



**BIG BULL MECHANICS**  
BOOK TWO

# STROKER

BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
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Stroker  
Big Bull Mechanics, 2  
K.M. Neuhold

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# BLURB

**Is there an easy way to tell your lifelong best friend that you secretly married his brother eight years ago? Asking for a friend...**

When Gates shows up needing a place to crash, I offer him my spare room. Whatever happened between us nearly a decade ago is water under the bridge. I don't lie awake at night wondering what could have been. Nope, definitely not.

But Gates seems determined to get a rise out of me. He's tie-dyed all my clothes, removed my bedroom door, and replaced my hand soap with lube. I'm not sure if he's hoping I'll kick him out or kill him, but he won't break me that easily.

When he tells me his Stroker Rod is broken... What kind of mechanic am I if I don't get hands-on with his problem?

We put our feelings behind us a long time ago, and there's no way I'll let Gates break my heart again. No amount of fiddling under the hood will fix everything broken between us. From here on out, it's purely physical. Right?

Yup, just a couple of guys and their stroker rods.

\*\*\*Stroker is a best friend's brother, secretly married, super steamy MM romance.

# Prologue

EIGHT YEARS AGO

GATES

My heart and my mind both race with indecision in spite of the fact that there's no doubt about the outcome. The room is nearly pitch dark, the only light comes through the small gap between the curtains, letting in the neon lights of the Las Vegas Strip just outside.

Tallahassee snores evenly, tucked onto one side of the bed, leaving room for me to change my mind and crawl back into my side without him ever knowing I got up to leave. My throat constricts and I glance towards the door while I absently drag my thumb along the smooth metal of the ring we picked up a few hours ago. Fuck, was it that recently? It feels like a different lifetime.

The fingers on my other hand twitch, inadvertently crumpling the piece of paper I'm holding. I glance down at it, the sweat from my palm making the letters smudge. Who writes a Dear John letter on hotel stationery? My throat tightens again, and I swallow roughly. It's not *really* a Dear John letter though, is it? That would only count if we were dating.

*Nope, you're not dating, you're married, dumbass.*

"Not helpful," I mutter quietly to myself before reaching up to pinch the bridge of my nose.

I should have said no when Tallahassee came up with the stupid, drunken idea to get married tonight. He kept saying it would be funny, but "funny for who" is what I should have asked, because I'm not feeling particularly amused right now.

Of course, I wouldn't be me if I didn't make impulsive, dumbass decisions on the regular. The only difference with this particular idiocy is that I can't call my brother to bail me out. I stifle the manic sort of laughter that rises up in my chest. Now *that* would be a fucking text to send right now.

*Hey, you're probably still balls deep in that pretty drag queen you said you were going home with, but I married your best friend on a lark. Help? Oh, PS, we've been fucking for years whenever I'm in town, even though you asked me to never fuck your friends. Anyway, happy birthday!*

I groan quietly. Seriously, what the fuck is wrong with me? No one should make this many shitty decisions in their life. If there was a Stupidity Olympics, I'd take home the gold every damn time.

I take a deep breath and look at the note in my hand again. I'm not *really* running out on him. Since we were all kids, I always said I wanted to get out of Wisconsin and stretch my wings. I was out the door on my eighteenth birthday, and I've been hopping around ever since. I leave and I come back, it's what I do.

When I blew back into town two years ago after a particularly messy breakup in Florida, I just needed a place to crash and collect myself for a few weeks. I *definitely* didn't plan to start hooking up with Tallahassee. It just sort of... *happened*. And then it happened again the next time I came home, and the next, and before I knew it, falling into his bed was just sort of a given when I was in Wisconsin...or whenever I managed to talk him into coming out to wherever I was staying.

That's the story of my life: make a decision without thinking about the consequences, become horrified by the consequences, bolt, repeat.

Except the only thing horrifying about what's happened with him is that I really fucking like him.

I inch closer to his side of the bed, trying to imagine a world where I tear the note up and climb back in next to him, and then go back to Wisconsin with him tomorrow morning and start some domestic fantasy of a life. My chest pangs at the idea, a deeply buried part of myself begging me to do just that.

But for once, the rational side of my brain stops me from doing something that stupid. I don't have a damn thing to



offer a man like Tallahassee. I can't keep a job for more than six months without getting bored, I'm a slob, I'm a fuck up... My eyes burn and I rapidly blink in the hope that it will stop any tears from coming.

That world where I get back in bed with him and go on to live in domestic bliss, that's for a Gates who has his shit together, not this version of me who can barely function as an adult most days, let alone as a married adult in a real relationship.

If I stay, Tallahassee will end up hating me just like everyone else does.

And if I go, he'll hate me too...

Fuck my life.

I huff at myself to keep from breaking down in tears and finally slip the ring off my finger. There's someone a hell of a lot better for Tallahassee than me.

I set the note on the dresser, the words *I'm sorry* scrawled large and messy, feeling incredibly inadequate. Then, I put the ring on top of it and pick up my duffle bag. I'll have Steele ship the rest of my clothes wherever I end up. I can't let myself go home with them right now. I'm afraid if I do, I'll be tempted to stay.

It's a risk, but I can't make myself leave without leaning down and brushing a light kiss to his lips. They're warm and soft under mine, making my heart flutter and my whole body desperately yearn to just get back in the damn bed.

"Bye, Tal," I whisper. His eyelids flutter but don't open, and then I'm gone.

At least I've managed *one* selfless act in my life. That should count for something, right?

SIX MONTHS AGO

TALLAHASSEE

I trudge up the stairs to my apartment, absently jangling my keys in my pocket, my body heavy and sore from a twelve-hour day at the garage. Eight years ago, I would have

given my left hand to get Gates moved into my apartment. It's my left hand, so it's far less important than my right, just to be clear.

But now he's here and...well, honestly, it's pretty much as bad as anyone could have predicted it would be to live with a wildly impulsive, immature ex. Except he's not *really* my ex, because he's fucking Gates and he hasn't bothered to sign the divorce papers in the last eight years.

Yup, marital bliss, coming home every night to a man who is determined to wage some kind of psychological warfare on me. Maybe he's hoping I'll kick him out or maybe he's pissed at me for some reason, even though *he's* the one who left. The inner workings of Gates's mind are a complete fucking mystery as far as I'm concerned.

Whatever his reasoning, he's taken to planning bizarre pranks. Will there be shaving cream covering the floor just inside the door, causing me to slip, fall, and throw out my back? Will all of my laundry be piled in the living room in retaliation for the laundry basket I left outside of his bedroom, hoping to coax him to stop leaving his dirty underwear all over the damn apartment? Oh god, or worse, *more* of his underwear, just to spite me.

With Gates it could be anything.

I pause outside of the apartment, bracing myself for what I might find on the other side of the door. With a deep breath, I turn the knob and push it open. It's quiet inside, but that sometimes just means the prank is going to be more of a surprise.

I carefully stick my head inside, half expecting a bucket of water to pour out over me or something equally as asinine. But nothing happens. *Hm*. Is this his new tactic? Is no prank the new prank? The real prank is the stress gathering in my gut as I try to figure out what his prank is? That's diabolical.

"Gates?" I call out. The only answer I get is the sound of someone— I'm assuming Gates, but it could very well be

an ostrich that he rented and put in my bedroom for all I know — banging around unseen.

I can't stand in the hallway all night, so I take a cautious step inside. Still nothing happens and nothing seems to be out of place.

“*Squaaaaawk. Daddy!*” My macaw, Nigel, greets me with a scream, flapping his wings but remaining perched on top of his cage where he prefers to spend a lot of his time.

“Hey, buddy.” I smile and cross the room to say a proper hello.

“*Hey buddy, hey buddy,*” he mimics, bobbing his head up and down excitedly. I reach in through the open door and stroke the feathers on his head gently. “*Fuck, fuck, fuck,*” he sings.

“Oh good, Gates has been teaching you some new words,” I mutter, fighting the urge to roll my eyes.

When I agreed to let him live here, I figured he would only stick around a couple of weeks at most. I definitely didn't think he'd be in town long enough to pay a second month of rent. It's been nine weeks, and he's still here, tormenting me and teaching my bird more cuss words every day.

The banging sound I heard when I walked in gets louder, clearly the shuffling of footsteps now and someone bumping into the walls. I look over my shoulder to find my *roomie* stumbling into the living room, my expensive bottle of tequila clutched in his hand.

I sigh. “I hid that for a reason.”

“And I found it for a reason,” he counters, bringing the bottle to his lips and taking a deep gulp from it, then fixing me with a smug look that dares me to say something about it.

I set my jaw, preparing to yell at him. But that's exactly what he wants. I don't know why he's so desperate to piss me off, but I'm not going to give him the damn satisfaction. Instead, I cross the room and snatch the bottle from his hands, tilting my head back and swigging down at least two shots' worth.

The high proof liquor burns my throat on the way down, settling hot in the pit of my empty stomach. When I lower the bottle, Gates is staring at me with both eyebrows raised.

“What? I can’t drink my own damn tequila?” I challenge.

He shrugs. “You can do whatever the fuck you want.”

“Glad to have your permission,” I say dryly. “Any particular reason you’re drunk off your ass at seven at night?”

“It’s a free country.” He juts his chin out defiantly, reminding me what a bratty teenager he was back in the day. Hell, he never really grew out of it. His driver’s license may say he’s a forty-year-old man, but he’s still an immature teenager, through and through. If I were his parent, I’d put him over my knee and spank some damn sense into him already. Unfortunately, he’s probably into that kind of thing. My cock plumps unhelpfully, reminding me of how fun and adventurous he always was in bed.

“Do me a favor and stop teaching my bird such foul language.”

Not that it’s *entirely* his fault. When I got him, the shelter warned me that he had been owned by a cantankerous old man for years already and seemed to have a very *colorful* vocabulary. It doesn’t help that he seems to have a particular interest in only learning swear words. But Gates has certainly expanded his repertoire considerably since moving in.

He snorts and takes the bottle back from me, throwing back another gulp. I consider going straight to my room, leaving him to finish off my booze and pass out drunk, but I was actually looking forward to having this bottle. I got it a few years ago on vacation in Mexico. If he’s going to drink it, I might as well join him.

I kick off my shoes and pull out my phone to order a pizza, and then grab the bottle from him again and flop down on the couch. He follows suit, stumbling and then collapsing next to me.

“You doing this dog wash thing tomorrow to help Porter raise money for his clinic?” I ask.

“A bunch of buff, half-naked mechanics getting all wet, wrestling dogs?” A slow, suggestive smirk stretches over his lips. “Yeah, maybe.”

I huff a laugh through my nose. “Your brother is *goooooone* over his sweet little veterinarian,” I say, already feeling the effects of the alcohol going to my head, making all of my thoughts feel like they’re wrapped in tequila-soaked cotton.

“Yeah, but it’s Steele. He’s in love with a different guy every week.” Gates takes another swig from the bottle, licking a stray droplet from his bottom lip, my eyes tracking the obscenely slow motion.

“No, he’s in *bed* with a different guy every week,” I correct. “I think this is different.”

“Hm.” A look passes over Gates’s face. Is he sad at the idea of his brother finally settling down? I’m not sure why it would make much of a difference to him.

I run my thumb mindlessly over a hole worn into the thigh of my jeans, tugging at a fraying string.

“Dare I ask why you’re drunk this early on a weeknight?”

He rolls his eyes. “I’m a fuck-up, remember?” Even if I didn’t know him as well as I do, I’d like to think I’d still have noticed the pain underpinning his flippant response.

I grab the bottle back and take another sip. I shouldn’t, I’m already drunk, but what the hell. I can live with a hangover while I bathe some dogs tomorrow.

“Fine, if you won’t tell me why you’re drunk, at least tell me why you’re still here.” I blurt the question I’ve been wondering for the past few weeks.

“You want me to leave?” He asks, picking his head back up, both of his eyebrows raised.

Do I? No sane man would want his ex—sort of—husband staying in his apartment indefinitely. Right? Especially given how much of a disruption he’s been to my life. Ten minutes ago, when I was trudging up the stairs, I would have said “hell yes” to that question. But there’s something about the soft, vulnerable look in his eyes that’s giving me pause.

“No,” I answer quietly. “I figured you’d be long gone again by now, that’s all.”

“I can’t,” he mutters, running his hand along his jaw and bouncing his knee.

“You *can*’t? What does that even mean?”

“It means...” He lets out a long breath and when his eyes meet mine, an icy feeling hits me in the chest. I’ve never seen Gates look scared before. I’ve seen him cocky, surly, drunk, happy, horny, silly... I’ve seen him show a hell of a lot of different emotions and in a lot of different states in the thirty plus years I’ve known him, but *scared* is a new one. “I’m having surgery next week.”

“Surgery?” I repeat, sure I heard him wrong. “For what?”

“Getting my dick shortened. It’s too big,” he says blandly.

“Stop fucking around,” I snap impatiently, my heart beating too fast to play nice and let him be a smart ass. “What kind of surgery?”

“A mass removal,” he says casually. “And one of my balls. Are you happy now?” He shrugs, his expression completely neutral. *Too* neutral for someone who just revealed that he’s about to lose a testicle.

“Is it serious?”

He rolls his eyes again. “No, I just figured one ball would be plenty.”

“I mean is it cancer? Do you need chemo or...?”

“No, they said just the surgery. No big deal, it’s just a few days stay at the hospital.” His tone is cavalier, but that caged wild animal, fearful, darting look is still in his eyes.

“Does Steele know?” I run my hand over the back of my neck and shift closer to him on the couch.

“No. He’s busy with his own shit, he doesn’t need to worry about this.” He throws back the last of the tequila and sets the empty bottle on the coffee table with a *thunk*.

When he leans back again, he sets his hand on the empty couch cushion between us. I reach for it without giving it a second thought. I can’t imagine how he must be feeling. If I were scheduled to have one of my testicles removed next week, I’d be freaking the fuck out. I eye him, the bags under his eyes, the unkempt state of his hair and clothes. I just figured he’d been going through a bad breakup or something, but suddenly a lot of shit is making sense. He hasn’t been himself since he came back to town this time. He’s been... quiet.

Gates is never quiet.

To my surprise, he flips his hand over and laces his fingers through mine, silently taking the small amount of comfort I’m offering. He swallows hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat.

“Don’t tell him, okay?” he says, sounding like a little kid again for just a second.

“I won’t,” I promise. “But you should.”

“Maybe,” he mutters, not making any guarantee. “Can we talk about something else?”

“Sure, like what?” The buzzer sounds, reminding me that I ordered pizza. I get up, unsteady on my feet thanks to too much to drink on an empty stomach. I get the pizza from the delivery person and bring it back to the couch, setting it on the coffee table and flipping the lid open.

We both dig in, letting the grease, cheese, and carbs soak up some of the alcohol.

“Top five movies,” Gates asks.

I pause with my slice of pizza halfway to my mouth, realizing that in spite of the fact that Gates has been living here for two months already, we haven’t had a *real* conversation in eight years.

“*Top Gun, Die Hard, Fight Club, Fast and the Furious, and Clueless.*”

“Seriously?” He chuckles. “One of these things is not like the other.”

“I know, but *Die Hard* is a secret guilty pleasure,” I joke, and he laughs again.

We go back and forth while we work through the pizza, coming up with our top five of all the usual things before things get a little more creative.

“Top five porn searches,” I challenge, my voice dipping low, surprising myself with the question.

Gates fakes a gasp. “Wow, getting dirty. Let’s see... solo Fleshlight, loud bottoms, pillow humping, straight guy’s first time, and roommates.”

My body heats and my cock thickens as he rattles them off. I really shouldn’t have opened this can of worms when it’s been so long since I’ve gotten laid.

“Top five jerk off sessions,” Gates asks.

“What?” I sputter.

“Five best times you’ve jerked off in your life,” he clarifies.

My face heats. “I’m not telling you that.”

“Fine, but you realize then that means I win this game.” He shrugs.

“I thought this was a conversation, not a game.”

He levels me with a challenging look. “Everything in life is a game.” I realize he’s nearer than I thought, the two of



us having inched closer and closer during our conversation without realizing it.

My eyes drop to his lips without my permission, my tequila-soaked brain spinning over memories I forced myself to push to the back of my mind a long damn time ago. Memories like the first time we kissed ten years ago, on Steele's balcony on New Year's Eve, my heart pounding at the idea of getting caught and having to explain to my best friend why I had my tongue down his brother's throat.

I catch him doing the same, glancing at my lips before pulling his gaze back to meet mine. He opens his mouth to say something, but I'm moving before I have time to let the rational side of my brain catch up, pressing my lips against his.

He drags in a surprised breath, his mouth soft and pliant under mine immediately, his tongue darting out to sweep along the seam of my lips and his hand landing on my thigh. I hook a hand behind his neck and deepen the kiss, all of my thoughts foggy and unsteady, except one...

*I'm kissing Gates.*

I spent eight years getting over him and dammit, his tongue snaking around mine feels the same as it always did.

I gasp and shove at his chest to break the kiss. I blink away the haze and he seems to be doing the same, both of us staring at each other in shock, my heart going wild against my ribcage as I try to figure out what the fuck just happened.

"Sorry, I—" he starts to say as if he's the one who started the kiss. Was he? It's hard to know now.

"I'm going to bed." I jump up more nimbly than anyone who's just drunk half a bottle of tequila ever should, and practically sprint down the hallway to my bedroom, shutting the door loudly behind myself.

\*\*\*\*

The inside of my skull feels like someone is taking a jackhammer to it and my stomach is roiling as I sit up in bed, trying to remember why I'm sleeping on top of my sheets and still wearing my jeans.

Last night comes back to me in a dizzying rush. Fuck, I kissed Gates.

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

I push myself out of bed and head straight for his bedroom so I can apologize and blame it all on the booze. He'll understand, he was even drunker than I was. And he kissed me back. But none of that means we're reopening the Pandora's Box that was our trainwreck of a relationship, if it can even be called that.

I knock on his door, but there's no answer. I wait a few seconds and knock again a little louder. Still nothing. I try the knob, turning it and easing the door open slowly, expecting to find him sprawled out in bed, still snoring. My stomach plummets.

He's not in bed. He's not even in his room. *Nothing* is in his room. I fling the door open and step inside, double checking what I'm seeing. The closet is empty, the drawers are all empty. Empty, empty, empty. Gates is gone and it doesn't look like he's planning to come back.

The million times he's left before all rush back to me in a dizzying instant, reminding me exactly why it was such a bad fucking idea to kiss him last night.

The impulse is strong to close his door and pretend that the last few weeks never happened, that he never came back into town this time. Except, he's supposed to still be here for surgery next week. Which means I need to figure out where he went and get his ass back here in time.

*Fuck.*

# Chapter 1

## TALLAHASSEE

I'm aware I'm dreaming, because Channing Tatum is writhing under me, moaning my name. It's not that I *couldn't* pull Channing, it's that if I *did* Gates would have fucked it up before I got him naked. Still, it's a nice dream, so I'm not about to overthink it.

I grind our cocks together, dragging my tongue along the corded muscles above his clavicle. Since this is a dream, there's no flavor of sweat or taste of his skin under my tongue, but it's been nearly eight fucking months since I've gotten laid, so I'll take whatever muted fantasy my brain is willing to give me at this point. I pull back to look up at his face and my blood runs hot and cold at the same time.

It's not Channing Tatum grinning at me, splayed out naked in my fantasy bed, it's Gates.

I curse and my cock throbs again, clearly too neglected and stupid to comprehend the complicated history all tangled up in the decision my sleeping brain made to bring Gates into this. Before I can decide whether to say 'fuck it' and keep it rolling, since it *is* a dream after all and I do currently have the blue balls of the century, or to wake myself up, a jarring, high-pitched sound breaks through the haze of the dream.

I jolt upright in my bed, my cock achingly hard from that stupid dream as I try to shake off my sleepy confusion and figure out where that sound is coming from. I work to pry my heavy eyelids open, slapping blindly in the direction of the noise until my hand connects with something plastic and the alarm finally stops.

What the fuck? I haven't had an actual alarm clock in probably fifteen years. Which means this must be another one of Gates's *hilarious* pranks. Wow, he woke me up half an hour early and in an annoying way, *good one*.

I'm blinking into the darkness, still working to orient myself when another loud noise makes me flinch. It's an alarm

again, but it sounds different than the first one. I swing my hand at the alarm clock again, backhanding it straight into the wall next to my bed, but it doesn't stop the sound.

I growl with frustration and grope around for the source, finding it a little further away on my nightstand a minute later. But it's less than ten seconds after I stop the second alarm that a third blares. *Fucking Gates.*

I fling my covers back with a hot spike of frustration and stride over to my light switch. Both my lamps come on, illuminating my room to reveal no fewer than a dozen alarm clocks, placed around my bedroom. It takes me about five minutes to disarm each one, the intervals between the alarms getting shorter each time, adding an extra layer of annoyance to the whole process as I work to silence them all.

Of course, even that is too simple of a prank for Gates. The climax comes when I grab my doorknob so I can storm out of my room and tell him off, only to find it slick and sticky with what can only be lube.

Surely at this point it will be a justifiable homicide, right?

I wipe my lubed-up hand hastily on my shirt as I stomp out of my bedroom, following the sound of Gates's cheerful whistling coming from the kitchen.

"Are you actually fucking insane?" I ask gruffly, stopping just outside the kitchen to glare at my *roommate*, who's wearing nothing but a pair of low-slung gray sweatpants and whistling what sounds like *Closer* by Nine Inch Nails while he attempts to flip a pancake in the air using just the pan. Predictably, the half-cooked pancake hits the floor, splattering batter all over his feet and pants.

He doesn't seem bothered by it, picking it up with his fingers and tossing it back into the pan, raw side down, and then glancing at me over his shoulder with a relaxed smirk that makes my heart race with a mixture of annoyance and nostalgia. That's the same look he gave me before he kissed me for the first time a lifetime ago, and it's exactly the

expression I would expect him to have after setting a dozen alarms and lubing up my doorknob.

“Morning, Lassie.”

Another low growl rumbles through my throat unbidden. “Stop being cute.”

He bats his eyelashes innocently. When we were young, as in toddler young, he couldn’t pronounce my name, so he always called me Lassie. The name stuck for years. Now, he only whips it out when he’s trying to irritate me.

I grit my teeth, trying to get my frustration under control. He gets too much satisfaction from getting a rise out of me.

It’s been six months since his surgery...and six months since the kiss that we don’t talk about. He ended up on a bender in New Orleans that Steele and I had to go collect him from. He never brought the kiss up again and neither did I.

It’s just like all the other kisses in our past. We pretend like they never happened and try to live our lives.

It’s easier some days than others...

“You’re crankier about that little prank than I expected,” he says casually, scooping the finished pancake onto a waiting plate before adding more batter to the heated pan. “Were you having a dirty dream when the alarm went off?”

I narrow my eyes at him and huff with annoyance, feeling my nostrils flare and my muscles twitch. “No,” I lie.

Gates gives me a look that says he’s not buying it. Was he always this irritating or has he been perfecting the technique over the past few years?

“Here,” he says, thrusting the plate towards me.

I scrunch my eyebrows together, looking at the breakfast he’s offering me. My stomach rumbles but the gesture makes my chest feel just a little too warm and fuzzy. Since Gates moved in with me eight months ago, I’ve learned the signs of what I’ve started privately referring to as *The*

*Danger Zone*, AKA anything that Gates does that softens me towards him. Accepting a delicious-looking pancake as a way for him to make up for the immature prank is *major* Danger Zone.

“No thanks,” I say in a clipped tone, turning away from him and going for the refrigerator to get my parrot, Nigel, his breakfast.

## GATES

A whole ten seconds of verbal sparring—not my best work. I’ll have to go bigger next time if I want to really goad Tallahassee into shaking off the ice for a few minutes. I stupidly thought that the cold shoulder act when I first moved in would be temporary. After all, it’s been years since we’ve interacted in any meaningful way, it makes sense that it would take some adjusting. But it’s been two hundred and forty-three days since I moved in here— not that I’m counting— and things are chillier than ever.

I didn’t even get any perfunctory pity from him about losing my ball like I did from my brother. Not that I wanted it from Tallahassee anyway. I probably would have moved the fuck out if he’d have been all fake nice to me about it.

I finish cooking my second pancake and glance over my shoulder to see him chopping fruit and cutting up a hardboiled egg for Nigel.

“I still think it’s fucked up to feed a bird eggs,” I say, shaking my head solemnly.

“It’s protein, he doesn’t overthink it since he’s, you know, a *bird*.”

“Have you ever *asked* him?” I insist, mostly to see the vein in his temple start to throb.

He makes one of those annoyed huffing noises, his nostrils flaring and...yup, there’s the vein. “No, I haven’t asked him.”

“So, this is non-consensual cannibalism that you’re inflicting on poor Nigel?”

He reaches up to pinch the bridge of his nose and I bite back a grin, working to keep my expression neutral. He always gets the most annoyed when I don't crack and reveal how hard I'm working to fuck with him.

"Fine." He scoops everything into a bowl. "Let's go ask him."

I follow him into the living room. Nigel flaps his wings when he sees us both, bobbing his head up and down and screeching with excitement. I've always been a dog guy, but I've gotta say, this parrot's enthusiasm and personality have really won me over since I moved in. At least *someone* is happy I'm here. Plus, he has some of the best comedic timing I've encountered in my life.

"Hey buddy," I greet him.

"*Hey buddy, hey buddy,*" he mimics.

"I've got breakfast," Tal tells him. "Do you want some eggs?" He holds up a little bit of the cooked yolk to show Nigel, who leans in to gently nibble it off of his finger. "See?" He raises his eyebrows at me with a smug smile on his lips.

"Hold on, that doesn't count. You have to tell him what it is."

He rolls his eyes at me, muttering something under his breath that I can't quite make out, but I doubt it's flattering. "Nigel, eggs come from chickens and if they're fertilized, they become baby chicks," Tal explains patiently to the bird. I'm caught between fighting laughter and admiring how gently he's breaking the news to Nigel.

The parrot screeches and flaps his wings again, screaming "*No*" at the top of his lungs. See, what did I tell you about this dude's comedic timing?

Tallahassee growls with frustration, picking the egg bits out of the bowl and then setting it down where Nigel can eat all of the non-cannibalistic parts of the meal.

"You two planned that," he grumbles before stomping out of the room.

“Good work, buddy.” I reach into my pocket to pull out a small chunk of one of the homemade biscuits Auggie gave me for the bird.

He makes a happy sound, taking it from me and adding it to his bowl. Somewhere down the hallway, I hear a door slam and I sigh to myself. I’m sure there’s a better, more *mature* way to interact with Tallahassee. Sure, he’s my ex—sort of— husband, but that’s ancient history...kind of.

I’m going to get this shit right one of these days, aren’t I?



# Chapter 2

## TALLAHASSEE

There's something calming about the scent of motor oil as I step into Big Bull Mechanics. Denali, Steele's husky, bounds over to greet me, jumping up to lick my chin before returning to her spot in front of the fan to stay cool in the stuffy garage. It's only May, but it gets hot fast when the bay doors are closed.

The board hanging on the wall next to Steele's office has been updated with some brand new "Assholes of the Week", including a bad review with some highlighted passages, a picture of an elephant's asshole, and a screengrab from what appears to be porn with the actual goods covered over with a sticker to keep it safe for work.

"Why the sour face?" Red asks immediately as I pass him to grab a handful of donut holes and pour myself some coffee from the carafe.

"It's been a long morning," I mumble through a full mouth.

"It's barely past seven," Auggie points out, reaching into his pocket and tossing a treat to Denali, who catches it in midair with an audible snap.

"Yeah well, you try living with your—" I cut myself off, realizing I almost just said *ex-husband* which would be a very, *very* bad slip to make considering no one, and I mean *no one* knows that Gates and I have any kind of history. If they did, well, let's just say I don't think that Steele would throw us a party, and fuck knows none of these assholes could keep their mouth shut if they knew. "Gates," I finish instead.

"He still torturing you?" Shep asks before stuffing a few donut holes into his own mouth.

"He's still Gates," I answer vaguely.

Auggie snorts. "Well, send him my way if you're sick of him. I think a good spanking might just straighten him out."

I know he's only teasing, but my body flushes with a hot feeling that nearly knocks me on my ass. My hand automatically tightens around the cardboard coffee cup, causing scalding hot liquid to splash over the sides. I curse, setting it down quickly and grabbing a napkin to dry off my hand.

"I'll be fine," I assure him, my voice low and gravelly.

"Okay." He shrugs, pouring himself a cup of coffee and then shuffling off to start work on one of the cars that are already lined up and waiting for us.

I give it a minute for the sugar and caffeine to kick in, and then I do the same.

The scuffing sound of boots on cement pulls my attention mid-morning. I step out from under the lifted car I'm working on and crane my neck to see if it's a customer who wandered into the garage, or maybe Porter here to *hang out with Steele in his office* during an early lunch break. Instead, I spot a man who can't be taller than five foot four and probably weighs a hundred pounds in steel toed boots...which he happens to be wearing, coincidentally.

"Who ordered the twink?" I ask, and the rest of the guys all pop up, a ripple of curiosity echoing through the bays.

The man crosses his arms over his chest and arches an eyebrow at me. I'm positive it's not the first time he's been called a twink, but there's something about his icy stare that makes me feel like I should apologize.

"Sorry," I mutter, ducking my head back under the car to escape his glare.

"Can we help you? Are you dropping off a car or selling Girl Scout Cookies or what?" Shep asks, and when the man turns his attention away from me, I risk another glance, taking in the rest of his appearance.

His dark hair is short but messy. Not styled mess, but *I don't give a fuck, I look good anyway* mess. His arms are small but muscled and covered with tattoos. He's wearing a tight white t-shirt that he must have purchased in the children's

section of the store for it to fit his tiny frame so snugly, and a pair of grease-stained jeans with the kind of distressing that's earned through overwear and a rough lifestyle rather than the kind they try to fake in the store.

"You in charge?" the man asks, his voice dripping with a surprising amount of confidence. He reminds me of this feisty little two-pound kitten I found once as a kid. It was barely bigger than the palm of my hand but when I went to pick it up it was all claws and teeth.

Shep snorts. "Nope."

The man is silent for a moment, clearly waiting for Shep to tell him who *is* in charge, or maybe go get the boss for him. Obviously, he doesn't know Shep. I'm about to jump in and ask him if there's something we can help him with before bugging Steele, but he raises both hands and makes a shooping motion at Shep.

"Well? What are you waiting for? Be a good boy and run fetch him for me."

Shep's mouth falls open and I hear Red gasp while Auggie stifles laughter and I simply stare at the little fireball. Shep looks to me for help and I shrug one shoulder, then tilt my head towards Steele's office. I don't get the feeling this feral kitten is going to take no for an answer.

He looks satisfied as Shep scurries off.

"Tallahassee." I wipe my hand off on my coveralls and stride over to offer him a handshake.

I'm half expecting him to slap my hand away considering the vibe he walked in here with, but he relaxes his stance and takes it. "Riggs," he gives his name in return.

Shep returns a few seconds later with Steele in tow. He eyes Riggs just as curiously as I did, clearly trying to figure him out in the ten seconds it takes to reach him.

"Hi, I'm Steele. Is there a problem?"

"No problem." A toothy, overly confident smile spreads across Riggs's face. "I just moved to town and I'm

here to offer you the pleasure of my services.”

Steele cocks his head to one side and then looks over at me. I shrug again. Fuck if I know what any of this is about.

“I’m in a relationship...” He answers slowly, and this time I’m the one who fights back laughter. I’ve never seen a man go from smiling to scowling so quickly.

“Good for you,” Riggs says flatly. “I’m a mechanic. I specialize in diesel, but I’m flexible.”

“*Oh*, okay that makes a lot more sense.” Steele lets out a relieved breath. He looks Riggs up and down again, assessing him in a different way now. “You work on trucks?” He asks skeptically.

I glance over at the semi we’ve had parked in the far bay for a few days, all of us arguing over who would have to deal with it. Riggs follows my gaze, hesitating for only a moment before striding across the garage. All of our eyes are on him as he expertly uses the large tire to scramble up the side of the truck and pop the hood.

“This engine is a total gut job. If you have the parts, I can have it done by the end of the day,” he calls down after peeking his head inside for a few seconds.

“Wait, did you even hire him?” Auggie whispers, sidling closer to Steele to join us in watching this whole thing unfold.

“I...” Steele starts.

“I don’t think the little spider monkey was *asking*,” Shep says, his tone dripping with awe.

Riggs hops back down from the truck and whirls on us again. “What did you just call me?”

“Oh shit. Dude has major *I’ll cut you* energy,” Red whispers, joining our little group.

“Nothing,” Shep hurries to say.

Riggs huffs and nods. “So, do you have the parts I’ll need? If not, someone can teach me your inventory system so I

can get them ordered,” he says, turning his attention back to Steele.

“Um...I...uh...” Steele looks around at all of us again.

“I’ll show you how we order parts,” Auggie offers, patting Steele on the shoulder as he passes him, throwing an arm around Riggs’s shoulders like he’s not even afraid of the terrifying little man.

“Well, I guess we have a new employee,” Steele mutters once they’re gone. “I’d better go start on the new hire paperwork.”

## GATES

I pace around the apartment, pausing at random intervals to drum a beat with my fingers against various surfaces. I’ve been telling myself for an hour to sit down and see what I can do about scrounging up some new clients for my website design business. That’s what adults do after all, and I am certainly an adult. Yup, a business owning, bill paying, *technically* married adult.

I glance over at my laptop, sitting open on the coffee table, and let out a long breath. *Okay, I’m going to sit down and do some work in five, four, three, two, one...*

Nope, still not working. Fuck.

I groan and wander over to where Nigel is perched on the back of an overstuffed armchair, preening his feathers and chattering to himself.

“Do you ever feel all cooped up in here?” I ask. He stops grooming himself and blinks at me. “Of course, you do. You’re a bird and here you are with your wings clipped, living in an apartment.”

“*Fuck*,” he says, and I snort a laugh.

“Yeah, *fuck*,” I agree. “I guess it’s not all bad, right? You’re well taken care of, and you’re loved.” He bobs his body up and down happily.

“*Spank me, Daddy.*”

I chuckle again. “Make sure you save that one for just the right moment to use on Tallahassee.”

Nigel squawks and flaps his wings, clearly agreeing with me that he’ll only have one shot to land that particular joke. I trust him to know when to use it properly.

I head into the kitchen and pour myself a third cup of coffee for the morning. Not that it will do anything to perk me up, but there’s still something so satisfying about a hot cup of coffee. Armed with a fresh mug of sugary, caffeinated motivation, I manage to get my ass over to the couch and open my email.

I sort through all the junk and spam and a bunch of newsletters I’m sure I never signed up for...or maybe I did and just forgot. When I get through the nearly one hundred unread emails, it turns out there are *two* waiting for me from prospective clients. Score, that means I was productive today by default. Suck it, ADHD brain.

I respond to both emails to get more information about the websites they each want designed, and then I click over to one of my dozen open tabs and start scrolling through a list of properties for rent in Miami. The beach would be nice...

That familiar, restless tug in the middle of my chest urges me to click on a few. But skimming through the information doesn’t give me that same burst of excitement it usually does. In the past, I would have had the uncontrollable urge to pack my shit up *today* and drive down to Florida to rent one of these apartments. I would have given in to it, too—scribbled another lame-ass apology on a Post-it note for Tal and Steele, and *poof* I’d be gone like a ghost.

How far has that shit gotten me, though? Since I was a kid, there’s been this little voice in the back of my head telling me that the *next* place would be *the* place, that somewhere out there is where I’ll feel settled and happy. I’ve been so sure that if I could just find the right state, the right apartment, the right weather, the right view, I’d become the person I was always supposed to be, everything else would fall into place. The right place would lead to the right job, would lead to the right

friends, would lead to the right person in my bed every night. The right place would cure all of these empty, desperate feelings inside of me and suddenly I would be just like everyone else.

Twenty years of chasing and I still haven't found that *one* right place. I'm starting to think I had it all wrong. Maybe I fucked up my relationships with every single person in my life, chasing something that never existed to begin with.

Ain't that a fucking bitch.

My finger twitches against the laptop keyboard. For once, I don't want to bolt. I want to stay right here and see if I can fix all the things I broke between me and Steele, me and my mom, maybe even all the things I ruined with Tallahassee. I'm not delusional, I know it's too late to put things back the way they used to be with him, but maybe I can at least make them better.

I stroke my thumb along my left ring finger. I wore that ring for all of six hours nearly a decade ago, but it's felt like a missing limb ever since. I suppose that's my penance for what I did.

I close all three tabs with rental information and open a new one to look up stuff to do in Wisconsin. Being bored doesn't mean I need to flee into the night like a rabid raccoon, right? It can mean I take a weekend trip. Maybe I can convince my brother to go explore somewhere nearby with me.

I bookmark a few options, feeling slightly bolstered by the possibilities. I've been a fuck-up my entire life, but forty could be a new chapter for me.

Fuck, that's pathetic. Forty and just getting my life together. I feel the strong urge to call Tal just to say, "you're welcome."

What kind of an idiot would want to be married to an immature jackass like me anyway? If I *really* wanted to do him a favor, I might dig out the divorce papers he sent me seven years ago and finally sign them.

That thought is like an icy hand reaching inside my chest and squeezing. Maybe I don't need to go that far. One adult resolution at a time.

I open one more tab and pull up some porn I bookmarked a while back. I hit play and set my laptop on the table. It's the good kind of amateur scene where the two guys are obviously a real-life couple, kissing and groping as they strip each other with the kind of passion that can't be faked.

A tight feeling constricts inside my chest again, hot this time instead of ice cold. I slip one hand inside my sweatpants and drag my fingers against my soft cock. It tingles but doesn't make any effort to do anything more than that.

I sigh with frustration, pulling my hand out of my pants and slamming the laptop shut without bothering to close the browser.

*One problem at a time*, I remind myself. One problem at a damn time.



# Chapter 3

## TALLAHASSEE

I drag my ass up the steps to my apartment at the end of the long day. Gates's alarm clock prank this morning feels like it was weeks ago rather than hours, and I'm more than a little wary that I'm about to walk into whatever fresh prank he spent the day dreaming up.

I send up a little prayer to the god of motorcycles and turbo engines that Gates found something else to occupy his energy today other than coming up with new ways to get a rise out of me. All I want is to take a long, hot shower— with the option of jerking off— order some dinner and watch a movie in peace.

I crack open the apartment door slowly, bracing for just about anything. Anyone else probably would have kicked Gates out by now for this level of psychological warfare, but I refuse to admit defeat. He'll tire himself out eventually, or we'll both be mature and have an adult conversation about all the bullshit that's motivating this silly standoff of stoicism and pranks. My money is on the first option, but hey, anything is possible.

I'm greeted by silence as I poke my head inside. For a second, I'm reminded of the night six months ago that started exactly like this and ended in an ill-advised drunken kiss between the two of us. My lips tingle at the memory and I clench my jaw in annoyance at my own physical reaction.

You'd think my body would know better at this point than to react to anything having to do with Gates with so much *intensity*. Unfortunately, I'm still human and Gates is still... well, *Gates*.

I kick off my shoes and close the door behind me, still listening for any sign that he's here. When I don't hear anything, I greet Nigel and then flop down on the sofa. I pull my phone out of my pocket so I can browse through options for dinner, but the screen stays black when I tap it. That's what

I get for watching YouTube videos during my lunch break and running down the battery.

I toss it aside with a sigh, noticing Gates's laptop on the coffee table. I pick it up and flip it open. I'm met with a request for a password. I drum my fingers against the sleek, plastic back while I try to put myself into his brain— a terrifying prospect to say the least— to decipher what he might have picked for his password.

I discard the obvious options such as *man-child* and *PainInTallahasseeAss* and try one I know he used as a teenager: *AssMan*, both a *Seinfeld* reference and a nod to his love of a “biteable booty” as he so eloquently puts it. Nope, that's not it. I try a few other options, all of which fail.

I'm about to give up and settle for making whatever I can find in the kitchen, but I decide to try just one more. On a whim, I type in a date: *June15*. The lock screen disappears, and his home screen pops up while my chest constricts so violently it feels like all of the air is punched out of my lungs.

Obviously, he chose the date because it's his brother's birthday. No reason other than that for Gates to pick June fifteenth. No reason for me to *try* that date for his password either. Nope, nope, nope.

The danger siren blares in my mind as I scramble to rationalize and minimize the information I inadvertently stumbled on. Nothing to see here, just a forty-five-year-old man trying not to panic.

As a diversion, I click to open his internet browser so I can decide on dinner. Which turns out to be an even better distraction than I expected when it immediately opens to porn.

“Hello,” I mutter, making a move to pause the video before hesitating and letting myself watch for a few seconds.

In my defense, it *is* Gates's fault that my dirty dream was interrupted this morning. It's *also* his fault that I haven't gotten laid in eight fucking months since his pranks and general jackassery chased away any dates I tried to bring home until I eventually gave up and resigned myself to celibacy until

he gets bored and leaves town again. Which, by my calculations, should be any day now.

That realization cools whatever fluttery feelings were caused by the coincidence of Gates choosing *that* date as his password. He hasn't been in town this long since he was eighteen. Before long, I'll come home to find his bedroom bare and *maybe* a goodbye note.

I scowl and then force myself to shake off all the thoughts of Gates and enjoy a few minutes of two gorgeous men sucking each other off on the computer screen. I lazily stroke myself over my jeans at first until my cock starts to swell and stiffen. I widen my legs and unzip my pants to give my dick some room to breathe.

I wrap my hand around my growing erection and slowly start to stroke myself, my breath speeding up and my blood heating in my veins as the two men on the screen moan and whisper dirty things to each other.

*"Spank me, Daddy,"* Nigel squawks.

My stroke stutters. Did he just say...

My bird flaps his wings and loudly imitates some of the filthiest sounds I've heard in my life. *God damn, fucking Gates.*

Nigel's mimicked panting turns into moans and please of *fuck me* and *more, Daddy* while I start to wonder just how bad I must have been in a past life to be subjected to this.

I sigh, tucking my dick back away and standing up to find a treat to distract the parrot with. This must be that comedic timing Gates keeps insisting the bird has.

Fucking hilarious.

Before I have the chance to return to the laptop and close out of the porn window, the door flies open and Gates steps in.

*Perfect.*

He stops in his tracks as the door swings closed behind him. Gates looks at me, then at his open laptop that's

emanating filthy moans and the slapping sound of skin on skin, and back to me again. Thank fuck I at least put my dick away before he walked in.

“Did you come home from work and immediately start watching porn on my computer?” he asks, the corners of his lips twitching with a smile he’s obviously fighting. “Wait, do you jerk off in the living room a lot?”

I scoff, feeling heat creep up my neck and over my face. “I didn’t jerk off,” I mutter, breaking off a piece of the treat I found for Nigel and offering it to him. “Nice new vocabulary you’ve been working on with him, by the way.”

Gates’s control over his expression cracks and a shit-eating grin quickly spreads over his face before he lets out a loud cackle.

“I love that bird.”

“I can’t believe you’ve found a way to cockblock me without even being home,” I huff. “It’s bad enough that you drove all of my dates away, but the only reason I was desperate enough to even consider jerking off to porn on your laptop is because my balls are so damn blue, I’m worried I’m going to need to seek medical attention soon.”

“Wow, that was rude.”

“You teaching my bird to make sex noises? Yes, I agree, that was rude.”

“No, I mean it was rude to rub your balls in my face,” he clarifies. Of course, my brain immediately conjures an image of Gates on his knees, rubbing the rough stubble of his beard against my balls while he tongues my shaft. My cock jerks and his smirk intensifies. He knows exactly what he’s doing. He widens his eyes in an innocent expression and goes on. “Actually, it’s downright inconsiderate. You know I only have one ball now and here you are going on and on about having two balls. Two neglected, overly full balls, sure, but you should still count your blessings.” He shakes his head and *tsks* at me.

“And my balls, apparently,” I mutter sarcastically, and he nods sagely in agreement.

“While you do that, I’m going to take a shower.”

“No way, I got home first, I’ve got dibs on the shower.” I stride over to the laptop to close it, my plan to order dinner already forgotten in the face of possibly losing my chance to shower for the next hour while I wait for the water to heat back up after his turn. But Gates is way ahead of me, already sprinting down the hallway to his bathroom, whipping his shirt off his head and narrowly missing colliding with the wall in the process.

The bathroom door slams, and I hear the water running before I’ve even made it out of the living room.

*Fucking Gates.*

## GATES

I cackle to myself as I finish stripping and reach into the shower to check the water temperature. I didn’t get a good look at Tallahassee’s face, but I’m sure he was annoyed. I’m marking this one in the win column. And here I was, trudging up the steps, trying to come up with a plan to keep him from giving me the cold shoulder all night long while Nigel was already laying the groundwork for me. I’m going to have to ask Auggie for a new batch of treats for that kickass parrot.

I push back the curtain and step under the hot spray. I reach for the bar of soap and work it between my wet hands to create a good lather while I close my eyes and let my mind wander for a minute to the image of Tallahassee on the couch with my laptop in front of him and his dick in his hand.

My cock twitches.

Oh sure, when I’m trying to jerk off to porn, my dick has nothing to say lately, but as soon as I imagine Tallahassee all sweaty and breathless, stroking himself and moaning...

Another tingly jerk as my cock slowly starts to swell.

I suppose it should be encouraging to know that my dick isn’t *broken*, but I still think my doctor is wrong. I

brought it up to her after the surgery that I've had a hard time getting...well...*hard* since they took good ol' lefty. She stands firm in the belief that it's psychological, not a physical issue. It's *my* dick, I think I would know.

*Doctors*, am I right?

With a proper amount of suds on my hands and the bar of soap, I start to wash myself, whistling as I scrub my skin, taking my time so I can imagine the growing irritation on Tallahassee's face while he waits for his turn.

I soap every inch of myself, bracing for the uncomfortable clench that always hits me in the pit of my stomach when I move my hand between my legs to wash my *one* ball. Logically, I know it's no big deal. So, I lost a nut, who cares? My balls aren't what make me a man. And it could be worse. If I hadn't found the mass when I did, it could have led to losing them both.

Still, that sick, ashamed feeling seems to be immune to the solid, rational self-talk I babble to myself as I hurry to clean the sweat out of the area and move on quickly. I set the bar of soap down and start to rinse off when the water suddenly runs ice cold.

I yelp and jump out of the way of the spray, my feet slipping on the slick surface of the tub. I instinctively grab for the shower curtain to keep myself from falling. Of course, all I end up doing is ripping the whole thing down as I windmill my arms and go down anyway.

"Ow," I grunt, my ass throbbing from the impact, freezing water still pelting me. I sit up quickly, untangling myself from the shower curtain and slamming my hand against the water knob to stop the cold water from spraying out.

As soon as the shower stops, the reason for the unexpected temperature change is obvious. I can hear Tallahassee's shower running just on the other side of the wall, clear as day.

"Mother fucker," I mutter, scrambling out of the tub and snatching up a towel to wrap around my waist.

I'm dripping from head to toe, goosebumps forming on my skin from the blast of cold water now evaporating off of me as I storm out of my bathroom and right into his. I slam the door open so hard it bangs against the wall.

I stride straight for the shower and whip the curtain open. Tallahassee doesn't even startle, just arches an eyebrow at me while he shampoos his hair. The thick suds run down the sides of his face, down his neck, and over his muscled chest. His nipples are both rock hard and I'm hit with the sudden memory of the exact way he used to gasp when I would run the flat of my tongue over each of them slowly.

A vague part of my brain registers that there's water pooling on the tiled floor and also that I came in here to yell at him, not ogle his naked body. But *damn*.

My eyes track lower, taking in the slight softness of his belly where his chiseled abs used to be. I used to spend hours licking each one of his rippling muscles and praising the hours and hours he would spend at the gym, but fuck, somehow he's so much hotter like this.

"Are you planning to take a picture or just drool?" he asks, and I shake myself out of my lust induced stupor, clutching my towel with one hand.

I glance down to realize that my cock is rock hard and extremely obvious against the thin, damp towel. I swallow and look back up at him, my mouth moving but my brain still spinning its wheels.

I should probably just turn around and walk my dumb ass right back out of the bathroom before I make even more of a fool out of myself, but my feet feel rooted to the spot. He doesn't say a word as he finishes rinsing his hair and then shuts off the water. He grabs a towel of his own and wraps it around his waist.

"You want to go get a drink?" I blurt, surprising myself as much as him.

At least I have the satisfaction of watching the shock ripple over his expression at the unexpected request. I'm

prepared for him to say no, or maybe even tell me to fuck off.

“Sure. But only if I can put pants on first.”

“Um, yeah, pants,” I stammer, pointing over my shoulder as I slowly back out of the bathroom. “Pants,” I say again, feeling like the biggest idiot on the planet, which is only confirmed by the satisfied grin on his face.

Fine, he won this round, I’m man enough to admit that. But we’re going out. Together.

I smile wider, slipping into my bedroom and hastily drying myself off so I can get dressed. My stomach dances with nerves as I rifle through my dresser for something to wear. I haven’t had a proper conversation with Tallahassee since the night we got married and I left him asleep in the hotel room. I’ve antagonized him, we’ve bickered, and there’ve been plenty of those chilly silences he seems to love so much, but we haven’t talked. Hell, we haven’t even *yelled*.

Is it fucked up that I would give my remaining ball for him to just yell at me for being a prick so we can get it out of our systems and find a way to move forward? I clench my fists to keep my hands from trembling. For a laugh and to hopefully break the tension, I grab one of the shirts that Tallahassee left piled in front of my bedroom door after I tie-dyed all of his stuff pink and purple. In my defense, I paid to replace everything after. I’m a nuisance, not a monster.

This could be good, the two of us having a drink at a bar like friends. Or at the very least, like people who don’t despise each other. If I don’t fuck this up, maybe this can even be some kind of fresh start.

No pressure.



# Chapter 4

## GATES

I step into the living room and Tallahassee immediately snorts when he sees me wearing his blue t-shirt that I dyed with pink and purple splotches. It's an amused noise instead of an annoyed one, so I'm marking it down as a win.

I pluck at the fabric, tight against my broad body, the sleeves tight enough that they're riding up to show off my heavily tattooed arms.

"I figured I'd represent with bi colors tonight." I shoot him a playful wink.

"I'm glad you found a purpose to the destruction of my property," he says.

"I always find a silver lining." I shrug and then stop to take him in. He's dressed in a fitted black t-shirt that has a small V-neck, showing off both his inked left arm but also a hint of the large tattoo that extends over the left side of his chest. His jeans fit him like they were made just for him, hugging every muscle and curve of his body expertly. How is it possible that he's as distracting clothed as he is naked?

Maybe I've just been around him too long. I've *never* lived with another person for eight whole months, that's bound to start fucking with a man's head. Plus, there's the history and all this unresolved shit between us. Also, he's hot as fuck and is still hands down the best lay of my life.

Tallahassee clears his throat, and I give my head a shake to get my attention on anything other than the shape of his thighs and how they would feel wrapped around my head.

"You're doing a hell of a lot of staring tonight."

"Yeah, well, you're not the only one with blue balls," I mutter honestly.

"Great, this can't possibly end in disaster," he deadpans.

"What, you don't want to go for a drink now?"

“We’re going, I’m just pointing out the potential for this to blow up in our faces.” He picks his keys up off the little table next to the door. “I’m driving, I don’t trust you not to drive me out into the woods and leave me for dead as a joke.”

“Ha ha,” I mock dryly, slipping on my shoes and following him out the door.

I slide into the passenger seat of his car, fiddling silently for a minute or so with the adjustment levers and the seatbelt and then finding a loose thread to pick at.

“Stop that.” He bats my hand away before I can start to unravel the upholstery all together.

He pulls out of the parking lot while I glance around his impossibly neat car. It smells like motor oil and a hint of lavender in here and there isn’t so much as a single wrapper on any of the floors or the backseat.

“So, you don’t keep any clothes in here *at all*?” I ask in shock, craning my neck to just be sure I’m not missing a pile of something gross shoved under his seat from behind.

“What? Why would I keep clothes in my car?”

I shrug one shoulder. “I do.”

“Your car is like a science experiment. It smells like old hamburgers and is full of junk that you don’t even remember you own.”

“I have a system,” I defend.

“Sure you do.”

I huff and reach over to turn on the radio. I flip through a few channels before settling on a station that’s playing “Bohemian Rhapsody” by Queen, and obviously you can’t just scroll past such an anthem. Tallahassee is stoic for the first minute or so, both hands on the wheel, eyes on the road, while I go all out with the high parts and the low parts, head bobbing and drumming on my thighs. He finally joins in around the third verse or so, singing just as loudly and off key as I am.

“You’re going the wrong way,” I tell him when we pass by the street that leads to Wooley’s without turning.

He smirks. “No, I’m not.”

It takes another thirty minutes before he pulls into the parking lot of a bar a town over. Unlike Wooley’s, there’s no rainbow flag in the window, but there *is* a massive neon sign with the word “Arcade” beckoning me to jump out of the car with the enthusiasm of a ten-year-old being dropped off at... well...an arcade.

“An arcade and a bar all in one? What genius came up with this?” I ask in awe as he climbs out of the car.

“I thought this would be up your alley. Come on.” He bumps his shoulder against mine as he passes me, and I hurry to follow him inside.

The place is as amazing inside as it looked from the outside. They really managed to capture the nacho and dirty sock smell that takes me back to the arcades of my childhood. The cacophony of bells and game music along with people cursing and laughing as they play is just as familiar.

“I need some food.” I pluck one of the menus off the bar and slide onto a stool. Tallahassee follows suit, flagging down the bartender and requesting a couple of beers while we both look over the menus.

The unmistakable sound of the Mortal Kombat theme song draws my attention, my head whipping up and a smile quickly taking over my face. How many hours of my childhood did I spend kicking both Steele and Tallahassee’s asses at that game? There are a couple of guys standing in front of the machine, mashing the buttons and jostling each other with their shoulders, playing dirty like any respectable adult would.

“You know what you want?”

“Huh?” I drag my attention away from the machine. “Oh, food, right. I forgot.”

“You forgot you were hungry?” he asks with amusement.

“I’ll just get these.” I point at something random. The bartender nods, so either he knows what I asked for or he’s just

going to wing it. Either way is fine with me. Tallahassee orders a cheeseburger and I return to looking around at all the flashing lights and throngs of people around us.

“Really takes you back, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, it does,” I agree. “Do you remember that one summer when I was probably eight and you two were thirteen and Steele decided that some of the games were too *mature* for me?” I roll my eyes, and Tallahassee chuckles at the memory.

“He was such a mother hen, even back then.”

“I guess I shouldn’t complain. I’d probably be dead by now if he hadn’t saved my ass so many times.” The bartender sets a couple of beers down for us, and I pick mine up to take a swig. “You know, his head would probably explode if he knew...”

His expression sobers and he takes a sip from his own glass, not looking at me. “Yeah, that’s probably an understatement. He would lose his shit if he knew that we used to... That we’re technically still...” He clears his throat.

“Yeah,” I echo. “I’m the one he’ll be pissed at if he ever does find out. So, don’t sweat it.”

“I think I’d get it just as bad as you would,” he argues.

“Please, the best friend versus the screw-up brother? No contest.” I wave him off. “It would take all of two seconds for Steele to decide that I must have seduced you against your will and then tricked you into marriage. You poor soul.”

Tallahassee’s jaw twitches and it occurs to me that this is the closest we’ve come to talking about anything *real* in years. I hold my breath, waiting to see if he’s going to blow the conversation off or if he’s ready to face it head on. I don’t get the chance to find out because the bartender chooses that moment to set our food down.

Apparently, I ordered the nachos after all. They look pretty damn good, so I’m not complaining, that’s for damn sure.

Tallahassee doesn't seem to share my enthusiasm for my randomly chosen dinner. He makes an annoyed sound and drags my plate towards him. "You can't eat just nachos for dinner."

"Why not? It's got veggies," I point at the lettuce, black olives, and jalapenos. "And cheese is protein."

He picks up his knife and cuts his burger in half, setting one portion of it on the edge of my overflowing plate.

"Here." He scoops some nachos onto his plate in trade.

"If you wanted some of my nachos, you could have just said that," I point out.

"I just want you not to bitch in an hour that nachos weren't enough."

"When have I ever done that?" I challenge, and he gives me a pointed look. In all honesty, I can't recall having done that, but it's more than obvious that he can, so I show my surrender by picking up the burger and taking a bite.

"It's a lot easier to get away with shit when you're with people who haven't known you your entire life," he says.

"It really is."

## TALLAHASSEE

It's surprisingly easy to fall into conversation while we eat. And not just nostalgic "remember when" type conversation. Gates tells me about some websites he's worked on recently, which turns into a branching conversation full of tangents that I can barely follow but is fun, nonetheless.

When we're finished with our food, he heads straight for the token machine and then drags me over to play Mortal Kombat. I haven't played this game in about thirty years, but my muscle memory takes over immediately.

The machine is clearly designed to accommodate a pair of scrawny kids playing together rather than two full-grown men. Our shoulders bump, first unintentionally and then in a playfully malicious way as we become more and more cutthroat. The hairs on my arm stand up when his brush

against me, our hips touching as we both try to edge each other out of the way just enough to gain a competitive advantage.

“You suck at this game,” Gates taunts.

“Your mom sucks at this game,” I counter, channeling my inner preteen.

He cackles. “I’m going to tell her you said that, then she’ll come down here and kick your ass too.” He does some fancy combo move that I can’t remember how to counter while I just helplessly slam my hand down on the buttons over and over.

Gates *does* kick my ass, over and over while we both laugh and trash talk. I stick to just the one drink since I have to drive us home later, but he goes for a couple more, choosing one game after another to show off at.

“I should have known that the eternal man-child would still be better at this shit than I am.” I kick the Pacman machine when I don’t come anywhere near his high score.

“You should have known better than to stoop to my level.” He shakes his head and grins, leaning in closer until I can feel his hot breath ghost against my earlobe. “I have home field advantage,” he whispers, and my brain just about short circuits.

I blink stupidly, every cell in my body hyperaware of just how close he’s standing and how damn good he smells for some reason. My heart pounds heavily like it’s trying to burst out of my chest to get closer to him. Gates pulls back just an inch, his eyes lingering on mine before dropping to my lips. Electricity crackles through the air between us, making my hair stand on end and my skin pebble with goosebumps. It reminds me of that night too many years ago now when I stepped out onto Steele’s balcony in the freezing early hours of the New Year to find Gates already out there, surprisingly sober and strangely reflective.

*“Sorry, I just needed some air,” I said, about to turn around and go back inside.*

*“You’re fine.” He waved me over and made space for me. The packed snow crunched under my boots as I closed the few steps to join him by the railing. With the door closed, the noise from the crowded party was muted, leaving us alone in the quiet dark.*

*I tilted my head up to see a few fireworks explode colorfully in the distance and then noticed Gates shivering.*

*“You’re freezing.” I shrugged off my jacket and draped it over his shoulders without giving him a chance to protest.*

*“I meant to go in and get a coat earlier, but I forgot.”*

*I shake my head at him. Leave it to Gates to forget he’s about to go into hypothermia. Steele is going to be pissed tomorrow if his brother has pneumonia or frostbite. That was my excuse anyway as I inched closer and put an arm around his shoulders too. I didn’t ask if he was using the same justification to lean into my touch or not. I don’t think I wanted to know.*

*He turned his head and pressed his face into the crook of my neck, and I can still remember the intense way my heart leapt. This moment was somehow both surprising and felt entirely inevitable at the same time.*

*He tilted his face towards mine and our eyes met, the air around us thick like it was holding its breath, waiting to see if we were brave enough or stupid enough to give in.*

*“Listen, about that night six months ago...” Gates says, jolting me out of the memory.*

*“We don’t have to talk about it.”*

*“Okay, yeah, I get that.” He brings his hand up to rub the back of his neck. “But maybe if we *did* talk about it and about what happened before-”*

*“Seriously, drop it. There’s nothing to say.” My jaw ticks, my teeth clenching together as my heart speeds up for an entirely different reason now. I feel like an animal in a snare. The *danger* siren is blaring loudly in my mind. I need to get the fuck out of here.*

He huffs out an irritated sound. “Why? Are you afraid if we talk about it—”

I don’t let him finish the sentence because *yes, I fucking am*. I’m afraid if we talk about it, I’ll let my guard down with him, and if I let my guard down, bad shit could happen. Bad shit of the falling back into bed with him variety.

I only glance back long enough to make sure Gates is behind me as I leave the bar. My ears ring in the quiet parking lot after the noise from all the games. It feels like I just stepped into a completely different universe, and it’s exactly what I need. It’s a bucket of ice-cold water on the moment I almost fell into with him back there.

He grumbles unintelligible words and shoots me frustrated looks as we get into the car and start towards home, but otherwise doesn’t say a word. The drive home gives me the chance to silently get my shit together.

I don’t blame Gates for everything that happened almost nine years ago now. It sucked waking up to the note and his ring on the nightstand, but it wasn’t exactly a surprise. I was pissed at first, privately raging and very nearly flushing both rings down the hotel toilet. But once I calmed down, I realized that it was as much my fault as it was his. Maybe it was *more* my fault.

He never told me he would stay. Actually, he was very clear that he *didn’t* plan to stay, and I tried to trick him into it anyway. Everything he said Steele would blame on him is what I did. Some stupid, desperate part of me thought that maybe if I could get him to marry me, it would be enough of a reason for him to give up his vagabond lifestyle and stay here...stay with me.

I’m as bad as those people who buy a tiger and try to keep it in their apartment. At least all I got was heartbreak out of my mistake.

We don’t exchange so much as a glance as we head up the stairs to the apartment and take our shoes off. As always, Nigel flaps and squawks in greeting. Gates goes over to pet him and kiss his beak and then turns back to face me.



We're only about six feet apart but it feels like there's an entire fucking mountain of issues crammed into that space. Maybe I'm being just as immature as he is by refusing to talk about this shit, but I can't bring myself to do it.

"Thanks for..." He drags his fingers through his hair and licks his lips. "You know." He jerks his head towards the door, and I just nod.

"Yeah."

We stare at each other for another few seconds. I'm not sure what I'm waiting for, maybe for time to suddenly reverse itself so we can have a second chance to not fuck everything up. Unfortunately, no matter how long we stand there, that doesn't seem like it's going to happen.

"Well...night." He finally starts to inch towards the hallway.

"Night," I echo as he disappears, leaving me alone in the living room, wondering what I would have done differently if I *did* have a second chance somehow...

# Chapter 5

## TALLAHASSEE

My eyelids are heavy, and I have absolutely zero desire to get out of bed when the alarm on my phone sounds. I was up most of the night, tossing and turning, replaying memories of all the nights we swore we'd never let Steele find out about, and the millions of reasons why I can't let my guard down with Gates again.

I just have to keep the wall up a little longer. He's been here for over eight months, any day now I'm going to come home to find the apartment empty. My chest squeezes at the thought, another excellent reminder of why I need to keep Gates at arm's length.

I sit up and throw back my blankets, then swing my legs over the side of the bed and use both hands to rub the exhaustion from my eyes. Luckily, my doorknob is lube-free this morning, and as far as I can tell, there aren't any other traps currently set for me. Halle-fucking-lujah.

I shuffle out of my room and down the hallway towards the kitchen, my caffeine-seeking missiles set on coffee. The up-tempo beat of some pop, rap, something or other thumps from the kitchen. I steel myself for whatever crazy ass morning shenanigans Gates might be up to and close the last few steps to the doorway.

I pause before my feet hit the tile floor. Just like yesterday morning, he's in the kitchen shirtless with a pair of dangerously low-slung sweats clinging to his hips, just an inch from slipping free and leaving him bare assed in front of the stove. The round curve of the top of his ass is peaking out over the waistband, the muscles on his back flexing with every movement, the colors and shapes of all the tattoos he's added to his skin since the last time I touched him eight years ago beckoning me to trace them with my tongue. My throat goes dry and my cock thickens, straining against the thin fabric of my boxers.

It's not just that he's dressed completely indecently either. Nigel is on his shoulder, bobbing happily up and down to the beat while Gates croons along with the song, completely out of tune but in a disturbingly charming way. He picks up a slice of strawberry off the counter and holds it up for the bird, who grabs it and makes a happy sound.

I'd rather walk into the kitchen and find Gates naked, on his knees, covered in whipped cream than see such a painfully domestic display. We've fucked before, and something tells me that if I told him I wanted to fuck again, right here, right now, he'd be all for it. But *this*, this thing that's happening right now in front of me, it'll never be real, no matter how much I used to wish it would be someday.

I clear my throat and he turns his head to grin at me.

"Morning, Lassie."

I grunt a greeting, keeping my expression blank. He's not going to goad me this morning or any other morning. I've been letting him get under my skin and it's made me too damn vulnerable. It's time to shore up this wall between us, for both our sake.

I beeline for the coffee, refusing to allow myself even one more glance at Gates's bedhead or any other damn thing.

"So, any idea where you're going?" I ask as I fill my mug and then lean against the counter to take a sip.

"Like, in life, or...?"

"What?" I cock my head, trying to figure out what he's talking about.

"What?" he echoes, shrugging. Nigel digs his talons in to keep his balance, only wobbling a little on his fleshy moving perch. "That was a weird question for the first thing in the morning, I don't know what you're expecting me to say."

"I just figured, you've been here nearly a year now, you're probably itching to get going again."

"Trying to get rid of me?" He arches an eyebrow at me. There's humor in his tone, but I swear for a second I see a

flash of disappointment pass through his eyes.

“No.” *Kind of.*

“I can move out if you want.”

“No,” I say again, a little more firmly this time. “I was just curious. If you don’t want to tell me where you’re going, it’s fine.”

“I’m not.” He focuses back on the eggs he’s scrambling and clears his throat. “I’m not planning to go anywhere.”

“Oh, so you’re just going to wing it?” I take another large gulp of my coffee, scalding my mouth in the process.

“No, I’m staying,” he clarifies, and I snort into the mug, hot coffee going up into my nose.

“Right,” I mutter, pushing off the counter and dumping the rest of my coffee down the sink. I’ll get more at the garage.

I take a shower and get dressed. I pass Gates on my way out, sitting on the sofa, watching cartoons like all forty-year-olds do, eating eggs, with Nigel still happily resting on his shoulder. On my way past, I catch him offering the bird a little bit of his food, and I try not to roll my eyes too hard. Non-consensual cannibalism my ass.

## GATES

I sneak a covert glance at Tallahassee on his way out, dressed in his gray jumpsuit that looks way hotter on him than it has any right to. Then I fall back into mentally working through the website design I want to start on today while the TV plays in the background, giving me just enough noise to keep me from going crazy in the silence, but not interesting enough to interrupt my train of thought.

I occasionally run some ideas by Nigel in between sharing my eggs with him. He’s not very helpful though. No matter what I suggest, he nods and says, “*Yes, Daddy.*” I’m starting to think he doesn’t know a damn thing about website design.

After that, I get around to putting my thoughts into action and getting some solid work done on the site until I'm so bored, I'm positive I will literally die if I don't get out of the apartment for a while. I put Nigel back on his perch and go get dressed.

I'm not even sure where I'm going until I'm only a block from Big Bull Mechanics. Lunch with my brother sounds like a perfect idea. I pull into the parking lot and swing into an empty space. As soon as I get out of the car, the sounds of the garage hit me through the open bay doors. The whir of the impact wrench, laughter, and the clang of tools all come together in a blur of noise. The scent of motor oil tickles my nose, causing a peaceful, nostalgic feeling to settle over me.

Steele has been working on cars just about as long as I can remember. When I was seven or eight, I used to dread the weekends my older brother would spend at his dad's house. I would throw tantrums as soon as he would leave, flinging myself onto the floor, kicking and screaming at the top of my lungs. I refused to understand why he got to go, and I had to stay with my mom. Not that my mom wasn't great, because she *was*. But I wanted to be wherever Steele was, and I really fucking wanted whatever it was that always made my brother come home confident and beaming every Sunday night, smelling like motor oil with grime under his nails.

When he was sixteen, he got a car of his own to fix up and spent every spare moment out in the garage, working on it, basically building it from the ground up, and I would lurk around, hoping some of his epic coolness would rub off on me.

He taught me the basics. I can change my own oil and do my own tune up. I can even fix some moderately complicated issues. But like with most things in my life, once I felt like I'd mastered it as much as I cared to, I was bored of it. I was perfectly happy to hang around, watching Steele and Tallahassee work on cars while I worked hard to earn a few seconds of their precious attention by making them laugh or roll their eyes at whatever crazy shit I managed to come up with.

I guess not a whole hell of a lot has changed in thirty years.

I stroll into the garage, stooping to greet Steele's husky, Denali when she bounds over to greet me. She's shedding her winter coat, tufts of fur flying around her like a tornado of fluff. She skids, her nails scrambling against the cement floor, and slides right into me, knocking me back onto my ass and immediately covering my face in wet, sloppy kisses.

"Hey, baby brother," Auggie shouts a greeting as I gently wrestle the dog off me and get back to my feet.

"That's *handsome* brother," I correct him with a wink.

"Tough call." He sizes me up like he's really giving the matter some thought. "Both of you are total smoke shows, honestly."

"Jesus, if you have a thing for the man, just work up the balls to ask him out already," Red taunts.

"Dude," Shep says, shooting Red a dirty look.

Red pulls his eyebrows together, giving him a bit of a caveman look as he tries to puzzle out his misstep.

"Balls," Auggie offers as a hint, and all three of them shoot me sheepish, apologetic looks.

I bite back a groan. Someone should have fucking warned me how annoying everyone would be about this whole ball cancer thing. I lost a nut, big damn deal. *Tell that to yourself the next time you're trying to jerk off and still can't get it up.* I groan inwardly again.

An awkward silence descends, and I consider just turning around and walking right out to avoid the uncomfortable looks of pity and curiosity they're all giving me.

"Don't be jealous just because Gates is more of a badass with one ball than you are with two," Tallahassee says to no one in particular without even bothering to roll out from under the car he's working on.

Some twinky dude I've never seen before guffaws from the last bay where he's working on a truck, and a titter of laughter goes around the rest of the group, letting the tension out of the air. I want to give him an appreciative look, but he still has his head under a car, so I settle for eye fucking him for half a second before heading to Steele's office.

He's hunched over his desk, doing some kind of paperwork, so I walk in without knocking, figuring he'll welcome the distraction.

"No," he says as soon as I step inside.

"You don't even know why I'm here."

"Sorry, reflex," he mutters, barely looking up from what he's working on.

I reach over and yank the papers out from under his nose. He makes a grab for them, but I'm quicker than he is. "Come to lunch with me."

He sighs. "Fine, but if you're about to try to recruit me to a cult or pitch me some investment scheme..."

"That was *once*," I defend, and he gives me a skeptical look. "Fine, twice."

Steele snorts, setting his pen down and pushing his chair back. "I'm in the mood for pizza."

"Pizza it is," I agree.

We head down the street to the same pizza place we frequented as teens. I'm hit with another wave of nostalgia, I'm just not sure if it's the good kind. The smell of burnt cheese and tomatoes reminds me of the night Steele caught me getting drunk behind the bleachers after a football game and dragged me here to sober me up— and lecture me— before taking me home. It reminds me of the first awkward date I had with Rachel Green even though I had a major crush on her brother, and the date I had a year later with her brother. It reminds me of a bunch of stupid seventeen-year-olds crowding into the small restaurant on prom night, trying not to drip pizza sauce on our fancy clothes, and how fucking out of place I felt for reasons I could never quite put my finger on.

The fucked-up thing is that I spent all this time running all over the country, trying to find somewhere I could belong, and it just led me right back here, to the same place I spent half a lifetime trying to leave behind.

Steele pats my shoulder roughly, jarring me out of my thoughts. “Lunch is on you. I’ll go grab us a table,” he says with a smirk, sauntering off to grab his favorite booth right by the window so he can people watch.

I order us a pizza and then join Steele, sliding into the opposite side of the booth from him and passing him a soda.

“So, out with it.” He makes a *bring it on* gesture with his hands before picking up his drink and taking a sip.

“Out with what?” I cast around mentally, trying to figure out if I missed the first half of a conversation or just forgot what we were talking about.

“You said there’s no cult and no investment scam, so what’s up?”

I frown. “You’ve been busy with Porter, and I just figured it would be cool to catch up. Why do I have to have an ulterior motive?” I try to keep my voice light and amused, but even *I* hear the edge of hurt in it.

“Of course we can catch up. Sorry, I’m a little stressed this week, it’s making me act like an asshole.”

“What’s going on?” I ask, and he gives me a mildly skeptical look. Jesus, have I really been so much of a burden on him our whole lives that me even asking what’s stressing him out is somehow suspicious? The way my stomach twists itself into a knot at that question is warning enough not to dissect that train of thought too much right this second.

“Porter’s roof is shot to shit. The vet clinic is doing better, but not enough that he has twenty grand to drop on a new roof. I offered to give him the money, but he’s not hearing it.” He relaxes back against the booth, the old, cheap seat groaning. “I’ve...uh...been trying to work up the courage to ask him to move in with me, but I don’t want him to think I’m only asking to solve the problem with his roof.”



My eyebrows shoot up. “I figured this thing was serious, but damn, *moving in* together?”

“He’s The One,” he says without the slightest waver or hint of uncertainty in his voice.

“Shit. Well, congrats man.”

“Yeah. I just need to figure out a solution to the roof issue, then I can ask him.”

“I could go over and take a look,” I offer.

“Take a look at what?”

I roll my eyes. “The roof.”

Our pizza is brought to the table and we both dig in. “No, I mean, what would you taking a look do?”

“I had an apprenticeship as a roofer when I lived in Texas. I’m not saying I’m a master roofer or anything, but if it’s a simple enough issue, I might be able to take care of it. I’ll even cover the cost of the materials. Fuck knows I owe you a hell of a lot more than that.”

My brother is quiet for a long moment, staring at me like he’s trying to figure out if I hit my head or maybe got replaced by an alien impersonating Gates. That twisting feeling in my stomach clenches again. I knew it would be hard to fix things here, but maybe it’s not even possible. Maybe I’ve been a jackass so long that Steele won’t ever see me any other way. And don’t even get me started on what a fucking mess I’ve made with Tallahassee. It’ll be a miracle if I can make that any better.

“Yeah, if you don’t mind,” he finally says.

“I don’t mind,” I assure him. “Hey, you know what we should do?” I switch trains of thought quickly, already moving on from the roofing issue and the feeling-like-an-asshole problem to something a lot more fun.

He gives me an amused look. “I literally couldn’t begin to guess what you’re about to suggest.”

“We should do a little weekend road trip. We can just drive around looking for stupid tourist attractions and stop at as many as possible.”

Steele chuckles. “Yeah, maybe. Not this weekend, but let’s plan to do something soon.”

My enthusiasm deflates. “Sure,” I agree.

We finish eating our pizza, talking about random shit, but my mind is a million miles away, trying to convince me that staying might be a huge mistake. I’ve done too much damage here. I should just leave and start fresh somewhere else. I should find somewhere to build a life and a group of friends like Steele has here. Maybe there’s even a Porter out there for me...

When we round the corner into the Big Bulls parking lot a short while later, I’m still lost in thought, and all wound up with uncertainty. Even I’m not sure if I’m about to go back to the apartment, pack my shit, and leave without so much as a destination in mind.

I have myself just about convinced that it would be best for everyone if I got the hell out of here when Tallahassee comes into view.

The afternoon has warmed up considerably. All the bay doors are still open and there are at least half a dozen fans blowing to cool the place down. Several of the guys have their jumpsuits unzipped or even half off, exposing their bare chests in a display that I’m positive isn’t OSHA approved. But I can’t look anywhere but Tallahassee. His jumpsuit is only unzipped a few perfectly respectable inches, but the hint of chest hair and ink makes my mouth water and my heart beat a little faster.

He brings a hand up to wipe the sweat off his face but leaves a streak of grease in its place. Fuck, why is that weirdly hot? I’ve never been much for domestic fantasies, but I can’t help picturing him in the garage at home on a Sunday, fixing that weird sound my car has been making, and I come out to bring him something to drink...

My throat tightens and I force myself to look away. How is it that over eight years ago, I literally ran away at the thought of something that mundane, and now I'm getting all emotionally horny over it? Is this what maturing feels like? Or maybe I've just spent the time missing Tallahassee so much that I can't lie to myself about it anymore.

Any thoughts I had of taking off evaporate in an instant. I'm not ready to give up yet, even if my road to forgiveness looks harder than I want it to right now.

Now, I just need to find a way to keep Tallahassee from being all cold and quiet when he gets home tonight. If he just goes straight to his room and closes the door, I'll lose the momentum from last night.

I'm sure I'll think of something.

# Chapter 6

## TALLAHASSEE

I look up just as Gates is leaving the garage, my eyes lingering on his back for a few extra seconds until he climbs into his car and takes off.

“That’s not the boss’s boyfriend, is it? I thought he was hot and heavy with that cute vet who came by yesterday,” Riggs asks.

“Nah, that’s his brother, Gates.” I track his car until it disappears from sight, my mind refusing to let go of that moment last night when it felt like nothing had changed. If Gates hadn’t said anything about the kiss, what would have happened?

“Ah. You have a thing for him, then?”

“What?” I sputter, whipping my head around to check that Steele isn’t still within earshot. “It’s not... He’s...” I scoff and shake my head.

“Tal and *Gates*?” Auggie asks, butting in on the conversation with amusement dripping from his tone. “You know, actually I could kind of see that. There’s all this fiery tension between the two of you.”

“Hate fucking is the best kind of fucking,” Shep says.

“Nobody is hate-fucking anybody,” I mutter.

“That’s a lie, I hate fucked this obnoxious twink last night. He’s the worst, I can’t stand him, but we’ll probably do it again next week because hate fucking is the *best*,” Shep insists.

“I meant Gates and I aren’t...” I trail off and sigh. I don’t know why I’m bothering. Now Riggs has put this idea in their heads, I’m never going to get them to shut up about it. “You know how weird Steele is about anyone fucking his brother, so can you guys just drop it?”

“Wait, does that mean there’s something to drop?” Red pops up from under the hood of a car with a curious look in

my direction. “*Did you fuck Gates?*”

“We’re not fucking,” I insist. *Technically* it’s not a lie. It’s been years since Gates and I fooled around, so no, we’re not actively fucking. Now, if they asked if we’re legally married because Gates’s irresponsible ass never got around to signing the divorce papers? That one would be a harder lie to tell with a straight face.

“Tal,” Steele calls, standing in his office doorway. My stomach plummets. Did he overhear the guys being dumbasses? Did he notice the way I couldn’t stop myself from watching Gates leave just like Riggs did? *Shit, shit, shit.*

I set down my wrench and wipe my hands clean on the front of my jumpsuit. Well, *cleanish*. And then I head over to Steele’s office.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing, I just didn’t feel like staring at paperwork again yet. Come shoot the shit with me for a few minutes.”

“Oh.” I let out a relieved breath and stroll into his office, plopping myself down on the chair in front of his desk, and propping my feet up. “So, what was Gates here about?” I ask as casually as I can manage, trying not to let my mind wander to the conclusion that he stopped by to tell his brother that he’s taking off.

“I don’t know. He was being weird.”

A spike of anxiety makes my blood pressure skyrocket. “Weird?” I rasp and then clear my throat. It’s fine. Gates can leave. I’ve been waiting for this since he moved into my extra bedroom. It’s *fine*.

“Yeah, like really helpful. He paid for lunch and then he offered to take a look at Porter’s roof to see if he could fix it himself. It wasn’t like him at all.”

“Oh,” I say again, trying not to let Steele see the relief that washes over me. I should *want* Gates gone. It’ll be easier to get back to being completely and totally over him if he’s not in my face every morning, half naked, singing and cooking breakfast.

“But then he was also talking about a road trip and stuff. I think he’s getting restless. Has he said anything to you about how long he’s sticking around?” Steele asks in the same carefully casual tone I’m using.

That’s probably why I’m relieved at the thought of Gates sticking around. Steele prefers it when his brother is in town, and I want my best friend to be happy. There’s a simple, completely unselfish explanation for the whole thing.

“He claims he’s staying.”

We trade a look that says neither of us is buying that line.

“Right.” He sighs. “I guess we’ll find out once he’s gone, like we usually do.”

“Yeah,” I mutter, feeling sour all over again. We turn the conversation away from Gates and onto lighter topics for a while until Steele shoos me away to finish the car I’m working on.

Luckily, none of the guys bring up Riggs’s insane, albeit accurate, theory about me and Gates again, and the rest of the day flies by in a blur of oil changes, tune ups, and tire rotations. Pretty exciting stuff.

I jog up the steps to my apartment, not sure if I should be prepared for a prank or for Gates to try to get past my defenses again. I suppose it’s best to be on guard for anything. I step inside and don’t immediately find anything out of the ordinary. I greet Nigel and then head down the hallway to my bedroom. It’s not until I step inside that I notice something amiss.

“Gates,” I shout.

He doesn’t respond right away, but I can hear him rustling around inside his bedroom, so I storm across the hallway and pound on his door. “Gates!”

Footsteps near the door and after a few seconds, it swings open. “Hey, how was your day?” he asks casually, leaning against the doorway with an easy grin.

“Where’s my bedroom door?”

He frowns and cocks his head to one side. “Your bedroom door? Seems like an odd thing to lose.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “I didn’t *lose* it. My dumbass roommate took it. Haha, hilarious prank, kudos to you. Now tell me where it is.”

He shrugs one shoulder, his expression remaining completely innocent. “I haven’t seen it. You know, I was just reading an article about the uptick of crime in this town. You don’t think someone broke in here and took your door, do you?”

I let out a frustrated growl and make a move to push his door the rest of the way open so I can find my damn door and put it back on its hinges. But he holds tight, blocking me from seeing into his bedroom.

“Fine,” I huff. “I suppose privacy is overrated anyway.” I grasp the zipper on my jumpsuit and slowly tug it down, keeping my eyes locked on Gates’s. He watches with a spark of curiosity, tracking the movement of my hand as I pull the zipper lower and lower.

When I step out of it, he swallows hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing and his cheeks flushing with just a hint of pink. His gaze lingers on my white boxer briefs, my soft cock bulging against the form-fitting material. His eyes go wide when I hook my fingers in the waistband and start to pull those down too.

“What are you doing?” he asks, his voice husky, reminding me of too many nights whispering filthy things to each other in the dark. My cock jerks at the rapid flood of memories, and Gates’s eyes go wide as he watches it slowly swell. His attention on it only encourages things, coaxing my cock to thicken quickly.

“I don’t have a door, so it doesn’t matter where I undress, right?” I challenge, keeping my voice as even as possible, in spite of the rapid redistribution of blood from my brain to my growing erection.

Gates licks his lips and clutches his door harder, like he's afraid if he lets go, he'll throw himself onto my cock. My erection twitches again. I'm playing with fire. The danger alarm in the back of my mind is blaring, but I can't seem to make myself care.

"I—" He moves closer. It's only half an inch but it's enough to snap me back to reality. I'm not just playing with fire, I'm one match away from burning down the wall I've spent years building to keep me safe from Gates.

"I'm going to take a shower," I say, cutting him off.

He nods silently and I whirl on the spot, practically sprinting into my bedroom before I can do something too stupid to come back from.

## GATES

Tallahassee leaves his clothes in a heap in front of my bedroom door, running away from me like his ass is on fire. He's gone in a blur, but it's still long enough for me to catch a quick glimpse of the small donkey tattooed on his left ass cheek. An unintended grin spreads over my face and I absently rub my hand over the same spot on my own ass where a matching tattoo rests.

Six months or so after we started fooling around, I convinced Tallahassee to come visit me in Colorado, where I was living at the time, and while he was there, we got drunk and decided it would be hilarious to get matching asses on our asses. We weren't wrong, it's pretty fucking funny.

I hear the shower start in his bathroom. It's loud enough that I'm sure he left the bathroom door open on purpose to prove some kind of point. *But* he didn't just go to his room and close the door tonight, so I'm pretty sure I won this one.

I stand in my doorway, listening to the shower running and the noises Tallahassee makes as he moves around his bathroom before pulling back the curtain to get into the shower, the wet sound of the water hitting his skin, and then a quiet moan that I'm sure I wasn't supposed to hear.



Heat rushes through my veins and another muffled, throaty groan reaches my ears. My cock responds while my mind fills with the image of Tallahassee in the shower, one hand braced against the slick wall while he works the other up and down his thick, stiff shaft. Is he thinking of me?

My knees quake and a moan gets caught in my own throat. I back into my room and swing the door shut, unzipping my jeans with one hand before the door is even fully closed. My cock is more than half hard, which is a fucking feat, as I shove my hand down the front of my boxer briefs and wrap my hand around it. I lean against my door, tugging roughly at my cock to coax it to full hardness. It's been fucking *months* now since I've gotten off. If it weren't for the occasional wet dream since my surgery, I think my one good ball would have exploded from cum backup by now.

I squeeze my eyes closed, sinking into the fantasy of Tallahassee in the shower only a few dozen feet away, furiously jerking off while thinking about me. My skin prickles and my cock tingles, still not as stiff as I'd like it, but getting better by the second, thickening in my grip, getting harder and harder.

But what if he's *not* thinking of me? What if Tallahassee is in there, pissed at me for taking his door off and is jerking it to thoughts of someone else while he prepares to kick me out and wash his hands of my bullshit once and for all?

I let my head fall back, banging quietly against the door. Fuck.

I keep stroking myself, closing my eyes tighter and trying *not* to wonder if I fucked up *again*. I pull on images of Tallahassee from years ago, with just a few less smile lines around his eyes and absent the guarded expression he always has towards me now. I imagine him down on his knees in front of me, with his mouth open eagerly, waiting for me to stuff my cock inside.

My dick twitches and my breathing speeds up. The Tallahassee in my fantasy leans in close and drags his tongue

along the inside of my thigh, the way he used to torture me for what felt like hours until my whole body would tremble, and I'd beg him to just fucking suck me already. His tongue inches higher and higher, my hand moving wildly over my cock.

I reach between my legs with my other hand to cup my balls and that sick feeling hits me again. Not balls. Ball. Just one. The rational, logical part of my brain knows it's not a big deal. It's just a damn testicle, who gives a fuck? But I can't shake the feeling that hits me every time. Why can't I just remember not to touch my sac when I'm trying to jerk it? Or better yet, why can't I get over this weird mental block I've developed?

I sigh and release my softening cock while my poor, neglected leftover ball gives a helpless throb from lack of relief.

It's probably for the best anyway. If I want to fix shit between Tallahassee and me, I shouldn't be jerking off to thoughts of him anyway.

Would he be weirded out or turned off by my half sac? Not that I'm planning to ask him to get up close and personal...

But, fuck, if he offered, would I be able to say no?

I groan, zipping my pants back up and stalking across my room to grab the hammer and hinge pins off my desk, and then picking up his door and awkwardly walking it out of my room, and across the hall to his. The soft moaning has stopped, so that's one distraction down at least. Although, *not* picturing him washing cum out of his happy trail is a challenge of its own.

It only takes me a few minutes to get the door back up. I'm turning over a new leaf—no more pranks. Or, like, very few pranks and only if they're going to be *really* funny. That's progress, right?

When I'm finished with the door, I head into the kitchen. I whistle to myself as I open the fridge in search of

the chicken that I swear I picked up at the store a few days ago. Or was it pork? I shift a few items around in search of it.

“Gross,” I mutter as I pick up a container full of leftovers that are more of a science experiment than food at this point. I should probably clean out the fridge.

I turn around, leaving the refrigerator door open, and go to get a garbage bag. But when I reach the sink, I realize that if I’m cleaning out the fridge, I’ll need to do the dishes too, so I don’t have moldy Tupperware just sitting in the sink. I turn on the sink to let the water warm up, and while I wait, I reach into my pocket to put on some music.

I have a few texts from various friends all over the states, some sending me memes, others asking when I’ll be back around. Guilt churns in my gut. I haven’t told *anyone* about the surgery or that I’m planning to stay in Wisconsin for a while. Hell, at this point, it feels like if I respond at all, I’ll have to explain to everyone why I’ve been M.I.A. for nearly a year.

“Gates.”

I look up from my phone. “Shit,” I gasp, reaching to shut off the sink just as the water starts to overflow, sloshing onto the floor and soaking my feet.

“What the hell is going on?” He walks into the kitchen, picking up the disgusting container of leftovers that I set on the floor in front of the fridge, and closing the refrigerator door. Then, he crosses the room in a hurry and pulls some hand towels out of a drawer, handing one to me and keeping the other for himself as he drops to the floor to start mopping up the mess.

I glance at the sink and back at the refrigerator, trying to retrace my steps to remember what exactly I was doing. My stomach growls. Oh yeah...

“I was making dinner,” I answer, getting down on the floor to help him.

He fights back a smile. “Ah, of course. That’s also how I cook dinner, scrolling through my phone while the sink

overflows.”

“There was logic to it,” I assure him.

“Of course.” We get the floor dry, and he stands up, offering me a hand. I hesitate for a second, half expecting him to retaliate against all my pranks by pretending to help me up and then letting me fall instead, or something equally as juvenile. But that’s not Tallahassee’s style.

His hand feels warm and familiar, albeit with a few new calluses that have developed over the years. I get to my feet and toss the sopping wet rag into the empty side of the sink.

“Thanks for giving my door back, by the way.”

“Yeah.” I run my hand over the back of my neck and give him an apologetic look. “I’m trying to be less of a pain in the ass, but you’ve gotta cut me some slack, okay?”

“Cut you some slack for cock blocking me, ruining my shit, and generally torturing me for the past eight months?” He cocks an eyebrow at me in challenge.

“Fuck, man, it was the only thing that ever thawed you out. I was good the first few weeks,” I remind him, pointing a finger at him accusingly. “But you acted like I wasn’t even here, and you hardly even looked at me. I thought I was going to go fucking insane. So, I started fucking with you, and you have to admit, it worked.”

His shoulders sag and he looks at me with sad eyes that are *so* much worse than annoyance or even pity. “*That’s* why you’ve been fucking with me?”

I shrug. “Look, I’ve never been the most mature guy in the world, I think we both know that.”

“Perish the thought,” he says flatly.

I point at him again. “You haven’t exactly handled this situation very well either.”

Tallahassee lets out a long breath and then cards his fingers through his hair, causing several strands to stand on

end. “Fine,” he says. “It’s a really weird, messed up situation and neither of us have been handling it well.”

I nod. “Thank you.”

We stare at each other for several *long* seconds. There are so many things that are still unsaid, but this feels like a small victory, and maybe I should be happy with that and try not to fuck it up?

“Why won’t you talk about the kiss?” I blurt, because of fucking course my mouth can’t listen to the sound logic my brain is offering up.

His expression hardens and he takes a step back. “There’s nothing to say about it. We kissed, so what? We’ve done a hell of a lot more than kiss.”

My stomach churns. “I know. We never really talked about that either.”

“You want to drag up the past?” His nostrils flare and he stands a little taller. “Why don’t we talk about why you never bothered to sign the divorce papers when I sent them?”

My throat tightens. “I never got around to it.”

“You couldn’t find time in over *seven* years to sign the papers?”

*No, because I didn’t want to.*

I swallow hard. “You’re right, maybe it’s best if we leave Pandora’s Box unopened,” I admit, leaning against the damp ledge of the sink.

Tallahassee nods. “Okay, so I won’t ignore you and you’ll give up the pranks, and neither of us will bring up the past again. Deal?”

I chew on the inside of my cheek, considering the offer. If I really do want to fix things, I know letting the past go is the right thing to do. He’s right, there’s nothing good that can come from harping on it now. It’s not like we’re going to talk this shit out and then fall back into each other’s arms...or beds. What’s passed is past. I fucked up, *I* left, and now I have to live with that.

I stick my hand out to shake. “Deal.”

He shakes my hand firmly. “Good. Want help making dinner? This time I can flood the kitchen while you unload all of the items in the fridge onto the floor.”

I snort a laugh. “Tease me now, Lassie, but you won’t be joking when you taste how good my chicken is. Or maybe it’s pork, that is still undetermined at the moment.”

“Mystery meat, sounds delicious,” he mocks.

I reach into the sink to scoop a handful of water out and toss it at him. He yelps in protest, and I go in for more, but he grabs me before I can splash him again, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me in to hold me captive against his chest so I can’t launch another attack. I laugh and struggle until he manages to shuffle me clear of the sink so I can’t reload.

“Tell you what, why don’t we just order dinner and I’ll clean out the fridge tomorrow instead?” I offer. “Tomorrow or probably by next week Tuesday at the very latest.”

“Next week Tuesday?”

“Yeah, for sure by that Friday,” I bargain, and he chuckles.

“You order food, I’ll clean the fridge right now.” He releases me and tries to shoo me out of the kitchen.

“Only if I can also pick a movie for us to watch.”

Tallahassee sighs. “Fine, but nothing with too many explosions. That shit gives me a headache.”

“*Clueless* it is,” I tease, darting out of the room, cackling before he can try to get the last word.

This truce might just work out after all. Not pranking him will be easy. In fact, it will free up a lot of time in my day not having to come up with new schemes constantly. Not talking about the past, though...that one might be trickier.

# Chapter 7

## TALLAHASSEE

*“You shouldn’t be here,” Gates whispers, moving closer in spite of his warning.*

*It’s been three weeks since New Year’s Eve. Three weeks since I kissed him on the balcony, in the freezing cold. Three weeks since I immediately freaked the fuck out, made an excuse, and went home to pretend like I didn’t just kiss my best friend’s younger brother.*

*“You want me to go?” I ask, stepping towards him, my body feeling like it’s pulled by a magnet.*

*He smirks, catching the front of my sweatshirt in his fist and leaning in until our noses are nearly touching, his breath ghosting over my face. “I didn’t say that.”*

*My heart goes wild, every molecule in my body aching, demanding I close the fraction of an inch between our lips and kiss him again, just to find out if I’ve been imagining how incredible the first one was. I must have been, right? A simple, brief kiss isn’t enough to shake the very foundation of a person’s core the way this one did. It’s a hell of a lot more likely that I’m losing my god damn mind, and as soon as I kiss him again, I’ll snap out of it and think clearly again.*

*“Steele is going to be pissed if he finds out.” I’m not sure if I’m warning him or saying it out loud in the hope that it will convince me to come to my senses and walk out before I do something I can’t take back.*

*Gates nods. “Steele is always pissed at me, so it’s no big thing. But you shouldn’t ruin your friendship with him over a kiss...or more than a kiss.” He nudges the tip of his nose against mine and my breath hitches in my chest.*

*My stomach is fluttering and dancing, my skin feels like there’s an electric current running over it. And, in spite of his warning, Gates is still holding on to the front of my shirt.*

*A deep part of me knows he's right. Steele will absolutely lose his shit if he finds out, and whatever this is probably isn't worth losing my best friend over. I should turn around and leave like I did a few weeks ago. I should choose the safe path and try to forget whatever madness brought me over here tonight when I knew Steele would be out on the date he's been crowing about all week.*

*I lunge forward before my common sense can get the better of me, claiming Gates's mouth in a rough, hungry kiss. And, fucking hell, the spark is still there. He parts his lips and thrusts his tongue into my mouth, and the electricity racing along my skin is even more intense than I've spent three weeks remembering.*

*His chest heaves against mine, both of us breathing fast, our lips moving in a desperate rhythm as our tongues tangle. I thread my fingers through his hair, and he tugs on my shirt.*

*It's just a kiss, but it feels like so much more. It feels like something I'll never be able to come back from, and I don't think I want to.*

I sit bolt upright in my bed, drenched in sweat and aching to my very core. My cock is hard as a rock and my hands are trembling as I reach up to rub my hands over my face. I barely have a chance to wonder why the fuck I had *that* dream, that *memory*, before my brain supplies the answer.

It's June fifteenth. At this time exactly nine years ago, we were on a plane on our way to Las Vegas. By the end of the night, Gates and I were married, and by the next morning, he was gone.

My stomach knots, but even this itchy, anxious feeling isn't enough to convince my cock to calm down. I check the time and turn off my alarm that's set to go off in half an hour, then I fling back my sheets and slip out of bed.

It's been a few weeks now since our little heart to heart. As promised, Gates has given up his pranking career, and I've been doing my best not to shut him out, even though it's fucking hard to face him some days.



I shuffle across my bedroom, towards the connected bathroom. I tug my shirt up over my head and toss it into the laundry hamper, pausing just long enough to step out of my underwear and fling them onto the pile of laundry as well.

Maybe I should pull a Gates and pick all of my dirty boxers out of the hamper to drape them all over the living room. Would he be annoyed or amused? I try to imagine his reaction as I step into the bathroom and turn on the shower, nudging the temperature towards cold to calm my raging libido and cool myself off.

I step under the lukewarm spray, sighing at the relief of the water on my overheated skin. Unfortunately, it doesn't do a damn thing to get my throbbing erection to stand down. I reach for a bar of soap and start lathering myself up, closing my eyes and calling on a go-to fantasy so I can take care of things.

I picture a sexy bear cub of a man, all wet, hard, and eager for me. I wrap my soapy hand around my shaft and start to stroke myself. I imagine the nameless fantasy man rubbing up against me, grinding his cock on mine, moaning my name and panting how good I feel. And then, just like Channing fucking Tatum, he has the audacity to morph in my mind's eye. Gates replaces him, cock hard, skin soaked and soapy, playful grin on that damn kissable mouth of his.

A fresh spike of heat ricochets through me, and I grit my teeth, my hand working faster over my cock. I mentally try to shake the image off, to replace Gates with the bear cub again. But the damn stubborn man just won't budge. God, that's so Gates. He sticks in my imagination, replacing my hand with his own, kissing and nipping along my throat as he jerks me off, his erection angled between my legs, nudging my balls as he thrusts and grinds on me.

*"I'm addicted to your cock."* My mind conjures the words he always used to moan when I would stretch his hole and stuff him full.

My balls tighten and my cock pulses hard in my grasp, making me gasp and fuck faster into the tight, slick grip of my

hand. It's hopeless trying to banish him from my fantasy, so I give in to it, imagining biting a bruise onto his shoulder and then pushing him against the wall roughly. Precum leaks from my cock and a moan slips from my lips as I tighten my grip, teetering closer and closer to the edge.

*"Tallahassee."* The way Gates used to rasp my name like it was a filthy, desperate word is etched into my memories. I gasp and brace my free hand on the wall, my knees buckling as my orgasm punches through me with so much intensity I can't catch my breath until it's over and the wall is painted with my release, my balls drained and tingling.

I hurry through the rest of my shower after that, rinsing the cum off the wall and then the soap off my body. I take more time than usual drying off and getting dressed, dreading sitting in the kitchen with Gates this morning, eating breakfast together like everything is fucking peachy, like we're not secretly married, like I didn't just jerk off so hard to thoughts of him that my soul left my body for a second.

It turns out that I was worrying for nothing. I step out of my bedroom to a silent apartment, aside from Nigel's typical morning chatter. I peek my head into the kitchen to find a fresh pot of coffee waiting for me, but no other sign of Gates.

My heart forces its way into my throat. Could he be gone? Would he have left without a word?

I let out a strangled laugh. Of course, he would leave without a word. That's the only way he ever leaves. For a long time, I thought he just didn't care, or maybe that he thought no one else did. I asked him once, ten years or so ago.

*"I'm just a hell of a lot better at hellos than goodbyes,"* he said, and then he kissed the life out of me, proving his point that he is damn good at hellos.

I stand in the kitchen, trying to work up the courage to go back down the hallway to his bedroom to check, but I can't. I don't have the emotional bandwidth this morning to deal with it if he left in the middle of the night. If he's gone, he'll still be gone when I get home later. I'll face it then.

I prepare Nigel's breakfast and then fill a travel mug with the coffee that Gates left for me, and I take off before my self-control snaps and I give in to the urge to check his bedroom.

The garage is bustling when I get there, music already blaring, everyone either shooting the shit or elbow deep in their first car of the day.

"Hey, Tal, today's the day," Auggie says as soon as he spots me.

My steps stutter and for a second, I wonder how the hell he knows that today is the nine-year anniversary of my secret wedding to Gates.

"Uh..."

"Steele's birthday."

My breath whooshes out of my lungs and my shoulders sag. "Right, Steele's birthday."

"Don't tell me you forgot. I told you last week that I organized for us all to take him out for laser tag tonight," he reminds me.

"I didn't forget," I lie.

"Cool. I think Red got a cake and dropped it off at Wooley's this morning so we can take him there after laser tag."

"Sounds good," I murmur, my mind still stuck back at the apartment. Maybe I should have just checked Gates's room and gotten it over with. It's like ripping off a Band-aid.

"Gates texted me this morning that he'll be there, and Porter, obviously. I talked to Miller yesterday, and he says all the guys will be there too." By 'all the guys' he means the guys who work at Four Bears Construction, and all their partners.

"Gates is coming?" I fixate on that one particular sentence. "He told you this morning that he'd be there?"

“Yeah. He texted me like an hour ago to say he would definitely make it.”

I smile. “Thank fuck.” Auggie arches an eyebrow at me and grins back. “Because I’m sure Steele would want his brother there.”

“*Right.*” He winks at me, and I scoff.

“It’s not—” But I don’t get a chance to finish defending myself before Auggie starts on the noisy work of using the impact wrench to take a tire off of the car he’s working on.

Gates hasn’t left. That’s good. Good for Steele, obviously. And good for Nigel since that bird is crazy about my annoying roommate. As for me, the sooner Gates leaves, the sooner I can get back to my regular line up of shower fantasies and maybe even bring a date home again. Yup, whenever he decides to take off, it will be a huge relief.

I wonder whether, if I tell myself that enough times, I’ll eventually believe it.

## GATES

“Alright, so, the good news is, from what I can tell, the roof itself is in good shape, there’s just a spot that needs to be patched.” I climb down the ladder slowly, the warm mid-morning sun beating down on the back of my neck.

“You think you can fix it?” Porter asks, looking adorably hopeful, pushing his slipping glasses back up his sweaty nose.

“I can fix it,” I promise with more confidence than I actually feel. I’ve done fixes like this dozens of times, but never without any supervision. Plus, it’s been a few years. But if this is my chance to do something to repay everything Steele has done for me, I’m going to take it.

“You’re a lifesaver.” He flings his arms around me in an unexpected hug.

“Don’t mention it.” I awkwardly pat his back. “Like I told Steele, it’s the least I can do.”

Porter lets me go and I drag my hands through my hair to push it off of my sweaty forehead.

“Do you want to come in and cool off for a few minutes?” he offers. “I have some fresh lemonade.”

“Sure, that sounds good.” I follow him inside. The blast of icy air-conditioning is a relief of its own. It shouldn’t be this damn hot in the middle of June. I catch myself absently running my thumb along my bare ring finger as I follow Porter into the kitchen, the weird phantom limb of a ring clearly very aware of what today is.

“You know, your brother is really glad you’re still in town,” he says conversationally while he pours two glasses of lemonade from a pitcher.

I scoff. “I don’t know about that. I stopped by the shop to have lunch with him a few weeks ago and he kept making cracks about me needing to borrow money. He’s always so suspicious of my motives, which I guess I’ve earned, but it still sucks.” I’m not sure why I confess all that to Porter. Obviously, he’s heard Steele’s side of things and I’m sure he thinks I’m a loser jackass too. Plus, I didn’t exactly make a great impression on him while I was staying at Steele’s place after my surgery, moping around and acting like a spoiled asshole.

“Sometimes it can take some time to change people’s perception. It took forty years for him to form his current opinions, so try not to get too frustrated that it’ll take longer than a month or so for him to see you differently.”

I put my elbows on the table and let my shoulders sag. “Fuck, you don’t think it’s going to take another forty years to fix things, do you?”

He chuckles and sets one of the glasses in front of me. “Nah. I’ll give him a little nudge too, if it helps.”

I sit back up and take a sip of the drink. “Thanks. I owe you one.”

“If you can fix my roof well enough for me to sell this place, we can call it even.”

“Deal.” I grin. “I didn’t know you were planning to sell.”

“Yeah. Don’t tell your brother, but once this house is decent enough to at least make my money back on it, I’m going to put it on the market and invite myself to move in with him. Once I have all my stuff there, I’m sure he’ll figure it out.”

I snort a laugh. “I can see why he likes you.”

“Thanks. You’re not as bad as they say, either.” He winks at me.

“Spread the word. I could use all the good press I can get.”

“Give it time,” he says again, patting my arm reassuringly.

We finish our lemonade and then I decide to get to work. I might as well get the roof done while it’s on my mind, otherwise I’m bound to forget all about it, and then there goes the goodwill I’m working my ass off to build.

Hell, I’ve spent three weeks trying to get my ass over here to take a look at it in the first place. The only reason I managed to make it over this morning is that I woke up with my stomach in knots when I realized today is our damn wedding anniversary and I was scared as hell I might say something about it and piss Tallahassee off. Avoidance is the best medicine sometimes.

“Don’t forget, Steele’s birthday thing is tonight,” Porter reminds me before I leave for the hardware store to get the supplies I need.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

# Chapter 8

## TALLAHASSEE

I feel like I'm fifteen all over again, stepping into the laser tag equipment room. Of course, this place is a hell of a lot better than the one we frequented as teens.

Our large group is noisy as we all pick out our laser rifles and put on our tag vests. I sneak a glance around at all the guys from Four Bears Construction and their husbands or partners, partially because watching them flirt with their men is better than glancing at the door every two seconds to see if Gates is really coming, and a little because I can't help but wonder if our little garage full of eternal bachelors is going to fall prey to the same fate that struck them. Steele already found the man of his dreams. Things might not be *official* yet, but I hear wedding bells in their future.

Who's next?

I size up Auggie, Red, Shep, and our newest addition, Riggs. Red has a longstanding, utterly hopeless crush on his nomadic, *straight* best friend, so he'll probably stay forever single. Shep is a slut of the highest order—his words, not mine. He has an entire stable of fuck buddies and gets hives at the idea of commitment, so he's a no go too. Auggie is a strong candidate to get hit next. He has a kind heart, and he bakes like Martha Stewart on speed, so he's definitely a catch. The problem is, he rarely seems to set his sights on guys who return the feeling. His most recent hopeless crush was his neighbor, Demetri, who's now happily committed to one of the burly construction workers, Miller. I don't know Riggs well enough to guess his situation, but unless he tones down his vibe or finds a man who thinks scared horny is the best kind of horny, he might be shit out of luck too.

Fuck knows I had my chance at love, and I'm not the least bit eager to rinse and repeat with anyone else. It took me too long to get over Gates. Some days I think I'm *still* trying to get over him.

The door opens noisily and *speak of the devil*, Gates appears. My chest gives an irritating flutter at the sight of him striding in, sunburned and sweaty with a carefree grin on his lips, looking better than he looked starring in my fantasy this morning. My cock twitches at the memory and I grit my teeth.

The relief that spreads through me is as frustrating as the way my skin is heating up at seeing him. Auggie said he would be here. I guess I just didn't fully believe that he was still in town until I saw it with my own two eyes.

"Look who decided to show up," Steele teases, swinging an arm around his brother's neck and dragging him in for a noogie, like they're still a couple of kids.

Gates laughs and wrestles him off. "I was fixing *your* boyfriend's roof so you can get him to move in with you guilt free."

"What?" Porter asks, perking up while Steele scowls at his brother and Gates grimaces.

"Shit."

"You want me to move in with you?" Porter asks.

Steele drags his fingers nervously through his shaggy beard and then gives Porter an adorably hopeful smile. "I've been working up the courage to ask."

"That's perfect because I was planning to just move all my stuff in anyway and see how long it would take you to notice," he confesses, and Steele laughs and then pulls him in for a passionate kiss, earning catcalls from the group.

"You were working without any sunscreen on, obviously," I eye the glowing red skin on the back of his neck and face, reaching over to tug up his sleeve and confirm that they're just as burned. I make a mental note to pick up some aloe on my way home tonight. He's going to be hurting tomorrow.

Gates cranes his neck to look at his shoulders where I'm tugging up the sleeve, seemingly surprised to find them burned. "Huh."



I snort and shake my head. I swear, the man needs a keeper twenty-four hours a day.

*Not my problem*, I remind myself, finally buckling my vest into place and picking up my laser gun.

“Let’s kick some big ol’ Bear ass,” I say with a wink in Ridge’s direction. We had one date before he ended up head over heels in love with Apollo. There aren’t any hard feelings there, but Apollo puts an arm around his man and glares at me anyway like a dog protecting its bone.

“Oh please, you guys are going down harder than Dare does when he’s hungry for my cock,” Stone taunts, and his husband rolls his eyes.

“Please, we both know you’re the one begging for a good throat fucking daily.”

“Jesus, you two, please respect my virgin ears,” West complains, putting his hands over both ears and humming loudly.

His husband, Sawyer, chuckles. “You’re hardly a virgin, babe.”

“Fine, but I don’t need to hear my uncle talk about oral sex.” He shudders dramatically.

“Come on, we all suck cock, let’s be adults about it,” Shep scoffs.

There’s an extra addition with the group tonight, a new hire to the construction company. Griff introduced himself when everyone filed in, he’s a big, stoic bear of a man who seems to fit in with the group perfectly. Of course, right now he’s looking around the group, following the banter with an expression that says he’s not sure all this camaraderie and teasing is what he signed up for.

“And on that note,” Steele says with amusement, “let’s play.” He cocks his fake gun and we all file through the door into the arena.

We would have killed for a place like this when we were young. The arena is fashioned after an abandoned city,

complete with a faux bombed-out building and respawn points for each team. It's obvious the owners play a lot of video games and paid attention to detail when designing the arena.

We all scatter, spreading out in a hurry before the alarm sounds to signify the start of the match. I head straight for the building, hoping to get a good vantage point to snipe the other team undetected. The buzzer goes off and chaos erupts, with everyone throwing any sort of plan or strategy out the window in favor of wildly shooting anyone they see from the opposite team.

I find the perfect spot at a window to shoot the guys a few feet down on the ground. I hit one after another, racking up the points for our team until my own vest pings to signify that I've been hit.

"Hey," I grumble, looking down to see the light in the center of my chest flashing to alert me that I need to go to the respawn point. I turn around to see who hit me and find Gates standing there looking smug. "I'm on your team, dick."

He cackles. "Oops."

I aim for his chest and pull my trigger. Of course, since I haven't respawned, it doesn't count, so he just laughs harder. I huff and stomp past him to get to the respawn point, shouldering him roughly as I pass just for good measure. His body is warm and solid, which just annoys me more.

I jog into the small outpost that's marked for our team. As soon as I step inside, my vest flashes and dings again to let me know I've been reset. I cock my laser rifle and step back out, but as soon as I exit the covered area, my vest goes off again.

"God dammit," I complain, looking around to see who had the bad manners to shoot me coming out of the spawn point. It takes me about half a second to spot Gates, hanging out of the same window I was using a few minutes before with his gun pointed right at me. He waves and blows me a kiss.

"We're on the same damn team, fuckwad," I shout, hearing the cackle of his laughter over the chaotic shouts and

endless ping of vests registering hits.

I back into the respawn post one more time, strategizing about how I'm going to get out without him immediately tagging me again. Even though it's not *technically* allowed, I decide to slip out the back of the small, covered area, staying low and keeping an eye out for Gates or anyone from the other team as I do my best to stay behind cover until I reach the building again. If he wants to play dirty, we can play dirty.

I sneak up the stairs as quietly as I can, my laser gun at the ready, my back to the wall so he can't pop out of nowhere and hit me from behind. Luckily, he's still perched in the window when I reach the second-floor landing. He's focused on taking aim when I creep up behind him and grab the back of his vest.

Gates yelps in surprise as I drag him out of the window and onto the floor, immediately straddling him and pointing my gun at his chest.

"*We're on the same team, dick,*" he mocks, holding up his hands in surrender, still clutching his gun in one of them. The smirk on his face warns me not to trust his submissive posture. He could pull his gun on me at any second and force me to respawn for a third damn time in two minutes.

"Ask for mercy," I taunt, pressing the barrel of my laser rifle against the sensor in the middle of his chest. Just like when I shoved past him, I'm suddenly hyper aware of how solid his body is, trapped under me, my thighs on either side of him, pinning him down. My cock starts to swell immediately, his smile slipping and his expression turning from amused to heated.

"Mercy," he says with a hint of playfulness, lifting his hips just enough that I can feel the soft bulge of his cock against me.

My throat tightens and my lips tingle with the memory of a million filthy, hungry kisses shared between us. What would he do if I leaned in right now and shoved my tongue into his mouth?

A loud buzzer sounds and for a second, I think it's the self-installed danger alarm in my head, but it turns out the game is just over. I pull the trigger, even though it's too late for any points on it, and then climb off of Gates, offering a hand to help him up. He takes it, getting to his feet and dusting himself off.

"Good game," he says, patting my shoulder.

"*Tsh*," I scoff. "You owe me a drink, Benedict Arnold."

"Deal."

## GATES

Our team lost to Team Bear by three points. Do I regret causing the loss by shooting my own teammate for a laugh? Abso-fucking-lutely not.

We all file through the door to Wooley's and head for the table that's already set up for Steele's birthday, complete with balloons and streamers hanging from the ceiling overhead, and a cake sitting in the middle.

A strange pang hits me in the middle of the chest. Maybe if I bothered to stick around anywhere long enough, I could make the kinds of friends who would do this shit for me too.

"First round of drinks is on Gates," Tallahassee volunteers, putting a hand in the middle of my back and giving me a playful shove in the direction of the bar.

Joke's on him, I stole his credit card a few minutes ago when he wasn't looking. Which is both hilarious and *technically* not a prank since we're married and in the eyes of the law, his money is my money.

"I'd be happy to," I say agreeably, snickering behind his back when he turns around, and then striding up to the bar to order us a couple of pitchers of beer and a round of shots.

I drum my fingers against the sticky bar top while I wait for the drinks, looking around at the busy bar. It has a more chill vibe than most gay bars I've spent time in. The pool tables and dartboards are a nice touch, and there's an area near

the old jukebox that people have claimed as a dance floor, all of the tables pushed back so there's room for couples to cram in and rub up on each other to the beat of whatever eighties tune is currently playing. I could see hanging out here more, assuming I stay in town. I mean, I *am* staying in town...

My gaze wanders in the direction of Steele and his large, ragtag group of friends all gathered around the table, laughing and talking. And, of course, my attention quickly zeros in on Tallahassee, sitting on Steele's left side, saying something that Steele is laughing and nodding along to.

A familiar edge of guilt creeps in. It's the same guilt I spent two years battling while the two of us fooled around in secret, and another nine years trying to suppress, wondering just how ballistic my brother will go if he ever finds out we got married.

I can still remember the night that Tallahassee showed up at Steele's apartment while I was there alone like it was yesterday. I warned him then that my brother would be mad, but he didn't seem to care. At the time, I reasoned with myself that he was an adult and could make his own choices. If he wanted to risk Steele's wrath, who was I to stop him? Now, I think I might have just been too selfish to turn him away. I wish I could bring myself to regret it, but I'd make the same decision again today.

How does that saying go? Ask for forgiveness, not permission.

I think if Steele found out, he'd be pissed, but I think he'd get over it. Not that there's much for him to find out at this point aside from a legal technicality and a heap of history we're both trying to put behind us.

The bartender, Brad, slides the tray of drinks across the bar to me, and I carefully pick it up to carry it over to the group.

When I set everything down, everyone reaches for one of the shots, and I hold mine up.

“To the best damn brother a guy could ask for. Happy birthday, man.”

“Happy birthday,” everyone echoes before downing their shots.

Steele gets up and comes around the table while the rest of the group pours themselves beer from the pitcher and digs into his cake.

Tallahassee, Auggie, Shep, and Red all get up and head over to the pool tables, and I watch for just a few seconds, lying to myself ineffectively about why I can't stop looking at Tal.

“Hey, I just wanted to say thanks for being here tonight,” Steele says, squeezing my shoulder and then pulling me in for a side hug.

“I'm glad I could make it. I hate that I've missed so much while I've been looking for some kind of meaning or fulfillment all over the damn continent. I don't want to miss out on any more here.”

He squeezes me a little harder. “So, you really are sticking around?”

“Just try and get rid of me.”

“Good. I'll sleep better with you around.”

Another wave of guilt tightens inside of me. It never occurred to me that my being gone was affecting anyone else.

“I'm sorry,” I mutter.

Steele waves off my apology. “Just happy to have you around. If you leave again, Tallahassee and I might just have to hunt your ass down again and drag you back kicking and screaming.”

A huff of a laugh escapes me. “I doubt Lassie would care if I left. He'd probably throw a party.”

Steele chuckles. “I forgot about that stupid nickname. But, yeah, you're probably right. I'm sure he's sick of your

annoying ass by now.” He ruffles my hair playfully and then saunters off to rejoin Porter.

My stomach knots and my attention is pulled towards Tallahassee again, wondering if Steele is right. Is he sick of me? Is he counting down the days until I leave or at least get the hell out of his apartment?

I can’t wonder about that for long, though, because my gaze lands on a cute twink who barely looks old enough to be in the bar, leaning against the pool table where Tallahassee, Auggie, Shep, and Griff are playing, making eyes at my man. I mean, at *Tallahassee*.

I throw back another one of the untouched shots and then square my shoulders and make my way over to them.

“There you are, Pookie. I’ve been looking for you everywhere.” I wrap my arms around Tallahassee from behind, shooting a pointed look at the twink.

“Uh...” Tallahassee tries to shake me off. “What?”

“Can’t let my husband just wander off unattended. Especially not such a hunky husband,” I continue, winking at Twinky McBullFucker like we’re sharing an inside joke. Auggie, Red, and Shep all try and fail to cover laughter.

“I, um, think I just spotted some friends,” the man says before scurrying off in a hurry.

“Aw man, did you have to cockblock the poor guy like that?” Auggie asks, still fighting laughter, while I finally let Tallahassee shake me loose.

I shrug. “It’s funny to see him get all mad and yell at me about having blue balls.” I squeeze Tal’s ass teasingly, and he jumps.

“Yeah, fucking hilarious,” he grumbles.

“Speaking of blue balls...” Shep looks past my shoulder at someone in the throng near the bar. “Here, you be Tallahassee’s partner, I have an entirely different stick and balls I need to attend to.” He thrusts the pool cue into my hand without waiting for a response and disappears.

“You’d better carry your weight. I’ve got fifty bucks riding on winning this game,” he warns.

I clumsily twirl the cue between my hands. “Psh, it’s in the bag.”

Griff turns out to be a pretty solid player when he’s not getting distracted by Auggie’s flirting. And, of course, I want to win, but I also want to fuck with Tallahassee just a little, so I settle for only a few ass grabs and lewd comments to distract him while he lines up his shots, reveling in the looks he throws my way that linger on the line between amused and aggravated. I grin back each time, wondering what he did with the rings after I left and if he even remembers what today is. Did he throw them away or does he still have them somewhere, tucked away?

And why the fuck am I so obsessed with those rings?

“I’m not splitting the winnings with you,” Tallahassee says after he sinks the last ball to win the game.

“Rude,” I scoff, blocking his path and standing just a little too close to him. I know I’m playing with fire, especially with my brother nearby. But I can’t seem to help myself. “Tell you what, you can buy me a drink instead,” I barter.

He leans in closer until his lips are right next to my ear, the scent of his spicy body wash and the natural sweetness of his skin making my heart beat faster and my cock ache to rub up against him. “I already bought you and everyone else a round. You’re not as sneaky as you think you are.”

I grin and put my hand on his chest to feel his heart thundering for just a second. “Well, then, one more drink won’t hurt.”

I push against his firm chest and back up a few steps, making sure he’s following me before I spin around and head up to the bar. I flag down Brad and order us a couple more beers. I don’t necessarily want another drink, but there’s something about the energy between Tallahassee and me tonight that I’m afraid to let slip by.



“Sorry for shooting you earlier and making our team lose.”

“No, you’re not,” he says with a snort, taking the beer Brad passes him, but not taking a sip from it.

“No, I’m not,” I agree. “In my defense, it wasn’t exactly a punishment to have you sitting on top of me, looking all sexy-pissed like some kind of rogue assassin with a hard-on for his target.”

“I didn’t have a hard-on,” he sputters.

I cock an eyebrow at him. “Sure, you didn’t.”

“Were you always this much of a pain in the ass?” He leans in a little. It’s just a fraction really, not even enough for anyone to notice, unless you happen to be hyper aware of every single molecule of space that the man takes up.

“I think so.” I chuckle, but the words hit a target deep inside me.

Being a huge pain in the ass is exactly why I couldn’t stay—why I never stay. Sure, at first my quirks and chaos are charming and fun. I say wacky things sometimes and shake up the norm. Everyone likes that for a minute, but sooner or later it gets old. It’s one thing to get dropped by friends, kicked to the curb by boyfriends or girlfriends I was with for a good time, but the thought of wearing out my welcome with Tallahassee? That’s a little too much to bear. Maybe it was selfish, but it was so much easier to bolt before he could be the one to tell me to go.

I swallow around the lump in my throat, mindlessly tracing the shape of the beer glass with my thumb and bumping my knee against his to reassure myself that he’s still right here.

“I know we promised not to bring it up again, but I’m sorry.” I risk a glance in his direction. Even without elaborating, I can tell he knows exactly what I’m talking about. His eyes get a glassy, faraway look to them and he frowns down at his untouched drink.

“Me too.”

“I can try to get that twink back for you as a penance if you want,” I offer, and his frown morphs into a crooked smirk.

“Nah, he wasn’t really my type anyway.” He presses his knee harder against mine, like he’s seeking the same wordless reassurance I was. “Don’t ever call me Pookie again though.”

“You got it, Lassie.”

He groans and I cackle.

Tallahassee pushes his drink away without ever taking a sip and looks over his shoulder. I follow his gaze to see Steele and Porter lost in each other on the makeshift dance floor. Not making out, not even grinding like most of the guys out there. They’re slow dancing, staring at each other like they’re in some cheesy movie.

“Gross,” I mutter, and he makes a sound of agreement. “I’m happy for them though.”

“Yeah, Steele deserves it. And, even better, he’s distracted enough that if I slip out quietly now, he’ll never even notice I’m gone.”

“I love that plan.” I slide off my stool, brushing my hand along his arm, just to see if he’ll let me. He doesn’t pull away, if anything, he presses into my touch for a second before he stands up too.

“Are you okay to drive?”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes at him. “If it will make you feel better, I’ll ride with you and I’ll come back to get my car tomorrow.”

He nods, resting his hand on my lower back to steer me through the increasingly crowded bar, the pressure of his touch just enough to make my head spin and my skin heat. His causal touch almost makes me forget the past nine years ever happened.

What if I hadn’t left that night? It’s a question that’s plagued me ever since. What if I’d just stayed?

It's cool outside, the oppressive humidity of all the bodies in the bar giving way to the evening breeze as we step into the dark parking lot. I make sure my car is locked as we pass, not that I think anyone would steal it, but I wouldn't put it past a couple of drunk, horny idiots to climb in the backseat and fuck if given the chance.

I crane my neck to look again, considering the possibility of pulling Tallahassee into the back of my car and letting this fantasy or energy or whatever is flowing between us tonight last a little longer.

He bumps into me before grabbing my hand to drag me along. "Something wrong with your car?" he asks, looking back at it with me.

"Hm? Oh, no, just lost in thought."

We reach his car, and he releases my hand, nudging me towards the passenger side. I climb in and roll down the window. It's a short drive home, but the cool night breeze on my skin feels like heaven the whole way.

Neither of us says anything as we climb the stairs to the apartment. There are a million things I *want* to say, but I'm afraid if I do, I'll ruin the nice moment we're having.

We take off our shoes and both greet Nigel, and then, just like the night we went to the arcade, we linger for a few seconds like we're both waiting for the other person to say something. The air around us feels heavy, *charged*. This is one of those moments where I would kill for that social script other people seem to have gotten that I missed out on. Is there something he wants me to say?

I clear my throat and shift my weight, turning towards my bedroom slowly, hoping the perfect words will come to me at any second.

"Hey," Tallahassee says, grabbing the back of my shirt to tug me to a halt before I can go anywhere. I turn to face him, feeling unsteady and drunk even though it's been a few hours since I took those shots. Maybe it's more about the way he's been letting me touch him all night than about what I had

to drink. He's silent for several unbearably long seconds, his eyes searching mine like he's expecting *me* to say something. I would, except I don't have the first clue what's on his mind. "Happy anniversary."

My heart skips a beat and my breath catches. "Wha-"

His lips land on mine, somehow both unexpected and inevitable at the same time. His mouth is soft and inviting and gone before I even have the chance to process what's happening.

"Night," he says, giving me a crooked smile, my brain still spinning uselessly like a car caught in the mud as he backs into his bedroom without another word.

"Night," I murmur too late, brushing my fingers over my tingling lips and then slipping into my own room, my thoughts a swirl of chaos and memories as I tumble into bed with a smile, I can't wipe off my face.

There are a million reasons why picking things back up with Tallahassee is a bad idea. My dick is broken, our past is messy, and my brother would be pissed. But for just a few minutes, I pretend like none of that exists and I let myself fall asleep thinking about what could be.

# Chapter 9

## TALLAHASSEE

I was drunk last night. That's the only explanation for kissing Gates before I went to bed. Setting aside the fact that I only had a single shot early in the night and I drove home perfectly clear headed. If I *wasn't* drunk and stupid, then I would have to dig into these dangerous, insane feelings that are simmering inside me, and that is just unacceptable.

I hear Gates's shuffling footsteps in the hallway, and I close my eyes a little tighter. I have the next two days off and I fully intend to hide out in my bedroom, feigning illness until I can convince myself that kissing Gates again is a *very* bad idea. The worst idea. A fucking catastrophic idea.

I lick my lips and my heart trips over itself at the taste of him still lingering there. I groan quietly and put my pillow over my head.

*Kissing Gates is bad. Kissing Gates is bad. Kissing Gates is bad.* I chant it over and over in my head, hoping eventually I'll convince the rest of my body of the immutable truth that letting Gates in, kissing him, falling for him all over again, isn't an option.

My door creaks open and I hold my breath, pretending to be asleep. All of a sudden he's so damn mature, wanting to talk about every single time our mouths happen to occupy the same space, can't he take a hint and let sleeping dogs lie?

He's silent in my doorway for several seconds. Is he buying my sleeping routine? Is he planning to break our truce and prank me? Fuck, that might be reason enough to "wake up" and find out what he wants.

I shift, getting ready to pull the pillow off of my head and face Gates like an adult, but before I can do that, an ungodly loud sound blares through my bedroom. I yelp in surprise, bolting up while a jolt of terror zings through me. Is it a tornado siren? What the fuck is happening?

It takes a second for my ears to stop ringing, but as soon as they do, I can hear Gates cackling. Of fucking course he is.

I pick up my pillow and chuck it at him as hard as I can. He dodges it, letting it collide with the door and thump onto the ground.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I growl, rubbing my ears.

“That didn’t count as a prank,” he says, setting a fucking airhorn down on my nightstand and climbing onto my bed. He doesn’t sit down or even lay down like a normal adult would. No, it’s Gates, so obviously he stands on the foot of my bed and bounces like an eight-year-old. My bed groans dangerously under his weight, not at all designed to be bounced on full force by a hundred-and-eighty-pound grown man.

I kick at his legs, hoping to trip him to teach him a lesson, but just like with the pillow, he dodges it and shoots me a smug look.

“Why are you in here acting like a child on my day off?”

He scoffs. “I’m not acting like a child.” He stops jumping and drops to his knees in a fluid motion. My heart beats faster and my dick perks up as he crawls up the bed slowly, hovering over me with that damn grin still on his lips. “I’m trying to wake you up so we can go on an adventure.”

I should say no. He can go wherever he likes, but my plan to stay in bed and add bricks to the wall around my heart that’s meant to keep Gates out is a solid one. Going on whatever insane adventure he’s dreamt up is almost as bad an idea as kissing him again is—*was*.

He licks his lips, my eyes tracking the movement against my will.

“Okay,” I murmur like I’m under a spell. Maybe I am. It’s the same spell Gates has always cast on me without even trying.

His smile gets even bigger. “Good. Get dressed and throw whatever you need for one night into a bag. The party bus leaves in ten minutes. It’s me, I’m the party bus.” He licks my nose and then hops off of me, darting out of the room while my head is still spinning, trying to catch up with what just happened.

Apparently, the logical side of my brain is still drunk, because I get out of bed and do exactly what Gates told me to do. I pull on a pair of cargo shorts and a white V-neck t-shirt that I caught Gates drooling over on me a few weeks ago. Then I pull my duffle bag out of my closet and toss in an extra pair of socks and underwear, another set of clothes, and some toiletries.

When I step out of my bedroom, he’s waiting for me with a thermos full of coffee that he shoves into my free hand. I greet Nigel and check that Gates already fed him, before telling him to be a good boy and that we’ll be home tomorrow.

“*Fuck me,*” he squawks, and I sigh.

“Thanks for teaching him that.”

“You’re welcome,” Gates says cheerfully.

We both slip on our shoes, and he picks up my keys off of the table next to the door.

“You’re not driving my car.”

“But you don’t even know where we’re going,” he points out.

“So let’s take your car,” I suggest.

“It’s still at the bar because some super overprotective Daddy type wouldn’t let me drive it home myself last night.” He throws a pointed look at me over his shoulder as we head down the stairs.

“I am *not* a Daddy type.”

“Keep telling yourself that.” He pauses, glancing around the parking lot until he remembers where I parked. “Anyway, I texted Sawyer to tell him not to have it towed, and I figure I’ll get my car after we get back tomorrow. In the

meantime..." We reach my car, and he yanks open the driver side door. "Get in, Lassie."

I sigh and climb into the passenger side. "If you put a single scratch on her, you're paying for the damage."

"Chill, I know a good mechanic," he teases with a wink, slipping on a pair of sunglasses and setting the radio to an eighties station. "Are you gonna ask where we're going?"

I lean back in my seat, flipping down the visor to keep the morning sun out of my eyes, and taking a sip of the coffee he gave me. "Nah. Whatever you've come up with I'm sure will be just stupid enough to be a blast."

"I love that you have faith in me."

I look over at him, all pink with the sunburn from yesterday, practically bouncing with excitement as he pulls out of the parking lot, and I resign myself to getting my heart broken by him all over again.

There are worse fates, I suppose.

## GATES

I drum my fingers against the steering wheel, singing along with the radio at the top of my lungs while Tallahassee harmonizes. I half expected him to shove me out of his room and lock the door this morning, or maybe just flat out refuse to go along with the half-baked adventure I came up with at two o'clock this morning when I couldn't sleep.

Wind whips through our open windows, ruffling our hair and carrying our voices away. Every time I steal a glance at him, there's a carefree grin on his face that I didn't think I'd ever see again. I figured I lost the privilege to see him smile like that when I left.

I don't know if I should be desperately trying to forget the kiss from last night or working up the courage to do it again. Who am I kidding? I'm definitely going to try to kiss him again. The only real question is if he'll slap me or kiss me back.

Questions like that are what keep life interesting.



An hour into our drive, I pull off the highway to get gas. “I’m starving, you want a donut or anything?” I offer once the gas is pumping.

“No, I need to piss though. You hustled me out of the house so fast this morning, I forgot.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Does that mean you didn’t brush your teeth either?”

“Nope, so don’t even think about kissing me.”

“Too late,” I mutter.

“What was that?”

I put on an innocent expression, batting my eyelashes at him. “Nothing.”

I slow my stride on the way into the building to admire a row of Harleys, all with rainbow flags on the back. I let out a low whistle, approaching the closest one to admire it.

“Nice bikes,” Tallahassee says, joining me.

“A hell of a lot nicer than mine.” I have the sudden urge to turn the car around and head back to town to get my bike out of the storage unit I rented when I got there.

“I’ve been thinking about trading my bike in for a Harley. I love my sporty little thing, but it’s hell on my back.”

I snort. “You sound like such an old man right now.”

He shakes his head, giving me a playful glare. “Keep it up and I’m going to do something about that sassy fucking mouth of yours.”

His words send heat rushing over my skin. “See, there’s that Daddy vibe I was talking about,” I point out, wondering if he can hear how breathless he’s making me from a simple, teasing statement like that.

“Just because you’re a brat, doesn’t make me your Daddy.” He gives my shoulder a little bump with his as he heads inside to use the bathroom, and I take one more minute to drool over the bikes.

“You ride?” Someone asks from behind me.

I turn around to find five big, beefy men all dressed in matching leather jackets, each with a rainbow patch, which I’m guessing means the bikes belong to them. The closest one, the smallest of the group, probably a twink when he was in his twenties, now more of an otter, is holding a fluffy little white dog who has his own leather helmet and a pair of goggles on.

“Yeah, but nothing this nice. I have a Harley that I rebuilt from scraps basically. She runs alright, but she’s not all shiny and sleek like yours.”

“Nothing wrong with anything you built with your own two hands,” one of the men towards the back of the group says. He’s a total silver fox with a bushy gray beard and long hair to match.

“At least it runs, right?” I shrug and then offer my hand to the man with the dog. “I’m Gates, by the way.”

“I’m Arrow.” He shakes my hand. “These assholes are Piston, Tex, Jaguar, and Hero.” He points to each of the men in turn. “And this little man is Gregory.” He kisses his dog’s snout, earning an annoyed huff from the little guy.

“We’re the Skins,” one of the men with a colorful tattoo all the way up his neck—I think his name is Piston?—says.

We spend a few minutes talking about their bikes and they tell me about some of the places they’ve gone and charity events they’ve done.

Behind them, Tallahassee comes back out of the gas station. “Oh, hey, this is Tallahassee, my husband.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “Would you stop saying that?”

“Don’t mind him, he’s just crabby. I’m the love of his life, he’s wild about me.” He gives me the finger and saunters over to the car without me. “Anyway, it was good to meet you guys.” A thought occurs to me. “Actually, hold on just one second.” I hurry over to the car and tap on Tallahassee’s window.

“Yes, love of my life?” he says flatly when he rolls his window down.

“Aw, love that, Pookie.”

He huffs through his nose. “Did you need something, or just come to harass me more directly?”

“Give me one of your business cards to give to these guys.”

“I don’t carry business cards with me, besides I’m sure they fix their own bikes.”

“Why don’t you carry business cards? You really should.”

He cocks an eyebrow at me. “I’m a mechanic.”

“So?” I sigh. “Fine, forget it.”

I spin back around, reaching into my pocket to pull out my wallet where I keep a few of my own business cards. I hand it over to Arrow when I reach them, figuring he seems like the leader of the group. Club? Gang? Fuck if I know.

“Here. I do website designs if you ever need any work done, or if you just want to get ahold of me to see my Frankenbike, or you know, whatever. My brother is a mechanic too, if you ever need any work done that you can’t do yourself.”

“Kickass.” He shoves my card into his pocket. “We’ll hit you up sometime.”

They all mount their bikes, Gregory being put into a backpack with just his head sticking out, and then strapped to Arrow’s back.

I wonder if they make something like that for birds. I bet Nigel would love to go for a ride. I’ll have to pitch the idea to Tal to see what he thinks.

The bikes roar to life and they take off, waving to me one by one as they peel out of the parking lot and disappear.

“You can make friends anywhere, can’t you?” Tallahassee says when I get back into the car after getting my

donut and a coffee because I forgot my own on the kitchen counter at home.

“That’s the best part of any adventure.”

He looks at me skeptically, a hint of worry seeming to linger under the surface. “That’s why you get bored in one place, isn’t it? There’s a whole wide world of people to meet and things to see.”

“Sure,” I agree, and his expression hardens. Because he thinks my answer means I’m going to leave again? Hope unfurls inside of me. Does that mean he doesn’t *want* me to leave? I think I could be happy staying here, but he didn’t believe it the first time I told him I was staying, there’s no reason for him to believe it now.

Porter said I have to keep showing people that I’ve changed and hope they see it, right? So, I guess that’s what I’ll do.

“There’s plenty of adventure around here too, you know,” I say, pulling out of the gas station and getting back on the highway.

“Like what?”

“You’ll see.”

# Chapter 10

## TALLAHASSEE

“*This* is the big adventure?” I shield my eyes from the sun and look skeptically at the scrap metal that has been mangled and welded into a sculpture.

“It’s the world’s biggest scrap metal sculpture,” Gates says indignantly. “How can you be disappointed by this?”

“I’m not disappointed by the sculpture. It’s pretty damn cool.” I walk around it to get the full effect and appreciate the amount of time and effort that must have gone into making it. “I’m disappointed that this is the most exciting thing the state of Wisconsin had to offer.”

My gut roils with that feeling of unease and helplessness I’ve gotten used to over the past few months—always on edge, constantly waiting for the morning I’ll wake up to find Gates gone again. If a twisted heap of metal is really the best this state can do, I’m not sure I blame him for always running somewhere else.

He props his chin on my shoulder and looks up at the sculpture. “I don’t think it’s so bad.”

“No, but it’s not worth sticking around for.” There’s a quiver in my voice that I hope like hell he didn’t hear.

“It may shock you to hear this, but I don’t choose where I live based on the roadside attractions.” He drags his fingertips up my forearm. It seems like an unconscious move, raising goosebumps on my skin and tempting me to lean in a little closer.

There’s a part of me that wants to shake him and beg him to admit that he’s not going to stay. Maybe knowing ahead of time will make it hurt less. But it’s such a beautiful day, and it may not be Disney Land or Bourbon Street, but there’s a backdrop of hills and a blue sky overhead, and a whole scrap yard full of sculptures for us to admire. We might as well enjoy it.

“I should learn to weld,” Gates muses as we stroll through the yard, stopping at each sculpture.

“There’s a terrifying thought,” I mutter, and he makes an indignant sound.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I only know how to fix a roof, build a motorcycle, write code, suck dick like a god...”

I bark out a laugh. “Alright, point taken. You’re pretty fucking good at everything you do.”

“Exactly. I just never stick with anything.” There’s a mixture of self-deprecation and humor in his tone.

Without thinking, I slide my fingers through his. I don’t know how after all these years it can still feel so comfortable and natural to hold his hand, or how it felt so damn right to kiss him last night.

He squeezes my hand and my stomach dances like I’m a kid with my first crush.

“You live with passion, and that’s so much better than picking one thing you’re good at and sticking with it forever,” I point out. “I would know. I’ve been doing the same shit day-in and day-out for twenty-five years.”

“So, shake it up. Nothing’s stopping you.”

He says it like it’s the easiest thing in the world to dive headfirst into whatever wild urge strikes at any given time. But that’s what Gates does, he leaps without worrying where he’ll land or what the consequences might be.

I look at him, sunburned from fixing Porter’s roof yesterday, with a dopey grin on his face, and everything inside me lights up the way it always does. Maybe it was always a pipe dream to think I could *truly* get over him.

“I’ll work on summoning the little Gates inside of me,” I deadpan, and he turns a wicked grin on me, leaning in to whisper into my ear.

“If you want a little Gates inside of you, all you have to do is ask.”

My whole body heats and I bark out a laugh. “That was bad.”

“You’re not seduced?”

“Not so much.” I keep ahold of his hand while we walk, catching the scent of him randomly on the breeze, fighting the urge to tackle him onto a grassy patch of the ground and kiss the absolute hell out of him.

Maybe I really should embrace my inner Gates and do what feels good in the moment instead of spending so much damn time and energy worrying about what will happen later. Would that be such a bad thing?

“If you could go anywhere, where would you go?” He asks as we stroll.

“I have no idea. A Brewers’ game, I guess.”

Gates laughs. “Anywhere in the world and you’d go to a Baseball game in Milwaukee?”

I shrug. “I’m a man of simple tastes.”

“Fair enough.” We stop in front of another one of the sculptures. “I really should learn how to weld,” he says again.

“Fine, but not in the apartment. I don’t want you to set Nigel on fire or melt my kitchen counters.”

He gasps. “I would *never* hurt Nigel.” He tilts his head, admiring the statue from a different angle. “I could do it in the storage unit I have rented, I’d just have to move my motorcycle and the other stuff I left in there. Or we could get a house with a garage.”

*We* could get a house with a garage? Like we’re a real married couple making *real* married decisions? Like he’s going to stay here long enough to warrant buying a house? Or maybe he’s just trying to goad me into an argument to spice up the afternoon. If that’s the case, I’m not going to bite.

“Fine, but you have to promise to wear whatever safety gear is recommended,” I barter.

“Aw, are you worried about me melting my face off?”

“I’m worried that your brother will kill me if you melt your face off.”

He laughs again, the sound ricocheting through me and loosening knots that I didn’t know I’d been carrying around for years.

“So, what now?” I ask once we’ve gone around the whole scrap yard and made our way back towards my car. “Anything else planned for our grand adventure?”

“Yup.” He pushes me towards the passenger side again. “Get in.”

## GATES

“Who the hell books a campsite ahead of time?” I grumble, pulling out of the third state park in a row that’s turned us away due to not having a reservation.

“Literally everyone.”

“It’s *nature*. You shouldn’t have to make an appointment with nature.”

Tallahassee slides his phone out of his pocket and starts scrolling through it while I get back onto the main road. I’m determined now to find somewhere to camp without a reservation or die trying. Well, maybe not *die* but I would stub a toe trying if it were absolutely necessary.

“Okay, take the next left. There’s a campsite that had availability, I just booked us a spot.”

I grumble. “Making a reservation is letting the system win.”

“What system?” he asks, fighting laughter while I turn where he said and look for the campground.

“Big Camping.”

“Ah, right. I forgot about them.”

“That’s how they get you. Never sleep on Big Camping,” I say ominously before pulling up to the little ranger hut or whatever it is to get the car sticker and map of the campground. He directs us to the furthest campsite a few



miles into the woods and gives us a list of rules which are basically a dozen different ways to say, “Don’t litter, douchebag,” and then waves us on.

I take the winding dirt road all the way to our secluded camping spot and pull the car into the small clearing to park. We climb out of the car and Tallahassee looks up at the sky with a frown. While we drove around looking for somewhere to camp, ominous gray clouds gathered.

“Did you check the weather before you planned this?” he asks, and then rolls his eyes before I can even come up with a quippy retort. “Of course, you didn’t. Let me guess, Big Weather?”

I snort. “You have to admit, it’s extremely suspicious that all weather reporters have weather related names. I don’t trust it.”

“Tell me you at least packed a tent?”

“Of course, I packed a tent.” I go around to the trunk, popping it open to pull out the camping supplies I stored before waking him this morning.

There’s a rumbling noise in the distance that sounds suspiciously like thunder. Maybe it would be smarter to get back in the car and drive the hour and a half home instead of trying to camp in a storm, but we’re already here and we paid for the night. Besides, it might pass right by us.

Tallahassee helps me get all the gear out and we work together to start getting things set up.

“You’ve put up a tent before,” he says a few minutes later when I’m fumbling with getting my little one man tent up. His is already fully erect. Show off. Also, oof, that metaphor hits too damn close to home right now.

“I *have*, it’s just been a while,” I grumble, working to straighten out the side that somehow got twisted while I was trying to put the poles in.

“All the shit you can do expertly, and you can’t manage one simple tent?” he teases, striding over to help me.

He drops down on his knees beside me, picking up the poles and threading each one through.

My eyes land on the deft way his hands work to put the tent together. What is it about competence that's always so fucking hot? It must be one of those ingrained caveman things. *Hell yeah, Caveman Daddy, build me a shelter. Don't stop, I need a fire. Oh yeah.*

I snort at my own internal ramblings while trying to help Tallahassee, but only managing to slow the process.

“Damn, one of your poles is bent.” He holds up a pole that's at a ninety-degree angle.

“Shit. Okay, we can probably rig it up—” I don't get a chance to finish telling him my idea before the sky opens up overhead and starts to pour.

I shout, jumping up in surprise as the rush of warm summer rain washes over me. The force is enough to knock my half-built tent down immediately.

“Come on,” Tallahassee shouts over the roar of the downpour, grabbing my arm and pulling me over to his tent that's holding up surprisingly well.

There's barely room for one person, but somehow, we manage to cram inside. My back tests the stretch of the nylon surface, our chests rising and falling against each other while our panting breaths quickly make the air around us humid and heavy. The rain hammers against the top of the tent in a deafening drumbeat, and I slowly become aware of every inch of Tallahassee pressed up against me.

His thick, hairy thigh against mine, skin slick from the rain. Our shorts are soaked, molding them to our bodies. His cock is rock hard, and I can feel the heat of it pulsing against mine. Tallahassee's nose brushes mine and our mouths are drawn together like magnets, connecting in a rush of lust. I let out a muffled moan around his tongue and thread my fingers through his short hair to kiss him deeper.

This isn't a damn thing like the brief, guilty kisses we've shared since I moved home. This feels like nine years of

rage and desperation exploding into an inferno of need. Heat tightens in the pit of my stomach, and I hump against him. He slides his hands down to my ass, digging his fingers into my cheeks hard enough to bruise and nipping at my bottom lip between deep, tongue tangled kisses.

Climbing inside the tent was like entering a time machine. It's like the last nine years never happened. We're just two people giving in to something that we've danced around for too long, pretending like it wasn't there, without any of the other complicated bullshit in the way.

I drag my hands over him, along his chest, teasing my fingertips over his hard nipples through his soaked shirt, and down the planes of his stomach. I pop the button on his shorts and then hook two fingers in the waistband to tug them down until his cock is out, hard and pulsing as he tugs my shorts down too.

I groan against his lips at the first touch of hot skin to hot skin. My foreskin pulls back and I shiver at the slick feeling of the head of my cock sliding against his precum-slicked shaft.

“Fuck,” I gasp. “I’m addicted to your cock.” The words are automatic, I’ve said them to Tallahassee a million times in moments exactly like this. This time feels different though. Maybe it’s because everything always used to feel so bittersweet, one foot of mine always out the door.

But I’m staying this time. I’m not the same Gates as I was back then. This could be for real, if I can convince him I mean it.

He moans and humps me faster, grabbing onto my ass again and rolling his hips against mine. My cock throbs desperately, making up for all the disinterest I’ve had towards it for months.

“Gates,” Tallahassee rumbles my name. Our wild panting sounds are muted by a clap of thunder that shakes the ground and vibrates through my bones.

The heat in the pit of my stomach tightens, precum pouring from my cock to mix with his. We're slippery and slick from a combination of sweat, rain, and precum, sliding against each other with every thrust.

He grunts, the sound vibrating through me, the stroke of his cock pushing me closer and closer to the edge. My muscles tremble and tense, my heart pounding in my ears. Tallahassee cries out, shuddering as his cock starts to pulse hard against mine, spilling hot, sticky ropes of his cum all over me

"Fuck," I rasp again, letting go and fucking against him harder, faster, more desperately until my cum joins his, my orgasm punching through me, leaving me breathless.

We grind against each other, chasing every wave of our orgasms until our cocks start to soften and we're exhausted. We share heavy breaths inside the overheated tent. When my heart slows down enough for me to hear, it sounds like the rain has stopped.

"I think the storm passed," I whisper, trying not to disturb the air around us. The moment feels fragile, like cracked glass on the verge of shattering.

"Yeah," he agrees just as quietly, still clinging to me.

We lie like that another few minutes before he awkwardly shimmies out of the tent, stripping out of his shorts as soon as he's standing, leaving his soft, cum soaked cock swinging freely and his biteable bare ass on full display.

I do the same, draping them over my shoulder until I can get cleaned up. My tent is heavily waterlogged, but otherwise the mud is the worst of it. The sun is already coming out again, making it a sauna anywhere the trees aren't shading. I strip off my shirt and Tallahassee arches an eyebrow at me.

"It's hot," I shrug, opening the car and tossing my clothes onto the seat so they'll stay clean. "Oh, hey, I brought food." I grab the cooler that I almost forgot I packed and carry it over to the firepit area.

“Now we just need dry firewood.” He looks around like he’s going to find a miraculous dry spot.

“Check the trunk.” I smirk and unpack the cooler, cracking open a chilled water bottle and guzzling half of it.

It doesn’t take long for us to get a fire going with a grill rack over it to cook dinner.

“Are you going to stand around bare assed all night?” he asks. He already cleaned up and put his soaked shorts back on while I strut around in nothing but my sneakers. I *did* clean up. I just chose to stay naked...because of the heat.

“Standing seems like a solid option. I’m not going to sit on a log and get a tick up my asshole.”

“I meant put your clothes back on,” he says dryly, eyeing me in what I’m sure he thinks is a subtle way. When his gaze nears my soft cock and sagging *ball* I angle away instinctively. I don’t *think* it looks weird from a distance, but it’s hard to know for sure.

Anxiety crawls up my throat until I’m itching to cover up before he looks too hard. My dick shrivels at the thought. If I think too hard about it, I might end up dissecting the miracle erection Tallahassee gave me. Or maybe it was just a sign that my doctor was right, this whole limp dick issue has been mental, not physical.

“Fine,” I sigh, grabbing my shorts and slipping them on without any underwear. They hang low on my waist. Tallahassee’s eyes burn into me again, and I try to hide a smug smile. He might still be telling himself he hates me, but his body doesn’t agree.

That’s a start, at least.

“I think your tent is going to be useless,” he says once he’s done ogling me.

“I guess we’ll be snuggling all night then.” I grin at him. He grumbles, but I catch a hint of a smile when he thinks I’m not looking. “Hey, Lassie? I really am sticking around this time.”

“Okay.” He doesn’t sound convinced. I don’t blame him.

It’s like Porter said, I have to show him that I mean it.

I can do that.

# Chapter 11

## GATES

I'm jolted awake by the hammering sound of a woodpecker nearby. Tallahassee and I are wrapped around each other, naked after leaving our clothes out to dry overnight. Conveniently, neither of us mentioned the clothes we had packed in the car.

He's breathing deeply, still dead asleep with his eyelids fluttering from a dream. I drag my hands over the warm skin of his back, hanging on to the fantasy that I have any chance of getting him back for a few more minutes.

Echoes of his moans last night, the sound of my name gasped and whispered as we fucked against each other, they all ricochet through my mind, making my heart pound. Maybe there *is* a chance? Just a tiny one? I'll take a miniscule chance over no chance at all.

He comes awake slowly, rolling into me just before full consciousness hits and he pulls away in surprise. His eyes are foggy with sleep as he blinks them open and stares at me like he's trying to piece together which parts of last night were a fever dream brought on by the heat.

"So, we, uh..."

"Yup," I answer simply.

"Ah, okay. So, I *didn't* hit my head or fall into some kind of wormhole that sent me back in time nine years?" he checks.

"Nope." I curl my hands into fists to keep myself from reaching for him again just to keep touching his soft, warm skin. "Are we going to pretend like that never happened either?"

"Can I have coffee before I answer that?"

"Fine," I agree, untangling myself from the mess of the sleeping bag and clumsily crawling out of the tent. I snatch up my still semi-damp clothes and ball them up, carrying them

over to the car and tossing them in to exchange them for my clean, dry clothes.

Tallahassee doesn't say anything, just starts a fire so he can boil water for instant coffee. I plop my ass down on the damp log and wait quietly, trying hard not to squirm with impatience. I want to grab him and shake him until all of his thoughts fall out.

"I'm not going to pretend like it didn't happen," he answers after his first sip of burnt smelling coffee.

"Okay, so what was it then?"

"I don't know." He shrugs. "If this *is* something, I don't want to rush it like before. Let's just let it happen."

A slow smile creeps over my face, the knots of anxiety in my chest falling away. "Okay. I'm good at letting things happen naturally."

He gives me a skeptical look.

He's right, I'm not. But I'll try.

He stands up, dumps the rest of the sludge that's pretending to be coffee onto the ground and tosses the paper cup into the fire. He strides in my direction, grabbing me forcefully when he reaches me, pulling me against him in a hard, deep kiss.

My heart flails and I kiss him back just as roughly, still working on processing what exactly the fuck is happening. I was prepared for Tallahassee to brush me off, to tell me last night was a mistake, to maybe even pretend like it never happened. I was *not* prepared for him to suggest we see where things go.

He breaks the kiss and I nearly stumble, unbalanced physically and mentally. He immediately starts to pack up all of our shit, tossing things into the car and dousing the fire while I struggle to catch my breath and right my thoughts.

As soon as I manage to regain control of all of my extremities, I help with cleaning things up. I ball up our tents, not even attempting to fold them properly so that they'll fit



back into their original bags, and throw everything into the trunk.

Tallahassee chuckles. “That’s probably how that pole got bent in the first place.”

“Yeah, well, considering where it landed us, you should be helping me to bend the rest of the poles too as a tribute to the Camping Gods for our epic orgasms.”

He laughs again and we do one last visual sweep of our camp before he snatches up the keys and jumps in on the driver’s side.

“Come on, we passed a coffee shop on our way here yesterday. I think it’s only a few miles away.”

“Let’s do it,” I agree, sliding in on the other side. I recline the seat a few inches and close my eyes, listening to the quiet hum of Tallahassee’s voice, almost completely drowned out by the song he’s singing along to, but still there in the background, steady and familiar.

It’s a surprisingly apt metaphor for the last near-decade. I’ve been in and out of dozens of relationships, I’ve run all over the country trying different jobs and looking for a place to fit, but thoughts of what I left behind with Tallahassee have always been there just under the surface, steady and familiar.

“You know, if we do this,” he says, pausing like he’s rethinking his whole ‘let things happen naturally’ stance in favor of his old standby of pretending like uncomfortable shit isn’t real. I crack one eye open to see him gripping the steering wheel tightly. “We’ll have to tell Steele eventually.”

I grunt in response and close my eye again. “Let’s just cross one bridge at a time. Steele doesn’t need to know anything until we’re sure this isn’t just one last fling to get it out of our systems. Right?”

He’s quiet for a few seconds before muttering, “Right.”

Is he legitimately trying to think through what obstacles might be ahead of us, or just coming up with reasons

to write this off before we've even made it home? If it's the latter, I'm sure he can come up with a million.

We pull into the coffee shop, and both get out to go inside. There's a short line that we join, and Tallahassee stares at the menu board extremely hard for a man who's never ordered anything other than a large black coffee in his entire life.

"There are always plenty of good reasons not to do things," I say quietly, giving in to the words that have been playing in my mind for the past few minutes. "That's why I never think too hard about shit, or I'd talk myself out of everything."

He snorts. "If it's that easy to talk yourself out of something, maybe that's what you *should* do."

"Are you talking yourself out of *this*?" I brush my fingers against his, not managing to work up the courage to actually grab his hand.

His eyes are still fixed on the menu board as he lets out a long breath and hooks his pinky around mine. "Not yet."

I can work with that.

## TALLAHASSEE

There's always a reason not to do something? Try dozens of reasons. Hundreds maybe. Steele is a genuine concern. If he finds out, there *will* be a blow up. But he's the least of my worries. How about the fact that Gates and I *live* together, which means this is bound to get messy quickly? Or the explosive chemistry between us. At first glance, that should go in the 'pro' column, but all it does is make me too stupid to think straight when Gates is around. Can't forget to add to the list that he's so irresponsible, he couldn't even be bothered to sign our divorce papers.

I take a sip of my coffee and then set it in the cup holder and sneak a quick glance at Gates in the passenger side with his seat reclined back, the late morning sun bathing his face, his eyes closed and a placid smile on his lips. His damn

lips, which are still just a little bit swollen from my mouth on his.

He's funny as hell, that one goes in the pro column. And life is never boring with him around. I swallow hard and drag my eyes back to the road ahead. Who am I kidding? No mental pro/con list is going to change my mind. I knew what I was doing when I pulled him into my tent last night. We could have run to the car to wait out the storm, each of us a respectable distance apart, keeping our hands to ourselves. I *knew* where things were going to lead, and I did it anyway.

Hell, if I was *really* trying to resist him, I would have kicked him out of my bedroom yesterday morning instead of following him on this adventure. But I've never been very good at saying no to Gates, and I know I'm not going to start now.

"Oh hey, stop there." He points at a farm stand up ahead. I smile and ease off the gas.

"I forgot what it's like to drive anywhere with you. Every two feet there's somewhere you're dying to stop." I pull onto the shoulder, and he hops out. I check for any cars and then do the same.

"Is that a problem?" Gates rests his arms on the top of the car, grinning at me.

"Nah, I'm not in any rush to get home."

"Good, neither am I."

It's well into the afternoon by the time I pull into my regular parking space in front of my building. On top of what we left with, we also have a basket of fruit, a few packages of cheese, and some other random items Gates insisted on stopping for along the way. We also took a detour to see a giant ball of twine and to take a short hike at Devil's Lake.

All in all, the hour and a half drive home took nearly five hours, but I'm not complaining. Nothing with Gates is ever simple or straightforward, but it's always fun.

We head up to the apartment and Nigel screams in greeting as soon as he sees us. He spreads his wings and

launches himself into the air, soaring towards me and landing expertly on my shoulder to nuzzle and nibble on my ear and cheek.

“It’s time to clip your flight feathers again, huh?” I scratch his neck and he leans into my fingers, closing his eyes and making happy sounds.

“Why clip them at all? Let the little dude be free to fly,” Gates argues.

“That’s your answer to everything,” I grumble, carefully setting my stuff down so I don’t jostle Nigel too much and heading for the kitchen to make him a tasty snack. “Did it ever occur to you that having his wings clipped is safer for him?”

“But is he happy?” His tone is so innocent as he reaches over to pet the bird, but it hits me right in the center of my chest. Am I making the same mistake I made nine years ago? Even if I swear to myself and him that I won’t rush things, even entertaining the idea of there being *something* between us is one step towards penning Gates in, taking away his freedom and his happiness.

“You think I should let him go?” I ask, offering Nigel a blueberry to nibble on.

“What? No, of course not.” He frowns, and then hops up onto the counter next to where I’m starting to chop up some larger pieces of fruit into bite size chunks. “I meant maybe if we get a bigger place, there would be enough space for him to fly around a bit.”

“A bigger place? Like a *house*?” My stupid, suggestible heart leaps at the possibility that he wasn’t just teasing yesterday. It’s what I was picturing all those years ago when I desperately tried to hold Gates down and keep him here with me. I wanted us to get a fixer upper and work on it together, make it our own and then grow old there.

He shrugs. “Yeah, why not?”

A feeling of longing so intense hits me, nearly knocking me on my ass. I turn away from him just in case my

pathetic fantasy is written all over my face.

“That’s not exactly taking things slow and seeing what happens naturally,” I point out, keeping my tone as even as possible.

“Right.” He sighs.

I can feel his eyes boring into me, but I refuse to look. I scoop the chopped fruit into a bowl for Nigel, adding some protein and other things he needs as well before finally looking up at Gates again. “If it’s going to be too hard...”

“It’s not,” he says quickly. “I’m getting ahead of myself, but I can rein it in.”

I nod and then walk back into the living room to set the bowl of food on top of Nigel’s cage. He hops off my shoulder and chows down. Gates hovers in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room while I start tidying things up a bit just so I have something to do other than stare right back at him.

He’s left a pile of loose papers scattered all over the coffee table, burying his laptop. They look like website notes, so I stack them neatly and keep going, righting the cushions and gathering up a few pairs of dirty socks, half tempted to ball them up and lob them at Gates as punishment for leaving his nasty laundry in the living room again.

Another stray sheet of paper is half under the couch. I pull it out and find a list of places scrawled in his messy handwriting: Miami, Virginia Beach, Myrtle Beach...

I feel immediately numb looking at it. Numb and stupid for thinking even for a fraction of a second that Gates would be happy here, cooped up in this apartment with his wings clipped.

“I was thinking about a vacation this summer,” he says, plucking the paper from my hand and balling it up.

“Do whatever you want.” I carry the trash into the kitchen with Gates right on my heels. “I don’t want to be the idiot who keeps trying to change you. I only end up getting hurt,” I mutter as I throw everything into the garbage can and

turn around to find him there, in my space, looking helpless and determined at the same time.

He grabs my face with both hands and tugs me forward, his lips colliding with mine in a fierce, half-desperate kiss. I grab onto his shirt, balling the fabric in my fist and kissing him back hard, pouring all of the doubt and stupid hope weighing on my heart into it.

I walk him backwards until he collides with the fridge, letting out a muffled *oomph* against my mouth.

“I don’t know if I can change,” he admits, sliding his hands into my hair and nipping at my bottom lip. “But I really fucking want the chance to try. Give me a chance?”

I close my eyes and lean into him, feeling the frantic rhythm of his heart against my chest and matching it with my own. “I don’t think I have a choice. I’m already in this, for better or worse.”

A smile creeps over his lips and he kisses me again.

Wherever we’re headed, it’s already too late to slam on the brakes.

# Chapter 12

## TALLAHASSEE

I'm only half awake when I instinctively reach my hand out and come up with nothing but cool sheets on the empty side of my bed. My gut jolts and I snap my eyes open, my brain hazily working to piece together what ended up happening last night.

Gates and I kissed for a while in the kitchen and then went to our own bedrooms— to process everything that happened? To give each other a chance to change our minds? Fuck if I know. I didn't process, though, and I definitely didn't change my mind, even if I probably should have. I hung out with Nigel and watched some stupid videos on my phone before eventually falling asleep in my clothes.

I sit up in bed and look over to find my bird perched on top of my dresser, his head tucked under his wing while he sleeps. I take a few minutes to shake off my groggy stupor before throwing back my blankets and getting out of bed.

My whole body feels stiff from sleeping on the ground the night before, but aside from that, there's a new spring in my step as I hop out of bed and change out of my wrinkled clothes and into a clean work jumpsuit. It's amazing what a good orgasm can do for your wellbeing.

I rouse Nigel, placing him on my shoulder. He chatters away, nibbling on my earlobe as I step out of my room with him. I pause in the hallway outside of Gates's bedroom door. The loud sound of his snoring is audible even through the closed door, giving me a sense of peace knowing he's still here.

He asked me to give him a chance to change last night. I want to, I really do, but will I *ever* not worry that he's going to bolt? Twenty years from now, will I still wake up every morning and immediately check to see if Gates is still here?

I put my hand against his door, grounding myself in the feeling of the smooth wood and the memories of his lips on

mine last night. Worrying about what will happen in twenty years isn't going to do me a damn bit of good right now. It's time I take a leaf out of Gates's playbook and just try to live in the moment.

I shuffle into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee, leaving it on for Gates when he wakes up. Then I put Nigel on top of his cage with his breakfast and head to work.

I'm the first one at the garage for a change, aside from Steele, who I think would live here if it weren't for Porter. He nods to me from his office, and I put on a pot of coffee and then hook my phone up to the speakers. The one advantage of getting here first is the ability to pick the music for the day. God help us when Shep is the first one here. The man puts on techno. *Techno*.

I pull up my favorite playlist and hit start, and then I stride over to the first car I have on deck for this morning, popping the hood and getting to work. I fall into the easy muscle memory of the work, singing along with the music and enjoying a rare sense of peace that feels like I've spent years chasing.

"Someone's in a good mood this morning," Auggie's voice cuts through the music.

"I'm always in a good mood," I counter.

"You're in a *particularly* good mood this morning," he clarifies. I can feel his presence behind me, his eyes boring into me like he's trying to read my mind. The scuffing sound of other footsteps joins his, and I feel like an animal on display in the zoo, all the guys crowded behind me, trying to figure out why I'm not in the shitty mood I've been in for months.

"Pass me that wrench," I request, looking over my shoulder and nodding towards my toolbox where the tool I need is sitting on top.

Red cocks his head and narrows his eyes. "You got laid."

I try to scoff, but end up sputtering incoherently, heat quickly rushing up my neck and over my face.



“Yeah, he did,” Shep agrees, picking up the tool I asked for and handing it to me with a smug grin.

“About damn time,” Auggie says, patting me hard on the back. “So, Gates finally stopped cock blocking you, huh?”

I shrug his hand off and do my best impression of Steele, glaring at all of them.

“Yes, fine, I got some action. But I’m not giving you nosy assholes any details, so back off,” I huff.

“Oh baby, get it,” Shep teases, bending over and sticking his ass out suggestively. Red smacks it hard enough for a good jiggle and Auggie cheers.

Yeah, I was absolutely right about these three dumbasses having less than zero chance of finding guys stupid enough to fall in love with them.

“We’re spanking now?” Riggs asks with a smirk, striding into the garage with his usual overconfident swagger.

“Sure, bend over,” Auggie flirts with a smirk.

“You first.” Riggs bares his teeth in a dangerous grin.

“I’m scared and a little horny,” Shep whispers.

“So, typical Monday?” Red teases.

“Pretty much, yeah.” Shep shrugs.

I duck my head back under the hood of the car, glad the subject is off me at least. I’ve never had much of a poker face and I’m a shitty liar when it comes right down to it.

The morning passes by fairly uneventfully with all of us working and fucking around. Auggie shows off some tricks he’s been teaching Steele’s dog during down time between work tickets.

At noon a car pulls up to the garage and a man in a suit gets out, walking right up to the open bay doors rather than going in through the waiting area.

“Need some help?” Shep asks.

“Yeah, my car is making a weird noise. But I don’t want you guys to do any of that unnecessary bullshit that’s going to cost me an arm and a leg. Can you fix it?”

“Oh, for sure.” Shep reaches into his pocket and fishes around for a second, pulling out a pair of used orange ear plugs and holding them out to the man. “These should do it without any *unnecessary bullshit*.”

The man huffs and I cough to cover my laughter.

“Dick,” the man mutters, getting back in his car and slamming the door behind him.

“Come back soon,” Shep calls cheerfully after him as he peels out of the parking lot, his car making a high-pitched sound that most certainly means the timing belt is about to go out.

Good luck and godspeed to whatever mechanic he ends up taking it to instead.

“There’s that impeccable customer service I pay you for,” Steele mutters, leaning against the open door to his office, obviously having heard the whole exchange.

“You pay me to fix cars, not coddle assholes,” Shep counters shamelessly.

“Fair enough,” Steele says. “Hey, Tal, what’s this I hear about you finally breaking your dry spell?”

“For the love of fuck. You guys *have* to have better things to worry about than the state of my dick,” I grumble.

“Nope, not really.” Auggie shrugs.

“There was sexual contact with another human, that’s all I’m saying about it.”

“Wow, way to make it sound romantic,” Riggs says dryly.

“I don’t know how you’re still putting up with Gates.” Steele shakes his head, and my heart jumps into my throat.

“What does this have to do with Gates?”

He arches an eyebrow at me. “Because he was cock blocking you. Right?”

“Oh, right, yeah.”

“Honestly, I don’t know how you’ve gone this long without kicking him out,” Steele says.

“He’s not that bad.”

Everyone goes quiet and I look up to find all eyes on me with an array of suspicious and skeptical expressions on their faces.

“We’re talking about *Gates*, right? Didn’t he destroy your property as a prank?” Red reminds me of the tie dye incident.

“Yeah, but we’ve come to an understanding. He’s not pranking me anymore. We’re actually getting along.”

“Gates is being reasonable? I’ll believe that when I see it.” Steele snorts, and I bristle at his dismissive tone.

“He’s trying, you should cut him some slack,” I snap.

He’s quiet for a few seconds before he nods. “You’re right. He did come through and fix Porter’s roof. I still need to thank him for that. You know what, I’m going to text him to come by for dinner tomorrow.”

“Free dinner?” Red perks up.

Steele sighs. “Sure, why not. Everyone can come.”

“I’ll bring dessert,” Auggie offers.

“Suck up,” Shep teases.

“Fine, no cookies for you.”

“No, I take it back,” he backpedals quickly.

They tease each other back and forth, but I stop listening after that, getting back to focusing on work and counting down the hours until I can head home just to check one more time that Gates is still there.

Maybe I should take my own advice and try to cut him some slack, but it’s a work in progress.

## GATES

I'm only vaguely aware of the sound of the television in the background, playing reruns of *The Office* for the last six hours straight, and Nigel chattering away, occasionally screaming curses at me for ignoring him while I stare unblinking at my laptop screen, determined to finish the *two* websites that I promised to have done by today and then proceeded to *not* do for weeks.

I woke up this morning in a panic when I realized I absolutely *had* to get these done or explain to two different clients why I dropped the ball. Luckily, I am an absolute fucking master under pressure.

I squint at the screen, making a few adjustments to get the graphic exactly where I want it, and feeling a rush of accomplishment when everything falls exactly into place. The site looks exactly the way I imagined it, both functional and visually appealing. And that's number two done.

I blow out a long breath, snapping the laptop closed and stretching my arms over my head to work out the kinks in my shoulders and neck.

"I was wondering when you were going to come up for air."

Tallahassee's voice startles me. I look over my shoulder to find him coming down the hallway, his hair damp, already dressed comfortably for a night in.

"I didn't even hear you come in."

"I know. I said your name, but you were in the zone. I don't think you would have noticed if the apartment caught fire," he jokes.

"Probably not," I agree, rubbing my eyes and setting my laptop on the coffee table. My stomach growls loudly. "Fuck, I'm hungry."

The oven timer sounds shrilly from the kitchen. Holy shit, do I have magic genie powers? "I'm horny," I test the theory, and Tallahassee arches an eyebrow at me, but doesn't take it upon himself to immediately throw himself onto my

cock. Huh, I guess my powers only work on dinner. “Did you cook?” I ask, standing up.

“No.” He frowns, heading towards the kitchen. I follow behind him, the smell of cheese, sauce, and garlic mingling together to make my mouth water as we get closer.

“Oh, that’s right, I made lasagna and forgot about it.” I grin, grabbing the oven mitts so I can pull the dish out. “I love when Past Gates does me a solid like that.”

Tallahassee chuckles. “Well now I’m extremely glad that the apartment *didn’t* burn down around you.”

I scoff. “I would have smelled the smoke.” He quirks a doubtful eyebrow at me again. “Probably,” I hedge with a shrug. “The important thing is we have dinner, *and* I finished both the websites I needed to do by my deadline.”

“Way to go,” he says, pulling out plates and silverware while I grab a knife to cut the lasagna. It hits me how domestic this moment is, the two of us getting dinner ready, in an apartment we share, after our long days at work...

My skin prickles and I wait to be hit with the urge to flee, or to be overcome with fear at the thought of something so simple and *boring* feeling so damn nice. Neither thing happens. Tallahassee looks at me over his shoulder with a curious expression.

“Something wrong?” he checks.

“Nope.” I return my attention to the task at hand, cutting and plating two portions, along with the garlic bread I picked up at the store earlier.

I hand Tallahassee his plate and he takes it, leaning against the counter rather than going to sit down at the table. I follow his example, leaning on the opposite counter and awkwardly holding my plate in one hand while trying to cut the lasagna into bitesize pieces with a fork in the other.

I’m not sure why we’re standing other than Tallahassee feeling this strange, domestic moment too and trying to combat it by avoiding the table at all costs. If we sit down, it might be too real. So, we eat just like that, clumsily forking

half-cut chunks of pasta into our mouths and not saying anything.

Should *I* say something? Or is the silence on purpose? Fuck, this is stressful. Was it always this awkward between us?

I don't even have to think very hard to know that the answer to that is a resounding 'no'.

I clear my throat and set my empty, sauce smeared plate into the sink.

"Did I fuck up already or is this the taking it slow part?" I ask point blank. I've never been very good at beating around the bush, it makes me itchy.

He looks up from his plate and licks his lips. "You didn't fuck up. I'm just... Fuck, I think I forgot how to do any of this."

I let out a relieved laugh. "I'm glad it's not just me." I take his plate and stack it on top of mine, then brace my hands against the cool granite of the countertop again to study him for a few seconds. "Want to watch something stupid and makeout?"

"Pulling out the teenage playbook?" He scratches his scruffy chin and then nods. "Sure, let's do it."

My heart trips over its own beats as I push off the counter and follow him into the living room. I don't know why, but I was expecting him to blow me off or roll his eyes at my juvenile suggestion. Maybe I'm still just trying to wrap my head around the idea that this is real, this is happening...as long as I don't fuck it up.

Tallahassee plops down on the couch, putting one hand over the back of it and tossing me the remote. I fumble and then catch it, dropping down next to him, close enough that his arm ends up around my shoulders, and I prop my feet up on the coffee table.

I'm barely aware of the movie I pick. Something with a guy in it? Probably? Who cares? I toss the remote onto the table, wincing at the sound it makes before sliding across the smooth surface and toppling onto the floor on the other side.

He chuckles and trails his fingers down my arm, letting his arm slip from the back of the couch to rest fully on my shoulders.

“So...” I wiggle down a little lower to get more comfortable.

“So...” he echoes, and we both grin at each other like the awkward idiots we are.

“I have a confession.” I put a hand on Tallahassee’s thigh, feeling the heat of his thigh through the thin material of the shorts as they ride up a few inches. He visibly tenses and my stomach turns sour. I’m only playing around, but after years of constantly fucking up, he doesn’t trust me at all. I can’t say I blame him.

I lean in and ghost my lips against his earlobe, nipping at it and drawing a shuddering, quiet gasp from him. “I’m not sorry I taught Nigel all those dirty words.”

He barks out a laugh and shoves my chest. “Why did I think for a second you would have matured in the last decade?”

“Did you want me to?”

He cocks his head and looks at me, his eyes landing on mine and searching deeply. I almost forgot just how blue his eyes are.

“No, not really,” he answers after a few seconds. “You’re a pain in the ass, but I always kind of liked that about you.”

“Only kind of?” I challenge with a smirk.

“Don’t push it,” he murmurs, leaning in until our noses bump and I can feel the curve of his smile teasing my lips.

“You’re such a tease, Lassie,” I murmur, nipping at his bottom lip.

“Please don’t call me that stupid name when we’re about to fool around.”

“Are we about to fool around?” I taunt playfully, flicking my tongue against the seam of his lips. A flutter of excitement and nerves moves through me.

The other night in the tent was purely primal. It was all heat of the moment, no thinking required. *This* is something completely different. This is on purpose, this is fully thought out, this is for real.

What if my dick doesn't cooperate? What if my missing ball freaks him out? Do I have a scar down there? I don't exactly have a good angle on the situation to check myself.

“We are as long as you shut up,” he murmurs before pressing his mouth to mine in a hard, deep kiss that steals my breath and makes my heart race.

“Shutting up,” I mutter against his lips.

His tongue slips into my mouth, hot and hungry as we tug at each other's clothes and hair, heavy, drugging kisses and rumbling groans passing back and forth between us. My cock starts to swell, thickening and throbbing at the taste of Tallahassee's lips like Pavlov's dogs hearing the dinner bell. For *years* after we split, all I had to do was think his name and I would be hard as stone.

He slides his hand down my chest and along my belly. The image of him slipping his hand into my pants to tease my cock sparks in my mind and another shot of panic jolts through me. How noticeable is the testicle situation? I haven't even had a good feel down there myself thanks to the sick feeling in my stomach every time I've tried. My erection wilts and I flinch away from the kiss.

“What's wrong?” he asks breathlessly, shaking his head like he's trying to clear the fog.

“Nothing,” I lie, ignoring the hot shame that settles in the pit of my stomach as my cock shrivels. “I want to suck you.”

He groans and spreads his legs as I slide onto the floor between them. The fabric of his shorts is straining to contain



his erection. Every throbbing vein is visible through the material that his cock is stretching thinner and thinner.

I lick my lips and lean in to drag my hot, open mouth over his cock, leaving a damp spot on his shorts right where the head of his cock is pressed. Tallahassee cards his fingers through my hair and flexes his hips to bump his cock against my mouth again when I try to pull back.

My cock tingles but only manages to get half hard, even when I slip my hand into my shorts to try to coax it to stiffen again while I continue to tease and mouth at Tallahassee's. After a minute of trying and failing to get my erection back, I give up and focus my energy on the fun of playing with the man I've spent the better part of a decade dreaming of, no matter how hard I tried not to.

I pull my hand out of my pants and hook my fingers into the elastic waist of his shorts. He lifts his hips so I can tug them down, his cock springing free and slapping against his belly. I let out a low moan. I was sure I was romanticizing his dick, remembering it so much better than it was.

It turns out that my imagination was *underselling* it.

His cock is just long enough to hit every spot perfectly, the right thickness for the kind of stretch that used to make me pant and beg without leaving me sore for days and days after. My tongue still remembers the path of each one of the throbbing, winding veins that line his shaft.

"Mmm, I've missed you," I murmur, flicking my tongue along the salty crown.

Tallahassee makes a sound that's caught between laughter and a lusty gasp. "Are you talking to my dick?"

I wrap my fingers around the base of his shaft and give him a few slow strokes, pulsing my hand around him to coax a dribble of precum from his slit. "Do you mind? I'm catching up with an old friend," I tease with a smirk, leaning in to press a chaste kiss to the head of his cock, tasting his precum on my lips and feeling him swell and jerk in my grasp.

“By all means, take your time,” he says breathlessly, his balls pulling up tighter while more precum trickles down his shaft and over my fingers.

I stroke him faster, mesmerized by the rapid rise and fall of his chest, the quiver of his thighs, his fingers tightening in my hair and against the cushion of the couch, his eyelids fluttering and his lips parting with grunts and moans.

I tease my tongue over the head, lapping up the long, sticky strands of precum, and then I wrap my lips around him and take his hot, throbbing cock into my mouth. My muffled groan vibrates around him, the weight of his erection on my tongue sending electricity racing through me.

I snake my tongue around him, bobbing my head to take him deeper and deeper. The head of his cock bumps the back of my throat and I swallow around him, fighting my gag reflex to take him all the way in until my nose is pressed against him, and my mouth and throat are completely stuffed full. I hold myself there until my lungs are burning for oxygen and my eyes are watering, and then I finally ease back. Spit and precum dribble out of the corners of my mouth, tears streaking down my cheeks as I drag in a deep breath through my nose and then take him deep again.

I can't get enough of being filled by him. If there was a way to choke on Tallahassee's cock while he fucked me at the same time, I'd take that offer in a heartbeat. For now, I'll settle for greedily deep throating him and memorizing every filthy sound I manage to drag out of him with each flick of my tongue and constriction of my throat.

“Gates,” he rasps my name as I slide my hands up his belly to his chest to flick and pinch his pebbled nipples. His muscles all tremble, his thighs tightening around me as thrusts into my throat in jerky bursts, like he's using every ounce of willpower he possesses to hold himself back and losing.

I can feel his heartbeat thundering wildly under my palm. He chants my name over and over in between pleas and curses, tugging hard on my hair and letting go of the tether of his control to fuck into my throat deeper and faster. I make

muffled sounds of encouragement around his cock, spit pouring down my chin now as I give up on being able to swallow around the onslaught.

“Fuck, Gates,” he shouts my name, and his cock starts to pulse against my tongue, and he floods my throat with his cum. I pull off just enough to get some of his release on my tongue, my eyes rolling back and my own cock jerking and swelling just a little at the salty-sweet flavor of him.

I paw at his chest and belly, feeling the flutter of every muscle and the racing of his pulse with each wracking wave of his orgasm that rushes through him. I greedily suck him until I’ve milked every last drop of cum from his balls and his cock is starting to soften in my mouth. He shudders and gasps when I release him with a sloppy sound, pulling my shirt up to mop up the spit and cum from my chin.

“Give me a second to catch my breath and then I’m going to rock your world,” he assures me, groping for my hand while he lets his head fall back against the back of the couch and his eyes droop closed.

I lace my fingers through his and press my lips against his knuckles, smiling even though his eyes are closed, hoping that the anxiety knotting in the pit of my stomach won’t show on my face or in my voice.

“I’m good,” I say casually, crawling back up onto the couch to reclaim the spot right next to him.

He peeks one eye open to study me silently for a few seconds but doesn’t push the issue, thankfully. I shift close to him and rest my head on his shoulder, still keeping hold of his hand.

“What are we watching?” I ask when I realize that the television is still on and I don’t have the first clue what’s happening on screen.

“No clue. You picked it, shouldn’t you know?”

“Well that means absolutely jack shit,” I mutter, and he laughs. I pick up the remote and hand it to him, not paying much attention as he flips through the options to find

something else. My mind is too busy obsessing about the state of my dick and what Tallahassee will think about my sad, lonely ball...if I ever get the courage to let him get up close and personal at all.

And here I thought my biggest problem was going to be convincing him not to hate me anymore.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

# Chapter 13

## TALLAHASSEE

I ended up stuck at work late, fighting with a particularly stubborn engine rebuild that refused to see eye to eye with me. So, by the time I pull into Steele's driveway, it's already filled with cars, including Gates's.

I smile reflexively, bringing up the memory of hours spent last night fooling around on the couch and talking until we were both too tired to keep our eyes open. It wasn't like "old times", it wasn't a reminder of how things *used to be*. It felt like the start of something new, and that's as exhilarating as it is terrifying. There are so many ways this could end badly, and the little seed of hope that wormed its way into my chest without my permission weeks ago is starting to take root there.

I get out of my car, the sound of music and raucous voices hitting me immediately, and I head around the side of the house to the backyard.

"Did you give up and set that car on fire for the insurance money?" Red teases as I join the group, gathered on the back patio.

"No, I fixed it because I'm a *good* mechanic," I taunt with a smirk, catching Denali just as she launches herself at me in a hail of tongue and fluff. She yelps and howls happily while she kisses my chin, and I spot a new little fur monster cautiously watching from behind the safety of Porter's legs. "Who is *that*?"

"This is our new baby. His name is Bunny." Porter stoops down to pick the little husky puppy up. "One of my clients had a litter and I couldn't resist."

"You guys will need to start handing out free ear plugs to anyone who comes over," Auggie jokes.

Steele gasps dramatically. "You don't appreciate the husky serenade?"

“I do, my eardrums don’t.”

I finish loving on Denali and go to meet the new little guy, scrunching his fluffy face in my hands and kissing his snout while he wiggles in Porter’s arms. “Why is his name Bunny?”

“Vet med naming superstitions,” Robbie, the co-owner of Porter’s veterinary clinic, answers.

“What now?” Gates asks, passing me a cold beer from the cooler.

“It’s like, every dog named ‘Lucky’ ends up getting hit by a car or having a terrible medical condition,” Porter explains.

“Ah, so you’re hoping that since his name is Bunny, he won’t try to eat baby rabbits like our girl, Denali here,” Shep says, patting Denali’s head while she gives a big, toothy doggy grin, lacking even an ounce of shame for her attempted massacre.

“Exactly,” Porter says with a grin, kissing the puppy and then setting him down.

Bunny immediately barks at Denali, latching onto her tail to antagonize her and then darting away to encourage a chase.

“This looks like it’s ready to go,” Steele announces, lifting the lid on the grill. “Help me grab the meat really quick?”

“Sure.” I set my drink down on the patio table and follow him into the house.

“Sorry I had to take off while you were still struggling with that car,” he says, and I wave him off.

“Please, I don’t need you to hold my hand after all these years.”

He shrugs. “I know. I always feel like I should be at the garage, you know? That place is my baby.”

I snort, pulling open the fridge to take out the trays of meat and veggies he has ready to put on the grill. “I hate to tell you this, but the garage isn’t a baby anymore. The old girl is a teenager now and she’s more than capable of functioning without your constant supervision.”

He sighs. “I know. I need to let go a little.”

“Exactly. Focus on your man more.” I nod towards the window where Porter is visible, laughing hysterically at something Gates is saying.

My heart stutters and I stare at Gates for several long seconds, wondering what he said that made Porter laugh so hard, if he notices how much everyone lights up when he’s around, and if he really meant it when he said he was staying this time.

As if he can feel my eyes on him through the window, Gates looks over, his gaze meeting mine. The smile on his lips gets even wider, his carefree expression tempting me to set down the tray of vegetables I’m holding and go out there to kiss the hell out of him right now.

Gates looks away again and I glance over at Steele to see if he noticed. Luckily, he’s busy with a dry rub. My throat tightens and for one insane moment I wonder if it would be so damn bad to just tell him that I married his brother nine years ago and even though it seemed like a huge mistake for nearly a decade, it’s starting to feel like things *could* work out, if we’re brave enough and stupid enough to just keep trying.

I open my mouth, but my brain intercedes seconds before the words make it to my tongue.

I can’t blurt this shit out to Steele like that. For one thing, I’m not about to blindside Gates, and for another, it’s too soon. We’ve fooled around twice in a matter of days, there’s no guarantee that this is going to turn out to be anything more than the two of us giving in to the chemistry that’s always simmered between us. If I tell Steele now, it might mess everything up before we get the chance to really find out.

“How is it living with Porter?” I ask instead.

Steele looks up from what he’s doing with a soft expression on his face that I’ve never seen before.

“It’s great. Waking up with him every single day is just...” He shakes his head and grins like a lovesick fool.

“I’m happy for you, man. You deserve this.” I pat his shoulder and pick up the tray that he’s finished with while he washes his hands.

“What about you? Do you think you’ll ever settle down with anyone?”

My eyes go automatically to Gates again, now doing some weird dance that has everyone in hysterics outside. “Maybe,” I answer wistfully.

If Steele doesn’t murder us both first.

## GATES

“Oh, hey, you do websites, don’t you?” Porter asks while Steele loads up the grill and Tallahassee casually saunters back in my direction like he hasn’t been watching me through the window for the past five minutes, making my pulse race and my stomach flutter with a stupidly giddy feeling.

“Uh, yeah,” I answer uncertainly, even though I’m extremely sure that I do websites, I just don’t know why he’s asking.

“Wow, I figured you would have gotten bored and moved on to another job or three by now. Is this one a record for you?” my brother teases, and I do my best to hide the wince that instinctively moves through me.

I force a smile and bring the bottle of beer up to my lips. “Still doing it,” I say again, even though he’s not completely off the mark. I am bored of it. Or, well, not exactly bored of the websites but definitely bored of taking commissions and forcing myself to do them on command by a certain deadline. That shit is for the birds. Not Nigel, he’s too badass for this shit.



Wait, what was the question again?

“Did you need a website?” Tallahassee asks, saving me from trying to scramble to get back on track with the flow of this conversation.

“Yeah, we do,” Robbie says immediately. “Our lead tech is running a Facebook page for us, but I keep telling Porter that we need a real website where clients can make appointments and everything without having to call all the time. People *love* being able to make appointments without calling.”

“They really do,” I agree. “And, yeah, I can do that. Email me tomorrow and I can get all the specifics I’ll need.”

“Sounds great.” Porter grins.

“What about you?” I call over to my brother. “I could do a kickass website for you too. Oh, shit, you know what would be amazing? I could do a ‘get to know your mechanic’ tab and have sexy pictures of all you guys. You’d have all the ladies, gays, and theys knocking down the doors to have you fiddle with their engines.” I waggle my eyebrows.

“I’m not having porn on my business website,” Steele grumbles.

“Who said porn?” I look between Auggie, Red, Shep, and Riggs. They all shrug. “I’m talking about photos of you all with your jumpsuits half zipped, looking sweaty and greasy while you fix cars.”

“I’ll think about it,” he says reluctantly.

“It’s a fantastic idea if you ask me,” Auggie says.

“I agree,” Tallahassee jumps in, and the rest of the guys all chime in with their approval as well.

Steele sighs. “Fine, we’ll talk about it.”

Nervous excitement zips through me. Maybe *this* will be the chance I need to show my brother that I’m really working to change, to be more responsible and grow up a little. Even if he *is* right about me being bored with this career

already. I don't have to be the flighty, pleasure of the moment person I've always been. I can change.

"Great." I let out a whoosh of a breath. "Hey, do you need me to take a look at your roof too?" I shield my eyes from the sun and look up towards his roof. "Or I can clean your gutters? If you guys want to take a vacation or anything, I can watch the dogs."

Tallahassee clears his throat. "Chill. You're trying too hard," he whispers, and I snap my mouth shut.

Steele looks over his shoulder at me, eyeing me apprehensively. Tal is right, I'm trying too hard. I can't fix forty years of fucking up in one afternoon, no matter how badly I want to try.

While the food cooks, Porter hauls out their corn hole set—to a raucous round of innuendo, of course—and we team up to play a few rounds. Or we *try* to play a few rounds until the dogs turn it into a game of fetch instead, bringing our bags back to us each time we throw them.

"We're out of beer," Auggie complains, popping open the cooler to find it full of nothing but melting ice.

"There's more in the garage," Porter says.

"I'll go get it," I offer immediately. I *know*, still trying too hard...

"I'll help," Tallahassee volunteers, tossing his empty bottle into the recycling bin and following me inside.

"I can't believe you're going to have *two* beers. Who's going to drive me home later like a worried mother hen, even though I'm stone cold sober?" I tease as we make our way through the house to the garage.

"I'm not, I just wanted a minute alone with you." I can hear the smirk in his voice just before he grabs the back of my shirt and hauls me to a stop.

"And why exactly would you want that?" I tease, letting him back me against the wall and pen me in with his arms on either side of me. He leans in, brushing the tip of his

nose to mine, his skin warm from the sun and still smelling like oil and sweat from his day of work.

“Because it’s been torture standing out there without being able to kiss or touch you every time you say something hilariously, endearingly stupid,” he says, ghosting his smiling lips over mine.

I huff out a laugh and grab the back of his neck to drag him in for a proper kiss, slamming my mouth against his and sliding my tongue between his lips. Tallahassee bunches up the front of my shirt in his fist, pressing in closer to me until his body is flush against mine, pinning me to the wall as our tongues tangle and our cocks harden against each other through our clothes.

The sound of footsteps approaching sends us flying apart, both wiping our mouths hastily with the back of our hands and trying to get our breathing under control before whoever is coming sees us. Not that our rumpled clothes and raging erections aren’t a dead giveaway all their own...

I push off the wall and grab for the door handle to the garage, hurrying Tallahassee through with stifled laughter, like a couple of teenagers who almost got caught making out, which is almost embarrassingly close to what just happened.

“That was a close one,” he says once we’re in the garage, grabbing the two cases of beer that are right next to the steps.

“Yeah. It wouldn’t be the end of the world though, would it?” I ask, chewing on my bottom lip and immediately wishing I hadn’t opened a can of worms with that question. I don’t want him to think I’m pushing too hard or expecting things to move too fast.

“Nah, it would just cause a friendly barbeque to end in bloodshed and my best friend to never speak to me again. No big deal.”

“I keep telling you, if he’s going to be pissed at anyone, it’ll be me.” My stomach knots. “And he’s going to find out eventually, right?”

“We got married before without bothering to tell him,” Tallahassee points out, and my heart sinks. He stops smiling immediately and reaches out towards me with his free hand. “Shit, I didn’t mean it like that. Of course, we’re going to tell him eventually. I just think we should find the right time and that we shouldn’t rush it. I want to make sure this is solid and...” He trails off with a helpless expression.

“Real?” I guess the next word he didn’t want to say.

“Yeah,” he agrees after a second’s long pause.

I force another lighthearted expression and grab the case of beer out of his hand, sticking it under my arm to carry both of them at the same time and opening the door again. “Right, makes sense.”

“Gates, wait.”

I pause but don’t turn around to face him. “I get it, Lassie. You’re right. I’m just pissed at myself that I fucked things up so badly before. But I’m willing to put in the time and the work to prove to you that things can be different this time.” I finally turn my head to look at him. “We good?”

He hesitates and then nods. “Yeah, we’re good.”

We head back to the backyard and fill the cooler with the rest of the beer. The rest of the night passes with good food and the kind of laid-back atmosphere I didn’t know I was missing all these years. The guys rib each other and we try another game of corn hole once the dogs are busy gnawing on some boiled bones that Porter made for them.

“Wait, is it offensive for us to play bags? I mean, considering...” Shep asks, giving me a concerned look.

“Yes, I’m extremely offended,” I joke with a solemn tone. “The only way I’m going to feel comfortable with this game is if we empty all of the bags by half.”

“You know, I fooled around with this guy who only had one ball for a while,” Auggie says conversationally, taking his shot and landing it right in the hole. “I couldn’t even really tell.” He shrugs, and my insides squirm.

Is he only saying that to be nice? Are they all joking about this behind my back?

“Well, it helps that my other ball is two times bigger than average,” I tease with false bravado.

“Can we talk about something other than my brother’s ballsack?” Steele asks, and I let out a relieved breath, glad to have the spotlight off of my testicle, metaphorically speaking, of course.

Ball conversation aside, it ends up being a fun night. Maybe I really could find my place here, find real and lasting friends here. I want to. I want to build a life right here with Tallahassee and make things right with my brother. I want to be the kind of guy who *doesn’t* get immediately bored with any job or hobby he tries and can stick to commitments he makes. I want to be worthy of a man like Tallahassee and a life like this.

Will I ever be that man?

Eventually, the evening starts to wrap up and everyone files out one by one. Tallahassee says he’ll see me at home, and I stay just a few extra minutes to help clean up.

“I really do want to do that website for you,” I tell Steele again while I help him put the leftovers into the fridge and wipe down the counters.

“I’m sure it’s a lot of work.” He waves me off. “Besides, by next week you could be in a different city with a completely new job.”

My pulse spikes and I clench my jaw so quickly that my teeth audibly snap. “I won’t,” I insist. “I’m staying.”

“I know you think that now.” He shakes his head.

“Just let me do the damn website. I owe you a hell of a lot more than that,” I growl. “And I know nothing I say is going to convince you or Tallahassee that I’m serious this time, but you’re going to see eventually.”

“What does Tallahassee care?” he asks, pulling his eyebrows together.

“He doesn’t. Forget it.” I noisily stack the dirty dishes into the dishwasher and slam it closed. “I’m doing a website for you. Send me the info if you want, otherwise I’ll just figure it out myself. I’ll talk to you later.”

I head out of the kitchen and towards the front door without waiting for him to respond. I pass Porter, in the living room with both dogs curled up on the couch, and I give him a wave on my way out, not pausing long enough to give my brother a chance to catch up and question me again or try to convince me that leaving really would be for the best.

I’ve never tried this hard to change before, so I never had any clue, but apparently the hardest thing about turning your life around is that everyone around you is always waiting for you to go back to the person you used to be. It would be a hell of a lot easier to do just that, to take off, find a new city again and whatever random job sounds fun. I’m sure I could find someone fun and sexy to date and a group of friends to integrate myself into for a few months. But eventually, I’d be right back here, still secretly wild about Tallahassee, still desperate for my brother’s approval, still feeling as lost as I’ve ever felt.

Maybe this time if I stay, I can break the cycle.

Maybe.

I take my time driving home, windows rolled down and music blaring into the peaceful summer night. A few blocks from the apartment, I spot an antique-looking chair on the curb. It’s tattered and dirty, but there’s something about it that calls to me.

I pull over and get out to take a closer look. It’s clearly seen better days, but there’s an undeniable charm to it, even if the wooden legs have been gnawed by a dog and the fabric is fraying and smelly. Doesn’t this chair deserve another chance to be loved by someone who will appreciate how unique it is?

On impulse, I open the door to my backseat and awkwardly stuff the chair inside.

Everyone deserves a second chance. Don’t they?

# Chapter 14

## TALLAHASSEE

It's been almost a week since the cookout at Steele's and I still can't get that look out of my head. The look Gates had on his face when he thought I was implying that whatever this is between us isn't real.

Hell, if anything it's too real. There are too many things at stake, including my friendship with Steele and my own damn heart. But if it can work this time, if Gates stays and we see this thing through, it will all be worth it.

Which is the crux of the issue. I believe that *he* believes he's staying, I'm just having a damn hard time letting go of all my doubts and trusting him.

Maybe a proper date would help. I could take him somewhere nice, prove to both of us that this isn't just two guys fooling around because it happens to be convenient. It's inconvenient as hell, actually. The problem is, where do I take a guy like Gates? Dinner doesn't feel like a proper date when we already live together and have dinner together every night. Do people still go to the movies? We could go back to the arcade bar, and I could *not* freak out if he tries to kiss me this time...

I ponder all of this while I work on autopilot, doing a tune up that I could do in my sleep. The sound of footsteps scuffing against the floor next to me is the only thing that manages to pull me out of my rambling, tangled thoughts.

"You are focusing way too hard on a simple tune up," Auggie says, leaning against the car a few inches from me.

"I was just thinking about this guy I've been seeing. I want to take him on a date, but everything sounds too boring and cliché for a man like him."

"Ah, yes, the mystery man." He leans in a little closer and whispers the next part, "For real, is it Gates?"

I shoot up so fast that I bang my head against the inside of the hood with a loud thud. Luckily, no one bothers to even look up from what they're doing to check if I've given myself a concussion or not. I dart a glance towards Steele's office, half expecting him to be immediately alerted to the conversation, his ears magically attuned to any mention of one of his friends fucking his brother.

I clear my throat and give Auggie a warning look. Even without a verbal confirmation, the pleased, mischievous expression on his face tells me that he can read the answer written all over me.

*"This guy isn't typical, he likes adventure, and he always has unique ideas of his own, so taking him out to a simple dinner just won't cut it. But if I can't even come up with an idea for one damn date, how am I going to keep him from getting bored with me long term?"*

"Whoa, that's some deep shit." Auggie strokes his chin. "Fuck knows I'm no relationship expert, but I'm pretty sure overthinking shit like that is bad. Take it one date at a time. What does he like?"

I brace my hands against the edge of the car and frown. "Motorcycles? Skydiving? Teaching my bird to swear? Annoying the hell out of me just to watch me lose my shit..." I smile as I list off all of Gates's endearing and annoying interests.

"Motorcycles." Auggie picks out one of the options easily. "Go for a ride somewhere."

"Huh, yeah that's not bad. Thanks man."

He pushes himself up and clasps my shoulder encouragingly. "Good luck. Remember, don't crush a butterfly if you love it, or however that saying goes."

I snort a laugh. "Did you get that one from Stone?" I tease.

"Joke all you want, but the man is strangely wise."

"If you say so."



I'm still thinking about Auggie's suggestion as I drive home that afternoon. It's only six o'clock, which means nearly four more hours of sunlight left on this beautiful summer day. I pull into a parking space right next to Gates's car and get out.

Is that a chair in his backseat?

I shake my head. I'm not even going to ask. I jog up the steps to my apartment and swing the door open, stopping in my tracks when everything looks weird. I back up and check the apartment number, just to make sure I'm not losing my mind. But nope, it's right.

I stride in again and glance around at the living room furniture, all in different locations than when I left this morning. Gates appears from down the hallway with Nigel on his shoulder and a huge smile on his face.

"I thought things were looking a little stale. You don't mind, do you?" He gestures at the rearranged furniture.

"Uh, no, I guess it's fine. Where's Nigel's cage though?"

"It's in your room. Don't you think he probably gets lonely at night when we're both asleep? It was either move his cage or go buy a second bird to keep him company," he reasons with a shrug.

"Thank you for picking the first option," I mutter, pinching the bridge of my nose.

"No problem." He squats down to encourage Nigel to hop onto the arm of the couch, and then he comes closer and wraps his arms around my neck. "I didn't fuck up, did I?"

"No." I slip my fingers through his belt loops and tug him in for a kiss. "Let's go on a date."

His whole face lights up. "For real? Right now?"

"Yeah, right now. I want to go get your bike out of storage and take a ride together."

His smile widens and he rests his forehead against mine. "That sounds perfect. Would it be lame to pack a picnic?"

“Food is never lame,” I say seriously. “Pack something while I go shower and change, and then we’ll go.”

“You got it.” He playfully swats at my ass as I head down the hallway, already working on unzipping my jumpsuit and thinking about where we can stop for our picnic. I look back at Gates just before he disappears into the kitchen with a bounce in his step.

If I’d known this suggestion would make him so happy, I’d have planned a date weeks ago. Gates is so worried that *he* needs to change, but if this is going to work between us this time, I need to be the kind of man he deserves too.

## GATES

My girl is purring like a kitten in spite of my shameful neglect of her over the past eight months. I twist the throttle to rev her engine, feeling the vibration of her power harnessed between my legs as we take the next turn out of town and out onto the wide-open country roads. I can’t feel the wind on my face with my helmet visor in place, but the sheer amount of bug guts that keep splattering on it is reason enough to keep it there.

Tallahassee rides just a few feet ahead of me, seeming to have a destination in mind. I’m more than happy to let him lead and enjoy the scenery as it gets more and more scenic the farther we get from town.

He looks sexy as hell in his leather jacket, straddling his own bike and handling her with the finesse of someone with a lifetime of experience. He’s the one who taught me to ride when I was eighteen, in spite of Steele’s protests that I was too immature and would end up careening off a winding road or splattered on the front of a truck.

He was probably right about me being too immature at the time, but his worry has kept me safe all these years. Any time I thought about doing anything truly reckless on my motorcycle, I always had my brother’s face in my mind with a disapproving, worried glare.

The contrast between the cute little picnic basket I packed and Tallahassee's badass biker vibe is the strangest turn on I've ever encountered. Or maybe it's the fact that we've been fooling around for over a week and every time he tries to touch me, I stop him, leaving me with a massive case of anxiety and blue balls—well, blue *ball*.

I'm not sure how long we ride, but eventually he signals a turn, and we pull off onto a dirt road surrounded by trees, without any sign to tell us where we are. But Tallahassee seems to know, since he doesn't slow down or hesitate, just flies down the unpaved road with me right on his tail. The trees get denser and the road turns into more of a path, until it all eventually gives way to a clearing and he slows to a stop.

"Wow," I mutter, kicking on my brakes and taking off my helmet to get a better view of the secluded lake that he's led us to.

"Perfect place for a picnic, right?" He grins and swings his leg over the bike to dismount.

"Among other things," I flirt, climbing off mine as well.

"Want to go for a swim first?" He doesn't wait for an answer, already starting to undress while I'm still catching up to the question he asked.

He shrugs off his jacket and then pulls his shirt over his head, dropping it onto the ground next to his motorcycle. I tug my shirt off while he kicks off his shoes and shimmies out of his jeans and underwear, leaving him bare assed and glistening with sweat, his skin glowing in the sunlight that's shining down on the clearing in the trees around the large lake.

My eyes fall on that donkey tattoo on his ass cheek again, the bittersweet feeling I had last time replaced with humor and a dangerous amount of optimism about what could be. We could ride our bikes together every night in the summer, we could go on adventures just like this. Hell, we could sit on the couch every night and I think I'd be happy, as long as it was Tallahassee sitting next to me.

He jogs into the lake while I scramble to shed the rest of my clothes and rush in after him. The water is lukewarm and crystal clear, like something out of a dream that shouldn't even exist in the real world. Maybe that's all any of this is, a dream that I'll wake up from sooner or later.

Tallahassee splashes me, throwing his head back and laughing at the shocked, indignant sound that bursts from my lips. "You're going to pay for that," I say.

"Ooo, I'm terrified," he taunts, and I launch myself at him, jumping onto him and dunking him under the water for half a second before letting him back up.

"Asshole." He pushes the water out of his face and lunges right back at me.

We tussle and splash, our laughter echoing through the clearing and being carried away on the gentle summer breeze. Our wrestling and teasing turns into heated kisses after a few minutes, our chests rising and falling against each other, our legs bumping under the water along with our hardening cocks.

My skin heats, in spite of the coolness of the lake, and I drag my wet fingers through Tallahassee's hair to kiss him harder and deeper, nipping at his lips and stroking my tongue over his.

He pants into my mouth, his hands groping my slick skin above and below the surface of the water. My heart hammers inside my ribcage and my cock thickens and pulses against his. We drift towards the shore until our feet touch the muddy bottom of the lake and we break our kiss long enough to stumble out.

Without the cover of the water to obscure things, my cock wilts and nerves course through me. I grab my underwear and tug them back on, wondering if there's any way that Tallahassee won't notice my bizarre behavior.

When I turn back around, he's eyeing me curiously. Yeah, I didn't think I'd get that lucky.

"What's going on?" His gaze shifts to my boxer briefs and then back to my face.

“What? Nothing.” I take a step towards him again, bracing my hands against his dripping-wet chest and leaning close for a kiss.

Sex is a perfectly good distraction, right? I mean, not mutual sex since I can’t get out of my damn head long enough to confess to him that my dick is broken, but I can totally blow him again to stall this inevitable conversation. It’s been working perfectly all week, and bonus, I get to suck his dick a lot. It’s a win-win.

He falls right back into the kiss with me, backing me up against my motorcycle and devouring my mouth in hot, heavy, hungry strokes of his tongue in my mouth. My cock thickens slowly, nerves still dancing through me every time his hands slide down my stomach or get anywhere near my underwear.

“Gates,” he murmurs my name against my lips. “You have to tell me what’s wrong.”

I sigh and my heart sinks. What if this is a deal breaker? Who in their right mind would want to be with someone with one ball and a broken dick? I look up at him, his legs between mine as I rest my wet ass against my motorcycle, my hands on his bare skin, his resting on my shoulders.

“My dick is broken,” I blurt.

“Your dick isn’t broken,” he says immediately.

“Right, you would know.” I roll my eyes petulantly, giving him a small push to signal that I want him to back up so I can put the rest of my clothes back on for this conversation, but he doesn’t budge.

“It was in perfect working order the night that we dry humped the living hell out of each other,” he reminds me. “And every time we fool around, I can feel you get hard before you freak out and blow me instead of letting me touch you.”

I blow out a long breath. “I don’t know why it worked that night in the tent. I think that was some kind of forest rainstorm magic. And I keep freaking out because my *dick is broken*,” I reiterate more forcefully. I’m not sure why I’m

suddenly so set on convincing him of this, considering I'm still sure it's going to be the thing that turns out to be just too much for us to overcome.

“What did your doctor say? Is this a side effect of your surgery?”

“She said that it's psychological,” I grumble, and he nods, moving his hands *slowly* off my shoulders and down my chest, stopping to tease my nipples between his thumb and forefinger before continuing his journey down my belly. I tense my abs and squirm under his touch, my skin hot and my pulse thundering, and my cock confusingly caught between excitement and nerves, unsure whether to rise to the occasion or shrink back in fear.

“Tal,” I murmur, putting my hand on his to stop him.

“You really don't want me to touch you?” He eases his touch until his fingertips are only barely brushing my skin, his body still crowded near mine, his hard cock swaying inches away.

“I don't want you to be freaked out by my scarred half sac.”

“So, I can play with your cock, just not anything else?” His touch gets a little firmer again, raising goosebumps on my skin as he traces along the skin just above the waistline of my underwear.

“I don't know. I get all fucking nervous any time you're even in that general area, and then my cock won't cooperate. *I* haven't even been able to jerk off since the surgery without feeling squirmy and weird.”

Tallahassee puts one hand under my chin, still teasing my skin with the other, and tilts my head up for a slow, sweet kiss. “As a mechanic, it *is* my sworn duty to fix any problems with your stroker rod that might come up.”

I snort a laugh against his lips. “You're such a dumbass.” My cock tingles and swells, and my hips twitch as he tugs at my underwear without actually making any attempt to pull them down.

He tsks and nuzzles his nose against mine before claiming another deep, scorching kiss. His erection bumps mine, hot even through my boxer briefs.

“You’re underestimating how much mechanics know about this subject. For example, there’s an art to stroking a crankshaft...” He flicks his tongue against the seam of my lips and rolls his hips, grinding our erections together. The catch of his cock head on mine makes my eyes roll and my toes curl in the dirt. “It’s simply grinding the rods...” he does it again and I groan.

“Okay,” I gasp breathlessly. “Point taken.”

“Trust me?” he asks, grinning against my lips.

My heart forces its way into my throat and my stomach writhes again, but I nod anyway. “Yeah, I trust you.”

Tallahassee lowers himself to his knees between my legs and my pulse jumps, my cock nervously shrinking again.

“It’s okay,” he promises, kissing the tip of my cock through my underwear, the warmth of his mouth heating me up, his eyes gentle as he looks up at me and hooks his fingers in the waist of my underwear.

I hold my breath as he tugs them down, stopping before he exposes my sac, leaving just my half-hard cock swaying inches from his mouth. “Hmm, yes, the stroker rod itself seems to be in perfect shape. Exquisite actually,” he says in an overly professional tone that drags a bark of laughter out of me. “Of course, it’s going to need some hands-on testing to determine full functionality.”

“By all means,” I tease, gesturing for him to go on and then bracing my hands on my bike, my legs spread on either side of Tallahassee’s bare, glistening body, his fingers digging into my thighs as he leans in and flicks his tongue along the sheathed head of my cock to lick my foreskin.

I gasp and my cock twitches. He does it again, a longer, slower lick this time, from the base of my shaft all the way up to the tip of my foreskin. When he reaches the top, he teases his tongue inside, docking it into the hood of skin and

flicking it against the hidden head of my cock while he starts to stroke me.

He wiggles his tongue and then nibbles gently on the loose skin, sending hot, shuddering jolts of pleasure straight down to my sac, tightening it and making my cock swell bigger and bigger, harder and harder.

I drag my fingers through his short hair and cant my hips, bumping the head of my cock, slick with precum, against his soft, nearly parted lips.

“Tallahassee,” I groan his name and he gives me a teasing smirk, kissing the head of my cock again.

“Yup, this certainly seems to be a working stroker rod,” he says playfully, stroking me from base to tip, my foreskin rolling over the head of my cock and back again each time, making all of my nerve endings spark and spreading the precum all around my head and down my shaft.

“Fuck me,” I moan.

“Servicing your rear exhaust is going to cost extra.”

“Oh my god, shut up.” I laugh, pushing him off and stumbling to turn around and drape myself over my bike. “There’s a packet of lube in the pocket of my jeans. Now fuck me.”

My knees tremble and my cock throbs while I wait, listening to the sound of him shuffling through my clothes and then tearing the packet open. My hole quivers and my sac feels heavy and tight, throbbing for release along with my stiff, pulsing cock.

He tugs my underwear down in back, still not completely off, even though my shriveled missing ball is the furthest thing from my mind right now, and he slips his lube slicked fingers between my cheeks.

“Fuck.” I moan as the slippery tips of his fingers glide over my rim, coaxing and teasing my hole to soften with soft, patient strokes while he trails hot, open-mouthed kisses along my spine. I squirm impatiently, my thighs quaking and my skin on fire with the need to feel every inch of Tallahassee



against me, on top of me, inside me, all over me. “Please,” I groan.

“You’re as impatient as ever,” he murmurs, easing two fingers inside me. The burning stretch makes me suck in a sharp breath, my cock giving a knee weakening throb and leaking sticky strands of precum onto the seat of my motorcycle.

“Yes. Now fuck me already.”

Tallahassee chuckles and then lines the thick head of his cock up with my hole. I sigh and wiggle my hips, spreading my legs and tilting my ass up invitingly.

“I never stopped thinking about you,” he whispers right next to my ear as he pushes the first few inches of his cock inside me.

I gasp. I’m not sure if it’s because of his words or because I was too impatient to let him prep me properly and now, I’m paying for it. Probably a little bit of both.

“I didn’t either,” I confess, moaning as he thrusts deep inside me, stretching me, claiming me, owning me from the inside out.

I turn my head and his lips find mine in an awkward, angled kiss that I feel all the way down to my toes. He eases his cock out and then slams it deep again, jarring me against my bike and forcing another deep, animal groan from me. “More. Show me how much you missed me,” I beg.

Tallahassee growls, bites my bottom lip, and then fucks me harder. We move together in a wild, desperate rhythm, rutting and thrusting, fucking and grunting like animals in heat. Our skin is slick with sweat and water from the lake, making us slip and slide against each other as we slam into each other, over and over, harder and faster with every thrust.

“Gates. Fuck, Gates,” he pants my name, making sloppy attempts at kisses in between ragged breaths.

“I fucking missed you. I thought about you every damn day,” I confess, digging my fingers into the hot metal of my bike to brace myself for his rough thrusts, my cock grinding

against the warm, buttery leather of the seat. Every time he fills me, it's like an itch I haven't been able to scratch in years—deeply satisfying and primal.

“I'm so close,” he groans, digging his fingers into my hips.

“Fuck yes. I want your cum dripping out of me, I want you to come so hard inside of me that you can't remember your own damn name.” I moan, thrashing and writhing with him, reaching for my own cock to stroke myself furiously, heat mounting inside of me, building higher and higher until Tallahassee lets out a strangled roar, slamming his hips hard against mine and burying his cock as deep as it will go as it starts to pulse out his orgasm.

He whimpers and grunts, the throbbing of his cock against my prostate sending me over the edge in my own blinding wave of pleasure, painting the seat of my motorcycle with ropes of thick cum as my orgasm goes on and on until I can't feel anything except for Tallahassee.

He collapses against me and my knees buckle, taking us both to the ground in a heap of breathless laughter and trembling muscles.

“I think you killed me,” he mutters, landing in the dirt next to my bike.

“*I killed you?*” I scoff, lying down next to him, only vaguely aware of how filthy we're both going to be when we manage to have full control of our bodies again.

We lie there catching our breath for a few minutes, watching the sky overhead turn pink and orange as the sun starts to set. Cicadas and crickets chirp loudly from the surrounding trees, and fireflies start to light up the air around us.

“I don't care about your missing testicle,” he says eventually.

“It might look gross. I haven't even checked.”

“I don't give a single fuck,” he insists firmly. “I'm probably an idiot, but I'm crazy about you. What's going on

between your legs has absolutely zero bearing on that.”

“What if I had a gnome between my legs,” I tease.

“That would be weird, but I’d roll with it.”

I chuckle weakly, still half out of breath. “Okay, I’m going to work on being less freaked out about this.”

“Take your time. Just talk to me, okay?”

“Yeah.” I turn my head and press a kiss to his bare shoulder. “When I can feel my legs again, can we jump back in the lake to clean off and then eat?”

“Yup, just as soon as I get the feeling back in my extremities,” he agrees.

Best. Date. Ever.

# Chapter 15

## TALLAHASSEE

The sound of power tools emanating from my apartment is ominous to say the least. I take a deep breath with my hand on the doorknob, bracing myself for whatever I'm about to find Gates up to on the other side.

I push the door open slowly, unmuffling the noise enough to decide that it sounds like a sander being used in the kitchen. With Gates that could mean anything from him deciding to sand and repaint all the cabinets on a whim, to... god only knows what.

But, hey, at least it's one more day that he's here—in my apartment, in my life, chipping away at the guard I put up years ago, little by little. Silver linings are important when you live with someone who could impulsively destroy your entire apartment without meaning to.

I slip off my shoes and head towards the noise, unzipping my work jumpsuit a few inches as I cross the living room to the kitchen. If given ten guesses, I don't think I would have come up with finding Gates on his knees on the kitchen floor, sanding down the legs of the chair that I saw stuffed in his backseat a few days ago. The grungy fabric has been ripped off and is lying in a pile, and an open can of varnish sits dangerously close to where he's working.

Gates looks up at me and grins. He's wearing a pair of goggles, wood shavings in his hair and clinging to his short beard. I duck in and pick up the can before it can get knocked over and stain the floor, while he switches off the sander and pushes his goggles up.

“Hey,” he greets me, turning his head up in a wordless request for a kiss that makes my belly flutter at how damn comfortable and *committed* something like that feels. I bend down and press a hard kiss to his lips. “That's for you.” He points towards the counter, and I turn around to find a piece of paper sitting there.

I frown, shuffling over to pick it up without disturbing the obstacle course he's made of the kitchen. I pick up the paper and glance over it. It's a printout of STD and HIV tests, all reading negative, with today's date printed on the top next to Gates's name.

"You didn't have to do this." I set it back down, and he shrugs.

"I figured it was the responsible, adult thing to do after I demanded that you fuck me the other night but didn't bother to bring a condom." He smirks, and my insides heat at the reminder of our date at the lake.

After we washed up in the water, we got dressed and spent a few hours under the stars, enjoying the food he packed and talking about life and about the past, dancing around any mention of the future without working up the courage to directly address it.

"I can get you mine too. I got tested at my last physical six months ago."

He waves me off. "Whenever is fine. I'm not worried about it."

I lean against the counter and look over his project again. "So, what is all of this?"

"A new hobby," he says, flashing me another smile. "Or maybe my next business venture?" He furrows his brow and uses his arm to wipe the sweat off of his forehead. "Except if I quit doing this website thing then Steele was right and I'm a fuckup who can't stick with anything. Plus, proper adults don't bounce from career to career. I can stick with website design. It's not so bad." He runs through his own personal pep talk rapidly, while staring at the partially disassembled chair in front of him.

My stomach tightens and I grip the counter a little harder while I work to keep my expression neutral. Is the new hobby a sign that he's getting bored already? Is he white-knuckling it to stay here because it's the "adult" thing to do? Or just to prove something to his brother?

“Anyway...” He looks up at me, still as carefree as ever as he runs his hand proudly over the smoothed wood of one of the legs. “I found this chair on the curb the other day and I thought it would be cool to restore it to its former glory. What’s wrong? You look freaked out.”

I clear my throat. “Just wondering which deity to personally thank that you chose this over welding metal sculptures in the kitchen.”

Gates snorts. “I told you, I would need a garage for that.”

“Of course.” I nod. “You hate doing your websites?” I pick out the other bit of information he wove into his rambling. I *had* noticed that he’d spent less time working on them in the last month or so, but I figured he was doing them more while I was at work instead of at odd hours of the night like he used to.

He tugs his bottom lip between his teeth and guilt flickers over his features. “I don’t *hate* it.”

“But you don’t like it.” I fill in the words he seems to not want to say for whatever reason.

“It’s more that I hate the deadlines and that I *have* to do it. It sucks, but my brain is just like that sometimes. I dream about sucking your cock, I get hard just thinking about it. But if you gave me a deadline and said I *had* to suck your cock every single day by seven o’clock, then I’d never want to do it again.”

That uncomfortable squirming feeling starts again in my gut. Is he talking about more than just the websites? Does the very fact that I *want* him to stay make staying a nightmare for him?

“Don’t do anything for anyone else,” I rasp out after a few seconds of panic. “Not for Steele, not for your clients...” My throat tightens and I trail off, the words *not for me* hanging unsaid between us.

Gates stands up and brushes his dusty hands over his jeans, leaving them as streaked with sawdust as his face is.

“Come for a ride with me? We can grab dinner.”

I blink at the non sequitur, but I guess that’s just Gates.  
“Yeah, sure. Give me a minute to change and we can go.”

He sets down his sander carefully and then steps over the chair to stand in front of me. He smells like varnish and wood, and he looks even more adorably disheveled up close, with a red ring around his eyes from the goggles. He grabs onto the collar of my jumpsuit and tugs me in roughly for a kiss, his lips hot and soft against mine.

It feels like an unspoken promise, I’m just not sure what it’s a promise of. That he won’t leave? Or that he’ll still love me if he does?

My heart stutters at the I-word that I haven’t allowed myself to think. Even all those years ago when we got married, we never said it—not out loud. It was always there, in the way he looked at me, in the way we touched each other and laughed together and stayed up late into the night having whispered conversations while Steele slept. But I think some part of me held the actual words back, because I knew that if I said them, there would be no coming back for my heart when he left.

“Go get dressed then.” He gives me a little nudge towards the doorway. “I’ll wash up too and meet you back out here in five minutes.”

## GATES

I glance at Tallahassee out of the corner of my eye while I drive down the quiet back road, my pulse thundering in my ears as I wonder what he’s going to think and whether this was one of those *bad* impulsive decisions.

I take a deep breath. It’s not like I *did* anything. I just need a way to show him what I’m thinking, to prove to him in some small way that I’m serious when I tell him I’m staying.

“This doesn’t look like any place to get food,” he says, rolling down his window to watch the houses pass in the dark.

“We’ll get food after. I just wanted to show you something first.”

I turn off the main road onto an uneven gravel driveway. It crunches under the tires, the car jolting us around as I navigate the bumpy terrain before slowing to a stop in front of a ranch-style house that has clearly seen better days.

I put on the high beams, illuminating a faded For Sale sign in the overgrown, weed strewn yard, a roof that's one strong breeze away from caving in, and loose siding.

"Where are we?" Tallahassee asks as I unbuckle and get out of the car. He hesitates for a second and then follows me, the sound of his door slamming echoing through the quiet night, disturbing the chirping of a million crickets for half a second before they resume their song.

"I went out for a ride on my motorcycle earlier while you were at work, and I stumbled on this place by accident." I round the front of my car and hop up to sit on the hood, and Tallahassee joins me.

"It looks like it's due to be bulldozed." He crosses his arms and looks over the house with an unimpressed expression.

"Come on, where's your *vision*?" I bump my shoulder against his.

"My vision is just fine. I'm looking at a house that's about to fall over."

"Nah, I took a look inside and the foundation and bones are solid. A new roof, a fresh coat of paint, and a full gut of the inside and she'll be brand new."

"Is that all?" he asks blandly, and I chuckle.

The enthusiasm that's been bubbling in my chest since I found this house earlier dims considerably at his less than excited response. My shoulders sag and I lean back, bracing my hands on the hood of the car, hot from the engine running and the sun that set recently.

"You're right, this was dumb." I sigh and hop off the hood. "Where should we eat?"



“Wait.” He snags my arm to stop me from walking away. “What is this? You actually want to buy this house?”

I shrug, looking at him and then back at the house with a silly, wistful feeling inside my chest that is gone like a puff of smoke as soon as I try to latch onto it.

“Maybe not *this* house.” Even if I *did* spend the entire afternoon mentally tearing it down to its studs and rebuilding it exactly the way we would want it, including high ceilings for Nigel and a four-car garage with enough space for our bikes, cars, and a possible welding studio. “I just...” I stuff my hands in my pockets and wander a few feet towards the house, and then turn to face him again, the headlights of the car backlighting him in a way that makes the whole moment feel surreal. “I want something permanent. I want to put down roots here and put my energy into building something with you. I know you said we need to slow things down and I’m not trying to rush, I swear I’m not. We can wait to buy a house until the time is right. We should *definitely* wait until after we’re ready to tell Steele about us, because a secret wedding is bad enough, we should *not* add secret property owners to the list...”

He gets off of the car and strides towards me, cutting off my rambling by slamming his mouth against mine in a rough kiss that makes me feel like I’m falling, even though we’re standing still. I drag my fingers through his hair, he grabs onto the front of my shirt, and we get lost for a few minutes with our tongues tangled and our lips falling into rhythm together.

“I wanted you to know that I’m thinking about this stuff, that’s all,” I finish my thought more succinctly when we break the kiss.

“Thank you.” He pulls me even closer, crushing me to his chest and wrapping his arms around me. He looks over my shoulder at the house for a few more seconds, his expression softening like he’s giving it some real thought this time. “It would be a *lot* of work.”

“I’m ready to put in some hard work for something I can keep.”

I can feel his heart speeding up against mine. “Me too.”

# Chapter 16

## TALLAHASSEE

“Are you sure he’ll be okay for three whole days?” Gates gives Nigel those side of the head scratches that make the bird close his eyes and click his beak happily.

“I told you, that hippie chick, Laila is going to pop in to feed him and play with him. And it’s not even three full days,” I say, picking up the duffle bag from the floor next to his feet and flinging it over my shoulder along with my own.

“Yeah, but does she know that he only likes green grapes, not the red ones that are in the fridge? And that he really prefers to eat oranges with the rind still on because he likes to pull them apart and then nibble on the rind after?”

I press a hard kiss to the side of Gates’s head. “You’re cute, Nigel is fine, and Laila grew up with an African Grey, so she’ll be fine too.”

“Fine.” He huffs. “I know swearing is fun, but keep it polite in front of your babysitter. We’ll be back on Sunday afternoon.”

I fight back a grin at how damn adorable he’s being with the bird.

“*Spank me,*” Nigel squawks.

“See, that’s the kind of stuff that it would be impolite to say to a complete stranger,” Gates informs him solemnly.

“Yeah, birds don’t really have social graces. That’s what you get for teaching him to talk like a sailor.”

“Still totally worth it,” he says, giving Nigel one last pet and then turning to slip his shoes on. “Remind me again what this weekend at the lake is about.”

“Steele didn’t want to close for the actual Fourth of July holiday, but he figured we all deserved some time off, so this was his compromise.”

“Ah, yeah, that sounds like my brother.”

We head out together, leaving a key under the mat for Laila. I toss our bags into the trunk of my car when we reach it, and then slide into the driver's seat. Gates is already cranking up the air conditioning and flipping through his playlists to pick something to listen to.

"Hey, so, what do you think about telling Steele this weekend?" I ask, sounding a hell of a lot more casual than I feel bringing up the question that's been on my mind for the past week since Gates took me to that house and made me think that this thing could really stick this time.

"Telling him...?" He looks up from scrolling through his playlists.

"About us," I clarify.

"Oh. *Oh.*" His eyes go wide and then a smile spreads slowly over his lips. "You're ready for that? Aren't we taking it slow and not jinxing things?"

I fiddle with the knob for the fan, just to have something to do with my hands for a second. I've gone back and forth for days about whether it's too soon and if it might fuck things up, but I think Gates needs some kind of proof that I'm taking this seriously too and that I'm working really damn hard to believe him when he says he's not going to leave this time.

"I think he deserves to know," I say.

"Yeah." He clicks on a playlist and a heavy drum solo starts playing through the speakers. "But is this really the best weekend to tell him? There are a *lot* of places he could hide our murdered bodies out in the woods."

I chuckle. "Okay, good point. Soon though?"

"Yeah, soon. I just need to get my will in order first."

"You have a will?" I arch an eyebrow at him.

"Nope. See? *Lots* to do before I'm ready to face the firing squad."

"We can wait if you're not ready," I offer, sensing the anxiety rolling off of him. Maybe this wasn't the best time to

bring this up at all.

“I want to tell him. Hiding sucks, and you’re right, he deserves to know. I’m just trying really fucking hard to prove to him that I’m not the same screw up I’ve always been, and I know this will be a setback.”

I reach over and put my hand on his, squeezing it comfortingly. “We’ll figure it out.”

“We always do, Lassie,” he teases, putting on his sunglasses in exaggerated slow motion like he’s a detective in an overacted crime drama.

He’s being goofy, but the sentiment settles in my chest anyway. We might still be figuring all this out between us, but I like that Gates and I have an *always*.

I turn the music up a few notches and put the car in gear, pulling out of the parking lot and onto the street while he sets the GPS with the address Steele sent us.

It’s a few hours’ drive to the cabins Steele rented out for the weekend. When we pull off the main highway and follow the dirt road through the woods, there are already a handful of cars there. Denali and Bunny are racing around the clearing, yapping and howling as they chase each other.

I park my car, and when I open my door, a loud squeal startles me.

“Hey, watch out for Hamlet,” Auggie calls, jogging over and scooping up a small black-and-white-spotted pig.

“You got a pig?”

“Hell yeah, I did. Look how cute he is.” He angles the little dude’s face towards me, flat pink nose wiggling as it sniffs the air.

“See, we could have brought Nigel,” Gates gripes, getting out of the car on the other side and coming around to meet the new, snorty little addition to the Big Bull family.

“I’m not bringing my bird out here to get eaten by a coyote.”

Auggie gasps and pulls Hamlet closer to his chest, eliciting another loud squeal. “You think there are coyotes out here?”

“The dogs should keep them away,” Porter calls over an assurance from a few feet away, where he’s unloading Steele’s car.

“Okay, good.” Auggie lets out a sigh of relief. Steele comes out of the nearest cabin wearing his infamous silver basketball shorts that sit low on his hips and cling in all the right places to leave very little to the imagination, his t-shirt slung over his shoulder. “Oh fuck, it’s the shorts.”

Red, Shep, and Riggs all whip their heads around to look at Steele.

Riggs wolf whistles, lowering his sunglasses while everyone else simply stares at the obscene way the shorts fit him.

“I thought we talked about those shorts being for private time only,” Porter jokes while Steele holds both hands in front of his junk and glares at everyone staring at him.

“Stop it, you bunch of pervs. Eyes off the merchandise,” he growls.

“Bring out the eye candy and then ban everyone from looking,” Shep complains, shaking his head and turning his attention towards Gates. “Hey, you’re the single brother. What’s up, boo?” He waggles his eyebrows and looks my man up and down suggestively.

“Actually, I’m married,” Gates says with a smirk. My heart flutters and heat races through me, along with the almost irresistible urge to grab him and kiss the absolute hell out of him.

Steele barks out a laugh. “Ha, that’ll be the day.”

Gates bristles and narrows his eyes but doesn’t say a word. “Which cabin are we in?” he asks instead, both of us going around to the trunk to grab our bags.

“Third one down. You’re sharing with Red. Then it’s Riggs, Auggie, and Shep in the middle, and Porter and me here on the end.” He points to each cabin in turn.

“Cool.” Gates gives his brother a little salute and saunters towards our cabin.

I follow him into the one-room cabin lined with several rickety single beds. Red’s stuff is already strewn on the one closest to the door, so I claim the middle one and Gates takes the farthest. He tosses his bag down and then plops his ass down on the bed, which groans concerningly under his weight.

I unzip my bag and pull out the sunscreen, pouring some into my hands so I can make sure Gates doesn’t get a sunburn like he did when he was working on Porter’s roof.

“Shirt off,” I instruct, moving to stand in front of him, positioning myself between his legs. He pulls his shirt off and sets it down on the bed and I take my time rubbing the lotion all over his shoulders, chest, and arms, using the last little bit on my fingers to coat his nose and cheeks, and then wiping the excess off on my own shorts.

“Do you think he’s ever going to see me differently? Or am I just a fucking idiot?” he asks with a sigh.

I card my fingers through his hair with a gentle tug to get him to tilt his face up towards me. “He’ll pull his head out of his ass eventually. I promise.”

He closes his eyes and his lips part on another sad exhale. I lean in and kiss him more gently than I ever have before. The soft press of our mouths together makes my skin tingle and something deep inside of me ache.

“I’ll make sure of it,” I vow, even if I don’t have the first clue how to fulfill a promise like that. But, fuck, I think I’ll do just about any damn thing in the world to make Gates happy.

## GATES

After we drop our bags in the cabin and make out for a couple of minutes, we head back outside, where there’s a debate going on about whether it’s better weather for hiking or

swimming in the lake, which Denali settles by running headlong down the dock and launching herself into the water.

“I guess we’re swimming,” Porter says with a laugh, stripping his shirt over his head and then wiggling his pants off, leaving him in nothing but a pair of boxers before he follows his dog, sprinting across the lawn and down the dock to jump in.

The rest of us follow. Most of the guys already have swim trunks on, and the rest of us opt for our underwear the same way Porter did. The sun beats down hot on the back of my neck and shoulders as we stride down the hot wooden dock towards the sparkling, still lake. Denali is paddling around happily, and Porter is trying to encourage Bunny to be brave and take the leap too. Hamlet is the one who responds to the coaxing though, screeching as he launches himself off the dock and hits the water with a loud splash.

“Oh shit.” Auggie jumps in after him in a panic, only to find the little pig happily paddling around just like Denali.

“Your turn,” I tease, putting my hand between Tallahassee’s shoulders and giving him a hard shove to send him tumbling into the lake.

I cackle as he pops back up and splashes a wave of water in my direction, then heaves himself up to grab my leg and drag me in after him. The cold water rushes up around me, making me sputter and cough through laughter as I kick and splash back in his direction.

Everyone laughs and splashes like we’re a bunch of kids at a pool party. Chicken fights break out and I arch a challenging eyebrow at Tallahassee.

“It is so on,” he says, swimming over to me and scrambling up on my shoulders in the shallow part of the lake where my feet touch the squishy, muddy bottom. We face off against Riggs on Auggie’s shoulders and are immediately defeated. Apparently, Riggs is as much of a scrapper as he appears to be.



“He bit me,” Tallahassee complains when he pops back out of the water after falling off my shoulders.

Riggs shrugs shamelessly. “No one said no biting.”

“It’s implied,” Tallahassee insists.

“Fine.” He scoffs and rolls his eyes like Tallahassee is being dramatic. “I won’t bite *anymore*.” He looks over the rest of the group and grins wickedly. “Who’s next?”

Shockingly, no one volunteers.

“Big babies,” Auggie mutters, and Riggs nods in agreement.

When Tallahassee pulls himself out of the water a little while later, I do a double take at his underwear, see through and clinging to his body. I gasp, inhaling lake water right into my lungs. I start to choke and Red pats my back to help me cough it up.

“Damn,” he says appreciatively, joining me in looking at Tallahassee’s ass.

“Hey, don’t you have that same tattoo?” Steele asks, tilting his head and narrowing his eyes at the obscured image of the donkey on Tallahassee’s left ass cheek.

“Uh...” I dart my eyes around in search of some distraction that will keep me from having to answer that question. Luckily, Tallahassee provides exactly that by turning around to face us.

Everyone hoots and whistles at the free show. He really does have a fantastic cock, even when it’s soft and kind of squished in his underwear like it is right now. My dick tingles and starts to swell.

*Fuck.*

I dip under the water and swim a little farther away so I won’t get caught with an erection while I stare at Tallahassee. Not that I’d be alone, if everyone’s reaction is any indication. He takes it in stride, giving them all the finger and jumping back into the water so everyone is forced to stop looking.

I swim a little farther and pull myself up onto a large flat rock on the far side of the lake, flopping down to bask like a lizard in the bright afternoon sun. I close my eyes and enjoy soaking up the heat for a few minutes, the raucous sound of everyone laughing and goofing around echoing off the lake.

“Seriously though, about the tattoo.”

I pop my eyes open to find Steele dragging himself onto the rock beside me.

“You caught us, Tal and I are in a secret relationship.”

He snorts, and I bristle again like I did earlier when he found the idea of me being married *so* laughable.

“Why are you so hung up on this anyway?” I snap. “Tallahassee, and all of your other friends for that matter, are all grown up. They can handle their own love lives without you needing to protect them from a fuckup like me.”

“I can’t speak for the rest of the guys, but Tal is a hell of a lot softer inside than you realize.”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes at his condescending tone. Of course, he assumes he knows more about Tallahassee than I do, even if I’ve known the man as long as he has.

“Right,” I mutter.

“He was in love,” Steele says, and my heart skips a beat, my mouth going instantly dry.

“Recently?” I ask as casually as I can manage.

“Nah, it was probably about...” He looks off into the distance for a second and strokes his beard while he thinks. “Just shy of ten years ago?”

“Did he...” I clear my throat. “Did he ever say who?”

“No. He was really cagey about it for some reason. But I could see how happy he was, always grinning like a damn fool.” He smiles at the memory. “Then one day he was just fucking devastated. He wouldn’t say what happened, just that things were over. It took him *years* to get over it. I’m not sure

he ever really did, but he at least got to the point where he was seeing people again.”

I bring my thumb to my lips and anxiously gnaw on my fingernail while I listen to the story. He’s talking about when I left Tallahassee after our secret wedding, and he doesn’t even know it. It’s one thing to know that I was a complete fucking idiot back then, but to hear about it all from someone on the outside... Yeah, that’s a kick in the balls—*ball*.

“I think he’s met someone again,” he goes on, and the struggle to keep my expression neutral gets even harder. “He’s smiling again like he hasn’t in a long time. You know, the other day, I caught him whistling at work?” Steele gives a low, affectionate laugh.

“Good, he deserves it,” I say, hoping my voice sounds less thready to him than it does to my own ears.

“He does. So, don’t fuck it up for him.”

I sputter. “Why would I fuck it up for him?”

“I don’t know.” He pats my shoulder. “Just let him be happy.”

“Yeah,” I mutter as he gets up and walks away and I sit there unpacking everything he just said.

# Chapter 17

## TALLAHASSEE

Gates has been quiet all afternoon.

I glance across the campfire at him, the dancing orange flames the only thing illuminating the pitch-dark night all around us. The typical banter and teasing that's going around the circle turns into white noise the longer I study him, trying to figure out what happened between the time we were all goofing around in the lake and now that has him staring silently, completely ignoring everything going on around him.

Did Steele say something to him when the two of them were alone? Or did *he* say something to Steele? If he came clean about everything, I think I would know. I think the entire state of Wisconsin would know thanks to the size of the eruption that would occur.

As if he can hear exactly how loudly I'm thinking at him, Gates's far-off gaze snaps to me like he's coming out of a hazy dream. Something like guilt crosses his features, but maybe that's just a trick of the firelight. I arch an eyebrow at him in silent question and he shakes his head and glances at all the guys around us, like he's just now realizing where we are, then, he jerks his head subtly towards our cabin.

I nod, taking a sip from the bottle of lukewarm beer that I've been nursing for an hour while I watched him. He gets up without saying a word. No one seems to notice, or if they do, they don't bother to question where he's going. I force myself to wait another two minutes, counting every second in my head to keep from jumping up and immediately following him. Something tells me people *would* notice that.

When enough time has passed, I gulp down the last of my beer and stand up just as silently as he did. I saunter casually over to the bag we set up for recyclables and I toss the empty bottle in, lingering a few extra moments to make a show of yawning and stretching my arms over my head before finally slipping away and heading straight for the cabin.

“Gates?” I say his name in a low tone as the rickety door bangs closed behind me.

“Yeah,” he answers from the direction of his bed. My eyes slowly adjust to the dark and I’m able to make out the shape of the furniture and then his body by the moonlight that’s creeping in through the grimy windows.

I cross the cabin, careful not to trip over any of the shit we all left strewn on the floor when we unpacked earlier. When I reach his bed, I stop right in front of him in the same position I took up earlier to comfort him, standing between his legs while he tilts his head up towards me. I card my fingers through his hair again and lean in to brush a soft kiss over his lips.

He tastes like smoke from the bonfire and sunshine from a long day spent outside, and that perfectly addictive only-Gates flavor that I spent nine years dreaming of.

“I’m sorry,” he says softly when we part.

“For what?” My stomach twists. Is this it? Has he been quiet all afternoon thinking about how to tell me that he changed his mind and he’s going to leave? If I beg, will he stay?

“For leaving.” He reaches up and wraps his fingers around my wrists, my hands resting on his shoulders, and holds on to me like he’s afraid *I’m* the one who’s about to bolt. “For agreeing to marry you when I knew I couldn’t stay, for staying away for so long after that, and for taking so many fucking years to get my shit together.”

The air whooshes out of my lungs with relief. I sit down on the bed next to him, grab his hand, and hunch to put my head on his shoulder. “What did Steele say?”

“Not much. He was just trying to warn me off from ruining this *amazing new relationship* that you’re in.” We both snort a laugh. “But it just made me think, you know? We agreed not to bring up the past, so I feel like I never properly apologized. I didn’t think I would *ever* be this mature, but I

think we need to face this shit head on if we're going to completely move past it and make it work this time."

I let out a long breath. "Okay. If we're doing this, then I should apologize too."

"For what? Being amazing? Putting up with my shit for years when everyone else wrote me off?"

"For trying to trick you into staying when I knew you weren't ready or might *never* be ready." Finally saying those words out loud feels like a huge weight lifting off of my chest. I spent too many years letting Gates feel like he held all the blame for things going wrong between us when it was at least fifty percent my fault. "I thought that if we got married, it would give you a reason to stay. It was sneaky and wrong, and if I hadn't done that, if I hadn't pushed so hard, maybe things would have actually worked out in their own time."

He squeezes my hand. "I think in a weird way, they did work out in their own time. It just took longer than either of us wanted it to." He kisses the top of my head. "Do you know why I left?"

"Because you were restless and didn't want to stay in this boring little town."

"No." He jostles me as he shakes his head. "I mean, initially, yes. But that night, when I took off the ring and left you that note, I knew I wasn't good enough for you. I thought I might never be good enough for you, and that if I left, you'd have a chance to find someone else."

I chuckle, the noise sounding sad and rusty to my own ears. "There was never anyone else, you idiot."

"Yeah, not for me either," he agrees. "Not really."

I pick my head up and look at him, his face less than an inch from mine, his breath ghosting over my lips as he leans in close enough for our noses to bump.

"I love you, Gates. I did back then, and I never stopped." My heart skips a beat as the words fall out of my mouth. I can't decide if I'm saying them too early or way too

late, or maybe he's right and this is finally the right time, even if it feels like it took forever for us to get here.

"I love you too. I always have." He slams his mouth into mine, a mix of hard and tender as his lips move against my lips and his tongue tangles with mine.

## GATES

Tallahassee's moan vibrates around my tongue as we grope at each other's clothes in a blind wave of lust and the wild rush of having finally said the words we've both been waiting a decade to say.

The bed creaks under our shifting weight as we fumble to get each other's clothes off, while reluctant to break the kiss long enough to actually do it. I tug on his shirt, sliding one hand up the furry slope of his belly, just the slightest bit soft and round, overlaying the muscles he's built underneath with a lifetime of manual labor.

My cock is hard and aching, straining against the cotton of my underwear, trapped behind the zipper of my shorts. Even with our confession of love still lingering in the air, the same nervous, self-conscious feeling that I've been fighting since my surgery lingers right on the edges of my lust-drunk thoughts, threatening to ruin things at any moment if I give it even an inch of leeway to creep in.

Tallahassee yanks his mouth away from mine and tugs my shirt over my head, flinging it blindly into the darkness, then does the same with his own. Outside, the faint sound of drunken singing assures us that we have at least a little time before Red stumbles in here for bed.

"Did you bring any lube?" he asks breathlessly, toying with the button on my shorts without actually popping it open. My cock twitches towards his touch with a desperate throb. I nod, grabbing the back of his neck and dragging him in for another kiss—rougher this time, all teeth, tongues, and impatience. Maybe if we hurry up, we'll make it before my brain tries to ruin shit.

Unfortunately, Tallahassee doesn't seem on board with that plan, slowing things down by teasing my nipples at a leisurely pace like we have all the time in the world. He slows the rhythm of his lips to match, forcing me to pause and fall back into the moment fully, feeling every careful stroke of his tongue over mine, every brush of our lips as we bring them together over and over. My heartbeat slows down too.

He takes my hand and places it in the center of his chest to feel the steady rise and fall of his breaths and the sturdy, unhurried rhythm of his heart. A heavy pulse of heat rolls through me just as slowly as the kiss, settling in the pit of my stomach and spreading lower to tighten my sac and make my cock dribble.

"Do you want to fuck me?" he asks, trailing his fingers down the center of my chest, all the way to my bellybutton, where he stops to tease it with his fingertip like he would if it were my hole.

A shudder of excitement rushes along my spine and makes my cock jerk and twitch again.

"Hell yeah," I answer immediately, reaching for the elastic waist of his basketball shorts before a fresh flutter of nerves gives me pause. "But what if I can't..."

"You can," Tallahassee says firmly. "It's perfect, I won't be able to see or touch anything. All I'll be able to do is bite down on my fist and try not to scream too loudly as you pound my prostate until I see stars and then fill me up with your cum so it will leak out of me for the rest of the weekend."

"Jesus," I mutter, dragging him in for another deep kiss.

I can feel the shape of his smile against my mouth, and he gives me a little shove in the middle of my chest. "Go get the lube."

"Yeah," I agree in a daze, squinting into the dark in search of my suitcase. It takes me a few seconds to find it, and then to dig through it by feel alone until my fingers brush the



smooth tube I shoved into the bottom just before we left, in the hope that we'd find a few minutes of alone time this weekend.

I can't see anything but shadows, but I can hear the rustle of Tallahassee taking off the rest of his clothes and the continued groaning creak of the bed. My hands tremble as I reach for the button on my own shorts, my cock wilting slightly at the fresh rush of anxiety that swamps me.

"I can't see a damn thing," he assures me, like he can read my mind. Or maybe he just knows me well enough to hear the momentary pause and know exactly what's going through my mind. "And if I could, there isn't a single doubt in my mind that I would tell you that you look as sexy and fucking perfect as you've always looked. One day, when you're comfortable, I'll even prove it to you."

My stomach clenches and I nod, even though he probably can hardly see it in the dark. I finally get rid of my shorts, letting them fall around my feet along with my underwear, and then kick them off to leave on the floor next to the bed.

"Come here." I reach for him in the dark, grabbing his hand to yank him up and pull him to me. Tallahassee crashes into me with quiet laughter, his body just as bare as mine, his skin still hot from a day in the sun, and his cock rock hard as it bumps into me, leaving a sticky streak of precum on my skin. "We'll break the bed."

"The creaking doesn't instill a lot of confidence," he agrees. "Do you have another suggestion?"

I grin and wrap my arms around him, still clutching the bottle of lube in one hand as I back him up in the direction of the wall. He lets out a quiet *oof* when his back collides with it.

"This should do." I playfully tug his bottom lip between my teeth, squeezing his asscheek with my free hand.

He makes another amused, horny sound, tilting his head as I start to kiss and suck my way from his mouth to his jaw, and then down his throat. "There's no way you can hold

me up against the wall and fuck me. We weigh the same amount.”

I rumble a laugh. “That sounds like a challenge, Lassie.”

“What did I say about calling me Lassie when we’re getting frisky?” He huffs, and I chuckle again, shoving the bottle of lube into his hand and then grabbing the backs of his thighs to pick him up in one fluid motion that has him gasping and scrambling to grab onto my shoulders for balance.

“You were saying?” I murmur with a cocky grin that he might *just* be able to make out in the dark and pin him to the wall while he wraps his legs around me, his cock brushing my belly.

“Show off,” he grumbles, clicking open the bottle of lube and squirting some onto his fingers.

It’s awkward, but he manages to find the right angle to prep himself, letting the bottle of lube drop to the floor by our feet while I continue to suck and nibble on every inch of skin I can reach, from his earlobes to his collarbones to the Adam’s apple in his throat that bobs with every hard swallow and quiet gasp he makes while he works his fingers in and out, his knuckles bumping against my achingly hard cock, only inches from his hot hole.

“I’m so unbelievably, stupidly, forever in love with you,” I whisper again in between warm, wet presses of my mouth.

Tallahassee pants and wiggles in my grip, his chest heaving as his breathing gets faster and faster, his skin getting slick as beads of sweat start to form.

“I can’t live without you again.” He whimpers, pulling his fingers out of himself and wrapping them around my cock to guide me to where he wants me.

“You’ll never have to,” I promise, the head of my cock notching against his slick, relaxed entrance. “I’m not going anywhere.”

I'll tell him again and again if I have to. I'll tell him a million times. And, if that doesn't work, I'll just wait until he's seen it with his own eyes. I don't care if it takes until we're eighty, ninety, a hundred. I'll be here, showing him every damn day that I'm not going anywhere ever again.

I sink inside the vice grip of his ass. He throws his head back, banging it lightly against the wall as he bites back a moan. I crash my mouth into his again as I fill him deep in one jarring stroke, swallowing another of his groans and digging my fingers hard into his thighs to hold him up.

He tightens his legs around me as I press him harder against the wall to balance his weight, and then I start to fuck him. I pull out and thrust back in, slow and steady at first, trying to match the leisurely pace he set earlier when we kissed, wanting him to feel every inch of my cock filling his hole, tugging at his rim, dragging along his prostate while he trembles and fights to keep from crying out.

His inner muscles squeeze around me, milking my cock with every thrust, quickly fraying the threads of my self-control until I'm fucking him harder, deeper, slamming him against the wall over and over, humping him wildly and trading heavy breaths and muffled moans around our tongues.

Tallahassee's hands are all over me—in my hair, pinching my nipples, dragging stinging scratches down my shoulder blades. In between sloppy, desperate kisses we mumble sweet words, filthy words, and, of course, each other's names. Over and over, again and again, until my thighs are burning and my cock is so impossibly hard inside of him that I'm surprised I don't just tear him in two.

He reaches between us and wraps his hand around his own cock, stroking himself furiously in time with my rutting thrusts.

“Gates,” he gasps, squeezing his legs so tightly around me that my thrusts stutter, his inner muscles fluttering and then clamping tightly around me.

I bury my face in the crook of his throat, sucking on his salty, sweat drenched skin as a blinding wave of heat starts in

the pit of my stomach and explodes outward, rushing along my spine as my sac clenches and my cock starts to pulse in time with his orgasm, dragging the cum out of me with a shuddering gasp.

The flood of my release makes his insides even hotter and wetter around my cock, the pleasure going on and on through stilted half thrusts, helplessly grinding together as we chase every last shiver and aftershock until we're both drained and completely out of breath.

I stumble back, nearly losing my balance, my knees buckling under his weight now that I'm no longer working with the kind of super strength that comes with such an insane level of horniness. It's like when people lift cars and shit.

My softening cock slips out of him, and he manages to get his feet under him before I trip over my own feet and land on my bed with another concerning sound from the metal joints of the rusted cot.

"Come here." I scoot as far to one side of the small bed as I can, and Tallahassee laughs as he attempts to wedge himself onto the half an inch that's left over.

"This isn't going to work."

"Shh. You have to believe." I pet his head soothingly, and he just shakes his head, but stays there, balanced uncomfortably on the edge.

Less than a minute later, the cabin door swings open with a rusty groan. Tallahassee tries to bolt up, but I hold on tight to keep him next to me. It's too dark for Red to see anything properly anyway.

"It smells like sex in here," he mutters, and I put a hand over Tallahassee's mouth to muffle his laughter.

"Weird," I say as casually as I can manage.

Red doesn't say anything else, just shuffles around for a few minutes in the dark before I hear the creak of his own bed as it adjusts to his weight.

I finally slip my hand off of Tallahassee's mouth and he snuggles closer, pressing a soft, sweet kiss to my lips and then resting his head on the pillow right next to mine. I know he'll have to get up and go to his own bed soon, but I'm going to keep him here as long as I can. Even Red coming in didn't do a damn thing to ruin the high I'm feeling right now.

Tallahassee loves me. I would have loved to have heard those words from him years ago, but I think it only would have scared me worse. I'm ready now. I'm ready to stay and find a way to be the man he deserves.

He's mine, and after decades of running, I finally found home. It just turns out it's a person instead of a place.

I run my thumb over my bare ring finger again before closing my eyes and drifting off to sleep.

# Chapter 18

## GATES

The power sander is so loud, I almost don't hear my phone buzzing on the counter. I notice it lighting up out of the corner of my eye just before I miss the call, and hurry to turn off the sander and answer it.

I'm in such a rush to answer before I miss it, that I forget to check the display to see who's calling.

"Hello?" I say, my heart hammering at the possibility of it being Steele.

It's been a few days since the weekend at the lake, and I've been spending every waking moment running different scenarios through my mind of how to tell my brother the truth about Tallahassee and me. So far, writing him a note and then the two of us moving to Guam is my favorite of all the options. Lassie wasn't impressed when I suggested it though.

"So, you *are* still breathing." My mother's teasing voice sends a wave of guilt through me. I wince and sit my ass down on the kitchen floor next to the new chair I've been working on all morning. I shake the sawdust out of my hair and take off my goggles.

"Hi, Ma. Sorry, I've been a little busy."

"Just the way you like it," she says knowingly, and I chuckle.

She's always understood my free-spirited nature. Hell, she helped me pack my life into two backpacks the night I decided to take off for the first time. I could tell she was nervous about letting me go, bringing up things she thought I should know like how to use kitty litter to get my car out of a snow drift and the signs of heat stroke, but not once did she try to talk me out of it. I didn't even know where I was going, and she supported me anyway. I think part of her knew that if I ever got in any real trouble, Steele would show up to bail me out. And she was right, he always did.

For twenty years while I ran around the country without a care in the world, my brother was always there anytime I called.

“Are you still in town?” she asks, pulling me out of my drifting train of thought.

“Yeah. I’m staying, actually.”

She gasps. “Oh honey, I’m so happy to hear that. This means we can start having Sunday dinners as a family like I always dreamed of.”

“You’ve never said anything about that before. You really want us over at your place every weekend eating all your food?” I joke.

“I never said anything because I didn’t want you to feel bad for living your life the way you wanted to. And Steele already does enough for me and everyone else, I didn’t want to add one more obligation to his plate.”

“Yeah,” I say, guilt twisting in my gut.

“Which reminds me,” she says with a sigh, and I can hear her writing something down. “I keep meaning to call him. My car is making a funny sound, I need him to come take a look at it.”

“I can do it,” I offer without hesitation.

“Oh, I don’t want to bother you. You just said you were busy.”

“I’m not doing anything important.” I nudge the half-sanded chair out of the way and stand up, brushing more sawdust off of my clothes. I *should* be working on the new website commission I have, but that can wait until later, or tomorrow. This is the kind of stuff I’ve been leaving Steele to do for years and years, and I’m not going to do that anymore.

“If you’re sure...”

“I’m sure. I’ll be over in a few minutes.”

Her house is only a ten-minute drive from the apartment, reminding me that I really need to do better about

seeing her. I like the idea of Sunday dinners. It's quaint and idyllic, like the kind of thing you see in old TV shows from the fifties where families are all cheesy and shit. The image of Steele, Porter, Tallahassee, and I all gathered around a table with my mom and a home cooked meal spread out in front of us brings a smile to my lips.

Of course, I'm going to need to get my shit together and tell Steele the truth first. Minor detail.

I pull into the driveway and the front door opens immediately, like she was standing there just waiting to see my car. She steps out onto the porch with her hands on her hips and a grin on her face that's a perfect match for my own. She's a tiny woman, barely over five feet tall, but she has always been fierce as hell.

As soon as I reach her, she throws her arms around me and pulls me in for a bear hug worthy of someone twice her size and weight. "You look good." She pats my belly, and I playfully bat her hand away.

"I'm like a domesticated house cat now, getting all doughy because my food is brought to me instead of needing to hunt for it."

"Well, it suits you." She leads me inside, straight to the kitchen where she has fresh banana bread waiting like she just stepped out of a Martha Stewart catalog.

I lean over the counter and take the slice she passes to me, her eyes boring into me as she studies me like only a mother can. After a few seconds, she gasps.

"What?"

"You're seeing someone," she declares.

"What?" I sputter again.

"Don't try to deny it, it's written all over your face."

"It is?" I reach up to touch my face, as if I'm going to find the words, *I'm in love* burned there.

"No, but that love bite is a dead giveaway," she teases with a grin.



I slap my hand over the spot I'm only now remembering Tallahassee sucked on last night while he fucked me. My face heats and I stuff my mouth full of a huge bite of bread to hide my embarrassment.

"Is it serious?" she presses. "Can I meet them?"

A warm feeling floods me at her hopeful smile, and the fact that she's never once in the nearly thirty years since I came out assumed the gender of anyone I was dating. Mother of the year, for real.

"It is serious," I confess. "And I'd love for you to meet him. But, uh... Well, it's kind of complicated."

She frowns. "How complicated can it be? You're forty, sweetheart, relationships should be pretty straightforward at this point."

I snort a laugh. "Yeah, that would be nice. It's just... I really need to talk to Steele first."

Her eyebrows go up and she gives me that same look I've seen from my brother a million times, the 'what have you done now?' look. Except there's a lot less judgment in my mom's face, just curiosity. She puts both hands up in surrender though. "Fine, I won't get in the way of brother stuff. I hope I can meet him soon though."

"Me too," I agree before shoving the rest of the slice of banana bread into my mouth. "Let me go take a look at your car really quick, then we can spend some time together."

"Excellent. I'll make dinner, if you can stay that late?"

I lean over and kiss her cheek. "Sounds great."

## TALLAHASSEE

My phone buzzes in my pocket just as I'm making my way out to my car after clocking out at the garage. I smile when I see Gates's name on the display screen.

"Hey," I answer, climbing into my car and pairing my phone to the speakers.

"Hey. I fucked up," he says immediately.

“Fucked up like you burned down the apartment and we need to find a new one or fucked up like you were doing laundry and accidentally turned everything pink?”

“Fucked up like my mom called me to look at her car, and I thought there was a simple fix, but I ended up making it worse.”

I switch my turn signal from left to right, changing my route to take me to his mom’s house instead of back home. “I’m on my way over.”

“Oh my god, you’re a lifesaver. I didn’t want to call Steele and give him another reason to think I’m the world’s biggest fuckup.”

“Whatever it is, I’m sure I can take care of it. I’ll be there in a couple of minutes.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

We hang up and I take the familiar route to the street we all grew up on where their mom still owns the house I spent half my childhood at. As I turn onto the quiet, suburban street, a flood of memories wash over me: the three of us running through the sprinkler in the front yard on hot summer days, Steele and I holed up in his garage working on cars from sun up until sun down with the boombox blaring, a million nights turning off our headlights and letting my car idle down the street in the hope that none of our parents would hear us sneaking back in after curfew.

The guilt that’s been haunting me since Gates came home tightens in my gut. We have to tell Steele the truth, even if he’s going to hate us for a while for it. He’ll get over it eventually, right?

I pull into the driveway behind Gates’s car and get out. The garage is open, so I bypass the front door and go in there instead, where I find my adorable doofus of a husband under the car, grumbling and cursing.

“See, there’s your problem. You have to talk a little nicer to her,” I say, grabbing his leg and pulling him out from

under the car, the creeper he's lying on squeaking on wheels that are clearly in need of some grease.

“Ah, is that the problem?” he jokes back, sitting up and grabbing onto the front of my jumpsuit. He has grease smeared on his nose and hands, and he smells like oil as he slams his mouth into mine with an easy familiarity that lights me up inside.

“Talking nice to cars you need to fix is basically Mechanics 101. Don't worry, I'm sure I can convince her that you didn't mean to hurt her feelings.” I slip the wrench out of his hand and stand up.

Gates gets off the creeper and I take his place, rolling under the car to take a look. Luckily, he knew enough to set up a light under here so I can see what he's been working on. It only takes me a few minutes to locate the problem and where he went wrong with it.

“How's it going?” he asks, putting his hand on my thigh. Even through the thick material of my jumpsuit, I can feel the heat of his touch. My cock responds immediately, and he moves his hand closer, inching it higher and higher on the inside of my thigh.

“Not helping,” I mutter, and he cackles unapologetically.

“Sorry, you look really fucking hot like this.”

“I'm a disembodied pair of legs,” I point out, and he laughs again.

“Mmm,” he hums in agreement. “Must just be my Tallahassee Kink kicking in then.”

“Dinner is ready, if you boys are hungry,” Gates's mom shouts out to us.

“I'm almost finished,” I call back.

His hand disappears from its tortuous path immediately and I'm able to focus long enough to finish up what needs to be done. I roll back out to find him sitting next to the car, just

like he used to do when we were teenagers, watching me the way kids look at their biggest hero.

“Easy peasy.” I set the wrench down and wipe my hands off on my overalls.

“You’re so fucking hot when you’re doing mechanic shit.” He pulls me in for another rough kiss, and I laugh before returning his rough affection.

“You’re weird, but I’m not complaining,” I say when he releases me again.

“Tsh, you’re not complaining because you like my brand of weird,” Gates points out, standing up and offering me a hand to help me up after him.

“I really do.”

I follow him inside through the door that attaches the garage to the rest of the house. I stop in the bathroom to wash up while he heads for the kitchen to do the same and join his mom in setting the table.

While I scrub the grease and oil from under my fingernails, I wonder what his mom will think when we eventually tell her that we’re together. Not just together, *married*.

It’s been true for nine years, but all of a sudden, that single word in my head sets my heart racing. It *feels* real for the first time. We got married for the wrong reasons, and back then our relationship wasn’t anything more than secret, heated hookups a few times a year. A mental slideshow of the past ten months plays through my mind—simple moments, domestic moments, fleeting moments like the one just now in the garage full of teasing and sweetness. We’re building something now, not just a relationship, but a *life* together.

“You fall in?” Gates pops his head around the open doorway and grins at me.

“Just didn’t want to come to the table with black fingernails,” I explain, drying my hands off and holding them up to show off.

He gives me a wicked grin, leaning in to flick the tip of my index finger with his tongue in a move that I'm sure is meant to be sexy, but ends up making me laugh instead.

"Clean enough to eat off of," he teases.

"So weird," I say again, and he just chuckles.

We head into the kitchen where his mom has a casserole waiting for us. It smells like heaven, so we all sit down and dig in. His mom asks me about my parents, and I tell her all about how much they're loving their retirement years in Florida. We talk about the garage and Gates goes on and on about Nigel. We talk like a family, about the past and the present and nothing in particular.

The conversation is comfortable and feels like home, if home was a moment you could live in. I catch his mom glancing between Gates and me every so often with that knowing, motherly kind of smile that leaves little room to doubt that even if we haven't told her yet, she already knows everything.

We stay to play cards after dinner, and then Gates and I wash the dishes while she goes to sit down in the living room. It's another one of those perfect moments, with Gates playfully splashing me with soapy water, and then gasping when I give him a soft kiss that lingers for a few heartbeats.

"I love you," I whisper, letting my forehead rest against his for a minute.

"I love you too."

We finish washing and drying and go to say goodbye to his mom before we leave.

"Sunday dinners, starting next week," she declares as she gives Gates a long hug.

"Sounds great, Ma. I can't wait."

It's my turn next, the small woman hugging the absolute stuffing out of me with a strength I can't believe she possesses. "Take care of him," she whispers, and I hug her back just as tightly.

“I will,” I promise.

As we head out to our cars, Gates waves back at her over his shoulder one last time before she closes the door behind us. I wonder what he would say if I gave him what I’ve been hiding in my dresser for years? Is it too soon? Maybe, like all of this, it’s finally exactly the right time.

# Chapter 19

## GATES

“There’s my boy,” Tallahassee greets Nigel as soon as we enter our apartment.

“*Fuck off*,” the bird squawks, and I bark out a laugh.

Tallahassee glares at me, and I try to stifle my amusement. “Sorry, but his comedic timing really is incredible. It’s like he doesn’t just know the sound of words, he really gets the meaning.”

“Considering how often he makes fake orgasm noises thanks to you, I sure the hell hope he doesn’t understand the actual meaning.”

I chuckle again while he fills up Nigel’s bowl—which is back in the living room because the picky bird refused to eat in Tallahassee’s bedroom—with bird seed to tide him over until the morning, and then turns back towards me with a nervous look on his face.

“What’s up?” I ask, crossing the room to wrap my arms around his neck.

He reaches up to drag his fingers absently along my arms and then turns his head to press a kiss to my forearm. “Just...thinking about something.”

I arch an eyebrow at him. “Care to share, or am I supposed to guess?” He doesn’t respond right away, just keeps looking at me with that uncertain gaze and tightness around his features, so I go ahead and try to guess. “Hmm, let’s see, are you thinking about how sexy I am?” I tease, brushing my lips along the edge of his stubbled jaw. “Oh wait, I know, you’re thinking about how you can’t live without me, right?”

He snorts. “Anyone ever call you a narcissist before?”

“Rude,” I scoff. “Okay, hmm. Are you thinking about that piece of chocolate cake that you left in the refrigerator last night that I definitely *didn’t* eat for breakfast after you left for work this morning?”

“Dammit, I really wanted that cake.” He huffs as I flick my tongue along his earlobe and then gently bite it. His cock swells against mine.

“Husband tax.” The playful words on my own lips make my heart beat a little faster. I’ve been trying them out more and more, just to see how they’ll feel and how he’ll react.

His breath catches, and for a second I think I’ve fucked up. I’m pushing too fast, our marriage might be legally real but we’re not *there* yet, I’m scaring the hell out of Tallahassee...

“I want to show you something...give you something, actually.”

“Intriguing. Lead the way.” I step back to let him have the space to slip out from between me and the wall, and I follow him down the hallway to his bedroom. I want to make a dirty joke just to ease the tension, but there’s something heavy in the air that keeps the words stuck on my tongue.

Tallahassee points me towards his bed and then goes to his dresser on the other side of the room. He’s silent as he pulls open the top drawer and starts to rummage through it. I don’t have the first clue what he’s looking for, but I hold my breath anyway, fidgeting in the quiet of the room. After a few seconds, he pulls out a small pouch and turns back towards me.

“I don’t know if the timing is right or if this is even something you still want. After our talk over the weekend, this might be the last thing our relationship needs, or maybe it’s *exactly* what we need. I don’t know...”

“Lassie, take a breath.” I stand up and cross the few steps that separate us. “Now, give me whatever you have, because the suspense is killing me.”

He chokes out a laugh and thrusts the velvety drawstring bag into my hand. It’s so light it feels empty. Wait, is the bag the present? I cock my head and hold it up to get a better look at it, and then I realize there actually *is* something inside.



I tug at the strings and reach in with two fingers to fish out the contents. As soon as my fingertips brush against smooth, cool metal, my heart jumps into my throat and I know exactly what he's giving me.

"Is this for real?" I ask as I carefully pull matching sterling silver wedding bands out of the pouch. My chest tightens and my eyes burn with the flood of emotions that rushes over me so intensely I can hardly breathe. "You kept them all these years?"

He nods. "I thought about flushing them that morning that you left," he confesses, and I let out a strangled laugh. "But it didn't feel right." He shrugs. "I just always had this stupid hope that maybe one day..."

"Me too," I confess, slipping one of the rings onto my finger where I've felt it missing for so long. Then I do the same for him, taking his hand and sliding it down his ring finger. "That's why I never signed the divorce papers. I didn't lose them, and I didn't forget about them, I just didn't want to. I knew I was being selfish, that I should give you the chance to move on and find someone who would be good enough for you in all the ways I knew I wasn't...but, fuck, I guess I'm okay with being a little selfish because I just couldn't fucking do it."

He drags his fingers through my hair and yanks me in close, pressing his forehead to mine, our noses bumping. "I'm glad you didn't."

Our lips connect with a force that knocks the air out of my lungs and sets my heart thundering. I grunt around his tongue as he walks me backwards toward the bed again until the backs of my legs collide with it.

I grab the front of his jumpsuit and drag him down with me, tumbling onto the messy sheets with our tongues tangled and our chests heaving against each other. He smells like sweat and oil from working all day, and I just want to rub myself all over him like a cat in heat.

We grope at each other's clothes, fumbling with zippers and buttons, desperate to get each other bare. The ring

around my finger feels heavy, *solid*. It feels like a promise. It feels like lazy Sundays in bed and bickering over whose turn it is to mow the lawn, like inside jokes and knowing all the broken, ugly parts of each other that no one else is allowed to see, like the kind of forever I've always been afraid of until this moment.

"I want you to look," I blurt against his lips.

He stops kissing me and pulls back to give me a curious look. His lips are swollen and damp and his cheeks are tinted a light shade of pink with arousal, his pupils blown wide. He looks like the sexiest man I've seen in my entire fucking life.

"Look at what?"

"My mangled sac, my scar, whatever the hell is going on down there that I've been fucking terrified to look at myself."

"If you're not ready, it's not a big deal. Our system is working out okay for now," he assures me.

"No, I know, I just..." I shrug. "It's better to get it over with. If it freaks you out or turns you off, I'd rather get that over with now than later."

"It's not going to freak me out or turn me off." He runs his hands along my chest and down my belly slowly, teasing goosebumps onto my skin.

"Great, then it will be no big deal, and it's better for me to end the angst now than keep worrying about it," I reason, sounding a hell of a lot more cavalier than I feel as my erection wilts and nerves twist knots in my gut.

"Okay," he agrees. "But if you feel uncomfortable and want me to stop, just say the word."

I nod, swallowing hard and licking my suddenly dry lips. "Let's do this."

I lift my hips and shove my shorts and underwear off in one fluid motion before I can give myself time to chicken out. Tallahassee helps, tugging them the rest of the way off and

dropping them on the floor before settling himself between my legs.

I tilt my head back and close my eyes, holding my breath and resisting the urge to put both hands over my flaccid cock and Frankenstein ball sack.

I meant it, if Tallahassee is going to get grossed out, I'd rather get it over with now.

## TALLAHASSEE

Gates trembles almost imperceptibly under my gaze. I don't need to look at his scar or anything else to know he's fucking perfect and nothing is going to change that, but if he needs me to prove it, I'm more than happy to do that.

I sink to my knees next to the bed. He tenses when I put my hands on his thighs to push them a little wider apart, and I almost tell him that this can wait until another night, when he's more comfortable and *ready* to let me show him how much it doesn't bother me that he's missing one testicle. I look up, set on suggesting we hold off on this, but even with his eyes closed and his hands twisting in my sheets like it's all he can do to keep from covering himself up, there's a stubborn, determined set to his jaw.

I already told him he can call this off at any time. If he wants to get this over with then we can do that, and I'll make damn sure he knows exactly how I feel about this whole thing.

I press a kiss against the inside of his thigh, just above his knee, and he gasps.

"Do you know the first time I realized you were the most gorgeous man I'd ever laid eyes on?" I ask, kissing the same spot on his other leg, lips parted, tongue teasing the soft, rarely touched patch of skin. He squirms and shakes his head. "Your twenty-first birthday. Steele and I came to visit you in Phoenix, and we climbed over your back fence in the middle of the night to skinny dip in your neighbor's pool."

He laughs, and then sucks in another breath when I kiss him again, just an inch higher. "I remember that," he rasps.

“I couldn’t stop looking at you, and I was terrified that Steele would notice and kick my ass for perverting on his little brother. Except, you weren’t exactly little anymore. You weren’t the gangly kid who followed us everywhere, pestering us and being a general nuisance. You were this *man*. You were confident and funny as hell, and so goddamn bold it was intimidating.”

Another kiss, another heated gasp as he uncurls his fists from the sheets and drags them through my short hair.

“And you didn’t do anything about it for another ten years?” he teases breathlessly.

“I didn’t think I had a chance,” I admit, adding a hint of teeth to the next kiss, nipping at the warm skin another inch higher on the inside of his thigh.

“Dumbass,” he mutters, and I laugh, biting a little harder on the next one to get him back for the name calling.

I kiss higher and higher, taking my time on every single inch of skin along the way. His muscles tremble, but his cock slowly swells, the nervous shivers he started with giving way to heated ones. His breath hitches and he keeps his eyes firmly closed, like he can’t bear to watch my reaction as I work my way closer to the center of his spread legs.

“You’re still the sexiest man I’ve ever laid eyes on,” I murmur, gliding my tongue along his hot flesh, tasting the saltiness of his sweat, watching the way his cock twitches and his sac tenses with arousal. “Every inch of you is perfect.”

He gasps and squirms, pushing lightly on my head to slow me down, his hard cock wilting. I backtrack to the spot just above his knees again and start the process over with wet, open-mouthed kisses up and down the lower half of his thighs.

“You’re just too horny to see all my flaws,” he teases, slowly relaxing again.

“Nope.” I drag my hands over his belly and chest, and then down to his thighs before starting all over, touching him everywhere but his stiffening cock. “I see all your flaws. You’re messy and impulsive, you’re immature and self-

absorbed, and you taught my damn bird to swear like a sailor.” I list off all the things about Gates that drive me absolutely batshit insane, kissing him in between each one. “And you know what?”

“What?” he asks, his hips twitching impatiently as I near the crux of his legs again. This time he tugs my hair harder instead of pushing me away, his muscles tensing as he holds his breath and stills.

“I love every goddamn annoying and perfect thing about you.”

I finally drag the hot, wet flat of my tongue directly over his sac, feeling the smoothness of his scar contrasting against the textured skin. He lets out a shuddery moan, his breath rushing out of his lungs and his whole body seeming to relax at once. A droplet of precum trickles from the slit of his cock and rolls down his shaft, and I lick him again. As I expected, his missing testicle is hardly noticeable. It’s certainly not a turn off. And his scar is even less so.

“Is it weird?” he asks with a tremor in his voice.

“Nope,” I say again before sucking his big, heavy ball into my mouth gently, dragging another hissing gasp from him.

“Oh fuck.” He pants, flexing his hips again, his cock slapping against his belly.

I wrap my fingers around his thick, throbbing erection and stroke him in long, slow tugs while I continue to suck and lick his tightening scrotum. More droplets of precum roll down the length of his cock, making my fingers slick and sticky.

I release him with a sloppy sound and kiss my way up his heated, silky length until I reach the head of his cock and take him into my mouth. I reach between his legs with my free hand and tease his spit drenched sac with my fingers, tugging at his ball and rolling it against my palm until it pulls up tighter and tighter to his body.

Gates moans and humps into my mouth, his long, thick cock hitting the back of my throat and making me gag. He gasps again at the way my throat constricts around him, my own dick jerking hard at the tight convulsion that ricochets through my body.

“You feel so good,” he groans, trembling to hold himself still and then failing and thrusting deep into my throat again. This time I manage to swallow around him, taking him all the way in, choking on him, suffocating around him, drool dripping down my chin as I bob my head and hold him in my throat.

I reach my free hand up to drag my fingers through the spit dripping off of my chin and then slide them between his legs to tease his hole. He grunts and moans, panting my name and fucking my throat as I slip two fingers inside his tight pucker. Gates clenches around me, canting his hips, fucking himself desperately between my mouth and fingers. I think it’s safe to say that the miniscule two-inch scar he’s been so hung up on for months is the furthest thing from his mind.

“I’m close,” he warns through gritted teeth, bracing his feet against the bed and fucking deeper into my throat. Over and over, faster and faster.

I moan encouragingly, the sound muffled around his throbbing shaft. He lets out a strangled wail, his cock stiffening and then starting to pulse against my tongue and down my throat, the inner muscles of his ass gripping my fingers and fluttering around them with the waves of his orgasm. I pull off just enough to catch the swollen head of his cock on my tongue, coaxing every drop of cum from him and holding it there until he’s spent and completely wrecked.

I pull off and spit the mouthful of cum into my palm, the desperate ache in my cock the only thing on my mind now that I’ve made Gates see god. I sit up and wrap my drenched hand around my cock, coating myself with the slick mixture of cum and saliva, shuddering at the filthy, wet feeling of spreading his release all over myself.

“Give it to me,” he mutters in a hoarse voice, lifting his hips up in invitation.

I grab his thighs and lift him up, shuffling closer while he wraps his legs around my middle. Lining my cock up with his soft, relaxed hole, I fill him in one hard thrust. Gates throws his head back again and hisses through his teeth, sinking his fingernails into my arms and writhing underneath me. I brace my hands on either side of his head and slam my mouth on to his, letting go of the pain and doubt I’ve held close to my heart like a shield since the day he left, letting the wall I’ve built around my feelings come tumbling down brick by brick as I fuck into him, hard and deep.

His cock stays soft, pressed against my belly as he murmurs filthy words and sweet words to me between kisses, running his hands all over me in soft touches and rough ones. Our tongues tangle and heat pools in my gut. I fuck him wildly, the headboard banging against my wall and the mattress creaking, both sounds nearly drowned out by the moans and growls that tumble from my lips.

My orgasm hits me without warning, rushing through me with so much force my elbows and knees buckle, sending me tumbling on top of him while I continue to grind my hips, filling him with pulse after pulse of my cum until there’s nothing left inside of me and I start to soften.

“So, I guess the scar wasn’t an issue?” He laughs weakly, running his hands along my sweat drenched back.

I echo the sound of his amusement with my own breathless, rusty chuckle before working up the strength to roll off him. He shifts close, sharing my pillow and tangling our legs together.

“We’ve gotta tell Steele,” he says.

“Yeah,” I agree.

# Chapter 20

## GATES

I've lost track of the number of times I've walked into Big Bull Mechanics with my palms sweating and anxiety knotting in the pit of my stomach. There's been at least a dozen times over two decades that I've stepped inside the noisy garage, blocking out the chatter and teasing of the guys working, and marched straight to Steele's office to beg him for money or for help, to tell him I fucked up again and needed to be bailed out, to give him another reason to think I'm nothing but an immature jackass who can't handle adult life...

This time feels different.

I don't have my tail between my legs. I don't feel like the world's biggest loser, crawling to my big brother to fix everything for me. For once, I feel like an adult, coming to another adult with a long-overdue truth.

I take a deep breath. Every one of my footsteps echoes in my ears, louder than the whir of machinery or the blare of music coming from the garage. I glance at Tallahassee as I pass him, and he stops what he's doing to look up at me.

He arches an eyebrow in question, and I give a quick shake of my head. We spent twenty minutes this morning arguing over who would be the one to tell him. Tallahassee wanted to protect me, but for once in my life, this is something I need to face head on, on my own.

He mouths *good luck*, and I respond with a wry smile. I'm going to need all the luck I can get, that's for damn sure.

I can see my brother in his office through the glass windows that surround it. He's doing something at his computer, his brow furrowed and a frown on his lips. Great, he's already in a shitty mood. Maybe this can wait until tomorrow...

I drag my thumb along the smooth metal of the ring on my finger and a new surge of resolve settles in my chest.



*No.* It's been long enough. Steele deserves to know, and Tallahassee and I deserve to not hide anymore.

I slip the snug silver ring off my finger and slide it carefully into my pocket, feeling immediately naked without it on. I only put it back on last night, but it feels like it belongs there.

I decided, and Tallahassee agreed, the best way to tackle this is to ease Steele into it. I'm going to start with the 'I'm defiling your best friend' part, and if that goes well, I'll move on to the 'actually, we're married' portion of the confession. Baby steps.

I raise my hand to knock on his door. His head swivels away from the computer and his frown deepens as he waves me in.

"Since when do you knock?"

I chuckle, the knots in my stomach tightening. "I figured I'd try something new."

"What's up? Do you need something or are you just swinging by to say hi?"

"I wanted to see if you're up for grabbing lunch." I hope my voice sounds less high and manic to him than it does to me, but the way he tilts his head and studies me for a few seconds doesn't instill a lot of confidence.

"Sure. You're buying," he teases with a wolfish grin.

I wait for a moment, leaning against the doorframe while he finishes what he's working on and stands up, stuffing his keys and wallet into his pocket. He comes around the desk and gives me a rough pat on the back as he passes me. I fall into step beside him, replaying the words in my head that I plan to say.

*Hey, remember when you said Tallahassee looked happy? Yeah, that's all me.*

Solid opening line, it should ease the tension and hopefully show my brother that I actually *do* care about his best friend's happiness.

*I know this is going to take some time to process, but we were together nine years ago, and we recently got back together. It's serious and I'm in love with him.*

Direct, straight to the point. See? I can totally do this. Easy peasy. Steele will be smiling and giving us his blessing before our food even comes.

“What are you thinking so hard about over there?” he asks, dragging me out of my thoughts and alerting me to the fact that I’ve been completely silent for the several-minute drive to the restaurant he picked.

He pulls into a parking spot and we both get out. “I’ll tell you once we sit down,” I say, and both of his eyebrows jump up.

“So, this isn’t just a brotherly lunch?” He scoffs and shakes his head. “I should have figured you’d have an ulterior motive. Alright, let’s get this over with.”

Fuck. I already messed this up.

*Stupid.*

I do my best to recover mentally as I trail after him into the small cafe, trying to shake off the feeling of being a child who’s about to be scolded. *I’m an adult, I’m an adult, I’m an adult.* I remind myself of this fact over and over as we’re led to our table and give our drink order.

I bounce my knee under the table while I stare blankly at the menu, not absorbing any of the information as I run my speech over in my head again.

“What can I get for you gentlemen?” The waitress asks.

“Can I get a club sandwich with fries, please,” Steele orders, handing her the menu.

“Yeah, same,” I mutter, not really caring what I put in my mouth. I need to rip off the Band-Aid. Food is the least of my concerns.

She smiles and assures us our food will be up shortly, and then saunters away. My brother leans back a little in his

seat and looks at me expectantly.

Okay, here goes nothing.

“I’ve been seeing Tallahassee,” I blurt. Shit, okay, not the perfect opening line I had practiced, but I can recover. “I kissed him ten years ago...or, maybe eleven years ago? It doesn’t matter.” I shake my head, trying not to let myself get lost in the weeds. “Anyway, we dated, or hooked up, I don’t know, we never really defined it, and now—”

My words die off as Steele’s expression goes from confused to shocked to a world of pissed off I’ve never seen in my life.

“What?” I’ve never heard a single word sound like this much of a threat.

My mouth goes dry, and I dart my tongue out to try to wet my lips, but it doesn’t help. “Tallahassee and I—”

“One thing,” he says, cutting me off. “I’ve asked you for one thing in our entire lives. I never asked you to be the one to worry about mom, I never asked you to grow the fuck up, I never even asked you to pay back a single dime of the money I’ve supported you with over the years. Don’t fuck my friends. That’s it.” His voice inches higher and higher as he talks, until he’s practically shouting the last line in the nearly empty cafe.

The hostess looks over at us with concern as Steele stands up so fast it rattles the silverware and causes my soda to slosh over the sides of my glass and pool on the table.

“Would you let me explain?”

He huffs and shakes his head, and then storms out of the restaurant.

“Fuck,” I mutter, tossing a twenty down on the table to cover the sandwiches they’ve likely already started making, and then I bolt after him before he can leave without me.

I barely get the car door closed behind me before he peels out of the parking lot. He doesn’t say a word on the way

back, but every few seconds he shakes his head, rumbling angry noises from his chest.

When we reach Big Bull again, he swings his car into a spot and gets out but doesn't march straight back into the garage. I climb out and face him over the hood of the car, still working to untangle every excuse and explanation I've spent the morning working on that are now all jumbled up inside my head.

"Do you remember when you were ten and I had spent the summer working at that stupid ice cream stand to save up for a top-of-the-line boom box?" he asks, his voice calmer now, but still tight and rumbly.

"Yeah," I answer, barely above a whisper.

"I had it two days. *Two* days before you borrowed it and broke it. That's what you do, Gates, it's what you've always fucking done. I work my ass off for the things I have and then you come in and fucking break them without a goddamn care in the world. That's what you're going to do to Tallahassee too. Right now, you're having a blast, the world is all fucking sunshine and rainbows, but what about in a few months when you're bored, huh? Who's going to be the one left here to pick up the pieces when you break him too?"

The music and other noises from the garage have stopped, the guys not even bothering to hide the fact that they're listening in as they inch towards the bay doors to get a better view of the show. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Tallahassee hovering closer than everyone else, clearly trying to decide if he should jump in or let me handle this myself like I said I wanted to.

I guess it's no surprise I fell so hard for a man who's just like my brother, always ready to protect me, no matter the cost. I just wish Steele could see it, all of it.

"I'm not leaving," I say firmly, reaching into my pocket and slipping the ring back onto my finger. "We're married."

There's an audible gasp from our audience. I should have charged admission for a show this good.

"Un-fucking-believable," Steele mutters, turning on his heel and storming into the garage. The guys all jump to part, letting him past, except Tallahassee who strides over to me.

"So, that went well," I mutter, leaning into him when he wraps his arms around me.

"About as expected," he says dryly. "Is it my turn now?"

I sigh. "Sure. Have fun with that." I sag with defeat. I should have guessed how he would react, but I guess some stupid part of me was holding on to hope that I made some headway in showing him that I've changed. I guess not.

"Hey," Tallahassee says, putting his hands on either side of my face and looking right into my eyes. "I love you, and sooner or later he's going to see the man you've worked so damn hard to become. Okay?"

"Yeah," I agree with a sigh.

He kisses me hard and then takes a step back. "I'll see you at home in a few hours."

I lean on Steele's car and watch my husband square his shoulders and march back into the garage with a determined stride.

In spite of everything, I can't help but smile. I picked a fucking good one.

## TALLAHASSEE

I don't bother to knock, swinging the door to Steele's office open and stepping inside without waiting. I close it behind me, even though it's far from soundproof and the rest of the guys practically have their noses pressed up against the window to find out what's going to happen next on this week's episode of *The Middle Aged and the Give-a-fuck-less*.

"You're a fucking idiot if you think that ring means he won't leave," he says immediately.

I wait for the barb to land, for the harsh but accurate comment to hit me exactly where I've been hurting all these years and make me doubt the decision to throw caution to the wind and trust Gates with my heart again. But it bounces off easily.

"He already has once," I answer blandly, taking the chair in front of his desk and spinning it around to straddle it.

It takes a second before understanding dawns on Steele's face. "You got married nine years ago and he took off again. That's why you were a fucking mess after my birthday in Las Vegas?"

"Yup. And don't think I haven't called myself every name in the book, spent nights awake telling myself I'm the world's biggest moron for falling in love with him and letting him hurt me, and promised myself over and over that I would never put myself in this position with him again."

He shakes his head. "Well, your bitterness towards him certainly makes a hell of a lot more sense now."

I huff out a laugh. "Yeah."

"He lied to me, and you fucking lied to me."

"Yeah," I agree again. "I'm not sorry, though, if that's what you're waiting to hear. He's a grown-ass man and so am I. Should we have lied to you? No, probably not. But you had no business dictating his sex life or mine."

"Right, I'm the asshole for wanting one damn thing in my life that Gates doesn't destroy. Don't come crying to me when he leaves again and you're left to pick up the pieces."

I stand up, my chair scraping against the concrete floor noisily. "When you realize what an absolute dick you're being, let me know. And, by the way, you should think about opening your eyes and seeing your brother for the person he is now, *today*, not the little kid you've always seen him as."

I leave his office without waiting for a response, ignoring the whispers from the guys as I head back over to the car I was working on before this whole day blew up. After a

few minutes, Steele leaves the garage without a word to anyone, and slowly everyone gets back to their own work too.

Steele doesn't come back, so I close up the shop at the end of the day, locking all the doors and setting the security system.

"Hey," Shep says as we're all heading out at the end of the night. I look up to see what he wants. "Congrats man." I cock my head. "On the wedding," he clarifies.

I smile slowly, a warm feeling settling over me after a long day of feeling frustrated and maybe just a little guilty for how hurt Steele seemed. "Thanks."

Auggie pats my shoulder and Red attempts to rumple my hair, while Riggs just grins in a self-satisfied kind of way.

"I called it," he says smugly.

"Yeah, you nearly gave me a damn heart attack too," I confess. "How did you know?"

He shrugs while we all walk slowly over to our cars. "You had that stupid look on your face when he was around."

"What stupid look?"

"The one everyone gets when they're dumb enough to fall in love." His words are a little harsh, but I swear there's a flicker of wistfulness in his face.

"Aren't you too young to be this cynical about love?" Auggie asks.

"Never too young to know that feelings are for suckers. Peace out, losers," he says, shooting us all the double bird before getting into his car.

"I can't decide if he's the best or the literal worst," Red says as Riggs pulls away.

"The jury is out," Auggie agrees. "Now, what the hell are you standing around here for when your *husband* is waiting for you at home?" He gives my shoulder a small shove.

“Night, guys,” I call as I get into my car. He’s absolutely right, my husband is waiting for me.



# Chapter 21

## GATES

It's one of those perfectly lazy mornings where I've been drifting in and out of sleep for hours with absolutely no clue what time it actually is and not a damn reason to care. My husband is wrapped around me, bare skin to bare skin, his half-hard cock nestled against my ass, his hot breath ghosting over the back of my neck.

If it weren't for the fact that I haven't heard from my brother in a week, I would be on cloud nine right now.

A week isn't that long. We've certainly gone longer without talking, but never because of a fight. The first few days, I called and texted, being sent straight to voicemail and left on read over and over. Tallahassee says Steele has been coming to work and giving him the cold shoulder since the blow up.

A few days after everything went down, I went over to my mom's house and told her the truth and how Steele took it. She didn't seem surprised, and she suggested I give my brother some space to work through his feelings. He's always been stubborn, and I guess she's right that I can't rush him. He'll be ready to talk this out when he's ready, and no amount of pestering from me will hurry that process along.

In the meantime, I'm just going to spend most of my waking hours obsessing about it.

"You're too tense for a Sunday morning," Tallahassee murmurs sleepily, kissing the back of my neck.

"Sorry."

"Thinking about your brother?"

I sigh. "Unfortunately."

"He'll come around," he assures me for what has to be the hundredth time in the last few days.

"I know. I just hate waiting for shit. I want to storm over there and shake him until he talks to me."

Tallahassee snorts. “That’ll work.”

I sigh a second time and then roll over to face him. “Hi,” I say, smiling as I tuck my head right next to his on the pillow, the tips of our noses touching.

“Hi,” he echoes with a slow grin, his eyelids still heavy with sleep.

I brush a soft kiss to his lips, and he drags his fingers up and down my spine at a leisurely pace. “We should stay naked in bed all day.”

“Sold,” he agrees readily, kissing me a little deeper the second time as we sink into each other, tangled up together under the sheets, thigh to thigh, chest to chest, heartbeat to heartbeat. His fingers tickle along the skin on my lower back and then over my ass while my cock starts to swell against his.

And then my phone vibrates on the nightstand.

“No,” I complain with a groan against his lips.

“It might be Steele,” he points out.

The vibrations stop and I return to kissing him. He’s right, it might be Steele, but he can wait twenty more minutes after torturing me all week.

The buzzing starts back up again almost immediately. “Dammit,” I mutter, unwrapping myself from Tallahassee’s arms and rolling to answer it. There’s a local number on the screen, but it’s not one I have saved in my phone. “Hello?”

“Gates, it’s Porter.”

I sit up in bed instantly, my heart pounding. “What’s wrong? Is Steele okay?”

“Oh, yeah, sorry, I didn’t mean to worry you by calling multiple times, I just figured since you wouldn’t recognize my number, it was the easiest way to get you to pick up,” he assures me, and I take a deep breath to calm my racing heart.

“Jesus, okay.” I let out a breath, trying to get my heartbeat back to a normal pace after that scare. “Why are you calling?”

“So...um...okay, this is delicate, and I’ve been going back and forth on whether *I* should just go ahead and call or if I should keep pestering Steele to do it. Except, he’s really stubborn, like holy shit does that man know how to dig his heels in when his pride is on the line, even when he knows he’s at least partially at fault for a situation—”

“Porter,” I cut off his rambling.

“Right, sorry. Anyway, here’s the thing...” I hear a door click shut on his end of the phone, like he just stepped into another room for privacy. “I proposed to Steele yesterday.”

“Holy shit. Congratulations, that’s amazing. I’m assuming he said yes?”

“Yeah, he said yes.” Porter chuckles and there’s a sweet kind of fondness in his voice. “We decided to have everyone over tonight for a little celebration and to make the announcement, and I told him to call you but he’s being a stubborn jackass, see my previous rambling for reference.”

I laugh, but my stomach sinks. “He doesn’t want me to come?”

“He does, he’s just being a butthead.”

Tallahassee snorts, clearly listening to everything, and I mouth the word *butthead* at him incredulously.

“I don’t know.” I run my free hand over my face. “I don’t want to crash an engagement party or whatever it is. He’s pissed at me and—”

“So what?” he butts in.

“What?”

“So, what if he’s pissed? He’s your brother. Get your ass over here this afternoon so we can celebrate the fact that I finally managed to land the big, beastly marshmallow of my dreams and the two of you can kiss and make up.”

I chuckle again. I really can see why my brother fell for this guy. “Yeah, okay, I’ll be there.”

“Good. Be here at three and bring a side dish because I didn’t have time to plan for shit, I was too busy down on my knees, thanking every god I could think of.”

Tallahassee laughs again and I turn to press a quick kiss against his temple. Hearing the love overflowing from Porter when he talks about Steele makes me stupidly happy. My brother deserves all the best things in the world, I just hope he can come around to seeing that I’m not fucking around either. I don’t want to see Tallahassee hurt any more than he does.

“See you then,” I say.

“He’s a good match for Steele,” Tallahassee says as soon as I hang up the phone.

“He’s like one of those too cute cartoon characters with the huge eyes that you can’t help but feel protective of,” I muse.

“Which is perfect for Steele,” he says again, and I nod in agreement.

“Well, there goes our naked day.” I throw the covers back and we both climb out of bed. “How about a shower to make up for it?”

“Like you even had to ask,” he scoffs.

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A few hours and a couple of orgasms later, we’re strolling up the sidewalk to Steele and Porter’s house with fruit salad and champagne in tow, our hands clasped tightly as we both prepare to face this together.

I’m not going to get into an argument with Steele at his own engagement party. I just hope he’s ready to let it go so we can all move on. It’s Steele who answers the door when I knock, immediately glancing down at our joined hands and then back to our faces with his eyes narrowed.

I thrust the bottle of champagne towards him. “Congrats, man. Porter is amazing.”

His expression softens. “Yeah, he is,” he grunts, taking the bottle and stepping aside to let us in.

I let out the breath I was holding and follow him through the house to the kitchen, where everyone is gathered to keep out of the extreme mid-summer heat.

“Oh, fruit salad, bless you. Every one of these Neanderthals brought some kind of meat with them even though I specifically asked for *side* dishes.” Porter takes the bowl from Tallahassee.

“Hey, I brought homemade cupcakes,” Auggie points out.

“You did, thank you,” Porter says. “So, we’ll be having four types of meat, fruit salad, and cupcakes. Sounds like a well-rounded meal.”

“And beer,” Red adds with a shrug, seeming distracted by his phone, tapping away at the screen without looking up.

“That’s all the food groups,” Riggs agrees.

“Except ass,” Auggie says.

“Ass isn’t a food group,” Shep argues.

Auggie scoffs. “Bite your tongue.”

“Or get someone else to bite it,” Red suggests with a wink, glancing up just long enough to smirk before returning to whatever has him so focused on his phone.

“You guys are so slutty,” Riggs sighs.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Auggie smirks.

Porter pops open the bottle of champagne that I brought. “To eternal love,” he says dryly, holding it up like he’s making a toast.

“Here, here.” Shep takes a sip from his beer, and everyone laughs.

“Everything okay over there?” Auggie asks, noticing Red’s distraction.

“Yeah, well, hopefully.” He frowns, pressing his phone and then bringing it up to his ear before shaking his head and lowering it again. “I got a weird text from my best friend, Journey, at two o’clock this morning. A few days ago he told me he was going to be in Russia, so that’s an eight-hour time difference... Anyway, the text was kind of frantic and basically said he needed to talk to me right away, but now his phone is going straight to voicemail.”

“Oh shit,” Shep mutters.

“Yeah, oh shit,” Red agrees, trying the call again and then huffing.

“He probably let his phone die or something.” Riggs shrugs.

“Maybe,” Red says with a sigh, but he doesn’t sound convinced.

Steele sidles over to me while everyone continues to theorize about what could be going on with Journey. “Come outside for a minute?”

“Yeah.” I lift Tallahassee’s hand to kiss the back of it, and then let go of him to follow my brother outside. The dogs jump on us in noisy, tongue filled greetings, and then bolt past into the air-conditioned house.

Steele leads me over to a shaded spot on the deck and leans against the railing, tilting his head up towards the clear blue sky overhead.

“I’m sorry we kept this whole thing a secret for so long,” I say, taking up the spot right next to him.

“But not sorry you did it?” he asks.

“No,” I answer without hesitation.

“Hm.” Steele grunts and nods. “Porter yelled at me.”

I snort. “For being pissed at us?”

“No. For, and I quote, *treating a couple of forty something men like children.*” He reaches up and drags his fingers through his bushy beard. “You know, you never

bothered to learn to crawl, you just started running the second you found all your limbs. Even back then, I think I worried about you even more than mom did. You were always running into things, giving yourself cuts and bruises. Mom would tell me that that's how kids learn, but I don't know, I just wanted to follow you around and line your path with cushions whenever I could."

My chest tightens and I lean my head on his shoulder the way I always did when we were kids. "I couldn't have asked for a better big brother, but I'm not a toddler getting scrapes and bruises anymore."

"I know," he says with a hint of sadness in his voice.

"I don't plan on leaving again, and if I do, I'll talk Lassie into coming with me. We're in this now, it's for life. For better or worse and all that jazz."

"That's what I'm worried about. You don't think it's bad enough constantly stressing about where you're going and when I'll see you again? Now you're going to take my best friend with you when you go."

"Steele, I need you to hear me when I say this. I know I haven't given you a lot of reason to believe me, but I mean it when I say I'm trying really damn hard to change. I want to build a life right here. I can't promise we'll *never* leave. I can't see that far into the future. But I can promise you that *if* we go, it won't be like before. I won't blow in and out with no word about where I've been for months on end, I won't get so caught up in things that I forget to call. I'm not a kid anymore, I just want you to see me for the person I'm trying so hard to be instead of that toddler who needed you to protect him from all the sharp edges in the world."

"If I promise to work on it, will that be enough?" he asks.

"Yeah. We can both work on this shit together. And when we fuck it up and fall back into old patterns, which I'm sure we will, our husbands can yell at us for it."

He chuckles. “I have no doubt about that.” He kisses the top of my head and then pulls me in for a side hug.

“I love you,” I tell him, patting his back.

“Love you too. Even if you are the world’s biggest pain in the ass.”

## TALLAHASSEE

I smile as I watch Steele and Gates hug it out on the back porch.

“Those two are going to need a lot of keeping in line, aren’t they?” Porter asks with a sigh.

“Yeah, we have our work cut out for us,” I agree with a laugh.

“At least they’re hot.”

“True.”

The two of them come back inside and Steele walks straight over to me and pulls me into a similar hug. “I love you, sorry for being an overprotective ass, and I’ve had my fill of emotional shit for one day, so can we leave it at that?”

I thump him on the back. “Yup.”

“Aw, what a very special episode of *As the Crankshaft Turns*,” Auggie jokes.

Steele gives him the finger, and all is right with the world.

It’s nearly midnight by the time Gates and I get home to our apartment, greeting a very chatty Nigel who clearly spent all day saving up swear words to share with us as soon as we walk in the door.

“I’m in the mood for something sweet,” Gates says after he gives the bird some love. He saunters into the kitchen and I kick off my shoes to follow him. “Perfect.” He pulls out a can of whipped cream and turns a wicked smile in my direction.

“What are you planning to do with that?”



He shrugs coyly. “I could think of a few things.” He stalks towards me, and I take a step back playfully, planning to at least make him work for it a little. But instead of leading a sexy chase that ends in rough sex on the floor somewhere in the apartment, I trip over the upturned table in the middle of the kitchen and land on my ass.

“Dammit,” I groan.

Gates stifles a laugh. “Are you okay?”

“This isn’t working.” I wince at the throbbing pain in my ass and back, lying still for a second and then turning my head to glare at the damn table.

“Sorry.” He cringes and lowers himself to the floor next to me, still clutching the whipped cream in his hand as he lies down beside me on the cold linoleum. “I can ditch this hobby.”

“No, I was just thinking we should rent you a workspace or something.”

He props his chin on my shoulder. “Seems like a waste. I might be sick of this in a few weeks anyway.”

“It’s not a waste if you have fun doing it until then.”

“Mm,” he grunts, but doesn’t sound convinced. My mind turns over an idea that might be crazy but sends a wave of excitement through me anyway.

“Okay, what about that house then?”

“The one that I showed you a few weeks ago that was practically about to fall down?”

“The fixer upper,” I correct so it sounds a little more optimistic.

“It was just an idea, an impulse really. You don’t want to take on that big of a project, do you?”

I turn my face towards his and press a kiss to the tip of his nose. “It could be fun to build something together like that, really make it ours.”

The possibility of it all dances through his eyes like he can picture all of it unfolding if he concentrates hard enough. “Could we dig a pond out back?”

“Why a pond?”

“I don’t know, I just always had this image in my mind of sitting by a pond together on a hot summer night, dipping our toes in and looking up at the stars.”

I smile at the picture he’s painting. “Okay, we’ll dig a pond.”

He slips his hand into mine and ghosts his lips against the corner of my mouth. “Lassie?”

“Yeah?”

“Can we have another wedding too? One where we invite people and take stupid, posed pictures, and do the Chicken Dance?”

My throat tightens and I squeeze his hand. “I’d like that.”

“Good. Me too.”

We stop talking after that and spend the rest of the night licking whipped cream off of each other and making love on the kitchen floor. It’s messy and perfect, which is all I ever wanted with Gates to begin with.

# Epilogue

ONE YEAR LATER

GATES

My hands won't stop trembling as I try to tie my damn bow tie.

"Need some help?" I look up to find Steele standing just outside the doorway to my bedroom, already dressed in his own tux, all ready to stand beside me as my best man in a wedding that feels extremely real even if it is just a do-over.

"Thanks." I hand him the tie and tilt my head so he has room to do it. "I don't know why I'm so damn nervous. We're already married."

He smiles. "I threw up three times the morning of my wedding," he confesses.

"Shut up. You looked so put together by the time I got there."

He shrugs. "Game face, man."

He and Porter tied the knot a few months ago with a small ceremony at a nature preserve. "Any marriage advice for me?"

Steele chuckles. "You've been married longer than I have, shouldn't I be the one asking you that?"

His words soothe that deep well of insecurity I've spent the last year working to heal. It's such a simple acknowledgement of what Tallahassee and I really have together, but it means the world coming from my brother.

"Okay, hmm, let's see then..." I sit down on the edge of the bed to slip my shoes on. "Never let your man win an argument. If you let that shit slide even once, next thing you know, he'll be walking all over you."

He snorts. "Don't become a marriage counselor, okay?"

“Oh, please, like I don’t rock every single job I do,” I joke and then instinctively brace myself for some offhand comment about how many jobs I’ve had or how I never stick with any for long. In my defense, I’ve been designing websites for over two years now. It’s not heaps of fun every single day, but I’ve stuck with it and found new things to love about it and reasons to keep doing it.

“Yeah, you’re damn good at everything you do.” He agrees instead of teasing me, and some of the knots in my chest loosen a little.

One thing I’ve learned in the last year is that healing takes time and goes both ways. Steele was stuck in his perception of me, and I was stuck seeing him one way too. We’re getting there, little by little. And as expected, there have been plenty of kicks in the ass from both our husbands to keep us on the right track.

“You ready?” Tallahassee asks, peeking his head into our bedroom, Nigel perched on his shoulder wearing a little custom-made tux as well.

“*Spank me, Daddy,*” the bird squawks, and Tallahassee sighs.

“I hope he does that during the ceremony.” I grin.

“I can’t believe I agreed to include this foul-mouthed parrot in our wedding ceremony. My mom is going to call an exorcist if he starts making sex noises.”

I cross the room and give Nigel a little stroke on the top of his head. “He wouldn’t do that, would he?” I use that silly baby talk voice to address the bird. “No, he wouldn’t.”

“Tell you what, if he starts to make sex noises, I’ll make even louder sex noises to distract everyone,” Steele offers.

“How will that help?” Tallahassee asks.

Steele shrugs. “It’ll be twice as funny?”

My husband rolls his eyes. “You’re as bad as your brother.”

“Wow, and on our wedding day, no less.” I feign offense. “By the way, isn’t it bad luck to see each other before the ceremony?”

“We saw each other before our first wedding,” he reminds me, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me close for a kiss.

“And he left you right after,” Steele points out. “Sounds like bad luck to me.”

“Not helping.” I glare at my brother, who just smirks unapologetically.

“He’s not leaving this time,” Tallahassee says with the kind of easy confidence that I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to earn. But here we are, standing in a house we rebuilt from the studs up, all of our friends and family outside to witness the wedding that’s a decade overdue, with no doubt in either of our minds that this is one hundred percent real.

“Nope, he’s stuck with me,” I agree, smoothing out the front of his dress shirt and straightening his bowtie. “And I don’t think I believe in bad luck. There’s good shit and bad shit, and we just have to help the people we care about get through it all.”

“Who even are you? Where is my immature jackass of a baby brother?”

“Don’t worry, he’s still an immature jackass, he just has his moments,” Tallahassee assures him.

“Glad to know he hasn’t *completely* changed. I’ll leave you two to your pre-wedding blowjobs or whatever it is you plan to get up to. Just don’t hold things up too long, I think the officiant is already waiting.” He ducks out of the room, leaving the two of us alone.

“So, for real, you ready to do this?” Tallahassee checks again. I press my forehead against his and grin.

“I’ve *been* ready. I’ve got my vows right here...” I pat my pocket and come up empty. “Shit, okay, I’ve got my vows up here.” I tap my forehead. “I’ve got my heart right here...” I put my hand against the center of his chest.

“That was cheesy,” he complains, but the softness in his voice gives him away. He likes it when I’m cheesy.

“I know we took the long road to get here, but if you ask me, it was worth every pothole and wrong turn. And, lucky me, I have my sexy mechanic riding shotgun, so if the car ever breaks down, we can fix it.”

“This is a really convoluted analogy.”

“Yeah. It kind of got away from me, but my point is, I love you and we’ve got this.”

“We got this,” he agrees, kissing me one more time. His lips are warm and soft, and even after a million times, my heart still flutters at the touch of them against mine.

And the best part is, I know that there’s going to be another kiss after this one. And another after that. And then a billion or so more...

The End

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# 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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