



BIG BULL MECHANICS
BOOK FIVE

LUBE JOB

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

K.M. NEUHOLD

Lube Job

Big Bull Mechanics, 5

K.M. Neuhold

Contents

Copyright

Blurb

1. Chapter 1

2. Chapter 2

3. Chapter 3

4. Chapter 4

5. Chapter 5

6. Chapter 6

7. Chapter 7

8. Chapter 8

9. Chapter 9

10. Chapter 10

11. Chapter 11

12. Chapter 12

13. Chapter 13

14. Chapter 14

15. Chapter 15

16. Chapter 16

17. Chapter 17

18. Chapter 18

19. Chapter 19

20. Chapter 20

21. Chapter 21

22. Chapter 22

23. Chapter 23

24. Chapter 24

25. Chapter 25

26. Chapter 26

27. EPILOGUE

More By K.M.Neuhold

About the Author

Stalk Me

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Blurb

THE ONLY THING BIGGER than Riggs's attitude is his tool... and only one of those problems can be solved with more lube...

There's no tragic backstory or closet stuffed full of skeletons from relationships past. I've just never been very good at the "very special episode" sh*t. If you're looking for a shoulder to cry on, may I suggest a therapist?

Casual fun with my emotionally stunted, overgrown frat boy roommate slash coworker should be perfect, right? Shep seems to be just as allergic to commitment as I am to emotions, but that doesn't mean we don't need our stroker rods serviced, if you catch my drift.

Now if he'll just stop looking at me with those dopey puppy dog eyes while I'm elbow deep in a diesel engine, and making my stomach flip with that smile of his, that would be great...

Chapter 1

SHEP

I ALWAYS FIGURED THAT my natural talent for giving dick so good that it drives men literally insane was a gift from god or some shit. Probably not the Christian god or anything, but Zeus maybe, or one of those other chill, sex positive Greek gods. With the hot as fuck morning sun beating down on the back of my neck and the top of my mostly bald head, I wrench the steak knife out of my tire with a muttered “fuck.” I’m starting to think that *maybe* it’s more of a curse than a gift.

I snort a laugh at that ridiculous thought and stoop to check out the damage. The tough rubber has a jagged slice nearly all the way around the rim. Whoever did it must have been super fucking ragey. It should probably concern me that some cock-crazed twink was outside my house in the middle of the night with a butcher knife, but if you’ve had your life threatened once, you’ve had it threatened a million times. It’s old news at this point.

I sigh and push back to my full height, flipping the knife in my hand and catching it by the handle again before whipping it at the ground. It lands perfectly, the blade embedding itself into the dirt, the hilt sticking up through the long grass that's overdue to be mowed. I wipe my hands on my overalls and kick the flattened tire for good measure.

I'll have to grab the tow truck during a lull sometime today. In the meantime, I still need to get my ass to work this morning. I lean against the hood of the matte black Dodge Charger, turbo charged and rocking a badass yellow stripe along each side. She's a beauty, which is probably why she's become a target for my disgruntled hookups. At least whoever hacked up her tire didn't go the key route. Fuck knows I've had to repaint her a dozen times in the five years since I drove her off the lot brand new.

With my ass heating against the sun-warmed hood, I pull my phone out of my pocket and call the first number that comes up under recent calls. It rings a few times, and while I wait, I unzip my jumpsuit and use the loose edge of the rough fabric to wipe the sweat off my forehead before it can reach my eyes.

"Can't do it," is the greeting I get when my brother answers his phone.

"You don't even know what I'm calling about, dickhead," I huff.

"Don't I?" Axel's chuckle echoes through the phone, a carbon copy of my own deep, rumbling voice. "Some

unsatisfied hookup took their sexual frustration out on your car and now you need a ride to work.”

“Fuck off. They don’t go batshit because I leave them unsatisfied, they go insane because they’re desperate for another ride, but I’m one and done.”

“Sure, keep telling yourself that.” He laughs again. “I still can’t do it.”

“Come on, please? I’m totally stuck.” I rub my free hand over the coarse stubble on the top of my head and squint in the general direction of Big Bull Mechanics. I suppose I could walk it if I absolutely *had* to, but it’s at least a few miles away, and that shit isn’t exactly appealing.

“I’m elbow deep in some dirty holes already this morning. I can’t just fuck off to save your slutty ass *again*.”

“Fine,” I say with a sigh. As if Axel is any less slutty than I am. *Please*. “Later.”

“Later,” he echoes, and his end of the phone goes silent.

“Fuck,” I mutter, staring at my phone again, trying to decide who my best bet is for a ride. I don’t doubt that any of the guys would leave the garage to come get me if I called them, but it starts to get a little embarrassing by the hundredth time you have to ask for a favor like that.

Now that they’re all paired off, rocking heart eyes and shit, it feels even more weird to ask them for help when a rando wrecks my car or breaks into my house to wait naked in my bed. *Shudder*. It’s like just because they all went and fell in

love, they think I should too. But if dicking a dude down once sends them straight to the nuthouse, just imagine what repeated exposure could do. I can't risk it.

I suppose I do have *one* option. He's not going to drop any hints about me needing to settle down, that's for damn sure. He'll grumble about having to go out of his way, but he loves to grumble about shit, so I'm basically doing him a favor. With a grin, I scroll down a little and hit the button to make the call.

"I know, I know, it's my turn to get the coffee and donuts." Riggs's voice sounds distant, letting me know he's already driving and must have answered on speakerphone.

"Before you do that, can you swing by and pick me up?"

He's quiet on the other end for half a second before he huffs out a sound that's somewhere between a scoff and laughter.

"Who'd you piss off this time?" he asks, the faint ticking sound of his turn signal coming through the line.

I ease my ass farther onto the hood of my car to sit down more fully while I wait, a grin spreading over my face at the amused judgment in his voice.

"Fuck if I know," I murmur. "Could've been the go-go dancer I picked up Friday, or maybe the little firecracker who works at the coffee shop over in Belland." I scratch my chin absently and add a couple more possibilities to the list.

"Busy weekend, then?" Riggs asks in a deadpan voice.

I can't decide if the comment deserves a cocky response or some kind of defense. Yeah, I get around. Why shouldn't I?

The familiar rumble of his old Mustang's temperamental engine announces his arrival, saving me from having to come up with any kind of reply. When he rounds the corner onto my street, I end the call without another word and stuff my phone into my pocket.

RIGGS

You would think that repeatedly having his car defaced might make Shep a *little* pickier about the wackos he beds, but apparently not. Hell, if straitjackets and restraining orders get him hot, who am I to kink shame him? You do you, boo.

He hops off the hood of his car as I swing into his driveway right behind it. Losing the weight of his stocky, powerful body makes his Challenger rock on its deflated front tire. His overalls are unzipped down to his belly button, forcing me to take in an eyeful of the tattoos covering his chest all the way up around his throat. Tattoos that seem to follow the curvature of his massive muscle titties perfectly and frame his pink nipples in a way that draws the eye right to them. Not *my* eye, obviously. But if someone happened to be checking him out then they *might* notice that his nipples are weirdly lickable, that's all I'm saying.

But me? Even if I *did* happen to notice his nipples... Well, I've always been more of a biter.

Shep tugs the passenger door open, and I notice a creak that reminds me that my girl could use a little WD-40 on her old joints. She's a delicate flower at her age. He slides in and

wipes the back of his hand over his forehead, sprinkling me with a light shower of sweat with the motion. I wrinkle my nose and my tongue darts out involuntarily, tasting the saltiness on my lips from the rogue droplets. *Gross.*

It's even more unsettling that I have to lick my lips three or four times before I've completely cleared the flavor of his sweat from them entirely.

"Ever heard of a shower?" I mutter as I back out of the driveway.

He chuckles. "I showered this morning. Fuck lot of good it did as soon as I stepped outside into this ninety percent humidity fucking nightmare."

"Tell me about it," I grumble in agreement. "So, list of suspects." I return to the topic that was cut off by my arrival. "I'm thinking it was probably the barista. He has an attitude problem. He purposely misspells my name every single time I go there. It's five letters. Seriously, *how* hard is it?"

"Yeah, he kept calling me Steph while I was balls deep."

My jaw ticks involuntarily. Not like I care who Shep sticks his dick in. I just haven't gotten laid in goddamn *ages*, and it's making me crabby as fuck.

"You didn't bother to correct him?"

"Why?" he asks with what I can only assume is genuine confusion as to why it would matter whether the dude he's fucking calls him the right name or not.

“You’re right. Where’s the fun in actually knowing someone before you rut into them like a wild boar in heat?”

“I can’t tell if you’re being sarcastic right now, dude,” Shep confesses, scrunching his thick eyebrows in confusion as I roll to a stop at a light.

“Nah,” I answer, waving a hand dismissively. “Knowing people is messy and annoying, regardless of whether you stick your dick in them or not.”

That’s the fucking truth too. Once you let people in, they get all needy and shit. The guys at Big Bull are already all up in my comfort zone, no matter how hard I keep trying to put up walls to keep them out. I’ll just have to keep being a dick and hope they all get the hint at some point.

“Fucking preach,” Shep agrees vehemently, and my lips twitch with a grin. At least someone gets it.

It’s not about trauma or a haunted past or whatever bullshit people always assume is the reason I don’t want to get close to them. I’ve had a perfectly normal life. My parents are still married and even hugged me regularly, I have a sister who calls me weekly and I almost always answer, and I’ve never had my heart broken by any reckless Lotharios. You can’t get your heart broken if you can’t be bothered to give it to anyone.

I’m perfectly fine with me, myself, and I—although, I meant it earlier about needing to get laid. But aside from pumping blood into my dick, my heart really has fuck all to do with sex, and that’s exactly the way I like it.

Chapter 2

SHEP

THERE'S NOTHING QUITE LIKE the smell of motor oil, cheap coffee, and tire rubber all mixing together. No shit, it's my favorite smell on the goddamn planet. Add in the eardrum-pounding sounds of clanging metal, the whirr of the impact wrench, and rock music cranked in an attempt to drown the rest out... Home sweet home as far as I'm concerned.

I remove the oil tray from the car that's suspended above my head thanks to the miracle of hydraulics and step out of the way to let it drain into the barrel beneath. My baby is next up, assuming we don't get another walk-in before I'm finished with this one.

While the oil drains, I go take another run at the last few crumbled donut holes at the bottom of the box. Wrecked holes need love too. I shove a few into my mouth, ignoring the crumbs that tumble down to cling to the front of my overalls. Steele's dogs, Denali and Bunny, aren't sleeping on the job though. In two seconds flat, they're at my feet, licking the

concrete floor to make sure there isn't a single sugary molecule left behind. My eyes wander to the list of rules Steele has been adding to with his new favorite black marker, and I grin at the latest addition.

No licking the customers.

In my defense, the customer asked. Service with a smile, that's my motto. Unless they're going full Karen on me, then it's service with sarcasm. Choose your fate, friends.

"I'm surprised you haven't started stocking up on tires in your garage so you can stop hauling her in every time you piss someone off," Tallahassee says, sidling up beside me to scoop the last few chunky crumbs into his mouth before tossing the box into the bin a few feet away.

"I did, but I already ran through them." I shrug, and Auggie snorts, listening in from his spot under the hood of a Honda two bays down.

"Alright, I have to know. What is it you do that makes dudes insane? Do you pick the crazy ones? Is your jizz watermelon flavored? What?" Auggie asks, stuffing his socket wrench into his pocket and craning his neck to look at me around the hood.

I smirk and cup the soft bulge of my dick through the heavy material of my overalls.

"Want to find out?" I taunt, knowing full well that's a hard pass. He only has eyes for his man. Can't blame him when he gets to go home to that big, sexy bear night after night. As if

summoned by my reflexive flirting, a possessive growl from behind draws my attention. I glance over my shoulder and wink at our hulking office manager standing behind me. “Don’t worry. The more, the merrier.” I toss him a saucy wink.

Henry crosses his arms over his large chest and arches an eyebrow at me in a bored kind of way. Guess that’s a no from him too. Again, not shocking.

Auggie laughs, so used to my bullshit at this point that the threesome proposal doesn’t do a thing to get his undies in a bunch.

“What we need is someone willing to take the bullet and then tell you what the problem is, so you can fix it before you craze-ify the wrong dude and end up...” Auggie drags a finger across his throat with a grimace.

“What the fuck, dude? That’s dark as hell,” I complain, wiping my hands off on my overalls and returning to the car I’ve been working on.

“That’s my point. You need intel before it’s too late,” he insists, and then casts his gaze around the garage until it lands on Riggs, who’s leaning against the massive tire of the big rig he’s been elbow deep in all morning. His throat bobs as he guzzles down water, my eyes following the mesmerizing motion for a few seconds until he lowers his water bottle and tugs an earplug out of his ear, all while glaring at Auggie.

“What are you idiots talking about?”

“Shep’s cursed dick,” Tallahassee supplies helpfully.

“He needs to find someone to fuck who can tell him what it is about him that drives so many dudes to commit crimes after he dicks them down,” Auggie explains. “Know anyone who’d be willing to take one for the team?” His smirk grows at the same rate as Riggs’s scowl.

I’d love to argue that my dick isn’t cursed, but maybe it kind of is.

Riggs’s expression flattens into a blank look for a second before he lets out a snort and then pops the earplug back in. *Ouch*. Harder than a hard pass then. I reach down and pat my dick. *Don’t listen to them, fella, there’s nothing wrong with you*. Probably, anyway.

Red cranks his music a little louder and the conversation dies off while we all get back to focusing on work.

I’m ninety percent sure that curses aren’t a thing. But maybe just to be safe, I should stop fucking people for a while. Unless the curse extends to blowjobs too? Fuck, that would suck. Or *not* suck, I guess would be more accurate. I could probably live the next sixty years or so of my life without fucking anyone, but no way could I do without another blowjob from here on out.

I finish the oil change, then replace my girl’s tire, moving more or less on autopilot as the afternoon drags on, one routine maintenance order blurring into the next. My eyes wander every so often to Riggs. The sight of the moody little twink working on the massive truck always puts a smile on my face for some reason. It’s badass. He’s like the take-no-shit,

overconfident little goblin we should all aspire to be. And I'm positive that if I said that out loud to him, he would give me that patented dick-shriveling look of his.

I chuckle quietly to myself and shake my head as I press the button to lower the lift. I flick my gaze to the clock. Five minutes until closing, which means I can wrap this baby up and call it a day. No clue how I'm going to spend the night yet, but that's half the fun, right? I go around to the front of the car to close the hood, then pull a soiled rag out of my pocket to wipe as much of the grease off my hands as I can manage so I won't get the inside of the car all gunked up.

Consensual customer licking aside, I am clearly a model employee. Again, not counting when I'm forced to be a smartass to the dickheads. Also not counting when I'm tired or hungry and end up crabby with the idiots. I never leave a mess, that's the main point, and Steele should definitely give me a raise.

Once I've pulled the car out of the garage and passed the ticket back to Henry to log and collect payment on, Auggie catches my eye with that shit-eating grin of his I know all too well.

"Wooley's tonight?" I guess.

"Wooley's," he echoes in agreement. "You in, Tal?"

"Yeah, let me text Gates to meet us there," he says.

Red mutters an agreement as well, and Steele just nods as he locks up his office. Riggs clambers down from the truck

and pops both earplugs out, stuffing them into his pocket.

“Drinks?” I call over to him.

He shrugs one shoulder, his eyes lingering on me for a few seconds. “Sure. Why the fuck not?”

“Excellent.” I punch him playfully in the shoulder as I pass him to get to the timeclock, and he kicks me in the ass for good measure. I yelp and rub my left ass cheek where his boot connected. “Goddamn.”

“Hands off the goods, fuckface,” he says, giving me a look that dares me to complain.

“Aw, my very own nickname. I must be your favorite,” I tease. And, *yup*, there’s that dick-shriveling glare. I throw an arm around his shoulders, unintimidated by him. Okay, maybe I’m a *tiny* bit intimidated by him, but the first law of the jungle is to never let them see you sweat.

If it’s true for howler monkeys, it’s gotta be true for terrifying twinks, right?

RIGGS

I slide onto a stool at the bar while Steele, Tallahassee, and Red all greet their men like they’ve just come home from war rather than a grueling eight-hour day spent torquing nuts and providing quality lube jobs. I fight the urge to roll my eyes at the over-the-top display from each and every one of them. They’re all tongues and wandering hands, like it’s mating season on the goddamn Nature Channel. *Barf.*

I reach down and adjust the swell in my cock before it can become too obvious. I'm horny, not jealous of their psychotic pair bonding, just to be clear. Auggie and Henry claim one of the pool tables, and I ignore their attempts to get my attention while I flag down the bartender.

Sawyer, the owner of Wooley's, nods to let me know he sees me, then finishes mixing the drink he's already working on. Shep plops his ass down in the open seat next to me, leaning over the bar top with his elbows on the smooth wood surface, his bicep bulge visible even through the long sleeves of his overalls. Not that I'm looking. His muscles are bigger than my head, it would be hard *not* to notice in passing.

He catches my gaze and smirks like he thinks he just caught me checking him out or something. This time I do roll my eyes, tossing in an audible scoff just in case he misses the eye action.

"Hey." Sawyer makes his way over and fist bumps Shep, then up nods at me, a few strands of his long blond hair breaking loose from their tie to cascade over his face. "The usual?"

"Yup. And put it on his tab." I jerk my chin at Shep.

"I'm not paying for your ass all night," he argues, but his earlier smile still hasn't faded, undermining any hint of authority he tries to infuse into his voice.

"You owe me for the ride this morning," I remind him, flashing my teeth in a way that I'm sure is more feral than friendly. My mom always used to complain about it when my

school pictures would come back. *I swear, sometimes I wonder if you were raised by wolves.* Eh, she loves me, menacing smile and all.

Shep sighs. “Yeah, fine.” He gives in easily.

Sawyer raps his knuckles on the bar and shuffles away to get Shep whatever hipster microbrew he’s ordered that I plan to spend the rest of the night ragging on him about, and my rum and Coke. He swivels on his stool to angle his body towards me, his knee bumping against my thigh as he crowds into my personal space.

A calculating look dances through his hazel eyes and I groan. I already know where this is going and it’s going to be so very stupid. My lips twitch, but I school my expression into boredom.

“No.”

“Come on, you know you like it,” he cajoles.

“No,” I say again, clearing my throat to fight off the quiver of laughter that’s threatening to escape at this man’s amusing idiocy.

“Okay...” He rubs his hands together, clearly preparing to ignore my protests. “An alligator that can walk upright on its hind legs...”

“So, a dinosaur?” I say, picking up my glass as soon as Sawyer sets it down, and taking a sip.

“What? No, this is totally different. Shut up and let me finish.”

I wave my hand in a ‘go ahead’ gesture and gulp down a little more of the rum and Coke, savoring the way the sweetness contrasts with the burn of alcohol as it slides down my throat.

“*Versus* a kangaroo with a rocket launcher,” he finishes.

“Wow, that’s even more stupid than I was expecting,” I deadpan. “How would a kangaroo even hold a rocket launcher with its short arms? Never mind the question of how it would know how to operate it even if it *could* hold it.”

“You’re so bad at this. You’re overthinking it,” he complains.

“I think you’re underthinking it,” I counter, covering my laughter at his frustrated growl with another sip from my glass.

“Fine, a *dinosaur* then, versus a kangaroo that’s a genetically modified military genius with a rocket launcher designed specifically for short arms.”

“Obviously the kangaroo would win then. That poor, stupid lizard is completely unarmed.”

“You’re right.” Shep nods solemnly. “That one was too easy. How about this...”

The bar slowly fills up around us as the usual after-work crowd takes over the rest of the empty stools and tables. The music is cranked louder so it can be heard over the increased chatter, and I nurse two drinks over the course of Shep’s asinine, maybe *slightly* fun, game.

“I need to take a piss,” I announce, hopping off my stool after finishing off my second drink.

“You want me to order you another?” he offers.

“Nah, I can’t stay too much longer,” I answer before turning to make my way through the somewhat crowded bar towards the bathroom.

Two of the three urinals are already in use, so I unzip my overalls as I approach the one in the middle. It’s a pain in the ass to maneuver taking a piss with these damn coveralls on, but you do what you gotta do. The zipper doesn’t *quite* come down low enough to make things easy, but luckily this is one of those times when having an extra-long dick comes in handy.

The dude on my left lets out an audible gasp when I unleash The Beast. I guess as a society we’re past the common courtesy of at least *pretending* not to ogle other people’s junk in the bathroom? Good to know. I ignore the weight of eyes on my dick, whistling to myself as I relieve my full bladder then tuck myself away again. I hit the flush lever with my elbow and turn to find the guy who was on my right now lingering by the sink. He licks his lips and grins when my eyes meet his.

Honestly, he’s not bad looking. Dark hair, dark eyes, full lips that would look nice wrapped around The Beast. My cock doesn’t give so much as a twitch though. Horny and picky is the worst combination. I ignore his hungry gaze and hurry through washing my hands.

Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to hang around for *one* more drink. I might even be open to joining forces with Shep to kick

Auggie and Henry's asses up and down the pool table. A hand gropes my ass as I make my way back through the crowd, and I throw a wild elbow without bothering to glance over my shoulder to find out who the grabber is. My steps falter when I reach my stool only to find that it's no longer empty.

I narrow my eyes at the petite man with white-blond hair and a pink crop top sitting in my seat, leaning over with one hand braced on Shep's thigh, batting his eyelashes like he's got something in his eye. Maybe he'd like me to check for him. I grit my teeth, and the man slowly turns his head, his *fuck me* smile turning into a look of unsettled surprise when he sees me. That's right, Goldilocks, I'm fucking scary and you're in my damn spot.

I flash my teeth and he rears back a little, yanking his hand off Shep's thigh in a hurry. Shep chuckles and reaches for the man's hand to put it back.

"Don't mind him. He might look rabid, but he doesn't actually bite," Shep assures his soon-to-be victim. *Dickt*im. I swallow a snort at my own joke.

"Aw, now don't lie to the poor, sweet boy." I click my tongue.

The man's big blue eyes dart back and forth between the two of us. "Is he your boyfriend or something?"

Shep and I bark out a laugh at the same time.

"Just a friend, babe," Shep says, and I roll my eyes at the use of the pet name. Either he didn't bother to ask the guy's

name, or he already forgot it. “Listen, I’m going to hit the bathroom quick and then I’ll show you my car.”

Shep winks and the man blushes. *Gag*. The dumbass waggles his eyebrows at me behind his new friend’s back and I mime vomiting as he shoves past me to go take a piss. I claim his now-empty stool, earning another nervous sidelong glance from the wide-eyed twink who’s about to be dragged out to the parking lot and defiled. Fine, *defiled* might be a strong word considering the whole thing is obviously very consensual, but still. Someone should probably save him from the curse.

Shep’s dick is like a Lovecraftian creature. No man may ride upon it without being struck with utter madness. I would be doing a public service by warning him off. Plus, it would be pretty fucking funny to see Shep’s face if he comes back from the bathroom to find his conquest has fled into the night.

I force the friendliest smile I can manage and lean towards him like we’re a couple of girlfriends just gossiping.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name,” I say.

“Oh, it’s Lewis.” He eyes me cautiously as if I might strike at any second like a deadly cobra.

“Lewis,” I repeat with a cheerful lilt. Ugh, I’m going to need to drink a whole bottle of mouthwash to get this sweet-ass taste out of my mouth when I’m done here. “As Shep’s very best friend, I just want to say thank you so much for giving him a chance. After the accident with the horse, he’s been so worried that... *things* would never go back to normal. It’s really affected his self-esteem.”

“Accident?” he repeats. “Did he fall off while riding?”

I grimace and feign a look of embarrassment. “Not exactly.” I clear my throat and drop my voice. “It was more like it was the other way around, if you know what I mean.” I give him a significant look, waiting for the moment when his expression morphs from confusion to horror. It takes everything in me to keep my expression somber as Lewis hops off his stool so hastily that he knocks it over.

“You know what? I actually just remembered that I have to... um... go.”

“Oh, shoot.” I stick out my bottom lip in a show of sympathy before Lewis flees into the crowd in the direction of the exit.

Once he’s gone, I give in to the urge to cackle evilly.

“What are you...” Shep starts to ask, stopping mid-sentence and looking around with a frown when he realizes Lewis is gone.

“He had to run,” I answer. “He grabbed his stomach and hauled ass for the door, so I’m thinking things went *south*, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh, shit,” he mutters.

I swallow down my laughter and pat his hand sympathetically.

“How about just *one* more drink?” I offer. “I’ll even pay for this one.”

That seems to perk him up. Shep rights Lewis's toppled stool and takes a seat, waving at Sawyer for another round. He was only a few feet away for my entire performance, but luckily, he doesn't rat me out. He just arches an eyebrow at me silently for a second before getting us another round.

Chapter 3

RIGGS

I GROAN WHEN MY alarm goes off, the sound making my brain pound against the inside of my skull like a fucking gong. *One* more drink turned into two... or maybe it was three. Worse yet, I can't remember if they got charged to Shep's tab or my own. What I *do* know is that we ended up winning fifty bucks each off of Auggie and Henry over a couple games of pool, Steele organized us rides home *and* made sure we'd have our cars this morning. Also, Shep went home *alone*. Not that the last bit is particularly relevant aside from the fact that it's funny how well my little joke worked out.

I manage to get my heavy limbs to work long enough to roll over and turn off my alarm. With a yawn, I wrap my arms around my pillow and tuck it longways against my chest as I rest my head back on it. Not like I'm *cuddling* it, I'm just... resting and fighting off a hangover. I didn't believe it when people warned me that a night of drinking hits different after the age of thirty, but I'm definitely feeling it this morning.

I let my eyelids droop closed again and the memory of Lewis's wide-eyed horror before he ran off dances behind them. I snort a laugh into my pillow. Poor Shep and his neglected dick. I'm sure he didn't know what to do with himself when he flopped into his bed all alone. That has to be a first for him. Hopefully he managed to work out the mechanics of getting off with his own hand.

I'm not sure why my thoughts have wandered down this particular path, but now that they have, I can't stop the images that follow. *Shep drunkenly undressing, his cock rock hard and aching for relief as he wraps his hand around it with a whimper...*

My eyes shoot open as a bolt of electric heat zings under my skin, straight down to my balls. For the love of fuck, the last thing I need is to lie here picturing Shep jerking off. But my dick is already off and running with the idea, swelling slowly, snaking down my thigh as it plumps and hardens. The problem with being a *shower* rather than a *grower* is that it takes me a hell of a lot longer to get fully hard, the rush of blood required to inflate The Beast sometimes leaving me lightheaded. But damn if it isn't impressive once it gets there.

I huff out a cocky laugh and roll onto my back as I slip my hand under the covers. A deep sigh vibrates inside of my chest, and I stroke myself steadily, coaxing my cock little by little until the tingle in the tip spreads outwards to settle in my gut and the base of my spine. A few teasing drags of my thumb over the head and I'm finally hard as granite. It feels like a damn waste of ten pulsing inches to get off quick and

dirty in my own hand, but it's either that or spend the whole day dealing with surprise boners.

I pull my hand off my cock and spit into it while I use the other to shove my sheets off and my boxer briefs down around my thighs. But before I can get down to business, my phone starts to vibrate on my nightstand.

"Seriously?" I grumble. I roll to reach for my phone. I swear to god, if it's Shep telling me he needs a ride *again*, he's going to get an earful for ruining my morning personal time.

It's not Shep's number lighting up my screen though. It's not any of the Big Bull guys. It's not even my annoyingly lovable sister.

"Fuck," I mutter, trying to remember what day it is and whether I somehow forgot to pay my rent for the month. "Hello?" I croak, using my free hand to pull my underwear back into place, barely managing to stretch them over the swell of my erection.

"Mr. Kent, sorry to call so early," my landlord, Victor, says on the other end of the phone.

"It's fine. What's up?" I slide to the edge of the bed, put my feet on the floor, and run my fingers through my hair to tame it while fighting off another yawn.

"I hate to do this to you, but we decided to sell the house. With the market so hot right now, it feels like a missed opportunity if we don't take advantage of it," he explains. My

stomach drops like a stone. At least the news is a total boner killer too.

“Fuck,” I murmur again, dragging my hand over my face. “So, you’re kicking me out.”

“Not kicking you out,” he says quickly. “But...”

“But I have to go,” I supply with a humorless laugh.

“I’m sorry. You can stay until the end of the month, or I can give you a partial month refund if you want to go sooner,” he offers.

“Um, yeah, let me figure it out and I’ll let you know.” I’m sure I say something about calling him back later and I might mutter a “goodbye” before I disconnect the call, but who the fuck knows.

I stand up and toss my phone onto the bed. This is just fucking perfect. There are plenty of apartments to rent in Fall Crosse, but it’s almost impossible to get one with a garage. My temperamental old Mustang can’t take the cold winters at her age, plus I have a half-built ’72 Kawasaki that’s more parts than an actual motorcycle at this point. A familiar *tap, tap, tap* at my bedroom window reminds me of the other problem with trying to rent an apartment.

I shuffle over and push the window open. I’m greeted by a friendly *caw* as my little buddy spreads his jet-black wings and flies past me to perch on my headboard, clutching a pen in his beak that he drops as an offering right onto my pillow.

“Thanks, Vel.” I open my top dresser drawer and grab a couple of peanuts out of a bag. He caws again when I toss them onto the bed.

As far as I know, most apartment buildings wouldn't be cool with a crow. No matter how tame he is.

I've been saving for a downpayment on a house, but that hot market Victor wants to cash in on is exactly why I was hoping to stay here at least another year or two.

I guess I'll just have to figure something out. I don't have the first clue what that will be, but hey, that's half the fun, right? Life throws you curveballs and you turn them into touchdowns, or whatever the fuck sports metaphor makes sense here.

With my dick completely forgotten, I hop into the shower and hurry through my morning routine. The minty flavor of my toothpaste makes me gag, reminding me again that I drank too damn much last night and I'm going to be paying for it most of the day today.

By the time I return to my bedroom, Vel is gone again. There's a black feather on my pillow right next to the pen as a lovely parting gift. I pick both up and place them on top of my dresser, along with the other bits and bobs he's brought me in the past year since Porter declared him fully grown and ready to be released into the wild.

I grab a Pop-Tart on my way out the door, biting into the cold pastry as I shove my feet into my boots without even pausing to tie the laces. I have no idea if I'm late, early, or

right on time for work. What I do know is that I need to go fucking do something with my hands before I let myself spiral into a panic about my living situation. I've always done my best thinking and problem solving while elbow deep in a diesel engine.

When I stride into Big Bull a few minutes later, Auggie, Henry, and Red are all gathered around the coffee, shooting the shit while they munch on a tray of muffins. I'm guessing Auggie baked those and brought them in. My mouth waters at the smell of sugar and blueberries, but that Pop-Tart I scarfed is sitting heavy in my alcohol-soaked gut at the moment, so it's best if I stick with coffee for now.

I grab a paper cup and fill it from the carafe of coffee, not bothering with any cream or sugar. I'm not a morning person under the best circumstances, but with my head still pounding this morning, all their voices sound like a whole lot of white noise. If they're saying anything directly to me, they're shit out of luck.

I groan as the first steaming sip of coffee hits my tongue, scalding and bitter, just the way I like it. A snuffling sound near my feet draws my attention, and I look down to see Auggie's pet pig, Hamlet, nibbling on my untied bootlace.

"Hey, quit that," I scold. Hamlet grunts but doesn't relinquish the lace until I actually bend over and gently shoo him away. "Are we changing the name of this place to Old MacDonald's? Is Angie around here somewhere too?"

“It would be a lot of work to bring a cow here,” Red says thoughtfully. “I could load her up in a trailer, I guess.”

Auggie snorts. “You’re crabby this morning. Hammy just wants to make friends.” He tosses the pig a few bites of his muffin. Steele’s huskies must hear the nearly silent sound of food hitting the floor, because they scramble out of his office immediately to get in on it. “Shh, don’t tell your daddy,” Auggie whispers, tossing out a few more bites.

“Don’t tell me what?” Steele asks, appearing in the office door.

“About the... surprise,” Auggie scrambles to cover his ass.

“Mm-hmm,” Steele mutters. “Don’t feed the dogs.”

“I wasn’t.” He holds up his now-empty hands innocently, and I snort into my next sip of coffee.

I tune out the drone of their voices again as Steele launches into a lecture about why dogs shouldn’t get people food. I’m assuming it’s the same lecture he has to hear from Porter every time the huskies get the shits because of Auggie, so it’s only fair he should have to listen to it too. The familiar purr of the V8 Hemi engine in Shep’s Charger rattles in my ears, drawing my attention to the parking lot.

He swings the car into the empty employee parking spot right next to mine, narrowly missing my Mustang with that oversized front end of his.

“Watch it, fucker,” I shout as soon as his door flies open.

“I had plenty of space,” he calls back as he climbs out of his car. Just like yesterday, his overalls are unzipped obscenely low. Seriously, it has to be an OSHA violation for him to even show up to the garage like that, his muscles all sweaty, his tattoos glistening in the sunlight as he swaggers up to the bay doors.

Worse yet, he doesn't look hungover at all. He's at least ten years older than I am, and he drank more than I did. Granted, he was sucking down that low-alcohol-content hoppy bullshit. But *still*.

“Don't mind Riggs, he's crabby this morning,” Auggie says, picking up a muffin and lobbing it at Shep. He catches it midair and takes a massive bite.

“*Whnisnth?*” he mumbles through a full mouth.

“It really is a fucking barnyard around here,” I mutter around another sip of coffee.

Shep swallows the food and wipes the back of his hand over his mouth before trying again. “When *isn't* he?”

“Oh, fuck off. I'm a ray of goddamn sunshine.” I should kick him right in the shins for even *suggesting* that I'm anything but pleasant.

“You're... unique,” Henry offers in my defense. Or maybe it's more of an accusation. It's hard to tell.

“And we love you for it,” Auggie adds.

“Shove it up your ass,” I say sweetly before fishing my earplugs out of my pocket and popping them in one at a time.

I'm pretty sure I see Auggie's lips form the words, "*Told you so,*" before I abandon my half-finished coffee and this *scintillating* conversation about my glowing attitude.

SHEP

I watch Riggs retreat, my eyes wandering briefly to the way his perky ass fills out his overalls before I drag my gaze away and pour myself a cup of coffee.

"What's he so moody about?" I ask, and then take another bite of my muffin.

Auggie shrugs, which seems to be the general sentiment everyone else shares as well.

"He's always kind of like that, isn't he?" Red says, glancing over his shoulder at Riggs, who's grumbling under his breath as he rummages through his tools now.

I frown. "Sort of, I guess. But no one bothered to ask?"

"He was pretty drunk last night. I figured he was hungover," Auggie offers, and I grunt.

I guess that could be it, but it's not like last night was the first night we went out and got loaded on a work night. He's always a little crabby in the morning, but if there's something more serious than a hangover going on, we won't know unless we ask.

The guys finish their food and slowly scatter to their regular workstations. I watch Riggs for a few more minutes while I eat my muffin and finish off a cup of coffee. He's moved on from

quietly insulting his tools to taking his complaints to the engine itself. I chuckle as he mutters the word, “Fucker,” a few times while using his wrench in a tight spot. He pulls one hand out and brushes it absently over his cheek, leaving a smear of black grease in its wake.

I’m not sure what’s so mesmerizing about the whole thing, but I can’t seem to make myself move for the longest time. I must have lost track of how much I had to drink last night too, because my insides feel all sloshy and weird this morning. *Fluttery* almost. Maybe I’m having some kind of allergic reaction to whatever microbrew Sawyer has on tap this week. I rub my belly and then tug my zipper midway up my chest.

Before I can think better of poking the bear—or in this case, the crabby twink—I’m standing next to the truck, looking up at Riggs while he works.

“If you’re lost, your bay is two down. I can draw you a map if you think you can’t find it,” he says without taking out his earplugs.

I grin and lean my weight against the truck, waiting for him to realize he’s not going to blow me off that easily. After a few seconds, he finally tugs an earplug out.

“What?” he asks.

“Just wanted to see how you’re feeling this morning.”

“Peachy.” He gives me one of those half-terrifying feral smiles of his, as if to prove his point. “That all?”

“I don’t know, is it?” I ask, and he groans.

“You’re extremely annoying this morning. Are you sure *this* isn’t the reason you’re always getting your car keyed and your house spray painted?”

“It’s something to consider,” I agree with a chuckle. My agreeability only seems to annoy him more, which is pretty much the entire point. “Seriously though, is everything cool?”

Riggs huffs and mutters a few more *mother fuckers* to the stubborn nut he can’t seem to work loose.

“Fuck, fine. If it will make you leave me alone... I got a call from my landlord this morning and I have to find a new place to live. So I’m a little stressed, but if I can have a little peace to think, I’m sure everything will be fine.” The nut finally gives way, and he hisses, “Hell yeah,” under his breath. It’s weirdly endearing, and I have the momentary urge to high-five him in celebration. “In case it wasn’t clear, ‘peace to think’ was my polite attempt at telling you to fuck off.”

Another bout of laughter rumbles in my throat. I don’t know what it is about Riggs, but the more he tells me to fuck off, the more I want to stay right here, bugging the shit out of him. Maybe some kind of brotherly affection? Except I can safely say that I’ve never casually checked out my actual brother’s ass.

“You need a place to stay?” I piece together the main headline from what he said.

“A place that allows birds and has a garage. Preferably something that won’t eat up all the down payment money I’ve been socking away. I’m sure there are plenty of options in the

area. I haven't even had the chance to look yet. I was in the middle of jerking off when I got the call, so that's my fucking day so far." He tosses a couple of rusted pieces onto the ground with a *clang* while my mind takes an immediate dive into the gutter, imagining Riggs naked with that massive cock of his rock hard in his hand. Probably both hands, if his flaccid length is anything to go by. I'm not even sure that would cover it.

My skin heats and my mouth goes dry, my gaze dropping involuntarily to the space between his legs, even though it's completely blocked by the front end of the truck.

"Dude, stop thinking about my dick," he says, snapping me out of my thoughts.

I make a strangled sound that's meant to be a scoff but comes out sounding more like something between a gasp and panicked laughter.

"I wasn't thinking about your dick."

"Sure you weren't." He tears his eyes off of his work just long enough to shoot me a cocky smirk.

Have I thought about his disproportionately huge dick a time or two since he unexpectedly dropped his pants during a photoshoot last summer? Sure. I'm only human. Of course I'm going to think about it on occasion, even if it's just to wonder about the mechanics of choking something like that down.

My cock jerks to life at the thought.

“Don’t go getting it immortalized in bronze or anything. It’s just a dick.” A *really* fucking big dick, but just a dick. Nothing to get all flustered over. Why are we even talking about his dick at work? Oh, right, the call from his landlord. I clear my throat. “Anyway, if you need a place to stay, I’ve got a spare room and plenty of space in my garage. But how many birds are we talking exactly? Is this going to be an Alfred Hitchcock situation?”

Riggs cackles. “One bird, and he lives outside, I just open the window and let him visit.” he answers. “But you don’t have to do that. I’m sure I’ll find someplace.”

“Why bother with the hassle? I have the space. And I guarantee you won’t find lower rent anywhere.” I’m not sure why I’m hard selling him, but I hold my breath while I wait for his answer.

He waffles his head back and forth, chewing on his bottom lip, his eyes still fixed on the engine he’s working on.

“I don’t know. I’ve never had a roommate before. Are you going to backwash in my orange juice and leave piss sprinkled on the toilet seat? Or, like, murder me in my sleep over some minor infraction that stews entirely too long under the surface?”

I blink at him. “That escalated quickly. No, no, and no. I learned proper aim years ago, you can label your food if you want to be anal about it, and I solemnly swear not to murder you. Between the two of us, you’re definitely the stabby one,

so I should probably be asking for that same promise from you.”

Riggs’s lips twitch in an almost-smile before he flattens his expression back into something more neutral and shrugs. “Yeah, fine.”

“Fine?” I echo. “As in... you’ll move in?”

“I guess. Just until I find my own place though,” he says.

My grin widens. Maybe I’m nostalgic for the years I spent living with my brother, but this spur-of-the-moment offer is feeling more right by the second. Even if Riggs doesn’t stay long, it’ll be cool having him around for a while.

“Cool,” I say casually, patting the body of the rig and then pushing back. “We’ll make a plan to get you moved in this weekend.”

He stops fiddling with the engine and looks up at me. There’s no trace of annoyance, no hardened jaw or bored indifference. He looks... kind of sweet for a few seconds. Of course, it doesn’t last long before his expression flickers and hardens. Riggs nods and mutters, “Thanks,” almost too quietly for me to hear.

“No problem, bestie,” I tease, laughing at the groan I get in response.

Riggs as my roomie? This is going to be fun.

Chapter 4

RIGGS

“DON’T GIVE ME THAT look.” I shove another peanut through the bars of the small dog crate. Vel clicks at me in annoyance and puffs up his feathers, ignoring his favorite treat in favor of glaring at me. “It’s a short drive and then I’m going to let you out. Believe me, I don’t want to move either. I *just* got shit organized around here the way I like it.”

The crow turns his back on me, sticking his face into the back corner of the plastic carrier and tucking his head low in what can only be interpreted as the silent treatment. I read that crows have been known to hold grudges. The information made me chuckle when I learned it, because, seriously, same. But faced with the ire of my favorite feathered friend, it’s not as amusing. If peanuts aren’t a good enough penance, maybe I can ply him with a tastier treat once I let him out in Shep’s neighborhood. I could get Auggie to bake something special for him. Can crows have baked goods?

I pull out my phone and type a quick text.

RIGGS: Can crows have cookies?

Before my text has even been read, a honk outside draws my attention. Actually, it's *two* quick honks, like I'm a dame in the fifties expected to run outside and jump into my date's hot rod.

I tuck Vel's crate carefully under my arm so I won't jostle him more than necessary, and step out the front door. The horn sounds loudly again as the door swings closed behind me. Vel caws in protest at the sound and flaps his wings inside the confines of the cage.

"Hey, knock it off, fucker," I shout over the rumbling engine of the small moving truck idling in the driveway. "You're scaring my bird."

The horn blares one more time, because of course it does. My jaw ticks and I tighten my arm around Vel's cage.

"Don't think that just because you're helping me out, I won't put my foot up your ass," I threaten.

The driver side door of the truck swings open and Shep hops out, his boots clomping heavily on the pavement. He turns towards me with a grin spreading slowly over his lips.

"Kinky," he flirts, his gaze starting at my feet and working its way up my body an inch at a time until he reaches my face. "Cute too."

His eyes linger as he darts his tongue out and drags it over his lips. A weird spike of heat ricochets through me. Rage? Hm, no it feels different from rage. Hotter. There's something

off about Shep this morning though. Something not quite right as he continues to stare me down with a teasingly flirtatious smirk.

“Careful, I’m pretty sure he bites.” It’s Shep’s voice, but it didn’t come out of his mouth. Unexpected flirting is one thing, but I’m going to have to draw the line at ventriloquism. For real, I cannot live with one of those creepy-ass dolls around the house.

A *second* Shep rounds the front of the truck to join the first, and I blink rapidly to clear my vision. Nope, I’m not seeing double. There really are two of them.

“Only when provoked,” I joke back, my eyes ping ponging between the two of them as I put the pieces together. “I’m guessing this is your brother?”

The *real* Shep pats his understudy roughly on the shoulder. “Yup, this is Axel. My less handsome younger brother.”

“Two minutes younger,” Axel clarifies.

Now that I know that the other man *isn’t* Shep, the differences are obvious. Axel’s hair is a little bit longer, and his skin is a few shades darker, with more freckles and wrinkles on his face. I’m guessing he spends a lot more time in the sun than his brother does. His tattoos are different too. They creep up his throat and down his chest and arms in the same way, but the designs themselves all look like plants and flowers.

I cock my head and flash a toothy grin. If Axel thinks he's going to unsettle me by flirting, he's sorely mistaken.

"I've always wondered if identical twins have identical dicks."

"Care to take a peek? For science, of course," Axel offers.

"Nah, why don't you two measure each other and get back to me." I elbow him out of the way so I can set Vel's carrier inside the cab of the truck and crank the air conditioner up a little higher, so he won't get too warm while we're loading up.

When I glance over again, Axel is gone and Shep is stifling a chuckle as he leans against the open truck door.

"Sorry about him. He likes to pretend *I'm* the only one who can't keep it in his pants." He shakes his head, but the fond smile on his lips tells me everything I need to know about their relationship. It's the same dopey look my sister always has when she's apologizing for my lack of social grace.

"Don't worry about it. I'm used to handling horny morons." I give him a pointed look and he laughs again.

"Fair enough. By the way, since you're moving in, we should probably figure out some kind of system." Shep takes a step back to give me space to hop out of the truck, then swings the door closed behind me to keep the cool air in for Vel.

"System?" I ask.

"Yeah, you know, for sex."

It's hot as balls out this morning, but suddenly I'm even hotter with Shep's stocky body so close he practically has me pressed up against the side of the truck, the smell of sandalwood and sweat lingering on his skin as he throws out the casual comment.

A system for sex? Like, the two of *us* having sex? Hell, if that's what he's looking for, I'm sure I could come up with a plan to make his toes curl while he moans my name in that deep, ragged voice of his.

"I was thinking of the old tie on the doorknob trick, but I don't think I actually own any ties. Do you?"

Oh. *Oh*. He means sex with other people. Duh. Of course, he does. This is Shep we're talking about. Phew, what a relief. A manic laugh bubbles up in my throat. Just imagine that... *me* and *Shep*. That's a disaster waiting to happen if I've ever seen one. He might be the only person I've ever met who's *less* likely to ever fall in love than I am.

Actually... when I think about it that way, sex with Shep would probably be perfect. No strings, no bullshit. Nothing but rough, sweaty, carnal fun...

"I'm guessing that's a no?" he asks, and I jerk my head to shake myself out of that spiraling train of thought.

"A tie? No," I answer, catching up with the conversation. "I do have a pair of handcuffs though."

His eyebrows shoot up. "You want to hang handcuffs on our doorknobs to let each other know we're getting lucky?"

“Oh, is *that* what we were talking about?” I tease, and to my surprise, a flash of lust dances in Shep’s eyes for a second before he forces a laugh.

Shit. I’m flirting with him. That’s... weird. It’s super weird. Weirder now that he’s looking at me like he kind of likes it.

I clear my throat and put a hand against the center of his chest, feeling the heat of his skin through his t-shirt as I give him a light shove to move him out of my way. He takes the hint, dragging one hand over his buzzed hair and taking a step back.

“We’d better go help Ax.” He tilts his head towards my house, and I nod.

“Let’s do it,” I agree. The faster we get this done, the faster I can get out of the sun. The temperature is clearly making me delirious.

SHEP

Aside from Riggs’s bedroom furniture, there isn’t a hell of a lot to move. His clothes and other belongings only fill a few boxes, and the rest of the furniture came with the place when he rented it. The massive toolbox and disassembled Kawasaki motorcycle in his garage are the biggest challenges to load onto the truck, but that’s mainly because he keeps hounding us to be careful with everything, even after we wrapped each item in three layers of Bubble Wrap.

Axel wipes his hands off on his shorts after we set the bulky, hundred-plus pound toolbox down in the corner of my garage. We both glance back at the open truck to make sure that really was the last of it.

“That should do it. Should we help him put his bed frame back together?” he asks.

“It’s already done,” Riggs answers, appearing at the door that separates the garage from the mudroom.

I wipe my forearm over my sweaty brow, giving Riggs a reflexive once-over as he leans against the doorframe. He changed out of the ratty jeans and black t-shirt he was wearing earlier, replacing them with a red tank top that’s hanging loosely on his slender upper body, the neckline sagging low like it’s been stretched out. My eyes are drawn to the smattering of dark hair on his chest and the surprisingly dainty brown nipples he’s flashing in that shirt. On his bottom half, he’s rocking a pair of shiny basketball shorts that fit somewhat better than the shirt, but still look a little loose on him. It takes everything in my power not to let my attention linger too long on the thick bulge that snakes down one leg of the shorts.

“I hope you don’t mind that I borrowed some of your clothes.” He plucks at the oversized shirt. *My* shirt. “I was all sweaty, so I tossed my clothes into the wash. Then I opened my box of stuff and apparently a bottle of lube busted open during transport, so I had to wash everything else too. It was this or start getting really comfortable with casual nudity on day one.”

On day one... does that mean he's planning to be casually naked later on? I immediately conjure the image of Riggs lounging on the living room couch completely naked, his huge, soft cock shamelessly on display as he flips through the streaming options. My throat tightens and my mouth goes dry. I've had roommates before, and a bit of unintentional nudity is usually part of the deal. I just hadn't thought too much about *Riggs* being leisurely bare around my house.

"It's fine," I manage to say after a few too many awkwardly silent moments. "Wear whatever you want."

"Thanks. I grabbed your hamper of dirty clothes to add to the load too since there was space," he adds.

"Aw, isn't that domestic," Axel teases, and Riggs narrows his eyes at him in a scowl.

"Do you like your balls attached?" It's amazing how he can make the question sound so conversational and so threatening at the same time. Truly, a skill I could learn from the frightening little twink.

Axel flinches and subtly shifts his hands in front of his junk. For a second, I'm expecting him to answer with a meek "yes, *sir*," but he just nods.

Riggs straightens himself up and I realize for the first time that there's a big black bird perched on his shoulder. That's a hell of a thing to miss on the first pass. I guess deliberately *not* noticing his dick bulge was more distracting than I realized. The bird puffs up its feathers and then lets out a loud caw.

I jump back, and Riggs barks out a laugh.

“I think he’s scared of you, Vel,” he whispers conspiratorially to the bird.

“I’m not scared. I just didn’t realize they could be so... loud.” I take a cautious step forward, eyeing the bird and noticing the way it eyes me back. Its black eyes are assessing, *smart*—honestly, kind of spooky.

“He’s not always so loud, he’s just mad at me for putting him in a cage. I was actually just getting ready to let him outside.” Riggs takes a step into the garage and the bird turns its head to nibble at a strand of his hair.

“He doesn’t live in the house?” I have a vague memory of him saying something about that when he first mentioned the bird the other day.

“No. He’s wild, he’s just... my bro.” Riggs shrugs and Vel wobbles on his shoulder but stays perched. “He was the black chick we found in that engine last year. Remember?”

“Oh, shit. I do remember that.” It’s hard to believe something so tiny and fluffy grew into something straight out of a horror movie. When they get close, Riggs stops, and I reach out slowly. “Do I let him sniff me like a dog?”

Riggs snorts. “No fucking clue.”

Vel stares at me again, and then nudges my fingers with his beak. I’m not sure if he’s actually sniffing me or just trying to figure out if I have food for him. But I hold still either way, so I won’t startle him. When he’s finished assessing me, he

makes a clicking sound, then spreads his wings and launches off Riggs's shoulder, soaring through the open garage door into the large oak tree in my front yard.

“Does he need anything else? A bird feeder or a... nest?” I scratch my head, trying to figure out what a wild crow might require.

“I asked Porter if there was anything I could do to make his transition to a new area easier, and he suggested a platform outside my bedroom window where I can put treats and little trinkets for Vel, so I'm going to get that set up. But otherwise, he's pretty self-sufficient.”

“Well, I'm going to take off.” Axel's voice behind me is almost as startling as Vel's caw. I forgot my brother was even here for a minute, which is odd since he's usually working on ways to give me a hard time or get under my skin. Forty years old and nothing has changed.

“Cool. Thanks again for helping.” I pull him in for a one-armed hug, giving him a rough slap on the back.

“No worries.” He brushes off the thanks, then turns a teasing grin on Riggs again. “See you around.” He winks, and earns one of those rabid, toothy smiles in return.

“So...” I clap my hands together, turning towards Riggs as Axel hops into his rusty pickup and disappears down the street. “What do you say to going out tonight to celebrate our new status as BFFs and roomies?”

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re a tad overeager?” he asks in that flat, shit-stirring voice he’s perfected.

“Not even once,” I answer solemnly. If anything, I’ve been accused of being too standoffish by most people outside of my small circle of friends-slash-coworkers. There’s just something about Riggs that makes me want to scale the ten-foot wall around him so I can get a peek at what’s on the other side.

“Hmm. Fine, we can go out later.”

“Hell yeah,” I cheer, throwing an arm around his shoulders. “Okay, now on to roommate business. We’ve gotta talk shower schedule, dividing up the refrigerator space, and where did we land on the whole sex issue?”

“I’ve changed my mind. I’m not staying.” He tries to shrug me off, but I smile wider and tighten my grip.

“Sorry, but you’re stuck with me now. Just give in to it. It’ll be so much more enjoyable if you try to relax,” I say suggestively.

“Huh, that’s usually my line,” he muses, succeeding in shrugging me off when we reach his bedroom door.

A spike of electricity tightens my nipples and shoots straight down to my cock. Riggs is a top? I guess he does have total top energy, so I shouldn’t be surprised. But with that tool of his... *damn*.

I swallow hard, my hole twitching in what I can only assume is terror at the thought. Dick hardening terror. He smirks, pats my cheek, and then slips into his room, closing

the door in my face and leaving me to deal with that brain melting revelation.

Chapter 5

RIGGS

“WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK?” I murmur, skidding to a stop as soon as I step through the door to Wooley’s. Shep crashes into me from behind, jarring me forward another step, then catching me with an arm around my waist.

He’s not much taller than I am, but he’s a hell of a lot more solid, with a stockier frame and probably twice my weight in muscle. A puff of hot breath tickles the back of my neck and a tingle of awareness sparks along my skin from the close contact. The urge to shove him off me and maybe elbow him for good measure is definitely there, but there’s also a much *weirder* urge to lean into him.

I’m sure that has more to do with my recent dry spell than with Shep. Probably.

Luckily, he drops his arm before I have to actually figure out which of those two impulses to give in to. He doesn’t step back though, his body still plastered against mine from behind

as he joins me in looking out over a sea of men wearing blond wigs.

“Did we miss the memo about a costume party?” Shep muses, finally moving to stand next to me.

A big, burly bear of a dude struts past us wearing a cheerleading uniform, and he’s not the only one. There are at least a dozen other men dressed as cheerleaders, another handful wearing black leather leotards, and a lot of high-waisted shorts paired with casual t-shirts and fedoras.

“It must be Taylor Swift themed.” I’ve uttered the realization out loud before my brain has a chance to catch up with my mouth, and as soon as I do, I wish I could call the words back into my mouth.

Shep’s eyebrows jump up and his eyes go as wide as the shit-eating grin that’s spreading over his lips.

“Oh my god, are you a Swiftie?”

“What?” I scoff, shouldering past the closest Twink Swift to make my way up to the bar.

“You *are*,” Shep says, following hot on my heels. “You figured it out way too fast to not be a fan.”

I make another dismissive sound between my teeth. “There’s a guy in a unicorn t-shirt doing “Lavender Haze” as his karaoke song.”

““Lavender Haze’ is a deep track, my little Swiftie,” he taunts.

“I’m not...” I shake my head and wave to the nearest bartender, who’s wearing a pair of thick-rimmed glasses, a fedora, and a white t-shirt that says, ‘Not a Lot Going On At the Moment.’ “I respect her artistic talent,” I finish saying with my head held high and a mildly threatening look tossed over my shoulder at Shep.

“Hey, no argument here.” He holds his hands up in surrender. “T. Swift is my girl. I’m going to put my name on the karaoke list and rock the hell out of ‘Shake it Off.’ Want to make it a duet?” He waggles his eyebrows.

“Absolutely not,” I answer flatly, fighting off the twitch of my lips at his mildly endearing enthusiasm.

“I get it. You’re more of a ‘Love Story’ guy, aren’t you?”

I snort. “You caught me.”

“Hey, order me a beer, I’ll be right back.” He squeezes my bicep and another little sizzle of electricity sparks in the wake of his touch. Then he slips back into the crowd and disappears from view.

Probably going to find some rando to have a quickie with in the bathroom. I roll my eyes and my shoulders tense for a half second. Not that I care who he fucks, but I *am* his roommate now. If he sticks his dick in crazy and the house gets burned down as a result, I’m going to end up homeless too.

The bartender, I think his name is Brad, finally makes his way down to me, and I order the usual for both of us. While Brad gets the drinks, Sawyer hustles by looking frazzled by

how crowded the bar is, but happy about it. I spot his husband, West, at the end of the bar. He's a total muscle bear of a man in full Swift cosplay, like everybody else in the bar. Sawyer slows down his harried pace as he passes his man and leans over the bar to brush a quick kiss to his lips before continuing on. West stares after him as he goes, his face full-on dopey, like he can't believe Sawyer just kissed him. He does know they're married, right? I guess it's kind of sweet though, being so moony over someone after so long.

A tight feeling constricts around my chest. What would it even be like to feel that way about someone? Romance always seemed like kind of a pain in the ass as far as I could tell, but lately I've been a little... I don't know, curious I guess, about the draw. I blame the love virus that spread rapidly through Big Bull in the past couple of years, turning all of the guys into complete mush. They all seem kind of *happy* to be mushy though...

Shep returns just as Brad is setting down the drinks in front of me, pulling me out of my thoughts. I pick up both drinks and shove the glass of beer towards Shep while I lift my own to my lips and take a sip. He takes the glass in one hand and holds up a blond wig in his other.

“Where the hell did you get that?” I ask.

“It was in the back seat of my car.” He shrugs.

I wrinkle my nose. “You realize that raises more questions than it answers, right?”

Shep chuckles. “I hooked up with a drag queen a few weeks ago and she left this in my car.”

“Ew,” I mutter.

“Here.” Shep drops the tangle of blond locks onto my head, and I squeal.

“Oh my god, you did not just put a skanky lice wig on my head.” I tear it off and toss it back at him with a laugh. He catches it in one hand and deftly flips it around before perching it on top of his own head, completely askew.

“Don’t be such a baby. May Jestic didn’t have lice.”

“That you know of,” I grumble, and he just laughs again.

“Fair enough. Worst case, I’ll buy some lice shampoo and life will go on.” When he puts it that way, it sounds entirely reasonable.

“Fine, I guess I could stand to lighten up a smidge,” I concede, and Shep’s forehead wrinkles.

“I didn’t say that. Be yourself, Riggs. I’m here to hang out with *you*, feral biting and all.” He teases, throwing his arm over my shoulders as he takes another long gulp from his beer, his throat bobbing as he swallows.

I’m glad for the momentary distraction so he can’t see the rapid blinking and stunned silence his comment elicited. I’m trying to think of a time when someone *hasn’t* told me I need to fucking chill or play nice or whatever the fuck else way they’ve come up with to call me a dick without calling me a

dick. But the way Shep just said it, it almost sounds like he likes that I'm a little bit of an asshole.

I hold my drink close to my chest to keep from spilling it as he steers me through the crowd of Taylor Swifts with his arm still firmly around my shoulders. If I'm leaning into him at all, it's just because there are so many damn people in here tonight. Whoever convinced Sawyer to start holding themed nights was clearly a genius.

We manage to snag a table just as another group is leaving. And, lucky us, we've got a front row seat to the karaoke cringe fest for the rest of the night now. The open space that's usually a makeshift dance floor has a small stage setup, along with the microphone and a laptop where the words for the song play across the screen. But instead of a karaoke machine with a small selection of tunes, there's an actual band to back up singers. Nice touch.

The dude currently on the stage wraps up his off-key rendition of "Invisible Strings" before putting the microphone back into the stand and doing a little curtsy in his cheerleading uniform. He gets a round of cheers from the crowd. Even I'm feeling nice enough to join in with a whistle and some clapping as he flounces off the stage.

The next person takes the stage and tells the band which song he wants to perform. I have to give it to everyone brave enough to get up there and sing. They aren't holding back. The band plays the backup instrumentals like they're on stage with the Swift Queen herself, and every dude who takes the mic

sings his heart out. We clap and cheer for one after another, and I catch Shep silently mouthing along with the words more than once. It's *possible* I'm lip syncing a smidge too, but only to the real bangers. Anyone who can hear "We Are Never Getting Back Together" without shouting "Like, ever" in the correct spots is basically a war criminal.

"Please welcome our next diva to the stage, Shep," the guitarist reads off the sign-up sheet after a surprisingly hot duet of "Exile" that ended with the two singers with their tongues down each other's throats.

"Oh my god, are you seriously going to sing?"

Shep drains his beer and then hops out of his seat. "Hell yeah, I am." He flips his long blond hair over his shoulder then struts up onto the stage.

After a quick chat with the band, he takes the mic and starts to sing "Bad Blood." Not just singing it, but fully embodying the song, full of fierceness and the slightest hint of vengeance as he croons and dances across the stage. His unsecured wig falls off more than once during his performance, but that doesn't do anything to dampen his enthusiasm or the cheers from the crowd.

"Damn, he's fucking hot," I hear the guy at the table next to me shout to his friend. I whip my head around to see both of them eyeing Shep like he's the last cupcake in the bakery display.

"Think he'd be up for a threesome?" They share a pair of lascivious grins, and I bristle.

Obviously, I don't begrudge Shep some hot group action, but we *did* come here together tonight. This is supposed to be our roommate celebration, not an excuse to add a few more notches to the bedpost.

"Just make sure you swing by a pharmacy for crab lice shampoo on your way home from his place," I blurt out a warning.

They both turn their attention towards me with a grimace, clearly losing interest in Shep. Guilt wars with a sense of amused satisfaction inside of me as I turn back around to find Sawyer standing *right there*, holding refills for both of our drinks. His lips are pursed, and he studies me silently for a second.

"Oh, come on, it was just a joke. It's not like Shep doesn't pull plenty of ass. He's not going to die from blue balls because I played one little prank," I scoff, taking both drinks from him.

"Two pranks," he corrects, reminding me that he was there when I scared off that guy the last time too.

"Fine, *two*," I agree, rolling my eyes and holding up three fingers like a Girl Scout pledge. "I swear I won't do it again."

"Do what you want. It's none of my business." He picks up the empty glasses, then glances over his shoulder at Shep, who's wrapping up his performance. "But I speak from experience when I say it's a hell of a lot easier to just tell him you're into him and save yourself the trouble of sabotaging a bunch of his dates."

He leaves without giving me the chance to form a snarky or dismissive response. I snort to myself as I pick up my drink. I'm not *into* Shep. Please. I don't even know what that means if I'm being completely honest. I know I don't want to make stupid heart eyes at him or write poetry comparing him to a season or whatever the fuck people do when they're all emotionally sprung on someone. Sure, I'd be down to fuck, but I'm not going to doodle my first name with his last name in my notebook.

"What's so funny?" Shep asks, returning to the table and picking up his beer.

I shake my head and wave a hand dismissively before answering. "Sawyer said something stupid, that's all."

"Oh, good. I was worried for a second that you were laughing at my shining moment of triumph on the stage."

I open my mouth, ready with a light roast of his performance, as per usual. But something else falls off my tongue instead.

"Nah, you fucking rocked it."

Surprise flickers through his eyes and his smile widens, all toothy but not in the threatening, rabid way mine always seems to be.

"Aw, I think T. Swift brings out your softer side, man."

"Shut up." I hide my own smile behind the rim of my glass.

"Tell you what, I promise I won't tell anyone that you're secretly nice if you promise not to kill me," Shep barter. I tilt

my head and narrow my eyes at him.

“What did you do?”

“Everybody make some noise for our next Swiftie, Riggs!”
the guitarist announces.

SHEP

I’m not even a little surprised, after some protest and cajoling onto the stage, that Riggs picks “Look What You Made Me Do” as his song of choice. He stands awkwardly in front of the microphone, looking out over the small crowd with a hint of panic in his eyes. I pull the wig off my head and toss it up to him. He catches it and stares at it for a second like I just threw a dead animal at him, before his expression shifts to determination and he puts it on.

He sings the scathing lyrics with an appropriately dangerous scowl, growling the words in a voice that strokes my dick to life. Maybe I really *do* have a thing for crazy, because he’s looking mildly unhinged up there and it’s kind of doing it for me. He sways his hips back and forth to the beat and meets my eyes, his raspy voice dropping to an artfully threatening whisper at the appropriate spots, and my skin tingles, my balls tightening and my breath hitching.

Damn.

The song is over way too soon, and it’s obvious I’m not the only one who enjoyed it if the thunderous cheers are anything to go by. He whips off the wig and chucks it blindly into the

crowd before hopping off the stage and returning to our table with a much more confident swagger than he had when he went up there.

“You owe me *so* many drinks for that.” He shakes his head, then picks up his nearly full drink and downs it in a few gulps, wiping his hand over his mouth when he’s done. “How about some shots?”

“Oh, shit. Are things about to get wild?” I’m all for it, I just hope this night won’t end with Riggs puking in the bushes next to my garage.

“Afraid you can’t keep up with me?” he taunts, already standing up so we can go back to the bar and let someone else enjoy the prime karaoke seats for a while.

“You’re asking for trouble, Tiny,” I tease, reveling in the flash of violence the nickname ignites in his eyes.

As much as we joke, I don’t think he would actually stab me or anything. But that begs the question: if I push him hard enough, what *will* he do? Bite me, maybe? My cock jerks and my heart beats a little faster. I’m a fairly vanilla guy, but fuck if there isn’t something hot about the thought of him leaving a couple of bite marks on my chest in a fit of rage and passion, the lines blurring to the point that we can’t tell where one emotion ends and the next starts.

“Are you coming?” he asks, already slipping into the throng of people.

“Not yet,” I mutter, reaching down to adjust my erection before following him.

The time it takes to make our way up to the bar gives me a chance to cool my libido, at least. Riggs is hot—I’ve always thought so. I’ve got a thing for twinks, and his whole feral vibe is bound to make any guy wonder what kind of wild, untamed shit he gets up to in bed. He’s also my roommate now and my coworker... and I’m pretty sure we’re friends, even if he’s not likely to admit it. Sex would make things way too complicated.

He leans over the bar to get Brad’s attention, and I allow myself one last appreciative glance at his bouncy little ass before I officially declare things between us completely and totally platonic. It’s for the best.

Riggs orders, but I can’t hear exactly what over the din inside the bar and the music playing from the karaoke stage. When Brad leaves to get our drinks, Riggs turns his head to look at me over his shoulder with a wicked glint in his dark eyes.

“You up for body shots?”

Chapter 6

RIGGS

SHEP'S LIPS PART IN surprise and his eyes heat up again. I bark out a laugh.

“I’m kidding. Body shots are for spring break and trashy bachelor parties.” I spin around to face him, leaning back against the bar and resting both elbows against it. “Although, you *do* have the kind of killer man cleavage that I’m sure could support a shot glass.”

He crosses his arms and glances down at his chest, like he’s checking for truth in my teasing.

“Are you making fun of my muscled man titties?” He flexes his pecs, straining the already stretched fabric of his t-shirt.

“Making fun?” I arch an eyebrow and lick my lips. “Definitely not.”

He chuckles and drops his arms, taking a step closer to me. My heart rate kicks up as he leans in, blanketing me in the

masculine scent of sandalwood again. It tickles my nose and the back of my throat until I can't decide if I want to sneeze or press closer... breathe deeper. Shep reaches around me, pulling back a second later with two shots, the citrus smell of lemon and vodka joining the mix.

Right. The drinks.

I take the one he holds out to me.

“To new roommates,” he says with a grin.

I clink the rim of the shot glass against his, echoing his toast before bringing it to my lips and downing it in a single gulp. I cringe at the sour, sugary flavor of lemon, then lick my lips to take the edge off with the sugar that's lingering from the rim.

Shep sets his empty shot glass back on the bar, still hovering close, caging me in with his body. In his defense, it's a madhouse in here tonight, with barely enough room to breathe, let alone move around. I glance over my shoulder, weighing the option of ordering another round or two of shots, while also giving myself a second to breathe in something that *isn't* Shep's confusingly sexy scent.

“You want to go get drunk at home instead? It'll be cheaper and a hell of a lot quieter,” I lean towards him and shout the suggestion over the increasingly loud karaoke music.

He nods. “Works for me.”

He takes a step back so quickly that it leaves me off balance for a second before I toss some cash on the bar to cover our

drinks and hurry after him. I drag in a deep breath of fresh air as the gravel of the parking lot crunches under my shoes. I make a beeline towards the Charger, but Shep keeps walking without pause.

“Where are we going?” I pick up my pace to catch up with him.

“Home,” he answers with a lilt of mocking amusement.

“Well, we just walked right past your car,” I point out, jerking my head back in the direction we just came.

“We’ve already had a few drinks,” he says. “It’s only a couple of blocks.”

I guess that makes sense. Better safe than sorry, and why waste money on a ride when it’s so close?

Once the lights from the strip of businesses fade behind us, I shove my hands into my pockets and tilt my head back to appreciate the view of the darkened sky, lit up only by the sliver of the moon and a million pinpoint stars.

“Have you always lived in Fall Crosse?” I ask.

“Bit further north,” Shep says. “Almost Minnesota, but not quite. Axel and I moved down here after high school, rented a place together and both got jobs to start saving up for our own houses. Been here twenty... two years now. Fuck, I feel old.”

I snort a laugh.

“What made you pick here?” Apparently, the few drinks I’ve already had tonight have made me uncharacteristically

chatty. I suppose it doesn't hurt to get to know my new roomie a bit better. My new *temporary* roomie. Even if he didn't put a time limit on his hospitality, I'm not going to hang around longer than I absolutely have to.

"We kept hearing how gay it was," he answers with a chuckle.

"It seriously is. What's up with that?"

"No fucking clue. I'm definitely not complaining though," he says, mirroring my posture and looking up at the sky as we walk, our footsteps echoing against the sidewalk in the otherwise quiet night.

"Same," I agree.

"What about you?" Shep asks, weaving a little and bumping his shoulder against mine. Probably best we didn't drive since that last shot seems to be going to his head right about now.

"I grew up in New York. I decided on Chicago for college because I just felt like I needed some fucking breathing room." I pull in a deep breath as if to demonstrate my point, and then let it out slowly. "It only took one semester for me to realize that college was the last fucking thing I wanted to be doing. So, I didn't bother to enroll for any more classes, but I didn't want to go home with my tail between my legs either. I spent a couple of years hopping around the Midwest, picking up odd jobs and getting by, and then I ended up renting a room from this dude who was older than fucking dirt." I smile and shake my head. "Roger. He was a diesel mechanic and it all sounded

really cool when he talked about it, so I let him show me some stuff, and eventually I enrolled in a program at the community college. Now here we are.” I finish with a shrug as we reach the house.

I glance up into the big tree in the front yard, squinting into the darkness for Vel. Of course, I can’t see shit, so I don’t know why I’m bothering. The bird doesn’t need my concern anyway. He can take care of himself just fine. Maybe that’s why I like him so much. He isn’t needy like a dog or that pig of Auggie’s. He just does his thing, and I do mine, and sometimes we chill together. Why can’t more of life be like that?

Shep left the porch light on earlier, bathing the stoop in an almost-too-bright glow that’s attracted a handful of moths to flutter around it as we stop for him to fish his keys out. I glance down to see a silver watch lying next to the dingy welcome mat, and I bend down to pick it up with a grin. Wherever Vel decided to make himself at home for the night, he left me a present first to let me know there’s no hard feelings about the crate.

“Hey, that’s mine,” Shep says when he sees the watch.

I cackle and hand it over to him. “I probably should have warned you that Vel is kind of sneaky and he loves a good heist. Open windows, any hidden little gaps, he’ll find a way in if he wants to.”

“Oh good,” he mutters sarcastically, shoving the watch into his pocket and swinging the door open.

I kick my shoes off and then head down the hallway towards the kitchen. “Hey, order us a pizza or something,” I shout over my shoulder while I go in search of his liquor cabinet.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Shep calls back, his voice dripping heavily with sarcasm.

“Oo, I like that,” I taunt, opening the first cabinet I reach, only to find it filled with cleaning products. Two more tries before I hit the jackpot and snag a bottle of vodka, not bothering to search for any glasses.

I unscrew the cap on my way to the living room, not pausing my stride as I lift the bottle to my lips and take a generous swig. I’m already guaranteed a hangover tomorrow morning, so I might as well make it count. At least tomorrow is Sunday, which means I can spend the day feeling like shit right here at home instead of dragging my ass to the garage.

Shep is lounging on the couch with his feet up on the coffee table, using one hand to place our pizza order and holding out the other for the bottle of vodka without even tearing his gaze off of his phone screen. I pass it over and plop down next to him.

SHEP

Riggs is absolutely sloshed. And I say that as someone who has *also* lost track of his own consumption and is definitely noticing the Tilt-A-Whirl action happening in the living room.

“Truth or bare,” he says, tossing the last half-eaten slice of pizza back into the box and closing the lid.

“Um, do you mean truth or *dare*?” I ask, snorting when he blinks slowly in confusion at my question.

His cheeks are rosy and his eyes are glassy, a sloppy grin on his lips that’s completely out of place on his usually scowling face. He doesn’t look bad when he smiles, kind of cute actually. But it’s just not... Riggs.

“Wait, hold up,” he says, making a grab for the half-empty bottle dangling in my hand. I yank it back, and the scowl returns instantly. Even though he’s seated, he sways like my movement threw him off balance.

“I think we’ve both had enough.” I set the bottle down, and Riggs makes a little growling sound that reminds me of an angry kitten as he scrambles onto my lap so he can climb over me and pick it up again.

My body is pretty numb after however many shots we’ve taken, but not nearly numb enough to *not* feel the warm weight of him as he sits his ass directly over my dick. He holds my gaze defiantly as he takes one last swig before putting the bottle down again right where I set it the first time.

Note to self: don’t tell Riggs what to do unless you want him to do the exact opposite. I feel like I already kind of knew that, but it’s a good reminder.

I’m expecting him to climb off me now that he’s finished proving his point, but instead, he wiggles around a little like

he's making himself comfortable.

“As I was *saying*...” He gives me a pointed look. “Truth or *bare*. It's like strip truth.”

“I am way too drunk to figure out what you're talking about.” I chuckle, holding my hands up awkwardly, not sure where to put them or if he's seriously not going to move. It's not *uncomfortable* to have him on my lap, I just can't really figure it out.

Riggs grabs my wrist and yanks my arm down to rest my hand on his knee, not making any comment about this strange development.

“Tell the truth about something or take off a piss...” He scrunches up his face, trying to figure out what word he actually meant to say. “Peas...” He cocks his head. “Take off your clothes,” he finishes after giving up on trying to fix his sentence.

This sounds like a bad idea; I just can't remember exactly why.

“Alright, Wiggles,” I tease, “truth bomb or take off your shirt then.”

He laughs again and slides down a little more, making himself more at home on top of me as he lets his head loll onto my shoulder. Um, okay, this is... different. Not *bad* different, though.

“You're supposed to ask me something,” he says.

“What am I supposed to ask?” I frown, trying to remember if that was part of his original explanation.

“A truth thing.”

“What’s that?” This is like a terrible, drunk version of Who’s on First that neither of us can seem to figure out. It’s not helping that Riggs is now wrapping his arms around me like I’m a life-sized teddy bear.

“Oh my god, why is this so hard?” he complains.

“That’s what he said,” I joke, and Riggs groans and chuckles at the same time.

“Ask me something you want to know,” he insists.

“Shit, I don’t know... uh... what’s your favorite color?”

He pops his head up off my shoulder again and looks at me like I’ve lost my mind. “That’s the *truth* you want to ask me? I’m taking off my shirt just to make things interesting.”

He sits up some more and grabs the hem of his shirt, tugging it up and somehow managing to get himself tangled in it in the process of pulling it off. He wobbles on my lap, shifting and wiggling against my slowly hardening dick as he lets out muffled curses while he works to free himself from his shirt.

I take pity on him after a few seconds—or maybe I’m taking pity on *myself*—and help him get it off. He flings it aside once he’s free, then stands up. He sways unsteadily, and I reach out to try to keep him from falling. He bats my hands away, the same way he usually does when I touch him casually

at work or during a night out. So apparently cuddling is fine, but keeping him from stumbling and cracking his head on the coffee table is a no? Got it.

“I have to piss.” He shuffles out of the room.

There are at least even odds that he won't come back, so I take one last gulp from the bottle of vodka and then sprawl out on the couch. My bed is too damn far away, and this couch is comfortable enough.

My eyes are just starting to droop closed when Riggs stumbles back into the room. It's probably the booze talking, but I never noticed how soft and creamy his skin looks before. Like milk or Cool Whip or... frosting? Damn, I'm hungry. Would he taste sweet if I licked him?

Wait, shit, *that's* why the stripping thing was a bad idea. I remember now. Kind of.

I know I should sit up to make room for him again, but my body feels too heavy and none of my limbs are feeling all that cooperative about the situation. Riggs doesn't seem to mind though, climbing right on top of me and draping himself over me like a blanket.

“Mmm, you're comfy,” he murmurs, wrapping his arms and legs around me this time like a drunk octopus. “Purple, by the way.”

“Purple?” I echo stupidly. Is that some kind of code for something? I think some people use stoplight colors for kinky sex stuff, is this... is this like that?

“My favorite color,” he says.

“Oh.” I laugh and tentatively wrap my arms around him, bracing for him to go off like a bomb. Instead, he sighs and relaxes against me even more.

“You’re right, s’too hard to think of questions,” he mumbles. “Just tell me something.”

“Hmm,” I hum, my eyelids starting to feel heavy again as I consider what kind of truth I can drop. “I hate chocolate.”

“That’s fucking weird.”

“It’s too sweet, and it coats your tongue until you want to gag.”

He snorts. “Gagging is hot.”

My cock jerks in lazy agreement. “True. But chocolate is still gross.”

Riggs makes a sound, kind of a hum that’s not quite a laugh, and buries his face in the crook of my neck. The warm puff of his breath makes my skin tingle. Apparently, Riggs is a cuddly drunk. Who knew?

“I’ve got one,” he says.

“Oh yeah?” Without thinking, I drag my fingers along his bare skin, following the curve of his spine, and he shivers.

“I cockblocked you out of a threeway tonight.”

I pause with my hand in the middle of his back, trying to sort out what he means in the alcohol sodden depths of my brain.

“What?”

“When you were caroting... Keuriging... fucking *singing*.” I want to laugh at his inability to figure out words, but I’m holding my breath so I won’t miss the actual explanation of his ‘truth.’ “Some dudes wanted to bang you.” His shoulders twitch like he’s trying to shrug.

“And you scared them off?” I guess, and he nods.

“Sorry. Are you mad?”

Am I? I consider it for a second. Instead of drunk cuddling with my normally prickly roommate, I could be banging two dudes right now? I should be pissed, but laughter bubbles up in my throat instead.

“Nah, it’s fine. But why?”

Riggs twitches again. “Roommate night.”

That’s apparently all the explanation I’m going to get, because seconds later, he starts to snore.

Chapter 7

RIGGS

IF I DON'T OPEN my eyes, will the hangover still be able to see me? I'm sure the consequences of my own actions don't follow the *Jurassic Park* T-rex rules, but a guy can enjoy a minute or two of delusional hope, can't he?

I squeeze my eyes closed a little tighter as reluctant consciousness creeps over me and I become more and more aware of the rest of my body. It's not a very pleasant awareness, either. There's a rotten lemon flavor clinging to my tongue, my stomach is tender and already starting to roil even before I've moved a muscle, and I'm feeling oddly claustrophobic. I flex my arms and realize I'm pressed up against something solid. Not just solid—warm and very much alive.

My eyes fly open. *Fucking fuck.*

Shep is slumbering peacefully, his mouth hanging open and his eyelids fluttering. Somehow, we ended up on the couch,

lying face to face with him on the outside and me squished against the back cushions, my arms and legs wrapped around him like I'm a koala and he's my favorite tree.

My dick is rock hard, trapped awkwardly down the leg of my jeans, pulsing against my thigh. My shirt is missing but Shep is still fully clothed, the stiff shape of his erection pressed against me. My nipples tighten and my heart rate speeds up.

Did we fuck?

No, I would remember that. I've never been so drunk that I blacked out sex. I *wish* we had fucked. That would be so much less humiliating than exposing Shep to my shameful secret, my boozy alter ego... Cuddle Slut Riggs. *Shudder.*

A wave of embarrassment washes over me and I scramble to untangle myself from him. When my limbs are free, I put both hands against his stupidly firm chest and give him a hard shove. He tumbles off the couch with a sleepy, confused grunt, and an *oof* when he hits the floor. *Shit.* I cringe as a rush of guilt mixes with the bitter taste of shame and stale alcohol on my tongue.

I lift my head to look over the side of the couch at him, sprawled out on the floor, still blinking awake slowly with confusion.

"Sorry," I mumble, casting a glance around the living room in search of my t-shirt. I notice the half-empty bottle of vodka and my stomach cramps violently, bile rising in my throat.

Shep says something that I don't quite hear as I jump to my feet and sprint to the bathroom. Or maybe he was just laughing at me. It's hard to say. I manage to make it to the toilet just in time to spew the contents of last night's ill-advised binge, and vow to myself that I'm never going to drink that much again.

When my stomach finally settles, I rinse my mouth out and grab my toothbrush. While I'm brushing, I wander back into the living room to make sure I didn't give Shep a concussion or anything when I toppled him off the couch.

He's still lying on the floor, one arm tucked under his head like a pillow, his eyes closed and his shirt rucked up to show off his stomach. Does the man have some kind of topless quota he has to meet each day? Not that I can say much since my shirt is currently missing, but that's hardly the point.

I stand over him for a minute, brushing my teeth and studying him. My official explanation for my creeptastic behavior is that I'm trying to remember what exactly happened after we got home and started drinking straight from the bottle. But I don't actually care that much. We got drunk, Cuddle Slut Riggs made an appearance, and we passed out. I'm sure that's as exciting as things got. I guess the real reason I'm silently studying him while he half-dozes is that I'm trying to figure out Sawyer's comment about liking him.

What does that even mean? Okay, I know what it *means*, obviously, but I can't quite get my head around it. I guess I've never totally understood the concept. I know what it means to want to fuck someone. Hot, horny impulses, getting stuck on

thoughts of licking, sucking, biting, *owning* someone. These are things I understand. But wanting to just... hold someone's hand? Not so much.

“Are you planning to stare at me all morning?” Shep asks without opening his eyes.

“Just waiting to see if I caused permanent brain damage,” I mumble around the toothbrush, turning around and heading back to the bathroom so I can get rid of it and wash my mouth out one more time.

When I return to the living room a second time, Shep is sitting up, his back against the couch, running his hands over his face.

“Hey, boo, you want to start the coffee?” he murmurs with a yawn.

“Boo?” I flatten my lips and raise both eyebrows. “One night of drunken cuddling and you think I'm your boyfriend, gearhead? Why don't *you* start the coffee?”

He snorts. “I would, but you owe me for cockblocking me. I figure coffee is the least you can do.”

In spite of the fact that I feel like roadkill, the suggestive undertone of his words tightens my nipples and makes my still half-hard cock pulse. I'm sure there are more interesting ways I could make up for causing him blue balls.

My brain catches up to exactly what he said before I get the chance to suggest any of those alternative options.

“Shit. I guess I told you about Lewis from the other night?”
I grimace.

“Lewis?” he repeats. “Wait, who’s Lewis? I was talking about the threeway you apparently cost me last night.”

Double shit.

I chuckle awkwardly, dragging my fingers through my unkempt hair and spotting my shirt lying on the floor a few feet away. I pick it up and tug it over my head.

“Um, Lewis was that twink with blindingly blond hair and big blue eyes. I *may* have implied you got fucked by a horse.”

Shep’s eyes go wide, and I brace for the well-deserved cussing out I’m sure he’s about to let fly. He opens his mouth, but instead of calling me a dickhead or any other choice words, he simply barks out a laugh.

“Well, now you definitely owe me some coffee.”

I sigh. I guess I really can’t argue his logic on this one. I shuffle into the kitchen and fumble through his cabinets until I find what I need to start a pot of coffee. While it brews, I lean against the counter and scroll through some rental listings, marking a few to come back to later without much enthusiasm.

On the one hand, I *just* got my shit moved in here, so moving again sounds like a pain in the ass. But I also don’t want to overstay my welcome and make things weird at work. Not to mention this new—well, new-ish, anyway—undertone of sexual tension between us. That’s bound to make things messy eventually.

The last thing I need is Shep's love potion dick anywhere near me.

Then again, if anyone is immune to that thing, it's probably me...

SHEP

The smell of the coffee brewing is *almost* enough to get my ass up off the floor. My shoulder is aching from the way I hit the ground, but aside from that, I'm suffering a hell of a lot more from all the booze last night than from Riggs shoving me off the couch while I was still asleep.

Unfortunately, even the hangover from hell isn't enough to convince my libido to cool it this morning, which is the real reason I'm still sitting here instead of in the kitchen with Riggs. My cock is rock hard, tenting the tight confines of my wrinkled jeans. I press the heel of my hand against the base of my erection and hiss a gasp between clenched teeth.

I haven't gotten laid in over a week, which might actually be a record for me. My body is fucking *primed*, which is probably why I've got my wires all crossed about my roomie this morning. I'm suffering from serious cum backup and he just happened to be the guy who slept plastered to me all night, his arms and legs wrapped around me in a vice grip while he mumbled in his sleep and occasionally ground his massive erection against my thigh.

A heated shiver runs down my spine and constricts around my balls. I palm myself through the denim again, horny

enough that I'm hardly bothered by the sharp outline of my zipper biting into the bare skin of my cock or the lack of breathing room my jeans allow for. I let my head loll back and jerk my hips, dragging the length of my erection against my hand. With Riggs's cedar and motor oil scent clinging to my shirt and my skin—hell, I'm pretty sure it's even embedded in the couch after a single night of him sleeping on it—I can't keep images of him out of my head as my eyes drift closed.

“You coming?” he calls from the kitchen, and I bark out a laugh, wrenching my hand off my dick.

Almost.

“I'm, ehm... just gonna shower first.” A shower, yes, that's exactly what I need.

I heave myself up off the floor and shuffle down the hallway to the single shared bathroom. I crank the shower nozzle to 'hotter than Satan's asshole' and then undress while it heats up. Shedding my Riggs-scented shirt feels like peeling off a layer of insanity. I can't fuck Riggs.

Firstly, because he pretty strongly implied that he only tops. So, I literally can't fuck him.

That doesn't mean he can't fuck me.

My dick jerks so hard at the rogue thought that I gasp, then cover the sound with a cough even though there's no one in here to hear it except for me. I've only bottomed a few times, and it's not like I'm *against* it, I'm just not so sure I'm interested in taking Riggs's footlong monster cock. And I'm

sure my erection and racing heart will get that memo *any* second.

I undo my jeans and let out a groan of relief as my cock is released from the stranglehold. My pants join my shirt in the hamper, and I wrap my hand around the base of my throbbing erection, giving myself a few slow, teasing strokes.

The air in the bathroom heats around me, becoming heavy with steam. I pull back the shower curtain and step inside, returning to my list of reasons I can't fool around with Riggs while the scalding water cascades over my skin.

One: we're not sexually compatible.

Two: he's kind of scary.

I chuckle, then push my face under the stream of water for a few seconds before reaching for the bottle of bodywash on the shower ledge. Sure, Riggs has big 'fuck around and find out' energy, but if I'm honest, that's what attracted me to him the first time we met. Not *attracted*... more in a friendship way. Fuck, who am I kidding? Yeah, his feral vibe has always been a turn-on in a fear boner kind of way.

He seems like the kind of crazy that would be absolutely wild in bed. Shit, maybe I *do* have a type. In which case...

Three: exposure to my cursed dick might push him over the edge into crazytown.

I'm still on the fence about whether I believe in curses, but the problem is worthy of concern.

Four: he's my roommate and things could get weird.

It's a solid list full of valid points, but my dick remains unconvinced. Fine, there's only one way to handle this situation. One jerk-off fantasy to get it out of my system and then it's over. Right? Right.

I fill my palm with soap then put the bottle back. My eager cock jumps in my grasp as soon as I wrap my hand around my shaft again. My skin tingles and my breath quickens. I close my eyes and let myself picture Riggs in the shower with me, his dark hair waterlogged, his skin slick, and a wicked look in his eyes as he stares up at me from his knees.

I pump my cock faster, suds forming along my length and running down to cling to my balls. In my mind, Riggs licks his pretty pink lips, then gives me one of those dangerous, toothy grins before wrapping them around my dick.

“Fuck,” I murmur, my hips snapping forward.

It's easy to imagine the way his eyes would flash and his throat would constrict with a gag as I filled his mouth too deeply without warning, the heat of his tongue stroking over my length. I'm so wrapped up in the fantasy, I can almost feel the bite of his fingernails into the skin of my ass, forcing me to hold still and let him set the pace.

I jerk myself faster, tightening my grip. What kinds of hungry, desperate sounds would Riggs make while he sucks me? Would he keep his eyes on me the whole time, getting more and more turned on by how easy it is to take me apart with nothing but his tongue and the hot suction of his mouth?

The Riggs in my imagination reaches down to wrap a hand around his own cock, jerking himself wildly while slurping eagerly, taking my length down his throat again and again. My toes curl against the slick porcelain of the tub beneath my feet. My skin is so oversensitive that every splash of water feels like the caress of his tongue against my nipples, my abs, the head of my cock, and everywhere in between.

I muffle a moan into my fist, clenching my eyes shut tighter and fucking into my other hand with abandon, until the tight coil of electricity in my gut explodes without warning and I come so hard it feels like my balls are about to be turned inside out. My cum hits the shower wall in forceful spurts, my panting gasps harsh to my own ears as I sag forward, hips jerking and hand still moving over my pulsing cock.

I stroke myself until I'm drained and oversensitive, before finally letting go. I came so damn hard I'm a little lightheaded when I open my eyes, half surprised to realize that I'm actually alone in the shower.

Alone in the shower and officially over this stupid little fantasy. Riggs is my roommate, coworker, and friend, adding 'fuck buddy' to that list would be a bad idea. Unless he really wanted to...

I force that thought away, along with any lingering ones involving mildly threatening twink mechanics, and finish washing up. With the last bit of soap washed away, along with all evidence of my shower fun, I turn off the water and reach for a towel.

Normally, I walk around naked after I shower. Seriously, is there anything worse than putting fresh clothes on when you're still damp? The answer is no. But I'm a considerate roommate and all that shit, so I wrap the towel around my waist before opening the bathroom door.

I'm not sure if it was the shower or the epic orgasm, but there's definitely a pep in my step as I follow the delicious smell of fresh coffee straight into the kitchen. Riggs looks up from scrolling through his phone when I walk in, taking in my semi-nudity with a slow perusal before returning his eyes to his screen. Ouch. Apparently, there's a fifth very good reason to add to my list. He's not interested.

It's good. It's better that he's *not* going to be in the shower, jerking his massive cock and thinking about me. I clear my throat and he scoots over an inch to give me access to the coffee maker without looking up.

"Thanks." I reach up into the cabinet to grab a mug.

A smile twitches on Riggs's lips and he finally stuffs his phone into his pocket. "You're welcome. I assume my cockblocking debt has been repaid?"

I pause with the mug halfway to my lips and grin.

"Not quite," I tease, and he quirks an eyebrow, waiting for me to go on. "Tell you what, come with me today and we'll call it even."

"Come where?" He cocks his head curiously.

"You'll see."

Riggs snorts. “Well, I guess I have no choice.”

I smile even wider and lean against the counter next to him, my bare shoulder bumping against his. “I guess not.”

Chapter 8

RIGGS

I GLANCE UP AT the tree and smile when I spot Vel chilling out, surveying his new little kingdom.

“He’s not going to shit on my car or anything, is he?” Shep asks, following my gaze to the branch where Vel is perched, which just so happens to hang over the driveway.

I shrug. “Only if you deserve it.”

“I guess he wouldn’t be the first one,” he says with a chuckle, coming around to the driver side of the car and holding his hand out palm up like he’s expecting something.

“Can I help you?” I ask, eyeing his open hand.

“I’m driving.”

“Um, no, you’re not.” If he had asked nicely, I probably would have given him the keys. Why the fuck should I care which one of us drives? But I already gave in on the coffee thing this morning, and I’m not about to set a precedent where

this horny gearhead thinks he can boss me around and I'll just take it. I don't care how threadbare and tiny his towel was this morning, he can ask correctly or get fucked.

I set my jaw stubbornly and cross my arms, giving him to the count of three to either ask the right way for the keys or get his ass into the passenger seat.

One.

“You don't even know where we're going,” he argues.

I don't budge or respond.

Two.

He huffs and drops his hand.

“Please?” he finally says.

“Please, what?”

“Please can I drive your car so I can surprise you with where we're going?”

Full sentences, what a fucking revelation.

I relax my stance and give him a toothy grin while I reach into my pocket to pull out the keys.

“Sure thing, *baby*.” The term of endearment is meant to be a taunt since the dumbass called me ‘boo’ this morning, but when it falls off my tongue, something soft flickers in Shep's eyes. I frown and open my mouth to backpedal or make another joke to play it off, but nothing comes out. So instead, I clear my throat and toss him the keys.

He catches them midair, and I go around the front of my Mustang to climb in on the other side. Once I'm in, the engine rumbles to life with a deep purr, the familiar sound managing to rattle loose the weird moment of tension between us.

“Notice how there's no graffiti on your garage door with words like ‘man whore,’ and your porch is free of desperate, crying twinks,” I point out. “Maybe I did you a favor by chasing away a conquest or two.”

“That may all be true, but my dick isn't too fond of logic, so don't expect any thank you notes as long as he calls the shots.”

I know I shouldn't glance at his lap, but my eyes are quicker than my brain. At least he's fully dressed now.

“And how long do you plan to let your dick do most of your thinking?” I tease in a monotone.

“No fucking clue. Maybe forever.”

I huff out a sound of mixed amusement and irritation. “Sounds about right,” I mutter.

“You have a problem with my sex life?” He glances over at me with one eyebrow arched as he slows to a stop at a traffic light.

Do I? In theory, no. He's an adult, it's all consensual, so none of it is any of my business. And it's not like I'm a virgin or a saint. So why does this line of conversation have me bristling?

“Why would I?” I’m aware it’s a non-answer, but seriously, why the fuck would I care? If he has an answer to that question, I’m all ears.

He grunts and presses his foot to the gas pedal again.

After a few blocks, he turns into a strip mall. There’s a carpet cleaner, an empty storefront, and a shop with a neon sign that says Ink Slingers above it. I’m guessing we’re not here to schedule a carpet cleaning. Shep pulls into a parking spot right in front of the tattoo shop, next to three Harleys, all glistening in the late-morning sun.

I’m not drooling, *you’re* drooling. Okay, maybe I’m drooling just a little.

I get out and stop to admire the bikes, my fingers itching to touch and tinker with them, my bones vibrating like I’m already straddling one of these beasts, roaring down the open road with the wind in my face. Once I’m fully settled in at Shep’s, I really need to find the time to get back to work on my bike. Putting her together from the ground up has been a hell of a lot harder than I thought it would be though, and it’s not exactly the kind of thing you can guess at as you go along.

“You coming?” Shep calls, and I jerk my attention away from the motorcycles to find him waiting by the door to the shop.

“Yeah.” I hurry to catch up. “What exactly are we doing here?” I ask as I reach the door and he pulls it open, waving for me to go ahead.

“Matching tattoos,” he says, and I stumble over my feet.

“Um, no. Try again. My creamy white ass is perfect as is, no artwork required.”

Shep drops his gaze to my backside, his eyes lingering for several seconds. The unmistakably hungry look on his face heats my skin and tightens something deep in my gut.

“No arguments here,” he murmurs, and I make a sound that’s meant to be a laugh but somehow ends up sounding more like a pant.

“Hey there, Sheppy. We didn’t have an appointment today, did we?” A deep voice with a southern drawl interrupts us before I have the chance to dissect Shep’s flirtatious comment. Was it even flirtatious? Maybe he was just being Shep.

He looks past me, giving the man a friendly nod, and I spin around. If I’d had to describe this dude based solely on his voice, the police sketch would have been pretty much dead on. He’s leaning against the railing that surrounds the raised portion of the shop, both arms covered in tattoos down to his knuckles, with the kind of square steel jaw that you just know could take a punch from Chuck Norris himself without so much as a bruise, and a red cowboy hat perched on top of his head.

“Hey, Tex. No appointment, I just figured I’d take a gamble and see if anyone had time to squeeze me in.”

Tex. A lot of thought must have gone into that generic-ass nickname. I fight the urge to roll my eyes as the big ‘ol burly

Texan flashes what is no doubt his best County Fair winning smile and looks at Shep like he's a steak dinner.

"No problem. Give me a few minutes to clean up, and then we can talk about what you're looking for," Tex says, licking his lips, then pushing away from the railing and walking away with a swagger.

"Aw, did you bring me here so I could cockblock you again and save you from that thirsty cowboy and his grating drawl?" I tease in a low voice.

"Grating?" Shep repeats with a chuckle. "Honey, that man's voice is like melted butter, and he can pour it over me anytime he wants."

I press my lips into a thin line. "Right. Seriously, do you need me here for any of this?"

He drops the playful grin, replacing it with a little wrinkle between his eyebrows. "Well, technically no, but the company while I get inked would be nice."

My mouth falls open. He dragged me along just for the company? He could have called his brother or pretty much anybody else, but he wanted *me* here to kill the time with him? I close my mouth and clear my throat.

"Okay."

His smile returns. He puts both hands on my shoulders and pushes me forward gently, steering me towards the few steps that lead up to the platformed area of the shop. The closest chair is occupied by a man who looks a hell of a lot like

Henry, but with silver hair and a more laid-back vibe. A petite blond man is hunched over his arm, the buzz of his tattoo needle permeating the space. They're both wearing motorcycle boots, and I notice a leather jacket slung over a nearby chair with a large skull patch on the back.

"Those bikes outside belong to you guys?" I guess, and the blond man looks up from his work.

"You better believe it," he answers. "Beauties, aren't they?"

"Hell yeah, they are," I agree, looking over my shoulder in the direction of the large front window that the motorcycles are still visible through.

"Arrow," the man in the chair introduces himself with a tilt of his head.

"Jag," the artist says, jerking his chin in an up-nod.

"Jag?" I repeat. "As in jag-off?"

A bark of laughter from farther down the way draws my attention, and I look over to see a mountain of a dude, with a dark, bushy beard and pink socks peeking out from his steel toed motorcycle boots.

"He's got you there, Jags," he says, and Jag pauses tattooing long enough to hold up a middle finger in the man's direction.

"Jag as in *Jaguar*," he corrects, twisting in his seat to show me the jaguar tattoo that's wrapped around his right bicep. "You ride?"

“Sometimes. I don’t have a bike right now... or, well, I do but it’s more *pieces* of a bike than an actual bike,” I explain, and both of them nod in understanding.

“You here for some ink?” The bearded man rolls towards us, not bothering to get up from his seat, eyeing my exposed bits of unmarked skin with interest.

“Me? No. I’m here to hold this big baby’s hand in case he starts to cry or anything.” I pat Shep on the shoulder.

“You’re a virgin, aren’t you?” He grins, and I snort.

“Not so much, my Viking dude.”

“Hero,” he corrects, offering me his name. I’m guessing it’s more of a club nickname judging by the matching jacket and patch he’s wearing. “And I meant tattoos... piercings?” His eyes drop to the bulge in my jeans with interest.

“The Beast is just fine the way it is,” I assure him.

“The Beast?” Jag and Arrow echo at the same time.

“You named your dick?” Shep asks with a laugh.

I scoff and give them all the same answer. “Yes.”

“Interesting,” Jag murmurs, still smiling and eyeing me.

“Actually...” I say, and then immediately wonder if I should just keep my mouth shut, or if Shep bringing me here was some kind of nudge from the universe. “I’ve tossed around the idea of a tongue piercing once or twice.”

I stick my tongue out and run it over my lips absently, trying to imagine what it would feel like to have a titanium

barbell through it.

“You could totally pull it off,” Hero says.

“What do you think?” I turn to Shep.

“You’re asking me?” The shock is clear in his tone.

“Don’t let it go to your head or anything. It’s not like I’m asking for permission, just the opinion of a... friend.” I grit out the word between my teeth. Ugh, why does that feel so sappy to say? Like we should be braiding flowers into each other’s hair or staying up late whispering secrets like a couple of preteens.

“Hell yeah. I think you should go for it, *bestie*.” He emphasizes the word and I groan. “It would be hot.”

“I’m already hot,” I argue. It’s not arrogant if it’s true. “You know what? Fuck it. I’m going to do it.”

“Kick-ass. I’ll go let Brick know he’s got a customer,” Hero says.

“I told you to stop calling me that stupid name. It’s *Felix*.” Another man appears from behind a curtain I hadn’t even noticed. He’s just as petite as I am, maybe an inch shorter than Jaguar, and definitely no more than a hundred pounds soaking wet. His short auburn hair is neatly combed, and aside from the rainbow-colored hoop through his septum, he looks completely untouched by tattoo or piercing needles as far as I can tell.

“You can’t fight it, Brick. Embrace the nickname, it means you’re one of us,” Jag advises.

“Goody,” Brick mutters before zeroing in on me. “Hello, how can I hole you today?”

“I want my tongue pierced,” I answer.

“Coolio.”

He waves me forward through the curtain, cutting us off from the rest of the shop. I don’t know why, but I was expecting it to be a little closet or something on this side, but it’s just another room with the same fluorescent overhead lights and walls filled with photos of tattoos and piercings that have likely been done here over the years.

Brick points to the chair in the middle of the room, then turns towards the waist high roller cabinet that looks exactly like what we all have at Big Bull for our tools, except his is decked out with an array of colorful stickers and artwork. He pulls open the top drawer, and instead of wrenches and lug nuts, it’s filled with boxes of rubber gloves and unopened packs of needles.

I hop into the chair, ignoring the nervous sweat that’s forming along the back of my neck. It’s a quick pinch. How bad could it be? I take a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart while he busies himself getting prepared.

He hands me a consent form and starts to rattle off aftercare instructions and all the associated risks. I nod along, hoping the warnings about tongue amputations and sepsis are just industry humor.

“Ready?” Brick asks, holding up the ominous looking clamp in one hand and a needle in the other.

“Yup,” I answer, impressed by how sure I sound when there’s at least a fifty-fifty chance that this impulsive decision is going to end with me fainting like one of those dramatic goats as soon as the needle touches my tongue.

I stick my tongue out and he clamps it tightly.

“So, you Shep’s boyfriend, or what?” he asks.

Laughing with your tongue in a vice grip isn’t easy, but I manage it. “*Ahefmomanthedeenalthoebebody?*” I mutter with exasperation. This is worse than when the dentist tries to make small talk while he’s drilling your teeth.

Brick chuckles. “I’m fucking with you. I know who you are.”

“*Ewdo?*” I pull my eyebrows together in confusion.

“Sure, you’re the badass diesel mechanic he can never shut up about.”

“*Waaaa...*” Brick shoves the needle through my tongue before I can finish clumsily trying to ask what the fuck he’s talking about. Why would Shep be talking about me at all? Let alone to a bunch of horny tattoo artist bikers?

“Hard part’s over,” he says.

Is it? Because it kind of feels like I’m wading into the hard part right now. Or maybe that ominous feeling is just a mixture

of my hangover and the adrenaline rush that's threatening to make me hurl. It's anybody's guess really.

SHEP

"I'm ready for you," Tex calls out from his workstation just a couple of minutes after Riggs disappeared behind the curtain.

Everything is tidy and smells like the lavender disinfectant they use here. Tex's hat is hanging off the coat hook on the wall now, right next to his club jacket. He's poised and ready with his sketch pad for me to tell him what I'm looking for. We've been working on a piece for the past few months whenever I've had time to swing by, so he has the previous sketches pulled up as well for reference.

I tug my shirt off and drop it on the empty chair, then hop into the tattoo chair while I describe what I'm looking for today. He nods along, already sketching before I'm even finished talking.

"So, that's the famous Riggs, huh?" he asks once I've gone quiet to give him a few minutes to work on the drawing.

"Is he famous?" I ask with amusement. If he is, that's news to me. I guess it wouldn't surprise me all that much though. Not sure there's much Riggs *could* do to surprise me at this point actually. When you're always on your toes, it's hard to get knocked off balance by anything.

“You talk about him a lot, that’s all,” Tex says with a shrug, his eyes fixed on the screen of his digital sketch pad.

“Huh.” Do I? I guess I hadn’t noticed. At least not any more than I talk about anyone else at the shop. Maybe I’ve mentioned some of his funnier scathing comebacks here and there.

He flicks his gaze up towards me and licks his lips. “You know, I’ve been meaning to ask... have you ever been to that Italian place over in Belland?”

The change of topic nearly gives me whiplash. “The Italian...?”

“‘Cause, if not, I thought maybe you and I could go sometime. Or even if you have, we could still go. I doubt they have a one-time only policy or anything.” He ends his short rambling with a breathy, nervous laugh, a blush creeping over his cheeks.

Oh. *Oh.*

“Uh...” For some reason, my eyes dart towards the curtain where Riggs is getting pierced before returning to Tex. “You’re sweet.”

His shoulders sag a little and his lips twist into a wry smile. “Sweet is about as useful as a trapdoor in a canoe, isn’t it?”

I chortle at the expression. “I just don’t really date. Plus, my dick may or may not be cursed. I’m still looking into it.”

His bushy eyebrows knit together with confusion. “No hard feelings. I’m sure your dick curse will be lifted by the right

prince.” There’s a wistful edge to his words, and he punctuates them with a sigh before pulling himself back together into the confident biker cowboy I’m used to, flipping his pad around to show me the sketch. “How’s this?”

“That’s perfect.” I settle back and lift my arm to give him space to work, while he prints out the sketch onto transfer paper.

The flutter of the curtain catches my eye a couple of minutes later, and Riggs emerges looking a little pale but otherwise fine.

“How’d it go?” I ask.

“Pe-ce,” he mumbles, giving me a thumbs-up and sticking out his tongue to show me the metal stud in the center of it.

It’s swollen right now, obviously, but it’s definitely going to look hot once it starts to heal up. I’ve always wondered what it would feel like to get head from a guy with a tongue piercing. The offhand thought sends a jolt of heat through me, giving new life to the fantasy I tried to shake off after my shower this morning.

Riggs looks down at the tattoos along the right side of my ribcage, right where Tex is about to add the new one today. Surprise flickers in his eyes and he reaches out to run his finger over them. Goose bumps skitter along my skin, and my cock swells at the unexpected gentleness of his touch, maybe because it’s such a contrast to the rough way I imagined it this morning.

“I thought it would be fun to memorialize my friends by getting their pets tattooed on me,” I explain. “Denali and Bunny.” I point at the cartoonish replicas of Steele and Porter’s dogs. “Nigel.” Gates and Tal’s foul-mouthed parrot. “That fat little fucker is Hamlet, obviously.” Tex rolls over with the sketch he just finished preparing for me. “And today, Angie is being added to the mix.”

Riggs looks at the drawing of a fluffy Highland cow wearing a crown of flowers and barks out a laugh.

“What about Vel?” he asks, already sounding less like his tongue is five sizes too big.

“Next time,” I promise. “Plenty of space for him at the bottom.”

I’m almost expecting him to roll his eyes at how sappy and sentimental the whole idea is, but he just nods eagerly at the mention of his freaky crow being included.

“Ready?” Tex asks after he finishes placing the outline and sanitizing my skin.

“Ready,” I confirm, already relaxing in anticipation of the familiar bite of the needle.

“Do you need me to hold your hand?” Riggs mocks.

I play along, hitting him with my best puppy dog eyes. “Would you?”

I grab his hand and he stiffens for a second. I’m sure he’s about to pull away and possibly smack me for invading his personal space, but after a second, he relaxes and rolls his eyes

at me with a quiet huff I almost don't hear. Instead of jerking his hand out of mine, he links his fingers between mine with a sassy, challenging look. He's calling my bluff.

Ha. If he thinks he's going to win a round of chicken with me, he's sorely mistaken. I squeeze his hand and give him the best look of faux sincerity I can muster.

"Fine, but now we're seriously even," he grumbles, his lips twitching like he's fighting back another smile.

"Sure. Assuming you don't cockblock me again," I tease.

"No promises," he mutters.

Chapter 9

RIGGS

“HOT MEAT COMING THROUGH,” Shep warns, and I spare him a reluctant laugh at the cleverness of that innuendo.

He winks and skirts around me to set the plate of burgers and brats on the counter. Plus some grilled eggplants for Red and Journey. He drags his free hand casually along my back, and I’m not even surprised by the goose bumps that skitter down my spine or the uptick in my heartbeat anymore. It’s been almost a month since I moved into his spare bedroom, and I swear, the man cannot seem to keep his hands to himself.

Not like he’s a creep constantly pawing at me or anything. If that were the case, I would have put him in his place and moved the fuck out in a hot second. I’m not even sure he realizes how often he touches me—putting his hand on my back when he leans around me to grab something out of the cupboards, or mindlessly picking a piece of lint off my clothes. The first week or two, I figured that all the casual

touches would be like a vaccine, making me immune. Somehow though, they seem to be having the opposite effect.

My nipples tighten and my cock swells as Shep's chest bumps against my back when he reaches over me to get the paper plates out of the cabinet.

"I could have done that," I mutter.

"Yeah, it's almost like you *want* to put your hands all over your prickly little roommate," Auggie says, his eyes bouncing between Shep and me like he thinks if he looks long enough, we'll confess that we've been fucking this whole time.

I roll my eyes, making sure Auggie sees and knows just how ridiculous I find this ongoing obsession he has with whether or not I'm going to stick my dick in Shep. I pulled *one* stupid butt plug-related prank at work, a *year* ago, and apparently that's equivalent to carving a heart with mine and Shep's initials in it.

Come to think of it, I wonder what Shep did with those plugs. Did he use any of them? I glance over my shoulder at my roomie curiously. He's put a few feet of space between us, leaning against the opposite counter now, without bothering to acknowledge Auggie's taunts.

Tallahassee tugs open the refrigerator and pulls out a couple of beers, handing one to his husband, Gates, and cracking the other open for himself. I wrinkle my nose at the thought of alcohol. I'm still not over the vodka night. Gates hooks a finger through the belt loop on Tal's jeans and drags him closer, searing a kiss into his lips.

I tilt my head, studying the interaction with the same curiosity as the night I watched Sawyer and West at Wooley's. I feel a little like Jane Goodall with the apes, dissecting the behavior as an outsider. Sex, I get. Obviously. But kissing is something that's always been a head scratcher for me. What exactly is the appeal in mashing your food hole against someone else's food hole?

When I was a teenager, my sister and I went on a double date to a drive-in theater. She spent the entire night in the backseat with her tongue in Brandon Craigson's mouth while his twin brother, Simon, and I shared popcorn in the front seat and traded a couple of kisses before the activity quickly became boring for me. I was turned on, but I wasn't exactly going to ask the guy for a handjob with our siblings a foot away. But it seemed like for most people, kissing was an activity of its own, not just a necessary step before getting off together.

I asked my sister about it later—what the appeal of kissing was. She went on and on about butterflies in her stomach and tingly feelings that were more than just wanting to get naked. If anything, I understood the kissing issue even *less* after that. So I gave up trying to figure it out and mostly avoided it all together. I have to admit, it's still a puzzle that I'd love to solve.

“You want a drink, Riggs?” Shep offers, nudging his way into the fridge once Tal and Gates stop swapping spit in front of it.

“A cold soda would be great,” I answer, finishing my work of mixing a bowl of potato salad.

“Living together is going well, I take it?” Steele guesses, grabbing a couple of plates and filling them with food for himself and his husband, Porter.

“Eh.” I feign indifference and shrug.

Shep scoffs. “I’m amazing and I’ve ruined him for all other roommates.”

“Men always think that, and it’s never true.” I tut.

He grins, refusing to let my teasing detachment get to him. Honestly, living with him has been pretty good so far. My worry that he would keep me up night after night with a parade of moaning fuck partners hasn’t come true at all. In fact, he hasn’t brought a single guy home since I moved in. Not that I expect that to last forever. I have no clue what’s caused him to want to spend every night vegging on the couch with me instead of going out and picking someone up, but sooner or later, he’s going to get back to his regular schedule of frequent, casual sex and ensuing property damage.

All in all, I can’t complain. Except for his insistence on being social—like today’s cookout, for example—he’s been a good roommate. I would even go as far as calling us friends at this point. And it’s not nearly as gross as I thought it would be to... *care* about him. A little, anyway. Like, I hope he doesn’t die. I tug at the suddenly suffocating collar of my shirt and clear my throat, as if everyone in the room could hear the uncomfortably mushy direction of my thoughts.

“Here.” Shep nudges my arm with the cold aluminum of a soda can.

“Thanks.”

Everyone fills their plates and then filters outside into the backyard one by one. Shep went all out making it nice back there for the barbeque today. He set up a couple of large umbrellas to create some shade and filled up a kiddie pool for the dogs and Hamlet to stay cool in. I even pitched in by picking up some outdoor string lights and hanging them around the patio, so it’ll be nice once the sun goes down later.

“Thanks for helping out with everything today,” Shep says when it’s just the two of us left in the kitchen.

I wave a hand dismissively, hoping he doesn’t notice the uncomfortable way my face heats. “Don’t mention it.” I grab a paper plate and start assembling a cheeseburger with the toppings I like. “Is your brother still coming by today? Or did he end up having to work?”

“He should be here.” He lifts his arm and glances at his bare wrist, sighing with exasperation. “*Sometime*. I would know exactly when if I still had my watch.”

I chortle. “It’s a game for him now. The harder you try to hide it, the more fun it is for him to find it.”

I don’t know why he’s so salty about Vel’s new hobby. He always brings the watch back after a day or two... if only so Shep can hide it again and they can play another round.

The sound of a car outside announces Axel's arrival, followed by the sound of the front door swinging open a minute later. There's more than one set of footsteps that clomp down the hallway towards us. I'm about to ask Shep if he knew his brother was bringing anyone, but before I get the chance, Axel rounds the corner into the kitchen with a couple of twinks in tow.

They're both dressed like they're here for a pool party, wearing tropical shirts with the buttons completely undone, and swim trunks. Axel has an arm around one of them while the other lowers his rainbow rimmed sunglasses and looks around the kitchen for a moment before his gaze lands on Shep. A slow, flirtatious smile spreads over his lips.

"Wow, you two really *are* identical," Thirsty Beach Barbie says, tacking on a little giggle at the end, just in case we weren't aware that the comment was meant to be horny as fuck.

I snort. "They're twins."

Blondie's gaze flickers to me with a momentary flash of surprise, like he didn't realize I was standing literally *right here* while he undressed Shep with his eyes.

"Didn't know you were bringing anybody," Shep says, but the way he's eyeing Blondie up, it's obvious he doesn't mind that his brother decided to bring an eager little snack, potluck style.

"Oh yeah, this is Tate." Axel introduces the man tucked against him, then points at the spare twink. "And his cousin,

Drew.” He waggles his eyebrows at Shep over Tate’s head.
Subtle.

A feeling I don’t really have a name for tightens my chest and makes my jaw tick, my teeth meeting with an audible click. The food on my plate is suddenly a hell of a lot less appetizing too, but I’m not about to dump the whole thing in the trash. The thought of shoving a handful of potato salad right into Drew’s face occurs to me, and I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t tempting. Except he hasn’t done anything wrong. So what if he’s dressed like he’s never been to a cookout before and has a hard-on for Shep after a single glance?

Shep probably needs to get laid, and the whole cockblocking prank is played out at this point. So, whatever, good luck to Drew and here’s hoping he’s more mentally stable than Shep’s previous conquests.

Thoughts and fucking prayers to them both.

SHEP

Riggs turns on his heel and stalks out of the kitchen, slamming the back door behind himself on his way out. I crane my neck and watch through the window as he tosses his plate onto the outdoor table, spilling most of the contents onto the table and the ground. The huskies and Hamlet all come running, but Vel beats them to it, landing on the table and spreading his wings with a loud *caw* to scare the other animals away from the spilled food he clearly intends to eat himself.

“That was weird,” Tate says, lowering his sunglasses the same way Drew did when they came into the kitchen and looking out the window at the mele as well.

“Yeah, Riggs is kind of like that,” Axel says with a shrug, and I bristle, whipping my head back around.

“Riggs isn’t *weird*.” If you want to get technical about it, he’s different from most people, and I’ve probably called him weird more than once to his face. But I’m not about to let my brother, or anyone else, stand here and say it about him behind his back.

Drew clears his throat and steps closer until he’s right up in my space. He smells like a mixture of coconut sunscreen and something fruity. It’s not bad, but it’s a little much, and for some reason all I can think about is how nice Riggs always smells without it ever being overpowering. It’s been over a month since I’ve gotten any action that wasn’t from my own right hand though, so even if his scent is sticking in my throat a bit, my cock still perks up and takes notice of the way he’s looking at me.

“Do you have anything to drink?” he asks with an overly sweet lilt to his voice.

“Uh, yeah, of course.” I step back, reclaiming the space between us and spinning to open the refrigerator. I bend over and stick my head inside, studying the contents longer than necessary while I take a deep breath.

Drew is hot and I’m horny. I’m *way* beyond horny, actually. I woke up this morning humping my fucking pillow, and even

after I jerked one out in the shower, I've still been sporting wood most of the day. I don't even know why I've gone so long without looking for a hookup. I guess the time has just kind of gone by. Riggs and I have fallen into a routine, too. After work, we swing by the grocery store and pick out something to cook for dinner, then we spend a couple of hours watching bad horror movies or in the garage together working on his bike. It's been nice just hanging out and not constantly thinking about getting anyone into my bed, or what destruction might emerge in the wake of each fleeting orgasm.

Seriously though, it's time. It's *past* time for me to break this uncharacteristic bout of celibacy. And Drew checks all the important boxes. *Hot. Interested.* And... yup, that's about it. So, head in the game, dude.

"Soda, beer, water?" I offer the options, already grabbing a beer for Axel, since I know that's what he'll want. Tate and Drew both ask for water, so I snag those as well. I pass out the drinks, then nod towards the food on the counter and tell them all to help themselves.

By the time the four of us head out back a few minutes later, Riggs's food is all cleaned up. Vel is still hopping around the table picking up crumbs, while the dogs watch from a safe distance, eyeing the bird with concern. Hamlet seems to have grown bored of the whole thing and is lying in the pool, grunting happily.

I grab a seat, and to my surprise, Drew plops right down on my lap. He wiggles his tight little ass, and my cock swells in

reaction to the friction, my eyes involuntarily darting across the table to Riggs, who's sipping his soda and watching Hamlet flop around in the water.

“Do you know when Riggs's birthday is? He won't tell us,” Journey asks.

I frown, trying to think about if it's ever come up before. “Uh... no, I don't think so.”

Riggs grins, but keeps his attention fixed across the yard like his life depends on it.

“I wasn't born, I was spawned,” he jokes in an ominous tone.

“All hail,” I say dryly.

He chuckles and finally turns to look in my direction, his eyes flicking briefly to Drew. His lips curl up a little more, but this time it's more of a sneer than a smile. Even without him uttering a word, I swear I can hear him mocking Drew with his eyes. He darts his tongue out to lick a stray droplet of soda from his lips, and his fully healed tongue stud glints in the sunlight.

Why does he care? Is he really just offended by my sex life, or does he have something against Drew personally? I put an arm around Drew's slim waist and rest my hand on his bare belly. He giggles when I drag my thumb along the patch of skin below his belly button. I can already tell by the way he's melting against me and wiggling on my lap that he'll be sweet as pie in bed. He'll beg me to toss him around and plow his

tight little ass until his throat is raw from screaming my name all night. My dick is really fucking on board with that idea too, already aching hard.

But, for some reason, as the afternoon drags on, I can't keep myself from watching Riggs and wondering what it would be like to fuck someone who wasn't quite so sweet and pliant. What would it be like to let *him* manhandle *me*?

The longer I think about it, the more annoyed I am at Riggs for planting the thought in my subconscious in the first place, just by being so... *Riggs*. The thought digs its claws deeper into my brain with every passing second, impossible to dislodge no matter how hard I try, until I'm not even sure if fucking Drew will shake it loose.

So what will?

Chapter 10

RIGGS

SOAPY WATER SLOSHES OUT of the sink and splashes over the front of my shirt as I scrub the bowl in my hand possibly a little too vigorously. But hey, if you're going to scrub the dishes daintily, why even bother? Am I right? It's just good sense.

I jerk my head towards the window that overlooks the backyard. It's like a fucking muscle twitch, uncontrollable and completely random. It has nothing to do with the fact that the guys all cleared out thirty minutes ago, including Axel and Tate. But Drew with his do-me eyes and inability to sit in his own damn chair is still here, *still* perched on Shep's lap like he has been all afternoon.

I wish they would just hurry up and fuck already.

Or not.

Whatever.

Their sex life is of absolutely no interest to me.

I return to my scrubbing, going at it hard enough that I start to get a pain in my elbow. It's a common ailment. Dish Elbow. That's how you know you're actually washing your dishes hard enough.

The sound of the door opening startles me, and the bowl slips out of my fingers, splashing into the lukewarm, soapy sink water and creating a tidal wave that soaks not only my shirt, but my pants too this time. It immediately seeps through, making my shirt cling to my skin and soaking my jeans to make my underwear beneath damp.

I look over my shoulder, a teasing jab on the tip of my tongue for Shep about how long it's taking him to close the deal. But it's not my roommate standing in the doorway. Drew draws up short, blinking at me with surprise, his steps stuttering.

“Oh, I didn't know anyone was still here.”

I flash a toothy smile at him, taking possibly a little too much pleasure in the slight widening of his eyes and the way he rears back like he thinks I might come at him like a wild animal.

“I live here,” I bite out the words.

“Oh,” he says again, and then just stands there silently. Is he waiting for me to say something else? Does he expect me to offer to leave so they can fuck? I hold back a disbelieving snort. They're welcome to do whatever they please, but I'm not about to clear out of my own house. Well, *Shep's* house, but I pay rent and I'm not going anywhere.

“I probably shouldn’t say anything, but...” I bite my lip and dart a strategic glance towards the door behind him like I’m afraid Shep is going to come in and overhear. Okay, maybe I am a *little* afraid that he’ll come in and overhear what’s already on the tip of my tongue. I should be a good roommate by going to my bedroom, closing the door, and putting on some music to give them privacy. But my mouth seems to have a mind of its own. “I’m sure it’s just a coincidence, but the last two guys who shared Shep’s bed still haven’t been found.” Drew gasps and I bite the inside of my cheek to keep myself from laughing. “I’m not saying that he *killed* them or anything...”

His eyes go wide for a brief second before he narrows them with suspicion.

“You’re lying,” he accuses.

This is my perfect out. I let my mouth run away with me and Drew is gift wrapping an opportunity for me to laugh it off and pretend it didn’t even happen. I shrug one shoulder.

“That’s what the last guy said too. Even when I showed him the shoebox full of newspaper clippings,” I say grimly. His expression doesn’t change, and I roll my eyes internally. “*Murder* newspaper clippings,” I specify, and he starts to look mildly concerned again.

“How do I know you don’t just want to scare me off so you can have him for yourself?” he asks with a mild tremble in his voice, letting me know he’s not quite so sure of himself anymore.

The scoff that I huff out through my nose isn't part of my act though. Seriously? Scaring him off so *I* can suck Shep's dick? Right, like I'm just over here salivating to peel his shorts off and wrap my lips around his aching cock. My skin heats up and I chuckle, the sound coming out appropriately grim for the conversation.

“Look, I'm not your babysitter. Do whatever you want. But if you end up with your body chopped up into little pieces at the bottom of a ravine, don't say I didn't try to warn you.” I let out another dark bout of laughter. “I guess you won't be saying much of anything at that point.”

“Oh my god,” he whispers, then looks over his shoulder towards Shep, still outside, waiting for his return. I'm not sure if it's my insistence that sold it or something else, but Drew looks properly shaken when he turns back towards me. “You know, I just remembered that I have to... um... go.”

I nod solemnly. “I'll distract him to give you time.”

“Thank you,” he mumbles, darting past me, his footfalls speeding up as he heads for the front door, slamming it behind himself on his way out.

A whoosh of laughter bursts out of my throat, the knot that's been in my chest all afternoon finally unraveling. Jesus, what the fuck is wrong with me? I really shouldn't take this much pleasure in cockblocking Shep over and over. That realization deflates me a little, and I grimace.

Fuck. Why did I do that?

Outside, Shep gets tired of waiting for his ‘friend’ to come back. I watch through the window as he gets up from his chair and comes towards the house. I consider making a break for my room and playing dumb if he comes to ask about Drew, but I’m rooted to my spot with a mixture of guilt and defiance holding me in place.

The door swings open and Shep steps inside. His nose and cheeks are slightly pink from being out in the sun all day. The easy smile that rarely seems to leave his mouth slips as he glances around the kitchen and doesn’t spot Drew.

“He... left,” I answer his unasked question. His expression goes from confused to stormy in the blink of an eye.

His eyes tighten, his nostrils flare, and the muscle in his jaw twitches. I didn’t exactly expect him to laugh it off again like he did the first two times—actually, I have no clue what I expected—but I’ve never seen Shep pissed like this. His default when shit is irritating him is usually sarcasm.

“What the fuck, Riggs?” The words leave his lips like a clap of thunder.

I fucked up, and I should apologize. It might not even be too late to run outside and tell Drew that I was just messing with him. But here’s the thing, I’ve never been very good at the whole contrite thing. My spine stiffens and my teeth click as I set my jaw rigidly.

“If you’re so hard up for Drew, go get him,” I mutter, grabbing a rag off the counter to dry my dripping hands.

“Who?” Shep’s anger twists back into momentary confusion.

I bark out a sound that’s meant to be a laugh but comes out entirely too scathing to be mistaken for humor.

“Jesus fuck, Shep. The twink who spent the afternoon glued to your lap. *Drew*.” I wave my hand in the direction of the front door. “I can see you’re heartbroken that he left.” If he’s leaving the sarcasm card on the table, I might as well pick it up.

“*You’re* pissed at *me* because I didn’t remember some guy’s name?” He scoffs, and I know that the coarse growl of anger in his voice shouldn’t stroke my dick to life, but I don’t really have a lot of say in the matter. “You cockblocked me *again*.”

I roll my eyes and bite down on my tongue, so I don’t accidentally give in to the urge to apologize to him.

“If you can’t be bothered to go get Drew before someone comes to pick him up, then Wooley’s is just up the road. I’m sure you can be balls deep in some other twink whose name you don’t know in under an hour.” I make a shooping motion, then spin on my heel and stomp out of the kitchen.

I whip my wet shirt over my head as soon as I reach my bedroom and fling it blindly in the direction of my hamper. The mild release that the motion provides almost convinces me to pick up something else and chuck it against the nearest wall, just to see how good it would feel. I doubt it would be enough to unravel this feeling building in my gut though. I

don't even know what the feeling is, except that it's too fucking much.

Shep clearly isn't ready to let this shit go, blocking the door with his hand before it can swing closed behind me. He pushes it hard enough that it flies back to hit the wall with a *thud*. My skin tingles with awareness, all my hairs standing on end as my breath quickens and my dick swells even harder.

I said what I had to say to him, and since he isn't saying anything else yet, I keep my back towards him and strip out of my damp jeans as well. The slight vibration of my zipper over my cock as I tug it down sends another rush of blood pulsing through my hardening shaft. I hook my fingers into the waist of my jeans and underwear at the same time and shove them both down.

Behind me, I hear Shep's breath catch. He's the one standing in *my* bedroom. If he doesn't want to see me naked, he can leave. Better yet, he can go find a fuck toy at the bar, bring him back here, and spend all night with his headboard banging against our shared wall. It won't bother me. Why should it?

"Why did you run him off?" Shep asks. His voice is quieter this time, some of the anger already bleeding out of it, leaving behind rough edges and a deep tremor that adds to the goose bumps already popping up all over my bare skin.

I saunter over to my bed and plop down on the edge, not bothering to do anything to hide my nudity. I click my tongue

stud against the inside of my teeth and stare at him silently. Why *did* I scare Drew away? Fuck if I know.

It almost seems like Shep isn't expecting an answer from me at all. He takes a step closer and keeps talking. "You said the first time it was supposed to be a joke, but who was the audience? Who was supposed to laugh?"

I open my mouth and then snap it closed again. Shep doesn't stop walking until he's standing over me, breathing just as hard as I am, the rigid outline of his cock bulging shamelessly in his shorts.

I *know* I should apologize for being a prick. There's no excuse for what I did. I can't even find a way to justify it to myself other than as an impulse I gave in to without bothering to wonder why until I'd already done it.

I lick my lips, looking up at him and holding his gaze. My cock is fully hard now, so thick and heavy that I have to spread my legs to make room for it. Heat dances in Shep's gaze and his bulge twitches.

Before I know what I'm doing, I find myself leaning forward, my eyes never leaving his as I press my parted lips to the place where his cockhead is starting to leave a wet spot on his shorts.

"Are you mad that I got *Drew* to leave, or are you just upset that you're going to have to get off with your own hand again tonight?"

SHEP

Who the fuck is Drew?

Oh, right. He was the sure thing Riggs managed to get rid of in the point two seconds they ended up alone together. In my defense, it's really fucking hard to remember a goddamn thing when he's mouthing at my aching cock through my shorts, getting the fabric hot and wet with his breath and tongue until there might as well be nothing between us at all.

I clench my fists and watch through heavy, drooping eyelids as he sticks his tongue out and drags it slowly over the length of my cock. The silver stud catches on the fabric in a few spots, then snags against the flare of my cockhead when he reaches it. It sends a hot jolt through me, making a burst of precum dribble from my slit to get my shorts even wetter.

Riggs grins with satisfaction and pulls back, like he just won an argument I didn't even know we were having. He braces his hands behind himself on the bed, leaning back and putting his body on full display. I've seen him shirtless more than a few times, so the defined muscles decorating his slender frame aren't a surprise, and neither are his pert pink nipples, standing at attention and begging to be sucked until they're puffy and raw.

I drag my eyes down his slender body, and he spreads his legs a little wider, like an invitation. I swallow hard, zeroing in on what I'm sure he considers the main event. Even having seen his massive cock flaccid on one occasion and knowing that he refers to it as The Beast doesn't fully prepare me for

the sight of it in all its glory. It's not just long, it's *thick*, too heavy to stand tall, and fucking mouthwatering.

He lets out a raspy laugh, his cock twitching and his abs flexing with the sound.

“I guess that answers my question.”

I manage to tear my attention off of his dick and bring it back to his face. Did he ask a question? Oh, right, he asked if I was only mad because I was horny. Understatement of the fucking year. I passed horny about three exits ago and am well on my way to goddamn desperate.

“My balls are so fucking blue I'm going to have to come up with a new color soon,” I grit out, reaching for my cock. But Riggs beats me to it, wrapping his hand around my shaft, his grip tugging the fabric taut over the head.

A moan rumbles on my tongue and my hips snap forward without my permission.

He hums, as if the fact that I'm about to cream in my fucking shorts from a few over-the-clothes strokes is nothing more than a fascinating turn of events. Jesus, what does he need me to do, beg?

“Riggs,” I groan, reaching out and tangling my fingers in his hair.

He just chuckles as I drag his face close to my cock again, the hot puff of his exhale against the damp fabric making me jerk and throb. If it wasn't for how hard his own cock is, I would think he's completely unaffected by whatever is

happening right now. I'm usually the one with men begging for it, ass up or on their knees, panting my name like my cock is the answer to all their prayers. I didn't expect it to be so fucking hot for the tables to be turned on me.

"I suppose I owe you," he murmurs thoughtfully, opening his lips around the head of my cock and sucking it with my shorts still between us.

My balls tighten and a whine vibrates in my throat. I want his mouth on me for real. I want to feel the dribble of his spit sliding down my shaft and the ridged texture of the roof of his mouth. I want that tongue stud of his teasing my slit and his work-calloused hands tugging at my balls.

"Please," I gasp. Somewhere in the back of my mind I'm aware that there were reasons Riggs and I shouldn't hook up, but right now I can't imagine giving less of a fuck about any of them. If his mouth on my cock is the final omen of the goddamn apocalypse, bring it the fuck on.

He grabs my shorts with both hands, bunching the cloth in his fists and then yanking them off my hips. The motion tugs my cock down before letting it spring free to *thwack* against my belly. It's still bouncing in front of his face when he wraps his hand around my shaft and gives it a long, slow stroke.

"It doesn't look particularly cursed," he says conversationally, giving it a leisurely tug from root to tip, coaxing a fresh dribble of precum to leak out. I laugh, but the sound turns into another moan as he drags the flat of his

tongue over my sensitive, swollen head, his tongue stud catching on the opening exactly the way I imagined it would.

My fingers flex in his hair, tugging at his scalp, but I don't do anything to try to hurry him along. Partially because, knowing Riggs, the more I try to rush things, the more he's likely to dig in his heels and make me suffer, and partially because there's something fucking hot about being at his mercy.

He wraps his lips around my tip, pulling just my head into the hot, wet depths of his mouth. The tight suction threatens to buckle my knees, and when he adds a little more tongue action to the equation, it scrambles my brain enough that I almost blurt out that he can chase off any cute twink he wants as long as he'll keep doing *this*.

With his free hand, Riggs reaches over and opens his nightstand drawer. I track his motions, breathing raggedly, as he pulls out a bottle of lube and thumbs the cap open. My cock throbs between his lips as he drizzles the lube directly onto his flushed, veiny cock. It jerks at the sensation, and my dick mirrors the reaction, twitching against his tongue.

He drops the bottle of lube onto the floor by our feet, then wraps his hand around his cock, his fingers barely able to meet around the impressive girth. Heat coils tightly in my gut and my balls pull up even harder. I think I could probably get off on this alone, Riggs sucking my cockhead while I watch him jerk himself off. A burst of my precum floods his tongue, and

his eyelashes flutter, a moan vibrating from his throat and straight through my cock.

His lack of much reaction until this moment makes the sound a thousand times hotter. I shout, my head lolling back as I lose my fight against my own self-control, jerking my hips forward to fill his throat with my cock. Riggs makes another muffled sound, stroking his tongue along the underside of my shaft. I can feel the roll of the metallic stud over each of my pulsing veins. The sound of our heavy breathing fills the room along with the slick, filthy squelch of his hand on his lubed cock, stroking himself faster and faster as he falls into the same punishing rhythm, bobbing his head to take me deep over and over.

His tongue stud catches against the flare of my tip with every out stroke. My toes curl and my cock swells impossibly harder, until I'm sure every ounce of blood in my entire body is pooled there, making me lightheaded. I babble incoherently, mumbling praise and curses, gritting his name out between my teeth. I beg him desperately, but I'm not sure if I'm pleading with him not to stop or to make me come.

With the small amount of control I still have over myself, I pull my attention to his hand on his cock, the glisten of his lubed shaft in the dim light of his bedroom, the way his already thick head flares even wider with each upstroke. On his next tug, Riggs pinches the tip of his cock between his thumb and forefinger, making a muffled, horny sound that finally sends me over the edge.

My orgasm hits me so fast that I nearly lose my balance as it barrels through me, tightening all my muscles at once and punching the air out of my lungs. I let out another ragged shout and spill down his throat, thrusting helplessly just to feel the little tug of his tongue stud again. The forceful spurts of my release paint his tongue and the back of his throat, going on and on as he shivers and grunts right along with me.

When I'm drained and oversensitive, he releases me with a *pop*, and I brace my hands on his shoulders while I catch my breath and wait for the feeling to return to my legs.

"Fucking *god*," I murmur when my head stops spinning.

A lazy, cocky smile spreads over his swollen lips. He drags his tongue over the bottom one to gather a stray drop of my cum that managed to leak out. "Just Riggs is fine," he teases.

I give a weak, breathless laugh and bend down to drag my shorts and underwear back up. He doesn't seem in much hurry to get dressed just yet, his cock slow to deflate, his bare chest and stomach streaked with his own release.

I drop to my knees between his legs. His breath catches as I brace my hands on his thighs and lean in to drag my tongue through the pools of cooling cum on his skin, gathering them on my tongue as I work my way from his belly to his chest. When I reach his throat, I ghost my nose over the thundering pulse point in his throat and along his jaw until my mouth is only an inch from his.

Riggs's lips part, but before I can close the last bit of space between us, he jerks back.

“I don’t...” He shakes his head roughly.

I swallow my mouthful of cum and flash him an easy smile. “More for me then,” I joke, pushing myself back to my feet with my hands still braced on his thighs.

All of a sudden it feels like everything is jarringly silent. Like the ringing in your ears after you leave a concert.

Riggs just sucked me off.

What the fuck happens now?

Chapter 11

RIGGS

HUH, MAYBE THAT DOE-EYED beach twink was onto something. Not like I was pining for Shep or anything that ridiculous, but I guess some part of me was into the idea of getting my mouth on him. Go figure.

I run my tongue along my bottom lip again. The tart flavor of his sweaty skin and the thick, drugging taste of his release still linger there, adding to the lazy, satisfied feeling making my limbs feel like lead. I press my palm against my softening cock, shivering one last time at the dull throb of sensitivity left behind by my orgasm.

Shep is still standing over me, his shorts back in place. There are deep furrows on his forehead, his lips twisted in an expression that I'm sure is meant to be the same relaxed smile he gave me when I wouldn't let him kiss me a minute ago, but it looks more like a grimace now. My heart rate is slowing down, but I can see from the flutter in his throat that his is speeding up.

A nicer person would give him a second to work through whatever it is that's freaking him out. Presumably, he's realizing that after a blowjob like that, he'll never be satisfied by anyone else's fumbling attempts to please him. I get it, that's some scary shit. But no one has ever accused me of being all that nice. Also, the longer I let him stay all up in his head, the more chance there is for things to get potentially weird.

I lean forward and grab onto his hips, digging my fingers in with all the desperation I can muster while I make my eyes all wide and pitiful.

“Please don't go. I think I'm in love with you, baby.” I mimic the breathless, needy voice I've always imagined accompanied these kinds of pleas from the men who couldn't take a hint as he did his best to make his post-nut escape.

Shep's eyes go wide and his lips part with shock. “You...”

I cackle and let go of my grip on him. “Oh, never mind, it passed. I guess the curse doesn't last when your dick is taken orally.”

The breath whooshes out of his lungs and all the worry on his face melts into an unimpressed look. “You're fucking hilarious.”

“Thank you,” I say agreeably as I get to my feet. I'm expecting him to take the hint and step back, but he stays rooted in place, crowded all up in my space, barely an inch between my naked body and his fully clothed one. Maybe he's still waiting for an actual apology for the whole Drew thing?

I snort at the idea of taking the extreme step of forming the words “*I’m sorry for chasing Drew off,*” with the same tongue I just used to blow his mind. That was the apology, dude. Take it or leave it.

After a second, Shep finally takes a step back, giving me room to get past him. I make a beeline for my dresser, tugging open the top drawer so I can grab a pair of shorts and a t-shirt.

“So... we’re all cool, right?” he asks, sounding all kinds of unsure as I step into my shorts, not bothering with any underwear since all we’re going to do is lounge on the couch for the rest of the night.

I glance at him over my shoulder. “Why wouldn’t we be?”

He rubs his head with one hand and then shakes his head and shrugs simultaneously. “Uh, no... Yeah... That’s... cool.”

I pull the shirt on then rake my fingers through my hair to tame it a little before spinning back towards him.

“It was a blowjob. I’m thinking that wasn’t a first for either of us, so no need to make a whole *thing* about it. Right?”

He gives a single nod. “Right,” he echoes.

“Perfect.” I walk out of my bedroom, and a few seconds later, I can hear his heavy footsteps padding down the hallway behind me.

With my libido pleasantly satisfied for the first time in... well... *a while*, there’s a little spring in my step. I wouldn’t have thought jerking off while blowing someone would be that much of a step up from just getting the job done myself, but I

really do feel better. Like there was an itch I didn't realize I was desperate to scratch.

I head into the kitchen, my stomach rumbling. After I spilled my food earlier, I didn't have enough of an appetite to motivate me to replace it, but now, I feel like I could eat a horse. I open the refrigerator and start stacking leftovers onto the counter beside it. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of Shep lingering in the doorway.

I grab the last container and then swing the refrigerator closed again, arching an eyebrow at him over my shoulder.

“What's up?”

“Nothing, I'm just wondering...” He leans against the doorframe and rubs his head again.

“Jesus, Shep, you ever consider that maybe *you're* the clingy one after sex?” I ask with a laugh.

“What? No, I'm not...” He huffs out a breath and then chuckles. “Sorry, you're right, I'm being really fucking awkward. I've never fooled around with someone and *not* wanted them to immediately get the fuck out, so this is new territory for me, and I don't really know what to do.”

“I guess it's good news that you aren't kicking my ass out on the street at least.” My tone is light, but a fear I wasn't aware I should have had twists itself around my chest. Apparently, that was a risky fucking blowjob, and I didn't even know it.

“What? Fuck no, of course not.” He stands up straighter, and it looks like maybe there’s still something on his mind, but he gives up on his bumbling attempts to say whatever it is and joins me in the kitchen instead.

While I make myself a plate of leftovers, he peels back the lid on a container of cookies that Auggie left behind. They’re a mix of rocky road cookies and sugar cookies. Predictably, Shep stacks a few of the sugar cookies into his hand, nudging the primarily chocolate cookies aside with a grimace.

“Okay, can I say *one* thing about...” He flaps his hand vaguely in the direction of the bedrooms.

I roll my eyes, grabbing one of the cookies out of his hand and stuffing it into my mouth. “If you must,” I mumble around a full mouth.

“Your dick is fucking huge.” He drops his voice to a low rumble, his tone verging right on the edge of reverent. The comment is so unexpected I spit a volcano of cookie crumbs at him and fall into a brief fit of laughter. “I’m serious. Do guys seriously look at that monster and then *bend over*? Who the fuck is that brave?”

I laugh harder, fighting through it to swallow down the now soggy glob of cookie before I end up choking on it or spitting the whole thing onto the floor.

“You’re such a dumbass,” I say once I get a hold of myself.

Shep brushes the crumbs off the front of his shirt and grins.

“So...” he starts, and after the dick comment, I don’t know what to expect out of his mouth next. “Want to watch a movie?”

“Fuck yes,” I answer with a rush of relief.

I knew it would be fine. Shep just needed a few minutes to unscramble his brain. It’s all good.

SHEP

I flop down onto the couch, putting my feet up on the coffee table and picking up the remote. My dick is still tingling from that Olympic gold level of head Riggs just whipped out without warning. I glance at him casually as he takes up the empty spot on the sofa, completely unruffled as he digs into his plate of food with the ferocity of a prisoner who just got out on parole.

Why wouldn’t he be unruffled? Like he said, casual oral sex isn’t exactly headline news in either of our lives. No need to make a big deal out of it. Maybe we’ll do it again sometime, maybe we won’t. It’s whatever.

My eyes zero in on the stretch of his lips as he opens wide to shove a hot dog inside. My spent cock gives a lazy twitch. Yeah, I definitely wouldn’t be opposed to it if Riggs was interested in a repeat at some point.

“How’d you get rid of him, by the way?” I ask, flipping through the streaming options too fast to really get a feel for the options.

“Who?” he asks, his voice dripping with fake innocence, his eyebrows inching higher in challenge.

“De... errick?” I take a shot in the dark. I’m ninety-eight percent sure his name started with a D. That has to count for something, right?

Riggs shakes his head. “You’re unbelievable.”

“Hey, I *did* end up knowing the name of the guy who sucked my dick tonight,” I defend.

“You sure about that?” he challenges, and dammit, I *was* sure. Maybe he’s just fucking with me.

“Almost entirely,” I hedge, and he chuckles, but doesn’t tell me whether he’s just messing around or if Riggs is actually a nickname.

“I told him you were a serial killer,” he answers my earlier question instead.

“What?” I squawk.

“He bought it surprisingly quickly too. You might want to think about what kind of serial killer vibes you must be giving off that all it took was a few ominous words from me before Derrick was scurrying out of here like a little mouse.”

There’s something surprisingly sexy about the shamelessness that’s rolling off of Riggs right now. I should be a lot more pissed about the whole situation, especially since he didn’t even apologize. But I’m way more caught up in the sheer brass balls this man has.

“I fucking knew his name was Derrick,” I crow, momentarily ignoring the fact that there might be a rumor spreading through the gay community of Fall Crosse as we speak that I’m Jeffrey Dahmer or some shit.

“His name wasn’t Derrick,” Riggs says flatly. “It was Drew.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Seriously? That doesn’t sound right.”

“Unbelievable,” he repeats, this time with more amusement than before. “Tell you what, from now on, I’ll give you five bucks for every hookup whose name you remember. Verified by *them*, not by your own word.”

I bark out a laugh. “You actually going to let that happen? You’ve chased three different opportunities away and that was *before* you got a taste of me.” I grab my junk through my shorts to make my point, and Riggs scoffs. “Now you’re probably going to be kicking in my door and slapping my dick out of dudes’ mouths.”

“Somebody has a fucking ego.” Well, that was definitely not a *no*. I could leave it at that, but I guess I’m still trying to sort out the *what next?* of this whole situation.

“For real though, was this like a one and done kind of thing or what?” I just come right out and ask because I’m pretty sure Riggs could spend all night deflecting this conversation in circles.

He stops chewing and stares at me with a mixture of discomfort and pity. Jesus, is that how my face looks when a

guy starts acting like he's ready to call a wedding planner after one good fucking? Riggs sets his half-finished hot dog back on his plate, and puts the whole thing down on the coffee table before brushing his hands off on his shorts and swallowing down the food that's left in his mouth.

“Dude, come on. Don't tell me you're suddenly a *boyfriend* guy. You want to take me to prom or some shit because I sucked your dick?”

“What?” I bark out a startled sound. “Of course not.”

“Good, because that's not... *me*. I don't do the whole heart-eye bullshit.” He shifts on the couch to angle his body towards mine a little more, the bulge in his shorts prominent, even with his dick soft. “But if you're looking for a mechanic to perform routine maintenance...” He trails off with a shrug and a flirty twist of his lips.

“You're saying you're on call for lube jobs?” I tease.

“For now. Just don't make it weird by asking for a customer loyalty card. Alright?”

“Got it,” I agree, scooting an inch closer and finally just clicking on whatever I currently have selected on the TV.

Riggs settles back and snatches the last cookie out of my hand. I don't fight him for it. In fact, I'm still feeling tingly enough below the belt that I'd probably offer to go grab him another from the kitchen if he really wanted. He doesn't ask though, and I don't offer. We just fall into a comfortable silence in front of the television.

There's a hell of a lot of peace in Riggs's bluntness. With most guys, I'd wonder if they were playing games or hoping that the enticement of casual sex now might lead to commitment later. I've been there enough times before that I stopped bothering with repeat performances. But he's made it clear what he wants and what he doesn't want. Blowjobs? *Want*. Kissing and talking about our feelings? *Hard pass*.

I can live with that.

Chapter 12

RIGGS

I PUSH MY BEDROOM window open, letting in the warmth and humidity and the smell of fresh cut grass. I drag in a deep breath, an uncharacteristic smile curling at the corners of my lips as I just breathe in the summer for a minute. The flutter of wings announces Vel's approach. He lands with a caw that either means "good morning" or "make with the peanuts, human slave." It's hard to tell one from the other. Either way, I give him a gentle stroke along his sleek feathers then set a few peanuts down for him. He didn't bring me any presents this morning, but that probably just means he's holding on to whatever treasure he managed to sneak away from Shep for now.

Once Vel is satisfied with his treats and attention, he launches himself back into the sky with a parting squawk. I tug my window closed again, wincing at the metallic groan that accompanies the action. I should bring home some WD-

40 from the shop and lube these babies up. I'm sure Shep's windows could use it too.

I swear my bedroom still smells like sweat and cum from last night, along with the lingering scent of sandalwood that seems to follow Shep everywhere, seeping into my clothes if he so much as brushes against me.

After the initial weirdness, we ended up watching an over-the-top gorefest slasher flick and laughing our asses off together. By the time I dragged myself to bed around midnight, everything felt normal between us. If he can have some chill about it, I'm more than open to a repeat. Sex, horror movies, no pressure or expectations... that's heaven, if you ask me. But I guess a lot of it depends on Shep.

Maybe that's why I'm dragging this morning, not quite wanting to leave my bedroom and find out whether things are going to be uncomfortable or not. If anyone should be comfortable with casual, naked touching, it's Shep, but there's only one way to find out for sure at this point.

I tug the zipper up on my overalls and shove my feet into my work boots, running my fingers through my sleep ruffled hair, and finally taking a breath and turning the doorknob. I hear the clomp of his footsteps in the living room and the sound of things being moved around and shuffled.

"Have you seen my keys?" he asks, standing in front of the couch with the cushions piled haphazardly around his feet.

"Did you check the key hook?" I ask, refusing to notice the way his jumpsuit is hanging open like always, a teasing little

peep show that offers a glimpse of the dark, curly hairs along the waistline of his briefs when he bends just the right way.

“They’re not on the key hook. They’re not in any of my pockets. They’re not anywhere,” he gripes, picking up the cushions and tossing them back onto the couch without bothering to arrange them properly. “Your keys are on the hook,” he says it like it’s an accusation, and I bite the inside of my cheek against the laughter that threatens to bubble up. “How does that bird know which keys are yours and which are mine?”

“He’s smart.” I shrug. “Come on, I’ll drive this morning. It’s probably my turn anyway.”

Shep huffs and tosses the last cushion, and then nods. “Yeah, alright.”

I stifle another grin. He’s crabby this morning and I’m not sure why that’s funny, but it makes me want to poke at him a little, rile him up. Fair’s fair, after all, and fuck knows he delights in getting under my skin when I’m in a grouch-ass mood.

“Now, listen, Sheppy,” I say in a soft, coddling voice that’s difficult to pull off with a straight face. “I know it might be strange and confusing for you that last night we shared a sexual encounter and this morning your tires aren’t slashed. But I promise, that’s perfectly natural.”

He snorts. “You’re a dickhead. You know that, right?”

I twist my lips into a smirk. “I figured you’d be in a better mood this morning,” I say, making my way towards the front door with Shep right on my heels. “You’re making me doubt my blowjob skills.”

That’s a lie. I give absolutely killer head. But it’s enough to get a rough chuckle to rumble through his throat.

“My memory sucks. You might have to do it again to remind me,” he flirts, snagging my keys off the hook by the door before I get the chance. I hold my hand open, palm up, and he drops them in, pulling the door closed behind us in a smooth motion, like we’re a well-oiled machine this morning.

“We’ll see.” I smirk, even though, yeah, it’s probably going to happen again. Maybe next time he’ll even try his hand at taming The Beast. The mental image of the muscle-bound mechanic on his knees, choking on my monster cock gives me an instant chub. I subtly adjust myself as I round my Mustang and slide in on the driver’s side.

Living together, it only makes sense for us to ride to work together too. The first week, we were *lucky* enough to start each morning with catcalls from the guys and joking speculation about whether or not we were fucking. Thanks to some well-placed glaring and those assholes having the combined attention span of a goldfish, they moved on quickly, at least.

We get some nods and grunts of acknowledgment as we saunter into the garage a few minutes later. Shep gets a couple of playful shoulder punches too, but no one is brave enough or

stupid enough to try that shit with me. That shoulder bruising, male posturing bullshit isn't it for me, and I'm happy to make that known by hitting back twice as hard when necessary.

I head straight for the coffee, snagging two mugs and filling both from the cardboard carafe from the donut shop next door. I hand one of them to Shep, who looks surprised as he takes the cup from my hand, glancing down into the dark depths of the steaming liquid inside like he's half expecting some kind of prank even though he just watched me pour it.

"Thanks," he says.

I bristle and grunt in response, wanting to move on without some awkward, mushy moment of gratitude for something as simple as me pouring a second cup of coffee when I was getting one for myself anyway. It's not like I went out of my way or anything. Shep takes a sip from his mug without another word about it, and I let my shoulders relax. I lean against the sturdy table and bring my cup to my lips for a tongue searing sip of the bitter, burned coffee that I'm ashamed to say is exactly the way I like it.

I'm not actually sure why I bothered to come in this morning. I finished up the engine rebuild on the semi I had last week, and as far as I know, there's nothing new on my schedule yet. In a few months I'll be up to my ass doing repairs and maintenance on farm equipment, but the summer is usually more of a slow trickle, with half my days consisting of me sitting around here with my thumb up my ass, hoping to

get a call about a truck broken down on the highway that I can get my hands dirty with.

“Hey, Riggs,” Red says, jerking his chin in a nod of greeting. “Journey said he’s having some trouble with the tractor again. If you have time this week, would you mind swinging by the farm and taking a look?”

Since they took over Journey’s late uncle’s farm last year, I’ve resurrected that rusted old tractor so many times that I’ve considered calling the Vatican to have it declared a miracle. I keep telling him it’s past time for a new one, but Journey has some kind of emotional attachment to the thing. If it gives me something to do with my hands this morning though, I’m not about to bitch about it.

“Yeah, I can go now.” I take a few more hasty gulps of coffee, unbothered by the way it scalds my throat before it settles into my gut. It’s oddly reminiscent of Shep’s hot cum filling my throat last night, and holy hell do I need to stop thinking about sucking him off already.

My cock swells mildly again, but I ignore it, swiping the keys for the tow truck off the hook near the door and trading them for my own keys, just in case I end up getting any other calls while I’m out of the shop and need the tools or anything else in the “hooker truck,” as Auggie delights in calling it.

I hang one arm out the window and crank up the radio, catching one last glimpse of Shep *finally* fucking zipping up his overalls as I roll out of the parking lot. Maybe I’ll swipe Steele’s coveted black marker and add a rule to the sheet about

uniform etiquette. If he actually bothered to cover up his sweaty chest, he might not get hit on by customers every damn day. What a tragedy that would be.

The drive to Red and Journey's farm is about as peaceful as it gets, with the small-town scenery of Fall Crosse giving way to open fields lined with rows of chest-high cornstalks, the smell of cow shit heavy in the air. After a handful of years living in Wisconsin, I'm horrified to say that the manure smell is starting to grow on me a little. There's something homey about it, even if I'm not quite sure what *home* even means.

Thirty minutes later, I'm turning down the long driveway that leads up to the farmhouse. Their one-eyed cat, Cornelius slinks out of the bushes and trots beside the truck until I reach the top of the driveway. It jumps up onto the porch railing and starts to groom itself, keeping its one good eye trained on me skeptically while I park and hop out.

The house is looking a lot better than it was last summer. The loose shutters have been fixed and repainted, and the porch is brand new and no longer sagging. I remember Red saying something about new flower beds too, but they look pretty trampled. The reason for the garden destruction is obvious as two fluffy Highland cows come around the side of the house and immediately help themselves to the remaining daffodils like it's a buffet.

"Ang, come on, we've talked about this." Journey's voice comes from the house seconds before the screen door swings open and the man himself steps out onto the porch with a

couple of apples in hand, no doubt meant to bribe Angie and her calf to leave the dying garden alone. “Oh, hey,” he says when he spots me.

I jerk my chin in greeting and pull the toolbox out of the back seat of the truck cab.

“Red said the tractor is acting up again. Is it down in the barn? I can head down and take a quick look.”

“It died on me in the alpaca pasture. I actually have to put some ointment on Bella, so I’ll come down with you,” he offers, tossing the apples to the two cows and giving up on trying to get them to move out of the flowerbeds.

“Cool,” I grunt, heading down the familiar dirt path towards the barn and pastures.

While we walk, Journey tells me all about Bella’s dermatophilosis, which apparently involves a lot of scabs and discharge. I can’t stress enough how much I do not want to know about crusty skin conditions that afflict farm animals, but I’m polite enough to hum or nod in what feels like the correct places. If I cared at all, I might think it was kind of cool to see Journey coming into his own with this whole farm thing. A year ago, he wasn’t even sure he was going to keep this place, and now here he is, pulling on a pair of rubber gloves and slopping cream onto an alpaca’s scabby ass. But I don’t care. Not much, anyway.

I leave him to his glamorous task and head straight through the barn towards the grazing fields. I spot the tractor, but as

soon as the rest of the alpacas see me, they crowd around the gate, expecting treats or freedom or fuck knows what.

“Shoo.” I wave my hands, but all that accomplishes is earning me some dirty looks and flattened ears. I sigh and eye the fence, trying to figure out if there’s a way I can climb over it with this thirty-pound toolbox in tow.

Journey emerges from the barn with a handful of hay. He clicks his tongue at the alpacas, and they hurry farther down the fence line to where he’s tossing the food over, giving me the chance to slip inside without letting them all out. He follows behind me. I guess taking a look at the tractor is a team sport this morning.

“So, you and Shep seem to be getting along pretty well,” he says in that offhand, conversational tone people always use when they want you to think the comment just popped into their head, but in reality, they’ve been dying to bring it up.

“Yup,” I answer succinctly, flipping open the hood of the tractor with a rusty groan once we reach it.

“We were all kind of skeptical about the whole thing when you moved in with him. I think Auggie might have even had a pool going, taking bets on how long it would be before you stabbed Shep in his sleep,” he says with a chuckle, plopping himself down on the tractor seat and leaning over the steering wheel to watch me poke around the engine.

“That so?” I murmur.

“Mm-hmm. There was another betting pool too...” He pauses, no doubt waiting for me to take the bait and ask what the other wager was about, but if Auggie was involved, I already fucking know. I have to wonder how well Henry is satisfying his needs if he’s *this* obsessed with what’s going on with my dick.

“Please don’t tell me that you got me out here this morning so you could ask if I’ve been wrecking Shep’s hole.” I would expect this kind of thing from Auggie or even Gates, but Journey’s usually a lot less of a gossip. And I know Red couldn’t possibly care less about anyone else’s sex life, so he didn’t put his man up to this line of questioning.

He laughs again. “Hell no. I just figured I’d give you a heads-up about it in case you wanted to take extra steps to keep your private shit private. Those guys are like dogs with a bone when they get an idea in their heads.”

“Don’t I fucking know it,” I grumble. There’s a surprising amount of relief in Journey living up to what I thought of him. There’s something else too, kind of a warm feeling swelling in my chest towards him. When he changes the subject instead of finding a different way to try to worm the information out of me, the feeling intensifies, and I realize that it might be respect.

Shit, is Journey sort of my friend too? Shep sneaking under my defenses is one thing, but if this becomes some kind of fucking epidemic, I might need to take drastic measures. He tells me about the loom he bought to weave the alpaca wool

into yarn while I work on the tractor, and it's actually almost interesting. Journey's enthusiasm about the yarn and the alpaca sweaters he's knitting with it is so over-the-top that he manages to drag some back-and-forth out of me until I finally find the problem in the engine and take care of it.

I pull my hands out and wipe the grease across the front of my overalls, nodding at Journey to give it a try. The tractor purrs to life and I grin with satisfaction. He should definitely toss this relic into a trash heap and shell out for a new one, but I'd be lying if I said it wasn't a bit of an ego boost every time I manage to pull the old lady back into the land of the living. This must be how doctors feel when they have their hands in a patient's chest. All godlike and shit.

I close the hood with another creaky groan and a clang, tossing the tools back into the box. I'm not sure if it's because I'm riding the high of getting the tractor running, or if he used some kind of reverse psychology on me without me realizing it, lulling me right into a trap by talking about alpaca sweaters for an hour. Whatever the reason, words tumble out of my mouth without prompting.

"You know, me and Shep..." I've started the sentence, but I'm not sure how to finish it. Me and Shep *what?* Fooled around last night? It's none of Journey's business and I can't imagine why he would care.

He turns off the noisy engine and leans back in the seat, cocking his head and studying me for a second. Maybe waiting

for me to finish what I started saying, or maybe reading it all right there on my face without the hassle of any more words.

“You’re sprung on him, aren’t you?” he asks with a knowing smirk that *almost* erases all the fuzzy shit I was feeling towards him earlier.

“Who the fuck says ‘sprung’ anymore?” I roll my eyes and huff. “I’m... horny for him, that’s all.”

A slight blush lights up his cheeks like he’s never heard the word horny before. What does Red say to him when his dick gets hard then? Maybe he’s just uncomfortable because we haven’t exactly been ‘sex talk’ friends until right now. Hell, I didn’t even think we were *friends* until today. Acquaintances, coworkers, people who annoy the shit out of me, these are all things I’m used to. Friends? Yeah, not so much.

Journey clears his throat. “Okay, and do you think he feels the same way?”

“Sure seemed like it when he was pulling my hair and coming down my throat last night,” I answer with a shrug.

He makes a strangled, uncomfortable kind of sound. “Well, I guess that’s a pretty clear answer then.”

“Yup,” I agree. “It’s simple and that’s exactly how I like it. I don’t need Auggie or anyone else getting all excited about it and making it weird.” The thought of the guys whispering about what’s going on between Shep and me makes my stomach squirm.

It reminds me of fucking high school. It was never any big secret that I was gay. I never ‘came out,’ I just *was*, and anyone who had a problem with it was cordially invited to lick my balls. There were a couple of girls I hung around with, I guess I would call them friends if I had to put a label on it. They were fucking obsessed with my love life though, always asking who I had a crush on, making a big thing out of it any time I so much as spared a second glance at a guy. And if the guy in question happened to be into dudes? God help me. It was like the more they pushed and gossiped and giggled, the less interested I became in whoever he was.

The more they talked about the butterflies I was supposed to have in my stomach and all those swoony, romance movie feelings, the more it put a spotlight on the fact that I just *didn't* feel that way. It made me itchy. It kept me up at night wondering if there was something wrong with me, like maybe I wasn't gay after all. Except, I definitely didn't have the butterflies for girls either, and I was positive I wanted to put my hands and mouth all over a sweaty football player or two.

“My Ace-spec ass can't really understand the whole sex without feelings thing, but you do what works for you. It's none of Auggie's business,” Journey says with an air of solidarity that loosens the knot formed in my chest by thoughts of past bullshit.

“What's that like?” I ask as we start making our way out of the field. I guess I'm feeling all conversational and shit today.

“What? Being demisexual?” he tries to clarify, but I shrug. I guess I’m not really sure what I’m even asking.

“Feelings,” I joke in a deadpan way.

He’s quiet for a second, and when I glance over, he’s looking at me in that curious way again. “For real?”

“Dude, I know what feelings are. I’m not a sociopath.” I roll my eyes again. “I mean, I’ve never had all that fluttery shit people talk about, but aside from that, I feel plenty.”

“Huh.” He opens the gate and gestures me through before the alpacas can rush over again. “Seriously *never*? How do you know when you have a crush on someone?”

I wrinkle my nose, the hairs on the back of my neck standing up in that primal, defensive way. “There’s nothing wrong with me.”

“I know,” he says immediately. “I was just curious, that’s all. It’s probably different for everyone, right?” The easy innocence in his voice brings my defenses down a few notches.

“Probably,” I mutter. “I don’t know, I guess I’ve never really had a crush. Not like people talk about, anyway. I see guys I want to fuck, obviously, but all that warm and fuzzy shit just doesn’t really come into play. I’ve never felt like kissing anyone or holding their hand, I’ve never been desperate to be around a guy or missed him when I wasn’t. I’ve never sat around daydreaming about a guy aside from the hot, naked kind of daydreams.”

I can't believe I'm saying all of this to Journey when I haven't even said it to myself before. Not like this, anyway. I've always been vaguely aware of all of this, but to just put it all out there... it almost makes me wonder if I *am* a sociopath. That can't be normal, can it?

“Tell me to fuck off if I'm way out of line here, but it sounds like you're aromantic, or at least on the aromantic spectrum.” He says it gently, like he's afraid I'm about to go off like a bomb at the news.

There *is* an explosion, but it's more internal than external. I freeze mid-step, my heart and my stomach clenching tightly, the air catching in my lungs, and then they all release at once with a *whoosh* of an exhale, my pulse breaking into a gallop.

I don't live under a rock. I've heard the term 'aromantic' before, I just never really thought about it. There are a thousand different labels and more human experiences than can even fit into all of those boxes. I like guys, so I happily slapped on a 'gay' label and never bothered to worry about it again. But holy shit, what if I'm not just cold and standoffish like so many men have accused me of being in the past? What if I'm just aromantic?

“Are you okay?” Journey asks, pulling me out of my daze.

I nod. “Yeah.”

He doesn't push me to say anything else as we make our way back up to the house, and I'm grateful for a few minutes to sort through my thoughts. Everything is jumbled and confusing as I mumble a thanks and climb into the tow truck

to leave, but even with my thoughts buzzing, a weight is missing from my chest.

Having a word for the way I feel shouldn't change a thing. Except, somehow it does. And I don't know why, but for some reason all I can think about is telling Shep later, at home, over dinner.

A laugh rumbles in my throat at the surprising, fleeting thought, and I push my foot down on the gas pedal as I pull out onto the road, smiling a little wider than I was earlier, and feeling just a little bit lighter.

Chapter 13

SHEP

I CATCH MYSELF LOOKING over my shoulder every few minutes all day, glancing at Riggs's empty bay. It makes sense that the garage would feel a hell of a lot emptier without a big-ass truck parked in the last spot on the end. But in a weird way it feels like it's more the lack of my favorite ragey twink that's making Big Bull feel all echoey and cavernous today.

"Shouldn't he be back by now?" I ask out loud to no one in particular, glancing at the clock hanging over Steele's office door. It's nearly the end of the day and I haven't heard shit from my roomie since he rolled out of here in the hooker truck this morning.

"Who?" Tal asks, grunting as he heaves a new tire into place then grabs the impact wrench to tighten the lug nuts.

"*Rigggggs,*" Auggie answers for me, his voice all singsong like me asking about Riggs is grounds for mocking.

“He went to fix a tractor six hours ago. For all I know, he’s trapped under the damn thing out in the middle of a field, calling for help.”

I’m sure that’s not what’s going on, but the made-up scenario makes my skin prickle and the muscles in my neck tick with tension anyway. Honestly, if a tractor had the audacity to roll over on Riggs, he’d probably yeet it off and then stomp the thing into a pile of twisted metal. The fleeting image of him standing over a destroyed scrap heap, his eyes dancing with righteous rage makes my dick jerk.

“He was only at the house for an hour or so,” Red says, wiping his hands clean—well *cleanish* anyway—on a rag before stuffing it back into his pocket.

My pulse spikes, but no one else seems all that concerned that Riggs has apparently been completely MIA for the last five hours. That’s a hell of a lot more worrying than the unlikely possibility of him still being over at the farm was. Maybe he went home since he didn’t have any work waiting for him here. My fingers twitch tighter around the wrench in my hand, my instinct telling me to drop it, leave this tune-up half finished, and race home to check that he’s there.

“He had back-to-back highway breakdowns. He’s been out working all day,” Steele answers from his office.

A relieved breath whooshes out of my lungs, taking the tension in my neck and shoulders with it. I let out a quiet laugh and shake my head at myself. Of course, Riggs is fine. He’s *Riggs*. He’s like a cockroach: indestructible.

I've always had a thing for twinks. Don't get me wrong, big, hairy dudes are hot in their own way, but petite guys who can't be described as anything but *pretty* have revved my engine as long as I can remember. Before Riggs though, I never realized how *sweet* most of the guys I've fucked have been. Not that there's anything wrong with a little sweetness, but I can't deny that his aloof badassery last night did it for me in ways I never even thought to fantasize about before.

My cock swells a little more just thinking about the cool, confident way he took me apart. I think I can safely say that I'm entering my ragey twink era of hookups. Assuming there's anyone else even out there like him. That's a big if. An even *bigger* if is whether or not he'll scare them off if I try. A hot shiver runs down my spine and I grin to myself, hidden under the hood of a Honda where none of the guys can see.

After I finish up with the tune-up and pass everything off to Henry, I pull my phone out of my pocket to kill a couple of minutes until another customer comes in. There's a text notification waiting for me. My heart rate spikes again, and my smile pulls wider as I imagine all the possible snarky, sarcastic texts Riggs might have sent while he's been out rescuing stranded truckers all day long. But when I tap on the notification, it's not from my roomie at all.

AX: Since you never texted me, I'm assuming last night was a success.

The text is punctuated with an eggplant emoji, a tongue, and water droplets. Considering my brain has been on a replay loop all damn day long, it's not shocking that I immediately have to reach down and adjust my stiffening dick at the reminder of what went down with Riggs. But my smirk slowly falls as I read the message a second time and then type my response.

SHEP: Have we finally achieved psychic twin status? How the hell did you know Riggs and I fooled around?

AX: ?????

AX: BRO. You fucked your scary roommate? Was this before or after Drew completed that little lap dance he spent all afternoon working on.

Drew? Oh, right, Axel's friend who Riggs scared off.

SHEP: Instead of. I'm not 25 anymore, I can't screw around with two guys in the same night... unless it's a threeway situation, but Riggs isn't really the sharing type.

AX: *snort* uh, yeah, I didn't get the sharing vibe from him at all.

AX: Idk, dude, he's hot and all, so I get it, but fucking your roommate seems like a bad idea. What are you going to do if he gets all clingy and thinks the two of you are playing house now?

I bark out a laugh, remembering the way Riggs nearly took my head off for even *thinking* the blowjob was anything more than casual. Auggie slams the hood closed on the car he's working on and arches an eyebrow at me.

"That Riggs?" he guesses, eyeing my phone with a smirk.

"No, but Riggs is right, your man should be concerned about how obsessed you are," I answer, then type out a reply to my brother.

SHEP: I'm not worried about it.

I shove my phone back into my pocket without waiting for a reply. I understand what Axel is getting at. He's had better luck avoiding crazies, but he's just as slutty as I am. It's not like we've *never* had serious relationships, but we both learned years ago that it's a hell of a lot easier to avoid the whole mess. Sure, seeing all the guys fall in love one by one like it's mating season or some shit has put the thought in my head from time to time that maybe forever with someone might not be the worst thing ever. Getting mauled by a grizzly would probably be worse, I guess.

Luckily, Riggs has made it clear that it's the definition of a non-issue. We can fool around all we want and neither of us are going to rush out to get the other's name tattooed on their ass, or whatever it is people do when they go all apeshit in love.

The deep purr of the tow truck's engine announces Riggs's return just minutes before the end of the day. I'm mopping up my bay when he parks and hops out, looking tiny as hell next to the truck. I pause for a minute to watch him stride into the garage, his overalls streaked with grease, his skin pink and his hair damp with sweat from spending the day digging around inside overheated engines while the sun beat down on him. He catches me looking at him and shoots me a teasing wink that heats me through in seconds flat.

"Miss me all day?" I flirt sarcastically, fully expecting a snort and an eyeroll, which is exactly what I get.

"I missed fucking lunch is what I missed," he says, his stomach growling loudly to prove his point.

"I've got a couple of steaks thawing in the fridge. We can throw those bad boys on the grill as soon as we get home," I suggest, and Riggs lets out one of the porniest sounds I've heard in my life. It's a full-on breathless moan that goes straight to my dick, even though I'm fully aware that the meat he's panting after right now isn't mine.

"Could the two of you be any more adorable and domestic?" Auggie coos with a taunting smile.

"Eat glass," Riggs fires back with a toothy grin of his own.

Auggie lets out a startled laugh and I swear for a second that a grudging kind of affection flits through Riggs's eyes before he shuts it down with his usual bored glare. I hurry to finish my clean up and clock out. A couple of juicy steaks are

calling my name. And with any luck, that won't be the only meat I'll be choking on tonight.

RIGGS

Spending the day outside of the garage, taking calls and enjoying the fresh air was my ideal workday. I'm covered in a layer of grime and sweat, and I'm hungry enough that I might take a bite out of Shep if we don't get home soon, but neither of those things are doing a damn thing to put a damper on my good mood. I'm even having a hard time finding it annoying that I can feel his eyes on me every few seconds from the passenger seat.

“What?” I ask, my lips twitching with the threat of a smile.

“What?” he echoes with an air of innocence. I glance over at him, and he's pinning me with the horniest look I've ever seen, his lips damp like he's been licking them, practically unzipping my overalls with his eyes. *Yeah, innocent my dick.*

My cock starts to swell, unfurling a little in the confines of my briefs to create a more noticeable bulge. The effect his staring is having on me definitely doesn't go unnoticed either. A hot, electric feeling skitters along just under the surface of my skin while I force myself to pay attention to the road ahead of me for another mile so we can reach the house in one piece.

When we get to Shep's place, I use the garage door opener he gave me so I can park my Mustang in the garage. I almost felt guilty when he offered since I'm already taking up half the garage with my work-in-progress motorcycle, but if he's

happy to leave his Charger in the driveway where any deranged one-night stand can vandalize it, I'm not going to argue with him.

The door that connects the garage to the house opens into the small laundry room. I stop just inside the door to take off my boots. There's no space for Shep to move around me, so he waits, drumming his fingers against the dryer with the kind of dramatic impatience that only encourages me to take my sweet time untying my laces, wiggling my ass more than necessary in the process.

By the time I have one boot untied and slipped off, he's stopped drumming his fingers, leaving the room eerily quiet except for the sound of our breathing.

"You have no idea how tempted I am to grab a handful of your ass right now. But something tells me that's a good way to have you swinging on me," he says, humor and heat woven together like he can't decide if the idea of me punching him is funny or sexy.

I kick off my second boot and turn around to face him, patting him on the cheek in a way that's meant to be patronizing but ends up backfiring when all I can think about is what it would feel like to have him rub his coarse beard stubble against the inside of my thighs.

"Look at you, learning consent. I'm so proud of you."

"Fuck off. I'm all about consent, thank you very much," he says, his lips twisting into a crooked smile that softens the *fuck off* part of the sentence. "Case in point, you wiggling that tight

little peach right in front of me while I kept my hands perfectly to myself.”

“You want a Nobel Prize?” I deadpan. “For the record, if you want to play grab ass when it’s just the two of us, it’s fine.”

His grin widens and he takes a step closer. He’s usually only half an inch taller than I am, but with his boots still on, he’s got another inch or so, which isn’t much, but it makes it feel like he’s towering over me in the tight space of the laundry room. Shep brings a hand around, landing it directly on my ass cheek. He digs his fingers in roughly and my breath catches when he uses the leverage to drag me forward, my body crashing into his.

It’s not the first time I’ve noticed it, but fucking hell this man is *solid*. I brace my hands on his broad, sturdy chest and flatten my lips into an unimpressed expression that’s completely at odds with the lust racing through my veins and rushing straight down to fill my cock. He’s already locked and loaded, his erection pressed up against me as he kneads my ass cheek like he’s just trying to see how much I’ll actually let him get away with before I throw hands.

“Goddamn, that’s even nicer than it looks,” he flirts, wrapping his other arm around me to grab my other ass cheek, nearly lifting me off the ground as he spins me to back me up against the washing machine. “Are you a totally strict top or do you bend the rules every so often?”

He leans in and ghosts his nose along the edge of my jaw, drowning me in the smell of a hard day's work that makes me want to unzip his coveralls and run my tongue all over his salty skin. Whatever revelations Journey detonated this morning, there's absolutely no question in my mind that sex with a man *does it* for me. Sweaty skin, hairy chests and thighs; deep, rumbling moans of pleasure; hard, swinging cocks finding each other in a frenzy of humping, grinding, wild lust. Hell to the fucking *yes*.

But Shep asked me a question and it wasn't whether I want to undress us both and rut against him like an animal in heat until we're covered in each other's cum. Which, to be clear, would definitely be a yes.

His teeth graze sharply over my throat, raising goosebumps and tightening my nipples. He squeezes my ass cheeks again, tugging them apart just enough to make my hole ache subtly. Do I ever bottom? That's what he wanted to know. Will I bottom *for him*? That's what he's really asking.

All alone in my bedroom with a toy, I've had plenty of panting, earth shattering prostate orgasms. But when it comes to the thought of bending over for someone else, being that gut-clenchingly, heart-racingly *vulnerable* for someone else?

"No. I don't switch." I answer, tilting my head to offer him more of my neck. He takes the hint, licking and sucking his way along my pulse point until the collar of my jumpsuit gets in his way. "Do *you*?"

Shep stops kissing my throat, pulling back enough to look at me again. He pries his hands off my ass too, bracing them on the machine behind me, boxing me in with his arms. His lips are damp and swollen from just a few minutes of working their way along my skin. They're going to look damn good after I've *really* put them to use. My cock jerks eagerly and I reach up to toy with the zipper on his uniform, feeling the heat radiate off of his skin and the thunder of his pulse against the palm I still have pressed to his chest.

“For *this* monster?” He raises both eyebrows skeptically, grinding against my fully hard cock just in case I wasn't clear what monster he's referring to. “It would take a hell of a lot of booze.”

Yeah, I'm definitely not going to get him drunk just to have a go at his ass.

“There are plenty of ways to get each other off even if we take anal off the table,” I point out the obvious, tugging his zipper down a few inches. A little shiver of anticipation races through me, a Pavlovian response to the metallic sound that promises nudity isn't far behind.

“Definitely lots of ways to have a good time until we're both bored of touching each other,” he agrees.

In spite of having an actual word for the way I am, I still have to wonder if I'm a little fucked up inside because Shep's acknowledgment that this is all temporary makes my dick even harder. Maybe it's a release valve for the emotional pressure that usually goes along with sex, or maybe it's just *me*. Either

way, I moan and yank his zipper the rest of the way down, exposing his chest and abs, all the way down to the waistline of his boxer briefs. I slip my hand inside his open jumpsuit, igniting a thousand fantasies I've had over the past year and decided to ignore.

His skin is hot and sticky, just like I'm sure mine is, but neither of us seem all that concerned about a little sweat. His muscles jerk and tense under my touch. He leans into me harder, fumbling for my zipper at the same time, both of us breathing harder as our cocks bump and tease against each other through our clothes.

Shep brings his face closer to mine, his next exhale puffing against my lips. My stomach clenches and my hand flies up on instinct, my fingers wrapping around his square jaw to hold him in place.

“Don't,” I say firmly.

The raging fire in his gaze cools to something more serious and he leans back an inch. “I know.” He licks his lips and I track the motion of his tongue with my eyes, feeling it all the way down to the tip of my cock. “Joking aside, Riggs, I swear I'm not going to do anything you don't want me to do. That's fucked up and it's not how I roll.” The somber look melts away again, with a playful smirk taking its place. “If you tell me that my mouth on your mouth is off limits, then I promise I won't even give you mouth-to-mouth if you're dying.”

I sputter a laugh, the uncomfortable knot in my stomach unclenching. “You're an idiot,” I mutter. “If I need mouth-to-

mouth to live, then you have my consent. Until then, I'm sure you can find a more interesting use for your mouth than swapping spit with me."

I shrug out of my unzipped overalls, pushing them down my hips with a little shimmy and taking my underwear with them. When they pool around my feet, I shake them loose and hop up onto the washing machine, wincing at the cold steel against my ass. I spread my legs and palm my cock, wrapping my fingers around my thick shaft and giving myself a slow stroke. Shep's hungry gaze stokes the fire in my belly, tightening my balls and making my cock throb.

"Jesus, I feel like I need a game plan to figure out how to tackle this thing." The reverent tremble in his voice makes me think he's eager for the challenge.

"Open mouth, insert cock. I'm sure you can figure it out," I taunt, grasping the base of my cock and angling it towards him.

Unlike Shep's, my dick isn't a precum faucet, even when I'm so damn eager to have his mouth on me that I'm vibrating all the way down to my bones. But the way he looks like his mouth is watering, I don't think it's going to be a problem.

He ignores my teasing and studies my cock with a furrow of deep concentration between his eyebrows for a minute or so, like he's trying to figure out the best way to defuse a bomb. I would make another joke about it if it wasn't so fucking hot. I've never seen anyone so determined to do it right before. Most guys just get right to it, giving it a sloppy try for a few

minutes, gagging and grappling with The Beast until they give up and jerk me off instead. It gets me off just fine, it's pretty hot actually. But, yeah, Shep's determination is doing it for me, and he hasn't even laid a hand on me yet.

“Don't try to take it all at once, that's a recipe for failure.” I give him some genuine advice this time, stroking myself slowly again from root to tip. My head flares deep purple, bulging when my fist wraps around it before I reverse course again. “Licking and sucking on the head is almost enough to get me off on its own, so don't feel like you have to overdo it and be a hero.” I stroke upward again, dragging my thumb over my slit when I reach the tip again and teasing along the sensitive nerve endings clustered there.

Shep grunts and nods like he's finally figured out a plan of action. He bats my hand out of the way and gets into position between my legs.

“Buckle up, buttercup, because I'm about to ruin you for other men,” he says, bracing his hands on my thighs to push them even wider so he can fit his massive shoulders into the space.

My head falls back, and I bark out a laugh at his bravado. If I had a dime for every man who claimed they were going to turn my world upside down before flaming out within minutes and focusing on their own pleasure instead, I'd be a wealthy dude.

My laughter turns into a deep moan, tugging at the center of my chest and bursting out of my throat when he wraps his hot,

wet lips around my cock and starts to suck. Not just sucking, *Hoovering*, his cheeks hollowing as he seals his lips so tightly around the head of my cock that every inch of me instantly lights up like a Christmas tree.

“Oh fuck,” I gasp, arching my back and grappling for somewhere to put my hands before settling on bracing them against his broad shoulders.

He takes my advice, not trying to deep throat me immediately. He laps at the head of my cock, flattening it against the roof of his mouth until the pressure makes my eyes roll back before he lets up. His sucks are sloppy and wet as he bobs his head up and down, leaving eighty percent of my cock untouched by anything but the streaks of spit that are leaking from his lips to roll down my shaft.

I can't tear my eyes away from the stretch of his lips and the flare of his nostrils as he drags in each lungful of air in between hungry licks and moans that vibrate through my dick. I wasn't bullshitting him; I could *almost* come like this, with his fingers digging into my thighs hard enough to leave bruises and his searing mouth around the first couple of inches of my cock.

I gasp and squirm against the hard steel of the machine, giving in to the fantasy of grabbing his head and burying my cock so deep in his throat that I can see his Adam's apple throb with every pulse of my release. My cock jerks between his lips and he takes me a little deeper, swallowing around me with

ball-tightening pressure when I batter against the fleshy back of his throat.

He gags, the reflex constricting so tightly around the head of my cock that an embarrassingly needy whine slips out of my lips, my hips twitching and my skin burning for more of his touch. As if he can read my mind, Shep unclenches his hands from my thighs and starts to drag them over more of my body like he's mapping me, memorizing all the places he can touch me that will make my breath catch and my cock jerk between his lips. He teases his fingers over my belly and my chest, flicking them against the hard buds of my nipples, making my insides burn like a match struck against flint.

He takes me another inch deeper, humming with satisfaction and slurping roughly, sending more mind-blowing tremors down my shaft to settle in my balls. I know he's taking it slowly because it's too damn much to swallow all at once, but the desperate, ravenous way he's sucking me, I can almost convince myself that he's savoring every inch, *getting off* on taking every single one.

"Fuck, Shep," I groan, my hips jerking involuntarily, making another gag tighten around my cock. "Sorry," I pant.

He hums again like he's reassuring me and starts to bob his head faster. He wraps his hand around the last few inches, slipping the other one between my legs to palm my heavy, aching balls. He rolls my sac in his hand, sending bolts of pleasure down to my toes and back up again. My legs tense and tremble.

The sounds tumbling off my lips now are beyond desperate. They're urgent and frantic and fucking humiliating if I actually gave a fuck about keeping my cool right now. Shep devours my cock with frenzied grunts of his own. The wet, filthy sound of his hand stroking me adds the perfect harmony to his pleased noises.

"I'm... fuck... I'm close." I dig my fingers into his shoulders, not sure if I mean to push him away or drag him closer.

He relaxes his throat, and my cock slips another inch or two deeper, almost completely engulfed in his mouth and throat, the tip of his nose teasing against my pubes. It's the look of utter fucking ecstasy on his face while he chokes on my length that sends me over the edge with a moan that echoes off of the walls of the laundry room, so loud I swear it startles birds out of the trees outside as I thrash and pant and pump rope after thick fucking rope of cum down his throat, until my balls are empty and my head is spinning from the force of my release.

My cock takes ages to get soft, so it's still stiff when he pulls off, his breathing raspy from the abuse his throat took. Shep hauls himself to his feet and shoves his hand down the front of his underwear. He collapses against me, burying his face in the crook of my neck with a harsh groan as he works himself hard and fast.

I shove his hand out of the way and replace it with my own, wrapping my fingers around his already throbbing shaft, his underwear damp against the back of my hand, sticky with the

precum he's been leaking like a fucking hose, probably since I started teasing him with my ass a goddamn eternity ago.

It only takes a few rough tugs before Shep muffles a shout against my throat and coats my palm and fingers with his hot, sticky cum, his orgasm going on and on until he collapses more fully against me with trembling knees.

“You're the best roommate ever,” he mumbles breathlessly.

I huff out a laugh. “Back at you.”

Chapter 14

SHEP

MOTOR OIL AND SWEAT with the slightest hint of fading cedar deodorant shouldn't smell half as good as it does on Rigg's skin. Or maybe I'm just cum drunk and he doesn't smell as good as I think he does. I drag in another deep inhale with my nose pressed into the curve where his neck meets his shoulder. My mouth waters and my insides all twist and flutter. Maybe it *is* just Riggs. Dude should bottle this scent and sell it. He'd make a fucking fortune.

“Are you about finished sniffing me?” he asks in that bored, acidic tone that would make anyone else sound like the world's biggest prick. But it's Riggs, so I rumble out a lazy laugh and peel myself away from him.

“Sorry, I forgot you only cuddle when you're drunk,” I tease while he wipes the cum on his hands all over the front of my overalls.

He huffs out a sound that's not quite amusement and presses a clean hand to the center of my chest to give me a small push. I take another step back to give him space, but there's not much farther I can go in the tight confines of the laundry room. His cock is still half hard, remnants of my saliva and streaks of cum clinging to his shaft. My throat aches and my spent cock gives a lazy twitch while a prideful smile spreads over my face. I'm fully expecting him to play it cool and act like I did a passable job sucking his dick, but we both know I fucking owned him for a few minutes there.

Riggs notices the smirk on my lips and snorts a laugh as he hops down off the washing machine.

"Your gold medal will be in the mail tomorrow," he says dryly.

"Hell yeah, it will," I crow, winding up and cracking a loud slap against his bare ass cheek when he turns his back to me.

Riggs yelps and spins around with a hand raised defensively, clearly ready to let me know where the line is with my ass grabbing privileges. I cackle and hold my hands up in surrender.

"Shit, sorry. It was a reflex."

He rolls his eyes and brings his raised hand gently to my face to pat my cheek again. "Watch it, gearhead." He almost makes the insult sound like an endearment. "Now, be a pal and toss some steaks on the grill while I go hop in the shower."

"Sure thing, *buddy*."

He snorts again, bending over to pick up his discarded work uniform. He balls it up and tosses it into the washing machine, then saunters out of the laundry room bare assed. Since I'm here anyway, I strip out of my jumpsuit too. It's one thing to wear it a few days in a row with oil stains all over it, but crusted cum inside and out would be a step too far. Although, it would be pretty fucking funny to see everyone's reaction if I did it as a joke.

The shower is running by the time I pass the bathroom and slip into my bedroom to grab a pair of shorts and a t-shirt to pull on. On my way back out of my bedroom, the sun glints against something on my windowsill.

"Fucking creepy bird," I mutter, stopping to push the window open and grab my keys. They're warm from the sun, and I hear a distant caw that I swear sounds like mocking laughter as I stuff the keys into my pocket.

Riggs told me to put some treats out for him when he brings my stuff back. It feels like I'm training him to steal from me, but what the fuck do I know? So, I scoop a handful of raisins out of a bag under my window and leave them on the sill. I checked with Porter to make sure raisins were safe for Vel. The bird might be a dirty thief, but that doesn't mean I want anything bad to happen to him.

There's actually a nice breeze this afternoon, so I leave the window open to air my bedroom out a bit, then make my way into the kitchen to get to work on dinner. While the grill heats up, I season the steaks and cut up some veggies to toss on with

them. Riggs re-emerges wearing fresh jeans and a t-shirt, the cedar smell overpowering the other ones now. Logically, it should be an improvement, and the cedar scent *is* nice, but I have to say, his natural musk was really doing it for me. Not that I'm about to be a fucking weirdo and tell him that.

“Truth or bare,” I prompt him with a grin after I come back inside from putting the steaks on to find him leaning against the counter like he's waiting for me.

There's a moment of confusion on his face, his forehead wrinkling and his head cocking to one side as that drunken night seems to slowly come back to him. I can see the exact moment it clicks. His lips twitch with a suppressed grin and he shakes his head.

“You realize that a game where the consequences are nudity really loses its stakes when we've already seen each other naked, right?”

I shrug one shoulder. “Get naked then,” I taunt.

“Ask me a question and I'll see how I feel,” he suggests with another almost-smile.

I open the refrigerator and grab a couple of beers, popping the caps off both of them with my thumbs and handing one over to Riggs. I study him like I'm trying to come up with the deepest, most personal question I can think of, trying to get in his head really. Psyching out your opponent is half the game, regardless of what game you're playing. But he just stares me down with an unimpressed, unintimidated expression, waiting

for me to hurry up and ask a question so he can decide if he would rather be honest or show me his dick again.

“Where’d you spend summers as a kid?” I finally ask.

Both of his eyebrows jump up. It wasn’t the kind of question he was expecting. Always keep your opponent on their toes, that’s the other important thing to remember, regardless of the game. I take a sip of my beer, the cool glass of the bottle almost a shock against my overheated skin. It’s impossible to tell if Riggs is going to answer the question or not. I guess it’s a win-win either way, but I *am* curious about who the mysterious, pint-sized mechanic is under the bared teeth and big dick energy.

He doesn’t look away as he tilts his beer bottle up to his own lips and takes a sip, his throat bobbing with the swallow. He wipes the back of his hand over his mouth when he’s done and finally jerks his eyes away from mine, his gaze going to the window where there’s heat and a little bit of smoke rising from the grill outside.

“My Aunt Gina had this horse farm in upstate New York,” he answers, the corners of his eyes tightening. “My mom would drive my sister and I up there the week after school would let out, and we’d stay for three or four weeks usually. We thought it was the coolest thing ever, and I’m sure Gina enjoyed having free labor for a month.” He smiles, still looking out the window. His expression is a hell of a lot fonder than I would expect for someone reminiscing about shoveling out horse stalls. “When I was fourteen, she had this stallion,

Bruiser. He was a mean fucker that everybody was afraid to get near. But by the end of the summer, I was riding him up and down the trails around her property.”

“Damn, that’s awesome,” I murmur. I can totally picture Riggs as the star in one of those horse girl movies, taming the untamable horse, all symbolic and shit. It definitely tracks. “I guess that explains how you owned all of us on that bull ride.”

Not gonna lie, the image of Riggs riding that bucking mechanical bull last year, his hips swiveling in perfect time with each wild jerk has lived rent free in my head ever since. He barks out a laugh and finally looks back at me again.

“Yeah, I guess the balance thing kind of sticks with you, even if it’s been years since you’ve ridden,” he says.

“You never go back to visit anymore?” I ask.

His smirk falls and he clears his throat.

“Only one question per turn. That’s how games work.”

Oh, right, we were playing a game. I nod and gesture for him to go ahead. Riggs clicks his tongue stud against his teeth, narrowing his eyes at me, studying me the same way I studied him a minute ago, clearly trying to psych me out. I’m sure my unflappable expression doesn’t hold a candle to his, but I give it my best shot anyway.

“Why don’t you ever date? Are you hung up on some massive heartbreak from years ago? Secretly married and waiting for him to roar back into your life on a motorcycle and tell you he’s been in love with you for all these years? What?”

“Um, none of the above?” I answer with a chuckle. “It’s nothing that serious. I’ve been in love a couple of times, dated some great guys. I didn’t wake up one day after some crushing breakup and decide I wasn’t going to ever fall in love again or anything dramatic. I guess the whole back and forth of the dating scene just got a little exhausting, so I stopped bothering. I feel like it should be easier, you know? Like, with the right person it should just *click*. And if that never happens, then it’s not like I’ll die alone. I’ve got Axel, I’ve got friends. I’m fine.” I shrug.

“That’s... a surprisingly healthy outlook.”

“Were you expecting me to say something like ‘I can’t be tied down to just one guy when there is so much ass to conquer?’” I joke, taking another sip of my beer then setting it down again.

“Maybe something like that,” Riggs admits.

“Sorry to disappoint.”

“You have been the opposite of a disappointment so far.” He says the words slowly, like they’re difficult to get out, and he’s back to looking out the window instead of right at me.

I put a hand over my heart dramatically. “Holy shit, that almost sounded like a compliment.”

“Shut up,” he mutters, and I laugh.

“I’ll try not to let it go to my head.” I shoot him a wink, then slip out the back door to check on the food.

Riggs follows me outside, opening the patio umbrella and shaking off the patio chairs to clear them of any bugs and debris while I flip the steaks. When I turn back towards him, he's sitting down and looking up into the trees overhead with a faraway look in his eyes again.

"She died that winter," he says unexpectedly. "I've thought back really hard about it, trying to remember if she was just really good at hiding it, or if I was so focused on trying to tame Bruiser that I never noticed she was sick."

"If she was anything like you, I'm guessing she had the stoic thing down pretty well." I pull out the chair next to him and sit down.

He exhales a half laugh, half-choked sound. "Yeah, she did," he agrees. "Aunt Gina was a total badass. She would have hated anyone knowing she was sick."

A single tear forms in the corner of his eye and then breaks free to roll down his cheek. Without thinking, I reach over to brush it away. Riggs leans into my touch for just a second, letting me catch the moisture on my thumb, before he scowls and bats my hand away.

"Don't be weird," he scolds, but his tone is much softer than usual.

"Sorry," I mutter. "Would it be more comfortable for you if I whipped my dick out while I touched you?"

"Yes, actually," he says with a rough chuckle, then clears his throat again. "Anyway, I figured that a motorcycle would

remind me a bit of riding a horse, but without all the shit shoveling. Maybe it will once I actually finish getting the damn thing put together.”

“You know, they *do* sell fully assembled motorcycles.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” he asks.

“Fair point,” I concede with a smirk.

RIGGS

I can’t believe I’m blubbering about my dead aunt to Shep. I guess *one* tear might not constitute blubbering, but still, it’s an unprecedented emotional display. Luckily, he doesn’t say anything else about it while we sit outside and eat our dinner, going back and forth with more ‘truth or bare’ questions, keeping them light for the rest of the game.

As unexpectedly eager as I was earlier to tell him about the bomb Journey detonated in my brain this morning, I think we’ve already gotten deep enough for one night. Besides, I’m not even sure *why* I had the impulse to talk to him about it this morning. It’s just a thing. It’s not even a thing. A label that doesn’t change anything.

Vel comes down from his favorite tree to strut around the table until I give him some of the cooked veggies from my plate, and Shep and I open another beer each while we watch the sky overhead get darker. Crickets start to chirp once the sun disappears, and a few fireflies light up the backyard here and there.

“Do you actually like kissing or is it more of a habit?” I ask curiously, putting my feet up on the patio table and reclining in my chair. I swat at a mosquito that tries to land on my arm and Shep swishes his half-empty beer bottle absently in one hand.

“Depends on the guy, I guess,” he admits.

“What do you mean?” I frown. “Like if the guy is a good kisser or not?”

Before I implemented my strict moratorium on kissing, I really did give it a chance. I kissed tons of guys at school, even a couple of girls just to be totally sure. Some kissed sloppy with way too much tongue, some had dry lips and bad breath, and a few were clearly more skilled than the rest. But I still never managed to find the whole activity anything but a little boring and awkward.

“Sure,” Shep says. “If they’re any good at it, and you know, sometimes you get that swooping, tingling feeling in your belly. Chemistry, or whatever it is.”

“Huh,” I mutter, a hot, irritating feeling twisting in my gut briefly as I try not to wonder too much about which of Shep’s nameless hookups gave him the fabled butterflies.

“I’m guessing you don’t? Like kissing, I mean,” he says, his smile faltering for half a second. “Unless you’re just not interested in kissing me?” His tone is light, but there’s a moment where I can see his expression tighten with insecurity, even in the dark.

“It’s not personal,” I assure him. “I just don’t really *get* kissing. All the intimacy of sex without the benefit of an orgasm. What’s the point?”

“Guess I never thought about it that much,” he admits.

I hum in understanding.

Shep absently drags the rim of the glass bottle along his bottom lip, and for a fleeting moment of insanity, I wonder what it would actually be like to put my mouth on his. Does he kiss roughly, all scraping teeth and bruising force? Or would he knock me off balance with a shockingly soft press of his lips against mine? My throat tightens and the curious feeling is gone as quickly as it arrived.

I laugh to release the pressure inside of my chest, and Shep cocks his head with curiosity.

“Just remembering how fast you fell off the mechanical bull,” I lie, but now that I mention it, the memory of him face planting in two seconds flat *does* fill my mind and make me laugh a little harder.

“Ass,” he mutters without any actual venom. “Maybe we need a rematch sometime.”

“Sure. I’ll happily embarrass all of you a second time. As long as Red and Journey don’t cheat again.”

In their defense, they did still try to give me the prize money. But I didn’t actually care that much. Surprising the hell out of everyone with my mad skills was fun on its own, even without a wad of cash to sweeten the deal.

Shep and I finish our drinks while reminiscing about not only that night, but a dozen others full of too many drinks in dimly lit bars and all the money that's changed hands over one bet or another.

“Auggie has a pool going about when we'll hook up,” I tell him what Journey let me in on this morning.

“I know. I've got two hundred bucks riding on you giving in to my charms in another six weeks,” he says with a smirk.

“Dickhead,” I grumble with a laugh, tipping back my beer to finish off the bottle, then licking my lips. “Give me half and I'll stick to that story when the time comes,” I bargain.

Shep flashes me a smile. “Deal.”

I tap my empty bottle against his to seal the agreement. I'm sure by then we'll be tired of hooking up anyway, so it won't matter if we tell everyone we did. For some reason the thought of this ending makes my throat tighten again. Maybe after a month without any alcohol, the two beers tonight have gone to my head. That would explain the bizarre urge I have to climb onto Shep's lap and rest my head on his shoulder.

Cuddle Slut Riggs is a fucking menace.

“Want to go inside and find something to watch?” Shep suggests, getting to his feet and gathering up our empty plates before I can do anything stupid, like actually try to cuddle with him.

I jump up to help, grunting in agreement with his plan. We have a few episodes left of the show we've been watching

together, and if I end up falling asleep for half an episode with my head on Shep's shoulder, that's really more of a reflection of how comfortable the couch is and the pacing of the show than anything to do with me.

Chapter 15

RIGGS

AUGGIE IS RUNNING HIS mouth, as usual, making all the guys laugh. The sound is thunderous, even over the loud clang of the heavy metal side door closing behind us. In spite of all of the end of day ruckus, the sound of Shep tugging the zipper of his jumpsuit down is the only thing I can hear.

After two weeks of daily post-work blowjobs, my dick has become acutely attuned to the metallic whirr, perking up eagerly in spite of the fact that we're still surrounded by five other grease monkeys, all of them cackling like a herd of hyenas.

“What do you say, Riggs?” Tallahassee asks. “You down to lose your crown as reigning pool champ tonight?”

I flash him a toothy grin. “You're dreaming, Tal. Make sure you bring plenty of extra cash. Big bills, preferably.”

He chuckles and breaks away from the group to hop on his motorcycle. The rest of the guys drift apart and head for their

own cars too, calling out more friendly shit talk to each other. Tallahassee's motorcycle roars to life, drowning out the last of the dwindling conversations. A tug of envy has me sighing as he shoves his helmet on and peels out of the parking lot of Big Bull.

“You lusting after Tallahassee or his bike?” Shep asks with amusement laced heavily through his tone.

I turn around to find my roomie leaning against his Charger, his arms folded on the roof as he smirks at me, squinting from the glare of the sun.

“What do you think?” I ask, tugging open the passenger door and slipping inside.

“It's a nice bike,” Shep agrees, getting in on his side.

“Mine will be nice when it's done.” I'm not sure if I'm saying that more in defense of my poor girl or in an attempt to manifest that shit. “Actually, do you mind if we make a quick detour over to Belland? I've been meaning to stop into Basket Case Bikes to pick up a part I still need.”

“Yeah, no problem,” he agrees, taking a left out of the parking lot instead of a right.

I'm sure the guys won't miss us if we're an hour late to Wooley's. Hell, Auggie will probably pop wood over the chance to speculate about which surface I bent Shep over to fuck him senseless. He's not *completely* off base, obviously, but no way am I giving him the satisfaction of that information.

I glance over at Shep, who has his attention fixed on the road. I eye the spot on the side of his neck, half hidden by the collar of his jumpsuit, where I sucked a bruise last night while we jerked each other off on the couch. The spot is obscured by the color of his tattoo, invisible unless you know it's there and are looking for it. My skin heats and my lips twitch into a half smile.

There's something so fucking hot about marking him up like that, even if no one will ever notice it but me. Not that I would be opposed to whatever thirsty twink we're bound to run into at the bar tonight noticing the hickey and taking it as a sign to keep their hands to themselves. Maybe I should make it a little darker before we go to Wooley's. Auggie can speculate about it all he wants, but unless he gets a forensic specialist to match the mark to my dental records, he can't prove a thing.

"Why are you looking at me like you're going to eat me?" Shep asks, glancing over at me after he pulls the car into a spot in the far corner of the Basket Case Bikes parking lot.

I huff out a laugh and reach over to drag my index finger over the bruise lightly. Shep's lips part and his eyes heat.

"Don't ask stupid questions," I tease before unbuckling my seatbelt and getting out.

It takes a minute before I hear his car door open and close behind me. He was probably adjusting the erection he sprang, or too busy panting to realize I was already out of the car. I laugh under my breath, not looking over my shoulder again until he falls into step an inch behind me.

Shep reaches past me to pull the shop door open when we reach it. A bell jingles to announce our presence, and the smell of brand-new leather greets us as we step inside. I've emailed the owner, Monty, a couple of times, and ordered a few parts off of his website. But this is the first time I've actually been into the shop.

The place is the perfect blend of necessities for both the people who like to work on their own bikes and people who barely know the tail pipe from the saddle bag but managed to get their license and like to ride. One side of the brightly lit shop is lined with shelves full of parts and tools, while the other has dozens of different bikes for sale on display, plus all the accessories you could ever need.

Shep lets out a low whistle as we pass a cherry red Ducati Diavel on display. It's sleek as hell, the chrome gleaming under the fluorescent lights.

"Damn," I mutter in agreement with his impressed whistle.

"She's a beauty, isn't she?" A deep voice agrees, drawing our attention to the man organizing a wall of sturdy leather biker boots a few feet away.

His head is half shaved, and the remaining hair is long, cascading down the other side. He looks like exactly the kind of guy you would expect to find working in a motorcycle shop like this; covered in tattoos and a generous beard, wearing a pair of holey jeans and a denim vest with nothing on underneath. He clearly subscribes to Shep's theory of business

attire with his vest unbuttoned, his bare chest shamelessly on display.

“Do I even want to know the price?” Shep asks, still eyeing the bike, barely managing to hide his drool.

“I don’t know, do you?” the man asks with a laugh, and Shep grimaces.

“I’m Riggs, by the way. I’ve been bugging Monty with technical questions while I rebuild an old Z1,” I introduce myself. The man looks me up and down with that impressed glint in his eyes that never fails to raise the hairs on the back of my neck. Just because I’m not six feet tall or built like a compact tank the way Shep is, people find it fucking *cute* that I’m into this stuff. It’s grating as hell.

“Monty,” he says, taking my hand in a firm handshake. “Good to put a face to all the emails. How’s she coming along?”

“Getting there,” I answer. “I actually wanted to come by and see if there’s any chance you could track down a pair of turbo four hundred camshafts for me that will fit her. I figured you might have some connections.”

“Yeah, I might know someone who can help you out with those. Let me make a call real quick. Do you have a few minutes to hang around?”

“We’ve got time. I appreciate it.”

He abandons the boots and slips into the back to make a call, while Shep and I keep looking around. Shep keeps

coming back to the Ducati though, with that wistful look in his eyes.

“Do you even have a class M license?” I ask, even though I’m already drooling over the fantasy of seeing his thick thighs straddling the bike, the two of us roaring down a winding country road, side by side.

“I’ve had one since I was eighteen. I renew it every time it’s about to expire, even though I haven’t had a motorcycle in nearly twenty years,” he admits, putting a hand on the leather seat and stroking it lovingly. “It’s gotta be around thirty grand,” he murmurs, almost sounding like he’s talking to himself.

“Think about it,” I suggest with a shrug.

“Yeah. It’s hot though, right?” Shep looks to me for validation that’s completely unnecessary.

“Hell yes, it’s hot. And you’d be hot as fuck riding it.” I slouch a little to put my chin on his shoulder, admiring the bike side by side with him. “How about once I finish the Z1, I’ll build you a bike too?”

He barks out a laugh. “I’d like a motorcycle this century.”

I gasp with mock offense. “I’m practically done, you dickhead.”

“Uh-huh,” he murmurs. “I guess all the parts scattered all over my garage floor are for a *different* bike?”

“You’re such an ass,” I complain with a chuckle, turning my head and biting down hard on his earlobe. He yelps and I

laugh harder.

Monty reappears from the back holding a scrap of paper.

“You’re in luck. A guy I know has the camshafts you need, and he’s willing to give you a good price for them. His name’s Jaguar, and he lives just up the road. He said you can swing by now if you want.” Monty hands me the paper with an address written on it.

“Jaguar?” I repeat. “Cocky little tattoo artist?”

“Yeah, that’s him. You know him?”

“I get all my work done at Ink Slingers,” Shep answers before I can, tugging at the edge of his half-open jumpsuit to show off a quick peek of his ink.

Monty nods. “Right on. They’re a rowdy bunch of idiots, but they’re not bad guys... for the most part. Jag will hook you up.”

“Thanks again. I appreciate it.” I stuff the paper into my pocket and Shep casts one last longing glance at the red motorcycle before throwing an arm over my shoulders on our way out.

SHEP

“Hope you don’t mind. I didn’t know this was going to turn into a fucking scavenger hunt,” Riggs says, squinting out the window, trying to read numbers off of the mailboxes as I drive slowly down the dirt road on the outskirts of Belland. None of

the houses on the street are actually visible, all hidden down long, unpaved driveways, obscured by overgrown trees.

“Not like the guys are going to be crying into their drinks if we’re late or don’t bother showing up.” I shrug. “There it is,” I say, finally spotting the right house number, barely visible on a rusted mailbox.

I turn down the narrow driveway. It’s one of the few down this road that’s not only paved, but nice and smooth. I’m betting he’s the only person living down here who doesn’t spend all winter snowed in. Then again, when you buy a house in an area like this, you either *want* to be left alone all winter, or you buy your own plow to deal with it yourself.

His property looks like he’s well on his way to having his own junkyard. There are a handful of motorcycles and rusted-out old cars littering his front lawn, all looking like they’ve been scrapped for parts at this point. I park and we both get out. Jaguar must have been watching for us, because his garage door starts to open as soon as my boots hit the pavement.

He’s wearing a pair of leather pants that would be a joke on anyone else, but fit like they were made specifically for him, along with the same steel toed boots he always seems to have on, and a neon pink wide-necked tank top that swoops down to the middle of his chest to show off all of his ink. The loud outfit isn’t the most notable thing about him at the moment though.

“You have a pet squirrel?” Riggs’s eyes light up as Jag gives the little rodent perched on his shoulder what appears to be a slice of apple.

“Yup,” Jag says proudly. “This is Fuzzy McFluffyTail. And, before you ask, a name like that is what happens when you agree to let clients submit suggestions and vote on a winner.”

Riggs laughs, approaching slowly with his hand outstretched. “Does he bite?”

“Sometimes,” Jag answers casually, like the possibility of someone contracting rabies from his half-feral house pet isn’t a concern to him. “Here.” He scoops the squirrel off his shoulder and *tosses* him towards Riggs.

Riggs gasps and then chuckles when Fuzzy McFluffyTail latches onto him like he’s a tree, catching the front of his jumpsuit and scaling him in a flash. The rodent doesn’t stop on his shoulder though. Instead, it runs circles from back to front while Riggs holds his arms up, unsure what to do until the squirrel jumps down and scampers away.

Jag pops one of the apple slices he’s still holding into his own mouth and saunters over to the workbench in the corner of the garage.

“Still working on that Kawasaki?” he asks.

“Uh, yeah. These camshafts should be the last part I’m missing though, so hopefully it’ll come together quickly from here.” I can’t decide whether Riggs’s confidence is wishful thinking or just plain bravado at this point.

“Cool.” Jag grabs the pair of camshafts and turns towards Riggs, eyeing him up and down like he’s sizing him up.

I frown and my pulse thunders a little louder in my ears. Is Jag checking him out? The muscle in my jaw ticks and my hand twitches with the urge to grab Riggs’s jumpsuit and tug him closer, making it clear to the inked biker that this particular feisty twink isn’t on the menu.

At least, I don’t think he is.

Actually... I guess other than that *one* mostly snarky conversation we had after the first time we fooled around, we’ve never brought up whether or not things are in any way exclusive. Why would they be? Aside from the fact that Riggs is bound to sabotage any hookup attempt I make. Do I have the balls to do the same to him? Would I want to?

“You know...” Jag goes on. “If you want any help, I’ve got the time.”

Riggs cocks his head and inches forward to lean one hand against the dusty workbench. “For what? An hourly rate?”

Jag shrugs. “Just for fun. I’ve put together and taken apart a hundred bikes. It’s like... therapy for me.”

“Yeah?” Riggs reaches out and takes the turbo camshafts from Jaguar. I’m sure the way Jag’s fingers brush against Riggs’s as he passes off the parts is totally unintentional, but the territorial growl that rumbles deep in my throat is reflexive.

The sound draws both their gazes towards me. Riggs arches his eyebrows, his lips twitching with amusement.

“Sorry, Fido, I’m all out of liver treats.”

I try to scoff at his teasing, but it just ends up coming out as another rumbling, bestial kind of sound that I didn’t think people actually made in real life.

“Tell you what, let me give you my number and you can text me if you decide you want a hand,” Jag suggests, turning his attention back towards Riggs.

“Sure, that sounds good,” he agrees, pulling out his phone and unlocking it, then handing it over.

I inch closer until I’m hovering next to Riggs, able to feel the heat of his body through the layers of our clothes. He glances at me over his shoulder again while Jag types his number in. His lips are twisted in an expression that’s half amused, half confused by whatever wild hair up my ass has me acting like some kind of horned-up caveman.

Jag hands Riggs’s phone back, and he puts it away.

“What do I owe you for these?” he asks, nodding towards the parts he’s still holding.

“Don’t worry about it.” Jag waves him off. “You can owe me one.”

“Owe you one *what?*”

Jag shrugs again, flashing a wicked, chaotic kind of smile. “We’ll figure it out.”

Riggs glances cautiously between the camshafts in his hand and Jag, clearly weighing whether or not he wants to take the deal and run or insist on paying cash rather than owing the dude a mysterious favor in the future.

After a second, Riggs tightens his grip around the pair of metal cylinders and nods. “Alright. But I’m not smuggling heroin up my ass or whatever your little motorcycle club gets up to.”

Jag throws his head back and laughs loudly, the sound echoing off the cement walls of the garage. “You’re fucking funny, man. I like you.” He clicks his tongue and his squirrel darts back into the garage in a flash, weaving between my legs and scrambling up Jag’s clothes to settle itself on his shoulder again. “Hit me up,” he reminds Riggs one last time, then slips back into the house, closing the door behind himself.

“Wow,” Riggs says with a chuckle. I can’t tell if it’s a good ‘wow’ or a bad ‘wow’ though. Does he think Jag is totally unhinged, or did he dig the dude’s chaotic, impish vibe?

And why the hell does it bother me so much that I can’t tell which it is?

He turns towards the mouth of the garage and bumps right into me since I haven’t moved an inch, rooted in place, still trying to figure out whether Jag was flirting and if Riggs was into it.

“Something wrong, wolfman?” His tone is just as teasing as the words are, but his forehead scrunches as he studies me with genuine concern in his eyes.

Is something wrong? Not so much. Just grappling with the overwhelming urge to strip you down and rub myself all over you like some kind of possessive, fucked-up mating ritual. Regular fuck buddy shit.

I huff out a laugh at the inner thoughts that I have *zero* intention of saying out loud to Riggs. He puts a hand against the center of my chest, his rough, calloused fingertips brushing over the bare skin under my parted zipper. A fresh wave of heat crawls through me and my cock swells instantly.

“Nope,” I finally answer his question. Things are going fucking great between us. It’s nothing but blowjobs and hanging out, and I’m not about to fuck that up. Even if I kind of want to pound on Jag’s door really quick and make it fucking clear that he doesn’t have a chance with Riggs.

I jerk my head towards the car to signal for him to get back in. He eyes me one more time like he’s expecting whatever’s running through my head to be stamped across my forehead. He must not see what he’s looking for though, because after a second, he strides back over to my car and gets in.

A hot, twisted feeling is still working its way through my veins as I slide in on the driver’s side and haul ass back down the long driveway, far away from crazy-ass twinkies... well, except for the one in the seat right next to me.

Chapter 16

RIGGS

SHEP GRIPS THE STEERING wheel tighter, another rumbly sound vibrating in his throat. The deep tremor of the sound creeps over my skin, raising all the little hairs on my arms and along the back of my neck and making my cock start to swell. I mindlessly roll my tongue stud back and forth between my teeth while I study him from the passenger seat.

“Do you think you’re going to give him a call?” he blurts out the question with that same rough tone to his voice, his eyes fixed on the narrow dirt road ahead of us.

“Jag?” I clarify, feeling a little crease form between my eyebrows as I continue to stare at him. “I don’t know. Probably. Like you said, it would be nice to get this bike built sometime this century.”

Shep’s jaw ticks and he grunts. Agreeing with me that I likely won’t finish the Z1 on my own anytime soon? Acknowledging the logic? I have no fucking clue.

“He seemed kind of into you,” he says after another few seconds. The statement is loaded as hell. Casual but tense, his knuckles turning white as he grips the wheel even harder, like he’s damn near going full Hulk and ripping the whole thing off the column.

Oh. Holy shit.

A titter of laughter bubbles past my lips.

“Are you *jealous*?” I accuse, not bothering to hide the mocking lilt.

He exhales sharply, part laugh, part scoff from what I can tell. “Seriously? You want to play that game?”

“What game?” I frown, trying to remember a time I’ve gotten all growly and jealous over Shep.

“You spread the rumor that I’m a serial killer,” he says flatly.

Right. That.

I echo the dismissive, huffy sound he made a minute ago.

“That wasn’t... I’m not...” I shake my head when I can’t quite find the right defense. I wasn’t *jealous*. But, okay, fine, I can kind of see where he would get that impression. “I just didn’t want some thirsty beach Barbie’s hands all over you,” I grumble.

He grunts again. “Well, I didn’t want some Manic Pixie Biker Twink’s hands all over *you*.” The words on his tongue

are made of pure gravel, making my heart beat just a little faster and a wicked grin tug at the corners of my lips.

I lean over towards him a few inches, the seat belt tugging at my shoulder, keeping me from getting as close as I'd like to.

“You want to put your hands all over me instead?”

He finally cuts his gaze away from the road for half a second to glance over at me, checking to see if I'm fucking with him or if it's an invitation. The air in the car feels thick, heavy—that consuming, deep-in-your-chest kind of pressure that comes seconds before a roll of thunder rattles your eardrums.

Shep eases off the gas and turns down an unmarked gravel side road without bothering to signal. Not like there's anyone behind us anyway. We may only be a few minutes outside of town, but the quiet backroads give the impression that we're the only people around for miles and miles. Trees line the road on both sides, his Charger bumping along down the uneven road until we reach a clearing with nothing but a water tower and a whole lot of privacy.

He puts the car into park and the click of both of our seat belts as we throw them off is almost simultaneous. My pulse is a frantic drumbeat, throbbing in my ears, and my cock is well on its way to rock hard. Shep gets out of the car, slamming his door behind him and wrenching the back door open seconds later. I pop the glove compartment, banking on Shep's shamelessly slutty tendencies to help us out, and I'm not disappointed. I push aside the half-full box of condoms and

grab a couple packets of lube, then scramble over the seats to join him in the back.

Shep grabs onto my overalls and drags me into the backseat with another growl, the sound animalistic and full of impatience. It sends a little shiver through me, gripping my balls and quickening my breathing to match the fast, ragged pace of his. It's humid as hell outside, and even with the air conditioner running, our breath fogs up the windows in no time as we get tangled together, fumbling with each other's zippers and trying to figure out how to use the little space we have.

With his zipper already halfway down, it's not hard for me to get his overalls the rest of the way open. Shep's nose bumps against mine as I slip my hands under the coarse, stiff fabric of his clothes. I can feel the frantic beat of his heart as I drag my palms over his chest, feeling it rise and fall rapidly with every ragged inhale and exhale. His skin is hot and already starting to slick with sweat. Mine is too, droplets of moisture pooling along the back of my neck.

I slide my hands up the muscled ridges of his shoulders and push his jumpsuit out of the way. He shrugs out of it, his lips parting with his next exhale. I can feel more than just the warm flutter of his breath against my lips, I can feel the moistness of his mouth, taste the sweetness of his tongue filling the inch of space between our mouths. My cock throbs and I let out a low moan.

What would his tongue feel like moving against mine?

What would he do if I gave in to this momentary insanity and bridged the gap between us to find out?

I'm sure he would kiss me back. After all, he's not the one with the hangup, I am. If I slammed my lips into his, I have no doubt he would twist his fingers into my hair and lick inside of my mouth. But what if I still don't like it? Is it worth ruining the moment over a few seconds of curiosity?

Even scarier... what if I *do* like it?

I tilt my head away from his, dragging in a lungful of fresher air to clear my head. Not that any of the air inside the car is particularly fresh at the moment. It's thick with the smell of the sweat and oil, the sweet, salty smell of the precum already soaking Shep's underwear, and the fading scent of cedar and sandalwood.

Shep drags his tongue along the curve of my jaw, hot and wet, leaving me dripping with saliva.

"That's disgusting," I mutter, leaving his spit cooling on my skin while I struggle out of my uniform, managing to get it down around my thighs.

"You don't like it?" Shep taunts, hovering over me and licking another sopping trail between my pecs as he hooks his fingers into my briefs and shoves them down to join my overalls around my thighs.

"I didn't say that." I huff, nipping his earlobe roughly and tugging at his clothes until he's as undressed as I am.

He groans, low and husky in his throat, rolling his hips to drag his hard cock against mine. His silky skin caresses mine, bunching and tugging along our shafts with each jerk of his hips. Slick precum trickles from his slit and clings to my cock, but it's not nearly enough. It evaporates too quickly with each thrust, leaving us sticky and grinding through too much friction.

For a few minutes I don't even care. We paw at each other with brutal, harsh hands, pinching, biting, groping hard enough to leave finger shaped bruises. Some primal, greedy part of me wants to leave unmistakable marks on him so anyone else who might see him naked will know that he's claimed, already touched, and fucking satisfied. I get the feeling he's doing the same thing, whether he realizes it or not.

Shep sucks a hickey onto my collarbone while I claw at his round, bouncy ass cheeks, kneading them in my hands and sinking my blunt fingernails into his skin with each frantic, rutting thrust.

"Are you worried Jag might be eager to ride The Beast?" I taunt breathlessly, pressing my open mouth to the hollow of his throat and flicking my tongue against it to feel the growl that vibrates in response.

Shep snaps his hips harder, grinding me into the leather seat. The slightly uncomfortable tug of his skin against mine keeps me from getting too close to the edge, even though my balls tighten.

“Are you that hard up to fuck someone?” he asks through gritted teeth, pulling back an inch to meet my eyes. The hazel of his irises is dark, partially obscured by how wide his pupils are. “Is that what you need? You need me to let you wreck my hole? Get it all fucking stretched out and sloppy with your cum?”

My cock jerks hard against his, my hips snapping involuntarily with a desperate thrust as I sink my fingers harder into his ass cheeks.

“Fuck yes,” I groan, my eyes rolling back.

“Then you won’t fuck Jag?” he asks, still staring at me so intently that it scrambles my brain almost as thoroughly as his filthy words and the feeling of his cock against mine.

“I... What?” I pant.

Shep pushes himself up, hunching his shoulders and neck when they meet the roof of the car. I whimper and squirm, not giving a fuck about keeping a cool facade for a change. He picks up the two lube packets that I must have dropped and forgotten about off the floor and tears them both open with his teeth at the same time.

I gasp and my cock twitches from the cool, slick feel of the lube as he squeezes out both packets over our cocks, not bothering with precision. When they’re empty, there’s lube clinging to my belly, my balls, and my pubes, along with the generous amount now slicked over my throbbing erection.

The thirty second pause was enough for me to get my thoughts somewhat back in order and realize what Shep had been asking me before. I sit up and push against his chest, switching our positions as best I can in the confines of the backseat. His legs are still straddling mine, our movements restricted by our overalls, but I manage to crawl on top of him.

I brace one hand against the door, grabbing his jaw with the other and holding his gaze with a hard look.

“If you want me to fuck you stupid and leave you dripping with my cum, then say the word.” I lean in closer and bump the tip of my nose against his, letting go of his jaw to wrap my hand around both our cocks the best I can. “But you don’t need to worry about Jag or anybody else. I want...” The words feel tight in my throat, maybe because I’m not even sure exactly what I’m trying to say.

What *do* I want? I want what we’ve been doing. I want movie nights and ribbing the hell out of each other. I want those heated looks he throws my way when no one else is looking, and us getting each other off so hard that neither of us can walk afterward.

Why does it need to be more complicated than that?

After a few seconds, I give up trying to finish my sentence and settle for flicking my tongue against his lips, catching the taste of the moan he unleashes as I start to stroke our cocks together. He shudders and bucks into my grasp, hooking his hand behind the back of my neck to hold me in place, our

noses pressed together, our parted lips an inch from each other, sharing the same air with every grunt and groan.

The lube on our skin makes a filthy squelching sound as we hump and rut, my fingers around our cocks providing just enough friction to drive us closer and closer to the edge. We're off rhythm and messy, but that only seems to add to the mounting heat coiling tighter and tighter between us.

"Riggs. Fuck. *Riggs*." He growls my name between gritted teeth, his eyelids squeezing shut and then springing open again like he's afraid to miss a damn thing.

My head bumps against the roof with every thrust, my hand is still braced against the door, rocking the whole car along with us, and I can't seem to look away from him either. Every twitch and flicker of pleasure that contorts his face settles deep in my gut until I'm gasping his name in that same desperate, half-reverent tone he keeps saying mine in.

"*Fuck*," he roars one more time, punching his hips up violently, his whole body tensing as his cock starts to pulse against mine.

I jerk us both frantically, my balls pulling tighter and tighter as he spills hot ropes of cum all over my cock and into my hand. And then I follow him over the edge, pressing my forehead hard against his, sucking in gasping breaths as my orgasm crashes over me in waves, painting his belly with my release.

I stroke us until we're both breathless and sagging against each other.

SHEP

Neither of us say anything. I'm not sure *what* to say, actually. There are too many things running through my head and all of them feel... dangerous. Like cutting the wrong wire while trying to disarm a bomb.

I want to ask how that sentence was supposed to end. He wants... what?

I want to ask again if he's going to call Jag.

It seems like we were supposed to solve something, but after all the possessive grappling, the bruises we both left feel like a Band-Aid—just something to make us feel better for right now while the problem underneath is covered up and ignored. Is it even a problem? I have no fucking clue at this point, and I don't want to ask that either.

“Mind if we stop home for a shower before we go to the bar?” Riggs asks, climbing off me and getting out of the car.

It's hot outside, but compared to the steam we worked up inside, the open door feels like a blast of air conditioning. He uses one hand to keep his overalls from falling all the way down, his hard dick swinging freely, streaked with my cum as he opens the other door and reaches into the glove box again. He pulls out a wad of napkins and starts to wipe off the lube that's all over his skin, along with the evidence of my orgasm. I lick my lips, my insides still buzzing, my heart beating too hard, but in a different way now than it was earlier as I catalog each of the bites and bruises I left on him.

I want to tug him into the back seat all over again and just... hold him for a couple of minutes.

Jesus fuck. That's not good.

He ducks his head and looks back at me with raised eyebrows, asking without words why I'm still lying here, letting his cum cool and crust onto my skin instead of cleaning myself up. He doesn't look the least bit rattled. And why should he?

I drag both hands over my face and let out a slow breath.

It's endorphins or whatever. That's what has my brain all twisted up right now. It'll pass in a few minutes, and everything will be just as cool and casual as it's been for the past couple of weeks. It has to be.

I finally drag myself out of the back seat on unsteady legs. Riggs shoves another handful of napkins at me, zipping up while I wipe myself off and pull my clothes back into place.

"So, yes to a shower, or are we rolling up to Wooley's reeking of cum and lube?" he asks as I pull out of the clearing and back onto the main road. "If it's the latter, we probably need to just go ahead and admit that we're fooling around, because I don't think there's any way to sell this one."

"Huh?" I jerk my gaze over to him for just a second, taking in his disheveled hair and the reddened spot on the edge of his jaw from my teeth. "Oh, right. We can stop by the house. Or we can skip the bar altogether if you want."

"Nah, let's go," he says, and I nod.

Riggs seems perfectly relaxed and happy, humming along with the radio and drumming his fingers against the door the rest of the way home. I should be relaxed too after nutting that hard, but this tight feeling in my chest refuses to unravel.

As soon as I park, he hops out and saunters up to the house. I'm a few seconds behind him, still moving in a daze. Maybe I'm just tired. It was a long-ass day, and fuck knows there's nothing like some solid sleep after an orgasm. That explanation makes more sense than whatever else my brain is trying to come up with.

Inside the house, Riggs kicks off his boots and tosses his phone, along with the camshafts, onto the coffee table in the living room as he passes through.

"Give me five and then you can hop in if you want to," he calls over his shoulder.

I grunt in response, flopping down on the couch and bending to untie my boots, toeing them off one at a time. I reach into my pocket and toss my phone onto the table right next to his, then lean back to close my eyes for a minute.

Visions dance through my mind of an alternate reality where Riggs had erased the space between our mouths while he jerked us off, kissing me the same way he touched me, with a rough confidence that takes me apart inch by inch.

I shiver and lick my lips, feeling guilty for even having the fantasy, knowing he's not into it.

The rattle of a phone vibrating against the wood table drags my eyes open, and I sit forward to pick it up, swiping my thumb over the button to accept the call.

“Hello?” I answer.

“Hello, is this Mr. Kent?” a woman says on the other end.

I frown and pull the phone away from my ear. Shit, this is Riggs’s phone.

“I’m...” I start to tell her that she’s got the right number but the wrong person, but she keeps talking.

“I’m calling about the apartment you filled out an application for. The one at six-twenty-five Thomas Circle.”

My heart stops beating. Riggs said he was going to keep looking for places, but I guess I forgot about that. Or maybe part of me assumed he wasn’t *actually* looking. Why would he when things are going so well here? He’s got the garage to work on his bike, and Vel likes all the mature oaks in this neighborhood.

I clear my throat. “I actually already found a place. Thanks though.”

I end the call before she can respond and toss his phone back down on the table.

I would probably feel worse about that if he hadn’t told someone I got fucked by a horse. I snort a laugh. I guess it’s pretty funny, but it was still messed up. Besides, I’m doing him a favor. He doesn’t *want* to move out, he just thinks he should. Well, problem solved.

I run my fingers over my lips and sigh.

One problem solved, anyway.

Chapter 17

RIGGS

I FEEL THE GHOST of Shep's touch all over me while I shower and get dressed. No surprise—frotting in the back seat of his car was hot as fuck, especially the dirty shit he was spouting about wrecking his hole. But the thing is, thinking about it on a loop isn't making me horny. I mean, it *is*, but it's not *just* making me horny. There's something itchy buzzing under my skin, making my heart beat faster and my brain fixate on stupid things like the little smile on Shep's lips after he finished coming, and the way he just kept *looking* at me after we were done.

We step out of our bedrooms at the same time, clean and dressed, free of any lingering traces of the wild, possessive rut we shared half an hour ago. I brush my fingers over the tender spot along the edge of my jaw. Not completely free of any traces, I guess. There's nothing obvious though, nothing that will make the guys or anyone else at Wooley's think twice about why it took us so long to show up.

I look him up and down, and my insides heat another few degrees. He looks fucking lickable in dark wash jeans and a white t-shirt stretched tightly over his chest and biceps. But again, whatever this *thing* buzzing inside of me is, it feels like more than just wanting to get him naked all over again.

I squirm and tear my gaze away from him. Maybe I have some kind of bug. A summer flu? The plague? Anything is possible. I tug at the collar of my t-shirt because I have no clue what to do with my hands all of the sudden.

“Ready?” Shep asks, and I feel a rush of relief at being given a simple goal: get to the bar and drink until I feel less fucking weird.

“Yeah,” I answer. “You can drive. I’m planning to have, like, ten drinks.”

He chuckles. “Yes, princess.”

My lips twitch “Please, we both know that if I’m royalty, I’m the fucking queen.”

“I guess I can’t argue with that.” Shep throws an arm around my shoulders, a casual move that I’ve come to expect from him. I guess that’s why it feels natural to lean into it instead of shoving him off.

The weight of his arm is actually, almost... nice. When did that happen?

I stop to grab my phone off the coffee table as we pass through the living room. Shep’s face twitches as I shove it into my pocket. I frown and cock my head, trying and failing to

read his expression before it changes again. Is he still getting his panties all twisted over Jag?

I open the front door and something on the stoop glints in the late afternoon sunlight. I bend down to pick it up while Shep closes the door behind us. It's a quarter, and I have no doubt that it was a present from my favorite little bad omen.

I stuff it into my pocket and tilt my head to see Vel perched on the apex of the roof.

"Thanks, buddy," I call out, and he caws.

I step off the stoop with Shep right behind me. His hand lands on my lower back, the touch pushing my shirt up an inch. His fingertips brush against my bare skin and a warm shiver runs up my spine, tempting me to press into his touch, to find out how many touches it will take for this unsteady, over-the-top reaction to wear off. That has to be what's going on, right? Like adding fresh wood to a fire, it burns hotter and brighter for a few minutes until there's nothing left.

I don't know what the 'fresh wood' is in this situation since we've been fooling around for a couple of weeks now and this particular reaction feels newer than that, but the logic feels sound. I need to ramp it up, get Shep to touch me as much as possible until my nerve endings have burned through whatever this is.

"It's a nice night," he says. "Should we just walk?"

"Sure," I agree with a shrug. A few minutes of fresh air will probably do me some good anyway.

Shep pulls his hand back, letting it swing freely at his side instead of holding it against my skin. The loss of his touch makes me bristle more than it should. Like a pebble in my shoe. I weave an inch closer as we walk side by side down the sidewalk. The back of my hand bumps against his, and Shep's fingers twitch before he clenches them into a fist.

I puzzle over his reaction until he relaxes his hand, and then I try it again. It's intentional this time, the solid press of the back of my hand against his for a few steps before we break contact. The thought of holding hands with someone has never crossed my mind before, other than in a flippant, 'what's the point?' kind of way. But if I'm trying to burn this feeling off, why not?

My heart thuds, not fast exactly, but *heavy* as I slip my hand closer to his, trying to figure out the right position to grab onto him in a way that will feel natural. It seems like it should be a no-brainer, but my stomach clenches with an unexpected wave of nerves as my palm brushes his. Shep glances over at me, curiosity dancing in his expression.

I lick my lips and brush my fingertips against his. Another unexpected shiver works its way along my spine, so electric that it makes my scalp tingle. His lips part on a soft exhale and he does what I've been dancing around for way longer than necessary, slipping his fingers between mine and joining our hands.

I'm not sure what I'm expecting exactly, but there aren't any supernovas or earthquakes. Shep's hand is warm, and his

palm and fingertips are rough with the same work wear as mine, calloused and strong in a way that can't be replicated by anything other than years of manual labor. It's a nice feeling. Not exciting or particularly earth shattering, but comforting in a way I wasn't counting on.

"You sure you didn't pregame with a few shots while I was in the shower?" he teases, glancing at our joined hands, then back at my face.

"You ruined it," I complain with a laugh, trying to pull my hand free from his.

"No, I'm just kidding," Shep argues, tightening his grip on my hand so I can't take it back. "I had no idea that Sober, Non-Sexual Touching Riggs was even a *thing*, that's all."

"He's not." I huff, wiggling my fingers in protest before giving up and letting the hand holding continue for another block. "I thought I would try it out. I've decided I hate it."

"Do you really?" He loosens his grip, but doesn't actually let go, his fingers relaxed but still laced between mine.

"It's... fine," I mutter. I feel like I would probably hate it with anyone else, but Shep's hands are nice, and feeling just a little bit soft around him isn't as gross as it is around most people. "Kind of like sweatpants."

He snorts. "Holding my hand is like *sweatpants*? Like, you can see the outline of my dick?"

A surprised laugh bursts from my lips. "You're such a dumbass."

He grins, letting his hand fall away from mine as we near the bar. For one fleeting second, I actually miss the feeling. I shove my hands into my pockets and pick up my pace.

I'm *really* going to need those drinks. Whatever is going on with me tonight can certainly be cured by a gallon of booze.

SHEP

As soon as we step inside Wooley's, Riggs flees like a prisoner seeing his only chance at escape. *Ouch*. He heads straight for the bar, and since it's clear he's trying to get away from me, I don't follow him.

I spot the guys gathered around a pool table in the far corner, so I make my way over to them. Auggie and Henry look like they have a game going against Axel and Cole, one of the owners of Four Bears Construction. I hadn't noticed from across the bar, but our little group is twice as big as usual, the construction workers mixed in among the usual group of my friends, plus a few of Axel's landscaping crew too.

"Hey, man. We didn't think you were going to make it, so we had to settle for your spare parts," Auggie says when he spots me.

I chuckle at the outraged sound my brother makes at being referred to as 'spare parts.'

"Lucky for you, I got all the pool genes when our zygote split," I say, clapping my brother on the shoulder while I razz

him. He shrugs me off and gives me the finger.

“Why have we already beaten them at two games then?” Axel brags.

“Oh, because Auggie and Henry are abysmal pool players too,” I answer solemnly.

“Fuck off,” Auggie scoffs.

“We’ve got a pitcher of beer if you want,” Cole’s brother, Ollie, offers, nodding towards the plastic pitcher filled with frothy amber liquid on the nearby table. I’m sure whatever cheap swill Sawyer sells by the pitcher won’t quite cut it, but it’s right here, so I grab one of the empty plastic cups from the stack next to it and pour myself a cup.

“Hey, where’s that scary little badass?” Ollie’s husband, Daniel, asks, craning his neck to look around like he expects Riggs to appear out of thin air by my side.

I turn to look over the sea of tables, spotting Riggs perched on a stool at the bar with two empty shot glasses already in front of him.

“Getting drunk,” I answer, tilting my head in his direction.

“Getting lucky, more like,” Daniel corrects, and I whip my head around again to see that in the two seconds since I last spotted him, Riggs is in fact chatting up some rugged looking dude at the bar.

My jaw clenches and my heart races. It’s not like I thought holding hands for two minutes while we walked to the bar meant we were ‘going steady,’ or whatever the kids are calling

it these days. But goddamn, could he have moved any faster? At this pace, he's going to be deep throating this guy before I finish my first drink.

"Oh shit. Danny Boy, take it back before he flips the table," Stone mutters loudly.

I glance down, realizing that I *am* gripping the edge of the table. Stone's husband, Dare, picks up the pitcher of beer, as if he's afraid I'm actually at risk of raging out at any second.

"It was just an observation," Daniel says.

"What's the problem? You two are just roommates, right?" Auggie sounds so damn smug that I actually rethink the rage thing. Landing one solid punch might make me feel a hell of a lot better.

The dude leans a little closer, and I notice the subtle shift of Riggs's body in the opposite direction, putting *more* space between them as he turns in his seat and waves down Sawyer for another drink. The knots in my muscles loosen and I let go of the table, flexing my fingers when I realize I've been gripping it hard enough to leave a mark. I take a sip from my cup, grimacing at the flat, bland flavor of the beer.

Axel finishes up his game, pocketing the bills tucked into an empty cup on the edge of the table. He comes over and bumps my shoulder hard enough to slosh my drink over the rim of my cup. I punch his shoulder half-heartedly, my attention still fixated on Riggs at the bar. It looks like the dude has taken the hint and switched his attention to the man seated on his other side, but I can't be sure he won't swoop in again

the second I look away. Riggs might need a hand getting rid of the asshole, and I want to be ready if that happens.

“Might help to go piss a circle around him, that way everyone else will know that he’s yours,” Axel teases quietly, pouring himself a drink.

“He’s not...” I trail off, dragging my tongue over my bottom lip mindlessly. I’m not sure why, but I can’t quite get myself to say ‘not mine,’ even if it’s true. Riggs isn’t mine. He’s not *anyone’s*.

Another man approaches, leaning close to Riggs under the guise of ordering a drink. A growl rumbles in my throat and vibrates on my tongue before I can swallow it down.

Axel’s eyebrows go up and he looks at me over the rim of his cup. “You sure about that?”

The new guy puts a hand on Riggs’s thigh and my body coils with tension, ready to spring into action. Before I can do anything more than growl and bristle though, Riggs grabs the man’s wrist and twists it. The man stumbles back, and I let out a bark of laughter, a hot, tingly, too-fucking-big feeling swelling in my chest. It’s probably the wrong reaction for me to have to casual violence, but goddamn if there isn’t something intoxicating about that prickly, take-no-shit attitude of his.

“Damn,” Axel mutters, watching the whole thing right beside me. “You sure it’s safe to be hooking up with him? He’s kind of...”

“Hot?” I supply the word without thinking, and my brother chuckles into another sip of his beer.

“I was going to say ‘feral,’ but sure, hot works.”

Riggs hops off the stool, gathering up another full shot glass in one hand and what I’m guessing is a rum and Coke in the other. He downs the shot as he weaves between the tables, slightly unsteady on his feet. When he reaches us, he puts the empty glass down and takes a sip from the full one.

“Alright, who’s ready to lose some money?” he asks, making a grabby motion with his free hand.

Surprisingly, that approach has the guys queuing up to challenge him. It’s possible they’re under the assumption that getting him drunk will hinder his ability to shoot pool, with everyone offering to buy him shots before they take on the challenge. By the end of the night, they’re all at least twenty bucks poorer and Riggs spent the night drinking for free.

“Is the house always this far away?” he complains, stumbling into me as we make our way home several hours later.

Even with my arm around his shoulders, there’s only so much I can do for his balance. At least I can keep him from completely face planting on the sidewalk.

“We’re almost there,” I assure him, pulling him a little closer.

Even though we’re nearly the same height, he tucks under my arm just right. He only stays put for a few seconds before

wiggling free and bounding ahead a couple of steps, then flinging his arms wide and spinning in place a few times. Riggs laughs, and I dodge one of his windmilling arms, missing a black eye by about half an inch so I can wrap my arms around his waist before he falls.

He stumbles and hiccups.

“Jesus, I’m fucking driiiiink.” He frowns and sways into me again. “Drank? *Drunk.*”

“I think the word is ‘wasted,’ baby.” The endearment tumbles out without me meaning it to. My only saving grace is the fact that I’m sure he won’t remember it in the morning.

“Nope, it wasn’t a waste,” he argues. “I feel better.”

“Better than what?” Was he upset earlier, and I didn’t realize it? I think back over the afternoon, but all that comes to mind is the two of us steaming up the windows of my car.

“What?” he echoes, clearly already losing the thread on his train of thought.

“Nothing, drunkie. Come on, watch the step.” I lift him up just enough to keep him from tripping over the stoop when we near the front door.

“Strong,” he mutters, leaning against me.

Inside the house, I kick off my shoes and hang up my keys, then guide Riggs to sag against the nearest wall. I drop to my knees without giving it much thought, reaching to undo his shoelaces for him. His hands land on my shoulders and he looks down at me with a sloppy, suggestive grin.

“You look good on your knees.” I can see the soft bulge in his jeans already starting to swell.

“I know.” I wink at him, then pull his shoes off one at a time.

He looks baffled when I stand back up. “Did you take my shoes off?”

Riggs looks down at his feet and wiggles his toes inside his socks.

“I didn’t have faith that you’d manage it in this state.” I put an arm around his middle again, pulling him away from the wall and tucking him under my arm so I can guide him down the hallway.

“Wisconsin?” he asks.

I bite back laughter. “Yes,” I say as seriously as I can manage. “I didn’t think you could take off your own shoes in Wisconsin.”

“*Psh*. I do it every day,” he brags, banging into his bedroom door when we reach it, before managing to find the knob and turn it.

Riggs breaks free from my hold again, tugging his shirt over his head as he shuffles towards his bed. His jeans go next, catching around his ankles and making him fall right onto the bed. He kicks them off, grumbling about his pants being defective before he manages to free himself.

I could probably help more, but it’s too funny to miss out on. Once he climbs under the covers, I start to back out of the

room. I want to get him a glass of water and a garbage can to put next to his bed. Something tells me he's going to need it.

"Wait," he gasps.

"I'm just..."

"Don't go." Riggs clutches his sheets, pulling them up to his chest and looking at me with wide, helpless eyes that have no place on the face of a man who may or may not have broken someone's wrist a few hours ago for coming on a little too strong.

That too-big feeling from earlier tugs at the center of my chest again and I nod.

"I'll be right back," I promise him.

I'm half expecting him to be passed out by the time I return with everything, but he's still clinging to consciousness, his eyelashes fluttering as he watches me set the water down on the nightstand and the can right next to the bed.

"Come here," he mumbles, holding the sheets up in invitation.

I hesitate for half a second. He's *way* too drunk for sex, but I don't think that's what he's looking for anyway. My stomach flutters and my heart beats out a slow, hard rhythm that feels a hell of a lot like longing.

Shit.

"Shep," Riggs says my name softly, and I know there's no way I'm walking out of this room again tonight.

I strip down to my boxers and crawl in next to him. As soon as I'm under the covers, he pulls himself half on top of me, wrapping his arms and legs around me like I'm his favorite teddy bear. He lets out a little sigh, his whole body going lax against mine.

My insides vibrate and everything somehow relaxes and tenses all at once. I want to pull him closer—not that we can get much closer than this—and I want to wiggle out from under him before I let myself get any more confused about what this is.

My cock swells from the weight of his body on mine and the familiar cedar scent that tickles my nose, but it's easy to ignore. Getting each other off is fucking amazing, but it's been a long damn time since I've just held someone like this. I'm not sure if I ever have before, actually. I try not to linger for cuddling after a hookup, and none of the guys I dated in the past were big snugglers. Riggs murmurs something I can't hear and wiggles even closer, pulling himself almost fully on top of me.

“Can I tell you a secret?” he whispers.

“Sure.” I slide my hands down to his ass just so I have something to hold on to. His perky cheeks actually make for excellent cuddle handles. I'm sure he'll be *thrilled* to hear that when he sobers up in the morning.

I chuckle at the thought.

“I didn't hate it when you called me baby earlier. Don't tell Riggs,” he says in a low, conspiratorial voice.

“Hey, *baby*,” I whisper back. “You are Riggs.”

He snorts. “*Sober Riggs*.”

“Ah, okay. It’ll be our little secret,” I promise him.

A slow smile spreads over his lips, his eyelids drooping as he looks at me in the dark, his face only a couple of inches from mine. He closes his eyes, and it takes me half a second to realize what he’s doing, leaning in closer, his mouth soft and parted, his head tilted just enough that our noses won’t collide.

My heart jumps wildly against my ribcage, and this time I’m the one who jerks my head to the side before our lips can connect. If he’s too drunk for sex, he’s definitely too drunk for this. Drunk Riggs might want to kiss me, but that doesn’t change Sober Riggs’s rules.

If we ever kiss, I need every version of Riggs to be fully on board.

To soften the rejection, I card my fingers through his hair and press a soft kiss against his forehead. Sober Riggs would probably kind of hate that too. Forehead kisses are too sweet, and definitely not something you can get off on. But it feels a lot more harmless than a *real* kiss, and Drunk, Cuddly Riggs seems to like it a hell of a lot. He sighs again and brushes his lips over my cheek.

It only takes a couple of minutes before his breathing slows and he starts to snore. Sleep doesn’t come so easily for me though. My mind is too busy turning over what ifs that feel even more unlikely than a kiss.

What if I told him this feels like more than it's supposed to be?

What if this is the kind of *easy* I've always wanted?

What if he just... stayed? Maybe forever...

Chapter 18

RIGGS

I'M AWARE OF THE feeling of warm skin and the familiar scent of sandalwood before I'm fully conscious. Last night is a hazy blur, my memories as dizzying and distorted as my vision probably was after my fifth or sixth drink. The effects of my binge are lingering right on the edge of my consciousness, along with the swirl of confusing feelings I apparently failed to drown with all the booze.

But for the moment, a heavy, lazy feeling is keeping the rest of it at bay. I wiggle a little closer to Shep, my chest pressed against his back, my cock nestled into the crease of his ass, our underwear keeping me from feeling the full heat of his skin. Our legs are tangled up, just like the sheets around us, and the steady rise and fall as he breathes keeps me in this peaceful, sleepy mood.

I'm sure the urge to roundhouse his ass out of my bed before he wakes up and realizes we're cuddling is mixed up with the rest of the things I'm ignoring right now, like the

queasy feeling in my stomach and the gentle throb of my alcohol-soaked brain against my temple. Once I'm fully awake, I'll be grumbling about what a menace Cuddle Slut Riggs is, but right now... this is nice.

I brush my lips against the back of Shep's neck, tasting the salty, sweet flavor of his skin as my cock swells against his ass. He moans softly in his sleep, pressing his ass back to meet my growing erection.

I've touched Shep enough times now that I'm well on my way to memorizing all of the dips and planes of his body. I know there are raised scars hidden under colorful ink, and which spots are the key to making him gasp and pant for me in seconds flat. But there's something different about these half-asleep touches, slow and almost dreamlike.

He makes another breathy rumbling sound and grinds his ass harder against my cock. The dry cotton of my boxer briefs chafes over the sensitive skin, making me hiss through my teeth before I reach down and tug them lower. The head of my stiff, aching cock catches on the waistband and ends up pointed downward as I wiggle my underwear down around my thighs.

"Not going to karate chop me onto the floor this morning?" Shep asks in a sleep-rough voice, a gravelly chuckle punctuating his words.

I flick my tongue against his earlobe and thrust against him again. My cock slips between his legs, the head nudging the

soft swell of his balls through his underwear, turning his laughter into another ragged, half-bitten moan.

“I haven’t decided yet. I’ll let you know in a few minutes,” I tease in a bland tone, dragging my fingers up his torso to find the stiff nub of his nipple.

In the gray, way-too-early morning light, with nothing but the sound of our breaths and the distant chirp of birds just waking up outside, it’s easy to pretend this really is nothing more than a hot dream I have zero desire to wake up from. Why would I want to when it’s so damn cozy?

I thrust lazily between his legs, teasing his nipple with my thumb and forefinger, listening to the catch of his breath and the shuddering, gasping sounds he muffles in the pillow. Even the coiling heat in the pit of my stomach feels like a slow burn, as if my body is in no rush towards the inevitable explosive conclusion.

After a few minutes, Shep shimmies his underwear down. When I thrust between his legs again, we both moan. His skin is hot and a little sticky, and the soft hairs lining his inner thighs and around his balls tickle against my shaft. I part my lips and flick the tip of my tongue along the back of his shoulder, squeezing my eyes shut a little tighter against the wave of things I’m not ready to deal with. It’s too early, and I’m too hungover. I just need a few more minutes of... this. Just Shep.

He moves and shifts, the creak of the nightstand drawer letting me know what he’s up to without me needing to open

my eyes.

“Here,” he rasps, pressing a bottle into my hand a second later, and then arching his back to roll his hips. His thighs flex and clench around my cock, making my eyes roll back and my eyelids flutter open on a needy gasp as my balls clench.

“Fuck,” I pant.

Shep grunts and turns his head to look back at me. His eyes are still heavy from sleep too, his expression just as dazed as I’m sure mine is, like he can’t quite decide if this is a dream or not either. His lips are parted, a little puffy, and quiet sounds keep rolling off his tongue. A warm feeling fills my belly and rises through my chest.

Did I kiss Shep last night?

My tongue feels heavy and my lips tingle at the foggy memory of leaning in close, of *wanting* to find out what it would feel like to kiss him. I drag in a sharp breath and shake off the memory. We didn’t kiss. I would remember that. Probably. And if I don’t, then it wasn’t worth remembering... which I guess is entirely possible, given my history.

“Baby?” Shep murmurs, dragging me back to the present with an endearment that makes my skin tingle and feel tight all over at the same time.

I huff out a laugh and squeeze some lube into my hands, then toss the bottle aside. The confusing shit I was trying not to deal with last night is so close to the surface, and it’s the last fucking thing I have the energy for this morning.

“Come on with that mushy shit, Shep,” I complain, nipping hard at his skin.

He moans long and low, so I do it again, leaving a few marks along the back of his neck while I coat my cock with lube. I thrust between his legs again, sliding easily, the lube warmed by his skin immediately. The loose, rough skin of his sac bunches against my shaft with every thrust until it starts to tighten and constrict, pulling up closer to his body with every grunt and growl I force from his lips.

I dig my fingers into his hips, smearing excess lube over his skin as I dig in hard and thrust deeper and faster. Shep writhes and claws at the sheets, groaning like I’m fucking his hole and not just the tight channel of his thick, muscular thighs. The slow sweetness from a few minutes ago is replaced with the urgency that always seems to flare between us anytime we touch, like he’s kindling and I’m a spark.

“Play with my hole,” he gasps.

I’m not sure if his request is unexpected or if my brain is just too muddled from sex and my hangover to comprehend them immediately.

“You want...?”

“Finger me,” he says before I can finish. “Two fingers, knuckle deep, make me come.” He pants out the filthy and helpfully specific request, still grinding himself on my cock, his thighs quaking around me with every thrust.

I add a little more lube to two fingers and slide them into the cleft between his ass cheeks. He groans when my slicked fingertips glide over his puckered entrance for the first time. It flutters eagerly under my touch, making my cock jerk and throb between his legs.

Maybe I should start with one finger, soften him up, take my time stretching him out, but he's vibrating with impatience, and something tells me he can take it a little rough. Shep isn't a delicate flower who's going to flinch away from the sting of the stretch, even if he *is* scared of The Beast. I grin against his sweat-slicked skin and press my fingers harder against his hole until it gives way to the pressure.

He inhales sharply, clamping down around me—not just his hole around my fingers, but squeezing his thighs so tightly around my cock that I see stars. Two trembling breaths and he relaxes around me, letting me sink my fingers in deeper.

“More,” he grits out before I even have my fingers halfway in.

I chuckle and kiss the back of his neck again. “Have you been a closeted, greedy bottom this whole time, Sheppy?” I tease, thrusting my fingers in as hard as I can and jerking my hips at the same time to fuck between his thighs. “You secretly dying to tame The Beast?”

His answer is another low moan and something that sounds like a muttered, “Fuck you.” I smirk again, even though he's not looking at me. *Not this morning, but maybe one day.*

That thought catches me off guard. Would I let Shep fuck me? The knee-jerk ‘hell no’ I’m expecting doesn’t come. I file the topic away with the rest of the shit I can’t think about right now and thrust between his legs again.

It doesn’t take long for me to find a rhythm that has both of us gasping, fucking my fingers in and out of his hole the same way I’m fucking between his thighs, in deep, hard strokes that raise goose bumps on both our skin and make the bedsprings creak and groan. I find the fleshy spot deep inside of him that makes him buck and moan, stroking it and teasing it with every thrust of my fingers.

My eyes are open now, all traces of sleep gone, and all I can do is stare at the way his face contorts with pleasure, his head craned in my direction, his eyes fluttering open and closed as he rides my fingers shamelessly, every thrust tightening his thighs around my cock. Something swells inside my chest, something *more* that leaves me gasping for breath.

“Riggs,” he shouts my name, his hole tightening around my fingers again and then starting to pulse.

A hot shiver rocks me and I roll him onto his stomach, fucking frantically between his thighs, my fingers still buried in his ass as we both moan and grunt and writhe. I throw my head back and wail with pleasure as the coil in my belly releases and my cock throbs between Shep’s thighs, pumping out an orgasm that hits me so hard it whites out my vision. My own cum joins the slick lube, making the slide of every thrust

easier until my balls are drained and he's sticky with my release, fucking covered with it from taint to crack.

I barely remember sliding my fingers out of him, let alone rolling over and falling back to sleep. But the boneless orgasm stupor, with Shep big-spooning me, is *much* better than the hangover that's still waiting for me, so I'll definitely take it for as long as I can.

SHEP

The second time I wake up in Riggs's bed, I'm alone, with dry cum crusted between my thighs and all over my stomach. The first time was *much* better. I reach for the pillow that's still indented from Riggs's head lying on it all night long and put it over my face to block out the sun.

Are we late for work? I have no fucking clue. What day is it even? I only had one beer last night, but I feel foggy and disoriented anyway. I lay awake half the night thinking about shit, you'd think the same damn thoughts would be tired from chasing themselves around my brain for hours already, but I'm barely even conscious and they're already creeping back in.

Is Riggs feeling what I'm feeling?

Am I even feeling what I think I am? Or is it just fantastic sex scrambling my brain?

I groan and toss the pillow away, letting the morning sunlight force me awake. Being covered in dry cum at least has the benefit of forcing me out of bed. I tug his bedspread off with me, balling it up with his sheets so I can toss them all

into the wash for him. I leave them in the hallway for now though and shuffle into the bathroom to take a piss and hop in the shower.

I give up trying to stop my brain from fixating on Riggs and just give in to it. Random thoughts flit through my brain like a hummingbird on crack while I fill my hand with bodywash and stand under the hot shower spray. Not just sex stuff either. Actually, almost entirely *not* sex stuff.

When is Riggs's birthday? He never did answer that one. *Was he joking about me not knowing his real name?* He told me about his aunt, and we've talked about all the little things that don't really matter but *feel* like they do. Things like his favorite movie (*Killer Klowns from Outer Space*), and his favorite color (purple). It feels like I know him, but it also feels like I've barely scratched the surface. The thing is, I *want* to know. I want to know about his worst birthday as a kid and his dream vacation spot. I want to know all the things that make him grumble under his breath and roll his eyes, and all the things that make him smile.

I drag in an uneven breath and rinse the suds off my body, along with the remnants of our early morning fun. My hole is tender, a groan vibrating in my throat as I drag my fingers over it one more time before shutting off the water.

Maybe I do want Riggs to fuck me.

Right now, I want a lot of things I really can't wrap my head around.

I step out of the shower and grab a towel from the rack to dry myself off. When I walk out of the bathroom, the smell of bacon makes my stomach rumble loudly and my mouth water. I make a quick detour into my bedroom to tug on a clean tank top and a pair of shorts, then head down the hallway into the kitchen.

The delicious smell wasn't just a hallucination. Although, the sight of Riggs wiggling his ass cheerfully in front of the stove this morning kind of seems like one. He glances over his shoulder at me. He looks a little green and the bags under his eyes definitely hint at him needing to spend the rest of the weekend napping and wallowing in his hangover.

"You made breakfast," I point out the obvious, and his eyes narrow immediately, his lips flattening into a thin line.

Something else I can add to my list of things I know about Riggs: he likes doing nice things for people, but only if you don't acknowledge them. I thanked him for washing my car a few weeks ago and I thought he was about to yank my balls out through my asshole.

"I needed something to soak up the hangover, and I made too much."

I glance at the table where he has plates and silverware set out, along with a carton of orange juice. It looks a lot more intentional than 'made too much,' but I'm not about to push my luck by pointing that out.

He returns his attention to the stove, and I linger in the doorway for a minute, letting my eyes roam over him from

behind. I've checked him out a million times, appreciating his lithe frame and perky ass *long* before we started hooking up. But all the ways I could put my hands on him and make him moan isn't the first thing on my mind right now. It's how fucking right it feels having him here first thing in the morning, in my house, in my *life*.

I swallow around the lump forming in my throat.

If I wrapped my arms around him from behind and kissed the side of his neck, would that be crossing the invisible line we drew around our sex life? Is this how I've made too many men feel over the years? Desperate and a little bit lost?

"I made this whole breakfast, so I hope you're not waiting around for me to pour your coffee for you too," Riggs says without looking back at me again.

I force a laugh out of my chest, letting it loosen up all the knots there, then cross the kitchen to grab two mugs. I fill them both and set one on the counter next to Riggs.

Instead of going to sit down at the table, I lean against the counter and watch him push the eggs around in the pan.

"When's your birthday?" I ask, snagging a strip of bacon off the plate that's set off to the side.

A smile twists on his lips and he glances at me suspiciously, his tired eyes glinting with the kind of playful mischief that never fails to draw me in where he's concerned.

"Why?"

"Because we're friends," I reason.

“Mm.” He’s clearly unimpressed with that reasoning. “Birthdays are so awkward,” he says instead of answering the actual question. “I never know what I’m supposed to do. Do people expect me to throw a party? Bring cupcakes? Wear some kind of birthday sash?”

I bark out a laugh. “Sure, if you’re a girl in high school, you should absolutely do the sash thing.”

“Seriously, I don’t get the obsession. I’ll tell you, and then it’s just this *thing* you have to remember and worry about. And once you know, I’ll feel bad if you forget, and then *you’ll* feel bad. Why bother?” He shrugs and turns off the burner.

“Because when people care about you, they want to celebrate your existence,” I explain as if I’m talking to an alien.

He rolls his eyes again. “You care about me?”

“Well... yeah.” I frown and he starts to turn away. I snag him around the waist before he can get far and drag him closer.

“Shep,” he says my name in an exasperated half-laugh as he stumbles into me. “Come on.”

“No, I’m not ‘making it weird.’” I make air quotes with my free hand. “Forget about the sex for a minute. *Of course*, I care about you. You’re... my best friend.”

The surprise on Riggs’s face looks genuine, and it makes me sad for a second. Did he really not know that? Even before we started getting naked together, he was the best part of my

day. That realization hits me hard and tightens some of those knots in my chest all over again.

“You’re *definitely* making it weird,” he accuses with a chuckle. “But fine, if I tell you when my birthday is, will that make you happy?”

“Yes.”

“September seventh,” he answers, and then squirms out of my grip.

“Wait, that’s in, like, a month.”

“Mm-hmm.” He goes to grab the plates off the table. “Don’t tell the guys, okay? They’ll for sure try to make me wear a ‘birthday boy’ sash, and then I’ll have to commit mass murder.”

I snort. “No one’s going to make you wear a sash,” I assure him instead of promising not to tell.

He shuffles past me with the plates, dishing food out onto both of them, casting looks at me out of the corner of his eye. Is he really that worried about people knowing his birthday? Or is something else bothering him?

He hands me one of the plates, but when I go to take it from him, he doesn’t let go. Riggs darts his tongue out to wet his lips, his tongue stud glinting in the light.

“I... uh... you’re....” He clears his throat and meets my eyes, a slight scowl on his face. “The best friend thing. I... *care.*”

He huffs once he gets the words out.

A slow grin spreads over my lips and a chuckle vibrates in my throat. “Was that hard for you to say?” I tease.

“Shut up,” he says, releasing his grip on the plate.

“Do you need more practice with your feeling words?”

“I take it back. I hate you. There’s a feeling word for you,” he mutters, and I cackle.

“You *like* me,” I taunt, and I can see the war going on, the scowl and the amusement jostling for supremacy on his face.

“Your eggs are poisoned. Enjoy.” He stomps past me and plops down at the table, and I immediately scoop a forkful of eggs into my mouth, still grinning widely.

Maybe he’s not head over heels in love with me, but he *cares*. That’s something, isn’t it?

Chapter 19

RIGGS

“YOUR BIRD IS DOPE as hell,” Jag says with a chuckle as Vel picks up one of the shiny bolts off the garage floor and tries to make off with it.

I click my tongue and toss him a grape from the baggie in my pocket. He drops his treasure to trade it for the treat, which I’m sure was his plan all along.

“He’s not really *mine*.” I shrug and grin crookedly at the crow as he hops up onto the seat of the motorcycle and starts to preen his feathers. “We’re just bros.”

The heavy sound of Shep’s footsteps on the driveway has me biting the inside of my cheek against an even bigger smile.
Three, two, one...

“Hey, do you guys need anything?” he asks.

I look up from watching Jag assemble the Kawasaki engine like he could do it in his sleep and see Shep standing in the

open mouth of the garage with his hands shoved in his pockets and a smear of dirt across his cheek.

In the month and a half since I moved in here, I've only seen Shep do the bare minimum upkeep on the outside of the house. He mows, but the flowerbeds are all overgrown with weeds, and the siding and windows are long overdue for a power wash. Shockingly, when Jag showed up this afternoon to help me with the Z1, Shep suddenly had a million outdoor projects he wanted to get done. Guess where the tools for all of those projects live?

“Yeah, could you spot me a condom, actually,” I tease in a monotone. Jag chuckles and Shep bristles, narrowing his eyes and looking between the two of us like he's not totally sure whether I'm joking or not. I roll my eyes. “We're fine. Just like the last time you asked,” I answer genuinely this time.

He nods. “Cool. I'm just going to...” Shep points at the hedge clippers hanging on a hook on the back wall of the garage. On his way past us, he eyes Jag, then quickly sweeps his gaze over me. Is he trying to check for cum stains or open zippers?

I swallow another chuckle. Maybe I should be more annoyed that he's being such a blatantly jealous idiot right now. I must still be a little hungover from Friday night though, because I'm having trouble finding his behavior anything but charming. *Stupid*, but charming.

He grabs the shears and skirts around us again, stopping next to the motorcycle and craning his neck to look at our

progress. He reaches out with his free hand and runs his index finger along the top of Vel's head. The bird closes his eyes and tilts his head towards Shep's touch. The closest thing I've ever felt to a flutter contracts around my heart for just a second. Indigestion? Who knows. I didn't think Shep liked Vel though, so it's sweet to see the fleeting moment between them.

Shep doesn't say anything, just nods after a second and continues on his way out of the garage. I'm sure he has extremely important hedge trimming to do... or he *would* if there was a single hedge anywhere on his property. My lips twitch and I watch him as he goes, thinking about the two of us possessively tearing into each other in the backseat of his car. Have any of the hickies I left on him faded yet? Maybe he'll let me check later.

"I suppose you're going to try to tell me that *he's* not yours either." Jag draws my attention back, his tone dripping with knowing, as if he just saw every one of the filthy thoughts that flitted through my mind.

"Shep?" I scoff, even though that's obviously who we're talking about.

He steals my move and looks up to roll his eyes at me. "*Shep?*" He mocks my innocent tone and then laughs. "Pretty sure those rusty shears are going through my chest if I get too close to you."

"Nah, he's all bark." I wave a hand dismissively.

Shep isn't even really any bark, he's just... Shep. I've called him a dumbass more times than I can count, but

honestly, he's not stupid, he's just uncomplicated. He's worried he's going to come in here and find me deep throating Jag's cock. Me? I would bare my teeth like a junkyard dog and run the man off like I did before. Or, you know, make up stuff about Shep that sends them running for the hills. But all he can think to do is act like the poor, frazzled parent of a teenager, hoping that by barging into their daughter's bedroom every five minutes, they'll be able to keep her chaste.

I snicker at the analogy.

"Should we fuck with him and pretend to be fooling around when he comes back?" Jag asks, flashing me a mischievous smile and waggling his eyebrows.

I cackle but shake my head. Maybe it would be the smart thing to do. Obviously, the lines are blurring if he's acting like a jealous boyfriend. But Jaguar's suggestion sounds too mean, like the kind of thing that might actually hurt Shep's feelings. And, holy shit, I actually *really* hate the idea of hurting his feelings.

I bristle and huff out a quiet breath. Well, shit. If I don't want to hurt his feelings, how the hell am I supposed to keep him from getting too attached to me? What are we going to do? We can't just keep having hot, sweaty morning sex and living together *forever*. If I don't want to hurt his feelings, we could end up undressing each other every night after work, all handsy and playful before making dinner together and watching TV. We could end up sharing a bed and cuddling *sober*, until... when?

My chest tightens with a feeling that's so big I can hardly breathe.

"You okay, man?" Jaguar asks, looking up again with concern.

I clear my throat and nod. "Great. Yeah. Perfect. Can you show me... um..." I pick up a random part off the floor without really seeing it and hold it up.

He studies me for a few seconds. If he pushes me, I'm not sure what I'm going to say. Am I okay? I have no fucking clue. But I don't really know what's wrong either, or even if something is wrong. It's more that it's just too much, plus a whole bunch of shit I can't quite sort through and don't have words for. I lick my lips, silently pleading with him to let it go. We're not even friends, but I'm afraid I might vomit all over him if he presses me on it.

His lips twist into a sympathetic half smile and he reaches for the part.

"Yeah," he says. "Pay attention though, because once I'm done putting it together, I'm going to make you take it apart so you can learn." I'm not sure if it's a threat or a promise. Either way, it's the distraction I need to feel like myself again right now, so I'll take it.

SHEP

I glance down the hallway that leads to the garage, bouncing my knee and only half paying attention to the TV

show that's playing. I wonder if Riggs is getting hungry. They've been out in the garage all afternoon. Or maybe he's thirsty. Do they need a fan? Even with the garage door wide open, it can get hot in there in the summer.

The image fills my mind of Jag reaching over and casually running a hand along the back of Rigg's neck, making Riggs shiver in that way it took me almost a week to learn to do reliably. My muscles coil and I'm off the couch before conscious thought even has the chance to catch up.

I'm just going to go check on them.

I don't even make it around the couch before I hear the door open and close, followed by the shuffle of Rigg's steps on the tile floor of the laundry room. Another thought flashes through my head: Riggs and Jag grappling with each other in a heated frenzy right up against the same machine I sucked Riggs off on only a couple of weeks ago. My cock hardens and my gut tightens at the same time, my body unable to decide whether the idea makes me horny or murderous. Maybe both?

I have no fucking claim over Riggs. That's what we agreed on, right? Actually, I'm still unclear on that whole point. He said not to make it weird, but I feel pretty fucking weird right now. And I'm not sure it's the kind of weirdness that can be fixed with naked grinding. Not that I'm not willing to try that as an option, obviously.

My cock jerks in agreement, and I reach down to adjust myself.

Riggs comes down the hallway alone, and a whoosh of relief deflates my chest. I shift on my feet. Should I sit down and pretend like I *wasn't* about to rush to the garage and pry them apart if necessary? Should I open my mouth and blurt out all of the things that have been running through my head all day? The problem is, I don't have the words for any of them, just all the vague, knotted-up feelings. Even if I could get any of them into the right shape to say them out loud, they definitely seem like the kinds of things that would fall under the category of "weird."

I run my hand over the back of my head, wincing at the raw sting I hadn't noticed on my skin until just now. Riggs frowns and takes a step closer.

"You're all sunburned." He reaches up and presses his index finger against my forehead, and I hiss at the fresh twinge. His mouth twists into an expression that's somewhere between disapproving and worried, and he wraps his fingers around my wrist to pull me down the hallway towards the bathroom.

He lets go of me and stoops to rummage under the bathroom sink once we get there.

"I'll be fine. It's not that bad," I say, poking at the top of my head again to see how bad it feels, like when you can't stop tonguing a cold sore in the corner of your mouth.

Riggs makes a rumbly scoffing sound. He finds what he's looking for and turns back to me with a bottle in his hand.

“Sit,” he says, pointing at the closed toilet seat. “It’s aloe, plus a whole bunch of other stuff that’ll help you heal faster,” he explains, even though I didn’t ask.

I sit down and he squirts the lotion into his hands and gently dabs it onto my face and the top of my head. I hang my head forward so he can get the back of my neck too. He’s thorough, smoothing his slicked hands down my back, dipping them under the collar of my shirt and then dragging them back up to make sure he didn’t miss a spot on my neck or anywhere else.

I hum quietly, my hands finding their way to his ass while he works. Riggs chuckles and wiggles but doesn’t try to get free. I squeeze his ass playfully, and he laughs a little harder. The sound is light and airy, and it hits me that before we moved in together, I never heard him laugh like this. I’d heard the harsh, scoffing laugh he uses at work when someone is being an idiot or trying to get under his skin, but this one is completely different from that.

I lift my head and look at his face, the shape of the smile on his lips, the little furrow between his brow as he finishes applying the lotion to every inch of my face. He could have just told me there was lotion in the bathroom. Hell, he could have taken one look at my red face and laughed. Instead, he’s bossing me into letting him put it on for me.

Maybe it’s heatstroke that makes me too bold for my own good, or maybe it’s the stupid, hopeful feeling in my chest.

“What are we doing?”

He snorts. “Well, right now, we’re trying to prevent your skin from drying out and peeling off in big, nasty flakes.”

I wrinkle my nose at that visual. He finishes his work and turns to wash his hands in the sink.

“Riggs,” I say his name. Is it even his name? I still don’t know. “I don’t want you to fuck Jag.”

He shuts off the water and looks at me through the bathroom mirror as he dries his hands on the towel next to the sink.

“I don’t want to fuck Jag.” He says it like it’s that fucking simple. I guess that one specific issue is, but it’s more than that. It’s not just Jag.

“I don’t want you to fuck anybody else.”

I see his eyebrows go up through the reflection in the mirror, but I can’t read his expression. My heart thunders and part of me wishes I could pull the words back before they can actually change anything.

He turns around and leans against the sink, looking at me silently for so damn long that I’m almost tempted to keep talking just to chase away the awkward silence. But there’s not much else I can say until he responds, is there? I guess I could talk about the weather until he decides whether he’s going to call this thing off or not.

“What are you doing, Shep?” he asks, saving me from commenting on the heatwave we’ve been having. “This is working, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s working,” I agree. It’s working so damn well it’s turning my damn head around and making me stupid. I don’t say that last part out loud for obvious reasons. He chews on his bottom lip, his eyes full of an uncharacteristic helplessness that pushes me off balance.

“I still don’t...” he starts to say, then stops and shakes his head. “If I tell you I’m not looking to hook up with anyone else, will that make you feel better?”

I think the real answer to that is all twisted up in the jumble of things I don’t have words for. But it’s close enough that I nod.

“Yeah,” I answer gruffly. “Nothing *weird*, just... no one else. For either of us.”

Riggs chuckles. “Monogamy sounds pretty kinky to me, but I guess I can vibe with it.”

All the knots in my chest loosen and I reach for him again, snagging my fingers through his belt loop and tugging him closer. I have to tilt my head to look up at him from my seated position. The little furrow is still between his eyebrows, his hands resting gingerly on my shoulders like he’s afraid to touch me too hard and hurt me.

“But we’re not...” he starts to say, and I nod quickly.

“I know. We’re roommates and friends who happen to lube each other’s crankshafts... exclusively.” I flash him a smirk.

“Right. Want to order something for dinner?” he asks, and I nod again, getting up from the toilet seat and following him

out of the bathroom.

In the living room, I plop down on the couch and pull out my phone. Riggs sits down next to me, close enough that there isn't even an inch of space between us. He tilts his head to rest it on my shoulder while I scroll through the options of places we can order from. I know not to draw attention to it. If I do, he'll be on the other side of the couch in a flash, like a grouchy cat that wants to be petted, as long as you never acknowledge that it's happening.

I slip an arm around the back of the couch as casually as possible, giving him the space to sink in a little closer, and that's exactly what he does. A contented feeling settles into my chest, loosening all the tension from earlier and filling me with even more things I don't have words for right now.

I don't need anything more than this. Hell, this is a dream scenario, isn't it? A live-in fuck buddy who isn't expecting anything but sex and friendship from me? Hell yes. Why would anyone get married when they could just fuck their best friend forever instead? Life hacking, baby.

Maybe if I play this right, we can just keep doing this... like, maybe forever?

Chapter 20

RIGGS

“I CAN’T BELIEVE WE’RE going to a birthday party for a *cow*,” I mutter, torn between laughing at the lunacy of the whole thing and... no, that’s pretty much the only option, actually. I doubt this behavior would qualify as dangerous, so having Red and Journey committed is probably out.

“You wouldn’t throw a birthday party for Vel?” Shep asks from the passenger seat of my car, pointing at the small strip mall right on the edge of town to remind me that we need to make a stop.

“That’s different,” I scoff, immediately picturing the bird wearing a tiny, bird sized party hat, perched on a heap of shiny trinkets brought to him as birthday offerings from all his mechanic underlings. Hm, it’s worth considering, actually.

Shep laughs, and I pull into a parking spot right in front of the flower shop. The sign across the top of the shop is brightly colored and a mix of cursive and block letters that reads Little

Shop of Flowers. I snort a laugh at the name as I get out of my car.

Shep falls into step beside me, and I lean a little closer. The move is completely automatic, done without even a second of conscious thought. I probably wouldn't have even noticed myself doing it except that he *doesn't* put an arm around my shoulders. It's so unexpected that it throws me off balance and I stumble over my next step.

What. The. Fuck? Somewhere along the way I went from elbowing him in the gut if he tried to touch me to... *expecting* it. My skin prickles with agitation and I have the strange urge to grab his arm and put it where it belongs myself. Of course, Shep seems completely oblivious to the entire internal crisis that only lasts about a tenth of a second, just enough time for me to trip over my own feet and for him to catch me with an arm around my waist. There, was that so fucking hard?

I grumble under my breath, and he chuckles quietly, probably assuming I'm muttering about my momentary clumsiness or maybe complaining about his arm around me, rather than my bizarre reaction to the *lack* of his arm around me. Maybe he was right all along, and his dick *does* wield an insanity curse, but taking it orally is more of a time release situation. The fact that I didn't immediately slam on the brakes last weekend when he suggested making things exclusive is all the proof I need that my brain is being slowly taken over by Shep's cum spores.

He drops his arm from around me and pulls open the door to the shop, waving me in ahead of him. The floral scent inside is too much, making me sneeze immediately as I step inside.

“Fuck you,” a cheerful voice calls from somewhere unseen, the words said in the exact same cadence as “bless you.”

“I’m sorry, what?” I ask, sniffing to fight another sneeze.

“It’s nondenominational,” the same perky male voice answers, and seconds later a familiar petite man with big blue eyes and white-blond hair steps out from behind a towering flower display. “Oh, it’s you.”

He narrows his eyes at me and then darts a glance past me, his cheeks turning a light shade of pink when his gaze lands on Shep. My hackles go up instinctively, and I have the wild urge to step in front of Shep and block him from Lewis’s view. I’m not sure what that would do exactly, and not just because Shep is twice as broad as I am.

Of course, he’s too busy literally smelling roses to even notice that Lewis must have realized at some point that I was full of shit about the whole horse thing and is hoping to get a second shot at the back seat action he was promised months ago.

“Do different colored roses have their own smell?” Shep asks, sniffing a red rose and then a white one, his forehead wrinkled as he tries to work out what seems to be a complex puzzle.

“They’re not scratch and sniff stickers,” I point out.

“No, I don’t think they do,” Lewis confirms, nibbling on his bottom lip and seeming to give up on Shep remembering him. “Can I help the two of you?”

“We’re picking up an order,” Shep answers, giving up his quest to sniff every flower and finally looking at Lewis.

“It’s a floral blanket for a cow,” I explain blandly.

“Not for a horse?” he asks, his cheeks flaming bright red as soon as the words are out of his mouth. Shep frowns with confusion and I bark out a laugh. “I’m sorry, that was so bitchy.” Lewis grimaces and shakes his head at himself. “I’ve got that all set for you. I’ll be right back.” He goes behind the checkout counter and disappears through a door into the back.

“What the hell was that?” Shep asks once we’re alone.

My lips twist into a half smile and I put a hand on his chest. The touch is completely casual, and he doesn’t seem surprised by it at all. I’ve probably done it a hundred times now without realizing it, and the only reason I’m noticing it now is because of the way I reacted outside to Shep *not* touching me when I expected him to.

“You almost fucked him in your car,” I remind him.

His forehead scrunches up even more and he looks at the door Lewis disappeared through, clearly working hard to place the memory.

“When?”

“I really should be flattered that you remember who I am at all, shouldn’t I?” I tease, patting his cheek.

It's another move that I've done dozens of times by now, the rough feeling of his stubble under my palm is so familiar I think I could pick him out of a lineup with my eyes closed. He surprises me by turning his head and kissing my palm though. It's exactly the kind of mushy thing I usually hate but... it's not so bad. Maybe it's better than *not bad*.

"I actually pinned a sign to your back to remind me of who you are in case I forget," he teases, turning my signature deadpan right back on me.

"Dick," I murmur, my grin widening as I lean into him a little more.

My cock swells, but it's more than that, it's like I just want to be *close* to him. That night of drinking last Friday didn't cure shit. If anything, it almost feels like it made it worse. Can I blame this on a prolonged hangover if the feelings started before I got wasted, spent all night cuddling with Shep, and then had mind-meltingly hot sex with him the next morning?

A throat clears behind me. Shep tears his eyes away from mine to look over my shoulder, and I manage to pry my hands off him long enough to turn around and offer Lewis what I hope is a non-threatening smile. He blinks rapidly, so I'm guessing I didn't quite hit the mark for *non-threatening*, but I tried, dammit, and that has to count for something.

"Do you want to take a look?" he offers, setting a large rectangular box on the counter. It reminds me of a cake box with a clear plastic window on the lid so it's easy to see the flowers inside. I know jackshit about flowers, so the fact that

they're colorful and none of them look dead is good enough for me.

I nod and reach into my pocket for my wallet. "Looks good. What do we owe you?" He rattles off the price and I hand over my card with a huff under my breath. "I can't believe we're dropping this kind of money on something you *know* Milkshake and Angie are going to eat before the end of the night."

Shep puts a hand on my lower back, and I lean into his touch without thinking. Again.

"Yeah, but think about how happy Journey and Red are going to be when we put it on her," he says. My irritation at the price deflates, but I grumble again just for good measure. He's right, they're going to be over the fucking moon about this silly flower blanket.

Lewis rings us up, still casting awkward glances at both me and Shep while the transaction processes and he finally hands back my card along with the receipt.

"Listen, I'm... um..." I clear my throat and stuff my hands into my pockets. "Sorry," I mumble the word. He raises his eyebrows at me but doesn't let me off the hook that easily. Ugh, he's annoying, and not just because he still clearly wants to have sex with Shep. "That whole thing at Wooley's, scaring you away from Shep..."

He still doesn't say anything. Come on, what does he want? A written confession? Five Hail Marys?

“He’s not great with his feeling words,” Shep jumps in for me. “But he wanted me bad and handled it like a dickhead.”

“Shut up. No, I didn’t,” I argue, more of a knee-jerk reaction than anything.

“Which part?” Lewis finally speaks.

“What?” I ask.

“You said you didn’t, and I’m asking which part? You didn’t want him, or you didn’t act like a dickhead?” There’s a subtle challenge on Lewis’s face. Is this the penance he wants? I have to humiliate myself by admitting I wanted to jump Shep’s bones?

Fine.

I bristle and grit my teeth. “Fine, yes, I wanted him, and I was a dickhead. All good?” I don’t wait for confirmation or an acceptance of my apology. “Good,” I declare, picking up the box, which is a lot heavier than I expected for a bunch of flowers. “Come on, let’s go drape a baby cow with flowers like she’s the Queen of fucking England.”

SHEP

As expected, Journey and Red squeal like schoolchildren when they see the floral blanket we bought Milkshake for her birthday. And, as Riggs predicted, both of the fluffy Highland cows immediately start to munch on it.

“Told you,” he says smugly, pulling a water bottle out of the cooler and uncapping it.

I'm way too fucking mesmerized by the way his throat bobs as he tilts his head back and guzzles down a few gulps. When he's done, he drags his tongue over his bottom lip to gather a stray droplet of water, and my cock swells.

"Hm?" I hum, trying to follow the thread of conversation.

The twist of Riggs's lips into a teasing grin tells me that he's fully aware of where my mind is at. Not that it's any great feat of psychic ability to figure that one out. It feels like he takes up one hundred percent of my thoughts lately. It would be easier to say that it's just sex occupying my brain, but that's only half of it at most. It's just... Riggs. My head has become the twenty-four-hour Riggs channel. It's like ESPN, except instead of game highlights, it's highlights of every damn time he's so much as *looked* at me on any given day.

I open my mouth, but I'm not even sure what I'm planning to say to him. Something stupid? Highly likely. Luckily, I'm saved from finding out by the bleet of a baby goat that darts between us.

Riggs jumps back to make room for the stampede of larger goats that are right behind the first one, all stoked to get to the barnyard party currently going on a few feet away. The alpacas are all wearing colorful hats, or at least some of them are. Some already removed their hats and ate them, or managed to be threatening enough to avoid the indignity from the start. The rooster, Sanders, is strutting back and forth, eyeing everyone warily, just waiting for someone to be dumb enough

to come near any of the hens so he has an excuse to chase them off.

I immediately think of all the hot, possessive feelings Riggs has been inspiring in me lately, and honestly, I kind of get where Sanders is coming from. I never thought I'd be able to relate to a rooster, but here we are.

“Sorry, they have no manners,” Stone apologies with a grin, bringing up the rear of the goat brigade. His husband, Dare, is just a few steps behind him, looking put-out and irritated, but I notice a spark in his eye when Stone turns to look back at him that makes me think he probably doesn't mind his man's antics as much as he makes it seem.

Over the last handful of years, I've gone from being surrounded by nothing but single friends to everyone being paired off. At one point Riggs described it as a zombie virus, rapidly spreading through all of our friends and coworkers. I swallow a chuckle at the memory of the way he wrinkled his nose and looked all horrified by the possibility of being bitten himself.

I glance around again at all of the couples standing around us. Porter is cooing over one of the alpacas while Steele casually rests a hand on the back of his neck, Tal is leaning in close to Gates, smiling like a fool while his husband whispers something into his ear, Daniel sneaks a kiss from Ollie when he thinks no one is paying attention, and the big, bearded softie grins like he just won the lottery. My heart clenches so hard that I can't breathe for a second.

I guess it makes sense that being the last of the uncommitted guys, it's starting to give me a pang in my chest every time I see one of them get all moony over their partner. Except, it never bothered me until recently.

I glance at Riggs again and my heart jolts against my ribcage. I've never been the kind of person who wanted a forever person just to have one. The idea of actively *looking* for someone to get serious with just doesn't make a lot of sense to me. It feels like some people are hiring for an open position rather than falling for a specific person, and it never sat right. Maybe that's why Riggs is resistant to the idea of relationships too. Maybe he's feeling the things I'm feeling. Maybe he's been waking up in the middle of the night the past few days like I have, just to get in an extra few hours of thinking about him. As if the other eighteen hours of the day weren't enough already. And maybe I'm getting my hopes up.

"What?" Riggs asks, touching his face like he's expecting to feel something out of the ordinary there, drawing my attention.

I tug my mouth into a half smile and shake my head. The first birthday party for a cow is not the time for me to spring feelings and shit on a guy like Riggs. The timing is bad. It's not that I'm a coward with a complete inability to form all the difficult, complicated words that have been building up inside me for days now.

He gives me a curious look and I notice his hand twitch like he's about to reach for me. But he seems to remember that

we're standing in the middle of a pasture, surrounded by our loudmouth friends and a bunch of farm animals, so he stuffs his hands into his pockets instead. Did I make it fucking weird by bringing up exclusivity last weekend? Things have felt a little off since then, but I can't put my finger on exactly what's changed.

"Hey, are you two about done staring into each other's eyes?" Auggie calls. When I look over at him, he holds up a long wooden stick and tilts his head towards the papier-mâché likeness of Milkshake that's swinging from the limb of a nearby tree. "Come on, we're going to play."

"Is it just me, or does it seem fucked up to celebrate Milkshake's birthday by beating the candy out of a replica of her with a stick?" Riggs points out.

"I guess we didn't really think of it that way," Red admits, frowning at the piñata like he's rethinking the whole thing.

"I doubt she's going to take it personally," I assure him, grabbing the blindfold from Auggie's other hand. I tie it loosely, but it starts to slip down as soon as I let go of it.

"Here." I can feel the familiar press of Riggs's body up against my back, and my cock reacts immediately. He pulls the blindfold tight, tying it again with nimble movements, his hot breath puffing against the back of my neck, making my skin tingle and my heart beat faster.

"Damn, this is getting kinky," Daniel says with a breathless laugh that makes me think I'm not hiding my excitement well at all.

“Too bad we don’t have any gags,” Riggs says dryly, and even with my vision completely blacked out, I’m positive he’s sending a pointed look right at Auggie.

I huff out a laugh and hold my hand out for the stick.

“Let’s do this,” I say confidently. I just hope everyone is smart enough to take a few good steps back before I start swinging.

Luckily, there are no injuries in the quest to beat candy out of the faux cow, although my first swing does tweak my shoulder more than I would like. But, in the end, it’s Dare who takes the third turn and manages to bust the thing open. Unfortunately for all of us, instead of filling it with candy, it turns out that Journey stuffed the thing full of apple slices. As soon as they litter the ground, the cows and goats all rush forward and go apeshit on them like it’s Christmas.

There are some other silly games, and eventually food. Riggs and I aren’t even the only ones who brought presents. Porter and Steele brought a paint set and Journey seems thrilled when Porter explains how they can teach Angie and Milkshake to hold the paintbrushes in their mouths to paint. But through all of it, my attention keeps returning to Riggs, over and over.

In spite of all his prickliness, he looks like he’s having a good time. He catches me staring and I notice his lips twitching with a smile. My heart jolts again. Am I totally fucked here? It feels like I am, like it’s too late to slam on the brakes or try to reverse course.

I'm falling for Riggs *hard*. And I don't think there's anything I can do to stop it.

Chapter 21

SHEP

“ADMIT IT, YOU HAD fun.” I slip a hand under the back of Riggs’s shirt and ghost my fingers over his warm skin as I follow him to our front door.

He flattens his lips into an unimpressed expression, but I can see the spark in his eyes that tells me he’s getting ready to be a delightful pain in the ass.

“What could be better than a day spent out in an open field, under the blazing hot sun, surrounded by cow manure and farm animals?” His mocking enthusiasm makes me grin.

“You had fun,” I say again. His lips twitch and I know I’m right. I may not know *everything* about him yet, but there’s something exciting in realizing that I do know him, that I can see past the mask of indifference and snark he wears for everyone else.

I toe my shoes off as soon as we step inside, and step closer to wrap my arms around him from behind while he works his

own off one at a time. I press my nose against the back of his neck, breathing in the smell of sunshine on his skin, along with the lingering coconut scent of sunscreen and the salty tang of his sweat. He hums and leans into me, pressing his ass briefly against my rapidly swelling cock before wiggling out of my grasp and turning to face me.

A filthy smile spreads across his face and my insides heat and start to ache with the sharp, bone-deep kind of longing that there's only one cure for. I move towards him again and Riggs takes a step back, mischief dancing in his eyes.

“You want me?” he asks. It's the stupidest question I can think of, and the playful lilt in his voice tells me he knows it too.

Riggs licks his lips and takes another slow step back, like someone being stalked by a lion, trying not to startle the dangerous animal. The peek at his tongue stud makes my cock twitch and swell a little more with the memory of a dozen times he's licked me until I'm sweating and clawing at the sheets, begging for him not to stop. A needy sound rumbles in my chest and vibrates up through my throat as my legs carry me forward in another attempt to close the space between us that fails.

“How about a game?” Something in the deep recesses of my brain must have made a decision at some point, maybe just this second or maybe weeks ago, the first time Riggs touched me. Whenever it was, I'm completely unaware of it until the

rest of the suggestion rolls off of my tongue. “A race to your bedroom. Loser gives his ass up.”

His lips part on a quiet gasp and I notice the growing bulge in his jeans twitch visibly. He takes another step backward, bringing him a few inches closer to the finish line. He looks over his shoulder, down the dark hallway, then back at me. If I wasn't paying attention, I would have missed the subtle nod of agreement. I'm sure that was his intention to get the upper hand with a surprise head start. But it's exactly what I was counting on.

“Go,” Riggs shouts, then tears off down the hallway, his footsteps thundering on the wood floors, a peal of laughter echoing off the walls.

I give him exactly half a second before I sprint after him. I'm more than happy to let him win, but where's the fun in it if I don't at least play the game? There's something deeply primal about the huff of his breath in the pitch-dark hallway, so close I'm *almost* sure I could tackle him and pin him against the wall. But he's fast, and he wants the win a hell of a lot more than I do.

He swings the bedroom door open a few steps ahead of me, light from outside giving us something to see by, at least. The neighbor's back porch light is shining through Riggs's open curtains, illuminating his bedroom and casting eerie shadows on the walls.

He skids to a stop, but I keep going, speeding straight into him and tackling him into his bed. The springs groan under

our weight, the whole bed frame scraping noisily against the wood floor. Riggs laughs again, twisting underneath me so he's facing me by the time the mattress stops bouncing.

His chest rises and falls against mine with his fast breaths. I know he's not winded from sprinting that short distance, which can only mean that *I'm* the one making him breathless. I drag my thumb along his bottom lip and rock my hips so he can feel the weight of my hard cock. My pulse is a drumbeat in my ears, but I can still hear the impatient sounds Riggs tries to stifle as we grapple with each other's clothes.

He grips the bottom of my t-shirt and drags it up, pressing open-mouthed kisses all along the edge of my jaw as he meets the hardness of my cock with his own. I'm so greedy to touch every inch of him that I can't decide where to start. I drag my fingers through his hair, bunch the material of his shirt in one fist and then release it, fumble with the button on his jeans, undoing it but leaving the zipper untouched. I play with his nipples and snake my tongue along the column of his throat, letting him undress me one item of clothing at a time without managing to focus on anything long enough to get him as naked as I am.

Riggs's grip on my boxer briefs is so rough that I hear the faint sound of a seam tearing, pulled too tightly as he yanks them over my ass and shoves them down around my thighs. My cock springs free, a sticky strand of precum clinging to my belly. I kiss his chin, ignoring the now familiar ache urging me to drag my mouth closer to his, to breathe in one of his

shuddering exhales, then seal my lips against his and swallow his muffled grunts and murmurs.

“Shep,” he says my name in a half moan. He grips my jaw and the firm press of his fingers grounds me, bringing everything into sharp focus. Riggs is beautifully disheveled underneath me, his clothes rucked up but still in place, his hair messy, and his lips swollen from kissing my skin. “Do you really want me to fuck you? Because if you think you owe me this or something since you asked for things to be exclusive...”

“You’re a dumbass.” I steal his usual line and peel his shirt off, tossing it aside without bothering to look where it lands. “I want this.” I brace my hands on either side of his head and roll my hips again so he can feel just how badly I want it. The rough drag of his jeans against my hot, oversensitive cock isn’t enough to dull the desperate, hollow feeling deep inside of me.

Riggs darts his tongue out and flicks it against the seam of my lips. I part them on instinct, my cock jerking heavily against his, leaking a pool of precum that dampens his jeans. He uses the distraction to roll us over, straddling me with his featherlight body. He doesn’t stay there long though.

He climbs off me and I prop myself up on my elbows to watch him. He finishes undoing his jeans and shimmies out of them, his huge cock swaying in the darkness, taunting me, testing my bravery by managing to look twice as big as usual in the dim lighting. My hole clenches and my insides flutter with equal parts fear and lust.

He wraps a hand around his cock and gives himself a couple of slow, absent strokes, playing with it, coaxing it just a little bit harder. A shiver rocks me and my cock twitches against my belly. He opens his nightstand, pulling out the now familiar bottle of lube that lives there. It takes him an extra few seconds to rummage for a condom though, items inside the drawer rattling as he shifts them around before finally pulling one out and tossing it onto the bed.

“Roll over, baby,” he says. My heart jumps violently at the sweet pet name. I’m not even sure he realizes he said it. There wasn’t a trace of mocking in the word, unless I’m just too damn horny to notice it. Either way, I’m not stupid enough to draw his attention to it.

I flip over onto my belly, folding my arms under my head and spreading my legs to make room for him. My cock throbs against his silky soft sheets, the concentrated, unmistakable smell of Riggs wafting up to tickle my nose and fill my lungs. He grips my ass cheeks in both hands and parts them. I’ve bottomed a handful of times in my life, and it’s always been hurried, dark, and mostly half drunk. I never thought a lot about actually being on this side of the equation, so... on display. Just when I’m about to start feeling self-conscious about him staring at my hole, he moans and kneads my ass cheeks in his hands.

“Fuck, you’re so hot.” He pulls my cheeks farther apart, pulling the skin around my hole taut and sending a little ripple of heat through me. “Can I lick you?”

I groan and nod, lifting my hips in a silent plea. He presses his thumb to my pucker first, just the brush of his dry pad along my rim, but it liquefies my bones and sends a little tremor through my muscles. The flutter of his breath is next, the hot puff of an exhale dancing over my sensitive skin and waking up every last one of my nerve endings. My balls tighten and I cant my hips, biting down on my bottom lip against the whimper that's rising in my throat.

Even knowing it was coming, I'm completely unprepared for the hot, wet touch of his tongue when he leans in and licks over my entrance. I buck, balling the sheet in my fists and grinding my cock against the bed.

"Oh fuck," I pant, and Riggs chuckles, the vibration moving through his tongue and tickling my hole with his next lick.

Some people eat ass as a courtesy, a quick shortcut for prep before hurrying along to the main event. Others eat ass like their life depends on it, like it's a delicacy they want to gorge themselves on, spurred on by the delirious moans they elicit with nothing but the skill of their tongue. One guess which of those two categories Riggs falls into...

He hums and digs his fingers into my ass cheeks harder, shoving his whole face between them so he can lick me deeper. He laps at my pucker until I'm dripping with his spit, rivulets of it running down to pool around my heavy, aching balls. Every drag of his tongue over my entrance lights up an

empty feeling inside of me, a desperate need to be filled and stretched. *Fucked.*

I grunt and hump the bed, my thigh muscles burning with the effort of holding myself back. He wiggles his tongue inside of me, and I howl, *almost* satisfied for a fraction of a second before it's already not enough. I shove myself back against him, riding his tongue as he spears me with it, licking my insides, fucking me as deep as he can reach.

"Finger me," I plead, getting my knees under myself for a better angle, my ass up in the air, my face pressed into the bed as I claw at the sheets. "Fuck me."

"Are you always such a shameless bottom slut?" he asks, his tone dripping with affection and lust as he scrapes his teeth against the swell of my ass cheek and clicks open the bottle of lube.

"No," I answer honestly. I've been in the mood to get fucked here and there, with the right guy, but it's never felt like *this*. Like if I don't get his cock inside me soon, I might fucking die.

Riggs makes a raspy sound that's somewhere between a laugh and a moan. "In that case, I'm flattered."

He presses two slicked fingers to my hole, and I don't wait for him to take his time. I push back onto them, impaling myself with a low, gut-deep moan. The twinge of pain as I stretch to fit around his fingers heightens all my senses. He works them in and out, stroking my prostate, his knuckles tugging at my rim with every thrust. I can feel every bead of

sweat that rolls down my back, the wet drip of lube and saliva in my crack, the gentle tickle of the air conditioning coming from the vent somewhere over his bed. I can hear every uneven breath, the distant hum of traffic, and the squelch of his fingers inside of me.

Riggs adds a third finger and the heat inside of me ratchets up another few notches. My cock swings untouched between my thighs, and I'm afraid the slightest breeze against it might be enough to set me off before I even get him properly inside of me.

"I'm ready," I grunt, clenching around his fingers. He moans and his cock bumps against the back of my thigh.

He fucks his fingers in and out a few more times, twisting and stroking, then squeezes some more lube out of the bottle directly onto my hole. It's thick and cold as it drips down and trickles inside of me. I can feel my pucker, soft and gaping from the stretch when he eases his fingers out.

The crinkle and tear of the condom wrapper sends a thrill jolting through me, my hips jerking again, my cock slapping against my stomach with the motion. And then he presses the impossibly thick head of his cock to my entrance, and I go completely still. Every single thing inside of me zeroes in on that one single spot. I can feel the pulse of my heartbeat surging through my hole, the slippery lube coating me inside and out, and the insanity-inducing emptiness that I'm on the verge of full-on *begging* him to fill.

“Riggs,” I rasp his name, and as if that was exactly what he was waiting for, he grabs my hips and presses against my entrance harder. The pressure builds, the slight sting that faded after a few seconds of his fingers is back in full force, threatening to tear me in two. “Riggs,” I gasp again, and my inner muscles give way.

I rise up onto all fours and jolt forward instinctively, clenching around the long, thick, *holy-fuck-what-was-I-thinking* invasion of his cock. My erection wilts and my thighs tremble as I twist the sheets in my fists and struggle for a full breath.

“Want me to stop?” he asks gently, running his fingers along my spine. My skin prickles eagerly at his touch, my nipples tightening and my scalp tingling.

“No,” I grit out, finally managing to suck in a lungful of air. “Just give me a second.”

He leans over me, shifting his cock inside of me again without meaning to. It’s halfway into my fucking guts, filling me so deep I didn’t even know it was possible. I take a few more breaths and my cock starts to swell again, the ache in my hole fading into something needier.

“Ready for the rest of it?” Riggs asks in a murmur, brushing his lips against the back of my shoulder, his body trembling as he holds himself still.

“Oh, fuck off. The *rest* of it?” I gasp, clenching around the already massive length I’m impaled on, my hole stretched and

so fucking full I can hardly breathe. “How did you get me to agree to take your fucking twenty-inch dick?”

He laughs breathlessly, his hips twitching to fill me with another inch that makes my back bow and a moan rise up in my throat.

“Baby.” There’s that word again, this time it’s clear that it’s a taunt as much as it’s a term of endearment, and fuck if that doesn’t make me want Riggs even more.

“Yeah, give it to me,” I agree, my voice full of gravel, my muscles all quaking and burning with the effort of holding still.

He rolls his hips slowly, giving me the last couple of inches. My eyes roll back and my cock twitches, fully hard again and so goddamn ready for Riggs to ride me hard, until that beast between his legs is satisfied and we’re both drained of cum. I rock back to meet his cock, the slap of skin on skin and the creak of his bed frame filling the bedroom.

Every thrust eases the pain a little more, turning it into hunger instead, a desperate pit inside of me that can only be filled by Riggs. His hands are everywhere, touching every inch of my skin while he fucks me hard and deep, my cock jerking with each thrust that nails my prostate over and over, making me see stars and forget my own name.

For one fleeting second, I entertain the fantasy of him flipping me over and driving into me again while we kiss passionately, our tongues tangled and our lips bruising against each other. How greedy can one man be? Riggs is railing me

within an inch of my life, and all I can think about is the one thing he doesn't want to give me.

He wraps his arms around me and presses his face into the back of my neck. His thighs tremble, and he pants my name over and over again in between open-mouthed kisses against my skin. I want so much more than just the right to put my mouth on his. I want *Riggs*.

The realization has been creeping up on me for weeks now, but with his cock filling me, his balls colliding with mine with every thrust, his hot breath making my skin even more slick than it already is, I don't have any hope of downplaying it, even in the privacy of my own mind. I want him. I want the filthy parts and the prickly parts, all the sweet parts he keeps hidden from the world and even from himself. All of it. All of *him*.

A strangled sound works its way through my throat and Riggs fucks me harder, reaching down to wrap his hand around my cock. That's all it takes. My balls tighten so violently it almost hurts, my insides clenching hard around his cock. I scream his name and start to pulse around him, spilling rope after hot rope of cum into his hand as he jerks me off wildly, snapping his hips with the same feverish rhythm until he follows me over the edge.

Even through the condom, I can feel the heat of his release, and it makes me shiver and convulse with a second orgasm before the first has even finished, going on and on until I

collapse onto the bed with Riggs on top of me, completely spent and utterly fucking wrecked.

RIGGS

Rolling off Shep and getting rid of the condom is a bit of a blur, but I manage it somehow. I came so hard that my head is still spinning as I drag in gasping breaths tinged with disbelieving laughter, because that seems to be the only way I can release all of these too-big feelings filling my chest like a helium balloon.

“Sex should not be that good,” I pant, lying sideways on the bed with Shep next to me, just as sweaty and out of breath as I am.

He chuckles and scoots closer, invading my space with a hopeful, nervous look dancing over his face. Someone with as many muscles and tattoos as Shep has no right looking so fucking *cute*. I beckon him in, and he closes the rest of the space between us to rest his head on my shoulder.

At some point I’ll probably drag myself out of bed for a quick shower, but I’m not in any rush. I let my eyes drift closed and I drag my fingertips lightly along the arm Shep draped over my chest, feeling the hairs stand on end and his muscles twitch under my touch. It’s peaceful. No expectations, nothing I’m supposed to say or feel, just a few minutes of simply *existing* in post-fuck bliss with my best friend.

“I think I’m falling for you.” Shep’s words are so quiet I’m not even sure if he meant for me to hear them. They’re too

fucking quiet for the bomb that they are.

Chapter 22

RIGGS

SHEP'S WHISPERED STATEMENT DETONATES inside of me, making my chest tighten and my heart race.

“Did I fuck you so good that I managed to Uno Reverse your dick curse?” There's an edge of manic desperation in my voice as I sit bolt upright and drag my fingers through my tangle of messy hair.

This thing between us has been going so well. It's been *working*. I just need Shep to take the fucking hint and laugh this off. He's just fucking with me like I did to him the first time we fooled around. Nothing has to change.

He doesn't say anything.

“You're not falling for me.” I try the more direct approach, chewing on my thumbnail, refusing to look back at Shep's face to find out if he's silently laughing at his hilarious joke or not.

“Yeah, I am,” he argues, just as quietly as the first time but with more certainty behind his words.

Too many feelings expand and swirl inside my chest, like a tornado spinning faster and faster until I can't decide if I want to scream or cry or fucking punch Shep for ruining the best goddamn thing that's ever happened.

"Fuck you," I mutter, scrambling out of bed. I pick up the shorts that are on the floor next to the bed, Shep's shorts, and I tug them on without looking at him.

He doesn't say a word. He doesn't plead his case or try to convince me that he's really and truly throwing away our perfect arrangement of friendship and sex because he's *falling in love* with me. He's absolutely silent, and for some reason that irritates me even more. I grind my teeth and huff out a frustrated breath through my nose as I storm out of my own bedroom, slamming the door so hard it rattles on its hinges behind me just to prove a point. I'm not actually sure what that point is, other than making sure he knows just how pissed off I am, but I think the reverberation of the wood gets it across nicely.

Once I'm out of the bedroom though, I'm not sure where I'm going. Part of me wants to storm out, to go somewhere and fucking scream until my throat is raw and my lungs are empty, somewhere I can hit something until I'm too fucking tired to feel so goddamn disappointed that everything is ruined just when it was getting good. But instead of going anywhere, I stop in the hallway and lean against the nearest wall, cursing under my breath at Shep and the stupid hope I had started to let in that maybe this could be different.

My bedroom door creaks open, letting a sliver of light into the hallway. He stands in the doorway, mostly in silhouette, still completely naked as far as I can tell. The smell of sex wafts out of my bedroom, still clinging to both our bodies.

“The thought of something real with me is really that bad, huh?” The bitter tinge in his voice hits me right in the gut like a sucker punch, raising my hackles like a junkyard dog.

“Fuck you,” I mutter again.

“No, I’m serious.” His voice gets louder, angrier, the air around us buzzing like a poked hornets’ nest as he steps into the hallway, closing in on me until he’s right in front of me, close enough that I can see his face in the dim light and smell the sweat on his skin again. “I’m good enough to fuck, but, what? I’m too stupid for anything more than that?”

“You *are* being fucking stupid right now.” I put my hands on his chest to push him away, to transfer some of the energy that’s building inside of my bones and coiling around my muscles, but he grabs my forearms in one hand and steps into me. His bare chest against mine, both heaving with ragged breaths. “You’re fucking stupid for ruining this.”

“How did I ruin it? By *feeling* something for you?” His hand is still wrapped around my forearm, his fingers flexing tighter and then relaxing.

He has me caged in between the wall and his body, but even with all the bluster, there isn’t a doubt in my mind that he would step back if I told him to. I can’t make myself spit out the words that would get him to back off though.

“Yes,” I grit out the single word answer through clenched teeth. “We agreed this was casual.”

“It was,” he barks. “But things change, Riggs. Are you telling me that *nothing* has changed for you?”

He presses me harder into the wall, the frustration rolling off of him in waves, matching mine, both of us trembling, fucking *seething*.

Have things changed for me? I barely understand the question. Shit changes all the time. Obviously, things are different between us than they were last month, or even last week. When I moved in here, I didn’t care if Shep got a sunburn. I wouldn’t have rubbed lotion on his tender skin and then spent days obsessing about his risk of melanoma in the future. A year ago, I didn’t care if the way I cooked eggs was the way he liked them. I didn’t even know him, not really, so yeah, things have changed. But I know that’s not what he means.

He wants me to tell him things have changed in the way people always *expect* things to change. He wants things I don’t even know if I’m capable of. The fucked-up thing is that for the first time, I want that too. I *want* to feel all those stupid, fluttery things that everyone else feels. I want to be able to tell Shep that I’m daydreaming about wedding venues, if that would mean we could keep everything else the way it is.

He’s silent, waiting for me to say *something*. Waiting for me to either push him away or tell him that he’s right, things have changed, and I do want to rent a pair of horses so we can

ride off into the sunset together. The only sounds are our ragged breaths and the pounding of my pulse in my ears. Shep is so close that I can taste the sweet flavor of his exhaled breath against my lips.

I drop my eyes to his mouth and my heart beats faster. Is *wanting* to want something the same as actually wanting it? Is it even close?

My throat tightens and everything inside of me crackles and buzzes like a live wire, electricity with nowhere to go. Shep licks his lips and it's like a match being struck. I wrench my hands free from his grasp before I'm even sure what I'm doing. I wrap one hand around the back of his neck, our noses bumping and our bodies colliding as I drag him in that one final inch to press my lips against his.

My heart was already thundering, but it breaks into a full gallop, beating so fast I'm not sure I'll survive it as Shep's warm, soft mouth gives way to mine. He makes a breathless, startled sound against my lips, and I swallow it down, sweeping my tongue into his mouth in search of more sweet gasps for him to feed me.

His tongue is wet and heavy, stroking against mine, our lips falling into a slow rhythm together. Even mostly naked as we both still are, it's obvious that this kiss has nothing to do with sex. It's not foreplay or a polite segue into anything more interesting. It's exactly the kind of kiss I never understood the point of.

There are no butterflies in my stomach, no fireworks, none of the giddy, mushy things everyone says I'm supposed to feel. But there is something else. Shep wraps his arms around me, pressing a hand to the middle of my back to hold me close. The steady *thud, thud, thud* of his heart beats against my chest, and a warm feeling unfurls in the pit of my stomach. Not a horny feeling or a giddy feeling, but something like sticky, sweet syrup oozing into my veins, making me feel like I'm wrapped in a blanket, but from the inside out. It's like coming home to a place I didn't even know I was missing until this moment.

I dig my fingers into the back of his neck harder and deepen the kiss as the feeling spreads from the pit of my stomach into my chest. I want to be closer to him. I want to devour him or *be* devoured by him; I don't care which. I want to crawl inside him somehow and share the same rapid heartbeat.

This feeling, this kiss... It's not at all what anyone told me it was supposed to be. It's so much *better*.

SHEP

Everything feels tilted on its axis, off center, unsteady, and all I can do is cling to Riggs and wait for the world to right itself under my feet.

"Is this okay?" I ask between panting breaths, carding my fingers through his hair, my lips brushing his as I form the words. I *think* he kissed me first, but I'm not even sure anymore. I'm not sure of anything, except that kissing him is

even better than the fantasies I've been guiltily harboring for weeks now.

Riggs huffs, the exhale of his laughter fluttering against my mouth. He drags his fingers roughly over the back of my neck, holding me in place and bumping his nose against mine.

"If it weren't okay, do you think you'd still have your balls?"

I bark out a laugh. "No, not so much." I run my tongue over my bottom lip, tasting him there.

"Well then, there you go," he says, then claims my mouth in another hard, slow kiss.

I'm not sure how we went from arguing to this, but I'll take it for as long as I can, especially since I have no fucking idea what comes next. Our lips and tongues move in an unhurried dance, the current of the kiss pulling me under so I can drown in it. The hard nub of his tongue stud scrapes over my tongue, sending shivers down my spine with every stroke.

"Shep." He breaks the kiss and murmurs my name against my lips. "Things did change."

I quirk a half smile in the dark that I'm sure he can't see, but maybe he can feel the shape of it. "I know."

Riggs puts his hand against my chest again, and this time I let him push me back. I take a step away, running a hand over my damp mouth as I drag in a few deep breaths to steady myself. My cock is partially chubbed from the kiss, but still not recovered from my recent orgasm. It feels like it was hours

ago that Riggs fucked me, but it was actually only a few minutes.

“I don’t know if I can give you the things you want.” His words might feel like a way to let me down gently if it weren’t for the tremor of emotion underneath.

“Right now, I just want *you*.”

He sags against the wall and shakes his head. “I’m... I think I’m aromantic.”

I frown. “I don’t totally know what that means. You can’t fall in love? You’ll never want a relationship?”

“I’m still figuring it out. I never wanted a relationship before, and if you’d asked me a few weeks ago, I probably would have said that I couldn’t ever see myself falling in love,” he says, and my heart gives a stupid little leap of hope.

“And now?”

“Now...” He exhales slowly, letting the silence hang between us for several seconds. “Now, I think maybe I want those things, maybe I could *have* those things, but they might look different than they do for other people. I don’t know if you want that, Shep.”

“Yes,” I answer without hesitation.

Riggs snorts. “You want a boyfriend who thinks most parts of a relationship are gross and uncomfortable? You want to whisper in someone’s ear that you love them and maybe never hear it back in the way you’re hoping? You want awkward

attempts at holding hands and sex when talking about our feelings gets to be too fucking much?”

“Yes,” I say again, moving closer to him again. I cup his jaw in my hand and rest my forehead against his so he can see my face in the dark, and I can see his. “I want *you*, Riggs. We’ll figure the rest out.”

He tugs his bottom lip between his teeth and stares at me for another minute before letting out a shuddering exhale.

“Fine.” It’s the same defiant set of his jaw, the same edge to his expression that he had when he gave me this exact answer about moving in here. Fine. It’s Riggs speak for ‘I’m too overwhelmed to admit how much I want this.’

I let a slow grin spread over my mouth. “Fine,” I echo, teasing him with the same careful indifference in my tone that he has. “Can I kiss you again?”

He rolls his eyes, but I notice the twitch of his lips with a smile. “Yes. I’m embracing a whole new level of weird, so let’s do this.”

“Bring on the weird.”

Our lips meet in the middle, soft and slow again. It’s not the way I expected Riggs to kiss, but I am so fucking here for it, matching the languid drag of his tongue. I wrap my arms around him, pulling him back across the hallway into his bedroom. Our lips move together as we stumble across the room without breaking the kiss and tumble into bed.

Maybe Riggs's brand of weirdness is exactly what I've been waiting for.

Chapter 23

SHEP

I RUN MY HANDS over the smooth red body of the Ducati and bite back a groan of longing.

“Look, I’m not one for the hard-sell, man,” Monty says, leaning against a nearby shelf and grinning at me. “But you’ve been in here every day this week getting drool all over the poor girl. When are you gonna pull the trigger and make an honest woman out of her?”

I chuckle and rub a hand over the rough stubble on my jaw, stuffing the other one into my pocket to keep myself from feeling up the bike again. I’m not even sure what’s holding me back, other than the vague feeling that dropping this kind of money on a bike I can only realistically ride five months out of the year in Wisconsin is immature and irresponsible. On the other hand, it’s not like I splurge often.

For some reason, Riggs comes to mind, filling my head with that confident grin he wore the first time he walked into

Big Bull and hired himself for a job that didn't even exist until he showed up. He had that same I-do-what-I-fucking-want gleam in his eyes the night he stripped naked without a damn word and sucked my dick. My heart and my dick twinge at the same time.

“Fuck it,” I say before I can talk myself out of it. “Let's do this.”

Monty claps me roughly on the shoulder. “Hell yeah. The paperwork won't take too long. If you want, you can even leave your car keys here and I can have my nephew run it over later for you. That way, you can leave with the bike right away.”

An hour later, I'm tearing out of the parking lot of Basket Case Bikes with the twin engine of my brand-new motorcycle vibrating between my thighs. My t-shirt flaps in the warm breeze and the sun heats my skin as I fly down the road towards home.

The garage door is wide open when I pull into the driveway. Jaguar's bike is parked near the open door, the same place it was when I left earlier. They both seemed surprised when I told them I was going out for a while instead of sticking around to put on another performance of *The Jealous Idiot*. Jag might be down to fiddle with more than just Riggs's engine, but I'm confident the feeling doesn't go both ways.

They both look up at the rumble of my Ducati as I roll to a stop and cut the engine.

“Thank fuck,” Riggs says, wiping his hands off on his jeans, leaving a few streaks of oil in his wake. “I was going to go buy the damn thing for you if you didn’t pull the trigger this week.”

I swing my leg over and pull my helmet off. “You’re telling me that if I’d held out another few days, you would have dropped thirty Gs on a present for me?”

He saunters out of the garage towards me and snorts a laugh. “Hell no. I was going to forge your signature on the loan documents.”

“Ah, that makes more sense.”

My heart beats faster and my smile widens as Riggs puts his arms around my neck, sliding one hand down the back of my shirt to tease his fingers over my skin. He bites his bottom lip and looks at me with smoldering eyes that make me wish we were alone.

“Kiss?” I prompt, and he leans in, catching my lips in a casual kiss that sets my pulse racing. It’s probably the thousandth kiss in the last week, and I’m pretty sure that after a few thousand more, my heart is still going to go wild every time. Even if it doesn’t always come naturally for him to offer it up on his own, from the way he kisses me, there’s no doubt that he likes it as much as I do.

I grope his ass playfully and he bites my bottom lip.

“It turns out your timing is perfect, actually,” he says when he breaks the kiss.

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?” I let Riggs go and glance past him to where Jag seems to be putting tools away in the garage.

“The Kawasaki is finally finished,” Jag answers for him, looking over at the bike proudly. “She’s purring like a kitten and ready to be roughed up a bit.” He winks and pats the seat.

“No shit?” I raise my eyebrows and look at Riggs for confirmation.

“What do you say? Want to go on an adventure?” he asks, then glances back at Jag for a second. Riggs squirms in place subtly enough that I doubt most people would notice it, but it’s one of his tells that I’ve come to know well. He swallows and drags his fingers through his hair, not worried about leaving it messy or the stray streaks of oil still staining his fingertips and between the creases of his knuckles. “Or, um... like, a date, I guess?”

“A date?” My eyebrows creep even higher. “Are you going to bring me flowers and take me to some fancy Italian restaurant?” I tease.

He snorts. “Hell no. I’m thinking more along the lines of picking a direction and just riding until we see a cool bar or a roadside stand that sells questionable burgers. And after that, we can find somewhere to make out or something.”

“That sounds even better.”

“I guess that’s my cue to leave you crazy kids to your milkshake with two straws or whatever you’ve got planned,” Jag says, picking up his helmet and slipping it over his head.

“Why the hell would we share a milkshake?” Riggs asks, looking genuinely horrified by the idea.

Jag laughs, not bothering to explain. He holds out his fist for Riggs to bump. “Text me if you want. We can go for a ride sometime or just hang out.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Riggs shrugs, but I notice his lips twitch with a smile. He might think he’s cold as ice, but he likes other people more than he realizes. He has more friends than he realizes too.

“Later,” Jag says, jerking his head in a parting nod, then hopping on his Harley and roaring out of the driveway.

“Do you need to get cleaned up first?” I ask Riggs, eyeing his dirty jeans and the tight gray t-shirt he’s wearing with a sweat stain down the back. It shouldn’t be a sexy look, but it really fucking is. It’s all the working man fantasies I’ve gotten off on since I was a pre-teen drooling over the sixteen-year-old neighbor my parents paid to mow our lawn. Plus, it’s *Riggs*, and I’m fucking positive he could drive me wild wearing a burlap sack.

“Nah.” He snags the front of my shirt and steps close again. He nudges the tip of his nose against mine, his lips hovering without quite closing the gap between our mouths. “You like me dirty.”

“Hell yeah, I do,” I rumble, sliding my hands up the back of his shirt and pulling him against me, searing my lips to his in a brief kiss. His chest vibrates with a moan. Nope, still not tired of being allowed to do that.

“Come on, gearhead, the open road is calling us.” He breaks the kiss and shoves out of my grasp, smirking at me while walking backward towards his motorcycle.

“Sweet talker,” I flirt, and he cackles.

After Riggs came out to me as aromantic last week, I spent a few days doing a deep dive, trying to understand it better. It turned out, it wasn't that hard to grasp. Maybe for some people sex and romantic feelings are all tied up together, but it's not a stretch at all for me to understand how he can have all of the physical attraction without romance getting mixed up in it. It's not like I wanted to cuddle and hold hands with all the one-night stands I had over the years.

I heard him when he said that a relationship with him might look different than it would with someone else, but if I wanted a relationship with anyone else, I could have had one. I want Riggs. Whatever he has to offer. Whatever it looks like. Being aromantic doesn't mean he can't fall in love with me, so I'm going to let my stupid heart keep hoping for that and see what happens along the way.

He grabs a helmet off the nearby workbench and pulls it over his head, then wheels the Kawasaki out of the garage. He looks damn good swinging one leg over the seat and mounting the bike. He twists the throttle and the engine rumbles smoothly.

“Let's go see what kind of trouble we can find,” he says, his voice muffled by the helmet and the roar of the engine.

I kick my bike to life and stuff my head back into my helmet too.

“Lead the way, baby.”

RIGGS

Shep and I chase each other down long stretches of quiet country road, racing without a destination in mind. There’s a freedom to it, an intoxicating, untamable thrill that swells in my chest and makes me feel like I can fly. I can hear his occasional unbridled laughter on the wind when he manages to pull ahead of me for a mile or so, or when I zoom ahead and leave him in my dust.

I don’t have a clue how long we’ve been riding or even which direction we’re headed in, and it doesn’t really matter. We have all afternoon to get lost and then find ourselves again. It’s exactly the kind of first date I might have dreamed of if I’d ever thought about that kind of thing.

We hit a small town eventually, and my stomach growls, reminding me that it’s well past time to stop for a bite to eat. I slow to let Shep catch up with me again, and when he does, I jerk my head towards a pub just up ahead.

We pull into the parking lot when we reach it and park our bikes.

“Let’s see if they serve food,” I say, pulling my helmet off and tucking it under my arm once I dismount.

“I smell something deep fried, so that’s promising,” he says gamely, putting a hand on my lower back casually, just another one of those touches he somehow made me start to crave before I even realized it.

We step inside and I do a quick sweep of the place, my eyes landing on a couple of open stools at the bar. Shep breaks away to use the bathroom while I grab the seats. The place is busier than I expected for a grungy looking pub in a small town, but there is a highway exit a couple of miles away, so that probably explains it. I spot a pride flag sticker on the mirror behind the bar, and I relax a little more.

“I’ll be with you in a minute,” the bartender calls over to me while he fills a couple of beers from the tap.

“No worries,” I assure him, grabbing one of the sticky menus from the caddy at the end of the bar and looking it over.

“Did it hurt?” Shep purrs from behind me a minute later, his voice a deeper tenor than usual.

I glance over my shoulder at him and arch an eyebrow. “Did what hurt?”

“When you fell out of Tennessee.” He slides onto the open stool next to me and gives me a sultry smile, looking me up and down like he’s seeing me for the first time.

I snort. “Did you hit your head?”

“It’s sexy roleplay, work with me here.”

“Oh, is that what we’re doing? Okay.” I shake out my arms and get myself into character, shifting my expression into a

smoldering stare.

“Because you’re the only ten I see,” he finishes the stupid and wildly incorrect pickup line, and I snort.

“That’s the stupidest line I’ve heard in my life.”

“But we’re talking, so it worked,” he points out, wagging his eyebrows at me like he’s sure he just proved himself to be a secret genius.

I crook a finger to beckon him closer, and he leans in. “Roses are red, violets are fine. You be the six, I’ll be the nine,” I whisper.

His eyes roll up in his head and he groans. “Fuck, that was a much better line than mine.”

“This guy bothering you?” The bartender asks, sliding down the bar to stand in front of me. He’s a string bean with pouty lips and a baby face. If I had to guess, he’s a college kid working here during his summer break to earn some extra cash before heading back to school where he’s working on getting a degree in computer science. Still, he gives Shep a hard look like he’s prepared to throw hands for me if necessary.

“Yes,” I answer solemnly. “But he’s my boyfriend, so it’s fine.”

“Thank god.” His rigid stance softens, and he grins at both of us, all pearly whites and dimples for days.

We order a couple of sodas and burgers, and when he hurries off again, I swivel on my stool to angle myself towards Shep.

“Boyfriend, huh?” he says.

“That’s what that whole talk was about last weekend, wasn’t it? If not, I clearly misunderstood some shit.”

“No, I just hadn’t heard you say it out loud before. It’s... hot.” He drops his voice to that low purr again, bumping his knee against mine.

“It’s easier with a stranger,” I admit.

“You don’t want to tell the guys?”

Neither of us brought it up over the past week. We just went to work and acted the same way we have for the past month. Is it important to Shep that everyone knows? Probably. It’s usually one of those things people care about in relationships—at least, I assume it is.

“I don’t care. They already suspect something’s going on, so we might as well just tell them and get it over with. It’s just... awkward, I guess.” The bartender drops off our drinks, and I pull my glass towards me to take a sip. “Talking about shit like that with people feels uncomfortable.” I squirm in my seat at the thought of saying the words out loud to Steele or Auggie. “*Shep is my boyfriend.*” Ugh, so awkward.

His expression is impassive for a minute, taking in what I’m saying without reacting. There’s a little twitch in his right eye that gives him away though. He wants to tell people. He wants to hold my hand in public.

“We’ll let it come up naturally. Would that be easier?” he suggests, and a knot in my chest unfurls.

I nod. “Sure, that works.” I take a breath and wipe my hand on my jeans, getting rid of the sweat forming on my palm. Then, I reach over and grab his hand in a quick, jerky motion like I’m trying to pick up a venomous snake without getting bitten.

He looks just as surprised as he did the first time I held his hand, letting me clumsily thread our fingers together without comment before helping me out and adjusting his grip so everything fits together a little more comfortably. He looks away and tries to hide the big, dopey smile that’s spreading over his lips, but I see it anyway. My stomach fills with that warm, *home* feeling again, just like the first time we kissed.

I might be shit at a lot of this, and I might not have the romance thing down, but making Shep smile? Yeah, that I can definitely do.

Chapter 24

RIGGS

I DAWDLE IN MY bedroom, managing to drag the process of putting on a one-piece set of overalls out into a good three minutes. That doesn't seem like much, but usually it only takes about thirty seconds, so that's some top-notch stalling if I do say so myself.

Once I'm dressed, I kill another ten minutes tidying up my bedroom and then opening the window to see if Vel is around. He must have something more exciting going on this morning though, because he doesn't have the good grace to stop by and wish his best bro a happy birthday.

There's a sharp rap at my door. I sigh and lean back inside the window, pulling it closed so I won't get bugs or other random birds making my room their new home.

"I'm coming," I call with all the enthusiasm of a man about to be led to his execution. The warm rumble of Shep's chuckle

on the other side of the door tells me he knows exactly what I'm doing this morning.

I grab my boots from their spot next to my bed and shove them on, taking more time than necessary tying each one. When there's absolutely nothing else I can do to drag this out, I shuffle across the room and pull open my door, bracing myself for whatever horrors are about to be forced upon me. I screw my eyes closed and grimace, not sure I can even face whatever it is Shep has planned.

He laughs again, the sound warm and soft, just like everything else about the marshmallow himbo. I open one eye slowly. I don't see a million balloons filling the hallway or a birthday crown clutched in Shep's hands, so I let out a long breath of relief and open them fully.

His grin is a mile wide, his eyes dancing with humor and that warm, mushy thing that's been there a *lot* lately. The warm, mushy thing that made me squirm at first, but is maybe starting to grow on me the same way all his casual touches did.

"Happy birthday," he says, holding out a shiny new travel mug to me. I take it and unscrew the lid. The coffee inside is steaming and smells rich and expensive.

"This is it?" I ask suspiciously, taking a slow sip. "A nice new coffee mug and some fancy coffee?"

"Disappointed?" Shep asks in a coy way that makes me think it's a trick question.

“I know you told the guys, so just tell me now how weird it’s going to be at work today.” I replace the lid and inch closer, bringing my lips close to his. I can smell the same expensive coffee lingering on his breath.

“It’s going to be *so* fucking weird,” he taunts in a whisper, bridging the last inch to kiss me.

I catch the unzipped edge of his jumpsuit in my free hand, curling my fingers around it and feeling the cool metal of the zipper bite into my palm. I deepen the kiss, forgetting my birthday anxiety for a minute and just enjoying the feeling of his tongue stroking against mine, our mouths falling into a lazy, familiar rhythm together.

“Let’s call in sick and stay home in bed together instead,” I suggest.

Shep grins against my lips. “I’m sure Steele won’t see right through that or anything.”

“Who cares? It’s my birthday.” I’m prepared to stoop to pouting, but I can tell by the unwavering amusement on his face that there’s no way I’m getting out of this. “Fine.” I sigh. “Let’s get this over with.”

Vel is perched on the hood of Shep’s car when we get outside. I guess he didn’t forget about my birthday after all. I click my tongue at him, and he caws, spreading his wings and leaping onto my shoulder when I’m close enough for him to make the jump.

“Hey, bud. I don’t have any treats.” I stroke his feathers and he closes his eyes with contentment.

“Here, I’ve got one,” Shep reaches into the pocket of his jumpsuit and pulls out a plastic baggie full of apple slices. He tosses one to me and I manage to catch it without disrupting Vel’s perch on my shoulder too much.

He caws again, then takes the treat I offer and takes off.

I spend the short ride to Big Bull imagining streamers and balloons all over the garage, maybe even a banner out front announcing to the world that it’s my birthday. Ugh, I’ll have to spend the whole day with people asking me annoying questions like how old I am and if I’m a year wiser or whatever the fuck people say to adults on their birthdays.

Shep pulls into his usual spot, and I unbuckle. I grab the door handle, but I don’t pull it right away, still needing a minute to prepare myself for what I’m sure is going to be an exhausting fucking day.

“Riggs,” Shep says. I glance over to let him know I’m listening. “I know it’s hard for you to let people in, but these guys are your friends. Trust them. Trust *me*.”

I blow out a long breath. “Yeah, okay.” I’m not sure what he means by that, but fine, I can try.

We get out of Shep’s car, and his hand finds its way to my lower back as we cross the small parking lot. Denali lets out an excited howl in greeting when she sees us, as if she doesn’t see the two of us five days a week. Shep stoops down to pet her

head when she rushes over, but I'm too focused on darting my attention around the garage in search of any colorful decorations or things that might shoot confetti at me without warning.

Steele, Red, Tal, Auggie, and Henry are all gathered around the table outside of Steele's office, which is pretty typical for this time of morning. Except, instead of a box of donut holes, there's a cake.

"Happy birthday," Auggie says, gesturing to the cake with a flourish. "I've finally perfected my buttercream frosting, so I hope you like it."

The cake is simple, no candles, no writing, nothing embarrassing or over-the-top.

"And don't worry, we're not even going to sing," Red says as if he can read into the depths of my cringiest nightmares.

I open my mouth, but I'm not even sure what to say.

"Oh, one more thing." Tallahassee reaches past the cake to pick up a wrapped box.

"Not presents," I groan, and he laughs.

"It's just *one* present. It's from all of us," Auggie says.

My throat is tight, my fingers trembling slightly as I slide one of them under the edge of the paper to open it.

"Noise canceling headphones?" I read off the box.

"They should be more comfortable than the earplugs you always put in at work," Steele explains.

“And they have cat ears,” Auggie adds with a devilish smirk.

A laugh rasps past my lips. “I... love them.” I clear my throat to dislodge the lump that just won’t seem to loosen. “Thank you, guys. This was...” I look at the headphones again and shake my head.

“See, that wasn’t so bad, was it?” Shep squeezes my shoulder. I didn’t even realize his hand was there, but I lean into the pressure of his touch now. No, I guess it wasn’t so bad. A little embarrassing maybe, but also sort of nice.

Fuck, Shep was right. These guys *are* my friends. Loudmouthed, nosy, obsessed-with-my-sex-life, idiot friends. And maybe I kind of like them.

I unwrap my new headphones from their packaging, using it as an excuse to pull myself together before I do something truly humiliating, like cry about how nice this was. I toss the box and the rest of the packaging into the nearby bins and test out the headphones over my ears. They really are a lot more comfortable than the earplugs I usually use to dull the noise from the garage. And the cat ears are annoyingly cute.

I slide them off my ears again, hanging them around my neck so I can slip them back on when I get to work in a few minutes. Then I cut into the cake while everyone falls into their typical morning chatter about their partners, their pets, their lives.

“Shep is my... man friend,” I blurt.

They all go silent, eyes falling on me all at once with an array of confused and surprised expressions.

“Your *man* friend?” Auggie repeats, sputtering out a laugh. “You sound like a forty-year-old single mom gently trying to break the news to her kids that she’s getting railed by someone.”

“You thought that was going to sound *less* awkward than ‘boyfriend,’ didn’t you?” Shep guesses.

“Yup.” I spear the cake with a plastic fork and shovel some into my mouth.

“It was a lot worse,” Red states the obvious.

“Mm-hmm,” I mumble agreement around a full mouth.

“Who won the pool?” Tallahassee asks, and I narrow my eyes into a glare.

“No one is making money off of this,” I grumble.

“Oh, come on, just tell us when you first did the nasty and we’ll never speak of this again,” Auggie says.

“We’re actually waiting for our wedding night,” I answer sagely, and Shep sputters a snort into his coffee.

“Just don’t fuck at work,” Steele says, pointing at the list of rules with a stern look aimed squarely at Shep.

“Oh, come on, like Auggie and Henry don’t break that rule every damn week,” Shep complains.

“Hey,” Henry says defensively.

Auggie just shrugs. “You have seen him, right?” He looks Henry up and down with exaggerated appreciation.

I take the opportunity while they’re all distracted to slip my headphones over my ears and melt away from the group. Maybe having friends isn’t so bad. I guess.

SHEP

I wrap my arms around Riggs and kiss the back of his neck. He laughs and elbows me playfully, making a show of trying to get me off without any weight to it. I’ve been on the receiving end of a full gut check from him enough times in the past to know the difference.

My cock swells against the curve of his ass. He swivels his hips, purposefully grinding his perky cheeks on my stiffening erection with a breathless, teasing sound that’s pure fucking temptation. I graze my teeth over the spot that’s still damp from my lips and Riggs finally manages to get the door unlocked.

I let go of him so he can step inside. He turns around and faces me with a smirk, fiddling with the zipper on his jumpsuit and tugging his bottom lip between his teeth. My insides heat and my cock gets even harder. I fucking love when he whips out the coy act, playing at being shy and unsure of himself, when we both know he’s going to take whatever he wants sooner or later anyway.

“Since it *is* my birthday, I get to decide what we do the rest of the night. Right?”

I quirk an eyebrow at him. “Warming up to the birthday idea finally?”

“Shut up,” he says with a chuckle. He takes a step closer and licks his lips. I cup his face and drag my thumb over the smooth skin of his cheek. Riggs squirms and huffs—just a quiet exhale of frustration.

“Spit it out, baby. Are you working up to asking me for something super freaky, or what? You want to pull out some leather and a paddle? Ball gag? How kinky are we talking exactly?” My tone is breezy and light, not quite teasing but playful enough that I hope he knows I’m open to hearing whatever he’s gathering the courage to ask for.

“Take a shower with me?” he blurts, his face flaming bright red as soon as he asks.

He’s been strutting around, taking whatever he wants without waiting for permission first since the moment I met him, probably longer than that. And here he is, blushing like a virgin asking me to shower with him. My heart beats out a wild tempo against my ribs, and words that are probably too much for him rise up on my tongue.

I grab the back of his neck and haul him close for a kiss before I can say something stupid. Riggs melts into me, tugging my zipper down as far as it will go, teasing his fingers along my chest and stomach until my cock is aching and my insides are vibrating with the intense need to slam him against the nearest wall and rut with him like a couple of animals in heat.

“Let’s take a shower,” I agree, breaking the kiss but keeping my arms around him as I walk him backward down the hallway.

When we reach the bathroom, I let him go long enough to crank on the water. I shrug out of the top half of my jumpsuit then wiggle it off, taking my briefs along with it. Riggs undresses too, his usual confidence returning in droves as he looks me up and down with naked lust in his eyes. His gaze lands on my cock and he tilts his head to the side like he’s thinking hard about something.

“What if we’re together forever?” he asks, so fucking casually that I have to replay the words in my head a couple of times in order to figure them out, my heart beating harder each time I turn them over.

What if we’re together forever? What if you stay and we just do this for another fifty or sixty years? What if this is exactly the relationship I’ve always been waiting for without realizing it? What if I tell you I’m in love with you and you don’t run away?

I clear my throat in an attempt to banish the avalanche of thoughts that clutter up my head.

“I…” I shake my head, still worried I’m misunderstanding his question.

“What I mean is… are you satisfied with our sex life?”

A startled laugh forces its way out of my throat. Is *that* what he’s asking?

“Satisfied is an understatement,” I assure him, pulling the shower curtain back when the mirror starts to steam up.

I nod for him to go ahead, following him in once he’s under the water. I crowd in close to him to share the hot spray and, okay, also to feel his skin get all slick and slippery against mine. Riggs’s cock swells slowly, starting to thicken against my thigh as he drags his fingers over my stiff nipples and tilts his head back to catch more of the water.

The muscles of his face twitch with thoughts he’s not voicing, so I just let him think in peace for a minute. I reach for my bottle of bodywash on the ledge and fill my hand with a generous amount.

“Brace yourself, baby, this is about to be super weird,” I warn, smiling and kissing the side of his neck. He mutters and squirms but doesn’t outright protest or knee me in the balls.

I lather up the soap between my palms and then start off easy, gliding them over his pecs and up along his shoulders, working the suds into his skin and massaging some of the tightness out of his muscles at the same time. He groans and sags into me, letting his forehead fall against my shoulder. The position gives me easy access to wash his back, so that’s exactly what I do, wrapping my arms around him and taking my time with every inch. His muscles twitch and relax under my hands and his cock continues to thicken against me, little by little.

“I never showered with anyone before because it seemed way too intimate. I was right,” he murmurs, flexing his hips,

dragging his cock against my wet thigh. My dick twitches, but I ignore it to focus on the tightness in his voice.

“Do you want me to stop?” I kiss the side of his head and pause with my hands on his ass cheeks, waiting for the verdict.

He doesn't say anything for several long seconds. He brushes his lips over my collarbone and squirms against me again, then finally shakes his head. “Don't stop. It's a lot, but with you... I like it.”

I kiss him again and keep going, slipping my soapy fingers into the crease of his ass. He moans and the tension in his body eases immediately. Sex is easy, emotional intimacy is uncomfortable for him. I understand that more than he probably realizes. It's simple to get naked and make someone scream—it's primal and natural, it's uncomplicated. This shit right here? Talking about the future and making space for each other in our hearts and our lives? It's fucking hard. But I want it, and I think he does too.

He moans and lifts his head so I can see his eyelids flutter and his lips part with a panting breath as I glide my fingers over the tight pucker of his hole.

“What if I want to *try* to let you fuck me?”

He sure is full of what ifs today, and my cock is extremely interested in this one. I tease his rim slowly with two fingers and drag my tongue through the rivulets of water streaming down his throat. They're hot and refreshing, carrying the salty hint of Riggs's sweat.

“If my cock in your ass is really the best birthday present you can think of, then who am I to deny the birthday boy exactly what he wants?” I graze my teeth over his fluttering pulse point.

He makes a sound somewhere between a laugh and a groan, ragged and gravelly and full of longing.

“Happy birthday to me.” He grins and shuts off the water.

Chapter 25

RIGGS

MY INSIDES QUIVER WITH nerves as I pull back the shower curtain and grab a couple of clean towels off the shelf. I wasn't planning to offer up my ass tonight... or *ever* actually. It's not like I haven't thought about it. I've spared a fantasy or two wondering what it would feel like to be one of Shep's sweet twinkles, panting and mewling underneath him, feeling the full power of his flexing muscles and the vibration of every grunt and groan that rumbles in his chest.

But a jerk-off fantasy isn't the same as splaying myself open to him and finding out what it feels like to be *that* vulnerable. The breath I exhale as I dry myself off rattles in my throat, and Shep doesn't miss it. He wraps his arms around me from behind, and the damp terry cloth of his towel rubs against my bare ass cheeks. The swell of his cock nuzzles into my crease, and he ghosts his fingers over my belly, making my cock harder and the nervous trembling worse at the same time.

“I don’t *need* it, baby. If you’d rather fuck me again, I’m all for it. Or we could just fall into bed and spend an hour or so naked, grinding against each other until we’re sweaty and covered in each other’s cum,” he says in a deep voice right next to my ear, dragging his index finger in slow circles around my belly button.

The thing is, I believe him. Even if I never bottom for him, he’ll be satisfied with our sex life. But I think I want it. Not in general, not just for the sake of getting fucked to find out if I like it. But with Shep? Yeah, I want that.

I free myself from his grasp and drop my damp towel on the floor, then turn around and undo the towel around his waist with a flick of my wrist and a cheeky grin. His cock springs up again, hard and thick, already drooling precum for me.

“How can I complete my hero’s journey if I don’t face the curse head on? Well, *ass* on, anyway.”

He snorts and stalks towards me. “Think you can handle it? I’ve been known to drive sane men crazy.”

Shep wraps his hand around the base of his shaft and gives himself a slow stroke from root to tip, bunching the skin and then tugging it taut again. My mouth waters and my hole clenches with fear and interest.

I think I’m already a little crazy about you. Jesus, there is no way in hell I’m even going to try to say something that gross and gooey out loud. I can’t believe I even *thought* it, but I guess I can add it to the list of things Shep has done to me

that I never expected. Things he's made me want. Things he's made me feel.

"I can take it," I assure him instead, my voice full of bravado and flirtation meant to chase the nerves away, or at least hide them.

I open the bathroom door, letting the steam around us drift out into the hallway and the coolness of the air conditioning rush in to raise goose bumps along my skin. My nipples tighten and I shiver from the chill, but also from the way Shep is looking at me. Heat and lust are dancing in his eyes—everything I've come to expect and crave when he looks at me. There's more than that though. There's something softer and needier, something that makes my heart beat too fast and forces me to look away.

I'm done talking. Everything inside of me feels too raw and exposed already. I need it to be simple again, at least for a little while.

I back into the hallway and Shep follows me, measuring each step like a predator stalking its prey. It reminds me of the night he chased me through the house and then let me fuck him in my bed. It was primal, animal instinct, and that's what I want right now. I want him pawing at me and chasing all the thoughts out of my head. I want us communicating through nothing but growls and moans.

I spin around to put my back towards him and wiggle my ass. "You want this?" I taunt, and Shep grunts. The sound

sends aching, hot ripples through my insides. “Then come and get it.”

I take off without any more warning than that. The house is small and there isn't far to run, but he picks up on the game easily, his footsteps thundering behind me as I lead him on a chase. I skid into the living room and scramble over the couch, putting it between the two of us then whipping around to face him again.

“You think you're cute?” he growls, bracing his hands on the back of the couch, tracking me with his eyes as I scan the possible escape routes.

“I think my ass is worth making you work for,” I tease.

He launches himself over the couch, and I dart out of the way and flee into the kitchen. It was a major miscalculation though. Unless I want to run outside, there's nowhere to go from here. I eye the back door, considering whether it's worth it to make him chase me naked through the backyard and risk having the neighbors call the cops.

Shep catches up to me before I can decide though, tackling me from behind and shoving me up against the nearest counter. His skin is still burning hot and slick from the shower, his body hair still weighed down with moisture. He bites the side of my neck like a beast taking down its meal, grinding his cock between my ass cheeks and bending me over. I gasp at the sharp sting of his teeth and the cold contrast of the countertop on my chest and cheek.

“I win,” he crows, rocking his hips again to drag the thick length of his erection over my hole. “I wonder if I should drag my prize back to my bed to play with it, or just enjoy it right here.”

He flicks his tongue over the same spot where he bit me seconds ago. It throbs and so does my cock. The cold granite makes my stiff nipples ache, and I squirm underneath him just so I can feel him pin me down a little harder. This is what I need. Rough and dirty, vulnerable in ways that are uncomplicated.

“Here,” I beg, licking my lips and spreading my legs a little wider.

I press up on my toes so I can catch the head of his cock on my rim. It’s too dry and I’m too tight, but the warm slick of precum that trickles over my hole and the gut-deep gasp that shudders through Shep makes my cock jerk and my balls tighten.

“Yeah?” He nibbles along the back of my neck. The bites are gentle this time, sparking little electric jolts down my spine.

The single word contains a dozen unspoken questions. We both got tested last week, but we hadn’t *explicitly* talked about going bare. Is this really how I want my first time? Am I totally sure I want this at all?

“Please,” I pant, curling my fingers against the smooth surface with nothing to grip.

Shep kisses the shell of my ear and grunts again, grabbing my hips with both hands. His fingers dig into my hip bones, his thumbs fitting perfectly into the dimples on my lower back, like he was made to hold me exactly like this. I stumble as he yanks me away from the counter without warning and spins me around.

“What—” I cut off the question with a gasp as his hands wrap around the back of my thighs and he hauls me up like a ragdoll to sit on the counter.

“That’s better,” he murmurs, stepping between my legs and carding his fingers through the wet tangle of my hair to drag me in for a rough kiss.

Better?

He pulls me to the edge of the counter, stroking his tongue over mine, one hand around my lower back, the other hooked around the back of my neck. Another surprised sound falls from my lips, and Shep swallows it and greedily deepens the kiss. I wrap my legs around his hips and my arms around his neck for balance, hanging almost entirely off the counter with nowhere to go and nothing to do but trust my weight to his rock-hard muscles. *Fuck, that’s hot.*

My cock presses against his abs, grinding with just enough friction to drive me insane, but without any hope of getting off like this. I groan and whimper, trading muffled sounds with Shep between our mouths until he breaks the kiss to rest his forehead against mine. Every one of his heavy exhales tickles

my lips, our noses bumping, so close that there's no way to avoid looking into his eyes unless I keep mine closed.

“Hang on,” he says gruffly.

I tighten my arms and legs around him a little more and close my eyes so I can have a few seconds to breathe. I have no doubt this will still be rough and dirty in all the ways we both like, but face to face like this with nowhere to hide, it's bound to be vulnerable in complicated ways too.

He opens and closes the cabinet next to my head, and I pry my eyes open to see what he's doing. There's no way he keeps a stash of lube in the kitchen, is there? That seems like something I would have noticed. The thought of him bending someone like Lewis over this exact same counter sends a spike of hot, sharp jealousy through me. I growl without meaning to, and Shep chuckles like he can read the stupid, possessive thoughts running through my head, making me want to bite and suck his skin, mark him up again even though I know there's no one else.

It's not lube that he pulls out of the cabinet though. He produces a small bottle of extra virgin olive oil and clumsily uncaps it with his teeth. Completely unconcerned about making a mess, he tilts the bottle to pour a generous amount over his fingers, plenty more splashing onto the floor by his feet and all across the counter. The slippery liquid drips off his two fingers, running down onto his palm and the back of his hand.

My heart speeds up and my hole clenches and aches, anticipating the feeling of his fingers sliding in and out, opening me up, teasing and touching places no one else has. A moan swells in my throat and I thrust against his stomach again.

“Please, Shep,” I murmur.

He rumbles a pleased sound from his chest, wrapping his arm around me again to hold me close while he slides the fingers of the other hand between my ass cheeks, leaving a smear of oil across one.

His slippery fingers find my hole, warmer than I expected, softer too. I can feel the rough callouses on his fingertips, but the olive oil smooths them out, making them the perfect texture against the sensitive ridges of my rim. He strokes me with them like they’re his tongue—long, slow, wet laps along the edges. The feeling tingles through my balls and the tip of my cock, making me squirm and pant.

“You’re so fucking pretty, Riggs. Did you know that?” Shep says, his lips brushing mine as he forms the words.

I shake my head, not sure if I’m saying “*No, I’m not pretty*” or “*No, don’t be so sweet when this is supposed to be dirty.*” He pets his fingers over the center of my hole and my cock jumps, my insides pulsing with an empty feeling that leaves me gasping for breath.

“I think I’ve wanted you since the day you strutted into Big Bull, bold as all hell, and demanded a job like it was fucking

owed to you,” he confesses, his breathing picking up to match mine, the tip of his cock teasing my ass cheeks.

I barely have time to process his words before he starts to slowly work the tip of his finger inside of me. He wiggles it and I whimper, needing more before the mild sting of discomfort has even faded. I rock my hips, pulling him deeper.

“Jesus,” he murmurs through gritted teeth, giving me his whole finger then claiming my lips to swallow the moan that rocks me. “So greedy. So hot. So fucking perfect.” He groans between kisses, punctuating each word of praise with a thrust of his finger.

He pulls almost all the way out then adds a second finger.

“Shep,” I gasp. It feels like I should say something sweet back to him. I’m probably supposed to tell him how long I’ve been indulging in hot daydreams about him too, or spout off a bunch of things I like about him. With his eyes boring into mine, the fact that none of those same perfect words come to mind makes my insides twist uncomfortably.

I slam my eyes closed and clench tighter around his fingers, digging my nails into his shoulders.

“Shh,” he whispers, bumping the tip of his nose against mine again and then brushing our lips together. “Just feel it, baby. Don’t worry about anything else.”

He slows the thrusts of his fingers, forcing me to feel every thick inch as he slides them in and out. I do what he says, turning off my thoughts about what I’m *supposed* to say, or

what he might expect, and just focus on the feeling of him opening me up, the smell of his clean skin, the sound of his ragged breaths and soft grunts.

“Fuck me,” I beg.

SHEP

I ease my fingers out of the tight grip of his hole. The little whimpering moan he makes is an entire fucking fantasy all on its own, ricocheting through me to settle in my throbbing cock. A string of slippery precum is hanging from the tip of my cock, and I catch it on my fingers to slick it down my shaft, along with the remnants of the oil.

Riggs’s eyes are open in cautious slits, like he’s prepared to close them again if it all gets to be too much. His cheeks are flushed and his lips are swollen and pouty from kissing. He’s... perfect.

I pull him closer, taking the full weight of him into my arms and lining my cock up with his hole. My head nudges against his slick, warm entrance. His lips part and he makes another quiet noise that I’m positive will live in my subconscious for the rest of my life, fueling jerk-off fantasies and filthy dreams until the day I die.

“Riggs?”

“Mm?” he hums, tightening his thighs around my waist.

“What’s your real name?”

His eyes open wider and the dazed, horny look on his face melts into one of amusement for a fleeting second, followed by a deepening of the blush on his cheeks. Is he embarrassed?

“Clark,” he answers.

“Clark... *Kent*?” I sputter a choked laugh. He slams a hand over my mouth and narrows his eyes again in a threatening glare.

“If you make a Superman joke, I will castrate you and feed you your own balls.”

I cringe and nod wordlessly. He drops his hand and his lips twitch with a smile that melts into another dazed, slack expression as his pucker slowly gives way to the pressure of my cock. We both moan as the tight ring of muscles relaxes and I slip inside of him.

I wasn't lying when I said I could be perfectly happy being with him and never fucking him. There's more to life and more to sex than this one act. But holy fuck does he feel incredible stretching around my cock. His rim flutters and clenches around me, his cock jerking and flexing against my belly so hard that he spills a burst of precum.

“Oh fuck,” he gasps. “Oh fuck.” His chest expands with quick breaths, his fingers biting so hard into my shoulders that I'm sure I'll have bruises tomorrow.

“Good ‘oh fuck’ or bad ‘oh fuck?’” I ask through clenched teeth, my balls trembling and constricting, my cock twitching

inside of him, begging me to slam all the way home and fuck him until neither of us can see straight.

“Good,” Riggs pants. “Good, good, good.” He squirms in my arms, trying to take me deeper.

I press him into the counter to hold his weight better, then give him what he’s desperate for. What we’re *both* desperate for. I fill him with a jarring thrust. His moan rattles both of us, sending seismic quakes through my bones. His eyelids droop but stay open, giving me the chance to see every flicker of pleasure in his eyes as I find the perfect rhythm.

My arms and thighs start to tremble under his weight, but sheer force of will keeps me from setting him down. I want to live inside of him. I want to own his hole and every one of his orgasms. I want every fucking thing he’s willing to give me. He already owns every part of me, inside and out, whether he realizes it yet or not.

Grunts and groans echo in my throat, muffled every time our lips find their way to each other for brief, disjointed kisses. They’re impossible to keep up through each jolting thrust, but it doesn’t stop us from trying. Riggs pants my name like it’s the only word he knows, gasping it with a dozen different inflections. Desperately, sweetly, baffled like he can’t believe anything could feel this good, and so, *so* greedily.

I fuck him deeper and faster, until my lungs are burning and I’m not sure how much longer I’ll be able to hold him up. I fill him over and over, sucking his bottom lip and bruising his ass cheeks with my grip, never taking my eyes off his.

I slam home in another hard thrust and Riggs's eyes go wide, a strangled, shocked sound punching out of his throat and another flood of precum soaking my skin.

“Right there, Shep,” he cries out, throwing his head back and riding me furiously, testing all the limits of my physical strength. And then he's coming, screaming my name and pulsing around my cock as he paints my chest and abs with rope after rope of thick, sticky cum.

My knees give way under me, but I tighten my hold around him, taking us both to the floor. He's still coming, convulsing through his orgasm as I lay him down and fuck him furiously, claiming his lips again in a gasping, open-mouthed kiss as my own release barrels over me. I bite down on his bottom lip, my balls drawing up tight, heat exploding through my veins as I pump my release deep inside of him.

He runs his hands up and down my back, breathing heavily as I chase every last aftershock of my orgasm, drunk on the way it feels to shoot my load bare inside of him.

Just Riggs. *My* Riggs. Prickly, scathing, strong, intimidating, but so fucking sweet when he gives me a soft moment. How could there ever be anyone else?

“I love you,” I rasp the words as my spent cock slips out of him. Maybe not the most opportune time if I were really thinking about it, but there it is. Raw and real and probably the truest thing I've said in my life. “Please don't freak out.”

He lets out a weak laugh and I roll off him. I'm covered in his cum and I'm pretty sure I just rolled in the olive oil I

spilled on the floor, but my attention is fixed on his face, waiting for his reaction, waiting to find out if I just fucked everything up.

He closes his eyes and licks his lips.

“I...” Riggs clears his throat and shakes his head. He opens his eyes and rolls onto his side to face me. “I want this. I want all of it. I... I mean...” He stumbles over whatever else he wanted to say, and I lean in to cut off the rest of his words with a kiss.

“Knowing you want this is enough.”

“Shep, I...” he puts a hand on my chest and looks into my eyes, a desperate, apologetic look in them.

“I told you, you’re who I want. Everything else is just details that will work themselves out. Okay?”

He hesitates for a second then nods. I pull him against me, and he ducks his head to bury his face in the crook of my neck.

“Do you think knowing my name before you fucked me broke the curse?” he asks.

I pinch his ass playfully, and he squeals with laughter. I file the sound away with all the rest, deep inside where I can keep them forever, just like I plan to keep Riggs.

Chapter 26

SHEP

“NICE OF YOU TO finally remember that your brother exists,” Axel says, uncapping the bottle of beer I hand him and putting one foot up on the coffee table.

“Come on, I haven’t been that bad,” I argue. He arches an eyebrow at me, and okay, maybe I *have* been neglecting my brother a bit lately. “Sorry, I’ve just been distracted.”

Right on cue, Riggs strides through the living room wearing a pair of low-slung jeans and absolutely nothing else. He smirks at me as I track his movements with my eyes.

“I’m going to wash the cars and bikes since it’s so nice out. Knowing fall in Wisconsin, it’s bound to be snowing by next week, so I might as well take advantage of it while I can,” he explains without slowing his steps at all, disappearing a second later through the door to the laundry room.

“I can definitely see the distraction factor,” Axel teases as soon as Riggs is gone.

“Shut up.” I laugh and shake my head. “It’s not like that.”

“You’re not fucking your scary roommate?” he asks blandly, his tone telling me he already knows the answer.

“It’s more than just fucking, so watch it.”

He snorts and takes another sip of his beer. Humor dances through his eyes and he waits for the punchline. When it doesn’t come, his smile falls.

“No shit? Things are serious with you guys?” He looks over his shoulder like he’s expecting Riggs to be standing there, forcing me to say this at gunpoint or something. “How did that even happen? Since when do you even want something serious?”

I wait for him to finish firing questions at me, and then I shrug.

“It crept up on us, I guess. He’s...” My chest swells and my tongue suddenly feels too big for my mouth. “Amazing,” I settle for saying, the word cracking on my lips.

“Ho-ly shit,” he mutters. “Well, fuck.” Axel sits forward, putting his beer bottle down harder than necessary on the coffee table. “I was kind of counting on the two of us grabbing ass together at the nursing home when we’re ninety. Now you’re telling me I’m going to have to be an old, single perv all by myself?”

“Sorry, dude.” I try not to smile too hard at the implication that I could really keep Riggs until I’m ninety, that we could

be all old and wrinkly together. “You know, the old perv part might be inevitable, but the *single* thing is kind of up to you.”

“Yeah,” he scoffs, clearly not in the mood for a pep talk about love. I pat him on the shoulder instead, lingering with a squeeze.

“Riggs or no Riggs, you’re still the other half of me. You’re not alone and you never will be.” I’m glad Riggs is outside right now, because the mushy shit I’m spewing would have him reaching for a barf bag. Axel quirks a half smile though.

“Yeah,” he says, a little more confidently this time. “I guess I’d better figure out how to get on his good side, huh?”

“Don’t worry too much about it. He loves having the chance to be all prickly and intimidating,” I assure him.

“Great. You sure picked a strange one, man.” Axel shakes his head, and I smile even wider.

“Yup,” I agree.

My brother hangs around for the afternoon, and we catch up and just relax together. After Riggs finishes washing the cars and bikes, we decide to fire up the grill and make some burgers.

Riggs and Axel are lounging at the outdoor table, Riggs showing my brother some of the tricks he taught Vel. I flip the burgers on the grill and replace the lid to give them a few more minutes. The distinct roar of a Harley engine cuts through the quiet afternoon, and I look over at Riggs with a frown.

“Did you invite Jag over?”

He shakes his head. “Nope.” The engine cuts off, close enough that I’m pretty sure it *is* in our driveway. “Yo, Jag, we’re out back,” Riggs shouts loudly enough to scare birds out of the nearest tree. Vel just blinks and hops around the table though, no doubt waiting to see if there’s going to be a feast of spilled food again today.

A few seconds later, the tattooed twink rounds the side of the house and comes into view. He’s wearing a pair of neon pink sunglasses this afternoon, and a matching bandanna on his head to tame his hair. His skintight jeans and gray Henley are less notable, but he’s rocking them like he does most things. He flashes me a grin as soon as he sees us.

“I didn’t know I was crashing a party.”

“We have plenty of food if you want to stay,” I offer, and he nods.

“I never say no to free food.” He pats his flat stomach with the vigor of someone proudly showing off a massive gut.

Axel laughs. “You sure about that, shrimpy? You look like you could use a couple of sandwiches before you blow away in a strong breeze.”

Jaguar pivots in his direction and lowers his sunglasses, giving my brother a slow, critical once-over that sends a chill down *my* spine, and I’m not even the one under the icy gaze.

“Who’s the idiot?” Jag asks dismissively, ignoring the fact that he’s clearly my identical twin.

Riggs wiggles with the kind of glee that only the promise of seeing someone get their ass handed to them can truly inspire.

“Axel. But ‘idiot’ totally works.”

“Hey,” Axel protests.

I shrug. “If the shoe fits, Ax.”

Things stay chilly between Axel and Jaguar the rest of the afternoon, but that doesn’t put a damper on the nice weather or the good food. Actually, watching Axel try harder and harder to make up for putting his foot in his mouth, only to make it worse over and over is better than a movie for entertainment value.

Riggs smiles at me from across the table, and I nudge his foot with mine. It’s such a simple moment, but everything slides into place like this is the exact second my entire life has been building towards. Me and Riggs. Whatever it looks like, wherever this journey takes us, it’s just... *right*.

RIGGS

After Axel and Jaguar leave, I turn to Shep with a grin and wrap my arms around him.

“We still have a couple of hours before the sun sets. Want to go get lost somewhere?” I suggest, knowing the answer even before a smile spreads over his lips and he nods.

“Hell yeah. Let’s go on an adventure.” He pulls me against him with his strong arms around my middle and sears my lips

with a kiss. “I love the way you think.” He slaps my ass playfully when he lets me go.

There’s that word again. Love. He hasn’t said it again *directly* like he did the other night, but he’s slipped it in just like that—casually, like he hopes I won’t notice. Or maybe he’s the one who doesn’t notice it. How could he not? Does a word like that really come so easily to him that he can just throw it around without realizing it?

He doesn’t seem to notice the electric jolt the word sends through me though. He’s already grabbing the keys to our bikes off the rack by the door and stuffing his feet into his boots. I take the keys with numb fingers when he hands them over, licking my lips and testing out the shape of the word on my tongue without saying it out loud.

Love.

What does it even mean? What does it *really* mean?

The butterflies that everyone talks about aren’t love, even though some people seem to think they are. Nerves, infatuation, a flood of bonding hormones and endorphins... that’s not love. I know that’s not what Shep meant though. At least I don’t think it is.

I guess I still don’t know for sure.

“Did you change your mind?” he asks, hesitating by the open door.

I yank myself out of my thoughts and shake my head. “No way. Let’s go.”

I let Shep pull ahead as we make our way out of town, gunning for the rural roads where we can break speed limits without anyone minding. We've become familiar with all of the back roads around Fall Crosse over the past few weeks, learning the winding curves and wide-open stretches on our bikes. Sure, we've both driven them in our cars hundreds of times before, but they look different on a motorcycle. They *feel* different.

Shep takes a road that curves its way up a hill fifteen miles or so outside of town. There's nothing but farms and scattered houses as far as I can see as we climb higher. Halfway up, we spot a shady area with a nice view and a picnic table, so we pull off and kill our engines.

I pull off my helmet and hop off my bike, taking a deep breath of the fresh air and the quiet.

"Hey, look." Shep waves me over and points at the stretch of pasture just below us. "Horses."

My chest squeezes. I don't know why I thought he wouldn't remember that story about my aunt and her horses, but of course he did. I grab his hand, more naturally now, without hesitation.

"I'd love a horse," I say wistfully.

"Let's get a horse then," he agrees without hesitation. The assumption that it's something we would do *together* should make me squirm, it should make me sweat. Instead, that warm, peaceful feeling I've started to associate with Shep fills my chest and spreads through me.

“Where would we keep it? You can’t just put a horse in your backyard,” I point out.

“I bet Red and Journey would let you keep it at their farm. They’ve got plenty of space.”

“Huh.” It’s not actually a bad idea. It wouldn’t hurt to ask, anyway. I tug on Shep’s hand, leading him over to the picnic table so we can sit down and enjoy the view from there.

He hops up on top of it, stretching out his legs and lounging back on his elbows. The position is just *begging* for me to straddle him, and there’s nothing stopping me, so I do exactly that.

“Hey,” he says with a rich, deep chuckle as I crawl on top of him, perching my ass right over his cock, my legs on either side of his hips.

“Hey,” I purr.

“Do what you want with me, but I’m going to take a nap.” He lies back and closes his eyes.

“Boo,” I complain lightly. I don’t actually mind just *being* here with him though. I run my hands casually over his chest, feeling the steady rise and fall of it. His face is relaxed, bathed in light, as the sun starts to sink lower in the sky. His heart beats out a slow, calm rhythm under my palm and mine slows to match it. “Hey, Shep?”

“Hm?” He hums without opening his eyes.

“What do you mean when you say you love me?” His eyes fly open, and I can feel his pulse speeding up. “I’m not an

alien or anything, I know what most people mean when they say it. I'm just wondering what *you* mean when you say it. How... how did you *know*?"

I look away as soon as I get the question out, because staring right at him while it hangs in the air between us is way too intense. Fuck, it's awkward. I squirm and bite my tongue against the urge to laugh it off and pretend I don't really want an answer.

He puts his hands on my hips and squeezes, then moves under me to sit up. He doesn't dislodge me from his lap though, which means his face is close to mine and there's nowhere I can look to avoid him anymore.

"It means you make my life better just by being in it," he says, quietly but firmly, dragging his fingers through my hair but not coaxing me to look at him directly. "It means that when I think about the future, you're part of it. It means I would do anything to make you happy. It just means I'm completely and totally all in."

I suck in shaky breaths and grab a fistful of the front of Shep's shirt, taking in each piece of what he says and turning it over inside my head. He makes my life better by existing. The future? It's cloudy, but hell yeah, Shep is there. And wanting to make him happy? That one is a no-brainer. Is it really that simple? Is this overwhelming urge I have to protect him from his own stupidity and see him smile every day what love really is?

“But I’m serious, baby,” he says, putting a hand on the back of my neck and massaging the tight muscles gently. “If you aren’t there, that’s fine. If you can never say the word out loud, I think I can live with that too. Actually, I’m sure I can. It’s just a word and I *know* how you feel.” His other hand finds its way to my chest, right over my heart, mirroring the way I’m still touching him. “You’re enough for me, Riggs. You’re everything. And I can feel the same things pouring off of you every time you touch me. So, fuck words if they’re too hard or if they don’t feel exactly right to you. Okay?”

A choked sound works its way out of my throat. Fuck me, now I’m fucking crying like some big damn baby. I squeeze my eyes shut but a few hot tears escape anyway, trickling down my cheeks as I sniffle and try to duck my face even more before he can see them. Shep doesn’t miss a thing though. He takes his hand off the back of my neck and brings it to my face, using his thumb to catch the tears without trying to force me to look up.

“You know what the hardest part has been?” I manage to ask through sniffles. “I’ve always felt like people must think I’m broken. This shit is awkward as fuck because people have all kinds of expectations, there are so many ways I’m *supposed* to feel and *supposed* to want to act, but none of it felt right or natural. But with you...” I sniffle again and bunch up his shirt in my fist, finally managing to drag my eyes up to meet his. I know he’ll see the stupid tears still brimming in my eyes and I do it anyway. “You just let me *be*. You let me feel

things the way I feel them, and you never act like there's something missing inside of me."

"There's *nothing* missing inside of you," he says fiercely, catching another rogue tear and brushing it away.

"I love you." The words roll off my tongue with all the ease in the world this time.

Shep's breath catches, and he furrows his brow, bringing his other hand up to my face and staring into my eyes with an intensity I can't quite read.

"You don't have to..."

I put a hand over his mouth to stop him. "Don't be a dumbass," I say with a watery chuckle. "Just tell me you love me back."

I uncover his mouth, the scrape of his stubble against my palm surprisingly grounding in this surreal moment.

"I love you back," he echoes dutifully.

"Fuck yeah, you do." I loop an arm around his neck and kiss him. Deep and slow, the salty flavor of my tears lingering on my lips. There's not one single butterfly, but the moment isn't any less without them. Maybe it's even better because it's *us*. It's real and it's messy, and it doesn't have to be anything other than what feels right for me and Shep.

It's perfect.

EPILOGUE

FIVE YEARS LATER

SHEP

THE SOUND OF LAUGHTER wafts in through the open windows, along with the warm summer breeze and the smell of charcoal and meat. I grab the second bag of ice out of the freezer to refill the cooler, and step back outside with it.

Denali darts past me, chasing after Hamlet, with Bunny bringing up the rear. The parrot on Gates' shoulder squawks loudly at the ruckus and yells, "Fuck," which sends Gates into a fit of laughter. I can't blame him; a swearing bird is kind of the height of comedy. Tallahassee shakes his head at his husband and grins, looking at the man with that same stupid, smitten expression he's been wearing for years.

Porter is perched on Steele's lap, sipping a beer and making everyone cringe with a story that no doubt involves poop worms, or whatever gross shit he always thinks we want to

hear about. And, just like Tal, Steele still looks as over the moon in love with his husband as he did on their honeymoon.

My backyard is filled with happily married couples, so many friends I can barely afford to feed them all, especially when some of them have special requests like bean burgers. *Looking at you, Red and Journey*. I guess I get it—it *is* harder to eat meat when you know how cute its face used to be. I grimace at the thought and push it out of my mind so I can still enjoy my food this afternoon.

I fill the cooler with ice, and while I'm still bent over, a familiar hand snakes up my spine.

“You look damn good like this,” Riggs says in a low voice, sending shivers up and down my back.

“Yeah?” I arch an eyebrow at him. “You want to do something about it later?”

I straighten up and grin at him, opening my arms. He steps into them easily, looping his arms around my neck and brushing a kiss against my lips.

“If you're lucky,” he teases.

There isn't a ring on either of our fingers, but that doesn't change the fact that the last five years have been the best of my life. It turns out that I was totally right, spending your life with a best friend you get to fuck is the life hack of all life hacks. Highly recommended.

He's still prickly and a little surly, not always great at talking about emotional shit, and I love him for all of it. I love

how unapologetically *Riggs* he always is, and how he pushes me to be that version of myself too. I love every messy, weird moment of the life we're building together.

Riggs grins a little wider, his eyes flickering to the side and then back to me. He squirms in my arms a little and tugs his bottom lip between his teeth.

“What’s up, baby?” I frown.

“Uh... well...” He licks his lips and grabs a fistful of the front of my shirt like he’s afraid I’m going to get away. *Unlikely.*

Vel caws and lands on his shoulder in a flurry of dark feathers. I lean back to avoid taking a wing to the face, then realize he has something shiny clutched in his beak.

“What did you steal now, you little klepto?” I ask, holding my palm open for whatever it is. Vel drops it into my open hand, then Riggs pulls a treat out of his pocket for him, and the crow takes off again. “What...?” I stare at the silver band in my hand, and Riggs draws in a trembling breath and steps out of my arms.

In an awkward, stilted movement, he drops down to one knee, and I’m still frowning, trying to figure out what exactly is going on. Did Vel steal the ring from someone? Is Riggs hurt? Is he tying his shoe? Did he drop something?

Auggie shouts something vaguely encouraging that I can’t quite hear over the whooshing of blood in my ears, and Riggs

looks up at me with a vulnerable, sweet kind of hope written all over his face.

My heart leaps hard inside my chest, and my brain finally catches up to what's happening. Or what I think is happening. *Is this actually happening?*

“Shep,” Riggs says in a trembling voice. “I have spent, like, two months trying to come up with the right things to say, all the gross, cringy stuff I’m probably supposed to say, but it all just felt wrong.” He laughs, the sound cracking as it works its way through his throat. “Fuck, I don’t know why I decided to do this in front of other people.”

He chews on his bottom lip, and I struggle to draw breath into my lungs. Am I dreaming? Is this a prank?

“Fuck it.” He gets back to his feet and brushes his pants off. “Just... marry me? Keep going to bed with me every night and putting up with my shit, and let’s just do this until we die. Sound good?”

The air punches out of me on a bark of unsteady laughter. I’m not sure what he spent two months on, but what he said sounds absolutely fucking perfect to me. I curl my fingers around the ring and reach for him with my other hand, dragging him back into my arms.

“Yes. Fuck yes.”

“I love you,” he says, too quietly for anyone else to hear, but more than loud enough for me.

“I love you back.” I rest my forehead against his, unable to wipe the smile off my face and not sure why I would want to.

When his lips find mine, we’re both still grinning like fools. I can hear the guys cheering and Nigel screaming a few more obscenities, but it’s all just background noise. We kiss slowly like we have nowhere else in the world to be, like maybe we’ll just do this until the end of time, which would be perfectly fine with me. Eternity with my arms around Riggs, feeling his heart beating against mine? I’m there.

The End

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Interested in taking a walk on the Paranormal side of things?! K.M. Neuhold and Mia Monroe now have a joint pen name where they're writing DRAGON SHIFTERS! Check out Hot Head by Mika Nix.

About the Author

K.M. Neuhold is a complete romance junkie. Pansexual and polyamorous, she often describes herself as being in love with love. She loves to write stories full of bearded, cinnamon roll men who get super swoony HEAs. Her philosophy is there's so much angst and sadness for LGBT characters in media, all she wants is to give them the happiest happily ever afters she can with little angst, tons of humor, and SO MUCH STEAM. K.M. fully admits to her tendencies of making sure every side character has a full backstory that will likely always lead to every book turning into a series or spin-off. When she's not writing she's a lion tamer, an astronaut, and a superhero...just kidding, she's likely watching Netflix and snuggling with her husky while her amazing husband brings her coffee.

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- For the inside scoop and early teasers, be sure to check out my Facebook group, Neuhold's Nerds
- And if you want to see me acting like a total dork and having entirely too much fun, follow me on TikTok!