

Ink, Steel & *Forever*

A Hard Ink / Raven Riders Short Story



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Jeremy

It was gonna be a freaking awesome day, that was all Jeremy Rixey knew as he stepped into the big lounge at the back of Hard Ink Tattoo and flipped on the lights. At least, he *hoped* it was going to be awesome.

Really, it all depended on Charlie Merritt. As so much of Jeremy's life did these days—and Jer wouldn't have it any other way.

“He's gonna say yes, right?” Jeremy asked Eileen, the now beast of a three-legged German shepherd padding along beside him. Most of the time, the stray they'd all sorta adopted lived with Jer and Charlie in the apartment they used to share with Nick and Becca, who now had their own place over in the new—and finally finished—side of the L-shaped Hard Ink building.

In response to the question, Eileen gave him a tail wag and a pronounced head tilt, her big-ass ears pointing off to the side like an antenna.

“Yeah, it's gonna be okay,” Jeremy said, an unusual nervous flutter racking through his belly. And that shit was *not* something he was used to. Rarely did anything make him nervous or embarrassed or uncertain. But Charlie had that power over him. And that was just one of the things that made Jeremy know into his very soul that he needed to claim the man as his. Once and for all.

Just as Jeremy flipped on the lights in his tattoo room, noise sounded out from the front of the shop, and voices spilled in as the door opened and closed.

“Don't pretend you didn't love the hell out of that,” Ike Young was saying, voice full of humor.

Whatever Jess bit out in reply was too low to hear, but the tone of it was full of sass. Just like Jessica Jakes herself. The two tattoo artists had worked for Jeremy for five years and always been at each other's throats—and that hadn't seemed to change since they'd gotten together last summer. But what had changed was that all the sexual chemistry that had longed brewed beneath the surface between the couple was now *all kinds* of out in the open. All the damn time.

“Yo,” Jeremy called as they filled his doorway. “How’s it hanging?”

“A little to the right,” Jess said, giving a wink and smirking at Ike. The two were a study in contrasts. Jess was petite, had red highlights in her long, jet-black hair, and was vamped up in a pair of skin-tight black jeans, black knee-high boots, and a black bedazzled tank that exposed all the ink on her arms, shoulders, and chest. Beside her, Ike was a tall, intimidating, bald motherfucker of a guy, though equally covered in ink—much of it they'd done on each other.

Jeremy did *not* want to know more about that.

Which made his gaze stray to the tattoo table and his memories stray to the first time he'd given Charlie a tattoo...

“Annd that’s pretty much all I need to know about that,” Jer said.

Jess shrugged and pulled out her phone. “You asked.”

“Anything special on the agenda today?” Ike asked.

It took everything Jeremy had not to yell, *Hell yeah, there is! I’m proposing to my man today!* “Just typical Friday busy-ness. I filled the gap in your schedule with a new client,” Jeremy said to Ike. “So you’re booked all day now.”

Something flashed behind Ike’s eyes.

“That a problem?” Jer asked.

His expression blanked and he shook his head. “Nope. I’m good.”

“Oh!” Jess exclaimed, her expression like she’d just won the lottery. “Today is penis piercing day!”

There went Ike’s blank expression, because it was like a storm rolling in. “Fucking penis piercings.”

Jeremy empathized. He really did. Not all shops did penis piercings, and among Jess’s jill-of-all-trades awesomeness was the fact that she was a kick-ass piercer. And she handled a fair number of Baltimore’s penises. Heh.

Ike did not find this as humorous.

“Aw, don’t be like that, baby,” Jess said as she pushed onto tiptoes and wrapped her arms around his much-higher shoulders. “Yours is the best penis ever.”

Ike rolled his eyes. “You are not funny.”

“Yes I am.” She kissed him.

The bald man’s scowl deepened. “Not even a little.”

“Oh, definitely a little,” she kissed him again. It was clear in Ike’s tightening grip around Jess’s back that she was getting to him.

“As much as I love you guys, any chance we could move this morning’s public display of affection out of my room?” Jer said, chuckling. After everything Ike and Jess had been through, it was damn good to see both of his friends happy—and that they’d found that together was even better. But that didn’t mean he wanted them sucking face while he was trying to prep his freaking station.

“You used to be more fun, Jeremy Rixey,” Jess said, breaking away from her man.

“What? I am, like, the funnest person either of you know.” He pointed to his shirt, which read *I hope your day is as nice as my butt*. “Who else wishes you that *good* of a day? Huh? No one. Literally no one.”

Jess rolled her eyes as the bell jingled on the front door. “I’ll get it,” she said, disappearing back up the way she’d come in.

Raking his hand through hair that was longish again—after having finally grown back in after his brain surgery last year—Jeremy closed his eyes and tried to get his head in the game so he could focus on the ink he had to get today. His first one was a big back piece that was going to involve several hours’ worth of work. He pictured in his mind’s eye and mentally reviewed the plan of attack he thought through the night before.

When he opened his eyes again, Ike was still there.

“Uh, need something?” Jeremy asked.

Ike shook his head, but his boots remained planted. He glanced up the hall toward where Jess was laughing at something as she checked in Jeremy’s client, and then back at Jer again.

“Dude, what is up with you? You’re a giant angst-bucket.”

“Fuck,” Ike said.

Jeremy’s gut well on a free-fall. Things had been almost ridiculously sedate at Hard Ink over the past ten months since his brother’s wedding—well, as sedate as any place could be with a three-legged dog, one-eyed cat, six horny couples, and one five-month-old baby boy all living in one big building. But that was all the *normal* kind of crazy that was just life. But something about Ike’s tone made Jeremy think of the other kind of craziness. The kind that had dominated his and his friends’ lives for four months last year. The kind that could leave a life in ruins.

“Dude, you’re freaking me out.”

“It’s nothing,” Ike said. “Just...” He shrugged with one big shoulder. “...relationship stuff.” The big guy scrubbed his hands over his face. “Forget I said anything.”

The anxiety bled out of Jeremy’s gut in favor of concern for his friends. “Everything okay between you two?”

“Yeah. Oh, yeah. Never better. Dude, just forget about it. I fucking suck at communication.” Ike rolled his eyes, the gesture dripping with self-deprecation.

Jeremy chuckled. “Well, I won’t debate you there. But if you decide you’d like to stumble through trying again, you know where to find me.”

Ike flipped him the bird and stalked out of the room.

Ike

Jesus Christmas, Ike was an emotional misfit. The thought almost made Ike chuckle. But then the amusement faded away again, because if he fucked this day up, he was never gonna forgive himself. And that was coming from someone who knew how to beat himself up for something for twenty damn years.

But this was something good. And he wanted it to *be* good. Because Jessica Jakes deserved that. After everything, they both did.

Plus, if he fucked it up, she was never going to let him forget it. And there was only so much ammunition he could allow Jess to use against him. That tight little body of hers was a weapon enough. And she damn well knew it.

As he sat in his tattoo room prepping his station, that thought *did* make him chuckle. Because Jessica Jakes was so much trouble. Just like Ike knew she would be. But he wouldn’t have it any other way.

Not when he fucking loved her more than life itself.

Which was why he'd been counting on that opening in his schedule this evening. He had something special planned, and he wanted to do it here. At Hard Ink. With all their friends around.

Neither Ike nor Jess had much in the way of family. They'd both lost everyone they'd cared about from early in their lives. Their first families. But the Hard Ink team—men and women, and the members of his Raven Riders Motorcycle Club, too...they were all their family of choice. And after the shit storms they'd all survived last year, both here and up at the club's compound, they deserved any and every reason to celebrate.

And in Ike's whole life, he'd never had something bigger to celebrate than making Jess his. His Old Lady. His everything. His forever. Once and for all.

"Hey, baby, your first client's here," Jess said, peering around the corner into his room. And damn if that smile she was giving him didn't sucker punch him with how much he loved her. Her sass, her snark, her courage, her adventurousness. The way they matched so fucking perfectly in the bedroom.

Which was *so* not a helpful thought. "Get your sweet little ass over here." He pushed away the rolling tray table with his supplies and pointed between his spread thighs.

Grinning, she all but sashayed to him. "How many times do I need to tell you. I may be small but we know my ass is not."

He palmed the body part in question and hauled her against him. "Your ass is perfection."

She arched a brow and quirked a wicked little grin. "You're making me want things, Ike Young. Things neither of us can have right this minute."

Heat flashed through his blood. "And you're making me hard."

Jess palmed his erection through his jeans, feeling the truth of his words for herself. Interest filled those animated brown eyes. “Well maybe your cock and my ass should meet later.”

Ike’s head thumped against Jess’s breasts, even as comments like that were a big part of why they were so damn perfect for each other. “Killing me,” he murmured. “Killing me dead.”

Her laugh was a musical, life-giving thing. “Aw, baby. Don’t cry. Mama will kiss it and make it better.” She stroked the back of his bald head. “Later, of course.”

In a quick motion, he yanked down one side of her tank top along with the lacy bra beneath it and latched his mouth to her pierced nipple. He sucked—hard—and flicked it with his tongue. And then he pulled off just as quickly and righted her clothes again. “Tell my fucking client I’m ready,” he said, peering up at her with as innocent of an expression as he could manage.

But that was really freaking hard when her face was painted with arousal and surprise and a little outrage, too. “You are evil. *Evil*. And you’re damn lucky I love you.”

He stood so that he was towering over her, and then he took her face in his hands. “Yeah, I really am.” Their kiss was filled with sweetness and heat of the kind that both healed places deep inside and promised so much more yet to come.

“Okay,” she said, her cheeks pink and her eyes so soft. For him. “Let me go get your guy before I have to climb you.”

“Later,” he said, repeating her words. But he wasn’t teasing. He was totally, deadly serious.

Later, he was making Jessica Jakes his in every way he could.

Charlie

Sitting at his computer station in the Hard Ink Security command center, Charlie Merritt could hardly believe this was his life. Somehow, in just over a year's time, he'd gone from a total loner who lived and worked ninety per cent of his life in a basement apartment, to a man who had the love of the most amazing man on the planet, a better relationship with his sister than he'd ever thought they'd find, and a dozen friends who made him feel important. *And* a kick-ass job playing with the coolest tech toys on the market—and many that weren't on the market, too.

The latter was all thanks to one of his best friends (and how weird was it for him to be able to think *that* phrase?), Derek “Marz” DiMarzio. Together, Charlie and Marz ran the command center for the new security services company Charlie's brother-in-law, Nick Rixey, had opened along with four other men. All of them former brothers-in-arms from the Army. Once, they'd all been part of the same Special Forces A-Team. A team that had been through hell and back. A team Charlie's father had commanded before he'd been murdered in the conspiracy that had led to Charlie's kidnapping, which had brought everyone here together.

And now they included Charlie in that team, too.

Sometimes he feared he'd wake up and all of this would've been the cruelest dream. Instead, every morning he woke up to Jeremy Rixey. His strong, inked arms. His pierced mouth. His pierced cock...

And if *that* was a dream, Charlie never wanted it to end.

“Yo, hoss. You awake over there?” Marz was saying.

Heat bloomed on Charlie's face as he peered over at the other bank of monitors where Marz sat with a shit-eating grin on his face.

“Yeah. What's up?” Charlie asked.

Marz winked. Charlie was so busted. “Dude, I know that look. Since I probably wear it a coupla times a day myself.”

Charlie chuckled. He used to be painfully shy. Day by day, he was getting a little better at not only being around so many people, but at sharing himself with them, too. Letting them really know him, social anxiety warts and all. And since none of them gave a rat’s ass about the fact that he was gay—unlike his father—being himself was so much easier. So he teased Marz right back. “Derek, when *don’t* you have that look on your face?”

It was true. The guy was totally, utterly, and unapologetically in love with Emilie Garza, which was why they were engaged to be married in just two months. Charlie wondered what that would be like—knowing you were going to spend your life with just one person. Forever.

He thought of Jeremy. His inked and pierced body, so damn sexy and just downright ridiculously appealing. His smile and sense of humor, which had the power to make anyone laugh even under the worst circumstances. His generosity, which had given everyone a home during some of the darkest hours of their lives. Right here at Hard Ink Tattoo.

And Charlie knew exactly what it would be like to know a person like that would be in your life forever. Would be *yours*, forever. It would be everything.

Marz’s grin was so big that it nearly lit up the room. “Guilty as charged,” he said with a shrug. “What can I say? When you’re already high on life and then you fall in love... Man, there’s nothing like it.”

High on life. It was a perfect description for Marz who, despite having lost a limb in Afghanistan, had one of the most positive attitudes Charlie had ever encountered. Truth be told, the guy was such a positive force that sometimes Charlie thought it was rubbing off on him. And that was saying something for someone who’d been a lifelong pessimist.

“But I don’t have to tell you about that...” Marz wagged his eyebrows.

“No one has ever accused me of being high on life.”

Smirking, Marz shook his head. “No, I’m talking about the other part. Don’t act like it’s not crystal clear how deep into each other you and Jeremy are.”

“Can we be done with sharing time yet?” Charlie asked, squirming under Marz’s teasing. Even though he was totally right.

Laughing, Marz held up his hands. “Okay, fine. But, dude, you just sounded scarily like Beckett.” Beckett Murda, Derek’s best friend from their SF team.

Relaxing, Charlie chuckled. Since Jeremy’s nephew had been born in March, the two of them had spent *a lot* of time with Beckett, Jeremy’s sister Kat, and Little D—otherwise known as Derek Rixey Murda. So maybe Marz wasn’t the only one rubbing off on him. But that was okay with Charlie; he’d take all of Beckett’s bad-assedness he could. “Well, that’s even more reason you like me. Now, did you need something or did you disturb my daydream about my fine-ass man just to annoy me?”

Marz barked out a laugh that made Charlie feel like he actually belonged here. “You’re good people, Charlie Merritt. But, yeah, I need your eyeballs on the surveillance plan for tomorrow’s op. Take a look?” He nodded toward the set of monitors on his left.

Charlie was out of his seat in an instant. Marz was a freaking genius who wasn’t afraid to cross some ethical lines when it was in the service of justice to do so, and the fact that the guy valued Charlie’s opinion so much was just one more thing that built him up these days. “Yeah. Show me what you need.”

Jessica

Ike was being freaking weird.

And it wasn't just because Jess had had her hands on another man's dick. Although she was having all kinds of fun cranking him up over that, as was her way.

No, this was different. All day, Ike had been acting nervous and anxious and...just...twitchy as hell around her. And it was driving her crazy trying to figure him out. No matter how many times she'd asked him what was up, he brushed it off. But she knew she wasn't imagining it.

And for that matter, Jeremy seemed off today, too. Was it something in the water? Jess didn't know. But it was only two hours until closing time, and then she was forcing the issue.

She sighed. Why were men such pains in the asses?

Cleaning her equipment, the thought made her bark out a laugh. Because Ike Young was So. Damn. Skilled. at making her ass hurt. In the best possible way.

Heh.

"What are you laughing about in here?" Ike asked, leaning that big mountain of a body against the door jamb to her room.

She dried off her hands and turned to him. And let herself just drink him in. Fuck, he was hot. Irritating as hell sometimes, but she wouldn't have him any other way. And it wasn't like she was perfect either. "I was thinking naughty thoughts." She grinned.

"Were you now?" Ike asked, not moving a muscle. But that didn't keep him from radiating a near predatory interest.

She nodded. "Very naughty."

He pushed the door shut. Locked it. Leaned against it again.

The tension between the became nearly a physical thing in the room.

“Take your pants off, Jessica.”

Yes! Except... “But you have a client.”

“Running fifteen minutes late.” He arched a fierce brow. “Pants. Off. Now.”

Merry Christmas to me! She was naked from the waist down in an instant.

He stalked toward her, his boots a low, threatening *thunk* with each step. Until he towered over her. And then he dropped to his knees.

No preamble. No soft seduction. No easing her into it. His mouth was on her the second he hit the ground. Tongue probing and licking. Lips sucking. Teeth teasing. Big hands forcing her stance wider until he was absolutely feasting.

She’d never met a man who ate pussy the way Ike did. Like he was *starving*. And it pretty much made her the luckiest fucking woman in the whole world.

That was the last coherent thought Jess had as Ike worked her body until she’d shattered twice against his hard mouth.

“Jesus, Ike,” she rasped, panting where he had her pinned against the sink. “What was that for?”

He rose and pressed his hard-as-steel cock against her belly. “Since when do I need a reason to take care of my woman?”

Sweet Ike slayed her. He really did. “Well, you did *good*.” She squeezed his length through his jeans and glanced at the clock. “We have six minutes left...”

“My thoughts exactly,” he said as he worked his jeans over his hips. “Get up here.” He scooped her up until he held her with her thighs around his hips and her arms around his big shoulders, and then he lowered her onto his cock.

“Oh, God,” she said, sensitive from the orgasms and feeling the fullness everywhere.

“No, baby. It’s just me,” Ike said, a possessive glint in his dark eyes.

He gripped her by the ass as he lifted and lowered her, his fingers just shy of her rear hole. That would have to wait until later, because you just didn’t rush anal sex. Yo. But Jess wasn’t complaining about having him fill up her pussy, because no matter how they came together, he always made her feel so damn claimed.

The standing position had her clit grinding against the firm plane of his lower abdomen, and the delicious torment of it made her moan as her head fell against his, their breaths mingling.

“Hush,” he said. “You remember last time.”

She grinned even as she had to bite back another moan. Last time...when Jeremy had gathered as many members of the people who lived here to give them a standing ovation the moment they walked out the door. Freaking Jeremy.

She loved the idiot, but still.

“Can’t help it,” Jess whispered. “Always make me feel so good, Ike.”

“Gonna take my time with you later,” he said against her ear. “But now I just gotta have you.”

“Do it,” she said. “Just use me, Ike. Use me to get off.”

The words put a match to his lust, because he went at her like he was desperate. His hips hammering up into her. His strong arms gripping her tight and moving her exactly how he needed. His breaths a raw rasp in her ear. It was amazing.

“Gonna come, Jess.”

“Come in me. Wanna smell like you.”

“Fuck,” he bit out, and then he was coming, his cock jerking inside her, his hands holder her tighter than ever before. “Mine,” he said when his body stilled. “Always mine.”

She pulled back to meet his gaze, his words making her think of his weirdness today.

“That was never a question. And it never will be.”

His kiss tasted like a promise. A seal. A vow.

Faintly, the sound of the bell over the front door reached them.

“I’m Cinderella and it’s midnight,” Jess said, smiling.

Ike chuckled and withdrew from her, though his gaze tracked her every movement as she cleaned herself up. “I love you, Jess.”

“Of course you do.” She winked at him. “You sure you’re okay today?”

He gave a nod and a wink. “After that, I’m fucking great. Catch you after my guy?”

She fastened her jeans. “I’ll be waiting.”

Jeremy

Jeremy shot off a text message, and hoped he was doing the right thing.

He did it just in the nick of time, too, because he’d barely put his phone down when Charlie walked into his tattoo room wearing his version of Jer’s funny, innuendo-filled T-shirts. Except where Jeremy’s were dirty, Charlie’s were geeky. His current shirt read *I Wear This Shirt Periodically* over a table of the periodic elements.

For Jeremy, Charlie’s presence was like the sun coming out at night. His blond hair. That smile—still a little shy after more than a year. Those intense blue eyes looking at Jeremy with so much emotion.

It was their routine on nights when Jeremy worked at the shop until closing and Charlie didn’t have some kind of investigative operations to work on with the rest of the team. Charlie

would come find Jeremy at Hard Ink. And there was something so right about that—about them always finding each other again at the very place where it all began.

That’s why he was doing this here.

Right here. At Hard Ink Tattoo.

“Hey, babe,” Jeremy said, rising to take the other man in his arms. Because it’d been too damn long since they’d last touched.

“Hey,” Charlie said, peering at him through the long length of his finger-raked hair.

“How was your day?”

A tendril of excitement went through Jeremy’s belly. Because he hoped it was about to get about a million times better. “Good. Uneventful until now.”

Charlie arched a brow. “Until now?”

“You, Charlie Merritt, are always eventful.”

His lover snorted. “Hardly. I’m like the least eventful person ever.”

“Says the man who discovered a military conspiracy,” Jer said giving him a look.

“Oh, that.” Charlie smirked, and it was so damn sexy.

Jeremy could not overstate how much he adored Charlie’s deadpan humor. “Yeah. That.”

“Can we kiss yet?” Charlie asked.

Laughing, Jer took his man’s face in his hands. “Someone’s feisty,” he whispered just before devouring Charlie’s mouth in a long, drawn-out meeting of lips and souls.

“Someone’s horny,” Charlie quipped, his grip tight on Jer’s hips. The comment proved how far Charlie had come and how far they’d come together. Once, Charlie had been so damn shy, self-conscious about others knowing his sexuality, and timid about saying what he wanted in bed. But in the past fifteen months, Jeremy had totally corrupted him.

“I love Horny Charlie.”

“Good. I love Sex God Jeremy. Can we get out of here?”

“Sex God Jeremy, huh? You can call me that any old time.” He waggled his eyebrows, making Charlie chuckle. “But I have something to do before we can get out of here.”

Charlie’s shoulders fell. And Jer hoped like hell that would become a funny part of their story of tonight, and wasn’t an omen about how his proposal was about to go.

Voices filtered into the big lounge space at the back of Hard Ink. Enough voices that Jeremy suspected everyone had gotten his text. Which meant it was time.

He took Charlie’s hand. “Come with me.”

Out of his room. Down the hall. Into the lounge.

“What’s going on?” Charlie asked.

Jer’s brother Nick shrugged. “That’s our question,” he said, and everyone nodded. Becca Merritt Rixey beside him—Charlie’s sister and the awesomest sister-in-law ever. Derek and Emilie. Beckett and Kat, Little D asleep on Kat’s shoulder. Shane and Sara. Easy and Jenna. Jess. The only one missing was Ike, who’s appointment was apparently running a little over.

Just then, Ike’s door opened and his after-care conversation with his client spilled out of his room and then he was walking the guy down the hall and out the door. The click of the front door lock echoed through the space and then Ike was coming back, scrubbing a hand over his head. “What’s going on?” he asked when he saw everyone assembled.

Show time.

Jeremy reached into his pocket and received the piece of jewelry that had been hiding there since early this morning. Not a ring—because those would come later.

But that was no reason not to drop to a knee. So that was exactly what Jeremy did.

He heard at least one feminine gasp—Becca or Kat, he couldn't be sure. And he wasn't paying attention to another soul on earth. Not in that moment. Down on one knee, he took Charlie's hand and tried to make sense of the collision of reactions skittering across the man's handsome face.

"Jeremy?" Charlie whispered.

"Charlie Merritt, I want to make you mine in every way I can. And I want to do it right now. You are the one person who knows every part of me. You once told me that I rescued you, but what you didn't know then, and what I know with absolutely certainty now, is that you rescued me, too. Your love has grounded me. Your quiet strength gives me so much peace. You're my best friend and my lover, and now I want you to be my partner and my husband. I told you a long time ago that I'd make you believe how much I wanted you. And I do, with everything that I am. So would you be mine, Charlie? Be mine forever? Will you marry me?"

By the times the words were out of Jeremy's mouth, he was actually shaking with nervous anticipation. And he wasn't the only one. Charlie gripped his hand so tight that that his knuckles had gone white, and even that hard grip didn't hide that he was trembling, too.

Still, Jeremy managed to hold up the titanium chain link bracelet he'd had engraved:

J & C

"Are you..." Charlie swallowed so hard that Jer heard it. He shook his head and tried again. "R-really?"

Jeremy stood so that they could be eye to eye—and so that Charlie could see the soul-deep certainty in his heart. "With everything that I am. Really. Marry me."

“I...I...” Blazing blue eyes collided with his. And Jer saw the answer before his soulmate said it out loud. “Yes. Jesus, Jeremy, yes. I’ll marry you. It would be the very best thing that ever happened to me.”

Elation. Brilliant and blinding. Jeremy pulled Charlie into the hardest hug, and his fiancé held him right back. And then everyone was clapping and crying and shaking their hands. Nick had to help put on Charlie’s bracelet because Jer’s hands were shaking too bad, something everyone had fun teasing him about. But Jeremy didn’t care, not when Charlie’s hand was in his and they were standing there all kinds of stupid happy with their entire family.

Becca threw her arms around both of their necks. “I’ve been hoping for this day for so long. I love both of you,” she said, tears in her blue eyes.

“Welcome to the craziness that is the Rixey family,” Nick said, shaking Charlie’s hand.

“Yeah, well, the Merritts aren’t much better,” Charlie replied, “as you well know.”

“Roger that,” Nick said with a wink, and then he turned to Jer. “You did good, bro. I’m happy for you.”

When they could finally break away for a moment, Jeremy turned to Charlie. “As amazing as our wedding day is going to be, I vow to try to make every single one after that even better.”

“Just being with you, Jeremy. That’s all I need. That’s all I’ll ever need. You’ve made me so happy.” He peered at his bracelet. “I’ve never felt like I belong in this world as much as I do with you.”

“Um, everyone?” a voice called out. “I can’t fucking believe this.”

Jeremy and Charlie turned to where Ike stood at the edge of the gathering.

“Ike, what’s wrong?” Jer asked.

He chuckled and shook his head. “You, Jeremy Rixey, you are what’s wrong.” There was no heat to the words.

Jeremy was completely confused but flying too high to do anything but joke around. “I mean, I’m so wrong, I’m right, I know. But what—”

Ike crossed to Jessica, who was standing next to Becca and Nick, grabbed Jess’s hand, and made a show of scanning his gaze over the room. “Apparently, great minds think alike. For the record, I’ve been waiting to get her alone all day. But since everyone’s here…”

Ike went down on one knee.

“Holy shit,” Jeremy said out loud. A murmur of excited surprise echoed the sentiment.

And then one of Jeremy’s best friends proposed to another.

“I swear to God I had this planned,” he said, taking Jess’s hands in his bit paws.

“This…this is why you’ve been acting so…weird?” Jess managed, her voice unusually warbly and her eyes wide with wonder.

Ike pulled a ring out of his pocket and held it up. “Yeah, asking the most amazing woman in the whole fucking world to be your wife does that to a man. And that’s what I’m doing, Jess. I only make sense when I’m with you. You made me realize I was only living half a life before I let you into my heart. You helped me learn about forgiveness and moving on and finding strength where I didn’t think it existed. And you made me a better man for all of it. I love your sarcasm and your snark and your laughter and your smart mouth. I fucking adore your courage and the way you take care of me. And I can pretty much measure my life these past years in the moment I spent putting ink on your beautiful body. All of which mean, Jess, I just love *you*. And it would be the greatest honor of my whole damn life if you’d agree to be my wife. Will you marry me, Jessica Jakes?”

Jess sank to her knees. “I’m speechless,” she whispered. “Yes.”

“Yes?” Ike’s usually intimidating face was almost comically happy.

“Yes, I’ll marry you.”

Ike hauled her into his lap so that she straddled his thighs and their kiss quickly invited catcalls.

“There’s a five-month-old over here!” Beckett called out, making the whole room erupt in laughter.

“Yeah, yeah,” Ike said, laughing right along with them.

Another round of congratulations and celebration ensued, until someone was suggesting they all needed a full-on party. It didn’t take long until Becca had pulled together champagne and food. Music played and laughter sounded out. And all the while, Charlie was at Jeremy’s side.

They went up to Ike and Jess.

“Congratufuckinglations,” Jeremy said, holding out his hand to Ike.

“Right back at you, thunder-stealing motherfucker,” Ike said, returning the shake as they all laughed again. “I’ve been planning this all week. For today. So I could take Jess away for the weekend.”

Jess’s face went impossibly brighter. “We’re going away for the weekend?”

He nodded, his expression full of satisfaction. “I need you alone.”

“Well, I like the sound of that. But he didn’t steal your thunder, baby,” Jess said, peering up at him with the most adoring expression on her face. And damn if Jeremy wasn’t happy as hell that his friends had found the same kind of happiness that he and Charlie had. “I think this is the perfect happily ever after for all of us. Right here at Hard Ink. All of us finding our happy endings together.”

“Happy endings.” Jeremy smirked. “Heh.”

Jess rolled her eyes. “Leave it to you.”

Jer winked. “*Always.*”

Becca and Nick came up behind them, and he clapped Jeremy and Ike on the back. “So, are we looking at a double wedding, too?”

“No,” all four of them said at the exact same time, generating another round of laughter.

“Well, I guess that’s settled then.” Nick grinned. “I’m just happy as hell for all of you. I have nothing but the best things to say about marriage.” He pressed a kiss to Becca’s temple.

She whacked him in the stomach. “You better.”

“This happiness,” Nick said, getting unusually emotional. He blinked fast and shook his head. “This happiness is exactly what we fought for. And seeing it happen for everyone here makes it all worthwhile.”

“Amen to that,” Jeremy said, putting his arm around Charlie’s shoulders.

Nick grabbed a glass of champagne and raised his hand. “To Jeremy and Charlie, and Ike and Jess. And to new beginnings.”

“To new beginnings!” everyone cheered.

And they all lived happily ever after.

The End

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