

COMPANY

LESLIE MAXWELL KAIURA

Jason watched as Donna worked her way down the bar, wiping the polished wood in quick circles with a towel. Her curly blond ponytail bounced with the motion, and the tank top she wore under her bar apron exposed a tattoo of a red rose on her upper arm. When she reached the far end, where he had been sitting and nursing a beer for over an hour, she picked up his empty bottle and tossed it with a practiced flick of the wrist into a trash can that stood several feet away. “Can I get you another?”

“Nah, I’m good. Gotta drive home.” He pulled out his wallet and put a five-dollar bill in the tip jar.

“That’s twice what the beer cost. You gotta let me work for my money, hun.” She gave him an inviting smile, but he wasn’t quite sure what the invitation was. Southern charm? Salesmanship? Something else?

“I’ve been here taking up space for a while.”

She laughed and looked around. It was Wednesday night, and at 9 p.m., the place was dead. “Well I don’t see anybody waitin’ to sit on that stool and run up a big tab. Sure you don’t want one more?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. Why don’t you let me buy you one instead?”

“You’d have to wait a couple of hours ‘til I get off. No drinking on the job.”

Jason shrugged. “Another time maybe.”

“Friday I get off at nine. Julie’s got the late shift.”

“I guess I’ll be here—maybe we can have one together after you get off.”

She cocked her head to one side and rolled her eyes in a way that indicated the length the empty bar. “I’d rather get out of this place, you know.”

“You do seem to spend a lot of time here.”

“So do you, lately.”

“It’s boring at home. Too quiet.”

“And this place is better?”

“At least there’s company, on the nights you work, anyway.”

“That’s pretty sad.”

“Tell me about it.” She was the closest thing he had to a friend around here, and they had barely exchanged more than a little friendly bartender small talk. Yes, he was new in town. No, he didn’t follow any of the teams

playing basketball on the screens above the bar. She had assumed he wasn't a talker and had mostly let him be until a week or so ago, when he had left not long after her shift ended and found her in the parking lot, anxious and annoyed, trying to start a little Nissan with a dead battery. That was a problem he could fix, at least, and he had.

Donna leaned forward, and it was hard to ignore the effect created by her crossed arms and the deep neckline of her shirt. It made him a little uncomfortable. What was he doing here anyway?

"So maybe I should come over for a visit?"

"There's not much to my place, but you can come if you want."

She leaned back from the bar and laughed. "Well that's a warm invitation if I ever heard one."

"Sorry . . . I haven't had anyone over since I moved here. I haven't been in much of a social mood."

"No shit. If coming in this place to sit by yourself and have a beer or two is your idea of a social life, you need some help."

"Yeah, I guess I do." He got on okay with his boss, but he hadn't bothered to make friends since he had landed in this town on his way to nowhere. A cheap motel off the interstate, a job ad in a local paper someone had left in a booth at Aunt Edith's "Best Breakfast in Town" Diner, and here he was.

"Friday night, then?"

"I'll be here. Thanks, Donna."

"For nothing," she replied, fishing his five-dollar bill and a few singles out of the tip jar as he slid off the stool and nodded a goodbye.

The week ground on like they all had since he had answered the ad from the horse farm. The pay was low, but it came with a place to live—a little cabin where the back edge of the big property ran along the county road for a ways—and with enough hard, dirty work to wear him out. It was alright, but Friday was the fifth in a string of long days and by quitting time, it had gotten to him. The early spring weather had been chilly, but he had worked hard enough to break a sweat under his flannel shirt, and he felt disgusting. He got home, took a shower, put on a clean pair of jeans and an undershirt, and collapsed on the couch in front of the TV. He dozed off and woke up hungry, then made himself a bologna sandwich and took it and a beer back to the couch.

He had just put the empty paper plate on the floor by his feet when someone knocked on the door. A glance at his watch showed it was already

twenty after nine. Dammit, he had planned to be at the bar before Donna's shift ended. He turned off the TV and got up to answer the door.

She was standing on the porch still in her work clothes—snug black jeans and a white tank top that said “Sam's Bar & Grill” across the front, the print stretched across her generous bust. The logo was only partly visible because she was hugging herself against the cold night air. For a moment he stared at her—she was almost as tall as he was, which wasn't saying much, and he couldn't avoid her eyes. She looked at him pointedly and arched an eyebrow.

“Hey, sorry.” He stepped hastily to the side so that she could come in. “Really, I'm sorry. I kinda forgot we had plans.”

“Well, I drive by here every day to and from work and see your old Bronco out there. It's hard to miss.” She looked around the room and back at him. “Yeah, you need help.”

He glanced around. It was rather pathetic. On one side of the room, there was a worn-out couch in front of a small TV on a folding tray table, and on the other side, where a dining table should have been, was his drum set. Besides those few furnishings, the work boots that he had kicked off inside the door, and the paper plate and beer bottle by the couch, the room was bare, leaving the scuffed floor and dingy walls to shine in all their run-down glory.

“I haven't settled in 'cause I wasn't sure how long I'd be here,” he offered by way of explanation. “I said it wasn't much.”

“I guess there's more beer in the fridge, at least?”

“Sure thing. Hold on a sec.” He disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a bottle. He handed it to her and said, “I hope that's okay. If you want a glass, you'll have to settle for a Dixie cup.”

“Nah, this is fine.” She took a long drink before walking over and sitting down in the middle of the couch. “Good lord, it's nice to take a load off. I've been waiting tables or standing behind the bar since two this afternoon. Come sit.”

Jason sat down beside her and she turned toward him, folding one foot under her other knee. She looked at him intently, resting her head against the back of the couch. He wondered how much older than him she might be. She was pretty but seemed worn around the edges.

He found that he had no idea what to say to her now that she was here. He hadn't expected her to come. Or maybe he hadn't wanted her to.

She spoke first. “So what brings you here from Georgia?”

“Georgia?”

“You still have Georgia tags on the Bronco. Saw them when I pulled up.”

“Oh yeah. I just, um, needed a change.”

“From what?”

“That’s a long story that you probably don’t wanna hear.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry. Just trying to make conversation.”

“It’s okay.” He stared at the half-empty beer bottle in his hands.

Donna took the bottle from him and put it on the floor next to hers, and before it had occurred to him why she had done this, she had turned his face toward her own, leaned into him, and kissed him. She shifted closer and drew his arm around her, and for a few seconds he couldn’t resist enjoying the warmth and closeness of her. But he also couldn’t help thinking of Nedra, and as Donna’s hand slipped through his hair to find the back of his neck, he found himself closing his eyes and wishing . . . Shit. It wasn’t right. Letting her kiss him while he was thinking of someone else made him feel like even more of an asshole than usual. He broke away from her.

“I don’t know what the hell I’m doing here,” he said as he ran his fingers through his hair and tucked it behind his ears. He glanced over at Donna and saw that she looked confused, maybe even a little hurt. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have . . .”

He trailed off, unsure of what to apologize for.

“No, you didn’t do anything. I guess I should’ve known . . .”

“Known what?”

“That you weren’t interested in me. You’re different than most of the guys I meet at the bar. All the assholes who stare at my boobs, you know.”

“Nah, I’m an asshole too,” he replied, but he had to smile at her bluntness. “But I try not to stare . . . much . . . You’re a sweetheart, Donna, but I’m . . .”

“Hung up on some girl back in Georgia?”

He grunted and leaned forward, elbows on knees, looking at her sidelong. “Hung up, yeah,” he agreed. The words were inadequate but would do. There was a girl, and there was other shit too. Better to let her think he got dumped, but he hadn’t. He had left. Hung up . . . he ought to be strung up.

“It figures . . . I meet someone who actually seems like a nice guy, and . . .”

He interrupted her. “If I was that nice, I wouldn’t be here by myself with a job shoveling shit and furniture from Goodwill.”

“Well, you don’t have to tell me what got you here, and I’ll spare you my sob story too. Sound like a deal?”

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

“You mind if I stay a while? To have another beer? I hate going home this early. My parents’ll still be up.”

“You live with your parents?”

“For a year or so now.” She paused, and her chest rose and fell with a long breath. “I was living with someone and he moved out. It was too much for me to make rent and a car payment on my own. So ‘til I can save up, I get to live at home with my two darlin’ little half-sisters and feel like the black sheep of the family.” She absently rubbed a hand over the rose tattoo on her arm; it was a traditional design with bold colors and heavy shadows. “Got that when I was younger and a lot stupider,” she said lightly when she noticed that his eyes had followed her hand.

“I’m still young and stupid.” Jason pulled up his shirt sleeve to reveal a cross drawn to look like it had been carved from old stone, and behind that, crossed drumsticks wreathed in blue flames. Donna traced the cross with a fingertip, and he shrugged it back under his shirt.

“Yeah, I remember checkin’ your I.D. for the first time and thinking that you were way too young and hot to be drinking all by yourself in a hole like Sam’s. The beard makes you look a little older, though.”

“Just trying out something different,” he said, touching his darkly whiskered face.

“Something to hide behind?”

“I guess. I haven’t wanted to be bothered. Not that many people would notice, or bother at any rate.” Nedra had been the one people recognized. She stood out—she shone—or she had, anyway. An image of her flashed into his mind—his beautiful girl, his whole life, kneeling among glass shards and water spattered across the kitchen tile, and screaming at him as he tried to help her clean up the mess. Screaming at herself, really, but he was too close to know the difference. She had managed to cut the same finger that bore the ring he had given her, and when she had seen the blood, she had collapsed into a weeping mess and had not let him touch her. He picked his beer back up and emptied it.

Donna looked over her shoulder and considered the drum set on the other side of the room. “I wouldn’t have pegged you for a Christian music fan. My sisters listen to that stuff.”

He guessed that she had recognized the band name, Mercy Mercy, spelled out in gleaming silver on the front of the bass drum, but had not realized why the lettering would be there. “That stuff?” He let out a humorless

chuckle. “A lot of it is pretty bad, to be honest, but I think we were alright. Sometimes I don’t even know why I brought those damn drums with me, though.”

Her eyes narrowed and then widened as she looked back at the drums and then at him. “You were in that band?” She took in his nod. “Wow, now I feel like an ass. Jesus.”

“Yeah, Jesus and southern rock.” He tried to keep equal measures of regret and bitterness from seeping into his voice. They had been on the verge of going somewhere—out of the Bible belt—maybe big time.

Donna toyed with her beer bottle. “I don’t go to church anymore. But I don’t mind the Jesus bit so much. I like that one where he told those old guys off when they wanted to throw rocks at that lady. Where was her asshole boyfriend, anyway?”

Jason didn’t have an answer for that. Jesus was fine. It was the asshole boyfriends who screwed things up.

“You still play?”

“I practice ‘cause it’s a habit, but in here,” he motioned toward the low ceiling and blank walls, “and without the rest of the band, it just seems like noise.” He took a deep breath. God, he had tried so hard to be good enough. The drums—they had been the easy part.

Donna bit her bottom lip. Pensively, not seductively. Her uncertainty made him feel better. She said, “I didn’t mean to bring up any of that old shit we said we weren’t going to talk about. Let’s shut up and drink another beer.”

“Good idea.” Jason got up and returned with two freshly opened bottles.

They sat side by side for a few minutes and drank in silence until Donna leaned over to him and said, her breath warm in his ear, “If you wanted to kiss me, not for any good reason, I mean, just for the hell of it, you know . . . I wouldn’t mind.”

“I don’t want to take adv . . .”

“I’m a big girl. I can handle it.”

He kissed her—one long, tender, tentative kiss that came to an end when she pulled away, kicked her feet up on the other end the couch and slid down to nestle under his arm. “You are a nice guy. I can tell.”

“Maybe. Just don’t expect much, okay?”

“I never expect much outta guys anyway . . . and especially not guys who are a decade younger than me. Damn, my sisters would probably have the hots for you. They’re 17 and 19—little church youth group princesses.” She wrinkled her nose. “Oh God, I think they saw your band in concert once over in

Greenville. Maybe I should introduce you. They'd freak." She sounded mildly horrified by the idea.

So was he. "Nah, that's okay. I like you and your shitty past. Makes me feel like I'm in good company."

"Well, in that case maybe I'll keep you company for a while."

Donna's visits became more frequent and then habitual. If it wasn't too late, she would stop in on the way home from work, and on her nights off she would come over and sometimes bring dinner in Tupperware containers since he subsisted on sandwiches and canned soup. He couldn't figure why she liked spending so much time at his place when all they did was drink a few beers, watch TV, and talk about work or other things that didn't really matter. Her life at home didn't sound that bad except for the typical annoyances of sharing a small house with four family members and her mom's spoiled pack of lapdogs. Sometimes she would make him laugh and sometimes he would kiss her, and while now and then it felt like she wanted more, mostly she didn't seem to mind whether he kissed her or not. He was glad of that, because the tug of war in his insides—temptation and memory, hope and despair—was bad enough already.

After a couple of months, they had fallen into such a comfortable routine that she no longer knocked; he left the door unlocked when he was at home and she came and went as she pleased. Then one Friday night she showed up later than normal, bursting through the door and walking quickly past him into the kitchen. The glow of the fridge light briefly illuminated the darkened doorway, and he heard a beer cap hit the linoleum and roll away as he came into the room behind her. She leaned against the counter and downed a third of the beer before taking a breath and running a hand over her face.

He flipped on the light and she winced. "What is it, Donna?"

She shook her head and took another drink, then put the bottle down.

Jason took her hands in his. "Your hands are shaking. What's wrong?"

"It's one of those things we said we wouldn't talk about." She was upset, maybe even frightened, so he put his arms around her and she clung him, pressing her face into his neck. He thought she was going to cry.

"Tell me, Donna. It's okay."

She was quiet for a while and then, with her face still hidden against his shoulder, she murmured, "I lied to you . . . about why I'm living with my family."

She didn't say anything else, so he finally asked, "What does that have to do with you being upset right now?"

“Ray is back in town and he showed up at the bar tonight.”

“Ray?”

“I used to live with him . . . until he pushed me off our front porch and broke my arm. That was almost two years ago.”

Jason took her by the shoulders and stepped back so that he could see her. “This guy showed up and hassled you?”

Donna nodded and looked at the floor between them. “He kept tryin’ to talk to me at the bar, but I was ignoring him as much as I could. When I got off, he was standing outside by my car so that I couldn’t get in. He was trying to make nice, apologizing about the accident all over again . . . of course he told everyone it was an accident, the bastard.”

“Did you tell anyone that it wasn’t?”

“My family suspected, but I figured that if I didn’t say anything about it, I wouldn’t have to hear about it either. My mama acts like she never did a thing wrong in her whole life, like she forgot that before she got married and got Jesus, she got me first—and it wasn’t no virgin birth either.” She stopped suddenly and her face flushed pink. “Anyway, I just wanted to get away from him. I moved back home and he kept calling me for a while, but then he got a job out of town and was gone.”

“You didn’t report it?”

“No. It would’ve been my word against his, same as always.”

She glanced up at him, her eyes glistening and her brow pinched. He realized how tight—painfully tight—his grip on her shoulders had become. He let her go and fled from those eyes. He ended up on the porch, where he stood with his hands on the railing, looking down the sloped gravel drive toward the highway.

She spoke from the doorway behind him. “I had been in a couple of relationships with guys that I liked, but who decided that they didn’t like me enough to stick around. When I met Ray, he seemed to really want me, you know, and it was nice at first . . .”

“You don’t have to explain yourself,” Jason interrupted without looking back at her, but she continued anyway.

“Things started to change when we moved in together. He got possessive and jealous . . . and he’d just take what he wanted and I let him because I thought I loved him. I still didn’t realize what an asshole he was. But then I got pregnant. I didn’t know if he’d be happy about it, but before I even told him about the baby, I lost it, real early. I was kinda relieved, as bad as that sounds, but then he found out ‘cause I had to go to the hospital and have a D&C.”

She paused and he could hear her inhale slowly, as if gathering the resolve to finish the story. He didn't want to hear it. He wanted to turn and punch the rough square beam that supported the roof of the porch. Maybe break a knuckle or two.

"He thought that I had done something to end it, and he got angry. That's when things really got bad. I didn't wanna be with him anymore, but if I resisted, he would . . ."

"He'd hit you, right?" Jason gripped the railing hard.

"He'd slap me around, threaten me. He was smart enough not to leave bruises."

"So you didn't tell anyone." It was more of a statement than a question, and Jason regretted the way it sounded, but there was no taking it back.

"No. But I decided to leave him. He tried to stop me, and that's when he got mad and pushed me over the porch railing. He took me to the emergency room, but I never went back home with him." Her voice had become hard.

Jason didn't respond. What could he say to that?

Eventually she walked up behind him, put her arms around his waist and leaned into him. When she spoke her voice was softer, almost a whisper. "Did your dad leave bruises?"

"Sometimes." He didn't ask how she knew, whether she had guessed or whether she had read it in some interview he had done with the band.

"Did you ever hit your girl?"

The quiet question was a sucker punch and the answer hissed out through his clenched teeth, forced out with his breath before he could stop it.

"No, but I wanted to. That's why I fucking left."

Donna hugged him tighter, her hands crossed over his chest. "You're a good guy, Jason. You're a good guy because you wanted to, but you didn't."

"It doesn't make any difference."

"It did for her."

"I wouldn't know." Jason said this and turned back toward her, tilting her face up with one hand so that he could see it clearly in the glow of the security light. "He didn't put his hands on you tonight, did he?"

"He tried to get me to kiss him, but some people walked out of the bar and I told him that I'd scream. He let me go and I got in my car and left."

"I'll be there to walk you out tomorrow."

Jason was there at the end of her next three shifts, but Ray only came in once and sat at a table with some other guys. Donna discretely pointed him out and Jason watched him from his usual spot at the far end of the bar. Seeing the man in person, he understood one reason why Donna said that she had let Ray take what he wanted. She couldn't have stopped him if she had tried. Ray was a big guy—tall, with tattooed arms that stretched the fabric of his Clemson Tigers t-shirt. He didn't hassle Donna, but he did watch her often as she moved up and down the bar, working and trying to ignore the fact that he was even in the building. Jason sat there until Ray and his friends left, and then checked the parking lot to make sure that they were gone before Donna's shift ended.

Two nights later, when she was scheduled to work again, Jason called the bar to catch her in the lull between the early dinner rush and the later drinking crowd. His old Bronco had broken down as he was leaving work, and he had had to give up on it until he could get to the auto parts store in the morning. He had caught a ride home, staring at the black grease smudges on his hands and jeans and thinking about her all the way. "Get someone to walk out with you, even if you haven't seen Ray around tonight. Just to be safe," he told her. She agreed in an offhand way so he persisted, "Promise me you will, or I'm gonna walk down there and do it myself. It's only two miles."

"Okay, I promise. I think Sam's staying to close tonight, so I'll wait on him. I gotta get back to work."

Jason said goodbye and hung up, satisfied. The bar didn't close until eleven, so he figured that she would go on home when her shift ended. He had already locked up for the night and had fallen asleep on the couch in front of the TV when her insistent knock startled him awake.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you," Donna said as he let her in, "Ray showed up after all and sat at the bar for a couple of drinks. It kinda freaked me out because his truck was still in the parking lot when I left. Sam walked out with me, though, and I didn't see Ray. He must've left with one of his friends."

"It's okay. Are you alright?"

"Yeah, but I feel gross from gettin' ogled all night. I . . ."

She went quiet when the front windows lit up with the glare of headlights. Jason walked to the window and looked out at the truck that had pulled up in the shadows behind Donna's car.

"Shit. We got company," Donna whispered as if Ray might hear her from where he still sat in his truck. "He must've followed me."

Jason was pulling on the work boots that he had left lying by the door. "I'll take care of this." He yanked up the zippers on the inside of each boot and pulled his jeans back down over them.

Donna had cracked open the door and looked out.

Ray called to her from the driveway. "So you living in this little dump now?"

"Get outta here, Ray. I don't wanna talk to you."

"Come on, baby. Gimme a chance."

"Go away."

"How long you been living here? I thought you were still staying with your mama and stepdaddy."

Jason pulled Donna back, and she held onto him, a little wild eyed. "Don't," she said.

"Just stay inside," he told her, and pushed the door closed. He walked out and down the three porch steps to the ground, which was probably a mistake. Damn, Ray was tall. This wasn't Jason's his first go-round, though, and he wasn't a kid anymore. He gave Ray a hard look. "She doesn't live here. I do. And this is private property. You need to leave."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. She doesn't want to talk to you, and I will call the police."

"Oooh," Ray mocked, "And what are you gonna do in the twenty minutes that it will take the slow ass podunk P.D. to get over here?"

"Whatever I need to."

"Tough guy, huh?" Ray strode toward him, but Jason stood his ground and Ray stopped only inches away, jerking his arms as if he were going to throw a punch.

Jason wasn't about to let the big man think that he was intimidated. He stood still and kept his clenched fists at his sides. "Get the fuck out of my yard."

"You gonna make me?"

Jason heard the door open behind him, and then Donna's voice. "Jason, don't..."

He opened his mouth to speak just as Ray's fist shot out with a vicious blow and then another that caught him center mass, right below the ribs, and drove all of the air out of his lungs. His vision blurred and he clutched his stomach with one hand as his knees buckled. "Shit," he gasped.

"You aren't even worth the time it would take to kick your ass." Ray chuckled and aimed a kick at him, but Jason was fast enough to raise both hands and block it, although the force rocked him back off of his knees. Ray

was surprised but laughed it off, giving a dismissive wave and turning to walk back to his truck. “I’ll let you off easy this time, buddy.”

Jason felt his anger flare white hot, and for once he let it. It made him reckless. “You leave her alone or you’ll regret it,” he called, trying not to wince as he rose to his feet. “I don’t care how big you are, you fuckin’ piece of trash.”

Ray turned back. “Oh, so you’re a scrappy little guy, huh? Cute.” He charged. Jason fended off the first few blows and managed to jab a fist into Ray’s side, but it didn’t have much effect. They tussled for a moment until Ray broke free and landed a jarring punch to Jason’s left cheekbone with a big hand that sported some kind of school or signet ring. There was a bright starburst of pain, and Jason’s head rang as Ray laughed again, taunting him as he stumbled to one knee.

“You better give it up while you can, you dumb little fuck.” Ray turned to walk down the gravel drive toward his truck.

The pain in his diaphragm and his head were too familiar, and they only made Jason angrier. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment and all his flaming rage, all his hot yellow shame coalesced like a target on that broad back. He took a deep breath and ran down the slope. Ray didn’t have time to turn around before Jason jumped, hitting the big man’s with his full weight and using the momentum to ride him to the ground. They fell hard, Ray face-first into the gravel with Jason on top of him. Jason moved fast, scrambling up and dropping back down hard, driving his knee twice into Ray’s lower back, eliciting a grunt and then a loud groan of pain. Ray tried to get his arms under him to push up, but Jason gave him another vicious knee to the kidney and smacked his face into the gravel.

It wouldn’t last long, but for the moment, Ray was too stunned by the pain to struggle. Jason knelt on his back, knees spread wide to make the most of his weight, and leaned down toward Ray’s ear. “How much blood you wanna piss for the next few days, big guy?”

Ray grunted and spat, panting. “Get the hell off of me. I’ll kill you, you little fucker!”

In the glow of the security light, a few of the whitish rocks stood out, darkened by blood.

“No, if I let you up, you’re gonna get the hell out of here, and you aren’t gonna bother Donna again, ever.”

“You let me up and you better watch your fucking back.” He tried again to get his hands under himself to push up and throw Jason off.

Jason punched the other side of Ray’s lower back as hard as he could—he might not be big, but he was strong enough—and Ray quit struggling, his hands instinctively moving to try to protect his pummeled kidneys. Jason

leaned forward again. “You don’t understand, friend. You won’t catch me off guard next time, and I don’t have much going for me right now. So if you mess with Donna, I might just kill you. Little fucker or not.” He thought he actually meant it, too, and it startled him. He inhaled sharply through his nose, trying to shake off the pain that radiated from his temple and cheek. “So what’s it gonna be?”

“Okay. Whatever. Lemme up and I’ll go.”

“You better, Ray.” It was Donna, who had come up behind them holding a longish, three-inch thick section of tree branch that she had pulled from the pile of firewood beside the cabin. She brandished it like a club. Jason jumped up and backed toward her, taking the makeshift weapon as Ray slowly got up, holding his lower back with one hand and wiping his nose with the back of the other.

Ray sneered at them but made no move to continue the fight. “You can have her. Plenty of other dumb bitches out there . . . younger and hotter ones, too.” He spat on the ground and stared Jason down one more time.

Jason propped the piece of wood on his shoulder like a baseball bat. “Get outta here.”

Ray gave them a mocking bow and got into his truck. When he was gone, Jason threw the firewood aside as Donna wrapped her arms around him and burst into tears. They stood there for several seconds, and then Jason pulled her back toward the cabin.

“Let’s go inside.” The adrenaline was subsiding, and the pain swelled. His head throbbed every time one of his feet hit the ground, so he went up the porch steps slowly, then went inside and sat down on the couch. Donna knelt in front of him, still crying.

“You’re bleeding. I didn’t want you to get hurt.” She reached up to touch his face. He leaned away from her fingers and lifted a hand to feel the damage for himself. There was broken skin just below his temple—he sucked a little air between his teeth when he touched it—and there was the stickiness of smeared blood, but not too much.

“I’ll be okay. There’s some first aid stuff in the bathroom cabinet, and pain pills, too.”

Donna got up and came back in a minute with a first aid kit in a small plastic box, a bottle of pills, and a glass of water. Jason shook out four of the ibuprofen tablets and swallowed them in one gulp, and then let Donna wipe the blood away from the small laceration on his cheek.

“It’s not bad,” she told him, “the cut anyway. But you’re already bruising up.”

“God, I feel like I got hit by a truck. He only got me twice, but that was enough.”

“I’m so sorry. I can’t believe you did that. How’d you know how to keep him down?”

Jason gave a bleak chuckle and regretted it as the pain in his head and stomach flared at the same time. He took a shallow breath and then explained in a whisper, “When you come up rough and you’re the smallest in the bunch, you learn how to fight dirty. But damn, I haven’t been hit like that in a long time.” He carefully rested his head against the back of the couch and closed his eyes. At least the blood on the gravel hadn’t been his this time. It could have been so easily, though. What a damn idiot.

Donna gently placed two small butterfly stitches on his cheek. “Are you sure you don’t want me to take you to the E.R.? You might have a concussion.” She took his hands in hers, still kneeling in front of him.

“Maybe . . . but I’ll be okay when this headache eases off.”

“You shouldn’t go to sleep for a while just in case.”

Jason squeezed her hands. “Stay here with me, okay?”

“Of course I’m gonna stay. That was the most amazing thing anyone has ever done for me. Thank you.”

Without opening his eyes, Jason made a doubtful grimace. He wasn’t proud of himself and he didn’t want her gratitude. But at least this time, maybe he had made a difference, and the bruises would be worth it. Maybe he had done for her what he hadn’t been able to do for his mother.

“I’m serious,” Donna said. “He could have really hurt you . . . God, I hope he didn’t.” She pushed his shirt up to look at his stomach, gingerly touching the skin between his ribs and his navel. There was a smudge of tiny red pinpoints to mark the place where Ray’s big ring had dug into his diaphragm, and that was probably just the beginning.

“Yeah, that’ll be sore,” he whispered, “But don’t worry. It’ll be okay. I’d do it again if I had to.”

She pushed herself up and kissed him, then sank back between his knees and rested her face on his chest. Jason put his arms around her shoulders but kept his eyes closed.

The gentle pressure of Donna’s fingers dabbing the blood off of his cheek and the sound of her quiet weeping had taken him back to another time, and to her. That night it had been the E.R. nurse who had dabbed away the blood and pressed the butterfly stitches into place above his eyebrow, but later, after paper shuffling and phone calls and questions about what to do with a seventeen-year-old boy who couldn’t go back home, she had been there. The same sheriff’s deputy that had found him walking down the two-lane

toward town had taken him to her house, and when Nedra had run out to meet him in the yard, he had smiled even though it made his lip split open again. She had cried over the blood too, and he had been happy to bleed. That was the night she had become his home.

Homesickness rose up in him and he pressed his eyes shut against the tears that tried to well up with it, but the movement sent another shot of pain through his cheek and he let out a grunt of discomfort.

Donna shifted between his knees. “You should let me do something for you . . . something to help you feel better.”

She sank a little lower and he felt her fingers slide along his stomach just above the waistband of his jeans. He opened his eyes and looked down at her for a second before it dawned on him what she meant. He sat up and then back again when his aching head protested the rapid movement. He reached down and pulled her up toward him. “Donna, you don’t have to do anything for me. Not like that.”

“I know, but I want to, and it’s not like you’d be cheating on anyone. Endorphins are natural painkillers, you know.” She pushed up his shirt and he felt her warm breath on his skin.

He caught her hand and held it still, and then he felt his face grow hot as he spoke. “I’ve never done that before.”

Surprise registered in her eyes. “You’re a virgin?”

“Uh, yeah, because of her, I was waiting.” It was a half-truth at best. He had never done what he assumed Donna had in mind, but he didn’t like to admit the truth. He had slept with the one girlfriend he had during that year he got sent to live with his grandparents, and damn, he thought, he had done that wishing she had been someone else too. He had barely been sixteen, and later it had been one more reason for him to feel like he didn’t quite measure up.

“Don’t take it the wrong way, okay . . . listen, I don’t want to use you like that and then leave. I don’t want another reason to feel like an asshole.”

“You are not an asshole. Why won’t you listen to me when I tell you that? If I want to do something for you—freely, with no strings attached—how does that make you the bad guy?”

“I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to go back home, but if I do, I don’t want to go back feeling like I’ve fucked things up even more. I’m sorry. I can’t get her out of my head. I’ve loved her since I was fifteen.”

“I don’t understand why you are fucking around here, then. If you love her so much, go do something about it. Get her back.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“What could you have done that’s so bad that you can’t go back and at least try to fix it? Hell, you got mad and wanted to hit her? Who doesn’t want to hit somebody every now and then? You didn’t do it. You aren’t this terrible person that you seem to think you are.”

“It’s not just that I wanted to hit her . . . it’s that things weren’t working, no matter what I did. There was this accident and she got hurt . . . but it was more than that. It messed with her head. She got, was, I guess . . . sick. I mean, depressed and moody, angry, sometimes out of control. She couldn’t help it, but I couldn’t handle it. I felt like I was turning into someone that I didn’t want to be. Someone who was bad for her.”

“Your father.”

The tension that had crept into his body made him hurt, but he couldn’t let it go. “Yeah, and she saw it too . . . she saw it and it killed me.”

“But you made a choice not to be like him. And just now you made a choice to not be like the other guys who have used me and treated me like shit. If you keep choosing to be the good guy, you will be. For me, you already are.”

Jason held her to his chest and tried to believe her, but the echoes of rage inside of him—the memories of the red outlines that his thumbs had pressed into her shoulders, and of the spittle he had sprayed with threats into Ray’s ear—whispered to him other, truer things.

You can get kicked out or you can walk out, but some of the places you come from just won’t leave you behind.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Leslie Maxwell Kaiura is an Associate Professor of Spanish at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. She teaches all levels of Spanish language, culture, and literature and is a member of the Women's and Gender Studies faculty. Her area of research focuses on gender ideology and violence against women in 19th and early 20th-century Spain, and she has published scholarly articles in journals and edited collections. She is an amateur theology nerd and dreams of one day publishing the novel from which the story "Company" originated.