



LOVE AND LIBATIONS BOOK FOUR

RAQUEL RILEY

Tequila
AND TATTOOS

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This book contains sexually explicit material which is only suitable for mature audiences.

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For Gordy,

He never meant to hurt you, and neither did I, but your suffering made you strong, and beautiful, and beloved. You are beloved.

For Shannon,

You dreamed of finding unconditional love, you sacrificed for it, and it filled you with regret for what you lost. What if I gave not one, but two extraordinary men to love? Would that make things better?

For Aries,

You are sunshine in a cloudy sky, a shining beacon of light in the darkness. And somehow, somehow, you used it to guide two very lost men home. I am forever grateful to you.

Carrick Family Tree



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Dear Reader

Start From The Beginning

Also by Raquel Riley

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te·qui·la

[/tə-ˈkē-lə /] *Noun*

A Mexican liquor made chiefly from the fermented sap of the blue agave that has been subjected to two separate distillations.

Spirit of surprises. What lemons are for. That voice in your ear.

See also: "Trust me!" - Tequila

PROLOGUE

GORDY

THE PARK WAS SITUATED on the corner of Tide and Main. It wasn't much, just a swing set, a slide, a merry-go-round that barely turned from all the rust that had accumulated around the base, and a walking track overgrown with weeds. Behind the park, beyond the fence, sat a wooden shed. It wasn't more than ten by twelve feet, just a caretaker's shed filled with tools and a lawnmower. No one came there anymore, not since the city sold the land to a private investor, who was waiting for the property to mature in value before he developed it. The park was abandoned, which made it the perfect place to hide away. I used to play there as a kid with my cousins. My mom would push me on the swing.

But as of last year, I stopped going there to be alone. Now, it was where I came to meet up with my best friend. The park was the ideal spot for us to get away and spend time together. His father made his life difficult. His home wasn't a place he wanted to spend time in. It wasn't a sanctuary—a safe haven—like mine was. His father drank too much, and that made his home a dangerous place, especially after the sun went down.

I heard the creak of the rusty gate open and close before I could make out his face in the dark. He came closer, taking a seat on the swing next to mine.

“Hey, Shannon.”

“Hey.”

He sounded bad. Dejected. “Do you want to tell me about it?”

“Ain’t worth telling. Same old shit, different night.”

“Here,” I said, offering my headphones to him. “I made a soundtrack for you.”

He fit the headphones over his ears as I pushed play on my walkman. Loud rock music filled his head, giving him an outlet for his pent-up anger and frustration. It was what he usually preferred to listen to. The music resonated with the pain he kept buried deep down inside him. He kicked a rock so hard that it skipped across the ground, stopping just a few feet short of the merry-go-round. I swung in silence, idly pushing the toe of my sneaker through the worn path I’d made in the dirt below my swing, giving Shannon time to settle his emotions. I never counted the minutes of silence in between our words. Just sitting with him, sharing space together, was enough to make me feel content. After the fifth song, he removed the headphones and handed them back to me.

“You better go on home. It’s getting late, and I don’t want you to get in trouble with your mom.”

“What about you?”

“Don’t worry about me.”

“I always worry about you.” I jumped off my swing and stood in front of him.

“I think I’m going to stay here.”

“Where?” I looked around, seeing nothing but a slide and a bench that was missing two of its slats. He angled his head toward the caretaker’s cottage. “In there?”

“I came by after school and dumped a sleeping bag in there. I’ll be fine for the night. Go on home.”

There was no way I could leave him alone all night to sleep in a strange place while I slept in my soft bed at home. “Why don’t you come with me? My mom won’t mind.”

“Thanks. Maybe another night. I don’t wanna wear out my welcome,” he joked.

He continued to push me to leave until I finally, reluctantly, left. My conscience tortured me the entire walk

home. I found my mother in the kitchen, and I did something I'd never done before—I lied straight to her face. Not little lies like telling her my cousin Carson broke her vase when it was actually me, or telling her I brushed my teeth when I hadn't. This was a big lie. With big consequences if I got caught. But I weighed my options and felt it was totally justified.

Shannon needed me.

“Ma, can I sleep at my friend’s house tonight?”

She barely glanced at me as she continued to stir the pot on the stove. “I don’t see why not. Which friend?”

“Shannon.”

She laid her spoon down and gave me her full attention. My mom’s face twisted with distaste. She didn’t like Shannon’s father. Thankfully, she hadn’t realized how bad he had it at home, or she never would’ve allowed me to go.

“All right, but promise me you’ll come back home if things don’t go well. Sometimes, his dad isn’t always nice.”

She didn’t know the half of it. “I promise, Ma.”

“Don’t forget to pack your toothbrush,” she called out as I ran up the stairs to my room to pack a bag.

I grabbed my sleeping bag, two pillows, and my backpack, and waited until I heard the TV turn on in the living room before sneaking back down to the kitchen. I filled my backpack with snacks, drinks, and my walkman, and dashed back across the neighborhood to the park.

Shannon was more than a little surprised to see me.

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m sleeping here, with you.”

He looked puzzled. “Why?”

He couldn’t imagine why anyone would leave a soft bed in a warm house to come sleep out here in the dirty cold with him. He didn’t realize *he* was the draw.

“I was worried you might get hungry,” I improvised, dumping my pillows and my bedroll on top of his. When I sat down next to him, he chuffed a sound of disbelief as he shook his head in confusion, and I opened my backpack to show him my stash. Shannon laughed and bumped his shoulder into mine before grabbing a Twinkie.

“Only you would be worried about food, Gordo.”

It was a nickname I hated, given to me by my mother when I was just four years old. I was a chubby baby and an even chubbier kid. Now that I was in tenth grade, no one in my family used the name anymore. No one except Shannon. He didn’t say it to be mean, though, he just liked having a name for me that no one else used, that belonged only to him and I. Honestly, I liked hearing him say it. Coming from him, it didn’t make me feel fat. It made me feel special. At least, special to him. My family now called me Gordy instead, which was short for my real name, Graham Junior. I was named after my uncle, my mother’s brother, who was the head of our family, and really the only dad I had.

Sometimes, Shannon shortened it to Gord, which was ironically the shape of my body so was later changed to Gourd, and sometimes, he added a few extra letters and made it Gordita, like the Mexican wrap—thicker than your average taco, just like me.

“You really don’t mind sleeping here?”

“Not at all. If you don’t mind, I don’t mind. Although it would’ve just been easier if you’d said yes when I asked you to come home with me.”

Shannon laughed again, something he only ever did around me, and reached for a can of YooHoo. “Yeah? Who knows, maybe next time you ask, I’ll say yes. Your mom obviously has the kitchen stocked with good snacks. How bad can it be?”

That was the first of many nights we spent sleeping in the shed.

Throughout the rest of our sophomore year, Shannon spent most weekends at my house. Though we still spent plenty of

hours at the park. We had moved a couch we found on the curb into the shed, which was much softer than sleeping on the ground. In the stillness of the night, Shannon and I talked about everything. His dad...his feelings about his mom leaving. My dad leaving. School. He asked a lot of questions about my family. I think it fascinated him, the way I belonged to so many people, how we cared about each other.

During our junior year, he'd become a permanent fixture in my home. My mom thought of him as a second son. He'd gotten a job working for my uncle after school, sweeping out the garage of his motorcycle repair shop. Neither of us had a lot of friends, nor did we date. We never talked about girls. Sports, TV and movies, food...but never girls. I knew for a fact I wasn't interested in them, and I guessed Shannon wasn't either, from his obvious lack of enthusiasm, but I didn't have the balls to ask.

It wasn't until our senior year that things began to change. I started to notice him in different ways. When he talked, I watched his lips move and imagined what his mouth tasted like. When he went shirtless in the summer heat, my eyes strayed to his dark brown nipples and the muscles beginning to develop in his thick arms. We swam in the rock quarry all summer long, and when he emerged from the water and his wet shorts clung to the outline of his dick, I stared and wondered what it would look like. What it would feel like.

At night was the hardest, when he laid next to me. Sometimes with his head on my shoulder as we shared my headphones. I couldn't get close enough. I wanted to feel his warm breath ghost across my face. Feel his weight on top of me, pressing me down into the mattress. I wanted to know what his mouth would feel like if he moved his lips against mine.

I had it bad for Shannon Calhoun.

He spent more and more time at my uncle's shop and had even taken to sleeping there some nights, on a couch in the office. My uncle kept the refrigerator stocked with drinks and snacks for him, providing Shannon with a refuge from his home.

Other things began to change, too. I grew six inches that summer. I was now the same height as Shannon. No longer did his six foot frame tower over me. My body had become as large as his, although where his was packed with muscle, mine was still soft. But it didn't stop him from looking. I felt his eyes on me constantly. More than once, I'd caught him staring at my ass.

One weekend, he slept over, and when he woke the next morning with his usual morning wood, he rubbed it out in bed next to me, thinking I was still asleep. It was so difficult to keep still as his breathing grew heavier. I heard him grunt my name as he came. It was just a harsh whisper, but he might as well have screamed it out loud. They were the only words I heard bouncing around inside of my head for weeks afterward.

I became hyper focused on little things, like the way he didn't mind sharing my toothbrush or my fork. How he flicked or twisted my nipples to tease me. Or how he smacked me on the ass when we tossed the football or passed each other on the stairs. Sometimes, he rested his forehead against mine in the dark, in bed, when we talked about important things. He constantly found reasons to touch me, and I'd become reliant on his physical attention in order to feel whole.

I started to believe that it wasn't my imagination. I became convinced one day at the park when I mentioned I was going to shave my goatee.

"What? No!" He turned to face me, his hand cupped my jaw, his thumb stroking over the sparse stubble on my upper lip. "Don't shave it, Gordo. I like it." His eyes dropped to my mouth, his gaze heavy. Hypnotic. "I bet it would feel incredible when you kiss someone."

He swallowed, and my heart beat painfully. Was he going to kiss me? I wanted him to. More than anything. He grazed the rough pad of his thumb across my lips, the most intimate thing he'd ever done to me, and I closed my eyes, preparing to feel his lips against mine.

To my everlasting disappointment, he pulled away and dropped his hand.

“Someday, some lucky girl is going to steal that kiss from you, and she’s going to tell you how good your mustache feels against her smooth skin.”

I wanted desperately to tell him it would be a boy, and not a girl, who would steal my first kiss. “Meet me here tomorrow. I have something I want to tell you.” I would need the hours in between to figure out how to say it to him.

But the next day, he never showed. Instead, he stayed late at my uncle’s shop to help him work on a bike. And the following day, he was a no-show again because my uncle had taken him out for pizza. It was becoming a habit, him ditching me to spend time with my uncle. Even with my cousins sometimes.

He was giving away all of the pieces of himself that belonged to me—had only ever belonged to me. I didn’t like having to share him with my family, although I was grateful he had them. He was becoming a real Carrick. It was what he always wanted—had always dreamed of—belonging to a real family. I was thrilled for him. And at the same time, I hated that he belonged to them now as well. With every day he spent with them, every missed opportunity he didn’t choose to meet up with me, he belonged to me less and less.

I missed his constant presence, his listening ear, his attention. His touch. Eventually, my uncle tried to adopt him legally, but the process had taken forever. Two weeks after our high school graduation, the paperwork finally went through. Although he was eighteen now, Shannon had finally found himself a real father. He was officially a Carrick. My cousin, even if only by law and honor. And I realized, he could never be with me now. But I had to know. I had to ask if it was possible.

I called my uncle’s shop, and Shannon answered.

“Hey, Gourd, what’s up?”

“Can you meet me at the park tonight? There’s something I need to ask you.”

“I’m a little busy, can you just ask me now?”

I became frustrated. I was tired of him always being too busy for me anymore. “No,” I said, a little more harshly than I meant to. “Meet me at the park when you get off work.”

He usually finished around seven. The sun had set, the cicadas chirped loudly, and I was beginning to sweat from the humidity. I checked my watch and cursed myself for being a fool. It was twenty minutes past seven. He wasn't coming.

Again.

The following night he ditched me again, giving me some excuse about working on his car. The third night, I foolishly returned to the park, hoping against hope he would be waiting for me on the swings. As I approached the rusty gate, I made out his form in the deep shadows. He was seated on the wooden bench. Hope bloomed in my heart, and for a quick second, I allowed myself to imagine a future for us. I grabbed for the metal latch but dropped it like it burnt me when I heard a voice that didn't belong to Shannon. I made out the shape of a head in his lap, and the unmistakable motion of that head bobbing up and down.

Shannon wasn't alone. He wasn't waiting on me. He tipped his head back and moaned, the sound full of pleasure.

“Fuck, David. That feels incredible.”

David. I guessed that answered my question. He liked guys. It also answered my second question. He wasn't into me.

The rejection stung so bad that tears sprang to my eyes. Furiously, I wiped them away as I jogged back to my house. I never brought it up, and he never mentioned it. Secrets were beginning to pile up between us like dirty laundry, along with the distance and the lies.

We were growing up, becoming different people.

We were growing apart.

He continued to work for my uncle, continued to lift weights, his body filling out beautifully. Shannon was focused on creating a better life for himself, probably so that he never became the man his father was. And I covered my hurt the only way I knew how, with food. I ate my feelings. I stuffed

my pain while I stuffed my belly. And whenever Shannon used my nickname, it didn't feel good anymore. It didn't feel like *ours*. It felt like an insult.

Gordo... *fat*.

Fat... *unlovable. Ugly. Undesirable*.

That's how he saw me. That's what I had become. Most importantly, that's how I saw myself. The hurt I felt that festered all summer finally scabbed over. And that scab looked a lot like anger. I began to tag along after my cousin Carson when he hit the gym. I paid better attention to what I was putting in my mouth. Among my prerequisite classes at the community college, I took a course in health and nutrition. I began to eat better and experiment with different recipes and ingredients. Cooking became an outlet for me, a passion. As my body began to fill out with muscle and take on a different shape, so did my focus on my future. I enrolled in cooking classes. I spent all my time in the kitchen, while Shannon spent his in the clubs.

To be fair, he worked his ass off with my uncle, but he had plenty of partners warming his bed. And I took note of every single one of them. Subsequently, my bed remained empty. My body looked a lot different than it used to, but in my mind, I still felt like the fat kid. The one no one looked twice at. The distorted self-image I had of my body remained with me long after the baby fat melted away. And with every pretty twink that eagerly volunteered to become another notch carved into the headboard of Shannon's bed, I became angrier and more withdrawn.

I had gained a cousin, but I had lost my best friend.

SHANNON

ANY TIME I passed the kitchen on my way to the bathroom or the store room, I always searched out Gordy. Just a glimpse was all I needed. My eyes landed on him standing in front of the sink as he rinsed off his knives. They were a gift from me when I hired him to cook here at the Lounge. I spent a fortune on those damn knives, but his previous set just didn't measure up to the quality he deserved. I smiled, appreciating the way he looked in his black chef coat, so sharp and professional.

He turned from the sink and dried his knives on a towel before moving over to the counter, where he began to divide a filling made of ground meat into sections. Oh, fuck me. He was making his goddamn meatloaf again for Aries, his super secret crush. My smile dimmed abruptly, like someone had turned off the light switch in my head. I walked into the kitchen and braced an arm on the counter where he was shaping the meat into greased loaf pans.

"I wonder what Aries would say if I told him we don't have a meatloaf special on our menu. That we never have, and we never will, because Limericks serves high-end food, and meatloaf doesn't cut the mustard around here." When he remained quiet, not even sparing me a glance, I prodded, "What do you think he would say, Gordo?"

"Why does it matter to you what I serve?"

"Because it's my kitchen and my bottom line that's paying for the ingredients you're wasting." It was a petty defense, but I couldn't find a better one.

“Are your finances so tight that you can’t afford a couple of pounds of ground beef?”

He was trying to piss me off so I would drop the matter. “Nice try, Gourd. He fucking lives with you now. He’s your damn roommate.”

Aries was a friend of mine and Gordy’s. He was also a talented tattoo artist who inked both of us regularly. My beef wasn’t with Aries, it was with my cousin.

“What’s your point?”

“My point is, why don’t you just cook for him at home?”

He grumbled and cursed under his breath, his voice too low for me to make out what he said, but it didn’t take a genius to figure out he was telling me to go to hell. I leaned in closer, just to make him uncomfortable.

“I have an idea, Gordo. Why don’t you start cooking for your man on Monday nights, when you don’t have to work? You could call it Meatloaf Mondays. I bet Aries would love that. His own personal chef,” I taunted as I ran my fingers down the lapel of his jacket. “You could even wear this coat, so it feels official. You could make him a nice meatloaf dinner at home and serve it to him, and then wash all the dishes afterward and clean up for him as well.” With a smirk, I added, “Maybe he’ll even let you feed it to him.”

Gordy pulled away from me. “Get your hands off my jacket,” he grated.

“Do you do all the chores and the cleaning around the house? I bet you don’t ask Aries to lift a finger to help, do you?”

He dropped the ball of meat he was forming with his hands onto the counter with a wet plop and raised his eyes to mine. His shamrock green irises, a trait of the Carricks, bored into my blue ones, a reminder that I wasn’t born into his family, that Gordy wasn’t really my cousin. Not that I needed another reminder. Every time I felt the familiar pang of longing for him or remembered our younger days, when I used to pant after him and fall asleep with his face on my mind and my

cock in my hand, I was reminded that he wasn't really my cousin by blood, only by law. And thank God for that because it would be awkward as fuck to get hard for someone you were actually related to.

“So, tell me. Do you make Aries work for it?”

“Work for what?” he snarled, getting angry. Just like I predicted he would. It didn't take much for me to get him riled up.

“Work for his room and board. What did you think I meant? Jesus, settle down, Gordo. Someone might get the wrong idea and think you actually have a crush on your roommate.”

“You know what? I'm not gonna take the bait. You're jealous because he spends so much time with me.”

“Jealous? If I wanted to spend more time with him, I'd ask him out on that date he keeps begging me for.”

His large meaty fist crashed down on the wooden butcher block. “Don't talk about him like that.”

“Or what?” I challenged, stepping into his personal space. His nostrils flared, his eyes narrowed, and my stomach flipped upside down. Whenever we went toe to toe like this, I got hot, like standing too close to a fire. My body warmed all over with a flash of heat. Maybe because it was the only time he ever showed how he felt about me. When you're starved for something, you'll take the good, the bad, and the ugly, even if it's all ugly, just to get a taste.

“Don't be a bully, Shannon.”

“A bully? I'm not bullying you or him.”

He wiped his hands on a towel. “Then what are you doing?”

I shook my head and took a step back. *What the fuck was I doing?* I had no clue. I just didn't like how he always cooked a special meal for Aries. Never once, in the eighteen years I'd known him, had he cooked something special for me. He knew all my favorite foods. He knew when my birthday was and had

been present to celebrate all the important moments in my life, like the day I was adopted, the day I'd opened this bar, but never once had he made something special just for me.

I had tasted his food many times. Gordy was a talented chef. Beyond talented. His food was delicious and creative and looked as good as it tasted. What I wouldn't give to have his passion for cooking infused into a dish he made specifically for me, to please me or impress me. Or maybe just to celebrate me or thank me for something I'd done for him. Like giving him that set of fucking fancy knives that he was now using to make meatloaf for another man.

I had no answer for him, so I just conceded victory to him and walked away. When I reached the doorway, I turned back.

“Don't use my kitchen and my resources to cook something that isn't on the menu. Take that shit home and make it for Meatloaf Mondays from now on.”

I walked out before he had a chance to answer, not that he would have. Though I would bet ten bucks he shot me the bird behind my back. Nobody knew him better than I did. I knew his secrets and his fears. His happiest and saddest memories. His most random thoughts, and his most serious ones. I knew that he had three different smiles—a polite and professional one he gave strangers and customers, a shit-eating sarcastic one he wore when you stroked his core personality by saying a filthy joke or something cutting, and the one that shined brightest, when he was truly happy about something. He often mixed it with a little chuckle because he was so overcome with good feelings that a smile alone wasn't enough to express his joy. Those were the ones that warmed my heart. The second one was the kind that made my stomach flip.

The only thing I didn't know about him, and I'm not sure that anyone did, was why he hated me so much. For as close as we used to be, it never made sense to me why he pulled away. And I hadn't asked because I felt that it was somehow tied to my joining his family when his uncle adopted me. And if that were true, his reason would hurt too much for me to hear it. I'd rather not know.

AROUND NINE O’CLOCK, Aries came into the bar.

“Hey, Shannon.”

It wasn’t the bright and cheerful greeting he gave everyone else. It sounded more like the flirty lingering hello he saved only for me.

“Hey, Aries. How’s business at the shop? Were you busy today?”

“I was swamped. Business is doing great. I just closed up and figured I’d come and grab dinner on my way home. Did Gordy happen to make his meatloaf today?”

He was practically salivating at the mouth. *Jesus Christ.* “Of course he did. He knows it’s your favorite.”

“That man’s food is on another level. I’m starving.”

I met his pretty light brown eyes across the bar top as I wiped a clean rag over the glossy granite surface. “Well, that’s convenient because Gordy has just the thing to fill you up.”

Aries smiled tentatively, but his eyes narrowed on me, as if he were trying to figure out if there was a double meaning to my words. Of-fucking-course there was. Not that I’d tell him that. I was dying to see him figure it out for himself, and also curious what his reaction would be when he found out my cousin, his roommate, had a crush on him.

“Can I get you a drink while you wait?”

He laughed easily, the corners of his eyes crinkling in a way that softened his entire face. He was attractive, bright like sunshine. Sandy brown hair with blond highlights and a five o’clock shadow to match, tawny skin and soft flecks of gold in his eyes.

“You know the answer to that. I’ll drink with you when you ask me out for one, not offer one to me here like a common customer.”

I smirked, slinging the rag over my shoulder. “You don’t want to be a common customer here?”

“I don’t mind being a common customer here, just not a common customer to *you*.”

Gordy chose that moment to interrupt, placing a brown paper bag on the counter. “Hey, Aries. Do you want to have dinner with me? I’m about to take my break.”

His handsome face lit up. “That sounds great. Sure beats eating at home alone.”

They chose an empty table in the lounge, near the stage where a woman dressed in a gorgeous gown was singing bluesy music, accompanied by a piano. I watched as they sat down to eat, watched as Gordy removed the styrofoam to-go carton from the bag and served it to Aries before pulling one out for himself. They laughed easily together about God only knew what. A flash of jealousy stabbed me in the gut. It was so odd to see Gordy so relaxed with someone when he was such a thunder cloud around me.

I didn’t want to think about how the burning pain of that knife twisting in my gut was what caused me to leave the bar and walk into the lounge and approach their table.

They both looked up at me as I interrupted their conversation, but only Aries was smiling.

“Hey, Aries, are you still interested in having that drink with me?”

“Anytime. Just say when and where.”

“How about Monday night at eight o’clock? I’ll come get you.”

“Sounds perfect. And long overdue. I’m looking forward to it.”

Why did I have to look at Gordy to see his reaction? Why couldn’t I just enjoy Aries’ excitement? Gordy glared at me, of course. His anger and petty jealousy satisfied my own.

“Me, too,” I answered, matching his smile.

ARIES

I HAD to cut my last appointment early and reschedule the second part of my customer's sleeve so I wouldn't be late to meet Shannon. I'd waited months for him to finally ask me out. Asking him to change our time wasn't an option I was willing to consider.

Shannon pushed through the door of my shop five minutes early, sending a rush of butterflies through my stomach. I waved from my station where I was cleaning up and capping ink bottles.

"Take your time. I know I'm early," he called out, leaning on the counter to browse through 'The Muse', a book of my designs.

I hopped up to wash my hands at the sink. I'd had a long counter installed along the side of the room that had a place to wash up. Above hung a collection of framed mirrors with a funky eclectic vibe. Some had heavy gilt frames, others had antlers, but somehow they all blended well together. My customers loved to eyeball their brand new tats in the mirrors when I finished with them.

I joined him at the front counter. "When am I going to get you in my chair again?" I'd done most of Shannon's ink. Most of his friends' and family's ink, too.

He chuckled and closed the book. "Soon. I've been thinking about getting something new." He placed his hand over my heart, his palm flat against the black tweed of my vest. "Right here."

Fuck, he was so smooth. My heart skipped a beat under his hand. There wasn't much, if anything, I hadn't dreamed of letting this man do to me.

"Can't wait," I said shakily, smiling to cover the hitch in my voice.

Perfect, Aries, you numbnut. Why don't you just roll over and beg for belly rubs? Jeez!

"Are you ready to lock up?" He slipped his hands into the pockets of his jeans and rocked backward on the heels of his boots.

"Yep. All set."

I followed him out front where I saw his bike parked along the curb. Shannon handed me a helmet.

"I brought an extra one for you, in case you wanted to ride with me."

Fuck, yes, I wanted to ride with him, sitting behind him with my thighs squeezing his ass while holding onto his tight hard stomach. I hoped we were going somewhere very, very far away, so that it would take us a long long time to get there.

He drove us down by the riverfront. Shops and restaurants, and even the town square with a farmers market lined the Cooper River, which separated our small town from the big city of Charleston. By comparison, Cooper's Cove was an eighth of the size of its sister city.

Shannon pulled into the parking lot of The Shellfish Shack, a rustic little restaurant on the water that sold the freshest seafood in town. My mouth watered at the idea of devouring a seafood boil for dinner. It had been at least two years since the last time I'd eaten there.

We were shown to a table outside on the dock overlooking the river. The slight breeze cooled off the southern summer humidity, and with the sun having already set, it was a balmy but beautiful night.

We took a minute to look over our menus before deciding on an appetizer of raw oysters and shrimp ceviche cocktails,

followed by a large seafood boil for two. Our waiter spread thick brown paper over our table and laid our feast out right in the middle. Fragrant steam wafted from the overturned pot, smelling like old bay seasoning and garlic. He also set a bowl of melted butter before us along with two plastic bibs and metal mallets and crackers to get our shellfish open.

“This is going to get messy,” I joked.

“Yeah, but it’s gonna be worth it.”

I paused for a moment and raised my eyes to his. “You didn’t have to take me out like this. I was only expecting a beer. This is really nice, especially after a long day of work. Thank you.”

He seemed off-kilter from my gratitude. Either he didn’t date often or he’d been dating assholes.

“You’re welcome.”

Shannon raised his Corona to his lips, and I watched the way his throat bobbed as the beer went down, wishing I could lick him there.

Goddamn, this man was sexy as hell. His hair was black as night, cut short on the sides and slightly longer on top, just long enough to tease his forehead with a curl that begged to be wrapped around my finger. Shannon’s eyes were a striking icy blue, but they didn’t feel cold whatsoever—he had too much personality for that. Maybe it was the way he always looked at me with a touch of heat. He had a bit of a dark shadow along his squared jaw, and a straight nose that would give a plastic surgeon a hard-on. He was dressed in black jeans and a white V-neck T-shirt that showed off the muscles in his arms and the skin that was covered in tattoos—ink that I had put there with my own hands, my own designs. Nothing was sexier to me than that.

I lifted my Corona and tapped his bottle with it. “To long-awaited plans finally coming to fruition and good friends.”

Shannon frowned. “I don’t want you to think I didn’t ask you out because I wasn’t interested.”

“Okay. Then why didn’t you ask me out?”

He tilted his head and then laughed. “Because I was interested.”

I laughed, too. “I sure as fuck hope you’re going to explain yourself because that made no sense.”

“It didn’t, did it,” he agreed, setting down his beer and shaking his head. “Look, we’re friends. You’re a really great guy and we have a lot in common. You’re somebody I admire and respect.”

“Okay, so what’s the problem?”

He popped a bay scallop in his mouth, taking a moment to chew and swallow it before speaking. My pupils dilated as I watched him suck his fingers clean.

“I don’t really date. The guys I spend time with? They’re good for one night. Maybe two, rarely. But not more than that.”

“Ah, the elusive bachelor. Refuses to be tied down and caught in love’s snare.”

Shannon laughed. “It’s not like that. I don’t mind falling in love. I just haven’t met anyone who I thought of like that.” He stared past my shoulder into the river, becoming lost in his thoughts.

“I still don’t see what that has to do with me.”

“We’re friends. I didn’t wanna fuck that up if I decided not to call you after a first or second date.”

“Let me ask you a question.” I speared a baby potato on my fork. “You said you liked me. So how do you know you’re not gonna want to call me back?”

“I don’t know that. I just didn’t want to risk it. I mean, if all you wanted to do was grab a drink with me, that’s fine. I just thought maybe there was more to it than that.”

“Like what?” I teased.

“You’re gorgeous, Aries. If you wanted to take this further and come back home with me after this, I wouldn’t say no. I’m dying to touch you.”

I felt that in my dick, which began to thicken between my legs. I popped the buttery potato in my mouth and chewed as I thought of what to say without embarrassing myself.

I'm down to fuck whether you call me back or not? No way. That sounded way too thirsty.

Let's hold off until our second date and see if you're still interested in sleeping with me after that? Yeah right, like I was going to miss the opportunity to suck his dick. It was probably magical with healing properties and some such shit. Definitely not an option!

“I'll make you a deal.”

Shannon looked more than a little interested in what I had to say.

“Two dates. Two drinks you agree to take me out for. Touching is on the table. All contact is definitely allowed, and encouraged,” I added with a smile that made him laugh. “If after that, you just want to remain friends, that's totally fine with me. I don't want to lose you as a friend either. Or a customer. Zero awkwardness, I promise. But...”

I let it linger in the air as I took another swig of my beer.

“But?”

“But, if after the second date, you still want to call me back, then call me. No strings attached.”

He leaned back in his chair and laughed. “You make it sound so simple. Nobody means it when they say no strings attached.”

“I do, “ I countered. “I'm just here to have a good time, Shannon. Whatever that looks like. That's my philosophy on life. Enjoy everything and everyone to its fullest. No regrets.”

“That's an interesting philosophy. I like the sound of that.”

“Then agree to my deal,” I challenged.

Shannon sat forward and took a long swallow from his bottle. He set it down and leaned in, looking directly into my eyes, making the moment feel charged with electricity.

“Agreed.”

After we finished our dinner, we shared a slice of Key lime cheesecake before Shannon paid the bill. But instead of walking to the parking lot, he detoured around the side of the building, heading for the pier.

“Let’s take a walk,” he suggested.

The pier was mostly deserted being that it was nearly ten o’clock on a Monday night. We walked slowly, shoulder to shoulder, in no rush to end our evening just yet.

Shannon cleared his throat. “So, you do this often? Date, I mean.”

“Often? Not really. But I don’t usually say no when a hot guy asks me out.”

He chuckled. “You seem so comfortable and relaxed. I’m not used to feeling so—”

I lifted my eyebrows, anticipating his next words.

“Out of my element.”

“I think you’re doing fine.” I shivered as a stiff wind blew past.

“You want my jacket?”

Yes! “Nah, I’m fine, thanks.”

We stopped walking and leaned on the wooden rail, looking out over the dark water.

“I like this,” he said, running his fingers beneath the breast of my vest.

Underneath it I wore a burgundy T-shirt with black dress pants. It was good advertising to show off the colorful ink that covered my arms when I was at work.

“You’re different than most of the guys I’m usually involved with.”

“Different how,” I asked, hoping he meant it in a good way.

“You dress differently, and you like riding with me and shooting pool, drinking beer and getting dirty. You’re intelligent and fun and easygoing. I don’t know, you’re sort of magnetic. You have this aura around you that just...shines.”

I laughed appreciatively. “What kind of guys do you usually end up with?”

“Simple and pretty. Maybe shallow and self-obsessed, but I don’t know any of them well enough to say for sure.”

“Sounds fascinating,” I joked.

“Hardly.” He pushed off the rail and stepped closer, gripping my hips. “I usually meet them at the bar or in the club, and then never see them again.”

He leaned in and the scent of his spicy cologne tickled my nose, making me want to bury my face in his neck and breathe him in.

“But not with me.”

Fuck it. I leaned in and brushed my lips over his skin, just below his scruffy jaw. He gripped me tighter. Pulled me in closer.

“Not with you.”

Shannon tilted his head, seeking out my mouth. He opened for me right away, sweeping his tongue inside my mouth, twisting it with mine. He tasted like beer and shrimp. I clutched his shirt, bunching the cotton in my fist as he deepened the kiss, searching out every hidden crevice of my mouth. Fuck, he could kiss! My underwear were literally melting away, along with all my inhibitions.

When he raised his head, I reminded him, “Did you mention something about taking me back to your place?”

Shannon chuckled. “I’m sure I did.” He gave my swollen lips another peck, this time softer. Short and sweet. “I wish I could remember why I decided that was a bad idea.”

“It’s a great idea.”

He smiled and touched my lips. “Maybe we should hold off until after our second date. Just in case.”

“In case of what?”

“In case I call you back for a third date. Can’t have you thinking I’m a total slut.”

Yes, you can! “Maybe that’s wisest,” I conceded reluctantly. I tried to take it as a good sign that he didn’t want to rush things because he seemed to really like me.

“Come on. It’s getting late.”

SHANNON DROPPED me off at my shop so I could retrieve my car. Before he let me go, he kissed me again. Another toe-curler that made my dick leak in my pants.

“I’ll see you soon.”

I just nodded my head and smiled like a fool.

Gordy was still awake when I got home, which didn’t surprise me. He was a night owl, like me. It was just one of many things we had in common. I loved living with him. We always had a great time hanging out together. Everything here worked because his uncle came by to fix stuff and maintain the house, which was more than I could say about my last apartment. His cousins popped in often, bringing life and camaraderie to the quiet atmosphere here. They were great guys. I got along well with them. But the best part was the food. The food was out of this world. Nobody cooked like Gordy could.

Gordy was a quiet soul. He didn’t seem to have friends, outside of me and his cousins, Carson and Carlisle. He never dated. He was a total introvert. The only exception was when he joined his cousins on Monday nights. They usually went out for drinks and to shoot pool. Shannon never seemed to be invited. At first, I thought maybe he just wasn’t interested in spending time with his family. But then I began to realize it probably had more to do with the tension between him and

Gordy. I'd witnessed it many times now, I just didn't understand the reason for it.

"Hey, you're still up," I said, ruffling his hair as I walked by the couch.

"Yeah, just got in a little while ago."

"Did you go out with the guys?"

"Yup. Same old, same old."

"You're so dramatic," I said, shoving his shoulder playfully. "Don't worry, I'm going to save you from leading a stale and boring life. I don't have to be at work until three tomorrow. We'll do something fun and exciting."

"I can't wait," he said in the most monotone, unenthusiastic voice he could muster.

I laughed, shaking my head. "Wanna watch a movie?"

"Sure."

"Find something good while I go upstairs and change. No Food Network!"

After I'd slipped into sweats and a clean T-shirt, I went down to the kitchen to grab a Yoohoo. Gordy was addicted to them, and thanks to him, now I was, too. I grabbed two, one for him, and saw stacked containers of food in the fridge. Neither of us had eaten at home, so I was curious as to why there were fresh leftovers. I peeked into them to find chicken cutlets, mashed potatoes, and asparagus.

Had he cooked tonight?

I closed the fridge, unsure about what to do. I wanted to ask him about it, but an odd thought occurred to me that made me second guess myself. My mind started connecting dots and the picture they were forming made me unsure about everything I thought I knew.

Gordy knew I was going out with Shannon tonight.

They had issues between them.

Perhaps Gordy anticipated I wouldn't hit it off with his cousin and prepared dinner for me in case I came home early and disappointed. Had he cut his night short with his cousins? For me?

He pampered me constantly when it came to food. Always making sure I had amazing meals prepared fresh. I assumed he did it because he loved to cook. Which he did, but everyone needed a day off. Even chefs. Was he doing it for my benefit?

Or was I making too much of it?

I decided not to ask him about it but was definitely going to start paying attention when it came to him. Gordy was a great guy. Hot as hell, with his square Thor face, dark short scruffy hair and goatee, and his thick frame packed with muscle. His arms had to be as thick as my legs.

He was loyal, creative, sarcastic, and incredibly thoughtful. Our friendship was easy and fun. Solid. But he was so guarded. It was hard to read his feelings. If a guy like him was interested in me? Shit, I'd jump on that pony and ride him into town in a hot minute!

Laughing at myself, I shook my head.

That might be the worst thing you've ever said.

GORDY

I NEEDED ARIES TODAY. Needed his sunny personality to distract me from the dark thoughts in my head that had ruined my night and robbed me of sleep. He was like a balm to my deepest cuts.

For years, I'd worked so hard to move past Shannon. And when that had failed, I'd just stuffed everything deep down, where it wouldn't choke me everyday. Days ago, when he confronted me in the kitchen about making the meatloaf, he cornered me, gotten in my face, which wasn't new. But it wasn't anger this time I saw in his eyes.

It was heat. It felt personal.

And my dick hardened when he ran his finger down the lapel of my jacket. All the old feelings rushed back to the surface. It was still there, between us, the fire, the resentment, everything I had felt back then that had almost destroyed me.

Loving Shannon had left lasting scars on my heart that I doubted would ever heal.

He'd stirred it up and poked at it, picked at the scab, and now I was bleeding again.

He felt it, too. I knew he did. I could see it in his face, the way he looked at me, touched me. The way he backed off when the spark threatened to ignite.

And then he'd asked Aries out on a fucking date!

Had interrupted my dinner with Aries to make a point to me.

He didn't need me and didn't want me.

I was replaceable.

But he wasn't. I could never replace him.

The void he left in my heart would never fill up with someone else's love.

If he used Aries up and spit him out like every other pretty boy he screwed, I'd kill him.

My thoughts last night had become obsessive, wondering what they were doing. Would they end up back at his place? Was Aries disappointed? Hurt?

I'd returned home early and taken my frustrations out in the kitchen, as usual. But he hadn't come home early, hungry and disillusioned about my cousin. I was a fool. It seemed Shannon had no problem showing his affection to other guys, as long as they weren't me.

ARIES HAD SUGGESTED we go swimming at the rock quarry today, and it sounded perfect to me. He was so attuned to my dark moods, always sensing when I needed rescuing. The sun, the exercise, his laughter, helped to bring the boiling wrath in my gut to a simmer.

“Jump with me.”

He grabbed my hand. I looked down at our fingers laced together, my big rough hand dwarfed his slender one. The colorful mandala tattoo that covered the back of his hand caught my eye. Every inch of him was gorgeous. He was shirtless, wearing only a pair of black shorts to swim in. His pink nipples jutted proudly from the myriad of colorful swirls that decorated his chest and stomach. I could feast on his skin for hours—days—and still be hungry.

“1... 2... 3...”

He jumped first, tugging me along with him. We fell together, hitting the water with a huge splash that stung like a bitch. Aries didn't let go of me until we'd surfaced. He

whipped his head around to snap his wet hair from his face, sending a spray of water droplets in my direction. It looked darker when wet, almost brown. Why did I have to notice these things? Why did I insist on torturing myself?

We swam for a while until we were hungry and tired. I helped him climb out, holding out my hand to him and pulling him up over the large jagged rocks.

He was breathless and flushed, dripping wet, his nipples rock hard little nubs, his baggy shorts molded tightly to his groin and thighs. It was a struggle to keep my desire for him in check.

We opened the tailgate on my truck and spread out a blanket in the truck bed, where we sat and ate sandwiches and chips.

Aries finished first and laid his head on my thigh, using it as a pillow as he laid himself out to bake dry in the sun. He was so touchy-feely, so easy with his affection. It didn't mean to him what it did to me. I was touch-starved, hungry for contact with another person. It had been so long since I'd felt another's skin touch mine, felt their arms come around me and just hold on, like I was the most important thing to them.

Hesitantly, I touched his hair, and he leaned into my hand. It felt so silky soft. The sun highlighted the blond streaks, making them appear bronzed. I let my fingers run through the wet strands, and Aries practically purred from my touch, like a kitten.

“How come you don't ever date? Are you asexual?”

I choked on my chip and beat against my chest as I coughed. Where in fuck had that question come from?

“No. Just don't like anyone.”

He chuckled. “When was the last time you dated someone?”

I shrugged. “Never?”

He rolled his head to look up at me. “Really? You've never dated anyone?”

I shook my head instead of repeating myself.

“Are you a virgin?”

My shoulders shook with silent laughter. “No. I’ve had sex a few times. Didn’t like it.”

Aries sat up. “How does anyone not like sex?”

“Plenty of people don’t enjoy it. For me, I didn’t like the way it made me feel. In here.” I tapped my head.

The handful of hookups at clubs I’d had over the bathroom counter, as I shoved into nameless men for all of three minutes until I had come, were completely unsatisfying and had left me feeling cold and empty. Like I had used them, despite their consent. I wanted no part of that anymore.

“Damn. I’m sorry you had a shitty experience. Don’t give up, though. You never know when the right person is going to come along that you click with.”

I studied his handsome face, so hopeful and earnest, and chuffed. “You’re right. You never know.” Except I did know. It had happened to me twice now. How many more chances was I going to get? “Is it easy for you to fall in love?”

“Love? No. Lust? Sure.” He shrugged carelessly. “I don’t shy away from sharing my body with guys who treat it right. Not anonymous hookups. That’s steeped in shame and selfishness. But two or more people exploring and sharing each other in bed? Taking their time. Giving and receiving pleasure. It’s beautiful.”

“Two or more?”

“I’m polyamorous.”

You think you know a guy—but then...

“Fuck no. I’m not into that. If I’m just banging somebody, I don’t give a fuck who else he’s sleeping with, as long as he agrees to let me wear a condom. But to settle down with someone, in a serious relationship? Fuck, I can barely find one guy I can stand, let alone two. That just sounds like a whole lot of complicated mess.”

Aries laughed. “How did I know you would say that?”

“Am I that predictable?”

“I think you might surprise yourself if given the opportunity. You have a huge heart and an endless capacity to love. I see it with your family.”

“That’s different.”

“It’s really not, though. Love can look so different. Relationships can vary greatly. Society tells us we can only choose one person, but that’s bullshit. There are no rules when it comes to love. You make your own.”

He laid his head back down on my thigh and closed his eyes, turning his face up to the sun. As I watched him, his words rolled around in my mind, causing my thoughts to jumble into a huge knot. I didn’t know jack-shit about love, or people, for that matter. I knew food. That was comfortable. It was safe. Food didn’t reject me. It didn’t stomp on my heart and make a fool of me. Food didn’t flaunt other men in my face to humiliate me.

I’d stick with food.

Aries reached blindly for my hand, and when he found it, he brought it to his head. I smiled and indulged him by scratching my fingers over his scalp lightly.

“This is a perfect day. Too bad we have to go to work,” he mused.

“GRAB the onions and peppers and prep them for the chutney,” I said to my assistant, Danny. He came in every day for a few hours to help prepare for dinner service. Danny was enrolled in community college. He wanted a career in the restaurant industry but couldn’t afford culinary school. So he was getting real life experience, like I had.

“Yes, sir.” Danny set up production on the counter opposite mine. “Shannon is in a mood tonight. I feel bad for

everyone who doesn't work in the kitchen. They can't hide like we can."

"Oh yeah? What's he pissed about?"

"That bouncer, Rory, is back. Your uncle returned to the bar and grille—"

My uncle, Graham, ran the sports bar and grille across town, also named Limericks. He had been coming here for weeks to watch over the staff while Rory, his best friend, recovered from a stab wound from a man who had stalked Kelley, the burlesque dancer who performed here on Friday nights. My uncle had fallen head over boots in love with Kelley while trying to keep him safe.

"—and Ryan is here, and Shannon is complaining about how everyone is sitting around making eyes at each other instead of working."

I laughed to myself. Ryan was my cousin Carson's fiancé. They'd met and fallen in love here in this bar. And Rory was in love with my cousin Carlisle, Carson's twin. Thank God I hadn't been afflicted with the same virus. The Love Bug. They could have it. I wanted no part of that mess.

As I whipped up the marinade for the Sea Bass, my mind drifted back to an old memory.

"WHAT'S WRONG, SHANNON?"

"Feel like crap. I think I'm getting sick."

I worried about him on a good day. But when something above and beyond his usual load of terrible burdened him, I became manic with worry. I'd come to the caretaker's shed after school to find him curled up in a ball on his sleeping bag, sweating and sneezing. His cough sounded deep and wet, rattling around inside his chest.

"Come on, sit up."

"No. Go away. Leave me alone so I can lay here and die."

“Shut up, Shannon. You aren’t dying. Come on, we gotta get back to my house.”

“No way.”

“Shannon, please. Don’t make me worry about you all night. Come home with me so I can take care of you.”

With a lot of grumbling and cursing, he got to his feet and followed me back to my house.

“Get in the shower.”

“Just leave me here,” he begged, plopping down face first on my bed.

“Shower, now.”

I turned the water on cool. Shannon complained, of course. He didn’t even wash, just let the water run over his head. When he stepped out from the shower, he was shivering, wrapped in a towel as he left a wet trail in his wake on his way back to my bed.

I laid another blanket over him and ran to the linen closet in my bathroom to raid it for supplies. I found a box of tissues, a thermometer, cough and cold medicine, and mentholated vapor rub. I carried it all back to my room and dumped it on my bed.

“Here, lift your head up and take this.” I used the oral syringe to push a dose of medicine down his throat without making a mess. Obediently, he lifted his head and opened his mouth, but cringed when the flavor of the sour medicine hit his tongue. Then I took his temperature.

“One hundred and one point three.”

I lifted the lid on the vapor rub, and Shannon cursed. “What the fuck is that shit?”

“It will help you breathe. I need to rub it under your nose.”

“It’s making my eyes burn. Smells awful. Get it away from me, Gourd.”

I swiped a dollop under his nose anyway. “You’ll feel better soon. Just rest.” He closed his eyes, all the fight going out of him like a deflated balloon. I coated my fingers with more vapor rub and massaged it into his chest. Despite his shivering, his skin was hot to the touch. Shannon was burning up. He was at my mercy, with no one to care for him but me.

I laid beside him and he snuggled closer to my chest. “Don’t want to make you sick,” he mumbled.

Too late. I already am. I’d caught the Love Bug.

“Why are you so good to me?”

“Trying to buy my way into Heaven,” I teased.

“Well, you’re definitely a saint. Saint Gordo. My guardian angel,” he sighed before he drifted off to sleep.

THE FAMILIAR CHOKEHOLD of anger gripped me again. My constant companion. I wondered if Shannon ever thought of the past. *Of me.*

“Hey, lightly whisk. You’re murdering that marinade,” Danny admonished.

“Sorry, can you take over for me? My hands aren’t cooperating today.” More like my head, not my hands.

SHANNON

FUCK DATING.

What were the rules?

Was I supposed to just call? Text? How long was I supposed to wait before reaching out? I mean, we'd already agreed to go out again, but if I asked right away, I'd look desperate. On the other hand, if I waited too long, I would appear callous and uninterested.

I was neither of those things.

I was totally into him.

He was as cute as any of the guys I'd dated, but in a different way. Aries wasn't a manicured and polished kind of pretty. He wasn't fake or put together.

His beauty was natural. Earthy. Wholesome. It was in his wide smile, his laughter and the way it lit up his entire face. His pretty brown eyes shone like polished hazelnuts.

Jesus fuckerpants! Polished hazelnuts? What the hell was wrong with me?

There wasn't anyone I hadn't snapped at today. Except maybe Gordy. Well, the day wasn't quite over yet. There was still time for him to piss me off.

I didn't know the protocol for dating etiquette, but I knew someone who did.

I stepped outside in the alley behind the bar for privacy and fished my phone out of the pocket of my jeans.

He answered on the second ring. “Hi, Shannon!”

Hearing the enthusiasm in his voice from receiving my call made me smile. “Hey, Kelley. How are you?”

“I’m fabulous, of course.”

I chuckled. “Great. How’s Glitter?” Kelley treated his cat like a real person. It would be rude of me not to ask.

“She’s fabulous, too! Are you coming by for dinner?”

“Uh, no. I was calling to ask a question. Advice, really.”

“Okay, shoot.”

“I need dating advice. Like what are the rules for calling a guy to ask for a date?”

The squeal that blasted through the phone deafened me, and I couldn’t help but laugh at his excitement.

“Sorry, that just slipped out.” He sniffled dramatically. “My baby boy is growing up.” I could just imagine him dabbing his teary eyes lined with waterproof mascara.

“Uh, I’m thirty-four and I only met you a few months ago,” I corrected.

“Semantics. Now, where were we? The rules of engagement. The art of war. My Specialty.”

“War?” Maybe I called the wrong expert. Perhaps I should have called my cousin Carson. He claimed to be a certified dating coach, although I suspected he didn’t know his elbow from his ass when it came to dating. Just like me. He’d gotten plain lucky when he met Ryan.

“Definitely war. You need to plan your attack. Develop your strategy. Choose your weapon. You cannot enter the battlefield of dating empty-handed.”

“Okay? What kind of weapon did you use on my Pops?”

His sexy laugh made me smile. “Never you mind, little Padawan. I don’t think lingerie is your thing.”

He was right about that.

“For you, I’m thinking chivalry and charm. And, of course, that stacked body.” My eyes widened with surprise. “I didn’t say that last part,” he added in a whisper.

I cracked up. Kelley was a total character. “I’ve already been on one date with him, and it went fantastic. Or, at least, I think it did. We agreed to go out again, but I’m not sure how long I should wait before asking him. Do I call or text?”

“Do not text! Texting is for sexting, not securing a date or getting to know someone better. You can flirt through text, but only after it’s going somewhere.”

“Good to know.”

“Don’t wait too long to call or he’ll think you’re playing games with him. There’s nothing wrong with looking interested. Call the man and stop making him dangle on the end of your hook like a fish.”

“Will do. Thanks, Kelley.”

“Anytime, sugar.”

“My Pops never stood a chance against you, did he?”

“Never,” he confirmed. I could hear the smile in his voice.

I POCKETED my phone and stepped back inside. My call to Aries would have to wait. I had a bar to run. In between pouring drinks for thirsty customers and closing out tabs, I wrote down a few words on a cocktail napkin. Just some thoughts of what I might say when I called him. A rough draft.

~~I love your eyes. Really~~
Shannon?!.

~~Feeling thirsty? Ready to grab~~
~~that drink? Lame.~~

~~Can't stop thinking about you.~~
Desperate!

~~Did Gordy ask about our date?~~
Absolutely not!

BASICALLY, after an hour, I had nothing.

Why was this so incredibly difficult?

I'd never had trouble communicating with Aries before. He was easy to talk to. Deciding to have a second date with him seemed to be causing a communication barrier for me.

"Hey, handsome. Am I interrupting something? You look lost in thought."

Of-fucking-course Aries walked in before I had a chance to call him. "Hey, yourself. What brings you by? Can I get you a drink?"

"No, I'd rather wait for the one you promised me."

"About that. I was just about to call you."

He narrowed his eyes suspiciously. I don't think he believed me. "That's all right. I guess I beat you to it."

"I was, honest to God! I just couldn't figure out what to say."

He placed his palms flat on the bar top, right next to the napkin where I'd written out my thoughts. I grabbed it quickly and crumpled it in my fist before shoving it in my back pocket. But not before he glanced at it. He raised his brows questioningly, looking amused.

"That's nothing, just something I was working on."

Aries leaned across the counter and lowered his voice. "It doesn't have to be difficult, Shannon. It never has been before between us. Just pick up the phone and say, 'Hey, Aries, it's

Shannon. Are we still on for that drink? ‘Cause I’m really looking forward to seeing you.’”

And just like that, all the tension and misgivings in my head dissolved, and it was just me and Aries and our long-standing friendship again. I braced my elbows on the bar top and leaned in to meet him halfway.

“Hey, Aries, it’s Shannon. Are we still on for that drink? ‘Cause I’m really looking forward to seeing you again.”

He winked and flashed a sunny smile. “You bet. Just tell me when and where.”

“Does Monday night work for you again?”

“Sure does.”

“Good. Now tell me what brings you here in the afternoon. Aren’t you working?”

“I am. I just decided to grab lunch in between clients. I went down to the coffee shop, and they have this new flavor, milk chocolate cappuccino. I swear it tastes just like a YooHoo! I had to buy one for Gordy.”

That green-eyed monster called jealousy reared its ugly head again. It bothered me that they were so familiar with each other. But of course, Aries knew he liked YooHoo. He lived with him. I wondered what other private jokes and insider information they had on each other. Aries straightened and grabbed a napkin from a stack on top of the bar and wiped the condensation from the outside of the cup, and it occurred to me that I wasn’t sure which one I was jealous of, Aries or Gordy. Jesus Christ, I wasn’t even fit for a healthy relationship. My head was totally fucked. I didn’t want anyone to know Gordy like I did, and I certainly didn’t want to compete with him for Aries’s attention.

“So, is Gordy busy?”

“Oh yeah, he’s probably slammed with dinner prep right now. Why don’t you leave that with me and I’ll make sure he gets it.”

“Sure, that’ll work. Thanks, Shannon. See ya,” he waved as he turned to leave.

“Hey,” I called out. Aries turned back. “I really am looking forward to seeing you again.” His bright smile was worth the admission.

When he left, I picked up the coffee he dropped off for Gordy and headed to the kitchen. Out of curiosity, I raised the straw to my lips to taste it. Damn, it really did taste just like YooHoo. The flavor brought back so many memories that had long been buried in my subconscious. Memories of sleepovers with Gordy, where we would stay up late watching Marvel movies, binging on snacks and YooHoo. He always had an extra one in his backpack for me, whether we were at the park or at school. Then again, Gordy always had an extra everything for me. He was the most thoughtful and considerate person I knew. Too bad that kindness hadn’t extended into adulthood.

He was standing at the sink, spraying hot water over a colander full of vegetables when I entered the kitchen.

“Hey, Gordo, got something for you.”

He turned the water off and faced me. Gordy looked at me curiously, arching his brows when he saw the coffee in my hand.

“Your *friend* brought this by.”

I emphasized the word friend with a lot of meaning. Which made him scowl. Gordy Carrick had perfected the scowl. His thick, dark brows slashed down over his nose and eyes, shadowing them. His full lips compressed into a thin straight line. He looked ominous.

“Aries was here?”

“Funny, you knew exactly who I was talking about. I didn’t mention any names.”

“Where is he now?”

“He left. He only stopped by to bring you a snack. Isn’t that cute? Said it tastes just like YooHoo.”

Why couldn't I just walk away? What devil made me stand there and fuck with him? I just needed a reaction. Anything to let me know he was still in there. The boy from my memories. The one that used to care. I brought the straw to my lips and sucked. Gordy grabbed the drink from me.

"Get your fucking lips off my straw." He slammed the drink down on the countertop. "What's the matter, Shannon? Does our friendship make you feel threatened?"

"Threatened? By you? Hardly, Gourd. But tell me the truth. Did you sit up all night on Monday waiting for your friend to get home? Wondering just how late I would keep him out? And what I was doing to him?"

He looked like he was going to advance on me. I knew he wanted to, but instead, he balled his fists by his sides and swallowed his anger, his nostrils flaring as he breathed in through his nose.

"You're a fucking asshole."

"You must be rubbing off on me then," I countered.

"I wouldn't rub off on you if you were the last man on earth."

I took a step closer, crowding him against the counter. "Careful, Gourd. It almost sounds as if you wish I were. Is that what you want? To have me all to yourself?"

His green eyes widened, his mouth stretching into a flat line as my words sank in, and then he pushed against my chest. Hard.

"I don't want you at all."

I scoffed, shaking my head, and then turned on my heel and walked out of the kitchen, as if I didn't have any more time to waste on him.

No, there isn't a shred of the boy I used to know left inside him.

ARIES

I CHECKED my reflection in the mirror behind my bedroom door and smiled as I smoothed my hands over the pink button-down shirt I'd chosen. I paired it with black skinny jeans and black suspenders. On my feet, I wore shiny black wingtips.

You are date ready, Aries, my man.

I'd had to text Shannon and tell him not to pick me up from work. If there was even the slightest chance I was going to get laid tonight, I was coming home to take a shower first and make sure I looked *and* smelled good.

Not ten minutes later, Shannon knocked on my door. When I opened it, I looked up, and up and up, and smiled into his sinfully sexy face. I wasn't a small guy at five feet ten, but compared to Shannon, and Gordy, I felt tiny.

He looked unbelievable. His black button-down shirt was rolled up his forearms, like mine, and showed off the tattoos I'd inked into his skin myself, but unlike mine, his arms were thick and corded with muscles and veins. He wore dark wash jeans and the black boots he wore when he rode his motorcycle. With his icy blue eyes and dark scruff, he was the epitome of tall, dark and handsome. Basically, he looked like a badass. Like something—or someone—I wanted to get underneath.

Shannon snaked his hand around my hip and pulled me close. "You look yummy." He brushed his lips over my neck and the stubble on his upper lip scratched my skin deliciously. "Smell good, too."

He dragged his tongue along my skin. He'd fucking licked me, like the icing on a cupcake! In a minute, there wasn't going to be a date, just sex. We had to get out of here.

"You look amazing yourself. You ready to go?"

Shannon looked over my shoulder, probably checking for Gordy. "Are you home alone? If so, we don't need to be in a rush."

I laughed nervously. "I think it's best if you get me away from all horizontal surfaces."

It took Shannon a moment to catch on, but when he did, he smiled wickedly and leaned in for a kiss. His lips were warm and soft against mine as he slid his tongue into my mouth. I wanted to crawl inside of this man, he was so fucking tempting. He kissed like he did everything else in life, with confidence and swagger. I was rock-hard for him.

It really didn't take much to get me hot.

With great reluctance, he pulled away, his voice shaky. "I see what you mean. We better get going."

He'd driven his truck tonight, and my stomach flipped when he opened my door for me. Who did that anymore?

"So, where are we going?" I asked when he was seated behind the wheel.

"Ever been to Dave and Busters?"

"Can't say that I have. But I bet we'll have fun."

"That's the plan, anyway."

"So what did you do with your day off?"

He glanced over at me when he stopped at a red light and smiled. Shannon had a killer smile. Pink lips and straight white teeth.

"Hit the gym this morning. Went for a ride with my Pops and Rory this afternoon. We stopped for pizza. Did some laundry, and now, here we are."

"Here we are."

He laid his hand on my thigh and squeezed. “I’ve been looking forward to this all week.” I missed the heat of his hand when the light turned green and he placed it back on the steering wheel. “Can I ask about your family? I feel like I’m at a disadvantage since you know mine personally.”

I smiled, pleased that he wanted to know more about me. “Sure. I’m an open book. I was born and raised right here in the Charleston area and moved to Cooper’s Cove when I was about twenty. I apprenticed at a tattoo shop here down by the river. Eventually, the guy retired. He developed arthritis and it got bad. Couldn’t tattoo anymore, so he sold me his equipment cheap and I opened my own place.”

We passed over the bridge that connected Cooper’s Cove to Charleston, and I glanced out over the dark water and the bright lights of the city. It was a beautiful sight.

“I was raised by hippies. Like, in an actual commune and shit. It was...educational,” I said, chuckling.

“No shit?”

“Honest to God. My mom and dad are still married. Well, not legally. They don’t believe in that. They’ve been together thirty years now. I think she got pregnant with me like three months after they met or something.”

“Jesus. What are the odds? That’s incredible.”

“They still live on the farm, right outside the city limits. Farm is a colloquial term for commune,” I teased. “My parents have an open relationship. They swear that’s the secret to their longevity. Pretty much everyone on the farm shares in each other’s relationships. It’s a community of love and living simply.”

“Wow. That’s...different. A world away from how I grew up.”

“When did you start living with Graham?”

“When I was eighteen, more or less. That’s when he adopted me. Before that, I didn’t really live anywhere. I bounced around between my dad’s, Gordy’s, Graham’s garage,

and this little secret spot Gordy and I had. We spent a lot of time there.”

His soft smile was telling, though I don't think he realized he was doing it. I couldn't imagine not knowing where I was going to rest my head every night as a kid, scrounging day to day to survive. Those experiences had shaped Shannon into the man he was today, had honed the hard edge to his personality I sometimes caught glimpses of.

“So, are you also a believer of free love?”

“If I said yes, is the date over?” I smiled like it was a joke, but I was mostly serious, feeling him out.

“Really? You are? No, the date isn't over.” He laughed, taking his eyes off the road to look at me. “Why don't you help me understand your concept of free love better?”

I was impressed with his open curiosity and willingness to listen.

“While I'm only interested in men, unlike my parents who take the whole 'love is love' saying to heart, I'm open to all kinds of arrangements. If I'm not in a committed relationship with someone, I enjoy taking my pleasure wherever I find it. Love is beautiful. People are beautiful. In all their shapes and sizes and colors.”

“That sounds almost poetic,” he quipped with a smile. “So, you also do committed relationships, then?”

“If that's what me and my partner, or partners, agree on, yes.”

“Partners? As in more than one?”

“I'm polyamorous, Shannon. I believe if everyone involved is on the same page, it isn't cheating.”

He pulled into the busy parking lot of Dave and Buster's and parked the truck but didn't make a move to get out. Turning in his seat, he faced me in the dark cab of the truck, the leather beneath his ass creaking as he shifted his weight.

“And if I'm not interested in being on the multiple partners page? Then what?”

I sucked in a sharp breath. He was talking about us. The possibility of us. “Then I would respect that. One hundred percent. As long as you respect the fact that I might ask you to remain open to revisiting those boundaries at a later date.”

“Really? You would be okay if I wanted things to remain between us? You wouldn’t feel like you were missing out?”

I reached across the console for his hand. “With you? No. Not at all. But you never know what the future holds. You should always remain open to the possibility of love. I mean, why would you want to miss out on something so wonderful?”

He chuffed, smiling a little. “Come on. Let’s go inside and get something to eat.”

He held the door for me as we walked inside, and the hostess seated us at a table in the back, where it was a little quieter.

“I still can’t believe you grew up in a commune. And you’re poly? How did I not know this stuff about you? It must have been interesting, to say the least, growing up there.”

“You have no idea. Growing up with so many different role models gave me the opportunity to learn a lot. Walter taught me how to play the guitar. Lou taught me the harmonica. Mary Ellen taught me how to bake bread. I can skin a chicken, plant a garden, and weave wheat into a straw mat.”

Shannon laughed. With his arms folded on the table, he was leaning into me, completely absorbed. “I think you’re the most interesting person I’ve ever met.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it,” I joked.

“What about your dad? What did he teach you?”

“My dad is a carpenter. He and two other guys on the farm built all the cabins there. With their bare hands.”

“So you can build a house, too?”

“No.” I laughed. “I did not inherit those skills from him. I use my hands to create art, not habitats.”

“It must really be something. I’d love to see it.”

“I can make that happen, actually.”

“What? Really?”

“The farm is open to the public. They sell food from the garden and crafts that they make, and my mom leads group meditation and does palm readings.”

“Get the fuck out. Palm readings? You have to take me. I have got to see this place for myself.” Shannon was having a hard time getting the words out through his laughter.

“So you want to meet my parents, huh? After the second date,” I teased. “I’ll arrange it.”

His smile fell quickly, replaced with shock and a touch of horror. It was my turn to laugh hysterically now.

We ordered burgers and beer and joked with each other as we ate. I felt so relaxed with him. It was like it had always been with us—fun—real—easy.

What wasn’t easy? Watching him eat! The way he opened his mouth so wide around that burger, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed, when he licked the grease from his fingers? There was nothing relaxed about how that made me feel. I wanted that sinful mouth and those talented fingers on my body in the worst way.

After dinner, we headed over to the arcade side. Shannon bought a play card with points on it to use on the games. The first one we tried was the motorcycle riding game, of course. Shannon had me sit in front of him, instead of behind like I did on his actual bike. He curled his big body around mine, dwarfing my shoulders, and put his hands over mine on the handlebars. The way he squeezed my legs between his powerful thighs felt amazing, like he was showing me what he was capable of. I was definitely on board. His lips tickled my neck, making me laugh as I crashed us into the virtual wall time and again.

“You’re a terrible driver,” he joked. “Remind me to never let you steer my bike.”

“You were distracting me!” We were laughing loudly, and it felt so good. My blood pumped through my veins, my pulse was slightly accelerated. I felt alive.

The second game we played was a basketball throw. Shannon stood behind me, his chest flush against my back, his hands gripping my hips, and whispered directions in my ear as he nibbled the lobe.

“Give me a nice rim job.” I shook with silent laughter as I tried to aim.

“Yeah, lick that rim. Get that hole in one.”

“That’s golf, not basketball,” I sputtered.

“Nothing but net,” he breathed in a husky voice that went straight to my balls.

It went on and on as I missed every single shot. He touched my hands as I held the ball in front of me, trying desperately to concentrate. Shannon trailed his fingers over the designs that covered the backs of my hands.

He whispered, “Do you know how many times I’ve thought of these hands? When I’m in your chair and you’re working on me, I watch your hands. The way they move and grip that gun, your fingers flexing, how they wipe the ink from my skin. I want to peel your latex gloves off and suck on your fingers. Imagine how they would feel on my skin, touching my nipples, my cock.”

“Fuck, Shannon. I’m rock-hard, now. Thanks.”

“Tonight, I want you to show me how good it would feel. I don’t want to wonder anymore. I want to *know*.”

“Let’s go now,” I suggested.

Shannon laughed wickedly in my ear. “Where would be the fun in that? I like delayed gratification. Make me work for it.”

He fucking edged me for two more hours until our play card was out of points. I clutched a plushie motorcycle to my chest as he walked me to his truck. I’d spent the remainder of

the points we'd earned on a wad of bubblegum I shoved in my pocket.

Again, he opened my door for me, and when I was buckled in, he asked, "You coming home with me?"

"Gods, yes!"

He laughed, and I realized I might have sounded a little too enthusiastic, a little too desperate, but fuck it, I *was* eager. I'd wanted to get him naked and inside me for months now, and it was finally happening. Damn right I was excited!

The drive back to his place was fraught with sexual tension. Flirty glances—little touches here and there—his hand on my thigh—my fingers laced with his over the center console. Every time I caught him staring, I licked my lips so that his eyes were drawn to my mouth. My heart beat so hard I could feel it. The excitement and adrenaline made me feel high.

He parked in front of a brick seven story building. I followed him through the lobby to the elevator and watched as Shannon hit the button for the seventh floor.

"You must have a great view."

"Not as good as the view I have right now."

I realized he was talking about me and blushed.

Really, Aries? Now you're blushing like a fucking princess?

He unlocked the door to his apartment, and I got the five cent tour on my way to his bedroom. Shannon's place was nice—exposed brick walls, high-end furniture in browns and creams. I hadn't known what to expect, but it suited him well. He began to strip, taking off his shoes and pants as he slipped out of his shirt. He was naked by the time I was just getting my shoes off.

"Here, let me," he said as he walked me backward to the bed.

Shannon placed his knee on the mattress and laid me down as he crawled over me, kneeling over my thighs as he worked

the buttons of my shirt open. My eyes traveled down the length of his body, over his sculpted chest and abs, down the trail of black hair that led to the thickest cock I'd ever seen. All seven inches were sculpted perfectly, with beautiful veins bulging from his engorged shaft. I was dying for a taste.

"I'm almost tempted to leave these on," he said as he fingered the straps of my suspenders.

"What would you attach them to?"

His eyes gleamed wickedly. "Maybe a jockstrap."

I had to will my eyes upward to meet his. "I can't say I've tried that yet."

"Me either." He smirked.

I raised my shoulders off the bed so he could remove my shirt and suspenders. Shannon smoothed his hands over my chest.

"You're pierced? Fuck, that's sexy."

"I have a piercing fetish," I admitted.

Shannon teased the metal barbells in my nipples with his fingers, flicking and pinching them until my back arched off the bed.

"Oh my God, stop. You have no idea how sensitive I am there."

With a wicked grin, he leaned down over me, bracing his hands on either side of my shoulders, and sucked my nipple into his mouth. He lavished the tight bud with his tongue, lightly flicking at the sensitive skin stretched taut around the barbell. He then gave my other nipple the same attention, suckling, his mouth warm and wet, driving me out of my mind. I think he just wanted to hear me beg because he laughed like a villain.

"Please, no more. *Fuck*, suck my nipples," I contradicted myself as I tangled my fingers in his hair and pulled his head down to me.

He looked like a dark god as he raised his eyes to my face with the barbell through my nipple between his teeth. He tugged lightly at it, and I felt it in my dick. He was gorgeous, rough and sexy, with muscles for days, and a sizable cock to back it all up. I couldn't wait to play with him.

Shannon released my nipple and moved further down my body, pausing to taste my belly button.

“Another piercing?” he asked, peeking up at me from beneath his lashes.

I shrugged before plopping my head back down on the mattress with a sigh of pleasure as his tongue played with the silver hoop. He licked a wet trail through the dark blond hairs that disappeared inside my pants, stopping to work the button open. Slowly, he lowered my zipper, as if unwrapping a treat, and sucked kisses to the smooth skin above the band of my black briefs.

Shannon ran his lips down the length of my cotton-covered bulge, breathing hot air through the fabric. The sensations of his breath and tongue were igniting a heat in my blood that burned throughout my body.

Inch by inch, he lowered my briefs and pants down my thighs, jumping off the bed to stand between my legs as he pulled them over my feet. His hands gripped my calves, kneading the muscles as he leveraged my legs apart. I knew he was staring at my hole, which drove me insane. I bent my knees and planted my feet flat on the mattress to give him a better view.

“Like what you see?”

He stroked his dick as he stared. That was my crack, watching a man stroke himself, especially while he was looking at me. Nothing got me hotter. I copied his movements, cupping my balls before running my hand down the length of my shaft and over the head. My slit was leaking, making the crown wet and sticky. Shannon crawled between my legs, shaking his head.

“What?”

“I just caught myself wondering how I can make this the best sex you’ve ever had. Not a thought I entertain often with guys.”

“Well, you can start by not talking about other guys,” I teased.

“Sorry, you’re right. I’m blowing this, aren’t I?”

I held the base of my dick and brushed the wet tip over his lips. “Not yet you aren’t.”

He sucked the head between his lips, and I moaned when I felt the stubble around his mouth scratch my sensitive skin.

“Tell me what you like. I want to make it good for you.”

“Just having you ask what I like makes me feel good. But if you really wanna know, it would drive me nuts to see you play with my cum. My slit is super sensitive.”

He dipped his tongue into my slit, just lightly at first, lapping up the pool of fluid. When he pulled his tongue away, a sticky string connected us. That was the shit that got me hot. That visual, so filthy.

“That’s it right there.” I squeezed my sack, hoping to produce more for him to play with. He dove back in for another taste, his tongue going a little deeper this time, stretching the opening of my slit wide enough to make it burn.

“Ahhh!”

I teased my nipples as he suckled me, and I could feel my balls shrinking, drawing up tight against my body. I could come from this, from just his tongue, teasing my head. He drew out another sticky line from my slit and swirled his tongue around the spongy tip of my cock, flicking back-and-forth over the frenulum. A sharp twitch of pleasure made the muscles in my stomach contract, and I hunched forward, wrapping my hands around his head, holding him down to my groin like a prisoner, trapped between my legs.

“Damn, you’re so fucking hot. The way your body reacts to me. I love it.”

He swallowed the entire length of my cock, taking it to the back of his throat, and I hunched over his head again, coughing as I choked from the sharp stab of pleasure.

“I’ll come if you don’t stop. Either fuck me or let me suck you.”

“I can’t wait to fuck you,” he growled.

Making a fist around my shaft, he squeezed upward, milking my cock. When he’d collected enough, he reached between my cheeks and spread my slick around my hole. Again and again, he repeated the motion until he had enough for his finger to glide easily over my slippery pucker.

“You’re killing me,” I rasped.

“Not yet, but I’m going to.”

And he did. Shannon slid his finger past the tight barrier of my entrance, tunneling deeper with each pass. As he deepened the glide, he sucked and licked my sac and my smooth taint, and I chanted repeatedly under my breath not to come yet.

When he curled his finger, brushing over my gland, I shot a thick spurt that landed on his cheek.

“Damn, Aries! You’re fucking amazing.”

He swiped the mess with his index finger and sucked it clean. I tightened the muscles in my thighs, ass, and stomach, trying desperately to hold off from coming. I took deep breaths in through my nose as I thought about the electric buzz of my tattoo gun, the way it vibrated in my hand, visualizing the vibrant colors of ink in the bottles that lined my station.

“Please, no more. I need to come so bad.”

Shannon rolled off the bed and grabbed a condom and a bottle of lube from the top drawer of his nightstand. I scooted up to rest against the pillows. His eyes were heavy with lust as he stroked his cock. My anticipation mounted as he rolled the condom over his shaft and smeared it with lube.

“Hold your knees up. Bend them to your chest.”

He crawled to me slowly, stroking himself as he settled between my legs, and rubbed the tip of his cock back and forth through my wide-open crease, spreading the slick over my entrance. He tested the resistance of my pucker a few times, pressing against it slightly before pushing past the tight rim. Like a perverse fuck, he held it there, the widest part of his dick stretching the tightest part of my channel. The burn was overwhelming, a sweet pain that was almost unbearable, until he pushed past it and entered me fully. He held himself inside me, balls deep, as he shifted over my body, taking my lips in a possessive kiss that made me forget all about the bite of pain in my ass.

“Fuck, you’re tight. And so goddamn hot. You feel perfect.”

I moaned, stealing his lips again for another mind-melting kiss. Digging my heels into his back, I clenched my thighs tightly around his ribs. His tongue stroked over mine in sync to his cock stroking in and out of my body. He was just playing with me, enjoying the easy glide, the incredible tightness. Fucking into me with slow strokes and soft thrusts, driving me insane.

“Shannon, please, fuck me for real.”

“I am,” he teased, smiling down into my face.

I licked his lips and bit his chin. “Flip me over and fuck me hard.”

He gripped my jaw, smooshing my lips together. “God, I won’t last with that mouth and your tight ass.” He sucked on my puckered lips, drawing them into his mouth, nipping them with his teeth. Then, he released me and sat back. “Turn over.”

I scrambled to roll over onto my stomach, popping my ass up and spreading my thighs.

He took his time, pulling my cheeks apart, rubbing over my wet hole with his thumb, dipping it in and out. He cupped my heavy balls, rolling them between his fingers.

“You have a load for me?”

“Fuck yes. Slide your cock in me and fuck it out of me.”

He smacked my ass hard, the sharp sound reverberating throughout the silent room. I loved the bite of pain.

“Watch your mouth or I’ll be dumping my load right here, right now,” he said, tracing his finger down my crease.

He loved the filthy things I said when I was turned on. It drove him nuts. I hoped he would say them back to me. I craved the nasty exchange of words when I felt stripped raw like this, horny and desperate. I was capable of saying and doing anything.

Shannon gripped my hips and leaned over my back, pushing inside me with a powerful thrust that moved my entire body forward, banging my head into the wooden headboard. He leaned further over me and wrapped a hand around my throat, holding my ability to breathe tight in his grip. I shot another premature rope of cum over his pillow. When my head hit the wood again, he raised me up and held me tight against his body, his hand still around my throat, and fucked into me with brutal thrusts, long and deep. My body absorbed the impact as his hips thundered against my ass and bounced back off again, over and over, slamming into me until I grabbed my dick and pumped it furiously as I came. I grunted as ropes of thick white cum stained his pillow, criss crossed over his headboard, and dribbled down the back of my hand. He released my throat, grabbed my hand, and brought it to his mouth, sucking and licking it clean with a feral grunt.

Shannon pushed against my back, shoving my face down into the wet pillows as he railed me, and then he filled my ass with his warm seed. I could feel the heat of it through the thin latex barrier. He growled when he spilled his release, a primal sound that made my ass clench around his shaft, milking him dry. He bit my shoulder, and I yelled.

“Ow, fucker.”

“Sorry,” he said, chuckling. Shannon sucked the sore spot, soothing it with his lips. “I got carried away.”

He sat back on his ass, knees bent in front of him. His cock was still half-hard. It was a fucking monster. Thick and wet. I kneeled between his legs and rolled the condom off and tied it.

He grabbed it from me and chucked it on the floor. I bent my head and sucked what was left of his erection into my mouth, slurping lightly, knowing he was likely sensitive after coming so hard.

He laughed and pushed at my head. “Just making sure I got it all,” I said cheekily, smacking my lips together. He pulled me in for a breathtaking kiss. I sighed dreamily, completely sated and satisfied.

Shannon literally fucked the life out of me, I thought before I collapsed back on the pillows. “Eww, it’s wet and cold,” I said, grabbing the pillow from beneath my head and tossing it to the floor. He laughed as I closed my eyes, a dopey grin on my lips.

A moment later, I heard the shower come on. Snatches of the sex we’d just had drifted through my head as I lay there. The sound he made when he came. His diamond-bright eyes peeking up at me as his tongue played in my slit, his goatee scratching the insides of my thighs. The first glimpse I got of his amazing body and cock when he took his clothes off.

I was sold on him. One-hundred percent.

The water turned off, and Shannon appeared with a wet cloth. He rubbed me clean, between my legs, my hands and face, and ended with a sweet kiss to my lips.

“Stay with me tonight?”

I nodded, smiling sweetly. *Fucking sold.*

GORDY

HE'S NOT COMING HOME *tonight*.

I fucking hate you, Shannon.

Aries sent me a text at a quarter after midnight confirming that he wouldn't be home, so that I wouldn't worry, he said. *Easier said than done.*

Shortly after that, I turned in for the night, seeing as Aries was already tucked cozily into Shannon's bed.

My only consolation was that it would be over soon. This was their second date. Shannon didn't do third dates. Then I could help Aries move on from my man-whore cousin who loved to fuck with people's heads and hearts, knowing damn well he was never going to offer them anything more than one night in his bed.

Some of us didn't even get that much.

Next Monday night, I would invite him out with me and the twins to take his mind off it.

Fuck Shannon.

Aries didn't need him.

Nobody needs him.

He had me. And I would get him through it. Maybe we could start a club for people recovering from their addiction to Shannon Calhoun.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, I came home in a pissed off mood after having suffered through eight hours of watching Shannon smile—he even fucking whistled—like the lucky bastard he was. I'd been sorely tempted to wipe that smug smile off that fucker's face.

I needed relief. A distraction. Something physical to take my mind off both of them. After a hot shower, I wrapped a towel around my hips and went downstairs to the kitchen to whip up a batch of my special chocolate mint love butter. The container on my nightstand was empty and had been for several weeks. It was time to fill it up again. I planned on turning in early, putting on some soft music, and edging the fuck out of my cock.

After collecting the ingredients I would need, I lined them up on the counter—peppermint oil, honey, coconut oil, and cocoa extract. Not only was the homemade lube edible, it smelled amazing and tasted like mint chocolate chip. The peppermint oil created a delicious mild heat. The whipped lube made my skin buttery soft and The natural ingredients didn't upset my stomach when ingested.

As I stirred the pot, waiting for it to come to a boil, the front door opened and closed, and Aries called out, "Honey, I'm home."

I startled, my arm flailed, and the wooden spoon I held bumped the peppermint oil off the counter. It spilled into a puddle on the floor.

Shit! I did not want him to know I was cooking up a batch of lube. It was perfectly acceptable, just not the kind of thing I wanted to share about myself with my roommate. Or anyone else, for that matter.

He poked his head into the kitchen, wearing a sunny smile, and I reached down into the bottom drawer to the left of the stove to grab a lid for the pot, to cover up what I was making.

When I stood, I slipped in the puddle of peppermint oil, my feet coming out from underneath me, and I landed flat on my ass with a painful thud.

Aries rushed over and kneeled down beside me. “Damn, are you okay?” Concern for me was written all over his pretty face.

“Not my finest moment.”

His smile returned, and I forgot all about my ass as his eyes roamed over my naked chest and down my stomach. When he didn’t say anything more, I realized why...

“My towel came open, didn’t it?”

“It certainly did. Not that I mind the view.”

I raised my head to see him blatantly ogling my junk. The damn traitorous thing thickened before his eyes, like a thirsty snake drinking in the attention. I dropped my head back down on the tiled floor with a thud and shrugged.

“If you don’t mind, I don’t mind.”

I knew I was playing with fire, and I would get burned. I always did. But why not let him look for a minute? No one ever did. *Never wanted to*. Or maybe it was me that didn’t want it. But I wanted *his* eyes on me. It felt good. Actually, it felt fucking incredible to know he liked what he saw.

“It’s like an elephant trunk,” he said, his voice caught between laughter and awe. “You must be bigger than Shannon when you’re hard, and I thought that his was the thickest I’d seen!”

Great, like I needed to know that. I moved to cover my dick with my towel and sat up. “Nice to know I finally beat him at something.”

Aries straddled my legs in a lunge, grabbing my hands to pull me up off the floor. But when I stood, he didn’t back away.

“I’m sure you have him beat at a lot of things. You must not have any idea how amazing you are. How talented—” His

eyes traveled down my chest. “—How hot you are. How thoughtful and generous.”

I swallowed hard, not knowing what else to say. I could be flippant, but it didn't feel right. More than anything, I wanted to take the compliment from him—wanted him to mean it.

He raised his eyes back up to my face. “When I look at you, I see all that and more. What is it going to take for me to get you to see it, too?”

Be mine. Choose me over my cousin.

Just once, I wanted someone to choose me. What would it feel like to come in first place and not be a consolation prize.

“Definitely more hands-on demonstrations,” I teased, my voice sounding more gravelly and deeper than usual.

Aries broke the tension by twisting my nipples.

“Ow, fuck.”

“We should pierce these. Like mine.”

“Only if it makes you want to touch them more.”

He soothed them with his thumbs, grazing over the tips until they made hard points. “I think that's the first time I've seen you flirt. It's a good look on you. Even if you're just teasing me.”

Boldly, I cupped his jaw, raising his eyes to mine. The lights in the kitchen reflected in the gold flecks of his irises, making his brown eyes appear bronzed.

“Who said I was teasing you?”

Aries parted his pink lips. His throat bobbed deliciously.

And then he broke the spell cast over us. “Let's get this oil cleaned up before we slip again.”

He grabbed a kitchen towel and bent to wipe the spill. I felt the loss of the moment, grieved it, but still reveled in the small victory I'd gained by taking an unlikely chance. It wasn't my usual MO, but to be fair, what I'd been doing hadn't exactly

been working well for me. Hiding inside my shell wouldn't get me anywhere with him.

And I desperately wanted to get somewhere with Aries Banghart.

He sniffed appreciatively. "What are you making? Smells like hot cocoa and Christmas."

"You're correct about the peppermint and cocoa, but it isn't hot chocolate." I reduced the heat to a simmer.

"What is it, then?" The mixture had reduced and thickened into a thick, creamy texture.

"Sort of like a flavored butter."

"I used to make butter on the farm. Freshly churned."

"This is a little different."

"Quit being mysterious." He nudged my shoulder with his, peering into the pot again for another whiff.

"Damn, you're nosy. It's body butter."

He raised his eyebrows and smiled charmingly. "Is that anything like boy butter?"

I shook my head and chuffed. "Yeah. Same thing."

"You make your own lube? Get the fuck out! You have to let me share the recipe with my parents. They'll love you forever."

"That," I stated adamantly, "isn't going to happen."

"Oh, come on." Aries slid his arm around my waist and peered into the pot again, dipping his finger for a taste. "Tastes pretty good." I watched him slide his finger between his lips and suck it clean, wishing it were *my* finger—or my cock. "You were planning a fun night for yourself, huh?" His eyes gleamed wickedly, sending a wave of heat through my body. "Is there enough for me? Friends share."

I had something I wanted to share with him. "I'll put some aside for you when it cools."

IT WAS NEARLY impossible to relax enough to get myself off, knowing Aries knew exactly what I was doing. Was he doing the same thing right now as I was? I kicked the covers off my legs and rolled over, peering at the clock on my nightstand. Eleven-fifteen. The scene from the kitchen came back to me for the hundredth time. I was analyzing it from every angle. Was he flirting with me because that's what friends sometimes did to blow off steam and have fun? Or was there more to it than that? Could he be interested in me as well? I was exhausted from running it through my mind, and restless at the same time.

I changed the music from sultry to something with a harder edge. A little Nine Inch Nails might do the trick. Closer came on the shuffle playlist, and I opened the lid on the jar of body butter. I spread a big dollop over my chest, working it into my skin as I massaged my pecs, teasing over my nipples with the pads of my thumbs. My hands trailed lower, smoothing over the ridges of my abs and hipbones, dipping into my belly button, and tracing the trail of dark hair that traveled between my legs.

I rubbed my hands together to spread the rest of the butter around, and then slid my hands down the insides of my thighs. The skin there was smoother, with less hair, and it relaxed me to rub small circles lightly over the muscles. My dick hardened all the way at the slight tease, from the feather light brush of my knuckles as they whispered against my balls. I was working myself up good, the way I'd wanted to. It helped to imagine it was Aries's hands that were touching the juncture of my thighs.

The colorful garden of floral tattoos and intricate patterns that covered the backs of his hands and fingers, the fauna that skittered up his arms—I imagined he was kneeling between my legs as I watched his inked hands work me over. His slender fingers traced the crease of my thigh and groin. He raised his eyes to mine as he teased me, anticipating my reaction.

“Touch me, Aries,” I whispered, spreading my legs further apart.

I swiped more butter from the jar and wiped it on his palms. In turn, he buttered my balls, lightly massaging one, and then the other. It was a slow-burning, torturous pleasure that made the muscles in my thighs clench. He wrapped his fist around the base of my cock and slid upward, replacing the bottom position with his other fist, so that a continuous stream of pressure gripped my shaft.

“Touch it with me, Gordy. Feel how slick it is.”

I ran my hands over his imaginary ones, stroking upward until I’d squeezed a massive amount of blood into the head of my cock. It mushroomed into a dark purple color, and was extremely sensitive as I fisted over the crown. My precum mixed with the butter, making everything feel more sticky and slippery.

I wanted his hands on me for real—and his mouth. It would feel incredible. Overwhelming. The wet heat, the tight suction of his hollowed cheeks, his soft pillowy lips catching on the rim of my head. *Fuck!*

“Aries,” I hissed, coating my stomach in a warm rush of seed.

Well, so much for edging myself. The idea of his mouth on my dick brought me too close, too fast.

Unlike me, Aries didn’t have an en-suite bathroom. He had to get up and use the hall bathroom to wash up. I smiled when I heard the bathroom door close. Then, the flush of a toilet. Had he only gotten up to take a piss? Or was he washing up the mess he made? I’d like to think it was the latter, and that he whispered my name when he came.

SHANNON

BUCKLING MY SEATBELT, I put the truck in reverse as my phone rang. I swiped my thumb over the screen and held it up to my ear while backing out of my parking spot. “Hey, Pops. What’s up?”

“Thank you for making Kelley so happy. He’s shitting sunbeams and rainbows.”

“What did I do?”

“Asked his advice. By the way, who the hell are you dating?”

“None of your damn business, old man,” I said affectionately.

“It’s funny you think you have secrets from me. I know exactly what you’re doing, and who you’re doing it with.”

I laughed. “That’s kind of creepy.”

“Well, when you fuck it up, you can call your stepdad back for advice.”

“Excuse me? Stepdad?”

“Kelley has been raving all week about how you made him feel like a real stepfather. It’s kinda cute, to be honest.”

I could just imagine it. “Jesus Christ. I refuse to call him my stepfather. He’s younger than me by almost ten years! But I’m glad I made him smile.”

“Hey, I’m happy for you. I can’t recall you ever having dated anyone before. This is big, but I’m not going to make a

big deal, right?”

“Right. Don’t even mention it.” When he chuckled, I added, “Seriously. Don’t.”

Graham’s rich deep laugh flowed into my ear, warming my heart and putting a smile on my face. The man was like my anchor. He’d given me a solid place to land when I was lost. I loved him deeply for it.

“Talk to you later, kid. I love you.”

“Love you, too, Pops.”

I ended the call just as I was pulling into the parking lot of Limericks. Some people dreaded going to work, but not me. This place was my baby, it energized me, filled me with a sense of purpose and rightness. I’d busted my ass since I was a teenager, saving every penny I earned, changing the dirty oil in motorcycles, stockpiling grease under my fingernails, and then working with my Pops at the sports bar, slinging drinks and busting my back hauling one hundred and thirty pound kegs. For years, I’d scrimped and saved while nursing the idea of someday opening a high-end cocktail bar with live entertainment. It wasn’t until last year that my dream had finally come true.

Yeah, this place was home to me. Not my apartment—that was just four walls and a bed. It didn’t fill me with the same feeling of success and contentment as the lounge did.

Another thing I loved about coming here every day was that I was surrounded by my family. My cousins, Carson and Carlisle, worked the front end of the bar while Gordy ran the kitchen. It was his domain, and woe to the person who stepped foot in there without his permission.

Whenever I ate dinner at the lounge on my break, and was spoiled with the gift of his food, I was reminded again just how talented he was. It filled me with pride, although I hadn’t had a damn thing to do with his success.

The only way I could explain it was that Gordy had always felt like mine. Despite the fact that we barely talked anymore.

And when you feel a kinship with someone, you can't help but take pride in their accomplishments.

I grabbed my phone from the cupholder and slipped it in my pocket, smiling as I thought about what my Pops had said. I could just imagine the joy on Kelley's face he described to me. Just because of my phone call. Because I'd asked for his advice. Kelley and I had very different upbringings, but we had both landed in the same place.

Alone and without family.

He valued the Carricks as much as I did. When you'd gone your whole life without feeling the love and acceptance of the people around you, you knew how priceless it was when you finally found it. You would do anything to hold onto it.

Anything.

A long time ago, I was given that gift, and the price that I paid to receive it left a hole in my heart almost as big as the one I'd started out with.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts as I pushed through the glass doors and headed to the storeroom in the back to grab my clipboard. On it was a running list of things I had to do, reminders, notes about scheduling conflicts, my inventory list and receipts from my supply shipments. Technically, all of the bookkeeping and ordering was Carlisle's domain. He handled it flawlessly. I had no complaints. But it would be irresponsible of me not to keep a copy of everything important that happened in my own bar. Whether it was his job or not, the responsibility still fell on my shoulders at the end of the day.

As I passed by the kitchen, I searched out Gordy, as I always did. He was talking to Danny, his sous chef or whatever he called it, and they both looked thrilled.

Motherfucker!

I froze in the doorway, staring as Danny jumped up into Gordy's arms. Gordy caught him easily. He wrapped his legs around Gordy's waist and pressed his body against Gordy's

chest. And fuck if my cousin didn't squeeze him back! Were they fucking? Dating? I thought he liked Aries.

I moved on to the storeroom and locked myself inside. I was an asshole. A real son of a bitch. I felt ashamed of myself for taking something from Gordy that he coveted. I hadn't meant to do it purposely, had I? Aries was easy to like, and easy on the eyes as well. The only reason I hadn't asked him out sooner was because we were friends, and I hadn't wanted to fuck that up. Which I eventually would because everyone knew I didn't date. I was also jealous the day I saw them having lunch together. I hated to admit that, but I wasn't fooling myself. My gut had burned as hot as my heart had, like a severe case of acid reflux. That was the catalyst that had lit the fire under my ass to ask Aries out.

But I knew Gordy liked him. He would never admit it to me, or anyone else for that matter, but it was plain to see. He made the man meatloaf every week! We didn't even serve that here.

Yeah, Gordy liked him. *A lot*. The man didn't do anything in small measures. He was passionate and loyal and put his whole heart into everything he did.

It was one of the things I liked best about him.

And here I was acting like a bully, stealing his favorite toy. I beat my head against the concrete wall. Pain rattled through my skull, but I deserved it. Welcomed it. I'd stolen the object of his affection. Beat him to the punchline. He may never have gotten up the nerve to ask Aries out. Gordy was notorious for dragging his feet when it came to being decisive. He was not a man of action. But it still didn't make it right.

Would I ever be done hurting that man? Hell, I didn't mean to keep doing it. That was the last thing I wanted. But here I was, getting jealous again, but this time over a pipsqueak college boy. Why couldn't I just let him find happiness?

Because he's mine. He belongs to me.

That selfish voice I recognized all too well surfaced, loud and clear. Logically, I knew Gordy didn't belong to me

anymore. Maybe once upon a time he had, but those years passed long ago. I didn't belong to him either. It was time to burn the bridge that separated us and let him go forever.

I was his cousin.

That was all I would ever be to him.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, I woke with a sense of purpose. After a quick shower, I dressed in jeans and a T-shirt and hit the road. I made a pit-stop at the Apple Blossom Bistro for two lattes and a couple of muffins. On my way to Rainbow Ink, I chugged my coffee in four large gulps, trying to juice myself up. The pain of what I was about to do would hurt worse than the sting of Aries's needle.

The shop was mostly empty. He had only been open for an hour or so. Aries was seated at his station, setting up his gun and a selection of colored inks. A twenty-something guy sat in his chair, nervously biting his nails.

Aries raised his gun and hit the switch. It came to life, buzzing like a swarm of bees. I loved that sound. Loved the bite of the needle piercing my flesh. Loved the smell of the ink and antiseptic.

The man in the chair flinched. "Oh God, slow down. Go easy on me. I'm a virgin."

Aries laughed. "An ink virgin?" The man nodded. "I haven't even touched you yet. Relax, my man."

He white-knuckled the arms of the chair and squeezed his eyes shut as if he were undergoing major surgery without anesthesia. I laughed silently, wondering how many times a day Aries encountered this.

Aries noticed me and angled his head my way in recognition, shooting me a wink and a smile. I held up his coffee and the bag of muffins.

“Hey, Shannon. Just put them on the counter. I’ll be finished soon.”

Setting his breakfast on the counter, I took a moment to observe him. I loved to watch him work. He was beautiful. His elegant hands, pretty face so focused. His tongue peeked out, and I wondered if he always did that when he was concentrating. Today, he’d dressed in gray jeans and a rainbow ink T-shirt. His black suspenders were back, the ones I wanted to see him wear with only a jockstrap.

Fuck me. I began to imagine him tattooing me after hours, when it was just me and him, and he wore nothing but those suspenders and jock, no latex gloves, so I could see the flowers on his hands stretch and move as he worked on me.

“All finished,” he announced, switching off his gun.

“That’s it?”

“Yup. It doesn’t take long to do a heart with initials.” Aries swiped the man’s skin with antiseptic. “What do you think?”

He looked down at his shoulder. “Looks great! I can’t wait to show my girl. She’s gonna love it.”

Aries laughed. “As long as you love it, my man. That’s what matters.”

He covered the man’s freshly inked skin with ointment and a clear cellophane bandage and recited his aftercare instructions.

When the man was gone, Aries approached the counter and grabbed his coffee.

“Thanks. I needed this.” He peered into the bag and grabbed a cranberry chocolate chip muffin. “These look delicious.”

I loved that he didn’t make it awkward. No hug or cheek kisses required. No strings, just like he promised.

“I didn’t just stop by to treat you to breakfast. I was hoping to get in your chair, if you aren’t busy.”

“Nope. Not for another two hours. What did you want? Finally gonna let me pierce them nips?”

I chuckled. “Not today. I was thinking of some ink.”

“Sweet. I love to decorate your skin. Come sit in my chair and tell me what you want.”

I followed him to his station and whipped off my shirt. I had to bite back my smile when Aries stared at my chest like he hadn’t ever seen it before.

“Sorry,” he said, sounding anything but. “It’s still impressive everytime.”

I laughed again. It seemed to be all I did around this guy. “So, I was thinking of a knife.” I pointed to the clear spot above my pec. “Through my heart.”

“Jesus, Shannon. It’s eleven a.m.. Are you always this morose in the mornings? Would you like to finish off my coffee? You might need it more than me.”

My smirk turned into a full-on smile.

“What is the meaning of it?”

“It’s representative of my current mood lately. But not a dagger. A chef’s knife.”

Understanding dawned in Aries’ eyes. “I’m going to go out on a limb here and make a crazy assumption. We both only know one chef, I’m assuming. Do you want to explain to me the meaning behind the whole knife to the heart drama?”

“No drama. Just a reminder.”

“No drama? But you want blood dripping from the cut? Okay Shannon, whatever you say.”

I sat back and relaxed while he cleaned his gun. “Colors?”

“Black, red, and gray.”

“So what is the reminder for? What is it that you don’t want to forget?”

“The consequence of sacrifice. That you can’t get something for nothing. Everything has a price.”

“I don’t know what all of that means, but maybe someday you’ll tell me about it.”

As he lined up the vials of ink, I studied him again. Aries was easy. Solid. And yet, I felt this undeniable pull toward him. Even now, I wanted to lean in and steal a kiss.

So much for no strings.

“Yeah, maybe someday I will. In the meantime, can I ask you something?”

“Sure, anything.”

“Would you go out with me again?”

“A third date? Really? Hey, Patrick,” he hollered to his coworker who’d just walked in. “Look outside and tell me if there are pigs flying.”

My shoulders shook with silent laughter. “Pigs are not flying and hell didn’t freeze over.”

“So, a third date, huh? Are you ready to admit I’m the exception to the rule?”

“I’m getting there,” I murmured, smiling. “Just remember, no strings attached, right?” Was I trying to convince myself or him?

“Right. No strings.”

I closed my eyes and reveled in the sting of his needle as it pierced my flesh again and again. I was a little addicted to the mild pain. But it was nothing compared to the pain I was stuffing deep down. Or the disappointment of knowing that no matter how many tattoos I collected on my body, they would never dull the ache I battled every day.

ARIES

“HEY, wait up! Where’s the fire?”

Gordy didn’t even slow down. Just glanced over his shoulder. “Come on, slow poke, we’re just getting started. We still have two more miles to go.”

“Two miles!” I was huffing and puffing with each step. My sneakers pounded the pavement, stomping the sweat dripping from my face into the asphalt.

Gordy slowed but didn’t stop. The bastard turned and ran backward while waiting for me to catch up, like this was nothing more strenuous than a leisurely stroll.

“There’s a park up ahead. We’ll stop for a rest.”

His idea of ‘up ahead’ and mine were probably vastly different. I followed him another half mile to an overgrown lot, caged in by a rusty chain-link fence.

“This is your idea of a park?”

“Used to be. About twenty years ago.” He frowned at the padlock on the gate. Gordy stuck his foot through one of the holes in the fence and hoisted himself over the top, landing on the other side in a crouch. “Come on. You wanna sit down or not?”

Yes, I did. But not enough to risk getting tetanus. Reluctantly, I climbed the fence. Gordy wandered over to an old weathered bench that looked as if it would collapse if he sat on it.

“Better not.”

He chose instead to sit on the merry-go-round. It was covered in rust and dirt, but I really needed to sit down and slow my breathing.

“Did you used to come here when you were a kid? Little Gordy on the merry-go-round?”

He made a short harsh chuffing sound and shook his head. “I was never little, even when I was a kid.”

He whipped his T-shirt over his head and balled it up, using it as a rag to wipe the sweat from his neck and chest. His body was fit and toned, full of muscle and bulging veins, but if you looked closely, you could see the stretch marks that riddled his skin, criss crossing over his ribs and stomach. I guessed they continued down into his shorts, making tracks along his hips and thighs. He was beautiful, with or without them. They were the secrets of his youth, the things he never wanted to talk about. I had the insane urge to want to lick them, to trace the scars with my tongue, to heal him from the outside in.

Without even realizing what I was doing, I reached for the waistband of his athletic shorts, drawing them lower to peek at his hips. Gordy caught my hand, his fingers closing over my wrist like a vise.

“What’re you doing?”

I raised my eyes to his, but I had no answer. His brows were drawn down tight. He looked angry.

“Taking a closer look.”

“Don’t fuck with me while you’re fucking with my cousin.”

I was sure of two things at that moment. One, Gordy wanted me. And two, I wanted him just as much, if not more.

“Why do you push yourself so hard? You’re a man now. Your body is perfect. You’re not the kid you used to be.”

“Perfection is subjective. It’s a state of mind. It’s in the eye of the beholder.”

“Well, in my eyes, you’re beautiful.”

He let go of my wrist, shoving it away from him. It was a sign of rejection and it cut deeply. The more I got to know Gordy, the closer we became, the more I seemed to want from him. What started out as friendship was transforming into a bromance. He had a way of sneaking underneath my skin and infiltrating my heart, and the tender feelings he stirred within me were also feeding my attraction to him. It was a slow burn kind of lust. Not the explosive desire I felt for Shannon, where I couldn't get naked fast enough. With Gordy, it was like stoking a fire. He'd lit the kindling, and he was fanning the flames. Soon, I feared it would become an inferno.

“You're such a conundrum. A contradiction.”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

“No,” I laughed. “Just an observation. You're quiet and moody, stingy with your words, but when you finally open your mouth and speak, you say the most meaningful things. You're antisocial, but somehow so much fun to hang out with.” My eyes caressed the scruff on his face, his messy hair that stuck out in every direction, wet and spiky with sweat. “You dress like a louse, and give zero fucks about your appearance, but you create the most beautiful food. You are a mystery.” I wagged my brows playfully. “Mysterious.”

Gordy snorted. “I think maybe you're having a brain clot.” He stood and tucked his shirt into the back of his waistband. “Come on. If you beat me back to the house, I'll make you something to eat before you leave for work.”

“I guess I'm not going to eat today.”

MY WEEK FELT as if it were dragging ass, and then all of a sudden it was Monday. The anticipation of seeing Shannon again was wreaking havoc with my mind. As excited as I was, there was a part of me, a large part, that refused to feel good about it. I was not looking forward to telling Gordy. His reaction was going to hurt me, just as my actions were going

to hurt him. I worried I would be pushing him further away when all I wanted was to get closer.

When I came in the front door from work, Gordy was seated on the couch with the remote in his hand, flipping through the channels. He was dressed to go out with his cousins.

It was unavoidable. I sat down beside him and smacked his thigh.

“Can I interest you in a night out with the guys? They keep nagging me to bring you.”

He looked so hopeful, and there was no way he could convince me his cousins wanted my company more than he did.

“I would love to, but I already have plans.”

When I didn't elaborate, he raised his brows in question.

“I have a date.” His face fell. “With your cousin.” The disappointment turned into confusion.

“With Shannon? How is that possible? He doesn't do third dates.”

I removed my hand from his thigh and laid it in my lap. “It seems he found an exception to the rule.”

Gordy looked disgusted. “Wow, you must have really impressed him. What did it take?”

My heart squeezed painfully from his barbed words. “That's just... that's ugly, Gordy. Don't be like that with me. Please.”

Without another word, he got up and went to the kitchen.

I was torn between wanting to avoid him by going upstairs and wanting to follow him. Eventually, my feet, or maybe it was my heart, led me to the kitchen.

“Gordy?” He shuffled the dishes around in the sink, pretending to be busy while ignoring me. “Can we talk?”

He grunted, like a caveman. Like Gordy.

“Please don’t be like this. I only wanted to go out and have a good time.”

“Is that all?” He banged a metal pot particularly loud. “While what... jerking my chain? I guess that’s why God gave you two hands, so you could jerk two dick’s at once.” I inhaled a deep breath in an effort to remain calm and centered. But he wasn’t finished. “I told you I’m not into that sharing bullshit. If you want him, go get him. Don’t come crying to me when he breaks your heart.”

Why was he so convinced Shannon was going to hurt me?

“I told you I don’t see it as sharing.”

“Oh no? How do you see it, Aries? Tell me.”

“I just want to be able to have all the people I care about close to me. I don’t understand why it has to be either or.”

He looked back over his shoulder at me, raking his eyes down my body, and scoffed. “This isn’t a fucking game, Aries. You’re playing with people’s...”

He cut his words abruptly and turned back to the sink. But I knew what he was going to say. *Feelings*.

“I’m not playing games. I like you. More than a little.”

“And Shannon? You must like him more than a little, too.”

“I do. It’s different, though.”

“How nice. A variety pack. A little of this, a little of that.” Gordy shut the water off and grabbed a towel to dry his hands. “I’m not interested in competing with my cousin. It’s not a game I want to play again. Ever. This whole free love thing might make sense to you, but to me, it feels like...” Without another word, he turned and walked out.

“Gordy!” He stopped in the doorway but didn’t turn to face me. “It feels like what?”

“Like rejection,” he mumbled before disappearing.

I FELT LESS than enthusiastic when Shannon picked me up. I hadn't even had time to change out of my work clothes. In the truck, I was much quieter than usual. His words kept coming back to me.

"Like rejection."

"It's not a game I want to play again. Ever."

When had he played it? Who had rejected him? The more I considered it, the more I got the feeling his feud with his cousin wasn't about familial matters. It wasn't as simple as clashing personalities or teens with growing pains. Something more had happened between them.

But was it something irreversible?

"Want to tell me what's on your mind?"

I offered him a shallow, overly bright smile. "I swear I'm happy to see you."

Shannon chuckled. "Aries, we've been friends awhile now. Don't bullshit me. Tell me what's going on with you, as your friend, not your date."

I chewed my lip before spitting out the words. "I left things bad with Gordy."

He nodded, silent at first, and then, "You had to know he wasn't going to be happy you're dating me."

"Is that what we're doing?"

"Dating? Yeah, I mean, it's more than a one-night stand. But we agreed on no strings, right? For now?"

"Yeah, no strings." I stared out the window as the city passed by. I wasn't even sure where he was taking me. I'd been too distracted to ask.

"If that ever changes for you, I expect you to let me know."

"Of course."

Shannon remained silent for several minutes before he spoke again. "Aries?"

I glanced over with a smile. “Hmm?”

“I’m happy to see you, too.”

His Duchenne smile liquified the lining of my stomach.

He pulled into a deserted lot but didn’t park. I knew we were down by the beach, but beyond that, I had no clue where we were going. Shannon drove to the back of the lot and stopped at a metal gate. It looked like some sort of access for maintenance vehicles. He hopped out of the truck and pushed the gate open, then climbed back in wearing a wily grin.

“Where are we going? I’m probably not even dressed right for whatever you have planned.” My converse and cuffed jeans weren’t exactly appropriate dinner attire.

“You look perfect. I love the way you dress.” His fingertips brushed over the leather patch on my elbow. “I never would have guessed you could pair a vintage Eagles band tee with a stuffy old cardigan. But somehow, on you, it works.”

His teasing smile looked so freaking sexy on his gorgeous face. Dark shadows highlighted the angles of his cheekbones and jaw, contouring his features beautifully. I reached out to caress his jaw, my thumb stroking over his scruffy cheek, and smiled at him. It was a little shy, a little sweet, and a lot grateful—for his compliment.

Shannon drove through the gate and jumped out again to close the gate behind us and got back in. He drove down the beach about a half mile before putting the truck in park, leaving the engine running.

“You’re killing me! What are we doing?”

“I know a guy who works for the maintenance division for the beaches and river. He comes in the bar a lot.” Shannon shrugged with a smile. “I asked him to leave the gate open when he got off work.”

His smile was contagious. I returned it with one of my own. “What did you have to promise him in return?”

“Just a few free drinks. Totally worth it.” He laid his hand on my thigh. “Wait here. No peeking.”

Shannon got out and lowered the tailgate and hopped in the bed of the truck. I heard a lot of shuffling and banging but refused to ruin his surprise by snooping. He tapped on the glass divider window, and I turned to see him crowding my view.

“Open it,” he called out. I slid the window open, and he handed me a plug. “Can you plug this in for me?”

I inserted it into the truck’s a/c adapter and then heard the buzz of a motor. It was killing me not to look!

Ten minutes of suspense and anticipation before all went silent again. Then he jumped out and came around to open my door.

Shannon offered me his hand, like a gentleman. “Aries Banghart, will you have dinner with me?”

“It would be my pleasure, Mr. Calhoun.”

He led me around the back of the truck, and I gasped, completely stunned. Shannon had transformed the bed into a picnic under the stars. He’d blown up an air mattress and covered it with a blanket and pillows from his couch at home. A brown paper bag sat atop the makeshift bed. I assumed it held our dinner.

“This is perfect!”

He handed me his phone. “Here. Find us some music while I turn off the truck.”

I climbed up and sat on the inflated bed as I searched through his database of music, choosing some classic rock I knew he would love, and settled in as he rejoined me.

“This is too much. You went to a lot of trouble.”

“We can just sit in the cab if you want,” he teased.

“No way. I love this.”

“I figured you would. This is my first third date. I had to go all out.”

“This is my first moonlit beach picnic.”

“Oh, I’ve done this before, it just wasn’t romantic. I was with the twins and Gordy.”

He settled back against the pillows and slipped his arm around my shoulders, drawing me close to his side. I laid my head on his chest, silently wondering what Gordy was up to with his cousins at the moment.

“You’re thinking about him, aren’t you?” His voice was quiet in my ear.

“I feel awful how we left things.”

“Just give him time. He’ll come around.” He planted a kiss behind my ear, and I shivered with delight.

“Shannon?”

“Mmm?”

“I like him.”

“I know. You’ve become good friends since you moved in. Closer than you were.”

“No, I *really* like him.” I sat up to look at him, but he didn’t remove his arm. “I have all these feelings for him, and I don’t know what to do about it.”

“For Gordy?” He chuckled, like he couldn’t fathom it.

His laugh made my spine straighten, and I immediately felt defensive of him. “Why is that so hard to believe?”

“It’s not. Not at all. Gordy is…” He swallowed and shifted his eyes away from my face. “He’s one of the best guys I know. He’s—” He didn’t finish. Instead, he said, “You know he’s liked you forever, right?”

“Kinda. I was sure of it after moving in. We were just friends for so long, which is why I thought we’d make excellent roommates. But the more time we spend together, the more I realize how incredible he is. In here.” I laid my hand over his heart.

He grabbed it and raised it to his lips, placing a kiss to the back of it. “He is,” he agreed.

“I started to care deeply for him, more so with every day we spend together. Do you know how it feels to have a deep connection with someone? The kind of solid bond that you instinctively trust?”

“Yeah. I have that with Rory. But we’ve been friends for years. It takes time to form a bond like that.”

“Usually. But I have that with Gordy. I felt it almost instantly. I just knew he was someone my soul aligned with.”

Shannon chuckled. “You sound like a real hippie.”

“I guess.” I shrugged but smiled. To me, soulmates, karma, and a person’s energy were very real things. Take Shannon, for instance. His aura was bright purple. He radiated good energy, but he could be intense, sexy, soulful, while also being positive. I was drawn to it. His aura energized me. It heated my blood.

Gordy, on the other hand, was green. Despite his dark moods, he radiated calm light and an earthiness I bonded with. His soul was beautiful and pure. I admired him, and the good in him sparked a kindred attraction within me that called to me. I wanted to touch him, taste him, learn his secrets and his fears, and replace them with my love and assurance.

“So where does that leave us? I won’t compete with him. He’s my cousin. We’re family.”

“I wouldn’t want that. I would like to bring you two together, not split you further apart.”

“So, you skin chickens *and* you’re a miracle worker? I’m impressed.”

I laughed at his joke, but then grew pensive. “Can I ask why you two don’t get along?”

He snorted and ran his fingers through my hair. “You can ask. Doesn’t mean I have an answer.”

“I’m sorry, I shou—”

“No, I’m saying I don’t know why. We used to be so close. Closer than brothers. I suspect it has something to do with me joining the family, but I’m not exactly sure. He’s very tight-lipped about it.”

“You think he was upset that his family accepted you? That doesn’t fit with what I know about him.”

Shannon shrugged. “I don’t know. Might never know.”

“Why don’t you just ask him?”

“Because I might not want to know the answer. If I’m right, I definitely don’t want to know.”

That couldn’t be right. There had to be more to it than that.

“I feel like I’m losing you when I just found something between us worth hanging on to.”

“You aren’t losing me, Shannon. I’m a little crazy about you,” I admitted with a rueful smile. “Just give me time to sort it out, okay?” I straddled his lap, sliding my arms around his neck as I stared into his eyes, so pale in the moonlight they resembled shards of ice, but nowhere near as cold. His gaze was full of heat and life. “Gordy won’t touch me as long as we’re dating.”

“So that’s what your argument was about,” he guessed. I nodded. “How frustrating for a guy who likes to sow his love like seeds in a garden,” he teased, nipping at my lips. “Take all the time you need, but remember what I said. I won’t compete with him. Eventually, you’ll have to make a choice.”

“Yeah, but for now, no strings, remember?”

He pinched my ass, and when I squealed, he silenced the sound with his lips.

WE ATE seafood salad sandwiches and drank blackberry wine coolers and lounged in each other’s arms. The heat of his body warmed my back as his thick colorful arms came around my chest, securing me close to him. It felt heavenly to be held like that. The sound of the waves crashing onto the shore made a

beautiful accompaniment to the music as we stargazed. I pointed at the sky, to the Little Dipper.

“Do you know what that one is?”

“Yes, but not the others. Do you?”

“I spent a lot of time outdoors growing up.”

“Did you not have a TV?”

“We did, but I could only watch it when something important was on. At night, I sketched designs and laid out under the stars. Naira taught me about astrology.”

“Is there anything those people can’t do?”

“Probably not,” I admitted, laughing. “Dotty and Michael homeschooled all the kids together. My mother and Serena made quilts, clothes, soap, and essential oils.” His hand moved down my stomach to cup my dick as he chuckled in my ear, his breath warm and heavy on my skin, making goosebumps rise to the surface. “See the Big Dipper there?”

“I can feel it,” he said, squeezing lightly. I was growing thicker in his grasp.

“It lines up with Orion’s belt. And the tip of the handle on the Little Dipper is Polaris, the North Star. That’s how you can always find your way home.”

Shannon slipped his hand inside my jeans, under the band of my bikini briefs, and stroked my hardening cock. “Be my North Star,” he pleaded roughly in my ear. “Show me the way home.”

I was falling under his spell hard and fast.

Getting hooked on Shannon was unavoidable.

GORDY

SHANNON WAS SO FUCKING PETTY.

Exhibit A: The other day at work, he stood in the doorway to my kitchen and spied on me as Danny hugged me. He'd been so excited that day, overcome with enthusiasm because he aced his culinary finals. He brought his certificate into work to show me, and I was so proud of my protégée. But Shannon threatened to fire him later that day when he was five minutes late from returning from his dinner break. Five minutes! Danny was probably on the phone with his family, telling them about his good news.

Exhibit B: My mother called and asked me to come over on my day off and pressure wash her house. I didn't mind at all, but I told her I'd get back to her once I figured out my plans for Monday. The following afternoon, Shannon sent me a text.

Dickwad: Never mind. It's taken care of.

HE MADE it sound like I was dragging my ass and didn't care enough to make it a priority. At least, that's how I took it. He didn't even go over there and do it himself. He paid some overpriced company to come and handle it for him. Again, trying to make me look bad because he had more money than I did. I can't swear that's the truth, but that's how it made me feel.

Exhibit C: ...He...Once he...I don't know! I have eighteen years worth of examples of his pettiness. I'm done with his bullshit!

I WAS SO WORKED up over their third date that I was about to cancel my night out with Carson and Carlisle. I felt like a fucking basket case. There was no use in sitting home driving myself crazy, though. I'd rather take my anger out on a cue ball, and possibly Carson.

Limericks Sports Bar and Grille was packed with its usual Monday night patrons—a few regulars at the bar, some couples grabbing a quick dinner in the Grille area after work, and the double-trouble couple—Murphy Maguire and Hudson Brantley. I nodded in their direction a quick hello and found our usual spot in the back, near the pool tables. Carson and Carlisle arrived shortly after.

“Where's Uncle G?” Carson asked, scanning the bar.

“He's been working less shifts lately. He's relying on his new manager instead so he can spend more time at home with Kelley,” Carlisle answered.

Carson sighed. “That's what love will do to you.”

He should know. He was a total sap for his fiancé, Ryan.

“Let's order, I'm starving. You all good with potato skins and wings?” Carson raised his brows, awaiting our answer.

Why did I continue to torture myself like this, eating greasy crap and hanging with Chip and Dale while Shannon and Aries were out on a real date, eating something delicious, no doubt, and more than likely eating out each other? I had a date with a jar of body butter when I got home. I was definitely getting the short end of the stick.

Carson flagged a server and asked, “Damn, Gordy. You're even quieter than usual. What's up with you tonight?”

I shrugged my shoulders, not wanting to drag out my drama.

“Come on. If you can’t talk to us, who can you talk to?”

Did he think that was supposed to sound sensible?

Carlisle prodded me, and his gentler approach was hard to resist. “Gordy, we care. Talk to us. Maybe we can help.”

“I kinda let someone know I have feelings for them. But they’re seeing someone else.”

Carson scoffed. “What’s this other guy got that you don’t? Besides a personality.”

I frowned, my lips twisting. “He thinks I have plenty of personality.”

“Well, shit, Gordy! He’s done the easy part for you. What are you complaining about? Go get him. Fuck this other guy.”

“I never said either of them were men.”

“Come on, are you kidding me? Anyway, be serious. You can hold your own against anyone. Do you need a dating coach? I can help you out with that.”

My eyes rolled heavenward. “Get fucking real.” I scoffed and smiled at Carlisle, who was laughing.

Carson looked hurt. “Hey, I know how to land a guy. I purposely sucked at finding Ryan a guy because *I* was the right guy!”

The server took our order and dropped off a pitcher of beer while we waited on our food. Talk turned to Carson’s wedding plans, Rory and Carlisle’s recent weekend trip to the Carrick family cabin in the mountains, and the next event Carlisle was planning for the Lounge to bring in business.

I was home by eleven, showered, and in bed with my date—my right hand. My phone vibrated on my nightstand at the most inconvenient time, with my hands and cock buttered and slippery, a moment away from shooting my load. I wiped my hands and stomach clean and checked the message.

Gordy: Aren't you busy?

Aries: Can't sleep. Thinking about you.

I IGNORED THE MESSAGE. What was I supposed to say to that? My cousin was lying right beside him.

Aries: I'm not jerking your chain, Gordy. I'm feeling you, and I want more. I know what you said. Just give me some time to figure things out.

Gordy: G'night Aries.

MAYBE CARSON WAS RIGHT. What would happen if I went after Aries? Was there even a remote possibility that he would choose me instead of Shannon? If only I knew anything about dating. From what I'd witnessed over the years, Shannon was one smooth fucker. He could land a guy at the club in twenty minutes flat. I'd watched him do it time and again. I had no fucking clue how to do that.

Then again, whatever I had been doing up until now seemed to be working just fine.

It was all so confusing and exhausting, and I fell asleep with his face on my mind and his name on my lips.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I was sitting at the kitchen table, having a cup of coffee, dressed in only my boxer shorts, when Aries came in through the front door. He came right to the kitchen, probably having seen the light on.

“Morning. Is there any coffee left?”

I nodded toward the machine. As he moved around the kitchen, taking down a mug from the cabinet, grabbing the creamer from the fridge and the sugar from the canister on the counter, I watched him, curious about his date. Questions were burning holes in my mind. What prompted him to text me late at night when he was lying in another man's arms? Was he serious about wanting to further things between us while he was pursuing someone else? That didn't sit right with me. Just what was he planning?

He sat down at the table next to me, in the chair Carlisle used to claim, and blew over the rim of his mug, to cool the liquid before taking a cautious sip.

"If you have time today before work, you should come by the shop and let me fill in the color on your neck. I don't have much scheduled this afternoon."

Several weeks ago, he'd done a maze on my collarbone that crept up onto my neck. It was to symbolize my struggle with food, being lost for so many years and finally finding my way. Aries wanted to color in the sun shining at the end of the maze.

"Yeah, maybe." I touched my neck, letting my hand trail down over my pec. Knowing his eyes were on me made me self-conscious. No matter how far I'd come with my confidence, with my self-esteem, no matter how much muscle mass I'd built up, or how low my BMI dropped, I still felt insecure when my body drew the attention of someone's eyes.

"So about last night. I—" he started.

Abruptly, I stood and pushed my chair back, wincing as the legs scraped loudly over the tiled floor. "I have to get ready."

I dropped my mug in the sink and left the kitchen without another word.

I REALLY DIDN'T HAVE ANYWHERE I needed to be, so I drove over to my mother's house to check on her. I found her

sitting on the back patio, sipping from a cup of tea while reading a magazine.

“Hey, Ma.” I leaned in to kiss her cheek.

“Hey, baby. I didn’t know you were stopping by.”

“Just thought I’d come by and see if you needed anything.”

“Well, that’s just sweet of you. Actually, I’m all good. Shannon stopped by yesterday and cleaned out the gutters on the roof. I guess it’s about time I had you all back to come and stain that new fence you put in for me.”

“He was here yesterday? What for?”

“Nothing much. Just stopped in for a visit. Brought me a box of donuts from that place I like downtown.”

I was glad Shannon was good to my mother. As he should be. She was always good to him when he needed it most. And as painful of a thorn as he was in my side, I was happy I could share my mother with him. He never had one. No matter how old I got, or how independent I grew, I would always need my ma. I figured Shannon would, too.

“Can I get you a doughnut, baby?”

She meant well. She really did. She just didn’t understand my struggle with food. A donut wasn’t going to kill me. But the more I said no to the sweet temptation of sugar, the better off I was in so many areas of my life. Things like depression, body dysmorphia, and self-esteem, were all passing phases to my mother. Probably because she never suffered from any of them, she just couldn’t understand how devastating, how crippling, they could be. After having consumed way too much grease last night with my cousins, I really didn’t need a doughnut today. It was like adding insult to injury.

“No, thanks, Ma. I ate already. I’ll talk to Uncle G about getting everyone together to come and stain the fence for you.”

“That sounds great. I’d appreciate it. So tell me about your new roommate. How’s that working out?”

With a bright smile pasted on my face, I lied through my teeth. “It’s going great, Ma. Aries is the best.” Well, that part

wasn't a lie. He was the best.

“That’s such a relief. I worried about you when the boys moved out. I’m so glad the twins are doing well. So happy and in love. But I worry about my own boys, too. You and Shannon living all alone. You should bring him over so I can meet him. I’ll make a nice dinner.”

I needed to make an excuse to get out of there before she started trying to fix me up with someone.

“Shannon said he’s seeing someone. I was overjoyed. Maybe he can bring his date and you can bring your roommate and we can all get to know each other.”

“Sounds great, Ma.” I’d rather stab my eyeballs out with forks and eat them. “I’m gonna hit the gym before work. I’ll see you soon.” I hugged her goodbye and hightailed it to my car.

I could just imagine the shit show at my mother’s table with me, Shannon, and Aries all trying to explain the dynamics of our fucked up situation.

I didn’t go to the gym, which was a huge mistake after what I ate last night for dinner. But I couldn’t get Aries off my mind, and this morning, when he invited me to swing by the shop, I couldn’t resist the invitation.

So as not to show up empty-handed, I stopped by the coffee shop near Rainbow Ink and ordered two of those milk chocolate mochachino-frappachino-cappachino things that tasted like YooHoo. He’d become addicted to them lately, but more importantly, he thought I loved them, and stopped by the lounge to bring me one on his break often, which blew me away. He was the first and only guy who’d ever gone out of his way to spoil me like that. Knowing Aries like I did, it was nothing he wouldn’t do for anyone. That was just the kind of guy he was. Thoughtful, selfless, generous. Always putting others before himself.

It still dazzled the fuck out of me, though.

When he saw me walk in, he popped out of his chair and rushed right up to me, leaning up on his toes to kiss my cheek.

“You came!”

The kiss was something new, but I wasn't going to complain. His excitement over seeing me gave my adrenaline a higher spike than any sugar rush.

He smiled sweetly when I handed him his drink and took a big loud slurp, sighing with pleasure when the chocolatey flavor hit his tongue.

“So good. Thank you.”

“Smells good in here,” I noted, sniffing the air.

“Lemongrass. I put it in the diffuser. It's my mom's special organic blend of essential oils.”

My lips curved in a smile. Whoever thought I would fall for a hippie? Certainly not me. Aries would correct me and say he wasn't a hippie, he was just progressive and open-minded, which pretty much meant the same thing. Weren't all hippies open-minded and progressive?

“Come, sit down while I get the ink out.”

I followed him over to his station and settled into his chair. It was padded with black leather and pretty comfortable since most of his clients had to spend hours at a time in it.

Aries selected yellow, orange, white, and red pigments. He loaded the yellow into his gun first and snapped on a pair of black latex gloves. It was ridiculous, they were just sterile latex, but something about the way he snapped his gloves on made my dick hard every time. I had a fantasy about him jacking my dick while wearing those gloves.

I pulled my shirt over my head and handed it to him. His eyes roamed over my chest and stomach with interest. Intent. I recognized the look in his eye. It was the same one I had when I looked at him. He leaned in close to work, and I closed my eyes, tipping my head back to give him better access to my neck. As the initial bite of the needle pierced my skin, I winced and tightened my grip on the arms of the chair. Soon enough, I began to relax as the buzz of the gun lulled me into a serene trance.

I focused on his warm breath ghosting over my skin.

The touch of his fingers wiping away the excess ink.

His musky sweet scent. Citrus and something else. Was it sandalwood or patchouli?

I had to see his eyes. With his face so close to mine, his eyes and his mouth were all I could think of. I opened my eyes, and he met my gaze, a direct stare heavy with unspoken thoughts and sizzling desire. Aries switched off his gun. He swallowed and licked his plump peach lips.

I wanted that tongue in *my* mouth.

Bold as could be, I slid my hand around his neck, the other palmed the back of his head, and brought his mouth down to mine. He groaned as our lips made contact, just before he parted them for me. Aries swept his tongue into my mouth and I suckled on it, sliding my tongue along his, making love to it as I would his body. He must have laid his gun down at some point because his hands gripped my shoulders, pulling me up to meet him. I tugged him down, and he practically crawled into my lap. His weight felt so solid and right, and I wanted to stay like this forever with him, eternally stuck in this moment, where he belonged only to me, and was mine to do with as I pleased.

“Gordy,” he breathed against my lips, “want you so bad.”

I cut his words off with my mouth, deepening the kiss, taking possession of his tongue so he couldn’t speak. I didn’t need his words. I could feel them in the way he touched me, clung to me. In the way his body responded to mine.

Fully sprawled over my body now, Aries rolled my nipples between his thumb and forefinger as he kissed me back. He pressed the bulge of his hard dick against mine, rocking into me. I gripped his hip, my fingers digging into him as I tried to slow his movements.

“Don’t you dare make me come in these pants,” I warned him.

“That’s hot,” he panted, sounding breathy and turned on.

I chuckled against his lips. “Wearing wet, cold, sticky boxers all day isn’t.”

He peeked down through his lashes at my lips, looking like a shy sex kitten. “I’ve been wanting to do that for a while now. I had no idea it would feel like that or I wouldn’t have waited.”

I rubbed my stubbly cheek against his soft lips. “Same.”

“I don’t want to get up.”

“Me either.” I looked toward the door, which we’d left unlocked. “Someone could walk in any moment. This isn’t exactly professional.”

Aries laughed softly. “You’re right. Your sun is finished. I, on the other hand, am not. I’ll be right back.” He popped a kiss on my lips. “Gonna run to the bathroom.”

Was he going to finish himself off in there? Or just cool down? Fuck! I needed to know. Needed to watch.

He must have only cleaned up because he came back three minutes later. “Do you wanna stick around a while, or do you have things you still need to do before work?”

“I wish I could, but I gotta go home and get ready.” I slid my arms around his slender waist and looked down into his smiling face. “I’ll see you tonight when I get home, or in the morning if you’re already asleep before I get in.”

He tilted his face up for a soft kiss. Damn, I couldn’t get enough of him.

I drove home with a huge dopey grin on my face, feeling high on life. Aries Banghart was an incredible kisser.

It was the *best* first kiss of my entire life.

It was the *only* first kiss of my entire life.

SHANNON

I WAS in the middle of folding a load of laundry when my phone rang. I pulled it from my back pocket and answered.

“Hey, Pops. What’s up?”

“Hey. I have a favor to ask.”

“You don’t have to ask for anything. Just tell me what you need.” When he hesitated. I said, “Pops?”

“It’s really for Kelley, not me.”

“Anything you need. Or he needs. What is it?”

“Kelley and I wanted to go up to the cabin this week for a few days. We’ll be back Friday before his performance. Could you maybe watch Glitter while we’re gone?”

“The cat?”

“Yeah.”

“I guess? What do you need me to do, stop by and put some water and food out? Change the litter box?”

“I was thinking more like...she could come stay with you for a while.”

“Oh, come on! Seriously?”

“It would mean a lot to Kelley. Well, both of us, really.”

“Is there a reason you can’t bring her with you?”

“It’s snake season. Kelley is worried about the cat getting bit.”

“Bit by a snake? Am I missing something?”

“Jesus, Shannon! He puts the cat on a leash and takes her for walks outside! What do you want from me? I can’t make it make sense to you because I don’t get it either. I just want him to be happy. And relaxed. Which means he can’t be worrying about Glitter while we’re gone. Tell me you’ll watch the damn cat.”

“I can’t believe this. I must be a real sucker.”

He laughed without humor. “You and me both.”

“Yes, I’ll watch the cat,” I conceded with a heavy sigh.

“I owe you one.”

“I know you do,” I agreed, laughing.

“Could you stop by tomorrow? Kelley wants to go over a few things with you in person.”

“I guess so.”

I hung up the phone and finished folding the laundry. I was already regretting my decision, but it was just one little kitten. How much trouble could she be?

WHEN I ARRIVED at the Lounge, all the usual suspects were in place. Carlisle was stocking the bar with liquor and supplies. Carson was busy wiping down tables and straightening chairs. Rory hadn’t arrived yet, but he would be here soon for his security detail. I headed straight for the kitchen and found Danny and Gordy chopping vegetables and prepping for the dinner service.

Something was off.

I could feel it in the air.

More accurately, I could hear it.

It was Gordy.

He was smiling! Gordy never smiled. And he was humming something under his breath, just loud enough for me

to hear. What the fuck had happened to him? Had he won the lottery or something?

“What’s up with you? You’re happy.”

“What’s up with you? Why are you standing in my kitchen?”

He said it without his usual scowl. With his full lips turned up at the corners, he looked almost...charming.

“Just came to see if you had everything you needed for the tasting event this weekend.”

Carlisle had planned a seafood tasting event, with many different seafood dishes, all paired with some very expensive wines. I could only guess how excited Gordy was about getting to try his hand at some unique shellfish recipes. I had seen jumbo prawns, sea urchin, and squid on my inventory order form.

“Yep. Carlisle took care of everything, and Danny here said he would come in early to help me prep that evening.”

I looked Danny over from his dark brown hair and smiling face to his skinny frame and long legs. “How...helpful...of him.”

Did he have to look so goddamn eager?

“Alright. If you think of anything you need, let me know.”

I started to leave but turned back. Gordy looked up and smiled patiently. Something was up with him. Had he gotten laid?

Jesus. That was not something I wanted to think about.

I PULLED up to my dad’s house and parked behind his truck, shaking my head and laughing to myself at Kelley’s metallic purple Mustang parked next to it in the driveway. Everything he did, he did it big. And loud and colorfully. And definitely coordinated—from his clothes, to his car, to his cat. He was

one of a kind, for sure, and I was grateful he was making my Pops so happy lately. If I had to babysit his cat to show him my gratitude, I figured it was the very least I could do.

Though I started to change my mind when I walked inside and saw two piles of luggage—Kelley’s, and Glitter’s. If I had to guess, my dad had one small duffel bag, and it was already packed in the truck. But Kelley had a purple cheetah print rolling suitcase, two teal duffles, and a garment bag. What could he possibly need that for in the mountains?

Was that a hatbox? Fuck. My Pops had his hands full.

But that was nothing compared to the mountain of cat paraphernalia.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” I muttered.

“Hey, Shannon!” Kelley greeted me with a cheek kiss and a hug. Jeez, he smelled fantastic, like watermelon.

“Hey. What’s all this?” I gestured to the pile of luggage and accouterments, some with Glitter’s name spelled out in, well, glitter.

“Just a few things she’ll need,” he said breezily.

“You’re only going away for three days.”

“A girl has to look her best,” he said with a wave of his manicured hand.

I started to realize at that moment just how deep I was sinking underwater.

Kelley handed me a purple designer purse that held his precious kitten. I peered into the mesh window and saw a tiny white ball of fluff staring back at me with the greenest eyes, like my Pops and the rest of the Carricks possessed. She was dressed in a pink sweater, and somehow, Kelley had managed to stick a small pink bow on her head.

Yeah, I was pretty much fucked.

I was in way over my head.

“So what do I do with all this?”

“Well, that’s her cat tree. Place it by a window or sliding glass door. She likes to sit on the top and look out. The white thing is her bed. I had a pink one, but switched to white because it hides her cat hair better. It’s going to get absolutely everywhere, so if you don’t have a vacuum, you might want to borrow mine.”

He pointed to a pink bag. “I packed her food and water bowls, her treats, her vitamins. Her brush and comb. Oh, and she has a body spray, it smells like lavender. Just mist it lightly around her. It makes her sneeze at first, but then she loves it. What am I forgetting, honey?” he called out.

“Your lists,” my Pops answered.

“Oh, right, here you go.” He reached into the pocket of the pink bag and pulled out a stack of papers that he handed to me. “The first one is a list of her outfits for each day. I wrote down all the coordinating items so you wouldn’t get them mixed up. The second list explains her feeding schedule and vitamin regimen, and which treats she likes depending on the mood she’s in. Salmon when she’s feeling playful, and shrimp or whitefish when she’s sleepy. There’s also a list for her exercise routine. I walk her twice a day and do a light massage and range of motion exercises with her in the mornings. Do you think I should pack her stroller?”

I had no answer for him because I was stunned speechless. What in the ever-loving-fuck had I volunteered for?

“I’ll just run and grab it. Oh, and her scratching post. I’ll be right back.”

My Pops appeared, looking sheepish. “Sorry about all that. Just do the best you can.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me, Pops,” I whispered. “I can’t remember all this. I have a job. A life.”

“Just bring her with you in the purse. That’s what Kelley does. He takes her everywhere with him. To yoga class, to the dance studio, to the gym. You’ll get the hang of it in no time,” he said, clapping me on the shoulder.

Kelley came back, dragging a folded up stroller and a cone covered in rope. “Here you go. That should cover it. Any questions?”

He had to be kidding me. “Uh, no. Just, hurry back.”

“Call me if you need anything. Or if Glitter misses me and wants to say hi.” He bent and shoved his face in the mesh window. “Daddy’s gonna miss you so much, princess. Papa is, too. So so much. You call Daddy if you need to hear my voice, alright? Be a good girl for your brother. I want to hear about lots of bonding time between the two of you.” He straightened up and flashed me a blinding white smile framed by glossy pink lips. “I bet by the time we come back, you won’t be able to part with her.”

I highly fucking doubted that.

I WASN’T TOO proud to admit defeat. I needed help, and I needed it right now. I loaded Glitter and her endless supply of crap into my truck and drove straight to Westwater Lane, except for the quick stop I had to make on the side of the road when I thought she might have peed in the cat carrier.

I bundled the bag under my arm and marched right up to the front door, knocking loud enough to raise the dead.

It was just my luck that Aries wasn’t the one to answer the door.

“What the hell do you want?”

Gordy was shirtless, wearing a pair of gray sweatpants and nothing else, looking like... *damn*.

“I need help. Is Aries home?”

Gordy eyed the purse tucked under my arm, my black T-shirt covered in white cat hair from the pitstop we made on the side of the road, and asked, “Is that Glitter? Did you kidnap Uncle G’s cat?”

“Yeah, Gordo. I stole my dad’s cat because I just couldn’t resist spending time with her.”

He smirked and stepped aside, holding the door open. “You just gonna stand there, or you coming in?”

I wasn’t prepared to be invited inside, by him of all people. “Am I welcome?”

He shrugged and began to shut the door in my face, but I braced it with my hand and foot. “Okay, okay, let me in.”

I followed him inside and stopped in the living room. It had been at least two years since the last time I stepped foot in this house. I tried to avoid it at all costs. Not the house, but Gordy.

“Should I ask why you have the cat?”

“Because Kelley and my dad are spending time at the cabin. They asked me to babysit.”

Gordy crossed his arms over his chest. The way he stared at me felt like a challenge. “And what, you thought you’d come here and dump her off on us?”

“No. I just... I need help, is all.”

“Hmm,” he hummed, scratching his goatee. “This reminds me of a version of an old joke. How many grown men does it take to babysit a kitten?”

“Okay, smartass. You can laugh all you want at me. But you have no idea what this entails.” I walked back to the front door and opened it, pointing at my truck. “Do you see all that?” Gordy peered over my shoulder at the pile of stuff in the bed of my truck. “That’s all for her. I have all these lists and clothes and vitamins, and I think there’s perfume or something. He definitely gave me a stroller and some sort of harness or leash. I don’t fucking know, Gourd. What am I supposed to do with all this shit?”

When I glanced back at him, I noticed Aries had joined us and was looking out the door at my truck in confusion.

Join the club.

Gordy laughed and shut the door. “What did you expect? He treats that cat better than royalty.”

Aries stepped forward and popped a kiss on my cheek as he relieved me of the cat carrier.

“You just come with me, princess, while your brother and your cousin figure it all out.”

“No, Aries! No!” I pointed at him. “Don’t you start with that nonsense. She isn’t my sister. She’s a cat, for crying out loud! She’s not human.”

“Give me the lists,” Gordy requested, holding out his hand.

I dug into my back pocket, pulled out the folded wad of paper, and handed it to him. He scanned them, smiling, and handed one to Aries. “Here, you take the one with the clothes.”

“Clothes?” His dark blond brows slanted down in a confused frown.

“Yup. Shannon can be in charge of the exercise list. And I’ll deal with the nutrition.”

“Exercise and nutrition?” Aries repeated. “Come with me, little one. We’ll get you situated in no time.”

He headed for the kitchen, and we followed. Aries retrieved two small bowls from the cabinet and filled one with water from the sink. He opened the pantry and grabbed a can of tuna.

“I think the list says she can only have distilled water.”

Aries looked at me doubtfully. He spoke in what I assumed was his kitty-cat singsong voice. “She’s gonna drink good old-fashioned tap water like normal cats do. The added aluminum and chlorine adds a little extra flavor.”

Gordy laughed, and I wanted to because I agreed with him, but if this ever got back to Kelley, he would skin my ass alive. Aries popped the tab on the can of tuna and dumped it into the bowl. Then, he unzipped the mesh window and gently lifted Glitter out of the bag. He placed her in front of the food bowls, rubbing the soft hair between her ears, right next to the ridiculous pink bowl.

“Try it. It’s good. Your cousin Gordy doesn’t buy that generic garbage. Oh no. Nothing but the best for us. Large flake, wild-caught, Albacore tuna. That’s the real deal there, Glitter.”

She poked her nose at it, taking a tentative lick with her tiny pink tongue, and then dove in, daintily but hastily consuming the entire bowl.

“Imagine that.” Aries laughed. “A cat who likes tuna. Go figure.” He turned to me. “What else can I help you simplify?”

“You’re a cat whisperer,” I said reverently.

“Go get ready for work and leave her with me. I’ll take her to the shop with me today. She won’t be in the way.”

“Really?”

“Yes, but I expect you to come back here tonight after work and get her.”

“Definitely! Thank you so much.” I forgot to consider Gordy before rushing over to kiss him. I placed my hands on either side of Aries’s face and planted my lips on his, overcome with gratitude. “When Gordy closes the kitchen, I’ll knock off early and come back with him.”

I stood and turned to him. His expression was thunderous, and I realized he did not like witnessing that kiss. “I might as well drive you. Since we’re going in together and coming back together.”

He hesitated before crossing his arms over his chest. “Whatever,” he grumbled.

I DIDN’T HAVE time to run back home and change before work, so I borrowed a lint roller to clean my shirt. Gordy was silent beside me in the truck. The tension was driving me insane.

“Can you not think of one thing to say to me?”

“Got nothing to say.” He stared out the window.

“Jesus, Gourd. We used to be inseparable. Now we can’t even spend ten minutes with each other.” When I got no reaction from him, I sighed heavily. “I’m not gonna apologize for kissing Aries in front of you. But it wasn’t my intention to hurt you. I would never want that.”

“And I’m not gonna apologize for having kissed him yesterday.”

It hit me like a punch to the gut. That explained his chipper attitude yesterday. “So we’re sharing him now?”

“He said he needed time to figure things out.”

I ran my fingers through my hair. “Yeah, that’s what he told me, too.” After a minute I added, “What if he chooses me? Is that gonna make you hate me even more?”

He scoffed. “Is that even possible?”

I swallowed hard and admitted, “I would be happy for you, if he chose you.”

Gordy glanced at me, something almost resembling a smile stretching his lips just slightly. “He probably won’t choose either of us. We’re a fucking mess together. Who would want that drama?”

Say it. Say what you’re thinking. He deserves to hear it.

“I think your drama is worth putting up with.”

His lips spread into a full smile, not a huge one, but it was enough for me.

HOURS LATER, Gordy had the kitchen closed and cleaned, and we were climbing back into my truck. I’d left the running of the Lounge in Carlisle’s capable hands. Neither of us had much to say until we got back to his house.

I parked in the driveway, and just as I turned the ignition off, Gordy blurted, “My mom wants us to stain her new fence we put in a few months back. Maybe you and I could go knock it out sometime next week or the week after.”

I was stunned. “I mean, yeah. We could do that.”

When was the last time he asked me to help him with anything? I knew better than to get ahead of myself, but a seed of hope bloomed in my chest. If he could try, so could I. Just maybe, he and I could be friends again, like we used to be.

It will never be like it used to.

We pushed through the front door and saw Aries sitting on the couch, cuddling Glitter. A pink cotton onesie decorated with fishbones was lying on the coffee table.

“I laid out her pajamas for you. I refuse to put them on her, but if one of you wants to do it, have at it. Be prepared, she scratches.”

Gordy laughed and popped a kiss on Aries’ head as he walked by the couch. “I’m going upstairs to shower and change.”

They made a cozy little picture, with their routine, sharing their home together. I felt slightly displaced and a little lonely. “I guess I’ll get her stuff together and head out.”

Gordy paused at the bottom of the stairs. He stared at me for a minute without saying anything, and I stared back. “You might as well stay the night. You’ll just be back in the morning anyway, banging on my door too early asking for help.”

“I, um... I—”

I rubbed the back of my neck, unsure what I was supposed to say. Yes, I wanted to stay because it was easiest. And because he was trying, and I wanted to encourage that. Also, I wanted to be near Aries. But the idea of sleeping on the couch alone while they went upstairs to their cozy bedrooms chafed my ass. I was a grown man, and yet I felt awkward sharing a bed with the man I was sleeping with just because my cousin had a crush on him.

“Whatever. You can just go back home then. Take your sister with you.”

“No, I’ll stay. Thank you for the invitation.” I sat down next to Aries and reached for the cat. “I can’t thank you enough for watching her tonight. You’re someone I can count on, and that means everything to me.”

It surprised me that he leaned closer and brushed his lips against mine. I wasn't expecting him to kiss me with Gordy so close by. I slid my tongue into his mouth and tasted him. In seconds, I was placing the cat on the floor and taking him in my arms, leaning him gently down onto the throw pillow. He could ramp up my desire from zero to sixty in a quarter of a second. That's what he did to me.

"Slow down, Romeo," he said, chuckling. "It's sort of taboo to have sex in front of your siblings," he teased, looking meaningfully at the cat.

That damn cat owed me a hell of a lot at this point.

I cooled things down between us, and it wasn't long before Gordy returned, wearing nothing but black sweatpants. I didn't know if he often went shirtless around the house or if he were just posturing for my benefit, but it worked because Aries couldn't take his eyes off him.

"I left a clean pair of clothes in the guest bathroom, in case you wanted to shower and change."

I didn't know how I felt about wearing his clothes. It was probably going to fuck with my head all night long, but I thanked him because it was more than I expected from him. Way more.

Aries patted the couch right beside him. "Saved you a seat."

Gordy went right over to him, like a trained puppy. Didn't he realize how awkward this felt, the three of us sitting so close together? Was there a reason we couldn't all spread the fuck out? I couldn't move because I was trapped between Aries and the end of the couch. I figured Gordy wasn't going to move either, and leave me alone with Aries while he sat at the other end. So we stayed squished together, with Aries being the meat in the Calhoun/Carrick sandwich, which I'm sure he loved.

Aries reached for my hand and laid it on his bare thigh. Then he reached for Gordy's and did the same to his other leg. He had showered and changed before we even came home. He

looked cute as fuck in his loose black boxers with splashes of rainbow colored ink all over and a black T-shirt with his shop's logo on the front.

“Gordy, show Shannon the sun I colored in.”

I glanced across Aries at Gordy. “You got something new?”

“Nah, just colored in the sun in my maze.” He leaned over and bared his neck.

“Nice. Looks good. Really stands out now.” I wasn't sure what the maze represented for him and wished I had the guts to ask. Knowing my cousin, it was something meaningful.

“Shannon got new ink, too,” Aries said, looking smug.

I froze like a deer caught in headlights. Why would he mention that? He knew it had to do with Gordy, even though I hadn't confirmed it.

“Let me see,” Gordy said conversationally.

Reluctantly, I peeled off my shirt and pointed to the spot above my heart, now covered with a heart filled in with a culinary aesthetic. The heart was pierced by a chef's knife, similar to the fancy set I bought for Gordy. He leaned closer to peer at the intricate detail inside the heart, his eyes narrowing angrily. I glared at Aries, asking him why with my eyes.

“That's...wow. Nice work, Aries.” He pushed himself up to his feet.

“Where are you going?” Aries asked.

“Thirsty,” he grunted.

“Why would you have me show him that?” I whispered.

“Go talk to him.”

“What? No.”

“Go. Talk. To. Him.”

Fuck me. Reluctantly, I trailed after Gordy. In the kitchen, he grabbed a glass from the cabinet, banging it closed harshly, and reached in the fridge to grab a carton of juice. I had no

idea what to say, so I just stood there, awkward and silent. He ignored me, pouring the juice in a glass before returning the carton to the fridge. He stood over the sink, looking out through the window at the dark backyard as he sipped the juice.

“Gourd. I—”

“Save it. I don’t fucking care.”

But he did. I felt it. Anger rolling off him in waves.

Just hours ago, I felt as if we might have the possibility of a fresh start. I couldn’t tell him the tattoo represented a resolution, to burn the bridge between us, and close the door forever.

“You want something to eat?” His voice sounded gruff, deeper than usual. Full of pent-up emotion.

“I guess. If you’re making something for yourself.”

“Not really. I just don’t know what to do with myself right now. Feel like I need something to focus on.”

He drained his glass and rinsed it out with water before dropping it in the dishwasher.

“Have I ever told you how much I love your food?” He remained still, staring out the window into the darkness. I took a step closer. “You’re so talented. I’ve always been so proud of you, of everything you’ve accomplished, even though I have no right to be.” I took another step closer, cautiously, as if I were approaching a frightened animal. “My bar wouldn’t be the success that it is without your food.”

“I know,” he huffed.

I took another step and closed the distance between us, bracing my arms on the counter on either side of him, caging him in. His entire body stiffened.

“You’ve never once, in eighteen years, made something just for me.” My voice was soft, a whisper in his ear.

“Back up.”

It was a command, issued with the intent to follow through with a consequence if I didn't obey. I took the warning and backed off. Leaving him alone in the kitchen, I rejoined Aries on the couch. About five minutes later, Gordy joined us. He held out a plate to me with a sandwich on it. Peanut butter and jelly, a favorite of mine years ago.

"I cut the crust off, like you prefer it."

Stunned, I accepted the plate. He reclaimed his seat next to Aries. Nobody said another word. We watched a documentary about nineties rock bands, and I ate the entire sandwich. It wasn't the fine cuisine he was known for making, but it tasted delicious.

Anything made by his hands just for me would taste like fine cuisine.

The show ended, and I got up to dump my plate in the sink. "I think I'll take that shower now and turn in. You wouldn't happen to have an extra pillow and blanket, would you?"

Gordy and Aries both stood, Gordy stretching his arms over his head. I couldn't help but admire his body. It had changed so much over the years. One thing that hadn't changed was that he'd *always* been beautiful.

He eyed the couch, and then me. "You know, there's an extra bed upstairs. It was Carlisle's room, so you know it's clean. You don't have to sleep on the damn couch."

He was just full of surprises tonight. "Thanks. I'll try to keep Glitter with me so she doesn't wake you."

"It's no bother. I'll keep my door open in case she wants to come in and cuddle with me." Aries popped a kiss to my lips, more sweet than sexy, and headed upstairs.

Lucky cat. That was another strike against her.

ARIES

I WOKE up with the sun in my eyes and a smile on my face. That was an expression my mother used when she would wake me for school. It was fitting for how I felt this morning. I stretched my legs out straight and long, flexing my toes, careful not to wake the sleeping kitten beside me. She was warm and soft and purred like a motor.

Down below in the kitchen, I could hear the faint rustling of pots and pans. Gordy was awake, and he was making me breakfast. And in the room down the hall from mine, Shannon was most likely asleep, and most likely naked.

It was going to be a great day!

I rolled out of bed and went down the hall to brush my teeth and wash my face. When I came back to my bedroom, Glitter was wide awake, licking her paws. I scooped her up, shoved my feet into my slippers, and headed down the hall. A quick peek into Shannon's room as I passed by confirmed he was sleeping, his naked torso visible as it peaked from the covers bunched around his waist.

Mmm, delicious.

What I wouldn't give to crawl beneath the covers with him and keep him warm. But not like this, with Gordy downstairs. I felt so torn between the two cousins. They each appealed to me in different ways, but both equally necessary.

If only they were into sharing.

Glitter and I breezed into the kitchen, going straight up to Gordy, who was standing at the stove, scrambling eggs in a

pan.

I placed a kiss on his scruffy cheek. “Good morning. How’d you sleep?”

“Fitfully.”

He laid the spatula down and turned, sliding his arms around my waist. I loved the way his large hand spanned my entire hip. He took his time kissing me, licking at my lips, before sliding his tongue inside my mouth, creating a warm glow in my belly.

It was way too early to be this turned on. “With kisses like that, I won’t be hungry for your food.”

He chuckled. “Are you going to hold that cat all morning? You look like a little old lady, shuffling around in your slippers with your fur baby tucked under your arm.”

I laughed with him and set the cat down on the floor. “I didn’t want her to have to keep up with me on the stairs. She’s so tiny.”

Gordy grabbed two bowls from the counter and set them on the floor before her. “Here you go, little girl. I made your food according to your daddy’s instructions, just how you supposedly like it.”

“It looks like plain dry kibble. What did you do special to it?”

He shot me a wry look. “Soaked it in a blend of chicken broth and liquid vitamins. According to his list, Kelley claims it makes it soft enough for her tiny teeth. It kind of makes sense to me, even though it’s high maintenance,” he said, shrugging his broad shoulders.

My God, if I had ovaries, they would be on fire right now for this man.

I kneeled down to rub between her ears. “You have the best big cousin, don’t you? Now, if we can just find your big brother, we’ll be all set.”

“You have got to stop referring to her as my sister,” Shannon said from the doorway. His big body filled out the

entire frame.

His voice was gravelly and deep from sleep. He never looked or sounded sexier. Like Gordy, he was dressed in nothing but black sweatpants. They looked like twin Gods. Miles of tanned and tattooed flesh on display for my pleasure.

“Morning, Shannon,” I purred, coming to my feet.

He spared a lightning quick glance at Gordy before sliding his hands around my back and pulling me in close for a kiss. Shannon brushed his lips over mine, softly, teasing my lips apart. He slid his tongue inside my mouth, tangling it with my own. His hands roamed down my back, over my ass, squeezing a handful in his palm. His drugging kiss made my dick hard, and I pulled away to adjust myself, sliding my hand inside my pants and pushing everything to the left.

I hated that the kiss most likely made Gordy jealous, but the idea of having an audience turned me on. If only he wanted the show, welcomed it—that would do it for me.

To even the score between them, I said, “Wow, two incredibly sexy good morning kisses. What a way to start my day.”

“Breakfast is ready, sit.” Gordy plated the food—veggie omelets, English muffins with homemade strawberry preserves, and turkey bacon.

He brought two plates to the table. “You, too,” he said to Shannon. “Sit.”

I watched Shannon’s eyes widen slightly. He wasn’t expecting Gordy to make him breakfast. I was so proud of Gordy’s efforts. He was really trying. I wanted nothing more than to mend the rift between them and bring them closer together. To restore the decades past friendship I was told they had once shared. And after spending the weekend in close proximity to the two of them, watching how they interacted with each other, I was more convinced than ever the feud between them was quite personal, and possibly romantic. At one time, I thought they might have had feelings for each other and possibly still did.

What a fucked up triangle we make.

When we were all seated at the little wooden table, I asked out of pure curiosity, “So what is this cabin I keep hearing about? Carlisle and Rory went a couple weeks ago, and now Graham and Kelley are there.”

Shannon looked to Gordy before he answered, “My Pops owns a little cabin on Rook Mountain. It’s not much, but it’s some of the prettiest country you’ll see in this state. It borders the North and South Carolina state line. The whole family is welcome to use it anytime. I go up there a lot with Rory to fish. We like to ride our bikes through the winding mountains.”

“Oh, I like the sound of that. Next time you go, maybe I can tag along. I love to fish. I also like sitting behind you on your bike.”

We shared a heated look while Gordy was focused on his omelet, purposely avoiding looking at us. I brushed Gordy’s foot with mine under the table, not wanting him to feel left out.

Without looking up, Gordy said, “I can take you anytime you want. There’s this little pond I swim in that’s fed by a natural spring. You’d love it.”

“Is it a clothing optional pond?”

He finally raised his eyes to mine and smiled wickedly. “No clothing is a requirement.”

“I’m never swimming in that pond again,” Shannon grumbled.

I almost choked on my English muffin when I laughed. “Speaking of getting away, I have something I’d like to bring up to both of you. Midway through every summer, the farm has a summer harvest, where they pick all the vegetables and fruits from the garden and orchard and prep them for winter. Some of it gets dried, some of it is canned or pickled, and then some of it is prepared fresh for the summer harvest festival. They’ll be strawberry shortcake, biscuits with homemade preserves, salad with strawberry vinaigrette, cucumber tomato

salad, mango chutney over grilled chicken breast, zucchini bread. They go all out with the fresh foods. Dancing and singing, too, accompanied by all the different instruments they play. It goes late into the night, and I usually stay in the guest cabin. I'd really like both of you to come with me and meet my family. Not just my parents, but my whole extended family on the farm."

Neither of them spoke. They just looked at each other, and then at me, and then back at each other and back to me again. I was becoming anxious.

Finally, Shannon said, "I'm in. I'd love to go."

We both looked to Gordy. "Count me in," he agreed with his signature grunt.

I breathed a sigh of relief and smiled brightly. "Awesome! We can do it Monday on your day off and come back Tuesday morning, so you have plenty of time to rest up before work."

"Wait, we're all sleeping together in one cabin?" Gordy looked unsure.

Shannon frowned.

"How about you two stay in the guest cottage, and I'll sleep in my parents' cabin?"

"I like that idea even less," Shannon complained.

I thought it sounded brilliant. It would force the two of them to spend time alone together, and possibly, hopefully, fix their differences.

"If we're gonna be gone Monday, we should probably head over to Ma's today and take care of that fence before she complains to my Pops that we're neglecting it."

Gordy nodded.

"Good. After breakfast, I'll drive us over there, and then we can head into work together. I'll drop you back here after we close tonight."

Gordy cleared his throat. "I guess it would be alright if you stayed over again."

He mumbled the words so low, I almost wasn't sure he said them. But the stunned look on Shannon's face confirmed it. A rush of giddiness came over me. They were each trying so hard, making progress that I knew cost them a lot.

We finished breakfast, and I offered to help Gordy clean up while Shannon went to take a shower and pack a day bag for Princess Glitter.

I carried the dirty dishes to the sink, where Gordy was rinsing them clean before stacking them in the dishwasher.

"Can I ask you a question?"

I paused, giving him my full attention. "Of course."

"Last night, why did you show me his tattoo? You had to know it had something to do with me. So why?"

No wonder he didn't sleep well last night. Gordy internalized everything. Turned a problem over in his mind until there was nothing left of it.

"I did know it had something to do with you. Although, I have no idea what it means to Shannon. I guess I just wanted you to know that, even though it seems as if there's nothing left of the friendship you once had with him, you're very important to him. He still thinks about you. If I hadn't interfered, you might not have ever known that." I reached past him to put the last plate in the sink. "I needed you to know."

"Why?"

"Because you're both so important to me. I don't want to see either one of you hurt, especially not by the other. You're family. And once, you were friends. Nothing would make me happier than to see that restored."

He laid his sponge down and wiped his hands on his pants. "You probably have the best heart of anyone I know."

Tenderly, he cupped my chin, the pad of his big rough thumb caressing my jaw. Gordy brushed his lips over mine, softly, a sweet connection of our mouths. No tongues, no swapping saliva, just him taking a moment to show me his

gratitude and appreciation. The gesture went straight to my heart and melted it into a puddle that sloshed around inside of my chest the rest of the morning.

SHANNON

DAMN, it was hot out. The heat from the sun was evaporating all the fluids in my body, and I felt as parched and dehydrated as a raisin. I pulled my T-shirt, soaked with sweat, over my head and sat on the steps of the back porch. Gordy pushed through the screen door carrying two frosty glasses of sweet tea, coated with condensation. My mouth watered for a taste. He handed one to me and I accepted it gratefully.

I raised the glass to my lips and downed half of it at once, and when I glanced over at Gordy, I caught his eyes lingering on my body. That old familiar thrill tightened my gut. It was satisfaction, desire, and nerves, all twisted together into a potent cocktail with more proof than any alcohol I served in my bar. Having his attention focused on me felt forbidden—taboo.

I wasn't supposed to want him, but that had never stopped me before.

“Fence looks good. Thanks for helping me knock it out.”

“Of course. Are we staying for lunch or stopping off somewhere?”

“Might as well stay. Go take a shower while I make some sandwiches. Then I'll jump in the shower and we'll get going.”

Knowing we would end up sweaty and filthy, we each brought a change of clothes for work.

“Sounds good.” I finished off my tea and headed inside.

In the bathroom, I stripped down and turned the water on lukewarm. I felt too overheated to take a hot shower. Just before I stepped under the spray, my phone chimed.

Aries: Are you both still alive? Is the fence still standing?

Shannon: Ha! Hilarious. We're fine. Finished and about to shower and eat.

Aries: Excited you guys are coming with me to the farm!

Shannon: You gonna introduce me as your boyfriend?

Aries: No strings, remember? 😊

YEAH, I remembered. And I was starting to regret ever saying it. The more time I spent with him, the less I wanted to keep it casual. Especially with my cousin in the picture. I had so much to lose.

Shannon: About that...maybe we should renegotiate.

I SHOWERED QUICKLY and changed into clean clothes—Dark wash jeans and a Limericks Lounge T-shirt.

When I walked into the kitchen, I paused in shock. Gordy was bent over with his head in the fridge, shoving a slice of lemon meringue pie into his mouth using his bare hands. I said nothing as I watched until he started to work on the second piece.

Absolutely fucking not!

I yanked the refrigerator door from his grasp, swinging it wide open, and grabbed the pie tin from his hands.

“Fuck!” he mumbled around a mouthful of pie.

I tugged him over to the sink and held his sticky fingers under the faucet, washing them clean before I grabbed the kitchen towel and dried his hands.

“Gour—” I caught myself before I said it. In this dark moment, with him battling his issues with food, calling him Gourd or Gordo didn’t sound cute or funny. “Graham,” I said softly. His given name felt strange on my lips. I could only recall having used it maybe three times in our lives. “Don’t do this. I don’t know what’s triggering you, but this isn’t the way to deal with it.”

He finished chewing and swallowing the last bite in his mouth. Tears pooled in his deep-green eyes, but he refused to let them fall down his cheeks. They reminded me of glittering emeralds—so beautiful and precious. Taking me completely by surprise, he hugged me tightly, hiding his face in the crook of my neck. It was unexpected and sudden, and so unlike him. Which was a clear indication of how unsettled he felt.

“Talk to me.” My arms came around him, rubbing soothingly up and down his spine. His T-shirt was cold and damp with sweat, and I peeled it up so I could feel his warm skin beneath.

He stayed silent in my arms, soaking up the comfort I offered him. All of my senses sharpened to a razor’s edge. He needed this, needed something from me that only I could give him. It had been so fucking long—too long—since he’d asked for it. It was the same bond we’d always shared, thicker than blood. Time and strife had not thinned it.

In comparison, what I had with Aries was easy breezy. He didn’t need anything from me. We simply enjoyed each other, complemented one another. With Gordy, nothing was simple. Never had been. The truth was, I needed him to rely on me. It made me feel stronger, more significant. And he was the only person I had ever felt I could trust with my darkest memories. With my heart.

Until now.

Until Aries.

But Aries wasn't Graham Carrick Junior. He never would be. Just as Gordy could never make me feel what Aries could. I was something different for each of them. It was what they called forth in me, what they brought to the surface of my heart. I was starting to realize that together, they made me feel like a complete man.

Gordy sniffled, and I think he wiped his nose on my shirt. *Fuck it. He needs this. He needs me.*

"Let's pretend you didn't see that."

"That's not gonna work, and you know it."

He raised his head and straightened, and I let go of him, but he didn't move back.

"I don't want to admit I can't handle it. I'm not gonna stop fighting for him. He's the best thing that's happened to me in...a long time."

"If it's upsetting you this much, then we need to talk about it. Something has to change."

"I was doing so good, for so long now, and then I opened the fridge and saw that pie. I know it makes no sense to you, but my head tells me if I just stuff myself with the pie, there's no room for any of the bad feelings in there."

"I get it. I remember what you told me about how food makes you feel. About the bullshit that voice tells you. It doesn't mean anything if you don't let it. It's just a piece of pie. Don't let it undo all the good work you've done. Don't give it any value."

He moved away to pour himself a glass of water and didn't speak again until after he chugged the entire thing.

"Everything going on lately with him, and you, especially you, is bringing back a lot of bad feelings. Bad memories I hid down deep. I feel insecure again... stressed out. I guess I'm not dealing with it very well. I know I can do better."

“You can. I know you can. If you want, I can take you to the gym tomorrow before work. Or maybe—maybe you just need some space from me.”

“No!” He swallowed, frowning. “I don’t know. Don’t know what I need. I’ll figure it out.”

“I trust that you will. Just don’t keep it to yourself. You know, if you need something—from me.”

God, I hoped like hell he did.

ON FRIDAY, I packed up all of Glitter’s paraphernalia and dumped it in the bed of my truck. I spritzed her with the lavender perfume, dressed her in a pink leotard with a sparkly tutu attached, and tried like hell to tie the ridiculously thin satin ribbons on her little ballet slippers. They were just too tiny, and my fingers were too big. After wasting twenty minutes of my life trying to attach the pink bow on her head, I decided to forgo it. I couldn’t for the life of me figure it out. Gordy packed up her food, treats, and vitamins, and Aries cuddled her while saying goodbye.

“I would have never survived this week without both of you. You saved me.”

“More than likely, we saved Glitter,” Aries teased.

I took the cat from him and placed her in the carrier. “I’ll see you at work later,” I said to Gordy. The look we shared lingered, heavy with unspoken words. I turned to Aries and kissed him quickly on the lips. “Call me later.”

As I drove to my dad’s house, I felt like the surreal bubble I’d been existing in for the past three days had finally burst. I wasn’t even a mile down the road and I already missed it. *Missed them.* Without the Glitter debacle, and Aries and Gordy agreeing to help me, I might not have ever felt like I had a chance to repair the damage between me and Gordy. Now, at least I felt hopeful. There was a chance, however slim. It was a long-shot, but I wanted it, desperately.

I brought Glitter to the door, figuring I would go back for the rest of it later. Kelley answered with his arms open wide.

“My precious little girl, come to Daddy! I missed you so much, baby,” he squealed, hurrying to unzip the carrier. He held the kitten aloft, and she licked his face like it was made of Albacore tuna.

“I can’t thank you enough for taking such good care of her. The next time I ask you to babysit for me, maybe I won’t feel so torn about it, knowing she was in such capable hands.”

The next time?! Jesus, no. Please.

He whisked her away to do God knew what with her, and my Pops appeared. He walked me out to my truck to help me with the load.

“I can’t tell you how much it meant to us that we didn’t have to worry about her. Not that he didn’t,” he joked.

“Pops, it’s a little much, isn’t it? All this shit? The lists and the routines. Don’t get me wrong, I was happy to help, but you have to admit it’s a lot. She’s just a cat.”

He sighed heavily. “Look, obviously to you and me, it seems absurd. Over the top. But that’s who Kelley is, it’s why I love him. He’s totally over-the-top.”

He grabbed the cat tree and scratching post from the back of my truck. “The thing is, you know what it feels like not to have a family. And so does Kelley. Sure, he has us now, but it’s not the same as when I took you in. You had a real connection with Gina.”

He was referring to Gordy’s mom, his sister. “And Gordy was like a brother to you. Kelley doesn’t have anyone like that. Glitter is all he has. That cat means everything to him, and I mean *everything*. It’s the only child he’s ever going to have. With a heart as huge as his, all that endless love he has to give, and no one to give it to but me, she’s his outlet. He showers her with affection, and I love that about him. Love to watch them together. Yes, I feel a little silly walking through the mall pushing a cat in the stroller. My neighbors think I’m fucking nuts walking a cat wearing a dress on a leash. But it’s

a small thing to accept to have his love. So no more teasing him about the damn cat.”

“Fuck, Pops. When you put it like that, I feel bad now. I’m sorry I didn’t realize what it meant to him.”

“Thank you.” As soon as he dropped Glitter’s stuff by the front door, he turned to give me a hug, squeezing me roughly. “I love you, boy.”

“Love you, too, Pops.”

“And I promise you’ll always be my favorite child. I’ll never let that little rat replace you in my heart.”

He pulled back and I saw the wicked gleam in his twinkling eyes.

“Better not. I give better gifts than her on Father’s Day.”

GORDY

IT WAS GOING to be a long day. *Very* long. Like, *endless*.

I was sitting in the passenger seat of Shannon's truck, with Aries in the backseat. Except, he couldn't stay there. He seemed to have ants in his pants. He kept leaning over the console, poking his head in between the front seats.

"Remember, guys. No arguing in front of my family. We're all just friends having a nice day." He sat back and then popped forward again a moment later. "Be nice to everyone I introduce you to. They all had a hand in raising me and feel like I'm their kid." Again, he sat back, and again, leaned forward a minute later. "Mary Ellen is going to pack up enough food to feed a Third World country and insist you take it home with you. Do not decline. It's considered rude." He did it again, the whole back-and-forth thing, which was driving my anxiety through the roof. "I don't think the air conditioner in the guest cabin has been fixed yet. It's probably gonna be hot in there. But you can open the windows for a cross-breeze." Aries's gaze volleyed between me and Shannon. "I just don't—"

"For the love of God, sit back and relax," Shannon barked. Aries flopped back against the seat with a pout. My shoulders shook with silent laughter. It wasn't only me he was getting to. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you. It's gonna be fine. We're all gonna have a nice day. Just let me concentrate on driving so we can get there in one piece."

He turned on the radio and shuffled through the stations until he found an alternative rock song we both knew well. I

closed my eyes and leaned back against the headrest, beginning to relax.

He popped forward again. “Gods, no. What is this noise?”

With great patience, Shannon asked, “What do you want to listen to?”

“Country,” Aries and I both said at the same time.

“Fuck,” Shannon cursed. “Just don’t sing, okay?”

I switched the radio to a country station, and it was only a matter of minutes before Aries began to hum quietly. When the next song came on, it was one he knew well and liked. He started to sing. And then I joined in the chorus, crooning about beer, women, and trucks. And Shannon could be heard groaning loudly over us.

My mood was definitely starting to improve.

It took forty-five minutes for us to reach the farm on the outskirts of the county. I’d driven down this rural highway several times but never noticed the turn-off for the farm before. The sign welcoming us to Harmony Grove wasn’t very large. We traveled down a dirt road with more potholes than the New Jersey Turnpike before reaching a clearing, where several vehicles were parked in an orderly row.

I wasn’t sure what to expect, but it wasn’t what I was seeing. Harmony Grove was nice. The cabins resembled tiny little homes. Windows were decorated with flower boxes. Narrow front porches held rocking chairs. There was a gazebo in the center of the farm filled with wooden benches, like a gathering place. Next to that was a large fire pit built into the ground and surrounded by colorful Adirondack chairs. Far behind the cabins, under the shade of a stand of pine trees, was a pen with livestock. I counted four goats, three sheep, and dozens of chickens. Behind it all, a large garden was spread out into sections, with a healthy orchard as the backdrop. I spied a teenage girl on a horse and two women sitting at a picnic table under a large oak tree. They appeared to be crocheting something. A large blanket maybe? Several feet

away, there was a water spigot in the ground and two little boys were filling water balloons in a bucket.

Everywhere I looked, they were members of the community, working, playing, gathering. It was lively and welcoming. Aries waved to several people we passed on the way to his parents' cabin. We approached the tiny gray home, and he knocked on the front door. A woman answered, and I realized Aries was his mother's spitting image. They had the same sandy-colored hair, matching hazelnut eyes, and identical heart-shaped faces.

"Sweetheart, you're home! I've missed you." She enveloped him in a warm hug. "Are these your friends you were telling me about?"

Shannon and I glanced at each other. What had he told her about us? He stepped forward first and offered his hand, but she pulled him into a hug as welcoming as the one she gave her son.

"Call me Evelyn. Brian is around here somewhere," she explained, searching the perimeter of the grove. "He's getting ready for the harvest. Him and Walter have been working so hard since dawn."

"Hi, I'm Gordy. If you point us in the right direction, we'd love to help out."

"Oh, sweetheart, I can already tell they're good boys," she cooed. Shannon and I shared a smile at being referred to as good boys, like we were twelve or something.

Evelyn put us to work immediately in the garden, pulling potatoes, snapping pea pods and cucumbers from the vine, picking tomatoes and strawberries. It was still early in the day, the sun not quite directly overhead yet, which was the perfect time to do hard labor. Around noon, we began to prepare the food. I shelled peas, while Shannon cleaned the stalks off cobs of corn. Aries washed all the berries and peeled potatoes. We worked outside under the gazebo alongside other members of the community. The work was shared evenly by everyone. Apparently, there was no such thing here as a woman's job or

a man's. Everyone pitched in equally. If you wanted to eat, you worked for your meal.

Around three o'clock, everyone came together to eat. They dragged picnic tables from around their cottages to the center of the farm, around the gazebo, and set the tables with every kind of food imaginable. Aries was right, it was a veritable feast. All of the food was homemade and fresh, and most of it looked rather healthy, but I needed to pace myself. It was too easy for me to eat with my eyes instead of my stomach. I tended to take portions larger than I needed. A buffet was a nightmare for a guy like me. I did better with controlled portions. I felt Shannon's eyes on me from across the table. He was concerned for me. I hadn't even needed to mention it. He just knew. I didn't worry about the food after that. Shannon had my back. That was how it used to be between us, back when we were friends. We shared our burdens, our worries and our nightmares, our greatest fears and our triumphs. Would I ever be able to share those things with him again? The idea seemed surreal, almost too good to be true. I was jaded enough to know better than to believe anything that sounded too good to be true.

Dinner lasted until sundown. Shannon was recruited to help Brian and Walter collect and chop wood for the bonfire while Aries and I took advantage of the moment we had to ourselves.

“Would you like to go for a walk?”

“Lead the way,” I said.

We wound our way through the orchard, and Aries showed me a trail beyond which led to a small pond.

“This is pretty,” I remarked.

“Yeah, it's a favorite of the residents.”

I raised my brows. “Does that mean they—”

He nodded, laughing. “Bathing naked in a group...and other stuff.”

I'm never getting in that pond.

“I see,” I said, grinning along with him. “I bet you had some wild adventures growing up here. Especially in your teenage years. Be honest, how often did you use this pond?”

He couldn’t stop laughing. “Plenty.”

I sat down on a large rock and tugged Aries down into my lap. My arms came around his waist, squeezing his back to my chest. The physical connection, feeling the weight and warmth of his body against mine after being starved for touch for so long, was the sweetest aphrodisiac.

I rested my chin on his shoulder. “Would you be interested in going out on a date with me? Like, a real date like Shannon takes you on?”

“I wondered when you would ask me. Of course I want to go out with you.”

I exhaled in a loud rush because apparently, I’d been holding my breath. “Let’s do it one day this week. I don’t want to wait.” I’d waited thirty-four years already. This date with Aries would be my first.

It was so peaceful here. Nothing but the sound of birds singing, and wind rustling the leaves on the trees. Dappled sunlight filtered through the flora canopy.

“Harmony Grove is a beautiful place. I’m glad you brought me here.”

“Me too,” he sighed.

“Your parents are great.”

“They really like you and Shannon.” He squirmed on my lap, turning sideways so he could tease my lips with his. “But not as much as I do.”

His heated look gave me ideas about the kind of things I’d like to do to him if we weren’t surrounded by a farm full of his family. For starters, I was beginning to rethink my vow of never swimming in that pond.

BY THE TIME darkness descended over the grove, the food had been cleared away, replaced by musical instruments, sparklers, and a roaring fire. Shannon, Aries, and I shared a picnic table. I wanted him back on my lap, sitting between my legs like we had by the pond, but that wasn't an option with Shannon there. I was positive Shannon wanted the same thing for himself. Our truce had lasted all day long. We shared Aries's attention instead of vying for it. Shannon hadn't done anything to trigger my insecurities, and as a result, I was able to relax and feel connected with the community around me.

Aries surprised us by playing the harmonica. He was really good. Walter played the guitar, and Brian, Aries's dad, shook a tambourine to the beat of the song. The music sounded very bluesy and folksy, and I could see where Aries had grown his love of country music from.

"You were right," Shannon confirmed. "Even with the light from the fire, you can see all the stars out here. That one right there," he pointed to the brightest star, "that's where you said Polaris was. Right?"

"Yup. At the tip of the handle of the Little Dipper. When the party winds down, I'll show you my favorite spot."

HIS FAVORITE SPOT turned out to be a wagon stocked with hay bales behind the livestock pens. We laid down on the hay with Aries between us. He held onto Shannon's right hand, and my left hand, only letting go to point out the occasional constellation. Aries had extensive knowledge of the stars and planets, and I was captivated, falling under his spell, as I listened to his honey-smooth voice explain it to us.

I didn't want this night to end. Odd, seeing as how I didn't really have him all to myself. I also hadn't felt like a third wheel at any point. Being together felt balanced and harmonious. When this trip was over, I hoped Shannon and I could continue to work on our differences. I didn't want to go home and feel like the other shoe had dropped.

Around midnight, Aries called it a night and turned in. I followed Shannon to the guest cabin.

“Of-fucking-course there’s only one bed,” Shannon complained. “And Aries knew it, too, when he suggested it.”

“You can always sleep in your truck,” I suggested, kicking off my shoes and sitting on the edge of the bed.

“No, thanks.” He sat on the edge and kicked off his shoes as well. “He was right, it is hot in here. Let’s open the windows.”

The cabin was small, just a bedroom and a bathroom. No kitchen or sitting room for the guests, which made sense, since they would most likely be visiting with the other residents. Rectangle windows lined both walls of the narrow bedroom, and when we had them all opened up, the breeze felt almost refreshing in the stifling, warm air.

The mattress was covered with only a white sheet. A homemade patchwork quilt was folded carefully at the foot of the bed. Shannon crawled beneath the sheet, still wearing his T-shirt and cargo shorts. I laid on top of it in my jeans and T-shirt. Despite the mattress being soft, I was uncomfortable and sticky with perspiration.

After thirty minutes of tossing and turning, Shannon said, “Fuck it.” He stripped off his shorts and T-shirt and covered himself with the sheet up to his waist. “You gonna keep me awake all night with your fidgeting, or just take your clothes off, so we can cool off and get some sleep?”

I wanted to, and I felt a little better about doing it after he basically gave me permission. I stripped off my jeans and T-shirt, and crawled under the sheet, keeping it bunched up around my waist like he did.

The chirping of cicadas, crickets, and God only knew what else, filled the awkward silence between us. It felt as if the bed was shrinking. My heart beat faster, and I swallowed, feeling self-conscious. The last time I lay like this with him, shoulder to shoulder, we were eighteen years old. Just a couple of kids who didn’t know that fate was about to rip them apart.

“This sucks,” Shannon grumbled. “I wish Aries were here.”

I braced my arms under my head. “Not me. The first time I lay with him, I sure don’t want your dumb ass there.”

He rolled to face me, propping his cheek on his arm. “Really? You two haven’t ever...you know.”

“With Aries? No. Not yet. We’ve been figuring things out.”

He snickered and rolled to his back. It hurt my pride that he felt superior to me because he’d done something I hadn’t. How many nights had he slept with Aries while I lay in my bed alone, wondering what they were doing? I deserved to get a dig in.

“But we have a date this week, so...”

“So? What? Are you gonna push him up against the wall in the dark club like you do the other guys? Or are you gonna take him to the bathroom because he’s special and do him in the stall, bent over the dirty toilet?”

I kicked him in the shin hard with the heel of my foot.

“Ow, motherfucker!” Shannon kicked me back harder.

I tangled my legs with his to keep him still, so he shoved me in the ribs instead. My anger flashed to the surface, lightning quick, and I rolled over on top of him and cocked my arm back, making a ball with my fist.

“Go ahead,” he hissed. “Hit me. I know you’re dying to.”

A tiny voice in my head grew louder, rising above the whoosh of blood pounding in my ears—a voice I recognized.

Shannon’s voice.

“WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR FACE?”

Shannon’s eye was swollen and mottled a dark reddish-purple. A long scratch marred his cheek.

“Nothing, what happened to yours,” he teased, deflecting my question with an ugly-joke.

“I’m serious. Was it your dad?”

He tried to pull the blanket up over his face so I would stop looking at it. I swatted the covers away, carefully touching the swollen tissue.

Shannon winced. "That hurts."

"Answer me, then."

"Of course it was my dad. Who else would hit me?"

I raised up, leaning my weight on my arm, and looked directly into his good eye. "I'm sorry." I had to resist the urge to kiss it and make it better.

"What are you sorry for? It's no big deal. It's just a black eye."

"It is too a big deal. He shouldn't hit you."

"Everyone uses their fists when they get mad," he justified.

"No, they don't, Shannon." I laid back down on my pillow, still gazing into his face. "I would never hit you."

"Okay," he scoffed.

"I mean it. I swear on my life, I will never ever hit you."

THE VOICE FADED, and I uncurled my fist, feeling ashamed of myself. "I would never hit you. I swore to you, I would never *ever*, no matter how angry I got, that I would never hurt you. I'll be damned if I let you goad me into breaking that promise."

Shannon's throat bobbed as he swallowed. "That was a long time ago. People break their promises."

"Not me. I don't break my promises."

He pushed me off him. "It's too hot to fight with you."

I laid down flat on my back and stared at the paneled ceiling. "I know a place we can go to cool off. There's a little pond not far from here."

"Yeah?"

“Fair warning, there’s a good chance we might catch an STI from swimming in that water.”

Shannon laughed. “I’ll take my chances. Just keep your eyes closed and your mouth shut and you should be good.”

ARIES

Gordy: You almost ready?

Aries: Give me ten more minutes.

“WHY ARE WE TEXTING?” I yelled loud enough for Gordy to hear me two doors down the hall.

Gordy: Cuz I want this to feel like a real date.

IT DOES. I straightened the bowtie at my throat. It was navy blue with pink polkadots, and matched perfectly with the suspenders I wore over a pale pink button-down shirt.

I'd finally gotten Gordy to admit to me that I was his first real date. I kind of figured. In all the time we'd been friends, I never saw him date anyone. I just couldn't figure out why. Gordy was the real deal. Solid, smart as hell, a stacked body, and the biggest heart anyone possessed. If you had a guy like Gordy on your hook, you would be foolish to throw him back in the water. And I was no fool. No way. Gordy was a keeper. The level of pride and sheer joy I felt from being the only man he had ever dated was indescribable. The man had great taste, and he'd chosen *me*. Not only was I his *first* date, I was aiming to be his *last*.

And that was the problem. I had it bad for both of the men I was dating. It was next to impossible to choose one over the other. I wanted them both. How was I ever going to decide?

I dabbed my mother's love potion blend of essential oils on the inside of my wrists and behind my ears. It was the perfect spot for my date to nuzzle me, and I wanted to smell irresistible.

Gordy poked his head in my room. "Your time is up, Mr. Banghart." He got a good look at me and walked fully into the room. "Damn, you look really good." His fingers went to my bowtie. "I love this."

"You look incredible yourself."

His button-down shirt was the darkest blue, almost black, and he'd tucked it into gray slacks. A black belt and dress shoes finished off his polished look. I'd never seen him look so good, but then again, I thought he looked mouthwatering in jeans and an old T-shirt.

We locked up the house and walked out to his truck parked in the driveway. Gordy opened my door for me and reached across me to buckle my seatbelt.

Smooth, just like his cousin. It must be something they learned from Graham. Guys our age just didn't do those things anymore.

He even asked me to choose the song on the radio. Gordy drove down to the riverfront and parked in front of a restaurant that overlooked the Cooper River.

"This place looks nice," I remarked. No wonder he asked me to dress up.

"It was featured in one of my culinary magazines recently. I'm dying to see what the fuss is about."

Sometimes, it was easy for me to forget he was a food snob with refined tastes. To me, he was just Gordy Carrick, a gentle giant with a grumpy personality, who wore jeans with holes in them and never styled his hair.

I was dating a foodie.

From the moment I stepped inside the restaurant, I felt out of place. Not because of the way I was dressed. I was appropriately attired for the swanky joint. It just wasn't my vibe. And despite Gordy's love of fine food, I didn't think it was his either.

We were shown to a table by the windows that overlooked the river. It was a beautiful view. Docked boats, the pier lined with people fishing or walking, enjoying the scenery. Diving seagulls. We were fortunate to live in Cooper's Cove, having access to both the river and the ocean.

The hostess left us with menus, long thin books bound in black leather, and explained our server would be by soon.

I peeked inside and immediately felt a spike of anxiety. There were no prices! Just descriptions of the dishes. I didn't want to choose the most expensive thing on the menu, but how would I even know which one that was? The seafood and the meat dishes all said market value. How was I supposed to know what the current market value was on seafood and beef? I settled on a pasta dish, thinking it was more than likely one of the cheaper options.

Our waiter introduced himself as Thomas and ran through a long list of specials. Gordy placed his order for a surf and turf dish with a fusion twist, and we both ordered vodka sours.

I studied him as he straightened his utensils for the third time. "Would you ever wanna work in a place like this?"

"Nah, it would choke me. At Limericks, I get to choose the menu. Shannon gives me license to experiment with new things, and never ever balks at the price of my more exotic orders."

"That makes sense. I guess it feeds your creativity."

"It does. Plus, I get to see my family every day. I would never want to work anywhere else."

I loved that about him. That he valued his family above his career, money, and just about everything else. It was just one of the many things we had in common.

Thomas returned with our salads and drinks. The salad fit into a bowl the size of a tea cup. There were only about three bites to the whole thing.

Next, he brought us a clear soup with lemongrass and foie gras noodles. Again, it fit in a teacup.

“So, I was thinking. Maybe we could plan an overnight trip to the cabin. You mentioned wanting to fish with me. There are great hiking trails.”

“I would love that. We’ll definitely plan on it.”

Thomas returned with our entrées. At least I thought it was supposed to be the entrée. My gumbo pasta consisted of about six strands of fettuccine, four pieces of diced red bell pepper, and two slices of andouille sausage. The entire thing could have been scooped onto my plate with an ice cream scooper. The remaining white space around my dish was decorated with swirls of a creamy Cajun sauce. It was pretty, but I was guaranteed to still be hungry afterward.

Gordy’s dinner wasn’t much better. His surf consisted of three grilled and seasoned shrimp and the turf was the smallest filet I’d ever seen. He could have shoved the entire thing into his mouth in one bite.

We shared a laugh as our eyes met across the table. Gordy raised his glass, and I mimicked him. “A toast, to first dates and micro food.”

Sadly, or comically, we were finished eating in ten minutes. “I’m sorry. This wasn’t quite what I was expecting.”

I hated that he felt he had to apologize to me, that maybe I was disappointed. Gordy had anxiety about nailing this date the right way, and I didn’t want to feed into that.

I reached across the table and covered his hand with mine. “Hey, you wanna get out of here and go somewhere fun?”

A smile lit his rugged face. “That sounds perfect.”

We finished our drinks while Thomas processed his credit card.

“Where to?”

“Six blocks east,” I said, hiking my thumb to the right.

It was fully dark outside now, and he had to be wondering why I was pointing us toward the beach.

He didn’t ask, though, just followed along and drove us down to the beach.

“Pull in there,” I said, pointing to the drive-through restaurant.

“Tijuana Tacos?”

“Yeah, I’m starving, aren’t you? That place has the best tacos, and they use fresh ingredients, which I know you’ll love.”

Gordy drove through, and I slipped him my debit card.

“No way, I’m paying for this date.”

“You did. You mortgaged the damn farm back there at that restaurant. Anyway, it’s more enjoyable when we share.”

He grumbled, which made me smile, but accepted my debit card and handed it to the cashier at the window.

“What’s next?”

“Find a place to park nearby.”

Gordy pulled into the public lot and turned the truck off.

“What now?”

“You got a blanket in the back?”

“I do. I keep one just in case. You never know.”

“You never know,” I repeated, wagging my eyebrows.

He laughed. “You’re a mess. Get out of my truck and show me what you have in mind.”

Gordy grabbed the blanket, and I carried the bag of tacos across the street and down to the sand. He spread it out and I waited for him to sit down first, and then nestled between his legs. Reaching into the bag, I grabbed the first taco and unwrapped it, handing it to him.

“Here you go. Tell me that’s not the best damn taco you’ve ever had.” He took a bite, swiping at the juice that dribbled down his chin. “It’s good, isn’t it!”

“I could make a better one,” he mumbled, taking another bite. I pulled one out for me and a second one out for him.

“Open up,” he rasped.

Gordy teased my lips with his taco, and I took a large bite, the deep-fried corn tortilla crunching in my mouth. He chased it with a taste of his lips, sliding his tongue into my mouth, already filled with food. It was a savory kiss that made my cock twitch. Gordy was a quiet man, but he wasn’t shy about kissing me, and I loved that about him.

Even after our lips parted, he kept his face close to mine, his stubbly cheek pressed against my smooth one.

“I fucked it up, didn’t I?”

“What, the kiss?”

“No.” He chuckled. “The date. Dinner.”

“It was nothing we couldn’t course-correct with a couple of tacos.”

“I just wanted this night to be memorable.”

I wondered if he meant for my benefit or his, being that it was his first date.

“I know what could make it a lot more memorable.”

He gaged the challenge in my tone, looking wary. “What?”

“Strip, and go swimming with me.”

“In the ocean? At night? Fuck no! Not a chance in hell.”

“Why not?”

“Cause you can’t see the sharks at night.”

Laughing, I stood and began to strip, sliding the suspenders from my shoulders and loosening my bow tie.

“We’ll only go in up to our knees.”

“Pretty sure sharks can swim in knee-deep water. I watch shark week every year. Mike Rowe says it’s possible.”

He was cracking me up. I held his gaze as I stripped my pants off, followed by my briefs. “Your turn.”

“Fuck,” he grumbled, coming to his feet.

He hesitated before sliding his black boxer shorts down his legs. I watched like a voyeur, completely absorbed in seeing him naked for the first time. Well, besides the kitchen incident. This time, I was able to take a leisurely look. His cock resembled an elephant’s trunk. It was thick as fuck, and if I ever got it in me, he would stretch me wide-open.

I couldn’t fucking wait to feel him.

“You first,” he challenged.

I grabbed his hand and tugged him behind me as we ran down to the water’s edge. Turning to him, I held both his hands in mine as I walked backward into the water, keeping my eyes on him. He followed with great reluctance. When the water began to rise above my knees, he tugged me to a stop.

“That’s deep enough.”

“Then we might as well sit down. There’s no point in standing here in shallow water.”

He sat quickly, probably grateful that I wasn’t going to argue with him about going deeper, and pulled me down onto his lap. I sat between his legs, my back against his chest, as the water rose and receded around us. The waves were calm, lapping gently at our legs. His hands came around my stomach, roaming freely over my chest and abs. Not that I had anything worth touching. My stomach was flat and lanky, like the rest of me. Gordy’s hands gradually slid lower, massaging between my thighs, cupping my sac. His lips nipped at my ear, my neck. This feeling was surreal, bathing in the sea under a dark velvet sky littered with stars, and this man’s rough hands sliding so softly over my body. I could live in this moment forever.

Gordy began to stroke my shaft, slowly, not fast enough or hard enough to make me lose my mind, but just enough to

keep me on edge.

“Every time the water recedes, it washes away the sand under my ass and tickles my hole.”

“You’re a freak,” he rumbled in my ear with his gravelly voice, making me shiver despite the humidity.

He continued to tease my lobe, my neck, his lips trailing across my jaw to my mouth. I turned my head to meet his lips. His kiss was passionate and deep, possessive, just like the man himself.

Gordy pulled back and rested his lips against my temple, his warm breath ghosting across my skin. “I’m falling so hard for you. I’m in much deeper than knee-deep water,” he confessed.

I leaned back further into his embrace and pushed my head against his lips. “It’s okay, come swim in the deep end with me. I’ll keep you safe.”

WE DIDN’T STAY MUCH LONGER after that. We were both in a hurry to get home, probably for the same reasons. He continued to touch me during the drive home. His hand on my thigh, his hand holding mine, a quick kiss at the red light. Just enough to keep the fire stoked.

As soon as we pushed through the front door, Gordy said, “I’ll be upstairs in the shower.” He paused at the stairs and looked back, “You coming?”

Not if I don’t hurry up and get my ass in your shower.

It was just like at the beach. I stood under the spray with Gordy at my back. His huge body caged me in as he wrapped his arms around my waist. One hand trailed up to my nipples to tease the metal barbells.

“I love these,” he grated in my ear.

His other hand, full of soap, slid down to grip my dick. He stroked my shaft unhurriedly, drawing out the slow burn of pleasure that sparked in the pit of my stomach. I turned my

face to find his lips. He sucked my tongue inside his mouth, stroking it with his tongue, enveloping it in a warm caress that felt as good as the glide of his hand.

“Finish me,” I begged.

“Not like this.”

We rinsed the soap from our bodies and stepped out of the shower stall. He wrapped me in a large, fluffy towel, and I followed him into his bedroom. It was cool and dark, and his enormous king-sized bed dominated most of the space. Gordy sat on the edge of the bed with a towel wrapped around his hips and pulled me between his legs. He opened my towel and used it to dry my body carefully. Gordy took his time with me, rubbing the terry cloth over my wet hair, drying my shoulders and back, and my stomach. It almost felt as if he was worshiping me, like he enjoyed serving me, enjoyed caring for my body.

“Bend your leg and put it up here,” he said, patting the space between his thighs.

I lifted my leg and planted my foot on the mattress between his legs, and he dried my calves and thighs slowly, his hands rubbing over my skin, touching and exploring me. He dried the other leg as well, before turning me around to face his dresser. A large mirror hung above it.

“Sit with me.”

His voice was barely a whisper in the dark. He scooted back a few inches to make room for me. His hands again came around my hips, sliding down to cup the inside of my thighs.

“Spread your legs.” With gentle pressure, he spread them with his own hands, not needing my help at all.

“Lean over and reach into the top drawer of my nightstand. Hand me the jar.”

I did as he asked, giving him the glass jar filled with white cream. He unscrewed the lid and placed it beside him on the bed before swiping his fingers inside the jar to collect a huge dollop of cream. Gordy spread it on his hands by rubbing them

together to warm it before sliding his fingers around my aching, hard cock.

“Smells good,” I said. *Like mint chocolate chip ice cream.*

“Mhmm.”

I looked down to watch his fist stroke my length, the tip of my swollen head disappearing in his grip, and then reappearing with a squelching sound that sounded filthy.

“Eyes on me,” he said, in his deep, commanding voice.

I found his emerald green eyes in the mirror. His gaze was hot and dark, and so intense. My face mirrored my pleasure. My eyes appeared glassy. My lips, swollen from his kisses, were parted, my tongue peeking out. The rapid rise and fall of my chest showed how fast my heart was beating.

I was panting for breath, the sound loud in the silence. “Squeeze me tighter.”

He tightened his fist, stroking again and again over the sensitive crown. His other hand rolled my balls between his fingers. I was about to lose control.

“Give it to me,” he begged.

And I did. The arc of my warm seed landed on my chest, up onto my neck, even, where Gordy leaned in to lick my flushed skin clean.

He used my discarded towel to wipe his hands and my stomach dry. I was going to stand, but he surprised me by wrapping his arms around me and squeezing me tight.

It was a hug. He was hugging me.

The security of it, knowing he wanted me closer, as close as he could get to me, gave me more pleasure than his hand job.

I dropped to my knees and turned, burying my face between his thick thighs. He groaned and opened his towel for me. At first, I only teased the head of his swollen cock, collecting his flavor on my tongue. But when he palmed the

back of my head, I took as much of his length as I could, gagging as I hit the halfway mark. Tears gathered in my eyes.

“Fuck,” he hissed.

With long, even strokes, I covered most of his length with my mouth again and again. His thighs trembled, proof of how good I was making him feel. He wasn't going to last much longer, and I decided to draw out his pleasure by popping off his cock to tease his balls with my tongue. I lapped at them, coating them with my saliva, learning the feel of them, the heavy weight of them.

“Aries,” he whispered.

He brought both his hands up, holding my head, and guided my mouth back to his cock. With the barest amount of pressure, he began to fuck my mouth. I allowed him to go as deep as he wanted, raising my eyes to his so he could see my tear-stained face when I gagged. His cock was just so damn thick, it was impossible not to. I couldn't even swallow around his length when he was at the back of my throat. Gordy respected my limits. He didn't try to give me more than I could take.

With a tortured groan, he curled his body over my head, holding me imprisoned in his lap, and shot rope after rope of hot cum down my throat. He flooded my mouth, and I gagged again. Gordy raised up so I could pull off and swallow. I hadn't even cleared it all from my mouth before he leaned down to steal my lips.

“Damn, you taste so good,” he praised.

“So do you.”

I laid my head on his thigh, my cheek pressed against his hairy skin, and he tenderly stroked my face and head, carding his fingers through my damp hair.

“Will you sleep in here with me tonight?”

I would sleep in here with him every fucking night.

“Yes.”

We stood and crawled under the cool, crisp sheets. He wrapped his body around mine, spooning me, and I could feel his warm breath ghost over the back of my neck. He was asleep in minutes.

I reached down and pulled the blanket up over our hips, making sure Gordy was tucked in tight and warm.

Now I lay him down to sleep. I sucked the soul right outta his meat.

The words danced through my mind just before I drifted off.

SHANNON

“HEY, babe. Did you stop by to see me or Gordy?”

“Neither. I came by for a drink.”

It was the third time this week I’d seen him in here, keeping himself company at the bar. He wasn’t flirting with me or trying to sneak in an hour of quality time together while I was on the clock. Aries was trying to pickle his brain in vodka. Or tequila, bourbon, whiskey, or rum. He didn’t seem to be picky about the substance, as long as it had a numbing effect.

I set aside the rack of glasses I was wiping dry and braced my palms flat on the bar top. “Talk to me. I’m a bartender, you can tell me anything.”

His laugh lacked all traces of humor. “There are some things I can’t even tell my bartender.”

I’d picked up a lot of tips and tricks about how to read people over the years. But it didn’t take a genius to figure out what his problem was. Aries was stuck between a rock and a hard place, or more aptly, me and my cousin, and he had a decision to make. The bitch of it was, there was absolutely no way to avoid someone getting hurt. It was inevitable.

“What I can tell you,” he said, pointing at me, “is my drink order. Pour me a tequila sunrise. No, wait. A jalapeño margarita. Yeah, I want it to burn.”

“You know,” I said as I poured agave and orange juice into a glass, “tequila won’t solve your problems.”

“Neither will soda. So when I finish this, pour me another shot.”

I slid his drink across the counter and watched as he drained his entire glass in three healthy gulps. With a shake of my head, I moved down the counter to help someone else. He could use a minute to let that soak in before I refilled his glass. I tried to hide my smile when he started to flag me down, as if I didn't know he was sitting there, waiting for me to pour him another shot.

I made a circuit around the square-shaped bar, taking away empty glasses, refilling some, and closing out tabs. Eventually, I made my way back to Aries, who was mumbling to himself about choices and karma. I had to admit, he was kind of cute when he was drunk.

He held up his empty glass. “El Niño.”

Reaching below the counter for bottles of peach schnapps and pineapple juice, I grabbed a clean glass from the rack overhead and was tempted to just hand him the damn bottle of vodka so he could stop wasting my time adding extra ingredients and just tap the main source.

“Sounds like you've got a lot on your mind. My offer still stands if you want cheap therapy.”

Adding a splash of blue Curaçao, I slid the glass towards him and he raised it in a salute. “Less thinking, more drinking.”

After another circuit of the bar and a trip to the store room for more liquor, Aries was ready for another refill.

“Tequila Wallbanger.”

As I poured the Galliano and a healthy dose of my pity for him into a clean glass, he continued to talk to himself, but louder now, more clearly.

“I think you need to stop drinking,” I advised with a touch of concern. If he thought he felt bad now, it was nothing compared to how he was going to feel tomorrow.

“That's what I told myself!”

He looked serious, and I wondered if he really had a stern talk with himself. Maybe that's what all the grumbling was about?

“And?”

Aries scoffed, and then hiccuped. “I'm not about to start listening to a drunk who talks to himself.”

I leaned over the counter, getting close enough to his face to get buzzed from the alcohol on his breath.

“I'm not going to over-serve you, Aries. At some point, I'm gonna have to cut you off.”

“Don't worry,” he purred. “I've got this.”

I didn't believe him for a second, but I also believed he was a responsible guy. I poured him a second wallbanger. “I'm gonna run to the kitchen and get you something to soak up all the alcohol in your belly. Behave yourself until I get back.”

“And then I can misbehave?” He tried to sound flirty, but looked ridiculous, swaying in his chair, his expression so lewd it was comical.

“Jesus.”

I ducked into the kitchen and found Danny and Gordy nearing the end of dinner service.

“Hey, do you need me?”

“Your boy is out there, about to fall off his stool.”

“Aries?”

I nodded. “He's doing his best to drown his confusion in alcohol.”

“How come when he's drunk, he's my boy, but when he's sober and rational, he's yours?”

His sensible observation made me laugh. “Can you fix him something to absorb the alcohol? I doubt he's eaten today.”

“Sure, I'll bring it out in a minute.”

I stopped in the bathroom and then the store room before returning to the bar. Gordy followed right behind me, carrying

a plated sandwich on thick ciabatta bread. Two empty glasses sat before Aries, the two I poured for him. They were already drained empty, and his head rested on the granite counter, his cheek smooshed into the glossy black surface.

Gordy stood behind him and reached over his shoulder to place the plate on the counter. I poked the tip of my finger between his puckered lips. He sat up so suddenly that he lost his balance and started to fall off his chair. Gordy caught him and set him right.

“What? Where?” he sputtered.

He was completely disoriented, his eyes glassy, face flushed. “Fuck, Aries, you said, ‘I got this.’”

He twisted his head to see who stood behind him, smiling when he saw it was Gordy. “If I say I’ve got this when I’m drunk, I totally don’t have shit and you should stop me before I hurt myself!”

He was speaking to Gordy, despite me having asked the question. Gordy just smiled at him and pointed to the sandwich.

“Let’s eat something, big guy. Fill that belly with something solid.”

He pulled out the empty chair next to Aries and sat down, taking the sandwich and bringing it to Aries’ mouth. “Open up and say ahh.”

He was so drunk he actually complied. I chuckled, shaking my head at the ridiculousness of him. “I know for a fact he hasn’t eaten anything today. That’s why the alcohol hit him so hard, so quickly. I served him four drinks. He should be tipsy, but not falling over drunk.”

Gordy fed him most of the sandwich. Aries was a sweet drunk despite his morose mood. Every time he took a bite, he made these little appreciative moaning sounds as he chewed. The way he stared at Gordy, like a love sick puppy, was actually kind of cute. I felt for the guy. I didn’t envy the choice he had to make.

“Let me get you a drink,” I offered.

“Mojito, please.”

“What you need is a glass of water.”

“Only if it’s frozen into cubes and completely surrounded by tequila,” he said, slurring his words.

Ignoring him, I dumped a handful of ice cubes in a glass and filled it with water. I reached for a straw and stuck it in his drink, to avoid him making a mess on himself.

“What are we gonna do with him?” Gordy asked.

I looked over to the entrance, where Rory stood talking to another customer, and waved him over.

“What’s up?” he asked, leaning over the counter.

“Need you to take him home. Help him inside.”

Rory looked over at Aries, who was having a hard time sitting up straight, and nodded. “No problem. I’ll call you when we get there.”

Gordy hustled him off the chair, but he grabbed onto the edge of the counter. “Wait! I was about to have a tequila shot. *The sexy way. I lick the salt, swallow the tequila, and suck the lime.*”

“Jesus Christ,” Gordy mumbled. “Get him out of here, Rory, before he either passes out or jizzes his pants.”

No force on earth, not even God himself, could have made me not find that funny. My shoulders shook with laughter. It got even louder when he turned back at the door and winked at us, waving goodbye.

“What in the ever-loving-fuck was that shit show?”

“That,” I said to Gordy, “was our boy trying to decide which of us he wants to belong to.”

He looked at me and frowned, and then at the door where Aries had just disappeared through, picked up the empty plate, and headed back to the kitchen without another word.

“FEELS like forever since we got together,” my Pops complained.

“That’s what happens when you fall in love, Pops. Got no time for your friends anymore.” I raised the cold bottle of beer to my lips and took a deep swig, hissing appreciatively as it burned a path down my throat. “Rory’s just as bad. He’d rather hang out with Carly than us.”

Rory grinned, looking thrilled to be guilty as charged. “Who could blame me? He’s—” he sighed dreamily, “—amazing.”

Graham laughed. “Thank you for keeping it PG. That’s my nephew you’re talking about.”

“Besides, we offered to come over last week and hang out in the hot tub with you. You turned us down flat. Don’t complain if you don’t see enough of me,” Rory defended.

“That’s just it! I don’t want to see *more* of you, per se, half naked in whatever you call a bathing suit. And I definitely don’t want to share tubby time with my damn nephew. No, thanks.”

I laughed as I swallowed another sip, nearly choking. “Stop with the lies, old man. You don’t wanna have tubby time anymore with your friends because your much younger lover insists on wearing a sexy bikini meant for a woman. You’re keeping him all to yourself.”

“Who says it’s meant for a woman!” Graham tried to look outraged, but he was laughing.

Rory smirked. “Nah, it’s because Kelley insists on bringing Glitter in the tub. Which means no heat and no jets. There really isn’t much point after that.”

“You’re kidding,” I said, looking at my Pops. “Tell me you’re kidding.”

He only shrugged, smiling. “What can I say? She has an adorable little pink bathing suit. Kelley found her an inflatable raft somewhere designed for cats.”

“Get the fuck out, Pops. There’s more than one cat who likes water? Next time, take a video and send it to me. Aries would love it. Gordy, too.”

He exchanged a meaningful glance with Rory before they both turned their inquisitive attention on me.

“So, Aries, huh?” Rory chuckled. “Can’t say I didn’t see that coming.” He took a swig of his beer. “But explain to me how Gordy fits into all this.”

“Yeah,” my Pops seconded. “You two getting along, thick as thieves? Definitely didn’t see that coming.”

Rory shook his head in agreement. “Nope.”

“We’re not thick as thieves,” I scowled. “Just...forced to spend time together, so forced to get along.”

“Nobody’s forcing you, son.”

“Kinda.” We were interrupted by the waitress delivering our burgers. I lifted the bun to check the condiments and added extra ketchup to mine before taking a big bite. “He’s sorta dating both of us,” I explained around a mouthful of meat.

Again, they shared a look, silently communicating. It was irritating as fuck not to know what they were thinking about me. “What?”

Rory smiled slyly. “Let me guess, it’s just a temporary situation, right?”

“Yes,” I confirmed a little too strongly.

“It’s beginning to make so much sense now,” my Pops mused. Rory clapped him on the shoulder, and they dissolved into laughter.

“What makes sense,” I asked irritably.

“Oh, Shannon, you can’t be that blind. You’re smarter than this, son.”

“I feel like I need a secret decoder to figure out your message. You’re making my head hurt. Either spit it out or shut up and eat your burger so we can get back on the bikes.” I didn’t appreciate being the brunt of their jokes.

“That would be too easy. Just let me know when you figure it out. I’ll be waiting in the hot tub with my young hot lover and my cat.”

I dismissed them with a roll of my eyes as they fell apart with laughter again and finished my burger and my beer.

What the hell was so funny? It was just temporary.

Wasn’t it?

My phone chimed and I checked the message. “Speak of the devil,” I mumbled.

Aries: I know we made plans tonight to get together, but I have a better idea. Want to meet me at the cabin? Fishing, skinny dipping, a ride on your bike... you down?

Shannon: Sure! What time you wanna meet?

Aries: How bout five-ish? We can eat dinner together.

Shannon: Sounds perfect. See u soon.

I RAISED my head to find both of them staring at me, looking amused.

“Had to be Aries, judging by the dopey smile on your face.”

I scoffed, shaking my head. “You two are worse than a couple of old biddies at bingo. Never seen so much gossip.” I took the last bite of my burger and washed it down with the last of my beer. “Pops, is it okay if I use the cabin tonight?”

“No wonder he was smiling,” he said, slapping Rory’s arm.

Rory added, “I wonder what Gordy’s doing on his day off?”

It bothered me more than it should what his reaction would be when he found out Aries and I went away together. Why did I feel like I was betraying him? Fuck that. Gordy was a big boy. If he wanted to whisk Aries away for a night or two, he was more than welcome. I couldn’t really stop him.

My chest tightened. *Damn greasy burger.* It wouldn’t kill me to eat more like Gordy, with a care for my cholesterol. I placed my hand over my heart to quell the burning sensation.

My conscience prickled at the lie.

It’s not the fucking burger, and you know it.

ARIES

EVERYTHING WAS GOING ACCORDING to plan. When I woke this afternoon, hungover and coated in my own drool, the idea hit me like a sucker punch to the stomach. There was no way I could choose between Gordy and Shannon. So, I wasn't going to! I wasn't wrong about them. They had some sort of history that had led to a falling out. If I could just get the two of them together and make them talk, maybe they could work things out.

Or maybe I'd lose them both. But I had hope that wouldn't be the case. Still, it was better than being without *one* of them.

With a little finagling and a few white lies, okay, mistruths, I was going to make sure they were both at the cabin today.

And nobody was leaving until we worked our shit out!

The two of them knew jack shit about what it took to make a relationship work. But I did. And unbeknownst to either of them, they'd been doing a fine job of it for weeks now. They'd shared nicely, been respectful of each other—mostly—and had spent more time together than they had in decades. With a bit of guidance from me, they could make this work.

They had to. I needed them both in my life and in my bed.

After a refreshing shower that restored my humanity, I had sent Shannon a text with our change of plans. He was on board. Now, to get Gordy to agree. I heard him downstairs in the kitchen, making lunch, and shoved my feet into my slippers and headed down.

“Hey,” I said, sounding way too chipper for a guy who’d drunk as much as I had the night before.

“Hey, yourself, sleeping beauty. I’ve got a protein shake for you. Figured you’d need the boost.” He eyed me curiously. “But you look pretty good. How’s that possible?”

I slid my arms around his waist and pressed my lips to the warm bare skin between his shoulder blades. “Cause, I have an idea, and it’s changing my whole mood.”

“Oh yeah? What’s this idea?”

“Let’s take off to the cabin! You promised me a swim in the pond.”

Gordy removed the lid from the blender and poured the contents into a tall glass. “Here,” he said, handing it to me. “Didn’t you have a date with Shannon tonight?”

“We can reschedule. I’d rather take off with you.”

His thick dark brows dipped low over his green eyes. “Aries, we should talk about yesterday. All this back and forth is clearly affecting you, and to be honest, it’s affecting me, too.”

I felt terrible hearing him admit my actions were hurting him. That wasn’t what I wanted at all. Love, acceptance, lust... those were the things I wanted to make him feel. Not insecurity or jealousy. That’s not what love was. And I was definitely in love with Gordy. It had snuck up on me and then settled like a heavy weight in my chest, refusing to be denied. I loved him in so many different ways. As a friend, a lover, a trusted confidante, someone I admired. He was so many things to me, and most importantly, he was mine. And though it was a new feeling, I knew it would only deepen with time.

“We can spend the entire night talking about it. Go pack a bag.”

Gordy looked skeptical but popped a kiss to my cheek and went upstairs.

I THOUGHT Harmony Grove was the prettiest land in South Carolina, but I was dead wrong. Rook Mountain was breathtaking. The view stretched unhindered as far as the eye could see, across mountain peaks and tiny picturesque towns. The emerald pines and vibrant wildflowers were an explosion of rich colors. I never wanted to leave. I sketched most of the way while Gordy drove. Inspiration was bombarding me. The scenery, the scents, the fresh air blowing in my face through the open window of Gordy's truck—I couldn't draw fast enough. I wanted to capture it all.

"We're almost there," Gordy warned.

It was only two o'clock. I still had three more hours until Shannon arrived, unless he decided to come early.

He parked in the gravel drive, and I got my first look at the cabin. It was small, only one bedroom Gordy had said. It was made of real logs with a porch that stretched across the entire front. The cabin was shaded by pine trees and off to the side, there was a fire pit built into the ground, surrounded by adirondack chairs. I heard rushing water.

"Is that a creek?"

"Yup. Runs behind the house. Trout, bass, crappies, and bluefish. You want to fish first? Or eat?"

"Eat. I'm starving."

Gordy explained that the fridge wasn't stocked, so we stopped at a tiny general store on the way and picked up hotdogs and burgers to grill tonight. But for lunch, he had stopped at a BBQ joint that he swore sold the best brisket sandwiches in the Carolinas.

"Why don't you drop our bags in the room while I plate the food? We can eat on the porch."

I poked my head into the bedroom and tossed our bags in the corner. The bed was a queen. Plenty big enough for two people, but three was stretching it. I sure hoped my plan

worked out, or it wouldn't even matter. At this point, I wasn't sure what I'd hoped for. A continuation of the status quo? A Vee dynamic, where I was dating them both and they accepted it happily with their newly formed friendship? It wouldn't be the first time I'd tried it.

Pushing through the screen door, I joined Gordy on the porch, and he handed me a plate piled high with a heart attack. "I thought you didn't eat this stuff?"

"Only when I come up here. It's my chance to splurge. A cheat day."

I eyed the mountain of greasy seasoned fries, the brisket sandwich on Texas toast dripping with juice and barbecue sauce, and my stomach rumbled.

"Shit, this is like a year's worth of cheat days."

"Don't remind me. Eat."

He picked up his sandwich and took a big bite, and I watched his profile as he chewed. Gods, he was gorgeous. It was more subtle than Shannon's raw sex appeal, but I saw it plain as day. His green eyes were stunning. His square jaw covered in stubble reminded me of Thor. So did his thick arms and thighs. Fuck the sandwich. I wanted to sit on his lap and eat *him*.

Gordy chuckled. "Quit staring at me and eat. I want to go fishing."

It was so typical of him to feel uncomfortable with my attention. He didn't take compliments well. "I thought we were grilling for dinner? What are we gonna do with the fish we catch?"

"Put them in the freezer for the next person who visits."

I loved that. His philosophy regarding his family was a lot like my non-traditional family in Harmony Grove, where everyone worked together, watched out for each other, and considered their fellow neighbor, but without the sexual sharing of partners.

Damn, what would that be like to witness? I almost dropped my plate as an erotic image of Shannon and Gordy tangled up in a lover's embrace came to mind. Probably because of my desire for both of them. But what I wouldn't give to see it!

Two Alphas in a bid for dominance. *Fuck!* I would buy tickets to that show.

After lunch, Gordy took me fishing in the creek behind the cabin.

"I've been fishing my whole life with my uncle and cousins, and you make me look like an amateur."

With a shrug of my shoulders, I replied, "What can I say? In Harmony Grove, you either learn to fish or you starve. A man can only eat veggies for so long."

"Yeah right," he scoffed, "Those people eat better than most. That festival was incredible."

"I'll take you back anytime you want," I said with a wink.

"Aries," he sighed. "We have to talk."

"I know. We will. I promise. For now, let's just fish."

When we were sticky with sweat and our hands smelled like fish, we put the poles away and hiked up to the pond. I leered as Gordy shed his clothes and jumped in.

"Your turn."

I stripped slowly, making it look sexy. He never took his eyes off me. "Come here," he croaked, crooking his finger.

I jumped in the water, breathing a sigh of pleasure at the refreshing coolness, and swam over to him. Gordy pulled me against his solid chest, and I wrapped my legs around his waist. "You gonna grind that hard dick against me until you get off?"

"I could, but what fun would that be for you?"

"Plenty. Trust me."

He cupped my ass, kneading my cheeks in his large hands. I traced the tat I inked into his shoulder of a maypole with five ribbons trailing down from it, each a different color of the rainbow that wrapped around his thick bicep. He told me it represented the men in his family, and his pride in them being true to their sexuality.

“Gordy,” I hissed as the tip of his finger flirted with my hole, now puckered tight in the cool water.

“You want more?”

“Yes. I want all of you.”

“Think you can handle that?”

“I would happily die trying.”

I lowered my mouth to his and slid my tongue inside. We nipped at each other’s mouths, suckled the other’s tongue, until I was writhing against his stomach in a desperate attempt for release.

“Come for me.”

He cupped the head of my dick in his hand to feel the hot rush of my seed before it washed away in the water’s current. I leaned my forehead against his, spent and sated.

“Crazy about you, Gordy,” I murmured.

He stared into my eyes for the longest time before he whispered, “Don’t hurt me.”

AND THEN I DID.

Not because I wanted to, but it was unavoidable when we spied Shannon sitting on the porch, rocking lazily in the chair as our shoes crunched the gravel beneath our feet on the path that led to the house. We were shirtless with wet hair and flushed from the heat, our faces and shoulders sunburnt.

We slowed as we approached the porch, and Shannon stood with his hands on his hips, looking all kinds of pissed off.

“What’s he doing here?” Gordy barked.

I wondered who was more angry, Shannon or Gordy?

“I was just about to ask you the same thing, Gordo.”

“Aries and I were—”

“Guys...” My words fell on deaf ears.

“I can see what you were doing. Making sure I never wanted to swim in the pond again!”

“Guys, I—”

Gordy got up in Shannon’s face. “Who the hell invited you, anyway? You just couldn’t stand to give us a day away alone, could you?”

“That’s bullshit! Aries—”

“Guys!” This time, they paused long enough to hear me. “Let’s go inside and talk about this.”

I led the way, hoping they followed. Shannon came in last, slamming the screen door behind him.

“You, there,” I said to Gordy, pointing at the worn sofa. “You, sit,” I said to Shannon, pointing to the recliner. I remained standing. “I invited you both here for a reason. Sorry about misleading you, but it was the only way I could think to get you both here.”

I began to pace back and forth in the tiny living room. “Lately, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, and it wasn’t until this morning that I finally came to a decision. I don’t think either of you are going to like it very much, but for me, it’s really the only option. I don’t want to hurt either of you, and I also don’t want to lose either one of you. Just hear me out, okay?”

I pushed my fingers through the wet strands of my hair, trying to gather and organize my thoughts. If only my heart would slow down for a second so I could breathe.

“Gordy, I really like you. You’re so talented, and way smarter than you give yourself credit for. You’re not a man of many words, more the strong silent type.”

Shannon snickered, and I glared at him, silently warning him to keep his mouth shut.

“But what you lack in conversation, you make up for with actions. You’re solid, Gordy, always there for me. You always come through in a pinch, finding little ways to show me that you like me. That you appreciate me. You’re like...” I wracked my brain for inspiration. “...a roasted chestnut, crispy on the outside, and soft and gooey on the inside.”

Shannon laughed louder this time, and Gordy and I both glared at him.

“Something about your soul calls to mine, something eerily familiar, and when you’re near me, when you touch me, it feels like...like...tectonic plates shifting inside of me.”

Shannon scoffed, but I chose to ignore him.

“That’s what you do to me, Gordy. I’ve fallen in love with you, and it was so easy to do.”

He smiled softly, looking hopeful, and I felt hopeful as well.

My heart bounced wildly in my chest. It would suck so bad if I had a heart attack and died before I could finish this.

“And Shannon, I’m crazy about you. We started out as friends, but something drew us closer. I can’t stay away from you. Gordy may be silent, but you more than carry a conversation. We can talk about anything and everything and I love it. We have so much in common, we’re so in sync with each other. I could talk to you for hours and never run out of words.”

Shannon looked to Gordy to gauge his reaction, and then smirked. “Do I shift your tectonic plates, Aries?”

Gordy gave him a dirty look.

“Yes, you do. But you know what? There’s enough room in my heart with all the shifting for both of you. I know it’s not what either of you wanted, but I’m tired of the back-and-forth, feeling like a ping-pong ball being slammed over a net. I like both of you, and I’m not cheating. I’m trying to be honest with

you. I don't want to choose. I don't see how I could? You each give me something I need, and I feel that magic with both of you."

I took a deep breath and sat on the edge of the wooden coffee table, in between my two men.

"It's okay to say this isn't what you want, but I'm not giving either of you up without a fight. I need you to work your shit out. Even if you don't want this," I said, gesturing between the three of us, "it's past time you figure out what your problem is and make peace with each other."

I stood and crossed the room, pointing to the open bedroom door. Swallowing past the knot clogging my throat, I gathered up my courage and delivered my ultimatum.

"That is the only bedroom in this place and neither one of you are coming out until you come to a compromise. I'll be on the couch. Let me know if you need anything from the kitchen." When they continued to sit, frozen in place, I raised my voice. "Shoo. Get gone. Move your asses!"

Reluctantly, they shuffled toward the bedroom, and I locked the door behind them.

Please, Gods and Goddesses, don't let them kill each other.

GORDY

I BUSIED myself looking over the pictures on top of the dresser. I had them memorized years ago, but the one of Kelley and Glitter rocking on the front porch of the cabin was new, as well as the one of Rory and Carlisle together fishing, and the one of Carson and Ryan. It was a selfie of them in the kitchen, baking something, and making an absolute mess. They were smiling into each other's eyes, and I could feel their happiness.

Too bad I couldn't hold on to that feeling for myself. Whenever I seemed to find it, it would vanish into thin air. Love was an elusive mirage that I'd lost twice now. Shannon paced back-and-forth. When he started laughing, I turned and glared, feeling furious at him for stealing my happiness, yet again.

“What the fuck is so goddamn funny, asshole?”

He stopped laughing, and I started to pace, trading places with him. He chuffed, and I got up in his face, most likely looking as furious as I felt.

“What's so fucking funny?”

“When he called you a roasted chestnut.” His shoulders shook with laughter, and I shoved him in the shoulder. “He said you're the strong silent type and he digs it.”

Fucker was enjoying this. Too much! “Yeah well, he said you're a Chatty Cathy.”

“That is not what he said. He said I'm interesting enough to carry a conversation.”

“Fuck you.”

I flopped down on the bed and plucked a pillow over my face. I felt the mattress dip under Shannon’s weight as he sat on the edge with his head in his hands. He sighed loudly, no longer finding hilarity in our situation.

“How long do you think he’s gonna keep us locked in here?”

I refused to answer him. But I did peek at him.

Shannon laid down flat and stared up at the ceiling.

“Are we gonna talk about this? Or we gonna lay here and ignore each other until we starve.”

“Go ahead, talk away Chatty Cathy. It’s what you do best.”

He chuckled, which irritated me further. “It’s definitely not what I do *best*. Are you gonna keep pretending this is about him, or are we gonna talk about what this is really about.”

I moved the pillow from my face and slapped him in the face with it. “What do you mean?”

“We used to be friends, Gordy, once upon a time. What happened to us?”

A sick feeling swirled in my gut. I rolled over and faced the window. “*You* happened.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He sat up straight, clutching the pillow to his stomach.

I rolled back over in his direction. I had no desire to discuss these things. But what good was keeping them to myself doing? I felt like a radioactive bomb ready to combust.

“It means you stole my family.”

Shannon laughed incredulously. “I stole your family? Do you even hear yourself? That’s the stupidest fucking thing you’ve ever said, and trust me, I’ve been keeping track. You say a lot of stupid shit.”

I sat up as well, mirroring his position. “You did! You moved in and pushed me right out. Started spending all your

time with my uncle, and the twins, hell, even my mother likes you better than me. Maybe I became silent because everyone stopped talking to me.”

He searched my face, his brows drawn down tight. “Gordy, how the fuck can you say that? You’re as much a part of the family as any one of us is. If anything, I’m the outsider. I’m not a Carrick.” He stared down at the quilt, picking at invisible threads. His voice became softer. “I’m a stray dog that nobody wanted. Once upon a time, I thought maybe you wanted me. I thought we could be brothers, that we could be a family. I didn’t know how wrong I was. I didn’t realize I was the last thing you’d ever want.”

He laid back down and turned away from me, still clutching the pillow to his stomach. I leaned over and dared to touch him, placing my hand on his hip. He remained still.

“It’s not that I didn’t want you to be a part of my family. I just wanted you to be mine. *My* friend, *my* brother, *my*... whatever. But they stole you from me, and you shared all of the best parts of you with everyone, all the parts that belonged to me. I felt like there was nothing left for me that was special anymore. Like maybe you wanted them more than me.”

Eighteen years. It took me eighteen years to admit that to him.

“Maybe you just don’t know what it feels like to want to belong to someone, to be a part of a family. Because you’ve always taken for granted what you have.”

I shook him, urging him to turn over and look at me. “You did belong to someone, Shannon. You belonged to me. Why wasn’t that enough?”

Shannon rolled over onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. He swallowed, and I watched his throat bob. “Do you think there’s still a part of me that belongs to you?”

My chest tightened, and I nodded. “Yeah.” My voice sounded ragged, and I cleared my throat. “There’s always going to be a piece of you that belongs to me. I don’t think

anyone could take it from me. I wouldn't let them if they tried." Tears threatened to spill, and I swiped them away.

Shannon's gaze dropped to my face. My mouth felt as dry as dust, and I licked my lips. He watched, looking so intense and torn. We drew closer together. Inch by inch. I lowered myself down to his side, propping my weight on my elbow. My lips hovered over his. I could feel his warm breath ghost across my mouth. His hand snaked around my neck, drawing me closer, burning my skin, and I buried my face in his neck. I didn't have the courage to kiss him, no matter how badly I wanted to. He wound his legs through mine, tangling our limbs together. His embrace felt safe. It was healing. It gave me courage.

We lay silent, just touching, breathing each other in, for a long time. I slowed my breaths to match his, my fingers tracing the rise and fall of his chest. He twined his fingers with mine.

"It wasn't just the family stuff. I had other reasons for cutting you off," I blurted.

"Tell me, Gourd. Get it all out between us now so we can fix it. I want to know everything."

"I saw you that night. In the park, with David. You were supposed to be meeting me, but you were there with him instead. In *our* park," I hissed.

"What was I meeting you for?"

"Because I was going to tell you..."

"What? What were you going to tell me, Gourd? Say it."

I swallowed, shaking my head. I was a damn chicken.

"You still can't say it. Even after all these years."

"You knew? I knew it!"

Shannon huffed a harsh breath. "Of course I knew. Did you think I didn't feel it, too? How could I not?"

"Then, why?" I felt the tears threaten again. "Why would you hurt me?"

“Because I’m a coward and I’m selfish. Because I wanted them more than anything.”

“More than me?” I hated that my voice wobbled on the last word.

“I told you, I’m a selfish coward. All my life, I dreamed of finding a father, like Graham. Who would love and accept me just the way I am. I couldn’t risk losing that.” He untangled his fingers from mine and brushed them down the side of my face, catching a stray tear that managed to escape. “Not even for you.”

“I loved you. With all of my stupid inexperienced heart. And you broke it that night in the park with that guy.”

“I don’t know what you saw, but I’ll spend the rest of my life helping you to forget it.” He reclaimed my hand, swiping my fingers over his lips. “I’m sorry I hurt you. I’ll never stop being sorry for that.” I laid my head down on his chest, feeling his heart beat strong and steady under my cheek. “Do you believe in second chances?”

“Depends who it is,” I answered.

“What if it’s me?”

A reluctant smile stretched my lips because I knew he was going to say that. “You’re the only exception to the rule.”

“Do you think we can start over?”

“Yeah, as long as we don’t forget the past, what we used to have.”

“I could never forget what we used to mean to each other. It was everything to me.” He raised our hands to his lips again and kissed my fingers.

Hesitantly, I asked, “Do you think I could still be everything to you?”

“No,” he said softly, “because there’s someone else now, someone who means so much to me. But he could never be everything either because of you. You’re both two halves of a whole. I need you both.”

It was exactly what Aries had said. “You really think we can make this work? All of us together?”

“I don’t know, but I know we have to try. Do you think he’ll let us out of here? I’m starving.”

I raised up on my elbow again and gazed into his beautiful face, a face I’d been in love with since I was a kid.

“Come here.” He gently gripped my chin, guiding my mouth closer to his.

I had waited two decades for his kiss, and I was finally going to feel it land on my lips. My heart pounded in my ears. My stomach threatened to spill its contents. My head swam with a dozen thoughts and nothing at all but the flavor of his mouth. His lips whispered over mine. A featherlight tease. Slowly, softly, he coaxed my lips apart and slid inside. Every function in my body was focused on his lips. My heart beat in sync with the rhythm of his kiss. My stomach swirled in the same tango as our tongues. All of the blood in my body moved south, filling my cock, thickening it. Time ceased to exist as his mouth moved against mine in a seductive dance. It was as if I had never erected one defensive wall against him. My heart lay wide open. Filleted in half and torn apart. Shannon Calhoun owned me. There was nothing I wouldn’t give him or do for him.

Without warning, the bedroom door opened. Aries draped his body against the door jamb, crossing his arms over his chest. He wore a sly, satisfied smile.

“Well, well, well. This worked out even better than I could have imagined. Is there room for me?”

I never wanted him to doubt that. To question his place with either of us. “Fuck yes.” I scooted apart from Shannon, creating a valley between our bodies. “You belong right here, between us.”

SHANNON

FOUR DAYS. It had been only four days since Gordy and Aries had glued together all my broken pieces and made me whole again, like a shattered vase that had been repaired. I felt like a whole new person, like I'd been reborn, stronger, happier, brighter, and more confident. And yet, I felt the opposite was happening with Gordy. Aries was the control in our little experiment. He remained unchanged. Gordy was fidgety and nervous. He would jump at the slightest things. If I had to guess, I would say his anxiety was eating away at him, eroding his confidence and his happiness. I was determined to get to the bottom of it and help him reverse the damage our brand new triad was inflicting on him. Because I made a promise to him that I would never hurt him again, and I intended to keep my vow.

So far, I'd spent three of the last four nights with them at their house, cozying up together in an endless tangle of limbs in Gordy's big king-sized bed. Aries always wormed his way into the middle. It was quickly becoming his favorite spot. We hadn't made love yet, and my head was filled with scenarios of how that would go when it finally happened. I'd never been with two men at once. The possibilities were infinite. The big question looming in my mind was, was Gordy a bottom or a top? Verse? I sure fucking hoped so. Not only did I want to get inside of him, I wanted to watch him top Aries. It was a new fantasy and quickly becoming an obsession.

Beside me, Aries stirred. And from the moment his bright brown eyes blinked open, there was already a smile on his face.

“Morning, babe. Sleep good?”

“Mmhmm. The best. I don’t even need covers. Sleeping between the two of you is like cuddling up with an electric blanket.”

I returned his smile and brushed the hair from his eyes, running my fingers through his bangs. He looked over at Gordy who was still asleep, his lips parted as he snored without sound.

“He’s cute when he sleeps.”

“He’s cute all the time,” Aries defended. “But when he wakes up, watch out. He’s grumpy.”

“Who, grumpy Gordy? Never met him,” I teased. “Maybe he just hasn’t been given the right incentive to wake up happy.”

His eyes twinkled. “You’re just full of good ideas this morning, aren’t you? Should we try? Like a scientific experiment?”

He didn’t wait for my reply as he began to peel back the covers. In his quest to expose Gordy’s dick, he uncovered mine as well. I rubbed my hand over the cotton-covered bulge, quickly getting amped up as I watched Aries straddle Gordy’s legs and work his basketball shorts down his hips. While I chose to sleep in my boxer briefs, and Aries in his cotton bikini briefs, Gordy favored full-coverage.

Apparently, he also liked to sleep commando. His fat cock slapped against his stomach as the waistband of his shorts lowered beneath his balls.

“Oh my Gods, he’s bare. How perfect.” Aries licked his lips, preparing to devour his treat.

It was the first glimpse I’d gotten of Gordy’s cock, and unsurprisingly, it fit him perfectly—thick and gorgeous, like him.

Aries licked up and down the shaft, wetting the entire length before sucking it into his mouth. He was able to stuff almost half of it down his throat on his first pass, taking

another inch on the next one. A deep rumble rolled out of Gordy's throat, and he blinked his eyes open, raising his hand to the back of Aries' head and guiding him down the length of his shaft.

"Fuck, Aries," he rasped, his voice rough from sleep.

I freed my cock, licked the palm of my hand, and stroked it in time with the glide of Aries' mouth on Gordy. Watching him blow Gordy was the hottest thing I'd ever seen. I felt zero jealousy seeing them together. I wanted them both so badly. And I was convinced of how much they each wanted each other and me. There was no room for insecurity and doubt. We had triple the amount of pleasure to share, and there was plenty to go around.

"Suck him harder. Tease his balls."

Aries kept his eyes on mine as he obeyed, hollowing out his cheeks as he slid down Gordy's shaft. Even though it wasn't my cock being sucked, he was still connected to me, and I was in charge. That heady feeling of power was not something I knew I wanted, but now needed.

"Just the tip now. Drive him crazy."

Aries complied, pulling off most of the way, keeping his lips wrapped tightly around Gordy's thick crown. Gordy bucked his hips, chasing Aries's mouth. Both of their gazes were now focused on me, and I scooted closer.

"Help me," I demanded of Gordy, taking his limp hand and wrapping it around my cock. His eyes burned with emerald fire as he helped bring me off.

It was the first time he'd ever touched me, but far from the first time I ever dreamed of it.

I placed my other hand over Gordy's on the back of Aries's head, and together, we urged him to finish Gordy.

"Make him come. And don't swallow until you show it to me on your tongue first."

"Fuck," Aries hissed, taking hold of his own cock and furiously pumping his hand.

Gordy grunted, the muscles in his stomach contracting as his hips bucked off the bed. He flooded Aries's mouth at the same time my release rushed forth, shooting a sticky grid over my stomach. Aries spilled over his hand with a moan and opened his mouth to show me the collected seed on his tongue.

"Swallow it. Every last drop. And then tell me how good it tastes."

I watched his throat bob as he swallowed. "Fucking delicious."

"Give me your hand."

Aries slipped his hand from his briefs and offered it to me. I gripped his wrist and licked his palm clean. Then, I leaned over Gordy and took his mouth without asking, sharing my bittersweet bounty with him.

As I pulled away, Gordy chased me, pulling me back down for another kiss. I was happy to oblige. With Aries's flavor on both our tongues, his kiss tasted delicious.

When he had enough, I raised my head and slid my hand around the back of his neck, looking directly into his eyes.

"He's ours. Belongs to both you and me. And we will *always* share his flavor."

The heat in Gordy's eyes was intense as he nodded. There was no more competition, Aries didn't belong to me or him. He was *ours*. We were equal. We were a team.

Partners. Cousins. Lovers. Best friends.

Aries crawled over my legs and off the bed, heading to the bathroom to wash up. Gordy continued to work his softening cock, and I stared unabashedly.

"You want some," he asked, gripping the base and shaking it at me.

"I doubt you have any left after that monster load."

"Maybe you just like to look," he suggested, staring at the mess coating my stomach.

"Maybe I do," I agreed.

Aries came back with a warm cloth and cleaned me. “I would love to stick around and possibly repeat that, but I have plans.”

“What plans?” I questioned. It was the first I’d heard of it.

“I’m going home for the weekend. I’ve got the shop covered.”

“Are we all going?”

Aries grabbed his discarded underwear and slipped them over his legs. “Nope. Just me. I’ve got to help my dad and Walter with some maintenance and cabin repairs. I want you two to spend some time together. Alone. Do everything I would do,” he said with a wicked smile.

“But—”

“Look, I need you guys to be solid with each other so you can be strong for me. You have a lot of shit to work out still, a lot of talking to do, and it’s not something I need to be present for necessarily.”

I swallowed, and my eyes found Gordy’s. Aries was right. We had a lot to work out. But I had faith that we would.

ARIES LEFT SHORTLY AFTER, and I remained in bed, distracted with my phone while I listened to Gordy take a shower. More than anything, I wanted to join him, but I knew Gordy better than that. I couldn’t rush him. He became overwhelmed easily with his feelings, and I could already see signs that he wasn’t shouldering the stress well. He exited the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his hips, his skin still damp and flushed, and my mouth watered.

I wanted him just as badly, if not more, then I had eighteen years ago. All of the time that had passed, all of the hurt and angst that divided us, hadn’t dimmed my need for him. He would always be *the one* for me. My feelings for Aries grew stronger every day. I was crazy about him. But Gordy was the

foundation on which I built my life upon. My safe harbor. The seed that gave me life.

I could even say he was my soulmate. The problem was, we were both hotheaded, aggressive, and intense people. We didn't always mix well together. Like two dark shadows trying to find their light. Aries was the sun that brightened our sky. He was the buffer we needed to coexist peacefully. As much as I loved Gordy, as much as I needed him, we just wouldn't work without Aries. He was the catalyst that finally brought us together. The Band-Aid on our gaping wound.

He caught me staring and lifted his chin in acknowledgment, like a silent nod, saying hey, what's up? I returned the nod, and he did it again. I laughed and grabbed for him.

“Cut your shit and get your ass over here.”

I sat up on the edge of the bed, and he stood between my legs. When I reached for the knot on his towel, he stopped me.

“I feel like Uncle G is gonna pop through the door any moment and say gotcha. Or even worse, Ma.”

Again, I laughed. “I have a feeling he won't be as surprised as you think.”

“Why, did he say something?”

“It's more like what he didn't say. Him and Rory seemed to find our situation amusing.”

“Oh God, they know. They're going to tell Ma.”

“Would that be so bad?”

He shrugged his thick shoulders. “Do you think she'll be happy for us?”

“I don't see why not. Look how happy we are.”

Gordy smiled, practically blushing. I could count on one hand how many times I'd seen that look on his face.

“Fuck, you're turning me into a big softy.” He scrubbed his face with his hand, trying to erase his expression.

“What was it Aries said, you’re like a big gooey chestnut?”

Gordy planted his hands on my chest and pushed me backward. I fell apart, laughing. He started to move away, but I locked my legs around his, holding him in place.

“Come down here, Gordo.”

“Dude, you just came less than an hour ago.”

“So did you. But not by my hand or my mouth.” It wasn’t even about coming again. I just wanted to feel him, be close to him.

I raised up just slightly and reached for his towel again. This time, he let me. He kept his eyes trained on my movements as I unwrapped his hips and let the towel drop to the floor. His cock was already half-hard and thickening before my eyes. I sat up all the way and placed my hands on his hips. With deliberate slowness, I sucked little kisses over the stretch marks that spanned his belly and his thighs. My hands caressed more scars that covered his perfect ass. Some were covered with tattoos, while others were plain to see. I kissed every single one. Gordy placed his hands on either side of my head, holding onto me as I cherished him with my mouth.

Possibly more than a hundred times I had dreamed of sucking him off, but my imagination had never played out like this. This wasn’t hot and filthy. It wasn’t forbidden. It was cathartic. Gordy’s scars ran deeper than the surface of his skin. They needed to be healed from the outside in. I had to take my time with him, go slowly, and show him he had nothing to fear from me.

I paused and reached for the knob on the drawer of his nightstand, hoping he stashed his lube in there. My plan was to jack him off slowly, with both of my hands and my mouth. I wanted to see him release all over my chest as he hissed my name.

“No, wait. Don’t look in there.” Gordy batted my hand away, but he was too late.

A framed picture of me sat in plain view, next to a jar of what I assumed was his lubricant. I pulled it out and Gordy tried to swipe it from me, but I refused to let go.

He groaned and rubbed his face, dropping his ass down next to me.

“Didn’t I give this to your mother for Mother’s Day about six years ago?”

“Put it back.” He sounded angry.

I was so confused. “Why do you have this in your drawer?” I stood the picture up on his nightstand and rolled over him, straddling his thighs.

“I refuse to answer you.”

With a taunting smile, I asked, “Didn’t your mother ever wonder why it was missing?”

“Yeah, she noticed. I told her I didn’t know.”

I grabbed his wrists and raised them above his head and leaned down to rub my nose against his.

“You wanted a picture of me so bad you stole it?”

Gordy tried to push me off, but I locked my legs around his calves. He wasn’t going anywhere, and neither was I.

“Do you jack off to it? Is that how you learned to kiss? By making out with my picture?”

I wasn’t taunting him to hurt him. But the idea that he wanted me so badly while pretending to hate me all these years made every endorphin in my body spark to life.

Again, he tried in vain to squirm out of my hold.

“Hold up, Gordo. If you want a picture of me that bad, I’ve got a better one I can take for you. I’ll send it to you later on my dinner break tonight. You know, in case you start missing me.”

“Fu—”

I cut off his protest by covering his mouth with mine. He was going to tell me to go fuck myself, but I’d much rather

fuck him instead.

And as much as I wanted to make that happen, right then and there, I knew we needed to straighten things out first like Aries had said.

“Get dressed. I’ve got somewhere I want to take you.”

GORDY

I STARTED to sweat when Shannon drove into our old neighborhood. “We’re going to visit Ma?”

Shannon chuckled. “You are such a chickenshit, Gordita. Relax, I have somewhere else in mind.”

He parked alongside the curb of an old park. *Our park.*

“What are we doing here?”

“We have a few things we need to get straight, and I can’t think of a better place to do it than here. Can you?”

Literally anywhere else.

Instead of saying that, I shrugged my shoulders, trying to appear as if I didn’t care.

Shannon got out of the truck and rounded the hood, coming around to my side. He opened my door, and I climbed out with a frown. Why was he treating me like a fucking princess?

He leaned in and feigned like he was going to kiss me but pulled back at the last second. “Lighten up, Gordo. I promise this time will be different,” he teased with a smile that was almost convincing enough to dispel my nerves.

We approached the rusty gate almost completely overgrown with weeds.

“Check this out,” Shannon said, pointing to a sign. It looked brand new, as did the padlock on the old gate.

“Riverside Realty. Looks like it’s been sold recently. I wonder if they’re finally going to tear it down and build something.”

My heart squeezed too tight, creating a pain in my chest. They were going to tear down our origins, our history. If I hadn’t felt there was hope for our future, it would have completely destroyed me.

Shannon tugged at the lock. “Looks like we’re gonna have to jump the fence. You go first.”

“Why me?”

“Cause, there’s something I need to make right. Go sit on that bench over there.”

The old wooden bench was in bad shape eighteen years ago. By now, it was probably only held together by cobwebs.

“I doubt it’s going to hold me.”

“Well, the merry-go-round, then.”

I jumped the fence with some difficulty because of my size and headed to the merry-go-round. Once upon a time, it had been a bright fire-engine red. Now it was a dull gray metal that looked filthy with dirt and rust and chipped paint. I sat down anyway. After a minute, Shannon climbed over the fence, with a lot more grace than I had. He walked over to me, and I couldn’t read the expression on his face.

What the fuck was he up to?

He sat down next to me and leaned forward, bracing his forearms on his knees. “Hey, Gourd. You said you wanted to meet me. You had something you wanted to tell me?”

“Huh?” I must have looked as confused as I felt because he chuckled.

“Back then, you had something to say to me, but I didn’t show up. And then I did, but I wasn’t alone. But I’m here now. Alone.” He took my hand in his, lacing our fingers together. “I’m here for you, and I’m listening. What did you want to tell me?”

I glanced down at our hands, then around at the decaying park, remembering that night I waited for him. Almost paralyzed from fear, with my heart in my throat, I waited...and I waited...but he hadn't shown.

"This is fucking stupid," I grunted, getting to my feet.

He tugged me back down. "We're not leaving until you spit it out, so get to talking."

"Why does it matter? It was a long time ago. Ancient history."

"It matters, Gourd. What did you want to tell me?"

With a roll of my eyes, I stated the obvious. "That I'm gay. I'm into guys."

"Really? Me, too!" Shannon's voice was laced with a heavy dose of mock enthusiasm.

I couldn't help but laugh at his ridiculous behavior. As if it would have gone down like this eighteen years ago.

"Mazel tov, can we go now?"

"No, there's more. Finish it." When I remained silent, he prodded, "So, is there a particular guy you're into?"

I felt like a fool. Almost twenty years had passed, and he knew I liked him. Why was I clamming up again? I could feel the anxiety spiking in my bloodstream, releasing a rush of adrenaline so strong it made a wave of nausea roll through my gut.

"Gourd?" He squeezed my fingers tightly between his knuckles. "I'm listening."

There was no way around it. If I wanted this to be over, I had to say the words I'd dreaded for so long. I sucked in a deep breath and held it in my chest until my heart slowed enough to think clearly. Then I released it in a heavy sigh.

"I like you," I mumbled, barely loud enough to be heard, despite him sitting right next to me.

"No," he said with a chuckle. "Try again."

I stared down at my lap and blurted, “I like you, a lot.”

The weight of his stare felt heavy on my face. He nudged my chin, his fingers tilting my head up to meet his intense blue eyes.

“Try again, Gourd. One more time.”

I swallowed past the constriction in my throat, feeling eighteen again.

“I’m in love with you.”

He leaned in close, his warm breath just a whisper on my lips. “I’m in love with you, too, Gordo.”

He kissed me like he never had before, like I dreamed of. No, I never could have dreamed of a kiss like that. It wasn’t shy like our kiss at the cabin or hungry like the kiss we shared that morning in bed. And it wasn’t anything like the filthy three-way one we shared with Aries last night, either. This kiss was something different. Something new.

It was the way you kissed someone you were in love with.

His hand, so rough and possessive, tenderly stroked my jaw, his fingers sliding into my hair. His lips completely engulfed mine, claiming them. It was a bruising, passionate kiss that left my lips swollen and my heart obliterated.

From the way he kissed me, I could believe he was in love with me. I could feel it.

It felt like hours had passed before he finally raised his mouth from mine. He was still holding onto me like he never intended to let me go.

“I fucked up. I never should have walked away from you. I thought I could still have you in my life, as my best friend, my brother. I thought that could be enough for me. And then I could have both you and a family.” He swallowed, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. “I was a fool! If I’d known I was going to lose you, I never would’ve—”

He broke off his words, shaking his head.

“You never would have what?”

He gripped my hair tighter as he hissed, "I would have chosen you!" His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed again. "I'd have risked losing them in order to keep you. I swear it, Gordy. You have to believe me." In a softer tone, he whispered, "I would have chosen you."

Somewhere inside of me, a missing piece clicked into place, and I felt whole. "I believe you."

And I did. I'd felt firsthand the effects of his choices on our relationship. I truly believed, for the first time in years, that he would have avoided the destruction of our friendship if he'd been given a do-over. After all, it was impossible to believe he really loved me if I still believed he would hurt me intentionally if given another chance.

Shannon wrapped his vice-like arms around my back and neck and hugged me hard, his breaths harsh against my neck as he fought for control of his emotions. "Cousins," he hissed, "like that ever would have been enough for me." His tone was self-deprecating, sounding harsh and bitter.

Time passed without being measured. Cars passed by, a dog barked in the distance, a car alarm went off and then was silenced. And yet he still held onto me.

I hoped he never let go.

But eventually, he did. He sucked in a ragged, shaky breath. His eyes were red and wet.

He loves me. He's sorry... I forgive him.

Shannon sniffled, clearing his sinuses. "We should come back here soon, before they tear it down."

"And do what?"

"Sleep in the shed. One last time."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. I mean it. Like old times, only better. 'Cause this time, I'm not hiding from my old man, and maybe, if I'm lucky, I can get Graham Jr. to touch my dick inside the sleeping bag."

He wagged his eyebrows, and I laughed at his absurd playfulness. “There’s no way we could both fit in one sleeping bag.”

Shannon’s smirk was wicked. “Are you saying it’s going to be a *tight fit*?”

His double entendre made my eyes roll. “Alright, fine. One last time.”

WE STOPPED BACK at the house to change for work before Shannon drove me to the Lounge. That kiss lingered on my mind as I prepped for dinner.

“What’s got you smiling, Chef?”

I shook off the memory and looked at Danny. “Nothing,” I said, dismissing him with a smile.

“It’s obviously something. It’s not like you to smile so much.”

I was distracted by Shannon passing by the doorway. As he always did, he slowed, his eyes searching me out. It was something I noticed he did often, and I’d come to expect it, even holding my breath until he passed by.

On his return trip, he strode into the kitchen, coming directly to me, and took the knife from my hand, laying it down on the cutting board. He placed one hand on my hip, the other sliding around the back of my neck, and kissed me full on the mouth. By the time he let me go, I was breathless and disoriented.

“I’ve always wanted to do that.” He winked at me and then turned and exited the kitchen.

Dazed and fighting a silly grin from spreading over my face, I picked up my knife and dared to glance at Danny. He was grinning from ear to ear. I lost the battle with my smile.

“I guess that explains it!” He began whistling as he julienned carrots.

I parroted the tune, whistling as I diced a tomato.

WHEN OUR SHIFTS ENDED, we left the closing of the bar to Rory and Carly and headed home around eleven. We showered separately and dressed in sweats. The tension between us felt heavy, and we sort of danced around each other in the bedroom. It felt awkward.

“You want to go down and watch a movie?”

“Not really,” Shannon replied. “I’d rather get in bed with you and talk.”

My lips curved upward. “Really? You want to talk?”

His eyes traveled the length of my body. “Something like that.”

“I’m just going to go down and grab some water. Do you want some?”

“No, thanks. I’m thirsty for something else.”

I felt sick to my stomach. My nerves were getting the best of me, and I was caving to my insecurities.

Ignoring his comment, I went down to the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge. But instead of closing the door, I stood there with my hand rubbing small circles over my stomach as I considered having a snack. Nothing healthy like peanut butter or yogurt. No, I was in the mood to binge on carbs. I hated feeling overwhelming anxiety. It felt like a thousand ants crawling under my skin. And instead of trying to focus on the skills I’d learned to cope with it, it just felt easier to stuff my face and my stomach until I zoned out in a carb coma. I was reaching for the leftover container of pasta salad when his voice stopped me.

“Don’t do it, Gourd. Put it down.”

His arms came around my waist, and he tucked his chin into my shoulder, peering into the fridge. I hung my head,

overcome with shame and embarrassment, and slammed the door shut hard enough to rattle the condiments.

“You didn’t want to put that in your mouth. Wouldn’t you rather have me in your mouth?”

“You’re not helping,” I grated through clenched teeth.

He hopped up onto the counter and pulled me between his legs. “Come here.” With his hands on my hips, Shannon stared into my face with concern. “What’s got you so upset?”

I fucking hated feeling vulnerable. Especially with him. “I miss Aries.”

“Me, too, but that’s not what has you trying to consume a gazillion carbs for a midnight snack.”

“He just makes everything easier. With just us, I feel—” There was no way I could finish that sentence.

“Aries is doing his own thing right now, and you and I needed this time alone together. Do you know how many years I waited for a night like this with you? Why don’t we go upstairs and get in bed, and just enjoy it. I only want to hold you.”

“You’re so full of shit,” I said, chuckling.

“I mean, if you want to touch my dick, I’m not gonna say no.” His smile died. “Is that what has you so upset? You nervous?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “That, and...it’s you. I don’t know how to act like this with you.”

His thumb grazed back-and-forth over my hip bone in a lazy caress. “Yes, you do. It used to be as natural to us as breathing. You were so good to me. All I’m asking for is a little bit of that.” He lifted his hand and tucked his fingers under my chin, raising my head higher. “I promised you, I wasn’t going to hurt you again, and I mean to keep that promise. You have to learn to trust me again, starting tonight.”

Shannon led me upstairs to my bed. We crawled under the covers, meeting in the middle. He scooted up behind me and wrapped me in his arms, spooning me. The heat from his body

and his natural scent, so familiar to me, helped to calm my nerves.

“I love your body. I love *you*. I have for more than half my life.” He trailed the tips of his fingers down my arm, tracing the ink tattooed into my skin. “I used to lay in bed with you and imagine laying my hand right here.” He laid his palm on my hip. “I wished I had the courage to do this.” Shannon slid his hand down to cover my inner thigh. “In my dreams, you never said anything, just pretended not to notice.”

I smiled at his make-believe scenario.

“Eventually, I touched you here.” He covered my dick, now hard and twitching under his palm. It jumped when he squeezed the swollen head. “You pretended not to notice that either. Then, when you were really interested in the movie, I imagined just tugging your pants down and slipping inside you.”

My body shook with silent laughter. “Did I pretend not to notice that, too?”

“Fuck no. You better notice my dick. That’s just insulting.” He pushed his dick against my ass, grinding into the cotton of my sweats. “In my fantasy, you told me you wanted more.”

My laughter was no longer silent. “I bet I did.”

“Would you have pushed me away? Told me no?”

“Who the fuck knows? Probably not. I used to lay there dreaming of pretty much the same thing.”

“Really?”

“Well, not being impaled on your horse cock, no. But sliding into your mouth? Yes.”

Now it was Shannon who was snickering. “Of course. Make me do all the work.”

He continued to stroke and squeeze my cock through my pants, keeping me hard for him. “You know,” he mused in a thoughtful voice, “I can’t picture it. You might have to show me exactly what you had in mind.”

And just like that, my lust replaced my fear, and my only focus was on getting my dick in his mouth.

“Maybe I should.”

“Fuck, Gourd. I’ve been trying to get my hands inside your pants for two decades. You really gonna make my fantasy come true?”

“It’s *my* fantasy,” I challenged, never allowing him to have the upper hand.

He tugged my pants down and crawled between my legs, burying his scruffy face between my thighs. Shannon licked my balls, rubbed his chin over them, making them draw up tight against my body. He licked over my taint, the tip of his tongue flirting with my fuzzy hole. I clenched my thighs tightly, squeezing his head.

Shannon pried them apart with a chuckle. “I’m guessing that’s the first time someone’s done that to you.” I nodded, and he smiled deviously. “Wow. You saved something for me.”

I’d saved a lot of things for him. For Aries, too. He lowered his mouth to the head of my cock, lips parted, and my breath hitched. But just before he swallowed me, he paused.

“There’s something I’ve wanted to ask you for years.”

I slammed my head down onto the pillow in frustration.

Shannon continued. “Are you a top or a bottom?”

I scrubbed my hand over my face, annoyed but trying to hold in my laughter. “I bet it killed you. How long has it been eating away at you?”

“Since I was seventeen.”

“Really?”

“I had a feeling you were into guys.”

“Well, you’ve lasted this long. A few more years of not knowing won’t kill you.”

He nipped my thigh, and I squirmed. “Yes, it will.”

“I’ve never bottomed.”

“Yeah, but would you?”

“Would *you*?”

Shannon smirked. “Probably not. I usually hook up with smaller guys. Guys who like to bottom. I can’t really see myself feeling comfortable being submissive to them.”

“For me, it’s more about being vulnerable. I won’t give that control to just anyone.”

“What about me,” he asked, looking devilish.

“Who knows, maybe I won’t even notice when you slip it in.” I was feeling playful, goading him, poking the bear.

He rubbed his scratchy chin over my sensitive sac extra hard, making me flinch and cover my balls. “You’re gonna notice, fucker. You’re gonna feel every inch of it and ask me for more.”

“There’s only one way to find out,” I said, laughing.

“Is that an invitation?”

“It’s a challenge.”

Shannon smiled with satisfaction. “It always is with us. Glad to see some things never change.”

MUCH LATER, after he swallowed my release, I laid my head on his chest and he held me in his arms.

“I’m taking you on a date tomorrow.” He stroked his fingers through my thick coarse hair.

“What kind of date?”

“I don’t know. Somewhere nice. I’ve taken Aries out a few times, and now it’s your turn. I’m kind of excited about it.”

I wished I could say the same. Again, that was something I didn’t know how to do with him. How to act right. It filled me with apprehension.

“Tomorrow is our last day alone before Aries comes home, and I’m going to take advantage of having you all to myself.

I'll plan something and surprise you."

Wonderful.

THE STEAKHOUSE WASN'T what I was expecting for our first date. It really wasn't Shannon's kind of scene. The atmosphere was dull and stifling. The buttons at my throat were choking me. Our conversation felt forced. Whenever he looked at me, I smiled, trying to convince him I was enjoying myself.

"Did you see something you liked on the menu? It's full of the kind of food you like."

"The kind of food I like?"

"Yeah, fancy shit. Cuisine."

Now it made sense why he brought me here. He was doing this for me, not us. Shannon was trying to impress me. It almost made this ridiculous facade of a date worthwhile. I leaned my forearms on the table and studied him as he perused the menu. He looked hot as fuck tonight in a white button down and dark jeans. He'd chosen nice boots, black with minimal scuffs. His cheeks above the line of his goatee were smoothly shaven and his hair was freshly cut.

We both ordered prime rib and loaded baked potatoes. Shannon cut into the meat, which was as soft as butter, and laughed.

"I remember one time your mom made us nice juicy steaks for dinner and we stayed out too late at the park. She was so mad at us for wasting her dinner. So we put the steaks in the microwave to reheat them, you know, so they wouldn't go to waste, and they came out rubbery like shoe leather. I couldn't even chew the meat, it was so hard. I ended up swallowing the pieces whole and then got constipated for three days."

I laid my fork down, struggling not to laugh so I could finish chewing the meat in my mouth.

“I remember that, too. Do you remember the first time Uncle G let Carson grill steaks at a family barbecue?”

Shannon laughed hard. “The whole piece of meat caught fire on the grill. Carlisle came out with the fire extinguisher and doused all the good steaks as well.”

We were both laughing now, loud enough to draw attention.

“We ended up eating hot dogs from the microwave. That was the first and last time he ever let Carson near the grill.”

Shannon nodded, his smile wide and bright. “This prime rib is amazing. What is this sauce with it?”

“Horseradish and au jus.”

“Can you make something like this?”

“Of course.”

“I’d love to have this again.”

He had mentioned I never cooked for him, and he was right. I never had. But now I wanted to, more than anything. Wanted to fill his body with my food. Wanted him to know it was just for him, from me.

Shannon stared at me, shaking his head with a smirk.

“What?” I raised my napkin to my lips, self-consciously wiping my mouth.

“Look at us. We’re on a date. A fucking date, Gordo. Who would have guessed?”

“Not me,” I said, chuckling.

“Feels good, though. Me and you together feel so good.”

“It does,” I said, no longer laughing.

I stared into his shining blue eyes, the same color as shards of ice, yet so full of warmth, and wished we were alone.

“You want dessert?”

“No. I just want to get out of here.”

“Come on, finish up. We’ll go for a walk down the pier.”

HE TOOK my hand in his, lacing our fingers together as we strolled down the boardwalk. The stars twinkled in the night sky, waves lapped at the wooden pylons of the pier. The smell of salt water and ocean air was as familiar to me as...Shannon. Yet somehow, I still felt uncomfortable in my own skin. It was also new to me, holding him like this, being able to touch him whenever I wanted.

I wanted to hug him, squeeze him tight. Touch him constantly. I hated second-guessing myself. It just felt so foreign to be able to act out on my innermost thoughts after denying them for so long.

He stopped walking and turned to me, sliding his hand around the back of my neck, drawing me close.

“What is it, Gordo?”

The man could read me like a book. “This isn’t us. We’re dumpy sheds and rusty parks. Pool halls and rock quarries. I don’t know how to be with you like this.”

“Like what?”

“Like this. Romantic, trying to woo me.”

“Is that what I’m doing?” His voice was husky. Amusement danced around the corners of his lips.

“Isn’t it?”

“What would you suggest?”

“I have no idea, let’s get out of here and figure it out as we walk back to the car.”

With our fingers still laced together, hands still joined, he admitted, “This is all new to me, too. I don’t know how to do this dating thing, talking about my feelings. Actually having feelings,” he said with a laugh. “I feel like an imposter, posing as a good boyfriend.”

I couldn’t help but laugh because it sounded so absurd. It was exactly how I felt taking Aries on a date.

“I know exactly where we should go.”

“Yeah?” He tossed me the keys to his truck. “Lead the way, Gourd.”

“THE ROCK QUARRY? You’ve got to be kidding me. It’s dark as fuck.”

“I know. Makes it a little more interesting, doesn’t it?”

“Come on, you’re not really serious, are you?”

“What’s the matter, chicken?”

“Don’t start that chicken bullshit with me. It’s how you would always dare me and the twins to jump in with you.”

“It’s how I’m going to dare you to jump in with me again now,” I said, laughing.

“What are we supposed to wear in the water?”

I unbuckled my seatbelt and undid the buttons at my throat. “Absolutely nothing.”

“Just so you know, that’s a lot more effective than daring me and calling me chicken.”

Shannon undressed quicker than I could, dumping his clothes into the backseat. I couldn’t get my pants off without stepping out of the truck, making Shannon laugh as I danced from one leg to the other while trying to hold my balance as I kicked them down my legs.

“Need a hand?”

His hands gripped my hips, keeping me steady, his voice a warm whisper in my ear.

“We should take these off as well,” he suggested as he snapped the waistband of my briefs.

“I refuse. That water is dark and I can’t see the little fish that want to nibble on the end of my cock.”

“What if I want to nibble on the end of your cock?”

“You can nibble all you want. After we swim.”

I set off for the cliff with Shannon trailing behind me. “You’re nothing but a cocktease, Gordy Carrick. Who would’ve guessed?”

“There’s a lot of things you probably haven’t realized about me yet,” I countered with a smirk.

Shannon caught up with me on the edge of the cliff, pulling me into his arms. His breath ghosted over my lips, making me yearn for his kiss.

“There’s a hell of a lot I know about you, Gordo. I know everything I need to in order to realize you’re the man I want to spend the rest of my life with. Everything else is just icing on the cake.”

In the wake of his words, I forgot all about swimming. Tonight had been a revelation—Shannon revealing words and thoughts I’ve longed to hear my entire life—of waiting to feel wanted, needed, and cherished, by this man.

He slid his hands down my arms until our fingers were laced together. “Last one in...”

Together, we jumped, leaping over the edge into thin air, and we fell together, hand in hand as our bodies hit the water. He surfaced just before I did, tugging me through the water. The exhilaration and joy on his face as he laughed, shaking water from his dark hair, was nothing less than beautiful.

“What? What is it?”

With a deep breath, I found the courage to finally ask, “Did you hate me all these years? Did you regret ever meeting me?”

“Fuck, Gordo! How could you think that?” He speared his fingers through my wet hair, gripping my head. “I hated myself. Hated what I’d done to you, letting go of the chance to love you. Hated the tension and the distance between us. Hated what had become of our friendship. I didn’t know exactly what your reasons were for pulling away from me, but instinctively I knew I was to blame.”

“I’ve watched you for years.” I couldn’t stand the weight of his gaze on my face. I dropped my forehead to his so that

neither of us could look into the other's eyes. "Watched as you took guy after guy home from the club, the bar. And with each one that wasn't me, I hated you just a little more. At least that's what I told myself. What I realized was that I hated myself a little more each time."

"Yourself? But why?" He pulled his head away from mine, needing to see my face again.

"Because each time was a reminder that I wasn't what you wanted. I would never be what you wanted. It was a cold hard rejection. I convinced myself that I was the one at fault because I was too clingy, too fat, too unattractive, that I was pushing you to want something you didn't. It was my fault that I wanted us to be more. Not yours."

"You know that's bullshit, don't you? It had nothing to do with you. It never did. You were enough. My God, Gourd, you were more than enough. Certainly more than I deserved or dreamed of. And that was the problem. I wanted everything, all of it—you, the love and acceptance of your family—and I knew I was reaching too high. I had to make a sacrifice, and I was too young and naive to realize at the time I was making the wrong one."

Shannon pressed his mouth to mine, stealing my breath and returning it with his own. He whispered against my lips, "I'd give it all up just to have you. Everything...the Carricks, the bar, my entire future," he gave my lips a sucking kiss, "—because I don't have a future without you. Not now that I've felt your touch, tasted your kiss, and seen what we can be together. You are my future, Gordy Carrick. You and Aries." He swept his tongue between my lips, searching out my tongue, sliding alongside it, sweeping me up into a dizzy mess. "Tell me you want that too."

"I want it," I whispered into his mouth.

ARIES

SIMPLY SAYING I missed my men was an understatement. All weekend long, I pined for them, wishing I was in between them, wherever they were. But I meant what I said, it was imperative Gordy and Shannon spend time together without me, that they become rock solid with each other. I saw them as the base of a pyramid with me on top. I was just the cherry on the sundae. If their relationship wasn't strong, our entire foundation would crumble. It was too easy for them to use me as a buffer, a go-between to lessen the tension between them. I needed to disappear so they could work their shit out. And I hoped to the Gods they had because I was more than ready to take our relationship to the next step, and to do so required complete harmony amongst us.

I didn't know the extent of the dark things that troubled Gordy. I knew he had issues with his body image and his confidence that stemmed from being overweight as a child. I knew he used food as a Band-Aid. I also knew how hard he worked to overcome the worst of his struggles, to take them in hand so they didn't destroy him. But like with any addiction, it was a never-ending battle. He needed our support. He also needed to be able to trust in both of us, needed to find comfort and security with both me and Shannon, especially in the bedroom. I wanted to make love with him, to show him my heart, my desire for him, not to exacerbate his personal demons.

My guys missed the hell out of me, too, which they proved the moment I walked in the front door. I barely made it to the kitchen before Shannon swooped in and picked me up in his

strong arms. He carried me into the kitchen and sat me down on the countertop, nestling in close between my legs. His soft warm lips sucked kisses into the skin of my neck, making my stomach flip upside down.

“Gourd,” he called out.

A moment later, I heard Gordy’s footsteps thunder down the stairs. When he entered the kitchen, I hopped off the counter, preparing to greet him, but he beat me to it, taking me into his arms and sucking bruising kisses into the other side of my neck. I felt Shannon’s heat at my back, the stubble of his goatee scratching my neck. They feasted on me like vultures. It was a page torn from my hottest fantasy, where they tag-teamed me, not even bothering to take turns, just attacking simultaneously.

My dick clawed at my zipper, trying its damndest to break free.

I fisted a handful of hair on each of their heads, pulling them in closer, grinding my body back and forth between them as they pressed their erections against me.

“Missed you, sunshine,” Shannon rumbled.

“Mmm,” Gordy agreed.

“Not as much as I missed both of you. Did—” I would have said more but Gordy claimed my lips. When I could breathe again, I squeezed out, “Did you work your shit out? Because I’m really horny.”

Instead of answering me with words, Shannon raised his head, staring at Gordy with as much heat and hunger as he was showing me. Their mouths met over my shoulder in a blistering kiss that left me with no doubts as to the status of their relationship. Fuck, I could watch them kiss all day. The two hottest guys I knew were providing me with my own personal live-action porn show.

“Thank fuck. Let’s go upstairs.”

Shannon chuckled at my eagerness, but I couldn’t have cared less. I only had two hours before I had to open the shop,

and I wanted to spend some naked time with my men before I left them again.

Gordy trailed behind us, seemingly in no rush to get his hands on me. He sat on the opposite end of the bed, as far away from us as possible. I felt his eyes on us as Shannon peeled my T-shirt off.

He rubbed his thumbs over my pierced nipples, teasing them into hard buds. My balls tingled from the contact.

“I love these. So fucking sexy.” He turned me around so we faced Gordy as he continued to pluck at the metal barbells. The sensation made hot shivers swarm through my belly. “While you were gone, I laid Gordy down on this bed and tried my damndest to fit his huge cock in my mouth.”

Just imagining it made my dick rock hard. “How far did you get?”

“Only about halfway. I think you and I need more practice.”

“Definitely,” I breathed in a husky whisper.

Shannon slid his hands down my stomach, fingers splayed as he mapped my hip bones. He zeroed in on my zipper, lowering my jeans down my hips. His hand disappeared inside my cotton bikini briefs, his knuckles protruding through the thin fabric as he gripped my cock.

“He loved every second of my mouth on him. Do you know how I know that?” I shook my head, and he continued, “Because he came down my throat. And I swallowed every drop like a good boy. He loved that part, too.”

My eyes were glued to the movement of his hand. His grip was warm and firm. He cupped my balls, squeezing lightly, and I felt spasms in the nerves at the base of my spine. It turned me the fuck on having Gordy watch as Shannon took me apart.

“What else did you two do while I was gone?”

“Did you know he’s never had his hole licked? I was the first to ever rim him.”

“I’d have liked to have seen that,” I panted, finding it difficult to breathe and talk at the same time.

Shannon lips caressed my ear, my neck, spinning me into dizzy heat.

“Would you like to be the second?”

“Yes,” I hissed.

He dropped to his knees as he slid my pants down my legs, and I stepped out of them. I slid my hand inside my briefs and palmed my dick, stroking up and down in a slow pass. Shannon tugged my underwear aside, exposing my ass, and spread my cheeks apart with his thumbs. He was staring at my hole. Would he taste it? I wanted Gordy to watch the pleasure on my face as Shannon pushed his tongue inside my ass.

“Lean forward and put your hands on the bed.”

When I complied, he made my wish come true. His wicked tongue licked over my hole before sliding inside. In and out, a torturous repeat of the wet glide, a sensation that made the fire in my belly burn out of control.

A wet spot appeared on the front of my briefs as I continued to thrust into my hand.

Shannon bit my cheek. “Is he watching you?”

“He’s watching us.”

“Good. I bet he’d love to participate. Maybe he needs a special invitation. Why don’t you crawl up there and show him what he’s missing?”

That sounded like an excellent plan.

I crawled right up into his lap, straddling his thighs. He scooted back some so we didn’t fall off the edge. His hands cupped my ass, squeezing and kneading.

“Touch me,” I begged.

He hesitated, glancing at Shannon. I followed his gaze, looking over my shoulder to see him undressing. Gordy lowered his head and sucked my nipple between his lips. The constant light suction made the sensitive peaks burn. I felt it

all over my body. My skin came alive, all of my nerve endings firing like live wires. I wanted to be filled, craved the stretch and the burn. Reaching for the hem of his T-shirt, I lifted it over his back and shoulders, tugging it over his head. I dug my fingers into his back as he lowered his head to my other nipple, giving it the same attention.

Shannon's weight dipped the mattress as he crawled over to join us. He kneeled at my back with his hands on Gordy's shoulders.

"Lay down, Gourd."

He raised his head and looked into Shannon's eyes before complying. Shannon nudged me forward, and I covered Gordy's enormous frame with mine, sucking kisses onto his neck and chest, licking over his nipples. My tongue trailed down the valley between his pecs, lightly dusted with dark hair. I felt Shannon's heat over my back as he leaned over me, nipping at my neck.

"He likes to be touched, not looked at. Comfort him. Touch him. Show him how much you want him."

His deep sultry voice was like a wicked conscience in my ear, guiding me, giving me permission to do every filthy thing I'd fantasized about for weeks.

I traced the maze tattoo on his shoulder and neck with my tongue, following it up to the bright sun where I sucked a dark bruise over it, like a solar eclipse.

Gordy's breath became shallow and harsh. He closed his eyes and laid his head back, giving in to the pleasure I was wreaking over his body. Shannon's touch disappeared, and I heard a drawer close. Then he returned, and he worked my briefs down my hips, down my legs. I gladly kicked them off my feet and scooted down Gordy's body, tugging his sweats lower to expose his erection. Ignoring it, I kissed the mass of scars and marks that criss crossed his belly and hips. He tensed, his muscles contracting as his body went rigid beneath me.

“Love your soft skin. Your ink that I designed. Love your body, so full of strength.” I murmured the words between wet, sucking kisses and gentle nips. “Love this hair,” I said, rubbing the tip of my nose into the nest of dark curls that surrounded the base of his shaft. I traced the engorged veins of his cock with my tongue. “Love these thick veins.”

Gordy groaned, running his fingers through my hair. He bucked his hips, trying in vain to force his cock into my mouth.

“I’m gonna get it nice and wet and thick before I sit on it.”

“Fuck,” Gordy hissed as my tongue delved into his wet slit.

Shannon touched my hole with cold fingers as he smeared a dollop of butter through my crease. “I’m gonna open him up for you, Gourd.” He worked the tip of his thick finger past my rim, retreating and returning again and again until I was loosened up. “He never told me if he was a top or a bottom. What do you think?”

His breath was a hot tickle in my ear, making goosebumps race down my spine.

“I think both.”

“How can you tell?”

He slid his finger inside until it was buried, and then he curled it, touching my prostate. I jumped, accidentally taking more of Gordy’s cock than I could manage, and gagged. He cursed, and I pulled off to answer.

“Because he looks at me like you do, like he wants to own me. I know he wants to get inside me. But he looks at you just like I do, like he wants to be devoured.”

“I think you’re right,” he agreed, adding a second finger.

My ass felt stretched wide open. The cool butter soothed the burn. The opposite sensations felt amazing and just made me hornier, more desperate to be filled.

“Better add a third before you take his cock. It’s gonna split you wide open.”

I shrieked as he pushed a third finger inside my tight passage. His knuckle brushed over the sensitive bundle of nerves again, hitting it with each stroke and thrust of his fingers. My knees shook. I pushed back against his hand, fucking myself on his fingers as I did my best to suck Gordy off.

“When he pushes inside of you, I’m going to fuck him. Then he’ll feel us surrounding him on all sides.”

That made me even more desperate. Gordy opened his eyes and focused on Shannon. Was he nervous? Excited? It would be his first time being penetrated. I crawled up his body and kissed him.

“His dick feels so good when it’s buried deep inside you. You’re gonna love it.”

“Nah, he won’t even notice I slipped it in,” he teased.

Gordy smiled, and I figured it must be an inside joke. How could he not notice Shannon’s thick cock stretching his virgin ass? It would be like shoving a pipe through a pinhole.

“Question, gentlemen. Are we using condoms? I’m good either way.” I shared a look with Gordy, coming to an unspoken agreement. We both shook our heads. “Okay, no condoms. Aries, lay down on your side, head on the pillow. Gordy’s gonna spoon you.”

I scrambled up to the headboard and turned on my side. A moment passed before Gordy hugged me from behind. He hitched his leg over my thigh, his hand gripping my hip, and lined his cock up with my hole, barely pressing against my entrance. I rocked in sync with him, the fat head of his cock working its way deeper inside me with each thrust of our hips. My rim was on fire as he stretched the skin taut and thin. He kissed my neck, my ear, whispering assurances and promises as he tunneled deeper into my ass.

I was gone for him, in my head and my heart.

I guessed when Shannon found his hole because he gasped in my ear, choking on his next breath.

“It only hurts at first, then it’s incredible,” I promised him.

“It’s just his fingers,” he rasped.

The force of his thrusting intensified as Shannon finger-fucked him. Gordy wrapped his hand around my cock and stroked me in sync with the pounding of his hips. He groaned loudly, and I knew Shannon was entering him.

If only I could watch! That would be amazing, to sit back and stroke myself as I watched them fuck.

“Easy, Gourd. Let me in,” Shannon whispered.

Gordy stilled, and I waited for him to become accustomed to the invasion before resuming his pace.

“That’s it. Fuck, you’re tight,” he hissed. “I fucking dreamed of this for so long.” He sucked in a sharp breath and then sighed in a heavy rush of pleasure. “Dreamed of you wanting my cock. Of mine being the only one ever to fill you.”

I glanced over my shoulder to see Shannon curled around Gordy’s body much the same as Gordy was curled around mine. Reaching my arm back, I covered Shannon’s hand on Gordy’s hip so we were all connected.

“The harder I fuck into you, the harder you fuck Aries.”

Gordy whined in the back of his throat and resumed his thrusting. His movements became frenzied, increasing in speed and strength. He nailed my prostate again and again until I was sure I was going to come, before changing his pace, making my orgasms recede. He was edging me unintentionally, so lost to his own pleasure.

“Steady, Gourd. Aries and I will stay still. We’ll let you set the pace. Fuck into him and then push back on my dick.”

Gordy’s breathing grew erratic, his hand on my hip felt clammy. He was working himself up into a heart-stopping orgasm, and he was taking me with him. I removed my hand from his hip and fisted my cock, pumping furiously.

“Not gonna last,” I panted.

“Me either,” Gordy grated in a harsh breath.

“Harder, Gourd. Take me with you,” Shannon hissed.

Gordy growled, a raw and primal sound, as he emptied his load deep in my ass. He continued to push into me from the force of Shannon's thrusts until I came into my fist with a shout. Shannon finished moments later, cursing sharply.

"Fuck! That's it. Fu—" He laughed hoarsely before cursing again. It must have felt incredible.

Gordy lowered his thigh from my hip, and we lay still, struggling to catch our breath as our heartbeats slowed. As winded as he sounded, Gordy still had the energy to press soft kisses to my neck and shoulder. I smiled and closed my eyes, reveling in the blissful peace between us.

With my determination and my refusal to settle for just one of them, I had created this moment, this perfect union. I was willing to bet money that not one of us had any regrets.

Shannon was the first to speak. "I wasn't sure how to do this at first, with the three of us at once, but now I can imagine a hundred different positions I want to try."

Gordy laughed and rolled into me, and I assumed he was separating his body from Shannon.

"Why don't you let my poor abused ass recover first."

"Oh, so you noticed I was inside you?"

With a laugh, he answered, "Oh, I noticed, and I was begging for more."

Shannon smirked. "Of course you were. Just like I predicted you would." He leaned over Gordy and pressed a kiss to my shoulder. "Love you, Aries."

"Love you both," I said with a contented sigh.

SHANNON

WHEN GORDY CAME out of the bathroom, fresh from his shower, I was waiting to ambush him. He eyed me warily as I sat propped against the headboard, sipping my coffee.

“What?”

“Whatcha got planned today?”

“Errands. Visit Ma. Why?”

“Thought maybe you’d want to come with me to visit my Pops.” I studied him over the rim of my cup as he moved around the room, choosing clothes from his dresser. “Also, I need to stop by my condo and get some things.”

“Have you decided what you’re going to do with it?”

“I’m not sure. I could sell it, or I can keep it and lease it out.”

Gordy frowned as he took a seat on the edge of the mattress near my feet, bending to slide his socks on.

“Is there a reason you want to hold onto it?”

He avoided meeting my eyes as he asked, which told me everything.

“You think I’m keeping it as a backup plan? An out?”

“Are you?”

I set my mug on the nightstand and sat up. Up close like this, I could smell the lemon verbena soap he’d used that Aries’s mother made.

“Gourd, I made a promise to you and I meant it. There’s no going back. Me and you are forever. More than anything, I want Aries to be a part of that, but he hasn’t given us that forever vow yet. No matter what happens with the three of us in the future, nothing is going to change between you and I.”

He nodded, still not meeting my eyes. I slid my hand along his jaw, gently turning his face toward mine. “We’re forever, Graham Jr. You’re stuck with me for life.”

Leaning in, I captured his lips, sliding my tongue between them. Gordy fell into the kiss easily, giving me full access to his greedy mouth. I pulled away and gazed into his beautiful green eyes.

“I love you, Gordita. Waited so long to be able to say that out loud.”

His lips quirked. “Love you, too.”

“It’s been two weeks now that we’ve been together, hiding our relationship from our family. It’s time. Come with me to Pop’s today.”

“What about Aries? He has to work.”

“Pops knows Aries very well. They’re friends. It’s not like he needs an introduction. This really isn’t about him. It’s about me and you hiding our feelings for each other for years from the man who raised us and loves us most. It feels right that you and I go there today and tell him in person, to make sure he understands.”

He nodded without saying anything.

“And then we can make plans to take Aries to Ma’s next week for dinner.”

His head snapped up, his eyes growing wide. I smirked, and he narrowed his gaze, glaring at me.

“Let’s get moving. We’ve got a lot to do today, and I’m in the mood to stop in for some fresh ink.” I climbed out of bed, heading for the bathroom. “Are you going out with the twins tonight?”

“Not sure. I’ve blown them off for the past two weeks. They’re getting suspicious.”

“Maybe we should all start going together. The only reason I ever avoided hanging out with you all was because of you and me. Since that’s no longer an issue, I don’t see the problem with all three of us going.”

“Wow, you’re just in a big hurry to put it all out there, aren’t you?”

“Stop being a wuss and put your shoes on. I’ll be out in a minute,” I said, shutting the bathroom door behind me.

“GET OUT OF THE TRUCK, GORDO.”

His mumbled curse didn’t make it sound like he was excited. He slammed the door shut and trudged up the wet pathway to my pop’s house. I caught up with him, reaching for his hand. He pulled away and walked ahead of me.

“Oh, it’s like that?” *Fucking wuss.*

He rapped his knuckles on the door, and by the time my Pops opened it, we were standing shoulder to shoulder. Graham opened the door and paused, staring back and forth between us.

“Did someone die?”

“No, Pop.”

“Not yet,” Gordy muttered under his breath.

“April fool’s day?”

“Nope. Quit guessing and let us in. We’re getting wet out here.”

He moved aside, and we entered the foyer, heading straight for the living room.

“Why don’t you both take a seat and tell me what this is all about. It must be good for you two to show up here on your

day off looking like...buddies.”

Gordy and I both sat on the love seat while my Pops sat across from us on the couch.

“Where’s Kelley?”

“He took Glitter for a walk.”

“A walk?” I asked, my confusion showing on my face. “It’s raining outside.”

“Well then, it’s a good thing Glitter is wearing a raincoat and galoshes.” He smirked.

I was dumbfounded. I looked to Gordy but he was no help, just shook his head, silently telling me to leave it alone. But how could I? A cat wearing a raincoat, taking a walk in the rain? That was like parallel universe shit.

“Pops, how—”

“You agreed to leave it alone, Shannon. Don’t start with me.”

He had me there.

“What did you two want to tell me? Whatever it is, I get the feeling it’s a lot more interesting than a cat wearing a raincoat.”

Possibly, but probably not.

Again, I glanced at Gordy, wondering how to begin, and again, he was no help. He glared back with wide eyes, basically telling me this was my shit show and I was in charge.

“Let me guess,” my Pops said, interrupting my thoughts. “You two were both coincidentally on your way here at the same time and ran into each other at the front door?”

“No, it’s not like that. Gordy and I, we’re here together.”

“Well, that’s great,” he boomed jovially. “You two are finally starting to act like cousins then. It’s only taken what, twenty years?”

“No, Pops, I don’t mean like that.” I reached for his hand, sliding my fingers through Gordy’s. This time, he accepted my

touch. “We’re *together*.”

His gaze dropped to our joined hands, looking puzzled. “You’re dating?”

“Not really. I wouldn’t call it dating. It’s more than that. What I feel for Gordy is...”

“Is what? An anomaly? Just last week you despised each other.”

“I fell in love with Gordy a long time ago. I’ve loved him everyday since, even if I didn’t show it or want to admit it to myself. But what matters is I know it now and so does he. I wouldn’t say dating because what I feel for Gordy is everlasting. I will love him until my last day. And from now on, that’s how it’s going to be, me and him.”

He looked at Gordy, waiting for him to speak up, to confirm or deny my words. He only nodded.

“No, I’m going to need more than that, son. Tell me what’s going on between you two.”

Gordy swallowed before answering. “Everything he said is true. I fell in love with him a long time ago, when we were just kids. And for me, those feelings haven’t changed in all this time.”

“So then, what went wrong between you?”

“I had a decision to make, and I made the wrong one. I did something I knew would hurt him, to make it easier on him to accept my choice. I thought I was doing him a favor.”

My Pops assessed me with shrewd eyes. “What choice did you have to make, Shannon?”

“I thought I had to choose between him and you, between having a family or falling in love.”

“And you made the wrong one, huh?”

“Pops, I would have done anything to be a Carrick, to have you, live with you, have you treat me like a son. Even if it meant... I didn’t know I was going to lose him. I thought I would still have him as my best friend, my brother.”

“You fool,” he hissed. “You never had to choose. You could have had all of us. I’d have loved you like a son no matter who you loved.” He leaned forward and placed his hand on Gordy’s knee. “I owe you an apology. All these years, I thought you were just being stubborn and mean, hating on your cousin for no good reason. I thought this animosity between you was petty bullshit. I had no idea he hurt you so badly. I’m sorry, Junior.”

“S’ok,” he mumbled.

“Wait. What about Aries?”

“We’re in love with him, both Gordy and I. We’re all in this together.”

He scrubbed his face. “Is this all because of him? Did he do this? Hell, if I’d known you two had buried all these feelings, I’d have locked you in a room together years ago.”

Gordy snickered, and I said, “That’s exactly what he did. He locked us in a room together until we made up.”

“Well then, I have a lot to thank him for. All together, huh? How does that even work?”

“So far so good, old man.”

The front door slammed shut. “Oh my God, it’s raining cats and dogs out there, no pun intended,” Kelley said with a breezy laugh.

He sailed into the living room with Glitter under his arm, wearing identical yellow raincoats, stopping short when he saw us.

“Oh, hi, boys. I didn’t know there would be two of you when I saw Shannon’s truck outside. Sorry I missed you.”

I smirked at his use of the word boys, as if we weren’t older than him and in our thirties. He shrugged out of his raincoat and carried it to the laundry room, reappearing minutes later with a fluffy towel, and the kitten still tucked under his arm.

“Come join us,” my Pops suggested.

Kelley flopped down beside him, towel drying Glitter's white fur into a floofy halo. He wore white jeans that looked painted on with a pink blouse dotted with white paw prints. Rain or shine, I'd never known the beautiful dancer to look less than his best.

"Our walk took longer than expected because this little princess sidestepped every puddle."

"Imagine that," my Pops teased, "a cat who doesn't like water." He shared a covert wink with me, and I smiled.

"So what did I miss?"

Graham slid his arm around Kelley's waist. "The boys have something they want to share with you."

"Oh," his face brightened, "I hope it's happy news."

"Why don't I just give you the short and sweet version," I suggested.

I leaned in close and tilted Gordy's face sideways to meet my lips, brushing my mouth over his in a soft caress.

"That about sums it up," my father muttered as Kelley squealed like a game show contestant.

"You're together!" He stomped his feet in a mad rush, clapping and squealing some more. "Graham! Look! Your boys are together!"

"I see it, Fancy."

"I need all the details! When, where, and how."

The *details* took another thirty minutes. By the time we left, Kelley was busy planning our wedding. It wouldn't surprise me if he asked Glitter to be our flower girl.

"I don't know about you, but I'm ready to go see our boy," I said, hustling him out the door.

"Bullshit, you just want some fresh ink."

"I want both."

I PUSHED through the front door of Rainbow Ink carrying a cardboard tray of iced coffees. After all, I couldn't show up empty-handed, not when Aries had given me so much. With not one, but two amazing guys in my life, I had so much to be thankful for. There was no such thing as spoiling them too much.

He rushed right over and greeted me with a kiss. "I don't know which looks better, the coffee or you two."

Gordy stole his next kiss, nibbling on his lip until he made Aries giggle. "You busy?"

"Nope. I just finished filling in some color on a sleeve, but I don't have another client scheduled for two more hours. Hopefully, I'll get a walk in."

"You did, I just walked in. Wanna do me?"

"Yes, but probably not the best of ideas to do it here."

"I meant a tattoo, hornball."

"I knew that." Aries took a sip of his coffee and smiled, walking toward his station. Gordy and I followed him. When he was seated in his black swivel chair, he asked, "Hopefully nothing too sadistic this time. No more knives through hearts."

"Nope, nothing like that." I still wasn't sure how I felt about that tattoo. It was a painful reminder of just how close I'd been to letting Gordy go for good. On the other hand, I'd only have been lying to myself. I could never let him go. Which is why his ink sat right over my heart.

"I want a ram's head, right here." I pointed to the blank space to the left of the heart and knife tattoo.

Aries winced. "Oof, over the ribs? That's gonna hurt."

"No pain, no gain," I joked. "Gordy can hold my hand."

Gordy rolled his eyes at me and scoffed before taking a sip of his coffee.

Aries organized his equipment, snapped on his gloves, and turned on his gun. The familiar buzz of his needle was a comfort to me, and I closed my eyes and zoned out as it bit into my skin again and again. About an hour passed before Aries turned off his gun and removed his gloves. He swiped my skin with a cold antiseptic wipe and sat back.

“What do you think?”

He held up a hand mirror so I could inspect his talent. The orange and red shading in the horns popped against my skin, looking like fire, while the charcoal gray head looked menacing and fierce. *I loved it.*

“It’s gorgeous, just like you. Now I have a reminder of you to carry with me all day, right next to my heart.”

Aries smiled with a puzzled look on his face. “Me? How do I represent a ram?”

“It’s your sign. Aries. You were named for it.” I could be romantic on occasion.

Aries bit his lip, swallowing his smile as he busied himself cleaning up his station.

“What? You don’t like it?”

He hesitated, looking guilty. “Babe, it’s really sweet of you. I love the gesture. But—”

“But what?”

“My name isn’t Aries. I wasn’t named for my birth sign. I’m a cancer.”

“What in the fuck is your name then?” How was I sleeping with a guy whose name I didn’t know?

“It’s short for Aristotle. My mother loves Greek philosophy.”

I glanced at Gordy, whose shoulders were shaking with mirth. He was laughing at me. They both were. Because I was a buffoon, who’d just inked the wrong thing into his skin.

“Aristotle. Gotcha.”

“Hey,” his tone was soothing as he smoothed a bandage over my ribs. “It was incredibly sweet of you. For what it’s worth, I love it. And I love you.”

Ignoring Gordy’s chuckles, I said, “So do I. It’s what I call you, and it reminds me of you. You are a little bit like a ram. You get an idea in your head and butt your way through the crowd until you make it to the finish line.”

He leaned in and pressed a kiss to my lips, handing my shirt to me. “You’re absolutely right. It’s how I got the three of us together.”

Gordy refused to be silent any longer. His laughter grew louder. “Stuff it, Gordo! He likes it.”

Tears streamed down his cheeks. “You’re one of a kind, Shannon.”

“Better fucking believe it,” I mumbled as I pulled my shirt over my head. “What time are you closing up tonight?”

“Around seven, why?”

“Gordo and I got somewhere we want to take you.”

“Oh, count me in.” He stood and stretched, arching his back and showing off his slender frame, drawing mine and Gordy’s eyes like a moth to a flame. “Now, romantic gesture aside, if you really want to give me a gift, you’ll get your dicks pierced. Both of you.”

You could’ve knocked me over with a feather. Gordy, too, from the look of him. *Hell no*. “You’re not coming anywhere near my dick with a needle. And Gordy is big enough without adding another half inch of metal to the end.” He agreed, nodding along. “You’re cute, but not that cute. It’s never gonna happen.”

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, I asked, “Why are we doing this again?” Yeah, I was whining. Pleading. But come on, he was poised over my naked lap with a thick-ass needle!

“Because it’s his dick,” he clarified, pointing to Aries, “and if he wants it pierced, that’s what he’s going to get,” Gordy said with a satisfied smirk.

“Well, your dick belongs to me, and I want to see it pierced. So you’re next.”

Gordy’s eyes burned with challenge. “And who does his dick belong to?”

“Both of us, but I like it just the way it is. And what if I wanted *you* to touch my dick.” My eyes gleamed with invitation.

“I’ll have to ask him for permission to play with his toys, I guess,” Gordy teased.

With a sarcastic snort, I asked, “You always have to be difficult, don’t you?”

“Some things never change,” he said with a smile before dropping his pants and climbing onto the chair next to me.

“I can’t concentrate seeing the both of you laid out for me like this, wanting me to pierce you.” Aries licked his lips like he was thirsty. It would have turned me on, if I wasn’t scared shitless.

“We’re talking about my dick, here. You’re holding pliers and a huge-ass needle. I’m gonna need you to concentrate real hard, Aries.”

“Relax,” Gordy snickered. “He’s obsessed with your dick. He’s not going to maim it.”

Aries brushed his hand over Gordy’s soft but thick cock. “I’m obsessed with your dick as well.”

“Oh yeah? Maybe you should convince me,” he suggested, cupping his balls and tugging them away from his body.

Aries chuckled. “Take it easy Gordy, I can’t do this if you get hard.”

Fuck both of them. “Can we please focus on *my* dick right now?”

There was absolutely no chance of me getting hard whatsoever, not with the fluorescent lighting reflecting off the very sharp tip of that needle.

GORDY

“PULL IN THERE,” I directed Shannon, pointing to the Riverside Convenience Store.

“You thirsty?”

“No, I want to stock up on snacks for our sleepover tonight.”

“Of course you do,” he said with a chuckle. A fond smile teased his lips.

The idea of returning to the shed overnight filled me with all kinds of nostalgia, and I was nervous, to say the least. Not sure why, because if I wanted Shannon to put his hands down my pants this time, I was pretty sure he was on board. He pulled up in front of the door and went inside to purchase a twelve pack of YooHoo, snack-sized chips in various flavors, some candy, and a box of Twinkies.

It would be just like old times. With the addition of Aries.

He would probably think we were out of our minds trying to romanticize a bug-infested crumbling shed, and we were. Maybe it only made sense to Shannon and me, but it was important that we have one last night together in the place that meant so much to us growing up. We’d spent countless hours there learning so much about each other, falling in love, forging a bond that would last the rest of our lives. I climbed back into the truck and buckled my seatbelt.

“You good? Got everything you need?” I nodded. “You didn’t forget the Twinkies, did you?”

“You know I didn’t.”

“You know I still love them Twinkies.” His pale blue eyes flashed with humor.

“Are we talking about men or snack food?”

“So fucking clever,” he whispered in a husky voice as he leaned in to nip my bottom lip with his teeth. “I wouldn’t exactly describe you as a twink, Gordita, and you know how crazy I am about *you*.”

A soft teasing brush of his lips across mine made me forget all about his obsession with twinkish men. When we returned home, I began to pack an overnight bag for us, making sure to include some things for Aries as well.

Shannon pulled out his phone and plunked down on the couch. I set the backpacks and duffle bags by the door and sat down next to him. His lips quirked into a smile as he read Aries’s text. Leaning over, I stole a peek at his screen.

“Who you flirting with?”

“Why, you jealous? By the way, your boyfriend tattooed a sun today and it made him think of you,” he said, followed by a fake retching sound.

“I need to text him and tell him we’ll pick him up straight from work.”

Shannon leaned over to peek at my screen, his handsome face pulling into a scowl.

“You have me saved in your phone as dickwad?”

Fuck, I should have changed that. Instead, I played it off with a shrug.

“Why, what do you have me saved as?”

“Gordo. What else?”

“You want me to change it to Shannon?” I asked with a straight face.

“Gee, you think? Do you want to sleep next to a guy you think of as dickwad?”

“I’ll always think of you as dickwad,” I said with a smile, almost laughing.

“Are we going out with the twins first?”

“Yeah, might as well. That way we can eat something. I’m not making a meal out of Twinkies and Twizzlers, no matter how much I want to recreate our youth.”

THE SMELL of beer and fried food would never grow old to me, no matter how many times I walked into the sports bar. It had been my second home since I was old enough to drink legally, and it always would be. Granted, I served better food at the lounge, but the high-end cocktail bar didn’t feel as familiar as my uncle’s place.

I spotted the twins seated in the back, near the pool tables.

“Gordy, long time no see. Nice of you to finally join us.”

“It’s been like three weeks, Carson. Don’t be so melodramatic.”

A moment later, Aries joined us. “Hey, guys,” he greeted with a breezy smile.

“Hey, you brought reinforcements,” Carson said, smacking me on the back.

It was Aries who answered. “Sure did. I was told there would be a pitcher of beer and greasy wings doused in hot sauce, so how could I refuse?”

I pulled out a chair for him and was pleasantly surprised that for once, I wasn’t dreading the night ahead of me. Wishing I were somewhere else, with someone else. My guy was sitting right next to me, and there was nowhere else I wanted to be.

“How’s it going with that guy,” Carlisle asked. “You know, the one you said you liked. You were competing with some douche for his attention.”

If the floor had opened up and swallowed me whole, I couldn’t have been any happier. My cheeks heated with

embarrassment, but Aries just laughed.

“I would say he’s still competing for his attention,” Aries joked.

I nudged him with my shoulder, rolling my eyes. “It’s going great.”

“So you’re dating him, then?”

“You could say that.”

“Why didn’t you bring him?” Carson asked.

“Who says I didn’t.”

Carson peered over my shoulder. “Is that Shannon at the bar, talking to Uncle G?”

Carlisle nodded. “Be cool. Don’t start any drama,” he said with a pointed look in my direction.

Aries nudged my foot with his under the table. This kind of shit was probably entertaining to him, but it made my stomach roil with nausea. Not only did I hate being the center of attention, I hated people having opinions about my personal life. I didn’t like feeling judged, even by my family.

“Hey, guys,” Shannon greeted.

He placed a frosty bottle of beer in front of Aries and kissed him on the cheek, then he placed one in front of me. But instead of kissing my cheek, he took hold of my chin, looking directly into my eyes before cracking a smile and kissing my lips.

The twins froze, waiting for my reaction.

I grabbed the back of Shannon’s head and pulled him down for a second kiss.

“What in the fuck is going on? What am I seeing? Are you seeing this, too?” Carson asked his brother. “What did I just see?”

“A reconciliation?” Carlisle ventured.

“No, a reconciliation is a handshake. A pat on the back. Possibly even a hug if you really liked the guy. With these

two, we wouldn't even get that. Why are their lips touching?"

Carlisle shrugged, and Aries laughed.

Shannon grabbed a seat on the other side of Aries, sliding his arm around Aries's shoulders.

"Have I introduced you to my boyfriend, Aries?"

"We've met," Carson said without humor. He lifted an arched brow, waiting for an explanation.

"Have you met my other boyfriend, Gordo?"

Carson's green eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You're full of shit, Shannon."

"Ask him," he challenged.

"Gordy, what's going on?"

It was so like the twins to approach the situation at opposite ends. While Carson blustered and demanded answers, Carlisle just simply waited patiently, asking nicely.

"It's true. We're all in a...situation together."

"What's the situation," Carson demanded.

"A situation," Aries explained, "is when three guys who all like each other share a bed."

"So you're all sleeping together?" Carson folded his arms across his chest.

"You bet your sweet ass we are," Shannon gloated.

"How do you two go from hating each other to sucking each other off?" Carlisle smacked his brother in the shoulder. "What? Don't hit me, Carly, it's a good question."

"We had some shit to work out. And we worked it out. Enough said. Who's buying the next round?" Shannon asked.

"No, you can't just leave it at that. We have a million questions. Don't we, Carly?"

"I don't. I think he pretty much said it all."

My uncle carried over two pitchers of beer and set them on the table. He slid his arms around me and Aries's shoulders.

“Did you share the good news yet?”

“You knew?” Carson asked disbelievingly.

“Found out today.”

“Did you tell your mother yet?” Carson asked, looking satisfied and superior.

“Not yet,” I grunted. “Maybe next week at dinner.”

“Oh, I’m going. We’re going, Carly.”

“I don’t remember hearing you be invited,” Shannon pointed out.

“Don’t care, I’m not gonna miss it.”

I dropped my head into my hand and pinched the bridge of my nose. There was no way in hell Carson was getting past my mother’s front door. On any other night, my mother would love to have him at her table, but I’d be damned if I let him turn our good news into a spectator sport.

With one pitcher of beer down, Shannon pushed his chair back and stood. “Come on, Aries. Come and dance with me.”

Aries stood with a smile on his face. He turned to me. “You coming, Gordy?”

Shannon smirked, shaking his head. “Gordy doesn’t dance, but he can watch.”

He was right, I didn’t dance, ever. I had no rhythm and too much self-awareness to feel comfortable moving my body in front of others. But I felt the bitter sting of disappointment as I watched them move together, with their hands all over each other, touching, grinding, without a care for their audience. I wished I could be so free. It made me feel a tad bit better when both of their eyes found me, boring into me as they held each other close, keeping me connected, even at a distance.

Carson followed my gaze, a wistful smile in his far away eyes. “I can’t imagine being with two guys, unless it was a clone of Ryan. There’s nobody better than him, and I would just end up feeling bad for the third guy.”

Shaking my head, I shared a smile with Carlisle. I was glad he felt that way about his fiancé. To see him so happy and in love was such a complete reversal from the man who used to be a man whore. And probably a very lonely one, I would imagine.

“Yeah, too bad for me. They probably don’t love me as much as they do each other.”

“They better!” he defended, then he looked over at me and smiled, looking sheepish. “Oh, you were messing with me. I see now.”

What a goofball, and so easy to tease.

Finishing the last of my beer, I cleared my throat. “I’m glad this worked out for everyone, and we’ll definitely do it again next week, but we have to cut out early tonight.”

“How come?” Carlisle asked.

“Got a date planned with my men.”

ARIES WAS BRIMMING with excitement and smiles. “So, where are we going? You were very mysterious about the details.”

“You’ll see.”

A few more miles down the road, winding through the back streets of our old neighborhood, Shannon pulled up beside the curb.

“What’s this?”

“Looks like a park,” I said with sarcasm.

“This is the same park we jogged to. Are we getting out?” Aries wanted to know.

“We’re getting out,” Shannon confirmed as he opened his door.

I grabbed the backpack and duffel bag and hopped out. Shannon opened the back door to retrieve the sleeping bags.

“Guys,” Aries ventured, “it looks a lot like a sleepover, but all I see is a lot of...nothing. I don’t see a damn thing.”

With a smirk on his lips, Shannon teased, “I don’t know, I see a lot of rust and dirt. Definitely a lot of weeds. How about you, Gordo? What do you see?”

Deciding to play along, I added, “I see a good time.”

I dumped our bags over the fence and did my best to climb over without snagging my jeans. Shannon followed, making it look effortless. He held out his hand to Aries.

“Come on, hop the fence.”

“Oohh, tetanus and trespassing, you guys really know how to do romance right.”

I snickered as Shannon helped him jump over, then picked up our gear and headed to the shed.

We had to climb another fence to get to it, and Aries looked less and less thrilled with each barrier to the looming shit-shack beyond. I wrenched the door open on squeaky hinges. It hung at an odd angle, due to the deterioration and rot of the door frame.

“Smells like home,” Shannon joked.

“Smells like something died in here,” Aries corrected.

I crossed over to the couch and picked up the cushions, banging them against the wall of the shed to knock the dust and debris from them. Then, I spread a sleeping bag over the couch cushions and plopped down, reaching for my backpack.

“Is this seriously it? This is where you wanted to take me? Am I missing something?”

Shannon sat down and tugged Aries onto his lap. “Maybe we should explain why this place is special to us.”

“Sooner, rather than later,” Aries quipped.

“You sound very judgy for a guy who used to sleep in the back of a hay wagon,” I noted.

“Hey, that was romantic. This place—” he looked around, his face scrunched with distaste, “not so much.”

“It has its perks,” Shannon pointed out. “We all have to sleep real close to each other.”

Aries turned sideways on Shannon’s lap so he could look into his eyes. “Why are we here, Shannon,” he asked softly.

Shannon took my hand, maybe he was seeking strength from me, or he just needed the connection.

“For a long time, this was my home away from home. Gordy and I used to hide out here. I can’t even guess how many nights we slept here.”

The distaste on Aries’s face seemed to morph into sympathy. “Why?”

“My dad was an asshole. A drunk. He liked to communicate with his fists.” Shannon’s gaze searched the interior of the shed, most likely remembering the violence that drove him here so many nights. “I never even had to lie and tell him I was sleeping over at Gordy’s. He never asked why I was gone.”

“Ha! I lied my ass off.” I laid my palm facing up on Aries’s knee. He covered it with his hand, and then Shannon laid his over the top of ours.

Shannon’s eyes found mine. “Does your mother know you kissed her with that lying mouth?”

“I figured you were worth it, but she never found out.”

“So what did you all do here,” Aries asked, looking around the dismal interior.

“Listen to music,” I said, pulling out my phone to search up a playlist. I’d downloaded a lot of the songs I used to play for Shannon.

“Eat snacks,” Shannon added. “Dream about touching each other,” he said, leering at me. A playful smile teased his lips.

I hit play and loud rock-metal music filled the small space.

“Damn, I used to listen to that shit? I must’ve been really angry.”

He laughed at himself in a self-deprecating way, but it wasn’t funny to me. Shannon had been angry, abandoned, hurt, and more, and I was the only person he had reached out to. And I’d abandoned him and hurt him, too. Granted, for different reasons than his father had, and his mother, but, nevertheless, I’d walked away from him.

For selfish reasons. For love. Self-preservation, really.

I turned the music off and set my phone aside. “This place, it isn’t much. But it was all he had. It was Shannon’s salvation, his safe place. For that reason, it will always be special to us.”

Shannon dug my hand out from the bottom of the pile and laced his fingers through mine, squeezing my knuckles with his. “You’re wrong, Gordo. This wasn’t my safe place. You were. You were my salvation.”

Tears stung my eyes. His words stirred up uncomfortable feelings within me that I didn’t know how to process.

Salvation. Safety.

It was all I ever wanted to be for him. And then I wanted more. And it all fell apart. His touch reminded me that those feelings were in our past—water under the bridge. We’d moved past that and were united now, staring down a beautiful, bright future together.

Shannon leaned in, and I met him halfway, fusing our mouths together, sliding my tongue along his in a kiss that gave me confidence about where we now stood.

When he pulled away, he continued to stare into my eyes.

“I love you, Gordita.”

“Love you, too, dickwad.”

“Listen, I love both of you, and I love that this place has meaning to you, but isn’t a trip down memory lane enough? Do we really have to sleep here overnight?”

Reaching down, I grabbed an extra sleeping bag and plunked it on his lap. “Better get comfortable, we got a long night ahead of us. Anyone want a YooHoo?”

We laid like we used to, at opposite ends of the couch, with our legs tangled together. It was a tighter fit now that our bodies had grown much larger. Not to mention, that we had a third partner. Aries stretched out in front of Shannon, like the little spoon. His knees and arms dangling off the edge of the cushion. He continuously checked the floor, probably for bugs and rodents, and although I was extremely uncomfortable, I smiled, feeling a rush of euphoric nostalgia. Shannon’s father was no longer a threat to his safety. I no longer had to wonder if he liked boys or how he would feel about the fact that I did. I didn’t have to lay awake all night hoping he would touch me, even accidentally. I was in love with two men, and they were both here with me now, and that made this place a whole lot more palatable.

Aries jumped up suddenly, accidentally kicking Shannon and I. “Was that a rat? I just saw a big fat rat! In the corner,” he said, pointing. He shoved his socked feet into his loafers. “I love you, both of you, but I’m out. Thanks for the walk down memory lane, but I’m going home.” Within seconds, he was outside of the shed, the door slamming behind him.

Shannon chuckled, sitting up and stretching. “I know for a fact it was a rat because I saw it earlier while we were talking.”

“You were wise not to point it out.”

“Gordo?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you. And I’m going to spend the rest of my life loving you. But he’s right, this place fucking sucks and my dick hurts. Let’s go home.”

Home. With Shannon and Aries. That sounded perfect.

“I still can’t believe he talked us into piercing them.”

“I can. He could talk me into anything.”

ARIES

SHANNON AND GORDY might be dreading this evening like a prostate exam, but I was rather looking forward to it. I'd heard so many stories about the woman who had raised them, and I was excited to finally meet her. Despite their reservations, I thought Gina was going to receive the news of her boys' long-awaited reconciliation and subsequent relationship with open arms.

How could she not?

The two most important people in her life were most important to each other, in love with each other. That had to be cause for celebration.

Gordy chuffed. "Wipe that smile off your pretty face. This isn't Harmony Grove, where cousins are allowed to love cousins and all disagreements are settled with a blow job."

"You'd be surprised how effective that philosophy is," I said with a wink.

Shannon chuckled. He got it. "They call it *Harmony* Grove for a reason, I guess," he surmised.

"I'm gonna be sick," Gordy grumbled, rubbing his stomach. He looked more pale than green, which concerned me since he was driving.

"Do we need to pull over?"

Shannon dismissed me with a smirk. "Don't worry about Gordita. He'll be fine. Just being a big scaredy cat."

Gordy glared at him. “Fine, tough guy. You be the one to explain it to her then.”

I leaned forward between the seats and whispered, “If you pull over, maybe I can *harmonize* your current mood.”

Reluctantly, a smile peeked through the corners of his frown.

As we crested the hill that led down his mother’s street, Gordy turned off the radio. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, like frantic staccato beats of nervous energy. I laid my hand on his shoulder, squeezing reassuringly. Shannon captured his hand and raised it to his lips. He pressed a kiss to each of Gordy’s knuckles.

“Just leave it to me, Gourd. I want you to try and relax. Deep breaths.”

“Easier said than done,” he grumbled.

“I know, but try. I don’t like seeing you get all twisted up like this.”

It wasn’t often the two of them went soft on each other, but when they did, they absolutely melted me. For the rest of my life, no matter what I accomplished, my greatest achievement would always be bringing them together.

He rolled into the driveway slower than molasses dripped from a spoon and turned the truck off, making no move to reach for the door handle. Again, I leaned forward and squeezed his shoulder.

“Come on, Gordy. Introduce me to your mom. I can’t wait to show her how much I love you.”

His eyes, so green and full of heart, found mine in the rear view mirror. He swallowed hard and then smiled and covered my hand with his.

“Love you, too.”

“Hey, what about me?” Shannon asked.

“I hope my mom kicks your butt for tossing me aside so many years ago.” His smile was playful and devious,

reminding me of his sarcastic side that I fell in love with.

We approached the front door, and Shannon knocked.

“Boys! Come in!”

Gina hugged and kissed her boys before turning her attention to me.

“Are you the boyfriend or the roommate?”

I glanced between them, unsure how they wanted to spill the beans. Surprisingly, it was Gordy, who spoke up.

“Both.” When his mother looked confused, he clarified, “Ma, this is Aries.”

Gina gave me a bright smile. “Oh my stars, Shannon is dating Gordy’s roommate. Is this why you all showed up together? Have you been spending time together? Getting along like brothers should?”

Shit. She was making it harder for them to come clean.

“Let’s go sit down at the table,” Shannon suggested.

I followed them into a bright white and blue kitchen. It was large enough that it had a dining nook. The table was set with a casserole dish, a salad bowl, a bread basket, and four plates.

“I got this recipe from Gordy,” she explained. “But somehow, my sauce never thickens like his does.”

She removed the tinfoil cover, and I saw a pan of cheesy lasagna that looked divine. Gina used a spatula to cut it into generous squares and served each of us.

“This looks delicious, Ms. Carrick.”

“Oh no, you don’t,” she scolded. “You call me Gina. Now, tell me everything.” She gave Shannon a soft smile, and I could see how much she loved him. “You look so happy. I’ve waited and prayed so long for you to find your special someone. Now I just have to work on Gordy.”

The three of us exchanged looks, and I half expected Gordy to blurt it out. But it was Shannon who took the lead.

“Save your prayers. Gordy found his special someone.”

Gina’s gaze landed on her son with wide eyes. “Gordy? Why didn’t you tell me! You could have brought him to dinner.”

“I did, Ma.”

“Is he coming, then? Do I need to set another place?”

I reached for Gordy’s hand under the table.

“Shannon and I—” Gordy paused, swallowing his words.

“We made up,” Shannon blurted.

“What do you mean, you made up?”

“We’re no longer angry with each other,” Shannon said. “In fact, we had a chance to talk about a lot of things, and Gordy and I—”

All eyes turned to Shannon as we waited for him to say more. It became clear he wasn’t going to, and I couldn’t take any more suspense. I felt as if I were riding a roller coaster, my stomach dipping in waves as my heart sped up and slowed back down again.

“Shannon and Gordy are in love with each other. Have been since they met. And now we’re all dating.” I’d captured everyone’s attention with my outburst. They stared open-mouthed at me.

Gina recovered first. “I don’t understand. Is this true?”

“Yeah, Ma. I’ve always had feelings for Shannon, even when I was younger.”

“Well, it didn’t take a genius to see that. I suspected you had a crush on him.”

“You did?”

“You did?” Shannon seconded.

“Of course. A mother knows these things. Did you feel the same, Shannon?”

“I did. I guess I was just better at hiding it,” he said, covertly stealing a glance at Gordy.

“So you all like each other and you’re all dating? How does that work, exactly?”

“Ma, we’re not going into details.”

“I’m not asking for details, Gordy. I guess I just want to know that nobody is feeling left out. Relationships are tricky enough without having to navigate a third person.”

“You’re okay with this?”

“Yes, son. I am. If it means both my boys are happy and well-loved, and no longer at each other’s throats, why wouldn’t I be? Did you think I wouldn’t?”

“I honestly didn’t know what to think,” Gordy admitted.

“How long have you been keeping this from me?”

“Not long,” Shannon promised. “It just took us a few weeks to settle into a groove and become comfortable with the idea. Gordy and I spent so long as you said, at each other’s throats, and this is all so new for us.”

“As soon as we finish dinner, I’m going to call my sister and tell her that her boys did not beat mine to falling in love. My boys fell in love with their first crush.” She covered her heart with her hand. “Ugh, such a sweet story.”

I felt so relieved, like ten pounds had been lifted from my shoulders, that I smiled at everything everyone said throughout the entire meal. I was just so happy it worked out and that Gordy had nothing to worry about anymore. It would be smooth sailing from here on out.

It wasn’t until we were getting ready to leave that I was in for a surprise of my own. Gina pulled me aside and dropped a bombshell on me.

“I can’t thank you enough for bringing my boys together, and for having a heart big enough to love both of them. You’ve made all the difference in them. I can see it plain as day how happy they are. And for that reason, you’ll always be my favorite son. But don’t tell them that, you know how competitive they can be,” she finished with a wink.

Gina pulled me in for a hug, and I felt tears gather in my eyes. It was the curse of being a big, soft marshmallow—I felt everything deep in my heart. And my heart was connected to my tear ducts.

WE WERE quiet on the drive home, but it wasn't an uncomfortable silence. I think everyone was up in their heads, contemplating their own thing.

“Hey, Gourd, stop by my place. Might as well grab the last load of things.”

“I like the sound of that,” I said. That meant he officially lived with us now. “Have you decided what to do with your place yet?”

“I think so,” he said with a smirk.

“Are you sitting on a secret?”

“I was thinking of renting it out, and the other day, I came across some guys I know looking to move out of their current place. I like the idea of renting to people I know.”

“Is it anyone we know?” Gordy asked.

“In fact, it is. The troublesome twins.”

“You're gonna rent your nice place out to Hudson Brantley and Murphy Maguire? Have you lost your mind?”

Shannon chuckled. He looked so sexy when his eyes crinkled and his lips quirked. “They both have good jobs, and they seem pretty committed to each other. I mean, you would have to be to put up with Murphy as long as he already has.”

“Yeah but, but...” Gordy seemed at a loss for words.

“Isn't that the couple that you won't let drink at the lounge?”

“Exactly! Why would you let them into your house if you won't even let them into your bar?”

“I don’t know, maybe I’m nuts, but I like the idea of renting to a gay couple. They don’t always get treated fairly in the rental market. Especially with their obvious age gap. Just do me a favor. If this whole thing comes back to bite me in the ass, please don’t say I told you so.”

I exchanged an amused look with Gordy. “Who, us? Never.”

IT DIDN’T TAKE us long to grab the last couple boxes of his things before we were back on the road headed home. I showered with Shannon, who was extremely touchy-feely, making sure to wash all of my dirtiest places very thoroughly, while Gordy busied himself in the kitchen. Unfortunately, our shower wasn’t large enough for the three of us. I toweled off and reached for a pair of underwear.

“Leave it off. No point in getting dressed when I’m about to undress you.”

I liked the sound of that a whole lot. I crawled onto the bed and sank to my stomach with my ass popped up in the air, hoping to entice him. Shannon crawled up next to me, propped up on his elbow and hovering over my body. He traced patterns on my back with lazy strokes of his fingers, following the curve of my spine until he teased my crease.

Gordy wandered in, pulling his shirt over his head. He sat on the end of the bed, watching us as he kicked off his shoes.

“You going to take a shower?” Shannon asked.

“No, I showered before dinner.”

“Good, then get your ass over here, and lose the jeans. I want to touch you.”

Gordy hesitated, and I wondered what was troubling him. I looked to Shannon for answers, but he shrugged.

“What’s wrong, Gordo? I thought you were feeling better on the way home.”

“I was. I’ve been on high alert for days, anticipating the worst reaction from her, and now it’s just taking me a little while to process. I’ll be okay.”

“You want to talk about it?” I asked.

“It’s just...”

“Just what, Gourd? You can tell us.”

I nodded my head in agreement with Shannon, hoping to put Gordy enough at ease that he would open up to us.

He breathed in and out a heavy sigh. “Every time there’s any kind of conflict or sacrifice to be made, any kind of hardship, I always feel like—like, maybe I’m just not worth it. Like, it’s easier if you just decide not to be with me.”

I was floored and raised wide eyes to Shannon to gauge his reaction. He looked just as surprised. I slid my hand over Gordy’s knee, now bare.

“Of course you’re worth it! You mean everything to me.”

Shannon slid in closer, running his fingers up the inside of Gordy’s thigh. “Whether it’s easier or not isn’t really the issue. Not being with you isn’t an option. You belong with us. *To us*. You stole our hearts. The only life we’re going to live is going to have you in it. Do you understand me? You’re worth everything,” he whispered fiercely, making my stupid eyes water again.

Gordy nodded, and I pulled him down to lie next to me. Shannon worked Gordy’s briefs down his legs, settling between his thighs to lick and nip at his soft skin.

“I’m going to spread your legs and show you how much I love you.”

A loud whoosh of breath escaped from Gordy as he closed his eyes and gave himself up to the pleasure of Shannon’s wicked tongue.

The sound of his mouth working Gordy over made me hot as hell. I could just imagine how warm and wet his tongue would feel sliding between Gordy’s cheeks, spearing into his hole.

Like the devil in his ear, I whispered between sucking kisses, “Are you going to let him fuck you again? With his fingers this time?”

He could only nod silently, lost to Shannon’s mouth. I wanted desperately to play with his new piercing, but he wasn’t ready for that yet, so I slithered down his body to join Shannon between his legs, focusing on the parts where I could bring him pleasure. While Shannon had Gordy’s knees bent, making a home for himself in the valley of Gordy’s ass, I worked my head around his bent thigh. My tongue peeked out to play, teasing along the crease of his thigh. He sucked in a sharp breath and raised his head to look at me. I gave him a show, keeping my gaze locked with his as I licked and sucked a trail of dark bruises into his skin. Pushing against his taint with my fingers, I applied pressure against his glans, making his enormous body writhe as he fisted the sheets.

“Let’s open him up.”

Shannon popped two fingers into my mouth, and I sucked on them, coating them generously with spit before he pushed them inside of Gordy. He hissed at the intrusion as his rim stretched and burned around Shannon’s thick fingers. I watched, mesmerized as his hole loosened for Shannon, accommodating his digits.

“Slip one in,” he coaxed.

I wet my finger and slid it inside of Gordy, right alongside Shannon’s. Gordy was coming undone, moaning and twisting, trying to scoot away from us while pushing his ass against our fingers, trying to take them deeper inside him.

“He loves it. Add another.”

I did, brushing over the bundle of nerves inside his passage that drove him wild. Rivulets of his cum dripped down his thick shaft, pooling in the nest of dark hair around his base. I rushed forward to lick them clean and Shannon’s eyes grew hot as he shoved into my mouth, stealing Gordy’s taste from my tongue.

We continued to finger-fuck him as we kissed, almost missing the money shot while wrapped up in each other. Gordy grunted, grabbing and squeezing his heavy sac as thick white fluid arced over our faces, coating Shannon's lips and my tongue. We kissed like that, frosted and dazed with lust.

Gordy lifted his head. "Your turn," he said to me.

Fuck.

SHANNON

One Year Later

IT WAS Monday night and we had no plans to go out, which meant, meatloaf... Again. Our usual Monday night get together with the twins had sort of fizzled over the last few months as Carson had been occupied with wedding plans and his honeymoon, and Carlisle was now busy planning his. We still got together, just not every week. In lieu of beer and greasy wings, Monday nights had become date night for us, and sometimes, that meant a quiet night at home where Gordy made Aries's favorite meal.

The kitchen smelled incredible, the air fragrant with herbs that made my mouth water. I set the table while he put the finishing touches on dinner. As soon as Aries walked in the door, we would sit down together and eat.

When I finished, I sat down at the table, with my chin propped on my hand, and watched Gordy as he cooked, moving around the kitchen with confidence and ease. I loved to watch him, whether at work or at home. A guy who looks as sexy as he does and cooks is a rare jewel.

“I can feel your eyes on me. Burning holes through my soul. Quit.”

With a chuckle, I got to my feet and joined him at the sink where he was washing his hands. I slid my arms around him and took his rough warm hands in mine, lathering them with

soap, sliding my slick fingers in between his. I never realized such a mundane task could be made intimate and sexy.

“Dinner smells amazing. I can’t wait to taste it.”

I nipped the skin behind his ear, trailing my lips down over his neck until he shivered in my arms.

“Did you mean dinner or me?”

“Both.”

“I’m home!” The front door shut with a bang as Aries shouted out.

He found us a moment later, sliding his arms around my sides to encompass both me and Gordy in a hug.

“Let’s eat,” Gordy said.

Aries and I took our usual seats, and Gordy brought the food to the table.

“Hey, this isn’t meatloaf,” Aries remarked.

Gordy took his seat and smiled. “That’s because it’s not meatloaf Monday.”

“It’s not?”

“Nope. It’s marsala chicken Monday. It’s your day,” he said, leaning in to press a kiss to my cheek.

My day? When was it ever my day? We’d been eating meatloaf every week for a year. Marsala chicken was my favorite. I cleared my throat because it began to thicken to the point that I couldn’t swallow.

“Looks delicious,” I said in a voice that was full of gravel. My plate was piled high with chicken, sherry mushrooms, and parmesan garlic mashed potatoes.

“Wait until you taste it,” Gordy said with a wink.

Fuck the chicken. I wanted to taste *him*.

We made it through dinner and small talk, which I barely contributed to because I was stuck in my head, running through ideas and dreams, scenarios I’d never dared to hope for, until now. Why couldn’t I have it my way? Why couldn’t

we all have it? Ryan and Carson had found their happy ending, Pops and Kelley had found theirs, and Rory and Carly were working on theirs. When was it our turn?

Just because there were three of us didn't mean we couldn't write our own rules, our own ending to our story.

Aries went to take a shower while I helped Gordy clear the table.

“Thank you for dinner. It was one of the best meals I've ever had.”

Regret marred his face. “I should have made it for you a long time ago. I guess I'm just a stubborn ass.”

“Your ass is a lot of things, but I'm not sure stubborn is one of them. Juicy, perfectly rounded, firm...”

“Okay,” he choked out with a laugh, swatting me away as I squeezed his perfectly rounded, juicy stubborn ass. “Go upstairs and take a shower.”

Just my luck, I found Aries still in the bathroom, with the water running hot, steaming up the air. I stripped quickly and snuck inside to join him.

With my hands on his hips and my chest warming his back, I nipped at his ear with sucking kisses.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Yes, you can jack me off.”

“No, sassy ass. That's not what I was going to ask.”

“What were you going to ask?”

“Would you want to spend the rest of your life with me?”

Aries turned his head to look up at me. “More than anything.”

“Would you care to make that official?”

Recognition dawned across his pretty face. “Like, marriage?”

“Yeah, the forever kind.”

He turned to me with his full attention. “I mean, I never...”

“I know. I know what you’re gonna say.” He never imagined it was possible because there were three of us. “But you once told me love comes in all different packages, all different shapes and sizes.”

“I said that to you on our first date,” he said, cracking a smile.

“You did. It doesn’t have to be something traditional. But for me, the package looks a lot like a wedding ring. I’m a traditional kind of guy. For me, family means everything. I’ve made a lot of sacrifices in order to belong to people. I guess I’m just asking for someone to make a sacrifice to belong to me. I need to lock it down.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Shannon.”

“I know, I believe you. But with my ring on your finger, if you ever did walk away, just maybe, the weight of that ring would slow you down, give me time to catch up.”

Aries slid his arms around my neck and slipped his tongue inside my mouth. I wrapped my hands around his waist, holding him tight to me.

“I’ll always let you catch me.” He laid his forehead against mine.

“You know, Gordy is the marrying kind as well... he needs commitment. He needs the two people he trusts and relies on most to swear before God and everyone they’ll always be there for him.”

“I think you’re right,” Aries agreed.

“So is that a yes, then?”

“I don’t know, Shannon. I don’t recall hearing you ask me a question.”

Oh, he wanted it done properly? My unconventional hippie wanted tradition and ceremony? I reached around him and shut the water off.

“That’s it? You’re not going to ask?”

Shaking my head, I teased, “Not yet.”

But I would. I had a plan. I just needed my partner to help me.

TWO DAYS LATER, I asked for help.

I ducked my head into the kitchen. “Gordy, when you’ve got a second, meet me in the lounge.”

Taking a seat on the edge of the stage, I sat with my hands folded in my lap, listening to the soft strains of Frank Sinatra playing through the speakers, promising me I could do it my way. And I intended to take his advice to heart.

With the lights dimmed low and a table in the back set with candles and champagne, I’d set the stage perfectly.

“What’s all this,” Gordy asked, walking into the empty lounge.

I stood and held my hand out to him as I walked toward him. “Come dance with me.”

“Come on, Shannon. I’m in the middle of dinner prep. We open in ninety minutes.”

“I know, I won’t keep you long. Just come dance with me.”

“I don’t dance,” he grumbled under his breath as he made his way to me.

I swept him into my arms, placing my hands on his hips.

“What am I supposed to do?”

I loved that after all these years together, I could still discover things we hadn’t done yet. “Just put your hands on my shoulders and hold on. Follow my lead.”

He fell into step with me, and I pretended not to notice when he stepped on my feet.

“What’s all this about, Shannon?”

Gazing into his beautiful green eyes, the same color as clover, I smiled softly, wistfully. “Do you remember when we got together? I made a promise that this was forever between me and you. I’m never gonna break that promise to you, Gourd. I’m going to love you for the rest of my life.”

“I believe you. And I promise you the same.”

“Do you? Would you promise before God and our family?”

“Of course I would. I don’t understand.”

“What if I asked you to marry me?”

His feet stopped moving. “Are you asking?”

“Yeah, Gourd, I’m asking.”

“Fuck,” he breathed, running a hand through his thick unruly hair.

“Come here, let’s sit down and talk about it.” I led him over to the table set with our celebration.

“Wow, you were all prepared.”

“I’d hoped.” He sat across from me in a small booth for two, and I reached for his hand across the table. “Gourd, I’ve been in love with you since I was a teenager. And I’m gonna be in love with you when I’m an old man. Never gonna change my mind about you. So why not marry me and be my husband? That way I can tell everybody you’re mine.”

“What about Aries?”

“He wants to marry you, too.” He scoffed when I smirked.

“You asked him already?”

“I might have hinted. I had to be sure, you know how he feels about the institution of marriage. His parents aren’t even married, and they’ve been together over thirty years.”

“What did he say?”

“I think he was upset that I didn’t ask.”

“So you think he’ll say yes, then?”

“With both of us, asking him together? How could he say no?”

Scooting out of the booth, I took a knee in front of him, still holding onto his hand.

“Oh, God,” he said in a wavy voice.

“I thought long and hard about the right way to do this, but I just couldn’t come up with anything that felt like us.”

“I don’t need all of that. It’s the sentiment, to me. Just you wanting to ask me to be yours for a lifetime is enough for me.”

“Yeah?”

He nodded, pursing his lips to bite back his feelings.

“In that case, Graham Alastair Carrick, Junior, will—”

“No, no, no, not like that. Do it the right way. Like you said, *us*.”

Frowning, I tried to make sense of what he was asking, and then it hit me. *It still wasn’t us*.

I kissed his bare ring finger, placing my lips where the symbol of my commitment to him would soon rest. Tracing the pad of my thumb along the edge of his thumbnail, I asked again, “Gordo, will you marry me?”

“Yes,” he tried to say, but it came out broken and warbled.

I pulled him into my arms and felt his tears on my neck. He’d waited as long as I had to hear those words come out of my mouth. Way too long.

When he finally raised his head, swiping at his eyes, he scooted over to make room for me in the booth.

“How are we going to ask Aries? A romantic picnic? Fancy dinner?”

“Nah, that’s not him. We need to speak his love language.”

“Hold hands around a campfire and sing Kumbaya?”

I couldn’t help but laugh just picturing the three of us around the fire pit at the cabin. “No, you fool. Ink.”

“You want me to tattoo ‘will you marry me’ into my skin?” He sounded and looked alarmed.

“Sort of. In a way.”

BY THE TIME we pushed through the front door of Rainbow Ink the following afternoon, Gordy and I were both on the same page. I’d called in a favor to Patrick, Aries’s co-worker, earlier. Everything was set.

The fresh smell of lemon grass assaulted me, one of Aries’s mother’s special blends.

“Hey! I missed you two.”

I’d never get tired of hearing that. No matter that he’d just seen us four hours ago, or every day for that matter. Aries was always happy to see us, always had a smile for us. His sunny soul kindled a spark in mine.

“Come over here and see this design I’ve been working on. You’re gonna love it.”

Gordy and I exchanged a look as we walked toward his station. I reached in my back pocket and pulled out a piece of paper I’d doodled on, holding it secretively in my fist until the right moment.

“Look at the purple and red, aren’t they gorgeous together?”

Aries pointed to the wings of a phoenix, with detailing and shading in the feathers so realistic looking, you would think the bird was about to leap off the page and take flight.

“It is gorgeous. You’re so talented,” I gushed, leaning over to pop a kiss on his lips.

“If you want it, I have time. It would look great on your back.”

“I was thinking of something more like this.” I unfolded the paper and laid it on his table.

Aries took a moment to study it before raising his eyes to mine. "It's our names. What do you want to do with those?"

"I was thinking you could do them in that fancy script you do so well."

"Cursive," he asked, looking amused.

"Yeah, cursive. I thought maybe you could do it around my finger and make all the names start at different points so they overlap."

"Like a ring?"

I felt a pang of guilt seeing his confused and slightly hurt expression. "Exactly like a ring."

Aries glanced at Gordy. "I want one, too," he seconded.

"You do?" Aries's face fell.

"Yup, right here, like a ring," he said, shaking his finger at Aries.

"It's the kind of thing people ask for when they get married. Like a wedding ring."

"That's exactly what I'm looking for!"

"Yep, me, too," Gordy said.

We were going to hell for misleading him. I didn't realize he would take it so harshly, which I guessed was a good sign.

"Okay, let me get my black ink ready."

He moved around his station quietly, gathering the necessary supplies while I washed my hands at the sinks. When he was ready, I laid my hand on his table, over a gauze pad, and he held my hand in his, separating my fingers so he could work around the base of my ring finger.

"So, are you two...planning on, you know...getting married?"

"We are." I could have continued to play along, while he made false claims of how happy he was for us, but he deserved better. "We're planning on marrying you."

It took a moment for my words to sink in, for him to realize he'd been set up, but then he raised his beautiful whiskey eyes to mine, his gaze volleying back-and-forth between Gordy and me to make sure we were serious.

“Me?”

“Yes, you. We want to marry you, Aristotle Banghart.”

Gordy nodded, wearing a huge grin. “As soon as you make our rings permanent, you can head over there.” He nodded towards Patrick, who was pretending not to listen, but clearly was, if the huge smile on his face was any indication. “Patrick is waiting to ink your ring, if you’ll have us.”

“But, how?”

“Nothing legal,” I explained. “We’re not running off to the courthouse or anything. Just the three of us, making promises to each other in front of our friends and family. I don’t need a priest to make it official. The three of us vowing to love one another before God and the people we love is as real as it gets.”

Aries laid down his gun and covered his mouth. His eyes grew wet, and he tried to blink the moisture away.

“Oh, and the best part,” Gordy added. “We’re getting married in Harmony Grove.”

Aries practically jumped over the table in his haste to hug both of us. It was awkward and uncomfortable, but I wouldn’t move away for anything as he clutched tightly to me, sniffing his tears away.

“Yes, yes, yes,” he chanted over and over. “I love you both so much. Gods, yes.”

EPILOGUE

I DIDN'T SEE what the big deal was about weddings. Why did it take my cousins months and months to plan these things when the folks of Harmony Grove could do it in one weekend? They should go into business. They could make a killing.

The weather was perfect—a light breeze, the autumn air crisp, and the leaves had just started to change on the trees, providing the perfect backdrop for our ceremony.

The Grove wasn't a very formal place, so we opted to wear dark pants and whatever color button-up shirt we wanted. I just knew Aries was going to show up wearing suspenders and a bow tie because that was his style.

His mother asked that we not arrive until the day of so that she could surprise us with the decorations. And Aries, who was the least traditional guy I knew, insisted we not see each other before the wedding, which meant we all slept apart the night before and drove separately. Aries stayed at home, I crashed with Carlisle and Rory, and Shannon went to his Pops's and Kelley's place.

"You nervous," Rory asked in his deep, booming voice.

"Not at all," I lied from the backseat.

His shit-eating grin in the rearview mirror said he didn't believe me for a second.

"Don't just hustle down the aisle. Walk slow, but not too slow! Make eye contact with your guests, smile and wave," Carly advised. "And don't rush through your vows. And no

mumbling and grunting like you do. Speak slowly and clearly, and loudly enough for everyone in the back to hear you.”

“Fuck, now I’m nervous.”

Rory chuckled. “You’ll do fine.”

Would I? I was beginning to sweat, despite the cool air. It would be just my luck to ruin this whole charade by stumbling through my vows or tripping over my own two feet as I walked down the aisle toward my grooms. But I knew for a fact that whatever I did to mess it up, Shannon and Aries would cover for me and find a way to smooth it out.

They always had my back.

My gaze dropped to my ring finger, where our names were entwined and overlapping, just like our lives. Living with two men over the last year was sometimes messy, often loud, at times stressful, but always worthwhile. I’d never laughed so much in all my life as I had in the last year. Their love had transformed me into a stronger, healthier, more confident man. A man I actually liked when I looked in the mirror.

The crunch of gravel under Rory’s truck tires signaled our arrival, and I went in search of my grooms, but was intercepted by Aries’s mom.

“There you are, and don’t you look so handsome,” she gushed. She looked lovely, dressed in a long, flowing, purple skirt and white peasant blouse. “They’re already here,” she said, answering my unspoken question. “Shannon is cooling his heels in my house, and Aries is waiting in the guest cabin.”

“Where would you like me to wait?”

“Right up there,” she said, pointing down the aisle. “You can join your uncle.”

I turned to where she pointed and paused as I took it all in. The wooden arbor was covered in flowers of every color. Instead of folding chairs, guests were seated on blankets and stuffed cushions on the grass, as if they were about to watch an outdoor summer concert. The *aisle*, or pathway, running through the center of the guests, was strewn with flower petals. Tiny white lights were strung throughout the tree

branches above, like little bright stars. Sashes and scarves in every color and material hung from the trees along with daisy chains and woven strings of flowers.

“It’s beautiful,” I gasped.

“Thank you. I’ll pass along your compliments. Aries’s father built that arch. He wanted to create something that would shelter his son as he promised his life to the men he loves.”

My chest burned from the feelings her words created.

“This is for you,” she said, holding out a boutonniere. She pinned it to the breast of my shirt, and then stepped back to admire me with a pleased smile. “There, now you’re all set.”

I took a deep breath through my nose, letting the clean crisp air fill my lungs in an effort to steady my racing heart.

“When the music begins, you can walk down the aisle and stand to the left of your uncle. A moment later, Shannon will come down the aisle and stand to the right. And then Aries will join you. That’s the way he wanted it,” she added when I smiled. “He said he wanted to walk toward his pillars.”

“He said that?” I could barely speak because of all of the emotion choking my voice.

“He did,” she nodded. “He thinks of you two as his rocks.”

I blushed as a rush of tears threatened to spill. He stroked my ego in the best ways, and because I was damaged goods with an introverted streak a mile wide, I had no idea how to accept a compliment, but it made me glow inside.

There was absolutely no chance in hell I was going to make it through this wedding without crying.

The music began, and it lightened my heart to hear an instrumental version of one of Aries’s favorite country songs instead of a traditional wedding march.

I started down the aisle, trying to remember what Carlisle said about smiling and making eye contact with the guests. I wasn’t a smiley kind of guy by nature. It made my face hurt.

When I reached the arbor, my uncle hugged me tight, clapping me on the back.

“I’m so proud of you, and I love you.”

“Love you, too, Uncle G.” Fuck, here we go with the waterworks.

I stood still and smiled while people took pictures of me, and then it was Shannon’s turn. He stood at the head of the aisle, his eyes fixed on me as he made his way toward me with a smile on his gorgeous face. My heart grew too big for my chest with each step he drew closer. His black pants and bright blue button-down matched his blue eyes and dark looks to perfection, making him appear otherworldly. He was too much...everything. I swiped my eyes dry and swallowed hard. He was like a fantasy from long ago, manifesting before my eyes, walking toward me, intending to make me his husband. *Finally.*

Before he took my uncle’s right side, he paused in front of me and brushed his lips softly over mine. “Hey, handsome.”

“Can’t you wait till after the ceremony,” my uncle asked.

“Hey, Pops.” Shannon greeted him with a roguish grin. “Bet you never thought you’d see this day, huh?”

“You finding not one, but two men who want to marry you? Or you marrying your cousin? Which one?”

“I love you, too, Pops.” Shannon pressed a kiss to his scruffy cheek.

“Love you, too, son. I’m so damn proud of you.”

Shannon took his place and winked at me as he rocked back on his heels. The music changed to another song, an instrumental version of Amazed by Lonestar. It was one of Aries’s favorites. Whenever it came on, he *tried* to sing it to us. Tried being the operative word. He looked incredible. Dressed in black pants and a baby pink button-down shirt, with shiny black and white wingtips. And I was right, he wore suspenders and a bow tie—both were hot pink with black polka dots.

He smiled radiantly, his eyes volleying back-and-forth between us as he came closer. And when he finally stood in front of us, he gave us each a shy smile.

“Hi.”

I returned his smile while Shannon leaned forward, intending to give him a kiss, but my uncle cut him short.

“Wait till after the ceremony,” he growled. “Welcome, friends and family,” he boomed in a voice that carried over the crowd. “We’re gathered here today to celebrate the union between these three incredible men and to honor the love they share.” He paused to smile at each one of us in turn. “Please take the hand of the man standing next to you.” I reached across for Shannon’s hand while extending my other hand to Aries. He tickled my palm, a lewd gesture he followed with a smirk.

“You have now formed a circle, an eternal and unending shape, a symbol of your love and commitment to one another, just like the ink tattooed into the skin around your fingers. Always remember that with a man standing to the right of you and another to the left of you, you can never fall. Hold each other up when it’s difficult to stand alone. Shine a light into the other’s darkness. Be their smile when they can’t find theirs. And always leave your arms open to receive each other.”

It was getting ridiculous now with these tears. I had to look away from them momentarily while I got a hold of myself. Taking a deep breath, I let my eyes roll over the crowd of assembled guests, and my gaze landed on Glitter. My sister-in-law? She was dressed in her pink tutu with a rhinestone collar and matching tiara. How in the hell Kelley got that to stay on her head, I’ll never know, but the sight of her was so hilarious and absurd, that I couldn’t help but smile. It did the trick, allowing me to hold my tears at bay.

“A lot of your faces are new to me,” my uncle continued, “but you’re Aries’s family, and I look forward to getting to know you. If you’re not familiar yet with these two guys standing up here, let me vouch for them. These are the men

that Aries has chosen to marry. This is my nephew, Graham Jr. We call him Gordy. He was named after me, but he far exceeds me in kindness and integrity. He's a talented chef, a fine son, and an even finer man. I've helped raise him since he was a baby. That's his mother there," he said, pointing in the crowd. "My sister, Gina." My mom waved to everyone who looked at her.

"And this other guy, this is my son, Shannon. Now, I didn't get to raise him, something I regret deeply because I missed a lot of important moments and milestones in his life. But I've been there for all the ones that shaped him as a man, including this one, and I couldn't be any prouder of him. As for Aries here, well, we've been friends for years. You've always been there for me when I needed a hand, always quick with a smile and a firm handshake, and you haven't pissed me off yet, and you don't owe me any money," he joked, making the crowd laugh. "If I searched high and low, I couldn't find a better man for my boys."

My uncle cleared his throat. I could hear him choking up with the same emotions that were stealing my voice and my breath.

"I think I've said enough. Gordy, you got something you want to say?"

Fuck, why'd he have to start with me? Shannon and Aries squeezed my hands. I drew strength from their touch.

"You've got this, Gordo," Shannon whispered.

Taking a deep breath, I swallowed twice more, trying to clear a path for my voice to come through.

"Shannon, I've loved you for years. When I was young, my love for you gave me the courage to be honest about who I am, and who I'm attracted to. But really, it's always been you. And now that I'm older, my love for you has given me the courage to love myself. I guess I did that backwards, but the point is, your love made me whole. We're an unlikely pair, but we fit together perfectly."

I turned to Aries, whose eyes were shining with unshed tears. God, he was beautiful. And he was mine. He was here to marry me. I just couldn't fathom my luck.

“Without your love, none of this would be possible. None of us would be standing here today. I can't imagine a world where the three of us aren't together. It feels like it's always been us, together as one. When you touch me, you fix the parts of me that are broken. You heal me from the outside in and shine your light on my darkness. I can't believe I get to spend the rest of my life reminding you how much I love you every day.”

I nodded my head toward Shannon, letting him know he was next.

“An unlikely pair, huh? You're right, though, we do fit together perfectly. Always have. I never dared to dream you could be mine. That was reaching too far. But here we are.” Shannon looked into each of our eyes. “Stuff like this doesn't happen to guys like me. Where I come from, there are no happy endings, no strong men with healthy relationships. When we started out, I had no idea how to do this, but the both of you have shown me how to love. You make it look easy. I'm just gonna keep following your lead, for the rest of my life.”

He leaned down to kiss each of our joined hands.

“You just couldn't help yourself, could you?” My uncle teased him. “Aries, it's your turn, son.”

Despite the tears shining in his eyes, his signature breezy smile was in place as he beamed at us.

“Well, I'm the last guy who ever thought he'd be standing here. Tradition isn't exactly my thing. But the two of you could convince an Eskimo to buy ice, and a guy like me to agree to get married.” Some of the guests laughed, including Shannon and I. “I really didn't think I had a chance getting the two of you together and agreeing to this whole crazy arrangement, but I knew I had to try because there was never going to be two guys I wanted or needed more than you two. Shannon, Gordy, you guys are my rocks, our foundation, the

cornerstones of my life. It only makes sense because you're in it. I guess what I'm trying to say is, you're the breath in my lungs, the beat in my heart, the spark in my soul. Your love keeps me going, it gives me life. I can't wait to get started on the rest of my life, loving the two of you every day."

My uncle stepped forward and took the reins again. "That was beautiful, all of you, beautiful. It's easy to see how much you love each other, and just how right you are together. Gordy, let me ask you a question, son. How long do you vow to love these men?"

"Forever," I said, squeezing Shannon's hand as I looked into his eyes, "and ever," I repeated to Aries.

"Shannon, how long do you vow to love these men?"

"Forever," he said, squeezing Aries's hand, "and ever," he swore as his gaze bored into mine.

"Aries, how long do you vow to love these men?"

"Forever," he promised me, "and ever," he said to Shannon.

"That's it then," my uncle pronounced, "it's a done deal. Forever and ever. Congratulations. Now is your chance son, try to keep it PG."

Shannon didn't need to wait for an invitation, he slid his arms around my back and Aries's, and pulled us in close for a three-way kiss. My tongue slid inside Shannon's mouth, retreated, and then found Aries's tongue. I lost track of whose mouth was whose as I fell into the warm, wet comfort of their lips. My uncle had to clear his throat in order to break us apart. And then, the guests were on their feet, cheering loudly for us. Cameras snapped our pictures. Shannon held our hands up high, joined with his in victory.

Soon after, we broke apart for the buffet. There was so much food, and it all looked amazing. The banquet was followed by dancing and more pictures. Aries found me holding up a tree.

"It's quiet over here."

“That’s why I’m standing here,” I replied with a smirk.

He leaned against my side, laying his head on my chest. Our gazes followed Shannon, who was dancing with his sister. He held Glitter’s tiny body up in the air and swung her around in slow circles.

“He looks hot as fuck, doesn’t he?”

“Mmhmm,” I agreed. “So do you.” My fingers toyed with his bow tie, itching to take it off of him and undress him.

“So do you,” he parroted, trailing the tips of his fingers over the buttons of my shirt, inching his way up my chest. “I love this dark purple on you.”

“I hope you like it better off of me,” I teased, dipping my head down to catch his lips. He opened for me, sucking my tongue into his mouth.

“Hey, hey, hey, slow down there, newlyweds. It’s not time for that yet,” Shannon teased as he approached with Glitter still tucked under his arm.

I couldn’t pass up an opportunity to rib him about his sister. “Family photo?”

“You’re real cute, Gourd. It’s a good thing I love you. I’m just giving Kelley and my Pops a chance to dance.”

“There you are, hiding out,” Aries’s mother exclaimed. “You two, come with me. I’m going to read your palms and tell you your future.”

“I can already guess what it is. I grow old and wrinkly with these two by my side.”

“Stop spoiling my surprise,” she admonished.

We followed her to a picnic table. She started with me, taking my hand in hers, running her fingers over the lines of my palm.

“You have a deep soul, Gordy. An old one. Fiercely loyal and independent, yet your love line runs deep. You don’t love often, only once, well, twice in your case, but when you do, you love for a lifetime. You are wise beyond your years and

you chose well for yourself. You have a long and happy future ahead of you.”

I didn't hold much stock in palm readings and supernatural nonsense, but I wanted to believe every word she spoke.

She moved onto Shannon's palm. “Your lifeline runs deep and long. You have traveled a hard road, but it leads to a happy ending. There are many people who love you. You have a very charismatic nature and draw people to you like magnets. Don't take them for granted, hold on tightly to them. The people who love you are wise and will guide you down the right path. Love with all your heart, it will never steer you wrong.”

Evelyn reached for my hand and joined ours together in hers. “Now I'm going to give you a bit of motherly advice. You both have big, strong broad shoulders. But that doesn't mean you have to carry all the burdens in this relationship alone. That boy over there, the one you just married, he's stronger than he looks. Share your burdens with him, tell him about your struggles. He will smooth the way for you. It's a gift he's always had and he only wants to share it with the people he loves. He has a bit of magic in him,” she mused fondly.

I had to agree with her. Aries did have a spark of magic in his soul. You could see it reflected in his eyes, feel it when he touched you. *My magician*. In fact, this whole day felt magical, ethereal. I was afraid to close my eyes for fear that when I blinked them open again again, it would all be a dream.

Evelyn left us, but Carly and Rory soon replaced her seat. “We're so getting married here,” Carlisle declared.

“Here? You want to get married in a polyamorous hippie commune?” Rory looked skeptical.

“Damn straight. Look around. The twinkling lights, the flowers and the food. They're playing their own music on their homemade instruments. It's beautiful and whimsical, yet organized. Count me in!”

Rory chuckled. “You’re right, it’s perfect, sweetness. I’m all in.”

“Sounds like just what you need,” Shannon observed fondly. “You think it’s too early to call it a night?”

I had to laugh at that. “Someone’s eager.”

“It’s our wedding night. I’m eager to get inside of you.”

Carlisle made a disgusted face. “Okay, that’s all I needed to hear of that! Come on, Rory. Let’s go find some bleach for our ears.”

“Let’s go say our goodbyes and wrap it up.”

WE FILED into the guest cabin one by one. “I’m sorry it’s not the nicest place to spend our honeymoon in,” Aries apologized.

Shannon squeezed his ass. “Sweetheart, in a minute, I’m not going to be looking at the decor. Let me help you with that bow tie.”

Aries practically giggled as Shannon untied his bow, sliding it from around his neck. Next, he attacked his buttons with nimble fingers.

Shannon nipped at Aries’s jaw. “Have I told you how hot you look in this bow tie?”

Aries began to unfasten Shannon’s buttons. “No?”

“My mistake.” Shannon bared Aries’s throat and nipped at his warm skin.

He was so smooth, always knowing the right thing to say or do to make Aries trip over his feet for him. I hung back, working on the buttons of my own shirt.

“Uh-uh,” Shannon corrected him as Aries’s hands dropped to the button on his pants. “That’s for Gordo. He’s been dying to get inside your pants all night. Haven’t you seen the way he’s been looking at you? Watching you as you danced with your family?”

Aries caught my gaze over Shannon's shoulder, licking his lips like he was suddenly thirsty for me. "Can you give me a hand, Gordy?"

He would never have to ask me twice. And God bless Shannon for smoothing the way for me, knowing when I needed a push, or a shove, in the right direction. I unbuttoned his pants and lowered his zipper over the bulge of his already hard erection. It pushed against his pants, begging to be released from its cotton confines. Sinking to my knees, I pulled his pants down his legs, lifting each foot in turn as I slipped the fabric off. Running my hands back up his calves, over his knees, and along his thighs as I straightened, I made sure to brush my hand over his hardened cock. Aries's eyes were wide as he watched me. I grasped his chin between my thumb and forefinger, keeping his head still as I lowered my mouth to his. I only wanted to tease his lips, but he opened for me immediately, his tongue searching for mine. The kiss quickly became heated as I let my hands roam all over his smooth soft skin. He moaned into my mouth when I teased his nipples, tugging at the barbells. That breathy whimper drove me crazy every time, letting me know just how needy he was for my touch.

When I raised my head, I caught a glimpse of Shannon over Aries's shoulder. He was laid back against the pillows, stroking his bare cock, his eyes locked on us.

"Lay down for me," I said, guiding his long, lean body down onto the mattress.

Shannon reached under Aries's arms to haul him up the bed, so that his head rested between Shannon's spread thighs. He squeezed his shaft, milking out a drop or two of cum, and collected it on his finger before holding it over Aries's mouth.

"Open up."

Aries sucked Shannon's finger between his lips. He had a filthy obsession with cum play that Shannon loved to indulge.

And I loved to watch.

My mouth blazed a wet trail up his legs, nipping the soft skin inside his thighs, sucking kisses onto his belly, lapping at his sensitive nipples. One day, I would love to tease them until they burned, until he came for me just from the stimulation. His body writhed against mine, our limbs tangled together. Shannon alternated between feeding him cum and stroking his finger through Aries's silky hair. He belonged to us completely in that moment, nothing but a victim of the pleasure we were wreaking over his body.

"Suck him, Gourd. I want him to come before I get inside of him."

A broken whimper escaped from Aries, and he thrust his cock into my mouth, searching for release. I teased him by swirling my tongue in circles, tickling his shaft before beginning to suck his length with long hard pulls. Shannon teased his nipples as I worked him over with my mouth, and in just minutes, he shot down the back of my throat with a cry loud enough for the entire Grove to hear.

Shannon chuckled with satisfaction. "Now the real fun can begin."

"I just need a minute to—"

"No rest for the weary, Aries."

"Yeah, but don't I get a wedding gift, too?"

Shannon paused. "You can have anything you want, sweetheart. You're my husband now."

A wicked light gleamed in Aries' hazelnut eyes. "I want to see the two of you together. I know you play with each other when I'm gone. Touch him," he begged. "Love him. Let me watch."

Shannon looked totally on board with the idea. He enjoyed being watched as much as he enjoyed watching. It made me feel like a bug under a microscope. Made my skin itch, like it was pulled too tight. Shannon sensed my reluctance. Moving to his knees, he crawled to me, sliding his arms around my waist. His touch was gentle, soft. Aries stole his spot against the headboard. He reclined with his arms behind his head, his

knees bent and spread. I wanted so badly to crawl between his legs and take him.

As if Shannon could read my mind, he said, “Not yet. It’s my turn first. With you.”

He brushed his lips over mine, seeking entry into my mouth. What started out as gentle quickly escalated into a fiery passion. My inhibitions slid away with his touch. I had nothing to fear from him or from Aries’s eyes on me. These men loved me, desired me. They would never judge me.

He raked his blunt nails over my back. I felt like he wanted to tear me in half, and I was ready to let him.

“Lay down.”

He pushed me onto my back, and I spread my knees to make room for him between my thighs.

“You two with your pierced dicks smashed together is everything!”

I spared Aries a glance to see his eyes were focused on where our bodies joined. Shannon gripped both our shafts in his big fist and stroked them together. The nerve endings in my thighs tingled, like sparklers.

“You finally fucking married me, after twenty long years. You’re mine now, Gordo. Never gonna let you go.”

After that, everything became a blur of heat and pleasure.

Shannon’s mouth and hands were everywhere. Branding me. Worshiping me. Suckling at my nipples, nipping the thin skin of my neck, biting my shoulder. Tracing the maze inked into my collarbone with his tongue. Wherever his mouth made contact with my skin, I felt it all throughout my body.

“Your husband wants to watch me fuck you,” Shannon rasped in a voice made entirely of sin.

And then Aries joined us. Maybe Shannon motioned for him, but I didn’t know, I couldn’t see with my eyes closed. When his lips touched mine, I was lost. Undone. Being loved by two men, spinning me into a frenzy. I was in a tailspin, falling, falling away as my body took over, giving into its

natural response. Where they touched me, I burned. When they kissed me, I moaned. I felt like nothing but a mindless beast, high on lust. Shannon's cold fingers touched my hole, and I knew he was prepping me.

"Not too much lube. I want to feel you from the inside." I barely recognized my own voice, so broken and deep.

"You're gonna fucking feel me, I promise," Shannon vowed darkly.

He pushed inside my body without much prep or lube, a tight fit with plenty of friction. The metal ring pierced through his cockhead rubbed at my walls, making my legs shake. I knew firsthand how good it felt to have that ring pushing against my sensitive, swollen crown as I moved in and out of Aries's tight body. It heightened my pleasure tenfold, as it now was Shannon's.

"Fuck me hard," I grunted, digging my fingers into his back.

Again and again, he thrust into my body, a relentless invasion as he pounded my gland. Aries kissed me, crooned in my ear, and teased my nipples.

"Harder, Shannon," Aries urged. "He's ready to blow."

With my body bent nearly in half, my knees banging into my chin with the force of his thrusts, I'd never been fucked so brutally. Shannon was like an animal, obsessed with getting deeper inside of me, and yet, with Aries's love washing over me, giving me a soft place to land, I felt beautiful. It felt like we were making love.

Someone's hand began to stroke my cock, and I couldn't hold back any longer. I came in a hot rush, completely soaking my stomach, a rope arcing over my chest and chin.

Aries's tongue snaked out to lick me clean, like a hungry kitten, lapping up my milk.

"I'm gonna fill you up." Shannon's breathing was ragged as he fucked into me. Sweat dotted his brow, and he grunted loud as he came. I felt the warmth of his cum filling me, and I wished we had a plug with us so that I could keep it inside of

me all night. My husband's seed. It belonged to me, was *mine*, just as he was.

"I'm gonna come again," Aries panted, rising to his knees.

He jacked his cock furiously and then came in a hot rush over my face. When I felt the first rope hit my lips, I parted them and held my tongue out to catch as much of it as I could. He leaned down to kiss me, smearing what was on my lips between us. Shannon lowered his weight onto my body and joined us, sliding his tongue into the fray. I wasn't sure whose tongue was in my mouth, and I didn't care. I wanted them both.

"Love you," I whispered fiercely.

"Love you," Shannon hissed.

"Love you both," Aries sighed.

CURIOUS ABOUT THE HONEYMOON? Read a Tequila And Tattoos bonus Chapter now. [**Snapshots Of A Honeymoon**](#) is available for free download by subscribing to my newsletter! You can sign up for my Newsletter by visiting www.raquelriley.com. **Snapshots Of A Honeymoon** is also available for purchase as a digital download through my website.

DEAR READER

Thank you so much for reading **Tequila And Tattoos**, the fourth and final book in the *Love And Libations* series.

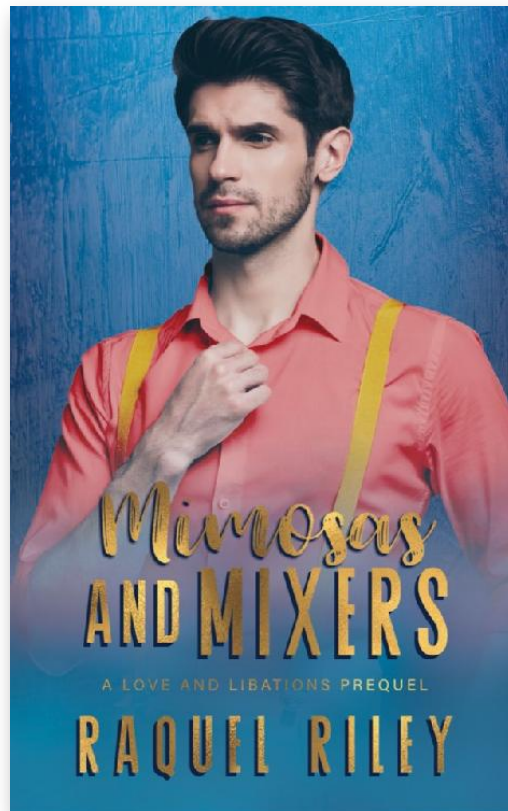
If you enjoyed Gordy, Aries, and Shannon's romance, [please leave a review](#) to tell other readers how much you loved them. Telling your friends and spreading the word on social media helps people find their new favorite book.

With love,

Raquel Riley

START FROM THE BEGINNING

Want to start from the beginning? Download [Mimosas And Mixers](#), the prequel to the *Love And Libations* series.



Are you ever too old to fall in love? What are the odds you'll end up with the first boy you ever crushed on?

Nate

Running into Charlie at our high school reunion was kismet. I can't imagine myself with anyone else. Is it too late for a second chance at love?

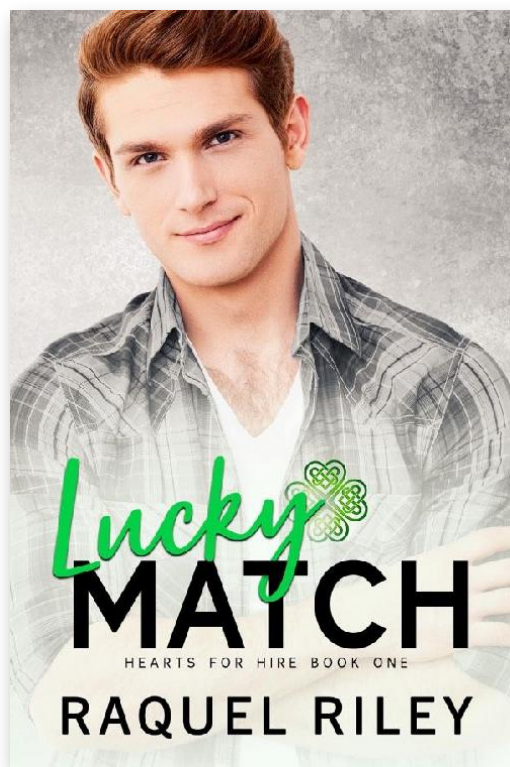
Charlie

Nate is everything I dreamt of finding in a partner. Except, he's my son's therapist. Will their professional relationship come between our personal one? Or does fate have other plans for us?

Mimosas and Mixers is the prequel to the Love and Libations series. This sweet heat gay romance novella includes cameos from the Hearts For Hire Series and features tropes such as second chances, a mature couple, childhood friends, and found family.

ALSO BY RAQUEL RILEY

Want to catch up with the [Hearts For Hire series](#)? Start from the beginning with [Lucky Match](#) and work your way through all of the escorts' happily ever afters!



After one date, I realized that would never be enough...

Lucky Maguire

I started Lucky Match, a dating service, as an enjoyable way to earn some extra cash. That's how I ended up on a date with my super hot Economics Professor.

Here's my three step plan to seduce my teacher:

Convince Hayes to fake date me.

Inform him that we were never fake dating; it was always real.

Make him fall in love with me.

How many dates will it take for Hayes to realize I'm his lucky match?

Hayes Brantley

After my divorce, I decided it's time for a change. After missing being with a man for the past twelve years of my loveless marriage, I'm finally free to make up for lost time.

I called Lucky Match to hookup with someone who looks like the sexy student I can't stop fantasizing about. I had no idea I'd end up with the real deal.

Is a second chance at love worth risking my career and another broken heart?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Raquel Riley is a native of South Florida but now calls North Carolina home. She is an avid reader and loves to travel. Most often, she writes gay romance stories with an HEA but characters of all types can be found in her books. She weaves pieces of herself, her family, and her travels into every story she writes.

For a complete list of Raquel Riley's releases, [please visit her website](#).

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