Slow Train Coming Remix

by Artemis2050

Summary

I am honored to present my first EVAH officially authorized remix.

This is from the gorgeous Slow Train Coming by MJules, which you absolutely must read first if by some mischance of fate you haven't seen it yet.

- Inspired by Slow Train Coming by MJules
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He sees her when he first walks into the bar, partly because it’s in his nature and partly because some long-forgotten training drilled it into him always to know when the parameters shift. Change can mean danger, and even if there’s damned few things in the world that really pose a threat to him, he can no more keep from noticing her entrance than he can keep from knowing that the leather-jacketed guy at the end of the bar is high on more than just liquor, or that the tempers at the table playing poker have just ratcheted up a notch.

Her arrival is just something to register and file away as he turns back to his drink, but then there’s something about the way she stands in the doorway and sweeps the room with a vaguely scornful gaze that intrigues him enough to keep watching. He doesn’t know if it’s instinct or training that makes her assess the situation before she strides across the room and settles herself onto a stool at the bar, but something in the way she moves tells him that vigilance is second nature to her too.

She’s not as good at it as he is, because she didn’t notice him.

She looks tired, and even before she catches the bartender’s eye and orders her drink he knows she’s on the move. Whether she’s running from something or someone or on her way to somewhere else he doesn’t know, but for the moment she’s here, and when her drink comes and she picks up the glass he can see her settle in, relaxing her awareness, letting herself forget whatever brought her here in that long first swallow. The drink is gone before she even sets her glass back down on the scarred wood of the bar and turns her head to gesture for a refill.

She doesn’t see him, intent as she is on getting that second drink, until he leans on the bar beside her as it arrives. “Might wanna slow down a little, darlin’,” he suggests a little maliciously, because he knows even before he sees the slight flare of her nostrils and the tensing of her shoulders what her reaction will be.

She knows she’s let her guard down. “I’m fine,” she tells him without looking up, and he can hear something in the way the words lengthen and slide into each other that lets him place her background a little more precisely. He’s a little curious as to what brings a girl from the American South this far north into Canada.

But he doesn’t ask. She’s back on the alert now, and while she sips her new drink he knows she’s aware of his gaze moving over her. She’s no stranger to men’s interest, and he doubts she consciously realizes the way she alters the tilt of her chin as she takes another sip of bourbon, the way she leans forward a little more over her glass when she sets it back down to give him a better view of the way her breasts swell against the tight shirt she’s wearing. It’s automatic, he thinks, and that makes what he sees in her eyes when she finally lets a little smile touch her lips and glances up at him from under her lashes all the more surprising.

There’s cold hard calculation behind that look, and more of a challenge than can be explained by the simple give-and-take of casual flirtation. It’s unexpected, and it takes him a second to understand the reassessment he’s already made.

She isn’t on the watch for danger to herself.

“What’re you runnin’ from?” he asks, and her expression changes completely. He doesn’t know if it’s the long trip she’s had or the alcohol working or just the fact that he saw through the act, but he
wonders what she’s done to herself to be able to smile instead of cry when she answers.

“Ghosts. Memory.” She turns back to her drink, and he knows he ought to walk away. Those two words send a warning directly through his spine, a signal he doesn’t know what to do with, that for once he’s not the only loaded weapon in the situation and strategic retreat would be the smart choice. But before he can move she crunches through an ice cube and looks back up. “What about you?”

“Ghosts that I can’t remember,” he answers, and watches intently as she turns that over in her head, accepting the truth of his words even without knowing what they mean. It’s a moment of complete honesty that she’s bought and paid for, and he’s curiously disappointed when she chooses to take her winnings off the table. Her eyes drop to his crotch and she shifts her hips against the worn leather barstool.

He’s under no illusions about her attraction to him. He knows damned well that any woman in this place would consider it a successful night if she left with him, and this one is no different. But that’s just biology, and whatever it is about this girl that made him answer her question makes him wish she’d chosen differently. She’s making the same choice he’d make, and the only thing she wants now is to know how he wants her to play it—do they share another drink and banter for another minute or two before she heads for the bathroom and he follows, or does he just tell her how he wants it?

She’s used to male attention, used to the little games civilized people play so they can pretend afterwards that the fucking wasn’t the goal from the outset. She isn’t pretending that, but she’s still young enough to think the game still needs to be played, and that pisses him off a little, because either way, it makes her too much like him. And not enough.

He reaches for his wallet and drops a bill on the bar. “Pay for your drinks,” he tells her, and he can see the corner of her mouth turn up when she realizes he’s already paid all he’s going to for this encounter. “Outside. My truck.”

He doesn’t wait to see what she’ll do. There’s always the chance that she’ll surprise him again, wait to see if he’ll come back, try and negotiate a little more. The weather’s turned even uglier since he entered the bar and the storm howls around him, the snow swirling through the parking lot and erasing the footprints he makes by the time he’s a step further on. He doesn’t look up until he’s inside the cab of the truck, but he already knows she’s coming, making her way through that fierce wind and bringing another rush of cold air in with her as she opens the door and climbs in beside him.

All he wants, suddenly, is to have this over with. He doesn’t bother with turning on the heat or even warming his hands before reaching for her, lifting her onto his lap and shoving her knees apart so she fits against him for an instant before he raises her hips so he can push her pants and underwear out of the way. She gasps when he simply thrusts two fingers inside her, whether from the cold or the roughness of the gesture he isn’t sure at first, but he grins a little when her head falls back and she moves her hips forward against his hand.

She’s hot and slick with desire already, and she wants it rough, so he doesn’t waste time with foreplay; he pulls his hand away to reach for the condom in his wallet and release his cock from the denim it’s straining against. But she takes over where he’s left off, sliding her own hand down to give herself the pleasure he’s temporarily denying her, and he loves that this isn’t some little display of sensuality for his voyeuristic benefit. She just wants to be fucked hard, and she isn’t going to wait for him to get around to it.

He jerks her hand away roughly as soon as he’s got the condom on, gripping her wrist tightly enough to hurt, to punish her a little for trying to do his job for him. She likes it, he can tell, and she likes it even more when his hand closes over her hip to pull her down against his shaft, hard and
ready for her. She reaches down with the hand he’s not holding and an instant later he’s inside her, thrusting up as hard as he can into that wet heat.

He lets her hand go so he can control the motion of her hips against his, and her head drops back again as she gives in to his rhythm, his direction. It’s surreal, the intensity of this purely physical connection, and the wildness of the storm and the mist of fog creeping over the windows of the truck as the heat of their bodies meets the cold air makes it seem even more like the world outside doesn’t exist.

Then her knees slip a little, between the slickness of the cheap vinyl seats and the force of his thrusts against her, and her hands land on the back of the seat beside his head. Her eyes meet his, open wide and glazed over with lust and something more. It’s incongruous that it isn’t until then that he feels exposed; they’re still almost as fully clothed as they’d been in the bar, even though he’s fucking the living daylight out of her, but in that instant something looks out of her eyes and if he gives himself another second he’ll be wondering whether the ghost he’s seeing is one of hers or his own.

And he doesn’t want to know. So he pulls out of her and throws her off his lap, onto her back on the seat beside him, because this way he can hold her down and thrust into her even harder, forcing her open and pounding into her until every vestige of control is given over, until all she can do is gasp for breath and accept what he’s making her feel. He knows when she’s close to coming, and he needs her to get there so he can lose himself in his own climax and stop thinking about the way she looks, giving herself over to the pain and the pleasure that are all she wants from him. Then she cries out, her muscles tightening and spasming around him, and he stops thinking about anything at all.

But he can’t get away from his own overcharged senses, and he’s still aware of her hands clutching at his arms and the whimpering moans that he’s forcing from her throat with every stroke, and the scent of her sex that won’t ever be gone from the truck. Fifty thousand miles from now, he knows he’ll catch it unexpectedly when he opens the door, and that thought sends him over the edge, his whole body jerking with the force of the sensation, driving even deeper into her until he’s not sure he can still tell where he ends and she begins.

When he’s aware of anything again, it’s that he’s probably crushing her ribs with the way he’s collapsed on top of her, and that her cheek under his forehead is chilled and damp with their combined sweat. It’s over, and he slides out of her and sits back, pulling his jeans back up and ignoring the way she has to shift around on the seat to adjust her more-disordered clothing.

He knows she isn’t going to say anything else. He wrote the fucking book on being a ship that passes in the night, and he can see she’s learned that lesson as well. Maybe it’s because he knows the rules of this game so well that he decides to break one as she finishes with her clothes and reaches for the handle of the door. “You know…” She holds still, but she doesn’t turn back to him, which is probably the only reason he finishes the sentence. “You’re gonna hafta learn to trust somebody sometime.”

He has no idea where that came from, and he sure as hell isn’t the right person to be telling anyone about trust. But she frowns a little and stays where she is for another moment before she answers, as though she understands what he means even if it’s nothing personal to either of them.

Her eyes meet his again, hard and clear. “Lookin’ for somebody to trust is a long wait for a train don’t come,” she says quietly, and that Southern drawl makes the cheap metaphor work, somehow.

“Some trains are just slower than others,” he says, and wonders why in hell he’s following her lead, talking about nonexistent trains instead of watching her leave. “But they all pull into the station eventually.” It isn’t until the sentence is hanging in the air between them that he recognizes it for the offer it is. It’s only because of what he sees in her that reminds him of himself that he’s said it, and he
wonders if he’s hoping harder that she’ll accept or that she’ll turn him down.

But she is like him, and though her eyes soften a little she still shakes her head. “Sometimes ‘eventually’ is too late,” she tells him, and he knows all about that kind of clear-sighted reality. She leans close for a second and brushes a kiss against his cheek before she’s gone, and the rush of wind and snow that makes it into the truck before she gets the door closed is almost enough to obliterate her scent.

He watches as she takes a few steps, and then she pauses for a moment, apparently weighing the advantages of returning to the warmth of the bar against those of getting back on the road. The road wins.

He lights a cigar and watches as her taillights disappear into the swirling snowstorm, aware that he’s probably added one more phantom to the inventory she carries with her. He takes his time, cracking the window to let the smoke curl out into the storm and not reaching towards the ignition until it’s been plenty long enough for her to take any of a dozen possible turns, until the temptation to follow is futile even if he feels it.

Ten years ago she wouldn’t have left, he knows. But he wouldn’t have asked the girl she was ten years ago to stay, so maybe that makes them even.

He’s lived long enough without regrets not to collect them now. But as he crushes out the cigar and turns over the engine, his hand reaches up to rub against his cheek where she touched him last, and he smiles wryly to himself.

If their paths ever cross again, he doubts like hell he'll be the one to notice first.
Slow Train Coming Continuation

Chapter Summary

Leave it alone, the inner voice says. It's fine the way it is. You need to learn to keep things simple and short.

I never listen to the little voices unless they're advising me to eat chocolate.

He’d figured if he ever ran into her again she’d be the one who noticed first.

In the event, it doesn’t work out that way.

Even he doesn’t notice at first. He’s two provinces farther on and more than a few mental leagues away, and he’s just annoyed at pulling into the only filling station in a hundred kilometers and having to wait longer than five minutes for someone to come out and unlock the gas tank. He gives it another thirty seconds before he decides that an extra ten bucks will cover the lock as well and he might as well take matters into his own hands, and he gets out of the truck.

First of all, it’s the same wreck of a car she’d been driving a month ago, up on jacks inside the open garage doors. But even that doesn’t register, not really, not until he picks up on that same scent that’s still clinging to the inside of his truck, now mixed with the additional notes of fear and vomit and blood, and then he reacts purely on instinct, his knuckles burning as he races into the cinderblock building attached to the garage.

He’s too late, or at least he’s too late to be of any use in preventing whatever’s happened. She’s slumped in the corner, head buried in her arms, and there’s a man in faded coveralls sprawled on his back in the center of the floor. The eyes are wide open and staring straight up at the ceiling, leaving no doubt as to the man’s condition, and all he does is make sure she won’t see anything that’ll scare her before he crosses the room in a couple of swift strides and crouches in front of her. “Hey, darlin’. Come on. Time to go.”

She raises her head and looks at him without the least sign of surprise, but it isn’t because she knew it was him; she’s just too overwhelmed to react. Whatever happened here happened long enough ago for the bloody nose and cut lip she got in the proceedings to clot but not for the cheap liquor he can still smell in the room to wear off; she’s glassy-eyed, but he doesn’t think it’s just the alcohol. She’s in shock, and he holds out a hand as warily as though she’s a wild animal that might snap. “Come on,” he repeats.

“Don’t touch me,” she says dully, but she puts her hands down to the wall behind her and forces herself to get to her feet, then doesn’t object when he puts a hand at the small of her back to guide her away from the piece of meat cooling in the middle of the floor and over to a small sink in the corner of the room. He turns on the cold water full blast and when she doesn’t move, he takes her arms and forces her hands down and under the stream. “Wash up,” he orders brusquely. She needs to pull it together, and he’s completely prepared to take matters into his own hands, but as he’d hoped, the cold water seems to shake her out of her daze a little and she leans over to wash her face herself.

He doesn’t bother with the body. The blood and vomit are both hers, and there’s not that much of either, so he mops up efficiently with a handful of rags he finds in the corner. When he stands back
up, she’s turned around and is staring down at the corpse. He moves in between her and it. “Hey. Nothing you can do.” He still doesn’t know exactly what happened, because other than the fact that the guy is dead he doesn’t seem to have much wrong with him. With any luck, maybe the local authorities will figure he just had a heart attack, all by his lonesome. He’s not really concerned about it. By the looks of things, anyway, the son-of-a-bitch got what was coming to him.

“I didn’t mean it to happen,” she says helplessly. Or hopelessly. It doesn’t much matter which. He crosses the room to her again and this time she lets him put an arm around her, turns her face into his shoulder as he leads her out of the room and into the cold winter afternoon.

She doesn’t ask any questions when he brings her to his truck, doesn’t object when he opens the door and puts her inside. He tosses the filthy rags into the back of his trailer to be disposed of somewhere safe, later; then he heads for her car.

There’s a duffel bag in the back, and a haversack of sorts in the front under the seat. When he checks the glove box the registration is in the name of a Richard Wiscott of Ontario. He isn’t in any serious doubt that the car is stolen, but he takes the identifying papers anyway to slow things down a little on the off chance that anyone’s going to care enough to investigate. He checks the trunk, but there’s nothing else of interest in the car. The front plate is missing and he rips the rear plate from its rusty bolts and adds it to the trash pile in the back of the trailer. He tucks her duffel bag under the tarp with his bike and then goes ahead with his petty larceny at the pump without the annoying necessity of leaving payment. He pushes the knapsack across the seat to her as he gets back into the truck. She tugs it into her lap as he starts up the truck and pulls out onto the highway.

It’s a few long miles before she speaks, and she doesn’t turn her head when she does. “Were you following me?”

He doesn’t look at her either. “Nope.”

“Why’re you doin’ this?”

“No idea.” It’s true enough. Even if he doesn’t know exactly what happened back there, he figures it wasn’t precisely an innocent situation. He’s seen her in action before, after all, and she might not have wanted to give the mechanic what he’d been after, but she’d done the drinking on her own before things got ugly. He really doesn’t know what he’s thinking, taking in this damaged woman with a self-destructive streak a mile wide, but he made the offer a month ago and he’s not going to withdraw it now.

She sighs and settles back against the seat of his truck, and he accepts that she’s not going to explain or apologize, and he likes her a little more for that. It’s something else they have in common, the ability to accept without elucidation, and he leaves her alone as he drives away.

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He doesn’t stop for another couple of hours, getting her as far away from the tiny gas station as he can before they finally reach something resembling a town again. At the very least, it’s somewhere he can crash for the night and it’s somewhere she can get away from him if she’s so inclined. He pulls into the lot of a generic-looking motel and cuts the engine.

She meets his eyes when he looks over at her, and although she looks better with the caked blood washed away from her nose and chin, she’s still probably going to have a shiner tomorrow and he hopes she’s got some makeup in that bag of hers, because otherwise he’s liable to be arrested for assault and battery. He doesn’t bother with explanations either.
“I’m stopping for the night. Your stuff is in the back. Bus station’s over there if you want to take off. You want a place to crash, I’ll be back in a few minutes.” She doesn’t answer and he doesn’t wait; he just gets out of the truck and walks away toward the office with the flashing neon “Vacancy” sign. He knows damn well what she’ll think he expects in exchange, but he doesn’t bother dealing with that for now either.

And she’s still there when he returns with the key, lets him open the door for her and lift her duffel bag out of the trailer and carry it inside for her. If she’s surprised at seeing two beds in the room she doesn’t react; she just sets her knapsack down on one of them and gives him a tentative smile. “Mind if I shower first?”

“Go ahead.” It’s an avoidance tactic, he knows, but she’ll feel better if he lets her get herself cleaned up and he doesn’t really care if it’s a few more minutes before he has to deal with her.

When she gets out of the bathroom, wrapped in a towel and bringing a wash of steam with her, he’s stretched out watching a game on TV. He uses the remote to turn off the set as she walks across the room and sits down beside him.

He really despises the fact that he can see resignation in her eyes. He reaches out and seizes her wrist as she starts to reach toward his fly, and doesn’t try to hide the anger in his voice. “The fuck you think you’re doin’?”

“Come on.” It’s not just that she thinks she owes him, he can see that; she’d love it if he’d fuck her into oblivion again, but he’s not going to do that. Not right now. “You know you want to.” That challenging look is back, with a touch of desperation on the edges.

“No. I don’t.” He pushes her hand away. “I got a question for you.” He sees her brace herself and wait for what’s coming. “What’s your name?”

She’s surprised enough to smile before she can stop herself. “What do you want it to be?” she offers archly, but he doesn’t respond, and finally she comes across. “Marie. My name’s Marie.”

“Oh. Mine’s Logan.” He reaches forward then, but all he does is brush a hand down the side of her face. “You all right?”

“Been through worse.” He allows her the lie, and strokes her face once more before he gets up and heads for the bathroom himself.

When he gets out, she’s curled up on her own bed, hugging one of the pillows against her chest, and she’s fast asleep.

There’s an extra blanket in the closet, and he puts it over her before he throws himself back on his own bed to try and get whatever rest he can.

He knows the second she’s awake. He’s never needed much sleep, has always been able to rest with one eye open, so to speak.

He lets her get as far as the door before he speaks. “You runnin’ again?”

She gasps in surprise, one hand still on the doorknob, and he’s impressed with her reaction time, because by the time she turns around she’s recovered. “Wasn’t going to wake you,” she tells him. “But I gotta go.”
He sits up. “Why?”

She sighs impatiently. “You wouldn’t understand. And I can’t explain it. It’s just easier this way.”

“You don’t have to explain.” He sees the suspicion in her eyes. What does he mean by that, and that too is familiar to him. “You got money?” She hadn’t gone for his wallet. Apparently there was still some honor among thieves.

“Some,” she lies.

“Let me buy you breakfast. No strings.” It’s more than he did that first night, but that was a different kind of transaction. “Then, you still want to leave, I’ll drop you at the station.”

He’s using her weaknesses ruthlessly. He can see she’s lost weight since the last time he saw her; that was probably why she got drunk enough to get into trouble. She hesitates, and she’s lost. Her duffel bag lands on the floor.

“No strings,” she says, still suspiciously.

He doesn’t answer, just swings his feet over the edge of the bed and reaches for his boots.

She orders everything in sight, and stuffs it all in while he drinks coffee and picks at toast and bacon. He waits till she’s finished before he asks. “You comin’?”

She’s had a while to consider her options, and she’s not stupid. “No strings,” she tells him again, and it’s not a bargaining point. She’s just putting her cards on the table.

He just nods.

If she’s surprised at where they’re going, she doesn’t show it. It’s another of thirty or forty towns where he knows there’s always a fight to be had, and long enough since he’s been to this one that the collective memory has faded enough for him to get decent odds.

He doesn’t offer her money again, but he makes sure the bartender understands he’ll be taking care of her tab. It’s a strange night in the cage, with his head in two places at once.

He knows when she slips out the back with the blond cowboy type from the end of the bar, but at the end of the night she’s there, slightly too disheveled, and he doesn’t say anything until they’re back at the motel.

“Take a shower. You smell like him.”

The next morning, she slips out of the room at five AM, and he doesn’t let on that he’s awake this time. The keys to the truck are in his jacket, which is under his bed, and if she’s getting away with anything else that’s just too bad. There’s only so much he can take, and only so much he really figures he can do anyway. If she’s hellbent on suicide, next time it can be someone else’s problem.

So he’s surprised when the door opens again, twenty minutes later, as he’s pulling a t-shirt over his head, and she’s standing there with a couple of greasy bags from the diner across the street.
She tries to make it casual. “Hey. You hungry?” She comes a step or two into the room. “I got you coffee.” He nods, and she comes in further and kicks the door closed before setting down the food on the rickety little table.

It’s an apology of sorts, he supposes, although it may also just be her way of proving she doesn’t need his help. When they’ve eaten, he digs out a ten and holds it out across the table.

She shakes her head. “Don’t need it,” she tells him, and there’s a touch of smugness in her voice. He raises an eyebrow at that, because hell if she’d have wound up where he’d found her if she’d had any—“I won three hundred last night on a ten-dollar stake. You’re a good bet.”

He can’t help his mouth twisting in amusement, because that was damned opportunistic of her. Then he shakes his head. “You can’t do that again.”

The sly smile slips away. “Why the hell not?”

“Because it looks too much like a scam, that’s why not. You want to watch the fights, fine. But no betting.” She scowls, and he relents. “Tell you what. I got an idea. Bet against me.”

She looks at him like he’s lost his mind. “And that makes sense how?”

“Drives up the odds. And I’ll cut you in. Ten percent.”

After a minute, she smiles. “Twenty.”

“Ten,” he retorts. “Or nothing.” She considers that.

“Okay.”

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Better odds tend to attract better opponents, and the next night isn’t exactly a walk in the park. He’s exhausted when they finally call a halt to the fun around two AM, and all he wants is a beer and somewhere to collapse for a few hours. He’s throwing a handful of water over his head at the sink in the corner when she slips into the makeshift dressing room, closing the door behind her.

“Hey, sugar.” Yeah, she’s drunk, and she’s behind him a moment later, sliding her arms around his waist. “You did good.” He can feel her tongue come out and glide over his sweat-slicked back. “That last guy looked pretty tough.”

“Yeah.” Her hands are pressed against him, running over his stomach, and he already knows how good it’ll feel when she moves them lower—“He got in a couple of good shots.”

“Can I kiss it and make it better?” He closes his eyes as her lips work against his shoulder, enjoying her touch and that honey-tinged drawl that comes out more strongly after the drinks and the excitement of the evening. “Just tell me what hurts.”

He turns and seizes her arms, pressing her back against the wall, and she gives a throaty laugh and lets her head fall back as he leans in to attack her neck, using his teeth and tongue against that soft flesh. When he lets her arms go so he can move his hands to her breasts, free under the thin material of her shirt, she moans and reaches for the button at the top of his jeans. He knows he’s seconds away from being inside her again, and the thought of her long legs wrapping around his waist as he lifts her up against the wall just makes him want to move even faster.

Then there’s a bang on the door, startling them both, and he brings one hand up instantly to close
over her mouth. “Who is it?”

The doorknob rattles, but she had the sense to lock it behind her, and a surly voice calls out, “Open up. Got your money.”

The room is tiny and there’s nowhere for her to go, but they’re behind the door anyway and he relaxes his hand, brushing a finger over her lips, and she nods her understanding. He reaches for his shirt before he unlocks the door, and doesn’t move out of the doorway when he opens it.

The ugly bastard who’s standing there hands over a wad of bills. “Congratulations,” he says, sounding completely uncongratulatory, and doesn’t wait to see if the amount is going to be checked before turning away.

And when he closes the door and looks at her again, everything’s different, somehow. He’s too aware of her smeared lipstick that doesn’t really hide the split in her lower lip, of the bruises around her eye, and of the fact that he’s about to hand several hundred dollars over to her and he can’t mix that up with what they were about to do.

“It doesn’t matter,” she says, and he knows she’s aware of the same thing. “That wasn’t why…” She trails off, but the unconscious way she tugs her shirt back into place says it all.

He drops the money onto the chair that holds his jacket and his knapsack, needing to separate that from whatever it is that’s suddenly sprung up in the room. She doesn’t look up when he reaches toward her, but all he does is brush her hair back from her face, gently but impersonally enough not to be confused with desire. “That looks like it still hurts,” he tells her, and her eyes come up to meet his.

“A little,” she confirms, accepting the out. She clears her throat and rubs at the side of her mouth. “Guess I should just meet you by the truck.”

He nods, and she leaves, and she’s there waiting, her jacket pulled tightly around her body to keep out the cold, when he gets there. He’s got her cut of the take ready in one hand, and he gives it to her almost casually as he reaches to unlock the door for her.

She doesn’t count it.

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She’s even more uncharacteristically quiet the next day, and halfway through the night he becomes aware that she’s no longer in the bar. At first he figures it’s just payback again for him not giving her what she wanted the night before, and then he’s annoyed with himself for worrying enough about what she might have gotten herself into to actually consider leaving the cage, and finally he just accepts that whatever tentative confidence she might have had in him simply wasn’t enough to carry them past her having a few hundred dollars in her pocket.

But he’s surprised, he really is, when he slides back into his leather jacket at the end of the night and realizes instantly that the weight of his keys is gone from the right-hand pocket. It doesn’t really make him angry—he should have known better than to leave them where she could get them, and taking the easiest way out is exactly what he’d probably have done too. His wallet is still in the other pocket, untouched, and he supposes that’s about as much as he could have hoped for. It’s just nature taking its course.

Which is why he’s even more surprised when he walks out back to see his truck still sitting there, and her in the passenger seat. She’s got the window cracked open a little for air, and she rolls it down
the rest of the way as he walks over to the truck. He sets his knapsack on the ground, crosses his arms and leans on the door. “Hey.”

“Hey,” she returns. She didn’t bother with makeup today, and the bruises fading to greenish-yellow are obvious. “Thought I took off?”

“For a minute, yeah.” He’s not about to deny it. No point anyway; she’d know he was lying.

“I just didn’t feel like comin’ in tonight.”

“No big deal.” He’s oddly touched by her demeanor; she’s obviously aware of what he’d thought and as dysfunctional as it is, he knows she’s trying to tell him he can depend on her at least that much. “You hungry?”

“Yeah.” He picks up his stuff and goes around to swing himself into the driver’s seat. She’s still silent as he drives to pick up the usual diner food that’s all that’s ever available at these odd hours, in these makeshift towns, but when they get back to the motel she slips an arm inside his as they walk from the truck to the room.

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It takes her longer than he’d thought to catch on. He wasn’t sure about her at first—there were other, simpler explanations for the dead mechanic back in Manitoba. But once he was looking for clues, it didn’t take him long to figure it out.

He actually sees it, the moment she gets it. It’s just another bar, another fight, but this time someone didn’t like the odds and snuck in a knife. When he feels the blade enter his belly he knows he’s done for the night; welts and bruises may take a few hours to form, but there’s no explaining this away. He wins anyway when the other guy is disqualified for using a weapon, and he stays doubled over while the fight organizers rush him out of the cage and into the back room.

Then she’s there, pushing her way through the roughnecks to kneel down beside him. She’s been there the last few nights, sitting at the bar and tossing back her bourbon-and-cokes, but it’s been a week since the night he called her on her little trip out back and since then there hasn’t been anyone else’s scent on her, at least not more than could be explained by casual contact. Her eyes are panicked as she reaches toward the wound. “How bad is it?”

“We got a doctor comin’,” one of the refs tells her. “Can’t take him to the hospital. They’ll close us down.”

“Fuck you,” she snaps, and he reaches out one bloody hand and grabs her wrist before she can really screw things up.

“No doctor,” he rasps. “No hospital. Just get the truck.” He lets his arm fall away a little from where it’s pressed against the side of his stomach where the knife went in. She’s about to argue. Then she doesn’t.

The fight promoters sure as hell don’t argue. They’re willing enough to let them leave—relieved, even, that he’s not going to bleed to death until he’s safely in someone else’s jurisdiction. He lets himself be helped out to the truck and she’s already in the driver’s seat, they shove his gear and his winnings in after him and he doesn’t relax until they’re well away from the fight bar and back on the open road. Then he glances over at her.

“You okay to drive?”
Her lips are pressed into a thin line. “Yeah.” She hasn’t been drinking much the last few days, so he lets it go. “How long have you known?”

“Few days.”

She sighs. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

He’d thought that was obvious. “You didn’t ask.” After a minute or two she laughs a little bitterly and shakes her head.

“Fair enough.” She reaches down toward the middle of the seat and fishes in his jacket, comes up with a pack of cigarettes. “You mind?”

“Help yourself.” She lights up and they drive a ways before she speaks again.

“That was a nice thing you did for me.”

He’s tired of it all, suddenly. He can see how this scene is supposed play out; he’ll tell her she doesn’t owe him anything, she’ll try and get him to fuck her once more before she slips out of his truck and out of his life for the last time, and he just doesn’t give a shit about playing a role in this little drama. “Stop the truck.”

“What?” He reaches out and grabs the steering wheel, almost sending them both into a ditch. She’s pretty good, though, and keeps it on the side of the road before she brings them to a stop. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Cut the bullshit.” He keeps his hand right where it is. “Seriously. Or just get the fuck out now.”

She knows when to drop the games, he’ll give her that. She sits still, and for once he really doesn’t know just what’s going on in her head. He can still see the traces of the black eye, her makeup worn off with the long night and the heat of the bar, and he relentlessly quashes the urge to touch her. He’s not immune from the impulse to try and make it better, but that’s not what she wants or needs.

Finally she sighs and takes her own hands off the steering wheel. “This is it, then.”

“Up to you. Like I said, you gotta trust somebody sometime. I can see that hasn’t worked out so well before,” he adds, forestalling the obvious once more. “But it might be different. This time.”

She doesn’t deny it. He always saw that shred of hope in her, the one she’d probably always have refused to admit she’d held onto. If she’d really given up that last bit of innocence, that belief in something that might make it all worthwhile, she wouldn’t be out here on the road. Looking for it. She takes a long drag on the cigarette she’s still holding before she answers. “Why do you care?” she asks, and he likes that she doesn’t pretend that she doesn’t know that he does.

“I don’t know,” he answers honestly, and he sees her inhale once, sharply, tasting the bitter candor of that response. He lets his hand slide off the steering wheel. “Take it or leave it.”

She nods, and throws her cigarette out the window. And starts up the truck.

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He takes the first shower this time, when they find another anonymous motel, wanting to get rid of the blood and sweat and stink of the fights, and she says something about finding some beer and she’ll be back later. He lets her take the keys to the truck, even though he’s still really not sure she’ll be back with it.
But she is back, sooner than he’d expected, while he’s still under the hot water, and then he hears the bathroom door open a crack. “Hey,” she calls through the opening. “You want one?”

“Sure.” He pushes back the curtain and holds his hand out; he’s not shy, and she offered. She comes into the room, hands him the cold bottle, and watches while he takes a long swallow and sets the bottle down on the windowsill. She’s still looking him over, and he doesn’t mind, though he hopes she’s not going to start with the seduction games again. Finally she reaches out and touches him where the stab wound would have been, just lightly, with one finger.

“It’s really gone,” she comments. “You heal from anything?”

“Pretty much.” She nods, and leans back against the sink, sipping her own beer as he finishes rinsing off. He’s reaching for the taps when she speaks again.

“I could use a little of that some days.” He glances at her sharply, but she doesn’t seem to mean anything much by it; it’s less a warning than a slightly wry observation. What the hell.

“Come here.” He holds out a hand, and she shakes her head.

“I was joking,” she assures him.

“Come here.”

“You don’t have to prove anything to me.”

“I said come here.” And incredibly, she does, setting her beer down on the sink and taking the one short step to stand within his reach.

He doesn’t know why he’s doing this. It’s exactly the kind of dramatic gesture he’s been trying to avoid, but it’s not because he’s trying to prove something to her and it’s not because she’s still hurt and he wants to help and it’s not because he’s feeling self-destructive, though all those things are true in their way. He just really wants to kiss her.

So he does, sliding his wet hands into her hair and tilting her head just so before taking her mouth with his; her lips open to him and he feels her hands come up to rest against his chest. And it’s strange, this feeling of falling into her, and he’s a little dizzy when she finally pulls away and reaches to pick up her beer.

“I’ll be in the other room,” she says, and slips away through the door.

He doesn’t see her at first, when he walks out of the bathroom with his towel over one shoulder, but she’s there, having another smoke by the window and half-hidden by the curtains, and she doesn’t look around or move from where she’s standing.

He just goes across to his bag and digs out a reasonably clean pair of jeans. He tosses the wet towel back towards the bathroom after he gets them on, and fishes another beer out of the paper bag she’s left on the table. By the time he’s sitting down with the remote, she’s finished with her cigarette, and he forgets about the television and watches her as she comes towards him. She hasn’t changed out of her shirt, wet from the shower, and her nipples stand out under the fabric from the chill at the open window. But that’s not why he looks away.

He can still see the shadows of the bruises on one side of her face, and the cut that hasn’t quite healed at the corner of her mouth.

“I didn’t mean to kill that guy,” she says simply. “I was drunk. He got nasty. It was stupid.”
“I figured.” He raises an eyebrow. “If you don’t want to get stupid, don’t get drunk. Least not with people you don’t trust.”

“You mean only with you.”

He snorts. “I don’t really mean anything, Marie. But you gotta trust somebody sometime.” It’s the third time he’s said it to her, the same words, and maybe there is a charm in threes, because she comes over to him now, looks at him a little questioningly before she slips onto his lap. She rests her head on his shoulder, and puts one hand flat against his chest.

This time there’s no kiss to get in the way and confuse the issue, and when he shakes his head to clear it and looks down at her the bruises are gone. “I can control it now,” she says, sounding miserable. “But I hurt a lot of people first.”

He just nods, and runs the back of his hand down her face. “I can see that,” he tells her, but what he really sees is that she hurt herself the most of all.

*You’ve got to trust yourself sometime too.*

Her lower lip quivers a little, and he wonders if she’s going to apologize for sucking out a little bit of his soul or blame him for making her do it. But what she says, when she does speak, is unexpected.

“I’m sorry I fucked that guy.” It takes him a second to realize who she means, and when he does, he has to laugh. Yeah, she wants forgiveness for something tonight, but at least she’s asking for something he has the power to grant.

“Okay. Don’t do it again,” he says, but the words are softened by his expression. And she shakes her head.

“I don’t want to. But I know I’m gonna fuck up again, Logan. Is that what you’re tellin’ me? You’ll be there even if I fuck up?”

“Pretty much.” It’s a bigger offer to make, and he has no idea why he’s making this one either. But there it is.

She considers that for a while, and this time he knows what he wants her choice to be. Her eyes are deep chocolate brown, and right now there’s no calculation or challenge to be seen in them—just a question, and he waits for her figure out whether she finds the answer she wants in his own. At last she lets out her breath and puts her head back down on his shoulder. “Okay,” she says, and he can barely hear her.

He tightens his arms around her then, and just holding her feels good, like he’s finally giving her something she really needs. He’s not kidding himself that this is the end of it; he has no clue what the right way is to handle this or what’s going to happen. She might decide differently tomorrow, or hell, just take off the first time he has a bad day and yells about something, and that’s just something they’ll have to deal with down the line.

But for tonight—for now—it feels like they have a chance.

*Finis*

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