

THE SLOW BURN

MOONLIGHT AND MOTOR OIL SERIES #2

By Kristen Ashley

PROLOGUE

She Was Going to Be Just Right
Toby

Thirty Years Ago...

Toby sat on his rump in the middle of the room and stared.

His big brother Johnny was standing by their daddy's leg and patting it.

Daddy was sitting on their couch, bent over, head in his hands, his shoulders heaving.

He was crying.

Toby had never seen his daddy crying.

"Daddy," his big brother said, his voice funny.

Their daddy lifted his head, his face red, and looked at Toby's big brother.

Then he lifted one of his big hands and wrapped it around Johnny's neck.

"It's okay, son," he said, his voice funny too. "It's okay," he repeated.

His eyes strayed to Toby.

Toby felt his lip wobble, his belly all funny when he saw his daddy's face.

"We'll all be okay," his father whispered.

Toby didn't believe him.

He didn't believe him at all.

This was Tobias David Gamble's first cognitive thought.

It was also his first memory.

He was three.

And when it came to his dad, Toby's thoughts on that particular subject would turn out to be right.

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Ten Years Later...

“She’s ruined him,” Margot snapped.

Toby was about to go in the back door.

It was after school.

His dad and brother were at the garage.

If Toby didn’t feel like working on some car, and sometimes he didn’t, he’d go to his Grams and Gramps’s after school.

That is, if he didn’t sneak out to the mill and pretend he was a fugitive from justice. Or a cop hunting a fugitive from justice. Or a scientist discovering a new kind of moss that would cure cancer. Or a sailor stranded from his ship on a desert island (that had a mill with a water wheel).

Everyone had freaked the first time he’d walked all the way out to the mill to do his own thing.

He’d been eight.

Now, if he was in the mood, he just went. And if they didn’t know where he was, they went out there to get him.

But Grams and Gramps were in Germany for a vacation, visiting Grams’s family.

Since he didn’t want to go to the garage, like always when his Grams and Gramps were busy, Toby went to Margot and David’s after school.

David was his dad’s best friend.

Margot was Dave’s wife.

She was also a pain in the butt.

This was because she was super strict. It was always, “A gentleman does this,” or, “a decent man does that,” or, “you offer a lady a cookie first, Tobias, before you eat fifteen of them.”

Her cookies were *the best*.

Who wouldn’t eat fifteen of them?

And if you offered them to some girl first, *she* might eat fifteen of them, not leaving you enough when she was done.

But okay...

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He'd never tell anyone this, not anyone in the whole world, but he liked it when Margot got all cuddly with Dave, her eyes getting soft, like he built some big cannon and pointed it to the sky and lit that thing, filling the heavens with stars.

He wished his mom had thought that about his dad.

But he liked it that Margot gave that to Dave.

He wouldn't tell anyone this either, but Toby liked it when she got all soft in the face sometimes, when she looked at him when he got an A on some paper or after he helped his team win a game (and she'd know, she always went to his games, Dave too) or after he made her laugh.

And he liked it a whole lot when she'd run the backs of her fingers down his jaw.

But right then, Toby didn't turn to the screen door and push it in when he heard Margot in the kitchen talking on their phone.

He stood at the side of the door and listened.

Margot'd get ticked, she knew he was there. She was big on manners, and eavesdropping was not something she was keen on. So eventually he'd have to retrace his steps, give it time and come back.

But now he was gonna listen.

"I can't begin to imagine what's wrong with Rachel, except for the fact she's not Sierra."

Toby's eyes closed and his shoulders slumped.

His dad was scraping off another girlfriend.

That sucked.

His dad seemed better when he had a lady around.

This time it sucked more because Toby really liked Rachel.

He'd learned not to like them. They never lasted long.

A lot of them tried real hard to last as long as they could, and Toby could see this. His dad had money. He was a decent-looking guy. And he had that low voice Toby had overheard one of his father's girlfriends say was "sexy."

Lance Gamble was a catch.

A lot of them tried to get to Lance through his sons.

Most of the time it was sickening, and it bugged the crap out of Toby and Johnny (it was just that Johnny was the kind of guy who'd learned to keep his mouth shut about stuff that bothered him or find a time he could talk it out with Dad so it wouldn't tick Dad off, Toby...not so much).

But Rachel was real. She was pretty and she was sweet. She didn't give off that fake vibe.

And she cooked awesome.

He'd wanted her to stick around.

Apparently she wasn't going to do that, and as usual with his dad and his girlfriends, that was not her choice.

"If that woman ever came back, I'd slap her right across the face," Toby heard Margot go on. "That is, before I tore her hair out, scratched out her eyes and ran her right back out of town on a rail."

Now Margot was talking about Sierra.

Dad's wife.

Johnny and Toby's mom.

She was still his dad's wife, as far as Toby knew.

Even though his dad tried to hide it from the boys, he'd tried to find her, but she was nowhere to be found. A couple of years ago, when an effort at this had failed, Toby had heard Dave suggest he get an *ex parte* divorce (whatever that was). But his dad had said, "Just gonna give her more time. If I know my Sierra, she won't be able to stay away from her boys for too long."

He was wrong, seeing as she'd stayed away by that time for eight years.

Toby still didn't think his mother needed more time. She'd had enough time. Now it had been ten years.

She hadn't come back.

Because she wasn't gonna come back.

And if she did, no one wanted her back.

Except his dad.

And Toby.

He didn't remember a lot about her. He'd been too young when she'd gone.

Except he remembered her being pretty. He remembered her smelling good.

He remembered how happy she made his dad.

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Though Toby wasn't feeling that so much anymore.

Mostly in this moment because he liked Rachel.

"I don't know," Margot was saying. "David will talk to him, I'm sure. But he won't listen. I think he thinks he has to be available when she comes home. But that woman is never coming home. Dave knows it. I know it. The whole town of Matlock knows it."

As Toby had noted, he knew it too.

"No," Margot snapped. "I can't even *begin* to understand what was in her head. But I'll tell you this, we're all having the last laugh."

Toby straightened after she said this.

How were they all having the last laugh when his mom had up and left them?

Margot told him.

Well, not him. Whoever she was talking to.

"Johnathon is fifteen and he's already one of the finest men I know. Good. Decent. Kind-hearted. Strong. Knows his own mind and how to speak it. Sharp as a whip. And she'll never know what a fabulous man her boy turned out to be."

Yeah.

Well, sure.

Johnny was awesome.

Everyone knew Johnny was awesome.

Everybody.

Even Toby, and sometimes Tobe wanted to hate his big brother, but Johnny was just that guy.

You couldn't.

No one could hate Johnny Gamble.

"And Tobias..."

Toby perked up.

"He has no idea his potential..."

Right.

His *potential*.

"But when he learns..." she trailed off for a sec before she carried on. "I find myself struggling with him. Do you rein in all that audacity? Is it right to try to stop a boy from

devouring life? He's so bold, Judy, it sometimes takes my breath away. In another time, he'd be the first to walk on the moon. The first to corral fire. Johnathon will find a sweet girl, make babies with her, work in his father's garages and live a good life, quiet and happy. Tobias will find a spitfire who challenges him and drives him insane, and they'll go off and tear through the world, running with the bulls in Pamplona or uncovering hidden treasures in Egypt or something."

Toby blinked in the sun.

Margot thought all that?

About him?

"And then what do I do?" Margot asked her friend Judy (who did not make cookies as good as Margot's, but they were all right). "My last, not born of me, but my last boy? How does a woman handle her baby trekking through the Amazon or deep-sea diving to explore sunken pirate ships? I fear I'll spend the rest of my life waiting for the phone to ring just to hear he's all right. Lord, I hope he finds a woman who can communicate. At least she'll check in."

Without him telling it to do it, Toby's body slid down the siding of Dave and Margot's house.

All the way down.

Until he hit his rump.

Because she thought all that.

About him.

"And Sierra doesn't get that," she continued. "She doesn't get the solidness of Johnathon or the fearlessness of Tobias. She'll never know that. She'll never hold the grandchildren Johnathon will give her in her arms. She'll never hear the breathless excitement of Tobias's children over the phone when they call and share what their father's up to now."

Toby felt something hit his stomach, and it wasn't what usually hit it whenever anyone mentioned his mom.

It was something a whole lot different.

"So I suppose I should thank her," Margot declared. "Because she left and I got all that. She left and that became mine. And I suppose I shouldn't be angry with Lance for breaking it off with Rachel. Because if he found a woman, she might claim those boys. Because what woman, outside Sierra, who's no woman at all, wouldn't claim those boys? And then where would I be?"

Again, without him telling it to do it, his body got off its rear, took its feet and turned right to the screen door.

Margot never missed a trick.

So even though she was standing at the kitchen counter with the wall phone, with its long cord, held to her ear, her side to the door, she sensed him and turned.

Toby didn't move.

He just stared at her with her pretty light-red hair and her big eyes, wearing one of her nice dresses (she was always in nice dresses) and he felt that feeling in his stomach.

"I have to go, Judy. Tobias is home from school and if I don't get him an after-school snack, his stomach will eat through him." She paused. "Okay. Yes, of course. See you then. Ta, Judy."

With that, she hung up the phone.

But all Toby could think was she'd said he was "home."

And he was.

He had three homes.

His dad's.

His Grams and Gramps's.

And Margot's.

And she'd make him a heckuva after-school snack.

She always did.

Anytime he came to her for as long as he could remember.

His mom gave him that. All of that.

And she did it by leaving.

Unmoving, he watched her walk to him.

He only shifted when she pushed out the screen door.

She held it open, stood in the door and studied him.

"How much did you hear, darlin'?" she asked quietly.

"A lot," he answered.

Her pretty face got that soft he liked so much before she whispered, "Child."

Toby said nothing.

"I know you liked Rachel, Tobias, but—" she started.

“I like you.”

She stopped. Blinked.

Then her hand crept up in front of her to cover her throat so he wouldn't see it move as she tried not to cry in front of him, because ladies did not give in to tears or hysterics in front of others. It was rude.

According to Margot.

“When I find a woman, she's gonna be like you,” Toby told her.

“My beautiful boy,” she said quietly.

“Though she's gonna hafta be able to wear pants if she's gonna run with some bulls or somethin'.”

Her face got even softer, but she said, “*Something*, Tobias. Don't drop your 'Gs.' You're not a hillbilly.”

“I'm totally a hillbilly. Everyone from Kentucky is a hillbilly, don't you know.”

Her mouth did that thing it did with him a lot. It got all shaky, like she was trying not to laugh, before it got stern.

“I am not a hillbilly and I'm a Kentuckian born and bred. And *you* are not a hillbilly either,” she stated.

“Are you gonna feed me, or what?” he asked.

“Margot, I'm famished. Will you please make me a snack?” she corrected.

“I'm never sayin' that famished word *in my life*,” he returned.

She didn't quite beat the smile before she replied, “*Saying*, Tobias.” Then she shifted aside so he could get in, murmuring, “Lord, child, what am I going to do with you?”

“Feed me?”

She rolled her eyes, but he saw before she did, they were smiling.

He walked in.

She made him wash his hands then get out his books at the kitchen table while she fixed him a roast beef sandwich with melted muenster on top, slathered in mayo with a ton of ridged Ruffles stacked on the side.

In fact, there were so many chips, the sandwich was almost covered in them. It was like she was making him a full meal, even if he'd had lunch and it was near-on dinnertime.

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He didn't care. It was awesome and he was, well...*famished*.

He grinned and got down to his geometry because he knew she wouldn't let him go home until he was done with his homework.

Toby was half through the sandwich, had made a dent in the chips, and was almost done with geometry when he looked at Margot at the stove, doing stuff with a big hunk of meat in a pan she was gonna roast for Dave for dinner.

Their boys were all in college. Well, Lance, the oldest one, was an engineer out in Oregon, but Dave Junior and Mark were in college.

So it was now just Margot and Dave.

She didn't have all her boys to look after anymore.

Dad had said it made her sad. And Toby'd seen that, for sure.

And when he did, even if Grams or Gramps were home, or the mill was calling, he came after school to her, and not just because she did great snacks (Grams did great snacks too).

Now she seemed to be doing better.

And he was glad.

Still.

He was looking at her because that feeling in his stomach had turned and it did it so bad, he had to get it out.

"Only thing I care about..." he started.

Margot turned her head to him.

"Is you not goin' away," he finished.

She straightened from her beef and rotated fully to him.

"I'm not going anywhere, Tobias."

"I like Rachel fine," he said. "And I don't care about Mom," he lied. "But don't you go anywhere."

"I'm not going anywhere, darlin'."

He stared at her.

She let him and stared right back.

This went on awhile.

When it lasted long enough to make that feeling start to fade, he looked back to his books.

Margot went back to her roast.

When Dave, Dad and Johnny got home (Dave worked at the garage too), Margot demanded the Gambles stay for dinner.

And when Margot demanded something, the men in her life did it.

Toby didn't mind.

Her roast was almost as good as her cookies.

And they all got to give her stuff during dinner and she got to pretend it annoyed her.

Like always with his family the way it was...

It was awesome.

And like always when he was over at Margot and Dave's he went home with a full stomach.

And that felt good.

Fifteen Years Later...

Tobe lay with his back to the headboard of his bed, his phone to his ear, listening to it ring.

It was late and there was a three-hour time difference.

He knew they'd answer.

They did.

Or Dave did.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Dave," Toby replied quietly.

"Son, do you know what time it is?"

"Tell Margot I got my pilot's license today."

"Oh hell," Dave muttered.

Toby grinned.

"What?" he heard Margot in the background. "Is that Tobias? Where is he? Is he all right?"

"I'll let you handle that," Toby said to Dave, still quiet. "Love to you both."

Then he disconnected.

He looked at his watch and timed it.

It was one minute and twenty-three seconds later when his cell phone vibrated.

“Hey, Margot,” he answered in a soft voice.

“I have a mind to—”

“I got all my hours in. I aced the test,” he assured her. “My instructor said I was a natural.”

“When you were learning to teach golf, your instructor said you were a natural at that too,” she returned.

“Well, I was.”

“And when you were up in Alaska logging, your foreman told you he thought you’d been born in the north, you were such a natural logger, when you’re *southern* through and through.”

“Well, there was that too.”

She sighed before she announced, “All I can say is that I’m glad you’re not doing that anymore. Did you know that logging is the number one most dangerous job in America?”

He did not know that.

Though, having been a logger for two years, he wasn’t surprised.

She kept at him.

“And I suspect being a pilot is number *two*.”

He had no idea.

He also didn’t care.

“You’ll be the death of me,” she declared.

He cared about that.

“You’re gonna live to be a hundred and twenty and bounce my grandchildren on your knee,” he said low.

Margot had no reply.

“Don’t tell Dad. I’ll call him tomorrow and give him the news,” Toby instructed.

“Oh, so your father gets a phone call that’s *not* after one in the morning?” Margot replied.

He lowered his voice further but didn’t pull the smile out of it. “Just makin’ sure I check in with my girl.”

Margot again said nothing.

“Come out to Phoenix, I’ll take you up,” he offered.

“That will happen when hell freezes over, Tobias.”

Tobe fought back busting out laughing.

Though he couldn't beat back a quiet chuckle.

“Now that you've bested the skies, can I expect a call to share you've spent your time looking for, and finding, a special someone?” she asked through his humor.

She wanted him settled and happy.

Okay, maybe not settled. She liked he was a rambling man (though she'd never admit it out loud).

She just wanted him happy.

“Not sure that'd be a good idea, sweetheart. I'm missing green. I'm thinking of hitting Tennessee next. Always wanted a spell in Nashville. Wouldn't be a good idea to find a woman, then expect I could drag her across the country.”

“Dear Lord,” she murmured.

It drove her nuts he hadn't met anyone yet.

Johnny had met someone.

Of course.

It took Margot ages to like Shandra, or trust her, and Toby still didn't know if she really did.

Of course.

No one was good enough for her boys.

Not a soul.

Then again, as far as Toby was concerned, she was right.

He hadn't found anyone good enough for him.

Because there was no one like Margot.

Not a soul.

“Gonna let you get back to sleep,” he told her.

“That'd be nice,” she replied, but he could tell she didn't want to let him go.

“I'll phone at a decent hour next time.”

“That'd be nice too.”

“Love you, Margot,” he said softly.

She only hesitated a second, and he knew that second was to get her shit together, before she said, “Love you too, my beautiful boy.”

Toby was grinning when he disconnected.

“Maybe not make a phone call to check in with *your girl* when I’ve just let you fuck me twice and I’m trying to sleep.”

That came at him groggy as well as unmistakably ugly.

Toby looked down at the naked woman beside him in his bed.

They’d been drinking (a lot) and then they’d been fucking (a lot).

He thought she’d passed out.

Then again, obviously she had, though not for long since he hadn’t even turned out the lights, but also obviously she wasn’t a huge fan of being woken up and had no issue sharing that.

She had a great ass. Nice hair.

But nope.

And again...

Not good enough.

From what she said, and how she said it—clearly thinking he was the kind of guy who’d talk to some other woman when he had one naked beside him in bed—she was not good enough by a long shot.

“Maybe it’s time we get you home,” he suggested.

She blinked and the ticked look on her face changed to coaxing. “Baby, a girl just needs some rest for round two, or, uh, in this case...three.”

“Sorry. I got an early morning.” Lie. “So I’ll take you home.”

And that, as far as he was concerned, was that.

He shifted his legs off the bed and reached for his jeans.

“Toby—”

He yanked on his jeans and looked at her face.

Pretty too.

Still, not close to the one.

“I was talking to my mom,” he shared.

“Oh,” she whispered, now up on a forearm. “You call your mom Margot?”

He was not gonna get into that, so he answered simply, “Yep.”

“That’s sweet, I guess.”

“You know something big happened today,” he reminded her.

And she did.

They’d met that night at a bar, and when he’d told her, she’d been all in to celebrate with him. If her celebrating with him meant him buying her a lot of drinks, a late dinner since she was getting loaded and he wasn’t a big fan of sloppy, drunk women, then coming home with him and getting it on.

“I went out to celebrate, met you, so I hadn’t had a chance to tell Margot yet,” he finished.

“Yeah, okay. But it’s still uncool to make a phone call when someone is sleeping,” she responded. “Even if it’s your mom.”

It was also uncool to be a bitch about it when you’d been asleep for maybe ten minutes.

And he’d been quiet. It wasn’t like he’d had a forty-minute conversation with someone he had to shout at because they were on a helicopter.

He shared all that by saying, “Babe, get dressed.”

“But I didn’t know it was your mom.”

No, she thought he was a colossal asshole and was chatting with some other woman while she was beside him after he fucked her in his bed.

He was not going to get into that either.

He bent to nab his tee, straightening and repeating, “Get dressed. Let’s get you home.”

He pulled on his tee when she began, “Toby, I was just—”

“You’re right,” he cut her off again. “It was rude. I should have left the room to make the call. I didn’t. Sorry about that. I was trying to be quiet. I didn’t know you were a light sleeper. But I got shit to do tomorrow, I ’spect you got work tomorrow, and you’re up, so might as well get you home so we don’t both have to get up early for me to drive you there.”

“God,” she muttered, turning her head and sliding toward the edge of the bed. “What a dick. Always the way with the hot ones. Total fucking dicks.”

So totally not the one.

“You know, you wanna stay, hang, sleep with me, wake up with me, the way to do that is not act like a bitch when I wake you up after I call my mom when I accomplished something that means something to me and I wanna share that with her and then call me a dick,” he advised.

“What am I supposed to do?” she snapped, yanking up her panties. “Thank you for waking me up when you made a phone call *right next to me* while *I was sleeping?*”

“It’s my bed, Kristy,” he pointed out. “And you were out for maybe ten minutes. It wasn’t like I woke you up from a deep sleep when you gotta perform neurosurgery tomorrow.”

“And it was *my* pussy I let you eat an hour ago in *your* bed, Toby,” she shot back, now angrily snapping on her bra.

With that, he was done.

Really so totally not the one.

“You know, a woman gives it up,” she kept bitching, “a gentleman doesn’t kick her out of bed.”

That made him still in doing his belt.

Because Margot drilled being a gentleman into him since he could remember.

And Kristy was not wrong.

“And don’t give me any shit about giving it up,” she kept going, now yanking on her short skirt. “Cause you were there and you gave it up too. Though most men don’t see it that way,” she ended on a mutter.

“We met five hours ago. And in that five hours, babe, I didn’t make any promises,” he reminded her, doing it going careful because he hadn’t, but he had been a dick (though that was a stretch, but if he stretched it he could see where she was coming from, he wasn’t a huge fan of sleep, there was too much living to do, but he got others were) and now she had a point.

“Oh no, they never do,” she sniped.

Hang on a second.

“You give it up, I give it up, I make you go twice. Tell me, Kristy, where do you think that puts us?” he asked. “Not bein’ a dick now, babe. Really wanna know so I don’t run into this shit again.” He flung an arm out her way. “I mean, it’s clear you don’t want me to think you’re easy when I’m just as easy. So a woman can bang a man all easy. But a man bangs a woman, there’s some inherent promise in that?”

She didn't have an answer to his question and she shared that by replying, "Fuck you."

"Great," he muttered, bending and reaching for his socks.

Boy, he could pick them.

Just like his dad.

He turned his back on her to sit on the bed and pull his socks on.

"You know, maybe I thought we were starting something," she said to his back.

He twisted to her. "And maybe we would have been if you didn't call me a dick."

She threw out both arms. "So it's me calling you a dick and not you kicking me out of your bed that puts us here?"

He stood again and turned to her. "No, it was me actually *being* a dick and making a call when you were sleeping, 'cause, you see, Kristy, I live alone so I'm not used to having a woman sleeping beside me in bed. Especially that woman bein' you, since I only met you tonight, so I didn't think, and I should have because that was a dick move. But me waking you up and you not sayin', 'Who was that, baby?' Then saying, 'It's sweet you called your mom to celebrate the news, but next time, do you mind not doin' it in bed when I'm sleeping? I'm a light sleeper.' Instead, you give me shit like I'm phonin' some other woman when I'm with you, *that's* what put us here."

"Thanks for the lesson in consideration, Toby. Next time a guy's an asshole, I'll be all sweet instead of just pointing out he's an asshole."

"What I'm saying, Kristy, is a man might not know he's *bein'* an asshole, or you think he's bein' an asshole, so maybe bein' a modicum of cool in pointing it out, he'd learn the way with you and not do it again."

She snapped her mouth shut.

She opened it to clip out, "I'll call a friend to give me a ride."

"Takin' you home," he murmured, turning back to sit on the bed and pull on his boots.

"Don't do me any favors."

"For fuck's sake," he muttered, and pulled on his boots.

When he got up, he found she was dressed.

He also saw by the look on her face she was in a different mood.

“You know, you want me to cut you some slack in being a dick, maybe you should do the same. I mean, I did just wake up, Toby.”

Yeah.

After ten minutes.

Jesus.

She gave him that, he gave it back to her.

“And then you called me a dick and gave me shit about eating your pussy and kicking you out of my bed. I’d give you a blow by blow, but it just happened, and you were there. You think when we got zero foundation but a couple of orgasms, after all that ugly we can resurrect something that hadn’t even gotten off the ground?”

“Probably not,” she mumbled.

Definitely not.

He moved to the bedroom door.

He was at it when she called, “You know...”

Toby turned to see she was still standing at the side of the bed, the only move she’d made was to shift around to face him at the door.

“...I get it,” she finished.

He beat back a sigh and asked, “You get what?”

“You want the sweet ones. All guys want the sweet ones who are all understanding, even when they’re being jerks, and don’t point out you let them go down on you, much less fuck you, *twice*, and that means there’s been a connection. You can’t handle it being real. They say girls want the fairytale. But boys want it more and they have the power, so a girl has to twist herself into that fantasy to land a guy.”

“No, Kristy, that isn’t how it is,” he returned. “Maybe for some guys, but not me.”

“And you’re not taking me home right now because I wasn’t how you wanted me to be?”

“Yeah, I’m takin’ you home right now because you weren’t how I might want you to be. But this is the gig, babe. You give your shit to me, you don’t cool it and attempt to handle the situation, not only might I have a lifetime of that if I eat it now, that’s what you’d give our kids, if we got that far.”

Her head jerked and her eyes got big.

But Toby kept talking.

“And that isn’t okay. I actually *don’t* want a sweet one. I want one who’ll give as good as she gets, stick up for herself, stick up for me, and stick up for the babies we make. And when shit goes off the rails, and I admit I’ve been a dick, what I *don’t* want is her to shut her mouth and not admit she’s been a bitch, so we can take it from there. That’s what I don’t want, Kristy.”

“Okay, I’ve been a bitch,” she admitted.

“And what do I do with that?” he asked.

She again threw up both hands. “You just told me to admit it.”

Now he was curious.

“Why are you fighting for this?”

“Well, duh,” she said. “Because you’re all kinds of hot and insanely good in bed.”

He shook his head.

“Oh please,” she drawled. “Don’t act like I’m not right here because you didn’t like the looks of me and wanted to get in my pants, but instead you liked my *smile*, or some shit, and I made you laugh.”

She had not, he just realized, made him laugh.

With her looks, ass, legs and come on, she’d made him fight getting hard.

That was why she was there.

And now Tobe was beginning to realize where he’d gone wrong from his very first girlfriend, the one he’d asked to “go with me” at fourteen to the woman standing in front of him right now.

She wasn’t finished.

“The ones who look like you don’t go for some fat bitch who cooks good and worships the ground they walk on. The ones who look like you go for ones that look like him, gorgeous, and they still worship the ground he walks on.”

“Yeah, I totally want my woman to worship the ground I walk on,” he shared.

“See,” she retorted.

“And she’ll do that because I’d die for her.”

Kristy again shut her mouth and her eyes got big.

“She has to have that fire for me too, babe,” he told her. “And yeah, she’ll probably be gorgeous because I’ll want that fire for her when I’m eating her pussy. But this,” he indicated the room with a tilt of his head, “this is just a pain in my ass.”

Her voice was small when she shared, “I heard you tell your mom you’re moving to Nashville and it wouldn’t be good to meet a woman now and drag her there.”

And it comes out.

Why didn’t she lead with that?

Why hit him with a load of shit when she was clearly more into him than he knew and wanted him to be into her?

“I was just messing with her, though I wouldn’t mind heading to Nashville. That’s not the point. You’ve got no idea my relationship with Margot or my plans for the future, immediate or otherwise. But just to say, if I’m willing to die for a woman, Kristy, when I meet her, it goes without saying I’d be willing to stick. And if I feel I gotta bounce, I’ll be willing to put the effort into talking her into coming with me,” he explained, what he considered unnecessarily.

“And obviously I’m not that girl.”

Was she out of her mind?

Toby didn’t field that one.

She read his silence correctly.

“Right. Great. Just sayin’, not in the mood to spend more time with you. So I’m gonna call a taxi,” she snapped.

“Maybe that’s a good idea.”

She strolled his way, going all out with the sway of her hips to the point he worried she’d take herself off balance.

“Good luck finding your fantasy girl,” she bid acidly.

“Thanks,” he muttered, getting out of her way.

He let her pass him but followed her out.

He didn’t lock his front door when she slammed it behind her.

But he did look out his window to watch her dig her phone out of her bag and bend her head to it.

And he kept watching as she stood out there until a taxi pulled up.

He didn't go for the door to walk out with her and pay for the damn taxi when she turned to him and flipped him off through the window, mouthing, *Fuck you, dick.*

Toby sighed again.

Yeah, he could pick them.

He still continued to watch until she folded into the taxi and it took off.

She'd get safe home.

So Toby stopped watching and went to lock the door.

He went back to his bedroom thinking that it was going to be just him and his fist for a good long while after that.

After he got undressed and stretched out under the covers, Kristy was already barely a memory.

All the ones who came before, who acted like bitches or nagged incessantly, or decided he was going to marry them before he even knew their middle names or how they took their coffee, were memories.

Tobias Gamble was not going to be his father.

He was not going to pick the wrong one and end up broken in a way no woman—or no child, not even his own blood—could fix.

She was going to be just right.

She was going to love the children they made more than anything in the world.

She was going to worship the ground he walked on.

And she was going to be so spectacular, he'd be willing to die for her without even a blink of an eye to think.

So yeah, Kristy was a memory.

And therefore, Toby had no problem getting back to sleep.

Four Years Later...

Toby pulled up to the house in his old red Chevy truck with the silver panels.

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The house was cute-as-fuck, totally the place where whoever the new woman his brother was seeing, after Shandra got done grinding him to ash, would live.

But Toby didn't have a mind to the house.

Toby didn't even have a mind to the fact this was the first time he'd seen his brother in months, since he hadn't been back to Matlock in months.

He didn't have a mind to any of this seeing as there was clearly a drama playing out beside that cute-as-fuck house.

A drama Johnny was involved in.

Johnny and some strung-out-looking dude, some huge black dude, and two of the prettiest women Toby had ever seen in his life.

Yeah, one of those women was Johnny's new girl.

And that figured.

House cute as fuck.

Women pretty as hell.

Toby got out of his truck and saw Johnny give him a short shake of his head before Tobe began to make a slow approach.

The strung-out dude was speaking.

"You know I've been lookin' for gigs," the dude announced.

"I'm not sure how you'll find gigs camped out on the couch with a six pack or humping some chick in my bed," the blonde woman (or one of the two) with all the hair, fantastic ass, long legs and clear attitude replied.

Right.

That probably wasn't Johnny's girl.

Though she was the prettier one.

Christ.

Coming closer, Tobe saw she was gorgeous.

"Addie, don't lay this shit on me," the dude returned. "You haven't been giving it up for months."

"That's because I'm *tired*, Perry," she shot back. "I'm *exhausted*. I'm a single mother of a baby boy with a deadbeat dad who *lives with me*."

Great.

Just fucking fabulous.

This strung-out dude was *her* dude.

“I love my kid,” the Perry guy hurled back.

“He’s a toy, like I was a toy before I wasn’t shiny and new anymore and life became a drag. But you didn’t give me away, you tossed me aside and looked for a new toy just like I know you’ll do with Brooklyn when he’s not fun anymore,” the gorgeous chick called Addie replied.

Toby saw Johnny turn his head and watch his approach.

Toby lifted his eyebrows toward his brother.

Johnny gave him another short jerk of his head and again looked at Addie.

“That’s not true, baby.” Perry was now trying to wheedle. “I love you. I love Brooklyn. You know that. It’s just been tough since the band broke up and—”

“God, spare me,” Addie drawled biting. “You’re *such* a cliché and I’m *such* a moron for falling for it.”

“We got it good, we just gotta get that back,” Perry said.

“*You* had it good, because you had someone paying your bills and doing all the grunt work taking care of your son so he’s nice and clean and fed when you feel like playing with him. *I* didn’t have it good. And even after sharing this about seven million times, it didn’t sink in that you might wanna give your wife and son better. I know this because nothing changed. I also know this because I walked in on you fucking another woman.”

What was happening sunk in.

That beautiful woman had a baby with this asshole guy.

They were *married*.

And this fuckwad cheated on her.

She’d seen him do it.

Shit.

“I’ll get in another band soon and then—” the asshole guy started.

“Do not try to feed me that again, Perry. I believed it two years ago. Do you honestly think I’ll believe it now?”

“So, right,” Perry bit out, not trying it on anymore. He was again pissed. “Now *you* get to make the decision we’re done then *you* clean out the apartment and the bank accounts and take off?”

“You cheated on me and we were done so I moved, Perry. I took my stuff. I left yours. That stuff that’s mine includes what’s in the bank accounts since every penny in them I earned,” Addie explained.

Toby could not believe this moron had cheated on her.

Jesus.

Was the man blind?

“When I got back after you split, there was nothing in the place but my clothes,” the moron retorted.

“Which is what you brought to our marriage and all you contributed to our marriage, so that’s all you’ll get out of it.”

“It took me a week to get up here because I had to raise the cash for gas since you took it all and canceled our credit cards,” Perry complained.

“*My* credit cards,” she fired back. “Your name was on them. I paid them.”

Man, this woman had some serious sass.

And she was laying his ass out.

It would be really fucking righteous, if what was happening didn’t suck.

Perry raised his hand quickly to his forehead, slamming his fingers against it and then sending his hand flying out, and Toby braced to lock things down because if this dude was stupid enough to cheat on his beautiful wife with all her righteous attitude, he’d be stupid enough to do something even more dickish to her surrounded by three men.

The asshole made this irate move, stating, “Can you not see how totally fucked up it is, some bitch cleans out an apartment and takes a man’s kid then takes off without even a fuckin’ note?”

Toby found himself swallowing a growl that the man had called her a bitch.

“You were inside her,” Addie whispered.

At that, precisely the way she said it, Toby’s focus locked on her, and like it had a mind of its own, his body moved nearer to hers.

“Baby, can we *please* talk about this without an audience?” Perry begged.

“She looked at me. You looked at me. You looked right in my eyes when you were connected to another woman,” Addie said, her voice dripping with hurt.

“I tried to come after you.”

“With your dick wet from another woman.”

The moron went silent.

Toby still didn’t look at him.

His attention was riveted to her.

How could she be even more beautiful showing her pain?

“This is how this is going to go,” she said softly. “I’m moving up here. I got a job in the grocery store. I start on Monday. I’ve already contacted an attorney. She’s started divorce proceedings. You *will* pay child support. You *will* take financial responsibility for the child you very enjoyably had a hand in creating. We’ll see what part of his life you’ll play, but *that* will be up to me. But he’ll be up here with me and Izzy. And you’ll be down there with your broken promises and your ridiculous dreams.”

“My dreams aren’t ridiculous,” Perry clipped out, clearly insulted by that, and not all the shit she’d been saying about him being a dick of a partner, a cheat, and shit at being a dad.

The selfish ass.

“You wanna be the lead singer of a rock ‘n’ roll band and no, that’s not ridiculous. The ridiculous part is you think that’ll happen sitting on a couch, drinking beer,” Addie told him.

“You’re not going to take my son from me,” he threatened.

“Too late, I already did. But just saying, Perry, you never actually had him because you never actually claimed him.”

“We’ll see how this goes,” he snarled.

It was then Toby tensed when Addie got in his space.

“I know how it’ll go so listen up,” she hissed. “I’ll work until I drop to fight for what’s right for my son. I’ll sell my body if I need to, to give him not only what he needs but even just a little bit of what he wants. And I’ll bleed my last drop before I let you fuck him up. *You know me*, Perry,” she stressed. “You know what makes me. You know every word I say is true. And you know you don’t have what it takes to fight that. I’ll do whatever it takes to beat you, to give my

son what he deserves. I was taught how, day in and day out by my mother, so I know the way. And I'll take it if you make me, and I'll die knowing I gave my boy happy."

Toby felt something he hadn't felt in years slide into his stomach as he stared at her while she said these words.

But even at its strongest in the past, it had never burned as deep as it did right then.

"You're gonna have to fight it," Perry hurled at her.

"Only because you're intent on proving how big of an asshole you are and you're gonna make me," she returned.

That asshole glared at his wife. He then glared at the other blonde, Johnny, and the African American guy before he turned and stutter-stepped when he saw Toby. He recovered quickly and started to stalk off.

"Just to let you know," Addie called after him. "My attorney already has three appointments to get sworn affidavits next week. And that bitch you were banging while my son was in the next room got served a subpoena, so she's one of them."

She didn't even know his name, but Toby wanted to bump fists with her for being so fucking badass.

That or kiss her.

At that juncture, the second option was seriously inappropriate.

But that didn't mean he didn't want to do it.

"Kiss my ass, Addie," Perry yelled, not breaking stride.

"The time you get that from me, baby, is long gone," she returned in a loud drawl.

Only then did Toby wrench his eyes from her so he could watch her hopefully soon-to-be-official ex slam into his car, make it roar and then reverse and peel out in a shower of gravel and a cloud of dust.

Toby twisted back when the other blonde started carefully, "Addie—"

But Addie turned and raced down the side of the house, disappearing at the back.

The second woman raced after her.

Toby felt his brother's eyes and tore his away from the area where the women had disappeared, doing this fighting running after them, and put them to Johnny.

"Welcome home, brother," Johnny said.

God.

Johnny.

Toby felt lips hitch.

“I’m Johnny,” Johnny said to the black dude.

Say what?

They didn’t know each other?

“Charlie,” the guy replied, lifting his hand Johnny’s way.

Johnny shook it, let go and introduced, “This is my brother, Toby.”

“Toby,” Charlie said, offering his hand to Toby.

“Charlie,” Toby replied, taking it.

When they were done shaking, all three men hesitated, then when Johnny started down the side of the house, Toby and Charlie trailed with Ranger, Johnny’s dog, walking with them.

So rumor in town was true.

Shandra, Johnny’s ex-bitch who destroyed him was back in Matlock, because there was Ranger. The dog he’d given her to look after her after she’d kicked his brother in the teeth (this being about a nanosecond (slight exaggeration) after their father died) and took off.

But Ranger was here.

With two blondes and a cute-as-fuck house with ugly drama playing out in the side yard.

Jesus.

So Johnny walks his ass into that kind of drama, setting himself right up to be the hero, which Tobe so totally knew Johnny would wait about an hour to do.

And when Toby had tried to intervene with some chick whose brother had some medical bills she was trying to help pay, she decided he was her prince charming. She then rented some hall for their reception when he had no intention of buying her a ring. And when he tells her that last, even though he goes gentle, she loses her mind about losing her deposit and takes off in his truck.

Johnny found the righteous blondes who’d go to the mat to take care of their kids.

Toby found the nutcases.

Good to know things didn’t change.

They walked in the back door hearing Addie saying, “No, Iz. Just put the queso under the broiler and let’s get this party started.”

But her eyes hit Toby’s brother when he entered then they went behind him after Johnny cleared the door, and Tobe and Charlie crowded with him into the small kitchen.

She was holding an adorable baby tight to her and hovering in a corner of the kitchen like the two women in it had her caged in (the blonde, clearly Eliza, who everyone in town was talking about being the girl who mended Johnny Gamble’s broken heart) and an African American woman, who probably belonged to Charlie.

Though, to Toby, they seemed to be giving her space.

It was then Addie said, “Great. As if that drama being played out in front of Clubber McHotterson,” she indicated Charlie with a flick of a hand, “and Magnus McHotterson,” she indicated Johnny with a jerk of her head, “wasn’t bad enough, now we got Talon McHotterson here to enjoy the show.”

All the drama with that dickhead outside and she was cracking jokes.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Toby again couldn’t take his eyes off her.

“Maybe we should go upstairs and talk, baby girl,” the black lady said softly.

“About what?” Addie asked. “About how Johnny’s changed more of Brooklyn’s diapers after knowing him for a week than his father has after knowing him seven months?”

Yeah.

That was Johnny.

And it just sunk in that her kid was called Brooklyn.

Kickass name.

“Doll, how about you let Johnny and Charlie look after Brooks and we girls get a bottle of wine and—?” Eliza tried.

“I saw you two,” Addie said, her voice hoarse, and Toby, already alert to everything about her, went more so. “In the stable. I saw Johnny doing you against the wall.”

Well, shit.

That he did not have to hear.

“Oh Lord,” the black woman mumbled.

“Shit,” Charlie muttered.

“Hell,” Toby murmured.

“He never gave me that, what you two had in that moment,” Addie told the woman who had to be her sister, they looked so much alike. “I could have walked right up to you and neither of you would have seen me. I didn’t exist, nothing existed. Nothing but him for you and you for him. He never gave me that, Iz. How did I never see that?”

That made Toby look to his brother.

With relief.

Shandra had torn him apart.

Apparently, town talk was right, and this Eliza had put him back together.

His brother had that. And Tobe was glad he did.

And he was glad even thinking he wanted the same.

His eyes moved back to Addie as Eliza whispered, “Addie, sweetie.”

“He gave me this.” She cuddled Brooks closer. “That’s all he ever gave me. But he gave it to me getting himself an orgasm and honest to God, that was all he was thinking about.”

“Addie, please, baby, let’s go upstairs,” her sister coaxed.

Addie reared her head like a stubborn mare, and it was inappropriate as hell in that moment, but that didn’t change the fact that move was hot, before she snapped, “No. This is a party. We’re having a party.”

She forged past her sister, Johnny, straight to the door where Toby was standing.

Yeah.

Totally gorgeous.

But holding that baby and doing everything in her power not to fly apart...

The most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

“Out of the way, Talon,” she ordered.

“Name’s Toby,” he replied gently, but he didn’t move.

Her head jerked back, and her tortured blue eyes caught his.

Christ, yeah.

Spectacular.

“You’re his brother, aren’t you?” she asked.

“Yeah, darlin’,” he replied.

“Of course. You’re perfect, so of course. You’re probably taken too, aren’t you?”

If he was taken, which he wasn’t, he wouldn’t be in about half an hour.

Fortunately, he wasn’t.

“I—” he started to tell her that.

“Not for me,” she cut him off. “Man like you. Man like Johnny. Man like Charlie. Not for me.”

Right.

She’d been holding it together.

But he sensed she was about to fall apart.

“Honey,” Toby whispered. “How ’bout we get you—?”

She tossed her hair and looked over her shoulder at her sister. “I did it, Iz. I did it. What I swore to myself I’d never do. Not the same, but a version. I found Dad. I found a man who was good for nothin’ except to break my heart.”

And that was when her face melted, and she started to go down.

“Tobe,” Johnny growled, on the move.

But Toby was all over it.

He caught her in his arms and sank down to the floor with her. Addie’s ass hit his inner thigh with Toby’s leg at a bad angle and that didn’t feel too hot.

He winced, but ignored it, putting his arms around her and tucking her and her kid close to his chest.

She shoved her face in his neck and started sobbing.

All he could think was she felt good, especially her hair against his skin, so fucking soft.

Also, she smelled great.

Her baby started fretting.

Right.

Time to get her to a safe place.

Toby lifted his gaze to her sister. “Where you want her, babe?”

“My bedroom,” she whispered. “Upstairs. I’ll show you the way.”

Toby nodded, got his feet under him and with great care lifted Addie and her baby cradled safe in his arms, walking behind the sister as she hurried into a hall.

He walked them up the stairs as Addie cried in his neck.

And he walked her down the hall into a bedroom where he placed her in the bed while she kept crying in his neck.

Eliza moved in the minute she was in bed, so Toby took a step back.

Another step.

Then he stopped and watched.

Eliza soothed Addie, and with the two sisters' heads so close, Toby thought another man might not be able to tell their hair apart.

But he could.

Already.

Because Jesus Christ, fuck...shit...

He'd fallen in love.

Fallen in love with a spitfire with a baby and a cheat of an asshole husband she was trying to make her ex...

A spitfire who just happened to be the sister of his brother's new woman.

Something Toby could not fuck with.

Johnny, who had retreated from life when the love of his had torn his heart from his chest, was back. Healed. Moving on with a pretty woman with a cute-as-fuck house who obviously loved her sister, and who his brother connected with so much, someone had seen him fucking his girl and he hadn't even noticed.

So yeah.

Toby could not fuck with this.

And again yeah.

To put it simply...

Fuck.

On that thought, reluctantly, Toby walked out.

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