



Punctured, Bruised,
and Barely Tattooed

a companion novel to the Tangled Web series

Jade C. Jamison

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Goodreads sample

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Kory McCallister has had her eyes on tattoo artist Stone Bowman for quite some time—so long, in fact, that no other guy will do. Stone pushes every turn-on button Kory has—he’s tattooed from head to toe; he’s hot; he’s funny and charming; and he’s also mysterious. So when Kory’s friends dare her to ask Stone out on a date, she can’t believe she actually finds the guts to do it.

More surprising? He takes her up on the offer.

She discovers that, while his past might not be quite as dark or mysterious as she’d imagined, it’s bigger than she’d expected, and it’s something she will need to contend with if she decides she wants to keep him around to color her life for good.

“Know what? Never mind. I thought you were better than that.” She turned on her heel and started walking down the street away from him.

Three...four...five. “Kory.” *Yes.* It had worked...well, at least she hoped so. She’d have to wait to hear what he had to say. Carefully, she turned around. She was several steps away from him. She made sure her face didn’t show sadness, fear, or anger. She hoped she had a look of annoyance, like he was an irritant at this point.

She let out a breath as though she didn’t have time to wait. Finally, she said, “Yeah?”

He walked toward her and she became aware of the sound his boots made on the sidewalk. Sure, she heard a couple of cars driving down the street, and she could hear noise from the bar she was almost standing in front of. She was becoming more and more aware of the heat bearing down on her shoulders like a weight, and it got worse the closer he got, because her breathing grew shallow.

He stood in front of her. *Oh, fucking hell.* His eyes were dark and her mouth started watering as his hands cupped her cheeks and he guided her chin upward until his lips touched hers.

Gone...the heat, the noise, even her goddamn heartbeat...until it started throbbing in her chest and her blood began swarming through her body, warming her back up from lifelessness. Stone’s tongue touched her lips and parted them before entering her mouth and, *holy God*, for the first time in a long time throughout her miserable existence, she felt alive. Overflowing with too much emotion, too much adrenaline and...

her fucking panties were wet

...hopes and dreams, unspoken and unknown, flowed through her like water.

Until the kiss was over. She opened her eyes, the breath gone from her lungs, and she searched his eyes. He’d done it. Why had he done it after fucking with her, blowing her off? Did he like messing with her mind?

But his eyes—they told her more than his words ever could. Jesus. What she felt then was heavy. Had he been screwing around with her head, when really he was just trying to deny something?

As she sucked in a breath, forcing it to the bottom of her lungs, she realized her hands had formed fists around the back of his t-shirt, as though she were clinging to him for dear life. No smile, no smirk. He said, “That what you wanted?”

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Chapter One

KORY MCCALLISTER SAT on the brown vinyl couch in the air conditioned studio. She pulled her thumb away from her lip once again, because that nail had already been chewed into oblivion.

So stupid. Yeah, stupid that she was so nervous, but she couldn't help it. She was going to see Stone Bowman soon. God, that man was her dream guy and he probably had no idea she even existed.

She took a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves. No, she wasn't nervous about getting pierced. She'd done it plenty of times and, with her fear of needles, she was surprised that she'd been able to do it so many times, but it was because of Stone. She'd entered this place two years ago and there he'd been—tall, dark, shoulder-length hair, scruff on his face, coal-dark eyes, and *holy hell*, more tattoos than her eyes could take in. His neck, arms, chest (although his shirt covered most of it), and heaven knew what else. His body was a living canvas, and Kory had fallen in love with the guy the first time she'd seen him. He was a dream. He was also a calming influence, part of why she thought she'd never be able to be pierced by anyone else on the planet, and she supposed that was why he was so good at his job.

He was also a hell of a tattoo artist, but Kory's fear of needles had prevented her so many times from getting a tattoo.

No one would have ever guessed she was afraid of having a needle poke her because the girl was pierced all over—multiple eyebrow piercings, nose, lips, and her ears were pincushions. She also had a belly ring. She still had plenty of places to pierce, but she didn't want to have Stone doing the honors on her nipple...not now, anyway. She definitely didn't want anyone else doing it, either.

She knew having Stone pierce her was a waste of his supreme talents as a tattoo artist, but he was co-owner of the shop. She always requested him and he'd never refused.

Kory knew her friends thought she was crazy. Earlier that day, they'd been shaking their heads at her, asking why another piercing? Didn't she have enough holes in her body? And how would that work with her business major anyway? They never listened to her counterarguments—that she could remove the piercings whenever she needed to, very little harm done, and it wasn't like she was getting tattoos.

Of course, that was what she was working up to...but there was that fear of needles stopping her.

Silly, yes, because she was pierced. A lot.

The needle was quick, though, and it wasn't like getting a tattoo, where it would take hours of work with a vibrating gun. No, instead, it was with a—well, yeah, that fucker was a big ass needle, but it was fast...at least the way Stone did it.

That was why she'd gone to get pierced in the first place—to get over that fear. She had an irrational phobia about needles, and she was tired of saying she was a strong woman when she couldn't even get her nose pierced.

She had thought about it for weeks and weeks and finally found the courage to march in to the shop called The Iron Maiden. It was early evening, close to the time the shop was going to close, and she'd told the guy she wanted her nose pierced and wanted it done fast. He had so many questions, though, and she couldn't remember their conversation to this day. All she could

remember was his absolute beauty, inside and out, and she credited him with making needles a little less scary.

Since that day two years ago—during the summer after she graduated high school—she'd been back almost every month. She doubted Stone even remembered who she was from one visit to the next, but his image in Kory's head had kept her focused for years.

Truthfully, Kory knew she belonged more in that shop than she did in college, majoring in business. With her background, she was surprised she wanted it too, but she never wanted to have to beg from anyone for anything. When she left her foster parents' house after graduation, she knew she had one of two paths—she could be the tough-as-nails, hard ass, bruised and destroyed burnout who worked shitty jobs or maybe became a stripper, but that would be following the path of her egg donor, and there was no way in hell she wanted to be like that woman. The other path was the one untraveled by people of her kind. She didn't want to be beholden to the man, so she would become him. She was smart enough—street smart, anyway—and her foster parents had helped her see that she had value. She could learn whatever she needed to, so long as she applied herself.

She heard the door to the back part of the shop open. They played the same music back there that they did in the front area where they sold the body jewelry and clothing, but hearing the music coming from that area wasn't what tipped her off to the door opening. No, it was Stone walking out with a satisfied customer. Kory tried not to feel jealous, but that customer was tall, thin, and blonde, and Kory was pretty sure the woman had fake boobs to boot.

Stone was smiling and chatting with her as he led her to the counter while continuing to discuss aftercare. She tittered, revealing overly white teeth, as she handed a silver toned credit card to the guy at the counter. The guy—a kid named Richie—mentioned to Stone that he had another customer waiting. Kory looked at her phone, hoping she looked distracted, as though she hadn't a care in the world, because really she was on pins and needles waiting for him to get his ass over there.

God, he probably thought she just was a stupid kid. She'd grown her dark hair out since the first time she'd seen him, and she knew she looked more like a woman today than she had back then. Unlike the busty babe he'd just tatted, though, Kory's breasts were small. Of course, they matched her body. She was small all over, and it just made her self-conscious. She knew people dismissed her, so she had to make up for it with her voice and gestures. The problem was that behavior was often at odds with how she felt inside.

She was a mess, a basket of contradictions. That meant she'd never make a good girlfriend, would never be dating material, would—

“Hey.” She heard Stone's voice just a couple of feet away as her brain was considering an exit strategy.

Too late. Besides, she could feel the butterflies freaking out in her tummy now as an eerie calm washed over her back. “Hey.” She looked in his eyes. Wow. Yeah. This guy was the shit.

“Richie said you're itching for another piercing.”

She swallowed. “Uh, yeah.” God, she felt like she could drown in his dark eyes. She could—and she'd be content breathing in the water, filling her soul with his essence. Kory so many times felt like she didn't belong anywhere—nowhere on the planet—but she could see herself finding peace in his eyes.

Now, though, his gaze unnerved her. It wasn't like it was in her fantasies. There they had an easy relationship. In real life, though, he was just a hot guy and she was merely his customer.

His annoying punctured, slightly stalkerish customer who needed an excuse to be touched by him once more.

He tilted his head toward the door to the back, indicating that he was going to lead her behind the glass door. She stood, her legs a little wobbly, and she couldn't help but focus on his hand as he grabbed the handle. Fuck. Those tattoos all over his hand made her feel warm between her legs. If he knew what seeing him did to her, he'd be kicking her ass out and filing a restraining order.

Jesus.

She was so absorbed in her warm thoughts that she almost missed what he asked. She forced herself to focus so she could remember the words that had just come out of his mouth. Oh, what she wanted pierced. Yeah. She gulped again, walking through the door toward the back while he held it open, and said, "Tragus."

He half smiled and nodded. "Right or left?"

She hadn't thought about it, really. No way would she get them both done—not now. It would give her another excuse to visit if she only got one. She turned around, pulling hair behind her ears on both sides. "I don't know. What do you think?"

He shrugged. "I think it would look okay on either side." They stopped near an alcove where a cushioned table butted up against a wall, almost like a doctor's office. She knew the drill and hopped up before Stone could say a word. He opened a drawer and started getting out supplies and set them next to the piece of jewelry Kory had chosen long before he had been involved. "Do you have a preference?"

No, not really. She just wanted his hands on her again. She would never say that, though. "Hmm. Maybe balance. You know—even me out?"

He didn't even look up from what he was doing. "So on the right then?"

Wow. He remembered that she had more holes on the left than the right. Part of that was because of the industrial she had in the right ear, and she'd never bothered to put other piercings in the gap above where the bar went through. That was good, though, because it gave her plenty of options for later...until he realized she had a problem and refused to continue piercing her.

She wasn't a freak, though. She knew plenty of people who were crazy pierced—the ones who had to have surgery to be pierced through bone, and even some of the extreme ear stretchers, something Kory couldn't quite get into...those were the ones who had a problem.

Sure, she did too, but it had nothing to do with being addicted to body modification. It was an addiction for the man doing the work.

"Yeah, that's fine."

He turned around and wiped with alcohol the tiny area where the tragus piercing would go. She couldn't help but look at his face. He was right there and he was close, and it was at that moment that Kory realized that she probably trusted this man more than she trusted anyone else. Why? Because he had, multiple times, had her well being in his hands and, while piercings stung, he'd never injured her.

God, he was gorgeous. Kory loved how the colorful tattoos crept up his neck. If he would have decided to grow out his beard, it would have covered the tops of them. More than that, though, she loved the tattoos on his hands. The ones on his arms crawled down the backs of his hands, and he also had letters on his fingers. One hand had the letters *P-A-I-N* on the knuckles and the other had the letters *F-U-C-K*. Kory was pretty sure it was a statement—*fuck pain*—which was appropriate for a guy who tattooed and pierced others for a living. Kory knew he wasn't pierced much, at least where her eyes could see. He had slightly stretched piercings in his

ears and Kory could tell he used to have snakebites that he had since allowed to close up. She bet those had been sexy.

If Kory were the blushing kind, her cheeks would have turned pink when she started wondering if maybe he was pierced in places she could only imagine.

The alcohol felt cool against her skin and he turned away from her to grab his needle. She bit her lip and looked ahead, swallowing. "You gonna close your eyes?"

She grinned and glanced up at him. That meant he *did* remember her, because she always had to close her eyes. That was okay, though, because she could feel his body heat close to her, assuring her through the pain that it was going to be all right.

Chapter Two

KORY SAT AT the outdoor table outside the little café where she and her friends met every Wednesday at noon. Her friends Lacey and Tina were also her roommates, but they realized once they were working and going to school that they rarely saw each other, so they made a plan to meet for lunch—just once a week, because it was all they could afford—and that way they could catch up on anything they might have missed.

“Wait. Let me get this straight.” Lacey tucked a piece of blonde hair behind her ear. Unlike her friend, Lacey was not pierced multiple times. She had two holes in each ear and a nose piercing. That was it...but she did have a couple of tattoos—one on her ankle and the other on her back, and she had plans for more in the future. “You got a tragus? Why? You’re taking the title *metalhead* a little too far, don’t you think?”

Tina giggled and pulled her light brown hair back over her shoulders. “She’s not doing it for the piercing, Lacey. You of all people should know that.”

Lacey furrowed her brow and shot a glare out of her blue eye at her friend. “I’m beginning to seriously worry about her.” She turned to look at Kory again. “I get wanting to be pierced. *I get it*. I really do. But this obsession’s starting to worry me.”

Kory rolled her eyes. Tina was right—Lacey didn’t get it. “I’m not obsessed with getting pierced, Lacey, but I *will* get more piercings. I was calculating it last night. I can still get pierced at least seven times—eleven or twelve if I’m creative—before I have to get pierced underneath my clothes.”

Tina said, “Wait. Don’t you have your bellybutton pierced?”

“Well, yeah, but I’m talking about having to take my bra off.”

Tina snorted. “You haven’t progressed that far in the relationship.” Lacey was fuming. Kory was ready to put her out of her misery when Tina beat her to it. “Oh, come on, Lacey. Where the hell have you been? Kory doesn’t give a shit about being pierced. She’s only going there so she can spend time with that hot tattoo artist.”

“Tattoo artist?”

Kory grinned. “Yeah. Stone Bowman.”

Tina was more like Lacey in that she didn’t have many piercings but she had four small tattoos, and they were all visible, depending upon what she wore for the day. She’d gone to The Iron Maiden for her last tattoo but had been tatted by the other guy in the shop, a guy who went by the nickname Six-pack, but Kory was pretty sure his real name was Russ.

And, for the time being, Tina appeared to be the brightest girl in the group. She furrowed her brows and shook her head, a look of incredulity plastered on her face. “Where the hell have you been, Lace?”

Lacey didn’t like feeling as though she were in the dark, so her quick temper flared. “What?”

“Jesus. Seriously?”

Kory smiled again. She knew why Lacey didn’t know. She didn’t know, because Kory had never actually *said* anything. Tina tended to be perceptive; Lacey, however, needed a press announcement—and apparently that time had come. Lacey looked pissed, but Kory took one of her hands in both of her own. It got her friend’s attention and took her mind off Tina’s jabs. “I

have a lady boner for Stone.” She hated the term, but she knew that would grab her friend’s attention.

Lacey blinked and then tilted her head. She glanced back at Tina and the brown-haired young woman nodded as if to say *Told you so*. She returned her attention to Kory. “Wait a minute. So you’re telling me you keep getting pierced *only because you have the hots for some guy?*”

Kory let go of her friend’s hand, but she was laughing. “You make it sound so stupid when you put it that way.”

Lacey picked up her iced tea. “That’s because it is.”

“Lacey Fuhrman! That’s only easy for you to say because you always have men falling all over you.”

“No, that’s not it at all. Seriously, answer me this. Do you think it’s normal to undergo body modifications just because you want to be around a guy?”

Kory frowned. “Have I ever struck you as the kind of person who *is* normal, who *cares* to be normal?”

Tina nodded. “That’s true. We’re lucky we’re her friends.” Lacey rolled her eyes.

Kory inhaled. “Yeah. That *is* true.” And, she knew that when Lacey gave some thought to what she knew about Kory’s background, she would have to agree. Kory was surprised she wasn’t in need of permanent therapy either, but her therapist had once called her *resilient*. Yeah, if nothing else, she was that.

The waitress brought their food—cheeseburgers and fries—and took their glasses to fill their drinks. Kory squirted mustard on the underside of the top bun and decided not to say anymore about it. She didn’t need more grief from Lacey.

Except Lacey had other ideas. “Okay...so tell me what’s so special about this guy.”

Kory couldn’t help the smile that spread over her face. All she had to do was think about Stone and she felt better. She mashed the bun onto her sandwich and then grabbed the ketchup, squirting a blob of it on the side of her plate. “I don’t know that you’d understand.”

“Try me.”

Tina said, “He’s hot—I’ll give you that.”

“That’s not it, though. There’s something about the guy. I’m drawn to him. I don’t know why. I sometimes wonder if maybe there was something that made me feel connected to him the first time I met him.”

She could tell that Lacey was trying to be respectful, even though her friend’s skepticism was at war with herself. “Like what?”

Kory took a deep breath and dipped a fry in ketchup. She let her mind wander while she chewed on it, thinking back to the first time she had ever been under the needle with Stone Bowman. “I don’t know. It’s like he’s a kindred spirit...like there’s something we have in common, but I don’t know what it is. I’ve asked myself over and over and over—what could it possibly be? Was there a message hidden in one of his tattoos that my subconscious mind latched onto or was it something he said? Did he have something hanging on his wall at The Iron Maiden that spoke to me? The times I’ve gone in there, it’s not like we’ve had huge, long, drawn-out conversations. It’s not like I’ve asked him about his past or his hopes and dreams. I really don’t know much about him, but it feels like I should. It feels like there’s something between us...and I want to know what it is.”

Lacey shrugged. “Okay, so I guess I can kind of understand that.”

“Thanks.” Kory ate another fry and then said, “On top of that, though? There’s also something super mysterious about him.”

Tina said, “Well, you kind of already said that—you know, you want to know what your connection is.” She wiped her fingers on her napkin. “Makes you wonder about past lives.”

Lacey cut her burger in half with the table knife that had been rolled in her napkin with the other silverware. “Okay, now if we’re going to start talking about reincarnation bullshit, I’m out.”

“I was just sayin’.”

The waitress brought their filled drinks back and asked how the food was. They all dismissed her, letting her know their meals were fine.

Kory set her burger back on her plate, unwilling to drop it just because there had been a halt to what they’d been discussing. “No, that’s not what I mean at all. It just feels like there’s some weird connection.”

Tina giggled. “Or maybe he’s just hot.”

“Yeah, maybe. Oh, no, he definitely is. Holy shit. Lacey, you need to see him sometime.”

“Why haven’t you ever snuck a pic with your phone?”

She frowned. “Good question. Um, maybe because I’m afraid I’ll get caught, and then he’ll think I’m some perv, and I’ll never have a chance with him.”

“Oh, my God. You really *do* like him.”

“Yeah. Duh.” Kory dragged a fry through the ketchup but her mind’s eye had latched onto the visage of Stone in her mind. “He’s tattooed—all fucking over. Both arms are fully sleeved. And he’s tattooed on his chest and they go up his neck almost to his face. I don’t know about the rest of him, but I imagine him tattooed all over his damn body. Oh, his hands and fingers too. And then he has longish dark hair and his eyes are almost black. Beautiful white teeth. And he usually has a few days’ growth on his face—never a full beard, but a dark shadow. His arms seem so strong, so firm, and...well, you’re just gonna have to see him.”

Lacey smiled, her bad mood behind her. “Well, I guess you’re just going to have to start dating him.”

“I don’t think he even notices me as a woman. He seems to recognize me as a customer, but that’s about it.”

Tina set her Diet Coke down. “You can change that.”

“Oh, don’t expect me to go in there acting all slutty. Not gonna happen.”

“No.” She leaned over the table. “I didn’t say you had to be outrageous and force his attention.” She took a deep breath. “Does he have a girlfriend?”

“I don’t know.”

Lacey said, “*You don’t know?* You’re lusting after this guy and, for all you know, he might have a wife and two kids at home.”

“I don’t think so.”

Tina gave Lacey a look and then moved her eyes back to Kory. “There’s one way to find out.” Kory raised her eyebrows. “You ask him out on a date.”

“Uh...*no*.”

“Why not? Are you crazy?”

“Yeah, but not *that* crazy.”

Tina put her hands on the table. “Kory McCallister. Seriously? You’ve been carrying a torch for this guy for what—a year or longer?—and you’re not willing to ask him out for a drink or something?”

“A drink? Are you kidding? I’m not old enough yet.”

“Oh, shit. I forget that. Sorry, Kory.”

Kory hadn’t. Tina had turned twenty-one in March and Lacey in January. Kory had to wait until August. It wasn’t too big a deal, because the three girls drank at private parties anyway, but her friends had started venturing into the bar scene once in a while, and Kory had tried twice and, having been carded both times and rejected because of her age, decided to wait until she was legal and wouldn’t have to sneak around. She just frowned and ate another fry, wishing they would change the subject.

Tina wasn’t going to drop it, though. “Why not pizza, then? Or a concert or something?” Kory shrugged. “What are his interests?”

“I don’t know.”

“So a date would be your way to find out. Just...just do it, girl. I know you want to. And what have you got to lose?”

Kory took a deep breath, ready to resist, but she heard Lacey’s next words, and they struck hard. “Or are you dying to be pierced from head to toe?”

“All right. I’ll do it.”

Tina smiled. “Yeah?”

Kory nodded. “Yeah. I just have to work up the nerve.”

“Fuck that. Don’t think about it. I’ll go with you. I got your back, girl.”

Well...Kory didn’t know that she wanted the in-person support, but she appreciated the sentiment. If Stone turned her down, she’d need a drinking buddy—and Tina could buy the beer for it. But she had to *ask* first.

Chapter Three

KORY SUCKED DOWN a long, slow gulp of air. She'd been planning this for days, picturing it in her mind. Yes, she had even imagined every possible scenario—Stone saying yes, Stone saying no, Stone laughing at her, Stone looking flattered but ultimately rebuffing her. She'd envisioned him giving her excuses and reasons why he wouldn't. She was ready for anything and felt like she could handle the rejection that she was convinced was coming.

Surely, he had a girlfriend or he had a type that Kory wouldn't fit. She just knew it.

That was okay, though, because she was ready for anything. And she'd never been a crier, so it wasn't like she'd make an ass of herself when he turned her down.

Tina had the night off from work, so she drove Kory over to The Iron Maiden. Lacey had finally offered her love and support and hugged Kory before heading to her night class. Tina cranked some Gemini Syndrome in her car and drove like a maniac over to the downtown area where Stone's shop was. It was Wednesday night, one week later, and Kory knew he worked Wednesday nights. She came near the end of the day as well, because if they'd come any earlier, she knew he would have been immersed in an involved tattoo project. She could wait but she knew that would seem...well, she needed to call a spade a spade. It would seem stalkerish.

She took another deep breath and looked down at her clothing. Lacey had tried to convince her to wear a dress or something frilly...something clearly *not* Kory. It wasn't that she didn't want to look nice or desirable to Stone, but she didn't want to look like someone she wasn't. If by some weird twist of fate he said yes, she wanted him saying it to *her*, Kory, not some fake version of herself.

So no dress. No frills. No curly hair (another Lacey idea). She was going to wear jeans, a Five Finger Death Punch t-shirt, and her suede black boots. Nothing fancy. Totally metal. Completely bad ass.

Herself.

Part of her wanted to ask Tina if she looked all right, but she knew she looked okay. She looked normal—not beautiful, not pretty, but normal. Not ugly or scary, but just her usual self.

She could hear her psych prof in her head saying something about self-sabotage, but she refused to believe that. And, deep down, she realized that maybe she didn't want to put a lot of effort into the whole ordeal, because then, when he said no, she could blame it on the fact that she hadn't done much to win his affections.

She knew she could live with that.

Tina parked in a space that was fairly close to the shop and then looked at Kory. "All set?"

Kory nodded. "Yeah."

"Nervous?"

"Hell, yes."

Tina smiled. "You be okay?"

"Yep. I can do this."

"Good luck. Remember, he might actually say yes."

Kory shook her head, hardly able to believe she was doing it, but it was like she'd told herself earlier that day: the worst he could do would be to say no. And what would that hurt? It wouldn't hurt anything. It wasn't like she'd invested herself into a relationship or as though she'd spent countless hours fantasizing about him.

Well, maybe she *had*...but this might be the perfect way to get over him.

Shit or get off the pot. She'd had an aunt who used to say that. She could barely remember that woman, only that she had been missing one of her canine teeth and she would say that stupid phrase a lot.

Of course, Kory might have been misremembering. It had been far too long since she'd seen the woman, and her memory might have been faulty.

She shook her head, trying to focus. "Okay, see you in a bit." She smiled at Tina and got out of the car. Once she stood, she ran her hands along the front of her t-shirt, smoothing it out, and then she took another deep breath.

It was still warm outside, even though the sun had disappeared behind the mountain a while ago. She walked the few feet to the front of The Iron Maiden and pulled on the glass door. She felt the cool air rush out of the building as she walked in and her eyes adjusted to the semi-dark of the huge front area of the shop.

Richie was at the counter, cleaning the glass top with a window cleaner. He looked up when he heard the tinkle of the bell that indicated he had a customer. She could see the look on his face. *Oh. Her again.* But then he forced a smile as Kory made her way toward the cash register. "Hi. What can I do for you?" He shook his head to the side to force his long black bangs out of his eyes.

Kory tried to smile at Richie. He acted like he expected her to buy some new jewelry, which wouldn't have been unusual, but she knew he knew better. She'd been in this shop no fewer than seven times since Christmas, and only once was that to buy jewelry. The other times were for a piercing. What would make this time odd, though, would be that she'd just been there the week before. And that fact registered with him, because he then said, "Having problems with your newest site?"

She shook her head. "Oh, no. I just, uh, wondered if I could talk to Stone."

There was that look on his face again. "He's with a customer."

"Right. But after?"

Richie almost sighed out loud, and that made Kory realize that Stone probably had lots of women who came in just "to talk." She wondered if she should make something up about wanting to ask him about a career in tattooing or maybe about a new place to pierce on her body, but before she could, Richie said, "Yeah, I guess. Have a seat, and I'll let him know you're here."

She peeked in the rear of the shop and saw that he was tattooing some guy's back. It looked like he was doing an outline, so it could take a while. She got on her phone and texted Tina. *Looks like he's busy. Could be a while. Want to do this some other time?*

She chewed on her bottom lip, feeling nervous. She had so much pent-up energy and she just wanted to get this over with. It wasn't like she could march in there and ask Stone if he could take a break for a few minutes so she could chat with him.

Tina answered her back. *No. I will gladly wait. Ur just nervous. Want me to come in there and wait with you?*

Kory felt her blood pressure rise. *Hell, NOOOOO!!!*

Okay, just checking. She followed it up with a smiley face emoticon.

Kory sat on the couch another five minutes and texted Tina again. *If you wanted to hang somewhere, I can let you know when I'm done.*

She heard the door swing open, because the music got louder. She was almost afraid to look, because she felt out of place. Oh, she *looked* like she belonged, but she was sure her eyes would be a dead giveaway. She was nervous as hell.

But she *did* look—couldn't help herself. Stone was walking the guy out and he approached the counter. She couldn't hear all of the conversation, but she gathered that the guy was going to be coming back several times—at least once for more outlining and then for color, but the guy was a busy man.

Kory wondered if it was because of the pain—maybe he could only handle so much. She knew that would be *her* problem...if and when she ever got the guts to be tattooed.

She felt her phone vibrate and she looked down at the screen. *Ur not chickening out, are you?*

That stupid little text was flashing at her when she looked up to see Stone standing right in front of her. Oh, God, the man was jaw-dropping gorgeous. “Didn't I just see you a few days ago? Did your last piercing get infected?”

She stood up, moving on instinct, and he tilted his head, trying to see the tragus he'd given her the week before. As though it were in slow motion, she watched him raise his hand and pull back her hair a little on the right side so he could see her ear. She felt as though she were on the verge of collapse, feeling the warmth of his hand right up against her face. “It looks okay to me,” he said.

It was a struggle, but she found her tongue. “What? No, the piercing's great. Expert work, as always.” Oh, fuck. Did she sound as big a dumb ass to him as she did to her own ears? *Get it over with!* “I, uh...needed to ask you some questions.”

He considered her for a second. “Oh. Okay.” He nodded. “We can go in the back.” She would say one thing for Stone Bowman—he was patient as hell. She could almost sense Richie's exasperation, but Stone acted like he had all the time in the world and he was happy to give it to her. Yeah, Richie could learn a thing or two about customer service.

Must. Not. Look. She really wanted to check out his ass, but she was glad she didn't, because when he got to the door, he held it open for her, and she would have been caught gazing. She smiled and walked through, waiting for him to lead the way. “So what's up?” he asked, pausing by the counter that held his tattoo supplies.

Kory's mouth was dry. Somehow in the short time she'd had to wait, followed by the overabundance of nerves while he walked her in the back, her adrenaline supplies had depleted themselves, but not without first dumping all they had into her body. She felt jittery, like she'd had too much caffeine and no sleep. Her stomach was woozy and she was beginning to doubt she could ask her question.

She sucked in a deep breath. “Okay, so...” She swallowed, even though there was nothing in her mouth to force down her throat. “I really want to get a tattoo, but I'm afraid of that gun. Does it hurt really bad?”

She could almost hear Tina in her head, shouting at her. *What the hell? That's not what you were gonna ask him!*

Stone shrugged. “Depends on your pain tolerance.” He had a sly grin on his face. “You seem to have a high one, and I have a hard time believing you're afraid of my gun. How many piercings do you have so far?”

Oh, he had no idea. She really was totally fucking afraid of needles and pokey things, and the piercing might have started out as a way to get past all that. Then her fascination with Stone had made it tolerable, but she hated the damn things. Really hated them. Really, when she

thought about it, the tattoos might be easier to handle than all this pincushion torture she'd been putting herself through. She forced a laugh. "I don't know. I lost count."

He shook his head. "I think you could handle it just fine. What do you have in mind?"

She could still hear Tina in her head. Worse yet, Lacey's voice was joining hers, and Kory didn't want to seem like a wuss. That's what she was, though, and after all that tough talk about being able to handle anything.

She spat it out. "I wondered if you'd want to go out with me sometime."

Oh, holy hell. She'd actually said it.

And she couldn't register Stone's reaction to save her soul. He seemed taken aback a bit, but that was understandable, because he'd been waiting for her to talk about tattoos. Then he smiled. "Okay. What did you have in mind?" He said it just like he'd said it before when he'd asked what kind of tattoo she'd wanted. That was what convinced her he was just toying with her.

Oh, shit. But was he maybe actually considering it? "Oh, uh, I dunno..." She couldn't ask him out for a drink, so she said so. "I, um, can't go to the bar, but maybe, uh, pizza or..."

His eyes. They were lit up. Amused, maybe? Kory wasn't sure. "Yeah. Pizza's a great idea."

"Yeah, sure, pizza."

"Okay. When?"

Holy fucking shit. Was he *really* saying yes? "Oh, uh, yeah? You want to?"

His smile was huge. She didn't think she'd ever seen a smile like that on his face. It was beautiful. "Yeah."

"Um...maybe Friday night? I don't work then."

He nodded. "I'm done here a little after eight. That's not too late, is it?"

She shook her head. "No, that's fine."

"There's a pizza place across the street. You want to meet there, say around eight-thirty?"

Kory nodded. "Yeah. I like that place."

"Okay. Now tell me about this tattoo you're wanting."

She grinned. "How about I save that for Friday?" Because she had to get the hell out of there before she fainted...or freaked out...or both.

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