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We Belong

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Thunder

The wrench cranked its metallic spiral, joining the crescendo of my favorite song, “*We Belong*,” by Pat Benatar.

I tilted my head back, ponytail tickling the arch between my shoulder blades as I belted, “*We belong to the light, we belong to the thunder*,” into a spark plug like it could amplify my call to the wild in the empty metal shop.

It was a christening – a serenade and celebration of my new way of living. With my own business in a town where no one knew me, I had agency—an ode to everything that I knew life could be. Overwhelming. Personal, intimate glory.

The song had me spinning, fixing things and singing, free to drown out anything that wasn’t within this new realm of possibility. The floor might as well have been covered in oil because I was gliding, restoring machines and every confidence I needed.

A ring of the entrance bell snapped me out of my solo. I turned to the front of the garage where three muscular men in torn-up jeans and scuffed shirts sauntered in, all eyes fixed on my passionate pose: the one on the left looked on in mirth, the one on the right in confusion, and the center man in curiosity.

After a second, I unfroze, trying not to blatantly stare like they were gawking at me.

Probably because they thought I was a freak.

They were all a little roughed up, but my gaze lingered on the one in the middle who had a plaid button-down shirt knotted around his waist. Sweat clung to his collarbones under a white tank top. Thick, wavy black hair was shoved back under a red bandana. I wondered if it was the humidity keeping it hidden away or if it was always that pretty. The other two men were handsome, too, but he was a client.

My hand shot back down to my side as if I hadn't been serenading the world with a spark plug. "Hi! How can I help you?"

"Karaoke night at Sidewinders," the gentleman with a stud earring suggested. His tall friend with an abundance of neck tattoos laughed. The bandana-wearer gave them both an exhausted glare and slapped their arms with the back of his hand.

My lip twitched in embarrassment as I hurried towards the stereo to turn down my favorite power ballad.

What kind of business owner sang into spark plugs? It made me look like I couldn't control myself. I could. I just couldn't let myself get carried away again.

Looking apologetic, the guy with the plaid shirt tied around his waist stepped forward, hips shifting like he was trying to disguise a wince. "Hey. Sorry about them. We banged up our bikes and we were hoping you could take a look at them."

It was the first time any motorcycle owners had come into the shop. From what I understood, there was a huge motorcycle club chapter in town. They could have been repeat customers. Or just customers.

Still, they had just caught me belting out Pat Benatar in the middle of the workday, so I was probably in for an uphill battle to earn their respect—let alone their business. I was nobody in West Ridge. That was part of the appeal to move here in the first place. I did want to be *somebody* to *someone*, eventually. I think I

was ready to rebuild and reintegrate myself to being productive and helpful.

Based on their greeting, maybe they weren't swayed by seriousness or singing. I corrected my posture anyway. There was no harm in being professional.

"Of course. Do you need help retrieving them or were you able to bring them here?"

"They're in the pickup truck out front."

"Great. I'll retract the door and you can back them in here for a closer look. Sound good?"

"Yeah." Bandana-boy flashed me a lopsided smile. Nice. Freckles. Or maybe they were beauty marks.

I focused on the door controls and the muted red of the pickup truck, my fingers trembling with adrenaline. It was almost the same model as my old neighbor Frank Knope's, just a different color. It was well worn, too. I probably would never see him again, but it reminded me of when I felt safe, for once.

Of course, the truck was a coincidence. I needed to let go of all aspects of the past to enjoy the present and future ahead of me.

Despite the recent accident, the bikes were in good shape. I ran my fingers gently over the bodies, the scratches grooved into their black, shiny sides.

The bandana-wearer helped me lift them into the station. "They're what we like to call well-loved."

"I love them, too. They're beautiful."

He smiled at me just a little, enough to make heat splash on my chest, but his gaze swooped back to the bike quickly enough that the burn didn't linger.

I kind of yearned for that happy ache.

Trying to focus on the project at hand, I reminded myself that not all relationships led to happiness.

The bike wasn't in terrible shape, especially if the spill was nasty enough for him to want to disguise any pain. His elbow was scraped up too, but not as badly as it should've been. My gaze

swept over him, the scuffed jeans, narrow hips, broad shoulders, lean muscles.

Desperate for a distraction, I averted my attention from the potential client.

There were leather jackets in the seat of the truck. They must have taken them off before coming in. Why? Were they Rattlers? I vaguely remembered that name and icon on the patches I'd seen on leather jackets throughout town.

He cleared his throat, gaze studiously fixed on the motorcycles. "So, what do you think?"

His apprehension surprised me. Maybe he was worried I wouldn't serve him because of the gang affiliation.

I spread my palms on my overalls. "I have to order a few parts, but it's nothing that can't be fixed."

"How much?"

Thankfully, it didn't require too much mental math before I had the answers for them, per bike and total.

"I told you that fucker in Knoxville was trying to rip us off," the one with the neck tattoos glowered and said, elbowing the one with the earring's arm like the pricing was a call to their honor.

The bandana-wearer's eyebrow arched in what I hoped was respect. "Really? That's it?"

"Yeah, although you're making me feel like maybe I should charge more." I smiled, my gaze drawn to the cut on his lip. "While we're at it, you look like you could use some patching up yourself."

"I'm fine." His chin ducked down, causing a stray curl to slip from under his bandana. Maybe that was why he wore it, to keep those dark locks out of his eyes when he was driving. A curious itch to play with it took root in my fingers.

Touching him would likely be playing with fire. As ready as I was to rebuild my life, I couldn't jump into a fully-fledged crush and burn myself out on it.

"It's no trouble," I offered brightly. "I have a first aid kit in

the main office that I use to patch myself up with all the time. Hazard of working with sharp objects.” Wiggling my bandaged, ungloved hands at him seemed to lighten the fog of unease in the air.

“Okay. If it’s not too much trouble.”

A surge of giddiness bubbled up in my chest. I tried to hold my breath to suppress it, spinning to face his companions. “Do any of you need anything? Water? Bandages?”

“No, we’re fine. Go on and help the judge.”

“Judge?” I quirked an eyebrow, enjoying the way the man next to me seemed to slouch even more as he spared a withering look at his friends.

“It’s a nickname. My actual... well, my normal nickname is Reed.”

“Reed,” I repeated, feeling the unique name wrap around my tongue and tie itself like a pretty little ribbon.

“Yeah.” This time his wince seemed to be from emotional embarrassment. “Like read a book, but spelled wrong, because... irony.”

His sense of humor made everything seem lighter, even the mental images flitting through my brain. “In ancient times, they used to sharpen reeds to write books. The reed plant, I mean.”

He smirked, massaging his wrist. “What a coincidence.”

“I’m Betty.”

“Betty. Nice to meet you.” I offered my hand, which although bandaged, was at least clean. He considered it for a moment before clasping it firmly. His fingers grazed the inside of my wrist as we parted, and it nearly took my breath away.

“Thanks for helping us with our bikes.”

“My pleasure.”

There was a glimmer of hope in his eyes, like maybe I was different. Maybe I could understand. Thrumming with excitement, I directed him to a chair in the private office and unpacked the alcohol, cotton and bandages.

The scrape on his elbow was easy enough to patch, but the

one on his lip... that one looked like such a pretty, dark brush-stroke. I wanted to touch it with my fingers. Maybe...

Stop, I begged myself, but the pad of my finger dabbed the plush rawness of his lip, and it was like all the air was pushed out of my lungs. A full-on body slam of sensation.

His head rocked back, eyes flickering curiously at my fingers. Probably wondering if I was clean.

“Sorry. Just wanted to see how deep it was. This is going to sting.”

I cupped his jaw gently, pressing the alcohol-soaked cotton to his lip.

That’s it, baby. I’ve got you, my chest hummed as he hissed, eyes watering.

“Shit.” His tongue darted over the spot I just sanitized, no doubt tasting salty, sterile flesh. “You weren’t kidding when you said it stings.”

“I don’t kid about pain.” I was pretty sure I was smiling. I must have been. It was light. Easy. I pushed the cotton swab further into my palm, then into my pocket.

By the time the men left, I had two phone numbers and a general address on the south side of West Ridge. Chewy, the guy with the neck tattoos, and Reed said goodbye to their bikes while Milo, the one with the earring and pickup truck, reminded me about karaoke night. I got the parts ordered and tried to steady my excitement when they paid in cash.

“See you soon,” I said brightly.

“I hope so.” Reed smiled, glancing back at his bike, but he looked at me too.

It could mean something.

I beamed at his motorcycle, securing the scratched side mirror.

He didn’t leave the things he loved behind, especially not just because they were a little broken down and he couldn’t use them at the moment.

My fingers slid across the cotton ball in my pocket for reassurance.

Sidewinders were actually a type of rattlesnake, I found out after a quick internet search, which made it a very appropriate name for their particular club's base and bar. Not entirely sure if I wanted Reed and company to see me yet, I dressed incognito and scoped the place out to get used to the patterns and patrons.

Despite the motorcycles outside and the casual atmosphere, I felt anxious going in.

It was probably a bad idea to go into a motorcycle club bar on my own, but I certainly couldn't make friends if I didn't put myself out there. Of course, I didn't want to be too out there.

I scanned the first floor, quickly spotting a staircase to a small balcony space that had a few more pool tables as well as some high-top tables and chairs. It was someplace quiet and out of the way which was exactly where I needed to be to get my fix.

Before West Ridge, I hadn't really had the opportunity to strike out on my own. Any attempts I made to bring people into my life were met with challenge, scrutiny, and in some cases, destruction. Getting to know people from a distance seemed easier. Safer, definitely. No one would purge my phone, burn my diaries, drown my photos, or threaten anyone if they didn't suspect anything on my end or theirs. I just wanted to treasure any little piece of intimacy from the people who mattered to me. Once, I'd tried to keep a guitar pick from the boy next door only to have the hard plastic carved into my forearm for 'betraying' the only intimacy I was supposed to need.

Soft things were better to keep. Photos, too. Those usually couldn't hurt me as tangibly if anyone discovered them. Not that anyone who used to hurt me would know where to find me. Of course, there was always the risk that the memory that meant so much to me might be nothing to the person I shared it with.

Maybe my fantasies were unsettling. It wasn't like I had a lot of them. Just the guitar pick, the cotton ball. Zack and Reed—and I didn't *have* Reed yet, I was just curious and affectionate. We had a moment.

The boy next door didn't love me, but I had to hold onto the hope that I'd find a healthy, loving relationship one day. Frank Knope taught me that I didn't need to look through a window to pine for love that could be. I had to walk out the door until I found and forged a loving reality—and that had to start with me. Moving to West Ridge and running the garage was a big change in a loving reality.

Yet, I couldn't help hiding.

Scratching absently at my forearm, I tugged my olive-green trucker hat further down and wished I could get away with wearing sunglasses indoors for an added layer of protection. My makeup tonight was different than what I'd normally do in the hopes I wouldn't stand out too much from any other patron.

Of course, some guys noticed me and offered me a drink. I declined as politely as I could, although playing pool and participating in light chatter seemed like a harmless enough cover while I craned my neck over the balcony to see if the trio from the garage had come in yet. When I spotted them, I abandoned my game with a quick apology and parked on a stool nearby. Some drunken man with a prickly-looking beard kept winking at me and calling me a good luck charm. If only good luck was as easy as being in someone's orbit.

The guys didn't look up, which made watching them easier and more relaxing. Although I couldn't just stare at them – at him – indiscriminately the whole night, I did manage to pick up enough to sate my need to know him better.

Reed didn't order anything alcoholic. Maybe he was the designated driver for Milo's truck, but maybe it was something else. He kept an eye on the door like he was waiting for someone. The pool balls broke behind me, rattling and rumbling like a

comforting flash of lightning and thunder in the back of my mind.

Opening the camera app on my phone, I took a picture to mull over. Reed was so relaxed in his leather, slouched against the wooden beams of the bar. His smile wasn't wide yet. I scrolled past the poem from three months ago about freedom stretching me thin and drafted a new one for my blog.

*Maybe you're still waiting
Because you don't see me
My fingers tracing your scratches
Your lips ripping me at the seams
We could tie it all together
And just be you and me
Silky flesh and jagged steel*

*Blood and cotton
Thunder and Lightning
One follows the other
Anywhere
Anywhere*

It wasn't my best work, but it was something. I bit my lower lip, watching him.

He was something.

Inspiration was like lightning (or drowning) and I should bottle that feeling. Even if it was just for that night. It really should just be tonight, unless he turns out to be a really great guy.

From the looks of it, he was great. At the very least, he didn't seem the type to put someone else down. The most he did was good-natured ribbing when his friends made a terrible shot or he

made a great one. Even when his friends walked home and he didn't need to drive anybody, Reed remained sober. There was the occasional light beer, but even then, he took a few sips and pushed it off on someone else.

Control, I realized, watching him angle towards the door and noting the way the other Rattlers listened to him and challenged him. He liked to be in control.

Analyzing him like that wasn't doing either of us any favors. I needed to go home. I needed to stop while I still had my agency and integrity intact.

I considered the lively group to my right, my current camouflage. No one at the bar knew my name. They thought I was just passing through. A friend of a friend. None of my clients had to know anything about my visit there.

It was fine. I was fine.

As soon as there was a significant enough distraction, I snuck out, the word "coward" bouncing around in the back of my head.

The fresh air felt stifling as I headed to the secret spot I'd parked my car. As I slid into the seat, I caught a glimpse of my poor attempt at a disguise. Maybe a small part of me wanted him to notice the girl on the balcony.

It was too late for that, now. Besides, nobody liked an attention whore. But that wasn't me.

I didn't need attention. I just wanted to see Reed in a way that didn't risk getting hurt by anybody.

Shaking, I started the car and fitted my fingers around the wheel.

I could drive. I just had to be careful.

At home, I wiped off my camouflage and fluffed my hair to get back to the basics of being Betty. As I booted up my computer for something to watch while I went to bed, I wondered if I should back up the images I took at Sidewinders. Photos were a safe way to feel closer to him. Looking him up on

the internet might even be better than following the real thing. It'd be a safe little fantasy.

He did seem pretty wonderful, though. It was hard to imagine finding a version of him better than what I'd already seen.

Reed didn't have a social media presence, but his friend Milo did: a gallery full of friends and family at tailgates and the river. I found photos of Reed as far back as high school, large headphones on instead of his signature red bandana. Sometimes he graced the camera with a lopsided smile, one or two teeth peeking through, but more often than not he had a sullen expression as he read or studied something in the distance.

A sensitive soul, I mused and tried not to dwell on it, nor on the beautiful bikes in the garage that needed my attention.

Once the parts were in, it was easy to put the motorcycles together. Fixing things felt like purifying my very being. I worked hard to make sure everything ran smoothly. I lay on top of Reed's bike, the seat warm under my thighs, and dreamed about how he would feel atop it: the motor thrumming, the fire behind him, wind whipping in his face.

A test drive made sense to make sure it was working, to make sure it was right.

My palms itched in their gloves. I smiled at the sweat-stretched leather binding on his helmet, tracing the intersecting diamonds crudely carved on the front of the hard material.

Balanced, rough around the edges and beautiful: just like Reed.

Little nettles stung my skin everywhere. I imagined it was him I was clinging to, not the bike. My nails could sink into his shoulders, our bodies molding together without any stitches necessary.

The trembling motor succumbed to me, thrust me into the fantasy. Even the thirsty little gurgle of feeding it gas made me feel like I was taking care of him.

I took care of the bikes. Not the men.

That'd make a good poem, probably. I wrote a little and tried

to determine if I should call Reed and tell him about the bikes being ready. I wasn't sure if I was ready to say goodbye. Or hello. Or anything, really.

Overly eager to be prepared for the pickup, I made sure everything was clean and spotless in the garage and even on my hands. I wore my nicest jumpsuit, which I shimmied out of last-second, when they arrived. My heart jumped just like it did when I'd called him to report he could come in to pick up his bike.

"Hi, Reed."

"Betty. Thanks for getting the bikes ready so fast." His cheeks colored, his eyes fixed on the counter as I smoothed my clothes back into place.

"My pleasure. Do you want to take them on a ride around the block first?"

"No, I trust that you got them in working order, and if not... we know where to find you." His lip quirked up and my head was inclined to tilt and follow its curve.

If only I knew where to find him.

I braced myself with a smile, handing him the keys, I traced the smudges on his hands as subtly as I could while trying to ignore the violent vibrations of my heart.

"Nice color. Were you working on something too, or...?"

"Oh, that? No. I have a typewriter. It's kind of old-fashioned, but... it's fun to struggle with something literal while trying to get past a metaphorical writer's block."

My eyes lit up and I felt myself drifting forward. "You write?"

"Nothing fancy. Just non-fiction. It gets me out of the house and into a coffee shop, just so I see the light of day once in a while."

"I write, too! Poems."

"About what?"

I bit my tongue, guarding myself because I knew how ridicu-

lous the answer was, but his eyes were such a clear blue that I was sure he could read me anyway. “Mostly feelings.”

“If they’re anything like your singing...”

I tugged on my ponytail, twisting it between my fingers in embarrassment. “So, are you published?”

He laughed, raising his eyebrows. “Not yet. The writing thing is more food for the soul. The reading part is for my brain.”

Of course he’d read and write. He was funny and smart, a lethal combination even before his looks came into play.

“What about your heart?”

Pursing his lips, he shrugged at the floor. “Probably destroyed by the number of frozen meals and fast food I consume on a daily basis. I have what most people consider an infinite appetite.” The declaration fell somewhere between a brag and an apology. But I understood having a hunger. Craving something.

Maybe he was the kind of guy who didn’t get cravings from the heart.

He coughed, glancing at the garage and shifting his weight from foot to foot. “So, can I take her out?”

A desperate part of me wanted him to mean me instead of the bike.

“Oh! Yeah. Um, yes. Any time. She’s oiled up and ready to go.”

“Great.” He opened his mouth, inspiring a very excitable ‘maybe... yes’ in my brain, but his lips fluttered, unable to form anything to hold onto. Too many seconds passed before either of us spoke.

“Reed?”

Shaking his head, his cheek wrinkled with his lopsided smile. He smoothed his hair under that bandana of his. “Sorry. My train of thought got derailed. Um, thanks again, Betts.”

The intimacy of the new nickname speared me through the chest like a root tightening against my ribs.

He stuffed his hands into his pockets, sighing at the image of his two friends lounging against the pickup truck outside.

My heart raced. Desperate, I tried to think of a reason to get him to look at me instead of them. That was too needy. But I needed him.

“You know, we’re in a club. A motorcycle club. Maybe I can set something up, like a referral program or something.”

Hands wringing behind my back, I got up on my toes to make my ponytail swing in a way I hoped was inviting. “You haven’t tested your bike yet. How do you know you like my services?”

He snorted, that little tooth-preview smile reminiscent of Milo’s high school photo collection. “You patched up my face and my bike. Suffice to say I think your service is pretty great.”

“Any time. You’re... it’s a beautiful bike.”

My fingers curled into my palms.

I had to stop before I got lost in him.

His thumb traced his beautiful healing mouth that I longed to break open and touch. But then he saw the tension in my hands and the dreamy look disappeared. “Sorry, I’ll get out of your hair.”

“No, you don’t have to—”

“Please. You don’t want a bunch of Rattlers hanging out, cramping your style.”

“I don’t have a style yet.” I bit my lip, hoping my eyeliner wasn’t smudged, hoping that my eyes were still big and innocent. “Maybe there’s room for a Rattler or two. This is a garage. It’s pretty spacious, especially since it’s usually just me.”

He laughed. “You’re something else.”

“Something good, I hope.”

I was full of hope.

The split in his lip threatened to break the skin. Maybe I should take another chance to touch that plush, sweet flesh. “Good things don’t happen around here too often, but you coming to town just might be one of them.”

Practically skipping, I got the motorcycle ready.

Reed thought I was good.

The internal high tapered off at the realization that maybe I wasn't. I could be, though.

"So... maybe I'll see you around?" he asked.

In my haze, I barely noticed the screeching main garage door opening, nor the bell ringing at the entrance.

"Y-yes," I stammered, not wanting to mention that I saw him all the time in my imagination. He was the person who could pop out around any corner, the duet to my every song.

Reed mounted his bike, readjusting himself in the seat like he was remembering how it felt, how it purred. He looked up at me, swallowing hard. "How does it look?"

An uncomfortably hot feeling bubbled up in my gut and behind my ears. "Good. It all works."

Reed laughed, the loveliest sound I'd ever heard. I wondered if I could get him to do it again: to record it, to play it, to add it to the soundtrack of my life.

Chewy's entrance distracted me from the vision of Reed. He looked between both of us with an element of wariness.

"Hey. Is it too early to get my bike?"

"No," I managed with flatter intonation than I intended as I probably blushed every shade of pink known to good girls and cotton candy. "Let me get it ready for you."

By the time Chewy was all set, I could barely make eye contact with any of them for fear of fainting. They all tipped a salute to me before riding off down the street with thunder in their wake.