



GLITCH IN THE GAME

USA Today Bestselling Author
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Glitch in the Game

Layne Daniels



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Glitch in the Game

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Layne is a USA Today Bestselling Author, a long time reader of steamy romance, and began writing her own stories in December of 2020. Her favorite books to read are about Daddy Doms, strong alpha men who fall in love with fierce women, and sex positive living. When she's not writing, she's wrangling her family of jocks into some semblance of chill, running a business, getting ALL the tattoos, and living her very own instalove fairytale with Mr. Mine.

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Dear Reader,

“I have an entire forest living inside me and you have carved your initials into every tree.” - Pavana

Have you and a lover ever carved your initials inside a heart and left it behind for posterity? Gwen carves herself right into Cabe's very soul. Then she takes off without realizing how deeply her leaving would scar them both.

Mr. Mine and I have each other's initials inked on our ring fingers. We he married me I was 19 and everyone said it could never last. We were too young. For our 19th wedding anniversary, we got rings tattooed to celebrate proving them wrong.

We've never done the initials in a tree thing, but like Gwen for Cabe, I know my initials are carved deeply into Mr. Mine's soul. Naysayers be damned, life is best lived by those who are living it.

Until next time,

XoXo,

Layne

Chapter 1



January

Gwen Jordan

“**T**he movers are done loading the truck. You’re sure about this?”

Cabe Masters looks how I feel. Sadness and regret tug the corners of his mouth down in a frown I’m not used to seeing when he’s with me. In the three months we dated, I got used to his contagious good mood and generally happy disposition. I’m definitely the cynic between the two of us and seeing his unhappiness makes this whole process harder. Because no, I’m not sure. I don’t think I’ve ever been less sure. Still, no matter how many times I run the options in my mind, the play always fails.

Long distance relationships don’t work. I’m moving four hours away for my job, and he has too much going on here for me to ask him to uproot everything and go with me. Maybe, if we’d had more time together...

“There’s nothing to be sure about, Cabe. It is what it is. My job is there. I have to go.”

He looks as if he has something to say, but finally shakes his head and takes a step toward the door. He’s already had a say. For Cabe, staying together is logical. He had a quick plan for how I’d visit here and he’d come to Mariposa to see me a couple times a month. I grew up a military brat. I saw how travel, deployments, and time apart from us eventually became a life apart from us for my father. And that was after years of love and commitment. Cabe and I have only been together a couple of months. He’s never even spoken of love, much less a life together.

That's why last night when he showed up to try to talk me out of breaking things off, I put steel in my spine and told him no. It hurt. Not in the breath-stealing suddenness that comes from an unexpected end, but in the unabating dull throb of melancholy in the wake of making an untenable choice.

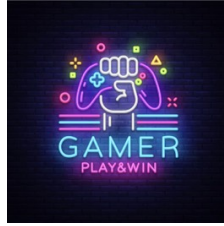
"You won't reconsider. What we have, it means so little, that you won't even try?" Anger bleeds from his voice and posture, and guilt pricks at me. I'm punishing this good man for the bastard my father became, for no damn reason beyond my own damage. My own cynical inability to have faith.

I trace him with my eyes, committing every detail to one final mental snapshot. Regretting that our final moment is one of shared misery, I am helpless to believe in any other possibility. His shoulder-length brown hair is all wild curls around his head. Normally, he'd have it tied back with string at his nape. Today, he's been rifling those long, calloused fingers I love to hold through it as he watched the movers load my furniture onto the truck. Now it's a tangled mess shifting in the breeze that blows through the screen door.

One of the first things that drew me to him was watching him waggle his eyebrows at a drunken customer, who was telling a bawdy joke, across the bar Cabe's brother owns. He'd been at the bar covering a shift to help out, and I'd been there on a miserably boring blind date that had ended when my date and I both admitted there were no sparks. At least, none until I laid eyes on Cabe and my whole body seemed to go up in flames.

For three months, Cabe went out of his way to win my heart, even though he had it nearly from the moment we'd met. I'm a lot younger than he is, though, and I think most of the people around us think what we have doesn't make sense. Maybe, that's why he never moved to make things more formal in our relationship. I remind myself it doesn't matter any more. Whatever his reasons for not deepening things, I should be thankful for them. This already hurts too much. I don't know if I could do it at all if he loved me back.

Chapter 2



March

Cabe Masters

It's been eight weeks since Gwen bailed on me without giving me the chance to work out something, so we could stay together even though she was moving hours away. The night she left, I took myself to the bar my brother owns, where Gwen and I first met, and got myself blindingly drunk. The next morning, I woke up, stuffed into a corner booth and more hungover than I'd been in a dozen years. I proceeded to repeat that pattern for four days before my brother, Connor, banned me from his bar rail and told his employees he'd fire them if they served me a drop.

After that, I brought my miserable ass home and stayed here. I'm still so pissed that she wouldn't even fuckin' communicate with me, so we could find a compromise. One day, I was living in a fog of sexual satisfaction and love, the likes of which I'd never believed was even possible. The next day, I had no girlfriend, no love, no sex, no future. The shittiest part is that none of it was even my fault.

I hadn't done a damn thing to deserve being dumped. Fuck, from the moment I laid eyes on her, my heart was so tangled up in her I usually didn't even realize anyone else was in the room, even when they were talking straight to me. I didn't get her a crappy gift or forget a holiday. I didn't ignore her to hang out with my buddies. I even went out of my way to impress her mother, her best friend and co-owner of their company, and her cat. I'd done everything I was supposed to do for a woman I wanted to be with.

Didn't matter. She still dumped my ass. So yeah, the first month or so that she was gone, I pretty much mainlined bourbon and railed at the unfairness of being undeservedly

ditched. Tonight doesn't look to be any different as I look out the kitchen window to see the darkened barn where I spend my days woodworking and building custom furniture.

At least, this month, I've made it back into the shop. I'm a month behind schedule on custom orders, but, thank fuck, I was massively ahead on my work prior to my life becoming a dumpster fire. I guess my previous tendency to be super-organized and ahead of schedule is paying off.

For all the fucks I give.

I pour myself a tall glass of whiskey oblivion, so I won't need to refill it constantly, then sit back in my recliner. The poor Cabe pity party is getting old, but I can't seem to bring myself to let go of the hurt and anger. She's still gone, and I'm still the idiot who let her go.

My phone rings, and I look at the number on the screen. I want to shuffle it to voicemail as I have damn near every call for the past two months. Something pauses my finger over the decline. I can't hide from life forever. My finger moves to the accept call icon before I can fully process that this means I'll have to speak words. I'm uncertain I've spoken aloud in a week or more.

"Hello?" Yeah, my voice sounds as if I've been chewing barbed wire. Definitely need to quit the radio silence part of this pity party.

"You're a fucking idiot. You know that?"

"Excuse me?" I pull the phone away from my ear and am moving my thumb to hang it up when Connor continues yelling at me.

"Did you even try?"

"Try what?"

"To get her to stay. To wait for you to move the business and go with her. To do literally anything more than hide out like a feral dog licking a sore paw behind your barn? Did you even try explaining she's your damn soulmate and that you'll make it work?"

I hadn't. When she'd told me she was leaving I'd sat there at her kitchen table and let her list out all the reasons we couldn't be together anymore while she'd countered every suggestion I'd made. Then I stood up, kissed her on the forehead, and left. Two days later, I hadn't heard a peep from her, and I'd driven by her place to find the moving van out front.

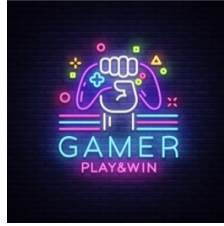
"I never told her I love her." I didn't mean to say that part out loud. The revelation of the magnitude of my fuck up just seemed to vomit right out of me.

"Wait. Never as in *never*? Not once did you tell Gwen, the woman you told me you were gonna marry the night you met, that you fuckin' love her?" If I thought Conner sounded pissed before, he's gone full nuclear at this point. His next words rip through the haze of my heartbroken hangover, and as the dial tone signals he's ended the call, they continue on loop in my ear.

"Then it's good she dumped your ass, because you don't deserve her."

He's right. I don't deserve Gwen. But if these months have taught me nothing else, it's that I can't let go of her. I can't accept that she won't be mine. I only hope it's not too late. I need a plan, and I need it to be big.

Chapter 3



May

Gwen

Mariposa's an awesome little big city. It's got everything I could want, from comic book stores and cafes, to tattoo shops and fancy art galleries. Restaurants with witty names and skate parks nestled alongside puppy playgrounds. It's got it all. And I hate it here.

My cute two bedroom condo in the heart of the city is above one of those quirky art galleries, and last week, the front window featured wood sculptures made by chainsaw that reminded me of Cabe's woodworking shop. Every time I walked past the doorway to the gallery, it smelled like freshly cut, untreated lumber the way his house does.

Every day, I hide out in my condo with the windows shut, even though the weather is gorgeous, because I can't take how much it makes me miss him. The worst part? I moved to be onsite with Lily to help launch the videogame our company has been working on for four years, and now, she's insisting we all work remotely because some workflow guru advisor asshat told her it would improve team morale and productivity for everyone to be in their own cocoon of wellbeing.

Most of the team relocated to be near our new company headquarters. When Lily's grandfather passed away, he left control of his Fortune 500 company to Lily and her brother, which included a massive business complex in the town of Mariposa. Her brother took over the company and offered Lily three floors in the building to house our video game development company. As her best friend and CFO, my office is right next to hers, just as it has been since I signed on as her righthand woman in a male-dominated industry immediately after our college graduations.

I didn't even know Lily had met with this supposed expert in corporate wellness, and I have yet to see any expenses in the accounting and budget receipts for the cost of his alleged brilliance. If I'd known in January that ninety percent of my work was going to be done remotely, I would have kept my ass back in Kansas City where Cabe is.

When all of this nonsense about remoting to work started three weeks ago, I contemplated packing up, heading back there, and begging Cabe to take me back. Then logic kicked in, and I realized just because I was too hung up on missing him to consider moving on, it didn't mean he'd have the same struggle. We've been broken up for nearly as long as we were together. He may not be a player, but it would be silly to think he hasn't replaced me in the time I've been gone.

Right now, the only real bright spot I have is that next week I get to take a break from the numbers grind of the company's finances to help beta test the final version of the game. We're so close to launching it, I can feel the excitement humming through the entire team, even if we aren't all in the office near one another. This is a game that will revolutionize the industry.

While it begins as a single player quest players will interact with other live gamers through the online system and battle them for control as they move through the challenges. But unlike traditional games that have a winner-take-all modus operandi, *Capturing Ego* offers the loser of a challenge the opportunity to join up with the winner and move forward as an asset in the winner's horde. It will build coalitions to conquer the storyline in a way that rewards humility and teamwork, without denying the true gamer's love of besting opponents.

Nearly all of the company will be playing off and on over the next three weeks as we test the system. The plan is to open it up to paid beta test players after that. I may give off nerd accountant vibes most of the time, but my true love is for videogames. Sure, Lily codes them, but the storyline and world creation is something we've worked on together since our freshman year. Though she's technically my boss, we're actually sixty-forty partners in the business. *Capturing Ego* is nearly as much my baby as it is hers.

My system dings with a player-to-player direct message. *Are you ready to start playing next week? I can't wait to play with you.*

I don't recognize the user tag, but then again, the company has grown since the last time we did any interoffice playing. It could be any of the handful of new people. I don't know if they know who I am, and I don't want to cause any drama, even though the message feels-over-the-top flirty to send a coworker.

It will be fun to play the new game with everyone in the company. There, that sounds friendly without encouraging any flirtations. Sure, some of the guys who work with us are hot, and there's no policy against fraternization in the office. But until I can picture any face but Cabe's when I'm touching myself alone in my bed at night, a parade of hot guys won't make a difference. At the rate things are going, I'm not sure I'll ever be over him.

Do you want to get a head start and play some Vision Spark while we wait for Capturing Ego to open up? I'd love to partner up with you...

Okay, now, I know whoever this new gamer is, they're trying to flirt. *Vision Spark* is my favorite game, and it's definitely more fun when you team up with another player. I begged Cabe to learn how to play it, so we could play together, but he could never get the hang of working the controller. For a guy whose hands can craft the most beautiful wooden furniture, he sure has clumsy fingers when it comes to pushing tiny plastic buttons on the remote. No matter how much he tried, giving his effort to learn something that was important to me, we'd die in game so fast poor Cabe would just get frustrated. Eventually, I stopped asking him to play with me and just played solo games when I was hanging out at his place.

Maybe, the reason Cabe was happy to keep our relationship so casual was he couldn't take a videogame girl seriously. He's a lot older than me, and maybe, he thought I was too childish to build a future with. I have no idea why these thoughts are creeping into my brain at this moment. Every time I think I can go an hour without missing Cabe, without regretting the

way everything so perfect became so done, some little moment
creeps up and overtakes me.

Chapter 4



Cabe

The dancing alien face emojis that indicate Gwen is typing should be a relief. Days of plotting, convincing her best friend, Lily, that I didn't have anything but the best intentions, and weeks of learning how to play videogames and chat online with her help are about to come to fruition. What that fruition looks like hangs in the balance.

I wish I had Lily or Connor here to reassure me that I don't come off like a total creeper. Connor insisted I be bold, but Lily made me promise to drop enough hints that Gwen would be able to figure out the ruse and not feel duped. All of this while I somehow manage not to botch things completely while using this damned controller with its buttons smaller than Tic Tac candies. I already feel like a failure, and we haven't said more than a handful of words to one another.

I've never been a guy prone to self doubt or negative thinking, but losing Gwen broke something in me. Always the chill vibe guy in my family, I've become a morose son of a bitch, who isn't fit to be around people since she left. My first instinct, when Connor's words finally sank through to my alcohol-muddled brain, was to rush to Mariposa, throw Gwen in my truck, and bring her back here where I could keep her forever.

If it took ropes and locks, so be it. I'd been moments away from going caveman and kidnapping her back to my cave when exhaustion took hold and I fell into the first real sleep I'd had in weeks. It was almost as though acknowledging I wasn't just going to accept that Gwen had dumped me was the breakthrough my body needed to begin working to get her back. I woke up the next morning feeling, and smelling, like ass. But ass with a plan.

Dream Cabe seemed to be a brilliant idea diviner, but now that the plan is in motion, I'm having some serious doubts about my ability to pull it off. The chime of an in-game private chat message pulls me from the swamp of self doubt.

Vision is always more fun with a partner. I'm up for a short quest if you want. Should we start now, or do you have anything to take care of before we go in-game?

Gwen's response has a shout of triumph rumbling from me. I feel a little spike of guilt, too. How many times had she tried teaching me the game, only for me to toss away the controller after a few minutes with comments about how games were for children.

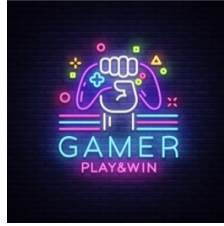
That whole time, Gwen had been sharing pieces of her heart and soul with me, and I'd been shitting all over them. The worst part is, once I realized how much videogames meant to my girl, I'd accepted learning how to play really wasn't as hard as I'd made it out to be. It may be a challenge to balance playing with chatting, but I'll do it.

If not, there's always Plan B. My house is on a sizeable acreage outside town, so if I gotta kidnap her and tie her to my bed to convince her that there's no future where we're not together, well, so fuckin' be it. Now, to play the game and figure out how to drop enough hints that Gwen realizes it's me. Lily swears Gwen's shut down every guy who's asked her out since she got to Mariposa. While I know Gwen had been free to go out with anyone she wanted to, I'm caveman enough to admit I would have been broken to learn she'd replaced me. Finding out she's lonely in her new home hurts my heart, but fate willing and the creek don't rise, I'll have her back in my bed soon. Then I'll never stand back and let her be hurt again.

Ready, willing, and able to serve, milady. Grab a Dr. Pepper and let's roll.

There, the first hint that I know who she is. Gwen only allows herself to drink the caffeine of straight Dr. Pepper when she's playing a videogame. The rest of the time, she drinks sparkling water or Sprite. Plenty of people could know that about her, though, so I need to think of more clues to drop.

Chapter 5



Gwen

I'm no detective, but a few things are super obvious here. Number one, I get the feeling whoever Measure2Cut1 is, they know who I am. Next, it's clear within the first few minutes of play that whoever it is isn't great at playing *Vision Spark*. That in itself is a huge flag that something is amiss, because literally everybody plays the game. It's been the number four, indie-developed, multi-player videogame on this console's platform since it came out five years ago. Unless this person lives in a backwoods forest somewhere, there's no way they can possibly be making these newb mistakes. Unless they're a plant trying to hustle me for pity drops, which is what happens when proficient players create rookie accounts and convince players they're new to the game and need tools and spells gifted to them. I don't get a grifter vibe from Measure2Cut1, though, so I'm a little stumped.

Since I have nothing better to do while I sit around the condo, bored and lonely, I'll humor them and see what's up. It's kind of a surprise that Lily would hire someone who doesn't play the biggest game on the market. She handles the human resource end of the technical employees. I handle the admin team. It might make sense for someone who doesn't play games to sneak through my hiring process since being a game nerd isn't required to handle the reception desk or marketing. We've always tended to hire people who fit our vibe, though, and even though I'm the numbers side of the company, I'm still a gamer girl at heart.

After fifteen minutes and two restarts, I can tell Measure2Cut1 is frustrated but trying to keep his temper. I know it's a guy because at one point, he mentioned that the speech to text app was making him sound like a degenerate. When he'd said that, he used male pronouns, so I think it's a safe assumption that it's a guy. Female gamers may have to be cautious when they play in open forums, but this is our intraoffice gaming server, so mistreatment based on gender isn't tolerated. If

Measure2Cut1 was a girl, she wouldn't feel pressured to use male pronouns in our safe space.

Now, I just need to figure out who we've hired recently that's a man, works at a videogame company, sucks at them, but has been around enough to know my beverage of choice. Earlier, I sent a text to Lily to ask about recent hires, but she claims we haven't hired anyone new since I brought in six teenagers to be part of our street team to hype the new game on social media.

I have to admit it's a mystery that has me intrigued. Not much has captured my attention since Cabe and I broke up, so even this small scavenger hunt to figure out who I'm playing has my mood lifting to the highest it's been in ages.

Hey, M2C1, I gotta throw together dinner, so I'm going to log off for a while. If you're around later, we can play more?

I'm really not making anything complicated for the meal. Since transitioning to remote working, I'm alone in the condo morning, noon, and night. Cooking for one feels like way more effort than it's worth, especially since there's a restaurant on the ground level of the building. I've eaten more tacos and sopes in the last few months than I've had the rest of my life combined.

Which, believe me, I'm not mad about. Really though, I need the chance to digest the mystery of Measure2Cut1 and to do some investigating. I'm going to check the roster of employees and figure out how this guy gain access to our company server if we didn't hire him. More than that, I need to determine whether I should be worried he's gotten in without our IT security guru raising any red flags. With the biggest game drop in a decade about to happen, the idea that someone could sneak past our cyber-security is a major problem.

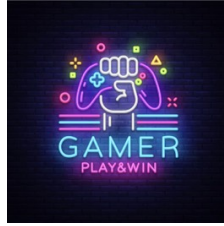
You making garlic cream chicken?

And just like that, the shoe falls, the bomb drops, the switch flips. One person in all my life has been a maniac for the garlic cream chicken dish I make a couple times a month. One man who'd lay his head on my lap after a day of work, sawdust clinging to his hair like the finest glitter that he complained

never washed all the way away, and beg me to make it, even though we'd only had it a few days before.

The sucky skills at the game, knowing my secret game-time-only favorite drink, even the name, measure twice, cut once. It all makes sense. I'm almost ashamed at how long it's taken me to figure out the breadcrumbs he's dropped. But what the fuck is Cabe doing right now? He hates videogames, and we're broken up. Part of me wants to call him out right this second and demand to know what he's thinking. I rein myself in, though. Whatever he *thinks* he's doing, he's being sneaky and underhanded about it, and I intend to find out his true intentions. I won't discover them by just asking him. No, there's a reason I was the gamer in this ex-relationship, and Mr. Cabe Masters is about to be reminded.

Chapter 6



Cabe

Okay, that had to be the most obvious clue in the universe. I fucking love when Gwen makes garlic cream chicken. I'd happily eat it every day for the rest of my life, especially if it meant I could eat it with her on my lap. There's no way Gwen won't pick up on this hint. I need her to know it's me talking to her, and I need her to know it, right now.

Lily and Connor both agreed that I should keep the secret for a few days and use the time to draw her out, but I know Gwen. She'll feel betrayed if I talk to her without telling her who I am. It's risky enough to attempt to woo her this way. Keeping the secret any longer than absolutely necessary to open the lines of communication is a sure way to push her beyond the breaking point.

I wish. Haven't bothered cooking in ages. Mostly throwing together rotisserie chicken and veggies for salads and eating takeout lately. That sounds like a nice dinner, though. Is it what you're having?

The idea of Gwen, who loves cooking almost as much as she loves these damn videogames, not having a reason to cook because she's alone in Mariposa makes my chest tight. It also pisses me off. If she'd just given me the space to process that her job was moving to a new city, I would have offered to pack up my shit and move right along with her.

Connor can call me a stupid bastard for not telling her how I felt as many times as he wants, but dammit, every time I ran my beat up hands over her curves, I was pressing my love into her skin. Every swipe of my tongue spelled out how cherished she was. Fuck knows, every pulse of my cock as I drained myself as deep in her pussy as I could press was in testament to the depth of my obsession with her. Maybe, I fucked up by not using my words, but I spoke my truth to Gwen in every other language I was capable of speaking. It still burns in my

gut that the missing words alone were enough to tank our entire relationship.

Never again. The next time I have Gwen in the same room, I'm giving her the words. The words and every bit of cum I've saved since the night Connor's call broke through my drunken misery and set me on the path to reclaiming my woman. I wished I could claim I'd saved every bit of myself since the moment she left, but in those early days, the only thing that helped me cling to even the barest hint of sanity was the time spent huddled in my shower yanking my dick until it was too sore and raw to miss the home of her wet heat.

If only. I haven't had garlic cream chicken in a few months. Hoping to have it again soon, though.

Now, if she doesn't put one and one together with those words, I'm marching across the street and planting my face directly in between her and the screen she's reading. Oh yeah, I'm here in Mariposa, in an apartment directly across the street from her condo. Is it a little bit stalkerish? Probably. Do I give a single flying fuck? Not a one. I don't feel an ounce of shame, and I'm damned if I'm going to push pause on planning for our future now. I bought a couple of acres out near where Lily moved their company headquarters, and it's already got a cute little mid-1900s two-story farmhouse that was updated by the previous owners and a barn that'll be perfect to turn into my woodshop.

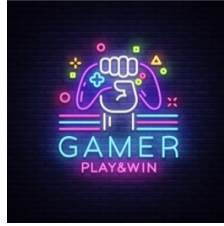
It's not enough to simply show up here and convince Gwen to rekindle our relationship. Once the fog of misery lifted and I started thinking back on everything I knew about my girl, I realized the reason Gwen ended things between us had less to do with me and more to do with how she was raised. With everything she's told me about her military father, it makes absolute sense that she can't trust a man to stick around if there's an excuse of distance to keep him away. No, she needs to know I'm committed to being where she is and I'll never let distance keep me away.

The only thing worrying me is how long it took me to figure it all out. Just because Lily says Gwen isn't going out with anyone, or even flirting, it doesn't mean she'll fall right back

into my arms. As much as it's true I never told her I love her, Gwen never said those words, either. I want to believe it's because she was waiting on my dumbass, but maybe, I'm alone in this heartbreak. Maybe, Gwen's just not dating right now because she's still settling into her new town.

Maybe, I need to put on my big boy britches and stop overanalyzing things. Gwen is mine, and she'll realize it when she figures out it's me talking to her. Then I'm walking across the street, putting her in my car, driving her to our new home out there on the acreage I bought for us, and showing her exactly how *not* over we are.

Chapter 7



Gwen

Now that I know the company hasn't been hacked and it's just Cabe messing with me, I can relax a bit. I don't want to get ahead of myself and assume he's trying to get back together, but I've read enough romance novels to recognize a grand gesture when I see one. It's just a bit confusing, though. Why now? Replacing me can't have been difficult, and if he'd truly not wanted to break up, he sure accepted it pretty easily.

Whatever his reasoning, I'm willing to play along for a while to figure it out. The truth is, I think both my heart and my libido would revolt if I didn't let this play out. Doesn't mean I can't mess around some to repay him for trying to trick me. There's no way I can let this go past tonight, though, so I hope he has plans to explain what he's thinking soon.

I used to make it a lot when I was cooking all the time. Maybe, I should make it one night soon. I could always bring the leftovers to the office and share with you...

It's not nice to tease. I know that, but I want to see what it takes to push him enough to spill his intentions in this game.

You'd share your favorite dish with a stranger?

Did I say it was my favorite?

I'm smirking at the screen, wondering if he'll realize I've figured him out. I gotta admit, bantering back and forth with Cabe in an online game is fun. He always was quick with a grin or a funny story, but whenever he tried playing a game with me, he'd get so intense and easily frustrated that neither one of us had much fun.

What does it mean that he's obviously changed his mind about videogames and worked so hard to connect with me through one? Nothing's really changed. He still lives hours away, and though Lily and I have discovered how economical and efficient remote working is for nearly all of what we do, I'm

still here in Mariposa. With my parents gone and Lily and our company here, even with working from home, I'm not sure it would be a great idea to move back to Kansas where Cabe lives. Assuming that's even what he'd want.

True. You didn't say it's your favorite. Do you cook for men a lot?

I'm typing my response when the grinning alien emojis indicate he is saying something else, too. His next comment appears before I can finish typing, and I have to laugh. Leave it to Cabe to recognize his own neanderthal tendencies and backtrack.

Wait! Don't answer that. None of my business. I don't want to know.

Is it possible he's been as lonesome without me as I've been missing him? He's the total package, so I'd just assumed he'd have no trouble moving on and finding a new girlfriend. But maybe, I misjudged things a bit. Nothing Cabe ever did made me feel like anything less than the most important person in his life. True, he never used the words, but I always felt as if he really cared about me.

He told me to ignore his question, and I know it's unfair of me to answer it honestly if it means putting him on the spot before he's ready to reveal himself. But this back and forth in my own head is giving me whiplash.

I haven't cooked for a man in months. I left a man I really cared about when I moved to Mariposa, and I can't seem to bring myself to let go of my feelings for him. So I'm happy to share leftovers the next time I cook, but I'm not looking to "cook" for a man anytime soon.

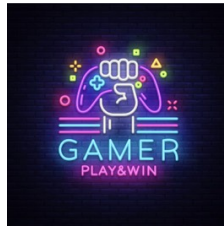
The emojis that signal Cabe is typing something start immediately, but no message appears. I look over at the side of the screen where our game is ongoing, though for the last few minutes, we haven't been making much progress and see his avatar is standing motionless. Was I too honest? Did I misread everything, and now, he regrets whatever this is?

I'm trying to keep calm and not get upset while I fidget in my recliner, waiting for what comes next. Whatever that will be. Two minutes pass. Then three more. Either he's writing a book or he's gone AFK, away from keyboard, and left me hanging. I don't know which would be worse, but every second that passes has my stomach cramping tighter and tighter.

The sound of someone pounding on my door surprises me so much I tip the whole reclining game chair over backward and land with a shriek in a pile on the hardwood floor.

"Gwen! What was that? Are you okay? Did you fall? Are you hurt?" Shouted questions come at me too fast to respond, and I'm pretty sure I can't speak even if I try. It sounds like... It sounds like Cabe is on the other side of my door, yelling frantically, right now. But, how?

Chapter 8



Cabe

Rattling her doorknob does nothing to help, and it's probably scaring the shit out of her. The crashing sound that came from the other side of the door right after I started knocking on it has me freaking out, though. If Gwen's in there, hurt, and I'm stuck out here, I'll go insane.

"Cabe? But how can you be here? What's going on?" Hearing my name from her lips has my knees quaking and endorphins flooding my entire system. It's been entirely too long, and it's like my soul recognizes it's finally within reach of its other half. I'm nearly delirious with how much I need her, even as my heart races double-time with worry for her safety.

"Baby, just open the door if you can, please. Are you okay?"

The door swings open wide, and I'm helpless to do anything less than grab her around the waist and haul her against me. In the split second it takes me to catalogue her from head to toe and see that she's okay, her body goes from being sunken against me to pulling away. That won't do. I need her in my arms after so much time apart.

"How are you here? I don't get it. Weren't you just online with me?" I see the confusion on her face, and I realize I probably rushed things and screwed up the whole plan to woo her I can't bring myself to care, though. The moment she admitted she still had feelings for me was the instant my endgame goals became secondary to my need to see her face-to-face.

"Yeah, that was me. Look, it was probably a dumb idea. I just..." I pause and take a deep breath to settle myself. Rushing over here was a gut reaction, which makes it even more important not to bungle things more by blurting out something stupid.

Gwen's face is open and hopeful. It makes my heart clench with optimism and certainty that this was the right thing to do. I know she's waiting for explanations, and I want to give them

to her, but first, I am going to pause and enjoy being near her for the first time in far too long. I breathe in the tart green apple scent she layers from shampoo to body mist, a quirk I failed to appreciate until the first time I went to the grocery store after she left. I'd wound up hiding my raging boner behind the handbasket when I passed a display of granny smiths in the produce section. Even the blast of cold air in the frozen food section couldn't tame it.

Long mink lashes sweep over the swell of her cheekbones when she blinks, and I'm reminded of when she taught me butterfly kisses, brushing those lashes over my lips and nose. Being face-to-face with Gwen brings every moment of our time together hurtling into the forefront of my brain, as though I haven't already been living on the memories for months. Her pulse flutters in the hollow of her throat, and I wonder if she's drinking in the sight of me as desperately as I am hers.

I allow her to step out of the circle of my arms but catch her hand to twine her fingers with mine before she can move out of reach. She moves farther into her condo and gestures to me to follow, and I do. Because I'll follow her anywhere, and it's time I make that clear.

We settle across from one another at her kitchen table, and I look around at her place. All of the hominess and comfort of her old apartment seems to be missing, though the space here is gorgeous with its restored open-beam ceilings and rustic plank flooring. Too bad, she's got half unpacked boxes with household goods spilling out of them stacked in corners and against walls.

Just as much as I didn't want to imagine her here in Mariposa, having the time of her life without me, seeing her living this way reminds me of how she described her childhood's transiency. Always resting in one place with one foot out the door, ready for their next military base change. It hurts my heart to think of her holding back from making this place her home. I get it on a cellular level, though. Without her around, the house I'd lived in for years turned into a roof and some walls.

Gwen is my home, and seeing her apartment so devoid of the brightness that made her old apartment such a cozy place, helps me feel confident she feels the same way about me.

“I think I’m ready to hear your explanation for all of this.” Direct as always. Well, the only way to the other side is straight through, right?

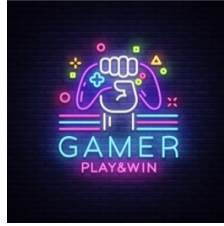
“I rented an apartment in the building across the street. Connor said some things that made me think. Okay, they were things that pissed me off first then made me think.”

Her lips quirk and I know she’s thinking of how my brother gets under my skin by being the thoughtful and introspective one while I am the type to just relax and let things unfold.

“So, yeah, Connor pointed out that I didn’t take my turn to say things that I wanted to say before you left. At first, I was too angry that you just walked away from our relationship and didn’t seem to give a fuck that I didn’t want us to break up. Just, bang, door closed and you on one side with me stuck outside by myself.” My fists clench as the frustration in those memories creeps over me. I may never get over how low it felt to have the woman I love just dump me with no discussion or chance to figure things out.

“Then I realized that just because you walked away, it didn’t mean I couldn’t follow. I called Lily and convinced her to help me. I wanted to show you I care about the things that are important to you. I practiced and learned how to use those damn controllers until...look!”

Chapter 9



Gwen

Cabe holds his hands out right in front of my face with a boyishly proud grin on his face to show me little calluses on the tips of his thumbs that I know he didn't get from his woodworking business. Those calluses and scars are all old and hardened along the pads of his fingers and his palms. A shiver of awareness chases through me, recalling the rasp of his work-roughened hands dragging along my delicate skin. My body absolutely misses Cabe's touch.

"Maybe, it's over the top, but I'm not willing to stand back and let you be the only one with a say in how things go between us. Dammit, Gwen, we had something fantastic going, and you can't just walk away from that."

I open my mouth to explain my reasoning, but he interrupts me.

"And I know you have a history. I get that. But you didn't even give me the chance to tell you all I need is a shed and some extension cords for my tools. I would have followed you here with no real hesitation about it. I came here prepared to win you over, make you love me again. I was ready to beg, convince, negotiate, whatever it took. Just now, online, you said you haven't cooked for anyone in months because you still had feelings for your last man. Look me in the eyes and tell me that's not me, and I'll give you space until I convince you that we belong together. If you can't, though... If you can't look me right in the eye and tell me you don't still feel for me what I sure as hell feel for you, then the space between us ends today."

I'm not sure I followed that messy word vomit Cabe just flung out there with his frantic conviction. But I think the gist of it is he still has some sort of feelings for me, and he wants to figure out a way for us to be together. I got the part where he said he could have followed me to Mariposa. I'm just not sure he means forever or splitting time between here and his business

back home or what. One thing is perfectly obvious, though. Cabe is here, in my condo, wanting me. And I am here. For. It.

“I wouldn’t lie to you like that, Cabe. Of course, I still have feelings for you. I may not know exactly what’s going to happen next, but I know for sure I want to take this moment right now for ourselves.”

Before I can take my next breath, he’s on me. Lifting me from my chair and sitting where I’d been with me on his lap, he wraps his arms tightly around my waist and buries his face against my neck. Hot breath shudders over my collarbone, and I feel him shaking beneath me. It’s becoming more and more clear Cabe’s feelings for me were a lot stronger than I’d allowed myself to believe. I’m unsure why I clung so desperately to hearing the words when it’s obvious his actions were telling me over and over again.

Our embrace may have been borne of comfort and the relief of sharing our continued feelings for one another, but the growing steel rod lifting me from his right leg sends arrows of arousal directly to my center. My hips roll to align his jean-covered erection with the notch of my thighs. Feeling him pressed against me so solidly has my panties dampening as my core clenches.

“Fuck, Gwen. I didn’t rush over here expecting to be with you right away, so if you’re not ready or need more time, you have to stop me now. I’ve been without you for too long, and I don’t know if I’ll be able to hold back if you keep rubbing that perfect little pussy of yours over me like this.”

His dirty words raise the heat I’m feeling even higher, and the slow roll of my hips becomes a steady rocking motion over his cock. Cabe raises a hand to cup my cheek and pull me close for a kiss. There’s no hesitation or build up, he simply angles my head the way he wants it and dives into my mouth. His tongue pushes past my teeth and works along my tongue, pressing and dueling for dominance. This kiss isn’t a gentle sip from my lips. It’s a greedy gorging complete with teeth and tongue.

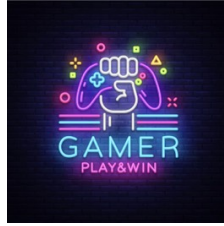
“Don’t stop,” is all I can gasp before his mouth is back eating at mine. I’m dizzy from it, but I don’t care. Cabe knows what I want, and he’s going to give me everything I need. I may not have been a virgin when we met, but nothing in my life could ever compare to the way he mastered my body.

“Won’t. Can’t.” His words are barely more than a growl against the tender skin of my throat as he bites and sucks his way down to the collar of my T-shirt. Fingers tugging at the hem of my shirt are my only warning before he pulls himself away from me to whip it off. I’m left in his lap, wearing pajama shorts and a thin cotton bra, my nipples so desperate for his attention they’re pressing through the fabric as though even they missed him. Cabe notices and grasps them firmly between his thumbs and forefingers.

“I hope you’re not expecting sweet and gentle, right now, Gwen. I don’t have it in me to go easy on you. I need to feel your hot cunt wrapped around me too badly to go slow. Besides, you’ve been a very bad girl. Keeping this sexy ass body away from me all these months. I’ve got a powerful need worked up. You’re gonna slake it for me. I’m taking all these months of pent-up need and putting it all right here in this tight pussy.”

He lifts his hips to buck against my center while his fingers pinch my nipples so tightly a lick of fire arcs through me when he releases them in tandem. My cry of agonized pleasure is so loud it would startle the neighbors if any were home at this time of day.

Chapter 10



Cabe

Having Gwen on my lap is everything I've needed so badly these last months, and it's still not enough. My dick is so hard up for her, I think it would happily stuff itself inside her and take up permanent residence. I haven't gotten a boner for anyone or anything unrelated to her since the night we met, and the months apart haven't changed that in the slightest. That doesn't mean I can be rough with her soft curves, though.

Every bit of Gwen is cushiony soft to my hard. The smooth pads of her fingers and the plump swells of her palms skate over the defined planes of my chest, her short nails raking over my flat nipples in repayment for the way I tweaked hers. Thick thighs drape over my own legs and frame the space between our pelvises where my hard-on pushes against the zipper of my jeans. Her sleep shorts have ridden up to the crease at her hips and I can see the plump pillows of each outer lip riding either side of the seam of the thin cottony bottoms. Gwen's never been one for wearing panties around the house, my fingers actually ache with the desire to slip into the leg holes of those shorts and reach the prize between her legs that I just know is unobstructed by underwear.

I know she's soaked for me. The light blue of the fabric is darkened with her arousal. That sharp tangy flavor that is totally Gwen scents the air, and saliva pools in my mouth because I want to feast on her so badly. I'm waiting for her words to give me the go ahead, but I'm not sure how much longer I can stay still.

"Have you been pent up all this time?" She doesn't ask outright, but I know Gwen's asking for the same reassurance she offered me so willingly. My sweet girl has a possessive streak. Part of me feels as if it would be justified to make her wait for the answer, to pay her back some for leaving me the way she did. But looking at the sadness in her eyes and the

defeated slump to her shoulders, I can't bring myself to allow her to think for a single moment that she could be replaced in my bed or my heart.

“Gwen, I haven't even been able to jerk off since the second week after you left. Anytime I tried, it's like my dick knew there wasn't gonna be any of you for it to sink into. Didn't even get hard until you responded back to my message in the game. Now, the fucker's about to nut all over itself in my jeans. Because you're it for me, Gwen. It's you, or nothing and no one.”

The sadness ebbs from her eyes, but her shoulders stay lowered in apology. I know the last few months have been hard for her, too, and I am tired of focusing on the pain of our separation when I have my future here in my lap to enjoy. I need to bring Gwen to the same page, and I know the quickest way is to distract her away from overthinking.

I slip one hand into the loose leg opening of her shorts and go straight for her clit. I work my thumb between her fat labia and use the slick fluid that's gathered to ease the slide of the digit in tight circles, pressing firmly against her. My goal is to drive her to the top of her orgasm's cliff and hurtle her over the edge with no build up or foreplay. After her first orgasm, I know she'll be more pliant and relaxed. Then I'll take my time and reminding us both how much better we are together.

I barely get a finger curled into the hot vise of her channel before she's rocketing into space. Her body shakes and jiggles in my lap nearly enough to knock her to the floor, but the stranglehold she has around my neck holds her in place. My dick is so hard every wiggle she makes on top of it threatens to send me after her into an orgasm. It tastes like I'm sucking on pennies from where I've bitten the inside of my cheek to hold back the fountain of cum that's building in my balls.

Satisfied little kitten mewls break from where she's got her face buried against my chest, and I know it won't be but another moment or two before she's ready for more. I stand with her cradled against me and stumble toward the back of the condo where I figure her bedroom must be. I need to feel her mouth on my skin, see her lips stretched around my cock

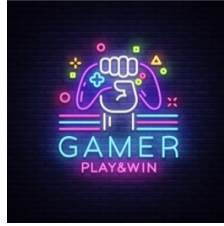
as I feed it as deep into her throat as I can get it. I need to be surrounded by the scent of her, cuddled on Gwen's bed, so once we've fucked our fill she can't run out on me or push me away.

Her bedroom is a little more unpacked than her living areas. The same bed we'd made love in dozens of times before she moved is against one wall, across from a series of three windows that let in the late afternoon sunlight.

Laying her down on a bed, where so many memories were made, in a room that's so unfamiliar feels strange, and for a moment, my mind tries to wander back to how much these months have sucked. I force my attention back to the present and the feel of having Gwen laid out like a holiday feast before me.

“Do you really mean that it's me or no one, Cabe? I mean, we weren't together for that long. And we're so different...” Gwen's never been the type to let insecurity show. In her industry, and with her brains, she has to push back against guys who think they know more than she does just because they're male. With the family history she's shared with me, I know she's a woman who presents a brave face, even when she's feeling unsure. I don't know why my thickheaded self failed to see how important it was to look beyond the surface to see that my girl needed the words from me. It's a mistake I won't ever make again.

Chapter II



Gwen

This could be a dream, lying here on my bed with Cabe looming over me after giving me an orgasm so powerful and swift it had felt like a riptide sheering me away from the safety of sandy shores and into the churning surf. The sting in my nipples from where he pinched them in such a punishing grip convinces me I'm wide awake. This is actually happening. I didn't just dream Cabe into my bedroom in my desperation to be near him again.

"I meant it. Fuck, Gwen, I will forever regret I didn't give you the words before now. I love you. The moment you sat at Connor's bar rail with that stuffed shirt I could tell you'd be important to me. Hearing your giggle for the first time had my heart tearing itself wide open and building a shrine in your honor all the way inside my chest. I've never felt for anyone the way I feel for you, and I know clear to my soul that you are meant to be mine. I'm so sorry it took me so long to get here, but you need to know I'm not letting you go, now that I'm here."

The Cabe I recall may have had a sunny disposition, but he was never one to wax poetic or make dramatic speeches. The fact that he's doing both now hammers home for me how serious he is. His eyes keep trying to hold my gaze, but they fall to the distraction of my body. I twist my arm underneath me to my back and unclasp my bra. Cabe reaches to tug the fabric from my chest as soon as it loosens. He balls up my bra in his hand and brings it to his face where he breathes deeply a few times.

"If you only knew how many detergents and soaps I tested, trying to figure out how to get this smell back." The words are so deep they're nearly unintelligible, but I know what he's saying. From the first time he hugged me, he has always been a little obsessed with the way I smell. A few times, he even made up excuses to wash clothes at my place. I don't know if

he realized I'd been on to him, but it was pretty cute the way he always wanted that connection.

"I'll wash your clothes for you before you leave for home. Later. Right now, though, Cabe, I need you. I hurt."

For an instant, his face is stricken until my meaning sinks in, and then he's all frantic motion. Pulling off his clothes and tearing my shorts down my legs to toss onto the pile of his things, his patience is toast.

Once our clothes are in a pile behind him, Cabe pauses to stand at the edge of the bed. It almost looks as if he can't decide where to start, but for me, this moment is perfect already. Seeing his sturdy body standing above me, thick and muscled and hard everywhere I'm not, has shivers of anticipation racing over my skin. His cock is so engorged it points to the ceiling, the flared helmet nearly tapping the divot of his belly button. He watches me as I watch the way it throbs and pulses. A line of clear precum rises from the slit at the top and slides between the ridged underside of his head to curl its way along the veins that push outward from his shaft to disappear in the trim nest of black curls at his base.

"You don't know hurt, not yet. I'm going to ride that magnificent pussy until you can't sit properly tomorrow. I swear, Gwen, I have so much fucking cum ready to unload inside you, you'll be feeling me slick between those puffy lips for days. I hope you're ready."

His cock bobs as he speaks, and my core clenches at the memory of how it felt to be split wide around his girth. It always seemed as though Cabe was a gentle teddy bear of a man until he had me beneath him. He'd get me so wet I'd feel the cold damp spot under my ass before pushing that monster in to the hilt. I need that pounding right now. I'm soaked and ready for him.

"If it's mine, give it to me." I rise to my knees before he can climb onto the mattress and wrap one hand around the base of his cock. I use the other hand to cup his balls and firmly tug down on them both. The way they roll in my palm and try to rise back to his body tells me he isn't in as much control as he

wants me to think. He's on the verge of exploding, and I want to see if I can push him past the breaking point.

I angle his erection toward my mouth, and just like he'd sent me from zero to sixty in a heartbeat, I do the same to him. With no lead up or warning, I gather as much moisture in my mouth as I can before I stretch my lips as wide as they can go and take him deep. I swallow immediately, squeezing the head of his dick with the ridges along my throat as his shocked shout echoes from the high ceiling.

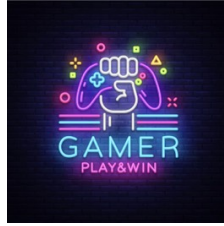
A hot spurt of cum coats the inside of my mouth, and my tongue curls at the salty tang of it. Pressing the spongy tip of him against the roof of my mouth, I use the wetness along the shaft to milk two more pumps of precum before he wrenches himself away from me.

"No, you don't. You're not sucking your way out of the pounding you have coming. Dirty girl." Cabe uses my imbalance after he jerked away from me in his favor and flips me onto my stomach. He climbs onto the bed above me, one solid thigh pressed on the outside of each of my soft ones, and places a firm hand between my shoulder blades to keep me flat beneath him.

The crack of his palm against my left cheek resounds an instant before the scalding heat ignites. His hand squeezes my still jiggling flesh to prolong the delicious agony. I'm so wet at this point I know I'm making a mess on the duvet. Ask me if I care. My sharp wail drowns the sound of the next slap Cabe delivers, and without a split second of warning, my nervous system implodes. This time, he follows the spank by gripping both of the fleshy globes of my ass and spreading them to make room for his cock to nestle between them.

Cabe leans forward until his chest presses against my back. When his hands release me blood rushes to the slapped skin he'd been gripping, and I'm carried away on a second wave of brain-melting need. It's always been good between us, but this is next level.

Chapter 12



Cabe

With my dick angled down to press against Gwen's clit, it's not the most comfortable position to be in. Still, I could be strung upside down from my ankles and spun like a top and not complain at all. Just feeling her against me after all this time is making every moment closer than the last to perfection. The first time we had sex, I knew I'd found my soulmate. This time, I know I've found my soulmate and refuse to live without her.

I lay a few more swats across Gwen's luscious ass, the ripple of her fleshy cheeks rebounding from each smack stoking my arousal nearly higher than I can endure. She's absolutely drenched, slippery around the head of my dick where it's wedged between her pussy lips. My legs braced on either side of her keep her from grinding back against me, though I can feel how badly she's dying to move.

"Cabe, please." The begging has my hips punching forward to press into the tight channel of her sex. Sweat gathers on my upper lip where it's pulled back in a snarl. I need to be balls deep in Gwen just as much as she needs it, and I'm done waiting. Her eyes need to be on mine, though, when I join us back together after this separation. Nothing else is acceptable. Seeing her shatter in orgasm is as necessary as breathing right now, maybe even more so.

My cock pulses angrily when I pull my hips from the cushion of Gwen's ass, but I know it'll settle once I get her on her back, beneath me. I lever myself to my feet beside the bed and wait for Gwen to roll over, taking the opportunity to grab my wallet from my pants. After we got together in the beginning, we went and got tested together and discussed our sexual histories before she'd gone on birth control and we'd ditched the condoms. But I know remembering to take her pill every morning had been a chore she'd hated, so I'm assuming she

quit taking them altogether since she's been celibate just like I have.

Putting a baby in Gwen has been my long run goal since the night we met, but she's so much younger than me. I thought we had time, and I wasn't going to rush our relationship. Fuck, I hadn't even told her I love her, much less given her the ring I'd commissioned for her. I'd had it designed the week after our first date, and it'd been sitting in the safe inside my woodshop waiting for, I dunno, some magical, perfect moment.

A steady stream of precum rolls down the side of my shaft, and I know my dick's totally on board with jamming the ring on her finger and slipping a baby into her belly. I wrestle those urges into submission, though. Gwen's on the verge of launching her career into the stratosphere with this new game, and I'll be damned if I do anything to limit the shine of her future. I intend to discuss plans for the future, and it's going to happen sooner rather than later, but for this moment, I'll suit up in a fuckin' rubber, so I can protect and respect her.

"What are you doing with a condom? I thought you said there hadn't been anyone else!"

I grab her ankle and tug her back toward me before she can roll off the other side of the bed. Not only am I not letting her put distance between us, but we're gonna nip this questioning one another shit right in the bud before it gets out of hand.

"When have you ever, *ever* known me to lie to you, Gwen? Ever." Being completely honest, her lack of trust in me really fucking hurts. I know she's got some issues from how her dad treated her and her mom as if they were easy to walk away from, but even without my giving her the words, there's no way she has any grounds to question my honesty and devotion. After today, though, I have every intention of making myself so damn crystal clear my claim on her will be obvious from here to the moon.

"N-never. But I...I don't get why you need a condom if there hasn't been anyone else?" Even on her back, glaring daggers at me, with her orgasm coating the inside of her thighs and

making the whole room smell like sex, she's glorious to behold.

"Because for two months you had me texting you every morning to make sure you didn't ignore the alarm on your phone to take your damn birth control pill. Even with the daily reminder, you still panicked the month your period was three days late. I figure once you left town, you'd drop the birth control as fast as you dropped me."

Okay, that last part was unnecessary. I know I need to stop throwing it in her face that she left me. I make a mental vow that I'm done bringing it up. Especially when I watch her eyes soften, and the frown melt away. The way she's looking at me right now, with trust and appreciation, and yeah, love, washes away the last of my bitterness, and the need I was already feeling swells to fill the void left behind.

"Oh my gosh, Cabe. You're so good to me, but we don't need the condom. I kept taking the pill after I got here. In fact, I finally got into the habit of doing it every morning without ever forgetting. I think it helped me feel closer to you, like there was still hope that things could work out as long as I kept taking them. Silly, I know, but it felt right."

"You sure? Be sure, Gwen, because my cock knows its home is deep inside that sweet cunt of yours. I'm already not letting you go again, ever, but if there's a chance I could make you pregnant..."

The idea of slipping one past the goalie and knocking her up has a lot of appeal, but when I make Gwen a mommy, I want her one hundred percent on board. My plan is to dial back the woodshop business, work from home on that land I bought a few miles from here while the babies are sleeping or once they're in school. I'm going to convince Gwen to let me be a stay-at-home daddy for our little ones, but that's a conversation for later. Right now, it feels like my balls are more blue than a Yankees ballcap and the look on her face tells me she's feeling just as desperate.

"We'll cross that bridge if it happens, Cabe. Now, please, please, be with me!"

I don't need to be told again. Climbing onto the bed feels like coming home, and my heart is racing even more than the first time we kissed. I need the taste of her on my tongue when I make her come, so I kneel between her splayed legs and press my mouth to her mons, rubbing my tongue back and forth over her thick labia before pressing it between them to slip over and around her clit. The nub of her clitoris is engorged and pressing up past the thin hood that shields it, and I know it will only take a few sucks of the button to send her skyrocketing, but I want her coming on my cock. I give it a couple quick pulls to edge her a bit before kissing my way from side to side along her tummy and up her ribs to the generous globes of her breasts.

Her nipples are soft and nubby at the edges of pale pink areolas, and the tip of each one tightens into a point under my stare. I cup them in my hands, the velvety abundance of each spilling out between my fingers. Pushing both together and fucking my shaft between them has always been a favorite way to get off. I'll do that later. Maybe. First, I gotta get my fill of her magic pussy and that sassy mouth of hers. I need in that puckered pink asshole, as well. We hadn't had much time to play with anal, and Gwen had never let any of her previous lovers play with her backdoor. I intend to renew my acquaintance with all her holes, tonight, and set the standard that all of her is mine to pleasure, mine to fuck, mine to love from now on. Hell, my body is hers to enjoy any way she wants to, as well.

Chapter 13



Gwen

Cabe's weight presses me down into the mattress, and a tiny dart of pain streaks through me from the way his sharp hipbones gouge my soft belly. He's lost weight and gained extra muscle since I last saw him. I need to make sure to feed him later. An artist in his woodwork, the man forgets to eat for far too long for such a ginormous body. I've missed feeding him nearly as much as I've missed the way he fucks me like it's his job.

"I'm not going to last, Gwen. It's been too long. I promise I'll make it up to you."

I know he will. I've never had a lover as unselfish and attentive as Cabe is.

"Less talking, more sexing!"

Cabe chuckles and pulls my nipples between his fingers at the same time. The combination of erotic pain and satisfaction from making him laugh settles the broken pieces of my heart and heals more than just the pain of the last few months. Even in the midst of the best sex of my life, Cabe mends the bits of me that were damaged by life and love long before we'd even met.

Slowly, far more slowly than his words had led me to expect, Cabe pushes himself inside me. First the wide bulb of his head notches into my opening and withdraws for Cabe to slap it on my spread labia and needy clit. My keening wail should deafen us both, but he doesn't increase his pace. Instead, he eases the throbbing rib that runs the length of the underside back and forth over me, teasing me with small dips of his head into my pussy on every downward thrust. Precum mingles with my juices until every roll of his hips makes a smacking wet sound that is louder than even our harsh breathing and moans.

Cabe may have worried that he'd be the one going too fast, but I can't wait any longer, and with all my strength, I arch my hips and roll to the side to dislodge him from above me. Climbing astride him, my knees barely touch the mattress, and I scramble to scoot around enough to create the leverage I need to impale myself on him. Surrendering to my impatience, Cabe grabs the base of his shaft and angles it away from his stomach so I can climb up to a squat and drop down onto him.

As soon as my ass meets his thighs, it's like a bell has rung and the bull has been loosed from the chute. Cabe's fingers grab onto my hips so tightly I know there'll be ten dark bruises tomorrow, and he shuttles my body up and down.

Once. Twice. A third time and he breaks. I don't have time to register a moment of emptiness as he lifts me off his cock and throws me to the blanket beside him. Before I blink, he's rising above me and slamming in to the hilt, his cockhead bumping against my cervix with enough force to bring tears to my eyes. My core is clamped so tightly around him that I feel the tug of my inner walls as he withdraws. His lips are peeled back in a snarl, and he's breathing so heavily his chest rasps against mine with every inhale. If his pain is half as good as mine, we may never be able to stop.

"Oh fuck, fuck, Gwen, I need you to come. Fucking right now!" As the words rush out, I feel the first hot pulse of his cum rifle up his cock and spread heat throughout me. His shaft swells even thicker as three more spurts gush into me while he holds himself as deeply inside my pussy as he can get. His pelvis grinds against my clit while his orgasm ebbs, small aftershocks jerking his still-hard penis inside me. Finally, the tension snaps, and the coil of my own orgasm unfurls. From the center of my body, where we're still connected, all the way to my curled toes and the fingers digging into his back, every nerve ending feels ablaze with satisfaction.

Cabe drops to his elbows, his face buried in my hair where it's tangled on the pillow. His gasping breaths send single strands flying into the air to tickle along my cheek and lips. The weight of him grounds me and prevents the postcoital euphoria from floating me into outer space. I know there's still a lot to

work out, but lying here in a tangle of sweat and cum, nothing seems impossible.

“How long are you staying?”

Fuck a duck. Of all the things I could have led with after the most amazing lovemaking ever, that’s where I go with it? Cabe’s face morphs from confused to frustrated back to confused again before settling. His brows draw together, and his lips firm in a determined line.

“Okay, we’re going to go over this one more time. You are mine. Where you are, I will be. Today, tomorrow, always. I bought a couple of acres a few miles from here where there’s a house and a barn I can convert to a shop. We’re going to move out there, and you’re going to do whatever you want to make it your dream home. Tear it down and have it rebuilt for all I care. But it will be our home, and you will be moving out there with me.”

“Oh yeah? I will, huh?” I’m baiting him now. This alpha-dominant-caveman Cabe is new. Happy-go-lucky Cabe has taken a back seat, though I can see him lurking as his smile sneaks into the corners of his lips.

“Yup. Because over there in the pocket of my jeans—”

“In the condom pocket?”

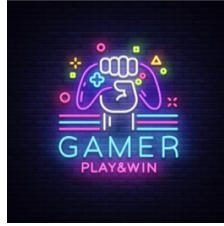
“Shut it, wench.” Playful Cabe is back now, the smile overtaking his face as he realizes I’m not objecting to anything he’s proclaiming.

“As I was saying. In the pocket of those jeans is a ring. A ring I had designed for you the week we met, and it’s the ring you’re going to wear until I can add the wedding band behind it. I should have put it on you as soon as I had it, so you’d know how totally and completely I love you. Then, when you’re ready, I’m gonna fill this sweet, sexy tummy with our babies.”

My heart is racing as Cabe hands me everything I didn’t even know how much I wanted. It took pushing him away and breaking my own heart to realize how damaged I’d been by the way my father abandoned my mother and me. But here’s

Cabe, my perfect soulmate, proving that even if I'm the one who abandons us, he'll fight for what we have and hold us together.

Chapter 14



Cabe

“Well?”

My heart stutters. Well, what? The hell is she asking? I just laid myself bare for her, fucked her within an inch of our lives, and even now, I can feel myself stiffening where I'm still semi-hard inside her.

“Are you going to put the ring on and ask me?”

Just like that the mounting stress disappears and contentment fills me.

“Ask you? Probably not. Demand? Hell, yes. You're going to marry me, Gwen. I didn't spend the last month learning to get captured in that damn game to accept anything less.”

“Okay.” She leaves it at that like there's nothing else that needs saying. Guess I know how she felt all this time, waiting for the words from me, but fuck, I'm not strong enough to let her say them in her own time. I need them now. Right fucking now.

“Say it, dammit. Give me the words.” I don't even care if this is begging. She begged for cock ten minutes ago. I'm alright with begging to hear her say she loves me, now.

“Nah. Make me.” Gwen's legs are wrapped around my waist, and I'm still buried nine deep inside her, my erection having rebounded to one-hundred percent the instant she agreed to be mine. Without withdrawing from her heat, I circle my hips to rub the base of my cock against her clit. She's always so sensitive after she comes a few times I know it won't take much to work her back up.

“Say it, and you get an orgasm” I can feel her milking along my shaft, clutching at my girth and teetering along the cliff of her orgasm. Pinching one nipple between my thumb and forefinger while taking long suckling pulls on the other has

those pulses chasing one another up my stalk faster and faster. I know she's close.

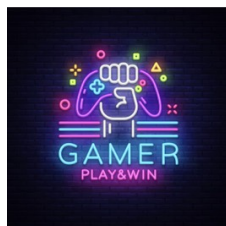
"Say it."

"You know I do!" She's panting and arching her back beneath me, pushing her breast deeper into my mouth.

"I love you!" Her scream rips free and has cum rifling so forcefully from my balls that they cramp up tight against my body it's painful. It's worth it to finally, finally have the words and know she means them. There's so much wetness between us, when I snap my hips back and forth into her, we make a squirty squelch that has her giggling even as she freefalls into her orgasm.

Once the last ripples fade and we're both nearly able to breathe normally again, I ease myself free from the vise of her cunt and throw myself onto the comforter beside her. The world could end right this minute, and I'd go happily into the afterlife because Gwen loves me and knows I love her.

Epilogue



Gwen

From the window beside my desk in the office he built me in our home, I can see through the open doorway into Cabe's woodshop. The sound of videogame explosions over my headset would normally hold my complete attention. I hate losing at any game, but especially when I play *Vision Spark*. Something's going on, though, and I'm dying to know what's up. All day, Cabe's been out in the shop, making a ruckus with his tools, but any time I try to pop in to distract him, he nudges me back out with a kiss and a smack on my ass.

Normally, I'd just assume he was busy working on a commission piece, but I happen to know he wrapped up his last orders earlier this week and has nothing else on the horizon. He plans to take a few months off once the baby arrives so he can play daddy nonstop.

I quit the game and lean back in my chair, the controller resting on the shelf created by my ginormous baby belly. Once he put his ring on my finger, Cabe wasted no time getting me moved out to the land he'd purchased and married to him within the week. It wasn't even a full month later that I surprised him with the news I'd stopped the birth control. Another couple of months and we were expecting. Now that the big day is nearly here, he's been frantic with preparations. It's honestly been pretty cute.

Until today. Whatever he's doing out there in the early summer heat has me feeling out of sorts and irritable. I'm as big as a house, and I've been spoiled lately by having him constantly underfoot to pamper me. Right now, though, I'm bored, cooped up, and tired of feeling as if my skin is stretched so tightly over my middle that this baby could burst out of me Alien-style at any given moment. And what's Cabe doing? Dinking around in his shop doing something he won't even let me peek at.

Annoying, that's what it is.

I grab my phone and send him a text telling him he has fifteen minutes until I find a pair of shoes that still fit my swollen ankles and take myself out for ice cream. Cabe's been a fanatic about my not driving or going anywhere alone ever since my belly got massive enough to touch the steering wheel. If this threat doesn't motivate him to get his ass out of his woodshop, nothing will.

Twelve minutes pass and I'm starting to heft myself out of my chair when the sound of the screen door banging against the frame alerts me that Cabe's on his way. Moments later, he's ambling into the room as if I didn't just send him the equivalent of a technological temper tantrum. His smile never fails to make my heart squeeze, and when his eyes light up from looking at me, my annoyance melts away like the ice cream I'm only a little bummed I won't be sneaking out to get.

"Well, you want to see what I'm doing in the shop so badly, let's go."

His hand in mine as we walk out the back door to the porch and down the stairs into the yard strikes me as one of those moments when you realize you have everything you could ever dream of. Even if the grass is itchy along my ankles and the sun's got beads of perspiration forming along my hairline pretty much the moment we step outside, I can't imagine a more perfect moment.

"Whatever it is, can it wait for ice cream? I wasn't kidding about how badly I want a snack." I'm teasing, mostly, and Cabe knows it if the grin he flashes my way is anything to go by.

"I promise, you'll want to see this. And then, later, I'll get you your ice cream cone. This is the last thing I needed to wrap up before I close down things out here for the next few months." Cabe pushes the door along the track to slide it open, and the late afternoon sunlight filters in to cast a perfect beam on the project he's been keeping such a secret.

"I've been sneaking out here in the mornings when you're still sleeping to work on it, but I had a feeling I needed to get it

done today, so it would have time for the stain to dry and air out a bit.”

There, in the golden glow of the light streaming into the shop, sits a cradle built to resemble the starship the heroine of *Vision Spark* pilots. A rainbow of wood stains color the cradle in the signature blues and grays of her rig, with pops of brighter yellow and orange. Despite the colors, the grain of the wood shines through and renders the cradle a piece of art worthy of being a family heirloom. I can close my eyes and picture the day when we rock our grandbabies in it when they visit.

“Better than ice cream?”

“Definitely.”

Want a sneak peek at Rowen's
story?

Pre-order [AFK Deployed](#) now! It releases 11.2.22

Chapter 1

Edison Bremer

“About to log on 2 unalive some baddies. U want in?”

Like a Pavlovian dog reacting to the ding of a treat bell, I’m fighting off a boner in the middle of a staff meeting. All it takes these days is the chime of an incoming text, the pattern I’ve assigned to Rowen Fowler, aka Roguella. Age twenty-six to my thirty-three. My dream girl. Who has no idea how close we actually are. Fuck, just that thought alone makes me feel like a creeper. I guess it’s accurate, though.

We met on an online gaming platform as anonymous strangers, and over the last year, she’s gone from faceless gamer buddy, to friend, to obsession. Fortunately, or maybe unfortunately for my rapidly becoming a stalker self, Rowen lives right here in Mariposa. When my battle buddies and I retired from the SEALs, I moved home to the little town where my family still lives. My closest SEAL brothers, Huxley, Benedict, and Eco, followed me. We opened a security firm that primarily does contractor work with the Department of Defense.

“Give me fifteen and I’ll be there.”

At the other end of the table, Benedict details exactly how much drool his and July’s baby, Stella, is capable of producing as she gnaws her first two baby teeth free through her gums. Hux is nodding at Benzo as if he’s a governor dispensing death row pardons. I know it’s cuz he’s been dying for his wife to give the go ahead for baby making. I try hard not to think too much about that shit, though, given that he’s married to my little sister, Ramsey.

Might have felt some sort of way about one of my best friends hooking up with my kid sister, but Hux is one of the best men

I know. And Ramsey's nosy ass butting in is what brought him back to the land of the living when the Navy bounced him out on a medical discharge. If it hadn't been for her snooping while the guys and I were talking, who knows if Hux would have joined the other guys and me here in Mariposa.

Still, I'm way happier paying attention to the messages between Rowen and me than listening to my brothers gossip about infant development. It's like a damn mommies and me playgroup around here lately. Even Eco's strangely focused on getting as many fatherhood tips from Benzo that he can. He's perpetually single, but while we call him Radar because he can nose out anything hidden, he's also the most secretive of all of us. Who knows if there's an underlying reason for his sudden interest in dad life.

My screen lights up with a message from Roguella. *"No promises 2day, Wizard. It's nuclear @ work. No ? how much time I'll have 2 kick it. If I'm gone when ur on, I'll CYL."*

CYL? She'll catch me later? I think the fuck not.

Learning to decipher Rowen's texting shorthand had been easy. Way easier than convincing her to take our chats from in-game direct messages into actual cell number texts. Still, even after all the subtle-as-atom-bomb hints I've dropped, the woman's eternally clueless about my intentions.

"Benz, I think you ought to check out early and go be with July and the baby. Hux, you and Radar nail down the plans for the Skellit project. I gotta go. Something's come up." We might have all separated from our SEAL team with the same insignias and ranks on our chests, but everyone knows who's in charge.

Back in the days when we were brutalizing our bodies during training and live missions, the guys always looked to me for the final decisions. It's a role I was born for, and so I don't bother with platitudes or asking for input now. If there was anything worth weighing options on, I certainly would lean into the expertise and opinions of the men I call brothers. I know Benzo would rather be with his wife and new baby than anywhere else. Hux and Radar are always like kids in a candy

shop when it comes to getting all our tech specs lined up before big contracts.

Me? I've got a finite time to capture my girl's attention, even if it's still behind a screen and not between her thighs as I've dreamed of for months. Whatever and whenever, I'll take any piece of her I can get. The tactical planning for how to keep pushing our relationship out from behind the screen is ongoing, and I refuse to miss any chance.

I haul ass back to my office and shut the door, locking it for good measure. There's nothing overtly sexual about our game play. Simply hearing Rowen's mic'd up voice while she slays enemies during our quests never fails to make me rock hard. The last thing I need is to have my brothers busting my balls because they barge in to find me damn near jizzing myself while I play a first person shooter game.

"Booting my system up now, Roguella. Save some baddies for me." I'm texting in one hand and starting my system up with the other. My dick already twitches and firms up because it knows what's up.

"Hurry Whizz, I need you! dumped into a raid in progress and —"

I have no idea what the rest of her message reads, because the first five words have so much blood rushing to my groin I'm dizzy with it. Sparks of pinprick light arc across my field of vision, making everything blurry. As a grown ass man, it's unnatural and inconvenient to be so reactive to a single stimulus.

In the last half year, since meeting Rowen online, absolutely nothing gets me hard but her. By the same token, there's an unexpected comfort in having found the other half of my soul, as ludicrous as it is to be this certain about it despite never being face to face with her. That's going to change though, real soon. I just have to figure out how to convince Rowen she belongs to me and we belong together offline.

Edison and Rowen's love story is also book 3 in my Cyber Patrol SEALs stories. Book 1, Dear Huxley and book 2, The SEAL's Squid are already out, and book 4, Snow Cam Do will be out in early December. Preorder them all now on Amazon!

Also by Layne Daniels

The Vice & Vow Ink World

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[Dear Huxley: Heart of a Wounded Hero](#)

[The Seal's Squid](#)

[AFK Deployed USA](#)

[Glitch In the Game](#)

[Snow Cam Do](#)

Books in Order of Publication

Kringled in Key West

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Poke'd

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Getting Off His Naughty List: Curves for Christmas

Room Twenty-Two: The Muse Between Them Club Sin

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King of the Clubhouse

Dirty Daddies: 2021 Anniversary Anthology.

Dirty Daddies: Spring 2023 Anthology.

Resisting You: Charity Collection of 2nd Chances
Vows and Vendettas: A Mafia Romance Anthology