



Sweet

Author: *Howl Avery*

Category: Erotic, Romance, New Adult, Lesbian Romance

Description: When predator meets predator, who becomes the prey?

Will wants to meet the perfect man, but it's easier said than done in such a small town. His crush of over a year has no idea he even exists, and ignoring his best friend's advice has only made the problem worse. Rather than limiting himself only to who's available locally, Will turns to the digital world.

Cas is ready to move on after his last relationship ended in death. Right away, he meets the perfect candidate through a new anonymous chatting app, with only one problem—he quickly learns his new friend's identity in the real world. If this budding relationship continues, it'll only be a matter of time before Cas is recognized for who he is as well.

As Will and Cas steadily become closer, their attraction cannot be denied. Nor their similarities. Cas embraces the darkness in Will like no one ever has, creating a mutual obsession that needs to be satisfied in the real world. Maybe Will has finally found the perfect man for him—if he can look past Cas's homicidal tendencies.

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Chapter one

Cas

None of these strangers can ever be you—because you're dead. Other people continue on, living their lives around me, yet I have to remind myself you're no longer one of them. Our time is over, Henri. Time for me to move on.

What does moving on look like in this day and age? Random encounters? Not going to do it for me. I need to cultivate something with someone to be satisfied. We need to have an emotional investment in each other first. So that by the time we actually meet, we have more than attraction. We have a special connection. I'm a romantic like that.

Plenty of apps and websites I could use for this, but I'm looking for someone to connect with on a whole other level. Hmm. Let's see what the interweb has to offer.

After a few searches, the algorithm takes notice of my needs and suggests a new app. Totally random and anonymous messaging. All initial matches are timed. If you both like each other by the end, you have the option to DM each other, for further conversation in the app or taking it elsewhere—but only if you both match. This could be fun for me.

After downloading the app, I click the chat icon and the screen loads. First message. First time getting back out there. Let's do this.

Purple Puppy:...

Purple Puppy:Ugh. I don't know about you, but I would pay actual money just to be able to choose a username instead of the randomly generated ones we get for each new conversation.

Purple Puppy:Last person I talked to was Gold Cock. He hit the username goldmine.

Ah, either nervous or hyper. Almost like an actual puppy.

Orchid Mantis:You know, not really thrilled with mine, either.

Purple Puppy:What the hell kind of color is that, and how did you get something exotic?

Orchid Mantis:It's a shade of pink-purple. Also, an actual animal, like a Black Mamba.

Purple Puppy:And I've got username envy again.

Purple Puppy:And wasted at least five minutes complaining about the app usernames. Sorry about that.

Purple Puppy:Not even going to blame you for thumbs-downing me.

Orchid Mantis:I don't know. Two purples in a sea of colors are an interesting coincidence.

Purple Puppy:...Yeah.

Ellipses kinda piss me off. I don't mean to bad-mouth my generation, but we use them so damn much it can mean everything and nothing, but no one ever seems to know which.

Purple Puppy:Not gonna lie, I downloaded this app today and I'm already starting to think it was a horrible mistake. I'm not made for this.

Purple Puppy:I don't do the random and the anonymous stuff very well.

Purple Puppy:And I'm talking too much again.

Kinda needy and even a tad insecure. I can work with that. He's already got me smiling at my screen.

Orchid Mantis:I actually downloaded it today too... and you're my first conversation... I haven't tried to find anyone else since my boyfriend died. Anonymous and random seemed an easier way to start over. Sorry to get heavy on you.

Purple Puppy:Oh my gosh. No, that's fine.

Purple Puppy:That must be so hard.

Purple Puppy:Sorry. I'm a burst texter. I can't help it.

Orchid Mantis:You text like you're young.

Purple Puppy:Is that a bad thing?

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Orchid Mantis: Depends on how young. App is supposed to have an age limit, but I don't want to meet Chris Hansen.

Purple Puppy: Bahahahah

Purple Puppy: No, I completely understand and agree. Over 18. Not particularly young but not old?

Purple Puppy: Also, not so sure if I'd be interested in someone significantly older. Some silver foxes are like hot damn, but... yeah. No offense.

Orchid Mantis: Do I text like I'm that old?

Purple Puppy: Well, you use full sentences. Which is really impressive. To me, at least.

Purple Puppy: And... yeah. You have that vibe.

Orchid Mantis: I'm not old yet. At least, I don't think so. Neither was my boyfriend.

Orchid Mantis: Sorry, I didn't mean to go there again.

Orchid Mantis: I understand what you mean about not being made for this. Maybe it shouldn't feel embarrassing, but it does. Being out there and looking again after I found someone. I don't know if I can put the real me out there to be judged yet.

And as a testament to my youth, I end with a sad emoji this time.

Purple Puppy: Yeah, all the guys on apps only want to meet up and fuck.

Purple Puppy: Which isn't an issue most of the time, but... it would be nice to find someone who wants to talk. Get to know you. Form an actual connection.

Orchid Mantis: I feel the exact same way.

Maybe thirty seconds left on the timer, and he's still typing. He's not fast enough and the conversation grays. Then the pop-up prompts me to make my choice. I slam the thumbs-up button so damn fast. He is exactly what I need right now. Questionable self-esteem. Possibly dependent. Eager to please. And just so sweet.

Not even a minute later, the phone chimes to let me know it's a match. Puppy wants to play with me. I smile at my screen. Maybe it's beginner's luck. Or maybe I already found that special someone I'm looking for—the one.

The next guy I'm going to kill.

Chapter two

Will

Sigh. Bailey Bee. So sweet. So sexy. I can stare at this man all day and still find new things to obsess over. He has this way of smiling at people and instantly putting them at ease. Oh, and his hair... rose gold. It's an actual hair color, and I even did an internet search just to figure out the name of his shade. Rose gold. And if that isn't enough, he's close to my age and built about the same, too. Not ripped like a gladiator or perfectly lean, but the achievable kind of sexy with some muscle definition and visible veins and... I need to stop there while in public. To put it more concisely, he is the Rocky to my Dr. Frank-N-Furter. If I were building myself the perfect man, that would be Bailey.

Except Bailey doesn't know I exist, so every Sunday, I pine at a distance while watching him work his stand at the farmer's market. Sometimes I wonder if his name is really Bailey. His last name certainly isn't Bee. Or is it?

"Just go talk to him and get it over with. This is getting kinda sad."

"Fuck off, Jess," I mutter without looking back.

I don't even need to turn my head to know Jesse's glaring at me. He gets so annoyed by my pining a.k.a. slacking. I'll bet money that if I look right now, he's scowling at my back and disturbing his black hair by scrubbing his scalp before stuffing his hands in the pockets of his work sweatshirt. I'm wearing mine too, with the name of the farm on the back and my name embroidered on the front. Cold as hell in the early morning this time of year in Massachusetts, and my buzz cut doesn't help.

"Can you at least help me unload the rest of this?"

I don't so much as glance back at him, just lift my arm in his direction and give him the middle finger. Shoppers will arrive soon, and then I'll have to focus on working. He can handle unloading the last box when almost everything else has been done.

I don't expect Jess to understand. The idea of a classic romance with handwritten love letters would probably make him break out into hives. He's a good friend and an excellent co-worker. And regrettably, attractive to boot. Not romantic, though.

Jesse and I met working at the same farm. Not out in the fields or anything, but in the little store that sells produce and sometimes other goods made by our boss's daughter, Cheryl. I've worked there for a few years, but this is my second year selling for the store at the farmer's market. And Bailey Bee's Honey is only two stands down and across from ours this year. Getting a space this close to him feels serendipitous.

“Don’t spend another year gazing at him from afar, then kicking yourself once the market ends for the season in a few weeks.” Jesse sets a crate next to me and smacks my arm. “And at least unpack while staring. Would ya?”

“You know, I don’t heckle you for ogling women,” I grumble.

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Either he doesn't hear me or chooses not to respond before he gets back to work.

I tear my eyes away from Bailey for maybe five seconds to unpack jars of jam for the display. When I look up again, he's walking over. No, not here. Oh, fuck, yes. Right to our stand. And up to me.

"Hi," he says with that perfect smile that could melt the coldest of hearts.

A somewhat pained sound escapes while I raise my hand in a small wave. He watches my hand move, but gestures at the display I'm building.

"When did you guys start selling jam?"

When did we start selling jam? I have no idea. I know nothing anymore. Go ahead and ask my name. I can't even tell you. After a short yet awkward silence of me gawking at Bailey, Jess comes and saves me.

"Cheryl added it to the store earlier this year."

And now Bailey seems disappointed I haven't responded to him. I'm bombing this. So badly. So very, very badly. I can't help it. On-the-spot social interaction has never been my strength. Not when the person is this attractive. Makes way more sense to figure out everything about them first to ensure the conversation flows in the right direction. How else are you supposed to say the right thing?

"Well... ah." Bailey smiles and I should go to prison for the crime of thinking he couldn't get any cuter. Except he can. When nervous. "I guess... I just wanted to say

hello to you guys.” His eyes flick to me at the wordguys. “I better get back now. Don’t have anyone to watch my stand.” He smiles one more time and turns to leave.

What’s that saying? I hate to see him go, but I love watching him walk away. Jesse gives me a look when he notices me craning my neck to watch Bailey. Sue me. The guy has a succulent ass. How is one man so gorgeous? Bailey’s perfect in every way, which is why my mind short-circuits around him.

“Dude,” Jesse says with a shake of his head. “That was painful to witness.”

“Great, because it was painful to experience.”

Jesse sighs and grabs the empty crate, then stores it under a table. “You’re not exactly subtle, either.”

“I can’t help it. Even thinking about talking to him makes my brain force restart.”

I take a deep sigh and look over at Bailey’s stand, where he’s talking with his first customer. Cutest goddamn beekeeper in existence. Who could blame me?

“This is why I’m talking to that guy. To like, build up my social skills so I don’t act so much like me.”

Jesse rolls his eyes. “You talk to me just fine, thanks.”

“Duh, you’re straight.”

Jesse rolls his eyes again.

“And I dunno. This guy’s nice. Kinda lonely, too. I get this vibe that he’s older. His partner died, and he’s trying to start all over, but all he finds are these guys who only

want a quick fuck.”

“That’s actually really sad.” Jesse frowns. “But taking up his time out of pity isn’t doing him any favors.”

I shrug. I’m not out searching for someone to be a glucose guardian, nor am I so young that Mantis will disregard me. At least, I don’t think so. Maybe for the right guy... maybe certain stuff won’t matter as much when we already have a connection. And there is something between us. I look forward to reading his messages and texting him back... whoever he is. Who knows? Maybe we’ll get to the point where we want to share more and take this somewhere. I’m not ready to discount him just yet.

The rest of the workday passes quickly enough. Right after the market ends, but before we load the truck and break down the displays, I get a notification ding. Mantis and I are still messaging solely within the app. His choice, and I don’t mind.

Orchid Mantis: Having a good day?

Purple Puppy: Well, ah, that’s a loaded question. I want to say yes.

Purple Puppy: And really, not terrible right now. But dammit, am I ever awkward in person.

Purple Puppy: Who am I kidding? I’m awkward not in person, too.

Orchid Mantis: You’re exuberant. It’s sweet.

Aww. See, this is exactly why I enjoy talking to Mantis. Even after the unfortunate realization that the stupid app saves each randomized username when two people match so you know who you’re talking to without knowing who you’re talking

to—which may be for the best since we haven't shared our personal info yet—he makes the app worth keeping. Mantis is such a wholesome guy.

And really and truly, we've been texting daily for a week, and it's nice to have someone who wants to... talk. That's it. Maybe I do need an older guy, since I clearly have some dated expectations. Mantis strikes me as the type who would gladly woo me.

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Orchid Mantis:I take it you have someone you like?

Oh, boy. This may get awkward.

Purple Puppy:Maybe? Doesn't feel right to say for certain when I don't really know him. I want to know him. I also want to have an epic romance with someone.

Purple Puppy:Only he doesn't know I exist. And I'm starting to think maybe he never will. It's a lost cause at this point.

Orchid Mantis:You should talk to him.

Purple Puppy:You sound like my best friend.

Orchid Mantis:Your best friend sounds smart.

I look over at Jesse, texting away with a huge grin on his face. Probably hitting up another girl he met at the store. At least he won't complain about me being on my phone when he's taking a break to do the same.

Purple Puppy:I've got to go for now, but I'll talk to you again when I get home. Still wrapping it up here.

Orchid Mantis:I'm looking forward to it.

And I realize too late he could've construed my last message as a slight innuendo, but Mantis is not that kinda guy. He's really going to want to talk to me about mostly

normal things. I say mostly since we have dipped into sexual conversations a bit, but hey, that's part of being responsible, too. And really, that's what he seems like—an actual adult. Whereas I'm that dog in the burning room telling himself everything is fine. I have no idea what in the hell I'm doing and I'm starting to believe I'll never have my shit together. I can't even imagine what a guy like Mantis sees in me.

Chapter three

Cas

The day has warmed significantly from late summer sunshine, but the leaves will be changing any time now. I'm still outside and not yet in my house when my phone dings again. Ahh, PP. You might not like your username, but I find it entertaining—as much as I find you.

Purple Puppy: I should've asked how your day was earlier.

Purple Puppy: So, how has your day been?

And a smiley. How sweet.

Orchid Mantis: I've had better.

Orchid Mantis: You're right. Talking to guys is hard. Except maybe you. Less hard.

Purple Puppy: I make you less hard?

Orchid Mantis: That's yet to be determined.

Purple Puppy: Oh my gosh, I need to know how you imagine me.

Purple Puppy:Or a guess, at least. As vague or specific as you want to get.

Hmm. Time to cheat. The app lets you list as much or as little about yourself as you want. Mine's blank. I prefer making people work for their tidbits. It builds trust and makes them feel special when I do share. As for him, I've checked his user profile before and not much of what he has on his page is helpful. I'm hoping to find something I may have missed last time. Never know when something may jump out at you.

He's near me. Doesn't say exactly where, but within the closest search radius. No age. Average height and weight. No pictures. Not much of anything, really. Well, I do like a challenge.

Orchid Mantis:You converse like you're young, like in your twenties, but the things you talk about aren't school or hookups but work and friends. You're fun, but you want to be responsible. Like you don't think of yourself as a real adult yet. Closer to thirty than twenty, most likely.

Purple Puppy:...

Purple Puppy:I was expecting something a lot more pervy.

Purple Puppy:And not quite that spot on.

Orchid Mantis:You don't like pervy.

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Purple Puppy:Says who?

Orchid Mantis:Pervy isn't what you came here looking for.

Purple Puppy:Well, you got me there.

Purple Puppy:Do you want to know how I picture you?

Orchid Mantis:Actually, I really do.

Purple Puppy:Not old... but older. Maybe forty or fifty. And I bet you're super fit and health conscious, which means you're in better shape than me even though you're older than me. Stone-cold fox with abs and starting to gray but it looks great on you. Total silver fox.

Orchid Mantis:It's cute how you're still convinced I'm older.

Purple Puppy:Oh, come on. Don't be so modest about it. You're hot still and you know it.

Ah, that gets me to chuckle.

Purple Puppy:So, how close was I? 100%? 110%??

Orchid Mantis:Way off. Way, way off.

Orchid Mantis:Much younger, for starters. Not what I would consider super fit, but

still okay? Average, I guess?

Purple Puppy:Dad bod?

Orchid Mantis:No, haha. Maybe like one step up from that. Ahhh... brother's best friend, who's nothing extraordinary but always there. Started off as the boy next door.

Purple Puppy:Somehow, this has gotten much better than I ever imagined.

And the blushing emoji.

Purple Puppy:Okay, so maybe I was way off on the rest, but I know this much will be right, so here goes. You're most definitely a classic gentleman. The type who wants to go on dates and appreciates someone holding the door for you. And if you sent me flowers, I would not at all take offense since I'm a sap, too. I'd write you a handwritten letter in exchange, saying how much I appreciate your gesture and our relationship. Then include two more pages about my unbridled passions and yearning. And you'd be so moved by the gesture, you'd tell me how sweet I am all over again.

I was right. He's the one. Sigh.

Orchid Mantis:Forget how far off the first guess was. That one was perfect.

Orchid Mantis:You know what? I want you to call sometime.

Purple Puppy:I'm not so sure I want to pony up for a premium account.

Purple Puppy:Not that I'm broke.

Purple Puppy:Okay, I am broke. But I'm also not trying to be flaky, nor am I

attempting to weasel any money out of you.

Orchid Mantis:No video-chatting nonsense. Normal, over the phone conversation. I think it would be nice to hear your voice sometime. And audio calls in the app are free, so you have no excuse.

Purple Puppy:...

Purple Puppy:... okay

Purple Puppy:For some reason I'm still waiting for you to turn out like other guys. Like you say that you want to talk, but really you mean sex.

Orchid Mantis:Well, certainly not the first time we talk. You need to court me a bit more if you want that out of me.

Purple Puppy:Ahaha. Okay.

Purple Puppy:This is why I like talking to you so much. You have a great personality and you're not afraid to use it.

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Thanks, babe. I made this one just for you. I smile to myself and sigh while staring at the screen. He's a romantic, and he wants a fellow romantic.

Lucky for him, this is my favorite part. The gaps between men have always been about holding out for that special someone and refusing to settle for availability or convenience. I can and have waited much longer before, since I refuse to quit once I set my sights on someone.

What I won't do is spend all my time and energy trying to get him to hook up with me because I don't need to. I'm going to make him want me. To come to me. To go out of his mind trying to figure out what I'm thinking and what his next move should be. He is going to pursue me like mad, and I'm going to love every minute of it.

Orchid Mantis: I like talking to you, too. Which is why I expect you to message me again soon. Not right now, though. I need to take care of the animals.

Purple Puppy: You said you didn't have pets!

Orchid Mantis: I don't. It's, well... essentially a farm. They're working animals. But I do care about them, which is why I care for them.

Purple Puppy: Oh! That's another thing we have in common. I work for a farm, too. Not on the farm, though. Mostly stocking and running a register. But my boss is a great guy and I like his goats.

Purple Puppy: Anyway, don't mean to keep you! Until next time.

And a smiley.

Now that is a helpful kernel. Sure, we're in a rural area, but there are only so many farms around me. Even less with farm stands or stores. And goats. Chickens and cows are pretty common around here, not so much goats. Hmm. He made it sound like a mom-and-pop general store, but goats can mean a shop with artisan crafts like soap.

Well, as much as I want to spend more time on this, I have other responsibilities.

Chapter four

Will

I can't focus while at work the following Tuesday. More than likely, Bailey will be the object of my desire forever, but after talking to Mantis the other day... I dunno. I feel almost giddy. He has that effect on me. And I'm really, really digging the "brother's best friend" comparison. Maybe he wants something more than chatting, and I don't mean sexting or even hooking up a few times, but an actual relationship... and maybe I'll want it, too.

Jess comes in while I'm stocking. And by that, I mean he catches me daydreaming while manhandling corn cobs. Wait, no, not like that.

"What's gotten into you?" Jesse grins.

"I think I really like Mantis," I say with a smile and a sigh.

"You don't even know his name," he scoffs.

"I don't expect you to understand." I shake my head and pile more produce on the

display.

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot how gay guys are. Anything lasting more than a couple of hours, and he’s the love of your life.”

“No,” I huff. “I don’t expect you to understand romance.”

“I can be romantic.” He smiles.

“Netflix and chill isn’t romantic just because you open a bottle of wine.”

“Okay, but... what happened to your Bailey obsession?”

I shrug. I still like Bailey. And I want to get to know Bailey. But right here, right now... I have Mantis in front of me. And he’s someone I can actually talk to. Even someone I can see potentially liking me back.

“Anyway, I came to remind you that you need to help with the goats tomorrow. I’m off and Lucy’s the only other one on the schedule,” Jesse says.

My face scrunches. “But you’re our animal guy.”

“How? I got hired for the same job as you, yet you always make me go out there while you get to stay inside and cover the register.”

“I don’t live on a dairy farm.”

Technically, his mom and dad’s farm beside acres of woods, but they can’t afford for Jess to move out. He still helps out when he’s not working here and puts part of his paycheck toward paying the bills. All the kids do.

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Jesse rolls his eyes. “Come on. You love our goats. It’s one day.”

“I love petting our goats,” I correct.

“You can’t ask the pregnant girl. She’s going to pop any day now.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” I grin. “Switch shifts with me.”

Jesse sighs, but he doesn’t refuse. He never does. Best coworker ever. “Did it ever occur to you I might have plans already?”

“Not really, no. Do you?”

“Not anymore, it seems.”

“I’ll make it up to you,” I say with my sweetest smile.

“Oh, yeah? You’re going to be my hot date instead?”

I laugh mockingly. He thinks he’s so cute and funny. “No. We both have Sunday night off. We can hang out after work, with like pizza or beer or whatever at my place. I’ll buy.”

“I’m glad you said so, because I wouldn’t be surprised if you asked me to pay.” He breaks into a smile and chuckles.

“One time!” I laugh with him. “How many years of being friends and I forgot my

walletonetime?”

“It also happened to be the first time we did anything outside of work. And I still don’t believe that excuse. You totally thought it was a date and expected me to pay.”

“No, I didn’t.” And I laugh even harder.

Okay, maybe I had hoped somewhat. But I really did forget my wallet. And I might’ve had a brief crush on Jess after I first got hired, but... that ended as soon as I found out he dated the girl who I replaced at our job. I wasn’t going to be that guy pining over what never could or would be. I was a romantic—not into tragedies.

“Sunday after work, it is.” Jesse smiles one more time before going to punch out.

Before I know it, it’s my turn to clock out, too. I almost can’t wait to get home and hear from Mantis. Then I don’t have to. A notification I’m dying to see flashes across the screen of my phone while I’m still in the breakroom.

Orchid Mantis: Evening. Did today treat you well?

Sigh. Mantis always asks the kinds of questions that prove he really cares. He’s so genuine.

Purple Puppy: Actually, yeah. I got my friend to switch shifts with me tomorrow, and now we’re going to hang out on Sunday after work.

Orchid Mantis: Is this the smart best friend or the guy who doesn’t notice you?

Damn, he really does pay attention.

Purple Puppy: The best friend. Guy who doesn’t notice me... well, he doesn’t get

many chances to notice me... or not notice me, I guess.

Purple Puppy:I doubt seeing him more would even change anything.

Orchid Mantis:I would notice you.

Purple Puppy:Yeah?

Orchid Mantis:Even in texts, you come across as unforgettable. An individual. I would take notice if I were in a room with you. He probably notices you, too.

Purple Puppy:Unfortunately, I am much less competent in person than I am online.

Orchid Mantis:Then talk to him online.

Purple Puppy:...

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Purple Puppy: Why didn't I ever think of that?

Purple Puppy: Would that be weird to message him out of the blue?

Orchid Mantis: Not if he's someone you see regularly. Though I rescind my advice if he's a customer or something. That would be unprofessional.

Hmm... Well, I do know Bailey through work, but we aren't exactly coworkers. Then again, Jess actually is a coworker, and we hang out all the time. Maybe I can make up some bullshit excuse about seeing him in my suggested friends on social media. It's a small town, after all.

Purple Puppy: I feel like you're my wingman.

Orchid Mantis: And I feel like you won't figure out how you feel about this guy until you talk to him. Who knows? Maybe you'll realize there's no connection, and he's a waste of your time.

Purple Puppy: Am I a waste of your time?

Yes, I know I'm needy. What of it? Mantis is the first guy to stroke my ego and nothing else. Being wanted feels nice, even if it's only by a name on a screen.

Orchid Mantis: Never. You make my days more fulfilling and I enjoy our conversations. Plus, I think it's helping me to have someone to talk to. Even if we stayed anon or just friends, I'd be happy to have met you.

Purple Puppy:Would you... want more than that?

Orchid Mantis:The more we talk, the more that answer shifts toward yes. At the same time, I enjoy what we have, and I don't want to overanalyze it. I am open to seeing where this is headed.

Oh, deep breath. This is the nice part about being online. Mantis doesn't have to see me as flustered as a teenager and twice as awkward over his honesty. And if this guy has me losing mental capacity, I mustreallylike him.

Purple Puppy:I think I would like that, too.

Purple Puppy:I don't mean to run, but I'm leaving on a high note. I'll message you when I get back home.

Orchid Mantis:I'll be looking forward to it.

Orchid Mantis:But I need to check on the animals real quick. Want to see who finishes first?

Any other man, and I'd say that's a line. Only, I know Mantis isn't like that.

Purple Puppy:Yes. Race me.

Orchid Mantis:Okay, no cheating. I'm going to my front door first and you should head to your car or whatever.

Purple Puppy:Or what? Vespa? Broom?

Orchid Mantis:You said you're broke, and cars are expensive. Not judging if you have to walk or use public transport.

Aww. I'm looking more at my screen than where I place my feet while I walk across the parking lot.

Orchid Mantis: Okay, I'm at my front door. Ready?

Purple Puppy: In my car. Key not yet in the ignition. Go!

I drop my phone onto the middle console and don't even stop to fiddle with the radio this time. After I flick on my headlights, I reverse out of my parking spot. Since I closed tonight, I encounter little to no traffic on my way home. As soon as I'm parked, I snatch up my phone again and type.

Purple Puppy: I win.

Orchid Mantis: Only counts if you're in your house. Your task was getting home.

Purple Puppy: Are you done with your animals?

Orchid Mantis: Almost. I still need to walk back to my place, too.

Ahh. I unbuckle my seatbelt and scramble out of the car. Within seconds, I've got the keys to my rental in my hand and I'm shoving my door open. Officially, home.

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Purple Puppy: In my house!

Orchid Mantis: Okay, okay. You win.

And a smiley.

Orchid Mantis: Doesn't feel like losing when you hustle like that just to talk to me, though.

Oh. My heart. Currently pumping, not only from rushing into my house. Maybe I should be embarrassed to be called out like that, but... I like that he noticed. And the thought of him smiling at his screen, secretly pleased to have someone who cares so much... makes my cock twitch. Jess is right. I don't know what this guy looks like, or even his name. And yet, if he were to answer my call all out of breath from rushing to get to his phone and then say how happy he is to hear from me... my hand would go straight down my pants. How has this guy gotten such a hold on me already?

Chapter five

Cas

So, an eager PP doesn't need much time. I set my timer and about seven minutes is all it took for him to get from the parking lot of his job to outside his house, and another minute at most before he was inside. That helps me significantly. He lives and works close to me. Which means even if I assume his drive bumps him outside my radius, there are only so many farms within ten to fifteen miles of me. The number shrinks even more once I eliminate the ones that don't match what he's told

me. I'm not looking for a chicken farm or dairy farm, but something with goats and a store. May not sound distinct, but that could be enough to distinguish it from others in such a small area.

My phone dings and I close the current screen with the maps app. Someone's up late.

Purple Puppy:I know I already said I'm going to bed, but I'm in bed and I can't sleep.

Orchid Mantis:I'm in bed, too. But I'm not telling you the color of my underwear.

Purple Puppy:Oh no. Noooo. I didn't mean it like that.

Sure, you didn't.

Purple Puppy:I'm sorry. You probably have work in the morning.

Orchid Mantis:It's okay. You can text me until one of us passes out.

Purple Puppy:Yeah?

Purple Puppy:Could I maybe... call you?

Orchid Mantis:Are you going to wish me goodnight?

Purple Puppy:Yes.

And a smile emoji. How could anyone resist?

Orchid Mantis:Okay.

I include another variation of the smile emoji. An article I once read said each smiley

is supposed to mean something different. I'm not sure how we as a society managed to complicate this, but here we are. Emoji subtext is a thing I need to worry about now.

My phone rings less than ten seconds later, and I accept the audio call through the app, but I don't say anything. Not yet.

"Hi."

And I was right. He doesn't have that youthful lilt, but he still sounds young—only more like my age and not a teenager.

"Hey," I say back.

"I did... not put enough thought into this." He laughs, very obviously from nerves.

"How so?"

"I... want to say goodnight to you, but I technically don't know your name."

I roll over in bed, and I make sure he can hear me moving while he waits for my response. "What do you normally call me?"

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“Mantis.” He pauses. “What do you call me?”

“PP.”

“Like piss?” He’s laughing now, and it’s genuine.

“I was thinking more like slang for penis.”

“Oh, my god.”

“What?”

He’s trying and horribly failing to stifle his laughter. “When I tell you my name, you must remember this moment.”

“Oh, when?”

“Yes, when.” He takes a deep sigh. “You won’t have to tell me yours, though. Only if you want.”

“I like those terms.” Then I let out the most pleased sigh I can possibly muster. “And I like talking to you.”

“Me, too. And um... I think I would like to call you at night again.” He gets quiet, but when I don’t fill the silence for him, he carries on. “Just to say goodnight, like this.”

“Okay,” I agree. “Goodnight.”

“Night. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

And the call ends. Well, this is going along at a nice pace. Me being me, I want to drag it out as long as possible, but that’s not very smart. Nothing good lasts forever. Too bad. After I close the app, I start another internet search. I don’t actually have to be up early. I can spend all night on this if I want. And I do. Figuring out who he is before he tells me adds a certain thrill. And he will tell me—sooner or later.

He winds up calling me every night that week, and he always asks first. So sweet. Also, probably horny. The whispery voice of a late-night phone call really seems to turn his crank, even if we only talk about our day and wish each other goodnight. Well, for now. I know that won’t last forever and I don’t want it to, but this is a game where most of my moves will be none at all. Pursuing the object of my desire offers limited satisfaction, since what I want most is to be pursued.

After he gets home from work, he messages to ask me if he can call later. Of course, I say yes. My phone rings while I’m in bed and I am so ready for this. Showtime.

“Hi.” He sounds a bit breathier than usual. Hmm.

“Hey.” Low, barely above a whisper. He likes the feigned intimacy, almost as if we’re lying in bed together. “What have you been doing?”

“Long day,” he sighs. “I have to be up early for work tomorrow, but I still wanted to get a chance to call.”

“I’m glad you did. I like our little routine.” Which is true. “I like thinking about...” And I purposely stop there.

“About?” He believes my hesitancy.

“About what it would be like to be there. Just to see you while you’re sleepy and in bed, all done with the day and relaxing. Makes my night better.”

“Do... you really want to? See me?”

“You could send me a picture of your hand and I’d be thinking about holding it.”

He chuckles but the sounds of him rustling around come across the phone. “Check your messages.”

The shift in his voice takes me off guard. He normally speaks with the same gentle tone: warm yet masculine and always casual. I’m not sure I’d call this authoritative but... a step in that direction. Well, then. I pull the phone away from my ear and... fucking jackpot. Tattoos. Not some random body that could belong to any guy anywhere. Better yet, not so many that the designs blend into each other, but enough to make him extremely distinctive. I save that to my phone so damn fast because I know I’m going to obsess over every pixel later in my search for an identifying feature.

After the initial burst of excitement, I spend another moment taking in the rest of the image. Shot from about the neck down. Decent body. Not that I really care either way. A toned chest, but with the slightest tummy pouch. Clearly in bed, with his dark sheets across his lap and... I see cock. Not full-on and out there. Only the tiniest bit peeking out from behind the sheet on him. Enough to know what I’m looking at while still appearing unintentional.

If it were me, I would’ve done it on purpose. With him, my gut says no. Yet, I’m still too busy processing the change in his demeanor to say for certain. Something that can still somehow manage to take me by surprise makes my cock twitch.

“Send me something back.” His voice has the same quality as before, but this time I

hear the actual difference. He's dropped the sweetness. An inflection I've heard so many times in so many good boys. Hell, I've done it too, depending on the guy I'm trying to pull.

"You don't want to see me hard," I softly chuckle. Not so much because I believe it, but because he wants to hear me thinking that way. He wants the rush he'll get when I ask if we really should, and he'll have himself believing he's the one swaying me.

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“Yes, I do.” His insistence leaves no room for doubt. “Show me.”

And even harder now. No. This never happens to me. Well, not never ever, more like not this way, not so easily, not so suddenly. Fuck. I may as well use this to my advantage. I take a breath and shove my tight black underwear down my hips. Not all the way. Enough for a peek, though this will very likely come across as intentional. But that’s exactly what I want this time.

He must be patiently awaiting a response because I don’t even have to say anything after snapping a quick shot and sending it over. The change in his breathing tells me exactly when he gets it. “Fuck, that’s hot.”

Now I have no doubt he’s jerking off. And right about this time, I’m usually doing something more interesting while making a show of breathing heavily and parroting whatever the other person is saying. Most people enjoy phone sex by imagining the other person: what they’re doing over there, or even better, that they’re here and doing it themselves. This also happens to be what I don’t like about phone sex. I tell myself I lack imagination, but really, so much of it doesn’t inherently appeal to me. Can’t get into phone sex. Until tonight, apparently.

“Touch your cock for me.” And he says this without even a “please” tacked on as an afterthought.

“For you, huh?” Maybe I sound annoyed, but I’m already whipping mine out.

“I’m not there to do it myself.” He sighs on his end. “You have to do it for me, so I can hear you.”

I don't even have to exaggerate my gasping because I am so turned on right now. Maybe more than I've ever been. After a few slow strokes, I'm leaking and I take a minute to play with my balls while I listen to the pleased breaths coming through the phone.

"Do you have anything to fuck yourself with?"

I'm about to tell him no when I realize I do. I'll have to open multiple drawers, and I'll definitely have to move, but I've got a few toys and lube stashed in my room. Still not why I'm ready to say no. Just... no.

"I'd be prepping your tight hole by now. Do it."

My skin shivers and what the fuck, now I actually want it. And if I want it, I'm doing it. He must hear me scrambling and that should be sufficient evidence I'm on the move. As soon as I'm back in the middle of the bed, I rip my underwear all the way down my legs and roll onto my side. After spreading the lube with my fingers, I dip into myself ever so slightly. When I moan a little, he lets out a satisfied hum.

"Now, let me hear you taking my cock."

Honestly, I'm not even sure I've ever used this toy. If I did, I can't remember it. I pin the phone to the side of my face with my shoulder, since I'm not wasting a hand for that right now. Then I slide the dildo in without hesitation, mostly from being more desperate than I've ever been, but also because I feel certain that's how he'd do it—line up and just start fucking. And does that ever feel amazing.

More pleased humming on his end. "You're enjoying that as much as I hoped you would, baby."

And maybe for the first time ever, I actually am. I'm not faking the moans and sighs.

At this rate, he may even get me to come. I'm doing the work, but I'll go ahead and give him the credit—he earned it.

When my breath quickens to panting, he starts to join me. He pauses only to say, “My name’s Will.”

And he doesn’t have to tell me the rest. If this man gets me to come, you better believe I’ll scream his name while I’m doing it, if that’s what he wants. As soon as I gasp and say his name, he’s moaning in my ear. My skin prickles while I listen, intensifying the pleasure while I’m coming. As much as I want him to return the favor, I have to remind myself not yet. Soon, but not yet. Slowly, our breathing returns to normal.

“Willy,” I snicker when it occurs to me.

“Yes, of all the nicknames you could’ve given me, you somehow managed to pick yet another euphemism for a penis.” He laughs, and he’s right back to sweet. “I’ll call you again soon.”

“You better.”

We wish each other goodnight, then I hang up the call.

Chapter six

Will

Never bottoms, my ass—or his ass, I guess. Either way, that’s a crock of shit and I called it. Talking to Mantis on the phone for the last week has been amazing, especially our conversation last night. He’s got such a sexy voice—the low and smooth kind, but not over-exaggerated like a bad porno. Talking to him never fails to

make my cock swell, but at the same time I am a very visual guy. Most of us are.

Case in point, me resting my chin on my fist while staring at Bailey working his stand while Jess not-so-subtly glares in my peripheral vision. He can judge all he wants—I did most of the unpacking while he set up the displays earlier, just so he wouldn't complain at me for slacking later. As if gazing at the sweetest specimen in existence were somehow a waste of time. People spend hours gazing at art in museums and Bailey's not only living and breathing art, but a literal masterpiece. My personal David, walking among us.

"For some reason, I hoped talking to Mantis more would also mean watching Bailey less," Jesse says from somewhere behind me.

"Fuck off, Jess," I murmur. Of course, being my best friend means Jesse gets to hear all about me pining for Mantis, too. "At least Mantis understands and doesn't discourage me. He's given me a lot of good ideas about starting a conversation and approaching him."

"And how long have I been telling you to go up to him and talk to him?"

I scoff. A technicality, and the most basic advice anyone can give.

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Much in the same way that Jess and I conversing isn't pressing enough for me to tear my eyes away from Bailey, he's sneaking a glance at his phone between customers at his stand. Almost as if Bailey's texting someone.

Maybe Mantis is right. Maybe Bailey has been a lost cause from the start, but I simply don't know it yet. He came over to our stand again today and spent the entire time ignoring me and flirting with Jess. Another lost cause.

Then again, I've done a very... thorough search of the internet to learn more about Bailey. He doesn't list himself as in a relationship on any of his social media profiles, but that doesn't mean anything. Aside from the most basic information, he doesn't put much out there. Not judging. I'm the same. Never can be too careful these days. At the very least, I've learned his last name is not in fact Bee. The gimmick is still cute, anyway.

"Watch the stand for a minute. I'll be right back," Jesse says as he's walking away.

Yep. You can count on me. The market will be over in less than ten minutes anyway, so foot traffic has already dwindled significantly. As soon as Jess is out of sight, I've got my phone out and lowered enough to be obscured by the table in front of me.

Purple Puppy: I'm hanging out with my friend right after work, so I may not get to call tonight.

I include the biggest frown emoji available.

Orchid Mantis: Get back to work.

Sent with a sassy wink.

Purple Puppy:How do you know I'm at work?

Orchid Mantis:You told me yesterday that you had work in the morning.

Purple Puppy:Maybe I'm done for the day.

I grin at my screen. Teasing him is fun.

Orchid Mantis:You're not.

My skin prickles with that sense of being watched, but there aren't any customers waiting when I glance up from my screen.

Orchid Mantis:You already told me you're hanging out with your friend right after work. Therefore, you must still be at work.

Purple Puppy:...or I could be home and waiting for him to get here.

Orchid Mantis:No.

Orchid Mantis:You're not.

Purple Puppy:And how would you know? Are you spying on me?

Orchid Mantis:If you had so much as five free minutes, you'd be calling me.

Well, he's got me there. Fuck a duck, does he know me.

Orchid Mantis:Go be the responsible adult you're trying to become, and I'll be doing

the same. I'll message you later.

I smile at my screen and put the phone back in the pocket of my jeans. Do I ever have great timing, too. Jess returns within minutes while I'm responsibly packing everything that needs to be loaded back into the truck.

"Are we still on for tonight?" Jesse asks once I'm within earshot.

"Yeah, of course." I smile right at him. "Best coworker and friend ever."

Jesse smiles back and gets to work alongside me.

Really doesn't take much to keep Jess happy, which is what I like so much about him. The man may not grasp the concept of romance, but at least he recognizes appreciation, and he's always grateful.

A couple of hours later, everything's done back at the farm and we're finally at my place. We're going to have a binge marathon: a season of a show, a case of cheap beer, and a large pizza. Neither of us have work tomorrow since our boss always gives us Monday off to compensate for time and half on Sunday while working the farmer's market ourselves. Jess and I have been working for him long enough that he trusts us to get a job done without micromanaging. Plus, he's getting kinda up there in age and starting the slow process of leaving the business to Cheryl.

"Oh, please, no." Jesse cringes at my selection. "Not makeup. I can't watch that for a whole evening."

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“Yes, you can. And it’s not makeup, it’s an SFX makeup competition. The kind people do in movies and stuff.”

And really, he shouldn’t complain when I could’ve picked something much worse. He’s well aware that I have only one interest when it comes to television, and that’s competition shows. Not quite game shows where the contestants are pitted against each other, but the kind where the contestants have to display their skills to win: baking, tattooing, or even forging weapons. Jess shouldn’t whine about something as cool as special effects makeup when I got him to watch an entire season of a modeling competition with me the last time he came over. He bitched the whole first episode, but by the finale he was yelling at the judges for sending home his favorite contestant.

So, we’ve got eight episodes, about forty-five minutes each, and likely enough pizza and beer to last us the six hours we’re about to kill on my couch. Let the binge begin.

The second to last episode, the challenge is anthropomorphic bugs. Jess and I both have our pick of who we’re hoping to make it to the finals. He’s rooting for the guy making a firefly, which I will admit looks ambitious and impressive. My favorite contestant is a lady recreating a cockroach. I kinda admire how she chose something common and ugly—while simultaneously terrifying at this scale.

The other two each pick something elegant: a dragonfly and a mantis. Admittedly, the mantis stands out to me. I don’t live under a rock. I know what a praying mantis is. Never have I seen the orchid variety, which somehow appears floral—a perfect mimicry of something beautiful. And that gets me thinking about Mantis, to the point I’m not focusing on the screen anymore. Jess notices.

“Is it weird I almost feel bad for not calling Mantis tonight? Like I’m standing him up or something.” I’m half speaking my thoughts aloud and half asking Jesse’s opinion.

Jesse mutters something mostly to himself.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing,” he grumbles.

More and more, I’ve noticed this when I bring Mantis up in conversation. I can’t tell if he’s sick of hearing about him or what. Even when I recounted to Jess what happened last night, it’s not like I went over it in graphic detail. Maybe he’s not used to it since I haven’t dated many guys since we became friends, or maybe someone has some latent homophobia to unpack. Really hoping that’s not the case, though.

“If he’s as great a guy as you say he is, then he’ll understand you’re with your friend,” Jesse says instead.

“He is great.” I give him a sweet smile. “He reminds me a lot of you in some ways.”

“Only he’s romantic.” His tone is all mocking, and he rolls his eyes.

“Well, yeah, that and... into guys.”

Jesse crosses his arms while he keeps his eyes forward, facing the television. His jaw ticks and he sounds more annoyed than ever when he says, “Who said I wasn’t?”

Uh... what? My thoughts come to an end like a needle scratch and I whip my head over to stare right at him.

“Did I ever say I was straight, or did you just assume I was?”

Maybe it's the beer, but I can't remember if he did or didn't. "No, but you... you dated the girl who quit before I got hired. You told me yourself."

"And before her, I was still trying to make long distance work with my boyfriend from college. Thanks for the bi erasure."

"No." I don't mean to scoff, but... he's not being funny right now. "Quit fucking with me."

Jess grabs hold of my shirt and pulls me closer, bringing his lips to mine—not in a peck, but an actual kiss. One where his tongue invades my mouth, and he ends up taking my bottom lip into his teeth. Despite the heat between us, I suspect he's trying to make a point more than anything else. And I'm already horny. Making out with me is only going to make me hornier. This feels more like gay chicken, except I know I'll win and I'm going to be pissed when I do.

The second Jess pulls away, I shove his head down toward my lap. Jess drops his whole body lower onto the couch and starts undoing my jeans for me. Once my cock is in his mouth, I'm starting to believe no one wants to win that badly—not if they're straight. I lift my hips and pry him back up so I can lean forward and push my pants all the way down my legs. Then we're both tugging our shirts over our heads, but I go back to yank his pants off him, too. Jess turns and leans back into the arm of the couch so I can peel his unzipped jeans down his hips and toward me.

"Let me see how hard you really are," I whisper right before freeing his cock. Once again, almost to myself, while still asking him.

And the answer is incredibly hard. Fuck, my best friend has a nice cock, too. Jess melts further back into the couch from passion, but I want him closer to me. I pull him up and turn him to face the back of the couch, then kneel right behind him instead. We can both hold the back for support while upright but for now I've got his

hips while grinding against his ass and he twists his upper body enough to kiss me the entire time. My precum leaves him slick enough to pop my fingers in and he gasps against my mouth. Not taking my time and not fucking around.

“I bet you can take my cock, yeah?” His hole clenches tighter around my fingers at the mere mention, and that gets me to pant hard right in his ear. “You can do that for me. Can’t you, Jess?”

Jess nods slightly and I don’t really give him a chance to respond more or less than that. I spit on my hand and that’s all he’s getting before I shove my cock all the way inside him.

“Fucking asshole,” he chokes out.

Actually, yes, I am about to do that. Instead of being cheeky, I shush him and start to thrust. “You can do it. You’re already doing it, Jess.”

He makes the choked sound again, but his cock is fucking dripping when I reach a hand around to jerk him off for encouragement.

“You’re so tight, Jess,” I murmur right into his ear. “And I’ve wanted to fuck you since I first saw you.”

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His body trembles against mine once I'm slamming into him. Oh, he is going to fucking feel this tomorrow. I'm making sure of it.

“Will...”

His voice breaks when he says my name, so I switch my focus to stroking the length of his cock more and shallow thrusting. It's not long before I can hear and feel him approaching climax. As soon as his cock pulses, I stop holding back. I'm fucking him hard and using his orgasm to help him ignore any pain. After he comes, he has nothing. This also happens to be the part my fucked-up brain enjoys most. The whines. The whimpers. The weeping.

“Almost done. I'm so close, Jess.”

And with a few more rough strokes in him, he's gotten me there. Once I'm done, I ease my wet cock out of him but stay close.

He's still shaking, and he hasn't said anything.

“You did such a good job. Thank you,” I whisper, running my hands up and down his arms. See? Not a complete asshole. I get the concept of aftercare. Not to mention, I know he enjoyed himself and I don't hesitate to remind him. “You came so hard for me, Jess.”

“I... did.” And he almost sounds surprised by that fact.

As for me? Not so much. Usually, I can spot guys like him a mile away—which was

why it disappointed me all the more when I thought I'd never get a chance to fuck him.

"What do you need now? You wanna shower with me and we can go to bed?" I nuzzle my face closer and kiss his neck once very sweetly.

Jesse nods again. When he sighs this time, he sounds relieved, and the tension leaves his body.

"Okay. You can stay overnight, and I'll take good care of you."

I slide back off the couch and he slowly moves to follow me when I take his hand. The walk to my bathroom isn't very far and my bedroom is even closer. We get in the shower together under the scalding water and he goes ahead and has a little emotional breakdown.

"I've liked you for a really long time, Will." Not sobbing, but pretty damn close, with a raspy and shaky voice that matches his shivery body.

I run a hand through his dampening hair before leaning closer to kiss him. He goes right back to melty for me as soon as I do. Ooey-gooney trust beneath my hands until he's nothing but relaxed mush. Then I get us both cleaned up like the responsible guy I am, wrap him up tight in a towel so he won't get cold, and rub his hair mostly dry before bringing him into my bedroom. Loaning someone a pair of my clean underwear may seem gross, but I've decided it's significantly less gross when you've fucked said person. We get all bedded down, and since I am such the nicest guy, I snuggle him real close under my weighted blanket while I play with his hair. He conks out within minutes.

The following morning, Jess wakes me by stirring next to me under the covers. The sun's hardly up, but he's used to waking even earlier, I'm sure. I don't feel amazing,

but I paced my drinking enough that I'm mostly okay. When I open my eyes, Jess hasn't moved away by an inch, and I smile right at him. Probably should not have fucked Jess. He's a nice guy. A little too nice, even. And I feel somewhat dense for not realizing he was head-over-heels for me, since I definitely would've refrained from any sex last night had I known sooner.

He smiles back and looks at me as if he wants to talk to me.

I bring my face to his for a lazy, tender, morning kiss. Jess rolls right onto his back with the gentlest push, where I can trap him under me. His breaths quicken while I kiss down his body and he's rock hard by the time I grab the band of the underwear and pull down. He looks at me again, almost as if he's wondering what I'm going to do next. I lock my eyes on his for a few seconds before I gulp that nice cock of his all the way down my throat. Jess suddenly becomes too distracted moaning to speak, and I'm yet again amazed at how inventive I can be to avoid a conversation I don't want to have.

Chapter seven

Cas

I guess it's like they say: where there's a will, there's a way. And so far, Will has been getting his way—though if it's more through sheer willpower or unmatched willingness, I'm still not sure. My initial impression of him isn't unfounded. Will's proven to be somewhat needy and eager, yet I also had him pegged for anxious and bashful. Now, I'm not so sure anymore. I'm starting to doubt. Not only my instincts about him, but all of this. And a large part of that is... I know who Will is.

When he sends over his photo initially, I don't take the time to study it closely. Which is also why I make sure to save it so quickly, so I can go back and catalog every minute detail for any clues. The picture showcases quite a few distinct tattoos,

enough to make his body unique. I intend to study his ink in the morning and see which can be identified.

Before I can even head to bed, it clicks—Will. I know someone named Will, also tattooed.

After opening my camera roll, I scrutinize the tattoos specifically. The largest one, on his chest, stands out right away: two anatomical hearts sewn together to make the heart shape we more easily recognize. I've never seen Will shirtless, so on to the next. Some text in different areas that I can't make out entirely—not helpful. A 3D snake weaving in and out of the skin around his collarbone—a fairly generic piece and therefore equally unhelpful at this point. What looks like two writhing snakes coiling around each other to form a heart shape with their heads and tails runs the length of his forearm—interesting, but I likely won't know for sure until I see him in person again. Also, I'm somewhat in denial still and desperately trying to convince myself that I'm wrong this time when I rarely am. Then, there it is, right at front and center—The Lovers. Two embracing skeletons framed within the tarot card tattooed on the back of his hand.

Extremely fucking distinct, and one I've seen up close. One I recognize.

At the very least, I'll see him soon and I'll be able to know for certain. In the meantime, I'll keep telling myself maybe I'm wrong and there's two guys milling around our small town with the exact same tattoo on their hand. Or maybe this Will is... Will, the guy I know.

Sunday morning comes, I'm at the farmer's market and so is Will. No surprise there. Perverse as it may seem, part of me almost hopes they are the same guy. I have been interested in this Will for alongtime. At the same time, any connection to me also means I absolutely need to back off immediately. And I don't want that. At all.

I steal glances all day, and the more I look at him, the more I can believe it. The hand tattoo, that's hard to ignore. Then the afternoon warms while the chilly morning air of late summer in New England recedes. Layers are essential during this time of year. Will's preoccupied and I happen to look over at the right moment. He pushes up the sleeves of his black hoodie, exposing both forearms and—the entwined snakes. I can't even pretend they're two different guys now. Fuck. It's enough to get my eye to twitch, that's how hard I'm working not to lose my shit in public.

Needless to say, this may not work out now. I don't know about killing someone I know. Not that I really give a damn, but picking someone who can be traced back to me at all is not a smart move on my part. And that gets me pissed off, because I don't like changing plans and I don't like wasting my time and I absolutely don't like when I can't have what I want. And I already want him.

When my phone dings late Monday morning, I glare at my screen above me while lying down in bed. I'm still slightly annoyed that he never attempted to call me. Again, not that I really give a damn if he does or not. It's more about making sure all the pieces are moving in the right direction at the proper pace, and him losing interest factors into my moves. Then again, maybe for the best. Maybe Will can make the decision for me. I don't really like that possibility, either, but at least then it will be out of my hands. Temptation won't get the better of me.

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Purple Puppy:Sorry I never called you. I really wanted to, but my friend stayed over.

And he tacks on the sad begging eyes.

Orchid Mantis:Is this the smart best friend?

Purple Puppy:Mhmm

Purple Puppy:We... kinda sorta had sex...

Orchid Mantis:How does one kinda sorta have sex?

Purple Puppy:Very carefully.

And that gets a chuckle out of me. Smartass.

Purple Puppy:It wasn't exactly planned, and it's never happened before.

Purple Puppy:I dunno where we stand.

My brow raises at his word choice: we. As in us? Not likely, no. More like him and his friend. Hmm. Not sure I like that any better.

Purple Puppy:I don't think this is going anywhere, but telling you still felt the most responsible and I'm attempting responsibility these days.

Mother fucker. He's really going there with me. Well, fuck. For the best, I guess.

Purple Puppy:Are you mad?

Orchid Mantis:Not particularly.

Purple Puppy:And what if I said thinking about you was what got me all riled up in the first place?

I smile to myself. Still on the hook. Too bad I can't decide if that's a good or bad thing. Uncertainty is something I don't experience often. I keep waiting for him to make his moves and decide for me. Changing courses still may be for the best, but I'm not sure if I can.

Orchid Mantis:In that case, not at all.

Purple Puppy:I think my cock didn't like a change in routine and missed you.

He ends his sentence with a frowning emoji.

Orchid Mantis:Just how long have you been jerking off when we talk?

Purple Puppy:Hey, I'm a gentleman.

Purple Puppy:I waited until after we hung up.

Purple Puppy:Except for last time, but I would've stopped if you didn't get into it. Which you did.

He's got me there. Dammit.

Orchid Mantis:Call me tonight.

Purple Puppy: Oh, yeah? Not in the doghouse?

Orchid Mantis: Call me tonight and find out.

And with that, I power my phone off. It's good for him to suffer a little. It'll keep him on his toes.

It works. I go about my day as usual, doing all the mundane responsibilities all people must endure—work, laundry, dishes, paying bills—but nothing particularly important or thrilling. I keep busy and don't miss my phone. When I'm in bed that evening and powering my phone back on, it rings almost instantly. Yet again, I find myself torn between being pleased to see he's retained such interest and dreading what's coming. I still haven't made up my mind, and that's not like me at all.

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“Hey,” I sigh.

“Someone’s been busy today.” Will’s voice already sounds so thick and drippy. It’s hard for me to forget how sweet he is.

“I had a lot to do.” My eyebrows scrunch and even now, on the phone, I’m not sure what I should do about him. “Had a lot to think about, too.”

“Such as?”

I take a deep breath. Really, I care most about what I want. And I want him. He’s supposed to be the one. I also care about myself. Until now, what I want and what’s in my best interest has never conflicted so much.

“I think maybe you should try harder with that guy you like. Or even your friend. Anyone but me.”

Will quiets and takes a long pause before he says, “Why?”

“I’m starting to doubt if this will be good for either of us.”

“I pissed you off, didn’t I?” he concludes.

“No.”

“You never ignore me all day.” He stays level, but that forcefulness creeps back into his voice. And I’m already enjoying it too much. “Even when you said you didn’t

mind, I couldn't really believe you."

"I really don't." And I honestly don't. He can spend his final days sticking his dick into whoever and whatever he wants.

"Clearly, you do."

"No," I say again. I can hear him gearing up to say more and with a sudden rush, something I shouldn't confess spills out. "It's... I know you."

"Sure. You know mesowell," he scoffs.

"I mean, I recognize you from the picture you sent me," I clarify. "I know who you are, Will."

"Well, this is awkward." He pauses enough to release a long sigh. "Let me guess. You don't want me to figure out who you are, too."

"Not really, no."

"Is this like a being in the closet sort of thing?"

"No," I admit. "It's more like... I don't think I can keep moving forward now."

"Have we met? Do you know me well?"

"I'm not telling you that."

"Do you like me? In person?"

"I'm not telling you that, either."

Will takes a deep sigh. “Okay. Sounds like bullshit, but okay.”

“It’s not.”

“It is. You said you’d be okay with us never telling each other who we are. And I agreed. Still do. It’s not my fault you found out who I am. You’re not obligated to tell me who you are, you know?”

“I know,” I quietly agree with him.

“So, what you really should’ve said is, ‘Will, I’m scared shitless you’re going to realize who I am’ because that’s the real issue here.”

Well, he’s right. Only not for the reasons he thinks, whatever those may be.

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“I’m not going to try to find out who you are and how we know each other.” He’s trying to sound comforting, and I appreciate the genuine effort.

“You can’t promise me that. If we keep this up, you’ll recognize me. I can’t have that happening.”

“Okay.” Nothing on his end but acceptance and another sigh. “Do me a favor?”

“Sure.”

“Don’t tell me goodbye. Tell me goodnight instead.”

I smile to myself. “Goodnight, Will.”

“Night.”

Then I hang up before anything else can tempt me into changing my mind.

Chapter eight

Will

I’m too passionate for my own good. What some may even consider obsessive. Maybe they’re right. If I ever figure out how to control what I hyper-fixate on, I’ll be unstoppable. Until then, here we are. I’ve been going over my current conundrum again and again, trying to make a decision from the three options laid before me.

Mantis: who I know I want. Who I can't get out of my mind. Who I now devote all my waking moments to, trying to piece together what I already know about him with the same fervor as a conspiracy theorist. I don't need to know who he is, but I'm not sure what else to do now that he's essentially dumped me. Learning his identity may be my only chance. Maybe then I can approach him in person while not letting on I suspect anything. Even then, not good odds.

Bailey: who very likely doesn't know who I am and who I'm not so sure I can even approach. I haven't tried. Maybe it'll be easier this time around, but my unfounded devotion to him hasn't wavered, so maybe not. I haven't even mustered the balls to message him online yet. I'm still working on studying him every chance I get and learning every bit of info I can uncover, usually by scouring the internet. Where's he from? Where's his business? Where does he even live? What interests does he have that I can use to get my foot in the door conversation wise? What routines does he have? How can I run into him across town? A lot of unknowns remain.

And then there's Jesse, my best friend. Dependable. Attractive. A sure thing. Also, sweet. Maybe too sweet. Enough to give me a toothache.

Last Monday, Jess left my place right around sunrise without really saying much of anything. Since then, I've only seen him in passing at work, which is the usual, but he seems to be walking on eggshells. Not avoiding me or ignoring me, but visibly unsure. Admittedly, I've sort of left him in limbo. Between everything with him, then Mantis, I can't see the bigger picture until I take a few measured steps back, so I do.

By Sunday morning, Jess and I haven't really spoken, but we're about to have a lot of one-on-one time together today. May as well address this now while we're together and mostly alone. We're silently unloading everything from the truck, and no one but the other vendors have arrived to start setting up their stands before the crowds arrive.

"Are we okay?" I finally ask when I set down my crate.

Jesse whips his head over as if I asked him the stupidest question he's ever heard.

"Come hang out with me after work."

"For what?" Oh, he may be mad with a prickly voice like that.

"Hang out. Talk. Whatever." I step closer and take both of his chilly hands in mine, rubbing his knuckles and smiling at him. "I'm sorry. It's been a weird week and a lot's happened and... I needed to get my head screwed on straight."

"Interesting word choice."

I smile wider. "You're my best friend, Jess."

"Yeah. Your friend." He rolls his eyes.

"Maybe more. I dunno yet. Finding out is half the fun, though." I step forward to close the distance and Jesse meets me the rest of the way, parting his lips to let my tongue in at my request. When I pull away enough to speak, his rapid breaths make short bursts of clouds in the cold morning air.

"Come to my place after work," I say again.

"Is it going to end like last time?"

"With a sleepover? Hopefully." And I peck one more kiss on his lips.

When I smile this time, Jesse smiles back at me. Until he stops, and I turn to glance where he's looking. Bailey's at our stand and he offers an awkward wave.

"Hi, Jesse."

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Do they know each other outside of here? No, they can't. Can they? Why does he always seem to go for Jess? Probably because they've had actual conversations. Ugh.

Bailey notices my reaction, or maybe a lack of one. He struggles while he looks at me next, saying nothing. He's so sweet. Clearly, he's trying to be polite, but he can't seem to remember my name.

"Will," I say. And then I realize that's probably the most I've ever said to him. Pathetic.

Bailey smiles again, and he's visibly lingering on me now. His eyes briefly meet mine before flicking back to Jesse.

Too late, though. I'm not the only one who noticed. Jesse leans closer to me and his arm wraps around my back to hold my waist. "What's up, Bailey?"

"I'm sorry, I hate to ask this, but uh..." Yet again, he doesn't seem sure where to let his eyes land while addressing the both of us. "I got a new goods display... for my stall... and I mayhave underestimated how awkward it would be for one person to unload, and—"

"Sure." Only after I agree does it occur to me that I've volunteered my services before Bailey even gets the chance to finish asking his question. Jesse snaps his head to look at me, but I shrug it off. "I don't mind."

"You're really sure?" Bailey asks.

“Yeah.” I gesture to everything we’ve already unloaded. Jess can start setting up some displays without me.

“I can go if you’d prefer.” Jesse frames his offer as if he may be asking both Bailey and me. Only he knows that I wouldn’t prefer letting him go instead.

“You stay.” Then I lean closer to whisper, “I want to be what wrecks your back today.”

Jess smiles, and it seems I’ve gotten myself out of trouble for the moment. He goes one step further and pulls me in for a kiss. Which I’m not expecting, but I go with it. Once he releases me, I leave our stand to follow Bailey.

We walk around to the back of his pickup, still pulled up to unload, and I can see his problem right away. The display doesn’t appear to be particularly heavy and loading it was likely a breeze for him. Yet the shape is awkward and somewhat bulky to maneuver. Getting it out of the bed of his truck alone will only be easy if he doesn’t give a damn about damaging it.

Bailey pulls himself into the back of his truck and dammit if I don’t lose all my focus. Don’t stare at his ass. Don’t do it. Do not stare at it. Of course, I say all this to myself while actively staring. Not my fault, I swear. Thankfully, he never notices, and we begin moving the display together. Between the two of us, we get it unloaded, and it even remains in one piece.

“I should probably break it into smaller parts to transfer next time.”

Bailey’s brow knots as if he’s trying to figure out how the hell to manage disassembling and reassembling this thing once a week, and I’m thinking about him wearing nothing but a tool belt. No! Not time for horny. This is the perfect opportunity.

“Uh...” Even after Bailey looks at me, we spend additional time in silence while I construct my reply. “I could help.”

“Oh, you’re too sweet.” He dismisses me with a small chuckle and a wave. “You have enough to do.”

“No, really. I’m here every week and this didn’t even take us ten minutes. You’d spend longer unloading a bunch of pieces yourself, never mind putting it back together.”

“That is a good point,” he mumbles. When he hits me with his Bailey smile that shines right through my soul, I almost faint. “Thanks.”

Fuck, he’s so fucking cute. He’s doing that actively standing pose. One leg slightly bent and the opposite hip popped, all while one hand holds his other forearm.

“C’mere.” He swings his head for me to follow him and turns to walk a few feet away.

Bailey squats again to pull a crate of jars toward him. Ah, what I wouldn’t give to slide a hand down the back of his jeans. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he’s doing all this bending and squatting for me on purpose. He pops back up with a jar of... I don’t know. Something purple. He hands it right over to me with a shining grin and it fits right in the palm of my hand.

“Elderberry,” he says.

Well, I have no idea what the hell he’s talking about, but I’m still grateful, so I try to appear very appreciative and not confused.

“It’s... that’s why it’s purple.” Then he becomes the sort of excited where people

stutter and ramble, and it is so sweet to see him launch into a subject he clearly loves. “The bees... they eat the elderberries on my property... but I’ve been infusing it also to make it more concentrated.”

“Isn’t elderberry poisonous?”

“Yes.” His eyes light up and I can’t believe he’s impressed that I knew. “Makes cyanide in the body. Not at this strength, though. It’s got a lot of health benefits and boosts the immune system.”

“Thanks,” I say. “That’s really nice of you to give this to me.”

Bailey shakes his head. “I never give away honey. Bees work too hard for me to do that. You earned this.”

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“Now I feel bad,” I tease.

“No, keep it. Stay healthy. Don’t miss a Sunday.”

Bailey smiles at me before he gets back to work, and I float on back to our stand to do the same. So maybe he’s not as much of a lost cause as I thought.

Jess comes home with me after we’re both done for the day, and it’s a routine I can see myself falling into. Not sure if I can picture much more past that, but maybe. I’m not ready to give up on any of my options yet, and at the very least, Jess and I can fuck while we figure the rest out. And damn, I definitely want that.

I do not dance around or waste any time. As soon as we’re inside, I’m tugging him in the direction of my bedroom. He climbs right into my bed with me and loves every second I’m lying on top of him and kissing him. When I sink my hips against his, he thrusts back and sighs from the friction. Yet, the second my hands tug on his clothes, Jess pulls his mouth away from mine.

“You said we would talk,” Jesse pants.

“Talk,” I murmur. I’ve already moved on to kissing his neck now that I’ve successfully buried my hands under his shirt.

“What’s this?”

“Fucking,” I softly cackle near his ear.

“No. Us. What are we doing?”

“Same answer.” I pull away to tear my shirt over my head then go back for his. When I get to his pants, he tenses and shifts away.

“I haven’t bottomed much,” he mumbles.

I crawl closer, so I’m hovering directly above him while still looking right down at him. “But you will for me. Won’t you, Jess?”

Jess gnaws on his lip but doesn’t say anything while he stares up at me with wide eyes. He watches me closely when I kiss down his stomach before yanking his jeans and underwear off at the same time. I shimmy the rest of the way out of my remaining clothes before coming right back to him. He’s panting and happy after his cock’s in my mouth, but I pull off to suck a finger before stuffing it all the way into him. His thighs shiver, and I almost think I can get him to come right now.

“Mmm,” I hum while I watch him squirm. “You came so hard for me last time, Jess. I’d love to see it again.” I remove my hand and lean over to look right at him. “You think you can do that for me?”

“You think you can get lube?” So sassy.

I smile back at him. “Anything for you.”

Jesse exhales when I crawl away to dig through my drawers, then I throw the bottle down on the bed near him. I lie down next and lean him back against my chest. He’s so close I can kiss him, and I do exactly that while snapping the bottle of lube open. After dumping a bunch in my hand, I start stroking his hard cock, slicking it more with each pass of my hand. After I do the same for mine, I wipe the last bit into his ass, my fingers grazing his hole. His entire body lifts to try to follow the path of my

touch. Probably should stretch him more, but he asked me for lube, not more prep. I hold his thighs and start to press my cock into him, but he flinches away with a soft gasp.

“You can take it, Jess,” I whisper in his ear. “You’ve already done this before.”

Jess shakes all over when I grab behind his knees. I sink him down onto my cock, pushing all the way into him. His body clenches around my cock so tight, I almost believe I’ll pass out. Against my chest, his lungs work overtime as he tries to breathe through it.

“Give it a second.”

Despite what I say, I’m not waiting any longer. I thrust into him over and over until I hear him approaching his breaking point, then I slow down and focus on pleasuring him. I drop one of his legs and switch to shallow rocking. He relaxes back into me and starts to moan, his slippery cock in my hand. After only a few passes more from base to tip, his dick begins to pulse in my hand. I scoop his thigh up again so fast and I’m back to fucking him as hard as I possibly can. As much as I love hearing him climax, I love the sound he makes right after even more. The moment when he realizes his pleasure is over and there’s nothing left for him to feel. He chokes out my name over and over again until I’m finally coming in him.

Jesse trembles all over and his breathing stays erratic while he comes down. I’m still inside him, but also pressed against him: my lips on his neck and my hands stroking up to his shoulders. Once he relaxes, I slowly ease out of him and nuzzle my mouth to his ear. “You did great. Thank you so much, Jess.”

He takes a single deep breath and nods.

“You wanna shower now?”

Jesse nods again.

Yet another scalding shower where we spend the first half with our tongues in each other's mouths, only this time after scrubbing us clean, I rub his back and shoulders before we get out. We haven't eaten, and it's still too early to sleep, but I pull him into bed with me anyway, where he can get all snuggled up while I play with his hair. The smaller television in my room is on and broadcasting the local evening news. I've got my phone in my hand and I'm scrolling through our limited options for delivery.

"What do you want to eat, Jess?"

He shrugs.

"C'mon you need to eat."

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“I want those dumplings you hate,” he murmurs.

“Okay.” I smile. “Anything for you.”

I’m tapping away on my phone to place our order when the news anchor on the television launches into more local news.

“Police are still seeking leads in the case of a missing local man. Twenty-seven-year-old Henri DeSantos was reported missing by his family earlier this month. DeSantos, a local artist, was last seen leaving his studio sometime on the fifth. His current whereabouts remain unknown. Police are asking anyone with any relevant information to contact missing persons.”

Jess makes a sound beside me, almost like a sigh, and I look up just in time to see the photograph on the screen. Good-looking guy. Right about our age, too. Eerie.

“He looks familiar.”

“Can’t imagine how you’d know him,” Jesse says.

“You make it sound like you know him.”

“We went on a few dates. Nothing serious,” he mumbles into my skin while he sinks deeper against me.

“I don’t remember hearing about that.”

“You didn’t even know I’d been with men until a week ago.”

Good point. I go back to typing away on my phone to finish placing our order. We can chill out in bed together all night and Jess can help himself to as many gross dumplings as he wants.

Chapter nine

Cas

Well, I may have underestimated myself for the first time ever. Because when I saw Will on Sunday, I kinda... lost it. Only internally, though. Externally, I remained calm, but on the inside... yeah, I really don’t like not getting my way. And the thought of him with another guy—even though I told him to do exactly that—nope, don’t like that. Witnessing him interact with someone else only drives the point home. The plan is back on. I’ll be damned if I let anyone else have him.

I wait a few days to message him, mostly to gather my thoughts and go over everything in my mind multiple times. This can work. This has to work.

Orchid Mantis: I saw you the other day.

Purple Puppy: Oh yeah? Where? When?

Orchid Mantis: Not telling you.

Purple Puppy: What was I doing?

Orchid Mantis: Not telling you that, either.

Purple Puppy: So, what do you want to tell me? You must’ve messaged me for a

reason.

I take a very deep breath and carefully craft my reply.

Orchid Mantis: You saw me too, and you didn't recognize me. Thought for sure my voice would tip you off, but... no.

Purple Puppy: You almost sound disappointed.

Orchid Mantis: I'm not. I'm starting to think... maybe this can't go in the direction I wanted initially, but it can still go somewhere.

Purple Puppy: Such as?

Orchid Mantis: I don't know yet. We can wait and see.

Purple Puppy: You really are freaked out about this, huh?

Not going to respond to that.

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Purple Puppy:What do you think I'll do if I figure out that you and someone else I know are the same person? Are you worried about how I'll react?

Orchid Mantis:I'm not trying to find out.

Purple Puppy:So... do I get to see your cock, or will that give too much away?

And a smiley.

Orchid Mantis:I'd be impressed if you could identify anyone by that alone.

Purple Puppy:Well, we haven't been playing to my strengths.

Purple Puppy:Clearly, I couldn't ever pick a voice out of a lineup.

Purple Puppy:But I wholeheartedly believe I could a cock.

That gets me to chuckle.

Orchid Mantis:Here I am, thinking you'll be happy to hear from me, but all you want is to see my dick.

Purple Puppy:I am happy. I missed texting you. I missed talking to you. I missedyou.

Purple Puppy:And if you'd shown me more of your cock, I would've missed that, too.

Purple Puppy:I'm calling you. Right now.

Right now? It is a bit late, but now? My phone rings and sure enough, Will's calling. As soon as I answer, I hear him breathing heavily as if he had raced somewhere.

"Running a marathon?" I tease.

"Yes," Will sighs. "Straight to my bedroom to call you right away."

"And why's that?"

"Because just thinking about that one picture you sent me got me hard as a rock. And I had to talk to you. At least hear your voice."

Fuck. Again. Thirty seconds into a conversation and my cock's swelling. I swear, if he ever uses this voice out in public, I'll be sporting an erection in an instant. That'll certainly give something away.

"Baby, I need you to touch your cock for me." Will pants into the phone and I don't doubt he's already started playing with his. "I'm so fucking hard and I have to hear you."

And even harder. Again. I'm starting to believe last time wasn't a fluke. I rip my pajama bottoms down my thighs then kick my underwear off next. Imagining Will and being able to hear him only makes touching myself even better.

"Will you fuck yourself again for me?"

"Yes." Considering I'm shoving a lubed finger in my ass before he even asks, definitely yes. Back to crashing around in my drawers for a toy, and I've got it in me within minutes.

“I love the sound of you taking my cock.” Will’s voice whispers right in my ear.
“You think you can come that way for me?”

Normally, no. Not even if I play with my cock the whole time, or I’m so close it feels as if a sneeze could send me over the edge. This time, absolutely positively. It’s almost as if the moment he asks, my body answers with a resounding yes.

I’m moaning his name in seconds, and I can hear the exact moment when he realizes he’s gotten me to come so fast and so hard. He shifts to unintelligible, but his voice stays so clear I can almost picture him here in this room with me. Then we’re both quiet while trying to catch our breath.

“Baby—” he gasps.

“Cas,” I whisper to correct him.

Will remains quiet for a few seconds, only the sound of his uneven breaths breaking the silence. “I don’t know anyone named Cas.”

“I know.”

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“Alias?”

“No, Cas is my real name,” I say even quieter. “The one you know is just another name.”

“And what name would that be?” He softly snickers.

“I’m not telling you,” I chuckle with him.

“You can’t blame me for trying.” He sighs. “I swear, if I ever find you out in the wild, I’m going to fuck your beautiful brain out.”

That probably shouldn’t make me smile, but it does. “Goodnight, Will.”

“Night, Cas.”

He hangs up the phone, but I can’t stop staring at the screen. I’m in deep fucking trouble. In so many ways. I shouldn’t have done that. I absolutely shouldn’t have done any of that. And the fact that I did means I can’t do this. I can’t have him and yet I know I have to.

Until now, I’ve held off on doing a deep dive into Will’s background. I don’t need to confirm who he is anymore, and rather than continue to dig, I attempted to cut and run. Even more now than before, I need to know what I’m dealing with and see all the pieces laid out before me. Maybe then I can convince myself how stupid this is and my decision will stick this time. Let’s do this.

So, I know his name, obviously. And I know where he works. Not much else. When we first started talking, he struck me as the type who gave too much away unintentionally. I don't doubt I would've learned his identity eventually based on the info he gave me alone versus simply recognizing him. But what do I really know? We talk a lot and yet, I feel as if I don't know him at all sometimes. What he's divulged now seems carefully measured, something I would do.

Something I would do.

That makes me pause, if only for a moment. How similar are we, really? No, I'm being paranoid. I dismiss that idea as ridiculous and carry on.

Back to what I know. He works for Moonlit Meadow Farm. He lives very close to work, only a couple of miles away. Not much in the way of houses and rentals in that area. As for life before, that's harder to find. He doesn't seem to have any family in this area and he didn't graduate from the local high school. Hmm.

On to social media next. Lots of pictures and the screen feels more like a one-way mirror where I can study him as much as I want without him ever noticing. Is enjoying being able to stare at him weird? Probably. Don't care. So lovely to look at.

Buzzed hair, but not too short and still with a conscious sense of style. He has a bit of a beard in some of his other pictures, and he's one of the lucky few who looks excellent both clean shaven (like he is these days) and not. And such intense, expressive eyes—the kind that burn so fiercely he could singe a hole right through someone.

I end up falling down a rabbit hole of clicking through years and years of photos: selfies and shots with various friends, at work and a few that are likely in his home, and plenty showing off his tattoos. While clicking through those, I can finally see what the text on his collarbone says, opposite the snake tattooed to look as if

threading in and out of his body. He's pulling the neck of his shirt down and to the side to show off fresh ink still pink around the edges. It reads: memento mori.

Remember death. Ironic.

Chapter ten

Will

This is probably one of those socially unacceptable behaviors of mine, but oh well. I struggle enough as is. Can't be perfect. When I went to help Bailey unload his truck last Sunday, I may have gotten a glimpse of his license plate. That kinda info opens up a lot more doors in terms of how much you can find out about a person.

Bailey doesn't have his home address listed for his business, but... he does have his work truck registered. Searching the address helps confirm this is not a mailing address but his actual property. And since Bailey doesn't have a store for me to pop into, I may have gone out of my way to drive by his place while going to and from work all week long. Not as if I intend to break into his house and hide in his closet just—I don't know. Get a better sense of him from the outside. Maybe even his daily habits. That would be helpful.

Or maybe I should just message him like a normal person. I like to think I did okay when we talked on Sunday. Not too horribly awkward. And I actually got words out. Whole sentences, even. I wonder what he would say if I asked him out? Jess will likely get pissed, but... oh well. After Sunday, I'm no longer content to give up on Bailey. Jess has always been right there in front of me, but unlike how I almost abandoned the Bailey dream for Mantis—er, Cas—I'm not ready to throw in the towel this time. Maybe that says everything I need to know about how I feel for Jess but don't want to admit to myself yet.

Jess and I usually don't have to work Saturday nights since we have to be up early Sunday morning, but Jess has a split shift and I'm covering for Lucy. The girl popped out a ten-pound baby yesterday and I'm just glad I wasn't here when her water broke at work. That being said, I don't mind working evenings. Less interactive work and more quiet tasks like straightening and rotating stock, only ringing occasionally when someone comes in. And really, this place is small enough that I have a clear view of the register even from the back of the store.

While I keep one eye on the front, Jess fights the price gun because I can never make the damn thing work. I'm only a few feet away, pulling all the overripe produce to either go in our discount bin or compost—depending on how far gone it is.

“Hey, are you coming to my place Sunday after work?”

The store's currently empty and we're closing within the hour, so we're focusing more on our tasks while idly chatting at times. I can hear the uneven click of the gun, but he doesn't say anything to me.

“Jess?”

“Yeah, I'm thinking,” he mumbles. When I look over, he finally slams a part back into the right place and it's no longer jammed.

“Are you coming over?” I ask again.

“What am I coming over for, exactly?”

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“What do you want?”

He doesn't seem to know how to respond to that and starts stickering jam jars.

“It's okay not to know. We can always just... hangout and whatever happens, happens.”

Jess scoffs and finally looks over at me.

“What?” I ask.

“I have shit to do on Sunday,” he mutters.

“Fine. Sleep over tonight. We're both going to the same place in the morning, anyway.”

Jess stays quiet for a minute while stickering, and I've already accepted he's going to tell me to fuck off when he turns to me and smirks. “Are you going to buy me dinner?”

“Anything for you.” And I smile back.

“Okay.” He goes back to stickering.

I turn to check one more time if the store is empty, which it is. We're in the very back anyway, and we'll hear anyone coming before they even see us. I sneak over to where he's standing and wrap my arms around him from behind in a hug. Jess stops what

he's doing and stays frozen in place until I kiss his neck. I should probably get back to work and he's going to tell me exactly that.

Nope.

He whips around to face me and kisses me with the sort of ferocity I didn't think he was capable of. He almost backs me into some produce with the way he leans into me. Hot damn. It's going to be a long final hour of our shift.

Nothing lasts forever, thankfully.

We close up, Jess comes home with me, and we're all over each other within minutes. My front door closes, and somehow my pants are coming off before my shoes. We're still in the entryway and haven't even set foot in my living room yet.

Jess sinks to his knees in front of me, looking up at me with that wide-eyed expression of his.

"Are you seriously going to blow me right here?"

Yes, he is. And actions speak louder than words. He swallows down my cock without any hesitation and it quickly becomes apparent he's determined to finish me right here and now. That doesn't exactly factor into my plans for the evening, but after being horny for close to an hour, I don't have much willpower left. The hot, wet mouth of my best friend offers too much temptation. His eyes flick up to mine once I'm close and he doesn't allow me to have second thoughts. He has me backed up against the wall and seconds later I'm coming and he's swallowing down every last drop.

I let my head tip back against the wall while my breathing returns to normal.
"Fucking hell, Jess."

He's smiling at me from the floor still when I peek at him. "You still buying me dinner?"

"Didn't you just eat?" He makes a face and I can't help laughing. "I'm only kidding."

The rest of the evening turns out nice but feels very coupley. We order in and eat our dinner while watching television on the couch, where we finish our evening snuggling. We shouldn't stay up much later when we have to be on the road early tomorrow. When the current episode we're on ends, we head off to my room and crawl into bed. I can almost see myself doing this on repeat. It's not bad, but something still feels either misplaced or missing altogether.

Even though we should really go to bed, my dick disagrees. I messaged Cas earlier to let him know I won't be able to call, and he seemed okay with that, but... maybe I have a harder time breaking routines than most people. We've already gotten comfy under the weighted blanket, but I roll over to Jess for a kiss anyway, then end up crawling on top of him. Jess responds with a breathy sigh, thrusting upward against me. He's already hard, and the friction makes my cock beg for more.

As soon as I move to yank my underwear down my legs, Jess says, "We don't have time for a shower and all that."

"We'll make time," I mutter back.

Maybe he has another argument, but that gets cut off quickly. The second my hand dips down to touch the outline of his hard cock, his breathing picks up rapidly. He starts pulling his underwear down himself and I'm more than happy to help. When he moves against me this time, his shaky gasps only stop when I lean forward for another kiss.

Once again, I can almost see myself doing this for real. Falling in love with Jess.

Being together. Having a future. Almost—but not quite. Not yet.

When I start to pull away to get on my knees, Jess tries to drag me back to him. Tries and fails. Which I can understand, since I typically only want sex with as little distance as physically possible from the other person.

I keep a hold on his thigh while I swipe my cock back and forth across his hole, spreading precum. His skin shivers beneath my hand and he pants as if he's been running.

“You... better... not...” Then the rest of the sentence never comes.

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When I spit in my hand, he jerks away at the sound, then not even a moment later he's right back to moaning as usual when I slide a finger inside him. I pause only to swipe lube from my nightstand, rubbing it along the length of my shaft and swiping the last bit between his ass cheeks.

"You sound like you want more real bad, Jess," I say. After I pull my finger out, I go back to rubbing my hard cock against his hole but only ease the very tip inside. "Can you take more for me?"

Jess's whole body shakes, but with me, the answer's always been yes. Doesn't matter what I'm asking. "Okay," his voice warbles.

I push deeper, but not all the way, grabbing him by the hips and pulling his legs up over my thighs. Jess has to throw a hand back onto the mattress to brace himself, but as long as he keepshanging on to the back of my neck, he's not going anywhere. He relaxes when I pause to kiss him, then linger there. I let my lips hover right against his mouth. "You're going to take everything I give you. Won't you, Jess?"

With a final thrust, I force my cock all the way into him. Jess pushes his hips away, but I'm already in him and he can only go so far when I'm holding his ass to keep him pinned against me. And Jess is just slim enough I can watch my cock bulge in his stomach when I thrust into him again and again. He whispers something that sounds like a chant of "I can't" once I start moving.

"I know you can," I whisper back. "And you're going to come so hard while doing it."

His wet cock bumps against my skin while my hips continue to move against him and gradually pick up speed. Even when his body shakes against mine, I don't quit. I alternate between kissing him and pushing deeper while squeezing his ass. When he starts to tremble this time, his hips lift for more friction and he starts to moan.

"That's it, Jess. You can do it."

And the harder he moans, the harder I fuck him, until he's caught between coming and whimpering. His symphony of sounds gets me right to the brink, so the second his orgasm hits, I'm chasing right after him. I've never come so hard and it quite literally takes my breath away. I don't move after. I hold on to him instead, so we're chest to chest while I ruffle my hand through his hair.

"Will, do you even like me?" Jess croaks.

"I like you so much, Jess," I whisper before kissing the side of his head. "Thank you for putting up with me."

The next morning we're at the farmer's market. The cold mornings have only gotten colder while the leaves start to change and drop. Right around the time we set down the last crate, Bailey wanders over with a smile and a wave. He looks so damn sweet in his plain zipped fleece, and I swear even the sight of him clothed makes me harder than most men can while naked. I awkwardly shift around in my jeans.

"Hi," Bailey says. "Just wondering if you—"

"Yep, let's go get it done right now." Then I walk in the direction of his stand before he can object or Jess can ask me what I'm doing.

Jess not so subtly glares, anyway. I never actually told him my plan to keep helping Bailey out and maybe even get to know him in the process. Considering how things

are with me and Jess, he'll likely be even less supportive now than he has been in the past.

Bailey climbs into the bed of his truck and the way his body flexes while he moves is going to get me into so much trouble one day. Once again, we're done unloading within minutes and Bailey is as appreciative as last time.

"Thanks so much," he says.

"It's not a big deal." Except it is. We're actually talking again today. Maybe we can hang out or even go on a date sometime. I just need to find the balls to ask him first.

"Still, it's kind of you to do. You're a really nice guy," Bailey says while his eyes meet mine.

"And you're sweeter than honey."

The corner of his mouth twitches, but he rolls his lips in before smiling. "Not all honey is sweet."

"That's like saying not all skies are blue."

"Well, sounds like someone is neglecting to factor in sunrises and sunsets." Bailey drops to a squat again, and he's digging around among the tiny jars in a wooden crate. Watching his assbounce while he balances on the balls of his feet does all kinds of things to me. He breaks the seal and holds it out to me. "Try."

I move a finger toward the open jar but he pulls back with a smirk.

"Hold on, Pooh Bear. Don't go sticking your finger in there." There is a mini wooden honey stick on the side, held on by an elastic band. He chuckles to himself while he

pulls it off and twirls it around before offering the stick to me.

It's small enough that I can pop the whole thing into my mouth like a lollipop and hold it there. The sweetness is there, but it's more complex. More intense. Kinda like what I'm seeing.

Bailey managed to drip some honey on his finger before handing it over, so I spend far longer than socially acceptable watching him suck it off. Best part is, he sees I'm watching him and stares right back. His eyes don't waver even to blink.

After I pull the stick out, I realize the difference in taste isn't the wood. There is smokiness to the honey and something else—like sea salt when paired with chocolate or caramel. Still nothing like I've ever tasted before. "How'd you make this?"

"Trade secret." He shrugs. Then he puts the lid back on and offers the closed jar to me. "Here."

"You don't have to give me this just for helping you."

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“Did you want something else?”

Fuck, all the blood rushes to my cock at that question and he’s smiling not so innocently at me this time. “You don’t need to give me anything,” I say as calmly as I can manage.

“Good answer.” He nudges the jar at me again. “I already broke the seal. You may as well keep your earnings. Or if you prefer, I’ll bill you later.”

Bailey chuckles and I laugh along with him before taking the small jar. The same hand he licked brushes mine for a brief second and I’m definitely jacking off with that one tonight. I’m about to pat myself on the back for a job well done when his expression shifts and he tilts his head.

“Hey, can I ask you something?” Bailey says.

And there goes my ability to speak. I nod.

“Are you and Jesse... like...” He pauses and scrunches his brows. “Sorry if this is too personal. I’m trying to ask if you two are... together.”

“Not too personal.” I’m trying so hard not to freak out because my hopes are already sky high with this line of questioning. “We’re... something. Not quite together, though.”

Bailey visibly exhales.

I just may drop to the ground and convulse. Can anticipation even do that to a person?

“Sorry, I know he’s your friend and... I didn’t mean to make this awkward.”

“Not at all.”

Bailey lights up like a Christmas tree and my fucking guts feel as if they’re going to fall out. “He and I... um... we’re supposed to go out today after the market. I hope you don’t mind.”

Ugh. This man. So damn sweet. Leave it to him to consider something like that when most guys wouldn’t give a damn about fidelity—theirs or anyone else’s. Even so, I absolutely do mind. I don’t want to share either of them with anyone, least of all step to the side so Jess and Bailey can have each other. That’s not how this works and I’m going to have to remedy it immediately.

“It’s all good.” I smile at Bailey before I turn to leave. “Thanks for the honey.”

Chapter eleven

Cas

Sunday has simultaneously become the best and worst day. I’ve enjoyed the farmer’s market ever since I started going, but Will’s presence has complicated the experience for me. I look forward to seeing him. And yet, without fail, something happens that makes me all twitchy inside and I have to work to hide it. When that one older guy (who loves to flirt while his wife browses) stops to talk to him, I pause to glare instead of continuing the task at hand. I don’t want him so much as talking to other people—because he should be doing that with me. And when his gaze lands elsewhere, I have to fight the urge to make a scene. The kind where I gouge out

someone's eyes so they can't look back at Will again. Or the kind that'll make him look in my direction, however briefly. When we're texting or on the phone, I get to be his entire world. Out here, not so much. And it's nothing short of infuriating for me.

My phone dings in my pocket after I leave the farmer's market. I have plans to meet someone at the coffee shop in town, but I'm still waiting for him to arrive. So, after a quick look around, I decide to check my messages in the meantime.

Purple Puppy:I'm having a rough day.

Purple Puppy:Make it better.

And a frown.

Orchid Mantis:How do you propose I do that?

Purple Puppy:Send me a video of you fucking yourself.

And a smile. As if the smiley somehow will tip the scales of my decision.

Orchid Mantis:No.

Purple Puppy:Too much?

Back to the frown.

Orchid Mantis:Simple logistics. I can't talk on the phone and record at the same time.

Purple Puppy:Record it before I call you.

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Right back to the enthusiastic smile.

Orchid Mantis: Still no.

Purple Puppy: Why not?

Oh, and the pleading eyes. If only he knew that had no effect on me.

Orchid Mantis: Because I don't ever fuck myself unless I'm doing it for you. And if I can't hear you asking me, I'm not going to be able to get into it.

Purple Puppy: Fuck, that's hot.

Purple Puppy: I'm going to have to figure out how to send audio messages in this app or something because I literally need to see this before I die.

Orchid Mantis: You plan on dying soon?

Purple Puppy: You plan on meeting up with me anytime soon?

Orchid Mantis: No.

Purple Puppy: Then don't tease me when I'm already having a bad day.

And another distressed emoji.

Poor Will. I had a feeling he would react this way, but all the pieces must keep

moving in my direction. This is something I need to do to ensure it. Even if he's looking at the board from a different angle, we're in the same game.

Orchid Mantis:What's got you so down?

Purple Puppy:I don't wanna talk about it. Hmph.

Orchid Mantis:Yes, you do. You brought it up.

Purple Puppy:I did what you said about trying to see where things go with my friend. But I think he's trying to see someone else. And that guy I like... progress has gone nowhere with him.

Orchid Mantis:Are you upset your friend is getting involved with someone else?

Purple Puppy:No.

And a sweating smiley.

Purple Puppy:Uhh... how do I say this...

Purple Puppy:We haven't quite figured out where we stand yet. And until we do, I want him all to myself.

Purple Puppy:I can't help myself from going all in, and even when I'm not quite there yet, I'm a tad possessive. Is that bad?

Orchid Mantis:I'd argue self-awareness is healthier than denial. I like to think that I deserve to take up all your attention and I'll gladly shove anyone in my way off a bridge. So, I suppose that makes me a tad selfish, but at least I'm well aware of my tendencies.

Purple Puppy: Oh, and that makes it healthy?

And a laughing emoji.

Orchid Mantis: Precisely. How else can you learn to control it if you won't even acknowledge it? Denial will only harm you in the long run. Learn to embrace it.

I flick my eyes up just in time. He's walking in.

Orchid Mantis: Gotta run.

Purple Puppy: Where?

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Orchid Mantis:Out.

Purple Puppy:Talk tonight?

Orchid Mantis:Probably.

Purple Puppy:Tease.

And a wink.

That makes my heart pick up in pace. I can't promise him I won't be busy tonight, but really and truly, I don't see this taking up my entire evening.

I'm right about my night being free. By the time I get home, the sky's dark and the air has begun to chill again. We're in the time of year where the days are on their way to getting shorter and the temperatures drop with the sun. Autumn is right around the corner on the calendar, but it always arrives sooner the farther north you are.

Instead of going straight inside to escape the brisk air, I take a midnight stroll on my property for no particular reason.

Well, that's not entirely true. I have a reason, but I don't want to admit it to myself. I don't change my mind often. Once I'm set on something, I won't let it go—be it an object, idea, or person. Right now, I'm set on Will. Any thoughts concerning him should be about how I'm going to kill him.

Normally, at this stage, I'm more focused on the idea than the person. I'm planning

every step, factoring every detail, and even going so far as to walk my property while imaging every step—one part daydream and one part dress rehearsal. And I'm having a hard time focusing when Will's starring in my fantasy. My mind goes... elsewhere.

A lot of the area around my house is wooded, giving the illusion of privacy as well as isolation. Amid the darkness, I don't rely on my eyes so much as the crunching of leaves and small twigs that have blown their way over to my destination. Henri still hasn't been moved to his final location. That's another thing I have to do sooner rather than later. Can't be leaving him in the greenhouse all winter. Time to get to work. The insects have about picked him clean, but the meat grinder in the basement can take care of the rest. After that, well, calcium is very good for lawns and I have a lot of property out here.

The wind blows right through me upon passing the greenhouse and I sink further into my jacket, taking a breath while I stand in the dark. I haven't devoted too much time to Will, but I spent a lot on Henri. Maybe longer than on any guyever. Still don't miss him, the person. The attention, the dance of growing obsession, and even how the planning stage took over most of my mind and my time. When I try to insert Will into that equation, it doesn't feel as satisfying as it should.

Maybe I won't kill Will.

No, that feels too resolute. Maybe I won't kill himyet. A much more realistic compromise with myself. One that says I'm allowed to change my mind, regardless of what happens next.

Chapter twelve

Will

Needless to say, I'm not very happy with Jess. In hindsight, every time Bailey has

approached us at the farmer's market, either he addresses Jess first or Jess talks to him—never me. I suppose them getting together shouldn't be as big a surprise as it was. Fairly certain that this violates some kind of bro code, but as they say, all's fair in love and war. And fucking guys, we're the worst. That being said, as much as I want to confront Jess about this... I'm not sure I can without losing my cool. Which is exactly why I can't do that. If it were me, I'd want to see him flipping a lid over this. Remaining nonchalant will be the only way to hit him where it hurts.

We always have Monday off, and with Lucy still out on leave, he's been mostly closing while I've been opening. I don't really get a chance to speak to him until Friday. Someone needed to switch shifts and the boss's daughter always comes and opens on Friday, anyway. I'm more than happy to help, like the nice guy I am. Not only do I prefer closing, but Jess and I will be working together. We really do make a good team.

After the small dinner rush, the store always winds down and we can chat while working. Most of what we do doesn't require so much thought we can't multitask. Jess fights the sticker gun once again, since he remains the only one who can make it cooperate, and I'm dealing with the basket of returns. We've maybe thirty minutes to close.

"So, how did Sunday go?"

"What?" Jess laughs as if I'm telling a joke instead of asking a question.

"Sunday. You. Bailey. How'd that go?"

And he looks so pleased with himself when he shrugs. "It... went."

I hum at such an excellent lack of an answer.

“Why do you ask?”

“Seemed like the polite thing to do.”

“I probably should have said something to you.” Jesse pauses and focuses more on the sticker gun than me for a moment. “Do you mind?”

“Not particularly.” When Cas gave me that answer, it drove me up a wall. I can already see it’s having the desired effect on Jess.

“Because you don’t give a damn about me,” Jess says, his voice slightly rising.

“That’s not what I said.”

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“You’d care if I fucked Bailey.”

And I look at him as if I haven’t the faintest idea what he means. “You wouldn’t do that,” I say with a shrug.

“I did,” he scoffs.

“Sure, you did,” I chuckle.

“Why wouldn’t I? Because we’re bestfriends and I know how much you’re obsessed with him? That’s exactly why I went out and fucked him.” He flushes pink with frustration and damn if it isn’t cute on him.

“Honestly, it never even occurred to me that you two were meeting up for sex, which is why I didn’t care. I know you don’t like him. You said you liked me. Guess not. Oh, well.”

Jess lets out a long sigh, visibly deflating. “We didn’t,” he grumbles.

“Didn’t what?” I ask with a wide smile aimed right at him.

“We chatted, mostly. He’s thinking about getting some goats. You know, milk and honey. Asked me if I’d be willing to help out short term since he’s all alone up there on his farm.”

“See? I had no reason to doubt you, and I was right. Has nothing to do with Bailey.”

Jess stays quiet while he finally slams the sticker gun and starts clicking tags. “Why didn’t you tell me that you were going to be helping him?”

“Uh... because I didn’t think you’d mind me sparing ten minutes to assist another small business?”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it,” he grumbles.

“Well, why didn’t you tell me that you made plans with him?”

“To piss you off,” he cackles. “Clearly, that backfired.”

“Oh, Jess.” I set my empty basket down and go over to him. “That’s only because I trust you.”

When I reach him, Jess looks simultaneously relieved and embarrassed. He exhales, but he keeps his eyes cast down to what he’d been doing only a moment ago but has since stopped. I tilt his chin up with a smile and bring him closer for a kiss. His lips part and he wraps his free arm around me. We can’t stand here at the back of the store and make out for the rest of our shift, tempting as it sounds. So I pull away, and Jess laughs to himself before stickering my chest with a price tag.

“Damn. You calling me cheap?” I chuckle.

Jesse shrugs and laughs harder.

I pull him closer to me again. “Say you’re coming to my place after work.”

“Yes.” Jess pecks a kiss on my lips and smiles before going back to stickering.

The door dings as a customer enters, so I head to the front to cover the register. A girl

close to my age smiles back when I greet her, then resumes wandering around. She loads up her basket with jam, then comes to the front only moments later.

I'm about to start ringing when she smiles up at me. "Do you happen to know when Cheryl's opening the sugar shack this year?"

"Uhhh... no, but I'll ask."

I lean away from her and call for Jesse. He appears right away from the back of the store, but before I can repeat the question about the boss's daughter opening the sugar shack for the season, my customer abandons me.

"JC!" She runs right over to Jess and flings her arms around him.

"Andrea. Didn't know you were back in town." Oh, and right about now, Jess looks like he wants to crawl into a hole and die.

"Gosh, when he said Jesse, I wasn't even expecting you. I've known you as JC for so long, I almost forgot that's your name." She chuckles, but Jess only laughs nervously along with her.

"Do you remember how in high school, you tried getting everyone to start calling you by your middle name?" She pauses for another fit of giggles. "Cassius, like the boxer."

What.

The.

Fuck.

Jess says something to her about not really remembering, but he's close to turning scarlet. I can't really focus on them, anyway. My head is spinning. There is no way. None. And yet... a lot of it adds up.

Cas regularly talks about caring for his animals and Jess still helps out on the family dairy farm. I've mentioned Jess to Cas, but never by name. Cas always calls him my smart best friend—the very same friend Cas thinks I should reconsider dating rather than pursuing anything with him. And whenever I fret about the guy who doesn't notice me, Cas always assures me that he would notice if he knew me. Jess, by his own admission, has liked me for a very long time, and I never realized. Maybe that's the real reason why Cas stopped talking to me—he thought for sure I would finally notice what was right in front of me.

I figure Jess has got to be finding guys to hook up with somewhere. So, he finds me by chance, decides now's the perfect time since he's always been too chicken shit to make a move, makes me infatuated with this alternate persona, only to dump me... just so he can swoop in and be the one to comfort me. Fuck, that is some evil genius level shit. Because when push came to shove, I ran right to Jess. The person I've known the longest.

Cas himself admitted he knows me—just not how well or if he likes me. And yet, he seems to think I'd recognize his voice... almost as if I've heard it a lot. People can sound different on the phone but... I would know Jess, wouldn't I? Or should I say

Cassius... which can easily be shortened to Cas? The only part I can't fully riddle out is Cas coming back, but that also coincides perfectly with Jess pulling back and trying to make me jealous by going out with Bailey. Almost as if he's testing my resolve or something. What. The. FUCK.

I glance over at Jess again, and he looks nothing short of uncomfortable. One could argue that making out with your coworker and then getting bombarded by someone from high school minutes later is enough to rattle anyone. Or it could be him panicking that I know who he is now, which has been Cas's fear from the start. Or it could even be me staring unabashedly at him while still reeling from being hit upside the head with this truth sledgehammer. Looking as guilty as he does isn't helping.

My mind utterly devolves while ringing this lady out. By the time she leaves the store, I reach two conclusions. One: more than likely, if Jess is Cas, he'll freak out if he suspects that I recognize him. And two: if I confront Cas about this but guess incorrectly, he will get so spooked he may disappear again, anyway. My only option at this point is to say nothing at all and maybe I'll show my hand when I'm more certain. In the meantime, I'm going to try to get as much info from both of them as possible and go from there.

The door dings again and Jess waves once to his friend, who holds it open for another customer. We're never this busy at this time of night. Then again, our version of slammed is dusting off the second register. The guy who just came in walks right past the register on his way to the back, but he pauses and smiles at us. It's Bailey.

"Hey, Jess." His eyes dart toward me. "Will."

Not even a hello for me. I see how it is. I smile anyway. "What brings you out this way, Bailey?"

"Oh... you know..."

No, I don't. Spit it out, man.

"I've never seen you shop here." Jess stands at the end of the register, where he bagged for me while I rang out his friend. Why he's still here eludes me until I notice the glare he's throwing.

"I know." Bailey's eyes drift momentarily to the floor. "Long overdue to check this place out, but I'm not exactly close by."

Which is not at all true. The store is on the main road. If Bailey wants to avoid driving past us to get to the only chain grocery store in town, he has to take the back roads going to and from his place. Not that I should even know any of that.

Bailey's eyes flick up once more and land on me while he gnaws into his lower lip.

Jess notices. That, and how despite nothing being said between us, Bailey and I continue to linger too long on one another: me with a burning hunger to lick the sweetness from his skin and Bailey with apparent naïveté while he regards me.

Then Bailey's right back to focusing on Jess with a smile. "Anyway, it's nice seeing you. I'm going to..." He points to the back of the store.

I really want to believe Bailey meant the plural version of you. Likely because I still want to think he's got some interest in me, but I can't gauge him to save my life. Last week, he's flirting with me and we're eye-fucking; today, not even a greeting and he can barely say a word to me. Whenever Jess is around, Bailey treats me like a ghost. His eyes still instinctively shift to my presence, but he almost never acknowledges me. I don't get it.

Why Jess? Why pursue him and pretend to be shy around me? And yeah, sweet as it is, I'm sure it's a routine. There's nothing bashful about the guy who held my gaze

last Sunday while sucking his finger. Fuck, and thinking about that gets me hard at the register. Thank fuck for the apron that's part of our uniform.

Bailey comes back with a huge bag of garlic bulbs, which he promptly sets on the counter.

"Vampires?" I tease.

Jess, for whatever reason, still hasn't left the bagging area and snorts at my joke.

Bailey laughs along, but his heart's not in it. More the kind you do when you know people are laughing at you and not with you, but you're too socially awkward to ignore the cue of laughing along even when it's at your expense. He swipes his card before I can even say the total. "No... um... garlic and honey... never mind," he mumbles.

Now, I don't know who once told this precious ray of sunshine to shut up about his special interests, but I want to knock their teeth in. So I try not to let my agitation be misinterpreted. "If you're making dinner, don't get too detailed. We've got another five minutes to close and we're both starving."

Bailey has that nervous trill to his laugh again, but when I smile at him, he shifts and launches headfirst into an excited prattle the same as before. "No, you can ferment the garlic in honey as a remedy. Lots of people use it like cough syrup. Honey is naturally antibacterial."

"Interesting," I say, trying to sound genuine. "Sounds better than mellified man, but that's not real. Is it?"

"The fuck is that?" Jesse asks.

Maybe I've made the conversation too morbid, but instead of recoiling at my contribution, Bailey's mouth twitches slightly before he smiles again.

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“An ancient cure-all made by mummifying a cadaver in honey for a century. There’s still debate whether the ritual sacrifice existed or if the historical records are fictitious,” Bailey says to Jess despite keeping his eyes on me.

Bailey seems intrigued by my general knowledge again, but I cheated this time. Since he responded so well the first time, I’ve been reading everything and anything honey related to impress the world’s sweetest beekeeper.

Jess clears his throat at the end of the register, and Bailey finally tears his eyes away and looks over. “Town makes us charge for paper.”

“I can carry it. Thanks.” And Bailey pulls the mesh bag toward him before shoving his wallet back into his pockets. “See you guys Sunday.”

The minute Bailey leaves, Jess checks the clock and locks the door behind him. Officially our last customer of the day. I pull the drawer out of the register and carry the whole thing to the small office. Jess can finish in there, and I’ll do everything else out here. Keys still in hand, Jess opens the office door, and I set my drawer on the desk. And then he’s all over me.

His lips immediately seek mine, begging me for attention. Jess sighs against my mouth while his fingers dig into my back to force me even closer. With each returned kiss, he leans more into me until his cock brushes mine through our jeans.

“We’ll be at my house in thirty minutes or less,” I snicker.

“Too long.” Jess grabs my belt buckle and his hand’s in my pants in an instant. He

certainly knows how to be persuasive.

When I don't fight his suggestion but shift my clothes away instead, he's nothing but rushed movements. First whipping his cock out, then stroking ours together so the entire length of his shaft rubs against mine. A soft pant escapes while his lips hover against mine, but he's focusing less on my mouth and more on my eyes. When I drift away, Jess calls me back.

"Look at me." My gaze locking on to him pulls a moan from his depths. "I don't want you looking anywhere else."

Fuck, if making him jealous gets this result, I'm doing it all the time. "What if someone looks at me?" I tease further.

"I'll make sure he can't again." Not the sexiest sentence, unless said like a breathy promise while on the brink of coming.

Instantly, I'm reminded of what Cas told me earlier this week about shoving anyone between me and him off a bridge. That thought, of someone matching my obsession with their own darkness, gets me to come.

Chapter thirteen

Cas

I've come to the realization that Will may actually like me. Maybe even more someday—like love. Yet, what startles me the most about this is how badly I want all of it. I want him to love me madly and to be the sole object of his desire until the day he dies. And really, that's something even I always considered unachievable. It's how my bad habit started. Meet the right guy. Feed our obsession. Then end things before he loses interest. He stays mine forever that way.

But with Will, it's different. I'm still not sure how or even why, but usually when a guy I've fixated on wavers even slightly, I get annoyed. Almost enraged, even. With Will, the feeling builds in complexity. I start to fret. I never do that. Never before have I given a damn aside from the waste of time and effort on my part. And yet, with Will...

I feel myself slipping. Caring more than I should. Making idiotic decisions fueled by emotion. And instead of being annoyed when he doesn't respond the way I want to me jerking his chain, I become jealous of whatever distraction is breathing in the same room as him. I want him—need him—focusing solely on me. Not having that just may be what tips me over the edge.

When Will doesn't attempt to call on Friday night, my stomach churns. Not so much from missing out on a good time or even wondering what he's doing, but convincing myself this is it. He's lost interest. Can't expect him to stay satisfied with our exchanges forever. He's going to want more, eventually. That much is not only natural and expected, but inevitable. He will want more. And when he can't have it, he'll fade away. Maybe I really do need to move on sooner than I want.

My phone in my hands, my fingers hover above the screen while I consider my words. Not that I'm going to send anything past midnight, but I like drafting these things ahead of time. Rehearsing conversations and interactions is something I often need to do, which makes communication over a phone all the easier. My phone dings in my hand.

Purple Puppy: I'm sorry I didn't call again.

Purple Puppy: And I'm sorry I didn't warn you ahead of time like I usually do.

Orchid Mantis: It's okay.

Purple Puppy:Is it, really?

No, not really. Never going to admit that, though. Not to myself, nor to him.

Orchid Mantis:Everyone gets busy. Stuff slips their mind. It happens.

Purple Puppy:I didn't forget. I could never forget something I look forward to all day.

Purple Puppy:Busy comes closer to what happened.

Orchid Mantis:Smart best friend, again?

Purple Puppy:Yeah...

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Purple Puppy:He's staying over. I'm hiding in the bathroom of my own home so I can text you.

Purple Puppy:I'm trying to do what you said, but... do you still want me to?

No, of course not.

Orchid Mantis:I want you to do what you want and have what you want.

Purple Puppy:In that case, how soon do you think you can be here?

And a winking emoji.

Purple Puppy:Don't worry. I'm mostly kidding.

Purple Puppy:Why don't you tell me what it is you want to do and to have?

Oh, if only he knew. Nix that, if only I knew. I can't very well explain any of that to him, especially if I don't even know anymore.

Orchid Mantis:I tend to want things I can't have.

Purple Puppy:Like me?

Orchid Mantis:Especially you.

Purple Puppy:Name the time and place. Not even pretending to joke around this time.

Purple Puppy:I don't care who you turn out to be. I want you and wasting my time with anyone else isn't working for me.

Purple Puppy:Have you ever even considered that maybe the only thing holding me back from loving the version of you I already know is this one right here? Seems like we're needlessly torturing ourselves.

Orchid Mantis:I don't think you like the guy you know. Never mind love.

Purple Puppy:I bet I do.

Purple Puppy:No, scratch that. I bet I like the guy I know. You're definitely sexy and we've probably flirted plenty. And I bet I want more with that guy.Except you've said yourself that's not you. The real you.

Purple Puppy:This is the real you, and I want you so fucking bad I can't stand it.

Orchid Mantis: But what would you say to the other me?

Purple Puppy:STFU ATTDLAGB

Orchid Mantis: Someone's horny.

Purple Puppy:Yes.

Purple Puppy:I am.

Purple Puppy:Literally, just the thought of you gets me hard.

And even though I'd never been the type, same here. He wakes my cock up better than anyone ever has. So even though I shouldn't, yet again, I take a page out of his

book.

Orchid Mantis: Show me.

Purple Puppy: Gladly.

Not even thirty seconds later, the picture comes through and seeing the bulge in his pajamas gets me from twitching with interest to rock hard.

Orchid Mantis: How quiet do you think you can be while hiding?

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Purple Puppy:Baby, don't tease me this way.

I smile to myself and slam the call button. Sometimes, the best move is none at all. This is not one of those times.

Will accepts my request, of course. Nothing more than a shaky gasp comes through the line when he answers, but he can't speak as much as he wants right now.

"Sorry, but I need to get off right now and after seeing how hard you are, I couldn't leave you like that," I whisper.

"Why's that?"

"Because you'd just go sticking your cock in your friend again," I snicker. "Actually, you still might, but I want you replaying every second of this when you do."

Will curses while he suppresses a groan. "You're not even here. Why is it always so good with you?"

"I'm good for you. And you are for me. Talking with you never fails to get me hard." Which is why I happen to be stroking my cock as we speak. Most of the time I can't even get off on my own, but with Will it's different. The attraction flows freely with him and it's close to instant arousal every time. "Same reason I never bottom. I can't get into it."

"Except we know that's a fucking lie."

“It’s not. Unless I’m talking to you, then I want nothing more than to fuck myself.”

“Yet, you’re not now.”

I smile to myself. “You haven’t asked me to.”

“Cas, you’re killing me.”

My cock jumps at his complaint and the sigh that escapes me sounds especially... pleased.

Even now, I can’t help thinking about it sometimes. The rest of the time, I’m thinking of him. Watching him. Talking to him. Being alone with him. And more than any of the rest, doing this in person. Which, again, sex usually isn’t even in my top five things that I think about day-to-day, but with him, everything has been feeling different. I’ve been different.

“You’d know if I were killing you.” My voice suddenly becomes raspy, and I am so turned on.

“You are. I’d literally do anything to meet you, Cas. I mean anything,” he whispers.

And that gets me closer to coming than anything sexual he could’ve said. So much so I whimper right into the phone while my whole body shudders. Will’s been rendered speechless, save for panting my name. The thought of his whispering lips and the sound of my name in his voice never fails to get me to finish. From the sound of it, I have the same effect on him.

“Anything?” I ask once I catch my breath again.

“Maybe not cut off my cock. That would sorta defeat the purpose.” He snorts a laugh

and I join him only for a moment.

“I’d still fuck myself with it, if you did.”

Will curses at my teasing yet again. “Don’t start. We’ll be here all night.”

“Not a problem for me.”

“Some of us have work tomorrow.” He sighs. “Who am I fucking kidding? Like I give a damn about that when I’m talking to you.”

How sweet. “Get some sleep. Call me tomorrow. Or else.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

And I smile to myself when the call ends.

Chapter fourteen

Will

Calling me is a ballsy move. A very unlike Cas move. Part of me wonders if I’ll manage to catch Jess awake and using his phone, then eliminate my suspicions. By the time the thought of opening the door and checking if he’s asleep crosses my mind, everything’s over and Cas hangs up before I can verify anything.

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After I leave the bathroom, I'm still in my head, mentally comparing Jess to the one picture Cas sent me weeks ago. It's no use, really. I can't rely on memory alone this time. They aren't built so differently that I can say for certain, nor can I rule out the possibility entirely. I end up crawling into bed with more questions than answers. The bed shifting must disturb Jess because he moves closer to me before wrapping an arm around me with a contented sigh and kissing my shoulder. Not even while awake. He really does stuff like that even in his sleep, because that's how sweet he is.

The next morning, Jess leaves early since he's opening. I see him only in passing at work since I'm closing again. More than likely, we'll head back to my house again on Sunday evening, but we haven't made any official plans. I'm thinking about that on my way out, because as much as I'm looking forward to calling Cas tonight, I'm also dreading the thought of having to bail on him again when Jess stays over. I'd almost rather talk all night with Cas than spend it fucking Jess, and that can't be normal.

As soon as I turn right out of the parking lot of the store, my headlights illuminate a truck pulled off on the side of the main road... and Bailey. Huh. After turning around in the empty street, I park behind him, then step out of my car.

"You okay?" Not really sure what else to say, since his truck doesn't look as if it's been in an accident and I don't see a flat.

"Yeah..." Bailey says. He throws his hands up, clearly frustrated, but doesn't let it break the surface. "I think it's the transmission, but I have no idea."

"Okay, hop in and I'll drive you home," I say.

“You don’t have to...”

“How else are you getting home?”

“Tow truck should be here soon and I need to be here. Thanks, though.”

“I don’t mind waiting.”

“You just got out of work.”

“How do you know?”

Bailey swings an arm out and gestures to the dark building in the distance. Okay, maybe he does know. With a sigh, he puts both hands in his pockets. Now that the sun has gone down, the air has a slight chill again.

I pull my hoodie over my head and hand it over, but Bailey shakes his head. All while he shivers from a sudden breeze. “It’s fall, dude. That’s why I wore long sleeves.”

“Well, it was warm when I left this afternoon.” Bailey makes an exasperated sound, but he takes my work sweatshirt from me and pulls it over himself.

“Do you have to stand out here for the tow truck?”

“I don’t think so,” he says.

“Let’s wait in my car. I don’t mind.”

“You have to be up early tomorrow.”

“Are we staying out all night? Because an hour or two won’t make that big a

difference to me. I never go to bed when I should.”

“Me either. I don’t learn.” Bailey softly chuckles, then lets out a long sigh before walking toward my car.

The door’s unlocked still, so he climbs into the passenger seat, unprompted. I join him and turn the heat on low to take the chill out of the air.

“So...” As much as I want to ask about him and Jess, I don’t let myself. “Long day for you too, I take it?”

“You could say that.” He sighs. “Most days are. I’ve got a lot going on and not much time for anything else. Anyone else.”

Well, that opens a door I shamelessly waltz through. “I figured as much, you know, since you aren’t seeing anyone... right?”

“More or less,” he says. “Why?”

I shrug. “I figured Jess would be the first to tell me otherwise.”

As much as I’m hoping to hear how he feels about Jesse, Bailey doesn’t take the bait. He snickers but says nothing else on the subject. “You two really are close, huh?”

“Yeah, we met on the job. Maybe four years ago? It was right after I moved out here. And Jess worked for the farm all through high school, then came back after college. Once I got hired, we became friends really fast.”

Bailey hums.

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“How about you?”

“Well... it’s been about six for me. I always knew what I wanted to do, ever since I was a kid. First chance I got to make it happen... I did.”

“Huh. I always thought you were local,” I say.

“I grew up somewhere a lot like this place. Small-town guy from the start. Not like you.”

“What do you mean, not like me?”

Bailey rolls his lips inward and bites back a smile.

“Oh, I get it. Openly gay guy with tattoos must come from the big city.”

“No,” he chuckles. “It’s, um... yourR’s.”

“Are you implying I’m a pirate now?”

Bailey finally gives in to laughter. “You pronounce yourR’s. Out here, the only time we’re not droppingR’s from a word, it’s to put one where it doesn’t belong.”

Interesting. I suppose I’ve been around the rural accent for so long that I don’t even really hear it anymore. Before I can ask more, I see lights approaching and the tow truck turns off the road to park. Bailey hops out to go ahead and deal with that while I fiddle with the radio, then get out my phone. I’m about to message Cas when I see he

sent one while I was at work.

Orchid Mantis:I'm sure I sound like a hypocrite, but I have no idea when I'm getting home, and I don't want to disappoint you if I don't take your call.

I look up, and Bailey's still talking with the guy from the towing company. He looks so adorable, with his hands stuffed in the front pocket of my baggy sweatshirt. Not that he's significantly smaller, but I like my sweatshirts oversized, so what's loose on me almost swallows him. Bailey and the tow truck driver both walk to the other side of the truck, where I can't see. Looks like I have time to respond.

Purple Puppy:Hot date?

Orchid Mantis:Of course.

And a wink. Fucking tease.

Orchid Mantis:Just got caught up somewhere with a friend. Don't know how long I'll be.

Purple Puppy:Ironically, I was just about to message you that I'm helping out a guy I know and I still have to bring him home after this. I won't be calling at the usual time, anyway.

Orchid Mantis:And now you won't bother?

Purple Puppy:I assumed you'd need sleep, but I can blow up your phone every five minutes until you answer, if you prefer. You know. Once you're not busy with your friend.

Orchid Mantis:Smartass.

Purple Puppy: You love it.

Orchid Mantis: I've got to run. Don't be surprised if I don't answer. I won't be offended if you don't get a chance to call.

Orchid Mantis: And enjoy your hot date.

Purple Puppy: I thought you were the one on a hot date. I'm actually helping out a friend.

Orchid Mantis: Sure you are.

Orchid Mantis: Friendly sex, only. As friends. I know how you operate.

I close my phone and look up in time to see Bailey walking to my car while the tow truck leaves with his pickup. He opens the door and climbs back into the passenger seat, then shoots me a small smile.

After I start the car and pull out toward the road, Bailey becomes visibly uncomfortable. "Where are you going?"

"Uh... bringing you home...?"

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“I haven’t told you where to go.”

Oh, fuck. I nervously laugh and hope he doesn’t read too much into that. “Sorry, I just assumed since your car was pulled onto this side of the road.”

“It’s okay.” He exhales.

“Should I turn around?”

“No, you’re... this is actually right.”

“Okay, because I don’t want to disappoint you when you need to tell me the rest.”

Bailey relaxes and laughs this time and does that ever sound sweet. He continues giving me directions, which aren’t many since there are only so many roads and so many turns one can take out here. Finally, he says, “You can let me out here.”

I pull off the road and slow to a crawl, but don’t stop. “Long driveway,” I comment.

“It’s fine.”

Actually, it’s not. This isn’t his house. He lives across the street and one more driveway down from us. He really is paranoid and while I’m normally so self-involved that all I ever want to know is why someone won’t trust me, this time I’m wondering what’s got him so skittish—or who. Is it me? It can’t be me.

Once again, I’m not even supposed to know, so I can’t let any of my internal conflict

show. I throw the car in park and politely wait for him to get out. Only he doesn't move after.

"Thanks," Bailey says. The car's dark, but his voice sounds light. That gives me an ounce of hope.

"Don't mention it," I mumble.

"I still feel bad for taking up your time." His voice drops to something slightly above a whisper.

I exhale and turn slightly toward him. "Don't."

"Is this the part where you say you didn't have anything important going on?" He chuckles to himself.

"No," I say. "I did. Well, I do. But I've got time and, well, I couldn't leave you on the side of the road."

"Why not?"

"We're... sort of friends."

"Are we?"

Guess not. "I'd like us to be. We should get together more. And by more, I mean at least once since we never have."

Bailey seems conflicted by my suggestion.

"If it's about Jess..."

“It’s not,” he quietly interrupts.

“Is it me?”

“Maybe,” he says even quieter.

“Hey, that’s okay.” I drop my voice to match his when he doesn’t say anything.

“Bailey, can I just—”

I don’t get the rest out. All I want is honesty, but Bailey swoops in closer to me, pausing before our lips meet as if second guessing himself. Ah, no. I’ve only been obsessed with him for over a year and a half now. If he thinks that’s what I want, then I’m not ashamed to close the rest of the distance.

As soon as Bailey’s mouth crashes on mine, all I can think of is him. My mind chants his name over and over like a silent mantra, sending my urges into overdrive while I pull him even closer. I swear, I will fuck him right here and now, given the chance. The way he pants into my mouth is not helping. Neither is how he smells so good—clean and slightly sweet, almost citrusy—and... like me. The woody scent of my body wash permeates my sweatshirt, which I never noticed until I’m inhaling the mixture of us on him.

Instead of having to beg for admittance to his mouth, Bailey sweeps his tongue across my lips while trying and failing to crawl closer. When we separate with a soft smack of lips, it’s only for him to quickly unbuckle while I do the same before throwing up the center console.

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Right as I'm starting to think my long-held Bailey fantasy may become a reality, he pulls away from me. Not all the way—more specifically, shifting his lower half out of reach when I cup his gorgeous ass. Kinda heartbreaking, since I've wanted nothing more than to grab a handful for months, but I can adapt. My fingertips brush around his hip toward the front, before I curve my hand between his legs. He enjoys that for only a few seconds before pulling away entirely this time, breaking our kiss in the process.

"I'm sorry." I really don't know what else to say when he went from almost in my lap to backing so far away that I can't reach him.

"It's... okay." He pauses and takes a deep breath.

And I really don't get it, since he sounds like he's trying to calm down more than anything. "Did I... should I not have done that?"

"I'd prefer it if you didn't."

Well, then.

And yet, when Bailey moves again, it's not to open the door and leave. He scoots back over to me, grasping my face and kissing me once again with a soft sigh. Which I absolutely will not complain about, only I'm suddenly at a loss for where to put my hands. Not only that, I'm so hard I'm desperate for any sort of release and he's very obviously into this, too. I don't get it. Maybe I'm not meant to.

Bailey's fingers drift down to curl towards the band of my jeans, tugging at the

button, then the zipper, before sliding his hand inside the small space. Just his hand on my skin is enough to get me to gasp against his lips, then he frees my cock and slowly strokes—enough to feel good without providing any relief. Maybe he anticipates me wanting to return the gesture, since he throws himself backward again after the slightest move from me.

I take a deep breath, but I do not complain. Bailey must expect me to demonstrate a level of self-control I simply don't possess. I try to remind myself this is the guy I've fixated on for what feels like forever. With anyone else, I won't indulge any hesitancy. I can dig deep and manifest patience for him.

So, imagine my surprise when I hear his belt tinkling while he fumbles in the dark. Even though I can barely see, his breathing changes and I know he's touching himself. He squirms back over to me, his hand still in his pants when he kisses me. I fist my cock, steadily moving faster out of sheer desperation. It's not long before I'm thinking about how, realistically, it shouldn't be that difficult for me to rip his jeans the rest of the way down his legs or to turn him around so I can start thrusting into him until I make him whimper.

When Bailey starts to move away, I hurriedly pull him back toward me rather than let him panic again. Instead of pushing back, he flattens himself down so his head's above my lap and then my cock's in his mouth. Suddenly, this has gotten so much better than I hoped. He hums with pleasure when I sink my hand into his loose curls—just long enough for me to grab onto and therefore the perfect length.

That patience I manifested disappears. With a firm grip on his head, I thrust so hard he gags, and then I keep going. His face feels wet against my skin, and I'd give anything to stare into his watery eyes at this moment, were it not for the dark. At the very least, I can listen. The more I slam my hips forward and force myself farther back into his throat, the louder Bailey whines. Until his back arches while he's still got my cock in his mouth and his whole mouth vibrates. Hearing his pleasure tips me

over the edge, and he gulps every last drop down before slowly rising again. His nose brushes near mine before he leans forward and rolls his tongue in my mouth. Not at all my kink, even in the slightest. But the smirk on his lips when he kisses me reignites that same mental record skip of his name. Bailey's in my car. Bailey's kissing me with the faint taste of my cum still in his mouth. Right after Bailey got off from sucking my cock. Bailey, Bailey, Bailey.

He pulls away, for what really is the final time this evening, shifting his jeans around and closing his belt. Then he moves to lift my hoodie over his head.

"Keep it for now. It's cold out there," I say to him.

"Are... you sure?"

"I have another. Besides, you can give it back to me tomorrow at the farmer's market if you really want."

"What if I can't get there?" With a haughty smirk, he pulls the bottom hem back down over his wet stomach. Fuck, I'd love to pin him down and taste him.

"I'll give you a ride if you need one."

"Yeah? What would Jess say about that?"

Before I can say it's not his call, I realize he must mean because I'm supposed to be helping Jess. Doing my actual job. Not giving out rides.

"He'd say I'm the nicest guy he knows for helping you load your stuff in my car and handing you the keys so you can get yourself there. So long as you drop me off at the farm first, of course."

Bailey snorts a laugh. “You’re sweet.”

And don’t I know it.

“I got a beater for emergencies, so you’re off the hook.” Bailey sighs once more before looking at me. “I guess I’ll... see you tomorrow.”

After Bailey gets out, I put the car back in drive and turn to head back toward my place. My headlights briefly illuminate him, standing by the side of the road and watching—waiting—for me to leave before he heads toward his house. Considering what just happened between us, I don’t take it personally.

Chapter fifteen

Cas

Horny. Not something I’m accustomed to, but there’s no denying that feeling. Now, it’s not as if I never get aroused. It’s more like most people get excited thinking about sex and then they want... sex. Me, not so much. Sex has always been my foreplay, the lead up to the main event. Because when I’m horny, I’m not thinking about sex. And when I see someone who has that effect on me, I’m not imagining their expression while getting fucked, but the look on their face when I strangle them. Don’t worry, I’m well aware that’s not normal and I’ve come to terms with it.

The very first time I saw Will, he instantly elicited that response from me. All I could think about when gazing into his eyes was my version of the throes of passion: basically someone fighting for their life. Luckily for him, I always go out of my way to find people I don’t know. After hovering around him for as long as I have, I’ve never made a move.

After unintentionally picking him as my next target online, I should only be wanting

that even more each time I see him. I don't. Actually, I find myself thinking of it less and less with each interaction. I mean, the urge is still very much there, but... he just may be the first and only person who can reliably get me sexually aroused. The intensity of the urge has begun shifting to a different focus around him and, like a greedy puppy, I only want more.

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So whenever I hear from Will, regardless of the hour or what I'm doing, I need to use all my remaining focus to hide the fact that I'm dropping everything for this man. He cannot have me thinking I'll be at his beck and call, even if it's really looking that way on my end.

Purple Puppy:I'm sorry, I know it's late, but I couldn't help myself.

Orchid Mantis:It's okay.

Purple Puppy:Really, really?

Orchid Mantis:Really and truly.

Orchid Mantis:Did you have a good time, at least?

Purple Puppy:I was helping a FRIEND.

Purple Puppy:And yes, I did. Not my fault he understands gratitude.

Orchid Mantis:Most of your friends seem to.

Purple Puppy:Appreciation is something I've never complained about.

And a smiley. Which makes my eye twitch again. Even if one of those friends he's referring to is me, it's not Cas. Is it possible to be jealous of oneself? Because irrational as it may seem, that's exactly what I'm feeling right now.

Purple Puppy:And really, it's only the two friends currently. And you. Who I actually want the most and not only because I can't have you.

Well, that helps pull me away from the edge just a bit.

Purple Puppy:I don't think anything could turn me off you at this point. Except for you not being gay, but I highly doubt that.

Orchid Mantis:Funny you say that, actually.

Purple Puppy:Oh. Oh no.

Purple Puppy:Don't you do this to me. My dick can't take it.

Purple Puppy:I've always wanted to be someone's bisexual awakening, and I know you've had a boyfriend before. Don't tease me.

Orchid Mantis:I have. A few, actually. Never really considered myself gay, though.

Purple Puppy:Well, I'm not biphobic or anything. Probably the exact opposite. I love the idea of a guy choosing dick because it's not even a choice for me.

Orchid Mantis:And why is that?

Purple Puppy:Dunno. I'm a card-carrying gay with a lifelong membership. I don't mean to fetishize it, but the idea of converting someone who's sexually curious is hot. Judge me all you want.

Orchid Mantis:Interesting.

Purple Puppy:My turn to ask why.

Orchid Mantis:Not telling you.

Purple Puppy:I get it. You're judging. Go ahead. It's like you said. At least I acknowledge it's kinda fucked up.

Orchid Mantis:That's not it.

Purple Puppy:It is.

Orchid Mantis:It's really not.

Purple Puppy:It's fine. I deserve it.

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Orchid Mantis: Fine. I'll tell you.

Orchid Mantis: I've never really thought of myself as gay even though I've always preferred men.

(Killing men, also, but I'll leave that part out.)

Orchid Mantis: Mostly because even with men, I can't get into sex normally.

Purple Puppy: Normally meaning there're exceptions or meaning the sex has to be abnormal?

Orchid Mantis: Probably a bit of both, if we're being totally honest.

My phone starts to ring in my hand, so I hit the accept button. I can't even manage a greeting right now. Will hasn't given me much and I need to gauge his response first.

Thankfully, Will skips the greeting and gets right to the point. "Cas, be honest with me, okay? Am I an exception for you?"

"Yeah," I admit.

Will bites off a hiss of obvious pleasure. "That is so fucking hot."

"Doesn't feel that way for me," I huff.

"And what does it feel like?"

“I don’t know. A lot of things. Mildly frustrating. Isolating. Embarrassing. But also, right somehow? Like there’s no point in fighting what comes naturally. Feels that way with you, too. Closest I’ve ever come to normal, I suppose.”

Will pauses for too long, making my guts twist. “You do realize that’s not totally abnormal, right?”

“Um...” Not really, no. I’m not so sure what normal should be, only that I’m not it. “How... do you mean?”

“Okay, so, there’s a lot more nuance to sexuality and attraction than straight or gay.”

“Yeah, I know. You already told me you’re not biphobic, but that’s not the case here.”

“Cas, there’s nothing wrong with being asexual or whatever. You don’t have to beat around the bush.”

“I’m... not?”

“Fucking hell,” he mutters. “Look, I’m not trying to label you or anything. I just don’t want you thinking you’re alone. Other people are like this, too.”

“It never occurred to me there was a word for it. Never mind that other people might be the same way.”

“There are. Way back when I first began dating, my first serious boyfriend was demisexual. It’s not completely unheard of.”

“And what is that, exactly?”

“They don’t experience sexual attraction unless they form an emotional connection.”

“That... uh... might explain a few things, actually.”

“No wonder you can’t get into fucking yourself without me, baby.” And despite the lust dripping in his voice, he manages to stay so sweet somehow. “Do you remember what I told you?”

“You’ve told me a lot of things,” I chuckle.

“How I’m a possessive freak who wants complete control over someone? And now you’re basically saying that aside from me, you’re not able to muster any sort of attraction to anyone.” Will takes a deep breath. “And you told me you want someone entirely to yourself, so much so you’d do anything to keep them focused on you.”

His arousal makes his voice deep and gravelly and... I start palming my swelling cock. Happens every damn time. Every time with him, that is.

“So, basically, I give you something only I can do for you, which means you’ll have a level of reliance on me only you can offer. You feed my fixation and it’s exactly what yours needs.”

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“Sounds toxic and codependent.”

“No, more like you and I were made for each other, baby.” Will softly sighs on his end. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to enjoy sex again knowing you’re out there. Hope you’re happy.”

“Extremely,” I say, with a wide smile. Suddenly, I feel thankful I’m the only one who can see.

“Good. I like hearing youhappy.”

“You like hearing me moan your name,” I snicker.

“Fuck, yes, I do.” He pauses. “But what I like best is that it’s you. I mean that. I’m not going to give you an ultimatum, but Cas, you have got to know how much I want you and no one else. No one. And I’m not going to be satisfied until I have you.”

I groan into my phone and he cackles at me this time.

“Thought you’d like that, but it’s all true.” He takes a deep breath. “I’ve been rock hard since you picked up the phone. Even more now that I’m wondering if you can even get it up without me.”

“I can, but not reliably. And even then, I’ll lose interest unless I start fucking something.”

“What about right now, Cas?”

“So hard that I’ve been doing something about it.”

“Yeah?” Will purrs. “Can you get off on your own?”

“Not really. A lot of times I get really close and then nothing. Same goes for sex with someone else. Made me a great top, though. So long as I had a cock ring, I could rail a guy all night and not get tired.”

“Fuck,” Will gasps. “I think the only thing as sweet as knowing only I can make you come will be turning you into a bottom.”

“Good luck with that.”

“Oh, it’s happening, baby. So at least let me hear you fuck yourself in the meantime.”

After lots and lots of phone sex, I don’t need to scramble like I did the first few times. All I need is him ushering me in that direction and I can start using everything that’s ready and waiting. While I open the lube, I tease him further. “You won’t even give me the chance to plow you?”

“I would. I wouldn’t enjoy it, but I would.”

“Now if that’s not true love, I don’t know what is, sweetheart.” A pleased sigh escapes while I play with my ass, but I quickly grow impatient. I need more and I crave the fullness, but thinking of Will filling me instead builds my panting into a moan.

“Cas,” he sighs. “We have to do this in person sometime. Can’t you do that for me?”

The corners of my mouth twitch. “I can.”

“Don’t break my heart. Only agree if you mean it.”

“I do.”

“I don’t need vows,” he chuckles to himself. After listening to me and responding with a long breath, he says, “Be honest, baby.”

That gets my heart to gallop like a fucking stallion, but the whimper that comes out of me sounds downright pathetic. “I—”

“You can say no.” Will eases into that sensual yet unmistakably resolute voice of his. “But I want to hear you screaming yes.”

My first yes may be unintelligible when the pleasure builds to a dangerous level, but that doesn’t stop me from repeating myself louder and louder while riding out my orgasm. After making me come almost nightly, I can’t imagine how it continually gets better, but it does. And right now, I’m coming harder than I ever have while Will moans in my ear over the phone.

Once we both shift our breathing back to a steadier rate, all Will says is, “When?”

“Soon.”

“I’ll take it.”

Chapter sixteen

Will

Sunday, Sunday, Sunday. I can still remember the announcer in a commercial booming that day to burn the event in our brain. Can't remember the event, but mentally I'm replaying the voice clip while I walk over to Bailey's stall. Sunday, Sunday, Sunday. Most important day of the week for me. As soon as his eyes land on me, a smile blossoms across his face. Instead of waiting for him to come ask for help, I take some initiative and show up ready to help him unload. Only, I'm thinking of a different kind of load I'd love to help him with. He's wearing my hoodie and I about double over like a horny teenager swooning at their crush.

"That's a very nice hoodie you have there," I tease.

"Thanks, this guy I really like gave it to me." Bailey smiles even wider and my legs almost melt away.

"Oh, he gave it to you?"

Bailey shrugs. "Loaned, then. He can have it back when I'm done with it."

"So, never."

"Now, I wouldn't steal your work apparel, tempting as it may be. It was fricken' freezing this morning, and this made the perfect top layer." Then he lifts it away from his chest before releasing it. "Plenty of room."

“Keep it as long as you need. I have another, as you can see.”

Bailey nods and turns to his truck, climbing into the back as always. I’m done helping him in record time, which is amazing because I’m fairly certain my hands are shaking and not from the chilly morning air. Since I saw him last, I’ve decided to ask Bailey out. I need to see where this is headed. I am still fully committed to something with Cas, but that possibility becoming more real has only made me want to do this even more. My window of opportunity is closing and I need to take my chance at getting Bailey out of my system while I still can.

“Hey, so, I wanted to ask you something.” I stuff my hands in my front pocket, warming my fingers and hiding my nerves. “Do you... maybe... would you...”

Bailey watches me intently but he lets me struggle through my broken sentence, and if I didn’t know any better, I’d say he enjoys it, too.

“Would you maybe want to go out tonight?”

“Out? Where?”

“Ah... my place? Or yours.”

Bailey considers this way too long for my liking, with a terrifyingly neutral expression.

“Or anywhere you want, really.”

“What are we doing while we’re out?” And he’s smiling again. Phew.

“We can do something... normal.”

Bailey erupts into laughter. “Then you better pick the activity.”

“Okay.” I take a deep breath. “Dinner and a movie are very standard and very normal.”

“So, basically, a date,” he concludes.

“Yeah, I guess, but I’m okay with us going as friends, too. I meant it when I said I wanted to spend some time with you just hanging out.”

His lips roll inward while he considers this, but his eyes lift to mine with the sweetest expression, all longing and innocence and—he is so lucky we are in public right now.

“Sounds good to me.” Bailey’s cheeks flush before he flicks his eyes down again.

“I’d say text me, but I don’t even have your number.”

“Shit. Right, of course.” I pull my phone out and offer it to him. Bailey quickly types his number, and I save his contact then text him so he has my number, too.

“Well, I should...” Bailey gestures at his inventory.

“Of course. I’ll see you tonight.”

With that I speed walk back to our stand, which is not very far. I’m not sure how long Jess has been watching, but he’s standing stock still and glaring right at Bailey. He’s still staring even when I walk right up to him and his hands clench into fists at his sides.

“Care to explain?”

“He’s taking me out to dinner tonight,” I say with a shrug.

Hissing like a cobra really is only an expression, but damn if Jess doesn’t come as close as I’ve ever heard when he releases a sigh. “Why?”

“To thank me. His car broke down right on the main road near the farm, so I waited for the tow truck with him and gave him a ride home.”

“And somehow that involved you leaving your clothes with him?”

“It was cold, and he had been waiting outside a while.” I shrug again.

Jess furrows his brow, fighting between my sensible excuses and his emotions. “So why wear it now?”

Because he wanted me to see him in it. The guy knows what he’s doing, and he goes about it the sweetest ways possible. Of course, I cannot say this to Jess.

“He probably wanted to make sure he didn’t forget to bring it, then threw it on over his sweater this morning. I don’t really know, but I don’t really care, either.”

Jess huffs and his eyes dip to the ground. He’s out of ammo and not a great shot against someone who spends every waking moment serpentining his way around conversations.

“Hey, so, I was thinking. We both have Monday off. We should do something fun. It’s opening day for the fair, and it won’t be too busy in the morning while most people are at work.” Then I tilt his chin up so he can see my gaze fixed intently on him.

“What would we do?” His attempt to play coy doesn’t have the same effect as when Bailey does it. With Jess, I always know what he wants and what he wants to hear. Mostly because Jess wears his heart on his sleeve, and it’s the best and worst thing about him. Bailey still keeps me on my toes and I fucking love it.

“We could get some fair food, visit the beer garden, maybe even check out the 4H building and the midway.”

“How about rides?”

I lean in so close my lips brush his ear. “You’ll have to wait until after for the ride.”

Jess looks back up at me, his eyes hooded with lust. He licks his lips while he stares at my mouth. Just like that, he’s too busy thinking of sex to be mad. Too easy.

Later that night, I’m in my car and back in front of the wrong house to pick up Bailey, who’s waiting at the end of the driveway. I’m not sure if I should be impressed to see him so committed to the lie or questioning his sanity. Who am I kidding? The fact that I even know this isn’t where he actually lives is a testament to my loose grip.

Bailey climbs right in and shuts the car door, and I find it hard to tear my eyes away. I can’t get over how good he looks, no matter what he wears, no matter what he’s doing, and no matter the lighting. I’ve never met anyone else like that.

“Okay, I have a proposition for you,” I say before I throw my car back in drive.

“We haven’t even had dinner and you’re already propositioning me?” Bailey smiles and I am starting to really enjoy him teasing me.

“We can get dinner. Anywhere you want in the surrounding area. And we can see a movie at the cinema in the next town over either before or after. I checked and they’re doing showings past ten tonight, so we have plenty of time.”

“Okay...” Bailey says.

“Or, and I have a feeling you may object to this, you can take a chance and let me surprise you.”

Bailey raises a brow. “This feels like a bait and switch.”

“Still dinner and a movie, honest. All I’ll tell you is we’re likely going to be out late and it’s much farther than the triplex is.”

“Bigger one with more options?”

“No.”

“One of those fancy theaters with leather couches and a liquor license?”

“Still no, but we can do that next time because I didn’t even know those existed.”

“Next time?” Bailey smirks at me but continues before I can respond. “Okay, I’ll take the chance.”

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“Excellent,” I say, pulling into the street and heading in the opposite direction.

We are in the car for longer than I want, considering this is a date, but it is so worth it to see the sheer confusion on his face while he gazes at the neon restaurant sign when I come to a stop and park. “Wow, Will, you really know how to make a guy feel special.”

His hesitancy isn’t unwarranted since the place isn’t much to look at from the outside. Chipping, off-white paint on a squat building that could just as easily be a laundromat as it could be a place to eat, with nothing particularly memorable or even exceptional to inspire someone to stop and check the place out. A true hole-in-the-wall, yet also a hidden gem.

“I don’t fault you for failing to recognize such refined cuisine, but you will thank me later.”

Bailey snorts.

“Do you have food allergies or diet limitations or anything?”

“No?”

“Excellent,” I say with wicked laughter. Then I lean in to peck his cheek. “You stay here.”

“I don’t even get to come in?”

“Nope,” I say with a wide grin. “This is part of the surprise.”

“Okay,” he sighs.

He doesn’t have to wait for me long, since someone as cultured as myself is familiar with the menu and I know exactly what I wish to get in order for him to have the full experience. I’m back within minutes and I leave the folded bag in the backseat before pulling out of the parking lot.

“I see. You’re going to make me smell it the rest of the ride as punishment for questioning you,” Bailey says.

“Baby, if I wanted to torture you, it wouldn’t be with food.” I turn to smile at him before looking back at the road, not even pausing to watch his reaction. “Besides, we’re less than ten minutes from our final destination. And I’m going to make you close your eyes at the five-minute mark.”

“You’re too good at this secretive stuff,” he chuckles.

“No, this is called surprising someone, and it’s supposed to be fun,” I laugh with him.

“Yeah,” Bailey says with a heavy exhale. I’m not watching him while driving, but his voice sounds different. “I’m not so good with that.”

“I may have noticed.”

“Is it disappointing?” When I don’t readily respond, he adds, “With me being so friendly most of the time, some people get put-off. Even offended. It’s not personal though, I’m just...”

“It’s okay,” I say when he goes too long without finishing.

“It’s not you, but it’s you.” He groans. “That sounds awful.”

“Not judging. Go ahead and try again.”

Bailey takes a deep breath. “I like you a lot. And I’m a bit... guarded... so even admitting that much is a huge deal for me. It’s nothing you’ve done but... how I respond is because of you... and how much I like you.”

This man, I swear. He’s so sweet he could make a nun weep. “My turn.” With a steadying exhale, I collect my thoughts. “I have to ask. Is this like a trauma thing? Yes or no is sufficient, I don’t need details.”

“It doesn’t really matter how I got this way.”

“In that case, all you need to know is I like you a lot, too. And at the very least, I’d like us to be friends. You set the pace and go ahead and yell at me if I’m skirting a boundary, okay?”

“Okay,” he mumbles.

“Now close your eyes.” And I look over to confirm he has. “We’re almost there.”

I take the turnoff, and the car jostles a bit while we drive across the lawn to an available space. We got here early enough that there are plenty of great spots available. After parking the car, I say, “Go ahead and take a peek.”

“Oh my god,” Bailey exclaims. And the smile... not the Bailey smile. Not the shining and sweet expression I’ve seen so much. He’s so shocked, he doesn’t take the time to filter his reaction. His lips curve, but his mouth hangs open even as he turns to me. “I’ve always wanted to go to a drive-in.”

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“Excellent. Because I’ve got a 1950s date night at the drive-in theme going here.” I reach into the back and grab the bag, still nice and hot, and lay the options out on the dash. “We’ve got a split grilled hotdog, cheeseburger, hamburger, and grilled cheese. Oh, and this entire bag is fries for sharing.”

“Quite the variety,” he chuckles.

“Anything for you, baby. I got you the entire menu,” I chuckle with him. “However, what they lack in variety, I promise they make up for in taste.”

“And I can just pick whatever?”

“Yeah... that’s kinda the point of me buying one of everything.”

“What if I want it all?”

“You’re going to eat all this yourself?” And I really can’t tell if he’s teasing or not.

“Yup.” He smiles.

“Then I’ll happily eat some concessions instead. This place sells popcorn and plenty of other snacks. A wide variety of drinks, too.”

Bailey goes for the hamburger first and unfolds the tinfoil. “What are we seeing?”

“Double feature. Rom-com first, then a horror flick. But we can leave before the second if you want.”

The sun has already set, and the first movie should start in fifteen minutes or less. I have no idea why I assume Bailey won't like scary movies, but very few people have a neutral opinion of horror and he doesn't strike me as a fan. Then again, the idea of him curling into me to hide appeals to me way too much.

Bailey takes his first bite, and he hums from the sheer deliciousness of his burger. That's the entire reason I chose the place—I felt certain he'd like it. Turns out all that creeping on his social media paid off some.

“Worth being surprised, huh?” I tease.

He nods along, happily chewing. And I have to say, seeing him so content right now makes the entire evening for me. While chewing the last bite, he looks at the rest of the food set on the dash. “What's your favorite thing to get from there?”

“Trying to decide what to eat next?”

Bailey cackles and nods while rolling the empty wrapper into a ball.

“Cheeseburger.”

He shifts that closer to him. “Second favorite?”

“Grilled cheese.”

He steals that next and looks at what's left. “That leaves the hot dog.”

“I will gladly eat the hot dog. Honestly, the whole menu is good.”

“And I'm about to figure out how true that is since I will be eating all of this.” He steals the hot dog, too. “Starting with the cheeseburger.”

“You go right ahead.”

Bailey smiles again, and I recognize the smirk of being very pleased with himself. He picks up the cheeseburger and teases it closer to me again.

“You really can have it.”

“Oh, I know. My turn to torment you.” He makes a show of unwrapping it slowly and inhaling.

“Stuff yourself, if that’s what makes you happy.”

“Normally, it doesn’t.” He hands over the unwrapped cheeseburger and smiles so sweetly. Bless him, the innuendo went right over his head. And I continue to think this while he lovingly watches me take the first bite of my burger before leaning even closer and flicking his eyes up at me again. “I might like it if you do it, though.”

He’s trying to kill me. Either I will be the first man to die from sexual frustration, or he intended me to choke on that bite of burger. And that smile—nothing short of wicked now. This is exactly how Bailey keeps me on my toes. I have no doubt he knows exactly what he’s doing, but for the first time, I’m struggling to keep up with someone... and I fucking love it.

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Good thing we both thought to unbuckle shortly after parking, because the only thing in my way now is the center console, which I slam up so fast, I just may break it. The screen has begun playing ads, and it illuminates him just enough that I can watch Bailey's eyes widen when I grab hold of him. He panics at first, struggling in my grasp before freezing and going limp while I drag him closer to me. We're almost nose to nose yet his eyes, dilated in the low light, stay fixed on me.

"Bailey," I whisper. "Take a breath, baby."

He does exactly that, and once again, he sounds more aroused than anything else when I comb a hand through his curls.

"I want to stuff my cock in you and make you sit on it the whole movie." When my hand glides down his back to grab his ass, his hips reflexively swing away from my touch but against my body more. Once pressed even closer to me, I can feel his cock harden through his pants. "Think you can do that for me?"

Bailey doesn't say anything. He only takes another deep breath and drops his hands to start undoing my pants. Maybe I should've seen this coming, given how much he loves to tease, but I had him pegged for the indecisive and squirmy type. After all, he literally squirms whenever I try to touch him. My brain can't quite process what's happening and I'm waiting for the moment when I call his bluff and he rescinds. He doesn't. Heyanks my pants down just enough for my cock to spring out, then flicks his eyes back to me.

And this is exactly why I keep a bottle of lube in my car. Don't judge me. After I move my seat all the way back and recline more, we both shift around in the limited

space. I end up scooping an arm under his knees and I ease his jeans down just enough to stroke a finger between his cheeks while he's in my lap. Bailey's back leans more into my chest while his breaths come quicker.

"Relax, baby," I whisper in his ear. "We have so much time to kill."

Now, when it comes to sex, going slow is not at all something I enjoy. Unless I'm doing that specifically to torment someone, which is the case right now. The coming attractions begin, but I don't think Bailey even has his eyes open. So I take my time with him, stroking his hole with more and more lube until I can ease a finger in. And another. And another. I spend so long on fingering him, I have to pause a few times to stroke my cock for the slightest bit of relief. By the time the opening credits of the first movie finish, I'm dripping precum and ready to start.

"I'm not going to thrust," I say, unsure if I'm trying to promise him or to remind myself.

Bailey nods in acknowledgement, so I insert the tip of my cock and lower him onto me, easing deeper inch by inch. What feels like an eternity later, I'm all the way in and encased by his warmth. Bailey throws his head back, and I kiss the length of his neck hard enough to leave marks. His breathing picks up again, so I speak right against his skin.

"Watch the movie."

As the minutes tick by, my cock starts to soften intermittently until the slightest jolt from Bailey wakes it back up. Really, I can and will stay like this the entire time, until he's either begging me to fuck him or at least get him to come. Even though he struggles to relax, his squirming feels so fucking good.

By the time we're halfway through the movie, I've stroked and sucked about every

inch of him in reach, while he basks in my undivided attention. I've been working up to his cock, and I'm on the edge of my seat while I wait for the sound of frustrated pleasure. The second my hand's close to his balls, Bailey throws his hips back and I almost lose it between the sudden movement and the pitiful whine he lets out. I circle my hand to the inside of his thighs instead, and after a few seconds of feeling his skin shake before I try a second time, he slams his legs shut and jerks back again.

"Bailey." I drag his name out. "Sit still, baby."

"Or what?"

"Or I'll clamp down so hard on your floppy little cock you won't be getting off at all tonight." I slide my hands over the tops of his thighs, savoring the shudder the closer I move to the inside of his legs to pry them apart. "You're so tight that I'm going to come just from you wiggling around."

"Good," he huffs.

What?

Bailey grinds in my lap, slowly yet purposefully, and it feels so fucking amazing. My fingers dig into the flesh of his thighs, but his soft whimpering only makes it all the better for me. What the actual fuck.

"Bailey, I mean it. I'll edge you all fucking night and never let you come."

"I don't want to come." And he jerks his hips back while he softly pants. "I want you to come."

Oh, fuck. I may do just that if he keeps it up. He anticipates my hands moving and wraps his around my wrists, pinning my arms down at my side with ease. Oh, fuck.

Don't get me wrong, him holding me in place while he grinds on my cock feels amazing, but I'm not sure if it's enough—which means he succeeds in teasing me, again. Finally, I can't hold back the moan building in me and Bailey decides to release me. My hands seek out skin again and he turns his neck as best he can to find my lips and steal a kiss before separating our mouths with a wet smack.

“Make that sound for me again.” And in case he doesn't know which one, I knead the tops of his thighs.

He does, and it's perfect. The whimper of frustration and pleasure, only not the sound of someone whining to get off but begging for the pleasure to stop. My hands creep to his hips, pushing myself deeper and rocking him harder. When his hands fly up to stifle the sound that he makes—something that sounds dangerously close to a sob—I fucking lose it. I become semi-aware of myself doing my Bailey, Bailey, Baileychant in his ear until his body clenches like a fist—and he'd love nothing more than to slug me for getting him so close to coming on my cock.

“Come for me,” I rumble in his ear.

And he has the audacity to shake his head. I fucking love it.

“Yes, baby.” I nip at his neck until his breathing becomes uneven and curve my fingers down the perfect slope of his hips and stomach. Bailey slams backward into me while my fingers curl and uncurl to stroke the trail of hair leading to what I want most. “Do it for me.”

Bailey muffles himself so much all that escapes is a groan, but the rest is unmistakable. His back arches just like last time and he throws his head back more while he leans into me with twitching muscles. I'm really not so sure I've ever made anyone come so hard, and his continued whimpering while he literally rides out the pleasure milks every drop out of my cock. I may even forget how to breathe for a

moment in favor of coming with him instead.

Fuck. With a deep sigh, I kiss his neck one more time. “That wassofucking good. Have you ever gotten fucked that good in your life?”

Bailey shakes his head and pants, “I’ve never bottomed.”

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“Are all the bottoms fleeing to the city or something? Because there is a distinct shortage in an already limited pool of options out here.”

Bailey snorts a laugh but says nothing more on the subject. Then the end credits for the first movie begin to roll.

Chapter seventeen

Cas

Well, then. This is not at all going according to plan. After coming to terms with the idea that I will not be killing Will anytime soon, I need to go in search of an immediate outlet for my base urges before I get sloppy. That’s what I carved out my night to do. Sigh. What a mess.

I’ve seen him before at the farmer’s market and he’s never been subtle. He loves to flirt and has all but asked me out. So when I saw him by chance, sans wife, I took a chance. I know a sure thing when I come across it.

It takes time, and it takes effort, but not so much that the reward becomes overshadowed. One long shower later, I’m curled up in a nice clean outfit, including a shirt I stole from Will. As in, he likely doesn’t know I took it when I saw him, but it smells just like him and I need something to keep me from going berserk.

After spending as much time with Will as I have, I’ve come to the realization we should not work. We are too similar. He likes to top. I like to top. Yet, when I’m with him, I find myself bending to his will and I actually love it. He wants me all to

himself. I want him all to myself. Instead of our neurosis overcoming us, we rev each other up and feed off it. And then, there's the part of him I glimpsed long ago but readily dismissed. He's too much like me already, but I need to know exactly how much. I'm hoping Cas can get the truth out of him.

Purple Puppy:I've missed you, baby.

Purple Puppy:And I need you.

Purple Puppy:When can soon be right now?

Orchid Mantis:When I feel like it's going to be a good decision on my part.

Purple Puppy:As opposed to?

Orchid Mantis:Reckless. Maybe dangerous.

Purple Puppy:You make me seem so scary.

Oh, if only he knew.

Purple Puppy:I don't scare you, do I?

Orchid Mantis:No. Until now, we've been very compatible. What I need is reassurance that's going to extend to when we meet in person.

Purple Puppy:Okay. And what do I need to do to do that?

Orchid Mantis:Give me real honesty. Tell me everything you think I need to know and then some.

Purple Puppy:I'm not typing this out.

I'm about to call him on his shit when the phone rings in my hand. He really is more careful than I give him credit for sometimes.

"Hey," he says when I answer. Surprisingly, he sounds normal, but I've also never spoken to him this early in the day. "If this is about who's going to bottom, I swear I will if that's what it takes."

"No." I laugh. "This is more... I need you to give me a preview of what's going to happen."

"Baby." His voice unexpectedly softens, and that does something entirely new to me. "I won't do anything you don't want. I can't make promises, but I will always promise that much."

"And what will you do to me, consensually?"

"Ideally?"

"Sure."

"Everything you don't want me to do."

And fuck, that makes my hair stand on end.

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Will takes a deep breath and I'm starting to think the conversation alone is getting him going.

"And you still expect me to trust you." I try to sound irritated but hearing him even remotely aroused always has the same effect on me.

"Yes." His voice goes back to light and friendly. "You remember what you told me?"

I chuckle at an argument he's made before and I give him the same answer. "I've told you a lot."

"Let me put it this way. I will fuck you bloody if that's what I want. Is that messed up? Probably. I don't deny it, but I also don't fight it. I know what I want and what I want more than anything is knowing that you're letting me do it."

Good to know he's got some limits. Maybe even more than I can say for myself. Thinking of this must keep me quiet for too long because he fills the silence.

"Cas, I mean it. I'm probably always going to want to hurt you, but I would never do anything without saying so first. You got that, baby?"

"Yeah." I take a deep breath of pleasure at the very thought, recalling the last time I saw him. I've experienced enough to know he likes it rough, but that's not really the problem. Hell, I like killing guys, so I'm in no position to judge. What I need to know is that he can match what I've mastered: self-control.

The last time I saw him, I spent the night at his house after our date. Admittedly,

being alone with him and in a situation I potentially can't control always puts me on edge. It's a stupid move on my part. And I can't stop making those. Even if my decision-making ability has deteriorated, it's not as much of a problem as my self-control waning. Because when I had him alone in his bed, as nervous and vulnerable as he got me, I didn't feel that way once I swung a leg over him and straddled his lap. He gobbled up my kisses so greedily he either didn't notice or didn't care when I wrapped my hands around his neck, brushing my thumbs near his Adam's apple. It would've been so easy for me.

Remembering is enough to get me hard, only I can't say for sure anymore what excites me most—which is why I attempted to get one urge out of my system for now. I can always kill someone else. It won't be as good as killing Will, but it will satisfy me temporarily. I cannot enjoy sex with someone else. This has been a tried-and-true fact long before Will and I even met. Keeping him around solely for that reason seems to make more and more sense every day, but in the back of my mind, the promise I made to myself keeps resurfacing. I can kill him still. Just not yet. Not yet.

Soon.

Chapter eighteen

Will

I've been spoiled lately between an amazing night with Bailey on Sunday, followed by a sleepover with Jess on Monday. I've spoken to Cas every night since then and I'm dying for the moment he decides to take a leap of faith with me. Since I've got work early in the morning, I attempt to go to sleep early, but it's not happening when I keep thinking of Cas.

Nothing good is ever on TV this late. I grab my phone instead, and the local forum

for our small town has shared another article about another missing person, Jason Wilton. Not a local, but more than likely a second-homer who liked coming up for leaf peeping. I've seen him at the farmer's market before. Total closet case and obviously looking for a May-December romance. Comes with his wife, who either doesn't know or doesn't care that he stares at just about every young guy he crosses paths with while shopping. Probably skipped town with the first man he found who wanted a silver-haired Daddy. The guy wasn't terrible looking, so I doubt he had much of an issue.

I'm still staring at the photograph attached to the article when my phone vibrates in my hand. I've got an in-app message and I'm pleasantly surprised that Cas is awake still, too.

Orchid Mantis:Remember how I said soon?

Orchid Mantis:Soon is right now.

Purple Puppy:Please believe that in no way do I want to refuse, but is there any way I can get you to wait a little over twelve hours?

Orchid Mantis:You don't have anything going on after work?

Purple Puppy:I do.

Purple Puppy:A date.

Orchid Mantis:With who?

Purple Puppy:Not going to tell you that.

And I add a smiley so he can see I'm only teasing.

Purple Puppy:He's a nice guy. He won't mind if I reschedule.

Orchid Mantis:Cancel.

Well, that wakes my cock right the fuck up. I press my palm into the swelling bulge at the front of my boxers and watch the texting dots reappear.

Orchid Mantis:Will you do that? Tell him you're never going out with him again because there's someone else.

Purple Puppy:Yes. Of course, I would.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:03 pm

Orchid Mantis:Then do it.

Purple Puppy:Consider it done, baby.

I click off the screen and set my phone down on the mattress and roll over to sleep.

The next morning at the farmer's market is wicked cold. All the leaves changing into reds, oranges, and browns are proof enough that we don't have many mornings left at the market before we're done for the season. I head over to Bailey's stand as soon as I can, mostly because I know we need to talk. It's not the ideal time or place, but I don't want to wait until the last minute. He lights up when he sees me, but I struggle to return his enthusiasm. As soon as we're done unloading, I pull him off to the side and around his truck so we're not in the direct line of sight of anyone.

"I need to talk to you." I can't find the willpower to drop his hands, so I keep holding onto him while he gazes adoringly at me. Ugh. So sweet. So much so I almost don't think I can go through with this.

"What's up?" Bailey chirps.

"I need to cancel tonight."

"Okay." He shrugs it off and his smile has yet to falter. "Something come up?"

"Yeah, you could say that." Between deep breaths and reprimanding myself, I manage to get the rest out. "Listen, Bailey, I like you. Ireallylike you. Like I've had a crush on you since we met last year, but..."

“But...” And the shine is fading. Oh, my fucking heart.

“There’s this guy I’ve been talking to for a while now and... I think he wants to go all in. And if he does, I want it too.”

Bailey’s eyes turn down as he considers this, but otherwise his expression remains neutral. “You love him?”

“Yeah, I think maybe I do.”

“How about me?”

I can only shrug. “I don’t know. I could see it happening with us too, but this guy... I’ve wanted something with him for a while now. Maybe it works out with me and him, maybe it doesn’t. I’m not going to string you along in the meantime.”

“So, it’s not like... me and my...” He doesn’t bother to finish, but I don’t give him the chance.

I move my hands to cup his face instead, bringing his lips to mine. My heart races in my chest whenever Bailey’s involved, but Cas... I need to know if what I feel with Cas extends to the real world.

When I break our kiss, I keep my face close so I can stare into his eyes while stroking his cheeks. “No, baby. Probably the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do, but I’m not going to hurt you that way.”

Bailey grins ever so slightly before I let him go.

I take a few steps away, then turn back with one last question for him. “If I fuck things up with this guy, would you ever give me a second chance?”

“Don’t fuck it up.” And he smiles a Bailey smile this time before turning to continue working.

I walk back to the farm stand, where Jess is already setting up the first display. My stomach sinks so far, it could be below my knees. I want to believe I didn’t just make the biggest mistake of my life by walking away from a guy that I still want so very badly, and only because I want Cas. But what if Cas really is Jess? Are my emotions going to shift immediately? Because I do care about Jess, but I can see myself getting bored quickly and only hurting him in the long run.

“Hey, what are you doing tonight after the market ends?” Jess doesn’t even look away from the jars he’s stacking.

“I’m... I’ll be seeing someone tonight.”

“You’re fucking Bailey, aren’t you?”

“No. Well, I have, but no. It’s not Bailey.”

“Don’t lie to me.” And his voice gets extra prickly.

“I’m not. I... uh, actually, I just told him that we couldn’t go out again. Until I know where I stand. And I should probably say the same to you. I think that guy I met online is going to want more.”

“I want more,” Jess says with extra emphasis.

“I know.” Fuck, this is the worst conversation to have at the start of a shift. “That’s my point exactly. I need to want it, too. And until I meet this other guy and we figure things out, I’m not going to know what I want.”

“Because you want him.”

“Yeah,” I say with a sigh. “I have for a long time. I know you want us to have something, Jess, and sometimes I do, too. I’m always going to care about you and we’re always going to be friends. I just... I need to know where things are headed with this other guy first. Otherwise, I won’t be able to make any decisions.”

“Wow. You almost sound like a responsible adult.”

“Only almost?” I tease.

Jess resumes his task and doesn’t look at me when he huffs to himself. “Get back to work.”

The day passes quickly while we work, so I only have time to stop and think once most of the hustle and bustle of shoppers winds down. After everything’s packed up, I’ve got my phone out while I wait for Jess to be ready to leave. May as well message Cas and let him know I’m done so we can figure out the when and where.

Once I open the app, I see that he messaged me. What the fuck? I don’t remember getting any notifications. When I check the timestamp, I realize he messaged me early this morning. I must have passed out with the app open, so the messages went through and I never got a notification badge.

Orchid Mantis: You don’t really have to. Saying you would is enough.

Orchid Mantis: And I’m actually busy tonight so we’ll have to reschedule. I’ll be

seeing you real soon.

Purple Puppy: Too late.

And I tack on a displeased and sassy emoji because that's exactly how I'm feeling right now.

Purple Puppy: I'm starting to think all you really want is to fuck with me, dude.

Purple Puppy: I'm sure you don't give a damn, but I've had a crush on this other guy longer than I've even known you. And I dropped him like a hotpotato, maybe even hurt his feelings in the process. Just for a chance to be with you.

Purple Puppy: And I know I'm ranting now, but too bad. You asked me to do something. I did it. Now it's time for you to put up or shut up. I cut off the only other people who have given a damn about me. Either we are giving this a try, or I'll fuck right off and stop wasting your time.

With a huff, I close the app and shove my phone back in my pocket. This guy. He gets under my skin too easily. Enough for me to roll over and show my belly, if that's what'll appease him. It's not me. But I can't figure out how to pull back now. I'm in too deep and I'm willing to do too much just to have him.

By the time I'm home, I'm less pissy once I remove my shoes and walk to the living room so I can collapse on the couch. Let's see if Cas has decided to beg for my forgiveness. I doubt it. He's got me by the balls and he knows it. Fuck.

Once the app loads, I click on my messages and... our conversation is gone. Weird. Some kind of glitch? Maybe I left the screen open again and accidentally cleared out my messages. I've deleted whole apps before when I forgot to turn on the screen lock before pocketing my phone.

No reason to fret. All the usernames get randomly generated for each and every conversation. Meaning there is likely more than one Orchid Mantis floating around in the app at any given time. However, the developers were not entirely irresponsible in terms of anonymity. Every user also gets a numbered user ID upon joining, and that's listed on your profile for safety reasons—like in case you need to block someone or report a user or something. And I happen to have Cas's memorized in case of this exact instance. I enter his number in the friend search and...

User not found.

Well, obviously, I typed too quickly. I punch the number in the search bar again and...

User not found.

Okay, maybe it's time to panic a little. Cas and I never messaged outside the app at his insistence. I have no other way of getting a hold of him. Time to take this up a notch on the creeper level. Dig around for my tablet. Download the app. Register under a different email. Brand spanking new user ID. Good luck with blocking me now, asshole. We're too close to the finish line for you to walk away on me like this. Surely, he got pissed off after my tirade and blocked me. Once I apologize, all will be well.

After I enter his user number in the search, I'm already crafting the perfect apology while the little spinning wheel takes its time to load and...

User not found.

I can't believe it. I can't believe after all that he'd cut and run. No. That's not how this works.

Now, everyone reacts to rejection differently. Some people want to devour a pint of ice cream and a comfort movie while in their pajamas. Or a shoulder to cry on, who will lend an ear to their woes. I am the type who decides the night is young, and I have plenty of rage to release once I find someone to spite fuck. So, I'll go and do just that.

Chapter nineteen

Cas

Not soon. Tonight.

Chapter twenty

Will

Can't exactly go clubbing in a small town. And we're so small, we don't even have a bar—never mind a gay bar. We do have a bowling alley the next town over and a steakhouse, both of which the local barflies frequent to get their fix. I consider the steakhouse since I haven't had dinner, but going to a restaurant alone is too damn depressing. At the very least, the bowling alley has other entertainment that's less pathetic to be seen doing solo.

Jess winds up texting me before I step out the door, saying if I get stood up, he'll come over. Too sweet. Not in a good way. A tooth-achingly sweet gesture that's about as pathetic as drinking at a bowling alley after demolishing three separate prospects in rapid succession. That's got to be some kind of record.

Not only that, but Cas has done exactly this to me before. And every time Jess swoops in to save the day. I'm not falling for it again. Even if Jess isn't Cas... fuck, I suppose I'll never know now.

As soon as I open the heavy glass door, the sound of cracking pins and some kind of techno pop blasts over the speakers. All the lights are out except a few flashing colored ones. Sunday night laser bowling. How could I forget? Ugh.

I head to the bar on the other side of the lanes and grab an empty seat on a vinyl stool with padding as flat as a pancake. The noise carries over from the bowling area, but it's not as if the bartender needs to hear much. Only a couple of beers are on draft and she can easily figure out what I want to order from me simply pointing at the menu.

Stupid fucking laser bowling. All the teens come out, which means the bar is next to empty, and the adults who drift over this way don't stay. Instead, they head back to their dates or friends or whatever. I'm crinkling the greasy wax paper into a ball and accepting that I should've gone to the steakhouse instead of spending money to sit alone and drink shitty beer while eating an overpriced fry basket when—a hand on my back. I turn. It's Bailey. He's flashing his smile while keeping a hand on me, but I can't hear a damn thing he's saying while his lips move. I gesture to my ear and he slides his hand down to my arm, then tugs me toward the closest exit. Uh, okay.

I've already paid my bill, so I throw a tip on the counter and spring to my feet. The second we're outside, my hot breath hits the cold air and makes a perfect cloud while I exhale in annoyance at myself.

"I thought you had a date?" Yep, he goes there.

"So did I."

"I'm sorry." Bailey frowns and takes a step closer.

"It's okay." I take another breath, only much shakier this time. This is not okay. I'm not okay with this. It's only when I have to explain it to Bailey that the truth smacks me upside the head. "I may have overreacted and... well, he changed his mind."

"He'll come around, I'm sure."

"No." My bitter laugh sounds more like an unhinged cackle. "He, uh, basically, he cut all ties with me and I have no other way of getting in contact with him. We were supposed to meet in person today, but instead, I scared him off. For good this time."

"This time?"

“Yeah. He’s... well, you might get this. He’s really private, and he immediately backed off once he figured out who I was, because he worried I would do the same, eventually.”

“But you didn’t?”

“Hardly fucking matters now, does it?” I throw my hands up. “I’ll never get to know.”

“You’re really torn up about this,” Bailey says, another frown marring his features.

“Yeah.” I hold his gaze. “I really liked you. For even longer than I liked this other guy. But... I don’t know. Feels like I’ve been holding out for this guy for weeks and he finally decided what he wanted, and we were going to give it a go in the real world. You were like... something I never expected to happen. I spent the better part of the year thinking you didn’t even know my name. So when I finally had the opportunity to get closer, I jumped at the chance. But I never meant for things to play out this way, Bailey. And I feel like shit after you put yourself out there for me.”

“It’s okay.” He smiles, only barely. “I take it you don’t have any plans?”

“No.”

“Well, just so happens my date canceled on me, too.” My face flushes and he snickers. “Let’s get out of here.”

“And go where?”

“Movie?”

I pull out my phone to look at the clock, then quickly check the showtimes online.

“The next one isn’t for another forty-five minutes or so. We’ll have to hang around and wait a bit.”

“Come back to my place.”

I almost think I don’t hear him right.

“I’ve got all the good streaming apps,” he says, getting quieter with each word.

“Sure. Yes. Of course,” I babble. “And listen, I meant what I said about wanting to be friends. I know I haven’t been very...friendly, but if one good thing can come out of this mess, I want that to be us becoming friends. Okay?”

“Sounds good to me.”

After we both walk to our vehicles, I follow Bailey out to his place. I’ve never actually seen the house aside from pictures. That’s how far back from the road his home is set on the property. After a slightly bumpy and twisty ride down a driveway long enough to be a private road, we reach our destination. He parks in the pebble driveway near the front porch and there’s more than enough space to leave my vehicle beside his.

“Nice place,” I say upon exiting my car. He’s got a two-story farmhouse that’s definitely older than both of us combined, but in great shape still.

Bailey thanks me and I do not mention the whole “you had me drop you at a different address last time” bit. Bringing me here is clearly a huge leap of faith on his part, and I’m not going to make him even more nervous. We climb creaking wooden steps to a screen door and Bailey walks right in to an open floor plan. He’s got a modern farmhouse meets log cabin interior. Except the furnishing appears more logical and less homey, as if intentionally following a stylish trend.

“Didn’t realize the honey business was so lucrative,” I mumble.

“It’s not. Pays the bills, though.” Bailey takes his coat off and hangs it by the door.

“That’s such a rich person thing to say.”

“Not rich. I’m—”

“I swear, if you say comfortable, I’m slugging you.” I laugh and he chuckles with me.

“Okay. I’ll be upfront. I got lucky. A young couple bit off more than they could chew, and halfway through renovations they moved back to the city. Bank foreclosed and I got this place for a steal. But I also worked my ass off from the time I was thirteen and hoarded about every penny of it for this to happen.”

I hum and take off my shoes by the door and follow him over to a couch set in front of a wide flatscreen. “So, what do you want to watch?” Bailey asks while he grabs the remote.

“There’s a new thriller streaming that I wanted to see.” Actually, horror, but I’m not sure he will agree if I say so. We spent the entirety of the last one making out, so I never got to enjoy him curling into me out of fear. I’m despicable, I know.

“Okay,” Bailey readily agrees.

“And I’ve got another one of those ideas,” I say with a smile, eyeing all the furniture he has to divide the space.

“Oh?” Bailey chuckles. “Am I allowed to know this time, or do I have to endure another surprise?”

“Was the last one so bad?”

“No.” He smiles. “I trust you.”

“Good, but I’ll tell you anyway, because I’ll need help.” I take his hand in mine.

“Any chance you’d want to build a blanket fort?”

Bailey suppresses his surprise and still fails terribly to convince me when he says,

“What... uh... what makes you think I’d want to do something like that?”

“Forts are fun.” I shrug. “Not to mention cozy. And sometimes romantic.”

“And make popcorn?”

“Sure! Why not?” I thread our fingers together while gazing into his eyes, and he lights up brighter than a galaxy of stars. I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of seeing Bailey happy. Likereally and truly happy and not just a charismatic and charming customer-service type façade he puts on all the time. The kind of happiness where he doesn’t stop to think about it or how he should react.

Over the next hour, we get building. Bailey drags out a mattress pad for the floor and uses some extra thick blankets for even more padding. He gives me a whole stack of sheets and clips to construct the sides and roofing. Soon we’ve got an excellent fort made, with enough space for both of us to comfortably sit or even lie down if we prefer. Bailey goes to the kitchen to make popcorn on the stove with real butter while I lean back against some pillows we brought inside our cozy hideaway and flick through the new releases. The only light comes from the television until Bailey’s silhouette cuts across the screen. He sets a large bowl down first, then crawls in the fort to snuggle beside me. Oh boy. I hand over the remote and he presses play without any reservations before tossing it down between us.

Maybe thirty minutes into the movie, when it’s undeniable we’re watching a horror flick, I get the reaction from him that I’d hoped for. Bailey’s arm coils around my waist while he presses himself into me, not hiding his face but burying himself closer for security. I dip a hand beneath the hem of his shirt, comforting him while gently tracing his spine with my fingers. A small sigh escapes and he stays relaxed, which is a pleasant surprise, considering he’s proved himself to be hit or miss with physical contact. Or maybe I should say, he can’t always decide if he wants to agree with his body or keep fighting the pleasure he’s feeling. And tonight, he’s agreeable.

Bailey eases into my touch and sinks closer and closer until his lips brush my neck. Maybe he really is hiding now. I'm about to ask him if he's okay when I realize how close my hand is to the gap at the back of his jeans. I'm expecting a whimper when I plunge my hand inside. His body snaps closer to me as usual, except he's rock hard now and the sound he emits is more of a groan of sexual frustration than anything else. His hips rock against me again, and he sighs right in my ear from the friction, making my cock swell, too.

Without an exchange of words, Bailey pivots and swings a leg over me. His hips roll against me with sudden urgency while he brings his lips to mine. All of that feels impossibly good: having him so close, his tongue probing my mouth, and my cock grinding at the rigid bulge at the front of his jeans. The desire igniting in him plays out like the stuff of my fantasies.

Bailey gets harder with each thrust of his pelvis against me until he works himself up so much he pants into the sliver of space between our lips. His fingers creep up to my nape, curling inward when he finds nothing to grab then settling on either side of my neck. A thumb strokes up my throat from my clavicle, and all of a sudden, I've never wanted anything as badly as I've wanted to fuck Bailey. He whimpers in the way I love so much when I grab a tight fistful of his hair, sending shivers of excitement through us both. He's always had that effect on me. And now that I have this much of him, I only want more. Maybe Bailey has wanted more, too.

Bailey tears at my clothes and I'm more than happy to oblige, as is he when I'm fumbling with his belt. I'm about to ask if we should head to the bedroom when I decide I can't even wait that long. Floor will do.

As soon as I get his jeans off, I nudge him back onto the padding and blankets beneath us, then bury my face between his thighs. His back instantly arches in response, but he keeps his legs open for me this time. I want to lick every bit of him and then some, until he's writhing for more. His thighs jump when I wrap a hand

around each one, almost the way someone does when ticklish. Instead of more squirming, he settles momentarily before releasing a sharp breath when I drag my tongue across his hole.

Just when I'm internally lamenting a lack of lube potentially limiting our options, Bailey claws toward his pants then gives up and frantically points. I take the hint and reach his jeans for him and—would you look at that. Travel size lube stashed in a front pocket. Someone wants to getfucked, and he came prepared.

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Once I'm shoving fingers in him, he's eerily quiet. Not protesting, but only barely panting the entire time. I've never taken so much time fingering someone, and it's only because I want him collapsing into pleasure instead of fighting it. My finger grazes the most sensitive areas inside him, but he doesn't give me more than a needy whine. Okay, not going to worry about that. Can't expect everyone to be a screamer, and the times we've been together he's never been loud.

"Can I fuck you, Bailey?" I am really hoping the answer is yes, considering the point we're at.

"Yes," he whispers. "Please."

Normally, I'd just fucking go. Fuck him to the point of tears and then some. But it's Bailey. So I'm doing everything in my power to suppress the urge to push him past his limits, because that's almost always what I want. Instead, I try to be... gentler. Not gentle per se, but my equivalent: going slower and moving more carefully. His soft panting picks up while I tease him with the tip of my cock, but there are no complaints when I ease past the resistance of his body. Slowly, I bury my shaft all the way into him inch by inch while he's gasping. Everything seems good until a few thrusts in when I lower myself down against him. Bailey bucks his hips and squirms against me like he wants to get away. And I'm starting to worry he's not into it. But fuck me and my fucked-up brain, because him struggling so much under me only makes it better for me.

"Bailey, breathe—" I whisper.

But I don't get a chance to spit the rest of my comforting words out. Bailey's about

the same size as me—so not huge but not lacking muscle either—and yet, damn me for underestimating him still. He clamps down on me and throws us sideways. Before I can even register what he’s doing, Bailey wrestles me onto my back and sits with his legs on either side of me. I’ve never really had the tables turned on me, and the unexpected outcome is a raging fear boner.

Despite the arousal, I react close to the same way as he did, thrashing to get out from under him while he sits on me like an expert bull rider refusing to be thrown. Until Bailey tires of my fighting, and swings his hand back to smack me across the face so hard my ears ring and... that really shouldn’t excite me even more, but does it ever send white-hot desire through my veins. I’m too stunned to do anything more than stare up at him. Bailey simply smirks down at me, only one half of his face illuminated by the soft glow of the television.

His hand moves back to stroke my shaft with one tortuously slow pull before lining up and shifting backward onto my cock again. My mouth is still hanging open once he’s riding me like our lives depend on it. Then both his hands slide up my chest, reuniting near my neck before his thumbs simultaneously graze my throat again. Bailey’s panting builds harder and faster than ever before while he hovers above me until he moves one hand to drop his weight. He leans his face down to mine, kissing me frantically and then...

A single soft moan slips past his lips and right into my ear like he’s planting it there. I’ve never heard him moan before. And that’s all I need for the realization I should’ve had long ago to come crashing into me.

It’s him.

“Oh, fuck. Cas,” I gasp.

He moans harder at the sound of his name, and that’s all the confirmation I need.

With renewed fervor, I kiss his shaking lips until he pulls away and sits upright again. Clearly, we need to work on a compromise. I don't want him so far away from me and he obviously doesn't want to be under me. We can and will make this work, so help me.

With my hands on his hips, I shift him back farther and sit up, then throw him off my lap altogether. He comes right back, but doesn't fight when I clamp onto his arm and twist to get him to turn his back to my chest. Cas hooks an arm around the back of my neck and squats back on top of me, and I wrap my free hand under his thigh to keep him there. We're pressed so close his entire body drags against mine when he moves, and I can kiss him the entire time. My other hand no longer needs to pin him in place, so I brush across his torso, since I'm content to let him treat me like a warm dildo. He's so into this and for once, that's all I need.

So much so, when I hear the telltale moans of him getting close to coming, my cock recognizes a sound it knows all too well and twitches while still in him. Our mouths break apart while we're breathing hard but I still manage to whisper, "I'm so close. Take me with you."

And if that isn't the most beautiful sight I've ever seen: him glistening slightly from beads of sweat and in sheer bliss while fucking himself with my cock—and moaning my name the entire time. When his hole clenches down on my cock, he's got me groaning his name on repeat, too.

Right when my orgasm hits, his head throws all the way back and spurts of cum erupt from his cock to cover him. Does it ever feel amazing to have my pulsing cock in him, and to see him come so hard from a good, rough fuck and nothing more. Best of all, the man leaning back against me is most certainly Cas.

"You sneaky fucker," I say, setting his leg down and moving to ruffle my hand through his perfect hair.

“Are you surprised?” His ragged breathing interrupts his question and I can’t believe I didn’t hear the similarity sooner.

“I don’t know,” I say. “All I know is it feels too good to be true.”

He snorts.

“Baby, you don’t even know. I was obsessed with a guy who didn’t even notice me, until I found the perfect guy and moved on, only to pull my crush finally and... now they’re literally the same person.”

“I noticed you.” His thick voice drips across me while he speaks right in my ear. “And I wanted you.”

“Then why didn’t you...” I can’t finish that thought when the question seems foolish when spoken. Between what he’s told me and what I’ve witnessed firsthand, I can see how dating may be an issue for him.

“Even after you admitted you liked me, I wasn’t so sure you liked Bailey. I thought so, but I wasn’t completely sure and I don’t like unknowns,” he says.

“That’s another thing,” I exclaim. “How the hell does one get Cas out of Bailey? It’s almost as bad as getting Dick out of Richard.”

“Well, that... uh...” He blushes a bit. “Bailey is my middle name and what I use professionally. Casper is my legal first name.”

“Well, Bailey Beedoeshave a certain ring to it.” I sigh. “And I wouldn’t blame you for not wanting to be totally honest right away.”

“Everything I told you has been true.” He shifts to rest his head on my shoulder while

still holding on to me. “But there’s still a lot you don’t know.”

“That’s okay,” I whisper, kissing his head. “Plenty of time to figure more out.”

“Is there?” He snorts again.

Something about his attitude irks me, so I ease him back onto the floor and swiftly pin him under me so we’re nose to nose. “I mean it. There’s no getting rid of me now. Not when I finally have what I want. You’re mine, baby.”

“Sounds like someone’s fallen in love,” he says with a smirk.

“No. You fucking came along and tripped me.”

I claim his lips in a kiss again, savoring the sound of him moaning into my mouth. Seems like now that I know who he is, he’s not bothering to hold back. Neither am I. With him right where I want him, I kiss down his neck and leave a trail of marks, all while slowly grinding my hips into his so our cocks brush. He reacts better to the friction than he ever has to being touched, but I still pull that sweet, tortured sound out of him.

“Fuck,” he whimpers.

Yep. Perfect. Almost as if he were made for me.

Chapter twenty-one

Cas

Itell myself the night is young. There is still time. I can change my mind. Never before have I felt the need to talk myself into what I think I want. Now all I need to

do is admit to myself what I want has changed.

Going on that first date with Will is a mistake I can't take back. I know—hindsight and all that. For some reason, I convince myself that because I'm not normal, I really can get someone out of my system. And for the past few weeks, all I've been thinking about is meeting Will so he can dick me down. Once that happens, I'll be able to decide if it wasn't so great that I need to keep him around, or that once is enough for me. And I am incredibly wrong about both.

Twelve hours after bringing him home, and we've done little more than have sex repeatedly then sleep, only to wake and start all over again. We haven't even left the fort, but sleeping on the floor isn't bad at all with the thin mattress and thick blankets beneath us. I still don't think I can pry myself upright after lying down for so long. My body feels as if moss and grass have grown over me and I don't have the strength to rip up the roots of the overgrowth just so I can move. I am sore, and exhausted, and I tell myself those two things are what's kept Will alive. I can't be bothered to do anything more than lie here right now.

"I have the whole day off," Will whispers before planting a kiss on my temple. His fingers curl at the lowest point of my back, then he smirks when I groan and sink further down next to him.

"I should get up though," I grumble.

"Should. Not must," he teases.

Will's right. I check the bees twice a day, literally just walk the property and look for any potential problems around the hives. And this time of year, I make sure everyone has fresh water and something to eat, just in case. The bees aren't going to know or care if I go out later, and really, I'm a lot more attentive than necessary. Most hives can go up to two weeks without any human interference.

“How about a compromise, hmm?” Will rolls and takes one of my hands in his. “We get up. We bathe. I’ll feed you. You get to feel productive.”

“How is that a compromise?”

“After that, you’re allmine.”

I roll my eyes, but he’s managed to make me smile. Which is weird, because normally that’s a practiced gesture, but I don’t even have to think about it this time. So much falls into place naturally with Will and I don’t get it.

Will’s unabashedly staring at my cock while his hand glides down the trail of hair below my navel. Try as I may, I end up twitching and he stops, stroking upward to my abs instead.

“You really don’t like that, huh?” Will mumbles. He’s watching me but also seems to be deep in thought while speaking.

“Not really, no.”

“Why?”

I shrug, since I can’t really say. Maybe I’ve got fucked-up nerve endings, or it’s something psychological, or I’m truly abnormal in every sense.

“You really like being touched, though.” He runs a hand through my hair as if to prove his point and fuck him, because I move my head to follow the path of his hand as he does. “And you definitely enjoy friction on your cock. I bet you’d get off from a good frot.”

“Maybe.” I won’t hold my breath, but he’s made miracles happen before.

“What don’t you like about it?”

“It’s... you know how sometimes a light touch is pleasant, and other times it tickles and makes you shiver? It’s like that, only I get the overstimulated feeling most of the time. And it doesn’t bother me when I’m doing the touching because it’s more like trying to tickle myself. The downside being, it doesn’t often feel good enough to orgasm, either. I’ve got to be really turned on, preferably fucking something. Or someone. Still no guarantee.”

“Mmmmmm, then you must’ve been extremely turned on last night.”

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Yes. Not saying it aloud, but yes, I don't think I've ever been as horny in my entire life as I was last night. I literally had Will right where I wanted him, when what I wanted changed for the first time ever. All the soreness and grogginess today is so worth it because until I met Will, I had given up on enjoying sex, never mind coming multiple times in a single night.

“And you thought being bored out of your mind made you a good top.” Will moves on to tracing up my throat to my chin. “I did say I'd turn you into a bottom even if it killed me.”

I roll my eyes. Maybe he's onto something here, but this feels like the gay statement all over again. Not sure it counts if I've never considered it before and I never would again. Not for anyone else, that is.

“You get what you get.”

“I've never met anyone so committed to coming hands free. Makes you the perfect bottom.” His lips curl into a mischievous smile.

I throw a leg over him and trap him closer to me. When he moves to set his hand on my thigh, I smack him away.

“And a bratty bottom, too. I should start calling you BB instead of baby.”

“You are so ridiculous,” I laugh.

“Coming from the man who called me PP. At least I made it cute.” He pulls my chin

to his face and plants a kiss on my lips.

“You’re making me sound obnoxious.”

“You kind of are.” He creeps his hand up my leg, all while staring at me. “You’re so defiant, you’d rather deny yourself what you want, so long as it means not giving me what I want, too.”

That may be accurate, but we’re not going there right now. “What do you think I want right now?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Will teases. He runs his hand along my side and smiles when my skin shudders. “I can tell you what’s going to happen, though.”

“What’s that, then?”

“We are going to keep doing this thing and be together. And you are going to give me everything I want.”

“Someone sounds confident,” I chuckle. And I’ll admit, it’s somewhat endearing when I could choke the life right out of him if I could be bothered to try. I just don’t want to yet.

“I’ve already won, baby. I got you.” He’s got a sly grin while he speaks, bringing his lips only a breath away from mine. “Just a matter of time before I get the rest.”

We actually manage to leave the fort later that morning. Not right away, because Will is forever determined to love on me and I don’t hate it. If anything, I like it so much more than I’d ever want to admit. Not only the kissing, but the constant petting and holding on to one part of me or another. The man constantly overwhelms me in every sense of the word.

And maybe that's because the slightest wave of astonishment washes over me when what I want changes again. Will unknowingly calms me right down and I tell myself what I have been for the last few weeks. I can change my mind at any time in either direction. Except, the last few times that urge appeared, I didn't want Will. Going this long has left me as desperate as when you're so horny you're about ready to fuck anyone, but you still have some set of preferences. Yet even when Will is right in front of me, and I feel myself itching to give his throat a hand necklace, my brain skips over the idea as if I've somehow lost interest. Maybe I have. I like how Will treats me like no one else exists in his world. Maybe even more so than my default method for achieving that feeling in the past. What the fuck.

We head to my bathroom right after and Will lets out a low whistle that echoes off the walls. Okay, I admit, it's a really nice bathroom. I'm weirdly specific about a lot, and this is one of those things. I made sure when I remodeled that I started with the bathroom because if I ran out of money I wanted this done even more than the kitchen or bedrooms.

Giant shower, with multiple shower heads to accommodate standing or sitting. Giant window that takes up the entire wall because it's my fucking property. No one's seeing me naked but the wildlife and they don't give a damn. A large square tub made of natural stone running the length of the window and encased in the plank floor, making it accessible with a set of stairs.

"Nice onsen."

Clearly, I make some kind of expression because Will scoffs at me.

"What? I told you I'm cultured. I know an onsen when I see one."

"Yeah, I just, uh..." And I don't even know how to communicate that I honestly believed he wouldn't have the slightest clue what I was going for here, never mind

the actual word.

“I get it. You think I’m stupid.”

“No,” I quickly disagree.

“It’s okay. It’s the good looks. Doesn’t seem fair to be this attractive and intelligent.”
He winks.

Fucking tease.

I start the water for the tub first, then we rinse off all the yuck of sweat and sex in the shower before walking over, still dripping and cool, to climb into the scalding hot water. So nice. And of course, because it’s Will, he hardly has a hand off me the entire time. And because it’s me, I bask in the constant attention.

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“Hell yes, the water is lava,” Will says when he climbs in after me. He lets out a pleased sigh. “I swear, you only get more perfect with each passing moment.”

I snort and shake my head. Oh, if only he knew. And he never will. Until I change my mind, and then it will be too late for him, anyway.

“C’mere, baby.” Will opens up his arms and I slosh through the water over to him. “It’s cute how you get impressed so easily.”

“I’m not impressed,” I grumble. Maybe a smidge. Not admitting it.

“Then impress me. Tell me something.”

“About what?”

“Anything. Any kind of weird little trivia that comes to mind. Maybe some quirky shit from when you were a kid. Like right upuntil I was a preteen, I used to find a way to peel everything I ate.”

I shrug.

“Aw, c’mon.”

“I... don’t know.”

“How do you not know?”

I'd repeat myself, but rather than risking an infinite loop of questions, I give him the best answer I can. "It's sort of... not there."

"Like, you can't remember your childhood?"

I shrug again. "That implies I forgot. It feels more like it never happened. It's just... blank."

"Shit," he mumbles. After a minute or so of holding onto me and stroking my arm, he changes the subject. "Tell me something about bees."

"You don't want to hear that," I chuckle to myself.

"Yes, I do."

"No, you—"

"I do," he says with the forceful voice that never fails to send a shiver through me. "I like how excited you get about the stuff that interests you."

Well, that's embarrassing enough for me to keep my mouth shut.

"Anything." He softens right back to a whisper before kissing my neck once and resuming his affectionate stroking up to my shoulders.

"Okay." Probably going to regret this. No one cares to hear about this shit. Ever. I suppose Will is the type who needs to learn the hard way. "Nothing keeps farmed bees in manmade hives. They choose to stay."

"Why is that?"

“No one really knows. They could leave and make their own hive, but they don’t. Maybe they realize that if they are willing to make a sacrifice, they can stay somewhere safer. Someone will take care of them. You’re like... their god.”

“I can see why that might appeal to someone.”

I huff.

“What? I can barely motivate myself enough to pay my bills on time. I’d make a shitty higher entity to the legion who depended on me. You’re clearly more responsible.”

“You make it sound as if I’m the only thing standing between life and death for mostly self-sufficient animals. I think you could handle it.”

“Nope. I’ve only got enough in me to take care of one other person, but do a really, really good job at it.” And if there were any doubt at all in my mind what he meant, he kisses the top of my head.

Okay. Well. That was kind of sweet, but I can’t be fawning all over him and maintaining this level of interest. I need to pull back some. If I continue being nothing but honest with him, I’ll risk telling him everything.

Chapter twenty-two

Will

“What?” Cas huffs.

He does a great job of acting displeased. But he has tells. And I am finding more and more each time I’m with him. I kinda love it. Both that I can see through him and how much he enjoys himself around me.

“You look so cute right now,” I sigh.

He squints as if I’m a crazy person, and maybe I sorta am, but I can’t help it. I am so fucking in over my head with this man and I would do anything for him.

“I’m only eating pancakes, Will.”

“I know. But you’re so cute while you do it. Especially since I made those pancakes just for you.”

Cas smirks and stabs another piece. “You just like seeing me stuff my mouth with something of yours.” And then he does just that, shoving the fork past his lips.

Fuck. Me.

Perfect man. I’d make him my sugar daddy, only we’ve established he’s younger. He’s clearly better off, though. Mr.Comfortable lives in a half-a-million-dollar home,

which is worth six times that when taking into account all the other buildings and property. I know, because I've seen his home estimate on real estate websites, and the surrounding houses.

And he has got a nice fucking kitchen but with like nothing in it. Someone is clearly a minimalist and doesn't cook for shit, either. Likely he can, since he made the popcorn. Yet so much of the house seems barren. Where the fuck are the spices, my dude?

Thankfully, dutifully caring for my man includes impressing him with my abilities. Not that I'm a stellar chef, but when you're broke as fuck and everything you can afford tastes like shit, you learn really fast how to make it taste as good as possible while still coming in under budget.

Unsurprisingly, Cas has a lot more of one item that I consider humanly necessary. Honey. Very obviously made by him and not only here for storage. He says he mostly uses this area as a test kitchen for the various new products he imagines, so while it's all technically edible, it's meant for various purposes.

And then, there's the honey shrine. I don't know what else to call it. It's not a flickering candle with dripping wax and a creepy portrait at the center kind of shrine. I'm not sure what else to call a shelf with rows of perfectly spaced and individually labeled jars. All honey and nothing else.

"Honey never goes bad. Not if you take care of it."

Cas has caught me staring and the poor guy struggles enough as it is. I don't want him to think it's weird. Eccentric? Sure. But I stand by what I said. Anyone who makes someone else feel bad about their interests is an asshole.

"Kinda like relationships." I catch his eye and he smiles.

“I suppose.” His temporary amusement fades and he starts pushing his food around. “That’s also why I don’t just give honey away. Though I do make special ones, sometimes.”

“Like the ones you gave me?”

“No.” He sighs. “Not premium batches. More like intentionally crafted. Each one for a specific person.”

“Someone you care about?”

“Yeah.” And his eyes flick over to his honey shrine, then back to me.

“Where’s my custom honey?”

He chuckles at my wide smile and shakes his head. “None for you.”

“Rude. I earned it.”

“Not yet.” He breathes an even deeper sigh and I can’t tell if he’s irritated with me or what. “Will, where do you think all these hypothetical people are now?”

I shrug.

“They’re not here, are they?”

“Cas,” I say when the realization hits me.

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He takes another heavy sigh and goes back to stabbing his food. “If you fuck me over, I’ll make some in your honor. Kinda hoping it doesn’t come to that.”

“It won’t.”

And he rolls his eyes.

“I’m telling you. I wasn’t kidding when I said you’re mine now. If you want to get rid of me, you’re going to have to kill me. Until then, I own you, baby.”

Now, that makes him smile.

At the same time, I can’t help thinking about one of the first things he told me. “What happened to your last boyfriend?”

“He died.”

“I know. How?”

“Henri was murdered.”

Well, shit. Don’t I feel like the biggest asshole now, especially after the joke I just made. So even though I want to ask when and where and all sorts of details, I keep my trap shut. No wonder the poor guy is so paranoid about letting people in.

I gesture for him to come here and he does, straddling my lap with his feet on the floor. Cas reminds me of an animal that got hit one too many times, who’ll bump up

against your hand for affection then flinch from the contact if you move too suddenly. He eases into my touch when I wrap my arms around him, and I have to say, gaining his trust bit by bit feels so much more rewarding. There's still the whine and the automatic roll of his hips when I plunge my hand down the back of his shorts, but the rest of him doesn't pull away. He buries himself deeper against me, panting against my lips while our faces almost touch until he can't take me rubbing and grabbing his ass anymore. Cas steals a kiss, humming with pleasure against my mouth. His lips taste so sweet from breakfast. Almost as sweet as him.

I get to spend the entire day with Cas, which is amazing. Is that too much too soon? Probably. But I'm a possessive fuck who wants to dominate everything about him, including his time, and he loves the attention. Like I said, we're made for each other.

After breakfast, we retreat to his bedroom, which is as impressive as the rest of his house. Even more impressive is how I resist pinning him to the bed and fucking him the minute we enter, because all I can think about is the nights he took my calls while in this very room. Most impressive is how he winds up being the one to climb on top of me the second he gets me on his bed.

Getting me horny is a dangerous thing. And while I'm sure the state he's in isn't unbearable, he's got to be sore today. The last thing I should do is fuck him, least of all the way I want to. However, I very much get the sense he'll let me if I try. The reason being, it's not what he wants the least. The last thing he wants is me touching his cock, so guess what we'll be doing?

With Cas still perched on top of me, I wrap my hands around his hips, which snap in my direction. Seeing a guy get turned on is always sexy, but with Cas, knowing that's wholly dependent on me and nothing else makes my cock swell.

"What have you got for toys?" I whisper.

“Why?” Cas sounds amused, but he’s also not jumping off my lap and running.

“I’ve got an idea.” He rolls his eyes, but before he can say more, I cut him off. “Trust me.”

Cas shifts begrudgingly, but he points to the nightstand, anyway. I can reach from here. Good to know he’ll let me rifle around in his drawers. Not that I really need to because the guy is organized, which really doesn’t come as a huge surprise but it’s still funny to think of someone being that anal.

There isn’t much in here but I don’t need variety. I know what I’m looking for and I find it. First, lube. Cas raises a brow, and he’s laughing at me when I drizzle it down his shaft like I’m saucing a hotdog. And since he’s plopped back down to perch on top of me, I drip quite a bit onto myself. A small sacrifice.

“How turned on are you?” I ask him.

“Enough.” Such a brat.

“Enough to fuck something?” And before he can respond, I slide the fleshy tube over his cock and hold it there.

It appears I’ve taken him off guard, but still in a good way. Cas gasps from the immediate pleasure, bucking back to the few slow strokes I’ve given him. I figure the toy would be a good compromise, since he can’t feel my hand on him even if I’m the one holding it. He leans even more into me while he thrusts forward, simultaneously letting his head roll back.

“Does it feel good, baby?” I ask, despite knowing the obvious answer.

Cas simply nods, and he’s already begun moaning.

“Then let me stick mine in, too.”

His head snaps back forward, visually digesting what I’ve said.

“You’ll only feel my cock on yours,” I whisper. “Can you do that for me, baby?”

Cas drops down lower and smirks with his face right above mine. “I’m not moving from here.”

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“You will if I want you to.” I take his chin and pull him closer for a kiss. “But I don’t.”

His only response is another moan when I slam the toy back toward his pelvis before pulling it forward again and lining up my cock. As soon as I push into the tight space with him, his hips lift completely off me for the briefest moment, but he stays put otherwise. Which means I get to enjoy his legs shaking so hard he’s practically vibrating atop me—all while he pants.

Cas swoops down again, bringing his mouth to mine and wasting no time at all. His tongue slides along my lips and I let him right in, so he’s dipping into my mouth as soon as he starts thrusting. And since he’s enjoying this way more than I could’ve hoped, I push back with the toy and glide against our cocks together. Cas shivers and whines to the point it’s almost impossible to tell if he’s enjoying himself or not. I make the next stroke tortuously slow for me, but Cas moans hard before claiming my mouth again.

All I have to do next is grab a fistful of his hair in my other hand for his muscles to begin to twitch. He’s so close already. With a few more strokes, his moans shift into a groan... then a growl. He stops moving and plunks his head down beside mine with an aggravated sigh. Someone’s not happy. I pull his face back to mine and whisper his name. He looks right at me.

“I’m supposed to be the one who gets to edge you, brat. Stop stealing my job,” I tease.

He snorts, but he smiles before he hangs his head back down.

Uh, nope. I rip his face right back up and I'll hold him there if that's what it takes to get him to look at me. I swear, this man has tapped into a well of patience I couldn't have even begun to fathom going this deep. Most people get off so easily, so I don't feel bad at all about getting my way. With Cas, I'm tormenting him theentiretime and I know it. Yet without me, there's no relief either. It's an insane amount of control to have over a person.

I thrust up against him rather than move my hand. "That feels so good, baby," I whisper. "Your cock against mine. Just like I wanted."

Cas pants and his rigid shaft brushes even more against mine.

"Move with me. Now."

Goosebumps erupt across his skin and he moans hard from my next thrust, which brings me dangerously close to the edge. Still, he rocks with me. Slowly at first, then faster while actually thrusting. Once he gets shaky again, I start slamming the toy back over our cocks and he lets out that whimper my fucked-up brain adores.

"Cas, look at me," I say. As soon as his gaze focuses on me again, he shudders and I gasp in return. "Do you want it, baby?"

"Yes, please," he chokes.

"Then I don't care if you don't like it."

And just in case he doesn't know what I mean, I move my hand even faster. Cas immediately whines and lifts, receding from the pleasure like one would from pain. Maybe I should keep a hand in his hair, but instead I take the chance and caress the length of his body to his hip, then circle back to trace his spine. Cas leans into my touch, but when I cup his ass, he whimpers enough to make me regret not fucking

him. I dig my hand into his skin and cling tight, pulling him even more toward me with each thrust, just like when we're fucking, which is exactly what I'm thinking about while using the toy.

I can feel myself right there, and it's taking more out of me to hold back than let go right now, but I don't want to give. Maybe that makes me stubborn, too. Rather than get off, I want to see Cas give me what I want and I'm prepared to keep at it all night if that's what it takes. Thank fuck it doesn't.

Cas shifts to a moan so suddenly, I think even he's taken by surprise. Mere seconds later, his cock pulses against mine and I am done for. He's groaning so hard, anyone might think I'm killing him—almost like how laughing and sobbing can sound indistinguishable if there's no context. He drops his head down by my shoulder right after, and he stays put, yet he also can't seem to stop moving while his body shivers. Definitely an intense experience for the both of us.

I wrap my arm around him while I hug him close to me, and I'm rewarded with that feeling of him tunneling himself even closer while my fingers play with the hair at the back of his head.

"You did so good, baby," I whisper.

Then I plant a kiss on his temple. Normally, I pet him too, but I'm not so sure he can handle that right now, so I'm not risking it. Instead, I slide the toy toward myself as gently as possible and off us entirely, then set it down. With my other hand free, I can hug him properly, and his lower half steadily drops down until he's resting completely against me.

"I love you so much." I sigh against his skin before my next kiss. "You know that?"

Cas nods.

“Good.”

Lots of people are into shit like spanking, or choking, or even much heavier stuff, but... I figured out long ago there's more than one way to skin a cat. And if you happen to enjoy hurting someone—and I mean really hurting them—giving them a good smack feels unimaginative at best. After all, bruises heal and go away.

If you want to really do some damage to someone, you're going to kick around in the darkest corners of their mind. And I may have indulged this desire... on occasion... but I don't think I've ever come as close to mentally snapping someone as I did Cas. Holy hell, I hope I haven't left him permanently traumatized. Maybe I go about this irresponsibly, but I never claimed to be otherwise. Actually, I'm usually saying the exact opposite.

Cas stays perched on me for so long, I assume he fell asleep until his face moves away from where he's buried himself in my neck. His lips graze my ear while he says, “I really liked that.”

“Me too,” I say.

“Even how you did whatever you wanted with me.”

Well, then. I curl my fingers into his hair and kiss him. Not much I can say to that.

“I don't normally like anything out of my grasp.”

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“Baby,” I say with a deep sigh. “I meant what I said before. I don’t care if you don’t like something, but you’ve got to want it.”

Cas slides his hand over to my neck, almost holding my jaw, but mostly stroking my throat affectionately with his fingertips. “I want it,” he whispers. He sounds so relaxed and pleased. “I want you, too. But I’m used to wanting what I can’t have.”

“You don’t have to worry about that much being out of your grasp.” I sigh and hold him tighter. “You’ve got a grip on me.”

“Yeah?” His lips brush my neck when he smiles before kissing me there. “You’re never going to be out of reach?”

“Not if I can help it.”

Needless to say, I have an amazing day with Cas at Bailey’s house—er, Cas’s house. Still working on mentally fusing those two. Anyway, a great time is had by all, but since a full workweek is ahead of me and I’m still opening quite a bit while Lucy’s on leave, I need to be somewhat responsible. I head home Monday night and get to the farm bright and early Tuesday morning. Since my evening will be free, Cas and I will meet up for dinner after I punch out.

Cas is much, much needier than he’d like me to believe and I fucking love it. Still, whenever I’m with him, I get this sense that he doesn’t fully trust me. Almost as if he’s waiting for me to pull the rug out from under him. He’s done a great job of convincing me he trusts me, and he keeps doing and saying all the right things, but I still get the sense he’s holding back. That’s okay. I’ve pushed him quite a bit over the

last twenty-four hours I spent with him. I want the man bending, not breaking. Well, not beyond repair, at least.

A few hours after opening, who should appear but Jess. Fuck. I haven't spoken to him since Sunday evening and, as far as he knows, I'm still lovesick from my date being canceled. He comes right up to my register and smiles.

"Aren't you closing?" I ask.

"Yeah, well, today is the only day Cheryl isn't opening with you and she knows you won't do animals."

I roll my eyes.

"So, I agreed to do a split shift. All the goats are fed and happy now." Jess pauses and looks around, but the store is empty. Has been since the breakfast rush ended and will be until a few people trickle in around lunch. "How... are you?"

"Fine."

Jess smiles and circles around the counter to step closer and whisper, "We're both closing again Friday."

"Yeah, Jess, I—"

"Except I don't know if I can wait until Friday." Jess leans forward, but I turn and put my hands on his shoulders.

"Jess, we should probably... not."

He scrunches his face. "Why?"

“I told you why.”

“Yeah, and he ditched you,” Jess scoffs. “So much for wanting more.”

“It’s—I’ll explain more to you Friday.”

“Or... we can hang out tonight.”

“I’m kinda busy tonight.”

“Fucking Bailey.”

Well, yes, I am. Or rather, I will be. But I’m not sure exactly how to say that right now. If we weren’t at work, maybe I wouldn’t feel the need to choose my words so carefully. Just when I think I’m saved by the bell, I look over and see exactly why Jess said what he did.

Cas is coming into the store. And those hickeys I left all over him have not faded in the slightest. Not that anyone can see each and every one while he’s wearing my hoodie, but I notice enough from here. And if the look Jess gives me is any indication, he can, too.

Chapter twenty-three

Cas

Do I need to come in right now, today? Of course not. But when I spot Jesse’s truck in the parking lot, I decide I must go shopping precisely at this moment. I’m well aware I look like I’ve been worked over and I want to rub Jesse’s nose in it. Again, the old me wouldn’t care, but this is the new me. I’m trying to diverge from my usual path. I can officially say I have never been this invested in someone or for this long,

and the fact that Will's still breathing speaks to just how much I am.

Will looks especially pleased to see me when I waltz through the door. Jesse does not. Perfect.

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“Hey, Jesse,” I say with my most dazzling smile. I’m petty, I know. “Will.”

Jesse’s still got a hand on Will and that makes me a bit twitchy, but for some reason that continues to elude me, I am not mad at Will for this. Instead, I want nothing more than to prune Jesse’s fingers off him with a pair of shears, then stuff each one down his throat. Not going to do that in public, though.

“What brings you all the way out to my neck of the woods, baby?” Will smiles back at me like the cat who ate the canary.

Now, Will telling Jesse about us isn’t part of the plan, but a lovely surprise for me, nonetheless. Mostly because Will does it himself. Maybe that shouldn’t be so surprising given how he goes out of his way to stake his claim at every given opportunity, but his eyes stay locked on me like nothing and no one else exists.

Jesse snaps his head over to Will, questioning whether he hears that right. Yes, you do.

“Just had to grab something real quick,” I say to Will.

“Shoot, here I was hoping you wanted to run into me at work.” Will smiles wider while he teases me.

“I don’t need to when you’re due back at my place in...” I look at my wristwatch.
“Less than four hours.”

Will looks even more pleased by this, Jesse still does not, and I head to the back of

the store for a believable impromptu purchase. Jesse remains in the bagging area when I return, and the fact that Will either doesn't notice or doesn't care that his best friend looks seconds away from a rampage brings me intense joy. As soon as my card's back in my wallet, but before I've grabbed my bag, Will walks around the counter with a dreamy smile and smooches me.

"Have a good day. I'll see you tonight, baby," he says right before kissing me yet again.

And what the fuck, because that was nice. So much so that my face warms and I can feel myself smiling without thinking about it yet again. Jesse about throws my bag of groceries at me on my way out, but I don't give a damn.

Will gets out in the afternoon and will be here right after work, but that's still not soon enough for my liking. Any amount of time away seems too long. He's become something of an addiction and one I don't think I'll break easily. That's because I often tire of people, but not my obsessions. People have always let me down, so people continually lose my attention, eventually. Bees? Never. Any other special interests of mine? Not a chance. Hobbies offer the comfort of structure and familiarity. People? Rarely.

Yet, I almost feel that way when it comes to Will. He's not as predictable as I'd like, but I do find myself easing into comfort more and more around him. He's been ingrained in my daily routine since long before we even met and now that we have, I feel more out of sorts by his absence than I ever have been by his presence.

That being said, we have a lot in common. Maybe even too much, considering our overlapping traits. And maybe that should scare me, since it probably would any normal person, but it doesn't. He doesn't. Will excites me in more ways than one, and I suspect I do the same for him. He reminds me of a caged animal systematically testing the walls of their enclosure for any weak spots. Only, I'm what's keeping him

contained and those weaknesses he finds are what he'll use to bury his way under my skin. And this man, he's got me fighting the urge to be pressed against the window the minute I hear the tires of his car in my gravel driveway.

Will knocks on my screen door, and I try to act as if I haven't been waiting by the door for the last ten minutes or like I've known he was here since before he parked. He smiles when I open the door for him.

"Honey, I'm home."

I roll my eyes, mostly disgusted that yet again he's successfully made me respond not only positively but involuntarily. I'm beaming from ear to ear and I can feel it.

Before anything can be said by me, Will scoops me up and throws me over his shoulder. Then I'm too stunned to address anything but the subject at hand. "What are you doing?" I ask while the front door recedes from view.

"Abducting you," Will cackles.

"I live here," I laugh with him.

"The term can also apply to holding someone against their will." And even though I can't see, I can hear him kicking the door to my bedroom open. "Like I keep telling you, baby. You're mine." And he literally throws me back onto my bed. "I'm starting to think you enjoy making me jealous."

"Oh, I do?"

"Yeah, you do." Will grabs my hips and yanks me closer, hurriedly undoing the buckle. "You always look so damn cute wearing my clothes, then you had to go and ruin it by talking to Jess before me." And he moves on to undoing my jeans next.

“Luckily for you, I very much enjoy reminding you that I own you, baby.”

My breath hitches when his fingers graze my thighs and he looks especially wicked when he rips my jeans down my legs. He’s got me stripped in seconds and he only needs a few more to undress himself, too.

“I’d love nothing more than to fuck you right now,” Will whispers as he drags me across the bed toward him, his fingers gripping my hips while he pulls me right into his lap so we’re facing each other.

“You can.” My chest rises and falls even more rapidly at the very thought.

“I know I can,” he says with another smile. “But I’m not letting you off that easily.”

Will’s hands move toward my ass, kneading the flesh and only gripping harder when I jolt away in response. My body shudders from the mixture of discomfort and arousal in my response, which only makes his cock swell. He presses me closer against him and that’s when the alarm in my head always seems to go off. I don’t even know why, only that I don’t like feeling as if I’m not in control. As soon as I lose that sense of the situation, I revert to immediate panic.

“Cas.” He’s said my name a few times already but only now does it register. “Look at me.”

My eyes flick up to meet his.

“Breathe, baby,” he purrs.

Instead of rapid, shallow panting, I take a few purposeful breaths while his grip on me tightens. And even if it really shouldn't be enjoyable for me when he starts grinding me against him, suddenly it is. Maybe even because I've heard his low, commanding voice so often over the phone that even in person, he affects me. My shoulders drop with a final sigh that quickly transforms into a pleased pant.

“That's it,” he says, stroking up my spine at the same speed he drags his sentence. “Remember how I'd always ask you to touch your cock for me?”

My hips roll forward with his touch, and when I let my head tilt while releasing another pleased sigh, he's right there. Lips on my neck, to my jaw, then pausing right by my ear.

“Do you think you can do that for me now?”

Normally, that's an instant no, but... I almost want to try with Will. Almost. His hand moves up my spine again, this time traveling up my neck and landing in my hair. I raise my hand, but I still can't get myself to commit. And then I get pissed at myself because this shouldn't be so difficult. I really rather him fucking me however hard he wants.

“I wasn't kidding when I said I want to make you do everything you don't.” Then he kisses my neck before wrenching my face back toward his. “We'll work up to it, baby.”

I nod, but every part of me is shaking. Oddly enough, not scared or nervous. Not exactly looking forward to this either, but when I dip my eyes down for a moment, I can see the sticky trail of precum I've left on my stomach.

Will sighs and slides his hands back down to clench my ass. "We are both so fucking hard we could cut steel, but I'm not moving my hands from right here." Then he kneads into my flesh to drive home his point.

Now, touching him? Not at all a problem. If anything, I've always preferred someone who could sit down and shut up, because I had little to no interest in what they offered me, anyway. Sex has always been a means to an end, to what actually brought me fulfillment.

I fist Will's cock, stroking down to the tip while he lets out a pleased hiss. Will's fingers dig into my skin, but he doesn't move otherwise—save for his lips parting to pant. As soon as I lean forward for another delicious taste of his mouth, he meets me the rest of the way. With every sweep of my tongue and stroke of his cock, his grip hardens until I'm certain he's bruising me. And I kind of love the idea that he's not afraid to hurt me, even if he's fighting his other urges for me. Fuck, does that make my cock ache.

As if he can read my mind, Will whispers, "I want to feel you against me so badly."

My eyes flick back up to him while I shift around atop his thighs. He immediately presses me closer, and the feeling of friction on my cock is about as good as the sensation of his rubbing against my skin. As soon as I move my hand back into the space between us, his breathing picks up from the anticipation alone. Fuck, I can understand why, too. With both our cocks in my hand, the feeling is more of him on me than me doing anything to myself. After giving myself a second, I stroke the lengths of our shafts. Our tips brush together in my palm and that almost feels like too much, but still better than anything I've managed with anyone else. My whole

body squirms in response and I can't hold back the whine that feeling always pulls from me.

Will's next breath turns into a groan, and I just know he's close. Weeks of sex over the phone mean I've heard it numerous times now. Something about that response helps everything else click into place. Suddenly, it's more like when we would talk, and I would be able to let go only at his insistence. All those nights spent alone in this room while imagining him. And now he's really here. I move my hand faster without thinking about what it's doing. Instead, I'm remembering how much he fucked me last night and how I loved every second of it. That gets my moaning to start.

"That's it, baby," Will says. "Go ahead and come."

And I want to, but that isn't something I can do on demand. Things would be so much simpler if I could.

"Cas." He's got that gravelly voice I love so much, but it's different now. His tone reminds me of the night at the drive-in when he tried giving me an ultimatum and I called his bluff. His nose brushes against mine, then across my cheek as he makes his way to my ear. "Come for me, or else I'll grab your cock and make you come myself."

And that's probably the last thing I want, which means it's at the top of his list. Yet his soft threat has an unexpected effect. Well, unexpected to me. My body jerks forward with the sudden rush of unanticipated and overwhelming pleasure of an orgasm. Once I'm moaning Will's name, he thrusts against my fist a few more times before his cock pulses, too.

Only then does his hand slide up my spine and neck before settling in my hair, where he cradles my scalp and gently rubs his fingers. "That felt so fucking good," he whispers before kissing my temple.

Agreed. Actually felt good, but I'm not telling him. Even if he somehow manages to have any doubts, I'm not setting the bar high for myself.

"I find it interesting how all the times I've gotten you off, a lot of those happened after I threatened you," Will says with a smirk, followed by another kiss.

"Did not."

"Yeah, I did." He sighs right in my ear. "Not with bodily harm, of course, but somehow I doubt that would rattle you."

I huff to myself. He's right about that much. Not to mention, if I so desired, I could kill Will. Easily. He's only slightly bigger but not at all stronger and he has no reason to suspect me, so he leaves himself wide open, frequently. Maybe I shouldn't find comfort in those thoughts, but relaxing happens more naturally when I have the upper hand.

With a wide grin aimed right at him, I say, "I don't think you could rattle me."

"Is that a challenge?" He laughs.

"No." I sigh and relax more into him. "Regardless of what you do, I'm always going to feel a certain level of comfort around you."

"I think that's the sweetest thing you've ever said to me."

Chapter twenty-four

Will

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:03 pm

Cas and I end up seeing each other nightly, which may be too much too soon, but we're not the type of people to hold back. He gets adorably impatient in between my visits, and apparently, the only remedy is my cock every evening. This also means I've spent more time at his place than mine this entire week. I've got to close with Jess tonight, so I spent the night with Cas just so we could have all morning together. I gotta say, waking up next to him is nothing short of spectacular. He's one of those clingy sleepers who threads his whole body with mine, so we always wake up still tangled together.

Cas sighs into my ear the moment he stirs, then he's already on me, lapping at my mouth with his tongue. As if waking up rock hard weren't enough, he starts playing with my cock, too. We've been working up to the whole me touching him thing, but even if it never were to happen, I wouldn't mind. Everyone has their limits. Cas doesn't seem abnormal to me, despite his claims otherwise. This is another one of those things about him that keeps me interested, fucked up as that may seem.

I dip my hand down between us, brushing against his hand when I grip the base of my hard shaft. Cas's lips part against my mouth with a soft pant while his fingers recede across my skin to hold his cock instead. Pulling my foreskin over the head of his cock has been a good touching-without-touching compromise. It's a shame so many guys are clipped because does docking ever feel fucking good. Cas becomes a shaky mess of pleasure until I decide I've tormented him enough for now.

"I can't wait until Sunday," I sigh against his lips. "We'll have all night and then all day Monday."

"And you can fuck me as much as you want?" Cas snickers.

“I already can. You’re mine,” I remind him with a nip of his lip.

Cas lets out an extremely pleased sigh and melts even more against me. He’ll never admit it, I’m sure, but the only thing he loves more than me being so possessive is me constantly reminding him of it.

“I’ll do whatever I want to you.” I comb my fingers through his hair, gripping a handful on the way. “Because you’re already everything I want. And everything I need.”

His breaths come even more rapidly while he coils his limbs around me tighter.

“You’re the only thing that matters to me.”

Cas whines and I have to say, there is an unmatched pleasure to ramping him up. His hard cock digs into my thigh, and feeling him grind his lower half into me while he seeks some kind of release does all kinds of things to me.

“I want to feel you in me,” Cas whispers.

“How much of me?” I tease.

“More than you’ve ever given me.”

And with that one ragged sentence, my brain about explodes. Oh, we are so doing this. I know exactly what to give him and he’s going to love it. I grab the lube from the nightstand and toss it on the bed. I’m notoriously stingy with it, because my fucked-up brain loves nothing more than my cock destroying someone’s insides. But this is one of those instances where even I know we absolutely have to use lube, otherwise this will all be a waste of time and effort on my part.

Cas sinks further into the mattress while I kiss down his body, pausing right at the base of his cock. I lick at the air as a sort of warning before flicking my tongue at his swollen head. With Cas, there is a very fine line between not enough and too much, and that line seems to move by the minute. What makes him buckle with pleasure one minute can make him squirm the next and I have to say—I fucking love the nonstop challenge.

His whole body shivers when I lick down his shaft, but he's leaning hard into the pleasure by the time I get to his balls. This is much closer to the safe zone, in the sense of what's reliably enjoyable. Unlike the first time I rimmed him, he crumbles with pleasure when I drag my tongue across his hole. His cock twitches for a release, but we're just getting started. I grab behind his knees and fold him all the way backward, so his legs rest on either side of his head while his ass is in the air. My hands grip his firm ass while I trace my tongue across his hole only once before stopping and looking down at his shiny cock right near his face.

“Lick your cock for me, baby,” I prompt.

With his eyes lidded from lust, he laps at the tip with minimal squirming.

“Again.”

When he does, I drag my tongue across his hole in time with him. I stop and smirk down at him, but I don't need to ask this time. He licks at his own cock and sighs from the relief of me teasing his hole, too.

Grabbing the lube, I slather his ass and go right back with my tongue while stuffing a finger into him. And then another. And another. And one more. His whole body shivers when I pull my hand away, watching him lick the precum seeping from his slit.

“Do you still want it, baby?” I say.

“Yes,” Cas chokes. “Please, yes.”

With a nip to his ass, I smile, then jerk him back down onto the mattress. I continue to smirk while I bend my fingers like a duckbill and push my way into him. There is some resistance, of course, but not a struggle. Cas embraces it fully with more shaky breaths until I’ve made a fist all the way in him and he shifts right into a hard moan.

“That’s it, baby. Good boy,” I whisper. His abdomen swells where I knock inside him and the sight alone is enough for my swollen cock to leak.

As predicted, Cas loses his fucking mind within minutes. His back arches and his cock pulses while he comes. The literal second he starts, I’m extracting my hand from inside him, so by the time he’s finishing I’ve yanked him the rest of the way toward me by his thighs. After taking something so much bigger, there’s no resistance when I slam inside him with one stroke. I don’t need much, anyway. Hell, I’m so turned on I probably could’ve gotten off from the visual alone. A couple of thrusts are all I need to blow my load inside him.

After I sink back down beside Cas, he traps me there against him once more. His lips immediately find mine and he kisses me the entire time he quivers from the residual pleasure.

“I love you so much,” I whisper down to him.

His breaths quicken at the words but he says nothing. I’ve told him quite a few times by now, but he still hasn’t said it back to me. Not going to push that, nor will I rush him, but if the way he wraps tighter around me is any indication, he doesn’t have to say the words.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:03 pm

I'm anticipating a very awkward shift with Jesse. We haven't spoken at all since I last saw him a few days ago, when Cas came to visit me at work and Jess left shortly after. He's probably pissed at me, which I can understand, because I just went through the trouble of telling him I wasn't ready to commit to anyone until I got things straightened out with Mantis, and then I showed up a couple of days later with Bailey as my new boyfriend out of the blue. We get lucky in the sense that there's a Friday rush that keeps us busy from lunch to dinner. Once the crowd trickles out, it's just me and Jess.

The store's quiet aside from the clicking of the sticker gun, and we haven't seen a customer for the last hour. When he approaches the front where I'm straightening by the register, I figure now is as good a time as any.

"So, you'll never guess what happened to me," I say.

Jess scoffs and he's opening up the sticker gun to change the tape.

"Listen, I didn't just drop you and jump into bed with Bailey."

"Really now?" Jess slams the gun back together. "Could've fooled me."

"The guy I had been talking to... well, it was Bailey. This whole time. That's why we're... together."

Jess hums, and the doubt in his voice is evident.

"I'm sorry." I sigh. "I feel like a dick and I really didn't mean for this to happen."

“It’s fine,” he mutters.

“I still care about you. A lot.”

“I said it’s fine,” Jess says again. He pauses to take a shaky breath. “I know you’ve liked Bailey for a while. And if he’s really the same guy as the one you were talking to, I never really stood a chance. Yeah?”

“Jess,” I say with a frown.

“It’s okay.” He takes another deep breath. “It’s not like you weren’t honest with me. I knew and took a chance anyway.”

“I still want us to be friends, Jess.”

“Yeah, me too.” He looks down at the sticker gun and laughs to himself before sticking a price on me. “I might need a little time, though. To get back to the point we were at.”

“I get that. It’s okay.” And I smile at him.

“I’m sure you’re busy tonight.” Even if he’s trying not to sound bitter, it doesn’t come across that way. “So, see you Sunday, I guess?”

“Yeah,” I agree. “Sunday.”

Sunday arrives, and it feels like the dawn of a new era. I unload the truck with Jess, same as always, while the crisp and damp air fills my lungs. Right about the time we finish, Cas comes strolling over, adorably anxious as soon as he gets within a few feet of us.

“Hey, baby.” I smile with my phone in my hand and swirl my thumb on the screen to crank a dial all the way up. Before he dropped me off at the farm this morning, I shoved a vibrating plug in him and told him he better not take it out until we’re back home. I’m evil, I know.

Cas smiles back and closes his eyes briefly before looking at me again. He keeps his eyes locked on me this time.

“You need some help, baby?” And I turn it back down with my phone.

“Yeah,” he says with a small sigh.

“I’ll help you, Bailey. Will seems to be too busy playing with his phone.” Jess puts his crate down and jabs me with an elbow before he walks over to help without being asked.

I crank the dial all the way back up again, so much so Cas trembles, then plays it off as being cold by rubbing his arms. “That’s okay.”

Good boy. Back down.

“Oh, come on. I insist,” Jess says.

And all the way back up again.

Cas looks at me with an almost pleading look in his eyes, but he can’t expect me to save him from every interaction. Either he figures it out himself or he deals with the consequences.

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“Do you mind?” Jess asks me all of a sudden.

“Of course not.” I smile. If it were possible to crank the settings any higher, I would’ve.

“I, um...” Cas fumbles before he manages to get even one sentence out. “I actually have something. For Will. That I need to give him.”

Very good boy. I crank it all the way down and put my phone in my pocket as a sign of good will. “Let’s go, then.”

Cas waits in place until I throw an arm around him and then we walk over to where he parks his truck. Instead of climbing into the bed, he leads me around to the passenger side door and pulls me toward him for a frantic kiss.

“Fuck me,” he whimpers.

“Now?” I chuckle.

He nods.

“Here?”

He nods again.

“You just want me to pull that plug out of you.” I snicker into his neck before planting a kiss there.

Cas shakes his head. “Fuck me.”

“And what if Jess hears?”

“I hope he does.”

Well, damn. He just won his case. I fumble with my zipper and I can hear him doing the same, sliding his jeans down just enough to expose his ass, still mostly covered by his sweatshirt. Well, my sweatshirt.

Cas braces his hands against the car door and I tug the plug right out of him before popping my hard cock in place instead. He’s stretched out some, but not so much he can’t feel it. He’s got the car window rolled down for easy access while unloading, so I toss it down on the seat before leaning all the way against him.

The residual lube from putting the plug in earlier gives just enough glide once I start moving my hips against him. Either all the teasing, or the thrill of being outside where more vendors are due to arrive at any time, has his heart racing. He bends his body to kiss me over his shoulder and after only a few thrusts, he’s quaking so hard I think his legs may give out.

With a hurried and shaking movement, Cas whips his cock out right before he splatters the door of his truck while he comes. He’s not going to be totally devoid of a mess in his pants, though. Within a few more thrusts, his clenching ass has me finishing in him. I hurriedly pull out as soon as I’m done and reach back into the car, grabbing the plug and shoving it back in him like a cork.

Cas whimpers from the sensation of instantly being filled once more, but I can only snicker in his ear. “Where else would you have me put it?”

He rolls his shoulders into me, a half-assed shrug.

I stay pressed behind him while I pull our clothes back in place. With a kiss to his neck, I drag my lips to his ear. “You going to be a good boy today?”

He nods.

“I’ll be watching, baby. Better be all business or else I’ll have you wetting your pants.”

Cas leans further into me, panting as if he’s about to come all over again. In spite of this, he nods his head as if it’s on a spring.

“I can’t wait to get you home and fuck you until you can’t walk straight.”

“Is that the punishment or the reward?” Cas quietly laughs, his hard breaths making clouds in the cold air around us.

“Both.” No point in denying it. With my hands on his hips, I hug him to me. “You’re mine. I get to do with you what I want and with any luck, you’ll enjoy it.”

Cas cranes his head back for one more kiss before I release him, and we both get back to work.

Chapter twenty-five

Cas

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:03 pm

I have never had this much sex in my life. Hell, I've never spent this much time with anyone in my life. And the best part is, I don't have to be all needy and awkward and ask Will if maybe he'd like to come over on a daily basis. No. This motherfucker tells me he'll be here as soon as he's out of work and I better be ready, then proceeds to spend the rest of his waking hours devoted to me.

Usually we have lunch or dinner or whatever, and he spends the entire time lavishing me with contact. Kissing me, and holding me, and touching me constantly so he's always on me. And always, always at some point, he winds up dragging me to the bedroom where he fucks me senseless. Until I don't think I can move anymore and I don't even want to try. And I kind of fucking love it. I really fucking love it. I love how he treats me like he owns me and I love waking up every day covered in bite marks and bruises from him spending the night claiming me and I even love how the soreness lingers like a memory, so even when he's not there, I'm instantly brought back to the night before and him panting right in my ear how much he adores me. Maybe to some it's like being chewed up and spit out, but Will consumes my body entirely and I've never had anyone who did that before. Never had anyone I wanted to give it over to, either.

This also means, as much as I belong to Will, he belongs to me. Now, I'm not the possessive type like him. More the petty type. I want to grab every man around him and shove their nose into our relationship until they recoil and maintain their distance. Those that don't will be dealt with in other ways. Part of my daily routine over the last month has become driving past the farm and popping in just to say hello and be adorable and remind Will exactly what's waiting for him when he's done working.

Only this morning, there's another car parked at the back of the lot where Cheryl and

the other employees always leave their vehicles. Huh. Maybe Jesse got a new car. No way Lucy is done with maternity leave yet. Cheryl, being the sweetheart she is, gave Lucy double the amount of time most women get. Still probably not long enough and maybe even why we have a whole generation of fucked-up kids that are now milling around as fucked-up adults, but that's beside the point. It's still better than Lucy would get working anywhere else in town.

The bell jingles when I open the door, iced coffee for Will in hand. And who should I see standing at the register right beside my boyfriend, but some fresh-faced platinum-blond teenybopper in skinny jeans.

“Hi, welcome to Moonlight Meadow Farm. Shit. Moonlit Meadow Farm. Fuck, I just said shit, didn't I?”

Will snorts. “You picked the right person to fuck that up on.” Then he turns right to me with a warm smile. “Afternoon, baby.”

I wordlessly offer the iced coffee to Will, which he accepts with an even wider smile before taking a sip, then gesturing to me.

“Riley, this is my boyfriend. Boyfriend, this is the new hire to fill in while Lucy's on leave.”

Lovely.

Will snickers at my prickly attitude and pulls me across the counter to plant a kiss on my lips. “Couldn't stay away?”

“Never can,” I say with a sigh.

“Good. Because I can't wait to see you later.”

Sigh. Well, that quells my insides. For now.

“You guys are a really cute couple,” Riley chimes in. “You’re going to have to introduce me to some people. I don’t really know anyone yet except Will.”

And there goes my good mood. I’m all twitchy again.

“Yes, young Riley is new to the area and already well aware of how small the pool of available options is out here,” Will says.

“What about Jesse?” I ask with a wide smile.

“Ah... yeah... that could work. Maybe. I guess.” Will forces a laugh. “You’ll meet him eventually, anyway. He works here, too.”

Riley does that happy little clap, and it’s enough to make me want to vomit. I suppose the one comforting thing is Will showing no interest in who’s right beside him. He really does have eyes only for me and he hasn’t taken them off me yet.

Will pulls me back for one more kiss, one that can make me weak in my knees, then smiles at me. “Until tonight, baby.”

Well, that puts me in a good enough mood that I may just make it out of here without losing my shit publicly. Instead, I imagine what would’ve happened had Riley been brash enough to hit on me, and that makes me smile to myself before I leave.

Will gets out of work only a few hours later, and by now I’m used to the routine. He comes into the house, we plan our evening, then we conclude with him ravaging me senseless. It’s a good routine, not only because it’s predictable, but because it requires very little effort on my part. When Will arrives that evening, instead of our cute and domestic song-and-dance, he scoops me right up with a grin.

“I’ve been thinking of you all day,” he whispers against my mouth, pulling my lower lip in between his teeth.

“Yeah?” I hum.

“After you left, that twink went out of his way to tell me how cute he thought you were. All I could think about the rest of my shift was bending you over the counter and fucking you right in front of him.”

That gets me to smile.

“Oh, you like that, huh?” Will’s nose grazes near my ear while he nips at my neck. “Good, because I have a surprise for you.”

“Am I going to like it?” I snicker.

“Probably not at first,” he says. “But you will.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:03 pm

Oh, that makes my cock twitch. Will pulls at my thighs and I jump into his arms, wrapping my legs around his waist while gazing down at him.

“You’ve been such a good boy,” he purrs in my ear. “We need to put that to the test for my amusement.”

My whole body shakes from excitement while Will hikes to the bedroom, so by the time he throws me down, my cock is thick and swollen. I’ve concluded Will really is the magic element of this formula. Even after sitting down and watching porn, nada. With Will, I’m always rock hard in seconds and the guy goes at me until I’m coming—whether I like it or not.

We peel our clothes off and Will’s got me flipped on my back in seconds. My body jumps with anticipation as he works his way down my chest, licking and sucking, kissing and biting. My skin breaks out with goosebumps by the time he reaches my navel. He’s been consistently pushing me. Not impatiently, but more in a manner that says he’s determined to break down my hesitancy and I really will be all his, forever tethered to his whims.

Will gazes back at me while his tongue traces down to my cock. His hands move up to the insides of my thighs, gripping me hard despite being delicate with his mouth. His tongue licks softly at the head, lapping at a small bead of precum at the slit. When his mouth wraps around the tip, my pelvis lifts automatically but he slams me back down into the mattress with his hands.

It’s not like it doesn’t feel good. If anything, it feels too good. By the time the overstimulation stops, it doesn’t feel like much of anything. Will’s hot breath hits my

wet skin, and he wraps his lips around the head of my cock again. He holds it there, suckling just the tip, slowly and gently. Not a proper blowjob by any means, but it's what works for me, and the last time he got me to come within minutes.

When Will pulls himself up more and pops off, I let out an involuntary whimper that makes him chuckle. He's got the lube, which is promising, but after stroking a finger outside my hole repeatedly, he cracks a smile and I know he's merely teasing me yet again. He ends up dumping a bunch on the tip of my cock, and now I'm just confused.

"Hold your cock for me," he says with a throaty whisper.

I do as he asks, and he settles back into the space between my legs. Then he's got a... I don't know. I honestly have no idea what he's going for here and not knowing makes my heart race in my chest.

"What is that?" I squawk.

"What does it look like?" Will smiles.

Well, it looks like a thin metal rod. Maybe titanium or surgical steel. Smooth in some areas, bumpy and twisty in others.

"Where is it going?" I ask, not even bothering to mask the alarm in my voice. No point. It's not like that will dissuade him in the slightest. If anything, I'm egging him on by responding this way.

"Where do you think?" Will asks right back.

"You're going to shove that in my cock, aren't you?"

I don't think it's possible for him to smile any wider, and yet he manages it. "When have I ever not been gentle?"

The very notion gets me to snort. Will has a very contrary sort of gentleness about him. On one hand, he'll fuck someone raw and not even bat an eye, but he also knows that won't bother me nearly as much as plenty of other things he could do. He's been consistently testing my limits, but he has also been accommodating since the beginning, so much so we've done things I never even thought would be physically possible for me to enjoy. Maybe because, despite it all, he has kept his promise to me. He's never done anything without telling me first.

Will swirls the rod against the tip of my cock, only barely grazing the skin of the head before coming in contact with the slit. Ever so slightly he pushes, so the rod goes inside and... it's immediately pleasurable in a way I've never experienced. When I moan, Will pulls back slightly only to push deeper.

"Good job, baby." He sounds nothing short of pleased, but I can't say how he looks when I've got my head thrown back and my eyes closed.

Likely grinning ear to ear as he repeats the process of gliding the rod in and out gently, so the bumps and twists in the metal graze the inside of my cock with every pass. It's unlike anything I've ever felt before, and maybe the newness lends to the absolute pleasure. There's no negative association, no discomfort, nothing but sheer pleasure that's matched only by the fullness I've come to crave—only this time it's my cock being stuffed.

My legs shiver so hard they vibrate, and my balls tingle with the promise that I am going to get off from this. The pleasure keeps smacking me hard, so much so I can't even stop to think about what I'm doing or how I must sound. My cock pulses and Will must sense it somehow because he swerves right back into praise.

“That’s it, baby. Good boy. Very good boy.”

And his voice shoves me right past the edge, as usual. Only this is not the sexy gasping orgasms he usually pulls out of me. I come hard and I moan harder, with a climax that lasts so long I almost believe it won’t stop. Then it’s over, and Will does his damndest to move slowly and gently while everything’s still so sensitive. Only after the last of the rod comes out do I register his other hand holding on to my cock, too. Oh my god, I think he actually jerked me off while he had the rod in and I didn’t even realize it.

Before I can even begin to process that, and while still in my post-orgasm haze, he rolls me over and swipes some lube across my hole with his fingers.

“Go ahead,” I pant. I know exactly what he wants and he can have it. It’s not even that I don’t care. I want him to have what he wants. To take it.

“Are you sure?” Will murmurs down at me.

I nod. “I want it,” I croak.

“Oh, baby,” he coos in my ear.

Will lines up his cock, slamming into me all at once, then dropping his weight down to pin me in place. I normally do not like the trapped feeling, but I know I can get him off me. I don’t want to this time. I want him groaning in my ear, and one of his hands fisting my hair so he can rip my head back right where he wants it.

“I love you so much. You’re so perfect, baby.” He gasps right in my ear.

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Before I can even adjust to the sensation of being filled so quickly, he's going deeper with each thrust. His pelvis pushing me down against the mattress almost becomes too much, especially with my spent cock rubbing against the sheets beneath me. Lifting my hips only does so much and his pleased breaths drown out my whines of protest.

"You're doing so good. It feels so fucking good using your hole however I want." Will briefly shivers atop me and he starts moving even faster while my body screams at me.

He's been right about one thing. It doesn't matter if I don't like it. Even when he knows, he doesn't care. He wants it. All that matters to him is me wanting it, too. Except, he's what I want, and I'm starting to see that now.

Will pushes harder against me, making every thrust rougher while his desire builds. Even after I force myself to relax, I can't stop the intermittent whimpers coming out of me.

"That's my good boy," he rasps in my ear. "You're such a good boy, Cas. Almost done, baby."

Will continues to pant his encouragement and after a certain period the white-hot pain dulls, and pleasure starts to creep back in at an uncomfortable rate. Will notices, and shifts over to shallow and steady thrusting while kissing bruises into my neck.

"Tell me what you want, baby," he sighs into my skin. "Let me hear it, again."

“Fuck—” I croak.

Will pounds harder against me again, not only forcing his cock deeper into me but also the air from my lungs.

“That’s my boy. Say it for me.”

The rest happens strangely on its own, as if someone else does it for me. I can feel my body breaking down into minuscule pieces, yet I have never felt more loved in my life. Cared for. With a trembling voice that matches my quivering body, I say, “Fuck me, Daddy.”

Will halts so aggressively, I almost think he intends to stop. He doesn’t. He picks back up and fucks me so mercilessly I can’t believe I’m not making more noise. Maybe I am. I really can’t do more than gasp when I can hardly breathe. The lack of air makes my head swim and hyperventilating beneath him only makes it worse. His fingers press into my flesh with an iron grip and relief comes in the form of a pulsing cock while his warm cum fills me. Will kisses down from my neck to my shoulder while he holds on to me securely.

“I love you. I mean it. I love you and you’re going to be mine forever, baby. Like it or not.”

I like it.

Chapter twenty-six

Will

Well, fuck. New kink unlocked. Cas got so into the sensation of sounding, he didn’t even notice me touching him and I finally got to stroke his hard cock until he started

coming in my hand. Which I'd sorta hoped for, but it still went way better than I ever could've expected. Especially the sex after. Good goddamn. Unfortunately, Cas and I cannot spend every waking moment of the day fucking. I have to be at work, like a responsible adult, generating income. Ugh. At least I'm getting training pay for having to babysit the new hire, who's about as yappy and excitable as a gay Jack Russel terrier. Don't get me wrong, Riley's cute as a button and not the sharpest tool in the shed, which any guy should love to snap right up. Hell, six months ago I sure as shit would've. Not anymore.

The next time I see Jess, I'm making a point to sell this guy to him as if I'm a used car salesman. Fuck, I'll even smack Riley's ass like the hood of a car and say, "This baby can fit so many dicks in it," if that will make any difference. Ultimately, I go for a more subtle approach.

Jess shows up to take Riley off my hands and teach him all about the goats. I flourish my hands around our new coworker like Vanna White.

"Riley," I simply say, with a smirk aimed at Jess.

Riley turns at the sound of his name, and I offer a warm smile instead. "This is Jess. He's my best friend, and he's worked here the longest."

Riley smiles politely and feigns interest in Jess's friendly nod. Fack.

"He's the guy my boyfriend mentioned," I say.

Riley cocks his head at me, and Jess raises a brow.

"Will, can I talk to you for a sec?" Jess says.

"Of course." Riley is competent enough to watch the register for five minutes. I hope.

Jess pulls me toward the office and drops his voice down to a hiss. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“What?” I ask with an innocent smile.

“Why does it sound as if Bailey’s trying to pawn that kid off on me, and why are you going along with it?”

I roll my eyes. “It’s not that extreme. He’s new. And lonely. He needs friends.”

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“So be his friend.”

“Allow me to emphasize lonely, again. He knows no one in the area and half the gay population of this town is standing in this room right now.”

“He’s a barely legal airhead.” Jess rolls his eyes again, but he’s starting to smile.

“Exactly! Those are the best ones, Jess. No expectations. No basis of comparison. You can mold him into whatever you want. He’s like a gay blank slate waiting for you to draw in cum all over him.”

“You’re despicable.” Jess’s mouth quirks up at the corners.

“Yes, I am,” I say with a wide smile. “All I’m saying is, maybe don’t be afraid to put yourself out there just because he’s so young. Give him a chance. Worst-case scenario, nothing comes of it. Best case, you’re getting your dick wet.”

“Okay,” Jess huffs.

“Atta boy,” I say.

Jess follows me back to the front and takes Riley outside for some bonding—er, training—and I’m really hoping Jess moves fast because I cannot handle Riley fawning all over my boyfriend every shift that we’re working together. They come back in the early afternoon, and Jess leaves until the start of his closing shift tonight.

I’m hoping to see Riley infatuated when he bounces back over to me at the front

register. No such luck. Not that I can tell, anyway.

“So, you have fun playing with the goats?” I tease.

“Yeah, it wasn’t as bad as you made it sound,” Riley says. “And Jess is a nice guy.”

“He is,” I agree with a wide smile.

“He, um, he told me that you used to date.” Riley flicks his baby blues up at me.

“Oh, no, we’re friends now. Er, still. It didn’t really get serious. Or last long.”

“Because you met your boyfriend,” Riley says with a winning smile. “But you haven’t been together that long. Isn’t that right?”

Oh. Oh no. This is not how this is supposed to go.

“Sorry,” Riley says immediately after. “It’s just that... You’ve been really nice to me, too, Will.”

“No, it’s okay. He and I... we met last year at the farmer’s market and we’ve liked each other the entire time. So, no, it’s not exactly recent. Kinda like how I was friends with Jess for years before we ever dated.”

Riley nods along at this information and I’m starting to think this is going to be the end of it. Crisis averted.

Someone comes by with a return shortly after, and that’s the perfect opportunity to teach him. Returns are few and far between and I’d like him to do it at least twice before running the register solo. Riley hovers right beside me the entire time, gradually leaning closer until he’s resting his chin on my shoulder while he watches. I

stop talking to look over at him and he gives me the adoring smile once again. I can practically see the little hearts in his eyes. Fucking fuck.

Of course, the only thing that can make this awkward as hell moment even worse is the sound of someone clearing their throat. Cas smiles back at me and seeing him flushed shoots desire through my veins from my heart all the way to my cock.

“Baby,” I say with a smile.

I walk around the counter and scoop him up, then plop him right back down on the counter so he’s perfectly level with me. Genuine happiness reaches the surface and Cas hands me an iced coffee that he must’ve already set on the counter for me while I was distracted. Perfect fucking man. I don’t know what I did to deserve him.

“Having a good day?” Cas asks.

“Now I am.” And I comb a hand through his hair just in case he has any doubt exactly what I mean.

Cas shifts his eyes over to Riley, literally looking down his nose at him while swinging his legs. “Wish you would’ve told me Riley was working with you again. I would’ve brought a coffee for him, too.”

“You’re too sweet,” I say with a kiss to his cheek.

Cas looks especially pleased, but he’s not focusing on me. “How’d it go with Jess?”

“Oh, ah, he’s very nice,” Riley flounders. “We don’t have any overlapping time off this week, but uh... maybe next week. Once the new schedule comes out.”

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“You shouldn’t have to wait that long, cutie pie,” Cas says with a frown.

What... what the fuck is happening?

“I’ll take you out. There are some guys I can introduce you to who live right outside town.” Then Cas turns his head to me and beams.

“Uh... when?” Riley asks.

“Tomorrow,” Cas chirps. “Will has to close and I’ll be all alone and bored, anyway.”

Oh, no. No, no. No fucking way.

“Baby,” I say.

“Simmer down. I’m not taking him to a rave or anything,” Cas chuckles. He reaches up and pets my buzzed head with pure affection in his eyes. “Works out perfectly. You’re closing with Jess and it’s been ages since you’ve seen him. And I’ve got a meeting in the city with a potential investor the next day. You can stay home and hang out with Jess, and I’ll get a room out there and stay overnight.”

“What about Riley?” I stammer.

“I can catch a rideshare back. I’m a big boy,” Riley argues.

Cas smiles and fans his hand out, very pleased with his handiwork.

“I still don’t like it,” I say.

Cas wraps his arms around me for a tight hug, his lips right by my ear while he barely breathes out a whisper. “Just think how tight I’ll get after a night away. You can wreck my ass all over again, Daddy.”

I raise a brow at Cas when he pulls away, sliding himself off the counter so he bumps into me slightly once he’s back on his feet.

“You’re right,” I say to Cas. Man always knows how to win because he’s not afraid to play dirty. “It is a good chance for me to catch up with Jess and you won’t have to be up before sunrise the next day to get to your meeting.” I peck him on the lips to show him my sincerity.

“Wow. You guys have such a mature relationship. Like adults and shit,” Riley admires from the register.

That’s us. Responsible fricken’ adults and shit.

The next day comes and goes. Riley opens with Cheryl, but there is an overlapping hour where all of us are working together. Cas makes plans with Riley about meeting up that night, and Riley floats out the door at the end of his shift with the promise of being fucked down on the horizon. Jess seems shocked that Cas is okay with us hanging out, and honestly, I am too.

Then again, Cas knows I’m not interested in Jess and he very clearly does not approve of Riley being around me. He’s probably hoping getting railed will have the same effect on Riley as it would a dog in heat, and maybe he’ll calm the fuck down and stop sniffing around me. Again, not interested in Riley either and it’s kinda cute how he thinks he has a chance. His crush on me, and his interest in Cas, is mostly annoying. While I don’t like the idea of Riley around my boy unsupervised, Cas is

undeniably doing me a favor by taking him out to meet someone else after pawning him off on Jesse didn't go as well as planned.

The next day, I'm closing again. Jess'll open and tend to the goats. I get to show up a few hours later before the lunch rush. And since Riley is supposed to be learning to close, he'll take over the register, then get to duck out an hour early while I lock up alone. Or, at least, he's supposed to. He's not at the register when I get there, but I dismiss it, thinking he must be outside with Jess longer than he was supposed to be. Cheryl doesn't seem too bothered since I'm here, so she hands over the keys and heads to the office before she leaves. About an hour goes by and... still no Riley. What the fuck?

Cas shows up around the same time as usual with afternoon caffeine. Best boyfriend ever. He even brings a second one for Riley like he said he would. He frowns when he sees me alone at the register.

"I thought Riley was working with you tonight?"

"So did I. Starting to think he's no-showed," I say. "I can't imagine he's still outside with Jess, and Cheryl didn't say he called out."

Not even a minute later, Jess comes into the store and looks at the two of us. "Where the fuck is Riley?"

"He's not out there with you?"

"No," Jess growls. Cas offers him the spare iced coffee, and he begrudgingly accepts. Hopefully that puts him in a better mood.

"He's probably hungover," I say before looking to Cas for confirmation.

“Don’t look at me. I poured him into a rideshare before he could turn into a pumpkin,” Cas says with a shrug.

“You let him go alone?” Jess asks.

“No, of course not.” Cas sighs. “He met some guy, and they left together.”

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“What guy?” Jess asks.

Cas shrugs. “Riley was going straight home anyway, so I didn’t see the harm. It was kinda the whole point of taking him out somewhere with a wider pool of options. He had fun.”

“Then he’s probably passed out at home and forgot to call in before his shift,” Jess agrees. With a sigh, he looks at me. “You okay closing alone?”

“Yeah, of course. Get the hell out of here,” I say with a smile.

Cas puts a hand out, offering to take Jess’s trash for him.

Jess smiles back at both of us and hands over his mostly empty cup, filled only with ice and the essence of coffee. “Thanks for the coffee, Bailey.”

“No prob.”

As soon as Jess is out of earshot, I smirk at Cas and stroke some hair behind his ear. “Look at you, playing nice with the other boys.”

Cas shrugs, looking extremely pleased with himself while he grins.

“You’re still mine,” I remind him.

“I’m yours,” he parrots with a wider grin.

“Mybottom,” I tease.

Cas rolls his eyes.

“What? You’re mine. You’re never having sex with anyone else ever again. Ergo, you’re officially a bottom. My bottom. And my good boy.”

With that, I pull him in for a smooch and kick him out of the store before I get myself in trouble being unsupervised around him.

Chapter twenty-seven

Cas

What Will thinks happened yesterday:

Stop at the farm with coffee. Find Riley in the parking lot. Head a few towns over to the city. Meet up with some friends of mine. Enjoy nightlife. Get Riley a vehicle before he can get himself in too much trouble. Send him home shitfaced with someone who’ll fuck his brains out. Go to my hotel. Stay the night. Meet with investors in the morning. Come back home. Stop by the farm around my usual time with iced coffee, equally confused as everyone else about what went wrong.

What actually happened yesterday:

Stop at the farm with coffee. Meet Riley there. Ask if he still wants to carpool tonight. Pick him up at his place close to nightfall. Detour to my house real quick, since I forgot my phone at home. I’m so scatterbrained, hahahah. He’s impressed by the house. Pretend to check my phone. Aw, shoot. The meeting that I completely made up got canceled. Frown. So very saddened by this fake news.

Riley says it's okay. We don't have to leave town to have fun together. Perfect. Let's pregame at my house. We start with shots. He's a lightweight. He starts to flirt with me. Flirt right back. Be open to him making a move so he thinks it's okay. Take him to bed.

Wring his little fucking neck until he stops fighting, then give it a satisfying snap just for good measure. Won't be resting that head again on anyone anytime soon.

Drag Riley out of bed. Strip the sheets and put dirty linens right in the washer. Scald the shit out of everything. Everything. Top to bottom. Every room. Every surface. Everything he might've touched and even stuff he definitely didn't, just to be safe. Load up Riley in a leftover painting tarp from the remodel. He spends the night wrapped up outside in the barn. Scald the shit out of myself. Make bed again. Bedtime. Sleep great.

Wake up the next day. Lie low at home for the morning. Stop by the farm at my usual time with coffee. Give spare coffee to Jesse. Smile. I'm such a nice guy. Offer to take his trash. Heart-melting kisses from the boyfriend before he sends me on my way. Go home. Put on my snow tires. Same tires Jesse happens to have on his truck. Load up Riley. Sun sets early. Around twilight, arrive at a wooded area conveniently located a couple of miles from where Jesse and his family lives. Dump Riley. Shake the shit out of the coffee straw around Riley's face and mouth. Thanks for the free DNA, Jesse. Do a half-assed job burying Riley like an amateur. Take the tarp with me for now. Go home. Wash truck. Scald self again and put all clothes in the washer. All done with everything in time to welcome home my horny boyfriend. Lots of sex. Sleep even better than last night with him wrapped up with me.

A week passes. No one has any idea what happened to Riley. And by that I mean, no one's come across his body in the pitifully shallow grave I left him in. Eh. Just a matter of time. The farmer's market has officially come to a close for the season. Will and I have been going strong, and he practically lives with me. Jesse has backed right

the fuck off, so I've been able to tolerate Will's best friend like the good boyfriend I am.

The remaining leaves are frosted every morning. Snow has started falling regularly, though it rarely sticks. The whole season is cozy and lovely. Sex in front of the roaring fireplace, Hallmark holiday-type romance. I am extremely happy for perhaps the first time in my life, so much so I am content with day-to-day normalcy. Mostly because Will smothers me with love and affection, and I adore the constant attention. He really doesn't give a fuck about anyone or anything outside of me.

Since neither Will nor I have family obligations, and since the farm will be closed for the long weekend due to the holiday, we have decided to go away. It's going to be just me and him, in the middle of nowhere in the mountains, spending the entire time cuddling and drinking cocoa between rounds of screwing. Sure, we could've done all that at my house, but the snowy mountain backdrop is something we both want to experience. Will has to close tonight, but he's going to sleepover and then first thing tomorrow we're driving out to the rental for our vacation. Like the good boyfriend I am, I pop by in the afternoon with his caffeine fix. Leave it to him to suck down iced coffee in a store that isn't heated very well.

I am basking in sweet nothings and promises of all the things Will is going to do to me over the weekend when Jesse comes by to drop off his keys. I wordlessly pass a hot coffee over to him, since he probably needs it from being outside and I'm in such a good mood even his presence can't take that from me.

"Thanks, Bailey," Jesse chirps.

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I hum a response and don't even really bother to look in his direction.

"I'll see you guys... wow, won't be until Tuesday. Have a good Thanksgiving," Jesse says.

"You too," I say with a polite smile.

"You doing something with the family?" Will asks.

"Yeah, all the relatives are coming out to the farm for the weekend and Mom's cooking a turkey. The whole shebang," Jesse sighs. "I suppose you guys are staying close to home?"

"Mm, no," Will says. He pauses to slurp his coffee, then sets the plastic cup on the counter. "We're going away."

"You're... going away?" Jesse says, clearly confused.

"Yeah," I chuckle. "We rented a place in the mountains a couple of hours from here. Just us two for four whole days before coming back to reality."

"You didn't tell me you're going away," Jesse says quieter.

"Shit, dude. I guess I forgot. We kinda decided last minute since we have nothing else going on, anyway." Will laughs. "It's okay to be jealous. I would be, too."

"Yeah," Jesse nervously laughs along. "Fuck you both. I'll be trapped with over a

dozen people I only see a couple of times a year, and every single one has an opinion about my sex life.”

“Sometimes being the black sheep of the family instead of the good son has perks,” Will teases.

“Well, have a good holiday and I’ll be seeing you soon.” Jesse waves and leaves.

“I better head out, too,” I say. “I’m going to get everything packed tonight, so tomorrow we can just grab our coffee and go.”

“You’re the best.”

Will gives me a kiss goodbye and I run a bunch of last-minute errands before coming home right before dinner. I park in front of my house, and Will should be home soon also since the store’s closing early. Keys in hand, I shove my door open. This isn’t the kind of area where people lock their doors. I don’t really believe in that, except it looks worse to be the one weirdo who doesn’t trust their neighbors. And besides, what the fuck do I have to be afraid of?

As soon as I close the door behind me, and while my keys are still in my hand, a click gets my attention. Jesse’s standing off to the side in my living area.

“What are you doing in my house?” I ask.

“You know,” Jesse says.

“I’m calling Will.” The second I shift to grab my phone in my pocket, he raises his arm. He really has some nerve to draw a gun on me in my own house. Rude.

“Do you think I’m fucking stupid?” Jesse hisses.

A bit, yeah. Not going to say that, though.

“I know you did something to Riley. You looked at that kid like he was shit under your shoe, and you expect me to believe after one night of being all buddy-buddy with you, he mysteriously dropped off the face of the planet?”

“Of course, I didn’t like him. That was kind of the point of me taking him out to meet people,” I say. “He needed a boyfriend, and I didn’t want him to keep hitting on mine in the meantime.”

“Right. And you took care of that, I’m sure.”

“Jesse, you’re being paranoid,” I laugh.

“Maybe I am. All I know is, someone’s been picking off guys around here over the last year. And if you expect me to sit back and let you take my friend to the middle of nowhere for four days when the last guy you went out with is still missing, you must think I’m fucking stupid.”

Fuck. Fuck. FUCK. Time to dig deep. I swallow hard repeatedly and blink, letting my eyes water until the corners sting. After I let out that first sob, Jesse drops his arm ever so slightly.

“I’m sorry,” I choke.

“You did do something, didn’t you?” Jesse says.

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I shake my head. “I know you think I stole Will from you.”

“That has nothing to do with this.”

“Of course it does. But you should know Will and I really did like each other for a long time. I even asked Will first if anything was going on between you two, because I didn’t want to ruin your relationship. And just when I finally think we’re all in a good place, where you’ve forgiven Will and he and I are happy together... you saw the way Riley looked at him. Yeah, I took him out and pawned him off on the first guy who showed an interest in him because I was jealous. And now he’s probably been trafficked or something, all because I couldn’t handle him flirting with my boyfriend.”

“Shit, Bailey, I...”

“It’s all my fault. I never should’ve let him leave, but it’s not like he was alone with the guy. He was taking a rideshare to his house. I thought he would be okay.” I let the sobs wrack my entire body, and Jesse frowns.

Pro tip: 97% of the population will become uncomfortable around someone crying and immediately want to flee or comfort them. That’s assuming they have any sense of empathy. The 3% that don’t are probably like me. Jesse is in the 97% and he immediately lowers his arm all the way.

“Fuck, I don’t know what I was thinking,” Jesse says. “I’m so sorry. None of this is your fault. I didn’t even know you felt so bad about all this.”

Jesse takes a step closer. Wide open. Grab arm. Twist. Knee to the gut. Gun is mine now.

“Bailey, fuck, I’m sorry,” Jesse says with one hand up and the other where I kicked him.

“I know.” And with a deep breath, I cut those tears off as if I simply turned off a faucet.

Jesse notices and tilts his head to the side, scrutinizing me as he should’ve from the start.

“Did you believe that?”

His only response is his eyes widening.

“Pretty good, huh? I’ve been practicing that for a while now.”

“You fucker. You really did kill Riley, and now you’re going to do the same to Will.”

I scoff. “Of course not. Will’s my boyfriend.”

And because he’s proven to me over the past few weeks that I’m only a menace while topping.

“As for you, you’re my boyfriend’s best friend. And that’s kept you alive until now. Not so much anymore.” I shrug.

While Jesse’s frozen in place, I tilt the gun and make sure the safety’s off. I don’t like guns. Too messy. But if I’ve always been one thing, it’s adaptable.

Chapter twenty-eight

Will

Weird. As I walk to the front door to enter the house, I almost think I can hear voices. And nonsensical as it may be, temporary rage flashes through me. Who the fuck is here? With my boyfriend. The answer should be no one. I whip the door open without knocking and...

“Jess?” I bark.

“Oh, thank fuck,” Jess exclaims with apparent relief. “Will, your boyfriend is fucking nuts.”

I turn to Cas, who’s standing right in the foyer with a handgun hanging in his hand. He’s all shivery when he zips over and buries himself against me. Only when I wrap an arm around him and hug him to my side does he calm down some. “Whose gun is that, baby?”

“Jesse’s.” He squishes into my side even more. “He was in the house when I came home and he’s been saying a bunch of stuff about me that doesn’t make any sense. I managed to get it away from him, but I have no idea what’s going on.”

“Jess, what the fuck?” I bark.

“No. Do not fall for that shit. He’s playing you like a fiddle,” Jess yells back.

“See what I’m talking about?” Cas whispers.

“He killed Riley, and he’s going to do something to you next.” Jess gestures in the direction of Cas while he screams.

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Cas flicks the safety back on and nudges my hand with the gun. "Take it. I don't even want to hold it," he says to me with a small frown.

"Sure thing, baby." I tilt his head closer for a kiss and double-check the safety. Then I turn back to Jess. "So, let me get this straight. You broke into my boyfriend's house and pulled a gun on him, because he's unhinged. Not you."

"He's manipulating you." Jess stares at us like we've got two heads each. "Ask him what happened to Riley. Go ahead."

I wordlessly look down at Cas, who takes a shaky breath before he swallows hard. "Promise you won't be mad," he croaks.

"Of course not, baby. You can tell me anything," I say while hugging him even tighter to my side.

"Riley and I... we never left town." He pauses for another shivery breath. "My meeting got canceled, so we decided to stick around here. Right before we were supposed to head out together, he told me never mind. He'd been texting Jesse while we pregamed at the house, and since Jesse was already done hanging out with you and we'd never left town, Riley said they were going to meet up at his place. I really did make sure he left here in one piece, but that was the last time I saw him."

"Why didn't you tell me any of this?" I ask.

"Jesse was right there when you asked me and I didn't know what to say, so I lied. I didn't want to assume the worst then, but I'm really starting to think he did something

to Riley,” Cas says while worrying his lower lip. “I’m so sorry. I should’ve said something sooner, but... Jesse’s your best friend. I thought maybe he was just embarrassed and didn’t want you to know. I didn’t want to accuse him of anything or get him in trouble. When he acted like he didn’t know what happened to Riley, I panicked and lied.”

“That is not what happened. At all. Go ahead and check my phone,” Jess screams.

“Of course, because he’s probably deleted all the messages by now,” Cas whispers beside me.

“Jess, this is pretty fucked. I know you don’t like him, but to try to accuse my boyfriend of something you know he couldn’t have done? That’s pretty extreme,” I yell at him. “Did you think you could get rid of him and have me all to yourself or something?”

“What? No,” Jess snaps. “I literally had no reason to kill Riley.”

“And that’s the other thing. He keeps talking about Riley being dead when he’s only missing,” Cas whispers beside me.

“Jess.” My whole body deflates when I exhale.

“Fuck, I didn’t do anything. You’ve got to believe me,” Jess screams and steps closer to me.

Cas recoils but sticks by my side, so I wrap my arm even tighter around him.

“Unreal. The both of you.” Jess takes a few more steps forward.

“Jess, back the fuck up. Seriously,” I say.

Jesse doesn't listen. He comes right for me, trying to wrestle his handgun away from me. I don't think he'll use it on me, but I also never thought him capable of murder. Now I'm not so sure on either count, and I'm not taking the chance. Not with Cas right here. Then the moment comes when it's wrenched from my hand and the safety clicks while being turned off. I look at Jess. He looks at me. And he's got his gun pointed right at me.

That is, for all of half a second. Cas wraps an arm around Jesse's neck from behind in a firm chokehold. I smack the gun out of Jess's hand the second it's pointed away from me. Cas wrestles Jess to the ground, and I have a moment where I wonder how long until he's considered subdued. Jess keeps fighting, but Cas stays expertly perched atop him, riding him like a rodeo cowboy who refuses to be thrown off a bucking bronco. Exactly the same way he managed to stay on me the one time he wrestled me to the ground. I don't move. I just watch. And then Jess isn't moving either.

"Is he...?"

Cas shivers all over and releases a small hiccup while he looks at me, tears streaming down his face.

"Oh, baby," I say while I rush over to him. I bend down to scoop him right up, and he wraps his legs around my waist while he clings to me. He's shivering all over and so scared and so... hard. Hard as a fucking rock as his hands cradle my face and he kisses me furiously.

"It's okay," I whisper. "I got you."

"You own me," he corrects. "Completely."

"I do." I rake his hair back with my fingers and his legs squeeze me even tighter. Jess

is wrong. Cas cares about me. I know he does.

The Jess Incident, as I shall forevermore mentally refer to it, gets handled by Cas. Mostly because, uh, that's my best friend. Well, was my best friend. And the less I know, the better. I can legitimately claim ignorance on the matter. Not that I'll ever be telling anyone about this. Yeah, my boyfriend may have flipped out and strangled my best friend in a panic. Said best friend may have pulled a gun on him first and even pointed it at me while loaded. Mistakes were made.

We go away as scheduled, mostly because we agree it would be more suspicious to suddenly stay home instead. The next four days are spent disassociating and repressing the memory. Not that I blame Cas. Fight or flight in a life-or-death situation and all that. It's not as if I can even claim I would've done differently if someone threatened him. And if it had been an open and shut case of self-defense, I wouldn't have even stopped to think of the consequences. But it's not. And I'm not letting my boyfriend go to jail over bullshit that's not his fault.

A month passes. Everything feels chillingly normal despite the obvious differences. Cas is the same. I am the same. Our relationship, the same. Ironclad obsession, unwavering on both ends. Only difference is no Jess, and that kinda hurts but can't be helped. His absence is noticed right away, of course. His family has reported him missing, but that was the end of it. No twenty-four-hour news coverage and search parties for a missing queer man. Definitely not in this town.

Right before Christmas, I get called down to the police station. Admittedly, I internally panic, but it makes sense they want to talk to me. It's well known that Jess and I are not only coworkers, but friends. Some people maybe even know we briefly dated, since neither of us were subtle about it. So, here I am, sitting in an interview room and cooperating in good faith, meaning I can leave at any time if shit gets too personal.

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“Thanks again for coming down. I’m Detective Sax,” he says as he takes a seat. “And you’re Mr.—”

“Will. Will is fine,” I interrupt.

“Would you like a drink? Soda? Coffee?”

“No, thanks.” I’ve seen SVU, dude.

“Then let’s get right to it. I take it you know what this is about,” he says.

“My best friend is missing.”

“And by that you mean...” He pauses to check a file. “Jesse Miller.”

“Yeah,” I say with a deep exhale.

“Before we get to that, I wanted to ask you about something else while I’ve got you down here.”

“Anything to help,” I agree.

“Excellent,” Detective Sax says. He opens a file folder and lays out a row of photographs. “I was wondering if you could tell me what these men all have in common.”

Jesse. Riley. Jason. Henri.

All missing guys. Half of which are ones we know. Knew. Oh, fuck.

“All them fuck other dudes,” I say with a cocky grin. “Actually, that’s not fair to say. At least one of them was a strict bottom.”

The detective sputters a bit, yet doesn’t waver otherwise. “That is... insightful. May I ask how you came to that conclusion?”

“Easy. I fuck other dudes.” And I smile.

“You’re saying you slept with all of these men?”

“Of course not,” I scoff. I point at Jesse’s photo. “Jess is my best friend. We kinda dated before I got serious about my boyfriend.”

I point at Riley next. “Riley worked with us. He was new and Jess was newly available, so they were supposed to go out at some point. Then Riley no-call, no-showed one day and we never saw him again. It can be kinda awkward working with someone after hooking up, so I wasn’t too surprised he quit without notice.”

On to Jason. “I don’t actually know this guy. I only recognize him from the farmer’s market. He used to flirt with all the guys whenever he came with his wife. He may have gone out with some guys in town, but I can’t say for certain.”

Henri. “And I don’t know this guy, either. Never even met him. But Jess told me one night they went out a few times after we saw a news report about him.”

The detective opens his folder and adds one more picture to the pile. Cas. Fuck.

“And that’s my boyfriend,” I plainly state. “We met at the farmer’s market a couple of years ago and started dating this fall.”

“What if I told you that we’ve known for a while someone has been targeting gay men?” The detective folds his hands onto the table.

“Jess is bisexual,” I interrupt.

“Is that important?”

“Uh, yeah? It’s why I said all these guys have sex with other guys. Saying they’re all gay would be too much of an assumption.”

“Understood,” Detective Sax says. “We’ve known about this problem for a while. It’s a small town. Not a large gay community. When people start disappearing, and a pattern develops, it’s easy to assume we’ve stumbled onto a serial killer.”

I frown.

“Now, your boyfriend,” he says while moving his hand from Cas’s picture to Jess, then Riley, and Jason. “Also happens to know these three men, either from the farmer’s market or the farm where you work. Which is a big coincidence.”

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“Small town. Like you said. Anyone who worked at the farmer’s market last year could say the same.”

“Jason, we almost missed, since he’s not a year-round resident. And the bit about Henri, that’s news to us. Bailey didn’t recognize him, and Henri’s the only piece of the puzzle that we couldn’t fit so far.”

Three major things happen simultaneously at this very moment. Not only do I realize how easily all of this could also be tied to me, but that the police have already spoken to Cas. Which means I have to stop myself from blurting that Cas’s last boyfriend, who he told me was murdered, happened to be named Henri. How the fuck did that slip past me until now?

The detective studies me quietly, but there isn’t anything to say without being asked a question. “You seem pretty distraught by this.”

“My best friend is missing and you’re telling me a serial killer is picking off guys like us. How should I be?”

“That’s understandable, Will.” Detective Sax crosses his arms while staring at me. “Let me tell you what I know, followed by what I think.”

“Go right ahead,” I say with a sweeping gesture.

“As of right now, Henri DeSantos and Jason Wilton are still missing. We found Riley Snyder’s body in the woods yesterday afternoon, only a couple of miles from the dairy farm run by Jesse’s family.”

“Oh, my god.” I sit up straighter and lean forward. Riley’s dead. Actually dead. “And you’re sure it’s him?”

“Yes, despite decomposition we were able to make a positive identification. We’re also working on collecting some DNA.” When I don’t say anything more, he adds, “What are you thinking, Will?”

“I’m thinking, I didn’t know Riley long or well, but... I can’t believe he’s actually dead.”

“Now that you know what I know, I’ll let you know what I think.” Detective Sax leans closer to the table and continues. “Henri and Jason both vanished without a trace. Whatever happened to them would’ve been calculated. Practiced. Controlled. As for Riley...”

He pauses and slides a crime scene photo in front of me. Fuck me, that’s gross and I can’t help recoiling.

“Riley pissed someone off, which means his case isn’t like the other two. This was angry, and it was sloppy. And I think he knew it, and he panicked, so he left town before we caught up with him.”

“I’m sorry, who?”

“Jesse.” Detective Sax takes the crime scene photo and places it back in the folder. “You’re right when you say it’s easy to connect most of these men to multiple people. Bailey, for example. Even to you. But given some evidence we found at the crime scene and the location of Riley’s body, and his disappearance coinciding with Jesse’s, we have reason to believe Jesse had been involved.”

“Jesse did this?”

“I understand he’s your best friend, but if you know something about this, now is the time to tell us.”

“I... I don’t even know what to say.”

And I really don’t. Holy shit. Until today, Cas has been right all along. Hasn’t he? I don’t want to believe Jess did any of this. I don’t really like the alternative, either; that Cas somehow managed to get away with four murders.

Even while I consciously try to suppress that idea, one thought keeps resurfacing: Cas pointing out to me how Jesse kept referring to Riley as dead when he was only missing. That slip of the tongue seemed so damning then. And just now, the detective said Henri is still missing. Not murdered. Missing. Maybe Cas simply assumed the worst, but it’s enough to make me stop and think. And question. And doubt. Only one other person fits into this puzzle perfectly, one who even Jesse said has been lying through his teeth to me.

“Has Jesse tried to contact you in any way?”

“No, he... our friendship really wasn’t the same after I started dating my boyfriend,” I mutter.

“Bailey,” Detective Sax clarifies. “So far, you’re telling us almost everything he already did. Except, Bailey was well aware that Jess didn’t like him very much.”

“Yes, things were tense for a bit. I was sort’ve seeing them both for a short period of time but they knew about it. I ended up with my boyfriend. Jess and I agreed to remain friends.”

The detective hums. “Then you’re both lucky to be alive. Henri and Jason disappeared some time over the last twelve months. Best we can tell, Riley was last

seen leaving work on the twentieth of last month, and as you said, he didn't show for work the next day. Can you recall what you were doing the night before?"

"I'm sorry... this is all just..."

"It's fine. Take your time. The twentieth of November. The week before Thanksgiving."

"What day of the week was that?" I ask while rubbing my brow. Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me. I already know and I think I'm going to be sick.

"Friday. It was a Friday."

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I need a deep breath before I can continue. I take it all back. About Riley. About Jess. About Cas. About everything. Finally, I have the perfect fucking man. Literally made for me. And there's a very real possibility he's slightly homicidal. What the fuck does that say about me?

“Will?” Detective Sax prompts.

“I always close Fridays. I remember Riley telling me before his shift ended that he had plans to go out that night. He left the farm a few hours before closing.”

I pause and take a deep breath. Am I really going to do this? Can I do this? It's so fucked, but Jess is already gone and I can't lose them both. I can't. I won't. I exhale and let the rest spill out as calmly as possible.

“Jesse closed with me, then we both left for the evening. I went to my boyfriend's place since I always spend the weekend with him. We were together all night.”

“That coincides with what Bailey told us earlier. We have reason to believe that after Jesse left work, he met with Riley that night.”

Fucking hell, Cas. You knew. You made sure you knew where everyone would be. You knew that I would remember where Jesse really was that night. And you knew I'd cover for you, anyway. You probably even knew that I'd catch the lie as soon as I heard it, and you still took the chance. Fuck you, dude. Killed my best friend and pinned everything on him. I tent my nose and let out a sigh.

“Are you okay, Will?”

“Yeah, it’s just... a lot. To take in. All this shit... about Jess.” About Cas.

“I understand,” Detective Sax says. He begins putting the rest of the photos back in the folder. “If he attempts to contact you at all, please let us know immediately.”

“I will,” I say with a shaky breath.

And with that, I’m free to leave.

Chapter twenty-nine

Cas

There is what I hope Will does, what I think he’ll do, and what he actually ended up doing. All three of these scenarios may have different answers, and not knowing which one he chose leaves me uneasy. I hope he’ll be smart like I know he is. I think he’ll stay loyal to me above all else. I can’t know for certain. I don’t like not knowing things.

Will comes by the house that afternoon, and I’m caught between acting as if everything is normal and holding back some until I can gauge the situation. When he walks into the house, he smiles yet looks sad when he wraps his arms around me. He’s not a very emotional person. I wouldn’t say totally devoid. But then again, neither am I. We’re both merely below average in that area.

“I love you,” he murmurs in my ear.

“I...” I don’t know. I feel things for Will that I’ve never felt for anyone else. The fact that I feel anything at all for him speaks for itself, but that’s not love.

“It’s okay,” he says while shushing me. “You don’t have to say it back. I know how

you feel.”

“You do?”

“Yeah,” he says with a snuffle. When he pulls back and combs a hand through my hair, he looks at me with red-rimmed eyes. “And I know what you did, baby.”

I don’t really know how to respond to that, so I don’t respond at all. No point in lying. Still, it feels as if I’ve disappointed him and for the first time ever, that’s something that bothers me.

“What am I supposed to do about that, huh?”

“Whatever you want,” I calmly say.

“Cas...”

“I’m yours,” I remind him. “You get to do whatever you want to me.”

Will pulls me closer again, threading with me while I squeeze my arms around his waist. He kisses the top of my head and holds me close enough to suffocate me. I do care about Will. I do. I still care about myself more. Most. Always have. Always will.

Sometimes, self-preservation means doing hard things. And I have to do this.

“Come to the greenhouse with me,” I whisper into his chest.

“Now?”

I nod.

“Why?”

“Come with me,” I repeat.

Will takes a deep breath. “Okay.”

We trudge through the fresh snow to my massive greenhouse further back on the property. This is a place I’ve wanted to bring him for a long time now. Only I kept telling myself, not yet. Soon. Not yet. Just a bit longer. Not yet.

Here we are.

The warm air hits as soon as I open the first door, making sure it’s closed all the way before I open the second set. The bees swarm the room, even at the door. It’s a massive colony and they’re all thrumming in unison.

“Come on,” I say, tugging his hand.

Will hesitates. “Don’t we need a suit?”

“Not for these. They don’t sting.”

“Can’t or won’t?” Despite his question and some hesitation, he follows me into the warm room and shuts the door behind him.

“Can’t. They can bite, but they will die if they do. Therefore, they won’t. They’re peaceful creatures so long as you don’t swat at them or something,” I say.

“They... don’t look like normal bees.” One lands on his shoulder and I put my hand out for it to crawl on me instead.

“They’re not.” I watch the little creature buzzing around my hand. These are not your typical cute and fluffy bumblebees, but lean, bright red and black creatures like something out of a nightmare. “Sometimes ugly things are harmless. And sometimes beautiful things are deadly.”

“Things like you?”

I flick my eyes over to him. “Only sometimes.”

Will releases a long sigh before he looks away, but I can see he gets what I’m saying. He’s never swatted at me. I’ve had ample opportunities and... I don’t want to. He’s never given me a reason, and I no longer have the desire. I never will with him. Not anymore.

“Do you remember what I told you about the domestic bees?” I ask.

“They choose to stay,” Will says, sadness still in his eyes when he looks back at me.

“That’s right.” I smirk. “They’re self-sufficient. They don’t need the comfort of domestication. They can come and go as they please. Kind of like you.”

“Then why are these locked up?”

“Easy. Imported.” Another lands on my arm and I move my hand for it to crawl there instead. “I could let them out, but they’re not meant for such a cold climate. And

since they can never leave to feed themselves, they'd die without me. I own them. Completely."

I offer my hand to Will, and he puts his palm out for a little buzzing friend. That warms my cold heart a bit. Enough for me to really smile.

"These are vulture bees." I flick my eyes up to him and hold his gaze. "They produce a savory honey because they only eat one thing. Carrion."

Impressive what they can do to a corpse, too.

Will closes his eyes and lets out a long sigh, but he doesn't say anything for even longer. When he does break his silence, all he asks is, "Why did you bring me here, Cas?"

"You say you know how I feel about you. You don't. You can't. I don't feel things like a normal person should." I let out a measured sigh until he looks at me again and I stare right into his eyes with an unwavering gaze. "This is my limit and I won't ever care more, no matter how much you want me to. Go ahead and love me, own me, fuck me however you want. I'll be yours and I promise that won't ever change. But if you fuckwithme, with the trust I put in you, I will choke the life out of you and let them pick your body clean."

"Do you really think I would do that?"

"You wouldn't be standing right here if I did." I turn and gently wrap my arms around him. Even now, he doesn't have his guard up. I've realized it makes it easier for me to let mine down, too. "I don't want to hurt you. Ever. What I want is for you to keep loving me the way you do and, in exchange, you get total control over me. Forever."

Will stares down at me and I can only gulp while my heart thrums from uncertainty. I hate this feeling and I always have, but for once I want to believe I've found the person who won't let me down. Not like everyone else always has.

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“And you’ll be a good boy?” Will finally asks me.

“I can be. I have what I need now. I have you.”

Half his mouth raises in a smile. “Really? Almost sounds as if you’ve fallen in love.”

“You tripped me.” And I shine a smile up at him.

Will pulls me closer for a kiss that I sigh right into like easing into warm water. Self-preservation is hard. Sometimes difficult choices must be made. Even stupid ones.

Trusting Will is not smart. But he finally has what he’s always wanted: someone who’s completely and irreversibly dependent on him. He treasures that too much to throw it away. And we both know it.

He owns me so completely, I more than want him in return. I need him. Which means he gets to be the only thing that comes close to how much I care about myself. Without him, there is no me.

The End