

An excerpt from *Strange Love*

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Ruin Me

Three days later I'm meeting Patrick at the bar. I dropped by his house again on Monday evening to ask if he'd like to come out for a drink this week and see what happens, or to talk more. He said sure, and now I'm sitting in one of the booths by the window, just before eight o'clock, eyes on the parking lot, heart jack-hammering my ribs. I'm afraid he won't show and even more afraid he will.

I wasn't sure what to wear. Jay was around when I was changing and I hope he noticed me putting on my crappiest underwear, so he'll know I'm not planning on going hog-wild tonight.

I'm trying really hard not to appear too eager. Actually, I think I'm overdoing it a bit, acting as if this whole situation pains me greatly. If there's a tightrope for people walking the line between "selfish harlot" and "dewy-eyed martyr", it's *very* narrow, and the chasm is so deep I couldn't tell you if there's a net or not.

Jay's gone from disbelief to acceptance in the past few days and is now treating the whole thing like a project. He bought a copy of this book called *The Myth of Monogamy* and seems to be tackling the situation sociologically. Typical, rational Jay. Pragmatism is his Prozac.

From my seat in the booth I can almost see the spot where I got threatened at knifepoint back when I was twenty-seven. Our town is small and the Tap is its only bar. I decided I liked beer enough to get over my bad memories a long time ago.

I hear a door slam out in the dark and then Patrick Whelan's walking toward the entrance. I look away. I don't want him to see me watching if he glances at the window, which is so stupid.

He spots me when he enters and heads right to the booth and sits down across from me, looking tall and solid.

“Hey, Robin.”

“Hey.” I glance around, feeling as if everyone must know exactly why we’re here.

“You have a good day?” he asks, chattier than I’ve ever seen him. I realize he must be as terrified as me and I relax.

“It was all right,” I lie. I was useless and jumpy at work all day, counting down the seconds to this very moment. “Can I get you a beer?”

“Sure.” He taps my plastic pint glass. “What’s that?”

“Sam.”

He pulls out a battered old leather wallet and hands me a twenty. “Get us a pitcher. We’ll probably need it.”

I laugh, relieved beyond words. He smiles at me. I haven’t seen him smile like that in years—not since our visits.

I deliver our pitcher and Patrick’s change. We say cheers and clack our glasses together.

“So,” I say. “Jay can almost lift his arms again. After all that chopping.”

He nods. “I didn’t think he’d keep going for that long.”

“Why’d you make him chop wood?” I ask.

“I figured it might get his aggression out so he wouldn’t snap and try to kill me.”

I laugh. “So you gave him an axe?”

“I’m not really an expert about stuff like this.”

I nod and smile and look down into my beer, turn the glass around and around on its coaster. *More Than a Feeling* comes on the jukebox and I tap my fingers along to it.

“So. Jay said you said you feel...something? For me?”

He nods, casual, as if I’d asked if he’s ever been to Montreal.

I take a deep drink. “I don’t really know what I’m after,” I admit and meet his eyes.

“He said you guys are happy. But you...”

“I’m obsessed with you,” I offer, voice low and private. “Or my body is.”

I catch his eyebrows contract. “Because of what happened?”

“Maybe. Probably.” I didn’t know Patrick before the attack but I’d seen him around town. He never really made an impression before that night. I touch my neck, the spot where my slim cut faded into nothingness years ago.

Patrick watches my fingers. “And you think if we, if you and me, do something...then you’ll get over it?”

“That’s the idea. I don’t know if it would work or make things worse, to be honest.”

“I don’t want to be responsible for breaking up anybody’s home,” he says. “I’m here because your man said maybe it would help you guys. And because I like you. Not just *like* you, I mean. Because I’m attracted to you.” He huffs out a breath, looking as if he just spoke fluent Esperanto and blew his own mind.

Seeing Patrick this way—sitting across the table from me looking so lost—reminds me of visiting hours. I do something I’d always wanted to do then but wasn’t allowed to. I reach out and put my hand on his wrist and smile at him.

He stares at my fingers for a moment then pulls his arm back and covers my hand in his big one. Then he seems to remember where we are and takes it away, eyes darting toward the bar.

“Jay said he thinks maybe you...like me. A lot,” I say.

He nods, giving me nothing to work with.

“I’m a little worried I might end up jerking you around. God, that sounds really egomaniacal. Plus I’m probably jerking you around already.”

Patrick shrugs. “I think you both did your best to explain it. I know the score.” He takes a couple swallows of his beer. “Look,” he says. “We can talk this to death for the next five hours, or I can lay it out for you.”

“Okay.”

“I like you,” he says, eyes watching his fingers drumming the tabletop. “As a person. And I’d genuinely like to see your relationship work out.” He clears his throat and continues, quieter. “But I’d also like to sleep with you, or however far you want to take it. I also think this idea’s nuts and I wouldn’t be surprised if it wrecks things with you and your man and I wind up in the middle of it.”

“Oh.”

“But I also think that you and me, we’re not close or anything. Not for a long while. No offense, but there’s not a ton at stake here. You know, friendship-wise? There’s not a lot at stake for *me*. So sure, I’ll go along with whatever you guys agree on.”

“Wow, okay. Thanks. That actually made everything seem a lot clearer.”

“But listen.” He rubs a palm over his eyes. “I don’t want this to end up like *Springer*. I don’t want your man calling me or showing up at my house with a shotgun or hassling me at work or any of that. Or worse, taking it out on you. If you think he might get that way, do everybody a favor and call it off now.”

“I follow. I don’t think any of that will happen. He’s known I have feelings for you for four years. Since before I even knew what they were all about. He knows it’s just part of the package with me. And he’s not a jealous guy.”

“Yeah, I guess not... This whole letting-you-be-with-another-guy thing,” Patrick says. “Would you do the same for him?”

I grin, guilty. “Not in a million years.”

He nods. “Anyhow, that’s all I’ve got to say about it. Count me in.”

“Wow. Just like that?”

He smiles. “Just like that.”

I feel my body relax. I realize I’ve been hunched forward, shoulders tight, elbows on the table, and now I lean back into the booth’s vinyl padding and push out a long breath. I stare at Patrick, like *really stare*, because I feel like I finally can, now that everyone knows where everyone stands. I move my foot under the table and press my ankle against his. He presses back. It’s just legs, not even the sexy parts of legs, but I feel energy, electricity zapping through two pairs of jeans and shooting right up my bones into my hair and fingernails. I lose my mind a little. Patrick sips his beer, looking dutifully neutral, scanning the activity around the bar.

Moondance comes on. I push my shoe off and run my stocking foot up the inside of Patrick’s leg. His eyes glaze over. I’m not trying to tease or torture him. I just want to turn him on, plain and simple. I want proof that he wants me back and that I have the power and also the permission to fuck with our boundaries, shamelessly. I rub the ball of my foot up the inseam along his big thigh, stopping an inch or two from where I guess his crotch is.

He clears his throat and refills his glass.

“So,” I say, foot still nestled between his legs. “Are you free later this week at all? Maybe you could invite me over for dinner.”

“I’m a pretty lousy cook.”

“Well, I’ll bring something then.”

He nods. “Okay.”

“Friday? Seven?”

“Sure.”

I smile. Friday is perfect. Firstly because I don’t think I can wait more than two days, and secondly because I don’t want this ridiculousness to eat into my weekend time with Jay. I feel as though it’s something I should be fitting in, like a doctor’s appointment.

We sit, sipping our beer, listening to Van Morrison, not saying anything. I study Patrick, and he seems to study me back. I take my foot away as we drain our glasses.

“Well, I better get home soon,” I say finally.

“You good to drive?”

I nod. “Walk me to my car?”

“I can’t stand up yet,” Patrick says. “Why don’t you go use the ladies’ or something and let me cool off?”

I have to bite my lip to keep from grinning, so outrageously pleased that I’ve managed to arouse this man.

I take our empty glasses and pitcher and leave them on the bar on my way to the bathroom.

Patrick’s standing beneath the keno monitor when I emerge and I stare at the numbers to keep my eyes from drifting to his crotch. He pulls the door open and follows me out into the parking lot. I walk to my car and hear him behind me.

I turn and smile up at him. “Thanks for meeting me tonight.”

He nods. He looks around us, maybe avoiding my eyes, maybe on the alert for knife-wielding Dartmouth poli-sci majors.

“Can I kiss you good-night?” I ask, more nervous than I’ve been around the opposite sex since eighth grade.

“Sure. Maybe we should go behind my truck though.” He nods to where he’s parked, farther from potential prying eyes.

I put my hand in his and it’s warm and big. He leads me to the edge of the lot and

we stand behind his cab, mostly hidden. The parking lot's got a streetlight at every corner—it didn't used to, trust me—and I stare at Patrick in the pinky-orange glow and watch the steam of his breath form and disappear in the cold breeze. I watch his lips.

“You're sure about this?” he asks.

I nod, still focused on his mouth.

When he leans in and kisses me... Shit, I don't know. People talk about melting and that's how it feels, honest to God. My bones go soft and my body warms and if I wasn't held in place between a truck and a solid wall of man, I bet I'd fall over.

I feel those big, rough palms on my jaw and he angles his head and kisses me deep, filling me with his tongue and his heat and his noises. And he can *kiss*. My hands flap around, unsure of where to go until I settle them flat against his chest on his black fleece jacket. I feel and hear him groan when I kiss back and it triggers something in me. I pull his zipper down and run my palms over his work shirt, so tempted to rip it open and scatter his buttons all over the asphalt.

He tastes like beer and impatience. His fingers tangle in my hair, hands covering my ears so it sounds as if we're underwater. I stand on my tiptoes and press myself against him and he's warm and sturdy and goddamn if he's not hard for me.

I slide a palm down between us, pausing at his belt, needing some natural disaster to stop me from groping him.

Instead there's a flare of music as someone exits the bar. We both freeze then pull away as an engine starts a few cars down. Patrick releases my head and pushes me back a pace by the shoulders before cramming his hands in his pockets. I meet his eyes and they look as wild as I feel. I move away a little more and the car swings out, washing us in its headlight beams.

I clear my throat. “Friday at seven?”

He nods. He puts his hand on my back between my shoulder blades and steers me to my car. He watches me climb inside. He waves at me as I reverse and I wave back.

I wonder if sexual frustration exacerbates blood-alcohol level. It sure feels that way. If I get pulled over on the short drive between here and my house I'll have to say, “I only had two beers in two hours, officer, but then I made out with a lumberjack. You know how it is.”