



The Truth of Loving You

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Category: Erotic, Romance, New Adult

Description: He's the worst mistake I'm dying to make

Cole:

There is no second chance at love. Not since I buried my heart with my husband. Shane shouldn't matter because I've sworn off men. Unfortunately, I'm obsessed with big brown eyes, a square jaw, and a pink flush. Shane is too young, too innocent, and too smart to get involved with me. But when he begs, I cave, agreeing to teach him and give him what he needs. Now we're in too deep- either I'll destroy his heart or he'll destroy what's left of mine.

Shane:

I'm on the cusp of achieving my dream promotion to the C-Suite of a major financial corporation, when Cole, the CEO's grieving, broody son, stumbles into my life. Cole has made me question everything from my sexuality to my goals. He's unlocked new desires I desperately crave. Large hands and a commanding voice calm the storm in my head. I'm addicted even though he could absolutely ruin my career. Failure at my job isn't an option; clinging to success has kept me sane. Love defies logic.

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Chapter one

Shane

“Whothefuckareyou?” demanded the gorgeous man swiveling in my office chair.

My overworked brain came to a screeching halt, which never happened. It was always calculating hundreds of scenarios, but right now, it only focused on intricate tattoo sleeves on bulging arm muscles and a chest stretching the limits of his T-shirt.

I stood paralyzed in my office doorway, vaguely aware of my unprecedented attraction to him. He didn’t belong here and shouldn’t have been able to get past security.

“Get out and shut the door behind you,” he ordered with a slight slur in his low, gruff voice that turned up the static in my brain.

I had a love/hate relationship with static in my head. It either preceded an epic panic attack or blessed numbness. His perplexing effect on me had caused the world to hit pause, so only this stunning man existed. I blinked hard, as if that act would explain why the stranger with haunted green eyes—ones staring daggers at me—were so captivating. He was objectively good-looking, but I’d never thought of men as gorgeous, even if his low growl overrode my incessant thoughts.

“Do I need to call security?” he taunted.

My brain crashed at the thought of being thrown out of my new office and dream job

by an intoxicated guy whose sandy brown hair had a rumped, just rolled-out-of-bed style, but still managed to complete his sexy, I-don't-give-a-fuck-vibe. His gaze raked over me, and I had the urge to straighten my clothes and run a hand through my unruly hair but refrained.

“Security,” he sang in a melodic voice loud enough for the surrounding offices to hear.

Since it was late, no one answered his call, and the silence cocooned around us.

“Listen, you need to leave Pax’s office.”

This office had been empty for years, its last occupant had been the CEO’s beloved son-in-law and protégé, Paxton. This guy didn’t belong here, and his connection to Paxton only brought more questions.

His presence took up so much space it made it hard to breathe. He made my executive mahogany desk seem pretentious, and my chair barely contained his impressive frame. I drank in his tattoos, and the desire to trace them overwhelmed me. I’d never been attracted to tattoos before. The man smirked as if reading my mind.

“This is my office now. You’re trespassing. It’s time for you to leave.” I gathered my courage, standing to my full height despite his disdain.

He dropped his head in his hands, shaking it back and forth. “The old man finally did it. Un-fucking-believable.” His green eyes ensnared me as he raised his head. “What’s your name, pretty boy?” he asked, and I hated that my body and brain responded to his voice.

“What’s your name? Security will be interested in who you are.” I’d been bullied

most of my life, and I refused to yield to him. He sighed as if undecided whether or not to answer me.

“Cole.” His head raised and pieces fell into place.

This was Cole Branson, the son of Donald Branson, the founder of Branson Financial Inc. Cole’s deceased husband was Paxton—the man I’d been hired to replace.

Cole watched as recognition flashed across my face, and my stomach plummeted. I never imagined being face-to-face with Cole.

“Shane,” I whispered, my voice disappearing along with my brain. “My name is Shane; this is my office,” I said louder while cringing inside. My ability to converse like a human vanished, but that blessed numbness in my head made it hard to care.

“So you’re the boy genius my father hired. Faux Pax.” Cole stood and narrowly avoided face-planting.

His words were meant to sting and they might have if pain wasn’t etched into his entire being. He staggered across the room toward me. The urge to help overwhelmed me, but this entire situation rendered me useless. Cole overloaded every single one of my brain cells.

He was not involved in the business, and according to the rumors, wouldn’t even inherit any of his father’s controlling stake in the company.

My employment ignited a firestorm of speculation and rumors, since the company functioned without Paxton for years. Cole’s name had been mentioned, and it was clear he was unwelcome.

But this broken man spoke to all the broken parts of me. I recognized his pain.

Cole abruptly halted in front of me; his emerald eyes locked me in place and brought goosebumps to my skin. Cole's hand clumsily landed on my cheek. "Such a pretty boy," he murmured.

"I am not a boy." I remained stock still as he stroked my cheek, and my words brought a grin to his face. The effect was blinding, akin to staring into the sun. That sort of smile should only be allowed on supermodels and actors, not a broken-hearted man, breaking and entering a secure financial building.

I was definitely having an out-of-body experience with a comfortably numb brain. No panic. Numb. Because of him—for him.

Cole leaned forward, and my heart fell to the floor with the realization that he intended to kiss me. Without permission, my toes lifted my body to meet his lips, but he abruptly jerked away.

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“Shane,” Cole said my name, and his voice spiked a longing in me. He turned and lumbered down the hall with an unsteady gait.

I had an unexplained sense of loss as he walked away. I glanced around my office for some sort of explanation. When none appeared, I sank down into my chair, reaching for my anxiety meds. The hiatus from my brain ended, and my thoughts rushed back in as if a dam had broken. Thousands of questions flooded my brain, but one stood out—why had he come?

The torrent of questions left me wondering what the hell had happened. I’d almost let the man kiss me. At no time in my life had I ever been the slightest bit interested in a man. The stress from the first week of my new job, simultaneously trying to catch up to speed and fit in as the youngest member of the management team addled my brain.

I needed to refocus and finish my report for tomorrow morning’s meeting. I took solace in the fact that a repeat with Cole would not happen again. Cole would be a distant memory as soon as I lost myself in financial reports. Reconciling numbers was my ultimate therapy, where I solved every problem. Multiple therapists had informed me that work was my unhealthy obsession. But I’m living out my dream.

A phone rang at my feet. It absolutely was not my ringtone. I closed my eyes, repeating the mantra—it was not my problem. I sighed as the ringing stopped and pushed my chair back to retrieve it.

It started ringing again. I told myself not to try to catch Cole to give him the cell. Seeing Cole again would be a mistake.

By the time it started ringing again, I was running down the hall to the faster freight elevators, chasing a gorgeous man who calmed my brain—that insanity wasn't lost on me.

Two minutes later, I flew around the corner and came to a screeching halt in the corridor leading to the lobby. My mentor, John, supported Cole with an arm around his waist as they stood in front of Paxton's portrait.

There were plaques on the wall with all the chief executive officers, but Paxton's memorial was the largest. He'd been everything I was not, with his blond hair, blue eyes, and charming smile. His portrait showcased his football player's build. He'd been a people-person and the backbone of the New York office until his death. He and Cole must have made a stunning couple.

"I miss him." Cole's voice sounded guttural.

"Me too, kid. Me too."

"Five years today," Cole said, and his words hit me like a sledgehammer.

"I'm sorry." John's head dropped forward.

The phone in my hand broke the reverent silence of their moment.

I lurched forward, arm outstretched. "This was in my office."

Cole glanced at the screen and pushed my arm away. "I'm not taking calls." He said it as if I was his personal assistant, and I knew what to do with that statement.

I turned to John for help, but he said, "Shane, go home. You've barely left the office to sleep, and it'll all be here tomorrow. You deserve a life outside of work, since your

spreadsheets won't ever love you back. That's the best advice you'll ever get from me."

Any other day, I would have laughed at John's advice and the insinuation that I should find love. I didn't have time for love. And love was absolutely not something a person deserved.

Love meant heartbreak and disaster. Two things I wouldn't allow into my life. But for some reason, his advice prickled my skin.

Maybe I'd follow John's words of wisdom in a few years once I'd accomplished my goals.

Cole groaned when his phone rang in my hand again. "He won't leave me alone."

My gaze flicked to John, who went white with panic, and I followed his eyes outside to a black Lincoln rolling to a stop.

"Shit! Donald's on his way in. I'll distract him. Shane, you take Cole out the side entrance and put him in a cab. They should not be in the same room today." John shoved Cole at me and pushed us around the corner, out of sight.

I was in no way prepared to bear the brunt of Cole's weight. The man smelled infuriatingly good for a drunken mess. I had a fleeting thought that I might be the drunk one. I needed to get him in an Uber and forget this night ever happened. The anniversary of Paxton's death had some weird mojo, and it was clearly affecting me.

We wove our way down the hall in silence and exited the skyscraper to stand on the sidewalk. I leaned him against the building to open up a rideshare app.

"Where do you live?"

“Where do you live, Pretty Boy?” he rumbled.

That absolutely did not send a shiver down my spine; it had to be a summer chill.

“I’m not hitting on you. I’m trying to get you home.”

Then, I made the mistake of getting caught in his hypnotic gaze.

“I don’t want to go home,” he growled. “I’ll walk to a bar.”

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He heaved himself off the building and promptly fell flat on his ass.

“Big guy, I think you’re done drinking for the night.” I braced myself to help him to his feet.

In the dicey tango to get him upright, my hand inadvertently clutched his ass. The good news, I got a handful of his wallet. In his inebriated state, he didn’t notice as I extracted it from his pocket to get his ID.

“You looking for a piece of my ass?” he asked, and that blinding smile almost made me drop my phone.

“No. I’m not...” It felt wrong to finish that sentence even though a half hour ago I would have said I wasn’t attracted to men with a hundred percent confidence.

“Good.” He sounded irrationally angry.

After I entered his address in the rideshare app, his phone started ringing again. We both stared at the name “Alec” on the screen.

“He’s trying to save me from myself,” Cole grumbled.

Alec called back again. Since the car was three minutes away, I figured I’d answer it and deal with Alec, who clearly intended to blow up Cole’s phone until he got a response.

Turning my back to Cole and taking two steps away, I answered in a whisper, “Cole’s

phone.”

“Fucking hell. Is he okay?” asked a panicked voice.

I peered over my shoulder at Cole leaning against the building. At least he had someone who cared about his well-being. “I’m putting him in a car to get home.”

“Thank you. I’ll take care of him when he gets here.” He hung up.

I wouldn’t have to deal with this confusing situation for much longer. Those reports were calling my name. If he got in the car, then I could finish my work and be home by 10:00 p.m.

Cole started a slow sideways slide.

“Hey there.” I rushed over and wrapped both arms around him to prevent his fall.

His mournful green eyes looked down at me, nearly breaking my heart. “I don’t want to be alone,” he rasped as he pulled me tight against him.

I did not have the willpower to let him go. Echoes of grief pounded through me. Only a monster would leave him in this condition.

As I tried wrangling him into the car, he locked eyes with me and said, “You’re not leaving me.”

His voice wrapped around me, silencing all thoughts of work and misgivings about why being seen with him was a terrible idea. I obeyed by sliding into the car first and pulling him next to me. Normally, I would analyze every possible reason why Cole had the power to calm the storm in my brain. But then his head dropped to my shoulder, and after that, the reasons didn’t matter.

The driver's smug expression in the rearview mirror caught my attention, but I decided against explaining the ridiculous situation I'd gotten myself into.

A brief detour with Cole, a handoff to the mysterious Alec, and I'd be back at the office in thirty minutes. I forced myself not to notice how soft his hair felt on my cheek or give in to the urge to run my fingers through it. Nope. A sharp corner sent us off balance, and Cole's head landed in my lap. My dick decided it'd been too long since it'd had any attention and joined the party.

Cole hummed appreciatively and rubbed his face against it.

Fuck. My. Life.

Using probability and statistics, I reassured myself that other straight guys probably—accidentally—got turned on by a broken-hearted gay guy. It wasn't a high percentage, but I wasn't the only one.

Right?

A few blocks away, the car stopped in front of an upscale high rise with a doorman who rushed to open the car door for us.

"Mr. Branson, so good to see you."

Cole didn't move from my lap. "I, um, I think I'm going to need some help. His boyfriend or friend, Alec, said he'd be here to help him," I said like a question instead of a statement.

The doorman's eyebrows rose to his receding hairline. "Sir, Mr. Branson hasn't been here in months, and no one else has been here since..." He glanced at Cole as his voice trailed off.

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That statement confused me, but it was clear that my duties to get Cole into his apartment weren't over. After some deliberation and encouragement from the driver, the doorman escorted us up to Cole's apartment and let us in, since, of course, Cole didn't have his key.

"You're such a pretty, pretty boy and so young," Cole said as I lowered him onto his bed. His driver's license indicated he was fourteen years older than me.

"That's what all the drunk men tell me when I pour them into bed."

I felt a tad smug about my witty response. I removed his shoes and debated whether I should attempt his belt and jeans. Cole solved the problem by taking off his belt and pants in a remarkably coordinated move.

Damn.

I did not check out his package on purpose. Or the tattoos covering his insane body. Purely accidental curiosity. That had to be a thing.

"I hope your day is better tomorrow. Good night." I tugged the sheet around him, gave a weird wave, intending to return to complicated spreadsheets that made more sense than this night ever would.

Cole grabbed my wrist and yanked until I was sitting next to him on the bed. "You're a good guy for a wanna-be-Paxton and lapdog for my dad."

"My life's goals have been achieved. After all, dogs are man's best friend, and I

always wanted to be someone's substitute for the real thing." I smacked his leg as Cole laughed. "I'm going to leave before you ask me to be your new best friend."

Cole's chuckle died on the last two words. "Hewasmy best friend. We grew up together. Paxton was my forever love. My one-and-only." His torture filled the room. "Then, I killed him." He dropped my wrist, and his eyes slid closed. "Never love again," he mumbles as he drifted to sleep.

There was no reason to sit there rubbing his leg. And zero explanation for my urge to stay and help him with his grief. Paxton had been in an accident. Cole definitely had not killed him, but his death clearly tormented the man.

Anyone in my position wouldn't leave a grieving man without provisions. That's what I told myself. Sometimes a person needed someone else. Anyone. And I was an expert on grief. As I'd suspected, the apartment cupboards were empty, so I enlisted the help of the doorman.

A concerned Alec called again, and I heard his relief regarding the mix-up. He also seemed oddly hopeful that Cole and I had hooked up. That should not have twisted my insides.

Cole wasn't any of my business.

I left him the essentials on the bedside table. Unable to stop myself, I ran my fingers over his forearm tattoos. His arm farthest from me had a large shield, but the one closest had geometric patterns layered over each other. It gave them a 3D quality. My fingers stopped at the cuff of his T-shirt, where I could see the bottom of an animal. I itched to reach up and explore the ones peeking out on his neck. My behavior was ludicrous, and I had to leave. It didn't matter that this broken man's voice soothed the part of me that had been anxious for years or that he's awakened a new attraction.

Cole was not meant for me. So, I stood, ran my hand through his silky hair, and fled. The probability of running into him again was so low it was minuscule. Undoubtedly.

Chapter two

Cole

The light was way too fucking bright. I cracked my right eye open but could not place the blank, beige wall. My loft had dark gray walls and blackout blinds, so last night went horribly wrong. The only image my brain supplied was of bottomless brown eyes, sharp cheekbones, tousled brown hair, and lips too plump to belong to a man. My heart tripped in panic, and my eyes flew open.

Hell. I couldn't remember the details of winding up in our apartment.

If I fucked that pretty boy in our bed, I wouldn't be able to live with myself. On the bedside table sat a bottle of water, ibuprofen, and a note. I tossed back the pills and chugged the entire bottle as I braced myself to read it. My heart hadn't stopped hammering, and I desperately needed to believe I wouldn't cheat on Paxton in our bed.

The note, written in Sharpie on the back of a drugstore receipt, shook in my hand.

Cole,

My famous hangover cure is in your kitchen. Call your friend Alec; he's really worried. So, don't be a dick and make him wait. Most importantly, try not to hurt yourself missing him.

Your Pretty Boy

I scrubbed my hand over my face. That gorgeous motherfucker used proper punctuation on a drugstore receipt. And those four sentences jolted my heart in a way I didn't believe was possible. My heart had been savagely wrenched out of my body the day Paxton died. I hadn't felt even a twinge since. He was right; Alec would worry himself sick. I'd ditched him after the cemetery, and he'd want to kick my ass as soon as he knew I was okay.

My laugh turned to a groan as my head throbbed. I stared at the note as if it was my lifeline. The fact that the beautiful stranger cared twisted up what was left of my scooped-out insides. He'd made me a hangover cure. No one had done anything to take care of me in over five years. To be fair, I hadn't let anyone. I reread the last line over and over again.

Those nine words destroyed me.

Images of his disapproving grimace and then his smile hit me hard, and I clutched my head. That twingey-twist in my chest didn't matter, and since the pretty boy worked for my father, there was no chance something sexual could happen. But he'd said, "Most importantly" as if my well-being mattered to him and "try" like there was no use telling me not to hurt myself because missing Paxton and my guilt had made me almost insane.

He'd seen my pain and hadn't dismissed it or told me to get over it. And he goddamn signed it "Your Pretty Boy," which fascinated me in a dangerous way. No matter what, he was off-limits.

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I'd never be with another man. My man was gone, but I still enjoyed the benefit of being bi. Even though hetero sex paled in comparison to what I'd had with Paxton, it at least had dulled the ache.

I sent a quick text to Alec and checked my schedule. The perk of owning a tattoo parlor was that I didn't have to answer to anyone else. Luckily, I'd scheduled a huge back piece that would take most of the day. I had plenty of time to try my pretty boy's hangover cure, and then I could lose myself in my art, drown out my misery, and banish his face from my memory. It wouldn't even be hard to resist the urge to remember his name.

Working today had been a win of sorts. Last year, it took me two days to get out of bed after I'd visited the cemetery. I couldn't tell if working today meant progress or moving further away from Paxton. Most people would have voted for progress, but I had my doubts. Paxton's future and choices were taken away, and it felt wrong to move past that, as if moving on would devalue his life.

The circumstances of his death directly related to my selfish, careless nature. My stubbornness caused a rift we never repaired. He'd never known that I'd changed my mind and was willing to do anything, anything, to make him happy. The loss of our potential future was as excruciating as losing my best friend and soulmate. I didn't remember a time in my life without him. We'd grown up together, and we'd saved each other from parents determined to see us fail. His loss would haunt me forever, as it should.

For that reason, I had no right thinking about seductive brown eyes, long fingers, and lips for days. The more I tried to scrub his image from my brain, the more he popped

up: young and innocent and eager to please. He was the opposite of Paxton—long, lean, and classically beautiful, with dark hair in need of a cut. Paxton had been taller and bulkier than me. The golden boy with hair to match. The guy from last night was off-limits and most likely straight. My imagination needed to fuck right off.

Alec grinned as he plopped himself down in my client chair as I cleaned my station. When I'd built the shop out, I'd erected solid partitions, so each station had privacy and a door.

His lazy smile and deep dimples transformed his face into the poster boy for mischief. "I need to know who's the very fine voice that took you home and put you to bed."

I shrugged with every intention of telling him no one, but the words wouldn't come out.

"Holy shit." Alec slowly rose to an upright position. "Something happened with you two."

"No," I forced out. "He works at Branson Financial and took Pax's old job."

Alec slumped back into a reclined position and threw his hands up. "You went to his office! Dude, there's nothing there but shitty memories and your asshole father. You give your father power over you every time you step into his world. Cut the cord. You're not eliminating Pax; you're cutting out your father." Alec tossed one of his favorite candies in the air and caught it in his mouth.

I wiped down my ink tray for the fifth time. Alec wasn't wrong. I felt tied to Branson Financial because of Pax, but the feud with my father would disappear if I let it go.

Alec sighed. "I had visions of the hot voice pulling you out of your man hiatus."

I snorted. “He’s straight.”

“Not the point. You deserve a second chance at love. Pax wouldn’t want you to tear yourself up like this.” Alec swung his legs off the chair, stood, and slapped my back as he walked by.

He didn’t understand what it was like to lose your soulmate.

“Get the hell out of here,” I waved toward the door, adding, “and don’t be late for your early appointment tomorrow.”

“Don’t pull that dad shit with me, old man,” Alec joked as he left.

I grunted, feeling every one of my thirty-eight years today. This body didn’t recover from a hangover like it used to. I performed menial tasks until there was nothing left to do but go home.

Locking the door to Unframed Art, I rounded the corner to the entrance to my apartment. I wished there was access directly from the shop into the loft. But early on, Paxton and I knew we needed a separate entrance to maintain a work/life balance. The emergencies significantly decreased if someone had to ring my doorbell instead of texting me.

Our loft felt cavernous. Usually, I tried to work late or go to the gym, so I’d be too tired to notice the void. Paxton had found this building after we moved back from London, and it was his vision to open my shop downstairs and renovate this space to live in. I’d have lived anywhere with him. But after several promotions, his taste had become more discerning, so we’d moved to Greenwich Village seven years ago.

We’d rented this space to Alec until I moved back in. Alec had needed a rescue, and we’d needed a renter. Now the high ceilings, exposed brick, and open floor plan

mocked me with a sense of loneliness. The kitchen, living room, bedroom, and eating areas were all one huge room. Only the bathroom and storage area were separated. It was the epitome of an industrial loft.

The urge to grab a bottle of Jack and fall into bed was strong. Instead, I opened the freezer and pulled out a meal Paxton's mom had frozen for me.

When my food was hot, I sat at the island with my dish and pulled my laptop closer. With one hand, I shoveled food into my mouth as the other brought my screen to life. I froze with my fork halfway to my mouth. Before work, I'd had the insane idea to google Shane. Without warning, my memory had supplied his name, and for a second, I'd wanted to know more. But I gave up the search and thought I'd cleared my browser. Instead, the definition of the name Shane screamed at me from my laptop.

My fork fell onto my plate of lasagna as I slammed the computer shut. The bottle of Jack called to me, and I answered. Taking a long pull, my eyes closed as I relished the burn. I yelled, "Fuck," and it echoed back to me. Names weren't the definition of who people are. It didn't matter that the name Shane meant gift from God. People's names aren't prophecies. His name gave me one more reason to stay the hell away from him. Despite my conviction, I reopened my laptop.

Chapter three

Cole

Since my cemetery visit, Alec had pointed out that I was a sulking asshole. After being a disaster at the shop, I was determined to approach this week with a different mindset. Alec tolerated me, even though I was a miserable boss and a terrible friend.

He'd been my lifesaver for years. I wouldn't have my tattoo parlor, Unframed Art, if

it weren't for him. He'd kept things going when I didn't have the will or ability to function. He still had my back when I couldn't cope. We don't talk about my appreciation because then he'd have to admit he felt like he owed me for helping him after his bad breakup when he became homeless.

But my attitude was being tested because today was paperwork day, my least favorite part of being a business owner. Sometimes, I thought about selling, but the idea of working for someone else was less appealing than the stack of invoices and receipts piled high in a mess all over my desk.

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I'd pulled together all the necessary documents except the latest sales report, so I wandered up front to print it out.

My stomach dropped as my pretty boy entered my shop. I had to stop thinking of him as my anything. I absolutely could not pick up 180lbs of guilt and regret if I caved on my attraction to him. My hazy memory from a week ago didn't do his pretty face justice. And his dazed expression pulled heartstrings I didn't know existed.

"I'm thinking about..." Shane tipped his chin up with determination and restarted. "I want to get a tattoo."

"Well, you came to the right place. I'm Alec Ivy," he crooned. Do you have a specific request or we can consult our books."

Before this moment, I never wanted to punch Alec for his flirty personality. I tried to rein in that uncalled for urge. Alec had no idea who Shane was or that I currently had lost all feeling in my limbs at seeing him again. Alec's easy smile, dimples, and deep chuckle charmed everyone with two legs. Harmless, yet I didn't want him near Shane.

Shane kept his eyes on me. "I saw your original artwork online, and I was hoping you could design something for me."

"Oh, I'm so sorry but," Alec's voice dripped with fake customer service empathy, "Cole doesn't have any appointments today. I can absolutely schedule his first available for you."

The silence stretched as Shane and I stared at each other. A confused Alec's eyes ping-ponged between us. Alec would harass me if he knew Shane was the guy who helped me last week.

“What type of tattoo do you want?” I asked.

“A memorial tattoo.” Shane shuffled his feet and drummed his fingers on his thighs.

He wasn't insinuating that we'd met, and his request seemed genuine. Normally, I spotted when a person hadn't fully committed to the idea of marking their skin permanently. And the thought of someone else inking Shane's body turned my stomach. If he was getting a tattoo, I was doing it. But I wouldn't bring up breaking into his office or his bedside note.

“Let's move to the consultation area.” I gestured to our lounge area, and Shane visibly relaxed. The opposite of most customers. The shop had a large picture window with double doors that opened by the register and check-in/out desk. The entire wall behind that area had drawings and pictures of tattoos. Our consultation area was across the rooms with a couch, club chairs, and a coffee table.

Alec let out a long sigh. “But—

“I'll rearrange my schedule.” My firm voice left no room for argument.

Alec couldn't care less about Shane but knew putting off paperwork was a bad habit of mine.

I reintroduced myself with my full name so he'd give me his. Shane Reynolds. I repeated his name out loud, liking the way it sounded coming out of my mouth.

My hand balled into a fist as I resisted the urge to touch him as I guided him over to

the couch. The guy showed me a little goddamn compassion last week, and my reaction was to stake some sort of claim over him. I shouldn't ignore the voice in my head shouting that I should cut and run. Shane was nothing to me. If I lost his business, it'd be nothing.

"Thank you for fitting me in." Shane sank onto the couch. "I should have called for an appointment. I didn't think." His big brown eyes begged me to ease the stress rolling off him.

"No worries." I chose the chair next to him instead of sitting on the couch with him. "So the first step is to talk about where you'd like the tattoo because that will determine the size and scope of the artwork. We can discuss images and any words you have in mind."

"Great." Shane sat very straight on the edge of his seat as if preparing for a formal lesson. "I have an image that I'd like to incorporate." He pulled a piece of paper out of his shirt pocket. So goddamn adorable.

I shook out all my inappropriate thoughts, and we spent the next half hour talking about what he wanted. Shane's excitement and rambling about the tattoo design magnified the fact he gave zero information about the person who'd inspired it, which was unusual. People tended to overshare with me. He had more than one image in mind and described it in stunning detail.

"Give me a few minutes to sketch out a design, and you can see if it's what you envision on your skin for the rest of your life."

I needed to be sure he was ready for this, especially since he admitted this would be his first tattoo. I always got a rush knowing I was the first to ink someone.

My curiosity won out. "What's your girlfriend going to think about this?"

“Oh, no, I don’t have one.” Shane’s neck turned an adorable pink.

“Boyfriend?” I asked to confirm his heterosexuality.

He’d requested the tattoo cover his left pectoral, over his heart. Usually, a sign it was for a lover.

“Nooo. Not one of those either.” He lifted a shoulder.

I nodded as if his answer didn’t drive my interest higher and started sketching. It occurred to me that I recognized the symbol he’d brought from the year I worked in London. A circle around three connected swirls, a form of a Celtic knot.

I took my time and crafted something I wanted to see on Shane’s body. “Here. What do you think of this?” I handed Shane my sketch pad.

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Shane's eyes widened as he grasped it in both hands. My heart rate sped up with his pause. Idiotic. My initial sketches rarely matched the final product. Revisions made clients happier, so why did I need him to love it?

"Perfect," Shane breathed out. "It's absolutely perfect." Then he transformed into a ten-year-old boy in front of me, trying not to bounce in his seat with excitement. "Can we do it today?" His eyes danced, and his smile stuttered my heart for a beat. Maybe two.

Alec coughed from across the room disapprovingly. I checked the time on my phone.

"Let's put a mock-up on you first before we decide. How does that sound?"

"Yes, please." Shane's smile got impossibly bigger. His eyes returned to my drawing as he reached out to squeeze my leg. "Thank you."

His response of "yes, please" hit my gut in a snaking desire. It shouldn't make me think of doing dirty things to him. Absolutely not. But I'd indulge myself and put my ink on him.

I really didn't give a shit that paperwork day would be spent inking Shane. But while Shane sat alone at my station, I had to promise Alec I'd finish sorting everything for our tax accountant, and the weasel also used the opportunity to blackmail me into going out on Saturday night. Worth it.

"How much is this going to hurt?" Shane stretched out in my chair while I prepped his skin. He'd loved the mock-up and couldn't wait for me to ink him.

“You ever break a bone?” I asked sarcastically.

Going by Shane’s thoughtful expression, he didn’t get my question was supposed to be humorous. “No, but I burned my leg.”

He reached down to pull up his pant leg to reveal his shin and a large patch of puckered skin on his otherwise perfect leg. That had to hurt like hell when it happened.

“It will hurt 95 percent less than that.” I locked eyes to reassure him, and he melted back into the chair with a sigh.

“You just won a place in my heart.” He grinned. “Statistics, graphs, and spreadsheets are my language.”

I had no appropriate response to that statement. Firing up the tattoo gun, I got to work. After finishing the first part, I noticed Shane’s cock had hardened. This couldn’t happen. After leaving my permanent mark on him, I’d send him away and never see him again. I had to ensure he didn’t come back.

“You got a pain kink?” I asked, hoping to embarrass him.

“Sorry.” Shane swallowed and raised the leg farthest from me as if it would hide his impressive cock. “So sorry. I’m 100 percent sure I won’t die of embarrassment, but that isn’t comforting right now. Has this happened to you before?” Words exploded out of his mouth. “I know the probability has to be low. But I can’t be the only one. Please tell me I’m not the only one.”

“Hmmm.” I let the awkward pause stand. My station felt small today, intimate, our own private area. A place for secrets I wasn’t sure I wanted to tell. “It happened once before.”

“Did you punch him?” Shane’s voice cracked.

I had to make him run from me as if it were his idea. Which was the only explanation for what came out of my mouth when I looked him in the eye and said, “No. I married him.”

Chapter four

Shane

Cole’s sword should have sent me running. But they had the opposite effect. His hands on my body sparked a lust I’d never felt. I’d spent the last week convincing myself that his effect on me had been an anomaly. That my mind had not gone numb and I wasn’t remotely attracted to him. I wasn’t attracted to guys. My hard-on said otherwise.

Each tattoo artist had a private room, but all the doors were open, so we didn’t have any illusion of privacy. I’d stood on the sidewalk admiring Unframed Art’s esthetic until I saw Cole and ventured in. The large window had given me a perfect view of hundreds of tattoos on the wall, as well as the reception desk and consultation area.

Before I arrived at his shop, I’d cyberstalked Cole Branson.

I shouldn’t have been shocked that he owned a tattoo parlor with the amount of ink covering him. His designs spoke to me. They were art, beautiful images on skin that could be paintings in a museum. I’d been contemplating this tattoo since I was eighteen and didn’t need my parents’ permission. Finding a worthy design that I’d proudly show on my skin had held me back from getting a tattoo. Cole could make art for me, so I showed up at Unframed Art for a tattoo. Only a tattoo, not the man, but my body hadn’t gotten the message.

Cole's extraordinary artwork felt right inked over my heart. A dragon for protection, courage, and bravery, holding a Celtic knot to honor the past and carry me into the future.

Thoughts of the past shrunk my hard-on. I had to focus on that emotional pain to avoid its resurgence. Last week, I blamed my erection on Cole face-planting on it. Direct contact with one's dick would cause almost every able-bodied male to get an erection. Facts of biology.

Today, Cole's easy confidence, brilliant creativity, and incredible skill turned me on. Add his large, calloused hands on my skin, and my dick wanted his attention. It actually demanded his attention.

I was uncertain about how to process that information. I couldn't remember the last time someone had openly appreciated my looks or touched me for my pleasure.

It had been easy to dismiss my attraction to Cole. Coming here today, I was finally going to get my tattoo and prove I had no desire for Cole. A man. A very manly man. So not my type. Not at all.

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But if I thought about his hands touching me for longer than a second, I'd be hard again. The pain felt soothing in his capable hands, so I focused on the needle and let my mind go blank. The pain sorted all the chaotic thoughts hammering my brain into file folders I tucked away. My therapist would probably argue that this was not better than every single coping strategy I'd tried, but results didn't lie.

My mind always operated at a million miles an hour. Now it was blank. Nothing existed besides Cole's steady hand, the pain, and the hum of the gun. No wonder people had ink all over their bodies. I could get addicted to this.

This was a one-time indulgence. Cole lit fires in me that were counterproductive to my life's goals. I wanted to be taken seriously at Branson Financial. If I performed at the level Mr. Branson expected of me, I'd have considerable stock options and the opportunity to be promoted to the C-suite—the highest-ranking executives in the company. Any involvement with Cole would derail those aspirations.

I'd asked John about Mr. Branson's and Cole's relationship. "Explosive" was the term John had used. Mr. Branson took a chance on me, and I wouldn't ruin it for some irrational attraction to his son. I was straight.

Decision made, I closed my eyes and let the pain relax me.

"All set," Cole rumbled.

"What?" My eyes flew open. "I thought it'd take a couple of hours."

Cole's chuckle sent a shiver through me. "It's been almost that. You zoned out on

me.”

“Oh, sorry.” I was always apologizing to this man, and I needed to stop.

His big hand prevented me from looking down at his work. And tilting my face down placed my lips entirely too close to his skin. I jerked my head back and smashed it into the chair.

Cole paused with a sideways glance at me. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone look so relaxed getting a tattoo. No wincing, or grimacing, or hands clenched into fists.”

I let out a slow breath. “Yeah, it put me in a weird headspace and my brain took a much-needed vacation.” My body was loose, and I wasn’t fidgeting.

The intensity in Cole’s eyes confused me, but the air became thicker, and the little hairs on my arms raised as we locked gazes.

“Welp,” Cole said as he abruptly pushed his wheeled chair away from me, sending him across the room, “let me get your aftercare instruction sheet.”

Cole continued an explanation as he rifled through a cart with supplies, but the buzzing in my head overrode his words. When he’d moved away it was as if a lock had snapped and all my anxiety whooshed back in, turning my brain up to speed a billion and one to make up for the reprieve. I fought the urge to reach out for him to ground me again. It had been the pain, not him. He couldn’t help me now.

I closed my eyes, practicing my five senses technique. Cole’s words registered in the background but my brain had to work overtime, focusing to calm down. When I opened my eyes, Cole wasn’t in the room. Standing on shaky legs, I heard his voice yelling to me from the other room, and I followed it.

“I knew I had a few extra copies in here,” Cole said, slamming a file cabinet shut.

But I stared at his desk with piles of papers strewn everywhere. My brain short-circuited. My body moved with the sole purpose of bringing order to mayhem.

“Chaos. It’s pure chaos,” I heard myself mutter as I began picking up, scanning, and organizing the papers. “I just have to...I know it’s...this is why I don’t have friends. I can’t leave it like this. It’s not right.”

I felt Cole’s palm on my arm but I brushed it off.

“It won’t take me long. I’m sorry. I can’t stop. It’s not right,” I said.

Cole’s hand landed on my shoulder and squeezed. I’d moved behind Cole’s desk and processed the documents quickly. He remained quiet with his hand on my shoulder, which allowed my brain to focus on a filing system. “I know...boundaries...I shouldn’t but I can’t stop. I’ll leave. I promise.” In the silence, the air-conditioning kicked on and turned my sweaty skin clammy. “Almost done.”

When the chaos turned to order, my brain hit a tripwire, and I dropped my head, nearing collapse. Cole maneuvered me into his chair.

“Don’t move. I’ll be right back,” he barked, so of course, I obeyed that voice.

Later, I would feel the impact of Cole seeing me like this, but right now I had to breathe so I didn’t perpetuate my panic attack and pass out.

Cole knelt between my legs and uncapped a bottle of water. “Drink,” he said as if daring me to disobey him.

Both his palms rested on my thighs with his thumbs drawing soothing circles.

My eyes remained steadfastly closed. Now that the panic abated, embarrassment set in. Getting out of here with my eyes closed wasn't an option, so I gave myself another few moments before I looked into Cole's eyes.

"Are you okay?" he asked, concern written all over his face.

"Never better," I quipped. "I actually never wanted the tattoo. It was all an elaborate scheme to secure a job offer as your bookkeeper. Did I get the job?" I hoped my sweeping hand gesture and smile put him at ease.

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Cole didn't laugh. "Does that happen often?"

"Thank you for your concern." I sighed, touching his shoulder but immediately withdrawing my hand since his hard, warm muscles did something inappropriate to my body. "I'm fine." I stood and waited for him to move.

Cole stood to his full height but didn't move back, so I had to tip my head back to meet his eyes. "Shane."

He said my name like a reprimand and reached for my arm but dropped his hand.

"I'm really fine. Sorry for busting into your office, crossing too many boundaries to count, and giving your paperwork the Shane-o-rific filing system."

Cole twisted to reach behind himself and grabbed a stack of papers, flipping through them inches from me. The only way out of this room was through this hulking man. His fingers speared into his silky hair causing some to stick out at an odd angle. I would not fix it. I shoved my hands into my pockets. Cole picked up another stack and then another.

"How'd you do this?" His voice was incredulous. "This would've taken me all day."

"I could tell you, but it's a secret." I tapped my head, smiling at the truth. "I'm not even allowed to know." When my brain went into overdrive, I rarely remembered my process. I saw the abandoned aftercare paper on the floor. I reached for it and squeezed by Cole in a bent position. "Thanks for everything. You're a true artist."

I backed out of the room, waving the paper like a lunatic, vowing not to return.

Chapter five

Cole

“Whatarethechancesyou go home with someone tonight?” Alec asked in a lighthearted attempt to encourage me.

“Zero.” I took another sip of Jack.

My hand would have to do. The expectations another person had after sex weren’t worth the hassle. I wasn’t in the mood for the hassle.

Alec dragged me to Pink Titanium even though the paperwork was successfully sent to our accountant for our quarterly taxes. He’d offered to pick me up on his Harley, probably thinking I wouldn’t show up. In my younger days, I’d hung out here a lot, but it got trendy, and we got old. Last night, they’d had drag-karaoke, so it was a mellow crowd for a Saturday night. Alec insisted he needed a wingman, but we both knew that was bullshit. Alec could have a locker room of hockey players panting after him when he dropped his pads. He’d convinced more than a few of them to walk on the wild side for the night. Hookups were easy for him, but Alec butchered relationships.

I cracked my neck in an effort to relax. Socializing had never been my thing, but being alone every night wasn’t a good time either.

“I made the aftercare calls today,” Alec said, and I nodded. Alec usually delegated that task, but we found the follow-up helpful in avoiding health issues as well as increasing our number of repeat customers. “Shane’s doing fine.”

He threw a lopsided grin my way.

Alec had more than a few questions about Shane, especially since I spent paperwork day tattooing Shane and creating a new organizational system for invoices and receipts. Alec knew it wasn't possible for me to have done it, but there was no way to explain what had happened. I had as many questions as Alec and fewer answers. Shane obviously had some sort of panic attack, but it was far from normal. His brain went into supercomputer mode and processed over a hundred random pieces of paper and organized my mess.

I needed to go digital, but I was clinging to the paperwork as part of my life with Paxton. He'd unofficially assumed bookkeeper duties for me. We would take bets on who could finish first. As in, if Paxton sorted the paperwork first, or if I made him come first. I used to tease him that I paid him in blowjobs. One more change I had to make in my life and business that took me further away from Paxton's memory.

Alec's shit-eating grin and chuckle annoyed the fuck out of me. "What?"

"Your boy Shane is over there." Alec pointed with his beer bottle to a high-top table at the edge of the bar area.

He clapped a hand on my shoulder and strolled over to the bar, squeezing in next to a twink.

I stood my ground. There were a thousand reasons to stay away from him. He was too young. He worked for my father. He'd replaced Paxton. He was obviously going through something. I had enough shit in my life. I absolutely wouldn't choose to add another complication. But...but I couldn't stay away.

My feet took me in a wide circle as I scanned the crowd. I only wanted to see if any of our other friends were out tonight. It was a complete coincidence that I leaned

against the back of a booth near Shane's table. He and a woman seemed very familiar with each other, leaning in close, touching each other. He'd said he didn't have a girlfriend, but he wouldn't be the first guy to lie.

"Stop it," Shane whisper-yelled at the woman.

"You can't go anywhere without me," she said in a sing-song voice.

"I swear this was the worst idea you've ever had." Shane rubbed the heels of his hands in his eye sockets. "Can we leave?"

Uneasiness spread through me thinking of Shane going home with that woman. She had curly brown hair and a round face with big brown eyes. She was definitely attractive, but her skin had a sallow tint and her makeup didn't hide the bags under her eyes.

"No!" She banged on the table, and Shane groaned.

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I didn't understand their dynamic, but it didn't seem sexual. I blamed curiosity for bringing me closer to their table.

"What about that guy?" She pointed toward the bar.

As if he felt my eyes on him, Shane looked over his shoulder and did a double take when he saw me. He leaned into the woman and spoke in her ear.

"Where?" Her voice rose above the noise of the bar. "The guy?" Her head turned on a swivel.

Shane said something else I couldn't hear, and the woman's head swung in my direction.

Without meaning to, I joined them, setting my tumbler on their table.

"Hey," Shane said, gripping the woman's arm so hard he dented her skin.

"So, you're the guy, huh? I'm Sara, Shane's sister." She stuck out her hand, and I shook it, nodding hello. She gestured for me to say something.

"I'm Cole. The guy who tattooed Shane."

"You got a tattoo, you little shit! Show me." Sara two-hand shoved Shane.

Shane tumbled sideways, and I caught him perpendicular to the floor, then hefted him upright. My hands stayed on him too long, taking effort to let go.

“What do you mean, I’m ‘the guy?’”

They both ignored me and had a staring contest. A weird sensation took root in my chest as I imagined what she meant by “the guy.”

“I’m not showing you yet.” Shane crossed his arms over his chest, protecting the tattoo. His eyes shifted to mine. “Tell her it’s unsanitary, and I can’t show her until it’s healed.”

I wouldn’t deny those big brown eyes. “It really isn’t a good idea,” I said, and Sara tsked. “Why am I the guy?” I asked again, unable to let it go.

Sara opened her mouth, but Shane slapped his hand over it. “No. You’ve bossed me around enough tonight. You don’t say another word.”

Sara was laughing behind Shane’s long fingers. He slowly drew his hand away, and she pursed her lips, miming locking her mouth and throwing away the key. I imagined they’d done this since they were kids. Sara folded her hand in her lap under the table, but it wouldn’t surprise me if she spoke up again.

Shane stole a glance at me and turned that pretty shade of pink. “This is not happening.” He propped his elbows on the table and rested his forehead on his hands.

The sane thing would be to let him off the hook and walk away. I was incapable of doing that.

“Weeeell, you see—“

“Did I or did I not tell you not to talk anymore?” Shane hissed at Sara. “I know you’re trying to help, but for the love of God, I’m an adult. You need to stop trying to micromanage my life.”

Sara sat in stunned silence as if it never occurred to her that Shane didn't want her help. I selfishly wanted to hear his thoughts directly from him.

Shane turned to me, eyes blazing. "Do you want the truth?" he asked, and I nodded. "I don't think you do."

I crossed my arms over my chest, determined to hear his answer.

Sara dug her ringing phone out of her purse in the middle of our stare down. "Shit." She pressed her phone to her ear. "Hello...no not...how about..." Her face morphed to horror, and she sped away from the table.

My eyebrow rose waiting for Shane's answer.

"Do you want to hear that I hate not knowing if you remembered meeting me the week before you tattooed me? That having your hands on me made me question everything I thought I knew about myself and turned my world upside down? And my sister's solution was to bring me to a gay bar to try to pick up a guy. Is that what you anticipated? Because I hardly know you and I know you didn't want to hear all that." Shane's breath was ragged, and his chest heaved.

I'd frozen and managed a slow blink, trying to make sense of his confession. That was definitely not what I had expected. I was reasonably sure Shane had just come out to me.

Sara reappeared flustered and flapped a hand at Shane. "C'mon, we gotta go. Now." She held her purse like a life jacket in front of her.

Shane rushed to untangle his legs from around the stool. "What is happening right now?"

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We both noticed the front of Sara's shirt grow wetter by the second. Sara needed to leave, but I wasn't ready to let Shane go. Not after his confession. Shane had dished out his feelings and insecurities onto the table like he'd been serving dinner. I wasn't sure if he was brave or crazy. I'd never met anyone like Shane. And I felt if I let him go now, I might not ever see him again. It was wrong, but I wanted more of Shane.

"Baby issues. Move it." Sara's face had turned bright red, and she had tears in her eyes. "Isaac was screaming when my dear idiot of a husband called." Sara gestured to where her milk had soaked the front of her shirt.

This situation I could fix if they gave me two minutes. "Stay here. I'll be right back."

Shane

The inferno known as Cole scorched my back. My brain had run through hundreds of outcomes from my self-sabotaging speech, and none of them included his potent stare from eighteen inches away.

"You're sure you can get home?" Sara asked me for the third time, wearing the motorcycle jacket Cole had gotten from a friend.

"Stop treating me like I don't know what I'm doing." I huffed as I made sure not to close the door before she had herself situated. "I am more than capable."

"That you are. Enjoy," she said with a laugh, handing me the jacket through the window before the Uber pulled away.

Cole still loomed close enough that his presence set me off balance. He had no reason to stick around. The way he spoke to Sara and eased her embarrassment melted my heart; he'd acted like she mattered to him. No. Cole was a decent human helping someone out after a statistically random predicament. Not a knight in shining armor like the guys Sara talked about in her many, many romance novels.

I'd managed to fast-track rejection from this man, and I should get it over with. But not hearing it would allow my continued romance style fantasies. I handed him the jacket and walked away. I could live with my fantasies and not the real thing. Honestly, it would make my life much less complicated.

"Shane." Cole's voice rang with authority as if he meant to stop me in my tracks.

It sent tingles through me, but I forced one foot in front of the other.

"Shane, we should talk."

"No, we should not," I said over my shoulder. "I'd wanted to shock you, and seeing you speechless was quite satisfying. I didn't anticipate the milk-tastrophe and an awkward 'sorry it's not you, it's me' speech on the sidewalk. We can skip the last part and go our separate ways."

Word vomiting while speed walking had me slightly breathless. Definitely the walking and not Cole. I'd reach the corner, request an Uber, and wallow in self-pity.

A very large, very strong hand closed around my bicep. I halted with a resigned sigh. But he remained an intimidating, mute figure behind me.

I'd been turned down enough in my life to give myself at least five versions of no: sympathetic, remorseful, condescending, rude, or, worst of all, silence. Reaching for my phone, I needed to get out of here as soon as possible. I hated that Cole was going

to force his version of the ‘no’ speech on me.

But my phone wasn’t in my pocket. I frantically patted myself down even though I knew the truth. “You conniving snake. I’m going to buy your kid the most obnoxious toy available.” I cursed Sara.

“What?!” I felt Cole jerk behind me.

“Nothing.” I ripped my arm out of his vise grip and doubled my pace. “Goodnight.”

“Where are you going?” Cole demanded.

“Home.”

“You’re going the wrong direction.”

I spun around. “How would you know?”

He seemed stunned. He probably wasn’t used to anyone questioning him. Not with his alpha male, I’m-the-boss vibe he had going on and on and on. Not the point. Focus.

“It’s on your intake form.”

“Do you have a photographic memory?” I kept my tone light.

“No,” he laughed.

“Then, you don’t actually know that, do you? The average person cannot retain a random fact like an address without context. It’s,” I jabbed my finger at him, “a one-in-a-billion chance you would remember.”

I continued my journey, calculating which block I would use to walk in the right direction. Damn him. I made it halfway down the block before he spoke again.

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“I know you’re going in the wrong direction because I have a buddy that lives in your building. It stuck in my head.” Cole had the nerve to jog up to me.

He thwarted my determination to leave with an ounce of dignity. A small shred was all I was asking for after my epic panic attack last week and speech tonight. He made me want things I’d never have, but he wouldn’t let me go. Cole was going to cost me a million dollars in therapy bills.

“It’s not your concern.” I paused at the street corner under the light.

Cole closed the short distance between us, and his green eyes blazed with an unnamed emotion. “I’m making it my business.”

Turning, I started back toward the club, figuring the best plan was to ask someone to borrow their phone. I was not the average person, rather a savant, so I’d memorized all the numbers in my phone. Cole fell into step beside me, his arm occasionally brushing mine, and it somersaulted my stomach.

The friend Cole borrowed the jacket from leaned against a building, tossing a piece of candy in the air and catching it in his mouth. I recognized him from Unframed Art. He pushed off the wall as soon as he saw us. “Shane, good to see you.” He smiled at my surprise. “I’m Alec, remember?”

His eyebrows raised as a scowling Cole handed him his jacket.

“Hi,” I said.

“The tat still doin’ okay?” He moved closer. “The mock-up was incredible, but I’d love to see the finished product. Do you mind?” Alec gestured to my shirt buttons. I nodded, and his fingers brushed my shirt.

Cole caught Alec’s wrist. “Do. Not. Touch. Him.”

Alec burst into laughter. “That’s what I thought.”

My too-fast brain was having trouble computing the meaning behind the words. The logical conclusion that Cole was staking some sort of claim on me was immediately banished to prevent any false expectations.

“You two headed home?” Alec grinned.

“No,” I answered as Cole said, “Yes.”

Cole’s eyes bore into me.

“Actually, I’m in a bit of a bind.” I focused on Alec and refused to look at Cole. “Can I borrow your phone? My devious, dead-to-me sister has my phone, wallet, and keys.”

Within ten minutes, I found myself panic ridden in the back of an Uber with Cole on the way to his apartment.

Chapter six

Cole

Shane’s shallow breathing and tight lips lasted the entire ride to the apartment. I’d touched his bouncing thigh to calm him, but that made his breathing worse. I couldn’t

blame him. I almost got into a fight with my best friend and all but marked Shane as mine, all the while making it clear that nothing would happen between us. But the thought of Shane leaving with Alec enraged me so much that my irrational solution was to kidnap him.

“Mr. Branson,” my doorman greeted, “and Mr. Reynolds. It’s nice to see you again.” He held the door open for us.

“Saul, I told you to call me Shane.” Shane smiled.

I couldn’t decide if I should be impressed that Saul knew Shane’s name, or if it should bother me. Reason one hundred to abort mission: save Shane. I’d argued that he’d gotten me home safely, and I was returning the favor. I needed to hold onto that lie.

“Yes, Mr. Shane. Mr. Branson, will you need a grocery delivery?” Saul asked. Saul was quick to anticipate the tenants’ needs, and it’d be good to have food tomorrow morning.

“I’ll text you a list, if you don’t mind.” I let him punch the elevator button for us while I scrolled to find an old grocery text for him.

“No trouble at all.” Saul smiled. “It’s nice to have you back.”

I nodded but didn’t tell him that this was a one-time thing. After Shane finally agreed to come to my apartment, a wave of guilt had overtaken me. I didn’t want to take him to where I was currently living, and Shane had already been to the Greenwich Village apartment. But I shouldn’t have brought him here. It felt wrong.

At my door, I punched the key code in.

“This is new,” Shane observed.

“Yeah, they were waiting for my approval to replace the old lock.” I opened the door, and he immediately approached our floor-to-ceiling windows to enjoy the view.

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I hadn't admired it in forever and had forgotten the beauty of the city. The modern apartment had suited Paxton's taste with a huge island separating the living room and the kitchen. Our bedroom and guest room were down the hall to the left of the living room with another set of rooms off a hallway from the kitchen.

After a few minutes of watching him admire the skyline, I pointed to the couch. "Sit." Shane grumbled but planted his ass on a cushion. I filled a glass with ice water and handed it to him. "Drink this."

I watched his eyes dilate, giving me a rush. I hated how much I wanted Shane.

But he politely set the glass on a coaster and folded his hands in his lap, avoiding eye contact with me. "Let's not make this more awkward than it already is. I've had enough for today. Point me toward the spare bedroom you promised, and tomorrow, if you get me an Uber, I will Venmo you the cost. We can forget all about the milk-tastrophe, and you can save your breath on why my attraction to you is a misguided faux pas and not reciprocated." After a beat of silence he said, "Please."

He wasn't wrong.

Fighting my temptation proved harder than almost anything else I'd done in my life, which is why I'd intended to tell him all the reasons we shouldn't act on our attraction. Now, that seemed like kicking an injured puppy. But I brought him here with an idea of how to help him, so at the very least, I had to stop acting like a dick.

"Milk-tastrophe." As I laughed, his shoulders relaxed, and I wanted more of that. "I thought you finance guys didn't believe in payment apps."

Shane's head snapped up, all his angled features set in a fierce grimace. "Oh, I don't have the app. My meddling sister is paying for it before I murder her."

I threw my hands up with my palms facing him. "No more details, I want plausible deniability of any criminal acts. These tattoos already make me a suspect."

Shane's chuckle sent relief through me as he sank into the sofa his body going limp. "Why me?" he groaned.

"Shane," I started hesitantly, enjoying the sight of him relaxed. He threw a hand up to stop me, so I added, "I won't give you a speech. I promise."

He squinted at me in disbelief.

"How much have you had to drink tonight?" I had to make sure he didn't regret answering my questions.

"I'm going to assume you don't count soda as drinking." Shane rested his head on the back of the sofa so his eyes were on the ceiling.

Every time this guy opened his mouth, I wanted to know more. No one goes to a gay bar to pick up men for the first time sober.

"Listen, from what you said," I began, and Shane's furious expression almost stopped me, but I continued. "You were surprised to be attracted to a man, and now you're confused. I think I can help with that."

Shane raised an eyebrow and remained uncharacteristically quiet. At Unframed Art and tonight, he rambled until all the thoughts in his head were out of his mouth.

"First, I want to thank you for trusting me with that information."

“It’s not a big deal.” His expressive face seemed genuine, which I found unbelievable.

“It’s a very big deal. To realize it and then to tell someone.” Pretty Boy had been so honest with me that I owed him the same. “When we were teens, Paxton kissed me, and I didn’t speak to him for two years,” I said, and Shane bolted upright. “But the worst part—I bullied him and threatened to out him.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Shane said, his intense brown eyes holding no judgment.

“You should know that you’re handling it much better than I did. And you can ask me if you have questions. This is a no-shame zone.” My hand waved to include all of my apartment.

It took me a long time to forgive myself for the pain I’d caused Pax in our teens. He’d told me that regret was a wasted emotion and to focus on the future.

Shane sat on the edge of the cushion, and his knee started bouncing again. I didn’t touch him, but the desire to calm his restlessness took me by surprise. I’d never experienced such a powerful attraction to another man. I loved Pax as my friend first, so there wasn’t this sexual tension. The pull toward Shane felt so right that it was definitely wrong.

“It’s not that I’m ashamed.” His face was thoughtful. “I did an overall analysis of my feelings about boys and men and didn’t find any evidence that I was attracted to them. The odds of latent bisexual feelings are very, very low. Usually, a person has repressed their feelings and can identify them in hindsight. I cannot. I don’t understand it.”

“No one else?” The caveman in me loved the fact that Shane wasn’t attracted to any other guys, and I couldn’t resist the clarification.

I'm an asshole.

Pretty Boy shook his head and bit his lip. I wanted to be the one biting his lip—that was ridiculous. “It’s weird, right?” his soft voice pleaded for understanding.

I shrugged, hoping to coax him into understanding even bigger things about himself. “Weird is the new normal. At least you didn’t try to punch me. The first night we met, I was in no condition to defend myself. You could’ve done some serious damage.”

Shane’s eyes widened, but his leg stopped bouncing. “So you do remember me from that night. You never confirmed.” He picked up the water but didn’t drink. “No one has ever appreciated that I did not inflict physical harm on them. I think that is highly underrated.” Shane finally took a sip of water.

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“Drink it all,” I commanded, and he obeyed immediately.

There was so much to know about Shane. His definition of courage was inaccurate because he’d been more open and honest than anyone I’d ever met. That took more courage than pretending your feelings didn’t exist. I would know.

The way he eagerly responded when I commanded sparked an urge I’d never known. I had to have more.

“Do you think you’re a submissive?” I asked.

Chapter seven

Shane

I managed to spray the last sip of water all over Cole’s beautiful furniture. He stood, clapped me on the back, and then answered the door for the grocery delivery. Thankfully, it gave me a minute to calculate a response.

Part of my brain wondered why I wasn’t having an identity crisis. Most men would, and it would be understandable. Twenty-four-year-old men did not wake up one day and have an epiphany that they were lusting after a man. Then again, my mind had never worked the same as other people’s.

I knew from years of planning and painstakingly plotting my future that life never turned out the way I imagined. I wasn’t easy going, but I had learned how to accept and adjust. Maybe that was why this wasn’t causing me to devolve into an analytical

mess. Sometimes, people learned how strong they were in a crisis. I learned I was attracted to a man when Cole touched my cheek, called me Pretty Boy, and almost kissed me.

I wasn't planning on second-guessing this new-found information. I was doing what made sense, accepting and adjusting. With all the things I'd been through, this didn't seem daunting or unmanageable. It was simply part of myself I had to figure out, put into context, and rearrange my expectations of the future. Which wasn't hard since my personal relationships were never a big part of the future that I'd imagined.

But I wasn't submissive. I hated when people tried to control me. It increased my anxiety.

Since meeting Cole, I'd begun researching gay, bi, and latent sexuality. My obsession with numbers kept me fascinated by research data, but the unpredictability of the outcomes caused low-level anxiety. In my extensive research, I'd also gone down the rabbit hole of kink. Intriguing stuff. I'd read about dominant and submissive relationships.

Cole's capable, domineering personality definitely attracted me. Objectively, I did fantasize about him sexually manhandling me. He'd asked me about pain kink, and now, I understood his question. He must have noticed I'd enjoyed the tattoo gun on my skin. But that wasn't about being submissive.

Cautiously sitting next to me, Cole said, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked you that."

"Are you sorry because you don't want to know the answer or sorry because you think you upset me?" Most people didn't say what they actually meant, and that was part of the reason I had difficulty forging real friendships.

Cole barked out a laugh and his smile flipped my stomach. His default expression

resembled a frown, giving off an aura of severity and annoyance. But his facial expression masked his pain, in my opinion. His smile transformed all the severity into soft lines of pleasure. To be on the receiving end was almost too much.

“Your mind works like a computer verifying data.” The light in Cole’s green eyes showed warmth, not irritation, a welcomed change.

“That annoys most people. But if you’re serious about answering my questions, I’d like your advice,” I said.

He might be off-limits, but he opened a door that I very much wanted to walk through.

“Not annoying at all. Truthfully, trying to figure out what’s in your mind keeps me up at night, so I’m happy to help,” he said, and I wanted to laugh at the absurdity of his confession, but his expression stopped me.

He’d leaned forward, his breathing hitched, and he sagged back.

I took a deep breath, hoping his acceptance of my thought process didn’t change. Most people thought my ability to over analyze things was quirky in the beginning, but they often changed their minds, eventually finding me aggravating. “Tell me what you think...” I explained my attraction to him and only him.

I hadn’t found other men attractive in my daily life or at Pink Titanium. My sister thought I needed to be certain a guy was attracted to men before my brain would consider sexual desire. Cole listened with an infuriatingly blank expression, but he didn’t interrupt, so I pressed on.

“After researching pain kink, I don’t think I fall into that category. Instruments of pain turn me off. I have high anxiety and trouble sleeping because I can’t shut off my

brain. Only eleven percent of submissives find pain helps counteract psychological distress with endorphins similar to a runner's high. The mild pain of your tattoo gun definitely helped me. The experience was transformative, and I crave it again so badly, like an addict. That makes me nervous, but I actually slept that night for six full hours. But I can't imagine letting someone tell me what to do."

I waited for a response from Cole.

His pupils had enlarged, his breathing heavier than before. All the possibilities of emotions that would cause that response started to spiral through my head. I didn't want to analyze all of it.

"Knowing that, do you think I'm a submissive?" My voice wavered with uncertainty.

Cole scrubbed a hand over his face. "You went all in, didn't you." Another statement, not a question.

I felt my face fall. Sara, the only one who understood me, had no idea how to help with this.

Cole leaned in with a smirk. "I thought you'd ask something like 'How did you know you're bi?' You surprised me is all. Maybe I should tell you why I asked the question."

I nodded emphatically.

“I do think you have submissive tendencies, but that isn’t something someone else can decide for you. I should’ve asked you some easier questions, but I can’t always think straight when it comes to you.” Again, Cole scrubbed his hand over his face. “Please don’t take offense to anything I’m about to say. I’m not judging you.” He drew in a deep breath. “You always look like you’re calculating something. Your brain is working all the time, and you’re in constant motion fidgeting. When I use a certain tone with you or demand something, you respond immediately and physically slow down. And sometimes your eyes dilate like you’re turned on.”

“That makes sense.” I forced myself to stop drumming my fingers on my thigh. He’d observed things I’d felt, some conscious, some not. “I should learn more about being a submissive. Maybe I should join a club for that sort of thing.”

Cole growled and clenched his jaw. I shrugged; we were at an impasse.

Cole cracked his neck and said, “What else is going on in your head?”

I understood Cole’s guilt and pain regarding Paxton, so I made an effort to keep my thoughts generalized. No need to scare him off with my lust for him. “I’m worried that I want something theoretically.”

Cole huffed out a sound between a grunt and a laugh.

“I never gave dicks much thought beyond my own, but when I did, well, I’m interested. I mean, in theory, the thought of sucking a guy’s dick is a turn on, but

what if the attraction is only in my head. What if I try to suck a dick, and in the moment, I find it repulsive?”

Cole shut his eyes. “Please stop saying ‘suck a dick.’”

“Sorry, was that too crude?” After I asked the question, I noticed Cole had started to get hard. That should not thrill me but it did. Ignoring his growing erection, I continued, “If my question bothers you, we don’t have to talk about it.”

“It’s fine. I said I would help you, and I meant it.” Cole opened his eyes but repositioned himself so there was more space between us. “Has that ever happened before? You thought you’d like something sexually but didn’t?”

“No, but I’ve never been adventurous in that area.” A blush crept up my neck.

“I don’t think it’s something to worry about too much.”

“You’re right, and if I go to a professional, they would understand my predicament and not take offense if it didn’t work out.” A lightbulb went on in my head. If I hadn’t been so wrapped up in my own revelations, it would have occurred to me sooner. “Are you a Dominant? Is that why you asked about me?”

“I’ve never been a Dominant before.” Cole sounded like the admission was dragged out of him.

“So maybe you have questions, too.” I bounced forward. “We should go to a sex club together. I’ll learn about being a submissive and confirm that I’m attracted to dicks, and you can figure out if you’re a Dominant.”

In this plan, I wouldn’t have to give up Cole completely. Maybe we could be friends. Conceivably, it was possible to be friends with a guy I wanted to have sex with.

“No!” Cole bellowed, shooting to his feet, and I instinctively shrank back into the couch.

My brain had made a serious miscalculation.

Cole

My reaction was primal, vicious. Immediately, I regretted it. I’d scared Shane and also had no intention of acting on my feelings. The thought of another man’s hands on Shane, teaching him, pleasuring him, and getting to have Shane’s mouth had triggered a homicidal rage against a nonexistent guy. Some remote part of me howledmine.

I couldn’t go there with Shane. I’d lost my soulmate, and Shane deserved more than a night of dirty sex. Shane deserved more than me.

“Sorry,” I said, hanging my head and forcing my fists to unclench. “It’s not you—it’s me.” I refused to look at him and see the fear I’d put in his eyes.

“Fuck you,” Shane spat. “You promised.”

My head snapped up in reaction to his anger. He was furious, an avenging angel ready for battle. Shane should be carved in stone to capture his beauty. And fuck, anger was hot on him.

Shane pointed a finger at me. “You insisted I come here. You wanted to talk about what happened. You said you wanted to help me. And YOU askedmequestions about my sexual preferences. Then, you dare judge me for wanting to explore my options!” Shane’s chest swelled with every breath. “You don’t want to help me, you just want to feel superior. Would you like me to list all of the ways you’re a hypocrite? I have a list a mile long.”

“That’s enough,” I demanded.

“Do not use that dominant tone with me and think I’m going to comply like a good little boy. I’m not your experiment.” Shane advanced a step and halted. “I’m not your anything.”

“Stop.” I hated myself for making him feel less than.

I hated that my past chained my ability to be what Shane needed. I hated, even more, the images of him as my very good boy. He’d be so fucking good.

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“Are you seriously hard right now?” Shane waved one hand in my direction and shielded his eyes with the other. “Patronizing me turns you on?” Shane turned toward the door. “I need to go.”

“Wait.” My voice cracked in desperation, and I think that was the only reason Shane stopped. “I’m sorry.”

“That’s not good enough,” Shane said without turning around.

“I’m sorry if that came off as patronizing. It wasn’t my intention, and it definitely wasn’t what turned me on.” My words had no impact on Shane, who stood rigid facing the door, furiously drumming his fingers on his thighs. The need to explain burned my throat. “You should be angry with me. I’m an asshole. I’m being a colossal asshole.”

Shane turned around and motioned for me to continue, looking less fiery.

“I don’t know what you want from me.” It was the truth and a lie. A hypocrite for wanting him.

Shane threw his hands up. “Nothing. Literally. I’ve asked you for nothing but apparently, I had the audacity to try and take what you offered: advice and guidance.”

“I know I’m not being fair to you. The thought of you finding a man to trust with your firsts makes me crazy. There are so many assholes out there who might take advantage of you, hurt you. Thinking of some other man getting to touch you and guide you infuriates me,” I said, enduring his resentful stare. I had to tell him the rest.

All of it. Holding his stare, I continued, “Because I want it to be me.”

Shane’s body folded in on itself, and his knees hit the carpet. His mouth opened, but I held up a hand. He needed to hear the rest. I dropped my head, unwilling to watch his expression.

“But I can’t be the one. You know I’m not over what happened. If we have sex, the guilt will eat me alive, and I’ll ghost you. I won’t take your calls, and if you show up at the shop, Alec will tell you I’m not there. You deserve to understand why I’m terrible for you.”

The silence stretched for a beat, but my head involuntarily popped up at the strangled sound. Shane shuffled toward me still on his knees as if standing took too much effort.

On his knees before me, his lips twitching, he said, “You’re trying to tell me, you have a unicorn dick, and whoever is lucky enough to experience it, immediately becomes obsessed, and Alec is actually your bodyguard. His job is to keep all crazed stalkers away from said unicorn dick.” Shane’s gaze flickered to my hard-on.

My chest burst with a laugh. “The mouth on you.”

“For the sake of argument, if I were immune to a unicorn dick and didn’t become obsessed, would the guilt hurt you?” Shane’s eyes were questioning, not accusing.

I hated that the answer was “yes” and kept silent.

“I witnessed your grief, and I would never want to add to your pain.” Shane bit his lip, nervous to continue, and I refrained from using my thumb to tug his lip loose. “We’ve already admitted we’re attracted to each other. What I think is different, for both of us, is the way our attraction manifested itself. It has unlocked desires we

never knew we had.”

Shane’s explanation was clinical and set me at ease that he wouldn’t push me toward something I wasn’t ready for.

Shane continued, “I can’t unknow the desires you unlocked. To deny them would be to deny a part of myself, which I think would be self-destructive. I’ve seen yourself-destructive guilt and grief. I worry that denying yourself would be all the more detrimental to you. I don’t think he would have wanted that.”

We should be having this conversation on the couch or at the table on equal footing, but he looked so damn beautiful on his knees for me. Logically, I knew everything he said was true. My heart hadn’t been logical a day in my life.

The turmoil in my brain made me blurt out, “I’m too old for you.”

Shane sat back on his heels. “Should I call you, Daddy?”

His low, lust-filled voice caused my cock to jump to attention and ache behind my zipper. The way he said it was nothing like Alec’s teasing. My hand reached into his soft brown hair and tugged. “What do you want?”

I watched his mind start to analyze a way to answer my question. I wanted his answer raw and wrung out of him like he was doing to me. I yanked his head back. “Answer me, Pretty Boy.”

Shane’s eyes dilated, and everything I hoped for spilled out.

“I want you. I want you to be the one to teach me. I want to suck your dick and swallow you down. I want to know what your cum tastes like.” He licked his lips, and I groaned.

“I can’t offer you any more than tonight.” I needed him like this on his knees ready to obey me, but he had to understand this was us scratching an itch. Nothing more.

He tried to nod, but my grip held his head in place, and I wished I’d swallowed his moan. Claiming it as mine.

“Tonight,” he begged. “No strings. No guilt.” Desire raged through me, taking over all of my senses. Shane’s cheek rubbed my cock through my denim and nearly undid me. “Please.”

One night. I’d handle one night without guilt. I had to burn this urge out to let it go.

“Take my cock out. Right. Fucking. Now.”

Chapter eight

Shane

Mytoo-fastbrainhita glitch, and my shaky hands fumbled, uncoordinated in undoing Cole's belt and jeans. I'd taken a risk as soon as he'd admitted he wanted me. Humor was the best option, but I'd estimated only a one-in-a-thousand chance of persuading him out of his pants. My attraction to him was ill-advised.

Cole was damaged and surly about his desire for me. I tugged his belt loose with my eyes wide open. A zero percent chance things would end well. I knew after tonight we'd probably never speak, and my heart would hurt. Worth every single second of misery to experience this with him.

I craved him on an elemental level. No one else would satisfy my need. When I'd called him Daddy everything had shifted. There was only us. I was certain I gave him something he needed as badly as I needed him. We could be what each other needed tonight. Cole had to be my first.

Finally, finally, I wrestled his jeans down, euphoric that he was commando. Cole's dick sprung free, large and demanding, and thumped my chin. It was thick with prominent veins that I wanted to trace with my tongue. The crown was purple and wet with his desire for me.

I forced myself not to touch him, waiting. Waiting for him to take control, so we'd be in this together. My dick wept in my pants in anticipation. I would do anything Cole asked. Tattoos covered his legs, but I only had eyes for his cock.

Cole's large, calloused fingers stroked my cheek with featherlight touches. My eyes fluttered closed at the sensation. "Open your eyes, Pretty Boy," he whispered.

Longing had transformed Cole's features. His eyebrows, which usually dipped down, were smoothed out in a straight line. His green eyes alight with lust and his mouth soft with kissable lips.

"Open." He pressed his thumb into the side of my jaw, and it unhinged for him. "You are perfect." He tightened his grip on my chin.

My head was eerily calm, my sole purpose was to wait for Cole's next command. The calm morphed into a fervor of hunger. I silently begged him with my eyes, my body vibrating for him.

Cole took his dick in hand and dragged his tip across my bottom lip. His hips shifted and cock filled my mouth, heavy on my tongue. The sound from the back of my throat was inhuman as I tasted his pre-cum and felt his ridge. I knew he wanted me to wait, so I denied the instinct to seal my mouth around him.

"You want to suck my cock?" Cole's voice was low and rumbled across my skin. I nodded with his cock in my mouth, wishing I was naked for him. "Are you hard?"

His eyes drifted down, and he let out a satisfied hum. I was rock hard.

"Suck me," Cole ordered.

My heart leapt, and I closed my mouth around his wide head. My tongue explored his ridges and lapped up his pre-cum. He tasted so fucking good. All my fantasies paled in comparison. Cole's scent intoxicated me, and I pushed forward, gagging myself to bury my nose in his hair. He smelled musky and spicy, and I wanted more. His cock was too large for me to manage, but I swallowed, choking and getting as much of him

down my throat as possible.

Cole grabbed my hair with both hands. “Fucking hell,” he growled.

I tipped my head down, nuzzling into his skin, which caused his cock to dislodge from my throat. I pulled back. “Can I touch you?”

A shiver rippled through my entire body with the way Cole stared down at me: rapture, awe, affection...I was too lust drunk to pinpoint his emotion. The slight inclination of his head was all the permission I needed.

I meant to hook my hand around his thigh for leverage, but his flexing muscles distracted me. Both my hands caressed up the back of his thighs until I had two hands full of his ass. We both groaned. Cole widened his stance as far as the jeans around his ankles would permit. I licked up the V of his abdomen while my hands committed every curve and dip of his ass to memory. I longed to know every single inch of his body.

My tongue mapped out every vein and ridge. I sucked his tip with such force I made a popping sound when I released him.

Cole ran his fingers through my hair, flexing and pulling but not demanding I change what I was doing. His breathing had become heavy, and a thrill jolted my system that I had this effect on him. I dragged him over the edge of his control. Me. That thought alone almost made me come.

My hand cupped his balls, and I let my middle finger massage his taint. The other hand grabbed his shaft just as Cole thrust down my throat.

“I’m going to fuck your mouth, and you’re going to take every inch of my cock,” Cole roared.

I went blissfully limp and gave myself over to him. All of me focused on pleasing him. My throat relaxed, and my hands folded in my lap. Cole's pleasure became mine. My cock ached, and any friction would result in an epic orgasm, but that was secondary to Cole's.

"You are every man's wet dream." Cole gasped as his thrusts became erratic. "You. Are. My. Perfect. Pretty. Boy." He rammed his cock down my throat with every word.

His praise washed over me like a drug, like I was made for this. My eyes were tempted to drift closed to bask in the glow of his words, but the sting on my scalp let me know he wanted my eyes on his.

"Shane!" My name exploded out of him as a curse, a prayer, heaven and hell.

Then, he was coming down my throat. The sight of him completely unraveled, and then swallowing him became too much. I came with him as our gazes locked together. I swallowed Cole Branson's orgasm, and I loved it.

I was so fucked. I'd joked that he had a unicorn dick, and I wouldn't get addicted. Fail. I wondered vaguely how many more times he would allow me to get my fill until the bright light of day would ruin this perfect night and his regret would overwhelm him.

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He softened in my mouth, and my cheek rested against his thigh. Cole continued to stroke my hair as small tremors ran through him. I was afraid to move. Maybe his guilt would kick in now that I sated his lust. I vowed to keep him in my mouth as long as he allowed.

A minute later, his fist latched onto my hair, dragging me off his dick.

Cole

Fuck. Pretty boy looked like he never wanted to let go of my cock and honestly, I didn't want him to.

"You okay?" I asked.

Shane's head bobbed up and down.

"I need your words." I stroked his soft skin under his protruding cheekbone.

Shane slowly blinked. Everything about him was calm. I did that. I made the man whose brain worked at warp speed and fidgeted constantly serene.

"That was fantastic." Shane's big brown eyes held so much emotion.

It was too much, but I wasn't ready to wreck this. I dropped to my knees in front of him.

"You're fantastic," I said as I held his face and brought my lips to his forehead.

The urge to kiss his pouty lips drowned me, but it wouldn't be fair to him. Even if I wasn't fucked up, I wasn't good enough for him. His hands unclasped and fell to his sides. I noticed the large wet spot on the front of his pants.

"You came?" My voice came out harsh and accusing.

"I...you...it..." he stammered.

One arm hauled him against me, and my other hand stroked him from the top of his head to his tailbone and back. I had a hard time speaking, but I forced out a string of, "Shhh, shhh, shhh."

On some level, I felt cheated out of his orgasm. That it should have been mine to take. That I should've admonished him and told him next time he wasn't allowed to come until I permitted him. His cum belonged to me. But that was crazy. There would be no next time. That knocked the breath out of me.

"Sorry." I forced out a laugh. "I didn't realize my unicorn cock had the power to make you come without being inside you."

"You were inside me." Shane rested his head on my shoulder.

His words unsettled me.

"Was it okay?" Shane whispered. "I mean, I know it was my first time." His voice became stronger.

I wanted to explain in thorough detail all the ways it was fucking mind-blowing, but that would make tomorrow harder. "A solid effort. Not unicorn level, but solid porn star level." My voice teased. "Ya did great, kid."

“Life goal as a porn star, met. Check.” Shane laughed, and the twinge in my chest ached.

After showing him the guest room, bathroom, and getting him some clothes, I asked to see his tattoo. To make sure it wasn't infected. The lies I told myself were getting worse.

“It looks good,” I murmured as my hand brushed over his skin.

His nipples hardened and I congratulated myself for not licking them. A shred of self-control had returned. But not enough for me to let him go yet. He smelled like sex and clean linen and everything good. His muscles were solid under my hands. Long and lean with definition and strength. I had to tear myself away before I decided to climb in bed with him. Sleepovers were not on the agenda with a hookup.

“All set? Need anything else tonight?” I stood to leave.

Shane's fingers on my wrist stopped me. “Thank you. I appreciate it and know it was hard for you.” Shane's gorgeous brown eyes conveyed too much emotion. Again.

“It was nothing,” I lied, then fled into my room but refused to lie down in my husband's bed.

I sat in his reading chair, researching on my phone. I wasn't thinking about how I'd broken my vow of no men. Or what Paxton would say if he could see me now. But he couldn't see me in this life, and that was my fault.

I crept into the living room to wait out the night on the couch.

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I already like Shane too much, and the way he looked at me made me think he felt the same. We both knew it didn't matter.

The thought startled me. Shane differed vastly from anyone I'd met since Paxton's death. He didn't shy away from acknowledging Pax or the impact his death had on me. I stared out at the skyline wishing I was a different man.

I jerked awake and heard a muffled cry. The sky, striped with the colors of dawn, indicated it was still early. Shane sounded distressed as I stumbled toward his room. My body hadn't caught up with being awake.

The light from the hall cast into the pitch-dark room. Shane was tangled in the covers moaning and thrashing in the throes of a nightmare. I cautiously sat on the edge of the bed and softly called his name. When he didn't respond, I rubbed his leg and said his name repeatedly, getting slightly louder each time.

Shane eased out of his nightmare, whimpering, and then his eyes popped open.

"It's me. Cole." I kept my voice low. "You were having a nightmare."

Shane drew in a ragged breath. "Sorry to wake you." He sat up and moved out of my reach. "It happens sometimes. Nothing to worry about."

"Tonight was a lot. For both of us," I confessed. "Are you okay with what happened? Any regrets?" His regret would make it easier for me to let him walk out and never see him again. I'm an asshole.

“No regrets.” Shane sighed.

My eyes were adjusting to the dark enough to make out his features. His brain was working overtime. Overtime on top of overtime from the looks of it. I reached out for his leg again, but he flinched. Maybe I needed to touch him more than he needed me.

“Tonight isn’t over,” I hedged, itching to do some of the things I’d found in my search online. I was the fucking epitome of bad decisions.

Shane’s mouth turned down. “I think that would be pushing the boundaries of the word ‘night.’”

“Okay, but when I promised you a night, I meant it doesn’t end until it’s time for you to leave.” Hell was too good for me. I was playing with fire and I didn’t care. “I did some research about how to shut your brain off.”

Shane remained silent, unmoving.

“Do you trust me?” I whispered so low I wondered if he’d heard. Maybe it would be better if he hadn’t. That was a lie; my body was already responding to our proximity.

Shane’s chin tipped up almost defiantly. “I do.”

I shifted so I sat against the headboard and switched on the dim bedside lamp. As much as I wanted to know if this would help Shane, I craved it.

He was right. Something new had been unlocked in me. I didn’t know how to handle it, or if I could deny it after tonight. But I had to know if it was a fleeting desire or more.

“Come here.” I hauled Shane into my lap, getting off on his compliance. My hands

roamed over his back and shoulders, feeling his protruding shoulder blades and the ridges of his spine. “I want to see if I can shut down all your thoughts. Will you let me?”

Shane nodded, and it felt like both of us were on a fragile ledge on the brink of collapse.

Chapter nine

Cole

“You can trust me,” I said, unsure if I was convincing him or myself as I removed his shirt and pulled off his shorts. Shane remained loose and pliant as I stretched him across my lap face down. Miles and miles of smooth skin begged to be touched. If I had more time, I’d explore every dip and curve with my tongue. He rested his head on his hands; his face not visible to me.

My fingers speared through his hair, already in disarray from sleep. My other hand skimmed over his firm ass. The man filled out a pair of pants, but naked, his ass was a perfectly firm rounded muscle. As eager as I was, I took my time enjoying the feel of his body.

“I want to put you in subspace again like at my shop,” I said before delivering a sharp strike on his ass.

Shane jerked but made no sound as I rubbed the red spot I’d created. Damn. My handprint on his ass—incredible.

I fell into a rhythm of strikes and caresses. At first, Shane’s body stiffened, but then he began to rock back into the blows. I’d never considered my hand an erogenous zone, but the heat on my palm went straight to my cock. I understood Shane’s fear of

addiction to this.

Shane would occasionally let out a hum of satisfaction. All my focus was on him. Nothing else mattered.

By the time Shane's cheeks were bright red, I felt calmer than I had in years. All the guilt and regret had been wiped away. Shane and I existed in a bubble of contentment. Neither of us was able to rouse ourselves from the blissed-out comfort.

But eventually, goosebumps broke out over Shane, and he shivered. I eased him off my lap and threw a blanket over him.

“Wait here,” I commanded.

Shane’s eyes knocked me off my feet. If a man was capable of actual heart eyes, Shane embodied it. Everything was laid out on his face for me to see, his calm contentment and gratitude. The pull was back, the one that made it hard for me to leave the room.

I started the shower, letting the water warm up and then grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge. I uncapped it as I knelt over Shane. Lifting him back into my lap in a sitting position, I brought the bottle to his mouth.

“Drink this, and then we’re getting you in the shower to warm up,” I said, and Shane held my wrist instead of taking the bottle from me.

Pleasure spread through me with the knowledge that I’d given Shane what he needed. I did something for him that no one else had ever done. He wanted to take what I was offering him.

Picking Shane up, I carried him into the bathroom. The steam had fogged up the mirror and created a cocoon of warmth. Shane was unsteady, so I stripped and stepped into the shower, holding him against me while the water poured down his back. Gradually, he came back to himself and looped his arms around my back.

“How do you feel?” My voice clogged with a riot of emotions.

“Amazing.” Shane sighed, sagging against me, so I supported his weight. “I want to see all your tattoos when we finish. You’re walking art.”

My heart clenched, and I pushed it aside, unwilling to acknowledge it. I felt Shane's cock as it started getting hard, and he tried to push away from me.

"It's okay." I bit into the soft, fleshy part of his neck where it met his shoulder.

I'd lied to myself, pretending that I was doing this for Shane. But right now, I needed to be close to him. Giving him what he needed gave me a high I wasn't ready to come down from. He'd wanted one night of no guilt, no regret. It suddenly felt necessary to indulge in taking care of him until he could stand on his own.

I reached between us to stroke his cock. Slicked with water and conditioner, my hand glided over his shaft, long and lean and beautiful like the rest of him. I'd missed this, a cock filling my hand with its hard, soft skin. A strangled noise vibrated in the back of Shane's throat as my thumb circled his slit. Pulling him out of the stream of water, I leaned him against the shower wall. I slid my hand down his back, between his legs to cup his balls. They were heavier than I expected and wouldn't fit in my mouth if I tried.

Shane's eyes were glued to where my hand worked his cock. In slow motion, his hand reached for mine.

"This is for you," I said, letting go of his balls and tracing a finger over his hole.

"I want to." Shane's fingers circled my cock. "Please." His eyes pleaded with me.

I swallowed. "Just hold it until I'm done with you."

I wanted him to enjoy every second of the orgasm I was going to give him while I watched. This time his orgasm was all mine.

Shane's eyes became unfocused as his lips parted and his chest heaved. He squeezed

my cock but struggled to do more. I wedged my thigh between his legs to stabilize him.

I pressed my middle finger against his hole to bring his nerve endings to life. Shane came alive for me. Thrusting into my hand, moaning and spouting pleas for more, and cursing. I watched in awe as this beautiful man came all over my hand, wishing his hand wasn't over my cock, so it would also be covered.

“Wow.” Shane let out a shaky laugh. “You broke my brain. No words.”

“That was the plan.” I chuckled, feeling his lightness was contagious. “Let me wash you.” I tried to steer him back under the water.

“You next.” Shane stood his ground, and his grip tightened on me.

This man tore down all of my resistance. For good or for bad, I never wanted to say no to him. “I'll use this to jack myself, and you can watch.” My palm was slick with his cum.

“Me.” He held out his hand.

My mouth went dry, knowing I'd made him almost nonverbal in his pleasure.

The last half hour had ignited a new level of lust in me, and I was about to blow. “If you touch me, I won't last.”

Shane's eyes lit up, and he jerked me toward him by my cock. He took my wrist, so our palms connected and then he slathered my cock with his seed. Knowing I was covered in his cum dragged a guttural moan out of me. In a few strokes, I was painting him with my orgasm.

He looked like a debauched sex God—wet and covered in my cum. The image would stay with me long after he left. Shane looked like mine.

I'd left my brain at the bar.

“Thank you for tonight,” Shane said, leaning forward.

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I yanked him into a hug afraid he was going to kiss me. Too intimate. But I was so fucked up that I moved my hand to my mouth to lick his orgasm. It was a mistake. He tasted incredible. It would be my punishment. Tasting something I couldn't have.

Washing us quickly, I finished and wrapped Shane in a bath towel. I brought another into the bedroom to dry his hair. I'd read that once the endorphins wear off, a submissive can crash. He began shaking when I tried to redress him.

"I think you need skin-to-skin contact to warm up." I threw the covers back and climbed in the bed behind him. "I'll warm you up until you fall asleep."

"You have a dragon tattoo, too." Shane's voice was slow and sleepy. I nodded and pulled him close. "Your dragon is a fierce warrior, and mine is more like an intellectual guardian. Fitting."

He tried to turn toward me, but I was exhausted and held him in place. "Sleep."

"I like the wolf on your shoulder too," Shane said.

Relaxing and nuzzling in, he fit perfectly with his head tucked under my chin, our legs tangled, and my arms around him. It was as if we'd been doing this forever, and we clicked into place. He'd be gone soon, and the guilt would come. But right now, I didn't want to deny myself. Tonight had been more than I ever thought I'd have.

It would need to last me a lifetime.

Chapter ten

Shane

Waking up surrounded by Cole was heaven. I vaguely remembered thinking he might regret waking up with me and tried to extricate myself from his embrace last night. Our bodies had other ideas. Both his arms were wrapped around me, and he'd slung his leg over my thighs. His rhythmic breath on my neck sent shivers down my spine. I closed my eyes and gave myself over to this fleeting, glorious moment.

Last night, I kept waiting for his guilt to overwhelm him. I'd been afraid of the crash and his subsequent anger. I held no illusions that last night changed anything between us, but it gave me hope for him. He deserved to be happy and loved.

Cole was alive but not living; I understood that.

Carefully disentangling our limbs, I eased out of bed. My stained pants and boxer briefs were on the ottoman at the end of the bed. Instead of trying to explain the stain to Sara when she picked me up, I grabbed the shorts and T-shirt Cole had given me last night.

The covers pooled under Cole's arm, giving me a view of the head of his dragon tattoo, which started on his back. The dragon's neck reached over his shoulder so the head rested above his heart. It had large teeth, flaring nostrils, and prism eyes of yellow, green, red, and purple. I backed out of the room before I touched him.

The apartment had a completely different look in the bright sunlight. The floor-to-ceiling windows created the illusion of the apartment being part of the skyline. My eye was drawn to a huge painting on the far wall. The vibrant slashed blues and greens mixed with red and orange painted on metal reminded me of an abstract sunset over water. My hand involuntarily reached to touch the paint. As soon as I did, I knew he'd painted it. At first glance, the strokes were random. But each brush stroke had been expertly placed to create beauty in chaos.

Turning back around, I surveyed the apartment. I wasn't sure if I should try to find Cole's phone to call Sara or wait for him to wake up. I decided to do a quick sweep of the apartment, and if I found it, I would call. If not, then I'd wait for him.

The apartment was much bigger than I originally thought. There was another bathroom and bedroom off the kitchen. Larger than a married couple needed. The decor was also less masculine than I expected. Soft fabric, muted colors, and rounded corners.

Fuck. This apartment was set up for a family.

I stood in the doorway of the primary bedroom to see if Cole's phone was in plain sight. The bed was perfectly made without a crease. Cole never got in his bed last night. Never even sat on the edge.

Wandering into the kitchen, I opened a paper bag from the delivery last night. Three bagels. An odd number since Cole had repeatedly said he didn't live here. The fridge had a container of six eggs, four sausage patties, and orange juice.

The least I could do was make breakfast. Soon, I would have to deal with all the feelings from a one-night stand with a guy I was obsessed with, but for now, I'd make breakfast. All the anxiety and longing and shitstorm could wait.

Although the kitchen had silverware, dishes, and glasses, there weren't any pots or pans. I finally located a brand-new, high-end nonstick griddle in an empty pantry cupboard. Perfect for making breakfast sandwiches. I removed the packaging and got to work.

Cole stumbled out of the bedroom wearing boxers and nothing else. His tattoos were on full display, and I tried to catalog them all. The designs had been crafted to incorporate each muscle, curve, and dip of his body. I wanted to touch and lick all of

them.

I was so enamored by his body that I missed the expression on his face. Last night, he'd said this wasn't over until it was time for me to go. It was obviously time for me to leave. The sausage patties were cooked and sat on a plate, but the eggs were still cooking, so I turned the griddle off. I doubted either of us would be eating.

"What are you doing?" Cole snapped.

There was no use in engaging with Cole's anger. The regret and guilt I'd so thoroughly prepared for had snuck up on me. I blamed the spanking and mind-blowing orgasms he'd delivered last night.

"You can't use that pan!" Cole shouted. "You can't..."

Cole watched me walk around the island. Thankfully, my shoes were by the door. At this point, I'd leave barefoot. Cole could have his anger. I'd leave with my dignity if nothing else. I knew what I was getting into, and I chose it anyway.

I'd been a target for misplaced anger and grief for a large part of my childhood. I would not put myself in a situation to endure that again. Knowing his anger wasn't personal didn't help. It still felt terrible and very, very personal.

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“Fuck!” Cole yelled as the door shut behind me.

Last night, I’d noted the stairwell in case of an emergency. A handy idiosyncrasy I had when entering new buildings. By using the stairs, I would most likely avoid any further confrontation with Cole. I was not in the business of being a target.

When I reached the ground floor, I heard Cole’s raised voice. He apparently didn’t believe I hadn’t passed through the main entrance. I exited the building via the stairwell and found myself on a side street.

I ducked into a building alcove when I heard Cole bellow my name. His fury drove him out of the apartment building in his boxers. He seemed to take hold of himself, and I assumed he went back inside.

At least it was a mild summer day and not scorching hot. I found Sixth Avenue, followed it into Washington Square Park, and sat on a bench.

The problem with being so well acquainted with loss and grief was understanding the irrationality of it all. Life would be so much easier if feelings were logical. More than one therapist had told me that I don’t feel my feelings; I logic my way through them.

Fuck-you-very-much. Not one of them explained how to feel those feelings, since it was different for everyone. I had to figure it out for myself. Well, today was not that day.

I couldn’t bring myself to regret last night. Even sitting on a bench looking as if I was half a paycheck away from being homeless, now I knew myself better. I knew that

being with a guy felt amazing. That sucking and swallowing turned me on to the point of orgasm. That calloused fingers on my dick felt better than anything had before.

Spanking had been a revelation.

I shouldn't rule out a sex club for experimenting. Research stated that a Dominant/submissive relationship had the potential to be deeply nurturing, and I definitely got off on serving Cole's needs and receiving his spankings. I didn't have time to meet and vet strangers. I did not have a good track record with relationships, so Cole had been right. Finding someone to trust would be difficult. One reason I'd trusted him was that I knew where I stood. A one night only teaching experiment.

With Cole, I wasn't trying to be something other than myself. He was off-limits, so I didn't have to worry about what he thought about me or the impact my tendency to word vomit would have on our future. It was refreshing, liberating even.

I wondered if Cole realized things about himself from last night. His eyes had turned molten with lust when I'd called him "daddy." He'd made it so comfortable for me to give myself over to him. Relinquishing control to shut my mind off was the ultimate high. But being a Dominant might be difficult for him. Of all the things I'd learned about myself, the most shocking was that I absolutely had submissive tendencies. At least in bed.

I had enough to work through without adding Cole's issues to my unrequited feelings. I'd stupidly hoped Cole and I could be friends. There was no way I could be near that man and not want him inside me. That was a truth I couldn't ignore. Finding another way to satisfy myself was going to be excruciating. My sex drive had been almost nonexistent, but since meeting Cole, I'd had to masturbate daily.

I'd willingly explored this, and now I had to figure it out on my own. Cutting all

contact with Cole would be for the best. I'd tell Sara eventually but not today. I wanted to have a handle on everything before she started trying to fix my life. She'd been doing that for fifteen years, and I needed to stop letting her do it.

I stood; I had a two hour walk to Brooklyn to logic through my feelings and pretend I still wanted to murder Sara.

Chapter eleven

Cole

“Fucking,fuck.Fuck!”

I'd lost my mother fucking mind. I'd betrayed Paxton in our home. With a random guy who'd meant nothing.

I don't know which thought made me sicker, betraying Paxton or trying to convince myself that Shane meant nothing. Hating Shane was so much easier than hating myself. I spewed my anger at him, but he hadn't given me the satisfaction of a fight. Not one word.

He'd expected it. Somehow, he'd known I'd fuck it up and wasn't surprised or shocked. He'd looked disappointed. Welcome to the club. Disappointment and anger were the main menu.

It was fine. Better this way. A clean break. No expectations and no commitments. I'd never see him again. I wasn't capable of giving Shane more—now it was over.

This way I wouldn't be tempted to put Shane on his knees and make him beg. And I wouldn't give into the need to feel in control or want the satisfaction of bringing him peace. I'd put it all behind me.

My heart leapt at the knock on my door. I didn't know I was hoping it was him until I yanked the door open and experienced a gut punch when Paxton's mom, Lisa, stood in front of me.

"How'd you know I was here?"

"A mother always knows," she said, and I pulled her in for a quick hug.

I loved how she treated me like her son. The road to get here had been bumpy, but I didn't think I would've survived the last five years without her.

"Did you...are you making...breakfast?" She pushed past me and rushed to the stove. Probably to ensure I wouldn't burn the place down. From the other side of the counter, I saw what she saw. Three bagels on a plate, four cooked sausage patties, and ruined eggs on the griddle. Her eyes widened with shock. "Is someone here? Do you have a," she paused and sounded almost excited, "guest?"

I shook my head. Last night I'd pulled up my notes in my phone and texted our standard breakfast order to Saul. I didn't know I'd fucking done that until right fucking now. We always ordered extra because Lisa miraculously appeared on mornings we'd made breakfast.

Saul must have tipped Lisa off.

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“Oh, baby, come here.” Even though Lisa was a full foot shorter than me, she cradled me to her chest and guided me to the couch.

“I’m an asshole,” I confessed as she stroked my hair.

Four full days—today was the fifth day—but I wasn’t counting, and no response from Shane. I’d left him a message to apologize and to arrange returning his clothes. Lisa had talked me off the ledge and said it was okay to spend time with another man but to take things at my own pace. She never pushed me to move on or told me I shouldn’t feel guilty.

I felt guilty, but mostly because I thought I should hate what had happened with Shane. But I didn’t hate it. The memory replayed in my mind over and over and over. The last few nights, I’d jerked off, remembering the way his ass warmed and turned red under my palm.

Paxton and I’d had an extremely active sex life. There was nothing better than sinking into him after a long day. We both liked it when I took charge, and I’d never wanted more.

But commanding Shane and doling out pain as comfort was completely different. It had never occurred to me to dominate someone, so I’d never had the urge before. Being bisexual stretched the boundaries of normal sex, but I wasn’t sure I was willing to explore being a Dominant. I shouldn’t want to do it again. I shouldn’t want it at all.

But it didn’t stop me from trying to leave another message for Shane.

“His damn phone keeps going to voicemail,” I grumbled.

Alec placed his hand on my forearm with such a look of pity, it confused me. “He blocked you, dude.”

“Wwwhat?”

“Try texting, but I’m telling you he blocked you. I thought you’d figure it out, but watching your clueless ass call him is pathetic. No one calls. No one.” Alec patted my arm condescendingly.

I shook my head in disbelief. Shane wouldn’t. He’d loved what we’d done. That was a fact. Yes, I’d been an asshole, but he should let me apologize.

Alec picked up the shop phone and dialed. “Hi Shane, it’s Alec from Unframed Art. I wanted to let you know we’re offering a special of 50 percent off your next tattoo for new customers only. Call us if you’d like a consultation.”

“What. The. Fuck.”

“He blocked you, and before you throw a tantrum, if he blocked you, then he’s not coming in to get another tattoo.” Alec sauntered over to a customer picking out artwork.

“I wasn’t going to have a tantrum,” I grumbled, annoyed with myself for using Alec’s stupid word.

My next appointment arrived, and I welcomed the distraction.

Unfortunately, he wanted a skull on his biceps. With the easy design, my mind had plenty of time to think about Shane.

Alec materialized as soon as I finished to schmooze my customer and book his next appointment. Alec was a master at customer service, and I depended on him to take care of all the payment details and charm clients into more tattoos.

“Are you going to tell me why you’re stalking the yummy baby-bi?” Alec leaned against my office door.

I mentally took back all the positive thoughts I’d had about him. Shane was yummy, but I didn’t want anyone else thinking it. “I’m not stalking him.”

“Mm-hmm.”

We stared at each other, neither conceding our point, although I didn’t actually have a point.

“You know I’m on your side, right? You’ve mourned for years, and I’ll never tell you it’s been too long, but I will tell you that he’s the first person to get to you. I want you to be happy. I don’t know if he’s right for you, but if you want a friend to help figure it out, you know where to find me.” Alec tipped his chin up and wandered back up front.

He was right. Shane had gotten to me, and I’d fucked up. Not a newsflash. Shane had been using the griddle pan that Lisa had given me for my birthday. Paxton had snatched it from me and told me if I wanted a decent breakfast, he’d be the only one using it. I had a habit of ruining pans. With a kiss, he’d made me promise to never use it without him. He’d died before we’d made breakfast together again.

The time between seeing Shane with that pan and Lisa showing up was a blur. I can’t remember what I’d said to him, but he’d left without a word.

Fixing the situation might make it worse for both of us.

But my mind wouldn't let go of the image of his face while he came all over my hand. And I had to apologize; it felt necessary to move forward.

I found myself knocking on his apartment door at 9:30 p.m. on a Thursday.

Knocking again, I slumped against the wall across from his door while waiting for an answer. I should leave his clothes and take this as a sign that he was a mistake that I needed to keep in the past. Unable to drop the bag of his clothes, I stepped into the elevator without closure.

Chapter twelve

Shane

I'd watched Cole outside my apartment from the stairwell, thankful when he left. I did not have the energy for him. My job was more challenging than I expected. I'd known I had huge shoes to fill when I took this job.

Donald had hired me because I had the same innate ability with numbers that Paxton had. He'd said age was irrelevant, and that Paxton achieved management status by the time he was twenty-two. At twenty-four, I had several years of experience, but it had become clear that not everyone shared Donald's opinion and confidence in my abilities.

I'd been prepared to put in extra time to bring everything up to date. I was not prepared for the systematic errors. I dedicated most of my time to shoring up how the financial data was stored and identifying the sources of data for reports with the tech operations executive.

Branson Financial actually had important data stored in a PowerPoint. A goddamn PowerPoint. One of the new analysts had to write code for a new report. The management's ineptitude was staggering, but the worst part was a culture unwilling to change. If someone told me one more time that wasn't how Paxton had done it, I might hurt someone.

The world had changed in five years. Technology advanced, markets varied. No one seemed to think that if Paxton had lived, he would have adapted. If Paxton was alive,

he'd skewer the idiots.

The last thing I needed was to find Paxton's broken-hearted, gorgeous husband at my door like a bewildered bear.

He made me want to climb him like a tree—forgetting all my problems. If I let him command me to do whatever filthy things he imagined, he'd succumb to his guilt again, and I'd be left gathering up pieces of my heart.

I would always be thankful to Cole for helping me figure myself out, but it wasn't a reason to subject myself to his pain. I'd barely had time to do any new research into my proclivities let alone explore them.

I did grill Sara as to why she wasn't shocked to find out I was attracted to a man. She said we lived in a hetero world, and while my peers were exploring girls, I was in a deep depression and trying to survive. I'd skipped the hormonal teenage phase and landed in adulthood to escape our parents. Sex wasn't a priority, so I'd never questioned my preferences. I'd never been wildly attracted to another human before. I struggled to label myself; was I just bi or something else? Sara encouraged me to follow my attraction and instincts and not to worry about labels. She made sense, but I wasn't thrilled with trying to sort this out now that I was on the cusp of attaining my goals.

I always suspected I had a personality prone to addiction. I hardly drank, never took drugs, and tried to eat a healthy diet. Sara called me a germaphobe, but it went so much deeper.

I needed control in my life. I clung to it like a life raft. Finding out that ceding control to Cole actually gave me peace was incomprehensible. It opened up a part of me that might never have surfaced without him.

Being on my knees, at his mercy, waiting for instructions while not having to predict, analyze, or interpret was intoxicating. Knowing nothing was expected of me except to follow directions, held my too-fast brain captive. I craved more. I craved him. But he was too dangerous.

Sara had known something had happened and assumed the worst of Cole. Correcting her would mean telling her what happened, and I wasn't ready for that.

She invited me to her in-law's place on Long Island for the weekend. I needed the mental break. Her family had adopted both of us, and we regularly would escape to Long Island in the summer.

"I'll take Isaac to see the water." I stood without waiting for an answer.

The wind and sea air off the Long Island Sound lulled me into complacency. Sara had insisted on lunch at her in-law's favorite deli. I was in the midst of a food coma and took a crying baby Isaac from Sara to give her the chance to finish her lunch.

Sara's husband, Christopher, and his parents were amazing. But they were overly tactile and expressed love through hugs, pats, and squeezes. It was so far from my own experience that I distanced myself from them. I knew Sara embraced her new family as much as they did her. She wanted all of the attention and love we'd lacked in our childhood.

I did not enjoy it.

The motion put Isaac to sleep, so I kept my stride even as I walked along the water.

"You're good with him."

I turned to see Cole, infuriatingly handsome as always. He flexed his fingers, and his

brows pulled together in a frown.

Instead of asking all the things I wanted to know, number one being “why are you talking to me,” followed by “what are you doing here,” then “are you okay,” and “can I call you daddy again,” I said, “I know.” I rocked him gently in my arms. “This is Isaac.”

An awkward silence followed as we stared at each other.

“I’m sorry—”

“I don’t need your apology.” I cut him off.

I couldn’t hear how much being with me hurt him or another version of the “it’s not you, it’s me” speech.

“There you are, honey, I thought I’d find you out here.” An older, petite, blonde woman looped her arm through Cole’s. My eyes volleyed between the two, finding no familial resemblance, but Cole kept his eyes on me. “Cole.” She swatted his arm. “Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend?”

“Hi, I’m Shane, and this is Isaac,” I said, hoping Cole would blink or have some sort of reaction.

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“I’m Lisa. Nice to meet you.” She gave me a little wave since my hands weren’t free.

“Lisa owns the place.” Cole gestured to the deli.

“It’s fantastic,” I said.

Before Lisa responded, Cole said, “He lives in the city. You can save your pitch about weekly lunch specials.” He affectionately pulled her closer.

“How do you know my boy?” Lisa asked.

Cole went rigid, so I opted for a partial truth. “He tattooed me.”

Cole visibly relaxed, and I tried to figure out their relationship.

“What is going on over here?” Sara stormed toward us with fire in her eyes.

“Sara,” I said in warning.

It never occurred to me that my overprotective sister would run into Cole again.

She stood between us with her feet shoulder width apart and her fists on her hips. With Isaac in my arms, I was handicapped.

Sara pointed a finger at Cole. “I know what you did to him.”

Cole reared back as if Sara had slapped him. His eyes shot to mine, and I shook my

head. Sara absolutely did not know what Cole and I had done.

“And you made him walk to Brooklyn!”

“You walked,” Cole inhaled deeply, “to Brooklyn,” he said with a dip in his voice that sounded like regret.

Isaac decided he did not enjoy the angry tones and woke up wailing.

“Sara, don’t.”

My sister was about to start a tirade as she held her arms out for Isaac.

I held him tight and said, “I’m only giving him back if you promise to walk away.” Her stare was murderous. “I’m serious. I’m going to talk to Cole, and you’re leaving.”

Stiffly, she nodded, I handed over Isaac, and she marched up the sidewalk back to the restaurant.

Lisa cleared her throat. “I’ll meet you at the house later.” Her eyes ping-ponged between us as the tension got higher. She stretched up and Cole dutifully bent as she kissed his cheek. “Be nice.”

She gave me a small smile before following Sara’s path.

“You walked all the way to Brooklyn.” Cole brought my attention back to him.

“I did not tell her anything about that night,” I explained in a rush. “I was upset and she assumed some things, and I didn’t correct her. Eventually, I’ll tell her the basics. She’s my best friend, but I never thought...”

There were so many things I never thought, so I didn't know how to finish that sentence. And I should not explain Sara's anger to Cole.

Cole studied me, and I fought the urge to insist he tell me what to do so I wouldn't have to navigate this conversation. My discomfort won out. "What do you want?"

"To talk." Cole's shrug feigned nonchalance. "I tried to return your clothes after you blocked me, but you weren't home."

"Are my clothes being held for ransom?" My lips twitched at the thought of Cole clinging to my clothes.

"A man's gotta use what he's got." Cole's face softened when he smirked. "What do you want? I'll give you whatever, but I need to apologize."

I held up my hand to tell him to stop, but I reconsidered my strategy. "I want the painting in your living room. The metal one."

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“Are you mental? You can’t have—”

“It’s as absurd of a request as your need to apologize. I don’t need it. Ask yourself why you need to say you’re sorry. My guess, it has nothing to do with being sorry. And unless you figure it out, don’t bother me again. I blocked you for a reason.”

Cole crossed his gorgeous forearms over his chest. He should register his bare forearms as deadly weapons or insure them as priceless art. Both were true. “I’m not trying to start something with you.”

Cole’s eyes lowered to the ground, and I watched his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed.

“I know.” It wasn’t my place to tell him things about himself, but he’d unapologetically asked if I was submissive, so I guess we were past social niceties. “You liked being dominant, and you liked being with me, but you don’t want to like those things because you feel guilty. Your anger isn’t about a griddle or a painting. I can’t help you figure those things out.”

Cole’s green eyes melted me on the spot.

“I’m starting therapy.” Cole’s mouth fell open after his admission.

“That’s great. I hope it helps. I hope you find what makes you happy, Cole. You deserve a full life.” I took a step back so I didn’t step forward into him.

I retreated a few more steps while keeping my eyes locked on a confounded Cole. I

was not responsible for fixing him. Trying to mend his broken heart could ruin me. It wasn't worth the risk.

Chapter thirteen

Cole

Twoweeksandthreedays and two therapy sessions since I'd seen Shane. Tracking days obsessively never occurred to me before. Not until Shane.

Therapy wasn't as terrible as I'd imagined, but it was also worse. She'd given me some mental exercises to use when my anger or thought process took a wrong turn. It actually fucking worked, so that was cool. But I'd leave exhausted.

Facing my regret and guilt felt pointless. Nothing would change what happened. I couldn't go back and make different choices. I couldn't even lie to myself and pretend I'd make different choices in the future.

That made me the biggest asshole of all. All my choices were thought out and logical. How Pax and I grew up left trauma that stuck with a person. I'd never pretend to be someone I'm not.

That night with Shane tortured me. Knowing he walked to Brooklyn because of my guilt, unironically ate at me. My go-to emotion was anger, and Shane took the brunt of that. It wasn't fair.

It wasn't his fault that I hated myself for being with another man in the apartment Paxton had bought for our future. A future we'd fought about that would never exist. None of that was Shane's fault. Shane had been the one bright spot in my personal hell.

He deserved more than to be used by me.

Paxton had been the one steady thing in this life that I counted on. My mom had left, and my dad hated me for looking and acting like my mom. My business was unpredictable. I was unpredictable.

Dominating Shane and taking care of him afterward had been a relief. He needed me to tell him what to do as much as I needed to take control. Almost as if the control put me in a subspace as well. If I wasn't broken, we'd be the perfect match. Even if therapy helped me, I wouldn't love another person again.

Love gave someone else too much power over my life. My feelings, happiness, and control became all wrapped up in another person. Pax was my soulmate, and I would never feel that way about someone else.

I could never give away that much of myself again. To trust another person with my well-being and my heart.

I had to figure something out. I wasn't sleeping enough, but I was reluctant to take my prescribed sleeping pills. I usually spent 70 percent of my time tattooing, but I'd cut back, handing clients off to my very capable staff. Clients always agreed, but I felt guilty.

I needed to refocus on my business, but my heart wasn't in it. For the first time in almost a decade, I took out my easel and paints. The morning light in the loft was perfect for painting. I'd started and discarded over a dozen canvases. Nothing felt right except the paintbrush in my hand.

Alec burst through the door using the keycode. If I had responded to his texts, he wouldn't be barging into my space. I only had myself to blame.

“You’re not dead. Good news.” Alec grinned, took a seat at the island, and sucked in a candy.

“I told you I was going to paint.” I let the brush lead me instead of trying to consciously create something.

“Yeah, I was afraid of what you were using to paint.” Alec’s serious tone stalled my hand.

In his mind, I might have been painting with my own blood. I winced. “I’m past that,” I assured him.

“I don’t think it’s that simple, boss.” Alec stretched his arms over his head. “I can cover your two-thirty appointment.”

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“Nah, I’m looking forward to that one.” My brush worked its way across the canvas.

“Cool.” Alec stood and sauntered over. “You’re painting a portrait?”

“It’s not a real person. I’m just painting.” My brush stroked the canvas lightly.

Alec watched silently as I worked. He broke the silence after about fifteen minutes.

“You know that’s Shane, right?”

“No,” I barked, studying my work.

Fucking hell. My pretty boy’s stunning bedroom eyes stared back at me.

Maybe Shane was right. Maybe I did need to figure out what I wanted from him. He was in my dreams, my thoughts, and now my painting. The part of my mind that I kept trying to shut out was banging for attention.

I had to do it without hurting Shane. I couldn’t be responsible for letting another man down. One was enough.

Chapter fourteen

Shane

Myapartmentfeltclaustrophobictoday. I’d rented a one bedroom because I never entertained, and I refused to pay more for unused space. Sitting on the couch, I felt cramped between the window and the kitchen island.

My office at Branson Financial had become the place I tried to fix everyone else's problems rather than do my actual job, so I set up my laptop with a secure link.

A position at Branson Financial had sounded like the dream job. A fast-track to a C-suite position before I turned twenty-five. My ultimate goal. But reality lacked glamor and prestige. I didn't have a grasp of whether Branson Financials' unwillingness to innovate and update was a symptom of the company or a wider problem in the industry.

I desperately wanted a corporate culture comparison, and even wished I'd kept in touch with a few of my classmates. I'd never made lasting friendships, so there was no one to complain to about my very high paying position.

They'd hate me even more.

I opened my spreadsheet but had trouble accessing the database to verify the accounts. For some reason, this report wasn't balancing, and every time I worked on it, something else more pressing popped up at work.

And I was entirely too distracted with thoughts of Cole. Therapy had taught me to set boundaries and not entertain regret when I made decisions in my best interest. My mind would not get on board with putting Cole in my rearview mirror. I couldn't take responsibility for his emotions. After five years of grieving, he seemed stuck in the anger phase. I understood, but I had my own issues.

The fire in his eyes when I'd been on my knees got me instantly hard. No one had ever looked at me with such intense lust and possession. I wasn't blind; I was good-looking, but my quirks usually turned women off before sex.

I was a reformed people pleaser, but sex was different. I'd tried so hard to please that it became analytical and unemotional. My only long-term girlfriend had told me that

she'd stayed with me for so long because of the orgasms, but she needed to find someone emotionally available. I'd thought we'd had an emotional connection. My therapist said I'd held back.

Dating wasn't worth my time and energy.

Cole made me rethink my priorities. If it were possible to find someone whose desire for me lit us both on fire, I'd make time. I'd put in the effort.

Unfortunately, Cole was the only one who'd triggered carnal thoughts in me. Being with Cole was akin to running my own Fortune 500 company, and I feared any other man would be like settling for a job as a small-town financial planner. If I put my other sexual experiences on a sliding scale, they were a three at best, but Cole blew the number so far off, the scale had become useless.

I couldn't blame myself for being slightly obsessed, but I wouldn't act on it. I had to get over Cole Branson.

A knock on my door jolted me back to reality. My computer read 10 p.m. This was the second time I'd regretted renting in a building without a doorman. The first was when I saw Cole pounding on my door. As if I'd conjured him up from some erotic nightmare, through the peephole I saw Cole standing on the other side of my door.

"I can hear you, Shane."

He'd heard my involuntary gasp. I wasn't prepared for whatever brought him to my door, but sending him away would haunt my every thought. My head clunked on the door.

"I feel the same," said Cole, and I heard the same clunk on the other side.

If only we weren't so wrong for each other, we'd be amazing together.

"I'm opening the door," I announced, so Cole wouldn't fall into my apartment.

"Hi," he said with trepidation.

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“Hi.” My eyes devoured him in his tight red T-shirt that accentuated his pectorals and showed off his biceps. His T-shirt made him a walking red flag, but I wanted him anyway. When my gaze landed on his face, my heart stopped. Cole’s green eyes were ravenous for me. “Can I see your library card?”

Cole’s expression turned to confusion.

“You’re totally checking me out,” I deadpanned.

Cole’s mouth slowly quirked up into a smirk. “Are we doing this in the hall?”

I stepped aside to let him in. “What are we doing?”

Cole stopped a couple feet into my apartment to survey it. It wasn’t much. A total of 750 square feet of open floor plan with a bedroom and bathroom. My kitchen island doubled as the dining area, and my living room had a couch, coffee table, armchair, and a TV mounted on the wall. A present from Sara; I’d never watched it.

“You were working?” Cole asked, motioning to my laptop. “It’s Friday night. I was afraid you’d be out.”

“More like hate-dissecting and tracing data in reports. But you didn’t come here to talk about my work, so tell me why you’re here.”

I wasn’t harsh but direct. Cole could not ask me again what I wanted from him when he initiated contact. My nonexistent social life wasn’t his business. I closed my laptop and directed him to sit either on the couch with me or in the armchair. Cole chose to

sit next to me. My body wanted to kneel in front of him and beg, but my body was foolish.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said,” he said, gripping the back of his neck and squeezing. “I can’t stop thinking about you.”

Cole’s guttural voice should not turn me on. He was struggling with the admission and had dropped his gaze to the floor.

“Okay,” I said, hoping to encourage him to continue.

“I’ve been angry for so long.” His head remained down but he lifted his eyes to mine, and I nodded. “Furious with him. Hating myself.”

“I,” I paused, not sure how much I wanted to say, “understand that.”

Cole raised his head and searched my eyes for more. When I didn’t give him more, he ran his hands over his thighs. My brain never worked like most people’s, but this man came here to confide in me, and I longed to replace my hands with his, strip him naked, and suck him off. I wondered if our chemistry had somehow changed my neuro pathways and made me a deviant.

“That’s the thing about you. I feel like you do understand. You saw me at my worst and have never said one word about how I should try to move on or get over him. And I deserve that speech after the way I treated you.” Cole shifted slightly closer, bringing the heat of his thigh next to mine.

“Speeches are for the person giving them and useless for the receiver unless they specifically ask for your opinion. You can try to cobble your heart back together after a loss, but it will never be the same.” I touched his arm but quickly withdrew my hand.

“Who did you lose?” Cole asked.

“My loss happened a long time ago. You will never get over it, but it won’t rule your life if you make the decision to heal. It’s not a straight line; as long as you keep moving, you can alleviate some of the pain. It seems like you’re stuck.”

I wanted Cole to understand hope existed, but he had to choose it. I wanted to help him with his grief, show him a way out. But our attraction wouldn’t allow for it. I wouldn’t know how to help without constantly wanting to engage in sexual activity. Cole wasn’t ready for that. I wanted more than friendship, and I wouldn’t be his bandage over his bullet wound. He needed more than I was capable of giving.

Cole made a sound somewhere between a grunt and a laugh. “I am stuck and a hundred different other things.”

“Can we get back to my question? Why are you here? What can I do for you?”

Okay, technically that was three questions, but I wasn’t up for a night of wallowing in pain.

Cole swallowed hard, and I braced myself for his answer.

Cole

This might be the craziest idea that I’ve ever had. Watching Shane’s stiff posture had me second-guessing myself. I wanted to still his fingers drumming on his thigh, but touching him would be a bad idea. I might not stop, and he had to agree to what I wanted before anything happened.

If my brain worked like Shane’s, it would have calculated the odds of him agreeing. But if I knew the odds, I probably wouldn’t be here. I took a deep breath.

“You told me you can’t unknow things about yourself. I feel the same. You were right, trying to ignore it is making it worse,” I said, and Shane went completely still.

That made me more nervous. When Shane’s movements stopped, I had a hard time reading him.

I stood and paced to the window. It might be easier to handle his rejection if I wasn’t looking at him. Or stop me from demanding he drop to his knees.

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“I never experienced the need to sexually dominate someone until you. And now it’s a need that won’t be shoved back in a box. It wasn’t about power, but the control somehow made me feel better. It felt good because I thought you needed it too. Like we were helping each other.”

I could see Shane in the reflection of the window. With his eyes on mine, he gave one slow nod. I couldn’t believe a guy as beautiful and sensitive as Shane was still single. The women he’d dated were idiots.

“I can’t be what you need in a boyfriend. I’m not ready for that. I don’t want to hurt you, but I also want you.” Truthfully, I doubted I’d ever commit myself to someone again.

Shane’s hand twitched, but otherwise, he remained still. I paused, hoping he would tell me he understood or that he wanted me too. But the man who talked a mile-a-minute remained silent.

“What if we agreed to help each other? You’ve never been with a man, and I can help with that. Together, we can figure out our boundaries and tastes. Mutually beneficial. Sort of a friends with benefits situation. No commitment, and if one of us starts to have real feelings, we end it. But I want it to be exclusive.” I held my breath.

Putting my cards on the table took more guts than I wanted to admit.

“So what you’re saying is that I can have your unicorn dick, but I can’t fall in love with it?” Shane asked with a straight face.

I wasn't sure if he was serious or making a joke. His brand of humor was confusing.

"I...um..." I had no idea how to respond as our eyes met in the window.

Shane's sigh sounded so long suffering that I needed to leave immediately.

"I'm sorry." I crossed the room. "I shouldn't have come."

When I reached for the door handle, Shane's hand on my forearm stopped me. It shouldn't turn me on, but it did.

"Wait," he said. "You need rules. Let's talk about rules because I can't commit to a noncommittal relationship unless I'm clear."

I wilted against the door, and he tugged me back over to the couch. I hadn't realized how much I needed him to say yes until he did. I craved that feeling of helping relieve his anxiety because it also helped me.

"No relationship has a guarantee, so I'm not asking for that or any long-term commitment, but I want to know how this will be different. What are your expectations besides sex, spanking, and no real feelings?" Shane pulled a bent leg up on the couch, so he was sitting sideways facing me.

Even the word "feelings" made me sweat. "I want to be upfront that I'm not going to fall for you or act like your boyfriend. We aren't going to go to dinner or meet each other's friends or spend the night together."

Shane clucked his tongue. "You met Sara and Isaac, and I met Alec. And Lisa. They both seem important to you. But I can agree to not mingle our important people together." Shane wrapped his arms around his torso. "I usually eat dinner at my desk, so no issues there. I can agree to not expect you to act like my boyfriend and no more

sleepovers. But I need you to be clear on this arrangement as well.”

That took me by surprise and offered hope. I expected him to argue the fine points between being a friend and a boyfriend. “Go on.”

“We meet here, at my place, or at a hotel. And we don’t ask about each other’s past.” Shane’s tone did not leave room for negotiation.

I waited for some other absurd request, but none came. Meeting here was my ideal scenario and not talking about Pax, perfect. I wouldn’t argue about making my life easier. “Okay.”

Shane dipped his head in satisfaction and his posture relaxed. “Alright. So basically, we’ll have sex, you’ll spank me, but nothing else,” he said, and it stunned me that he was agreeing.

I thought he’d have a million reasons why this was a bad idea.

“I brought a printout of my negative test results for you.” I cringed, hoping it wasn’t too forward, but safety was important. I hadn’t been promiscuous but not a monk either.

Shane’s eyes widened. “I can get tested too.” I shrugged in agreement, so he asked, “What about communication and how often?”

“Do we have to decide how often now? I’ve never done this before. Once a week won’t be enough, but any more than twice sounds like a commitment. I can call you to set it up.”

“Don’t show your age, Cole. No one calls. Text me,” Shane teased. “I’ll even unblock your number.”

I toppled him, covering him with my body. “I’ll show you my age,” I growled, ready to strip him naked. “You’ll be lucky to keep up, Pretty Boy.”

“Should I get on my knees for you, Daddy?” Shane’s breath washed over my face and officially broke my control.

Chapter fifteen

Shane

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I was playing with fire, but I didn't care. I'd go down in flames, either incinerated or with third-degree burns. Worth it to be the sole object of Cole's desire.

Of course, there were risks and red flags. Obviously. All relationships were a risk, and at least Cole was being honest about what he wanted. Honesty was new for him, and I thought we should reward ourselves with a couple of orgasms for his progress.

I'd never been accused of being a good boyfriend. I don't know how to relate to most people. Even if Cole said he was all in, we'd probably end in disaster. I excelled with rules. Rules were clear, easy to follow, and would ensure we both got what we needed.

He assumed my rules were for his benefit, and he could keep thinking that. Negotiating emotional landmines connected to griddles and other common household products was a hard pass for me. Best to avoid it by negotiating meet-ups at my place.

I'd willingly give him my body but not my pain or my secrets. My body demanded him, and I would oblige.

Cole wanted to devour me, and I was here for it. I knew calling him "daddy" would push him over the edge. And damn, my brain short-circuited. His entire body pressing mine into the cushion felt fantastic. I'd always felt pressure to be in control with women, but Cole made it clear he was in control. I loved the way he mastered me with the shift of his body or a simple look.

"I think you want me to punish you for being disrespectful," Cole said, lifting my leg so it hooked around his waist. His hand lifted my pelvis higher to grind our dicks

together, and I whimpered into his neck. “Do you want to be my good boy?”

“Yes.” My hands ran over his muscular back, cursing the clothes between us. “Please. Please.” I begged for more, needing him to direct me.

Cole sat back and pulled me into a sitting position. “No pouting,” he said before I objected to the loss of him on top of me. He began unbuttoning the work shirt I hadn’t bothered to change out of. He ran his hands down my chest, but his eyes caught on the image over my heart. “I fucking love seeing my ink on you.”

His fingers whispered over my skin, and I swallowed a moan.

“I’m so glad you were my first,” I said, not referring to the tattoo.

Cole kept his eyes on my skin, which saved him from being able to see the emotion on my face. The emotions that I’d kept on lockdown for the last decade and a half. My fingers traced over his shoulder to his collarbones while I schooled my features.

My emotions were going to be an issue. It would be my issue, and I refused to burden Cole with them. Not when we both needed this.

“What do you want?” Cole asked, pulling my pants down.

“You,” I said simply.

Cole’s large, calloused hands gripped my thighs, and he placed a kiss on my hip not nearly close enough to my erection. “What turns you on?”

His luminous green eyes had me captivated.

I had no idea. Cole turned me on. Cole’s hands, mouth, body, and fucking callouses

all turned me on. I was unsure of how to answer that question or ask for what I needed. That's what Cole was supposed to do, tell me what I wanted and then make me beg for it.

"Hey." His large palm rested on my cheek. "It's okay; we'll figure it out. Breathe with me."

Losing myself in Cole's eyes, I steadied my erratic breathing.

"We're watching porn," Cole announced.

"Wait, what!" I wanted Cole, not some peep show. "No."

"Don't worry, Pretty Boy." He stroked my cheek with one hand and grabbed my dick with the other. "We're going to watch to see what turns each other on."

"Is that normal?" I cringed as soon as the words left my mouth.

Cole took the comment in stride as he retrieved his phone from his jeans. "Can I cast to your TV?"

Watching Cole remove all his clothes made me light-headed. I vowed to trace every single one of his tattoos with my tongue. Most were gray shading but a few had pops of color. The wolf and the dragon stood out the most. I'd seen pictures of Cole on the internet when he was younger, but he was undisputedly hotter now. I relished the thought of touching him. Cole gave me the once over, and I knew without words that he was telling me to finish getting naked.

Yes, sir.

"Do you have a site you like?" Cole asked as we settled back on the couch together.

I swallowed hard. I'd never watched porn, and this was all new to me. "No. I've never."

I was too embarrassed to elaborate.

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“Oh.” Cole set his phone on the coffee table and turned so he fully faced me. “I thought you were joking when you asked if porn was normal.” He palmed my naked thigh, and I had no way of retreating. “When I realized I was bisexual, I also realized that normal was all relative. Being bi or gay means you’re living outside of social norms. I struggled with that. But being normal stops being important at some point.” Cole pulled me into his lap. “The question is: are you okay with porn?”

I took a second to think about my answer. “I’m not opposed, but I don’t understand why we’d watch it when we have each other.”

“This is new to both of us. Think of porn as a way to speed date our preference. Thirty seconds of a specific kink, and we’ll both know if it turns us on. In an hour, we can cover a hundred different things. It saves time and uncomfortable situations.” Cole’s hand coasted up and down my leg.

Being surrounded by Cole, sitting in his lap, touched something in me. I’d curled myself into him, wanting every bit of me to have skin-to-skin contact. “Sounds efficient, but I don’t think I’ll be uncomfortable with you.” His heady scent pulled my nose into the crook of his neck.

Cole squeezed me tighter. “Let’s just say, for example, I want to use something other than my hand on you. You agree solely to please me, and I don’t notice you’re uncomfortable. You can tell how much I’m enjoying it, so you’re reluctant to speak up. We can avoid a situation before it starts. You can watch a video and say no thank you. There is no pressure in the moment.” Cole’s entire hand covered my head as he stroked my hair.

We watched clips from more porn than I knew existed in the world. As I sat on his lap, he kept his hand wrapped around my dick, so he'd know what turned me on. And his cock sat snug in the crack of my ass, so I could tell the same. When he insisted that I was not allowed to come, I didn't think it would be a problem. But I underestimated Cole's effect on me as well as the porn.

"You did so good." Cole gave my dick a lazy stroke as he nuzzled my ear.

I grunted, strung out and ready to blow at any moment, but he wouldn't let me. Cole rose off the couch with me in his arms, but he set me on the floor. I blinked up at him in confusion.

In all his god like naked glory, Cole started toward my bedroom and barked, "Come." I pushed off the floor but his glare halted me. He snapped his fingers and pointed at his feet.

Cole was the only person I'd ever encountered who crashed my brain on a regular basis. Even though my mind protested, my body had already begun to crawl toward him. My dick bobbed, my balls hung heavy between my legs, and I tingled with excitement.

He waited until I was at his feet before he continued into my room.

"Kneel." When I obeyed, he stroked my cheek and asked, "Do you want me to make all the decisions about how to make you feel good?"

It was strange to feel so powerful on my knees. He was asking my permission, even though my face probably gave away my lust. I pushed all the thoughts of shame out of my head because this was exactly what I needed to silence my mind. He knew I wanted this, and I refused to deny myself anything with him.

From a kneeling position at the foot of the bed, I dropped my gaze and put my palms on my thighs. His fingers sifted through my hair, and I leaned into his touch. I needed a haircut, but I'd never cut it if Cole kept his fingers in it.

Cole lifted my chin with two of his fingers so our eyes met. His gaze flicked to the bed, and I crawled up onto it. "Stay on your hands and knees," he ordered when I reached the middle.

My body was tense with anticipation. Cole fisted my hair in one hand as the other ran down my shoulder, my back, and over my ass. He kept up the circular pattern until my muscles were relaxed and pliant. He shifted to the end of the bed to massage both my ass cheeks, and his thumb stroked my hole. A groan ripped out of my throat unbidden.

"That's it. I want to hear all your sounds, Pretty Boy." Cole's fingertips dug into my hip.

Cole's desires were commands that stoked my passion higher. His praise was addicting. With the first crack on my ass, I moaned unabashedly. Like last time, the first few strikes were pure pain, but then, the rhythm lulled me into a state of calm contentment. Cole soothed my aching skin by kneading it.

"I fucking love seeing your ass rosy and begging for me." The low timber in Cole's voice shuddered through me from my head to my toes.

His tongue allayed the sting even further, and I didn't recognize the sounds coming out of me.

"Please, Daddy, please." My cheek hit the duvet as I pushed my ass back against his face.

I didn't know what I was asking for, but it felt vital to have more.

"You don't come until I tell you." Cole slapped my glute. "Your cum is mine," he growled.

"Yes," I agreed, nodding my head into the bed. "It's yours. All yours."

"Don't move." He pulled away from me, and I heard his footsteps retreat.

If I had one ounce of shame, I'd regret the high-pitched whine keening out of me. But Cole's deep chuckle and hand twisting in my hair as he stood at the side of the bed, assuaged any negative thoughts.

"So needy. So ready for this." Cole purred, tilting my head to the side, so he could watch my face. In his other hand, he flipped open a small bottle of lube with his thumb and poured it down the crack of my ass. My moan was indecent. "You're so responsive. You're going to love this." Cole's grin was feral.

He tossed the lube aside and massaged it around my hole. It fluttered under his thumb, and he hummed with approval. He watched my expression meticulously for—I assumed—pain or discomfort, but soon his eyes wandered down to where his thumb pressed into me. I pushed back, but my muscles tensed involuntarily.

"Relax." Cole leaned over and ghosted his lips across my forehead. His cheek glided over my hair, caressing my head as he watched his thumb push in and out of me in shallow strokes. "You need more lube."

He withdrew from me.

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“No!” I protested. “It’s fine. I’m fine. Keep going.”

Cole cradled my face in his palm. “This is your first time. I know what you want and what you need. This only works if you trust me. Do you trust me?”

I flushed. “Yes.”

“If you’re uncomfortable, this stops.” His thumb skimmed along the underside of my jaw. “Know going forward that you will love everything that we do. If you don’t, you use your safe word. What’s your safe word?”

“Dragon.”

“That’s my Pretty Boy.” Cole applied liberal amounts of lube to me and his fingers.

At first, his finger was too large and would never fit inside me. My erection deflated, and I bit back my complaints. His thumb had revved me up but now my body was being invaded. The sting on my scalp, and the pure lust on Cole’s features prompted me to keep quiet and trust. A switch flipped.

I never dreamed his large calloused finger would inflict so much pleasure inside me. He kept my head tilted toward him, and his lips parted in a wide smile as he worked me. The nerve endings he’d sparked with his thumb were now lit up from his finger. This was what I needed.

The rhythm stoked a fire inside me. I thrust back, and he added a second finger. This time, I welcomed the painful stretch, knowing it would dissolve into pleasure. My

fantasies crashed and burned as reality replaced them with every glorious touch and sound from Cole.

“I’m going to introduce you to your prostate, but you aren’t going to come until I give you permission,” Cole rumbled in my ear and then nipped it.

With his fingers in my ass, he rose onto the bed behind me and lifted me up by my throat. My back was pressed to his chest as his fingers claimed my hole. His other hand wrapped around my throat, grounding me to him, soothing the overwhelming sensations.

Two things happened at once: his fingers flexed and tightened around my throat while his other hand changed the angle, and white-hot ecstasy seared through every single cell in my body.

“Come for me,” Cole grunted, driving his pelvis forward so his erection branded me with his heat.

My body obeyed his command, and he removed his hand from my throat to catch my orgasm shooting out of me.

Riding wave after wave of molten gratification, words flung out of my mouth in garbled, unintelligible syllables. All the pleasure I’d ever known was irrelevant compared to what Cole offered me.

I don’t know how I stayed upright.

Chapter sixteen

Cole

Fucking hell. Shane responded incredibly, my walking fantasy. He'd instinctively submitted without question, without thinking. As if he'd been waiting to submit to me from day one. I only regretted not seeing his face when he came. But there would be plenty of time for that. Watching porn had been a stroke of genius on my part.

I had irrefutable, cock-hard proof of things that turned him on. Neither of us would have to second guess. Our tastes were surprisingly similar for two people who seemed nothing alike.

Shane's pleas stopped as he sagged into me. He'd begged me to stop while screaming for more. Every single word out of his dirty mouth turned me on. And I wanted to dirty up that mouth even more.

When he sighed and nuzzled his head into my neck, I knew he'd come back into his body. I stretched back to stand on the floor at the end of the bed, taking him to the edge.

I pushed on the back of his head, guiding him toward my hand. "Clean it up," I barked, and he didn't hesitate. Fucking damn perfection. "Don't swallow."

Maneuvering him upright, I praised "good boy" and tugged his head sideways, so I had access to his mouth. His cum slid over my tongue and tasted phenomenal—salty, musky, and exactly what I'd been starving for. I licked every drop out of his mouth and brought my hand up so he'd clean up the rest. We both groaned as I brought our mouths together again.

Releasing him, I ordered, "On your back in the middle of the bed."

He scrambled to obey, lying in the wet spot without complaint. My eyes raked over his torso and light happy trail leading to his half-hard cock. We weren't even close to being done. Shane's hair was a wild mess, and his smile managed to look satisfied

and hungry at the same time. The bed beneath him was wrecked, and I randomly thought Shane was the type to have a dry-clean only comforter. A laugh burst out of me, breaking the silence. He'd need to throw it in the trash by the time I was done with him.

"Cole, let me take care of you." Shane's brown eyes pleaded with me.

Taking one ankle in each hand, I spread Shane's legs to kneel between them. If he only knew how much he satisfied me, it felt dangerous to tell him and give him that power over me. I had to be in control.

"Arms over your head and don't move."

Again, he complied immediately. The urge to cover him with my seed clogged all other thoughts. I took myself in hand and squeezed to relieve the ache. Shane's hawk eyes were mesmerized, and his cock hardened.

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“Tell me what you want,” I demanded as an order, not a question.

Shane licked his lips. “I want you to come all over me. Then, I want to taste you, so I have your cum inside me.”

The lust on his face increased with my pace. And the submissive longing tone sent me over the edge. I sprayed him from his cock up to his chest. A fucking Adonis covered in my orgasm.

Scooping it up, I lifted my hand, and Shane opened his mouth without prompting. His arms twitched, but he kept them above his head.

“You said you wanted my cum. Good boys get what they ask for,” I said.

Shane voraciously sucked, his tongue twining around my finger in his warm mouth. He nudged my hand with his chin to gain access to my palm, and his tongue lapped it up.

Being with Shane felt like standing on top of the mountain. I was invincible, and the world was at our feet.

I traced his tattoo while we recovered and said, “A dragon suits you.”

Shane’s entire body went rigid, and even though he continued to lick, he wasn’t present.

“What’s that about?”

Shane closed his eyes. “You can’t ask me questions about my past, and the tattoo is part of my past.”

I opened my mouth to argue but closed it. It hadn’t occurred to me that he’d insisted on rules I wouldn’t want to follow. But as I bound him to my rules, I was bound to his. I certainly didn’t want him to ask me questions. This was about sex. Only sex.

I slid down his body to swallow his cock, and he bucked and fucked my mouth like a caged animal unleashed. My voice would be wrecked for days, but it was a small price to pay. Shane unrestrained was like witnessing a Greek God in the throes of passion. Michelangelo would’ve been lucky to capture his beauty.

I tried to keep my eyes on him, but his salty, musky taste was so good my eyes rolled back, and I groaned around him. It almost felt wrong to take so much pleasure from him and find it so gratifying to keep a part of him inside me.

After round two, we gathered water and snacks and sat side-by-side, propped up against Shane’s headboard.

“I would like to officially apologize for doubting porn.” Shane’s lopsided grin changed the hard angles of his face to a younger, more playful version of himself. “It was the best idea; when are we doing it again?” His tone was teasing but the pink at the top of his ears said he was serious.

“We can do it again next time or every time. Don’t be afraid to ask for what you want before we start. But once we start, all the decisions are mine.”

If I kept control of him, then I’d control our deal, and it would all work out.

“Okay.” Shane sighed happily and rested his head on my shoulder. “Oh.” He turned so he faced me. “Can I call your dick ‘jumbo?’”

I tried to understand his expression to tell if he was kidding. He had a weird sense of humor, and he also didn't have a filter, so I couldn't tell. "Don't be a dick," I teased.

"Well, you're being extremely hardheaded." His gaze flicked to my cock.

"I expected a better comeback from you."

I picked up a piece of cheese and fed it to him. My heart fluttered again at the sight of Shane eating from my hand. Maybe I had arrhythmia.

"It's your fault," Shane said, opening for another piece of cheese. "I'm usually witty with highbrow humor, but you've decimated all my brain cells. I think they might have exited through my dick." He sat up straighter and laughed. "I'll call it 'Goliath.'"

"You're serious?" I asked, keeping the cheese far enough away so he had to lean into me.

"'Cock' is just so crass."

"I can see why, with all the things we've done, the word 'cock' would offend your innocent sensibilities." I traced a finger from his forehead, down his chest to his cock, and bit his shoulder.

Shane covered his mouth in mock surprise. "Cole, are you seducing me?"

"Smartass," I laughed, surprised by how much I enjoyed his teasing.

Chapter seventeen

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Shane

I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to keep all of my nervous ticks in check. I'd taken my anxiety meds for this meeting, but it wasn't enough. The managers were pompous blowhards with zero insight into how to run an efficient business. Everyone would rather suck up to Mr. Branson than actually do a good job.

"The data clearly show..." I started to say before being cut off.

"You said yourself that the teams finished the report on the same day."

"The team's efficiency is based on more than one report. Team A finished the report and closed five additional projects in the same week while team B only closed one other project. Storing the data in the new format and then using the new template saves time in converting the stored data to usable information. The new system saves time," I explained for the tenth time in our third meeting.

These men were one level below the C-suite and should be able to read reports and analyze data, but every single person in this company was allergic to change. An argument ensued between John and the blowhards.

The only thing that had kept me sane was Cole. Two weeks after we embarked on our friends with benefits arrangement, and I didn't know how I'd managed without it. I was sleeping better and was more productive than ever. It turned out that shutting off my thoughts and anxiety greatly improved my quality of life.

We'd met three times already this week and played out filthy fantasies that I never

dreamed of or been brave enough to verbalize. I'd been judgmental when he'd suggested watching porn, but he'd been absolutely right. Knowing something turns your partner on allowed for more experimentation and some innovation.

In two weeks, I'd come to know Cole's body better than my own. He'd touched and licked every single inch of me repeatedly, and I needed it again tonight. This meeting triggered my past issues, being ignored, underestimated, and belittled.

"That is not your area of expertise," a VP chastised me.

Our argument devolved and I stood, slamming my hands on the table.

John stood as well and said, "It's late. We can revisit this topic at our meeting next week. Thank you."

Everyone exited the conference room complaining and shaking their heads. I dropped back into my seat, my head in my hands with a killer headache developing.

"Challenging another VP isn't going to help." John patted my shoulder.

"Why was I hired?" I lifted my head to watch his reaction.

"To fill a vacant position." John smiled wearily.

"No. The position had been vacant for five years, and the duties had been divided among the other VPs. This company could've continued with a restructured plan. I was told that I was hired because systems and processes needed to be updated. But everyone here refuses to acknowledge the need for change and ignores the system-wide errors in data reporting. You have to see that, John."

John collapsed into the seat next to me. "Listen, kid."

“I am not a kid,” I said through gritted teeth.

“You are brilliant. I’ve seen you pick up a report, scan it, and find the error that three people over three days couldn’t find. Your intelligence is not in question. But in terms of office politics, you’re a kid,” he said as I glared. “All those VPs have been promised a chance at the C-suite, and you swoop in and are offered the chance to present at the board meeting. That offer comes with a chance to fill the open C-suite position. They’re furious you’re getting that opportunity. They aren’t going to adapt any of your changes because it highlights their inability to do their jobs.”

“What do I do?” I understood what he was saying, but the overall financial health of the company should come first at some point.

“I was promised a shot at the C-suite position ten years ago. I’m not handing you the keys to the kingdom. You have to figure it out for yourself.” John stood and walked out.

Dammit. No one seemed to care about efficiency over personal gain. Not one damn person. I should take another crack at the report that refused to balance despite my many attempts. Instead, I extracted my phone from my suit jacket. I needed the release that only Cole gave me.

My heart didn’t skip a beat or flip over when I saw the text from Cole asking me to meet him later. He probably assumed I was working late as usual, but I needed to get the fuck out. I texted him that I would meet him at his shop, which was closer than my apartment.

It wasn’t until I was standing in his shop that I read his second text stating he had a supply issue and would meet me at my apartment. I was breaking one of his rules by showing up at his work, and polite conversation required me to answer Alec’s raised eyebrow about why I was here.

Shit.

“Hey, Cole said there’s a supply issue and asked me to help,” I said, hoping his answer would give me an idea.

“I had no idea you could help us get ink in time for our scheduled tattoos.” Alec smirked, calling bullshit on me.

I forced out a laugh. “Nope, no ink.” But inspiration hit me. “We talked about implementing a program to help track usage so this doesn’t happen in the future.”

“Really?”

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I shrugged. I doubted he would specifically ask Cole, and I'd write some code to track supplies, which would help Cole's business as well as provide a plausible explanation for my random appearance. Carnal thoughts of Cole's hands on me, specifically spanking me into shutting off my thoughts, had clearly fogged my common sense and led me to this ruse.

"What do you need?" Alec asked as I stared, lost in fantasies about Cole. "To help," he clarified.

"Access to your POS system and info on how you track your inventory. It would also be helpful to know what supplies and how much are used for each tattoo. That way, I can create a link to trigger reorders."

Alec's eyes widened, signaling my nonsense worked. But it wasn't bullshit; I could actually help out. Why not? If the level of Cole's voice coming from his office was any indication, I'd be here a while.

"Let's get started." Alec motioned for me to join him behind the counter.

Soon, I was immersed in all the inner workings of a tattoo shop and so focused I shut everything else out, including Alec and Cole.

Cole

"Fuck." My voice echoed off my office walls.

Every owner I knew was struggling to get ink. The supply chain issues had hit

everyone. I managed to trade some supplies to get enough ink for the next few days. But we wouldn't be able to take walk-ins, and I had no idea when our shipment would arrive. It should've been here three days ago and every day since.

Some of my friends said they were still waiting on shipments from a month ago and had to use another vendor and pay to reorder the same supplies because the other vendor used a different shipping company.

My phone rang with a call from another shop's owner. "Dude, what's up? How's business?" I knew from experience, opening with a request, even from a friend, didn't get results. I had to sweet-talk my way into trading favors. I listened as he grumbled about the supply chain. My perfect segue. "What do you need? I'll see if I can help."

Alec wandered in, and I waved him off.

I mentally calculated how many needles I had to spare for my friend's shop. Even if he didn't have ink now, it would help build goodwill for the future. He'd owe me.

Alec left a sticky note in front of me with the current inventory of needles and a request to text him when I was off the phone. I put my friend on speaker and texted Alec to go home and we'd figure it out tomorrow. Alec had mentioned meeting up with a twink tonight, and he deserved some fun after today.

I was living for the moment I could get to Shane. Everything was a mess, and I needed to feel in control, which was exactly what he craved. My stomach flipped when I thought of what I'd do to him. I rationalized that I hadn't eaten in hours. Today, Shane was just the light at the end of the tunnel.

I wanted his tunnel in every dirty way.

Our arrangement had been the best idea I'd ever had. Shane wasn't clingy or needy.

We gave each other what we both needed when we needed it. The man was incredible.

Forty minutes later, I hung up the phone and texted Alec to see if he'd locked the front door before he'd left. Alec sauntered in with a shit-eating grin on his face.

"I thought you'd left."

"Nah, couldn't leave the boss in a lurch." His grin unnerved me. "You seem to be taking this better than expected." Alec surveyed my office. "No papers tossed everywhere, nothing broken, no holes in the wall."

"Fuck off." I grinned, not playing his game.

"You just seem," Alec tilted his head to the side, "'happy' is too strong a word but more relaxed, maybe. Like you had a good fucking, and it's made you less dickish." Alec's chuckle made his words less insulting.

"Thanks for keeping tabs on my cock but get out. I'm gonna make a couple more calls and leave."

The reason for my new-found relaxed state wasn't his business. Alec wouldn't understand that the non-relationship I had with Shane was the best thing in my life right now. Uncomplicated and easy. I should text Shane explaining I'd be even later than expected.

"Make your calls from the comfort of your home, boss." Alec called me boss to irritate me. "I'm working on a project, so I'll leave when it's done." Alec tipped his head at me and walked out.

What the fuck project could he possibly be working on.

I dialed my phone on a mission to get more ink and get my ass to Shane's place. Solving the Alec mystery was tomorrow's problem.

I cut down on the small talk and finished my two calls in less than an hour. We'd have ink through the weekend, and that would have to do for tonight. I texted Shane as I closed my office door and heard a phone go off in the lobby. Alec must've actually stayed.

"What the fuck are you..." My words died as my eyes landed on Shane typing furiously at our checkout counter.

"He won't hear you," Alec said, lounging on the consultation couch. "You did ask him to help right?" Alec's brow pinched together.

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“Well...yeah, but I didn’t expect him to be here this late.”

I might not be the smartest guy, but I had to assume Shane gave Alec an excuse for being here.

“Got it!” Shane shouted with a punch in the air. His smile and satisfied look blinded me. I had the sensation of my stomach dropping to my knees, and my knees weren’t having it. When he saw me, he turned that beautiful shade of pink.

“Oh hey, Cole.” He was not playing it as cool as he thought. “I told Alec you asked me to help out with your inventory issues,” he said, slowly pronouncing each word.

Any idiot would know he was trying to cover his reason for being here. He wasn’t subtle.

My relief at seeing him was alarming on so many levels.

Shane started twitching, and his words tumbled out. “You summoned a tech nerd, and here I am, at your service. I should get business cards with ‘professional tech nerd’ as my title.” A nervous laugh escaped him.

“Anyway, I wrote a program to link your POS, you know, point of sale, with your inventory and wrote another program to send alerts through the POS system for when you need to place an order for supplies. I factored in the average length of time to receive the delivery. Man, the delivery time has gone to hell, huh? Well, Alec helped me create a scale to estimate how much ink will be used when you schedule the tattoos. Obviously, walk-ins won’t be scheduled, so we looked at your last six months

of walk-ins and added that as a baseline to the report.” Shane took a breath.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I was slightly concerned that Shane was talking nonsense and looked like he was going to go on another rant. “Slow down and start from the beginning.”

Shane closed his eyes, and he visibly slowed his breathing. “Okay,” his eyes popped open, and he continued, “have you ever ordered food from a restaurant that uses Tasty on their website?”

Both Alec and I nodded.

Shane launched into a comparative explanation and paused to make sure we understood. I got it, but tattooing wasn’t as straightforward.

“This isn’t as accurate, but I did my best with Alec’s help to create a system that will estimate all the supplies used. When you schedule a tattoo, you’ll have a drop-down menu to estimate the size of the tattoo, and if it will be a color tattoo, shades of gray, or simple black. Alec and I sorted through the last six months and calculated how much of your business comes from walk-ins, and I analyzed the past year of your supply orders.” Shane motioned to a stack of papers next to his laptop.

“You did all this. Tonight?” I blinked, trying to imagine how he got all this done.

“Yeah, in like the last three hours.” Alec stood with his hands on his hips rocking back and forth on his heels while his eyes darted between us. “The guy works like a computer.”

Shane blushed further. “I mean it’s not ready for implementation yet. I need another day or two. And I can link it to the computer in your office if you want,” Shane continued, but I still didn’t understand the scope of what he’d done.

“Show me,” I demanded.

Shane looked a half a second away from dropping to his knees before he caught himself. “Sure, come here, and we’ll input tomorrow’s schedule.”

Shane explained the specifics of the system, and Alec and I took turns using it. He clicked a few buttons, and a red banner with a sound appeared across the bottom of the screen, alerting us to buy red ink.

Yup, red ink was the bane of my existence right now.

“This is amazing.” I stared in awe at the computer.

“Happy to help.” The pretty shade of pink spread across his neck.

“What the fuck are you doing working for my father?” I meant it as a compliment, but Shane reared back as if I’d slapped him. “I mean, Shane, you’re a genius.”

“Literally.” He shrugged as if being an actual genius was normal.

“You could charge a fortune doing this for businesses. You should run your own consulting firm and only have to work two days a week. Do you know how much I would have to pay someone to write a program for my individual business?”

“I just wanted to help. It’s not a big deal.” Shane started packing up. “I can test it for bugs and transfer it to your system over the weekend.”

I wouldn’t allow Shane to act as if his genius wasn’t a big deal. He needed me as much as I needed him.

“Alec, get the fuck out,” I said. Alec saluted, holding back a grin but didn’t move so I

barked, “Now.”

Chapter eighteen

Shane

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Cole's furious lust confused me. I had the urge to run, but his glittering green eyes held me captive, frozen in place.

Our eye contact never broke as Alec's laughter exited the shop with him. We heard the lock click into place and his motorcycle roar to life, all while silently staring at each other. I'd come here intent on being with Cole, but now, I second-guessed myself.

After an eternity, he stalked toward me, barely controlled violence in every step.

"You almost sank to your knees for me in front of Alec," he growled, standing within a hair's breadth of my chest.

Swallowing hard, I decided the truth was the best option. "Yes, Daddy, I need you."

"Do you still need me or did your mind-boggling project calm you?" His breath washed over my face, and I needed so much more of him.

"Need you." He wasn't angry; he was turned on.

"Then why are you still on your feet." He had a habit of speaking questions as statements.

My knees gave way before my mind registered that I was obeying, but Cole caught my arm, stopped my descent halfway to the floor, and said, "I've had a helluva day and can't wait. We're doing this here, so I have to know that you're okay with this. I'm dying to get my hands on you. Tell me now if you've had any dirty fantasies

about my shop.”

I fell into the depth of Cole’s eyes, gorgeous green pools promising me a lifeline. When I licked my lips, Cole hungrily tracked the movement. He gave me courage, and I said, “After the first night, I had a dream about being here in your office, on your desk—”

“We can do that. You have exactly sixty seconds to be in my office and ready.”

Running would have been the fastest, but Cole didn’t want that, so I crawled as fast as humanly possible to his office and wrestled out of my clothes, flinging them into a messy pile. Ordinarily, that would’ve stressed me out but doing what Cole wanted trumped everything else.

I still had one sock on when he stalked in. But I was kneeling behind his sleek, modern metal desk. The thought that he might punish me for the sock, sent a barely controlled shiver down my spine.

“You did such a good job.” Cole’s fingers tugged my hair, so I looked up at him from the floor. “I needed you, and there you were, typing away on the computer like a goddamn techie wet dream. Do you know why I was angry?”

“I broke the rules. I came here instead of waiting for you at my apartment.”

The compulsion to lean forward and put my mouth on his black jeans over his dick made me dizzy. His jeans stretched to cover his powerful thighs and begged me to worship the curves I’d memorized. But not until I was told.

Cole’s shoulders dropped but his stance widened. “Not even close. It upset me that you devalued yourself and your work. You admit to being a genius but act like it’s not a big deal that you spent hours working on a program that will save my business

time and money forever. I don't know anyone who could do that in months let alone hours." His fingers let go of my hair and trailed over my cheek to cup my chin. "You are a goddamn brilliant force of nature and don't ever forget it."

"Yes, Daddy." I sighed in relief.

With his message received, Cole gathered me up and tossed me on his desk so my chest hit the cool metal. His hand pressed into the middle of my back, providing balm to my nerves. Exactly why I came to Cole. Nothing else worked as fast as his presence and strong hands.

"Count," he ordered, and the blessed strikes began.

Cole didn't hold back or test my readiness. He knew how much I could take and never went over my pain tolerance. But he stopped after ten and massaged my glutes. I knew better than to complain.

"You have your safe word," he said and reached to open a drawer.

The next blow lurched me forward on his desk with a shout. He used a paddle or something similar. I managed to count out six more blows. My mind had gone utterly blank, unable to remember how many times he'd struck me. With a thunk, the paddle landed next to my shoulder, and Cole's calloused fingers traced the welts on my ass.

"I've never seen anything so fucking beautiful," he sighed.

My body was akin to a jellyfish—boneless. I heard Cole's zipper and the rustling of clothes.

"I take that back. I know what's better." Cole ran his dick over the swelling flesh on my ass and through my crack. I felt his fist as he jerked himself on me. It didn't take

long before hot spurts landed on my ass and dripped down my shaky thighs.

“That’s magnificent,” Cole whispered as he rubbed his semen into the welts, soothing them.

I hummed in appreciation. The cold metal on my front was veritable bliss coupled with the heat of Cole and the sting on my skin.

Cole let out a satisfied grunt after his seed soaked into my flesh. When I opened my eyes, I saw the shadow of Cole stripping out of his shirt. His naked torso covered my body on the desk. There was almost nothing better than the weight of Cole on top of me. It grounded me, so I felt safe for the first time in my life. I couldn’t think about that because it was temporary. But I’d enjoy every fleeting second while it lasted. The last two weeks of feeling kept by him, sitting in his lap, eating from his hand, and being cherished were intoxicating.

I loved that he didn’t have to hold back with me.

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He could manhandle me and not worry. All his hard edges and power made me wild. I could be as unrestrained as he was.

“You ready for some fun.” Cole’s warm voice floated in my ear.

Chapter nineteen

Cole

Shane was obliterated that I picked him up to carry him to my tattoo station. He looped his arms around my neck, his grin sloppy. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was drunk.

I reveled in his ability to handle my brutal strength and punishing assaults. It offered us the perfect arrangement. I gained an outlet for control, and he found a safe way to hand it over. The paddle had taken things to a new level, and I had a high from endorphins, too. There was nothing better than giving Shane exactly what he needed.

A feeling I wanted to keep.

“You’ve been such a good boy.” I eased him into the chair, but he was reluctant to let go of my neck. I palmed his swollen cock. “It’ll be harder to get what you want if you don’t let go.”

Shane’s hand fell from my neck as he let out a sad sigh, and I chuckled.

I wanted to draw this out and make it a playful distraction because Shane seemed

extra on edge tonight. Running my fingers through his hair the way he loved, my other hand traced the dragon on his chest. I'd been attracted to his face the first night I'd broken into his office, but the tattoo set all of this in motion. He'd come to me for ink and probably more.

Alec had been right, although I'd never admit it to him. I was steadier now, and Shane was responsible for that.

My selfish need for him couldn't invite hope for a future. He was young and deserved a long, full life with a partner who could grow old with him. I would never be that, but I could show him how much I appreciated him. With my mouth.

Shane's back bowed off the chair as I impaled my throat with his cock. As usual, Shane kept up a steady stream of swear words, begging, and praise. I'd lowered the bottom half of the chair so it was easy to kneel between his legs. I pinned his hips down, relishing his strength under me. His hips would probably bear my handprints, and that spurred me on.

This blowjob was hard and fast, meant to give him the maximum amount of pleasure in the shortest time.

"Cole," Shane shrilled, "please, please. I can't hold back."

"Come down my throat, Pretty Boy, I want to taste all of you," I said, my voice hoarse.

That was all it took, and fuck, he was beautiful when he came. I swallowed everything he gave me and licked him until he groaned for me to stop.

His body was slick with sweat, and I crawled up him to rest my elbows on either side of his head.

“That was fun.” Shane’s mouth turned up, and his eyes drifted half closed.

“That wasn’t the fun part; that was customer appreciation,” I said, and Shane’s eyebrow drew up in a question. “For your incredible brain, innovative thinking, and sexy ass.”

“Hmmm, I’ll do more work for you if you pay me in blowjobs.” Shane’s eyes shut, and his hands rested on my waist with his thumbs drawing circles on my ribs.

His statement stabbed me with a blast from the past. I climbed off Shane, breaking out of his grip when he tried to hold me to him.

When he protested, I pushed his head back into the seat with my entire palm to shield my face. “Don’t worry. I’m coming right back.”

In my office, I took a few deep breaths and cracked my neck. I’d promised a good time, and I needed to keep the past behind me tonight. I needed out of my head, but offering to tattoo him was out of the question with the ink shortage.

“Hang on,” I called and walked to the front of the shop, waiting for inspiration to strike or a heart attack.

Either would be fine, as long as I didn’t have to go back to Shane drowning in memories of the past.

The inspiration came while I straightened the magazines. After gathering supplies, I lingered in the doorway of my station, drinking in the full view of a sated Shane completely still and at peace. I did that. That made my fucked-up head chill out.

“Tell me a noun,” I said, and Shane’s head jerked in my direction.

“What?” he asked, sitting up and resting his forearms on his knees.

“We’re playing a game, and I’m asking you for a bunch of words, and you’re going to tell me,” I said, setting the permanent markers and magazine on the tray table.

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“A noun.” Shane’s expression turned mischievous. “Cole Branson.”

“Oh, Pretty Boy, you have no idea how much I’m going to enjoy this.” I rolled the stool over and uncapped a black permanent marker. “Adjective.”

Shane tapped his chin thinking. “Dynamic.”

My mouth pinched together, and I tried not to frown. How the hell would I draw ‘dynamic.’ “Okay, Mr. Smarty Pants, a normal verb.”

“Skipping.” He pinched his lips together, trying not to laugh.

“That is not normal.”

“Well, Mr. Fun, when you’re trying to Mad Lib me, skipping is quotidian.” Shane’s amused laughter bounced around the room.

“I don’t even know what that means, dickhead.” I bit his bare shoulder and then licked it to take the sting out.

“That’s Mr. Dickhead to you. And before you ask me for a body part, I’m choosing a dick.” He grabbed my hand and placed it on his cock.

“Listen, I’m an excellent artist, and I work with all kinds of mediums, but I can’t draw a dynamic Cole Branson skipping on your dick. It won’t stay still or the same size.” I gave him a hard stroke. “If you want, I’ll decorate your cock when I’m done creating a masterpiece of me somewhere on you.” A grin overtook my face, and the

urge to whistle surprised me.

“Here,” Shane’s hand circled from his collarbones down to his pelvis, “I want a dynamic Cole Branson skipping all over me.” His expression was serious, and I wouldn’t argue.

We were quiet for a few minutes while I outlined myself on his torso. I decided to showcase my face on his chest as realistic, but the rest of my body would be cartoonish and tiny. A little smug about my face on his chest. His fingers trailed over every part of me within his reach.

“I’m a little annoyed that I’m getting a Cole Branson original, and I won’t get to keep it.”

I bit my cheek so I didn’t smile. “You’ll have it for five or six weeks.”

Shane stilled then relaxed. “Fuck you,” he laughed.

“Are you experienced at washing off permanent marker?” I asked, waggling my eyebrows.

“I’ve done my fair share.” Shane’s fingers explored my bicep tattoo as it flexed while I drew. “I wanted a tattoo for most of my life, and I would draw on myself, or someone else would. You should have seen some of the middle school shit drawn on me. Angst city.”

“Any photographic evidence? I’d love to see it.” I had the strangest urge to see a young Shane.

“Probably not.” Shane’s index finger ran along the ridges of my spine, sending a shudder in its wake. “But I bet your middle school art was fascinating.”

“Lots of boobs.” I laugh. As I reposition myself, my hand landed on his scarred shin.
“Does this hurt?”

“Not talking about the past.” Shane’s tone turned icy.

“Mmkay, Mr. Rule Breaker. First of all, we were talking about middle school and boobs, which last time I checked was in the past. And second, I’m not asking you what happened; I’m asking if it hurts when I put pressure on your scar.” I leaned in to flick my tongue across his nipple and lightened the mood. “Don’t get bratty with me, or I won’t give you the second orgasm you want.”

“Fine,” Shane said with mock exasperation. “Boobs, huh?”

“Yep, I was obsessed with them. That was before I understood the power of the cock.” I threw him a lustful grin.

I concentrated on drawing and let the comfortable silence fill the space between us. There were very few people that I felt comfortable enough with to enjoy silence. Music was my usual buffer, but I didn’t feel the need.

“It never hurts anymore,” Shane said. “Sometimes the skin feels tight, but most of the time I forget about it.”

Putting my marker aside, I leaned in, kissed the middle of his scar, and rubbed my cheek down the length of it.

“Forgetting about it is the worst part, for me,” Shane said.

I remained quiet, hoping he’d keep talking. My artwork was done, and Shane had my undivided attention. But his eyes were unfocused, as if remembering. It gave me an idea, and I picked up the markers again.

“My family had been through a trauma, and I wanted to escape. I was supposed to go away to camp for a few weeks after it happened. Leaving was the only thing keeping me sane. But the week before, my parents refused to let me go. I snapped. The short story: I burned some shit, including myself.”

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“I’m sorry you went through that.” I glanced at him, but his eyes were closed, so I kept drawing.

“I hate forgetting because it makes me feel like I’m forgetting about what happened.” Shane’s voice shook.

“We have that in common.”

No one understood that feeling more than me. It was the bane of healing: how to honor your memories without being haunted by them. Forgetting wasn’t an option. No matter how much I wanted to know about Shane’s past, I wouldn’t ask. We’d been here for a couple hours, basking in a comfortable silence, but he needed to go home to sleep. For some reason, I didn’t like that idea.

Resigned, I moved my body to show him the design on his leg. It was a version of my thigh protection tattoo modified to Shane’s body and scars.

Shane inhaled a gasp and reached out to trace the lines but stopped himself. His wide eyes met mine. “You turned a horrific reminder of something terrible into beautiful art.” His voice cracked. “Thank you.”

His admiration felt undeserved, so I ruined the moment. “Better than dick art?”

Shane groaned but his eyes danced. “Not everyone can have a dick worthy of a sculpture.” He grabbed me and showed me how much he appreciated my art and my cock.

Chapter twenty

Cole

“Doyouwanttotalk about him?” Lisa asked.

I shook my head, hesitant to talk about Shane with Pax’s mom.

Lisa would have opinions, and hearing them might be a relief or a curse. She’d shown up at the shop after a late dinner with friends—following Shane’s confession about his scar while we were still cum drunk and wrung out. She’d seen the lights on and had wanted to say hi.

I’d let my guard down, and it was obvious we’d been together. I’d expected her to demand an explanation or pry; instead, she’d waited a couple of days and asked me to have lunch with her. We decided on takeout in the loft. I didn’t want to be in public if she was upset.

Lisa picked up our containers to throw them in the trash.

“I’ll get those.” I didn’t want her picking up after me.

“I like him, just so you know,” she said casually, her back to me.

The silence stretched down from the exposed beams and pressed down on me with all its weight. Lisa kept her back to me as she washed her hands.

I replied, “We aren’t together.”

Still facing away from me, her chin dropped to her chest, and she heaved a sigh. “Well, I think he’s good for you in case you want my opinion or things progress.”

Turning, Lisa sat next to me and patted my arm, but I couldn't look at her.

"It's a temporary thing. I'm helping him out because he just realized he's bi." My chest tightened as if it was wrong to dismiss our non-relationship relationship.

"You do seem to like to take care of him, and you're calmer. In control."

I snorted and looked her in the eye. "I'm not talking about that with you."

Lisa's jaw dropped, and her eyes widened as she turned red. "I...oh lordy. What I meant is your demeanor in general." I raised an eyebrow, and she continued. "He was nervous, and when he found out I was Pax's mom, I thought the poor man might vibrate out of his skin. When you held him close, the calming effect was instant. And you have a permanent scowl, but when he touched you, it was like Botox. Not a frown line is sight." She took my hands as I huffed. "Sweetheart, you've been fighting for control for as long as I can remember. You don't have to do that with him, and it's a relief."

"I haven't been—"

"You forget that even though I was a shit mom to Pax, I was still there. You idolized your father and wanted to do anything and everything to make him proud. When you figured out that he'd never acknowledge your accomplishments and nothing you did was ever enough, you fought. Everything Donald wanted for you, you rebelled against."

"I know that was hard on your relationship with Pax. He didn't understand your need to be in control and have control. Your dynamic with Shane is very different. You calm him, and he relaxes you. If I were you, I wouldn't give up on that relationship."

"I can't do that to Pax. I loved him."

“Oh, Cole.” Lisa’s eyes filled with tears. “I know. He knew that. But he’s not coming back. You can’t hurt him; you can only hurt yourself.”

I nodded, not trusting my voice. My feelings for Pax weren’t going away. Besides, Shane needed a man who fit into the corporate world and understood what he did for a living. Shane needed a man on his level, not someone on the sidelines like me. Someone who fit into his life, not a dirty hookup to satisfy a need. And that’s what we did for each other. Satisfied our temporary needs. Shane wouldn’t need me forever, and then he’d move on.

My lunch sat like a rock in my stomach.

“Since I’m dishing out life advice, I’m going to keep my roll going. Stop fighting against what your father would’ve wanted for you. He doesn’t think about you. Sometimes, I feel like you forget his opinion or reaction doesn’t count when you make decisions.”

Alec had said something along the same lines, but I didn’t see any connection.

“Don’t give me that look. You refused to play the sports he wanted, get the degree he wanted, and when you were in London, you had the chance to study art at Oxford.Oxford. But I would bet my life you turned it down because you didn’t want your father to take credit or pride in that.” Lisa delivered her blow with a soft tone and a half smile.

I shook my head in denial, knowing she’d hit her mark.

“You can be anything you want to be, and it has nothing to do with Donald. I see your easel and canvas. Stop fighting against him and fight for what you want. Do what makes you happy. And don’t push Shane away because he works for Donald.”

“It’s complicated.”

Lisa shrugged. “Pax was the only thing you kept that Donald loved. Don’t let him influence how you feel about Shane.”

“I’m not sure he did love Pax. I thought he did, but sometimes, I think he used him. I

don't think my father ever loved anyone but himself."

Lisa tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "You're probably right. He's a manipulative bastard, but that's not a consolation for you. I need to get going. Think about what I said."

With a kiss on my cheek, she was gone. I couldn't decide if I was relieved or sick.

Chapter twenty-one

Shane

"Sara, you don't need to worry about me." I checked the clock knowing Cole would be here soon, and I wanted to be ready so I had to get off the phone.

"I shouldn't worry that my baby brother is avoiding me and his favorite nephew? You only avoid Isaac if something is really wrong. Tell me."

I knew she wouldn't give up, but I wasn't telling her everything. "Fine. I started seeing someone, and it's new and not at all at the point where I would ever introduce you. So don't ask."

"Shane, that's amazing! I promise not to scare them off." She shushed a fussy Isaac. "Is it a guy or a girl?"

"I'm not giving any details. And I have to go."

"I need to put the little guy down, but you're telling me later. As long as you stay away from the tattooed angry guy, I don't care who it is. Love you, bye." Sara hung up, and I stared at the phone.

Well, I guess it didn't matter since Cole and I weren't a real couple, and our fling would end before Sara insisted on meeting my new person.

I opened my empty refrigerator—realized I'd already eaten my leftover takeout—and had nothing for dinner. Not eating before seeing Cole would be a mistake, so I shoved a spoon in a jar of peanut butter. That would have to do for now.

I'd fought with myself all day about giving Cole the code to my apartment. Giving him the code meant I could be naked and waiting for him. Both of us would get off on that, but giving him the code treaded too far into boyfriend territory. No matter how good it felt, we weren't moving in that direction. I knew that. My nosey sister knew that.

My phone pinged with a text from Cole; he'd picked up takeout for us. This was exactly why remembering we weren't a couple was so fucking hard.

"Someone's in a hurry," Cole said, giving my body a slow perusal as he brushed past me into my apartment. I'd opted to greet him in my boxer briefs. "I can't believe the marker on your leg is still intact."

I didn't tell him I'd wrapped it in plastic wrap when I'd showered. The chest tattoo had washed away.

"About that." I waited for him to set the food down and look at me. "I want you to tattoo it for real." He frowned, but I pushed on. "I'll wait until your ink situation is fixed. Obviously."

Cole crossed his arms over his chest. "That type of color in a tattoo will require maintenance every few years."

His statement hung in the air between us. Another reality check that even if he

brought me food, we did not have a future in which he would touch up my tattoo. Cole turned something ugly into a masterful design, and I couldn't imagine it not being there.

“Can someone else do the touch-ups if you ink it? Or maybe Alec to do it?” If he said no, I'd take a picture and research other tattoo artists, but that took spare time I didn't have.

“Fuck.” Cole turned away from me and braced his arms on the countertop. “I'll do it,” he said. Part of me thought I should tell him I didn't want it, but we'd made a pact to be honest, and I wanted it.

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He cracked his neck, his go-to move to reset his thinking. “I figured you hadn’t eaten yet.” He gestured to the food, “And I know work has had you preoccupied, so I thought you’d like to vent. I’m no genius.” He turned, and his genuine smile flipped my stomach. Stupid hungry stomach. “And I won’t be able to miraculously fix your problems, but railing against the machine,” his eyes crinkled with the laugh he held back, “might help you let go sooner and enjoy tonight more.”

I’d canceled on him last night, so it had been three days since I’d broken the rules and showed up at his shop. Three days seemed to be our limit of depriving ourselves of each other. Sara was sick of my complaining about work, so I had nothing to lose.

I talked while we ate at the kitchen island, giving him the overview of the problems and incompetence at work, and the VPs and directors unwillingness to change. I talked nonstop for twenty minutes while Cole nodded sympathetically.

I held back my weird account balance problem. I’d brought it up at the meeting, but it was dismissed by the CFO, and now every time I worked on it, a member of the C-suite had an issue I needed to fix. It was like the damn thing was red flagged. But that issue involved confidentiality, so I avoided talking about it with Cole.

After I talked myself out, Cole set down his fork. “For a genius, you don’t understand how people work,” he said, squeezing my forearm. I snorted, grateful for his candor. “You’ve backed up all your ideas with data and facts, but people are more complicated. Ask them what they need. Ask them if you can help them solve their problem their way first.”

I removed my arm from his hand and leaned away from him. “But they’re not dealing

with the issues.” I sounded like a petulant child, and I hated it.

“Probably,” Cole conceded, “but you have to build goodwill and trust. Take my ink situation. I didn’t call my friends and ask them if they had ink to spare. I asked how business was going, I asked if they were having issues with suppliers, and I asked what they needed and offered them what I had available. Then, I asked them if they had ink. I knew I needed to give them something first, whether it was a friend to listen or actual supplies. And I got what I needed.”

“Maybe you’re the genius,” I grumbled.

Theoretically, I understood reciprocity and dealmaking, but I usually used facts and data instead. In the past, it had saved time, but at Branson Financial, I clearly needed a new approach.

If I hadn’t been distracted by my work woes, I would have caught on faster. Agitated, I stood and paced away from him, annoyed I’d let my guard down. “Now I feel like your offerings of dinner and listening to my problems was a prelude to asking for something from me tonight.” I pointed at another bag on the counter. “What in the name of dirty kink do you want to do to me that you felt the need to ply me with food and cajole me with work conversation?”

“Your smart mouth is one of my favorite things about you.” Cole smiled ear to ear, not the least bit ashamed I’d figured out his plan.

If I were truthful with myself, I’d admit that the fact that he enjoyed my lack of a filter and using, in his terms, fancy words melted my heart in a dangerous way. I needed to stay clear that his heart was locked in the past.

“What did you bring?” I asked directly.

He held up the bag. “Toys.”

Without waiting to find out what type of toys, my knees hit the floor.

After I’d gotten my negative test results, we’d had all kinds of kinky blowjobs with restraints and body bending positions. We’d watched some porn with toys, and I’d been aroused by everything. My dick demanded I participate in every single opportunity Cole provided.

Chapter twenty-two

Cole

Shane was sprawled across my chest catching his breath as I held him tight. High on endorphins and boneless, we both needed the contact after sex. Neither my body nor mind separated from him right away. When his breathing returned to normal, I loosened my grip. I kept one arm around him while the other rested on my abdomen. After a minute, Shane twisted my ring around on my finger. It wasn’t the first time he’d done it, and he never pulled, always twisted.

“Does it bother you?” I asked after clearing my throat. My voice was hoarse, and still, I had no regrets.

“What, the fantastic orgasms you give me bordering on pain? Not at all.” Shane shifted to see me, and I saw his confusion.

“My ring.”

Shane’s gaze darted to our hands, and he dropped mine. “No. Sorry, I didn’t realize I was doing that. Does it bother you? I won’t do it again.”

“It doesn’t bother me, but most people think I should take it off.”

I rarely put weight on other people’s opinions, but this was a consensus. The fact that people cared about it pissed me off. Lisa’s words rang in my head, and I knew I had to do what was right for me. But it wasn’t as easy as it should be.

Shane’s silence gave me pause, so I craned my neck to see him better. His mind worked on what to say. “Spit it out.”

“I’m trying to think about how to say this without you thinking I’m trying to change your opinion regarding love and loss.”

We watched his fingertips trace over the ring.

His thought process took time, so I stayed silent. Maybe Lisa was right, and I always tried to fight to control my situation, but the anticipation hollowed me out.

“Did you know the Irish have a different view on soulmates? They don’t view soulmates as romantic but as people who have a soul-deep connection. So, any of your friends or family could be considered a soulmate.” Shane’s eyes darted to mine and back to the ring. “Paxton was your soulmate long before you were lovers. You told me you grew up as close as brothers.” Shane sat up on his elbow, so we were facing each other.

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We hadn't turned the lights on in his bedroom, but the living room light backlit him with a halo effect. My pretty boy angel.

"We have this ridiculous notion that romantic love has a limit. Love is not a pie. You would never tell a parent that they could only love one of their children at a time. Or tell siblings they had to choose their favorite and love only them. When my sister has another child, I will love them as much as Isaac. If you experience romantic love, and it ends, for whatever reason, your heart grows again when you find someone else to love. Love expands your heart to epic proportions.

"Your wedding ring is more than a symbol of marriage; it's a symbol that you found a soulmate in Paxton. I know you think you'll never love again, but I hope someday you find someone to love. They won't ever replace Paxton, but your heart can enlarge and make room for someone else."

Shane's bottomless brown eyes reflected all the sincerity in his heart, and his words sliced me open. Maybe because he was sure he wouldn't be around if and when I'd be ready to love again. My heart ached in a way I'd never anticipated.

"I never wore my ring when we were married." I blinked, surprised at my confession.

Shane reared back, almost toppling off the bed. His silence gave me a minute to decide whether I wanted to talk about it.

"It wasn't important to me." I slid the ring above my knuckle to show Shane the tattoo of Pax's initials on my finger. "We tattooed our initials on our ring fingers after college when we lived in London. We made a commitment to be with each other

forever. To me, our initials represented that commitment because gay marriage wasn't legal yet," I said as Shane snuggled in close and stroked my arm for comfort.

"We exchanged rings when we got married, but I told Pax it bothered me when I tattooed. It doesn't. It didn't. I wanted to see his initials on my skin. But it upset him that I didn't wear it. We compromised, and I wore it when we went out with people from his work or to professional events." I threw my forearm over my eyes.

Ruining an amazing round of sex with this admission had been a mistake.

"You feel guilty," Shane stated.

"I'm guilty of a lot of things," I replied.

Guilty that I wasn't good enough for Shane. I brought too much darkness and pain. Shane deserved a man with a whole heart. He deserved to be someone's one and only love. I couldn't bring myself to say that out loud. I was selfish and wanted him for myself.

"Judging in retrospect is easy. We can all look back and know what the best course of action was. But being in the moment and knowing what's right for now and in the future... that's damn near impossible." Shane lifted my arm off my face to look me in the eye. "Don't feel like you have to do something you're not ready to do. You can wear Paxton's ring until you die and still fall in love with someone else."

No one else would ever understand. Not the way Shane did.

Chapter twenty-three

Shane

Cole had been distant since his confession about his wedding ring.

I'd set up the new computer system and run all the tests to identify potential problems as promised. I'd also installed the program on the computer in his office so he wouldn't have to go up front to find or print reports. He expressed his gratitude and offered to pay me.

It was ridiculous, but his offer to pay me felt degrading. I'd wanted to help; he'd never asked me to create a program for him.

Alec had asked me if I wanted to meet them at Pink Titanium next weekend, but I declined. It didn't take a genius to know Cole didn't want me there. I shouldn't feel slighted because I'd agreed to friends with benefits who only saw each other at my apartment. But Cole had cracked the door into his past, and I wanted to bust it open.

Maybe he'd already detoxed from us, and we were over.

Usually, we'd have set up a night to meet by now. No, usually we'd have had at least one other session since last week with plans for another. I'd begun to take for granted that being with Cole improved my sleep habits and stress level. He hadn't touched me when I'd returned to his shop.

My phone pinged and like an addict, my hands shook seeing Cole's name. He wanted me to meet him at the shop tonight at 8 p.m. I should tell him no. I should make him wait for an answer. Of course, I did neither.

I flew through my projects with precision and determination. I'd taken Cole's advice and asked several of the VPs what they needed to complete the reports necessary for the quarterly review. I'd let them dictate how they wanted to submit the reports while I offered suggestions for code and data storage to make the gathering of information easier.

They were extremely receptive, and I began implementing the changes. The changes weren't as comprehensive as I would have liked, but it was a huge first step. It would increase the VP's departments productivity, and that would make my job easier.

Today, I didn't stop to explain my process to my staff. Today was about delivering the completed projects to the managers and getting under Cole. I didn't even investigate why I'd been mysteriously locked out of the database I needed to access in order to finish balancing my spreadsheets. A problem for another day.

Needy and shaking as any true addict, I flung the door open to Unframed Art at 7:57 p.m. Alec flinched in surprise as the door hit the glass window and slammed shut when it bounced back. I did not have the patience to wait three minutes outside to follow the rules. Alec's surprise had morphed into a smug, wicked grin.

"Cole, your 8 p.m. is here!" he yelled over his shoulder.

What. The. Fuck.

I stomped down the hall after Cole, but instead of going into his office, he turned into his station. It was hard to know if I should be even angrier or relieved. He'd sort of apologized, but my anxiety filled my ears with the sound of my heartbeat.

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“I’m doing your leg tattoo. Put these on,” Cole said and threw me a pair of basketball shorts. “I’ll be right back.”

He walked out, and I obeyed before my brain decided to analyze the situation. I heard his intake of breath when he reentered the room.

“Well,” I demanded, waiting for his explanation and reining in anxiety with anger.

“I’m enjoying the view.” He shrugged.

“Fuck you for sidelining me with your guilt.” I knew if I didn’t stand up for myself, Cole would only see me on his terms. I had a stake in this too. “You owe me an apology.”

He batted the air as if to dismiss my statement but then sighed. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Silence hung in the air for over a minute.

In the short time we’d been together, my body relied on Cole’s to function properly. Function like most bodies without stress ticks and mood swings. I’d had a blissful month of normalcy that I hadn’t known since I was an eleven-year-old child. Rationally, for the sake of survival, I should start the process of weaning myself from Cole. I might not have the choice to slowly back away from our time together.

“That’s it? You ghost me for five fucking days with zero explanation and a subpar apology. Do you really think I’m that easy that I will just fall to my knees and say all

is forgiven?!” I would not allow him to summon me and then act like everything was fine.

He said this arrangement would be mutually beneficial, and I was going to hold him to that.

“Do you want me to tattoo you or should I get Alec?”

“I’m not doing this.” I grabbed my suit coat and pants to leave. This arrangement had run its course if Cole wasn’t willing to acknowledge our connection.

“Wait.” He blocked the door with his body. “I just need a minute.”

“I gave you a minute. In fact, I’ve been here three minutes and fortyish seconds,” I spat.

“You know why I had a bad week.” His tortured face hurt to look at.

“You can have a bad week, but what you can’t do is punish me for what you volunteered.” I knew Cole had a ghost haunting him, but I refused to get pushed aside in his battle with guilt. “I did not start the conversation, or ask you anything you weren’t willing to tell me.”

“You’re right. I wanted to make it up to you by doing the tattoo for your shin.” His eyes pleaded with me to forgive him, and I hated that I was caving in.

“This isn’t a relationship where you have to bring me the proverbial flowers after a fight. I texted you four times and even picked up the phone like a goddamn Gen Xer and called you. All you had to say was that you were working through some shit, and you’d get back to me when you were ready.” I stomped into the hallway.

Cole followed me, but when I reached the exit, I wasn't prepared to leave things like this. He cupped my shoulder and the simple touch rooted me to the floor.

"Confession. I debated inviting you out to a private beach tomorrow. The kids are back in school so no one uses it during the week. I was mad at myself for wanting to break my own rules with you. I'd already told you something that I hadn't told another soul. You're right; I was punishing you for what I want from you."

I turned to face him. "We started this to explore our needs. But we both know that it's become more than that. You want the control, and I happily submit to release my anxiety. I'm not whining that I want to spend time with you; I'm asking for the release. So, if you can't provide it, I expect the common decency of a reply. And if I take matters into my own hands, you don't get to punish me for it," I said, making a conscious effort to unlock my jaw after my tirade.

"We decided this is exclusive." Cole crowded me against the door so we were chest to chest, and my traitorous body loved it. "I failed you. But I'm still in charge of every single one of your orgasms. That is not negotiable."

"Only if you keep your end of the bargain. You forfeit that right if you don't respond to me." I taunted him to force his hand into providing the bite of pain I'd been craving.

"You want me to punish you so badly, you'd tell me my cock is small." He smiled, planting his feet on either side of mine and tugging my hair, looking into my eyes. "I'm sorry," he whispered, holding my gaze. "I can't promise I won't fuck up again, but I promise not to leave you hanging."

"Thank you." I winced at the breathlessness in my voice.

"Is this a private lovefest or can anyone join?" Alec appeared out of nowhere and

brought his arms around the two of us.

“Okay, asshole.” Cole shoved Alec back. “Get out of here. This is, in fact, private.” Cole smirked, shoving him onto the sidewalk. “I’ll bring you coffee and donuts tomorrow morning.”

“I want a breakfast sandwich and a donut.” Alec grinned, winking at me.

I liked Alec and his ability to tease Cole. Sometimes, I think Alec borderline flirted with me to get a rise out of Cole. I didn’t hate it. I had to admit I liked it when Cole got possessive over me.

“Fine,” Cole growled, and Alec left whistling.

“Do you want the tattoo or should we do something else?” Cole asked.

Chapter twenty-four

Shane

I hadn't worn shorts since middle school, but now looking at the art on my shin, I wanted to wear shorts every single day. He told me it was a slightly different version of the tattoo on his thigh. The 3D shapes mesmerized me, and I was happy to have ink similar to his.

Cole's chuckle made me cringe.

“If you don't stop laughing at me, I'm going to insist you drop me at the next train station.” I tried to keep a straight face but failed.

“Is that the passenger equivalent of, ‘I'll turn this car around,’ Pretty Boy?” Cole's warm palm landed on my leg, and I immediately wanted it higher.

His laugh was either caused by my opened mouth stare at his sexy stubble or my spreadsheet for the day. I'd calculated optimal times to apply sunscreen and plotted when high tide was coming in. Necessary basic information. And it wasn't my fault that Cole's scruff had, once again, caused my brain to short-circuit.

Spending too much time with him might severely affect my number of accessible brain cells.

“If anyone should be mad, that would be me. You said I looked like an old Charlie Hunnam, but the guy is like five years older than me. Insulting.” Cole’s mouth quirked up, and his dancing eyes said he was anything but mad. After glancing at my disgruntled face, Cole continued, “I get it, I’m hot, and it’s hard for you to handle. We all have our kryptonite and yours is my two-day scruff.”

“Whatever,” I mumbled.

“Don’t worry, my kryptonite is your chest with my ink. If there are people on the beach today, I’ll turn into an asshole if anyone looks at you.” Cole tried to mollify me.

“I think you’re misjudging your personality if you think the keyword in that sentence is ‘turn,’” I said, and Cole’s head tipped back in a full belly laugh. “Eyes on the road. An accident will throw off my timeline.” Overplanning was an idiosyncrasy of mine, and I might have gone overboard due to nerves.

Oddly, Cole hadn’t seemed annoyed by it.

At least the drive out to the Island on a weekday was traffic jam free. Negotiating this day trip had been a feat. First, Cole had to convince me that taking a day off would help my state of mind and productivity in the long run. I wasn’t sure if I agreed with his assessment, but he used his body to bribe me.

But when he mentioned that the private beach was in Lisa’s neighborhood, I’d backed out. I truly believed someday Cole would find love again, but he wasn’t ready now, and I refused to live with Paxton’s ghost in my personal life since he dominated my professional life. When Cole suspected the reason for my change of mind, he gave me a crash course in Paxton’s family history.

He gave me more information than I felt I had a right to know. But in Cole’s mind, it

wasn't his past, so it wasn't off-limits. Lisa had an addiction that had raged for years until Cole and Paxton had moved to London. Fearing she'd never see her son again, Lisa had gotten sober. Paxton had wanted to believe in her sobriety but couldn't. He'd left her a trust in his will to buy property. Lisa had bought the house and business on Long Island with that money.

So knowing memories with Paxton would not be lurking on the beach or on Long Island, I took a day off work to spend time with Cole. I should have spent more time getting ahead on work than crafting the spreadsheet that Cole had tucked in his pocket with a grin. I couldn't tell if it was an amused smile or placating. Time would tell. If he was amused, that usually wore thin rather quickly and irritation replaced it.

The spreadsheet I'd handed him was a smaller version of my original. My anxiety had the curse of causing exactly what I tried to avoid. I needed to create control to ensure we'd have a good time, but trying to control the situation with events, places, and times on a spreadsheet sucked the fun out of it.

"You're thinking really hard over there. What's going on in that genius mind of yours?" Cole kept his eyes on the road, which I appreciated.

"You don't want to know." I forced my lips into a smile.

"I really do. I find your thoughts fascinating." Cole squeezed my leg, and I bit back swearing at him for teasing me. Cole rarely said something he didn't mean.

"Remember, you asked for it." I shifted, leaning against the door to see his face better. "I'm calculating how long I can stand it before I need to refer to my spreadsheet, and how long it will be before you decide this was a terrible idea. Also, I'm estimating how many future sessions we'll have before our arrangement ends."

Cole's fingers had dug into my leg before he caught himself and released his grip. He

took a deep breath and asked, “Are you thinking about this ending because you’re done with me after I ghosted you for a week or because you think I want to end it?”

My head knocked the window in my shock. “I’m not the one mourning the loss of my soulmate and committed to a life without love.” Hiding my insecurity by highlighting his pain was a terrible strategy.

Cole grunted and removed his hand from my leg. I’d hurt him on purpose but hated the consequences; for a smart person, I was a complete dumbass.

“Honestly, I was surprised by your spreadsheet, but it was thoughtful. You took the sunrises, tides, food options, and bathroom facilities into consideration because you care about my well-being. It’s kind of fantastic. I doubt there’re many things as interesting as how your mind works. I like it.” Cole’s white knuckles clutched the steering wheel. “Were you hoping it’d get on my nerves?”

Some of the tightness in my chest released. “No, but in my experience, it aggravates people. My thoughts aren’t always rational,” I confessed.

“Preaching to the choir, Pretty boy,” he said, and my chest loosened more.

We spent the rest of our drive talking about how my program was working for his shop and how his advice had helped improve my work situation. I was totally relaxed by the time we pulled up to a split rail fence with an entrance to a sandy beach.

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I grabbed my bag out of the backseat, and Cole popped the trunk. My carefully selected supplies were paltry in comparison to what Cole had brought.

“Are you kidnapping me?” I stared down at blankets, outdoor cushions, a cooler, and...what the hell. “Do you own that picnic basket?” I demanded.

“I didn’t steal it.” Cole pulled me to him in a one-armed hug. He sighed when I raised my eyebrows. “Lisa may or may not have dropped it off when I asked about using the private beach.”

“She’s okay with,” I gestured between us, “this?”

“Well, I didn’t give her the dirty details, but she knows I’m spending time with you,” Cole said, but I had yet to move. “She’s happy for me, for us.”

That explanation made things better but so much worse.

Between the two of us, it only took one trip to bring everything down to the beach. There was a path through a grass field, a few trees, and then Long Island Sound in all its glory. Cole explained the neighborhood trucked sand in for the piece of heaven.

“This is incredible.” The sand was soft under my feet and the water a cool greenish blue. “We’re in Setauket?” I asked, and Cole nodded, laying out a blanket. “I can’t believe no one will be here today.”

Cole sat and patted the space next to him. “Come here.”

“We need sunscreen.” I folded myself next to him, taking sun lotion out of my bag.

He grabbed it out of my hand. “Take your shirt off.”

Once he’d massaged every inch of exposed skin, turning me into a mess of lust, I did the same for him, covering him in sunscreen. It amazed me how much I loved touching his skin in a nonsexual way. And I got to study his tattoos. I wanted to ask about them but was afraid the meanings fell into the category of talking about the past.

“There,” I screwed the cap back on and sat back on my elbows, “this is relaxing,” I said, not at all relaxed with his body that close, half dressed in a semi-public place.

“Shane,” Cole said softly.

“Hmmm,” I answered, keeping my gaze firmly on the water.

His hand slid around the back of my neck as he pulled me in. “Come here,” he whispered.

My eyes widened as I tipped into him. His soft lips pressed into mine. Part of me had been afraid he’d done it by accident, but then his lips parted, and we were kissing. Our first real kiss. A kiss not attached to fluid exchanges or sex. I sank into the blanket, and he followed me down. Cole tasted incredible; I wanted to explore every part of his mouth, and by the way he pinned me in place, he wanted the same.

With all the filthy things we’d done, he’d never just kissed me, and this was heaven. His unhurried lips feathered along my jawline, he nipped my neck and made his way back to my mouth. His scruff dragging behind his hot mouth enhanced the sensation of his kisses. Cole kissed like he did everything, with command and expertise.

I had never been kissed the way Cole kissed me, with total possession and as if it were the only thing he ever wanted to do. I couldn't think of one thing I would rather do than kiss Cole Branson. We lay on the blanket, listening to the waves and making out forever. Or until my stomach rumbled.

Cole pulled my spreadsheet out of the pocket in his swim trunks, then consulted his phone. "Your stomach is right on time for lunch." He stretched, began unpacking the cooler, and set up a feast between us. "Time to feed you."

I watched, transfixed, as his muscles flexed with movement and his tattoos came to life. I had to remind my battered heart that this was temporary, and he'd never feel about me the way he felt about Paxton. Soaking in all his warmth and tenderness might make it hurt more, but in the end, I wanted it no matter when it ended.

I was confused when he stood to lie down behind me instead of across from me where the food would be in the middle.

A laugh burst out. "We are going to have interesting tan lines. I'm going to have a Cole shaped image." I motioned over the length of my body. "Zero regrets."

"Nope, none." Cole grinned in return.

He proceeded to hand feed me from the charcuterie tray. Nothing had ever tasted so delicious.

Chapter twenty-five

Cole

After lunch, I dragged Shane into the water. It had been forever since I'd spent so much time simply kissing. His plump lips begged to be kissed, and they probably made

women jealous. Kissing had always been a means to an end, but with Shane, it was a main event.

The man was so fucking adorable. I made sure to check the tides in his spreadsheet, and he melted for me. Dammit. Why was it so sexy when he talked numbers to me. It was certainly unusual for someone to make a spreadsheet for a day at the beach, but hell, it wasn't annoying. It was part of his charm.

I'd taken a hard look at myself after Shane called me on my shit. His explanation of what I should've done instead of ghosting him seemed so easy and reasonable. He wouldn't pressure me to label my feelings.

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Part of me hated that he'd been able to break me down. Made me confess my guilt over Pax. Hated the reminder that it was possible for me to fall in love with someone else but implied it won't be him. Hated him for being so wise for someone so young. My therapist insisted that I didn't hate him at all.

I had to admit that I'd broken the rules because I wanted more. For whatever reason, Shane had chosen me, and it wasn't my place to second guess him. He was so much more than a fuck buddy, and I had to own that.

I understood my obsession of wanting to have sex with Shane. Envisioning how incredible his ass would look taking my cock. I didn't understand the craving to want to be around him without sex. That type of want made our relationship real and not a temporary arrangement. I wasn't going to fight the want anymore. I was taking Lisa's advice and not fighting against things.

I knew without him saying it that Shane had been starved for affection and validation.

Feeding him from my hand had me needy for his body. I swear he sucked and licked my fingers to torture me. He traced all my tattoos with his fingers and his tongue. Shane made my biceps, forearms, and thighs erogenous zones with his touch. Maybe he wasn't the only one starved for affection.

We swam and I stopped in an alcove surrounded by trees, inaccessible from land. The perfect place to get my hands on him.

"Is this where you're going to dump my body?" Shane teased as I gripped his waist, bringing our bodies flush.

“No dumping. It’s not on the spreadsheet.” I ghosted my lips up his neck to his ear.

“Neither is all the kissing.” He shivered in my arms.

“Do you object?” I asked, snaking one hand down the back of his swim trunks to palm his ass.

“Not in the least,” he said as our lips brushed. “Well, I guess if you killed me now, I’d die happy,” Shane quipped.

“I’m not killing you until I’m done with you.” I hooked him around the back of the neck and kissed the hell out of him again because I could.

“Warn me when you’re done,” Shane whispered so low I don’t think he meant for me to hear, so I didn’t respond.

I couldn’t promise him a future. But Shane Reynolds was slowly becoming the most important person in my life. I didn’t know what that meant or how to make it work out.

When I was with Shane, I was more me than I’d ever been in my life. It was insane because I played a role for Shane, but now, the role was real. Like I was discovering the real me with him.

Lisa had noticed the difference after seeing us together for fifteen minutes.

I held him in a tight embrace as we kissed until we were waterlogged. We swam back to our blanket, and I laid out the cushions. I’d hoped to put them to better use, but the risk of getting caught wasn’t worth it.

Shane was sprawled out on the cushions with his eyes closed and face tipped up to

the sun. His good looks belonged in a high-end ad for cologne or some other fancy product. I ran my fingers through his hair, and he responded with a satisfied hum. One of my new favorite sounds.

“When did you recognize your love of numbers and spreadsheets?” I asked, stroking his hair.

“It’s a long, boring story,” Shane said, his body stiffening.

“I don’t think anything about you is boring. You don’t have to tell me, but I’ll take the quick version.”

Shane opened his soulful brown eyes, assessing me. I wanted to ask him who hurt him, but that was so far from our rules. Even this question went over the line. But it seemed to be such a vital part of him that I wanted to know about it.

Shane closed his eyes and faced the sun again. “It was a matter of survival. After my family trauma, I needed something that made sense. That summer I couldn’t go to camp, I started reading math textbooks. Literature is up for interpretation, but numbers are straightforward. By the time I was a freshman in high school, I’d mastered calculus.

“I doubled up on English classes and graduated at the end of my sophomore year. Numbers helped me escape from my family. Spreadsheets are the natural byproduct of organizing numeric data,” he said, and I had the feeling he wouldn’t have said all that if he’d been looking at me.

“I’m not sure if I should say ‘that’s awesome’ or ‘I’m sorry.’ Families can be shit. Mine certainly sucks. I’m lucky to have Lisa. And you have Sara. Do you talk to your parents?” I kept moving the line I’d drawn between us, unable to stop.

“If I tell you about my parents, then I get to ask about yours.” Shane rolled on his side, so we were face-to-face.

“Fair,” I agreed. I didn’t give a shit about either of my parents.

“My parents never got over what happened. They associate me with their trauma. I’m not their son; I’m their pain. It took years and years and years of therapy to accept that the best thing for me and my mental health was to limit contact with them. Sara saved my sanity. She fought for me against my parents, against the world. I’d be lost without her.” Shane’s eyes held a lifetime of pain.

I cleared my throat, thick with emotion. “My mom left right before I started kindergarten. I don’t know if she ever tried to contact me. My father’s a bastard, and once you cross him, you’re dead to him. I look like her, and I’m an artist like she was, which is not acceptable to my father. I’ve thought about trying to find her, but she’s the mom. She could find me if she wanted to.” I rubbed Shane’s arm, not sure if it was to soothe him or myself.

I hadn’t talked about my mother in over a decade.

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“It’s amazing how someone can be a good person in general but reprehensible to their children. I think our parents have a lot in common.” Shane traced his fingers across my temple and down the side of my face.

“How’d you come to work for that asshole anyway?” I asked.

I disagreed that my father was a good person. Shane was so much more than a lemming in a suit. He had the potential to rule the world instead of making my father richer.

“A headhunter contacted me, and I had an interview. He offered me the chance to be an executive officer within a year. That’s always been my goal, and with Branson Financial, it’s achievable before I turn twenty-five.” He shrugged. “I was asked to speak at the Board of Directors meeting this year, and if it goes well, I’ll be in the C-suite before New Year’s Eve.”

“And that’s the end goal? Why is it appealing?”

I had to remind myself that just because my father never promoted Pax the way he’d promised, it didn’t mean Shane wouldn’t attain his goals. Still, I didn’t want Shane to get burned by my father.

Shane looked at me like I’d asked him why a day at the beach was fun. He studied me as if waiting for me to say I was joking. He came to the realization that I seriously wanted to know.

“Isn’t that the goal of most people? Become a high-powered executive?” Shane said,

incredulous.

There was no humor in my laugh. “No. I personally wanted nothing to do with business, which is another reason that I’m dead to my father. I had less than zero interest in it.”

If I read Shane right, he wanted to ask about Paxton. I wouldn’t volunteer that our goals and the future had been a source of conflict between the two of us. I wasn’t going to go down hell’s highway again.

“That’s been my goal for years,” Shane said as though any other path was inferior.

I brushed hair out of his eyes. “As long as it’s what makes you happy, that’s the important thing. You’re capable of doing anything in the world you want.” I had to kiss him, so I didn’t kick my own ass for sounding like a sappy Hallmark drama. Shane was incredibly intelligent and capable, so I had to believe my father would see that.

Losing myself in Shane was so much better than acting like I knew what the fuck I was talking about.

Chapter twenty-six

Shane

I changed my shirt for the third time, and I’d be late if I couldn’t get myself out the door. Alec had brought up going to Pink Titanium again when I’d stopped by Unframed Art the day after the beach, and Cole asked me to meet them. This was a problem for me.

Our arrangement had been working for us for over a month, but Cole kept bending

and breaking the rules. I broke one first, but he planned a trip to the beach, talked about his past, and wanted to see me in public. I wasn't sure how to act. I had zero knowledge of how friends with benefits behaved in public, and Google did not enlighten me.

I had to decide whether the time I spent with Cole was worth it. When I was with him, my entire body relaxed, and my mind calmed. But when we weren't together, my head was a mess.

Just like the first night I met him, one comment from him had me questioning all my goals. I wanted to be a successful executive at a Fortune 500 company by the time I was twenty-five. That had been the plan since I'd understood the potential for my obsession with numbers.

Not once had I thought about if it would make me happy.

Happy. I had no context for that word in my life. Not since I'd hit double digits had happy been relevant. It had been all about survival and success. I'd overcome my issues, so I'd progressed to becoming successful. And I was very successful.

But happy...I didn't know how to determine what happiness felt like. I'd ask Sara.

I checked my phone, and my rideshare app said my car was three minutes away. I was wearing this shirt, and everything would be fine. I only half believed it.

The bar was much louder and far more crowded than when I'd been here with Sara. The stage was set up, and it looked like my worst nightmare—karaoke. Cole was going to be the death of me. One glance from his gorgeous green eyes, and I'd agree to anything.

I found space at the bar, deciding to get a drink before interacting with Cole. I

scanned the QR code since I wasn't a drinker and needed some suggestions. Tonight's special was the Pink Titanium, well when in Rome.

The bartender took my order with a wink, and for the first time, I felt weird about my sexuality. This thing with Cole had an expiration date, but flirting with other men seemed an impossible endeavor. Nevertheless, I couldn't imagine not having a strong pair of hands gripping me, manipulating my body, controlling me. The satisfaction from our encounters was substantially greater than anything else I'd ever experienced. Women were soft and cuddly and warm, but I preferred Cole's hard body and strength. I never had to worry about hurting him or going too far.

I was terrible at flirting with women, and now, I'd have to learn how to flirt with men. That was depressing. The bartender dropped off my drink and a napkin with a phone number on it. I stared at it, afraid of all the possibilities.

"How's that drink?" the guy next to me asked.

He was about my age, slightly shorter with a muscular build and a buzzcut. He had an easy smile and waited for my answer.

That jolted me out of my head. "Oh, I haven't tried it yet."

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I took a sip but didn't want to swallow the sugary sweet alcohol. I choked it down and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. I should have known a neon pink drink with more ingredients than I was willing to read would be like drinking alcoholic sugar.

"Not a great choice for me," I admitted.

He laughed. "Let me buy you another drink." I shook my head and began looking around for Cole, Alec, or any of the Unframed Art crew. "Are you here with someone?" he asked.

"Yes. No." I continued my scan.

"I think that's an 'it's complicated' answer. But it doesn't have to be. Let me get you a drink you'll like," he said.

I didn't have to be a genius to know Cole wouldn't like that even if we weren't technically together. I opened my mouth to decline, but a strong palm landed on my shoulder.

Cole didn't say anything to me, he just stared at the guy.

"Hey, I was looking for you," I said to Cole's profile because his glare was murderous. "I bought you this." I held up my Pink Titanium.

Cole's eyes slid to me and the outrageously large pink drink in my hand. The guy disappeared into the crowd. Cole arched an eyebrow, and his lips twitched.

“Well, it did put a hint of a smile on your face.” I beamed at him, batting my eyelashes like some drunk, male bimbo.

“What am I going to do with you, Pretty Boy,” he sighed, slinging his arm around my neck.

“I have a list and a spreadsheet if you can’t think of anything,” I said.

Cole’s entire face transformed with his laugh, his eyes crinkled and sparkled while all the tension bled from him. “I bet you do. Are you going to stop flirting and come join us?”

“Cole, you know me. You must know I have no idea how to flirt.” I set the concoction and the napkin with the phone number on the bar. Cole smiled but the pinch of his mouth and the clench of his jaw startled me. He seemed unsettled, which spiked my anxiety and I blurted, “You know you’re the only one I want. I wouldn’t choose anyone else.”

“You are too pretty and too innocent for your own good.” He relaxed, pulling me closer.

I felt the need to make sure Cole didn’t think I was becoming clingy or falling for him, so I added, “I’m sticking to our exclusive noncommittal relationship.”

His grin fell off his face replaced with a scowl as he led me to a large oval booth in the back with Alec and a few other people. Introductions were made, and I tried to figure out the relationships between everyone.

Madyson noticed me watching her play with Alec’s hair and planted a kiss on his cheek. “This guy was my high school boyfriend and I,” she held up her hand and waved her fingers in jazz hands, “turned him gay.”

“Always the shock value with you.” Cole tipped his chin at her.

“You love to embellish that story like a crazy bitch.” Alec pressed his forehead to hers. “I won’t risk our friendship. You don’t want that either.” After a beat, he said, “You can’t live without me.” His tone was teasing, but the affection he felt was evident. He said ‘crazy bitch’ as a term of endearment.

Everyone around the table seemed to understand what wasn’t said and looked away.

“Artists. They’ve all inhaled too much paint or ink,” said a scruffy good-looking friend of Madyson. I laughed in response.

Madyson turned her attention to me. “So, where did you come from and how did you get trapped with this unhinged crew?” She gestured around the table.

“This guy,” I pointed at Cole, “saved me at the bar and then kidnapped me to this booth.” I deflected.

“Nice.” Madyson grinned and leaned forward. “What’s your story? Gay, bi, pan? Do we have a chance?” Madyson’s booming laughter almost drowned out Cole’s growl but not quite. “Keep your panties on, Cole. I’m just giving you shit.”

“We?” I asked when no one commented on Madyson’s use of the plural form.

Cole leaned in and whispered in my ear. “Madyson and her husband, Jayce, are looking for a third to complete their throuple. Their partner left them heartbroken.”

My gaze flew to hers in sympathy. If I hadn’t been watching, I would’ve missed the flash of pain and her recovery.

Madyson reached over and tapped her bright orange nails on Cole’s forearm. “I’m

assuming this cutie is the brainiac who installed your new inventory program.” She cocked her head toward me.

Cole moved his arm to rest on the back of the booth behind me. Possessively.

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Madyson looked at me expectantly, but I had no idea what she was waiting for. She rolled her eyes. “Don’t tell me I’m going to have to beg both Boy Wonder and Mr. Grumpy to help my gallery. The things a gal’s gotta do to hustle in this town.”

I liked Madyson’s sense of humor and her need to antagonize Cole. I had no doubt she’d pretended to proposition me to annoy Cole. Being in a social situation with Cole made it harder to keep our rules intact. It was exhausting trying to maintain a social face, and I wanted to sink into Cole for comfort. But that wasn’t how our relationship worked, even if he had his moments of weird possessiveness.

My heart stuttered to a complete stop. Cole had taken his wedding ring off. My mind tried to filter through all the possible reasons why he’d remove it. But the Cole effect had placed a trip wire in my brain, so thinking straight became impossible. I had to squash the possibility of hope for something more.

“Knock it off, Madyson,” Cole said and then added, “you know I won’t sell my paintings for money.”

I intended to ask Cole about his paintings, but Madyson huffed and turned her calculating gaze back to me. “I own an art gallery called The Artistic Edge. What are the chances you can fit it into your schedule to do a system overhaul like you did for Unframed Art?” Her eyes flicked to Cole. “It’s a real question. No hidden agenda.”

My first thought was that Cole had put her up to asking me, but the scowl on his face said otherwise. “I don’t—”

“You probably can’t afford him,” Cole said. “He’d have to check his schedule before

answering you.”

Madyson and everyone at the table volleyed their eyes between Cole and me.

“Cole is my secretary and part-time bodyguard,” I deadpanned. “If he behaves and does his job well, I’m considering promoting him to VP of all my shit.”

“Well, cheers to that.” Madyson lifted her glass; everyone joined suit and downed their drinks. “Next round is on me.” She shooed people to exit the booth. When everyone started shouting drink orders at her, she held up her hand for silence. “I’ve got this. I have a gift, and I’ll make you all a bet. If I can buy you a drink you love, then you have to sing when they start karaoke. If you don’t like it, I’ll sing a song for every drink you don’t like. Deal?” She sauntered up to the bar before waiting for an answer.

“Don’t bet against her,” Alec warned us, “it’s mind-reading level shit.”

No one seemed worried, and although karaoke might kill me, I figured chances were low that I’d like the drink. Madyson was back in record time with a tray and served our drinks with a flourish. Cole sipped his and gave her a nod of approval. Everyone else praised her, and she left to get the tablet to sign up for karaoke.

I eyed my drink as if it might be poison.

“Did you decide not to drink tonight?” Cole’s warm, concerned voice spoke directly into my ear, causing goosebumps on the back of my neck. “I’ll tell her to fuck off.”

My skin flushed hot knowing Cole wanted to ensure my comfort and would take the pressure off me. Sara was the only person in my life to care about my well-being. I copied Cole’s go-to move and cracked my neck to release the tension. “No, I’ll try it.”

I didn't want to admit that the prospect of karaoke had me halfway out the door.

To my utter horror, the drink was amazing. "What is this?" I asked as Madyson slid into the booth.

"Peanut butter whiskey. Amazing, right?" She reached into her purse. "Try it with this." She launched a chocolate bar at me. "Better than sex."

"Clearly, you're doing sex wrong. Have you tried women? Men were a game changer for me," I said, and Cole choked on his drink while the entire table broke out in uproarious laughter.

Cole squeezed my thigh under the table, and I joined in the laughter, pretending I'd been joking. I couldn't imagine Madyson's desire for a third person in her relationship. I'd never want someone between Cole and me, but I wouldn't judge her. She probably didn't crave spankings.

After a couple drinks, I wandered down to the restroom hoping to miss my song. Madyson also picked our songs, which increased my dread. I'd never sung out loud other than the happy birthday song. Cole leaned against the wall, holding my drink when I exited the bathroom.

"I wanted to try your drink." He held it up.

I motioned for him to take a sip, confused. He pushed off the wall and stalked over until our bodies touched. My mouth opened in a silent O.

Cole's feral expression held me in place as he brought the glass to my lips and I sipped. His mouth sealed over mine and ravished while stealing the drink. Tasting Cole and the whiskey might become my newest obsession. He had me addicted to so many things. His groan hardened my dick instantly, and I forgot we were in a public

hallway as I ground my hips against him. He tried to back me into the bathroom.

“What are you doing?” I breathed into his mouth.

“Getting you where I can get you naked.” He growled.

“Not in there.” My voice rose an octave, and anxiety crashed my brain. Cole stepped back in surprise. “Germs. I can’t, it’s not...” I could not find the words to describe the level of horror I felt about engaging in a sex act in a public bathroom.

“It’s okay. I’m not going to make you do anything you don’t want to do.” He gripped the back of my neck and pressed his forehead to mine. When I’d gotten my anxiety under control, he tried opening all the doors in the hallway. “In here.”

Cole turned the flashlight app on his phone on and shut us in a small storage room. He set the phone and the drink on a stack of boxes, taking my face in both his hands.

“You okay?” Cole’s green eyes were luminescent in the dim light. “You’ve been tense all night.”

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I nodded but then shook my head. “I’m not a people person; I don’t drink, and I definitely don’t sing.” I breathed him in, letting his scent wash over me, and like any addict, it instantly calmed me.

“We can go.” Cole enveloped me in his embrace.

“No, I want to try to have a good time. I’m fine; it’s not a big deal.” He’d counteracted all my nerves, so I accentuated my point with a thrust of my hips.

“Do not,” Cole fisted my hair and yanked my head back, “act like your anxiety is nothing. You’re more important than a night out.”

My mind understood Cole’s point, but my body only wanted his. He swore when I whimpered and brushed my erection against his. He ran his nose down the column of my throat.

“You’ve been bad.” He bit the side of my neck as a warning as I tried to speak. “You were flirting in front of me.” My ass cheek received a sharp slap. “Then, you practically announced I’m the best you’ve ever had. What am I going to do with you.” His statement sounded like a promise.

“You are, Cole. The best. Do whatever you want.” I clung to him, craving whatever he wanted from me.

“On your knees and take your shirt off.” Cole fetched my drink and fed it to me so he could drink it, then instructed me to finish the last two sips.

“Such a good, pretty boy.” He stroked my cheek with his thumb, cupping my jaw. “Take my cock out.”

I’d become adept at unclothing him, and his cock bobbed in front of my face in seconds. He used his hand to signal me to open my mouth. I tilted my head up to him and opened my mouth. He dragged his glorious, large cock over my tongue. His pre-cum tasted salty with the promise of ecstasy. My tongue tried to circle his head, but he pulled back, and without another word, ruthlessly fucked my mouth. I refused to let my eyes close. Watching Cole unleash his lust was a privilege. There was an unexpected power in being the one to make Cole drop his unfeeling facade. His pre-cum coated my throat, and I eagerly waited to swallow every last drop he’d give me.

He pulled out of my mouth and squeezed his dick. “Who do you belong to?” His voice sounded rough and ragged.

“You, Cole, I belong to you.” In that moment I was his. I was desperate for his cum and could not imagine being anything but his. Even if he’d never fully be mine.

“You’re mine, and if any other fucker gets near you, they’re going to know you’re mine.” Cole unleashed, spurting all over my chest and shoulders. When he finished, he rubbed the sticky mess into my skin.

I should be angry. His words and actions of literally marking me were so far outside of our agreement. I should feel demeaned. I shouldn’t love it. I shouldn’t want him to do it again. But I did.

“Fucking hell, you liked that didn’t you.” Cole’s spent dick twitched. “You like me coming all over you, so everyone knows you’re mine.”

I did not trust my voice. I also was afraid of what would come out of my mouth if I tried to speak, so I nodded and kept his intense gaze. I did not remind myself that his

words were said in the heat of passion. That he didn't mean them. I forgot to remind myself that Cole wasn't mine.

"It's not enough, is it," he said without question, knowing exactly what I wanted.

His forefinger and middle finger scooped up his cum, and he shoved it into my waiting mouth. I attacked his fingers, licking up every bit that hadn't already soaked into my skin. He reached for my pants.

I caught his wrist. "I want to wait. I want you to reward me for singing karaoke or punish me if I can't do it." Orgasm deprivation was an absolute punishment for me that Cole got off on.

"Are you sure?" Cole searched my eyes.

It was so strange to have someone so in tune with my anxiety and want to make sure I didn't put myself in a situation that would be too much.

"Unequivocally."

Chapter twenty-seven

Cole

Shane had drained all the common sense I'd ever had right out of me. I was acting like a possessive, jealous boyfriend. Shane's goddamn innocence and inadvertent flirting killed me. All he had to do was stand there and look pretty. He didn't have to flirt. Men and women flocked to him. My entire body reacted to his claim that he'd choose me, but then he'd brought up our agreement and I hated it.

Causing me to lose my fucking mind and come all over him like a savage animal.

And the very worst part, he'd liked it. A lot. I fucking loved it.

Never before had I wished for a real chance. No one else had the empathy to understand my complicated relationship with grief and Paxton. Shane made it easy to want to keep him. To forget my pain and want him all the time.

Shane understood me and what we had was real, no matter how hard we tried to pretend it wasn't. I'd never met someone so brave with his feelings, and sometimes, I imagined what it would be like to have him in my life. Permanently.

My past hung around my neck like an anchor, and for the first time since Pax died, it didn't ground me; it threatened to drown me. So I'd taken off my wedding ring, and it had felt cathartic. Only echoes of guilt crept in.

I had stopped fighting my desire for Shane and feeling unworthy. I had to make myself worthy.

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Karaoke was blaring, and a terrible singer finished “Sweet Caroline.” The crowd had carried the song. We arrived back at the booth to smug smiles and knowing glances about what we’d been doing. I hoped my face told them they were cocky bastards, but I wouldn’t deny their assumptions. My feelings for Shane weren’t a dirty secret.

Madyson’s song came up, and she sang a perfect pitch rendition of “Boyfriend” to Shane. I might have cared if he wasn’t covered in my cum. But he was, and she could tempt him all she wanted, trying to entice him into a throuple. He was going home with me.

Soon it was my turn, and Madyson was a certified bad bitch. She had me singing Queen about having a good time tonight, and luckily, it was in my range, so I didn’t bomb. I sang to Shane about being a sex machine and an atom about to explode. His ears were my favorite shade of pink, and I had to finish this song to get my body closer to his again.

She’d picked this for me before Shane and I disappeared, unofficially announcing our new relationship. Alec was right; the woman had psychic abilities. The crowd was amped and singing along like I was a rockstar, not a mediocre voice trying not to stomp on Freddie’s memory. I bowed, and my heart stopped for forever or five seconds at the happiness on Shane’s face.

“Fitting lyrics,” Shane said, his face split into a wide grin, his bedroom eyes telling me everything I needed to know.

“A bit late, don’t you think?” I winked, and his flush agreed.

When Shane's song came up, all the blood drained from his face. If I wasn't sure, I might have thought all his blood had leaked out onto the floor. I grabbed his wrist. "You don't have to do this." He shook his head. "I'll sing with you."

I hated seeing him on the verge of panic. It was taking all his will to hold it back.

Shane marched to the stage, his back ramrod straight. I followed, but his glare had me second-guessing that move. I wanted to be there in case he needed me. Taking care of Shane's needs gave me a purpose. Being the one who calmed his panic filled a void I didn't know existed in my life.

The music started, and I instantly recognized the Sam Smith song. Shane missed the first line, turning not my favorite shade of pink but bright red. He mumbled sorry into the microphone but looked like he was counting down to restart at the next break. It was harder than it should have been to stay at the side of the stage and not go to him.

He opened his angelic mouth, and his voice knocked me backward. I stumbled over the amp cords and yelled, "Fuck yeah, sing it!"

The bar went insane. Shane could sing. He could saaang! He also had no idea. If people closed their eyes, they might think they were at an actual concert. By the time he'd finished, everyone was swaying in unison and singing to him. Madyson and Alec had gotten up and stood on the table of our booth. Shane's humility, another reason I wanted to keep him.

Shane tripped off stage and into my arms. The lyrics to Eminem's song from earlier were an earworm in my brain, telling me to seize everything I wanted and how there was only one shot, one opportunity to get what you want.

"I'm taking you home, right fucking now," I said, and Shane had no complaints.

Shane lay spent and sprawled on top of me after hours of devouring each other's bodies. I suspected the sun would be up soon. It was so peaceful lying here, listening to him breathe.

"Pretty boy, you can sing. Did you know?" I asked, tracing a finger around his shoulder blades and down his side.

"No. I've never sung before. I mean in the shower or humming to myself. I don't know what I sound like."

"If you weren't a genius, you could make a living as a singer. Keep that in mind if you have a midlife crisis." I squeezed his butt cheek because we both loved it.

"I'll keep that under advisement," Shane said into my chest.

We lay in comfortable silence for a while. "Your apartment is so comfortable. It's minimal, but it suits you."

Shane rolled off me and onto his side to prop himself up on an elbow so we faced each other. My body immediately chilled, and I wanted to haul him back on top of me.

"I need order, which can't be a surprise. But I want soft and comfortable too. I spend so much time in the office with hard and masculine furnishings, so I need the opposite here." He traced the tattoo around my pec and down my abdomen.

I glanced around the room and realized he'd been very thoughtful in picking out furniture. It wasn't feminine but there were curves and rounded edges with plush fabric. The chair in the corner hugged you when you sat in it. He kept weighted blankets on the chair and couch for his comfort. It felt like home, a home for Shane and me.

“I never liked our Greenwich apartment,” I confessed, running my fingers through Shane’s silky hair. He froze and I rolled closer, needing him to know. “Paxton bought it as a surprise. Lisa had taken out a huge life insurance policy on her piece of shit husband and changed the beneficiary to Paxton with a forged signature. Those two had mountains of issues, but they wanted to take care of each other. Not ironic that he left her money for real estate.” Shane’s face helped me continue. He didn’t pity or judge me. “It was an amazing gift, and I felt so guilty for not wanting it or liking it.”

“Sometimes a person means well, but they actually give a gift for themselves and not the other person. They don’t fully consider what the receiver would want or need,” Shane said, and I buried my face in the crook of his bent elbow.

He had no idea how right he was. That apartment was the beginning of the problems between Paxton and me. No, not the beginning but a huge symbol of them. A multimillion-dollar symbol.

“Do me a favor,” I forced the words out, “wherever your life takes you, make sure money isn’t the goal. It’s cold and it will never be enough.”

I very much wanted to ensure Shane’s life was never cold, but I still hadn’t figured out how to be good enough for him. And I hated the idea of him chasing his goals without happiness.

Shane wrapped his arms around me, and instead of getting up and going home in the peaks of morning light, I drifted off to sleep.

Chapter twenty-eight

Shane

Feeling ridiculous, I surveyed the apartment one more time. Cole had been here so often, he practically lived here. There was no reason to be nervous yet a thousand reasons as well.

We'd ventured headlong into what felt like a real relationship with sleepovers, dinners out, and drinks with his friends. He'd even showed up at my apartment when he knew Sara and Isaac would be here. A short overlap, but still he'd made an effort to see them.

Isaac was enthralled with his tattoos and wanted to touch all of them. My nephew and I had that in common. Sara was polite and left without making it obvious she'd departed because of Cole.

Sara hated us together, but as much as I loved her for wanting to protect me, I'd passed the point of no return. I was determined to stay with Cole until the end. When the end came, would I know?

We'd never talked about the change in our relationship or how we'd crossed so many boundaries. The tenuousness of our newly forged relationship held me back from asking about his wedding ring. That conversation might be the end of it all.

And there was still one step I wanted to take, but Cole was holding back. I'd debated pressing the issue, but he'd barreled over so many lines, I had to ask for this one thing.

Cole entered my apartment, calling out “Shane” before his eyes landed on me. I hadn’t regretted giving him the code because twice he’d arrived before me, and one of the times I’d been held up at work for over an hour. He had admitted that he didn’t know anyone in my building and had lied, so I wouldn’t know he’d cyberstalked me.

I didn’t admit that made me tingly. Our truths were doled out sparingly with trepidation. I knew he wasn’t really my boyfriend even if he acted like it. I knew we’d never be an epic love story. But I’d enjoy every minute I had him.

“Hey, I got takeout for us,” I said casually, as if I didn’t purposely get his favorite food.

“Great. I’m starved.” Cole set down his drawstring athletic bag, his usual for overnight stays. So far, so good.

We sat side-by-side at the island, eating and talking about our day and work, the usual for us. I complained about the impending board meeting, which would make or break my career. He listened without commenting but gave me sympathetic nods.

He’d made his opinion clear before. Madyson had talked me into creating a new operating system for The Artistic Edge. Cole had insisted I charge her because it was ridiculous to work for free. I’d agreed and he brought up again that I should start my own business and not have to work for someone else.

The idea was tempting, but I was so close to achieving my dream, I wasn’t going to squander my opportunity.

“I was thinking,” I said, avoiding his eyes while I cleaned up our dishes.

I paused and Cole picked up the conversation.

“I’d be shocked if you weren’t thinking.” He chuckled. “I think the only time you’re not thinking is when I’ve made you come so hard, your brain exits your body.” His front covered my back as he gripped my hips and planted kisses on the side of my neck.

“Yes, exactly that. I want you to fuck me,” I said it. I’d finally said it.

“Did you think I’d planned something else,” his raspy voice made me shudder.

Of course he was going to make this hard. I turned in his arms to look him in the eye.

“I want you inside me. I want you to fuck me.” I watched realization wash over his face. With all the things we’d done, he hadn’t penetrated me with his dick, and I was dying for it.

Cole went completely blank. Not eager, upset, or angry. Nothing. Except he retreated a few steps.

“Cole?”

He cared about my well-being and mental health; I knew that for sure. But he didn’t want to take this next step with me. Knowing he cared hurt more than if he didn’t. If I’d been alone in my feelings, it would be easier. Cole might not have wanted to have feelings for me, but he did.

Cole stalked toward me, his mouth found mine, and my body took over before my brain sent up the alarm. He maneuvered me into the bedroom, and as much as I wanted him, I shoved him back.

“What are you doing, Cole? I can’t do this with you if I don’t know what this is.” I hated myself for the way my voice shook.

I'd be a mess at the end, but he didn't get to see it. I refused to ignore his blank expression or his physical distance.

Cole ran his hand through his hair and made a strangled sound. "I don't have all the answers." He made no move to stop my withdrawal from his embrace, so I sat in my armchair.

"I'm listening," I said when he didn't continue. I think he'd been hoping sex would do the talking, but I wasn't having it.

"I want you so badly it scares me," he said in defeat. "Sometimes it's like if I don't get inside you, I'll die. But..." He looked so lost.

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Cole had his chance, but it was my turn to talk. “You set out specific rules and have systematically broken them. You haven’t acknowledged that we’re in, what most people would consider, a real relationship or asked how I feel about that or the dissolution of some of the rules. I asked for one thing. The only thing I’ve asked that I wasn’t hundred percent sure you wanted, and you checked out. You went so far into your guilt, I saw it. What am I supposed to do with that?” My voice had gone cold in survival mode.

All my reminders that this would end felt futile.

Cole leaned back in shock. I’m sure it never once occurred to him that I agreed to his rules for my own reasons. He focused so much on his guilt that he had blinders on.

“I’m not sure what you want me to say, but I want to be with you. I’m letting go of my past. You make me happy. Happier than I’ve been in years. Not in five years, longer than that. You know what I mean by that.” Cole caught me in his stare, and I understood he didn’t want to say Paxton’s name. “Do I make you happy?”

I answered honestly, “I don’t know what it means to be happy.”

Cole tilted his head to the side but didn’t demand an explanation. “I want to start this night over. I want to tell you that I want to fuck you into the mattress so you can’t walk for a week. I want to see my cum leaking out of your ass. That’s what I want.”

“You can’t be the only one who makes the decisions about our relationship. My opinion matters too,” I challenged, hating that I would give in to him but dying to believe he was sincere.

He vigorously nodded. "I know. I've been trying to figure out how to make this work, but I haven't said what I want and, Shane," he nervously inhaled, "I want us to be in a real relationship. I've been acting like a jealous boyfriend because that's what I want. The boyfriend part not the jealous part."

"I'm reserving judgment on that," I said, watching Cole's face deflate. My heart wanted to give him everything, even though it would be a terrible mistake. "But I will let you fuck me into the mattress."

As expected, Cole began undressing.

"I will make you feel so good." Cole knelt in front of me. "I will force so much pleasure on you that I'll ruin you for anyone else. If you don't want that, you need to tell me right fucking now."

Telling Cole to stop wasn't an option. He was foolish if he thought he hadn't ruined me. He'd ruined me the moment he touched me and called me "Pretty Boy." I thought that level of desire only existed in books and movies. Certainly not in my life.

I needed him to shut my brain off. "Spank me and fuck me."

Cole asked me every step of the way for either my permission or if I was okay. I'd brought up that he never asked me how I felt, but that wasn't about sex. That was about life, and I wanted my domineering Cole, not whoever the hell was treating me like breakable glass.

"Ready?" Cole asked after while I was on all fours shaking my naked ass for him.

"If you don't stop acting like I'm fragile, just fucking leave. I want you, Cole, not this guy tip-toeing around me," I said through gritted teeth.

Cole didn't say a word; he smacked my ass so hard I grunted and then he barked at me to count. Message received. And my brain turned back to the low hum of static that I loved. He worked me until I was begging for him.

"You want my cock," he growled, grabbing the strategically placed lube. I loved it when he turned questions into statements of fact. "You want to feel me inside you—don't you. Don't you!"

I answered but wasn't sure it was coherent. My body was so ready for him.

"Look at you, sucking my finger in. You have such a greedy ass." He worked a second finger inside me. "I can't wait to be inside you. Feel you clench on my cock."

My pleas were nonstop, and I was pushing back trying to fuck his fingers. His fingers disappeared, and I was not ready to be empty.

"I got you." His hand caressed my spine, and his head rubbed my rim. "I'll always give you what you need."

Cole fed me his cock an inch at a time, holding me back from impaling myself on him.

"Damn your ass looks so pretty taking my cock." Cole bottomed out, and we both sighed in relief. "You feel so fucking good."

He gave me a minute to adjust and then all talking stopped. He slammed into me and made good on his promise.

There were no words to describe the amazing sensations. My wildest fantasies were nothing compared to the feeling of Cole inside me. Cole pleased my body as if it was his right. My world narrowed to him and my absolute faith that he would give

me every single thing I needed. Cole fucked me until my vision blurred and then slowed down to inch his way in and out of me.

I swore I felt every ridge and bump, and when he hit my prostate, I died the most delicious death. My cock ached for Cole's attention, and I couldn't believe I'd held out. I wouldn't come without his permission. Cole hauled me up with one hand on my throat and the other jacked me off as he emptied himself inside me, and my lust-drunk brain went hazy.

So many endorphins flooded my brain, I didn't notice Cole's breathing was getting heavier instead of evening out. I couldn't see him because he had, in fact, fucked me into the mattress and lay on top of me. I whimpered when he pulled out and listened to him move around, too tired to pick my head up. I still needed another minute.

He brought me water and tucked the blanket around me. "How do you feel?" he rasped as his chest heaved.

"There aren't enough words to describe it, but right now, I feel empty. Is it crazy that I lived my entire life without you inside me, but now I feel empty?"

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Cole didn't answer and eased off the bed. I didn't pay attention to the rustling, and I assumed he went into the kitchen until I heard my main door shut. He'd left my apartment without a word.

My brain turned the static up to a deafening level. Everything was white noise. Cole was gone, probably forever. The loss was far worse than I'd expected. I didn't know what triggered him, but I refused to allow his past to damage my future.

Cole Branson had left me for the last time. I was done.

Chapter twenty-nine

Cole

I'd run three blocks before I came back to myself.

What the actual fuck was I doing!?

I finally had the guts to tell Shane I wanted him as my boyfriend in a real way, and I ran out after sex. After epic sex. He was so responsive, a goddamn dream. So perfect. So undamaged.

Selfishly, I'd taken the perfect man's first. And then he said he felt empty without me.

I didn't know how to live up to that.

It wasn't at all what I'd dreamed of for our first time. I wanted to watch Shane's face as I pushed into him. I wanted him to be able to see how much I ached for him. How good he made me feel and know I did the same for him. I wanted to watch him fall apart knowing my cock caused his bliss.

I wanted to kiss him as I came inside him.

But instead, I'd treated him like a cheap, dirty fuck. I'd used his body for my pleasure and defiled him. I hated myself so much, it made me sick. I was too ashamed to admit my failings and abandoned him.

I'd asked him to be my boyfriend, fucked him, and left him like a coward.

At this rate, I'd never be able to be enough for him. All I wanted to do was curl up and let him take care of me, but I was supposed to care for him, and I didn't have the ability to do it. My thoughts slammed into me like a freight train.

The feeling of being truly connected to him, but not being able to play my role, sent me into a tailspin. I was running away from one of the best things that had happened to me in my life. I was fucking it up. Again.

I could fix this. I would go back and fix this. He'd be mad. Monumentally pissed off. But Shane was so patient and understanding that we'd get past it. I'd make sure we were okay again. I wouldn't let my fucked up head end us.

My feet had already started back toward Shane. I let myself into his apartment and heard the shower running.

I took a few deep breaths to gather my thoughts to explain myself. Fucking hell, I was an asshole. No one but Shane could put up with me. It was like all our quirks balanced each other out. He helped me feel in control of my life again, and I helped

him let go of control. I needed him in my life. I needed him to help me understand what the hell just happened to me.

It had been less than ten minutes since I'd left. I couldn't let those ten minutes define us.

He stood in the glass shower under the water with his head resting on his forearm against the wall.

"Shane," I pleaded. He didn't look up, but I knew he'd heard me.

"If you say you're fucking sorry, I will be clickbait for the murder headline, Financial Executive Kills Mentor's Son in Sex Scandal." Shane didn't raise his head or his voice. "Get out."

"Please," I begged again, and everything I'd wanted to say flew out of my head as I was left standing watching my boyfriend end me.

The silence hung as thick as the steam. I wanted to apologize so badly, but Shane lifted his head, and I didn't doubt his declaration that he'd murder me. All he needed was a sickle, and he'd be the naked angel of death. I'd done that. I'd hurt him.

"I won't be your Faux Pax. Get. The. Fuck. Out."

That had never been the issue—he was so much more than that. But I didn't know how to tell him, and he wasn't ready to listen.

He needed time to be mad at me. I'd give him space. We'd figure this out tomorrow. It was late anyway. We'd be fine.

"I'll call you tomorrow," I promised.

“No, I’ll call you. And Cole, don’t ever come into my apartment again without permission.” Shane turned his back on me and picked up the soap.

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This was bad but I would fight for Shane. I would prove to him and myself that I was capable of being the person he could count on. I couldn't leave if I didn't believe that we had a chance at something real.

Every day felt longer than the day before. I missed Shane. I missed his big words that half the time I had to low-key look up on my phone. I missed his damn spreadsheets. I missed the smell of him. His body. His smile. Everything.

But he wasn't returning my calls. Or texts. Or fucking emails. Nothing. Not even an "I don't want to see you again." He'd ghosted me. I'd been to his apartment, but he hadn't answered the door.

I knew he was there. It destroyed me that he thought he was a substitute for Paxton when Shane owned me. He understood me and completed me like no one else ever had or would.

Shane was my endgame.

Cue the guilt. The only shred of hope in my miserable life was that Shane hadn't blocked me.

"Are you really going to volunteer at that place tonight?" Alec dropped into the chair across from my desk.

All the energy I wanted to invest in Shane's well-being had to go somewhere, and I found an outlet with the help of a skinny, recovering drug addict with horrible homemade tattoos. He'd come into the shop with his mentor, asking me to donate to

The Q Solutions, a local organization that focused on mental health for at-risk kids with a heavy emphasis on the LGBTQ community. Tonight would be my first night at the center. I needed something to keep me from falling into my old bad habits.

“You know I loved Pax, right?” I asked.

Alec drew in a sharp breath and rolled his shoulders. His blue eyes assessed me forever. “You know Lisa loves you, right?”

I nodded, figuring he would connect the dots for me.

“Do you think it’s wrong that she loves you?” he asked, and my eyebrows lifted. “She loves you like a son, but her son died. Is it wrong?”

My jaw tightened, and I said, “That’s not the same thing.”

“None of it is the same thing. Anyone who has met you, knows you loved Pax. He’s not coming back. You can’t hurt Pax by being with Shane. You don’t need to feel guilty.” Alec leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees.

I opened my mouth but couldn’t explain that my guilt wasn’t because I’d fallen for Shane. The guilt was from craving Shane like a goddamn dragon. I want to hoard Shane and covet him with all my greedy demands. Alec wouldn’t understand my overprotective obsession with Shane. Or that I had the best thing that ever happened to me in the literal palms of my hands and ran away.

“Lisa likes him,” I said. “She told me to stop fighting what I want and to start living by Pax’s motto of no regrets.”

Her blessing made it easier, but I wondered how she would feel if Shane became a permanent part of my life.

“Lisa is good people. Live your life and stop looking back. You can’t live with regret. Pax wouldn’t want you to live stuck in the past.” Alec smirked. “If you dump Shane, I’ll pick up your leftovers.” He waggled his eyebrows, trying to get a rise out of me, but I didn’t react.

“I fucked up, Alec. I don’t know how to fix it.” My chin hit my chest. “I wrecked him.” I was afraid of the truth and unable to look him in the eye.

Alec dragged his chair closer to the desk to rest his forearms on it. “Shane has been into you since you two eye-fucked when he came in for his tattoo. Shane’s different from most men. He wears his heart on his sleeve like a knight who forgot to put on his armor. I don’t claim to know much, but he definitely has anxiety. You help him with that. I don’t think it’s as complicated as you’re making it.” Alec leaned back and crossed an ankle on his knee. “The man practically begged you not to leave him when he sang that Sam Smith song. Whatever you did, make sure he knows you’re not leaving.”

“Motherfucker.” I slammed my fist on the table. At karaoke, Shane had sung “Stay With Me” right to me. I’d been so caught up in his voice, I hadn’t listened to the lyrics. He sang to me, his voice breaking with emotion. He wanted me to stay. And I’d left.

Chapter thirty

Shane

The thing I needed most was the last thing I wanted to do tonight. I was exhausted and hadn’t slept well in days. Which was exactly why I had to talk to my therapist in five minutes. Rushing up the stairs, I cursed myself for not leaving work earlier.

When I exited the stairwell, Cole was sitting in front of my door. I’d successfully

avoided any contact this past week but maybe that had been a mistake. Here he was in the flesh, at one of my very weakest moments.

All I wanted was his body next to mine, to inhale his scent, and drown in everything Cole. But it'd be a temporary fix, and the fallout had too high a price.

He hadn't seen me yet. "Go home, Cole."

He stood and he looked as tortured as I felt, which made it worse.

"I can't leave things like this." He crowded behind me as I opened the door, the warmth of his body soothing.

"Apparently, you can because you did. I have an appointment in," I checked my phone, "three minutes, so you need to go."

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He crossed his arms over his chest but didn't follow me in. "Bullshit. There are no appointments at this time of night." His eyes grew wide, and his mouth dropped open. "Unless it's with a sex worker."

A laugh escaped even though it wasn't funny. I should have made him think I did. It would serve him right. "No, asshole, it's with my therapist." I woke up my laptop to login. When he didn't leave, I said, "You get an elevator pitch, sixty seconds to make your case, and then you have to leave. I promise I will contact you with my thoughts within three business days."

Cole opened his mouth and looked like he wanted to argue with me.

"If you argue, I won't contact you. Take it or leave it." I kept my eyes on my computer in an effort to resist him.

"I fucked up. You're right, I made rules and broke them and never considered how you'd feel about it. I pretended we weren't in a real relationship, but it was real to me. I don't have an excuse, and I'm not sure what happened. We had epic sex, but I was clueless about how to be what you needed, and it was terrifying. I let you down because I was the needy one. All I wanted was to be with you. It's more than sex, I want—"

"Time's up." I cut him off. "Thank you for your honesty and not feeding me excuses. Time to go."

"I don't think that was a full minute." Cole shifted, but I still wouldn't look at him.

Fate was with me because my therapist's face appeared onscreen and greeted me. I held up a finger to her, and my eyes focused on the door casing above Cole's head. "Close the door, please."

He left with his head bowed.

The trip to the cemetery gutted me. I'd avoided coming here for years, but I was so unsettled it felt kismet. I needed to call or text Cole, but I wasn't sure what I wanted to say. Part of me wanted to forgive him. He was undeniably sorry. He texted me funny GIFs several times a day to let me know he was thinking about me. He'd even said not to feel pressured to respond and I hadn't.

Logically, the more time we spent together, the harder it would be when we ended forever.

Having Cole inside me had been transformative. My sister, on a drunken night, told me how I had to hold out for someone who would make me feel like our souls were connecting during sex. That was the problem when your sister was also your best friend, TMI. I'd laughed it off. But now, being with Cole once, I understood what she'd tried to tell me.

Sex could be an expression of love and souls joining. If Cole and I continued, I'd want that, and he'd told me the very first night I'd met him that Paxton was his one and only. I believed him. Even if he moved on from his guilt over Paxton, he'd already had his soul-deep love.

My therapist had warned me that my mantra of adjust, adapt, and move on was crippling my progress because I wasn't allowing myself to feel the pain and loss. That was a fair assessment—I didn't want to feel those things. I came to the one place where my loss was so strong that I had no choice but to feel.

I was so caught up in my own thoughts that I hadn't noticed the woman lying on what appeared to be a child's grave, weeping. Her voice had risen, so I heard her conversation with the dead.

"Every day that goes by, I miss you more. I can't believe I'll never see your sweet face again. People are unintentionally cruel. Your dad wants to fight the world for me, for us. If one more person tells me that I'm young and can have more children, I think I might explode. How dare they tell me that I can just have another child! Are you taking care of your brothers or sisters? Do my miscarriages have souls? I imagine you're the best big brother. I think fate is telling me that I was only ever meant to be your mom. I can't wait to be with you again and be your mom."

I stumbled away, trying not to disturb her.

Her pain choked me.

Spun me into a panic attack.

I managed to get to my car, took my medication, and used my strategies to ride it out.

My breathing and heart rate slowed, so the roaring in my ears dimmed. I slumped over the steering wheel, and the tears finally came. It had been years since I'd cried. That mother's pain shattered the wall that I'd built to protect myself.

But it also opened my eyes. I'd known Cole was broken over Paxton's death. He'd been overly honest about his ability to have a relationship with me. I'd been worried about my pain and hurt but ignored his. He said he wanted a relationship with me, but it was clearly hurting him, and he didn't know how to handle it.

I had become the source of his pain. My selfishness led us to this place. I'd pushed, forcing him to be my first when he wasn't ready.

He'd grown up with Paxton. They were friends long before they were lovers.

They had an unbreakable bond. Not even in death could sever it.

He'd told me he'd never love again. I'd asked for too much from him.

I knew what I had to do, so I asked to meet Cole at Unframed Art after he closed today. He responded immediately with a time.

I had to help him end his grief. Our relationship was destructive for Cole. I hated knowing that I'd caused him so much pain. After all he'd done to help me manage the stress of a new job, I owed him. I'd taken too much from him for my benefit.

I had to stop it. I had to set him free.

Chapter thirty-one

Cole

I paced the lobby of Unframed Art, going over what I wanted to say in my head. Last time had been a disaster—I briefly thought of making a list. A spreadsheet. A smile crossed my lips.

Dammit. If I knew how to make a spreadsheet in the next few minutes, I'd win his heart for sure. But I was going to have to say what was in my heart and hope that was enough for him to give me another chance.

He knocked before opening the shop door, which was so considerate and on-brand with his personality. He looked as wrecked as I felt, and it broke something inside me, knowing I did that to him.

"Hey," I said, moving close to him and locking the door to ensure we had privacy. I leaned in to kiss him, but he stepped back. "Let's go down to my office."

His head shook vehemently and pointed to the consultation area. "No. How about the couch?"

I'd hoped to do my begging behind closed doors, but I wasn't about to complain. I started to talk, but he held up a hand, and I owed it to him to listen as he cursed me out.

"I'm sorry," he said, and my stomach hit the floor. He didn't need to apologize; this wasn't a good start. "I asked for more than you were ready for, but I didn't realize how tortuous it was for you and I'm sorry."

“No.” I heaved in a breath, trying to refocus. “I’m so sorry. It was absolutely not torturous. It was incredible, and I can’t believe I ran away from it. And you. Sorry doesn’t begin to cover how terrible I feel about it.” I watched his face for any signs of anger or resentment.

I dared to hope again when he looked sympathetic.

“I know you do.” Shane grabbed my hand. “I have no doubt that you feel terrible and guilty about what happened. I don’t want to be the source of that struggle for you.”

“You’re not,” I interjected before he told me something I didn’t want to hear.

Squeezing my hand, he said, “You probably don’t remember, but the night we met, you told me that you would never love again.” The look Shane gave me stopped me from arguing. “I always knew this was going to end. I had no illusions that this would be something more than a temporary arrangement.”

“But it changed,” I blurted out, and the pity I saw in his beautiful brown eyes made me want to punch something.

“I was selfish.” He stood, unable to contain his nervous energy any longer. “I wanted to show you that caring about someone else wouldn’t take away from the love you had for Paxton. But not everyone heals from losing their soulmate, and that’s okay. But I don’t want to be the one who keeps hurting you because I want more than you can give.”

“But—”

“The other day it was sex. And maybe you can get over your guilt and feelings about sex, but then what about the next thing I want? Someday I want a committed boyfriend. I’ll want a relationship with maybe marriage and kids. I would never ask

that of you because I know that's not what you want."

My heart strangled me as if I were dying. The guy I was falling in love with found my deepest pain and stabbed it.

I had a plan. I had things to say. I couldn't remember a damn thing.

"I think the longer this goes on, the harder it will be to end." I don't know what he saw in my face, but he traced his fingertips from my temple down and across my jaw.

Like he was memorizing it for the last time.

"I will always be grateful to you. You gave me a part of myself that I might not have ever known. You're a good man, Cole Branson. I'll miss you." Shane stood on his tiptoes, kissed my forehead, and left Unframed Art and me. Forever.

My heart walked out the door with him, and I couldn't stop it.

Chapter thirty-two

Shane

Walking away from Cole was the hardest thing I'd ever chosen to do. I'd told Cole the absolute truth, that some people never recovered. Spouses of the deceased are often told they can fall in love again. But not everyone wants to. Not everyone can.

If I thought losing Cole was devastating, that was only a fraction of what it was like for him to lose Paxton. I thought my grief and pain helped me understand him, but it blinded me to how much I was hurting him.

I had to let him go. That's what you did when you truly cared for someone. His needs

had to come before mine. I hadn't done that for Cole. Not in our entire relationship. I kept asking him to sacrifice for me, but I wouldn't do it for him.

I'd done the right thing for him. I'd made a spreadsheet of all the reasons why I'd done the right thing. I'd eaten greasy food with the chocolatiest, biggest piece of cake and wallowed. I'd taken my therapist's advice and felt like shit.

I'd tried to cry again and accept, adjust, and move on.

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Cole was not on board with my plan.

A week later, and he was texting me daily, wanting the opportunity to tell me how much I meant to him. If I heard his words of remorse, I wouldn't be able to leave him again.

Eventually, the pain in our pasts would catch us, and he'd leave me. I had to set boundaries for my mental health. Losing Cole felt like losing a limb. Losing a limb was terrible, but losing my heart would be horrific.

It had already happened once, and I couldn't do it again. I wouldn't survive.

I'd spent the last two nights at my sister's house to avoid Cole. We still had location sharing on our phones, so when I'd checked in on him like a psycho ex-lover, his location was camped out at my apartment.

He was there again tonight, and I really wanted to go home after I fixed a glitch in the code for Madyson at The Artistic Edge. I wanted to sleep in my bed this weekend, so I texted.

Me: I can see you at my apartment and I'm not coming home

I waited, seeing the three dots appear and disappear for a couple minutes before his response pinged.

Daddy: I'm leaving

Daddy: I was going to turn off my location but I don't want you to think I'm going to ambush you

Daddy: I hope you'll talk to me again. Someday

I had to change his name. Previously, I'd entered it as Daddy on a whim since it was our thing. Today, in an effort to avoid pain, I thought about deleting his contact. That was a lie.

I was a Cole Branson addict, and I wanted every single thing he sent, even if I was determined to detox off him.

Turning off my work computer, I mentally prepared for the combo work and social night I'd planned. Madyson was hosting a few friends and potential buyers at The Artistic Edge for wine and cheese, and while I was there, I'd promised to look at her computer program.

I actually liked her and Alec, and they didn't seem to mind my random word vomits. Too bad they were friends with Cole. We needed a clean break, and his friends weren't mine to keep.

I pushed through the gallery doors and stopped short. Madyson had transformed the space, so the dim-colored lighting contrasted the bright lights positioned on the art. It was edgy, ethereal, and magical.

My heart swelled at the sight of all the people wandering around and admiring her installations. She worked with ceramics and glass but displayed a variety of paintings and sculptures of metal, marble, and clay.

"Hey, stranger." Madyson waved me over to her group, which included Alec. "This is my husband, Jayce. Jayce, this morsel is Shane, the genius who helped with our new

operating system.”

Jayce shook my hand with a fervent appraisal that thrilled and terrified me. He was over six feet of extremely fit man—a retired hockey player. Madyson teased me about her attraction, but Jayce...he was another level of intense. My nerves kicked in, and I was afraid I’d word vomit.

I swept my arm wide and said to Madyson. “This is incredible. How did you do all this?”

“Thank you, darling.” She air-kissed me from two feet away. “Haven’t you learned? I’m a genius.”

“You definitely are,” I agreed.

“That means a lot coming from a certified genius,” Alec quipped.

“Certified, huh?” Madyson held back her giggle.

“Yes, it’s stamped on my ass, otherwise I’d show you,” I deadpanned.

“Oh, Shane, don’t issue me a challenge. I’ll see that fine ass of yours yet.” She winked and sashayed over to another group with her arm looped through her husband’s.

“Wait,” I called, “I don’t see the laptop with the POS system on the counter.”

Madyson shook her head, and her laugh sounded like bells.

“Is that how she got you here?” Alec asked.

“You’re saying she lied to get me here? Why?” I glanced around, fearing Cole was going to materialize from behind a piece of art.

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“He’s not here. I doubt he’s coming,” Alec said. “But I think Madyson is trying to play matchmaker. She said your souls are entwined, and she does not have the goddamn time to deal with this bullshit.”

Alec raised his hands in defense. “Listen, don’t shoot the messenger. You know how she gets. She wants everyone happily in love even if she’s heartbroken,” he said as if I’d known Madyson for years and just had to accept this as part of her personality.

I sighed. “Well, I was looking for a painting for my apartment, so I’ll do a quick perusal of the art and leave.”

“You do that.” Alec tipped his bottle of water at me. “I’m taking my bike to the storage garage. The saddest time of year.”

“Your motorcycle? I always wanted to learn how to drive one.”

“The place isn’t too far from here. You wanna ride? We can Uber back.” Alec tossed his water bottle in the recycle bin with a perfect arc. I was nodding and trying not to act like a kid about to get a new toy. His bike was out back.

“Hold on and keep your feet on the foot pegs. Never take your feet off the foot pegs.” He pointed his finger at me like I would ever do something so stupid.

Chapter thirty-three

Cole

My phone pinged, but I ignored it. It wasn't Shane, so it wasn't important.

The lighting in the loft sucked for painting at night, but I had to do something, so I didn't lose my mind. Both Lisa and my therapist told me I needed to give Shane time and space.

I was a mess, but I had to listen to their advice, realizing Shane wouldn't return to his apartment because of me.

I'd been volunteering at The Q Solutions more, but that still left so many empty nights.

Shane wanted marriage and kids. I hadn't been a great husband the first time. But I'd learned from my mistakes and would do better for Shane.

Kids. The thought brought the worst of my past to my mind. If I had a father who gave a shit if I lived or died, I might not be so afraid of being a father. A future where Shane co-parented with me sprung to mind; we'd have each other and spreadsheets.

If he'd give me another chance, I wouldn't push him. Hell, giving up contact with him was killing me. Every day without Shane was harder than the previous. Absence did not make my heart grow fonder; it drove me crazy.

Alec and Madyson had been all over my shit to go to The Artistic Edge tonight. Madyson wanted me to see the night exhibit she'd put together. Alec told me it would be in my best interest to show up, but after the text from Shane, I wasn't fit for a social situation.

Madyson called me a half hour ago. She would not give it a rest.

Now, my phone was ping nonstop with incoming texts. Like blowing up my

phone would get me to her gallery. She had to know me better than that. Fucking hell. I set my paintbrush down and wiped my hands before I grabbed my phone. There were endless texts with the same message.

Madyson: Shane's in the hospital

I dropped the phone, and a stream of vile words left my mouth. Shane had to be okay. Nothing else mattered.

My body and brain were not functioning together. It took three tries to open my location app, and all the while my heart was beating out of my chest. I was afraid of what would happen to it if Shane wasn't alright.

I couldn't think the worst.

Fifteen minutes later, I was running into the emergency department like the devil himself was chasing me. The Uber driver got a huge tip because she totally broke some laws getting me here. Tonight, Uber was faster than getting my car out of the garage.

Once I cleared security and the sign-in desk at the ER, I confirmed I would take him home when he was released. I really didn't give a shit if Sara tried to castrate me later. I was taking care of Shane.

I flung back the curtain to find a nurse adjusting Shane's IV, his broken ankle raised, and Alec in the next bed with his wrist bandaged. Madyson cracked a joke about seeing Shane's ass stamp.

"What the fuck is happening!" I roared.

All their heads turned to me in unison, except the nurse, who continued what she was

doing and said, “Okay, this will help relax you and allow the local anesthetic to do its job. The doctor will be in shortly to reset your bone.”

“Who called Cole?” Shane was furious, and then his eyes glazed over, and a smile spread across his face. “Hi, Coleeeee.”

The nurse laughed. “No need to ask if you feel better.” She turned to me. “I’m Shane’s nurse tonight, and you are...”

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“His boyfriend.” I maintained the lie I’d told at the front desk.

“Great, there will be a list of dos and don’ts on the discharge paperwork, but the most important is keeping his ankle raised and he’ll need to stay off it for five days,” the nurse said.

“Will he be okay?”

“I think his anxiety made the pain worse, and we had a lively discussion about addictive meds and drug interactions. He finally allowed me to do my job.” She gave Shane a good-natured pat on the arm. “He’ll be loopy for the next couple hours, and the drug might cause some amnesia as well, but other than that, it’s your standard ankle break.” She turned to Shane. “You are extremely lucky you don’t need surgery.”

Shane’s arm flew up like he was answering a question in class. “I’m a dumbass.” He flexed his index finger in and out, pointing to himself. “Dumbass.”

“I’ve seen much worse,” the nurse assured him. “I’m going to get the doctor to set your bone right.” She disappeared behind the curtain.

Moving to Shane’s side with his good leg, I scrubbed my hand over my face. The relief almost brought me to my knees. Shane was fine. He was going to be fine. “What happened?”

“A breakdown in motorcycle etiquette.” Shane cackled, slapping his leg with the broken ankle and moaning. “I’m full of bad ideas tonight.”

“He was on a fucking motorcycle.” I rounded on Alec, thankful that I was on the other side of Shane’s bed because, otherwise, I’d fucking kill my best friend.

“It was an accident. We didn’t crash or hit anything. It was a freak thing,” Alec said, as if my anger was unjustified. “He tried to put his foot down when we rounded a corner.”

“Freak things get people killed!” I yelled.

The silence in the room was more than the absence of sound; it was so heavy, everyone felt its weight, unable to get out from under it.

Shane’s heart monitor intermittently boomed into the oppressive quiet.

He slowly raised his hand again. “I’m not Paxton. I’m not dead.”

I gripped his face in my hands. “Not once when I heard you were in the hospital did I think about Paxton. Not once on the way over here did I think about him, and I’m sure as hell not thinking about him now. I’m only thinking about you. I was in a full-blown panic that something had happened to you, Shane Reynolds.”

“Oh my god, you smell so good,” Shane moaned, turning his face into me. “The world should smell like you, it’s so good. Wait. Nope. If it smelled like you, then it would kill me with missing you.” Shane’s eyes rolled back into his head, and he licked his lips.

“I got it. The world should smell like Sara’s mahogany teakwood candles. Then, the world would be a better place. So nice. Oh.” His eyes popped open. “Alec. Madyson. Tell Cole about the soul thingy. The bullshit thingy.” Shane closed his eyes again, and I raised a less murderous brow at Alec.

“I’m going to call Jayce to see if he got the gallery closed and what time he’ll be here.” Madyson stepped out of the room as if she didn’t want to be a part of the soul thingy.

I focused on Alec. “Madyson thinks your souls are meant for each other,” he said, and Shane’s hand flipped around in a motion that told him to continue. “And the two of you apart is bullshit.”

Shane let out an annoyed grunt.

“You’re the only one who needs convincing, Pretty Boy.” I kissed the top of his head as the nurse returned with the doctor.

“Okay, party time is over.” She flung the curtain to shut out Alec. “I recommend you step to the other side of the curtain until we’re done.”

Shane gripped my wrists where my hands had slid down to either side of his neck. “I never wanted you to leave. I forgot everybody leaves.”

“I can’t leave him.” My eyes implored the nurse.

She clucked her tongue but nodded in agreement. “Stay right there, don’t move, and don’t watch. There might be some popping or other noise, and you don’t want to see it. Got it?” She had a glare that the only proper response was to nod in agreement.

“I got you, Shane. I’m not going anywhere,” I whispered like a prayer.

Chapter thirty-four

Cole

I carried Shane up the flight of stairs to my loft. He was still loopy and cuddly.

The nurse said he probably wouldn't remember much of what happened at the hospital.

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Shane didn't need to remember that I'd told him I'd never leave him again. Ever. I would prove it to him by showing up the way he needed me.

That text from Madyson put everything in perspective for me. I loved Shane. I wasn't falling in love; it was indisputable I'm-going-insane-without-you love. But I would have to be insane by myself if Shane wasn't ready for us.

When he told me that he forgot that everyone leaves, I wanted to cut my own heart out and hand it to him. He'd left hints of trauma and pain, but I had no clue what had happened. One day, he'd trust me enough to tell me. And I had Madyson's undeniable connection to the universe on my side. That crazy redhead had predicted too many things for me to ignore her.

I inadvertently jostled Shane while opening the door. "I know it hurts, Pretty Boy, we're home. I'll get you settled in, and you can take more meds in a bit."

"Kay," Shane slurred.

My mile-a-minute genius was tranquil and practically limp with his arms around my neck. Usually, he only achieved this state after several orgasms. It worried me but the nurse had informed me it was normal.

As expected, I had to fight Sara to bring him home. But the fact that she had a third-floor walkup, and he'd have to sleep on the couch made her see things my way. I'd promised to call her as soon as we got home and take Shane to her if he insisted. Luckily, he'd happily agreed to come home with me.

Home sounded so much better when it meant Shane was with me.

“Oh, fucking hell,” I swore under my breath, realizing all my paintings were lined up against the wall and the one on the easel was also visible.

“Can we fuck in hell? I think it would be hot.” Shane giggled at his own joke, and I hated that I had to set him down and he’d be out of my arms.

It would be amazing if he’d be happy to be here when the drugs wore off. But that wasn’t likely.

“Pretty Boy, we can do anything you want.” I laid him on the bed and propped up his ankle. “I need to tidy up, and then I’ll get you whatever you need.”

I dodged around the easel and stacked the paintings facing the wall. Shane was not ready to see my collection. Hopefully, he hadn’t noticed them. He was snoring lightly before I turned the easel.

Shane slept on and off all night and into the next day. I’d rescheduled all my tattoos or passed them off to other artists for the next four days. I doubted Shane would stay here that long, but I wanted to be available if he needed me.

Watching him sleep had become my full-time obsession. And the fact that he liked to sleep with me curled around him cracked my heart wide open. His immobilized leg stopped his movements, but he’d inched his torso closer to me. He relaxed completely when I wrapped my legs around his good leg and held him close.

There was something peaceful and satisfying in caring for him and in knowing I eased his pain. I spent hours watching his facial expressions and body twitches, discerning when he was dreaming, or in pain, or content to snuggle with me. It fascinated me, and I wanted it every day for the rest of my life. I’d never been so

happy taking care of someone else. It was an epiphany that I could be a good caretaker.

I had to tell him everything I'd held back before. If we had any chance, he'd have to know all the harsh details of my past. I'd offer him my heart on a platter and hope he didn't trash it.

I bolted upright with an ache in my side and a pissed off Shane next to me. "Sorry, I dozed off. Are you okay? How's your pain? Do you know where you are?" I rapid-fired questions at him.

"I'm fine. Other than you're in bed with me covering me like a damn burrito." Shane tried to move his leg and winced.

Checking my phone, I said, "You have one more dose of the good drugs, and then, you switch to over-the-counter. I'll get it for you with a little something to eat. Crackers or a bagel?" I disengaged our limbs and slipped out of bed so the movement wouldn't hurt him.

"Are you going to explain?" he asked, his voice hard and demanding.

I placed my hands on my hips, then dropped them, not wanting to seem defensive or angry. "I'm not sure how much you remember, but I'll give the basic details, and you can ask whatever you want." My account was quick, to the point, minus my emotional turmoil. "And you slept better in my arms, sleeping helps you heal," I concluded, determined not to apologize for something we both needed and wanted.

"And Sara knows I'm here?" he asked with a wary expression.

"I've been updating her every few hours. She's not happy with the arrangement, but she has stairs and Isaac and can't take off work on such short notice."

I handed him my phone in case he wanted to check my messages. He set it down without looking at it. Sara and I had increasingly civil conversations after the awkward one in which she overheard Shane say that Sara tried to mother him to make up for their own mother, but Sara smothered him. That was a story that I hoped he'd tell me one day.

“Wait. Take time off work? I have to go to work.” Shane panicked.

“Can you work remotely? The doctor and the nurse both said if you don't keep off your ankle for five days, it won't heal right, and might cause long-term issues.” I went over to the kitchen to get his last pill, water, and food. “I can go get your laptop or whatever you need.” Purposefully, I returned to the bed and sat gingerly, handing him the pill and water.

He took it without looking at me, and I gave him half a bagel.

“I can get you something else to eat. You've been out of it and haven't been hungry. I'll feed you whatever you want.” I resisted the urge to touch him. The last day had been heaven, being able to touch him, being near him.

Shane agreed but his expression remained unreadable.

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“Why, Cole?” He turned his haunted brown eyes to me. “Why am I here?”

Okay, we’re doing this. Go time for heart on a platter.

Shane

Cole tensed and visibly tried to find the words to answer my questions but couldn’t.

I hated waking up in a strange bed with Cole all over me, feeling groggy and disoriented. I did not inhale his scent and feel an instant sense of relief. I didn’t. That would be monumentally stupid on my part.

The jerk had the nerve to look all handsome and lickable while he slept. And the place smelled like him and my favorite scented candle. It was purgatory. Heavenly because Cole was next to me, and I felt calm and safe and an overwhelming sense of belonging. Hell because it was temporary, thus the reality of purgatory. This heaven was a pit stop on the way to hell.

Cole had dark circles under his eyes and looked sick when I asked him why I was here. Now he seemed resolved. I could not afford to let him see the part of me that wanted to stay in his bed forever.

While Cole tried to answer my question, I surveyed his loft from the bed positioned against the wall in the center of the living area. In the open concept with high exposed beams and brick, the kitchen was on the side by the door and a huge sectional couch faced a large screen TV. In the middle of it all stood an easel with a canvas on it.

“This space seems suited to your personality better than the other apartment.” I winced, realizing I didn’t want to change the subject.

Cole nodded in agreement but said, “I have a confession to make.” Cole lay sideways on the bed so we were eye to eye without hurting my leg. “When I got the text that you were in the hospital, I lost my mind.”

I swallowed hard. “I’m so sorry. That must’ve brought back some horrendous memories for you.” I vaguely remember his fury about the motorcycle.

It must’ve brought Paxton to mind.

Cole’s mouth turned up in a sad smile. “Not at all, but I’ll explain all that later.” He laced his fingers through mine, and I didn’t close my fingers, but I didn’t pull my hand away. “All I knew was that something bad had happened to you, and I had to get to you as fast as possible.”

He took a deep breath and snared me in his emerald green eyes. “It made me face the fact that you were partly right. I was hurting. But not because of you,” he said quickly, as I wanted to interrupt. “I hurt myself because I wasn’t willing to admit my feelings for you. Every day that I denied how I felt about you tormented me. I have so many regrets about my past that I let them wreck the best thing that has happened to me.”

I snorted.

Cole pulled out his phone. “What’s 153,042 divided by 87?” he asked, and when I huffed, he continued, “I need to make sure you’re not stoned for this conversation.”

“It’s around 1,760, but I can do the math stoned.” I didn’t know why I was arguing with him. “I will not forget this conversation.” Best to get it over and done with.

Cole's thumb caressed mine. "You were right about something else. I can fall in love again. I did fall in love again." I closed my eyes at his words, afraid to let them sink in. "You helped me understand that what I had with Paxton doesn't have anything to do with us. And that the length of time I grieve him does not equal the love I had for him. I buried part of my heart with him, but you grew another piece twice as large as the one I buried." Cole squeezed my hand. "Please look at me."

I cracked one eye open and then the other. Looking into the sun was always a mistake.

"I love you. You are a gift in my life. And I finally understand that doesn't take away from what I had before. You've never been a faux Pax. You're very different. You're what I want for my future. I'd been afraid of what the future would bring because it would never be what I'd imagined. But now I can see a new future, a future with you. I can't promise I won't fuck up, but if you'll let me, I'll prove to you that I'm not leaving you again."

Air rushed out of me, and my head fell back on the pillow. He had all the right words, but I could not believe Cole Branson loved me.

It wasn't possible.

He was anchored to his past, and I was me—a mess—not good with people or relationships or anything else. It would be extremely helpful if geniuses were able to understand relationships and act accordingly. But in my research, facts showed that geniuses were historically terrible at personal relationships. My family and past romantic partners would agree. Sara was the only outlier in that group. My life wouldn't be so empty if my brain functioned normally.

Cole couldn't possibly love me.

Cole crawled up next to me and rested his head on the pillow next to mine. “I know you don’t believe me. I wouldn’t believe me if I were you. I’ll take you any way I can get you. I promise not to push you. All I’m asking for is a chance. Do we have a chance?”

His breath caresses my face, and I wanted to scream “hell yes!” Instead, I looked him in the eye and said, “I don’t know.”

I expected him to argue or lose his temper, but he just nodded and pressed a kiss to my shoulder. “Do you want to sleep some more or eat?”

My stomach rumbled, so Cole fixed us dinner. He was a surprisingly good cook. When I asked him about it, he shrugged and said he didn’t usually have time to cook.

“How long before your next client?” I asked.

We were sitting side-by-side in his glorious king-sized bed. I had to get a mattress like this because I was getting too comfortable here. Cole trauma bonded with me because my accident was reminiscent of his past. He would come to his senses after I left.

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“Three days,” he said and continued to eat as if that wasn’t a bombshell.

“Cole,” my voice rose, “what are you talking about? This isn’t a joke.”

Cole blinked in confusion and set his plate to the side. “You need someone to make sure you’re okay. You shouldn’t even walk to the bathroom without help. I want to be here for you. I’d close my shop if I had to. I would do anything for you.” His face gave no room for disagreement.

“That’s crazy.” My heart wanted so badly to believe him.

“That’s love.”

“Same thing,” I said, and my stomach dropped through the bed and onto the floor with his responding grin.

My lips were defiant and turned up in a smile as well, until my ankle had a shooting pain.

Cole glanced at his phone. “You can’t take meds for another half an hour. So we need to distract you. Do you want to watch TV? Can you make a spreadsheet on your phone? How about making a list of pros and cons about me,” he teased.

“I want to know more about Paxton.” I dared him. He couldn’t tell me he loved me while keeping his old rules in place.

“Okay. Are you done? I’ll move the dishes so you can get comfortable. Do you need

another pillow?”

“Are you stalling?” My heart yearned to believe in him, but history made it too hard.

“Nope, but this might take a while.” He fussed over me like my well-being was imperative to him, before lying on his stomach. “I’ve been holding onto things for the wrong reason. You know I took off my wedding ring. I also sold all the shares of Branson Financial that Pax left me.”

“I didn’t know you had any involvement with the company.” I tried to keep the horror out of my voice.

Had I known he had shares would I have risked telling him to dump them?

“I didn’t, but Pax owned shares, and I kept them but realized they were a tie to my father, so I got rid of them,” he said, and I sighed.

“Any other ties to the company or investments in Branson?”

“No. Is that okay?” Cole asked.

Nervous laughter bubbled out of me. “Of course, don’t change the subject. Tell me more about Paxton.” I purposefully changed the subject from Branson Financial.

“You know a lot of the beginning, so I’ll skip to our last couple of years together which weren’t all happy. I told you Paxton bought the Greenwich apartment as a gift. The other surprise was that he wanted kids to go with the apartment. I didn’t. His father was terrible, and mine had disowned me. Between us, we didn’t have a father as a role model. It was more of a master class on what not to do. It was the worst argument we’d had since we were teens, and I’d been a dick to him.

“I’ll tell you the basics unless you want more details. It clouded all our interactions and fights for a couple of years. He really wanted kids immediately, so we wouldn’t be old men when they went to college. I demanded he work less. In hindsight, I hated that he worked for my father. Donald was proud of Pax and would brag to his friends about him. I was Pax’s husband, and he hated it.”

“Do you hate that I work at Branson Financial?”

Cole shook his head. “You had goals and a detailed plan of your life before we met. Your goals aren’t related to me or my father, they’re yours. Pax never wanted a career with Branson Financial, but my father had partially paid for Pax’s college while he trained and groomed Pax for his business. He guilted Pax into working for him. Pax swore it would only be until he’d paid my father back for school. But Donald wouldn’t take his money. Why would he, when he could use Paxton’s ambition and trusting personality to his advantage.” Cole shrugged.

“Anyway, Pax worked insane hours, and he was the one who wanted kids. I didn’t think it was fair to take on the majority of responsibility for something he wanted.”

“That seems fair.”

“Nothing about our situation was fair.” Cole’s eyes focused on our joined hands. “If we’d had better parents, if we’d made different choices, if we’d talked more instead of fighting... In the end, we wanted each other to be happy, but we never worked it out. I never told him I’d changed my mind. I’d gone to an adoption agency to get advice and paperwork. Pax bought me a motorcycle, the opposite of a responsible dad. He wanted to give it to me as a surprise for my birthday, but he got hit by a drunk driver riding it home.” Cole’s eyes shined with unshed tears.

The breath whooshed out of my lungs, and I had a vague recollection of Cole yelling like a wounded bear at Alec. It made sense now, knowing how Pax died.

“I feel like everything you just told me are reasons for us not to be together,” I said.

Chapter thirty-five

Cole

“I disagree but I respect your opinion.” I picked up his hand and kissed it.

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Dredging up all the confessions and pain in my past with Paxton was nothing compared to the blow from Shane's words. I thought my truth would bring us closer together. Something in his past made him closed off, and I was an expert at that. I'd done the one thing I swore I'd never do.

I gave him the power to hurt me because I loved him. But I didn't regret it. A chance was better than never taking the risk. Over time, I wanted to prove to him we were right for each other and that he could trust me.

"You're disappointed," Shane accused.

"I'm upset with myself for destroying your faith in me. I love you, but you don't feel the same. Basically, it would be unfair to expect you to change your mind because I had a life-altering realization. I'm in therapy, and I'm determined to fix myself."

Shane shook his head. "Therapy won't fix you. Fix implies that being broken is wrong. You don't want to be fixed. You want to accept the pain and manage it so you can hold Paxton in your heart with love. Love not pain."

"I'm not worried about my feelings for Pax. I want to be better for you. When I thought you were seriously injured or could die, it changed everything. I might have catastrophized a bit." I inhaled. "My world is better with you in it," I said, and Shane tried not to roll his eyes.

"What would you have done if I was seriously injured or in a coma?"

"I would've figured out if you had to stay in the hospital, or if I'd get a hospital bed

here to take care of you. I wouldn't walk away. As long as you'll have me, you're stuck with me." I risked making him mad again, but I wouldn't lie to make this easier for him to leave me.

"What would you do about Unframed Art?"

"I'm the owner, I don't need to tattoo. Alec can be the manager and I would hire another artist." I sat up, not wanting to have this conversation lying down.

"Too easy," he dismissed.

"Nothing about you being seriously injured would be easy, but deciding to step away from work would be," I said, knowing Shane was trying to pretend it didn't matter.

"What if I told you I want kids right away?" Shane tipped his chin up and set his jaw.

"First, I'm not agreeing to have kids with anyone who doesn't love or trust me. But let's say for the sake of the argument that wasn't an issue." I paused to get my thoughts together. "I would want to give my kids what I never had, love and attention. I don't know if I would sell Unframed Art or just step back until they were older. I would ask my partner to evaluate his level of time and commitment." Shane sputtered with my last sentence, but I pressed on. "I would never ask you to give up your dream of becoming a chief executive officer, but we'd have to be on the same page."

"Meaning?" Shane growled.

"You work late hours, so you'd regularly miss meals and bedtime. Would you be alright with that? It's easy to say yes and harder to balance when you miss your kids. I would get to do more of the fun stuff with the kids. Say, we took them out to Lisa's on a Sunday, and it rained, but Monday would be beautiful weather. I could stay out

there with the kids, but you'd need to drive back to the city alone to work. There are sacrifices you'd have to make."

"You've thought about this?" he asked incredulously.

I shrugged. I wouldn't tell him that I had fantasized an entire life with him while he was in pain, drugged out in my bed. A life where we had two kids, a boy and girl, and a walkup either near the park or with a tiny yard. Possibly a dog but, if not, definitely a cat. No need to freak him out more than he already was.

"You'd be fine with the fact that I work insane hours?" His hand covered mine on his leg.

"As long as you were happy. I wouldn't want you to be resentful of missing out. I used to think my father made Pax work long hours to spite me. But it's the job, and it's not personal. So if it's your dream to have both, I'd never stand in your way." There was only so much blood to bleed before my heart broke. "Can we change the subject? It's hard to talk about an imaginary future when you don't even want to be here or be my boyfriend." I choked out the words.

"I am glad I'm here," Shane whispered. I hummed, running my fingers through his hair. His large brown eyes blinked up at me. "Will you show me your paintings?"

Fucking hell, he thought, he was changing the subject, not twisting the knife in my gut. "You might not be ready for it." I hesitated; this could be the thing that broke us forever.

"I want to be the first to see a Cole Branson original." His lips turned up, and I'd never been able to say no to him.

"You asked for it." I sighed. "Remember that. And keep in mind, no one else will

ever see these paintings. They're for me."

Shane's face lit up while I prepared myself for the worst.

The moment of truth.

Chapter thirty-six

Shane

Cole was visibly nervous, sweating and with trembling hands.

I'd seen one of his paintings, so his reaction seemed out of place. He had talent, and I needed to get off the Cole-is-melting-my-insides train.

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He dragged the easel at a sloth's pace, as if prolonging the moment. His magnetic stare held me in its grip, and I had no desire to retreat.

He answered each of my questions thoughtfully and honestly. But it was all theoretical. An actual future with me would press the same wounds as his relationship with Paxton. My head swam, trying to integrate his declaration of love into our narrative. It had to be the trauma bonding. He wasn't thinking straight.

All the breath whooshed out of my body as his painting assaulted me. It was too much to take in all at once.

"Beautiful," I whispered as my eyes tracked over a figure evoking an angel of death. The background was awash with black and dark blues in contrast to white wings and a blood-red scythe. Water was dripping off his lean muscled body, and it looked like he'd started to paint a tattoo on the chest.

The face was... "What the fuck? That's me!"

Cole's face had gone expressionless, and he remained silent, watching my reaction.

My heart rate skyrocketed, and I rubbed the center of my chest to ease the ache. The me in the painting looked deadly, destroyed, but also beautiful. I'd never experienced a painting the way his made me feel. I hated the sight of it, yet my eyes were glued to it. The pain leapt off the canvas straight into my abused heart.

I wanted to burn this building down, destroying us both so the painting would meet its fiery death. The rage I felt was all-consuming except for the sliver of my mind that

understood what I was seeing.

He was showing me a piece of his heart.

“That’s after—”

“Yes. It’s you in the shower. After...” he confirmed, interrupting me.

“Is that how you see me?” In my peripheral vision, I saw Cole nod his head.

It was incomprehensible that Cole had painted such a beautiful version of me.

The canvas depicted a superhuman I’d never measure up to. I wasn’t that beautiful or fierce. Staring at the painting was the equivalent of standing in front of a freight train bearing down the tracks and waiting for the impact. Everything was hazy aside from a two-dimensional me.

Next thing I knew, Cole was crouched next to the bed, grasping my chin. “Look at me, Pretty Boy. Breathe with me. In and out. In and out.” His other hand placed mine over his hammering heart, then his warm palm covered my heart, trying to beat out of my chest.

“I got you. Keep breathing with me. In and out.” The torment on his face reflected the agony wracking my body.

Cole remained in the crouched position far longer than most men could handle until the tightness in my chest released, and I inhaled deeply. Then he collapsed to his knees. “I never would have shown you if I’d known what it would do to you. Fuck. I’m so sorry.” His chin dropped to his chest.

Everything in me screamed to reach out and touch him, but I couldn’t do it. “I don’t

understand.”

Nothing had made sense since meeting Cole. My whole life had been turned upside down, inside out, and then blown to bits.

“Art isn’t logical, and neither is my heart or my feelings.” Cole’s hand stretched toward me, but it fell with his sigh. “I pushed my feelings for you into a box. I thought it would be simple. Mutual physical attraction, not an emotional connection. I’ve been lying to myself since the day I met you in your office. I deluded myself into believing if I set up rules that I could keep you at arm’s length. But I hated every day I wasn’t with you.

“I lived for our time together while pretending it was only physical,” he continued.

I’d known all this, but hearing Cole say it out loud hurt more than it should.

“You fascinated me with your lack of filter and perspective. The more time I spent with you, the more I wanted to know you. No one else makes numbers and spreadsheets sexy. Your patience is immense, and you amaze me every single day. You care so much that you wiggled your way into my heart before I understood what was happening.” Cole stood and backed away, maintaining our eye contact.

My heart lapped up every crumb he fed me. An addict scrounging for the last scraps.

“I lied to myself, but I picked up a paintbrush after nearly a decade. Art doesn’t lie, but sometimes we don’t understand what it means.” He turned his back and began picking up the canvases. “My heart bled onto my canvas for you, begging me to see the truth.”

He meticulously turned over canvas after canvas of me. It seemed to be the progression of our relationship laid out before my eyes. The first painting had an

ethereal quality, so my features weren't sharp.

The portraits became sharper in detail, and I had less and less clothes until in the last couple, I was naked. But the very last one laid out wasn't of me but of the New York night skyline on display from inside floor-to-ceiling windows.

"You hate that apartment," I blurted, realizing it was the view from his Greenwich home.

Cole shifted his feet and scrubbed a hand over his face. "But you loved that view, and I thought... well it doesn't matter now." He tried to keep his voice casual.

"You painted it for me. Because I said I wanted art in my living room." I didn't have to ask; I knew.

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The size of the canvas was different from the others, and the color scheme fit my apartment. Cole nodded and shoved his hands in his pockets. He'd officially laid his heart out for me, but I couldn't take it. It was too much.

"Cole, I—"

"You don't have to say anything. It's too much too soon, and you're not here because you want to be. It's just I've been lying for so long I can't hold the truth in any longer. I know I have to earn your trust back. And I know you've got your own issues to work through. I hope someday you will trust me enough to tell me who hurt you, and I can be there for you."

"It wasn't me that was hurt," I said, hating that I gave away part of my past.

"That isn't true. Whatever happened hurt you terribly. I hate that for you." He began to collect the canvases.

"Can you leave them?" I don't know why I wanted to torture myself with all the faces of me. With the obvious care he put into the paintings and the way he portrayed me, I held a sliver of hope for the two of us but feared the hope might kill me.

"Anything you want, Pretty Boy. What's next?"

My ankle ached, which was much easier to focus on than the rest of it. After giving me pain meds, Cole asked me to choose a movie, picked me up like I mattered, and settled me on the couch.

I could not get comfortable and ended up with my head in his lap. The sound he made from the back of his throat had been a cross between a possessive growl and a contented sigh. I shouldn't have liked it. It shouldn't have given me pleasure knowing that being close to me, without the possibility of sex, brought him joy. I should've found another comfortable position, but his hands in my hair were soothing.

He knew what I needed before I did and offered to sleep on the couch, so we didn't have a repeat of last night. I was relieved and grateful. But lying in the dark, my mind raced and analyzed our conversations. Examining them for Cole's inadvertent untruths. So far, I hadn't found any.

Most of my girlfriends hated my inability to filter my thoughts and thought I was talking down to them when I used vocabulary words above an eighth-grade level. But Cole thought it was funny, and he'd told me he liked my word vomit and lack of filter. He'd stuck with me for longer than all but one of my girlfriends.

Cole got me. And it freaked me out.

But hypothetical was not the same as real life. I was afraid to let myself hope.

I'd never considered the future Cole laid out for me. My laser focus on my goals had prohibited me from experiencing fun and joy. I'd been stuck in survival mode and did not understand alternative scenarios.

I'd never imagined someone loving me enough to want to build an actual life with me. When I'd imagined marriage, it had been abstract with the two of us eating late-night takeout after a twelve-hour workday.

It certainly didn't occur to me to fantasize about a day at the beach and making out for hours on the sand. Or leaving work early because I had to see my partner.

Now that I knew that existed, was it possible to forge ahead without considering other options? I'd been so intent on the outcome that I hadn't bothered to ask if I still wanted to achieve my goal. Cole had planted the seed a month ago when he'd said as long as my goal, a.k.a. my job, made me happy.

And kids.

Sara and Isaac were my world, but I wondered if I possessed the ability to take care of a child. Kids had been another abstract concept to me. But Cole had serious thoughts and ideas about raising children. Choosing between my job and kids was inconceivable. I didn't want my brain to disintegrate on mind-numbing kids' songs and discipline, but I also didn't want to miss first words and steps.

I'd interrogated him to upset him. It wasn't fair and probably made me an asshole, but I needed to know he wouldn't run from hard conversations.

The insidious voice in my head had told me everyone leaves, and it was right. Now it was telling me I couldn't have it all. I hated that voice, but ignoring it had led me here. In Cole's life on a break from our breakup.

Cole thought he loved me, and he believed it. He said he lied to himself about his feelings for me, but I'd lied too. I'd lied, thinking I'd survive our physical affair without serious emotional scars. I knew eventually I'd fall in love with Cole. It seemed inevitable. Cole loving me was preposterous.

"I can hear your brain. Are you okay?" Cole's voice floated in the dark.

"You can't possibly hear what's in my head," I retorted, surprised he'd noticed.

"No, but I can hear your breathing, fidgeting, and sighing. Can I get you anything?"

“No.”

“Okay, let me know. Good night, Shane.”

“Cole?” I asked, and he hummed a response. “Why does your apartment smell like my favorite candle?”

He grunted a laugh. “In the hospital, you said the world would be a better place if it smelled like mahogany teakwood. I got it online because I can’t make the world better, but I could make my apartment smell better for you.”

The words got stuck in my throat, but I forced them out. “Thank you.”

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A simple thing made a difference, and for some reason, that hurt. It hurt that he wanted to make my life better.

“Cole?” I waited for him to respond. Maybe he’d fallen asleep. It was a stupid idea anyway.

“You want me in bed with you?”

He knew; he rounded the bed and slipped in next to me. My body relaxed and my hand found his. Whatever our fate would eventually be wasn’t going to happen tonight, so I hopped on the road to hell to ride it all night long.

“I need you.”

I let the words hang in the air and he formed his body carefully around mine, so he engulfed me, but my leg and ankle were safe. My brain was obsessing over the past with Paxton now that Cole was willing to talk about him.

“How many portraits did you paint of Paxton?” I hated the insecurity.

“Three.” His nose nuzzled my neck. “I painted one for an art class in college, one as a wedding present, and one as an ‘I’m sorry’ a couple years before he died. It turned out that I painted one a decade. Anything else you want to know, Pretty Boy?” Cole kissed my shoulder.

No. My brain celebrated with cartwheels and backflips. He had already painted three times as many paintings of me than of Paxton. It boggled my mind, and I hated

unsolved puzzles. Spreadsheets didn't work on people.

Hope pierced my heart and dared me to deny it.

Chapter thirty-seven

Cole

"CanIgetanorder to go?" I asked the server after I finished the meal I was supposed to share with Shane.

Shane Reynolds was the most stubborn man I'd ever met, and if I wasn't so in love with him, I'd literally shake some sense into him.

I knew our fantasy bubble of living together while I took care of him would end. I hated packing up his things and taking him back to his apartment. He had a hard time admitting he didn't like it either. He wouldn't admit that he slept better in my arms and loved my cooking. Or that his beautiful brain relaxed when we were together.

He acted like normal people were awake and texting at 3 a.m. But I was thankful he was willing to give me another chance. It seemed to surprise him as if the words were out of his mouth before his too-fast brain had calculated the result.

There were so many mistakes in my past to learn from, and I was determined not to repeat any with Shane. He was too important for me to let my ego get in the way. I would show Shane nothing but patience and love.

Sharing his pain and past would wait until he was ready to talk about it. I'd tested the waters by asking about the dragon tattoo I'd done for him. I should've known that he wouldn't talk about it. I guessed that it related to the traumatic event in his past.

I hadn't understood the amount of time he'd sacrificed away from work for me until he didn't. We were still exclusive, but he wouldn't commit to calling me his boyfriend, so if I labeled our arrangement, it would be casually dating. Wanting so much more was slowly killing me, but I had to trust that if he could count on me, then our relationship would move forward.

Sitting alone at a table for two, an hour past our meeting time, hurt. Shane had confirmed earlier in the day, but I knew from experience if he got caught up in a project, he lost all sense of time. It wasn't personal, but it fucking sucked.

The week after he went back to his apartment, he only showed up for one out of our five planned dates. A Sunday brunch since he'd visited his sister on Saturday and worked Sunday afternoon and night. He claimed he was behind after being out of the office for a week.

I knew he wasn't purposely avoiding me, but I also knew that Branson Financial would go on without him. My father did not care if the job was causing Shane to miss sleep and meals. Donald wouldn't hesitate to replace Shane if he thought it was the best thing for the company.

Shane's goal was his life's mission, and I would not hold him back or make him feel guilty. My gut screamed at me to tell him that my father was a liar and a user, and that Shane probably wouldn't get the promotion he was promised. But my head knew that Shane had to work it out on his own. I dropped off dinner for him at the security desk.

A half hour later, I got a text.

Pretty Boy: You are amazing. Sorry I missed our dinner!

Me: Please make sure you eat and try to sleep tonight

Pretty Boy: It will get better after the board meeting.

Me: Love you

Shane didn't respond, and I didn't expect him to. I wouldn't respond to his misconception that things would get better after the meeting, and he never responded to my declarations of love. We were at a standstill, and although I'd removed the "I" from I love you, I wouldn't stop telling him.

Shane had already worked a hundred hours this week.

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He was living and breathing Branson Financial, and I tried to support him from the sidelines.

He'd let me spank him a few times but only reluctantly. I wished he'd let me do it more, for his sake. It reset his brain and allowed him to function better. But my man was laser focused on work, not on his well-being.

I intentionally arrived at his apartment a little early tonight. I'd planned on him being late; otherwise, I'd have a hard time pulling off my grand plan.

Me: I'm at your apartment. I'll wait in my car until you get here.

Pretty Boy: Oh shit. I lost track of time

Me: No worries

Pretty Boy: It will be at least an hour

Me: I may or may not have a delicious item that needs to be frozen. Would you mind if I put it in your freezer?

Pretty Boy: My stomach wants to come home now! But go on in. It's fine

I'd been hoping for that response, but I knew it was hard for him. He wouldn't add "it's fine" if he didn't have some reservations. I hoped my plan was worth it.

By the time Shane arrived two hours later, I'd accomplished everything and also gone

down a rabbit hole on Reddit. I heard his crutches clapping down the hall. My nerves kicked in, afraid my gesture had crossed a boundary for Shane. I decided to act like this was any other night and not like there was a possibility he'd kick me out.

"Hey," I opened the door, greeting him with a kiss, taking his work bag off his shoulder.

"What's all this?" Shane asked as I settled him on the blanket in the middle of the living room, carefully raising his ankle on a pillow.

"It's too cold for the beach, but I thought we'd have a late-night picnic."

While he rearranged himself on the pillows, I clicked on the lights I'd strung around the room and turned off the overhead lights. The room glowed, and Shane's expression of gratitude gutted me.

Shane always had a reaction of disbelief when I went out of my way for him. As if bare minimum boyfriend behavior was new to him. I retrieved dinner from the fridge and arranged everything on the blanket. I'd picked foods I could feed him.

Shane moaned at the first bite, and his body melted into me. Swallowing his moans would have to wait until he was fed and willing. Tyler Shaw's song "When You're Home" filled the apartment, and we used our bodies instead of words to talk to each other.

When Shane sucked my fingers into his mouth, I lost control. The sparkle in his eyes told me that was his plan. My mouth devoured him, and we forgot all about the food. Shane felt so good under me as I thrust my hips into him. We ended up rolling onto the plates laughing.

"Do you want dessert or dessert?" I waggled my eyebrows.

Shane leaned in and kissed me again before saying, “I have been fantasizing about the dessert you brought.”

“Mmmm.” I chased his lips before getting up to clear the dinner container and get dessert. “Sit and relax,” I told Shane when he started gathering dishes.

“You’ve gone out of your way, the least I can do is pick up my mess.” Shane’s scowl prevented me from arguing.

I picked him up and handed him his crutches.

Shane opened the fridge and froze. After a beat, he yanked open the freezer and then a cabinet I hadn’t closed all the way.

“Cole,” he spat, “you bought me groceries. I am capable of doing that myself.”

I raised my hands in defense. “It’s not about you being capable; it’s about me trying to help you while you’re injured and slaying the world of finance.” He didn’t relax. “You’ve worked so many hours this week, I wanted to take a couple things off your plate, so you’d have more time to recharge. I want to make your life easier, and if you’re mad, I won’t do it again,” I promised. His reaction was worst-case scenario.

“What other things did you do?” He folded his arms over his chest.

“I cleaned your bathroom,” I admitted, at a loss for words and confused over his level of anger. “I’m sorry.”

His crutches slammed onto the floor with each step as he exited the room, and I plated his dessert for him. His favorite chocolate cake with peanut butter ice cream.

“Why is there only one plate?” Shane’s face held no emotion as he hopped over

without his crutches.

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“I got your favorite, and I’ll let you enjoy it. Call me when you have time again.” I cursed myself for not at least getting a feel for whether or not he’d be comfortable with my help.

It became harder and harder not to force myself into his life to take care of him. I’d thought this idea had been the least intrusive. Fail.

“I’m a dick,” he said, running his finger through the frosting.

“No, I crossed a line without asking.” Leaning in to kiss him, he held up his frosting covered finger to me, instead. I groaned, wishing I could suck another part of him.

“Please don’t go.” Shane scooped up more frosting for me. “No one has ever done something like this for me, and I don’t know how to handle it. I don’t know what you expect.”

I wrapped my arms around his torso and tucked his head under my chin. “Nothing. This doesn’t come with strings attached. I wanted to do this for you, but not so you’d feel obligated to me. That’s why I think I should go. So there’s no confusion on your part.”

“Thank you,” Shane’s voice was thick with emotion. “And I’m serious that I want you to stay. I’ve been terrible, and you’ve been nothing but understanding. I don’t understand why you put up with me.”

“The truth?” I squeezed him. “I love you.”

It was as simple as that.

Chapter thirty-eight

Shane

Instead of telling Cole with my words how much I appreciated him, I told him with my body. I grabbed the back of his neck and brought his lips to mine.

Cole's confession hit dead center in my heart. My head was a mess, but Cole's steadfast presence eased the tension in me. Every time he walked through the door, it felt like a piece of my heart returned.

But being a dick to him was my default mode at this point. I truly did not deserve him. He'd been my rock, and I hadn't had the guts to tell him I appreciated him. I'd done the opposite, continually canceling on him and finding ways to meet in public so sex wasn't an option.

My therapist thought I'd been unfairly testing Cole's limits. Deliberately pushing him away to see if he'd leave me again. She warned me that no human can sustain repeated rejection without a reaction.

I'd force him to choose between me and his self-preservation. If he chose me, he'd be a broken shell of a man and not the man I fell in love with. She asked me when my need to punish him would be satisfied and if it was worth the risk of damaging us both.

She told me I deserved love and had to learn how to accept it. I had a severe panic attack. Sometimes the truth was harder to hear than a lie. My actions proved her point.

Cole acted like the perfect boyfriend. I had to learn how to accept he was serious about his feelings for me.

I was trying.

It was hard for me to understand Cole's love for me.

At my therapist's suggestion, I researched something called Top Drop. It's when the dominant crashed and needed aftercare. They experienced feelings of being overwhelmed by their responsibility, which is exactly what happened to Cole. I carried the added guilt of not being there for him when he needed me most.

I brought nothing to this relationship except anxiety and painful memories of his past. Working at Branson Financial would keep him tied to his father and Paxton. I feared that would destroy us over time.

Unless...

I pushed away my suspicions about Branson Financial, at least Cole could never be accused of insider trading. I needed to compartmentalize and let Cole shut my brain off.

"Will you take me to bed, Daddy?" I whispered into his mouth.

Cole reacted the way I hoped when I purposely called him "daddy," like I'd thrown gasoline on a bonfire. He lifted me and held me so close it was as if he was trying to merge us into one; I wrapped my legs around his waist.

"You know I'll do anything you ask." He deepened our kiss and my insides turned molten. I craved our physical connection on an elemental level. Denying our chemistry was futile. "But our playtime can't affect your ankle."

“Screw my ankle.” I groaned into his mouth.

“Careful, Pretty Boy, or I’ll have to punish you for not taking your health seriously.” Cole nipped at my jaw. “Besides, it’s not your ankle I want to fuck.” He laid me down on the bed as if I were fragile and immediately placed a pillow under my ankle.

“I want to suck you off,” I begged, not the least bit ashamed of the need in my voice. Earlier, Cole expressly said he didn’t want me on my knees or my leg dangling where I might hit my ankle if we lost control. I understood that, but a small part of my brain terrorized me with insecurity. “Actually, I want you to fuck my mouth until I gag. I want to swallow your dick down my throat until you come.”

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Cole silently undressed and I couldn't read his expression. I licked my lips as his large cock bobbed up and down after he freed it. All my thoughts turned to getting myself naked for him.

"Let me," Cole said, unbuttoning my shirt and removing the rest of my clothes. "You don't have to suck me off because I bought you groceries, baby." He stretched out next to me, propped up on an elbow, tracing my dragon tattoo with his index finger.

"Ineeda belly full of your cum," I said, half hysterical. Calling me baby was new and he must've realized how much I fucking adored it. I needed his body to reassure me.

"You're going to kill me," he said, studying me. "Don't move. I'll fuck your face."

I cried out in relief as he maneuvered his dick to my mouth and planked over me. His moan washed over me, calming every doubt and fear. The flavor of his pre-cum burst in my mouth, sending me into a frenzy. Swallowing him down, I held him in place as I gagged.

He could choke me to death with his dick, and I'd have no regrets.

The desire to have him inside me outweighed sense and physical ability. A stream of nonstop obscenities spewed out of Cole. He slowed too much for my liking, but we found a pace that satisfied us and wouldn't accidentally unalive me.

I'd driven Cole to the brink.

"Take it. Take your daddy's cock, Pretty Boy," he growled. "You want your daddy to

fill you up with my cum, don't you."

Stuffed full of Cole with my own dick leaking all over my belly, I did something I'd never done before. I reached around and stroked his hole. He reacted immediately and thrust his hips violently with a breathy moan of "fuuuuucckkkkk."

"Dirty, Pretty Boy, you want it all. You want my cock and my ass. It's yours, baby. Everything is yours. I'm yours, Shane." And with that declaration, Cole shot down my throat, and I worked hard to swallow the never-ending stream.

"Daddy," I panted, struggling not to come. My dick ached, ready to explode.

"I have a present for you." Cole's gravelly voice gave away his excitement. "Roll over."

I hurried to comply, noticing a bag on the nightstand that must contain my present. Both his calloused hands ran down the length of my body from shoulders to ass. His light touches became a deeper massage. My muscles loosened under his capable palms.

When I was loose and whimpering with need, I heard him pop open a bottle of lube. He stretched my hole as usual, but I tensed at the feeling of a cold object.

"You're going to love it. The stretch might sting when it goes in but," Cole barked out a laugh at the double entendre, "it will be worth it. You have to keep your leg still, so you don't hurt your ankle."

Cole eased the plug into me, and his body enveloped mine and everything about him felt comfortable: his scent, his weight, the roughness of his hands.

"There you go. Relax and enjoy." Cole's breath fanned over my ear.

The plug was smooth and not as big as several of his fingers, so it wasn't hard to acquiesce and enjoy Cole's closeness. My body ached for the day he would fuck me again, and this was a spectacular step in that direction.

After the plug was seated in my ass, Cole reached for something, and immediately it began vibrating. A long moan and a string of expletives left my mouth. I'd never felt anything like it. Then he turned the vibration up.

"Mother of sex on a stick animal indecency," I spewed nonsensically.

"Your moans are music to my ears. I need to overdose you with orgasms that I control without hurting your ankle." He gently rolled me to watch my expressions.

My muscles shook in the effort to hold back my orgasm. He experimented with the intensity of the vibration and my cock leaked all over my belly. Cole knew exactly when to dial it back. The plug, which seemed small going in now, controlled every part of my body including my brain.

It filled me and pleasure spread, humming through every cell in my body. He enjoyed watching my effort not to come until he told me. He edged me for what felt like a century.

Cole swallowed my cock, pinning my hips to the bed until I was all the way down his throat. Sounds spewed out of my mouth, and I knew I'd break any second.

"Come down Daddy's throat like a good boy," Cole ordered.

We both loved calling him my Daddy. It added another layer of intimacy and trust to our relationship.

I let the tension in my body go, and white-hot bliss tore through me as I unloaded into

Cole's mouth.

"You make me so proud," he said, running his hands over my trembling muscles. "Daddy's going to take your plug out and come all over your hole." Goosebumps appeared all over my body at the thought. He hitched my good leg over his arm, so my ass was open to him. "You want Daddy's cum, don't you!"

"Pleeeaseeeeeee."

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“I’ll give you what you need.” Cole removed the plug and ran a hand over my ass. In minutes, my ass and cock were covered exactly as he promised.

Cole’s eyes were fixed on my hole, and I felt his semen drip into me. He pushed it inside, and my dick twitched.

“More,” I pleaded. “I need more. I need all your cum in me.”

Gripping my hip, Cole used his other hand to coat my insides with his cum. “I have no right to love this as much as I do. I have no right to want pictures of how good you look with my cum in your ass. But I fucking love it.”

Then he wrapped me in his arms and kissed me. Cole’s kisses were lazy, as if contented to kiss me all night long. I sank into the mattress, relishing his weight on me. He sighed into my mouth as if he also felt a combination of relief and satisfaction.

“Thank you,” I said into his ear and then rained kisses down his neck and across his sexy stubble. “I needed that.”

“You don’t ever have to thank me for sex.” Cole’s fingers wove into my hair, and he tugged, forcing me to see his beautiful face. His intent gaze studied me. “You are an incredible gift.” Cole paused before he said something else, and a startled laugh burst out of him. “I guess I knew that from the start,” he said.

My utter confusion must have shown on my face because he leaned in to feather a kiss to my lips before saying, “After I met you, I debated googling you to find out

more information.” My heart stopped for an agonizing eternity before galloping to a breakneck pace. “I didn’t,” Cole continued, unaware of my panic. “But I’d typed your first name and accidentally hit return. Did you know your name means ‘a gift from God?’”

“That’s a lie.” The words flew out with such venom that Cole recoiled and blinked.

“You’re my gift no matter your religious beliefs or beliefs about yourself,” Cole murmured.

I closed my eyes to give myself some space to process all my emotions. The past had made a mockery of the meaning of my name. I wasn’t a gift; I was disposable. An unwanted extra. Cole’s heartfelt sentiment couldn’t undo all the damage of my past.

No matter how much I ached to cling to his words and trust his admission, history proved otherwise. The past had taught me valuable lessons that were hard to ignore. I focused on the reprieve that Cole hadn’t found out about my past.

Chapter thirty-nine

Cole

It turned the page, my arm brushing over Shane’s head in the process. Something he seemed to enjoy.

Fate had shined down on me when a server crashed at Branson Financial. Shane couldn’t work and had called me, desperately wondering what I was doing. He’d come straight from his office vibrating with anxiety. He was holding something back, but he wouldn’t explain.

A full day with Shane was a gift I wouldn’t waste.

I'd been nervous that he'd pull back after he let me overdose him with orgasms, and he'd shut me out. My relief had felt tangible. He didn't remember pleading with me to keep him when he came down my throat. He'd been mindless, but it was clear he still believed I was going to leave him. I'd never willingly walk away from him again. I had to prove that every day until he knew it was a fact.

Reading *The Way of Kings* out loud with Shane's head in my lap was close to heaven. He'd insisted I start from where I'd left off, but then asked a million questions.

"I can't remember the last time I read a book." Shane's beautiful brown eyes met mine when I paused at the end of the chapter.

"Really," I closed the book, "I'd bet my life that you were a big reader."

Shane's body went rigid, and I cataloged that with everything I wanted to know about Shane but was too afraid to ask. He closed his eyes, regulated his breathing, and turned his head into my stomach, inhaling before opening his eyes again.

Shane picked up the book examining the front and back cover then flipping through the pages, devouring the maps and other illustrations. "Brandon Sanderson is your favorite author?" When I nodded, he asked, "What would you recommend if I started reading his work?"

"The *Mistborn* trilogy is amazing and the novels are shorter. It's a great place to start without making a huge time commitment." I combed my fingers through his soft hair, wishing he'd tell me a fraction of what went through his head. "We could read them together if you want." His answering grin knocked my heart back. The littlest things meant so much to him.

"That would be cool." He shrugged off his excitement.

“I can loan you my copy since I have it on my e-reader too.”

“I like the sound of your voice when you read to me.” Shane reached up to touch my lips. I would read to this man until I died if he’d let me.

“Okay, let’s get the physical copy since the illustrations are better.” I lifted Shane off my lap and tugged him up. “You can look through and pick which one you want me to read.”

I crossed over to the walk-in storage closet and turned the light on. Since I didn’t want Shane to lift any of the heavy bins with his bad ankle, I hauled them off the shelves, and he opened them.

“Cole,” Shane’s voice pitched high with alarm, “what are these?”

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I peered over his shoulder. “I don’t know.” Rifling through the papers, I shrugged. “It looks like stuff Pax brought home from the office. It’s probably useless, but feel free to see if anything is relevant to you.”

Hyper focused, Shane sorted the documents at lightning speed. It reminded me of the night I tattooed him, and he had a panic attack in my office. When I handed him a bottle of water from the kitchen, I noticed he’d taken a few photos with his phone.

“These need to be shredded; do you have a shredder?” Shane’s hands were shaky as he drank the water.

As I said, “yes,” Shane’s phone rang, and I sighed inwardly. He’d be called back to work and leave in a blink without looking back.

Shane barely got a word in because the woman on the other end of the phone spoke quickly without taking a breath. He nodded, even though she couldn’t see him.

“Actually, my firm had to shut its server down for maintenance, so I’m off today. Would that work for you?” He glanced at me. “Would you mind if I bring my assistant/boyfriend along? He helps me stay organized.” Shane’s ears turned pink. Hearing him refer to me as his boyfriend melted my insides.

Shane hung up and turned to me. “Don’t get cocky. I wasn’t going to call you ‘my sexy booty call,’ and you are a help to me. I won’t eat for the rest of the day if you don’t remind me, and I might forget the time and stay there all night.” He grumbled.

“No cockiness here. Promise.” I held up my hand in a pledge. “Where are we going,

boss?”

It wasn't my fault that my head took the casual reference of boyfriend as a statement of fact. Shane was mine, and I was his, even if he wasn't ready to hear that yet.

“Madyson's friend, Ashley, who owns a flower shop by the gallery. I should have asked you first.”

“There is nothing I'd rather do than spend the day with you. And getting to see you in genius Shane mode is a bonus.”

When he tried to argue, I insisted on going. Normal Shane was hot, but Shane using all his brain power to solve a problem was scorched-earth-burn-me-alive hot.

Ashley greeted us at the door, a petite bubbly blonde whose personality made her larger than life.

Her eyes dilated slightly at the sight of us. We were a good-looking pair with his lean, angular model look and my muscular, tattooed vibe. She talked nonstop while giving us a tour of the shop from the main customer displays, the workshop, coolers, and delivery area. Shane interrupted her several times since that was the only way he could ask a question.

This was exactly how Shane liked to work, getting all the information possible and then deciding for himself what was important. She had her computer set up and showed him where to find the files for inventory and invoices.

Before he dove in headfirst, I tugged his head back to look at me, “I'm going to bring you lunch in two-and-half hours, and you're going to stop to eat.” I placed a quick kiss on his lips as he mumbled under his breath about my bossiness.

But he had a smile, and I knew he appreciated it.

While he worked, Ashley showed me the art of floral presentation, and I put together an arrangement for Shane based on the flowers he'd touched during our tour.

At one point, Shane cracked his neck, and I massaged his shoulders. His fingers continued to fly over the keyboard, but he did turn his face to kiss my hand. It was a slow day, so Ashley closed her shop early, and I agreed to call her when Shane was done.

Shane pushed back from his chair flexing his fingers. "I'm almost done." His eyes swung around to take in the night sky outside. "Is everyone gone?"

"Just you and me, baby." I inserted myself in a kneeling position between his legs. "What can I do to help?"

"I think I need a mental break for a few minutes." His breath hitched as I ran my palms up his thighs to bracket his cock.

"I know just the thing, Pretty Boy." I bent to kiss his hard cock through his pants then sat up and said, "A quiz on all the characters in *The Way of Kings*."

He shoved at me, but his chair rolled back and his laughter filled the space. "You tease."

He pretended to accuse me, but I was drunk on the happiness in his voice. It had been too long since I'd seen him so relaxed and ready for fun outside of the bedroom.

"Do you need an incentive to finish?" I spun his chair, and he lifted his foot and cast, so it rotated in a few circles.

“Are you going to make me dizzy and take advantage of me?”

“I’d like to think you’re willing.” I pushed his chair, so it skidded across the room.

“But if not, here’s your chance to escape my deviant clutches.”

“Hmmm.” Shane brought his index finger to his jaw as if thinking while his foot propelled the chair back in my direction. “Deviant clutches sounds so scary. However, would I survive if I fell prey to them?”

“I know CPR.” I backed away, making Shane chase me in a one-legged zigzag since he couldn’t move in a straight line.

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He could easily get out of the chair, but it had become some sort of game.

“Do you? What’s the beat for compressions?” he quizzed and I was at a loss.

“‘Staying Alive’ is one of the standards for CPR compressions.”

He realized it was easier to turn his chair around and push toward me backward. As the chair rolled up to my feet, I spun him around to face me and bracketed him in place with my hands on the arms of his chair.

“How do you know everything, Pretty Boy?” I remained above him, even though his upturned lips begged me to kiss them.

“I’m not an actual human. I’m AI.” He stretched his neck further, seeking a kiss without words.

“So, you’re telling me my dream guy is a robot?” I kicked his chair back a foot.

“Well, that’s some bullshit right there. I don’t know how I feel about sucking a robot’s cock.” My stomach flipped, seeing his brown eyes dance in anticipation.

“I have it on good authority that you love sucking my dick.” He bit his lower lip and unbuttoned his pants. “The thing about technology is sometimes you can’t discern the real thing from artificial intelligence. I think you should investigate.” Shane’s fingers dragged his zipper down a centimeter at a time.

“I’ll make you a deal.” I would use his lust against him to gain the advantage and more time with him. “I’ll suck your cock right now and again as a reward for finishing your program. Then, you’re going to have a late,” I checked my phone,

“very late dinner with me and spend the night in my bed.”

Shane clucked his tongue. “I don’t have clothes for work tomorrow.”

“You do. Somehow you left a full set of work clothes at my place,” I said. He hesitated, and I stalked over, kneeling again and brushing the back of my hand over his cock. “You know I’m a man of my word. What do you say, Pretty Boy?”

Chapter forty

Shane

“I can’t wait until you let me back in your ass,” Cole groaned.

Cole could convince me to board a doomsday shuttle with him. The man knew how to finagle his way around my defenses and make me think it was my idea. And I loved everything about him. I couldn’t pretend I hadn’t fallen in love with him anymore. It was real for me and irreversible.

I was so fucked. And I wanted him to fuck me again.

Today had been spectacular. He read to me, I got the high of writing code, and then Cole got me off. Cole almost had me convinced we’d avoid doomsday and live happily ever after. Everything in me wanted to believe it was possible. I couldn’t find the strength to care that we would crash and burn when Cole fed me from his hand and stripped me naked.

All I cared about was doing exactly what he told me to do as he orchestrated our bliss. He had me on his bed on all fours caressing my cheeks after spanking me. My nerves were on fire along with my ass.

Cole palmed my cheeks, so both his thumbs massaged and opened my hole. “Your ass is dying for my attention, isn’t it.” His voice was hoarse and full of lust. “You’re going to ride my fingers until you get off, and then I’ll come all over your perfect ass.” He groaned when I felt my hole quiver under his touch.

I needed him inside me. The risk was worth it to feel him inside me again. “D-ddeeeeee,” I gasped, “fuck me. Take my ass. Take it—it’s yours. I want your cum inside me.”

Cole let out an animalistic growl, and I whimpered in disappointment when he pulled back. I howled in pleasure when his tongue replaced his thumbs. My face hit the bed, and my legs would’ve collapsed, but Cole held my ass to his face.

He didn’t ease me into the sensation; he struck with the precision of an assassin, and my ass was the target. He awakened nerve endings I never knew existed. My entire body sang in anticipation of his next touch. I pleaded for more, all the while the onslaught of pleasure threatened to explode every cell in my body. Nothing existed but his breath, his touch, his mouth. He brought me to another dimension, and I was greedy for more.

Cole seemed to want his entire face inside me, and I was on board for that. Our bodies were in agreement that we needed to be fused together never to be parted.

“You’re gonna take my cock, baby. You want me to fill you up.” Cole roared, and I chanted in agreement. “I want to see my cock disappear into your pretty ass.” Cole flipped me over, covered his dick in lube, and his head nudged my entrance.

“Yes, Daddy, fill me with all your cum. Don’t stop until you’re empty. I’m empty without you.” I lifted my hips, drawing my knees up to my chest.

He fed his dick into my ass inch by inch and held me still so I couldn’t impale myself

on him.

Finally, his hips were flush with my ass, and we sighed in unison. The look on his face made me believe he actually loved me.

“Get ready, baby. I can’t hold back,” Cole grunted.

“Give it to me, Daddy. Everything. Give me your everything.” And he did. The loft filled with the sound of our bodies slamming together and our disjointed words.

Praise fell from his lips. “I never want to stop fucking you. You ruined me for anyone else. You’re such a good boy. You’re my perfect pretty boy. Don’t make me stop, don’t ever make me stop.” The litany went on and on, and I promised him everything he asked.

My eyelids shuttered with pleasure. “Eyes on me. Don’t hide from me when you come.” Cole commanded me to come the instant before I detonated.

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He followed, his hot seed filling my ass. He collapsed on top of me, then jolted his torso upward.

“Is your ankle okay?” he asked, and I pushed my chest up to maintain our connection.

“If I still have two, I consider it a win,” I said, shifting so our bodies were skin-to-skin from head to toe. “Don’t pull out. Please.” My voice cracked on the last word, and Cole’s full weight knocked me back down to the mattress, stealing the air from my lungs.

“Promise you’ll tell me if it’s too much.” Cole peppered kisses on my neck and shoulders.

“I think my body will stage a revolt if your magical cock tried to exit me.” The weight of him was a pleasure all its own.

“Magical, huh?” Cole chuckled into my hair. “Unfortunately, biology will not allow me to make this situation permanent.”

“I think I can rewire your code to keep your dick in me.” I allowed this moment to seep into my soul.

“Throw in a spreadsheet and I’m all in.” Cole snaked his arms under my back to hold me closer.

“Perfect.” I sighed.

“I love you.” His voice was fierce as he squeezed me tight, and his dick twitched inside me. And I was desperate enough to believe him.

Sometimes, I wondered if my colleagues were willfully incompetent.

Cole had no idea that Paxton had taken documents against company policy. Paxton must have had the same suspicions as I had, but he’d managed to get physical documentation.

My head throbbed with the scenarios of whistleblowing and keeping Cole away from the blow out. But that was a problem for another day.

I sat in the doctor’s office, waiting to get my cast removed to work the rest of the day from home. It was always going to be a bad day, and there was no sense in making it worse or subjecting my colleagues to my insufferable mood.

Today marked the second worst day of the year for me. I’d already talked to my therapist, and she said to call if my thoughts devolved.

My plan was to get the cast off, force myself to work from home, reread my middle school copy of the dragon book that started the tragedy, and then cap off the night with a sleeping pill to get myself into tomorrow.

I should’ve brought Cole with me to the doctor’s office. I needed his steady calm, and if he knew I was here, then he would’ve insisted. Cole embodied everything a man should be: patient, generous, understanding, hot AF, and a God in bed. And for some reason he loved me.

Cole’s love wrapped me in a blanket of security, and he made me his priority. He would drop everything for me, and I didn’t deserve it. Cole was the sun, and I was the black hole sucking his light from him.

I loved Cole with an intensity that terrified me.

He'd proven over and over his dedication to me. I'd surrendered to the fact that Cole was, in fact, my boyfriend. Boyfriend couldn't accurately describe how I felt about him or our relationship. It was panic inducing to love him at this level, while knowing it all might end.

Even though Cole never said it out loud, I knew he wanted more from me. Wanted me to admit I loved him. Wanted me to share my past with him. He wouldn't wait forever, and I needed to get past my fear and tell him everything.

Soon but not today.

My phone buzzed with a call from my mother as I hobbled into my apartment cast free. My therapist gave me permission to put myself first and not talk to her today. I should have declined the call, but the masochist in me answered.

"Hi, Mom."

"Happy birthday, honey," she slurred.

It was too early in the day for this shit. Part of me held on to the hope that this would be the year that I mattered. I couldn't muster the strength to respond, and she started crying.

"I miss him so much," she wailed.

"So do I." I sighed, wishing I'd let her go to voicemail.

I listened to her cry for an eternity.

“Shep, come back. We need you. Come home, Shep.”

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And that was officially my breaking point. I hung up the phone.

Chapter forty-one

Cole

“Whatareyouguysdoing tonight?” Alec flopped down in the chair across from my desk.

“I’m going to finish sketching this tattoo, and then I’m headed upstairs. You?” I turned my drawing sideways trying to get a different perspective.

“You’re not celebrating?” Alec sounded surprised, and I met his gaze with confusion.

“What do you know that I don’t?” I asked. Alec liked to talk shit, but he seemed genuine.

He shifted uncomfortably in the chair, deciding what to say. “You know with the new program Shane made, I’ve been emailing our clients for their birthdays. A way to keep us on their minds and generate repeat business.”

“It’s been a success, then. Our sales are up?” I started shading the heart in the tattoo.

“Today is Shane’s birthday,” Alec said in such a rush I almost didn’t understand him.

“Gotta go.” He darted out of the room and left me frozen with my mouth open.

My thumb scrolled through our texts over the last couple of days. Shane hadn’t

dropped any hints and told me he wasn't feeling well today so he was going to bed early.

Shane shouldn't celebrate his birthday alone. Sick or not, my man loved chocolate, and he deserved the best for his birthday.

Two hours later, I was at his door ready to take care of him and celebrate his time on this earth. When he opened the door, he looked wrecked. He had dark circles under his eyes as if he hadn't slept since I'd seen him three days ago; his hair was sticking out in all directions, but his dead eyes scared me the most.

I pulled him into a fierce hug. "I want to take care of you tonight, and you look like you need it." I released him and set the bags down on the island next to the dead flower arrangement I'd made for him. Turning, I noticed, "You got your cast off. That's great. I would've gone with you. Is that what hurts?"

His lack of expression had a zombie-like quality like he was devastated not sick. "Why are you here? I said I was going to bed early."

"I know." A quick scan of his apartment offered no clues to what was going on with him. He'd hung the painting I'd done for him, and my heart leapt with that small token of our relationship. "I heard that today's your birthday, and I brought chocolate truffles from the bakery you love. I don't want you to be alone, so I'm here."

"I don't celebrate our birthday." Shane's expression never changed, and his voice was completely monotone—the AI version of Shane, not human at all.

"Okay." I shrugged. "Chocolate for a weekday pick-me-up." I unloaded the bags.

"Dragon," Shane said.

Ice ran through my veins so fast it forced all the air out of my body as if I'd been punched in the gut. He wasn't...he didn't... "What are you saying?"

"I'm using my safe word to end this. You need to leave." Again, there was no emotion in his voice. No anger or irritation or sorrow or anything.

I approached him like a cornered wild animal, but his eyes stayed fixed on the wall not tracking my movements. Something was terribly wrong.

"Baby," I said softly, standing in front of him and gently folding him into my arms. "What happened?"

Shane remained stiff. Usually, when I called him baby he melted and became boneless.

"Dragon," he repeated.

Knowing that something devastating had Shane in a state of shock made me feel helpless. All I wanted to do was make it better, and he was forcing me to leave. Shane was stubborn. No matter how much he needed me if I pushed him, he would refuse. Letting go of him was like ripping out a part of my heart. It felt final. As if when I dropped my arms, I was admitting that I wasn't what Shane needed.

"I love you. If you don't believe anything else, believe that. It's the truth." I had so much more to say but what was the point.

I don't think there was anything else I could've done to prove he was my everything. It killed me that those three words weren't enough.

I left Shane's apartment wondering if I'd ever see him again. I was afraid love was going to destroy me for the second time.

Tonight was no different from the previous few. I laid awake staring at the exposed pipes in the loft. Shane had texted me the morning after his birthday saying that he was going through some stuff and would call me when he figured it out.

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Shane texted every day, so I held that sliver of hope that it wasn't the end. He wasn't cutting me out, but he wasn't letting me in.

Hope had the power to kill a man.

I had pined for a dead man for five years, but this was worse. I'd known there was no future with Pax, but I'd chosen not to accept that and lived my life as if he might come back.

But Shane wasn't dead, and my choice had been ripped away. My choice would be to help Shane work through whatever was going on and be there for him.

Shane had been so sure I'd leave him. For a long time, I hadn't been unable to commit to a life with him. It never occurred to me that Shane would end us without a reason. It was always a possibility that I fucked it up, and he'd have to walk away for his mental health. But that didn't happen as far as I knew.

I was a new self-aware, going-to-therapy kinda guy. Therapy taught me a lot. I knew when I fucked up. Going to your boyfriend's apartment on his birthday to take care of him was not fucking up, even if he said he was going to bed. I could've tucked him in bed with a kiss on the head and left.

It wasn't about me. But Shane had to choose me. I wasn't what he needed, but he never gave me the chance to try. I'm sure it had to do with his past and probably his birthday. Intentionally holding onto pain had been my specialty. He'd helped me let go of it without disrespecting Pax. If only he'd let me do the same for him.

It'd only been a few days, but it felt like a thousand. Loving a dead person was hard, loving Shane, who was alive and well but didn't love me back, was excruciating.

My phone rang with a call from Shane which was weird, and my heart vaulted into a staccato. Shane texted and only called if he was typing on his computer and didn't want to wait until he was done. But it was after 1 a.m. Nothing good happened after midnight.

"Hello?" I asked with uncertainty.

I heard breathing but nothing else. Shane probably dialed me in his sleep, so I hung up. My heart was in my throat, and I willed myself to calm down. Shane wasn't trying to contact me, and everything was fine. I'd be fine. Eventually.

My phone rang again, and even though I knew he wouldn't be on the other end, I answered.

"Are you butt-dialing me?"

I heard a gasp and then a broken, "Daddy."

I was out of bed, throwing on clothes in a frenzy. "Where are you? I'm coming to get you." All I heard was gasping. He sounded like he was in the midst of an epic panic attack. "Hang on, let me check your location." He was at Branson Financial. "Are you in your office?"

I knew he was trying to answer and couldn't. "It's okay, baby. I'm coming. Stay with me." My car was in the garage a block away, but putting him in a rideshare car was unacceptable.

I talked nonstop to give him something else to focus on. We'd talked about his panic

attacks, and he said his brain gets stuck in a downward spiral and can't get out.

Listening to Shane struggle to breathe made my ears ring. The helplessness clawed my insides out until I was a hollow shell. It dawned on me that this is how Shane must've felt after whatever set him off. The inability to function like a normal person.

In my misguided effort to distract Shane, I realized I'd been telling him stories about Unframed Art and Alec, but Pax slipped in as well. I might as well break up with myself.

"I'm sorry. I'm not handling this well, and I'm sure the last thing you want to hear is my past with Pax. You can kick my ass when I get there."

The drive was taking forever, and I was breaking all kinds of traffic laws. There was no need to stop for red lights when I was the only guy at the intersection.

"I...like...it." Shane wheezed and three words had never sounded so beautiful to me. He had enough breath to talk, and that eased the vise around my heart.

"I'm almost there, Pretty Boy. You want more stories?"

Shane grunted a yes and then found his voice. "Tell me about when you were a kid."

I launched into a story about sneaking out, building a fort in our adjoining backyards, and falling asleep. Our parents couldn't find us, and Pax's dad built a fence a few weeks later. I drove around the side of Shane's building scoping out the truck entrance. I thanked God, karma, and whoever listened that it was open.

I found Shane crammed under his desk, blinking up at me with soul-dead eyes. "I got you, baby. I'm here." I crouched down and he willingly came into my arms. Settling him on my lap in his chair, I held him tight. "Breathe with me."

I placed his hand over my chest and laid my hand over his heart.

Shane tried to get as close to me as possible as if he wanted to crawl inside my chest for comfort. I brought my feet up on the desk with my knees bent, so I created a sort of cradle with my body.

“Can I get your meds or anything else?” I asked.

Shane shook his head and buried his face in my throat, inhaling deeply. We held each other for so long, my legs cramped, and my ass fell asleep but I wasn't letting him go.

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His breathing had regulated a while ago. I didn't want to wreck the moment, but I couldn't pretend he was fine and move on.

"Baby, whatever this is, you can't live like this." I rubbed my cheek against his hair.

"I know. I'm so sorry." His voice cracked. "I wanted to figure this out first and put it behind me. It's almost over. I promise."

My pulse kicked up with that cryptic promise. Not knowing if I was going to get the Shane that begged me not to leave him while orgasming or the Shane that pushed me away when he needed me most nearly broke me.

I held Shane, binding myself to him, so he'd never let go.

Chapter forty-two

Shane

"About another hour," I said, watching Cole's reaction.

Cole drove with a wary expression. He'd agreed to come with me today without questions, but I wondered if he regretted it now. I hadn't given him any information because I was afraid he wouldn't agree if he knew the details. Most likely, I was projecting my fears onto him.

Today, I'd tell Cole everything and find out if he'd love all of me. Either way, I had to forge a new life for myself. Cole had no idea what had happened, and he should

hear it from me.

Our birthday and the call from my mother set off a chain of events that I'd never seen coming. There weren't words that conveyed my regret over using my safe word and obligating Cole to leave. If he were a lesser man, he would have argued. But he honored my cowardly demand and left.

Last night, I'd said the one word that I'd hoped would bring him to me. And it did. There was no guarantee he would stay with me, but I had to stop living in fear. I needed to reclaim my life as mine and live it according to what I wanted.

"Are you planning my murder and making me drive to my own body dumpsite?" Cole's joke landed flat.

"Not today," I said in a falsely cheery, sing-song voice. "Thank you for dropping everything for me. Again. I hate that you have to do that for me. I'm going to try to be better."

Cole took my hand and squeezed. "I was serious when I said I do anything for you. I meant it, but I would like to know where we're going."

"The town I grew up in is about seventy-five miles north of Manhattan," I explained. "I have so much to tell you, but I want to wait until we get there. I'm afraid if I start talking, I won't actually make it there. I know I'm asking too much from you." I laced our fingers together, wondering if he would think differently of me.

"A couple hours and a car ride isn't too much to ask, and although I'd love to see where you grew up, it seems like it doesn't hold good memories." He brought our joined hands to his lips and kissed the back of mine.

"It wasn't all bad, not when I was young. If I tell you some good things, will you wait

to ask me questions until we get there?” Cole reluctantly nodded, and I took a deep breath and started my story. “I had a Paxton growing up; his name was Shep. We did everything together, and I mean everything. He was my best friend and more.” I ignored the curious glance from Cole.

“He had the best sense of humor, and everyone loved him. He made everyone laugh, and he also had the biggest heart. I was the weird kid with my nose stuck in a book, but he always included me, even when his friends made fun of him. He never cared that I had a hard time making friends or that I’d rather read than talk to people.

“Kids bullied him because of how close we were. I offered to pretend we weren’t friends at school so neither of us would have to hear the taunts and cruel things the kids said. But he told me that he would never be friends with anyone who wasn’t friends with me.

“He was brilliant. A whiz with numbers like me,” I said, and Cole opened his mouth to speak but didn’t.

I appreciated his restraint and leaned over to kiss him. When he turned his head, our lips connected for a brief moment.

For the next forty-five minutes, I regaled Cole with my adventures with Shep and all the ways we were different and the same.

By the time we hit the city limits, I was shaking and thankful I hadn’t eaten more. I would’ve vomited all over myself or Cole’s car.

“Baby, you don’t have to do this.” Cole’s concern radiated through the car.

I pointed ahead to the cemetery with a jumble of nerves. I should have told him about this instead of blindsiding him, but hearing something and seeing it are two different

things.

Cole's jaw flexed, and his knuckles turned white on the steering wheel. I'm sure he had an inkling that this was inevitable. I spoke of Shep in the past tense.

We exited the car, and I clung to his solid arm for support. I zigzagged through the markers; this was my second trip here since my therapist told my parents to stop forcing me to come.

I stopped in front of the grave. The left side was engraved with:

Shepard Reynolds

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1999-2010

Beloved son, brother, friend

Our angel

The right side was engraved:

Shane Reynolds

1999-

Cole cursed and his arms wrapped around me, preventing me from falling to my knees.

“I asked my parents to put twin on it.” Cole released me as I traced my fingers over Shep’s inscription. “They said no. They blamed me. I heard them say they wished it was me who died. I think it’s the only thing we’ve agreed on since it happened.”

Nothing accurately expressed the pain of losing my twin, my literal other half, but a decade and a half had numbed the pain to a dull ache.

“Pretty Boy, baby.” Cole tucked me into his body, and we sank down on the leaves and long grass. “Never again say it should’ve been you. I am so thankful you are here with me.” His lips pressed to the back of my head.

“A couple weeks before Shep was hit by a car, he told me he was going to be a CEO

or CFO and make tons of money, so we could live on a beach where he'd support me because I'd be a poor librarian or a writer." A humorless laugh escaped his lips. "Through therapy, I've realized that I'd adopted his goals. We were both whizzes with numbers, but I loved books more. The boy in me thought I could win back my parents' love if I was more like Shep. I got lost along the way.

"It was my fault. The day he was killed, the new book in the dragon series we'd been reading had just been released. They were the only books he'd read with me. We were going to sneak to the bookstore after school to buy it, but I wanted to stay after school for chess club. A nerd activity that Shep wouldn't do with me. I convinced Shep to go without me, so I'd have it when I got home. He didn't care, but I begged him to go get it for me." The confession felt foreign on my lips as if it belonged to someone else.

Someone who wouldn't recklessly send their twin to his death. Years later, I still had a hard time letting go of that guilt.

"That's the dragon in your tattoo," Cole surmised and bent his knees like last night, cocooning me.

I nodded and rested my head back on his shoulder. "Shep loved dragons because they're brave and resourceful. I loved them because they symbolized intellect and protection. I wanted him over my heart, and I loved the triquetra as a symbol of endless family love. It has the three swirls for me, Shep, and Sara."

Cole squeezed me tight and hummed an appreciation for the symbols. "What the fuck is that about." He gestured to my name on the stone. "That is next level crazy. Your name is on a grave. It's hard for me to look at. Why? How could they do that?"

I lifted one shoulder. "My parents are fucked up. They could not fathom a life where I got older and wouldn't be with Shep. I think they assumed I'd die alone, and this was

their way of keeping us together. Or they're dicks. Honestly, it's a tough call.

"They're the reason I don't celebrate our birthday. It was a day of mourning in our house. My mother called me on our birthday. She always gets drunk, and calls me to cry about missing Shep, and calls me by his name. My father called right before you came over, to cuss me out for upsetting Mom on his birthday. It's not the day I was born too—it's his."

"I'm so sorry they hurt you," Cole murmured in my ear.

Hope spread in my chest that he didn't see me as too damaged.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I never believed you could love me, and I assumed you would discard me like my parents. The grief screwed up the wires in my head. I'm working on my skewed perception of things."

"You've been through so much. Your twin was taken from you, and your parents abandoned you to their grief. They forced their grief on you. No one deserves that."

I shivered, and Cole held me tighter. I had a lifetime of scars that hadn't healed yet.

"I love you and I hope you're my future," Cole said, his voice breaking with emotion.

"I should tell you the extent of my depression. I was hospitalized the summer after he died. My parents couldn't bear the pain of seeing Shep's things around the house, so they threw everything in his room, our room. And if I tried to organize it, they'd freak out. I had to live in the chaos. Not only that, but seeing me reminded them of him, so they often sent me to my room.

"Remember I told you about not going to summer camp and having an epic meltdown. It was going to be my escape, but they were trapping me in the house with

his things all summer. I went out to our firepit and started burning his things. It's how I burned my leg." I lifted my pant leg to expose my beautiful tattoo that covered my scar.

"You're so strong." Cole kissed my head. "I'm so in awe of you."

"I'm a goddamn mess. I've been hospitalized twice, and you know how bad my anxiety gets. I'm on a ridiculous amount of medication. You need to know what you're getting into with me. I'm not the pretty boy you think I am." I tried to keep the resentment out of my voice.

"Are you trying to scare me away?" He nuzzled beneath my jacket and bit my neck. "I know exactly why I'm in love with you. I don't care about your hospitalizations or your medication. The meds aren't new info. The hospital gave me the rundown when they discharged you. It's why I went to your apartment. I didn't give a fuck if you had your computer or clothes. If I had my way, you would have been in my bed naked or wearing my clothes."

"But I use you to manage my anxiety," I argued with him because I was an asshole and had to own up to my issues.

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“No. I give you a part of myself to help you with your need to shut your brain off, and in return, you give me a part of yourself, so I can feel in control. We have symbiotic needs. We’re lucky like that.” He squeezed me tighter. “It’s your heart I love. Your strength, sense of humor, and your big ole,” he paused, and I elbowed him, “brain. What did you think I’d say? Your cock? Don’t worry, Pretty Boy, it’s big, and I love it too.”

“I love you,” I blurted out in horror and relief. “I wanted to say it better than this.” I waved my arm at the cemetery. “But I’m so in love with you, it scares me into wanting to run and hide.”

I shouldn’t have doubted him. I was afraid my pain and issues might overwhelm him, and he’d have to walk away. I turned in Cole’s lap to straddle him. His face was lit with a thousand suns.

“Oh, Pretty Boy, I love you. I will follow you or chase you to the ends of the earth. Whichever you need.”

Our lips met in a frenzied passion.

I could kiss this man until the end of time. But I pulled back. “Are we going to be okay?”

“I’m taking you home now, so you can be in my bed tonight. You’re mine, Shane Reynolds, and I’m not letting you run or hide anymore—you’re stuck with me.”

I held his face in both my hands for one more kiss or five more or a hundred more

kisses. For the first time in forever, hope didn't hurt. I believed Cole.

Chapter forty-three

Cole

I stood in Shane's doorway and watched his fingers fly over his keyboard while I vowed to give him everything his family had not.

"Brought you dinner," I said, holding up the bag as I crossed his office.

His wild-eyed terror was not the reaction I was expecting.

He'd been working like a fiend with vague promises that once his project was complete, it'd be over. He came home to me every night, but I was worried about him. He said for confidentiality reasons he couldn't discuss it, which I understood. But my priority was him.

A barrier had been lifted after Shane told me about Shep. He started to trust my love for him. I hated his parents but also felt sorry for them. In their grief, they'd lost both sons. One in a tragic hit and run, and one they forced away. They missed out on being a part of Shane's life. My pretty boy had just wanted his parents' love and attention, not their pain and anger.

"Shit," He cursed, fingers pausing. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck." He resumed his frantic typing. "Cole," he kept his voice low, "shit is about to go down. I never wanted you involved in this but you're here. I need you to trust me." His soulful brown eyes begged me for an instant, then focused on the computer screen. "No matter what I say, I love you. I need you to keep whoever comes into this office in here for a minimum of five minutes. They can't leave or use their phone. Use your charm, pick a fight, or even bodily restrain them. Do you understand me?" His voice was

commanding in a way he'd never used with me.

I wanted to ask more questions, but my father burst through the door. "Shane, my boy, what are you working on so late? Go home, enjoy the night with..." My father saw me, and his jovial facade collapsed. He'd tried to sound casual, but his perfectly pressed tie was askew. My father was...worried? Upset? Furious? "Cole, you are not allowed in the building. What are you doing here?" He turned to face Shane. "Did you let him in here?"

Shane never paused his typing. "You know my tattoo artist?"

This was not how I expected our night to go, but I trusted Shane completely.

"I'm calling security." My father reached for his phone and Shane coughed.

I grabbed his phone, and his surprise allowed me to toss it behind Shane's desk. "Why am I not allowed in this building? What do you think I'm going to do?"

"You ungrateful son of a bitch! You dare come here and question me as if you don't break in and distract everyone." My father straightened to his full height, and I hadn't realized how much bigger I was than him.

"I'm not bothering anyone but you," I countered.

I'd fight with my father forever if Shane needed it.

"Him, you're disturbing him."

"You just told him to go home."

"Shane, stop what you're doing. Right now," my father bellowed, but Shane didn't

comply.

My impeccable father's usual slicked-back hair stuck out on the sides. He looked unhinged.

"I'm surprised you aren't trying to reward him for all his hard work. You love a company guy who puts in the extra hours like Pax," I taunted him, afraid he'd try to physically stop Shane.

"What do you know?" my father demanded. "I know you sold Paxton's stock a couple of weeks ago. Did he tell you to do it?" He pointed an accusatory finger at Shane.

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“Why would he do that?” I asked, dumbfounded.

My mind raced back to Shane’s relief that I’d sold my shares and his reaction to finding Pax’s paperwork.

“Shane,” my father charged his desk, and I put my body in front of him, “if you stop what you’re doing and never see my son again, then the Chief Data Officer position is yours.”

My heart fell out of my ass. The job offer represented all of Shane’s ambitions and aspirations; he couldn’t turn it down. The situation felt like history repeating itself, but I wouldn’t stand in Shane’s way.

There had to be more going on than this odd confrontation, and I had faith in Shane.

“Interesting,” Shane said, still typing as if the keyboard was on fire. “What would my compensation package look like?”

“We can discuss that. I’ll go to my office to get the contract.” My father smiled as if he’d won.

Shane tilted his head but wouldn’t look at me. “I need more details before I sign anything.”

“Sure, sure,” my smug father agreed. “Just stop your current project, and we can sit right here and review the new position.”

“Great.” Shane didn’t pause his fingers. “I’m just closing out the documents, and I can’t wait to hear your offer.”

I stepped back, unsure how to play my part.

“Cole, stay a minute. I need to pay you for dinner,” Shane said, as his eyes flicked to mine. His voice was devoid of emotion, but his eyes told me everything I needed to know.

“You should’ve known better than to try to seduce Paxton’s replacement.” My dad’s words were designed to hit me below the belt. “I’ll pay the errand boy.” My father chuckled, taking out his wallet.

Shane remained silent, and my hand accepted the hundred-dollar bill from my father. I stared at the man who shared my DNA yet still couldn’t believe this narcissist was my father.

Shane pushed his chair back, blinking as if he’d emerged from a doomsday bunker. Slowly, a smile split his face. With his gorgeous brown bedroom eyes on me, he said, “That won’t be necessary.” He walked to me and plucked the money from my fingers and handed it to my father. “Donald, I resign.”

“What did you do?” Donald seethed.

“I prepared my presentation for the board early. I was finally able to balance our accounts with our clients’ assets. I took the liberty of sending it to the board of directors and the Treasury Department. I included the OFAC list and documentation of Branson Financials’ process to whitewash the banned clients on the list from our accounts. I assume you don’t want me to stay the required thirty days’ notice.”

I never saw my father’s punch coming until my head snapped back. “Did you put him

up to this?”

Rubbing my jaw, I said, “The first time in my life you decide to give me credit for something, and I don’t deserve it. I have no idea what any of that means. Shane has never talked to me about work. Good luck with that.” Whatever an O-fact list was, it sounded bad.

The last shred of control my father had snapped as he vowed to take everything from me.

“I have something you can never take from me, father.” I said “father” as if it were toxic in my mouth. “Something you’ll never have.” My father sneered so I enlightened him. “Love.”

He turned to Shane. “I will make sure you never work in finance again.”

Shane grinned, tugging me out of the office. “That’s okay. I’ve got a backup plan. I’m going to try a career as a singer.”

I threw my arm around Shane, and he steered me away from the elevators toward the stairs.

“We’re walking down seventeen flights of stairs?”

“No, we’re walking down five flights, and hopefully, Richard will use his key to the freight elevator for us. Unless you want to try to get past security.”

I wasn’t sure if I was more impressed that Shane personally knew the guy with a key to the freight elevator or that he’d just given my father an aneurysm.

“Do I want to know what just happened?” I asked as we jogged down the stairs.

“Your father did some very illegal things. There was an alert put on the accounts in question, so I had to write code to gain back-channel access. If your father left or used his phone, he’d crash the server, he’s done it in the past. If that had happened, I’d have been fired, and he’d keep on breaking the law,” Shane said matter-of-factly as if it weren’t a big deal.

“What’s an O-fact list?”

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“It stands for Office of Foreign Assets Control, OFAC. Your dad is laundering money.”

A tremendous sense of relief washed over me, my man could’ve been targeted by ruthless thugs or worse. Once again, my dad proved to be a piece of shit. Shane apologized all the way to the loft for involving me in the takedown of Branson Financial. I’d let him make it up to me naked.

“Is it vain to tell you I love the fact that you’re infatuated with me, and I’m your muse?” Shane asked, staring at the paintings of himself as I stroked his semierect cock after a frenzied first round of sex.

“You might feel differently if I hang them around our loft when we entertain.”

On the ride to the loft, two very important things happened. Sara called, and Shane had word-vomited everything about Branson Financial, our trip to the cemetery, and our news. He’d been nervous and ultimately relieved when Sara congratulated him and us. I felt privy to hear all the fucked-up details they shared about their parents. Some people should never ever have children. Sara wasn’t my biggest fan, but she wanted Shane to be happy, and I’d spend the rest of my life making sure that happened. Without a doubt, Sara had strong-armed a broken Shane through life, and I was immensely grateful.

The second big thing was that Shane had agreed to move in with me. My second chance at love felt destined.

“Our loft,” he whispered and melted into me. “I was thinking.” He twisted, which

removed his cock from my hand, and I was not responsible for the growl that erupted from my throat. “Don’t act like I stole your favorite toy.” He tried to be stern, but his smile conveyed how much he liked my possessive side.

“It is one of my favorite things.” I reached for him. “But it’s definitely not a toy, more like a gift that keeps on giving.”

My words caused Shane to flush the pretty pink I loved.

“I promise you’ll have full access to any part of me, but before you put me in a sex coma, I...” Shane inhaled to steady himself, “you love me.”

I wanted to tell him all the things about him that I loved, but those words were difficult for him, so I waited, taking both his hands in mine.

“I never imagined someone could love me the way you do. It’s hard to believe in something I didn’t experience. I had a Shep-sized hole in me my entire life. I realized there would always be a hole, an empty ache like you have with Paxton. But we have a choice on how to fill it, we can channel despair and pain or good memories and love into the void. You help me fill it with love and happiness, and I hope I do the same for you.” He leaned in for a kiss.

“I finally understand what happiness feels like,” he said, and my heart exploded with joy.

“I’ve never been someone’s first priority. But you. You were there for me every time I needed you. When I didn’t deserve it. When I pushed you away. You are always willing to drop everything for me.”

“Pretty Boy, it’s not a hardship.” I couldn’t express in words my feelings the way he had. My heart felt bigger than the room will how his words filled me up. Since I

didn't have the words, I'd have to show him. "I'd keep you naked in my bed forever if you'd let me. We've only scratched the surface of the things I want to do to your body," I said, ready to start doing those things now.

"These feelings defy logic and reason," Shane said. "I'm not worried I'll annoy you with my overthinking or overplanning or excessive spreadsheets. You make me feel safe and protected, which has been absent in my life. I promise to work every day to deserve that love." He leaned in to kiss me, but I eased him back.

"You showed me that my heart could grow to accept love and still honor Pax. I think you're the only person on earth who could love me and my past without feeling threatened or jealous. Pax and I assumed so many things about each other because we'd known each other so long. I want to spend every day until I die understanding how your big, beautiful brain works. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you. And I'm honored that you chose me. You chose a life with me over an offer that was hard to turn down. Thank you." I ran my tongue along his jaw.

"I hated that I couldn't tell your father to go to hell as soon as he started insulting you. I know it hurt you to think I'd take the job with him. Now and forever, I'll always choose you. I love you." Shane's brown eyes slayed me.

"Say it again," I whispered. I would never tire of hearing it, and part of me still couldn't believe it.

"I," Shane kissed me, "love," another kiss, "you." He sighed into my mouth. "We're made for each other." Shane molded his body against mine.

"I will always love you." I rolled him under me. "You're in charge of all the spreadsheets, and I'll be in charge of planning all the kinky activities," I said and let our bodies do the talking.

“I think I’m addicted to you,” Shane moaned into my mouth.

“It’s an addiction I intend to fill every day. Several times a day. Maybe I’ll sell Unframed Art and make fucking you my full-time job.” I rocked so our hard cocks slid together.

“Yes. Do that.” Shane created more friction between us. “Fuck me, Cole, please.”

“Let’s try something new. Do you want to fuck your daddy?” I loved how quickly his surprise morphed into hunger. “Pretty boy, we are just getting started. I have so much more to teach you.”

Epilogue

Shane

A Few years later

“Keep going,” I said as my husband closed the book he’d been reading to us.

Cole whispered, “I lost half my audience,” as he motioned to our son, asleep on my chest.

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“Shep loves your voice. We should record your voice reading so we can play it in the middle of the night.” I was still in awe of our infant despite the fact that he did not sleep at night. “And the waves. Those calm him too. You can read while the tide comes in, and maybe that will lull him back to sleep.”

“Little man takes after his da.” Cole playfully tugged my hair and then caressed Shep’s head.

We decided Cole would be called “Papa,” and I’d be “Da” after my Irish heritage. Daddy was taken, and neither of us wanted our son to call us that.

“Hmmm, I do love listening to you read, and waves are objectively soothing.” We’d bought an oceanfront house on Long Island to honor my brother Shep and complete our dream for a family. “I’d love to stay here all day.” I melted into Cole and the cushions.

We’d converted the sunroom facing the ocean into a library. After reclaiming my life for myself, I’d begun devouring books. Someday, maybe I’d write one, but for now, my focus was on my son and my husband.

Cole linked our fingers on Shep’s naked back. The skin-to-skin contact was important for him. “I was thinking we should’ve saved ourselves the headache of picking out a couch for this room and just put a bed in here.”

“You love this room too, don’t act like you don’t.” I undermined my stern tone by tipping my head up for a kiss.

Cole still made my heart flutter when he kissed me. We'd overcome so much personal trauma to be together and settle into marital and baby bliss. I gave up trying to achieve my twin's dreams. I started living for myself and Cole.

We were married on a whim after a charity event at The Artistic Edge benefiting the organization we volunteered at, The Q Solutions. Cole had auctioned off some of his paintings to raise money. He'd proposed and all of our family and friends were there, so Alec had officiated the ceremony for us.

The Q Solutions had given us more than we'd ever repay with our volunteer hours. One of the clients had struggled with what to do about her unwanted pregnancy. After many meetings and sessions with the center's social worker, she'd asked us to adopt her son. It was the second time I'd seen Cole cry; the third when Shep was placed in his arms. I'd actually suggested we name him Paxton, but Cole didn't feel comfortable with someday explaining the baby's namesake. But Shep would know about his uncles, Shep and Paxton, and how their untimely passing brought his dads together.

We'd known we wanted a place in the city, close to work, and the loft wasn't big enough for a family. I'd suggested we move into the Greenwich apartment to honor Paxton's dream of a family with Cole. That was the first time I saw Cole cry.

Ultimately, we sold that apartment for a place in Lennox Hill. Paxton had purchased the place in Greenwich for its proximity to Branson Financial. Our place was closer to Unframed Art, and Cole used half of the loft to paint.

I'd converted the other half into my office space. Everything had fallen into place after I'd quit Branson Financial. Whistleblowing on their OFAC violations was the last thing holding me down. I finished Paxton's work to expose Donald, and he was sentenced to fifteen years in jail. Donald assumed he'd get off with a hefty fine, but the evidence I'd put together with Pax's help sealed his fate.

When I told Cole I wanted to open a consulting firm to help small businesses operate efficiently, he'd offered me the money he'd made selling Paxton's shares of Branson Financial. But I'd taken on an acquaintance of Madyson's husband as a client, and he paid me an exorbitant amount of money.

The client was an asshole, so I charged him an exorbitant fee. He paid without complaint and bragged to his friends how he'd found the best service money could buy. His friends had a competition with each other to obtain the best products and services while simultaneously spending the most money. I opened my consulting firm without using any of my personal resources or Cole's.

All the heartache and trauma led us to our beach house with a baby.

"I'm so in love with you," I said.

Cole brushed my hair back from my forehead. "Are you talking to me or our son?" His lips turned up in a smirk.

Our cat yawned and stretched on the back of the couch. His look made it clear that we'd interrupted his nap. We'd named him "Misha" but Cole said we should've named him "King" because he ruled the house. Cole scratched his ears, and I angled my head to look at him while I answered his question.

"You and your ego, but I'll never leave this guy out." I shifted Shep as he started to fuss.

"My ego has taken a beating. Usually, around 3 a.m. when I can't keep my eyes open, but the love of our life thinks it's time to exercise." He scrubbed his hand over his gorgeous green eyes.

Our pediatrician had told us babies often get days and nights mixed up, and crying is

their only form of exercise, so we should let him cry a bit every day.

I struggled with that. Yesterday, I made it five minutes before I picked him up.

“I can try to restore your ego. If Shep will stay asleep when I put him in the crib, I’d love to have some time with my daddy.” I wagged my eyebrows at him, but it had the opposite effect I’d been going for.

Cole clenched his jaw and raked a hand through his hair.

“You okay, Pretty Boy?” he asked.

I found the words to soothe his concern. “I’m fine. I was reading that new parents need to get in the habit of napping when the baby sleeps to keep up their energy and be at their best for the baby.” I assured him, “But I’m not tired, so I thought we’d take advantage of some alone time.”

We’d been so focused on Shep that I missed the sexual connection with Cole.

The capacity for the human heart to experience love was infinite, and I still couldn’t believe my life. We were living a fairytale life so far from anything I’d been capable of dreaming. Cole had been correct when he’d said our needs were symbiotic, and it had allowed me to relinquish any lingering anxiety and guilt that I wasn’t enough for him. Our deep connection and sense of rightness bled into all aspects of our life.

“In that case,” Cole tugged at the O-ring on my necklace, “I’m all in.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:27 am

After our wedding, he'd asked our friend, Von, to design us black, titanium eternity necklaces in place of wedding rings. Mine had the added submissive O-ring, and it was the perfect way to symbolize our relationship. I never wanted him to cover Paxton's initials with another ring, and this way our love was always on display.

Lust replaced his concern, and my body instantly reacted. "Dammit," I breathed out. "If our angel doesn't sleep, I'm going to be in serious pain." Cole's dick hardened under my head. "And you too for that matter."

"If he doesn't keep sleeping, we might start referring to him as 'our little devil.'" Cole bent as if to kiss me again but thought better of it. "If I touch you now, I can't be responsible for inappropriate actions in front of our son." He hefted me into a sitting position with a hand pressing Shep closer to me. "Go put him down, and I'll meet you in the bedroom. But keep Misha out. He judges me."

"It's your fault for giving him treats after we have sex. You think he's judging, but he just wants a snack," I whisper-yelled, walking down the hall.

Cole caught up to us and slapped my ass. His hand branded me, promising more as it slid down to cup my ass with a squeeze. Anticipation strummed through my body, creating an ache only Cole could fill. Our sessions were no longer about need; they were an extension of our carnal desire to pleasure each other.

"Don't make me wait," Cole growled.

"Yes, Daddy."
