



ROCK U
BOOK 4

LIGHT

ME

UP

CHRISTIE GORDON

LIGHT

ME

UP



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Trigger Warning: This book contains themes of gun violence, past and present emotional abuse, past childhood neglect and suicidal thoughts of a side character.

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Thank You](#)

[About the Author](#)

ONE

SILAS



I shut the tailgate on Caleb's Toyota Tacoma and tapped it. "All ready." Our gear was stowed and ready to bring back to the band house. We'd had a good gig tonight. A perfect gig. The band was getting more and more popular all the time. At some point, the casinos had to notice us and then, maybe Vegas. Yeah, even *I*, the eternal pessimist, could dream.

Caleb waved at me, while stepping inside the cab of his truck. "See you there for the unloading."

"Yeah, I know. Because Axel can't be bothered to wake up earlier to do it in the morning, even though he lives around the damn corner," I grumbled. Caleb and Axel didn't live at the band house anymore, but we all still had to unload our gear into the practice room there. As I glanced at the taillights of Axel's Jeep driving off, I twisted around and strolled in the opposite direction, toward my old Nissan Maxima. She was ten years old, but she was paid for and that's what mattered. I didn't owe anyone anything, especially my father.

I glanced up at a full moon, hovering over the palm trees lining the busy street and shivered, then pulled my leather jacket closer over my chest and let my dirty blond bangs fall over my face. It was cold in the desert in January, especially at night. I hung my head, watching my combat boots clomping along the pavement, my skinny jeans folded up over them at the ankles.

Shouting rang out behind the side of a convenience store, all lit up. "Fuck off. Help me! Someone help! Oh my gosh, get away!"

“Shit.” I took off, racing around the corner of the building, heat swarming my chest. It was a dude’s voice. What the hell kind of stupidity was I walking into this time? I stopped at a dumpster, bracing myself, quickly assessing the situation.

“Let go, fucker!” A young man with longer, spiked brown hair clung to the strap of a colorful messenger bag and kicked at the ankles of another man, who held the bag and was older and thicker, wearing a hooded sweatshirt, his face in shadows.

“No, give me your fucking bag!” The hooded man growled and swung back with a closed fist.

As my heart pounded in my chest, I mumbled, “Dude is going down.” I hauled my ass between them and shoved the hooded man away, yanking the bag from his hands. Fuck if I was going to let him hit spiked-hair guy.

The hooded man landed on his ass and skidded. “What the fuck, man?”

Oh, this was too precious. “What the fuck? Are you trying to steal this guy’s bag?” I pointed behind me, the bag hanging from my hand, taking a quick peek at the younger guy.

“Yes, he was trying to steal it.” He swiped the bag from my hand and held it to his chest, huffing, then flapped his hand at the assailant. “H-he followed me from the bar. He’s probably jealous I was flirting with the other guy.”

What the fuck? I glanced at him, his face in shadow. Were they both queer?

“It’s not your ass I’m after, sweet cheeks.” The assailant leered at spiked-hair. “I was only looking for money.”

“Sweet cheeks is right.” He twisted his hips and slapped at his ass. “And they’re not for you.”

Crazy fuckers, both of them. How was it only the weirdos found me? I didn’t have time for this. “Get the fuck out of here.” I waved off the hooded man, but kept my gaze locked on him.

He stood up and swiped at the ass of his baggy jeans, then stumbled and righted himself. “Maybe you’ve got some

money on *you*, huh?” He stalked toward me, sneering and tilting his head this way and that. As he came closer, the scent of alcohol wafted off him.

“Go home. You’re obviously drunk.” I peered at him, fisting and opening my hands, my pulse hammering in my chest. If he wanted a fight, I’d bring it, crazy or not.

“Yeah, go home.” The spiked-hair guy stepped to me and edged into my side, his body trembling next to mine.

I glanced at him up close, his stark blue gaze meeting mine in the moonlight under his messy bangs, cut to frame his face, his cheekbones impossibly high. Fuck, the guy was gorgeous. My gaze fell to the plump pout of his lips and my dick twitched. Yeah, my dick sure as hell liked him.

“I’m not drunk,” the hooded man slurred. “Fuck, I got no money for an Uber.”

“Is that why you were trying to steal my bag?” Spiked-hair guy asked. “Here.” He opened his bag, fished out two twenties and held it out with a shaking hand, the shimmer of his colorful jacket almost glowing in the low light. “Is that enough to get you home?”

I planted my hands on my hips. “What the hell are you doing? Have you lost your mind? The guy was going to punch you a minute ago.” A smirk teased my mouth. Who did shit like this?

“Yeah, should work.” The hooded man stared at it for a second, as if unable to believe his eyes, then snatched the money. He jogged a haphazard pattern down the street, pulling his cell phone out of a back pocket.

I dropped my mouth open, staring as the man left. What the fuck just happened?

Spiked-hair guy faced me. “He obviously needed the money more than I did.” He tapped my chest. “Well, hello, strong and handsome. I’m Cash.” He chuckled, touching his finger to his lips. “Guess tonight I’m giving out cash, too.” He looked me up and down. “I owe you at least a drink.”

My heart stuttered. He was hot, but no. Just...no. Did I have some sort of beacon on my forehead that attracted crazy people? “The bars are all closed.” And I had to get home to help unpack the gear.

“Then how about tomorrow?” He bit the edge of his lower lip, his gaze raking over me. “I’m free. Are you?”

“I uh...” I did not see this coming. “*Free* is a relative term.” I sized him up. He was hot, colorful, and definitely insane. And I was too tired to be making decisions like this right now.

“Hey, you were that hottie in the band tonight. The guitar player?” He brushed his hand down the arm of my jacket. “Look at you, all bound up in leather.”

I yanked my arm away. “I’m not bound up.” Fuck, I had no idea what to say to this guy. Normally I had good comebacks for this shit. Not now.

“Come on, go out with me. You’re not taken are you?” He side-eyed me. “I didn’t see you with anyone on your breaks. Some of the other guys in your band looked like they had boyfriends. You all are queer, right?”

“Yeah, we’re all...” I blinked a few times. Shit, I’d seen this guy at the bar by himself, but he’d been chatting people up all night. I was probably just another target for a hook up. But how the hell had he struck out looking the way he did? He was a dangerous fucker and off his rocker. That was it. “Dude, thanks for the offer, but I’ve got to get home. I have gear to unpack.” I pursed my lips. “My friends will be wondering what happened to me.” I winced. Now I sounded like I was scared of him.

“Okay.” He pouted and swayed a moment, then his face lit up. “Don’t worry, I’ll come see you play next time, and I’ll buy you that drink. Or two...” He flicked his tongue over his lips, then twisted on the heels of his pink glittery loafers and sauntered off toward the front of the store.

For a moment I couldn’t take my eyes off his shoes. Who wore loafers like that these days? Apart from Milo, maybe.

“Holy shit.” I brushed my hand over the back of my hair, tucking the long strands behind my ears and strode to my car, parked on the side of the road.

After climbing in, I looked in my rear-view mirror behind me. Cash wasn’t following me, was he? My gaze caught on my brown eyes in the mirror. His eyes had been so vibrant and blue. Damn, I’d never seen anyone with eyes like that. I combed my hand through the center part of my hair and pulled the back of it out of the collar of my jacket. I was too tired to think about this. I had to get home, unpack and go to bed.

THE NEXT MORNING, I turned over, and opened my eyes, the sunlight spilling into my room through the center crack of my blackout shades on my window. Fuck, all I’d done was dreamt of Cash last night. What was it about the guy that had me so messed up? I had to get him out of my head. Crazy...just remember that. *No crazy dudes, Silas*. You don’t need that shit. Especially after the break-up with Mia. She’d fucked enough with my head for a lifetime.

I threw my covers down and stepped out of bed, then stretched and padded to my dresser for some pajama bottoms. I hated sleeping with any sort of clothing on, so only wore pajamas when I had to leave my room. And free balling? My housemates were used to it by now. At least I didn’t walk around in skimpy underwear like Axel used to do with his junk hanging out.

After slipping on my pajamas, I ambled into the main room of the house with our tattered old leather furniture and into the kitchen. I gave Gabe a sideways glance as I passed him sitting at the farmhouse dining table outside the island in our circa 1990s kitchen in all its white appliance and Formica counters glory. Gabe’s curly blond hair curtained over his blue eyes as he read. He’d moved in after Caleb had moved out before the holidays. Now that we had an opening, it had made sense for him to be here instead of alone in his apartment. “When did you get up?”

He ate Frosted Flakes cereal out of a bowl and flipped the page of a textbook resting on the table in front of him. “I don’t know, not long ago. Coffee is made.” He spooned more cereal into his mouth.

I poured myself some coffee and added creamer. “Milo is still in bed, huh? The guy sleeps more than anyone I know.” With a smirk, I stepped to the table and sank into the chair next to Gabe. “What are you reading?”

“Corporate law. I’m trying to get a head start. This first year of law school is already killing me.” He ate more cereal.

“Yeah, my accounting classes are grueling this year. I can’t wait to get my master’s and my CPA in the spring so I can move on with my life.” I sipped my coffee. I should probably start looking for a job, too. But where? I had no idea. The corporate life didn’t suit me very well. Nonprofits on the other hand...

His gaze lifted to meet mine. “Where do you see yourself in five years?” He curled the edge of his mouth. “You can’t volunteer at the kitty rescue forever.”

I let out a soft snort. “Or work at Target. But yeah, maybe they’ll need a CPA at the rescue. Someone’s gotta do their taxes.” Which was a fucking great idea. Maybe I’d look into it.

With his brows lowering, he said, “Are you going to tell me why you were so late getting back here last night? You were so cranky we were all afraid to ask.”

“What, crankier than usual?” I drank more coffee, my insides warming, and my pulse kicking up. Cash... “I met this dude. He was...crazy.”

“Crazy?” He set his spoon into his empty bowl and tented his fingers over it. “Crazy how and what kind of dude?”

I shifted in my seat, glancing out the sliding patio doors into our ridiculously green back yard, the lawn freshly cut from the neighbor kid we paid, and the tall trees throwing shadows over everything. “So, get this.” I leaned in, focusing on him. “I’m on my way to my car and I hear some guy calling for help.”

“So, of course, you *had* to help him. I mean, you are the hero type.” He arched his brow.

My heart stung and I winced. I was getting tired of everyone calling me a hero after the shooting. I only did what was right. No way was I going to let my friends die at a fucking Guitar Center because of some asshole with an AK. “No, I’m the fighter type. I don’t let assholes be assholes. More people should be like me and maybe we’d have less assholes in the world.” With a smirk, I lifted my chin.

“Okay, okay.” He sat back in his chair, chuckling and shaking his head. “So, some guy was calling for help...”

“I get there and this, shit I don’t know, colorful as fuck dude is fighting with some guy in a hoodie over a messenger bag. The bag was as colorful as the dude, so I assumed right away it was his and the other guy was trying to steal it.” Cash’s gorgeous face flashed through my mind. Damn, he could be a model. Maybe he was?

He cocked his head and waved his hand. “Go on.”

I huffed an exhale. “So, I shoved the guy in the hoodie to the ground, grabbed the bag and gave it back. The colorful guy’s name is Cash, by the way.” I ran my finger over the rim of my coffee cup.

“Cash. Interesting name.” He eyed me. “What are you not telling me?”

With a shake of my head, I said, “Nothing.” I snuck my lower lip between my teeth. Fucking gorgeous, he was. Damn.

“Why did you say he was crazy?” He planted his elbow on the table and rested his chin in his hand, crossing his legs.

Gabe was doing that thing he was learning in school or from his dad, I wasn’t sure which, the *how to interrogate a witness* thing, or whatever he called it. Damn him. “Because after I got Cash’s bag back, we found out the thief was just drunk and needed some Uber money, so Cash handed him forty bucks. Who the fuck does that?” I smirked, my chest warming.

“I don’t know, a nice person maybe?” He peered at me. “There’s still something you’re not telling me. Spill it.”

I stared at him. Fuck, he knows. He sees it. “The guy is crazy. He would have gotten punched out if I hadn’t shown up. Why the hell would he hand out money like that?” I wasn’t ready to admit to anything, not even to myself. I didn’t need crazy in my life.

“Silas. What did this guy look like and is he queer?” The corners of his lips twitched with the tease of a smile.

“What?” I stared at him. How the hell did he do that? I was pretty sure I hadn’t given him any clues, the smart little fucker.

“Who’s this guy hitting up the band’s Instagram account?” Milo padded into the room, his wavy brown hair snarled in the back and falling down to his shoulders, and his pink sweats hugging his narrow hips. He held his phone to his face. “His name is...Cash?” He stopped between us at the table, then held out his phone to each of us. “The guy is fucking hot.”

“Silas...” Gabe gave me a sly grin. “That’s what you’re not telling me.” He grabbed the phone from Milo. “Damn, he is a looker.” He swiped over the screen a few times. “I’m pretty sure he’s not straight, judging from the photos of him”—he flashed his eyes at me—“At the gay bar on Mill Avenue.” With a tsk, he handed the phone back to Milo.

I chewed my lower lip, my heart quickening. “Yeah, he’s all right, I guess. Crazy as fuck though.” I didn’t want to look, but damn it, I really wanted to look. “What uh, what did he say?”

“He wants to know when we’re playing next, so he can come buy a drink for his savior.” With a dimpled smile, Milo’s green-eyed gaze met mine. “Who’s this savior he’s talking about?”

“Apparently, our Silas has done another good deed and saved that guy from getting robbed last night.” Gabe snorted. “You know what they say, Silas. No good deed goes unpunished. I guess you’ll have to suffer through this very hot guy buying you drinks at our next gig.”

“Jesus.” I hung my head as my traitorous mouth quirked into a grin. They didn’t need to see me being happy about it.

Milo tapped on the screen of his phone. “So, I told him about our gig at the Yucca Tap Room on Friday.” He bit at his thumbnail. “He’s responding.” He flicked his gaze to mine, then back to his phone. “He wants to know your last name.”

“No.” I shook my head, my heart fluttering in my chest. “Do not give some rando my last name. I don’t need a stalker. Fucking Mia is bad enough.” I huffed, crossing my arms over my chest. She’d been relentless the last month or so, trying to *talk*. There was nothing left to talk about and every time we did, I somehow felt worse about myself.

“What’s going on with her, anyways?” Milo dropped into the chair next to mine and opposite Gabe, his forehead wrinkling.

I sipped my coffee. It was too early for all this shit. “She still doesn’t understand why I ended it.” I shook my head, pursing my lips as an ache wrapped around my heart. I’d been with her for two years. But for two years, she’d sucked the life out of me. It took the shooting for me to finally see it. I couldn’t spend another day with her after that and had moved into Axel’s old room, since he’d been recovering at his brother’s house, with his new boyfriend, Remy.

“She always tried to control you, Silas. What’s weird, is you’re not the kind of guy who takes shit from anyone. Why did you take it from her?” Gabe studied me.

“I don’t know. I guess when I’m in love, I’m all in, you know? I try to do whatever I can for that person.” I scratched my brow. More like, I lose myself. But that was pretty much what she demanded of me, too.

“You should be like that, but you have to find the right person.” Milo pinched his lips. “Not someone who forces you to be someone you’re not.”

As I widened my eyes, I flicked my gaze to Milo’s. The guy didn’t always say much, but when he did, he was on point. “Anyways, Mia is still insisting we have things to talk about.

But I've said all I needed to say and every time we do talk, she tells me how I wronged her and all the ways *I* fucked her up." I scoffed, then pressed my lips together, my chest tightening. I wasn't the asshole she made me out to be.

Gabe grabbed my forearm and squeezed. "You were good to her. Don't listen to any of that shit."

"Yeah, don't listen. You might be a crabby fucker, but you're still one of the best guys I know. You have a good heart." Milo held his phone up to his face. "Now, should I tell this amazingly hot guy that you're not interested, but I am?" He lifted a corner of his mouth.

"No." I snatched Milo's phone out of his hand. Just because Cash was crazy, didn't mean I wouldn't give him a chance. *Fuck me*. "I'll respond." I typed into the DM.

@KNOTMEBAND

This is Silas. If you want my last name, you'll have to work for it.

@CASHPHILLIPS

Oh, I'll work for you, hun. You just tell how you want it.

"Oh, shit." I huffed a chuckle. What had I done? I rubbed my forehead, then typed more.

@KNOTMEBAND

I'll see you on Friday. I don't suppose there's any way for me to stop you.

@CASHPHILLIPS

It's a date.

"Oh, Jesus Christ." Jiggling my leg, I handed the phone back to Milo. That backfired. Again, he blindsided me and I had no good comeback for any of it. He *must* be crazy if he still wanted to see me after my response. Maybe he wouldn't

show. My heart pricked. But something inside me wanted him to show.

Milo gazed into his phone. “Dude, you have no game. What’s wrong with you?” He held the screen out to Gabe.

Gabe scoffed a laugh. “What the fuck is that, Silas?” He pointed at the phone. “Do you like this guy or not?” He tapped the screen and tilted his head. “I mean, why wouldn’t you like him?”

“I told you. He’s crazy.” I sipped more coffee and stood up. “I need breakfast.” And for this conversation to be over. “We’re practicing tonight, right?” And I had a shift working the returns counter at Target today. Oh, joy.

“Yes, we’re practicing. Axel has a new song he wants to work on.” Milo set his phone on the table. “What are you making me?” He gave me his most charming smile.

“A frozen pizza.” With a smirk, I stepped into the kitchen and pulled out a pepperoni pizza from the freezer, then turned on the oven.

“For breakfast?” Milo’s mouth dropped open.

“Yeah, it’s easy and it’s already lunch time.” I unpackaged the pizza and set it on a rung in the oven, hunger pangs swarming my stomach.

“I could go for some pizza.” Gabe threw a grin at Milo.

“Fine.” Milo slumped his shoulders. “Guess that’ll work.”

AFTER MY SHIFT, I set up in the practice room, tuning my guitar and waiting for everyone to arrive. I glanced out the lone window of the room over Gabe’s drum kit and into the darkness. We were practicing later than usual, but we only had the one song to get down.

Gabe strolled in and sat down behind his drums in the corner. “So, how was your day?”

“Fine. People are annoying. Especially when they’re trying to return shit they obviously bought a year ago and used.” I shook my head. Target’s return policy, at least at my store, was way too lenient and the customers abused the shit out of it.

“Oh. But I’m sure you stood there and smiled anyways.” Gabe snorted.

“I don’t smile. You know that.” I strummed a C chord on my guitar. “Where the fuck is everyone?” I still had some reading to do for my tax provisions class.

“We’re here.” Axel strolled in, his black hair framing his face, tattoos on full display under his Sex Pistols t-shirt. Devin followed him in, wearing a sheer top and a long skirt, his red bangs falling to one side of his face. Finally, Milo entered with Caleb, his dark hair flopping to one side of his head, his hazel eyes taking me in.

Axel tapped my arm. “I heard a hot dude is after you. I can’t imagine why.” He threw me a sly smile.

I rolled my eyes. “Fuck off, Axel.” I was going to get teased by him to no end. I shifted my hips and straightened my spine. “It’s not so hard to believe, is it? I mean, I don’t dress like it’s nineteen eighty five.” I flicked the bullet belt around his hips.

“You’re just jealous of my style.” Axel tucked his hair behind his ear, then picked up his sparkly blue guitar off a stand and flung the strap over his shoulder.

Caleb huffed out a long breath. “Guys, can we please get this started without a stand-off?” He grabbed his bass, then adjusted his mic stand. “By the way, Silas...” He smirked at me. “The guy is hot. How the hell did you hook him?”

“He’s crazy. It wasn’t hard.” I pressed my lips together. I was pretty sure they’d all heard the story already. I played a quick riff to make them all shut up about it. “So, we’re doing *The Anthem* by Good Charlotte, right?” I’d cut my teeth on this song when I’d started guitar and could play it in my sleep.

“We are. Devin came up with this one.” Axel patted Devin’s shoulder.

Devin glanced at me from under his brows. “It seemed fitting, for all of us, really.” The corner of his lips twitched with a faint smirk.

“That it is. Good choice.” I squeezed his bicep. Poor Devin still seemed a little scared of me. I should try and talk to him more. “How’s the new queer bakery in Melrose?” I lifted my chin at him.

His ice-blue eyes, framed by black liner, lit up. “It’s going great. We opened right before the holidays and it’s super busy. We’ve had to hire three people to work the counter and Dana is training a new baker.”

“That’s awesome, man.” I nodded at him and forced a smile. Did my face still remember how to do that? I should probably stop into the bakery on campus at some point. I hadn’t been there since Devin and Axel had their little graduation party there last year.

“Anyways. Let’s get this started.” Caleb set his fingers on his strings and thumped out a few notes.

TWO

CASH



“Look, Jack, he messaged me today.” I held out my cell phone to my foster brother and best friend in the whole world, while I sat at the dinette in our two-bedroom apartment. He’d finally come home from work at Dad’s restaurant.

Jack set two containers of food on the table, then planted his hand on the back of my chair and leaned over me, his brown hair tickling my cheek. “Yeah, but he sounds like a dick.” He straightened, peering at me with his deep brown eyes, rubbing his chin. “You spent what, ten minutes with this guy, tops?”

“He saved me, Jack. You don’t understand. He’s a hero. He took down the gunman in that mass shooting at Guitar Center. He’s strong and isn’t he handsome?” I cocked my head, then tapped on the band photo on their Instagram feed and zoomed in on him. Every time I looked at him, my heart did a little dance. That had to mean something, right? “I’m going to meet him on Friday when his band plays down the street at that Yucca place.”

With a sigh, Jack dropped into the chair next to mine and raked his hand through his long bangs. “You need to tone yourself down. Yes, the guy saved you from getting robbed. But it doesn’t look like he’s all that into you. I mean, look at what he said in his message?” He pointed at my phone.

I peered at my phone, my gut tightening. Jack didn’t understand. He wasn’t there. Under my breath, I said, “He didn’t tell me not to come.” Maybe I was reading more into this than there was, but I *saw* how he looked at me that night.

There was at least an attraction. I wasn't stupid. I knew when a guy was into me. My problem was seeing when they stopped being into me.

“Hey, so go check him out at his gig and see what happens.” He snuck his arm around my shoulders. “You're a great catch, Cash. Anyone would be lucky to have you, all those other guys were just stupid.”

I turned my head, his face close to mine. “Yeah, you were always my biggest supporter. If it weren't for you, I might be really fucked up right now.” He was my rock. When I'd finally found my forever family after two years in foster care, he'd taken me under his wing and made sure I learned how to trust and love again. Well, him and all the therapy my parents put me into. But trusting him was probably easier since we were the same age. And now we were twenty-three, so that made seventeen years together.

“So, Mom said she wants to do a family dinner tomorrow with us. Do you work?” He leaned back, his arm sliding off my shoulders, then opened the food container and pushed it toward me.

“I do, but I get off around five.” I glanced at my burger and fries from Dad's restaurant. I'd worked there along with all my other six siblings at one point, but I was getting better pay at Discount Tire as the assistant manager and now I didn't even have to do the tires, just sales at the front of the store. Good thing my manager liked me so much. He said my optimistic attitude was contagious.

“Good, then we'll head over together as soon as you get home.” He picked up his burger and ate a bite.

THE NEXT EVENING, we pulled into the driveway of our parents' little bungalow in Mesa in Jack's old Honda Accord. The place was small, but it did have four bedrooms, which we'd all shared growing up. It had become a place of fond

memories for me now, memories I used to block out the nightmare of what my life was like before they found me.

“We’re home.” Jack smiled at me and stepped out of his car, then stretched his arms over his head, skin showing between his t-shirt and jeans.

After climbing out, I followed him under the canopy of a large tree and across the short walkway to the portico covering the front door, taking a peek at my lime green shirt and maroon jeans in my reflection in the window. Colorful clothes can lift your mood, that’s what my therapist used to say. “I heard Mom talked Dad into new furniture.”

Jack opened the door and waved me inside. “Yeah, can’t wait to see it.”

Stepping into the main room, I held my fingers over my open mouth, scanning the modern tan couch and rustic tables in the room with black accents.

“How do you like it?” Mom strolled out from the kitchen, open to the room, wiping her hand on a dishtowel, her gray hair cut blunt at the shoulders and her blue eyes wrinkled in the corners.

“Looks fantastic, Mom. I think you channeled the Joanna Gaines look.” I stepped to her and kissed her cheek.

Patting me on the back, she said, “Thanks, Cash. I figured it might not have enough color for you.” She gave me a warm grin.

“That’s only his clothes, Mom.” Jack hooked a brow at me, then gave Mom a tight hug. “What’s for dinner?”

“We’re eating healthy tonight. I’m making chicken breast with butternut squash and steamed asparagus.” She hooked her arm in mine and led me into the kitchen.

Dad set a long table with napkins and silverware. “Your mother, she’s trying to kill me with vegetables.”

“Oh, you hush. You liked the squash the last time I made it.” She released me and walked behind the kitchen island, into

her dated kitchen of old wood cabinets and black appliances. They needed to update the kitchen next.

I stepped into Dad's arms, and he gave me a fierce hug. Without this man, I might very well have ended up on the streets. Well, without both of them and the same went for all my siblings. These were special people.

"So, what new cases have you got at the center, Mom?" Jack grabbed a few canned Cokes from the refrigerator, then handed one to me.

"Oh, some poor baby with a bad heart needs a home. The mother says she didn't do drugs while she was pregnant, but she's sure doing them now and the father is nowhere to be found." She tsked and shook her head while she peered under a pot lid on the stovetop. "Just breaks my heart."

"Diana, we're too old to be taking in a baby. You just remember that." Dad stepped to her from behind, placed his hands on her elbows and kissed her cheek.

My heart warmed. God, I hoped I could have that kind of relationship someday. These two had raised seven kids out of foster care, most of us in rough shape when they'd taken us in, and they supported each other in every way.

"Come on, boys, let's sit at the table." Dad picked up a bottled water and sat at the head of the table. "I want you both to tell me what's new."

"What, since yesterday, Dad?" Jack chuckled and sat on the bench seat next to him. "You see me almost every day at the restaurant." He snicked his Coke open and sipped it.

"But we don't talk while we're working, Jack." Dad shook his head and drank his water.

"I found a new guy." I dropped in next to Jack and gave each of them a grin. "He's a guitar player in a band and he's the one who took down the gunman at the Guitar Center shooting last spring." My pulse quickened. At this point, I'd looked in great detail at every single photo I could find of him on all the band accounts, even watched videos of them on

YouTube. The only thing I couldn't figure out, was who the woman was with the long black hair in the oldest pictures.

"That's nice, honey." Mom plated food onto platters and bowls by the stove.

"No, really, I'm going out with him on Friday." I lifted my brows and stole a peek at Jack. I already knew what he was going to say. I twisted my Coke on the tabletop.

"Cash..." Jack covered my hand with his. "You're going to see him play at his show. It's not a date, date, you know?"

"Son, I want to see you happy, but the other guys you brought around...I think...well, they took advantage of you. I'm sure this young man is great, but just be careful." Dad leaned back as Mom set the plates of food on the table.

"Don't discourage him, Jim. He sounds like a noble boy." Mom sat on the other side of dad, leaving half the table empty. The only time this table was full anymore, was at the holidays when all of us were together. Most of us had scattered across the state of Arizona after high school.

"I'm not discouraging him, just asking him to be more careful this time." Dad stuck his fork in a chicken breast and dropped it onto his plate.

I stole a peek at Jack, twisting his lips while spooning squash onto his plate. He and dad were on the same page, I could see it. This time would be different. Silas was not like the others. They'd see. No one had ever stood up for me before, besides Jack.

"So, how are the sibs?" Jack placed chicken on his plate, then drank some Coke. "You can just start at the top." He chuckled.

"Oh, Anne started a new bartending job up there in Prescott at a fancier place than the last." Mom cut into her chicken. "Mason is now a sushi chef over in Pinetop and Jennifer moved in with him not long ago." She tapped her lips. "I think she's waitressing at the same restaurant."

"There's nothing new to report on Andy or Mike. They're still up in Flagstaff trying to get through their general classes."

She ate a bite of chicken.

“But I think Ella has decided to go back to school, right, Diana?” Dad stuffed squash into his mouth.

“Oh, yes. She decided to take some classes at a community college online. She’s in New River now in a trailer with her boyfriend.” She wrinkled her nose.

“You don’t like him, do you.” I ate some asparagus. Mom would never be a good poker player. All her emotions were right there on her face.

“No, but I’m giving him a chance. He’s not a bad kid, just maybe not right for her.” She sipped from a can of soda water.

“Yeah, maybe someday me and Jack will drive out there to see her and meet this guy.” I drank more Coke. Ella was the closest in age to me and Jack at only 18 months older. Funny how only a few of us went to college. Mom and Dad were both college educated, Dad with his culinary degree and Mom with a master’s in social work, but neither one pushed it on us. I was still trying to figure myself out, but sales was becoming my thing.

“Hey, where did you get all that furniture from anyways?” Jack held a bite of chicken over his plate on his fork.

“Target.” Mom giggled. “It’s from the Joanna Gaines collection.” She glanced at me.

“I knew it.” With a shake of my head, I smiled. “I really like the plant things you have on the tables. Maybe I’ll get some for our apartment.” We could use some better décor in our place. Right now, everything was pretty bare.

“You go right ahead, Cash. You’re the one with the flare for stuff like that.” Jack patted my forearm.

A FEW DAYS LATER, I strolled down a wide aisle at the Tempe Target, on my way to the home goods section. I was going to make good on my plans to spruce up my apartment after being

inspired by Mom. My gaze snagged a dirty blond head of hair over a shelf of decorative pillows and my breath caught. “Holy shit.” With my pulse picking up, I jogged to the end of the aisle and rounded the corner. “Silas?”

Silas stood next to a cart with various store items, his red Target t-shirt stretching over his wide shoulders, his tan trousers hugging his narrow hips and leather and beaded bands wrapping around his wrists. His eyes grew wide. “Oh, no.” He stared at me with those beautiful brown eyes of his, tucked under long dark brows, his sharp nose hovering over generous, kissable lips.

I took a hard swallow. “You uh, you work at Target?” As I came closer, my gaze ran over his long hair, parted in the middle and falling to the collar of his shirt. How I’d love to run my fingers through it. *In bed*. My cock stirred in my jeans.

“No, I just like to wear the uniform and stock shit for fun.” He scoffed, then pushed a cream pillow between two green ones on the shelf.

“Uh, that one doesn’t go there. It doesn’t match. The cream pillows are further down.” I pointed behind him.

“Maybe I should let you do this, and I’ll go on break.” He threw the pillow back onto the cart, and planted his hand on his hip, his gaze skimming over me, then stopping on my mouth. He snuck his tongue out to wet his lower lip. “What are you doing here? Stalking me?”

“N-no, I came in here to buy some things for my apartment.” I cocked my head. He wasn’t looking at me like a guy who wasn’t interested. Oh no, he was interested. “But now that we’re both here, maybe you could take that break and have a coffee with me at the Starbucks?” How convenient that the store had one, right there in front of the cash registers.

Drawing a deep breath, he straightened his shoulders and eyed me. “What’s the catch?”

I let a smirk play on my lips. “Catch? There is no catch. I just want to talk to you, to thank you properly—”

“You don’t need to thank me. I did what was right. That’s not hard, is it?” He fingered the edge of the pillow, his head hanging.

“No, but some people, in fact a few people walked right by that night and did nothing. *You* did something.” I stepped closer to him, my pulse quickening. Being close to him did something to me. He had something, an inner strength maybe, that I needed to be close to. “Come on. I won’t hurt you, I promise.”

His gaze flicked to mine and the corner of his mouth quirked. “Are you sure?” He stepped even closer to me, our chests almost touching, his eyes focused on mine. “Who are you?”

“I’ll tell you if you have that coffee with me.” I brushed my hand up his bare forearm and goosebumps rose on his skin.

His breath caught and he twisted away, then grabbed the cart. “I can’t. I have to work. I don’t get a break today. I’m only here for four hours.” He pushed the cart down the aisle, his tight ass toward me. “Besides, I wasn’t supposed to see you until Friday.”

I followed behind him. Was he looking forward to seeing me on Friday, then? “Okay, so when do you get off work?” At this point, I’d stick around and wait if I had to.

He stuffed the pillow onto the shelf with its matching counterparts, then faced me. “You’re a persistent bastard, aren’t you?” The threat of a grin flickered across his lips.

“I am. There’s no way to shake me, so you might as well quit trying.” I gave him my most flirtatious smile and fluttered my eyelashes at him.

“Oh, my God.” As a chuckle rumbled in his chest, he rubbed his eyes, then focused on me. “You’re kind of weird, you know that?”

“Yeah, I know. But I’ve learned to accept and love my weirdness.” I shrugged my shoulders. “You’ve got to love the person that’s inside you. At least, that’s what my therapist always told me.” I gauged his reaction. That was my invitation

to my past and if he couldn't accept it, then maybe he wasn't the man I'd sensed he was.

His gaze softened and he ambled toward me. "Yeah, I have a therapist, too. Guess there's a little weirdness inside me, as well."

I widened my eyes. That was not an answer I'd ever heard. People usually asked me if I was mentally ill or something. *The shooting*... "I know about what you did at the—"

"Yeah, let's not talk about it, okay?" He pursed his lips and his eyes dazed for a heartbeat. "I get off in an hour if you want to grab a coffee. But not here. I don't want my coworkers giving me shit. I do have to study tonight, so only a coffee. Okay?"

"Uh, yeah." My heart flip-flopped in my chest. Oh my God, I'd gotten through to him. "Do you want to stop in at Dutch Bros?"

"No." Scoffing a laugh, he shook his head. "Fuck, no. One of my best friends works there, and he'd tease the shit out of us. No fucking way."

"Okay, the other Starbucks down the road?" I lifted my brows. There was practically a Starbucks on every corner in Tempe.

"Yeah, let's go there. I'll meet you there in an hour." He puffed out a breath, his gaze landing on my mouth again. "What um, what sort of things were you looking for?"

"Oh, some cute little fake plants I can put on a side table." I twined my hands over my chest. He was going to help me shop. How adorable was that?

"Over here." He waved his hand and strolled a few aisles over. "All the fake plants are down here." He pointed to shelves lined with everything from tall, broad leafed plants to succulents and flower arrangements.

"Come with me." I grabbed his hand and hauled him down the aisle.

“Wait, what are you doing?” He stopped next to me his eyes wide. “Dude, you’re holding my hand at work.” He attempted to slip his hand free.

I tightened my grip on him, enjoying the warmth and the calluses on his finger pads brushing over the back of my hand. Definitely a guitar player. “I’m about to ask you your opinion.”

Leaning in and in a low voice, he said, “Then let go of my hand.”

“Only if you kiss me first.” I puckered my lips.

“What the fuck?” With his mouth dropping open, he yanked his hand free. “Dude, I’m at *work*.”

I let out a soft snort. “I’m messing with you, relax.” Oh, this was too easy. He was so serious all the time. I could show him how to have some fun, be a little crazy.

He tugged his t-shirt over his trousers and huffed. “Yeah, okay. Fine.” He darted a glance around the store.

“Which one do you like?” I tapped my finger to my lips, my gaze catching on a row of orchids in an assortment of pinks and yellows. “Oh, these. What do you think?” I picked up a smaller one in pink and held it to my cheek.

“That fits you. Perfect.” He huffed and planted his hands on his hips. “Can I go back to work now?”

“You most certainly can. Thank you for helping me again.” I snatched his hand from his hip and squeezed it then let it go. I couldn’t help myself.

“Yeah, fine.” He rubbed his hands together. “See you in uh, an hour.”

“Absolutely. I’m looking forward to it.” With a coy grin, I brushed by him and made my way to the registers, my hand and side tingling from his touch. I couldn’t believe my luck. Jack was going to die when I texted him to let him know I was meeting my Silas for coffee before coming home tonight.

THREE

SILAS



What the actual fuck was that? I watched Cash saunter away from me, his blue striped shirt fitted to his slender frame and yellow skinny jeans hugging his swaying ass in a wholly satisfying way. Goddamn, he had a nice body and a very fuckable ass. But where the hell does one find *yellow* jeans? His hair wasn't spiked tonight, but laying flat around his face. The striking beauty of that man still caught me off guard. If I weren't so young, I'd have thought I was about to have a heart attack, right here in this Goddamned store. My stupid manager probably would have tried to use the fucking defibrillator on me and killed me off for good.

I stared down the fake plant aisle, then drew a deep breath. I needed to get all those returns back on the shelf before I left tonight. My heart stuttered. I was going to meet up with Cash and have coffee. How the hell had I agreed to that? I didn't have a change of clothes, so I'd have to go in my monkey suit. Damn it. Or, maybe Gabe would be nice and drop something off for me.

I fished my phone out of my back pocket as I strode to my cart. But if I asked him to bring me clothes, then he'd ask why. And then I'd have to say...fuck it, it's none of his business. I tapped on my screen.

SILAS

Bro, can you drop off some jeans and a t-shirt at Target for me?

GABE

Sure, why? Got a hot date?

I shook my head, snickering. Here we go...

SILAS

None of your business.

GABE

Who is he, or she?

“Fucking really?” I smirked. Did the guys always have to be in everyone’s business?

SILAS

None

SILAS

Of

SILAS

Your

SILAS

Business

I watched the three dots pop up, disappear, then flicker at me. “Please, Gabe, just do it without asking questions for once,” I muttered to myself.

GABE

Sure, be there soon.

“Thank God.” I relaxed my shoulders and blew out a breath. Now I wouldn’t look like a dweeb when I met Cash for coffee. But at least now I knew if he *was* crazy, he was getting help for it. Jesus, did that make it any better? I was way out of my element with this one.

AN HOUR LATER, I pulled my old gray Maxima into a parking spot at Starbucks and primped my hair in the rearview mirror, then climbed out into the chilly night air and zipped up my leather jacket. I glanced around at the busy intersection, the tall palm trees lining the street, then the modern square building housing the coffee shop. Thankfully, Gabe had brought me a decent black shirt and my skinny jeans without the rips, so I’d feel comfortable. I was pretty sure he was thinking this was a date. I’d have some explaining to do when I got home.

Inhaling deeply, I stuffed my fingers into my front pockets and strode through the glass door of the shop. It was dinner time, so not many people were inside, just a few students with their laptops open, probably studying.

Cash sat at a table in the corner, a bright smile on his gorgeous face, and waved at me.

I upnodded at him, my heart fluttering in my chest, then pointed at the counter. I needed a sandwich and definitely some caffeine if I was going to go home and study after this.

He stood up and met me at the counter, behind a woman who was ordering. “Hey, handsome.” He bumped his shoulder on mine and edged into my side. “I’m glad you didn’t stand me up.”

“Why would I do that?” I glanced at him, fighting the urge to look at his lips. Why did he always have to get so damn close? I inched away from him, and he closed the gap, the heat of his body tingling my side.

With a shrug, he said, “I don’t know. Some guys are like that. They say one thing and do another.”

“I’m not that guy. I do what I say and say what I do.” I furrowed my brow. Did that come out right? My mind didn’t want to work when I was around him. It was infuriating.

As we stepped to the counter, Cash bent over and set his elbow on it, giving the female cashier a flirtatious smile. “Hi.”

Was he gay or bi? Did he flirt with everyone? As heat pricked my chest, I lowered my brows. I had to watch this guy. He’d been chatting everyone up at the bar last weekend, too.

The barista smiled at him and fluttered her lashes. “Hello. What can I get for you?”

He planted his hand in mine under the counter. “What do you want, hun?”

Hun? I gaped for a second, then said, “Just a medium coffee and one of those ham and Swiss sandwiches.” I tugged my phone out of my pocket with my free hand and held it up to pay.

“And you?” Her gaze shifted to Cash and her smile widened.

“Same on the sandwich, but get me a caramel macchiato with extra caramel. I like sweet things.” He flicked a coy grin at me.

Of course he does. After the girl left to get our order, I leaned over him. “I’m not sweet.”

“Oh, I bet on the inside you are.” He straightened, then pushed my phone down. “Let me pay for this. I’m the one who asked you out and I owe you.”

“You don’t owe me a thing.” Why did everyone have to make a big deal out of doing the right thing? Was our society really so fucked up that it had become the exception and not the norm?

“*I’m* paying.” He squeezed my hand, his gaze locking on mine. “I insist.”

I studied him. He was serious about this. “Fine.” I slipped my phone into my pocket and when the barista came back with the heated sandwiches and my plain coffee, Cash paid. I

stepped to the condiments area and while fixing my coffee with cream and sugar, a young male barista called Cash's name and set his drink on the pick-up counter.

Cash grabbed his sweet coffee drink and met me at the table in the corner, him dropping into the chair by the wall and me sitting across from him.

I set our sandwiches on the table, then opened my bag and touched the sandwich. It was still a little too hot to eat. What, did they use flame throwers in their microwaves here or something?

He sipped his coffee drink. "So, what are you studying? Are you at ASU?" He set his elbow on the table and his chin in his hand, his gaze roaming over me.

"Yeah, I'm at ASU. I'm studying accounting. I want to be a CPA." I tested my sandwich again. Finally, it was cool enough to eat. I slid it out of the bag and bit into it, the melted cheese mixing with the salty ham and the toasted bread. God, these were good. I moaned softly.

He wetted his lips. "Yeah? You don't look like an accountant."

"What are accountants supposed to look like?" I licked some cheese off my finger, sliding it between my lips and into my mouth, then out.

"Jesus." He squirmed in his seat, his lips parting. "I could watch you eat that sandwich all day."

"Stop it." I snapped my gaze to his. Me eating a sandwich was turning him on? My cock stirred. Fuck, not good. Or was it? "Tell me something, do you identify as gay or bi or what?"

"Gay all the way." He snapped his fingers and giggled.

"Oh, brother." I fought off a grin. I'd met a lot of gay men in my day, but no one quite like him. "So, why get flirty with the barista if you're gay?" I lifted my chin.

"Because I get a better drink that way." He sipped his coffee, then ate a bite of his sandwich.

“So, you flirt to get what you want?” I narrowed my eyes at him. I think I had him all figured out and it had only taken a few minutes.

“If you got it, flaunt it, right?” His grin waned and he leaned in over the table. “Look, it took a long time for me to be happy with who I am. I’m just trying to spread the happiness around me.”

I peered at him. Maybe there was more to him than it seemed. “Why is that? Did you have a hard time coming out or something?” Not everyone had the understanding parents me and most of my friends had. Like Devin, the shit he went through with his parents had been fucked up.

His gaze fell to the table, and he ran his fingers up and down the sides of his drink. “No, coming out wasn’t a problem. I uh, I grew up in foster care. Well, I started out with my birth parents, but was taken by Child Protective Services when I was about four, spent some time in foster care and finally found my forever family when I was six.” He bit his lower lip.

I watched him, how he shrank in on himself, like the light inside him had dimmed by talking about it. An ache crept into my chest. “I’m sorry, Cash.” I held my arm across the table and wiggled my fingers. If I could erase it all for him, I would. “Here, hold my hand.”

He set his hand in mine, the features of his face relaxing. “You really are a hero, aren’t you?”

“Don’t call me that.” I pinched my lips. Shit, that word was like nails on a chalkboard to me now.

“Why?” He squeezed my hand. “What you did—”

“What I did is what anybody should do in a situation like that.” I huffed and met his gaze. Shit, I didn’t know if he was talking about the shooting or the robbery. “I’m sorry.” I shook my head, then released his hand, sitting back in my seat and combing my fingers through my bangs. “I guess I’m a little sensitive about that word now. I’ve been working through it with my therapist, but let’s leave it at that. Okay?”

“Sure.” He ate more of his sandwich, gazing out the window.

I slumped my shoulders. Well, I’d fucked that up. Maybe I was the crazy one? He probably didn’t want to come to the gig on Friday now. I fingered the edge of my sandwich bag. How could I recover? Fuck, I did want to recover. I *liked* him, colorful and perpetually happy as he was. “Cash?”

“Yeah?” He snapped his gaze to mine, a smile fluttering over his lips.

I sucked in a breath. “Are you...do you still want to...I mean—”

He arched a brow. “Am I coming to your show? Fuck yes. Do I want to see you before that? Yes, if you’ll let me.” He set his sandwich down, jumped up over the table, grabbed the back of my neck and planted a quick kiss on my lips. “Shit, that is what you were going to ask me, right?” He choked out a giggle as he dropped into his seat.

Staring at him, I brushed my finger pads over my lips. Did he just? He fucking kissed me. He planted one right on me before I was ready. Damn it. He was a stealthy bastard. “Yeah, that’s what I was going to ask you.”

As a corner of his lips curled, he said, “So, you *do* like me.” He shimmied in his seat and ate more of his sandwich.

“Look at you, all fucking proud of yourself.” I scoffed a laugh and drank my coffee, my mouth tugging up into a grin. This fucker was making me smile without my consent. He might ruin my reputation. With a shake of my head, I finished off my sandwich. I needed to go home and study.

“So, can I see you tomorrow?” He drank the last of his drink, making a crackling sound through the straw.

“I have a test on Friday, and I set aside tomorrow to focus on that, so, no.” I snuck a peek at him. I *wanted* to see him, but couldn’t let myself get distracted from my studies.

He sighed, then threw me a grin. “That’s okay. I’ll see you on Friday night then.”

“Yeah, just know, when I have a gig, I’m sort of working. I mean, we can hang on the breaks, but you know.” I finished off my coffee. Some people thought if they met me at a gig, they’d be hanging out with me all night and it wasn’t the case.

His brows knitted for a second. “Yeah, I know.” He flashed me a coy smile. “Guess I’ll have to get your number and your last name so we can chat in the meantime.”

“Sure.” I drew a deep breath. Shit, was I really doing this? Was I ready? “My last name is Brown. Give me your number and I’ll call you.” Yeah, I was doing this. Me and crazy hot guy were a thing, as Axel would say. Fuck, Axel was going to go apeshit.

He gave me his number and I called him, then he said, “My last name is Phillips. You know, in case you want to look me up on social media and drool over all my pictures like I’ve been doing with your band photos.” He snuck his lower lip between his teeth.

My breath caught and a shiver raced down my spine, twitching my dick. That was sort of hot, thinking he might have been...what, jerking off to photos of me? Don’t be stupid. “Yeah, okay.” I nodded, then stood up and threw our trash into a garbage bin.

“I’ll follow you out.” He strolled next to me out of the store and into the dark night, then we stopped at my car.

I fished my keys out of my pocket, my pulse kicking up. “So, um...”

Wrapping his hand around the nape of my neck, he tugged me close and pressed his lips on mine, backing me up into my car door, then wound an arm around my waist and pushed his half-hard cock into my hip.

I slanted my mouth over his, a shiver heating my skin, then cupped his cheeks and slid my tongue between his lips. He tasted of sweet coffee and even smelled sweet, like fresh flowers. My dick stiffened behind my zipper and ached. My body wanted him, my fucking heart wanted him, and my brain was probably on board, too, if I let it.

With a soft moan, he flicked his tongue against mine, deepening our connection, our bodies flush. As he softly broke the kiss, he looked into my eyes. “Silas, you’re going to wreck me. I can already tell.”

I swallowed hard. What was I supposed to say to that? He was way out of my league. “I-I think you might have already wrecked me.”

As his lips quirked, he freed me. “Friday, it’s a date. I don’t care if you’re *working*.” With a flourish, he sauntered off, his hips swaying as he left, then climbed into a lime green Mini convertible.

Of course he drove a car like that. It fitted him, all spunky and colorful. All the things I wasn’t. As I winced, I opened the door on my old Maxima. Fuck, I was in trouble.

THE NEXT DAY, I strolled out of the sunshine in the late morning and into the Hayden Library, my face buried in my phone. I had an hour between classes, and I should be studying and not looking Cash up on Instagram. But try telling my fucking brain that. I strolled through the long foyer, glancing up at the open second floor above me, all whites and grays after the recent renovation of the building. It was all very modern now and had lost some of its charm if you asked me. But whatever, I had shit to do.

I dumped my ass into one of the new study couches in blue, nestled among an opening in the stacks. Here, no one would find me and bother me. I set my backpack next to me, then slipped out my laptop and rested it on a laptop table with my phone. With a deep inhale, I glanced at the phone. No, I would stop looking at his photos. I would not wonder who every guy was that was in a photo with him. I would focus.

“There you are. So predictable.” Mia waltzed up to my couch and dropped into the corner, flinging her long black hair behind her shoulder, her dark lashes fluttering around her light brown eyes. She studied me a moment, then crossed her jean-

clad legs and flung an arm over the back of the couch. Her tight shirt barely covered the top of her breasts.

My chest pinched. “Why are you here?” I powered up my laptop. Nothing good could come of this.

“Because you don’t seem to be taking my calls. Did you block me?” She glared at me, then dumped her backpack on the floor.

“I...” I gritted my teeth. Yeah, I fucking blocked her. “No, why would I do something like that?” I eyed her.

“Because every time I try to call you, it goes to voicemail, and you never return my texts. Or read them.” She crossed her arms over her chest with a huff.

“Maybe I happen to be busy. I’m in my final year here, you know.” I straightened my shoulders. Enough of this shit. “Mia, there’s nothing left to talk about. I don’t know how many times—”

“Yes, there is. You owe me an apology.” Her nostrils flared. “Kaitlin even says so.”

“Oh, Kaitlin. Well, then it must be true. She’s had how many boyfriends?” I gave her a tight grin. Kaitlin was her best friend and a busy body, always butting in on our relationship, probably because she never landed one of her own. She never liked me, and I never liked her.

“That’s not the point. You never apologized for how badly you treated me. I deserve to hear it. You were...you are a narcissist.”

A sting pierced my heart. That was her diagnosis of the day for me. I had multiple mental health issues according to her. All of which my therapist said was complete bullshit. It was more like *she* was a narcissist. “I’ll add that to my list.”

“See? You can’t even just say you’re sorry.” She slapped my laptop closed. “I’m talking to you, Silas Brown, and you will acknowledge me.” She pressed her lips together, her gaze hardening.

“I’m sorry. There, are you happy? Will you go away now?” I opened up my laptop and hit the enter button, so I could login. I didn’t even know what the fuck I was sorry for. Ever meeting her? Wasting two years of my life being badgered by her?

“You’re not sorry. You’re just trying to get rid of me.” She slammed the laptop shut again and held her hand on it.

“My, you’re so perceptive.” With a stiff smirk, I picked up my backpack, stood up, then wrestled my laptop from under her hand. “If you won’t leave, then I will.” I brushed my hair from my face, then slid the laptop into my bag.

“No, you won’t.” She jumped from the couch and snatched my bicep, her gaze boring into mine. “You need to acknowledge the pain and suffering you inflicted on me.” Her gaze flicked toward the stacks, then fixated on me. “You emotionally abused me.”

I stared at her, my mouth dropping open. That was a new one. Heat swarmed my chest. What sort of bullshit was that? “Are you fucking kidding me? Who abused who? Who wasn’t allowed to go out with their friends for a drink? Who did your fucking laundry for you? Who always brought the groceries home and cooked for you?” Through my teeth, I said, “Who took care of you every time your mom said something terrible to you?” God, the times I’d held her, listened to her, always made sure *she* was happy while sacrificing my own happiness. No wonder I became a cynical, moody fucker.

“You couldn’t drink with your friends because you’d look at guys when you were with them.” She glared at me from under her penciled brows. “You’re queer.”

“I am and there’s nothing wrong with that. You knew going in I was bi, and you said you didn’t have a problem with it.” *Jesus Christ, we’re back to this.* I rolled my eyes. “I never once cheated on you. Leave me alone.” I yanked my arm from her grasp, flung my backpack over my shoulder and stuffed my phone into the front pocket of my jeans, my pulse thrumming in my chest, my palms slickening with sweat.

“Everybody thinks you’re such a fucking hero, Silas. But you’re not a hero. You let all those people die before you did anything. It wasn’t until the gunman shot your friend, *Axel*, that you stopped him.” She narrowed her eyes at me, a smirk crawling over her lips.

Pain sliced through my chest. How did she always know the best way to pummel me into the ground? She’d learned that shit from her mother. She never saw she was just like her. I clenched my jaw, the corners of my eyes stinging. “Fuck off.” I stomped out into the open foyer, then slapped the doors open and puffed out a ragged breath into the warming air, stopping at the shallow pool of water at the entrance, willing myself to calm.

I watched the ripples of the water, shimmering in the sunshine, focusing on their movement across the pool as if they didn’t have a care in the world. Nothing she said was true. They were just words...but fuck if it wasn’t what I’d told myself a thousand times after the shooting. What if I’d acted sooner? What if instead of hiding, I’d confronted the guy at the doors? I was pretty sure I’d been the first one to see him.

Fisting my hands, I blinked, and a traitorous tear rolled down my cheek. “Fuck.” I swiped at my face. I’d thought I’d gotten over this shit. I’d worked so hard with my therapist to stop that line of thinking. But Mia, man, she ripped that wound back open in seconds. I should see if my therapist could take a quick call. There was no way I could focus on studying now anyways.

After fishing my phone back out, I texted my therapist and strode across the campus, under tall palms and between manicured lawns, students all around me, scurrying along. I’d find a quiet place somewhere and talk. Then maybe I’d be spared a nightmare tonight.

FOUR

CASH



“No, you don’t have to go with me. I’ll be fine.” I pulled my sheer yellow crop top down over my chest and stood sideways in the mirror of my bathroom, assessing the fit of my blue jeans on my ass. Not the regular blue jeans, but jeans that were actually a nice deep blue.

Jack stood with his hand on the door jamb, obviously feeling comfortable in his black top and jeans. “I don’t like you going out to these bars by yourself. Look at what happened the last time?” He pursed his lips.

“What? You mean I met the most handsome and strongest man ever?” I huffed a laugh. “I can’t bring you, you’re my brother. We’re not at the family-meeting stage yet.” I flashed my eyes at him as I passed, sauntering into the main room for my messenger bag. I couldn’t wait to see Silas. The band started at nine and he’d said he had to set up, so getting there by eight should give us *some* time together. And then I could claim him as mine in front of everyone. A smile tugged at my lips as I threw my bag across my body and plucked my phone out of it, holding it to my face.

“Did he text you yet?” Jack strode into the room and peered into my phone.

“No.” I dropped it to my side. “That’s okay. He said he was busy, and he knows I’m coming tonight.” I knitted my brows. I’d been trying to play it cool and was waiting for him to text me first, but apparently, he was playing it cool, too. Damn, I hated this game. “Anyways, I’m out. I’ll text you later to let you know how it’s going.”

“And tell me if you’re coming home or not.” He lifted his brows. “I assume there’s the possibility...”

“I can only hope I’m not. But I’m not sure what his living situation is like.” I widened my eyes. What if he lived with his parents? Shit. I tapped my lips, scanning over our apartment. Did I want to bring him here? “If I bring him here, you have to duck out.”

“I live here, I’m not going anywhere besides in my own bed.” With a smirk he tilted his head. “It’s not like I’m your parent, though sometimes I feel like it.” He snorted.

I arched a brow at him. “Really, and who picks up whose socks from the floor by the couch?” He’d been leaving them there since I’d met him when we were six and I’d been picking them up ever since. It was a dance we did.

“Whatever.” He scoffed with a smile. “Text me periodically, okay?”

“I will.” I pointed to the couch, a pair of socks crumpled up under the coffee table. “Make sure those are gone before I get home.” With a chortle, I sauntered to the door and left.

A HALF HOUR LATER, I strolled into the bar, perusing the wood paneling on the walls and the large, rustic bar centering the venue. Across the bar, past a set of pool tables, stood the stage with large letters running across the back wall, spelling out, *Yucca*. Right below the *a*, was my man, Silas, bent over a speaker and fiddling with the knobs. His ass was pointed right at me, all wrapped up in tight-fitting black jeans that bunched up around the ankles of his combat boots. I licked my lips as my cock stirred and my heart pattered in my chest. He was a sight to behold.

As I stepped toward the stage, the other guitar player with the black hair and tattoos, wearing a bullet belt, slapped Silas’ ass, then pointed at me and smirked.

Why was the other guitar player touching my Silas' ass? I stomped to the stage as Silas straightened and turned around, shaking his long hair from his face. "Silas?" There wasn't something going on I didn't know about, was there?

"Hey." He glanced at the black-haired man, then stepped toward me, his cheeks flushing. "Hi, uh, Cash." He rubbed his neck.

"Dude, he is fucking hot. You didn't tell me how hot he was." The black-haired man sized me up as he stepped off the stage and held out his hand. "Name's Axel."

I shook his hand. "Nice to meet you, I'm Cash." I peered at him. Now that I was getting a good look at him, he looked familiar. I hadn't been paying attention at the last gig. My heart jolted. Shit, had I seen him on that hookup app I'd used for a while? I hadn't hooked up with Axel, had I? No...

A man with wavy brown hair and light gray eyes stepped up to Axel and wrapped an arm around his waist. "Anything I can do?"

"Kiss me?" With a faint smile, Axel pressed his lips to the other man's and he deepened the kiss, wrapping a hand around the back of Axel's head.

"That's Axel's boyfriend, Remy." Silas climbed off the stage, then grabbed me by the elbow. "Come on, someone owes me a drink." He quirked the corner of his mouth as he hauled me toward the bar.

"Oh, yes, I do." I let a wide smile play over my lips. Axel had a boyfriend, and I was pretty sure I hadn't hooked up with him. Crisis averted.

Silas hopped up on a barstool with a vinyl cushion top and planted his elbows on the bar, all of his leather and beaded bracelets on display around both wrists, then scrubbed his fingers down the side of his nose. "What do you drink?"

I climbed onto the stool next to him. "Something sweet, like a wine or a mojito or...I know, how about the Guava cider?" I pointed to a blackboard listing out all the beers on tap hanging over the rows of lit-up liquor bottles.

“Sure.” He bit at his thumbnail, his gaze sweeping over me.

When a haggard bartender with a long beard walked down to us, Silas ordered a beer and my cider, then faced me. “I wasn’t sure you were going to show up.”

“Why? I told you I’d be here.” I scooted my stool closer to him. He seemed different tonight, like something had taken a little of his spark away. “Are you all right?”

“Shit, yeah, I’m good.” He choked out a chuckle, then under his breath, he said, “Now.”

The bartender dropped off our drinks. “On the band?”

“No, I’m buying.” I flipped open my messenger bag, then fished out my debit card and handed it to him. “Run a tab for me, okay?”

“Sure thing.” The bartender walked off.

“I get two free drinks for being in the band. So, you don’t have to buy me drinks all night, okay?” He sipped his beer.

“Yeah, okay.” I took a long pull of my cider from the bottle, the sweet bubbles flowing down my throat. “Hey, this is good.” Why hadn’t I tried this sooner? I studied him, running his fingers over the lip of his beer glass as if he were in deep thought. Yeah, something had happened to his spark. “Why didn’t you think I’d show up tonight?” I’d start there.

“You didn’t text me.” His shoulders shook with a faint laugh, his profile to me. “Isn’t that stupid? I was sure you’d text me after that kiss, but then...”

I leaned in, a broad grin curling my lips. “I wanted to text you, but you know, I had to play it cool. I had to get my game on.” I rested my hand on his thigh. “I was waiting for you to text me, too.”

He turned his head and his gaze met mine. “Yeah, that’s some stupid shit we put ourselves through, isn’t it?” His gaze fell to my mouth, and he slid his tongue over his lower lip.

“Yeah, it is. So, just for the record, you can text me any time. Or, text me all the time, I don’t care.” I shrugged a

shoulder. “Okay, I do care, and I want you to text me any time.”

“Okay. Glad that’s settled.” He huffed a laugh, then drank some beer, focusing on his glass.

“So, did you look me up on social media?” I held my bottle to my lips, the corners of my mouth twitching with an almost grin.

He scoffed. “No.” Hanging his head and shaking it, he said, “Yeah.” He faced me, sliding my knee between both of his. “Who’s the guy with the brown hair and eyes?” He chewed his lower lip.

I stared at him. Damn, he really had been looking. “My brother, Jack.”

With a blink, he said, “Your brother? He doesn’t look like you at all.”

“He’s a brother from another mother.” I let out a soft snort. “I told you I was in foster care. Jack was adopted by my parents, too. If it weren’t for him...” I pursed my lips, my attention drawing to my cider. “Well, I don’t know where I’d be.”

“Do you want to tell me more about that, or is it too hard to talk about?” He wrinkled his brows.

“No, it’s not too hard. Me and Jack are the youngest of seven. My siblings are living all over the state, but me and Jack stuck around by our parents and Jack works at my dad’s restaurant in Mesa.” I sipped my cider, gauging his reaction. I wasn’t ready to go into the time before I was adopted. That could wait. “I suppose you have a perfectly normal family and all that.”

“Except my dad’s kind of a dick. He’s an ex-marine and became a commercial airline pilot. Works for American Airlines.” He winced, then drank more beer.

“My parents are both great people. My mom’s a social worker for an adoption agency.” I arched a brow. Wait for it...

“So, she couldn’t keep her hands off the merchandise?” He gave me a small smirk.

I barked out a laugh tipping my head back. “Exactly.” So, he could smile when he wanted to. And he *was* funny under that gruff exterior. My heart warmed. “Do you have any siblings?”

“Yeah, I have a younger sister. She’s twenty-one.” He slowly nodded. “I’m almost twenty-four, by the way.” He cocked his head, brushing his fingers over my thigh, swirling them. “She’s studying to be a physician’s assistant. Well, she thinks that’s what she’s going to do if she makes it that far. But she’s smart as hell, so I’m sure she will.”

“Does she go to ASU with you?” His touch shivered up my leg and woke my cock. Damn, I could really use more of that.

“No, she goes to GCU. She wanted to go to a smaller school. She’d get lost at ASU.” He rested his elbow on the edge of the bar, his gaze finding mine.

“My older brothers are going to school up in Flag. They’re taking general courses, I guess. None of us really know what we want to do with our lives.” I drew a deep inhale. I had time. What was the hurry anyways?

“How old are you, Cash?” He watched me from the lip of his glass as he sipped his beer.

“Same age as you, though I turned twenty-three a few months ago. I guess you’re older.” I ticked my shoulders up and gave him a quick grin.

“Yeah, guess I am.” He snuck his lower lip between his teeth. “I’m uh, going to have to get up onstage soon.”

“Yeah, I know.” I glanced at the guys already up on the stage, the mics lined up across the front and the young man with the red bangs pacing across it, his mini skirt showing off high boots with a graphic t-shirt pulled tight across his chest. “That singer of yours has some style. The guy can pull off just about anything.”

“Yeah, Devin’s a special one for sure.” He downed his beer. “If it weren’t for him, I’m sure we wouldn’t be able to play in bigger venues like this.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “Devin works for Queer Confections Bakery. You ever been there?”

“No, but I’ve heard of it. Sounds like a really cool place.” I toyed with my bottle, twisting it on the bar top.

“Want to go there with me this weekend?”

My gaze snapped to his, my heart fluttering. “Like, on a date? Not a *me coming to watch your show*, but a date?”

He shrugged a shoulder. “Yeah, why not? I mean, you don’t seem as crazy now as I thought you were.” The corner of his mouth curled.

“You thought I was crazy?” I dropped my mouth open and slapped his thigh. “I am not...” I slumped my shoulders, a grin teasing my lips. “That’s not the first time someone thought I might be crazy.”

A few taps of the snare drum crackled through the air.

“I believe it.” He pushed his glass to the back bar, then stood up. “That’s my cue. I have to go play now.”

“Okay.” I rose from my stool, swiping my hands down my thighs. This was my chance to show the bar he was mine. Because *he was*, damn it. He just asked me out on a date. “Silas.”

“Yeah?” As he twisted, I cupped his cheeks and claimed his mouth in a bruising kiss, slipping my tongue between his lips. His spicy scent filled my senses and my cock swelled.

His eyes widened, then closed and he hooked his arms around my waist, bringing our hips flush. With a deep moan, he tangled his tongue with mine.

“Silas, get a room.” Axel chortled into the microphone. “I don’t even kiss Remy like that in public.”

Silas broke the kiss, then held up a middle finger at Axel. “Do, too. All the damn time.”

Remy nodded, then shook his head, chuckling, while sitting next to an older man with curly hair and a barely-there beard, and another one with dark hair.

Maybe I could go hang out with them. Maybe there were things they could tell me about Silas. “So, would it be okay if I sat with the boyfriends?” I grabbed Silas’ hand and rubbed my thumb over the back of it. I just loved touching him. I didn’t exactly know why, but it was like I needed it, or he needed it. I didn’t know, maybe I sensed we both needed it.

He hooked a brow. “Yeah, guess so. We started calling that the band wives table.” He hung his head and chuckled. “Oh boy, this could be bad.” He guided me through a growing crowd to the table, centered in the room, the men there chatting with one another. “Hey, guys? This here’s—”

“Cash. We know.” The older man stood up with his hand held out. “I’m Eric. Nice to meet you. Remy mentioned you were here to see Silas tonight.” As he shook my hand, he flicked a knowing look at Silas. “I’m Caleb’s boyfriend. He’s the bass player.”

“And I’m Brandon.” The man with the darker, wavy hair said as he rose from his chair. “Nice to meet you, Cash. I’m Devin’s boyfriend and he’s the singer.”

“Oh, the one with the amazing sense of style.” I gave them each my best smile. They all seemed nice enough. Hopefully, they knew Silas well.

“I’ll uh, leave you all to it.” Silas freed my hand and jogged to the stage, then hopped up and grabbed his black guitar off a stand.

I clapped my hands together. “So, which one of you can tell me more about Silas?” I glanced at each of them.

Remy held up his hand. “I think I’ve known him the longest. But he does tend to talk to Caleb more.” He threw a glance at Eric.

Holding up his hands, Eric said, “I don’t actually know him very well, except to say that he’s a good guy. He was there

for Caleb when he needed him and that's pretty much who he is. The guy that always has your back."

Brandon nodded. "Yeah, when Devin freaked out over his family, Silas was the one who took action and made sure he didn't...well, do something stupid."

"Have a seat and join the wives table." Remy pulled the chair out next to him and across from Brandon, then patted the seat.

I dropped into it as a few guitar tones played over the speakers from the band. "So, do you all know how we met?"

"We do. News travels quickly in this group." Remy picked up a beer and sipped it. "It doesn't surprise me at all that Silas saved you from getting robbed."

I drank the rest of my cider, then glanced around for the waitress and flagged her down to order another. "He seems a little sensitive about the shooting."

"Oh?" Remy knitted his brows. "How's that?"

"He doesn't like being called a hero." In fact, he'd seemed downright upset about it. I studied Remy's reaction.

"Yeah, he's very humble." He nodded, his brows snapping together. "You know it was my boyfriend, Axel, that got shot."

I glanced up at the stage, both Axel and Silas were bent over a speaker, fiddling with something. Were they having technical issues?

"How is he? In fact, how are all of them? That couldn't have been easy. Do they have some trauma?" I knew enough about trauma to practically be a therapist myself. A shiver worked up my spine as a memory flashed of a dirty room, my mother lying on the floor, vomit pooling under her mouth. I shook the memory away. Those days were long gone, and it wasn't my fault. That's what I needed to remember.

"Caleb and Silas seemed to have the most problems with it. Axel, well, nothing fazes the guy. They're all still in therapy. At least Axel hasn't had any nightmares for a few

months.” Remy turned to Eric. “How about Caleb? Have his nightmares stopped?”

“For the most part. I’m not looking forward to monsoon season though. You know, the thunderstorms?” Eric ran his fingers up and down his beer glass, shaking his head. “One time Caleb had a panic attack, and it was really hard to watch. It scares me it could happen again, and I wouldn’t be there.” He pursed his lips.

“Survivor’s guilt.” As the waitress handed me my new cider, I said, “Sounds like they all have some of it. Maybe Axel’s isn’t as bad because he was actually hurt.” I glanced at the stage and all of the band were taking their spots behind instruments and mics.

Devin stood at the center mic and snatched it off the stand. “Hello everyone. We are ready and tonight we have a new opening song to try out. This is *The Anthem* by Good Charlotte, and we are Knot Me.”

The bar erupted in clapping and cheering, people rushed the stage, and I roamed my gaze over each of the boyfriends at the table. The adoration they held for their partners on the stage was palpable. They had something very special. Could I have that with Silas?

Silas and Axel strummed a staccato riff on their guitars, then the drummer held up his sticks and pounded them down as Caleb started up on his bass, the whole band jumping together. The keyboard player, wrapped up in a pink sequined top, banged his head and held his hands over his keys, swaying his body. I needed to meet all these guys. They each had a way about them.

As the band quieted, Devin bent over the mic and belted out the lyrics to the first verse, his leg pumping to the beat, his voice gritty and seductive at the same time.

As the song sped up, Silas and Axel jumped and swung in a circle with their guitars, their hair flying around their heads, then Axel ran to Caleb and strummed next to him, cheek to cheek, while Silas smiled wide, the first real smile I’d ever seen on him. He was beautiful up there, no care in the world.

He was a different person, like whatever held him down in real life didn't exist up there.

I dropped my mouth open, mesmerized by them all, but especially Silas. I wanted to bring that joy out in him. I wanted to see him happy when he was off the stage, too.

As the band built to the chorus, Axel and Silas ran across the stage to opposite ends, playing the crowd, throwing their guitars back and forth, banging their heads.

A girl reached out for Silas.

He winked at her, then ran across the stage again as Devin crouched down for the second verse and sang even louder.

My chest pricked with heat, then settled. He was mine. She couldn't have him. It wasn't even a contest. I held my chin higher.

As the next chorus started, Axel and Silas twirled over and over with their guitars, strumming furiously, laughing together as their gazes met mid twirl.

The song settled into a short bridge and Gabe pounded the drums with Caleb standing close and jumping in time with the beat, Devin walking across the stage, talk-singing through it.

The last chorus started up and the band wailed on their instruments, Axel stepping close to Devin and both of them screaming into the mic, cheeks pressed together.

Silas' gaze snapped to mine, and his smile reached his eyes, then he bit his lower lip and ducked his head, jumping and waving his guitar back and forth to the beat.

My heart bloomed with emotion, and I clutched at my shirt over my chest. That was it. I was a goner. He had me and there was no way out of this. How had I not paid any attention to them when I saw them last time? Oh...because I was hoping to get laid. That didn't happen.

The song ended and Devin panted at center stage, the crowd cheering wildly for them all.

"They are really something." I clapped, fixating on Silas, who was bent over the speaker cabinet again.

“Yeah, they are. Every time we come here, the crowd gets bigger and louder.” Remy scanned the throng of people standing all around us.

“Where else do they play?” I sipped my drink and crossed my legs. Maybe I could get more intel while they worked out whatever was wrong with their equipment.

“This place called, Monastery Bar and Grill out in Mesa. They used to do a few dive bars, but they’re a little more discerning now with their shows. Gabe is working on getting them in at Talking Stick casino. His dad uh, *knows* people. They have bands out by the pool and it’s a whole thing, but most of the cover bands they hire are tribute bands of like, seventies and eighties rock bands.” He twisted his lips. “The pay is really fucking good.” He ticked his brows at me, then sipped his beer.

“Really. So there’s some good money in that?” I glanced toward the stage. Silas was going to be an accountant. How did this band thing fit in?

“Yeah, really good. Gabe said the tribute bands get like, ten grand a night.” He glanced at me, then focused on the stage.

“So, Silas told me he’s going to school to be a CPA?” I eyed Remy. Why go to school if you already have something so lucrative?

“See, but if they were making that kind of money they’d need a CPA, right?” With a smirk, his attention drew to me.

“Oh, yeah...” I rubbed my lips. There was much to uncover about Silas.

Remy tapped my shoulder. “But did you know that Silas also volunteers at a cat rescue a few times a month?” He hooked a brow at me.

“What? No.” With a blink, I shook my head, thinking it through. “It sort of fits him, though, doesn’t it. He’s got the demeanor of an alley cat.” I snickered as he busted out a laugh.

“Dude, that’s on fucking point.” He held his palm up and I slapped it.

Devin walked to the mic. “Okay, I think we’ve got it.” He glanced at Silas, straightening from the speaker, his gaze finding mine.

I puckered my lips and blew him a kiss, then gave him a coy grin. He was so hot up there.

With a shy smile, he dipped his head.

Axel walked to Silas and said something, then glanced at me.

With an eye roll, Silas slapped Axel’s shoulder and scoffed.

Remy leaned toward me. “Axel and Silas have a love-hate thing going on. They love teasing the shit out of each other. The rest of us sit back and watch the show.”

“I see.” I nodded, then drank some of my cider. I needed to catch Axel alone at some point. I was sure he’d have lots to say.

“So, again, we’re Knot Me and we’re Not Okay.” Devin turned his back on the crowd while Silas and Axel started up a harsh riff to the My Chemical Romance song.

FIVE

SILAS



As the set ended, I unwrapped my guitar strap from my shoulder and placed my guitar in the stand, then jumped off the stage. My bladder was about to explode.

“Silas.” Cash hopped up from his chair next to Remy and strode to me.

“Hey, give me a minute. Gotta piss.” I strode to the restrooms in an alcove along the center of the wall, then ducked inside. All that fucking with the equipment had made for a long set. My amp still didn’t sound quite right. I better not have blown something.

Axel strode into the room as I tucked myself away and zipped up my pants.

This wouldn’t be good. I brushed by him to wash up. What dumb comment was he about to make about me being with Cash?

“So, that guy is really into you.” He used the facility, then fastened his jeans and turned around.

“I guess.” I dried my hands on a paper towel and threw it in the trash, while Axel washed his hands.

“You met him at our last gig, right?” He dried his hands and faced me, his eyes narrowed.

“I did. But after, like on the side of the convenience store.” I blew out a breath. “That’s where he was getting robbed.” And where Cash had handed out money to that drunken asshole, like a crazy person.

“He’s so...” He grinned. “Perky and you’re so...” He looked me up and down. “Not.”

“And that’s a problem why?” I shifted to a wide-legged stance. I needed to get back out there. Cash was waiting for me and hopefully he wouldn’t come in here and hear Axel giving me shit.

“It’s not a problem. In fact, I’m finding it hysterical. I mean, it’s funny watching you be your cynical self while he’s so...well, like a butterfly.” He chuckled, clamping a hand on my shoulder. “He’s perfect for you, Silas. Maybe he can round out your rough edges and make you easier to live with.”

“Shut up.” With a shake of my head, I tossed his hand off my shoulder and strode out into the bar. But maybe Axel was right. Maybe Cash was just what I needed. A light in my fucked up little world. Well, besides the kittens and cats at the rescue.

Cash strolled up to me with a beer in one hand and another bottled cider in the other. “Hello, handsome.” He handed me the beer, then took a long pull of his cider.

How many of those had he drank tonight? “Hey, are you driving home?”

He snapped his brows up. “What do you mean?”

Wrinkling my brows, I said, “I mean—”

“You were great up there.” A woman with long, blonde hair stopped at my side, taking me in from head to toe. “You’re the rhythm guitar, right?” With a flirtatious smile, she touched her fingers to her red lips.

“Yeah, I am.” I drank my beer, then edged into Cash’s side. She must not have seen him plant that big old kiss on me before the set.

Cash wound his arm around the small of my back and hooked his fingers in my belt loop.

“You’re also the one who took down that shooter, right? The hero?” She swayed, fluttering her lashes at me.

Oh, here we go. With a quick purse of my lips, I said, “I’m not a hero.” People fucking died and I wasn’t fast enough. “Lots of people did things. My friend, Axel, he took a shot to the leg. Some of the store employees, well, they lost their lives. And the SWAT team ended it. Not me.” My chest heated. “Aren’t the real heroes the ones who lost their lives? Don’t they deserve something?”

“Hey, hey...” Cash lifted his arm around my shoulders and drew me into his chest. “Stop, that’s not a good place to go.” He focused on the woman. “Give him some space, hun.” He waved her off.

“Sorry.” She did a double take of us and walked off.

“Do you want to tell me what that was about?” He snatched my hand and led me to a quieter corner of the bar, next to a tall arcade game, then faced me.

“No, I don’t. I’m not sure I even know what that was about.” I held tightly to my beer, watching my knuckles turn white over the glass. Except I did and I wasn’t ready to tell him about Mia. Being a moody bastard was one thing. Having a maniacal ex on top of it was something else.

“Okay, then let’s talk about who’s driving and to who’s home we’re going to tonight.” He threw me a quick grin. “Since you brought it up.”

I darted my gaze to his. “What do you want to do?” Shit, did that mean he wanted to have sex? My cock woke. Was this a hook up type thing, or was this more than that?

“Where do you live?” He leaned in close and in a low voice, he asked, “Do you live with your parents?”

I choked out a laugh. “Fuck, no. I haven’t lived with them since I was eighteen.” Raising the edge of my mouth, I sipped my beer. “I lived in the dorms freshman year, like all the other idiots at ASU.”

“Okay, so what’s your living arrangement like?” He eyed me. “I live with my brother, Jack. He said he’d stay in his room if we went back there, but then, you know, he’s family.”

I furrowed my brows, staring at him. What the hell did that mean? “Okay. I live with Gabe and Milo in the band and I’m very fucking sure if we went back to my place, we’d stay in *my* room. See, we have a deal. No dicks out in the main room.” I looked him up and down. “Unless you weren’t planning on taking your dick out.”

Covering his mouth with his fingers for a second, he snickered. “Oh, I’m definitely taking my dick out. And probably my tongue. Does that work?” He raked his teeth over his lower lip, focusing on my mouth.

A shiver raced down my spine and sparked heat low in my belly. “You fucking better.” Was I really bringing a guy home to the band house? Yes, I fucking was. But I barely knew him. Did that really matter in the grand scheme of things?

He breathed deeply, then crept a finger down the front of my shirt and into the waist band of my jeans. “I give amazing head. Just so you know.” His gaze flicked to mine, his pupils wide and eyelids hooded. “You’re making me hard just thinking about it.”

My cock pulsed and lengthened in an instant, almost reaching his buried finger. I swallowed thickly. God, I wanted him to touch me, right now, in front of everybody. I didn’t care. “Yeah? Guess we’ll have to test that out.” I came in close, my lips brushing his, my stiff dick skimming over the bulge in his jeans. “I want you, Cash.”

With a quick glance behind me, he hooked an arm around my shoulders and yanked me into the corner of the bar, into darkness behind the arcade game, his lips smashing into mine, teeth clashing, tongues tangling.

I snuck my free hand up and under the back of his shirt and pressed my stiff cock to his, dry humping him against the wall, the kisses becoming hungrier as pleasure pulsed inside me.

He groaned and nibbled at my chin, my neck, then bit at my earlobe. “You’re so fucking hot up there on the stage. You know that? I’ve been sitting there next to Remy with a hard on most of the night.”

“Yeah?” I skimmed my hands to his chest and pinched a nipple, then teased the other, lifting my chin to expose more of my neck to him.

He whimpered. “Fuck, make me come. Right now.” He thrust against me.

“Are you serious?” I pressed him harder to the wall, then unzipped his jeans, stuffed my hand inside and stroked his hard cock. It was hot in my hand and pre-cum leaked into my palm. I wasn’t even going to think about someone walking around that game and finding us. Oh, yes I was, and now I needed him to touch me even more. “Make me come, too.”

Panting, he pressed his forehead to my shoulder, unfastened my fly, then snuck a hand into my jeans and pumped my dick.

“Oh, fuck,” I said in a rough whisper as sensation welled up inside me, heating my skin. My balls drew up. No way was I going to last, but that was probably a good thing.

“Faster, Silas. Almost there.” He rutted into my hand, then held his breath, his body tensing against mine. “Coming.”

His cock pulsed in my hand and hot wetness slicked my palm. The raw peak of pleasure washed through my body, and I fell over the edge, my dick spilling into his palm in harsh contractions. I gasped with each one.

As it all slowed, I drew deep breaths, willing myself to relax. “Holy shit. I’ve never done that in public before.” As I slipped my hand from his jeans, I glanced at my other hand. Somehow, I still held my damn beer.

He sipped his cider as he brought his hand to his mouth, then licked my cum off of it, sucking on his fingers one at a time, his gaze affixed to mine.

My cock jerked. Damn, that was hot. He might make me hard again just watching him do that. I mimicked him, laving his cum off my fingers and palm.

“I might have done that before, but it was at a gay bar.” With a faint smirk, he tilted his head. “It wasn’t nearly as good as it was with you.” He kissed my lips and grabbed the belt

loop on my jeans, pulling our hips together and rolling his waning dick against mine. “Damn, still feels good.” He closed his eyes a moment, his brows tensing.

“If you don’t stop...” I glanced behind me. Someone was going to come looking for me any minute. “I’ll never get back onstage.”

“We can’t have that.” His lips twitched with an almost grin. “Tonight, I’ll give you my tongue. Then when we get to know each other better, I’ll give you more.” He ticked a brow at me.

“Fuck...” Need sparked up my spine. I was in for the ride of my life, and I was happy as shit to be going along with anything he wanted. “Yeah, okay.” I fastened my jeans. “Clean up in the restroom?”

“Following you.” He slapped my ass, then tucked himself in and zipped up his fly.

AFTER A QUICK CLEAN UP in the bathroom, I strode across the stage and set my beer on a speaker cabinet. Caleb and Axel stood next to each other on the stage, shit-eating grins in their faces, nodding and taking me in.

After slinging my guitar strap over my shoulder, I stepped to them and scowled. “What now?” The fuckers were ganging up on me about something.

“I never knew you were one for voyeurism, Silas.” Axel snorted, his grin widening.

“What?” I winced. How the fuck did they know? I’d play dumb as long as I could.

“I uh, went to find you and uh...” Caleb scratched the back of his head.

“It’s okay.” Axel ticked a shoulder. “Sometimes, you just gotta go for it.” He glanced at Caleb. “This one time—”

“No, shut up.” Caleb backhanded Axel’s shoulder.

“What is he saying now?” Milo stepped onto the stage.

“He’s about to share too much about his disgusting sex life.” I plucked my G-string, then turned the tuning peg a bit. Maybe it wasn’t my amp. Maybe I was slightly out of tune.

“It’s not disgusting. It’s hot. Even ask Remy.” Axel lifted his chin to Remy, now dropping into a chair between Cash and Brandon at the band wives table.

Milo shook his head. “At least you have one. I think I’m about to turn into a virgin again.”

We all locked our gazes on Milo. He didn’t talk much about his personal life with us, only to Gabe.

“That’s terrible. We need to get you laid.” Axel peered out into the audience as Devin climbed onto the stage and took the mic.

Axel tagged Devin’s shoulder. “Hey, ask the people out there if anyone wants to take our cute little Milo home for a night of—”

“No.” Devin lifted the edge of his lips. “What the hell, Axel?”

“I didn’t even finish my sentence.” Axel huffed.

In unison, we all said, “You didn’t have to.”

With a tsk, Milo stepped behind his keyboards and shook his head. “Axel, I’m perfectly capable of finding a guy. Maybe...maybe I’m waiting on the *right* guy.” He threw Axel a devious grin.

Axel dropped his mouth open. “Oh? Is there someone we don’t know about?”

“I’m not telling. Not yet.” Milo pressed his index finger to his lips.

“Can we get started here?” I strummed a chord, then glanced into the room at Cash, fixating on me while Remy chatted at him. I couldn’t wait for the gig to be over, so I could bring him home. Thankfully, I didn’t have any work or school

shit I had to do tomorrow, so I could be up all night with him if I wanted to. And I wanted to.

FINALLY, we'd gotten back to the house, unpacked the gear in record time and Cash was on his way over with food from a twenty-four-hour Jack in the Box. There was nothing better than greasy tacos from that place after a night of drinking.

I waited in the front room, looking out the window while Milo and Gabe chatted at our dinette. Everyone was tired, but hungry. What would tonight be like? Was this the start of something big? It sort of felt like it.

Headlights scattered across the room from Cash's Mini.

"He's here." I bolted out the front door and stopped at his car as he climbed out. "Here, let me help you." I opened the passenger door and picked up two bags of tacos. If we couldn't eat them all tonight, they'd make a great breakfast in the morning. Yeah, I wasn't much for actual breakfast food.

He met me on the sidewalk in front of the house, hooked an arm around my waist and planted a kiss on my mouth. "You're so fucking handsome." He gave me a wide smile.

Heat swept up my neck. He was the opposite of Mia. Where she wanted me to cut my hair or wear less jewelry or what the fuck ever, Cash gushed over me. I wasn't used to it. I had to work on that. "Thanks. You're um...you're gorgeous as hell." I sucked my upper lip between my teeth, then strolled with him through the front door.

"Oh my God, that smells good." Gabe, standing in the kitchen, snicked a beer open, then brought it out to Milo, seated at the dinette. "Anyone else for a beer?"

"Yeah, thank you so much for picking this up for us." Milo gulped his beer.

"No problem." Cash twisted his lips. "You wouldn't happen to have something on the sweeter side to drink, would you?"

I set the bags on the table and Milo dove into them, spreading tacos wrapped in paper around the table.

“There’s some left-over apple Jim Beam from a party we had around the holidays. Want that?” Gabe walked into the kitchen and opened a cabinet, then grabbed a low-ball glass. “It’s good on ice.”

“Sure, I’ll try it.” Cash edged into my side. “I’ll try anything once.” He dipped his head to my shoulder.

I wound an arm around his hips, his body heat shivering up my side. God damn, I wanted to touch him and keep on touching him. He’d lit something up inside me. I’d never been an affectionate guy, but Cash was proving that maybe I could be.

Gabe poured the whiskey, grabbed two more beers, then stepped to the table, handing Cash his drink and me a can of beer. “So, let’s dig in.” He took the chair next to Milo.

I sat across from Gabe, then sipped my beer and set it on the table, my stomach grumbling. “Fuck, I love these.” I unwrapped a taco and bit into the end of it, the grease and spicy meat filling my mouth.

Cash slid the chair at the head of the table next to mine and sat down. “After this, we’ll have the energy to go all night.” He flashed a coy smile at me.

“I’m putting on my noise-cancelling headphones.” Milo snickered.

“I’ll set my sound machine on high.” With a snort, Gabe bit into a taco.

“Did you hear that? It’ll be like we have the whole house to ourselves.” Cash hooked a brow at me.

My cock stirred and I shifted in my seat, adjusting myself. “Yeah, well, it’s about time I got Gabe back for the horn blower he brought over here that time.” I threw Gabe a look.

“The horn wasn’t all he was blowing that night.” Milo’s shoulders shook with a sharp laugh.

“Jesus, you two.” Huffing a snort, Gabe drank his beer.

“What do you mean by horn blower?” Cash lifted his brows at me.

“Gabe here is in marching band. I think that guy played, what, the French horn or something?” I sniggered, licking grease off my index finger.

“He played the mellophone. We don’t use French horns in the marching band.” Gabe rolled his eyes.

“How am I supposed to know that? It’s not like I’ve ever been a band geek.” I ate more taco.

“I suppose you have some good band camp stories?” With a sly grin, Cash glanced at me and ticked his brow, then sipped his whiskey.

Gabe set his half-eaten taco on the table, his lips spreading in a slow grin. “All right. I just met you, Cash. Don’t start in already.” With a shake of his head, he sipped his beer.

“That’s great, Cash. You’re fitting right in. Keep it up.” I bumped his shoulder, then planted a quick kiss on his cheek.

AFTER DOWNING ALL THE TACOS, I held Cash’s hand and led him into my room, flicking on the nightstand lamps with the switch on the wall, then shutting the door behind me. It was pretty late, but I wasn’t even tired, not with him around. My half-hard cock twitched behind my zipper.

He stepped around the room, picking up a photo of me with my parents from my dresser, me in my maroon and gold graduation gown. God, that seemed like so long ago.

“So, tell me about this.” He held it up, a smile teasing his lips.

I stepped up behind him and wrapped my arms around him, pressing my chest into his back. “That’s my graduation from ASU with my bachelor’s degree. I’ll be getting my master’s this May.” I ran my gaze over my father, his lips pressed in a thin line and his graying hair cut short as if he

were still in the military, then my mother, her curly blonde hair in a bun, beaming at the camera. “My sister is taking the photo.”

He nodded, then set the photo down. “Your mother looks proud of you at least.” He turned in my hold and flung his arms over my shoulders, pressing his forehead to mine. “We don’t need to talk about it now, but we will. I want to know everything about you, Silas Brown.” He claimed my lips in a deep kiss, his tongue flicking against mine, then rocked his hips against my thigh.

Heat flared in my gut and my dick swelled like we’d never gotten off at the bar. “You sure about that?” I lifted his shirt up and over his head, then tossed it to the floor, letting my gaze rake over his washboard stomach and the peaks of his nipples. Leaning down, I sucked one into my mouth, swirling my tongue around it while kneading the other one.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” He tipped his head back, a long groan rumbling from his chest. “Lower.” He pushed on my head.

Crouching, I licked a trail down the center groove of his stomach, then flicked my tongue into his navel and cupped his balls through his jeans. My own cock ached for attention but for now, I wanted to touch him all over.

He rocked his hips, his hard cock bulging behind his front pocket and goosebumps broke out over his skin. “You’re driving me crazy.”

I peeked up at him, his darkened eyes and swollen, red lips. “Good.” Licking under the waistband of his jeans, I rubbed my palm over his dick and gently pinched at the head. How did I want to take him? Slowly. I pushed on his hips, and he stepped backward until the back of his knees touched the bed.

As I stood up, I shucked my shirt off, then cupped his cheek and pressed a long, deep kiss on his lips, slanting my mouth over his. Our bare chests touched and my skin heated.

He broke the kisses. “Let’s take this on the bed.” With a glint in his eye, he unfastened his jeans and dropped them to

the floor, then climbed up onto my bed and lay down on his back in only his briefs, one arm lifted and curling around his messy brown hair.

After kicking off my jeans, I crept up over him, my knees straddling his hips. As I hovered over my him, I ran my gaze down the muscles of his slender body and a lone tattoo running down his side. “What’s that?” I focused on it, tracing my finger over it. The words were in a scrolling font, almost unreadable.

“My adoption date.” He tilted his head over the pillow. “I consider that more of a birthday than my real one.”

My gaze snapped to his. There was something dark there, but I’d let him tell me in time. “It’s pretty cool that you did that.” I lowered down, resting on top of him, our hot cocks slotting together through our underwear. “I don’t have any tattoos. Don’t like needles.” A shudder rolled up my spine. “I hate them, in fact. The doc has to practically put me out to give me a shot.” I placed my palm on his cheek and brushed my thumb over it.

Turning his head, he kissed my thumb. “So, you’ll take on a gunman and risk a bullet, but a tiny little needle brings you to your knees?” He curled a corner of his mouth.

“Yep. Now you know my big secret.” I focused on his plump lips, then claimed him with hungry kisses, thrusting against him, sensation knotting inside my gut. How did he feel so good underneath me? I’d had plenty of guys, but he was was like nothing I’d ever had before.

He moaned and writhed below me, then skimmed his hands down my back to grasp my ass and squeezed. “What if we fucked tonight?”

My cock pulsed and I lifted my head. Damn, my dick liked that idea. “Um, I thought there was a deal here with your tongue and then waiting until we got to know each other better?” And somehow, I wanted that. It meant there would be more of him than just tonight.

“I know.” He gave me a coy smile. “It was just a thought.” He licked up my cheek and chuckled. “I do want more with you, Silas. You know that, right?” He rolled his hips and his dick jerked against mine.

“I do now.” I nuzzled into his neck and bit at the soft skin, then nibbled down to his collar bone. “Take off the briefs.” I didn’t want anything between us. As I rolled to the side, I shimmed my underwear off as he did the same, and tossed them to the floor, then snuck a peek at his cock, long and thick and a deep red, a bead of pre-cum glistening on the flared head. “You have a nice dick.” Shit, that sounded kind of stupid, didn’t it? With a soft grin and warmth sweeping up my neck, I sat up, my own dick jutting up between my thighs.

“Thank you. So do you.” He fisted his cock and stroked it a few times. “Do I get to feel your tongue first?” He arched a brow.

“Yeah.” My mouth watered as I crawled between his legs, then wrapped my fingers around the base of his dick. I tipped my head to glance at him.

He bit his lower lip, his brows tensing. “You’re seriously driving me crazy.” His cock jerked in my hand and pre-cum leaked from the tip.

“Uh-huh.” I had him right where I wanted him. I slowly licked up his shaft, then wrapped my lips around the head and flicked at the slit, the heady taste of him flooding my mouth. A shudder rolled up my spine and my balls tightened and ached. I was going to be so ready for my turn.

He gasped and bucked his hips. “Fuck, Silas, do it. Suck me off.” He slapped his hands to the back of my head and pushed.

Pulling off him, I gave him a smirk. “I’m getting there. You just be patient.” I licked and sucked the head of his cock, and it jerked in my hand.

“Oh, sweet Jesus, you’re going to kill me with this.” He arched his head back and panted, his toes curling.

With a faint grin, I plunged my mouth over his dick, licking the underside, then sucked on the way up, over and over, my cheeks hollowing, taking him to the back of my throat.

He cried out and shuddered, his thighs quivering. “That’s it. Oh, God, so good. So fucking good.” He bit his hand between his thumb and index finger, whimpering, his brows knitting.

I kept on him, pumping his cock with my mouth and fist, then cupped his balls and snuck a finger into his crevice.

“Fuck, coming.” His dick swelled in my mouth, then pulsed, his hot cum spurting to the back of my throat.

I swallowed it all down, my dick aching and leaking onto my thighs, until it slowed. As I released him, my body trembled. Shit, I almost came just from getting him off.

He sat up and shoved me down onto my back, then crawled between my thighs and brushed his palm up my sensitive dick. “You’re so beautiful, Silas. Every part of you.” He flicked his tongue at the head of my cock, and it pulsed.

“Not going to last, just a warning.” I gazed up at my ceiling. Watching him give me head was definitely going to push me over the edge too soon.

“Then I guess we’ll have to do it again. I mean, we have all night, right?” He flicked his tongue at my slit.

Tingling crept up my spine and out to my fingers. “Yeah, all night. I’ve got nothing going on tomorrow for once.” Would he stay tomorrow, too? I definitely wanted him to.

As he slowly dropped his mouth over my cock, he sucked hard and fondled my balls.

“Oh, fuck.” My breath hitched and pleasure coiled inside me. I dared a peek at his lips surrounding my shaft, moving slowly up and down and my thighs trembled. Sensation surged to a raw peak. I gritted my teeth, then pushed on his head and thrust my hips. There was no stopping it. “Coming, oh fuck, coming hard.”

He pumped my dick and swirled the head with his tongue as I erupted inside his mouth, my climax quaking through every nerve in my body. I fluttered my eyes shut and let it take me, gasping with each contraction.

As it calmed, he left my dick with a wet pop, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and threw himself up beside me. “You have sweet cum. Just what I like.” He chuckled.

With my brows furrowing, I threw him a look. Maybe he *was* crazy. “What? Cum isn’t sweet.”

“Yours is. To me, it’s sweet.” He rolled to his side, lifted onto an elbow, his head resting in his hand, then skimmed circles over my belly with his finger pads. “I knew you had sweet inside you.”

“Oh, brother.” I snaked my arm over his shoulder and pulled him to my chest. “Come here, you crazy bastard.” I kissed his head as he laid it on my chest.

“I may be crazy, but I know what I want and that’s you, Silas.” He nuzzled into my neck. “I’ve never met anyone like you before.” He kissed my cheek.

“I’ve never met anyone like you before, either.” My heart warmed. And never had I wanted to be so close to someone so quickly. He was breaking down my walls so damn fast, I’d never even had a chance to build them up. “How do you do that?”

“What?” He peeked at me.

I tensed my brows a moment. Should I really be saying this shit so soon? “Make me feel good.”

He lifted up, his gaze meeting mine, his hand warming my chest over my heart. “You deserve to feel good, Silas. You deserve to be happy.” He gave me a warm smile. “You make me feel good, too.”

I rubbed my hand across his back, my gaze darting between his eyes. “Will you stay with me tomorrow, too?” I bit the side of my lower lip, my heart stuttering. What if he said no?

“Of course I will. You’re stuck with me now, Silas Brown.” He rubbed his nose on mine. “We have so much to talk about.”

“Let’s go to the queer bakery tomorrow. I mean, since you like sweet things so much.” I pulled him down and pressed a kiss on his lips.

“That sounds wonderful.” He snuggled into my side, absently playing with the stubble on my chest.

I peeked down at his hand. I didn’t have a lot of hair there, but I did like to keep it trimmed. “Do you...do you like it shaved or would you rather I didn’t?” Was I going to change for him? Yeah. I was diving in quick and deep here, like I always did when I really liked someone.

“It’s good however you like it.” He kissed my chest, then wrapped his legs around mine, his dick resting against my hip.

“Okay.” I gazed up at the ceiling. I was finally starting to get tired. “I suppose we should turn of the lights and get under the covers.” The last person I’d spent the night with was Mia and by then, we were barely talking, let alone cuddling while we slept.

“Sure.” He rolled over and flicked off the lamp on the nightstand, then shoved the covers down under him and back up over him while I did the same.

“When’s the last time you slept with someone?” I winced. Why the hell had I asked that? I didn’t really want to know the answer.

He sidled into me, resting his head on my shoulder, and wrapping his legs around mine again. “It’s probably been a few months. I don’t make a habit of it.” He glanced up at me and brushed his finger over my lips. “I only sleep with people I really like.”

My chest warmed and I tightened my hold on him. “The last time I slept with someone it wasn’t very pleasant.” I kissed his head and settled in, closing my eyes. I barely knew what I was saying anymore and I should shut up.

“That sounds like a story we should explore tomorrow.”
He pressed a lingering kiss on my neck. “Good night,
handsome.”

“Good night.” There were a lot of things we needed to
explore.

SIX

CASH



I fluttered my eyes open to sunshine streaming in through the center of the black curtains in Silas' bedroom. Silas was wrapped around me from behind. If it was morning, then I'd actually slept through the night with him. That was a rare event, me not waking up and fighting to get back to sleep. It didn't surprise me too much though. Silas made me feel safe and wanted. He'd held me all night like I was the most precious thing in the world to him.

"Cash?" he asked in a ragged voice.

"Yeah?" I twined my fingers in his over my chest, then kissed his knuckles. I couldn't stop kissing him.

"Want to get up?" He pressed his hard cock between my ass cheeks. "I mean...I'm up." He freed my hand, then skimmed his fingers down my stomach and fisted my morning erection. His breath quickened and he rocked against me. "Fuck, you make me so horny." He bit my shoulder, then pressed kisses up to my neck.

A shiver swept over my skin. "Go ahead, do whatever you want."

"Just a minute." He rolled away from me, opened the black nightstand drawer behind him and came back with lube.

I looked around me a moment. Damn, his whole bedroom was black, the dressers, the bedspread, everything. Only the walls were white. "You want to have sex?" I made to roll onto my back, but he pushed me to my side again.

“No, something else.” He squirted lube on his hand, then slathered his dick with it, squirted more and shimmied up behind me. “This might be a little messy, but I don’t care.” As he wrapped his slick fingers around my shaft, he slipped his cock between my ass cheeks and rocked his hips, rubbing his dick into my crevice.

“Oh, yeah, I like this idea.” I tucked my hands under my pillow, enjoying the feel of his hot skin pressed to mine, teasing my hole while he jerked my dick. Little shudders of pleasure swept through me, dribbling pre-cum from my tip.

His breath grew rough as he nibbled on my shoulder, then flicked his tongue at the shell of my ear, thrusting faster. “God, you’re so fucking hard, Cash.” He swiped his thumb over the pre-cum and let out a low, deep moan, his body trembling behind me.

Sensation tingled up my spine and tightened my balls. “Faster, Silas. Make me come with you.”

He pumped his hand quicker over me, his thrusts growing erratic, panting into my ear, whimpering. “So good...so fucking good.” As his breath caught, his body tensed behind me, and hot wetness slicked my crevice.

I dropped my mouth open and clutched my pillow as harsh waves of pleasure surged over me, knotting my gut, spurting cum onto my thighs, my stomach and into the sheets. I moaned with each one and my toes curled.

As it slowed, I fought to catch my breath. We hadn’t had sex, but it had still felt intimate.

He wrapped me up, holding me tightly in his strong arms, his waning dick pressed between us. “I don’t want to let you go.”

My heart flipped in my chest. He was such a different person in bed, so caring and open and not the cynical man everyone else saw. It made me feel special to know he was showing me this side of himself. “Then don’t. Be my boyfriend.”

He lifted his head to look down on me. “What?”

“You heard me.” I turned my head, meeting his gaze. “This is obviously something special. Why not go for it?” He’d said I was crazy. He had no idea how right he was.

“I hardly know you.” He wrinkled his forehead, then swallowed hard. “I mean, I uh...” He glanced toward the light streaming in from the curtains. “Shit, I want to.”

“Then let’s do it. You’re not going to date anyone else anyways. If you do, this crazy bitch might kill you.” I pointed my thumb at my chest, giving him a sly smile. Yeah, I was smiling, but I was actually serious. “Let’s be us, Silas.”

He quirked the corners of his mouth. “Yeah, let’s be us. I like that.”

“Look at you, all smiling and shit. It’s about time.” I rolled to my back, the sheets sticking to my skin, and pinched his cheek. “You’re so fucking handsome when you smile.”

He pushed my hand away. “Okay, now you’re over the top. I don’t smile.” The side of his mouth tugged up. “For just anyone.” He rolled over top of me, digging his fingers into my sides, tickling me.

I jerked and twisted under him, giggling and yelping. “Stop that.” I grabbed his arms, trying to push his wriggling fingers away from me.

“I knew you were ticklish, I just knew it.” Laughing, he tickled me some more.

Pounding rang out through the room. “Dudes, what the hell kind of bizarre sex act is going on in there?” Gabe’s voice filtered in from behind the door.

“None of your business. Go back to studying.” He planted a kiss on my lips. “The guy is *always* studying.”

“Fine. But just so you know, Milo’s sitting out here in the fetal position.” Gabe chortled.

“Shut up.” He shook his head, chuckling. “Gabe is so full of shit.”

“Your roommates are pretty funny. I like them. In fact, I like all the guys I met last night. You have a really special

group of friends.” I tucked his bangs behind his ear.

“Yeah? You seem to fit right in.” His gaze lingered on mine. “Let’s get cleaned up, so I can take you to that bakery. You’re in for a real treat.” He waggled his brows at me.

“Okay.” My heart soared. Things were going so well. I couldn’t wait to tell Jack about it.

AN HOUR LATER, I strolled down the sidewalk on Mill Avenue in Tempe next to Silas. He’d let me borrow some of his clothes, a white t-shirt, and skinny jeans. They actually fitted me pretty well. He was taller than me by a few inches, but we were both about the same otherwise. There’d been nothing with real color in his wardrobe, but then, he didn’t have the sense of style I had. I was lucky to find the white t-shirt and not have to wear something boring and drab.

I glanced around me at the two-story brick buildings lining the street, then the glass high-rises off in the distance with “A” Mountain nestled among them. This was the older part of town, a splash of quaint amongst the new.

“There it is.” He pointed down the tree-lined street to a sign hanging over a glass door, reading *Queer Confections* in a rainbow of color. As we stopped at the door, Silas opened it and waved me inside. “After you.”

“Thank you.” I stepped in and perused the place, the colorful velvet couches and tufted chairs sitting among wooden tables. Students with their laptops and books opened sat in some while in others there were older folks, including a few queer couples in conversation, touching and smiling with each other. “I like it. It’s colorful.”

“Yeah, like you.” He grasped my hand and led me to the front of the store. “You see all that skateboard stuff on the walls? The guys who own this place are a couple of skaters. I met them last summer at a gig out in Mesa. Cool guys.”

“Really.” As we stepped to the ordering counter, my eyes grew wide. “Oh my, look at all this.” Rainbow cupcakes and pastries of all kinds scattered across the shelves inside the glass. I clapped my hands over my chest. “What should I try first?”

A young man stood behind the counter in a vibrant striped apron, his blond hair framing his face, his blue eyes friendly as he watched us. “Can I help you?”

“Yes, can you tell us a little bit about what you have? What things are the most popular?” Silas squeezed my hand and pulled me in next to him.

“The rainbow cupcakes are pretty popular, but the Danishes filled with chocolate tequila are also a favorite.” He set his hands on the back of the counter and leaned in. “I like the chocolate cake the best. Dana, the owner, makes it with Grand Marnier.”

“Now that sounds delicious. I’ll have one of those and a coffee please.” Cake for breakfast? Why not. It was already afternoon anyways.

“And I’ll have the tequila thing with a coffee.” Silas fished his phone out of his pocket. “Will it give me a buzz?” He smirked, then leaned into me. “Dana is the guy I met.”

“No, there’s not enough liquor in it for that.” The young man made our coffees and plated our treats, then set it all on the counter along with forks.

Silas paid with his phone, then tucked it into his pocket. “I’m buying since I invited you here.”

“Sure.” I picked up my cake and coffee, then turned around to the room. “Where do you want to sit?”

“How about that green couch over there?” He ticked his head at a couch centering the room and plucked his food and coffee from the counter.

“Okay, green it is.” I strolled to the couch with Silas following, then dropped into the center of it with Silas sinking in next to me. I set my things down on the table in front of me.

“Let’s get to know each other better so we can be proper boyfriends.”

He sipped his coffee, then set it on the table. “All right. What do you want to know?”

Cocking my head, I tapped my lips. “Everything. Why did you pick accounting? Who else have you dated? Do you ever go to the gay bar down the street?”

He raised his brows. “Okay, that’s a lot all at once.” He ate a bite of his Danish and moaned. “Holy shit, that’s good.”

“Let me try.” I opened my mouth and leaned in.

He held it to my lips and I bit into it. An explosion of butter and chocolate with a hint of orange filled my mouth. I covered my lips as I said, “Damn, that *is* good.” This Dana person was an incredible baker. Why had I never come in here?

“So, why accounting? Because I’m a numbers guy. I’ve always been careful with money, and I have a knack for it. It’s easy for me. I’ve been able to turn my part time Target job and my gig money into enough to live on without my parents’ help.” He shook his dirty-blond bangs out of his face, then ate more of his Danish.

“So, you’re paying your own way through college?” I cut into my cake. That was pretty admirable. My brothers were taking on debt like crazy up at NAU.

“My parents pay my tuition, but I pay for everything else. That was our deal.” He drank more coffee. “My sister got a scholarship and she’s still living at home, so they don’t have to pay for her.”

I nodded. “And where is home?” I ate my cake, the bitter chocolate mixing with the perfect amount of sweet. “Oh, damn.” I tapped the cake with my fork. “You have got to try this. Open up.” I cut another piece and slid it into his open mouth.

“Fuck, that’s good.” He chewed, then swallowed the cake down with more coffee. “I’m going to tell Devin to start bringing treats to practice. Dude’s been holding out on us.”

“Devin works here, right?” I drank my coffee.

“Yeah, he’s managing the stores for the owners and helping them expand their business. He’s probably over at the Melrose store today. That’s the new one.” He shifted closer into my side. “Anyways, home was Paradise Valley. That’s where I grew up.” He twisted his lips. “Yeah, my family had one of those fucking mansions tucked into the mountains.” He eyed me.

“You’re a rich boy.” I arched a brow. He didn’t give off that vibe at all.

“Correction, my family is rich, I am not.” He inhaled deeply. “While dad flies his airplanes, mom is an interior designer and a good one at that.” He bit into his Danish. “She has very wealthy clients and people seek her out.”

“Wow.” I looked him over. He had it all growing up, but something was telling me it was far from perfect. “So, how did Silas become so—”

“Fucking moody and cynical? I don’t know. Might have been my dad. He was pretty cold and just...not there. My therapist thinks I didn’t have a good male role model.” He shook his head. “Isn’t that fucking classic?” He set his Danish on its plate, then wiped his hand on a napkin. “Could be I was born this way. Apparently, I had colic pretty bad as a baby and almost died. So, I’ve been ornery my whole life.”

I smiled at him. “I’m glad colic didn’t get you.” I pressed a kiss to his cheek. There was something else though, under the surface. Had the shooting changed him? “Tell me about the shooting.”

He winced and hung his head. “What’s there to tell? Guy shot up the place and I almost lost one of my best friends and arch enemies.”

“Axel is both a friend and an enemy, huh?” That was an interesting statement. I studied him. His demeanor had changed.

“Yeah, we have a little competition going on. It’s hard to explain, but we both like teasing the shit out of each other.” He

huffed. “The guy is such a douche but in a good way.” His gaze met mine. “He’s superficial, confident and cocky but if you need something—”

“He has your back.” I nodded. I was starting to see a pattern. “Like you. I’ve heard from your friends that you’re the guy who takes action when someone’s in trouble.” I was skirting around the shooting, but still trying to get him to talk about it.

“Yeah, guess so.” He pressed his lips into a grim line. “I’m not a hero, Cash. I only did what had to be done. Problem was, I didn’t do it soon enough.” He scrubbed his face. “Fuck, my therapist hates it when I talk like that.”

“So do I.” I draped an arm over his shoulders and hugged him into my side. “You saved lives. Could you have saved more? Maybe, maybe not. It wouldn’t have done you any good to have been shot and killed first. Then who’d have saved your friends?” Here it was, the truth I’d seen flickering behind his eyes sometimes.

“It all happened so fast. I didn’t know what to do.” He gnawed his lower lip, then shook his head. “I-I don’t want to talk about this anymore, okay?” As his gaze found mine, his eyes glistened.

“Yeah, sure.” I squeezed his shoulders, then let him go. His friends didn’t know how much he was still struggling with this. They thought he was just humble. No, he was traumatized and hiding it.

He drank some coffee and straightened his shoulders. “Now that we’ve gone into the depths of my fucked-up psyche, how about you? Being in foster care couldn’t have been easy.”

My heart lurched. He needed to know, but was I ready to tell him? “Yeah, it was not nice.” I forced down a bite of cake. I’d start from the beginning. “My birth parents were both drug addicts and we lived in a broken down mobile home.”

He stared at me. “Holy shit.”

Yep, that was the reaction I always got. I sucked in a breath. “What I remember was the place always being dirty, not having clothes and being cold all the time, and well, hunger. I was always hungry.” I flicked my gaze to my cake. “I never had treats. For whatever reason, there was lots of fast food, you know Taco Bell and McDonald’s, but never anything sweet.” I fought off the memory of my mother, lying on the floor in a pool of vomit. Why that had stuck with me, I didn’t know. It might have been the day CPS picked me up.

He shifted, closing the gap between us. “And so now you like sweet things because you never got any when you were little.” He cupped my cheek, his brown eyes fixating on mine. “Cash, how the hell did you end up being such a happy fucker?”

I shrugged. “I use a cheery attitude to mask what happened in my life while you, my handsome man, are using a cynical attitude to mask, well, everything.” Yeah, maybe if I went back to school, I should take up psychology.

His brows snapped together. “Shit, you may be right.” He planted a lingering kiss on my lips. “You might be a genius.”

A grin worked over my mouth. “Not just crazy?” I tongued the corner of my mouth.

“I love crazy, you should know that.” His breath caught. “I mean, you know.” He dropped his hand and rubbed his forehead. “I’m getting ahead of things here.”

I snatched his hand and held it to my warming heart. “Silas, you and I are like yin and yang. This is why we’re finding it so natural to be together. We are...two pieces of the same puzzle.” I was falling so deeply for him, so quickly it was breathtaking.

His phone buzzed in his back pocket. “Shit.” He slipped it out and held it to his face. “Oh, fuck.” He scowled.

I peeked into the screen and read the message.

MIA

I need to talk to you. You can't avoid me.

“And who is Mia?” I flicked my gaze to meet his, my pulse quickening. Was there someone else in his life? I’d just assumed he wasn’t dating anyone, and he hadn’t led me to think any differently.

He blew out a breath. “Mia is my ex-girlfriend. I blocked her, but then she found me in the library the other day and figured it out, so I unblocked her.”

“Why would you feel the need to block her?” That was never a good sign. I ate the last bite of my cake, then washed it down with coffee, attempting to quell the flaring heat in my chest.

“She’s not a nice person. Not anymore anyways.” He tossed his phone on the coffee table. “We broke up shortly after the shooting. I was not in a good headspace, and she only made things worse.”

“How long were you together?” I narrowed my eyes at him. If he’d seen her a few days ago, maybe that was the difference I’d seen in him since first meeting him.

“We were together about two years. We were even living together.” He grabbed my hand and kissed my knuckles. “She’s sort of...” He flinched. “Emotionally abusive. That’s what my therapist calls it.”

“Jesus.” I squeezed his hand. “Is she volatile? Like will she keep coming after you?” I wrinkled my forehead. That woman better watch herself if she did come after him with me around.

“I don’t know. She won’t leave things alone.” He slumped his shoulders. “She was and still is emotionally abused by her mother, so she’s learned to do that herself. I thought I could handle it, but the last time I saw her, she’d gotten worse.”

“Worse how?” Finally, it felt like he was opening up all the way to me. I watched him cave in on himself. “Silas? Worse how?”

In a small voice, he said, “She...she tells me how fucked up I am, like I’m a narcissist or I have some mental disorder, and how badly I hurt her.” He huffed out a laugh. “The thing

is, I was always good to her. Ask anyone, any of the guys, they know.” His breath hitched. “Fuck.” He swiped at his eyes and sniffled. “Last time I saw her she told me that I...” He took a ragged breath. “That I let people die in the shooting.”

Heat swarmed my chest. Through my teeth, I said, “That’s not true, Silas.” I hugged him into my chest and brushed a hand down the back of his head. “She’s accusing you of the things she is and what she’s done to you.” My poor, poor Silas. This was what he’d been hiding. “Don’t you dare listen to any of it.”

With a deep inhale, he straightened. “Yeah, I know. I called my therapist right after talking to her and she helped. But it still fucked with me.”

I gazed deeply into his brown eyes, the wetness on his lashes. He really hurt from all this. “My brother, Jack, had an abusive mother. Where I was neglected, he was abused. I don’t know what’s worse. But it took a long time for him to understand that it didn’t define him. It took a long time for him to get her voice out of his head.”

He nodded, his gaze affixed to mine. “Yeah, I could see that. After a while, what they say worms its way into you and it’s hard to get rid of it.” He rubbed his brow. “I only had two years of it. I can’t imagine having a mother—”

“You had a father who might have been like that?” I’d gone into full blown therapist mode on him, but he needed it. I peered at him. “What do you think? Maybe because of your dad, she was comfortable for you?”

He shook his head. “I-I don’t know. Maybe. I suppose it’s something to explore in my therapy sessions.”

“How often do you go?” I chewed my lower lip. I hadn’t seen mine in a few months. I was in maintenance mode.

“Every two to three weeks, unless shit comes up like the other day.” He turned my hand over on his thigh and rubbed his thumb into my palm. “Thanks.”

“Of course. This is part of getting to know you. Like I said, I want to know all of you, Silas Brown.” I chuckled.

The phone buzzed on the table. “Fuck.” He picked it up. “She wants to meet up.” His gaze snapped to mine. “I’m not going to do it. There’s no reason for it. She just wants to belittle me some more.”

“I think you’re right.” I watched him tap his phone. It was pretty obvious he didn’t have any feelings left for her. But was there still something I should be worried about?

He held the phone out to my face. “Here, what do you think about that?” He smirked.

MIA

Meet me today.

SILAS

Fuck no. Leave me alone.

Three dots blinked on the phone. “She’s about to text back.” I pointed to it.

MIA

You’re such an asshole. What the fuck is wrong with you? You owe me an apology. A proper one.

I widened my eyes. She was a horrible person. “Silas, don’t respond. You’ll only keep it going.”

He glanced at his phone, then set it down on the table. “Yeah, you’re right. I should probably block her again.” He sighed. “At least then I’ll get a little bit of peace.”

“Might be a good idea.” I peeked at the phone. I needed to get him off the subject of his ex. We’d already spent too much time dwelling on it. My mind ran through the things Remy had told me last night. “Oh, I heard you volunteer at a cat rescue?”

With a small grin, his face flushed. “I do. It’s called *Fearless Kitty* and it’s up in Fountain Hills.”

“Way up there?” I drank the last of my coffee. I’d only been up there a few times with my parents when dad had taken

me and Jack to one of the car shows.

“Yeah, it’s not that far. Only like twenty-some miles.” He shrugged. “I heard about them through a study group partner in class and decided to go help out. I’m up there with a bunch of older cat ladies, but it’s cool.”

“Cat ladies?” I chuckled. Somehow, I did not see him fitting in there.

“Yeah, there are a lot of retired people up there. Probably why they had time to start this shelter.” He fingered the edge of his plate. “I’m working there tomorrow. I clean up and spend time socializing the kittens. It’s soothing.”

“Can I ask you, why don’t you have a cat?” My chest bloomed with warmth. I had to see this side of him, I just had to.

“Don’t know. I’m so busy with work, school and the band, I don’t think I’d be able to properly care for a cat.” He ticked his brows. “Besides, Gabe moved in and he’s allergic to cats.”

“Oh.” I leaned in, my lips quirking. “Can I go with you tomorrow?” I wasn’t a cat person, but I could learn.

“Uh, yeah, I don’t see why not.” He glanced around him. “This lady, Crystal, will be there tomorrow and she’s kind of a hoot. We get along well.” He drank the rest of his coffee. “So, what’s next? Maybe walk the avenue and check out some of the cool shops?” He glanced at my phone. “Or do you need to get back home?”

“No, I texted Jack earlier and let him know where I was.” I trailed my gaze over him. He was so different from when I’d first met him. I’d earned his trust and hopefully much more.

SEVEN

SILAS



After wandering around a few of the more eclectic shops, we found ourselves hand in hand strolling down Mill Avenue, the late afternoon sun throwing long shadows around us. Our discussions had been superficial, but at all times, Cash had been touching me in some way. I liked it and I was not normally a touchy, feely guy.

As we came to the steps of the gay nightclub, The Club on Mill, perched on the second floor of an older building on the corner, a man with short, brown hair stopped at us. “Cash.” He gave him a flirtatious smile, his blue eyes beaming at him.

“Oh, hey, uh...” Cash pressed his lips together. “Dex, right?” He threw a glance at me.

“Yeah, Dex.” He leaned in. “The club doesn’t open until seven. What are you doing down here?” He chuckled and touched Cash’s arm.

My chest heated. Who was this guy? I glared at him. Whoever he was, I already didn’t like him.

“Oh, I’m on a date with my new boyfriend.” Cash turned to me. “Silas, meet Dex.” He focused on Dex. “Dex, this is Silas.”

Forcing my lips to move, I gave Dex a tight grin. “Hi, Dex. Nice to meet you.” I held out my hand.

He shook it. “Hi, Silas.” After freeing my hand, he tapped his lips, looking me up and down. “Boyfriend, huh?” He cocked his head, his attention shifting to Cash. “This is new.

When we hooked up two weeks ago, you didn't have a boyfriend. Right?"

"Oh, uh..." With a stuttered chuckle, Cash swiped his hand down the back of his hair. "We just started um, being serious." He flashed his eyes at me.

I crossed my arms over my chest. He was looking for help. I wasn't sure if I should give it or not. It could be interesting to stand back and watch. Oh, what the hell. I hooked an arm around Cash's waist and kissed his cheek. "Yeah, we decided to be serious. No more hookups for either of us." At least that was the truth.

"Okay. Well, I'm happy for you both." Dex shifted his focus to me, and he wagged his finger. "I've seen you around somewhere."

"Maybe on campus? I go to school here. You in any finance or accounting classes?" I shifted my weight. I wanted this guy gone. Didn't he know he was imposing?

"No, I'm not a student here anymore." He sucked in a breath. "I know, you're in that queer band, right? Knot Me?" He gave me a broad smile. "You all played upstairs here at the gay bar, what, a year ago?" He pointed at the stairs behind him.

"Uh, yeah." I held Cash tighter to my side. I pretty much knew what was coming next. "I'm the rhythm guitar."

He nodded and rubbed his chin. "You guys are all heroes." He tapped Cash on the chest with his knuckles. "Their singer and his boyfriend saved a woman from a burning car, right here on Mill Avenue. And then—"

"He knows all about it." My heart lurched. Why couldn't he tell me how great the band was and not focus on all this other shit. There was a reason we didn't take any interviews after the shooting. I didn't need to be constantly reminded of that day.

Cash's attention drew to me, his mouth hanging open. "Devin saved a woman from a burning car?"

“Yeah, he did. Him and his boyfriend, Brandon. It was a whole thing, but it was a long time ago.” I rolled my eyes. It had started a chain reaction for Devin with his family that almost broke him, but everything worked out in the end. I glanced at Dex. “Anyways, Dex, it was nice to meet you.”

“Yeah, same.” He tagged Cash on the shoulder. “You better watch out, Cash. You’ve got a badass for a boyfriend.” He let out a sharp laugh. “I’m sure a lot of guys would love to be with him.”

Cash lifted his chin. “Yeah, but he’s with me.” He edged into my side.

“Come on.” I pushed him along, leaving Dex behind. I was getting hungry again after all this walking around. “Let’s go grab some pizza at the Four-Fourteen Pub down there.”

“Yeah. They have karaoke starting at six tonight, right?” He snatched my hand and swung them both between us. “You ever sing karaoke?”

“Not really. I sing all right, but I’m a harmony guy.” Shit was it already getting that late? Time flew when I was with him.

After strolling to the doors of the place, I opened one and waved Cash inside. “After you.”

“Thanks.” He swayed his hips in my skinny jeans as he sauntered inside.

I had to admit, seeing him in my clothes was kind of a turn on. I followed him in, and we sat in a booth along the back wall. I scanned around the bar. It was pleasantly dark with all the walls painted black and even the bar. Only the floor was a lighter color, a tan that matched the vinyl cushion of our booth. We could hide in here and no one would be telling me what a fucking hero I was.

He tucked into my side, planting his elbows on the bar. “Is it time for beers? I think they have cider here.”

“I think it is.” Damn, that sounded good right now. I perused the people sitting around us, mostly students my age, some couples, but there were a few older people scattered in. It

got packed for karaoke and that was about to start in a half hour.

“Maybe one of your band friends would like to join us?” He bumped his shoulder on my chest, giving me a sly smile.

“Devin won’t be singing today. He needs to rest his voice after last night’s gig.” I watched a waitress heading our way.

She stopped at the table, dropped off menus, and took our drink order, then left.

“Caleb and Axel on the other hand...” I fished my phone out of my back pocket, then texted Caleb and Axel. Cash had sat with Remy and Eric last night, so at least he knew them.

SILAS

I’m sitting here at the 414 Pub and Pizza. Want to do some karaoke or just grab some pizza with us?

AXEL

You still with Cash?

CALEB

Yeah, let me talk to Eric.

I tapped another text, holding my phone on the table. I was going to fuck with Axel.

SILAS

Of course, I’m with Cash. He can’t get enough of me. It doesn’t take me years to get the guy I want.

AXEL

You fucker. We’ll be right there.

CALEB

Someone has to mediate, so we'll be there, too.

“Good, the guys are coming.” I held the screen to Cash. Milo had plans with friends tonight, and I knew Gabe would have his nose in his books. It was hard to get him out of the house unless we had a gig. That had to change.

With a smirk, Cash pointed at my phone. “You’re right, I can’t get enough of you.” He pressed a kiss on my lips. “Can I stay over again tonight, or is that too much?”

I shrugged a shoulder. “Yeah, why not.” We should probably have a talk about sex. I wasn’t sure I could stop myself from fucking him after what we’d done this morning.

The waitress dropped off our drinks and we ordered a pizza with everything on it after taking a quick peek at the menus.

I should start with the guy we met on the sidewalk. “So, Dex. Tell me about him.” I flung my arm over the back of the booth, behind his shoulders.

He drew a deep inhale. “I hooked up with him at The Club on Mill a few weeks ago.” He twisted his bottled cider on the table. “We exchanged numbers, but neither one of us used them.”

“Okay, when you say you hooked up, how? Sex or...” My chest pinched. Shit, was that the guy he admitted to jerking off at the bar, the way he did to me last night? “You know what? Don’t answer that. I don’t want to know.”

His body relaxed. “Good, I didn’t really want to tell you about it.” He faced me. “The longest I’ve been with a guy was six months and that was a few years ago. He moved away to Nevada, and I haven’t spoken with him since. I see him on social media, but that’s about it.”

I nodded, then sipped my beer. Was that a red flag? “Why do you think you’ve never had a boyfriend for longer than that?” Was it because he went too fast with people? Shit, were we going too fast? I cleared my throat.

“I don’t know, things just don’t work out. I lose interest, or they lose interest, or we both lose interest.” He flicked his gaze to mine, then grabbed my hand, resting on the table. “You’re different, Silas.” His gaze darted between my eyes. “I’ve never asked someone to be my boyfriend this fast. In fact, I usually take things much slower. Maybe too slow.”

I arched a brow, my chest tightening. “You sure about that?” Somehow, it did not sound like him. I’d let myself spiral into this thing, but maybe that was the wrong thing to do.

“I’m sure.” He kissed the back of my hand. “I’m sure about you.” He pursed his lips. “I don’t know what you’ve done to me, but I’ve never gone after anyone the way I have you.” He swallowed hard, focusing on me.

My gaze searched his face. He seemed sincere. What choice did I have but to believe him? I couldn’t deny I was feeling the same way. “Yeah, okay.” I dropped my arm around his shoulders and drew him into my chest, then kissed his hair. Only time would tell if we’d last. I’d thought I might have married Mia at one time, too, but that obviously didn’t work out.

He plucked his cider off the table and took a long pull. “So, have *you* ever had a long-term relationship with a guy?” He raised a brow.

“You know what? Not really. The only person I’ve had a serious relationship with was Mia.” I drank my beer. “I was never looking for anything though, either. And even with Mia, she was the one that pushed for it.” No, I’d always been just fine by myself. A free man. I eyed him. But then, I’d never met anyone like Cash before.

“Um-hmm...” He gave me a quick grin, then tapped my nose. “See, I’m not the only one with a string of hookups and go-nowhere relationships behind me.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I huffed a chuckle, despite myself. He had me there. Maybe I was the one with the red flags. *Sex...* “So, if you’re staying the night tonight, does that mean—”

“Nope, I’m not that easy. I’m going to make you work for it.” He propped his chin on the palm of his hand and gave me a sly smile. “I know what you want. My hole is precious and not everyone gets it.”

“What?” I stared at him, my lips quirking into an open-mouthed grin. He couldn’t be serious. “You’re fucking crazy, you know that?”

“I do. But I stand by my statement.” He sipped his drink. “Yes, I do prefer to bottom, but I’ll top if you want, too.” He tongued the corner of his mouth, his gaze dipping to my lips. “I’m on PrEP and I’m HIV negative, since we’re talking about this. You?”

“I’m not on anything. I’ve never really thought about it, you know, being with the same person for two years and then...” I pursed my lips. I hadn’t exactly been careful the past few months. No, in fact I’d been downright reckless. “I should get tested.” I shifted in my seat. This was not a great thing to admit. “In fact, I’ll get tested this week at the student health services.”

His grin waned. “Sure.” He ran his fingers up and down his bottle. “We can use condoms in the meantime.”

“I know. I just...want to know for myself, too.” I winced, my chest tightening. “I’ve had a few hookups after gigs that weren’t safe.” God, what if I’d given myself HIV? What the hell had I been thinking?

“Really.” He chewed his lower lip. “At your gigs, do you usually end up with women or guys?”

“It’s pretty much equal, I’d say.” I huffed. “The guys in the band are always pushing me to find a guy, so they’re pretty happy about you.” I twined my fingers in his and rested our hands on the table. “I’m definitely bi. I don’t lean gay or straight. I like who I like, and I don’t care if they have tits or a dick.”

“What if they have tits *and* a dick?” He wagged his brows at me.

With a snicker, I dipped my head. “Yeah, I’d be okay with that, too.”

“Well, I’m definitely one-hundred percent gay. No tits for me, no way.” He fondled my breast. “I like a hard chest and a big dick and a nice, round ass.” He raked his teeth over his lower lip. “So, you’re perfect.”

With a nod, I tapped my beer glass on his bottle. “Cheers to that.” I drank some beer, while he sipped his cider.

“What are we celebrating? The fact that you’ve finally come to your senses and are dating this fine young man here?” Axel stopped at our table and planted his hands on his hips.

“Axel...” Remy, stepping up behind him, rubbed his forehead.

“See? I told ya.” I ticked my brows at Cash. “Come on, have a seat. We have a pizza coming, too.”

“Good, I’m starved.” Axel dropped into the chair opposite me while Remy sat across from him. “What kind of pizza is it?” He narrowed his eyes.

“Supreme, it’s got everything on it.” I eyed Axel. Shit, I’d forgotten he was a little picky about his pizza.

“Oh, gross. I’ll order another one.” He turned in his seat and flagged down the waitress, then ordered a pitcher of beer and a pepperoni and mushroom pizza.

Remy set his forearms on the table. “I’ll take some of your pizza. I never get to eat it with anything but pepperoni and mushrooms on it anymore.” He gave Axel a knowing grin.

“Just one of the hazards of dating the infamous Axel Sandstrom.” I smirked and drank some beer.

“We’re not dating. We’re partners. We live together.” Axel flashed his eyes at me.

“Yeah, whatever.” I wrapped an arm around Cash’s shoulders and pulled him closer. “We’re boyfriends.” I hooked a brow. How had that blurted out of my mouth? I glanced at Cash, a smile spreading over his lips.

Axel's eyes grew wide. "No shit?" His gaze snapped from Cash to me, then he held his hand out to Cash. "Congratulations. Silas is one lucky son of a bitch."

Cash shook Axel's hand. "Thanks."

Laughing out a huff, Remy said, "Seriously, I'm happy for you both. Silas is a good guy."

"Thank you, Remy." I drank more beer.

"I know he is. I can already tell." Cash squeezed my thigh under the table. "Some people might think we're moving too fast, but it's like I told Silas this morning. We have to be us."

With a nod, Axel said, "I like that." He planted a kiss on Remy's cheek. "You hear that lover boy? We have to be us."

Remy's cheeks flushed and he gave Axel a wide smile. "Yeah, I like that, too."

Caleb strolled in beside Eric and stood at our table. "What did I miss? Is anyone hurt?" He snickered, then sank in beside Cash while Eric pulled a chair over to sit beside Remy.

"Not yet. Give it time." My chest warmed. I had some of the best friends in the world. Sure, we gave each other shit but there was always love behind it.

"Guess what?" With his leg jiggling, Axel glanced at me, then focused on Caleb.

"Go ahead and use that big mouth of yours." I edged in closer to Cash. Axel was dying to spill the news.

"What?" Caleb eyed me, then Cash.

The waitress dropped off the pitcher of beer. "I brought extra glasses since I saw more of you at the table." She smiled at each of us. "The pizza should be right out."

As she left, Caleb stared at Axel. "What?"

"Silas and Cash are boyfriends." With a smug grin, Axel poured a beer, then pushed it at Remy and filled another glass.

"Seriously?" Caleb blinked a few times, then faced Cash. "Way to go." He held his fist to Cash.

Cash fist-bumped him. “Thanks.” He perused the table. “We decided this morning.” He dipped his cheek to my shoulder, then placed a soft kiss on my lips. “Who’s singing first?”

I glanced at Axel and his gaze met mine. “I’ll sing if you sing.”

“No fucking way. The bar does not need to be subjected to that.” With a snicker, Caleb shook his head, then drank a beer Axel had poured for him. “I’ll sing.”

“What, I can sing.” The tease of a smile played over Axel’s lips. “We can do a battle of the backup singers.” He flicked his tongue over his lower lip.

“I’d win.” I ran my index finger over the lip of my glass.

“There is no winning when the rest of us have to listen to Axel sing Soundgarden *off key* and Silas sing...what the hell would you even sing?” Caleb hopped up from the bench seat. “I’m putting a song in right now to stop this nonsense.” He stomped off to a man setting up a laptop on a table at the other end of the bar.

“You both sing in the band, why does Caleb think neither of you can sing?” Eric’s gaze flicked from me to Axel.

I flipped my hand over the table. “I don’t know. *I* can at least hold a tune. Axel on the other hand...”

“I can hold a tune.” He ticked his chin at me. “Come on, what do you want to sing?”

“Cash, what do you want to hear?” I squeezed his shoulders. “I might butcher it, but I’ll sing anything you want.” I cut my gaze to Axel’s. “Because that’s the kind of boyfriend I am.”

“Remy, what do you want me to sing?” Axel watched Remy.

Remy winced. “I’m not sure.” He snuck a peek at Axel. “Maybe not Soundgarden, okay?”

With a scoff, Axel shook his head. “Fine, no Soundgarden.” His blue eyes lit up. “Green Day?”

“Yes, I want to see you both do a Green Day song as a duet.” Cash smirked at me, then Axel. “You can each take a verse and harmonize the chorus.”

I stared at Cash. “Are you serious?”

“I am. I’ve seen you both onstage together with your guitars. Now I want to see what you’ll do without the guitars.” He sniggered. “It’s obvious you two have a certain charisma together.”

Sneaking a peek at Axel, I shrugged. “I don’t know.” That sounded weird. It was different when we could hide behind our instruments. Our dynamic changed.

“Let’s do it.” Axel pushed on my shoulder. “American Idiot. The song is perfect for you.”

“Why, because you think I’m an idiot?” With a smirk, I drank my beer. He was going down, now.

“No, because it sounds like if you were to write a song, that’s what you’d write.” Huffing out a laugh, he shook his head. “Why don’t we do that song with the band, anyways?”

“What song?” Caleb dropped into his seat beside Cash.

“American Idiot. I think we need to add it to our set list.” Axel ticked his brows at Caleb. “Anyways, I’m going to go put it in.” He pointed from me to himself. “And you and me are going to kill it.”

“Look what you started.” With a soft snort, I squeezed Cash’s shoulders and kissed his cheek, my heart growing light. This man was making me happy, something I didn’t know I could be anymore.

“I can’t wait to see what you both do.” Cash beamed at me.

“Oh, Jesus. I didn’t bring my earplugs.” Caleb sipped his beer.

The waitress dropped off our pizzas and some plates, then we ordered more drinks.

“Caleb, what are you singing?” I leaned over Cash to see Caleb clearer. He was no doubt going to rap something.

“Stressed Out by Twenty-One Pilots.” He picked up a pizza slice and tossed it on a plate, then shook his fingers. “Fuck, that’s hot.”

“Oh, no, did you burn yourself?” Eric grabbed his hand, then blew on his fingers. “We should get some ice.”

“I’m okay.” He gave Eric a coy smile. “You could lick them and—”

“No, we don’t need to see that. What, have you turned into Axel?” I set a pizza slice on a plate for Cash, then one on my own. “Watch out, it’s hot.”

Cash threw me a quick grin. “I know, but I appreciate you looking out for me.”

“There, our song is in right after Caleb’s.” Axel dropped into his seat, then picked up a slice of his pepperoni and mushroom pizza. “Damn, this is the best.”

The lights dimmed in the bar and the karaoke man spoke into a mic. “Welcome to karaoke at Four-Fourteen. First up is Caleb. Caleb, come and take the mic.”

“Shit, that was quick.” Caleb drank a few gulps of beer, then hopped up from his seat and strode to the center of the bar, where a mic on a stand waited for him.

He grabbed the mic, smiled back at us, then cleared his throat.

“This is sort of like old times, before Devin.” I bit into my pizza, then wiped my hand on a napkin. Caleb had always wanted to take the band in new directions, but Axel had pretty much vetoed it. But now Devin was perfect for the stuff we were doing.

The bar filled with a beat and an earie keyboard melody. We all watched Caleb while eating our pizza and downing our drinks.

As the first verse started up, Caleb dipped his knees to the beat and rapped it, half singing, half talking. As he went on,

his body became looser, and he sliced his hands to the rapping beat.

The chorus started up and Caleb hit the notes just right, swaying and hopping his body.

A few girls stood up from tables and danced around him.

“Damn, he’s not bad.” Axel twisted his lips. “Maybe we should add this song, too, and let Caleb do it.”

“Yeah, it would give Devin’s voice a break.” I unwrapped my arm from around Cash’s shoulders, then grabbed more pizza.

The more Caleb sang and rapped, the more he bounced around with the mic and swung his arms, dancing with the women, but giving Eric knowing looks.

“My boy’s got some funk.” Eric nodded his head to the beat, a broad smile on his face.

“He better, he’s a fucking bass player.” With a soft snicker, I drank some beer. Caleb was probably the best dancer out of all of us. It was a little-known fact unless you’d seen him at the gay bar on Mill Avenue.

“Caleb used to be your singer, right?” Cash leaned into my side, the heat from his body shivering over me.

“Yeah, but his range is limited, so we found Devin. It’s all good.” I watched as Caleb ended the song and placed the mic on the stand.

The bar erupted in claps and whistles.

With a wide grin, Caleb bowed, then strutted to our table and took his seat next to Cash. “Well?”

“That was awesome, man.” I held up my palm to him and he slapped it.

“You were great up there. It was so different from what your band does.” Eric plated more pizza for himself.

Caleb focused on Axel. “What do you think about adding something like that to our set list?”

“It’s a fine idea, isn’t it, Axel.” I peered at Axel. We had to find some new stuff. The songs we were doing were good, but our fans had heard them a million times by now. *I’d* heard them a million times.

“Yeah, sure.” Axel sipped his beer.

“Okay and now, we have Axel and Silas. Axel and Silas come to the mic.”

“Oh, shit.” A smile crept over my mouth. This was either going to go well, or really, really badly.

As I stood up, Cash slapped my ass. “Go get ‘em.”

“Come on, fucker.” Axel grabbed my hand and bounced on his toes as he hauled me to the mic. “We need the other one.” He grabbed another mic from the karaoke table, then joined me in the center of the room.

I stared at the TV screen on the wall, waiting for the lyrics to come up, my pulse hammering in my chest. I knew the lyrics, but fuck if I could remember them right now. It was weird doing this without a guitar on my hip.

As the fast riff for the guitars started for the song, Axel snatched my hand again and jumped up and down, making his black hair dance on his head. The first line of the verse started and he stood still, singing it at me at the top of his lungs.

The fucker. The battle was on. I lifted the mic to my mouth and belted out the second line, then he took the third and we both jumped at each other like lunatics between our lines.

The audience at the bar started clapping to the beat.

When the chorus hit, Axel and I stood back to back, legs wide, and head banded while we screamed out the chorus, then we both turned to face each other and sang even harder, face to face.

When the bridge came, we swung our arms and punched the air, jumping around each other, then fell into the back and forth of each of us belting out a line for the second verse.

People stood up and jumped and sang with us and Cash appeared at my side, hopping along with me, and singing

while he laughed.

By the second chorus, the whole bar bounced with us. Turned out, we didn't need our guitars to get the energy going we had at our gigs. It was us. Cash was right. We played off each other.

As the song ended, Axel flung his arm around my shoulders, set the mic in the stand, then kissed my cheek. "That was fucking awesome." He grabbed the extra mic from my hand, then placed it on the karaoke table.

I hooked my arms around Cash and swung him. "Thank you for making me happy." I planted a kiss on his mouth.

"Let's hear it for Axel and Silas, everyone," the karaoke man said. The bar clapped and cheered.

"I like to see you smile. It's sexy...and it warms my heart." Cash's gaze locked on mine, and he bit his lower lip.

"Well, thank you." My chest filled with warmth. I had a feeling with him, there'd be more times ahead like this. "Let's go sit down."

"Let's." He grasped my hand and led me back to our seats with Axel following us.

"Dudes, maybe you *can* sing?" Caleb chortled. "Sort of." He ate a bite of pizza.

"Yeah, we don't need to sing well. We have charisma. Right, Cash?" Axel held out his fist as he fell into his chair.

Cash bumped Axel's fist with his own. "You do."

EIGHT

CASH



As the night had worn on, Silas had become more affectionate and happier than I'd ever seen him. It was like a heavy weight had lifted off his shoulders. I loved seeing it. I strolled to my parked car down the sidewalk, lit up by streetlights, arm in arm with him. I looked forward to spending another night alone with him in his room.

“How did you do that?” He kissed my shoulder, a smile playing over his lips.

“What?” As we approached my car, I walked him to the passenger side. He'd had more to drink than I had, since I drove us here, and he was a little more than tipsy.

“Make me have fun.” He opened the car door and slid inside.

I jogged to the driver's side and climbed in. “I don't think it was all me. Your friends were there, too.” I started up the car.

“But I always hang out with them, and I don't remember feeling so...shit, stupid happy.” He planted a quick kiss on my cheek, then buckled his seatbelt.

“You being happy is not stupid, so get that right out of your head.” I backed out of the parking spot, then drove to the street and turned right onto the boulevard and into traffic. This part of town was always busy on a Saturday night.

“I really like you.” With a shy smile, he leaned his head on the headrest, snatched my hand, and kissed my knuckles.

Was he drunk? He wasn't stumbling, but maybe he'd had a little more than I'd thought. "Yeah?" I eyed him a moment. "I really like you, too."

"Good." He settled into his seat, turning his attention on the cars in front of us at the stop light. "Want a blow job?" His gaze flicked to mine and a mischievous grin curled his lips. "Like, right now?"

I stared at him. Was he serious? My dick stirred. "I-I don't think I can—"

Leaning over the center console, he palmed my dick through my jeans. "I want to. Is it okay?" He lowered my zipper, then pressed on his own hard cock, bulging under his front pocket. "Fuck, I'm so horny right now."

I'd never had anyone do that to me. I watched him, need humming inside me. "Um, I don't know." What if I crashed?

"Come on." He bent over and freed my cock from my underwear, then flicked at the head with his tongue.

"Oh, shit." My breath quickened as a shock of pleasure sparked in my groin. I snuck a peek at the car next to us, a young man giving me a knowing smile and nodding. "Silas, the guy next to us knows what you're doing." The light turned green, and I stepped on the gas, doing my best to focus on driving and not the fact that my dick was out and his tongue was on it.

"So what? You like it in public, right?" With a soft snort, he licked up my shaft, then fisted the base of my dick, trailing his tongue all around it and flicking at the slit. "Goddamn, you taste good."

As sensation heated my skin, I snuck my lower lip between my teeth and shifted my hips. "You're going to kill us."

"No, I'm not. I'll play down here until we get home. I won't make you come." He chuckled. "*That* might kill us." He pressed his tongue underneath my jeans and swept it over one ball, then the other.

I whimpered and my eyelids fluttered. Oh God, I had to get us home fast. Good thing he didn't live too far away. I drove a

little faster than normal, changing lanes between cars. I hoped I wasn't cutting people off.

He licked up my shaft and sucked my tip into his mouth, fluttering his tongue over it, then moaned.

“Fuck, Silas.” As a shudder rolled through my body, my foot hit the gas and the car lurched forward, then steadied. I turned onto his street.

He plunged his mouth over me and sucked.

A pulse of sensation shot up my spine and I stopped the car with a squeal of the tires in front of his house, both of us jerking forward.

He lifted his head and looked around, then swiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Shit, we're home already?”

“Yeah...home.” I could barely form words. My cock tingled and my balls ached for more. I tagged his shoulder. “Come on. Time to get naked in your bedroom.”

“I like the sound of that.” He gave me a lop-sided grin.

I peered at him. He *was* drunk. It was kind of cute. He was just drunk enough that all his walls were down, but not enough to be sloppy and out of it. “You okay?”

“I'm great.” He beamed at me. “Let's go. But you have to put your dick away. No—”

“No dicks out in the main room, I know.” With a shake of my head and a snicker, I tucked my still very hard cock back into my jeans and fastened them. “Are your roommates home?” I peeked at the dark house.

“I don't know. Gabe's probably in bed. Milo? Who the fuck knows where he goes half the time.” He climbed out of the car as I did the same and waited for me on the sidewalk, then flung his arm over my shoulders. “Come on, handsome.” He huffed out laugh.

“Those are my words for you.” I patted his chest as we strolled to his front door.

As he unlocked the door, he said, “Yeah, but you are way better looking than me. You’ve got some kind of sex nymph thing going on.” He pushed the door open. “After you.”

“Sex nymph?” Gabe stood up from the old leather couch, a smile teasing his mouth. “Did I just hear that right?”

Silas stepped inside, shut the door, then grabbed my hand and hauled me toward Gabe. “Yeah, you heard me right. And he’s all mine.” He threw a smirk at him.

“He’s had a few drinks.” I lifted my brows.

Gabe rounded the end of the couch, looking Silas up and down. “No, he’s just happy. It’s not a natural state for him, so he says stupid shit.”

“Don’t be spilling all my secrets, Gabe.” Silas kissed my cheek. “Come on. We have to finish what we started in the car.” He waggled his brows at me.

“Okay, I’ll just turn the sound up on my movie then.” With a sharp laugh and rubbing his neck, Gabe picked up the remote from the coffee table and turned the sound up, then faced us. “Go, have at it.” He waved at the hallway.

Holding the back of my hand to my mouth, I chuckled softly while Silas led me through the hallway and into his bedroom. These guys already felt like brothers to me. Jack would behave the same way if we were back at my place. I should bring Jack to the next show and introduce him to them all.

Silas flicked on the nightstand lights, then shut the door behind us and stood against it, his gaze raking over me. “Strip. I’m going to lick you from head to toe like a lollipop.”

My cock twitched and swelled. “Is that a promise?” I shucked off my shirt and dropped my jeans, then kicked them off as Silas did the same, leaving a scattering of clothes on the floor.

Stalking toward me, Silas said, “Yeah, that’s a promise.” As he reached me, he grabbed my ass and pressed our hot cocks together, then groaned and claimed my mouth in heated kisses.

I slanted my lips over his and snuck my tongue inside, deepening the kisses.

Rutting against me, his kisses became needy, then he pushed me onto the bed on my back. “No fucking yet, right?” He climbed up between my legs and took me in from head to toe, licking his lips.

“Not yet.” I gave him a coy smile. I only waited with a guy if I really liked him and Silas was...well, I was all in with him. But damn, it was so *hard* to wait with him. “I want it to be special.”

He dropped onto his elbows, his stomach resting over my stiff dick, and licked at the center groove of my stomach, then dipped his tongue into my navel. “Special, huh?” He ran his wet tongue up the center of my chest, snaking his way up and flicked at a nipple, then pinched it between his teeth, peeking up at me.

I threw my head back as sensation wound from my chest to pulse my cock, dribbling pre-cum against his skin. “Fuck, yeah.”

He licked across my chest to the other nipple and sucked on it, then lifted up enough to fondle my balls.

I raised my knees and wound my legs around his hips. “Give me head, Silas.”

“Is that what you want?” He bit at my nipple, lifting it between his teeth, then releasing it.

A shiver sparked down my spine and my mind went blank. “I-I don’t know what I want.” Squeezing my legs, I ground my dick against him, the tip of his cock teasing the edge of my crevice. It would be so easy to fuck him right now. But waiting would make it so much better.

“I do love giving you head, but I also love rubbing off on you.” He pressed a quick kiss on my lips, then reached into the nightstand drawer and grabbed the lube. “I’m opting for the latter. I want us kissing while we come.” He slathered lube on his hand, then dropped it between us and slicked both our cocks.

With my breath hitching, I dropped my feet to the bedspread on either side of his thighs. Did he have any idea how much he was using the word *love*?

He fisted our dicks, then rolled his hips, his shaft sliding against mine, his fist pumping both of us. “Fuck, that feels way too good.” Goosebumps broke out over his skin and his eyelids hooded. “Kiss me.” He lowered his mouth over mine and placed lazy kisses on my lips.

Sensation wound tight inside me, and I slipped my tongue inside his mouth, gliding it across his. As we kissed, I looked deeply into his dark eyes, gazing back into mine. My heart pattered and ached. I’d never felt so strongly for someone so quickly before. I roamed my hands across his back, grabbing at the taut muscles as they flexed, then down to his ass and squeezed.

“Yeah, fuck, keep doing that.” He nibbled down my chin and nuzzled into my neck, the jerking of his hand quickening, his body trembling over mine. “I’m so fucking close, but I don’t want to come yet.” He flicked his tongue at my earlobe and bit his way back to my mouth, slanting his lips over mine in hungry kisses.

I squeezed the globes of his ass tighter, then slid my fingers inside his crevice to tease his hole. Pleasure pulsed my dick and jolted up my spine. What would it be like to fuck him? It wasn’t something I normally wanted, but with him, I wanted everything. “I’m getting close, too.”

He groaned and his brows tensed. “Keep going.” His fist stuttered over our dicks, and he thrust hard against me, gasping. “Fuck, coming.” His gaze locked on mine.

I fell over the edge, sensation tingling my skin, my toes curling into the bedspread. “Oh, fuck.” I arched my head back, keeping my gaze affixed to his, my lips parting. Sweet contractions racked my body as my release surged over me.

His dick pulsed against mine and hot cum splashed onto my chest. “Fuck, yeah.” He pumped his hand faster and tighter over us, shuddering above me, his eyes fluttering closed.

As it slowed, he fell over me, resting his cheek on my shoulder. “Goddamn, Cash. What have you done to me?” He freed a soft chuckle.

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and kissed his hair. “I hope I’m making you happy.” My mind filled with Gabe’s words, *he’s just happy. It’s not a natural state for him...* If his friends were noticing a difference, that was saying a lot.

“You are. Maybe for the first time in my life.” He sighed. “Do I make you happy?” He lifted his head and his gaze met mine.

I brushed a lock of dirty-blond hair from his brown eyes. “Yeah, you definitely make me happy.” I raised my head to peck his lips.

“But you’re always happy, so I’m not sure that counts.” He buried his face in my neck.

Skimming my fingertips along his back, I said, “Not so. There are times when life gets me down. You’ll see.” I squeezed him to my chest. “But I’m sure with you to lean on it won’t be as bad.”

“What kinds of things get you down?” He circled my shoulder with his finger pads.

I shrugged. “Sometimes I just get down. It happens to everyone, you know when you have days where nothing goes right?”

“Yeah, I think every day is like that for me.” He huffed. “Except for today.” He kissed my collar bone.

“It all depends on how you look at it.” I gazed up at his ceiling, memories flooding my mind of a much younger me falling into depression and lying in bed all day or throwing fits over trivial things. “When I was a pre-teen or even in my teenage years, I wasn’t very nice to be around.” I breathed in deeply. I was exposing a part of myself I’d learned to overcome with the help of my therapist. “I feel bad for my parents and my siblings.”

“Yeah?” He propped himself on his elbows and furrowed his brows. “Tell me about it.”

I glanced at him, then focused on the ceiling, knitting my brows. “After what I’d been through, I didn’t know how to properly process emotions, so I didn’t. When I was really young, I was so neglected that it didn’t matter how I behaved. There was no one to stop me and no one to show me *how* to behave, so I just survived.” I rested my palm on my forehead, thinking back. “When my parents took me in, I’d already gone through a few foster care families. They said I was unruly and should be locked up somewhere.” My chest ached. They’d never even tried. They’d given up on me. I pressed my lips together. “But my mom and dad, they were different. They saw the reason I was behaving the way I was. It was because I finally had someone who noticed me. All I wanted was for someone to notice that I existed and that I mattered.” I shifted my gaze to meet with his, my chest tightening. “Acting like a delinquent wasn’t a great way to be noticed, but I didn’t know any better.”

“I see you, Cash. You matter to me.” He cupped my cheek and stroked his thumb over it, his eyes glistening in the low light. “Shit, I’m so sorry that happened to you.” He placed a soft kiss on my lips. “It’s sort of like the kittens we get into the rescue. They’ve been neglected a lot of the time and need to be fed and shown love, so they’re not scared and eventually, they stop biting and hissing at us.” He pressed his forehead to mine.

“Yeah, my parents did that for me and my therapist helped me work through a lot of my pain.” I dropped my arm to my side. Damn, talking about this wore me out. “Hey, what time are we going to the rescue?” I needed a change of subject.

“We should try to be there around ten. So, we should probably clean up and get some sleep.” He kissed my cheek, then climbed off me and stood next to the bed. “Come on, sex nymph.” He held his hand out to me with a smirk curling his lips.

As I lifted up, I shook my head. “I’m not sure if I like that nickname or not.” Grabbing his hand, I slipped off the bed.

“Good, then I’ll use it all the time.” He pulled me into his en-suite bathroom.

THE NEXT MORNING, I strolled with Silas down a sunny sidewalk with palm trees rising up every twenty feet or so along a wide boulevard with a grass and tree filled median centering it. Sculptures and fountains were strewn along a path inside the median, like a long oasis. I looked toward the end of the street at the sparkling water of a small lake surrounded by a green park and a tall fountain rising up in the center of it. We were in Fountain Hills for sure. The car show that I'd gone to with my family had been held at that very park.

Silas stopped at a one-story building in tan stucco with a red cloth awning hanging over the glass doors. "Here it is." He climbed the two steps to the entry, then knocked on the glass. "They don't open until eleven."

"Oh." I peeked down at my yellow shirt and smoothed it over my chest. I'd run home really quick to change this morning. Jack hadn't been there, which was probably good because he'd have asked a thousand questions.

An older woman with hair dyed a deep red and cropped at her chin all dressed in black, unlocked and opened the door. "Silas, come on in." She stepped aside. "You brought a friend?" She smiled at me, then held out her hand. "Name's Crystal."

"Hi, Crystal, I'm Cash." I shook her hand, then scanned around the room with a desk resting across from me, a window cage to the right and a set of shelves set up with purchasable items to the left.

"He's my new boyfriend." Silas lifted the edge of his mouth.

Her eyes grew wide, and she looked me up and down. "Oh, my." She rested her curled fingers over her lips. "He's hot. Way to go." She tagged his shoulder.

"Oh, um, thanks." I snuck a peek at Silas. I did not expect that out of her.

“See? She’s a cool lady.” His gaze shifted to her. “Thanks, Crystal. What’s on the agenda for today?” He pointed his thumb at me. “Cash is here to clean out the litter boxes.”

“What?” With the corner of my lips quirking, I stared at him. No way he was going to give me the dirty work.

“Well, we do have some of that to do, along with cage cleaning, but we have a new set of kittens that were brought in. One of them is a little ornery and needs some socialization.” She walked toward a door to the side of a desk and opened it. “They’re in the open cage right now if you want to see them. There are three of them, probably about nine or ten weeks old.”

“What happened to the mom?” Silas grabbed my hand and led me toward the door, then stopped.

“We’re not sure. They were left in a box on Stacy’s doorstep. I have a feeling whoever left them knew she volunteered here.” She inhaled deeply. “I suppose they couldn’t wait to bring them in here when we opened, or maybe they were ashamed.” She shrugged, waving a hand. “Who knows.”

Silas nodded, then asked, “Want to see some cute kittens?” He hooked a brow at me.

“I do.” I squeezed his hand. I couldn’t wait to see how Silas behaved with the kittens.

“Going in, chief.” Silas saluted at Crystal, then led me inside a room with stacks of cages along one wall, and a center area with a short barrier with a water bowl, cat toys and blankets inside it, along with a litter box. Tiny mews filled the room. The cats in the cages watched us, some perking up behind the bars of their enclosures.

Silas stepped over the barrier of the open cage. “Come on.” He knelt down and picked up a feather on a stick, then moved it toward a black and white kitten hunched down on its belly, its ears and tail twitching. “Hey, little buddy.”

“There aren’t too many cats in here.” I followed him into the enclosure and knelt down beside him. The place was clean

and well kept, with shelves of supplies along one wall.

“Yeah, this isn’t a big shelter. I think they can only have like thirty cats at a time in here.” He slowly moved the feathers toward the kitten, and it raised up on its back legs and swatted at the feather. “Watch, he’s getting ready to pounce on this.” He moved the toy back and forth, the kitten’s head turning with the movement. “Come on, little guy,” he said softly. “Come on, I won’t hurt you.”

The kitten dove over the toy, then Silas pulled it away and bounced the toy back and forth around the kitten. “There you go.” He chuckled and lowered to sit with his legs crossed, the kitten following the toy as Silas jerked it around him. “We have to get him comfortable with us.”

“That’s pretty cute.” I glanced behind us at the doorway, thinking on the things on the shelves in the main room. “What are they selling out there?”

While bouncing the toy for the frolicking kitten, Silas said, “People donate shit to the shelter for them to sell, like jewelry and stuff. Some of it’s pretty nice.”

A gray cat crept out from behind a fold in the blanket, its head following the movements of Silas’ toy and the first kitten.

“A-ha, got a second one.” He swung the toy toward the gray kitten.

“How do you know they’re males?” I shifted to sit cross-legged and placed a hand on Silas’ thigh, my heart warming. He was adorable playing with these kittens.

“I don’t. I just call them that until I know different.” He brought the toy closer to him. “Let’s see if they’ll let us pet them.” Slowly, he worked the toy toward us with the kittens following it, batting at it, and pouncing over it. “Hey, can you grab me a treat from the bag over on the shelf?” He moved the toy closer to his leg. “But move slowly, so you don’t scare them.”

“Yeah, sure.” I carefully got up, then stepped over the barrier, walked to the shelves, and grabbed a Ziplock bag filled

with little colorful balls. “I’m guessing this is it?”

Silas glanced at it. “Yeah, those are the treats.”

As I stepped back to the barrier, a large, fluffy white cat inside a cage sat up straight and meowed at me. I smiled at him. “Looks like someone’s hungry.”

“Yeah.” Silas shook his head. “Be quiet, Clyde. It’s not time for you to eat yet.” He huffed. “That cat is always trying to get treats.”

“Oh.” I made my way over the barrier and next to Silas and the kitten’s heads swung toward me. “Looks like maybe they know what’s in here, too.”

“They can probably smell it. This lady makes those special for the cats. I think they’ve got tuna in them or something. Smells horrible, but the cats love it.” Silas drew both kittens closer to him with the toy, then held his hand out to me. “Here give me a few of them.”

I opened the bag, then reached inside and handed a few of the treats to him. The scent of fish filled my nose. “Damn, those do smell.” I slid the bag closed.

He held a treat out to the black and white kitten, who sniffed at the treat, then glanced at Silas and sat down.

“Here you go, little buddy. Come on.” He wiggled his fingers.

The gray cat dove toward the treat, snatched it from Silas and darted to the far end of the cage, chewing.

“You little fucker. Taking treats from your brother?” He asked softly, shaking his head. “I’ve got your number now.” He held out another treat to the black and white kitten. “Come on, little guy.”

“You may be misgendering her.” I dug in the bag for another treat and held it out. Let’s see how I’d do. I’d never had a cat growing up, but dealing with them wasn’t rocket science. “Here you go, pretty girl.”

The kitten rose up and slowly stepped toward me, flicked her gaze at Silas, then gently took the treat from my fingers

and sat down.

“Look at your bad self. I’m going to start calling you the cat whisperer.” Huffing out a laugh, he leaned toward me and pressed a kiss to my cheek. “Give her another treat, but closer this time. Let’s see if she’ll let you pet her.”

“Okay.” I grabbed another treat from the bag and held it close to my shins. “Come and get it.” I cooed, “you are so cute, aren’t you.”

The kitten grabbed the treat, then brushed her side along my shin, her tail straightening.

“Okay, that’s it. I’ve been doing this for a year now and I’ve never seen a kitten take to someone like that.” He scoffed and shook his head. “Guess you’ll have to start volunteering here.”

“Guess so.” I skimmed my fingers down the kitten’s back and she arched into my touch. As long as I was here spending time with him, I’d be happy to volunteer. “Should I pick her up?”

“Not yet. If she climbs into your lap, then maybe.” He dug into the open bag in my hand and held out another treat, making a clicking noise.

A new kitten, all in black, poked its head out from the blanket and eyed him.

“Oh, that must be the ornery one. They know when they’re around their own kind.” He snickered, waving the treat around. In a gentle voice, he said, “Come here, you little bastard. I know you want this.”

The black kitten strode quickly toward him, stopped, and looked around, its tail flicking, then took a few slow steps and grabbed the treat from his fingers, then sat down and chewed.

“There you go.” He pursed his lips. “I bet you want more of that.” He held out his hand to me. “Can you give me a few more treats?”

I beamed at him. This was so adorable, him trying to win over these kittens in his own way. Clearly, the black kitten had

found a kindred spirit in him, same as mine had with me. I dropped a few treats in his hand.

The gray kitten lay down by the wall, licking its paw.

“Here you go.” He held the treat close to his shin. “Come on, I’m not going to hurt you.” He wiggled the treat.

The black and white kitten patted my leg, then climbed up into my lap and sat down. “Oh my God, do you see this?” With a broad smile, warmth filled my chest. Now I knew why he did this. It was amazing. These babies had no reason to trust us, but they did.

“Pet her. She’s comfortable with you.” He dipped his head, his cheeks reddening. “Sort of like me.” He peeked at me from under his long bangs.

The black kitten glanced at its buddy in my lap, then jumped into Silas’ lap.

“Oh, shit.” Silas giggled and stared at me, open mouthed. “These little guys are awesome.” He stroked his kitten’s back, and it curled up in his lap and purred. “I’m going to guess that the gray one over there is the ornery one.” He ticked his head at the grey kitten, eyeing us.

“I think you’re right. Here I figured it was the black one, since it came out last.” I scratched my kitten behind the ears and she tilted her head into my fingers.

“Okay, now we know which one we have to work on.” He gave another treat to his kitten. “The kittens learn from their siblings, so the gray one over there might get curious enough to come close to us if we keep petting these ones.”

“Okay, that seems easy enough.” With a grin, I leaned over and kissed Silas’ cheek. “Too bad we can’t bring them home.” But maybe someday, we would be able to. There was no end to the possibilities I might have with him.

NINE

SILAS



After spending the day with Cash at the rescue, I sat in his car in front of my house. It was time to say goodbye. “So, uh, I have to work this week and study.” My gaze cut to his.

“Yeah, I have to work, too.” He took a deep inhale. “What about this weekend? Are you free on Friday?”

“Yeah, I have a shift in the afternoon, but I’m done at seven.” I fingered the seatbelt buckle. Fuck, I was going to miss the bastard this week. I hadn’t even left his car and I could feel the ache of leaving him starting up in my heart. He’d really gotten to me this weekend. “Where do you work?” I studied him. I couldn’t believe we’d never talked about that.

He raised the edge of his lips. “I’m an assistant manager over at the Discount Tire in Mesa. I’ve been working there for a few years and my manager really likes me.”

“He’s not queer, is he?” My chest heated. I didn’t want anyone even looking at him, but me. Damn, I was a goner for him.

With a quick chuckle, he said, “No, he’s not queer. Don’t you worry.” He tapped my nose, then leaned in and pressed a long, deep kiss on my lips. “It wouldn’t matter even if he was. I have you.”

“Yeah, you definitely have me.” I quirked the edge of my mouth. He had no idea how much of me he really had, like *all* of me. “Okay, so...let’s keep in touch and plan something for Friday, all right?”

“Yes. Have a good rest of your day.” He straightened in his seat. “Bye, handsome. I’m going to miss you.”

Warmth swept up my neck. “I’ll miss you, too.” I climbed out of his car and waved goodbye to him as he drove off in his Mini, then stuffed my hands in the pockets of my jeans and strolled inside my house. As I shut the door behind me, my gaze caught on Gabe, perched in the middle of the couch, turned around and watching me.

“So, I take it you and Cash are hitting it off?” He peered at me.

“Yeah, we are.” With a long sigh, I walked to the couch and fell in beside him, then leaned the back of my head on the cushions and gazed up at the ceiling. “He’s different. He came from way worse circumstances than me and yet, he’s always so fucking happy.”

“Yeah, it must be contagious, because I’ve never seen you smile so much.” He chuckled. “When you were with Mia, you looked miserable most of the time.”

“That’s because I *was* miserable.” I lifted my head to meet his gaze. “She found me the other day in the library. I had her blocked, so she couldn’t fuck with me, but she did anyways.” I scowled, my chest tightening. I was finally feeling normal again. Maybe I shouldn’t be bringing this up, but there’d been a shit ton of texts from her since last night and I hadn’t wanted to look at them with Cash around. I’d set my phone on *do not disturb* to shut her out.

“Yeah? So, what did she say?” Gabe shifted to lift a leg between us, his arm resting across the back of the couch.

“She said...” I blew out a breath. “Fuck, just a bunch of bullshit about how I mistreated her.” I wasn’t even going to bring up the shit about the shooting. I already knew what choice words Gabe would have about that.

“Jesus Christ. I can’t believe that. We all saw her mistreat you. She’s got serious problems, Silas.” He huffed. “What the hell do you have to do to get rid of her?”

“If I knew the answer to that, I would have done it. Believe me.” I fished my phone out of my front pocket. “She’s been texting me since last night. I didn’t look at it yet.” I opened my messages and held the screen to my face. Was this really a good idea? I had to know where her head was at.

“Give that to me.” Gabe snatched my phone from my fingers, peered into the screen, scoffed, then swiped. “Fuck that shit.” He handed the phone back to me. “There, problem solved.”

I looked at my text messages. He’d deleted hers from the list. “Okay, did you look at them first to make sure—”

“There was nothing there you needed to see. It was all bullshit. She still wants an apology. That’s her lame excuse for badgering you.” He crossed his arms over his chest.

“I apologized like a billion times. I don’t even know what the fuck I’m apologizing for.” I scratched my head. This was insane. It was like her brain was stuck.

“Do you think her mom is behind this?” His gaze softened as it found mine. “I mean, you always said her mom was worse than she was, and she’d been abused by her.”

“Yeah, maybe. Fuck, or that stupid friend of hers. Who knows.” I turned my *do not disturb* off on my phone and it buzzed in my hand. “Oh, shit.”

His brows rose. “Want me to look at it?”

I glanced at my phone.

CASH

When do you play next? I want to bring Jack, so he can meet you.

I smiled. “Naw, it’s Cash. He must be home already.” Warmth sparked in my chest. We were now at the family meeting stage, apparently. “When is our next gig?”

“Saturday night.” Gabe crept closer to me. “Guess where?”

Eyeing him, I said, “Where?”

“Talking Stick Resort.” His lips quirked in a broad smile. “I finally got us in.”

“The fucking casino? You’re shitting me. Do the guys know that?” I stared at him, my heart soaring. Finally, we had a chance to make some big money.

“No, I just found out before you got home. Another band cancelled on them. I checked everyone’s schedule on our shared calendar, and no one is working, so I told them yes.” He tapped my shoulder. “But it’s just in the casino bar. It’s not out by the pool.” He shifted closer to me. “It’s sort of a trial thing to see if their audience will like the music we play. If we bring in a large enough crowd, they’ll consider the big outdoor venue at the pool.”

“Holy shit.” I stared at him. “This is awesome. I’ll let Cash know.” I tapped on the screen of my phone.

SILAS

We play on Saturday at Talking Stick Resort at the inside bar. This is huge for us.

The three dots popped up and I bit at my thumbnail.

CASH

That’s great. I’m so happy for you! We’ll be there!

Gabe glanced at my phone. “So, when are you seeing him again?”

“Not until Friday. He works all week and so do I, plus I have to fit some studying in.”

Nodding, he said, “Yeah. Where does he work?”

“The Discount Tire store in Mesa. I guess he’s an assistant manager there.” I tossed my phone onto the coffee table. He must be a good worker if he’d already been promoted to a job like that.

“Nice. Guess we all get deals on our tires now?” He huffed laugh.

“I’m sure something could be arranged.” I slapped my hands to my knees. “Anyways, I should get started on my studying.” I stood up. “Where’s Milo?”

“Out with a friend, I think.” He grabbed the remote from the coffee table, then turned on the television across the room, resting on a black console. “He’s been hanging out with this guy a lot. I guess he’s an old friend from high school.”

“Yeah?” I lifted my brows. “Good for him.” I walked into my bedroom. Time to hit the books.

A FEW DAYS LATER, I sat at a four-top table at the *Five Guys* burger diner just off campus with Axel and Caleb sitting across from me. They’d sent out a group invite for the band to discuss the casino gig, but Devin had been working at the Melrose bakery and Gabe and Milo were both busy meeting with their study groups. I had a feeling Axel and Caleb were wanting to talk about more than the casino gig or they would have rescheduled. I dug into my white paper bag, pulled out my burger, then unwrapped it. “So, what sort of changes to our set list do you think we should make?” I bit into my burger.

Axel stuffed a few fries into his mouth, his black hair lighting up blue in the sunshine streaming in from the window next to our table. “I don’t know. Maybe we should go back to starting with *I’m Not Okay*, like we used to.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “What do you think, Silas?”

Shrugging a shoulder, I said, “Yeah, sure, why not.” I dipped a fry in some ketchup, then ate it, my gaze catching on both of them, studying me. “What?”

“Are you? Okay?” Caleb set his burger down and wiped his fingers on a napkin.

“Uh, yeah.” I knitted my brows. Something was up. “Why are you asking me that?”

Axel huffed. “Gabe texted us. He said Mia’s been saying some pretty awful shit to you. More awful than normal.

Like...like about the shooting.” He twisted his lips.

“Fuck.” I flung myself back in my chair and focused out the window at the students rushing by in the noonday sun, some with friends or partners, chatting and laughing. At one time, that was me and Mia. Not anymore. Now I had someone so much better. “Yeah, so she’s been saying shit. I’m over it. I...I have someone who helps me forget, just like the two of you now.”

“Cash?” Caleb nibbled on the end of a fry, fixating on me.

“Yes, Cash.” I rested my elbows on the table. “I knew this wasn’t about the casino gig. You would have waited until we could all be together. Are the other guys in on this little intervention?”

Axel scoffed, then nodded. “Yeah, they are. We didn’t think you’d show if we texted and said, *hey, let’s talk about the shitty things your ex is telling you.*”

“Silas, I got a DM from Cash, too, on Instagram about the shit Mia accused you of with the shooting.” Caleb puffed out a breath and glanced at Axel.

“You did?” Axel stared at Caleb, then tagged his shoulder. “How come you didn’t tell me that?”

“You didn’t need to know.” Caleb shifted his attention to me. “Listen, Silas, you know what you did that day was—”

“I know I was a fucking hero.” Heat swarmed my chest. Why the fuck did everybody have to keep shoving this in my face? I glared at Caleb and stabbed at the table with my finger, saying, “I saw the guy first as he was coming into the store. I cowered and hid instead of taking action. I could have—”

“Stop it, Silas.” Axel grabbed my fisted hands over the table, his gaze hard. “Just stop it. I don’t want to hear another fucking word out of your mouth. You saved people, including me.” He tossed a glance at Caleb, winced, then refocused on me. “You are not to blame for the people that died. You. Are. Not.” He pressed his lips into a thin line. “I swear to God if I hear that shit out of Mia’s mouth, I might take her down. I don’t care if she’s a woman.”

Shaking his head, Caleb tsked. “You’ll do no such thing. Violence is not the answer.”

Axel freed my fists. “I know, but it sure felt good to say it.” The edge of his mouth twitched.

“How often is she texting you?” Caleb ate a few fries, then picked up his burger.

“I don’t know, every other day or so? I don’t read the text messages.” I cringed inside. Yeah, I had read some of them, but only when I’d felt particularly strong in the moment.

“Did you talk to the therapist about it?” Axel bit into his burger, then sucked his soda from a straw poking out of the cup.

“Yeah, I talked to her about it. She says I should block her and not listen to any of it.” I shook my head once. “Fuck, guys, if I block her, then she goes looking for me. I’d rather get a shitty text than have her say this crap to my face.” My mind replayed the day in the library. I also didn’t need her to see me lose my shit over it. It would give her too much satisfaction.

“So, what does Cash say about it?” Caleb ate his burger, then wiped his mouth with a napkin.

“Basically, the same as you two.” I stuffed a few fries into my mouth. “If I block her, she’ll find me and bitch me out, but if I don’t block her, she’ll bitch me out through text. I can’t fucking win.” I slumped my shoulders. If only there was a way to get rid of her for good.

Axel faced Caleb. “Maybe we could pay her a visit. She usually hangs out on the East side of campus, right?”

Squinting at Axel, Caleb said, “I’m not so sure that’s a good idea. It might stir up more shit.”

“Yeah, then she’ll accuse me of badmouthing her to my friends.” I huffed.

My phone buzzed in my back pocket, and I tugged it out. “What the fuck now.” I stared at the screen. I recognized the number, but couldn’t place it. Starting the call, I said, “Hello?”

“Silas Brown?” A deep male voice asked.

“Yeah, this is he.” I picked at the edge of my burger wrapper. I had no fucking idea who this could be.

“This is Dr. Oberg with Student Health Services.”

“Oh, shit.” I glanced at Axel. “Sorry, uh, yeah?” He didn’t need to be hearing this conversation. I covered my mouth with my hand, my heart stammering. With all this Mia shit, I’d forgotten all about the testing I’d had yesterday. What if this was bad news?

“Who is it?” Axel lifted his brows.

I waved at him and gave a sharp shake of my head.

“I have your test results here and I’m pleased to say, all clear,” Dr. Oberg said.

“Yeah? It was all negative?” I threw a peek at Axel, smirking at me and nodding his head. Shit, I said that out loud.

“Yes, all negative. If you’d like to get started on PrEP, we can schedule another appointment to walk through it.”

“Okay, um, let me think about it.” Did I really need to go through all that? I wasn’t gay. But Cash was and technically... yeah. I sighed, then said, “Yes, let’s schedule another appointment.” After scheduling an appointment for next week, I hung up the phone and set it on the table, then drew a deep breath. “Yes, I got tested and yes I’m negative.” Might as well just come out with it.

Caleb and Axel looked at each other, then busted out a laugh.

“That’s cool, man.” Axel beamed at me. “So, I guess you and Cash can go bareback now?” He wiggled his brows at me.

“Yeah, when we actually have sex.” I blinked. What the fuck did I just say? Oh no... I hung my head and grumbled.

“You haven’t had sex yet?” Axel leaned over the table. “You spent the whole weekend together and didn’t have *sex*?”

“Dude, no way.” Caleb giggled. “Did you suck his dick at least?” He threw a few fries in his mouth, his eyes twinkling.

“Yeah, I sucked his dick, okay?” I scoffed. “I know you can’t go a day without a dick in your mouth, Caleb.” He was well known for his deep-throating abilities.

“And Eric likes it that way.” Caleb drank iced tea from a straw.

Axel planted his elbow on the table, staring at me like I’d grown a second head. “Wait, you really haven’t had sex yet?”

“Yes, Axel. I know it’s hard for the former hookup king to imagine, but yeah. He wants to wait. He wants it to be special.” I shrugged, then ate the last bite of my burger.

“Special...” With a smirk, Axel nodded slowly. “You really like this guy.” His breath caught. “Wait, are you in love?”

My gaze snapped to Axel’s, my heart pattering in my chest. Axel always had to push it. I did miss the shit out of Cash the last few days though. But love? “We only spent a weekend together. I like him, a lot. But—”

“It only took four days in Mexico with Eric for both of us to fall in love.” Caleb ate the last of his fries, then crumpled up his wrappers and paper bag into a ball.

“I can’t remember falling in love with Remy. It was probably the first time I saw him.” Axel arched a brow.

“You would have been a baby.” Caleb rolled his eyes, then focused on me. “Anyways, things are moving along with you two. Don’t let this shit with Mia get in the way. Exes have a way of fucking things up.”

“Yeah, I’m quite aware of that.” I crushed my bag into a ball. Eric’s ex had almost ruined him and Caleb, too. I had to be careful of Mia and not let her get to Cash. My heart jolted. “Shit.”

“Shit what?” Caleb tilted his head.

“Mia is a fucking expert at digging into people’s weaknesses and Cash, well...” I pursed my lips. Should I tell them? I didn’t think it was a secret. “Cash was neglected as a child and put into foster care. He had a pretty shitty past. I’d

hate for her to get her claws into him.” And Cash did say something about having bad days. My heart ached for him, then heat flooded my chest. Through my teeth, I said, “I swear to God, if she says anything bad to him, I’ll take her out.”

“We’ll all take her out.” Caleb pressed his lips into a thin line. “Cash is too nice of a guy to have her bring him down.”

“Damn right.” I glanced at Caleb, then Axel. As usual, they had my back.

THE NEXT EVENING, after a short shift at work, I sat at my desk in my room, reading over an assignment on corporate tax law on my laptop. There were so many loopholes, it boggled my mind sometimes.

My phone buzzed on my desk, and I picked it up, my heart quickening. Was it Cash or Mia? I’d been texting Cash on and off all day and couldn’t wait to see him tomorrow night. I held the phone up to my face.

MOM

We want to have a family dinner on Sunday. Can you make it?

I thought it through. We had the casino gig on Saturday night, and I worked an afternoon shift at Target, so yeah. *Cash*...my heart stuttered. Would he want to meet them? I was meeting his brother on Saturday, so why the hell not? We *were* boyfriends, even if it was new. I’d even gotten tested for the guy. I’d better talk to Mom. I dialed her cell and held the phone to my ear. It rang a few times, then clicked.

“Hi, Silas. I suppose you’re calling to tell me why you can’t make it?” Splashing water sounded in the background.

“No, actually I’m not.” I inhaled a deep breath. “I’m asking if I can bring someone.” I’d start there.

“Oh? Is this someone a girl?” The water sounds stopped.

“No, a guy.” I straightened my spine. She knew this might happen someday. It wasn’t like I was in the closet in any way.

“Oh.” She cleared her throat. “Tell me about him. I’m assuming he’s not just a friend.”

“No, he’s...my boyfriend. And he’s a good guy, very uh, upbeat and, shit Mom, what can I say? I really like him.” A smile played over my lips. How the hell do you describe someone like Cash? Eternally optimistic? Always happy? A guy who’d give cash to a stranger just for asking? Yeah, that was him.

She chuckled. “I can tell. You don’t get tongue tied very often. I’ll warn your father. Hopefully he’ll behave himself.” She sighed.

“He better behave himself. I did sort of already warn Cash about him.” I shifted in my chair, my gut clenching. “What do you think he’ll be like?” Sometimes he was fine, but other times, he was cold, very, very cold. I didn’t want Cash to take it the wrong way.

“Well, it was easy for him when you were seeing Mia. He could pretend you weren’t queer. But since you two broke up, it’s bothered him,” she said.

“What?” I narrowed my eyes. I’d thought we were over that shit in high school. “Mom, he’s got to understand my attraction to men is not going away. I may not end up marrying a woman. I’ve told him that.”

“On the surface he understands, but deep down he thinks you should be able to control it somehow and focus on dating women. I don’t know, honey.” She puffed out a breath. “I know it’s hard. If you were gay, he’d probably be more understanding,” she said. “Is that weird?”

“Not really. I sometimes think it’s easier to be gay. Then no one questions it. No one tells you, you haven’t made up your mind yet or some shit.” I huffed a laugh. If I heard that crap from other people, why would Dad be any different?

“Okay, so I’ll let him know you have a new boyfriend for us to meet.” Her breath caught. “Where did you meet him,

anyways? One of those hookup apps?”

“No, not a hookup app. You know I hate those things.” I scoffed. Besides, me writing a bio about myself would end badly. There was no way I could pull that off without sounding like the cranky bastard I was. Who’d want to date me? “I uh, I met him after a gig. He was getting robbed, and I stepped in.”

“Are you serious?” She giggled. “Silas, you are just like your father in that way. He was always doing the courageous thing. Do you know how many medals he has?”

“Yes, I know how many medals he has.” They were on display in his home office for all of us to see. My chest filled with warmth. I was probably more like him than I wanted to be. After the shooting, it was the proudest I’d seen him be of me. We’d actually connected.

“So, you saved this boy from getting robbed and then you started dating him?” she asked.

“Yeah, pretty much. He sort of came after me.” I chuckled. “I thought he was a little crazy at first, but yeah.” I didn’t want to go into the details. We could do that at dinner. “You’ll see when you meet him. He’s basically the opposite of me. He’s got this positive attitude, Mom.” I roamed my gaze over my room, Cash filling my mind. “He makes me feel good about myself.”

“Oh, honey, I’m so glad to hear that. I know Mia was just awful. She isn’t still hanging around, is she?” She huffed.

“Yeah, unfortunately, she is. She’s still trying to talk about things, but there’s nothing left to talk about.” I planted my elbow on my desk and rested my forehead in my hand. Should I go into this with Mom? She was always good to bounce things off of. “I don’t know what’s up with her. I mean, it’s like she’s completely turned into her mother now, and she accuses me of all sorts of bullshit. She actually says I emotionally abused her.” My chest pinched.

“Silas, don’t you listen to that. You know you did everything you could for that girl. She was off. I could tell the first time you brought her to meet us. Your father was more

forgiving, but I could see it.” She clicked her tongue. “She controlled you and it took all my strength to keep my mouth shut while I watched you turn into someone you weren’t.”

“Jesus, Mom. You never told me this before.” I rubbed my forehead. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because you weren’t ready to hear it. You were in love. You have a big heart, always have. You would have protected her, and you and I would have grown apart.” She freed a ragged breath. “That’s what she would have wanted, and I wasn’t going to give it to her.”

I blinked. Mom was perceptive as shit. “Yeah, guess you’re right.”

“Of course, I’m right. I’m your mother.” She choked out a laugh. “I can’t wait to meet Cash. He sounds like a lovely person.”

“He is, Mom, he really is.” I drew circles over my desk with my finger, thinking about all she’d just said. Even Mom had seen the problems with Mia. It wasn’t me, it really wasn’t.

“Silas? Does Cash know about the—”

“Yes, he does. I think the whole damn state knows about the shooting and what I did.” Blowing out an exhale, I sat up straight and raked my fingers through my long bangs.

“Are you still having problems with it?” she asked.

“No, not really.” That was a fucking lie, but I didn’t want to talk about it. I slumped my shoulders.

“You’re still seeing your therapist, Lorena, right?” Clinking rang out in the background. Mom was picking up the house, something she always did before bed.

“Yep, still seeing her. She’s been great.” I peered at the clock on my laptop screen. It was almost ten. I should let her go. “Anyways, Mom, it was a pleasure to chat with you as usual, but I know it’s your bedtime.” I chuckled.

“Yeah, okay. I’ll see you on Sunday anyways. I love you, Silas and I’m looking forward to meeting your new man,” she said. “Oh, and don’t worry about your father. He’ll be fine.”

“Good.” I stood up from my desk chair. I should get to bed as well. “Love you, Mom.”

“Love you, too. Bye.”

“Bye.” I hung up the call. For everything Dad was not, Mom was. She filled in the spaces he’d left open. I really didn’t have too much to complain about, especially when compared to how Cash’s life had started out. Maybe my bad attitude toward my dad had been partly a response to what I’d been going through with Mia. There was so much to unpack now that my relationship with her was over.

TEN

CASH



It was finally Friday night, and I was about to see Silas again. We'd decided to order in at his place and watch a movie, since we'd be out most of the night at his show tomorrow. His roommates had both gone out with friends to give us some alone time, which was really nice of them.

I drove to the curb in front of his white bungalow, then parked my car and climbed out. My heart pattered in my chest as I walked up the driveway and past the window, peeking at the pink, hooded sweatshirt I'd paired with gray sweats. Since we were staying in, we'd decided it should be a casual and comfortable night. As I stepped to the door, it flung open.

"Hey, Cash." Silas walked out and wrapped his arms around me, yanking me into his chest, then kissed my cheek. "God, I missed you." He freed me and stood back, inspecting me, his hands planted on my shoulders. "You look good in pink."

"I do, huh?" I brushed my shaggy bangs off my forehead and took him in, all dressed in a black sweatshirt and thin Adidas track pants. "You look good period, my handsome man." Especially the satisfying bulge in those pants. I flicked him a grin, a shiver of desire rushing down my spine, then brushed by him into the house. Clapping my hands together, I said, "So, what are we ordering for dinner?"

"How about sushi? Do you like it?" Silas shut the door behind us, then followed me in. "There's a decent place not far from here and they do DoorDash." He slipped his phone out of his front pocket and opened the screen, then held it to me.

“Here’s the menu. If you don’t like sushi, they have fried rice and stuff.”

“Oh, I like sushi.” I swiped the menu on his phone, gazing at all the colorful rolls. “Yeah, let’s do this.” I handed his phone back to him. This would be a fun date with all the comforts of a good restaurant *and* home.

“I also bought some pear cider for you to drink.” He strolled into his kitchen and grabbed two bottles from the refrigerator, one beer and one cider, then held the cider out to me. “Here.”

“My, my aren’t you all prepared and thinking of me.” I took the cider and sipped it, the sweet bubbles cooling my throat.

“Did you work today?” He drank a long pull of his beer.

“Yeah, I did. There was a nice older gentleman who came in and we chatted for a while when the guys were putting on his new tires.” In fact, I’d been pretty sure the man was gay and was hitting on me. I probably didn’t need to mention that to Silas.

“Yeah?” He stepped to the leather couch and dropped into a corner of it, then patted the cushion next to him. “Come here. We need to talk.” He gave me soft smirk.

“Oh?” I fell in next to him and edged into his side. Hopefully it was about something good.

“So, I didn’t think these things should be discussed over text or I’d have told you this earlier.” He snapped his brows up and drank more of his beer.

“Okay.” My heart quickened. Did he get his test results back and was he okay? He didn’t seem upset.

“First, I tested negative. For everything.” He lifted his chin and gave me a broad smile. “I go back in next week to talk about getting on PrEP.” He studied me. “You’re on it, right?”

“Yes, I am. I’m not sure we both need to be on it if we’re not seeing anyone else.” I furrowed my brows. I’d never had to have this conversation. Did either of us still need to be on

it? He wouldn't cheat on me, would he? "I mean, not unless you want to." I worried my lower lip. Did he think I might cheat on him?

"I thought you had to be, uh, I guess I don't know very much about it." He scratched his neck. "Shit, we don't need it if we're not having sex with anyone else, huh." Pressing his lips together, he peeked at me from under his brows.

"Technically, no, but if you would feel better about things, then by all means..." My gut tightened. This was turning awkward, fast.

He huffed a chuckle and snatched my free hand, then kissed the back of it, the edges of lips twitching. "You know what? I don't need to be on it. You can stay on it if you want. I understand if you don't trust me yet."

"I trust you, Silas." I squeezed his hand. "I just don't um... I don't know what to do, actually. We have time to think about this, right?" Why did this have to be so complicated? "You do know I can't get HIV and I can't give it to you while I'm on the meds." I breathed in deeply. "So, this is about you and your lifestyle. If you think you might slip—"

"Fuck no, I won't slip. I'm not like that." He wrinkled his brows. "I've never cheated on a partner in my life and I'm not starting now." He shifted closer to me. "Especially with you, Cash. I'm falling for you. Hard." His eyes widened. "Shit, that sort of slipped out."

My heart blossomed with emotion. For once, the guy I liked was on the same page as me. "I'm falling *hard* for you, too, Silas." I cupped his cheek and gazed deeply into his gorgeous brown eyes, then pressed my lips to his.

He shut his eyes and moaned into the kiss, then broke it. "No matter what we choose, it's our own decision and our own health we need to consider and neither one of us should feel insecure about it. Right?"

"Yes, exactly. I'm on board with whatever you decide." I raked my teeth over my lower lip. "No condoms needed." My

cock woke. We hadn't even had dinner yet and I was ready to take him to bed.

“No fucking condoms.” His pupils flared and his breathing quickened. “We better order the food, or I might take you into the bedroom and not let you out until morning.”

“Yeah, I agree.” I drank my cider, willing my swelling dick to stand down for the moment. “Just order whatever you think is good at the restaurant and we'll share it.”

“Sure.” He tapped on his phone, then set it on the coffee table. “Done. I got us a few rolls and some nigiri.”

“Perfect.” I blew out a breath and relaxed into the couch, then eyed him.

He looked me up and down, then bit his lower lip.

“What?” He obviously had more to say. I chewed my thumbnail.

“I want to invite you to my parents' house on Sunday to meet them.” He gave me a blank stare. “I mean, I'm meeting your brother tomorrow.”

“Holy shit.” I sat up straight, my brows lifting. “Silas, are you sure?” My heart stammered in my chest. When he jumped in, it was with both feet. I thought I was the only one who did that.

“I'm sure. I want you to meet them. I already told my mom about you.” He sucked his lower lip between his teeth. “Is it too much?”

“No, it's not too much. You shocked me, is all. Damn.” I gulped down my cider, then wedged it between my thighs. “I uh, yeah, I'll meet them on Sunday.”

“My mom is having a family dinner, so my sister will be there, too.” He wrinkled his forehead, then rubbed his chin. “I'm shocking the shit out of you right now, aren't I.”

“Yeah, but it's a good shock.” I nodded. “I'm in, Silas, I'm all in.” I patted his thigh. “What about the kitty rescue?”

“I don’t go in every week, and I already told them I couldn’t make it.” He freed a ragged breath. “I have to work an earlier shift at Target on Sunday anyways. We can meet up after and head up to my parents’ house.” He focused on me. “Does that work?”

“Yes, that works.” I peered at him. “Are you okay? You look scared to death.”

He shook his head and smirked. “Yeah, I was afraid you might say *no* after our talk about the HIV meds. Fuck, I’m no good at this.”

“Neither am I.” I wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “As long as we navigate this together, and keep communicating, we’ll be fine.” I kissed his cheek, then tucked a long bang behind one of his ears. “That’s what I’ve learned from both my parents and my therapy sessions.”

“Cash, you are perfect for me. You know that?” He chuckled, his shoulders shaking under my arm.

“Yeah, I think I know.” My gaze travelled to the television resting on a console across the room. “What are we watching tonight?”

“Whatever you want, *hun*.” He snickered, then grabbed the remote from the coffee table and turned on the television.

I snapped my brows up. “Hun?” Was this the same man I left on Sunday?

“Yeah, you called me that when we went to coffee the first time. I thought it was weird back then, but now I kind of like it.” He tucked me into his side. “It’s you.”

Snuggling into his side, I said, “And now it’s the new Silas.” With a quick smirk, I drank my cider.

“So, what are we watching? He scrolled through some of the movies on his Netflix app.

“Ooo, that one with the swords and dragons.” I flapped my fingers at the TV. He didn’t know how into fantasy stories I was. It had been what I’d used to escape from my real life when I needed to.

“Yeah?” He clicked on the movie. “I pegged you for someone who’d like romantic comedy or something.”

“I do, but I like this, too.” Lifting my legs up beside me on the couch, I patted his sweatshirt over his heart. “I sort of have my romantic comedy right here.” I planted a kiss on his cheek.

“Yeah, okay.” As a chuckle rumbled his chest, he shook his head.

OUR SUSHI SHOWED up a half hour into our movie. Silas paused it and hopped off the couch to get our food. “I’m starved. This is going to be good.” He opened the door and grabbed a large paper bag from the delivery driver, then strolled into the room. “Do you want to eat and watch or just eat?”

“Sushi seems a bit complicated to be eating it on the couch.” I stood up and followed him to his dinette, then took a chair beside him at one end of the table.

He set everything out, running into his kitchen for more soy sauce and plates, then sank in beside me, tearing his wooden chopsticks apart. Pointing to each of the open containers, he said, “So...I got us a standard rainbow roll, a baked lobster roll, a Las Vegas roll and some tuna and salmon nigiri.” He gave me a smile.

“Looks like you thought of everything.” I smiled back at him while I mixed up my wasabi and soy sauce. He was so thoughtful about tonight. I wasn’t used to the guys I dated being like this, at least not to this extent.

He dunked a roll into his soy sauce, then ate it. “Mmm, good.” With a slow nod, he drank down some beer. “So, I have to ask. *Are we having sex tonight?*”

“Depends on what you call sex.” I fluttered my eyelashes at him. It was going to be fun to fuck with him a little bit.

“I guess I’m talking about penetration.” He scraped his teeth over his lower lip. “As in my dick in your hole,” he said,

hooking a brow. “Please?”

“Are you begging for it?” I held my chopsticks to my lips, looking him over, his strong shoulders and thick lips. My dick stirred, then swelled. Yeah, I wanted it, wanted him in a bad way.

“If I have to, then I am.” He ate another piece of a roll, then palmed his groin. “Fuck, just talking about it made me hard.”

“I’m about there, too.” I dipped a salmon nigiri into my soy sauce, then ate it and tilted my head. “I don’t know though. I mean, how well do we really know each other?” The edge of my mouth tugged up and I flicked my gaze to his.

He squirmed in his seat. “Well enough to be boyfriends, for me to get tested for you and for me to ask you to meet my parents. How’s that?” His tongue flicked over his lower lip.

“You didn’t invite me to meet you parents just to get in my pants tonight, did you?” I fought to hold in a snicker. Oh, this was precious.

His eyes grew wide. “What? No, of course not.” He set his chopsticks down. “I thought—”

“Relax. I’m fucking with you.” I let out a soft snort and placed my hand over his on the table. “Yeah, I think it’s time.” I glanced down at my sushi. I didn’t think I could eat it fast enough now. I had no willpower when it came to him. I hadn’t planned on having sex tonight, but it hadn’t been off the table either.

“Oh. I should have known.” He hung his head, then came back up with a wicked grin. “Do we have to wait for the end of the movie? I mean, my roommates aren’t home right now, and we can be as loud as we want.”

“That’s a good point,” I said with a nod. I ate more sushi. “There are no rules, here, Silas. We can do whatever we want.” My gaze dropped to his lips. I wanted that mouth on me as soon as possible.

“Good, then let’s eat up and get naked.” He adjusted himself, then drank some beer. “Fuck, I’m hard as hell now.”

“Me, too.” I shoveled more food into my mouth.

AFTER EATING, we left the remnants of our dinner on the table and Silas led me into his bedroom.

As we stepped inside, he flicked on the nightstand lamps.

“Why is everything in here black?” I shucked my sweatshirt over my head and tossed it to the floor, then dropped my sweatpants as he did the same.

He shrugged a shoulder, then stepped to me, wrapping his arms around my hips, his hands planting on my ass. “Do you really care about that right now?” He brushed his lips over the shell of my ear and flicked his tongue inside it.

Shivers swept over my body, and I gasped. “Uh...no.” I pressed my hot cock to his, our bodies fitting together so perfectly. This was going to be so good. He made me feel safe and wanted in a way I hadn’t before.

He nibbled across my chin, kneading the muscles of my ass, then claimed my mouth in hungry kisses.

I rutted against him and wrapped my hand around the back of his head, pulling him closer, the friction of our rubbing dicks pulsing sparks up my spine. Moaning, I stepped backward, taking him with me, until my legs hit the bed. “How do you want to do this?”

He raised the edge of his mouth. “Slowly and with feeling.” He pressed his lips together, resting his forehead on mine, then cupped both my cheeks, his thumb skimming across them. “This isn’t about fucking. This is about connection. I don’t know why, but that’s really what I want from you. I know maybe it sounds like I don’t, but I do.” His gaze affixed to mine.

I stared at him a moment, my heart stirring, and took a hard swallow. *Oh my God, I think I’m in love.* No one had ever said anything so romantic to me before. With a ragged voice, I

said, “Okay.” Stupid, Cash. He deserved more than that. “Um, yeah, I want connection, too.”

“Good.” He slowly pushed me down onto his bed and as I lay on my back, he crawled over me, his gaze locked to mine.

I sank into the comforter with my head on the pillows and raised my knees. “Kiss me.” Wrapping my arms around his shoulders, I tugged on him, and he lowered down over me. Our cocks pressed together once again.

He gave me slow, but urgent kisses, his hips rocking, his hands skimming over my heated skin. In a whisper, he left my mouth, saying, “Fuck, you feel good under me.” He licked down my chest, flicking his tongue at one nipple, then the other.

I arched my back as sensation threaded deep into my balls. “Oh, fuck.”

With a smirk, he swept his tongue over the grooves of my stomach, then quickly reached into his nightstand drawer for the lube. Sitting up on his knees, he slathered the fingers of one hand with lube, then fisted the base of my shaft with the other and dropped his wet mouth over my dick.

“Uh...” I arched again as pleasure rippled through my body. I loved all the attention he gave me.

Pumping my cock with his mouth, he snuck his slick fingers into my crevice and circled my hole.

My hole clenched and opened for him. “Put it in. Feels good.” I writhed on the bed, then threaded my fingers through his long hair.

He slid his finger into me and curled it just so, moaning over my weeping cock.

Bearing down on him, the burn slipped into pleasure, and I gasped, clutching his hair in my fingers. “More, give me more.” Now that I was so close to having him, I fucking wanted him. What the hell had I been waiting for?

Sneaking a second finger inside me, he pumped my insides while swirling his tongue over the tip of my cock.

As tension coiled in my gut, I stole a peek at him, his gorgeous dick rising up between his legs, leaking pre-cum. This was turning him on as much as it was me. The edge of release taunted me with each flick of his tongue, each thrust of his fingers. We had to stop this, or I wouldn't last. "Ready. Put it in."

"Yeah?" He lifted his head, shaking his hair off his face, a mischievous grin curling his wet, swollen lips.

"Yeah. Do it." My hole spasmed around his fingers and my cock pulsed off my stomach, dribbling pre-cum.

"Damn, guess you *are* ready." He lubed up his dick, then fell over me on a straight arm and lined himself up to me. "Tell me if you need me to stop. I know I'm pretty big." He smirked.

"Are you serious right now?" I freed a soft chuckle. He was, but he didn't need to point it out.

He nudged his hard cock inside me, then fell down onto an elbow as I wrapped my legs around his hips. "Oh, fuck, you're tight." He inhaled deeply, then pressed a long, hungry kiss on my mouth while he slowly slid inside.

Burning and pressure lit me up and I breathed through it and relaxed. I broke the kiss. "You *are* big. You fill me right up." I kissed his cheek. "Feels good."

"Yeah?" Biting his lower lip, he pulled out, then pushed back in, over and over. "Fuck yeah, this is perfect." He nibbled on my chin, then skimmed his tongue along my lips and gazed deeply into my eyes. "I fantasized about us fucking, but had no idea it would be *this* good."

My mind filled with him jerking off while thinking of fucking me and my cock pulsed between us. "Don't say things like that or you'll set me off." I snuck my hand between us and teased his nipple into a hard nub.

"Oh, fuck." His body shuddered and he quickened his pace. "Keep that up." He claimed me in needy kisses.

Pinching the other nipple, I groaned as pleasure wound tightly in my gut. The edge of release taunted me.

“C-coming, oh fuck.” He slipped his hand around my dick and pumped, his rhythm stuttering, his face tensing and mouth dropping open.

As sensation surged over me in harsh waves, my ass clenched around his cock and hot cum painted my chest and stomach. With a whimpering moan, I tugged him closer to me, his dirty-blond hair falling into my face. “Fuck yeah, so fucking good,” I ground out, as he filled me.

As it slowed, I uncurled my toes and he fell over me, panting. “Holy fuck. Way, way better than I’d imagined.” He buried his face in my neck, placing soft kisses over my heated skin. “I’m glad we waited.”

“Yeah?” I held him tightly, my arms wrapped around his shoulders, breathing in the spicy fragrance of his shampoo. I was fast learning to love this scent. I’d been able to smell it on my own hair after using it to shower last weekend. Funny what love did to a person. *Love?* Yes, love.

“Yeah, it, I don’t know, meant so much more to me.” He buried his face deeper into my neck. “Fuck, I don’t sound like me at all.” He lifted his head, his gaze meeting mine, his cheeks reddening. “What have you done to me?”

“I have magic, just like the guy in the movie we’re watching. But *I* have a magic ass.” I giggled.

He rolled his eyes and groaned through a laugh. “Oh, Jesus Christ.” He planted his forehead on my chest. “You might be right though. That is a fine ass.” He shifted his hips. “That I’m about to slip out of.” He smirked at me.

“Oh, I better get up.” I shoved him off me and rolled over. I didn’t need to make even more of a mess on his bedspread. As I hopped off the bed, I twisted around. “Be right back.”

“Sure.” His smirk widened. “I came a lot.”

“Yes, you did.” Cum slithered down my thigh as I rushed into his bathroom to clean up. “Next time, have a towel ready.” Both of us had been too deep in the moment to think ahead.

AFTER CLEANING UP, we watched the rest of the movie on the couch in the dark, me resting on his chest, his arms wrapped around me.

The groaning of the garage door opening filled the room and headlights flickered through it. “Someone’s home.”

“Probably Gabe. He never stays out that late unless we have a gig.” He sighed behind me. “You are staying tonight, right? I mean, I have to work during the day tomorrow, but...”

“Yes, I’m staying. I’ll do the walk of shame in the morning.” I lifted his forearm from my chest and kissed it. It would be good to spend some time with Jack, if he wasn’t working at the restaurant.

“Yeah, well, good.” He kissed my cheek.

Gabe strolled in from the garage door in the kitchen. “Oh, hello.” He huffed a laugh. “No dicks are out, right?” He clasped his hands behind his back and stalked into the room.

“No dicks are out. We got that out of the way early.” Silas scoffed. “How was your big night out?”

Gabe shrugged a shoulder. “Okay.” He dropped into the end of the couch by my feet. “I hung out with some of my band buddies.” His eyes widened and he pointed at Silas. “Not the mellophone player and don’t even say it.”

“Dude, I’m not Axel. I don’t beat the same joke to death.” A chuckle rumbled in his chest. “Anyways, we just finished a movie, and we’ll probably head off to bed soon.”

“Yeah, we have a late night tomorrow night.” Gabe raked his fingers through his curly bangs. “How are you doing, Cash?” He patted my feet.

“I’m doing great. Silas has been a real gentleman tonight.” With a grin, I hugged his arm to my chest. Except for in bed, which was perfect.

“A gentleman? Silas?” Gabe side-eyed him. “If you say so.”

“I can be a gentleman when I want.” He hugged me tighter. Then his phone buzzed on the coffee table and kept on buzzing, over and over. “Fuck.” Silas huffed out a breath. “Who the fuck would be texting this time of night?”

Gabe pursed his lips. “You think it’s one of the guys?”

“Maybe someone’s in trouble.” Sliding me off him, Silas lifted up and grabbed his phone, then frowned. “Nope, just bullshit.” He tossed it onto the table.

“Oh, no.” Gabe tsked, then glanced at me.

“What do you mean?” I sat up on the couch, throwing my feet on the floor. Obviously, something was going on they weren’t sure they wanted to talk about.

With a long exhale, Silas said, “My fucking ex.” He straightened on the couch, then planted his elbows on his knees and hung his head.

“Mia?” My heart stuttered. She better not try to hurt my Silas again. “Why is she texting you?” I grabbed for the phone, but Silas snatched my wrist.

“Don’t. It’s not worth looking at or even bothering with.” Silas pursed his lips, throwing a look at Gabe.

“Yeah, it’s better to leave it alone. Don’t worry about her, Cash. Silas is all yours.” He gave me a soft grin.

Warmth crept into my chest. That, I pretty much knew. “But you know what she’s been—”

“I know. We all know.” Gabe rubbed his forehead. “Fuck, let me see what bullshit she’s saying now.” He held his hand out to Silas.

“No, we’re not doing this now.” Crossing his arms, he stuffed his phone by his armpit and glared at Gabe.

“Silas, at some point you may need an order of protection. I’ve been talking this over with Axel and Caleb and we all think it might be a good idea. Let me see if we’ve got what we

need for that.” He jabbed his hand at Silas, his gaze growing hard.

“You can’t be serious.” Silas opened the screen on his phone. “I can’t believe the amount of energy you all are putting into this bullshit,” he said, handing the phone to Gabe, then brushing his hand over the back of his hair. “Did you know that Gabe is going to law school?”

“I...maybe.” Shit, had they mentioned that already? I tapped my lips, watching Gabe’s reaction to the text messages.

Lowering his brows, Gabe pressed his lips together. “She’s fucked up, Silas. I think she might be out of control. These messages might be enough.” He handed the phone back to Silas.

“Can I see?” Now my curiosity was killing me. I chewed my lower lip.

Silas swiped over the screen of his phone. “Jesus, fuck.” With a shake of his head, he blew out a ragged breath. “I don’t want you seeing these.”

I stared at him. “Why?” Hiding things from me was not the answer.

“Because.” He flicked his gaze to meet with Gabe’s.

“You should show him.” Gabe wrinkled his brows. “He needs to know.”

“What? Show me, Silas.” My pulse quickened in my chest. There was no way I was sleeping here tonight if he wasn’t going to show me those text messages. In a low voice, I said, “Show me.”

“Fine.” He huffed. “But just know she can be really, really mean.” He leaned toward me and wrapped his arms around my shoulders, wrinkling his forehead. “If this hurts you, then I want you to understand that I’m never showing you her text messages again. Deal?” He held the phone out to me.

“Fine.” I grabbed the phone and peered into it. Obviously, he had no idea the sort of shit I’d already had to deal with in my lifetime.

MIA

I know what you're doing.

MIA

You found a nice little twink to fuck around with.

MIA

He's a real loser. Do you know where he's from?

MIA

Oh, and you and Axel doing karaoke was laughable. Everyone was LAUGHING at you. You were terrible. Stick to your guitars. But even that's not very good.

Heat prickled through my chest. "Fuck that bitch." There were a few more messages, but I didn't need to read any more to know what she was all about. I slapped the phone on the coffee table. "What were you saying about that order of protection?" Maybe I could get one, too, and I'd never even met her.

Gabe shifted on the couch, crossing his arms over his chest. "I think that's enough to get one. She showed up at the library at school to harass Silas and now it's pretty obvious she was at the bar the other night with you all."

"Fuck, I didn't even see her." Silas freed a loud exhale.

I rubbed my palm over his back. "Is that a place you go to often? Would she have been looking for you there?" This might be bordering on stalkerish behavior.

"No, I can't believe she'd do that." Silas lifted his long bangs over his head and straightened, giving me a sad grin. "The place is right in the middle of Mill Avenue, where everyone hangs out. I'm sure she was just passing by and saw or heard us all in there."

“Yeah, I hope so.” Slapping his hands to his thighs, Gabe stood up. “Anyways, I’m heading off to bed. Let me know if you want to file the order of protection and I’ll give you a hand.”

Silas winced. “Yeah, okay.”

Gabe walked off down the hallway to the bedrooms.

“Silas? What did she mean by, *do you know where he’s from?*” I shifted closer to him on the couch and draped my arm over his shoulders, then kissed his cheek. He needed to know I wasn’t fazed by that crap. I could be strong for him.

“I have no idea. I mean, how would she know anything about you?” He glanced at me. “You’re not a loser.” He snatched my hand and held it tightly to his chest, then kissed my knuckles. “Not at all. You’ve fought through so much. I hate she said that about you.”

“I know I’m not.” I lifted my chin. “She must think very little of herself to be attacking me like that, someone she’s never even met.” Yeah, I’d met her kind before. They were all alike. “What did you even see in her?”

“I don’t know. I ask myself that every day.” He leaned against me and laid his head on my shoulder. “She wasn’t like this when I met her. But you know, people like that are always on their best behavior when you first meet them and they slowly change, so you don’t notice how awful they are until it’s too late.”

“Like a frog in boiling water.” I kissed his head, then reached for my cider on the side table and drank it down. I didn’t want this to spoil our night. “How about another drink, or do you want to go to bed?”

“Let’s go to bed.” With a sigh, he stood up and pulled me from the couch. “We can talk more there while you’re in my arms.” He quirked the corner of his mouth. “But not about her.”

“That sounds inviting.” I followed him down the hallway and into his bedroom.

ELEVEN

SILAS



The next day, I'd had a quick breakfast with Cash and sent him on his way while I got ready for my shift at Target. The messages from Mia filled my head while I clocked in behind the returns counter. I tried to make sense of it all. She probably didn't confront us at the bar because all my friends were there.

I made my way to the cash register and looked out at the store in front of me, red walls, and long isles of items on shelves. I couldn't wait to graduate and do something else with my life. I wasn't sure what yet, but it would come to me.

An older woman with short, brown hair stepped up the counter with a vacuum in a beaten-up box sitting in a red cart. "I need to return this."

I glanced at the box. It looked like it had been run over by a truck. "Sure, do you have the receipt?"

"The receipt? I-I threw it out. I didn't think I needed it." She opened a large, black purse dangling from her shoulder.

"Okay, then do you have the credit or debit card you used to purchase it?" I twisted my lips. I knew what the answer was, but I had to ask it anyways. She probably bought the damn thing years ago and thought she could turn it in for a brand new one. This shit happened all the time. How did the place even stay in business?

She stopped rummaging in her purse and stared at me. "Oh, no, I paid cash." She gave me a swift smile.

“Here, let me scan it.” I grabbed my scanner and walked around the end of the counter to the cart, then scanned the barcode on the box. It read, *item not found*. “I’m sorry, but it’s not in our system.” Yep, bought it years ago.

“What? That can’t be. I know I bought this right here, like, um...last month.” Her eyes grew wide. “I want my money back, young man.”

“I have no idea how much to give you since we don’t carry this anymore, if we ever did.” I planted a hand on my hip and shifted my weight. “Want me to call my manager for you?” Darcy was going to love this one. *We’ve got a Karen at the return counter.*

“Uh...um...well...” She huffed. “Yes, I want to speak to the manager.”

“O-kay.” I strolled behind the counter, picked up the store phone and over the intercom, said, “Darcy to returns. Karen’s here to see you.” I smirked. I couldn’t help myself and Darcy was the cool manager, so I wouldn’t get in trouble.

Darcy came striding out from the end of the accessories aisle, the edges of her lips twitching, her long blonde hair flowing around the shoulders of her red shirt. Under her breath, she said, “Silas, stop that.”

“Just stating the obvious.” I held my hand out toward the *probably ten-year old vacuum that most likely didn’t work anymore* in the cart. “We have a return.” I hooked a brow.

“Oh, ma’am, I’m sorry, but we don’t carry that brand here.” Darcy bit her bottom lip, sneaking a peek at me.

“What? But I bought it here. You have to take it back.” The woman shoved the cart toward Darcy.

My gaze caught on long, almost black hair on a woman walking in through the automated doors.

Fuck. *Mia*. “I-I need to go uh, use the bathroom.” I touched Darcy’s forearm.

“Yeah, sure you do.” Darcy tutted.

I stepped away from the counter and strode toward the short hallway to the restrooms. Would I make it in time?

My arm yanked backward.

“Silas. Where do you think you’re going?” Mia hissed.

With my heart pitching, I halted my stride. “Away from you.” I faced her, my brows lowered, my hands fisting at my sides. “What are you doing here? You going to berate me at work?”

“I’m here to shop. You just happened to be working today.” She glared at me, her red lips thinning.

“There’s like three Target stores in the city of Tempe and you didn’t think it would be a good idea to go to another store? Especially when you know I usually work on Saturdays?” I towered over her, my chest heating as her text about Cash flickered through my brain. Fuck her.

“Settle down, Silas. I have something to tell you.” She straightened her spine, looking me over. “I mean, now that we’re both here.”

“What.” I pinched my lips. Should I even listen to her?

“That guy you’re seeing, what’s his name, Cash?” She narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest.

“How the fuck do you know his name?” I glared at her. This was getting creepy.

“I had my tires replaced last week. He works at the Discount Tire out in Mesa.” She flipped her hair behind a shoulder, giving me a sly grin. “He’s very flamboyant, wouldn’t you say? The guy was flirting with pretty much every man in the store. I hope you don’t think there’s something serious there.” She lifted a brow, eyeing me.

My gut clenched. Hadn’t I seen Cash acting flirty with the barista the day we had coffee? And what about all the guys he’d been chatting up at the gig before I met him? *Fuck, don’t go there, Silas.* “He’s very nice to everyone. That doesn’t mean he’s flirting, and you don’t know him.” I pointed at her chest. “So, keep your mouth shut.”

With a smug grin, she swayed. “I don’t know anything, huh? I talked to one of his coworkers about him and he said he’s well known at the gay bar on Mill Avenue for...well, you know what the boys do in the bathroom and the dark corners of that place, don’t you.”

“Why the fuck would you even talk to one of his coworkers about that shit?” Didn’t Cash say he’d jerked a guy off at the gay bar? And who was the dude we’d talked to on Mill Avenue before karaoke? I stepped back, my heart lurching. No, she was fucking with my head like she always did.

“I saw you all at the Four-Fourteen Pub. Didn’t you get my text messages? When I saw him at Discount, I decided to find out more about him. I’d hate to see you get played.” She flashed her eyes at me. “Plus, he grew up in Mesa. Not a great neighborhood. I bet he was poor growing up.”

“So the fuck what?” I scoffed. “Someone doesn’t need to come from money to be a good person, Mia. News flash.” She was so fucking pretentious with that shit. It was probably the first red flag I saw with her that told me she might not be a good person.

“Well, I didn’t want you going out and getting hurt by someone like that.” She snapped her brows together. “You two looked pretty cozy at the bar last weekend.”

“Why the fuck do you even care? I thought I was emotionally abusive and all that shit?” I stared at her. Now she was making no sense at all.

“Silas, we have a history. Just because you mistreated me, doesn’t mean I don’t still care about your well-being. I don’t want to see you getting played.” She shrugged a shoulder, then glanced around her. “You aren’t that into him, are you?”

“It’s none of your business. Please, just leave me and Cash alone.” I planted my hands on my hips, shaking my head. “All you have to do is walk away. That’s all I’m asking for here. I don’t need you watching out for my best interests.” Because why in the fuck would I trust anything she had to say anyways?

“Fine.” She harrumphed, then crossed her arms over her chest. “Just watch that guy, Silas. I think he’s trouble.” She stomped off into the clothing section.

“Fuck.” With a sigh, I raked my shaky fingers through my bangs and strode to the returns counter, where Darcy was talking to a new customer, taking in a return.

“Wasn’t that Mia?” She handed the customer, a middle-aged man, some cash, then closed the register. “Thank you and have a great day, sir.” She smiled at him.

The man turned and walked into the store.

“Yeah, that was Mia.” I frowned, my heart aching. She was full of shit, right? Cash wasn’t a player. No way could I have been such a bad judge of character.

“Looked like you two were arguing. Didn’t you break up with her?” Darcy faced me, her brown eyes narrowing.

“Yeah, we broke up, like six months ago or something.” I rubbed my finger over the edge of the register. How long had it been now? It might have even been longer. Had I really been dealing with this shit for that long?

“Was she coming here to see you?” She pursed her lips.

“Yeah, I think so. She’s been hounding me and—” Should I be telling my manager about this? I snuck a glance at her, focused on me. She’d always been nice to me, even laughed at my weird humor. “She doesn’t seem to want to let things go and now she’s gossiping about my new guy.”

She raised her brows. “Oh, you have a new guy?” The edge of her lips curled.

“I do. His name is Cash. I met him after a gig. He’s...he’s a really nice, outgoing guy and he’s well, happy all the time.” Warmth flooded my heart. Yeah, Mia was full of shit.

“Happy all the time? Well, he found his match in you, didn’t he.” She pushed on my shoulder and chuckled. “That’s great, Silas. I never thought Mia was all that great for you. The more you were with her, the more I saw a change in you.” She tilted her head, studying me. “You seemed down on yourself

and not in your usual sarcastic Silas way. It went deeper. Like you never smiled anymore.”

“Yeah?” I swallowed hard. Damn, even she had noticed a change in me when I was with Mia.

“Yeah. The last week or so, there’s like a pep in your step. The old Silas is back. I’m glad to see it.” She shifted her weight, placing a hand on the counter. “My advice? Not that you asked for it, but get away from her.”

“Oh, I’m trying. Believe me.” Out of the corner of my eye, another woman approached, holding some clothing in her arms.

“I’ll let you handle this.” Darcy glanced at the woman.

“Yep.” Another return. “Can I help you?” I couldn’t wait to get out of here and set up for our gig tonight. And see Cash.

AFTER WORKING, taking a shower and dressing in my gig clothes consisting of a black shirt and my black skinny jeans, strategically ripped in the appropriate places, I strolled behind Caleb into a back door of the casino.

Caleb pushed a long metal cart piled high with the last of our gear. “Why am I doing all the pushing?” He flashed a smirk at me.

“Don’t know. ‘Cause I’m smart and didn’t offer to do it?” I huffed a laugh. After this load, we should be pretty well set up and we could get the sound check out of the way and order some food.

We entered into the casino bar, the ringing of the slot machines humming along in the distance, and I scanned the place. “Damn, this is too nice of a venue for our crowd.” A curved bar in white stone with blue glowing underneath it centered the place with white leather barstools all lined neatly up to it. Along the walls were sleek booths in white with round granite tables inside the sitting area.

“No, it’s not. This is what we wanted, remember? And don’t forget how much they’re paying us.” Caleb stopped at a stage tucked into one side of the bar with the rest of the guys setting up. “Five hundred bucks each, free drinks *and* free food.” He swiped the back of his wrist across his forehead as Axel turned around, eyeing us. “This is the last load.”

“Good.” Axel, dressed the same as any other gig with his bullet belt wrapped around his hips, jumped off the stage and grabbed an amp from the cart. “Are you excited?” He beamed at me.

I shrugged. “You really think our regular crowd is going to show up here?” This place was posh, not a college bar.

“I don’t care. It’s time for some new people to see us play.” He stomped off with the amp.

Gabe walked over to me from his drum kit. “How was work?” He narrowed his eyes at me.

“Fine.” I hauled a speaker to the stage and set it off to the side. Should I tell him what Mia said? I’d been trying not to dwell on it. I knew it was bullshit, but...it still bothered me.

Devin came around with cables coiled in his hand and started plugging things in.

“Gabe, can I talk to you for a moment?” Gabe had a good head on his shoulders. I could talk to him. I stepped out into the bar, between some round tables with white leather chairs. Fuck, this place was fancy, not just posh.

“Yeah.” Gabe followed and stopped to face me, placing his hands on his hips. “What’s up?”

I chanced a peek at the stage. Everyone was busy and not noticing us. “Mia stopped by Target today.”

“Oh, fuck.” Blowing out a breath, he dipped his head. “And what sort of bullshit is she trying to fill you with now?”

He already had her number, and I probably shouldn’t even say anything, but I had to get it off my chest. I surely didn’t want to open my big fat mouth around Cash after having a few drinks later. With my gut tightening, I said, “Apparently she

went in to get new tires and ended up at the Discount Tire where Cash works.”

“Really.” He cocked his head, the edge of his lips tensing.

“Yeah. She said she recognized him from the karaoke bar last weekend.” I pursed my lips. This was so stupid. Why was I letting this bother me? “She *was* there. Just didn’t make her presence known.”

“And?” He lifted his brows.

“And she said he was flirting with people and one of his coworkers told her he was a player or something.” Nausea balled up in my gut. Why did it feel like I was betraying him somehow?

He planted his hand on my shoulder. “Silas, who do you believe is real here? Mia or Cash?”

“Cash.” Didn’t even have to think about it. I hung my head. I *was* betraying him. How could I even question his feelings for me or the man he was?

“She’s mind-fucking you as usual. Cash has an amazing, outgoing personality. I’m sure some could say he’s flirtatious. But he’s also very into you.” He tapped my chest. “Don’t think you’re not a catch, Silas. You are. You caught him.”

I widened my eyes. Was that what this was really about? I was insecure about myself after Mia’s bullshit all those years and deep down, didn’t think a man like Cash could...what, fall in love with me? Damn.

“You with me?” He stepped closer to me.

“Yeah, I’m with you.” I flashed a glance at the stage. Devin was lining up the mics, which meant they were done. “I think it’s sound check time.”

“Yeah, okay. But I want to be sure you aren’t going to let Mia get into your head and fuck things up with Cash.” He pressed his lips together.

“I won’t.” I toed the stone flooring beneath my combat boot. Fuck, I’d better not let her shit get between me and Cash.

We had something good. That was obvious to everyone I knew.

He patted my shoulder. “Okay. Let’s get the sound check out of the way and come talk to me if you need to. I’m here for you.”

“I know.” I side hugged him, then kissed his cheek. Gabe was a great guy. Dependable and smart as fuck.

AN HOUR OR SO LATER, I played with my guitar pedal on the stage, making some final adjustments to my sound, when a flash of color caught my eye. I looked out into the bar.

Cash strolled in, wearing a purple and white striped shirt, paired with white jeans. Next to him walked a man almost as stunning as he was with brown hair cut short on the sides and long on top, but dressed in a black button-down and jeans.

I unwrapped my guitar strap from my shoulder and set the guitar in its stand next to my amp, then hopped off the stage. The other man with Cash must be his brother, Jack.

“Silas!” Cash ran at me and flung his arms around my shoulders, pulling me against him for a fierce hug. “I know it was only today, but I missed you.” He freed me and planted a long kiss on my mouth, cupping my cheeks.

Warmth bloomed in my chest and a smile curled my lips. “Missed you uh, too.” I gazed at him from under my brows. “Nice shirt.” I brushed my hand down his chest. “It fits you.”

“Thank you.” He ticked his brows at me, then held out his hand. “Jack?”

Jack stepped to us, rubbing the back of his neck. “Hi, I’m Cash’s brother, Jack.” He held out his hand.

With my pulse quickening, I shook his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” I needed to make a good first impression here. Jack was important to Cash. I released his hand.

“Nice to meet you, too. Cash told me a lot about you.” He arched a brow at his brother.

“All good things, right, Jack?” Cash edged into my side.

I hooked an arm around his waist. “Well, I’d hope so.”

“Yes, all good things.” Jack offered me a warm grin.

I kissed Cash’s cheek. “Should we go get some food?” I glanced at the guys, all seated at two tables pulled together along the far wall in the room. I’d been waiting for Cash to get here so we could eat together before I had to get up onstage.

“Yes.” Cash clapped his hands over his chest. “The booth over there looks comfy.” He pointed to a rounded booth in the corner.

“Sure does.” I grasped his hand and led him to the booth with Jack following, then we all slid inside with me next to Cash and Jack next to him.

A waitress walked to our table and handed us menus, then took our drink orders with me and Jack getting beer and Cash ordering a mojito.

“So, Jack, what do you do?” I perused the menu, looking for something simple. This place offered fancy versions of regular bar food and I wasn’t one for truffle oil and shit on my food. My breath caught. Shit, had Cash already told me what he did for a living, and I’d forgotten? I wasn’t great at this small talk stuff.

“I work in our family restaurant in Mesa. I do just about anything our dad needs and manage the place on the slower days.” He twisted his lips, his gaze fixed on the menu in his hands. “Dang, this place has some interesting food.” He pointed to his menu. “I never would have paired fish and chips with a remoulade sauce. That sounds pretty good, actually.” He rubbed his chin.

“Jack is always looking for new things to add to the menu of Dad’s restaurant. Aren’t you, Jack?” Cash patted Jack’s forearm.

“Yeah, got to try new things and see what sticks with the customers. We tend to have a lot of regulars from the neighborhood and at some point, the same dishes get old.” He set his menu down. “Yeah, getting the fish and chips.”

“I’m ordering the patty melt.” Cash placed his menu over Jack’s. “I haven’t had one of those in a long time and this one has truffle oil in it.”

I fought off a snicker. It figured he’d order that. “I’m getting a plain old cheeseburger. No remo-whatever sauce and no truffles.” Funny how I’d grown up rich, but never developed a taste for fancy food. And I’d been to plenty of nice restaurants for family dinners.

The waitress stepped to our table, set down our drinks, then took our orders and left.

“Cash tells me you’re studying accounting and want to be a CPA?” Jack sipped his beer.

“Yeah, I’d rather not work in a corporate setting though. I’m not exactly sure yet where I’d want to work.” I drank my beer down. Maybe this would help calm some of my nerves and I wouldn’t ask stupid questions.

“What about doing the books for the band?” Cash sucked on his drink through a skinny straw, his gaze meeting mine.

“Yeah, if we keep getting gigs like this, we’ll have to set something up, like an LLC maybe. This place will give us ninety-nine forms for taxes where a lot of the other bars we’ve played at gave us cash.” I leaned closer to Cash. “Don’t really have to report cash payments on your taxes.” I glanced at them both. Of course, if I had my CPA that way of thinking would have to stop. I’d need to start reporting all my income.

“Oh, and how many shows does your band do a month?” Jack eyed me.

“It depends. This time of year, we could have one every week, but in the summer it slows down. I think with the snowbirds gone, the bars aren’t as willing to shell out for live music.” I skimmed my fingers up and down my glass.

“Yeah, I could see that. Our restaurant slows down quite a bit in the summer, like to about sixty percent of the winter months.” Jack slowly nodded, pressing his lips together. “So, Cash tells me you grew up in Paradise Valley and your dad’s an airline pilot?”

“Yep. He flew planes in the military first.” I peered at him. Clearly, he was assessing me and my background. But what else did I expect? He was watching out for his brother, which in my mind, made him a good guy.

“Cool, like fighter jets?” Jack lifted his brows a grin teasing his lips.

I huffed a chuckle. “Naw, he flew the bigger stuff, the planes that carry troops and equipment to wherever they need to go.” My dad was not *Top Gun*. With a smirk, I drank more of my beer.

“Oh, that’s cool.” He flashed a glance at Cash. “So, Cash, you’re very quiet. That’s not like you.”

A broad smile stretched Cash’s lips. “I’m just letting you two get to know each other. I didn’t want to interrupt.” He leaned into my side, his gaze meeting mine.

“I see.” Jack nodded. “So, Silas, I’m assuming Cash told you about our history.” His gaze fell to his beer and his smile faded.

“He did.” I draped an arm around Cash’s shoulders. “I’m sorry you both went through some rough years growing up.” Was that the right thing to say? I pursed my lips.

“Yeah, well, you can’t choose your birth parents, right?” He let out a sharp laugh. “Me and Cash got pretty lucky though. Our mom is the nicest person I’ve ever met.”

“Yeah, she sounds like a saint. I mean, giving you all a home and making sure you got the therapy you needed?” I widened my eyes. Should I be talking about that?

“It was a life-changer for sure.” He glanced up as the waitress dropped off our food, then left.

“Wow, this looks really good.” Cash shifted in the booth, then picked up his patty melt and bit into it.

“Cash says you’ve had some trauma therapy after being in the shooting?” Jack cut into his fish and ate a bite.

“Yeah. Truthfully? I never thought I’d need therapy. Turns out, I probably needed it even if I hadn’t been in the shooting.” My heart jolted. Why the fuck did I blurt that out?

“Oh?” Jack ate a fry off his plate. “So, you found other issues you needed to deal with?”

Cash set his patty melt down and faced me. “That happens sometimes. You go in for one thing and it uncovers something else.” He licked grease off his finger.

I focused on Cash’s tongue flicking over his finger and heat tingled in my groin. Fuck, not a great time for a boner. I adjusted myself and poured ketchup onto my plate. “Yeah, guess you’re right.”

“What else did you find, if you don’t mind my asking?” Jack stuffed more fish into his mouth, then washed it down with beer.

My gaze cut to Jack’s. Fuck. I really didn’t want to bring up Mia. Could I have some time without her taking up space in my head and in a conversation? But I had to tell him something. I didn’t want to look like a dick. “My uh, ex has probably been abusing me emotionally.” I studied him. What would he think about that? Did Cash already tell him about Mia?

“Oh, this Mia person?” He set his fork down and tented his fingers over his plate. “She sounds awful.”

Cash’s gaze found mine. “I was a little concerned about her, so I talked about it with Jack.” He frowned. “I hope that was all right.”

Shit, had I ever seen him frown before? I brushed the back of my finger down his cheek and forced a smile at him. “Yeah, it’s all right. You don’t have to worry though. I’ll handle her.” I never wanted to see him frown again and especially because of me.

“Cash says she might be stalking you.” Jack snuck a glance at Cash.

“Uh...yeah, she might. I don’t know. She found me on campus one time and bitched me out, but the other time she was probably just in the same area. We were out on Mill Avenue at a very popular college bar.” I huffed, then grabbed Cash’s hand. “My roommate, the drummer in our band, is going to law school. He’s going to help me get an order of protection against her. So, that should stop it.” My gaze met Cash’s. Now I was committed to it. Was it really necessary though? It was probably a coincidence that she’d been at the bar last weekend.

Cash hung his head. “Silas? What’s her last name?” He snuck a peek at me from under his messy bangs.

“Um...” Shit, of course she’d been at his work, too. I scratched my cheek. “It’s Bianchi.” My chest clenched.

“She came into Discount Tire. I thought it might be her from the photos of you two on Instagram, but I wasn’t positive. Her hair is a lot longer now.” Cash drew a deep inhale. “Did she say anything to you about it?”

Fuck. I couldn’t lie to him. “Yeah, she did. In fact, she came into Target today to buy some shit and cornered me.” I glanced at Jack, narrowing his eyes at me. This wasn’t boding well for his impression of me. “I told her to leave me alone. Hopefully, that’s the end of it.”

“But you will get an order of protection, right?” Jack hooked a brow and drank his beer.

“Yes, I will. I’ll get it taken care of on Monday.” I glanced at Cash, then focused on Jack. “Consider it done.” I squeezed Cash’s thigh.

“Good.” Jack picked up his fork and cut into his fish. “Don’t worry, Silas. I know it’s not your fault. Sometimes this shit happens. I had an ex like that once.” He ate his food.

I slumped my shoulders, puffing out a breath. “Yeah?” I grabbed my burger and took a bite.

“Yeah, she finally gave up, but she was a real pain in the ass for a while.” He shook his head.

Cash smirked. “That’s because you two are so handsome. People can’t bear to let you go.” He ticked his shoulder, a smile sweeping over his lips.

“Oh, brother.” Jack rolled his eyes.

I barked out a laugh. “I’m with ya, Jack.” Thank God, that conversation was over, and he didn’t seem too fazed by it.

TWELVE

CASH



A few hours later, Silas was up on the stage, his band belting out their version of Hey Man, Nice Shot by Filter, all of them jumping and running across the stage. The bar had filled up with standing room only while me and Jack had turned our booth into the wives table, with Remy, Eric and Brandon joining us. The crowd was wild, people bouncing to the beat of the song, fists pumping in the air. And this time, they were *loud*.

Jack leaned over to me and in my ear, said, “They’re really good, Cash.”

“I know.” I sipped my third mojito. I should probably slow down a little, but Silas was taking me to his place at the end of the night, so I wasn’t driving.

Jack tapped my shoulder with the back of his hand. “I need to piss.” He was sitting beside me, and I was on the end of the booth.

I slid out and stood. “You know what? I’ll go with you since I’m up.” I tapped the table in front of Remy and yelled, “Bathroom.”

Remy smiled and nodded at me, then returned his focus to the band, swaying in his seat to the music.

“Okay, let’s go.” I grabbed Jack’s hand and wound through the crowd, then out into the casino, the song fading into the hum of all the slot machines. “Where do you think it is?” I scanned the walls behind the blinking lights of the slots.

“Over there.” Jack pointed to a sign reading, *Men*.

We beelined it for the bathroom. “What do you think of Silas?” I said as I washed my hands. I hadn’t had a moment alone with Jack to talk to him yet.

He tucked the front of his black shirt into his jeans and stepped to me. “He seems like a good guy. He cares about you a lot. I could see it in how he was touching and looking at you. It was like he was protective of you when we started talking about his ex.”

Warmth crept over my heart. “Yeah, he’s like that. Protective.” I bit my lower lip. Should I admit out loud how I felt? I knew it now. Having him meet Jack tonight solidified it. “I think I love him, Jack.”

“Yeah?” He gave me a warm grin. “I’m happy for you.” He leaned in, raising his brows. “I think he might be in love with you, too.”

“Really?” I clasped my hands over my chest, my heart pattering wildly. Could it be true?

“Yeah, really. He was pretty nervous to meet me. I could tell. If he didn’t have some deep feelings for you, it wouldn’t have mattered so much to him.” He patted my shoulder. “Come on, let’s get back out there.”

“Okay.” I followed him into the casino, then at the door to the bar, he snatched my hand to guide me through the people.

“Hey. Cash.” A woman’s voice said.

I twisted around.

Mia stood behind me with a blonde woman, both wearing tiny cocktail dresses and high heels, their make-up thick on their faces and long hair curled around their shoulders.

My heart dropped and I released my hold on Jack’s hand. “What do you want, Mia Bianchi?” I’d let her know I knew straight away who she was.

Jack pivoted and stepped to my side, then pointed at her. “This is Mia?”

She pursed her lips, looking me up and down. “Yeah, that’s me. Looks like you got yourself a new boyfriend, huh?” She

flicked her gaze at Jack.

“What?” I stared at her, my mouth dropping open. She couldn’t be talking about Jack? I jabbed my thumb at him. “He’s my brother. What’s wrong with you?”

“Brother, huh? Sure...” She smirked and ticked her head at her friend. “They look the same age and look nothing alike. What do you think, Kaitlin?”

“I don’t know, maybe Cash thought he could get a quickie in while Silas was busy onstage.” Kaitlin huffed a laugh.

Jack stepped forward, poking a finger at them. “Listen, Cash isn’t like that. He’s my brother.” He looked her up and down, grimacing. “You’re sick, you know that?”

The music stopped inside the bar.

“Yeah? We’ll see what Silas has to say about it. I sent him a photo of you two holding hands. Brothers don’t do that shit. I know. I have three of them. They wouldn’t be caught dead holding hands in a bar.” Shaking her head, she barked out a laugh.

“I’m guessing your brothers aren’t queer and probably aren’t very close.” I gritted my teeth. I hated to be mean to people, but she was about to catch my wrath.

“What the fuck?” Silas stormed out of the bar with Axel and Gabe following him. “Mia, you need to leave, now.”

“Silas, glad you’re here. How did you like the photo of your new guy here bringing his hookup into the bar to see your show?” She gave him an evil grin.

“You sick fuck. What’s wrong with you?” Silas’ gaze grew hard, and he stomped toward her, his hands fisted.

“Nope, stop, Silas.” Axel snatched one arm while Gabe grabbed the other, holding Silas in place.

“That’s his brother, Mia, and you’re way out of line.” Axel ticked his head toward the casino. “I’m sure there’s some himbo out there waiting to hook up with the queen of the stalkers.” He threw her a smirk. “And I mean *queen* judging by how you’re dressed tonight. Did you think this was a drag

show?” He flicked his bangs off his forehead. “On second thought, that’s putting down drag queens, who I know are much better people than you are.”

“Axel, you always were a perverted little shit.” She sneered at him. “Silas, we need to talk.”

“No, we don’t.” Silas freed his arms, then stepped to me and tucked me in behind him. “You need to leave. You’re not welcome here.”

“It’s a casino, Silas. It’s a public space and I can be here if I want.” She lifted her chin, glaring at him.

“Go right ahead, Mia. I think we have enough here for our order of protection. Right, Silas?” Gabe held his phone up. “I recorded everything, plus we have your text messages and footage of you at Target today.”

“Yep. Guess I’ll see you in court?” Silas gave her a wicked grin.

“What? You can’t do that. I only wanted some closure. Do you know how abusive this man is, Cash? I’d watch myself around him.” Her glare landed on Jack. “Don’t let your brother date him. He’s an abuser. He’ll ruin him. He’ll—”

“Stop it.” I stomped toward her, getting in her face. “You know nothing about him. It’s obvious who the abusive one is here. Leave.” I pointed out toward the casino.

The rest of our friends from the band and their partners filed out from the bar and surrounded us, everyone glaring at her.

Her wide gaze darted around us. “Come on, Kaitlin. We’ll have much more fun at the bar on the top of the casino. Those men are *real* men.” She turned on her high heels, grabbing Kaitlin’s elbow, and stomped off.

Silas twisted around to me and brushed his hands up and down my arms, looking me over. “Are you okay? She didn’t hurt you, did she?” He wrinkled his forehead.

“No, I have a pretty thick skin for people like that. I guess it’s a side effect of growing up the way I did.” I grasped his

hand and kissed the back of it. “Thank you for coming to my rescue again.”

“Of course. I’d pick you over her or anyone else every time.” He pressed a soft kiss on my lips, then scoffed. “I can’t believe she thought Jack was a hook up.”

Axel stepped to us. “Where does she get off on thinking shit like that?”

As more people left the bar, we all moved to huddle to the side of the doorway against the wall.

Devin glanced inside the bar, then tagged Silas in the shoulder. “Looks like you’ve got it under control. I’m going back in with Brandon, so our table doesn’t get snagged.”

“Yeah, okay. Thanks, everyone for standing up for us.” Silas ran his gaze over them all.

Remy squeezed his shoulder. “You know we’d have it no other way.” He gave us a swift grin. “You ever need us, we’re there.”

Everyone walked back into the bar except for Gabe and Axel.

“Just so you know, I was sort of bluffing.” Gabe pressed his lips together and planted his hands on his hips.

“I know. I haven’t asked for the Target footage. Could probably get it though.” Silas sighed. “This is a lot of bullshit to have to deal with on top of everything else.

“Yeah, but I don’t think her showing up unannounced is a coincidence anymore. She’s got problems, Silas. I’m worried her behavior is out of control.” Gabe flicked his gaze between me and Silas. “We’ll sit down on Monday and fill out the order. It’s online now and easy to do.”

“I suppose you’ve been researching it?” Silas hooked an arm around my waist and pulled me into his side.

“Of course. We file online and the Tempe police department will serve her. She’s still living in your old apartment, right?” Gabe glanced at me.

“Yeah, with her daddy footing the bill.” As Silas tightened his hold on me, a whisper of trembling rolled through his body.

I studied Silas. He was showing a poker face to Gabe, but it was obvious to me he was very upset.

“Good, so we have her address. After they serve the papers on her, she may contest the order and then you’d have to back up your claims in court.” Gabe knitted his brows. “She can also file an order of protection against you, so just be ready.”

“Seriously? Fuck.” Another tremble shook through Silas’ body, and he blew out a ragged exhale. “I don’t know if it’s worth all the trouble. Knowing her, she *will* contest it and she *will* file against me.” He growled. “I mean, fuck. What the hell else does she have to do? She doesn’t work and takes easy as fuck classes.” He scrubbed his face. “The only reason she’s in college is to find some rich guy to marry.”

“Silas. Don’t worry about it. I’ll be right there with you, okay? We got this.” I faced him and tucked a long bang behind his ear, then gazed deeply into his brown eyes. “This isn’t good for you.” I grasped both his hands and held them between us. I hadn’t realized how badly she’d beaten him down, but now I saw it.

“Yeah, I know.” His hands shook inside mine.

“Dude, if she’s showing up here and where you work and shit, what’s to say she’s not stalking you at your house? You gotta do this.” Axel clamped his hand on Silas’ shoulder. “Remy can install some cameras if you want.”

“You know what? That might be a good idea.” Gabe glanced at Axel, then focused on Silas. “This whole thing is creeping me out now. I’ll pay for the cameras,” he said. “And you know, even with the order she could still come around and harass you. We should have some way of monitoring it.”

“It’s final then. Remy will get you all set up tomorrow.” A grin crept over Axel’s lips.

“You didn’t even ask him if wants to do that on a Sunday.” Silas smirked at Axel.

“Don’t have to. I know his schedule and besides satisfying my sexual needs, he’s free tomorrow.” Axel wagged his brows, then dropped his grin. “Besides, I know he’s dying to help you guys out and security systems are what he does.”

“Yeah, okay.” Silas glanced at me, then hung his head. “I’m sorry, Cash. Guess I come with some baggage.”

“Don’t even go there. It’s worth it. You’re worth it.” I hugged him into my side, then kissed his cheek. “Don’t you all have to go play another set?” I peeked at Jack, standing to my side, watching all of us with his arms crossed over his chest. He hadn’t said a word.

“Yeah, we better get back in there.” Silas squeezed my hand. “You coming in with us?”

“Uh, give me a minute, okay?” I needed to talk with Jack. I flashed a smile at Silas.

“Yeah, okay.” As he walked off with Gabe and Axel, Axel flung an arm around Silas’ shoulder and led him inside.

“Jack, what are you thinking?” I faced him.

“Is Silas going to go through with the order of protection, or do you think he’ll back down?” He pinched his lips, his gaze chasing after Silas. “Because that woman is *mean*.”

“I think he’ll go through with it. I think with me and his friends pushing him, he’ll do it.” I studied him. Did he think less of Silas now? “Jack, he’s a good guy. It’s not his fault his ex is a psycho.”

“I know.” He dipped his head, then locked his gaze to mine and huffed. “She said some really shitty things about you. I don’t want her sending you into one of those depressive episodes you used to get.”

“She can’t. I’m way beyond caring what someone like that thinks or says about me.” My chest stiffened. “I haven’t had one of those in years. Probably since high school.” I lifted my chin. “You don’t need to worry about me. Silas is the one we should be worried about. He was trembling next to me.”

“He was?” Jack lifted his brows. “Shit, that’s awful.” He shook his head. “Well, keep me posted and take care of him tonight after the show.”

“You know I will.” I gave him my most charming smile. “Let’s get back in there and watch my hot rocker boy do this thing.” I wasn’t going to let Mia ruin our night. Besides, we had a plan, and I couldn’t wait to see her hit with the order of protection.

AFTER THE SHOW, I said goodbye to Jack and helped the band pack up their gear into Axel’s Jeep and Caleb’s truck. The show only went until midnight, so it wasn’t too late this time. When it was all packed up, we headed back to the band house and unpacked. As I lugged Silas’ guitar case into the practice room, Silas grabbed me up from behind and kissed my head. “Hey, gorgeous.”

I set his guitar down and turned in his arms. “Hey, handsome.” I snaked my arms around his neck and placed long, deep kisses on his mouth.

“Uh oh, looks like someone’s getting frisky.” Axel brushed by us and set down another guitar case. “I’m out. See you tomorrow.” He waved behind him. “Get a room.”

“Great idea.” Silas grabbed my hand and led me down the hallway and into his bedroom, flicking on the lights and shutting the door behind us. “It was a good gig tonight.” He skimmed his hands under my shirt and up my chest, toying with my nipples, then flicked his tongue across my lips.

“It was. You all were really good. I’m sure they’ll have you back.” My cock tingled and swelled inside my jeans. I was so ready for him. I wanted to show him how much I adored him, even with all the baggage.

“Yeah, I think they will, too. Maybe we’ll even get the coveted poolside gig next time.” He trailed his hands around to my back, then down to cup my ass and pressed his hard cock

to mine. “Who’s fucking who tonight?” The edges of his lips quirked.

“Are you asking me to top?” As tension wound in my gut, my cock pulsed. Yeah, I wanted that, too.

“Maybe.” He lifted his brows. “Okay, yes.”

“Your request is my command.” I licked at the seam of his lips, then gave him hungry kisses while unfastening his jeans and freeing his solid dick. He was so hard and ready for me. “Should I suck you off a little first?”

“Oh, God, please.” He raked his teeth over his bottom lip. “Just so you know, sometimes a good gig makes me really horny.”

“It does, huh?” I dropped to my knees, then worked his jeans and briefs down his thighs. His cock stood at attention, dripping pre-cum next to my mouth. “Damn, you are horny, aren’t you?” I fluttered my tongue over the head of his dick, the heady taste of him flooding my mouth.

He groaned and twined his fingers into my hair. “Oh, fuck, yeah.”

Fisting the base of his cock, I licked up the underside and cupped his balls, then devoured him, taking him to the back of my throat. Tonight would be all about him. With all the bullshit he’d been through, he deserved to be taken care of.

With sharp gasps, he clutched at my hair and rocked his hips.

As I pumped him, over and over, saliva dribbled out of my mouth and I swiped it up in my fingers, then snuck them into his crevice to tease his hole.

“Oh, fuck,” He ground out. “Stop, stop, stop.” He pushed me off him. “Almost came. Let’s get on the bed and take those damn clothes off.”

“Yes, sir.” I shucked my shirt over my head, then dropped my jeans and underwear as I stood up. My gaze caught on him, totally naked, creeping over his bed, his ass exposed to me.

My cock pulsed. “Stay like that.” I climbed up behind him and nestled my dick between his ass cheeks, then skimmed my hands over the globes of his ass, tilting my head, admiring him. “You have a fine ass, Silas. You know that?”

He twisted his head to peer behind him. “I might have been told that a time or two.” He fell to his elbows. “Go ahead and have at it. You know where the lube is.”

I leaned over and pulled out his nightstand drawer, then grabbed the lube and squirted it over my fingers. Bending over him, I placed soft bites on his back while sliding my fingers over his hole.

“Oh, God. I want this, Cash, want you. I don’t know why, but fuck I need this.” He rocked his ass into my hand.

I nudged a finger inside him, then curled it just so. “I’ll give you anything you need, Silas. I want you to feel good tonight.”

His body shuddered under me, and he whimpered. “There, you got it. More.”

I snuck a second finger inside and rubbed his internal spot, over and over, biting and licking up his spine.

Goosebumps broke out on his back and his thighs quivered. “Put it in. Do it.” He dropped his head between his arms and groaned.

“As you wish.” I chuckled. I didn’t know where this shit was coming from, but whatever. We were having fun. Lifting up on my knees, I lined my cock to his hole and slowly pushed inside, grabbing his hips. His tight heat enveloped me, the pressure and friction sparking heat low in my belly. “Damn, you feel good.”

“So do you,” he gritted out, then fisted his cock and stroked himself. “Go fast and hard. Fuck me like you mean it.” His hole relaxed over me, letting me all the way in.

With a sly smile, I said, “Oh, I’ll always mean it. This fine ass was meant to be fucked.” I pulled out, then pushed in, quickening my pace with each thrust of my hips until my balls slapped against his thighs. “Like that?”

“Oh, yeah, fuck yeah.” His voice wavered and he dropped the hand on his cock to the bed, pushing himself back onto me, meeting my thrusts.

As sensation wound tight inside my gut, I fought to keep my orgasm from overtaking me. I wanted this to last, but damn, he felt good. It’d been a while since I’d topped.

“Cash?” He slowed the pace and rolled off me onto his back opening his legs wide, his cheeks flushed, and his cock red and stretching to his navel.

“What are you doing?” I crawled between his thighs.

“I want to see you come.” He lifted his knees into his armpits, exposing himself to me again. “I want to see your gorgeous face when you lose it.”

“Good idea.” I slipped inside him once again, then fell onto my elbows and claimed him in deep kisses, while sliding in and out of him at a slower pace. After what we’d already done, my whole body tingled with sensation. My tongue swept over his and our lips slanted over one another. We kissed and slowly fucked for a few minutes, our gazes meeting, and my heart burst open for him. I broke the kisses and rolled my hips, the slow friction keeping us both trembling and on the edge of release. “Silas?” I had to tell him. I brushed my knuckles over his cheek.

“Yeah?” He widened his eyes. “Cash? Are you? Are we?” His throat dipped with a hard swallow, then he licked his lips. “We’re in love. Right? We love each other.”

A soft smile played over my lips. It figured he’d put it like that. “Yeah, we love each other.” I rubbed my nose on his. “I love you, Silas.”

“I love you, Cash.” His brows tensed and his mouth dropped open. “Oh, holy fuck. Coming.” Sucking in a deep breath, he arched his head back and cried out.

I slipped my hand between us and milked him, his cum spurting onto our chests. As his hole squeezed over me, pleasure swept through me in a torrent, tightening my balls

and curling my toes. “Oh, God.” I dropped my forehead to his shoulder and filled him, each wave stronger than the last.

When it slowed, I lowered onto him, his cum hot and sticky on my chest. I nuzzled into his neck, my heart blooming with emotion.

He wrapped his arms around my shoulders and straightened his legs, then kissed my head. “I’m so sorry about tonight.”

“No, we’re done talking about her tonight. You have nothing to be sorry for. I don’t want to hear you apologize for her terrible behavior ever again.” I kissed the soft skin of his neck.

“But—”

“No buts.” I lifted my head and gazed deeply into his beautiful brown eyes. “You are not responsible for her actions. She’s an adult and she’s making her own choices.”

He knitted his brows. “Okay. I just feel bad you got dragged into all this—”

“Shh...” I clamped my hand over his mouth. “Stop it. I’m not being dragged. I’m willfully going wherever you go.” He had to understand I wasn’t going to let her come between us. Not ever.

His gaze searched my face, then he arched a brow.

I freed his mouth. “Talk about something else.”

“You’re sliding out of me.” He smirked. “And we forgot a towel again.”

“Oh, damn it.” I rolled off him, then hopped from the bed. “Go clean up.” Maybe that would reset his brain so we could talk more about us.

He carefully climbed to the floor, then strolled into his bathroom.

AFTER WE'D both cleaned up, we snuck under his covers and turned off the lights. Silas lay on his back, his arm wrapped around my shoulders while I edged into his side, one leg wrapping around his thighs my hand on his chest.

“So, what did Jack think about me?” He worried his lower lip.

“He likes you. He told me you had some deep feelings for me.” I kissed his chest. “He thought you were nervous when you two were talking.”

“Shit, I was.” He rubbed his forehead, choking out a breath. “I was afraid I was going to say something stupid. I had a feeling meeting him was more important than meeting your parents.” He dipped his head down to peek at me.

“Yeah, you’re right. My parents love pretty much anyone. Jack on the other hand, he’s pretty protective of me.” My chest warmed. Now I had two men who were looking out for me. “Maybe we can go meet them at the restaurant one of these weekends.”

“I’d like that.” He kissed my head and squeezed me into his side. “I’d like to see this restaurant, too.”

“So, what’s on the agenda for tomorrow?” I skimmed my finger pads over the muscles in his chest. We had another day to spend together before we’d be off doing our own things for the week.

“I wanted to stop by the kitty rescue at some point, but now Remy is supposed to come and install some security cameras.” He freed a ragged sigh, then pursed his lips.

“So? Gabe can deal with that, and we’ll head up to the rescue together again. I think getting a few hours in with the kittens will be good for you.” I glanced up at him. I needed to get him away from this Mia situation.

“Yeah, you’re right. I wonder how big they are now. They grow so fast.” He stared up at his ceiling.

“Then that settles it. We’re heading up to see the kittens tomorrow before we go to your parents’ house.” I let my lips curl in a smug smile, then closed my eyes, settling in.

THIRTEEN

SILAS



The next morning, we'd had a quick cold breakfast of cereal at my dinette before Remy and Axel barged in through the front door in their jeans and sweatshirts. Apparently, Axel still had a key to the place. No surprise there.

"Dudes, we've got cameras and shit." Axel strutted into the room, holding a few plastic bags in his hands.

I stood up from the dinette. "How the hell did you get going on this so fast?" Was it all really necessary?

Padding out from the hallway, Gabe ruffled the back of his curly hair and said, "I gave them my credit card last night and told them to get what we needed."

"Yep." Axel fished a card out of his back pocket and handed it to Gabe. "You know Remy's an early riser." He ticked a brow. "In more ways than one."

"Stop." Holding my hand up, I huffed. "Too early to be hearing about your sex life."

Remy set a bag on the dinette, then perused the room, rubbing his chin. A tool belt was slung low over the hips of his jeans. "I only got stuff for outside. You're not going to need anything for in here, right?"

"No, there's no way Mia's getting in here." I glanced at Cash, watching us all. Here I'd thought he was the crazy one. Turned out it was me. What the hell was he thinking about all this?

“I’ll get started outside then. No one’s getting within one hundred yards of this place without it being caught on camera.” With a wicked grin, Remy picked up a few bags and sauntered out the door.

Axel clapped his hands over his chest. “This is going to be awesome.” He grinned at me.

“I hope this is all worth it. The order of protection might keep her away.” I picked up Cash’s and my empty bowls and brought them into the kitchen to rinse them out. “Can we take any of this stuff back if it turns out we don’t need it?”

Gabe padded into the kitchen and leaned his ass on the counter. “Silas, let’s be real here. She’s not behaving like a rational person. And irrational people don’t follow orders of protection.” He stepped to the coffee maker and poured himself some coffee. “Axel, do you or Remy want some coffee?” He glanced behind him.

“Naw, we picked up some Dutch Bros coffees before we went shopping.” Axel dropped into a chair next to Cash at the dinette and looked him over.

“You actually got coffee where you work? I thought you were sick of that shit?” I set the bowls in the dishwasher, then walked out to the table.

“I am, but Remy likes it. Sometimes, you gotta make sacrifices for your man.” Axel gave Cash a warm smile, then tapped the table in front of him. “How are *you* doing? I know Mia was a real bitch to you last night.”

“I’m fine. I don’t let people like that get me down.” Cash leaned in close to Axel. “If you do, then they’ve won.”

“Damn right.” Axel held up his fist and Cash bumped it with his own.

“So, are you guys all right if I take Silas up to the kitty rescue today?” Cash glanced at Axel, then focused on Gabe. “You don’t need him around here for anything, right?”

Axel peered at Cash. “Oh, hell no. We got this. You two get out of here.” His attention drew to Gabe. “Right, Gabe?”

Gabe nodded. “Right.”

Milo ambled out of the hallway, his pink sweatpants hanging low on his hips. “What the hell is going on out here and why is everyone up so early?” He rubbed his eyes.

“Remy’s installing the security cameras and shit in case the queen of the stalkers decides to come around.” Axel fished his cell phone out of a back pocket. “There’s an app you can download to see the camera footage once everything is set up.”

“Cool. Maybe we’ll catch some coyotes or javalina on it.” Milo stepped into the kitchen and pulled a bowl down from a top cabinet. “Do we still have any Frosted Flakes, or did you guys eat it all?”

“We left some for you.” I patted Cash on the shoulder. “Those are his favorite.” And I usually ended up bringing some home from Target when we ran out.

“A man who likes sweet things. I can relate.” Cash stood up, kissed my cheek, then grabbed my hand. “Let’s get dressed. We have kittens to see.” He pulled me into the hallway.

AN HOUR LATER, I knocked at the glass door of *Fearless Kitty* and glanced at Cash, wearing another set of my clothes, a red graphic t-shirt and jeans. I think he didn’t bring a change of clothes on purpose, so he could wear mine again. I peered through the glass. I’d texted Crystal when we left to let her know I’d be here for sure. With everything going on, I hadn’t been sure and didn’t want to just not show up.

Crystal, all dressed in an emerald-green track suit, contrasting with her red hair, unlocked and opened the door. “Right on time, boys. The kittens are waiting for you.”

“Good.” I stepped inside and pulled Cash in behind me. He’d been so good with the kittens last time, I couldn’t wait to see if together, we could pet the ornery gray one.

“I love the color of your outfit, Crystal.” Cash beamed at her.

“Thank you, young man. Sometimes, you’ve got to go bold.” With a warm smile, she strode behind her desk and sat down at an open laptop. “By the way, the black and white kitten is probably getting adopted tomorrow, so say your goodbyes to her.”

“Oh, it’s a she?” Cash gave me a sly grin.

“Yes and other two are male.” She typed on her computer.

I glanced at her laptop screen. “What are you doing?” It looked like a spreadsheet with a lot of numbers on it.

“I’m trying to get the books organized for the place. Gosh, our regular accountant, Robert, moved out of town with his son and now I’m trying to figure this out. We haven’t had time to hire someone new.” She huffed and clicked the mouse.

My pulse sped up. “Oh, um…” Would they trust me enough to—

“You know, Crystal, Silas here is getting his CPA when he graduates in a few months with his accounting degree. I’m sure he could pick this up for you.” His gaze cut to mine and a coy grin played on his lips.

Lifting her brows, she swiveled in the desk chair to face us. “Good God, I’d totally forgotten you were in school for that. Would you consider it? We can pay you. You can charge by the hour. We used to pay Robert sixty dollars an hour.”

“Sixty? Holy shit.” Blinking a few times, I rubbed my neck. “How many hours did he work a week?” For that kind of money, I could fit it in. I could probably do the books from home.

“Maybe ten.” She studied me. “I know you have a lot going on with school, your job at Target and your band, but—”

“Yes, I’ll do it.” My heart soared. This was just the experience I’d need to get hired at other nonprofits once I graduated. Then if we picked up more casino gigs, I wouldn’t get stuck in a stuffy corporate office somewhere.

“Great. Go and spend some time with the kittens, then when you’re done, we’ll go over some of this. I’m sure you can make better sense of it than I can.” Her eyes twinkled and she went back to the computer.

“Yes, ma’am.” I sauntered into the back room with Cash, then shut the door behind us. “Oh my God, I can’t believe it. Looks like we picked the right day to come up here.” I stepped over the barrier and into the kitten’s area as Cash did the same.

“I’m so happy for you, Silas.” He grabbed my arm and tugged me close, then planted a kiss on my lips. “Maybe it could be the start of a business venture for you.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking.” I crouched down to sit cross legged on the ground and the black kitten trounced from the opposite side of the pen, then stopped and looked up at me. “I think they want some treats. I forgot to grab them after that conversation.”

“I’ll get them.” Cash hopped up, brushed off the ass of his jeans, then grabbed the treats from the shelf and dropped in beside me. “There’s the gray kitten.” He pointed to a tall fold in the blanket, where the gray kitten eyed us. “Let’s work on him today, shall we?” He picked up the feather toy and waved it.

The gray kitten’s gaze chased the toy and his tail flickered.

“You almost got him.” I leaned in close to Cash, his body heat tingling up my side, warmth flooding my heart. God, I loved his man. He was so perfect for me in every way and so fucking understanding of the situation with Mia. How did I get so lucky? And I was sure my family would love him, too. How could anyone not?

I fished a treat out of the bag and let the black kitten snatch it from my fingers, then grabbed another and leaned way over. “Come here, little guy. I know you want this.”

The gray kitten stepped toward us, stopped, then watched the feather and stalked toward us again, low to the ground.

“That’s right, come here. We won’t hurt you,” Cash said softly while bringing the feather toy toward us.

“No sudden movements.” I kept my eye on gray and bit the side of my lower lip. “Come on...”

The black and white kitten pranced out of nowhere and crawled into Cash’s lap like they were best buddies.

Flicking his gaze down, Cash smiled and brushed his free hand down her back. “Aren’t you the cute one?”

The black and white kitten arched her back into Cash’s caress.

“See? Your sister doesn’t mind us. She likes us. We’re nice.” He cocked his head, watching the gray. “Don’t you want a treat?”

The gray kitten scampered toward the treat, and I pulled it closer to me. He stopped and eyed me.

“Come on. I promise we won’t hurt you.” I made soft clicking noises at him. There had to be a way to gain his trust.

The black kitten attempted to bite at the treat, but I moved my hand closer to gray. “If you don’t get this, your brother will.”

With a pounce, gray snatched the treat and wrapped his front paws around my hand, rolling to his back.

“There you go.” I released the treat and gray righted himself, chewing. “Okay, well, he’s not running away, and he actually touched me.” I sat upright and sighed, then scratched behind the ears of the black kitten. “I know Crystal is waiting for me to give them names, but then when they get adopted it makes it hard and kittens never stay around very long.” I flicked my gaze to meet with Cash’s.

“It’s hard even if you know they’re going to a good home?” He wrinkled his brows.

“Yeah, even then.” My heart ached. Soon the black one here would be gone. But that was life working in a rescue.

“Let’s name them, Silas. They deserve that.” He grabbed my hand and squeezed it. “This one in my lap, shall be named Oreo.”

I chuckled and shook my head. “That’s so original for a black and white cat.” It figured he’d pick that.

“Okay, smart ass. What do you want to call the black one?” He scratched Oreo at the base of her tail, and she reared up into his hand and purred.

“Midnight.” I smirked at him. “I know, that’s just as bad.”

“I didn’t say a word. I think it fits him.” He tilted his head at the gray kitten. “That one should be Silas.”

“No, give the poor guy a better name than that.” I rolled my eyes. The name might doom him to a life of being cranky.

“Oh, come on. He’s so much like you though.” Cash held out his hand. “He doesn’t trust easily and doesn’t want to get close, but I bet when you get to know him, he’s all soft and sweet inside.” He focused on me.

“Yeah?” I raked my teeth over my lower lip, holding his gaze. “Only with certain people. You have to be a special sort of person to see that side of me.” And Cash had it. He’d burrowed right inside no matter how much I’d tried to keep him out.

Warm pressure crept over my thigh and settled into my lap. I snapped my gaze downward. “Holy shit, Silas is in my lap.” Should I pet him, or would that scare him?

“He is. Silas, meet Silas.” Cash giggled softly. “See? Maybe he was waiting for a name. I think he’s been waiting for you to name him all along.”

Silas licked his paw in my lap, then lay down and purred while Midnight curled up under the outside of my thigh.

While petting Midnight, I slowly lowered my other hand to Silas’ nose and let him sniff at me. “I probably still smell like the treat.”

Silas meowed and looked up at me.

“That’s a yes.” Cash dug out some new treats and handed me one.

I fed it to Silas.

“Oh, good, you got the gray one settled down. I knew you could do it.” Crystal stood inside the doorway with a warm grin on her lips.

“We named him Silas.” Cash chuckled.

“That’s fitting.” She crossed her arms over her chest, watching us. “He obviously sees a kindred spirit in Silas.”

“Oh, stop you two.” I tentatively brushed my finger pads up Silas’ back.

He flicked his gaze to mine, then relaxed.

“Anyways, a few more minutes, then if you’re ready, human Silas, I’ll show you the books.” She stepped further into the room.

“Sure, then Cash can clean out the litter boxes.” I gave him a sly grin. “I did show him how last time.” He’d probably do it without complaining even though I was kidding him. He was such a keeper.

With a long exhale, he said, “Yeah, sure.” He scratched Oreos’ back some more.

I DIRECTED Cash into the rounded drive in front of my parent’s Mediterranean-style mansion in Paradise Valley. A tall round fountain spilled water down three tiers on the side of the drive facing the street. This house was pretty much like every other home in the area, way too big and ostentatious. But it was what my dad felt he had to have to feel like he was a success. Not me. I was fine living with a bunch of guys in our little old band house in Tempe.

Cash shut the engine off, then leaned over me to look out my window, his jaw dropped open. “Holy shit, I knew you were rich, but damn.”

“I know.” I huffed. “*I’m* not rich, my parents are rich.” I wasn’t like Mia. I didn’t have a credit card my daddy paid for,

and I was happy that way. “My dad believes you need to work for things in life, so...”

He faced me, then sank into his seat. “I have to say I agree with your dad. A lot of times when people have everything handed to them, they don’t appreciate it.” He planted a quick kiss on my cheek, then opened his door. “Coming?”

“Yeah.” I climbed out then met him at the entrance to a tall portico with masonry columns made to look like marble with Italian cypress trees standing next to them. I sucked in a breath and snatched his hand, my pulse quickening. “Here goes nothing.”

As we stepped up to a large set of carved wood double doors, one opened and Shelby stepped out in a pair of jeans and blue sweater, her blonde hair curling around her shoulder and her brown eyes fixated on Cash. “Oh my, Mom said you were bringing a boyfriend, but damn, he is something to see.” She held out her hand to Cash. “Name’s Shelby. I’m the smart younger sister.”

“Apparently you also have good taste.” With a warm smile, Cash gave her hand a quick shake. “Name’s Cash.”

“I love the name, too. I don’t think I know anyone with that name.” Cocking her head, she ran her gaze over him.

He flicked his gaze to me. “Well, my birth mother named me. I think she thought naming her kid after something she wanted more of was good luck or something.” He chuckled.

“Birth mother? Oh...” She widened her eyes. “Well, come on in.” She waved behind her as she walked into a wide hallway with columns lining it every ten feet.

I stepped onto the travertine tile floor, then shut the door behind me. The tile was gleaming. Mom must have had it refinished recently. “So, I mentioned my mom is an interior designer, right?”

“You did. This place is amazing.” Cash scanned the living room on one side of us and the office, lined in rich wooden bookshelves on the other. He stepped into the living room.

“The furniture is like something out of the nineteen fifties. Don’t they call that retro?”

“I think so.” Like I’d know about that. I stepped up behind him. “She updates the house every few years. I think she gets deep discounts on furniture and shows it off to her clients. She usually sees them in that office there.” I pointed to the office.

“Oh, wow. Let me see more of the office. The wood is stunning.” Cash turned and pulled me into it with Shelby following us.

“Where did you grow up, Cash?” She studied him.

“In Mesa. My dad owns a restaurant and my mom’s a social worker. We had a pretty modest home compared to this. In fact, this is probably the most expensive home I’ve ever been in.” His gaze met hers.

“Well, don’t worry. My parents are more down to Earth than this house would suggest.” She tapped my shoulder. “Right, Silas?”

“Yeah. Well, Mom is.” I hooked a brow at her. “Dad’s a hard one to figure out.”

She scoffed. “Silas, you and Dad are too much alike.” She leaned in close to Cash. “Neither one of them want to admit that they’re the same, so the two of them pretend like they can’t understand each other. It’s like watching one person talking to themselves.”

“Shut up, it is not.” With a smirk, I shook my head. “Good thing you’re not going to school for psychology. I think you’d be flunking out.” She may be right, but I wasn’t going to acknowledge it. I flicked her head.

“Ow.” She rubbed where I’d flicked her. “Brothers.” Lifting her chin, she walked off down the hallway. “Mom, Dad, Silas is here with his new boyfriend.”

“We better get out there.” I tugged Cash along through the hallway, then into the open kitchen and family room combo, now done up in comfortable creams and light wood furniture. Mom must be trying a new style in here, too.

With a white, flowing jumpsuit hugging her thin frame, Mom set a rosé wine on the marbled stone countertop, then stepped to us, a wide grin on her face. “It’s so nice to meet you, Cash.” Beaming at him, she grabbed both his hands and held them.

“It’s nice to meet you, too, Mrs. Brown.” He gave her his best smile.

“Oh, call me Emily. We’re not too formal around here.” She freed his hands, then tucked a lock of her cropped brown hair behind an ear, a long, gold earring dangling from it.

“Okay, Emily it is.” Cash threw a glance at me.

Dad stepped into the room, his brown-eyed gaze taking me in, then he scrubbed his hands over his graying crewcut. “Son. I hear you brought a young man over to meet us?” He snuck a peek at Cash, then lowered his brows. “I assume this is him?”

“It is.” My heart quickened. I’d never brought a guy home before. I chewed my thumbnail and glanced at my mom, sipping her wine.

“Hello, Mr. Brown. It’s such a pleasure to meet you.” Cash held out his hand and sauntered toward him. “My my, I can see where Silas got his handsome looks from,” he said. “I’m Cash.”

My heart about stopped in my chest and I dropped my mouth open, staring at him. What the fuck was he doing?

A grin curled one side of Dad’s mouth. “Why, thank you, Cash.” He glanced at me, then focused on Cash and gave his hand a firm shake. “It’s a pleasure meeting you as well.” He released him. “And my name is Dale.”

“Well, Dale, you have a beautiful home here. And I love that furniture in the front room, Emily. It’s all so colorful and vibrant. Then back here, the colors are more muted. Is that to give a feeling of comfort and relaxation?”

With a soft giggle, Mom stepped to Cash and touched his forearm. “It is. I wanted the front room to not be stuffy, but be more of a fun place where we could have guests over for game night or to host cocktail parties, things like that.”

“Well done.” He gave her an even wider smile.

“What can I get you to drink, son?” Dad cleared his throat.

“Oh, some of the wine that Emily is drinking would be wonderful.” He turned his smile on my dad.

“Certainly. I’ll be right back.” Dad left for a bar tucked into the corner of the room and poured a glass of wine for Cash. “Silas, are we both having whiskey?”

“We are.” I needed one after that exchange. I rubbed my fingers across my lips. I think Cash just flirted with my dad. Ho-ly fuck. And it worked. The little fucker knew how to flirt his way through anything.

Dad returned with a rosé wine in stemware for Cash and straight whiskeys for me and him. “So, Emily, when are we eating?”

“Oh, I’ll put the food out now.” She strode to the refrigerator and pulled out stacks of plastic boxes with colorful sushi inside. “Silas mentioned you were okay with sushi when I texted him earlier today, Cash.”

“I sure am.” Cash walked to her. “Can I help set things out?”

“No, Shelby can help me.” She tossed a look at Shelby, smirking in the corner of the kitchen with her phone in her face.

“Uh, what?” She tucked her phone into the back pocket of her jeans.

“Mom wants you to help her with the food. ‘Cause you know, woman’s work.” With a sly grin, I sipped my whiskey.

“Silas, don’t be a shit.” She strode to me and slapped my shoulder.

“Shelby, don’t mind him. He’s just trying to get you riled up.” Mom set more containers on the kitchen island, opposite the refrigerator. “We’ll put it all out in the dining room.”

“Yes, Mom.” Shelby picked up some containers, then scoffed at me as she walked by and into the dining room on

the side of the kitchen.

I faced Dad. “So, should we chat in the new comfortable and relaxing couches?” I couldn’t believe Cash had said that to Mom. Oh, maybe I could. With a smirk at Cash, I grabbed his hand and led him to the couch, then dropped into a corner of it and pulled him in next to me.

Dad centered himself on the couch opposite us, then leaned way back, resting his arm across the back cushions.

I snuck a glance at Mom and Shelby. They were making quick work of setting up, so we probably didn’t have to sit too long alone with Dad.

“Tell me more about yourself, Cash. Are you in college?” Dad sipped his whiskey.

“No, I’m not. I wasn’t sure that was the right path for me. Right now, I’m an assistant manager at a Discount Tire. I get to work with the customers and do sales. I like doing the sales part. I even have customers who come in the shop and specifically ask for me.” He drank his wine and gave Dad a quick grin. “Maybe someday I’ll decide to go to college. We’ll see.”

I rested my hand over his thigh, Mia’s words ringing in my head about Cash flirting with everyone in the store. Fuck, I couldn’t go there. She was a liar.

“I can definitely see you being a great salesman.” Dad ticked a brow. “How about your family? What do your parents do?”

“My dad owns a restaurant and went to culinary school and my mom’s a social worker.” Cash pressed his lips together. “Me and my six other siblings were all adopted out of foster care. Me and my brother, Jack, are the youngest.” He glanced at me.

I squeezed his thigh. Did it hurt him every time he had to tell that story? There was always a flicker of sadness when he talked about it, but it was so fleeting...maybe we’d talk more about it sometime.

“Oh my gosh.” Mom stepped toward us, holding her palms together at her chin. “Seven children? Your poor mother. I can barely deal with two.” She chuckled. “How old were you when your mother adopted you?”

“Six.” His gaze met mine and he bit his lower lip for a heartbeat, then released it.

Yeah, we’d talk about this later. I left his thigh to take his hand. He never really told me very much about his birth mother and now I wanted to know all of it.

“Oh...” Mom looked him over, then waved an arm at the table. “Anyways, the food is all ready, so let’s sit down and eat.”

I rose up, and led Cash to a long dining table in a light, carved wood with black legs and seating for twelve. I dropped in next to Mom, sitting at the head of the table, while Cash took the chair next to mine and Shelby sat across from us.

With a huff, Dad took a chair next to Shelby. “I’m not sitting down there all by myself.” He glanced at the other end of the table.

“We wouldn’t want you to, dear.” Mom smirked and poured soy sauce into a small bowl.

I picked up my chopsticks and set a few roll pieces and some salmon sashimi on my plate. Things had felt a little awkward when Cash admitted how old he was when he’d been adopted. Did Mom sense something? She was perceptive like that.

“Your parents sound like good people, Cash.” Dad dipped a roll into his soy sauce dish.

“They are. They’re the best. I was very lucky they found me.” He snagged a slice of sashimi, dunked it into his sauce, then ate it. “Wow, very good, Emily. It’s so fresh.”

“Well, Dale only likes the best with all the times he’s been to Japan.” Mom gave Dad a warm smile.

“One time I was there, the fish was still moving in my mouth, it was so fresh.” Dad wagged his brows at us.

“Oh, gross, Dad. Do you have to tell that story every time we eat sushi?” Shelby frowned and fake gagged.

Dad chuckled. “I only tell it to get that reaction out of you and it works. Always.” He smirked at her.

With a sly look at me, Cash said, “Hmmm, now that sounds like something you might do.”

“Yeah, I might.” I snuck a grin at him. They were right. Me and Dad were a lot alike.

FOURTEEN

CASH



After dinner at Silas' parents' house, we headed back to his house in Tempe. I was dying to get in his pants one more time before I had to head home for the week. As I drove up to his home, Silas sucked his upper lip into his mouth, then released it. "What?" I stopped my Mini in front of the house.

"I want to ask you about something, but I don't want to spoil the night." He turned in his seat to face me.

"Okay, is this a conversation we should be having in the car?" I lifted my brows. The closer I could get him to his bedroom, the faster we could fool around.

"Um, I guess not." With a sigh, he opened his door and climbed out of the car.

I met him on the walkway to his front door. "Is something wrong?" Had I said the wrong thing at dinner with his family? Shit.

"No, nothing's wrong." He fished his keys out of the front pocket of his jeans and opened the door, then cut his gaze to mine. "Nothing is wrong, believe me." He kissed my cheek.

I followed him inside.

Gabe sat at the dinette with his face in his laptop, then turned around. "Hey, guys. Remy's got the security system done. It's awesome. We can see the whole neighborhood." He snickered. "You want to take a look?"

"Not right now." Silas snatched my hand. "We have better things to do, right, Cash?" He hooked a brow at me.

“Right.” Good, he was on board with my line of thinking. My cock stirred and heat crept over my skin.

“Okay, I’ll find my earplugs.” With a shake of his head, Gabe smirked at us.

“Oh brother. Guess that’s the new thing.” Silas led me into his room and shut the door. “So...” He guided me to his bed and sat on the edge, pulling me down next to him. “Is it okay to talk about what happened to you before you were adopted by your parents?” He winced. “I think the last time we talked about it, Mia interrupted us with one of her stupid texts.”

My heart skittered. Why the hell was he asking about that? “I suppose so. I think I pretty much told you everything. Well, the abbreviated version. What else do you want to know?” I swallowed hard. Did I even want to go there? I’d only ever really discussed it in depth with my therapist.

“What exactly happened. Like, was your mom mean, was she nice, what? You said something about her naming you Cash. Talk to me.” His gaze darted between my eyes.

“Oh...” I rocked once. “For one, the woman who named me is not my mom. My mom lives in Mesa and is a social worker. The woman who named me was my birth mother. I guess that’s an important distinction to me. Just because she gave birth to me...” I inhaled deeply, a familiar ache growing in my chest. “You know.”

“I’m sorry. Guess I fucked that up.” He draped an arm over my shoulders. “Tell me about your birth mother.”

I lifted my chin, taking deep, cleansing breaths the way my therapist had taught me. “When she was uh, not high, she was nice. I think she felt bad about the state we were in, you know, the lack of food and the filth. I don’t think she was always like that. I think when I was a baby she wasn’t an addict. I think it started when I was older, maybe two or three. I was only four when I was taken away from her, so I don’t remember much.” Except for the fucking vomit on the damn floor. I sucked in another breath. “I don’t remember being scolded very much. Just...like there was no one there. She, well, both my parents

when my birth father was around, were high all the time and neglected me.”

“Shit, I’m sorry.” Silas’ eyes grew glossy, and he frowned. “What about the time you were in foster care?”

I shifted my spine, gathering my strength. “I was in pretty bad shape. I didn’t know how to have proper relationships with other kids or with my foster parents. I pretty much kept to myself and took care of myself. I mean, that’s what I was used to. Where before I couldn’t make myself food because there wasn’t any, now there was food and I fed myself instead of letting my parents make my meals.” I slumped my shoulders and pursed my lips, the dim memories floating back to life. “They thought it was funny, my first foster parents. They made jokes about me being a little adult.”

His eyes widened. “How the hell did you become so fucking wonderful after that?”

“A lot of therapy. I mean, *a lot*. My mom took me to a specialist in neglected children.” I huffed a laugh. “Mom had the connections, you know, and she knew all the best. Maybe I’m lucky I was the last one she adopted. I had Jack there, too.”

“So, Jack helped you out?” He fixated on me.

My gaze locked on his. He really wanted to know, and it was coming from a place of love. It didn’t matter to him how messed up my insides were, he loved all of it. “Yeah, Jack was there for me through everything. He taught me how to trust again. He...” I choked. “He held me sometimes when I was angry at the world and wouldn’t let me go.” I let a strangled laugh slip. “He was always stronger than me.”

“Well, I’m pretty sure I’m stronger than you, too. So, if you need it, I can do that for you now.” His gaze fell to my lips, then lifted to meet my eyes. “I love you, Cash. I want to protect you. I don’t ever want you to feel alone or angry at the world or to not trust in me. When I’m in, I’m all in. I’m here for you, one-hundred percent.”

My heart swelled with emotion and my eyes pricked. “I believe you. I know how you are. All sweet and gooey on the inside.” I pressed a deep kiss on his lips. “I love you, too. So much.”

He cupped my cheek with his hand, his gaze searching my face. “We are a pair, aren’t we?”

“We are.” I leaned in and crushed his mouth with a needy kiss. I was done talking. Slipping my tongue between his lips, I brushed it against his and heat flared in my gut.

He freed a deep moan, slanting his mouth over mine, then pushed me sideways onto the bed. “Are we fucking tonight?”

I crept up the bed on my back with him crawling along over me. “Yeah, we better be.” I wanted him to fill me up.

As he rolled on top of me, his hard dick pressed against mine through our jeans. Rocking his hips, he nibbled at my neck and snuck his hand up my shirt. “I need you, Cash. It’s not just love. I *need* you.” He sucked on my earlobe.

My heart ached with emotion. “I need you, too.” I’d never felt so close to another human being, not even Jack. I knew my heart was safe with him. As tension wound inside me, I slid my hands down his back to squeeze his ass. I groaned, tilting my head back.

He devoured the sensitive skin of my neck in soft bites and heady kisses, his hips rocking his solid dick against me.

Shivers played over my skin, and I raked my teeth over my lower lip. “Fuck me, Silas. I need you to fill me.”

“Yeah?” He flashed a coy grin at me, his lips wet and swollen, his eyes dark.

“Yeah.” I pinched his ass. “But we can kiss for a while first. I love it when we kiss.” I loved everything about him, actually.

“Good.” He flicked his tongue over my lips, then pressed his mouth to mine, writhing over me.

Sensation pulsed up my spine and I slid a hand under the back of his jeans to knead the muscles of his bare ass. I dipped

a finger into his crevice and his dick twitched against mine.

With a ragged moan, he said, “Maybe we can fuck each other?” The corner of his lip curled.

“We could.” I grabbed the back of his head and pulled his mouth to mine for a new round of hungry kisses. I wasn’t sure I could hold out long enough to do what he wanted, but I’d try.

He snaked his hand to my nipple and pinched, thrusting against me, groaning into our kisses.

My cock pulsed with sensation and dribbled pre-cum into my briefs. “Oh, fuck.” We needed to lose the clothes. “Let’s get undressed.”

“Yeah, good idea.” He rolled off me, then shucked his shirt off and skimmed his jeans and underwear down his legs while I did the same. He glanced at me, then leaned down and dropped his mouth over my firm dick.

“Oh, shit.” My breath caught and my body shuddered as heat and pressure enveloped my cock. I bit my lower lip, spreading my legs wide as he crept onto tucked legs between them.

Fisting my base, he pumped my shaft and licked up the underside, then moaned over me.

Pleasure burst up my spine. “Oh, God, Silas, watch it.” I shut my eyes and fought to steady myself. I didn’t want to come already, but fuck, he was good at this.

After a minute or so, he freed me with a wet pop and sat up. “Like that?” He lifted the edge of his mouth as he dragged the back of his hand across it and shrugged a shoulder. “I couldn’t help it. It needed to be sucked.”

“It did, huh?” I reached to the side and grabbed the lube from his nightstand. “I know something else that needs doing.” With a tick of my brow, I raised my knees, then slathered lube on my fingers and stroked his weeping cock.

“Oh, fuck.” He tipped his head back, hissing. “Yeah, we need to get on with it.” He stole the lube from me and slicked

his fingers, then ran them across my hole, his gaze fixated on me. "I'm going to sit back and watch. That okay?"

"Yeah." With our gazes locked, he nudged his finger into me.

I snuck my lower lip between my teeth and shut my eyes for a second, the burn morphing into pleasure as he teased my prostate.

"Fuck, you're so hot, Cash. I can't get enough." He pushed a second finger inside me and stroked.

I shifted lower on the bed, letting out a satisfied groan, my thighs quivering as pleasure sparked inside me. I focused on him.

While pumping my hole with a third finger, he stroked his own cock, standing tall between his thighs. "Shit, this feels good. You turn me the fuck on."

I wetted my lips, watching him. "Silas, you're the most handsome man I've ever seen." I smirked. "And yeah, you turn *me* the fuck on."

His gaze met mine and he flashed a quick grin at me. "I can't wait anymore."

"Do it. Fill me up." I shimmied lower on the bed while he crept between my legs, slathered more lube on his dick, then lined his tip to my hole, holding himself up on a straight arm.

"Tell me if you need me to stop." He pushed his cockhead in and gasped, his brows tensing. "Fuck. You're tight," he gritted out.

"I won't need you to stop." As he slowly pushed inside me, a wave of burning pleasure surged through me. I lifted my legs and wrapped my ankles around his hips.

He fell to his elbow, his balls hitting my ass, and his body shuddered over me. "Don't move." He gazed deeply into my eyes, pressed his palm to my cheek and brushed his thumb over it. "I love you, Cash." He raked his teeth over his lower lip. "I mean, I *really* fucking love you."

My heart ached with warmth, and I swallowed hard. “You know I feel the same. I’ve never loved someone this much before, Silas. In fact, I can say now that you have completely wrecked me.”

A faint grin quirked his lips. “Yeah? You wrecked me, too.” As he pulled out, he claimed me in hungry kisses, his tongue clashing with mine while he thrust back inside me, over and over.

As he quickened the pace, his body trembled, and his breath grew ragged. “Fuck, getting close.” His thrusts grew stronger and faster.

Sensation coiled inside my gut and sparked up my spine. My balls tightened. If I wasn’t careful, I’d come with him. “D-do you still want me to—”

He cried out, his head dropping to my chest, his face tensing. The heat of his release filled me.

I fell over the edge, harsh waves of climax surging through me. My toes curled and I gasped as each one hit, cum spurting over my chest and stomach. “Oh, fuck.” I dug my fingers into his back and held on tight.

As it slowed, he dropped down on top of me. “That came out of nowhere.” A chuckle rumbled in his chest.

“Same. Oh my God.” I planted the heel of my hand on my forehead and giggled. “And you know what?”

“We forgot a towel.” He snickered. “It doesn’t matter. Just ooze all over my bed. I don’t care.” He rocked his hips and his spent dick slipped from me. “It’s kind of my fault anyways.” He placed a quick kiss on my lips, then gazed down on me, propped on his elbows. “If you’d have told me a month ago that I’d find the love of my life...” He drew a deep inhale, tangling a finger in a lock of my hair. “Well, I’d have told them they were insane.”

With a soft smile, I traced a circle on his shoulder. “I have to admit, I was looking for someone like you.” I huffed a laugh. “Well, not someone like you, but someone I could fall in love with. Someone I could give my heart to and then you

showed up out of nowhere and just...stole it. I did get robbed the night we met, you know.”

His brown eyes widened.

“My heart was stolen by you.” And I was happier than I’d ever been my whole life. As I cupped his cheek, he leaned in and pressed a lingering kiss on my mouth, then set his forehead against mine.

“Cash, I don’t want to not see you all week. I need to be with you more. Can I see you before Friday?” He lifted his head, his gaze flicking between my eyes.

“Yes, of course. I’m sure we can work something out. I just thought you needed to focus on school and stuff during the week.” I flashed him a grin. “We’ll have plenty of time to be together after you graduate and all you’ll have to do is play in your band and do the books for the kitty rescue.”

He raked his fingers through his hair. “Shit, wouldn’t that be a great life. No more idiots returning old ass vacuums and shit.”

“What?” I stared at him. That was random.

“Oh, nothing. Just my job at Target. I mean, it’s not terrible.” He lifted his brows. Tapping my nose, he said, “Where you’re great with customers, I’m awful. I hate dealing with them.”

“Oh...” I got it now. “Anyways, I do need to get home tonight. I’m out of clothes and have to open the shop in the morning.” Though I’d love to stay the night with him again. In fact, I’d love to be sleeping with him every night. With a sigh, I pushed him to the side so I could clean up and go home.

FIFTEEN

SILAS



How the fuck did Monday get here so fast? I scowled, peering into my laptop while I sat at the dinette in our house. Classes were over for the day and Gabe had insisted on meeting me here to get the order of protection filed. Nausea crept through my gut. I still wasn't sure I needed to do this. We'd found nothing of interest on the cameras overnight and I hadn't seen Mia anywhere on campus today. But then, I usually didn't unless she was trying to find me.

The door swung open to the garage and Gabe stepped into the kitchen. "Oh good, you're here." He primped his curly blond bangs and sauntered to me, then set his backpack on the floor and fell into the chair next to me. "Do you have the website open already?"

"I do." I planted my elbow on the table and rubbed my forehead. I'd already looked the form over and it seemed pretty easy. "Do you really think this is necessary?" I winced. I knew the answer to that. Why even bother asking?

He shifted his chair next to mine, then squeezed my forearm, focusing on me. "Yes, Silas, I do. It's time she realizes she can't keep doing this to you. There has to be some consequences for her actions."

"But what if it doesn't work? What if it makes her more...I don't know, crazy?" I frowned. Maybe crazy was a bad word. Maybe desperate was more accurate.

With a shrug, he said, "It might, but if she comes around, we can call the cops and have her removed. She might even be

arrested.”

My chest grew tight, and I breathed through it. “Fuck, that’s not cool. I-I don’t know if I can call the cops on her.” I rubbed the heel of my hand across my chest. All this drama for what? This was so stupid. We were done.

“*I’ll* call. If we catch her on video here at the house, I’ll call. You won’t have to.” Gabe’s gaze grew hard. “I love you, man, and I hate watching you go through this. Quite frankly, a few of us have been concerned about you for a while.”

I widened my eyes. “You have?” I swallowed hard. I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear this.

“Yeah. We know you try to act tough, but we also saw you suffering. You’re a good guy, Silas, as much as Mia tries to make you believe you aren’t. Cash sees it, we all see it.” He creased his brows. “You’re a guy who takes action for others. It’s time you took action for yourself.”

I stared at him. I’d never thought of it that way. And that bitch was attacking my man now. It was time to put her in her place. “You know what? You’re right.” I cut my gaze to the form in front of me. “Tell me what to write, Gabe. I don’t want there to be any question in the judge’s mind that this order isn’t needed.”

“That’s my man.” With a wide grin, he patted my back. “We’ll get this done, request a remote hearing, then she’ll be served. We’ll see if she contests it after that.”

THE NEXT DAY, I walked across campus to the Five Guys on Mill Avenue to grab a burger with Caleb. He’d texted me earlier today and invited me to lunch. He was checking in on me. I guessed it was only fair since I’d been there for him when shit went down with Eric’s ex.

With a sigh, I opened the glass doors inside of the brick building and stepped through them, then looked around.

Caleb waved at me, sitting at a table in the back corner, smiling.

I upnodded at him, then ordered a burger and fries at the counter and scanned the place. It was packed with students as usual. After getting my food, I filled a drink container with iced tea, then joined Caleb at his table.

“What up?” He swiped his dark bangs from his brow and beamed at me.

“Not much, you?” Okay, that was a lie. It had felt like there had been way too much up lately. I opened my white paper bag and unwrapped my burger.

“I heard you filed the order of protection?” He bit into his own burger, watching me.

“Yeah, it was much easier than I’d imagined. We were able to get a remote hearing for it, too. I guess the courts don’t take this shit lightly.” I stuffed a fry into my mouth. In some cases, it was probably a life or death situation, but mine was not like that at all.

“How do you feel about it?” He sipped some soda from a straw.

“I don’t know, it sucks but it’s done.” I shrugged. My phone buzzed in my back pocket, and I fished it out, then held it to my face. Was it Cash? We’d planned on finding time to meet up this week.

334598

This is the Tempe Municipal Court AZPOINT notification system. Your order has been served.

As I sipped my tea, I swallowed the wrong way and coughed a few times. “Oh shit.” I stared at the phone. It was real. My pulse thumped in my chest.

“What?” He hopped up from his seat, leaning across the table, and peeked into my phone. “What is that?” He pointed at the phone and sat down.

“It’s the notice that Mia was served with the order. Fuck, that was quick.” I snapped my gaze to meet with his. “Do you think she’s freaking out right now?” I knew I would be.

“Maybe. Does it really matter?” He knitted his brows, his gaze searching my face. “Silas, it needed to be done.”

“Did it though?” I slumped my shoulders. I’d spent two years with her. I’d known everything about her at one point. How did it come to this?

“Yes, it did.” He pressed his lips together. “I tell ya, thinking back on it I’d have loved to have given Rajesh an order like that after all the shit he tried to pull on Eric.”

“Yeah, but he’s gone now, right? I mean, he’s not bothering either of you anymore.” I ate a bite of my burger and set my phone on the table.

“Yes, he’s gone. But did you know one time he showed up at Eric’s house after Eric had told him he had plans? The guy had some nerve.” He huffed, then ate some fries.

“We haven’t seen anything on the cameras. I really don’t think she’d dare come to the house.” I ate a few fries, then washed them down with tea.

“Dude, it’s only been one night. Give it time.” He leaned in and tapped his finger on the table. “I think Gabe wanted those cameras anyways. I think some shit is going down with his father.”

“Really?” I twisted my lips. “He hasn’t said anything like that to me.” I ate more fries. But then, Gabe tended to keep his mouth shut when it came to his family business.

“Anyways, I’m glad it’s done.” He ate the last of his burger, then crumpled up the wrapper. “How are things going with Cash?”

Now this, I wanted to talk about. “Great.” A smile crept over my lips and my chest tingled with warmth. I couldn’t help but feel good about us. “We confessed to each other over the weekend, and he met my parents on Sunday.”

“No shit?” He slapped my shoulder. “That’s great, I’m happy for you. He seems like a really sweet guy. He’s so opposite from you, but it seems to work.” He arched a brow. “I’ve seen a change in you, Silas. You look happy.”

“I’m not happy. That’s not possible.” I smirked at him, then chuckled. “Yeah, I’m happy. It’s been so long, I almost forgot what it’s like.” I stuffed the last bite of my burger into my mouth. “I never believed a relationship could be like this.”

“Well, believe it.” He sat back in his seat, glancing around the diner. “I have more news.” He waggled his brows.

“Yeah? What?” I ate some fries, then drank my tea. My phone buzzed on the table and my heart jolted. Could it be Mia? “Hold that thought.” I picked up my phone and held it to my face.

CASH

Hey, handsome. What are you doing tomorrow night?

As a smile swept over my lips, I tapped on the keyboard on my phone.

SILAS

I work until 6, but after that I’m seeing my boyfriend. I think he should come over and have dinner with me.

The three dots blinked at me.

CASH

How about you go to your boyfriend’s apartment since you’ve never seen it and he makes dinner for you?

My smiled widened as I texted him back.

SILAS

Sounds like an even better plan. Text me the address and I'll head over straight after work.

CASH

Okay. See you tomorrow. Love you.

SILAS

Love you, too. <heart emoji>

“I take it that’s Cash?” Caleb gave me a warm grin.

“Yeah.” I set my phone down and drew my attention to him. “How’d you know?”

“Your whole face lit up when you looked at your phone.” He peered at me. “You really love that man, don’t you?”

“I do. It’s like, fuck...” I blew a lock of bang off my face. “I *need* him, Caleb. You know what I mean? I’ve never felt like this before.” God, I sounded like a fucking idiot, but I didn’t care. This was Caleb I was talking to.

“Yeah, I know exactly what you mean.” He sucked the last of his soda down. “I feel like that with Eric.” He sighed. “I can’t imagine a life without him.”

“Uh-huh.” I drank the rest of my iced tea. It was time for my next class, then an evening of work and studying. Now I had a reason to get it all done tonight. I was seeing Cash tomorrow. My heart fluttered. I didn’t think I could imagine a life without Cash either. Wait... “What were you going to tell me?”

“Oh, shit, almost forgot.” He straightened his spine, his eyes twinkling. “We’re going to play at the casino bar once a month and they increased our pay to four-thousand a night. They said the night we played was the most money they’d ever made having a band in the place. We packed a great crowd.”

“Holy shit, that’s like over six-hundred dollars each.” I let a wide grin play over my mouth. Most of the bars we’d been playing at only paid five- or six-hundred total and we relied on tips. Finally, we were getting somewhere. “Do you think they’ll ever let us play at the pool?”

“Maybe. If we can keep going like this.” Caleb ran a circle over the table with his finger. “I’ve been thinking about doing some original stuff. I have some lyrics and melodies...”

I blinked at him. He’d never come out and said that before. “Really? But that’s not a casino thing. They only want cover bands.”

“Yeah, I know. We’d have to do those songs at the regular bars.” He peeked at me from under his long bangs.

“I’m okay with working on some originals. I have some riffs I’ve been playing around with.” I knitted my brows. “But it means we’d have to be in the practice room a lot more. Writing music and getting covers down are two totally different things.” Shit, would I even have time for that?

He nodded. “Yeah, it was just a thought.” He pursed his lips. “Otherwise, we might want to think about focusing on doing the tribute thing. That’s what the casinos are really looking for.” His gaze met mine. “Like maybe a Green Day cover band?”

“But Green Day only has three and sometimes four members. We have *six*.” I huffed. “And don’t the members of the tribute band have to play the part of the original artists?” I thought through it. “I don’t think we’re ready for that. Let’s see if we can break the mold and stick with what we’re doing for now.” I focused on him, frowning. “We can do this, Caleb. If we can pack that damn bar to overflowing, they’ll have to let us play poolside.”

The edge of his mouth ticked up. “Yeah, you’re right.”

“Okay, I gotta go. It was nice having lunch with you.” I stood up, then tossed my empty bag and wrappers into a garbage bin while Caleb did the same.

“Yeah, good chatting with you, man.” He clapped me on the shoulder. “And I’m really happy things are working out with Cash. I like him.”

“Thanks.” I gave him a side hug, then we both picked up our backpacks and walked out into a sunny afternoon.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT, I followed the directions on my phone to an apartment complex in Mesa and parked in an open spot, then looked out my windshield. The place was in a nicer neighborhood with lots of tall trees and desert landscaping underneath with lantanas and Mexican bird of paradise, all lined up in neat rows. I climbed out of my car and strolled down a sidewalk to a ground-floor unit, number 107. This was it. My heart flickered as I knocked on the door. All day I’d been excited to see Cash.

The door opened and Cash stood there, a wide smile on his lips, and a rainbow tie-dyed t-shirt stretching across his shoulders. “Hi, handsome. Come on in to our humble abode.” He stepped aside.

I walked in and as he shut the door, I grabbed him up in a tight hug and planted my mouth against his, my tongue sneaking between his lips. Fuck, I’d missed him, and it had only been a few days.

As he melted against me, he freed a soft moan, his arms wrapping around my waist.

“Damn, I wish someone would kiss *me* like that.” Jack shook his head, his hands resting on his hips.

I broke the kiss and faced Jack, keeping an arm wrapped around Cash’s shoulders. I had no idea he was there. “Sorry, Jack, but your brother is irresistible.” I gave him my best grin. He had to know how much I loved his brother at this point.

“Yeah, yeah. Anyways, I have to get back to the restaurant. I’ve already been on break too long and dad is texting me.” He grabbed a jean jacket lying across a green leather sectional

sofa, then slid his arms into it and strode past us. “Have a great time tonight.” He ticked his brows at me.

“Oh, we will.” I tossed my grin to Cash.

Jack walked out the door and shut it behind him.

“So, what are you making me for dinner?” I sniffed at the air, the scent of garlic floating around us. “Italian maybe?”

“Yes, spaghetti and meatballs. It’s a recipe my dad perfected for his restaurant.” He dipped his head to my shoulder, then smiled at me.

“Sounds and smells great.” As I followed him into the room, I perused his place, the dark wood tables surrounding the couch, the colorful artwork on the walls. “I’m guessing you picked out the pictures on the walls?” I stepped to one hanging above the couch, an abstract painting. I peered at it. It looked familiar. “Did you...did you get this at Target?” Huffing a laugh, I pointed at it.

“I did, but not the day I saw you there. I bought that picture probably a year ago.” He walked into his galley kitchen of white shaker cabinets and a dark tiled counter with stainless steel appliances.

The place looked like it had been updated recently. “How long have you lived here?” My gaze landed on the pink orchid he’d picked out the day he found me at work and warmth wrapped around my heart. God, how lucky was I that my prickly self didn’t scare him off that day? I stepped to it, centering a round, dark-wood dinette all set with plates, napkins, and silverware.

He emptied pasta into a colander in the sink. “About eighteen months. Jack and I moved out a few years ago, but our first place was nasty.” With a scoff, he dumped the drained pasta into a bowl on the counter, then added the sauce and meatballs on top.

“Yeah? How nasty?” I walked to him and wound my arms around his waist from behind, then nuzzled the back of his neck.

“It had cockroaches. *Bad.*” He shivered in my hold. “If you woke up in the middle of the night and turned on the kitchen lights, the damn things scattered everywhere.” He huffed. “And they were *huge.*” He sucked in a breath. “And they could *fly.*” He shuddered. “One flew into my hair. I almost fainted.”

I chuckled against his skin, images of him screaming and frantically waving his hands filling my mind. It wasn't funny, but it kind of was. “Sounds like palmetto bugs, the larger and scarier variant of the cockroach.”

“I guess so. They were scary. The things could probably take off with a whole hot dog if you left it on the counter.” He mixed the sauce into the noodles with a pasta fork. “I have some garlic bread in the oven if you could be a dear and take it out for me?” He turned in my hold and kissed my cheek.

“Of course.” I freed him, then grabbed a dish rag from the counter and opened the oven. A loaf of French bread, sliced up with butter oozing from it, rested in opened plastic on a cookie sheet. “Oh damn, is this that frozen Mama Mia garlic bread?” I pulled the cookie sheet out of the oven with the towel and set it on the glass stove top. “We have that at Target and it's so fucking good. It's my favorite.” My mouth watered. Damn, I was hungry.

“It is, especially since it's your favorite.” He tossed a smirk at me. “If something is just as good frozen as what you can make fresh, I say get it and make things easier on yourself.” He brought the bowl of pasta to the table and set it down. “Put the bread on a bowl and bring it over, please. The bowls are in the top cupboard to the right of you.” He gave me a smug grin. “And there is cider and beer in the refrigerator. Take your pick.”

“I know what *you* want.” I grabbed a bowl and tossed the hot bread into it, then pulled a beer and a cider out of the refrigerator. As I brought everything to the table, I said, “This all looks so good, Cash. I'm glad we could find time to do this.” Maybe someday, we'd be doing this every night together. I could dream.

He sank into a chair then patted the seat of the chair next to him. “Thank you.”

Setting the bread and our drinks on the table, I breathed in deeply. It had become so easy being with him. We evened each other out. Cash had definitely rounded out my rough edges, as Axel had said. I sat next to him.

He dished out pasta and meatballs on my plate. “Tell me when to stop and how many meatballs do you want?”

“Three.” His meatballs were on the larger side. “Stop.” I held my hand up and chuckled. He was piling the food up fast. “How much do you think I usually eat?” I gazed at the mound of pasta on my plate.

“I don’t ever want you leaving my place unsatisfied.” He ticked a brow at me, then plated his own food.

“Oh, I’m sure that won’t be a problem.” I picked up my fork and spun it in my spaghetti noodles, then gave him a coy smile. “What time does your brother get home from work?” Hopefully, we’d be alone together most of the night and fooling around was definitely on the agenda.

“Not until around eleven. The restaurant closes at ten and then there’s clean up and all that.” He cut into a meatball and ate it.

I shoveled pasta into my mouth. The sauce was garlicky, but not too much and had plenty of olive oil. “Damn, Cash, this is good.”

“Wait until you taste the meatballs.” He wiped his lips with a napkin, then sipped his cider.

Picking up a meatball with my fork, I inspected it for a moment, then bit into it. More garlic flooded my mouth with hints of oregano. “Mmm, very good.”

He giggled, looking me over. “You’re eating it like a cave man.”

“I’m using a fork.” I wrinkled my forehead. A dainty eater, I was not.

Taking a bite of his food, he asked, “Did you get the order of protection done on Monday?” He peered at me. “I know you probably don’t want to talk too much about it, but I’d like to at least know that.”

My chest squeezed. This shouldn’t become something we didn’t talk about. “Cash, you can ask me about it any time, okay?” Was that why he hadn’t asked during our text conversations this week? I sipped my beer. “Anyways, yeah, I filed on Monday, had a remote hearing that afternoon and she was served yesterday.”

“So, what’s next? Is that it?” He ate some pasta wound on his fork, then dipped some garlic bread in his sauce.

“Hopefully that’s it. She can contest it. If she does, Gabe says I’ll need to see her in court and bring my evidence.” I was not looking forward to dealing with something like that and pulling all that shit together for the court.

“If you do go to court, can I come?” He set his fork on his plate, his gaze locking on mine, his brows knitting.

“Uh, yeah, sure, why not.” I cut off a bite of meatball, then swirled it in sauce. It might be awkward, but whatever. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to. I can handle this, and I have Gabe to help out.”

“Yeah, but I want to be there for you.” He shrugged a shoulder. “You know, moral support.”

“Sure, I get it.” I nodded, then ate more food. I supposed if the situation was reversed, I’d want to be there for him, too.

“Have you seen anything on the cameras? Has she tried to contact you at all?” He drank his cider.

“Nope, nothing.” I sat back in my chair. Holy shit, it was weird, but since the gig on Saturday, I hadn’t heard from her. It might be the longest I’d ever gone without something—a text, a comment on social media, or her showing up out of nowhere.

“Good. Maybe it’s done then, and you can relax and heal.” He ate more pasta.

“Heal?” I furrowed my brows. Was he talking about my shooting trauma? I drank some beer.

“Yes, she was abusive to you. You don’t get over that overnight. Believe me, I know.” He squeezed my forearm and leaned in, his gaze searching my face. “You do talk to your therapist about your relationship with her, too, right? Not just about the shooting?”

“Yeah, but...” I thought through all my conversations with Lorena. Whenever we’d talked about Mia, it had been in reference to the shooting and how her handling of it caused the end of our relationship. “I suppose I could do a better job of that.”

“I think you should.” He gave me a quick smile. “There’s only so much my love can do.” He leaned in and planted a kiss on my cheek. “I’m here for you, Silas, no matter what.”

“I know.” I raked my gaze over him. How the hell did I get so lucky? This gorgeous man was in love with me, flaws, and all.

My phone buzzed in my back pocket.

“Fuck.” My chest pinched. I never knew what the hell I was going to face when the damn thing went off. I tugged it out and held it to my face. A notification from Instagram popped up.

@KAITLINLASSITER

Call me. We need to talk. 480-228-2846

“No fucking way.” I tossed my phone on the table and dipped my face into my hands, my heart wrenching. It wasn’t over. It might never be over.

“What happened?” He picked up my phone and held it to his face. “Who is...shit, is this the other girl that was with Mia at the casino?”

“It is.” I blew out a long exhale, dropping my hands into my lap. “Problem is, I don’t know if it’s Kaitlin contacting me or Mia using Kaitlin’s account and phone number.”

“There’s only one way to find out.” He stuck his fork into the last of a meatball. “We’ll call her. But we’ll do it after we eat. She does not get to interrupt our fine dining experience.” With a smirk, he ate the piece of meatball.

My body relaxed and a grin crept over my lips. He was the best. “Of course. I’ll just put the phone on *do not disturb*, so we can finish eating.” I wrapped a hand around the nape of his neck and pulled him in for a deep kiss.

AFTER WASHING the dishes together and putting everything away, we strolled to his couch and dropped into the center of it, side-by-side. I set my phone on the coffee table and stared at it. I was not looking forward to this. “So, when I call Kaitlin’s number, I’m not sure I want to put it on speaker.” In fact, maybe I should call outside? What if they said more shit about Cash?

“Why? I can help you better if I know what she’s saying to your face.” He squeezed my knee. “But I understand if you’re uncomfortable with it.” He twisted his lips.

My chest wound tightly. “Yeah, I-I don’t want you hearing um...well, shit about you. It’s one thing for her to badmouth me, but—”

“I can handle it, Silas. And I want to be able to defend myself.” He lifted his chin. “She’s been telling you things about me, hasn’t she.”

I breathed through a knot forming in my gut. “Yeah, she has.” Might as well tell him everything since he might hear it anyways. “She tried to tell me you’re a player. She says...” Fuck, I couldn’t say this to him. I huffed and hung my head.

“She says what?” He fixated on me, his gaze growing hard.

“She said you were flirting with everyone in the shop at work. I don’t know, shit like that.” I peeked at him from under

my long bangs. Why the fuck couldn't we have one Goddamned night without her interfering?

He pressed his lips together, breathing deeply through his nose. "Okay then. *You* know that's not true and that's what counts." He plucked the phone off the table and handed it to me. "Call the number and let's see what happens."

I opened my Instagram messages and called the number, then set the phone to speaker. It rang a few times, then clicked.

"Silas?" Kaitlin asked.

"Yeah?" I leaned against Cash, and he wound his arm across my shoulders, then kissed my head. "Just so you know, I'm sitting here with Cash, and I've got you on speaker." Shit, could I record this conversation somehow in case I needed it for court?

She harrumphed. "Fine."

"What do you want?" I glanced at Cash, focused on my phone in my hand. At least it was Kaitlin that answered the phone and not Mia.

"I need to talk to you about this restraining order you put on Mia."

Oh, here we go. My chest heated. "What about it?" I pursed my lips. She was going to try and talk me into rescinding it. No fucking way.

"You need to know that Mia's mom was at her apartment when she was served. You started a whole shit show." She huffed.

My gut clenched. Her mother was worse than Mia was. "Okay. So?" They were probably going to fight it and I'd be stuck gathering evidence for court.

"So, Mia's a wreck. Her mother laid into her. Do you have any idea how awful her mom can be?"

"I do." I blinked a few times. Did that mean they weren't going to fight it? "So, what do you want me to do about it? She deserved the order, Kaitlin. She's been texting me and showing up at my work and she's...fuck, you know how she

is. I'm not abusing her." I glared into the phone, my pulse quickening. Why the fuck was I always defending myself with these people?

"Silas, this isn't *about* you. It's about Mia. Her mom called her all sorts of nasty things. She told her no man would ever want her and she's useless without a man...and shit, now Mia's saying things that scare me."

I stared at the phone, then glanced at Cash. "Like what sort of things is Mia saying?" Mia had been down before after dealing with her mom, but she usually pulled herself out of it.

"Like she hasn't shown up for her classes since it happened, and I can't reach her. She's posting some weird shit on social media, too."

"Fuck." I opened my Instagram app and searched for her profile, then clicked on it. The last post was a black square and the caption read, *nothing left for me here*. I balked. "What the fuck?"

"Right?" Kaitlin exhaled into the phone. "I'm afraid for her, Silas. What if she hurts herself?"

"Have you tried going to her apartment?" I worried my lower lip. It wasn't like I could check up on her, I had an order of protection against her now. But fuck, if getting this order made her hurt herself, how could I live with myself? My heart pounded in my ears. I felt helpless. I *hated* feeling helpless.

Cash snatched my phone from me and scrolled through her Instagram posts, most of them images of us together during happier times. He bit his lower lip. "Silas, this is serious."

"Can you go to her place and check on her then call us back?" I said to Kaitlin, and fisted my hand over my knee. Could I send Cash over there? Fuck, that was too weird.

"Yeah, I'll try that. I was thinking of going over there anyways. I'll call you back," she said. "Silas? I know we never got along, but I do think you were good for her sometimes."

"Sometimes?" I choked out a laugh. "Yeah, okay." It fucking figured. No good deed goes unpunished. Story of my life.

“Give me an hour and I’ll call you back,” she said.

“Yeah, okay.” I took a deep breath. “Bye.”

Cash hung up the phone, then handed it to me. “There’s another post Kaitlin didn’t say anything about.”

“What’s that?” I opened my Instagram app and found her profile again. “Show me.” I held the phone on my thigh for us to both see.

He scrolled to a post two over from the black square, a selfie of her standing in her bathroom mirror, the phone covering her face. He tapped the image, then spread his fingers over it, zooming in on the counter. A pile of long, pink pills sprawled across it. The caption read, *am I ready?*

“What the fuck? Those are her Ambien. She doesn’t sleep well before a test without them.” I scratched my forehead. Was it a coincidence? I looked at the date of the post. It was taken last night. “She could have been getting ready for bed. I don’t know.” I didn’t want to go there.

“Silas, you said her mother abused her. How did she handle it? Did she ever show signs of depression?” He hugged me into his side.

With a frown, I said, “Yeah, I guess so. I was usually there for her. We’d talk it out and I’d reassure her that what her mother had said wasn’t true. Fuck, Cash, I’m sorry to be putting you through his bullshit.” An ache grew in my chest. “I-I can’t be the reason she...” As my eyes stung, I clenched them shut. We had to wait. Kaitlin would find her and fix this mess. I hated to admit it, but Kaitlin could be a good friend to Mia when she wanted to be.

SIXTEEN

CASH



My heart ached for him, my Silas. As I pulled his head down to my shoulder, I said, “If she does hurt herself, it’s not your fault. It’s a selfish thing to do and I know years of abuse from a parent like that causes all sorts of mental health issues.” I kissed his hair. “Jack was pulled from his abusers when he was four, like me, but was adopted straight away by our mom and dad and put into therapy. He still sometimes gets down on himself.”

He sniffled. “Did he ever...has he ever—”

“No, he never tried to hurt himself.” My heart stung. I’d lose my damn mind if anything happened to Jack. Well, and now Silas. I had two men in my life I loved deeply, but in different ways. “The bottom line is you can’t blame yourself. You need to do what’s right for you, and you did. Now it’s up to Kaitlin to try and get help for Mia or for Mia to realize herself that she needs help.” I glanced at the phone still resting on his thigh. “When we talk to Kaitlin, make sure she gets Mia some help.”

“Yeah, I tried though, and she refused. Her mother thinks seeing a shrink makes you weak.” He scoffed. “Her mother’s a piece of work, let me tell you.”

God, I hated people like that. I brushed my hand down the back of his head. “I suppose then Mia accused you of being weak when you went into therapy?”

“Pretty much. That was the first big argument we had after the shooting.” He lifted his head and swiped at his eyes with

his fingers. “Fuck, this was not how our night was supposed to go. We should be in bed right now, enjoying ourselves.”

“Yeah, but we have the rest of our lives for that.” I blinked. Holy shit, did I really say that out loud?

His gaze snapped to mine. “Did I just hear...” A smirk crept over his lips. “Cash, you really love me that much?”

“I do. I know it’s only been a month or so, but damn it, when it’s right it’s right.” I glanced across the room at the television in the corner, sitting on a wooden console at an angle. “If it’s good enough for *The Bachelor*, it’s good enough for me.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” He straightened his shoulders.

“Don’t those couples in *The Bachelor* date for like, a month and then get engaged?” I widened my eyes and slapped my fingers to my mouth. “I-I mean, I didn’t mean we should get engaged already. Shoot.”

He chuckled. “No, but we should probably find a way to see more of each other, like maybe make plans to move in together?” He raised his brows.

“I...” With a coy grin, I cocked my head. “Silas Brown, are you asking me to move in with you?” My heart fluttered.

“I uh, I guess I am.” He grabbed my hand and held it to his chest. “I do have the master bedroom in the band house. And you get along so well with my roommates.”

My chest bloomed with emotion. “Jack would probably be happy to have this place to himself. He makes enough money to afford it. We’ve just always lived together.” I glanced toward the hallways, where Jack’s room was. “It would be weird not living with him, but it might be time to branch out a little.”

He kissed my knuckles. “Doesn’t have to be right away. Maybe after I graduate you can move in? The band is going to be playing monthly at the casino now, so with you living there and me doing books for the kitty rescue, I wouldn’t have to take a corporate job after graduation.” He bit the side of his

lip. "I'd have time to maybe build a CPA business working with rescues."

"Yes, Silas, that's what you should be doing. We'll make a plan for it." I gazed deeply into his brown eyes. I'd probably have the rest of my life to look into them, too. My heart flipped in my chest. Nothing could stop me from being with this man.

The phone buzzed on Silas' thigh and we both jumped and yelped. The phone bounced on the carpet under the table.

"Shit." Silas bent over and picked it up, starting the call on speaker. "Hello? Kaitlin?"

"Yeah, it's me. She's here and she's fine. She says she's been sick." The clapping of hard shoes filled the background. "I read too much into things."

"Where are you? Are you with her?" He glanced at me, his brows wrinkling.

"No, I chatted with her for a bit at her apartment and now I'm going home. I have shit to do. I have a test tomorrow." She huffed.

"What did she say about those photos?" He pursed his lips.

"She said she was just pissed off at what you did." Her voice became low. "You shouldn't have done that, Silas. You didn't need to get a restraining order."

I pressed the mute button on his phone, resting on his thigh again. "That's bullshit. Those posts did not sound like a person who was simply angry." I had a feeling she was trying to cover up how bad off she really was. I unmuted the call.

"Are you *sure* she was sick? I mean, how do you know she's not covering up something more serious?" He focused on his phone.

"I know my friend, Silas. She looked like hell. She said she'd been puking and had a stomach flu." She blew out a breath. "I wasn't about to sit there with her for very long and get sick. Stomach flus are the worst."

“Yeah, okay.” He combed his fingers through his bangs. “By the way, I *did* need to get the order. So, don’t try and tell me—”

“You tell yourself that, Silas. But it was unnecessary. She wasn’t going to bother you anymore anyways. Not after the scene you made at the casino,” she said.

He dropped his mouth open, then glared at the phone. “I think you’ve said enough, Kaitlin. I’m going to hang up now.” He ended the call. “Fuck!” With a scowl, he tossed his phone on the coffee table and scrubbed his face. “To think I was actually concerned about Mia and thought Kaitlin was being civil. Fuck me. I can’t win.”

“Don’t even try, Silas. There’s no point with people like that.” I dug my phone out of my back pocket, then opened my Instagram app. Something wasn’t sitting right with me. I pulled up Mia’s profile and held the phone out of Silas’ sight. The two posts we’d discussed were gone. “Silas, she deleted those posts.”

He did a double take of me. “She did? Why?” He leaned into me and gazed into my phone.

“See?” I scrolled through her profile. “They’re not there.” Was she hiding how she really felt? Why did I care so much about her when she’d done nothing but be mean to me? I worried my lower lip. Because I knew what it was like to be in her shoes, at least a little bit. It wasn’t all her fault. “I don’t know why, but I think we should keep an eye on her account.” At least she hadn’t made it private.

“Yeah, okay. I suppose that’s not breaking the order I just put on her.” He wound his arms around me and pushed me onto my back on the couch. “Can we forget about all this now?” He pressed a long, deep kiss on my mouth, his hand resting on my cheek. “I want to lose myself in you. I want to pretend it’s only us.” He flicked his tongue over my lips. “I need this, Cash, need you.”

My heart fluttered with warmth. “Yeah, but let’s go into my bedroom. My brother might come home early, you never know.” I gave him a quick kiss. I’d take it all away for him.

After he stood up from the couch, he grabbed my hand and pulled me up. “I haven’t seen your room yet, so I can comment on all *your* shit.” He gave me a sly grin.

“Oh, well, it’s the opposite of yours. Are you surprised?” I guided him down the hallway and flicked on my pink lamps resting on my white nightstands.

“Oh my God. What are we going to do when we move in together?” With a chuckle, he stepped into my room and ran his hand over my patchwork bedspread in golds, greens and reds. “You seriously have the opposite taste of me.” Shaking his head, he strolled to me and planted both of his hands on my hips. “We’ll have to meet somewhere in the middle, I guess.”

“We do. The middle is good.” I’d meet him just about anywhere to have him in my life though. I claimed his mouth with my own and darted my tongue between his lips, then skimmed my hand down his sides to squeeze his ass. My hardening cock brushed against his through our jeans. “What do you want tonight? I’ll do whatever you like.”

“Let’s get on the bed naked and see what happens.” He left me to shimmy his shirt over his head, then dropped his jeans.

As I did the same, he fell to his knees in front of me. “But first, I think I want to indulge myself on your dick.” He fisted the base and plunged his mouth over my shaft, licking up the underside and cupping my balls.

“Oh, God.” I tipped my head back as a shudder of sensation rolled through me. If that’s what he wanted I was fully on board.

He pumped me with his mouth, his cheeks hollowing, then snuck a wet finger into my crevice and circled my hole.

My ass clenched and released. I slapped my hands to the back of his head and fucked his sweet mouth, tension knotting in my gut.

He moaned over me, the vibration sparking heat up my spine. “Keep that up and I’m not going to last.” It’d been so long since we’d been together.

“Yeah, me neither.” He rose up, then snatched my hand and led me to my bed. “Towel?” He smirked at me.

“Oh, coming right up.” I raced out of my room into the bathroom, snapped a hand towel off a rack, then sped back in.

He was lying on his back on my bed, one arm tucked between his head and the pillow, slowly stroking his hard cock. “That was quick.”

Nodding, I crept onto the bed, laid the towel underneath him, and watched the motion of his hand over his shaft. My mouth watered. “Let me.” I shifted between his legs and dropped my lips over him, the tang of pre-cum flooding my mouth. I flicked my tongue at the slit on the head of his cock, and he jerked below me, releasing a strangled gasp.

“Oh, fuck, Cash. That’s good.” He rocked his hips, twining his fingers in my hair. “What if you fucked me tonight?” He raked his teeth over his lower lip.

I tipped my head to gaze up at him, my mouth sliding up and down his swollen shaft, then pulled off him. “Yeah, anything you want.” I’d fuck away all the other bullshit in his life.

I leaned to the side and grabbed my lube, then slathered it over my fingers and hovered over him on a straight arm, my gaze finding his. “I love you.”

With a faint grin, he said, “Love you, too.”

I teased his hole with my finger, then slid it inside. “You good?”

His brows tensed, then relaxed. “Yeah, I’m fucking great.” He slowly stroked his cock. “Kiss me.”

I fell down onto my elbow, pumping his insides and curled my finger just so, pressing my mouth to his in hungry kisses.

“Oh.” He shuddered under me and squirmed. “More.”

I pushed a second finger inside and rubbed his prostate, slanting my mouth over his, my tongue dancing against his. My skin heated as I watched him. He was so fucking hot like this and all mine. No one else existed right now.

“Do it. I’m ready.” He lifted his knees up to his armpits. “Fuck me so hard I don’t even know my name.” He smirked at me.

“You got it.” My dick jerked. It was on board with that suggestion. I lubed up my cock, then nudged it into his hole, the slick heat of him surrounding me. “Oh, fuck, you feel good.”

He clenched his jaw, then took a few deep breaths. “Don’t stop, just go.” He spread his legs wider.

I thrust into him, falling to my elbows, and biting at his neck, then sucked hard, my hips pistoning. I was going to leave a mark, but fuck if I cared. Then everyone would see it.

“Fuck, yeah, that’s it.” He grabbed my ass and dug his fingers into the globes of muscle. “Faster.”

I quickened my pace, my balls slapping his ass. With sharp gasps, I panted against his neck. Pleasure shuddered up my spine and tightened my balls. I was close but I wasn’t losing it yet.

He shifted his hips, then groaned, over and over. “You feel good, so, so, good.”

Sweat dripped down my back and sensation grew into a hot ball in my gut. I couldn’t hold out much longer. “Silas, I’m, I’m—”

“No.” He grabbed my face and gazed deeply into my eyes. “Stop a minute and look at me.”

With a hard swallow, I halted all motion and looked into his hooded, brown eyes. My climax surged and waned with a shiver.

“Stay, just like this.” He pulled on my head. “Kiss me.”

I placed my mouth over his, then snuck my tongue between his parted lips.

His tongue tangled with mine and he moaned. “Yeah, just like that.” He kissed me harder, deeper. “I fucking love you, Cash. You are the yin to my yang every fucking time.” His

dick jerked and lifted off his belly. “And fuck, I’m going to come. Go.”

I pumped my hips and fisted his pulsing cock, his cum spraying our chests and stomachs while my release surged inside him in harsh waves of sensation. I gasped and shuddered with each one, my rhythm faltering, my whole body tensing.

As it slowed, I fell over him. “Oh my God. What have you done to me?” My cock still twitched inside him. “I think I’m still coming a little.”

“Me, too.” He wrapped his arms around my shoulders and squeezed. “That’s some tantric shit right there.” He chuckled against my neck.

I kissed the side of his head, then brushed my hand down the back of his hair. “I don’t know if that was really tantric, but I loved the connection.” It was amazing to think the man who’d tried to push me away at first was so open with me now, so vulnerable. But he was and I’d known he had it in him.

“Yeah, I have no idea what I’m talking about. My brain is offline after that.” He squeezed me. “I’d like to stay, but I have to get going. I have an early class tomorrow, followed by a short afternoon shift and an appointment with my therapist. Busy day.”

I lifted onto my elbows and gazed down at him. “Good, I’m glad you’re seeing your therapist after what’s happened this week.” I gnawed my lower lip, studying him. “You will talk to her about Mia, right? I mean, start focusing on how you can start to heal from that relationship as well?”

“Yeah, I suppose I should.” He huffed out a breath. “There seems to be no end to the amount of baggage I need to work through.”

“I understand how that is. Sometimes working through one thing uncovers the next.” I pressed a soft kiss on his lips. “I’m here for you, Silas. If you need anything from me, you let me know.”

“Yeah, it’s good to be with a guy who’s been there.” His eyes widened. “I mean, who’s been through therapy. You understand the process and aren’t expecting me to be cured after a few deep chats, you know?”

“I know.” Exhaling, I rolled off him and sat up, then threw my legs over the edge of my bed. “So I guess I won’t see you until Friday?”

He rose up onto his elbows and shook his bangs off his face. “Yeah. I don’t work for once and there’s no gig, so we should do something special.” He lifted the edge of his mouth.

“Like what were you thinking?” I gave him a coy smile. I wanted to keep doing things that made him happy, so I was going to keep my opinions to myself.

He gave his head a slow shake, then sat up with his knees bent and wound his arms around them. “I don’t know, dinner and a movie?” He dipped his head. “Is that too cliché?”

“Of course not. Dinner and a movie it is. You can pick the restaurant and the movie, too.” I squeezed his forearm. “I just want to be with you. It doesn’t matter what we do.”

“Cash, you *can* pick something.” He cocked his head and arched a brow.

“Okay, I’ll pick the restaurant and you pick the movie. Let’s go to Tempe Marketplace, since they have both.” I thought a moment. “How about The Thirsty Lion pub?” I hadn’t been there in ages. “I get off at six, so I can meet you at six-thirty?”

“That works.” He ran his finger over his stomach. “I’m sticky. Let’s wash up.”

“Yeah, my dick is sticking to my leg.” I huffed out a laugh, then stood up and wiggled my hips. That was unpleasant. I couldn’t wait until Friday. We had so much to look forward to and tomorrow I would try and schedule a time for him to meet my parents. It was way overdue.

SEVENTEEN

SILAS



It was early afternoon and I walked out of my bedroom in my Target attire, ready for another wonderful shift at the returns desk. At this point, I'd love to have a shift hanging out in the back room opening boxes. Maybe I'd even ask for it today. No one else wanted to do it.

“Hey, Silas.” Gabe looked up from the couch, his laptop open on his thighs. “Heading to work?”

“I am. What gave it away? The red shirt with the fucking logo on my chest?” I scoffed and headed into the main room. I was pretty sure I knew the answer to this, but I'd ask it anyways. “Anything on the cameras?” I hadn't cared enough to download the app yet and I wasn't sure I wanted to.

“No, just a drunk guy walking, no stumbling, down our street at about midnight last night.” Gabe chortled. “Come here, it's pretty funny.”

“It wasn't Axel, was it?” I couldn't help myself. He did live right around the corner. I dropped in next to Gabe and planted my hands on my thighs, leaning in to get a good view of his laptop screen.

“No, you goof.” With a smirk, he clicked open an app, then on a video clip.

A man in a jean jacket with short, dark hair, stumbled down the street, weaving back and forth, then stopped, pulled a small bottle out of his pocket, and tipped it back.

“Dude obviously hadn't had enough to drink yet.” I grinned. Maybe we'd have more fun with these cameras than

I'd thought.

The man dropped his arm, shook his head, then fell to a knee and a hand on the pavement.

“Oh no, he's going down. Look at him.” I pointed at the screen, a wide grin curling my lips. “Axel was like that when we were in Mexico last summer.” He wasn't even here, and I was picking on him. It was too bad. It was more fun when he was around and could respond to my insults.

“You stop. You drank as much as he did in Mexico.” Gabe shook his head, smirking.

After a moment, the man rolled to the ground, lay there for a second, then hopped back up and stumbled off.

“How the hell did he get back up after that? I figured he'd be out for a while.” As the footage continued, my gaze caught on a pair of headlights, special aftermarket headlights, on a car sitting at the corner on the street intersecting ours.

Gabe moved his cursor to stop the video.

“Wait.” I grabbed his forearm. “Fuck. Can you zoom in on that car?” I peered into the screen, my pulse picking up speed. It couldn't be, could it?

“What?” He zoomed in.

“No fucking way. That's Mia's BMW. I installed those Angel Eye headlights on her car when we first started dating.” Taking deep breaths, I swiped my bangs over my head. “She's breaking the Goddamned order.” I jabbed at the screen.

“Technically, no.” Gabe tilted his head, peering into the screen. “She's probably over one-hundred yards away. And even if she's closer than that, there's no way to prove it's her. There's no plate on her front bumper.” Pursing his lips, Gabe cut his attention to me, then wound an arm over my shoulders. “Silas, take it easy. You look like you've seen a ghost or something.”

“Fuck, man. Me and Cash thought she might hurt herself last night. This is such bullshit. I *know* it's her, I *know* it.” My heart thumped in my ears. This was too much. I'd never get

out of this. How could I be happy out with Cash on Friday night when I'd be constantly looking over my shoulder for her?

“Silas.” Gabe gave me a stern look. “What do you mean by that?” He shook my shoulders. “Talk to me.”

I stared at him, my mind running in circles. “I uh...” I fought to steady myself. “We got a call from Kaitlin last night. I guess Mia’s mom was at her apartment when she was served, and the bitch laid into her. Mia’s been missing classes and some of her social media posts were off. Cash recognized it first. There were signs, you know, that she might hurt herself.”

“You think she’s suicidal?” Gabe shifted to face me, his arm sliding from my shoulders. “Silas, that’s pretty serious.”

Gaping at him, I clutched at my chest. “Yeah.” Me and Cash hadn’t wanted to put it that way, but it’s what we’d both thought. “B-but Kaitlin went to her house and checked on her. She said she’d had the stomach flu.” I let my gaze wander the room, not focusing on anything. “She took the weird posts down after Kaitlin talked to her.”

“You need to stay in contact with Kaitlin and make sure Mia’s not going over the deep end with this. She wasn’t a stable person to begin with.” Gabe fixated on me. “Silas, if she hurts herself, it’s not your fault.”

“But isn’t it though?” My gaze locked on his. “I left her. Just moved all my shit out while she was at school and—”

“Silas.” Gabe squeezed my hands and shook them between us. “You had to get away from her. She was destroying you. Don’t you see? With the trauma you suffered after the shooting, you couldn’t stay in that toxic relationship.”

Milo strode out from the hallway, then dropped down between my knees, planting his hands on them. “Silas, listen to Gabe. You’re the guy we all count on, but the one you have to save is yourself this time.”

My vision blurred and pain sliced through my heart. Why was it so hard to be true to myself? My breath hitched. I always forfeited my own happiness for others. Fuck, maybe I

had a death wish that day at Guitar Center. Maybe I didn't care if I lived or died. "Why is it so hard for me to love myself?" I blinked, and a hot tear rolled down my cheek.

"Come here." Gabe tugged me into his chest while Milo climbed up beside me and draped his arms around me, resting his cheek on my shoulder, saying, "It's okay, Silas. We all love you and we'll show you how to love yourself."

That was it. A sob ripped from my throat, and I lost it. I wept in their arms for a moment, then calmed myself. "What the fuck, Milo?" As they freed me, I swiped at my eyes. He always said what we needed to hear.

"What?" Milo shrugged a shoulder.

"Why do you have to say such prophetic shit?" I huffed and shook my head.

"Where the hell did you come from anyways? I didn't even know you were home." Gabe reached across me and pushed on Milo's shoulder.

"Dudes, I had a massive shit. So, I was sitting on the toilet listening to you both." With a smirk, he glanced at Gabe, then focused on me. "I should probably go flush now."

"Yes, you should." I wiped my eyes again. "And wash your damn hands. Gross, dude." My heart lifted. No matter what happened, I had them all and now I even had Cash. I'd get through this. I breathed in deeply, then slapped Milo's ass as he stood up. "Love you, man."

He blew me a kiss and sauntered toward the hallway.

"That fucker is stealthy and he's always right." Gabe shook his head. "You going to be okay?"

"Yeah. I'll keep an eye on Mia's Insta and make sure Kaitlin is watching out for her. I guess that's all I can do now." I slapped my thighs and stood up. "I have to get to work." Now maybe all the annoying returns I'd have to deal with would be a pleasant diversion until I could see my therapist tonight and unpack all this shit.

"See you later." Gabe watched me go.

AFTER A RASH OF RETURNS, I had a few minutes of respite. I should probably take a moment to text Kaitlin. I scratched my head, then peered out over the red walls of the store and the rows of cash registers. What the hell should I tell her? That her best friend was indeed, a full-fledged stalker? No, that wouldn't do. I tapped on my phone.

SILAS

Did Mia show up for class today?

There, that would be a telling answer. I shifted my stance and leaned a hip against the back of the counter. The three dots popped up, taunting me. If Mia was out until after midnight, I doubted she would have made her eight o'clock class, but you never knew.

KAITLIN

Yeah, she was there. She was weird though. Can I call you?

“Shit.” I peeked out from under my bangs. Harry was managing today, and he didn't like for us peons to be using our phones while we were on the clock. I'd already be in trouble if he found me texting.

SILAS

I'm at work. Can't talk. Can you just text it to me?

KAITLIN

Oh, good, I needed to stop off at Target anyways.

“Fucking great.” I scoffed, then walked behind the wall holding the shelves full of returns. Maybe if I put some of this shit away, I could talk to her when she got here.

SILAS

Text me when you arrive, and I'll let you know where I am.

KAITLIN

Be there in five minutes.

My pulse kicked. That didn't leave me much time to get everything ready. I glanced over the items on the cart already. I'd just take it and go.

A FEW MINUTES LATER, I had my cart of returns, had notified Harry what I was doing and was now in the baby crap section of the store. I had no idea what half of this stuff was. It was colorful though, which reminded me of Cash. My heart warmed. God, I loved that fucker.

My phone buzzed on the cart, and I held it to my face.

KAITLIN

I'm here.

SILAS

I'm in the baby shit.

KAITLIN

Good place for you.

SILAS

Ha ha.

I placed what looked like maybe a set of teething rings on a shelf next to some others, then glanced up the aisle.

Kaitlin waltzed down it, swinging her hips, her skinny jeans riding high over her flat stomach and a white crop-topped sweater showing off her tits.

I smirked. Why wear a sweater if you're not going to cover your damn belly? Wouldn't that defeat the purpose of a sweater? "Hello, Kaitlin." I faced her and crossed my arms over my chest. She better not start in on me. "So, tell me what's up with Mia."

She quirked the corner of her mouth. "Besides you being a ___"

"Stop. We're not here to discuss me." I held my hand in front of her face. "I have some things to tell you and I'm doing this because I'm not the asshole you think I am." I glanced down the aisle. Good, my boss was nowhere to be seen.

"Okay, like what?" She pressed her lips together, looking me up and down.

"For one, there was more than the black post on her Instagram. Cash saw a bunch of her Ambien pills in the background of a selfie in her bathroom. It said something about being ready. We think it was a..." I blew out a breath. "Fuck, a cry for help or something." I fingered the edge of a box on the cart. This wasn't easy to talk about. Why the hell would she believe me anyways?

"Yeah, I noticed that, too, right before she took it down." She stepped closer to me. "Today she was super tired and almost fell asleep in class. Do you think she took too much Ambien last night?" She studied me.

I choked out a laugh. "No, I think she was up all night staking out my place. We installed security cameras on my house, and I saw her fucking car in one of the videos from like, midnight last night." I lifted my chin. At least she saw the post, too, so she didn't have to take my word for it.

Her eyes grew wide. "How did you know it was her car? Did you see her in it? There are a lot of BMWs like hers in Tempe."

“Yeah, but not with those special headlights I installed on it.” I peered at her and twisted my lips. What was she really thinking about all this?

“Okay, so are you going to have her arrested for breaking the order?” Her gaze turned hard, and she stomped her high-heeled foot. “That’s not cool, Silas.”

“I didn’t say anything like that.” And I wasn’t going to tell her that technically, Mia hadn’t broken the order. I straightened my spine. “Listen, she might be going off the deep end here and I know you don’t want to hear it, but it’s her mother, not me, that’s the problem.” And I had to keep telling myself that.

“No, it’s you *and* her mother that are the problem.” She stepped closer to me, as if challenging me. “If you hadn’t—”

“Kaitlin, I had to do what I did. She was...she was destroying me. Our relationship was toxic. Didn’t you even say that yourself once?” I pursed my lips and inhaled deeply through my nose. It was time to spill the whole fucking thing. “Do you know what she’s been telling me? Huh?”

She backed away a few inches. “No, what?”

“She told me I let people die in the shooting. She told me I didn’t act fast enough and because of that, their deaths were on me. *On me.*” I jabbed my thumb at my aching chest, my eyes prickling. *Fuck, don’t lose your shit.* “Do you have any idea how fucked up that is for me to hear?”

She lowered her brows and dropped her mouth open. “I...I had no idea.” She covered her mouth with her fingers, then walked a slow circle, shaking her head. “I had no idea.” She faced me, her gaze softened. “I’m sorry, Silas. That’s not right.”

My chest relaxed. “Still, I’m concerned about her. And I think you should be, too.” I dropped my hand on the edge of the cart and held tightly to it. “Don’t tell her I have video of her at my house. I’m not going to the police. I think we need to get her into some sort of therapy.”

“You know she’ll never go for that.” She flashed her eyes at me. “And what do you mean, *we*?”

“Okay, you. You need to get her into therapy. I can get a referral from my therapist.” I was grasping at straws here, but I had nowhere else to go with this. I drew a deep breath. “What else can we do?”

“I don’t know. I can talk to her about it.” She sighed. “Get me a referral and I’ll see what I can do. Maybe see if you can find someone with student services or close to campus. It has to be easy for her and someone her mom wouldn’t be able to find out about.” Her gaze met mine.

“Yeah, okay.” I worried my lower lip. At least it was something. “Is there anyone else who can help you? What about Nicole? Would she help?” Nicole wasn’t as close to Mia as Kaitlin was, but they did hang out sometimes and she never said shitty things about me. In fact, she’d always been pleasant.

“Yeah, I’ll see if me and Nicole can plan an intervention of sorts.” She chuckled, then rubbed her temple. “This is so messed up.”

“Yeah, it is. Let me know what happens and if...well, if you see something weird, you know.” My chest tightened. Hopefully, this would be the end of it, and I could leave it to Kaitlin and Nicole.

Harry stopped at the end of the aisle, did a double take of us, then strode toward me. “Everything all right here?”

“Yeah, I was just helping this nice young lady pick out a...” I held up the teething ring. “A teething ring for her baby.” I patted Kaitlin’s exposed stomach. “She’s expecting.”

“Silas,” She glared at me, her mouth falling open, then turned on her heels and left.

Harry watched her leave, his brows knitting, then focused on me. “I assume she’s a friend of yours since she knows your name.” He planted a hand on his hip.

“Yeah, I guess you could say that.” I held up a box of baby wipes and looked up and down the shelf. Where the fuck did

these go?

“Hurry up with that. We need you at the counter.” He tapped the cart, then left.

EIGHTEEN

CASH



It was Friday night, and I couldn't wait to see my man. Humming along to a pop tune on my radio, I pulled into the driveway of Silas' house. We'd decided that I'd pick him up tonight. He seemed to really like my car. Well, it was newer than his and I kept it in good shape.

Silas stepped out of the front door of the house, shut it behind him, then strode to my car and climbed in. "Hey, gorgeous." He wrapped his hand around the back of my head and pulled me in for a toe-curling kiss, tangling his tongue with mine. He broke it. "How've you been?" He raked his gaze over me. "I like it when you make your hair messy like that. It's how you had your hair the night I met you."

"Yeah, I think it is." With a smile, I backed out of the driveway. He remembered that I'd gelled my hair that night. It was sweet. "I've been good, by the way. Work was nice. I hit a new record in tire sales." I puffed my chest and drove onto the larger boulevard, lined by shopping plazas, palm trees and desert landscaping.

"You did? That's great. Do you get commissions for that?" He grabbed the handle above the window.

"No, but we get bonuses based on store sales. So, I think I'll get a good bonus this quarter." I glanced at him, then turned the corner at a streetlight. "How is everything with you?" Should I ask him for an update on the situation with Mia? Maybe not yet. He seemed to be in a good mood. "Have you decided on a movie to see?"

“I was thinking maybe something light with some escapism.” He placed his hand on my thigh. “How about the new Transformers movie?”

I nodded. “Yeah, that works.” I drove into the parking area at Tempe Marketplace and followed the traffic past the stores and restaurants. The place was a zoo on a Friday night. I pulled into a spot and shut off my engine. “So, let’s eat.” I peered at him. I had a feeling something was off. He didn’t seem his usual snarky self.

“Let’s.” He flashed me a grin, then climbed out of the car.

I met him behind the car, and we strolled, hand in hand, toward the restaurant, tucked inside a rounded, burnt orange building with large windows. I glanced at him. I really wanted to ask about Mia...I needed to wait.

He opened the door for me and ushered me into the restaurant, a large open space with dark walls and darker woods. “Want to sit outside?” The wrap around patio on this place was always my favorite. Then we could people-watch, too.

“Sure.” He talked to a hostess, who grabbed a few menus, then led us through the restaurant and out onto the patio. We followed her to a table with a sun umbrella, overlooking the interior of the outdoor mall, the fountains and walkways.

“This okay?” the hostess asked.

“Perfect.” I beamed at Silas as I sat in my wicker chair across from him.

He dropped into a chair and took a menu from the hostess. “Yes, this is great.”

“Your server will be right with you, then.” The hostess walked off.

I picked up my menu from the table and held it to my face. “So, drinks and some things to share?” I peeked at him. This was really fun, like a proper date.

“What were you thinking?” He perused his menu. “I’m getting beer to drink. No surprises there.” He smirked at me.

“The bacon wrapped prawns are good.” I skimmed further down the menu. “How about the spicy fried cauliflower?”

“Yeah. How spicy do you think it is?” He pursed his lips.

“Don’t know. We could ask, or...” I set my menu down. “How about we skip that one. You pick.” This was supposed to be about him tonight.

“How about the sliders and the beer battered fish and chips?” He set his menu down and sat back in his chair, then looked all around us and rubbed his forehead.

I followed his gaze with my own. What was he looking for? “See anything interesting out there?” Guess the people-watching was on. A man who was holding a teddy bear, was walking hand in hand with a woman, and they caught my eye. “Oh, isn’t that sweet.” I ticked my head in their direction. “Those two are obviously on a date and went to Build a Bear.”

He twisted in his chair and chuckled. “Yeah, looks like it.” He faced me as the server stopped at our table. He ordered a beer for himself, and I ordered a cider.

I watched him. “No snarky comments about the couple?” I unfolded my napkin and placed it over my lap, then tented my hands on the table. Something was definitely off about him.

“No, uh...” He looked out over the walkway. “We saw Mia on the house cameras.” He hung his head. “I’m sorry, I didn’t want to bring this up. I wanted us to enjoy ourselves.”

“Silas.” I slid my chair next to his and wrapped my arm around his shoulders. “We can still enjoy ourselves even if you have something you need to tell me.” I guessed neither one of us had wanted to bring her up. “Tell me what happened.”

He fished his phone out of his back pocket, opened the screen, then tapped a few times. “Here, I’ll show you.” He held his phone out to me. “Watch the video.”

I tapped on the play button.

A man stumbled around in the street, drank from a small bottle, then fell to his side and hopped back up. I smiled, covering my mouth with my fingers. “That can’t be Mia.”

“No, zoom in on the car across the street.” He peeked at the screen.

I set two fingers on the screen and opened them wider. “The BMW with aftermarket headlights?” My pulse quickened. “Are you sure—”

“Yes, I’m sure it’s her. I talked to Kaitlin yesterday at work, too. She said Mia was in class yesterday, but was really tired. Gabe says she wasn’t close enough to be technically breaking the order and since she doesn’t have a front plate, there’s not enough evidence to call the police.” His gaze caught on our server, who set down our drinks and took our food order, then left.

“But would you call the police on her?” I lifted my brows. I wasn’t sure he was capable of that.

“I...don’t know.” He scanned around us. “Just, know we might run into her. I’m afraid she might be around, you know?” He sipped his beer.

“Do you want to move inside the restaurant?” I kissed his cheek. “I’m fine with it if it will make you more comfortable.” My poor Silas. He had such a big heart, and this woman was walking all over it.

“No, it’s nice out. We shouldn’t change our behavior because of this.” He sucked in a quick breath. “Okay, let’s enjoy ourselves and not let it ruin our evening, okay?” He wrinkled his brows, his gaze finding mine.

“Yes, of course.” I took a long pull of my cider. “You saw your therapist last night, too, right?” Was that changing the subject? Shit.

“I did. It was a good session. We’re going to work on me putting myself first.” He huffed a laugh and shook his head, fingering his fork on the table. “You were right about uncovering new shit.”

“Yeah, you’ll get there, Silas. We’ll get there together.” I kissed his head, then shifted my chair back into my spot across from him.

The server set down our plates of food. “Enjoy.” She walked off.

I picked up a bacon wrapped prawn, then took a bite, the salty bacon filling my mouth. “Oh, so good.” I pointed at it. “Try one.” Maybe this would take his mind off Mia. I perused the open space behind him, the couples and families strolling by us, shopping bags in hand and some with treats from the shops. But now *I* was going to be on the lookout for his ex. At some point, she had to give up, right? “You do look nice tonight, Silas.” I let my gaze roam over his blue shirt and black skinny jeans. They both hugged him in all the right places.

“Thank you.” As his cheeks flushed, he dipped his head, then tapped his phone. “I’ll get us the movie tickets. There’s a showing in an hour.”

“That works.” I glanced around the patio. At least if we were in the theater, we shouldn’t have to worry about her following us. Or did we? Shit, I didn’t want to think about her anymore. I picked up a piece of fish with my fork and set it on my appetizer plate, then cut into it. *My parents...* “Hey, I was thinking it would be nice for you to meet my parents.” I stuffed the fish into my mouth.

His gaze cut to mine. “Really?” He quirked his lips into a soft smile.

“Really. I know they’ll love you. But I met your parents, so it’s time for you to meet mine and maybe at Easter, you can meet my other siblings.” Hopefully they’d all be in town for it.

“Yeah? I’d like that. The whole Phillips clan.” He stuffed a shrimp into his mouth, then washed it down with beer. “Tell me what it would be like.”

I sipped my cider. He was looking for a diversion and I’d give it to him. “Well, we can be loud. We’re a big group, you know and there might be other partners there, so it could be even bigger.”

“Are any of them married or do any of them have kids?” Silas ate another prawn.

“No, not yet.” I quirked the corner of my mouth. It was probably way too soon to talk about this, but he should know. “Someday, I’d like both of those things though.” I snapped my gaze to his.

“Yeah? Me, too.” He sipped his beer, watching me from over the lip of the glass, then set it down. “Gay couples can adopt now, right? Even from foster care?” He placed his hand over mine next to my plate. “Is that sort of what you were thinking? Giving another kid like you a chance?”

My chest burst with warmth. “Yeah, you got me.” I set my fork down, studying him. “So, you’d be open to that?”

“Hell yeah, why not? I save people, remember?” He squeezed my hand, holding my gaze.

“You’re right. It’s in your DNA.” I wrapped my fingers around his palm. He was so perfect for me. I could see a long and very happy future together.

AN HOUR LATER, we’d paid for our food and strolled down a walkway, past a fountain glowing blue under the water, toward the movie theater. The sun had just set, and the lights had come on in all the stores.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. “I’m not going to answer that.” He huffed.

“Yeah, okay.” I worried my lower lip. After what he’d told me about Mia, I was a little concerned.

“I’m going to use the facilities. How about you?” He stopped at the door to the mall’s public restrooms.

“Nah, I’m okay.” I gave him a grin. I hated to do this, but I was going to check Mia’s Instagram account. My gut was telling me something was off, and it usually didn’t lead me astray.

“Okay, be right back.” He grabbed my hand, pulling me to him, then kissed my cheek and walked into the bathroom.

I tugged my phone out of my back pocket and opened my Instagram app, then scrolled for Mia's profile. A new black box appeared at the top of it with a caption reading, *black is the best color. Is that what you see when you go?*

"Fuck." I rubbed my forehead. "Go where, Mia?" This wasn't good. It was cryptic, but not enough for me. I paced in front of the restroom. Should I point this out to Silas? If I did, he could at least contact Kaitlin and get Mia help if she needed it. I glanced toward the theater. I wasn't sure I'd be able to keep my mind on the movie now.

Silas strolled out of the restroom, rubbing his hands together, a wide smile playing on his lips. "Hey, ready for some Transformer action?"

"Um..." I pursed my lips. "Can you check your phone for me?" My chest squeezed. I didn't want to be the one ruining his night, but this was important.

"Yeah, why?" He slid his phone out of his back pocket, then held it to his face. His eyes grew wide. "Fuck." His gaze snapped to mine, his forehead wrinkling. "Oh, fuck, Cash. Look. What does that mean?" He frowned, then held the screen toward me.

I peered into it at an Instagram message.

@MIA_BIANCHI

You win. You won't need a restraining order after tonight.

"Call Kaitlin. Right now." I slipped my arm around his waist and led him to a bench at the edge of the walkway. As it turned out, I didn't need to tell him what I'd seen on her profile.

"Okay." He fell onto the bench, then tapped his phone and held it to his ear. After a few seconds, he scoffed and said, "Kaitlin, this is Silas. Call me right away. We think Mia is... fuck, might be doing something stupid tonight." He dropped the phone into his lap. "She's not picking up."

“Try texting her. Maybe she’s not in a place she can answer.” I sat down next to him and draped my arm over his shoulders. What the hell could we do if we couldn’t get ahold of Kaitlin? “Does Mia have any other friends you can call?”

He hung his head and jiggled his leg. “Yeah, there’s another girl, but I don’t have her fucking number. It’s not like Mia has a whole lot of friends.” He tapped out a text to Kaitlin.

“Try contacting this other friend on Instagram.” I looked out at the plaza, all the couples and families smiling and chatting as they walked along. That should be us right now. I straightened my shoulders. Someday it would be. We just had to get through this first.

He tapped furiously on his phone, then stared at it. “Come on, Nicole. Please respond to me.” His breath hitched. “Fuck, this is so lame. I’m sorry, Cash.” He turned into me, resting his cheek on my shoulder. “Should we go to the movie anyways?” He lifted his head, his gaze searching my face.

“Silas, if we do after getting her message and she hurts herself, how would you live with that? I know you. It would destroy you.” I held him tighter. “It’s okay. We have the rest of our lives to see movies together.”

His eyes grew glassy. “Yeah?” He sniffled.

“Yeah. I’m not going anywhere. We’ll get through this together.” I kissed his forehead. He didn’t understand this was nothing after what I’d been through in my life.

“Thank you. Do you have any idea how much I love you?” With his brows knitting, he peeked at his phone. “She’s not responding either.” He growled. “Fuck, what if she’s doing this for attention? Maybe it’s not real.” He stopped jiggling his leg. “I wouldn’t put it past her.”

“Silas, we can’t take that chance. Try calling Kaitlin again.” A knot formed in my gut. Even if she was doing this to get attention, she needed professional help.

He dialed a number on his phone, then held it to his ear. “Come on, pick up.” His face tensed, then he said, “Kaitlin,

this is serious. You need to call me.” He stabbed the end call button. “What should we do?”

“We go to Mia’s apartment.” I stood up. “Do you still have a key?” There was no other choice and if this was a stunt, well, I wasn’t sure what I was going to do.

“Yeah, I have a key.” He rose up from the bench and reached into his front pocket, then pulled out a set of keys. “She could have changed the locks though.” He shook his head, choking out a laugh. “Who am I fooling? She didn’t change the locks. She would have liked for me to go see her.”

“Let’s head over there. How far is it?” I grabbed his hand and led him toward my car, my heart pounding. The longer this went on, the longer it didn’t feel right.

“What about the order of protection?” He strode along beside me.

“I think it’s not something we should be worrying about right now.” As we approached my car, I freed his hand, then stopped with my door open and looked at him over the roof of my car. “Silas, whatever happens, we can handle it. Okay?” I had a feeling he’d be the one who’d need saving if the worst-case scenario played out.

“Yeah, okay.” With pursed lips, he climbed into my car.

AFTER DODGING traffic in silence to a two-story apartment complex only a few miles away, I parked, and we both stepped out of my car. “Check your phone one last time.” He’d looked so lost on the way over. I needed to keep him on track.

He held his phone to his face, then shook his head. “Nothing.”

“Okay, let’s go knock on her door.” I grasped his hand. “Lead the way.”

With a curt nod, he guided me up a path lit by walkway lights, past desert landscaping under tall trees and a

community swimming pool, then stopped and pointed. “It’s there, bottom floor.”

My gaze followed the direction of his finger. A window with the shades drawn glowed into the darkness. “Okay, so it looks like she’s home, unless she leaves the light on when she’s not home?”

“No, she’d never do that. She doesn’t like wasting electricity.” He huffed a laugh. “Can you believe it? She lives on her daddy’s money, but don’t fuck up the environment.” He shook his head. “Shit, she wasn’t all bad, I guess.”

He was talking about her like she was already gone. “Silas, take a deep breath.” I faced him and held both of his hands in mine. Maybe I should handle this. “How about if you stay here and I go and knock on her door?”

He scoffed. “No, I can’t let you do that. This isn’t your problem—”

“Yes, it most certainly is my problem. Anything in your life that’s a problem, is also my problem now. We’re in this together.” How many more times was I going to have to tell him that? As he glanced toward the apartment, I caught his gaze. “Silas, let me do this. Then if nothing is wrong, you’re not breaking the order.”

“Fuck.” He stomped his foot. “Okay.” He hung his head and released my hands. “Go, I’ll be right here.” He waved me off.

“Okay.” I walked to her door, glancing back at Silas. I didn’t know if I was more concerned about him or his ex. And what the hell was I going to say if she answered? I stopped at her door and glared at the handle. The truth, that’s what I’d say. I’d call her out. I lifted my hand and rapped on the door.

Nothing.

As I shifted my weight, I cleared my throat, then peeked at Silas, watching me. I rapped again. “Mia?”

Nothing.

I pressed my ear to the door and listened. Only silence. Either she wasn't home, and Silas was wrong about the light or—

Silas bounded up beside me, key out. “Step aside. We're going in.” He shoved the key in the door, then turned it and threw the door open. “Fuck!” He raced to the couch and dropped to his knees.

Mia lay across it, an arm fallen over the edge, her jaw slack and mouth open, her face pale.

“Oh my God.” I covered my lips with my fingers, nausea balling in my gut, then sped to his side placing a hand on his shoulder.

He pressed his fingers to her neck, then rested his ear on her chest. “She's alive.” He glanced at me, his brows furrowing. “Call nine-one-one”

“Of course.” I snatched my phone from my back pocket and dialed, then stood up and stepped away.

“Nine-one-one, what's your emergency?” a female voice asked.

I peered back at Silas, sitting Mia upright and shaking her. “Wake up. Wake up, damn it!”

My gaze snagged a bottle of pills resting on a square dinette by the kitchen. “We uh, there's a woman who's unconscious. We think she overdosed on Ambien.” With my pulse kicking, I strode to the bottle, picked it up and read the prescription. It was Ambien all right and the bottle was empty.

“Can you give me your address?” the 911 operator asked.

“Silas, I need the address.” I tapped the screen and set the phone on speaker.

He held her still against his chest. “It's uh, shit, one-one-thirty-seven East Orange Street in Tempe. Apartment one-six-eight.” He held her out and shook her again, her head lolling. “Come on, wake the fuck up.” He turned to me. “Ask them what I should be doing?”

“We’re on the way. If he’s shaking her, tell him to stop,” the operator said.

I knelt beside Silas, placing my hand on his shoulder. “You need to stop shaking her.”

He stared at me a moment. “But she needs to wake up. How do I get her to wake up?” He glared at my phone. “How do I get her to wake up?”

“You might not. Is she breathing?” the operator asked.

“Yes, she’s breathing, but barely and she has a slow heartbeat.” His gaze darted between my eyes. “Where are the paramedics? I don’t hear anything. Shouldn’t I be hearing sirens by now?”

“They’re almost there. I need you to calm down and lay her on her side. Is she on her side?” the operator asked.

“Silas.” I squeezed his shoulder. He was losing it. I could see it in his eyes. “You have to lay her down.”

“But will she die?” His eyes glistened and his lips bowed down.

“We need to do what the nice lady is asking.” I set my phone on the coffee table behind us and pulled Mia from his arms, then laid her on her side, facing us. I grabbed his shoulders. “Hun, you need to focus on me. It’s up to the paramedics when they get here.”

“But there has to be something we can do, right?” He threw a glance at my phone then picked it up and yelled into it, “What can I do? I can’t just sit here and watch her die.” He blinked and a tear rolled down his cheek.

“Check her breathing. If she stops breathing, breathe for her. Do you know CPR?” the operator asked.

“Yeah, I do.” His gaze snapped to Mia, and he handed me my phone, then pressed his ear to her chest, one arm wrapping around her shoulders. “Still breathing, I can hear it.” He drew a ragged inhale, then bit his lower lip. “Fuck, where are they?”

My heart broke for him. Here he was, saving a person who’d badgered and abused him for years. But he wouldn’t

have it any other way and it was one of the things I loved most about him. I side-hugged him and kissed his cheek, the wail of sirens sounding in the distance. “I hear the paramedics. They’re almost here.”

He gave a stuttered nod of his head. “Yeah, okay.”

I glanced at the open door. Someone should go out there and show them where we were, but I didn’t want to leave him. “Silas, should I go find them?”

“Yes, that would help,” the operator said.

“Okay.” I stood up, then squeezed his shoulder. “I love you, Silas. We’ll get through this.”

He nodded at me, his face white and eyes wide.

NINETEEN

SILAS



A tremor shook through my body as I watched Cash bolt out the door and into the darkness. I cut my gaze to Mia. The last time I'd seen a person like this was...fuck, don't even go there. That person didn't make it. She was going to make it. I'd be her breath and her heart if she needed it. I pressed my ear against her chest, the rhythm slow and faint and slower than when we'd gotten here, but still there. Should I start CPR anyways? Cash had taken the phone with him, so I couldn't ask the 911 person.

“Fuck.” I hung my head. Poor Cash. The shit he had to put up with to be with me. This wasn't fair to him. We were supposed to be on a nice date. “Why the fuck did you do this, Mia? Huh?” I brushed her black hair off her face. “I'm not worth it, I'm really not.” I pursed my lips. She was beautiful. She could have anyone she wanted. Maybe with someone else, she wouldn't be so insecure, and things could work out for her. “Mia, you need to let me go. We're no good together. I know you can be happy. Don't listen to your fucked up mother. Get some therapy like I am. Then maybe you can heal like me and find someone incredible, find your own Cash.”

My eyes pricked and my vision blurred. I was such a lucky fucker to have found him. I sniffled.

A team of paramedics burst into the room with a stretcher. One of them said, “Step aside, so we can get to work.”

“Yeah, of course.” I stood up, then ambled to the dinette and swiped at my nose.

The paramedic team surrounded her and set up equipment.

Cash jogged to me and wrapped me up in a warm embrace. “I’m so sorry, Silas. Was she still breathing?”

“Yeah, she was.” I wrapped my arms around his waist and buried my face in his neck, my heart wrenching. It was so good to be in his arms. “Thank God you were with me.”

“No matter where I was when this happened, I would have come to you.” He brushed his hand down the back of my hair. “We should follow them to the hospital. I’m sure you don’t want her to be alone through this.”

A shock sparked up my spine. Someone had to call her parents and I didn’t have their number, but her mom was on Facebook. Fuck, was I going to be the one to break the news to her? “Yeah, that’s probably a good idea. At least until her family gets there.” My body trembled. I had to get through that part of it, then I’d be done with it.

A paramedic held up the empty prescription bottle on the table. “Is this what she took?”

“Yeah, we’re pretty sure that’s it.” Cash held me to his side while he faced the paramedic. “We’re also pretty sure it’s a suicide attempt. There are social media posts and a message to him.” He ticked his head at me. “He’s her ex-boyfriend.”

The paramedic nodded. “Okay, we’ll let the ER know when we can.” He made to leave, then stopped and patted Silas on the back. “I think she’ll be fine. You probably saved her life by reacting so quickly.”

“Yeah,” I mumbled, then chewed on my thumbnail, tightening the hold of my arm around Cash. He was the only reason I appeared sane at all right now. At least the paramedic didn’t call me a fucking hero.

The paramedics lifted Mia onto the stretcher, all sorts of machines attached to her, then rolled her out of the room.

I stared at them as they left. “I have to tell her mother.” She was going to blame me. I just knew it.

“Okay, well, let’s get to the hospital first. Maybe you can see if you can get a hold of Kaitlin or Nicole again. It might be better if they contacted her mom.” He lifted his brows, focusing on me.

“Yeah, I’ll try that first.” My pulse finally slowed, and I drew a deep breath. What a fucking nightmare. “Let’s see if we can find her keys and her purse. She’ll probably need them.” And I knew right where she kept it. We’d lived here together, in this very apartment for fuck sakes.

“Sure.” He dropped his arms, then snatched my hand. “Lead the way.” He tightened his hold on me.

“Okay.” I walked through the hallway and into our old bedroom. I really didn’t want to be here. The bed was unmade, and clothes were strewn across the floor. She’d been a much neater person when we’d been together. Wasn’t this a sign of depression?

Her black purse sat on the corner of the dresser, right where she always left it. A thought hit me, and my heart jolted. “Cash, do you think she knew if she sent me that message, I’d be the one to find her?” I stepped to the purse and plucked it off the dresser.

“Probably. She knew you still had a key, right?” He glanced around the room. “We should go. I don’t think it’s good for you to be here.”

“I think you’re right.” I followed him out of the room, locked the place up, then strode to his car.

ON THE WAY to the hospital, I’d tried reaching Kaitlin and Nicole, but still got no answer. Where the fuck were they? I could see Nicole not responding since I’d never contacted her before, but Kaitlin? She knew how unstable Mia had been. She was supposed to be watching out for her.

We pulled up into the hospital parking lot just as the ambulance doors opened to the ER and Mia was rolled in by

the paramedics.

“Hurry. She’s already in there.” I hopped out of Cash’s car with Mia’s purse dangling from my hand and hustled into the emergency room waiting area.

Mia was whisked away through the double doors into the back.

I stood there, raking my fingers through my long bangs. She didn’t look any different from when they’d taken her from her apartment. Wasn’t there some medication they could have given her to counteract the drugs and wake her up?

Cash strolled in, looked around a moment, then strode to me. “Did you see her? Were they able to wake her up?” He brushed his hand up and down my arm.

“I don’t think so.” I perused the waiting room, all stark white walls with blue vinyl and chrome chairs lined up in neat rows. A few people huddled together in groups, watching a television on the wall, or giving us looks. “Let’s talk to the desk person and see what we’re supposed to do.” I knew I couldn’t go back there while they were working on her.

“Okay.” Cash twined his fingers in mine, then led me to a desk tucked into an alcove by the door leading to the back.

A man in blue scrubs sat behind a monitor, typing on a keyboard.

Cash said, “We came in with the girl they just took into the back, the one who overdosed on Ambien?”

“I have her purse.” I held it up. “I...we don’t know what to do now.” I clenched my jaw. Last time I was in this hospital was with Axel after he’d been shot. But that had been a very different scenario.

“Can you give me her name, and can you contact her next of kin?” The man’s gaze met mine.

“Uh, yeah, her name’s Mia Bianchi and I can probably contact her mom on Facebook.” I winced. I was not looking forward to this. Where the fuck was Kaitlin?

“How do you spell that?” the man asked.

I spelled it for him as he typed. “Does she have an insurance card in her purse?”

“Oh, yeah.” I huffed. Fuck, now I’d have to go digging through her shit.

“Silas, let me.” Cash tugged the purse from my hands and unzipped the top, then fished inside it and slid out a wallet. “I’m sure it’s in here.” He opened the wallet and fingered through the cards. “A platinum American Express card?” He raised his brows at me.

“Don’t ask.” I glanced at the man behind the desk. He might be privy to a shit show later.

“Ah, here it is.” Cash thumbed a card out of her wallet and handed it to the man.

“Thanks.” He typed information into his computer.

“Uh, they’ll let us know her status, right?” I knitted my brows as my chest tightened. She’d better be okay. And when she woke, I had to talk to her. She had to know this wasn’t the way.

“Depends. What is your relationship to her?” The desk man eyed me.

“I’m her uh...” I glanced at Cash. “A friend.” I scratched my cheek. I probably shouldn’t tell him my name. What if they had access to the order of protection from the courts somehow? I didn’t know how all this shit worked. Maybe I needed to text Gabe.

Cash squeezed my hand. “We’re very close as you can see by the fact that we were the ones who called the ambulance, and we have her bag.” He sucked his lower lip between his teeth.

“Yeah, well, what we need is family or for her to agree to give you her status when she wakes up.” He typed some more.

Fuck my life. I should have known. “Okay, I’ll see if I can contact her mom.” My gut clenched and my pulse picked up speed. This was really going to suck.

“Why don’t you both have a seat?” The desk man held his palm out to the waiting room.

“Yeah.” I strolled into the room with Cash following and dropped into a chair, blowing out a breath.

Cash fell into the seat next to mine, set Mia’s purse on the chair next to him, then wound an arm across my shoulders. “Silas, what are we in for here?” He wrinkled his brows.

“A shit show, that’s what.” I huffed a chuckle. It wasn’t funny, but fuck, it sort of was. “Mia’s mom is a piece of work. She’s going to come down hard on me. Fair warning.” I snuck a peek at him, nodding back at me, then held my phone to my face. I hadn’t been on Facebook in ages. Did I even remember my damn password?

I logged into the app, then searched for her mom’s profile and clicked on *Message*. “Here goes.” My fingers trembled while I typed.

SILAS

Hi, Cherie. I’m in the Tempe St. Luke’s hospital ER with Mia. She overdosed on Ambien. You need to come right away.

I held the screen out to Cash. “Does that work?” The phone shook in my hand and my mouth went dry. When would she even see this message? Would she even see it?

“Yeah, that’s good. It’s only the information she needs and nothing she doesn’t need.” He hit the send button. “There. Now you can’t second guess it.” A faint grin floated over his lips. “It’ll be okay, Silas.”

“Should I call the guys?” We might need backup. I forced a swallow, gauging his reaction.

He shrugged a shoulder. “If you think it would help.”

My phone buzzed and I opened up the screen. “Fuck, she’s on her way.” I held the screen out for Cash to read, my leg jiggling.

CHERIE

What did you do to my daughter now? The order of protection wasn't enough for you? Tell the staff I'm on my way.

The muscle in his jaw bulged. “You didn't do anything to her, Silas. She did this to herself. She's mentally ill and needs help and you've only done what you had to do to protect yourself.” He flicked his phone out of his pocket and opened the screen, then tapped.

“What are you doing?” I watched him.

“Getting help.” He held the screen up to me, showing a message sent to the band Instagram account.

@CASHPHILLIPS

Come to Tempe St. Luke's ER. Silas needs your help.

His phone buzzed.

@KnotMe

Consider it done. On our way.

A smile stretched over his face. “See? There's not a thing Mia's mom can do to you, Silas. Because you are loved by so many people.”

My heart slowed a few beats and my eyes stung. “Fuck.” I turned into his shoulder, wrapping my arms around him. “I love you, Cash.”

“Love you, too.” He kissed my head. “Now we'll see who gets here first.”

TEN MINUTES LATER, Axel strode into the ER, still wearing his Dutch Bros t-shirt, scanned the room, then caught his gaze on

me. “What the fuck, man? Are you hurt?” He jogged to me and knelt at my knees, setting his hands on them. “Talk to me.” He glanced at Cash.

I straightened and drew a deep breath. “Mia messaged me and she...fuck, she tried to kill herself with Ambien. We found her unconscious and called an ambulance.”

“Are you shitting me?” He stood up, then dropped into the chair next to mine, twisting to face me. “Why are you still here?”

I blinked a few times. Would Axel have just left her here? No...“I can’t leave her alone here. Her mom’s on the way. Once she gets—”

“Dude, she’s going to fuck you up when she gets here. She always hated you, didn’t she?” Axel scowled and sank into his chair.

“That’s why I called the guys in.” Cash lifted his chin. “Maybe she’ll lay off him if we’re all here.”

“Yeah, you got a point.” Axel squeezed my hand. “Shit, I’m sorry. This sucks.”

Caleb strolled in through the doors, his blue *Best Buy* shirt hugging his shoulders. “Silas, you okay?” He glanced at each of us then stopped in front of me and planted his hands on his hips.

“Mia tried to kill herself and Silas and Cash got her to the hospital. We’re waiting for Mia’s crazy bitch of a mother to get here so we can all leave.” Axel stood up.

“Oh, shit.” Caleb’s eyes grew wide. “I’m sure there’s more to that story, but we can talk about it later. When do we think her mom will be here?” He glanced behind him at the sliding doors to the parking lot.

“Not sure. She could be coming from anywhere. It *is* a Friday night.” I hung my head. “Did you all bail out on work to come here?” I peered at Axel, then Caleb.

“Yeah.” Caleb sank into the seat across from me, propping his elbows on his knees. “Don’t worry about it. I’d rather be

here supporting you. It's what we do, right, Axel?"

"Damn right." Axel held out his fist and Caleb bumped it with his own.

A minute later, Gabe and Milo strode in through the sliding glass doors, perused the room, then sped to us. "What happened? Did she do it?" Gabe panted.

"Yeah, she did it." I huffed.

Elbowing Milo next to him, Gabe said, "Told you that's what this was."

With a nod, Milo stepped to me and squeezed my shoulder. "I'm sorry, Silas. It's not your fault."

"Yeah, fuck, I know." My chest pinched. But did I? Only time would tell. I focused on Gabe. "Does the hospital staff have access to the court records? Like if they had my name, would I get flagged somehow from the order?"

Gabe let out a sharp chuckle. "No, don't be so paranoid. If she wakes up and knows you're here, she might tell them about it though. I don't know what good that would do since it's on her, not you."

"Oh." I wrestled my fingers in my lap. Maybe it didn't matter so much.

"Take a seat, you two. We're waiting for Mia's mom to show up, so we can shield Silas from her." Axel patted the empty chair next to him.

"Yeah, okay. Devin and Brandon are on their way. They were at the bakery in the Melrose district." Caleb's attention drew from his phone to me. "I told them what was up already, so they know."

Leaning forward, Axel tagged Caleb's knee. "Should we tell the wives to come?"

"Nah, they're way up in Scottsdale. We don't need to interrupt their nice dinner with your brother." Caleb smirked at Axel. "Maybe they'll bring Leo to the dark side, and he'll settle with a nice guy."

“Ha, yeah, right.” Axel shook his head.

Cherie walked in, her black hair cropped at her chin, wearing a white designer blouse with the collar up, then strolled into the room, a beige Gucci bag on her bent arm. Her gaze caught on mine, and she wrinkled her nose, then held her head high and walked to the desk.

“Fuck, she’s here.” I sank lower in my seat and slumped my shoulders.

Devin and Brandon walked in and made a beeline toward us. “Guys, any word?” Devin asked.

“Not yet.” I ticked my head toward the desk. “Mia’s mom is here though.”

Everyone swiveled their heads to look.

Cherie took long steps toward me, her black slacks billowing around her legs. “Silas.” She clamped her hands together.

As my heart beat a furious rhythm, I stood up along with all the guys, and I faced her. “Yeah.”

She scanned everyone, then fixated on me.

Axel crossed his arms over his chest, then tapped his sneakered foot on the hard floor.

“I see you’re too weak to face me alone.” She barked out a laugh. “Look at all of you, standing up for him against one woman.” She pointed at me and glared. “It won’t work.”

My chest heated. How the fuck did she know exactly where to dig? I needed to stay on topic. “Cherie, your daughter tried to commit suicide tonight. How about we focus on that? She needs help.”

“What she needs is for you to stop abusing her. What did you think would happen when you filed that order? Huh?” Her glare bore into me. “You abused my daughter, and you left her a shell of the person she was. Now you wonder why we’re all here?”

I shrunk, my breath catching. It was no use arguing with this woman. She'd never listen.

"You think you're a hero. How many people died in the shooting you were all in?" She threw her glare at each of us in turn.

Axel hopped on his toes, sneering. "Excuse my French, but what the fuck is that bullshit? Are you serious right now? When's the last time you had a gun pointed at your precious head?" He jabbed a finger at her.

"Young man, I'll ask you to calm down or I'll have them call security." She glanced behind her at the man behind the desk, now standing up and watching us.

Cash stepped in front of me, pushing me behind him, holding his palms out. "No one needs to call security. Ma'am, I don't know you, but it seems to me that's a terrible thing to say to someone who survived a mass shooting. Don't you think?"

She blinked a few times. "Well, I..."

"And your daughter is still alive because Silas is the one who responded to her calls for help and took action." Cash waved his arms. "I don't see any of her friends here, do you?" He twisted to glance at me and winked, then faced her. "In fact, all of Silas' friends are here right now for support. What does that say to you?"

She gaped at him a moment. "Well it, it doesn't—"

"If Silas is the abusive, terrible person you say he is, would he have this much support with him now? He could have ignored Mia's messages to him. He had every right to ignore them. Especially with the order of protection he had to file for his own sanity. But instead, he got her the help she needed." His gaze grew hard as he stepped closer to her. "If it weren't for Silas, you would be walking into your daughter's apartment maybe tomorrow, maybe the next day, and finding her dead on her sofa." He pursed his lips. "You should be thanking him and not berating him."

“Well...” She rubbed her neck, her gaze darting across the floor, then turned on her high heels. “I’m leaving.” She stomped off toward the desk.

A man walked out of the double doors from the back of the ER. “Is there a Silas Brown here?”

My pulse stuttered. “Uh, yeah?” I held my hand up, then edged into Cash’s side as he wrapped his arm around my waist. How the fuck did Cash know how to shut her up without getting in a pissing match with her?

Cherie’s hard gaze fixated on the man at the doors. “Where is my daughter? I need to speak with her immediately.”

The man’s attention drew to her. “If you’re taking about Mia Bianchi, she only wants to see Silas right now, ma’am.” He looked her over. “Are you her mother?”

“Yes I am.” She scoffed. “You need to let me back there.” She lifted her chin, then pointed at Silas. “This man filed an order of my protection against my daughter. He shouldn’t be allowed to go back there.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, I don’t know anything about that. But she’s an adult and as such, it’s up to her who she lets in to see her and it’s up to him if he wants to go back.” The man lifted his brows.

She stomped a foot. “What sort of a place is this that won’t let a mother see her daughter after such tragedy?”

“Jesus Christ.” I grasped Cash’s hand and Mia’s purse and led him to the scene at the door. “I’m Silas. I’ll go back, but I want to bring him.” I ticked my head at Cash.

“I’ll be right back.” The man left through the doors.

“Fuck.” I slumped my shoulders, sneaking a glance at Cherie. This was fucking awkward as hell.

Cash held his head high, gazing at the doors.

The man returned and waved us in. “Come on.”

We followed him back, passing people in scrubs pushing equipment or seated in a central desk area, drinking coffee,

and chatting with one another. Curtains hung around hospital beds, mostly closed, but some open with patients inside with their loved ones. I didn't want to look. At this point, I'd be happy to never be in an ER ever again. My gut clenched tight. I didn't know what we were walking into here, but I had Cash at my side and with him, I could face anything.

The man pulled a curtain aside. "Here you go." He gave a nod to an orderly sitting in a chair close by.

Cash leaned in and whispered in my ear. "I think she's on suicide watch."

"Yeah?" My gaze raked over her. She looked terrible. I set her purse down on the end of the bed.

She gazed at me with sunken eyes, her lips dry and pale and thin blankets covered her up to her chin. "Silas," she said in a soft croak.

"Yeah?" I stepped to her bedside and glanced at her hand. Should I take it? I didn't know what to do. I'd spent so many years by her side, but I had Cash now.

"I wanted to let you know I'm sorry." She swallowed thickly, her eyes glistening. "I had a dream that an angel came to me." Her gaze drew to the ceiling and a tear tumbled down the side of her face. "The angel told me if I got some help, then I would heal and find my soulmate, like you've done." She gave Cash a sad smile. "There's nothing like almost dying to make you think differently about your life."

Didn't I know it. A lump crawled up my throat and my chest squeezed. She must have heard me through the haze of drugs when I'd talked to her. But fuck, I was no angel.

"You're a good guy, Silas. I need to get away from my mom and get help. I've spoken a little bit to the psychiatrist here and he's going to refer me to a treatment center." She licked her lips. "I just wanted you to know that."

"Where's your um, where's your dad?" I set my hand on the metal rail of her bed. Her dad had always been nice to me.

"He's on a business trip." She coughed a laugh. "He's always on a business trip nowadays. I think he's trying to get

away from Mom, too.”

I looked around the room, the monitors attached to her body, reading her heart rate and oxygen levels. “So, tell me what happened?”

Cash warmed my lower back with his hand and edged into my side.

She pursed her lips. “I started drinking a lot after I got served with your order. I guess during one of my binges I thought it would be a good idea to just disappear.” Her gaze found mine. “I fought with myself, then dared myself to take the Ambien. After I did, I realized I didn’t really want to die.” Her eyes filled with tears and her lips bowed down. “I’d been scrolling through old pictures of us on my phone and I just...” A tear spilled down her cheek. “I remembered all those other times my mom laid into me and how it was always you who pulled me through it. It wasn’t you that was the problem, it was my mom.” She blew out a breath. “That’s when I sent you the message. I knew you’d come for me.”

I swallowed through the lump in my throat and grasped her hand. It was cold in my grip. “Yeah, thanks. It means a lot to me.” I glanced at Cash, his eyes watering. This might be bringing up old shit for him, too. “You know, Cash went through some stuff with his birth parents and therapy helped him.”

She shifted her head on her pillow and gazed at Cash. “I’m sorry I was such a bitch to you. You didn’t deserve that.”

“Thank you.” He sniffled and swiped at his eye. “I’m looking forward to seeing a new you, Mia. I’m proof it can be done.”

A faint smile ghosted over her lips. “I’ll remember that. It’ll be my goal to show you both a new me.”

I glanced again at the monitors. “So, what uh...how did they—”

“They pumped my stomach, or so I’m told. I woke up heaving. It was terrible.” Her fingers tightened around mine. “Can you do me a favor?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. Maybe someday we could be friends. She’d need friends to get through this.

“I’m not ready to see my mom and probably won’t be until I’ve gotten into my treatment program. Can you tell her I’m okay and I’ll contact her when I’m ready? I just...I don’t want to hear about how weak I am and have her try to talk me out of getting help.” She pressed her lips into a grim line.

“Of course, we can do that.” Cash gave her a warm smile and hooked his arm around my waist.

I rubbed my thumb over the back of her hand. Should I say anything about Kaitlin? “I tried to uh, get ahold of Kaitlin.”

She nodded slowly. “Yeah, Kaitlin and Nicole decided to do a nighttime boat cruise out on Saguaro Lake, so they probably don’t have cell service.” She winced. “I was invited to go with them, but I was too...upset.”

“Oh.” That explained that. I freed her hand. There wasn’t any more to say and I had to prepare myself for another confrontation with Cherie. Fuck, I hated that woman, even more now. “I think we should let you rest. You’ve been through a lot and I’m sure what lies ahead won’t be easy.”

“Yeah. Thank you, Silas.” Her gaze shifted to Cash. “And thank you, Cash.” She curled the corners of her lips.

“You let us know if you need anything, hun.” Cash patted her arm, then guided me toward the doors into the waiting area.

As we walked through the hallway, I gazed at my gorgeous man. “You’re a Goddamned saint, you know that?”

“Yeah, I might be.” He ticked his shoulders and smiled at me. “And so are you.”

TWENTY

CASH



I led Silas through the doors and into the waiting area, holding his hand tightly. I was not going to let that woman say terrible things to my Silas again. In my mind, she was the same as Jack’s mom. How ironic was it that money meant you were stuck with shitty parents, while us poor kids were taken away by Child Protective Services?

As we entered the room, everyone stood up. Cherie strode to us first, her arms crossed over her chest. “Well? How is she?”

“She’s fine.” Silas worried his lower lip, eyeing her. “She’s not ready to see you. She wanted me to tell you that she’ll let you know when she’s ready.”

“Of all the nerve.” Cherie threw her arms down with a loud scoff. “I suppose you talked her into that?”

I shoved Silas behind me, watching the guys step toward us from behind her. There was our army. She didn’t have a chance. “Mrs. Bianchi. Mia does not want to see you and there is nothing you can do about it. She’s safe and well taken care of here. I suggest you go home and think about why she doesn’t want to see you. It might be time to re-evaluate your relationship with your daughter.”

Her gaze grew hard, and her lips thinned into a snarl. “Who do you think you are?”

“Someone who’s been there. You should be lucky she wasn’t taken from you years ago.” I straightened my shoulders. I was so ready for this argument. It was one I’d

gone over in my head so many times while going through therapy.

She harrumphed. “Well, she’s nothing but a tramp anyways. I mean—”

“This is what I’m talking about.” I held my palm up to her. “She almost died and you’re calling her a tramp? Do you really think that’s appropriate right now? Is it appropriate ever?” God, it felt like I was talking to all the parents who’d abused or neglected their children. The words poured out of me. “Who the hell do you think *you* are?” Had anyone ever called her out on her own behavior?

She glared at me, her mouth tight, then she scanned all around her. “I’m not going to stand here and let you criticize my parenting skills in front of all these people.”

“Then you’d better leave, because I’m not done.” I smirked at her and tilted my head. “People who get help for their trauma and mental illnesses are not weak. It takes incredible strength to face and work through those things. The weak ones are the ones who never seek help.” I narrowed my eyes at her.

She dropped her mouth open and stared at me.

“Maybe if you were stronger, you’d be able to face your issues and get the help you need. You owe that to your daughter.” I planted my hands on my hips. Okay, I should probably stop.

She pivoted and stomped out the door, her purse swinging furiously in her hand.

“Holy shit, dude.” Axel clapped his hands as he stepped to me. “You put her in her place.” He patted my back.

Silas hugged me from behind and rested his cheek on my shoulder. “Thank you.”

“I wanted to give her some things to think about. If she heard just a little bit of what I said, then maybe Mia has a chance of having a relationship with her mother again.” It was worth a shot, right? I turned in Silas’ hold and hugged him to

my chest, then kissed his cheek. “Can we go home now and finish our date?”

“Fuck yeah.” He grabbed my cheeks and planted a hard kiss on my lips. “You’re incredible, you know that?”

“I do.” I gave him a smile and grabbed his hand.

“Wait, so what happened in there?” Gabe pointed at the doors while everyone gathered around us.

Silas shrugged. “Mia apologized to me and Cash and she’s going into a treatment center. She’s finally going to deal with the abuse her mom put her through all those years.”

Gabe lifted his brows. “Wow, it’s over.”

“Yeah, it’s over.” Silas beamed at me. “We’re free, Cash.”

Everyone hugged and congratulated us.

AFTER DRIVING to the band house, I followed Silas into his room. It had felt so good to get all that shit off my chest and to have Silas to myself, for real. I wanted him in the worst, but best way.

As Silas closed the door behind us, I skimmed my shirt over my head and dropped my jeans and briefs to the floor. “Who’s fucking who? Because tonight needs to be a celebratory fuck.”

“It does, huh?” Silas smirked at me while he undressed, tossing his clothes to the floor, his cock bobbing up, hard and ready. He ambled to me and cupped my cheeks, then pressed his lips to mine, our hot dicks rubbing against each other, his tongue swiping over mine.

I moaned as heat flashed in my belly. “I want you fucking me tonight.” I bit at the soft skin of his neck. “In fact, I want you to fuck me senseless.” I wound my hand around both our dicks, and stroked a few times.

With a groan, he tipped his head back. “That can be arranged.” He shoved me to the bed. “On your knees. Now.”

My heart fluttered and a shiver pulsed through my body. “Oh, my, yes.” I flipped over onto my elbows and knees, then wiggled my ass at him. “Come and get it.” With a short chuckle, I dropped my head.

“Damn right you’re going to get it.” He bit the side of his smile and grabbed the lube from his drawer, then crept up behind me and slathered my hole with cold lube.

My whole body shuddered with need, and I moaned.

He bent over me on a straight arm, then bit at my neck while working a finger inside and circled it until he found my prostate. “You’re so fucking sexy, Cash.” He licked at the shell of my ear, then nibbled on my earlobe. “And you’re all mine.”

Goosebumps broke out over my back and my ass clenched around his finger, sensation firing all through me. “More, I need it.” As much as I was his, I needed him to be mine, too.

He snuck two more fingers inside me and pumped, while placing soft bites down the top of my spine.

Crying out, I panted, the burn of his fingers melding into pleasure every time he hit my internal spot. I hissed, “Give it to me. I can take it.” I was ready enough for all of him.

“You sure?” he gritted out. He stretched me while rubbing his hard cock over my ass cheek, his pre-cum gliding across it. “Fuck, it’s going to be so tight.”

“Do it.” I pushed myself back onto his fingers and clutched the bedding.

“Yeah.” He lubed up his dick, then nudged his cockhead into my hole and wrapped his arms around my chest. “I love you, Cash. So damn much.”

“Love you, too.” As his hard cock slowly worked inside me, he gasped and shuddered. “Fuck, this is good.”

The pressure and burn filled me, and I breathed through it, bearing down on him, taking it all. His cock brushed over my internal bundle of nerves and a rush of sensation flooded my

senses. I needed more of that. “Go, Silas, for the love of God, go.”

He lifted and grabbed my hips, then pummeled me with the force of his quick, short thrusts, panting behind me.

I met his rhythm, pushing myself onto him. My insides lit up with tension and pleasure sparked up my spine and down to my toes.

“Want you close.” He bent over and picked me up, so we both kneeled, our knees wide, and he bucked inside me, over and over while he held me to his chest. He nuzzled into my cheek. “Love you, always and forever.”

My firm cock bobbed in front of me, and my heart filled with warmth. God, how I loved this man. “Me, too.” I had no words. He hammered my prostate and my balls tightened for release, tingling racing over my skin. “Gonna come.” I fisted my weeping dick.

“Come, Cash. I want to you see you come all over yourself.” He bit into my neck and licked at my cheek.

The edge of release surged inside me, and I pumped my sensitive cock while he plunged into my hole. As contractions rippled through me, my ass clenched over him and cum spurted onto my chest and stomach.

“Fuck, yeah, that’s it.” He grunted and pushed inside me, the heat of his release spilling, then pulled out and thrust in again and again, gasping with each one.

As it slowed, he placed soft kisses on my neck and shifted his legs out from underneath him as I did the same. “That was fantastic. We’re doing that again.” He wiped the cum from my chest and sucked it off his fingers. “You always taste so good.”

“Sweet?” I let out a lazy laugh, the post orgasm haze kicking in.

“If you want. It’s just you.” He swiped more off my chest. “I can’t get enough of you and now we’re fucking free.” He kissed my cheek. “I can’t believe it.”

“Well, believe it.” His dick slipped from my ass. “Uh, I need to go clean up.” I pushed his arms from me and climbed off the bed. “Hold that thought.”

“Yeah, I’ll come with you.” With a smirk, he stepped off the bed.

A LITTLE WHILE LATER, we lay between his sheets, me snuggled against his chest with his arm wrapped around me and my leg resting over his thighs, my satisfied-for-now dick pressing into his hip.

“What’s next for us, Cash?” He gazed up at his ceiling and raked a hand through his long bangs.

“Next, is you’re going to meet my parents and I’m going to have a chat with Jack about eventually moving out.” I kissed his chest. I had it all planned in my head already. “You’re going to graduate and play in your band at all the best casinos and be a world-renowned rescue CPA, saving rescues from going under with your finance and tax skills while I…” I looked around his room, the black dressers, and shades. What did I want to do with my life? “While I bring some color into our bedroom.”

“I hope by color you’re talking about new and interesting sex positions.” As a snicker rumbled in his chest, he brushed my bangs off my head.

“No, I am not.” I tipped my head to gaze at his handsome face. “Your life isn’t black anymore, Silas. We’re going to live a colorful life, you and I. Remember what my therapist said, *colorful things can lift your mood.*” I clucked my tongue.

“I thought it was colorful *clothes?*” With a smirk, he skimmed his finger pads over my shoulder, leaving a tickle.

“Whatever, the point is, when I move in, I’m going to make this place bright and colorful.”

“You already do that, Cash. Got news for you.” He nuzzled the top of my head. “When do you want me to meet your

parents?”

I tapped my index finger on my lips. “You wanted to see the restaurant, right? How about I see if Mom can meet us there on Sunday? I know my dad will be there and if we go in the afternoon, it shouldn’t be busy.”

“That sounds perfect. I have to work a long shift tomorrow, but have Sunday off. We can probably hit up *Fearless Kitty* in the morning.” He tightened his hold on me. “The band practices Sunday night.”

“Oh, yeah.” I thought through our schedules. “I could come over again tomorrow night, or you could spend the night at my place?”

“Let’s have a quiet evening at your place tomorrow night. Okay?” He yawned. “Fuck, I’m tired.”

His yawn was contagious, and I followed with my own. “Me, too. Wake me up when you want to have sex again.” I closed my eyes, snuggling deeper into his side.

“Count on it.” He reached over to his nightstand and flicked off the lamp. The room went dark. “Goodnight. Love you.”

“Love you more.” I chuckled softly.

“That’s not possible.” He kissed my head.

SUNDAY ROLLED AROUND and we were at the rescue after a nice morning of shower blowjobs, and breakfast. We’d had a wonderfully uneventful evening last night, curled up watching a movie at my apartment, followed by mind-blowing sex, as usual. I’d set up the meeting with my parents while Silas had been at work yesterday, and they were dying to meet him this afternoon. After greeting Crystal just inside the door of the rescue, she patted Silas on the shoulder. “I have good news for you.”

“What’s that?” He eyed her.

“Kitten Silas is going home today.” She quirked her mouth.

“Are you serious?” His eyes grew wide, and he dropped his mouth open. “Did you hear that, Cash?” He grabbed my hand and squeezed.

“I did. He’s so handsome, just like his namesake. Who could resist him?” I gave him a wide smile. Someday, I was going to surprise him by bringing him a kitten, but we’d have to figure out what to do with Gabe first.

“Yes, you two have done such good work with him. One of the local boys came here yesterday on his bike and saw Silas in the window. When he came inside to get a better look, Silas went right to him and purred in his arms. It was like a match made in heaven.” Crystal clapped her hands together and leaned forward. “And you’ll never guess what this little boy’s name is.” Biting her lip inside a smile, she glanced between us both.

“What?” My heart pattered. This was too exciting. Now I knew why Silas wasn’t bothered too much to see the kittens go, not when we knew it was to someone the kitten chose.

“The boy’s name is Cash.” She giggled. “Can you believe it?” She slapped her thigh. “Oh, my word. I told him about you two and he wants to meet you. He should be here any minute.”

Silas shook his head. “I can’t believe it. What are the odds?”

“I know, right?” She patted her desk. “Anyways, before the young Cash gets here, how about you tell me more about these tax loopholes you found that could save us some money? I’ve looked over the files you sent.” She stepped behind her desk and opened her laptop.

“Sure. It should save you all a few hundred dollars a month.” Silas slid a chair up next to hers and sat down.

“I’ll go in the back and see the kittens.” I opened the door to the back room. “Is there anything I should prepare for Silas?”

“No, you just spend some time with them. I’ve got it handled.” Crystal tapped on the keyboard.

SOME TIME LATER, I held kitten Silas in my arms, petting him as I leaned on the wall by the desk while my man Silas and Crystal reviewed a spreadsheet.

A preteen boy with curly blond hair entered the rescue with a woman. “Mom, there he is.” He pointed at my arms.

I bumped off the wall and stepped to them. “Hello. You must be Cash?” My heart fluttered with warmth. It wasn’t often I met other people with my name.

“Yeah, that’s my name.” He fixated on Silas in my arms.

“I hear this handsome little kitten is going home with you today.” I threw a grin at his mother, a tall woman with darker hair than his, but just as curly.

“We are.” She brushed her hand over Cash’s head, and he shook it away.

Ah, to be that age again. Still a child, but trying not to be. “Here, I’ll give him to you.” I held the kitten out to the boy.

Silas and Crystal stood from behind the desk and Crystal grabbed a paper bag off a nearby shelf. “I have a care package ready for you.” She handed the bag to the mom.

“Thank you. I paid the adoption fee online. Did you get it?” The mom asked, hugging the bag to her chest.

“Yes, we did.” Silas stepped to the boy and petted the kitten now curled up in his arms. “What are you going to name him?”

The boy smiled at him. “I’m going to keep his name Silas. He likes it and it’s a cool name.” He scratched the kitten behind his ears, lifting him closer to his face. “Don’t you, boy?”

Silas' eyes glittered in the sunlight streaming in through the windows. "Okay. You know that's my name, too."

"And I'm Cash." I pointed to my chest. "And we're uh, best friends forever." No need to get into the whole gay thing with the kid.

"Oh, see? Me and Silas will be best friends forever, too." The boy kissed Silas on the head. "I'm glad I got to meet you both. Crystal told me you tamed him. You did a good job. He came right to me when I walked in the door."

"Oh, I think he chose you." I beamed at Silas. "Same way as I chose him and there was no way he could escape me."

Silas rolled his eyes. "No, I chose you."

The mom peered at us, then smiled broadly. "You two are adorable." She faced Crystal. "It's good to see some diversity around here. Keep it up."

"Always." Crystal crossed her arms over her chest and gave us a knowing look.

A FEW HOURS LATER, I pulled into a parking spot, then looked over the long plaza of a building, the family restaurant centered in the middle of it, the sign hanging over the door in green and orange. "There it is, Diamond's Bar and Grill." I sighed. I'd had fun working there, but it had been time to go out on my own when I'd left. "We're not too far from the spring training stadium, so this place will be packed every day in a few weeks when the games start."

Silas nodded, his wide gaze taking in the building. "You said they're really nice, right?"

"Yes, they'll love you." I squeezed his knee. I did a double take of him, staring at the building. "You aren't scared, are you?"

"No." He huffed and unbuckled his seat belt, then climbed out of the car.

I stepped out and met him at the walkway in front of the plaza, then grabbed his hand. Something was up. “What’s wrong?”

He pursed his lips. “It’s just...” He blew out a long breath, then snuck a glance at me. “Everything is going so well.” He ticked his shoulders. “I’m not used to it. Guess I’m waiting for the next bunch of bullshit to get dropped on me.”

I let a grin creep over my mouth. “Silas, get used to it.” I kissed his cheek. “Besides, if some bullshit does happen, I think we’ve proven we can handle it. There’s nothing we can’t get through together.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” He pushed on my forehead. “As usual, Mr. Perpetually Happy. My fucking always optimistic boyfriend.” He gave me a broad smile.

“You better watch yourself. It might wear off on you. Then where will you and all your black furniture be?” I sniggered and pulled on him toward the restaurant.

“Oh brother.” He huffed out a laugh.

As we stopped at the heavy wooden door of the restaurant, I opened it and ushered Silas inside.

Silas stopped in the entryway and stuffed his hands in the pockets of his black jeans, scanning the place. “Is that your dad?” He pointed to Dad, striding into the swinging door to the kitchen.

“Yep.” I looked around. The place wasn’t that busy, like I’d thought. Only a few regulars sat at the long bar stretching across the far wall, watching the highlights of the basketball games. A couple sat at a booth along another wall and a family was at a table in the center of the place. Dad had made the restaurant nice for a typical bar and grill in the area, adding white subway tiles to some of the walls, dark, rustic woods and chair cushions that looked like real leather.

“This is a nice place, Cash.” He peeked at me with a soft grin.

“Thanks.” I stepped further in and spotted Mom sitting in a booth at the other wall. “Hey, there’s my mom. Let’s go sit

with her.” I grasped his hand and led him over, then stopped at the table. “Mom.”

She looked up from her phone, a glass of white wine perched on the table in front of her. “Oh, hi, Cash.” She shimmied out of the end of the booth, then tucked a lock of her short gray hair behind her ear, the corners of her blue eyes wrinkling with her smile. “This must be Silas?” She grabbed both his hands.

“Yes, ma’am.” He snuck a glance at me. “It’s so nice to meet you.”

“Oh, you can call me Diana. Ma’am was my mother’s name.” She chuckled. “Can I give you a hug?”

“Uh, yeah.” Silas spread his arms wide, and she fell into him, patting him on the back while he embraced her shorter frame.

“My, you give good hugs.” She released him. “You know what that means, Cash.”

“No, what does it mean?” I beamed at her. This was so great having him finally here.

“It means he has a sweet heart.” She cocked her head at him.

I tapped his shoulder leaning in. “See? Even she knows you’re sweet inside.”

With a quick inhale and a smirk, he rubbed his neck. “Uh-huh.”

“Silas, good to see you.” Jack walked out to us and shook Silas’ hand, then gave me a tight hug. “Dad will be right out. He’s got me running things so you all can talk. Can I get you anything? A beer maybe?” He leaned in toward Silas and arched a brow. “Shot of whiskey?”

Silas nodded. “Yeah, both.”

“You got it, Cash, I’ll bring you one of those ciders you started drinking.” He bumped my elbow with his own, then walked off.

“Let’s sit down, shall we?” Mom slid into her side of the booth while Silas and I glided into the other side.

“So, Cash has pretty much told me all about you already, but what I want to know is...” She pursed her lips, her gaze dropping to the table, then focusing on Silas. “How are you doing after everything you’ve been through?”

“Oh, I’m doing okay.” He glanced at me. “Did Cash tell you about my ex?” He toyed with the edge of a napkin sitting on the table.

“No, I haven’t told her about all that yet.” I shifted in my seat. “Mom, you’re talking about the shooting, right?”

“Oh, yes.” She tilted her head. “In my line of work, I’ve seen plenty of people traumatized after gun violence. I know it can be hard to get over.” She patted his hand. “I won’t ask about the ex if you don’t want me to.” She sipped her wine.

“Yeah, I’ve been seeing a therapist since the shooting. Well, me and my other two friends who were there have all been seeing the same person.” He raked his teeth over his lower lip.

“What’s her name? Maybe I know her?” She watched him.

“Ah...Lorena Wilson. She’s a psychologist we were referred to at the hospital,” Silas said.

“Oh, I do know her. She’s wonderful. You’ve got a great trauma specialist with her.” Mom smiled at him.

“Good to know.” Silas nodded, quirking his lips.

“So, tell me about these kittens you’ve been taking care of.” Mom offered him a warm grin.

Silas’ face lit up. “Oh, they’re so damn cute and they’re getting so big.”

Jack dropped off our drinks. “Dad’s coming. He’s got a surprise.” He waggled his brows at us.

I twisted in my seat.

Dad strolled out of the kitchen with a large platter. “I hope you’re all hungry. Since it’s my treat, we’re getting lasagna.

No healthy vegetables.” He gave a pointed look to Mom.

“Oh, Jim.” She huffed out a laugh, then covered her mouth with her fingers.

“Jack, bring the plates.” He set the platter in the center of our table. “You do like lasagna, right, Silas?”

“I do, sir.” Silas stood up from the booth. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He held out his hand.

“The pleasure is mine, now give me a hug.” He bear-hugged Silas, then released him. “If you haven’t noticed, we hug in this family.”

“But you’re supposed to ask first, Jim.” Mom tsked. “Not just order people to hug you.”

“But he was okay with it. Right?” He lifted his thick brows, smiling broadly at Silas, his brown eyes twinkling.

“Of course.” Silas shrugged, then slid in next to me while Dad shimmied in beside Mom.

Jack stopped at the table and dropped off plates and a beer for Dad. “Here. I knew you’d be wanting this.”

“Yeah, but just one. I have to work after this.” Dad sipped his beer.

Planting his hands on his hips, Jack said, “I got this. You just relax and get to know Cash’s new man. I have a feeling we’ll all be seeing a lot more of him.” He tapped Dad on the shoulder. “I’ve got Steph and Julian helping out with the dinner rush.”

Dad perused the restaurant. “Oh, okay.” He faced Silas and swiped a lock of graying, brown hair from his brow. “Okay, what were you talking about before I so rudely interrupted you all with food? Did I hear kittens?” He cut the lasagna up into squares and served us all.

Silas cut into his lasagna, then blew on it. “Yeah, I do volunteer work at a cat rescue up in Fountain Hills. I’ve started doing their books for them, too, but they pay me for that.”

“Silas is graduating in May with a master’s in accounting and finance. He’s going to be a CPA.” I ate a bite of food. “And he wants to focus on helping out animal rescues.”

“That sounds like a noble thing to do, Silas.” Mom drank some wine, then cut into her lasagna.

“Yeah, well, I’m going to try and make it work. I only have one rescue so far. I’m also in a band that started playing over at Talking Stick casino.” He sipped his whiskey, then tapped his noodles with his fork. “This is really good, by the way.”

“Thank you. It’s a recipe I picked up from an Italian friend when I was in school.” Dad’s attention drew to Mom, and he held her hand over the table. “Diana loves it, too. Don’t you, dear?”

“I do.” She gave him a warm smile. “We’ll go back to our healthy vegetables tomorrow.”

A soft grin worked over Silas’ mouth, and he leaned into me. “You’re right. They’re really nice.”

“Told you.” I gave him a toothy grin, then cut a bite of food. “Silas here has a great band. He’s the rhythm guitar player.”

“Really? Maybe we can come and see your band play one of these times. I’ve been dying to hit the slots over there.” Mom bumped her shoulder on Dad.

“Diana, only if you promise to stop at a hundred dollars.” Dad shook his head, then snapped his gaze to Silas. “She goes crazy on the slots if you aren’t watching her.”

With a soft chuckle, Silas said, “Diana, you’re a gambler?”

“I sure am. I married him, didn’t I?” She jabbed her thumb at Dad with a sharp laugh. “And look at all the kids I ended up with. I’d say I have damn good luck, don’t you?” She leaned over the table and squeezed both our hands. “You two are the cutest. I see a long and very happy future for you both.” She freed our hands.

“Aw, Mom.” I flung an arm around Silas’ shoulders. Mom saw the same things I’d seen all along. “I think you’re right. Silas is the yin to my yang. Right, hun?”

“Right.” Silas sniggered, bit his lip, then peeked at me as his cheeks flushed. “Hun.”

EPILOGUE

SILAS



It was Easter Sunday, and I was meeting the whole Phillips clan. It was hard to believe how many months had passed since I'd met Cash on that cold January night after our gig and how much my love for him grew stronger every day. I had no idea I could love someone this much. In a few weeks, I'd be graduating, and he'd be moving in and it was never soon enough. I rubbed my clammy palms over my jeans while Cash drove his Mini beside an open curb in front of his family home in Mesa. There were cars strewn about in the street in front of it and filling up the driveway.

“Looks like everyone's already here.” He plucked my hand off my thigh and squeezed it.

I let my gaze roam over his snug peach shirt and yellow jeans. He might as well have been an Easter egg. But that was my colorful man.

“Don't worry, I'll introduce you to them all slowly.” With a bright smile, he climbed out of the car as I did the same. He clasped my hand again as we strolled up the walkway of the small, gray bungalow under the canopy of a leafy tree.

The door popped open inside a portico and a young woman stalked to us. “Cash? I heard you have a boyfriend now.” With a wide smile, she flipped her long, blonde hair behind a shoulder, her blue-eyed gaze focusing on me.

“Hey, Ella. Yeah, this is Silas.” He held his palm up as if presenting me.

“Ella. You live in New River and are taking some online college classes, right?” I’d had Cash fill me in on everyone and had memorized all the info. For some reason, I thought that would make me more impressive.

With a nod, she said, “I am.” She glanced at her brother. “He *is* handsome, Cash.” She opened her arms. “Hug?”

“Of course.” I stepped into her arms and gave her a warm embrace, then freed her. “Where’s your boyfriend?”

“Oh, he’s in there. Dad’s got him grilling with him in the back yard. That’s what dad does to get to know someone at a family meal like this.” She twisted, her floral dress billowing around her legs. “Come on, everyone’s dying to meet you.” She waved us into the house.

I followed Cash and his sister into a main room that opened up to the kitchen and a long table all set with pastel colors and plastic eggs. I looked around some more. All the furniture was the farmhouse chic that Target was selling. Shopping at Target for home décor must be a family thing. I smirked.

“So, my other sisters are helping Mom out in the kitchen.” Cash pointed at a dark-haired woman who was washing lettuce in the sink. “That one’s Anne.”

She turned. “Hey, Silas. Nice to meet you. I’ll hug you later.” Her smile reached her brown eyes, and she blew a lock of long hair from her forehead.

I leaned into Cash. “Bartender in Prescott, right?”

“Right.” He ticked his head at a woman with light brown hair, stirring a pot on the stove next to his mother. “And that’s Jennifer. She’s a waitress—”

“At the sushi restaurant in Pinetop with your brother Mason.” I nodded. They were all so busy, but everyone was happy and chatting away with one another.

Diana turned from the stove. “Come here and give us a hug.” She held her arm out.

I strolled to her and hugged her, then greeted Jennifer and side-hugged her. Damn, it was a lot of hugging in one day.

I turned and perused a set of couches where three young men, all with dark hair, sat with Jack, watching the Diamondback's baseball game with canned beers in hand. Now that looked like fun. Cash led me to them and introduced me to Mason, the sushi chef, and Andy and Mike who lived in Flagstaff and were taking their general college courses up there.

After greeting everyone with more hugs, Jack patted the empty cushion next to him. "Have a seat, Silas. You like baseball?"

"With beer, I do." I snuck a peek at Cash. I knew that would get him moving.

"One beer coming up." Cash sauntered into the kitchen.

"I hear you're studying to be a CPA?" Mike eyed me, his brown eyes narrowing.

"I am. I graduate in May." I grabbed a fistful of peanuts sitting in a bowl on the coffee table. "Have either of you decided what you want to major in yet?" I puffed my chest. I was doing pretty good at remembering all the facts about them.

"No." Andy shook his head of brown curls. "There's too much to choose from."

"Cash is moving in with Silas in a few weeks." Jack ticked his brows as he sipped his beer. "I can't wait to have our apartment to myself."

"Yeah? Wouldn't that be nice." Huffing a chuckle, Mike poked Andy in the shoulder.

"Hey, if I moved out, who would be your maid?" Andy shook his head.

"I'm not *that* bad." Mike scoffed, then drank some beer.

Cash returned with my beer and a bottled cider for himself, handed my beer to me, then sat sideways in my lap. "Isn't he handsome?" He kissed my cheek.

Mike rolled his eyes. “Yes, Cash, he’s very handsome.” He gave me a sly smile. “Silas, you seem like a cool guy. I was expecting...” He twisted his lips. “I don’t know what I was expecting.”

“Thanks.” I focused on Cash, then threw some peanuts into my mouth. Yeah, this was pretty perfect hanging out with his brothers. Too bad they all lived so far away.

“You’re going to use the CPA to help out animal rescues, right?” Mason glanced at me, then scooped up some peanuts.

“I am. I’m doing the books for a cat rescue up in Fountain Hills right now. I’ve found some ways they can save some money already and the lady up there, Crystal, is hooking me up with a rescue down in Rocky Point, Mexico. This place takes the strays off the street, gives them medical attention, then sends them to places up here to be adopted out.” I ate more peanuts. It would be so cool if I was able to start working with them and they really needed the help.

“Yeah? Wow, man, that’s awesome.” Mason leaned over and slapped Cash’s thigh. “Now you’ve got to get my brother to do something besides selling tires.”

“Hey, I like selling tires. I’m good at it.” Cash curled his arm around my neck and hugged me.

“He is, you know. Cash is a natural salesman. He gets along with everyone.” I sipped my beer, then kissed his cheek, my heart warming. My phone buzzed in my back pocket. “Shit, hold on.” I fished it out and held it to my face.

MIA

Happy Easter to you and Cash! I hope you’re having a fabulous time with his family<heart emoji>

I tapped on my phone.

SILAS

Thank you. I am. I hope all goes well with your mom today. I know it’s a big day for both of you.

MIA

Thank you. It means a lot.

“Who’s that? Mia?” Cash peered into my phone. “She’s doing so much better now, isn’t she?” Cash sipped his drink.

“Yeah. She’s supposed to have her first meal with her family, including her mom, now that they’ve both been working through some things with her therapist. She was really looking forward to it.” I stuffed my phone back onto my jean’s pocket. Mia had come such a long way in a short time. All she’d needed was the right kind of help. But of course, there was still more for them to work through now they’d uncovered the surface level shit. Didn’t I know all about that.

“Homerun!” Jim walked into the room with a plate of grilled steaks, a young man with curly blond hair following him.

“What?” exclaimed everyone, focusing on the television across the room.

“Kidding.” Jim chortled, then pointed an elbow at us, leaning into the young man. “Okay, I suppose you can join them now. Lesson is over.”

“Thank you, sir.” The young man ambled to us and sat next to Jack.

“Everyone, this is Ella’s new guy, Jonah.” Jack waved a hand over him.

We all greeted him, and Ella strolled over, focusing on him. “Well? I told you not to call my dad *sir*.”

“I couldn’t help it. He’s your dad.” With a shoulder shrug, Jonah, pursed his lips.

“Get that man a beer.” I held my can up and everyone laughed and agreed. I knew how Jonah felt. This was a lot to take in, but damn, if they didn’t all make it easy. Now I knew how Cash got to be the way he was. He was surrounded by so much love, and it all started with Diana and Jim. “Your family is amazing.” I pulled him into my chest and nuzzled his cheek.

“Yours is pretty cool, too. Both of them.” He gazed deeply into my eyes.

“Both?” I cocked a brow. What the hell—

“Your birth family and your band family. I can’t believe how incredibly lucky we both are, can you?” His lips curled in a soft smile.

“Yeah, yeah I can.” For once, I was the one with the positive attitude. “With you, I’ll always be lucky.” I kissed his cheek.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christie Gordon started writing gay and MM romance books after finding Yaoi fanfiction by accident and falling in love with it. She's always had stories in her head and always enjoyed writing, so she decided to try her hand at it and took up fiction writing classes at a local community college. She published her first MM romance book with eXtasy Books back in 2009. She enjoys writing about men discovering themselves, overcoming obstacles and finding love in the process, along with a happy ending. [Visit her website for a complete list of her books.](#)

Christie's day job is in the high-tech industry with a Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering and a Master's in Business Administration. She currently lives in the Phoenix, Arizona metro area but has also lived in the Bay Area of California and grew up in Minnesota. If she isn't writing, she's watching boys love dramas or creating digital artwork. She's also a mother of two young-adult sons, whose antics keep her on her toes. Her one-eyed rescue pug is always by her side, snoring the day away.

