

THE
ONLY
ONE

DAISY JANE

the only one

A Soft Femdom Romance

Wrench Kings

Book Three

daisy jane

Copyright © 2023 by Daisy Jane

All rights reserved.

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

Proofreading by Geeky Girl Author Services, LLC.

Alpha reading by Laura Davies.

Cover design by Smearred Ink.

 Created with Vellum

contents

[Untitled](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Extended Epilogue](#)

[Reviews](#)

[Patreon](#)

[Also by Daisy Jane](#)

Acknowledgments

“Life’s under no obligation to give us what we expect.”

Gone with the Wind, Margaret Mitchell

prologue

...

delane

No way

“Yes, yes, that’s right, take it, *take it like the good boy you are,*” she says, performing the scene with the perfect amount of realness and rasp.

And on that note, I turn off my audiobook and look around my now vacant apartment, the last of my things stacked in old Banker’s Boxes by the door. It only lasted six weeks, but it was a glorious six weeks.

I walked around naked.

I listened to my filthy books without EarPods, as loudly as I wanted.

I put my feet on the coffee table with shoes on.

I didn’t put my clothes in the hamper if I didn’t want.

And as fun as those things were, once the newness wore off, I started to miss my family. Living on my own wasn’t really everything I dreamed it would be. In fact, when mom called and told me that Art’s back took a turn and that she needs me back, I was *happy*. Not because my step-dad’s back is getting worse because I hate that for him so much. But... coming back to a home full of voices and warmth *feels good*.

As it turns out, the grass isn’t always greener. Shoes on the table and audiobooks on blast weren’t better than living with love.

I flick off the light and close the door.

When I get downstairs, I find Delilah in the doorway, ringing her hands in her apron. As the owner of the deli below my apartment, Delilah once lived upstairs, too. The funny thing is, she left because she got married and Goldie, the woman who lived up there after Delilah, left to get married, too.

I hand her the key before pulling her into a hug. “Thanks so much Delilah. Maybe I’ll be back one day but my family needs me home.”

She smiles, passing me a white bag from the stainless counter. “I know. Here’s some fresh muffins to take home.” She hugs me again, and as much as I love her, I won’t miss being bombarded with the smell of baked bread at all hours.

I peer into the bag, spotting coarse sugar sprinkled onto the tops of blueberry muffins, and my stomach growls.

Delilah shoots me a wink. “Who knows, maybe you’ll be getting married soon. You know everyone who stays in that apartment moves onto bigger and better.”

Smiling, I glance back up the stairs to make sure my boxes are still there and of course, they are. “Maybe,” I reply, not letting on to the fact I had that thought just a moment ago. “Well, I gotta grab the rest of my stuff and get to work. Thank you again.”

“Of course,” she beams, waving me off with the tail of her white apron. “Go, I’ll see you later.”

“Bye, Delilah,” I call as I stomp back up the stairs, scooping up my boxes once I’m at the top. Smiling to myself, I trudge down and outside, stacking my things in my car.

Maybe the women who stayed in that apartment went onto meeting the man of their dreams but that’s not going to happen to me.

No way.

one

...

milller

You were pervin' if you can't stand

“What a good boy you are. You are seriously the best boy, you make me so happy, do you know that? Good boy. *Good, good boy.*”

Heat stalks up the back of my neck, radiating through my brain, making my temples go fuzzy and my thoughts a little wobbly. The blonde woman in the black plastic chair holds her dog's head in her hands, shaking his face as she showers him with praise.

“Good boy, what a good boy,” she coos, her soft proclamations of approval doing a number on me in more ways than one. From behind, Atticus slams his shoulder into mine.

“Quit pervin' and give 'er the keys, already.”

As quickly as I'm on my feet, I'm back down in the chair again.

Now Atti drapes his palm along the top of my shoulder, giving me a knowing squeeze. “Oh yeah,” he chuckles gruffly. “You were pervin' if you can't stand.”

I bury my face in my hands, the tips of my fingers knocking up my baseball cap.

“Shake it off,” Atti advises as he makes his way to Delane on the other side of the desk, dropping a few private words in her ear before disappearing into the shop. She types a few things, pulls open the sliding drawer adjacent to her, and fishes around until she produces a set of keys with an orange tag on them. She holds them up to me a moment before dropping them onto the Plexiglass.

“Seven is ready,” she says as I pull my cap back down, straightening my spine, preparing to shake off all that good

boy praise from a minute ago. Getting excited by a beautiful woman talking to a dog is a new low.

Seriously.

When it's safe to stand, I do and snatch the keys from the counter. "Thanks, Delane," I say, which earns me the smallest of smiles before she pops her EarPod back in and returns her focus to the computer.

Knowing she's not listening will make this next part a little easier.

With the keys pressed into my sweaty palm, I make my way around the counter toward the woman and her dog. She's gorgeous, with long light hair styled in those loose waves women do. Her eyes are bright, long dark lashes making her look innocent as she blinks up at me, full pink lips framing a beautifully white, toothy smile.

"All done?" she asks happily as she rises, conscious of the leash wrapped around her hand. The dog doesn't stir, as if he's trained to her verbal commands, and something about this woman and her dog has me anxious to sit down again.

I force myself to get through the next part instead of tossing her the keys and bolting, like I usually do with beautiful women.

Because even Atticus, the shop asshole, has a girl, leaving just me and Delane the single ones in the shop. Despite being twenty-six, I've never felt the pressure to be with someone when all of us were single.

Then Beau started seeing Beck, and it just so happened I got a girlfriend that month, too. And Atticus met Goldie and they got serious. Now here we are, a year later, and Beau and Atticus are both married and I'm single and have been for way too long.

I can be alone. I've been *alone* since I was eighteen.

But I don't *want* to be.

So I'm forcing myself to do this.

“Yeah, it’s all done and you’re all paid up, right?” I smile, letting the blunt tips of my fingers drag against her palm as I deposit the keys in her hand. Her skin is soft and warm, but she takes her hand away, looping the keys through her pointer finger.

“Yup, all good,” she says with a pacifying smile. She clutches her purse where the strap bands over her shoulder. “Thanks a lot,” she says, pinching her gaze on my name tag where my name is embroidered. “Miller. Thank you.”

I smile, and my heart is beating so loudly I’m almost nervous that if I open my mouth, the noise will blare all around us like a drum over a speaker. Swallowing, I gather my courage in all of a split second because she’s about to bolt.

I tug off my hat and fish a shaky hand through my messy hair. My hair may be a disaster, but it’s not polite to talk to a woman with your hat on.

“Before you go, I was wondering, and it’s completely okay if you’re not up for it or into it or whatever but,” I raise my eyes to meet hers and it’s the strangest thing. I can see rejection burning behind her eyes, like she’s going to let me down easy, yet all I can feel is Delane’s focus on us from behind me. I glance back to catch her looking at her computer screen, but I know she’s aware. She may even be listening. No pressure or anything. “Would you like to go out with me sometime? Again, it’s totally cool if you don’t want to.”

I run my hand through my hair again and then return it to my hat, where I’m bending the bill between my fingers at my belly.

Her smile tells me everything I already know, and the heat of rejection burns up my spine like wildfire.

“Thanks, Miller, I am flattered. Really, but I’m not dating.”

I’m not dating means *I don’t want to date you*. I may not be a ladies’ man, but I’m not a moron; I speak basic woman.

I lift a hand to wave off her rejection, to make her feel okay about having to reject me. “No worries, drive safe. Thanks for coming to Wrench Kings.”

I turn back to the desk, making my way quickly around it so I can get to the shop door and get out of here as soon as possible. The bell sounds when the girl leaves, and right as I'm about to open the back door, Delane swivels in her chair to face me.

Her EarPods are still in, but the chances she didn't hear that whole thing are slim to none, based on the look she's wearing. A sort of smile, a sort of grimace, and a lot of excitement burning in her gorgeous dark eyes.

Delane may be single like me, but she's single by choice. She has to be. A woman so strong and sure of herself, so gorgeous and unapologetically honest... if she wanted to be married with kids right now, there's no doubt in my mind she could be.

She pats the stool next to her, and I take the bait. She smells like sour cherry balls, and I notice the open bag next to her mug.

"Are you eating those things while drinking coffee?" My stomach sours at the thought. Or maybe my stomach was already sour from the rejection. Or from knowing she witnessed it.

She pops another into her mouth, and I notice the faint red rimming her lips where she's been sucking on the candy.

"I am. Do you have a comment you'd like to make regarding my personal food and drink choices?" she asks, tone pointed as if she's really saying, *step off*. So I do.

"No, ma'am," I say quickly, tugging the bill of my baseball hat to keep my nerves from manifesting in more obvious ways. I can't deny that Delane makes me feel... *things*.

"Can I tell you why that woman said no?" she asks, folding her arms over her chest along her breasts. Not that I'm looking. And the way she's asking the question makes me realize I'm not meant to really answer but just nod. So I do.

She drops her shoulders, letting her body language go from *in power and ready to go* to something more liquid, with no

spine and no confidence. She straightens again, snapping between the demeanors a few times.

I wave my finger at her when she's downtrodden and slouched. "If I'm supposed to be puddle man—"

"Not *supposed* to be," she says, finding the stool with her bottom as she backs into it. "Are. You *are* a puddle."

I try not to let my ex-girlfriend's words haunt me, but what can I say? I'm very hauntable. "I'll never be rich," I sigh, tugging the bill of my cap to give my hands something to do.

She knocks my hat back, and I catch it before it hits the ground. I smooth a hand through my unruly hair, another wave of embarrassment settling in my cheeks. I don't like looking messy around Delane. I tug my hat back down.

"Rich has nothing to do with walking around like a timid puppy." She drops a hand on my thigh, and all the blood in my body moves quicker in response. "You need confidence, Miller."

I cock a brow at her and hide the disappointment on my face when she takes her hand away. "First, I'm a puddle; now I'm a puppy. And I'm supposed to feel confident?"

She rolls her dark eyes, the amber bits around the pupil shining under the bright, fluorescent lights. I love that the shade of her eyes seems to shift with each expressive emotion she feels. Anger and passion make them amber with a hint of burnt caramel. It's one of my favorite shades on her.

"You know the point I'm making. You're not confident."

I've never given much thought to confidence. I go to work, do my job, and go home. Where confidence plays into any of that, I'm not sure. I shrug. "I don't know if I am."

She rolls her eyes again, but it makes my pulse stir some more. "I'm telling you that you're not, Miller. And trust me when I say that not being rich," she throws finger quotes around those three words as if they're so untrue she needs to qualify them with the gesture. "Has nothing to do with the way you carry yourself. I listen to so many stories, Miller. And the thing that all the heroes have in common isn't owning a

private island or getting picked up in a limo. It's confidence. All of the men that get the girl are sure of themselves. Know themselves, and because of that, they're not scared or nervous... ever."

Not scared or nervous ever? I don't know if I believe that. "What if they see a brown bear?"

Another eye roll and another private appreciation on my end. "I'm talking about relationships, not wildlife, Miller. Stay focused."

"So what are you saying? I'm not confident, and that's why she said no?"

She nods as she studies her cuticles, like telling me exactly what's wrong with my (non-existent) love life is run of the mill for her. Just another part of her day. "Yep. And once you are confident with whatever you're most insecure about, you will literally own your life. There won't be a single thing you can't do."

I'm almost afraid to ask, but I have to anyway. "How do *you* know?"

She drops her hand to her lap and twists on the stool to meet my gaze. Her knees brush mine as she does, and my body gets confused, reacting the way it did to the woman praising her pup. I scratch my hair beneath my hat in an effort to distract myself.

"Because I've heard it hundreds of times. I've listened to men get lost in their greatest insecurity, only to come out on the other side, the sexiest, strongest version of themselves mentally. And that carries over."

My mouth is uncomfortably dry when I attempt a response. "Well, I don't even know what I'm most insecure about," I admit because if I have to stop and think about it, I think the only thing I really feel good about is working on cars. *That* I know I'm good at.

She wrinkles her nose and twists her focus back to her computer. "I think you know, but I can't help until you admit it."

Help me? I didn't know help from Delane was on the menu. Heck, I didn't know there was a *help-Miller-menu*. Atticus and Beau come through the back, and I use their appearance as a distraction, slipping out the very door they came through.

I don't say goodbye to the crew beyond a simple wave that day, but as I'm driving to my apartment, I can't help but wonder...

Is confidence what Delane is attracted to?

two

...

delane

Once you conquer your biggest insecurity, the world seems
easy.

“No! Not like that!” My mom’s hand comes down across mine. And she wonders where I get my attitude from.

“Mom, I roll them this way every single time I make them, and they stay together just fine,” I groan, turning the eggroll over. I start lining them up in the bottom of the air fryer as she watches, glaring. Okay, I can’t actually see her glaring, but I can feel it.

“Well, you’ve been getting lucky,” she scoffs, using her knuckle to turn the temperature up. “Tuck the ends in, then roll. It stays together much better that way.”

I roll my eyes. “Did you hear what I just said? It works my way, too.”

She slides me an empty bowl as she begins popping lids to the sauce ingredients. “I pour, you mix,” she says, draining the remainder of the rice vinegar into the dish.

“So, how was work today?” she asks. Even though we’ve been kind of bickering, that’s just how we operate.

I shrug. I picture Miller’s messy strawberry-blonde hair beneath his hat and the way his cheeks turned pink when I called him on his lack of confidence. It’s so annoying when a man is adorable and doesn’t even know it. And that woman with the dog? What a fucking idiot. A man chiseled from granite with a goofy, lopsided smile and a heart as wide as the Earth is big—I’m glad she said no. She looked him up and down and decided, without knowing any of the shit that mattered, she didn’t like him.

Good. Leave the good men to the women who deserve them.

“Fine. Normal day.”

“Yeah?” Mom asks, measuring the garlic as I stir. Garlic is the only thing she measures because my stepdad doesn’t like a lot of it. “How are Beau and Beck doing?”

Mom’s always liked Beau. He’s annoyingly hard to dislike. And when he got married to Beck, a single mom, he became a superhero in her eyes. Mom was single for a handful of crucial years after finally breaking free from my toxic father. Seeing Beau take on a child and love him like his own reminds her a lot of my step-father and how he has loved us since day one.

“Good. Beau brings Jett into the shop here and there.”

Mom bumps her shoulder into mine. “Yeah? You dote on him? Gah, he’s so stinkin’ cute.”

I snort at the idea that I’d even have the chance to dote on little Jetpack. “I always want to. You know I love babies. But Atti, Beau, and Miller hog him.”

Mom spoons chili sauce into the bowl, her lack of measuring making me a bit nervous. “I think that’s enough,” I say warily as she plunks another bright red spoonful into the bowl.

She ignores my advice, per usual. “I bet Miller looks good with a baby,” she adds as she finally pulls her glasses down from her head, sliding them on to peer at the recipe. She shrugs off whatever she’s already done incorrectly, popping open the hoisin sauce as she returns the paper to the counter. “He’s just got daddy written all over him, doesn’t he?” she asks casually.

“Mom, daddy means something else,” I say, whisking the sauce, focusing on the way the viscous mixture seeps between the tines of the fork slowly, trying not to focus on how cute Miller looks with Jett. My mom’s not wrong—Miller looks *good* with a baby, and I’m sure he’ll be a great father one day. But why that makes my skin warm and something in my veins flutter, I have no clue.

Ignorance is bliss and all that.

“Don’t tell me daddy doesn’t mean daddy anymore,” she harrumphs as she begins re-shelving the sauce ingredients.

Clean up as you go; she practices what she preaches, that's for sure.

"I mean, it does mean father still, yes, but it also means like... *daddy*," I draw out, trying to send her the subtext without having to actually define it in words. I'm really trying to save her the cringe of having her daughter explain the subtle difference between daddy and father, but in true mom fashion, she isn't getting it.

"I'm not getting it," she says, sliding the tray of the air fryer out to peek at the eggrolls. I slap her hand this time.

"Don't open it! It will just take that much longer." I slide the sauce onto the table and grab the plates from the cupboard. She sets down the cabbage salad, and I grab the filtered water pitcher from the fridge.

Sitting at the table, we talk while we wait for the food to finish cooking like we always do. If we're home together, we cook together. I take over if it's just me and she's at work. Teamwork is how we make it work because, between the three adults in our house, we have a collective five jobs—my mom and stepdad each have two, and I have one. We work hard to keep the bills paid, keep food on the table, and keep Mara going in her competitive Karate. It's a group effort, and with my stepdad Art's back going out in the last two years, the effort has shifted a lot more to mom and me. But that's okay. He supported us in bulk for many years, and now we have to pick up the slack. Fair's fair.

"So, is Miller seeing anyone? He's the last one, right? Now that Atticus has Beck's friend, Goldie."

I raise a brow as I trace the top of my water glass. "You're really going to ask if Miller is seeing anyone?" Mom's got this idea in her head that I have a crush on Miller, so anytime she feels she can casually bring him up, she does. The thing is, mom's about as casual as a fart in church. I don't know why she thinks I'm into him anyway.

She shrugs, sipping her water coolly. "I'm taken," she says, her deadpan sarcasm always on point. "But now that I think of it, *you're single*."

I roll my eyes. “Smooth.”

She sips her water again, this time pretending to analyze the bottom of the glass when she reaches it. “And he’s what, a few years older than you, right? So he’s probably ready to settle down.”

“Mom!” I laugh. “I’m not into Miller, and he’s not into me, and us being single in the same building doesn’t mean we’re going to date!” I’ve said this much before, but apparently, it could stand to be said again.

She shrugs. “I just don’t like you being single, that’s all.”

“Why?” I ask because in all the times she’s attempted to play matchmaker, I don’t think I’ve ever heard her say what she’s just said. She doesn’t want me to be single. The playfulness that existed a moment ago seems to drain, leaving just the cold, hard reality in the bottom of the sieve.

She’s worried about me.

“I worry,” she says because I know my mom so well. “You can’t just listen to fictitious people’s extraordinary love lives,” she says, tapping her ear to allude to my audiobook addiction. “You have to live, too.”

After checking the digital timer on the air fryer, I return my attention to her. “I work full-time. I take Mara to most of her Karate events. If I’m not helping out here or there,” I nod toward the garage behind the house, off the alley. “I’m sleeping. So how I can fit in a boyfriend, I’m not sure.”

She tips her head to the side in that way moms do that completely tempers your argument. “There’s always time for love.”

I stick out my tongue and mime shoving a finger down my throat, complete with a little gag. “Mom, seriously. *There’s always time for love?*” Heat shimmies up my spine at her words because even though I’m teasing her, the need for love is alive inside me more than ever before. I hate that Miller’s lopsided smile rushes through my mind at her words.

“It’s true. It doesn’t matter how hard we have to work; love is the reward. Without it, life is meaningless, Delane.”

My eyes come to hers, and I also hate that there's seriousness in them because I already know that closing myself off to dating isn't good.

Dating is a skill, like learning a new language or anything else. The less I use the skill, the harder it is to use it *well*. The thing is, though, I haven't had a good date in such a long time. And my audiobooks never disappoint me. Ever.

"I know, mom. It's just harder than you'd think to find time for it all. And then to find someone worth the time."

As if he could sense that I wanted an out from this conversation, Art pops his head in the back door, the tip of his nose pink from the fading Winter evening. "Ready?"

I look back to mom with a grin. "Sorry—gonna have to shelve this convo. Gotta change the oil in your car." Mom waves me off, but we both know the conversation isn't ending there. As long as it's not this exact moment, where I can't stop thinking of Miller for some stupidly aggravating reason, then I'm fine with it.

I slither into my coat, already chilled from the cold lining. Tugging my hat over my curls, I slide into my boots and gloves and meet Art out at the detached garage. Mom's car is inside, illuminated like a piece of art with a tall fluorescent light on a pole. The hood is open, and as I approach the scene, I feel a lot like a doctor entering the surgical room.

Art slaps a jack in my hand and motions toward the light. "Already got the shop light going but haven't done much else, I'm sorry. I'm really fighting my lumbar tonight, sweetie," Art says with regret lacing his tone. I loop my arm around his waist and tilt my head toward his chest as we survey mom's car.

"Don't worry. That's why you taught me. So we can share the responsibilities."

Art drops a kiss onto the top of my purple beanie. "Okay, enough petting my emotions. Let's get to work before we turn into ice sculptures."

“I think the expression is ‘stroking my ego,’ but I kinda like your way better,” I snicker as I drop to my knees next to the driver-side wheel well, getting the jack in place.

At Wrench Kings, when the guys change the oil in vehicles, they don’t have to jack them up. They have the entire work bay beneath the garage floor, making oil changes quick and easy. Doing things from home is never as easy, but learning things the more challenging way will make me a better mechanic. At least, I like to tell myself that when I’m changing the oil of my mom’s early 2000s sedan with my nipples turning to glass cutters and my nose about to fall off.

Forty-five minutes later, I’m done, and Art helps me clean up. It doesn’t take Miller this long to change oil, but I remind myself that everyone starts somewhere. That even Atticus was an apprentice when he started. Even Beau took forty-five minutes to change oil when he began.

“You did good, my girl,” Art says with a broad, soft smile. I can see the pain he’s feeling in the way the corner of his eyes pinch with each word and how his body tenses with every step he takes. I feel bad for him, but the surgery he needs to correct his back issue is invasive, and it never feels like the time to do it. Though I suspect as the number of days off grows longer, we’re quickly approaching the inevitable.

“Thanks,” I smile, the tip of my nose nearly numb at this point.

When we head back in, we catch up on mom’s work drama as we eat our homemade Chinese food. After too many egg rolls and plenty of cabbage salad, I sweep the floor and take out the trash while Mara rinses and loads the dishes into the machine. Mom rests—*finally*—watching Survivor in her recliner, shouting at Jeff Probst like her opinion matters to him.

When the kitchen is clean, the coffee beans are ground for tomorrow, and Art and mom’s mugs are out and ready to go, I look over Mara’s homework and finally head down the hall to my room.

I should get through another few pages in the book Art bought me for Christmas years ago, The Mechanics Bible, but

as I strip out of my clothes and tug open my pajama drawer, I just don't have it in me. Instead, I fish my EarPods from my purse and pop them in, starting up a book I'm only a few chapters into.

Flopping down across my bed, cozy in fleece pajama pants with stars all over them and a Wrench Kings sweatshirt ruined by bleach and paint, I drop my forearm over my eyes and let out a very long sigh. The book fills every inch of my brain as I hand over all my worries and exhaustion to the female narrator's sexy, smoky voice.

I stroke my palm down the slick, rubber cock, loving how the lube glistens, like stars twinkling in a sky, making promises of dreams coming true. I curl my fingers into the underside of his chin and drag his mouth to the wide, wet tip.

"Open," I tell him, and like a good boy, he obeys. Advancing my hips forward, his jaw spreads further as I nudge the cock onto his tongue. The noise his throat makes as he opens wide for me makes my clit pulse.

"Suck me and listen," I tell him, placing my hands on his shoulders to feel the harsh flex of his muscles as he bobs down on my strap-on. I look down to find him eagerly sucking my cock, only to catch a glimpse of his caged cock hanging desperately between his thighs. On the floor, surrounded by his thick thighs and knees, is a shining drop of precum. His caged cock is desperate to get hard and even more desperate for release; that much is clear by how he's dripping freely to the floor below. My stomach clenches at the discovery. He may actually make me cum just from being so pliable and good.

"Good boy," I tell him as he bobs down on the length again, choking a little as his lips graze my groin. "Now listen," I start because I can feel myself unraveling and I don't want to get lost in my good boy until he knows exactly what's expected of him. "I'll own you for these months, my pet," I purr down to him as his tongue circles the crown of my cock. "You will give yourself to me completely. Utterly. No secrets, no limits. When I'm through with you, you will leave me stronger than you ever thought. Stronger than any weightlifting could ever make you. Because you'll be strong

here,” I whisper to him as he sucks, tapping the side of his head.

“Once you allow yourself to be handled and touched in all ways and allow yourself to see that everything is for love and pleasure rather than a measure of masculinity, you’re free. You’re free and unstoppable.”

She moans, and the scene continues, the gurgles of the male narrator making my skin grow bumpy with excitement. I stop the audio and drop my EarPods back into the magnetic case, putting them on the charger next to my bed.

I do not reach under the covers and let my hand discover just how much I liked that audio because my door isn’t locked, and I’m just so tired today. It was a long day—a full eight hours at Wrench Kings, cooking dinner and changing the oil in mom’s car—a normal day, but it hit me harder than usual, and I’m pooped.

When I close my eyes, I think about Miller. And because I’m alone in my dark room and no one can ever know what I’m thinking, I let myself think about him. A smile tugs at my lips when I think about his goofy, lopsided smile and how he was so nervous asking that blonde woman out today.

I can feel his insecurity when I’m next to him, and I do not understand it. He’s a brilliant mechanic with an adorable smile, bright eyes, and incredibly disciplined physique. He laughs a ton and is incredibly thoughtful and so kind it makes me feel like a jerk most of the time.

Why is *he* insecure? What is making him so hesitant?

I think of the woman from my book. Her words swirl around me. *Once you allow yourself to see that everything is for love and pleasure rather than a measure of masculinity, you’re free. You’re free and unstoppable.*

Confidence has never been anything I’ve struggled with. I know my strengths, and I know my weaknesses, and I juggle them accordingly. But Miller seems confused or, at the very least, crippled by his limitations.

I could help him. Because this woman in this completely erotic and amazing book... she's right. Whether it's fiction or not, she's absolutely right. And I can't help but snuggle down into my covers with satisfaction in my bones because... I was telling Miller the same thing earlier. Less eloquently, of course, but still.

Once you conquer your biggest insecurity, the world seems easy.

I could help Miller with that because I'm pretty sure I know his biggest insecurity. And there are some things I could use help with, too.

It's unlikely, and honestly, I'm shocked I'm even thinking about it, but maybe, just maybe, I could strike a deal with Miller.

I scratch your back; you scratch mine.

I force my eyes to stay shut and scream at my brain to turn off because I'm a real asshole without sleep.

But it's hard to sleep because I can't stop thinking about devising a plan.

three

...

milller

High schoolers have gone further than I have.

“No, Salsa, no, no!”

Out of bed in a split second, I’m reaching for him as I stumble around in my still-dark bedroom. But it’s too late. I can’t get to him, and he barfs all over my rug. One foot away from the hardwood floor.

“Salsa, do you not see that right here,” I motion with both hands down to the cherry-grain wood. “This is where you puke. Here. Where I can wipe it up.”

He brings a marmalade-colored paw to his mouth and licks it without a single care in the world. I blink at him, and after he’s tired himself from his minimal grooming, he jumps back onto my bed, curls into a ball, and closes his eyes.

“I got it, buddy, don’t worry,” I say to him because even though he’s a cat and I’m fully aware that he can’t clean up his vomit, I still need to guilt him a little. Why? Why does a grown man need to talk to a cat at two in the morning? Because I am alone.

It’s almost the only thing I can think about now. My loneliness. I know there’s a difference between being alone and lonely, but I’m both.

Sometimes, when I’m feeling dark, I wonder if I’d feel this way if Beau and Atticus hadn’t found themselves the real thing. If they were still single, would I care that I’m eight years into being a grown adult, living on my own with a career and everything, and still all alone?

Probably not. But man, what an ugly thought. What a devilish way to think—*if they weren’t happy, I would be*. No, I wouldn’t trade theirs for mine. But that’s just my point.

I’m at a place where I’m thinking that way. And that tells me what I need to know—time to get serious about meeting

someone.

After visiting my barf clean-up supplies under my kitchen sink, I clean up Salsa's mess, dispose of it, wash my hands and come back to my room. He's migrated toward the center of my king size bed, and the part of me annoyed that he just puked wants to move him so I can stretch out in my own bed.

But the part of me that worries he has a tummy ache is much bigger, so I slide into bed around him and punch my pillow until it's comfortable beneath my head.

The woman with the dog said no, but it's okay. There will be more no's, but eventually, there will be a yes.

And then there will be a date. Many dates, hopefully. And lots of firsts with the one I'm meant to be with.

I twist in the sheets until my back is flush with the mattress, and I'm wide-eyed, staring up at the ceiling.

Firsts.

What do I do with my hands when I lean in for the first kiss? I've kissed before—I'm not that big of a loser—but I've never taken the lead. Ever. Okay, maybe I *am* that big of a loser. But how do I even initiate holding hands? Do I rub her back when I hug her at the end of the date? Do I pat her shoulder? Is it offensive to women if I want to open their car door?

Sweat forms in thick, urgent beads on my forehead, sliding down my temples. My back grows clammy, too, as the cotton of my shirt sticks to my spine. My pulse hammers in the hollow of my throat, and I drop my palm to my chest, trying to knead the discomfort away with knuckles to my sternum.

That's it.

That's what I'm most nervous about. Or, what did Delane say? *Insecure?* That's what I'm most insecure about. I'm not one of those men who can't admit they have inadequacies.

I have plenty of them.

And she's right about me knowing what it is and needing to conquer it.

The *physical side* of the relationship is what makes me so insecure—the idea of having to do... *anything*. Make a move and know that it's the right move at the right time. What if I move too slowly? What if I do something too aggressive and don't even know it? What if I suck at everything I do? I know nothing about how to touch a woman. I know nothing about what a real kiss should be like, how you should take her hand and where.

I'm a twenty-six-year-old virgin with the dating experience of a fourteen-year-old boy. I've had two girlfriends wherein the relationship consisted of talking on the phone and going to the movies. That's it.

High schoolers have gone further than I have.

Going back to sleep with that fact bouncing around my brain is challenging. But I force myself because if I don't get a solid six, I'll feel grouchy all day, and there's nothing I hate more than feeling snippy.



I'M groggy and yawny as I make my way inside Wrench Kings this morning. Having an epiphany at nearly three in the morning will keep you from sleeping well, I'll tell you that much.

I'm ready for a coffee the size of my head and a slow morning when I push inside to a breathtaking sight.

Delane, curls wild around her face and down her shoulders, face free of makeup and cherry ball stain, a wide smile on her lips. But it's not any of that. Sure, she looks absolutely stunning—which I'd never say because she'd hate it and get uncomfortable—but I'm used to walking into her gorgeous self daily.

It's that her wide smile and general jubilation is... *directed at me*.

Me.

I swallow thickly and raise my travel mug to my lips, pretending to take a sip despite the fact that it's been empty since one minute out of my driveway. I have to hide the tiny smile that curls my mouth. *She's happy to see me.*

I mean, she's not mean to me. She's just... a little mean *in general* sometimes. But don't get me wrong, I like it. I like it more than I should, more than I have the right to, that's for sure.

But this morning, she's beaming at me.

"Morning, Miller," she says, giving me that amorous smile of hers. Her fingers tangle in her chocolatey caramel curls as she brushes, then tucks them off her face, behind her ear. My lips tingle at the fantasy of being pressed to the gentle slope of the neck she's just exposed. What noises would she make if I let my tongue discover all that warm, soft skin?

"Morning," I greet with a nod and a smile I piece together after lowering my mug. Some guy is gonna be really lucky one day; her morning smile has my heart pounding against my ribs—imagine what it would be like waking up to that daily. He—whoever *he* may be—is already a very lucky guy.

"Hey," she presses her palm to my chest, between my pecs, and I'm glad I've got my Wrench Kings hoodie on because my nipples get plucky.

Yeah, getting *hard nipples* from a hand to the chest? I need a girlfriend, like, *eight years ago*.

"Have lunch with me today," she commands. Maybe that's because we both know that when it comes to her, she doesn't have to ask. She can *tell me* anything.

"Okay," I say easily with a nod of my head. Her dark eyes shimmer as she stares up at me, rocking on her feet, rising onto her toes. I pinch my gaze on her. "Why?"

I don't miss the little predatory smile she makes. "I'm going to make you an offer you can't refuse."

Little does she know; there's very little I'd refuse her. Murder, that's probably the only thing. And even then, her reasoning would have to be very far off for me to say no. I

guess it's a good thing for me that Delane has no mortal enemies.

“Alright, Godfather,” I tease, winking. “I’ve got a fuel pump replacement at 11, but I should be good a little past noon. Where do you want to go?”

She raises her chin with pride as she reaches across the desk, lifting the blue cooler bag she brings every day. “I brought lunch. Enough for both of us. Leftovers from dinner last night.”

I’m not a picky eater, but I know for a fact that Delane and her mom are good cooks. For every single holiday, Patty comes in with Delane, pinching cheeks and delivering plates and casserole dishes full of warm, home-cooked meals and baked goods that stick to your ribs. Leftovers from Delane’s have to be better than anything I could buy around Oakcreek.

I shrug easily. “Alright. I’ll be out here later.”

Her smile returns, this time a bit unsteady, as her dark eyes continue to hold my gaze. “Okay, sounds good.”

I smile back at her, and I swear a little spark pops off in my chest, and right when I feel my ears heat and my cheeks go tingly, I excuse myself to the garage to get to work.

Atticus is out back, laughing about something with Beau, but honestly, I’m a bit shell-shocked from Delane, and I can’t hold it in. I’m also not the kind of guy afraid of asking for advice. I grew up in a home where questions weren’t asked; minds weren’t allowed to discover, explore and wonder. You believed what you were told and existed happily without any answers.

I’ve been figuring the world out since I left home at eighteen, and I promised myself that I’d never be afraid to ask. To share. To wonder aloud.

I interrupt them, Beau holding a paper cup of coffee almost to his mouth, Atticus mid-bite on a donut. “Delane just asked me to lunch and told me she has an offer for me that I can’t refuse.”

Atticus finishes his cruller, a piece of glazed dough stuck in the corner of his mouth. Beau motions to it, and Atticus licks the piece away. “Okay,” he drags out, confusion cinching his brows.

“Do you know what she’s talking about?” Beau asks, taking another sip. Steam escapes through the oval on his lid, casting white fog between us.

“That’s why I’m asking you guys. I thought you’d know why.” My eyes go between them, but they look more clueless than me. I shrug. “Well... don’t tell her I told you then, I guess.”

Atti snorts. “We aren’t fourteen, Miller.”

Beau claps a hand on my shoulder. “We won’t say anything, alright? Now, where are you taking her?”

“She brought leftovers; she wants to eat here. I’d take her out, but I don’t want her to be offended, and anyway, what if she wants to talk about something completely harmless, and it’s not a date at all? I wouldn’t take one of you out to a nice lunch. I can’t assume it’s more just because it’s her.”

“Because you got it bad,” Atti deadpans with a wink.

“I don’t. I don’t know why you always say that. Delane’s just, like, the coolest chick I’ve ever met. I just don’t wanna creep her out or assume the wrong thing, you know?”

Beau takes over, nodding. “We got you. Definitely, we got you. Well, she’s never asked me out with the promise of offers I can’t refuse, so it’s safe to assume, I think, that she wants to talk about something personal. It may have nothing to do with you, or maybe it does. I know that’s not much help, but it’s all I got with what you’ve said.”

Atticus strokes his hand down his beard thoughtfully. “I concur.”

I nod. “Okay, so it’s probably nothing.” Disappointment swells inside me. “That makes more sense than it being... *anything*.”

“Whatever the case, we’ll take off for lunch,” Beau adds with a smile. His insinuations leave me feeling a little depressed because now I’m convinced it’s likely nothing. But I don’t give off sad vibes, that’s not what I’m about. Smiling, I nod. “Thanks.”



COMING up from the under garage bay, the first thing I see is Delane. She’s got her EarPods in, her hair is now up in a wad on her head with loose tendrils bouncing around her face, and she’s spinning on the workbench stool, feet out like a child. I smile and feel it between my ribs.

I drop my hand on her shoulder when she’s facing the wall, and she jumps off the stool at my touch.

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” I say quickly. It’s the truth; I didn’t. But the other truth is that I wanted to touch her, and with her facing away from me with her ears full of books, this was a perfect opportunity.

“Dumb of me to be startled. We’re the only two here; who did I think it was gonna be?” she says with a smile.

“Beau and Atti took off?” I ask, tugging off my cap and running my fingers through my sweaty, matted-down hair. I’ve eaten with Delane a ton of times. Hundreds, probably. She’s told me I have pepper between my front teeth, watched my nose run when I ate peppers too hot for me, laughed at me for spilling soda on my shirt, and I’ve watched ketchup go down her top. Lunch with her isn’t a first.

Lunch *alone* with her is, though, and I’m feeling a lot like I do when it comes to firsts with a girl. Woman. I have to stop calling women girls. They don’t like that—Delane has told me as much. “*There’s only one time we want to be called a girl, and that’s if a good comes before,*” she told us all over burritos one day when Atti mouthed off to her and called her “little girl.”

She shrugs, and it brings me a moment of relief. For a second, I wondered if they'd tease her about asking me to have lunch with her privately, even though I asked them not to. But they didn't, and I know it's got more to do with them accusing me of liking Delane than them staying true to their word.

They think they're matchmaking. They should just go buy a lotto ticket. I mean, if anything's possible, right?

She walks us to the front desk, where two stools wait, and the whole meal is ready, too. She uses a fork to grab an eggroll from a glass container with a snap-to-lock lid. She lowers it to the paper plate in front of me, and repeats this a few more times until both plates contain egg rolls, cabbage salad, dipping sauce, and two cookies.

"Looks great," I admit, my stomach rumbling loud enough to make me a little embarrassed. But when I take a seat and glance at her, there are traces of a pleased smile on her face. "I've always liked your cooking," I admit, still stealing a glance at her, waiting for a full grin.

She gives me one, and my torso gets warm and tingly at the sight. "You know you're a good cook," I tell her, forcing myself to look away this time. I'm sure she could feel my eyes on her, and just staring at her smiling while we're this close is... weird.

I can't be weird. I'm sensitive to being weird. After all, being a twenty-six-year-old virgin is hard enough. I refuse to be a *weird* virgin.

"So are you!" she laughs, knocking her fork into mine. The tines slide together momentarily, and my eyes follow the fork as she drives it into her mouth. My fork touched hers, and now she's putting it in her mouth.

Blood slowly drains from my head, so I face forward and eat an eggroll in two bites, chewing almost aggressively to get it down. "Well," I say around a mouthful, which is rude and gross and not how she should be treated, but I feel so... flustered. My eyes water through an overly ambitious swallow. Why am I so lit up right now?

“Well, I cook a lot. That’s part of being alone.” I feel her look my way, so I adjust my words. “Single, I mean. Part of being single.” With a wide smile, I go to town on the cabbage salad and look up when I feel her unmoving next to me.

Her smile slopes to one side, soft like her wide, dark eyes, as she watches me in silence.

My heart seems to weigh so much more than usual as it beats now. “What?” I ask, forcing huskiness into my tone.

“I have a plan.” She swallows, and I wonder if she’s nervous. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Delane nervous before. If she ever has been, she’s hidden it well. And I don’t like the idea of her hiding anything around me. Whatever she thinks and feels, I want to see it, hear it, and know it.

I’m a very good co-worker. Clearly.

“Plan for what?” I ask, taking a drink from the paper cup of iced tea she’s poured me. We both like tea. Beau and Miller don’t like it without tons of sugar. The fact that the shop is divided over drinks and Delane and I share a side is nothing. Trivial, really, when it comes to what’s really important in life. Still, it makes me happy that we’re unified in something. Together on something. Even if it is just unsweetened tea.

“Your confidence,” she says, bringing the cup to her mouth. A dusting of red is smeared against the cup wall, left from her lips after each drink. I take a drink of my tea as she drinks hers, trying to focus on anything but that smear of color left from her lips.

“Okay,” I agree because anything to distract me from my hyper fixation on her lips. I move my legs, wiggling them like an impatient kid in class waiting for recess. Anything to keep everything between my thighs moving, so *he* can’t stop and focus on *her*.

“Wow,” she says, using the tip of her tongue to collect a stray drop of tea from the corner of her mouth. “I thought I was going to have to convince you.”

My focus snaps to her offer. “How are you going to help me with my confidence?” And then, trying to stay friendly, I

add, “and what’s in it for you?”

At one of those questions, her skin grows pink. It’s not often that Delane gets flushed, and I don’t know if she’s embarrassed or upset, but I don’t enjoy the idea of either. I drop my hand on the table between us, and her eyes go to it.

“I don’t mean that in any way other than curiosity, Delane,” I say softly as the pink drains from her cheeks. Her eyes trace the length of my fingers, circling the tips before coming to my eyes. I don’t miss the way her tongue slides along her bottom lip before she says, “I want to be a mechanic.”

My spine snaps me into a straight-backed position on the stool. “What?” I scratch at the messy hair on my head as I study her. She’s fidgeting with the edge of her plate, then refilling our tea from a thermos, and after that, she takes a bite. She chews fast, too.

“Delane, I—” Thankfully, she intercepts the conversation because I had no clue where I was going with that. She wants to be a mechanic? I had no idea.

“I know I’ve never mentioned it before. Mostly because I wasn’t sure I could do it, and I thought if I failed, I’d rather no one know.” Finally, she brings her eyes to mine and gives a humble, shy smile. My chest lights up with an energy so powerful, one that burns so bright; it physically hurts not to reach out and hug her.

“You can do it,” I say quickly, with ease, because Delane is the type of woman who can do anything if she sets her mind to it.

She smiles, pink coming back to her cheeks as she focuses on her hand, slowly turning her cup of tea over and over. “I think you’re right.” She takes a drink, and I’m so intoxicated by everything on her side of the desk that if someone offered me a million bucks to look away, I don’t think I could.

“I started working on my mom’s car with my stepdad. It’s a real piece of shit, but she can’t afford a new one. My stepdad isn’t a mechanic,” she looks at me shyly in a way that makes

me bounce my knee a few times to divert blood flow. “Not the way you guys are. But he’s self-taught and knows the minor repairs.”

“Basics,” I add with a nod. I scratch at my hairline again as I watch her because, at this point in this lunch, I think that Atticus may be right.

Maybe I do have a little crush on Delane, because I cannot quit fidgeting. I dig into my hair again, scratching a non-existent itch.

“Yeah,” she says, replacing her own nervous movement from the cup of iced tea to her fork. She pushes cabbage and carrot around her plate, the dressing leaving smears of dark oil behind. “And I’ve been working with him for two years. And I’m getting a lot better. Decent enough to have some real training, I think.”

“I’m sure you’re great,” I say, meaning it as much as I’ve ever meant anything. Then I think about Delane in a Wrench Kings button-up, her name embroidered on her chest like the rest of us. The thought makes me go a little haywire. Spending the day in the pit with Delane, working on cars together...it’s like a dream life I never expected. “I’d love to teach you anything I can.”

She laughs like I’m delusional, so I knock my elbow with hers. “You probably know more than you think,” I say because she’s the humble type of woman who claims to be a novice and will turn around and rebuild an engine quicker than me. Maybe not today, but one day, I know it. Because I know how smart and determined she is. “But yeah. Sign me up. I’ll teach you anything you want to know.” I take another bite and swallow before adding, “you’ve got the hard job. Teaching confidence to me.” I shake my head and let out a low whistle. “You saw me talking to that woman yesterday, right?”

She snorts through a sip of iced tea, bringing her wrist to the underside of her nose to catch her raucous laughter. “That was painful.”

We laugh at my expense, but I’m okay with it because that was essentially a crime scene with the way she murderously

rejected me.

I use the paper napkin she's put out to wipe my mouth, and when I crumple it and drop it on the plate, I notice Delane watching me.

"Having doubts, eh?" I tease, but she straightens her posture and laces her hands together in her lap. She looks like she's on the cusp of dropping big news, like telling your parents you wrecked the car or something. "Honestly, Laney, I'll help you learn to work on cars without you trying to do the imposs—"

"I have a plan, but you need to trust the process, okay?"

Trust the process. That always sounds dangerously close to "I won't know if this is all wrong until we're at least halfway into it," so I admit, I am skeptical.

But whatever she's got planned equates to time with her. Helping her learn cars—that's more time with her. It also means less time alone, even if we part ways in a few weeks, so I know I'm down for whatever scheme she's cooked up.

"Okay," I nod, watching how she smooths her thumb across the bed of each fingernail, fidgeting more than I've ever seen.

"First, the rules."

I know I should ask "rules for what" before we even establish rules, but like I said, I'm saying yes to whatever it is she's thinking, so instead, I say, "alright."

She edges closer to the counter, moving the stool with her. The way she twists her core to somewhat face me while also shying away from my gaze is enticing. "We start now, and we end when I've completed all of the workshops in my book. I'll pace your lessons with mine."

I scratch the mid-day stubble along my jaw. "What book?"

From beneath the desk, the same place she often stashes her purse, Delane produces a thick, worn old manual. *The Mechanics Bible* is visible on the cover. "Each lesson has a workshop at the end, something you try in your own garage."

She taps the cover with one nail after dropping it onto the Plexiglass. “There are fifteen workshops. If we spend a week on one, that’s about fifteen weeks.”

Not long enough and yet still more than I’ve ever gotten or would get without this little arrangement. “Okay,” I agree easily, still not sure how she plans on teaching me confidence. “So we start now, huh?” I ask, my tone prodding her teasingly, knowing there isn’t anything either of us can do to benefit each other with just ten minutes remaining on our lunch break.

She swivels to face me, and our knees bump as she stares me down, lips in a grin. “Show me how you kiss.”

Show me how you kiss? No, Delane didn’t say that. Kiss. What rhymes with kiss? Miss? Tiss? Pi— “I’m sorry,” I say, shoving a finger into my ear and wiggling it around to see if my confusion breaks free. Wiggle, wiggle. Nope, still confused as ever. “Show you how I *kiss*?”

She laughs, and it does nothing to stop the pulsing and growing going on south of the border. “I suspect most of your insecurity is in your abilities with women,” she says slowly as if saying the words too fast will make them hurt more. The fact that they’re true has them hurting plenty.

“Inabilities,” I admit, because what’s the point in denying it? She’s right. My lack of experience holds me by the throat, keeping me from getting a girlfriend. It may as well—if I got one that stuck around, I couldn’t seal the deal anyway.

“So I’m right in my assumption?” she asks, still talking low and slow, and I appreciate her sensitivity around my pathetic lack of experience. I refuse to let myself really focus on the fact that my inexperience is that freaking obvious in the first place.

I nod. “If you are assuming that I suck at hitting on and keeping women because I am inexperienced and nervous, like, Steve Urkel status, then yes. You are assuming correctly.”

“Steve, who?” her eyebrows pull together, and even her confusion is cute.

I sometimes forget that being starved of sitcoms and network television growing up has me in a weird spot in my mid-twenties. I fill a lot of my downtime with watching all the junk TV I never got to watch—including but not limited to *Family Matters*.

“Nothing,” I wave off the reference to the old TV show because most kids had normal childhoods where they were allowed to watch whatever they wanted. Read whatever they wanted. I’m sure Delane’s seen reruns of *Family Matters*—and other laugh-track shows that defined the 1990s—in her peripheral and doesn’t even know it.

It’s when you go without something for so long that you become hyper-fixated on it.

That was me for my first few years on my own. Every time I felt overwhelmingly abandoned, unloved, and alone, I took my measly apprentice paycheck and purchased myself something that would previously be denied to me.

And now, years later, I’ve bought myself most experiences.

But not all.

“You think I’m a bad kisser?” I ask her as she scoots her stool closer to me. I like that.

She shrugs casually. “I don’t know. I can’t imagine you being a bad kisser—”

“If you can’t imagine it, that means you have imagined me kissing... someone,” I say, feeling so much bravery I barely recognize myself. I don’t usually flirt like this. Heck, I *can’t* normally flirt like this. I know it’s flirting, though. I’m not that helpless. Our voices are lower, we’re sitting closer, and both of us are wearing syrupy sweet smiles.

With Delane, it doesn’t feel like I’m trying to flirt or come onto her. Instead, it feels a lot like me being me, her being her, and that being the easiest and best combination ever.

She rolls her eyes, but she can’t shake the pink in her complexion. “Anyway,” she says, not addressing my comment but... I’m right. She has pictured it. That’s...interesting. “I

think if you were able to enjoy instead of being nervous, then your entire dating game would change.”

I snort. “There isn’t much of a game going on. More like permanent half-time.”

“Either way,” she says. “Watching you ask that woman out was hard, Miller. You were so uncomfortable that even I wanted to slither away. I think if you weren’t dreading all the contact and sweating about who’s making what move when you’d do a lot better. Would you agree?”

I nod because that *is* what I worry about. All the firsts hanging out on the line, just out of reach but inevitable on the horizon. I never feel like I do the right thing the right way. And I do feel a little bit like a forty-something going back to college; everyone knows I’m late to the game, and it’s even more embarrassing.

“I would agree,” I admit sheepishly, swiping my hands down my face. I keep them there for a second because this lunch is so confusing and exciting and a little embarrassing. She sees my weakness, but she’s offering to help. And all I have to do is work on cars—which I love—and show her what to do—which gets us time together. Win-win.

“So kiss me right now. Kiss me like it’s the end of our first date. Show me how you kiss. That’s where we’ll start.”

Then she rests her hand on my knee. Splaying her fingers out, she leans forward, and I watch in what feels like a private dream as her eyes close slowly.

And then Delane waits for me to kiss her.

four

...

delane

Lucky bitch, whoever she is.

I really do believe in the books I read. I believe they have the power to change people's perspectives, hearts, minds, and therefore, lives.

Is there a difference between reading something in *The Mechanics Bible* and then putting it to use in the garage and listening to the men in the novels I listen to gain life confidence and then putting it to use in my personal life?

I suppose the minor detail between the two is that I *know* I can do things in the garage because—while my experience is limited, I do have *some* experience. When it comes to the things in my books... Well, I may be as inexperienced as Miller, but the difference between him and me is that I'm not afraid to do things I haven't done.

Quite the opposite. I guess this deal does *kind of* benefit me in both ways—getting some fooling around under my belt with someone I trust and help work my way through *The Mechanics Bible*.

After telling him we're starting with my evaluation of his kiss, I lean forward. I'm extremely nervous he won't do it, and if that's the case, how in the world will I ever look him in the eye after I went full Ariel and leaned in with my eyes closed just to be rejected?

But my worries wane because... *I smell him.*

That's how I know he's going to kiss me.

I smell his aftershave and laundry detergent as he leans down, his face close to mine. The closest it's ever been. My eyes are still closed, but I can feel his breath on my lips as he says, "I'm going to kiss you now."

No one's ever announced they were going to kiss me before. Granted, my kissing experience is limited to three

guys, but still, this is a first in more ways than one.

And then his lips are against mine, soft at first, but the way he gradually applies pressure, in sync with the increased beating of my heart—it's perfect. The longer we hold our lips together, the more my spine loses shape, and my body melts into him. Looping his arm around me, he presses his palm to my lower back, and the sensation that radiates through me from his touch is... nearly indescribable.

I said *nearly*.

Pins and needles, fullness and hunger, ache and satisfaction—every feeling, heightened and powerful, simmers at the surface. I'm almost afraid he'll feel it all if he kisses me much longer.

As I take my hand off his knee, I pull away. Our faces linger before each other, lips parted, noses pink from the friction. His breath is heavy, green eyes so bright and happy that I can't help but smile.

"You're smiling," he says quietly, and I feel his words against my lips as he, too, smiles. "Was it so bad that it made you laugh?"

He's never been so wrong. It was so good that I can't believe this kiss has been a few feet away from me this entire time.

"It wasn't bad," I say, letting my smile tease him a little. He takes his hand off my back, and the way it makes me feel really bad and quite empty is... jarring. "I liked your hand on my lower back, but I would have loved it on my face, too."

His focus goes to my cheek, and for a second, I think he's going to reach out and cup my face and try again, but he doesn't. I tell myself I'm not disappointed.

"When? Right away or, like, at the end?" he asks, worry etching his forehead in long, horizontal lines.

I slide off my stool and glance at my watch. Atticus and Beau will be back shortly, so I know my time is limited. And even though I know it's not part of the lesson, I have the strongest urge to pretend it is and kiss him again.

I step between his spread legs, lift my hand and lower it to his cheek. Stroking the edge of his bottom lip with my thumb, I smile. Bringing our faces almost together, I whisper, “when it feels right, you’ll know. You have to trust yourself a little.” Then our mouths are together again, and I don’t know if I leaned in, he leaned forward, or maybe a little of both? But either way, our lips fuse together so perfectly that my entire body flashes hot.

Because my heart is beating too fast and this is only an arrangement, I step away.

We’re doing this to make him confident for his forever girl. I bet he’ll find a woman like the one in here the other day. Blonde and gorgeous, someone who wears wide-brim Panama hats with sundresses posing in a field of daisies for a Christmas card. She’ll probably have a fancy job, like influencing women to buy sweet syrups and expensive coffee makers, giving exercise tips by taking pictures of her ass in gym mirrors, and recommending bronzers on her social media. Thinking of that woman from earlier is what I need to snap me back to reality.

“Now you owe me something for the pointer,” I say, wearing my best “utterly unaffected” face. He looks a million miles away as he stares me down, but his gaze is heavy and makes my skin hot, so I busy myself cleaning up. I stow the empty lunch bag beneath the desk and drop our plates and cups into the garbage can.

I log back into the computer as Beau’s Tesla pulls into the parking lot out front, the windshield reflecting brightly off the glass building. Glancing back at him, I see that Miller is in the exact position he was when I stopped kissing him. Sitting on the stool, hair mussed from his fingers, lips parted and pink, expression hazy. My smirk snaps him out of his daze; jumping off the stool, he tugs his baseball cap back down.

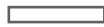
“Know how to slim jim a car?” he questions, walking behind me toward the shop door.

“Nope,” I reply, shaking my head. I’ve watched Atticus shimmy a tool called the slim jim down the side of a driver’s

side window, into the door, and pop open a lock. But I've never held the tool. "Just watched."

He opens the door and kicks a large foot outside, propping it open. With his hand gripping the doorframe above his head, he says, "come find me when you get a break. I'll show you how." He smiles, and then he's gone.

I don't know what I'm more excited about—learning how to pop open a locked car door or spending a little more time with Miller.



"YEAH? I CAN HARDLY HEAR YOU."

"Ahh, it's loud in here right now," mom says, the quiet roar of voices and phones ringing eating up much of the phone line between us. "Let me step out a second. Hang on."

I wait on the line as I input invoices with one hand, holding the phone with the other. A moment later, the line is much quieter, and she returns.

"Okay, I took some overtime at the Willowdale PD, so I won't be off til midnight. Do you think you can take Mara to Karate?" A door opens and slams in the background, and mom murmurs something to whoever is there.

I look through the rectangular window in the shop door and lock eyes with Miller. A spark of excitement twists through my core at his full, crooked grin and his sweet little wink.

Regular little wink. This is Miller. I don't need to be thinking of his wink as *sweet*. Ugh.

Thankfully, an hour after lunch, when his afternoon appointment was done, we snuck in ten minutes together. He showed me how to pop open a locked door using a slim jim. It's basically the same idea as a metal coat hanger straightened out, only made of things that don't completely fuck up a car or shatter glass. It takes some finesse, and while Miller did it

easily on his first try, he reminded me that it wasn't really his first try. "When you're really good at something, it's not usually your first time," he'd said as he felt my frustration on my third failed attempt. When he draped his hand over mine, curled his fingers into mine, and showed me the exact torque and force needed to do it... I finally did it, and none of my focus was on the lock.

Not at all.

I'd planned on popping out and maybe talking about skipping forward in the *The Mechanics Bible* and starting with some of the middle chapters. They're out of order in terms of skill, but it would be nice to learn some of the concepts sooner than later since mom's car needs work.

"Sounds good. I'll talk to Beau. I'll be there in a few."

Sliding my phone into my bag, I log out of my computer and slap a sticky note over the screen, letting Atticus know that if he touches my shit, he's toast. He's always using my login to look stuff up and never closing all the tabs, so when I try to log in the next morning, everything's all frozen.

Men. Or, *that man*, at least.

Using the black handset on the desk, I call the phone in the underground bay. Beau answers, and I'm grateful. Oddly, I'm disproportionately disappointed not to be talking to Miller again today.

That's new, and I'm not sure what to make of it.

"What's up, Laney?" Beau says, kind of out of breath. They're probably stacking the order of tires that came in an hour ago, so I keep it quick.

"Gotta take Mara to Karate. Mom's taking overtime in Willowdale."

He says something to Atticus before returning to me. "She's still dispatching over there sometimes?"

"Yep. Whenever they need a hand, and Oakcreek will part with her for a few hours."

Everyone loves my mom. She's one of those ladies that reminds you of all the best parts about having a family. Comfort, familiarity, tenderness. Her smile alone makes you feel important, and you feel so safe when you talk to her. I'm lucky.

"Tell Mara to kick ass," he says on a heavy exhale, probably holding the phone while stacking tires if I know Beau. He's not like the millionaire CEOs you see on the news, who are out of touch with their company's needs as well as a stranger to their employees. Beau works harder in this garage than anyone else, and that's saying something because Atti and Miller are workhorses, too. "And tell your mom I said hi."

"Will do. Thanks, Beau."

"No problem Laney." In the background, Atti gripes about something. I can't hear his specific complaint, but I can hear his grouchy tone. "Gotta go; Atticus is annoyed with me."

"How unlike him," I quip. "See you tomorrow."

Another reason I love working at the Wrench Kings here in Oakcreek is Beau. He's such a good boss; if I could be a mechanic here, I could work with the coolest people and be close to home. All the more reason to really make this arrangement with Miller work.



TEN MINUTES LATER, I've got Mara in the passenger seat, and we're headed to Karate. The mixed martial arts studio where she practices is on the main street in Oakcreek. It seems cruel to me to place a fitness studio next to the Wilting Daisy, the best bakery in town, but then again, maybe that's smart business.

I nod to the bakery out the windshield as I cruise into a forty-five-degree angle parking spot out front. "Should we treat ourselves to a cookie after?" I wiggle my brows at my younger sister across the cab. Her hair is thick and curly like mine, despite the fact that my stepdad Art has shaggy, dark

hair. Mom's hair genes were strong. My own father had straight hair, too, from what I can remember.

He's not dead, and I'm not pining over a worn photo of the two of us before he left this heavenly Earth. He was a fucking jackass with a heavy hand and a short fuse, and trauma has made him completely forgettable.

Thanks, Trauma. I'm fine with not remembering the man that made me hold my hands to my ears while hiding under my bed many nights. Fuck him.

I reach across and tuck some loose strands into her ponytail. "My treat."

Even though Mara is only twelve, Mom makes her earn her allowance and has since she was eight. Did the same with me, too, and I'm grateful. But because Mara is young, she doesn't earn a lot because she doesn't have a lot of expenses. That being said, a four-dollar cookie and a five-dollar hot cocoa would probably be a lot to her. And I can treat her.

Since I'm living at home, I don't pay rent. I do help with the bills and food, though, and not because my mom and Art ask me to but because I want to. I want to contribute to the household that I love; it gives me a sense of accomplishment that goes beyond anything I learn in the garage.

She wrinkles her nose. "Maybe, but that's so much sugar." She drops a hand to her lower belly and fans her fingers out over her gi.

Unclipping my seatbelt, I twist to face her, tapering my gaze on her. "Why are you worrying about sugar?" I don't like that.

She looks at her slide sandal-covered feet for a moment, then back to me with pink cheeks. "I'm so much bigger than everyone in my class."

I tip my head toward the brick and glass building with red painted letters across the window reading OAKCREEK MMA. "Your class here?" I snort. "No, you're not. You're *tall*. Taller than them. That's it, though, Mara." I knock her hand away from her belly. "Quit."

Her shoulders slope her concession. “I know, but I feel like a giant being two feet taller than everyone else. It makes me feel massive.”

I roll my eyes. “Massive is a bit extreme, and so is two feet. You’re maybe a foot taller but let me tell you this, Mara. Being tall is a good thing. You have those gorgeous long legs and a longer torso—clothes fit you the way they’re meant to fit!”

She smiles, so I continue. “And those other girls haven’t hit puberty yet. In another year, you’ll be taller, and so will they, and they’ll be jealous of those extra few inches you have.” I wink. “Long legs are not a bad thing.”

Only looking moderately convinced, she gives me a partial smile. “Tall’s good, huh?”

Nodding emphatically, I’m ready to call Beau’s wife, Beck, and put her on speaker and get a third-party perspective on this to prove to her she’s perfect. I hate that at twelve, she’s already feeling the crush of insecurities. Being a woman is hard, but being a young woman is a bitch.

“Tall is very good. You have more opportunities with sports and clothes.”

She laughs. “That’s good, I guess.”

I tug her ponytail gently to get her smiling some more. “Don’t worry about food and your body. You eat what you want when you’re hungry and you stay active; that’s all you do. You don’t worry about your size, okay?”

She nods, but I feel so mama-bear over Mara that I physically ache to hear the words. “Say it, Mara. Say you know that you are beautiful and perfect, and you don’t need to worry about your body.”

Rolling her eyes, she opens the door but doesn’t get out yet. “I’m not saying that because this isn’t the heartfelt moment on a family sitcom. But I won’t worry about food, okay?”

She’s getting sick of me, so I take her okay to heart and relax some. “Okay.”

Inside the studio, there are too many little kids running around in wrinkled gi's and belts marked in sharpie with their names across. I ruffle the hair of one little boy named Marcus, who zips past me on his way to the mat for his class.

“Delane!” he grins as he whirrs by.

The kids know me because Mara is serious about karate, which means I'm serious about karate, too. Art and my mom are here as much as they can be, but we all work a lot, so it's a group effort. Truthfully, I wouldn't want it any other way.

Because I'm here usually two or three nights a week, I know most of the families. And all of the instructors, too. Unfortunately, there's one of them I know too well.

“D, D, D,” comes a hair-raising chant from behind me. Mara splits, heading toward a huddle of girls waiting off the mat nearby. I take a preparatory breath and turn to face him.

“Rock, what's up?” I blink up at my ex. God, I hate that he's even an *ex* at all. Last year, at a stupendously low point in my life, after both Beau and Atticus decided the singles club was breaking up, I finally said yes to this fuckface when he asked me out for the hundredth time.

Red flag: if a guy asks you out many, *many* times after being rejected, it's because he's actually crazy. Not just crazy for funsies, but really crazy.

Enter: Rock.

We dated for all of two months and we broke up when I refused to have sex with him.

Yep, guys like that still exist.

Reaching out, he runs his disgusting hand down my arm, and I swear to God I have the strongest urge to gag. “You look hot tonight, D.”

“Don't call me D. No one calls me D.”

“I call you D,” he says, smiling as I bat his hand away not one but two times. Seriously. Two times I have to push his hand off me. One of the many red flags planted on Rock is a man who thinks he can put his hands on another person.

“And I’m asking you not to,” I deadpan, taking a small step back to put space between us. But of course, he lurches forward, his black TAPOUT t-shirt sticking to his large, sweaty body.

Yeah, he’s big. Rock is very built, which is not the typical build for karate. Most of the male athletes here are strong but lean, in fighting condition. Rock looks like he’s been deepthroating a bottle of steroids for the last five years. He’s always sweaty, even when he’s not leading a class, and his aggressive personality goes against everything karate is about at the core. But Oakcreek isn’t brimming with trained karate instructors, so Rock has a solid spot here. I’d take Mara somewhere else if there were somewhere I could afford to take her. It gives me peace of mind knowing Rock will never be her instructor, though. I can tolerate him for her to stay here.

It’s my own stupid fault for letting loneliness cloud my vision. No, it didn’t *cloud* my vision. It fucking blinded me. It must have. That’s the only logical reason I went out with this fucking turd in the first place.

“Where you been? I was looking for that fine ass of yours last week. Thought I spotted it out back, but she turned around, and I knew it wasn’t you.” A disturbing grin spans his face. “She had big titties, knew it wasn’t my mosquito bitten D.”

That’s it. I have no more niceties to give him. Turning, I head toward the metal bleachers positioned between two mats. I join the ranks of tired moms and working dads and face the mat where Mara’s class is warming up.

I don’t give Rock a single second of my time or attention for the hour and twenty minutes I’m there watching Mara. The best thing I can do is ignore him. Eventually, he’ll quit.

Mara has a great class. She nails all her drills, and I can see the confidence dripping from her, shoulders back, chin held high. We end up getting cookies and hot chocolate on me because she deserves it for working so hard. On the drive home, we call mom and fill her in on the good practice. When

the call is over and we're close to home, Mara asks, "why does Rock always bug you?"

I shake my head. "I went out with him for two months last year. He was a total creep, so I dumped him, and he's been a skeezy prick since." I twist my lips to the side as I flick my blinker on. "Actually, he's *always* been a skeezy prick. It was my poor judgment going out with him in the first place."

"Why did you then?" Mara asks as she begins untying the knot at her waist.

After pulling into the driveway, I put my car in park and give her the honest truth. "I was really tired of being single, and Beau and Atti had just gotten into relationships. I felt left behind."

Looking puzzled, she asks, "but Miller doesn't have a girlfriend, does he?"

I hope my cheeks don't flush, but I feel warm at just the mention of his name. My eyes fight to flutter closed to cherish the memory of his strong hand pressed to my lower back, making my insides feel all melty and delicious. But I blink at my little sister and smile. "Nope. He's still single. But even so," I say, ignoring the fluttering in my belly when I think about how he looked at me after the second kiss. Whoever he ends up with after this, she'll be the recipient of that doe-eyed, pussy destroying stare of adoration.

Lucky bitch, whoever she is.

"When you're older, you'll get it. Sometimes you just... want someone. Even if you're good at being single, there are times when having a boyfriend sounds really, really nice."

And the other truth that I don't tell Mara is that I want *more* than a boyfriend. After I become a mechanic, I want to settle down and have a family. I want my mom and Art to be a part of my kids' lives. I want them to be grandparents while they can, and I want to start my journey as a mom, too.

It's what I've always wanted and probably plays a large part of why I don't mind helping with Mara so much while mom and Art are working.

She smiles. "I think I get it." That's the thing about love; you may be too young to really understand it, but no matter the age, the desire to feel it is universal.

"Hey," I say before we get out of the car and go inside. "Don't ever date a pushy guy. Okay? Guys like Rock never truly listen to you, and that never makes a good boyfriend."

She nods. "Okay."

When we're inside, I start dinner. While I do, I hit play on the femdom audiobook I've been listening to the last few days. The woman in the story is a professional femme sought out by men who have recently been divorced. They hire her to rebuild them, make them strong and sound again. And she does it through orgasm control.

It's a crazy book, but crazy in a good way.

I get lost in the story and push Rock and his bullshit words from my mind as I make dinner for my family.

Miller would never say that shit to me. Ever.

five

...

milller

I just like that someone is *thinking* of how I was treated. And cares to stake claim to my well-being.

The red cedar rolls into a perfect spiral as I twist the pencil in the sharpener. With a crisp sheet of paper in front of me, I adjust my grip and begin writing. I start every single letter with those same two words.

Dear Dad.

I take a second to think about what I'm going to say today. I'm usually pretty detailed, but this morning I'm struggling to write.

It's the first time in years that I've really just... not wanted to write to him.

But I promised myself that I would do this, and I promised my therapist, too. This is how I'm working through the trauma of abandonment. And sure, I left them, but... they abandoned me my entire life. I'll tell you something about being abandoned by your family: it hurts way worse when you're living under the same roof as them the entire time.

Forcing me into a life I didn't want; I had to leave. I may have physically left, but it wasn't a choice. Not really.

I find the energy to write, knowing I'd probably regret it if I didn't.

I drop a line beneath the greeting and begin.

Salsa threw up his new food again. I think it could be the wheat, or at least that's what the vet told me to try next- gluten-free cat food.

You'd think it was crazy. You'd think it was crazy to buy cat food in the first place; I know you would. But that's what it's like on the other side. It's crazy in comparison to how you live.

I like it, though, Dad.

Anyway, no point in going there again.

I'm going to start training Delane at the shop. She wants to become a mechanic. I have no doubt she will. She'll probably be better than me. She's so smart and quick with her words in a way that makes me nervous, though I guess I've said that already. I'm looking forward to training her. I'm nervous, too, and that's another thing I'm allowed to be.

Nervous.

No one is telling me I'm less of a man for it.

Well, I'm not in a great mood this morning, so I'm going to end this one right here.

I hope you're well, Dad. And I hope everyone there in the house is well, too.

*Your son,
Miller*

Folding the bottom third up and then the top third down, I slide it into an envelope, scribble his name across the front and seal it. Next to my keys and wallet is a banker's box. Lifting the lid, I drop the letter inside and am met with the familiar crushing of paper as it swims into a sea of letters. I put the lid on and start on making two lunches.

When my nylon bag is packed, and the paper sack next to it is full with a lunch identical to mine, I get in my truck and head out. I don't start work for another twenty-five minutes, and I planned it that way. A couple of days a week, I leave early and head to Zeth's house.

I'm idling out front for less than a minute before he appears in the doorway, wrapped in a puffy blue winter coat, a gray marled beanie, and heather gray sweats with brown boots on his feet. He jogs to my truck, but because he's bundled in clothes way too big for him, it's more of a waddle than anything.

His breath hangs between us in a white cloud for a moment before he slams the door closed, outstretching his fingers in front of the heater vent. "Mornin'," he yawns, a shiver running through him as he does.

"Morning. How you doing this week?" I ask because I haven't seen him since last Wednesday when his mom went out of town and took him with her.

He nods, wiggling his fingers to warm them up. They look white and the beds are bluish. "The heat working?" I ask, nodding toward his house. He shakes his head, but I knew the answer just by looking at his fingers.

“I’ll bring a space heater by tonight, okay?” I don’t like how cold he looks. I reach between us to the center console and hand him the lunch I packed for him. “Here, I know the lunch card runs out this week, right?”

He nods and takes the bag. “Thanks, Miller.” He peers inside, eyes wide. “Two sandwiches?!” He drops the bag to the floorboard and gives me a hug over the console. A hug because I packed him two sandwiches. If that doesn’t make your heart hurt, you aren’t human.

“One for dinner later if mom’s short on her card this month.”

He shakes his head. “We’re good. She bought a case of mac ’n’ cheese, so I’ve had a big bowl of that every single night for two weeks.” I’m glad he has, but inside, I ache a little for him that eating Easy Mac is his big victory.

“Good,” I nod because I am glad he’s eating dinner. Sometimes they don’t, and I hate that. His mom is hard-working and prideful, and the only reason she’s letting me help them this much is because of the Big Brother program.

I met Zeth at the grocery store six months ago when he was counting change to buy a gallon of milk and turned up a quarter short. His clothes were oversized and dirty, but his hair and teeth were clean. I paid for his milk and walked him out to his bike. He wanted to pay me back the quarter and asked where he could find me. He saw my shirt, and sure enough, a week later, his mom drove him to the Wrench Kings to deliver me a quarter.

Then I offered to help. She said no. Atticus told me I could be a Big Brother and suggested the program reach out to Zeth and his mom. I did, they did, and here we are. Six months into a sponsored Big Brother friendship. We just hang out. He talks to me, and I listen because if there’s anyone that knows the value of feeling heard, it’s me. So I listen to everything he has to say.

Under the guise of learning a new skill, I took him out and bought him everything it takes to make grilled cheese. That included a toaster and all the food fixings. I’ve slowly been

trying to get them things here and there, but every once in a while, I'll overstep, and Zeth's mom Amy will make him give it back. It's a fine line I'm walking, but I'll gladly take an earful from Amy if it means they have just a little bit more comfort in their lives that they don't have to agonize over.

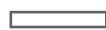
I don't make a ton of money—my ex helped me remember that—but I don't do too bad either. And as a single guy who owns his own truck and has a place of his own, I don't have many expenses. I want to help Zeth. He's a good kid and just twelve years old; he shouldn't know these struggles. It's unfair anyone has to.

"I gotta go, though. Mom's battery is dead, so I'm walking."

I look up the street to the powder-coated sidewalks and dreary gray sky. The school is just a few blocks up, fortunately.

"Get your stuff. I'll wait and drive you." I nod to the backseat of my truck, where there's a folded-up Wrench Kings hoodie, a Wrench Kings beanie, and a pair of fleece gloves. "Go put that stuff on, and don't argue," I say sternly. He hides his smile as he grabs the things and scurries to the front door. I always keep a spare set of clothes in my truck for him. Trying to slowly build up his wardrobe and I bring it all from my closet so he has room to grow and so Amy doesn't gripe at me for buying him new things.

I drop him off down the block a few minutes later but not before telling him I'm going to stop by later this week, bring his mom a new car battery, and replace it. Then, knowing he's warm and won't be hungry, I head to work feeling a lot steadier than I did earlier this morning.



"MORNING, BEAU," I greet my boss cheerily, raising my tumbler of coffee to him as he enters the shop.

“Good morning, Miller. There’s a woman out front waiting for you,” he says, slapping me on the back as he passes behind me to the desk. Putting his things away, I stare at him as I wonder who in the world would be here to see me. Amy’s at work, and she waved us off after Zeth got in the truck before school, so it can’t be her.

Beau sees my confusion and grins. “You better hurry before Delane eats her alive.”

Now I’m really confused, but at the mention of Delane, I head up front. Standing in the lobby wearing some workout type of unitard thing is the blonde woman from yesterday. Confused, my hand falls across my chest as I approach her.

“I sure hope your vehicle isn’t acting up,” I say as I approach. Without her dog today, she stands with her hands behind her back, head tipped to the side. She’s wearing a flirtatious smile that is nearly patronizing after she rejected me yesterday.

“Hi, well, there’s kind of a noise.” She chews her lower lip in a way that begs for me to look, almost like she’s trying to torture me. But no, she wouldn’t do that, that would just be cruel, and I don’t want to believe there are women out there that use their beauty to torture men beneath their station.

“What kind?”

She brings her hands in front of her and links her fingers together as if she’s about to explain something but doesn’t get the chance.

“Miller has a customer waiting. You’ll have to wait and talk to Atticus in ten minutes. He’s another mechanic here; he’s familiar with your vehicle. He was there for the repairs yesterday.”

Not much of that is true, aside from the fact that Atti does know everything about most cars, so he probably is familiar and could definitely find the source of the ghost rattle. But now I’m stumped as to why Delane’s so eager for this woman to leave.

She refuses to look at me as she stares down the blonde from her perch behind the counter. “Feel free to enjoy the complimentary coffee and have a seat. Atticus will be out shortly.” Finally, her dark gaze cuts over to me. “Miller, you have a vehicle in bay 3.”

I know I don’t, but if Delane doesn’t want me talking to this woman, well, I won’t. Atti can help her, and we’re not so big of an outfit that it’s going to do anything to his day. And if I’m gonna make this arrangement work with Delane, that includes keeping her happy.

The woman has a seat, and I make my way to Delane, taking her elbow in my hand. “Can we talk out back a sec?” I offer in a private tone. I glance at the blonde, but she’s engrossed in her phone.

Delane slides off the stool with a sigh, and once we’re behind the metal door and in the quiet, private shop, I fold my arms over my chest.

“Why can’t I hunt the noise?”

She rolls her eyes and takes a moment to meet mine. What’s with that? “She was a total bitch to you yesterday, and now she’s trying to bat her eyes at you and get what she wants without waiting in the queue like everyone else. It’s gross. I don’t like her.”

I don’t like her. Well. I’m typically an advocate for people loving people and all that, but Delane not liking the blonde in the weird grown-up onesie is... making me fight a grin.

She doesn’t want me to have anything to do with the blonde, and even virgins know that means she’s feeling a bit territorial.

I’m surprised to like it as much as I do. And it’s not that I’m envisioning some skimpy tank-topped pillow fight with giggles and loose feathers, and I’m sure as heck not picturing them wrestling in jello over me either.

I just like that someone is *thinking* of how I was treated.

And cares to stake claim to my well-being.

That's an incredibly basic gift of humanity and one that I have gone far too long without. And it feels so freaking good to finally have it.

Contentedness blossoms in my bones, strengthening me in a matter of seconds. I turn that rush of confidence into an offer. "Eat lunch with me today, out back on the loading bay. It's going to be sixty. It'll be perfect for a picnic."

The way warmth sweeps through me when she smiles is such a good feeling. My earlobes tingle and my fingertips burn to touch her, like the feeling of her beneath my hands would cure me of anything and everything.

The way my heart dips before speeding up reminds me that I've never felt that before.

"Okay," she says, a bit reluctant and a little shy. She reaches up to squeeze the end of the EarPod, to start her audiobook back up, but I catch her hand in time. "Thanks for looking out for me, Laney."

Back and forth, our eyes move together, completely lost in the way we're looking at one another. It's like we're seeing each other for the first time, and I can't figure out why.

Because she shooed off the blonde woman? That doesn't feel like that's why she's currently staring at me like I mean something, but maybe it is. Maybe acknowledging the way she protected me makes her feel strong, and she's pleased with me for making her feel that way.

I know Delane plays a big part in her family, and that's got to be hard. I was on my own at her age, but I only had myself to think of and support. Her situation is much harder, and she's always thinking of everyone else, no matter what.

Maybe just hearing I appreciate her efforts makes her give me this look.

Why am I staring then?

Why is my pulse racing and my neck getting sweaty, and my groin doing that thing that it does right before I get a hard-on that can't be ignored?

Because Atticus isn't wrong.

Delane *does things to me*, inside and out. And the woman can kiss. My mouth goes parched at the thought. "Meet you out back at noon," I force in a husky tone. She nods and slips back inside. With her gone, I'm left staring at a very, very smug-looking Atticus.

"What if I was going to eat lunch out back?" he asks, holding back a grin as he feeds his arms through a flannel, getting dressed to work in the bay beneath the garage. It's colder down there, so he layers up like crazy. I watch him tug a beanie over his tousled hair, then shrug into a down vest.

"Then the three of us will eat together," I reply.

He stops mid-zip and gives me a "get serious" look. "I ain't gonna be out back. I'm givin' you shit, Miller." He finishes with his vest and grabs his gloves. "She likes you, you know."

I shake my head and busy my hands with working the bill of my baseball hat. "Naa, I'm just helping her learn how to work on her mom's car a little."

Atticus freezes again, and I don't think he's ever been as interested in me as he is now. "Is that right?"

Nodding, I zip up my coat and puff some breath between my hands. "That's right. But don't say anything. That was all she was asking me about the other day." I leave off the part about my confidence and how she's helping me with that because he'd likely read it all wrong.

He lifts his chin and scrunches his nose as he takes a few sniffs. "Smell that?"

I shake my head.

"Love is in the air."

For maybe the first time in my life, I roll my eyes. He wags his finger at me as he heads down below. "I ain't wrong."

I know it doesn't happen often for him, but this time, Atticus is wrong.



DELANE WAS WAITING on the back bay when I came out. This time, we each ate our own packed lunches. She brought leftover spaghetti with meatballs and a huge slab of garlic bread—homemade, all of it. Today I have sprouts, lettuce, tomato, onion, cucumber, pickles, peppers, avocado, and cheese on toasted wheat bread with fruit salad, barbecue chips, and a bag of fruit snacks.

As a kid, a plastic wrapper blew through our yard once. I don't know how far it had to come to make its way onto the commune's property since we were well out of the way of everyone else. Purple and blue with fruit-shaped blobs on the front, I stomped the wrapper with my boot as it blew by. I picked it up and ran my fingers over it, reading the words *FRUIT SNACKS* on the front. It could've been magic beans to me at that point in my life, honestly. I hid the wrapper in my pocket and then kept it under my bed. Took it out and looked at it every day for weeks. Eventually, like all kids, I got lazy with hiding it and got caught.

Got the belt for it and was told at that time that we don't put poison in our bodies. I didn't know what that meant, and I don't know a lick more now than I did then.

Life is too short to only use your tastebuds for corn, stew, and bread. There are a lot of sinful things to taste in the world, and I wanted and still want to taste them all.

I look at Delane's lips as she sucks up a wild spaghetti noodle, red sauce splattering on her nose and chin. I want to kiss it off, then taste her lips all in one pass. But that's probably more of a Beau move than a Miller move, so I reach for my handkerchief from my back pocket and hand it to her. Tapping my nose and then my chin around a bite of sandwich, I say, "sauce."

She looks down at the patterned handkerchief, the navy blue fabric wearing greatly at the edges.

"A handkerchief? Really?"

I sip my coffee. “I’ve had it since I was a little kid. Got it from my dad.”

She clutches her hands to her chest, abandoning her loaded fork in the Tupperware of pasta. “Fuck, Miller, I’m sorry. I know things are rocky with your folks... I’m sorry.”

I don’t curse. I guess that’s another thing that kind of stuck with me—avoiding bad language. No one cursed where I grew up. Ever. I didn’t hear my first curse word until I was eighteen and told my father I didn’t want to get married.

Even then, his word of choice wasn’t meant as a curse but a threat.

“You’ll marry Carrie, or you’ll go to hell.”

I take another bite of sandwich Earthside and shrug off her apology. Not necessary. “Not rocky. There isn’t anything between us. I haven’t talked to them since I was eighteen.”

She doesn’t pick up her fork. Instead, she sticks out her bottom lip in a pout. “Miller,” she draws my name out slowly, sweetly, in a tone I’ve never heard from her. Bumps rise up on my skin everywhere as the edges of my jaw tingle and burn.

Man, I like Delane. A lot.

And seeing this private side of her that she doesn’t give to Kings makes me more than like her, which I have no business doing.

“It’s okay. I’m much happier now.” I take another bite, chew slowly, and swallow. I feel her eyes on me the entire time, and I’d pay good money to keep her interested in me like she is now. “I left because I wouldn’t be happy if I didn’t.”

She nudges the tip of her sneaker into the heel of my boot as she takes another bite of spaghetti. With food in her mouth, she says, “Why weren’t you happy there?”

I shrug as I set my sandwich down on the wax paper spread out next to me. I scratch my hairline and tug my hat back down. “Too long of a story for a lunch break.”

“Another day,” she says, sending my hopes through the sky. I’m not eager to tell her about my life, but I can’t deny the

flutter in my veins at her interest in knowing me. Who knew *interest* could feel like someone holding your hand?

“So, how’s your mom and Art doing? How’s your sister?” I have half a sandwich left, but I don’t want to waste time eating. If I eat, I can’t talk. And I rarely get Delane like this.

She sets her food down too. “Good. Art’s slipped disc is really giving him shit lately. Like, bad. They want him to have surgery, but he’s putting it off.”

With her hands on the edge of the concrete, she braces the edge of the bay the same way I do. Our pinkies touch, and my heart races. And before I can think best of it, I hook my pinky finger around hers. The corner of her mouth lifts as her wide, bright eyes lock onto mine.

“Sounds painful; I’m sorry he’s going through that.”

We look at each other as flames eat up my chest and throat. It’s just my pinky on hers, our eyes dancing together in the cool winter air. And it’s making me feel things.

And it’s making me *hard*. I can feel the entirety of my length stiffening against my thigh, but with her eyes on mine, I don’t worry about it.

“It’s okay. We’re trying to talk him into getting the surgery soon. He needs it.” Her eyes drop to our pinkies before slowly coming back to mine. “My mom is still working dispatch in Oakcreek. She picks up extra shifts at the Willowdale Police Department sometimes too.” She smiles, and I like that bubbly Delane can get a little shy sometimes, too. “I’ll tell her you asked about her. She’ll like that. She likes you.”

I swallow hard, and I’m about to say, “does her daughter?” but she speaks first, and the moment passes.

“Where’s your place at? You still in the apartment?”

Her lips are the perfect shape. A little heart at the peak, sloping down into full, pink perfection. She catches me staring, and I’m grateful she didn’t break our pinky connection as she snaps using her free hand.

“Yeah,” I reply, fully aware of the love-drunk smile drooping off my lips.

Her grin isn't far from mine, and that makes me feel so good.

I can count on one hand the number of times I've felt like this, and they've all been with Delane. “Do you like it there?” she asks.

“I love it. It's a great complex. It's small but perfect for just me.” I think of my apartment and how it's everything I never knew existed, never knew I wanted, and never knew I needed. “I love it.”

“I'm jealous. I'm in love with the idea of my own place. I just don't like living alone as much as I thought I would. We have a team thing going on at home, and while I liked some parts of my own space, I missed the team vibe.”

I nod. “That's tough. But if you had your own place again later, couldn't you still help them as long as you lived in town?”

She considers my words as she wraps a loose tendril of dark hair around her finger. Releasing it, the curl springs back as she turns to me. “I could. I guess life just showed me I wasn't ready to leave the nest yet.”

I nod because I get that, too. I wanted to leave home at sixteen but couldn't fathom it. Everything I didn't know seemed too big of a mountain to climb. Only when faced with a future I knew for certain that I didn't want, did I begin to get right with the idea of leaving.

“But I guess I should think about it soon.”

I bump her shoulder with mine. “In a couple of years, you'll be on a mechanics salary and have a lot more options.” She bumps back into me.

“I hope so.” I'm disappointed when she reaches for her bowl of food even though it is lunchtime. But she puts the lid on and stuffs it in her bag instead of eating. I'm also disappointed we aren't physically touching anymore. Turning to face me, she gathers her legs to her chest and rests her chin

on her knee. The wind carries a curl across her face, and I push it back behind her ear. “Thanks. Hey, let’s plan our first lesson.” She dances her brows up and down a couple of times, earning a chuckle from me.

“Okay. Well, where do you want to start?” I’m glad she brought it up, and *all of me* is excited that she did.

“We’ll keep going with kissing.”

I swallow around the knot of budding arousal I’m fighting down. I move my legs a little to send some movement and, hopefully, new signals to my groin. Now is not the time to get ready for battle.

“I meant with The Mechanics Bible, but...” I scratch a hand up the back of my head while I grin foolishly at her. “I like that more.”

She smacks her palm to her mouth as if she’s embarrassed, and I chuckle a little. “Okay, I’m sorry, I’m just finishing my audiobook today, and it’s heating up. I guess I have a one-track mind.” She smiles. “I’ll bring the MB with me to your place when I come over, and we can choose the lesson together.”

“Tonight,” I rush out, wasting no time. “You can come over tonight.”

She laughs and shakes her head. “Can’t. Mara has karate. Couple days?”

I nod. “Literally any day. All day. Every day.”

She laughs again, and I do too, and it feels good to make her happy.

“Alright, later this week. Sounds good.”

And suddenly, I have something to look forward to.

six

...

delane

Oh my god. *I have a thing for Miller.*

“You sure you don’t mind?” Art asks for the hundredth time.

I roll my eyes as I stuff my hoodie into my bag. “Stop asking if I mind. I don’t mind, Art!” I grab the apple and banana from the counter and add them to my stuff. “Mara, are you ready?”

“It’s too early!” She moans from the bathroom, where she’s combing her hair like a limp noodle, the door open so we can hear her complaints clearly.

“I’m dropping Art off at the clinic to see the doctor before I take you, remember? We gotta go.” Toeing into my black Vans, I grab my down parka and loop my scarf around my neck. “It’s right now or not at all,” I threaten like I always do. It’s not a real threat but more of a warning I’m about to lose what little patience I do have.

I wish I had more patience. My mom calls it fiery, but when I reflect on the times I’ve lost my cool, I usually feel a lot like a toddler stomping her foot.

Luckily, Mara pads down the hall with a mope on her face. I pinch her cheek as she walks by, earning me a sock to my bicep.

I rub the spot because it actually aches from her—she’s so strong. “Hey!” I grumble, rubbing over my coat again and again. “That hurt. You owe me a cookie for that.”

“No way,” she says as Art pulls open the door. Once we’re in the car and Art has double-checked the front door is locked, we’re on our way, and Mara is still tired.

I pat her leg by reaching into the back seat. “Cheer up buttercup; in a few minutes, you’re going to be doing some karate.”

She groans.

“You love it, so quit,” I say, coming to a stop. We drive the rest of the way in silence before wishing Art good luck at his appointment. I remind him that mom is picking him up as she’ll be off in just an hour, and he waves his hand at me. “*My back’s hurt—not my brain.*”

Fair enough.

Mara begins stretching as I drive her to her event. They’re doing one-on-one training for Kumite coming up in a few months. That will be when Mara can prove herself in a one-on-one competition. It’s kind of what she’s training for, in a way.

Rule number one of karate: it is used only for self-defense.

Rule number two: learn rule number one.

This Kumite is meant to demonstrate those skills, but some are offensive as well. It’s... everything to her.

This morning, they’re doing footwork drills to prepare, so I’m glad she’s snapping out of her funk.

As I’m treading up the bleachers, my legs feeling like they’re full of fucking sand, the voice that makes me want to vomit comes screeching up behind me. The bleachers creak as I fall to my butt, then, sitting down right next to me, is Rock.

But of course.

I roll my eyes. “Please get away from me now.”

“That’s not a very nice good morning,” he growls. I swear he *tries* to growl it like he’s mimicking someone with *actual* talent. He sounds like an old lady who’s trying to cough up a fucking hairball.

He’s *trying* to sound like one of my audiobooks.

He knows I listen to them.

Those two months we “dated” (because I refuse to think of it *seriously*), an audiobook had started up in my car when I drove us on a date. Yep, *I* drove us. Yet another missed red flag.

He laughed when he heard it. Teased me endlessly. “What’re you, some kind of call girl?” He *really* said that. And he did a really disgusting snort when he asked, too. I *almost* got mad, but then I remembered his brain was probably the size of a pea and his dick the length of the little pod it came in. I didn’t care about his opinion.

I know art. The performance of stories from words written with care. It’s a movie for your brain to build. And it’s amazing. So Rock could then and can now *kiss my ass*.

He flips his raggedy hair to the side and leans toward me, his body giving off a wet heat like an animal coming in from the rain. “You look good in that parka, D. But I can keep you warmer than that thing.”

I roll my eyes again, and he doesn’t know how hard I’m working to swallow my vomit. “Please leave,” I say, jaw tight, pulse beginning to pick up. A stray curl collides with my nose as his breath presses against my face.

“Leave with me.” His words crawl down my shirt like a toxin-filled spider, full of venom that can ruin me with just a tiny touch. Everything about him makes me squirm and scream, and my feminine wiles are waving their arms in the air, saying, *do not trust this man!*

And I don’t.

I throw my elbow into him, but my arm bounces back toward me. His core is lumpy and thick with buoyant muscle. I feel his grin over me as his lips come to my ear. He’s so much bigger than me, and that fact is now officially giving me panic.

He reaches over, unphased by my elbow, and lets his fingertips slide across the thin strip of exposed belly peeking from my baby tee. I elbow him again hard, twice, as hard as I can. So hard my abs seize with a cramp from the amount of strain I cast toward him. I pull my coat closed and stand up, taking the bleachers two by two until I’m pounding the glazed gym floor, heading to sit with the class waiting for the mat.

I can’t leave. But I can’t sit off in no man’s land.

As I'm passing Mara and the other girls in her class, from behind, Rock calls, "you fuckin' bitch," and his words travel up my spine like ice picks working me over. Of course, he had to say that so Mara could hear. He's even more of a prick than I thought.

I smile at Mara and give her a playful "what are you gonna do" type of look and sit next to a girl wearing an all-black gi, pressed to the nines. Her hair is shiny, slicked back, and neat. She eyes me cautiously and then spots Rock huffing off. She smiles knowingly.

After a few minutes, there's a break, and my mouth is dry after the surge of adrenaline passes. Stepping into the lobby, I peer down the hall and spot a drinking fountain that no one else seems to have noticed. I make a break for it, but a few steps in, I am grabbed by my hipbone. A familiar weighty hand. Panic seizes me for only a moment before I turn with a right hook to knock out anyone.

I may not do karate, but I work out, and no fucking floppy-haired loser with no game and a small dick is going to hurt me. The right hook sends him a few paces back and gives me time to head back inside the auditorium and take a seat. My heart is racing a million miles a minute. My knuckles are throbbing viciously, sending a searing pain down my forearm, haloing in my wrist. Sweat trails down my spine, soaking the waistband of my leggings. I just punched him so fucking hard.

Oh my god.

No. *No, no.* Don't do this. *He put his hand on you* not once but *twice*. He doesn't get to do that.

I take a deep breath and repeat those facts to myself as Mara takes the mat and begins her footwork drills. I keep my eyes on her bare feet and slowly get lost in how artfully and masterfully they work as she steps quickly, with more ease than a dancer.

Rock ignores me when he reappears, only a few red welts on his cheek to be seen. And yet, as I look down at my throbbing knuckles, they're bright red and already fading to

blue along the edges. He ends up at his mat at the far end, and I'm good with that. It can end there if he lets it end there.

Why does it have to get that far? Fucking men.

The rest of the morning goes by in a blur of me replaying everything that happened while simultaneously paying close attention to my sister, cheering her on.

A few hours later, heading home with Mara, I explained to her that Rock is just an asshole, but he's harmless. I don't know if she believed me. I think she sensed *I* wasn't sure if I believed myself.



MONDAY MORNING, I pull my hair up into a messy bun because I feel so sweaty and hot from the adrenaline. If residual adrenaline isn't a thing, I'm making it a thing. The rest of Saturday and all day yesterday, I thought about Rock being so aggressive with me. What if I hadn't hit him? I feel gross still, and it's Monday morning. I hate that Rock has that power from how he behaved. Atticus sidles up to me as I take a seat at my computer, logging in for the day.

"What do you need me to look up?" I breathe as I focus on the keyboard, my pulse still a little bit wobbly.

"I need—" he stops himself, and I close my eyes, knowing exactly why. "What the fuck happened to your hand?" He grabs it and turns me as he yanks it closer to his eyes, studying the puffy, discolored skin. "What happened, Laney?" he growls, and this man *actually* fucking growls it. Like if I don't tell him, he'll cuff my wrists and shout at me until I come clean.

"I promise I'll tell you," I plead as Miller enters the shop through the back door. "But later. Okay? Please?" I can't dodge telling Atti, and he'll make a big fucking deal out of it if I fight him; I know he will. I just... don't want to in front of Miller.

Would I have cared a few weeks ago? Probably not, and I don't like what that means. Whatever it means.

"Fine," he snarls. Actually snarls. This man is something else. I want to roll my eyes at him, but he's out of my space and out the shop door, bumping Miller on his way.

"Hi," Miller greets, and then his eyes, like a moth to a flame, fall directly to my sore hand. He swallows, and the way his Adam's apple ducks beneath his collar for a second, how his eyes taper a little as he takes it in, and how he inches closer to me on his feet... all of it has my heart flying around my chest so quickly I'm a little dizzy from the feeling.

He rests his hand on top of mine, and it's strangely intimate and not at all expected. Bold for Miller. It seems so hard to believe he isn't sure of himself when it comes to making a move when what he did just now was so incredibly romantic.

Romantic?

What am I fucking saying? I'm just all screwy in the head from that asshole Rock. Miller's just a concerned coworker. After all, Atti is concerned too.

"What happened?" he asks. The weight of his hand on mine sets off some series of reactions inside me; a flurry of nerves in my belly, my spinning heart... and... my clit pulsing in my panties, swelling and aching.

For Miller.

"I'm fine," I say, sliding my hand out from under him. This is too much out of nowhere. This isn't real. This is "*am I doing this right for my future wife?*" and yeah, maybe that's what I agreed to. But just for confidence. Not for all these other things.

This is too much.

"I believe you're fine. I just wanted to know what happened," Miller says slowly, watching my face process each and every syllable. He's paying me such close attention, and I don't know why I don't just tell him what happened with Rock.

That's a lie.

I know why.

I view Miller as someone above me. Out of my league, out of my pay grade. I'm quirky, curly-haired, curvy *me*, and he looks like he's about to lift his shirt, turn to the camera, give a thumbs up and say, "thanks, NutriBullet." *Seriously.*

And I tend to have a little attitude. The girl with the attitude punching someone? I nearly shiver with cringe at the thought. That's not who I want to be known as, especially not to a guy like Miller.

"I just don't want to talk about it right now, though, okay?"

He tugs on the bill of his cap. I love his hair, but he always wears a hat at work. Occasionally he'll take it off and run his fingers through all that thick silk he's hiding up there. I liken his hair color to strawberries on the vine in the utmost sunshine. Mostly golden but laced with light red. It's gorgeous. I love that after a few days of not shaving, a reddish blonde stubble takes over the strong curve of his jaw, making him look... *very good.*

Oh my god.

I have a thing for Miller.

"Okay. Will you have lunch with me, though?"

I nod, wishing his offer was something physical I could grab and hold close. "Yes. Then we can plan tonight."

He looks puzzled but not necessarily in a bad way. Happy puzzled. "I thought we weren't getting together until closer to the end of the week?"

I wiggle my head. "Well, the next few days are busy, and I just never expected a date on a Monday." I stop myself, and correct course before my cheeks get hot. "Not a date, but, you know, a lesson thing."

"Lesson thing," Miller nods, wearing that crooked grin that suddenly makes my body burn a bit brighter.

“But I need a distraction tonight.” I pause and wince a little. “That sounded like a bad line from a 90’s soap.”

He shrugs. “Don’t know. Never seen a soap.”

I pull my head back a little, shocked. “Seriously?”

He nods with another casual shrug. “Yeah. I’m catching up on TV and movies now but still haven’t seen a lot of it.” His smile is so effortless and genuine. “I don’t have much else to do, so yeah, I’m catching up.”

I like the idea of Miller not having much else to do. I like it a lot.

“What time can I come over?” I ask, a little ashamed of my lack of humility.

The smile is back, and my toes curl in my sneakers. “Anytime. I get home, well, you know when I get home. I leave here at five.”

I want to touch him, but it’s not appropriate. Instead, I smack his chest playfully. “I gotta eat dinner first. And grab the MB.”

His head jerks up in a sudden nod. “Yeah, we’ll need that.”

I arch an eyebrow at him playfully, but my heart pumps fast as he grins down at me. Why are we grinning at each other? Ugh. “You didn’t forget you owe me something, too, did you?” He *totally* did.

“Yep,” he nods. “I did. I was just thinking about what you’re going to teach me.”

I think of the heroine of the novel I’m listening to. She’s never one to run out of ideas. And she rebuilds men. That’s kind of what I’m doing with Miller, right? Rebuilding him into a strong, more confident version of himself?

I can’t even believe he’s lacking confidence. He has all the attributes to be arrogant, yet he needs me to show him basic female interaction.

Suddenly, I have an image of Miller trying as hard as he can to hold back an orgasm, and it makes my lower half burn.

Imagining him having an orgasm is... new to me and something I like very much. So much so that I would *not* pass a dry panties test right now.

The idea for tonight comes easily; I'll tease him. It was hot when I heard it.

"Likewise. My mom's drive shaft needs replacing." I smile and so does he. The way we ping-pong between what feels like flirtatiousness and then back to friendly playfulness so easily is... nice. "Text me your address." I pull my phone from my pocket and hand it to him.

He laughs, and I hadn't noticed the depth of his voice until now. It sounds like it comes from somewhere deep and dark, yet he's so light and kind. It makes me tingle, wondering where else that dark side might be able to come out one day.

"I have your number, Laney. We've texted before."

"Oh." I'm puzzled. I wrack my brain as I shove my phone away. "Really?"

His face droops a little, like snow beginning to melt. "Yeah. A couple of times. It's cool." He gets his phone out and starts doing something on it. "I'll text you."

"Thanks." A moment later, my phone buzzes. I look down, and sure enough, his name appears on my screen. "There you are."

"Told you," he says, smiling despite the fact that I've just proven myself to have not really thought about him at all until now. And I'm about to apologize, but he snags a set of keys from the drawer and heads out front. "See you at lunch," he calls over his shoulder. I watch him slide into the courtesy car out front, and then all I'm left with are taillights and confusion.

I don't have a second to think because Atti is back.

"Tell me now that he's gone," he growls, leaning toward me, the countertop squealing under the weight of his upper body as he pressures me with his close proximity.

“Jesus, back up, Atti. I don’t know how Goldie puts up with you,” I groan, attempting to shove him away, but because he’s like a trillion pounds of hair and muscle, he doesn’t budge. He does, however, take two steps back. Still, he’s close enough that I know he had cream in his coffee this morning. “I can smell your breakfast.”

“Well, take long enough tellin’ me what happened and you’ll get to smell me digestin’ breakfast, too.”

I shake my head. “You’re so gross.”

“Everyone is gross,” he deadpans. “Now explain the knuckles.”

Sighing, I turn toward him on my stool and start.

“You know how Mara does karate, right?”

He pinches the bridge of his nose with two filthy fingertips. “Here we go.”

“Here we go, what?” I question because he’s the one forcing me to tell him.

“Women always start their stories, like, five years before the event.” His hand drops to the Plexi as he refocuses his attention on me, face stoic.

I push a finger into his chest. “This is part of the story.”

“Just keep tellin’ it.”

“Anyway, before I was so rudely interrupted,” I say, narrowing my eyes at him because, god he’s getting on my nerves today. He’s like a bossy older brother I never had and never really wanted. “She’s been doing it for years. So I’ve been going there for years, you know, to watch her competitions and practices and stuff.”

He rolls a finger forward, and I want to sock him in his face, but my hand can’t take another blow.

“I’m getting there, Jesus Atti.” I huff a little, irritation causing me to perspire. But I’d rather be rage-sweating than PTSD-sweating, so I guess I have Atti to thank for that. “Since

I'm here and there and basically nowhere else, my contact with single guys is obviously a little light."

"Obviously."

"So last year, I dated one of the karate instructors from Mara's studio. He wasn't her instructor, and thankfully he won't ever be, but anyway, I only saw him a handful of times over the course of two months." I tip my head forward and drop my voice. "He was a complete dud."

"Obviously."

"Why is that obvious?" I put my hands on my hips, defensive over my bad choices. I can call them bad, but I don't need Atti calling them bad; he's only been happy for a millisecond.

"Because you're single," he offers slowly, still deadpan.

"Oh." Yeah, that makes sense. "Well, anyway. He still wants to date, I guess. But the reason I called it off aside from the fact that he was a complete dead-end was that... he wasn't a good listener."

Atti arches a brow, wordlessly commanding the details.

I shift on my feet as my nerves come alive a little. "He didn't like hearing no." Before Atti gets the wrong message, I hold up my palm in the universal sign for halt. "He took the no but didn't like it. So I called it off."

Atti's face softens a little and his demeanor shifts. "Good girl, Laney."

I smile, but it's short-lived. "Anyway, he was getting handsy at Mara's practice competition Saturday morning. I mean, nothing crazy because we were in a studio full of people, but still, he was handsy, and the last time I saw him, he made a comment about my body that was totally creepy and rude. So this time, putting his grubby hands on me after I told him no... I just... snapped." I take a moment to calmly replay what happened with Rock and feel the need to alter my words. "I panicked, I think. I'd gone to the lobby for a drink from the fountain, and I was alone, and he found me, and he just... I didn't know what else to do, so I hauled off and socked him." I

think about how shaken up I felt over the weekend and how hard it's been to hide my healing hand from my family.

“Where'd ya get 'em?”

I tap my eye. “Eyeball.”

Atticus extends a fist for me to bump, and I do. “Good girl, Laney.”

“You're not going to tell me it was stupid?”

His face scrunches a little. “Nah. You got Beau for that. I ain't no daddy. I don't gotta teach morals. He's a handsy prick, so you let him have it. I don't see nothin' wrong with that.”

For some stupid ass reason, my eyes fill so I face my computer and say, “thanks, Atticus.”

He pats my shoulder like an uncomfortable older brother, and before he leaves for the shop out back, he says, “thanks for tellin' me.”



THE REST of the morning is nice. Busy, with customers keeping the door revolving for most of the time. I listen to my audiobook, slowing it down to the original speed so I can soak in every single drop of it. I love how the woman takes the broken man into her hands and rebuilds him into someone mentally stronger than he was before, all using the control of his orgasm.

I don't think someone could shape my thoughts and feelings by holding an orgasm over my head, but then again, men are far simpler than women.

I know it's just a story, but I really feel like I get it. I can understand how bringing them to the edge and taking away their power in sex makes them open to any and all feelings. It's then that the heroine swoops in and fills their brain with all the things they no longer believe about themselves. And as they learn to control their orgasm more and more, she builds them up more and more.

It's kind of brilliant. And it's so fucking hot, too.

I can do that with Miller. For him. I can. I know it. I may not have the actual experience but again, is that really necessary? Plus, he doesn't have to know I've never done... *things*.

Atticus and Beau barrel through the shop doors together, having a friendly argument about what sounds like a book. They stop their chatter as I look up at them.

"What?" I blink. Why are they staring?

Beau leans toward me from across the desk. His smile is foreboding and tender like he's the coach and I'm about to be cut from the team. "Atticus told me about the douche at karate."

I turn to face Atticus and roll my eyes at him. He thumps his fist against his pecs. "Eye rolls bounce right off me. My old lady rolls her eyes at me so much; I'm immune."

I roll them again for good measure. "You didn't need to tell Beau."

Beau clucks his tongue. "Don't say that. Something's up with you; I wanna know."

Now I feel bad because Beau really means that. He's a good guy, and even though Atticus takes a cheese grater to my last frayed nerve, he's a good guy too. I let out a heavy sigh. "I know; I'm sorry. I'm just... annoyed by the situation." I speak a private truth, knowing with them it's safe. "I don't want to be the poor girl who fights."

Beau winces back from the desk. "Poor?"

I roll my eyes. "You know what I mean. *Lower income*."

His face grows serious. "Working hard to contribute to your family is nothing to be ashamed of."

"I know that," I say defensively, then wish I wouldn't have brought it up because Beau cannot possibly understand. I turn to face Atticus, and reading my mind, he nods.

“When you don’t got a lot, you feel like everyone knows and expects a certain behavior out of ya.”

Beau’s head ping-pongs between the two of us. “I’ve been to both of your houses. They’re fucking great.” He really looks puzzled, but then again, I forget that Beau is a millionaire that lives at my level because he likes it. Sure, he doesn’t struggle with finances, but his house isn’t fancy, and if I think about it, I think it’s smaller than mom’s house.

Miller pushes through the door with his hands full.

“We’re getting burritos,” Atticus announces, gripping Beau by the shoulder and walking him out. He still looks confused, but right now, my focus is already entirely elsewhere.

When the front shop door closes, Miller empties his hands onto the desk. He pushes one of the items he was holding toward me, leaving a streak of moisture beading on the Plexiglass. “I brought you an ice pack.”

I look up at him.

“Atticus told me what happened.”

I roll my eyes but immediately feel the need to clarify. “The eye roll was for Atticus, not you.”

“I’ll pass it along.” Miller’s lips twitch at the corner like he’s fighting the instinct to smile. “I’m sorry you had to hit someone. That must have been scary.”

I swallow the immediate lump of emotion that his words throw into my throat. “Yeah,” I breathe slowly. “It really was. I didn’t want to.”

“I know,” he says, and the way he says it makes me believe he really means it. My body feels like a Christmas tree that someone just plugged in.

“Thanks for the ice,” I say, wanting to change the subject. I plop the cold, melting bag onto my knuckles and feel relief from my heated state immediately. Next to me, Miller unpacks a bag from Delilah’s Deli.

“Two meatball subs,” he announces, and even though I’ve never had it before, my stomach growls like it’s my favorite

meal. I drop a hand to my stomach to stifle the outrageously loud howling. He grins at me, and my stomach goes from starved to a sea of nerves and swells so high that my breath and voice falter for just a moment.

“Hungry?”

I rub where I’m holding my stomach. “Yeah,” I say, really holding back the insanely large grin I’m feeling. “Starved.”

“What’d you eat for breakfast?” he asks as he unrolls and plates up the food. I see he’s nabbed all the sides, too, and a man who doesn’t skimp on sides is my kinda man.

“Oatmeal with blueberries and granola,” I say. “It’s Art’s favorite, so I made enough for all of us.”

He nods. “I like oatmeal.”

“What’d you have?”

We sit and eat the most delicious meatball subs either of us has ever had, and we talk about food. Miller tells me that he didn’t get to eat anything of his choosing growing up, so now, he treats himself to one thing a day that he’d wanted as a kid. I like that a lot, how he’s taking care of himself by filling his bucket with what he feels he lost.

He tells me his first few years of having his own place were made up of fast food and ice cream. Lots of ice cream. He also tells me the one snack that stuck with him that he eats every day is fruit snacks.

And I can’t help that I like that about him, too.

And I can’t believe I’m only learning some of this just now, after years of working twenty feet apart. I guess I never asked or listened, but now, I’m not sure anyone could keep me from learning about him.

By the end, we plan on me being at his place around seven tonight, and all I can think of is how hard it will be to get through the rest of the workday.



MILLER TEXTS ME HIS ADDRESS, and when I leave for his place, I don't lie to my parents. I mean, I omit details, but I don't lie.

“Going to Miller's place for a couple of hours. He's teaching me some stuff from the MB,” I tell Mom as I work my feet into a pair of well-loved Vans. She glances at me once before returning to her dating show on TV.

“Okay, lock the front door when you get home.”

“Don't drive home if you drink,” Art adds, peering at me over the top of his glasses.

“I'm not drinking. We're working through the BIBLE tonight,” I say, confused. Art focuses on his newspaper, but I see a small smile on his face.

“We are,” I argue against his smile.

Mom looks at me, confused. “We are what?”

I wait for Art to look, but he doesn't. “Nothing. Anyway, I'm going. Bye.” I kiss her on the cheek, and when I get to Art, he winks and lowers his voice when he says, “have fun.”

After sitting in my car in the driveway for a solid ten minutes figuring out which way I'm getting across town to Miller's apartment, I check myself out in the flip-down mirror.

When I was getting ready after my shower, I felt compelled to wear *things*. Pretty things made of lace and satin. Things that came from the mall that I hide in the bottom of my pants drawer.

Buying those pieces of lingerie after I dumped Rock was a promise to myself: no more filler guys. Only date guys worth dating. And when I date a guy who I'm glad I waited for, I'll wear the lingerie.

Miller is a friend turned mentor, and to him, I'm a friend turned... *guidance counselor*. Mentor and guidance counselor sounds like the start of a joke involving a bar, not the start of a very sexy night. So I went with my normal cotton bra and panties because I'm not trying to make an impression on

Miller about anything other than how he feels about *himself*. It's not about me. Or us.

Now that I'm looking in the mirror, I'm wishing I'd worn something lace, even if Miller never saw it. Because I'm feeling underwhelmed with myself, and suddenly I'm wishing I was a little... *more*.

It's late, so I didn't wear makeup. It didn't make sense to shower and then put on a fresh face of makeup. Also, I didn't want it to seem like I was dressing up for a date or something and make Miller feel weird.

I'm wearing jeans with my Vans and a Wrench Kings hoodie. My curls are up in what I'd like to think is a bun but is more realistically a wad of tangled former curls. Pieces that escaped the shower cap are wild and frizzy around my face and down the back of my neck, and when I smile, the wear of the weekend lies beneath my eyes in dark crescents.

I drive to Miller's place, and by the time I get there, I realize the thing bugging me isn't what I'm wearing or how I look.

It's that I am concerned about his opinion of me.

Since when?

Irritated with myself, I close my car door harder than necessary, and like usual, it doesn't make me feel any better. Stupid fucking car door. Miller's apartment is on the second floor in the back corner—the perfect spot.

Of course, he has the perfect location because I want a perfect little corner apartment, and I want Miller, and it's only making him that much more appealing to me.

Once in front of his door, staring at the gold-plated 4B above his peephole, I knock. There's a doorbell, but something about Miller says he's waiting and listening. A moment later, when the door opens and Miller appears, I'm glad I didn't ring.

He grips the door frame with one hand and the door handle with the other, making his broad shoulders seem to span the world. His t-shirt is fitted, clinging to his defined chest and

mountainous biceps. He seems so much... sexier... all of a sudden.

The moisture evaporates from my tongue at that thought. *Miller is sexy?* He reaches around the door frame and uses the blunt tip of his finger to tap the flickering bulb outside his apartment. His shirt lifts as he does, exposing an adonis belt I've only ever seen on book covers. I close my mouth and move my tongue around, desperate for moisture, eager to swallow.

"Hey Laney, come on in. Sorry. That light always flickers."

Yep, *Miller is sexy*.

"Hey," I say, sounding a little quiet, like I'm in shock, so I clear my throat. "No worries. It only flicked off after I knocked."

He closes the door, and as soon as the deadbolt is twisted, my energy changes. I couldn't see it coming, I didn't expect it, and I'm surprised, but when Miller comes to my side with a sweet smile on his face, I swear I fall a little in love with him.

It's crazy, I know.

We've been friends and coworkers for years. And only within the last few weeks have I viewed him as... more? And driving over here, I reminded myself how much help it would be to have him as a mentor to get me further in my journey so I can nab some schooling and an apprenticeship with knowledge and experience. I need that. I want that. And for Miller? He's so beautiful and wholesome. He eats Frosted Flakes and fruit snacks, for God's sake. He'll end up with a woman who takes pilates and changes her couch pillows for every holiday, and in no time, she'll be knocked up. Her hobbies will be riding her Peloton and going to Target while I'm over here dreaming about naps and audio porn and avoiding Target (and people) like the plague.

We are not the same, me and Miller's probable dream girl.

I can't pretend the horizon for us is full of sunshine. It just... doesn't make sense.

But I swear. The faintest scent of his cologne and the warm energy of his home seem to swallow me up, leaving only him to breathe in, only him to feel, just his words in my ear. “I’m glad you’re here.”

And there it is again. That little flame in my bones that flickers through me, eager to grow into a towering blaze.

Small but all-encompassing, focus-stealing, addiction starting, cheek tingling, brain fogging, clit pulsing, belly flipping blaze.

The blaze I’ve been dying to feel. Aching to experience. And finally, after years of dating, I’m feeling it with a *non-date coworker friend*.

“I’m... glad I’m here too,” I admit.

He motions me to his living room, where there’s a gray sectional peppered with cream throw pillows. I take a seat as he does, too, and his eyes stay on me as I check out the room. Framed art of... what appears to be fields or a farm. A bookshelf filled with books. Turning my head sideways, I scan spines, taking in a variety of titles. And I can’t help but smile when I realize... they’re all young adult books.

“What?” he asks, still watching me, wearing a smile of his own.

I motion toward the bookshelf after shaking off the strap of my bag and letting it fall to the floor near the couch. “They’re young adult books.”

He strokes his hand down his face, and his knee bounces a few times before coming to a stop. “Yeah,” he draws out. “Well, I wasn’t allowed to read anything growing up. And one time, I got to go into town with my dad, and I saw a kid sitting on a bag of wood chips at the seed ’n’ feed, and he was reading a mystery. It said across the front: a mystery.”

I smile, but it falls away because a child who isn’t allowed to read is seriously a fucking crime. “Why couldn’t you read?”

He leans back, and I get a second, heady hit of his cologne. Woodsy, clean, but masculine. My stomach clenches. “I grew

up in communal living, and we didn't have TVs or any outside entertainment or... anything good or fun, really."

I wince. "Geez." Pausing, I wonder how to word this, so I start slow. "Were you... like part of a... religious cult?"

He chuckles and strokes his face again, and I like Miller with a little stubble. I've always wanted to feel stubble rubbing my inner thighs. "Well, honestly, kind of. We believed what we were told to believe, or I guess that's kind of what I understand about it now, on reflection."

"You left at eighteen?" I ask, bringing my knees together in an effort to diffuse the pulsing between my legs. I can't believe I'm having such a strong... reaction.

He nods again. "Yeah. If you leave, you can never come back or have contact with anyone there. Ever. I mean, they don't have addresses or phones, so, yeah."

It occurs to me that this means his family, too. "You really don't see your family? You don't talk to them?" As I pull my knees to my chest, getting comfortable on the couch, I realize... I know this. I know all of this about Miller. "You don't. I'm sorry. I remember now." My face heats, and it should. I *should* be embarrassed. I've always been so deep into my audiobooks at work that most of the time, I never even took my EarPods out at lunch with the guys. But when they were out, I listened. I guess even on some unconscious level, I've always categorized Miller as not an option.

He smiles, and it works its way through my chest, leaving pops of electricity and waves of warmth in its wake. I'm so fucking glad I remembered.

"But," he brings the conversation back to the books with a tip of his head toward the bookshelf. It's then I realize he's not wearing his baseball hat. The plain blue one he always wears. He sifts a large hand through his soft hair. I remember it being so soft like that, too. It shines beneath the somewhat dim lights, and the relaxed flex of his arm as he holds it over his head makes my breath stick in my chest a little. Fuck, he's talking. I clue in.

“... so over the last eight years, I’ve been lost in the world of young adult literature, trying to redeem my crappy childhood. I mean, I’ll read a thriller here and there, but for the most part, I’m just really enjoying the simplicity of these stories and how perfectly they wrap things up.” He wraps a gift with his hands as he talks, and I love how much he cares about this.

“I get it. I love YA.”

“YA?” he questions, brows furrowed. His hair falls across his forehead, and he does nothing to push it away, and I think that’s because he’s so focused on... me. And I’ve never seen his hair like this and... fuck. It’s hot.

“Young adult,” I try not to stammer, though I don’t know how well I do. “I read a ton of it.” I shrug, not feeling the need to explain rather wanting to share. He seems like he wants to know. Or he’s fucking George Clooney in the acting department. “I read it to Mara a lot. I want her to read, and sometimes she’s honestly just too tired.” I laugh and add, “or lazy.”

He grins and kind of shakes his head. “That’s so cool. I love reading. I would love to have a sibling to read to or with.” I exhale slowly and heavily, my chest burning as I do. My body is physically aching for him, and my mind is actually *blowing* because of it.

This is *Miller*.

He shrugs. “That’s cool of you, Laney.”

Everything between my legs floods with warmth. No, not even warmth. Heat. Fucking fire. My pussy *burns* for his touch. God, I want Miller to reach out, slide his meaty hand down my pants, under my panties, and spread me open with those thick ass fingers.

“Do you hate it when I call you Laney?” he asks, saving me from choking on my tongue.

I struggle a little because my mouth is so dry, but after a moment, I manage to say, “not at all.” I wrinkle my nose. “Sometimes, when Atti patronizes me and then calls me

Laney, I hate *him*. But no, not you.” We share a small laugh, and our eyes stay on one another in a tenderly aggressive way that speaks volumes beyond our words.

“Good,” he says, his tone raw and low but also smooth like butter melting over a hot iron pan. My bones ache a little with how much I want him.

“I think it’s cool you’re catching up on all you lost.”

Casually, he casts his arm out along the back of the couch, drumming his fingers so just the tips skirt the edges of my shoulder. It’s barely a touch. More like a whisper.

But it eats me alive, I fucking swear. I can actually feel my pussy get so wet my panties start to stick to me. He, on the other hand, doesn’t seem to notice. “I don’t feel like I lost anything anymore. I kind of went through all the stages of grief in the first three years.” His smile is wide, and his eyes sparkle as he says, “I’m good now.”

I can’t imagine “being good” after leaving everything you’ve ever known to be true at age eighteen and starting over alone. Virtually alone. I mean, I remember Beau telling me that he didn’t know Miller was on his own until after they worked together for over a year.

It physically hurts my heart to know this sweet man sat alone on his birthday and holidays... all because he wanted to experience life and the people who were supposed to love him... didn’t. Because if they don’t support you, their love is conditional, and real love is unconditional. Everyone knows that.

“Good,” I say, feeling way too many things. “Good.”

“You said that twice.” Drum. Drum. His fingers barely touch me again. My body ignites, my neck goes soft and wobbly, and I twist positions just to hold it up.

“Uncomfortable?” he asks because, of fucking course, he does.

“No,” I lie. “Just a little thirsty.” Understatement of the year. All the moisture in my body is currently dripping from

my pussy, and my mouth feels like the asshole of the Sahara desert. I could drink two swimming pools of water.

He's on his feet and in the kitchen before I can even push my body out of the soft, incredibly comfortable couch and peer over at him. He returns with his water bottle. The metal one he takes everywhere that's covered in stickers and things. It's... *his*.

"It's clean," he offers. "I just washed it."

Somehow, that disappoints me. "Thanks."

I drink, and I drink, and I drink until I think if I take one more drink I'll puke. I hand the bottle to him, and he takes a drink. I swear to God, I think my pussy almost explodes. He's not trying to do anything sexy or attractive, I don't think. Yet he's doing all the things I've heard in my books and making me feel all the ways I've always expected and hoped to feel. Things I was starting to lose faith were real.

Butterflies and electricity, feelings of hope and desires for more. Things you want to feel when you're dating someone on your way to marriage. That blooms inside me when I'm around Miller. It's a dangerous high I'd do anything to chase.

Keeping perspective, I twirl a flyaway around my finger, giving the lifeless curl a little shape as I peer around the place further.

"Your place is clean." I hold one eye shut when I turn to him, giving him my most analytical and skeptical squint. "Did you clean for me?"

For a moment, he looks confused before he looks around his place and then back to me. "It's... always like this. But I did run the carpet cleaner because of Pico de Gato."

I snicker but try not to make him feel bad. "Gallo," I correct. "Pico de Gallo." He must've made it and spilled it. But he holds up a finger wearing a grin, and proceeds to swipe through his phone before holding it out for me to see.

On the screen is a very large orange and white cat with lots and lots of hair. He's wearing what I feel like would be a frown if animals had precise expressions, and his front teeth

are hanging over his bottom lip in... a scowl. Miller locks the phone after giving me a few seconds.

“That’s Pico de Gato, but I only call him that when he’s in big trouble.”

“So then... what do you call him the rest of the time?”

“Salsa,” he says before lowering to a crouch facing the small dark hallway, putting his fingers in his mouth and sending a sharp whistle down the hall. “*Salsa*,” he calls, his voice lighter than normal. *He has a pet voice.*

I love when guys have a pet voice. If a guy doesn’t have a pet voice and a voice he uses on babies and young children, I don’t want him. Seriously. Give me a guy who isn’t embarrassed to be soft for the creatures who thrive off gentleness, and I’ll gladly have him any day of the week.

My body is all tingly and warm as I stare down at Miller’s muscled body hunched over, calling his cat. And then, from the shadows as all cats do, Salsa appears, eyes glowing. He moves slowly toward us; his focus narrowed on me as he sniffs the air as he walks.

“He doesn’t like me,” I say quietly as if I’m trying to go unseen near a bear or something.

Miller looks up at me, reaches out and wraps his hand around my calf, rubbing it once. “He’ll love you. He’s just not used to company.”

And I’m not used to Miller being so casually touchy. I feel like I should have worn a pad or something, Jesus.

“Don’t have a lot of company?” I stumble out, realizing after I say it that it came off as “do you have women here?” and while I do want to know that, I also didn’t mean it to come across that way. I just wanted a momentary respite from the all-consuming want that’s growing inside me.

It’s strong and scary and not at all why I’m here.

I can’t go falling for a friend, co-worker, or someone who clearly isn’t into me that way. If he was, he would have asked me out years ago. Salsa wraps himself around Miller’s calves

and ankles as he greets his owner, and I watch as the two of them interact.

Miller strokes down his back, and Salsa purrs. When he gets to his feet, he motions for me to give Salsa a pet, but I shake my head. “I think I’ll let him get used to my smells and stuff before I touch him.”

Miller laughs a little but says, “that’s cool. Do what you’re comfortable with, but Salsa’s a cool dude. Unless he’s puking on my rug at 2 am, then he’s an annoying Pico de Gato.”

I nod, and the bookshelf catches my eye again. Being in his house and being so close to him, I almost feel like my eyes are roaming just to lessen the intensity I’m feeling. Desperate to hang onto something, find something I can turn into a conversation piece so we can get lost in talking, and I can chill the fuck out with the wetness and wanting.

Seriously.

“Hardy Boys?” I ask, eyeing the spines of two full shelves of books. He looks like he may have the whole series.

He nods. “I actually started those on the recommendation of the librarian.” At the bookcase, he pinches one from the pack and slides it out, running his hand over the cover. “When I first got my own place, I was just an apprentice so I wasn’t making that much. I used the library for almost all of my reading.”

“The library is such a great place for books, which I know sounds dumb because, hello, it’s a library. But I feel like most people assume it’s all like... educational books or old stuff. But you can check out like any book there; you just have to request it. And they have audiobooks, too,” I beam because books are my topic. And books at the library are certainly my topic. I wouldn’t be churning through titles the way I do without the public library.

His grin feels like a hug. “Man, I think you like the library more than I do.”

My cheeks heat. “I probably do.” I tip my head to the side, considering all this new information about Miller. “I really

didn't know you read so much. You never mentioned it before." As soon as the words leave me, I wonder if this is another thing I actually have heard and do know but never really paid attention to before.

But he shrugs. "I still feel like I'm in the discovery phase of books, though. I mean, like I said, I've read some Tolkien and stuff, but I don't know," he says bashfully, raking a hand up the back of his head, drawing my attention to his swollen bicep and shiny hair. My mouth makes a little extra saliva; I swear it does. "I guess I figured you guys would tease me about what I read."

"You read what you like; you don't read what you do because it's all you can read," I say, almost in defense of his choices more than him. But he laughs.

"I know, but you know, Atticus would probably give me shit."

I scoff. "Atticus reads a ton, too, and it's not always the most intellectual stuff."

At that, he laughs, pointing toward a hardcover book lying lengthwise along the top of the shelf. "He gave me that. Said it's his favorite."

I narrow my eyes on the spine and see it's a... "The Amazing Spiderman." I laugh, and Miller does, too. But part of me thinks Atticus gave that to Miller knowing he missed out on all the little boy loves, like comic book heroes and cartoon army men.

At his feet, Salsa curls between his ankles, purring. "I'll feed him real quick, and then we can..." His sentence trails as my pulse soars. "We can... do whatever you've got planned for us."

I pretend that sweat isn't sliding down the hollow of my spine and that my hands aren't clammy as fuck. "Sounds good," I reply, following him into the kitchen, where I watch him fill a white glass dish with kibble. Salsa starts eating before he's even done pouring.

“Starved?” I ask of the cat, who is clearly pushing twenty pounds.

He smirks. “He thinks so.”

After washing his hands, he moves through his small but clean kitchen and opens the fridge door. Inside are rows of drinks and stacked containers of colorful items. “Wow,” I gleam at the contents of his fridge, stepping closer. “Your fridge is like a fucking magazine.” I trail my fingertips down the edges of fancy glass containers, all labeled in Miller’s small block writing.

Carrots. Broccoli. Strawberries. Onions. Grapes.

“You seriously do cook a lot?” I ask, turning to face him. He brings his lunch often—why did I not realize he’s clearly cooking his own food daily?

“Yeah,” he says, feeling so fucking big standing next to me. When we’re at Kings’, he’s tall, and he’s one of the guys. But here, just me and him, he feels like Zeus. “It was one of the many things I wasn’t really taught or allowed to teach myself growing up.” He swallows, and I can tell he feels awkward about what he’s going to say next. Stroking his neck, he pinches his throat as he says, “cooking and baking were a woman’s job where I grew up. But I always wanted to do it. I always wanted to do everything. I was that kind of kid.”

I chew on the corner of my mouth to prevent a sad smile from sweeping my face. “Me too.”

He grabs us each a can of soda and closes the fridge. “I figured. Not many women want to be mechanics, but I think it’s cool as heck.”

I shrug and fiddle with a frizzy curl near my ear. “Well, that’s partly necessity, or at least, how it started. But now I just... love it. It’s rewarding to make something work again, especially in a car.”

Miller grins. “It is, isn’t it?” Then he heads toward the living room, and I follow him. We fall into the couch together, this time thigh to thigh. I take a sip of my soda to gather my thoughts and lower it to the ground by my feet.

Rip off the bandaid, Delane. Let's do this. I don't even know why I suddenly feel... nervous?

"Okay," I say, pretending my confidence is soaring inside me. "Let's start with the kiss."

He nods eagerly, eyes going wide with anticipatory excitement. And his expression does things to me. Makes me really not want to lead him astray or disappoint him.

"Your kiss was good," I start, and he immediately cinches his brow.

"Good doesn't sound very good," he says quietly, and there it is. His insecurities in himself shining through brighter than the sun. I let my hand rest on the spot between his knee and thigh and give a squeeze.

"That's not what I'm saying. It was a really good kiss, Miller. Seriously. It's me. Would I blow smoke up your ass?" Everything in me desperately wants him to believe me like I can't take a full breath until he agrees. I squeeze him again. "Would I?"

His smile is small and shy when he shakes his head. "No."

"Right," I add. "So believe me when I say... your kiss was very good."

Then our eyes lock, and silence twists between us as I remember the kiss and wonder if that's what he's thinking about, too.

"But you need to know that a good kiss doesn't always mean taking control. There's a time when you grab a face or hold a lower back."

"Okay," he draws out, scratching the side of his jaw. And before I can let my insecurities or inexperience creep in, I swing my leg over his hips and take a comfortable position straddled in his lap. Taking his face in my hands—his stubble intensifies the wet warmth between my legs—I bring our mouths together, kissing him aggressively, sweeping my tongue into his mouth. He tastes so good, like candied fruit or something. Not what I expected, yet somehow *better*.

As I kiss him, my fingertips sink into his face, and he moans, his lips vibrating against mine. I have the strongest urge to grind my hips against him. Right as his hands come to my thighs, I break our kiss and get drunk off the lusty look on his face.

Pink-tipped nose, cheeks flushed, lips parted and swollen. He blinks and swallows, and I laugh a little.

“It was so hot to have you let me take control. It shows you’re not trying to prove anything; you just want to enjoy it.”

He nods. “I do sometimes feel like I have to control everything since I’m the man.”

“You can find a relationship like that, Miller. That’s out there. Women that want their man to lie them down and spread their legs and fuck them until the condom is full and that’s all sex and love is to them.” My thumb strokes his cheek a little because I’m still holding his face. “Is that what you want?”

He shakes his head but doesn’t speak, and it’s then I feel him. Rising up at my center is Miller’s cock, hard beneath his jeans. My eyes widen at the discovery, and he starts to squirm back against the couch, presumably to give our laps space, but I don’t want that. I drop my hands from his face to his shoulders.

“It’s okay,” I whisper, my clit pulsing and my groin tightening with how fucking bad I want to have an orgasm with him right now. “It’s just the friction.” I stroke his cheek a little more. “Miller, we’re kissing. You’re getting hard. That’s okay.”

He swallows again, and I feel a little bad that his shyness is a turn-on, but goddamn, it really is. I take another soft kiss from his lips.

“This is what it’s going to be like between us, okay? I’m going to show you how to enjoy a woman without stressing about your performance. And when we’re done, you’ll be so comfortable with your body and hers that confidence will be second-nature, and you won’t second guess any of it.”

He nods, clearing his throat. His voice is husky when he speaks, and I wonder if his voice is smoky and raspy like this when he comes, too. I should not think about Miller coming while his cock is pressed to my crotch, but how can I not? It feels... Good. Being with him at his place feels good.

At that thought, I unseat myself from him and grab my soda, lifting it to take a sip. When I turn to face him, he's doing the same, but his can is empty in a matter of moments.

"You okay there, bud?" I tease, tapping his hollow aluminum.

"Thirsty," he rasps, his eyes locked on mine so intensely that I wonder things I shouldn't be wondering. Like... is he imagining what just happened between us as him and the blonde from the shop the other day? Is he already getting lost in the fantasy of taking these lessons to other women?

I shove the can down into my purse and get to my feet. "I parked pretty far away because I wasn't sure how the assigned parking in your complex worked, but... is there a place I can park closer? I was going to pull my car up and see if you could show me where the drive shaft is. Unless it's something we have to do at the shop."

"We could do it here, but we'd need to jack it up." The can cracks and pops in his hand. "If you can get to work a little early tomorrow, I will too, and we can use one of the bays and get underneath it. I can show you."

I nod. "Sounds good." Outstretching my fist, I wait for him to bump mine. But he looks confused as he stares at my curled knuckles.

"Feels weird to fist bump after we made out."

I open my curled fist so that I'm holding half of a handshake out to him. He laughs as he shakes his head, and all his strawberry blonde hair catches my attention again, taking my breath away. Hot with a hat, hot without... he'll have no trouble finding a girl.

"A shake feels even worse," he laughs, finally rising to his feet. Unexpectedly, he loops both arms around me and tugs me

into his chest. Hard and warm, smelling like a boyfriend would, he holds me tight to him for a few seconds, dropping a soft “thanks, Laney” into my ear. Those two words melt into me, filling my veins and bones with quaking, pulsing heat. I break free from his hug.

“No problem,” I force out casually. “See you in the morning.” I turn to face Salsa, who has been sitting on the edge of the couch glowering at me for the last ten minutes. “Later, Pico.”

The cold evening air seizes my lungs, making it hard to breathe.

It’s definitely not the evening with Miller that has me gasping and holding my chest as I walk to my car.

seven

• • •

milller

I don't know what it is, but it's from her, and I know it's not for a car. Which means it's only for one other thing.

I've always known that Delane is a sharp woman. As I'm cleaning up Salsa's food dish, crushing my empty can, and dropping it into the recycling, I think about Delane's words. "It shows you're not trying to prove anything." Granted, I realize she was referring to my sexual confidence, but still, her words stuck.

Maybe that's a common theme in my life, not just my inability to successfully stay with a woman. Maybe I'm always trying to prove myself to people rather than just enjoying myself and who I am now.

On that thought, I sit down at my table and pull out a fresh sheet of paper, writing *Dear Dad* at the top. Why do I write these? Am I trying to prove to him that my decision to leave, while incredibly hard, was the right one for me?

I don't know if that's what I'm trying to do. The decision to leave was the smartest choice for me—had I stayed with my family on the commune, I would have been absolutely miserable. I *know* that.

Do I feel compelled for him to know? I don't know. And instead of figuring that out, I write another letter.

I don't have much small talk to start this one out, Dad. I'm just sitting here in my apartment wondering who I'd be if I were still living with you and mom. There are times when I miss having a family so much that it physically hurts me. Sometimes I wake up in this place I love and pay for and am proud to have and feel so alone that I want to lie in bed and cry. I don't, though. I guess that's one thing that stuck. Men don't cry.

Even when I'm that sad, when the loneliness and lack of family to spend holidays with really eat at me, I don't really miss the commune. I only miss the idea of family. And I'm starting to realize that if I had stayed, I'd have you and mom, but I wouldn't be me, not really. I'd be some version of me that you and mom crafted and forced into some mold, and I couldn't do it. I know I couldn't.

I don't know what else to say other than I left to live, and while

living can be hard, something occurred to me tonight: being alive and not living is much harder than living with difficulties.

I hope you're well. I hope mom is too.

Your son,
Miller

I fold the letter in thirds as I have done for years, slide it into an envelope, write dad's name from habit, and add it to the box before flicking off the light, locking my door, and heading to bed.



STOPPING off at Delilah's Deli before I head into work, I pick up a coffee for Delane and a bagel, too. She likes the sweet ones, so I grab her a Cinnamon Toast Crunch with plain cream cheese on the side and a coffee just the way she likes it. The idea of passing her a cup of coffee and breakfast lights my soul, and I let myself get a little carried away, envisioning her waking up next to me and me bringing in a tray of warm food, feeding her breakfast while we kiss and talk and enjoy a slow morning together.

That thought trips me up a little, and the drive to Wrench Kings whirrs by as I dream of what life could be like with a woman like Delane.

I'm sure my inexperience is secretly laughable to her. That a twenty-six-year-old virgin is essentially a joke, but the way she treats me is so kind and doesn't make me feel bad for my

insecurities or inexperience... It makes me like her all that much more.

And if I'm being real, I already liked her a decent amount, though I don't know if I'd admit it to Atti or Beau.

Carrying a tray of coffees—because I nabbed one for Atti and Beau, too—I angle my back toward the door, pushing it open with my body. Delane is behind the desk, curls down, framing her face in a way that makes me want to lose my fingers in all that hair, hold her and stroke her and kiss her.

“Morning,” I choke out around the knot in my throat. I raise the tray and bag. “I brought breakfast.”

She blinks once, reaching below the counter to produce her own tray of coffees from Delilah's. “Great minds think alike.”

There are just two cups in her tray, and my heart does a flip that when she bought those, she was thinking of *only* us.

“That they do,” I reply, setting the tray and bag down next to her tray. “But before we eat, let's get your car in bay one.” I extend my hand to her and wiggle my fingers.

“What?” she looks at my open hand with confusion.

“I'll move it in. You just get your coffee and meet me under bay one.”

She fishes out her keys and hands them over. “It's really cold out. I don't expect you to move it. I can move it,” she argues softly.

I shake my head. “That's why I'm moving it. It's cold out. You don't need to be out there any more than you have to.” Times like this, I remember how much she does for herself and her family. I wish I could do things for her. I really do.

But she's helping me, and I'm getting time with her because of it, so I ought to be grateful, not wishful. She drops the keys in my hand. “Thanks.”

A few minutes later, I'm under the bay, Delane extends a cup of coffee to me, waiting with a scarf wrapping her neck. The ends of her hair are caught in it, and before I take the cup

from her, I use my gloved hands to free the curls from the scarf.

Her face is pink from the cold. “Thanks,” she says quietly, her words hovering in white air between us. It’s cold out, and she wants to do this, but she doesn’t have to do it freezing. I shrug out of my thick Wrench Kings coat, the one all employees have for working in the bays during winter.

She hands me the cups, fishes her arms through my coat without argument, then takes just one coffee back. “I should have said *no, you don’t have to*, but honestly, I’m cold as fuck.”

I laugh at that, running my free hand up and down the length of her arm, covered in my coat. She looks good in my coat, even though it’s too big and a little dirty. But my name is embroidered across her chest, and nothings looked better.

“Well,” I say after a too-hot sip of my coffee. “Let’s get started.” I slide a pair of safety glasses on her nose once I’ve placed both coffees on a table nearby.

“I feel like Elton John; these things are so big,” she grins, pushing the large plastic glasses up her nose.

“I don’t know who that is, but I’ll take your word for it.”

“Oh man,” she groans, “I forgot you’re still playing catch up. I know where you are on books and movies, but how are you doing on music?”

I volley my head as I step under her car, pulling a Brite-Mark out of my pocket to mark a line between the drive shaft and the differential’s pinion flange. “I’m listening my way through Rolling Stone’s top 500 albums right now, but when I was younger, when I first left, I started with everything. Cycled through radio stations.”

I make the marks and tell her what I’m doing and why. She nods, and the next time I glance back at her, she’s got her weathered *The Mechanics Bible* out, making notes in the margins.

I like that she really wants to do this. It’s not a whim or for show—Delane’s invested. She’s going to be great at this one

day, and I'd be honored to say I helped in that journey. We continue to talk about music as I place the fluid catch pan down under the output seal at the end of the transmission. I learn that Delane likes everything but country music, and I agree with her on that.

Pointing to things when I call them out, I see Delane's already a wealth of knowledge, and I feel some level of pride I know doesn't belong to me. I didn't teach her anything, not yet, but her knowledge makes me so proud of her. I learned hands-on, and she learned from an outdated book—I continue to be in awe of her as she takes a spot next to me, removing the fasteners and yoke retainers from the driveshaft, unanchoring it from the pinion flange. Some of her wild curls catch against my hoodie as I reach up, holding the driveshaft in place as she makes sure it's ready to slide out of its housing. I can smell her hair this close. All flowery and fresh. And with my arms up and the cold air circling us, my lower half starts to like having her this close a little bit too much.

“Almost done?” I ask, eager to get some space between us before I pitch a tent and embarrass myself. She huffs a little, not speeding up at all.

“Don't rush me; I'm learning.”

A moment later, she's removing the driveshaft from its yoke in the transmission, lowering it.

“I know this was just a trial run, but I'll tell you what to do with the new one when you make the swap.”

She nods eagerly, pushing a curl from her face with the back of her wrist, leaving a slight smear of chassis grease across her skin. I use my gloved thumb, step close to her, and rub it away. We're close, and her chest grazes mine as she sucks in a sharp breath. Our eyes lock, and my body is torn between dying to get closer to her and needing to step back.

“Thanks,” she says, the word not much more than a whisper.

We remain close together, and I hand down words like I'm reciting my wedding vows as opposed to telling her how to

replace a drive shaft. I can't help it. I can't force any rigidity into my voice when I'm this close to her. I'm nervous and excited and... nearly out of breath as her breasts rise up against me.

“Just watch your output seal when you're sliding the shaft back into the yoke. And make sure it's got a lot of chassis grease on it.”

She grins, and I feel it south of the border. “Don't break the ring on the condom when you slide the cock inside and make sure to add a lot of lube.”

“If that's what helps you remember, then yes, that,” I say, losing all moisture in my mouth. I like that Delane is well-versed in sex and not afraid to talk about it. She would push me to test myself if she were my girl, of that much I know for sure.

Her curls sway with her playful laugh. “It does.”

When the back door swings open, we step apart like teenagers caught fooling around. Atticus narrows his beady eyes at us, then looks to the driveshaft which Delane is holding.

“Which bagel and coffee is mine?” he asks, all interest in us completely lost because breakfast is two feet from him. That wasn't my strategy, but if it buys me a few more minutes alone with Laney, I'll take it.

“Any of them but the Cinnamon Toast Crunch,” I say over the top of Delane's head. “And any of the coffees are yours; they're all black. Except the one with the L on it.”

The corner of his mouth lifts a millimeter before he's gone, and the door is rattling the walls with its closure.

Delane rolls her lips together. “Want to have another lesson tonight?”

In ten seconds, I get excited and crash back down to reality. “I do, but I can't. I have plans.” Disappointment twists her face for a moment before she smiles, knocking hair off her shoulder casually.

“That’s fine; let me know when it works.” She shimmies out of my coat, and I can’t help but wonder, had I agreed to tonight, would she have kept it on? No, Delane isn’t like that, and this isn’t an emotional endeavor for her. We changed a driveshaft, so now I get a lesson in return.

That’s all it is.



THE DRIVE to Zeth’s after work is a lot different than it normally is. I want to see him—I always do—and I brought a few tools and my jack so I can look at his mom’s car.

But for the first time ever, I really wish I was somewhere else.

With her.

“How was work?” he asks as he slides into the passenger seat of my pickup. We always have a chat in my truck before anything we do, even if all I’m doing is dropping him off somewhere. The program advised a handful of minutes of dedicated conversation, and I’ve honored that.

It’s turned into some of our most vital time together, too.

I consider Zeth’s question. “Fine. The morning was the best part. Afternoon crept by,” I admit, omitting the detail that Delane is why the morning was so great. I didn’t see her much in the afternoon, and that’s not uncommon. The place is crazy busy. But only recently have I noticed how infrequently our paths cross some days. And I don’t like it.

“How was your day?” I ask, reciprocating the basic question because, for a kid like Zeth, I may be the only person to ask him. That feeling is familiar, so I never skip asking.

He shrugs. “Fine.”

“You eat?”

“When?” he asks, yanking up the zipper on his oversized parka.

“Today. Tonight. All day.”

He shrugs, and the coat rises extra because of how big it is on him. “Yeah. My card reloaded, so I ate breakfast and lunch at school. Haven’t had dinner yet.”

I glance at my watch and see it’s twenty-past-five. “Hungry?”

The way his eyes light up when I turn the key in the ignition, bringing my truck to life, makes me feel all sorts of guilt. I wish I could do more for him, but as a Big Brother, they advise against going overboard. It can often upset the families.

“Let’s get burgers,” I say, not giving him an opportunity to answer. “Go tell your mom. And tell her I’ll bring her back something.”

He leaves the door open when he runs to the house, opening the door and presumably shouting inside. He leaps down his pathway back to me and slides into the seat, slamming the door. “Thanks, Miller.”

I drive us in silence for the first few minutes. “You okay, Zeth?”

He looks out the window as he replies. “I wish you were my real big brother.”

I knock a fist into his thigh gently, getting his focus as I edge toward a red light. “I can be. Just because we don’t share blood doesn’t mean we can’t be family.”

“Do you have a family?” he asks, and I can feel his attention on my profile as I navigate through a busy, snowy intersection.

“I work with two guys I consider my brothers; like I said, we don’t share blood, but that doesn’t change the fact that we’d go to the ends of the Earth for each other.” I know I feel that way about Beau and Atticus, and despite the way Atti gives me crap, I think they feel the same about me.

Zeth bobs his head. “You got a girlfriend?”

I cast him side eye as the fast food restaurant comes into sight. “I’m working on that. It’s... complicated.”

“How?” he asks, and suddenly I feel like I’m in the car with that kid from *Home Alone* that gets into the airport van and asks the driver all those questions. *Did you know the McCallisters are going to France? Do you know if it’s cold there? Do these vans get good gas mileage?*

That was one of the first movies I watched when I got my own place. I watched it that first Christmas I had alone. I connected to Kevin McCallister as an eighteen-year-old, the way a six-year-old probably does. Until the end of the movie, that is, when he’s reunited happily with his family. I shut the movie off at that part.

But I relate to the kid in the van, too. I had so many questions. And like the kid in the van, they never got answered. It’s why I’m always honest with Zeth. It’s what I wanted at his age.

“Well,” I scratch the back of my head as the steering wheel slides through my other hand. The drive-thru line has a few cars in it, so I join the queue. “I don’t have a lot of confidence in myself. Do you know what that means?”

“I’m twelve, not two. I know what confidence is.” He puffs out his chest. “Feeling good about yourself.”

“Right,” I smirk at him across the cab. Delane would like Zeth. He’s a sweet kid with lip, and I think she’d appreciate his personality. “Well, I have a friend helping me with that. Because once you feel good about yourself, you can do anything.”

“That sounds corny.”

I shrug. “Maybe. But I believe it’s true.”

We talk about school as the line dwindles, and I order us all a burger with fries and Coke. I know Zeth’s mom likes Coke; he’s told me that before.

I eat my burger in the truck while he takes his and his mom’s inside the house. After I’m done, I set up two camping lights, get my tools out, and get to work on his mom’s car. It’s

a spark plug replacement along with a handful of other things, and after an hour and a half in the near freezing, the car is fixed, and I'm ready to thaw out. I pack up and go, eager to get home to a warm shower and happy to know that Zeth and his mom will be driving to school and work tomorrow, in a working car, rather than walking or waiting for the bus.

When I reach the top of my apartment stairs, my outdoor light flickers, and it's in a burst of temporary illumination that I notice a package on my doormat. Unlocking my door, I reach down and grab it, bringing it inside with me. There's no label with a return address, nor is my home address on it. Only the letter M.

I lock my door, drop my bag, kick off my wet boots and hoodie, flop down on the couch and tear into the package.

It could be a bomb, but as a guy who grew up never receiving any gifts—I'm willing to risk it for the excitement of unwrapping and opening something *actually* for me.

I lift the lid and inside the box, sitting on shreds of cardboard, is a black contraption of some sort. Angling the box under the dim lights, I study it some more, still unsure what it is. There's a lock and key attached to the item, too. I lift it out to discover a note beneath.

Unfolding the small square of paper, I realize the gift is from Delane because I'd recognize her beautiful penmanship anywhere. A mix of cursive and capitals, I didn't know I could love handwriting, but when it comes to hers, I really do.

Miller,

This is for you to wear. Part of the lessons. See you tomorrow.

Delane

I hold up the device, turning it in my fingers a few times before I notice the crotch of my jeans growing tight. I don't know what it is, but it's from her, and I know it's not for a car.

Which means it's only for one other thing.

Time to take that hot shower.

eight

...

delane

A chastity cage

“Tell me the truth or you know what happens.”

I wait for his response, but instead of words, a single bead of sweat journeys down his temple, and he squirms a little.

“Last chance, my boy. Tell me the truth.”

Another bead of sweat follows his Adam’s apple as he swallows. “I’m nervous,” he squeaks out, and though I already knew it, I needed him to say it—part of the process.

Moving the whip from where I tauntingly had it resting on his inner thigh, I bring it to his belly and watch his abs quiver. “If you weren’t nervous, I would say you aren’t ready. I would say you don’t understand. But nerves are good. Because you realize what happens after tonight.”

Another swallow, more sweat. “Give yourself to me this way,” I stroke the whip up and down his belly, calming his nerves. “Shelve the fears and enjoy this, my boy, and you’re free.” I lean down and bring my ruby lips to his, letting them graze as I relay the final bit. “Nothing will scare you after tonight.”

He nods, his eyes glassy and his chest moving quickly because he did tell the truth—he is nervous. At my hip, I tighten the belt. In front of me, I stroke my bare palm down the dildo. “Get on your knees.”

My finger has been hovering over the mouse in a state of “going to click” for the last few minutes. My audiobook has me completely transfixed. And I can’t help but think of Miller and all the promises of confidence I’ve made to him.

The heroine of this book is doing it—I can do it. The book is the reassurance I need, so I click my EarPod again, turning the audiobook back on.

He scrambles to his knees, his nerves now easily tangling with his excitement. I run a finger between the dark split of his ass and serve his hole with lube.

“Morning, Laney,” Miller says cheerily, causing me to jerk a little. As fast as possible, I turn my book off and pop my EarPods out, wanting to distance myself from the erotica as fast as I can now that he’s here.

“Morning,” I say, clearing my throat and finally clicking into the inventory screen, I was supposed to a few minutes ago.

He surveys the space. “Guys out back?”

I nod.

He leans across the desk next to me, propping himself up on an elbow. His hat is on, and I have the strongest urge to twist it backwards just to know how hot he looks, but that’s a girlfriend move, so I don’t.

“Can I talk to you privately?” he asks, voice rough and low, goosebumps rising along my arms.

“Yeah, but they’re out back.” I can see Beau and Atticus talking to a customer through the rectangular window in the door. “See?” I motion toward them, but Miller doesn’t turn around.

“More privacy.” He tips his head toward the bathroom. “Just a minute?”

I nod and follow him inside, where he doesn’t lock the door but puts his back to it instead. “What did you leave me?”

I study the beds of my fingernails casually, loving how surprised and confused he is. He’s just so... adorable.

“A chastity cage,” I tell him before folding my arms across my chest and smirking at him. “I take it that means you aren’t wearing it.”

“Wearing it?” he questions, eyes flicking between mine. “I’m not following you.”

Quickly, I pull my phone from my back pocket and do the inevitable Google search. I click an image, increase its size and hold it up for him. “This.”

His head swings away from the phone like I’m showing him a photo of a carcass or dead body. A large hand falls across his chest, and I can see his brain working. A moment later, his hand slides south, but he stops himself before he gets to anything good.

“You want me to wear *that*?”

“You were nervous when you got har—”

He halts me with a palm, color flooding his cheeks. “I know.”

“Well, this will allow you to not worry about that. At all. All you have to do is focus on enjoying and being open to the pleasure I’m offering.”

Scratching the side of his head, he looks down at the picture on my phone screen again. “How long do I... or when does it...” He trails off, eyes coming to mine, hunting for answers.

“It relieves all pressures to control your body or perform. It allows you to focus on enjoying things, and you’ll find confidence in that. You will discover who you are sexually when you know your performance isn’t on the table for grading.” I nod, and he starts nodding, too, liking what I’m suggesting.

“I don’t know if I fully understand, but I’m going to try.”

“And you don’t have to wear it long. I’ll tell you when. And also, you will understand, trust me.” I think of the audiobook and do not allow that slithering imposter inside me to take over and shout, “*you’re making him do this all based on a book!*” because fuck her. We’re doing this.

A slow grin crosses his lips. “You were thinking about my *goods* when you bought it.”

His words make my chest flutter because he’s right. But I see his boldness and raise him. Stepping toward him, I say,

“you’re right. And I felt your cock last night, too. And guess what? I’m going to see it bare. Hold it soft. Touch it hard. Discover all the veins and curves with my lips and tongue. Thinking about your cock when I bought this cage?” I lick my tongue and bring my face a bit closer to his. “That’s *nothing*.”

I leave that bathroom wearing the biggest grin, carrying the most excitement in me I have in a long, long time.

And I don’t think about how he couldn’t meet last night or what he was doing. I stay focused on when we do meet and everything I’m going to get to see and do.

nine

...

milller

For once, Saturday night is something I'm looking forward to. "You sure?" Beau asks Delane for what feels like the millionth time, but maybe it just feels like that because I'm still not hearing what I want to hear.

Delane rolls her eyes. "I'm sure. I have plans."

He raps his knuckles against the desk. "Okie Dokie. Well... we'll see you when we get back." Beau, followed by Atticus, files out the door and piles into his Tesla. We're meeting Beck and Goldie for lunch—Beau and Beck's kids are with their grandparents—and Delane doesn't want to go.

Well, she didn't say *that*. She just said she has plans. And I'm over here ready to say I don't want to go either because she's not. But that's weird and something a boyfriend does, so I make my way to the door, holding it open with my foot as I glance back at her. "You sure?"

She waves me off. "Go. I have plans. Have fun."

"I'm the third wheel without you," I pout, earning a grin from her.

"Sorry."

"Get your ass in the car, or we're leaving without you. Goldie has shit to do," Atticus shouts out the open car door. Ducking my head down, I pull my baseball cap around my eyes and leave, not looking back at Delane the way I want to.

Inside the car, Beau asks, "what's she doing for lunch?"

I shrug.

"Thought you'd know since you two are... *getting close*," he says, choosing his words carefully as he peers at me in the rearview.

"I don't know where she's going," I say, carefully choosing my words. I don't want to lie to Beau, and I don't

want to lessen the way my relationship with Delane is growing & evolving, either.

Atticus answers his phone, and I'm thankful we're a few minutes late, earning us a phone call from his wife. That's why I don't have to lie or get into things with Delane and me.

"We're on our way, baby, chill."

The conversation with Goldie buys me no time because he ends the call with her as quickly as he ends calls with us. I start with a subject change because I really don't want to talk about any of this with them. Not yet, at least.

"Hey, Beau, do you think it would be possible if I could use the hydraulic lift this weekend? I was at Zeth's last night and did some work on his mom's car, but I'd love to get her tires rotated and her oil changed."

He nods, keeping his eyes on the road. "Fuck yeah, you can. How is Zeth, by the way?"

Atticus contributes. "Mom's been nagging me to ask you about him. She's got some of dad's nicer clothes she wants me to get to Zeth." His large body attempts to peer around the seat at me; one eye pinched shut. "You want me to bring 'em for you to take to him?"

I nod. "He could use clothes."

Beau flips his visor up as he makes a left-hand turn. "You know, we could just take him shopping and get him a whole new wardrobe."

I shake my head. "I've thought about that. Making it seem like the program sponsored it, but if I get caught, they'll turn me loose. You're not allowed to do that."

"Why not?" Atti asks with irritation, which is how I felt about that rule when I first heard it, too.

"They think it'll make people sign up for the program for the wrong reasons."

"Lame," Beau deadpans.

“But we can give him hand-me-downs,” I clarify, slapping Atti’s arm from behind. “So bring them. Please.”

“Will do.”

Beau turns into the restaurant parking lot and parks. Inside, Goldie and Beck are waiting at a table, huddled together, wearing smiles, sipping from mugs.

I watch Beau slide into the booth next to his wife, wrap his hand around the back of her neck possessively and seal his lips to hers. They share a kiss where their mouths open and close together, tongues visible as they do. He moves his lips to her ear, tucking the blonde hair back as he whispers private words. She smiles at whatever he’s saying, and I watch his hand slide from her neck to the side of her torso, where his thumb very lightly strokes her breast for just a moment. She flushes with pink and moves her hand beneath the table, presumably on his thigh.

Atticus takes a spot in the half-circle booth next to Goldie, taking her face in his hands for an aggressive greeting kiss. They share no sweet whispers, but when they part, Goldie says, “I have to go back to work after lunch; quit making me wanna play hooky.”

Then their smiling happy heads turn toward me. “Hi, Miller,” Beck says cheerfully.

“Hey, Miller,” Goldie chirps, stroking Atti’s thigh beneath the table. I hope it’s his thigh.

“Hello, ladies,” I greet, pulling up a chair to sit awkwardly on the other side of them.

“Where’s Delane?” Goldie asks, bottom lip in a pout, head cocked. Her long dark hair is down, and I notice how Atticus pushes it back, so the ends don’t drag through her glass of water. He tucks it behind her ear and places a very soft kiss on her neck before picking up the menu and devoting his focus to it.

Their casual intimacy has me jealous. I’d pass on a million-dollar lotto ticket for Delane to love me the way Beck loves Beau, the way Goldie loves Atticus. I’d give it all up to

have Delane with me, her hand on my thigh, my lips discovering soft places on her neck, dropping sweet nothings in her ear.

My chest aches, so I focus on the menu, reading the entire thing twice but not actually knowing a single thing they serve.

“She had plans,” Beau finally supplies after I say nothing.

“Bummer,” Beck says, “I was looking forward to seeing her.”

“Hi,” a pleasant, somewhat high-pitched voice calls to our table. The four of them look up at someone standing behind me, so I twist in my seat to see who the voice belongs to. A waitress with hair much like Goldie’s, except it’s pulled into a long braid, her eyes are wide and green, and her face is bare with a smattering of freckles along the bridge of her nose. “How’s everyone doing today?” she asks, the black leather guest pad pressed against her hip, both hands centered on the top, holding it there.

“Good, how are you?” Beck responds, her face full of happiness. Her arm works beneath the table, and another wave of jealousy crashes down over me. I’m glad Beau is happy and that they have each other. And I shouldn’t feel bad about their happiness.

“I’m great,” she says, surveying the table with a smile. From above me, she looks down, and her smile broadens. She rests a hand on the back of my chair, her thumb brushing my upper back. It sends a shiver down my spine, and I want to inch forward in the chair to get away from the subtle touch, but I don’t. I recognize that if it were Delane’s thumb grazing my back, I’d be inching forward just to get my lap under the table.

“Where’s your other half? She on her way?” she asks, her voice a little flirtatious, and it occurs to me that she’s trying to find out if there is another half.

“It’s just us,” I say, motioning to the table.

Her eyes stay on mine, and I start to feel uncomfortable with her hovering over me in what feels like a moderately

predatory way. “She’s not on her way or there’s not a she?” she asks, batting her eyes at me. This woman is bold. I don’t even ask women out this way.

Atticus clears his throat, and my eyes jump to him in time to see Goldie loop her arm through his, tightening her hold to get him to shut up.

“Uh, no, she,” I reply awkwardly, feeling the extreme discomfort of this conversation in front of a table of my friends seeping into my face.

“That’s surprising,” she smiles down at me, moving her thumb so that she grazes my back again and again. Reaching beneath my chair, I tug it toward the table and give her a small smile.

“Well, we’re on our lunch breaks, so we should get to ordering,” I say, turning my focus to the laminated menu. She starts with Goldie and works her way around the table, and once she’s flipped her paper to the other side, pen hovering over the notepad, she smiles down at me.

“Cutest for last,” she says in a quiet tone, but I know they can hear her.

I put in my order and work on shaping the bill of my hat as she collects menus and finally disappears into the kitchen.

Goldie smacks the table top as soon as the waitress is out of our sight. “Miller! That waitress totally wants you!”

Beck nods fervently, her eyes wide with excitement. I may not know women well, but in general, it seems like they enjoy playing cupid. The thing is, I feel like I’ve already got an arrow stuck in me with Delane’s name on it, and I’m realizing that more and more.

“She totally wants you, Miller! Ask her out!” Beck adds.

“I’m pretty sure if you don’t ask her out, she’s gonna ask you,” Atticus adds after dropping his arm behind the booth, around Goldie’s shoulders.

“She looked one minute away from hopping in your lap and having her way with you,” Goldie teases as Atticus’s

fingers knead her shoulder mindlessly as if he doesn't even know he's doing it.

I want someone to mindlessly touch that way, and I cannot for the life of me picture myself touching the waitress that way.

I can see my arm over the back of my couch, touching Delane's shoulder. I can see her getting sleepy as we watch a movie and lowering her head into my lap, my arm draped down her side, fingers stroking her rib cage as she dozes off.

Every part of that fantasy can change except Delane. We can be on the floor, in a bed, or in a car. We can be arguing, listening to music, laughing over anything—but it's only my fantasy if Delane's there.

“Not interested,” I say, running my finger around the rim of my glass.

“She's so cute, though,” Goldie whines.

“Get her number at least,” Beck offers.

I shake my head and scratch at my temple, wanting more than anything for this conversation to end. “Let's just put it on the table 'cause we all know they're gonna find out anyway,” Atti grunts, pointing toward the booth where Goldie and Beck sit together. “Miller's got it for Delane, and they started hangin' out.” He lifts his arm off the booth back to dust his palms together. “There, now we can stop tiptoeing around it.”

“That's...” I start but don't know where to go with it.

Beck turns to face Beau. “You *do* understand the husband-wife rules, right?”

Goldie slams her curled fist into Atti's shoulder, and he barely budes. “What?”

“Same goes for you! You have good gossip; you have to tell me. That's the rules of being a couple.” She folds her arms across her chest and brings her pointed gaze to me. “I want details of this crush, Miller.”

I shake my head and look to Atticus to bail me out. He smirks. “Dude quit actin' like it ain't true.”

I look at Beau, who doesn't budge to bail me out either. He just shrugs. "It's nothing to be embarrassed about. Delane is cool as fuck."

And I never thought I'd be happy to see her, but the waitress returns, balancing a brown tray on her palm, loaded with a variety of drinks. She begins sliding glasses across the table, making sure each of us gets exactly what we ordered. She saves me for last, and instead of lowering mine to the table like she did with the rest, she hands mine to me.

Our fingertips touch.

There is no electricity. No zing. No zip of life up my spine. No warmth in my groin, no tightening of the jeans. There is effectively no reaction from my body to her touch. In fact, I'm starting to get a little annoyed by her brazenness. Yet, if it were Laney, I'd probably never let go of that glass of iced tea. Not until she did, at least.

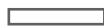
"Thanks," I say, turning my focus back to the table of my friends. Fortunately, either reading my extreme discomfort or simply being over the fact that I'm not going to spill my guts—Goldie changes the subject.

"Baby, I know I ordered a chicken salad, but I'm smelling fries. Can I have some of yours when they come?" Atticus gives her a wink which elicits a heartwarming grin from Goldie.

"Thanks," she smiles up at him, and then her phone rings, further distracting the table, and I know I'm safely out of their crosshairs. At least for now.

The food comes quickly; Beau nabs the tab and pays it before we have time to argue. Lunch is nice. The food is fine. We had a good time.

But the whole time, I can't help but think the food would have tasted a lot better if Delane were here to share it with me.



BACK AT KINGS, Delane is already back from wherever she went, and I hate to think she met someone. I don't ask, though, because I don't think that's my business, even though I want to know more than anything.

Instead, I approach her at the desk and ask to see her hand. She lifts it to me, eyes soft, mouth curled into a tender smile. I take her by the wrist and study the fading purple skin, smoothing my thumb over the worst part.

"It's looking better," I note, nodding my head. "Good. I'm glad it's not bothering you anymore."

"Yeah, me too," she says, her voice trailing off a little as she blinks up at me.

"Well, I'm getting back to work," I say because I just want another moment of talking to her, but I don't know what else to say, and there's a customer sitting in the waiting area, probably listening to us.

I pass by her, headed toward the shop door when she reaches out and snags me by the upper bicep. "Check your phone."

My heart leaps into my throat shoved out of my chest from the way my stomach jumps up. "I will," I say as she releases me, smiles, and returns to her computer screen.

Out in the shop, I take exactly twelve seconds before I get my phone out and unlock it. Sure enough, one text message is waiting for me.

DELANE

Put the cage on after work

My fingers move against the digital keyboard like I'm typing in launch codes to save the world, I swear.

I'll put it on. Come over tonight?

Dots dance, and I know I'm getting a response. I smile just waiting. And then my smile fades because—I have to put that

contraption on. I want to do it for her—I think I’d do anything for her, which is a bit terrifying as I’ve never felt that for anyone other than Salsa—but I’m a little confused as to how it’s going to go. But then her message appears.

Can’t tonight. Tomorrow night? Here’s a link to an article on how to best get yourself into chastity. Something tells me you may need it.

I don’t read the message as patronizing; rather, she knows my lack of experience and only wants to make things easiest for me. And for that open acceptance, my heart swells. Wearing a smile, I text her back.

You read my mind. Thank you. See you tomorrow night, how’s 7?

See you then.

I slide my phone into my back pocket and nearly jump out of my skin as Atti claps a hand down on my shoulder, squeezing me tight.

“Date with Laney at seven tomorrow, huh?” he gruffs.

“Not a date—” I rush out before, “you were reading our message?”

His lips turn down as he shakes his head. “Na, just the last one.” With his hand still on my shoulder, he squeezes again. “Have fun, man.”

He walks off before I can answer. I shove my phone away and head down to bay three, where I’m doing a driveshaft replacement, a bit ironically. And the entire time I’m working on the car above me, I keep thinking about Delane, that cage, and tomorrow night.

My life is going to change at seven on Saturday night, and even though I don’t know how or what’s going to happen, I just know it is.

For once, Saturday night is something I’m looking forward to.

ten

...

delane

Good morning to me.

Stretching my arms over my head, I wiggle my toes and let out a long morning groan. Rolling to my side, I reach for my phone with one eye open to check the time. I don't even notice the large digital numbers eating up the screen because I have a text message waiting. From Miller.

I grab the phone and hold it over me, unlocking it with my face.

MILLER

Still on for tonight?

I look at the timestamp. He sent that at 6:04 in the morning. I can't help but smile. And with that smile comes warmth. Low in my belly, spreading through my pussy, down my thighs—warmth from the idea of being back in Miller's apartment tonight, his sweet grin staring back at me, his cock locked *because I said so*.

I type back quickly.

Yep, see you then.

Dropping the phone next to me in the bed, I let my hand wander and find the wet heat building between my legs. Stroking two fingers through my lips, my clit is swollen and aching. Rubbing myself, I tip my head back into the fluffy pillows and envision Miller completely naked, sprawled across his bed, and that same smile on his face.

I'm crawling over him in my fantasy, kissing my way up his thick, muscular thighs as he moans and groans in response.

Our lips come together in my little fantasy, and the way he feeds me noises of pleasure gets me going. And before either

of us get to really touch each other, I'm cumming around my fingers, muscles seizing, sweat forming on my chest.

Well.

Good morning to me.

My phone dings in the covers next to me, and I swoop it up with my free hand.

MILLER

Park in my spot. Number 405. I don't want you walking far like last time. Also, bring The Mechanics Bible. We can choose our next lesson.

I should be smiling at what a gentleman he is, leaving his parking spot for me. But instead, I focus on the last sentence. The lesson. And it reminds me that this thing between us is a deal.

Just a deal.

I take my hand out of my panties and get out of bed, heading straight for the shower. It may be thirty degrees outside, but right now, I need a cold shower as a reality check.



**“YOU KNOW I APPRECIATE IT,
LANEY,”**

mom says, pouring coffee into my tumbler. She twists the lid on and passes it to me, also handing me a bag of snacks she's packed for Mara and me.

“I know, mom, and you don't have to say that. I like watching Mara's comp practices. You know I do.” It's the truth—I love watching Mara do what she loves. I must've come off a bit edgy when mom asked me a few days ago if I could take Mara to morning comp practice today, but it had nothing to do with my sister or her favorite sport.

Mara appears in the kitchen doorway; gi pressed to perfection. “I ironed it today because Pru told me last week that I looked like tissue paper.”

I cock a brow. “Pru’s a bitch.”

“Delane Marie! Don’t curse!” Mom scolds, swatting my arm as I wince away from her, laughing.

“What? Mara isn’t eight, mom. And I’m pretty sure she knows Pru’s a big old B.”

Mara nods with a grin. “Total B.”

“And anyway, she’s a rich B which is the worst kind. It means she’s a B because she’s spoiled, not because she has some trauma or struggle like the rest of us normal people.” I take a sip of my coffee, but it splashes against my upper lip as mom swats me again.

“Don’t say that! You don’t know that she isn’t hurting. And what trauma do you have?” She puts her hands on her hips and faces Mara. “What trauma do either of you have?”

I hoist my bag onto my shoulder and grab Mara by the elbow, guiding her toward the door. “I never got a pony or a trampoline as a kid. It’s ruined me.”

Mom rolls her eyes as she pulls her Oakcreek PD polo over her long-sleeved shirt. “Oh, please.”

Laughing, I wave her off. “Have a good day. And I’ll try to, as long as I don’t get any trampoline flashbacks,” I say, gripping the door with one hand and then my forehead with the other. “Oh no, one’s coming now...” I grit my teeth. “I’m jumping and laughing, and then I wake up to an empty yard.” I move my hand from my head to my chest and clutch at my heart. “Oh god!”

Mom reaches down, gripping the heel of her sneaker, both teasingly and threateningly. “Go now, or you’re taking a runner upside your head.”

I wiggle my fingers in a final, playful goodbye and close the door behind me.



“EAT THIS BEFORE YOU START; you need more than a bite of oatmeal in your stomach,” I tell my little sister as I pass her a bag of sliced apples.

She takes the bag with an eye roll. “But I’m nervous. You know I can’t eat when I’m nervous.”

I nod. “I know, but one or two will make *me* feel better.”

“Okay, mom,” she says sardonically as she stuffs two slices of Fuji apple between her teeth. “I’m going. Wish me luck.”

I tip my chin up at her as she descends the bleachers. “Luck!”

From behind me, like a true fucking creep, Rock plunks down next to me, his eye still slightly discolored from my strike.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Rocky Balboa herself.” He narrows his beady eyes, his jaw rolling with anger as he glares. You can’t glare at someone if you’re sitting right next to them—it’s way too fucking intense and creepy. Which is, unsurprisingly, exactly how I’d describe Rock.

“Go away,” I mutter, not giving him more than a moment of my focus. I watch Mara and silently hope that Rock goes away because I want to be excited for tonight, not worried about this motherfucker. And hitting him didn’t make me feel better. Granted, it lent me a moment of safety to escape, but when the dust settled, I felt yuckier for having done it. I don’t want to be a physically violent person.

Rock bumps his leg into mine, and my body slides an inch away from him on its own, I swear. “Don’t,” I say, still facing forward.

“You’re no Balboa,” he says after a moment where I can feel his eyes on me. He leans in, and his swamp nut scent

washes over me, making my stomach roll. “Rocky’s pecs are bigger than your little mosquito bites.”

With that, he rises and hops down the bleachers toward the mat furthest from Mara’s class. I click my tongue. I may not have huge tits, but they’re *way more* than mosquito bites.

Still watching Mara, my mind goes to Miller.

Does he think my boobs are too small? Does he like big boobs? I remember the woman from the lobby. The one with the dog who turned him down. She had... boobs. Not my boobs but real boobs. Boobs that could spill out over a lacy bra and seduce men and women alike. Boobs that could feed a child.

Rock’s words are in my head and they’re hard to shake. Which is stupid because he’s an absolute piece of shit moron, but that’s how it goes. If someone highlights my insecurity, their words have some phony validity. I bite into my apple slice and force myself, *literally force myself*, to watch ten twelve-year-olds run through their competition drills without my boobs or Rock on my mind.

Five minutes later, I’m still thinking about Rock and what he said. As much as what he said, I’m thinking about how he approached me after I punched him for putting his hands on me. If that didn’t stop him from engaging with me, would anything? I’m worried it won’t.

Pulling out my phone, I say an internal apology to Mara that I will no longer be watching her practice. I have to take my mind off of Rock, and the only way I can is with Miller.

Just thinking of his name makes me smile.

With my phone out, I look around to make sure my screen isn’t visible. I’m not sitting with the nuclear families sitting around me, so fortunately, I’m safe. Quickly, I open my library app and pop in my EarPods, which I brought with me because I don’t go anywhere without them. Seriously.

I return to my audiobook, finding my nerves immediately settling from the story I’m so engrossed in.

Rubbing the crown of the rubber cock, I transfer lube from my palm down the shaft. Another squirt and I'm smoothing my fingers up the divide of his ass, tucking the liquid in his tight hole. "Relax," I coax, then smack his cheek with my sticky hand. He jerks forward, but then his body softens some and he reclines back.

Positioning myself directly behind him, I slide my hand down his spine as I align the dildo with his ass, pushing in just barely, just to give him the sensation of entry.

He groans, but not in pain like I thought. I rub his back again and feed him the first real inch. Another groan. I slide my hand around his waist and give him more cock as I reach for his. He's hard—like a fucking stone in my hand—and from the tip of him, precum drips.

"Well, aren't you a good boy?" I give another long, rewarding stroke for taking me so well. He wants redemption, safety, and strength—he's open to this because he trusts the process, and that makes me want to really fuck him good that much more.

Another few inches get eaten up by his tight hole as I push my hips forward.

"It... it's good. It feels... good," he breathes, sounding like he's already walking the edge of an orgasmic explosion.

"Getting fucked is for everyone, not just women," I tell him, sawing my hips back to hollow him some, ready to start pounding him. He's not warmed up enough yet, so I slowly sink back in, preparing him. Warming him up and stretching him open so I can take his ass the way I want: hard.

I pop my earphones out and put them in the case. Miller isn't broken in the way these men are, so using this book as a guide may not be the best plan. I start to panic a little at that thought because if I can't be the heroine of this book, how do I figure out—with *little* experience—how to give Miller everything he needs and make him the confident man he deserves to be?

Before I panic and cancel, I take a breath and watch Mara. Her leg swings high, and her instructor passes by, giving her a nod of solemn approval—the highest praise from the fifty-seven-year-old man. She looks at me, beaming, so I give her a discreet thumbs up. As much as my mom wishes she could be here for all of these, I genuinely think having me here gives Mara just as much pleasure as mom does. Our family is close like that, and though the two are separate issues, the small interaction with my sister reminds me that I am strong and can do this.

I will take the energy of the *domme* from the book and use that to help Miller. I may not have an exact guide or lots of experience, but I'm smart, and can help him. I know I can.

Confidence has never been an issue for me.

I can figure things out.



MARA AND I HEAD HOME, and we're getting back at the same time as Art, who is white as a sheet. Mara skips inside, oblivious to his pain because she's on the competition practice high, so I catch him by the arm as he's ambling up the driveway toward the back door.

"Hey, hang on," I say, looping my arm through his. "How was work? Bad back day, huh?"

He nods, his silvery hair shining in the afternoon light. Art's been part of my life for some time, but he's never seemed to age as much as he has the last year. His back is getting so bad, and I hate it for him.

"Well, let's just say I was working the lumber doors, so you know how that goes for me."

I keep a steady hand at his back as he climbs the few stairs to the door, making sure he doesn't know my support is there because he'd hate it if he knew. I'm always worried he'll fall, though, with how his back tightens up. Once inside, I pull his chair out and bring him a mug, putting the kettle on.

From the center of the kitchen table, he takes a tea bag from the basket and readies it in his mug. “How was Mara today?” he asks finally after some much-needed sitting brings some color back to his face.

“Amazing,” I beam, taking a seat across from him. He nods, not that he doesn’t want to hear more but that he expected that to be my answer. This family shares a lot of qualities, but the four of us never stop when we decide we’re going to do something, and we go hard.

“Well, should we pick up a celebratory meal?” he asks, knowing mom has worked all day and much of the evening—when she gets home, she won’t want to cook either. Part of it is strategic, I’m sure because he’s in no shape to cook. But I have to let him down easily.

“I can grab it for you two, but I have plans tonight.”

Still somewhat pale and looking exhausted, Art manages to give me a sly grin. “Miller?”

I smack a palm against the table surface playfully. “Why did you make that comment the other night?!” I lean in and grab the honey, popping it open to add some to his mug.

“Come on, Laney girl,” he says in a “duh” tone that I really don’t understand.

“Come on, what?!” I’m genuinely at a loss as to what he’s insinuating.

He moves the tea tag to the other side of his mug, then removes his glasses, rubbing his face for a moment before replacing them. “I saw him at the Christmas party last year. I saw him at the baby shower for Beau.” He wags a finger at me above the empty mug. “That boy adores you. If you let him, I bet he’d worship the ground you walk on.”

I fall back against the chair, blinking, mouth open. “What?”

“He likes you, Laney. Even I saw it, and I’m an old man!”

I hold up a finger. “First of all, you’re not old. You’re oldish.”

He laughs heartily. “Much better.”

“Second,” I add another finger, “he does not. I watched him ask out a woman a few weeks ago that was my polar opposite.”

Art looks unimpressed with my proof that Miller does not like me, and then the kettle whistles. I bring it to the table and fill his mug, lowering it to a potholder so it doesn’t burn the tabletop. His mug steams, fogging his glasses a bit.

“You give him the time of day?” Art asks, sliding his glasses off to blow away the fog. His eyes meet mine as he does, and I’m confused as to why he’s wearing an expression that says “point proven” because Miller does not like me.

“We work together. I talk to him off and on all day, most days.” As the words leave my mouth, I’m reminded of the fact that I’d not realized Miller and I had texted in the past. But *he* remembered.

That could be nothing. Just... a fluke. I mean, he has far fewer people in his life, and therefore, he probably just remembers more.

God, I feel bad just thinking that. But there’s got to be some truth to it.

Art watches me thinking, so I roll my eyes. “We’re just friends,” I say, knowing full well we have a temporary more-than-friends arrangement.

He slides his glasses on and wraps his weathered hand around the mug, attempting to cool down his tea with a few short huffs of breath against the surface. “But he likes you, Laney. Trust me; I know what a man who adores a woman looks like.”

“You just look in the mirror, huh?” I tease, but the truth is, Art does adore my mom. And Mara. And me. He sips his tea, making a face like it burned his tongue. “Men have no patience. It’s been one minute since I poured the water. Let it cool!”

“Some men have great patience,” he says, sipping the tea, which I know has to be burning his lips. “Patience to wait for a

woman to realize they're interested."

"Miller is not interested."

He lowers the mug to the table, turning his head to catch the headlights shining through the front window. "Mom's home."

I look at where she's pulling into the driveway, then look back at him. "Miller's not interested."

His smile is slow. "You just said that. Are you trying to convince me or yourself?"

He earns himself another eye-roll for that. "I'm tired. I'm gonna go shower and take a nap." Pushing away from the table, I feel his smirk follow me as I head to the door, opening it for my mom.

I give her a kiss on the cheek as she enters, exhausted but smiling. "How was it this morning? Where's Mara?"

I nod to the hall. "In her room. It was good. She did great." I look back at Art and narrow my eyes glaring at him as if to warn him not to put ideas in mom's head about Miller and me. Mom's always wanting me to find a good man to settle down with—she knows it's what I want, and she just wants me to have everything I've dreamed of. But I don't want her getting hopeful when this is just... friends with a situationship on the side, temporarily, nothing more.

"I'm taking a shower, then a nap. Going to Miller's later."

She nods, thinking nothing of it because she both trusts and adores Miller, and I'm sure, like me, knows he is not at all interested. "You eating there or here?"

I point to the floor.

"Good, I'm making Chinese Chicken Salad," she says, raising the plastic bag in her hand between us.

"The one with the crunched ramen noodles and slivered almonds?" I ask with high hopes because that is one of my favorite salads. She nods. "Good."

“Hello, my love,” Art calls from the kitchen. Mom smiles at him around me before stroking a hand through my unruly curls, the way she always does when she gets home.

“His back is bad today,” I whisper, earning me a small smile of acknowledgement from mom. Then, she makes her way to her husband and plants a huge kiss on his head, unloading the grocery bag.

I head to the shower, trying to imagine myself coming home after a long day of work to... Miller.

The weird thing is... I *can* picture it.



THE LIGHT NEXT to Miller’s front door isn’t flickering tonight, and I got some weird sense of satisfaction parking in his assigned spot. It felt very... coupley.

I’ve never really been part of a couple, so even the little details are hugely romantic to me. I listened to a book last month where the hero gave the heroine a key to his house and she was upset. She wanted to move in, not just have a key.

To me, the idea that someone would give you a key to access their safe place... that’s more personal to me than living together. You can enter and find them in any part of their personal downtime... any time. Giving someone a key to me says, I want you to be able to have and see all of me, any time.

I would never be disappointed by that.

I stare at the lock on Miller’s door, analyzing the grooves as I listen to his footsteps grow nearer. My pulse picks up as the deadbolt turns on the other side of the door, and then it whooshes open, drenching me in the scent of Miller’s cologne and his home, the warmth from inside wrapping around me, nearly pulling me in.

Except, he pulls me in first.

By the hand, fingers weaved together with mine, he helps me inside and closes the door, locking it one-handed. Then we're just standing there, me cold from the outside, him warm from the inside, holding hands, eyes locked.

I want to kiss him. I do. But we're not technically in a lesson right now, so I can't.

"Hi," I say, my voice unexpectedly light.

"Hi," he says, his voice rougher than usual.

Neither of our hands releases and instead, he squeezes mine. "You're cold," he notices, bringing our linked hands to his other. He sandwiches mine in his, rubbing to warm it up. And then my lower half tightens and my pussy clenches as he lifts our hands to his lips, blowing.

I've never had a man warm my hands up while looking into my eyes this way, and it's... holy shit, it's subtle, and it's everything.

"Let's sit." He leads me to the couch, which is quickly becoming our spot, though, in a part of my brain that I do not acknowledge, I think any spot with him is a good spot. He releases my hand so I can shrug out of my coat, then takes it back quickly.

We sit close again, our thighs not just touching but pressed together with some pressure. I clear my throat to distract my body from how warm and tingly it's getting at the last minute.

"What makes you insecure with a woman?" I ask, loving way more than I should that we're still holding hands. And now, his thumb is stroking my hand. Wetness burgeons at my seam, and I can't help but think of his stroking thumb touching and rubbing me... on my bare pussy.

He chuckles soft and light. "Just jumping right into it, eh?"

I smile and shrug, but the truth is, I need to get into it because... I'm vibrating to touch him. Taste his lips. Show him the things he wants to learn while having some sliver of selfish gratification in the process. I just want to know what it's like to be with a man like Miller before he's not mine anymore. "That's why I'm here, right?"

His bright eyes flick between mine, studying me for a moment. Finally, he says, “yeah.”

“So, what makes you insecure with women?”

Using his free hand—I’m so glad—he strokes a hand down his face thoughtfully, staring blankly at his TV, which is off. I like that he didn’t feel the need to have background distractions to soften the environment. He didn’t need a buffer—just us.

“I guess it’s two things. Not knowing what she wants and, if I did know, not knowing how to deliver it.”

I nod. “Okay.”

He shakes his head, looking off into the kitchen.

“What?”

He faces me again, this time wearing a slightly droopy expression and a sad smile. “This is... embarrassing. I’m twenty-six and I’ve never...” he swallows as his eyes trace the curve of my lips. “Done more than makeout.”

The idea that this muscled, endearing, sweet, kind, sexy human being is completely untouched blows me away. I mean, I understand how it happened, but a huge part of me still can’t believe it. He’s so fucking hot.

My voice is soft, acting as a verbal hug with my words. “No, not embarrassing at all. You had so much to experience, so much growth when you left your parents.” I tighten our linked hands. “You can’t do everything at once. You chipped away at all the unknowns, and this is next in line.”

His soft smile makes my pussy clench. “You always know what to say.”

“I speak the truth,” I reply, my eyes caught on his mouth.

“Well. That’s the truth. Everything is intimidating to me, really.”

Taking action, I swing my leg over his hip and straddle him once again. I let go of our linked hands so I can rest my

palms on his chest, and god, does it feel good. He's hard and defined, and I wonder what he looks like without a shirt.

My nails stroke gently down his pecs and then up again as I bring my lips to his. "Are you wearing it?" I ask, referring to the chastity cage I delivered here a few days back. "How are you feeling about it?"

His nod is subtle. "I am," he says, sounding hoarse. "I feel good so far. Kind of excited."

"Good," I reply, my lips almost touching his. "So don't worry about your body reacting to me. Just focus on letting yourself enjoy this, okay?"

He nods, but I see some confusion etched into his forehead. His body heat radiates, and I greedily absorb it as my nipples harden.

I went for another simple outfit tonight because I don't want to appear more into this than he is. Jeans, a white long-sleeved henley, hair down. No makeup, nothing fancy. Perfect for our... situation.

"And turning myself over to you..." he trails off, clearly questioning the process.

"Trust the process. By the end of this, you won't have a single self-doubt. You'll know, based on watching me touch you, just what gets a woman going. And you'll know how to touch her because I'll show you. And you'll never have an ounce of doubt again. I promise." I kiss him and love that he leans in a little as I pull away. "Give yourself to me, and when we're done, you won't remember any version of you that was unsure."

He nods, and I wiggle against his crotch, moaning a little at the feel of his cage grinding my center. *Miller has his cock in a cage because I told him to.* My mind spins a little at the fact that we're here, and any lingering hesitation that maybe *I can't do this* drains away because when I'm over Miller like this, I know, experienced or not, I can show us both endless pleasure.

“Laney, you should know, I’m a virgin,” he rushes out quickly, worry draining from his face as he does, like he’d been worried to share. The thing is, I already knew. I still remember Atti’s expression when he knew he’d let the fact slip. And I never said a word, to respect them both.

“I know.” I taste his lips, and love the flavor he leaves behind. “I’m going to be careful and safe, okay?”

He nods, and I feel his trust in that one movement. Trust I will do everything to honor and protect.

“Everything I’m going to do to you now is how third and fourth dates go, okay?”

He nods, and I notice how pink his cheeks are. And how he’s breathing a little fast, too.

“Don’t be nervous,” I say, moving my hands from his chest to his cheeks. “It’s me. *Laney*.” My body quietly shivers at that statement. It’s Miller and me right now, and the ache that tears through my heart at our temporary nature is getting hard to ignore.

“Okay,” he says, exhaling a couple of steady breaths. “Show me.”

Sliding off his lap, he harrumphs. “Hey, I liked you up there.” Fuck, if I don’t agree.

I smile and curl my legs beneath me to gain height at his side. I drop my arm around his shoulders. “You put your arm around her,” I say, our gazes never leaving one another. My fingers meet his shoulder, hard and warm, and I knead him gently. He pushes a heavy breath past his lips. “And let your fingers play a little. Massage, knead, you know,” I say, my voice getting quieter and raspier with each word. His eyes search mine as my fingers stroke his perfect shoulder over his flannel.

Can a shoulder be perfect? Yes, *yes, it can*.

“At this point,” I say, “it’s really about starting the tease. The subtle touches that get her tingling.”

His mouth sounds devoid of moisture when he croaks, “does this move get you...” he swallows, gaining courage which is both insanely sexy and adorable. “*Tingling?*”

I nod.

“Then say something sweet, but like this.” With my fingers still roaming his shoulder, I lean in and bring my lips to the untouched, soft spot right below his earlobe, along his throat. My lips dust his warm, private skin as I say, “you smell good tonight.” Then I press my lips to the strong column of his neck, kissing him just once before pulling back. “Then a small kiss to seal the words.”

Our eyes come together as soon as I pull back; his chest is rising and falling almost urgently now.

“Did you like that?” I ask, subtly adjusting my position on the couch so that where I’m sitting on my heels aligns with my pussy. The immediate friction feels so good.

Bending at the elbow, I move my wandering fingers to the ends of his hair and start playing. It’s so soft; I discreetly wiggle my heel beneath me to ease the pressure building in my clit. He nods but doesn’t speak.

“You can play with her hair,” I say, sifting my fingers up the back of his head. He leans into my touch, and as he does, the slope of his neck becomes defined, his Adam’s apple bulging. “Does it feel good?” Based on his body language and the way his eyes threaten to close as he looks at me with a heady gaze—I know it does.

“Yes,” he croaks, blinking at me slowly.

Heart bumping my ribs, I bring my hand to his thigh, and he tilts his head forward, watching me. Stroking his thigh, I say, “or instead of what I just did, you can put your hand on her thigh. Women love seeing a man’s hand on their leg.”

When I look down and see my hand on his broad, muscular thigh, I realize I love this just as much. Seeing myself casually touching a man, as if I’m part of something serious and real, it’s everything I want. Knowing it’s Miller

I'm touching... it feels like I'm only just now realizing that I don't just want this, but I want it *with him*.

For real.

"I like seeing your hand there," he rasps out, still studying me, always watching me. I don't think he's taken his eyes off me at all yet. His eyes are hungry, making me feel like the most desired meal. I ignore his comment because admitting my truth allows too much vulnerability between us. Physical vulnerability is one thing, but I can't play with my heart. Not when it comes to him.

"After letting your fingers play a little," I say, fanning my fingers across his thigh, eager to feel as much of him as I can without coming off overly eager, "you can move it up a bit." I slide my hand down his thigh, closer to his groin. "Then you can just touch and tease casually over her clothes to get her really worked up."

I rub his leg a few times, the last pass connecting with his crotch only slightly. Yet it was enough of a graze to feel the cage. Arousal rushes out of me as he traps a deep groan in his chest.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs, eyes going glassy with each pass of my palm up his thigh.

"For what?" I continue rubbing his leg, letting each swipe connect with his crotch for a second. I can tell myself it's part of the lesson, but I think it's as much for me as it is for him.

"The, like, noise I made." His cheeks flush. "I don't want to creep you out."

Immediately I straddle myself in his lap, using my knees to pinch his hips. I drop my hands to his pecs and begin rubbing him, the heel of my palm skating over his nipples as I do.

"Don't apologize for enjoying yourself. That's not confident; that comes across as embarrassed. Don't be embarrassed for having needs, having them met, and enjoying it, okay?" I rub him through my speech, and he agrees with a nod.

"Okay."

“So you’re rubbing her shoulder, playing with her hair, touching her leg, whatever it is, the way you know she wants more is if she’s edging closer to you,” I say, canting toward the couch to bring our torsos nearly flush.

“Or if she’s breathing hard,” I say, sliding my hands to the sides of his throat, thumbs on his face as he breathes fast and hard.

“Like me,” he says.

“Like *us*,” I say, taking his hand from his side to place it over my chest.

Another errant groan escapes him, this time making it past his lips. “She may make a noise of approval,” I say after, and he smiles, knowing he did just that. “Then you know she wants more.”

Bringing his hand up, he pushes curls over my shoulder. I catch it on its way down, linking our fingers together.

“What if she doesn’t make a noise?” he asks, voice hoarse.

Eyes on mine, we stare at one another as I reach behind, finding his crotch below my ass. Cage pressed to my center, I move my hand up and down his balls, and even though he’s wearing jeans, I can feel them. And he can feel me.

His eyes close—he can’t fight it anymore. With a plunk, his head falls back against the couch, and he lets a long, feral groan free as I softly stroke his full sac over the denim.

I break our linked hands and center my palm over his heart, applying pressure as I grind down against him gently, still rubbing his balls. He groans again, thick veins straining in his neck as he does, like these few touches and movements are driving him to the edge.

If I could binge on his groans, I would.

“Then you keep touching until she does like I’m doing now.”

One more subtle, teasing pass of the back of my curled knuckles against his balls, and his eyes are open, hands on my knees, gripping me with white knuckles.

“So,” he stammers, voice cracked like a windshield moments from fully shattering. “Just keep touching her, huh?”

I nod and still my hips, leaving my crotch directly on top of his caged cock. “Yep, and it’s up to you for the next part.”

“What’s the next part?” he says around a moan he’s clearly trying to stifle, just a little. And I love that he’s a moaning, groaning mess right now. I’m dripping wet from it.

I lean forward, leaving just the tips of my fingers on his sac, drumming. “Finishing her.”

eleven

...

miller

I like her moving around my place.

Finishing her.

Finish. I know what that means.

Being raised in a house where heck was a bad word, the whole “not cursing” thing really stuck. And while I know I can swear, I still don’t. Out of habit more than anything but also, I’ve never felt like my current vocabulary couldn’t do the job. There’s never been a time when I need anything more aggressive and vulgar.

But a certain word rolls around my mouth as Delane nibbles at my lips, fingers stroking my chest, and her other hand still playing with my balls. My cock is straining against the confines of the cage, and I’m getting nervous that I’m going to make a fool out of myself and finish on my own before we even get to things.

Even though I’ve had years to explore my body in ways my doorless house growing up never allowed, the fact is, I’ve still never been touched by a woman. Not like this. Not even a quarter of this. A molecule of this, even.

So now, as she’s touching me, writhing on me, her wild curls illuminated by the light behind, I just want to cum. I want to cum so bad I don’t think I’ve ever wanted to cum this badly before.

The thing is, I’ve had a fair share of wet dreams as a twenty-something. And I’ve had a decent amount of touchless releases, too. Growing up, I never understood what I was feeling, and discussing our bodies in that way just wasn’t a thing. So I’d lie in bed at night as a young teen, grinding my hips into the mattress, knowing that the delicious friction would ultimately end in an eruption, a release, and a short-lived, heady high. It’d leave a mess, too, but I’d figured out early on that grinding on a bath towel made for easier cleanup.

Every so often, I go to bed without relieving any of those needs and wake up with damp sheets and a sticky belly.

I'm afraid that will happen now.

But I don't admit it because that's what I'm supposed to be working on. She's doing her part, teaching me things in slow, chewable bits. I have to do my part and stop being so embarrassed and worried. After all, that's what all this is about, right?

"Are you going to finish me?" I croak out, knowing that if she says no, I'll finish myself in a few seconds once she leaves tonight.

She grins, and a glowing feeling spreads through my torso. "You wouldn't do half an oil change, would you?" She slides to the floor on her knees between my open legs and reaches for the waistband of my jeans, easily popping the button open on the first try.

Delane is taking my pants off.

I've thought about this before, and now it's happening, and I refuse to get bummed that it's happening under different circumstances than I'd hoped. I force myself to be happy it's happening in the first place, no matter why.

She tugs them, and I lift off the couch so she can get them off my hips and down my thighs, banding them around my ankles. I'm left wearing nothing but my boxer briefs, and when I look down, the lump of the cage isn't what catches my eye. It's the large dark spot over my cage that I see. I'm leaking precum like crazy.

With a single finger, she rubs over the wet spot on the tip. "Now... just enjoy." She tugs them down where they stay banded around my knees, heart racing.

I'm more exposed than I've ever been, and while there is a touch of discomfort at the idea that Delane is staring at the split of my ass, directly at my balls, and can see the wet slit of my erection through the cage—I've never felt better.

I had no idea what wearing this device would feel like. All I knew was that if Laney said it would be good for the two of

us, I'd do it. I'd be here in a clown nose if that's what she wanted. Now that I've been wearing it a while, I've grown comfortable. It almost feels like wearing armor, and even though it's a physical restraint, the armor protects my fears from escaping and bleeding into my actions.

I actually *like* it.

She's the first woman to see me this way, touch me so privately, explore me at all. It feels surreal and good, and—

“Ohmygosh,” the words rush out of me before I finish my thought as Delane presses down on my balls with her lips. Eyes straining up at me, her hands sifting through the short hair on my thighs as she peppers kisses on my balls.

Delane is kissing my balls.

My dick aches in its constraint, and when her gaze locks with the cage, I know exactly what she's looking at.

“I'm...” I start, not knowing what to say. I'm... close? She hasn't even done anything yet, not really. But that's the truth. I'm a few more unbelievable moments away from exploding.

“Close?” she offers, not making me say the word. I appreciate that. For some reason, saying it feels harder than taking my pants down in front of her. “Stop thinking,” she says, halting my racing thoughts, reading my mind like it's her own personal diary.

“You're uh, you're going to make me,” I swallow, choosing the least aggressive word since I'm not sure I've even said cum or orgasm out loud. “Finish like this. And I'm feeling... embarrassed.”

She drags her tongue along the spine of the cage, wetting tiny parts of my penis that are bulging up from the cage. I swallow a groan, chin to chest, staring down at the most beautiful sight between my legs.

“Don't,” she says, alternating between licking my penis through the cage and kissing and lapping my balls. “Don't be embarrassed if I make you cum,” she says, the word sounding less forbidden and more normal when it comes from her. I like

that. I like that all these things that felt unspeakably uncomfortable before are already so normal and easy with her.

“You’re probably used to men that can go forever,” I say, admitting a fear of mine. At twenty-six, women my age have probably been having sex for years. They don’t want a guy who can’t find the clit and finishes before he’s even really been touched.

“Don’t worry about what anyone is used to. When you’re with a partner, it’s just you two. And if you’re busy being embarrassed, you aren’t enjoying things. So instead of worrying how long you last, just lay back and enjoy.”

“I’ll try,” I groan out as she applies pressure to my groin, right above the cage, using her tongue to tease my sac.

“Don’t try. Just do. Because Miller, until you get over feeling embarrassed, you’ll never be confident for anyone. Cumming this way is hot, and shows me you’re super open to any and all sexual experiences. And *that* turns women on.” She slides a fingertip over the opening of the cage, precum stringing between the cage and her digit as she brings it to her lips.

The world stops spinning as I watch her pink lips part, her glistening fingertip pushing inside only to reappear licked clean a moment later. “Now watch with me while I make you cum.”

I wonder if she’s turned on or if this is really just a trade for her. She does this for me, and I teach her car stuff, and that’s that. I don’t know, but the worry that I’m just a transaction has no room in my brain as she licks up and down my very swollen balls.

My orgasm has been building for so long. I may have stroked myself in the shower before she came over, but as I slide my fingers through her curls, holding her head tenderly as she sucks my balls, it feels like I haven’t had an orgasm in a lifetime.

Because my balls are so full, and everything trapped in the cage is angry, spitting in protest of not being free. She sucks

up what I spit out, moaning as she licks the precum from her bottom lip.

“Laney,” I pant, discovering my voice is almost gone and I’m breathing really hard.

“Your hands feel good in my hair,” she murmurs, kissing the insides of both thighs as her fingers play with my sac, the other still massaging and putting pressure on my groin. Everything she’s doing feels like the best thing I’ve ever felt.

Because it is.

“Laney,” I say, only this time I realize it’s a warning a bit too late. The overwhelming pressure of impending orgasm slides down my spine, flooding my groin, and surging into my locked and smothered erection. I’m surprised I haven’t broken out of this cage for how hard it feels like I should be. “You’re going to make me finish,” I say, trying really hard not to be embarrassed by how breathless I am.

“Tell me you’re going to cum, Miller,” she says, now back to massaging my thighs, taking all sensations and pressure away from my caged penis and thrumming balls. “Don’t say finish. Say cum. Say *you’re making me cum, Delane.*”

Her dark eyes shine from between my legs, and she brings the heel of her palm to my balls and begins rolling soft circles over them, earning a spurt of precum from me. I haven’t shot precum in years, back in the days when I really tried as hard as I could not to touch myself, but she has my body on fire, starving for her, buzzing to... cum.

“I don’t... I don’t usually....” I trail off, but she picks it up easily, knowing exactly what I’m trying to say.

“Curse, I know. But this isn’t cursing. This is just telling me what your body is going to do. There’s nothing wrong with it and let me tell you,” she says, kissing the wet slit at the peak of my cage. “It’s so sexy listening to a guy orgasm. There is literally nothing hotter than watching and listening to a guy cum—but you have to say those words, Miller.”

I know my time to obey her is limited, as any and all blood my body was using to function is quickly being absorbed by

my aching, thrumming groin.

“I’m gonna...” I pant, sweat sliding down my temples. Her eyes widen, and she’s never looked more beautiful to me. Lips glistening from sucking me, curls everywhere, eyes focused on me like I’m the only one in existence. She teases my slit through the cage with her tongue again before resting on her heels, gripping my balls with one hand, and tenderly stroking my thigh with the other.

“Cum,” I manage, the word feeling so foreign that my temples tingle. “I’m going to cum,” I groan again as she uses one single fingertip to tap my balls. That’s the last touch I can take from her, and before I can grip the base of the cage and at least angle what I know is going to be an abundant release, it happens—I cum.

It’s the first time I’ve cum in front of anyone. It’s exhilarating and intense as a wild rope spews from me, soaring into the air like a rocket before falling across my thigh.

I fight to keep my eyes open and on her, and watching her stare at me as I orgasm only makes me cum that much more. Another hot jet of cum spews from behind the cage, and this time, it lands across her chest, over her henley. The next shot coats her collarbone, and the next my thigh, dripping down over my balls.

“Delane,” her name slips past my lips from habit as the last of my cum erupts, the final thick rope landing on the floor between us.

Once the blood comes back to my brain, I blink away the fog of what just happened and find Delane flush, gorgeous, lips parted. “Don’t move, okay?”

I nod, a lazy smile curling my lips. She gets up and moves around my house for a second before returning with my baseball cap. Setting it on my head, she tugs the bill down over my eyes. “Just relax, and let me clean up.”

“Delane, I can’t let you clean up my... *That*,” I counter, reaching for the hat to tip it up. But she swats my hand away.

“Cum,” she corrects. “Say cum, Miller. That’s part of all of this. Be comfortable with sex, or you’ll never have confidence.”

“Okay,” I concede, not because I’m sure I can just flip a switch and suddenly be comfortable saying cum in front of other people, but because I want to make her happy. I hear her moving around, I hear the sink, and then she’s back, dragging a damp, warm terry cloth down my thigh, cleaning up my... *cum*.

“Hang on, okay?” she asks quietly, still moving around my place. I like her moving around my place.

“Okay,” I reply.

A minute later, she’s taking the baseball cap off my head and tossing it aside. In her outstretched palm rests a folded pair of sweats, a t-shirt, and a hoodie. “Now put this on, and I’ll toss the dirty clothes in the wash.”

“You don’t have to do all this,” I counter, feeling bad that she got me off and now is waiting on me hand and foot.

She tugs an elastic hair tie from her wrist and lifts her curls from her shoulders, putting them in a bun on her head. “Aftercare,” she replies, “is all part of it.” She motions for me to stand, so I do. And I’ve completely forgotten that my balls are still just... hanging out. But I don’t really care.

I step out of the jeans and boxer briefs, taking a few items of clothing from her. And while I’m stepping into the clean boxer briefs she brought me, I realize she’s taking her top off. I try not to look, but her perfect palmful of breasts sway as she feeds her arms through... my Wrench Kings sweatshirt. She’s got her own, but the way mine almost goes to her knees makes me a little crazy.

“Bathroom’s down the hall,” I offer, “if you want privacy.”

She twists the sleeves so the seams are properly aligned, then turns to me and scoffs. “I’m already dressed, and privacy kind of went out the door when I bought a cage with your cock in mind.”

I chuckle and start to get dressed. With my foot, I start putting the sweats on. “How’d you know where I kept these, by the way?” I ask in reference to the clothes. She winces a little, and I hate that.

“Sorry,” she sighs. “I didn’t want to go through your stuff, but I also didn’t want you getting up and taking care of yourself either.” She heads down the hall straight toward my laundry closet like she lives here and is familiar with my place. I don’t know what I like more, her familiarity or the fact that she’s putting her shirt in my washing machine because it has my cum on it.

“Why?” I call after her. “I can. I do all the time.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Oh yeah? Are you taking care of yourself all the time?”

I let out a small laugh. That’s part of why I like Delane. Nothing ever feels awkward, not for long, at least. “Aftercare is all part of it, Miller. You can’t make a girl cum and then go play video games. The job doesn’t end when you cum; it ends when they’re fully cared for after cumming.”

Now fully dressed in the sweats and t-shirt she brought me, I reach out and pinch the Wrench Kings hoodie. “Looks good on you.”

She grins. “Most things do.”

I don’t disagree with that, not at all. But I keep that thought to myself.

I lick my lips and notice how flushed she still is. “Hey, Delane,” I say as she flops back down onto my couch. “Is there anything I can do for you now? Since, you know, I owe you.”

She chews the inside of her cheek as she considers my question, finally asking, “If you could do one thing to me right now, what would it be?”

I scratch the back of my head, wanting to say everything I’ve been fantasizing about for... years.

I've wanted Delane for years. And I rarely let myself acknowledge that pathetic, love-lorn truth.

I've imagined lots of things. Sucking her nipples, licking her between her thighs until she's moaning my name the way I moaned hers, sinking into her as she locks her ankles behind me. Hey—I may be inexperienced, but my internet browser is in a long-term relationship with PornHub.

I can't seem to say any of those things, though, and the familiar heat of embarrassment climbs my neck.

She smiles, and my core thrums with an overwhelming emotion I can't name. "If you can't say it, you're not ready. To be the guy with confidence, you have to cut the ties to embarrassment."

Outstretching her fist, she waits for a bump. I knock my fist to hers, and then we're both in my apartment, grinning at each other.

"Stay to eat so this isn't weird," I say.

Her shoulders lift and drop. "Sure. But it wasn't going to be weird. This is our deal, remember?"

I nod, wishing this wasn't a deal but just... us. "Yep." I nod toward my kitchen. "Come on; I gotta feed Salsa, and then I'll make us something."

"Where is he, by the way?" she asks, searching around my place, looking like a wet dream in my hoodie. Heck, I'll probably have a wet dream tonight.

"Locked him in the spare room so he wouldn't, like, be out here licking his butt while we were doing... whatever." I grab the glass container of food and pop open the top, using the scoop to fill his dish.

"I'll let him out. I feel like I should make a serious attempt to be his friend, you know since I'll be coming over for a while."

"I think that's a good idea," I tell her as I lower the loaded dish to the floor. Only, I think it's a good idea because I want Salsa to love her. Chicks like cats. Most of them, at least.

Maybe if Salsa loves her, she'll have a harder time giving me up.

Wow.

That's probably the second most pathetic thing about me—that I am going to use my cat to guilt my crush into being with me. Only second to being a virgin, but of course.

While washing my hands a second later, Delane lets Salsa out, and by letting Salsa out, I mean she opens the door, and he refuses to show himself out of utter fear.

She hops up on the counter, her hand right next to the key for the cage. I'd set it out on the counter in plain sight so she'd see it when she came over if we needed an easy way to toe into our plans for the night.

Hooking it with her pinky, she drags the key around while watching me unload an armful of items from the fridge onto the counter adjacent to her.

“We don't need this yet, do we?” she asks in a sultry tone, and honestly, I don't think I'm ready for this. This is a lot of the very version of Delane I've been dying for, and now I'm getting round after round. It's overwhelmingly dangerous. I can't fall in love.

I'll never get over her when she decides she wants someone more.

I shrug. “You tell me.” Reaching for the wok already out on the counter, I bring it close to me and start unpacking already sliced and diced ingredients. Adding oil, I get out spices and am floored to find her just... watching me.

“What?” I ask. “And you didn't answer.”

She smiles as I peel the plastic wrap off a tray package of chicken. “Just... I don't know. Watching you be you at home is just...” she brings her thumb to her lips, biting down horizontally. “I like it.”

I dump the empty package in the garbage and wash my hands. “Cooking?”

She volleys her head as if that's both the answer and not the answer at all. "That but everything. I just... I'm seeing how cool you are and how little I really know about you."

I don't want her to feel bad so I shrug again. "No one really knows their coworkers like this."

Although...

Delane's favorite color is purple, not light shades like lilac, but vibrant, bold ones.

Her favorite kind of ice cream is rocky road, but she doesn't eat it that often because Art, Patty, and Mara have an allergy to the nuts in it.

She wants to be a mom. That was a hard fact to learn because she doesn't voice her big truths often. But I heard her say it to Beck at Beck and Beau's baby shower. And she'd be such a good mom, just like hers.

On rainy days, she likes to open a window, light a candle, get under a blanket, and listen to her audiobooks. She says it's the ultimate vibe.

She hates mushrooms, and she likes pickles with peanut butter.

Once, she paid over six hundred dollars she'd saved for a year on a Taylor Swift ticket, which she gave to Mara for her birthday.

When she was six, she fell off her scooter and got three stitches in her knee.

If you look closely, there's a fleck of emerald swimming in the rich chocolate of her left iris.

She cries when she reads poetry by Lucille Clifton.

If she could watch any movie on repeat, it would be *Sleepless in Seattle*.

"Yeah, I guess that's true. Except for Atti and Beau. They hang out all the time."

I bet I know Delane better than Atti and Beau know each other, and they've got a handful of years on us.

“Yeah, they’re the exception,” I say, driving the sharpened knife through the meat, cutting thin strips that I toss into the wok. I wash my hands again, then season the mix.

“You don’t have to stay in the cage,” she says, rerouting the conversation back to where it started. “But it could be good for you.” She shrugs, picking a piece of bell pepper out of the container before snapping the lid back on for me. “If you stay in and didn’t have the distraction of that thing,” she grins, nodding toward my crotch, “do you think that would help you focus on your head and stay on top of all the shit that creeps in?”

I push a wooden spatula through the cooking stir fry and dodge a burst of steam that drifts up from the wok. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, if you don’t have access to jerking off or worrying about your dick—” she holds up a hand to stop me from protesting— “and don’t say you don’t worry about your dick because I’ve listened to enough books to know that all men are constantly worried about their dick.”

We share a laugh, and as chaste as I unfortunately am, I don’t argue her point.

“So if it’s off the table, do you think you’d do better at talking yourself out of those moments of feeling embarrassed and insecure? It can literally be your main focus.”

Uncomfortable but fighting it for her, I scratch my stomach as I think out loud. “Well, as we discovered tonight, the cage doesn’t keep me from finishing.”

“Cumming,” she deadpans, dark eyes locked on mine, a smirk curling her lips.

“Cumming,” I repeat, loving how her cheeks pinken and her smile broadens. “But,” I say, pointing the spatula toward her. “Not having it as a concern will free up mental space; that part is true.”

“Think you can really get on your own case to not talk down to yourself?” she asks, voice dipping into tender territory. “The way you get embarrassed... I mean, I

understand a little bit about how you grew up so I know a lot of it is just... muscle memory. But.. You deserve to live without that embarrassment making choices for you.”

I don't know what to say to that because that's... surprisingly astute. Not surprising that she's sharp, but rather because I've never had my issues simplified for me that way.

I've never told Delane how I feel or asked her out because I've been too scared she'd turn me down. I couldn't live with that humiliation and embarrassment.

And with dating and women—I haven't been *waiting* for Delane. I've tried to date women. I'm just... crippled by the embarrassment of my truth. Being a virgin both sexually and emotionally has always been... hard for me to come to terms with. Not only have I been missing out, but I wasn't even taught to handle these experiences. I wear a thick coat of self-loathing because of it.

“How are you so confident?” I ask, but reword it for fear of her taking that the wrong way. “I mean, you're confident because you're brilliant and gorgeous, obviously.”

I add sauce to the wok and keep stirring, waiting for her to answer, but she isn't. Glancing, I do a double take and can't escape the way her eyes fix on mine.

“Brilliant and gorgeous?” she repeats, her legs no longer swaying from side to side against the cabinets.

I turn off the wok, cutting half the noise between us instantly.

“And so much more.”

She swallows, her eyes following me as I slide a hand up her knee, over her thigh, and step between her legs. We're close, and I don't know if I'm breathing hard or she is, but my vision blurs a bit from how fast my heart is racing.

“Yeah?” she croaks quietly.

“Fuck yeah,” I ground out, reaching above her to grab two plates off the shelf.

Her eyes widen. “Miller.” The way her hands fall to my hips, clinging, sinking into me like she’s been dying to hold me— “you don’t curse.”

I can’t help it; I look down at my waist on each side where she’s clutching me before looking up at her. “I *didn’t*,” I correct. Holding the plates between us, I add, “But it’s time for a change, I guess.”

Her hands fall away when I hand a plate to her. “Dish up,” I say with a smile. She slides down from the counter, and we stand hip to hip as she scoops veggies and chicken onto her plate, our hands brushing as she passes me the slotted spoon. Every little touch with her is electric.

The chastity contraption, while foreign to me before, has ended up being a good idea. Because all this close proximity with Delane? I’d be awkwardly shielding my crotch or saying, “give me a sec,” every time I needed to stand.

We sit across from one another at my small kitchen table, sliding my metal water jug back and forth to share sips. I like the way all of this feels with her, and each healthy serving of happiness I’m getting tonight is coming with an unwanted side of anxiety.

Because we have an end, and I want to avoid it at all costs.

“What are you thinking about?” she asks around a bite of chicken. She points the tines of her fork at her plate, adding, “Miller, this is fucking bomb. Seriously.”

I push a piece of chicken into a bell pepper. “I was just... thinking about how much I like having you here,” I admit, my pulse cranking a million miles a minute at the most real admission I’ve ever made. “And thanks. It’s nothing special. I think the key is fresh veggies.”

She smiles, chewing slowly now while her eyes lazily hover on mine. When she swallows, she says, “yeah, fresh veggies are better than frozen, for sure.” And though she doesn’t address the first part of my comment, so much of me really believes she feels the same. Or maybe that’s just my unabashed hopes.

We eat and we talk, and those two things are so simple but never before have they felt so... romantic. We talk about Delane's younger sister Mara and her competitive karate. She tells me about Art's back and how the disc issue seems to be getting much worse in recent months. Then we go through a list of movies that the world collectively agrees to be the best but that we don't like.

Around ten at night, we decide the next thing she's going to tackle—with my help, basic but important—changing air filters. Knowing that her car hasn't had them changed, probably ever, we plan to get to Kings a little early Monday so we can do the swap. About to walk her down, Delane tucks a curl behind her ear, then tugs her purse up her arm.

“You don't mind getting in a little early?”

I roll my eyes which earns a hearty laugh from her. The type of laugh that makes you laugh, too, because it's so genuine and deep. “First you said fuck, and now you're rolling your eyes,” she giggles, pressing her hand to her nose to catch the wild laughter that keeps coming. “I'm a bad influence! At this rate, you'll be Atti in a few weeks.”

I lean in, and I don't try to smell her, but her flowery scent overtakes my senses, and say in my best Atticus Winters impression, “There ain't no way I'm turnin' into him.”

She roars with laughter again. “I had no idea you were good at impressions.”

Laughing, I scratch at my chest bone. “I didn't either. I've never tried until now.” Her laughter slows, and she smiles up at me.

“Tonight's a first of many, then, huh?”

“I guess so.”

We stand there, two inches apart, icy air wafting inside through the crack in the door as we smile at one another. I want to kiss her goodbye so much, but instead, I motion her out and walk her down to her car. We part ways, and I stay in the snow until her taillights are nothing but a rouge blur in the distance.

Tonight did hold a lot of firsts for me. The first time I'd been physically exposed to another human being aside from my doctor.

And of all the firsts—orgasming in front of someone, wearing a chastity cage, having my most private area touched, licked, and teased—the truth is, my favorite first was just having an evening with the woman I'm pretty sure I love.

twelve

...

delane

The rage sweats.

The Monday morning after, as promised, I met Miller at Kings, and he walked me through changing my air filters. He even walked me through how it would be different on my mom's car, which he looked up in our computer systems to make sure he was right. On top of that, he brought me a coffee and wrapped me in his Kings coat in the cold while we worked.

And now I'm grouchy because the rest of that day was so busy, I only saw him one more fucking time. One time! Before I realized Miller is literally the perfect man, I saw his ass everywhere. He even annoyed me a few times with how often we'd bump into each other in the stock room.

It's like when you look at a photo of yourself a few years back, and you think, god, I'd give anything to be that size again, but at the time, you thought you were a whale.

That's me now with Miller.

I was totally unappreciative of the fact I could simply talk to him, look at him, or even touch him when I wanted. And now, on Thursday, days later, I'd probably give up an ovary, kidney, and maybe even an eyeball to just casually drag my fingers along the carved ridge of his shoulders as I pass behind him in the shop.

But he's busy.

And so am I.

Which leaves me where I am now: stuck behind the desk with an audiobook in my ears that I honestly can't even fucking focus on, a burning in my loins for a guy twenty feet away from me, and a line of customers needing to explain every excruciating pin drop of noise their car is making.

Shoot me.

“Okay, I’ll make a note, but in truth, you’ll have to explain all of this to the mechanic again when you come back, so maybe it’s better we stay high level, keep the details for the experts. I’d hate for you to repeat yourself,” I say to the middle-aged man wearing an orange construction vest, drumming his sausage fingers against the Plexi as I input his complaints.

“Fine,” he gruffs. After finishing with him, scheduling his appointment, and reminding him of said appointment as I slide him a card, he leaves. The next person in line is... a beautiful blonde.

Instantly, my senses rise up like the hair on the back of a dog rises when a threat is near.

“Welcome to Wrench Kings,” I say through the phoniest smile and clenched teeth. “Can I help you?”

She peers around for a second before discovering the long, rectangular window on the door to the shop. Narrowing her eyes in an attempt to catch a glimpse of the guys working out back, I end her struggle by rolling my chair to my computer, my head effectively blocking her view. Falling back on her heels, she gives me a “can’t blame me for trying” smile and clears her throat.

“I’m looking for Miller. I think he works here.” Like the man before, she drums her fingers along the Plexi, still foolishly attempting to peer around me.

“He does indeed,” I say with another smile I don’t feel at all. “Let me see if he’s busy,” I say. A minute ago, I virtually prayed for Miller’s schedule to slow down so he would stroll through here and make small talk with me, wearing that panty-drenching lopsided grin of his. And now that this stick figure with bolt-on tits and inhumanly long lashes is here, my prayers have done a full one hundred and eighty degrees, and I’m now hoping Miller is elbow-deep in an engine repair or a carburetor rebuild.

With one more cordial nod, I slip out back.

This raging jealousy inside me is so uncomfortable; I'm not used to feeling so out of control of my emotions. I'm used to being in control of everything—including my emotions. I'm an adult, for Christ's sake.

But the idea of Miller's hands on her, the thought of her getting to make firsts with him... it's incinerating me from the inside out, I fucking swear.

Atticus glances my way without a second thought, bending down to finish tying his boot. And that's when I see him.

Miller. Wearing his trademark adorable grin, sifting his fingers through his hair with his cap tipped up, he's talking to Beau. The hair around his temples is damp, and I wonder what his chest looks like bare with sweat sliding down.

There's a heartbeat in my clit just looking at him.

From the corner of his eye, he notices me and completely abandons conversation with his boss, heading my way. I can't deny that taking his attention that way feels good, but it doesn't do anything to squash the jealousy and fear that has my entire personality in a vise grip right now.

"Hey, Laney," he greets, making my stomach flip a little.

"Hi," I say, controlling my reaction because all of me wants to be a brat to him, even though he has no control over who comes to see him. And based on what the woman at the desk said, he clearly isn't expecting her. Around an unexpected lump in my throat, I say, "there's someone here to see you up front."

He cocks a brow and tugs his baseball cap back down. "Unhappy customer?" he questions as he feeds his arms through a sleeveless fleece vest he sometimes wears over his Kings uniform.

I shake my head. "You just assumed the worst," I say, realizing that Miller's lack of confidence, despite the fact he knows he's a wonderful mechanic, seems to span wider than I realized.

He shrugs. "People don't usually come back to sing praises, just to complain."

“Bitch,” I correct. “If you’re cursing now, you can say bitch.”

On my heels, he talks to me while we walk toward the door. “I don’t like that word.”

With my hand on the knob, I look at him over my shoulder. He’s closer than I expected, and I like seeing him this close up. It reminds me of sitting close in his apartment.

“No?” I ask, liking so much that of all words, bitch is one he doesn’t feel the need to use.

With a shake of his head, he says, “No. But it doesn’t bother me that you use it.”

I smile, wondering if he’s looking for a woman who doesn’t curse. Does the blonde ten feet away from us curse? I bet she doesn’t. I bet she’s exactly his type. He grabs the door as I pull it open, holding it for me.

“Thanks,” I say, and he steps in behind me, his groin bumping my ass. My eyes catch the blonde, who is watching intently. But instead of focusing on how close we’re standing, her eyes are on him. Why wouldn’t they be? As hot as Miller looked last weekend in jeans and a flannel, the man can wear the shit out of work blues.

“Hi,” she says from way too far back, like the eager whore she is.

Okay, she’s probably not a whore. I’m just... jealous. God, being jealous is the worst. I hate this feeling. Plopping down in my chair in front of my desk, I pop in my EarPods, ready to tune into some small-town romance as a distraction.

But as soon as both are in, I’m met with the disappointing death noises of uncharged EarPods. “Fuck,” I grumble, unlocking my phone to see if even one of the EarPods is moderately charged. But no such luck. Both are dead, dead, dead.

I really don’t want to look, but as I’m reaching for my EarPod my gaze happens to stumble upon Miller and the blonde woman. His hand is resting on the small of her back as he guides her outside... for privacy.

There's really only one reason they need privacy, and that's to make a date.

With dead EarPods in my ears and my finger mindlessly hitting enter on my keyboard over and over, I watch as the blonde touches his forearm and laughs, exposing lots of shiny, white teeth. Does she have more teeth than normal? She's so toothy, and... now Miller is laughing, too.

Rage and jealousy form a powerful cocktail in my veins, making me nearly blind as I attempt to keep my eyes on them. But the edges of my vision blur, and I don't know if my frustration is actually making me blind or if my rapidly beating heart is the cause but either way, I stare, making out what I can as sweat drips down my forehead.

The rage sweats. Fuck.

Then the world slows, and not in a good way. Blonde woman reaches into her pocket and passes him a small piece of pink paper folded in half. I don't own pink paper, and here she is, passing Miller her number on what I can only assume is feminine cutesy stationery that is also probably sprayed with her department store perfume.

And instead of handing him the number, the big-titted blonde steps into his personal space and tucks the paper into Miller's pocket. *His front pocket.*

What a fucking slut! Touching a man you don't even know just inches away from his dick? *Why don't you just drop to your knees and suck him off here,* I think to myself.

The fact that I haven't seen his cock hard uncaged yet makes my jealousy that much crazier. This pink-papered ho is going to see it before me.

I'm breathing hard when I turn around, facing a wall of accessories hanging idly on a corkboard. I stare at the car supplies, talking myself down.

This is what you signed up for—helping him so he can be with someone. And if that's the type of someone he wants to be with, well, that's his prerogative.

I've already learned how to change a driveshaft, replace cabin air filters, unlock a car when you've locked yourself out, and a few other things.

That was the deal. We're living up to the exact deal, and here I am, jealous and angry, ready to stomp my foot like a spoiled brat and say, *I don't care what I agreed to! This isn't fair! I want more!*

I want more...

I get hung up on my own thoughts. Do I *really* want more? Not just more of his body and his firsts because, of course, I want those things. But am I getting all twisted up inside for nothing? Do I really want this man?

Atticus barges in, and the epiphany I was mere millimeters from dissipates as he growls questions at me impatiently.

"Huh?" I ask, having not tuned in until now.

"I said," he starts, pissy attitude full fledged. He better watch the fuck out because I am not in the mood for Atticus 'tude today; I'm really not. "Can you look up a part for me?"

Folding my arms over my chest, I tip my head to the side. "Did you forget your login again?"

"I don't need a login; I have you," he deadpans, sifting his big, dirty fingers through the greasy strands of hair that have broken free from his man bun.

"So you forgot your login," I reply, rolling away from the computer to allow room for his big ass body to shove in and look up whatever he needs to look up. Never mind the fact that these guys have two computers in the shop that haven't been logged into for at least a year.

His jaw ticks, and I can see a familiar look settle onto his face: irritation.

"Look it up, Delane," he says, digging into his pocket to produce a scrap of paper with a part number scrawled across.

"You look it up; I'm not your personal assistant, Atticus," I say, my jaw snapping on the last letter of his name because

fuck! Can't I just have a minute to be annoyed without them needing me for something?

"This bad attitude of yours wouldn't have nothin' to do with the blonde that just left here, would it?" I can't even get annoyed by the shitty smirk that comes over him because my brain latches onto something else. *Left here*, he said. Not giving a fuck what Atticus thinks, I turn around, and yep, sure enough, Miller and the blonde are no longer out front.

When I face Atticus again, he's still got that smirk on his face. How does Goldie tolerate this man, seriously?

"That's what I thought," he says, with so much satisfaction I really want to sock him. But I don't because, thanks to Rock, I've met my lifetime physical violence quota.

"Shove it up your ass, Atti," I say, yanking the piece of paper from his grubby hand. In under thirty seconds, I've found the item, ordered it, and told him when it's coming in.

"Thank you, Delane," he says, overly enunciating everything, which only gets under my skin even more. God, he's like the annoying brother I never wanted.

Plunking back down in my chair, I face my computer and dive into my invoices, not caring if Atti is still there or if Miller is going to use that number he got, or if my EarPods are dead. All I care about are these... muffler... invoices, apparently.

And when the clock hits five, I don't do my usual hang-around and help close-up routine. I log out of my computer, shrug into my parka, grab my purse, and head the hell out of there.

I'm off at five, and nowhere in my job contract does it say I have to go say goodbye to all of those fuckers.

Okay, Beau isn't a fucker. Beau's amazing.

And Miller didn't do anything but exist as a supremely sweet, adorable, and totally fuckable guy. He didn't put a spell on the bimbo to come drop her number off.

Atti's still a fucker.



READY FOR SOME quality time making dinner with mom or even some time hovering over mom's car in the garage with Art, I come home to an empty, dark house.

The driveway is empty, so calling out is pointless, but I do it anyway. "Hello?" My keys clatter against the side table behind the couch where I drop them, shimmying my coat off and hanging it up.

Flicking on the light in the kitchen, I spot a note on the table with the basket of teabags centered on it. I slide it out and read.

Mom's picked up an extra shift, and Art's gone to the emergency department because his back was acting up, and he had an unbearable spell. Mara's next door hanging out with the neighbors because she doesn't like being home alone.

She's like me that way. A full house with voices and noises is where I thrive.

I get my jacket back on and cut across the lawn to the house next door, using the heel of my palm to knock a few times. A moment later, Kassie, the thirteen-year-old who lives there, answers.

"Oh, hey, Delane," she says cheerfully. "I love your hair. I know I always say that, but god, I love it," she says, reaching out to pluck a curl from my face, wrapping it around her finger.

Normally that would totally invade my space and annoy me, but with Kassie, I know she means it only as a compliment. She's a good kid.

"Thanks, Kas. Hey, can you tell my sister I'm home?"

She nods, but Mara appears in the hallway behind Kas, her bag slung over her shoulder. "Hey," she says, coming forward to meet me on the porch. "Thanks, Kas."

“Anytime,” she says, waving at us as we walk the fifteen feet back to our house.

Once inside, Mara hangs her backpack and kicks off her shoes. “I like Kas.”

I nod. “I was just thinking that.” She follows me into the kitchen, where I pull open the cabinet and survey the cupboard. Mara takes a seat at the table and reads Mom’s note.

“Have you heard from dad?” she asks, holding the paper up.

I shake my head. “No, I came home, read that note, and got you.”

On her feet, she goes to her bag, where she digs out her phone, returning to the table already texting. Looking through the canned and boxed food, I spot an amazing-sounding option for the kind of day I’m having. I pull the blue box out and hold it up to her, shaking its contents to get her attention.

She looks up, the phone glowing up at her. “Mac ‘n’ cheese?” I ask, shaking the box of dried pasta. She nods, so I grab the pot and fill it with water from memory.

I start the burner and set the pot over the open flame, thinking about the bomb chicken teriyaki Miller made the other night. He cooked like me—literally no measuring utensils or recipes. Just going off pure vibes, and I adore that.

I can’t believe there is a list of things Miller and I have in common, and I can’t believe that it’s growing.

“I had really good chicken teriyaki at Miller’s the other night when I was there,” I say to my younger sister, craning my neck to see if she’s still texting or if I have her attention.

“Dad got a lidocaine injection, and he’s just waiting to get discharge paperwork, but he’ll be home in an hour or two, he thinks,” she says, reading from her phone. Then she looks up at me and smiles. “I love chicken teriyaki.”

I nod and turn to the pot on the stove. “You would have liked his. It was the best I’ve had.”

“What made it the best?” she asks, taking me by surprise.

“Good question,” I reply, adding salt to the water. “He sliced the vegetables really thin, and everything was really fresh,” I decide.

“That sounds good. He’s a good cook?”

I nod, happy to be facing the stove so Mara doesn’t see the smile I can’t hide. “Seems to be.”

“What else is he good at?” she asks, tone way too teasingly for a twelve-year-old.

“Mara!” I spin to face her, hands on hips. “What does that mean?”

She narrows her eyes at me. “What do you think it means?”

From behind, I yank the slotted spoon off the countertop and wave it her way. “You’re too young to be insinuating things.” But I can’t help but smile when I face the stove again because we’re so alike. I was so curious about everything at her age, too.

Still am.

“You like Miller?” she asks, then, “he’s pretty hot.”

“Mara! You’re twelve,” I say as if she doesn’t know, but she caught me off guard. Miller is hot but my little sister telling me is kind of weirding me out.

“I’ll be thirteen in like four weeks, Lane.”

I dump the macaroni into the now boiling water and give it another stir and shake of salt. Turning, resting my tailbone on the counter, which I’m gripping, I ask, “do you really think he’s hot?”

God, I’ve regressed to age thirteen, where just talking about your crush makes you all warm and fuzzy. I don’t care that she’s twelve (going on thirteen); if she supplies me with a hit of the good shit, I’ll take it.

“Umm, completely.” She bites her bottom lip, putting my senses on edge. Wagging her eyebrows, she asks, “do you think the carpet matches the drapes?”

I chuck the slotted spoon at the wall above her head, intentionally missing. Laughing, my cheeks burning, I cackle, “Mara! Don’t you dare say that!”

She rocks forward, palms gripping her knees as she laughs, the veins in her neck bulging and tears starting to form. The harder she laughs, the harder I laugh, and my god, Mara is old enough to know about... penises.

Did I at her age?

I did.

“Don’t say that around mom,” I warn, realizing if she’s going to admit she’s not a baby anymore; I’m the only safe audience. “How long have you known about... that stuff?” I say, choosing what I say very carefully.

“Pubes?” she asks.

I volley my head, laughing a little. “Not just pubes but, like, how long have you been aware of boys?” Now I waggle my brows. “Like, *aware*.”

She shrugs. “Just this year.”

I’m a little relieved at her response and return to the pasta to give it a stir. “Well, take your time with... all of it. And be friends first. Always be friends first.” That’s the best advice I can give; when I think about it, it works for her age and mine.

It’s advice my mom gave me after I dumped stupid ass Rock.

Rock was not my friend. She knew that.

“Are you and Miller friends?” she asks, genuine curiosity in her tone. I adjust the burner and watch the boiling slow.

“We are, yeah.”

We’re both quiet for a minute.

“Do you like him as more than a friend, though, like, for real?” she asks.

I don’t waste any time answering.

“Yes.”

To say the least.

Mara and I eat Kraft Mac n' Cheese while she recounts her day to me, leaving no detail left behind. Preteens can sulk, but they can also talk like hell, too. Once we get to the bottom of the pot, scraping it clean, we wash the dishes and go our separate ways for the remainder of the evening.

In my room, I decide to charge my EarPods and listen to an audiobook on my phone. In the privacy of my space, I don't need earphones. When I have my shoes off and am shuffling my way to the center of my bed, I unlock my phone and freeze to see I have one new message from Atticus. One new photo message, actually.

I fall into the pillows and click his name, preparing myself for some snarky bullshit. A photo of what, I'm not sure, but nothing would surprise me with Atticus.

The photo appears as soon as the message is open, and I take it back. I'm surprised.

In the rectangle is a waste basket. But not just any trash can. It's the shop can at Wrench Kings, the one the guys keep near their bench where they eat and write things down.

I recognize the stamped concrete ground shining beneath and the blue liner. We have blue liners in all our cans because Beau has a partnership with an Earth-friendly company.

That's the can at Wrench Kings, the one Miller uses.

And inside is a crumpled piece of paper.

A pink one.

Three dots wiggle and roll, and then a message comes with the photo.

ATTICUS

he tossed it, so quit actin like a brat

I lock my phone, turn on my side, and enjoy the warmth behind my eyes as I exhale for the first time today.

thirteen

...

milller

I like her. A lot.

The plunk, plunk, plunk of coffee brewing paired with the sound of Salsa's collar clanking against the floor as he cleans himself sounds so much louder than normal. That's the harmony I wake to and have done for years, but today, the auto brew coffee and the orange cat are too loud.

"Salsa, buddy, please," I groan, rolling over, taking the pillow with me.

But even with a down pillow covering me, there is still so much noise. But it's not the coffee pot or Salsa; it's in my head.

I've been in this mood before. Uneasy, nervous, unsure, and of course, alone. I've seen a doctor, in fact, because I've felt this way so many times in the past. But it turns out I just have a bit of anxiety.

That's when I started writing letters to my dad. To ease the anxiousness. And honestly? As much as I tried to believe it wasn't going to help, it did. Getting out of bed, I pad down the hall after giving Salsa plenty of butt pats and take a seat at my small table. Reaching for a fresh sheet of paper, I grab a pencil, tuck my head down and begin.

I don't usually know what I'm going to say, but as soon as Dear Dad is scrawled at the top, the words just come.

Dear Dad,

As I start, like usual, Salsa jumps into my lap. Stepping on the cage, he lifts his paw as if he's stepped on a landmine and immediately jumps down. "Sorry, buddy," I call after him as he trots toward the couch, settling for a comfy spot there.

Returning to my letter, words pour from me.

One thing I always thank you for in my head and in these letters is that you supported my interest in working on cars. I know now that your support was partly because it would've given me a lifelong job on the commune, as the trade mechanics there were aging. I like to believe that part of it was you wanting me to thrive and wanting your son to have something he enjoyed. I'll never know, though.

Even without knowing the reason, I can thank you for letting me do it. Letting me tinker, putting things back together after taking them apart, and mostly, I want to thank you for letting me have my notebook. I never saw another boy with a notebook, and even though the insides were filled with car and truck-related stuff, I knew then, somehow, it was special. That me having something of my own was a secret. A big deal, even.

It's the only thing I left with that day. I don't know if you know that or even remembered the notebook.

As I got older, around sixteen, I hid it. I hid it because I remembered when the fruit snack wrapper was confiscated, and I didn't want my notebook to be taken.

You probably don't even remember the notebook.

You wrote in it. Twice. Once when we were changing a tire without a jack, you scribbled a diagram. I doubt you remember. I was thirteen. The sun was burning hot that day, and we were in our long sleeves and pants. I took off my brim hat and held it to the sun. I'll never forget you peering over at me from where you were crouched by that old car. Partly in the sun, partly in the shade, sweat keeping your hair pressed to your forehead. You smiled, and I smiled. And if there's only one thing I choose to carry with me, it's that moment. At least, I try for it to be that moment—none of the rest of it.

I'm teaching someone to work on cars now, too.

A woman.

You'd hate it, I'm sure. Women in your world don't work on cars. But this woman does. And she's probably going to be better at it than me. She's smart, Dad, and I think in another life, one where you can see limitlessly, I think you'd like her.

I like her. A lot.

And I know that's all that matters.

I hope you're well.

Your son,

Miller

Bottom third up, top third down, into the envelope the letter goes, and then it's in the box with the rest. And like usual, my mind is a bit quieter now. At least quiet enough for me to focus on today.

It's Friday, and Delane hasn't texted me to meet up, not one single time this week. In fact, I've hardly seen her at Kings. She's been there—she never misses a day. But her EarPods are her main focus. I'm used to that. She's been that way for years.

I'm just a bit confused because I thought we were getting closer. The last time she was here, we ate, and I told her some part of the truth about how I felt, and she didn't seem adverse to it.

So the week has been confusing, and probably where I've collected all this anxious energy.

After filling my water, packing my lunch, and feeding Salsa, I get dressed in my work blues, Wrench Kings hoodie, Kings coat and tug my baseball cap down to hide my sleep-deprived eyes.

I've let her have space this week, but today, I'm going to talk to her. Because I'm going to start chasing what I want.

After all, what's the point of being free of that life if I'm not living my new one here?



“EXCEPT, I know what I said, and that ain't it,” Atti growls, stepping into his space. The man's shoulder slides back, and I've seen this before, lots of times.

“Oh, it sure as shit is what you said,” the man argues, ego and pride inflating his chest, empowering his arrogance. “Now, I expect you to honor it.”

Stepping between the guys, I press a palm to Atti's chest. “I'll take it from here, man,” I say, needing to diffuse things before Atticus makes a home in this guy's face with his fist.

“Fine,” Atti gruffs, stalking off.

Facing the man, I smile, which only intensifies his glare. “We'll honor the price, but it's probably best you visit another shop for the rest of your needs after this repair.” Middle ground. He gets his way, but we all know he's full of it because Atti doesn't promise prices to anyone, so he can go elsewhere after.

He spits next to my shoe while maintaining eye contact. I think it's supposed to be an aggressive power move, but he doesn't know it takes more than spit near my shoe to rile me up.

“Fine,” he says when he realizes my smile isn't going anywhere.

With a dip of my head, I say, “great, you’re more than welcome to wait in the lobby, but it’s going to be close to forty-five minutes.”

He stomps off and, a moment later, enters the waiting area. I don’t like him being in there with Delane, but Atti’s already got his car on the hydraulic lift, starting the repair. I sidle up to him, ready to help.

We work in silence for thirty minutes, and though it’s not a two-person repair, I think we both want this asshole out of here. But I don’t get to finish helping Atti because there’s a loud noise from the office, and I’m headed that way within a second because... Delane’s in there.

When I push open the back door and see the man at the desk, mere inches away from Delane, I find myself coming to her, stepping in front of her, anxious to absorb his anger so she doesn’t have to.

“What’s the problem here?” I ask.

“She’s saying what that other degenerate said! I want the price I was promised, goddamn it!” he shouts, slamming his credit card onto the counter.

From behind me, Delane hisses, “degenerate? Who the fuck are you calling a degenerate?”

I take the card, adjust the price on the computer screen, and swipe. I give him the pink slip from his work order and hand him his receipt. “Leave now.”

And thankfully, he does. When I turn to face her, Delane’s eyes are wide, and I’m shocked to find them wet. Delane stands up to assholes—I’ve unfortunately seen it before a few times.

“I didn’t mean to, like, override you or whatever,” I stumble awkwardly, my chest fracturing from the torn expression on her face. “I’m sorry, I didn’t want to upset you, but I heard him shouting, and I just... I worried. I know you can take care of yourself,” I add, babbling until she speaks because I really don’t know what’s wrong—was it that jerk, or

was it me white knightting her? I know she isn't a woman who wants to be saved that way. She's strong.

"Laney," I whisper, my heartbeat growing more and more frantic by the second. "Talk to me; I'm freaking out."

The wetness never leaves her eyes as she says, "I can take care of myself, but that was nice of you." She rolls her lips together, wrapping her cardigan around herself protectively. "Thank you."

She looks toward the blank computer screen, dodging me. Gently, because no one is around, I reach out and bring her eyes to mine by taking her chin. "You've been avoiding me all week, and I'm confused, Laney." I shove my hands in my pockets and put it all out there the way I promised myself I would. "I thought we had a good time. And I gotta say, ghosting me doesn't do much for my confidence issue."

Her hands fly to her face, where she buries them, shaking her head so hard that some of her ringlets break free. Still hiding her face from me in her palms, she groans, "I know, and I'm so sorry, Miller. I'm so sorry. I suck."

I hook my finger around her pinky, tug her hands away from her face, and see her eyes are misty again. I don't like how she's so emotional, and I don't know why.

"What's the matter, Laney? You're scaring me."

She laughs, and a tear slides down her cheek. "You're right. We had an amazing time, and I've been avoiding you all week, and here you are, worried about how I feel." She shakes her head again, and I yearn to wrap my arms around her and absorb her pain, worries, or whatever she's feeling.

But we don't do that. Especially not at work. Emotional support hugs have nothing to do with our arrangement.

"What's up?" I ask finally, and as much as I want to know, I'm also terrified. Because what if her distance is from realizing that I'm too much? I'm teaching her a skill she can use to build a career, and she's been tasked with helping me be myself. Who needs lessons for that? I shake my head, ready to say never mind and disappear into the shop because at times

like this, the way I was raised takes hold of me in the form of depression and shame, and all I want to do is disappear.

She grabs my wrist, almost like she could sense I wanted to bolt. “It’s not you.”

If she means that, why don’t I feel relieved? My brow arches as I ask, “are you sure about that? It’s okay if you want to call things off.”

“No, seriously, Miller, it’s not you.” She steps closer, and our eyes sway together in dense silence that feels so electrically charged that if either of us makes a sudden move, we’ll go up in flames. “Can I come over tonight? We can talk.” She swallows before adding, “and have another session if you want.”

If I want? “Yes,” I say quickly, earning the most beautiful grin from her. Then I remember it’s Friday, and earlier this week, I promised Zeth I’d stop by, and I’ve also got an update for his mom and the work her car needs. “But I have somewhere I gotta go after work.” Reaching into my pocket, I dig out my keys, circling one particular key around the ring before it’s free. Outstretching it to her, I say, “Here. Let yourself in. I should be back around seven.”

She stares at the key, looking up at me with glassy eyes. Her fingertips grazing my palm as she takes the key makes the cage feel quite small. “Now I have two things crucial to your existence,” she says, smiling a little. “This key and the other.”

I nod. “That you do.” I resist looking at her perfect lips. “I’ll see you tonight, okay?”

She nods, biting the corner of her mouth. But I can see her grin. I’m wearing the same one. I head into the shop, not telling her that the keys are not the only thing of mine she owns.



DELANE'S already gone by the time I leave Kings. It’s probably better that she is because she’s all that’s been on my

mind today. After finding her emotional—which is so unlike her—I’m dying to know what’s been going on the last week. And I’m also kicking myself a little for not trying to find out sooner.

I guess I was trying to give her space.

Isn’t that what women want... space? I knock my baseball hat off my head as I scratch my scalp, deep in thought as I drive to Zeth’s. I’ve been living on my own for years, and every once in a while, things seem overwhelmingly complicated still.

The front door opens as soon as I’ve got my truck in park, and Zeth comes bounding down the walkway, wearing a new brown winter coat outfitted with a hood and everything. Cold air rushes in with him when he slides onto the bench seat next to me, shaking the truck as he slams the door closed.

“Hey,” I poke him. “New coat?”

He beams down at the coat, which I can see now that he’s up close isn’t brand new, but it looks good. “Looks good, right?” he offers, and it’s the first time since I’ve known Zeth that he’s said anything at all remotely positive about himself.

“Looks great,” I add, meaning it, wishing I could give this kid more. Not even money, but I would give that too, if it were allowed. I wish I could give him the confidence to know that the life around him doesn’t define him and that he can be whoever he wants. That his environment doesn’t have to be his identity. He doesn’t have to be the poor kid.

I don’t get the chance because he’s asking about his mom’s car, keeping us on task. I love the kid for that. “I told my mom you were going to try and fix her fuel... thing.”

“Pump,” I correct. “Yeah, I got the part. I was thinking I could take it to the shop this Sunday and work on it there.”

He nods. “I remembered you said Sunday. She said that works.” He looks at his lap, where he tangles his hands nervously before returning his deep, wide-set brown eyes to me. “She wants to pay you; said she’s not a charity case.”

“You know I won’t let her,” I reassure him.

“If she pays you, we won’t have the—”

I grab his knee. “Zeth, she isn’t paying me. I’m a mechanic. Fixing cars is my job. You’re my friend. Friends help out friends,” I say, meaning every word.

He nods, the relief of knowing his mom won’t have to spend their food money on the car written all over his face. Relief that a child shouldn’t have to experience because the struggle shouldn’t be his stress in the first place.

“Tell your mom Sunday morning I’ll be here, alright?”

He nods again and pops open the door, sliding out into the snow. “Thanks, Miller.”

I lift my hand in a goodbye wave. “See you in two days,” I say, watching him as he slams the door and trots back up the broken concrete path to the front door. He goes inside, and I stay there a moment, surveying their yard.

The grass is dying, which is normal for the cold weather. But a few bricks are missing from the planters, the trees haven’t had a proper trim probably ever, and the entire thing could use some fertilizer and a good weeding.

Living in an apartment means I don’t have a lawn, but caring for one is definitely something I can do.



OPENING the door to my apartment tonight feels like the first time I’ve ever come home. I’ve loved my place since the day I signed the lease because it was all mine, and I could do or be whatever I wanted within this space.

And I’ve been free, living how I want, for years.

Tonight, though, it occurred to me that my apartment has always been my place to stay. But having Delane here, coming home to her... I understand what home feels like, what it means. It’s not even my apartment, either. It’s the way the space feels when someone you love is inside.

“Hi,” she greets from the couch, Salsa curled up in her lap. “I really want to get up to say hi, but Salsa is warming up to me, and I feel like pushing him off my lap now would totally set back our relationship.”

Her hair is down and partially drying, and her upper half is in my Wrench Kings hoodie. Her face is bare, and her toes peek out from the blanket. She looks... perfectly comfortable and just plain perfect.

“Home,” I flubber out, saying the word that’s strung across my brain like a pennant banner at a party. “I mean, I’m home.” I close the door behind me and drop my lunch bag to the ground, shirking out of my coat, yet the embarrassment sticks. “I mean, obviously, huh?” I’m so cold; I doubt she can see the flare of heat in my cheeks.

“And we greet you,” she beams, taking Salsa’s paw to wave at me. With groggy eyes, loud, lazy purrs, and a wet nose, he allows it, sinking back into slumber.

She puts his paw back down and drags her nails through the hair on his head. “How was work, honey?”

I know she’s joking because she’s got her head tipped, batting her eyes dramatically, holding the top of her hand under her chin playfully. And I know she knows how work was because... well, we work together.

Her calling me honey, though.

Turning away from her, I yank off my hat and reach down for my lunch bag, heading to the kitchen to unpack my empty food containers. “Good. How was your day?” I ask, forcing huskiness into my tone because the word honey is melting through my veins, slow and sweet, making it hard for me to move or think.

“You okay?” she asks. “You sound weird.”

I cough and rinse my empty containers in the sink for a second before loading them into the dishwasher. Using some cleaner and a paper towel, I wipe out my lunch bag as I answer.

“Good, just trying to warm back up. It’s really cold out tonight.”

I stare at the closed cabinet door in front of my face, waiting for her response.

“Yeah, it is. That’s why this furball is such good company.” Coming around the corner, I see her lowering her nose to his head, taking a hit. “Gahh,” she sighs. “He even smells comforting.”

With my shoulder pressed against the cabinet’s edge, I fold my arms over my chest and smile at them. Actually, I’m not smiling at Salsa. He barfed in my shoe two days ago.

I’m smiling at her.

Okay, maybe a little of it is the two of them together.

“If he smells good, it’s only because he sleeps in my bed every day,” I joke, but as the smile melts off her face and her bright eyes fog over, I realize that the energy is quickly shifting.

“You do smell good,” she says quietly.

“I clean this place once a week. I don’t have much else to do,” I shrug.

One of her eyebrows slopes inward as she tips her head to the side. I love the way her hair gets fuller as it dries, and my fingers twitch against my arms at the thought of getting lost in it. Inhaling it while I’m on top of her, losing my hand in it as I bring her face to mine, stringing my fingers through it on the pillow next to me.

“I didn’t say *this place* smells good. I said *you* smell good.” She smiles, but it’s kind of shy and mirrors how I feel. Excitement speeds my pulse at the idea that Delane could maybe, *just maybe*, like me back.

“Thanks,” I grin, feeling silly and sheepish and, quite honestly, embarrassed.

She notices. “Why does it make you embarrassed when I tell you that you smell good?”

I shrug and laugh a little. “Honestly, I don’t know.” I rake a palm up the back of my head, my neck and face scalding me from the inside out. “I’m just not used to you saying things like that, I think.”

Her brow rumples. “I don’t get that.”

I swallow, ready to say *because I’ve wanted you to want me for years, and now that it feels like you sort of do, I’m kind of freaking out. And my usual way of relieving stress is currently sitting in a cage.*

I’m wearing a chastity cage. That alone is... jarring.

Everything has changed a lot in the last few weeks, and it begins to crash down on me like the heaviest waves the ocean can send. “I gotta catch a shower,” I tip my head toward the hall, walking away from the topic because I don’t know what else to do. Stay and end up admitting to her something I’m not quite sure I’ve admitted and accepted myself?

No way.

Collecting Salsa off her lap, she deposits him next to her, but no cat can have their ego bruised that way, so as soon as she releases him, he jumps down and takes off.

“Too warm?” I ask, suddenly a little short of breath as I slowly move toward the shower, pacing backward.

She shakes her head. “Thought you could use some company.”

I reach out and steady myself against the hall wall. Delane laughs, and the soft purr of it makes my balls tingle. Or maybe that’s an *ache* I’m feeling. My heart is beating so fast, and my mind is reeling—pinpointing anything is hard right now. Other than... Delane is going to watch me get naked.

“I’ll just keep you company. I’ll sit on the closed toilet or something,” she says casually, and I have a moment of fear where I picture Delane sharing the details of her day with another man, only a shower curtain dividing them.

I don’t like the idea of her with another man. I never have. But now, now that she’s been in my home... used my key...

gifted my balls with her lips—it almost makes me crazy. Painfully so.

I hook my head toward the hall. “Let’s go.” And then I hold my hand out to her, which stops her up for a second. Just a second, though, because she feeds her fingers between mine, and both of us hold tight. I smile as I walk us the few steps toward my bedroom. I’m almost to my bathroom when she tugs back on my hand, halting us.

Turning to bring us face to face, I find her peering around my darkened room curiously. With the drapes open a foot or so, moonlight paints a thick stripe of glowing light across my bed. It’s enough light to see her eyes and how they’re sparkling more than any star in the sky just outside. Her white teeth shine as she grins.

“You make your bed before you go to work,” she breathes, bringing her thumb between her lips, nibbling. This cage is seriously shrinking. And my balls are definitely growing because the weight of them between my legs has me holding my core tight, controlling my breathing.

“Yeah,” I manage, heart thudding. “It’s good for m—” I stop myself, questioning if I should say what I was going to say. She blinks, looking up at me with concern in her eyes. “I like to keep my space neat. It’s an offset control thing.” I huff out a breath in fatigue because I don’t like talking about this stuff. Not at all.

She squeezes our linked hands, and my pulse hammers in my throat in response.

“I can’t control my past or how my family chooses to live. It’s a way to not fixate on those aspects, I like to keep my place tidy, as a way of controlling what I can, I guess.”

Her dark lashes flutter right along with my stomach.

“I’m not a controlling person, though. I swear I wouldn’t be a—” a what? A controlling boyfriend? She doesn’t care about that. I swallow, finding my throat too dry to bring relief. “I’m not a controlling person, that’s all. I just like my space neat.”

Rocking to her toes, she drops my palm only to reach up and take my face in her hands. Her lips are slow and soft when they press against mine. She opens her mouth, filling mine with her wet tongue and soft moans.

I could cum from this; I know I could.

I want to tell her that as she reaches between us, cupping my cage, sinking the tips of her small fingers into my swollen balls. A grunt erupts between us from me, and she laughs against my mouth, never stopping the kiss.

My brain goes into a sort of shock as I realize *I want to tell her that I could cum from this*. I want to say those forbidden but honest, real words.

I pull away from her, my chest rising and falling like I can hardly breathe. My lips twitch, and I am out of breath. She rests a palm between my pecs and rubs slow, calming circles but doesn't say anything like she knows I need to say something.

Her other hand still cradles my caged groin as she sends comfort rippling through me in warming waves.

"I could," I start, finding my voice weak and wobbly. I lick my lips, take a small kiss from her—shocked at how I'm free to do that now and give my voice a spine. "I could cum from this, you know. Having you touch me and kiss me and just... be in my arms in my own house."

"Jesus, Miller," she breathes, her chest working in fast circuits, up and down. Her lips are parted perfectly, giving me just a peek at her pink tongue as she breathes. "That's... the hottest thing I've ever heard."

I want to smile, but the muscles in my face don't seem to want to do anything. All I can do is stare into her eyes and hold back the groan barreling through my chest at how hot it is to have her holding my gr—*my cock* that *she* caged.

"I don't believe that. I know what you listen to." I try to give her a weak smile, but I'm just... paralyzed by my reality.

She presses her chest to mine, looking up at me like I'm a feast and she's starved. The cage grows smaller by the second,

or her hand clutches me more tightly.

“Believe me when I say that you are incredibly fucking sexy, Miller.” One finger drags along the seam of my sac. “You are hot and sexy, and the idea that I could turn you on enough and make you cum without my tongue or my pussy?” She shakes her head, and I get a whiff of her shampoo. Precum rushes from me in waves, and I flex and tighten my groin, dying for some relief from this beautiful, sexy torture.

“The hottest fucking thing ever.” She crashes her mouth into mine, then moves it along my jaw and down the side of my throat. Her moans smear against my skin, and my cock reacts with another steady rush of precum.

“Say you’re hot and smart and hung,” she commands as her lips carve a hot trail across my collarbone.

I blink at her, mind foggy with possibility and a trapped boner that is quite frankly starting to make me a little mental.

“Say it,” she says, flicking my balls and making me jump. She wraps her arm around my neck and holds my balls gently in her palm, rolling them slowly.

“I’m hot and smart and hung,” I huff out, feeling... *stupid*. Or, I felt stupid right before I spoke, but now that I have, and I’m looking down into her luminous eyes, I don’t actually feel that. She smiles and takes my mouth with a short, hot kiss. She’s happy. I feel happy. Not... embarrassed the way I thought saying those things about myself would make me feel.

“You’re hot, smart, and hung, and when the time is right, you’re going to take that big cock you carry between your legs all day, and you’re going to fuck me with it. You’re going to own my body, and I’ll fall to my knees, waiting for you to say when.” She curls her tongue into my open mouth, then steals a kiss. “But we’re nowhere near that yet.”

I feel relief that we aren’t and also like I’ll die if I don’t experience every single word she’s just said. But I couldn’t be that guy that fucks her. Not yet. And the last thing I want to do is disappoint her.

“Now shower,” she says, falling back onto her heels. Once we’re in the bathroom with the lights on and the shower running, she hops up onto the counter, biting her bottom lip as she watches me.

“Is it weird for me to watch you get in the shower?”

All of me wants to say yes because... it’s a lot of exposure and vulnerability after showing my balls to no one except Salsa in the last... forever. But I want to do it because she *knows* it’s a lot of giving on my part. She understands where I came from and knows that I’m a virgin. Showing her where I’ll go for her, maybe she’ll start to see how I feel. I hope. Because saying the words feels nearly impossible.

I swallow through the excruciating dryness of my throat. “I want you to,” I admit, feeling a bit out of body at the whole experience. *Do I want her to?* I think this must be like saying I could cum like this. I was scared to say it before, but after saying it, I realized the fear was kind of just something I concocted because with Delane, I know she wants this. There’s no guessing. She’s here, on my counter, waiting for me to strip.

From over my head, I reach behind my back, yanking the neckline of my hoodie until it and my shirt are peeled off. I drop them into the waiting laundry bin and find her eyes roaming my chest like an explorer, stopping to admire every curve and dedicated dip. I’ve never worked out to achieve this body. I’ve worked out because it takes time and some knowledge base to make sure you’re lifting correctly, and that takes time, too.

I guess I could say I’d been exploring new things to avenge my lost childhood, yes, but I’ve always been drawn to things that distract me. Things that eat up my time and spit me out further down the line. If I’m left without something to learn or a letter to write, or a person to help, I have to think about myself and how the entirety of my life so far hurts my heart and that all I want is to start a new life with someone I love and move on.

Moving forward is always my goal. Only now am I starting to take it very seriously.

I run my hand through the light hair on my chest, then down my belly. Every guy my age I've ever seen, *ahem*, online, are hairless. Whether they shave or wax, I don't know. But I've never wanted to do it, and honestly, I've never had a reason. Again, Salsa isn't picky.

But I feel self-conscious until she blinks at me, mouth spread open wordlessly.

Finally, she swallows and hoarsely says, "you're like the hottest guy ever, Miller."

The way my chest feels like it's overinflated, like if it gets even one-millimeter tighter, I'll explode—I rub my hand across my chest, forgetting for a second that I'm shirtless, and that's what started all this.

"That made me feel funny," I admit, kneading my knuckles down my sternum, praying to whoever that my cheeks aren't fully on "red-headed-boy-embarrassed." If you don't know what that means, my cheeks turn scarlet if I'm even a tiny bit embarrassed. Even when I'm... aroused they get flushed sometimes, too. "But I liked it."

She winks, and now the rippling waves of excitement grow hot and begin to melt through me, softening me at bone level. My breath feels hot when I exhale. She nods. "Take off your pants before the water goes cold."

Delane just told me to take off my pants. And for the first time, I realize what she meant about the cage, and it's freedom. I'm locked and trapped, and yet... I feel free. Relieved. Because now I can focus on her beautiful eyes and gorgeous pink lips framing that sexy little smile... and not worry at all.

Right now, I'm secretly praising the cage. I step out of my jeans and boxer briefs and feel awkward with my hands hanging down by my sides. I reach for my groin, ready to stack my hands over the cage and rest them comfortably.

Delane reaches out and twists my nipple hard, sending a jolt of pain and adrenaline through me so fast I'm pretty sure I clenched my ass a little.

“Don't cover yourself.”

I let my hands take their awkward positions at my side again before getting lost in her face. That is something easy to do anytime, but with us on the cusp of so many things, staring at her now feels different.

It feels less and less unbelievable and more comfortable by the second. I mean, sure, don't get me wrong, I'm shocked that this woman I've done dirty things to in my brain is here with me. And I'm not forgetting the reasons why we're together. But still. We feel comfortable. I'm still glad for the cage, and my brain isn't working as hard as it usually does with women. Thought pacing is what I call it, but usually, when I'm with a woman, my mind is reeling from one thing to the next, questioning what I've done so far and wondering what I should be doing next.

Thought pacing is exhausting, and with Delane, I'm so busy being... fucking happy... that I'm not outside myself, overthinking like normal... ever.

“You are, like, so hot. I can't even believe it,” she groans, shaking her head and bringing her palms to her temples. “Seriously, Miller,” she giggles, cheeks red, bottom lip pinned under her top teeth. “You're a work of art.”

Wetness hits the top of my foot, and we both follow my eyes as I peer down, seeing a long trail of precum dripping from the slotted tip of my cage. She looks back up at me, eyes a little hazy, a lot beautiful. “See? So hot.”

Leaking, in my mind, is a sign of bad willpower and, therefore, bad sexual stamina. I've always worried that I'd get my girlfriend to the bedroom, and once we'd start getting naked to have sex, she'd see the huge spot I always have on my boxer briefs. I worried that she'd think I already came or that she'd think I was inexperienced, which was true.

But here's Delane, saying that my cock dripping onto my foot as I stand locked before her is hot.

I guess it's a good thing I'm already in love with her, or else the "when did you know" story would be pretty awkward.

And yeah, I love Delane. I've been in love with Delane since I first saw her. In theory, love at first sight is really stupid. You can't truly love someone you don't know. What if your values don't align? What if they have expectations set for you that you're not comfortable with? Values are tied to love, love between family members platonically and love between romantic partners.

I may be a virgin, but I know all about love. How hard it is to lose when it's unconditional yet one-sided.

But I felt that twinge of pain and pleasure when I first saw her. She was blowing a bubble with her gum, typing on the computer, and listening to something in her EarPods. And I just felt the unbelievable and all-consuming, crushing weight of love. Right then. I knew whatever complexities she had; I'd want them. Whatever troubles she had, I'd try to solve them. Whatever she needed from me, I'd give her. I felt it. The way you can open your palms under a rainy sky and feel the chill of the sky's tears, the love for her was there, inside me, from day one.

And I wasn't wrong.

Each new thing I learned about Delane, I fell deeper. *Alice down the Rabbit Hole* is nothing compared to *I fell in love with Delane*, and that's the truth.

I may have turned away from my family, but in my soul and at my core, I am a family man. I want a family. I want to give them everything mine failed to give me. And do it with patience and kindness, giving my children as many answers as I can. And admitting when I don't know. I want a house full of love and warmth, and passion.

I want it sooner than later because I'm done exploring the lost isles of my past. I'm done forging new territory to explore things I felt needed exploring. I'm caught up. Life is a lot

better when you have love, and if this is my shot at getting it—with the woman I fucking worship—I'm not going to be an idiot.

“I'm gonna get in,” I say, feeling a smile spread across my lips. She grins back at me.

“Get in then.”

I turn, pull back the curtain, and step inside, closing it behind me. Delane just watched me get into the shower. Delane has licked my balls. Delane is—

“So how was the week? You know, in there?”

I look down at my groin, noticing the darkened color of my cock, the head nearly purple as it peeks through the slots of the cage. “Hard and yet, not hard at all.”

We both laugh, probably more than the joke deserves, but it feels good. I like having someone who can easily move between intimate and silly.

“Did you want to jerk off?” she asks, her tone wavering, sounding a little shy. But Delane isn't shy, so it must be the noise between us, including the patter of shower water.

“Yes,” I admit, and even though it's the first time I've talked about masturbation with anyone, again, aside from a shrink and a medical doctor, it doesn't feel awkward. If anything, I feel uncomfortable because she's the one I'd think about when jerking off. Has been that way for years now. And I don't think I can lie to her if she asks. But I don't count on her asking.

“When? Give me a specific example of a time when you wanted to put your hand on your cock and stroke yourself but couldn't.”

The water is hot, but nothing burns as hotly as my temples. Pounding, pulsing, ears ringing, I try to think of a single time that didn't involve or include her. And my creativity, when aroused yet physically unable to be aroused, is at an all-time low. I stammer a little, my body alert and fiery for her, to give her a story she clearly wants.

Through my shock, I manage, “Yesterday. You had your hair half up, and there were pieces around your face that you messed with all day. You kept twirling them around your finger and pushing them back, and I was thinking, I wanted to be pushing them back.”

A second of silence, and I’m wondering if that was too creepy, too personal. Should I have just said, “because you looked hot in your jeans” or something?

“And what about that made you want to jerk off? Pushing my hair off my face?” she asks, her voice raspy and hoarse, causing goosebumps to rise up along the back of my neck.

“I’m pushing your hair back so I can see your mouth on my... on *me*.”

“Say it,” she corrects immediately, my torso humming with virility. I haven’t been this horny, this intensely, maybe ever.

“I’m pushing your hair back so I can see your mouth on my cock,” I rasp, the words making my tongue tingle from how incredibly wrong yet freeing they feel. “I want to watch you suck my cock.”

I watch the suds circle the drain as I wait for her response, but after a moment that feels far too long, I turn off the water and pull the curtain back.

She’s biting her lip, eyes looking a little drowsy, the key to my cage pinched between her pointer finger and thumb. “Here,” she says on a swallow, outstretching the key to me.

With my arm leaving heavy drops of water on the floor below, I reach out and take it, unsure if I want freedom. The cage does relieve stress.

“Take it off so I can see what a beautiful cock you’ve been hiding from me all these years,” she says slyly, and I know then that if she wants the cage off, it’s coming off. Delane isn’t someone who settles when it comes to something she wants, and honestly? All she has to do is tell me to jump, and I would. “I’ll wait in your room,” she adds, and then she’s gone, and I’m left dripping wet, in the steam, key in hand.

Once I've unlocked myself, I slide the cage off my shaft, leaving just the base around me. With one smoothing stroke of my hand to make sure my dick is still alive with feeling, it begins to grow. First in length, but a moment later thickens, and I stroke it again, letting out a little groan. I will never take jerking off for granted again.

Inhaling, I grab my junk, shimmy off the base, and set the entire contraption on the counter. It looks so small sitting on the marble counter, and as my cock comes alive between my legs, I almost can't believe I was in it for multiple days.

Towelng off only a little because I'm so eager to get to her, I wrap the terry around my waist and find Delane completely naked under my sheets. Or, what I'm assuming to be completely naked because there is a pile of clothes folded, sitting on my chair near the closet.

She raises her eyebrows at the bulge protruding beneath the towel. "And you're big, too." She shakes her head, clucking her tongue as she does. "Of course you are."

I stroke my cock over the towel, knowing I'm not even completely at launch phase yet. Shrugging, I say, "I hear it's not the size of the ship but the motion in the ocean."

"Did you really just say that?"

We both enjoy a laugh at my expense, making being in the same room together while naked much easier. It may not be a big deal to her, but I've never been in a room naked with someone like this before. It's a big deal to me, and her laughter paired with how she pats the bed next to her, inviting me, it's so easy.

An emotional cage, I guess, is what it feels like. I'm not worried because I feel safe.

I slide onto my bed next to her, keeping the towel on. She rests her head in her hand, elbow to the mattress, keeping her up. "Where'd you go after work today?" she asks, all teasing gone from her tone. She's genuinely curious, I think, and with how quiet her tone is, part of me wonders if she isn't worried about the answer. But why would she be?

“Eh, I had to help a friend,” I say, telling the truth but a very vague truth shrouded by ambiguity. Because... we’re about to do things, clearly, and where I went after work today doesn’t seem relevant.

I match her position, getting comfortable with my head propped in my palm. There’s just a foot between us and with the sheets pulled up to her breasts and up to my waist, it feels like we’ve already been intimate. And that fact makes things easier, too. Or maybe it’s not any setting or anything. Maybe this is just how it feels with the right person.

She narrows her eyes at me with a tilted smirk. “A friend, huh?” She pokes me in the chest, then teases some of my chest hair with her fingers, pinching and releasing softly. “Friends like you and me?”

I catch her hand, which catches her off guard. Pressing her palm to my chest, I give her a nudge, and when she begins softly rubbing, I almost die a little. “That feels so good, and no, not like us.” She pauses as her face softens like that’s music to her ears, then she continues stroking my pecs. “He’s twelve.”

Her brows pull together. She doesn’t quit rubbing, and it’s now that I realize my cock is already fat and heavy against my belly, ready for action. Thank god for this sheet.

“Who are you talking about?” She never stops stroking my chest.

“I’m a big brother. You know, like the sponsoring mentor kind. There’s a kid here in Oakcreek who I’ve been seeing for a while.” I take a breath, feeling so exposed telling her about him. Beau and Atti know, but it’s one of those things you just don’t talk about. Boasting about taking a role in someone’s life is kind of gross.

Her hand stops, but she keeps it resting against me, and my frantic pulse convinces me to place my hand on top of hers, trapping it there. She grins, and I don’t know if it’s in response to my hand or what I’ve just told her.

“Miller,” she sighs, contented and calm. I’m glad to make her feel that way because that’s exactly how she makes me feel, too. “That’s so cool of you.” She bites into her bottom lip, wrinkling her nose a little, making a rush of precum storm the peak of my cock, leaking onto the sheets. “And hot.”

I laugh at that, hoping for my dick to hear the laughter and calm down. He’s all systems go right now, and I haven’t even figured out if I need launch codes yet. “I don’t know how it’s hot, but... okay.”

Her smile slides away as a deeper level of care crosses her face. “What do you do with him? What’s his name?” And before I answer, she adds, “you know Mara is twelve, too.”

I nod because, of course, I knew that. “We play basketball when it’s nice. I take him to places, out to eat, and to the library and stuff. We’ve built a model airplane together, and I’m teaching him how to play chess.”

“You play chess?” she asks, the torque of her arm still stroking my chest slowly lowering the sheet. The darkness of her nipple is visible through the sheet but just barely, just enough to send my mind into a total tailspin.

Again, I nod. “Yeah. I learned it as a kid. One of the only games I could play.”

She winces. “Exciting.”

I laugh. “Right? Anyway, we do other stuff. I don’t know. Honestly, it’s mostly about talking. I’m there to listen. All I want to do is make sure he feels heard. Being heard should not be a luxury.”

She nods. “You’re right; it shouldn’t. And I think it’s great you’re giving him what you didn’t get.”

She’s perceptive and already lacing my past with my present, which means she’s thinking *deeply* about me. I like that. “His mom is great. She listens to him; I don’t want to come across like I’m some hero. She’s great.” I sigh, and my balls burn with need as she drags her nail across the pebbled flesh of my nipple, sending shockwaves through me. “But she’s overworked and underpaid and exhausted. And the

program— Siblings Saturday— they’ll kick you out if you try to donate too much.”

“Really?”

I nod. “It seems confusing, but it eliminates any people looking to... buy off kids for personal use.” I cringe saying the words, but it’s partially true; that’s what they told me. “And also so that the parents don’t feel bad.”

She shakes her head, and I don’t look as the sheet slides a little further down. “That’s... wow. Some people are truly fuck heads.”

I smile because while that term isn’t one I’d readily thought of using, I like that she expresses herself however she sees fit. I like that self-expression is easy for her. I guess opposites attract.

“I get that.”

“I work on his mom’s ride, too, if she needs it. Used the lift at Kings before to do some repairs, Beau’s cool with it.”

She arches a brow, and the sheet continues its taunting journey down as she shifts on my bed. “You let your ex make you feel bad about being a mechanic but look at what you did. You helped this boy and his mom. You had knowledge, and the heart to give.” She surprises me by leaning in and taking a kiss from my lips. I lean into it as she pulls back, grinning at me.

“I guess,” I say because helping Zeth and his mom never feels like some big act of service or something heartwarming. It’s just helping a friend. Zeth is my friend. It’s that simple.

“Lie on your back,” she says, and as she reaches up to push my shoulder, the sheet finally gives way. I place my hand on hers, over my shoulder, and freeze. Our eyes sway together, back and forth as her warm breath flanks my nose.

“The sheet,” I croak, my voice raspy and my willpower quickly dissolving. I haven’t looked because I’m not sure that’s what she wants. But god, stealing a glance at Delane’s bare breasts—just the thought has me reaching beneath the sheet, adjusting my length against my belly.

She kisses me again, then brings my hand through the space between us, resting it against her collarbone. “Now you rub my chest,” she says, and for a second, I don’t know if I can. I don’t want to finish all over myself. Sensing my hesitation as my hand rests idly on the gentle slope of her collarbone, she asks, “have you... done this before?”

The question isn’t patronizing but inquisitive like my answer will change the way she cares for me at this moment as if I need another reason to fall for her. “I have felt breasts, yes,” I laugh softly, needing to clarify, even though the truth brings a hefty side of embarrassment. “Not shirtless or braless,” I add, but really, touching bare breasts for the first time isn’t what has my hips aching to move, dying for my cock to slide against my belly for friction.

It’s *Delane’s* bare breasts.

“Never yours, either,” I add like she doesn’t know. But instead of teasingly smacking me and telling me she’s aware that hasn’t happened, she places her hand on mine and moves it to her breast.

The breath I suck in when she curls my fingers around her breast— “oh god,” I ground out, my vision going a little hazy at the sheer impact of the moment.

“Drag your thumb over my nipple,” she breathes, inching her body closer to mine until my cockhead is abrading against... her belly.

“Ohhh,” she breathes out, her eyes fluttering closed as I let my thumb drag across her nipple over and over, the feeling of my cock against her naked body almost too much. “I like that. But if I wasn’t telling you that I liked that, you’d know because I got closer to you.” She rolls her lips together, and the sound of it makes my cock hum.

I nod, and as much as I want to play it cool, my brain doesn’t send the right message to my mouth. “Are you gonna touch me?” I breathe out the question like I’ve used my last breath, but that’s how I feel. My chest is burning with all that I want to say but can’t, and my body is thrumming from everything I need but can’t take.

She smiles and reaches up, sifting her fingers through my hair. “Your hair is so soft. I knew it would be.” Her nails grating my scalp makes my cock buzz.

“You knew it? Like, you’ve thought about my hair, huh?” I realize it’s hair and not my dick, but at this rate, I’ll take any little scrap she’ll give me. I’m starved for it.

I can’t stop kneading and caressing her breast, and as she watches her own fingers sift through my hair, I watch my hand move over her bare body, loving how it looks. Loving how it feels. Loving it too much, maybe.

“Yeah, it always looks so soft.” One more ruffle before she drops her hand to the column of my neck. Her voice is low when she says, “I can feel your pulse.”

“Yeah?” Her nipple is so hard beneath my palm.

She nods. “Your heart is racing.”

We stare at each other, and somewhere in the distance, I can hear Salsa chasing a balled-up piece of foil around, likely in the living room. And this evening—us together naked in bed, Salsa playing, the heater cranking, a soft smile on her lips—it’s what I want. Forever.

“Stay just like that,” she whispers, those four words a promise.

I remain on my back, sinking into my mattress while watching in raw amazement as she positions herself between my thighs, both of us completely naked, no sheets or cages covering us. Her dark eyes still hold mine as she drives her hands up my legs, fingers fanned out.

“Now, don’t worry about when you cum. Don’t try and make it last or try to be anything for me. Put your hands behind your head, and just... enjoy, okay?”

I don’t know if I can agree to that and keep my word; every part of me is conditioned to hide what I’m really feeling. It’s so hard to retrain your brain, even when it comes to a beautiful woman stroking your cock. I want to last for her; I want to impress her with my stamina because women want that, right? A man who can last? Every video I’ve discovered

in the dark corners of the internet shows a man who can endlessly give it to a woman.

“I just... I’m not going to last long, Laney,” I say, and something about using her nickname while we’re naked together gives us both pause. Finally, she allows herself to look down at my exposed erection and full, aching balls.

“Do you think lasting is the most important thing?” she asks, her palms inching closer to my groin as she studies my cock. Yet, I feel less self-conscious than I imagined. She looks up at me, eyes glittering. “You’ve got a lot to be proud of between these thighs.” She clutches my quads and gives my legs a little wiggle to send home her point. “Quit worrying and just enjoy.”

I nod because my mouth is so dry I can’t speak. She swipes the slit, circling the wide, pink crown of my cock with one fingertip. Bringing her finger to her lips, she tastes my precum, and the sight has me leaking.

“Oh my god,” the words tumble out of my mouth, a breathy whisper.

“You taste good, Miller.” Then she wraps her finger and thumb beneath the crown, forming a tight ring. “Arms behind your head, I said,” she commands as my fingers itch to roam my body, to do something. Because something will diffuse my focus, something will allow me to not rocket off in approximately one minute.

But I don’t get something. Tucking my hands under my head, elbows out, I do as she says to make her happy. And I trust her. I do trust her.

Twisting, the ring she’s created with just two fingers begins to torture me. She slides her hand over the wet slit of my head, smoothing the precum into her palm as she does. Returning to the tight ring around me, she continues twisting and tightening.

My shaft flexes and bobs, but her grip around my cockhead keeps me steady. Precum bubbles from me with abundance, dripping over her thumb, down my length. The

veins in my cock are alive and well tonight, and with each torturous twist of her hand, I swear I get harder.

There's no blood in my brain right now, seriously.

"Does this feel good?" she asks, her voice smoky and low.

I nod, the pillows absorbing my subtle movement. I feel like if I really move at all, the reality of this moment will cause me to topple over. With the back of her curled knuckle, she begins massaging my balls and the private strip of skin leading me to my ass, all while still twisting a tight and torturous ring around my crown.

I let out a gasp when she releases the head of my cock, only to take my balls in both of her hands. Kneading, massaging, pressing them up against me, she plays with my sac for what feels like forever as precum pools on my belly.

Am I going to cum from her playing with my balls? All of me wants to flex my abs to divert some of the raw energy pumping down to my groin, to postpone the cascading orgasm surging up my legs and down my spine, coiling in my groin so tight I can barely breathe.

But she said to let myself enjoy it. And if I spend the next five minutes thinking of Salsa barfing on the floor and the history of the carburetor just trying *not* to cum, I won't enjoy this. And what if our lessons end? What if Delane meets a guy or is offered an actual apprenticeship at the Kings? She won't need me. And I may lose this.

Untensing as much as possible, I keep my eyes pinned on her between my spread legs as she caresses and kneads my sac, my cock a monolith above my stomach.

When I pictured having an orgasm with Delane, I never imagined it like this. I always thought I'd be plunging into her mouth or sinking into her warmth as she wrapped her legs around my hips, but that's another thing I like about Laney. Expecting the unexpected.

Torquing my balls just slightly, she grins at me through the partial darkness. "Your cock is beautiful, Miller." She cants forward, the ends of her curls dusting my groin, making my

stomach flex. She brings her lips to the glistening capped head of my cock, pressing them there.

As she does, she tugs my balls gently away from me, her tongue trailing the hard edge of my crown as she kisses my slick tip.

Oh my god. A mouth on my cock. *Delane's* mouth on my cock.

The coil of desire in my groin unravels and my self-control is obliterated. My orgasm charges through my veins, centering in my cock, pulsing with impatient need as I pant, "Laney," in warning. She sits up in time for the first rope of cum to glaze my chest and under my chin, and through the bliss, I stay alert, focused on her watching me shoot.

Hooded, glassy eyes watch as my cock erupts, threads of cum painting me and the pillow I'm lying on. It's a total mess, and when I'm through, I'm surprised to see she's as out of breath as I am.

"How was it?" she asks, finally sliding her hand down my shaft, stroking my cock for the first time ever.

My belly is riveted as my balls tingle, and I realize that for the first time, I think I'm going to cum again.

"Stroke me, Laney," I beg, unbelieving that those words came out of me... *out loud*. But they did because her hand pumping my shaft, covered in cum, makes me think of dirty, salacious things.

Her teeth bite her lip as she wraps both hands around my erection, twisting and pumping them so slowly that my hips surge up off the mattress, yearning for more.

"Are you going to cum again?" she asks, her eyes wide with amazement, I think. I can't focus on anything but her hands wrapping my dick, thumbs not meeting her forefingers. Precum and cum slide against my shaft, smeared by her hands. When I look up and see her face flush, lips parted, eyes fixed on my cock with bated breath, I lose it.

"Laney," I offer again in warning, and my plea makes her hands work my cock faster, harder, jacking me in a way that

truly feels like I've died and gone to heaven. My hips jolt up as I cum again, spraying my already coated chest with more and more sticky, thick release. The second orgasm yields as much as the first, and when the last of my cum has coated me, Laney slowly lowers my softening cock to my groin, taking her hands away.

She grabs my hips, and my eyes roll closed with how good all of this feels. This entire night.

“You okay?” she croaks.

I manage to open one eye long enough to nod at her. “That was... the best thing that's ever happened to me.”

She lets out a soft laugh before her voice dips into seriousness. “Do you know how hot it was to watch you get lost in what I was doing and just enjoy it?”

The bed dips, and the weight distribution shifts as she brings herself to her knees, slowly getting off the bed. She disappears into the bathroom, where I hear the sink. Moments later, she returns with a damp bath towel and straddles me as she cleans the cum off my stomach. Twisting the towel to find unused terry, she wipes below my chin and then my neck last. “You cum hard,” she smiles down at me, wiping the last of my release off the side of my throat, where the last ambitious shot went.

I'm about to tell her it's because of her; that's the reason I came so hard, emptying myself back to back. Her. Her hands. Her mouth. Just... *her*.

But I don't get to. “Give that energy to the woman you want to be with, and I guarantee she'll give you her heart.” She smiles as she folds the cum-coated towel and gets off the bed again. “Being sexually vulnerable shows that you're focused on happiness. Guys who are too embarrassed to let themselves be tested and teased... they're usually the guys who aren't comfortable in their own skin.”

She tosses the towel into the hamper and pulls my hoodie on. I love how it hovers just above her knees, making her look like she slept here. But as she pulls on her pants, I guess the

idea that she would sleep here is... foolish. And not part of our deal.

“Got it,” I say, responding to her advice. A few minutes ago, I was on cloud nine, reeling from sharing such a personal thing with her. And now she’s telling me that the way I behaved—how I let myself enjoy that—is perfect for *someone else*.

I try not to let her words sink into my gut like a ship that can’t weather the storm, but they do. Still, I force a smile and slide out of bed, grabbing some sweats and a hoodie for myself from my drawers. She watches me tug them on, and then we leave my room together, her purposely and playfully bumping my shoulder in the hall as we head to the living room.

That was a good time. A crazy, insane experience for me. It was sexy and hot, and I got to rub Delane’s breast. She made me cum. It was great.

Yet as we sink into the couch together, all I feel is crushing, bruising disappointment.

I don’t want to learn how to enjoy my body without embarrassment if it means I’m going to ultimately enjoy *it* and *sex* with someone else.

“What’s the matter?” she asks as I flip on the TV mindlessly, my focus scattered like ashes.

Smiling, I remember something I’d been saving for her. Something I knew I wanted to give to her once we made this arrangement, but only now does it feel right. I hold up a finger, indicating for her to wait. When I return with a very worn Five Star notebook in my hands, the cover only held on by copious amounts of masking tape; she looks confused.

I hand it to her, and time slows as her palm skates across the tattered surface, as if she knows what this means before she even knows what it is. But I believe that. I believe Delane and I are linked that way.

“Open it,” I urge, and she does. I watch her as she carefully turns pages, making sure to do it slowly so that none

of the worn paper tears.

The page where my dad had made a small sketch when I was a teenager appears, and she stops on it. She points to the pencil diagram covered in clear tape.

“This isn’t your writing,” she notes, perceptive as ever. That brings some of the warmth back to my heart. I know I’m being a baby—that we agreed to this tradeoff to prepare me for a serious relationship and her for her career—but I guess I always hoped it would end with us together. Her comment tonight helps me see how one-sided my hope is.

“My dad drew that.” I scratch the side of my jaw through the slight discomfort of my honesty. I never like talking about my dad. Or my mom. Or my life growing up. It never leaves me feeling anything but bad. With Delane, though, I will. Sharing with her feels like whispering secrets in the dark to my closest best friend. Safe. She feels safe.

“I think I told you before, but working on engines was one thing I was allowed to do. My dad took an interest in me taking an interest in cars, so he let me keep this notebook for what I was learning.”

She runs her hand over the page, eyes sparkling. “So this is like your personal *The Mechanics Bible*,” she breathes.

I nod and shrug a little. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Thanks for letting me look through it,” she says, amazement in her tone as she carefully turns one page to the next. Her phone goes off as soon as she gets lost in the pages. She scrambles to get it and sighs when she realizes it’s just an alarm she set.

“It’s late,” she smiles, hiding her hands in the sleeves of the oversized hoodie. “I better go.”

I nod, the ache in my chest nearly unbearable. I don’t want her to go. I don’t want her to make me confident for someone else. With a smile I don’t mean, I say, “tomorrow morning, come to Kings a little early. We’ll run diagnostics on your car. We’ll go through the repair codes.”

She smiles, toeing into her boots. Reaching for her purse, she tugs it up her shoulder and takes two steps toward the door. With her hand resting on the knob, she smiles. “Tell Salsa I said goodbye.”

I remember right then that she let herself in with my key. “Do you have my key?” I ask, not wanting it back. Not really. I’d love for Delane to come and go here as she pleases. But she has a home. And this isn’t it. The key was just to make tonight easy, and I have to lock my own door tomorrow.

She looks as sad as I feel, but only for a second. Maybe she’s just glad I reminded her. “On the counter.”

“I’ll tell Salsa you said bye.”

Pulling open the door, I realize she didn’t take my notebook. “Delane,” I say, stopping her on the threshold. Scooping it from the couch, I walk it to her, holding it out. “You forgot this.”

The way the porch light casts a yellow glow across her mouth is tantalizing. Her breath hangs before her in a white cloud as she stares at me quizzically. “What?”

I push it into her hands, and her fingers close around the spiral spine. “It’s yours now. I don’t need it anymore.”

She blinks up at me, eyes misty from the harsh winter air nipping away at them. “But this is... like... years of your life of learning.” She swallows. “What if you have a son one day? Don’t you... wouldn’t you rather it go to him?”

“I might have a son.” I swallow hard at that thought, knowing the many steps that have to take place *before* the journey there. Love, a wife, a home. Right now, I only have the first one, and it’s a one-way street. “But I don’t want to hang onto it for a what-if. You take it. Add to it, do whatever. I know you’ll use it. And it would make me happy to think I’m helping, even when you’ve moved on from Wrench Kings.”

Her face falters. “Why would I move on from Kings?” Wind whips around her and inside the open door, sending a chill up my back.

“After you apprentice, you may want to go somewhere bigger or better.”

Our eyes flit back and forth as our breath hangs between us in the frigid evening air. “I never want to leave Oakcreek. Like, ever.”

I didn’t know that about Delane. She brings the notebook to her chest, trapped by her arms.

“Text me when you get home so I know you made it safely,” I say.

She nods. “Goodnight, Miller.” She looks down at the notebook pressed to her breasts. “Thank you.”

“Goodnight, Laney.”

I slide the chain on the door as soon as it’s closed, then twist the deadbolt. Instead of being sad that she’s sticking to our arrangement, I should be happy.

Stalking down the hall and from the doorway, I stare at the crumpled sheets and sticky scene. We had fun tonight. I got parts of Delane I’d never had before. So for that, I’m grateful. With unchanged sheets, I crawl into bed, find her scent and inhale, her smile the last thing on my mind before I crash.

fourteen

...

delane

I nod, confirming that I do indeed *like him* like him.

Throughout the week, I've looked through Miller's notebook more than I did anything, including listening to smutty audio. In fact, I paused my audiobook while the hero has his pants down and the heroine is smacking his ass while he's lying over his desk.

Usually, stopping at such an important time in a book makes me feel off, like the characters are real people just frozen, standing around until I finish the book. Crazy, but that's how it usually goes for me. That's why I go through books so fast. Once I start, I need to know the story, and I want to finish.

But this time, I'm leaving them as is because all I want to do is absorb every single page of this notebook. *His* notebook. I know he gave it to me, but I can't keep it. In fact, as soon as I go through it all, I'm going to fix it up and give it back to him. As a Christmas gift.

At the kitchen table, before work, I've got the notebook spread open as I apply a thin layer of clear tape to one of the more worn edges. The page in question is filled with a perfectly drawn diagram of a wiper blade. The pencil it's drawn with has smeared over the years, so I ordered a ultra fine tip black marker on Amazon so I can retrace everything then tape it all. I hope he doesn't mind the modifications.

"Oh, I like that page," Art says from behind as he hobbles into the kitchen. After his trip to the ER a few weeks back, he's been going to the pain clinic for injections. He's only been twice, but they've put him on schedule to get them twice a week for some time. I hope they work because watching someone who thrives emotionally off their physical capability lose said abilities... It's been hard.

“Yeah?” I look up at him over my shoulder as he peers down at the page. The night I got back from Miller’s with the notebook, I stayed up all night going through it. I may just be the first woman ever who stays up all night reading a mechanic’s notebook but... honestly, I didn’t read because I wanted to know how to put a windshield wiper blade on or how a jack works. I wanted to see pieces of Miller that he hasn’t shown me.

The next few days, I became engrossed with the notebook, lying on the couch, sitting on the porch, or tucked into the corner next to my parents’ old record player with the notebook spread over my knees—I read it nonstop.

I didn’t hide it either because something about the notebook made me feel so proud. Proud to know a person like Miller, who has overcome and tackled so much scary shit on his own. And he’s a phenomenal mechanic. The fact that he was self-taught when he gained his apprenticeship kind of blows my mind because Atticus and Beau wouldn’t take someone who wasn’t ready. He got himself to where he needed to be without a technical school or a real mentor but on his own.

It’s incredible. All while supporting himself and going through the mental and emotional trauma of having parted from his family.

I was proud to show that notebook to Art, to have Mara poke through it with my supervision, to have mom flip through it in awe of who Miller really is. They saw the notebook the same way I did—as a tribute to how incredible he is. To how much he’s done and how far he’s come.

And even though he’ll get to belong to someone else one day, I’m honored to have him in my life in this season and to get to know him this well. He’s truly beautiful, inside and out. Not to mention that cock and those balls, holy hell.

I pinch the neck of the sweatshirt to fan myself, pushing away thoughts of Miller and his incredible orgasms that make me soaking and sopping wet.

“I like how he drew one diagram, then lightly drew the steps over the top. It makes the way the blade clips work make more sense.”

Tilting my head, I consider the hand-drawn diagram from Art’s perspective and fan myself a bit more. “He drew this as a teen,” I add, making the sketch much more complex.

Art pats my shoulder. “I like Miller’s dedication to things. That’s a hard-working man, right there.”

Mara and mom come into the kitchen, arguing about whether or not Mara’s gi is pressed well enough. Mom tosses her hands into the air, bags circling her eyes as she huffs, “then iron it yourself, Mara. I swear, I pressed that after ten hours on last night. I’m exhausted. Okay? Press it again if it’s not sharp enough. Never mind the fact that it’s probably been draped over your chair with a wet towel on it!”

Mara rolls her eyes as she slides into a chair at the table. Art pours us each a glass of juice and lowers two bowls of cereal to the table. “Thanks,” I say, picking up my spoon to have a bite of store-brand Cheerios.

“I didn’t put my towel over it,” Mara argues as she takes a bite of her cereal, refusing to give up while she chews. Around a mouth of milk and Tasty-O’s, she says, “you only ironed the front. The back looks bad!”

Her eyes catch on the notebook as they drag away from my mom, where she’d been hitting her with a punishing glare. Though my mom, in her exhausted state, seemed utterly unphased by Mara’s squinty eyes and huffy attitude.

“Miller’s notebook,” she says softly, tipping her head to focus on the page. “Did you get the pen?”

I nod. “It’s coming today. I put sticky notes on all the pages I want to redo.”

She holds her finger up and bolts away from the table, returning with a notepad of her own. This one, however, is held together at the top. Fanning the notebook out, she flips through it to show me the pages are lineless and blank.

“I got this for you. Tear a sheet out and use it behind the paper you’re fixing; that way, it doesn’t bleed.” She passes the notepad to me, tapping her finger on top of it. “And you can use this to add pages. You’d just have to tape them in.”

“Thanks, Mara,” I say. “I hadn’t thought about adding anything, but now that you mention it, it’s not a bad idea.”

“Okay, I’m taking dad to his clinic appointment. Then we’re getting groceries.” Mom drops a quick kiss on both of our heads. “Be here when I get back, so we don’t have to unload alone.”

I glance at my watch. “We’ll be back from Mara’s comp practice in two hours. So... if you get home before then, you’re shit outta luck.”

Mom shakes her head as Art pulls his beanie over his silvering hair. “You certainly have the mouth of a mechanic.”

Once they’ve managed to collect the things they need to leave the house—a bottle of water, Art’s Sudoku book, mom’s purse, the grocery list, reusable bags, and the envelope of coupons, Mara grins at me.

“I don’t know why you’re smiling, but I’m not lying for you.” I fold my arms over my chest and prod her with my pointed gaze. “Or buying you alcohol. You’re too young for that.”

She rolls her eyes. “Gross. I don’t want alcohol. I just wanted to ask how it’s going with Miller.”

I look down at the notebook as my skin grows hot. I can tell Mara. Maybe not the nitty gritty details of our arrangement—that can’t come for many years, if ever—but I can admit to her the thing I’m having trouble admitting to myself.

Extending my hand, I stick out my pinky. “Between us,” I say as she hooks her pinky with mine. We curl our fingers, making a pact for privacy.

I sigh and sink into the chair, staring dreamily at his notebook like I’m staring at a photo of my lover who is at war. “I really like him.”

“*Like him, like him?*” she clarifies with all of the transparency of an opaque teenager.

I nod, confirming that I do indeed *like him*, like him.

“Does he like you?” She leans in, letting her pink fingernails drag down along the metal spiral.

“Miller likes everyone. I think he’s just enjoying my company because he’s usually alone. But he’s definitely, like, a gold-level dude. He won’t be single for long. Once he puts himself out there, he’ll get snatched up. And I’m sure whoever he ends up with will never let him go.”

“Why can’t that be you?” she asks, reaching across the table to snag the apple Art set out for her. She shoves it in her bag, which she pulls up from the back of the chair into her lap.

My phone saves the day, rattling loudly against the table as my alarm sounds. “We gotta go.” I look her up and down as we stand. “You don’t have time to iron your gi anyway,” I say, “so why bug mom over it?”

“When I do my gi myself, she makes me do the front and back. But when she does it, she can half-ass it?” she says as I trail after her toward the door, making a visual sweep of the house to make sure everything is turned off and ready to be left.

“She’s half-assing your gi because she’s full-timing two jobs, a husband, and two kids. So remember that,” I say gently as we get into my freezing cold car in the driveway.

Then we drive to karate, not another mention of Miller to be made, and I’m grateful. Not because I have anything to hide but because all of the things on my mind are not safe for the ears of a twelve-year-old confidant.

I don’t dare take the notebook out at karate because that space has proved to be unsafe, and I’ve been treating Miller’s notes like my fucking firstborn. Rock approaches me while a family is sitting behind me, and I think he does this because he believes I won’t make a scene.

But he never did know me that well.

“D, are you over it yet?”

I scooch away from him on the bleacher and keep my sights on Mara.

“You’re pretty snotty for a poor chick,” he adds, sliding closer to me.

“If you think that because a family is behind us I won’t scream at the top of my lungs, you’re wrong.”

His face wrinkles with worry before it melts away quickly, leaving me the one feeling uneasy. He runs his tongue along his top teeth. “Nah, you wouldn’t embarrass your sister like that.” He slides toward me again, his hip connecting with mine.

I saw this thing on the news once. A girl was walking home from school, and a man tried to grab her. He had a car waiting and he was going to kidnap her. She said in order to avoid him or no one seeing him take her, she ran into the street, into oncoming traffic. It caused a fender bender, but it spooked the man and probably saved her life.

I don’t know if Rock is life and death, but I’m creeped out enough to run into traffic. I jump up, climbing the stairs until I’m standing right next to a forty-something mom who is sitting next to her husband, their small children in front of them, playing with a doll. I look down at her, then at Rock, on his feet like he was going to go after me.

He rolls his eyes and hops down the bleachers, and I stare at him with sweat running down my spine until he’s out of sight in the other small gym attached to this one. I look down at the mom, and she’s got a gentle smile on her face.

“Thanks,” I say, though she has no context as to why I’m thanking her, she nods like she does. Maybe she knows. Maybe she’s been harassed before. I don’t know, but I’m grateful for her.

I take a seat in front of the family and watch Mara crush her competition practice, despite the fact that my pulse never slows after my encounter with Rock.



BACK AT WORK ON MONDAY, my growing interest in Miller has me easily forgetting Rock and his bullshit from the weekend. I'm catching up on invoices when the guys come up front around lunchtime.

Thinking it's Atti who comes to my side and elbows me, I shove him back, keeping my eyes on the computer. "Back up," I gruff, entering amounts on my number pad at the speed of fucking light because I want to finish this before I go to lunch, and I'm starving.

"Sorry," Miller's voice flanks me, and I immediately spin around and grab his arm, laughing.

"No, no, I'm sorry," I snort, "I thought you were Atti just bugging me."

From across the counter, leaning over studying a menu, Atticus stares me down with a snarl in his lip. "So it's fine to be a jerk to me but not him?"

I roll my eyes. "Because he's not trying to annoy me, whereas your sole purpose is annoying me. Do you disagree?"

His dark, grouchy gaze flicks to Miller, then back to me. "Fine, I agree."

Smiling, I turn to look up at Miller, who... Jesus, looks more handsome than I remember. Boyishly adorable yet ruggedly handsome, like I want to buy him a sweater that coordinates with mine and get a professional photo taken, then get on my knees and suck the cum out of him.

"What's up?"

His voice is quiet. "Wanted to see if you wanted to eat lunch. With me. Today."

"Together," Atticus horns in. "You want to eat lunch *together*. The way you said it was more fuckin' wordy than it needed to be."

“Thanks, Professor,” I say, giving him my back, trying to carve a sliver of privacy out in this locker room of a space.

“I’d like that.”

“Did you pack your lunch?” he asks, bending to peer at the shelf where I normally store my vinyl lunch bag.

I shake my head. “I was going to grab tacos from the cheap place around the corner.”

“I brought enough teriyaki bowls for two.” He shrugs. “If you want it.”

“Oh, I want it.” *And you.* “Let me file these, and I’ll be out in five?”

He nods. While I’m in the back, with the door cracked, I smile at Atticus’s words to Beau. “Let’s go. Leave ‘em alone.” Big softie.

When I return, Miller has created a little picnic for us, spreading containers, plates, and drinks out along the counter. It’s just lunch, and it’s not a big grand gesture, but it hits like it is. Serving and providing is an act of love in my house. We may not always have the time to do more, but we show our love daily by serving one another.

I can’t help but feel a little of that love at the sight.

“You okay?” Miller asks, pulling me from the spiraling thoughts I’d been toeing into. He wants to eat lunch together, that’s it. There’s no “fall in love with me” vibes happening. I ignore the way that reality sinks into my gut like a stone in the river, heavy and unmovable.

“I’m fine,” I say, taking a seat next to him, rubbing my palms in anticipation of his amazing chicken teriyaki bowls. He really is a good cook. And so am I. Facing him while spreading a paper napkin across my lap, I tell him as much.

“I’m a good cook, too, you know.” I pick up the fork and spear chicken and vegetables with the tines, adding a scoop of rice.

“I know,” he agrees immediately, stirring his food around, steam wafting up to his handsome face. “Your mom is a great

cook as well. I remember having her Texas sheet pan cake last Christmas.”

Grinning, I agree. “Fuck, that’s such a good cake, isn’t it?”

He nods. “Is she from Texas?”

“Yeah, she was raised there. But honestly, that cake is a Betty Crocker classic.”

He snaps with recognition glistening in his eyes. “I have the Betty Crocker complete cookbook!”

Smiling as I picture Miller naked, wrapped in only an apron, his hard cock jutting through the fabric as he stirs batter seductively in a bowl, I ask, “have you seen the sheet cake recipe in there?”

He shakes his head as he talks around his first bite. “No, I haven’t made any of the sweets in there. The entire first part of it is cooking basics, and that’s mostly what I’ve used it for. Recipes I want to try come off the internet.”

I nod. “Yeah, some of the stuff in there is pretty outdated, like using Crisco instead of butter. Stuff like that.”

We each eat a few more bites, but my curiosity gets the best of me. Holding my loaded fork to my mouth, I ask, “where’s your family living? If you don’t want to talk about it, I totally understand. I was just wondering, like, *where* are they? If they still live where you were raised or if they... moved away.”

He twists his lips to the side before exhaling heavily as if the topic we’re broaching is emotionally taxing, and I don’t want that for him.

“I’m sorry, that was way too personal,” I quickly amend, my face going red from guilt. But below the desk, he drops a hand to my thigh, and my entire core cinches tight, my lower half pulsing from the faint touch.

“No, it’s okay. I want to share.” He takes a drink of his water and slides me his bottle, and the act of sharing a drink over lunch makes me heady. “I want to tell you.”

The *you* feels pointed, but I remind myself that Miller hasn't had an opportunity to tell his story to anyone, not really. I mean, maybe he's shared with Atti and Beau some but really share and get into the nitty gritty—I doubt he's got to do that yet. And even if I want it to mean more, even if I want our sharing to inexplicably bond us and tether our hearts, it's unfair for me to have those hopes and project them onto a man who hasn't even had the opportunity to talk.

He deserves a safe place to converse without my projections of love and life tossed onto him.

“Tell me anything and everything,” I say with a gentle smile as I feed myself another bite of food that I know is delicious but suddenly tastes so flavorless.

“Well,” he starts, “I think my parents still live in the same place. It'd be unlikely they moved or left, and if they did, I bet it'd be in the news.”

I push a red bell pepper slice around my plate. “Really?”

He nods. “The commune I grew up in is large. And a lot of people liken it to another word that starts with C. And I'm not gonna give it that label because I'm out, but let's just say moving everyone to a new place would be a lot like the Donner party in their covered wagons. It wouldn't go unnoticed.”

Whoa, that's... a lot to digest. “I guess when you said you grew up in a commune, I thought of hippies and free love and barefoot families eating out of clay pots around an open fire while singing or something.”

He laughs, and I laugh, too, and I hope he doesn't find what I don't know to be offensive. “That wouldn't be a bad place, in comparison.”

“So where you grew up, it was bad?” I ask, feeling so naive when it comes to real life. I've always thought of myself as a fighter, as someone who works hard to contribute and do the right thing, who doesn't take shit, and who stands up for people. Now I see that while I am those things, I've really not experienced stress and heartache the way Miller has.

He shakes his head as he chews through another bite. Before he talks, he drags a paper napkin along his lips, and I have the strongest urge to leap out of my seat and kiss him. To feel those beautiful, full lips all down my neck and across my bare belly.

“Not bad, but... not for me.”

“Did they kick you out?” I vaguely remember hearing bits of his story, and I think he left on his own. I hate myself for not storing this information because now I’d kill prior me to remember. To not have to put him through the paces of sharing every excruciating detail. As he takes a drink of his water, I vow to stop my questioning. He’ll tell me what he wants me to know. I don’t want to stress or hurt him with my inquisition.

“They didn’t kick me out. I left. But I didn’t have a choice, not a real one, at least.” He takes another sip of his water, and my eyes are glued to his Adam’s apple sliding beneath the collar of his blues as he swallows. Everything about Miller is such raw, beautiful masculinity. It’s so hot.

I bring my thighs together, clenching tight to bring a wave of relief to my tightly wound pussy.

“I was supposed to stay there forever like everyone does. They wanted me to marry a girl; they’d chosen her for me because our families were in the same trade. Anyway, marrying her meant I’d give up working on cars and run the land. Like a farmhand.”

I wrinkle my nose. “I can’t picture you as a farmer.”

He nods, eyebrows raised. “Me either. And I didn’t want to be a farmer. I wanted to be a mechanic. We had a few on the commune; I mean, we had cars for going into town here and there. There was an organic need for mechanics. But the men who were didn’t want to be. That’s the backward thing about that place. People could live more closely to their dreams and have fulfillment, but the way they ran it... your free will was all but gone. Donated to the greater good. Which, all this time later, I still can’t figure out.”

His hand, no longer on my leg, goes to his chin, where he strokes his face thoughtfully. I reach out and rest my hand on his leg because sitting this close without touching him or him touching me feels like a fucking crime.

“They just expected you to fill the role you were assigned. And if you had any qualms with it, you’d be out on your ass.”

I tighten my hold on his thigh and give him a small grin. “You said ass.”

He wiggles his eyebrows, and I feel it in my belly. “I’ve been hanging out with this beautiful woman...” he leans close to me, bringing his hand up to shield our mouths like he’s telling a secret. “She’s a bad influence.”

I punch him in the arm and laugh, shaking my head. It’s only been a second since my hand left his thigh, and already I miss the tight flex of defined muscle, the heat of his safe body, and the feel of him making my pussy tingle.

“What was the thing that made you really go, though? Them pushing you into farming?”

He lifts his hat off his head, and I can smell his shampoo as he sifts his fingers through his strawberry blonde locks. My nipples harden.

“Well, that. But mostly, they wanted to marry me off. And we were expected to start having kids right away. But at age eighteen, I wasn’t ready to get married, and I certainly wasn’t ready to have sex and be a father.”

I blink at him because I’ve never heard a man so strong and masculine admit a thing like needing more time before sex. It’s vulnerable and real and... beautiful.

“That’s brave of you to admit.”

He smiles sardonically. “They didn’t see it that way. I was told I would marry her on her eighteenth birthday, which was just a few weeks away. And I’d immediately father children and work her father’s land.” He shook his head. “I didn’t take any of my clothes or anything. I just took my notebook and the money my mother saved in a coffee can on top of the fridge—the money they saved for emergencies that required actual

currency—and in the middle of the night, I left. Caught a bus and never looked back.”

“You’re brave; you know that?” My heart is racing as I say those words, and it has nothing to do with his bravery and everything to do with the fact that...

I’m falling in love with Miller. And I can’t deny it.

“They always said abandoning your people is for the weak-minded.”

I rest my hand on his forearm, and instead of squeezing, I stroke him, trying desperately to show him in any way possible that I am here for whatever he’s feeling by rehashing this. “Fleeing everything you know for true freedom is the bravest thing I’ve ever heard.”

His eyes are hazy and hooded as he stares down at my hand stroking his arm. His voice is all rasp and smoke when he says, “come over tonight.”

Quickly I imagine what it would be like to be physical and intimate with Miller after everything he’s shared with me today. Paired with the dangerous position my heart is already in with him? It would be foolish. So foolish to fall farther down the abyss of loving Miller when he is not mine to love. He is temporarily mine to teach and build up but not mine to keep.

“I can’t,” I say, hating how fast the words come, how easily they topple out. But what is the alternative? There is no chance I would leave his house in a better situation. I’d leave with my addiction running deeper than before.

“Oh,” he says, looking hurt, and Miller looking hurt probably hurts me more than walking on shattered glass, I swear.

“I’m sorry,” I add, looking down at my empty bowl because I can’t face him while he looks so pained. I don’t want to cause that, but trading one small pain in lieu of a huge one is what I’m doing, and I know that.

Even if it feels like cruel and unusual punishment right now.

Beau and Atticus pull up outside, and when they get out of Beau's Tesla, it's clear they're bickering about something. And for once, I'm relieved because as they push through the doors, Atti's nostrils flared and Beau's eyes narrowed; I know they will diffuse things.

They have no clue they are walking into a situation that needs diffusing, but if they hadn't come back right now, I might have potentially gone against all the warning signs in my head and agreed to see Miller tonight.

"But you ain't gotta tip if the service is bad," Atti argues, and I take that moment to peer over at Miller. He's watching me, wearing a sad smile.

"Thanks for lunch," I whisper. He nods, we share a smile, and then he's gone. And I'm left with these two bickering around me.

I just had a wonderful, perfect lunch with an amazing human being, and yet I've never felt so sad.



"YOU WANNA WASH, or you wanna dry?" I ask my sister as our parents get comfortable in their recliners, the TV illuminating the dark living room.

She shrugs. "Um, I guess dry since I just did my nails."

I dunk the rinsed plate into the sink basin full of suds and scrub it with a sponge. After rinsing, I pass it to her, and our assembly line begins.

"What's wrong?" she asks after we've washed and dried a handful of dishes in complete silence. Feeling exhausted and unwilling to put on a brave face, I turn to her and give her the twelve-year-old-friendly version of what's wrong.

"Miller's helping me learn about cars, you know that, right?"

She nods. "Duh. That's why you have the notebook."

“Right,” I say, dipping a white mug into the bubbles. “And I’m helping him with... confidence.”

“Yeah?” she asks. “Like how?”

I chew the inside of my cheek as I rinse the mug and pass it to her. She may almost be thirteen, but still, sexual confidence that carries over to all aspects of life is still a bit of a mature concept for her. “His last girlfriend made him feel bad for being a mechanic. So I’m just helping him see all the amazing things about himself and hoping he sees them, too.”

“So...” she muses after a pause where we wash and dry another plate. “Why do you seem bummed?”

“Because it’s a temporary arrangement. I help him; he helps me. We’re agreeing to help each other for a limited time, then go back to our friendly coworker arrangement.”

“So...” she hedges again. “What’s the problem? Why aren’t you at his place tonight?”

“He invited me,” I say, passing her a bowl with blue flowers painted along the edges. “But I’m starting to...” Before I can finish, Mara does. Ah, her twelve-year-old, love-obsessed heart.

“Like him?!”

Rolling my eyes, I nod. “Yes, Mara. I like him. I always have, I think. But now I’m starting to like... *really* like him.” I have no problem using the L word in my head, but when it comes to verbally admitting how I’m feeling, I can’t do it.

Saying it makes it real. And if it’s a real thing that other people are aware of, I’ll have to deal with it.

Mara falls quiet at my side as I pass her another clean dish, which she dries and slides easily into the metal drying rack. Maybe our sisterly bond has her easing back on the questions, or maybe she’s just a pre-teen who has lost interest in her sister’s sad little love life. Either way, I’m grateful for the silence as we finish the dishes.

It gives me time to think about him.

fifteen

...

miller

I like the weight of her over me.

“Try it now,” I shout, sliding out from under Zeth’s mom’s old sedan. From behind the wheel, Zeth turns the key, and the car starts up, finally.

“Jackpot!” Zeth cheers as I get off the ground, dusting my palms against my thighs.

“Now, we’ll let it run for a few minutes to warm up.” I glance back at the house. “Your mom’s headed to work here pretty quick, right?”

He nods.

“Okay, so let’s keep it running.” I nod to where my truck is parked behind the driveway. “I brought you something. I’ll get it out while her car is warming up.”

Gathering my bag of tools from the ground, I head toward my truck, where I slide them into the backseat. Letting down the tailgate, I untie and reach for the basic lawn mower I just purchased at the hardware store in Oakcreek. As I push it up the drive toward Zeth, his eyes go wide. Looking over the snow-laden lawn, dying or close to dead, he turns back to me.

“Is that for us?”

I press my finger into his chest. “It’s for you.”

He looks confused.

With a hand on his shoulder, I say, “your mom works hard. She’s gotta take care of a lot of things. Now that you’re almost thirteen, I think it’s time you take over the yard for her. She can’t do it without your help, you know.”

He looks at the mower like it’s Everest or a complicated jigsaw puzzle, then looks back at me. “I don’t know how to use it.”

I squeeze his shoulder. “I’ll show you.”

“You live in an apartment,” he says, working out the logic of things on his own. “Did you buy this for us?”

I wave a hand down, not wanting to focus on that. “It wasn’t much, and you guys need it.”

“Can you use it when the lawn is full of snow?”

I shake my head. “No, but we’ll practice in the back, where it’s covered. Then you’ll know what to do in a few weeks when the snow melts.” I nod toward the bed of the truck back behind us. “There’s another bag back there. I’ll wheel this in the garage, and you go get it.”

Careful not to slip on the ice, he penguin jogs toward my truck as I wheel the mower in the garage toward the back door. I wait, and he returns with the hardware bag swinging from his arm.

“Open it,” I tell him, and he does. He produces a set of gloves and a small set of gardening tools from the bag. The tools are likely for an older woman, but for beginners, they’ll work just right.

“They’re yours,” I tell him as he wiggles his digits into the nubbed gardening glove. “The tools are too. You can pull weeds, clean up the cracks in the driveway, and all that kind of stuff. Don’t need the snow to thaw for that type of stuff.”

He looks up at me. “Thanks, Miller.”

I pat him square on the back, then take him into the covered yard to show him how to start and work the mower. After making him promise a thousand times to never wear sandals while mowing or put his feet near the blades, I let him mow. It’s a small space, but he does a great job, not struggling to push it at all since I bought a smaller unit.

When he’s done, he beams up at me from his spot collapsed in the yard, sucking down a Gatorade I brought him. “I liked that.”

Taking a seat next to him, I drink from my own Gatorade, loving the warm sun on my skin peeking through the trees. Something about being in sunlight with cold all around you is... magical. I think of experiencing this with Delane, and I

want to. Then again, I guess if I imagined any situation, I'd want to be there with her.

“Yeah? I thought you might. Taking pride in things you own is a good quality to have.”

He thinks about what I've said, and I know he's ashamed of where he lives because he doesn't meet my eyes when he asks, “your place is on the good side of town?”

I nod. “Yeah. But listen, Zeth, it doesn't matter what side of town you live on. You take care of the place you live and have pride in it, it's your home you share with your mom who loves you, and you love her; that's all that matters. I know it seems corny, but it's true.”

He doesn't say much to that but finishes his blue sports drink, then turns to me. “Thanks for this.”

After seeing his mom Amy off and passing on many offers to have dinner or accept a small cash amount for the work I've done on her car, I head home. On the drive, I can't stop thinking about sitting in the sun in Zeth's backyard with my boots in the snow and my face to the sky. How I'd have loved to see Delane next to me.

I shoot her a text.

what's your address?

Having known Delane for a few years and having met her family, you'd think I'd know where they live. But the holiday and company parties are always somewhere, and there's never been a reason to know where she lives.

And I've never followed her home because I'm not a stalker or anything.

Driving to the store, I pick out one specific item and pay for it; my phone vibrates in my pocket.

I'm not home

Why?

I take my item from the weighted scale at the self-check register and head to the parking lot, wearing a grin. I can just see her nose wrinkled, twirling a curl around her finger as she waits for my response.

I got something for you. Just want to drop it off.
It's okay if you aren't home.

A female chastity cage? :-D

Looking down at my lap at the bag of Sour Cherry Bombs—Delane's all-time favorite sweet—I laugh as I text her back.

Dang, I really missed an opportunity there.

No... not that.

Well, I'm not home. I'm out with my mom getting groceries at the Thai market in Riverside.

1212 Doff Drive

Thanks

I haven't heard of Doff so I program the street into my phone and navigate there. I can't help but laugh when I pull up outside of her place and see Art out front, a string of Christmas lights caught between both hands. The lights look tangled, or he's fed up, but either way, it's clear he needs some help.

"Art," I call when I'm out of the truck, heading up the driveway toward him. We've met a few times, and we're definitely on a first-name basis, despite the fact it's been a year since I've seen him.

The emerald strand of electrical wires and scratched bulbs fall to a tangle at his feet as he looks up, smiling broadly at me. "Miller, how're you doing, son?" He reaches his hand to me, and I get a flash of Graham Burns shaking my hand and calling me son. I loved Beau's dad, and I remember him

fondly. And whether it's Graham or Art, being called son by a man who is not my father never ceases to sting.

I shake his hand, glad to see him again. I've always liked Delane's family, been a bit jealous of her because of them, too, from time to time. Same with Atticus and his folks, same with Beau and his pop, even after he passed.

"Good, just thought I'd leave these for Delane." From my coat pocket, I produce the bag of candy. His grin is broad when he spots the red sugar bombs.

"Her favorite, and I don't know how. Not a candy worse than that, if you ask me." With a groan, he reaches for the tangled lights, so I grab them and hand them over.

"Here," I say before adding, "and I'm more of a Reese's guy myself."

Art chuckles as he peers at the twisted strand of lights. "I like the chocolate candies, too."

I nod toward the lights. "Can I give you a hand with these? Probably a lot faster if it's a two-person job."

With the tip of his pointer finger, he pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose as he considers me. Surveying the house a moment, he nods. "You know, if you don't have anywhere to be, I won't turn you down." Pressing a hand to his lower back, he groans a little. "Delane loved the lights when she was Mara's age. She says she doesn't care anymore, but I know it's because she thinks it's too hard for me." He massages his back. "And she'd be right. But the girls love them, and I don't want to quit putting them up."

Taking a loose end from the lights, I begin wrapping them around my palm and elbow, making a neatly wound strand. "Well, let's get them untangled, then get them up." Peering around, I spot two more boxes and point. "You got more there?"

He nods, moving the boxes toward us with his foot. "These are for the porch, and the lights are for the house."

From my pocket, I produce a couple of hand warmers. When it's really cold out and I'm in a bay at Wrench Kings, I

keep disposable hand warmers in my hat and gloves to keep warm. The truth is, I don't go anywhere without them. As a kid, I had one thin winter coat and never fully felt warm when I was working outside. One of the things that became a luxury was warmth, and now I don't go anywhere without the possibility of it.

"Here," I hand him two. "Put these in your gloves, and your fingers won't get so stiff from the cold."

Taking the pads, he shoves them into his gloves and wiggles his fingers. "What a good idea!"

For the next hour, Art and I untangle the lights. From his garage, he gets a ladder and stands at the base while passing me sections of stranded lights, then he passes me a hook, and we hang them across their entire house. After we stand back and survey our work, Art pours us some hot teas (spiked), and then we get to work on the porch display.

After we have the animated, air-filled snowman set up, the wreath hung (with extra lights), and some plastic candy canes lining the walkway, the boxes are empty, and we're done. As we worked, we talked. Nothing big, just small talk, like our favorite warm foods and how we like our coffee. Art tells me about a street in Oakcreek where they set their Christmas lights to the music playing on a radio station, and if you tune in while driving the street, the lights dance to the beat. It's a nice hour or so, and for the first time I don't feel bittersweet about quality time with a father figure who isn't my own.

Instead, when I drive away, waving to Art, who stands with his second spiked tea on the porch, I feel emotionally sated in a way I didn't know was possible. Something about spending time with Art filled some of my empty bucket, and that has me smiling.

Then I head home, feed Salsa, and flop down across my bed, cold and tired. That's the thing about being single with no family.

You have a lot of time for naps.



MY PHONE VIBRATING against my thigh is what wakes me. While my brain is groggy and slow, I look at my phone to discover it's only been about forty minutes. I open the text message that woke me, already smiling because it's from her.

DELANE

Thank you for helping my stepdad.

I didn't do it for her, but I would've done it for her equally. I text her back.

No big deal. I had a good time.

Can I come in?

I sit up in bed, my heart racing. Come in? Throwing off the covers that I'd somehow tugged over myself in my hasty nap, I pad down the hall, still a little groggy. Salsa skitters away as I jerk the chain from the door and twist the deadbolt.

Pulling the door open, she's there. Delane. Curls tucked into the scarf wrapping her neck, and coat zipped, nose pink, eyes bright. "Hi," she says, a smile in her expression as her greeting hangs between us.

Pulling the door open wide, I step aside. "Get in here." I smile at her. She smiles back. And the chill of winter melts away as she steps inside, tugging at the scarf as soon as the door is shut. Without talking, I stand behind her, feed my hands into the scarf, the backs of my knuckles grazing her neck. She turns her head, exposing the smooth slope of her shoulder as I remove the scarf completely.

"Now, your coat," I say, the three words coming out in a raw whisper. She shimmies her shoulders after one long unzip, and I take the coat off of her, hanging it with her scarf.

Standing in my apartment in jeans and a hoodie, her hair wild from the cold weather, Delane smiles at me. “What you did for Art today was really sweet, Miller.”

“I like Art,” I admit, “I always have.”

She sticks out her tongue, showing me how vibrantly red it is. “Thanks for the Cherry Bombs too.” Closing the two feet between us, she rocks onto her toes and kisses me, looping her arms around my neck. The taste of sour cherries floods my tongue, and my cock stiffens, my instincts pushing me back from her.

Her arms fall to her side as she tips her head, trying to understand my reaction.

Feeling embarrassment color my cheeks, I laugh a little in an effort to diffuse the situation. “Can I admit something?”

She nods, still looking a bit confused as to why I’d stop such a great kiss and perfect embrace. “Of course.”

“Well,” I step apart, the wide stance working to hide my growing erection. And is it ever growing. I’m turning into a steel rod from a single kiss and arms around my neck. “I’m getting... aroused. And I’m still not used to being comfortable feeling that while around someone else.”

Without hesitation, her eyes drop to the crotch of my sweats. She studies the area for a moment before looking back up at me with a salacious grin. “Miller, it’s hot to know that hugging and kissing me makes you hard.”

I nod. “Just not used to all of this yet.” I swallow, almost unbelieving of what I’m about to say, but in an effort to be honest and real with her, I ask. “Do you think I could go back in the, uh, cage?”

“Really?” She can’t hide the shock in her tone. But I wouldn’t want her to. I guide her to the couch, where I attempt to get her to sit next to me, but instead, she sits in my lap. Which feels indescribably good. Yet, my cock is thickening at her core, and I know we both feel it.

“So, I don’t worry about everything when I’m in it. It’s... strange. I mean, I know it relieves me from worrying about

him,” I say, alluding to my cock. “And that relief like... diffuses through me, and I just feel so much more at ease.” Feeling embarrassed, I slide her off my lap, drop my elbows to my knees and catch my face in my hands. “God, this is so embarrassing.”

She leans her face on my shoulder, weaving our fingers together. Squeezing my hand, she says, “it’s not embarrassing. It’s real. And I am so happy you told me.” She strains to reach my cheek but does and leaves a soft kiss there, one that worms down my spine and lands right in my dick.

“Go put the cage back on.”

I look over at her. “Seriously?”

She nods with a grin. “Yeah, tonight we can try something... new.” Getting off the couch, she heads toward the hooks by the door, grabbing her coat. “I have a bag in my car that I need but I’ll be back. While I’m getting it, you get in the cage.”

“Why didn’t you bring the bag up with you?” I ask, getting to my feet to help her into her coat.

“I didn’t know if we’d be... I didn’t know if we were lesson swapping tonight.”

I cock an eyebrow as she zips her coat, facing me. I smooth her hair around her face down, tucking the ends into her coat. She smiles. “I like it when you touch my hair.”

“I love your hair.”

Our eyes lock, and everything about this moment feels genuine and real, not like a formulated scene born from our arrangement. But it has to be. This is all just part of it, right?

“Let me get the bag; it’s cold.”

“Fucking freezing,” she agrees. “But no. I’ll get it, and you get yourself locked up.” And without another word about it, she slips out the front. I waste no time digging the cage out of my bathroom cabinet, adding some coconut oil to my cock, and sliding it in. I’m already battling a hard-on because Delane

is here, but I grin and bear it as I twist the lock and force my cock inside the cage.

When the key is free and in my palm, I stare at my locked cock in my reflection. There is something about being unable to get hard unless she frees me or allows me that is really fucking hot.

I didn't know giving your orgasms to someone—or giving your cock to someone—was a thing, but it's yet another reason why I feel like Delane is meant to be mine. She knows just what I need before I do.

The front door closes, and I hear her slide the chain through the course, then twist the deadbolt.

When I step out into the hall, I see her at the end, coat off, bag at her feet. It's a small bag, a little black duffel, enough to keep items for a night or two I'd guess. But the dark circling her eyes and the way she drags the hoodie off slowly, revealing nothing but a sheer white bra beneath, I don't think there's clothes in that bag.

“Are you—” she starts, but her words drop off as she walks closer to me, the hallway enveloping her bright eyes in the darkness. She cups my caged cock, and I can't help but groan. I missed her touch. I missed her.

“Oh yeah, you've got it on.” She smiles as she brings her mouth to mine. Our kiss is slow and tender, and I grow into the edges of the cold cage. “Do you feel better?”

Being honest, I say, “actually, I do. Now I can enjoy you without worry.”

She takes my hand without permission, guiding me to my room like it's ours. I get a flash of what that would look like.

Delane taking us to bed after staying up too late binge-watching a show together. I'd lie with my head in her lap as we watched, she'd stroke her fingers through my hair, and occasionally, I'd steal her hand for a kiss. Then after I'd dozed because her lap was the only place I ever wanted to rest, she'd nearly drag me down the hall. “Come get in bed, baby,” she'd

purr to me as I sleepily trailed after her. Because no matter where she heads, I'd trail behind her the entire way.

I like that idea. Delane and me... together.

“Take off your clothes, then get on the bed, on your back.”

I do it as she dims the lights to almost dark, and once I've positioned myself how she likes, I find her peeling off her pants.

Standing before me in a matching white sheer panty and bra set, Delane takes the elastic from her wrist and ties her curls on her head. A few strands fall free, and it's the sexiest look on her ever, I swear. A beautiful smile on her face, she walks slowly toward the foot of the bed.

“What are you going to teach me after I get done with you?”

From the partially open blinds adjacent to us, soft moonlight litters the floor, traces of it melting across her breasts and face.

“You are so beautiful,” I whisper, completely in awe.

She stills as if the compliment came at her like an unexpected slap. “Thanks,” she mutters shyly.

“I, uh, thought maybe you could learn how to change tail lights.”

Dragging her pointer finger up and down the sole of my bare foot, she says, “I already know how to do that, though.”

“What about,” I groan, feeling my balls tingle from her subtle teasing. “What about spark plugs?” She crawls onto the bed, her body swaying over mine as her knees tighten around my hips. Leaning back, her center grinds against my cage as she rests above me. “Spark plugs are more complicated than most people think,” I say, my mouth drier than dry.

“Spark plugs it is, then,” she whispers, bringing her hand to my pec, the other gripping the side of my abs tightly. With her thumb and forefinger, she rolls my nipple between the pads of her fingers, making my spine hot and my core flex. It feels... different but surprisingly good.

“I like that,” I tell her, and I wonder if I wasn’t in this cage, would the truth be so easy? She told me when we started this that overcoming my biggest insecurity would make me confident in all walks of life, and I don’t know if I believed her. It made sense, sure, but I don’t know if I believed that type of mental accomplishment was possible for me.

Now I know that she was right. Because my biggest hang-up has always been worrying about my lack of experience, but with my cock locked, I am without worry. Just here to enjoy.

“What’s off limits?” she asks, moving her thumb and forefinger to my other pec, pinching and rolling the other nipple. “On your body, is there anything I can’t have?”

I’m not sure I understand her question, but somehow I know the answer. “Everything is yours.”

Thrusting against me in torturously slow, gentle movements, Delane grips my shoulders and stares into my eyes as she does. This is what it would be like if we were having sex and she was on top. She’d grab me this way and ride me slowly, moving her hips to find the perfect friction inside her. And I’d just lie here, staring up at my beautiful girl in amazement. Except, she’d be naked.

“Delane,” I say her name with forced huskiness because every ounce of strength inside me ceases to exist with her straddling my locked cock. I’m putty for her; I’m a fluid, molten, liquid mess. She could drink me, spit me out, slap me, destroy me—she could wreck me, and I’d love her harder. Because I’m an actual fucking fool for her. With my heart shuddering beneath my ribs, I ask for what I want. “I want to see you naked.”

Without a word, she slides off my lap, her feet hitting the rug with a thunk. She’s engulfed in a shadowy part of my room, but when the bed dips, and she’s positioned between my spread legs, I can see her.

Legs crossed, her hands feed through the hair on my calves as she massages me tenderly, giving me a moment to take her in.

Naked Delane is more than I have ever fantasized about. I knew she'd be beautiful, but I didn't expect the sight to change me.

Her breasts are full and round, her areolas the color of peanut butter, tightening into a nubbed peak the color of milk chocolate. With a single carved line of definition running down her belly, my eyes fall to the split of her legs, where she's completely bare.

"Have you made it to third before?" she asks, her tone doing nothing for my aching balls and struggling cock. He wants to rage out of the cage and grow hard, long and mean and bury himself into her soft center, but I'm relieved that he can't. Right now, I'm so drunk off naked Delane that I doubt I could even perform.

My brain spins out a little as she repeats herself. "Have you made it to third?"

I shake my head against the pillows. "When I said I've really not done much more than make out with my girlfriends, I wasn't exaggerating."

She brings her small hands to her breasts, which fill her palms and then some. They'd be a perfect fit for my hands, and my mouth waters at the thought.

"Before I have my way with you," she says with a seductive grin, "come here." She pats the bed between my legs, so I sit up and match her position, legs crossed. Our knees grind together, and her skin is so warm my thighs spasm from the connection.

She takes my hand, brings it to her breast, and repeats with the other. "I know I've seen your breasts before," I say, trying to gather my thoughts, but with both of her breasts filling my hands, it's hard to think. "But this feels different."

She smiles, diffusing any discomfort lingering between us. "How?"

I continue kneading her breasts, watching how her eyes grow hooded. "I don't know," I mumble, forcing my eyes to

stay on hers. A moment later, she grabs me by the wrist, stopping me.

“Now,” she says, slowly lowering my hand so my fingertips skate down her bare belly. “You’ve watched a ton of porn, I’m assuming.”

“You’d be assuming correctly,” I say without embarrassment because even a shy virgin needs to jerk off.

“So you know that women can orgasm vaginally with their g-spot or through their clit.” My fingers reach her groin, warm and smooth. Pausing, she holds my hand just an inch above the dark slit of her pussy.

“Yes,” I croak, my pulse so loud I have the strongest urge to shake my head like a drunk cartoon character.

“You think you can make me cum? By touching me?” she asks. Before I can answer, she guides my hand between her legs, the tips of my fingers sliding between her soft, swollen lips. She’s wet, and I don’t know what’s normal, but she’s very wet. I can hear her arousal around us as I explore her pussy slowly.

“I can, yes,” I answer with surprising confidence. But if there’s one reason I’m here on this Earth, I swear it’s to please this woman.

“Do it then.” She lets go of her guiding grip, placing her palms on the mattress behind her. Swinging her feet out, she plants them flat on the mattress too. “However you want.”

On display for me, I stare at the dark divide of her wet pussy, then my gaze crawls along her tight core, up to her perfect little tits. I want things I had no idea I’d want.

I want to suck on her nipples and grind my hips against hers; I want to feel those thighs around my ears as I bury my tongue inside her.

I reach out, resting my hand on her groin as my thumb slowly strokes her swollen clit.

“Ahh,” she keens, tipping her head back into the moonlight streaming through. “That’s good, like that.”

“Do you cum this way?” I ask her, aware that clit orgasms are more reliable than g-spot orgasms (thanks, porn).

Bringing her gaze to mine, she’s wearing a flush on her I haven’t seen before. Looking a little lost, she smiles crookedly at me. “When I touch myself, yes, this is how I make myself cum.” Tucking her chin to her chest, she then watches me stroke and tease her clit, which seems to be blooming into a swollen, hardened little nub the more I touch.

It’s quite possibly the hottest thing ever.

“Your thumb feels so much better than my fingers,” she whimpers, and I stand corrected; *that* is possibly the hottest thing ever—knowing I’m making her feel good. She makes me feel good all the time—returning the favor makes me feel so good.

So fucking good.

“How do I feel?” she asks, her tone all smoke and rasp, so unlike the “how may I help you today” I’m used to hearing from her at work. This is a private tone she only uses when fully aroused and on the cusp of orgasm... and *I* get to hear it.

“Good,” I say, staring at my thumb glistening in her juices as I swipe up and down, over and over, watching her grow wetter and wetter. “Your...” I trail off because saying the word pussy is so foreign, but being a grown man who can’t say it is toeing into territory I don’t want to belong to. “Your pussy is so perfect. The shape. Your lips, your clit, everything is... just fucking perfect.”

Lifting her head, she finds my eyes, and through the fading light, we stare at one another. “You think so?” she whispers.

I stroke her again, then move the pad of my thumb on her bud in small, slow circles. Her head falls back as she mewls in pleasure. “*Ohmygod Miller.*”

“You like this?” I croak, continuing with the wet, tight circles. My thumb glides easily through her arousal, and when I glance between my legs, I see she’s not the only one. A thick strand of precum stretches between the opening of my cage and the bed, pooling into the fabric where it’s already dark.

“Yes,” she pants as I move my thumb a little faster, loving how her body flexes and writhes beneath just one of my fingers. She’s so responsive, almost as if this is her first time being discovered this way, too.

But that’s stupid because Delane has been with guys. Of course, she has. Hell, I know she was with that karate instructor at one point. I’m sure she enjoys herself to the max like this no matter who she is with because she’s one of those women who are in touch with their body and sexuality and aren’t ashamed or embarrassed to enjoy it.

I like that about her. I like everything about her, though, so I suppose that’s not surprising.

Arching her back, she moves her hips on the bed, inching closer to me. Her bare feet connect with my hips, and the scene of her spread bare for me, letting me see every part of her naked and up close this way—it’s too much.

“Laney,” I pant, though why am I panting? I’m so fucking worked up right now. Looking down, I see my chest is glazed in sweat, and when I run a hand through my hair, it’s damp.

Slowly she draws her head up and blinks at me. She takes her time exploring my body, eyeing every curve and cut of my chiseled chest and core. Looking at my caged cock, her tongue darts across her bottom lip before she gives me a toothy grin.

“You feeling good?” She reaches out and strokes my thigh with her nails and that does nothing for the cause.

I nod. “Yeah,” my voice is raspy and weak because, despite the fact I’ve not been touched, and I’m caged, I’m pretty sure Delane can make me cum just from *existing* this close to me.

Giving me a moment of unexpected respite, she slides off the bed and grabs her bag, the metal zipper whirring as she slides it open. Digging around, she looks up at me, an amber curl falling across her face. “Everything is mine?”

I nod and close my mouth, so drool doesn’t drip down my chin. She produces a thin black wand, and I don’t know what

her plan is; all I know is her face holds more excitement than ever, and I'd do anything to keep that going.

With it, she brings a bottle of lube and a towel to the bed. She catches me eyeing the bath towel and says, "you'll learn—sex and acts of sex are really, really messy."

Feeling like with her, I can say anything, I grin. "You do know I jerk off all the time, right? I'm aware of the mess." She bites into her bottom lip at that comment. "But I have towels. You didn't have to bring one."

She grins. "Now I know for next time."

Climbing back onto the bed, she directs me onto my back. Taking a spot between my legs, she drapes her calves over my thighs, clicking open the lube. Two squirts into her palm, and she's stroking the black wand, slowly coating it.

"Is that... for you?" I ask, and when she lets out a small, sweet laugh, my ass clenches.

"No, it's *for you*."

"What's it... what are you going to do?" My stomach twists with excited energy, and even though I'm pretty sure I know she's going to shove that thing up my ass and find my elusive prostate, I need to hear her say it.

"I'm going to massage your prostate with it," she says simply, closing the lube and letting it drop to the bed.

"I want to make you cum, Laney," I protest, sounding a little desperate I realize, but to let me touch that perfect, pink wet pussy and then take it away? Cruel.

Also, I see why men become obsessed with sex. She was so soft. Her pussy was so warm and slick. My cock is leaking just at the thought of it. Sinking my cock inside of that? My head spins a little at just the fantasy of it.

She blinks at me, her lubed toy and hands stilling over my groin. "This is about you. Getting you experienced and confident. This isn't about my orgasms."

"But it can be mutual, can't it?"

Worry etches her forehead for a second, but she scoots closer, and before I have time to ask her what's going on in her naughty, beautiful brain, she strokes a fingertip up my taint, then starts to massage my heavy sac.

I can't help but let a feral groan slip out. The sight of my hand on her pussy will be etched into my brain for all eternity, and right now, it's all I can see as I try not to cum through this cage as she strokes my balls.

"Are you ready?" Those three words are a whisper as they roll over my body, my core flooding with goosebumps at the delicate and foreboding intensity of them.

I nod. "Yes."

Slowly, she drives a lubed finger through the split of my ass, the tip circling my hole. My instincts have me jerking back toward the headboard a little, but she claps a sticky hand down on my thigh, keeping me immobile. "It's okay; I'm going to go slow and ease into it, okay?"

The way she alternates from tough to soft has me falling deeper and deeper. She knows what I want and need before I do, and I don't think I'll ever find that again. I really don't.

She leans forward, trailing the tip of her tongue along the metallic ridges of my chastity cage. My cock can hardly feel her, but still, the sight of it has precum spurting freely from me, making a mess on my groin and lower belly. She swipes her fingers through it, then drops her hand beneath my balls. A moment later, her precum-coated fingers are working their way inside me.

There's a strange burning as she slowly saws her fingers in and out of my ass, but once she's all the way in with her hand butted up to my cheeks, the discomfort has subsided.

"Does it still hurt?" she asks, slowly curling her two fingers inside me.

My mouth is dry and sticking together; I don't try for words. Instead, I just shake my head no as my thighs begin to quake. My belly is full of a new pressure, one that makes me want to wiggle and writhe against the mattress. But I don't,

because I also don't want to move and lose this feeling. Widening my legs, I bear down on her fingers, earning me the best reward yet.

“Ah, there you go. Let it feel good,” she purrs, making my cock spit a little more. A moment later, she's sliding her fingers from me, leaving me hollow and yearning. Straining my neck, I look down at her between my legs as she eases the wand inside me.

A few months ago, I'd only shown my cock to a doctor, and I wasn't even calling it a cock. I was saying penis like some goody two-shoes virgin. Now Delane is fucking my ass with a vibrator, and I'm pretty sure that even though I'll be sore tomorrow, I fucking love it, and I'll want it more and more.

The pressure builds as the toy takes me, the knot of unreleased arousal growing impressively large in my belly. I've never wanted to cum so badly and yet had my orgasm be so elusive.

Once the wand is fully seated, she flicks it on, and from deep in my ass comes a low, rumbling purr. My cock struggles to get erect within the metal, and my balls thrum with the rippling vibrations of the toy. And something deep inside me begins to swell. My orgasm grows like a snowball gaining size as it tumbles hillside. Each moment, it grows bigger and bigger until she takes her hand away, leaving the wand to shake and tremble inside me without guidance.

“Prop your head up,” she says softly.

Though each movement brings an undeniable rush of needing to cum, I shove a pillow behind my head and peer down at her as ordered.

Then she rocks to her knees and mounts me, her wet pussy in the center of my chest.

“Watch me cum, Miller,” she croons, looking down at me with glassy eyes.

“Lean forward,” I rasp, my mouth watering to feel her pert little nipple against my tongue. To suck her breast into my

mouth and taste her flesh.

Gripping the headboard above, she leans forward, and I seal my lips around her puckered nipple, sucking it onto my tongue slowly and gently. She tastes... so goddamn good. Sweet like a ripe pear. My tongue curls around her nipple, sucking the hard tip deeper until she moans out my name.

Her palm cups my cheek, and my eyes pop open, and so does my mouth. "You taste fucking phenomenal."

She isn't smiling, but she keeps her hand on my cheek as her other falls to her pussy. "How's the prostate massage?" she asks, her hand moving over her clit, the tips of her fingers brushing my chest with each stroke.

"G-good," I force out, my groin sweltering with need. Feeling her masturbate against me with this wand pushing all these undiscovered spots inside of me, the taste of her skin still tingling around in my mouth—*fuck*. "Make yourself cum, please," I groan, not wanting to admit that I'm going to cum from this, whether that's what she intended or not. I don't want to tell her yet because I'm afraid she might stop and all I want to do right now is watch her orgasm. I want to feel her wet pussy grind against me; I want to feel her arousal coating my skin.

"Since you're a good boy and you said please," she smiles as she says it, then, as she rubs herself with more fervor, she reaches back and cups my balls. I let out a groan to wake the dead, but she remains unphased as she rubs herself, the sound of her wet *pussy* filling my room.

I know she's reaching the crest of her orgasm, nearing her breaking point by the way she grips my balls more tightly, her hips roving over me, pussy and ass smearing against my core. Fuck, this feels like heaven, and no one has even cum yet.

I bet everything she does feels like heaven. I bet cumming inside of her is otherworldly. Watching her belly fill out with my baby and getting to make love to her each night... fuck me.

“Miller,” she calls out as her hips gain momentum and her fingers work furiously, the sound of her impending orgasm almost driving me insane with need. “Squeeze my tits,” she moans, still riding me like a jockey, her grip on my balls swinging between gentle and aggressive.

Doing as she says, I hold my palms at the full underside of her breasts and curl my fingers around them. Her eyes fall closed, and we both make a deep-rooted, carnal noise. Hers is a sexy sigh, and mine is a barbaric groan, but god, this feels amazing.

Nothing could feel better.

The sides of my head tingle, and my vision begins to fade as my heart begins to race. I know this feeling all too well.

“Miller!” She moans my name as her orgasm grabs hold of her, her hand slowing between her legs as her body twitches in euphoria. “I’m cumming,” she pants as I lift my hips off the bed only slightly, my own touchless orgasm a complete surprise.

Still holding her breasts, I moan her name because I always do. Almost every time I touch myself, I think about her or us.

“Delane,” I pant, trying not to grab her breasts so tight, but with each little wiggle of her hips and every whimper her orgasm brings, I fall a little deeper and grab her even tighter.

“I’m cumming,” she pants.

“I’m cumming,” I repeat because watching Delane cum was all it took. I unload every drop because she tastes so good. She feels so good. *We* are so good.

“Laney, I’m cumming,” I tell her again as my eyes succumb to the orgasmic darkness, flashes of white exploding around me as my mind shuts down, and my body curls in on itself. This is the best orgasm of my life.

When I’m empty, and my cock is pulsing in my cage, I’m left a panting, sweaty mess. I blink a few times at Delane, wide eyes shiny like glass.

“You came,” she says, her tone filled with disbelief.

“You’re so sexy.” I release her breasts and smooth my hands across them a few times soothingly, trying to wipe away the sting of my grip. “Watching you finish was all it took.”

“Say cum. Say seeing me cum was all it took.” She slinks over me, lowering her mouth to mine. “Say cum.”

I roll my eyes, feeling more like Atticus than myself. “Just seeing you *cum*,” I say slowly, spreading the words out like taffy. “That was all it took.”

At some point during our orgasms, Delane released her grip on my balls and pressed her palms to my chest to steady herself. I like the weight of her over me.

“You,” she says, wearing a broken smile. She looks both happy and fatally struck, and I can’t wrap my head around what she is feeling because I’m still coming down from that intense orgasm. “You are so hot, Miller.”

My heart hammers in the base of my throat, making me feel dizzy even though I’m lying down. “You said my name when you came,” I say quickly, under the buzz of her attention. While I still have the courage to be honest. “You saying my name was part of what threw me. Pushed me there.”

She stares at me for a decidedly long time, and I don’t know why. Impassive and almost stoic, her face gives no answers. After a very long minute or so she says, “well, that’s good. Your next partner will enjoy that because it means you’re...” she stumbles a little, staring at her hands on my chest. “Into how she feels, and women love that.”

Confused, I stare blankly at her as I try to understand but then it occurs to me that she’s being normal and it’s me that’s in the wrong. She’s right—what I said was romantic. Because it came from my heart, which is basically a walking billboard for Delane.

This is just an arrangement for her.

She slides off of me and heads to the bathroom, returning with one of my own towels, damp with warm water. She kneels her way to me from the side of the bed, wiping me down.

“Will you lie down next to me for a while?” I ask, feeling nervous for the first time tonight. Because her answer now isn’t about the arrangement; it’s about us.

She picks up her clothes off the floor, and my heart sinks. She’s going to leave.

“Yeah, but I’m cold, so I’m gonna go pee and put my hoodie on.” She smiles and does just that, using the en suite bathroom, then feeding her arms through the black sweatshirt sleeves before crawling into my bed.

Lying her head on my chest, she presses her palm to my belly. Her curls tickle the underside of my chin, and even though we were just together and sweating, the fresh smell of her skin still fills my senses.

Stroking her arm, I close my eyes, my heart fuller than it’s been in a long time.

The next time my eyes open, Delane is jumping around my room with no pants, screaming.

sixteen

...

delane

Cum down my throat like a good boy

Oh my god. How did I let this happen?

How did I let this happen? Am I seriously asking myself that? I *put* myself here. I have only myself to blame for this awful fucking predicament I'm in.

I sought him out and asked him to trade car knowledge for sexual confidence in a business transaction only, and I'm the one who went and caught feelings.

I love him.

How stupid?

Honestly, if I really cut the bullshit, I'm glad. He may never know that I caught feelings, but I wouldn't change anything because I really got to know him, and he's amazing. Everything he's been through, not just leaving his entire everything but starting over and building a really good life for himself from nothing? It's so impressive. And he doesn't brag about it like a total fucking douche bag. He's humble and hard-working and god, he is such a good friend. He's always bringing in our favorites, picking up the check, offering to help, and loaning out his things.

He's so handsome, too. That part isn't new to me. I've always wondered what those strong hands were capable of, and I got a taste last night.

The way he held my tits made my pussy throb. Seriously, I came from the way he squeezed and kneaded them, and my toes curled when he brushed his thumb over the nubbed tips. God.

I never stood a chance.

But when he ends up with a perfect-looking blonde with white teeth and big boobs, he'll be her king. And *she* will be the one who gets to polish the King's crown.

God, listen to me. Dreaming and drooling at the idea of sucking Miller's cock. It literally makes me swell and get wet when I think of my lips wrapping around his crown, my tongue caressing his head.

I laid down with him after. Thank god my hair was frizzy and a mess after fooling around—it was perfect to absorb my bittersweet tears as I lay with him.

It's hard to enjoy something you know is fleeting. At least for me, I guess.

We both fell asleep and slept so fucking hard. I'm not a bad sleeper. In fact, I sleep pretty well. But this sleep. My eyes opened, and neither of us moved a single inch. Our bodies were fused with warmth, and when the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was Miller's hand on my arm, I freaked.

Jumped out of bed screaming. I yelled about being late for work. I shouted about how my parents thought I was going to be home last night. I screamed about how we weren't supposed to do overnights. I said that one a few times.

Miller was confused and groggy, and honestly, he looked a little sad, too. Probably wanted to sleep in.

I left his house within three minutes of waking up and sat in my freezing cold car one mile down the road, waiting for it to properly defrost and warm up before making the rest of the drive home.

And here I am. Standing under the steaming spray of my shower, staring at the grout, wondering what to do.

There's probably only a handful of things I need to learn before I can take the apprentice's test to see if I can qualify to be in a program. Can I be in that close contact with him for four or five more weeks? Can I provide him with the emotional boost he needs from me for another month?

What will that do to my foolish heart?

But who starts up a whole thing and then doesn't finish? I need to become an apprentice if I want to move forward with my life. I don't want to work at a desk forever. And if I'm not

going to be in a serious relationship yielding marriage and kids anytime soon, I should really focus on becoming a mechanic.

After my shower, still wrapped in a towel, I sit on my bed, *The Mechanics Bible* spread open alongside his notebook. After forty minutes of thumbing through while looking at mechanic apprentice's practice tests online, I decide there is only one other crucial thing I need to learn, which is a full engine swap. Once we do that, I can quit. Miller doesn't even need me, whether he knows it yet or not. I'll let him know. I won't leave him high and dry.

I've already learned enough that even if I never moved forward with my career after this, I could still fix my car and my mom's car for most small repairs that don't require a lift. That's worth it, even if quitting this thing will feel like losing him.

I'm not going to lose someone who was never mine.

Getting my phone, I send him a text. He responds, and we fall into conversation, which is exactly what I need. I need to tell him and get it over with.

Think you could teach me a full engine swap?

Whoa, that's a big one.

Yeah, I can do that. When?

Are you feeling more confident?

I don't know how to answer that

I haven't been with anyone, so it's hard to know

How have you been feeling with me? You said when we first started that you felt unsure around women. You worried about everything. Do you feel that when we're together?

When I'm with you, I feel perfectly at ease

Why are you asking? Progress report?

After the engine rebuild, I think our arrangement should end.

This was only temporary anyway, so we may as well end it on a high note, you know?

I bite my thumb nail, awaiting his response. It is the first time he hasn't written back instantly. I hope I didn't hurt his feelings, but it's true—why go deep into this when we both no longer need it? It doesn't serve a point anymore. It only serves to be dangerous.

If that's what you want

The truth is

Here's where you tell the truth, Delane, I think to myself. But I don't dare type the words as some therapeutic release before deleting them because I don't trust myself. Not when it comes to Miller.

You don't need me to help you. You're an incredible catch, Miller, and your instincts have you continually doing and being all the right things.

You'll be someone's baby daddy and future hubby in no time

Never before in my life have I hated the smiley face emoji so much. When it takes a moment for three dots to appear to show me he's responding, part of me hopes he's celebrating my words. Because I wasn't lying—he's amazing and will make the figurehead of a wonderful, beautiful family one day.

Of that, I have no doubt.

Do you like spending time together? Just you and me?

I blink at the screen and reread his message at least seven times, maybe more.

Tomorrow, let's do spark plugs and brake lights. We haven't done it yet, and you'll need to know. Then next week, we can do the engine repair and ride off into the sunset, okay?

Smiling, knowing I should say no because more time with him is a bad idea, I quickly type back:

Fine. Tomorrow night we do spark plugs and brake lights. Next week we take two days doing the engine swap, then we're good.

Engine swap is four days minimum.

Not my rules :-D

Fine, let's end on a high note like I said.

Locking my phone, I pull clothes from my closet and pull them on after slipping into a bra and panties. Fully dressed, I start combing my damp hair as I process.

Do you like spending time together? Just you and me?

I must've scrolled up and reread that about a hundred times. Then he just changed the subject, and I don't know why.

And instead of combing my hair and stressing about the fact that I still have to make it out alive after another two weeks with Miller, I'm smiling.

Because even if it's just two weeks, it's two weeks with the hottest, sexiest, most amazing human I've ever and probably will ever meet.

After drying my hair, I head to work, peeking through the rectangular window to catch an eyeful of him. With his back partially to the window, I take a moment to feast on him. Tall with lean muscle everywhere, ropy arms, and solid thighs, work blues have never made me as wet as they are now. And the way he twists his hat back as he slides under a split hood, god.

I'm breathless just imagining the man who held my tits and made me cum last night. But it's not *that* I'm picturing as I smile at him through the window like a complete fucking creep. It was sleeping in his arms. It's sharing life over warm food with him. It's working under a hood together, bumping elbows and laughing. It's... everything.

"Creep," Atticus gruffs from behind. I spin like I'm caught because I totally am, but because I'm in such a tailspin over Miller, I have no extra energy to pacify Atticus or get him off my scent.

"Yup," I sigh, slouching into the chair in front of my computer. With a wiggle of the mouse, my screen wakes from slumber, and I log in, ignoring Atti. But of course, because he can sense when I want him to go away, he stays.

"Are you though?" he asks with as thoughtful of a tone as possible for him.

"Am I what?" I ask, turning to face him. His hands are on his hips, and his man bun looks like it could stand a wash or two, but his eyes are fixed on me like I'm a problem for him to solve.

"A creep."

"You just called me one," I say, shaking my head because I really do not have the energy for his weird mind games right now. I shake my head and sigh. "What, Atti? I'm too tired to dance, so just tell me what you want."

"What's up with you and Miller?"

"We're friends," I sigh. I'm sure my face is not going along with the bullshit my mouth is peddling, but I don't care. The stress of spending two more weeks with him and then having to turn him loose is suddenly tightening around my neck like a noose. I claw at the neckline of my hoodie and lurch forward slightly. "What?"

"I know you're friends, dumbass. Why are you watching him like the chicks in Hallmark movies watch their husbands from the window while they're mowin' the lawn?"

I tighten my gaze on him. “That’s pretty specific. Are you watching Hallmark movies?”

He glares. “Not by choice. Now quit tryin’ to give me the runaround. Spill it.”

“Why? It’s not like you were running to me like an open diary when you fell for Goldie.” I fold my arms over my chest. “Are we done?”

“We are not done.” He grabs the other stool and drags it close, plopping down with a groan.

“Easy, old man,” I tease.

“Forty-five ain’t old.” He stares at me like *really* fucking stares me down. I hate when he does this. He has this intense but non-threatening look he gives that just turns you inside out, I swear. “Just tell me, quit bein’ a girl about it.”

I wave a finger over my breasts. “I *am* a girl and fine. Just... don’t say anything, okay?”

He clucks his tongue. “You think you gotta say that to me? I ain’t gonna go play telephone to Miller.”

I shake my head. “I know that, dummy. I meant keep your mouth shut as I tell you.”

He nods. “Fine.”

Glancing at the small window in the door, I don’t see Miller or Beau in the small area I do have eyes on, so I turn to Atti. Taking a breath, smoothing my palms up and down my thighs, I dive right in.

“We have an arrangement. I help him with his confidence with women; he helps me get my skills up to par as a mechanic for the apprentice exam.”

Atticus raises a finger, stained with work.

“No questions,” I say to him, moving on with the story while I still have the damn confidence. I can’t believe I fell in love. “So we’ve been swapping... *skills*... for a few weeks now. Spending *extra* time together.” I stop there because it’s

clear where this is going, and Atticus might get under my skin, but he's not going to force me to say it.

He blinks, eyes wide.

"You know," I say.

"Yeah," he breathes, "I do. But you need to say the words, Laney. And not for me, but for you."

I shake my head. "Why do I need to say it out loud for me? Enlighten me, granddad."

He narrows his eyes to slits. "I'll let that slide due to your condition."

"My condition?"

His grin is slow and treacherous, and I know I'm not going to like his response. "Panty-twist-itis." He leans in, bringing his big annoying grin with him. "Miller's the cure."

When he pulls away, I shake my head, ready to argue, but he holds his finger up to me this time. "When you admit to someone else out loud that you're in love, your mindset shifts."

I swallow hard at his words because I *am* in love, and so is Atticus. If what he's saying is true, maybe I'm not ready for a mindset shift. I'm stuck in some weird, beautiful, and torturous limbo as I am now, but taking action and change of any kind can be utterly terrifying.

"Why do I want a mindset shift?" I ask, my voice a crawling whisper.

He shrugs. "To really live."

I look over my shoulder and out the window again. This time, like some cruel twist of fate where Atticus can witness it, Miller is there—and looking at me. He lifts a hand, a broad smile immediately enveloping his face.

My chest swells. A fire closes in around my heart. My throat constricts. I lift my hand and smile back.

I turn to face Atticus. "I'm in love with Miller."

He smiles. “I knew that.”

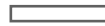
I flop down on my chair. “Fuck.”

Atti leans close and whispers, “have you... done that?”

I shake my head. “Not yet.”

He pats my back as he rises. “Now let it marinate. You said it out loud. Shit’s gonna shift in your head; you watch.”

Before I can say fuck off or even thank you, he’s gone. I spend the rest of the workday with my EarPods in, a steamy male-male book taking the edge off my worried feelings.



WITH ONE SOCK on and the other between my gripping hands, my phone dings. Leaning over the screen as I put on the last sock, I read the message from Miller.

MILLER

Just got home. Come over whenever. I'll leave the front open in case I'm in the shower.

After work tonight, Miller and I were alone at Kings, where he showed me how to change a brake light, using my own car as an example. Then, we walked through changing spark plugs together, and he even made a few notes in the margin of my *The Mechanics Bible* as he did. I got giddy with excitement, knowing immediately that I’d photocopy the page and add it to his notebook, the one I was doctoring to give back to him as a gift.

Though no one was there but us, he was extremely professional. He grinned when I attempted to flirt but leaned in once, right away, and said, “this is your dream, so I’m taking it as seriously as I take my own.”

That meant a lot coming from a guy who walked away from his known existence to chase the unknown, betting on

something he wasn't sure existed. I'm so happy he found his freedom and that our paths have crossed.

I don't want to imagine my life where I'm walking a path that doesn't lead to him.

Now I'm showered and heading over. Art and Mara have given me shit endlessly about not making it home until morning. They knew where I was—I didn't lie. They didn't mind. Honestly, I think Art might be in love with Miller, too.

Mom stayed quiet but nabbed my wrist tonight when I came home from work and headed straight for the shower. "Tell him I said thank you for the Christmas lights." She lowered her voice, and her eyes went soft around the edges. "Art's been a little... blue lately. Doing something with someone who treated him as a capable equal was really good for him." She smiled softly. "So please pass him my thank yous." Then she pulled me into her and hugged me tightly. Pulling away, her softness had been replaced with a broad smile. "Tell him he's on the Christmas cookie list this year!"

I grab my phone and type out a quick text.

Be over in fifteen.

My heart thumps like an idiot when the three dots dance.

:-*

Wow. Now a kissing emoji is making me horny. And kinda wet, if I'm being honest. Because I'm thinking of him and how he kisses me. How he kissed my nipple before he sucked it into his mouth, making my vision blur and my toes curl.

Grabbing my bag, I rush down the hall and scoop my coat off the back of the couch. With a pat to Mara's head as she sits engrossed in her game of Animal Crossing on her Nintendo Switch, I breeze past mom and Art with a simple, "see you when I get home."

"Tomorrow, then?" Mom asks, with no snark, as if she's perfectly fine with me staying over at Miller's. I'd like to think it's her trust in me, but if it is, I'm definitely breaking it.

Maybe it's as much that she knows and likes Miller and likes him for me.

"Maybe," I say, hoping that it's definitely. But who knows? That happened organically last night. It was an intense orgasm for him, probably the most ever. He needed aftercare. He wanted to hold me. I think he needed me to hold him.

But tonight, I have different plans for us, and who knows what the aftercare will look like.

After I'm in my car and the heat is blasting, I take my phone out and scroll through our last messages, my cheeks burning. The way I want him has me thinking... crazy fucking things right now.

Like... I want to fuck him. Tonight.

But no. That's jumping into a future that doesn't belong to me. The warm spot between my thighs aches as I sit behind the wheel, staring at the first light I've stopped at. The intersection is dead. Not a car in sight. The singular light that hangs from a wire above the intersection flickers.

Red. Off. Red. Off. Red. Off.

Pulse. Pulse. Pulse.

My clit pulses right along with that red light, burning bright, then dipping into a moment of despair before seizing my whole body again in another red hot flash. God, I need to touch myself. I am so horny for Miller that if I were to grind the center seam of my jeans even a little with these thin panties I'm wearing, and with how swollen my pussy is right now, I'd probably orgasm in under a minute.

His kissy face emoji had me thinking of his lips pressed to my clit, sending shocks of electricity down my legs. Would he moan as he kissed my pussy, or would he stay silent but eat me in long, deep strokes of his tongue? My cunt literally aches at the fantasy.

Red. Off. Red. Off. Pulse. Pulse.

I look down at my lap, where my thighs are flexing and releasing involuntarily as my pussy clenches, milking the

invisible cock she wishes was filling her.

I can't go over there like this. I'll grind his thigh like a horny dog and cum in my panties right there.

Peering around the dark intersection once more before checking my mirrors, I pop open the button of my jeans and let my hand slide down my belly, delving under my clothes.

"Ohh god," I drag out on a long, breathy moan as I sweep two of my fingers through my pussy, finding it swollen and slick. My body is literally preparing itself to be fucked by him. My panties are coated from how badly I want him pumping his cock and his load deep inside me.

I tug my tank top down, exposing my bare breast. The street light falls over me, casting light on my nipple. With my thumb and forefinger, I pinch it hard as I strum two fingers over my clit, hard and fast.

"Oh god, Miller," I moan into my car, tipping my head back into the headrest. My pussy is so wet that I can hear my fingers spreading my lips open over the noise of the car heater. *"Touch me, Miller,"* I moan, spreading my fingers further apart, making my clit cold and achy. With my other hand, I squeeze my breast, rolling and pinching my nipples, imagining my fingers are his lips and teeth.

"Baby," I pant, groggily peering around the intersection before checking my mirrors again. Thankfully, as my orgasm barrels through me, I'm still alone.

I stroke my clit through my orgasm, imagining his tongue writing the alphabet in my pussy, making me scream every fucking night. *"Yes, baby, yes,"* I say as the tail end of it curls my toes, the very last heavy pulse making me shudder. Shoulders sloping, I take a large breath and fumble with the window to crack it and let in some air. I take my fingers from my pussy and hold them in the street light, finding them sticky.

Reaching into the glovebox, I find a package of Wet Ones and quickly tug one out, rolling my hands in the wipe. I can't believe I just fingered myself in my car in public.

And yet, as I gas it through the intersection, pants all zipped back up, everything between my thighs still aches deeply. It needs to be filled by something more than my two fingers, and I am beginning to see that with more and more clarity.

Fucking Atticus.



“HI.” Miller’s greeting smile shook me to my fucking core. Literally, part of me wanted to cry as he said hello. Now that I’ve really admitted to myself and out loud how I feel, it feels nearly impossible to hide.

But I know it’s a mistake to say anything and would be pretty wrong of me, not to mention it would probably look like I roped him into this deal just because I was obsessed with him or something. And that’s just not true.

Instead of making a mistake, I channel that passion into bravery.

“I just put my car in park in the intersection of Flor and East Street and masturbated until I came.” I swallow and force backbone in my tone in place of nervousness.

His Adam’s apple crashes with his swallow. “Get in here,” he rasps, closing the door behind me as I hop inside.

He locks the door and turns to face me. “Why?”

I know what he’s asking, so I don’t play coy. “That spark plug lesson.” I smile and shake my head, loving the way his gaze chases my curls before coming back to me. “It got me thinking of what I’d be teaching you tonight.”

His jaw ticks. “And what would that be?” He steps close, shielding our mouths with his hand as Salsa stands inquisitive in the hallway. “You had your finger in my ass last night. I don’t know where we will go from there.”

I rock to my toes and focus on his lips, not his eyes when I kiss him. Holding his cheeks with my hands, I pepper kisses

on his lips over and over, then say, “Don’t worry, I do.”

We separate so I can start peeling off layers of clothes, and when I’m sans my coat and scarf, my winter boots, and my cardigan, I weave my fingers with his and guide us slowly down the hall to his room.

Halfway there he whispers, “you didn’t say hello to Salsa.”

I shoot him a wink. “I’m more concerned with his daddy, first.”

Once we’re in his room with the door closed, I poke around his closet, snatching two neckties that are draped over the neck of a hanger.

“Got a big interview?” He beams with his sarcasm, and it’s so fucking cute.

“Har, Har,” I say, nodding toward the bed. “Get naked and sit with your back to the bedpost.” I put my hands on my hips and wait.

I think for a second he’s going to protest or question the plan, but a moment later, his t-shirt and sweats are in a heap on the floor. I nod to them as he steps out of his boxer briefs. “The Miller I knew folded his clothes and stacked them.”

He grins as he stands, holding his undies balled up in one hand down by his side.

There, rising from the full pink swell of his balls, is his magnificent cock, bobbing against his muscled belly. Long with just the right amount of veins, a perfectly defined crown, and a thick, meaty shaft. Everything about his cock and balls melts the sanity and reason in my brain. I see his pink, slick head rising up with needy determination, and all I want to do is spread my legs and be pumped full of his cum. I want it dripping from between my thighs.

“That was before I put my mouth on your tits.”

Whoa. Dirty talking Miller is not something I’m used to. Not at all. My pussy clenches, and my ribs work to contain my rapidly pumping heart.

“Gonna tie me up?” he questions happily, getting on the bed in the exact position I asked for.

I nod. “Yeah, and I’m gonna edge you until you burst.”

His crooked smile does dangerous things to me. “Won’t take long.”

I run the tip of my tongue along the length of my lips. “I’m gonna use my mouth.”

He shakes his head but doesn’t lose his adorable grin. “I’m never gonna last.”

Smacking him playfully, I say, “you should have jerked off today!”

He brings his wrists together around the bedpost. “I did. Three times.”

I stop undressing, dead in my tracks. “*Three times?!?*”

His eyes crawl over my body, stealing my breath for a moment. “I got a lot on my mind.” With that, he smiles. “Tie me up, *Queen.*”

I snicker a little at his choice of words. Taking a spot behind him, I loop the silk tie around his wrist, securing it slowly and carefully. “It’s funny you called me Queen...” I start.

“You are my Queen,” he whispers, making me freeze. “Don’t stop tying.”

I continue tying.

“What were you saying? Why is it funny?”

My voice fails me for a minute as I begin to recount my thoughts from earlier. “I had a dirty thought earlier. It was about... oral sex,” I stammer, suddenly nervous that he’ll find this private fantasy of mine totally over the top and a little terrifying.

“What?” he urges.

“Earlier, when I thought of going down on you, I likened it to a Queen falling to her knees for her King to polish his

crown.” The silk whooshes against itself as I complete the first knot. Miller is quiet as I move onto the second, and my instincts rear up, ready to say I told you so.

“Yeah, this is going to be very, very quick,” he says on a breathy exhale after a moment. My whole body falls with relief, and I laugh, making him laugh. Once the second knot is secure, I swing over his shoulder and place a kiss on his cheek.

“Not about how long you last. It’s about enjoying it.” Swiping the bottle of lube off the nightstand where we’d placed it last night, I position myself between his legs. His cock bobs anxiously against him, and I reach for it, dragging my fingertip along the dark, wide slit. Precum bubbles immediately, and Miller lets loose a dark, feral groan.

“Oh god, it’s already torture,” he moans.

I giggle. “It’s been less than ten seconds!”

He laughs with me, but the lights are on tonight, and I can see his flushed cheeks. He’s not embarrassed; he’s really just struggling.

“Edging,” I repeat. “We’re edging, so when you get close, hold it, and I’ll stop. We’ll reset, then keep going.”

“That *is* torture,” he groans, and I punish him with the back of my curled knuckle grazing the seam of his sac. “Okay, okay, I’ll be good.”

I nod. “Good boy.”

He shivers a little. “Fuck. I liked that name.”

I repeat it. “Good boy?”

He nods. “I’d fucking love to be your good boy.” He cocks his head to the side as I fill my palms with lube. “Is that a thing?”

I nod. “Oh yeah. If I was your *domme*, you could be my good boy. I’ve read that in books.”

“What’s that mean, if you were my *domme*?” he asks, watching me as I start massaging his taint and balls with my slick, lubed palms. His responsive groans make my clit throb.

“If I guided you sexually, and you were submissive to me, sexually.”

I lower my mouth to his cock and let my tongue tease the sticky tip. A deep rumble breaks loose from his chest. “So,” he manages through a moan. “How we are now.”

I bring my face to his and kiss him, letting him suck my tongue into his mouth. Shit, dirty Miller is so fucking hot. “I like it.”

I smile, moving the conversation forward because I like it too. But planning to take on the roles of domme and sub makes no sense when our lifespan is limited to two more weeks.

“Do you like your taste?” I ask, stroking my fingers through his soft, strawberry hair.

“I like tasting myself on you,” he says with a grin. Well shit, that was a good answer.

I lower my mouth to his cock, this time creating a seal with my lips right beneath the crown. My tongue worships his head as my hand slowly strokes the shaft toward my mouth. My name leaves his lips in a shattered rasp as his skin screeches against the wood, struggling with his arms.

I pop off and look up at him, his eyes captivated by my parted, spit-covered lips.

“Close?” I ask quietly, wanting to know if he needs a break.

He nods, still staring at my lips, like he’s in a sleepwalking episode and no one can get through to him. “You’re my first,” he pants, and it’s now I notice a thin sheen of sweat breaking out over his pecs. “Blowjob,” he adds on another ragged exhale.

Using the tip of my tongue, I trace the bulging veins straining beneath his hot, hard flesh. His cock bobs in response, the head slapping against my cheek. He growls a string of curse words, which is so unlike the Miller I thought I knew. But he’s right. He’s a different Miller now, one I like even more.

“Lame, right?” He says, a rivulet of perspiration sliding through the tight valley of his abs.

I bob between his legs, taking his cockhead into my mouth again. He’s saltier this time, and now when I bob down on him, taking some of his shaft down my throat, his thighs twitch beneath my palms.

“Break,” he pants, and I pop off, sitting up to find him looking drunk and sweaty. His eyes are hazy, and his hairline is damp from his discipline. “Thank you.”

I give him a moment to catch his breath, and when I lean forward again to suck him deeper this time, he stops me.

“Wait, wait,” he reasons, voice broken, thighs still trembling, abs flexed. “Can I...” he stumbles, catching his breath. “Can I taste you before you make me cum? So you’re on my tongue when I do?”

Oh my god. Whenever I think he’s hit his limit of how far we can push his comfort, he surprises me.

Getting to my knees, I close the slim gap between our bodies as I feed my fingers through the sides of his hair. He’s so sweaty, and it turns me on even more. Guiding him, I tilt his head just slightly, as he still nearly towers over me, even with me on my knee and him on his butt. I bring his lips to my nipple, and a surge of heat zips up my spine as his lips crash down on me. He moans as he sucks, his rock-hard cock slippery against my belly.

A tingle worms its way through me, leaving my core trembling yet filled with blazing heat. “No more,” I pant, truly panting because I’m out of breath, my mouth sticky with dehydration. I fall back into position at his legs and lower my mouth to his cock.

“Yes,” I moan as I tease his slick head. Licking along the hard ridge of his crown, his legs twitch, and his abs begin to quiver and flex in intermittent bursts.

“Break,” he grounds out, precum melting along his length in white ropes.

“Yeah, hold it,” I reply softly, releasing his cock with a pop. With the tips of my nails, I stroke lines down his balls. Jerking a little, his head drops forward, the squelch of his skin against the wood making my lips and face tingle a little. I have Miller on the edge right now. Me.

Holy shit. My belly tightens, and a familiar tingle rumbles through my veins. I’m going to orgasm from teasing him. Before I get him to orgasm.

In a rush, I bend over and bob down on his length until his head pokes the back of my throat, making me gag. He attempts to give us distance by jerking his hips, but his tied-up state leaves him helpless. I breathe around his thickness, bobbing down deeper on him again, my pussy aching, on the cusp of total explosion.

With my vision growing hazy, I keep his cock in my throat, letting my tongue writhe beneath his shaft.

“Laney.”

It’s not a plea to stop. It’s not asking for permission, either.

“Laney,” he moans again, his guttural timbre making my arms prick with heated interest. The way he’s saying my name, using my nickname, in a raw and vulnerable way. Like this is the most clandestine side of him, and I’m the only one privy to it. Privy to watching him unravel at my hand.

I pop off his length, earning me an angry groan, veins popping up in his forehead. I smile at him and enjoy the tortured want twisting his handsome, godly features. “Cum down my throat like a good boy.”

My orgasm spins off the rails, knocking around inside me, stealing my breath, making my head fall forward, sucking Miller deep in my throat.

“Laney.” The third time it’s hardly a whisper. His cock thickens, flexing and pulsing in my mouth as he shoots his cum down my throat. Soft moans radiate from him as his release comes to an end, the wide slit of his cock dripping the last of his load onto my tongue. After I’m off his dick, I grab

his face, my own orgasm still rattling my pussy and brain, and bring it to mine.

He's panting, but immediately, his eyes fall on my open mouth, where the last of his load pools on my tongue. I close my mouth and swallow, then crush our mouths together. His tongue sweeps along mine, and we feed each other feral groans and out-of-breath promises until my pussy pulses for the last time, and my orgasm finally releases my rigid body. Our kiss breaks, and I rock forward, out of breath, reaching for the ties.

He still hasn't said anything, but after I get both wrists undone, I kiss him on the lips, holding his face in my hands. It's a slow and tender kiss, letting my tongue skate over his, letting my lips linger.

"You were such a good boy," I whisper, smiling against his lips as I take another kiss. He wiggles his arms before wrapping them around me, crushing my body to his.

His lips slide across my cheek, landing on my ear as his cock rests thick and fat against my thigh. I just came, but my pussy still pulses in response. "I'm your good boy," he whispers, his voice hoarse and unguarded.

And from there, we sink into the pillows, Miller tugging the comforter over us. I grip his chest like it's our last night together, and my lower half tightens with need. I just swallowed his cum, and I'm still literally aching to have him inside me. But we fall asleep together, and as much as I know I should get up and go home, I don't.

Miller brings his lips to my ear as we doze, his still partially hard dick at my back. "Did you cum when you went down on me?"

I close my eyes and tap into that electric ecstasy I felt earlier. I came so hard. He made me feel so good just by feeling good himself.

"Yes," I whisper back in the dark.

He holds me tighter. And his warmth and the steady thudding of his heart put me into a deep, deep sleep.

seventeen

• • •

miller

Are you gonna tease me first?

Dear Dad,

I'm in love. I have been for a while but whatever reassurances I needed to know it's real, I have them. I don't know what I'm going to do about it just yet, but I wanted you to know. I like to imagine that wherever you are and whatever you're doing, you want me to be loved. I don't know if I am. But I want you to know, I'm trying.

I wish you could meet her. I know it's not possible. I know I'm never welcome back and you'd never venture out to find your only son, and I'm realizing as I write this letter that I'm okay with that.

I've built a life with my bare hands. That's something you can't even say you've done. Born and raised in the commune, you never faced the challenges I have. I'm stronger than you, but your actions are why I discovered just how strong I am, so this is a letter to say thank you.

Thank you for neglecting my desires. Thank you for brushing me aside and showing me that if I stayed, I would never have a voice. I needed that cold, unforgiving parenting to push me off that property. I needed your words- "you will marry her and you will work her father's land" -to help me onto the bus. I needed to know that my begging and pleading, my desire to put off marriage and children until I felt ready, I needed to know they didn't matter. My needs never mattered. And that fact is what kept my head up, facing forward those first few years.

It was hard, you know. Very hard. Many times I considered crawling back, not because I wanted to go back, but because I was so scared and lost. But my apprenticeship at Kings saved me. And now the idea of going back to you is laughable, the same way you laughed at me when I begged you not

*to make me marry a girl I didn't
love.*

*I have nothing more to say right
now.*

I hope you are well.

Your son,

Miller



Pushing the heel of my palm into the horn again, I duck to peer through the passenger window of my truck. Zeth is rarely late coming out to see me, and just as my stomach is starting to do its nervous roll, the front door opens.

He skips down the path toward my truck, popping open the door and hopping in quickly. “Sorry, I was going to the bathroom,” he says.

I extend a curled fist and we bump knuckles. “Hey, no worries,” I greet him with a smile. He peers down at the brown bags at his feet, completely covering the passenger floorboard.

“What’s all this?” he asks, hooking a finger through the handle of one to peer inside.

“It’s everything you need for a good Christmas dinner,” I tell him, nodding at the four overly full bags. “And if she’s working then it will be Christmas eve dinner, or whenever you two can celebrate.”

Zeth scrunches his face as he blows between his palms, rubbing them. “Christmas isn’t for four more weeks.”

I nod. “I know. This is your practice run. You’re going to cook your mom Christmas dinner this year. And I’m going to

help you.”

Looking up at me with wide eyes, his voice is quiet when he asks, “are you serious?”

“As a heart attack. Because your mom works hard and she deserves it. And you deserve to show her what a responsible kid you’re becoming.”

He looks back down into the bags and takes a second before his gaze comes back to mine, warmth and emotion swirling in his eyes. “I want to be the man of the house for her once I turn thirteen.”

I drop a hand to his shoulder and give him a squeeze. “You will be. I’ll teach you how to cook. You’ve already got the yard work down,” I say, peering through the foggy window at the yard. Weeds have been pulled and while snow still sheets the lawn, I can see that Zeth has been using the tools I got him. The yard is looking better and what’s more, he’s taking pride in his home and helping his mom, and that’s really what it’s about.

“I gotta get to work, but you take these in and tomorrow after work, I’ll come by and show you how to make stuffing and gravy, and we’ll do the turkey together.”

“How’d you learn to cook?” he asks, looking at me like I hold all the answers to the world. I wish I did, kid.

“I taught myself,” I admit. “And I’m not the best, but I can show you how to make a nice Christmas dinner, okay?”

He nods. “I believe you.”



WORK IS busy and I’m dying to ask Delane to come over tonight. After I wrote that letter to my dad, I realized that being in love is meaningless if you don’t share it. And whether she feels the same or not, I need to tell her. I need to share. I’m dying for more of her.

“Yo, Beau ordered tacos. Group lunch,” Atticus shouts through the open bay flooring to where I’m beneath, staring up at him.

“When?”

“Now,” he says, stomping away.

After washing my hands in the shop bathroom and grabbing my water, I meet Beau, Atticus, and Delane at the desk, finding them sitting around a sea of white bags, the smell of chicken and cilantro making my mouth water.

Spinning my hat backward, I take a seat across from Delane. Sitting next to her doesn’t feel right with Beau and Atti around, and this way I can admire her as I eat.

Our eyes catch as our gazes traverse the bags of food. Her smile is small and her cheeks rosy as I grin back at her. Then I focus on the plate of tacos Beau passes to me, because if I stare at her or try to pass her a sly, flirty expression and it gets intercepted by Atticus? Not something I really want to risk with how I’m feeling today.

Beau starts talking about Beck and the kids, telling a cute story about Jett drawing a picture of them. Leaning back from the table to dust his lap of escaped bites of taco, he shakes his head.

“Not too long ago I was lost and now I’m married with kids and... fuck if I’m not maximum happy,” he beams at his lap as he continues to make a mess on the floor, shaking his head. “It’s strange, sometimes, reflecting on it. She was so close all along,” he says, scooting back close to the table, reaching for his iced tea.

Atticus grunts a response. “It is. Life’s like that. One day you’re chopped liver, the next day you’re a King.”

Feeling heat climb the back of my neck, I grab my water and take a long, hard pull, letting the liquid cool me from the inside out. Risking a glance, I look at Delane who is staring into her plate of tacos, refusing to look at anyone as she sips her drink. Feeling brave but also desperate to touch her, I stretch my leg beneath the desk, catching her ankle with the

top of my boot. Slowly, I slide my foot up her calf then down again, over and over, as discreetly as possible.

Her eyes flutter closed for a split second and in that moment my heart shifts, my bones throb, and my brain goes into overdrive. My body and all of its senses are alert. Is Delane feeling something for me, too? Still moving my foot up and down her leg, I watch her control her breathing and lick her lips.

Beau and Atticus, who are oblivious to our under table shenanigans, continue their love parade.

“Being with her is the final piece. I didn’t know a piece was missing but now I know I am complete,” he says, staring out the glass building into the parking lot. Atticus nods along in silent agreement.

“Love is really the human condition,” he says, and no sooner do the words leave him does Delane get up from her chair, and I’m left with my leg outstretched to nothing.

She crumples her plate and tosses it in the trash. “Thanks for lunch, Beau.”

He lifts two fingers in the air. “Yep.”

Did she get up right then because she wanted to or was it me rubbing her leg? Was it Beau? Was all the love and serious talk getting on her nerves? I scratch the side of my unkempt jaw, and try to fill myself with some of the confidence she’d given me.

Instead of letting my mind run away with itself, I get to my feet and do what she’d do or at least tell me to do: take action.

I clean up my spot and head to the stockroom, finding her there with her EarPods in, the iPad tilted away from her chest as she inventories wiper blades. I tap her shoulder and she spins, looking annoyed and startled when she faces me. Her expression shifts when I smile, and she returns the happiness for a second.

Then she frowns. “What’s up?” she pops out the EarPod and I take a deep breath.

“Can you come over tonight? Please? I need to talk to you.”

I hate that she looks unsure for a few seconds that last way too fucking long. “Okay,” she says finally and then she smiles but it’s all wrong. It’s a picture hung over a hole in the wall and I fucking hate it.

“Are you okay?” Why is my voice so weak? Why is my pulse hammering in my ears?

She nods, her fingers tangling with a stray curl at the nape of her neck. “I’m fine. See you tonight then.” She peers over each shoulder quickly before smiling up at me, still all wrong. “Seven?”

I nod. “Seven.”

Something’s off and the feeling it gives me is nothing short of a knife to my belly.

And yet I still want to make sure she’s clear about how I feel. Only now, I wonder if words are the answer. They say actions speak louder than words. Maybe that’s what she needs from life? A big action.

Maybe I can give her that.



DELANE COMES OVER RIGHT at seven, I mean, exactly. And I leaned against the front door with my head resting against the cold wood, waiting for her for the twenty minutes leading up to it.

I couldn’t sit on the couch and pretend like my whole life couldn’t potentially catch fire and blaze. I’d already grabbed groceries, worked out, and showered. I couldn’t even jerk off in said shower because I was so nervous about tonight.

About what I’d decided I’d tell her.

More so, what her reaction would be.

Before I took up residence against the door, I looked some stuff up on my laptop that I could add to The Mechanics Bible. Maybe even see if I could get some things together and make her a new notebook.

But I had to stop planning. I couldn't plan for anything until after tonight. So I leaned against the door and now she's here, stepping inside, shrugging off her black parka.

"You smell good," I comment as I slide the chain through the lock. She twists the deadbolt and smiles. A real fucking smile. And I swear, I can't stop myself, I sigh out loud in relief.

"Oh my god," I exhale, clamping my palm down against the wall, gripping it to center myself.

She grabs my other arm which hangs limp at my side, weaving her fingers through mine, cupping her other hand over the top of ours. "Are you okay? What's wrong?"

With my head hung as I grab a lungful of air, so relieved that I'm actually weak for a moment, I blink at her. "You smiled."

Her face grows serious and my heart beat tempers from the excitement, the swift change in demeanor making my spine lengthen. I remove my hand from the wall and gaze down at her, loving the light swirl of honey near her pupils. Gorgeous.

Truly fucking gorgeous.

"I always smile," she hedges, but something in her tone is asking me for more. She wants to know exactly what I mean, and I'll take her interest as just that: *interest*.

"At Kings, after lunch, you looked... different. Upset maybe. Well, I worried you were upset." I study her eyes but they remain motionless, sunk into mine as she slowly breathes up at me.

"I'm okay," she says, and I know it's a partial truth. But I also know Laney isn't a liar. If she's temporarily protecting the truth or just momentarily shielding me from it, she has a reason. I trust her.

I nod. “Okay.” Maybe this isn’t the time for a deep proclamation. Something doesn’t feel right and in truth, without the cage on, I do feel... exposed. And with her giving off this energy, it feels smart to reroute.

Her hand strokes the top of mine. “What did you want to talk to me about?”

The pad of her thumb is soft like velvet, and goosebumps break out along my skin as she strokes my wrist. In my jeans, I’m hard. There’s a lump in my throat. My breathing is growing quicker. I really wish I was wearing the cage. Thinking quick, I decide to share another truth. Not as deep perhaps, but something I want all the same.

“I want to progress this.” Gung-gung. Gung-gung. My heart is all I can hear. I nearly lose my balance from how hard my heart is throwing itself around in there. “I want to have sex with you tonight, Delane.”

Words can wait. Action. I’ve got the courage for action tonight.

“What?” She blinks a few times looking completely incoherent.

“I want to have sex with you.” I clear my throat, trying to avoid the lingering embarrassment I always feel when I say these words. “I don’t want to be a virgin anymore.” *And you’re my dream woman. If losing your virginity to the woman who will always own you isn’t a good reason, I don’t know what is.* Instead of that, I say, “I want to... be inside you. Tonight.” I swallow, which quiets the gung-gung rattling my brain.

“You do?” she says, her hand again nervously stretching the column of her neck, searching for stray curls to distract her.

Taking advantage of our linked hands, I lead us down the hall. Delane stops us and when I turn to ask her if she’s having second thoughts, I see why she’s stopped. Crouched, she uses her free hand to scratch Salsa’s chin as he winds around her, purring loudly. Cockblock.

“Now you can’t be mad at me for ignoring you the other night,” she says. She rises and pats her hand to my thickening cock, making me jolt back with a laugh. “Didn’t want you to be jealous,” she laughs.

But once the bedroom door is closed, and Salsa is outside, we’re alone and distraction free. I reach behind my head, grabbing the collar of my long sleeved henley. Giving it a tug, I take it off and toss it aside.

“The Miller that’s sucked my tits doesn’t fold his clothes,” she teases, but what teases me more than our inside joke is the raspy and completely broken tone she uses. Like she’s burning alive from the inside out, the same way I feel.

She takes off her shirt, and it joins mine on the floor.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I ask her, not wanting her to do anything she doesn’t want to do just because I want to do it. That’s not going to fucking happen.

She reaches for the top of her pants, the button popping open with a quiet blip. “I should be asking you that, no?”

I shrug and unbutton my own pants. Our jeans whoosh to the floor with a thud. We exchange grins as we step off and kick them aside. The way her narrow waist gives way to the gentle flare of her hips, how her breasts fit perfectly in my palms—my dick hardens just looking at her in a pair of black cotton panties and a plain black bra.

“I want to, Miller. I want to. Okay?” She closes the space between us, and cups her slight hand to my cheek. Playfully, she rears it back and gives my face a slap. “Got it, good boy?”

A purr rolls through my balls. And then I realize she’s making a little moaning noise as she strokes her hand across my bare chest, and I can feel that purring in my sac.

“Are you gonna tease me first?”

She pushes to her toes and drags the tip of her tongue across my lips in a fast, wet lick. “You fucking know it.”

“Wait—” I stop her. “I actually don’t have any condoms.”

“I’m protected,” she says easily, “don’t worry.”

Trusting her, I leave it there.

A moment later we're stripped bare, she guides me to the bed. Her hand is clammy and I wonder if she's nervous. I thought I would be nervous. I thought if and when this day ever came, I'd fuck it all up with bumbling, nervous energy.

But my stomach is calm. My heart beats like normal. The sun isn't any hotter and the moon isn't any brighter.

And that unexpected calm tells me that everything I feel for Delane is real and that real love is this level of excited comfort. I'm dying to sink into her, but... I'm not worried about ruining it.

Searching her eyes, I hate that I don't know how she's feeling. But she strokes my arm and silently directs me to get on my back. She drapes herself over my right side, lowering her mouth to my nipple. My cock rests heavily against my lower belly, my balls already complaining, the desire to orgasm already right there.

When she seals her mouth to my chest and sucks my nipple onto her tongue, sucking me in dizzying intervals while her hand plays with my balls—my spine seizes. Lurching forward out of the pillows, I clamp my hand down on the first thing I can—which ends up being her bare ass.

I squeeze her cheek, getting further from the respite I was looking for. "Oh god," I groan, lifting my palm from her ass, "that's... that's not helping."

She giggles against my chest, but from where she's pressed into my side, I can feel her heart beating crazy fast. I stroke my fingertips down her spine as she curls herself deeper into me, making my chest tight from the swell. "I don't think you can be tortured tonight," she says finally, walking two fingertips up the ridge of my hard shaft as her lips tease my nipple.

I hold my hips still, refusing to let them jerk forward. "I don't think so either," I groan. And the fact that I haven't jerked off in two days is not boding well for me, either. Still, I reach between us and drag the tips of my fingers between her

lips, a deep groan lumbering free from my chest as I discover her swollen and wet. She moans, but jerks back quickly, and I lose the contact.

Rolling onto her back, she grips my bicep, giving me a tug. “Lie over me,” she directs, and it’s then I realize... we’re done with foreplay. Saying I can’t be tortured meant... we’re moving on.

We’re going to have sex.

I drop my elbows to the mattress, my face hovering over hers with the clearance of just a few inches. My cock rests against the inside of her thigh, and the warmth of her body against mine nearly does me in.

She reaches beneath my arms, and skates her palms down my bare back. Reaching between us, I grab my cock, stifling a groan as it pulses in my grip. Aligning myself with her, her hands suddenly clutch at my back. “Wait, Miller.”

I find her eyes and see worry in them. “We don’t have to,” I say, releasing the hold I have on myself. I go back to both arms curled at her shoulders.

“I want to, I just wanted to say... It’s my first time, too.”

I pull back, propping myself on my palms, my body swaying over hers. “What?”

“Just that... I’m a virgin, too.”

Though I’m not upright, I swear my stomach drops as her words worm through my consciousness. She’s a virgin, too?

Before I know it, I’m no longer naked, swaying over the woman I love, about to make love to her. I’m now standing, jumping into a pair of sweats I swiped from the floor. Sliding to the edge of the bed, panic swelling in her eyes, Delane clutches the sheet to her chest with both hands.

“What’s the matter? Miller? What’s wrong?”

I tug the white cord at my waist, cinching the sweats. “You’re supposed to be freeing me of insecurities, starting where it all changes everything; that’s what you said.”

She nods her head, and she swipes a loose curl from her forehead. “Yeah. And I am. You learned confidence with the cage that carried over when you took it off. You enjoyed the last time we were together without being in your head.”

Fuck. That’s what makes her omission hurt that much worse— we *were* getting along so well. She was building my confidence. Tonight, even, I’d just gone through a whole bit in my mind about how amazing it was that I wasn’t shitting myself with nerves.

But it was all based on a lie. I feel betrayed.

“You’re a virgin, Delane.”

Shock splits her lips, and her jaw volleys wordlessly a few times before she lets out a low, sardonic laugh. “I listen to a ton of romance novels. I may not have had sex yet, but I’m well versed. If you’re doubting my skills, I know what I’m doing.”

She really thinks this is about some agreement to skill swap? My head swells with pressure, and I feel light on my feet. Bending over, I swipe a t-shirt off the ground and feed my arms through.

“It’s not about skills or what you can do, Delane.” I close the gap between us, my words melting out of me in a quiet rage. “I told you I’m a virgin. I’m a twenty-six-year-old mechanic. That was a hard thing for me to admit.” I slide my fingers around her throat and grip the back of her neck, only gently, though. “You lied, or at the very least you deceived me. You never told me you were a virgin, too.” I take a moment to remember her wide dark eyes and the feel of her naked skin beneath my hand. “I trusted you. But you didn’t trust me.”

I let go of her.

I grab my hoodie and pull it on, heading to the bedroom door. With my hand wrapping the knob, I cast my chin to my shoulder, not looking at her but speaking toward her. “You should go.”

“Miller,” she says, her voice trembling but fighting. Fighting for my attention, to speak her peace, but there’s

nothing to say. I came through with my deepest and darkest insecurity and poured myself into her open palms, asking her to guide and shape me so I could meet someone without being crippled by some stupid stigma about virginity.

She could have eased the pain and embarrassment. We could have bonded. It could have brought us closer. She could have... it doesn't matter.

Feeling sick and depressed, I double check my door is locked and pour food for Salsa, text Beau I won't be coming in tomorrow, grab a pillow and lie on the couch with the TV flickering against my face.

I'm not sleeping in my bed.

I can't go in there right now.

We were so close. I was going to talk to her after we had sex. Explain to her why I wanted it to be with her and what she means to me.

And now... I don't know.

I close my eyes and am grateful to feel overwhelmed with sleepiness right away.

eighteen

...

delane

I *really* fucked up.

“He’s not here?” I ask again, for the third time, my mind spinning. Not just my mind, actually. News of Miller not showing up for work today is making me dizzy, actually.

“No.” Beau looks rightfully puzzled. “Why?” He looks around the waiting room, checking the computer to make sure all of the appointments are accounted for. Returning to me with a questioning gaze, he asks, “what’s up?”

I fall back onto the stool to catch my breath, swiveling quickly to face my computer so that Beau can’t see the tear that streams down my cheek. Using my shoulder, I brush it away nonchalantly. “Go work. It’s nothing. Bye,” I deadpan, tilting my chin up ever so slightly to discreetly stop the tears from falling.

I don’t know if his handful of years as a married man has made him smarter when it comes to women or if all my years of audiobook listening have made me a grade-a actor or what but I’m grateful that he leaves.

Except when a large hand clamps down on my shoulder, I sigh. Can I ever just have a moment without Atticus being up my butt?

“Atticus,” I sigh, my voice wobbly with emotion. “Not today.”

He spins me to face him, and I find him sitting on the stool right next to mine. “Why ain’t Miller here?”

I shrug, hoping my tears go away soon because something tells me Atti isn’t going anywhere.

He nudges me with his elbow and though it’s soft, it’s too much pressure. I’m at the max. Last night was about to be amazing, and wham, out of nowhere, we’re... over.

Before we had sex, I wanted him to *know*. I told him, and he viewed it as a betrayal. But was not telling him *actually* a lie? I didn't think so but now, today, feeling like my soul has literally melted out of my body, I think maybe I was wrong.

“Laney, talk to me.” Turning to face him, I let my wall come crashing down, too tired and scared to keep it up. Tears stream down my cheeks as I grab at the sides of my hair, tugging it back, rocking forward, my head shaking.

“I don't know how this happened. It was fine. Everything was casual, then it wasn't, and then we were going to... and now he's not here.” Soothing hands rest on my shoulders, righting my body on the stool. From his pocket, Atticus retrieves a navy blue handkerchief. You know your heart is really broken when you let greasy Atti wipe your tears with his sweat rag.

But yep, that's where I'm at. He tucks it in my curled fist, predicting the tears aren't stopping anytime soon. He pats my knee and gets my attention. “No stream of consciousness crying shit. Tell me what's goin' on. Tell me what happened.”

Without sparing a single detail, I pour my guts out to Atti, who doesn't make a peep the entire time. He just sits and listens, even helping a customer with an appointment when they walk in mid-story. And when I've caught him up to the part where Miller and I were about to have sex for the first time and what happened, he reaches for his water and takes a long pull.

I twist my fingers together in my lap, searching his features for anything. A reaction of any kind, anything to bring my stress and tension down. But after he's allowed himself a minute or two to think, he faces me, a large hand stroking down the length of his beard.

“Why didn't you just tell him when he told you?”

I shake my head. “I don't know. Honestly, I think...” I trail off for a moment, really considering the one question that has been eating me alive since last night. “I wanted him to, like, look up to me or feel like he needed me or something.” I swipe his handkerchief beneath my eyes. “I knew I could benefit him

and show him how amazing he is, and I also knew he could help me move my shit here forward, too.”

“Which thing was more important?” He taps the toe of his boot on the floor once. “Helpin’ each other out,” he gruffs, tapping his boot again. “Or gettin’ extra time with a guy you’ve been tellin’ yourself you don’t like?”

My bottom lip wobbles and the hinges of my jaw burn with the aggressive sob I’m holding back. Atti pats my back, leaving his hand there for comfort. “Let it out.”

Letting my face fall to my hands, I let out exactly four ugly sobs, my shoulders wracking and my gut clenching hard with each deep cry. And then I sit up and pull it together, doing more damage to Atti’s handkerchief, which smells more like heartache than BO now.

“I didn’t really think it would be anything more than fun for a few months. I’d move on and get busy with the apprenticeship, and he’d find a girl and get her a ring.” I shake my head, another errant tear slipping free. “I didn’t think I’d fall in love.” I let out a long, soul-wracking sigh. “It was a mistake, all of it.”

Atticus shouts at me. Literally raises his voice and drops his other palm to the Plexi. “Hey! Don’t be sayin’ dumb shit like that.”

Startling, the hand he has on my back moves, calming me again. And this is why I tolerate Atti’s lip—because when the going gets tough, he’s here for me like every pseudo-older brother would be. “What’s dumb?” I wipe snot with my sleeve. Heartbreak is ugly in many ways.

“It wasn’t no mistake. So don’t be sayin’ shit like that. That’s the hurt talkin’.” He takes his hand off my back, leaning away as he clears his throat. Linking his hands together on the desk, he looks straightforward as he delivers me the deal.

“You should have told him about you. He ain’t wrong there. Omissions are lies, Laney. And you know that. So what you gotta do now is figure out in that smart brain of yours *why* you didn’t trust him. *Why* you omitted. And then you gotta tell

him. Tell him and save that poor man because I think you and I both know he's hurtin' right now because he feels like you two ain't as close as he thought." He strokes a hand down his beard. "That aligns with other relationships in his past."

Oh my god. My stomach lurches into a tight knot of disgust. I made him feel like his family? I slap my hand to my mouth because I can't stomach this. That I would make him feel that way. "Oh my god," the words rush out in a panicked breath.

"But if you tell him *why* you did it, it'll be okay." He strokes his beard. "You lied because you wanted to keep spendin' time with him, and you like him so much that you didn't think you could stand it if he turned you down if he knew." He teeters his flattened palm between us. "How close am I?"

I let out a wild, deep sob. "It annoys me," I cry, "it annoys me *greatly* that you're right."

He sighs with great despair. "It annoys *me* greatly that I'm the love advice guy now."

The fact that Atticus is more aware of and, in tune, with my true feelings than I am doesn't help to ease my woes. And after a momentary sob in which I bat away Atticus's sympathy shoulder grab or whatever the fuck, I lift my head and take a breath.

"Well, I have to shelve all of my horrible fuck ups for a few hours and then a couple more after work." I pat beneath my eyes and turn to Atti. "I have to take Mara to karate tonight." Then more to myself than Atti, I say, "I can't believe I fucked this up."

His boot connects with my ankle, and my gaze snaps to his with irritation. "Ain't nothin' too fucked up yet." He lets his boot crush loudly against the floor as he stands. "And quit actin' like you ain't as good as him. That's... just plain fuckin' stupid talk. You might be annoying, but you ain't dumb."

He leaves, the slamming door making me jolt. My senses are all off if I couldn't prepare for a noise I hear a thousand

times a day.

I get through the rest of the morning leading to lunch with relative ease. I pop my EarPods in and listen to my book, happy to be at the part in the story where they, too, are miserable. Though I know they'll reach their HEA before me, I'm eager to ride out their misery with them for now.

It loves company, after all.

When it's time to grab Mara from school— she's allowed half days twice a month for her pre-comp practices for her adaptive athlete allowance— I put on a nice, fake smile and manage to hide my misery.

I did that by staying silent.

Pulling into the parking lot at her Kumite practice, she prods my arm with her bony finger. “Why are you smiling like a psychopath?”

I laugh uncomfortably because I was pretty much acting just like that. She's not wrong. “Nothing, just... tired,” I lie, and not because I want to lie to Mara. That's not how our family rolls. My mom always says, *there is nothing you can tell me that is worse than you lying to me*. But spilling my guts to a twelve-year-old isn't healthy, considering the situation is all based around... sex.

“Actually,” I say, sending her a small, awkward smile through the cab as I figure out my words. Because now that I'm thinking about it, it's not about sex.

It's about not being real with him when he put it all out there for me and laid it bare.

I did have the perfect opportunity to bring us together. To lessen his nerves and assure him—using my sexually confident self as an example—that he could find and gain confidence with or without sex. That confidence came from knowing yourself and respecting your own truths.

I was teaching him the right lesson but all the wrong ways.

Not to mention, the truth is, I didn't tell him because... I wanted him to want me, and I thought that experience in that

arena was the only way.

God, I really messed all of this up.

“Actually, what? You started a sentence then just drifted off,” Mara says, leaning forward to find answers in my eyes.

“Actually, I had a fight with Miller.” *I hope it’s just a fight*, I think to myself as I push my hair up into a ponytail, looping my scarf around my neck. I fish my fingers into my gloves and look over at her. “I didn’t tell him something I should have told him because I was thinking of myself instead of him.”

“That’s okay, right? To think of yourself and put yourself first?” Mara asks, bumping her knee into mine, trying as best as she knows how to make me feel better.

I nod. “Sometimes. And I don’t want you to mistake this for me saying that your man needs to be happy over you because I’m not.” I rub my palms down my thighs, thinking of his and how strong and muscled they are. How strong and muscled he is everywhere. How my chest can ache and feel hollow while the bud between my thighs can pulse and quake is a very cruel design of the human body.

“I just mean, sometimes if you care about someone and want to make things work with them, you have to give things that you yourself are asking in return.”

Mara rolls her eyes as she pops the side door open and swings her leg out. “I thought you were gonna give me smart life advice but *give people what you want them to give you?*” She winces. “Don’t quit your day job to be a philosopher; that’s all I’m saying.”

Making me laugh, I throw my fist into her arm playfully, and she jumps out of the car with a giggle. “I’m surprised you know what a philosopher is,” I muse, making sure she’s collected everything she needs from the backseat of the car. Carrying her bag over one shoulder and gripping the strap with her free hand as she stands in the snow-slushed road, waiting.

“I got everything, *mom*; now let’s go.”

After I finish locking up and double-checking, we head inside, and Mara immediately splits, leaving me carrying her

bag and mine, our snack bag, and my water. One extremely overlaid duck walk later, and I've got myself perched on the perfect bleacher, close to the bottom but not ground level. I can see Mara's class; I have an eye on the hallway where Rock's class is, and I can see the front door easily, too. Literally perfect. Although it would be nice to be able to come here without strategically sitting places I feel I can easily escape from, that's not where I'm at, so instead of wishing, I simply sit where I can protect myself.

An hour passes and Mara is sweaty and looking aggravated. I motion to her to keep her head up, which she acknowledges with a nod. This comp practice is harsh, and Mara is paired with another competitor outside her range. The purpose is meant to test her mentally—she isn't expected to beat her, but she is expected to alter and strengthen her expectations of the match to make it as successful as possible. She's struggling, but Mara's always been one of those fighters that really shines in the eleventh hour.

After giving Mara a few more mouthed words of encouragement, I dig around in my bag for my EarPods, needing a hit of the sad shit to commiserate. Because if I'm not thinking about Mara or where to sit at karate or if the backseat is empty, I'm thinking about *him*.

Less than twenty-four hours ago, things were good. Today my heart is broken, and Miller didn't come to work today.

I start to spin out when that simple fact comes careening back. I hurt him enough that Miller, the hardest working guy I arguably know outside of Art and Mom, needed to miss a day of work so that he didn't have to be around *me* for a hot second.

I grip my stomach over my clothes, bringing no ease to the ache, but clutching myself is all I can do. I can't take away my discomfort so I just sit there, EarPods sharing a story of heartbreak with me, hand on my gut, tears in my eyes.

For a split second, while my eyes are tracking the two muscular bodies moving together along the edges of the mat, I think about what it would be like with Miller had he known.

Night one, had I admitted I was a virgin, would we have even started this deal swap? My bottom lip trembles as I begin to circle back to the same answer that's been drifting around my brain: *no*.

The same way that I wouldn't have agreed to this thing with him if he promised he was a great mechanic but hadn't actually worked on a car yet.

I fucked up.

I *really* fucked up.

And the worst part about being the one who fucks up? It's all on you to make it right. Tearing my eyes from my sister, I dig out my phone and open a text message to him.

But what do I say?

I type a few things and delete them. I type "I'm sorry" and hover my finger over send for a while before deleting that, too.

I need to apologize.

Instead of feeling sad for myself, I need to take action and prove to Miller, no matter what happens between us, that I am sorry for not being truthful and that I do see I was wrong for hiding the fact that... *I'm a virgin*.

Maybe I'm more self-conscious of that fact than I realized.

"Laney," a voice calls out my name, hoarse and raspy, and though the room is full of echoed shouts and hushed conversations, I look up over the shining gymnasium floor, trying to see if he's here or if I'm straight hallucinating his voice. My hands begin to tremble around my phone as my gaze searches the gym more frantically, determined to find him.

My bottom lip develops a tremble when I hear it again. "Laney."

Right as I stand up and shove my phone away, ready to give this all my focus because if he's not here, I need to go to the emergency room because I swear I'm hearing him. My fingers curl at my sides as I search because... I swear he's here. I feel him.

Then out of nowhere, at my side, standing a bleacher below but a foot taller than me still, is Miller.

Bags have staked claim to real estate below his eyes, but he's still wearing that adorable and intoxicating lopsided grin of his. With his hands stuffed in his pockets, a trademark Navy blue baseball cap tugged over his hair, I fall back onto my butt, staring up at him. My eyes fill as he takes a seat next to me. I watch his large palm cover mine, and as he stitches our fingers together, my chest tightens.

"Can we go outside and talk?" he asks, studying our linked hands, focusing on everything but me. I don't know if that makes me feel better or worse, but he's here, holding my hand, wanting to talk.

"Yes," I answer instantly, climbing down the bleachers and dragging him into a corner of privacy in the hall near the drinking fountain.

Once we're in a sliver of privacy together, my heart is beating so loudly, and I'm so fucking aware of my second chance that my mouth runs away from me.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you I'm a virgin," I rush out, practically bouncing on my feet with how eager I am to get the words out. "I'm so sorry, Miller. I realize that it would have made you feel a lot better, for one, but also, that it was just wrong to not tell you. I really just thought we'd swap services and move on. I didn't tell you because I felt confident I could show you how to be confident without you having to know my actual experience level. And I know now that I was just filling both of our heads with bullshit because I was just afraid to admit that... I wanted to keep spending time with you." I roll my lips together, forcing everything out because Atticus was right. I have to tell him why I lied because admitting that I did just isn't enough.

"I've always thought of you as being someone who is way out of my league. I do feel confident in my abilities from how much I've heard in my books. But the truth is, I thought if I told you I'm a virgin, I'd lose some edge in your eyes. And this was my shot at having some time with you."

With my bottom lip fully trembling, I hold his wide, emerald eyes, which are focused on me so intently that it steals my breath a little. I've never been looked at by a man the way that Miller looks at me. And I'm not ready to lose it, but I realize I may anyway.

"I didn't expect to fall in love with you and have all of this mean so much more. But here we are." I shrug, letting the tears swim freely down my cheeks. There's no point in trying to stave them off now. "I'm sorry, Miller. I was trying to have the best of both worlds. Get my skills sharp for the apprentice exam, help you out, and selfishly get you in a way I never thought I could. I thought I was balancing it all. But then... I fell in love, and my lie hurt you, and I'm sorry."

He stares down into my eyes, jaw set with control.

"Say something." My voice is terrifyingly hoarse. "I'm sorry, Miller. But please, say something." I reach out and wrap my hand around his wrist since his hands are back in his pockets. "Please say you will still be my friend at Kings. I don't want to ruin what we had at Kings."

He takes his hand out of his pocket, stealing mine. Our fingers waffle together, and the gesture melts the unease in my belly, leaving me woozy and warm.

When he clears his throat, my senses jump. "You love me?" His hold on my hand tightens.

"Sickeningly so."

nineteen

...

milller

I asked Atticus where I could find you.

“Yeah?” I blink, watching tears skate down her soft cheeks, her full pink lips curved in a soft smile.

“Yeah,” she breathes, driving her other hand into my pocket to fish mine out. With both hands linking us, she steps into me. “I’m sorry. I should have told you.”

Her surprising admission—*that she’s in love with me*—it’s... I can hardly fucking move. I don’t say it back, not yet. It doesn’t feel right with kids and adults everywhere and wandering eyes sticking on us. Though not saying it back right now is really hard, I have things I need to say and I don’t want to say them here.

“Let’s go to my place after Mara’s class, and we can talk, okay?” I stroke my thumbs along hers as she nods.

“How’d you know I was here?” she asks, her eyes never breaking the connection with mine. I don’t want to look away either because the last nearly twenty-four hours have been fucking hell.

I called in to work to try and right my head.

I wondered if she hadn’t told me about her virginity because she never planned on having sex with me.

I considered that maybe she didn’t tell me because she really did believe her books had taught her what she needed to know. It was only when Atticus texted me this morning that everything fell in line and I was no longer left wondering about Delane’s reasoning for not giving me the one truth I gave her.

ATTICUS

People lie to protect themselves from a truth they ain’t ready to admit just yet.

Maybe now she's ready to admit it.

I didn't bother responding to him because I knew what the message meant. That she hadn't been honest for a specific reason, and that fact brought me hope. Because it didn't make sense to me that Laney would have lied, knowing that she had a reason—whatever it was—made it possible for me to get off my couch and get dressed.

I'd asked Atticus where I could find Delane this afternoon since I knew it was her day to take Mara to karate.

"I asked Atticus where I could find you."

She shakes her head, wiping under her nose with the back of her wrist. "I should have been looking for you. I owed you an apology."

Guiding her to the gym, we make our way back to her stuff, where I help her collect it in silence, both of us passing core-warming energy back and forth in subtle touches and small smiles. Mara approaches us just as we're done clearing the spot.

"Hi, Miller," she says, sweat beading along her upper brow, a smear of dirt running the length of her forearm. I pinch the fabric of the gi.

"Foot?"

She looks at the dusting along the fabric and nods. "Yep, but it'll come out. There hasn't been a single stain we couldn't get rid of, right?"

Mara turns to Delane, whose cheeks are flush, gaze far off, and I realize then because I didn't say it back, now that the adrenaline is settling, she may be worried.

As Mara says goodbye to some girls nearby, I drop my hand to Delane's lower back, bringing my lips to her ear, my words kept private by the wall of her curls curtaining her shoulder. "I have so much to say to you when we get to my place."

She swallows as we peel apart. "Yeah?" Her eyebrows twitch a little.

I lean in again. “It’s going to be okay, alright? I just... want to talk to you at my place.”

As if my words were all she needed, my chest tightens at the elated smile she gives me.

I follow behind Delane as she drops Mara back at home. I watch the glow of her phone come to her ear as she idles along the curb in front of her house. A moment later, Art appears in the kitchen window, his phone held to his ear.

I like that she’s telling him she’s coming to my place. She doesn’t have to lie because they trust her. And she can go because she has freedom. And more than all of that, I like that she *wants* to tell them. That she cares about her family enough that she doesn’t just send Mara up to the house with a message as she drives away.

Once Art raises a hand to me, I wiggle my fingers at him through the front windshield, unsure if he can see but not taking the chance that I didn’t wave if he could.

Then, she calls me.

“Just wanted to tell them I’m going to your place.”

I can’t help but smile because last night, I wondered if she’d ever come over again. “I’m glad. They don’t mind you spending the night?”

There’s a pause. “Am I?”

I don’t waste any time answering that, not after everything. “Hell, yes, you are.”

Her laughter makes me hard. “Yeah, I told them. They don’t mind.” Her voice is so soft when she says, “my family really loves you, Miller.”

“Pull out, drive to my place; I’ll be behind you.” Suddenly, I’m overwhelmed with the desire to get home. “We’ll talk there.”



BACK AT MY APARTMENT, Delane and I walk up the stairs together. She's grinning, bumping my shoulder with hers, hands linked. Her breath huffs out in white clouds as I fidget with the key at the lock, finally getting us inside.

She twists the deadbolt as I slide the chain on.

She takes her coat off, hanging it up as I do the same. Our gloves come off. We kick off our boots. Her scarf is gone, and then mine, too. My cap is on the floor next to my hoodie, then she pulls her sweatshirt off, too. Another minute and we're already completely naked, just one foot inside my place. Taking her hand, I guide us down the hall, both of us ignoring Salsa for the moment.

Closing us inside, I pull back the covers to my bed and watch as Delane climbs in, the setting sun falling over the subtle curves of her breasts like paint splattered perfectly on a canvas. It's still early, not even quite dinnertime, but we both know exactly why we're climbing into bed.

We need this.

We need to share this first *together*.

I climb into the bed, my cock already growing fat and achy as I get a peek at her hardened nipples and trembling stomach.

With my head kept up on the palm of my hand, elbow to the mattress, I lean over her, just taking her in for a quiet second.

She stares up at me as if she knows I need this and just studies my features as I take in hers. That's what is so right about us—I've never felt like staring into someone's eyes while not speaking would be comfortable at all.

It's surprisingly not weird.

Time to say it back.

"I love you, Delane. I've known that for a while, but I never let myself consider how I felt because you're so smart, gorgeous, and fun...." I trail off, losing myself in the ethereal

smear of green circling her pupil. “I never thought you could love me. So I loved you from afar.”

When her bottom lip starts a generous tremble, I bring my mouth to hers in a slow, passionate kiss. A kiss where I feel her apology again, a kiss where I feel her love too. A kiss where... I get an idea of my future, and it’s just like this; the two of us together, whispering and kissing in the dark, touching and feeling, experiencing and promising, planning and thriving.

“You,” she pants when our mouths break apart. “You love me?”

I nod. “Atticus has been accusing me of it for a while. It turns out, the only thing harder than having Atticus be right is having him know it.”

She grins. “Tell me about it. I sadly do not think I’d be here with you if it weren’t for him poking his big greasy bun in my business.” Her smile falls away as I stroke the backs of my fingers down her hip and thigh. Her flesh pebbles beneath my touch, so I slide closer to her. So close that my hard cock now rests on her hip. “You’ve loved me?” she asks, retracing our steps back to what I’d just admitted; her tone says things she isn’t saying like she can’t understand how I could have loved her for so long.

I nod. “Loving you has been my constant the last few years.”

“I never thought I could have you,” she says, her voice quiet like she’s ashamed. I tip her chin up and take her mouth in what I hope is a reassuring kiss. “But I liked you, too. I liked you so much that I was a bit in denial about what you meant to me.”

I suck in a breath as she wraps her palm around my cock, stroking me from the root to the slick, dripping head. “So you love me, huh?” she asks, stroking me again.

Groaning, I tangle my fingers in her hair and hold the side of her head as I look down into her eyes. “So much, Laney.”

She swipes the pad of her thumb over my slit, stroking a stream of precum down my shaft as she does. “And I love you,” she breathes, pumping my cock faster now. “So much.”

“That,” I groan, the familiar tingle spreading through my balls and taint as she strokes. “Is hard for me to believe.”

Popping up off the mattress, she throws a leg around me, straddling my hips. Placing both hands against my chest, she smiles down at me. “See, this is why we started this in the first place. The fact that you can’t believe I’d love you.” Reaching between us, she positions my cock at her entrance but doesn’t sink down around me.

With both hands splayed against my chest yet again, she smiles. “We thought the same thing about each other; can you believe that?” Slowly, she wiggles her hips, feeding herself the crown of my cock. She winces, her quads flexing as she pushes herself off my cockhead a moment later.

“Should.. Do you want me to be on top?” I ask; missionary is largely the traditional position for this.

She shakes her head. “I like you being on your back for me,” she says, cheeks flush. And I have to admit, I do, too. In fact, while the best thing in the last few weeks was being with Delane, the second best thing was enjoying her control. Edging me, teasing me, showing me a world of orgasmic possibility— she sinks down a little more as I interrupt.

“I’ve liked you controlling things between us sexually,” I admit.

“Yeah?” she cocks a brow, and it’s then I let myself glance—just glance—at where her soft, pink cunt is spread around my cock, sucking me down, drinking me in. The sight of myself disappearing between those pouty lips makes me clench my ass and abs, desperate to diffuse the quickly mounting pressure in my cock. Clutching my chest, our eyes lock. “I like that, too.”

I swallow, and she smiles as our eyes come together in a blaze of emotion. “First, I want you to know I’m on birth control.” Our eyes hold, and I nod to acknowledge that I’m

fine with relying on a pill to keep us two instead of three. Truth be told, the idea of marrying Delane doesn't scare me. Raising kids with her doesn't scare me, either. In fact, it gets me kind of hard.

She smiles. "I'm going to go slow now until you're all the way inside me. It's going to be a little uncomfortable for me but don't worry, you won't *really* hurt me. Okay?" Sweat slides down my neck as I nod wordlessly because now that we're here—the right way—it's even harder not to lose control.

"I love you," I rasp, feeling like if there was ever a corny time to say it, it's definitely now. But I don't care.

Maybe that's who I am now that I'm with her.

I'm the corny guy who's wound around his girl because he's so fucking obsessed. I'm the guy who gives over control of our sex and my cock. And I like to cook; I don't mind cleaning, I want to wash her clothes and work on cars together. I like stroking her hair and hanging with her family, and listening to her talk about smutty audiobooks.

With her, I'm not even a sliver of the man I would've been had I *stayed*.

With her, I'm the mix of soft and hard that *I* want to be. I don't have to "work the land" and pin my woman to the mattress to put babies into her to be a man.

I'm my own man, and it's perfect for me because I have her.

That's really how I know it's all been worth it. The loss, the confusion, the heartache, the journey. Because we complete each other and again, as corny as that sounds, I wholeheartedly believe it.

"I love you too," she replies though as she does, she sinks deeper onto my cock, our playful natures dissipating with each inch. Her breath hitching with every inch she takes.

"Oh my god," I rasp, straining my head forward to peer down at where I am all the way inside of her. Her open pussy is pressed to my groin, spread wide to hold me inside her. "This feels so good," I comment, my voice broken, pulse

skyrocketing. Then I realize Delane's nose is wrinkled, sweat is beading along her brows, and her hands are curled into my chest like she's holding on for dear life.

My hands, which had rested idly on her hips, skate over the swells and valleys of her edges, coming to her face. Pulling her down, I love the way my cock bends inside of her as we share a long, wet kiss with her on top of me.

Grabbing some of her curls as I hold her face, I bring the tips of our noses together. "Does it hurt?"

She nods, kissing me again, this time sliding her tongue over mine, rolling them together with a moan. Then she's back to riding, her hands clinging to my bare chest like reins.

"I'll adjust," she breathes, eyelids fluttering closed as she lifts herself up on my cock to nearly hollow. She hovers there a minute, quads trembling with fatigue as she maintains the position, only allowing more of my body into hers every few seconds. Finally, again, I'm all the way inside of her, and the last thing I see before I slam my eyes closed is the look of heaven on her face.

"You're so beautiful," I groan, letting my hands melt over her body, exploring her hips, letting the nubbed tips of her nipples graze my palms as I take in handfuls of her.

"Open your eyes," she moans gingerly as her hips sway over mine, fucking me slow and soft, taking her time with us the way I'd always hoped she would.

The *she* wasn't always her. In recent years it had become her. When I closed my eyes and tugged my balls while stroking my shaft, emptied myself all over the shower wall, and woke up with a mess in the sheets after a particularly warm dream—all of that had been *her*. Fantasies and memories had fused together in my brain to bring me some of the most spine-twisting, soul-wrenching orgasms I'd ever had. I'd always wondered if we were actually together... What would our first time be like?

"I pictured this, just this way." I let my admission slip free, feeling security beneath her, the setting sun lowering a veil of

isolation around us. “The first time I saw it just like this.”

She stops riding to find my lips; our mouths temporarily lost to her barrage of curls and our mixing sweat. She pushes back to her seated position, riding me in quicker, shorter bursts than before.

“Does it feel good, or is it too sore?” I ask, not only because I want to know but also because focusing on anything other than the orgasm snaking its way through my veins right now is a smart idea.

I’m barely holding on.

When her lithe fingers fall to her clit, and she begins to stroke, taking one of her plump little breasts into her other palm, I close my eyes.

“Open your eyes,” she whispers the moment they’re shut. I do as she says because that’s all I’ve ever wanted to do. “Watch us cum together.”

I nod and sink my fingers into her hips and get lost in the erotic swaying of her over me, of me inside of her, of us together.

Knocking her hand away from her clit, I replace it with my thumb and make wide circles, groaning at just how soaked she is. “Like this?” I ask because I want her to cum. I want us to cum together so fucking bad.

She nods, letting her head fall back as she rides, looking like the most perfect, beautiful woman who has ever existed, seriously. Sweat swims down the valley between her breasts, glissading down her bare belly and our joined bodies. Everything about this moment is so fucking beautiful and perfect.

Picking up speed, she rides faster as the ends of her curls turn my thighs to gooseflesh with their subtle grazing. My thumb strokes her wet clit as my cock swells and torques inside, going where she goes, it’s toe-curling pleasure.

“Laney,” I pant, feeling my orgasm encircle me, no longer patiently waiting but rather being called to play.

“You ready, baby?” she asks, and that’s it. Those three words break me, flashes of white sound silently around my brain, and my jaw splits apart as my mouth hangs open. “Rub me fast, rub me fast,” she mewls as her hips come to a slow grind above me.

I rub her clit hard as I manage to croak her name one more time. “Laney.”

Then my body catches up with my brain, all the rest of me exploding in long, hot bursts. “I’m—” My cock erupts—like it has so many times before. But emptying myself inside of Delane feels so fucking different.

“Oh, Miller, *yes, baby, yes, yes, yes.*”

I cum in aggressive, hard shots, and each time I pulse inside her, she tightens around me, cumming in complementary waves, her small little pussy eagerly swallowing me whole.

We go like this, me unloading and groaning and clutching her while she grinds, grabs me, and takes every ounce of my orgasm, using it to wring out her own. When we’re coming down, and her orgasm has faded to trembling bliss, she slides off of me, dropping her head onto my chest.

We lie there in the growing dark, my cock draped over my thigh, Delane’s fingertips tracing the soft length tenderly.

Once I’ve caught my breath and got my bearings, with the arm draped around her back, I give her a shake. “How was it?”

She stacks her fists together and rests her chin on top, looking into my eyes. “More than I ever thought sex could be. Especially for the first time.”

Instinctually my hand falls to my sternum where I have the overwhelming need to stroke my chest and make those words stick because aside from knowing she loves me, knowing that having sex with me is already exceeding all her expectations? That’s something I want to remember; I know that much.

“I think I should get cleaned up, though,” she whispers before planting a kiss on my lips, then sitting up. I do the same, sitting up as I turn the bedside light on. We blink a few

times as we adjust to the warm lamp, and my chest hurts when I get a full view. Everything behind my ribs just aches.

The best ache.

“I can’t believe you’re mine,” I murmur, getting lost at the sight of her scooping her hair up, wrapping an elastic around the curls. She leans over me, leaving a kiss on my lips before I ask, “You’ll be my girlfriend, won’t you?”

Her smile is shy and all kinds of gorgeous. “I *guess* I will.”

She feeds her fingers through my stubble and crashes our mouths together, and after a minute of passionate kissing, I slide out from under her, casting her a wink with a promise I’ll return. And when I do, I come with a warm, damp towel and a dry fresh one.

“Lie back,” I rasp, and without argument, she does. Nestling myself between her thighs, I take the wet towel and smooth through her lips, spreading her open tenderly. A moment of delicate touching and wiping passes and my cum begins to slip out of her in lazy, thick streams. My careful wiping ceases as I watch much of my orgasm leave her body, creating a white puddle beneath her before disappearing into my bed.

I look up at her, feeling embarrassed to see her watching me. “It’s just...” I look back to her open sex on display, tracing the pink and exhausted parts of her that only I’ve had. “Incredible, really.” I look down again then back up to her, noting the pink shade. “Are you hurting?”

She smiles. “Maybe a little but in other ways, I feel better than ever.”

I wipe her again and take her hand, lifting her to a sitting position with a tug. When we stand, I wrap the clean towel around her so she doesn’t have to walk awkwardly naked to the bathroom.

“Wanna take a shower?” she asks, nodding as we walk.

I nod. “Can I wash your hair?”

She grins and pulls the curtain back. “You better.”



AFTER A SHOWER where washing Delane's hair turned into her giving me head—which somehow lasted even longer than the sex—I brought the washcloth to her inner thighs and carefully wiped away traces of her ravaged virginity.

I wrapped her hair in one towel and her body in another when we got out, and because she hadn't brought a bag, I dressed her in a pair of my sweats, a henley, and warm wool socks. I put her on the counter while she read through *The Mechanic's Bible*, asking me questions here and there as she flipped through. I made us French toast and eggs; we ate at my table while I stroked my foot up her calf. When we made it back to my bed, she held me by the ears and guided me to give her an orgasm with my tongue, which had me cumming into the mattress, too.

We cleaned up, and she'd fallen asleep curled into me, and it was the absolute best way to fall asleep.

Only, I can't fall asleep.

So much has transpired tonight that all the nerves, excitement, hope, and heartache had come together to make some sort of unstoppable adrenaline rush.

As much as I love lying with her in my bed, I slip out, toeing down the hall. Then I take my usual seat.

Sitting in front of a blank piece of paper, pen in the balance.

Dear Dad,

I was right about the woman I fell in love with. She's everything I knew her to be and more. And as much disappointment as I have brought you, I did something right in this life. I must have because she loves me back.

The woman I love has fallen in love with me too. You read that right.

I think I'm about to start my life now. It's unlikely that I'll make room for these letters as my life progresses, and that's how it has to be.

If you ever wonder where I am or how I'm doing or what I'm up to, just know that I'm living my life with the only one I was ever meant to be with. And that I'm happy. And good.

Take care.

Your Son,

Miller

I fold the bottom into the middle and the top over the middle, slide it inside a crisp envelope and add it to the stack existing in the box. Then, feeling a lot better, I join the woman I adore and fall asleep.

twenty

...

delane

I like *you* fucking *me*.

But I swear to god, if you guys embarrass me, he's never coming back. Got it?

MOM

We love Miller

And I take offense to that. How could we be embarrassing?

ART

We won't tell him he's your first boyfriend in over a year

And we won't show him the side of the house with the messed up stucco from your head when you crashed your bike ten years ago.

And we definitely won't mention the time you peed your pants playing Lazer Tag

Art, don't play with me

MOM

You can't see, but I smacked him one good. Don't worry, we will be on our best behavior

But you know that we know Miller, right dear?

I know, mom. I'm just saying... all the times you met him before were as a dude I work with. Now he's my boyfriend

MOM

Must have been some sleepover

Glad I took you to get on the pill when you were eighteen

Mom! Art is in the group chat!

MOM

Oh, he knows. How do you think Mara got here?

Mom joke!

ART

Good one, sweetie

Okay, no more parental fornication jokes or mentioning of said act. Just promise me everyone will be cool, okay?

We're right around the corner.

Turning to Miller, I find his eyes flitting between the road and me. He grins, and I feel it in my panties. If this is how being with Miller is, I'm legitimately scared for our friends and my family.

I reach over and drape my hand over his thigh, loving how his hard leg feels beneath my touch. "I can't keep my hands off you," I say, loving how he pats the middle seat between us. I unclip and slide over, my hand gaining surface area to explore.

"Ah," he croaks, "maybe try to keep 'em off, just for a little bit? Maybe just sit there and stare forward. Because if you rub my leg or touch me anywhere else, I won't be able to go inside."

I stick out my lip in a pout. "Fine."

“You sure your folks don’t mind if I drive to karate today?”

I roll my eyes. “I was there last night. It will be us two today. Next week Art will be there, and mom too. It’s a family affair, so don’t feel like our going is taking something away from them. Mara has karate shit to do all the time. There will be plenty more.”

We park in front of my house, and I return to my side of the cab and reach for the door handle when Miller stops me.

“Hey, Laney, real quick.”

I let my hand fall away from the handle. “Yeah?”

His cheeks are ruddy with cold, and his big frame seems to swallow his half of the cab, and my heart pounds at the realization that Miller is my boyfriend. This sweet man with the big heart and even bigger dick and orange cat is my boyfriend.

And he loves me.

“You date that guy, Rock?”

I edge toward him on the bench seat, waffling our fingers together as I respond. “I went out with him a couple of times. He tried to get me to put out, and well, I didn’t. We broke up. That was that.” I wave my hand through the air between us, trying to give the situation some levity. “We weren’t a couple so I don’t want to say we broke up like, *broke up*. I just mean... he didn’t like hearing no, but no was my favorite word for him so... we stopped meeting up.” I swallow, feeling the back of my neck grow clammy with this conversation. He has to know, and I’m glad he’s learning now to get it out of the way. I just really, really don’t like wasting time and energy on Rock.

“Do I have your permission to come to karate with you when it’s just you?” He brings my knuckles to his lips and kisses along them, making warmth blossom between my legs. “Please, Laney, please give me permission to be there with you. I don’t want you there alone, but I won’t insist on anything.”

I blink up at him, surprised by this man I know so well. “I love that you’re asking and not just insisting on being there.”

He takes my chin and brings my cheek to his lips, kissing me softly. “You’re a smart woman. I will never insinuate that I know better because I’m a man. But as the man that loves you, it would make me happy to know you were never down there alone. Not again, at least.”

Easily, I nod. “Okay. I’ll never be down there alone again.”

“Really?” he presses his lips along my knuckles again, drenching me in happy kisses.

“Thank you.”

We seal our agreement with a slow kiss.

Then we make our way inside my house, where mom and Art welcome Miller with a hug and a handshake, respectively. Mom serves us coffee and pastries, Art shows Miller the work he and I did together on his car two months ago, and after what feels like not enough time laughing and talking, Mara appears in her gi, ready to go.

On the drive, Miller and Mara talk about music and movies, which is funny to me because neither of them knows a great deal about either. But I get lost in their familiar voices, how easily they get along, and just how good I feel having these two parts of my heart collide.

Once there, Mara meets up with her class on the mat, leaving Miller and me to find a seat on the small set of portable bleachers nearby. I can’t stop staring at our linked hands, and in fact, I believe I miss most of the Kumite comp practice because of how fixated I am on them.

When Miller catches me in my haze, he grins, bringing me to life from head to toe.

“I love the way your hand looks around mine.”

He beams. “I can’t believe you like me back.”

At that comment, we both enjoy a full-bellied laugh. We laugh so hard that I blot at the corners of my eyes where tears collect, and he pulls his cap down over his face as he belts out

a few deep laughs. And then our watery eyes come together as we each catch our breath.

“So corny,” I breathe. “And I don’t just like you back.” I scoot close to him and bring my lips to his ear. “I love you back.”

Pulling away, he shoots me a sinister stare. “Technically, I love you back since you said it first.”

“Hmm,” I muse against his lips. “I guess that’s true.” I slide my hand up the back of his coat and flannel against his bare skin. With my nails drawing a sensitive line down his back, I tell him exactly what I want. “How about when we get back to your place, you prove how you love me back by being a good boy for a few hours.” I dance my brows at him as he pulls back. If he had a tail, it would be wagging with excitement right about now.

“I’ll be your good boy,” he breathes, curling his fingers around my thigh, making wetness gush from my cunt. “Any damn time.”



I DON'T THINK I've ever rushed Mara out of comp practice as fast as I did this morning. Sweet admissions of love turned promises of something sinister, and by the time I'd dropped Mara, grabbed my bag, and hopped into Miller's truck, my panties couldn't hold an extra drop.

Even though I'd told him he could wait outside, while I was inside grabbing some... *things*... Miller came inside and talked to mom and Art. When I emerged, I found them sharing Oreos over glasses of milk while he helped flip their puzzle pieces.

Art looked genuinely bummed to see him go, and it was at that point I decided I'd see if Miller wanted to come over somewhat regularly, not just to get close to my family but for Art, too.

Having been no contact with his own father since he was eighteen-years-old, I'd hoped that the suggestion wouldn't upset him or cause him to reflect back on his life. When I mentioned it to him, however, he swooped up my hand with his, kissed my knuckles (the way I'm learning he loves to do), and told me that it would "be an honor."

Now back at Miller's, he's brewing coffee and feeding Salsa, and I'm staring down at the duffel at my feet, beyond ready to make him my good boy.

"Remember a couple of weeks ago when I asked you what I could have?" I ask, dragging my fingertip down the spines of books lining his shelves. Books I will one day analyze because they belong to him, but for now, they're inconsequential.

In fact, with how I'm feeling right now, just about everything seems inconsequential. Everything but him.

He arches a brow as he pinches the filter, lifting it from the top of the carafe. "You mean like—" he stops mid-sentence as he stops me, my eyes wide and hungry like a wolf in wait. But I can't help it. *I want my good boy.*

"Oh, yeah," he wipes his fingertips along the dish towel before looping his arms around me, pulling me into his chest. I love the way his words scatter into my hair as he asks, "did you want me to give you something specific right now?"

His fingers roam and knead down my spine, making my nipples so hard they could pop a balloon. "Tell me, Laney, what did you want from me tonight?" He puts a breath of space between us, just enough to bend down and nuzzle into my neck, dragging his lips against my throat. "Tell me what to give, and it's yours," he says, lightly kissing a trail down my neck, along my collarbone.

"Get the bag." I nudge it with my foot. "And let's go to your room."

My heart races the few steps down the hall, and when Salsa winds through my ankles, I barely pay him any attention as I bend to give him behind-the-ear scratches. All I can think about is this—what I have planned.

He said he likes it when I'm in control. There are so many things I've wanted to explore with the right partner, and with Miller, it feels like everything is on the table.

He takes a seat on the edge of the bed, and for a moment, the overwhelming smell of his cologne and bedsheets have me almost tossing the bag aside, jumping on him, and letting him fuck me like crazy.

Like normal.

Right?

But maybe we aren't normal. Or maybe our normal looks different. Because all I've been thinking about for the last few hours is having my good boy on all fours, making him moan and cum and writhe and sweat. All I can imagine is feeling his cum flood my palm as I take his ass and give him the deepest, most intense pleasure he's never known even existed.

I watch him strip naked at my command, and I do the same because I adore the way his cheeks flush and his cock thickens at just the sight of my naked flesh.

When I unzip the bag and produce the belt, he looks confused. Digging in the bag, I produce a long, clear, veiny dildo and secure it in the belt, then look up at him, holding the contraption out.

"If you will give yourself to me completely, I'll have you." I drop the belt on the bed and stand toe-to-toe with him, me rocking up on mine as I bring our mouths together. "I'll handle you with so much care, baby."

He rakes a hand up the back of his neck, then looks at me, chiseled chest and adonis belt on full display.

This barrel-chested man with shoulders the size of a doorframe and thighs that would Hulk out of blues if he just bent over wrong—he stands in the lamplight, hands at his tailbone, head down, waiting for me to tell him what to do.

Waiting for me, period.

I stroke my fingers through his hair, humming with admiration at how soft and silky it is. After I've stepped into

the belt and secured the clear dildo at my center, I add lube to it and ask my good boy to get on his knees on the bed. When he does, I get on my knees behind him and pour the warm liquid down the split of his ass, using two fingers to drive it inside of him, stretching him. Preparing him for me.

Surprisingly, he only clenches a little. When I slide my hand down his spine and play with the loose ends of his hair as I curl my fingers in his ass, he opens for me.

“Good boy,” I whisper to him as he puts more distance between his knees, getting comfortable.

Positioning the cock at his ass, I take a moment to feed him all the confidence he may need.

“This is the hottest thing ever, baby, seeing you like this. Having you this way, I’m so turned on. Like, so fucking wet. God, I love you so much.” I sink my fingertips into his hips and feel his energy shift as he slowly swings back, opening himself to take the cock.

His groans of satisfaction have my clit pulsing, and as soon as the cock is fully seated, I let out a long moan.

“So hot,” I pant, staring down at where my clear dildo is all of the way inside of him. Reaching between his legs, I cup his balls, unable to hold both with one hand. Rolling one then the other, I continue to tease his sac as I slowly withdraw, sinking back into him again all the way before the crown is out. Gently, I slap his balls, earning a rich groan from him. I smile down at him, and make him mine.

The first full thrust in and out earns me a loud, bone-rattling growl that makes my pussy flood with wetness, and I grab the back of his bicep in response. “Slower? More lube? Or are you okay?”

His chin comes to his shoulder as he squints back at me, sweat beading on his upper lip. “I’m okay.” Etched with striations of muscle, his back tells the story of a hard-working man. *My* hard-working man. And every sexy man in work blues deserves the ultimate release.

Driving my hips forward again, I'm suddenly overwhelmed with the desire to see him. Look into his eyes as his cock slides through my slick palm, taste his lips while he cries out that he's cumming, or push my fingers through his hair so I don't miss a moment of his sweet release.

"Get on your back," I say, "quickly."

Without question or clarification, Miller turns over on his back, catching his very first eyeful of me naked, wearing the strap. Pushing onto his elbows, his very beautiful cock hard and shiny against his belly, he blinks at me with wide eyes.

"Laney, you look so hot."

"Fucking hot," I tease, knowing how sexy it is hearing Miller use curse words. If he never wanted to use them again, I'd be fine with it, but hearing Miller curse is like hearing your hot professor curse—HOT AS FUCK.

"Fucking hot," he adds, his voice raspy and raw, like he's already on the edge of an explosion. The truth is, between the friction and the sight, I'm not far behind.

Then I position myself at the end of the bed and instinctually, he brings his knees up just slightly.

"I should feel embarrassed and exposed," he muses as I add more lube to the clear cock, pushing some inside him with one fingertip. He winks as I do. "But I don't. And I realize with my ass on display and my balls out that this is a weird time to have an epiphany, but here it is," he adds, sweat sliding down his neck onto his chest, making him look like an absolutely erotic sight. More than before, if possible.

I lean forward, and my cock rubs against his, making us both moan a little. I take his lips in a quick kiss which only leaves me wanting him more. "What's the epiphany?" I ask him as I position the clear crown with his tight ring.

"That I'd only be this way with you because I think I was meant to leave my old life and find you."

"Miller," my voice falls flat and serious because what he's just said is quite possibly the most beautiful and romantic thing ever.

“Now make me pop.”

Fanning my hands over his chest, I let him know how much I adore his body as I purr and mewl my praise. His cockhead, shimmery with precum, is so pink it's starting to look purple, and when I give his shaft a single stroke and am met with an ambitious stripe of precum across his chest, I still my hips, the dildo just barely worked inside.

“Do you like this?” I ask, knowing he does. But I want to know beyond a shadow of a doubt if it makes his cock hard. “Do you like me taking you like this, I mean?”

I drive my hips forward, sending the dildo deeper inside of him. His eyes roll closed, and one of his hands reaches for his cock, desperate to stroke away the mounting tension, but I bat him away.

“Yes,” he pants, “yes, I like you fucking me.”

Hearing my good boy say such dirty words has my hips thrusting faster, the first sound of my groin slapping his ass giving us both a moment of pause. Wrapping my hand around his cock, my pussy clenches in response, reminding me that she is left out.

“Eyes on me, baby. Watch me take what's mine.”

Only, when I fuck Miller a bit faster and his other hand falls to his chest where he lazily pinches his nipple as he draws his knees to God, I realize... I'm going to cum.

The friction, watching my baby get fucked hard and love it without fear, feeling his long thick cock spasming and dripping in my hand—all of it sends me over the edge. I push a hair off my forehead, finding it sticky with sweat.

My legs tingle, my stomach clenches, and my entire stomach pulls low and tight, like preparing for a detonation. From the inside out, my orgasm devours all rational thought and ability to speak as I grind against the strap-on, keeping my eyes on him.

“Ohmygod,” Miller groans as I drive the cock into him again, this time stroking his cock twice when I'm seated deep.

“Oh fuck,” he groans, and then his trembling stops, his mouth falls open in a wordless haze, and then—

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight.

His body stays rigid as he shoots cum all over his chest and face and the bed behind him. Shot after ambitious shot, he cums so hard and so much that my orgasm carries on and on as he cums, just from the incredibly hot noises he makes, not to mention the sound of that cum thunking against his abbed belly and messy strawberry hair.

Slowly, as he is catching his breath, I slide out of him, immediately stepping out of the strap-on in favor of grabbing a bath towel. Wetting one side with warm water, I come back to the bed to find him in the same position, only now his breathing has planed out, and he’s wearing the most adorable, relaxed lopsided smile.

I drag the warm, wet terry along his hot, sensitive skin, taking his cum with me. “What did you think?” I ask, keeping my voice soft to respect the new headspace we’re both in.

He nods. “More of that.”

I bite into my bottom lip as I continue to clean him up. “Really?”

He nods again, eyes still closed. “That was so incredibly hot. I love having you over me. I love how you have a way of getting responses from my body that I can’t get myself. It was just...” he opens his eyes and smiles at me, making my eyes suddenly feel warm.

His gaze sharpens as he notices my emotions, so he wiggles his fingers to draw me into him. And, of course, I go. I fall into his chest like I’m a million pounds looking for a couch to crash on. He holds me tight and presses kisses into my hair.

“Talk to me, Laney.”

Then we lie there as I tell him that our open, honest and vulnerable relationship is literally everything that’s been missing from my life but that I didn’t really fully understand that until tonight.

He kisses me like crazy, we share a shower, and then he makes us protein smoothies as we lie on the couch, passing a book back and forth to take turns reading out of.

And when we fell asleep in his bed just an hour later, I was the little spoon, and everything about that felt right, too.

twenty-one

...

milller

Horniness multiplier

It's the first one I've written in a few weeks, mostly because I haven't wanted to give up any time in my life now to make room for something that no longer fits.

It'll never feel quite right to say I don't have my parents in my life when people ask. The thing is, though, I'm finally at peace with it.

If I'd never left that place and them, I wouldn't have what I do now.

A name for myself with a good company. A place of my own. A pickup truck I paid for that I can drive anywhere. Any food I want. The girl of my dreams.

It's freedom, what I gained, and I thought family was what I lost. But the longer I'm with Delane, the more I feel like I've found family in hers.

Delane's mom, Patty, has made it clear that I'm welcome in her home any time. There have even been a few times when Delane's been out shopping with Mara, and her parents invited me over to do puzzles or help them deep fry a turkey.

I don't even think Delane asks them to invite me, either.

And the crazy part is, I feel comfortable going. I want to go. I like being there with them.

As I stare down at the letter I just wrote my father, already neatly folded in thirds, I decide to put it in the envelope and add it to the rest. Only... it feels a lot like the last time. Because I no longer feel compelled to tell them I'm okay.

If they cared to know about me, they could easily find out.

Instead of giving another sheet of paper, another sad Dear Dad, I pull out another paper and sharpen my pencil, deciding

instead to draw another page for Delane's new notebook, the one I'm making for her.

I wanted to have it done by Christmas, but after Atti's mom found some old mechanic's books at a thrift shop and brought them by the shop, thinking they'd make "cute old decor," I nabbed some of the pages out to make a collage front. Atti promised he wouldn't tell his mom, and Beau promised, equally, that he'd tell Atti's mom he put them out front. But the project is bigger now, and I don't know if I'll finish in time.

The second notebook—which is full of drawing and instruction—is nearly full, and the idea of giving it to her to keep with her other one is really starting to get me anxious.

She's gonna love it.

It feels good to know her so well that I know what she wants and likes. It feels good to be in a relationship that has roots, friendship, and consideration that's been blooming between us for years. It's part of why we've fallen into such a serious stride after just a few months.

I mean, I feel serious about Laney. I feel like there is nothing I'd love more than to help her get the apprenticeship of her dreams, then carve out a life with her full of babies and family vacations and car trips and friends dinners and... I want all of it. I want all the things I wanted as a kid, only now, I want them with her.

I want my own family with her.

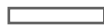
But women are planners. And I know before Delane will consider looking that far ahead on the horizon, she'll want to have her apprenticeship squared away. Except, as I've been working on that second notebook, I've had a pretty good idea. And this morning is the day, as Delane is at the dentist getting her teeth cleaned, to talk to Beau about it.

I finish the sketch of the exhaust system, spending time shading the catalytic converter and air injector tube above it. When it's done, I stash the notebook away, grab my lunch and

water, slip into my coat, give Salsa too much attention, then head to work.

It's one of the days Delane didn't sleep over. Since she had a teeth cleaning this morning and so did Mara, so she's coming into the Kings late. I know it's only been a few months but already waking up without her feels... off.

But despite the unease of missing her, I drive to work excited because... I really believe Beau will like this idea.



“AND YOU'RE BUTTERING me up more than normal,” Beau says, taking a bite of the fresh chocolate croissant I picked up from Delilah's Deli this morning. I even got him a strawberry cruller and Atticus two bear claws. They each got a bucket of coffee and promises of fresh chicken salad sandwiches for lunch—their favorite, also picked up from Delilah's, as long as they sit and listen.

“I'm not going to lie. I'm trying to grease the gears a bit through your stomach.” I reach forward and stuff another tiny bite of strawberry pastry into his mouth, and he opens it to accommodate with a groan. “Is it working?”

He nods as he chews. “Probably. Now what you got for me?”

Atticus, whose mouth is full, sits adjacent to Beau, watching me carefully. I'd run parts of this past Atti to test the water, and when I wasn't met with raucous laughter or looks of utter confusion, I knew I was onto something.

“You know how Delane wants to go through the apprenticeship program, likely here with you or him,” I nod to Atti, who is currently deepthroating his second bear claw. Beau's eyes go to him, then back to me, keeping pace with the flow of conversation.

“What about you? You wouldn't want to have her under you?” Beau asks, popping the white lid off his blue cardboard coffee cup.

“Oh, he wants her under him, alright,” Atti grins, slivered almonds poking out from the corner of his lips. Idiot.

“I think she’d be best off if it was one of you. If it were me...” I trail off, imagining our lessons together so far. I’d been able to teach her just fine, but that was before she was mine. Now, I’m a little embarrassed to say I’m not sure I could leave her alone. My hands like to wander when they’re next to her. “I think it’s best if it’s one of you,” I decide finally, realizing they understand and need no verbal explanation.

“Got it. You’d be jackin’ up cars with your hard-on. Message received.”

I wince. I’m still adjusting to using vulgarity for no reason. Although, making Atticus’s head spin with random curse words is still pretty fun.

“Fuckin’ right,” I add with a grin, jarring them both with that one. In fact, Atti chokes on his coffee a little, earning a satisfied grin from me. “Still gettin’ used to it?”

He nods, wiping coffee from his beard, where it splattered out as he choked. “Yeah.”

“Okay, so back to Delane. She’s ready for the program. You know she passed her entry test with flying colors.”

Beau nods, sipping his coffee, and Atti is still trying to wipe away loose splatters of coffee from his Kings blues.

“You pay for her to go through the apprentice program,” I start, holding up a finger to slow or stop any possible interruptions. “I know you didn’t pay for me or Atti or any other mechanic, but here’s why you’d pay for her.”

“Aside from the fact she needs it,” Atti adds, building the case for Delane, too. Even though she’s my girl, we’re family here, and Atti isn’t keeping a tally. He wants the best for Delane, and that’s why I know I have the right audience. I just have to make sure that Beau, the owner, is comfortable, not just Beau, the friend.

“Aside from that, you also pay for her to do an additional program. One that none of us have done. And she gets certified and works here, with that as her specialty.”

Beau scratches the side of his jaw. “I’m following. What’s the program?”

I grin. This is where it benefits both Beau directly and his greater causes. “It’s the Tesla Start program. It’s a twelve-week course designed to go with the traditional trade school for automotive repair. Basically, she’d be certified to work on EVs. And since you’ve added charging stations to all Wrench King locations, it makes sense to have an EV service. And what better place to have the flagship EV service station than right here in Oakcreek, where the owner of the franchise lives and works?”

He brings the paper cup to his lips and takes a long, slow sip as my insides bubble up, a lot like his hot coffee. His face is expressionless, and I can’t even bring myself to look over at Atti because I’m so nervous.

Delane would be great for this, and it would give her an entire operation here that belonged to her and only her.

I swallow nervously as Beau goes in for another sip. Finally, he lowers the cup to reveal a grin. “I love it. Let’s do it.”

“Yeah?” My chest immediately hollows with relief at his response.

“That’s a great fuckin’ idea, dude. I love it.” He takes his phone out, and I watch as his fingers quickly scatter across the digital keyboard. A moment later, it dings. “Alright, we have a meeting in place to get the program start on the books.”

“Beau,” I start, suddenly and unexpectedly clobbered by a tidal wave of emotion. Delane’s life is coming together, and that makes me feel so fucking happy.

He rises and claps a hand on the back of my neck, giving me a calming squeeze. “Two years of automotive school and a new program isn’t a big deal to me.” Jokingly and to ease my emotional edge, he adds, “you know, I’m *very* rich.”

“Thank you,” I say around the knot of emotion swelling in my throat.

He just shakes his head. “Don’t thank me. Investing in Delane is like investing in family. And it is quite literally investing in my own business, so really, don’t thank me.”

“Thank you,” I say again with a smirk.

“Hey,” Atticus says, finally joining the conversation as he finishes, then crushes the cardboard cup of coffee. “You should be the one to tell her the news. You know, about Beau paying for automotive school, tell her she can apprentice here during school with either of us and tell her about the Tesla program.”

I shake my head. “That’s Beau’s news.” After all, he’s the one making it all happen.

“Dude, I’m telling you right now, Laney will never find out that she has automotive school and a new program waiting for her then because we aren’t telling her.” He levels his eyes with mine. “You did this. You tell her the good news.” His grin is wide and contagious. “And she can stay at the desk as little or as much as she wants. We’ll get a temp up there when she’s not there.” He smacks Atti in the chest. “Goldie can find us someone, right?”

He nods. “Yup.”

Beau beams. “Perfect. Tell her. Make her dreams come true.”



“**YEAH,**” she replies, biting into her bottom lip as she ruffles her fingers through my hair, my hands draped over her thighs. I love when she sits in my lap and plays with my hair. I swear it feels just as good as cumming.

Or, pretty close.

“You didn’t have to ask, though. I’ve been going to your apartment almost every night.”

“I just wanted to make sure since I didn’t see you for the last two hours. I’m all thrown off,” I admit, though the truth is,

I want to make sure she's coming tonight because I'm planning something special.

In fact, Goldie and Beck are coming over to help me create a fancy and romantic ambiance which I didn't know I needed until Beau made me tell Beck (while she was on speaker) my big plan to surprise Delane.

I rented *Gone with the Wind* because it's one of her favorites. And I thought we'd make pizzas together. Everyone loves handmade pizza.

I learned very quickly that while my planned date was great for Valentine's Day, the news I was going to deliver needed a bigger production.

"Well, yes, I'll be there. Art and mom are taking Mara to a friend's birthday party tonight, so..." she walks her fingers up my chest, over my chin, and spreads my mouth apart to take a wet, hot kiss off me. "Dinner together tonight, too?"

I moan into her mouth as she kisses me again, hoping she knows the answer. When I'm met with her tongue sweeping mine, I know she does.

"Alright, we should probably quit so I can walk back in there at some point in the next hour." She slides off my lap, admiring the erection she left behind.

"I could blow you real quick," she bats her eyes, and my already hard cock weeps a little at the mention of one of my favorite things. She bites her bottom lip, and even though we're in the privacy of my truck, she whispers, "how's the plug feel?"

Groaning, I shift in my seat, the fullness of the toy Delane got for me rubbing gently against my prostate as I move. "I need to cum," I admit, feeling pretty filthy saying those words so easily. But as she wiggles her brow, I know she doesn't find it filthy but rather... exciting.

"I can't wait to ride you while you're plugged." She leans over my lap to press a small kiss on my cheek. "Okay, now, no more cock talk if you're gonna walk." She opens her purse and retrieves a tube of ChapStick. I look out the window as she

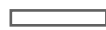
applies it because, at this point, with how hard I am, watching her put on ChapStick does the same to my brain as watching her suck me off, seriously.

“Meet me at my place tonight, then, after you shower and get your stuff?”

She nods. “Sure.”

With Goldie and Beck heading to my apartment an hour before I’m off work, that should leave me enough time to finish setting up and shower. After running through the plan for the millionth time in my mind, I tell myself that it’s fine and everything will go as planned and that asking on her behalf for Beau to pay for her schooling and the new program will be something she’s happy about, not upset.

I hope.



I'M fortunate that the hydraulic lift stopped working today because the rest of the afternoon went by pretty quickly as we scrambled to adjust the remaining appointments on the books.

Now, as I'm driving back to my place, I'm less worried that Delane won't like the surprise and more concerned with having a fucking orgasm.

When Delane told me she wanted me to wear a plug all day, I of course said yes, and I would say yes again any day of the week. I didn't realize how horny it would make me, and the last thing I needed more of was horniness. After not having sex for twenty-six years, then getting to do all the things with the woman of your dreams, yeah, *horniness multiplier*.

I take a breath as I climb the stairs to my place, trying to put on a “hi, thanks for the help” expression as opposed to the “this plug is rubbing my prostate and my briefs are full of precum” look I'm currently wearing instead.

When I reach the stoop, the door swings open, and Atticus stomps out. “I didn't wanna come. They made me carry stuff.”

He lifts the kid on his hip.

“Hey, Jett,” I smile at Beau and Beck’s son, wiggling my fingers in the air.

“Hi, Miller,” he says.

“How’d you get here before me?” I ask as we make our way back into my apartment, Atticus and Jett too. “I thought we left at the same time.”

He shakes his head. “I left ten minutes before you to come grab the boys for Beck and Goldie. So they could do whatever girly shit they’re doing in there.”

“We’re done, we’re done,” Goldie beams, her dark shiny hair up in a sleek ponytail. She’s wearing a blazer and slacks, gold hoops swaying from her ears. “Good luck, Miller,” she smiles, placing a kiss on my cheek.

Beck comes out of the kitchen with two empty grocery bags. “What you had planned was fine,” she says to me with a soft smile. “But we stocked the fridge with chocolate-covered strawberries and champagne. This is big news! We want her to feel like it’s a big deal, too, that’s all.”

I nod. “Okay, I get that.” I scrunch my nose as I think about what she’s said. Chocolate-covered strawberries and champagne. “What if she thinks I’m proposing and is disappointed by this instead?”

Beck places both her hands on my shoulders and holds my eyes with hers. “She won’t think that. It’s only been a few months. She won’t think this is a proposal, okay? And this is what she wants. This is better than a proposal right now because this carves her path forward.”

I look at Atti in the doorway, where he’s now holding a boy on each hip, both of them with golden blonde hair, just like Beck. “I told you you were in love.”

Goldie pats his head and guides him back out my front door. “Everyone is very impressed with the fact that you knew all along, babe. Now take the boys to the Tesla and buckle them in.”

“Fine,” he gruffs, stomping into the snow and out of sight.

“Thanks for thinking of the extra things to make it special tonight,” I tell Goldie and Beck, who look like they just put a corsage on their son before prom, seriously.

“No problem,” Beck smiles as she gets her coat on and steps outside.

“Anytime. And when there is an engagement, we’re here,” Goldie beams, following Beck. A few minutes later and they’re gone, I’ve fed Salsa, and the gas fireplace is going as I wait for Delane.

When she finally arrives, we kiss, and I grip the counter as we do because a warm, sweet kiss from her with this plug grinding my prostate paired with the night I have planned?

“I need a shower before we eat, okay?” I tug at the Kings blues I’m wearing beneath my flannel and coat. “Stinky.”

She smiles, reaching between my legs to cup my balls. Groaning and leaking, I step away from her grip. “Have your way with me after my shower,” I tell her, prepared to take the world’s fastest shower so I can get Delane naked and on my cock sooner rather than later.

Cuddled up on the couch with Salsa, *Gone with the Wind* starting up on my TV, Delane relaxes while I take my shower. It’s hard—both my cock and avoiding it—but I manage because my orgasms belong to her, and I only want to cum for her.

Washing all the places as quickly as possible, I squirt shampoo in my hair, exfoliate (important for men, not just women), and hop out. After toweling off and finding a pair of low-hanging gray sweats (Delane has made me aware that my cock looks good in sweats, and she prefers I wear no underwear, too) and head out, so fucking ready to cum and then share the good news.

Coming down the hall, I notice the blanket is a wadded mess on the couch, and both Salsa and Delane are gone. The TV plays quietly, and the fire still casts a glow on the shag rug. But the room is empty. When I reach the end of the hall, that’s when I see her.

Standing over my table, Salsa winding between her ankles, a white piece of paper with three fold marks spread between her hands.

“What are you doing?” I ask, and when she spins to face me, the paper dislodges from her hands. I make my way to her and pick it up off the ground, finding the words “*Dear Dad*” scrawled across the top in my writing.

“You’re going through my letters?”

twenty-two

...

delane

You don't have to last for me, baby

“Oh my god,” I hear myself say those three words over and over, but they don't really have any meaning as I continue to repeat them, hands stacked over my heart. “Miller, I'm so sorry, I was reading it, yes, I mean, I'm so sorry I opened your private thing and read it. That was wrong of me. I just saw the one on top wasn't addressed or sealed, and oh god. I'm sorry.” My hands are now cradling my head as I shake it hard, tears starting to fall.

Great. Now not only am I a snoop but I'm the girl who cries to get out of things.

“I'm not crying to make you feel bad,” I say, still unable to look up at him through the heavy tears. “I swear I'm not. I just, I feel so bad that you walked out. I was going to put it back and ask and—oh god. I'm not a snoop. I swear. I just... I saw Dad and... I just ached to know more.”

It's the only way I know how to describe how I felt when I saw that box. Immediately I wondered if it wasn't holiday decor or maybe even something for Salsa, but when I thought back, I remember that box being there every time I'd been at Miller's before. So I knew something was inside.

Salsa jumped down for a drink which had me thinking I'd get a drink. But I didn't even make it that far because I spotted the box when I got to the edge of the island near his small desk. When I lifted the lid and found hundreds of letters, I was curious. The one on top, however, just said “dad” on it. And that's when I knew exactly what I was looking at. Before reaching for that one single letter, I knew it was a box of letters that Miller had written his father, maybe even his family.

I didn't dig around, and I didn't open any of them except the one on top. It wasn't sealed, and the rest were, so I slid it

out of the envelope and started to read.

My heart grew fractured for my sweet boy the more I read, and the more I hurt for him, the more I became unable to ignore the letter.

Dear Dad,

The last letter I wrote was going to be my last one for good. But I realized something today, and I thought it was as good of a note as any to go out on.

The girl I told you about? The one I fell in love with? The one who loves me back?

Well, I decided today that even though we aren't married or even near that stage yet, I want to move on. And I want to do it with her.

It's time for me to live. Really live. And no part of my life included writing letters to someone who is as good as a ghost.

I'm quitting my past to live in my future, and I don't know if I even care if you understand.

I'm happy, I'm healthy, and I have love. That's my parting gift to you, that knowledge.

Take care of yourself and mom.

*Your son always,
Miller*

I'd just read the last line when he came out. He startled me, and I dropped the letter, and now we're here, Miller silent, me full of remorse for further hurting a soul who deserves no pain.

Finally, I take a breath and look up at him, wiping tears from my cheeks. "I'm sorry, baby, I really am. I just... I wanted to get to know you better."

Carefully, he replaces the letter in the box and nods for me to come into the kitchen. Easily, he grabs me by the waist and lifts me to the counter. As he bends over, I watch his perfect ass turn to stone, sorting through stuff on the fridge shelves. Next to me, he sets down a large tray of chocolate-covered strawberries and a bottle of champagne.

I stay silent, watching the strength in his forearm as he uncorks the champagne and pours us each a small cup. Passing me the glass, he takes a short sip of his, then locks onto me with a beautifully intense gaze.

"First of all, I want you to know, I'm not angry that you read that letter. If anything, I'm embarrassed. I'm embarrassed that my relationship with my father exists in a box and really only goes one way. I'm embarrassed that I couldn't see my own good qualities and will probably always struggle with ideas of worth because of the way they let me go without so much as a word. I'm embarrassed that instead of talking to you, I made you feel unsure of parts of me, and you had to take it upon yourself to try and learn."

He lifts his glass, tossing back the rest of the bubbly in a few eye-watering mouthfuls. "I know you weren't trying to be sneaky or nosey. I know you just want to know me, Laney, and I want that, too." Lifting a strawberry, he feeds it to me before I can even ask why he has chocolate-covered strawberries. When I'm done chewing, he kisses me, sweeping his tongue

through my mouth, moaning at the second-hand discovery of flavors.

“If there’s anything you want to know, and I don’t mean just like, right now but in general, if we’re ever somewhere and you think of a question or just... get curious about something,” he says, carefully selecting another strawberry which he feeds to me, all while keeping his eyes zeroed in on the way my mouth seals around the fruit. “I want you to know; you can ask. Okay?”

I nod because he’s still feeding me juicy, delicious, chocolate-covered fruit.

“I wrote him a letter every time I felt lost or down, initially. Then I just wanted to have someone to tell things to, and a father seemed like the right person, so... I wrote him. I wrote him a lot those first three years because those were the years I was struggling the most. I was in therapy, but still, times were bleak.” He pops a strawberry into his mouth, and I find his hand and begin stroking it with my thumb, wanting to give him anything soothing.

“Then I kept on writing to him. Sometimes every day.” He pours us each a little more champagne, and I can’t help but notice the pink staining his cheeks, both from the shower and the booze. He shifts weight on his feet, one of his hands still captured by mine as I continue to stroke the top of his palm tenderly. Then I realize... he’s still got the plug in.

My sexy, sweet good boy.

“Anyway, I decided, as you can see, that I’m done with the letter writing. I was thinking of actually... throwing them all out.”

I look over at the huge box and back to Miller. “You wouldn’t want to mail them?”

His lips turn down in a frown. “Na. I think those letters were more for me.”

“How so?”

He leans his hip against the counter. “Well, I think deep down, writing the letter gave me some temporary comfort.

Made me feel like he was close in some fucked up way. And it made me feel less alone.”

Tears stream down my cheeks, but I ignore them as I pinch his hips with my knees, reaching out and bringing him into my embrace. With my cheek to his heart, I hold him tight and say, “I’m so sorry you went through that. But you don’t ever have to be alone again. I promise.” The way he hugs me back so tightly has the tears flowing more freely.

“I love you, Delane. And I’m not mad. You can go through anything in this apartment because there’s nothing I want to keep from you. Ever.” I pinch his chin and kiss his lips before he adds, “what’s mine is yours.”

I wiggle my brow, feeling a nice transition to getting him naked because, after a long day of work and a mini emotional roller coaster ride, I definitely want him to feel what a good boy he’s been.

“That’s true. After all, your orgasms belong to me.” I grin, and his eyes darken as he lets a low, wild noise free from his gut. “Wanna go to your room?”

Grabbing me by the hips, he lifts me off the counter and slings me over his shoulder. “Fuck yes, I do.”



“TELL ME,” my command is a shattered rasp, my thighs trembling as I hold myself over Miller’s face.

“I can hold it.” I look down to see his eyes wide, completely lost in my spread, bare pussy. Over my shoulder, I glance at his meaty pink cock and the precum threading between the dark slit on his head and his trembling, muscled belly.

“Are you sure?” As I reach back, I draw out the question, dragging my fingernails along his hot, needy skin. He nods his head fervently.

Slowly, I lower myself back onto his mouth, immediately stroking my fingers through his full head of silky, soft hair as he feasts on my warm, pulsing center. “That feels so good,” I praise, loving how he groans when I do. “Good boy,” I whimper, playing with his hair because I’m ready to cum and trying desperately to put it off. I never want this to end. Writhing over him as he strains not to cum from eating me. Seriously, how hot is that? There is no better feeling than looking down at a brawny, broad-chested man with a cock and nice abs straining not to skyrocket his release all over himself because your pussy tastes so good.

It’s a drug, and it’s all I want for the rest of my life.

“Don’t cum, and I’ll fuck you,” I whimper, riding him faster, sweat slippery along my spine. The wide pad of his tongue presses against my clit in rhythmic pulses, along with his jagged breaths and broken moans. I know he’s close. I can hear the desperation crawling in each of his moans.

Pressure coils like a venomous snake inside my gut, and before I know it, I’m clawing at his shoulders, head back. “I’m cumming,” I moan as my thighs quiver, my movements slowing as my orgasm explodes. “Don’t cum,” I warn him as my eyes roll shut and my pussy squeezes all around his tongue, a throaty growl trapped in his throat as he lets me fuck his tongue the way I ride his cock.

When I’m done riding his face and moaning his praise, I slide down his torso, leaving a streak of wet pussy down his ribcage. “Now,” I smile, still trying to catch my breath as I crush my mouth onto his, sucking myself off his tongue. “Enjoy that plug while I fuck you hard, okay baby?” I let my tongue traverse his bottom lip before I take an aggressive kiss from him. Then, I sink down on my favorite thing of his, and I ride.

“*Fuuuck!*” he groans out, feral and loud. I’ve never heard him like that before. Caged, he was calm. On his back, while I fucked him missionary and watched him fill with utter happiness as he filled my hand, he was still so tender. This version of Miller, the one who’s been plugged all day, is tortured, ravenous, feral. Definitely aching, probably leaking,

and after going down on me for fifteen minutes, definitely struggling.

“You don’t have to last for me, baby. You’ve been a good boy. Cum when it feels good. Just cum and enjoy it.”

“Laney,” he bleats, his immense hands grabbing at my hips and thighs as I bob over him, sucking him inside of me over and over.

Reaching behind, I slide my hand between his thighs and find the plug tucked securely inside of him. Giving it a wiggle, then applying pressure, Miller slides forward on the bed with a merciful cry, moaning out that he can’t hold back anymore.

“Let it go, baby. Cum. Cum for me. Let it feel so good,” I purr down at him, trying as hard as I can not to have my second orgasm before he has his first. But the way he trembles and sweats beneath me, how his ass tightens and sucks up the plug a little more each time I push it— “you’re such a good boy, give me what I want, baby. Fill me up,” I hear the words melt off my lips and drizzle over him as my pussy seizes around his rigid, veiny cock, my orgasm taking control now.

“Fuck!” he shouts as the first rip tide of warmth rockets through my lower half, spreading through my core like warm sand. His cock flexes as he fills me with his cum from beneath.

I keep my eyes on Miller as I ride out my orgasm, rolling my hips, tightening my legs, clenching my ass, doing all that I can to feel every single moment of it before it’s gone.

When we’re both finally sated and spent, we share the spot in front of the bathroom sink with just the shower light on, passing a towel between us, wiping and cleaning. I wrap my arm around his chest, press my sweaty breasts to his back, and kiss my way down the slope of his shoulder as my fingers pinch the end of the plug gently. As I lie kisses on his warm, flushed skin, I whisper, “relax.” He does, and with a short tug, I remove the plug as he grips the side of the sink, eyes closed, Miller completely lost to my hands on his body.

“That was so hot,” he says as he watches me wash and rinse the toy in the basin of the sink.

“Yeah?” I ask. “Would you want to do plug-play again?”

He leans down, and all I can smell is his tangy, cedar scent. The smell of a freshly showered man whose just broken a light sweat as he orgasmed. So. Fucking. Hot. With his lips along my throat, he kisses and whispers, “hell, yes.”

After we finish cleaning up, Miller takes me to the couch, where he brings me the chocolate-covered strawberries from earlier. He brings champagne, water, and chips too, because there isn't a time in my life when chips didn't sound good.

He strokes the tops of my feet as I nibble on berries, and I get lost in both the sharp and soft edges of his profile and how the TV images flicker against his skin. He's beautiful. He's a man's man but a woman's lover, and he's truly a unicorn. My unicorn.

“Hey,” I say, wiggling my foot to bring his attention back to me.

“Hey,” he says, flicking off the news. “Were you just watching me?”

I hold up a strawberry. “Snack and a show, what can I say?” I wink, but just the subtle pass of his hands up my calves as he smiles at me makes my insides burn. But I do have a question.

“Can I ask you something?”

He nods, positioning himself to partially face me with a leg pulled up on the couch, partially bent. “Of course.”

I swallow around the nerves because this is a great fucking night. I don't want to ruin it by putting him in a bad emotional space. But he did express that he wants to communicate, no matter what. So, I bite my bottom lip before blurting my question.

“Do you forgive them?” I swallow again, trying to gauge his reaction, but his face is impassive. “Your parents, I mean.”

He blinks as his roaming hands slow to a stop. “Yes.”

“How—” I start, but the question coming next doesn’t need to be asked. He smiles softly, and his hands resume their tender and sensual kneading of my bare feet.

“I used to be insecure and think that everyone who didn’t want me or didn’t love me did so because I wasn’t what they wanted me to be.” He gives a silly grin, trying to lighten the emotional weight of the story. “Then I met this vixen who taught me that once I have confidence in who I am, everything else will fall into place.”

My eyes fill. I never thought a corny line would work on me, but it turns out when the truth is sweeter than a strawberry cruller, and it’s coming from a God of a man, that’ll make any baddie cry.

“Hey,” he says, sitting up suddenly. He swipes the wide pad of his thumb beneath my eyes, wearing a broad smile. “I can’t believe I forgot, but I have something to tell you, and you won’t want to be crying for it.”

I giggle, wiping away the rest of my tears. “You mean, you have some sort of surprise, and you almost forgot?” I like teasing him. He places my feet on the couch as he stands, webbing his fingers together in front of me. I blink up at him as I grin. “Are you giving a presentation or something?”

“Ha, ha,” he deadpans, still grinning. “And I only temporarily forgot because the whole butt plug thing putting me on edge all day.”

I nod. “Yeah, I can see how that would make you forget pretty much everything else.”

He nods. “Pretty much. But the strawberries and champagne, were from Beck and Goldie. They knew tonight was supposed to be special and a big deal for you, and they thought I needed to do more than rent your favorite movie and make pizzas.”

“I love the pizza and movie idea, though. You didn’t have to do more.”

He holds up a hand to stop me. “I know. I know that you would have loved what I had planned, but I also know that

they're right— I'm not used to making things as special as they should be, but I'll learn." He swallows, and his eyes cloud with emotion. "Laney, I'm gonna be the best boyfriend to you. I'm gonna do all the stereotypical cheesy shit, and I'm probably gonna go overboard sometimes, but... let me."

What he doesn't say comes through loud and clear. I nod. He needs to live through everything he's felt he missed, and I think both of us know this isn't a temporary relationship. If he wants to do all the corny dating things, he better do it before we're... engaged.

I suck in a breath as I realize I'm likely staring at my future husband. The man who will fill me with cum until I'm having his babies, the man who will hold my hand while I push, the man who will lift a sleeping infant off my breast and take it to bed. The man who will scrape my windshield and hold my hand, kiss my neck and give me his entire body to play with.

"I love you," I say quickly, just wanting the words out there between us while he's in such a vulnerable state.

He grins, and I can see the words have softened him.

"Whatever you're going to say, don't be nervous, okay?"

He nods. "I just hope you're happy." Then, he launches into a five-minute speech. A speech where he tells me that he didn't just convince Beau to pay for my automotive schooling and let me have my choice of mentors while undergoing my apprenticeship at Kings but that he convinced Beau to put me through a secondary program after I graduate, one where I work on EVs exclusively with Kings. I'd be the only one certified so, in theory, as the program grew, I could oversee it and train others... all with time and experience, of course. He promised me up and down—and Miller's word means something—that Beau didn't need convincing. He was on board instantly and loved the idea of me bringing a new EV program to Kings, as Beau himself is basically a Tesla fangirl.

When he's done explaining everything, he feeds his fingers through his hair, pulling at the ends. "I hope I didn't overstep. I just... I don't want you to wait forever to have what you

want from life.” His lopsided smile makes my insides flip. “I know what that’s like, and it just ends up feeling like time lost.”

I don’t know how to thank him, and I know words aren’t good enough, but they’re a start. I get to my feet, rise onto my toes, and pull his handsome face to mine. “Thank you. I love you. I am so beyond lucky to be loved by you.” I swallow hoarsely. “Thank you so much.”

After we talk through some of the details and I’m sufficiently excited and emotional, Miller and I go back to bed, where I give him many, many rewards with my mouth.

We fall asleep sticky, sweaty, naked, and happy.

twenty-three

...

mill

Unless.

“Yo,” Atti’s voice rumbles over the noise of the roaring engine above me. “You got company up front.”

I slide out from the car and get to my feet, unable to hide the fact that people visiting me at work makes me smile. And even though Delane had mentioned that her family may come by to get her for lunch today since Patty and Art finally share a day off, I’m still excited to see them.

Pushing through the door to exit the shop, I find Delane leaning over the desk on her elbows, chatting quietly with her mom and Art. With the same dark curls she passed down to her daughter, Patty pulls a wool cap down over her head, laughing at something Delane said. Art nudges Patty, and the three of them exchange words, resulting in their group’s laughter.

I smile from the doorway, just watching how easily they love each other. And now, they’re mine. From the corner of her eye, Patty spots me. Raising an arm toward me, she says, “there he is,” as Delane and Art both turn to spot me.

“Hi there,” I say, making my way toward them, instinctively dropping my arm around Delane’s shoulders, my fingertips protectively sinking into her arm as I subtly stroke.

“The man of the hour,” Art chides.

Patty looks between the two of us and then circles the desk, linking arms with her daughter. “We’re going out back to say thank you to Beau; we’ll be right back; then we’ll have lunch, okay?”

I salute her. “Sounds good.”

When the door swings closed, I know now is a great time for what I’d been thinking about the last week since Delane learned of the plan. Last night, she’d gotten word that she’ll

start automotive schooling in Riverside in a month, meaning she's about to get a lot busier in the best way—chasing her dreams.

But busier means less of her for me. *Unless.*

“Art, I was hoping to get a word with you, Sir.”

“You know, you don't have to call me sir, but I find it incredibly respectful and old school of you that you do.” He shrugs. “Now, what would you like to discuss?” He grins cluelessly.

“As you know, Delane is starting automotive school in a month. She's going to stay here at Kings, working when she can, and Beau's gonna pay her a normal salary regardless but... she's going to be a lot busier, and I was wondering if you had any problems with us living together before marriage?” I rub my hands together nervously as Art remains silent, the smile having fallen off his lips a moment ago. “It's headed that way for us, and I know that may sound quick, but Laney and I... Well, I've known and loved her for years, Sir. And I'm sure about us. But if we lived together now, I could make sure she gets where she needs to be, make sure she's feeding herself while working and studying, I can help her with things in class if she needs, and I can—”

“You can take care of her,” he says earnestly. “And she will need more care as she embarks on this journey.”

I nod. “Yeah, I think she will. Or at least, I want to support her as much as possible so she can enjoy as much of this as she can. I don't want her stressing about making dinner or getting Mara places. I can do all of that. And whatever slack she picked up at home, I will happily volunteer to help you with that. We can eat at my place a few nights a week or... whatever it takes.”

He doesn't say anything for a long moment. I didn't really talk to Delane about this, but it's logical from every standpoint. Not to mention, I want Delane to live with me. Outside of all the reasons why it makes sense, I want her with me. In my bed both morning and night. On my couch. Her feet in my lap. I want to wash her hair for her when she's too tired.

I want to wake her up with her favorite breakfast and come home to find her and Salsa cuddling. I just want her in my life as much as I can now that I have her.

Art extends half a handshake to me, and I take it. “Thank you so much,” I say, shoving away the happy emotion clogging my throat. Art pats our handshake with his other hand.

“You’re a good man, Miller. Everything you’ve done for that boy who you brother for, and for Laney...” he shakes his head as if his pride in me is overwhelming, and that feels both surprising and good. “Patty and I want you to know our family is your family, okay?”

Fuck. If that doesn’t make you wanna cry, I don’t know what does. But I swallow and breathe through it. “Thank you so much.”

And as Atticus and Beau barge through the back door, the spell is broken.

“Patty said we can all come to lunch,” Beau says, hooking a thumb between him and Atticus. “It’s cool if we come too?”

I nod toward the door. “Lock up.”

He puts his hands on his hips. “Dude, this is my place; I know I have to lock up.” He looks around, searching for Delane. Leaning toward Atti, he whispers, “where are the keys?”



I HADN'T PLANNED on asking Delane to move in with me in front of everyone at lunch, but after Art whispered my plans to Patty and she pulled me aside for a quick “we love you, and you have our permission,” it seemed like it would be hard to keep it bottled.

The way Art and Patty kept beaming at us had me nervous they’d spill the beans, so after the waitress had taken our plates and Atticus was too deep into a story about getting a

kitten out of an engine, I lean down toward Laney, aligning my mouth with her ear.

“Laney.”

She turns, trying to give me focus but also give her focus to Atti and his kitten rescue story.

“Move in with me,” I whisper, one arm draped along the back of her chair, the other reaching across my lap to access hers. Dragging the blunt tips of my fingers along her thigh, I whisper again, “live with me, Laney. Say yes.”

Slowly, she turns to face me, and my senses flare when she doesn’t immediately say yes. What if this is too soon? We didn’t talk about this; I just made this choice on my own, thinking it would be best for both of us.

But what if she isn’t ready?

What if she just... isn’t on that page with me?

Pushing back from the table as cold sweat slides down my back, I give a concerned-looking Beau a nod of acknowledgment as I nod toward the bathroom off the back hall.

I’m not even at the door when I hear her calling my name.

“Miller, Miller, baby, wait.” She takes me by the back of my elbow, and I spin to face her.

“I should have asked you if you wanted to instead of just asking. I’m sorry, I—”

This time, she holds her hand up for me to stop. “Of course, I want to move in with you. I was just surprised, that’s all. I honestly wasn’t expecting it after everything you put together with school already. It’s a lot. You’re just... so good to me.”

“I really thought you didn’t want to,” I let the words rush out on a relieved sigh as the adrenaline of the moment peters, leaving my hands a little wobbly. She takes them in hers and kisses my knuckles the way I do her.

“I love you, okay? And the Miller I love knows I love him.” She looks back down the hall at the table full of people we love in the distance. “The Miller that walked away from that table thinking I didn’t want to share a home with him, he’s the old Miller.” She rocks to her toes and lets her lips rub against mine as she says, “he needs to be punished for thinking I didn’t want him.”

She leaves me partially hard with a wet, short kiss as we link our hands together, heading back toward the table. “Tonight, we celebrate, and tonight, you get punished.” We stop a few feet from the table, and she raises our hands in the air as if I’ve won a battle and she’s announcing me the victor.

“We’re moving in together,” she squeals, and we’re met with a round of cheers from our people.

And my heart swells in a way I never thought it could before.

twenty-four

...

delane

“Be a good boy and cum with me, baby.”

“Say it again.”

The sound of my lubed hand searing across his already-reddened skin sends a deep vibration through my swollen clit.

“Deeper,” his feral, starved groan makes my lower half bloom with urgent need. I love having him this way, open and giving, without limits, without fear.

I swat his pinkened cheek again as I feed his tight ass more of the strap. He struggles not to lurch forward with pleasure as I fill him, clinging to the sheets with white knuckles. Another drizzle of lube onto the remaining few inches of cock, then I sink inside him even further.

“*Oh god yeah,*” he moans once the dildo is completely inside him, my balls pressed to his. Reaching around him, I find his cock like steel, the tip a leaking mess.

“You like it when I stroke deep inside you, don’t you?” I ask, sawing my hips slowly as my hand jerks his erection, sending precum spattering over the bed.

“Yes,” he moans, and I feel it in my cunt as he does. “God, Laney, you make me feel so good. I wanna cum already.”

“Not yet,” I tell him because when I have him bent over like this, with my hands exploring the striations of his back muscles, his ass clenched all around the toy, my own orgasm comes out to play. “Be a good boy and cum with me, baby.”

I swat his ass again, tighten my grip around his cock, and go to town. We’ve learned in our pegging sessions that what really makes Miller cum hard is when I go to town on him right before explosion. Fill and empty his ass so hard and so fast that he can’t even use language. He’s just broken grunts and desperate moans, and then he’s frozen still, beads of sweat

tracing his muscles, the only movement on his body until his cock empties itself in my hand in pulsing shots.

The feel of him cumming in my hand—that’s what sends me over. I grip his cock tighter as I slide a finger over the ribbed crown, loving the moan he swallows as I discover his leaking head. Pulling my hips all the way back like an erotic slingshot, I sink into him one more time, with force, letting my grip work his shaft as I do.

And then he stills, and I know he’s about to orgasm. Wiggling my body against his, making the cock grind slowly against his prostate, my own thighs begin to tremble as the first warm burst slides through my fingers.

The way he can’t even make words as he cums in thick, hot ropes, filling my hand and fingers, coating the mattress—it sends me over. My pussy clenches and my stomach tightens while my spine curls. Pumping him through my release, I cum so hard that when I’m done, I curl over his sweaty body and hold him for a second, my cum coated hand hanging limply by his side.

A beat passes, and he rises up from the remnants of his orgasm, draping his hands over mine that are now clinging to his chest from behind.

Then we stay on our knees like that, in the center of his bed, my strap-on still deep inside of him, his cum drying on my skin, our breathing in sync as he holds me holding him.

Stroking his fingers up my forearm, his chin drifts to his shoulder. “You know I want to marry you one day, right?”

I lick my lips, loving the flutter between my ribs. I don’t think that flutter will ever go away with Miller. “Why are you saying that?”

“Why wouldn’t I say it? I went a long time not saying things I wanted to, and I’m not doing that anymore. I want to marry you one day, Laney. Every day that goes by that you’re my girlfriend is just one extra day I’m taking to decide how I want to ask you to be my wife.”

I slide out of him and tap his shoulder, and he carefully turns around to face me. His cock is still hard, and the sight of it makes my mouth water, so I fall to my belly with him over me on his knees and wrap my mouth around his crown.

While I'm sucking him, I pause to tell him just how I feel. "I think I knew when we got together that we weren't a temporary thing. I think I knew you were my forever." He cups my cheek, letting his thumb play with my bottom lip as I unhinge my jaw to suck his salty cock deep.

"Can I tell you something?" he asks, looking so lovingly down at me that my pussy readies for another round of Miller.

Tracing the head with my tongue, I nod. "Please."

He finger combs my curls away from my face, then returns his grip to my face, where he pulls down my bottom lip as I suck him deep again.

"I like how we do things. I like you leading things." He pauses to groan as my lips brush his pubic hair. "I know it all started this way as a way to get me confident, but I gotta say, I've never felt more like myself than when I'm with you."

I continue to suckle his cock and balls as he ruminates. "I mean, I wanna make love to you in the traditional sense," he says, causing the pulsing between my legs to ramp up. "But I really like being yours to control and command." I open my eyes to catch him gazing down at me, still stroking my bottom lip. "I just want to be your good boy."

Releasing his cock, I hold it near my glistening lips as I say, "I want that, too."

And then I take him into the back of my throat until he empties himself into my belly in long, hot waves. When I've swallowed it all and licked my lips, he gives me a piggyback ride to the couch, where I am deposited with a blanket.

Feeding me fresh fruit and sharing his bottle of water, we watch a little night time TV as Salsa soaks up as much attention as he can before we head back to bed.

As we're drifting off, Miller kisses my temple and says through a yawn, "I want you moved in next week; that way,

you have a couple of weeks to settle in before you start school.”

I cup his balls and give them a tender squeeze. “That sounds perfect, baby.”

twenty-five

...

milller

Trust the process

“Did you make sure to tell your mom I’m not bringing you back until after dinner?”

Zeth reaches into the split-open box, grabbing another slice of pizza. “Yeah,” he replies before taking a bite that demolishes nearly the entire piece.

“Good.” I take another slice too, and bring it to my lips but pause. “Thanks for lending a hand today. And hey, I’m glad you finally got to come check out my place.”

He looks around at the boxes littered everywhere, Delane’s name scrawled on them in bright blue Sharpie. “I like your place.” He turns to me with orange grease in the corner of his mouth. “Your girlfriend has a lot of stuff.”

I laugh at that because it certainly does feel like a lot of boxes. But I know there’s room. “She does.” I nudge him. “She likes to read, too. We share that interest. And she works on cars.”

His eyebrows lift. “Really? Girls work on cars?”

I finish my last bite of the slice. “Yeah, anyone can do anything. You just have to believe in yourself.”

Zeth takes a long drink from his can of soda. “That’s pretty corny, Miller.”

“I know,” I admit because it is. It really is super fucking corny. Even I know it. “But it doesn’t change the fact that it’s true, dude. You can do anything; you just can’t lose sight of your dream.”

“Trust the process,” he says slowly, which earns him a quizzical look from me.

“That’s exactly right. Don’t doubt yourself along the way.” I narrow my gaze on him. “That’s pretty smart.”

He shrugs. “It’s what my mom tells me before she cuts my hair.”

At that, I laugh, and I laugh hard because under those circumstances, trusting the process is probably a lot more nerve-wracking.

Zeth looks back at the door. “When are they coming back?”

Patty and Art had been at my place all day, helping with the moving. Because of his back, Art was relegated to the unpacking phase and the order pizza task while Patty, Delane, Zeth, and I carried most of the boxes. Atti and Beau popped by once to move an armoire with me, but all in all, we knocked it all out in the span of four hours. The three of them left to get Mara from her friend’s house, where she’d slept over. With no karate today, she kindly told her older sister that she didn’t want to “do a damn thing” on her day off.

But with the good pizza here and the discovery of Salsa, Mara’s ready to come over.

“Soon.”

He chews the inside of his cheek as he pulls the napkin through each finger.

“What’s up?”

I can legit sense when this kid has something on his mind. He shrugs. “I love my mom, you know,” he starts, and I reassure him right there, sensing he needs it.

“Of course you do.”

“But, I liked Delane’s family. It was nice being around family.”

There is no way to take that ache out of his heart. If I could reach in and steal it from him or feel it for him so he didn’t have to, I absolutely would. Because I’ve been him.

Maybe at his age, I had both parents, but I never had a family. I was a pawn in their house to be dragged around and manipulated. I didn’t have a voice, I was never asked my preference, and never once had I ever felt warm and cozy. I

was meant to further their cause, a cause that wasn't even theirs but belonged to someone else. I was meant to follow the rules and sacrifice my individuality for the greater good—one that was never presented as an option but only as my stark reality.

I deeply understand Zeth's feelings, and while I know I can't alter them, I know I can give him something that was never given to me. I wish it was more, but it's all I can do.

"You are welcome here, and so is your mom, whenever you want. Holidays, parties, you two are my family. Okay? And they're my family now, even though I'm not their blood, and if they're mine, then you're theirs, too."

"They barely know me." I can feel his nervous vulnerability and his pride, and I want more than anything to tear it down and build him back up with me, but he's got to find that peace on his own. Until then, I'll never stop making him feel safe and loved.

"Now. They barely know you now. But it won't feel that way in a couple of months." I peer at him as he plays with the napkin still. "Mara's your age, you know."

He shrugs. "Girls don't like the poor kid."

I've never been that because growing up in the commune, one kid represented them all. But still, I know his fear: that he will never be like everyone else.

"Your mom may not be rich, Zeth, but you aren't poor. Okay? And I mean it when I say you and her are welcome with me anytime. In fact, why don't we have a big Christmas dinner? You and your mom, me and Laney, and her family. You can still cook. I'll help you. In fact, Laney's mom might teach you a few things."

He looks up at me with hope in his eyes. Hope tethered to fear. "Mom has to work."

I nod. "Fine, you'll come with me then. I'm sure she'd rather have you with me and Laney's family than alone at home. Plus, you can use your new sous chef skills." I bump his shoulder and watch a grin spread across his lips in response.

“You can cook now. Let’s show everyone.” I make him stand, and then I pull him into a hug. We don’t hug but today, with my girl officially moved in, my life feels like a dream. And I just want to spread that feeling.

“I love you, Zeth. I know I’m not your blood brother, but I am your family. And there is nothing you can say or do to ever change that.” He smiles, and I can tell he’s fighting emotions. I ruffle my fingers through his hair, and he swats me back. “So ask your mom if I can pick you up on Christmas morning and have you all day, okay?”

He nods, and the door swings open, bringing noise, laughter, and snow inside the small space. I fucking love the way it feels in my apartment today.



AFTER WE EACH took a turn in a long, hot shower, rinsing off the day of heavy lifting and moving, Delane and I crawled into bed, tired and cold. But happy.

So fucking happy.

Right as we’re starting to doze, she rolls in the bed to face me, reaching up to press her palm to my cheek. “Have sex with me,” she whispers against my lips as she reaches into my sweats, finding my sleepy cock already waking. “I need to feel you over me and inside me right now,” she adds, her admission a hoarse whisper. Reaching above me, she yanks off my shirt, and we both work on losing the rest of our clothes.

And then her legs are spread open, and I’m tucked between them, driving my erection into her soft core in slow, dizzying strokes. Our lips fuse as she feeds me moans and mewls of pleasure, our bodies pressed together, sealed with sweat and passion.

“Miller,” she moans, her heart rate skyrocketing. Mine beats quicker, keeping up with hers and my already impending orgasm. I’ve only been inside her a minute or so, and her wet

warmth is already making me struggle. She fills her fingers full of my hair, tugging gently as our mouths crash together.

My hips never stop roving, and I move over her a bit more, changing the angle as I push inside of her, over and over. Her tits bounce as I fuck her, and when I look down to find her mouth open mid-moan, breasts jiggling, sweat shiny on her smooth skin—I curse. Because I can't hold back.

Knowing just what my grumble means, she strokes her palms along my sides, then grips my bare ass. My balls tingle, and my groin cinches.

“It's okay, cum if you're ready.” Knowing there will be a day when I can make it longer than this, I seal her words with a kiss and find my hips rolling to a stop as I empty myself deep inside of her, throbbing pulse after throbbing pulse. When I'm able to pull my face from her neck and meet her eyes, I find her wearing the sexiest, most sensuous smile.

“I want you to go down on me,” she grins, and before she clarifies, I'm already shimmying down her body. Bury my face in her pussy? Why would I need to be asked twice?

“Wait,” she giggles, slapping my shoulder. From over her belly, I peer up at her. “Suck my clit, and when I cum,” she says, chewing at the side of her lip like she's...

“Are you nervous?” I drag myself over her body until I'm over her mouth and laying hot kisses on her lips. “Laney, Laney, Laney,” I tease.

She wrinkles her nose, pushing a sweat-laden curl from her face. “When I cum, I want you to *really* go down on me.” She drags her thumb along my bottom lip as she whispers, “then kiss me.”

I slide back down her body until her puffy pink pussy is staring back at me. It's so pretty. No, it's more than pretty. It's beautiful and fucking perfect, and the only thing prettier is her.

With her hands in my hair the way both of us like, she nudges my face to her slippery pussy, and I dive in like the utterly starved man I am. Biting gently, I suckle on her swollen bud as her legs spread wide, fingers sunk into her hips. I hold

her there against my face as I feast, loving how wiggly and responsive she is with every pass of my tongue. As fast as I came, she lets her hand slide free from my hair, down to my shoulder to smack me. “I’m gonna cum,” she pants.

Taking my cue, I slip my tongue inside her just as her orgasm crests, her warm cunt seizing around my tongue. A few more pulses around me, and a moment later, a salty flavor rushes into my mouth. When her legs are no longer pinching my head, and she’s coming down from her high, I climb over her body and bring my mouth to hers.

As soon as our lips touch, she drives her tongue into my mouth, hunting for her taste. Our joined lips vibrate with her hum as she collects everything in my mouth with hers, then swallows.

We kiss a little more, and then I have to roll off of her to go pee. When I return, she’s got her back to the headboard, sheet held tight to her breasts. I stop at the bathroom door. “You look so beautiful like that.” I reach for my phone on my dresser and hold it up. “Can I take your picture?”

She nods demurely. “Sure. Just for you, though, right?”

I nod and then put her in the frame, slightly off-center. Goldenrod light pours from the bathroom behind me, leaving a perfect trapezoid of color on the foot of the bed. In the fading glow, Delane sits covered but with just enough flesh exposed to make the entire photo incredibly erotic.

When I rejoin her in bed, we settle in, Delane lying her head on my chest, my arm looping her back. “You know... if there’s ever anything you don’t want to do, you shouldn’t do it just because I want to. I mean, tonight—”

“I wanted to do that.”

She pauses for a moment, and I notice when she speaks again insecurity is thick in her tone. “So you didn’t mind going down on me when I’m, you know, full of your cum?”

“Laney, trust me if you ever wanted to try or do something that I really didn’t want to do, I’d tell you. But until then, I

can't think of a single thing that I wouldn't literally die to do with you."

She pulls me closer, and I love that. "Really?"

I nod proudly, my chin bumping into her curls. "Really. I waited twenty-six years to have sex and say fuck. I'm not gonna do anything now I don't wanna do."

"Good," she says. "Good."

Peace and quiet wash over us as we realize we have no issues anymore. We're just a happy couple, being happy, living and discovering, and... loving.

Sleep comes easy and holds us tight and warm until morning.



"**ARE** you sure you don't want to wait until Christmas?" I ask her again, holding her gift above her head as she reaches for it wearing nothing but a big grin.

Seriously.

It's Christmas Eve, and all I wanted as my gift was Delane naked in my apartment all day. She delivered. In return, she wanted to open her gift a day early.

"I'm sure," she giggles, perfect tits bouncing as she reaches. I could play keep away forever at this rate.

"But you won't have anything to open tomorrow," I tell her because this secondary notebook I made for her has taken any and all of my free time. It really is the only gift I have for her.

"Please," she groans one last time before I lower the gift and place it in her hands. She twists her lips to the side as she stares down at it, considering it for a moment.

"This is the same shape and size as what I got you."

I cock an eyebrow. “Oh yeah? I thought you didn’t get me anything.”

I look over at the tiny Christmas tree on my kitchen counter, the one Goldie and Beck brought over last year and decorated out of pity when they heard I didn’t get myself a tree. Beneath it, which wasn’t there last night, is a wrapped gift that looks almost identical to the one she’s holding.

“Wait,” I say, looking back at her. “You’re serious.”

She nods. “I know. Weird, right?”

My eyes narrow on her. “What did you get me?”

She narrows her eyes back on me. “What did you get me?”

I grab the gift from the counter, and we sit across from one another on the couch.

“Same time?”

I nod. “Same time.”

“One, two, three.”

I don’t know what Delane’s reaction to her gift is because I’m stuck staring down at what’s in my own hands.

It’s... my notebook. The one I gave to her. Only... it’s... been loved.

Where there were worn edges before, now they are strengthened with thicker paper and taped perfectly, closely resembling a new edge. Where the graphite had smudged from years and years of touching and wear, she’s traced with an ultra-fine tip black pen. Along the edges, she’s cleaned them up either with eraser or whiteout. Each page I turn reveals a new way she’s redeemed the old work on the pages, bringing it back to life. In the margins on some, she’s added new notes and new doodles. And when I flip to the very back, I see she’s even added a few pages. And at the end, on the final page of the book, at the very bottom, I see “D&M” in thick, sturdy, lasting black ink.

I close the notebook, knowing I’ll be going through this with a fine tooth comb, over and over, just to understand how

amazing she is and how much she loves me. But right now.

“Thank you,” I murmur, finding her looking at me with wet eyes.

“You made another?” she asks, bottom lip wobbly.

“Don’t cry,” I sniffle.

She points at me with the notebook pinched between her fingers. “You don’t cry.”

Then we laugh. And we cry. And we hug.

“I can’t believe you went through and fixed the notebook,” I say against her hair as we hug, neither of us ready to let go. “That was so thoughtful, really.”

“And you made an entire second notebook full of new stuff!” She peels herself off of my body. “Baby, that was so sweet.” She lowers her voice, and it puts bumps along my flesh. “You’re a good boy. *The best.*”

I take the notebook from her and rest it on top of mine. I pick her up only to deposit her on the kitchen countertop. I begin making dinner as we talk about how funny it is we both had the same—or at the very least—a similar idea.

As I’m cooking bacon to crumble for our chef salads, she reminds me of something. “You know, I’m a good cook. You don’t always have to cook, you know.”

I steal a kiss from her. “I know, but honestly, I really like doing things for you. And it’s kind of the thing that makes me feel best—taking care of you. So if you ever wanna do your own wash or cook your own food, tell me, and you can. But if you don’t mind, I like doing it all. Because I love you and all I want to do is serve you, Laney.”

She shakes her head. “Where did you come from, Miller?”

I shrug. “A place that never understood me.”

Pinching a piece of cooked bacon off the paper towel, she takes a bite, motioning for me to come to her. Resting the spatula against the skillet, I push between her legs, resting my

curled knuckles along the edge of the counter. She kisses me, pushing bacon into my mouth.

A beautiful woman who I love more than myself right here on my counter.

Bacon in my mouth.

And tomorrow, we'll pick up Zeth and head to Delane's folks' place and share our first true family Christmas ever.

"Hey." I feed her more bacon as my hands massage up and down her thighs. "Thank you for everything. For being you and loving me, and everything that falls between."

Then I seal my words with a kiss, long and slow, and while my eyes are closed, and my heart is full, I get a vision of a full life on the horizon ahead, and it all starts with us.

"I'm so glad you were my first," she says.

I shake my head. "Not just the first. The only."

She nods. "The only one for me is you."

epilogue

...

delane

ONE YEAR LATER

“Stop crying, mom, because I really don’t want to cry either.”

Mom sobs uncontrollably at the sight of me in my wedding dress.

“I’m sorry,” she moans. “I thought I got it all out at the bridal shop, but now seeing you with your hair and makeup done,” she sobs again, this time pausing to blow her nose. “I can’t believe you’re getting married.”

I spin in front of the tri-fold floor-length mirror again. “Me either.”

But then again, I can believe it. Because I’m so head over heels *his photo is my lock screen* in love with Miller that the idea of not being with him feels unnatural now.

“How’s Art doing?” I ask, turning sideways to study my profile.

Mom blows her nose again. “Worse than me, can you believe it?” She waves her hand down, hanky flying, “men, they’re worse than us, only they just hold it all in until their daughter gets married, and boom, they cry for days.”

I turn to face her, collecting my dress in my arms as I step down from the tiered footrest I’d been standing on. “He’s been that much of a wreck?”

I guess that makes sense.

Art has been my stepdad for over ten years. He’s Mara’s real father. Yet, because of the struggles mom and I faced in the years before, it’s very hard for me to feel comfortable calling *anyone* dad.

But in the last year, Art and Miller have grown close. They’ve become friends, in fact. Not just friends either, but

their relationship truly borders on son and father, and seeing Art take Miller in that way, it all just kind of clicked.

As a kid, I wouldn't let myself call Art "dad" because I was afraid he'd leave. I was afraid to attach such a big title to something that I wasn't sure was even permanent. Art is, of course, permanent.

After Miller asked Art for my hand in marriage, it felt strange calling him Art. So I slipped into calling him dad one day, and I'm pretty sure he's been emotional since.

And that was three months ago.

In the last month? Miller's been calling him dad, too.

"He'll be fine," Mara says, finally peering up from her phone. She turned thirteen after Christmas last year, and being fourteen *this* year? Someone tell her she's just fourteen because she acts twenty, I swear.

"Texting Zeth?" I ask, batting my eyes playfully.

Her cheeks pinken, and I know I've hit the jackpot. "He's one of Miller's groomsmen, you know?"

Her eyes widen. "Seriously?" She looks down at the silk gown form-fitted to her muscular, curvy body and smooths her palms over the fabric nervously.

"Mar, you're gorg. So don't doubt that. And anyway, it's Zeth. He thinks you're the sun, even when you're being a little B."

Mom harrumphs. "Mara, you don't need a boy thinking you're *gorg* anyway. You're too young." Mom gets up and grabs a few more tissues. "I need to go fix my makeup."

When she's gone, I turn to Mara. "Hey, can you do me a favor? Can you find Miller and give him this?" I hand her a package. A very tiny jewelry box.

She takes it, and before she's to the door, she asks, "is this his ring?"

I chew the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. "Yes," I lie. "That is his ring. Tell him it's from me but let him

open it alone.”

She smiles and closes the door behind her.

I drum my fingers anxiously along the dressing room table top in front of the vanity where I’ve taken a seat. A moment later, my phone dings.

I open the text message from my fiance and grin at the photo.

The box wasn’t his ring. Thank God Mara is fourteen and doesn’t listen to a word I say. If she did, she’d know that Beau has both rings. Inside the box is the key to his cage.

In the last year, we’ve been together, we’ve fallen heavily into our love of chastity. It pairs so well with female dominance and male submission, too, which we learned through internet research is our preferred dynamic.

The photo is of his cock, pink and angry within the metal cage. Next to his palm is the key.

MILLER

Now that I have the key, am I allowed to use it?

Not until tonight. I just wanted you to see how close freedom really is.

I don’t know what you have planned for tonight, but I’m fucking excited. And I miss you. And I love you. And I cannot wait to marry you.

I love you, and can’t wait to marry you, either.

PS. Don’t forget your letter.

Locking my screen, I look down at the vanity where the letter I’ve written Miller rests. Not too long after Christmas last year, Miller shared with me that he was ready to get rid of the letters he’d written his father. He said keeping them felt like holding himself hostage and didn’t bring him anything positive.

“Just looking at it reminds me of a time when I solely existed, and that makes me so sad,” he’d said of the box. We agreed to start a new tradition, one that was meant to make him feel really good. Instead of just getting rid of the box, I told him we could keep the tradition alive but more positive.

We agreed that each time we felt overwhelmed by a positive feeling for each other, we’d write a letter and add it to a box. Our wedding day marks the day we’ve chosen to read the letters annually. After the ceremony and reception, we’ll go to our hotel room, share wine, and he’ll read what I’ve written to him for the last six months and vice versa. And next year, on our one-year anniversary, we’ll have a full year of letters to one another.

It’s a beautiful tradition and one that pays homage to the struggle he faced when he first moved here, and one that he can turn to when darkness from his past edges in, and he can physically see all the reasons why he’s amazing, and I love him.

With a smile, I fold my first letter and slide it into the box.

The first letter is only one line. And I’ve never meant anything more.

You’re the only one.

extended epilogue

milller

Fill me up

My cheek stings from a friction burn, but I don't want her to stop. I never want her to stop. I fucking love the way it feels to have her control my orgasm, ruin me if she pleases, ride me if she'd rather—whatever she wants; I never know what I'm getting, and I'm always left on my knees, humbled by my queen.

It's what she's become. Something like a queen. Because she does rule me. And she knows, without a doubt, my cock is hers.

When we met, I'd never have believed someone if they had told me where I'd be now. I would never have imagined I'd be doing some of the things I'm doing.

But it's better this way. Living life according to what you feel in your heart and enjoying it. That's a much better life than living your life always in comparison to some life you never had.

I love my wife. I love what we have. She's my best friend and my queen. I'm her best friend and her very good boy.

“You want more, or have you had enough?” Her fingers curl into the hair on the back of my neck, tugging but only gently. She wiggles above me as I strain the side of my face away from the mattress, gulping in air so I can reply.

“More,” I groan, “I want more.”

Another cold, hard whack against my bare ass causes my back to vibrate, and then she's sinking inside me again, lying flesh to flesh, her writhing sweaty body topping mine. With a rhythmic motion that builds my orgasm to the highest crest, she fucks me hard, all while gripping my biceps and dropping words of praise in my ear.

“Good boy, look at my good boy taking it so rough.”

Clutching the edge of the mattress as my body smears against it, she sits up off me for a moment, just long enough to reach back and stroke my aching cock, which is stretched behind me, flat against the bed.

She's never taken me in this position, me on my belly with my cock splayed behind me. But I like it; I feel taken care of and surrounded.

When she's back to topping me, tits to back, she drags the tip of her tongue along the curve of my ear. "Feel good being out of your cage?"

I nod as drool smears against the bed. "Yes."

"What do you think? Should I let you cum inside me now?"

Again, I nod, my lower half grinding against the bed unintentionally, my body so desperate for release that it's trying to find it without my permission. Slowly, she hollows me as she slides out, getting off the bed to step out of the thick, veiny strap-on attached to her hips. I watch from one eye as she lowers the cock carefully to the waiting towel on the floor, then returns to the bed.

"On your back," she orders, so I roll, glad to be face up for a while. Grabbing my cock, I pump myself a few times, groaning at how absolutely rock-hard I am from that pegging session. I liked feeling her tits pressed against me. I liked her forcing my cock back on the bed; it added a new level of pressure to things. I sigh. "That felt really good."

She arches a brow as she throws one luscious leg over my hip, centering herself on the erection she took from me. "Yeah?"

I nod. "Yeah."

She grins, tossing her chocolate curls over her shoulder, putting the sweaty soft slope of her throat on display. I reach up and stroke her skin, in awe of her delicate beauty.

"You're so beautiful." Then I try again, using my favorite word. "My wife is beautiful."

She leans down long enough to give me a wet kiss, full of filthy promise. “Now, are you ready to fill me full of your cum and put a baby inside me?”

Immediately I push up to my elbows, eyes wide. She grins as she lets her hands roam over the muscles of my chest, tweaking my nipples and massaging my abs. Finally, wearing a smirk, she says, “I did it. I’m off the pill.”

My eyes fill, but I ignore it.

It may be our wedding night, but I’ve been telling Delane since about four months into dating her that I wanted to marry her and make her a mom. She’s always wanted to be a mom, and even though at twenty-three and twenty-seven, many people want to tell us that we have time, that we should travel and live before adding kids to the mix, we’ve talked about starting our family right away.

Delane said after the wedding, we could talk about when she will go off birth control. I was hopeful that meant we could start trying to have a baby within months.

“Surprise,” she says, sinking down on my cock while my brain is still spinning. Luckily, my cock could not care less about her news, and he stays hard and eager as she begins to ride him.

“Are you, are you sure?” I groan as she swivels her hips in a way that makes me ready to blow. I grab her by the waist and bring her rocking to a stop. “Are you sure? Because you just fucked me for an hour. I’m not going to last long.”

She giggles. “Me either.” Dropping her hand between her legs, she strokes her clit. “I’m so close. Fucking you like that, god baby, it was so hot.”

I swallow thickly, discovering that her news has brought a thick lump of emotion to my throat. But I talk around it, determined to be sure. “You’re sure?”

She nods. “I’ve been sure as long as you. It just took some tapering and trying different things to get my hormones right after coming off birth control.”

Slowly, she resumes the torturous sway of her hips, her little cunt sucking up my cock, strangling him with her excitement as she does. “Fill me up,” she moans, “give me all your cum. Fuck your cum into me, Miller,” she moans, head tipped forward, the ends of her curls grazing my abs. Watching her find her orgasm using me this way is the sexiest thing ever. I grip her hips as mine surge up off the bed, my cock flooding with intensity as my orgasm bursts free.

“Oh,” she moans, eyes fluttering closed as she sinks her groin to mine, her clit kissing my body as she rides tight, low circles on my cock, her little pussy convulsing around me as we orgasm together.

I empty myself into her with a shudder, loving how it feels to be fucking her to make a baby. The idea of our child growing inside her, the vision of myself bringing her the baby to nurse in the middle of the night and rubbing her feet while she does—every single part of being a father and husband is appealing to me. I want all of it.

She flips her hair back, and sweat shimmers along her skin everywhere as I take in the sight of my queen owning my cock.

“Think you got me pregnant?” she asks with a giggle as she strokes her fingers through the light trail of hair connecting my belly to my cock.

“I don’t know,” I admit, “but I’ll spend every free moment of my life trying.”



Four weeks after our wedding, Delane missed her period.

The End.

reviews

I hoped you enjoyed Miller and Delane. If you'd like to explore more of this type of romance, you may enjoy my books I'll Do Anything (femdom with male chastity) or Stray (femdom with pegging).

Thank you for taking a chance on me and thank you for reading my book.

Your feedback and opinion matter to me! If you have a minute, can you kindly leave a review on Amazon?

Thank you again for spending your down time on my book. It means so much to me!

XO

Daisy

patreon

I write erotic novellas over on my Patreon. So if you like my writing style but want something shorter in length, I release a chapter every week.

Also, you'll get access to commissioned NSFW art featuring your favorite heroes and heroines from my books, Men of Paradise and Wrench Kings included!

You'll get access to everything in my one and only tier. Quarterly merch coming soon!

[Come on, hold my hand.](#)

[Patreon.com/DaisyJane](https://patreon.com/DaisyJane)

(Content ages 18+)

also by daisy jane

Series:

Wrench Kings (3 Books)

[The Wild One](#) / a reverse age gap romance / MF / Book 1

[The Brazen One](#) / a grumpy/sunshine romance / MF / Book 2

[The Only One](#) / a femdom romance / MF / Book 3

Men of Paradise (3 Books)

[Where Violets Bloom](#) / a stalker romance / MF / Book 1

[Stray](#) / a femdom romance / MF / Book 2

[With Force](#) / a CNC romance / MF / Book 3

Oakcreek (2 Books So Far)

[I'll Do Anything](#) / a bully femdom romance / MF / Book 1

[After the Storm](#) / an alpha MM romance / MM / Book 2

The Millionaire and His Maid (3 Books)

[His Young Maid](#) / an age gap boss/employee romance / MF / Book 1

[Maid for Marriage](#) / an age gap romance / MF / Book 2

[Maid a Mama](#) / a surprise pregnancy romance / MF / Book 3

The Taboo Duet

[Unexpected](#) / an age gap Daddy figure romance / Book 1

[Consumed](#) / a Daddy kink romance / Book 2

Standalones:

[The Other Brother](#) / dual POV / MF

[The Corner House](#) / single POV / MFMM, MFM, MFM with an HEA

[My Best Friend's Dad](#) / age gap instalove novel / MF

[Waiting for Coach](#) / age gap novel / student teacher / MF

[Hot Girl Summer](#) / a taboo step sibling romance / MF

[Pleasing the Pastor](#) / an age gap virgin romance / MF

[Release](#) / a taboo MMF, MM, MF romance

Novellas:

[Cherry Pie](#) / very taboo why choose / MFMM

acknowledgments

This book, along with all the others that I write, would not be possible without my village of smart, dedicated, amazing women who turn my manuscript into the best it can be.

A continual and much appreciated thank you to my long-time beta reader, Karen, who has read for me and supported me for years. I'm so glad we met.

Thank you to all of my beta readers for leaving thoughtful feedback in the document and taking one for the team by reading a book that still has some rough edges. You ladies are the real MVPs!

To everyone who ARC reads for me, thank you so much for spending your time with my book. There are so many wonderful stories out there and it is not lost on me that you chose me and I appreciate it so very much!

To Laura, whom I met through a book review after she read one of my books. Your feedback is so insightful and I truly cannot wait for you to write your own book because it will be, undoubtedly, brilliant.

My TikTok team who has become more friends than anything else! Our chat thread is often the highlight of my days! You girls are so fun and FUNNY and I adore all of you. Thank you so much for all of your extremely hard work in content creation.

And to Chaos and Cliterature for keeping me on the rails everywhere else! You ladies work so hard for me—I couldn't keep it all going with out you both. Thank you for caring about my work as much as I do!

Outside of the book realm, shout out and major thanks to Mr. Jane who supports me in all walks of life. All of my book heroes have a little bit of you in them, and as much as I adore them, they'll never hold a candle to you.