

An excerpt from *Drive It Deep*, © Cara McKenna

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*Two summers back, in Fortuity, Nevada*

It was a lazy Tuesday in Benji's. The drone of the dozen patrons chatting in the big barroom melded with the hum of the air-conditioning and the crooning of Merle Haggard from the jukebox. It all blended into a comforting, timeless hum that Jeremiah Church found as familiar as the rustle of dried sage grass or the lowing of cattle. This was the only bar he'd ever really known; the warm and worn-out heart of the only town he'd ever called home.

The July sun was still baking outside, even now, at suppertime, but this place was an oasis. It was everything a bar ought to be, Miah thought, glancing around. He'd had a beer already and a fresh one sat before him, and the sentimentality that alcohol always soaked him in was ripening, filling him with memories and an easy feeling of belonging.

There were angry drunks, sloppy drunks, weepy drunks. Miah rarely ever got drunk, but when he did, it made him softhearted and nostalgic, sensations he normally didn't have the time for. Which was how it ought to work, he felt. Like saddle oil for your soul.

There was just one thing missing from this scene. It had been missing since

late January, and was as elemental to this place as the wooden beams overhead or the clinking of glasses.

He turned to the front door as it swung in, and a wide grin split across his face.

“About goddamn time,” Miah called. He swiveled his stool around, watching his best friend stride in. His best friend, whom he hadn’t seen in his street clothes—or outside the penitentiary visitation room—in over five months. But today, Vince Grossier was a free man once more.

A couple of the older drinkers in the corner shouted their greetings and waved while Vince nodded their way.

Miah abandoned his untouched bottle on the counter and crossed the room, the two men’s chests colliding in a violent hug, set to the sound of hands slapping backs.

Miah stepped away, holding Vince by the arms. “Goddamn, they really let your ass out, huh?”

“Not a minute sooner than they could, but here I am.” Prison might diminish some men, but Vince looked just as he should in his jeans and boots and old leather bomber, his expression pure, eager mischief.

“Prison suit you or something?” Miah teased, leading Vince to the bar. “Aren’t you supposed to be all regretful and haunted-looking? Or at least skinnier?” If anything Vince looked bigger. Miah supposed that could happen when all you had to pass the hours were chin-ups and crunches.

"I regret nothing," Vince declared, then slapped the bar. "Raina! Where are you, girl? Escaped convict in need of bourbon, here."

"She's changing a keg. Here." Miah offered Vince his own beer. "Haven't even tasted it yet."

"Nah, we need to toast." Vince slid the bottle back over. "I can wait."

"Yeah, you would know something about patience by now, huh? Five goddamn months . . ."

"Don't I fucking know it. And over an innocent little bar fight."

"Well, for about six fights, in like two months."

Vince waved the semantics aside. "Whatever. Not a single one of them wasn't asking for it."

Miah took a pull off his neglected bottle. "Sorry I couldn't have picked your ass up, Vince. My dad's hip surgery means I'm really on my own with all the stock duties." The demands of the cattle business eased for no one, and Miah was the foreman of his family's Three C ranch, in charge of more than a couple dozen employees and the oversight of the stock and all manner of maintenance. He was lucky to have gotten off by seven this evening, but he still needed to be up and ready to start again by five.

"No worries," Vince said. "I know how bad that place has you whipped."

"And then some. So who brought you home?"

"Alex."

Miah laughed. "Police escort, huh? That fits." Their friend was a deputy with

the Brush County Sheriff's Department. It was his boss, Sheriff Tremblay, who'd arrested Vince, and not for the first time. "Where's he now?"

"He went to drop his car back home. You know Alex."

Miah nodded, mood darkening. "Yeah, I do." And he knew if Alex Dunn was off-duty and drinking tonight, he wouldn't be driving home. He'd barely be able to walk, in fact. Alex was an excellent deputy and a good man, and he'd never touch a drop until his workday was done, but it seemed lately that more often than not, if he had a sip, he wouldn't stop until he passed out.

It nagged at Miah. A lot. He hoped his friend could get his shit together, but it seemed like the only time they saw each other nowadays was here in Benji's, and a bar was a fuck of a setting in which to tell your friend to get his drinking under control.

Anyhow, tonight wasn't the time to be getting gloomy.

Tonight was a celebration. Miah had his best friend back.

"Raina!" Vince shouted again.

"She better not hear you—" The sound of stomping boots cut Miah off as the woman in question came marching in from the back hall, a door slamming shut behind her.

"Just who the fuck do you think you are," she demanded, "shouting at me like I'm some servant in my own fucking bar?"

Vince stood roughly, stool tottering. "'Scuse me, bitch?"

She made a beeline for him, dark hair bouncing with every livid step. "I've

got half a mind to call the sheriff and get you shipped back downstate." But she dropped the angry shtick the second she reached Vince, grinning. "How you been, motherfucker?"

He hugged her hard, picking her up off the ground and swinging her around. She whapped his arm when he let her go. "Goddamn, it's good to see you."

"You too."

"What are you drinking?" she asked as she circled the U-shaped bar and got back behind the taps.

"Beer and a shot."

"Coming right up." She cracked open a longneck then grabbed a bottle from the highest shelf.

"Whoa, now, don't break the bank," Vince said. "I got fines to pay off still, and no job yet."

"On the house." She poured three measures of the best bourbon and slid two of them over. "Welcome home."

Miah lifted his shot. "Welcome home."

"Good to be back in this shithole," Vince said, and they all drank, glasses clacking the counter in unison.

"Goddamn," Vince said, and thumped the wood with his fist, his mouth surely stinging from that shot, just as Miah's was. "Now *that* tastes like Fortuity."

Raina leaned on the bar, low enough to flash a deep shadow of cleavage in

that tight tank top. It was her personal uniform—black tank, tight jeans, and cowboy boots—and her wavy hair fell around her shoulders. Like Miah, she was half white, but her dark hair and eyes came from a Mexican mother, whereas Miah's came from his mom's Shoshone and Paiute roots.

He could remember the first fight he ever got in, and it had been because of Raina. He'd been in fourth grade, Raina in second, and some boy whose name Miah had long forgotten had called her a mutt. The boy had been older, but Miah had busted him one in the nose and made him cry. He'd nearly gotten grounded for it, until he'd reluctantly confessed to his mom what the fight had been about. Her face had gone all funny, like she couldn't choose between a frown and a smile, and she'd sent him to his room with a half-assed order to go think about what he'd done.

The lesson he'd taken away from that had been, if you're going to punch someone, don't punch a tattletale. But the real takeaway had been Raina—they became friends a few years later, and had remained close ever since.

She'd always been sexy to him, though he'd never fixated on her too much—it was more of an objective fact, her sexiness. She was a little too wild for his taste, or had been, back in their teens and early twenties. He'd disqualified her then as potential relationship material on the grounds that she'd slept with more people than he had.

Now that they'd both entered their thirties, it was hard to care. Part of what made Raina so magnetic was her no-shits-given attitude, and that allure now

trumped his outgrown insecurities. After all, Miah had dated steady girlfriend after steady girlfriend, never had so much as a one-night stand in his life, and where had that gotten him? He'd been single for six months now, and he could feel the lack of sex nagging at him. He liked to imagine he was more evolved than Vince about that shit, but every man had his limits.

And lately, he couldn't seem to quit thinking about the woman currently standing on the other side of this bar, smiling, laughing at a story Vince was telling. Single, like him. With no qualms about getting with someone for just one night, if that's all an affair was destined to be. Miah couldn't say if he wanted more than that; he knew only that he wanted *her*. Badly. And the shot wasn't helping. Made his morals feel all fuzzy, and his body warm.

Ultimately, what he wanted was a wife and children. An intimate, reliable family unit like the one he'd been raised in. A soft place to land at the end of a long day—and all of his days were long. But before all of that materialized, maybe just once he ought to find out what it was like to be with a woman like Raina. Try a taste of that, for a night or a week or a month, for however long it was meant to go on.

Vince started beside him, rocked by a hard clap on the back. He and Miah turned as one to find Alex behind them, and they got to their feet.

"Started without me, I see," Alex said, and accepted a half-hug from Miah.

"Making up for lost time," Vince said.

"What can I get you, Deputy?" Raina asked, though Alex was dressed down

in jeans and a tee shirt, his badge retired for the evening. His brown hair was freshly buzzed, reminding Miah of how he'd always planned to join the Marines, back in high school. See the world and all that. But a motorcycle wreck when he was seventeen had fucked up his knee, along with those grand plans.

Raina slid him a double shot of whiskey, her smile tight, if Miah wasn't mistaken. Alex's drinking troubled her, he bet, as did her role as his bartender. Couldn't be much fun, having to cut off your childhood friend when he got messy.

"You know who ought to be here?" Vince asked, glancing at each of them. "My goddamn brother."

"Good luck finding him," Raina said, smirking. Vince's little brother, Casey, had left Fortuity seven years ago and not been back since. Without that dumbass around, there was something missing. A certain foul-mouthed levity. The five of them had been tight all through junior high, high school, and into their early twenties. They'd named their little gang the Desert Dogs way back when Miah, Vince, and Alex had been in sixth grade, maybe. Raina and Casey had been a couple years behind, but tenacious in their tagging along.

"You tell Case you were getting out?" Miah asked Vince.

"Left him a message last week, but I was never gonna hold my breath."

"Where's he at?" Alex asked. "Not Vegas, still?"

"No, he's been bouncing around, it sounds like. Same number, though. Last I heard he'd moved to Texas," Vince said. "Hang on—I need a smoke."

Miah rolled his eyes.

“What? You think I’m gonna magically quit while I’m in *prison*? Everybody needs a vice, Church. Wish you’d find yourself one.”

Miah was glad Raina was busy with a customer. Her dad had died of lung cancer barely a year ago, and it felt insensitive. Then again, Vince had never been one to tone himself down out of consideration for others’ sore spots.

“I’ll make you a deal someday,” Miah said. “You quit smoking, and I’ll do most anything you could name in exchange.”

“How about,” Vince said, smiling, “I *keep* smoking, and you go and get yourself laid and loosen the fuck up.”

“Ohhh,” Alex groaned, wincing, then laughing. “Fucking mean, Grossier.”

“Fucking true,” he said, standing. “How long’s it been, Church?”

*Six long-ass months.* “No comment.”

“I rest my case,” Vince said, and headed for the door.

Miah eyed Raina, struck anew by how everything about her body so perfectly matched her personality. She could be hard and stubborn, and you saw that in her shoulders and the bold shape of her collarbone, the set of her jaw. She was sexual, too, and that aggressive femininity was reflected in the way her hips and her backside flared out from her long waist. She moved like she spoke, with confidence and self-possession and no apology, like she had every right to be moving through this world and you might just want to keep out of her way. She’d always been like that. Known exactly who she was for as long as Miah

could remember.

They'd never dated or hooked up, though they had seen each other naked back in their days of group skinny-dipping in the creek. Hardly a coup—the youth of Fortuity were not a modest crowd. They'd made out once, too, in their early twenties, at a big barbecue at the ranch, but Miah barely remembered it. They'd both been wasted, and it had felt more like a dare than any romantic impulse. All he could recall about it was the taste of pepper and whiskey on her lips, and the sounds of their friends cat-calling them in the background.

He remembered watching her at her dad's funeral last summer. He'd never seen her cry before, and she'd looked absolutely pissed off, like her eyes had betrayed her. Her hug had been stiff as a statue that day, her hands cold as stone. He'd felt them through his shirt. He might even have begun falling for her a little in that moment. She hadn't gone to pieces, sobbing, but in the rigidity of her body, and in the tight, shallow pitch of her breathing, he'd felt something he'd not ever sensed from her before. Vulnerability. Softness hiding behind that hard, willful shell. She hadn't clung to him; quite the opposite. But in that closed-up, cagey hug, she'd been as frail as he'd ever felt her. As *real* as she'd ever felt to him.

They'd known each other for ages, but until that hug, he'd never been in danger of losing track of his head with Raina Harper. Sure, he'd admired her body plenty of times, but he'd never really imagined what it'd be like to kiss her for real, or touch her hair, or feel the weight of her in his lap, or those muscles

moving against him. It had almost been as though he'd never noticed what color her eyes were. A revelation, discovering that feelings hid behind that attitude, that cool self-possession, that aggressive breed of femininity.

They had a past, too, a million shared memories. Twenty years or more of friendship, and that counted for a lot with Miah. History. She'd always been fun, and a touch intimidating. But that day at the funeral, she'd become more. He hadn't seen her the same way since.

Unlike his best friend, Miah couldn't get hot over just any attractive woman. He had to feel something first. Attachment turned him on, and possession lit him on fire. Familiarity and affection got him as riled as a beautiful pair of breasts or a stunning face. As a result, Vince had called him a pussy a thousand times in the past fifteen years, but Miah didn't care. If you were going to sleep with someone you didn't feel something for, what was the point? Why not just jack off if it was as impersonal as scratching some biological itch? Save everybody involved an awkward morning after.

Miah didn't want sex to be convenient, or opportunistic. Sex should be memorable and meaningful, and hopefully kick off the start of something real and intense and maybe even for keeps. Not some in-and-out transaction of necessity, like pulling into a goddamn gas station.

He studied Raina, standing barely three feet from him, talking to Alex. Her smile made his body flash hot, and when her gaze met his, his breath was gone. Just as quick, she turned away.

These past two evenings, there'd been a little *something*, hadn't there? He'd come by last night and the one before, needing a drink to dull his frustration toward a problem employee, and a little time away from the ranch. Her gaze had lingered on his longer than usual, he'd thought, and his own gaze had been lingering more and more lately, as his celibacy wore on. Could she tell that something had shifted in him this past year? That his attraction was no longer a moment of curiosity now and then, but nearing infatuation? Probably. She could probably smell it, like a shark smelled a drop of blood through a mile of ocean.

Vince returned from his smoke break.

"Another?" Raina asked him.

He looked to Miah. "Pitcher?"

Miah shook his head. "Pacing myself." Unlike Alex or Vince, he couldn't get tanked and stagger home later—the ranch was way out at the eastern edge of Fortuity.

Raina handed Vince a fresh bottle. "So what are you going to do, now you're finally out?"

He took a deep gulp. "I'm going to get drunk, and I'm going to get laid. Probably in that order."

"I meant for work," Raina said, "but those sound good, too. And I can help you with the first one." She grabbed his shot glass and the bottle of bourbon.

"Help me with both, if you want," Vince said, leaning on the bar and flashing her one of his shameless smiles.

Miah rankled, but kept his temper in check. He had no claims on Raina, these past couple nights' new heat notwithstanding. Plus he doubted there was much behind Vince's pass aside from a load of pent-up testosterone. Vince and Raina had had their whole lives to turn into something, but never had. Miah knew that for a fact—his best friend wasn't exactly discreet about his conquests.

She set the shot before Vince. "The drink's on me, but your other needs are *not* my problem."

Vince craned his big body to scan the barroom, but only a few new faces had arrived, and none were female. "When do your hands get off work?" he asked Miah.

"Leave my poor employees alone. Most of those girls are ten years younger than you."

"And some of the biggest flirts I've ever seen," Raina put in, grinning. "I really don't think they need any protecting, Miah. If they can handle themselves with all those steer, they can handle Vince."

"I'm not choosy who handles me tonight," Vince said, and downed his shot. "Most any willing party will do."

Miah shook his head. "Know what's sexier than consent, Vince? Enthusiasm."

Raina smiled, and Alex laughed.

"You spend a few months in prison," Vince cut back, "and you see how high your standards are when you get out. Hey, now—here we go."

A group had arrived along with the dusk, not short on women. From there the evening took a sharp turn, as more young folks arrived and the jukebox got in the mood for dancing, tables were moved aside, and the grumpy old men disappeared out into the night. Raina shut the windows and switched off the AC as the sky outside went black and the din of chatter and laughter grew.

Vince was on the hunt in due time, and Raina got busy with orders. Miah talked with Alex for two hours or more, until a whiskey glaze dulled his friend's eyes and the conversation grew stilted and a touch slurred. It cooled Miah's own interest in drinking, and he let his beer grow warm.

A good dozen ranch hands had arrived, and after a few rounds they shed their inhibitions around Miah being their boss, and tried to get him to dance, one of the girls tugging on his wrist.

"No way. You kids'll never respect me again."

Raina watched with a smirk on her lips as he continued to deflect. "Go on, cowboy. Let's see your moves."

"You *ever* seen me dance in our entire lives?" he asked, just as the hands all rushed to the floor at the opening notes of some popular song.

"Junior high semi-formal," Raina said.

"That doesn't count as dancing – that's just shuffling around in a circle."

"You never shuffled with me," she countered, affecting a pout she'd never actually wear in earnest.

"You were twelve when I was fourteen. I have some dignity, you know."

“‘Nother, please,” Alex said, sliding his empty tumbler across the bar.

“You are cut off, Deputy,” Raina told him. Her tone was cheerful and chiding, but Miah could see tension hiding behind it, hardening her jaw.

“Oh, come on.”

“I’ve got water, ginger ale, Coke, Sprite . . .”

“Fine, fine. Water.”

She poured him a big glass, but Alex drank only half of it before declaring he was tired and ready to head home.

“Need a lift?” Miah asked him.

“Nah, I’m good.” A sway in Alex’s step as he got to his feet contradicted the statement. Miah considered insisting, but then made the fateful mistake of glancing at Raina. If he dropped Alex off, he might as well just go home. It was after midnight, and Vince had already gone missing, presumably with a woman. Miah was done drinking and had no good reason to come back . . . yet he wasn’t ready to go. It felt like tonight was the night. He needed to make his move, take the temperature of the situation and find out if he had it all wrong or not. If Raina wasn’t feeling anything, no problem. Better that way, even, as he could snap out of this infatuation and quit fixating on her.

And if she did feel something? His blood pumped quicker, imagining it. Imagining leaning in, kissing her, pulling her against him.

And so he bade Alex a good night and told him to walk safe, because he wasn’t going anywhere until closing time. Not until he knew, once and for all,

whether this strange new energy between them was all in his imagination, or as real as electricity.

Last call arrived in a blink. Raina clanged the bell, drink orders were placed and filled, and Miah sat there, losing his nerve, utterly unsure if or how to make a move. His employees shouted their good-nights, and the crowd dwindled, and dwindled, until it was just him and Raina and a handful of others.

In time, voices at his back called out parting words to Raina, who smiled and saluted from the register. The door creaked shut behind Miah. He craned his neck.

Just him, now. Him and her. Alone together, for the first time in who could guess how long.

Raina came by, wiping down the counter. "Another?"

He shook his head, and she smiled.

"Don't tell me you're here for the charming company," she said, gaze panning the deserted barroom. "Because that's way too much pressure on me."

He shrugged. "So what if I am? It's been a while since we had a chance to chat, you and me."

"I saw you last night, and the night before. That's more than usual."

"I suppose."

"Does that mean I'm extra interesting all of a sudden, or that life isn't all peaches and cream back at Three C?"

His turn to smile. "Little of both."

“Do me a favor,” she said, and pulled two shot glasses out of the steaming washer. “Lock that door for me.”

Miah rose and did as she asked, flipping the dead bolt. The parking lot was empty, save for his truck.

He returned to the bar to find Raina tilting the bourbon bottle to the glasses. She instructed, “Now drink this.”

“I need to drive home.”

“One little shot won’t hurt you. It’s been two hours since I handed you a beer.”

“Tell me why first.”

She bit her lip, that coy little gesture from this normally brazen woman making Miah’s head spin. He didn’t need the goddamn shot.

“Because I want to ask you something,” she said.

His heart beat quicker as he spoke, a spark of hope flickering in his chest, itching to catch fire. “Something you can’t ask me sober?”

She nodded to his shot and he lifted it. They downed them together.

She set hers aside, staring at the empty glass as she let the sting of the liquor cool, tongue tracing her front teeth. Miah felt that same burn on his own lips, and the fever spread through his neck and chest as her gaze snapped to his.

“There’s been something different lately, hasn’t there?”

Miah froze, unsure if she meant what he hoped she did. What he *prayed* she did. “How do you mean?”

She smiled and leaned on the bar. "You've been looking at me different. And I've noticed because I've always looked at you."

His face flushed hot and all his charm abandoned him. "Have you?" He felt lucky he hadn't stammered those words.

"Of course I have. You're the most handsome man in Fortuity."

"I don't remember being given a tiara."

She laughed. "You, though—you've never really looked at me, not like that. Not aside from the occasional glance down my shirt."

Now he was definitely blushing. Though he couldn't deny it. "Sorry."

"Don't be. Why do you think I wear these?" she asked, plucking at the lace straps of her tank top.

He took a breath, and said, "I guess I have noticed you lately. Different than before."

She stood a little straighter. "Better late than never, I guess."

Was that some kind of confession? A green light? And shit, if it was, what did he want to do about it? What did *she* want to do about it? Should he ask her on a date, or—

Her dark eyes narrowed. "You want to kiss or something?"

Miah paused, then the truth shoved rational thought aside. That shot could have been half the bottle for how woozy he felt. He nodded. "I think I would."

Her smile deepened. "Help me close up, then."

He did, accepting a damp towel, wiping down the tables in a fevered haze,

putting up the stools and chairs in a disembodied rush.

He was going to kiss Raina Harper.

For real, this time, and sober. His friend of twenty years or more.

Christ, was this a terrible idea? Or completely natural?

“Looks good,” she said from behind him.

He turned, finding her drying her hands on her bar towel, approaching him with slow, lazy steps. There was something in her eyes. Something hot and playful he didn't think he'd ever seen there before. Miah swallowed and set the final chair upside-down on its high top.

“So do you,” he said, probably too late for it to even make sense, let alone sound smooth or clever. Raina just smiled, stepping closer, until there were perhaps two paces between the toes of their boots. Without thought, he gave voice to his worries, barely louder than a whisper.

“We about to wreck a good friendship?”

She blinked. “Since when did kissing have that kind of power?”

*Since when does it not?*

Miah had never dated a friend before, and never stayed close with an ex. Too awkward, too . . . too something. Something that made him uncomfortable. Whether you got hurt or did the hurting, how could you get back on equal footing?

Perhaps with a good friend, as he and Raina were, no kiss could undo all those years already invested. Or so he hoped. And a force inside him—an urge

taut and fiery and ready to snap—told him to quit with the worrying, take the chance, and find the fuck out.

He reached out, and he touched her. Put his fingertips to her neck, and slowly, shyly, curled his palm to cup her jaw. Her cheek was soft where his thumb stroked, and he got lost in that tiny touch for long seconds, feeling high. Hypnotized. She clasped his wrist—not stopping him, not urging him, only holding. He freed his fingers to lace them with hers, studying their two hands. He sensed her gaze on his face, but he was lost in the feel of his bare skin against hers.

“I always imagined if this happened,” she murmured, “that we’d be completely shitfaced.”

He laughed, the spell broken, but this new moment was just as fascinating. He met her eyes. “You always imagined this would happen?”

She shrugged. “I wondered, when we were younger. Then I figured you just didn’t feel anything like that for me. But I was always curious about you. About us, and what it would be like if we ever went there, together. But by the time I was twenty-five, I knew how to tell if a guy was into me. And with you, I just never felt it. Not until this week.”

“I didn’t really let myself feel it until recently.”

She touched his hair, tucking an overgrown lock behind his ear. “What changed?”

He didn’t want to bring up her dad’s funeral and the slow, steady evolution

of his feelings, so he fibbed. "Maybe you being away in Vegas made me notice you more once you got back. Plus now's the first time we've both been single in a long while. And I'm not the sort of man who gets designs on other guys' girlfriends."

"No, you're not. And here we are. Both single, like you said. Both *here*." She tilted her face up and her nose brushed his. He felt his brain dissolve and the room fall away. Her lips were there, right there.

He whispered, "You remember the last time we kissed?"

"The only time we've kissed. At that cookout. You were pretty plastered."

"Weren't you?"

She smiled, their noses glancing again when she shook her head. "Not really. And I guess maybe you weren't too drunk to remember."

"It's a little hazy," he admitted. "How were we?"

That smile deepened to a grin and she touched his chest, traced his collar.

"We were pretty fucking hot."

"Even drunk?"

"Oh yes. You can kiss, cowboy."

He swallowed, his pride so inflated it was filling his heart up tight like a balloon. "Good to know."

"It's probably been ten years, though. So feel free to refresh my memory."

And he did. Dove right in. He cradled her head, fingers tangling in her hair, and pressed his lips to hers. He felt that kiss like a lightning strike, like a heat

wave, like a million perfect clichés converging between their bodies.

Her mouth was hungry and he took her cues, tasting her deeply. No place for slow and steady with this fast, wild woman.

They kissed like they'd practiced this for hours, days, years. Like a dance their lips and tongues had mastered and made their own. He felt crazy from it, and let her hear it, moaning as she tugged him closer by the belt. Raina was tall, though he felt every one of the four or so inches he had on her. Felt big in the best way, aggressive like he had to get on top of her, push his body into hers. Unleash these feelings like a caged and angry animal.

Goddamn, no woman had ever done this to Miah before. Not like this. Not from sex, let alone *kissing*. All those things that got him so hot in a new relationship were gathering deep and low in his body. Possession, and familiarity. He knew her, better than any other woman he'd done this with. And he wanted her all to himself. Wanted to be hers, and to call her his in return. Wanted to make her feel all these things with his body.

He held her head, slid his other palm down her back and pulled her close—close enough to register exactly how hard he was when her flat belly pressed along his fly. He groaned against her lips as her pawing hands stroked his arms, his chest, his face.

Suddenly, big as it was, the barroom was too tight. Not intimate—just crowded, even in its emptiness, the high ceiling looming much too close. Miah's claustrophobia always got worse the hotter his body ran. Normally that meant

he was frustrated or overheated from physical labor, but just now it was from pure lust. He needed the open air, and the black sky, and a million stars above them, night chill be damned.

“Come outside,” he murmured, gathering her hair in his hands, aching to bury his nose behind her ear and breathe her in, get drunk off her. Feel her skin against his palms and her nails on his back, hear her voice saying his name as he drove his body into hers, again and again. Fucking crazy.

“What for?” she asked, but her sharp smile said she knew exactly what for.

“For whatever’s supposed to happen between us next.”

She stroked his cheek, dragged her thumb across his lower lip. He caught it in his mouth and drew it deep. That parted her own lips, and dropped her lids low. Low, like the blood flowing south to leave Miah’s cock heavy and hot and hurting.

“Outside?” she echoed.

“Outside. Now.” And if he didn’t goddamn get *inside* her tonight, he was going to lose his ever-loving mind.