

VET
SHOP
BOYS

Got Me
FEELING

CASEY COX

GOT ME FEELING

VET SHOP BOYS BOOK 8

CASEY COX

Copyright © 2023 by Casey Cox | All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

CONTENTS

[Connect with Casey.](#)

[About the Book](#)

1. [Locky.](#)
2. [Roman](#)
3. [Locky.](#)
4. [Roman](#)
5. [Locky.](#)
6. [Roman](#)
7. [Locky.](#)
8. [Roman](#)
9. [Locky.](#)
10. [Roman](#)
11. [Locky.](#)
12. [Roman](#)
13. [Locky.](#)
14. [Roman](#)
15. [Locky.](#)

[Sneak Peek at Got Me Hoping](#)

[Watch Casey on YouTube](#)

[Also by Casey Cox](#)

CONNECT WITH CASEY

WATCH Casey on YouTube

GET Casey's newsletter

JOIN Casey's reader group



FOLLOW Casey on:

Instagram

TikTok

Facebook

Amazon

Bookbub

ABOUT THE BOOK

I'm a thug. I've done bad things. And I'm straight... So why can't I get the sexy Aussie vet out of my head?

When I showed up on my brother's doorstep three years ago, I'd hit rock bottom. Broke and homeless, with a miles-long trail of destruction in my wake.

Those days are behind me. I'm rebuilding my life. Staying focused. Disciplined. Busy. If I'm not working to pay back my debts, I'm helping out at my brother's animal shelter. Whatever it takes to keep my *impulses* under control.

And then I meet Locky, the new Aussie vet. His husband cheated, kicked him out, and is threatening to turn their divorce nuclear.

My newfound control snaps. I have to help, even if the smart thing to do would be to stay away.

I definitely shouldn't give Locky a place to stay.

Or offer to be his wingman...with benefits.

Or get involved in his messy divorce.

Too late.

I may be straight, but Locky's triggered every possessive instinct I have. And that's what makes this situation dangerous. Because I do very bad things to protect the people I care about.

I've worked hard to start over, so why has Locky got me feeling I'd be willing to blow it all up for him?

Got Me Feeling is book 8 in the ***Vet Shop Boys*** series and can be read as a stand-alone. Expect plenty of humor, found family, bi-awakening, forced proximity, a possessive thug who's hiding a kitty-cute secret, a laid-back vet sick of playing it safe, and a heartwarming happily ever after!

LOCKY

Most people are familiar with the characteristics of a Type A personality. Hard-driving. Ambitious. Meticulous. Perfectionist.

That's not me.

At all.

I'm a total Type B. A typical, laid-back Aussie dude. Easygoing. Relaxed. Flexible.

Most of the time, that's a pretty good way to be.

Can't make it to the movies by six? No worries, we'll catch the later session.

Had a shitty day? Tell me all about it.

Need help with something? I'm your man.

But sometimes, people misinterpret you being laid-back and carefree as a sign that it's okay to steamroll over you, disregard your feelings, and spit you out like chewed-up gum.

People like my soon-to-be ex-husband and reigning king of cheating asswipes, Bailey Chadforth.

I approach the front porch of the house I kicked him out of exactly six months ago today—but who's keeping track?—and start to shake my head.

Oh no.

Hell. To the. Fuck. *No.*

This *cannot* be what I think it is.

I reach the stoop, halt, and grip the handrail so tightly my knuckles drain of all color as I glare at the five pieces of luggage stacked by the door.

Five pieces of *my* luggage.

There's a piece of paper taped to the front suitcase with two words scrawled on it with a black Sharpie.

GET OUT!

I glower at the sign, my vision turning red. Who the fuck does Bailey think he is? Cheating on me wasn't enough, now

he's forcing me out of my home?

I lunge up the steps, death stare the note taped to my luggage, and shove my key into the lock.

“Fucker,” I grunt, slamming my fist into the door.

He's changed the locks.

Fine. Have it his way. If he wants to hurt me, I can hurt him right back.

The other misconception people have about Type Bs?

That we don't get angry.

While it may not happen often, and it takes something pretty damn huge to piss me off, it does happen.

And when I go off, I go all the way off.

With my heart racing, I storm into the garage through the side door I always keep unlocked.

“Fucking lying, cheating, scumbag piece of shit...”

The curses keep flying out of me as I tear off the cover of Bailey's most prized possession. His Tesla Roadster.

“All the things I did for you...”

My eyes dart about, searching for—“Ah, perfect.”

I yank the hammer off the wall rack and pound it against my fist as I size up the vehicle.

Where to begin?

The doors, perhaps, for all those times I ignored the voice in the back of my head trying to warn me that something wasn't right about Bailey. Why didn't I listen? Instead, I tried to convince myself that since we were good as friends, we'd be better as more, even when signs of incompatibility were there right from the start.

Or maybe I should mess up the hood for the time he whisked me away to escape the brutal Virginian winter. Or at least, that's what he told me he was doing. Turns out Bailey had booked us into an LGBT resort where clothing was optional. And so were our marriage vows, apparently.

He pressured me into a threesome situation I never should have agreed to. But I did. Even though it went against every instinct I had. *Come on, babe. Just this once. It's my biggest fantasy.* Eventually, I caved. Like I always did with him. I did *so many things* to make him happy.

I gave up my life and friends and family in Australia and moved countries to be with him. I stopped eating meat and became vegan for him. I got fucked by another dude because he wanted it.

And it was never enough.

Or, wait, no. I've got it. I heave myself onto the hood and in three steps, I'm standing on the roof of the car.

The windows. I am going to smash every single motherfucking window for the day he came back from a work trip to San Fran, and I discovered he was cheating on me.

As an IT project manager, Bailey often traveled for work, so we implemented a five-day rule. If he was ever away for longer than five days, as soon as he got home, we'd have sex and spend the rest of the day together.

When he got back from a two-week trip to California, I could tell something was up. He seemed distracted from the moment he came home, and the sex was...flat. As soon as we were done, he got up, showered, then said he needed to check his emails in the study down the hall.

I stayed in bed, trying to figure out what was going on. If I was just imagining things, or if something was actually wrong. Like always, I found excuses to justify his bad behavior. *He was tired from working so much. His flight had been delayed. He was still on West Coast time.*

And then his watch dinged on the bedside table.

Now, his watch, his phone, his laptop were *always* going off with notifications. That's how it is in his line of work. He's always on.

In the three-and-a-half years we were together, I never once picked up any of his devices and read any of his

messages. That's an invasion of privacy and not my style at all.

But that day, lying alone in our bed with his load slowly trickling out of my ass after he'd basically fled the room after fucking me, something *compelled* me to reach over. To pick the watch up. To read the message that had just come through.

For a guy who works in IT and specializes in cybersecurity, you'd think Bailey would've known better than to not password-protect his watch.

What can I say? *Smart watch. Dumb husband.* My friend Fulton reckons I should put that on a T-shirt. Maybe I will one day.

The message was from someone called Kaleb.

We didn't know any Kaleb, did we? *It could be a work colleague, or someone he took a meeting with,* my ever-optimistic subconscious tried to assure me.

But even my subconscious had nothing as I blinked at what I assumed was Kaleb's muscular leg lifted into the air, showing off his hard cock and puckered hole.

I backtracked out of that message and saw text chain after text chain from a whole bunch of guys we didn't know. At least, *I* didn't. My husband seemed to have very intimate knowledge of every single one of them.

So, yep. I've decided. That's what I'm gonna do. Bust the windows of his most prized possession as payback for all the guys—plural, couldn't wrangle an exact number out of Bailey—he fucked while we were together.

I crouch down onto my knees, lift the hammer overhead, and am about to slam it into the front windshield when a deep voice yells, "Stop!"

I don't recognize the voice right away.

It doesn't belong to Bailey. He's more of a *change the locks on our house, pack my bags, and leave them out the front of our house with a sticky note* kind of coward—er, I mean guy; no, I do mean coward.

And it isn't any of the vets I work with at the Vet Shop Boys clinic. Seriously, those guys are the only reason I've been able to get through these last six months. Without them, I would've fallen to pieces. They're fucking legends. Each and every one of them, their partners, too.

But yeah, it's none of them.

A tall, dark figure moves in from the doorway, backlit by rays of afternoon sunshine. I squint but still can't tell who it is. Only that he's got a muscular frame and a slow, steady gait that makes me think he's not here to case the place. Though, with my luck, I s'pose I shouldn't rule that out just yet.

Oh, fuck. What if it's one of Bailey's hookups?

We're officially separated now, so as far as I'm concerned, he can do what he wants with whoever he wants. I just don't want it shoved in my face. The vet gang are trying to get me back out there, but the thought of jumping into the dating pool is about as appealing as plunging into an ice bath.

I leap off the car and manage to land steadily on my feet. With the hammer propped in my hand and my eyes fixed on the intruder, I call out over the roof, "Who the fuck are you?"

I'm inching toward the front of the car from the right, while the other guy is moving to the same spot from the left side of the garage.

"It's me. Roman."

Roman? *Roman*? I don't know any—

"From the animal shelter. Bishop's brother."

Oh. Right.

That Roman.

We've met briefly a few times. He took me for a tour of Bishop's animal shelter when I visited with Chester last Christmas. He occasionally shows up at vet gang dinners and catch-ups. We've never exchanged anything more than a few words. There's always a ton of people, kids, and animals at those things so it's pure bedlam.

But I've noticed him.

He's usually standing on the periphery. Friendly, but never one to initiate contact. Happy for others—Tyler comes to mind—to hog the spotlight.

But I see him.

It's his eyes that always pull me in. A dark chocolatey brown, deep and intense. So intense. Roman's the kind of person that when he looks at you, you *feel* his gaze penetrating through you.

I step out from behind the car to get a better view of him. He looks as intense as ever. Powerful. Almost a little scary looking, his face set in a borderline scowl that seems to demand, *What the fuck are you looking at?*

If I remember correctly, he's older than Bishop. His face is slightly more weathered. A neatly trimmed beard matches his dark hair. And those eyes. Those mysterious eyes are pointed straight at me, like he can see right into me.

It's late summer, and possibly one of the last warm days, so he's got a black T-shirt on. There's a couple of chains around his neck, and he has tribal tattoos running up and down both muscular arms.

He's standing a few feet away from me. His eyes take their time traveling down my body. I'm not bothered. Just like I've never been bothered. Not when he eye fucked me the first time we met at the shelter. Or every single time since.

Sure, the intensity of his gaze might be a little strange considering Roman is meant to be straight, but I'm currently going through a painful, ugly divorce, and being the subject of someone's brazen stare is... Well, it feels nice, okay?

It's been six months of nothing but me and my left hand, and frankly, I think Lefty is overdue a break.

Not to mention, my ego's taken a hit.

My soon-to-be ex-husband actively sought out other men, *multiple other men*, to have sex with.

Over me.

He chose *them* over *me*.

As hard as I'm trying to move on and leave all that shit in the past, I'm not okay with that yet. It hurts, and as much as I hate to admit it, a small, vulnerable part of me wonders if it's because I wasn't good enough.

Smart enough.

Hot enough.

Fuckable enough.

Just...*enough*.

"Planning on making some improvements to the car?" Roman asks, his eyes darting between the hammer in my hands and the Tesla.

"Something like that."

He nods, like there's nothing wrong with my admission.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

Because yeah, seriously, what *is* he doing here? How does he even know where I live?

A small line creases between his brows. "I was, uh, at a friend's house and I happened to be driving by when I saw you stomping toward the garage like a man on a mission."

"Oh. Okay."

Plausible enough, but I'm not sure I fully believe him.

He steps forward and takes the hammer from me. "What were you *really* planning on doing?"

Our fingers brush for barely a second, but there's an electric zap between us. An actual electric zap.

"Sorry," Roman says, taking the hammer from me.

"It's fine." I hold his gaze for a moment longer before looking at the car. "I was planning on destroying the fucking thing," I confess, running my hand over the sleek top edge of the roof.

"Take it it's not your car?"

“Belongs to my ex.”

“Same guy who packed your bags for you?”

A growl emanates from the back of my throat, and my fingertips buzz with that *I want to do smashy things* tingle again. “Yeah.”

Roman steps in front of me, sizing up the car, smacking the hammer against his open palm, like he intends to pick up where I left off.

My cock should *not* be swelling in my briefs...but it is.

There’s something dangerous about the heat flaring in Roman’s eyes, the deliberate *thwack thwack* sound the hammer makes when he pounds it into his hand, the way his biceps flex with the movement.

Okay. Yep. Fully hard now.

And just when I thought getting interrupted by my vet friend’s boyfriend’s older straight brother right before taking out some long overdue frustrations on my douchebag ex’s car couldn’t get any weirder, my phone buzzes.

Thankfully, it’s in my back pocket, which allows me to bypass the involuntary woody situation happening in the front and makes retrieving it a whole lot easier.

“Crap,” I mutter when I read the message from Fulton. “I’m late.”

“Late for what?”

I choke out an *I give up* laugh because seriously, given how my afternoon has gone, it’s the only thing left to do.

My cheating ex has changed the locks and packed my bags for me. Which means I have nowhere to live. Then I get caught trying to vandalize his car. And now I have an erection because of a straight dude.

My gaze drifts to Roman, who’s looking at me like I’m the only thing in the world, which I probably shouldn’t read too much into since it seems to be the default way he looks at

everyone, and not just me. I'm assuming. I mean, why would he single me out? He's probably just an intense, broody dude.

I hold the phone up so he can read the text, and let out a deflated chuckle. "I'm late for my six-month divorce party."

ROMAN

“Interesting arrival status,” Tyler quips with an amused grin before taking a noisy slurp of his drink.

“Don’t know what you mean,” I mutter in response to the group of guys I’m standing at the bar with. Me, Bishop, Fulton, Tyler, and Daly.

I’m not even lying. Even though Locky’s the one with the thick Aussie accent, and I often have to do the ear equivalent of eye squinting to catch everything he says, I barely understand half of what comes out of Tyler’s mouth at the best of times. Nothing like talking to a Gen Zer to make a millennial feel like a Gen Xer.

Tyler points to the remaining contingent of the group, who are sitting in their regular corner booth. Noah and Haze, Gus and Tate, Chase and Fischer, and Chester and Lawson.

And one solitary figure plonked smack bang in the middle of all the couples.

Locky.

The guy who I arrived with, and who Tyler is now quizzing me about because he wants to know why we turned up together.

The poor guy.

It was hard enough to get Locky to come at all. It took a helluva lot of convincing—and me swearing on my life I wouldn’t tell anyone about his predicament—to get him here.

I managed to fire off a text to Bishop to tell Fulton to can the *Smart Watch*, *Dumb Husband* shirts Fulton had ordered for everyone to wear as a surprise to kick things off tonight.

I’m still in the dark as to what caused Locky’s dicksnot ex to choose today of all days to kick him to the curb, but I knew that whatever celebratory vibe Fulton had planned for this evening had to be taken down a few notches.

“How *did* you end up arriving together with Locky?” my brother says, a grin stretching his lips like he’s already drawn his own conclusion.

Possibly a sexy conclusion if his suggestive eyebrow waggle is anything to go by.

While I'm all in on there being something sexy going on between me and the hunky, broad-shouldered Aussie vet, I need to quell whatever scenario Bishop, and the rest of these guys, are concocting in their heads. This isn't the right time.

"I was visiting a friend," I lie, but it's the same lie I told Locky, so...points for consistency?

"Friend, huh?" Bishop repeats, not buying it for a minute.

That's because there is no friend.

I've been low-key stalking Locky ever since I heard about his divorce. That was earlier in the year, a few months after meeting him for the first time at Bishop's animal shelter. There was something about him that just pulled me right in.

But he was married so it was a non-starter.

Until he wasn't.

"Does this friend have a name?" Daly joins the pile-on.

Friend? What are they talking ab—Oh, right. They're still going on about that.

No one's even bothering to hide their grins. I haven't breathed a word about my attraction to Locky to anyone, and I thought I'd been checking him out covertly. Whenever we attended any of the same dinners or group hangouts, I kept my distance from him, only exchanging polite greetings and making the smallest of small talk.

Sure, I'd look his way every once in a while, catalog every square inch of his tall, bulky body, memorize what he was wearing, what he ate and drank, the sound of his laughter as it carried in the air. But I thought I was being discreet.

Clearly not.

"Need to piss," I announce and take off for the gents.

When I get back, all the guys have joined the others in the booth, except for my brother. Yeah, like that wasn't planned.

We'll go, you stay here at the bar, Bishop. He'll open up to you. Find out what's really going on and then report back to us.

I swing my leg over the barstool. “Did they take a vote or were you simply informed you’d be staying behind to do reconnaissance?”

“That obvious, huh?”

The bartender comes over and hands us two lemonades, which Bishop must’ve ordered for us. We’ve both had a shitty time with drugs and alcohol in our lives. We’re both sober now, and we both intend on staying that way.

We tap our glasses together.

“They’re just curious,” he says once he’s taken a sip. “You know what they’re like.”

I nod because I do. They’re a bunch of loved-up, good-hearted fools. And I’d take a bullet for each and every one of them. They’re the best people I’ve ever met in my life.

When I arrived in Brookhaven a bit over three years ago, I’d hit rock bottom. I showed up on Bishop’s doorstep broke, homeless, and having left a miles-long trail of destruction behind me. No one from the gang so much as raised a judgy eyebrow my way. They all accepted me for who I was right off the bat.

“I’m curious, too,” he says, leaning over, smiling at me all friendly like.

Even though I know he’s partly angling for gossip, my heart dances away happily in my chest.

Because, see, when I first came to town, the reception I got from my brother was vastly different. I was lucky he didn’t punch me in the face and leave me out in the cold.

It’s what I deserved after what I did to him. I’ll carry that shame with me until the day I die. Doesn’t matter that I was off my face and in the throes of addiction, there’s no excuse for stealing fifty grand from him. It fucked him over so badly he was forced to live in a van. I’m working my ass off at the

hardware store to repay him every last penny, but still, nothing will ever truly make up for it.

I'd spent our entire brutal childhoods, where we got shuttled from one foster family to another, looking out for and protecting him as best I could. We survived all that only for me to betray him in adulthood.

But Bishop, being the extraordinary man that he is, gave me the best gift I've ever gotten in my life. He forgave me. If he hadn't, I'd probably be drunk or rotting in jail somewhere, not perched on a bar, drinking a lemonade, speculating with him about my love life.

After a few beats, he comes right out with it. "You got a thing for Locky?"

I swill some lemonade around in my mouth. "And if I did?"

"Then you'll have to brace yourself."

"For?"

His smile grows even bigger. "Locky and you are the last remaining single guys in the group. It'd send Fulton and the others into heaven if you two hooked up."

I smile, too. That's totally something I can picture the guys having a field day with. "He's one of a kind, Fulton."

"Wouldn't want him any other way." Bishop beams, then sends me a brotherly *stop avoiding the question* look.

I swivel around on the stool, my gaze zeroing in on Locky sitting with the guys, doing his best to put on a brave face despite the shitty thing that's happened to him, then spin back around.

"I do." I run my hand down my beard. "I like him."

"First time liking a guy?"

"Yeah. First time."

"Confused?"

"Not really."

“Scared?”

“Fuck yeah.”

He chuckles. “Good.”

“Good?”

“Yeah. Relationships are scary. Comes with the territory.”

“It’s more than that,” I mumble into my drink.

Bishop stays silent, then places a hand on my leg. He knows my history better than anyone. “You’re not the same man you used to be. I’ve seen it for myself. You’re working hard. Focused on getting your life back on track. You’ve *changed*.”

Have I, though?

Everything Bishop’s saying is true. I am *doing the work*, as my therapist in rehab was fond of saying.

And it’s a lot of work, and it’s never going to stop. I’m fully aware that recovery is a lifelong commitment, and I plan on sticking to it. I won’t let anything derail me.

Except...

Have *I* actually changed? The person beneath the addiction and all the mistakes.

Sure, I’ve got a job, and whenever I’m not working, I’m helping out at the shelter. Saving every penny and paying Bishop back in monthly installments. Completely eliminating booze and drugs from my life.

But that’s just *stuff* I’m doing differently, does it mean *I’m* a different person? Or do I still have the same impulses, the same tendencies, the same recklessness that created so much havoc in my life before?

Because while I may be able to rein some things in, when it comes to watching the people I care about get fucked over, I will crack. Been that way my whole life, don’t think I’ll change now.

My throat's gone dry. I take a swig of lemonade. "Gonna have to ask you for a favor."

Bishop eyes me cautiously. "Go on."

"You can't ask for any details, but I'd like Locky to move in with me."

I currently live in the house that's at the animal shelter, Bishop's old place, since he moved out to live with Fulton and their six thousand cats.

"Why?"

Because I'm a sucker for punishment who should heed the warning bells sounding off in my head and just walk the fuck away from Locky.

Except I can't.

And it's not just because I've got his luggage in the trunk of my car. It's because, despite barely knowing the guy, he's triggered every protective instinct I have.

How?

Yeah. Wish I fucking knew.

I'm just going by gut feeling, which, in the past, has been a recipe for my biggest disasters. Don't know what I did wrong in a previous life, but my instincts are all messed up. Because when it comes to protecting my loved ones, I don't have the same safety switch that normal people have. The one that says, *Calm down. Walk away. Don't do something stupid you'll regret later.*

There's *nothing* I won't do to help or protect someone I love. Even though it's landed my dumb ass in jail. Twice.

"Why do you want Locky to move in?" Bishop repeats.

"Said you can't ask for details," I answer back lamely.

Bishop shifts on his stool, his gaze flicking between me and Locky. "Is he in trouble? That why you wanted us to nix the T-shirts tonight?"

“You’re not very good at not asking for details.” I rotate around, my eyes instantly finding Locky again. “But yeah, some shit’s gone down, and he’s going to need a place to stay.”

“When did he ask you?”

“He hasn’t.” I let out a big breath, keeping my gaze glued on Locky. “Is it okay?”

“Yeah. Of course.”

“Thank you.”

We get up and walk over to the group, but my gaze remains fixed on one man. I slide into the end of the booth and half listen as Chase and Fischer regale me about something funny their twins, Imogen and Ellie, did at kindergarten today. Technically, they’re Fischer’s girls, but they’ve started the adoption process, and it’s clear as day Chase is all in. Must be nice to be a kid and have someone who wants to be your parent so badly they’re willing to fight for you. Can’t imagine how good that would feel.

I grunt and nod in the appropriate places, but my eyes never leave Locky. He’s engrossed in a conversation with Haze, Lawson, and Chester. Haze is speaking, making all sorts of weird—suggestive?—gestures with his hands, which is accompanied by wide eyes and mouth-covered chuckles from Lawson, Chester, and Locky most of all. It’s good to see him having some fun after what went down earlier, but for the life of me, I can’t figure out what the hell Haze is talking about. What is it that Haze does for a living again?

Locky eventually turns my way. I narrow my eyes and tip my head toward the bar, silently communicating, *We need a word.*

I excuse myself from the table. A few moments later, Locky pulls up next to me.

“Everything okay?”

He smiles, but it’s a sad smile. “Just fucking dandy. But it’s nice being here with these fellas. They always cheer me up.”

“They’re a good bunch,” I agree. “Have you told them?”

“No. Have you?”

“Said I wouldn’t, so I haven’t.”

“Good. Thank you. I... I need some time to figure out my next steps.”

“Course.”

“Can’t believe that fucker changed the locks. I thought that sort of shit only happened in the movies. Who does that in real life?”

My skin prickles with heat at the way Locky’s being mistreated. I get it—divorces are ugly by their very nature. But does this Bailey fucktard have to go ahead and make it even worse?

“Any idea why he did that? Apart from being a lying, cheating motherfucker?” I dip my head and wince. “Sorry. Shouldn’t have said that.”

“Don’t apologize. You’re right on the money about Bailey, you just left out the part where I’m a fucking idiot.”

“What do you mean?”

Locky sighs and his big shoulders deflate. “I let him talk me into putting the house in his name. Something about how it would be better for my green card if he owned more assets.”

“That sounds like bullshit.”

“It is.” Locky shakes his head. “Hence me being an idiot for believing it.”

I close the space between us and latch onto his arm. “You are *not* an idiot. You trusted someone you loved. If you ask me, that makes you brave and him the idiot for betraying your trust.”

Locky’s eyes fall to where I’m holding him then drift up to me. Can’t say I’ve ever paid much attention to guys’ faces before, but his is nice. More than nice, actually, he’s an extremely attractive dude.

He's got brown hair that's short at the sides but a little longer on top and light blue eyes that usually have a shimmer to them—when he's not down like he is now. And his lips. They're full, soft-looking lips.

But the best thing about them?

They're usually just ever so slightly tipped up. Because Locky's the sort of person who's almost always on the verge of smiling. That's just the kind of laid-back, friendly, happy guy he is. When he's not dealing with a douchebag ex that changed the locks on him, that is.

“You're right,” he says, tapping his hands on the bar, like he's trying to muster up some enthusiasm. “I know you're right. And tonight is meant to be a party. A celebration of my freedom. Better to find out who Bailey is now rather than spend the next forty years together and meet his fifteen secret families at his funeral.”

“Exactly.”

He smiles, and. *Fuck. Me.*

It's one of those genuine smiles that lights up his whole face. They're the reason I normally force myself to keep some space between us and observe him from a safe distance. Because standing in such close proximity to Locky when he's looking at me like that, smiling at me like that... Well, it's taking every fucking reserve of willpower I have to not fist his shirt, pull him into me, and kiss the ever-loving fuck out of him.

What would the guys think of that? Meh, they'd probably love it.

But instead of putting on a show for the vet gang, as much as my body desperately wants to, I simply grin back at Locky. While still holding on to his arm. That's probably weird. I should probably let go of it, but nope, I don't wanna.

“Oh, shit. My suitcases are in your car,” he suddenly remembers.

He fishes his phone from his pocket with the hand I'm not gripping onto like a lunatic and starts tapping away.

“What are you doing?”

“Finding a hotel to stay at. Then I’ll book an Uber and get my bags out of your car.”

“No.” I tug on his arm, drawing him closer to me.

He blinks at me, looking confused. “Which part are you saying no to?”

My fingers slide over his hand holding the phone. “All of it.”

“I don’t under—”

“Stay with me. At the shelter. The house is plenty big. Take all the time you need to regroup. Save your money for lawyers, not hotel rooms.”

“That’s very kind of you to offer...”

Awww, he thinks I’m offering. That I’ll take no for an answer.

“I insist.” I lower my voice, and whether he’s aware of it or not, his pupils dilate.

“Are—are you sure?”

“Of course.”

It’ll make my stalking so much easier. Means I won’t have to go over to Bishop and Fulton’s each week for dinner to covertly snap a photo of the staff schedule Fulton pins to the fridge to know when you’ll be working.

“Okay. Thank you. Wow. I’ll do everything I can to get this sorted out quickly so I can get out of your hair. You won’t even know I’m there.”

My gaze sweeps over his body one more time. “Take all the time you need.”

LOCKY

They say you only really get to know a person when you live with them. But yeah, I'm not so sure how true that is.

It's been exactly one week since Roman invited me to stay with him, and I'm incredibly grateful that he did. I'm a vet, and the thought of sinking my entirely-okay-but-not-anything-wow wage into a hotel room while trying to save up for the lawyer I'm going to need isn't appealing.

But the thing is, in the seven days I've been here, I think I've seen Roman for a grand total of twenty minutes. Give or take. I could be rounding up.

Even though I was the one who said he wouldn't even know I was here, it's turned out that the opposite is true.

I've been on day shifts this past week, relatively normal hours in vet land, working from ten to six.

Roman's already gone by the time I get up.

But I'm a light sleeper, and even though he's trying to walk around the old house quietly, the wooden floors start creaking before dawn. Despite not starting at the hardware store until nine, he spends the first few hours of the day at Bishop's shelter, tending to the animals and working his way through the never-ending maintenance to-do list.

In the evenings, he's back at it in the shelter. He'll pop his head in for a few minutes after I get back. We exchange a few words, then he's out the door again to clean up, check in on the animals, and get the place in shape for the following day.

Even once he comes back, and we've retreated to our rooms, I hear him sneaking out of the house again. He usually comes back around twenty minutes later. I have no idea where he goes or what he does. Maybe he's a closet smoker?

Who knows?

And that's just it. I barely know anything about the guy.

Well that is changing tonight.

I teed it up with him yesterday. We've cleared our schedules, and I am making us a Friday night dinner.

He's currently having a shower, while I'm in the kitchen, putting the finishing touches on a Mexican feast. And by feast, I mean tacos. And by tacos, I mean beef mince tacos with lettuce, tomato, sour cream, and avocado. What can I say? Aussie tacos don't hold a candle to what you can get here in the States. These are the tacos I grew up with, and more importantly, I'm eighty percent confident they're edible. Not exactly the world's greatest chef here.

"Holy shit," Roman exclaims when he enters the kitchen. "What's happened?"

I glance around at the four cutting boards and ingredients sprawled out over the counter, the pile of pans and baking dishes overflowing out of the sink, the washcloth I chucked on the floor to cover the salsa that slipped out of my hands that I haven't gotten around to wiping up yet. Not exactly the world's cleanest chef, either.

"What does it look like?" I say, cracking a smile. "I'm cooking!"

"Right," Roman drawls, taking it all in.

I'm a little messy. Used to be one of Bailey's bugbears with me. Roman hasn't said anything yet, although I have noticed the plates I leave in the sink are gone when I wake up in the morning. All my stuff from the living room is usually stacked neatly on the dining table as well. Might need to up my roommate game so I don't end up pissing him off and wearing out my welcome.

"Need a hand with anything?" he asks.

"Nope, it's all under control."

I hear him mutter something under his breath that sounds like, "It is?" but he just nods and pulls out a stool from the breakfast bar.

I finish plating the last of the tacos when I look up at him.

Properly look at him.

He's freshly showered, so his hair is still damp. There's also a spot he must've missed drying on his upper chest that's

made the material of his white T-shirt translucent there. I can make out the outline of a circular tribal tattoo. Matches the ones running up and down both arms. I wonder if they connect, if his whole body is just one big art piece.

Not that Roman needs to be inked for that. He's basically a walking masterpiece anyway. Some people just exude a sexy, smoldering confidence, and Roman is one of them. He's broody and dangerous with bedroom eyes and sharp features that do not do anything for me. Nope. My downstairs department setting is set to floppy.

Okay. Maybe not entirely floppy.

Semi-floppy.

Or semi-hard.

Depends if you're a cock half hard or cock half soft person, I guess.

"So, how was your week?" I ask, as much to distract myself from my ever-spiraling thoughts as I am genuinely keen to know.

I carry two taco-filled platters over to the small dining table.

"The usual," he replies, scooping up some plates and cutlery and bringing them over.

"I've barely seen you."

We sit down, and Roman stacks six tacos onto his plate. He's got an appetite, which is good.

And very large hands. Also good.

"Don't have a lot of free time." He takes a bite and makes a grunty sound of approval. "This is good," he says, with his mouth half full.

"Thanks. It's nothing. I guess working full time and helping Bishop out at the shelter would keep you pretty busy."

"Yeah. It does." He licks up some sauce that's spilled on his fingers. His thick, long fingers, and no no *no*, I am not viewing that through a sexual lens.

I am *not*.

Roman's staring at me in his usual, full-on way, making my heart tick along faster. Someone needs to crack a window open, because it's gotten warm in here all of a sudden.

"Don't know how much you've heard about me from the others." There's a hint of warning in his tone.

"Not a lot." I grin at him. "They're not really the gossiping kind."

Our eyes meet, and we chuckle, deflating the small edge of tension that's risen in the air.

"They're not the *bad* gossiping kind," I clarify.

When it comes to love and matters of the heart, the vet shop crew meddle like it's no one's business, but I think what Roman was getting at was rumors about him and his past, and honestly, I haven't heard anyone utter a single bad word about him. I've gathered he had some troubles, but that's about the extent of it.

"I've made a lot of mistakes in my life." His jaw tightens as he continues talking. "Done things I'm not proud of. I'll never be able to go back and undo the damage I did, but I can work on myself and do everything I can to fix as much of it as I can. Bishop forgave me for doing him wrong. Gave me a second chance. There's nothing I wouldn't do for him. Or those animals."

I smile. "I really admire that."

"What? Being a fuckup?"

"No. For owning your shit. Everyone makes mistakes, but not everyone owns up to them. Much less tries to make amends."

Roman crams the rest of a taco into his mouth.

"Thank you for telling me. You didn't have to do that."

He really didn't, and I respect his honesty, even if he didn't go into any of the details. After being lied to and cheated on,

it's a quality I appreciate so much more now. Secrets and hiding shit from people never ends well.

Bailey hid so much from me, who he was and what he wanted out of married life, and here's Roman, a guy I don't really know all that well, being upfront and open with me about what sounds like a really hard and painful part of his life.

"Just laying it all out there," he says with a shrug. "Probably should've informed you you're living with a criminal sooner."

"*Ex-criminal*," I point out. I may not know him well, but I can tell Roman's a good person. Besides, if his brother gave him a second chance, that's good enough for me.

He pulls a funny expression. Like he's trying to play it down and make it seem like not a big deal, but there's also a steely glint in his gaze, like he really is committed to turning his life around. I can *feel* that from him.

"Life doesn't always turn out the way we expect it to," I say, helping myself to another taco.

"True. Any word from Fuckface?"

I grin. "Just a few lovely emails reminding me the house and mortgage are in his name."

I'd been naively hoping for a good divorce, if there even is such a thing. In the immediate aftermath of me busting Bailey cheating, we couldn't talk to each other without it dissolving into a yelling match. He took a project in San Fran, which is where the company he works for is based. Having an entire country between us worked, and it's been nothing but texts and emails since.

I don't feel the need to speak to him again. It's over. Another six months and then we'll be divorced, and he'll be out of my life forever, assuming divorces in the States work the same way they do back home. I'm over the halfway point, I just have to hang in there.

"Any idea why he decided to kick you out now?" Roman asks, picking up another taco.

“I heard from some mutual friends that the project he was working on in San Fran is over so he’s going to be back in Brookhaven more now, making the issue of accommodation a whole lot more pressing.”

I shudder at the thought of running into Bailey around town. Brookhaven isn’t tiny, but it is small enough that we probably will run into each other from time to time. Can’t wait for that.

“So what’s your next move?” Roman asks, then shakes his head, and if I’m not mistaken, there’s a faint pink hue forming just above his beard. “Sorry. None of my business.”

“It’s fine. I don’t mind.” I dunk a nacho into some salsa and take a bite. When I finish chewing, I say, “I guess I need to lawyer up. Names on paperwork is one thing, but I’ve contributed financially to that house. I’ve bought furniture. We shared all bills and expenses equally. I have to have some rights. I’m not walking away with nothing.”

“And your visa? Are you okay to stay here?”

“Why?” I half smile. “You offering to marry me for a green card?”

His eyes go round, but not in surprise, more like I inadvertently stumbled on what he *did* have in mind. His brows dip. “Uh, no.”

“I’m fine on that front. I have a work visa for another ten months. We’ll see what happens after that.”

“Would you like to stay?”

“I’m a bit torn, actually.”

“How so?”

I blow out a breath. Roman’s been transparent with me. S’pose it’s only right I return the favor. “I’ve always played it safe. I’m Mr. Go With The Flow. Happy to go along with whatever.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad.”

“Most of the time, it’s not. But when I turned thirty a few years ago, I reflected on my life and it hit me how boring and predictable everything was.”

Roman lifts a brow, waiting for me to continue.

“I’ve always taken the safe, logical option. I got good grades in school which got me into the vet training program I wanted. When I finished that, I landed a job in a local clinic. I worked my way up in four clinics in Brisbane, my hometown, progressing from junior to senior vet by thirty. The next step was to put in another decade or so and then open my own practice. It’s just...”

Roman lets the silence stretch for a few solid seconds before gently pressing. “Just what?”

“I think... I think I want something more.”

“More?”

“Yeah. I thought I’d gotten that with Bailey and moving to the States. As pathetic as it sounds, that’s the most exciting thing I’ve ever done. But now that part of my life is ending. And even though I’m dreading the next few months and what Bailey has in store for me, there’s this little voice in the back of my head that won’t shut up. It keeps egging me on. Telling me that there *is* more out there. That once I get through this shitty time, I’ll find it. Whatever the fuck *it* is.” I wave a hand in front of my face. “I’m rambling. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.”

Roman’s voice comes out so gruff and low it makes my balls tingle.

My eyes cut to his as he clears his throat. “Like you said, life is unexpected. Who knows what lies around the corner for you? Look at it this way, because you’re such an easygoing guy, you’re more likely to adapt to wherever those next steps take you.”

“Yeah. I guess you’re right.” Never really looked at it that way before.

I glance at the table. We've pretty much demolished all the food. At least I did something to help repay a little of the kindness he's showing me. "Here, you have the last one." I push the platter toward him. "A small token of apology for unloading all this stuff on you."

"You can unload on me anytime." He closes his eyes and winces, and this time, his cheeks turn a much darker shade of pink. "Sorry. That came out wrong."

"Only if you have the humor level of a twelve-year-old." I pause for a moment. "Which I definitely do."

He lets out a breathy chuckle and devours the taco in three massive bites. I *do not* pay attention to the way his jaw grinds and his neck pulses as he swallows.

"That was delicious," he says, stretching his arms overhead, his shirt lifting enough to reveal a patch of golden, slightly furry skin covering his abs. Then my gaze drifts over to the tribal tattoos covering both of his arms, and *fuck*. Why does that drive me crazy?

I have a grand total of zero tattoos. Bailey doesn't have any. In fact, I don't think any of the handful of guys I've slept with have had anything more than something on their biceps.

But with Roman, I want to trace my fingers over every line, every patch, every single part of every inch of ink he has.

Oh, did I say fingers? I meant tongue.

Once he's done inadvertently tempting me, he reaches for his phone. His brows knit closer. "I, uh, need to go get some... fresh air. Thanks for dinner. Leave everything. I'll clean up when I come back."

"Oh. Okay. You sure? I've made a huge mess."

"Positive," he says before dashing out.

I take everything from the table and stack the plates and dishes by the sink to make his gargantuan task a little easier. I can't see anything through the windows except for pitch black, so I leave the light on and make my way to my bedroom.

Roman's definitely hiding something. I've only lived with him for a week and I already know his tells. Whenever he lies, he frowns and uses the word *uh*. Never says it any other time.

My money's on him being a secret smoker, and he doesn't want anyone to know.

That's got to be it. Why else did he just bolt after a meal? Don't smokers say that the best ciggies are the ones after food and sex?

Also makes sense that he's trying to hide it since smoking isn't exactly socially acceptable these days. Next time he ducks out, I'll try and catch a whiff of him when he gets back.

That's got to be it.

I mean, what else could he be doing outside right now?

ROMAN

“I’m serious, Chandler, let it go.”

It’s hard to be stern and scold a sixteen-ounce ball of fluff who’s got a thread of loose yarn dangling out the corner of her mouth.

Or his mouth.

Sex is yet to be determined.

Either way, they’re just too damn cute.

These little ones’ ears only started pointing up last week, their blue eyes still struggle to stay open, and testicles, should they arrive, won’t be visible for another few weeks.

I remove the thread and carefully place Monica back into the pen with her brothers and sisters. Phoebe and Ross are busy licking themselves, while Joey, a stunning onyx black, is sitting alone in the corner, eyes closed, not giving a fuck about anyone or anything. Little dude...or dudette, might just be my fave.

I gather up Rachel, the last one I have to feed and poop. On this watch, at least. At three weeks of age, these six little kittens need to be bottle fed every five hours.

Sound bad? Just last week, it was every three hours. I swear I’ve never been more tired in my life.

Rachel is a beautiful dark, sandy blonde color and has always been easy to feed, hence leaving her to the end. I pick up the bottle and she starts suckling away. This one’s always had a big appetite.

I don’t know what led some garbage human to dump these just-been-born kitties at the shelter last week, but after they got the all clear at the clinic, I took it upon myself to look after them.

Daytime is fine. Bishop’s got paid staff who can care for them. Nights are when it gets tricky, since Bishop can’t afford to pay staff to cover the hours. I told him I’d take care of them, which earned me not only his thanks, but also Fulton’s undying love. He is one seriously cat-obsessed dude.

It's not a big deal and nothing I can't handle with an alarm clock and copious amounts of coffee. I've only got to power through the next few weeks, and then these guys and gals will be old enough to handle a night on their own without requiring feeding and care.

"All right, buddy or buddyess," I murmur once Rachel is fed. "That's the *in* side of things taken care of. How about you give me some *out* action?"

Because yes, three-week-old kittens don't just need to be fed, they also need to be pooped. If I don't help them out with it, they could die. I grab a fresh warm cloth and gently massage it in small circles near her anus.

"It's all good, Rach," I whisper. "Don't be shy. Everyone needs to poop. I promise you, in a few weeks from now we'll all look back on this and laugh. One day, I'll bring it up in front of your friends when I pick you up from kitty day care and you'll groan and call me the most embarrassing cat dad ever. It's the cycle of life. It's a beautiful thing."

Rachel takes care of business, and I carefully plop her back into the enclosure with the others. I tidy up the table I've been using and check to make sure the supplies are stocked for tomorrow, which they are, before huddling over the enclosure one last time.

I stick my finger in and two of the kittens come up to suckle it despite just being fed. "All right, you guys. Sleep well. I'll be back in five hours."

I look over at Joey and give him a goodnight stroke with my index finger. He curls up even more, wriggling his butt at me, like he's telling me to hurry up and fuck off already. I'm disturbing their beauty sleep.

I check the temperature of the room one last time. It's set to seventy-five degrees, which is perfect, then flick off the lights. At least the shelter is less than a hundred feet from the house. It'd suck if I had to drive somewhere. I mean, I'd still do it, but it'd make things a lot harder.

I slip in quietly through the back door. Locky's probably already gone to bed, but he's left the lights on. The kitchen looks like a bomb went off in it. Despite the mess, I smile to myself. It's amazing the things you pick up about someone when you live with them, even if we have barely seen each other.

Things I could never learn from stalking alone.

For instance, he's messy. Kitchen, living, dining room, AKA the Golden Triangle that is Lachlan Healy. At the end of the day, I can map out where he's been and what he's been doing based on the trail of dishes, books, and clothes he leaves scattered about.

Another nugget I've picked up is that he's a terrible singer. A terrible and *very loud* singer, because no, I don't have cameras installed in his bathroom. His voice simply carries. It can't carry a tune to save itself, but it is able to penetrate through the walls and invade my eardrums.

But the best thing I've discovered about him is that he's thoughtful. When I mentioned in passing that I didn't have time to make breakfast in the morning, what did I wake up to the next day?

A note on the counter telling me to look in the fridge. I opened the fridge to find a row of jars lined up neatly on the second shelf. There was another note on one of them, telling me they were overnight oats, and to look down a shelf. One shelf down, there were sandwich bags filled with strawberries, blueberries, and a sliced-up banana. With a note to accompany them, of course. That note told me to mix the fruit into the jars, add some honey or peanut butter—or both—to the mix, and I had breakfast to go.

It's been nice getting to work with a full belly and not counting down the seconds until my lunch break because I'm so freaking famished.

I turn the kitchen lights off. I'll do the dishes when I wake up in five hours for the next round of feeding and pooping. I'm too exhausted to do it now.

I head toward my room and notice there's a sliver of orange light coming through the crack underneath Locky's door. An image of Locky reading in bed fills my mind, but the wholesomeness vanishes as quickly as his clothes do, because my stupid imagination takes a sudden, sharp turn into Fantasy Lane.

I knock on Locky's door.

"Come in," he calls out, his voice noticeably huskier than usual.

I open the door and there he is, lying on his bed, completely naked, his skin bathed in orange light. The thing my dick and I have noticed about Locky's body is that he's meaty. Filled out. Like maybe he played whatever the Australian version of NFL is when he was younger, so he's left with the size and shape from those days, with some of the muscle giving way to squishiness.

Mmm...*squishiness*.

But Locky's not reading naked in bed. No. He's fucking himself with a dildo that's poking out of his ass, and *Jesus*, my vision goes wonky, my knees buckle—

I sputter a cough and wake myself out of the fantasy.

What the fuck?

My forehead is pressed against Locky's door, my hand inches away from knocking on it.

I rear back and hustle down the hallway before I do something stupid like act on my irrational impulses.

I quickly brush my teeth, and in the safety of my bedroom, jump into bed. It's been a long day. Week. Month. Year. Take your pick.

Between my day job and helping out at the shelter, I was already running on low, but now with the addition of my six new best friends, I'm next-level exhausted.

Despite wanting to sleep, *needing* to sleep, my brain won't let me. I lie awake, staring at the ceiling, thinking about dinner. Even though I didn't tell Locky everything about my

checkered past, I said enough so that he at least knows that it is a checkered past. He didn't flinch at all, and it felt nice not being judged. Makes me think that maybe, in time, I can open up some more and fill him in on all the shitty things I've done. Maybe.

Then my mind goes back in time. To that day last week when I was stalking Locky and saw that he'd been locked out of his house. How my heart broke for him, even as rage bubbled inside me at the douchery of the move by his ex. How it made sense to have him stay here, and how quickly I've grown to like the mess he leaves everywhere.

And then my thoughts wind back farther still, to the very first time we met, when Chester brought him over to the shelter. That moment when I looked at Locky, and...and... I don't even have words to describe what I felt.

Have you ever met someone and known, just known deep inside, that this person was gonna mean something to you?

That's what I felt, and it's most likely the thing that kicked my protective instincts into gear. When I heard about his divorce a couple of months later, I started keeping an eye on him. Following him around. Making sure he got to wherever he was going safely.

Because, see, I still have some connections from my prison days. So I called in a favor. I asked my contact to see if he could dig up any dirt on Bailey. And Bailey Chadforth isn't a good guy. As if that wasn't obvious enough by his cheating and the lies he spun to Locky. And I'm no immigration lawyer, but I'm calling bullshit on the house needing to be in his name for green card purposes.

But it's the shady shit he's doing using the security clearances his job gives him that has really piqued my interest. My contact has no concrete details—or evidence. Yet. I'm keeping this information in my back pocket until I get both.

None of this paints a picture of a guy who's going to play nice during divorce proceedings, does it?

Though I'm one to talk. With my criminal record, on paper, I'm just as bad for Locky as Bailey was.

That's why I can't let my heart get involved in this. I'm helping Locky out through a shitty time in his life. That's as far as it goes. Once the divorce is behind him, and he's moved on with his life, I'll do the same with mine.

The thought makes me queasy, even if it is the truth. Locky deserves to be with someone good. Someone who can offer him a bright future. What have I got to give him? Nothing. I'm closing in on forty, live in my brother's house, and have no savings because all the money I make I use to pay Bishop back.

I turn on my side, punch fluff my pillow a few times, and squeeze my eyes shut, determined to get some rest.

I may be a loser, but I've got six furry friends depending on me.



“When's the last time you got laid?” Tyler asks Locky because only Tyler could get away with asking such a question. Out loud. In front of a group of people.

Although, just quietly, I'm not mad about it. I casually lean over the countertop, eager to hear what Locky has to say.

“Well, that depends...” Locky begins.

The eight of us—Bishop and Fulton, Gus and Tate, Tyler and Daly, Locky and me—are having Friday night dinner at our place.

I mean, my place.

I mean, Bishop's house that I currently live in.

With Locky.

Who I invited to live with me.

Er, *stay* with me.

Not because I want to live with the guy.

Even though I do.

But this isn't that.

It's just a...a...a platonic living arrangement brought about by circumstances outside of our control.

There. That sounded believable. Right?

I swipe a hand through my beard. Anyway. Where were we? Ah, right. Waiting with bated breath for Locky to enlighten everyone about the last time he had sex.

"Does fucking myself with a dildo count as getting laid?" he asks with a sly grin, and I can't tell if he's kidding or not.

Doesn't matter if he is. I still choke on my tongue right as my legs give out from under me as the visual of Locky doing the thing he just said—possibly in jest, although what if it's not?—floods my mind. Thankfully, no one seems to have noticed I'm hanging on to the countertop like a rock climber gripping onto a cliff face.

"It definitely counts," Tate answers confidently.

"Agreed," Fulton chips in. "Self-sex is a valid, natural, and beautiful sexual expression."

I have no idea what any of that means. I'm still stuck on the image of Locky doing himself with a dildo. In this house. In his bedroom. With just one wall between us. And now my head is spinning.

"The best way to get over a dick is to get under one. Or have one get inside you." Tate delivers that little pearl of wisdom with a chuckle.

"A fuck buddy *could* be a good idea. Help you move on," Daly suggests.

"Or maybe Locky just needs some more time on his own," Gus, the always steady voice of reason, counters.

Tyler scoffs. "He's had six months. At his advanced age, he can't afford to waste any more time."

A round of Tyler-inspired eye rolling ensues.

“How old are you?” I ask out of curiosity.

“Thirty-four.” Locky’s eyes cut to mine, and he lets out a small smile for the first time since this conversation took a sharp turn down Casual Fuck Buddy Boulevard. “You?”

“Thirty-six.”

The group conversation carries on around us, but I swear, while Locky sits there looking at me while our friends debate whether he should or shouldn’t start screwing around, it’s like everything else falls away.

It’s just him.

And me...

Until an elbow pokes me in the stomach, and Bishop cuts into the *no one else in the world* moment we were having.

I glare at my brother.

He looks between me and Locky a few times.

Locky gets ensnared in a conversation with Fulton, Tate, and Gus.

Bishop dips his head. “How are things going with you guys living together?”

“Fine,” I answer quietly.

“Just fine?”

I nod. “Don’t really see much of each other. We both work a lot. I’m at the shelter.”

“The kitties are doing well.” Bishop claps me on the back. “You’re doing a terrific job with them. Thank you.”

“No need to thank me,” I say with a smile, thinking about how cute Joey was this morning. They’re four weeks old now, which means their senses are improving. They’re more responsive and starting to explore more confidently. Their teeth are continuing to develop and their claws are retractable. Still require feeding every five hours, but only for another

week, when it will drop down to every six. A reprieve I'll gladly take.

"Is there anything else you wanna share about you and Locky before I drop it?"

"There's nothing else to tell. We had dinner last week, and now we're having dinner with you guys tonight. Apart from that, he makes me these delicious rolled oats things for breakfast, or *brekkie* as he calls it. I clean up after him because he's even more of a slob than you are, and that's about it."

"You know..." We've been talking quietly this whole time, but Bishop drops his voice even lower now. "You can allow yourself this. If you want Locky, give it a shot. Don't let what happened in the past stop you from having a future."

I draw in a long breath through my nose, my chest tightening at the mention of my past foray into relationships. "Don't know about that."

"Are you worried?"

"Yeah."

Intense feelings and me go about as well together as gasoline and a lit match.

"Should *I* be worried?"

"No. I've got it under control. This arrangement we have is fine. It's working."

It really is. Having Locky close means I know he's safe and keeps my *other* urges under control. Contained. For now, at least.

"Okay. But if anything changes, come to me before you do...anything."

"Will do," I mutter, the ache in my chest growing. I have to manage whatever feelings I have for Locky because if I succumb to them, it's not a question of *if* I'll do something stupid, but just how stupid it will be. I'm already in deep. Not over my head just yet, but the water line is rising fast.

As long as things stay exactly as they are and nothing changes...

“So, it’s agreed. Operation Get Locky Laid has commenced,” Tyler announces with a joyous clap.

Huh? What the fuck have I missed?

“You don’t have to do anything you’re not ready for,” Gus says, reading the expression on Locky’s face. “No one’s pressuring you into anything.”

“Of course not,” Tyler says, looking a little flushed since he *is* the one applying the most pressure. “I’m just trying to help in my own awesome way. Do not take anything I say too seriously. I don’t even know where Canada is on a map and apparently it’s a really big country.”

Locky smiles and puts down his beer. “Thanks. I know you guys mean well. And maybe you’re right. Maybe I should get back out there. Nothing serious. Just have some fun.”

A twinge pulls in my chest. I can’t tell if it’s because I’m not sure he means what he’s saying or the thought of him going out and doing things with guys irritates me.

Because it does. It shouldn’t, but the thought of some other bastard getting to be with Locky really fucking irritates me.

“And, look, if you’re worried about anything,” Bishop says, clapping me on my shoulder. “I’m sure Roman here would be happy to be your own personal bodyguard. Keep you safe, and all that.”

Well, duh. I’m already thinking ahead and planning stakeouts at his fuck dates. Do I want him bringing dudes back here to make it easier, or would I rather he not fuck someone else one wall away from me?

Talk about a lose-lose situation.

Everyone’s looking at me, so I muster a smile and say, “Yeah. Whatever you need, Locky.”

Locky stares at me for a moment, an unreadable expression crossing his face before he blinks it away. “Thanks, mate.”

We call it a night not long after that. Some of the guys have to work tomorrow, even though it's a Saturday.

It's a hugging tsunami when we reach the doorway because boy, do these guys like a good, proper bear hug. Fifteen minutes later—I'm exaggerating...*slightly*—everyone is all hugged out and in their cars. Locky and I stand shoulder to shoulder on the porch, waving them off. We wait until the last car is out of sight before heading back inside.

"I'll clean the kitchen," Locky says before I'm able to offer. He lets out a yawn. Then hiccups. "First thing in the morning."

"Cool." I smile. I'll get up earlier and beat him to it.

We reach the hallway that leads to our rooms. I wave my hand in front of myself. "After you."

"No, no." Locky blinks and smiles, his head swaying slightly. "After you."

"I insist."

His lips stretch out even more. "I resist your insistence and must persist in... Fuck. Don't know how to end that."

He's a little tipsy.

I chuckle and let him have this one. "Fine. I'll go first."

"Good. Gimme a chance to check out that fine ass of yours." He claps his hand over his mouth. "Did I just say or think that?"

"Say what?" I play dumb.

"Oh, thank fuck." He sags against the wall, then straightens. "I mean, nothing."

Still chuckling, I make my way down the hall. I can hear Locky's footsteps following close behind me. So close, I can feel his warm breath against my neck. So close, that if I came to a sudden stop—

Locky crashes into me when I do just that.

I turn around slowly.

He hasn't moved back. There's barely a few inches between us, the walls so close to our shoulders it makes the space feel even more confined and the air around us heavy.

Teeming with something.

But what?

Is it because he's a little buzzed?

But then...I feel it, too, and I stuck to water and lemonade all night.

Maybe it's all that sex talk from earlier still lingering in our minds?

Locky's eyes glimmer, then slowly, with great care, as if he's really thinking about what he's doing, he reaches out and cups my cheek into his palm. It doesn't feel like a move fueled by alcohol or inspired by the remnants of a sex conversation.

It feels real.

Genuine.

A thundering *thomp-thomp, thomp-thomp* beats loudly in my ears.

Holding my face, Locky blinks. Then blinks a few more times. Finally, he leans forward, his eyes fluttering shut as he presses his mouth to mine.

His lips are soft, softer than I would've thought a guy's lips would be, and he tastes like beer and pizza and something else I can't quite place.

He's not moving, so I snake an arm around his waist and deepen the kiss, sending a bolt of fire right to my core.

You shouldn't be doing this! my internal alarm bells blare.

Yes you fucking should be! my body answers as I lower my hand, spreading my fingers out as far as they'll stretch over his firm, round ass, and then haul him into me so he can feel the effect he's having on me. Even with way too many layers of fabric between us, I can tell he's just as hard as I am.

I wrap my other hand around the back of his neck, and when he whimpers into my mouth, I'm done for. I've been dreaming about kissing Locky for months, but even my most detailed fantasies about what his lips would be like don't hold a candle to how good this feels.

I drag my fingers against his scalp and gently pull on his hair, forcing his head back, and plunge into his mouth. My tongue shows no mercy as it unleashes a frenzy of swipes inside Locky's mouth, desperate to remember the feel and taste of him forever.

I hope I'm not being too rough with him, but before I can pull back to check, Locky slides a hand between our bodies and starts stroking my bulge.

I almost come on the spot.

"Harder," he murmurs.

I don't know what he means so I ramp up on all fronts. My hand squeezes into his ass harder. My other hand pulls his hair harder. And my tongue dominates his mouth with a torpedo of swirls, I'm amazed Locky's still able to breathe.

I continue mauling him until I finally need to come up for air. I pull away, and there's a string of saliva between us. The skin around Locky's plump lips is red raw, his mouth is parted, and his eyes look like he's just had the best fucking kiss of his life.

I know I have.

LOCKY

Monty is speechless. Open-mouthed, but speechless.

Which, actually, isn't saying all that much. He's British, and closed-off in that typical British way. It doesn't mean he doesn't care, it just means he doesn't know how to express how he cares.

He started at the clinic after me, so we bonded because we're the two newbies, and despite the stiff upper lip thing he's got going on, I've taken a liking to him. Plus, since getting together with Jeremy, he's opening up a whole lot more.

If we happen to be on a morning shift together, and the stars align and we have a break in appointments at the same time, we like to grab a coffee together from Daly's bakery just down the block from the clinic. Best baked treats in all of Brookhaven.

"Wh-wh-what's wrong, M-monty?" Jeremy asks, bringing over our two coffees, and two freshly baked cinnamon rolls because kissing burns calories.

Correction, getting kissed by Roman Turner burns calories. Shreds them, in fact, until they raise their hands in the air—because yes, calories have spindly little arms—back away slowly, and promise never to return.

"I'm just surprised," Monty says when he's able to find his voice.

"M-m-mind if I-I j-join you, or w-w-w-w-w—"

Jeremy shakes his head in frustration.

Monty takes his hand. "It's okay, baby," he says soothingly.

Jeremy flashes me a look, and I simply smile. "Mate, take all the time you need."

I can see the *thank you* in Jeremy's eyes as he takes a breath and tries again. "Or w-w-would you like s-some privacy?"

“You’re more than welcome to join us.” I push out the spare chair at our table with my foot. “I was just telling Monty that Roman and I kissed last night.”

Jeremy mustn’t have heard me over the noise of the bakery because as he sits down, his expression doesn’t change.

He looks at me and grins. “F-f-finally.”

“What do you mean *finally*?”

Jeremy and Monty look at each other, then at me, then back to each other. “Do you want to tell him or should I?”

Jeremy grins. “You c-c-can. I’ll s-sit b-b-back and w-watch-ch.”

“Sit back and watch what? What’s going on, guys?”

I dig into my cinnamon roll while I wait for Monty to find his words. “Well, I don’t quite know how to put this delicately —”

“No need to be delicate,” I say around a mouthful of exquisite baked goodness. “Just spit it out.”

Monty looks aghast that I’m talking with my mouth full, but quickly recovers and says, “I believe the term kids these days use is...eye fucking.”

I almost choke. “Huh?”

Jeremy cackles away as Monty explains. “Every single time you and Roman have been in the same room, he, well, eye fucks you. I’ve never seen anything quite like it. Have you?” he asks, looking Jeremy’s way.

Jeremy thinks about it. “Nope.”

Okay. So, this isn’t new information to me. I’d noticed Roman checking me out on multiple occasions. But I had no idea other people had picked up on it, too.

“I think the fellow may have feelings for you,” Monty says.

“He d-d-did ask-k you to m-move in w-w-with him.”

I'm about to say he was helping me out, but stop myself. I haven't told the guys about Bailey changing the locks because I'm too damn embarrassed. I've never had my life fall to shit like this before, and it's not a nice thing to go through. I know no one would judge me for it, but I just feel...ashamed, I guess.

"So what should I do about Roman?" I ask them. "What's the best way to handle this?"

They exchange a knowing smile. Monty tips his head toward Jeremy, as if to say, *You be the one to tell him.*

"Th-there's-s-s only on-ne thing to d-do. You have t-t-to talk to Rom-m-man."



I give it a good two, maybe three, minutes before racing to the back door. I pry the curtain back and peer through the glass. The sun is fading but hasn't quite set yet, so the sky is bathed in a pretty orange.

But nope. No sign of him out there.

Roman snuck out a few minutes ago, and this time, I'm determined to catch him smoking. It's bad enough that he wants to poison himself, but why is he hiding it?

There's also a chance he isn't smoking, and if that's the case, I want to find out what is getting him out of the house every few hours. It's been driving me mad.

Then there's also the small matter of last night's kiss we need to address.

Jeremy was right. Roman and I need to talk about it.

Before speaking with him and Monty this morning, I thought it had been just a kiss.

An incredible, body-tingling, toe-curling, definitely top five—possibly top three—kiss.

Okay. It was the best kiss I've ever had in my entire life. No other kiss in my life comes close to it.

Not my first kiss with Garrett Collins on a sweaty, summer day in the science lab after school in grade ten.

Not drunkenly making out with a super-hot German dude my mates dared me to pash on a boys' trip to Bali.

Not even my wedding kiss with Bailey, which obviously had to be somewhat chaste and measured. But not even then, at what was supposed to be the pinnacle of romantic moments, did I feel so *wanted*.

Kissing Roman felt like he would tear down the fucking Amazon jungle with his bare hands just to get to me. I felt like a prized possession. It was intense. A little scary...and I really fucking liked it.

But *after* speaking with Jeremy and Monty, and them both saying they've suspected for months that Roman might have a thing for me, it changes everything. And it makes me view the kiss in a whole new light.

It's one thing to check someone out, to be attracted or interested in a person. Actually having feelings takes it to a whole new level.

Does Roman have feelings for me? Is that why he asked me to stay here with him? Was that why he was okay when I sprang the kiss on him?

So. Many. Questions.

Questions I intend on getting answered very, very shortly. Right after I discover what he's up to.

Since I can't see Roman anywhere out back, I let myself out and quietly scuttle along the patio. I poke my head around the side of the house. There's no sign of him there.

I walk around the front. The yard is clear.

So is the street.

Where can he be?

As I look around I notice there's a light on in one of the rooms in the shelter building closest to the house. Huh. A staff member must have forgotten to turn it off. I head over to it, darting my head about, still on the lookout for Roman.

Once inside, I can see that the light is coming from the third room on the left. That's a private, temperature-controlled room reserved for the most vulnerable animals, usually those who are tiny or have suffered the worst kind of abuse.

When I reach the door, I come to a complete halt, ducking behind the wall so that Roman doesn't see me.

Not that he'd notice me, or even if the world was on fire, given how much attention he's paying to the...the... I lean around the doorframe and squint to get a better look.

Is that a litter of kittens?

I strain so I can hear what he's saying to them, his voice lower and gentler than I've ever heard it.

"You're so well behaved, Joey. Did you enjoy your meal? I have to say, I'm very pleased with how you're coming along. You're even looking at me. I count that as progress. We're so on the way to becoming besties."

Roman rolls his eyes as if Joey actually answered him. "Okay, maybe besties is a stretch. For now. But don't underestimate me. I'm gonna keep working on you until you practically beg to be my friend."

Just as he says it, another kitten wobbles over to him. Roman brushes his thumb over the kitty's back and they let out a tiny purr. "See, Chandler here is in the running for best friend status, too. So, what I'm saying is, don't sleep on me for too long. I'm not gonna stay single on the bestie friendship market forever."

He drops his voice even more so I can't make out what he's saying as he continues to feed and fuss over the litter.

I lean against the wall, my heart flipping, as I take in the sight of him huddled over the table, speaking softly and handling the kittens with such love and care, like he's afraid he'll break them.

The light falls over him, lighting up one side of his body. It really accentuates the contrast in size between him and the tiny balls of fluff he's fawning over. He looks like a giant.

A gentle giant.

A gentle giant who's made some mistakes in the past but is making up for it and rebuilding his life.

Who caught me in one of my worst moments, didn't judge me for what I was about to do, and then offered me a roof over my head and stubbornly refuses to let me pay rent.

Who kissed me so fiercely last night that my skin pebbles with goosebumps at the mere memory.

The man who's currently holding a ball of fluff in his massive hand, with his head cocked, and those dark intense eyes of his roaming over me.

Oh. Shit. When did that happen?

"Locky. What are you doing here?"

I step in from the hallway and answer in a hushed tone so as to not startle the kittens. "I thought you were smoking."

Roman frowns. "Smoking?"

"Yeah. That that's why you were leaving the house so often. To sneak in a ciggie."

He chuckles, shaking his head, and I'm not sure whether it's because my assumption was so off-base, or because I'm pretty sure Americans don't use the word *ciggie* for *cigarette*.

He lowers the jet-black kitten back into the pen, then comes over to me. "Maybe I am." He juts his chin out, grinning. "Maybe all this is a ruse to cover up my awful, stinking habit."

I smooth a palm down the front of his gray Henley before fisting the material and pulling him into me. I sniff a few times. "Nah. You're clean."

His grin grows into a smile. "You sure about that? I could be a sneaky sonofabitch." His eyes drop to my lips. "You might need to check. Thoroughly."

I've still got his shirt in my hand, and I can feel his heart beating through the fabric. I quirk a brow. "Might just have to do that."

I tug him forward, and we kiss. The flashback to yesterday's crazy kiss is immediate. But this time, I want to go slow. Savor it. Last night feels like a blur. I want to make this moment last longer.

I slide my tongue into his mouth, and as my head starts bobbing, I sweep up and down, left and right, round and around. I want to commit every little detail about him to memory, since this is probably just a one-off thing.

Okay. A two-off thing.

Our tongues continue tangling, and as tempted as I am to draw even closer to him, I don't, fearing that if I do, I won't be able to stop myself from going further.

I *want* to go further, but we can't. I don't want to ruin our new friendship, and there's also the not-so-small matter of Roman being straight. A straight guy who knows how to kiss.

He draws his head back slightly and leans his forehead against mine. "So, did I pass?"

"Pass?"

"You were checking for signs of smoking."

I loop my hands around his neck and smile. "Oh, Roman. Cute that you think that's what this is."

"So your plan was to kiss me all along?" His eyes sparkle.

"Totally," I say. "And you fell for all of it."

"All of it?"

"Yeah. You know, first I got kicked out of my house because I knew you'd offer for me to move in with you. Then I set about seducing you. You think I'm naturally that much of a slob?"

He strokes his chin. "Mess as a seduction technique. Hmm. Never heard of it before. Must be an Aussie thing."

“All the best things are.” I peck him on the tip of his nose. “Then I impress you with my crazy culinary skills.”

“Those tacos were pretty good.” They were okay at best, but I let it slide.

“And then I casually mention fucking myself with a dildo last night to seal the deal.”

“Oh. You think that’s what sealed the deal?”

“Well, isn’t it? I saw your eyes bug out when I said that.”

“Baby.” Roman sweeps the side of my face with his long fingers. “The deal was sealed the moment I laid my eyes on you.”

I blink. Then blink twice more, trying to figure out if he’s pulling my leg or not. His eyes stay on me, dark and unflinching. There’s no smile. No laugh. No *I gotcha* coming.

He’s serious.

“You mean the time we met at the shelter?”

He nods his head once. “You were married. I was straight. I knew nothing could happen.”

So Monty and Jeremy were right. Roman *does* have a thing for me. And now that I’m no longer married...

“Wait. But aren’t you straight?”

“Maybe. Don’t know. Don’t care.” His eyes dip to my just-been-kissed mouth. “I like you. But...”

He pulls away. Takes a few steps away from me. “I’m sorry. It’s too much. I’m coming on too strong.” He runs a hand over his beard. “This is what I always do. Fuck.”

I close the gap between us, wondering what he means by that last remark. “You’re not coming on too strong. You’re fine. But...”

“You’re not ready,” he finishes for me, looking over at the kittens.

“No. I wasn’t going to say that.”

He turns his head slowly until he meets my gaze again.
“What were you going to say?”

“Look, there probably is some truth to what you said. I’m not ready for a relationship or any sort of commitment. Look how much convincing I needed last night just to get on board with finding a fuck buddy.” I offer him a reassuring smile. “But hearing you say you like me isn’t the worst thing in the world.”

Roman nods, his jaw still tight, and then his gaze drifts over to the kittens.

I count six of them, adorable little things. A couple are asleep but most of them are on their feet, ambling about.

“Four weeks?” I guess.

“Five.”

“When did they get brought in?”

“Three weeks ago.”

“And you’ve been looking after them all this time?”

“I take night shift. Bishop can’t afford overnight staff. These guys don’t have anyone.” His throat bobs with emotion. “Someone had to do something.”

Roman’s normally sharp eyes are softer. He may look like a tough guy, but he’s really a total softie underneath.

“You went above and beyond,” I tell him. “With these guys... Just like you did with me.”

Roman smiles uncomfortably, like he doesn’t know how to take the compliment. We stare at the litter in silence for a while.

“Wanna know what the hardest thing about all of this is?” I whisper to not disturb the kittens.

“Tell me.”

“For me, getting married was like crossing the finish line. I’d run the race. It was done. I was out of the game. Now, my marriage is over, and I’m back at the starting blocks. I have to

do everything all over again. Find the guy. Date the guy. Run extensive background checks on the guy.”

Because fool me once...

I lean into Roman. His body stiffens for a moment before he swings one of his big arms around me.

He probably thinks I’m acting like a whiny child. Wouldn’t be half wrong, either, but I can’t help it. This is how I feel. The thought of starting from scratch and doing everything all over again is too much for me.

He presses into my bicep. “I got you. Whatever you need, I’m here for you.”

“What I need, according to my friends, is a fuck buddy,” my stupid mouth says.

I rip myself away from him, shaking my head frantically. “Sorry, sorry, sorry. That just came out of nowhere.”

A throaty chuckle comes out of him. “So this isn’t just an extension of your plan, then? Accidentally-on-purpose blurt out that you want me to be your fuck buddy.”

“Jesus, no, Roman. I’m serious. I did not plan this. You have to bel—”

The sounds of deep, rumbling laughter stop me from finishing that sentence.

“Oh, Locky. Cute that you think I’d let you get away with that,” he says when he composes himself. “I was planning on offering to be your wingman, should you decide to put yourself back out there. But I’m officially rescinding that offer. I’ve got something better in mind.”

I lift a brow. “Yeah?”

“How about I be your wingman...with benefits?”

I frown. “What the hell’s a wingman with benefits?”

ROMAN

What the fuck *is* a wingman with benefits?

Beats me. I just made it up on the spot.

But I can't tell him that. Need some time to think.

"Here." I scoop Joey up and pass him over to Locky. "Meet Joey. We're best friends, but he doesn't know it yet."

The stalling tactic works. Locky temporarily loses interest in our conversation as he lifts his hand to inspect Joey more closely. In a sign of loyalty to me, Joey appears very unimpressed with the incredibly attractive Aussie currently scrunching his nose and baby talking to him in an incredibly attractive Aussie accent.

Joey and I *will* be besties one day. Mark my words.

Okay. Back to the more pressing matter. What the hell am I offering Locky?

A wingman with benefits?

What. The. Fuck?

Now I'm just making words up.

It's better than being a wingman, sure, because I can't think of a more hellier hell than helping Locky score with other dudes.

So maybe if we just scrap the wingman part and focus on the benefits...

Locky's light blue eyes flick up to me. "What are you smiling about?"

Oh, nothing. *Just me being an Einstein-level genius.* Can't say that out loud, either.

"Just like seeing two of my favorite guys together."

Locky gently returns Joey to the enclosure and turns to me with a smile. "I'm one of your favorite guys?"

"You're heading that way. Might need you to make more of a mess in the kitchen or leave some wet towels on the bathroom floor to really seal the deal."

His light blue eyes sparkle with amusement. “Told ya it works.”

“*You* work.” I latch onto his wrists. “I like you. And if you don’t like the thought of starting over with anyone, or fucking some dude you don’t know, don’t. Use me instead.”

“*Use* you?”

“Don’t mean it in a bad way. I’m offering. And willing.”
Soooo fucking willing.

His expression changes from playful to something more serious. His eyes drill into me. “You’re not messing around, are you? You really mean this?”

“I do.”

He studies me. “Just to be clear, we’re talking about sex, right?”

“Oh. Wait. Shit. No. I thought we were still talking about housework.”

He swats me across the chest.

I grin. “Yes. I’m talking about sex.”

“With me?”

I glance down at the litter. “Locky, these guys might only be five weeks old but even they know I’m talking about sex with you.”

He looks down briefly at the kittens before pinning me with a look. “Why?”

“Why not?”

He frowns. Okay. Bad answer. I try again. “You need a fuck buddy. We live together. And I’m...”

Desperately infatuated with you.

Another thing I can’t voice, so instead I go with, “I’m keen to...explore.”

“Being with a guy?”

I nod.

“Would it be your first time with a man?”

“Yes.”

Locky takes a deep breath and starts pacing, like he’s running it over in his mind. I’m not offended. It’s a big thing to offer, and he’s right, he didn’t seem all that keen on the idea of a fuck buddy last night. I suspected he went along with it to appease the others, and I’m starting to think I was right.

“I can’t offer anything...emotional,” he says, returning to my side.

“Who’s talking about anything emotional?” I crack a smile, but for some reason, Locky only deepens his stare.

If I were the paranoid sort, I’d be starting to think he can see through my lie. But the only person I’ve ever spoken with about my feelings is Bishop, and there’s no way he’d ever tell anyone else. Well, apart from Fulton, and I trust him as much as I trust my brother, so I’ve got no reason to suspect Locky’s found out about my true feelings for him. So why is he studying me so intently?

“Just sex, then. Nothing else?” he confirms.

“Pure fornication,” I say, widening my smile.

“When?”

I glance down at my wrist even though I’m not wearing a watch, then dart my eyes over to the enclosure. “Now? I have to be back here in a few hours for feeding. Think that’s enough time?”

“A few hours?” Locky cackles. “Someone’s pretty confident.”

“I got game. I can back it up.”

“Ya reckon?”

I laugh. “Yeah. I *reckon*,” I repeat back in my best Aussie accent.

He shakes his head, eyes glimmering. “Ironic, isn’t it?”

“What’s that?”

“I came out here thinking I’d bust you with a ciggie in your mouth...”

“When the only thing in my mouth is going to be your cock?” I finish for him.

“Yeah.” He lets out a laugh, nodding. “Can’t believe we’re actually doing this.”

I smile. That makes two of us.



“So, what would you like to do?” Locky asks, closing the door to my bedroom behind him.

We’d talked on the way back to the house whose room we should do the deed in. Then Locky made me swear never to use the term *do the deed* ever again.

I’ve only ever snuck a few passing glances into his bedroom whenever he’s left the door open, but it was enough to let me know that if we wanted to have sex on a clean surface, it’d have to be in my room. Because even Locky’s bed is messy and full of whatever he tips out of his messenger bag when he gets home from the clinic. Plus clothes. Towels. Even a cereal bowl one time. I’m *not* joking.

“What do you mean?” I ask as his gaze flits around my room.

It’s not much. A bed. A dresser. A wardrobe. But at least it’s neat and tidy.

“What are you into? Top or bottom?”

I glance over at my bed. It’s a queen, not a bunk. Only has one level. What the hell is he asking me?

He sees my blank face and asks, “Do you know what those words mean?”

I shake my head, my cheeks flushed. “I just want to fuck you. Not up with all the latest lingo.”

“Lingo. Right.” Locky licks his lips, walks right up to me, and plants a kiss on the tip of my nose. “You’re cute when you’re clueless. Top is the insertive partner, bottom is the receptive partner,” he explains.

“I knew that,” I lie. “Which one are you?”

“Bottom all the way.”

Right. The fucking himself with the dildo. Makes sense. I have absolutely zero inclination to ever do that.

So there are dudes who are tops and dudes who are bottoms. Will you look at that, you really do learn something new every day.

“I’m a top,” I tell him.

“Great.”

He nods. “Okay.” Then looks at me.

“Okay.” I chuckle. “This just got weird.”

“It did, didn’t it? How do we make it not weird?”

Think I know a way. Acting on instinct alone, I pull Locky in close and press my lips to his. It still surprises me how soft they feel, and for a moment, I wonder how sex with a man will be different from sex with a woman.

That thought—*all thoughts*—dissipate when Locky pulls back slightly, locks his eyes on mine, and says with a grin, “That’ll do it.”

He crashes his lips into mine and this time, it’s game on. The kiss grows, becomes this frenzied, desperate thing. My hands find his hair, his shoulders, his ass. Mouths fused, we start tearing clothes off each other.

One early observation? This early part of proceedings is so much easier without having to deal with bras. Those clasps are finicky as fuck for a guy with big hands.

I get Locky shirtless, pantless, and breathing heavily in no time. I drag my hand down his neck, cupping his meaty pec, kneading the flesh like dough. His eyelids flutter, and he makes an approving moan.

He latches onto my hands and walks me back until my calves hit the side of my bed. Sliding his hands down my pecs, he traces the circular tattoo on my chest before tugging at the waistband of my briefs. “May I have the honor?” he asks, smiling.

“You may.”

I’m smiling, too, as he slides my underwear down my legs, and I step out of them. Locky sinks to his knees as I perch myself on the edge of the bed. His face is inches away from my erection. He looks up, and there’s hunger in his eyes, but there’s also something else.

I thumb his cheek delicately. “What is it?”

“First time,” he mumbles, and it takes me a few seconds to register what he means.

I’m his first time since his marriage ended.

“Tell me what you need,” I say. “We can stop if you like?”

He curls his fingers around the base of my cock and gives a tight pump. “No. I want this.” His light blue eyes find mine again. “I want *you*.”

And with that, Locky lowers his mouth over me, and my eyes bug out as I watch my entire dick disappear into his mouth in one long swallow.

Progress update? That will go down in history as the hottest thing I’ve seen in my life.

Locky starts bobbing on my cock. My hands fall to his broad shoulders, my thumbs finding the sensitive spot between his shoulder and neck and pressing in. Locky looks up and smiles, letting me know it feels good. Bet it doesn’t feel half as good as what he’s doing to me.

I close my eyes and let the moment fully sink in. I’ve fantasized about this for months. I never thought it’d actually come to pass. But I couldn’t bear the thought of Locky fucking other guys, and honestly, he wasn’t all that into it, either. This works for both of us.

And like we said, this is purely a physical thing. Feelings are banned. Or, in my case, any further feelings. I have to cap whatever Locky makes me feel at this. Wingman with benefits. Because if I allow myself to fall any deeper, there's only one way it will end, and that's badly. For everyone involved.

I have a tendency to get protective. Some might say possessive. Others might say I go ape-shit crazy and get overtaken by a blinding-hot fury when someone I care about, someone I love, is treated badly. I don't want Locky getting hurt by association.

I hook my thumbs under Locky's collarbones and gently guide him off me. My saliva-slicked cock lands on my stomach with a heavy *thwack*.

"What are you doing?" Locky asks.

Not sure if there's any lingo or a more appropriate way to say what I want, so I just come right out with it. "Wanna fuck you."

Locky's face lights up. "Was hoping you'd say that. You got supplies?"

Supplies? Shit. Do I?

I scooch up the bed and rummage through the top drawer of my bedside table. I spin around, proudly waving a condom.

"Great. What about lube?"

"Lube?"

"Yeah. How do you think we're going to fuck?"

"Crap." I peer back into the drawer, praying for lube to magically appear since I know I don't have any.

Locky crawls up the bed and places his chin on my shoulder. "You don't have any, do you?"

"I don't." I turn my head and our noses bump. "What do we do?"

"I have an idea." Locky leaps off the bed and races out of the room. He's still in his underwear, and man, if I thought his

pecs were meaty, they've got nothing on his butt. Always been an ass man, so with Locky, I'm in for a feast.

He returns a few moments later, holding out a large bottle of—

“Coconut oil,” he announces, flashing one of his big smiles.

“Isn't that for cooking?”

“Yes. But it's also a good, and safe, substitute for lube. Unless you're allergic, or you don't like the smell?”

It can smell like rotting fish for all I care. As long as it allows us to have sex with him, I'm in. “I'm good.”

“Great.”

Locky places the bottle on the nightstand, then strips out of his underwear. “What?” he asks, when he notices me staring at him. “Don't tell me you've never seen a naked guy before.”

I shake my head.

“Not even in a locker room? Or Bishop?”

I continue shaking my head and throw in a vomit gesture since picturing my brother naked is literally the last thing I want to be doing right now.

“Wow. So I'm your first...everything?”

“You sure are, baby.”

“And whaddya reckon?”

Locky clasps his hands behind his head and gives a little shimmy shake from side to side, grinning like an idiot and making me laugh.

“You looked fucking hot until you did that.”

He laughs, too, stops dancing, and joins me on the bed.

“Thank you for this,” he says, stroking the side of my face. “I'm having a really good time.”

I bring my lips to his and murmur, “Oh, Locky. You ain't seen nothing yet.”

LOCKY

People say it's not the size that matters, it's how you use it.

With all due respect, I beg to differ.

Or at the very least, add a caveat.

Sure. Size isn't everything, but if you've got it *and* you know how to use it, you've hit the holy grail of all that's sweet and pure in this world.

Roman's not only bigger than Bailey, but Jesus, the man knows how to use it, surging into me with deep, powerful thrusts before pulling all the way out—I'm talking *alllllll* the way out, not even leaving the tip in—and then slamming into me again until his balls squish against my ass.

Over.

And over.

And over again.

The best bit?

He doesn't take his eyes off me the entire time.

I'm lying on my back, his muscular, sweat-sheened arms pinned on either side of me, and those intensely rich, dark eyes bore into my soul while his cock attempts to break my hole.

Can't say I ever saw my night ending like *this*.

I thought I'd bust him hiding in a corner somewhere near the house, smoking. We'd have an awkward conversation about that where I'd pretend I was cool with it even though I'd secretly be hating that he'd taken up such an unhealthy habit. Then we'd have an even more awkward conversation about last night's kiss, which we'd put down to too much alcohol and the guys filling my head with all sorts of ideas about fuck buddies and whatnot. Things would be a little weird for a day or two and then we'd resume our lives as normal.

Me making him overnight oats for breakfast.

Him cleaning up the kitchen, the living room, the dining room, and any other room after I'd been in it.

Us not seeing anywhere near enough of each other despite living together.

But instead, we're on his bed, and I am copping the fucking of a lifetime.

And with his next powerful thrust, Roman hits the motherfucking jackpot.

Prostate, be thy name.

"Holy fuuuuuuck!" I cry out, as an explosion of heat erupts in my chest and spreads to every corner of my body, from the top of my head to the tips of my toes.

"Like that?" He's smirking, like he already knows the answer.

I close my eyes and concentrate, clenching my channel with all my might. I open my eyes to see his eyes have gone even darker, the muscles in his neck and jaw straining.

"Like *that*?" I ask, smirking because I *do* already know the answer.

"Fuck yes." He moves his arms, cupping my pecs in his oversized hands as he continues driving into me.

For his first time having man sex, Roman's taking to it like a pro. He's not showing any sign of nerves. He's having fun. *We're* having fun.

That's one of the things I like most. We're not taking anything too seriously.

Don't have lube? No worries, we'll use coconut oil, instead. Never seen a dude naked before? Here's a little dorky naked dance for you to remember.

Sex with Bailey was never like this. It was always on his terms. He had very specific preferences, and I just went with it. Come to think of it, that pretty much describes my entire sex life up until this point.

But with Roman, it's different. Lighthearted, but at the same time, there's no mistaking how much he wants this. Wants *me*.

He's squeezing my pecs so tight I'm sure there'll be fingermarks there tomorrow, but I don't care. No, scratch that. I *want* there to be marks there tomorrow. I may not have any tattoos like he does, but I want something to remember this moment by.

Speaking of tats, now that he's naked, my eyes can feast on the glorious ink covering his body. I want to ask if the ultimate goal is to get all the currently separate pieces to connect, but it's a little hard to get the words out while getting railed. Seriously, the man's hip-thrusting game is out of this world.

"Getting close," Roman spits out. Literally. Little spittles fly out the corners of his mouth, and it has no right being as hot as it is.

I reach for my cock and begin fisting it. Roman looks down and grunts. "So fucking hot."

He straightens, hooking his hands under my knees. His cock hits another part of me, setting off a series of head-spinning tingles.

My vision goes wonky, as the first rope of come shoots onto my chest. Roman drives into me even deeper, lets out an almighty roar, succumbing to the pleasure overtaking his entire body.

Once we're both done, he gently lowers my legs, placing them on the bed, then slowly pulls out of me. The contrast from full to empty hits me like a sharp sting, but I close my eyes, breathe, and remind myself of my own cardinal rule. This was just physical. Nothing more.

My post-sex brain is obviously confusing that look of fire in Roman's eyes, and the way he possessed me without suppressing me, for something else. When it's not.

This is just good sex. Plain and simple.

Roman's peering up at me from my stomach.

"You okay down there?" I mumble.

His eyes sparkle. "I will be."

And then he proceeds to lick his way up my stomach to my chest, collecting my release on his tongue as he goes. When he reaches my pecs, he swipes the come onto my nipple, then squeezes the flesh to elevate it slightly, before licking me clean. Yep, that image is going straight into the spank bank.

“Now I’m good,” he murmurs with a smile as he slides up next to me.

We lie in silence for a few minutes, me on my back, Roman tucked in next to me, my hands lazily combing through his hair.

“One more thing,” I say. “Do you mind if we don’t tell anyone about this?”

“Why?” His cheeks rise and press into my neck. “You want me to be your dirty little secret?”

“What? No.” I lift him off me so I can look at him. “That’s not it, at all.”

“Relax. I was kidding.” He’s grinning. “Although, for the record, I’d have no problem being your dirty little whatever you want me to be.”

His eyes are gleaming but, just like with what he said, there’s something more there. Another layer. But I’m too blissed out to unpack it right now.

“It’s not like that,” I say. “I just need to process things. On my own. In my own time. The vet gang can be a little...”

“Intense?” he suggests.

“Yeah. Exactly.

He swoops down and kisses me. “No worries. I can keep our arrangement to myself.”



I’m still floating the next day as I make my way to work.

Roman and I had sex.

And not just a little sex, we went the whole hog.

And there's a lot to like about his long, thick, American hog.

I didn't realize how much I needed to be with someone like that. Someone who I could unleash with and have some fun with. Someone who made me feel special and important. Someone who could fuck me until I felt I was going to split apart at the seams and then call me baby and shower me with tenderness.

Last night also revealed to me the full extent of the funk I'd fallen into, how bruised my ego is—was?—after what Bailey did, and how completely and utterly amazing it feels to be with someone who makes me feel like I matter.

Because he does. Roman makes me feel more wanted than anyone ever has.

And there's something about him that screams nurturer, too. You wouldn't know it by looking at him, but he cares deeply. Whether it's helping a guy he barely knows who's been kicked out of his home, or sacrificing sleep to look after an abandoned litter of kittens, Roman can't see something bad and not do something. He's the type of guy who will step up and help out.

The only tricky part is going to be making sure we keep things purely at a physical level. Like I told him, I'm really not ready for anything more. Even though my marriage is dead, and I have no love left for Bailey, the divorce is still happening. I need to get through that, process it, and only then will I have the bandwidth to get emotionally involved with someone.

But it felt so damn nice to be held. To fall asleep together. Spend the night pressed against a warm body. Wake up next to someone. It's crazy how much I miss those little things.

But nope. Roman and I are keeping this strictly sexual. That's the deal. Falling asleep in his bed was probably a mistake. One I can't repeat since I can't go around telling him

not to get attached while I do exactly that. That's totally hypocritical.

My next-day post-sex buzz dies the second my eyes land on the person leaning against a light pole a few doors down from the entrance to the clinic.

“What are you doing here?”

Bailey pushes off the pole and stalks over to me, his cold, gray eyes assessing me. “Thought you and I should talk.”

“I have to work.” I tip my head toward the bright Vet Shop Boys sign on the front of the building.

“You're early. You're always early. Let's get a coffee.”

I hate that he knows I always come to work a good half hour before my shift is scheduled to start so that I can chat with the other vets and see what's been happening, check in on any animals we have in care, and of course, catch up with Harmony to get all the latest goss.

“I passed a bakery a few doors down.”

“No,” I say firmly, registering the flicker of surprise in his eyes.

Bailey's not used to me contradicting him. I always went along with whatever he wanted. Not anymore. And I do *not* want to go to my friend's bakery with him.

“We can talk here,” I tell him flatly, determined not to budge on this.

“You're being stupid, but fine, whatever.”

I bite my tongue and let that remark slide. If I answer back, this will devolve into an insult-slinging match. He's obviously got something to tell me otherwise he wouldn't be here. The sooner I find out what it is, the sooner we can both be on our merry ways.

Besides, I just scored a win. Sure, it's small, but I'll take it. I stood my ground. Probably for the first time ever with him.

“I want the house,” Bailey says, in that mildly pissed-off tone he uses when dealing with unpleasant matters.

“Yeah. Kinda gathered that the day you changed the locks and threw me out,” I retort.

He takes out his phone and starts tapping away as he says, “No. I mean, I’m *taking* the house.”

“You can’t do that. We both put money into it, and we’ve both been paying off the mortgage. The fair thing to do is to sell it and split the—”

He lifts the phone up, showing me the screen. It’s playing a video.

Of me.

Masturbating.

“What the hell is that?” I yank his arm down so that no passersby inadvertently cop an eyeful.

I’m so confused. I’ve never taken a video of myself like that, but...

Oh, shit.

No.

No no *no*!

I look up at him and his expression confirms it. The motherfucker secretly recorded me.

A lot of our relationship was long distance so we’d often do video calls and jerk off together. I had *no idea* he was recording me. He never once brought it up, and even if he had, I would’ve refused.

Well...actually, I probably would have gone along with it, like I did with everything else he wanted, because I’m a fucking idiot who cares more about making other people happy than I do myself.

But that’s not the point.

The point is he recorded me in an intimate moment without my knowledge or consent. That has to be illegal, surely?

“We can split everything else, but I’m taking the house. And if you fight me on it, I might accidentally upload this onto a few porn sites. I’m sure plenty of people would get off to a sexy Aussie jerking off, fucking himself with a dildo, and doing whatever other nasty things I made you do for me.”

I shake my head. “You asshole,” I grit out, my jaw clenched so tight I can barely speak as it hits me that he didn’t just record me once—which would’ve been bad enough—he just admitted to doing it multiple times.

He grins back, like he’s totally unaffected. “The quality is amazing, too. Good thing I always had the latest version of the iPhone.”

“Shame you weren’t smart enough to lock your watch,” I begin, then change my mind when I hear what I’m saying. “Actually, scratch that. I’m *grateful* I discovered who you are now. Glad I didn’t waste any more time with you.”

He doesn’t say anything in response, but he makes the weird clucky sound he always makes whenever he thinks he’s won.

He claps me on the shoulder as he walks by. “Think carefully about your next move. You can make this easy on yourself, or you can make it hard.” He snickers at his own pathetic joke. “But if you fight me on this, I will make your life miserable. *Mate.*” There’s nothing but venom as he spits that word out.

I jerk my shoulder to get away from the slimeball. How could I have married this guy?

He walks off, and I heave out a long breath.

I knew Bailey had it in him to be nasty, so I shouldn’t be surprised he’d stoop to something so low. Yet I am.

And I’m hurt, too.

It’s the shittiest feeling when someone you swore to love and spend the rest of your life with treats you so badly.

What the hell am I going to do now?

ROMAN

“There you are,” Locky says, stepping into the room and quickly closing the door behind him.

“I believe the greeting you’re looking for is, *Honey, I’m home*. Isn’t that right, Joey?”

I look down at the little fella, who I’m holding in my palm, and yeah, he totally backs me up with a nod. “Whoa,” I whisper. “Breakthrough moment for us, little dude. I think we’re finally friends.”

Locky’s eyes shift between me and the kitten a few times. “Should I be worried?”

“Nah. You’re just witnessing the start of a beautiful friendship,” I say, carefully placing the little fella back down again. I stroke him with my thumb. Correction, he *lets* me stroke him with my thumb before sauntering away into the corner and curling himself into a ball to drift off to sleep.

I did it. I finally made progress with Joey. I’m smiling big, but my good mood dies the second I take a proper look at Locky. “What’s happened?”

He lets out a tired sigh. “Bailey happened.”

Immediately, anger rises within me, and that’s before I find out what the dickhead has done to Locky. I try to rein in my temper. Don’t want to scare the little ones. Or Locky, for that matter.

Thankfully, I’ve finished feeding the kittens and completed poop patrol, too.

“Come on,” I say to Locky. “Let’s get out of here.”

We walk the short distance from the building to the house in silence. I keep glancing over at him, trying to get a read on his mood. All I can see is that he looks like he’s been through the wringer, but that doesn’t tell me shit about why. Or what specifically Bailey has done to him.

No matter what he tells me, I have to try to stay calm. Yeah. I don’t like my chances. I was already overprotective of Locky before we had sex.

But now?

Now I'll tear that motherfucker ex's limbs off one at a time if I find out he's done anything to my Locky.

Yes, I'm aware I called him *my* Locky.

No, I'm not going to walk that back.

It is what it is.

I may not be able to have him in real life, but in my head, we're already married and raising so many kitties together we're giving Fulton a run for his money as the cat daddy champion of Brookhaven.

But back to the real world.

We step inside and head for the living room. Locky's messenger bag is on the floor, tipped over with shit spilling out of it, his coat is draped over the back of the couch, and vet magazines and paperwork from the clinic are scattered all over the table. I'm sure I tidied the place before leaving for work this morning.

We sit down at opposite ends of the same couch. Locky folds his legs underneath himself. I cross my leg, resting an ankle over my knee.

"Take your time," I say in what I hope is a calm tone. "And you don't have to tell me anything you don't want to."

"Thanks." Averting his gaze, Locky takes a deep breath and says, "Bailey wants the house and he's prepared to release intimate videos he recorded of me without my knowledge or consent as blackmail to get it."

Stay calm. Stay calm. Stay calm.

"Please tell me you're kidding."

Locky looks at me and smiles sadly. "Wish I were."

I pound my fist into my palm without consciously realizing that's what I'm doing until I notice Locky watching me. I stop. "Sorry. Reflex... What are you going to do?"

“Lawyer up, I s’pose. I’d been hoping we could avoid going down this path, that we could reach an amicable agreement ourselves. Appears not. I spoke with Noah today. Haze’s aunt is apparently a pit bull of a lawyer, so he’s going to get me a meeting with her.”

“I am so sorry you’re going through this.”

“Thanks.” Locky drops his head. “I feel like this is all my fault.”

“How is this your fault?”

“Okay. Maybe not this particular thing, but stuff in general. I went along with so much stuff to please him, I ended up losing myself.”

I don’t know what to say to that, so I stay quiet.

“When I saw Bailey this morning, he wanted to go talk in the bakery, and I said no. Then I felt good for saying no. Proud of myself. Like, yay for me, I’m finally using my voice and finally saying what I want and don’t want. Over a fucking bakery. It’s pitiful.”

“It’s not pitiful,” I growl, moving closer to him. Not wanting to invade his personal space too much, I place my hand on his leg. “You made progress. A small step, but a step in the right direction. You *should* be proud of yourself.”

Locky looks down and smiles, bringing his hand over mine. “Thank you.”

“What are you thanking me for?”

“For everything. For letting me stay here. For putting up with my mess.”

“Not a mess.” I raise a finger. “It’s an aphrodisiac, remember?”

That draws a chuckle out of him. “And for being such a good friend to me when we don’t really know each other.”

“We’re changing that. And just like with Joey, I have a feeling you and I are going to be good friends.”

He laughs even though I'm full of shit. I'd love for us to be *more* than friends, but even I'm not stupid enough to think that'll ever happen. Locky's not ready, and even if he were, why would he go for a screwup like me? He deserves someone so much better, someone who actually has their life together.

He runs his fingertips over my hand that's resting on his leg, still smiling. "And thank you for last night."

I stick my chin out and smirk. "I was pretty fucking amazing, wasn't I?"

More laughter, and Jesus, I want to get my phone out and record the sound. Screw that. I want to keep making him laugh, over and over again. It's the best sound in the world. I will never get enough of it.

"Can't even deny it. You were."

Our eyes meet, and something passes between us. Something I can't find words for, but I can feel all the way down to my bones.

"It's an open invitation," I tell him, clearing my throat. "Whenever you feel like sex, think of me like that Shakira song. *Whenever. Wherever.*"

He laughs then groans. "Oh, dear. That's a terribly dated reference."

He's right, but do I care?

Not one bit.

Because I just made Locky laugh again.



I step out of the shelter's admin office and take a sharp left. Bishop's inside, working on a Saturday so I'm helping him out, and Locky's at home. I don't want either one of them to overhear this conversation. If Locky's scumbag ex wants to play dirty, then two can play that game.

“Whatever it takes,” I mutter to my contact on the other end of the line. He’s getting closer to finding proof of the shit Bailey’s been doing, but he hasn’t managed to produce anything concrete, anything submissible in court.

He outlines a few options, all of them viable, so I give him the go-ahead to do whatever it takes by any means necessary and hang up. When I swing around, Bishop’s there, arms folded, eyeing me suspiciously.

“Everything okay?” he asks as I walk up to him.

“Yeah, fine. Why?”

“Didn’t catch what you were saying but it seemed...full on.”

“I’m a full-on guy.”

“Roman.” He latches onto my arm and stares deeply into my eyes. It’s weird having such similar eyes as each other. Swear it feels like I’m staring into a mirror sometimes when I look at him. “Anything going on that I need to know about?”

“No. There isn’t.”

Translation: Yes, there is, but I can’t tell you I’m having sex with Locky because we agreed not to tell anyone, and I can’t confess I’m meddling in Locky’s divorce because you’ll take it the wrong way and warn me to take it down a notch based on what’s happened before. But this isn’t like those other times.

No. It’s worse.

It’s so much fucking worse.

Maybe it’s brotherly intuition or purely a coincidence, but as we make our way back inside, Bishop asks, “How are things with you and Locky?”

“Same.”

“No progress, then?”

“Nope.”

“So you won’t mind if Fulton and some of the other guys take him out next Friday.”

I stop in my tracks. “Why the fuck would they do that?”

“Operation Get Locky Laid, remember?”

I groan, thinking the guys had forgotten all about that. “Thought that was just drunk talk.”

Bishop claps me on my shoulder. “You’ve got a lot to learn about the vet boys. Two things they never joke about—animals and love. And even though they know he’s not ready to date, they’re on a mission to get Locky laid. If you’re that pissed about it, you should tag along.”

“Who said I’m pissed?”

“Your face.” Bishop spins around so he’s standing in front of me. “Look, if you aren’t going to make a move, that’s fine. But you shouldn’t prevent Locky from getting out there. Dude’s going through a lot. This might actually be good for him.”

“Yeah. I know.”

It’s not my place to point out to Bishop that Locky *is* getting laid, and that it’s plenty good. We agreed to keep our arrangement between us, and I fully intend on honoring that.

“You really should come along,” he suggests again. “Keep an eye on things.”

Seeing Locky get set up with guy after guy? Barf. But still, there’s no way I won’t be there, keeping an eye on things.

“Who knows? You might even have fun.”

I *highly* doubt that. “Whatever. I’ll be there.”

Even if it is going to be a living hell.

LOCKY

“Gus seems to be having a good time,” Roman observes, tipping his head toward the stripper pole, where Gus is...well, Gus is tearing it up.

Who knew my boss, the voice of calm in an ocean of vet-inspired chaos, had such insanely good dance moves? Not to mention a body I’d kill for despite him being almost fifteen years older than me.

I didn’t see when he lost his shirt, but he’s gyrating and making his body move in ways that make me wonder if he’s thinking of auditioning should there be another Magic Mike movie.

Tate’s looking up at him with such hunger in his eyes, I doubt they’ll make it home before he mauls Gus.

I turn back to face Roman. “At least one of us is.”

“You’re not?”

The gang opted to bypass our regular after-work-drinks bar and dragged me out to a nightclub. Pulsing music. Laser lights. Stripper poles. The works.

“Not really my cup of tea,” I say.

This whole operation to get me laid isn’t my cup of tea, but like always, I’ve gone along with it. Chronic people pleasing syndrome is real.

The thing that makes it hard for me to say no to them is that I genuinely do appreciate their concern. They want what’s best for me, and they’re right, getting laid is good for the soul, as the person standing next to me—AKA: the man responsible for the best sex of my life—has made me realize.

But the gang doesn’t know about Roman and me hooking up, and I’d like to keep it that way for a little while longer. At least until I get a better handle on exactly what is going on between us, because right now, I have no freaking idea.

He’s been in a funny mood all day. I told him he didn’t have to come, thinking he might’ve felt pressure from Bishop, who he’s been texting with all afternoon. He grumbled

something about nothing being able to stop him from coming, but he looks even less happy to be here than I am.

He was tense on the drive over, keeping chitchat to a minimum, and looking like he wanted to murder someone.

And since we've arrived, he's been glued to my side. He even waited outside the restroom while I did a number one.

Maybe it should concern me that he's taken it upon himself to be my personal bodyguard, but for some reason, I don't actually mind it.

"What would you rather do?" Roman asks.

"Go home, eat pizza, and watch *Friends* reruns."

"So let's do that."

"Really? I'd feel bad for leaving since I am the reason everyone came out tonight."

"We've been here for a few hours so I'm sure they won't mind. Besides, Gus is killing it on the dance floor. Noah and Haze are probably in some corner booth making out like horny teenagers. Same goes for Bishop and Fulton. Monty and Jeremy have already left. And yeah, that covers everyone since the others couldn't make it."

"You're forgetting Tyler," I point out just as I hear his voice behind us.

"There you guys are!"

We spin around to see Tyler and some other guy trailing behind him.

"Ta da," he proclaims, gesturing at the guy he's brought over the way a hostess on a game show points out a prize. "This is James. He's single. Looking for no-strings fun. Is a fur daddy to a gorgeous German Shepherd—pics available upon request—and he loves chilling out, watching movies, and taking long walks on the beach."

James turns to Tyler. "I don't actually like the beach. Hate getting sand everywhere."

“Don’t worry about it.” Tyler waves him off. “Locky’s not going to check, but it makes you sound way more doable.”

James nods. “Okay. That makes sense.”

Can the guys see that we’re standing here, hearing everything they’re saying?

I glance over at Roman, who looks less than impressed. His eyes meet mine, and he sends me a look that says, *This does not make sense*.

I arch an eyebrow in complete agreement.

“Look, Tyler, James.” I smile at both of them. “Roman and I were actually about to leave.”

“You two together?” James points between us then turns to Tyler. “I thought you said he was single.”

“He is sing—”

I don’t know why Tyler cuts himself off. What, just because Roman’s pulled me into him, wrapped an arm around my shoulder, and might be death staring James like a wolf protecting his pack.

Okay. So maybe we are giving off slight *we’re together* vibes.

“I’m not feeling well. Roman’s going to take me home. Thanks for trying, Tyler, and nice to meet you, James.”

I grab Roman by the hand and lead him away. I swear I hear him growling as we pass James. I wave as we walk past Fulton and Bishop, who, yep, are cuddling up on each other in a booth. As are Noah and Haze a few booths down.

I make the universal *we’re going* gesture. Noah gives me the thumbs up, while Haze gives me an entirely X-rated hand sign. I tug Roman away before he can see and jump to any conclusions. I wouldn’t want him thinking I haven’t kept up my side of the deal. Because I have. I haven’t breathed a word about our arrangement to any of the guys.

We approach the front of the club, and I’m starting to think we’re in the clear, when a figure steps in front of us.

“Well, well, well.” Bailey sneers, his gaze dropping to where my hand is threaded with Roman’s. I fucking hate that he’s back in town. “You’re really scraping the bottom of the barrel with this one.”

Before I can respond, Roman whips past me, and all that growly energy he was trying to suppress with James explodes as his fist curls into Bailey’s shirt. “You leave Locky alone. You hear me?”

“Take. Your hands. Off me, you fucking oaf.”

Roman is glaring at Bailey, his jaw clenched so tight I half expect his teeth to shatter any minute. Just when I’m pretty sure Roman’s never going to release him, he does, lifting his hands in the air and backing away slowly.

“Touch me again, and I’m pressing charges.” Bailey eyeballs him. “And by the look of you, I’d say you’re pretty familiar with the inside of a jail cell anyway. You on probation?”

“Bailey, fuck off.” It’s one thing for him to make my life hell, it’s another thing when he drags a good friend into it.

He turns his attention to me and gives me a pitying smile. “The criminal and the slut. You two deserve each other if you ask me.”

I throw myself onto Roman in the nick of time, because he was on the verge of lunging at Bailey and doing god knows what to him.

“It’s not worth it,” I whisper into his ear, desperate to placate him. “He’s trying to provoke you. Don’t let him win.”

Roman’s taut muscles flex beneath me, his chest heaving angrily, but he takes a step back and waits until both my feet have hit the ground before he spits out, “You ever call him anything like that again, I will find you and fuck you up so bad they’ll have no choice but to throw me into the slammer for the rest of my life. You hear me?”

The threat hangs icily in the air. For once, Bailey doesn’t have a comeback. He starts to walk away, but before he disappears into the crowd of onlookers—because, hey, who

doesn't love a spectacle?—he turns over his shoulder with an indignant grin and says, “Just remember, I've got footage.”

To Roman's credit, he doesn't try to jump the guy again. Instead, he wraps his arm around me protectively, presses me to his side, and tells me everything is going to be okay.

ROMAN

I have no way of knowing if everything is going to be okay. But it wasn't just some throwaway line I said to try to make him feel better.

I meant it.

I will do whatever I can to make it okay, because by god, I will do *anything* to protect Locky from that asshole of an ex.

The guy looked like such a weasel it's hard to imagine Locky and him together. Not that that's something I want to spend too much time imagining, anyway.

So I turn my thoughts to something a lot more pleasant. When we got back from the club, I ducked into the shelter and brought the litter over for some impromptu play time. Yes, I know it's late, but I figure with all the sleep deprivation these guys have given me over the last month or so, they owe me one.

And it seems to be working. We're sitting on the floor in the living room, and Locky is smiling and totally absorbed as Ross and Rachel play fight with each other.

I've been keeping a close eye on Monica, who's trying to make her way onto the coffee table—never gonna happen, her legs are way too short, but try telling her that—while Joey is officially locking me down as his bestie. He's sleeping on my lap, can you believe it? Say what you want about me, but I am a man who perseveres.

“Thank you for this,” Locky says softly, looking up at me.

He got changed when we came back into a white T-shirt and sleep pants, but his hair is still greasy with gel or whatever oil slick he used on it.

“How are you feeling?” I keep my voice hushed because Joey is purring—fucking purring—as I lift him into my arms. Little dude just became my ride or die.

“Pretty awful. I feel like an ungrateful shit to my friends who were just trying to help me, and I'm horrified by the way Bailey spoke to you. I am so sorry about that.”

“You *never* need to apologize on behalf of that man.”

Locky lets out a small breath.

“He was right about one thing, though,” I say, somewhat reluctantly.

There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell Locky. I’ve been putting it off, but this is kinda the perfect moment, even though it came courtesy of that shitweed Bailey.

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

Our eyes meet. “Locky, I have served time.”

“Oh.” He blinks a few times then glances around the cat menagerie overtaking our living room. “Should we put these guys back so that we can talk properly?”

“Good idea.”

We bundle the kittens into their carriers and take them back to the shelter. Once we’re back inside the house, Locky lets out a massive yawn.

“Wanna talk in bed?” I suggest.

“Sure.”

“In *my* bed,” I clarify as we head down the hallway.

“I washed my sheets this morning.”

“It’s the rest of the room I’m worried about.”

That earns me a playful smack across the chest, but Locky passes his door and lets himself into my room.

“I meant it,” I say as we slip under the covers. “We need to talk. Will you be able to keep your hands off my irresistible body?”

Locky laughs. “I’ll give it my best shot.”

We lie down on our sides facing each other, which I soon discover is a big mistake. We’re too close. This is way too intimate for what I’m about to tell him. Then again, after I say my piece, I may never get the chance to be this close to him again. I need to savor every precious second of it.

“I’ve been in jail twice,” I say, diving straight into the deep end.

“What for?”

“Assault, both times.”

Locky visibly swallows as he takes that in. I’m not naive. It’s a lot to process. Just because we’re getting along well doesn’t mean I expect him to brush this off as no big deal. Because it is a big deal. I fucked up badly.

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

“I do.” I stroke his arm as I begin telling him my story. “Bishop and I had a rough childhood. Dad was a drug addict and he left Mom before I started school. She abandoned us a year later, also an addict.”

“Jesus, I’m so sorry.”

“We were put into foster care. Sometimes, we’d get placed together, other times we weren’t. It was...rough. That’s when my protective instincts developed. I was the older brother, so I always did what I could to look out for Bishop. If we were going to cop shit, I made sure I took the brunt of it. It’s something I learned to do well. Maybe a little too well.”

“How so?”

I blow out a heavy breath, the shame over my past actions clinging to me. “The two assaults I was charged for were...on my girlfriend’s ex-boyfriends.”

Locky bites his lip and frowns. “Go on.”

“They both had shitty exes. And I... I do this thing. When I care about someone, I lose all objectivity. I can’t think straight or make logical decisions. I go ballistic. If someone is in danger or needs help, I’d tear down everything in the fucking world to help them.”

Locky skims my bearded jawline with the backs of his fingers. “Yeah. I’ve kinda noticed that.”

“I’m not trying to justify or rationalize my behavior. It was wrong. I did bad things. I deserved to be punished for it.”

“And you’ve done your time, and you’ve learned your lesson. Right?”

“Half right.” I take a deep breath. “After my second stint behind bars, I vowed to myself that I’d never fall in love. That was what got me in trouble, so I figured if I avoided getting tangled up in messy romantic situations, I could turn my life around.”

“What happened?”

“I found a new love. Alcohol. There were some drugs, too, but mainly booze. I managed not to get into any more physical altercations and avoided getting arrested, but I made the biggest mistake of my life.” I pause, and take a big breath. Then another one. “I stole fifty thousand dollars from Bishop.”

“Oh, geez.”

“I was so fucking wasted I don’t even know how I did it. I wasn’t keeping the best company and I shouted a whole bunch of people tickets to Vegas. Went on a massive bender where I almost died.”

“Oh my god. What happened?”

“I was so out of it I started throwing up. But because I was lying on my back, I started choking. I’d have choked on my own vomit if a friend hadn’t walked into the room at that moment. They saved my life. The next day, I woke up feeling worse than ever, realized I’d hit rock bottom, and used what was left of the money I stole to check myself into a rehab center in Southern California. Did a thirty-day program. Finished it. Bought a plane ticket to Brookhaven. Begged my brother for forgiveness, and he...”

I choke up, my eyes stinging. “He gave it to me. He forgave me and gave me a second chance. I’m paying him back every penny I took from him and I won’t stop until my debt is paid back in full. And I’ve been sober all this time.”

“Oh, Roman.” Locky gives my hand a squeeze, keeping his light blue eyes focused on me.

I have no idea what’s going through his head. I’ve laid it all out there, my worst, most shameful shit. Wouldn’t blame him if he packed his bags first thing in the morning and I never saw him again. Hell. He might not even wait that long. He

might not even want to spend another night under the same roof as me.

“Thank you for telling me. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate that, and how much I respect you for everything you’re doing to turn your life around. It takes courage and strength, and I admire you so much for that. And I want you to know I would never, ever judge you.”

I swallow, blink, then bring my eyes to meet his. “Thank you.” He can’t possibly know how much that means to me.

He takes a breath. “We’ve all made mistakes. Things we wish more than anything we could go back in time and redo. Or not do.”

There’s a deep frown running across his forehead that’s not normally there.

“You speaking from experience?”

He gives a small nod.

“Feel like talking about it? You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“I want to, but Roman, this is my most shameful thing.”

I take his hand in mine and lift it to my mouth, pressing a gentle kiss to his knuckles before echoing his words back to him, “I would never, ever judge you, Locky.”

LOCKY

“I had a threesome when we were married, and I fucking hated it.”

My old man was a firm proponent of the rip the band-aid straight off method. “Just come right out and say it,” he used to say when it came to sharing important news or making a big announcement.

Sometimes, that’s exactly what’s needed.

Right now is one of those times.

I look for any signs on Roman’s face that he’s having a negative reaction to what I blurted out, but his expression remains the same.

Soft. Tender. Loving.

I go on. “Chase and Fischer recommended this great resort in Florida called Elysian. And the place was stunning. Gorgeous hotel, amazing room, incredibly friendly staff. A tropical paradise. It was also LGBT-friendly, which I thought would be great. We could feel comfortable being affectionate in public and not have anyone give us funny looks or anything. The thing was, Bailey saw it as an open buffet.”

“I take it you’re not talking about breakfast? Wait, sorry. *Brekkie.*”

“No.” I smile. “Not talking about brekkie. A lot of the guests there were looking to have *fun.*”

I raise my eyebrows, and Roman nods once to let me know he gets that *fun* means *sex*.

“I have no issue with that. Each to their own. I’ve just always been a one-man guy. Bailey had told me he was, too. We’d always been monogamous. But he took us being at Elysian as a sign to open things up. Apparently, he’d always wanted to have a threesome, which was news to me since he’d never brought it up before. He begged and pleaded and just wouldn’t let up, so, as always, I relented. Our whole romantic weekend away soon descended into him being on the hunt for another guy to join us.”

I chew my lip, the memory stirring up all sorts of emotions. Mainly anger and regret at myself that I went along with it.

“It didn’t feel right to me, but I went with the flow. Like I always do. *Did,*” I correct myself, and Roman nods again.

“This threesome thing consumed the whole weekend. We spent more time talking to potential partners than we did with each other.”

Roman frowns. “I don’t get it. Why?”

“Ever had a threesome?”

He shakes his head.

“Finding a guy that both Bailey and I liked and that liked us, and making sure that the three of us were all sexually compatible was hard work. Remember the tops and bottoms convo we had?”

He smiles. “Yeah. It was pretty straightforward.”

“It was. With us. But when you add another person into the mix, it complicates things.”

“Got it.”

Anyway, we finally found a guy that fit the bill, so to speak, and we...fucked.”

I flip onto my back and turn my head on the pillow to look at Roman. “Up until that point, I’d never had bad sex. Sure, there have been times where it’s been a little awkward, or rushed, or meh. But that happens. Everyone who’s having sex has mediocre sex at some point in their lives. But I’ve never *hated* having sex. Never had to close my eyes and tell myself it’ll be over soon. Until that time. Thankfully, it was over pretty quick. When the guy left and Bailey asked me how it went, I told him. Said it didn’t work for me and that I never wanted to do it again. He seemed to take it well. Until I found out he took *that* as an open invitation to start fucking around behind my back.”

“What a shitty thing to do.”

“Tell me about it.” I roll my neck from side to side. “Want to know the real fucked-up part?”

“Tell me.”

“It’s almost like I’ve forgiven Bailey more than I’ve forgiven myself. He cheated. He’s a douchebag. That’s a simple fact for my brain to process.”

I fall silent, prompting Roman to ask, “Why can’t you forgive yourself?”

“I guess I feel...ashamed.”

“About the sex stuff?”

I give a small nod. “Yeah. And how it gives him leverage to go around calling me a slut and threatening to post that video everywhere.”

“Hey.” Roman leans over and grabs my chin, tipping it up to meet his strong gaze. “You did nothing to be ashamed of sexually. The only issues are that you didn’t speak up and that he recorded you illegally. Him recording you is not on you, and the lesson you can take out of this is that you need to find your voice.”

His eyes darken even more. “I’m going to say something, and I need you to really hear me.”

“Okay.”

“When you’re with me, you say exactly what you want and what you’re feeling. Okay? No hiding. No going along with anything for the sake of it, or because you want to make me happy, or to avoid conflict. The most important thing to me is you being you. You got it?”

I nod again.

“Say it,” he commands.

My mouth has gone all dry. I’m sure Roman’s talking about me being more expressive when we have sex, so why does it feel like his words carry more weight?

“I will,” I rasp. “I’ll speak up.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

Those two dark orbs stay on me until a soft smile breaks out over his lips. “Good.”

He leans over and kisses me. “Now what would *you* like to do?”

“Why do I feel like this is a trick question?” I say, trying to lighten things up a little.

“Not a trick, but it is a test of sorts. A chance for you to tell me what *you* want. Nothing else matters.”

“But what about you?”

“Right now, I’m good with whatever you decide. As long as you make the decision for *you*.”

Hearing those words from him does something to me. Turns me on, yes, but it’s more than that. Roman makes me feel a lot of things. Safe. Wanted. Important. But now he’s added another thing to the list.

Free.

I know that right now, I can tell him what I truly want, and he’ll go along with it. It’s an incredible feeling.

“I would like to have sex with you,” I begin. “*But* this has been a big night, and my head’s all over the place at the moment. So I guess what I’d like is...”

I think about it to make sure I’m certain before I say, “I’d like for us to sleep together, nothing more, and maybe have a round of sex in the morning. If that works for you?”

I don’t think I’ve ever seen Roman smile so big.

He’s beaming. Like he’s proud of me.

“That *definitely* works for me.”



“Yeah. Like that. Right there.”

Roman's entire face scrunches in concentration as he thrusts into the spot that's making me see stars. *Pounding* into me—doing that all the way out, then all the way back in thing—over and over, like the fuck machine he is.

I'm glad we waited until the morning to have sex. Last night was too intense. There would have been no way of going from the heaviness of all the stuff we told each other to *this*.

“Wait. I have an idea.”

Roman stops with half his cock inside me. “What is it?”

“Come back in,” I murmur. “All the way in.”

He does.

“Push in even more.”

He does, and my breath catches. I have *never* felt this full in my entire life.

“What do you want, baby? Tell me.”

Looking into his eyes, I say, “Stay here. Don't move.”

“Okay.”

With our gazes locked, I start doing something.

Something he loved the first time I did it, but I want to do it even more now.

He frowns as the first sensations ripple between our bodies, then his mouth falls open, letting out a gasp of pleasure, before his whole body sways forward.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

I grin up at him. “You like it?”

“Fuck yeah.”

“I'm milking your cock with my ass.”

He hisses, his head falling back. “How?”

There's no super quick way to explain the mechanics involved. Or at least there isn't right now according to my sex-fogged brain. “I could tell you or we could just keep goin—”

“Keep going,” he grits, every corded muscle in his neck straining. “Don’t you dare stop.”

His head snaps down, his eyes landing on me. “Unless you want to, of course.”

I start laughing, and that, combined with the epic channel clenching I’m treating him to, catches him off guard and pushes him over the edge.

“Fuck!” he cries, his orgasm slamming into him.

It’s a little strange for Roman to have reached climax with hardly any movement, but I simply lie back and watch as this muscled, tough-looking dude with a heart and soul of pure gold loses himself inside me.

I don’t even need to come myself. What I got to witness is so much better.

This might be sex, but it’s a whole lot more intimate now that we’ve opened up to each other. I know about Roman’s past, and he knows about my biggest regret, and as I gaze up at him, I realize something...

This isn’t just sex anymore.



“Operation Get Locky Laid is officially over,” I announce to Chase, Noah, Chester, and Harmony in the staff lounge during my afternoon shift the following day.

Out of everyone, it’s Harmony who appears most devastated by the news. “But I finally managed to get my Grindr account unsuspending,” she moans. “Do you have any idea how many strongly worded email exchanges it took?”

“Take the win,” Chester says to her with a smile. “You’re free to grind another day.”

“But I wanted to grind for Locky.” She looks at me and squints. “Hold up. Does this mean you’ve found someone?”

I shake my head, still not ready to tell these guys about me and Roman.

After that incredible morning session yesterday, we had a few more rounds doing pleasurable things with, to, and inside each other's bodies.

I had the day off, so in between bouts of crazy amazing sex, I helped him out at the shelter, ran a few errands in town, and I even pitched in with some housework. And there are people who don't believe in miracles.

We ended the day with pizza, watching *Friends* reruns cuddled on the couch with the kittens.

Things are changing between us. I can feel it. What we're doing isn't purely a physical thing anymore. I'm beginning to think it never was. I can't be sure whether Roman had feelings for me before I moved in, but now I know, without a doubt, that I have feelings for him.

Which is all sorts of complicated because as much as I like the guy, I also know that it's too soon. I need time on my own to heal. But when I do have time alone, like yesterday, all I want to do is spend it with him.

The one thing that remains the same is our pledge to keep things private.

I turn back to Harmony. Didn't mean to leave her hanging there. "No. It's just... Going out and hooking up with random guys is not what I want to do right now."

There. I said it. It's what I feel, so I came right out with it.

Felt good, too.

Let the blowback begin.

"Cool," Chester says.

"Fair enough," Noah agrees.

"Makes sense." Chase grins happily at me.

Well...that went better than I expected.

I turn to the last holdout.

“I just want you to be happy. But if you’re not ready, you’re not ready,” Harmony says, trying to mask her obvious disappointment.

I smile. “Thank you.”

“But the second you are, call me!”

Her entire face lights up, and I laugh. “I will. I promise.”

And with that, the official Get Locky Laid operation is put to rest.

The unofficial one, though? That one’s just getting off the ground.

ROMAN

I've come a long way from the man I was when I first arrived in Brookhaven nearly three years ago, fresh out of rehab, begging for my brother's forgiveness, and feeling like the biggest fuckup on the planet.

Back then, I was barely one rung up from rock bottom. I hated myself for all the mistakes I'd made, all the people I'd hurt. Yes, I was sober, but it was only the first small step in a very long journey. I knew I'd have to spend the rest of my life making up for all the damage I'd done.

And I was prepared to do it.

I'd messed up big time. It's what I deserved. Didn't mean I was looking forward to it. But I kept any pity parties I threw limited to one attendee and tried not to hold them too often.

I did the work, found a job, and started paying Bishop back.

I applied my handyman skills to the house and the animal shelter to fix things up.

I remained clean and sober.

Tick, tick, tick.

And am I committed to staying on this track?

That's the biggest fucking tick of all.

Because no matter how hard these past few years have been, how lonely I've felt, or how much shame and guilt I continue to carry, there is no way I'd ever do anything to squander the second chance I've been given. I wouldn't trade the worst day in my current life for the best day in my former life for all the money in the world.

But now, for the first time since I've been here, I'm actually starting to feel better about myself.

My life.

My future.

Even the loneliness and self-loathing that I've been carrying is slowly being chipped away.

And most of that comes down to a certain broad-shouldered, super-messy Aussie vet.

It's been three weeks since he came home from work and told me he'd officially nixed Operation Get Locky Laid with the gang.

Three weeks of clearing our schedules so we can hang out together more.

Three weeks of Locky helping me out at the shelter, cooking dinner together, playing with the kittens (who are growing up way too fast), and snuggling on the couch watching TV.

Three weeks of the most unbelievable, toe-curling, mind-bending, soul-destroying sex ever. Seriously, the human body was not programmed to receive so much pleasure. That channel clench thing he does? Pure. Fucking. Bliss.

I should be over the moon.

Happier than I've ever been.

And I *am* happy.

But...there's a problem.

A problem called me.

There's no way this can last. Let's face it, I won't be able to keep up this nice guy version of myself. Because when I fall, I fall hard, and then I make big mistakes that take years and years to fix.

I'm falling for Locky. There's no doubt about it. And for whatever reason, I haven't started fucking up... Yet. I've somehow been able to control myself. Nearly punching Bailey's lights out is the closest I've come to losing it.

So far.

But it's only a matter of time before I erupt and do something that will derail my life and ruin whatever this thing between me and Locky is. My lack of self-control has done so much damage in the past, I'm scared it's going to destroy my life again.

“So, you know?”

I look up. Bishop’s standing next to me. When did he get here? He leans over and gently pats Chandler who gives an approving stretch and mew. I came here to hang with these guys and take my mind off things.

“Know what?”

“Wait. So you don’t know?”

I groan. “Just spit it out.”

“Have you spoken with Fulton?”

“No. Why?”

“Oh. Thought you had judging by how pissed you’re looking.”

“I’m not pissed. This is my thinking face.”

Bishop grins. “Explains why I didn’t recognize it.”

I shake my head and extend my finger for Joey to lick. “It’s a good thing I’m bringing these guys up to be non-violent, otherwise I’d be smacking you on the head for being so goddam vague. What are you talking about? Is something wrong with Fulton?”

“No, he’s fine...”

There’s a but coming.

“*But* he mentioned he was planning on talking to you about...”

Bishop’s eyes travel between me and the litter a few times.

“No,” I growl definitively when I catch on to what he’s implying. “We are *not* adopting these guys out.”

He scratches the back of his neck. “That is usually how it goes. They’re almost three months old now. It’s past due actually.”

“They’re *mine*.” I lift Joey into my arms and let him sniff my face before he gives me the best friend nose lick of approval. “Wait. What has this got to do with Fulton?”

“He’s thinking about adopting them.”

“They’re not up for adoption,” I repeat. “Besides, you guys already have seven thousand cats.”

“You really think he’s going to stop until he reaches ten?”

I take a break from nose kisses with Joey to glare at my brother. “Weak joke. How many cats do you actually have?”

“Twenty. I think. Hard to keep up.”

“Well, forget it. That’s plenty. These guys are going to live with me.”

“All of them?”

“Well, uh...”

Ideally, yes.

Realistically, taking on an entire litter of cats is a lot for any normal, non-Fulton person to handle. “I haven’t decided yet.”

“Well, you’re going to have to make a decision soon. Because we need to find permanent homes for these little ones. It’s in *their* best interests.”

I sigh because he’s right.

I hate that he’s right.

But I nod, and say, “Sure,” even though my mind’s already made up about one kitty at least.



“So what are you going to do?” Locky asks from the sofa, where he’s keeping an eye on things.

The kittens are happy playing, stretching, napping, and doing whatever they feel like all over the living room.

“I honestly don’t know. It’s not practical to keep all of these guys. As much as I love all of them, I know they’d be too much for me to take on. But I can’t let this little one go.” I scoop down and lift Joey into my arms, rocking him gently

from side to side. “We had a rocky start but we’re bonded now.”

He trusts me. The little dude who would give me attitude and poke his tiny kitty butt at me is now falling asleep in my arms, purring like the kitty angel he is. How am I supposed to let him go?

“You could just keep him.”

“That’s what I’m thinking,” I say. “But even one cat is a big commitment.”

“It is. But you seem like a pretty commitment-ready guy to me.”

“Do I now?”

Locky’s gaze drifts to my lips. The same lips that treated him to a pretty damn good blow job this afternoon when he came home from the clinic and jokingly uttered those three magic words—*Honey, I’m home!*

Truth be told, he could’ve announced that aliens had invaded and were currently dividing the human species into categories based on intelligence and useful skills. Nothing was going to keep me from getting a taste of him. I’m officially addicted.

After he reciprocated, he helped me clean up at the shelter. He made dinner, I cleaned up the destruction after him. And now we’re chilling as...roommates? Friends? Wingmen with benefits?

Who the fuck knows? We’ve never had the *what are we to each other* talk...

Until now.

“Speaking of commitment.” I place Joey back on the floor. He has every right to give me the filthy look he does. He’d only just drifted off. “Sorry, buddy.”

He stomps away and curls himself against the leg of the coffee table while I join Locky on the couch.

“I know we’re just casual...and that’s pretty much as far as my brain has gotten.”

Locky smiles warmly. “Is that your way of saying you’d like something more?”

“Maybe.” I look away. “But I can think of one big reason why nothing more can happen between us.”

“And what’s that?”

My gaze drifts back to him. “You.”

“Me?”

I nod. “You’re not ready for anything, and I respect that. You have a lot going on. I’m not trying to pressure you. Just wanted to let you know how you’ve got me feeling.”

“Wanna know what the funny thing about feelings is?”

“Enlighten me.”

Locky leans over and smiles at me. “They change.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I’ve been more assertive lately. I told the gang I didn’t want to go ahead with their plans to hook me up with random dudes. I’ve been more open with you about what I want. I had an overbearing client come in today, and I told him I needed some space and asked him not to hover over me while I tried to figure out what was wrong with his ferret.”

“You mean, apart from the fact that a grown man owns a ferret?”

“Exactly.” Locky smiles again. “The point is, I’m learning to look inside, figure out what I want, and then go for it.”

“I’m happy you’re doing that.”

“You’re a big reason why I can do that. I feel safe with you.”

My heart breaks out into a gallop hearing him say that. It’s all I’ve ever wanted, to give him that sense of security so that he can use his voice and do what he wants, and not be pushed around by anyone.

“You said something once,” he says. “Something about how me being a go with the flow guy would be a good thing as I navigated the next chapter of my life. And you’re right... I want to go with the flow. With the flow I feel in here.” He rubs his chest. “And the flow I feel *here*.” He moves his hand between us. “There’s something happening between us. And I’m going to lay it all out there. It’s a little scary. No. Scratch that. It’s a lot scary. I’ve never felt like this about anyone so quickly. It’s so big. So...unexpected. But you know what?”

I swallow. “What?”

“It’s what I want. *You* are what *I* want.”

I smile even as my head and my heart go into battle. My head is holding back. Keeping distance. Reminding me that while I’ve made changes and am on track for a better life, I’m not there yet. And that if I let myself fall all the way for Locky, it’s only going to be a matter of time before I fuck up again.

But my heart? My heart wants to take Locky’s words at face value. Wants to allow me to be with this incredible guy. Experience all the ups and downs that come with being with someone. If being with him while we don’t know what we are to each other has felt this amazing, how much better will it be once we define what we are and take the next step?

I don’t know what to do, what to feel, what to think, or even what to say. But Locky’s sitting back, peering at me with those beautiful blue eyes and a soft smile on his lips, and fuck, I melt. It’s probably a mistake, and I may have to walk it back later, but I let my heart win this round.

“I want you, too.”

Locky’s face lights up in one of his massive smiles, and the space between us vanishes as he leaps onto me. I fall back onto the couch as we kiss.

A new entrant has entered the battlefield. My body. It’s treacherous and can’t be trusted. It enjoys the soft feel of Locky’s lips too much. It engages in hand-to-ass warfare, kneading into his solid round butt with gusto. It embarks on a

dangerous mission southward to the promised land of cock and balls.

I break the kiss and cup Locky's face in my hands. "I don't deserve you."

As good as it feels making out with Locky, it feels wrong to progress things without airing my biggest fear. This right here, these four little words, they're the real reason why I'm scared.

"Yes, you do." Locky takes both of my hands in his. "We're more than the mistakes we made in our pasts, Roman."

His voice is laced with something that makes me think his words apply equally to both of us. I hate how he feels ashamed of the things he did for his ex, but then, how is that any different from the guilt I'm holding on to for the bad choices I've made?

"You're right," I say around the lump in my throat. "The past is behind us."

"Exactly. It's done. Over. All we have is now. And a future." He threads his fingers with mine. "A future *together*."

"I'd like that."

Locky smiles. "So would I. And I get it. It's hard letting go of stuff. But you have to. We both do. I deserve you, and you deserve me."

"So, what you're saying is, we both deserve each other?"

A laugh rumbles out of Locky. "Yes. But in a good way."

I smile back. "In a good way."

LOCKY

Talk of leaving the past in the past and focusing on the future is all well and good...until I'm sitting with Roman in a swanky office downtown, waiting for my meeting with a renowned divorce lawyer to begin, staring down the prospect of bitter, nasty divorce proceedings in my immediate future.

Makes the good kind of future we were talking about last night feel so far away.

"Don't be nervous." Roman reaches over and takes my hand in his. "You told me this Jocelyn chick is a ball-busting, take-no-prisoners bad-ass, remember?"

"Damn straight I am." Said ball-busting, take-no-prisoners bad-ass launches into her office. She's dressed in a bright red power suit and crazy high shiny black heels. She's strutting like she's walking down the runway, and yeah, she's intimidating all right.

She gives us each an impressively firm handshake. I glance over at Roman and can tell he's trying not to wince, either.

"Lachlan Healy," I say when she lets go, resisting the urge to shake my fingers out. "But you can call me Locky."

"Roman Turner, ma'am."

I turn to Roman, and he shrugs as if to say *she's a ma'am kind of woman*. Can't argue there.

"Take a seat," Jocelyn says, because she's also a *rise to your feet the second she steps into the room woman*.

"I've had a look at your file, and we have a strong case," she begins.

"We do?"

She nods sharply. "There is ample evidence of equal contribution to mortgage repayments and other household expenses. The emails exchanged between you and the other party agreeing to transfer your funds to him and place the mortgage in his name will also bolster our argument for a fair, fifty-fifty split. There are no dependents involved in this case,

which makes things neater, too. Not to mention more than sufficient evidence of extra marital relations.”

“Okay. Okay. That’s good.” I take a gulp and look Jocelyn square in the eye. “What about the...other thing?”

The *illegally recording me and threatening to post it online* thing.

“Ah, yes. The other thing.” Her eyes soften a little. “Mr. Chadforth’s threats, should he act on them, are a Class 1 Misdemeanor.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that Virginia has laws that prohibit the unlawful dissemination of non-consensual porn where there is intent to coerce, harass, or intimidate victims.”

I look at Roman. He nods and smiles back.

“That sounds good,” I say.

“The laws aren’t perfect, but they’re a start,” Jocelyn says. “A guilty sentence can result in up to twelve months in jail, and victims can sue for compensatory and punitive damages, as well as attorney’s fees.”

Jocelyn tips her head at me and smiles. “And I can be very, *very* expensive.”

I sure hope she is. “So, what do we do?”

“Our best approach is to petition the court for a no-fault divorce with an equal split of all combined assets, including the house. Since you have no minor children, we just need to prove you’ve been separated from your spouse for six months with a separation agreement in place.”

“We’ve been separated for longer than that, and I’m pretty sure I filed a separation agreement at the time.”

Those first few days and weeks after I discovered Bailey had been cheating on me are such a blur now. The shock of what he’d been doing behind my back rocked me to my very core. I was in a daze, but I’m pretty sure one of the guys

mentioned getting a separation agreement. Thank god they were there and that I listened to them.

“Good. We’ll look into that. Then I’ll reach out to Mr. Chadforth’s legal team and petition to get this resolved as quickly as possible.

“Great. Thank you.”

“In the meantime, and I cannot stress this enough, do not have any contact with Mr. Chadforth.”

“Oh, believe me. He’s the last person I want to see.”



“I’ve made a decision,” Roman announces, stepping into the living room two days after our meeting with Jocelyn. He’s holding Joey close to his chest. The other kittens are playing all over the living room. I put down the vet magazine I’ve been reading and smile. I think I know what he’s about to say, but I don’t want to deprive him of his big announcement.

“Go on.”

“We’ve been having some pretty heavy conversations.”

My smile grows bigger. “And by *we* you mean...”

“Me and Joey, duh.” Roman winks at me with an adorable grin.

God, he really is an incredible man. Kind. Compassionate. Caring. Strong. With all the stuff swirling around me at the moment, he’s been my rock. I bet he doesn’t even realize. Because that’s just the kind of man he is—he does good things without the need for praise, or even acknowledgement.

“We talked it out. Joey here offered what he said would be the one and only apology he’d ever give me in this one of his nine lifetimes for the way he treated me at the start. I accepted it, because hello, this face.”

He lightly brushes his finger over Joey’s nose, and he lets out a contented meow. Joey does, not Roman, and my heart

blooms in my chest at the sight of this big tough guy melting over a gorgeous little kitten.

“He’s agreed to let me be his cat daddy. Also, that was the negotiated-upon, one and only usage of the word daddy I’m permitted. I shall henceforth be known as the scooper of poops, the cleaner of kitty litter boxes, and the provider of treats and scratches.”

I chuckle as something wet starts running down my face.

“Locky?” In three giant strides, Roman is on the couch next to me. “Why are you crying?”

Shit. I’m crying? What the hell?

I start wiping the tears away. “Good tears,” I manage to get out. “Happy ones.”

“You know.” Roman holds out Joey and I take him, cradling the ball of black fluff against my chest. “I’ll need to raise it with the little dude for final approval, of course, but there’s always the option of adding one more name to the adoption paperwork.”

My eyes cut to his. “You serious?”

“Completely. You don’t have to decide now. Take your time and let me know what you—”

“I’ll do it.”

“Locky. You’re rushing.”

“I’m not. This is what I want.” I look down at Joey and offer him a *can I be your other cat daddy* smile, which I follow up with a *yes, that’s the first and last time I’ll ever use the word daddy* eyebrow raise. “Pending final approval, of course.”

“So...we’re going to be cat dads?”

“Yeah. We are. I bags being good cop.”

Roman lets out a deep-throated chuckle. “Fine. I can handle being the tough guy.”

“Nah. You’re not a tough guy. You’re a big, ol’ softie.”

“Shh. Not in front of you know who. We have to present a united front.”

I smile, and the three of us cuddle on the couch until Joey decides he’s had enough and goes over to play with Phoebe.

With him gone, Roman and I make out. Clothes start coming off, and before you know it, we’re in his bedroom, lying naked on his bed, covered in come.

“You realize we’ve left six kittens unsupervised in the living room.”

“Shit.” His eyes widen. “We’re the worst cat dads ever.”

“Come on.” I leap out of bed and throw him his shirt. “Let’s see what mischief they got up to.”

Thankfully, as I assess the situation when we re-enter the living room, I can’t spot any signs of damage. Most of the kittens are napping or chilling. It’s like they didn’t give two shits about what we were doing. I chuckle to myself because that’s so unlike cats.

Roman checks under the table, the sofa, then shifts his gaze around the room. “I can’t see anything.”

“Me either.”

Except for a man I really like.

A man I’m going to be co-parenting an adorable, spunky cat with.

A man who I’m fall—“We should tell the gang,” I blurt out.

“That we’re adopting Joey?” Roman asks slowly.

“Yeah, that and the *other* thing.”

He crosses the floor and slides his big hands around my waist. “Is the other thing how good my dick tastes?”

I laugh. “No. That information I am keeping for myself. But we should tell them about us.”

He runs his fingers along the side of my neck, his dark eyes studying me intensely. “You sure? I don’t want you to

feel pressured or rushed.”

I take a moment to check in with myself. Why do I want to tell everyone about us? I don’t overthink it and go with the first thing that pops into my head. “I like you. A lot. And I want to share that with the people I’m closest to.”

Roman’s forehead deepens into a frown, his eyes darkening even more. “So...what are we to each other?”

“We’re...us. I haven’t figured out what word that might be yet. Any suggestions?”

He hesitates before saying, “I like the word together. We’re *together*.” As he says it, a smile stretches his lips. “Yeah. Got a nice ring to it. Don’t you think so?”

“I do. It’s perfect.”

We kiss, slowly, deeply, and it’s familiar but different at the same time. I didn’t think I was ready for anything more, but now I can’t see myself without him. I know it’s soon and that I have a lot going on, but I also know what I feel. And this feels right.

The best part?

I’m not just going with the flow, I’m *creating* the flow.

This isn’t about doing what’s expected of me, or trying to make someone happy, or avoiding conflict and keeping the peace, it’s about following my heart. Simple as that.

“Do you want to tell Bishop first?” I ask, once we’re all kissed out.

“Actually, yeah. If you don’t mind?”

“Not at all.” I loop my arms over his shoulders. “Tell your brother, and then we can make the grand announcement to the vet gang.”

ROMAN

“I have some news,” I say to Bishop at the shelter a couple days after Locky and I had *the talk*.

“Is it about the kittens?” he asks, not looking away from the computer screen. He’s wrapping up for the day so it’s probably not the best time to strike up a serious conversation. Still, it’s the first chance I’ve had to see him all week.

“Partly. And also about me and Locky.”

His head whips to me. He assesses me for approximately two point four seconds, before a devious grin grows on his lips. “I’m all ears.”

“They’re not that big,” I deadpan, and he rolls his eyes. Had to knock the wind out of his sails a little. He thinks he’s got it all figured out...and, well, actually, he has.

“Locky and I are *together*,” I announce, even though he seems to suspect it already.

“That’s awesome.” Bishop leaps to his feet, rounds his desk, and bundles me into a tight, brotherly hug. “Happy for you, man.”

“We’re taking it slow, and it’s still early days, but yeah, it’s happening.”

He pulls back and stares at me for a long time. Long enough that I start to think that maybe I’ve been walking around with something on my face all day. “Why are you looking at me like that? You’re being weird.”

“Sorry. I’m taking a moment... When you first showed up here...” He shakes his head. “God, I was so pissed at you. Of all the people to fuck me over, the last person I ever thought it would be was you.”

That familiar shame, never too far away, returns with a ferocious vengeance and swamps me. “Bishop, I—”

He raises a hand. “Let me finish. Please. It took some time, but I made a conscious effort to forgive you. And every day over these past few years, I’ve watched you. You’re working hard. Paying me back. Staying sober. And my decision to forgive you has taken on a whole new meaning.”

“I don’t understand.”

Bishop smiles and braces my arms. “It sucks that we had to go through some real dark shit to get here, but where I’m at today, with you, is... Man, I love you more than I ever fucking have. I’m so proud of you, Roman. I couldn’t have asked for a better big brother.”

That does it. The walls surrounding my shame, my guilt, my pain crumble. Tears start falling. Bishop hugs me again, and I let myself bawl in my baby brother’s arms.

“This is good,” he says softly, rubbing my back. “Get it out. All that shit from the past I know you’re still holding on to. Release it. You’re not the same person anymore. Forgive yourself, man.”

I take a step back, rubbing my hand across my face to wipe away some of the tears. “I don’t know if I can.”

“You can.” Bishop stares at me with my own eyes. “If I can forgive you, you can do it, too. And believe me, forgiveness is a gift. It won’t change anything that’s happened, but it’ll unlock a much better future. You are a good man. You deserve to be happy. Go into your life with Locky as the best version of yourself, not someone trapped by his past.”

A light bulb goes off in my head. I’d never thought of it like that. I want Locky to have nothing but the best, and I guess that includes giving him the best of me.

“It’ll take time,” Bishop says. “And it won’t happen overnight. But chip away at it. Day by day, week by week. And you’ll get there. I used to think I’d never be able to look past what you did. That every time I saw you, I’d be reminded of it. But now, now I see *you*. Who you really are, not the mistakes you’ve made. And one day, you’ll be able to look in the mirror, and you won’t flinch. You won’t see a fuckup or a failure or whatever it is you might be seeing right now. You’ll see the kind, decent, hardworking, dependable, less-attractive-than-your-younger-brother man that you are.”

“Thanks.” I let out a snot-filled chuckle. “Need a tissue.”

Bishop grabs the tissue box off his desk, and I blow my nose. “Thanks, Bishop. I love you.”

“Love you, too. Now tell me, when are you guys telling the gang? Because heads will explode.”

“Locky’s going to tell Noah, Chester, Chase, and Harmony at work on Friday because they’re on night shift and can’t make it to dinner. Then we’ll tell everyone else at our place that evening.”

Bishop’s eyes sparkle. “I cannot wait.”



“P-p-plans for the week-k-end?” Jeremy asks after we’ve demolished a dozen pizzas.

The dining room isn’t tiny by any means, but like always, we had to grab the spare chairs from the basement and there’s not a lot of room to move. But the gang is here, and that’s all that matters.

“Work.” Fulton’s the first to answer, with a dramatic eye roll, which Gus laughs off.

Fulton’s not wearing his signature animal T-shirt tonight, or if he is, I can’t see it since he’s wearing a sweater. Which isn’t that odd in itself. It’s cold out, even if it is quite warm in the house.

But what *is* odd is that, as I look around the table at Fulton, Bishop, Gus, Tate, Tyler, Daly, Monty, and Jeremy, they’re *all* wearing sweaters. Every single one of them. The only two people who aren’t are Locky and me. Did we miss the memo? Are sweaters what the cool people are wearing these days?

“If it makes you feel any better, I’m working as well,” Gus says to Fulton.

Fulton pretends to think about it. “Actually, that does make me feel better. You can buy me coffee.”

Gus chuckles. “Deal. But it’ll have to be tomorrow since I’m off Sunday. I have a friend from Australia visiting.”

“Ooh!” Tyler lights up and points his fork at Locky. “Do you know him?”

Locky lets out an amused grin. “I don’t even know the guy’s name. Do you think all Aussies know each other?”

“Well, yeah.”

Locky’s still grinning as he asks Tyler, “How many people do you reckon live in Australia, mate?”

“I don’t know,” Tyler answers. “Like, fifteen.”

“Million?” Locky checks.

“No... Just fifteen.”

The table erupts in laughter. Tyler looks genuinely confused so Daly whispers something into his ear, prompting Tyler to say, “I wasn’t that far off. Twenty-something million still isn’t a lot.”

“But it’s more than fifteen,” I point out, and everyone laughs again.

“Didn’t think you’d be able to top your *Boston is in Canada* remark at Christmas,” Tate says, wiping his eyes. “But I think we have a new winner.”

Locky uses the occasion to quiz the guys about their knowledge of Australia. Most of the responses include beautiful beaches, stunning landscapes, and exotic animals such as koalas and kangaroos. Daly shudders as he points out that a lot of the exotic animals can actually kill you. Monty brings up the Sydney Opera House, which prompts Jeremy to add another feature from the city—the bronzed lifeguards from the TV show *Bondi Rescue*.

I throw in hot guys with amazing accents, which makes Locky blush.

When Bishop mentions reverse seasons, Tyler bursts out laughing. No one else joins in. He plants his hands on the table and eyes everyone. “What? Come on. Reverse seasons. You guys really think I’m that dumb?”

“No one thinks you’re dumb, mate, but it’s true,” Locky says. “Seasons are reversed in Australia. We have Christmas in Summer and the coldest months of the year are between June and September.”

“Nice try.” Tyler sits up and folds his arms over his chest. “But I am *not* falling for it.”

We all look at each other. I grin at Daly. He’s in for a fun chat when they get home.

“Anyway, tell us about this friend,” Fulton says, bringing the conversation back to Gus’s original point.

Conversations with these guys go off topic all the time. Haven’t found the right opening to bring up what Locky and I want to tell them over dinner.

But we’ll get there...eventually.

“Actually, he’s the son of an old friend. His name is Wilby, and I met his mom, Georgia, during a stint I did with Vets Without Borders in my twenties. She passed away last year, and Wilby got in touch with me recently and said he had something to give me from her. He’s in the States and wanted to drop it off personally.”

“Any idea what it is?”

“Nope. I’ll find out on Sunday. But since I’ve been thinking about Georgia recently, I have an idea I’d like to run past you all.” Gus glances over at Tate, who shares his smile.

These two are up to something.

“Tate and I have been talking about escaping winter this year and actually spending a month down under. As an end-of-year bonus this year, I’m thinking of shouting everyone a trip to Australia.”

“Oh my god!” Tyler claps his hands. “That’d be amazing!”

Bishop and Fulton are wide-eyed.

Monty looks chuffed, and Jeremy leans in to ask Gus, “D-d-define e-everyon-n-ne.”

“All vets...and their fabulous partners, of course.”

Tyler clears his throat. Loudly.

“Yes, *former* vets and their partners, too.” Gus chuckles. “Logistically, we can’t all travel as one big group, as much as I’d love that, since, you know, we have a vet clinic to run. But Tate and I will be there for a month, so the idea is to split the gang in two and have half come down for the first two weeks, and the other half join us for the last two weeks.”

“Gus, that is so amazing and generous of you,” Fulton says, having recovered slightly from his shock. “I’ll be shouting you coffee from now until forever.”

“Not necessary,” Gus says modestly. “It’s my pleasure. I’m blessed. I have a beautiful partner I’m madly in love with. I get to do what I love for a living. And I have you guys. Talented, passionate, and committed staff and their equally wonderful partners. You’re my family, and I think this will be a really special, once-in-a-lifetime trip.”

I nod, agreeing wholeheartedly.

As the guys begin chatting away excitedly, making plans and thinking out loud about what to wear—that’s Tyler, naturally—my thoughts drift back to my conversation with Bishop a few days ago and having him tell me I’m not the man I once was.

I’m slowly starting to come around to that idea. That I have truly changed and that I need to forgive myself for what I did in the past. And as I look around the room, I get glimpses of the new life waiting for me.

Dinners with friends.

Animals everywhere. The only reason the dining room is currently animal-free is because we sequestered everyone’s fur babies into the living room while we ate. It’s already enough of a feeding frenzy without them getting in on the action, too.

And of course, there’s the man who’s got my heart.

Locky.

Did I ever think I’d fall for a guy? No way.

Am I positively over the moon and feeling like the luckiest sonofabitch on the planet? Hell yeah.

Our eyes meet and all the noise and the commotion stops, fading into the background.

This man.

How did I get so lucky?

He gives me a small nod as if to say *it's time to tell these guys*. I smile back, more ready than ever.

I clear my throat and prepare to have to yell to get the guys' attention, but nope, a simple, barely audible throat clearing is all it takes for everyone to pipe down and look my way. Well, half of them are facing me, the other half are swinging their heads between me and Locky.

They're being weirder than normal—which is really saying something—but right now, I don't even care because we're about to tell them our big news.

“Gentlemen, there's an announcement we'd like to make,” I say, gesturing to Locky.

He shoots me a dazzling smile as he tilts his head and tells them, “Roman and I are together.”

Cheers, hollering, everyone yelling out *congratulations*... Yeah, none of that happens.

Everyone's faces remain stoic as they all silently, in eerie, robotic unison, get up from their seats.

I glance over at Locky, who's just as confused as I am.

They file out of the dining room, no one uttering a word.

“What the fuck?” I say, as Locky and I follow them onto the back patio.

When we get there, they're all standing in a straight line, facing away from us.

“Uh, guys?” Locky calls out. “Everything okay?”

No response.

He turns to me. “Did we just say some secret words to unlock a parallel universe or something?”

“Or something is right,” I mutter, staring at the row of backs.

Then one of them yells out, “Three, two, one!”

They all spin around, sweaters lifted, to reveal their shirts underneath. Each T-shirt is emblazoned with a letter.

From left to right they read, *W E L L , D U H !*

“How the fuck did you guys know?” I ask, raising a suspicious eyebrow my brother’s way.

“Don’t look at me,” Bishop says. “I kept my mouth shut.”

“It’s been so obvious, you guys,” Tyler says with a huge smile.

“S-s-so happy for y-y-you b-both!”

“We all are,” Daly adds.

“And, even better, we get to be cat uncles!” Fulton declares, answering the question of what’s going to happen with some of—okay, probably all of—Joey’s brothers and sisters.

“Now, let’s get a photo for Harmony. She could use some good news.”

“What’s wrong with Harmony?” Locky asks.

“Banned from Grindr for life,” Gus says, shaking his head. “She’s takin’ it pretty rough.”

“The good news,” Tate says, “is that now all her Vet Shop Boys have found love, she doesn’t need it anymore.”

“True dat,” I say as I kneel next to Locky in front of the group, smiling so big my cheeks feel like they’re going to explode, posing for a series of selfies next to the man I love.

Someday, maybe even one day in the not-too-distant future, I can see myself in this same position, down on one knee, before him.

He's given me a whole new lease on life, and I already know I want to spend forever with him.

But for now, it's cheesy grins all the way.

LOCKY

“How are you so good at sucking cock?” I ask Roman, who’s currently doing a tremendous job deepthroating me in bed.

His bed, naturally.

As soon as the question is out, I regret asking.

Not because I don’t want to hear what Roman has to say. I do. But some other time. Because in order to answer me, he has to stop his warm, wet mouth from driving me into a frenzy.

“You fit me so well, baby.” He smacks his lips. “Plus, I love the way you taste.”

I nod and gently—*but firmly*—guide him back onto my needy dick.

Note to future self: never interrupt a blow job by asking a question ever again.

“Getting close,” I murmur, cupping his face in my hands.

He looks up at me with a mouth full of dick and winks. Fucking winks. The cheek of the guy. I don’t even have to ask if he wants me to pull out since it’s a well-established fact that he doesn’t. Ever. He really does love the taste of me, and it’s intoxicating. No one’s ever been so hungry for me or so unabashed about it. I’ve never felt sexier or more wanted.

“Oh, Roman.” My lower back vaults off the bed as warm currents of heat spread out in every direction throughout my entire body. “Getting *real* close.”

His tongue goes into torpedo mode and I lose it, barely managing to latch onto his shoulders as my cock erupts in his mouth. Roman pulls back and stops moving, swallowing every last drop of my release.

“Nice way to start the morning,” he says with a grin.

I start to smile but then I think about what I have to do today and my lips freeze. Roman instantly picks up on it, stops grinning, and shuffles up next to me.

“How are you feeling about everything?” he asks, gently stroking my cheek.

“Good, but worried.”

We have a mediation session with Bailey today. Jocelyn thinks it’s worth doing to try to convince him to grant me the divorce. Which is a wild thought. I could be officially divorced today.

Roman props himself up on his elbow, facing me. “What are you worried about? Bailey?”

“Yeah. What if he mentions—”

“It doesn’t matter what he says, you will be fine.” He lifts my hand and brings it to his lips. “He’s got nothing new on you. He’s revealed his hand and if he wants to commit a crime by releasing those videos, or bully you by mentioning anything from your past, we can’t stop him. But I will be right by your side, supporting you and feeling nothing but pity for someone who can only make himself feel good by trying to make you feel bad.”

My eyes cut to his, and I see it. I really see it. The change in Roman. “Did you just hear yourself?” I ask.

He looks a little shocked. “Yeah. I did. Fuck. Who am I?”

“You’re an amazing person. Maybe more amazing than you give yourself credit for.”

He peppers a few more kisses along my knuckles. “You know,” he begins softly. “I’ve always been afraid of my feelings. In the past, they drove me off the rails. Clouded my judgment and caused nothing but trouble and heartache. But falling for you... It’s different. You ground me, even though I’ve never felt anything this strong in my life.”

“I’ve never felt anything so strong in my life, either.”

He swallows, his grip on my fingers tightening, and I can tell what he’s going to say next, so I open my mouth and say it at the same time.

“I love you.”

The corner of his mouth tips up. “Jinx. Buy me a Coke.”

“If I have to keep my mouth shut, how am I supposed to return the favor and blow you?”

Roman’s grin extends. “You don’t have to speak to go down on me.”

I chuckle. “Good point.”

And those are the last words I say before ducking down and taking Roman in my mouth.



We arrive at Jocelyn’s downtown office with ten minutes to spare.

Roman looks great in the suit he borrowed from Bishop, even if it is a little tight on him. Actually, maybe that’s why it looks so good, it makes his masculine frame stand out even more.

“You got this,” he says as I glance up at the tall building.

“Thanks.”

It’s a cloudy day, and I just feel so cold on the inside. My marriage could be over today, and while there’s no part of me that wants to stay with Bailey, it’s the idea that something I thought would last forever is ending that’s got me in a funk.

To worsen my mood, footsteps close in behind me and a voice I hope to not have to hear again for a long, long time after today, says, “Well, well, well. Look who we have here.”

Roman and I turn around to see Bailey sneering at us both.

I close my eyes and sigh. “Can we just get this over and done with today? Please. I’m sure you want to go on with your life, and I’m ready to move on with mine.”

“With him?” Bailey scoffs, eyeballing Roman.

“Yes, with him.”

“You know he’s a criminal. An actual criminal. I looked into it, and he’s been twice convicted of—”

I cut him off. “I know.”

Bailey’s mouth hangs open, clearly not expecting me to say that.

He glares at Roman. “And you know that Locky’s not as innocent as he looks, right? Did he tell you what we did in Florida?”

“Actually,” I take a step forward as Roman growls next to me. “He does know. I’ve told him about it. Because that’s what people who love each other do. They tell each other things. All the things. Even the hard and ugly and regretful things. Because you can’t have a good relationship with secrets, Bailey. I hope that, if anything, that’s one lesson you take away from this.”

He shakes his head. “Whatever. You are still not getting that house. It’s mine.”

“Like hell it is,” Roman grunts out.

“I don’t speak to felons,” Bailey retorts, and I instinctively reach for Roman, afraid he’s going to smack that smug expression right off the douchebag’s face and wipe away all his progress.

All the signs are there. Clenched jaw. Fists balled by his sides. Knuckles ghost white. Chest heaving. Death staring Bailey with a murderous intensity.

But I needn’t have worried.

Because the man by my side is Roman 2.0. He doesn’t let snakes like Bailey get under his skin and rattle him. Yes, he’s pissed. *Seething*, more like it. But he’s reining it in and keeping his rage in check.

“You’re going to go in there”—Roman points to the building—“agree to the fair settlement that’s on the table, and sign the divorce papers.”

Bailey looks at Roman like he’s lost his mind. “And why the fuck would I do any of that?”

“Because if you don’t”—Roman’s voice is eerily calm, sending a cold shiver up my spine—“I’ll be handing over

evidence to the feds about the side hustle you've got going on."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe the thing you do where you sell breached credentials and direct access to brokers using the security clearance from your job."

"You're lyi—I mean. Bullshit. You don't know what you're talking about. You're just making shit up."

"Am I?" Roman's hands land on his hips, and he tips his head up at Bailey. "See, 'cause I've got proof, buddy boy. And last time I checked, stealing and selling security access carries a jail sentence of ten years. Looks like I won't be the sole felon in the group anymore." Roman ends with a smirk, like he knows he's got Bailey cornered.

Bailey backs away from us slowly, then pivots on his heel and marches into the building.

"How the hell do you know all of that?" I ask.

Roman takes my hand. "I'll tell you everything later."



"I called in a favor from an old buddy of mine," Roman explains after the meeting. We're sitting on a park bench a few blocks down from Jocelyn's office.

"*Buddy* means *former cellmate*, right?"

"Correct. Now gimme some." Roman leans forward and sticks his tongue out.

I let him take a big lick of my quadruple-stacked ice-cream cone that we got from a hole-in-the-wall ice-cream parlor to celebrate as soon as the meeting was done. "Told ya you should've gotten salted caramel. It's the best."

"They're all the best."

"All fifty flavors that were inside that shop?"

“Correct.”

I throw my head back and laugh.

I'm free!

When Roman and I went inside for the mediation meeting, Bailey was already huddled with his attorney in the corner. Jocelyn didn't even get a chance to speak. We were informed that Bailey was agreeing to all the conditions and would be signing the papers there and then.

Jocelyn put it down to her power suit and her latest round of Botox, which she reckons gave her the power bitch eyebrow arch to end all power bitch eyebrow arches, but I know the truth. It was Roman's threat to expose Bailey's bullshit that sealed the deal.

“Thank you for what you did. I can't even tell you how much it means.”

Roman shrugs like it's not a big deal. But it is. I'm convinced it's the sole reason Bailey stopped being a dickhead, agreed to a fair financial split on all our assets including the house, and signed those damn papers less than thirty minutes ago.

“And also, thank you for not losing your cool and punching Bailey's lights out.”

“It was tempting.”

“I've never resorted to violence in my life, and even I was tempted. You're a new man, Roman Turner.”

He shoots me an intense stare before breaking out into a smile. “Yeah. I really think I am.”

And I honestly couldn't be more proud of him. He could have easily punched Bailey in his smug face for the way he was speaking to us. But instead, he played it smart, revealed the dirt he had on him, and didn't have to resort to violence to get the outcome I wanted.

Because this is who Roman really is. Protective. Maybe even a little possessive. But a good man. A loyal and dependable man.

A *changed* man.

It's my turn to lean in and take a bite of strawberry ice cream from Roman's three-scoop cone. He doesn't even make me work for it, just extends his hand and lets me have it. "Mmm. That's good."

"It is," he agrees.

We fall into a comfortable silence, ice creams in hand, watching the Wednesday morning unfold in front of us.

"I have to tell you something," Roman says suddenly.

"Yeah?"

He sucks in a loud breath. "Before, with Bailey, you said that you can't have a good relationship with secrets."

"That's right."

"Well, there's something I haven't told you."

A thread of panic starts to coil in my stomach, but nope, I squash it down. Because I trust Roman. And I know that whatever he's about to tell me, even if it's something bad or that I might not like, is something that I—*that we*—can handle.

Together.

"I've had a crush on you since the first time we met. Obviously, I couldn't do anything about it since you were married, so no way was I going there. But then I heard you'd split up and..."

He averts his gaze, his eyebrows pulling in tight. "I wanted, *needed*, to see you."

"We did see each other," I say. "At dinners and at the guys' places. You avoided me like the plague."

"I did." Still no eye contact. "You were stirring up feelings in me."

"Oh." I start to get it. "And you were worried you'd revert back to your old ways?"

He nods. “Yeah. But I couldn’t get you out of my head. Once a week, I’d have dinner with Bishop and Fulton. He’d have the clinic’s work schedule pinned to the refrigerator. I’d snap a photo to see when you’d be working.”

“Why? You never came in.”

“No. I didn’t.” The muscle in his jaw twitches. “But I... I... I low-key stalked you.”

“What?”

“I’d follow you either on your way to work or after, desperate to just...see you. It was stupid and creepy, and I’m really sorry.” Finally, *finally*, he looks over at me, chewing into his bottom lip. “Are you...okay?”

“I think I am.” I smile at the warmth filling me. “It’s actually kind of romantic. Something that happens in movies or romance novels, but not in real life.”

“You’re not mad or weirded out?”

“No.” I take a moment to actually process it, and yeah, I really am cool with it. No one’s ever gone to such huge lengths for me before. It feels nice.

Plus, he’s being honest and transparent with me when he doesn’t have to, since it’s highly unlikely I’d ever find out about this any other way.

Maybe that’s why I’m so cool with it. Because once again, Roman is showing me the type of man he really is. A good, honest one.

“Does this mean you had feelings for me when you asked me to move in?”

“Busted. Yeah. But I also did genuinely want to help you out. It was awful seeing you get locked out of your house like that.”

I think back to that awful moment all those months ago. “So you weren’t visiting a friend and happened to be passing by?” I ask, remembering that’s what he told me at the time.

He shakes his head. “Nope. I was stalking you.”

I reach for his hand. “And I’m fucking glad you were. I would’ve done god knows what to Bailey’s car, ended up creating nothing but more of a headache for myself, and still had no place to live. You helped me out. Big time.”

“You bring out the best in me, Locky.”

“I think we bring out the best in each other.”

I lean over and kiss Roman. His mouth tastes like a bunch of yummy flavors of ice cream all rolled together to form one mega-awesome flavor.

“I love you,” I tell him.

He smiles, and it shoots straight to my heart. “Love you, too, baby.”

“Thank you for being honest with me. Let’s promise to always tell each other everything. No matter how difficult or awkward or how much we don’t want to say it.”

“I promise,” Roman replies with a smirk. “Starting with... I may need some more ice cream.”



Wanna go back to the beginning?

Flip the page to read the first chapter of ***Got Me Hoping*** >

SNEAK PEEK AT GOT ME HOPING

It's just a one-night stand, they said. It'll be simple, no-strings fun, they said. They. Lied.

I'm done with love and being broken-hearted. The only dogs I want to deal with are the ones I treat in the veterinary clinic I work at.

But at thirty-four, having my first one-night stand can't hurt. Right? The rules are pretty simple.

1. Don't spend the night.
2. Don't see him again.
3. Don't share anything personal.
4. Don't fall in love with him.

But when Haze, the guy I spent a blazing hot night with and haven't been able to forget about, shows up as our new receptionist, the rules fly out the window.

There's no way one night could lead to anything more. So why has Haze got me hoping this might just last?

Got Me Hoping is book 1 in the ***Vet Shop Boys*** series and can be read as a stand-alone. Expect plenty of humor, found family, a vet who's almost given up on love, a soap-making chameleon, sizzling chemistry, an unexpected office romance, an adorable golden retriever, a foul-mouthed parrot, an eye-popping world first discovery, and a heartwarming happily ever after!

Chapter 1 - Noah

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Back it up. You’ve never had a one-night stand?”

Three sets of eyes land on me like laser beams. The last thing I expected to be doing tonight is admitting *this* to my friends and colleagues, especially during a drinking game I haven’t played since my days in vet school.

“Why are we even playing Never Have I Ever?” I complain-grumble. “It’s a stupid game that always devolves into sex.”

“Uh, you just answered your own question there.” Gus smirks at me. He’s the boss and owner of Vet Shop Boys, the veterinary clinic Fulton, Chase, and I work at.

“No. I’ve never had a one-night stand,” I admit. I try to play it off casually, like it’s no big deal, but I can feel my cheeks heating up. I’m thirty-four and single, so why haven’t I had one? I scratch the back of my neck. “Is that weird?”

Fulton’s hand lands on my shoulder, his friendly eyes meeting mine. “No, it’s not weird. You’re just not wired that way, that’s all.”

Thankfully, that was our third and final shot for the evening. It’s a Tuesday night, and all four of us are on the other side of thirty, so we know our limits. I downed two out of three drinks, revealing that I’d both skinny-dipped and had sex on a beach. So not a total prude.

“*Should* I have a one-night stand?” My eyes bulge. Dammit. I hadn’t meant to ask that out loud.

“It’s up to you, man.” Chase shrugs before taking a sip of his drink. “I had a few in college before I met Julie and settled down. Some guys need to get that shit outta their system, you know?”

Gus nods. “There’s no harm in trying, right? I mean, you don’t want to be ninety, on your rocking chair with your husband by your side, and wondering what a one-night stand *could* have been like. Besides, it’s just some simple, no-strings fun.”

“Exactly,” Chase chips in. “Nothing more. Nothing less.”

I take a sip of bourbon and let their words settle over me. Gus resumes his conversation with Chase, who's telling him all about Miles the turtle who was brought in today with a small crack in his shell. Turns out the best thing to patch it up with is epoxy resin. Who knew?

I finish off my bourbon as my eyes sweep around the bar. It's pretty busy for a weeknight. We're sitting in what's become our usual booth, tucked away in the corner behind the pool table. The dance floor in the distance is silhouetted with bodies.

I guess you could say we're regulars here. Being a vet is the best job in the world, but sometimes it can get tough. It's not all cute puppies and cuddly kittens. So having a few drinks and socializing with one another is a good way to decompress and blow off some steam at the end of a long day.

"What's it really like?" I mutter to Fulton, who's sitting beside me.

He stops scrolling through his phone and squints at me, running the silver, thin-rimmed glasses back up his nose. "What's *what* really like?"

"A one-night stand." I reach for a glass of water and drain half of it in one go.

"Meh. Overrated if you ask me. Kinda like jerking off with your non-dominant hand."

I snort. "What does that mean?"

Fulton places his phone on the table and turns to me. "Well, it's familiar and feels okay-ish. It's also not that great and a little awkward, but it gets you the desired outcome."

"Which is?"

"You tell me."

I blow out a heavy breath. "It's been two years."

Fulton fiddles with his red and yellow polka-dot bow tie. "Two years since..." He stops himself as soon as he realizes what I'm referring to. "Oh."

“Yeah.”

“And there’s been no one since?”

“Nope.” My voice is small, barely audible over the music.

He adjusts his glasses. “And you’re still not on any of the apps, are you?”

“Apps?”

“Yeah. You know, like Grindr, Scruff, Tinder, Woof, Growl, Squawk, Oink, Yay or…” Fulton throws his head back before letting out a very horsey, “Neiggghh.”

“Okay, now you’re just making animal noises.”

He lowers his head. “True. But when did you realize?”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that in two years of being single, you haven’t used a single dating app. There’s gotta be a reason for that.”

My fingers circle the top of my glass as I think it over. Why aren’t I on dating apps or having one-night stands? I’ve had three long-term relationships and been left with a broken heart each time. Fulton says it’s because I give too much of myself. I treat my boyfriends too well. But isn’t that how love is supposed to work? At their core, aren’t relationships based on a foundation of *I treat him well, he treats me well*? That hasn’t exactly worked out that great for me so far. It takes two to tango, and I’ve been left solo on the dance floor more times than I care to remember.

I can’t deny that the lonely pull in my heart has been getting stronger lately. A gentle curiosity stirs in my stomach. Maybe some simple, no-strings fun might actually be the thing I need right now.

A pool game is starting up between a bunch of guys in front of us. I notice one of the guys who’s just walked in, he’s tall and has shoulder-length blond hair. I crane my head a little to get a better look, but one of his friends shoves a pool cue in his hands and blocks my view.

“What if I want to do it?” I say. “Have a one-night stand, that is.”

Fulton sits up a little taller and clears his throat. “Well, then. As your best friend, fashionista with exquisite taste, and one of the best veterinarians in all of Brookhaven, Virginia, let me offer you some sage advice, should you choose to resign from your position as President of the Blue Balls Society.”

I let out a low chuckle. Fulton is quirky as fuck. He likes wearing funky colorful outfits, he celebrates his half-birthday since his actual birthday is on Christmas Day, and he listens to Mariah Carey Christmas carols...in June. He also happens to be the best friend a guy could ever hope to have.

I drain the remaining water. “Lay it on me.”

“First, set your expectations to low.”

“Okay.”

“Once you’ve done that...lower them again.”

“Geez, you’re really selling it.”

Fulton’s mouth slips into a smile. “I’m a realist. Besides, like the guys said, it’s just one night of no-strings fun.”

“Fair enough.”

“Now before I give you the four golden rules for any one-night stand, I’m going to preface this by stating, for the record, that there is nothing wrong with you never having had a one-night stand. That borders on reverse sex shaming, and you know how I feel about any sort of shaming.”

“Roger that.” I tip my fingers in salute, grinning. I love when Fulton goes on one of his mini-rants.

“The rules, like all things to do with men and sex are, unsurprisingly, very simple.”

“I’m all ears.”

Fulton lifts a finger as he spouts each of them off. “Don’t spend the night. Don’t see him again. Don’t share anything personal. Don’t fall in love with him. That’s it. Stick to these four rules, and you’re golden.”

I quirk a cheeky eyebrow. “That’s an awful lot of *don’t-ing* for something that’s meant to be fun.”

“It is what it is.” Fulton shrugs, his face growing more serious. “Ultimately, sex is about connecting. But how you choose to connect, whether it’s with the one and only person you love and want to be with for the rest of your life, or a random stranger whose path crosses yours for a few hours, there’s no right or wrong way.” He takes a breath and looks like he’s about to say something else, when Gus’ voice drifts over to us.

“Has anyone seen my fiancé?” he asks with an exaggerated hand flourish. Even in the dim lighting, it’s hard to miss the dazzling bling on his ring finger. “My fiancé seems to have disappeared. Do you think I should go and look for my fiancé?”

Gus recently got engaged to Marco. He’s just a *teeny* bit excited about it.

“Geez, anyone would think you’re getting married or something,” Fulton teases, but Gus doesn’t bite. He’s got groomzilla written all over him in big bright neon letters, but after what that man’s been through, no one deserves to find true love more than him. I’m happy for the guy, even if it means we’ll no doubt have to endure months of wedding planning torture.

“I haven’t seen him.” Chase cranes his neck on the lookout for said missing fiancé. “He mentioned something about going to the bathroom, but that was a good ten minutes ago.”

Fulton lets out a yawn. “I might take off, you guys.”

Chase nods and reaches for his jacket. “Yeah. Me, too.”

We all get to our feet. Gus is still searching for Marco as we exchange a round of hugs.

“I gotta pee. I’ll see you tomorrow at work. I’ve got the late shift,” I announce to the group as I leave.

As I approach the men’s room, Marco stumbles out. He looks a little disheveled, his shirt’s hanging out, and if I didn’t know any better, I’d say his lips were swollen.

“Hey, Marco. You okay?”

“Uh, yeah.” He averts my gaze.

“We’re all leaving. Gus is looking for you.”

“Oh, okay. Cool.” He ambles past me without so much as a wave. Hmm, that was weird.

I take care of my business and hustle toward the exit when I stumble into a six-foot-plus vision blocking my way. Breath escapes my lungs as two hazel eyes with shards of gray pierce right into me.

“Why, hello.”

A twinge spikes in my chest. “Uh, hi.”

He drags his hand through his wavy shoulder-length blond hair that’s pulled into a messy bun, a few loose strands falling and framing his angular face. A sweet rosy hue fills his cheeks, contrasting nicely with his broody stubble.

A glimmer of a smile plays on his lips. “Having a good night?” His voice is calm despite the flurry of people and sounds around us.

I give a quick nod. Words would be useful at this point, I know, but my mouth seems to have lost its ability to articulate them. My eyes, on the other hand, are in overdrive, roaming up and down this man’s body.

He’s wearing a white crewneck, and the flimsy shirt material is clearly fighting an uphill battle confining all that soft skin and supple muscle, the outline of his strong, well-defined chest and abs clearly visible. Ripped, faded jeans stretch over miles and miles of muscled legs, and the outfit is finished off with a pair of dusty brown cowboy boots, bringing just the right amount of swag to his stance.

Oh, and the man smells good. Damn good. I close my eyes for just a second and inhale the spicy citrus scent wafting off him. It’s not a cologne or an artificial smell. It’s something natural, and it seems to be short-circuiting my brain.

He’s smiling at me, looking all flirty and inviting. He hands back the pool cue to one of his friends. That’s when I

notice he's wearing four or five different colored bands around his left wrist. One silver, a few dark and tan leather, and a couple of bright colors thrown in there, too.

"I'm Haze." He reaches his hand to mine.

"Noah," I reply. We shake hands. "Can I... I'd like to... I mean, would you like..." Oh, fuck. I really suck at this. It's been a while since I've done the whole *talking to a cute guy* thing.

Luckily for me, Haze interjects. With a mischievous twinkle in his eye, he asks, "Drink or dick?"

I blink. Excuse me, but did he just say—

"It seems like you want to ask me something." Haze speaks slowly, measuring me with his deep eyes. "And I'm guessing it's you'd either like to buy me a drink, or you'd like to see my dick."

"Drink," I squeak, before clearing my throat so that I don't sound like a prepubescent teen. "Drink. I'd like to buy you a drink."

He chuckles, his warm breath dancing over my face. "Too bad, Noah." He leans forward, the citrus scent enveloping me. "Because I have a *spectacular* cock."

We make our way to the bar and slide onto a couple of barstools. I order drinks—a beer for him and a soda for me—while trying my best to avoid visualizing his cock. I mean, how great can it really be? A dick's a dick, right? So why is my heart thudding so hard against my ribs every time I think about it?

As our drinks arrive, my brain and mouth both thankfully decide to come back online. "I've never seen you here before," I say, taking a sip.

"My housemate dragged me out. Don't come here a lot, even though we only live a few blocks away. I'm glad I came."

A heat flushes through my chest. "Same."

Haze lifts his glass, his bright eyes measuring me as he takes a sip. “You know, I spotted you the second my friends and I started playing pool. You were sitting in the corner booth, talking to your friends, looking all Henry Cavill-like.”

“Is he the one who plays Batman?”

“Uh, no.” A gentle smile pulls at Haze’s lips. He licks it away and says, “You might be thinking of Ben Affleck.”

“Right.”

“Henry Cavill is way hotter.”

“Uh, thanks.” The heat from my chest rises up my neck. “I noticed you earlier, too, when you walked in and started playing pool with your friends.”

Haze’s smile deepens. “What brings you out on a Tuesday night?”

“After-work drinks,” I explain. “Any reason in particular your housemate dragged you out tonight?”

Haze gives a slight shake of his head and I watch as a few loose golden strands bounce around his face. “Student life.”

“Oh, what are you studying?”

“Acting at the Brookhaven Performing Arts Academy.”

“Very cool. I’ll keep an eye out for you on the big screen.”

He clasps his hand over mine, but says nothing. Our eyes stay locked as we share a comfortable silence. Haze seems nice. And not just because he looks great and smells divine—there’s something else about him. An ease that I can’t help but find appealing. An energy crackles between us. I can feel it.

The conversation I was having with my friends earlier in the night crashes into my mind. Here I am, sitting at a bar with a cute guy who has just told me he’s got a great cock. Is this what perfect one-night stand material looks, talks, and smells like?

I chew down on my lower lip before asking, “Have you ever had a one-night stand?”

Clearly not what Haze was expecting me to say, judging by how high both of his sandy-colored eyebrows shoot up. “Why do I feel like this is a trick question?” he answers with a nervous giggle.

“Not a trick question. I promise. My friends and I were talking about it earlier tonight, and it turns out I’m the only one from my crew who hasn’t had one.”

Haze’s eyes narrow. “I find that hard to believe. You’re freaking gorgeous.” He glides a hand over my bicep, and when he looks up at me, the desire in his eyes is hard to miss. “Is this your way of asking me to be your first one-night stand?”

Haze pulls out his bun and reties his hair as he waits for me to respond. My breathing gets heavy, and I’m overcome with a feeling I haven’t felt in years.

Desire.

I consider his question. Is that what’s happening here? Is this what I want?

Deciding to take a chance, I place my hand on his knee, gently toying with a loose thread below the rip. The warmth of his body radiates through the denim.

“Yeah. I guess it is.”

He runs his fingers down his stubbled jaw. My heart’s beating out of my throat as I wait for his response. God, I hope I haven’t completely misread the situation.

“In that case, I would be honored to be your first time.”

A rush of relief sweeps through me. “First one-night stand,” I clarify. “I’m not a virgin.”

“Good.” Haze leans in even closer and smirks against my ear. “My spectacular cock and I are very happy to hear that.”

He gets to his feet, and I do the same. “So how do we do this? Whose place do we go back to?” I ask.

Haze reaches across the bar and chugs the rest of his beer. He wipes the back of his hand against his lips. “Has your place got walls?”

There's something sleek and graceful about the way he moves, and I find my eyes drifting again to the bracelets that adorn his wrists. I'm so distracted I could have sworn he'd asked me if my place has walls.

I lift my eyes to his face. "Sorry? Missed that."

He blinks and repeats, "Does your place have walls?"

Nope, didn't mishear him. "Uh... Yeah, it does. Doors and windows, too, if that helps," I throw in with a snicker.

"Great. It's settled then." He shrugs his jacket on and flashes me a wide grin. "Your place it is."

Continue reading [Got Me Hoping](#) >

WATCH CASEY ON YOUTUBE

This may come as a huge surprise to you, but I'm a real person :-)

To prove it, I started a YouTube channel.

Well, actually... I started it because I was keen to talk about MM romance. That's why I called the channel:

Casey Cox Talks MM Romance.

Creative huh? :-)

I share snippets of my work as well as interviewing other MM romance authors!

[Watch me on YouTube >](#)

ALSO BY CASEY COX

Series

VET SHOP BOYS

Small-town vets, big-time shenanigans

MOVIN' TO THE MOUNTAINS

Rough, rugged, and reclusive men

ESCAPE

Perfect summer reads

ELYSIAN ESCAPADES

Escape series spin-off

KINGS OF AIRLIE

An exhilarating sports romance

3 brothers. 1 world title. Who will win?

UPPER ECHELONS

Billionaire rom-coms with

You've Got Mail/Pretty Woman vibes

Stand alones

CLAUSING A SCENE

Best friend's dad, age gap, snowed in, bi-awakening holiday romance.

HEART UNBROKEN

Second chance romance set in
the *Escape* universe

NOTHING SPECIAL

Best friends to lovers

RAY OF SUNSHINE

Friends to lovers, single dad romance

DRAXL

Apocalyptic himbo madness

Audiobooks

Casey's books on Audible



ONE LAST THING...

If you enjoyed this book, would you mind taking a moment to leave a quick review - or even just a star rating? It helps indie authors (like me) soooo much, and I would really appreciate it!

Thank you for reading,

Casey, xo