for something good to fo

Daisy had found hers in Marcus. Even though he was who he was
world, he was something else to her.

I across I'd found my good in Hank.

always Shirleen, well, I didn't know about Shirleen, but I suspected she
there. longer looking. Instead, her longing was the saving grace of a child,

uld tell just like Hank.

strange Tears hit my eyes and my hand reached out, found hers, and I l
ging. tight. I could only guess that I was correct at what was causing her e
gh and What I did know, it was there and she was letting me see it. I als
ephew, instinctively this emotional display didn't happen often.

ie tried, She squeezed my hand and then pulled hers away and downed h
to save of champagne.

 "I'm dry," she announced, breaking the mood and not even looking
l in the "Where's that boy with the champagne?" she was looking around.
had no You!" she yelled then walked away from me to pounce on a waiter
 tray of champagne.

us. We She didn't look back.

ed to a I didn't get a chance to process her words because I felt a touch
ire it. If skin at the small of my back. It was so light, there and then gone,
 almost like I imagined it. When I turned to see if it was real, I got an ey

't even a tanned throat coming out of a light-gray shirt surrounded by a black s
ne had. I looked up.

as also Luke.

ien like "Where's Hank?" he asked, deciding against any unnecessary plea
l they'd like "Hello."

s to the He was scanning the crowd and looking unhappy. I'd never see
 look unhappy. Mostly, he just looked hot, or sometimes amused, whi
just another form of hot. Now he looked plain old unhappy, which w
somehow hot.

was no "He's talking to Marcus." I replied then went on. "You look nice."
a child

moved a bit away from him, mainly because he did look nice. Really n
held on His arms were at his sides. When I moved away, his hand came
motion. curl around my waist and he pulled me back to him.

o knew I figured this was part of his not-outside-touching-distance bodygu
and decided to reassure him, "It's okay, Luke. Hank's here somewh
er glass Lee's keeping an eye on me."

I heard a cell phone ring somewhere, but I ignored it becaus
g at me. looked down at me.

"Hey! "You don't move away from me. We're findin' Hank. Now," he or
with a Immediately at his words and his tone, I felt fear crawl along my sl
"What's happening?" I asked.

Luke wasn't looking at me anymore. He was looking across the
on the followed his gaze and saw Lee, cell to his ear, his eyes on Luke. Lee
it was was tight and he jerked his head towards the door. At the same time,
yeful of repositioning Indy, moving her around to face one of the severa
suit. leading out of the room. She looked up at Lee questioningly, but tha
saw as Luke's fingers pressed into my waist insistently.

"Let's go," Luke said.

santries He started moving me toward the door. I noticed something hap
Eddie and Carl either both sensed imminent danger or had receive
n Luke verbal, badass-boys communiqués gliding through the air like radio
ich was They were also on alert and on the move.

was also "What's happening?" I asked, not fighting it, but going with Luk
was no longer crawling along my skin, but biting into me. Then, panic
" And I me, I said, "We have to find Hank."

ice. I no sooner said it when Hank and Marcus entered the room. Hank
e out to striding with a purpose, his eyes locked on me, his face like stone.

didn't look much different and was moving in the same way, his
ard gig scanning the room, likely looking for Daisy.

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Luke yanked me to his side then stopped dead.

e Luke I took my eyes off Hank and turned to look at Luke. In mid-swi
glance caught on something familiar. My head stopped and I stared.

dered. Billy was standing in the doorway to the room.

kin. His arm was raised.

In his hand was a gun and it was pointed at me.

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e's face

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l doors

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waves.

ce. Fear

: hitting

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His arm was raised.

In his hand was a gun and it was pointed at me.

TWENTY-SEVEN



WHEN MY LIFE BEGAN

I had to admit, Billy looked good.

The man-on-the-run thing was working for him. Faded jeans, his leather jacket hanging on him just right. His thick, blond hair was wild, his eyes were wild.

Other people had noticed Billy, but I didn't think they thought he was good, mainly because they also noticed his gun.

I felt a panic tear through the crowd. I heard small screams, felt people moving and caught Eddie and Carl's voices calling commands to the people.

All of this happened as if it was far, far away. Mostly, in those few moments, it felt like just Billy and me in the room.

"Hand her over," Billy demanded, looking at me, still pointing the gun at me, but addressing Luke.

Luke's response was to shove me behind his back.

This meant Billy was aiming his gun at Luke.

"No!" I shouted, coming out of my frozen bout with terror.

At the same time, Billy screamed, "Goddammit, give her to me!"

"Don't even think about it," I heard and my eyes swung to the left.

I saw Lee had a gun trained on Billy.

“Fuck you!” Billy shouted, swinging his gun wildly, aiming at Lee

I felt my stomach clench and my lungs squeeze, and vision
tangerine and chocolate wedding faded into an even worse nightmare.

“Billy, no,” I said, moving around Luke. “Don’t, I’ll go with you.”

“Luke, get her out of here.” This came from Hank, who was seven
feet behind Lee and moving forward.

He also had a gun, and it hit me, in a vague, slightly crazed (okay,
is beat-entirely crazed) way, how easily he handled it, just like he drove his 41
messy, Natural, like he was one with the gun. His right hand around the butt
on the trigger, the left hand cupping his gun hand. Both his arms were
looked cocked loose. His head was tilted slightly to the side and his gun arms
were aimed at Billy.

people Luke had already shifted in front of me, stepping back, forcing
edging move with him. The crowd was still easing away. I noticed people exiting
room just as I saw Marcus, also carrying a gun, sliding along a back wall

first few “Don’t move!” Billy shouted. He hadn’t noticed Marcus and he
his gun back at Luke and me.

gun at “Billy, don’t. Please,” I begged, peeking around Luke’s body.

Luke kept moving back. He was unfazed by the gun as well as unafraid.
Billy didn’t listen to me. He fired.

Luke’s body jerked.

I screamed.

The gunshot caused pandemonium. My scream wasn’t the only one.
People were no longer cautiously moving, but now running every

clearing the room.

Luke didn't go down. Instead, he shoved a hand in his jacket and pulled a gun out of a shoulder holster and trained it on Billy. I barely noticed that Billy was now pointing his gun at Hank.

Both Lee and Hank were side by side, maybe three, four feet behind them. They'd both advanced while Billy had fired and were only several feet away from him.

Both brothers were in a faceoff with Billy. *This isn't happening*, I thought with dread, and then I didn't anymore. Instead, I moved quickly, thanking my many years of practice with high heels, because they came in handy. I came wide around Luke and couldn't grab me and started toward Billy as fast as I dared.

"Luke, *get her out of here!*" Hank's voice cracked through the room. "Billy, I'll come with you," I said, moving forward more quickly than Luke, pulling at a strength I had no idea I possessed and ignoring Hank all.

All I could think was that if I had anything to do with it, Billy wasn't going to shoot Hank or anyone. I didn't know if he'd hit Luke, but if that was the end as far as I was concerned.

"Shoot him, Luke," Lee said.

"Roxie, get out of the way," Luke ordered from behind me. Then he didn't do as he ordered he said to Lee, "I can't get a clean shot."

I made it to within arm's length of Billy and his hand came out and grabbed my arm, twisting me and pulling my back to him so hard I slipped into his body. His arm wrapped around my waist.

He was using me as a shield.

Hank's expression shifted, going from controlled rage to out and o
pulled a Then Hank moved toward us.
because Billy shook his gun at him.
Hank halted, but Lee moved forward.
between "Stop fuckin' movin'!" Billy yelled at Lee, and Lee halted.
six feet "This isn't happening," I whispered my earlier thought aloud.
Someone was going to get hurt, probably already had been hurt.
t think All I could think was that I had to stop it.
ctice in "We have to go," I said to Billy.
e so he "I'm gonna kill him," Billy returned, still pointing his gun at Hank.
n. "No! Don't. Please, don't. Let's just go!" I cried.
o avoid "He tried to take what's mine. I'm gonna fuckin' *kill* him!" Billy y
κ. He was crazed, out of control and I was scared he'd do it.
wasn't I put my hand up to his arm, my fingers curling around his bicep
he had, the moment Billy fired again.
I didn't think, I just moved.
I twisted and shoved him with my entire body. He wasn't expectin
we both teetered and then went down. Billy on his back, me landing on
when I him. I tried to roll away. I wanted to check Hank, needed to do it, b
grabbed me and rolled us both. Coming up, he brought me with him a
out and me, my back to his front again, arm still round my waist.
ammed He was breathing heavily now. I'd knocked the wind out of him
was hanging on.

My eyes immediately went to where Hank was and he was still st

ut fury. much closer now, nearly on top of us. He, Lee and Luke had used the
to close in.

Hank's face was hard, a muscle moving in his jaw. He wasn't in
of the situation and I knew it was pissing him right the hell off.

All I felt was relief that he didn't seem to be bleeding.

Then everything happened at once.

Billy whirled, taking me with him and pulling us several feet away
Hank, Luke and Lee. I saw, now, that Vance was moving down the hall
toward us, gun raised. Billy stopped pulling back and whirled again and
two more men, both wearing black suits, white shirts and thin black ties
arriving from another doorway and closing in. I had no idea who they were
but they also had guns pointed at us.

elled. Again Billy whirled and there were two more men I'd never seen
coming from even another doorway. They were dressed a lot like
except they looked cleaner and their eyes were not wild, but clear
) just at purposeful. They also had guns pointed at us.

We were surrounded, with eight guns aimed in our direction and
didn't count Marcus, who I figured was somewhere in the room, altho
g it and one else was. And for that, I allowed myself a tiny prayer.

n top of "Put down your gun, Flynn," Hank demanded.

ut Billy Billy whirled again and we faced Hank.

nd held "Fuck you," Billy retorted.

but he "*Put it down!*" Hank's voice was like a whiplash.

anding, "Desmond wants to talk to you, Billy," one of the leather jacket
said from behind us, ignoring Hank's order and all the other people

the tussleroom. Billy whirled us to face him and he kept talking, "Let go of the g

"Fuck you, and fuck Desmond too," Billy returned, shaking his gun
control new target.

"Would someone please shoot him?" Lee asked, his voice so
impatient, like he wanted another glass of champagne and this
annoying delay.

ay from "Where? I got a clean shot at the back of his knee," Vance
halfway conversationally from behind us.

and I saw "Take it," Lee ordered casually and Billy whirled us around
eyes, both Vance.

you were, "Billy, quit jerking me around. I'm getting dizzy," I complained st
but in my defense, he was making me dizzy, and not in a good Hank-w

before, "Now I got a clean shot," Luke shared. With our latest whirl, Lu
e Billy, behind us.

ear and "Just don't hit Roxie," Lee instructed.

Billy whirled us around to face Luke.

and that "Oh for goodness sakes!" I snapped, beginning to lose my fear as
ough no my temper. I'd never been held hostage, pre-abduction, so I had no id
were playing with him, messing with his head.

"No one's shootin' him. Everyone stand down," Hank said.

I chanced a glance to my side and saw Lee's head turn to Hank.

"Stand...the fuck...down," Hank repeated, not taking his eyes, or g
Billy.

ed men Billy moved us to face Hank, and Lee gave a nod to Vance and
e in the Luke. He dropped his gun arm and stepped back.

girl.” This was for show. I figured Lee was a faster draw than just anyone. Don’t ask me how I knew this. I just knew it like I knew Welford hosiery was the best, bar none.

I felt, rather than saw, Luke and Vance drop their weapons to their hands. I had no idea what the other men did. This should have changed the level in the room, but instead, with Hank facing off against E. I asked

“Let her go,” Hank demanded and something about the way he made it sound like he was demanding more than just Billy taking his gun off me.

“She’s mine,” Billy returned, understanding Hank’s demand and making me a jerk to make his point.

“Let her go. Now. If you do, no harm will come to you. If you do shoot me myself,” Hank said.

It was clearly time for me to intervene. I didn’t know, in such a situation if Hank would get in trouble for shooting Billy, but I didn’t want to find out. What I did know was that Billy was prepared to shoot Hank. He’d tried it once and I wasn’t about to let that happen again.

“Billy, let me go,” I said quietly.

“No, Roxie. You and I are gonna walk out of here. We’re not disappearing,” Billy replied.

“Billy, look around you. We’re not going anywhere,” I told him.

“You gotta learn, Roxie. It’s you and me, just you and me. That’s all it’s ever been. That’s all it’s ever been for me. My life began when I met you,” Billy said, and his voice was beginning to sound funny. It was not his normal talk. There was a thread going through it that made it tremble.

t about I closed my eyes, and when I opened them Hank was looking at me
ew that I kept my gaze on Hank, direct and steady, and said to Billy, “You
he took me on a horse-drawn carriage ride on our first date.”

sides. I Billy’s already tense body went solid as a rock.

danger “You promised me that, remember Billy? Said we’d go to New
Billy, it City, have a carriage ride in Central Park. Do you remember?” I asked

said it My voice was not cruel. It was soft with the sad memory of an unfulfilled
s hands promise.

giving “Don’t, Roxie.” Instead of sounding angry or crazy, Billy’s
sounded like a plea.

n’t, I’ll “He has a dog,” I continued, still looking at Hank. Billy knew how
I liked dogs. “A Labrador,” I went on.

Billy also knew how much I liked Labradors. He’d never let us
dog. We were on the move too much, and anyway, he didn’t like dogs
tuation, last few years I didn’t get one because I didn’t want to bring a dog in
ind out. life with Billy. It wouldn’t have been fair to the dog.
already

I kept going, “You’ve seen him, when you were watching me.
sweet chocolate lab named Shamus. He sits on my feet and I’m going to
teach him to play Frisbee.”

gonna “Roxie.” Billy’s voice was now an ache and I guessed I still felt
for him to feel it slice through me.

Nevertheless, I kept my eyes on Hank.

; all it’s “He’s got a good job, a nice house. He protects people for a living
t you,” carried on, and I felt Billy’s tense body start to go slack behind me, as if
is slick words were pulling all the energy out of him. His gun lowered a little

2. knew I was getting somewhere.

1 know, “He has nice parents and his sister told me he did up the house h
You ever fix anything Billy? You ever make anything that was going
go right?” Again, it wasn’t an accusation, just a soft question.

✓ York “God, Roxie,” Billy murmured, even lower, his voice shaking.

. “I feel like I’ve been waiting,” I said to Billy, looking at Hank. “V
fulfilled for a long time, but I guess I know what you mean. My life began whe
him.”

; voice At my words, to my surprise, and likely everyone else’s in the
Billy just gave up.

✓ much His gun arm wrapped around my middle and he shoved his face
neck.

have a “Roxie,” he muttered there.

;. In the Hank started toward us slowly, not lowering his gun, not taking h
nto my off me. They were not lazy, not in the slightest. They were hyper-alert
intense I thought they might burn me.

He’s a “You want me to have that, don’t you, Billy?” I asked quietly, my
oing to Hank.

“I want you with me,” Billy said against my neck.

enough I took my eyes off Hank and turned to face Billy. He lifted his hea
turn and I put my hands to his cheeks. I looked at him and ran my
down the stubble below his cheekbones. His blue eyes were filled with

ving,” I I wanted to care, but I didn’t. If that made me a bad person, so be it

is if my “Billy, I don’t want to hurt you, but I don’t think I’ve ever be
e and Iyou.”

For the first time, I realized this was true. Billy was fun. He was himself, from the small town I grew up in. He was rebellion, which was something wrong been honing for a decade before I met him. He was also energetic adventure.

What he wasn't was a life force.

Waiting Not like Hank.

When I met I put my forehead to Billy's.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered.

In the room, And I was.

"You're the only good thing I have, the only good thing I ever had in my life," I whispered back.

I didn't get a chance to reply. Hank was through.

I felt his strong arm wrap around my waist, and with a tug he pulled me out of Billy's arms. We walked back several steps, clearing Billy, and Hank swung me to the side. I collided with Lee, and Lee pulled me back. I watched Billy try to lift his gun to Hank but Marcus was at Billy's side. His eyes on gun pressed to Billy's temple.

"Drop it," Marcus ordered.

Billy kept raising the gun, almost like he wanted Marcus to shoot him.

At that point, I held my breath. Lee kept moving us back.

My thumbs Hank still had his weapon trained on Billy, as did Marcus, but Billy wasn't raising his gun.

It. "Drop it!" Marcus bit out.

When with Billy's hand twisted and I realized what he was going to do.

reedom He was going to shoot himself.

ing I'd Terror seized me and I screamed. "Hank, stop him!"

gy and A gunshot blasted through the room.

Everyone went still as we watched Billy's hand explode in a mist
He shrieked a hideous cry of pain as the gun fell free.

There was a nanosecond of silence.

Then Hank ordered, "Call the paramedics."

Hank moved toward Billy in my line of sight so I couldn't see.

I looked to Luke thinking he shot Billy. Luke was shrugging
, " Billy; jacket. Blood was running down his arm. The sight of it overwhelme
sagged against Lee and he took my weight into his body at the same
shoved his gun in a shoulder holster.

lled me "Back off. Police." Eddie was there, gun raised, badge out. Dan
then heback in the room.

ck as I The two men who had to be from Chicago were approaching
ide, his Marcus and Billy. They moved back when they caught sight of Eddie.

"Drop your weapons and against the wall," Eddie continued. \\
hesitation their weapons fell to the ground and their hands went up.

um. The other two men in suits had disappeared, vanished, as if they'
been there.

lly kept Billy was sitting on the floor, Hank hunched beside him, block
view.

"Get her out of here, Lee," Hank ordered, not turning to us a
appeared to be an army of uniformed officers, led by Carl, came i
room.

“Let’s go, Roxie,” Lee said into my ear and my body went stiff.

“Luke—” I started.

“He’ll get taken care of, honey, let’s go.” Lee’s voice was soft as of red, pulling me back.

I started to struggle and Lee’s arm went from gentle to no-nonsense, gave up and allowed him to pull me out of the room.



I WAS SITTING on a barstool in Daisy’s kitchen, being mother henned by women and two gay men.

off his
d me. I
time he
Kitty Sue and Malcolm had arrived late (thank God). Malcolm was somewhere with the men, Kitty Sue was with us.

ger was
There was so much food on the counter at my side it could have fed the Chicago Bears, Bulls and Cubs for a week. There were four uniformed officers helping themselves to the food.

Hank,
Without
When Lee guided me into the kitchen, I noticed Dad experiencing a fleeting relief then he detonated, cursing and blinding. Lee went to help him, carefully guided him out, but we heard him yelling all the way down the stairs.

Jason followed them. His usual good-natured expression had disappeared.

d never
ing my
is what
nto the
Detective Jimmy Marker had come and gone, taking my statement. He was there. The whole time I talked to him, Mom stood beside me, holding my hand. Annette stood close behind me, taking the weight of my shoulders into her torso. At that time it was too fresh. I couldn’t have held my breath without Annette, and like any best girlfriend would, she knew it.

Detective Marker told me Luke had a flesh wound in his arm.

superficial and he'd be fine. He went on to tell me Billy was going to hospital, under armed guard, but his hand looked bad. Finally, he told me it was Vance who shot Billy.

“Boy’s a good shot. So’s Lee and so’s Stark. Even though he used a shield, you were covered. If they’d fired, none of those boys would have hurt you,” Detective Marker said calmly, as if the whole time I had not worried about.

“Stark?” I asked, confused.

“Luke. Last name’s Stark. Known by that on the street, though Lee would call him Luke,” Detective Marker explained.

“How do you know they’re good shots?” I queried.

Detective Marker hesitated and shuffled a bit, realizing he should say something and finally said, “Just do.”

Now, with Detective Marker gone, the activity was beginning to die down and Ally was helping herself to some Brie and apple slices while Simon and I spread a wodge of pâté on some French bread.

“Well, sugar, you made certain sure I’m gonna get a doozy of a vacation in the society pages,” Daisy told me on a tinkling laugh, trying to lighten the mood.

“Damn straight, Daisy-girl. Never read the society pages but I sure won’t miss this one,” Shirleen threw in.

Annette’s arm came around my chest and she kissed the top of my head. I leaned further into her, realizing finally that it was over.

Over.

It was Thank God.

I breathed another sigh. This wasn't a happy one. This one was relief to the me that "I'm just glad he didn't tear her gown or get any blood on it. I don't know if blood washes out of satin and I don't want to know. That is a practical laundry knowledge I'd be happy to go to my grave without. You gave me a hitkiller on my dresses, what with bar brawls and the like. I have to go shopping weekly to keep stocked up," Tod added.

"That's hardly the reason you go shopping, Tod," Stevie put in.

Tod turned to Stevie. "Excuse me, but Burgundy has to have choice's boys never knows which way she's gonna go," Tod declared then turned to Shirleen. "By the way, is the offer open to me to borrow that necklace? It is...*fine*."

"Sho' 'nuff, sweet thang," Shirleen said.

I felt a bubble of hilarity start to rise in me, but caught Indy's eye and disappeared. She and Jet were watching me like hawks and they didn't think any of this was funny.

"I'm okay," I mouthed to them.

Jet sucked in her lips. Indy looked about ready to hit the roof.

"Really," I said out loud.

Indy nodded her head with just a hint of a sad smile on her lips. I was hell feeling that she wished she had it in her power to erase my whole history with Billy with a wave of her magic wand.

Jet simply said quietly, "Okay."

"What?" Mom asked, missing the byplay.

I leaned over a bit and rested the side of my head against my mom.

"Nothing," I answered.

leaved. “Where on earth is Hank?” Kitty Sue asked, and she no sooner uttered words then the air in the room charged and the Hot Boy Brigade (plus a piece of) entered the room, led by Hank.

girls are “Uh-oh,” Ally muttered.

opping Annette’s arm fell away and I straightened. I would have smiled a but one look at his face told me that was not the way to go.

“What’s happening now?” I asked when he was a few feet from me. Shethinking Billy had gotten away again, visions of him bursting out of the door of the ambulance, still on the run and after me, filling my head.

re? It... Hank stopped right in front of me and I tilted my head back to him.

His face was hard and angry.

e and it Then he roared, “*What in the fuck did you think you were doing there?*”

Yes, Hank Nightingale, master of control, *roared*.

Hmm, seemed he was mad at me, not mad about the fact that Billy had escaped.

Well, at least that was good.

got the “Whisky—” I tried.

ry with “Oh no.” His voice instantly dipped low, dangerously low. fucking ‘Whisky’ me. You walked right up to him!”

My relief that Billy was still under armed guard was short-lived and melted instantly into anger at Hank.

Excuse me but *I did not think so*.

I jumped off my barstool and got in Hank’s face.

ered the “He shot Luke!” I shouted.

is Dad) “We had it covered,” Hank shouted back.

“He tried to shoot *you!*” I yelled.

“We had it covered,” Hank repeated.

t Hank, “He pointed his gun at Lee!”

“We had it fuckin’ *covered!*”

e. I was I put my hands to my hips. “I warned you I wasn’t going to let a
he back happen to any of you, and I wasn’t!” I was back to shouting.

look at “There were three of us and we knew Vance was closin’ in and th
one of him. You made it impossible for us to take him down. What
your head?” Hank was also back to shouting.

in’ out “He had a gun pointed at you. That’s what was in my head.”

“So...the fuck...what? It’s happened before, it’ll happen again
handle it. We had it under control.”

illy had Holy cow.

I shirked off thoughts of Hank having guns pointed at him and scoo
“Hank Nightingale, don’t you yell at me,” I snapped.

“It wasn’t smart, Roxie,” Dad decided to throw down.

“Don’t “Dad!” I turned to him.

“It wasn’t,” Lee added, his voice sober and sharp.

red and My mouth dropped open and I stared at Lee.

“It sure the fuck wasn’t,” Eddie agreed, and he wasn’t even there!

I opened and closed my mouth, words escaping me.

They were ganging up on me.

“Um...hate to butt in here, but, back the hell off,” Ally put in, standing at the bar filled with food. She had a half-eaten apple slice held aloft and she looked cool as a cucumber.

“Ally, stay out of it,” Carl ordered.

“Don’t tell me to stay out of it,” Ally flashed, dropping the apple slice and no longer looking cool as a cucumber.

“Everyone’s fine, everyone’s safe, it all worked out. Let’s calm everything down,” Annette offered, trying to play peacemaker.

“You don’t know what happened in there. She fucking walked right up to him. There were nine guns in there, eight of them pointed at Roxie. She was in the middle of it, she had been caught in the crossfire,” Jason threw in his lot.

Annette decided peacemaker wasn’t a good fit for her, and she narrowed on Jason. “Well, what would you do? Hunh?”

“I can’t do anything,” Jason said. “I wouldn’t fucking walk up to him. Christ!” Jason shouted.

“Oowee, you white people know how to fight,” Shirleen declared.

“Leave Roxie alone.” Daisy barreled in, hands on hips. “She can handle herself. She’s got enough to deal with tonight.”

“We’re not done talkin’ about this,” Hank warned me, ignoring Daisy. “We were still toe-to-toe.”

“We are so done talking about this,” I announced, not backing off.

“Hank, honey, maybe I should get you a beer,” Kitty Sue tried to calm me down.

“He doesn’t need a beer. He needs to talk some sense into himself,” Malcolm stated.

Kitty Sue, who I didn’t know too well and always seemed quite

iding attempered, went red in the face and turned to Malcolm.

and she “And exactly what sense is he gonna talk into her, Mal?” she dema

Malcolm turned to his wife. “The boys were handlin’ it.”

“Right. You know that and I know that, but in the heat of the mom
le slicedid what she had to do,” Kitty Sue said.

“She nearly got herself killed,” Malcolm shot back.

down,” “Hardly. They wouldn’t have let that happen. And I don’t care
don’t like it, Malcolm Nightingale, but I rather like the idea of Roxie
ht up toabout my son so much. Not to mention having the gumption to put he
e couldharm’s way for him. Just as long as harm didn’t find its way.”

“I like it too,” Mom whispered, coming close to Hank and me, g
er eyesmy hand and looking at me like she was proud of me.

I felt a rush of warmth spread through me, though not enough of a
make me less pissed off.

Still.

e’s had “Trish, you’re a fuckin’ nut. This is our daughter were talkin’
Dad exploded.

isy. “Yeah, and seems to me *one* of us raised her right,” Mom flashed b

“Damn tootin’,” Daisy said.

one bit. “Fuckin’ A!” We all heard boomed from across the room. I
alm herbeyond Hank and Mom and saw Uncle Tex was standing at the door.

wearing jeans and a flannel shirt, and if it were possible, both his hair
Roxie,” beard looked wilder than ever, like he’d been tearing at both of them
come I always miss all the action? God damn!”

e even- Everyone stared at him.

“Well?” he boomed again. “What happened? You okay darlin’ g
nded. asked me.

I nodded.

ent she His eyes swung to Hank.

“Nightingale?” he asked.

Hank moved to stand at my side.

if you “Yeah.” he said.

o caring “Well, thank fuckin’ God,” Uncle Tex finished, completely obliv
rself in the charged air in the room. Then his gaze moved to the food. “Shee-i
at that food. Jesus Jones. What’re we waitin’ for? Let’s get this party
rabbing You got any hooch?” he asked Daisy.

“Champagne,” Daisy replied, her lips turning up on the ends.

rush to “Well, break it out, woman. None too happy I ain’t gonna get my
that jackass in the holding room, but whatever. Now, I reckon if there
occasion to drink somethin’ as stupid as champagne, this is fuckin’
about!” looked to the room at large. “Am I right?”

Everyone kept staring at Tex. No one was quite ready to let go
ack. latest battle.

“Well? Am I right?” Tex boomed.

looked Finally, Indy spoke. “You’re right, Tex. You are so right.”

He was “Marcus, sugar bunches of love, bring us some champagne,” Daisy
and histo Marcus, but his head was already in their big, industrial-sized, s
. “How steel refrigerator. He turned, holding two bottles of champagne in one

“I’ll get the glasses,” Jet offered, moving toward a cupboard.

Hank’s arm went around my shoulders to wrap around my neck

irl?” he went stiff. I wasn’t quite ready to stop being pissed off at him.

His head dipped and his mouth was at my ear.

“We aren’t done talkin’ about this,” he murmured there.

I twisted my head to look at him.

“Yes we are, Whisky. No more talking, no *conversations*. Officially, the minute that champagne touches my lips, Billy Flynn becomes a memo-

Hank stared me in the eyes, his eyes were working. I could tell he was done being pissed either. Finally, he got it under control and his eyes came back to me. Look

“You’re off the hook, but only because this shit isn’t ever gonna start to you again.”

I nodded in agreement, but felt like having the last word. “If it does have to know, I’d do the same thing. You aren’t the only one who’s allowed to go with to protect someone you care about.”

He went back to being pissed off and clearly wasn’t going to let me have the last word.

“Sunshine—”

“No, Hank. I don’t want to hear it. Seriously. Now we’re done talking.”

He watched me a beat, then two, and then his eyes changed again. The look I’d never seen on him before, and it was as far away from pissed off as could be.

Quietly, just for me to hear, he asked, “You really think your life is meaningless when you met me?”

My body jolted, and if his arm wasn’t around my neck I would have backed away a step.

I wasn’t ready for this. I’d said it in the moment and I’d meant

everything I was, but I didn't want to discuss it.

Not now, maybe later.

A lot later.

"We're not talking about that either," I said to Hank.

lly, the He watched me again, a beat then two, and then during the third
ry." tightened around my neck, curling me into him. On the fourth beat I
wasn't frontal. On the fifth, his other arm wrapped around my waist and I
leared. went into my neck. On the sixth, my arms wrapped around him tight
happen pressed my forehead into his shoulder.

On the seventh, although it was right in the room, it seemed far a
lid, you couple of champagne corks popped and a bunch of people both Han
allowed cared about cheered.

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"We're not talking about that either," I said to Hank.

He watched me again, a beat then two, and then during the third his arm tightened around my neck, curling me into him. On the fourth beat I was full frontal. On the fifth, his other arm wrapped around my waist and his face went into my neck. On the sixth, my arms wrapped around him tight and I pressed my forehead into his shoulder.

On the seventh, although it was right in the room, it seemed far away, a couple of champagne corks popped and a bunch of people both Hank and I cared about cheered.

TWENTY-EIGHT



NORMAL

I saw Denver looming in front of me, and at the sight I had a little that I knew was half fear, half excitement.



I'D BEEN BACK in Chicago for three weeks, going out with friends for a farewell, arranging movers, packing, closing up the loft, meeting with the insurance company, getting my ruined furniture towed away and dealing with the insurance company.

I'd gone down to Brownsburg for a weekend and dealt with the wreckage and Mimi explosion when Mom, Dad and I told them all that had happened with Billy.

"I'm gonna fuckin' kill that motherfucker!" Gil shouted after I was telling the story.

Good grief.

"No need, son. The man doesn't have a hand," Dad replied.

Gil's temper didn't seem assuaged.

My brother turned to me. "You wanna tell me why you didn't tell me of this shit's been goin' on for the past however-many fuckin' years?"

"Um..." I mumbled.

The only answer I had to that was that Gil was six foot four a hundred and thirty pounds of pure muscle, and if he knew he'd have s Billy like a twig.

Of course, in hindsight, maybe that wouldn't have been a bad thing

Mom saved me. "All right, it's over. Roxie's fine. She's got a ne now, and Gil, you'll like him. Your dad likes him. I like him. Everyon him. So, let's move on. I made pecan pie. Who wants a piece of pecan

Bill that Mom's pie, over the years, had soothed many a foul temper.

We all moved to the kitchen and Mimi put her arm through mine.

"You sure you want to get into another relationship so soon after to say she whispered to me.

clients, I thought about it.

insurance For about a second.

role Gil Then I nodded to her. "Yeah, I'm sure."

ppened She looked dubious.

I showed her a photo on my phone that Ally took of Hank.

as done "Holy shit," Mimi breathed, staring at the photo.

"They're all like that in Denver," I told her.

"Holy shit," Mimi repeated.

I leaned into her ear and whispered a few other things Hank was li the sexy bedroom things, but the sweet, wonderful things.

l me all "Holy shit," she said again.

"Mm-hmm," I replied.

Mimi gave me a hug.

nd two Gil glared at me.
napped Whatever.



}. ANNETTE AND JASON were still in Chicago, likely not moving out to
w man until the New Year.

ne likes They had more to do than me and they didn't have a hot boyfriend
pie?" back to.

Half of Annette's staff were fighting to come out to Denver with h
of them were fighting to become the new operating manager of what
Billy?" was now calling "Head East." They also had to get things sorted for t
store in Denver, or "Head West."

Jet reported, during one of my many Rock Chick Phone Cha
Smithie was not happy with the delay in getting his reggae-white-v
stripper at a pole, but he was dealing.

Hank was the one that dubbed them the "Rock Chick Phone Chats
was what he called them anytime I referred to something said in a cha
with Jet, Indy, Ally or Daisy (for example, "Oh shit, you've been
another Rock Chick Phone Chat.").

I must admit I referred to those chats a lot, mainly when I was
ground and trying to make a point when Hank and I slipped into
Conversation.
ke. Not



I DECIDED to take two days to drive out to Denver, doing the long h
first day and stopping just over the Colorado border. I really shoul
powered through, but I didn't want to arrive and see Hank for the first
three weeks red-eyed and skanky. I wanted a good night's sleep (didn'

and plenty of time to make myself look as good as I could (this worked).

I had my now slightly longer hair in some nice waves and full-on r Denver to hide the fact that I didn't get good sleep. I went the way of Colo was apropos) and wore jeans, coffee-brown high-heeled boots and a d to get green turtleneck sweater with huge cable knitting down the front. I f this with my funky, super-long green, raspberry and cornflower-blue scarf and knit cap because it was colder than Christmas outside.

er, half I had another carload of stuff with me and I was moving into Uncl Annette for the time being. I'd been surfing the 'Net to find an apartment in he new and I had two days filled with viewings ahead of me. What was left destroyed belongings were being picked up at the end of the week an ts, that to have somewhere to take them.

voman- The staying-with-Uncle-Tex-gig and my own apartment had no down well with Hank. We'd had several "conversations" abo s." This apartment. Hank saw no reason for me to have an apartment. He fig at I had were going to move in together eventually, why delay it? havin'

I dug my heels in. Not because I didn't want to move in with h mainly because I was stubborn and because I wanted to give him the ; losing to back out, just in case. Eventually, we compromised on a six-mont a Hank (kind of, I got the distinct impression Hank wasn't exactly committed compromise, more like giving in so I'd shut up).

raul the The backing out bit was the reason I was nervous. I didn't mind r ld have I'd done it a lot, so I was a practiced hand. Hank and I had only had and a half of "normal" after Billy was caught, though normal had a time in definition in Denver, especially when it centered around Fortnum's t get it)

kind of spent the three weeks while I was in Chicago building our relationship
the phone. It was strange to feel something that seemed old and even
makeup in Denver was new over the phone.

rado (it Or, at least, it felt new to me.

a grass- Hank didn't act any differently.

inished



a stripy AFTER THE BIG showdown at The Castle, we all partied in Daisy's
until we'd made a sizeable dent in the food and an even more sizeable
e Tex's the champagne stash.

Denver Mom and Dad stayed the night with Uncle Tex in order to give Hank
t of my I privacy. They'd roared off, all squashed into Tex's El Camino, while
d I had and I stood watching. Hank had put his suit jacket over my shoulders
me warm.

at gone When they were out of sight, I turned to Hank.

out my "It's over," I said, my voice dripping with happy relief.

ired we

Seriously, if I wasn't in a fancy satin dress, I would have had
cartwheels.

im, but

chance His arms slid around me and he rubbed my nose with his. "Let's
h lease home."

d to the I questioned him all the way to his house, finding out the two exits
in black suits were Marcus's boys. At Marcus's orders, they'd also
looking for Billy and reported to Marcus that there was the possibility
noving. Billy had stopped following me and started to follow Annette and

a week Once Annette and Jason pulled into the party, they'd seen Billy circle

a weird times, and then, apparently, he found the courage to come in after they
. We'd parked, exited his car and disappeared in the woods around The Castle

lip over Hank, Eddie and the Nightingale Investigation team had already
steadily that Billy had declared, during his phone conversation with me, that
ready to make his move, and they weren't taking any chances. Therefore
had assigned Luke to Roxie Detail as added protection.

Vance was on Billy's tail, as were Desmond Harper's boys, so
knew he was at The Castle. Everyone was thinking Billy would not
kitchen crazy enough to approach the actual party. They thought he'd wait
dent in Hank and I as we left.

Vance caught Luke on the way into the party, warning him Bi
ank and there.

e Hank Coincidentally, at the same time, Marcus was telling Hank that Bi
to keep on the property. They made plans to gather the women and get us to
place in the house and then go what Hank called hunting.

Billy walking in had been a surprise. Vance was hanging back a
Billy slip in. That was when he called Lee.

e done The rest I knew, because I was there.

Desmond Harper's boys had been arrested.

get you Luke had stitches and had been released.

Hank had a phone call from Detective Marker right before
tra men Daisy's. Detective Marker reported that it was likely Billy would ne
so been his right hand again. I had to admit this made me sad, but in a
ity that detached, anyone-losing-a-hand-was-sad kind of way.

. Jason. "One more thing," I said, when we were in Hank's living room. V
several given Shamus his greeting and Hank had taken his jacket from my sh
em. He and thrown it over the back of a dining table chair.

decided He turned to face me. “Yeah?”

he was “You need to tell me about Shirleen and her nephew Darius. S
re, Lee some things tonight—”

His hand came out, wrapped around my neck and he pulled me to
they all put my hands to his chest and tilted my head back to look at him.

ever be “Remember, I told you I knew good people who did bad things?”

o catch I felt my stomach twist.

lly was “Yes,” I said.

“And remember when I told you Jet and I had a conversation
lly was people we both knew, people Jet refers to as ‘gray?’”

o a safe I remembered. He said they ran games, dealt drugs and likely m
people.

nd saw I felt my stomach twist joined by a heart squeeze.

“No,” I breathed.

“Yes,” he replied.

I shook my head. I didn’t want to believe that of Shirleen. I liked h

“I’ll tell you the whole story later,” Hank promised, correctly as
we left I’d had enough for one night. He wrapped an arm around me and mo
ver use toward the bedroom.

weird, “I don’t think I want to know,” I told him.

“Then I won’t tell you the whole story later.”

We had I nodded. That worked for me.

oulders “Okay,” I said.

We walked through the kitchen.

“Let’s erase the night,” Hank suggested when we neared the bedroom. He said, “My stomach twist eased and my heart started beating again, much faster than its normal rate.”

“Okay,” I repeated.



FRIDAY, Hank spent the day at work sorting through my mess with Bill.

I spent Friday helping out at Fortnum’s and alternately checking in on attendance on, running interference with and reassuring my mental state to Mom and Dad, Annette and Jason, Daisy and a variety of other people I’d dropped by.

Indy was going to have to hire someone else soon. The crowd was getting fiercer, especially in the mornings, and we were all forced to work harder to keep up with them.

Indy had the Bye-Bye Billy Party (the name was Ally’s idea) at Fortnum’s Friday evening, opening it for the private soiree because it was the only place that would fit us all in.

Even with short notice, and an almost shootout in the middle of the messingspread like wildfire that Indy and Ally were throwing a party. The party was well catered with everyone pitching in, most especially Kitty Sue and her mom, a lady named Blanca. In fact, even though I’d never met them, the entire family came. In fact, everyone came such was the allure of the Indy/Ally party, bringing food and booze.

Uncle Tex and Dad had the Jet caramel layer squares faceoff, and Dad had to back down and admit Jet’s caramel-chocolate brownies were better than custard sundaes at Miriam’s Café. After this happened, Mom repeatedly swore to Sweet Jesus, swearing that Dad had never admitted to anything.

om. outside Brownsburg, Indiana being better and such an admission ha
h faster divine intervention.

A couple of hours into the party, Vance walked in.

I noticed him immediately, not out of any heightened awareness
through osmosis from the Hot Boy Brigade, but because the bell o
ly. door went. I was standing with Indy, Ally, Jet, Annette and Daisy. Ha
dancing across the room with Malcolm, Eddie and Lee.

stability I broke away from the Rock Chicks and approached Vance.

ole who “Hey,” I said when I made it to him.

“Hey, girl,” he replied, his dark eyes doing a scan of my face.

ls were I didn’t know what to say, so I said, “I don’t know what to say.”

pitch in “Nothing to say,” he told me.

Then I figured out what to say. “I’m sorry you had to do that.”

dea) at “Had to do what?”
was the

I sighed. “Spend days hunting down Billy then having to shoot hi
so sorry, Vance.”

rt, word He watched me for a beat.

Eddie’s “How much you got left?” he asked, what I thought, bizarrely.

Eddie’s “Of what?”

of an “Of whatever it is that’s pulled you through this shit.”

I shook my head, confused.

nd Dad He got in my space. “Maybe you should know somethin’ about me
e better

l called Oh no.

nything “What?” I asked, even though I didn’t know if I wanted to know

d to betime one of these boys shared, it freaked me out.

“I’m not sorry,” Vance said.

“Excuse me?”

gained
ver the
ink was
but Roxie, I’m glad I got to do it. Fuckin’ thrilled.”

Holy cow.

I held my breath.

He got closer and said low, “Justice.”

Holy, holy, cow, cow, cow.

I felt heat at my back, an arm came around my upper chest from
and I was pulled into Hank’s body.

Vance moved back, his eyes shifting to look over my shoulder.

“Hank,” he said.

“Vance,” Hank said from behind me.

im. I’m
Vance’s shit-eating grin spread across his face as he took us in.

Then he said, “I’ll let you two let life begin again, I’m gettin’ a drii

Good grief.

I closed my eyes and curled my fingers around Hank’s forearm.

When I opened my eyes, Vance was still grinning at me.

“I’m not going to hear the end of that, am I?” I asked.

“Nope,” Vance answered.

.”
He kept right on grinning.

. Every
I narrowed my eyes at him. “Don’t you need a drink?” I asked, sc
uppity.

Vance started laughing.

Then he said, “Yep,” and walked away.

After a few seconds I realized that Hank’s body was moving and I was pretty certain it was with laughter.

“Don’t you start, Whisky,” I warned, looking out the window at the city on Broadway, my back still pressed against him.

He kissed the back of my head.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Hank murmured.

“No, we won’t. We’re never going to talk about it. Never. Never. Never. Never.” I announced.

Hank’s arm tightened and I felt his breath at my cheek.

“Later,” he promised.

Good God.

“Whatever,” I muttered.

He let me go and walked away.

When I turned back to the Rock Chicks, they were all smiling.

Jeez.



SOME TIME LATER, Luke walked in.

He looked none the worse for wear. In fact, he looked just as good as ever.

“I’m sorry, I love Jason and all, but that man is fucking *hot*,” I declared, and luckily Jason was across the room talking to my dad.

I disengaged from the Rock Chicks again and walked to Luke.

I didn't know what to say to him either, so even though he was a
and super cool, I just invaded his space, wrapped my arms around hi:
pressed my cheek to his chest and hugged him.
d I was

I know it was a girlie thing to do, but a bullet sliced through h
while he was protecting me. I had to do something.
he cars

After a few seconds, his arms came around me.

Not surprisingly, he didn't say anything.

Surprisingly, neither did I.

Then quietly he said, "I know it hasn't been that long for you, but..
, never,

When he hesitated, I said to his chest, "What?"

"Feel like having your life begin again?"

My body went stiff but my head tilted back to look at him.

"What?" I asked.

"Just checkin'. See, *my* life could begin again. I'm thinkin' abou
he replied.

I blinked at him.

"Are you fucking with me?" I whispered, my body still stiff.

He did his half-grin. "Yeah."

I pulled out of his arms.

good as "That isn't funny," I snapped.

"It's fuckin' hilarious," he told me.

Annette I was in the middle of growling my frustration when Hank's an
around my shoulders and he pulled me to his side.

"Luke," Hank said, his gaze was locked on Luke.

badass Luke's eyes cut to Hank. "Hank," Luke said back.
s waist, They just stared at each other.

This was making me supremely uncomfortable, so I decided to b
is flesh the badass, super cool, hot guy staring contest.

"Well, um...thanks for getting shot for me," I said to Luke, then
someone would shoot *me*.

Luke watched me speak then his eyes went to Hank again.

"She's cute," Luke noted.

.."
"I know," Hank replied.

"Oh for goodness sakes," I clipped.

"My favorite part from last night, outside of the 'my life began'
was when she told him he was makin' her dizzy," Luke shared,
verbose for once in his life.

t now," "Didn't think it was funny at the time, but, in retrospect..." Hank
shock agreed.

"The part about the dog and the Frisbee was a good touch too.
clearly felt in a talkative mood.

I'd had enough so I cut in.

"Don't you need a drink?" I asked Luke pointedly.

Luke's half-grin went full-fledged. "Yeah," he said, but he didn't r

"Well, why don't you go get one?" I snapped.

m went He reached out and touched my nose with his finger. Then he was
I turned into Hank.

"I'm beginning to regret my actions last night," I told him.

“Finally,” he said, sounding relieved and slightly arrogant.

I frowned at him. “Not because I did the wrong thing, but because. I couldn’t move.” I stopped and tried to pull away from Hank’s arm, but it tightened around me. I couldn’t move.

“Sunshine?”

I looked up at Hank. “What?”

“You think they’d tease you if they thought you’d done something you regret?” Hank asked.

I thought about it.

“Probably not,” I relented.

“You think they’d tease you if they thought you did the wrong thing?” Hank asked.

I thought about that too. “I guess not.”

He watched me for a beat then he shook his head. “Jesus, I can’t believe you hugged Luke Stark. Christ. They’re probably laughin’ themselves out loud.”

Oh no.

I’d forgotten about the control room.

“Maybe we should leave before I do anything else embarrassing.”

“Feel like makin’ any heartfelt speeches?” Hank asked.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Absolutely not.”

His other arm went around me and curled me full frontal into his chest. Then his head dipped low.

“Maybe, from now on, those are best just between you and me.”

..never “Hank Nightingale—” I started, but didn’t finish because he kissed me and I was dizzy.



SATURDAY MORNING we were woken up by my mother yelling through the door to Hank’s bedroom at the same time she was knocking.

“Kids! You awake?”

We weren’t, or at least I wasn’t.

“Yeah, Mom,” I called my lie.

“Tex is here. We’re spending the day with him and Nancy. We’re going to take you out to dinner tonight. Malcolm and Kitty Sue are coming too. Make sure you’re back here at six o’clock.”

“Kay,” I shouted then I snuggled deeper into Hank’s warm embrace, deciding to think about the scary get-to-know-the-parents dinner some other time (or never).

Shamus jerked to his feet when he heard the movement in the other room and he started walking around on the bed, or more to the point, on the floor, and tried to lick our faces.

Hank’s arms went from around me to around Shamus and he waved Shamus away, turning his back to me. Shamus didn’t give much of a struggle. Hank got Shamus to his side and pulled the dog to his chest and started rubbing his belly.

I got up on my elbow and watched for a few seconds then rolled over. My body snuggled into my pillow instead of Hank and closed my eyes to go to sleep.

The bed moved with Hank and Shamus. Shamus obviously let loose and started to walk on me and snuffle the covers around my body and face.

“What are you doin’?” Hank asked.

“Sleeping,” I replied, even though it was obvious I was not.

“Get up, Sunshine.”

“No.”

“Up,” Hank demanded.

“No,” I repeated.

“Sunshine...”

Shamus gave me a full face lick and I pulled the covers over my head. Sooner had I got them over my head when they were yanked off. I moved when Hank exited it then I exited it too, but against my will.

“Whisky!” I shouted, throwing my arms around his shoulders and carried me into the bathroom.

“Time to shower.”

“I want to sleep.” It came out kind of whiney.

He set me down in the bathroom. His hands went to the hem of my nightie and started pulling up, but I caught his wrists and stopped him.

“Shower, breakfast and then we’ll teach Shamus how to play Football to rub Hank said.

My head shot up and I looked at him.

“Really?” I asked.

He nodded.

I let go of his wrists, put my arms over my head and he pulled

ose, he nightie.



BILLY HAD CONFESSED to beating me up, abducting me, shooting Lu trying to shoot Hank. Assault, kidnapping and two counts of attempted homicide were kind of big crimes to commit. Hank told me he was going to go down for a long time. And that was just the time he was going to spend in Colorado.

It was Thursday, a week after the big event. Mom and Dad had left days earlier. I was going to leave for Chicago on Sunday.

Since our day teaching Shamus to play Frisbee (Shamus learned to read. No I knew he was a smart dog), Hank had been spending all of our time together bedshowing me what normal was like.

I realized normal was good. In fact, normal was downright delicious as he I was curled up on the couch in Hank's TV room. It was evening, and I made Hank lasagna, after we ate it, after we did the dishes and then I settled in to watch a movie.

My phone rang, and as it was displayed on my cell as an unknown number, I flipped open my phone.

"Roxie," Billy said.

"Billy?" I asked, shock in my voice.

I was leaned up against Hank. Shamus was lying in his doggie bed in front of the TV.

Hank's body tensed when I said Billy's name and Shamus felt across the room using doggie radar. Shamus jerked from full on his back lying upright. Both human and canine Nightingale boys looked at me.

“Roxie, I’m—” Billy started.

I flipped the phone shut, opened it again and pressed the button like and went off. Then I threw it onto the coffee table.

empted Maybe I should have listened to him, though I didn’t care. I wasn’t joining to mood and I figured it was likely I’d never be in the mood again.

serve in “You need a new phone,” Hank remarked, his body relaxing, h moving back to the TV.

ft a few “You’re right,” I agreed.

quickly, His glance came back to me. “Sorry?” he asked.

ogether “You’re right,” I repeated.

He did a slow blink. “Can you say that again?” he asked, l is. twitching.

fter I’d I gave him a look.

fter we His body followed his eyes and he turned into me.

Then I said, “My phone has a Chicago number. Of course I need unknownone. You don’t want to be paying long distance charges every time y my cell.”

He ignored what I said. His body moved over mine, pressing me i seat of the couch. His hands were sliding up my sides and I squirmed l bed in it was ticklish.

“Hank, stop, we’re missing the movie.”

it from His arm went out and he nabbed the remote. He twisted, hit pause side to screen stilled.

Shamus settled back on his side with a groan, getting the all cle: his doggie radar as Hank threw the remote back onto the table.

“I was watching that,” I protested to Hank when he came back to n
until it “We’ll finish it later,” he replied, his mouth moving along my coll
his hands sliding back down my sides, and I squirmed again.

“Whisky, stop doing that. You’re tickling me,” I snapped, pushing
His head came up and he looked at me. “What? This?” His hand
his eyes under my top and moved up my sides, even lighter.

I giggled, just a little, mainly because I couldn’t help myself. I sc
and kept pushing at him. He didn’t budge.

Then I scowled. “Seriously, stop. I don’t like being tickled.”

“Seriously?” he asked, still watching me then he did it again.

his lips “Dude! Stop!” I shouted and heaved.

Heaving, I found, also didn’t work. Hank was solid and stron
although most of the time it was super good, there were times, like th
when it was irritatingly bad.

I a new I tried to grab his wrists. Instead, he grabbed mine, pulled them o
you call head, and after a brief tussle held them in one hand.

“Don’t call me dude,” he said, but he was grinning.

into the I frowned.

because “Dude,” I replied, just to be stubborn.

At my use of the word “dude” he used his free hand to torment
tickling me again.

and the Half giggling, half squirming under him, some of the time shou
him to stop, alternating with calling him dude just to be annoyi
ar from eventually rolled off the couch.

ne. I landed on top of him. My hands were freed. I sat up astride his
arbone, started to search for ticklish spots on Hank. I found none, though he di
me try for very long, as in I was searching for about two second
deteriorated into wrestling (because I was still trying), which degener
at him. groping, which became far more serious and we ended up never see
ls went end of the movie.

I didn't mind. It didn't seem like it was going to be a good
quirmed anyway.



EARLY SUNDAY MORNING, I left for Chicago.

I'd packed a few suitcases to take back with me. Hank and Un
were going to move the rest of my stuff to Uncle Tex's while I wa
ig, and Hank took my bags out to the car while I finished getting ready at th
at one, time I was eating a breakfast of Hank's scrambled eggs and toast.

I put my dishes in the dishwasher, grabbed my purse, shoving
ver my balm into the easily accessible side pouch (because everyone knew, on
trip, you needed easily accessible lip balm) and walked out the front do

Hank was leaning against the side of the hood of my car, which h
returned from the impound the day after Billy was caught. He had his
and arms crossed and Shamus was sitting by his legs.

me by Hank was staring at his feet, looking both handsome and lost in the

I nearly tripped at the sight of him, but pulled myself together and
forward.
iting at

ng, we His head came up and he watched me approach him.

When I got to within reaching distance, he uncrossed his arms and
grabbed me and pulled me between his legs.

n and I My arms went around his waist. I relaxed into him and I rested my
idn't let on his chest.

s. This “You’re stoppin’ in Iowa?” he asked over my head.

rated to “Yeah,” I answered.

ing the “You’ll call me when you get a hotel.” It wasn’t so much a questi
demand.

movie A worthless demand. We’d already had this conversation.

“Yeah,” I said, feeling my nostrils beginning to sting.

“You’re stayin’ with Annette and Jason when you get there?” he
even though he knew that too.

s gone. Annette and Jason had left the day before my parents. I had no ide
ie same state of my loft, but I didn’t want anything to do with it anymore. I

want anything to do with any aspect of my life that included mem
my lip Billy, except to clean it up, pack it up and let it go.

1 a road “Yeah,” I repeated.

oor. His arms, already tight, got tighter.

e’d had “Jesus, Roxie,” he muttered and his voice sounded hoarse.

ankles My arms got tighter too, and the tears started to fall down my chee

ought. “It’s only a few weeks,” I said into his chest, but you could hear th
in my voice.

walked “Yeah,” he murmured.

After a while, he demanded quietly, “Look at me, Sunshine.”

I tilted my head back to look at him. The minute I did his came do
ankles, he kissed me.

y cheek I knew Hank's light kisses, necking kisses and make-me-dizzy
This was a fourth kind of kiss, long, sweet and full of promise. It might
been the best of them all (okay, maybe not, but a close second).

His mouth came away from mine and he wiped the tears from my
on as a Then he walked me to the driver's side, his arm hooked around my
mine around his waist. He gave me a light kiss. I got in and started
looked up at him, gave a weak smile and a stupid wave, then I drove a

At the end of the block, I looked into the rearview mirror and
standing in the same spot, eyes on my car, Shamus at his side.

asked,
I turned the car left toward University Boulevard.



a of the WHEN THERE WAS nothing but highway in front of me and Denver
I didn't mirrors, I pulled out my cell, flipped it opened and said Hank's name
ories of phone.

It rang twice.

"You okay?" he asked in greeting.

"My life began when I met you," I told him.

There was a beat of silence.

ks.
Then I heard him say, "Sunshine—"

he tears I flipped the phone closed, pushed it deep in my purse, but it rang
before I turned up Springsteen and I started singing with him to "Street
One."

Together, Bruce and I drowned out the sound of the ringing phone.

wn and



Now, I was back.

kisses. It was nearly noon. I was on I-25 and well into Denver when I pulled out my phone, flipped it open and said Hank's name.

I was now beyond nervous. No longer excited, just totally scared to death. For three weeks, Hank and I had talked almost daily. He'd missed me twice (I counted) because of work. Sometimes we could only talk for a few minutes. Three times (I counted) we talked over an hour.

"Jeez, bitch! Starving people in Africa would get a new lease on life if they had the money you two spend on phone calls," Annette shouted each of the times.

I ignored her.

Never did Hank give an indication he was going to back out.

Always he was just Hank.

Still.

In my car, Denver sliding by me, I listened to the phone ring and held my breath.

On the second ring, he answered.

"You in Denver?" he asked by way of greeting.

I let go of my breath.

"Well, hello to you too," I answered, sounding uppity.

"Sunshine, are you in Denver?" Hank repeated.

"You could say hello. It's the nice thing to do. What? Have you been taking Luke Etiquette Lessons while I've been gone?"

I was trying to cover my nerves.

A beat of silence and then, "Sweetheart, I'm gonna ask one more time."

lled out I bit my lip.
Then I said, "Yeah, Whisky, I'm in Denver. Exiting I-25 now."
o death. "See you at our place." Then he disconnected.
calling I flipped my phone shut and my brows drew together.
talk for *Our place?*
He must mean Fortnum's.
ife with I pointed my car toward Fortnum's.
re three

ield my

ou been

ime..."

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Then I said, “Yeah, Whisky, I’m in Denver. Exiting I-25 now.”

“See you at our place.” Then he disconnected.

I flipped my phone shut and my brows drew together.

Our place?

He must mean Fortnum’s.

I pointed my car toward Fortnum’s.



OUR PLACE

I walked into Fortnum's and everyone was there.

Everyone, that was, except Hank.

Lee, Mace, Vance, Eddie and Luke were relaxing on the couches and I was sitting on the arm of the couch by Eddie. Ally was standing by Mace and Tex and Duke were behind the espresso counter. Jane was behind the counter, Indy and Daisy sitting on top of it.

They all looked up at me when I walked in.

"Where's Hank?" I asked.

"Well, how the fuck are you too?" Uncle Tex boomed, coming out from behind the counter.

I grinned at him. I couldn't help it.

"Hey, Uncle Tex," I said.

He made it to me and his arms engulfed me so hard my breath went out in a poof. "Darlin' girl," he half boomed.

I smiled into his chest and gave him a hug back.

Then I gave hugs and cheek kisses to everyone else except Mace and Luke. I didn't know Mace all that well and I'd already had my lifetime of hugs from Luke.

Indy, Lee, Ally, Jet and Daisy stayed close while everyone else was away.

“Hank said he’d see me at our place. He should have been here me,” I told them.

The Rock Chicks looked at each other.

Lee got out his phone.

“Uh-oh,” Ally said.

“Uh-oh what?” I asked.

“Uh-oh nothing,” Ally muttered and bugged her eyes out and Indy.

with Jet I looked at Indy and my stomach did a scared to death curl.

. Uncle “Uh-oh what?” I asked Indy.

ie book “Um...” Indy mumbled.

“Hank?” Lee said into the phone. “Yeah, Roxie’s at Fortnum paused then he said, “Right.” Then he flipped his phone closed.

ut from “Where is he?” I asked Lee.

“His house,” Lee answered.

“What’s he doing there?” I asked, my brows coming together.

“Waiting for you,” Lee told me.

it out of My brows came apart and I blinked. “I don’t understand.”

“He’s comin’ to Fortnum’s,” Lee went on.

I kept staring at him.

ace and Daisy shoved forward, put her arm around my waist and started to
e quota me to the espresso counter.

“Sugar, I’m guessin’ your man didn’t tell you, but some minc

changed while you've been gone."

Oh...my...God.

I halted and stood stock-still, staring down at her.

"What minds have changed?" I whispered.

"Well, Hank's..." She stopped and then started again, "He overly..." She paused, looking for the word. Then finding it, she spoke "*Fond* of you movin' in with Tex. See, he thinks—"

"Oh for fuck's sake. You're movin' in with Hank," Uncle announced. "Silly, stupid girl nerves, movin' in with me then moving some apartment only to end up movin' in with Hank in a few months need to fuckin' *settle*, girl. Get over it and get over here. I'll make fuckin' latte."

I stared at Uncle Tex. "I'm not moving in with Hank," I said.

"You are," Uncle Tex returned.

Good God.

"Did you guys move my stuff to your place?" I asked.

"Hell no. Waste of time. I'll make you my new coffee. It's the damn popular, they're lining up out the door for it in the morning," Uncle answered.

I frowned at him. "I'm not moving in with Hank," I repeated, though I wanted to try his new latte.

"You are," Uncle Tex said.

"I'm not!" I yelled.

Daisy's arm went away from me and Jet came close.

ls have

“Maybe you should take it up with Hank,” Jet suggested. “I *conversation.*” She smiled like what she said was funny.

Daisy smiled too, obviously agreeing.

I didn’t think it was funny.

“Damn tootin’ we’re having a conversation. We’re going to have a conversation to end all conversations,” I declared, stomping up the espresso counter.

Everyone grinned at everyone else.

I ignored all of them and Uncle Tex made me his latte with chocolate burnt marshmallow syrup with a graham cracker on the side.

It was *lush*.

Five minutes later, Hank walked in.

I felt the air leave my lungs in a rush and decided immediately I was more than happy to move in with him.

I’d forgotten how handsome he was (well, I hadn’t really, just then I hit me again and hit me hard).

He looked so good I felt my mouth go dry. He was wearing Uncle Tex running shoes and the collar of a white T-shirt could be seen over his navy-blue, collared, navy-blue sweatshirt.

“Whisky,” I said, or more like *rasped*.

He walked up to me, not saying a word, pulled my coffee out of my hand, put it on the counter, took my hand in his and dragged (yes, dragged) toward the bookshelves.

I came out of my Hank Stupor and immediately decided I was more than happy to move in with him.

Have a “Whisky!” I snapped.

He walked us through the front section, through the album section into the back room.

A lone, male customer was perusing the travel books.

ave the “Can you excuse us?” Hank asked the man.

to the The customer stared at him.

“I’m looking for a book on India,” he said. “I’m going there on vacation.”

Hank turned to the travel section, pulled out five books at random and shoved them into the man’s arms.

“Go,” he ordered.

The man looked from Hank to me to Hank, shocked into near immobility.

“Hank—” I started, feeling sorry for the guy.

as more Hank leaned into the man.

The man caught the not-so-subtle hint and walked swiftly out at it hit room.

“I cannot believe you just did that!” I hissed to Hank.

jeans,
zipped
he kissed me.

Hank turned to me, backed me into the shelves, and without further ado

Long, deep, lots of tongue with his hands going up my sweater.

y hand,
I went dizzy.

ed) me His mouth came away, but his forehead rested on mine. His hands were
roaming the skin of my back and he was looking into my eyes.

isn’t so “Fuck, I missed you,” he murmured.

Then he rubbed his nose against mine.

Okay, so I was back to deciding I'd move in with Hank.

ion and "I missed you too," I whispered.

His hands stopped roaming and pressed me deeper into his body.

"Let's go home," he said softly.

I stilled.

"We need to talk about 'home,'" I said.

na—" "No talk. Tex and I decided."

om and I went rock-solid and changed my mind again about moving
Hank.

"You and Uncle Tex decided?" I asked.

obility. "Sunshine—"

"What about me?" I asked, taking my hands from around his neck
planting them on my hips while I pulled my head away from his.

of the Hank grinned.

I forgot how great his grin was (well, not really, but you know
mean).

ier ado, "Let's go home and I'll convince you," he suggested.

Good grief.

I had a feeling he could do that.

Stubborn to the last I replied, "We'll go to your place, get my stuff
ds keptto Tex's."

Hank shook his head.

"Tex won't let you move in with him. We've talked, he agrees,
told me.

“Then I’ll move in with Indy and Lee for a while.”

Hank responded immediately, “Lee won’t let you.”

I knew that was true.

“Ally—” I started.

“She loses her Christmas present, she lets you move in with her.”

“You give good Christmas presents?” I asked, curious for more than one reason.

in with “Concert tickets. Every year.”

Damn.

Ally was out.

“Daisy,” I tried.

back and His body started shaking with laughter, but this time he didn’t bother to answer.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Hank Nightingale...”

what I He pushed me back into the books, his mouth came to mine and he whispered softly, “Roxie, move in with me.”

Good God.

My heart squeezed and my stomach melted.

I guessed he wasn’t going to back out.

and go I thought about it (well, not really, but I pretended to think about it for a moment).

Then I sighed.

“Oh, all right,” I gave in.

” Hank He kissed me again.

So, it wasn't the conversation to end all conversations.

Whatever.



WE WENT BACK to the front of the store.

I decided to get it over with immediately.

an one "I'm moving in with Hank," I announced.

There was general merriment and a good deal of ribbing, mostly expense.

I scowled at everyone and nabbed my latte.

"One for the road?" Uncle Tex asked, correctly assuming we going to hang around.

other to "Yeah," Hank replied, wrapping an arm around my neck.

Uncle Tex started to make Hank a coffee and I stood, plastered Hank's side, and felt the ugly scar on that secret, private place inside had been ripped apart and then mended. Well...it just disappeared. he said

Gone.

.) "A month," Duke said, interrupting my thoughts. Duke's arm crossed on his big chest, his gravelly voice sounded almost (but no happy. "A month of pure bliss. No bullets flying. No kidnappings. No bodies. No cars explodin'. No cat fights in Chinese restaurants. No sh at the Society Party OK Corral. No visits to the hospital. Absolute, bliss."

He barely finished his last word when we heard a squeal of tires.

Everyone's gaze swung to look out the big plate glass window.

We saw a shiny, cherry-condition, red Camaro, circa 1983 braking

flipping so that it was facing the wrong way on Broadway and it shuddered to a halt.

No sooner had it stopped then the driver's side door was thrown open and a woman got out.

She had gleaming, thick black hair pulled back in a long ponytail. She was wearing a skintight black turtleneck, mushroom-colored cords and a kickass black belt.

at my

She was stunning.

She walked to the front of the Camaro, her hand going to the waistband of her cords and she whipped out a gun.

weren't

Hank tensed at my side and the room went utterly still except for a wicked undercurrent of energy.

She pulled the gun up in front of her and held it like Hank, casual, in two hands, arms cocked, head slightly to the side.

against
me that

The traffic was stopped at the red light on Broadway. She advanced like a woman without a care in the world, down the middle of the wide, not busy street toward a man who had alighted from a different car.

is were

He too, had a gun pointed at her.

t quite)

She halted.

To dead

They faced off.

shootouts

"Jules!" he shouted.

fuckin'

At the call of what was likely her name, her arms moved slightly left and down. Without apparently aiming, she fired, twice.

And she took out the two front tires of his car.

, its tail

"Holy crap," Indy breathed.

lered to “Righteous,” Ally whispered.

“Fuckin’ Jules!” the man yelled and started running toward her.

pen and She whipped around, ponytail flying, and ran back to her car, th
the gun into the passenger seat. She got in and started reversing on a
ail. Shesqueal of tires, leaving the man in her dust.

; and a All our heads followed her as the car twisted viciously around to f
right way again and she took off like a rocket.

The man with the gun turned toward Fortnum’s, started running a
ie backgoing, right past Fortnum’s down the side street.

“Stay here,” Hank said to me, his hand was in his back pocket pull
it for ahis phone. Then he moved to the door.

The place was a flurry of activity.

natural, The Hot Boy Brigade was on the move. Out of Fortnum’s they
disbursing with barely a word to each other, instinctively knowing wh
ed, likewere doing.

ormally I noticed it was Vance on his Harley who shot off in the direc
“Jules.”

Indy turned to me and said on a grin, “Welcome home.”

The End

y to the

“Righteous,” Ally whispered.

“Fuckin’ Jules!” the man yelled and started running toward her.

She whipped around, ponytail flying, and ran back to her car, throwing the gun into the passenger seat. She got in and started reversing on a smoky squeal of tires, leaving the man in her dust.

All our heads followed her as the car twisted viciously around to face the right way again and she took off like a rocket.

The man with the gun turned toward Fortnum’s, started running and kept going, right past Fortnum’s down the side street.

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The End

Rock Chick

BONUS CHAPTER

ADDED
OCTOBER 1, 2023



BONUS CONTENT

HER MAN

Hank

Hank woke without woman or dog.

And he didn't like it.

He opened his eyes, got up on his forearm and listened to the house.

Only then did a smile curve his lips.

They were in the kitchen.

He grabbed the covers, threw them off, snatched his pajama bottoms from the floor and headed to the bathroom. After taking care of business, and pulling up the bottoms, he was leaving the bathroom just as Roxie and Shamus came running into the bedroom.

She was carrying a tray he'd never seen before. It had little legs or feet, and from what he could smell, on the plate on top, there was bacon.

She was also wearing a dark-gray sleep dress that hugged her curves and fell to her ankles. It had long sleeves that fit close and a notch on a collar that dipped down to expose her collarbone.

He had no idea how she managed to make a winter nightdress so sexy. It was one thing his woman found easy to do: make pretty much anything sexy.

Shamus danced to Hank.

Roxie glared at him. "You're up!"

He grinned at her and pointed out the obvious. "Yeah."

"I can't serve you breakfast in bed when you're not *in* the bed," he informed him.

Fighting a smile, he gave his dog's head a rubdown before he sat up to the bed, adjusted the pillows and then reclined, straightening his legs.

She plopped the tray over his thighs.

And yeah, there was bacon.

Also, his favorite. Roxie's stuffed French toast, the pat of butter melting and mixing with an overabundance of maple syrup poured on top, just as he liked it.

She'd been with him now for a while. Through her drama, then separated while she dealt with moving to Denver (a time he didn't like much, the primary reason why he'd colluded with Tex to get her to move right in with him when she returned, an endeavor that was thank you very much successful), then Roxie coming home, moving in with him and them surviving the most recent drama.

Barely.

Now, they were back to normal.

He liked Roxie beside him in his life and his bed a whole fuckuva lot. He liked walking his dog with her. He liked looking at her and listening to her. He liked going to the movies with her and going to the grocery store with her. He liked coming home to her. He liked seeing her face light up when she walked into the house and cooking dinner with her and watching TV with her.

and listening to her when he made her laugh. He even liked being h
when shit went south with the Rock Chicks.

He just liked her.

d,” she But he liked their normal the best.

Like now.

entered She rounded the bed and hiked up the bottom of her nightdress ex
s. shapely legs all the way up to her thighs (again, sexy).

She climbed in opposite him, then said a gentle, “Shamus, no, 1
time. Daddy’s eating,” when their dog tried to climb in too.

ter still Shamus whined.

ver the “I’m sorry, baby,” she cooed. “He’ll be done soon and then you ca
up.”

n being Right, and he liked how much she loved his dog, and how much
all that loved her too.

o move Though she was correct, he would be done with his breakfa
fully a(Roxie’s French toast never lasted long before he downed it), but
rviving wouldn’t be getting on the bed when he was finished.

It was Saturday. For once in the Rock Chick World, they not only
dramas, they had no plans.

lot. He invited.
But Hank did, and they heavily involved this bed, so Shamus

to her. “‘Mornin’,” he said softly when she finally looked to him.

with her. Her beautiful face warmed, she leaned into him and touched his
when he with hers, pulling away, and after that sweet touch said it all, unnec
with her adding, “Good morning, Whisky.”

er rock He gestured to the tray. “None for you?”
“We’re sharing. The toast is a double stack.”
He looked closer and saw she was right. There were also two forks
He grabbed one and handed it to her, then went after the other.
But he started with a sip from his coffee.

xposing She dug in. He went in after her.
After he swallowed his first bite and savored it, he turned back
not this woman. “New tray?”
“Tod and Stevie and I went shopping yesterday.”
This was not a rare occurrence. His woman could shop.
n come However, it was in overdrive since Christmas was nearly on them.
Shamus “Did you buy two?” he asked.
She forked into the French toast then gave him her gaze before
shoved the bite into her mouth. “We only need one.”
st soon
Shamus She was right about that.
It was then Hank leaned in and kissed her. It was closed-mouthed,
had no still tasted of Roxie and syrup. The first part did it for him. All he needed
the combination packed a phenomenal punch.

wasn’t He put down his fork and picked up a rasher of bacon, saying, “
get used to this,” before he munched.
That was no lie, and he wasn’t just talking about sharing breakfast
mouth He was feeling great. He had his woman at his side, eating a full
essarily breakfast, the entire day off, no plans, the house was decorated for Christmas,
he was in the spirit, Roxie was in the spirit, Shamus was in the spirit,

one had been kidnapped or shot for weeks.

So he wasn't feeling great about how Roxie suddenly couldn't see his eyes.

"Sunshine?" he called.

She looked right at him and said fast, "I tried, but I couldn't stop it. Oh fuck."

His entire frame tensed.

"What?" he growled.

"It was already done by the time they called. Apparently, they've been planning this for weeks."

"What, Roxanne?" he pressed, his voice still low.

Her eyes got big before she announced, "Mom and Dad are coming home for Christmas."

He did a slow blink.

"That's it?" he asked.

"Okay, Hank," she began, scooching closer to him like she had to do to support him through a trauma. "You had a small taste of them when they were here."

"Sweetheart—"

"And it was Halloween, which is a holiday, I'll admit. So Mom was acting in true form when she Mom Bombed your house in all of Halloween. But you must remember, that isn't *the* holiday. Christmas is the antastic holiday."

"Roxie—"

"So, you experienced Mom Overload when she was here"

Halloween. And I know I warned you, but I don't think you appreciate how much Christmas is crazy town for my mom."

Trish Logan, down to the bone, was "crazy town."

But she was also hilarious, loved her daughter, loved Hank and daughter, and family was family, and it didn't need to be said, Christmas family time.

"I did promise her Christmases," he reminded her.

"I know, but this year, with things..." she trailed off.

It was hard for her to talk about it.

It was hard for any of them to talk about it.

So he didn't make her talk about it.

"I know," he murmured.

"We had to stay in Denver. For Vance."

Everything was fine now. It was a miracle, but it was.

But she was right. They had to stay in Denver, especially Roxie.

For Vance.

"This is about Tex too, I assume," Hank noted.

She nodded. "Mom has him back, and as usual with Mom, she's got the gusto."

"It's gonna be okay," he assured her.

"It's not going to be okay," she returned.

"Sunshine," he wrapped his hand around her neck, "it's going to be okay."

She searched his eyes. After a few beats, hers settled.

ate just Because that was what he was for her.
Her rock.
She was his everything, and that was what he was for her.
with her So, yeah.
was It was going to be okay.
Because even if it wasn't, he'd make it that way.



“Oh my God!” Roxie yelled from the kitchen.
Luke and Hank, both in the back room watching a football game,
at each other.
And they both grinned.
Roxie showed in the room and shouted, “I just *knew* I shouldn’t
pick them up from the airport!”
After delivering that, she flounced out.
Luke and Hank were buds, but they didn’t hang often. Luke was t
ing for be witness to what happened next.
Hank didn’t blame him, and he was surprised he didn’t have a ho
of Rock Chicks and Hank’s friends. Trish and Herb’s entertainmen
was second to none, and it was far better to watch it unfold than to l
what went down after the fact. (Though, that was good too.)
; to be Both men stood and strolled from the back room into the kitcher
they saw Roxie standing in the open front door, shouting out of it.

“Mom! It’s December twenty-third! We already have a tree!”

Hank instantly looked over the kitchen sink out the window.

And sure enough, outside in the freshly fallen snow, Shamus was c around Herb and Tex, who were carting in a massive fir tree.

Explaining how that could happen, Tex’s El Camino wasn’t at th He’d borrowed one of Lee’s company Explorers. And it looked piled the back with wrapped Christmas presents.

Hank bit back a bark of laughter.

“You can’t have too many Christmas trees, Roxanne Giselle, announced reproachfully, right before she pulled her daughter forcefu her arms and hugged her so tight, you could see how tight it was, do looked while swinging her back and forth.

She then caught sight of Hank, let Roxie go and shoved her asi such force, Roxie’s hair swayed.

let Tex She called, “Sweet Jesus! Praise the Lord!” while coming his way.

“Hey there, Trish,” he greeted, moving toward her and still holdin laughter.

there to “Sweet Jesus!” she shouted.

use full “Not in the house two seconds, and she’s covering it in Sweet Herb grumbled from the direction of the door as Trish hugged him tigh

it value “It is Christmas, Sweet Jesus seems the way to go,” he heard Li isten to under his breath.

1 where Hank put a stop to the swaying by standing firm, but he hugge back, and he did it *still* holding back laughter.

She let him go and turned to Luke.

Hank watched with interest to see what happened next. Not many hugged Luke Stark.

Trish Logan was not many people.

Although Luke didn't reciprocate, Trish wasn't deterred, and even when it was over, she reached up to pat his cheek and mumbled, "You're high in boy."

Luke Stark.

A good boy.

Trish That was too much. Hank was almost certain he sprained something trying not to bust out laughing, but Luke's only response was his lips forming a smirk.

"Trish Logan, I told you, this huge-ass tree ain't gonna fit in this house," Herb announced, standing with Tex in Hank's living room with the tree and unfurled. He then looked to Hank. "Son," he greeted, his eyes glowing at Luke. "Luke."

They both said the same thing in reply.

"Herb."

And Herb told no lies. The tree was massive and taking up a lot of available space. So much, both Tex and Herb were partially obscured by its branches.

Trish was taking off her coat with no apparent concern that there was probably a very expensive tree that could not remain in that house (and probably couldn't be returned) taking up the living room.

"It's not meant for in here. It's meant for the family room," she decided.

Oh shit.

people Hank and Roxie's tree was already set up in the family room. It had been there since the weekend after Thanksgiving. It was a beautiful live tree, with new ornaments, and even if Hank wasn't much of a shopper, he'd enjoyed traipsing from store to store all over Denver with Roxie to find exactly what they wanted.

Roxie, being expert in all the varied retail experiences, took him on his quest weeks before Thanksgiving, because, she shared, she went nowhere near any store on the weekend after Thanksgiving.

"Black Friday and the ensuing weekend are my version of the something forming circle of hell," she'd proclaimed, something Hank thought was damn hard to know.

It was a great memory. Drinking hot cocoa and listening to Bing Crosby in the living room, Nat King Cole, and the Carpenters' Christmas albums, and setting up the tree in the family room with his woman had been something he'd never forget. Making her sit under the tree with the smell of pine in his nose and the crooning in his ears, and Roxie filling all the rest of his senses when they got done being the best part.

She hadn't hidden she enjoyed all of that too. There could be no one else all theTrish had handed down her holiday joy to her daughter.

l by the Therefore, as he suspected, and he didn't even need her to show an aggravated look she shot to him to suspect it, Roxie waded in at this time. "As I said when you arrived, *Mom*, we already have our tree. And it's in the family room." (it alsofamily room."

clared. "We'll move that one into the living room," Trish returned. Oh shit...again.

Roxie shot Hank another aggravated look, but the level of aggravation

ad been this one was reaching the red zone.

with all He tried to be supportive in the one he returned, but he worried he enjoyed mostly because he thought this was all funny as fuck, including the fly what didn't.

The Roxie and Trish show was almost as good as the Trish and on this show.

owhere She turned back to her mother. "No, we won't, Mom. Hank and I our tree together. We went out and got our decorations together. V seventh decorated it together. It's our first Christmas together and that tree d good moving. We're having Christmas around *that...exact...tree. No discuss*

The Logan women squared off.

Crosby, Regrettably, or fortunately, depending on who you were in the scene up the Herb decided to chime in. "No problem, even though this tree cost more love to than I'd accept for payment for a donated gonad, I'll take it out back of Cole chop it up. Hank can use it as firewood."

ot it all Trish whirled on Herb, horrorstruck. "First, Herbert Logan, do not mistake, about your gonads in mixed company! Or, say, *at all*. Does your dad need to hear about your gonads?" Her hand shot up when Herb's opened. "I'll answer that. No! She doesn't. And second, you are *not* chop out the up that tree! We'll set it up outside in the front. Put lights on it. s point, perfect. It'll be the talk of the neighborhood."

s in the "I just hauled it in, now you want me to haul it out?" Herb incredulously.

"You were gonna haul it out back to chop it up," Trish pointed out.

"Yeah, but I do that, I get to use an axe. I take it out front, I go ation in with lights. I already dealt with my quota of Christmas lights this

woman,” Herb warned. Then he continued, doing it quickly so Trish couldn't get a word in, “And you know that since I told you five damn-gumme fact she after you kept wanting me to staple lights on shit.”

Herb looked to Hank and carried on ranting.

“We got lights on the house. The detached garage. The garden shed. The fence around the property. In all the trees. Around the banister out front. The one on the stairs in the goldarned house. And I know I'm forgetting the one mostly because, eventually I had to block it out so I wouldn't commit a felonious act, seein' as we got a cop in the family now, and you don't want your girl's father facin' twenty to life for wife-icide.”

Definitely sprained something trying not to laugh.

Herb concluded, “*And* she made me do all this knowin' the whole time we weren't even gonna *be* there for Christmas.”

Hank moved into the fray, setting off toward the tree. “I'll set it up to Lowe's, get some more lights. It won't be a problem.”

“The Lord sure heard my prayers, giving my daughter a *good* and aughterman who doesn't bellyache at Christmas,” Trish decreed. This statement was snotty, that part directed at Herb, and part heartfelt, that part directed at Hank. She then said while opening the refrigerator, “Don't go to Lowe's. It'll be yet, Hank. I might have a grocery list for you.”

“Mom,” Roxie cut in. “This house is groaning with food. You should have asked on us, but we did have *some* notice you were coming.” The stress on the word “some,” Hank didn't miss, was pretty heavy. “I got everything we possibly need yesterday.”

“Nothing wrong with me checking,” Trish retorted.

Roxie let out a loud sigh.

ouldn't "Nip this shit in the bud, son," Herb advised as Hank took control of the tree. "She'll have you runnin' all over hell's half acre for her if you do

"It's fine," Hank assured and started out the door, catching Tex going like a maniac.

ed. The Right.

ont *and* Even if it wasn't already, that made it worth it right there.

' some, Tex was happy his family was in town for the holiday.

mmmit a

l't need Yep.

Totally worth it.

"Oh, and while you're out there..." Trish called, head now in the hallway as Hank was halfway out the door with the tree, "...can you help Hank and Tex with our bags and the packages? We mailed them early to Tex. They're wrapped and everything, so we're all set to start Christmas without a hitch.

Head She peered around the fridge door to Luke, "You go too, Lucas. We've got a lot to bring in."

decent Luke touched his finger to his forehead and flicked it out in a gesture before heading toward the front door.

ected at He was still smirking.

e's just "Hell's half acre," Herb grumbled, following Hank out the door.

prung it where I live. That's my life."

ie word Hank mentally called bullshit.

e could Herb doted on his wife.

He bitched a lot, but it hadn't escaped Hank, he gave in.

Every time.

l of the
n't.”



rinning

Hank woke without woman or dog.

It was the dead of night.

Christmas was over.

And Roxie wasn't with him.

He threw the covers back, hauled his ass out of bed, and with a
through the shadows at the bathroom, the door of which was open
a fridge prowled out of the room.

erb and He stopped dead one step in the kitchen when he saw her.

They're She was sitting on the counter, curled into herself, arms wrapped
delay!"her calves, staring out the window.

re got a Shamus was lying on the tile of the kitchen floor right under her.

Shamus's head came up when Hank arrived, and he gave a soft wo

salute That was when Roxie's head came around.

His dog's tags jingled as he loped to Hank, but Hank only gave
distracted scratch while on the move to his woman.

“That's He slid a hand along her waist to curl his fingers in on the oth
wrapped his other hand around her ankle, and tried real hard to get h
from jackhammering out of his chest.

Because this was strange.

Roxie was a MacMillan. She was a Logan. Crazy came with the pa

But this was different.

“You okay?” he whispered.

“You know what’s the worst?” she whispered back.

He braced.

He was a cop. He knew a lot of worsts.

What happened recently to a member of their crew was some of the worst that could get.

What happened to Roxie was too.

glance She didn’t seem to have to process what Billy Flynn did to her toenails, heShe’d had her rough patch when Vance brought her home. They’d gotten through how she felt it sullied her so she wasn’t good enough for him, they fought their way to their normal.

around But he’d been around shit like this his entire career. He’d heard telling his mom about it while he was growing up.

He knew it could come back to bite you.

of. “No, sweetheart, what’s the worst?”

She tipped her head to the window.

gave him a “That tree looks amazing.”

He looked out the window, tightening his hold on her ankle, better side, did.

his heart Before Roxie, Hank had zero Christmas decorations. He was a single man who spent the last thirty-five years at his parents’ place for Christmas. He didn’t feel the need to buy them, mostly because he knew, when he found a woman, they’d do it up like he and Roxanne did it.

package.

Together.

They decided to go for what they needed, tree and some things around the house, and add on as the years went by. So they bought a lit wreath for the door, Hank hung it and set the timer to light it, and for this year, that they did outside.

That meant the huge tree in his front yard gleaming with an abundance of the worst bright white lights in the dark against the snow shone like a Christmas beacon.

Sometimes, less was more.

“Mom was right,” Roxie went on.

He wanted to smile.

He didn’t smile.

He focused on her profile.

“Why are you sittin’ on the countertop in the dark, Sunshine?” she prodded.

Her answer made Hank go completely still.

“Because today was the best day ever, in my whole life, and I don’t want it to end.”

It was Christmas night, actually probably the day after, considering he suspected was the time.

And she was right.

It had been a great fucking day.

She turned from staring at the tree to look into his eyes.

“I love how much Mom loves holidays,” she admitted. “I love her hash browns and egg casserole. I love how crazy it is with paper and lights and Christmas music playing. I loved how Shamus was in seventh grade.”

and the with all the mess and people. I loved watching Tex watch Mom and
for the happy he looked. How he looked like he'd finally come home, even
was all he was nowhere near Indiana, just being around Mom being Mom was
to him."

ance of He saw the tears shimmering in her eyes, knowing what she said
cheerful Tex was as big as it could get, and having felt that same feeling watching
settle back into the family who'd missed him for far too long, and now
him back.

Hank used his hand around her waist to pull her into his chest.

Roxie kept talking.

"I love that Nancy and Lottie came over. I love that Tex had someone
else to go because he's part of a huge, wide family, and went with the
Blanca's for dinner. I love that for our dinner, we sat around a big
ie?" he happy table at your folks' house. I love how Mom gets along so great
your mom. And Dad gets on so great with your dad. And how Ally eggs
on. And how Indy and Lee are so much in love, and the way they show

it want "Yeah," he agreed when she paused.

"I loved that Vance sounded good when we called him. And I love
ig what present you got me, Whisky." Her hand drifted to her neck, and she
with what dangled there. "This necklace is beautiful."

He didn't make a mint. So he had no choice but to get her some
things for her stocking, because the big thing was a diamond pendant.

It wasn't much, three quarters of a carat. But it hung on a platinum
cheesy and was embedded in the bottom of a short, delicate platinum wand.

ribbon She'd lit up when she saw it, and then burst out crying, both before
heaven threw herself in his arms and carried on about how it was too much, but

and how much she loved it, and it was *perfect for her*, so it was worth every penny though the money he'd gone over budget to spend on it.

at home She'd put it on immediately (after crying, hugging, carrying and kissing him).

and about She still had it on.

ing Tex "And I love that I never have to buy clothes again," he gently
ow had though he didn't lie.

He had new jeans, trousers, sweaters, shirts, thermals, Henleys, and mention underwear, socks and pajama bottoms. He was the last one to give presents, and Trish was nearly as generous as her daughter, so there she was, somewhere saying something.

them to Roxie leaned her shoulder into him. "And I loved sharing all of this with you, loud, you."

at with At that, he drifted a hand up her spine to her neck and into her hair
s mom he bent his head and kissed her, deep.
it."

When he was done, she rested her head on his shoulder, and then she looked out the window.

ove the "You like them, don't you?" she asked the window.

e toyed "Herb and Trish?"

ie little "Yeah."

"They're impossible not to like."

n chain She relaxed deeper into him and agreed, "Yeah."

ore she "So you're out here, sittin' on the counter, starin' outside, because you don't want this day to end?"

out how She took her head from his shoulder and tipped it back to look

enny of “This is a day I never want to erase.”

He smiled gently at her, got close and shared, “It doesn’t have to
on then yet.”

Her gaze heated.

Oh yeah.

teased, He could drown in the deep blue of her eyes. He knew that the sea
laid eyes on them.

not to Since then, he’d been sucked under, countless times. He didn’t r
opening was warm in there. And the sun was always shimmering on the sur
at was never-ending promise.

Perfect.

at with “Do I have to ask what you have in mind?” she inquired.

No. She didn’t.

before He moved his hand at her ankle to hook her behind her knees and
her off the counter.

ey both Holding her against his chest, Roxie slid her arms around his shoulders
and Hank carried her to their bed.

Shamus followed, and Hank waited until the dog made it into the room
before he kicked the door shut behind him.

But Shamus knew this drill very well, so he didn’t even try to hit the dog.

He collapsed with a doggie groan on Hank’s side.

Hank put his woman on the bed and then covered her with his body.

ise you This was an occasion. One of many. Their first Christmas together.

And their first Christmas night together.

at him.

So he was going to make it memorable.

And if Roxie didn't want the day to end (even if it already had), he'd be over her that too.

Therefore, he took his time. He let her take hers. It was touch and sighs and moans and scratches and tickles and whispered words and laughter and sucking and biting and finally, grasping and panting urgency.

And a whole fuckuva a lot of love.

After, curled close into Roxie's right side, with Shamus sprawled left, Hank splayed his hand on her belly and thought of what it'd look like after he planted babies there.

"I hope your worst is always having to admit your mom is right about something," he murmured in her ear.

She covered his hand on her belly. "We still have Luke, Ally, Mimi, Hector to get through. Maybe Darius. I'm thinking that time won't be too long while."

It sucked, but he knew she was thinking right.

"We'll make it through," he promised.

The second these words came out of his mouth, her fingers curved around his, almost like a reflex.

He knew what that meant. She didn't need to say it.

He knew it. He felt it in his gut, his bones, his heart.

That was who he was. It was what he was always meant to be.

What he didn't know, until he laid eyes on Roxanne at Fortnum's time she walked in, was that all of it was in preparation, waiting for her.

To be her shoulder.

He'd give Her rock.

Her sounding board.

and taste Her protector.

and soft Her man.

ng and

It was just good to know she knew it too.

“Go to sleep, Sunshine,” he urged.

l on her “Okay, Whisky,” she whispered but didn't let go of his hand.

ok like She held it there, all night.

And their first Christmas a memory neither of them would forget about woke up with her hand right there, curled around his, the next morning

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r.

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Her man.

It was just good to know she knew it too.

“Go to sleep, Sunshine,” he urged.

“Okay, Whisky,” she whispered but didn’t let go of his hand.

She held it there, all night.

And their first Christmas a memory neither of them would forget, Hank woke up with her hand right there, curled around his, the next morning.



KristenAshley.net
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

The Rock Chick ride continues with
Rock Chick Renegade
the story of Vance and Jules.



LEARN MORE ABOUT ROCK CHICK RENEGADE

Juliet Lawler has got a score to settle against the drug dealers of I Vance Crowe has made it his mission that Jules won't get dead while out vigilante justice. Jules doesn't have time for romance; she's to saving the world. She enlists Zip (the gunstore owner), Heavy (an ex-Frank (a mysterious recluse) to help. The Rock Chicks get involved provide advice and guidance. The Hot Bunch adopt Jules as one of the

Even though Jules tries to hang on to her inner Head-Crackin' Mamma, the Rock Chicks, Hot Bunch, Jules's long-suffering Uncle N Jules's friend, the rotund, African American, Jackie-O wannabe, M stop at nothing to wear her down.

But Jules makes some bad guys pretty angry, and one will stop at to take her out.

[Read an excerpt of Rock Chick Renegade now.](#)

LEARN MORE ABOUT ROCK CHICK RENEGADE

Juliet Lawler has got a score to settle against the drug dealers of Denver. Vance Crowe has made it his mission that Jules won't get dead while dishing out vigilante justice. Jules doesn't have time for romance; she's too busy saving the world. She enlists Zip (the gunstore owner), Heavy (an ex-PI) and Frank (a mysterious recluse) to help. The Rock Chicks get involved to provide advice and guidance. The Hot Bunch adopt Jules as one of their own.

Even though Jules tries to hang on to her inner Head-Crackin' Mamma Jamma, the Rock Chicks, Hot Bunch, Jules's long-suffering Uncle Nick and Jules's friend, the rotund, African American, Jackie-O wannabe, May, will stop at nothing to wear her down.

But Jules makes some bad guys pretty angry, and one will stop at nothing to take her out.

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ROCK CHICK RENEGADE



ROCK CHICK RENEGADE

Law

Well, I guessed eventually it would come to this. It wasn't like I expecting it. I knew when I started this crusade that something like this happen, probably would happen, and here I was, in a dead end alley, down Vance Crowe.

Shit, Lee Nightingale's tracker.

Of all the fucking bad luck.

Rumor on the street, Crowe was third in command at Night Investigations, after Lee and Lee's right hand man, Luke Stark.

This was saying a lot, considering all the men employed by Night Investigations were the *crème de la crème* of private investigations, surveillance and bond skip tracing, with a small dose of head-c thrown in for shits and giggles. In fact, Nightingale, Stark and Crowe guns-drawn face down with some low-life drug dealer at a society party month ago. Crowe had blown off the guy's hand.

Rumor had a lot of things about Vance Crowe. In fact, I knew women who'd had a couple of things from Crowe. By their report good things, though he didn't stick around to give them more than a

very good things, much to their dismay.

“Put your gun down,” Crowe said to me.

“Back off,” I returned, keeping my gun aimed at him.

I wasn’t going to shoot him, of course. I was anti-violence. That was one of the reasons why I was in this mess in the first place.

He kept walking toward me, unarmed and apparently unafraid.

I took aim at his Harley. It would kill me to harm the Harley, but I’

“Shoot my bike, there’ll be consequences,” Crowe warned in a voice that wasn’t said he meant it.

s could Fuck.

, facing I aimed at him again.

“Back off,” I repeated as he kept advancing.

“You’re Law,” he told me.

tingale Damn, he knew who I was.

“Stop moving,” I said, ignoring what he said.

tingale He got about a foot away from the barrel of my gun, which was positioned in front of his chest, and he stopped.

racking “I work for Lee Nightingale.”

e had a “I know who you work for and I know who you are,” I told him.

y just a Then I stared at him.

Damn, but he was good-looking. Native American coloring, brown two black hair pulled into a ponytail at the back of his neck. He was about six inches taller than me, with a fantastic body, dark-brown eyes, thick couple unbelievable bone structure, high cheekbones and a square jaw. It should have been impossible.

crime to be that hot.

“Put the gun down, Law,” he ordered, using my street name.

My street name was kind of a joke. The kids gave it to me. My real name was Juliet Lawler. Most everyone called me Jules, but the kids called me Law because at the shelter, what I said was “law.” It had taken on a life of its own these past four months, and now I wished they’d never given it to me.

“Step back, Crowe. I’ll just get in the car and go. I have no argument with you.”

And I didn’t. I had a lot of arguments with a lot of people, but not with anyone at Nightingale Investigations. From what I heard (which was true) they weren’t exactly lily white, but any fool would be crazy to go head-to-head with a Nightingale Man. I was a fool, but I was pretty sure I wasn’t crazy.

“I’ll say it one more time,” Crowe informed me quietly. “Put the gun down.”

“Step back,” I returned.

He moved faster than I’d seen anyone move, and before I knew it, he no longer had the gun.

Not only that, but he had my arm twisted behind my back and slammed my front up against his hard body.

I struggled.

This was not a good choice. I’d had a free hand and some of my momentum on my left. In seconds, he shoved my gun in the back waistband of his jeans, his other arm twisted behind me and he moved me, shuffling me back under the side of my car. Then he pressed into me full body.

I tilted my head back and shouted in his face, “Let go and step away from me!”

“Two cops were standing in Fortnum’s when you had your shot with Cordova. They saw the whole thing. You got a permit for that gun. You didn’t ask me. You asked Law.”

“Yes.” This was true. Zip got it for me. Zip was a benefactor who supported my crusade. Zip taught me how to shoot and Zip was a good friend. Therefore so was I.

Though, it was a little worrying that two cops saw me face down with Cordova. However, I didn’t figure Sal was going to run to the police on me, considering he was a criminal and a total jackass to boot.

“I’m takin’ you into the offices. We’re gonna have a talk,” Vance said. I wasn’t sure.

Oh crap.

I didn’t know what he thought we had to talk about, but I was half of it. Lee Nightingale’s brother and father were cops, and so was my friend. No way was I going to any offices with Crowe.

I kept staring him straight in the eye. It was kind of hard, since he was so hot. I was beginning to feel weird about it, especially with him pressing me against me.

I kept at it all the same.

“I haven’t done anything to you. Just let me be on my way,” I said.

He got closer. If you’d asked me the second before if he could, I would have said no. But his face came within an inch of mine and his body pressed deeper into me.

“This is a dangerous game you’re playin’, Law. Vigilante justice,”

y!” me.

wdown I knew that, though I didn't say.

un?” he When I didn't speak, he went on, “You've got the attention of Dar
Marcus. This is not a good thing. Do you know what I'm sayin' to you

or. Zip I felt a little thrill go through me, and not the kind that was going t
od shot, me with just his body pressed against mine.

Darius Tucker and Marcus Sloan were the two biggest crime h
wn Sal Denver, Colorado. I was happy they knew who I was. I didn't figu
and tell were scared, but I intended them to be.

Well, maybe one day.

said to Crowe must have seen something on my face because his eyes flas

“I should take you to the offices, lock you in the safe room and ke
there until you've had some goddamned sense talked into you.”

ving no He said “should.” This I decided to treat as a good thing. I didn'
his best what the safe room was, but I didn't want any part of that either.

I kept staring at him and kept my mouth shut, thinking maybe he'c
was so go.

ssed up He stared right back.

We were both silent, staring, his body pressed against mine.

I kept my chin up and hoped I kept my face blank.

[would “Jesus, you think you're fuckin' Catwoman,” he muttered.

pressed “I do not. Catwoman wore a leotard and stupid ears and fake
That's just silly.”

he told I had no idea why I shared my views on Catwoman. I should ha

my mouth shut.

I thought this primarily because what I said made Crowe's face
He wasn't looking at me like he was the pissed-off, badass boy trying
off the helpless, hapless female who dared enter his turf. He was look
me in an entirely different way. A way that made me even *more* aware
body pressed against mine.

"Where'd you learn to shoot like that?" he asked, and even his voice
changed. It was deep and masculine, but now it was also smooth,
across my skin like silk.

I decided it was best to go silent again.

He tried a different question. "Why was Cordova chasing you?"

I kept my silence.

Then something else about him changed. It changed the way he looked
even changed the atmosphere.

I'd been staring at him to keep a brave face and tough out a
situation. With the change, I was staring at him because I had to. It was
was drawn to him. My body softened. Even my arms (which he stood
behind me) that had been rigid with tension, relaxed.

"I could make you talk," he threatened, his voice low and quiet
knew, in that instant, he could.

"Let me go," I whispered, beginning to lose my fight.

This was a first. If Nick knew, he would freak out. He told me I'd
livewire since he met me at age six, always beating up kids on the playground
who bullied other kids, sometimes losing, sometimes winning.
ve kept phoning and writing senators or congressmen and telling them what I

and how they should vote. Always having some cause that I'd fight
change. passion that was nearly an obsession.

to warn Crowe kept staring me in the eyes, which kept me stuck to him b
king atmagnetic, macho man forcefield.

e of his "You need to stop what you're doin' or you're gonna get hurt,"
told me, his voice still silky low.

ice had "I can't," I admitted. Don't ask me why, but I had to say it.

sliding "Then somebody has to stop you."

Somewhere along the line he'd let go of my hands and he w
holding me. Actually *holding* me, his arms around me, mine loose
sides.

It took a lot, but I shook off whatever was keeping me entranced
oked. Itmy hands and pressed against his chest, hard.

He didn't budge.

lifficult Fuck.

is like I "Let me go!" I shouted.

ill held His arms tightened with a jerk and my hands slid up his chest to
his shoulders. I immediately began pushing. This didn't work, but it
t, and I message so I kept doing it.

"I'll let you go and I'll talk to Hank and Eddie. But I hear you're
street, I'll find you and shut you down."

. been a He could find me, I knew it. He found people for a living, and
'ground could be believed, he was really good at it.

Always I knew who Hank and Eddie were too. Both good cops, Hank Nigh
thought and Eddie Chavez—Lee Nightingale's brother and best friend. I was g

with athis meant Crowe would get me off the hook for shooting out Cordova
in broad daylight in the middle of Broadway, one of the busiest st
y some Denver. It had been showy and stupid and I knew better. Zip wo
disappointed. Nick would be furious.

Crowe What I didn't know was how Crowe would shut me down.

"All right, Crowe. Let me go, I'll stop," I lied.

At my words, he grinned.

I stared (again).

was just He had the most arrogant shit-eating grin I'd ever seen in my twe
at my (nearly twenty-seven) years of life.

My belly fluttered.

I, lifted A belly flutter? What was *that* all about?

"What?" I snapped and ignored my belly.

"You're lyin'."

"I am not lying," I lied again.

He shook his head. Then, to my surprise, he let me go and stepped

rest on I stood there, feeling weirdly bereft.

t sent a "That's it?" I asked.

on the "No," he said.

I waited, then waited more.

if word "Well, finish it," I demanded when he didn't say anything.

"I get the feelin' I'll see you again," he told me.

tingale Oh crap.

uessing I didn't figure that was good at all.

his tires He pulled my gun out of his jeans, released the clip, and with a
reets in overarm throw he tossed it well away. Then he leaned in and shoved
ould be in the waistband of my cords, right in front, by my hipbone.

He turned and walked away, threw a muscled thigh over his Har
roared off.

I stared until I couldn't see him anymore.

Then I pulled my gun out, lifted up my sweater and checked to
there was a mark where his hand slid against me.

Twenty-six I did this because it still burned.



I parked Hazel (my vintage red Camaro) in the garage behind my
scanning my mirrors while the door came down just to be certain I w
These days there was no telling.

I got out of Hazel and did the routine of walking the fifteen feet fr
garage to the back door. Eyes open, gun at the ready (I had an extra
my glove compartment), listening and praying no one was out to get m
back.

I unlocked the door and walked through the shared back room
duplex where Nick and I kept our washer and dryer, an extra freezer
old paint cans and the kitty litter, which Boo, my cat, could access t
the cat flap in my back door.

I unlocked that door, unarmed the alarm and flipped the light sv
my retro kitchen. Pink metal cabinets, pink fridge, pink oven doo
black and white diamond tiles patterning the floor. One wall was br
rest painted steel gray. It was cool as shit, but not on purpose. Only tha
been there so long, it had come back into fashion. I'd bought a high,
style black Formica-topped table with gleaming stainless steel sic

casual kickass retro stools with black leather swivel seats because the
the gund demanded it.

Boo approached from the other door and began immediately to
ley and about his day.

My cat was black with dense, soft fur and yellow eyes. He was
unbelievably proud, and he was the only clumsy cat I'd ever know
to see if he pretended he meant to fall over and miss his leaps from furniture to
whatever, but he was just not coordinated. At all.

"Meow, meow, meow. Meow meow. *Meoow*," Boo told me, ob
having a full day and feeling I needed to be kept apprised of every se
house, it.

as safe. I threw my gun and bag on the table and swiped him off the floor.

"*Meow!*" Boo protested.

rom the "Shut up, Boo. Mommy's had a very bad day. She did something
clip in then got cornered by a hot guy, and now she's pretty much fucked."

ie. "Meow," Boo replied, thinking his news was more important than

of my To shut him up I gave him kitty treats, feeding him from fingers to
r, tools, This made him happy until I stopped giving him treats
through complained, "Meow."

vitch to "That's it," I told him. "Only three or the vet is going to yell at me

r, huge "Meow." Boo didn't care what the vet thought.

ick, the "Whatever." I wasn't in the mood to argue with Boo.

it it had I dropped my cat, walked into the hall and pulled off my boots.

fifties- Nick owned the whole of the duplex. He let me stay in my side
les and the mortgage, kind of. Even though I was now twenty-six (nearly

kitchenseven), he didn't like me paying for anything, even my rent. So I put
bank account each month and gave him a check on New Year's Day
tell me year. He tore up the check so the money just sat there earning interest.

Sometimes you just didn't argue with Nick.

too fat, The duplexes were weird. They weren't in the greatest part of
n. Boothough I thought it was pretty, or at least part of it was. It was of
table or Baker Historical District, but the not-so-good part.

We were on Elati and had a park in front of our house, but there
viously subsidized high-rise apartment building on one side of the park and a
cond of apartment building across the park opposite it.

Our house was historically registered and Nick kept it in great condition
regardless of the 'hood. He'd redone his side—knocked out walls, put
bedroom and tore out his pink kitchen.

stupid I had not redone my side.

So my side was a lot like a loft. Nick had put in a new bathroom
mine. and I'd carpeted the whole place in a thick, soft gray. The front room
fangs. huge arched windows, a brick wall, the other walls painted a soft lilac
and he was enormous. It fit all my fancy furniture, including the dove-gray
chaise lounge that sat by the front window and my sweep-lined lilac
which flanked a gleaming, square pub set with midnight-blue leather-
again." pads on the benches and a blue-gray overstuffed chair and ottoman.
antique oval walnut dining table was at the inside wall. The half
backed chairs I'd had reupholstered in the same dove-gray velvet
lounge.

for half There was a closet that separated the living room from the bedroom
twenty- though you could only loosely call it a "bedroom." It was really a kind

It was in a mattress set on a platform that sat four feet above the floor and was
by every the hall. I had to climb up three narrow stairs to get to it. There was
underneath it and big areas cut in around the side walls of the bed that
above the lowered ceiling of the hall and closet. This was where I kept
candles and a television set.

of town,

officially This was my refuge. A little, feminine cave with fancy cream sl
fluffy green and cream patterned comforter, and an overwhelming a
pillows from standard to European to bedrolls to toss.

was a

own rent Then there was the bathroom and the kitchen. The hall was lined
floor to ceiling bookshelves that housed my massive CD collection.

condition

rock 'n' roll.
I loved my duplex and it was all for me. I didn't have parties because
didn't have very many friends, and none of them I knew well enough
to a party. I didn't have a rollicking good time in my bedroom refuge because
I'd never had a boyfriend.

for me

om had In my life, it was just Nick and me.

, and it

Before that, it was Nick and Auntie Reba and me.

er velvet

Before that, before I could really remember, there was Mom and I
couch, Mikey and me.

studded

But when I was six, Mom and Dad and Mikey died in a car crash
an. My Mom and Dad did, instantly. My brother Mikey died in surgery a
circle-hours later, though it was the same thing. I'd been with them and so
as the even though I'd been in the hospital for three months.

Then I went home to Nick and Auntie Reba.

room,

Auntie Reba was Mom's only sibling, much younger than Mom. I
big-sized had no siblings and all the grandparents were dead except my mom.

open to and at the time he had Parkinson's and was in a home (now he was dead)
storage Auntie Reba and Nick had only been together a few months when

at were family died. They got married a few months after I got out of the hospital

books, When I was fifteen, Auntie Reba died. She'd had a routine surgery
went well, and then a couple of days later, she just died.

needs, a A blood clot dislodged in her leg and lodged in her heart and then.

array of Nick, who wasn't even my real family, didn't turn me out.

ed with Something happened between us, losing Auntie Reba like that.

Mostly The only love I knew growing up (or remembered really) was
Reba and Nick's love for me.

cause I And I knew Nick's love for Auntie Reba.

to ask He loved her in a way that was indescribable. It wasn't like she was
because water or was the earth and moon and stars.

It was different.

It was breath.

It was necessity.

Dad and She was the last of my blood and she was life to him.

So we hung on to each other. It was the only thing we could do.

1. Well, Nick put up with me, which was saying a lot. I was a difficult child
couple even worse teen, always on a mission to save a broken-winged bird
arrived, schoolmate, a forest in Brazil I'd never even see. I didn't party or get
control in any normal way, but I was out of control just the same.

I became a social worker, which had Nick worried. He didn't
My dad needed any more causes.

My dad,

ad too). “Christ, you’ve saved the trees, you’ve made the wilting violet i
hen my prom queen and you’ve marched to take back the night. You can’t s
ital. world, Jules,” Nick said.

ery. All “Maybe not, but I can try,” I retorted, full of youthful bravado.

“Then I hope the Lord saves us all from you *trying* to save us all
..gone. finished.

After graduating from college, I had a few jobs and kept my bou
Nick was surprised. He was certain I’d run amok in my quest to s
world.
Auntie

This unfortunately put Nick at his ease. He’d thought I’d settled do

Then I got the job at King’s Shelter for runaway kids.

lked on This went well, for a while. The kids responded to me and I’d fo
niche.

That was until about four months ago, when I walked into the she
Roam and Sniff were looking funny.



I walked back into the kitchen opened a bottle of red wine and poured
a glass in one of my big-bowled red wineglasses. I went back through
to the living room and threw myself on the chaise lounge.

hild, an Boo jumped up and settled in my lap.

l, a shy “Meow,” he said to me.

t out of “Quiet, Mommy’s thinking,” I told him, and then slid my finger ur
jaw and rubbed.

think I He purred.

I looked out the window, and even though I didn’t want to, I remer



into the

ave the Roam, Sniff and Park were my boys. We were close. It took months
worked hard and got them to trust me.

They'd been on the street for years, but none of them was over
,” Nick I'd rounded them into the shelter, going day in and day out to 16th Street
where they hung out, and talked to them. I got a lot of kids from the
into the shelter, then into counseling, then to reunions with their parents
ndaries.
worked), then family counseling and then home (if it really worked).
ave the

Roam, Sniff and Park were never going to go home. They told me
their homes. Their homes were evil and there was no way I'd find a
own.
kind of reunion. So I just worked at keeping them clean, safe, fed
educated.

und my That day. That shitty, awful day when I arrived at King's, I noticed
wasn't there and I knew that Roam and Sniff knew something.

lter and I cornered Sniff, the weakest of the pack, and asked where Park was
“Dunno,” Sniff replied.

myself Park had a crush on me. I knew this and used it. It was not that I thought
the hall was all that, even though Auntie Reba and Nick told me I was, in
words, “extraordinarily beautiful.” He said this because he loved me
have a mirror though, and even though I didn't think I was the hottest
hotties, I was nothing to sneeze at. I had Dad's black hair, but on me, like
I wore it long, it had a bit of wave. I had Mom's violet-blue eyes and
under his skin and Mom's curves too. I wasn't going to win any beauty pageants
no one was going to hand me a bag to put over my head, either.

To be honest, I had a crush on Park too, but obviously not the same
numbered. as he had on me.

He was funny, sweet and smart as hell. He made me laugh so hard, but my stomach ached and he looked at me in a way that made me know he was making a difference.

At sixteen, I was beginning to realize I wasn't going to save the world, but I knew that Hell was going to save Park, even if it killed me. I knew I should stay within the street boundaries, but I loved that kid. I loved all three of them.

It's (if it) Park knew I'd be at King's that day. He wouldn't miss a chance to see me.

I was about to "Sniff, no pudding cup for you if you don't spill," I threatened.

Sniff liked his pudding cups.

"Dunno, Law. Just...not here."

Sniff knew something was going on and Park could be problematic. Park was too smart for his own good and needed challenges to keep his activities moving, especially moving away from a life that was pretty much shit. Park was in trouble a lot, searching for adventure and release and a way to get out from it all. I had my hands full with him. I had my hands full with all the other Nick's.

I grabbed the material of Sniff's overlarge sweatshirt at his arm and dragged him to Roam.

"Let's go boys. We're finding Park."

They came with me mainly because it meant they could ride in Hazard.

We found Park. It took hours. We searched all his places, and there were a fair few, but we found him.

I'll never forget it.

ard my The syringe was resting in the alley by his lifeless hand.

7 I was Bad dope.

He was stiff. Rigor mortis had set in. His eyes were open, his
sure as beautiful skin was pale.

d have I took one long look at him and then shouted, “Goddammit!”

Sniff puked.

to see Roam put both of his palms to the top of his head, his eyes never
the dead body of his friend.

I cursed a bit more (okay, maybe a lot more) then crouched low l
and stared at him.

It didn’t even look like him. I’d never met a person with more li
tidings. Park. Seeing him lifeless was like looking at another human being.

He was I dropped my head and cursed some more.

e mind Then I pulled out my phone and called the police. When I was
He got stared at Park again.

et away After a while, when the vision of him was burned on my brain, I
three of my eyes and found the vision of him was burned on the insides of my c

rm and That was when I knew what I had to do.

It just came to me.

I got out of my crouch and looked at Roam. “Who sold him the stu
zel.

Roam was black, tall, gangly, and when he filled out he woul
re were looker. Sniff was white, overly-thin, short and had acne. Park ha
Mexican American, medium height and already handsome. If he’d rea
age, he’d have been a knockout.

I knew from my work with him that Roam was sliding across the never knew if I was going to get through to him. Every day I went to I usually held my breath hoping he'd be there, as that was the only indication th I was doing was working.

Roam's black eyes stared at me, but he didn't say a word.

I put my hand to his chest and shoved him against the wall of the b next to Park's body. Then I got in his face. leaving

Roam was fifteen, but five inches taller than me, and if he tried, h take me. oy Park

He didn't try.

"Who sold him the fucking dope?" I demanded. ife than

"Don't know his name."

"Can you take me to him?"

Roam's eyes moved, quick as a flash, surprised but not wanting t done, I it.

"Law," he said. i closed

That was all he said, and I knew he could. eyelids.

"Tonight. You take me to him," I ordered.

Roam's face went hard and I knew why. Roam and Park had been ff?" since they could remember. They knew the bad times at home and the ld be a but-still-shit times on the street. Sniff had come later. New on the stre d been had taken him under his wing. The three had been inseparable ever sin

Until now. ched an

"Yeah," Roam agreed, and I knew why he did that too, and that going to happen.

edge. I “You aren’t getting involved. You show me who it is and then y
King’s shadow.”

at what “Law,” Roam repeated.

“No, Roam. This isn’t a discussion.”

“Ain’t no place for white bitches. These people’ll fuck you up,”
building told me.

“Don’t worry about me. And don’t call me a bitch, it’s rude.”

e could What could I say? I was still the adult in the situation.

That night, Roam showed me who it was.

I didn’t go after him. I wasn’t that stupid.

Instead, I followed him and I planned.

I also went to Zip’s Gun Emporium and bought a gun.

o show Zip was as old as time. White, short, wrinkled, skinny and most
except for about a dozen long, white hairs that were attached randoml
skull.

Zip watched me as I handled the guns in his shop, making my deci

“You ever held a gun?” he asked.

“Nope,” I answered.

friends “You buyin’ it for protection? To put in your purse?”

! better- “Nope,” I repeated.

et, Park Zip watched me some more. “Goin’ after your ex?” he asked.

ce. “Nope,” I said again.

wasn’t Zip’s eyes got wide for a fraction of a second then they narrowed.
after someone else?”

gonads. Always.”

needed It was good advice, but I didn’t expect to get that close.

p about I expected to be a nuisance.

I was going to use guerrilla tactics.

And I did.

I followed Park’s killer, and while he was off making a sale I used
d out a Zip’s knives and slashed all his tires.

ble and Sure, it might seem silly and immature, but you make a drug sale
want to get away and make another sale, not call AAA.

Then during one of Park’s killer’s sales, while hidden, I threw a
bomb at them, interrupting the sale and freaking everyone away the he
least and didn’t expect he lost his customers. Drug addicts would get over a f
on’t go when they needed a score. Still, it would aggravate the dealer, and th
t you to what I was after.

ix.” I followed Park’s killer some more and saw his supplier.

e mouth Then I followed his supplier and I slashed *his* tires.

I did this a lot, messing with their heads, doing stupid, annoying s
got right up their noses. My favorite was the plastic wrap I attached b
one offorth on the doorway when the dealer was taking a break from des
they’d people’s lives and banging his girlfriend. When he was done, he
o avoid through the plastic wrap on the door and for a second had no idea wh
how to walked through. He’d started yelling and carrying on, throwing hi
n guns, everywhere, plastic wrap clinging to him.

ppear. I watched the whole thing and nearly peed my pants laughing.

for the During the day, I listened to the kids.

At night, I eavesdropped on the dealers, the suppliers and the junkies.
This was how I learned the street, or part of it anyway.

I paid attention. I memorized faces, names and places, and I spent time with Zip, Heavy and Frank.

And I widened my net.

Sal Cordova was my first mistake.

Cordova was a small-time supplier and part-time dealer and I got the nose too just for the hell of it, mainly because he was a swaggering jerk who thought he was God's gift to women. Following him, hiding in the shadows in bars and watching him, I noticed he seriously thought he was God's gift to women, even when the women didn't agree. I worried that Sal Cordova was the kind of guy who would *make* a woman agree.

One could say Sal was good-looking. He was a couple inches taller than me, decent body (not Vance Crowe-esque but then again, who was?), brown hair, blue eyes.

Problem was, Sal was a jerk, he was a leech and he was so stupidly cocky.

One day I got close, sliding into the opposite side of a booth in front of him at a greasy spoon.

He looked at me, surprised, then he smiled, thinking I was coming at him.

"Hey, darlin'," he said and winked.

Um...*pu-lease*.

"I'm Jules," I told him, trying not to vomit.

"Hey, Jules." His smile widened.

es. Okay, so that was all I could take.

I didn't waste any time and told him why I was there.

a lot of "Sell dope to kids, any kids, including the runaways, you'll be business. Remember, I'm watching."

Then I got up and left.

As I said, cocky.

t up his And cocky was not good.

rk who That was when people—not the right kind of people—found out shadows was.

s gift to Zip was not pleased.

va was

"Girl, you got a screw loose," Zip said.

ler than When I told Nick (I told Nick everything; I did this because he'd f
) , light- anyway, I learned that a *long* time ago), to say he was not pleased understatement.

d, I got "Are you out of your flippin' mind?" Nick yelled.

I didn't answer. I learned a long time ago too that silence was t
front of way to go with Nick.

It was Roam and Sniff who spread the name Law.

g on to Roam knew me. He knew what I was like and he'd heard about my
on the street. He figured out it was me right away and he made a mist:
told Sniff.

Sniff could never keep his mouth shut about anything and he love
They both did, so Sniff and Roam thought what I was doing was the sh

By the time I talked Sniff into keeping his mouth shut, it was too

was Law and that was it.

Sal took my approaching him in the greasy spoon as a challenge. I
out of he wanted to “shut me down” as Crowe did, but that he wanted some
else entirely from me. Something icky, when you thought about doing
Sal (way *not* icky when you thought about doing it with Crowe, but
go there).

So instead of coming after me to stop me from getting up his nose
could believe this, Sal Cordova was actually trying to get me to go o
t who I him.

Yes, that’s exactly how stupid he is.

All of this brought me to my current predicament.

Sal had caught up with me and made his intentions clear.

ind out I’d told him to go fuck himself.

was an He got a little excited and there was a bit of a car chase.

We ended up in a guns drawn faceoff in the middle of a busy or
four-lane street, right in front of a used bookstore that was the
he best hangout for Lee Nightingale and his boys.

The rest was history.



y antics “Meow?” Boo asked, staring at me and knowing with feline instincts
ake. He life was fucked, and probably wondering if something happened to r
would feed him.

d Park. “Yeah, Boo. You called it. Meow,” I answered.

lit.

[Click here to purchase your copy of Rock Chick Renegade](#)

) late. I

Not that
nothing
; it with
I didn't

, if you
out with

re-way,
known

that my
ne who



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristen Ashley is the *New York Times* bestselling author of over 100 romance novels including the *Rock Chick*, *Colorado Mountain*, *Dream Team*, *Chaos*, *Unfinished Heroes*, *The 'Burg*, *Magdalene*, *Fantasyland*, *The Ghost and Reincarnation*, *The Rising*, *Dream Team* and *Honey* series with several standalone novels. She's a hybrid author, publishing titles independently and traditionally, her books have been translated in 15 languages and she's sold over five million books.

Kristen's novel, *Law Man*, won the *RT Book Reviews* Reviewer's Award for best Romantic Suspense, her independently published title *On* was nominated for *RT Book Reviews* best Independent Content Contemporary Romance and her traditionally published title *Breathe* was nominated for *RT Book Reviews* Contemporary Romance. Kristen's titles *Motorcycle Man*, *The Will*, and *Steady* (which won the Reader's Choice award from *Romance Reviews*) made the final rounds for Goodreads Choice Awards in the Romance category.

Kristen, born in Gary and raised in Brownsburg, Indiana, was a first-generation graduate of Purdue University. Since then, she has lived in Denver, the West Country of England, and she now resides in Phoenix. She worked as a charity executive for eighteen years prior to beginning her indepen

publishing career. She now writes full-time.

Although romance is her genre, the prevailing themes running through Kristen's novels are friendship, family and a strong sisterhood. To thank her readers and as a way to thank her readers for their support, Kristen has created Rock Chick Nation, a series of programs that are designed to give back to readers and promote a strong female community.

The mission of the Rock Chick Nation is to live your best life, be true to yourself, recognize your beauty, and last but definitely not least, talk to your sister's back whether they're at your side as friends and family or if they're thousands of miles away and you don't know who they are.

The programs of the RC Nation include Rock Chick Rendezvous, where Kristen organizes full of parties and get-togethers to bring the sisters together, Rock Chick Recharges, evenings Kristen arranges for women who have been nominated to receive a special night, and Rock Chick Rewards.

Rock Chick Rewards is an ongoing program that raises funds for nonprofit women's organizations. Kristen's readers nominate. Kristen's Rock Chick Rewards have contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to charity and this number continues to grow.

You can read more about Kristen, her titles and the Rock Chick Nation on her website.

KristenAshley.net



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Although romance is her genre, the prevailing themes running through all of Kristen's novels are friendship, family and a strong sisterhood. To this end, and as a way to thank her readers for their support, Kristen has created the Rock Chick Nation, a series of programs that are designed to give back to her readers and promote a strong female community.

The mission of the Rock Chick Nation is to live your best life, be true to your true self, recognize your beauty, and last but definitely not least, take your sister's back whether they're at your side as friends and family or if they're thousands of miles away and you don't know who they are.

The programs of the RC Nation include Rock Chick Rendezvous, weekends Kristen organizes full of parties and get-togethers to bring the sisterhood together, Rock Chick Recharges, evenings Kristen arranges for women who have been nominated to receive a special night, and Rock Chick Rewards, an ongoing program that raises funds for nonprofit women's organizations Kristen's readers nominate. Kristen's Rock Chick Rewards have donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to charity and this number continues to rise.

You can read more about Kristen, her titles and the Rock Chick Nation at KristenAshley.net.



ALSO BY KRISTEN ASHLEY

Rock Chick Series:

Rock Chick

Rock Chick Rescue

Rock Chick Redemption

Rock Chick Renegade

Rock Chick Revenge

Rock Chick Reckoning

Rock Chick Regret

Rock Chick Revolution

Rock Chick Reawakening

Rock Chick Reborn

Rock Chick Rematch

The 'Burg Series:

For You

At Peace

Golden Trail

Games of the Heart

The Promise

Hold On

The Chaos Series:

Own the Wind

Fire Inside

Ride Steady

Walk Through Fire

A Christmas to Remember

Rough Ride

Wild Like the Wind

Free

Wild Fire

Wild Wind

The Colorado Mountain Series:

The Gamble

Sweet Dreams

Lady Luck

Breathe

Jagged

Kaleidoscope

Bounty

Dream Man Series:

Mystery Man

Wild Man

Law Man

Motorcycle Man

Quiet Man

Dream Team Series:

Dream Maker

Dream Chaser

Dream Bites Cookbook

Dream Spinner

Dream Keeper

The Fantasyland Series:

Wildest Dreams

The Golden Dynasty

Fantastical

Broken Dove

Midnight Soul

Gossamer in the Darkness

Ghosts and Reincarnation Series:

Sommersgate House

Lacybourne Manor

Penmort Castle

Fairytale Come Alive

Lucky Stars

The Honey Series:

The Deep End

The Farthest Edge

The Greatest Risk

The Magdalene Series:

The Will

Soaring

The Time in Between

Mathilda, SuperWitch:

Mathilda's Book of Shadows

Mathilda The Rise of the Dark Lord

Misted Pines Series

The Girl in the Mist

The Girl in the Woods

Moonlight and Motor Oil Series:

The Hookup

The Slow Burn

The Rising Series:

The Beginning of Everything

The Plan Commences

The Dawn of the End

The Rising

The River Rain Series:

After the Climb

After the Climb Special Edition

Chasing Serenity

Taking the Leap

Making the Match

Fighting the Pull

The Three Series:

Until the Sun Falls from the Sky

With Everything I Am

Wild and Free

The Unfinished Hero Series:

Knight

Creed

Raid

Deacon

Sebring

Wild West MC Series:

Still Standing

Smoke and Steel

Other Titles by Kristen Ashley:

Heaven and Hell

Play It Safe

Three Wishes

Complicated

Loose Ends

Fast Lane

Perfect Together

Too Good To Be True

Too Good To Be True