

An excerpt from *Give It All*, © Cara McKenna

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*I've got to stop sleeping with Miah.*

Raina shifted under the covers, feeling him all around her. His arm locked to her waist, the warm length of his sleeping body pressed along her back and legs. His bed beneath her, his scent in the pillow under her cheek.

She was surrounded by old smells. Familiar ones. Though strangely, until a few weeks ago, she'd never actually been in Miah's bed. They'd been lovers for a few short, blazing months, two summers back, but the man was claustrophobic. They'd come to know each other's bodies on blankets under the wide-open northeastern Nevada sky, on the grass, and in the bed of his truck . . . Closest she'd ever come to laying him indoors had been the cab of that F-150. She still remembered every moment. The radio had been playing. "*Life in a Northern Town*" had come on, and goose bumps had broken out all over her skin, Miah's fingers on her clit and his mouth on her neck as she'd come.

*This is different*, she reminded herself.

Jeremiah Church's long, strong body was dressed in a tee and shorts, and Raina still wore her jeans and tank and bra.

This sleeping together was strictly literal.

But it really had to stop.

They'd lost a childhood friend six weeks ago—Alex Dunn, a sheriff's deputy. Raina hadn't slept properly since the day she accepted that Alex's death hadn't been the drunk-driving accident everyone had believed it was. The same day, Sheriff Tremblay had been called out and incriminated himself. She'd shut Benji's late that night—three a.m., probably—and even after that, she and Miah had sat together on the bar's front stoop, nursing a whiskey between them. Miah had been too drunk to drive home, and too upset besides.

They'd fallen silent. It should have felt cold. It got down to the forties at night in Fortuity, even now at the close of summer. But Raina hadn't registered the temperature, couldn't even remember the minutes or hours passing, with the two of them just sitting there.

After a long time she'd said, "Well." No other thoughts had come, no lament about the state of their town or the tragedy surrounding their friend.

Miah had said even less. Not a single word. Instead he'd gotten to his feet and taken her hand. He'd led her through the bar to the back stairs, up to the second floor to her apartment. Through the kitchen and den and into her room, where the dawn light was just beginning to slip through the front windows and swallow the aura of the neon sign flickering outside.

He'd thrown the covers wide and she'd taken his lead when he pushed off his boots. Whatever he'd needed, she'd have given. Any persuasion of sex that

might have offered an escape for the both of them. But all he'd done was draw her onto the mattress and held her. Spooned her. Fully dressed. No words, no sex or kissing, just the jerky sound of his uneven breathing against her neck, and his strong arms clinging as though she were the only thing keeping him from drowning.

The same thing, the night after. And the night after that. Then they'd switched to meeting at Three C, Miah's family's cattle ranch, as his work demanded that he get back to his usual routines. And her new routine became driving over there once the bar was closed. She'd find him waiting on the front porch, and he'd lead her inside. Sometimes he held her, sometimes the other way around. Sometimes they lay on their backs, fingers laced on the sheets between them.

It was weird, and probably not especially healthy, and no doubt confusing. But so was everything about their lives just now. She was thirty-two and he was a couple of years older, but all the recent uncertainty had them feeling lost as teenagers.

She took a deep breath, ribs expanding and pressing her into Miah's warmth. Everything was so fucked right now, fucked and shapeless, the mysteries far from solved. But their two bodies were solid, amid the chaos—something to hold on to.

This fraught spooning was what Miah needed, and Raina had gotten herself accustomed to offering far less to men, the past few years. It felt nice, being what

a man needed beyond the mechanical release of sex, for a change. And this particular man deserved good. Which was more than she could say for most of the ones she'd known. Or fucked.

But she really *had* to stop sleeping with him. Last night, he'd whispered to her as they were drifting off, about how she was the only thing that let him sleep. His lips had moved against her neck as he'd said it, and heat had trickled through her. Something in those words or the caress of his mouth had her thinking, *Sooner or later, this need is going to turn carnal*. He was going to want more from her—the things she'd taken away when she broke his heart, two summers ago. The things she was promising now, frankly, by coming back every night. Things she wanted, too, in her body . . . but not any place deep enough to make it okay. Because he wanted far more than Raina had in her to give.

As another dawn rose, staining the sky dark aqua through the skylight above them, Raina's thoughts turned to another man. The near stranger who'd helped her friends find some truth in the shadows obscuring Alex's murder. A man who presented like an entitled prick, but whose reckless actions had been those of a reluctant hero.

The stranger was tall, also. But where Miah smelled of the ranch—of leather and sweat and earth—the other man smelled of civility. Linen and soap, and a hint of cologne that didn't cloy, merely flirted. A man whose jaw was as smooth as Miah's neglected one was now bearded. Whose eyes were palest quartz to Miah's near-black ones; his hair light brown and styled, versus Miah's

overgrown black waves. His voice cultured and British and velvet-dark to Miah's down-home, plain-speaking one. Their accents, their hands, their shoes, their jobs—everything opposed. The Churches were well off—they came from old railroad money on Miah's father's side, and were rarities in that they still managed their ranch; most owners were rich absentees. Though you'd never guess Miah was wealthy, to look at him. He dressed like the ranch hands he oversaw, whereas that other man oozed privilege from every pore. Everything about the two of them was mismatched, but for the way they roused Raina. In that, they were perfect equals.

As the sky grew lighter, her instincts urged her, *Go*. Miah would be waking soon to start his long workday. She always slipped out before he rose, worried he'd try to kiss her good-bye. Worried one kiss would be all it took for them to tear aside this flimsy barrier and find themselves clawing at each other's clothes, hungry hands moving over familiar skin. And tempting as the sex was, it wasn't fair. Because he was a good man, and it meant far more to him than it did to her. He was rare, that way. Sex was an expression of his feelings for a woman.

For Raina, sex was merely the scratching of an itch. And that itch was all she felt, for men. All she *wanted* to feel for them. It made her think of that other man, one too cold to ever get truly close to. A beautiful shell, too glossy-smooth for the creeping vines of attachment to take hold. Safe. The man at her back? Dangerous.

For long minutes she willed herself to wake Miah, to get her balls together

and rip off this Band-Aid, quit leading the man on. But the morning air was cold, his body and the covers so warm. And she was so goddamn tired from not having slept properly in what felt like forever.

But it had to happen.

Miah's arm was draped along her side, his exhalations hot and lazy on the back of her neck. She touched his wrist, stroking softly until he stirred.

"Hey," he murmured, then yawned into her hair.

"I want to talk to you, before you have to start work."

"Talk away."

She took a deep breath. "These past few weeks have been awful."

"Yeah."

"But this has been nice. Us, I mean." She could sense his hopes rising, and realized her wording had been cruel in its kindness. "But it has to stop. It's been simple, but it won't stay that way."

He rolled her over, and suddenly she was losing her footing in this talk, that handsome face like a punch to rearrange her priorities. Even after a few hours' sleep, his breath was sweet. "What do you mean?"

"You and me, pretending like we can just spend night after night in the same bed together, and not take things too far."

He smiled faintly. "Would that really be so awful?"

Reckless, tempting logic. But she knew better than to trust it. "Not at first, no."

“We both know what we’re missing, Raina.” His hand closed around her wrist, and her breathing grew shallow as she let him lead her slowly, so slowly, between their bodies, then cup her palm to the front of his shorts. She swallowed, head swimming.

*Too true. I know exactly what I’m missing.* She could feel precisely that, stiff and hot against her hand. If any other man on the planet tried that shit with her—took her hand and showed her where to put it—she’d have torn him a second asshole. But she trusted Miah implicitly, far more than she trusted herself. She indulged him for a single, incendiary stroke, then gently escaped his grip.

“I won’t lie,” she said softly. “I do miss that. I *want* that, or my body does. But you need things I can’t give you. And you deserve those things.”

“You mean love.”

Intimidated by the eye contact, she drew closer to speak below his ear. “Love, for keeps, whatever you want to call it. Dating, marriage, kids, forever—all that stuff any other girl on earth would die to give you. The most I’m willing to offer you is sex, and I know that’s not enough.” And that was the cruelest part, because she knew how good they were. She wanted him so bad right now her body was begging her mouth to promise him anything, just to feel him inside her again.

He sighed, the noise thin with annoyance, steaming against her temple. “You think I can’t be selfish, too? Can’t make this just about sex?”

“I know you can’t. Not with me, anyhow.”

“Wow. Think that highly of yourself, do you?”

She pulled back to meet those dark eyes. “I’m not blind. I see how you look at me. And I felt what I did to you, when we were together – both the good and the bad.” The wonder of their chemistry, then the aching, dogging grief that tailed the both of them well after she’d broken things off. She kicked away the covers and left the bed. “You’re the most eligible man in Fortuity, cowboy. You should have moved on ages ago.”

“You’re not that easy to replace.”

“Well, try harder. Because this is never going to end with you and me and a farmhouse full of brown-eyed babies, Miah.”

As she pulled on her socks, he asked, “It’s him, isn’t it? Welch.”

She sought his gaze, held it. “No, it’s not.”

“Don’t lie to me. People in this town talk, and I’ve heard from plenty of them, asking me how I feel about the way my ex has been flirting with the developers’ corporate mercenary. The public face of the casino that’s brought nothing to this town so far except death.”

“Those murders have nothing to do with Duncan Welch – he risked his job to help us.”

“Doesn’t change how people think of him, though. And his personality’s not doing him any favors. He keeps strutting around town the way he does, he’ll wind up with worse than the broken tooth Tremblay gave him. You’d be a fool to

get yourself associated with all that.”

“Welch means far less to me than you do, so trust me—my ending things between us, it’s nothing to do with him. It’s about me, and you know it. It always has been. We had the only break-up in history where the ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ bit was true.”

“I’ve seen the way you two talk, in the bar.” Miah sat up. His black hair was ruffled, his arms tan against his dark gray tee. So handsome she had to turn away.

“And he can no doubt see the way you and I look at each other,” she said. “But Welch is nothing to me beyond a customer and a curiosity. But you—you’ve been my friend since we were kids. You’re my ex.” She chanced a quick glance. “The past few weeks we’ve been each other’s therapy. But I’m stopping it, because deep down I know I’m using you, and as good as it’s felt up until now . . . it’s starting to feel shitty.”

Miah seemed to hold in a reply.

“I hope you’re using me, too,” she added, and stepped into her boots, their leather cold and stiff. “Though I’m afraid I know you better than that.” He gave too willingly to possibly know how to exploit anybody.

He swung his legs over the edge of the bed, planting his elbows on his thighs. “Guess we’re going back to bartender and patron again, then.”

She took the elastic off her wrist and snapped it around a sloppy bun. “Bartender and patron—and hopefully friends, for both our sakes. And for the

sake of the club.”

Before this summer, the Desert Dogs had been nothing more than the name they’d called their bygone gang of childhood friends. Back then, they’d spend long summer days hiding from the baking sun in the auto shop, dicking around on motorcycles, thinking high school would go on forever. They were in their thirties now, and life had lost its simplicity. Miah was married to his job, and Raina was tethered to her dad’s bar. Their friend Casey had disappeared to chase after shady money for close to ten years, earning himself a criminal record in the process, and not returning until a few weeks earlier. His older brother, Vince, had done time as well, for recreational felonies. Alex was *dead*. And the mysteries shrouding Fortuity seemed unlikely to lift any time soon, so the four of them—Vince, Casey, Miah, and Raina—had resolved to come together again, but with a purpose now. To protect their town from threats unknown, while the law was preoccupied with the more obvious ones.

Miah didn’t reply, looking more weary than annoyed. She sighed and stepped close; touched his dark hair, laid a kiss on the top of his head. “You always were too good for me, Miah.”

“Says who?”

“Everyone but you, I imagine.”

He caught her wrist, holding it until she met his eyes. “Whatever you are to me,” he said, “it counts for a lot. I ever hear about you going with some man who has the nerve to say that to you—that you’re not good enough for him or for

anybody else – I'll have more than words for him."

She smiled sadly as he let her go. "I know you would. And I know I'm a fool for running from what you've got to offer. Again."

His lips thinned to a tired smirk. "You always were good at running."

She nodded, throat tight and hurting. "Watch me go." She checked for her keys, grabbed her helmet off Miah's dresser. As her fingers closed around the door's cool knob, she heard words at her back, nearly too soft to make out.

"You know I will."

The old farmhouse was quiet save for the muted sounds of Miah's mom in the kitchen. She'd be starting the coffee, probably making pancakes or eggs and bacon or some other perfect, wholesome breakfast, fit for her hardworking husband and son. Some meal Raina never would have made as good as her, had she ever let herself get deep enough with Miah to wind up a cattleman's wife. A Mrs. Church. She wasn't built for that shit. For the softer sorts of nurturing. She'd been birthed by some flighty facsimile of jailbait, raised by a bachelor bar owner who'd needed as much caretaking as he'd offered. She had zero qualifications to be the woman Miah had coming to him . . . and zero interest in earning them. She slipped out the back, skirting the far side of the house like a coward, in no mood to run into the warm and lovely woman who'd never, ever be her mother-in-law.

Her little Honda growled to life between her legs in the cold dawn air, and as she exited the ranch's big front lot, the grinding of rubber on gravel felt like the only noise in the world.

The wind bit, waking her quicker than coffee ever could. The closer she drew to downtown and home, the heavier the guilt grew.

Any sane girl who wanted something real, something good, would've taken what Miah had offered two years ago. Stayed with a man whose body roused theirs and whose nature promised stability. They'd have fallen past lust and into love with him, got married maybe, had a kid or two, settled down for a life of relentless reliability. Raina had been given the chance to pick a guy worthy of acting as her anchor, and then what? Resent him for taking away her freedom? Or, worse—lose him, maybe, as she'd lost her dad? Care enough to cling, then lose him to an accident or another woman or a midlife crisis or who knew what? Miah was steady, but he was still a man.

“I can make you happy,” he'd told her once, back when they were lovers. “Why won't you just *let* me?”

She hadn't answered him. Hadn't been honest and simply said, “I don't want a man who'll make me happy. I want to feel relief when things end, not grief. Why would anyone choose grief?”

Regrets were ugly, but they scattered like ashes soon enough.

It was attachment you had to look out for. Affection. Love. There was a certain line, where emotions were concerned, past which experiences ripened to memories, and it couldn't be passed over lightly.

Love had bones to it. Solid, rattling things bent on cluttering you up long after the soft parts melted into the ether. You had to carry those bones around

with you. Make room for them, dust them, trip over them just when you thought you'd finally misplaced them for good.

She parked behind the bar and headed for the back door.

Sex and moments of easy companionship were enough—just don't let those bones grow in. Keep it soft and shapeless with no skeleton, no means to follow you when the time comes to walk away.

Raina stepped across the very threshold where she'd been left as a baby, and into a thousand dusty memories of her dad. She shut the door behind her, feeling interred.

Good God, what was she doing here? She should have sold this place and moved on three years ago, after he'd died, quit surrounding herself with nostalgia for the only man she'd ever truly loved, and given these wounds a chance to finally heal.

There was still time. A flashy new bar and grill was coming to town in the next year, ahead of the casino, and only a block west of Benji's, on Station Street. The outsiders would be tearing down the derelict old tack shop and building from scratch. They had big money, and big plans, and undoubtedly stood a better chance at attracting the future gaming tourists than Raina would. They'd serve food, with a side of clean, friendly, faux-rustic charm. That basically left Raina cornering the Friday night fistfight market, with not nearly enough profits coming in to fund the overhaul she'd need to put in a kitchen, hire more staff, and undertake the renovation necessary to stay competitive.

And why bother? This place had been her dad's project, not hers. He'd opened it just before she showed up, and with Raina's mom MIA, he'd struggled to nurture his child and his business in tandem. This bar had been her home her entire life . . . but now it was her burden, a constant reminder of how badly she missed her father. A reminder, too, that she was still cleaning up after him, still keeping his dreams afloat, and her own on hold. It was a haunted place, its heartbeat silenced. She could sell it, and handily. Developers would be scrambling to buy up commercial real estate as the Eclipse's grand opening drew closer.

She could find a new place to call home. A new town. A new life. It wasn't too late . . . was it?

*Maybe this is your home now,* a voice in her head whispered. *The boneyard itself.*

*Can't you hear the clattering, girl?*

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Duncan Welch eyed the vodka and tonic sitting before him on the bar. His second of the night, and the sun had only just dipped behind the mountains to the west and dunked the town in premature dusk.

A troubling development, one that had arrived right along with his recent professional worries.

For all intents and purposes, Duncan was on probation. He worked for

Sunnyside Industries, the development company that was designing and eventually running the Eclipse, the casino slated to open in two years, here in Fortuity. He was Sunnyside's legal counsel, and more to the point, their fixer. Up until six weeks ago, he'd been a model worker. Up until he'd met Vince Grossier, king of the local roughnecks, a man on a mission to prove that his friend had been murdered. Duncan had been drawn in to run interference between Grossier and the people at Virgin River Contracting, but then circumstances had grown complicated. He'd exploited his position to uncover information that led to very real suspicions of criminal activity on the part of VRC. Sunnyside couldn't in good conscience fire him, not when his trespass had resulted in the exposure of a murder cover-up. But they weren't pleased. And Duncan had never been in this position before—never given an employer cause to chastise him. Having his reputation damaged made him deeply uneasy . . . had him wondering if the careful façade he'd built around himself these past twenty years might be showing cracks.

He took a deep drink.

At least he'd cut down on the Klonopin, in recent weeks. One vice was human; two was a crutch.

He eyed his bartender. Make that three vices.

Raina Harper. So not Duncan's style, yet he'd grown all but infatuated with her. He was tall, and so was she—perhaps five foot eight—though their similarities ended there. She was dark—wavy dark hair, dark eyes, tan skin.

Black tee or tank, always, and black lace tattooed over one shoulder, like a veil that had slipped from her face and caught there. Long legs in tight jeans and cowboy boots. She was probably thirty-one or -two to Duncan's thirty-eight, yet in some ways she made him feel hopelessly childish. She'd probably shot a gun, ridden her share of horses, taken dares, placed bets, crashed a car, fucked more people than Duncan ever would, and with far more abandon.

She made him want things he'd never given much thought to. Noisy, messy sex; nails raking his back. Instincts he didn't trust any more than he trusted his newfound two-drink minimum.

He shifted on his stool, trousers feeling tight.

Raina was the owner of this charming-cum-rabid establishment, Benji's Saloon, currently Fortuity's sole watering hole. An old wooden whale of a place, its thick rafters ribbing the high ceiling, a dozen world-weary Jonahs gathered around the jukebox in the so-called old-timers' corner, swapping tales from the bygone golden days. They'd be off soon, replaced by the next generation—noisy, lively packs of ranch workers who drank, and presumably mated, with the boundless, indiscriminate enthusiasm of youth.

Raina's monopoly on the town's nightlife would change when the casino was up and running . . . provided it ever got finished. Construction had been halted for a month now while the feds investigated Virgin River for widespread corruption. With progress frozen, Duncan didn't have nearly enough to occupy him. And the idleness chafed at him like a cilice.

He watched Raina chatting with patrons at the other end of the bar.

Another woman was working—Abilene. A girl, really. She was plump and short and angelic, the perfect foil to her employer. She came over as Duncan set his empty tumbler on the wood.

“Another?”

He smiled. “I’ll wait.” He let his eyes drift to Raina’s profile. “Not that I find anything lacking in your bartending skills.”

Abilene smiled back. “I don’t blame you. Those ones she mixes you must be, like, two-thirds vodka.”

“Perhaps she thinks the tonic is a garnish.”

Abilene was called away by another customer, and Duncan went back to studying the unlikely object of his fixation. The two of them made about as much sense as Duncan made in this bar, with its gritty floors, dusty rancher clientele, and ever-flowing river of watery domestic beer. Then again, none of the things that fixated Duncan had ever made much sense to him. Perhaps Raina was simply par for the course.

Plus, he doubted anything was ever going to happen between them. He was merely an amusement to her— an obnoxious, entitled outsider who tipped like an overzealous ATM, fit only for toying with.

Which was perfect, really, as Duncan quite enjoyed the sensation.

Abilene passed by her boss, saying something to Raina that Duncan couldn’t hear. But he could guess, as the woman turned and headed straight for

him.

Slender fingers circled his empty glass, but she didn't take it away just yet.

"Another?"

"Please."

"Two's usually your limit. Do I need to stage an intervention?" She was teasing—hers was a bar where men proudly boasted of downing a dozen shots just to celebrate the close of a workweek.

"I'm afraid all the recent inactivity doesn't suit me," Duncan returned.

"Poor baby. I'd kill for a night off. Don't think I've had one in three years. But even if I got one, I'd probably spend it tattooing."

Ah yes, her side gig. Duncan rankled inside his expensive suit jacket to imagine her hands inching over strange men's naked skin.

"At least you're still getting paid," she said. "Want to feel bad for somebody, save your sorrows for the dozens of construction guys who're twiddling their thumbs for nothing, waiting to find out if they'll ever get to go back to work at all."

She mixed his drink and he tipped her outrageously, then watched as she gathered the empties scattered around the counter. The vodka was working, now. He felt warm and loose, urges and emotions slipping out from under the cap he kept on his vulnerabilities, to flurry about in his blood. To make him hungry. The vodka, or the lust? In either case, he ought not to trust the way he'd recently begun gravitating toward both. Yet here he was. Night after night.

Raina had an ex, one she was still close with. Or at least Duncan thought Jeremiah Church was her ex . . . the way the man looked at Duncan sometimes, he had to wonder if there was still something simmering there. Though apparently not anything strong enough to keep Raina from flirting with Duncan, the virtual friction between them so intense it was a wonder their clothes didn't catch fire. The question marks surrounding her and Church had gone from poking him to clawing at him as of late, however. The hazards of an idle brain. He was itchy for answers, wanted them even more than he wanted to maintain the flimsy illusion that he couldn't care less who warmed her sheets.

He made it ten minutes—half his drink and three laps of Raina around the bar—before he blurted, “So, you and Jeremiah Church.”

She batted her lashes, posture changing utterly. She cocked her hip and chin, subtle as a cat hunkering down to stalk a mouse hole. He could just about see her tail twitching. “Yes?” she asked sweetly.

“What exactly happened between you two that he gives me a look most men would reserve for their mother's ax murderer?”

She shrugged, graceful collarbone flashing beneath two layers of black lace—the straps of her top and the ink decorating her skin. “Guess my side effects include withdrawal or something.”

“You turn a tame man feral.”

She busied herself stacking nearby empties. “Don't all women?”

*Not the ones I'm used to.* “You dumped him, I take it?”

She smirked. "I like you drunk, Duncan. Makes me suspect you might even be half human, under all that smooth, icy snakeskin."

*A snake, am I?* How terribly Edenic. Though Raina had clearly bitten into that apple ages ago, savored every scrap of its flesh, and spat the seeds at her jilted lovers' feet.

It didn't matter that he'd helped her and her friends get to the truth surrounding the death of Alex Dunn. Or that Duncan had gotten pistol-whipped in the process—by the sheriff, right before Tremblay attempted to escape. That had been a month ago. Duncan's broken tooth had been fixed and the stitches removed from his lip, and once again he was back to being a suspect outsider in Fortuity. He'd earned the cursory nod of greeting from Vince Grossier, but that didn't change the fact that he was the face of the company that was bringing a massive resort casino to their sleepy town. He was gifted with dirty looks daily by any number of distrustful Fortuitans, and he knew what people called him. The names ran the gamut from *faggot* to *cop killer*. The former didn't bother him, but the latter stung. He'd risked a lot to expose Alex Dunn's actual murderer, but to some of these locals, his mere affiliation with the casino made him complicit. Guilt by association. He was probably taking a risk even drinking here, but if there was one thing Duncan Welch didn't abide, it was intimidation. Especially when it tried to come between a man and his vices.

Duncan's image didn't do him any favors, either. He was corporate. He was overdressed, he was a British expat, he was wealthy. He was cold and clean and

calculating. He was wrong here, in every possible way. Wrong for Raina Harper's bed, as wrong as her ex was right. And yet *ex* was the operative word, wasn't it?

He sipped his dwindling drink and the alcohol spurred him to tell her, "I don't think your ex is over you."

"That's his problem, not mine."

"And you accuse me of being cold."

She grabbed some bills left by another customer and organized the register as she spoke. "Maybe we're not so different, then, Duncan. In any case, I'm perfectly happy on my own."

"Handsome, rugged cowboys need not apply?"

She smiled, the gesture indulgent. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you're jealous."

"Simply curious."

"Well, I don't need a man, handsome or otherwise. Not for more than a night or two. I'm already everything a woman wants to be—a mother to everyone who spills their drunken souls all over this wood," she said, stroking the bar in front of him. "A sister to my closest friends. A lover when it suits me."

"A corruptor," he added, lifting his glass.

"That also suits me."

"I can appreciate your desire for impermanence."

She smirked at that. "I'm sure you can. I bet you're counting down the days

until the casino's built and you get to book it the fuck out of Fortuity, move on to the next job."

"Indeed. Though it'd be unfortunate if the construction's stalled indefinitely and I have to leave two years sooner than planned, with nothing to show for it. Just a load of unfilled foundations drilled into your foothills."

He anticipated her reply, something to the tune of glee at the idea of the casino never arriving to take over her hometown. But she surprised him, frowning thoughtfully. "You know, it seems like an odd match for a man like you—working on the Eclipse. Luxury resort or not, gambling seems too seedy to be your style."

"I'll stoop to most any adjective you can think of, if the pay is good. I'm not bothered what my bosses are planning." He sipped his drink. "Casino, water park, megachurch—it's all the same to me. I came here only to do my job, and to do it well. My commitments are about as personal as a whore's."

She smiled. "A high-class one, no doubt . . . Shame my town hasn't treated you too gentle, so far."

Duncan's tongue went instinctively to the smooth resin that now composed half of his left front tooth as Raina was called away to attend to other customers. He watched her at it.

Her assumptions about him offered some comfort. It seemed he still appeared to be in control, above it all. In truth, his life was feeling anything but certain. And it went far beyond all this boredom, as everyone waited for Virgin

River to get the green light to recommence construction.

He tongued his imposter tooth again, feeling a kinship with it. The both of them were imitations. Passing for perfect but underneath . . . broken.