

“Get back here at once, Abigail!”

Her hair flowed behind her back, messy and auburn, like flaming lava stalking her as she rushed out onto the sidewalk.

Abigail Miller did not bother closing the door behind her, and she could still hear her father’s screams a whole block away, her own footsteps hammering against the sidewalk . She had two mismatched sneakers on: one pink, the other one blue. Abby had blindly grabbed them, having been barefooted when everything went wrong, as it usually did whenever her father was involved..

She was the kind of girl who didn’t have to put too much effort to have men staring her way. Abigail’s frame was petite, but she was, as her mother would put it, “round in all the right places”, a fact she loathed wholeheartedly. Sure, beauty was supposed to be something to strive for, right? A gift, a ticket to an easier life, having perky breasts and a firm ass? Yeah, well, it was not so great when her dad was one of the men ogling her, that was for damned sure, or when guys 20 year her senior wanted to ‘tap that’. She sometimes wished she could be plain and flat-chested and be done with this whole shitshow.

Her sun-kissed skin, adorned by a million little freckles, was no stranger to the elements. Abby preferred staying out of the damned house as often as humanly possible, after all.

What had started the argument this time? Well, apparently, her mom had the gall to overcook the steak. Dishes were suddenly darted at the wall, exploding in a hundred tiny little bits but only because her father’s aim was crap. He had been aiming at Lucy, at the terrified woman he had been married to for 20 years.

Abby had been stupid enough to try and get in the way, stand up to her dad. That never worked. Her cheek was still bruised by the sharp slap her attitude got her, but she did not care. She was far too used to bruises and scrapes by now, having discovered exactly how those felt since she was but a toddler.

Abigail might have been beautiful, but she wasn’t like those pretty girls at school with their little dresses, manicured nails and their ever-so-perfect hairdos. No... even if her family could afford it, she’d escape all of that like the plague. She was wearing a hand-me-down pair of khaki shorts, not because her dad did not earn money to buy her new stuff, but because he had the nasty tendency to visit the tracks twice a week. Sometimes he won, sometimes, well... sometimes he didn’t, and that wasn’t good news for anyone involved. Her blouse, a light shade of blue with a somewhat pleasant cleavage, was new but already stained with whatever sauce the steak had been covered in.

She ran past the town’s main coffee shop and the hospital and the school and even Regency Park. She ran past the first farm bordering the outskirts of town, and did not stop when she

reached the forest. She didn't even take a breather as she reached the highway, about two miles out of the place she had been born and raised in.

Abby had stuck what little belongings she could grab by the handful before her dad got to her, into that old, worn-out backpack, the same she used to carry around while attending high school. As she did so often, Abigail found herself wondering why she hadn't left town the minute she turned 18. Well, that had been a big mistake, and now it was time to fix it.

There she was: with nothing but the clothes on her back, a few extra outfits that probably didn't match, and her meager savings hidden in the pocket of her one good jacket. Abigail had finally walked away from her father, from her family, a bit too old to be considered a runaway.

She had nowhere to go, she had no idea what she'd do, but for the first time in her life, Abigail felt free. Like the air she was breathing was actually her own and not her overbearing father's. Like the town that had felt like an anchor keeping her from ever leaving was finally in the past. The saying went: small town, big hell. Everyone was in each other's businesses, and everyone had a reputation.

Well, no longer. She was never going to return to that damned place.

Abigail slowly allowed herself to stop running, trotting for a few more feet before coming to a halt. She was exhausted, her lungs about to burst, but it was ok. The future was possible now, not just an illusion.

She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply as she stuck out her arm and lifted her thumb.

Was it dangerous to be hitchhiking on an interstate highway? Probably. But it was her only way out, and she would face whatever she was getting herself into.

A few miles down the road, Aiden Myren wondered why the hell he was running yet another errand from town to town instead of getting himself a cozy, easy job in the city.

Aiden's restored Pontiac Firebird was his pride and joy, one of the few things that could easily turn his trademark scowl into a smile, however briefly. It had taken him years to get it to work, beginning with nothing but a broken-down mess. Aiden had salvaged his pet project from the junkyard he had been employed at ever since his senior year in high school.

The Myrens did not have a good reputation in town, they never had. Not Aiden's grandfather, nor his father and certainly not himself. He was a troublemaker, the sheriff assured him, and one day he'd end up at the local jail, precisely where he belonged. Or so everyone around him seemed to believe this was the case. Why waste his time proving them wrong, when he could live his life and let those idiots whisper behind his back until they went blue in the face?

With a sigh, he rubbed his temples with a mixture of frustration and exhaustion. He had been driving for hours and was more than ready to stop at some greasy joint for a coffee and a burger.

Aiden glanced at the rear-view mirror and caught his reflection staring right back at him. As a little boy, Aiden had been a skinny, clumsy thing. By the time puberty arrived at age twelve, however, he had begun filling out, growing muscles from the regular bicycle rides around town or the endless walks through the fields. Anything to avoid going back home until his old man was too drunk to care if he was there or not.

His pitch-black hair always seemed to be tousled, and his beard was a bit long. He had inherited his old man's sharp jaw and angular cheekbones, though the thin lips came from his mother's side of the family. At least that's what he'd heard. The small scar running down his left temple, however, was all his, as were the tattoos which decorated his back and arms.

He was already trying to remember where the next half-decent dinner was, when he noticed a beautiful, petite figure standing to the side of the road.

"Don't stop," He told himself in a foul mood. Would anyone stop for him? He should ignore the girl with her thumb up and keep driving, but a voice deep inside him warned Aiden against it. They were miles away from any town, and the roads were filled with creeps who'd be more than happy to pull her into their car. And what then?

"It's not your fucking business, that's what," he grunted with frustration, but he knew he was lying to himself.

With a sigh, Aiden slowed down his car, coming to a halt by the side of the road, and peeked out his window, giving the red-haired girl a look. She looked like a teenager, but something in her fierce green stare told him otherwise. Or maybe it was just what he wanted to believe. Picking up a teenager would get him in a mess he wanted nothing to do with, after all.

"Where are you going, princess?" He asked, and received a sharp glare as all response. He smirked her way and shrugged, "Well, don't tell me if you don't want to, but I'm heading two towns over. Might even make it to the city if that's where you're heading."

Abigail's stern look relaxed somewhat, and she nodded, stepping closer to the passenger's seat.

"I'd like a ride, if it's free," She replied, her green gaze scanning the stranger and his car for any signs of danger.

When the young woman stepped closer, Aiden noticed the little details he hadn't been able to catch from a distance: The bruise on her cheek, the stained clothes, the way her petite body

tensed. She was scared and trying to hide it the best she could.

“How old are you?”

“19. You won’t be helping a teenager run away if that’s what worries you,” She replied, biting her lower lip. “So, can I hop in or not?”

“Yeah, sure, if you don’t mind me stopping a few miles up the road for dinner,” He replied and unlocked the doors, waiting for her to get in.

She did so, dropping her bag on the floor by her feet, and looking up to him as he started driving.

“What’s your name?” She asked, feeling the silence thick and scary. She wasn’t a delicate little flower, but she had never gotten in a car with a stranger before either. Abigail was beginning to wonder if this was a good idea at all. If she wasn’t in more danger inside this car than she had ever been back at home. And that was saying something.

“Aiden,” He replied, peeking her way out the corner of his dark eyes. “How about you, princess?”

“Don’t call me that” She snapped back, and silence filled the space between them once again. She rolled her fingers awkwardly over her knees, before speaking: “I’m Abigail.”

“You’ve got a mouth on you, Abigail,”

This made the red-headed girl laugh, but it wasn’t a cheerful giggle. It was dry, matter-of-factly. It made her look tough, but Aiden could sense there was far more vulnerability behind that wall than she’d like to admit.

“So I’ve been told,”