

ROOTER

Book one in the Double H Romance Series



"A tale of love
and deadly
obsession."

Teiran Smith

ROOTER

ROOTER
A NOVEL

TEIRAN SMITH

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DEDICATION

Scott, thank you for believing in me and telling me to never give up. I love you.

Mom, I love you. Not a day goes by that I don't think of you.

THE BEGINNING

I am not a fan of extreme heat, humidity, or sweat. And yet here I am on a record breaking hot Mid-May Michigan afternoon sunbathing in my backyard. Not because I want to, but because even though it's eighty nine degrees of miserable outside, it's one hundred and eleven degrees of hell inside my house.

The old house I share with my roommates, Miranda and Mike, isn't equipped with central air. And even if it was, we couldn't afford to run it. So I figure if I'm going to be sweating profusely, I might as well get a tan while I'm doing it.

The only respite I receive from the sweltering heat comes from the overgrown blades of grass that tickle and cool the soles of my feet.

Our lawn desperately needs to be mowed, but it's not my turn. I've mowed it two weeks in a row. I'm always picking up the slack of my roommates. If not for me we'd be living in squalor. I don't know if it's because they don't mind the filth or if they're just that lazy. But I refuse to mow this lawn one more time out of turn.

I hear my favorite sound and turn to watch Rooter pull up to his garage on his motorcycle.

I live for the sound of Rooter's Harley when he comes home. He's lived next to me for a little over a year and we've never met. We've exchanged a few nods in passing, but nothing more. I can't muster the courage to introduce myself.

The fact that he's a one percenter might have something to do with that. He's a member of the Double H Motorcycle Club, formerly known as Halsey Hellions. Locals claim the Mayor and the Chief of Police are on their payroll; that the club owns this town.

I snooped around and found out Rooter is the club President's son. According to the patch on his vest he is the Sergeant at Arms. The SAA is third in the MC hierarchy, under the President and V.P. Word on the street is he's a "vicious motherfucker." There's a story he nearly beat a man to death with his bare hands.

When I look at Rooter, I see the tough exterior, but I also see something... gentle. It's been said that it's what a man does when he's alone that determines his true character. Rooter plays ball with his pit bull, Dopey, works out and runs on a regular basis, and has a carefree, childlike laughter. He smiles often; and in his smile I see innocence.

It's his smile that draws me to him.

I wonder what it would feel like to be the reason for his smile.

I yearn to be the reason for his smile.

Rooter opens his back door and lets Dopey out. The dog dashes to the giant red maple tree to pee and then lunges at him almost knocking him down. Rooter laughs, picks up the dog's ball and throws it. For the millionth time I wonder what his real name is.

"Goddamn it, Sophie!"

My reverie is broken by my undesirable roommate, Mike. He's so freaking annoying. I snap my head in his direction. "What?"

Mike is a for real dickhead. I've known him most of my life. Miranda has been my best friend since I was five and he's her older

brother. Once upon a time he and I were good friends, but I can't stand him anymore.

I've asked Miranda repeatedly to kick him out, but she refuses. She claims he can't make it on his own; that he's unstable from the death of their parents, both of whom passed away last year. I don't buy it. I think now he's just an asshole; a shame because he used to be a nice guy.

"I was supposed to be at work a half hour ago!" Mike complains. I roll my eyes. "Then it sounds like you're late."

"No shit!" He waves his hand at me. "You knew I had to work tonight!"

"What's your point?" I hold out my arms to inspect the color. I burn easily, but because I want to get a tan I didn't bother to apply sunblock.

"Did it occur to you to wake me up?"

He's right, I knew, and I could've woken him up, but his work schedule isn't my concern. Nothing about him concerns me. "Um, last time I checked, I'm not an alarm clock, or your mother."

Shit. I shouldn't have said that last part about his mother. That was cruel.

Mike's face turns a deep shade of red and the vein in his forehead protrudes. "Worthless, fucking cunt!"

He goes in and slams the door. He's hated me ever since I shot him down when he told me he had feelings for me. Almost a year has passed, and the time has done nothing to soften his attitude toward me.

I turn back in my chair to find Rooter glaring at our back door before turning his attention to me. I'm mortified and my heart pounds wildly. This is not the first impression I was hoping to make. Of all the ways I'd hoped to get his attention, this is not one of them. I raise my hand to wave because I don't know what else to do.

Rooter carries himself with confidence, head held high, and shoulders back as he strides toward our fence. “Everything okay?” He asks.

“Yeah, he’s just a dick.”

I figure now is a good time to introduce myself. I take a deep breath and get up from the lawn chair to meet him at the fence. The sweeping motion of Rooter’s eyes as he looks me up and down reminds me I’m wearing my neon yellow string bikini. I try to appear confident though I’m not. It takes all my strength to keep steady on my feet.

“So I’ve gathered.”

I extend my hand and hope he doesn’t notice it’s shaking. “I’m Sophie, sorry about that.”

Up close, Rooter appears even more youthful than I’d thought. A complete contradiction to the serious expression he wears. His face is smooth and flawless, unlike most of his biker friends. His complexion is dark, not necessarily from a tan, indicating a possible Latino heritage and he has a chiseled, square jaw. He’s taller than I realized, which compared to my considerable height is a good thing. I’d put him at six three, possibly taller. He’s strikingly muscular, though not bulky and his dark brown hair is cropped close, though not quite buzzed. A trail of tribal tattoos cover his right arm; disappearing underneath the short sleeve of his black t-shirt.

“No worries,” he says and takes my hand for a quick shake. His hand is rough and sturdy as it clasps mine. “I’m Rooter.”

Damn. I was hoping for his real name.

I hear Mike’s repugnant voice again. “Where the fuck are my black jeans?”

I turn to my back door to face the bane of my existence once more. When he sees I’m conversing with the badass one percenter who lives next to us, he turns pale white. He looks to Rooter, then

back to me and softens his expression.

“Why would I know where your jeans are?” I ask with my hand on my hip.

“Because you did laundry after me and I had left them in the dryer.”

I shift my weight from my left leg to my right and cross my arms. “Well, they weren’t in the dryer when I used it.”

“Then where are they?”

I huff, tired of this conversation. “I don’t know, Mike. I don’t keep track of your shit.”

“Bitch,” he mutters under his breath, goes back in and slams the door.

I turn back to Rooter. His jaw is clenched. It’s sexy.

“Are you sure everything is okay?” He asks without taking his eyes from my back door.

I wave my hand casually. “He’s just a blowhard.”

Rooter turns his gaze to me. His right hand is balled into a tight fist. “Seems he could use a lesson in manners.”

Rooter, a badass biker, teaching anyone manners seems ironic. I roll my eyes and nod in agreement.

“Look, Sophie,” I like how it sounds when he says my name, “you don’t know me, but if he ever gets out of hand,” he motions to his house, “I’m right here, just let me know.”

A smile crosses my lips. I didn’t expect that. “Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“I’m serious.” He looks me square in the eyes. “I take that shit seriously.” His phone rings which seems to irk him with the way he snatches it from his back pocket. When he looks at the screen his expression conveys it’s an important phone call.

“It was nice meeting you, Rooter,” I say and back away, excusing myself so he can answer the call.

“You, too, Sophie.” He looks me up and down again. “Remember what I said.” He smirks before answering the phone and walking away.

He smiled at me!

Oh my God.

He smiled at me!

I'll never be the same.

And I'm not. A few days have passed and I haven't run into Rooter once. I'm like an adrenaline junkie looking for her next fix; constantly looking out the window for him or listening for the roar of his Harley. His schedule isn't at all conducive to mine. He works days and I have class every weekday except Wednesday and wait tables at the Grand four nights a week.

It's not until a few days later, on Saturday, that I see him again. I'm getting into my car, headed to work when he and one of his biker friends pull into his driveway. I've seen his friend before. He comes around a lot. According to his patch, his name is Bear. He's scary looking; hulk-ish, with a beard and he never smiles. Not even when he laughs.

Rooter waves. “Hey, Sophie.”

I wave back. “Hey, Rooter.”

No smile. Damn.

After a long, hard shift I pull into the driveway a little before one in the morning. Saturday's are always busy, but tonight was one for the books. The local DA rented the private room for a party with his hoity toity friends. Of course, I was assigned to it. I'm always assigned to the jerks. Randy, my boss, says it's because I'm pretty and it helps keep them in line.

I'm not that pretty. I'm too tall, with a lanky, athletic build. My

hair is straight and so dark it's almost black. I have a baby face complete with dimples and blue eyes. I'm twenty one, but look fifteen. Not exactly a guy's dream come true.

The DA and his friends were complete chauvinistic jerks. They treated me like a lesser life form simply because of my sex and profession.

The highlight of the evening was when one of the men tripped me—I'm not convinced it wasn't on purpose—causing me to spill water on the DA, who ripped me a new one. I spent more than half my shift serving them and the bastards didn't even leave a tip. Water incident aside, I killed myself making sure everything was perfect. Their meals were cooked to order, and they never had to wait on a drink. The DA left a note telling me what a shitty waitress I am and that I need to work on my dismal personality.

Saturday's are when I make the majority of my money for the week. Saturdays pay my rent. This one is going to severely cripple my bank account.

Rooter's unexpected voice scares the shit out of me. I screech and nearly climb the tree when he says my name. I turn and find him sitting in his screened in porch. He's always there when I get home from work, but this is the first time he's ever acknowledged me upon arrival. He chuckles and apologizes for scaring me. With a laugh like that, I forgive him at once.

"Hey, Rooter." I wave.

Rooter points at my house. "Your friend, Mike, has been on-a-tear tonight."

"He's not my friend," I point out. I want it to be perfectly clear I'm not romantically linked to that jerk.

I peer at the house. Mike probably got drunk and took some Xanax. It's been his thing lately and every time he does it, he turns into a gigantic asshole.

“You might not want to go in there,” Rooter warns.

I listen for a ruckus. There’s nothing.

He continues. “They’ve been quiet for the past five minutes, but it’s been like that all night. He screams, she screams back then it gets quiet again.”

I rest my head on the roof of my car. I have nowhere to go at this hour. I’m drained and all I want is to pass out in my bed. I don’t have the patience to deal with this shit.

No choice but to face it. Might as well get it over with. I stand tall and straighten my shoulders. “Thanks for the heads up.”

“If you have any trouble, I’ll be here.”

“I appreciate it,” I say and lumber toward the house.

When I open the front door the smell of marijuana and stale alcohol assault my nostrils. The only light in the living room comes from our twenty year old television. Mike is on the couch playing video games. Not surprising. It’s all he does when he’s not working. Hell, I’m surprised he manages to hold down a job. He’s not the most motivated person in the world these days.

It’s a shame. Back in high school, Mike was the most popular guy, and was voted most outgoing. He didn’t know a stranger. He was the quarterback and captain of the football team, an avid runner, and very into fitness. Laughter followed him everywhere he went. With shaggy dark blonde hair, gentle dark blue eyes, and a bright smile, Mike was every girl’s dream. Although I wasn’t romantically interested in him, even I found him attractive. He’s still attractive. He’s not as active as he once was, but he still works out and lifts weights, which has bulked him up considerably. It’s his ugly attitude and new found drug addiction I find repulsive.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” he slurs, angrily.

“I’m tired, and really not in the mood.” I roll my eyes and march past him toward the staircase.

“Bitch, I’m talking to you!”

“Sleep it off,” I snipe and start up the stairs.

When I hear footsteps coming after me I run. I make it to my room just in time to slam the door shut and lock it. I push my desk chair under the door knob for added security.

“Move out,” he screams and pounds on my door.

“Leave me alone!” I scream back.

This isn’t the first time he has yelled at me to move out, but it’s the first time he chased me down to confront me.

“Mike!” Miranda yells. “Go to bed, dammit!”

“I’m not putting up with her shit anymore. She has to move out.”

“If anyone should leave it’s you,” she says. “So shut the hell up and go to bed!”

I hear a thump, followed by Miranda’s cry. Mike’s an asshole, for sure, but it’s the first time he’s ever laid a hand on one of us. I start to open the door but think twice about it. I can’t help her if he beats the shit out of both of us.

“Miranda,” I shout and lean on the door. “Are you okay?”

“Shut up, bitch,” Mike growls. “You’re next.”

“I’m calling the police,” I say and dig through my purse for my phone.

Both of them yell at me not to make the call.

Fear creeps up my spine as Mike kicks and punches my door. “Bitch, open this door or I’ll bust it down.”

I dial 911. He continues to scream obscenities and pound on my door while I tell the operator what is happening. The operator stays on the line with me until the police arrive. The moment they put Mike in cuffs he starts crying and says he’s sorry.

I file a report and the police take Mike into custody for the night. At Miranda’s urging, I don’t press charges. Rooter watches from his front porch as Mike is taken away in the squad car.

Once the cops leave with Mike, Miranda and I sit on the sofa in the living room. I glance at the old fashioned wooden clock on the wall. It's two thirty. I rub my face, exasperated.

"This can't continue, Miranda."

Her shoulders are hunched and her elbows rest on her knees. "I know."

"I don't think you do," I counter. "He's been like this for almost a year. Now it's turned physical. I won't live like this."

"He's had issues ever since mom died. You know that."

I roll my eyes. Here come the usual excuses. "Maybe so, but it doesn't give him a license to attack us."

She cocks her head. Her eyes are sad and tired. "What do you want me to do? Put him out on the street?"

Brother or not I can't understand why she puts up with him. "Yes. That's what I want. He's a grown man who knows right from wrong. He needs to be held accountable for his actions."

"I can't throw him out with nowhere to go."

I take a deep breath and sit up straight. "It's either him or me."

Her eyes go wide, full of shock and fear. "You can't leave," she begs. "You're the only one I can count on. I can't afford this house on my own."

She says on her own because Mike rarely makes rent.

The house is her childhood home. Her mom left it to her when she died. Her parent's had taken out a second mortgage out on it before her dad passed. The small inheritance her mom left behind, after burial fees, wasn't enough to cover the entire loan. Miranda was left with a seven hundred dollar a month mortgage payment. She was a full-time college student who worked part-time when it happened. Now she works full-time and takes classes over the internet.

"It's him or me," I reiterate with crossed arms.

I'm putting on a good show, but I won't leave. I can't. I'm a full-time college student working part-time. I can't afford my own place. I have no parents and I've never met my only brother. All of my friends are in the same predicament as me. I have nowhere else to go.

"I think going to jail will scare him straight," she rationalizes.

For both our sakes, I hope she's right, though I seriously doubt it.

Later that morning I sit on the sofa and drum my fingers anxiously on the end table while watching a lame B movie when Miranda walks in with Mike.

He looks at me with a contrite expression as he stands before me. "I'm really sorry, Soph," he says.

I don't buy it. "The only thing you're sorry about is going to jail."

"That isn't true," he pleads. "I had way too much to drink, which I'm quitting by the way. No more alcohol or pills." He crosses his heart. "I promise. I really am sorry."

Bullshit. "For your sake, I hope you quit the drugs and drinking. You're ruining your life. But as for your apology, I don't believe a word of it."

I snatch my soda from the table and go to my room. Not five minutes later, the doorbell rings, followed by a loud commotion in the living room. I rush down the stairs, taking them two at a time.

Miranda stands in the far left corner screaming. Blood is smeared on Mike's cheek as Rooter pins him to the wooden floor.

FEELINGS & ACCUSATIONS

“**Y**ou think you’re a man?” Rooter growls and smashes Mike’s face against the grain of the wood.

Mike whimpers in response. A pitiful sound. I’m almost embarrassed for him.

“Real men don’t hit women!” Rooter roars and digs his knee into Mike’s back between the shoulder blades. “If you ever so much as raise your voice to either of these girls, I’ll hit you so fucking hard you’ll dribble for the rest of your life!”

In one swift motion Rooter yanks Mike up to his feet keeping a hold of his hands. I stand in shocked silence. I’ve never seen or heard anything so menacing in my life. Or sexy. I shouldn’t be turned on right now, but damn I am. Rooter and I lock eyes as Miranda continues to scream.

“Quiet,” Rooter tells her, still looking at me. “Apologize to them,” he snarls into Mike’s ear.

“I’m sorry,” Mike says, his voice trembling.

“Be specific,” Rooter insists and squeezes Mike’s wrists causing him to grimace.

Mike looks at Miranda. “I’m sorry I hit you.” Then he turns to me. “And I’m sorry for being a dick to you all the time.”

“Tell them it won’t happen again,” Rooter demands.

Humiliation swims in Mike’s eyes. “I promise it won’t happen again.”

When Rooter lets go of his wrists, Mike dashes to Miranda’s side.

Rooter looks at me. “You make sure to let me know if he pulls anymore shit on either of you.”

I nod and watch as he turns and leaves without another word.

I am breathless and my mouth hangs open as I stare at the front door with disbelief. *Did that really just happen?*

Mike runs up the stairs and slams his bedroom door, jarring the entire house. I almost feel sorry for him. Almost.

Miranda looks at me, her eyes bulging from their sockets and asks, “What the hell was that?”

“I have no idea,” I lie. Rooter told me he’d be there if I needed him, but I hadn’t expected him to come along and handle the situation on his own.

Miranda darts up the stairs after Mike. I hear Rooter’s motorcycle roar to life followed by him speeding away. After several minutes of pounding on Mike’s door, begging him to open up and talk to her, Miranda gives up. A moment later she sits next to me on the sofa.

“He really is sorry, Soph. It’s all he talked about on the way home.”

Miranda is hands down, the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen. She has an exotic appearance to her which most blonde’s lack. Her face is heart shaped with flawless tan skin, a button nose and full, pouty lips. The exact opposite of me, she’s short. Petite, yet curvaceous in all the right places. Men and women alike drool over her bust size. I call her a “mini Jessica Rabbit.”

I gape at her and wonder how she can possibly believe him. Her warm brown eyes plead with me to forgive Mike. Most of the time, her puppy dog face wins me over, but not this time.

I'm sure Mike vomited apologies on their way here. And he probably promised to change and be better and to never, ever attack us again. It's what he always does. He'll act nice for a few days and then *bam*, dickhead Mike will be back just like that.

She constantly defends him and I can't understand why. I willfully gave him the benefit of the doubt when it first began. Both of his parents had just died unexpectedly, I'd rejected him when he admitted he was in love with me. But at twenty three he's a grown man who should know right from wrong and be willing to take responsibility for his actions and for his life.

My life hasn't been a cake walk by any means. In my opinion, his problems don't even compare to mine, yet I don't treat people like shit or attack them. What makes it worse is most of the time he appears to feel justified in his actions.

"I don't care." I don't say it to be mean or to piss her off, I'm just unwilling to lie.

Miranda pulls her eyebrows together in a frown. "That's a messed up thing to say."

"But it's honest. How many times are you going to allow him to lash out and get off with a simple apology?"

The afternoon sun leaks into the house illuminating dust on the old hardwood floors. I want to remind Miranda it's her turn to clean them, but now isn't the time.

She sits upright and crosses her arms. "As many times as I have to, he's my brother."

I shake my head in exasperation. "Have you taken a look in the mirror?" I ask. The right side of her mouth is swollen and bruised. "I won't allow him to do that to me and get away with it."

She waves her hands in the direction of Rooter's house. "Is that why that guy came here today? Did you send him here?"

My mouth falls open. How can my best friend of sixteen years

think I'd do such a thing? She can't possibly know me at all if she thinks this of me. "Of course not!"

Mike comes rushing down the stairs. He stops in front of the sofa and points at me. He must've been eavesdropping. "Bullshit!" He hollers. "Admit it. You sent that goon here to scare me."

"No, I didn't!" I protest. "But from the look on your face when he was here, I'd say you were pretty fucking scared."

"If you didn't send him, why was he here?" Miranda asks calmly.

My head twists in her direction. As I open my mouth to respond Mike interrupts.

"Because she's fucking him!" He answers for me.

Miranda shoots me a questioning glance.

I stand and face Mike head on, infuriated by their accusations. "I am *not* fucking him." My voice escalates with each word. "I don't even know him."

"Lie," Mike growls and stares me down, his chest rising and falling with rapid breaths. "I caught you flirting with him the other day."

Miranda's eyes dart back and forth between the two of us.

"I wasn't flirting with him." I put my hands on my hips. "He wanted to make sure I was okay after you screamed at me."

"Why would he care if he doesn't know you?" He asks through gritted teeth.

I sigh, tired of this conversation. "I don't know, maybe it's because he's a decent person who doesn't like to see girls being bullied by guys."

Mike throws his head back and lets out a boisterous laugh. "He *is* a bully! He's Double H!"

He's a master at deflecting. It's just like him to take the fact I've just called him a bully and put it on someone else instead.

"That doesn't make him a bully," I counter.

“Right,” he snorts. “You’re obsessed with him so you choose to ignore all the stories about them.”

“That’s just it!” I yell and throw my hands in the air. “They’re stories. Rumors. We don’t know if they’re true.” I point at his face. “You on the other hand, *are* a bully. You’re mean to me and Miranda all the time. *That* is a fact!”

“Stop it!” Miranda wails. She puts her hands up in protest and steps in between us. “Enough! This isn’t helping anything.”

Mike points back at me. “I don’t want her here if she’s seeing that guy,” he commands. “He’s dangerous.”

“I think you’re dangerous,” I counter.

“I said stop it!” Miranda screams at the top of her lungs. She turns to me, takes a deep breath, and speaks calmly. “Please let me talk with Mike alone. Will you wait in your room for me?”

Fine with me. I’m finished with this conversation. I stalk up the stairs to my room and slam the door behind me.

My adrenaline surges. It’s impossible to sit still so I pace back and forth. How do I always end up in situations defending myself against things I have nothing to do with? I raise my shaking palms to my temples, fingers splayed.

The sound of Mike’s voice as he hollers grates on my nerves. After everything he’s put me through this year I’ve come to truly despise him.

Living here isn’t working out. It hasn’t been working out for a while. If Miranda wants to baby Mike and put up with his crap for the rest of her life that’s her problem. I don’t want it to be mine any longer.

I’d give anything to have enough money to stand on my own two feet. Maybe I can fit in another job. I wouldn’t have any life, but if I could afford my own place, it might be worth it. Miranda will be able to find another roommate. She has tons of friends and

acquaintances.

I come to a halt and shake my head. Who am I kidding? At my current rate of pay, I'd need to work sixty hours a week to afford my own place. If I worked sixty hours a week and attended college full-time, I wouldn't have any time to study. I'd be stressed all the time. I resume pacing and try to listen to what they're saying downstairs.

Fifteen minutes later there's a knock on my door. I know it's Miranda because I heard Mike peel away in his Camaro a moment ago.

"May I come in," she asks in a gentle voice.

I open the door and gesture for her to enter. She looks nervous as I close the door. She takes a seat on the bed and fiddles with her fingers. I recommence my pacing. God, I hate it when she acts timid.

"How can you believe I'd send someone here to attack Mike?" I beseech.

"I don't necessarily believe it," she explains, looking at her hands as she continues to fidget. "It was just a question."

"I didn't send him here," I snap.

"Are you seeing him?"

I gape at her. "No. I've talked to him once. The day Mike yelled at me outside, Rooter saw it and asked if I was okay. That's it."

"Okay." She looks up at me with pleading eyes. "I believe you."

I come to a screeching halt. "Okay?" I turn to her. "No. None of this is okay! It's not okay that I have to answer such questions. That I, yet again, am defending myself against something I didn't do!" And I don't stop there. "What would it matter if I was seeing him? It's nobody's goddamn business what I do."

She holds her hands up in surrender. "All right. You're right. I'm sorry."

I don't give a damn that she's sorry. She's always sorry. "I'm so done with this shit Miranda. I'm especially done with Mike."

"I get it. I really do," she speaks softly. "Will you give me a little time to figure out what to do?"

I throw my head back and groan. If I had a dollar for every time she's asked me that I could pay my rent for the next six months. "What is there to figure out? He and I can't live together any longer and out of the two of us, I am by far the better roommate."

"Yes, you are," she concedes and sits hunched over and grips the edge of the bed. "But he's my brother. My throwing him out would be another rejection. Another loss. Can't you understand at all why that is hard for me?"

"Of course I understand." I take a seat next to her. "But Miranda, it's not getting any better. Mike's not getting any better. Time won't change what needs to be done. You're only delaying the inevitable."

Miranda sobs into her palms. "I know."

I take her into my arms while she cries. I rub her back in an effort to soothe her the same way she did for me after my rape last year.

After a few minutes, she looks up at me with sad, puffy eyes and says, "I can't lose my brother too."

Miranda explains that while she and Mike were downstairs talking, he broke down at her feet and cried. He claimed last night was a wake-up call for him and said he'll meet with a therapist to discuss his anger issues. He begged her forgiveness and promised to never be violent with us again. She believes him, just as she always does. I'm a bit more skeptical. She thinks I'll change my mind if I talk to him. I doubt there's anything he can say to change how I feel, but she begged me to talk to him so I will.

After enough time has passed to calm my nerves I decide it's now or never. If I don't talk to Mike now, I won't bother to at all. I stand and head to his room. Once at his door, I take a deep breath before knocking. I hear his bed creak and then he opens the door a crack.

“Can we talk?” I ask. *Please say no.*

He opens the door wide enough for me to enter. Once inside his room, I stare apprehensively at the dark wood door as he closes it. He stands in front of me wearing a blank expression and doesn’t say a word.

“I guess I’ll start,” I offer and wring my hands together, nervous. “I don’t want to fight with you.”

“Me either.”

He’s standing a few feet from me, and yet I feel as though he’s right up against me. It has been eons since the last time I was in a closed room with him. This conversation has to happen, but this may not be the best place for it. What if he blows up on me? What will I do then? It’s too late now. We’re already here.

I swallow. “Then why do you start so many?”

He opens his mouth as if to speak and then shakes his head. “Sometimes, I can’t control myself.”

“Do you hate me that much?” I implore.

A pained expression crosses his face. He shakes his head in response.

“You have to stop treating me the way you do,” I assert.

He takes a small step forward. “You don’t treat me much better,” he accuses.

My heart pumps hard within my chest. I take a step back. “I’m only reacting to the things you say and do.”

“Not always. Some days, you walk in the door and cringe when you see me. You walk by me like you wish I wasn’t here.” The tone in his voice is accusatory, yet sad.

“I never did those things until you started being so mean,” I justify.

“You broke my heart.” He loses his cool and throws his hands in the air. “I didn’t take it well, I admit it. But you knew for years how

I felt about you.” I start to say something, but he holds a finger up to stop me. His body shakes. “First, you let me kiss you, and then blew me off. Then, when I needed you most, I told you I loved you and you acted like I was inconveniencing you. It doesn’t get much crueler than that. So before you start pointing fingers, you need to realize how you are partially to blame.”

His words have knocked the wind out of me. He’s never been this open or vulnerable with me. My knees shake and I need to sit. The only place to sit is on the bed which isn’t preferable, but since it’s my only option I take it.

It’s all true. The day his father died, I went to see how he was doing. He broke down in front of me and afterwards, kissed me. And I kissed him back. When he confessed his feelings for me, I wasn’t prepared for it. I think my exact words were, “Please don’t do this. I’ve been through enough already.”

“The way I handled things with you was wrong,” I admit while staring at the matted down gray carpet. “I let you kiss me because I wanted you to feel something other than the agony of your father’s death. I’d just been raped by Adam. I wasn’t prepared to deal with your feelings for me.”

“Then why didn’t you say that?” He asks. I hear him take a step. “Instead, you got up and walked away like I was nothing. And then the next time I saw you, you ignored me. You don’t do that to someone you care about.”

I peer up at him. “I wasn’t ready to talk about the rape. I’m so sorry I hurt you. It wasn’t my intention.”

He sits next to me on the bed, hunched over with his head in his hands. “If I’d chosen a better time to tell you, would it have made a difference?” Mike looks at me with inquisitive eyes.

He’s not asking if it would’ve changed my reaction. He’s asking if I would’ve been open to the idea of being with him.

“It would’ve changed the way I handled the situation.”

“How would you have handled it?” He puts me on the spot.

“I don’t know, but Mike...” I can’t say the words. I look away, uncomfortable.

“But you never felt the same,” he finishes for me.

I shake my head.

“Why?” He puts me on the spot again.

I rub the tips of my fingers together. A nervous gesture. “I don’t know.”

“I devoted my entire life to you.” He taps hard against his chest. “I’ve tried everything I can think of to be the guy you want, but it’s never enough. Is it because I’m not bad enough for you? Because let’s face it, I’ve tried that too.”

“I don’t see you that way.”

“But you like that thug next door.” The vein in his forehead throbs, and he clenches his fists.

I don’t answer. This conversation is heading in a bad direction so I raise to leave. Mike races me to the door and barricades it with his body; his hands balled into fists as his thick arms hang at his sides.

THE WARNING

Mike's angry eyes bore into mine. "Did you send him here?"
My fear transforms to anger. "No."

He leans forward until our faces are no more than an inch apart. There's a haunting gleam in his eyes. "Are you fucking him?"

And so we're back to this. I refuse to answer his question. "What difference would it make?"

"Because if you could be with a piece of trash like that, you're not the person I thought you were."

"Well, you're not the person I thought you were either." I jut out my chin. "Because the Mike I grew up with wouldn't act this way and he certainly wouldn't attack me or his sister."

Mike winces at my words and leans away.

"Please let me go, Mike."

He backs away from the door and lets me leave.

An hour later, I hear the rumble of Rooter's motorcycle and peek out my bedroom window to watch him pull up to the side door of his house. Once he's off the bike, he glances up to my window and our eyes lock. My heart slams in my chest. Did he look up here because he

knew I'd be watching or because he knows it's my room? I can't read his expression. After a moment, he motions for me to come outside.

As I make my way outside I check for any sign of Miranda or Mike. If they catch me going out to talk to Rooter they will be pissed. Not that it'd matter. Nothing they might say would stop me. But I don't want to put up with more of their attitudes or accusations. I breathe a sigh of relief when I don't run into either of them.

As I approach, Rooter stands next to his bike with his hands in his pockets. If I thought my heart was beating hard when he looked up at me through my window, I was mistaken. It's like a jackhammer in my chest as I stand before the object of my affection.

"I'm sorry if I scared you earlier," his voice is soft. "That wasn't my intention."

One wouldn't expect such softness from a "vicious" biker, and yet it seems natural coming from him.

"I wasn't scared."

His eyes go wide with amazement. They're such a dark brown, they're nearly black. I've never seen eyes so dark. They're captivating. "You weren't?"

"Surprised, maybe." I smile.

He smiles back and I melt. There has never been a more gorgeous smile than his. He doesn't just smile with his lips. His entire face lights up, like a child on Christmas morning.

"I bet," he admits and rubs the back of his head and rocks front to back on his heels and toes. "How's your friend... What's her name?"

"Miranda. Now, she was scared." I chuckle.

"I could tell," he says regretfully, his brow furrowed. "Look," he holds his hands up in front of his chest, palms facing me, "what happened yesterday, believe it or not, is completely out of character for me. I'm not some weird dude who busts into people's houses and attacks them. It's just... I have a problem with guys who hurt girls."

ROOTER

Swoon. I try to conceal my excitement of standing here talking with him. “That’s an admirable quality.”

He smiles and rocks back and forth again. “I wish I’d handled it differently. But when I saw him get out of the car... I lost it.”

“Well, the good news is, I don’t think he’ll be attacking us anytime soon.” I say it jokingly, but I mean it. Mike may act like a hard ass and be willing to attack a couple of girls, but I doubt he has balls enough to go up against a guy like Rooter. If he was to go after me or Miranda again he knows as well as I do Rooter will jerk his ass into a knot.

Rooter perks up to this, his eyes hopeful. “You kicking him out?”

I shake my head. “I just think he’ll be too scared to try again. You scared the shit out of him.”

His nostrils flare. “Why aren’t you kicking him out?”

“He’s Miranda’s brother,” I explain, “and she owns the house. I don’t really have a say in the matter.”

Rooter shakes his head and grits his teeth. “You should have one if you pay rent to live there.”

I look to the ground. “It’s complicated.”

“No, it’s not,” he asserts. “He’s an abusive ass. He needs to go.”

“If anyone will leave, it would be me.”

His eyes bore into mine. “Maybe you should consider that option.”

“Easier said than done on my income,” I explain. “And Miranda can’t afford this house without me. Besides, I don’t think it’ll happen again.” Not necessarily because Mike’s remorseful, but because he’s scared of what Rooter might do.

Rooter throws his head back and laughs sarcastically. “Are you kidding me? Of course it will.”

“Mike is working through some issues.” I say it more in my defense than Mike’s.

“Sophie, do not make excuses for that asshat.”

Rooter’s hands clench into fists, but it doesn’t scare me. Most girls

would be intimidated by or even scared of him, but I'm not. I find it incredibly sweet he's willing to step up to my defense.

My mother was a drug addict who paid no attention to me whatsoever except when she was smacking me around and screaming. My dad bailed when I was a toddler. I haven't seen or heard from him since. I never met any aunts, uncles, or grandparents.

Once, while high, my mom admitted she never wanted children. The only reason she got pregnant with me was to keep my dad around which backfired because he never wanted kids either. When I turned sixteen I moved in with Miranda and her parent's. My mom got pissed, but only because her maid was gone.

The only boyfriend I've ever had took my virginity by raping me. Miranda has always been there for me, but when it comes to Mike we're at odds.

"I appreciate your concern, Rooter. Truly. But the situation is complicated."

His bitter expression tells me he wants to argue this point, but instead he says, "Well, just know, if I find out he hurts either of you again, I won't be as easy on him as I was before."

I don't doubt it. "Understood."

His phone rings and he looks as relieved as I feel. This conversation was a bit deeper than I'm comfortable with since I don't know him all that well. He snatches the phone out of his pocket, looks at the screen, then back to me.

"I need to take this."

I nod and turn to leave. He calls my name and I spin back around.

"If you ever need anything, I'm here."

"Thanks." I wave.

I watch as he answers his phone and strides to his door. Once he's inside I turn around and find Miranda standing in the doorway glaring at me with arms crossed and pursed lips.

“What was that about?” She whispers so Mike won’t hear as I walk in the door.

“He wanted to make sure we were okay and apologize for scaring us.”

“How very nice of him,” she snorts. “Did he happen to apologize for attacking my brother?”

I stalk past her to the kitchen, but she follows on my heels. “Don’t be like that, Miranda. He’s genuinely concerned about our safety.”

The kitchen looks exactly the same as it did when we were kids. Same pastel wall paper. Same old gray and white formica countertop. Same old reddish brown vinyl flooring. It has always been my favorite room in the house. It’s where I spent the majority of my childhood.

Loraine, Miranda’s mom, would bake cookies and cakes, while quizzing me and Miranda for upcoming tests. There’s a scratch on the countertop from me cutting a head of lettuce without a cutting board when I was ten. Loraine had been so kind and patient with me about it. Every time I see this scratch, I want to cry.

“Did you tell him there’s nothing to be concerned about?”

I turn and face her. Her arms are still crossed. “He’s not an idiot. He hears what goes on over here.”

“We argue. Who doesn’t?” She protests.

I roll my eyes. “It goes way beyond that and you know it.”

I grab a glass from the cupboard. Some of the glasses are from when we were kids. Loraine wasn’t one to upgrade. She’d simply buy more when needed. I choose one of the oldest ones.

Miranda’s defensive stance becomes even more rigid. “We have issues like everyone else. It’s not anyone’s business but our own.”

I open the refrigerator, remove a two liter of soda, and fill my glass. “Well, Rooter hears those issues on nearly a daily basis, and he doesn’t like it.”

“I still don’t understand why he’d even care.”

I plunk the glass on the counter a little too hard and she flinches. “Don’t start with your accusations, Miranda.”

She uncrosses her arms and softens her expression. This is how it always goes with her. She comes on like a hard ass then the moment I reciprocate, she backs down at once. “I’m not accusing, just making a statement.”

“Rooter doesn’t like guys hitting women. He hears us over here fighting with Mike all the time. He heard what happened last night,” I motion toward the bruise on her face, “and then he saw your face.”

She picks up my glass and takes a drink. “So your big bad biker has a soft spot for abused women?”

“Apparently so.” I tap the counter with my fingers. “He’s not letting this go.”

“It’s none of his damn business!” She squeals like a petulant child.

“Quiet,” I urge with wide eyes and glare at the ceiling. The last thing we need is for Mike to hear us.

Miranda points at Rooter’s house and whispers harshly. “That guy needs to keep his nose out of our business. He’s going to cause more trouble.”

“Don’t make Rooter out to be the bad guy here, Miranda. Mike caused all of this. And just so you know, I don’t think he’ll be going away anytime soon so Mike had better keep his anger in check.”

I’m half asleep when I pull into the driveway after work. It’s been a long, hard Monday. I had class from ten until three thirty then had to be at work by five. With all that’s been going on, I’m lucky to be averaging four hours of sleep each night. To say I’m exhausted is putting it mildly. I am utterly dead on my feet.

As usual, Rooter sits in his regular spot on his front porch when I pull into the driveway. I climb out of the car and wave. He waves back, but says nothing. As tired as I am I’d like to chat with him. Not about

anything in particular. I just like talking to him. But I don't know what to say. It's difficult for me to initiate a conversation with a person I don't know well. Asking about his day or commenting on the weather would be trite.

Since he doesn't speak, and I don't know what to say, I plod to my front door. As I unlock the door, I see movement to my left. I turn my head to see Rooter enter his house. All of a sudden, I get a crazy notion he may have been waiting for me to get home so he could make sure I got in safely. The thought gives me butterflies and a warm sensation fills my chest.

Our neighborhood is no longer the safe, family oriented place it once was. It has become overrun by criminals and prostitutes. A registered sex offender lives four houses down from ours. Last week there was a home invasion on the next street over.

I carry a thirty eight special everywhere I go. A birthday present, along with ammunition, from my mom on my sixteenth birthday. One could imagine my reaction. Saying I wasn't pleased is an understatement. Now, I'm glad to have it. Although I've never fired it, I have wielded it on a few occasions. Works like a charm.

To my surprise, the house is dark and quiet. Mike isn't in his typical spot on the couch playing video games. I creep up the stairs, listening for signs of life. Nothing. I take a deep breath, relieved. Tonight I will be able to sleep soundly, for at least a few hours, until I have to be up at seven to get ready for my nine o'clock class.

Thank God it's the last week before summer break. And to think I considered taking summer classes. Sure, graduating early would be nice, but I need a break. Plus I'll be able to put in more hours at the restaurant or even consider getting a second job and finally save a little money. As it stands, most of my money goes towards books and rent. There's hardly enough left over at the end of the month to splurge on something as simple as instant cappuccino.

ROOTER

I turn on the lights in my bedroom, drop my purse and keys to the floor and quickly strip down to my panties. I'm so tired I don't even bother to put on pajamas. I stretch my arms out wide and yawn. Just as I get ready to turn out the light, I see Rooter staring at me, bug eyed, from the window across from mine. We lock eyes for maybe three seconds. I'm frozen in place. He rushes and closes his blinds. I grab my comforter, wrap it around me and turn out my light.

How long had he been standing there? Had he watched me the entire time I undressed? He wouldn't do that. Would he?

My heart pounds within my chest and I giggle with my hand over my mouth. I can't believe that just happened. I've only been that exposed to one other guy. Adam. The night he raped me. Somehow, this exhibition doesn't bother me. Even if Rooter had been standing there purposely watching me undress, I don't care. In fact, I find it exciting. A fact that takes me wildly by surprise. Ever since Adam raped me, I've been rather timid around guys.

But as I stand giggling I find myself hoping Rooter liked what he saw. For the first time in my life, I genuinely want someone. I want Rooter, and I want him to want me.

The next day, after running an errand, I find Rooter straddling his bike as I pull into the driveway. Our eyes meet, the same as they had the night before, and my pulse quickens. I step out of my car and he climbs off his bike. He saunters over with a rueful expression.

"Hey." He puts his hands in his pockets and rocks back and forth, uneasy.

"Hey."

"I'm so sorry about last night. I'd just walked in my room and there you were." He waves his a hand up and down at me.

Yeah. There I was. In all my glory. I feel my face flush and have a burning desire to know what he thought when he saw me. "It was my

fault. I should've closed my blinds. I was just so tired."

"I don't want you to think I'm a creepy, peeping Tom."

"I don't." It wouldn't bother me if he was. "Like I said, my fault."

"It's just that, in a year's time, we haven't spoken a word to each other. In the past few days, I've burst into your house, assaulted your roommate, and watched you undress."

Wait. "Watched?"

"In my defense, it was kind of hard to look away." He rubs the back of his neck looking sheepish.

"Did you like what you saw?" I ask, taking myself, and by the way his mouth hangs open, Rooter by surprise. Where the hell did that come from? I'm never that brash.

He shakes his head and all of my excitement and brazenness disappear in an instant.

"Sophie," he says and his phone rings. He retrieves it from his back pocket, checks the screen.

I'm relieved by the interruption. Now is a good time to make my escape. I look at my house and take a step back. Rooter holds up his index finger as if reading my mind and answers the phone.

"Yeah?" He answers curtly and listens. I hear a male voice on the other end of the line, but can't make out the words. "I'm on my way. Be there in fifteen." He hangs up and looks at me. "I have to go," he says and takes a step closer, looking intently in my eyes, "but to answer your question, yes, I liked what I saw. A lot. And that isn't a good thing for either one of us."

"Why?" I whisper, relieved by his admission. His nearness makes my stomach do back flips.

He looks me up and down with a glint in his eye. "Because you need me to stay away from you and that was nearly impossible to do *before* I saw you in your panties."

I blink and just about lose my footing. His intensity is

overwhelming. “It was?”

“You have no idea.” His voice is strained. “If you’re smart, you’ll stay away from me.” With that, he turns and walks away. “Consider yourself warned.”

He climbs on his bike and fires it up.

What the hell does that mean?

Before I can ask he tears out of his driveway.