



Turning Tides (The Anchor #1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Shane Taggart knows how lucky he is.

After a lifetime of scrimping, saving, and barely getting by, he struck it rich with a winning lottery ticket. Now he owns a successful bar called The Anchor, helps his mom with her women's shelter, sent his youngest brother on a trip around the world, and works closely with his middle brother to help out in the local community without bankrupting himself. The only thing missing in his life is a bit of romance. But it's hard to find guys into doing things the way he likes best.

Archer Kinsman had it all.

He opened the tattoo shop of his dreams with his best friend, Clayton. Things were going great, and they were finally making real money. Then came the morning Archer woke up to empty bank accounts and a missing best friend. Forced to close up shop, Archer moves in with his brother, Cyrus, and his husband. It's cramped, but it's just until he gets back on his feet. It can't take too long, right?

The tides turn when Shane and Archer meet.

Archer is everything Shane is looking for. He's easy to be around, and he's more than willing to top, despite their size difference. Even if their chemistry wasn't off the charts, Shane would still want to help him get his life back on track.

Soon, Archer is living above The Anchor, and getting his business up and running again. But there's still one big problem—Archer's brother, Cyrus, is protective of him, especially after what he went through with Clayton.

Cyrus is also Shane's best friend.

Shane is willing to risk it all for Archer. His friendship, his business, even his heart. Will he lose everything or will luck smile on him twice in a lifetime?

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Chapter 1

Shane

Six years ago I'd been digging in my couch for loose change to buy shitty ramen. My shitty job didn't pay the bills and when I could afford gas, I drove for Uber, or sometimes DoorDash. My brothers weren't much better off than me. Kieran's student loans were choking the life out of him, and most of the time we didn't know where Brodie was.

Of all the stupid things that could have turned our lives around, it was a lottery ticket. If it had been hard work, we'd have been millionaires a million times over. But that's not how life worked. It was blind luck. A lucky whim. A gut feeling.

It wasn't enough that I'd never have to work again, but it was a scary big amount of money. The first thing I did when the money hit my account was to call my brothers. I wanted to make their lives better too. The Taggart family had been through hell and the universe had decided to make good on some debt it owed.

Growing up, we'd all been told we had college funds. A windfall from our dad's parents when they passed that had been placed in trust. Only, Dad spent it all before we saw a dime. He lost the house too and that's when Mom moved us three boys into a single bedroom apartment she could barely afford.

She worked her ass off to get us through high school. Kieran went to college for a fancy accounting degree. I remembered him saying that the world was always in need of people to do taxes. I think he had a premonition. Maybe he knew that he'd be my

first call when those lottery numbers flashed up on the screen.

Kieran was now debt-free. Brodie was traveling the world like he'd always dreamed about. And as for Mom... well, I'd tried to get her to retire. I bought her a nice house with a white picket fence and everything. I set her up with a monthly stipend so she'd never have to worry about food or bills. She kept her job as a receptionist for a while, but when a coworker needed a place to stay after leaving her abusive husband, Mom asked her to move in until she got on her feet. Four years later, Mom was running a women's shelter.

And me? I bought a house. Nothing fancy. Nothing grand. I didn't want or need much space. I was single and didn't need a huge house to rattle around in all by myself. My best purchase, though, was a bar—The Anchor. Kieran liked to razz me for the name, since the ocean was a short eight-hour drive away. But it was my anchor. My safe place.

Unlocking the back door, I went up to the now empty apartment that was above the bar. When I'd first bought the building, the bar was in great shape, but the upstairs had been used as a makeshift drug den. The whole upstairs had been gutted and redone. I'd had tenants in it over the years, most recently Mickey Underwood, one of my bartenders. Just like my mom, I couldn't resist someone who needed help. I'd charged him a pittance for rent which I funneled to my mom for her shelter.

Kieran's heavy footsteps followed me into the space. "I saw you come up. Hey, it looks better than the last time I saw it up here."

"Yeah, Mickey did a great job fixing the place up while he stayed here. Mostly new paint and stuff, but when he moved out, I had the floors replaced. "

"You know you could rent this out for a mint, right? It's a prime location, and even though it's above a bar, there's people who work nights and wouldn't notice. And

downstairs is quiet all day.”

“I know, but I like to keep it for emergencies.”

“You mean rescues.” Kieran shook his head. “You’re as bad as Mom.”

“I should be so lucky to be half the person she is. So should you.”

“Just don’t forget to look after yourself.”

I rolled my eyes. Kieran was a pain in the ass, but he was a well-meaning pain in the ass. He served not as my conscience, but my wallet. Clutching the purse strings and keeping me from giving all my money away. Not that I would, but... okay, I might. Not on purpose, but it was easy for me to see things I could fix with a little bit of money. I knew how hard it was to be hungry and cold and worried all the time. I couldn’t fix their whole lives for them, but sometimes I could make it a little better. Kieran kept me from going overboard.

“What brings you by, Kieran?”

“I can’t drop in to say hello?”

I scoffed. “No, actually. You’ve never been a man subject to his whims.” I glanced at him from the corner of my eye and saw his mouth twitch with amusement. Busted. “Spill.”

“Okay, so I was looking at the books and you told me to let you know when your investments had reached a certain point. Well, they have. And then some. I’ve sent you an email with the details and the numbers.”

I pulled my phone out and checked right then and there. It was a damn good thing the

place was furnished because I dropped down onto the couch. “How’d you pull that off?”

The thing about money was that it was easier to make when you had money to begin with. Kieran liked to gamble, but instead of slot machines or cards at the casino, Kieran played the stock market. I’d given him an initial investment of ten grand and told him to come see me when he turned it into a hundred.

“You did all this legally, right?” I stared at the reports he’d sent detailing every exchange, every loss, every gain. The gains were impressive.

“You’re an idiot. Of course it’s all legal.” Kieran sat next to me on the couch and draped an arm over my shoulder. I might be his big brother, but Kieran looked out for me. “What are you going to do with it?”

“I’m going to give you another ten grand and make you do it all over again, first of all.”

Kieran laughed. “I knew you’d say that, so I’ve already started over. That’s what’s left after I took ten grand off the top. So what are you going to do with it?”

Kieran knew I wasn’t making money just to have it. That I wasn’t looking to hoard as much cash as possible to sit on it like some money-loving lizard.

“Mom’s all set at the shelter. I might talk to Jonah Bennett.”

“Who?”

Sometimes I forgot that Kieran didn’t know half the people I knew. One of the virtues of being a bar owner, you ended up knowing just about everyone.

“He’s a teacher at the high school. He and his boyfriend are. Maybe there’s a kid who needs a scholarship, or maybe one of their programs could use a boost.” I scratched my neck and gave the number one final look before closing the email and putting my phone away. “I haven’t decided yet. Do you have any ideas?”

“Nope. Just advice. If you donate to a registered charity, get a receipt and I can claim it on your taxes. ”

“Such a good man. So full of heart.” I shoved him playfully. “Come downstairs with me. I’ll buy you a drink.”

Tucking my phone away, I ushered Kieran out of the apartment and down into the bar.

We were supposed to be closed and empty, but when we walked into the kitchen, I saw Cyrus already hard at work. He had earbuds in and a bandana tied around his head, hiding a hair net. When he saw Kieran and me, he popped an earbud out.

“You’re here early.”

“I didn’t clock in. I just needed to cut things before I cut a bitch.” Cyrus made a slashing motion with the knife he held.

Kieran made a beeline for the front of the bar, leaving me to deal with Cyrus.

“How about you put the sharp object down and tell me who shit in your cornflakes.”

“My brother Archer is staying with Marshall and me. Which is fine. It’s great. I love having Archer around; he’s been through some shit lately and I’m happy to help him out. But our place has one bedroom, so he’s on our couch, making my sex life take a nose dive. I try not to let it bother me, you know, ‘cause family is family and all that

shit, right? But...” Cyrus set the knife down and braced himself against the counter. “I haven’t gotten laid in weeks, Shane. Weeks.”

Unable to stop myself, I laughed. Cyrus cut me a dirty look, but I walked over and clapped him on the shoulder. “Why don’t you and Marshall rent a hotel for a night or two? Order room service.”

“Archer will feel guilty that he’s running us out of our own home.”

“So tell him it’s the anniversary of your first date or tell him you won it in a raffle.”

Cyrus turned his head and looked at me. “You want me to lie?”

“What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him. ”

“I’d feel bad about lying to him, though. He just needs to get back on his feet. He’s looking into loans to get a new tattoo shop open.”

“He does tattoos?”

“He did all mine. He’s been drawing since he could hold a crayon. He did the roses on my leg.”

“Those are his work? Shit, maybe I’ll get some new ink once he’s up and running.”

I’d been getting tattoos since I was sixteen and had saved enough for a cheap flash piece. There was a reason why sixteen year-olds weren’t allowed to get tattoos, but I’d had an impressive beard for a kid my age. For my eighteenth birthday, I’d gotten the tattoo covered up.

“He’s talented.”

“Yeah, too bad his business partner took him for all he was worth. Archer woke up one day and Clayton had cleaned out his half of the shop and left. No forwarding address, no nothing. Archer went to the cops after a few days when no one had heard from him and filed a missing person’s report. But nothing nefarious had gone on, unless you count the fact that Clayton had cleaned out the business account and skipped town.” Cyrus clenched his fists.

“Come have a drink with Kieran and me. I need input on something.” Picking Cyrus’s brain about people or organizations in need was a good excuse to get him out of the kitchen. Steering him out of there to get him away from sharp things, I sat him down at the bar and poured him a beer.

Drinking on the clock wasn’t something I condoned, but he wasn’t on the clock yet and it was only one beer.

“Can the cops do anything?” I asked.

Kieran turned his attention to the conversation, tucking his phone away. To Kieran I said, “Cyrus’s little brother’s business partner took off with their cash. ”

Kieran let out a low whistle. “That sucks.”

“The cops said to get the courts involved in sorting the mess out. Because it was a joint business account, so technically...” Cyrus sighed. “He’s stressed and depressed, and I can’t do shit to help him. He lost the lease on the building, which means he lost his apartment. Everything he owns is in storage and he’s trying to start over, but he keeps hitting brick walls.”

Cyrus let out another sigh. “Have I mentioned that I haven’t gotten laid in weeks?”

“Weeks?” I folded my arms over my chest.

“Okay, so not like weeks, but weeks since we’ve had the really good stuff, you know. The kind that slams the headboard against the wall and leaves me walking funny for the next few days. The good stuff.”

“Jesus, you’re too much,” Kieran laughed.

Cyrus looked at him with a sly grin. “If I’m too much, go find less.”

“Both of you are too much. Is there anything I can do?” My question earned me a look from Kieran, but I ignored him.

“Nah, I just needed to vent. I love Archer and I’m happy to help him. I tell myself that at least a hundred times a day.” Cyrus drank half his beer in one long swallow.

“If I can, let me know.”

“That won’t be necessary,” he said.

I had my doubts, but Kieran looked relieved.

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Chapter 2

Archer

If I ever got my hands on my piece of shit former business partner, I was going to chop his body up into itty bitty pieces and sell his remains as shark bait. No... that was a lie. At most, I'd punch him in the face. I might yell a bit. He'd better hope I never saw him again.

Moving in with Cyrus and his husband hadn't been ideal, but the alternative was even less than. Note to future Archer—don't put all your eggs in one basket. Living where I worked had seemed like a good idea at the time, but now I was an artist with no shop and an idiot without a home. All my shit was in storage and I was coming to the end of my savings. Hence, why I was up at the ass crack of dawn, folding the blankets and stacking them neatly out of the way.

I'd always been Cy's pain-in-the-ass little brother, and even though thirty had come and gone a year ago, I was still a pain in his ass. And his husband's. I didn't want to like Marshall at first. Did I have a reason? Not really. Jealousy maybe. Cy always got what he wanted. He was good at literally everything, whereas I was only good at art, and I'd honed that skill in the shadows, hiding from assholes who wanted to pick on the small guy.

Marshall won me over by never commenting on my height. I was over it now, but it had been an insecurity of mine for years. Topping out at five-foot-five had made me the target of a lot of bullshit. And then my attitude hadn't helped. In the eighth grade, the art teacher stepped in and invited me to eat lunch in her room. And while I was

there, I might as well do something productive.

To begin with, I hid there to get away from the assholes. Even bullies had a limit to who they'd fuck with, and apparently the art teacher wasn't someone they were willing to cross. An artist was born in the safety of that room. While Cy was busy crushing every sport he played and being the popular closeted kid with the beard who was still one of his best friends, I was the weird, small, artsy gay kid.

They didn't know I was gay any more than I knew I was gay. They were cruel kids and being gay was apparently the worst thing they could think to call me some days.

I shoved the memories away and tip-toed into the kitchen. I had a routine. Every morning I woke up early. I made a coffee and grabbed a quick bite to eat, then I took my art supplies and I left. In the nicer weather I went to the park. In the bad weather, the library. Sometimes I splurged and went to a cafe.

Sometimes there were dishes in the sink from the night before and I'd do them before I went out, but today there was nothing and I was left to stare out the window while I waited for my coffee to brew. The sun had barely started to poke out over the horizon, washing the sky in a vibrant orange.

"You don't have to sneak out every day, you know."

At the sound of Marshall's voice, I jolted. Spinning around, I tried to act natural but I hated that he'd sneaked up on me. Even more than that, I hated being called on my shit. I knew they wouldn't mind if I hung around their house all day and all night. But I minded. I needed to get my shit together. I'd all but begged for a space at the local tattoo shops, but they were all full. No new artists needed. They'd be in touch if they did .

It felt like a fucking conspiracy. I'd tried to get a business loan, but with no collateral,

no income—no nothing—banks didn't want to take a chance me. I'd saved for years to open that place. Every dime I made went back into it and we were finally taking off. Booking months in advance. And then it was gone. Some days it didn't feel real.

The coffee burbled and choked a final time and spit out the last drops.

"I don't sneak out."

I make myself scarce so it's almost like you don't have a house guest. So you don't get sick of me and make me leave.

"I have things to do."

"If you let us help you, we could come up with a plan, Archer."

Sucking a deep breath in, I did my best not to hurl my cup at Marshall. "I've got it under control."

"Cy is worried about you," Marshall whispered. He probably wasn't supposed to say anything to me about that. Shit like that is why I gave them as much space as possible. I didn't want to be a source of strife between them. Cy and Marsh had a good thing going. If ever there were two idiots deeply in love, it was those two idiots.

"When is Cy not worried about me?"

Marshall had the decency to look like he agreed with me. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a couple of bills. "At least stop by The Anchor tonight. I know he'll try to feed you for free, and I know you'll insist on paying, even though Shane wouldn't care. Have a drink on me. Eat with your brother. He loves you."

Marshall couldn't have dumped more guilt on me if he tried. I'd yet to be by Cy's job

because I knew him. Food was his love language and he'd try to shovel as much into me as he could. If he couldn't heal the cracks in me, he'd fill them with hamburgers .

Sighing, I took the money from Marshall and tucked it into my pocket. "Fine. When's his dinner break?"

Marshall laughed and popped a fresh coffee pod into the machine. "His break is whenever he wants it. Shane might sign the paychecks, but the kitchen is Cy's territory. Shane could try to tell him what to do, but at his own risk."

Cyrus was a demon in the kitchen. Which was why I tried to avoid any kitchen Cyrus was working in.

"I don't see what good having dinner with him will do."

Complaining about shit was part of my DNA. If I didn't bitch about things, I'd probably blow up. But Marshall didn't appreciate that about me sometimes. For as easygoing as he could be, he turned into a bulldog when it came to looking out for my brother. Which was the only reason he wasn't on my list of people to turn into shark bait.

"You're barely here. He never sees you. By the time he gets home, you're out cold, and when he's awake, you're skulking around town filling sketchbooks."

"I do not skulk."

Marshall folded his arms over his chest and stared at me. He didn't say anything because the fucker didn't have to. I was skulking. Pouting. Getting wrapped up in my own bullshit head and avoiding everything and everyone as much as possible. Shit.

"Fine, so I'm skulking." I deflated and Marshall reached out and ruffled his fingers

through my hair. “Tell Cy that I’ve magically turned a corner and will at least put my skulking on hold to have dinner with him tonight.”

I dumped my coffee into a travel mug and thumped the lid on. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have an appointment with the squirrels.”

“Squirrels? ”

“Yeah, in the park. Big fuckers. I swear they’re like the body builders of squirrels. I named them Arnold and The Rock. Arnie and Rocky for short.” With my coffee in hand, I retreated to the living room to grab the messenger bag I carried with me all the time with my sketchbooks and art supplies in it. An emergency twenty, a lighter—because you never knew when you were going to need one—and a small first aid kit for similar reasons. It was less of a first aid kit and more of a plastic baggie with some gauze and a handful of bandaids stuffed in it.

Marshall met me at the door as I tried to slip away. Without asking first, he shoved a handful of granola bars into my hands. “The best time to catch Cy at work is before the dinner rush, or after it’s over.”

Nodding, I slipped out of the house, grateful that Marshall let me go without further harassment. I mean, the audacity of him, looking out for my brother like that. How dare he call me on my skulking?

Making Cy worry wasn’t my intention. I’d wanted their lives to be disrupted as little as possible. It wasn’t their fault that my life had gone sideways and I didn’t see why they should have to suffer for it. Besides, I liked wandering around drawing things. It started to grow on me and I liked the effect it was having on my art.

My work was a true extension of myself. Unless I was designing something for a customer, I poured myself into my art. My whole heart, my soul. My fears and

excitement all went into it. When I lost everything, my art had gone dark. Broody. Angry. Thick lines and morbid imagery. Anger and sadness were best friends and much of my time spent skulking was also spent pouring my heart out into work that I'd never show anyone.

I drew a lot of hands. Clenched fists. Broken fingernails. Fingers gripping onto rocky ledges, searching for purchase, hanging on by a thread above the abyss below .

It was the squirrels that made me turn a corner. My art went from a sad, desperate sort of realism, to cartoonish ridiculousness. I dabbled in comic style from time to time, but most people didn't want that kind of tattoo. But now, with my shop closed and my life in storage, I had freedom to explore my art again.

In my cartoon, Arnie and Rocky were mortal enemies, fighting over the last of the season's nuts. It wasn't going to win awards for originality, but it lifted my spirits. I didn't want to be a small, angry man. Rage was exhausting and I'd spent enough energy on my former friend. Now I wanted to move on. As soon as I figured out how.

Talking to Cyrus would have to be step number one. He'd been great about the whole thing. I knew I was putting a cramp in their lifestyle. The sooner I had a plan, the better for everyone.

After spending my morning in the park, I spent my afternoon in the library. Now that I'd exhausted my avenues when it came to renting a chair from another shop or opening my own, I had to be realistic. Money didn't grow on trees. I tried not to think of looking for other jobs as a failure. It was a simple setback. Okay, a catastrophic setback. But I'd made my dreams come true once—I could do it again.

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Chapter 3

Shane

My bartender, Mickey, was at the other end of the bar, laughing and talking and pouring drinks like he'd been doing this gig for years instead of months. I met Mickey when he'd been busy putting his life back together. I gave him a job and rented him the unit upstairs, even though he'd been staying with Ethan Bennett at the time.

Mickey looked a million times better than when I met him. Putting on some weight had made him look healthier and he no longer resembled a half-starved stray kitten. Being with Ethan made him happier too. Mickey had recently moved out of the upstairs unit and in with his rescuer turned boyfriend.

I sidled up next to Mickey, who was also between customers. Tuesday nights were always slow, but the perks of having more money than brains was being able to do shit like not cut your staff's hours. Kieran gave me shit for it from time to time, but then I quickly reminded him of all the money he was able to make me with his stock market magic and he shut up.

"Hey, Mickey. How's married life treating you?"

Mickey rolled his eyes. "We're not married. But life is good."

Mickey's cheeks turned an adorable shade of pink.

“When are you going to make an honest man out of Ethan?”

Mickey elbowed me. “Do you ever stop meddling?”

I pretended to think about it. “No, probably not. ”

“Can you?”

“Oh, definitely not.” I grinned at him and the way he pretended to look dejected. Mickey had walked into my bar and right into my heart, taking up residence next to my brothers. Sometimes he made me miss Brodie something fierce. It wasn’t because they were anything alike, but we had this easy sort of big brother/little brother dynamic. It was so sweet my teeth ached.

“Has anyone told you lately that you’re a pain in the ass, Shane?”

I’d have answered him, but the sight of someone sliding hesitantly onto a stool at my end of the bar stole my attention. Whoever he was, he was fucking pretty. Dark hair, pouty lips, ink for days. A messenger bag hanging off his shoulder, he looked around the bar.

I slid over to him, hoping to get some flirting in if the situation looked right. Up close he was even prettier. Thick eyelashes framed the bluest eyes I’d ever seen. He probably hadn’t shaved in a couple days, leaving a sexy layer of scruff that I’d love to feel against my skin. He hadn’t looked overly tall when I’d clocked him taking a seat, but short suited me fine. Short, tall, thin, thick, male, female. I had four hundred types and this guy was definitely on that list.

“What can I get you?” I asked. He looked at me with his big blue eyes.

“Is Cyrus here?” Saying the words seemed to make this guy deflate a little. Like

Cyrus was the last person he wanted to see.

“What’s your business with my cook?” I tried not to be an asshole most of the time, but it was weird for someone to come into my bar and ask for my cook like they were asking to have a tooth pulled.

Annoyance flared in his eyes, making them impossibly bluer. “Is Cyrus here?”

He didn’t give me more than that. Not a single inch. He set his jaw and tilted his chin up, daring me to take him on. And then it hit me like a sack of bricks. The pretty guy with the tattoos could only be the mysterious brother Cyrus had been talking about.

“I’ll get him.”

My acquiescence earned me the barest of nods, the smallest approval. If the guy wasn’t Cyrus’s brother, I’d totally have turned on the charm and tried to flirt my way into making something happen. But Cyrus would kill me.

Slipping into the kitchen, I found Cyrus grilling up a burger. He’d taken it upon himself to feed Mickey every day and I think he thought of him as a younger brother too.

“Hey, Cyrus. Is that the Mickey special?”

“Don’t tell me he’s actually admitted that he’s hungry?” Cyrus cast a look of shock over his shoulder.

“Nothing that radical has happened.”

Mickey was the kind of guy who could be on fire and ask if maybe you wouldn’t mind putting him out, if you had the time, and the water to spare. “You have a

visitor.”

Cyrus plated the burger and I took it from him. “He’s out front.”

Cyrus furrowed his brow. His husband usually invited himself into my kitchen, or Cyrus let him in the back way if they wanted to pretend that I didn’t know he was there.

I followed Cyrus out into the bar. The guy was still sitting there, but he had a pop and he was stirring the ice around his cup with a straw. He looked up and offered Cyrus a half smile.

“Hey, Cy. Uh... I thought we could eat dinner or whatever.”

Cyrus stomped around to the other side of the bar, yanked the guy off the stool, and pulled him into a crushing hug. “You thought? All on your own?”

“Cy... air. ”

Cyrus released his brother. “Okay, maybe Marshall talked me around to it. Do you want to eat or not?”

“Keep your ass on this stool and give me ten minutes to whip up dinner for us. I swear to God, Archer, if I come out and you’ve fucked off, I will chain you to my couch.”

“Noted.” Archer motioned to an empty booth. “I’ll be waiting right over there for you. Promise.”

Cyrus stormed off back to his kitchen and Archer went to the booth leaving me standing there with Mickey’s burger. I walked it over to him and he rolled his eyes.

“Is there any point in ever telling him that I can feed myself?”

“Probably not.” I handed the burger off. “Grab a seat, fill your face. It’s fucking slow tonight.”

“It’s always slow on Tuesdays.” Mickey took the plate from me and went around to the other side of the bar. He grabbed a stool and dug into his food. I left him to eat and tried not to watch Archer. I half expected him to still be stirring the ice in his glass, but he’d taken something out of his messenger bag and it was currently occupying all his attention.

Keeping one eye on him in case he decided to bolt, I remembered Cyrus telling me that his brother was an artist of some kind. A tattoo artist. My skin itched with a renewed interest in adding more ink to my collection.

I watched Archer for longer than was reasonable or proper. Longer than Cyrus would have let me get away with, but he was in the back. Sounds of his cursing and swearing filtered out from time to time. Even when Cyrus appeared with two burgers, I couldn’t pry my gaze away from Archer.

When Cyrus sat down, Archer slammed his book shut and stuffed it into his bag. His gaze flicked up and caught mine—caught me, really. Instead of being embarrassed, I shrugged a shoulder, letting him see me not care that I’d been caught checking him out.

Cyrus wouldn’t actually kill me. He might talk a big game, but the man was a softie. He nudged Archer’s plate toward him and I finally made myself look away.

Mickey ducked into the kitchen to get rid of his plate and I busied myself by doing a round in the bar, tucking chairs in and bussing tables. The Anchor had a small stage, a more generous dance floor, and a DJ booth, but mostly we were the sit down and

eat a burger and have a few beers kind of place. The pool tables and the darts brought people in, but tonight the place was a ghost town.

“Hey, Mickey, it’s quieter than a cemetery in here. How about you go home early?”

Mickey’s boyfriend owned a diner and was up at the ass crack of dawn every day. Not my favorite time to be alive, but it worked for some people.

“You don’t mind?” Mickey was already reaching for his apron strings.

“I wouldn’t have suggested it if I did.”

I needed the distraction of working alone more than I needed the help. My gaze still wanted to slide over to Archer and Cyrus and when it did, they looked... animated. Cyrus was probably doing his typical big brothering that he inflicted on Mickey. But where Mickey blossomed under the attention, even from here I saw Archer bristling.

His plump lips were pulled into a flat line and he’d pulled his shoulders back. Fire danced in his eyes and I wondered if I was going to have to break up a fight between my cook and his brother in the middle of my bar .

Before things got out of hand, I poured two new drinks and carried them over to the table. Cyrus was talking with his hands again. The more agitated he got, the more he sliced at the air.

“Thought you boys could use a refill.” I set the drinks down and grabbed the empty glass. Archer’s hand shot out and he grabbed his straw and stuffed it into his new cup. I watched him lock eyes with Cyrus and stir the ice faster and faster. The corner of his mouth twitched and Cyrus let out a sigh.

“You’re a nuisance, Archer.” Cyrus sounded tired and dejected and I knew I’d

probably get way more information than I needed later. Cyrus had a big heart, but his big heart came with a big mouth.

Archer flicked his gaze to me and raised his eyebrow, silently questioning what I was doing still standing there. I refused to feel sheepish, but I did leave the table.

I poured a few beers for some locals who liked to come here on quiet nights to play pool. The tables I'd invested in were coin operated and any money they made went to the community food bank. When I first won the money, I promised myself that I wouldn't be one of those people who always said they'd help people if they won, but then spent it on cars that were too powerful and houses that were too big.

Kieran thought I gave too much away, but he'd long since stopped commenting on my charitable endeavors. Promising him that he could veto any of my harebrained ideas that could actually ruin me seemed to help. I didn't want to go broke, after all. Even my generosity had its limits.

A flurry of movement caught my attention and I looked over in time to see Archer stand up and toss a couple of bills on the table. He snatched up his bag and was gone even quicker than he'd come.

Cyrus stomped into the kitchen and I glanced around, making sure everyone was good before I ducked into the back to check on him .

"That insufferable child." Cyrus loaded dirty dishes into the tray to get them ready for the dishwasher. He slammed the plates in like they'd personally offended him.

"He's hardly a child."

Oh boy, if looks could kill. Cyrus glared at me.

“If he wants me to call him an adult, he can act like one.”

I folded my arms over my chest. I didn’t know Archer, but I wanted to stick up for him. He looked like he had walls that went ten feet high and just as thick. And clearly Cyrus had been slamming into them like the battering ram he was.

“Mickey has spoiled you.”

Cyrus stilled. “Come again?”

I let my arms drop and hooked my thumbs in my front pockets. I didn’t want to look or sound as defensive as I had been. “Mickey lets you fuss over him. You show that kid a scrap of affection and he thrives under it. I have the feeling it’s the opposite with your brother.”

“He won’t let me help him. I’m lucky he’s even staying at my place. Even though I bitch about that sometimes—to you, where he can’t hear me—I like having him around, but I want to do more to help him.”

“And he doesn’t want you to.”

Cyrus nodded. After a deep breath, he went back to loading the dishes, more calmly this time.

Running my tongue over my teeth, I allowed only a moment to talk myself out of saying anything.

“So don’t help him.”

Cyrus looked at me like I’d grown several heads.

“Maybe you’re not what he needs right now. I know you’re his brother, but sometimes that kind of love can be too smothering. There’s expectations attached. It’s a lot of pressure.”

Cyrus stopped what he was doing and watched me for several seconds before his shoulders relaxed. “If he’s not willing to ask me for help, I hope he asks someone. Now get out of my kitchen.”

“Love you too, Cyrus.”

I took his dismissal with a grain of salt. I knew from experience what it was like to have a brother you wanted the best for, but didn’t always see eye to eye with.

“That’s not what I said.”

“It’s what you meant, though. Admit it.”

Cyrus shoved the tray of dishes into the dishwasher and lowered the door, starting the cycle. “Idiots. I’m surrounded by idiots.”

I left Cyrus to his kitchen and I went out front and worked the bar. So what if I was still thinking of Archer hours later? So what if he was exactly my type? What Cyrus never knew wouldn’t hurt me.

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Chapter 4

Archer

I knew the moment Cyrus strutted out of the kitchen that coming here had been a bad idea. His usually unruly hair was tamed by a bandana, highlighting the deep furrow between his eyebrows. The one he got whenever he was thinking too much. The one he always had when he looked at me lately, like I was a problem he had to solve.

Cyrus thumped a plate down in front of me. Burgers were my weakness. Hell, food was my weakness.

“Eat. You’re too skinny.”

And there went my appetite.

“Can you not? You sound like Grandma.” Grandma had forever been shoving food at people. No matter their shape, size, age, or authority, she’d push food on them and tell them they were too thin. It was cute if you were a doddering old woman. Less cute coming from Cyrus.

“It’s true. Do you even eat? I swear you’ve lost weight.”

I did eat... but I had lost weight recently. I skipped breakfast to get out of the house so I wouldn’t disturb Cyrus and Marshall’s life any more than I’d already done. Stress killed my appetite the other half the day. When I got back to their place, a plate of dinner was always waiting for me, which I dutifully ate.

Instead of saying any of that, I picked up my burger, held his gaze, and took the biggest bite I could manage .

“Real mature.” Cyrus rolled his eyes, but thankfully he took the hint and stopped pestering me. For thirty seconds. “What did you do today?”

I shrugged. “The usual.”

Cyrus sliced the air with his hands. He always had been quick to anger and though he wasn’t angry yet, he was definitely annoyed.

“What does that even mean? You’re like a fucking ghost. You’re never home. You live with me, but I never fucking see you. I don’t know what you’re doing all day or if you’re okay. Jesus Christ, Archer.”

I tried to look unaffected by his outburst and I wasn’t sure if I succeeded. To buy myself time to answer, I drained my drink and set the empty glass on the table.

“I have time before my savings run out.” My statement did nothing to improve Cyrus’s mood.

“You’re impossible.”

“Thank you.” I grinned at him and popped a fry in my mouth. “These are excellent fries. You should try them.”

“I could co-sign a loan for you.”

“You could, but I won’t let you.”

“Why not? Archer, we could have you up and running in no time. If you won’t let me

loan you the money, you should at least let me help you get the loan from somewhere else.”

How did I tell him that I’d reached for my dream once only to have it snatched from me and I wasn’t sure I had it in me to try again. Losing not only my livelihood, but someone who was supposed to be my best friend had sucked the life out of me. It had taken something amazing and turned it into ashes. I wasn’t sure I had the inner strength to rise like the phoenix, but I didn’t know what else there was for me.

If I shrugged one more time, Cyrus would probably rip my arm off and beat me with it. Instead, I chewed an uncomfortably large bite of burger before swallowing. I was saved by having to respond to the appearance of Shane, the owner of the bar. Cyrus’s boss was also, from what I heard from Cy, his friend.

“I thought you boys could use a refill.” Shane set our drinks down and I liberated my straw from my old cup and thrust it into my new one, stirring the ice. Yes, it annoyed Cyrus. Yes, I knew it did. Thus the basis of its appeal.

“You’re a pain in my ass, Archer.”

Cyrus had been defeated, for now. I’d won the battle, but not the war, or whatever. And Shane was still standing there, lurking. I looked at him and arched my eyebrow, waiting for him to get the hint and leave. He did, and watching him go wasn’t a hardship. The man was fucking built. I’d give anything to sink my teeth into his peach of an ass.

I turned my attention back to Cyrus. Guilt had been a good friend of mine lately, and looking at him only made it swim to the surface and thicken in my throat. Before my life had gone tits up, Cyrus had a lot less stress. That furrow in his brow hadn’t been a permanent gully on his face. He was probably going to crack a few molars if he kept grinding his teeth.

“Why won’t you let me help you?” Cyrus asked.

“You are helping me. I’m literally living in your house.”

Cyrus snorted, his lip curled the way it did when he was gearing up for a good rant. “Do you? Because I never see you. Marshall never sees you. We don’t know where you are and what you do all day.”

“I’m out robbing banks and getting high. Knocking over liquor stores and lying dead in ditches. Fucking hell, man. I’m sitting in the library—drawing. Or the park—drawing.”

It was all I had and fuck Cyrus for making me feel guilty about that too.

“I’m going home. Thanks for dinner.” Standing up, I yanked the money Marshall had given me out of my pocket and tossed it down on the table.

Cyrus didn’t try to stop me. I wouldn’t have listened and he still had to work. I hated fighting with him even more than I hated not seeing him. Which was why I had been avoiding him. I couldn’t avoid Marshall, though. I still had to fucking sleep somewhere and, after the fight we just had, skulking off to a hotel would only make shit worse between Cyrus and me.

I grabbed an Uber back to their place. All the walking I was doing was starting to wear me down. The early mornings and the lack of proper sleep didn’t help. And, yeah, my diet sucked. Fuck you, Cyrus.

Marshall was watching television in the living room when I used my key to unlock the front door. He was in the recliner by the window and had a lap full of knitting. His gaze flicked to me and he offered a gentle smile.

“How’d it go?”

“About as shitty as I expected, so thanks for that.” I flopped down on the couch, too tired to move. Or think.

There was silence except for the low drone of the TV and the sound of knitting needles clicking softly. When Marshall spoke, it startled me.

“Cyrus is at work for a few hours yet. We could watch Spaceballs .”

“Hell, yes.” Cyrus did not share our love of cheesy movies. I’d been busy avoiding everyone and hadn’t been around to indulge in a movie night. Maybe I was being a dumbass. My presence didn’t seem to bother them. Hell, if I listened to Cyrus, it was welcome .

Marshall put his knitting down and disappeared into the kitchen. He came back seconds later carrying two bowls. “Popcorn. White cheddar for me. Dill pickle for you.”

He sat on the chair, reached for a remote, and started a DVD.

“You had this well planned. What if I’d said no?”

“No one says no to Spaceballs .”

I didn’t bother telling him that Cyrus would’ve said no. The movie started and saved me from having to talk. A small fucking blessing that was. I didn’t want to talk because every conversation lately was about how to help me. What did I need? What could they do?

If I had the answers to those questions, that would be great. But all I had was anger

and broken dreams. It was hard to be here, an interloper in Cyrus's perfect life. His dream job with his dream boss, his perfect husband and his knitting in their little, one bedroom house. Because they were it. They weren't going to have kids and had no need for a home office. They'd never planned on having guests overnight. They didn't even have a pull-out couch.

Something had to give. I couldn't sit around and brood all the time. I was wasting my time doing nothing. Pouting. Drawing stupid squirrels and resisting the urge to unblock my old partner so I could send him not-so-vaguely-threatening messages. But he was exactly the kind of asshole who would go crying to the cops. And then if he did end up dead, I'd be suspect number one. No, thank you. Orange wasn't my color.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow I'd find a solution to my problem. Something. Even if I took a shitty job that I'd hate, it was better than doing nothing. I was vaguely aware that sleep was pulling me under, but I wrestled against it. I tried to wait until everyone else had gone to bed before turning in, but the early mornings were catching up with me .

The movie was still playing when Marshall took the popcorn bowl from me and told me to lie down. I shot him a look, but didn't have the strength to argue. By the time my head hit the pillow, Marshall was covering me with a blanket and I was passing out.

When I woke, for a second I didn't understand where I was. All I knew was that my bladder was full to bursting. I tossed the blanket off me and stood. The house was dark and mostly quiet. slipping into the bathroom I shut the door quietly and took a piss.

Coming out of the room, I almost ran straight into Cyrus. Startled, I jumped and grabbed at my chest. "Jesus, Cy."

Cyrus's mouth twitched in amusement. "I wanted to say thanks for coming for dinner. If you come again, I promise not to be an asshole."

I narrowed my gaze. "Did you just apologize to me?"

Even in the dim light, I could see Cyrus roll his eyes. "You wish."

That was as good as it was going to get. Cyrus hated being in the wrong.

"I'll take it."

"You know I just want what's best for you, right?"

Groaning, I pushed past him and went back to the living room. Cyrus followed me—he couldn't help himself. Too tired to stand there and argue, I dropped down onto the couch. Putting my back to Cyrus, I covered myself in the blanket and shut my eyes.

Cyrus sighed and retreated back to his bedroom. He'd done so well too, with his almost-apology. I should cut him a break, and I knew it. But it was the middle of the night and the only talking I wanted to do was in my sleep.

Tomorrow, come hell or high water, I was going to find a way to fix my mess of a life.

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Chapter 5

Shane

Seeing Archer dart across the street in front of me was enough of a cosmic sign that I knew I should pull over and go talk to him. I'd been thinking about him for days. Ever since he stopped in at The Anchor to see Cyrus, he'd been on my mind. So had Cyrus, but in a different way. Cyrus, I worried about. He was still brooding about his brother, and even though his mood had evened out, I could tell it was still weighing on him.

Archer had been on my mind because... well, I was a man and he was my type and it had been a while. I didn't often bring people home that I met at work, because shitting where you ate was always a recipe for disaster.

But Archer's blue eyes and the way he held himself apart from everything made me want to break down his walls. I pulled into a parking spot and watched Archer grab a seat in the park under a tree. He pulled out his sketchbook, indicating that he'd be there for a while and giving me time to pop into a convenience store on the corner for a couple Slurpees.

Did I know what I was doing? Absolutely the fuck not. All I knew was that Archer had the look of a person who needed a friend. And if it got Cyrus to stop moping and brooding, that was a bonus.

Archer saw me approaching and closed his sketchbook. Pity, I'd have loved a peek. Whatever he had going on in those pages had me curious. Maybe another time I could

get him to show me. Some people weren't too fond of sharing their work, but a boy could dream.

"Here," I said as I folded myself down and sat on the grass next to him. I handed him a slushie.

"What's in it?" Archer eyed the cup suspiciously.

"A little of everything." That was the only real way to have a slushie. Everyone knew that.

"Thanks." Archer took a drink and I tried not to watch the way his lips wrapped around the straw. Instead I focused on not looking at him.

"Did Cyrus put you up to this?" Archer sipped his drink.

"I saw you come into the park and I thought I'd stop and say hi."

He leaned against the tree and made a point to not look at me. "How much did he tell you?"

"Would you believe me if I said nothing?"

Archer laughed. "That's a lie. Cyrus has a big mouth."

"Okay, so he told me the highlights. How your business partner fucked you over and that you're staying with him for a while, but that's it."

He took a deep breath and it whooshed out all at once. "That's the whole story. All my eggs were in one basket and he fucked off with the basket." Archer turned his head and looked at me, blue eyes full of quiet rage.

“That sucks.” I sipped at my drink, wincing when pain slashed through my skull. My eye closed involuntarily and I lifted my free hand, pressing it against my eye socket.

“Brain freeze?” Archer sounded amused, and with my one good eye I saw him smirk

.

“Glad you find it humorous.” I forced a couple deep breaths into my lungs and waited for the pain to subside. “Now I remember why I haven’t had one of these in years.”

He reached over and plucked the slushie from my grasp. In the time it took me to recover from the stabbing agony of a brain freeze, Archer had drank most of my slushie.

“Help yourself,” I told him. He smiled at me. A flash of teeth and it was gone again.

“I thought I’d save you from yourself.”

“How kind of you.”

He tipped the cup at me. “Happy to help.”

“Is there a way I can help you?”

If Archer rolled his eyes any harder, he was going to give himself a concussion.

“Are you sure Cyrus didn’t put you up to this?”

“Absolutely sure. Cyrus has nothing to do with this.”

“Ah, so you’re naturally nosy.”

“I prefer the term inquisitive.”

Archer eyed me... scrutinized was probably a better word for it. My skin heated under the weight of his stare.

“What I really need, Shane, is to fuck someone so hard I forget my name,” he paused and leaned back, letting his gaze drag over me again. Letting me see him do it.

Fuck, I loved how he said my name.

It was a bad idea. A terrible fucking idea. But, God, Archer’s stare was hotter than the sun, far more intense. Captivating. He pinned me in place with his challenge. The most likely scenario was that he was fucking with me. Most people looked at me and decided that I was a top. Someone they could count on to rough them up a bit. Hold them down, fuck them through the floor. Nothing was further from the truth.

It dawned on me that Archer hadn’t made that assumption. My blood sang through my veins, thickening my cock in my jeans. Fuck. This was about to get really embarrassing.

I shouldn’t let Archer fuck me. But he said it would help, and Cyrus had wanted his brother to have someone to lean on. Someone to help him. This wasn’t what he’d imagined, but it was what Archer would accept.

“If you’re looking for a willing bottom, there’s one right here.” The words were surprisingly easy to say.

Heat flared in Archer’s eyes. If he had concerns about Cyrus’s opinion, he didn’t voice them either. This wasn’t about him and I refused to think about him now. It had been months since I’d found someone to scratch that itch with.

“You bottom?”

I nodded. “Dedicated beefy bottom. Most people look at me and think I’m a top.”

Bitterness tinged the edges of his laugh, but none of it was aimed at me.

“I have the same problem. I’m five-six on my best day. And I don’t care how magical some guy says his dick is or how much he promises I’ll enjoy it. I promise I won’t.”

I pushed myself to my feet and held my hand out to Archer. His gaze traveled up my body, clocking the hard-on I was sporting. Fuck it, I didn’t care about being in public. Okay, I did a little, because the heat in my cheeks had nothing to do with the sun.

“Are you coming?”

Archer grinned at me and handed me an empty slushie cup, then got to his feet. “Lead the way. ”

In two minutes, we were parked out back at The Anchor. Archer looked at me in a quizzical way. “I hope you’re not planning a bathroom hookup.”

I scoffed at the idea of hooking up in the bathroom. “There’s an apartment above the bar.”

“No shit?” Archer followed me out of the car, his hands tucked in his pockets. I watched him glance around the parking lot.

“Cyrus won’t be here for a while yet. You’re fine.”

Unlocking the back door, I went to the top of the stairs and unlocked the door to the apartment. Looking over my shoulder, I saw Archer still there, leaning against the

wall.

“You can change your mind,” I offered, relieved when he shook his head.

“Get in there before I fuck you right here on the landing.”

I hoped he didn't see the way I shivered when he spoke to me like that. The deep gravelly rasp of his voice and the give no shit, take no shit attitude went straight to my cock. The way he grinned at me, sly and smug like he'd just uncovered all my secrets, told me that I was in trouble.

I pushed the door open and walked inside, trying not to look nervous. I was. Or awkward. Too late. Or that I was so horny I couldn't think. I was that too. Archer flicked the lock on the door behind him, and the sound made me flinch. I didn't know why. I'd had sex before. Random hookups. Relationships. But often there'd been a layer of disappointment, of not quite getting what I wanted. Of not giving into doing things I didn't want, but walking away unsatisfied and sad.

Hands pressed against my sides, moved up my ribs. Archer mapped the span of my shoulders before dragging his hands down my back.

“You're a big bugger, aren't you? ”

My mouthful of cotton wouldn't let me speak. Archer didn't seem to need me to say anything, though.

“Go get the supplies.”

My brain kicked into gear enough that I didn't hesitate to follow his command. I went to the bathroom and fished around in the vanity for condoms and lube. I'd moved them back up here after Mickey moved out because in the back of my head I'd

wanted to find someone to bring up here. That's why I hadn't rented it out yet, much to Kieran's displeasure.

Wasting time thinking about anything but how much I ached wasn't going to make it go away. I went back to the living room and found Archer standing there with his cock out. He stroked it, long and slow and stared at me as I approached. I walked right up to him and looked down into his face. He looked up at me and his smile grew like a slow-moving storm.

"You want a taste first?" Archer let go of his dick and grabbed the supplies from me. Tearing a condom off the row, he tossed the others aside. "Someone's ambitious."

He held my gaze, then flicked his eyes down. "On your knees."

I went willingly. Clumsily. Half drunk on endorphins already. Archer's hand was on his cock again and suddenly I had a fist in my hair. Gripping and tugging a handful, he held me in place and swiped the head of his cock across my lips. "Can I call you names and shit? Or is that like a limit for you?"

My eyes closed and I breathed through my nose as deep as I could. "You can do anything you want, Archer."

I opened my eyes and looked up at him. Unless he tied me down, he was a lot smaller than me. There was nothing he could do to me that I didn't want done .

Archer dragged the head of his dick against my lips again. A wicked smile flashed across his face. "Open your pretty mouth, slut."

I opened. Already desperate to come, my cock throbbed in my jeans, trapped and unhappy about it. But I ignored it in favor of relishing every single moment of this. Of the harsh hold Archer had on my hair and the way he slowly slid his cock into my

mouth, gauging how much room he had, what my gag reflex was like.

His dick was gorgeous. Long and thick, but without being something that was going to choke me to death or tear my ass apart. I couldn't wait for him to fuck me with it. God, it had been fucking years since I'd been this desperate for it.

“Suck.”

God, fucking finally. I hollowed my cheeks and took him to the root. My hands slid up the backs of his legs and I cupped his ass, pulling him closer. Archer's hold on my hair tightened and sparks of pain shot through me.

“Holy—fuck—slow down, Shane. God—”

I pulled back, releasing his cock. It bobbed in the air between us, twitching and writhing all on its own. He'd been close. I loved that I'd gotten him to the edge so fast. But I also didn't want this to be over quickly. I changed tactics, teasing him instead of devouring.

Archer's breathing evened out, mostly, as my tongue danced around the head of his cock. I licked him from tip to root and back again. Licked his balls. He trembled at the knees when I did that and he used my shoulders as a brace to keep himself upright. He gripped my face and fucked me with short, sharp thrusts then he pulled away and motioned to the couch.

“Get naked. Get comfortable,” he panted.

I watched him strip his shirt off over his head, then shove his pants down to the floor. He was thin and pale and fucking stunning. Defiant in the way he tipped his chin upward, like he was challenging me to look at him and find fault. Graceful in the way he motioned with his hand, ordering me to the couch.

I stripped out of my shirt where I knelt, then crawled over to the couch. Archer made a strangled noise in his throat. Upon reaching my destination, I stood long enough to take my jeans off, then I knelt on the couch, facing the back. I folded my arms over it and waited, legs spread.

Archer didn't leave me waiting long. A warm, sleek body pressed up against me. Lips brushed against the back of my shoulder. My neck. Hands tickled down my side. Danced down into the crease of my ass. They pressed against my hole. Dropping my head down to rest on my arms, I took a deep breath, shocked at how shaky it was.

Archer stroked his hand down my back again, soothing me. Then the click of a lube cap and the telltale squelching sound came before the press of slick fingers to my hole.

“Deep breath, that's it. Such a whore for me.”

I moaned and arched my back to stick my ass out, begging for him to keep touching me.

“Look at you, all sweaty and needy already.” Archer kissed my shoulder again. He worked one finger in and out until one finger was nothing. Worse than nothing. A slight intrusion that lit me up, but still teased me because it would be better if only it were more. He was driving me nuts. Desperation clawed at my skin.

Then another finger joined the first one and he stroked it over my prostate. I cried out and shoved my hand down to grab the base of my cock.

Archer's laugh was low and smug, and he did it again until I was leaking and pushing back on his fingers. Fuck, they were spectacular. Delicate, nimble, strong. Capable of great and terrible things. A third finger nearly undid me. Sweat gathered on the back of my neck and a drop slid down my spine. Archer licked it off my skin and hummed

in approval.

His fingers withdrew abruptly, but then the head of his cock pressed against my entrance.

“Tell me you want it.” Archer held back. He trembled against me, his own need threatening to overtake him and rip him apart the same way mine had decimated me. “Tell me.”

“Please,” I choked out, half ruined already and Archer wasn’t even close to being done with me. He thrust into me with a long, firm slide that opened me the rest of the way. He gripped my hips and I grabbed the back of the couch as he pulled back before fucking into me again. Harder this time. Faster too. Releasing the death grip I had on the couch, I relaxed. “Please, fuck me.”

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Chapter 6

Archer

Because people always assumed I was a bottom, I tried not to assume what role people liked to play in the bedroom. But never did I ever think Shane would be a fucking bottom, or that we'd end up here.

I dug my fingers into his sides, hoping they left bruises. Burying myself deep, I didn't dare close my eyes. This was all a dream. A scorching hot figment of my imagination.

Shane keened beneath me, pressing his juicy ass into me. I released his hip and cracked my hand across one of the plump, lightly fuzzy globes. Shane whined. All his little noises made my dick throb. The only thing better than a beefy bottom was one who wasn't afraid to make noise.

"That's right. Let me hear you." I slid out slowly, watching the way his hole wrapped around my cock when I pushed back in. I reached for the place where we joined and touched him there, on that sensitive ring of stretched skin. An unholy, unhinged, utterly depraved moan tore out of him. "That's a good slut. Such a needful thing."

Shane buried his face into the back of the couch. It made me feel cheated that I couldn't see the look on his gorgeous face as I fucked him into oblivion, but with any luck, this wouldn't be a one-off.

I slammed into him, gripping his hips to anchor him in place. I drove into him as hard

as I could, again and again. My pace was relentless, and I did my best to drag my dick across his prostate as often as I could without making him come. Not yet.

Lifting my leg, I put my foot on the couch, changing the angle. I slowed my pace and smoothed my hands over his back. I had a thing for a sexy back and Shane's was a fucking dream. Wide and unblemished, unmarked by tattoos. A beautiful blank canvas stretched out in front of me. I'd clocked Shane's half sleeve when I'd walked into the bar the other day, and when he'd stripped and knelt on the couch, I'd spotted another on his calf.

I leaned forward and kissed his shoulder. I wanted to mark him up. The urge was there to leave trails of hickeys where I itched to leave ink. Fucking Shane unlocked this feral little goblin inside me that wanted to mark him and keep him. I put my hand between his shoulder blades and pressed down, giving the illusion that I was totally in control, that he was trapped under me, subject to my whims. My mercy.

I had none.

I fucked him long and hard until my leg quivered and threatened to buckle. I put my other foot back on the floor. Shane had devolved into this needy slut, incapable of speech. The only sounds he'd made for the past several minutes were a litany of whimpers and moans.

Too close to coming and not ready for it to be over yet, I slowed my pace and folded myself against Shane's body. I slid my arm around his waist and reached around, taking his thick cock in hand.

"God, this thing is a beast." I stroked him from root to tip, swallowing a sound of my own when his ass tightened around my cock. "Such a nice toy." I swiped my thumb over the head of his dick, gathering a bead of moisture and spreading it around. Underneath me, Shane writhed back and forth, fucking himself with my dick .

I let my other hand drag higher on his torso. My fingers flicked his nipples, tugged them. Pinched and twisted and Shane's motions stuttered and broke. His whole big, beautiful body trembled.

"Please..."

He begged so fucking prettily, how could I possibly refuse? Shane was flushed and sweat-soaked and fucking trembling. His skin was tinted pink from the tips of his ears down to the tops of his shoulders and the back of his neck.

"Such a pretty slut." I thrust harder, snapping my hips. Drawing on a reserve of energy I wasn't sure I'd had a minute ago. Holy shit it had been forever since I'd been this fucking keyed up. Shane was a sight underneath me, bulky and begging. He turned his head and looked at me. He was a fucking wreck. A ruin. And I'd done that to him.

He reached for me, the fingers on his left hand brushed my leg, then found purchase. "Feels incredible."

His eyes shut and I wanted to snap at him to look at me, to watch me as I filled his ass, but I bit back that particular urge. I jerked him faster, watching the way his eyebrows pinched together.

"So pretty." Every muscle in my body screamed at me. Fatigue made my legs quake, but I was determined to make Shane come first. "My slut is so fucking hot for me, so wet."

I stroked his cock, sliding my thumb over the head again. Shane bucked into the touch and I sped up.

Shane shattered when he came. He pressed back into me, begging for more of my

cock as if I had more to give. His fingers dug into my leg like the spikes on a bear trap. He was sweaty perfection, trembling underneath me, filling my hand with his cum. Collapsing in a boneless heap, he quivered when I continued to stroke him with his own spend.

“Archer—please. ”

“Please what?” I wanted to lean down and sink my teeth into him. But instead, I snapped my hips and chased my own release. Shane’s ass was still impossibly tight and hot and oh, God, so fucking good. I definitely didn’t want this to be a one-time thing. Maybe a one-time-a-day thing, but even that sounded insufficient. My sex life had been a famine and after being presented with a feast it was impossible to think of anything less.

I came so hard I saw stars. So hard my bones liquefied. My hips snapped a broken rhythm, thrusting deeper and deeper, filling the condom instead of the gorgeous ass. Next time. Next time I’d fill him with my cum and then fuck it out of him.

For now, I simply collapsed against his back, panting and heaving, spent and sated. My knees threatened to give way, but Shane’s body held me up as I recovered.

When lying there became uncomfortable, I carefully pulled out, making sure to take the condom with me in my retreat. I slipped it off and looked around for what to do with it.

Shane unfolded himself and took it from me, his cheeks still pink.

“I’ll take care of that.”

I wanted to thank him by climbing into his lap and kissing him stupid. But the moment for kissing had come and gone without me taking advantage. Maybe next

time. There had to be a next time. Now that I'd had a taste of Shane, I wanted more. I wanted to learn all the little things that made him squirm.

He came back from disposing of the condom and reached for his pants. I did the same, because standing around with your dick out after a hookup was awkward as fuck.

Because I didn't want the first thing one of us said to be about how we shouldn't have done that, or how we shouldn't do it again, I took a step toward Shane and tilted my head back. Reaching for him, I wound my arms around his neck and was rewarded when he wrapped his arms around me in return.

And I took the kiss I'd forgotten to get before. Compared to what we'd just done, it was chaste. Sweet. Shane's mouth was soft and he tasted of sugar. He moaned into my mouth and I ate that up. I wanted to consume him. Devour him.

Sex wasn't a cure for shit, but I felt better than I had in weeks. All my problems were still there, and maybe I'd added a few more by fucking Cyrus's boss, but none of that mattered. Not when I was soupy and sated and felt like I could curl up and have the first real sleep I'd had in ages.

Shane ended the kiss. "I have to get downstairs and get shit going."

"I have to go pretend I know how to get my life back together." I pulled away from Shane and tugged my shirt back on. Combing my fingers through my hair, I looked at him. "Do I look as freshly fucked as I feel?"

Shane lifted his hand and did a seesaw motion. "A little. But I think you'll be fine."

I reached for him and straightened his hair with my fingers, making him look more presentable. I didn't want to ask if we could do this again because I didn't want him

to let me down easy. I didn't want him to let me down at all. Shane felt like the first right thing in a shit-storm of wrong and I wanted to hold onto that for as long as I could.

"Better?" he asked.

Maybe he wasn't going to say thank you, let's not do this again. Maybe he'd enjoyed himself as much as I'd enjoyed myself. Although, there was that whole name-calling thing.

"You're okay with what we did, right? The names and stuff? It just—" How did I tell him that calling him my slut felt right? I didn't. I let my sentence hang and waited on eggshells for his response .

Shane bent and kissed me again. On the lips, the corner of the mouth, the side of my fucking neck. My bones threatened to turn to mush when his breath ghosted past my ear.

"Everything we did was fucking brilliant."

He pulled away looking sheepish. Like it had cost him something to admit that to me.

"Thanks." Because what the fuck else did you say to something like that? "I'm glad," I added, ignoring the way my skin tightened and the knot of awkward in my guts twisted.

"I have to get going, but can we exchange numbers? Even if we don't do this again, I'd like to be friends."

Shane pulled his phone out and handed it to me. I sent myself a message and handed his phone back.

He was endearing, adorable, the way he grinned and tucked his phone away. I could tell that he didn't want me to leave, but he had shit to do, and I should have shit to do too. I had to get my life figured out so maybe one day I'd be worthy of a guy like him.

I grabbed my bag and let myself out, Shane following me down the stairs. I wanted to pause at the bottom and kiss him again, but I didn't want to get worked up again. My arousal hadn't vanished—it had abated now—but all it would take was a taste of him to ratchet up again.

I opened the back door and spilled out into the parking lot. Blinking at the bright sun, I didn't see the kitchen door swing open, but I heard it... and Cyrus's surprised voice say my name.

“Archer?”

Shane appeared at my back a moment later.

“Shane? What were you doing?”

Shit, fuck, crap, shit, fuck. What was I supposed to say? Nothing? Playing cards? I tripped and fell and my dick landed in your boss ?

“I was showing Archer the upstairs. He needs a space for a shop and I need a renter,” Shane said so fucking smoothly that the words almost didn't register.

Cyrus's face lit up and I hated that it had been a lie because he looked thrilled down to his bones. “That's a great idea. If you need help with rent—” Cyrus started, but I raised my hand, stopping him.

“Shane and I have a lot to talk about, so don't get ahead of yourself.”

Cyrus made a zipper motion across his lips. “I won’t say a word,” he promised.

After shooting us another goofy grin, he ducked back into the kitchen and shut the door.

I turned to face Shane. “What the fuck was that?”

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Chapter 7

Shane

Anger flared in Archer's face. I'd expected it, but my cover-up had seemed like a good idea at the time. And the more I thought about it, the better I felt about it.

"Listen..." I reached up and gripped the back of my neck. "There are only two reasons why I'd have someone upstairs. And unless you want to come clean to your brother about what we were really doing up there, then the only thing I could say was that I wanted to rent the space to you."

"But now he's going to think I've got a plan worked out or some shit. I don't have money to rent anything—that's why I'm on his couch. That's why I don't have a fucking shop. My former business partner cleaned me out."

Archer's tone was sharp and desperate. Completely different from the man he'd been a few minutes ago. His confidence had faded and in its place was uncertainty. Fear. Panic.

"I can't undo what he did, but maybe I can help in a more tangible way than blowing off steam." I glanced around. The parking lot behind my bar wasn't the best place for this conversation. "Did you want to come inside and talk in my office?"

"I want to shove my boot up your ass," Archer snapped, but it lacked any seriousness. His shoulders slumped and he sighed. "But in lieu of violence, I should at least hear whatever insane scheme you've cooked up in the past twenty-five seconds. Cyrus is

bound to have no less than seventy questions later.”

Some of the fire had bled out of Archer, but I guessed it had less to do with his anger decreasing and more to do with him being too tired to argue. The way fatigue etched his features was hard to miss. I wasn’t smug enough to think fucking me had taken it all out of him, but it certainly hadn’t helped.

I ushered him in through the back and into my office. It wasn’t anything to write home about. I hadn’t decorated it beyond bringing in the essentials—a desk, comfortable furniture, and filing cabinets even though most things were digital now.

Archer collapsed into a chair and set his bag down by his feet. “So what’s your grand plan?”

“Exactly what I told Cyrus outside. I rent you the upstairs. It’s got a bedroom you can lock to keep the public out. A kitchen, a bathroom, and the living space could be set up for you to work in. Is it ideal? Probably not. Hell, I’ve never owned a tattoo shop. I don’t even know if it could work. I’ll also have to check with zoning and shit to see if we’re even allowed to have a business upstairs.” There were more moving parts to this than when I’d first blurted it out, but it wasn’t a bad plan. It would get Kieran off my back about renting the space. Even if I had to waive the rent for the first little while. It’s not like Kieran would know.

“Did you miss the part when I said I have no money?”

Disclosing my financial windfall wasn’t a thing I normally did, but I felt the situation called for it. “How much has Cyrus told you about me?”

Archer furrowed his brows. “That you’re his boss. His friend.”

I nodded. “Six years ago, I was digging in my couch for spare change to buy ramen. I

was the definition of living paycheck to paycheck. Then, I had this one really good day and I said you know what, I should buy a lottery ticket. And boom, I won. I won an obscene amount of money, Archer. It's not something I hide, but I don't exactly advertise it. I did all the things I always said I would. I paid off my brother's student loans. I got my mom a house. I looked after my younger brother. I bought a bar."

"Fuck off. That's... no shit?"

"No shit." I grinned at Archer's incredulous expression.

"I feel like there's a catch."

"No catch. I do this a lot. Previously, the upstairs had been rented by my bartender Mickey."

"Cyrus told me about him." Archer ran his fingers through his hair, disturbing the dark strands.

"I didn't charge him what it's worth either. I charged him what he could afford. The space is empty. Kieran, my brother and money manager, wants me to rent it out."

Archer let out a laugh. "I'm sure this isn't what he had in mind."

"Probably not, but I won the money, not him. He helps people by helping me not go broke so I can continue to help people. We can draw up a contract if you want, and I'll take a certain percentage of your profits until you've established yourself. At which point we can discuss continuing your lease of the space. I won't hold you here if you find a place that's better suited to your needs, but I also won't make you leave if you want to stay."

"What's in it for you?"

I shrugged. “Besides getting Kieran off my ass? Nothing. It would make Cyrus happy to see you getting back on your feet. He’s been worried.”

I didn’t mind divulging that to Archer. I didn’t think it was a secret.

“And he had nothing to do with this? ”

“Like what? Asking me to offer you the upstairs? Definitely not. Cyrus knows his place is in the kitchen and not in my business.” I leaned forward, lowering my voice. “And anything else we did had shit to do with him too. I let you fuck me because I wanted it, Archer.”

I still did, but I didn’t want to say that. Not when I was trying to negotiate with him. I didn’t want it to seem like sex was part of the deal.

“I have to think about this. I know it’s a great deal, and that I’d be an idiot to turn it down. I don’t even know if the space would work.”

Opening my desk drawer, I grabbed the spare set of keys and tossed them on the desk. “The silver key is for the back door. The brass key is for the apartment. Take a few days to think about it. If you want it, it’s yours. If not, you can bring the keys back here and I’ll tell Cyrus that it wasn’t zoned properly to have a business upstairs.”

“Which it might not be.”

“I’m about ninety-seven percent sure we’ll be good to go, but I’ll check on that today and let you know.” My stomach growled, reminding me I hadn’t eaten yet today. “Were you hungry? Cyrus could whip something up for us.”

“No, ah... I’m going to go.” Archer scooped the keys off the desk and stuffed them

into his pocket. “Thanks for today. For all of it.”

He glanced away, unable to hold my gaze for too long. That was fine. I wasn’t going to hold it against him.

It wasn’t that I regretted offering him the upstairs unit. It solved both our problems. But now that I had, a repeat with him would be inappropriate. Which fucking sucked. Archer had been a beast. I could still feel him on my skin, in my body. I wanted to strip naked and examine my hips for bruises. Oh well, some things were more important than sex.

“I’ll be in touch.” Archer let himself out before I could respond .

The enormity of what I’d done slammed into me the minute he walked out of my office. Cyrus was one of my best friends, and an employee I could ill afford to lose. He was the backbone of this place. And I’d just taken his brother upstairs and helped him blow off some steam. Which I’m certain wasn’t what had been on Cyrus’s mind when he said Archer needed someone to help him.

Holing up in my office hadn’t been the plan, but I needed some space between Cyrus and me before I’d be able to face him properly. And I had to see about zoning and business licenses and shit. I fired off an email to my insurance agent to double-check my policy. Then I got to work on things I’d been avoiding. Kieran did most of the books for the bar, but I still liked to know what was going on.

After bringing my accounts up to date, I knew I couldn’t hide anymore. Cyrus was in the kitchen prepping for the dinner rush. Walking in there had me sweating like I was on the way to face the firing squad. Even though I’d provided a perfectly reasonable explanation about what we were doing upstairs, I still fully expected Cyrus to make some creative threats involving knives and hiding body parts.

He saw me enter and waved me over to his prep station. Cyrus's knife skills were out of this world and I'd admit to a tendril of fear keeping me from getting too close. Not that he'd actually hurt me, but it was better safe than sorry.

"Did you seriously offer Archer the upstairs for his shop?" Cyrus asked.

Shrugging, I replied, "It's not like I'm using it. Mickey's moved in with Ethan and Kieran was getting on my case the other day about letting it sit empty. I'm waiting to hear about zoning and insurance and stuff, but I have a good feeling we'll be able to make it work."

"Marshall and I were talking about selling our house and getting a bigger place. Something with a spare bedroom. "

"You love your house. You and Marshall put hundreds of hours into renovating it."

Cyrus sighed. "Yes, but it's one bedroom and up until Archer came to stay, it was the perfect size."

"Cyrus, don't sell your house. I don't know Archer that well, but I know he'd hate himself if you did that. Even if the tattoo shop can't happen, the apartment is still his."

"He can't pay rent, Shane." Cyrus waved his knife in the air, blanched, and set it down.

"Let him and me worry about that. You know I'm not hurting for cash, and you know why."

Cyrus eyed me skeptically before eventually letting out a sigh. He grabbed his knife and went back to chopping. "If it were anyone else but you, I'd tell Archer that if it

sounded too good to be true, it was. And I'd tell him to run the other way."

He scoffed and his chopping became more aggressive. "Not that he'd listen to me anyway. I told him not to go into business with his friend. That the quickest way to ruin a friendship was to either become roommates or business partners. But Archer does what Archer wants. Always has."

"It's not like he wanted the guy to clean him out." I knew Cyrus was just venting his frustrations, but I was compelled to stick up for Archer. I'd gotten a glimpse behind the curtain. Archer was tough, but even the strongest walls tended to crack eventually. And Archer had moments when he seemed fragile. One more wrong move, one more hit, and he might crumble.

"I love my brother, Shane, and it makes me feel like an asshole, but I really hope he takes you up on the offer for the apartment. One way or another. I've loved being able to help him, but all he's done since he arrived is slink around town avoiding me. I swear we talked more before he moved here."

I could empathize with Cyrus. I'd gone through similar things with my younger brother, Brodie. I realized I hadn't heard from the youngest Taggart in a while and made a mental note to reach out to him soon.

"Everything will work out, Cyrus." I squeezed his shoulder then told him I was going out front to get shit ready to open. Truthfully, I needed a minute when I wasn't thinking about—or talking about—Archer. My body needed a moment to cool down, because every time I thought about him, my skin itched to be touched by him again. Already I wanted to track him down and beg him to take me again.

But now that I'd gone and invited him to run a business in my building, that probably had to come to an end. I tried to think of that as a good thing, but I did a shit job at convincing myself that I was better off this way.

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Chapter 8

Archer

Shane Taggart was a fucking mystery. Who the hell gave people they just met keys to their fucking building? The whole series of events was fucked up. One minute I was in the park and the next I was balls deep in my brother's boss.

What I wouldn't give to hit that again. Holy shit. Shane was a sight, all needy and quivering under me. It was like someone had broken into my brain and made a man in the shape of all my fantasies. Shane had been built to my specifications. Tall, tattooed, thick, scruffy bottom.

I shifted in my chair. I had to stop thinking of him all naked and— nope . Focus, Archer. He gave me keys. He gave me hope. I figured there had to be a catch, so my first stop was somewhere with food and wifi. I ordered myself dinner, grimacing at the paltry sum in my bank account. While I ate, I googled Shane Taggart. Sure enough, he'd won a lottery. A sum that made my eyes bulge out of my head popped up on the screen.

Deciding that I'd seen enough, I closed the tab and put my phone face down on the table. Shane had the ability to help me, and I couldn't afford to say no. Those were the simple facts. The not-so-simple fact was that I'd fucked him and I wanted to do it again, but if I said yes to the space, it was like saying no to that ever happening again.

I wasn't stupid. Men came and men went, but giving up this opportunity for a piece of ass, one that wasn't even a sure thing, was stupid. Maybe Shane didn't do repeats.

It was a no-brainer. I had to take the space. I was slowly suffocating at Cyrus and Marshall's. They meant well, and I was grateful I'd had somewhere to go, but this felt like a lifeline. I'd been floating in the ocean, clinging to debris, and though Cyrus had tossed me a lifeline, Shane showed up with a whole fucking ship and offered to save me.

Saying no wasn't an option. Flipping my phone over, I brought up Shane's number and dropped him into my contact list. I gave him the initials LS. If anyone asked, it meant Landlord Shane. Only I would know that it meant Little Slut.

From memory, I made a sketch of the space, the parts I'd seen anyway. I hadn't gotten a look at the bedroom or the bathroom, but I was less concerned about those. I sketched out the floor plan and then mapped out where my gear would go. All the equipment at the shop had been mine, and when Clayton took off, he'd at least had the decency not to steal my shit.

After drawing up a few different blueprints for the space, flipped to a new page and started drawing a new business logo. Of course I drew an archer. A nice bow and arrow in several different styles. But that wasn't quite original. I wrinkled my nose. I was good at drawing shit. Less good at naming it.

All of this was moot if I couldn't use the space for a business. Swallowing the last of my coffee, and my anxiety, I fired off a text to Shane telling him that I'd take the space and I'd set up as soon as I got the green light.

My pulse raced when I saw the three gray dots bounce up and down as Shane formulated a response.

Just heard from my guys. You're good to go. All you need is a business license.

The room swam around me and I forgot to breathe for a minute. This morning I'd

been floating in the debris field, trying to see if there was anything useful in the wreckage of my life. And now I had a space for a business and a way to get the fuck off of Cyrus's couch.

When can I move in? I texted him back with shaking hands.

I paid for my dinner while I waited for his answer. I had to get a business license. And borrow a truck to get all my shit out of storage. I had to design a logo and choose a new business name. Set up a new website. New social media. The to-do list in my head kept going and the longer it got, the more excited I became. I'd been without a plan for so long, that having one suddenly fall in my lap was like waking up on a random day and discovering Christmas came early.

Tonight if you want. It's your space now. I'll touch base tomorrow about a lease.

Tonight. I could move in tonight. Like hell I was going to say no to a deal as sweet as that. I was out of the diner and down the street before I could think about it. I wanted to save what little money I had left, so I took the bus back to Cyrus's place. He and Marshall had bought their little fixer-upper a few years ago and they'd turned a turd into a jewel. It was a cute house with a swing on the porch and a white picket fence, and more than anything, I was happy to give them their space back.

Marshall was in the living room, folding laundry while he watched TV. He turned and offered me a smile when I came in.

"Hey, you're back earlier than usual. Did you eat?"

"I just came from dinner actually." I set my messenger bag down by the door and went to the laundry room. Most of my stuff was kept there because I hadn't wanted my things lying around tripping Cyrus and Marshall and cluttering their house. They'd moved some extra linens around and made room for me .

Grabbing my small suitcase out of the bottom of the cupboard, I filled it with my clothes. By the time I went to the bathroom and gathered my stuff from there, Marshall had caught on that something was up.

“Can I ask what you’re doing?” Marshall eyed me with concern.

In all my excitement, I’d forgotten not to be an asshole. “Um, I ran into Shane Taggart today. And we got to talking.” I sent a silent thank you to my body for not betraying that we’d done more than talk. “The space above The Anchor was empty and his brother has been on his ass to rent it. He’s checked into it, and I can run my business out of the space.”

I took my armload of toiletries to my suitcase and dumped them inside. I wasn’t going far.

Marshall followed me to the laundry room. “This is kind of fast, Archer. You should take time to consider your options.”

“What options?” I did my best to keep my voice level, to not be annoyed, because Marshall was a pussy cat, a gentle little kitten, and being mean to him wasn’t anything I’d intentionally do. When he didn’t say anything, I took a deep breath. “Look, I know it’s impulsive, okay. I know a lot can go wrong. A lot has gone wrong already. But I can’t sit around and mope anymore. Somehow or another, I was given this great opportunity to turn shit around and I’d be an idiot to say no.”

Marshall’s lips flattened into a thin line. “Shane is a nice guy.”

“I know.”

“Cyrus adores his boss.”

“I know. What are you trying to say, Marshall?” I zipped my suitcase shut and stared up at him. This was exactly why I needed to get the fuck out of here. I hated having my every move questioned. Did you eat breakfast? Didn’t you have three cups of coffee already? Have you looked for a job? Have you found your ex-business partner yet? It made my skin itch. It was like being examined under a microscope. Living here had given Cyrus and Marshall the impression that they got a say in my decisions.

“Look, Marshall. If Shane didn’t want me to have the space, he wouldn’t have offered it. He doesn’t exactly seem like a guy who does shit he doesn’t want to do. And I won’t fuck anything up for Cyrus.”

Including definitely not sleeping with Shane again. I’d already established that he couldn’t be my landlord and my little slut. It was a shame, but sacrifices had to be made.

“Are you sure this is what you want? You don’t have to rush into things. You can take your time.”

“I’ve made up my mind.” I grabbed my suitcase and eyed Marshall until he stepped out of my way. Impulsive was my middle name. Over the years I’d sort of learned to curb some of the urges I had. It’s why I leaned into my art as much as I did. Doing things with my hands kept them out of trouble. Keeping my mind occupied kept it from wandering. Cyrus had a ten-year Plan A and a ten-year Plan B. I had a messenger bag of art supplies.

“Did you need a ride over?” Marshall asked, keys already jingling in his hand. The thing I loved the best about my brother’s husband was that he knew what battles weren’t his to fight. If I wanted to go, he’d let me. If I wanted to stay, he’d welcome me.

“That would be nice, thank you. Are we going to flip a coin to decide who’s going to

tell my brother?”

Marshall laughed at me. “Hell no, that’s all on you.”

“You’re so loyal.” I envied that. Marshall would jump in front of a moving train for Cyrus. He’d move heaven and earth for him. They were the ride-or-die kind of husbands. I’d managed to find the exact opposite of that in Clayton. A man who only wanted me when it suited him, who I went into business with only for him to take off without a trace. Were it not for Marshall and Cyrus, I might not believe things like love and loyalty still existed.

Hell, until this afternoon I hadn’t believed that there was someone out there who was exactly what I wanted. Then Shane took me upstairs and went to his knees... and rocked my fucking world. And now I’d be living in his building. I’d probably see him every day. But he was off-limits now. I knew better than to shit where I ate, and if I was going to take Shane up on his generous offer, the last thing I wanted was to complicate things by continuing to fuck him. Though it was tempting. Shane was everything I’d always wanted, but never been able to find. Not only had I found the unicorn, I’d ridden it, and now I had to look and not touch.

It was a small trade. A chance to rebuild what was stolen from me, and all I had to do was keep my hands off the sexy bar owner.

No problem.

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Chapter 9

Shane

“Are you out of your mind?” Kieran stood in my kitchen, glowering at me.

It wasn't even noon yet. I'd no sooner crawled out of bed when he knocked on my door.

“I'd offer you a coffee, but I don't think I want to. What's your deal, Kieran? It's too early for this shit.”

Kieran dragged a hand down his face, a telltale sign that he was reaching the end of his rope, but trying desperately to hang on. Out of the three of us, Kieran was the brains. He often called Brodie, our younger brother, the courage. And I was the heart. I had a feeling it was my heart getting me in trouble again.

If this was about Archer, I'd rather let Kieran believe I was thinking with my heart instead of my dick. God, I still ached when I walked. I don't think I'd ever had sex that good and I wanted more. I hated myself a little for being my own cockblock, but Archer deserved a fresh start.

“I heard you leased the space above the bar.”

And there it was.

“You heard correctly.” I grabbed a mug from the mug tree on the counter and robbed

a cup from the coffee pot. Kieran had been appalled at my mug tree when I picked it up at a yard sale, but I'd always wanted one. I didn't even know why. It was another thing Kieran didn't understand, but eventually rolled his eyes and let me have my way in peace.

"How much are you charging?"

I hid my grin with my cup and turned to face him. "Probably not enough."

Kieran sighed. He knew there was no talking me out of something once I made up my mind, and that if I could make it happen with limited impact on my life, I would. I wasn't a huge risk-taker.

"I'm leasing the space to Archer, Cyrus's younger brother. He ran a tattoo shop before his business partner cleaned him out. Legally, he can run a business upstairs once he gets his license sorted. I'm going to charge him what he can afford until he gets his business off the ground."

Kieran's posture softened and he begrudgingly crossed the room to grab a mug from the tree. His lack of comment on it was another win. "I guess I can't be too angry about that," he said.

"You could, but it wouldn't change anything."

"I could, but then you'd probably pay him to rent the space. This isn't as bad as I thought."

"What did you think?" I knocked my shoulder against Kieran's. "Did you think I was going to turn it into some kind of above-the-bar brothel? My very own Twinks-R-Us?"

Kieran let out one of his signature belly laughs. “You’re ridiculous.”

“So are you. I know you worry about me giving all my money away—”

“Because you’re always giving it away. Money doesn’t grow on trees, and you didn’t win unlimited funds, Shane.”

“I know that. This is costing me nothing. Archer rents the space for what he can afford. He gets his business off the ground. Once he’s established, he either finds a better space, or he pays a reasonable amount for rent.”

“Is the upstairs even a good choice for a tattoo shop?”

“Archer didn’t have any complaints. He said he could make it work.”

Archer said a lot of things upstairs and I tried not to think of any of them. I couldn’t pop a random boner standing next to my brother. He probably already suspected something. Kieran had a nose for this kind of thing. He claimed that my face was like an open book to him.

“And you’re sure this is a good idea?”

“I’m sure it’s not a bad idea. You wanted me to get a tenant in the space and I did.”

“This isn’t what I had in mind.”

“It’s what you’re going to get.” I shrugged. “I’m not going to go broke, Kieran.”

“Because I won’t let you. If it were up to you, you’d give everything away.” Kieran tried to make it sound like he thought it was a bad thing, but the reality was that he cared as much as I did. He was just more pragmatic than I was. I was the dreamer.

Kieran was the realist. Sometimes he had to burst my bubble, but it was only because he wanted me to be able to be a dreamer in as many things for as long as I could.

I let his words roll around in my mind. “I mean, there are worse things to do. As long as I still had The Anchor, I’d be okay.”

Kieran gave me a soft, soupy sort of look. “You’re a good man, Shane.”

“Oh gross, don’t get all mushy on me. It’s too early.”

“It’s noon.” Kieran drank the rest of his coffee in two big swallows.

“Exactly. My noon is your five in the morning.” I wanted to check my phone to see if Archer had texted. Maybe I could offer to help him move his stuff in. I’d love a chance to see him again. Even though things between us had to be professional from here on out, I still couldn’t help the way the memories made me feel.

If I wasn’t careful, Archer could become an addiction. I wanted his touch, his words, the sound of his voice thick with arousal and heavy with approval.

“Are you coming for dinner tonight?” I asked him. The Anchor wasn’t Kieran’s favorite place, but sometimes I could convince him to come for a burger.

Kieran shook his head. “I made plans with Mom. I’m supposed to drag you over there kicking and screaming. She knows Mickey is working tonight.”

Mom ran a women’s shelter that I helped fund. One of the volunteers was a sometimes drag queen named Milo, who knew Mickey. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to see my mom, but I definitely wanted to see Archer more.

“Dinner at six?” I asked, knowing that she was a creature of habit.

Kieran only rolled his eyes at me. “Always is.” He set his empty cup in the sink and pulled his keys out of his pocket. “I have places to be and things to do, but I’ll see you there.”

“That wasn’t vague at all. You’re not meeting with the mob, are you?”

“You’re an idiot.”

I grinned at him. “Always.”

Kieran rattled his keys in his hand. “Don’t blow off dinner. Brodie’s birthday is coming up and I think she misses him more than she lets on. They talk, but it’s not the same.”

“Maybe I should stop funding his globetrotting and make him come home.”

Kieran barked out a laugh. “As if that stopped him before.”

“I’ll be at dinner. And I’ll see what I can do about our dear, sweet, baby brother.”

Kieran let himself out and I flopped down on my couch. When I won the money, I didn’t want to be an idiot with it and just piss it away on stupid shit like cars and boats and big fancy houses.

I bought a house and filled it with modest, but comfortable furniture. My couch was light grey and it was like sitting on a fucking marshmallow. It had easily become my favorite purchase. Before the money, I’d had an old futon with a lumpy mattress that never stayed on properly.

My couch was selected after an entire day of sitting on couches in furniture stores. When it was just me, and it usually was, I slept on my couch. I liked it better than

shutting myself away in my bedroom. The bedroom was a lonely space for me. It represented things I wanted but hadn't found. Call me a romantic, but I wanted someone to fall asleep next to every night. Someone to wrap my arms around at two in the morning when I slid into bed.

I pulled up the chats on my phone and opened the one I had going with my youngest brother. I thought about messaging him, but called instead. Maybe he'd be more apt to listen that way.

"Hey," a deep voice, familiar, but still strange after so long just texting, answered.

"Hey, little brother. How's... where are you?"

"In an airport. I'm heading to my next gate to catch my connection."

"Maybe one of those connecting flights will bring you this way sometime soon. We all miss you." I didn't want to pull the Mom card unless I had to.

"Stranger things have happened. Is everyone okay? Is that why you're calling? "

"Everyone's fine. I was talking to Kieran and missed having you around to team up on him with me."

"I'm almost at my gate. Give me some juicy gossip from home."

"I rented the space above the bar to Cyrus's younger brother. He's a tattoo artist and he'll be opening up a shop."

I left out the part where we fucked first. I didn't kiss and tell. And even if I did, I wanted to keep what happened to myself. I'd never been with someone who read me so well, someone who gave me what I needed so thoroughly. I'd only had him once

and I felt empty knowing once was all it would be.

“Shane?”

“What?”

“Did you hear anything I said?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “No, sorry.”

“Dude. Are you okay?” The concern in his voice made me feel a little bad. He was supposed to be traveling and having fun doing his own thing. Not worrying about me because I was a mopey asshole.

“I’m good. I promise. I just got up, that’s all.”

“It’s afternoon.”

“You morning people make me sick. Remind me why I asked you to come home for a visit?”

“Because I’m the best one.”

“Keep telling yourself that.”

“You were the prototype. Kieran was the failed attempt at perfection. I am perfection.”

Airport noises filled the background of the call. Announcements about boarding. The murmur of other people talking as Brodie passed them on the way to his destination.

“That’s not how that works.”

“I have to go, Shane. I’m at my gate and my flight is boarding. ”

“Cutting it close as always.”

“I live on life on the edge, what can I say?”

“Come home. At least think about it. I won’t tell Mom I called. If you come, it can be a surprise.”

“I’ll think about it. I have to go.” The call ended abruptly, but I didn’t mind. I was shocked he’d picked up at all.

After seeing that Archer hadn’t texted, I sent him one asking if he needed a hand with the move. I had a couple hours to kill and if I didn’t occupy myself, I’d just end up at The Anchor anyway.

My phone pinged with a reply from Archer.

Cyrus and Marshall got me covered, but thanks.

He sent a happy face emoji after the text and my phone went silent. I shouldn’t have been so disappointed, but I couldn’t help it. I’d hoped he needed my help. It would’ve been a good excuse to see him.

It was probably for the best that I didn’t. I wanted him too much.

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Chapter 10

Archer

The couch that came with the apartment was sinfully comfortable. And speaking of sin, the things I did to Shane on it whirled through my head. The only thing that stopped me from popping a boner was the presence of my brother, scowling as usual. Sometimes I swore he wasn't happy unless he was unhappy.

Flinging my arm over my eyes, I let out a sigh. "Thanks for helping on such short notice."

My life's possessions had been packed away in a storage unit and I was living out of a single suitcase in Cyrus's cramped house. I was a long way from getting my shop up and going, but everything had been carted up the stairs and stacked in the living room.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Cyrus pushed my feet off the couch and sat down where they'd been.

"Why would it be a bad idea? You like Shane. You're always on about what a good guy he is. You have some sort of hero worship going on for the guy." The notion that Cyrus might have a secret thing for his boss, even though he was married, entered my mind. But I quickly brushed it away as unimportant regardless of whether or not it was true. Cyrus was ridiculously in love with his husband, so whatever he may or may not feel for Shane didn't matter.

“I don’t want things to get awkward if this business venture goes south again.”

Slowly, I uncovered my face and looked at him. “Are you serious right now? Clayton is the only reason my shop failed. We were doing good. If we weren’t, there wouldn’t have been anything for him to steal from me.”

Every time I had to talk about him, it was like rubbing salt in an open wound. I wanted nothing more than to pretend he never existed. I’d cut all ties with him, personally and financially. I’d blocked him on all my social media accounts and changed my phone number. I’d have happily pretended he was never born, but some wounds took longer to heal.

“But you never pressed charges. You rolled over and let him fuck off with your money.”

Cyrus had always been an eye-for-an-eye kind of guy. Me, not so much. If Clayton wanted to fuck me over—cool... great. Go for it. But I’d never be stupid enough to make the same mistake twice. My new shop was mine alone. But for the grace of having a space to start out in, everything was mine. The equipment was mine. The talent was mine. Clayton had been good, but I was better.

“Cy, we’ve been over this. Charging Clayton and taking him to court, tracking him down, all of that takes time and money that I don’t have. It’s easier to wash my hands of the whole thing. To forget he exists entirely and hope one day the karma bus doesn’t brake for losers like him.”

I shoved myself to my feet. “Doesn’t your shift start soon?”

The only downside to working above the bar was going to be how easy it now would be for Cyrus to track me down.

“You shouldn’t let people walk all over you. But I suppose it’s your call.” Cyrus sighed, like it was a burden on him to let me make my own decisions .

“It is. Thank you.” I hated having this conversation with Cyrus and I was glad to be getting some proper distance between us. Cyrus was older than me by seven years. Just old enough to think he knew better. He’d always embraced the protective big brother role, and as much as I appreciated him having my back, it sometimes got stifling.

Cyrus got to his feet and headed for the door. “Maybe now that we don’t live together, I might get to see you more often.”

I grinned at him. “Don’t count on it.”

Cyrus shot me a dirty look, but finally left me alone. It was weird to know that he was just downstairs now, especially when I had spent the past few weeks avoiding him.

I was tired down to my bones and though I wanted nothing more than to curl up on the couch for a few hours, I had a ton of shit to get done.

With my earbuds in and my favorite playlist blasting in my ears, I got to work unpacking. I did a quick sort of boxes and would unpack the bedroom last. For now, I concentrated on getting the living space rearranged. I moved the couch to the other end of the living room and created a space for myself to chill out or to consult with clients.

Getting my equipment up the stairs had been no easy feat and I thanked my lucky stars I had Cyrus to help me. I’d never have hefted everything up there by myself. No wonder Clayton had only taken the cash. Everything else was too big to put in his pocket.

Arranging the tattoo portion of my space was trickier, but I got everything set up the way it needed to be. A chair with plenty of room to move around it. My tattoo machine on a small cabinet I'd thrifted for my supplies. Rubber bands, ink, needles, razors, and all the other little items that made a shop tick.

By the time I got everything sorted the way I wanted, I took stock of my inventory and made a list of things and inks I needed to order. With the tattoo part of my space set up, I could move on to hanging the art. I stopped and took a deep breath and looked around, planning where I wanted to hang my pieces. Music pulsed under my feet like a heartbeat reminding me that a whole world existed outside of the several hundred square feet I was determined to turn into my second chance.

The sun was significantly lower in the sky than when I'd started unpacking and arranging things, and my stomach angrily reminded me that I hadn't eaten since breakfast—and that had been a single breakfast sandwich Cyrus had bought me on the way to the storage unit.

Living above the bar was going to have advantages. After making sure I had my wallet and keys, I locked up and went into the bar. The place was busier than it had been the last time I was there. More than half the tables were full and a few people sat at the bar. I took a seat at the other end from them.

Shane saw me walk in and by the time I sat down, he'd finished serving other customers and made his way over.

"How's the moving going? Cyrus said you got everything up there okay."

"It's going great. The space is already coming together. Maybe you'd like to see it when I have things organized."

My cheeks heated at the thought of taking Shane again on that same couch. Maybe

we'd make it into the bedroom next time. If there was a next time. Him renting the space to me had probably put an end to anything that might have happened between us.

"I'd like that." Shane turned his attention to people at the other end of the bar, calling his name. "Can I get you anything?"

"Yeah, a bottle of whatever's good and a bacon cheeseburger with fries. "

After serving me my drink, Shane was off again. I tried not to watch him work, but I couldn't help it. He was friendly to everyone and they all seemed to genuinely like him. He was an easy man to like. Sitting at the bar, nursing a beer and pretending not to watch every move Shane made wasn't a hardship. It got even better when my food appeared in front of me, delivered by Mickey, the bartender Cyrus had told me all about.

"You must be Archer."

"Guilty as charged." I pulled my burger closer and snatched a fry off my plate. "And you're Mickey. Cyrus has told me all about you."

"Nothing bad, I hope." Mickey said it like he was trying to pass it off as a joke, but I saw the way he held himself, like he was anticipating an emotional blow.

"All good things. Cyrus only pretends to be mean. I think he's under the impression that people who work in kitchens have to be angry all the time. He's actually a softie. But don't tell him I told you that." I lifted the top of my burger bun up and showed it to Mickey. "See, he knows the burger was for me, so I got extra pickle. He's soft."

Mickey pretended to zip his lips. "I'll never tell."

Mickey had to go help another customer, but he returned a few minutes later when I was half done with my burger. “I heard you’re renting the upstairs.”

“As soon as I get everything sorted, I’m going to run a tattoo shop up there. It’s what I was doing before I moved back.” I didn’t want to tell Mickey how I’d been fucked over. It was bad enough that everyone else under the sun knew my business.

“Shane let me live there while I got my shit sorted too.” Mickey stole a glance at him and it was easy to see that Mickey had some serious hero worship going on .

“He’s easy on the eyes.” I caught Mickey’s attention with that and he gaped at me. I wiggled my eyebrows at him.

Mickey straightened. “He’s like a brother to me.”

If I’d have been less tired, I might have been able to let the shame that bloomed in my chest fall away, but it took up residence in my exhausted body. I’d wanted to see if Mickey had a thing for Shane and he’d delivered my answer to me. It should’ve made me feel better to know that he and the twink didn’t have anything going on, though Shane didn’t strike me as the type to fuck his staff.

And looks could be deceiving, but the way Mickey looked at Shane should have been a dead giveaway that they wouldn’t be compatible in bed. Not the way Shane and I were.

I finished my meal and Mickey took my dirty plate away with compliments to the chef. The only thing I hadn’t eaten was the useless sprig of parsley on the side. The rush of patrons had slowed, giving Shane time to cross over to my stool.

“Another?” He motioned to my empty bottle.

“I’m good for now. But if you want to bring a couple of those upstairs when you’re done here, I’d love to have one then.”

I didn’t want him to say no. Even though he should. Inviting him up for a drink seemed suddenly reckless. He was my brother’s friend. His boss. My landlord. My lifeline. He’d looked out and saw me struggling, treading water, and had reached down and pulled me up, offering me a second chance to get things right.

Maybe a little of it was spite because of the way Cyrus had spoken to me before, like I was the one that had ruined my business the first time around when all I’d done was trust the wrong person.

I shouldn’t want to complicate anything. Revoking my invitation should have been my next move, but instead I sat and held my breath and stared up at Shane, daring him to say no .

“I won’t be off until late.”

I shrugged and slid off my stool. “I’ll be up if you change your mind.”

“That wasn’t a no,” Shane told me. What he didn’t say was that it should be. We both knew it should be. We should take whatever happened between us, forget about it, and move on like adults.

“But was it a yes?” I held still, as if I’d scare away the right answer if I made any sudden moves.

“See you after last call.” Shane didn’t smile, but I saw the hint of color in his cheeks. I hoped he was imagining all the things I wanted to do to him when I got him alone again. I knew I was.

“I look forward to it.” I held his gaze longer than strictly necessary before hightailing it out of there and slipping back upstairs. Last call was hours away, but my previously exhausted body thrummed to life with a fresh burst of energy.

Cyrus would kill me if he knew what had gone on between Shane and me. He’d resurrect me and kill me twice if he knew that I wanted it to happen again. I should stay away from Shane and I knew it. But no one had fit under me like he had. No one had wanted to the way he’d wanted to and I held onto that with both hands, knowing I should let it go.

I couldn’t.

For better or worse, I was addicted to Shane Taggart.

Chapter 11

Shane

I had my fist raised to knock when the door swung open and a very eager Archer yanked me inside. With a fistful of shirt in one hand, he reached up and rugged me down into a kiss. There was no time to second-guess myself or whether or not I should be up here in the dead of night with a couple bottles of beer and a condom in my back pocket.

Archer was on his toes kissing me before the door was shut. The beers I held by the necks in my left hand clanked together as I stepped further into the space. I nudged the door shut with my foot and wrapped my arms around him.

Archer kissed like a force of nature. He consumed me. Every thought I'd had on the way up the stairs was swept away by that first taste of his mouth on mine. Archer tugged at my hair, my shirt. All hands and eager lips and desperation. I fumbled the beer, catching my grip at the last second.

Laughing, I pulled away and handed him one of the bottles. He eyed the drink, then took mine too. He set them aside and, in one smooth motion, reached for the hem of his shirt and whipped it off over his head.

His gaze bore into me and I felt stupidly vulnerable, like he could look at me and see how fucking undone I was from one kiss .

“Is that all you brought?” Archer eyed me, but my gaze drifted down his bare torso to

the low-slung pajama pants held up only by a loosely tied drawstring. Archer was slender to the point of skinny, the type of body that people always wanted to fatten up. To me, he was perfect. Slim and sexy with this unwavering take-me-or-leave-me type of confidence.

I reached into my back pocket and pulled the condom out.

“Good boy.” Archer smirked at me and I swear he had x-ray vision to watch my heart hammer harder when he said those words. I liked praise—who didn’t? Everyone wanted to be good; I knew I wasn’t alone in that regard. But as all things, the men who usually wanted me wanted to hear those words from my lips, not gift them to me without me asking. It was like Archer somehow got hold of a copy of Shane Taggart for Dummies and had skipped straight to the chapters about sex.

But there he was, bare chested. He gripped his dick through the fabric of his pajama pants and gave it a squeeze.

Archer plucked the condom from my fingers and let his eyes wander over my body. “Strip.”

I’d never been fucking hornier or more willing to do as I was told. I unrolled the sleeves of my shirt, then worked on the buttons. I went slowly, letting Archer’s gaze wash over me like his desire increased with every inch of skin I exposed.

After I shrugged out of my shirt and tossed it aside, Archer stepped closer. He dragged the blunt ends of his fingers down my chest. “You’re a fucking sight. Look at you. So fucking big.”

Archer looked like he wanted to say something else, but he snapped his mouth shut. “Pants.”

I flicked the button of my jeans open and shoved them off, taking my briefs and socks with them. I wobbled when I realized I was still in my shoes and those had to come off too. So it wasn't the most graceful thing I'd ever done, but when I regained my balance and stood up, the look on Archer's face made me weak in the knees.

There was something about him that I was drawn to. It might have been his confidence, or the way he accepted the things I didn't want as much as he embraced the things I did. But there was more to it than that. There was a look in his eyes sometimes that made me want to take care of him. Maybe he didn't let many people do that for him, but I wanted to be the one to chase the shadows out of his eyes.

"On your knees." Archer's voice was barely a whisper, but I obeyed anyway. Sinking slowly to the floor, I kept my eyes on him the whole time. He stared at me, daring me to look away.

Once I was down on the floor, he closed the distance between us. His hand sank into my hair and he pulled, yanking my head back. Now it was his turn to stoop down to meet my mouth. To tower over me and kiss me as though I were the smaller man. My mouth softened for him, allowing his tongue to sweep inside and caress mine. The whimper it tore out of me might have been embarrassing if I'd have given a single shit about that kind of thing. Maybe I would have, but Archer's fingers tightened in my hair, pulling on my scalp.

Then his mouth was gone and my face was being pressed against him. He ground his hips, digging his cock into the side of my face.

"Do you want that?"

I ran my hands up the backs of his legs. Cupping his ass, I opened and mouthed his cock through the fabric of his pants. He twitched magnificently under my ministrations.

Archer's laugh was deep and throaty. "Someone's eager."

He didn't loosen his hold on my hair. My scalp burned and the sensation of it must have been connected to my dick because the harder he tugged, the more my cock throbbed and leaked .

"Take my dick out. Get it nice and wet for you."

I pulled his pajama pants down and let them pool around his ankles. He stepped out of them as I was nuzzling in, burrowing against his skin, breathing in the scent of him.

"Do you need a special invitation?" Archer asked, pulling my hair harder.

I flicked my gaze up to meet his and if I hadn't been kneeling, the naked want in his eyes would have knocked me over. The intensity of his stare was intimidating, but it was also invigorating. As was the moan that tore out of him when I wrapped my lips around his cock and sucked him deep into my mouth. I took him all the way down to the root, my hands digging into his ass cheeks, and I held him there. Archer swore. He cursed my name, but never let go. Never told me what to do next.

"Oh fuck, Shane. That's so good."

I clung tighter, like I could wring the words out of him that I longed to hear.

"You're sensational."

I pulled back, satisfied with myself for earning the praise. Oxygen hit my lungs as I gulped in a breath. My head swam even as I went to do it again. Archer's other hand came down to cup my cheek. The condom was still in his fingers, and I could feel it trapped between us. An annoyance, but necessary for now.

I gave myself over to the task of pleasuring him. Of being whatever he wanted me to be. He let me lead for a while, and I forced whimpers and moans out of him until he told me to be still. His hips moved. Slowly at first. Shallow thrusts that were more of a tease than anything. My blood raced through my body and all I heard over the sound of it pulsing in my ears were Archer's ragged gasps as his thrusts increased in pace and depth .

I couldn't look away from him as he fucked my face. I didn't want to. Hell, I'd film this for my own personal private porn library if he'd let me. I'd never been the type to want to see myself get fucked, but I ached to see what it looked like. His slender form pulled tight. I wanted to see the lines of his body as he stood over me, not towering, yet owning me. I was putty in his hands.

And bereft when he pulled out.

Archer laughed at me, and bent to brush his lips against mine. "It's been a long day, Shane. I want you in my bed where I can fuck the shit out of you then roll over and pass out for the next twelve hours."

"I like the sound of that."

"Then get to the bedroom and get on your back."

Stupid hope flared in my chest. As much as I liked being fucked from behind, I wanted to kiss Archer. I wanted to be wholly consumed by him, like breathing was a gift he gave me. I'd ached for it last time, that closeness that eluded me when he'd drilled into me. When we'd shared that sloppy, sideways kiss, everything clicked into place. I'd been hooked ever since.

I stretched out on his bed. One I'd bought, that Mickey had used, that now belonged to Archer. I'd never been in it before. The room was a disaster of half-unpacked

boxes and a heap of clothes in an open bag in the corner, but everything faded to noise, then to nothing at all when Archer walked into the room.

He grabbed the lube from the nightstand and then knelt on the bed between my spread legs.

“Get yourself ready for me.” He flicked the cap of the lube open and I willingly held out my hand.

I smeared the lube over my hole, then pressed it inside. I made quick work of the stretch. If I were too loose, it wouldn’t feel the same when he pressed his cock inside me. I wanted just enough to keep the pain away, and maybe he knew that. Archer seemed to know shit about me that I didn’t know myself.

“That’s enough.”

I stopped the minute he said so and pulled my fingers out of my ass. “Good boy.”

Fuck. I love that so much.

He was going to be the death of me. I watched him concentrate on rolling the condom down his cock, then he slathered it with lube. Archer scooted forward a little, and then he was pressing against my hole.

“Open for me, Shane,” he said. “Let me in.”

He slid home with a gasp. I keened, reaching for him. I dug my hands into his hips and pulled him closer, tighter, and made him go deeper.

“Hands above your head.” Archer placed his hands on my chest, teasing my nipples with his thumbs. It was exquisite.

I lifted my hands above my head and then he was swooping down, thrusting into me as his mouth slanted over mine. Devouring me in a way I'd never been devoured before. I almost forgot myself and moved my arms, but I forced them to stay in place. I'd die if he stopped. His cock was perfect. So big. I was a contrary asshole because now that we were kissing, connected in all the ways two people could connect, I wanted him to put me on my face and fuck me through the floor. I'd let him walk on me if he wanted.

Anything.

I'd let him do anything.

"Don't stop." I panted against his mouth. My body was on fire from making myself stay still. I wanted to wrap my arms around him again and yank him closer. I wanted to flip myself over and lie prostrate at his feet .

Archer slapped the outside of my thigh and my eyes shot open. I gaped at him, stunned by his action, but not turned off. Not even in the slightest.

"Who's in charge?" Archer slowed his thrusts, dragging his cock in and out of my hole at a maddeningly slow pace.

I wanted to climb the walls. Or fling myself off a bridge. Anything to stop the agony.

"You are."

"That's good. Now... ask me nicely." Archer flashed a wicked smile at me.

It thrilled me to my bones to know that he was getting off on this as much as I was. Maybe more.

“Please, don’t stop. Please.” I begged shamelessly. There was no point in pretending that I didn’t want whatever he’d dish out and then some. “Fuck me harder, Archer. I need you.” I hadn’t meant to say that last bit, but it must have been fine because the next thing I knew, powerful hands dug into my flesh and Archer slammed into me, forcing me up the bed a little.

He grinned at me fondly, but also devilishly. “There’s my little slut.”

He reached up and slid his thumb into my mouth and I sucked on it like it was his cock. I could see the praise in his eyes even if it didn’t tumble past his lips.

“Please. Please,” I begged, lifting my knees up, drawing them closer to my chest. Archer took the hint and pressed his hands against the backs of my legs, folding me further in half.

“You like that?” Archer snapped his hips, pegging my prostate. I bit back a scream and my hands scrabbled for anything to grip onto.

“Love—love it.” My brain was overloading and my power of speech was the first thing to go. Archer sped his pace, brutally fucking into me without pause. He held my gaze and I almost looked away from the intensity of it. He was larger than life and powerful in ways I’d never dreamed.

“You look so good like this,” Archer said. “Sweet and sweaty and slutty and mine.”

I took the word mine, wrapped it around myself, and let it caress all the little parts of me that never thought they’d hear something as sweet as that said to me. I knew it wasn’t anything to be taken seriously. We said all kinds of things when we were naked and writhing and running on adrenaline, lust, and two working brain cells.

Mine was bedroom talk. Pillow promises. Sweet in the moment, but nothing to take

to heart. Yet I wanted to. I kept that to myself. I didn't beg to be his, even though it's all I wanted in that moment. It wasn't the present moment that was the issue, it was the millions of moments that came after that mattered. For now, I was his little slut. His good boy. And later I'd be his landlord. I'd be nothing.

I tried to be okay with that.

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Chapter 12

Archer

Something about Shane made me greedy. Ravenous. I wanted to carve out a hole the shape of me and live in him. I loved the way he gave himself over to me, as if it cost him nothing. But I saw the way he looked at me when I told him he was good, and the way he shuddered without meaning to. I knew it cost him more than the nothing he pretended.

Stretched out underneath me, Shane was a fucking sight. All thick and strong and utterly lost to me. He gripped the pillow like it was the only thing keeping him from flying apart. Maybe it was. I knew the feeling all too well.

Shane's body was hot and tight, and something about having a guy so much bigger than me under me, boneless and whimpering, panting my name, begging. It did things to me that I couldn't put a name to. All because a man with thighs thick and strong enough to pop my head like a grape had his knees pressed up around his ears while I drilled into him.

I released my hold on his legs and they wrapped around me as I dove down, slanting my mouth over his. As much as I loved hearing every whimper and moan that spilled out of him, I needed the taste of him on my tongue. I needed to breathe him in and hoard every sensation I could for later. Because we couldn't keep doing this for obvious reasons. Reasons which made no sense right now, but probably would when I wasn't lost to the heat of Shane's body.

Shane kissed me back like we'd been parted for centuries and not minutes. Like we were long-lost soulmates finally reunited. I tried not to let it fuck with my head, how much I liked kissing him, but the thought was there that his kisses were better than anything I'd ever experienced. I'd never been a butterflies-in-the-stomach kind of person, but when Shane kissed me, my entire body felt like tiny wings were fluttering inside me, under my skin, trying to break out or maybe trying to show me what it was like to fly.

"Fuck, I'm close," Shane keened, hands still gripping the bed.

"Do you want to touch yourself?" I asked him, licking and kissing a trail up the side of his neck. I'd slowed my pace to catch my breath, but my heart still thudded against my chest like it was trying to break free.

Shane shook his head like he was suddenly shy and had lost the power of speech.

"Did you want me to touch you?" I let the words out against the curve of his neck. I kissed the spot of skin below his ear. He trembled at that, his ass clamped tighter around my cock. "Tell me what you want and I'll give it to you. You've been such a good boy, you deserve a reward."

I might have missed the way his breath caught had I not been right up against him. The word ghosted out of his mouth, barely audible.

"Please."

"Please what? Be a good little slut and tell me what you want."

God, I loved the way he loved that. The way his body responded to me even when words failed him. The way his breathing changed and his legs tightened around me even the tiniest amount, though he tried desperately to stay still. Everything about

him was intoxicating .

“Touch me. Touch me, please, please fucking touch me.” Shane unraveled. It was beautiful. He was beautiful. Stunning, all curled up underneath me, ass stretched around my cock, arms pinned above his head with nothing but my word keeping them there.

I reached between us and took hold of his cock. Precum had pooled on his stomach and I gathered that up and smeared it on his dick, smoothing the way only a little. Just enough.

“That’s a good boy. My little slut. So hot and tight for me. You can come now. Come whenever you’re ready, little slut. Show me how much you love having my cock buried inside you.”

My mouth was running away with me, but I didn’t give a fuck. I couldn’t stop myself from talking. It was like breathing. Even if I held my breath, eventually I’d have to breathe again. Shane didn’t seem to mind. Every syllable that came out of my mouth was for him, for us really. Because I loved the way he reacted to my voice, to my praise.

I smeared a bead of precum over the head of Shane’s dick with my thumb and that small move seemed to be his undoing. He cried out, voice hoarse and thick and desperate. He said my name when he came, like I was the only thing left in the world. It sounded like equal parts elation and disbelief.

“Archer, holy fuck... shit, yes. Please, please, Archer.” Shane came, thick ribbons pulsing out of him. His ass clamped around my cock, squeezing it, milking it.

“Please what?”

Shane lifted his head and captured my mouth with his. And that, of all things, was my undoing. My release hit me like a hurricane, slamming into me, making my hips snap harder, bury myself deeper. I wanted there to be no condom between us. I'd flood his ass with my cum and keep it there in the deepest parts of him like a secret stamp of ownership. He'd let me too. I knew he would .

Our kisses slowed as our releases faded away. Eventually, Shane lowered his arms and wrapped them around me and I didn't have it in me to mind. I let myself enjoy being held. Being touched like I meant something, was worth something. I basked in the feeling until my face stung with beard burn and I collapsed in a boneless heap on top of Shane. My cum-sticky hand was still trapped between us and my cock had slid out of his ass, the condom hanging off it, but I'd be damned if I could find the energy to move.

It was Shane who got up and removed the condom. He took it to the bathroom and disposed of it. He returned with a facecloth and sat down on the bed, and gently taking my hand in his, he wiped it clean, paying special attention to the skin between my fingers.

A million things we should talk about hovered between us, but I was suddenly too fucking tired to care about any of them.

"You could stay." I told him, knowing he wouldn't. But I'd let him if he did. I'd curl myself around him, a ridiculous idea given the difference in our sizes.

"Can't." Shane sounded like he regretted that he couldn't. It was probably one of the things that hung in the silence between us.

"That's okay too," I told him.

My hand was clean but he held it in his still. I saw him look at it, like maybe my

hands held my secrets and if he studied the lines in my palms, he'd be able to find the key to unlock them. Or maybe he was trying to find a way to let me down easy. I'd never had this, whatever it was between us. It was perfect. Too good to be true. I didn't want to give it up.

I didn't think of myself as a selfish person, but Shane brought it out in me. Being with him made me not care about anyone else but myself—and him—and how we fit together. How good it was between us even though we'd just met .

“We should—” Shane started, but stopped.

He looked at me with those big, pleading eyes of his. They hid nothing from me. He was just as fucked over this as I was. Just as greedy and anxious to keep it as I was.

“We should do whatever we want,” I supplied, twisting my hand to link our fingers together. “Whatever we want.” I held his gaze as I repeated myself.

There were a million reasons we shouldn't and we both knew it. But, post-orgasm, the world was still fuzzy and distant and easy to ignore. I'd had enough of reality for a while. Being with Shane chased some of the unhappiness away. It was like the sun coming out after a long, dark winter. No sane person would willingly shut themselves away from the sun.

Forcing myself to move, I rose and straddled Shane. I kept our hands linked and draped the other one around his neck. Leaning forward, I rested my forehead against his.

“We're adults, Shane. We're adults who are attracted to each other and have incredible sex. So long as we both remain willing, why should we stop?”

“It's not that simple.”

“It is. It can be.” I wasn’t ready to give this up yet, but if he wanted to stop, I wouldn’t argue with him. I knew how to take no for an answer.

But Shane didn’t tell me no. He wrapped his other arm around my waist and tilted his head until our mouths met. He held me close and kissed me slow. His hand tightened on mine and though I feared the worst, he looked at me as he brought my hand to his lips. The world’s softest kiss brushed against my knuckles.

“It’s irresponsible.”

“So be irresponsible with me.”

Shane kissed my hand again before lowering it and releasing his grip from mine. I had to stop him from saying no. No was permanent. No was a decision he couldn’t unmake, even though I knew that was stupid. People changed their minds all the time.

“How about we take it as it comes?” I suggested. “We don’t have to plan for it to happen again, but maybe we don’t have to go out of our way to avoid it either.”

A million arguments sprang to mind, but I tamped them down. I liked him, but there was a good sort of begging and a bad sort of begging and I was teetering on the fence between them.

Shane eyed me as though he knew what I was saying. Like he saw through the bullshit and knew all the things I wasn’t willing to say. I didn’t want this to stop, but I didn’t know how to ask for it to go on. Shane had already given me so much, it seemed unreasonable to want more.

A million reasons not to loomed over us, but only one thrummed in my chest. It was the only one that I cared about. I wanted it. Him. And everything about him that he was willing to give me. But only if he was willing.

I didn't care that we shouldn't. My life was full of shouldn'ts. I shouldn't have gone into business with Clayton. I shouldn't have taken my eye off the money the first time I noticed a discrepancy in the books. I shouldn't have let him get away with it. But all of those regrets I'd racked up were things that I'd done. Choices that I'd deliberately made. I didn't want to regret letting go of Shane too easily.

Shane nodded, just once. But it was enough to bring a smile to my face.

"I don't suppose you want to stay over after all? "

Shane shook his head. "I can't." Again, it sounded like regret but he leaned in and kissed me, then stood and gathered his clothes off the floor and tugged them on.

"See you tomorrow, Shane." I said his name instead of calling him my little slut, but his cheeks turned that delicious shade of pink as though I had.

Chapter 13

Shane

The house I bought for my mom had been turned into a women's shelter, which meant security. I used to have wait for someone to let me in while I shielded the boxes from the bakery in my arms from the driving rain, but I'd recently paid for a new, thicker door, with programmable keyless entry. I'd finally told mom it would be safer if the girls didn't need a key to get in, in the case of an emergency. The security was unfortunately necessary. Not every man took being left with grace and maturity.

Mom met me at the door and ushered me inside. She had her apron on, which meant she was likely baking. "It's really coming down. You're soaked through. Let me take these and you can get your shoes off."

"Thanks, Mom."

Kieran and I got our looks from our father. He'd been a mountain of a man. Beefy and thick with intense blue eyes and a mouth that hadn't known how to crack a smile. He'd loved Mom, though, and us boys. Just not enough to stop himself from draining the accounts, losing the house, and walking away after.

Brodie looked like Mom. Short and slender with round, doe eyes and dimples when they smiled. Like a true middle child, I often thought I didn't fit anywhere. But with Brodie gallivanting around the world, and with the work I did at the shelter to help Mom, the notion that I didn't fit could no longer take hold. I knew it was leftover hard feelings from childhood and that it was stupid, but it wouldn't be the first—or

last—stupid idea I ever had.

“What smells good?” After I’d taken my shoes and coat off, I went to the kitchen. Mom was at the stove, stirring. A new face was at the counter chopping things. Mom probably gave her that job so she’d feel secure with a strange man wandering into the house. I tried to limit how often I came here for that reason. And sometimes Mom would text and ask that I wait a few days before coming over.

“Vanessa and I are making chili. I see you brought french bread for us, so we’ll make that into garlic bread later. How are things at the bar?”

“You’ll have to come by one night and I’ll buy you dinner.”

“Maybe one day soon. I’ve got a few irons in the fire just now. Vanessa, dear, can you add the mushrooms now and then I’ll get you to open those jars of tomato sauce.”

I loved watching my mom in the kitchen. She’d always been cooking and wanting to take care of people. It wasn’t hard to figure out where I got my urge to fix things for people from. Mom had always been the first one to her feet when someone was in need. Even when we didn’t have anything, Mom would find ways to help if she could.

Seeing her in her own little house, along with her brood of daughters that came and went, made me glad that I was able to give this to her. A lot of the women who left here went on to rebuild their lives and they often came back to see Mom and have coffee with some of the new residents and give them hope.

Mom set a cup of coffee in front of me. “Kieran tells me you have a new tenant.”

“I’m sure that’s all he told you.” I rolled my eyes. Even as an adult, I felt like Kieran

was still tattling on me .

Mom patted my shoulder. “He worries about us bleeding hearts.”

“Better to have a bleeding heart than no heart at all.”

Mom’s mouth twitched as she suppressed a smile. “Be nice to Kieran. He puts up with a lot between the both of us.”

Mom took a seat next to me and Vanessa kept the counter between us as she puttered around making the chili according to Mom’s specifications.

Some of the women who came here didn’t have many skills beyond surviving. Mom always did her best to teach them as much as they wanted to learn. For some women, that was nothing. They wanted a safe place to plan their next move and then they were gone. At one point, I asked Mom if that bothered her, but she shook her head and explained that everyone healed in their own way on their own time.

“Cyrus’s younger brother ran into trouble a while back and he’s been staying with Cyrus and Marshall.”

“Didn’t they buy that adorable house? I don’t seem to remember it being very large.”

“Archer was sleeping on the couch. He used to own a tattoo shop and wants to get it going again, so I’ve leased him the space above the bar.”

“Kieran made it sound like you’d given him the building.”

“Kieran wants me to rent the space for more than Archer can currently afford. If it wasn’t for the fact that I know I can trust him more than I could ever trust anyone else, I’d hire someone different to look after my finances.”

“Oh, don’t talk that way. You know he just wants you to be looked after.”

I was a grown man who was capable of looking after himself, but I didn’t say that.

“Have you heard from Brodie recently? ”

“He emailed about a week ago and moaned about missing my cooking, among a few other things, so I told him if he was so miserable that he should come home for a while. Then at least he could be miserable here and complain to my face.”

“Did it work?” Mom was often trying different ways to get the baby of the family to come home for a while.

“He hasn’t responded yet, but that’s not unusual for him.”

My phone buzzed in my pocket, but I ignored it. Mom hated cell phones at the table and I wasn’t going to stay long anyway. Whatever it was could wait.

“He’s about due for a visit, though. He usually blows in like a tornado once every six months or so and it’s been longer than that now. I’m sure he’ll be home soon.”

Even before I had money to funnel to his account, my little brother had been a resourceful person. There were programs that let you volunteer in a country for a short amount of time in exchange for room and board. You weren’t allowed to earn money, but it offered people a way to see the world. Brodie had done that a few times and had no trouble using the opportunities to his advantage.

Now with money trickling into his account, he didn’t have to depend on the kindness of strangers. It made traveling easier and safer for him, and it lifted a load off our mom’s shoulders, which was the only reason he took the money.

Vanessa excused herself and skittered out of the kitchen, taking the long way around so she didn't have to pass by too close to me. I never took offense to the way some of the women gave me a wide berth. I used to argue about the sense of coming here at all, but Mom had simply stated that sometimes it did the girls good to see a man who wasn't a villain .

"She's come a long way in a short time. A week ago, she might have stuck you with that knife."

I drank my coffee and didn't comment on the mental image she'd given me.

"Kieran cares about you. If he's harsh sometimes, remember it comes from a good place."

"I know." I let out a sigh and my phone buzzed again. I itched to see who it was. Truthfully, I hoped it was Archer. I'd agreed to be irresponsible with him, to not say no to things happening again if they were meant to happen again. And the more I tried not to want him, the harder it was to stop thinking about him. I felt like a kid with his nose pressed against the window of a toy store. All I had to do was go inside and I could have whatever I wanted, but something kept my feet from moving.

When my phone buzzed a third time, I gave Mom an apologetic smile. "Sorry, the stupid thing has been going insane."

I yanked my phone out of my pocket and was greeted with pictures Archer had sent me of the upstairs. He'd been holed up there for the past few days, only venturing out to eat and harass Cyrus. By the looks of the pictures, he'd finished unpacking and setting his space up for business. He'd hung art after being given permission to put holes in the walls.

I hadn't had a chance to see much of his work up close, but that was easy to rectify.

But I knew what would happen if I went upstairs to have a look. If I were to get another tattoo, and I went to Archer for the work, it would give us an excuse to spend time together. And I wouldn't mind letting him get his hands on me. I'd have to see his work before I committed to anything, but the idea was hard to shake.

I shot him a text asking him to bring some examples of his work to the bar tonight so I could see them. I had other ideas on ways to help Archer get his business off the ground and get back on his feet, but I didn't want to have the conversation on the phone.

"Shane Taggart, are you texting at my table?" Mom chided.

"Just a business thing, Mom. Sorry." I tucked my phone away without waiting for a reply from Archer. I'd have to get going soon anyway to meet the liquor delivery.

Mom eyed me like she knew all my secrets, but wasn't going to spill them, even to me. A quick glance at the time had her getting to her feet.

"I hate to rush you out the door, but Maggie is due to arrive."

Maggie was a social worker who frequently stopped by to talk to the women about their options and the programs available to them.

I stood and gave Mom a quick hug. "Text me if you need anything."

"You know I will."

"You know that's a lie."

Mom walked me out and, after another brief hug, she went back inside. The locks clicked into place behind me and I made a mad dash for my truck. It didn't matter

how fast I ran, the rain soaked me through again in seconds. It had been years since I'd seen rain come down this heavy.

I got equally soaked running from my truck to the bar. I threw the door open and ducked inside just as my phone buzzed in my pocket. It was another text from Archer. This time it was a gif of a wet dog shaking the water out of its fur. Another quickly followed. This time it was a drowned rat.

Need a hand drying off? Archer sent.

Arousal thrummed through me. I could feel his presence like he was in the room with me. I blushed, even though there was no reason to. Archer had this uncanny ability to turn me into a whimpering puddle of a person and I was quickly discovering that this talent wasn't reserved for in-person encounters only.

I have a delivery to get ready for. Raincheck?

Have it your way, funny man. Still want me to bring those samples by tonight?

Eight sound good? I'll buy dinner.

It's a date.

Archer sent a winky face and I tucked my phone away. Before I gave into the urge to run upstairs and let him have his way with me, I took my wet jacket off and got to work getting ready for the liquor delivery.

Chapter 14

Archer

It turned out that I was dying to get my hands on Shane. I wanted him in my chair. Leaving my ink on his body would feel like marking him as mine. It would be like claiming him, even though I didn't have the right. He didn't belong to me. That was a pipe dream. One day soon, Shane was going to wake up and go back to being his responsible self, but until then I intended to enjoy his attention.

I was dangerously close to becoming attached to Shane. It was an unenviable position to be in. Friends with benefits with an expiration date of whenever Shane grew tired of risking his friendship with Cyrus. That was one of the reasons I itched to get him in my chair. I wanted Shane to have some part of me to take with him. That way I could pretend that once upon a time I'd been important to him. Even if it had only been for a few minutes.

The Anchor was packed when I made my way inside. There was an empty seat at the bar and I made my way over to it before anyone got any bright ideas. I slid onto the stool and caught Shane's eye. He smiled at me and finished serving the other customers first before making his way over to me.

"It's busy tonight." I said when he appeared in front of me. God, he was fucking hot. Tight jeans, button down with the sleeves rolled up revealing his forearms. Fucking suspenders. They should be illegal. Apparently my dick liked suspenders. I raked my gaze over him, committing him to memory.

“It’s insane. I probably won’t have a chance to look at your work tonight.” Shane looked genuinely sad about that. “Can I get you anything? It’s on the house.”

“Whatever’s on tap is fine.” I pulled my wallet out and counted out a couple bills. “And the burger of the day.”

“We don’t have a burger of the day.”

“Just a cheeseburger with bacon, extra pickles.” I put my money on the bar, but Shane ignored it. Instead of ringing my order in, Shane went to the kitchen to tell Cyrus that he needed a burger. I motioned for Mickey, the other bartender, to come over.

“Is there a way to ring in a cheeseburger without Shane noticing?”

Mickey grinned at me and shook his head. “Sorry, but Shane does what Shane wants.”

“I’d ask how he can afford to constantly give shit away, but I know the answer to that.” I looked around until I located the tip jar. Before Shane came back, I tucked my money into the jar and took my seat again.

Shane returned a second later and had to pour a bunch of drinks to catch up. I loved watching him work. He smiled at everyone like they were an old friend he hadn’t seen in a while. He was funny and he had an excellent memory for what people usually asked for.

Without thinking too much about it, I moved my drink out of the way and took my sketchbook from my bag. My samples were tucked away safely in a different folder, but I never left home without my sketchbook. I set it on the bar and grabbed a pencil out of my bag and got to work sketching Shane. He caught on right away, but rather

than ask to see it or come badger me with questions, he left me alone except for the occasional glance my way .

When my dinner arrived, I had a rough sketch of Shane. I planned to fill it in with the details later, but I was more interested in capturing the way he looked like he belonged there, totally at home behind the bar. It made my chest ache because I wanted that for myself.

Shane set my plate down next to me and nudged it closer. “Even Michelangelo needed to eat.”

I relented and flipped my sketchbook shut and tucked it away. Shane slid my burger in front of me. Snatching a fry off my plate, I held his gaze and popped it in my mouth.

“I know you’re busy tonight, but you could come over after and see the samples. That way you can take your time looking them over.”

I loved the way his cheeks flushed and his gaze heated when he looked at me. Maybe one day I’d sit down here while he closed out the bar and then have my wicked way with him in unsanitary places. I wasn’t exactly tall enough to bend him over the bar and fuck him, but I could improvise.

“Can I think about it?” Shane asked.

It sounded like a no. Like he didn’t want to, but couldn’t figure out how to tell me in front of a bar full of people. It was possible that I was reading too much into it, but I’d already gotten my hopes up.

I plucked another fry off my plate. “Of course,” I told him before eating it. I tried to make my face as neutral as possible. Sure, I was disappointed, but I was hardly

surprised. Shane was the epitome of an upstanding person. If he were a cartoon character, he'd be both the fairy godmother and Jiminy Cricket all wrapped up in one hot-as-fuck package.

I finished my burger and fries like a good boy. I thought about staying downstairs and sketching Shane some more, but it was like being a kid with no money, standing outside the bakery looking at all the cookies you couldn't have. Sliding off my stool, I caught Shane's gaze and motioned toward the door. He was buried in drink orders and I saw the way his happy mask slipped for a second when he realized I was leaving.

It shouldn't have made me feel good, but it did. I liked believing that he liked having me there, even if he was too busy to talk. I didn't mind that either. Watching him work was a pleasure in itself, but I'd had enough torture for one night.

I shot him a smile and a nod and then tucked tail and left. As I was going out, more people were coming in. Shane had his work cut out for him tonight. It was best that I went upstairs and kept to myself, and freed up space for paying customers.

The soundproofing between the floors was good, but not one hundred percent. The bass of the music thumped through the floor like a heartbeat as I set my bag down on the couch and toed my shoes off. It wasn't loud like a club would've been, but it was still as loud as you'd expect living above a bar to be.

I changed out of my jeans into a pair of loose-fitting sleep pants and a shirt that had seen better days. During daylight hours, I kept the blinds open, but at night it made me feel like a bug in a jar, so I quickly closed them before settling down on the couch with my sketchbook.

Instead of finishing the sketch I started downstairs, I flipped to a new page and started over. Of course it was Shane I drew again, but this time I drew him the way I liked to

see him best. Naked and trembling for me. All bare skin and big, soulful eyes. Thinking about him was a dangerous pastime. It made me want things I shouldn't.

Shane had already given me so much, but yet I still wanted more. Not money or things. The only space I wanted was one inside his heart. The way he looked at me made my chest ache.

My art had been the thing I'd doggedly pursued since I was old enough to hold a pencil. It had been my escape and my comfort, and when Clayton had taken off, it had yanked the rug out from under me.

My biggest fear was that I'd never find a way to get my shop back. Moving in with Cyrus and Marshall had been a blow to my ego, but losing my shop had been a knife to my soul.

Then Shane waltzed in and handed it all back to me. A chance to rekindle the dream was more than I'd hoped for. I knew I shouldn't want more. That enticing him over time and time again was selfish of me, but I couldn't stop. I'd never found someone who fit me so completely. Someone who gave himself to me with enthusiasm the way Shane did. And as well as he fit me, I fit him too. I saw the way he looked at me sometimes. His emotions lived close to the surface and it was never hard to guess his mood or his thoughts.

I filled in the long lines of his body. The broadness of his chest and the whorls of hair around his nipples and belly button. I drew the softness of his stomach. No matter how talented I was, no one would be able to tell how firm he was underneath unless they'd been close enough—lucky enough—to touch him.

A glance at the time told me that the kitchen had closed an hour ago now and I knew Cyrus would be gone. Unable to resist, I pulled my phone out and sent Shane a text asking if he wanted company.

He answered a minute later, telling me the rush had died down and there were only a few stragglers if I wanted to come sit at the bar.

I didn't bother locking my door because the outside door locked automatically. I was about to go around when the door between the bar and the upstairs swung open.

"How about you come through here. It's faster."

"Are you sure the owner won't mind? I wouldn't want to get in trouble. "

Shane stepped closer and shut the door behind him. "I talked to the owner about it first and he's fine with it."

Winding my arms around Shane's neck, I pulled him down until our lips grazed against each other. "I heard the owner is hot."

"Oh, did you?" Amusement colored Shane's voice.

"Mmhm. Super fucking hot."

"It sounds like a lie."

I shut him up with a kiss. His arms came around me and he pulled me close, moaning into me, giving himself to me already, before pulling away all too soon.

"Work. I'm at work."

"Good thing you can't fire yourself for making out on the clock." I released him from my hold reluctantly and let him lead the way back to the bar. Mickey was still working, but didn't look twice at me as I came in and took a seat at my usual stool.

It was different to be there when Shane didn't have a plethora of thirsty customers to deal with.

"Do you want a drink?"

"Water is fine," I said. I'd had a beer with dinner and that was more than enough for one day.

Shane filled a glass with ice water and set it in front of me. "You didn't bring your sketchbook," he said.

"If I brought it down, you'd have no excuse to come up after work. And where's the fun in that?"

Shane shook his head. Mickey staunchly ignored us both, scurrying off to wipe down empty tables. And I sat and drank my ice water and pictured all the dirty things I wanted to do with those fucking suspenders. Who knew suspenders were so hot?

Chapter 15

Shane

By the time the bar was empty and Archer and I were alone, I was a hot mess of need. I was sure that anyone who'd looked at us knew we were doing some kind of not-so-subtle flirting. Locking the door, I turned off the outside lights, leaving only the security lights and the light standards in the parking lot on.

Archer spun on his stool to watch me. He leaned back and rested his elbows on the bar, watching as I lifted the chairs up off the floor and put them on the tables. Mickey had been sent home instead of sticking around to help with the last minute clean up the way he always did. Between the two of us, we'd gotten most of the closing duties done and all I had to do was prep for the cleaning company. They came in every morning and did the floors and the bathrooms.

My skin heated under Archer's scrutiny as I put the last of the chairs up. He crooked a finger and spread his legs. I don't think he appreciated how hot he was. His mop of dark hair was mussed from a day of running his fingers through it. He looked tired, but the good kind of tired, not the bone-deep, sad kind of exhausted he'd looked when I first met him.

Unable and unwilling to resist, I went to him. I stood between his legs in the space he made for me and tried not to quiver at that thought. Archer slid his hands up my chest, then gripped my suspenders and tugged me down to him .

“Do you have any idea how ridiculously hot you are in these things?” Archer growled

and slanted our mouths together.

If I had an answer, he kissed it right out of me with the frenzied way he overtook me. Still holding nothing but my suspenders, he had me deliciously trapped. Was I considered prey if I willingly ran into the jaws of danger? My heart pounded frantically as I let him sweep his tongue into my mouth. It drew a moan out of me, quietly needy. Maybe not so quietly, because Archer laughed against my mouth and pulled away.

Still holding tight to my suspenders, he gazed up at me. “The things I want to do to you.”

The air rushed out of me like I’d been struck. Whatever they were, I wanted them. Maybe more than I’d wanted anything. What we were doing was ill-advised at best, irresponsible at worst, and it had the potential to blow up in my face. But I found I didn’t care. If having Archer meant that I got to hold tight to this feeling, then I’d have him as long as he’d let me.

Archer was a force of nature. A storm against my skin. He pulled me closer again, close enough to kiss, but he didn’t. I closed my eyes, but could feel his gaze on me. Close as we were, I’d be able to count his eyelashes if I opened my eyes. His breath ghosted across my mouth when he spoke.

“What do you think of restraints?”

Archer’s question shouldn’t have been shocking, but I gasped against his mouth. Not in surprise, but in awe.

“Yes,” I croaked. “Whatever you want, the answer is yes.”

Archer laughed and kissed me lightly, teasing his mouth against mine for the briefest

of moments. “Wait here. Don’t move.”

He slid off the stool and slipped into the back, returning a minute later. In the time he was gone, I thought about a million things. Mostly about what he planned to do to me. None of my thoughts were about moving, but Archer seemed pleasantly surprised to find me exactly as he’d left me.

“Oh, I like a man who knows how to do what he’s told,” he said in a husky voice as he approached. I didn’t know what he’d left the room to get and I didn’t care. Nothing else mattered when his hands were suddenly on me again.

Archer unbuttoned my pants, unzipped my fly, and unfastened my suspenders. All the while, I simply stood there trying not to come in my jeans.

Moving a stool, he created space for me and pushed me up against the bar, front first. My dick ached in my pants as he pulled my hands behind my back. Deft fingers twisted my suspenders around my wrists. It wasn’t tight, and I could have gotten free if I wanted to.

No chance in hell of that happening, especially when Archer slid his hand down the front of my pants and gave my cock a tug. I shuddered against him, yearning to feel more of him on me.

“All fucking night I’ve thought of these suspenders.” He pulled and they tightened for a moment before relaxing their hold. When he tightened the restraints, it felt like having his hands on me. Like he was personally holding my wrists. A shudder tore through me. I was powerless to stop the need that coursed through me. Shutting my eyes, I concentrated on the feel of his hand, his strokes too firm, too tight, too perfect. And then his touch was gone.

He laughed like I’d said something funny and then my pants were yanked down to

mid-thigh and Archer pressed me forward, urging me to lean against my bar. A strong hand gripped a handful of ass cheek and he made an appreciative sound .

Pulling my briefs down, he let my cock wag in front of me, untouched and leaking precum. Suddenly slick fingers danced their way down between my cheeks and teased my hole.

“Oh fuck,” I cried, already close to losing it. My arms twitched in their bindings.

“Tell me you want me inside you,” Archer ordered. “Tell me how much.”

I laughed. My remaining brain power was being used to not come all over the front of my bar.

“Can’t talk, too horny.”

Archer also laughed, but continued to tease my hole with his fingers. His touch was maddeningly tender. Soft and careful when I wanted anything but.

“Naughty boys don’t get what they want,” he chided, teasing his fingers lower

I automatically widened my stance so he’d have as much room as he wanted to do whatever he wanted. Archer teased my taint with his delicate touch, and it dragged a needy, frustrated sound out of me. “All you have to do is tell me what you want.”

“You, in me. Please, Archer.”

His fingers moved back to my hole and he traced the rim with the pad of his finger before sliding it inside. It wasn’t enough and I let my displeasure be known with an unhappy moan.

“Use your words,” Archer chided, working his finger in and out of me at a glacial pace. The single digit intrusion was more maddening than fulfilling. I didn’t want some of him—I wanted all of him. I’d let him stick his fucking arm up me if that’s what he wanted.

“I need more,” I whined, pressing my ass back, chasing his retreating finger.

“More what? ”

“More of you. In me. Please. I fucking need it.”

Archer gripped the cheek of my ass and gave it a punishing squeeze before pulling it to the side, parting my cheeks. Two fingers thrust up into me, fast and hard and oh so fucking good. My knees went weak at the intrusion.

“Look at you, all slutty for me.” He punctuated his words with punishing thrusts of his fingers. He pegged my prostate a couple times, driving me close to the edge before backing off. “Does my little slut want more?”

The bar was digging into me uncomfortably, but I’d take it if it meant continuing what we were doing. Archer must have sensed my growing discomfort, though, because he moved me and bent me forward, pressing my chest to the stool. His fingers abandoned my ass and I bit back a complaint. Not soon enough to prevent Archer from catching it.

Laughing, he slapped my ass. “Needy slut.”

Pleasure swam through me even as he undid my bound wrists. “Grab the stool.”

I did as he said and watched in fascination as I let him use my suspenders to tie my hands to the stool. Archer stood and put a hand in my hair. If he got any closer, I

could suck him off at this height. I looked up at him.

“Let me suck you,” I pleaded. I wanted his taste on my tongue. I wanted to make him happy. To please him in any way I could.

He tightened his grip on my hair and stepped forward. My face was pressed against the bulge in his pants. “Do you want this?”

“Please,” was all I managed to say. “Please.”

“Then you’ll have to be a good little slut and earn it.”

Archer stepped away and, rather than making me beg for his touch, his fingers returned, breaching me. I arched and pressed against him the best I could. Sweat beaded on my forehead. The back of my neck. Goosebumps erupted on my skin as I fucked myself on his fingers.

He pressed himself against my side, letting me feel the hard length of his cock against my leg as he reached around. He gave me one stroke, made a noise in the back of his throat, then withdrew his hand. I heard him spit and then his touch returned. Archer bent the fingers that were in my ass at the same time as he wrapped his other hand around my leaking cock.

“That’s better,” he said. Suddenly his hand moved and he jerked me fast, sending me close to the edge with every rough tug. And just when I thought of going over, he stopped. Squeezing the base of my dick, he prevented my release. The evil bastard didn’t stop pegging my prostate with his other hand.

I was ruined. Wrecked. Gripping onto the barstool, I thrust back, keening and whining when his hand wasn’t moving fast enough, hard enough, going deep enough. I wanted him to fill me. I wanted to ache for days after.

The suspenders bit into my wrists when I tried to reach for Archer. Noticing what I'd done, he laughed.

"Need something?" His grip on my cock had vanished and he slid a third finger into my ass. The stretch was exquisite. The slight burn that gave way to intense pleasure made me feel indescribably good.

"More," I whined, writhing shamelessly.

"More?" Archer asked. "If I gave you more, do you think you could come without me touching your dick?"

"There's only one way to find out." I turned my head and looked back at him, catching his heated gaze. There was something about the way he looked at me that I could never get enough of. Something about his touch that made me want to do anything to earn it, to keep it .

Something glinted in Archer's eyes and his smile broadened. "What do I get if I make you come without touching your dick?"

"What do you want?" I'd have given him anything. Money. A house. A car. A trip to Puerto Rico. My fucking soul.

"I want to tattoo you."

"I was going to let you anyway, remember?"

"Can it be a surprise?" Archer's ministrations had slowed to a point where his touch was starting to frustrate me because it wasn't enough. He knew it too, judging by the devilish look in his eyes.

It was a risky thing to do, to let someone ink your body without even knowing what they were going to do, but I trusted him not to ink a giant dick on my back.

“Whatever you want,” I promised. “If you can make me come hands-free.”

“Challenge accepted.”

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Chapter 16

Archer

I should have stripped him naked for this, but that was only my greedy lust talking. I rucked his shirt up with the hand that wasn't in his ass so I could feel his skin under mine. My fingers followed the curve of his spine and, like a cat, he arched into my touch. The way he sought the touch of my hand was intoxicating. So were the little noises he made when I curved my fingers just right.

Currently I had three fingers inside him, but I knew he could take more. Maybe another night when we had more privacy. And more lube. I reached for the bottle I'd left on the bar and drizzled more onto my fingers as they slowly danced in and out of his hole.

He'd bartered his actual body with me and even though it wasn't something I would hold him to, the trust in me was like a drug. I'd done little to deserve it, and yet he gave me so much. I wanted to hoard it all and amplify it and then give it back to him. Trust was a gift and I wasn't about to squander it.

Once Shane's ass was more thoroughly slicked with lube, I increased my pace. He moaned and leaned into my touch, so I fucked him harder. It was the middle of the night and the chances of someone stumbling upon us were almost nothing, but I had to taunt him anyway.

"Anyone could come along and see you like this." Curling my fingers, I tagged his prostate until he whimpered and trembled before I backed off. "What would they

think, I wonder? If they saw you like this.”

Shane’s breaths were ragged as they sawed in and out of his chest. I slid my fingers through his hair, letting my touch dance across his scalp. When Shane shivered, I grabbed a handful of hair and pulled his head back. At the same time I fucked into him harder. The muscles in my arm were burning with fatigue, but I wasn’t going to let up until I won.

“God, look at you.” Again I lamented that he wasn’t naked, but only briefly. There was something deliciously lewd about having my fingers up a man who was almost fully dressed while I was also completely dressed. Being out in the open added a level of excitement, but it was Shane himself who made this experience one of the hottest of my life.

“So responsive.” To prove my point, I gently dragged my fingers over his prostate again and again. And each time Shane’s moans increased. His voice was growing harsh like his throat was dry.

He seemed to be beyond the capability of speech. I released my grip on his hair and grabbed his shoulder instead. I anchored myself to him like that. One hand on his shoulder, the other buried in his ass. It gave me leverage and I pulled back slowly then drove my fingers into him.

He keened and the stool skittered on the floor, but I held tight, and so did he. The muscles in my arm were screaming at me for relief, but I’d die before I stopped. Shane sounded like he’d die if I stopped.

“Listen to you. So beautiful.” I was fully aware that I was rambling. My dick was taking up the bulk of my blood flow and my concentration was split between making Shane come and trying not to come in my pants .

“So slutty. You’re absolutely dripping. Did you know you could get this wet?” I wasn’t expecting an answer, but he shook his head, gifting me with one anyway.

“More,” Shane panted, pressing his ass back to meet my thrusts.

“That’s right, my sweet slut. Fuck yourself on my fingers.” Despite the way my arm fucking burned, I gave his ass everything I could. Suddenly his hips started thrusting like he desperately wanted somewhere to stick his cock. His breaths became staccato grunts and moans... and then little surprised sounds before he found words once more.

“Oh. Oh.” His ass clamped around my fingers and I buried them deeper and deeper, grinding into him as he convulsed beneath me. “Oh. Fuck. Shit. Oh, my God. Oh—”

He was stunning as he came. His large, powerful body bent to my whim, tied to a stool, and still dressed. But he looked over his shoulder at me when he came. He wanted me to see his face when he came. The surprise that knitted his brow, the sweat that glistened on his forehead, the color of his cheeks and the beautiful mouth framed by a short layer of scruff waiting for my kiss. Or my cock.

I milked Shane dry, until he was a babbling mess of a man. Until he started to squirm away from my touch. Only then did I pull my fingers from his ass. I couldn’t feel my arm and I managed to get lube on my jeans when I fumbled with the fly.

Pulling my dick out, I stepped up to Shane. “Open for me.”

I’d barely gotten the words out when Shane leaned closer and I slipped my cock into his willing mouth. I threaded my fingers into his hair again, being careful not to use the hand that was still shiny with lube. Not that Shane would have cared much at the moment.

“Not going to last,” I warned him. Fucking him senseless with only my fingers had pushed me to the edge and kept me there. His pleasure had been my pleasure. It was intoxicating, invigorating, to see him tremble and shake as I drove him to satisfaction.

Shane hummed and it was my undoing.

“Can I come in your mouth?” I asked.

He sucked harder, all but forcing my orgasm out of me with one skilled slide of his tongue. I guess I had my answer.

I did my best not to ram my dick right down his throat but, God, I fucking wanted to so bad. I wanted to be in him as deep as I could go. My knees almost gave out when I came. I kept my eyes open to watch Shane, and he looked quiet, peaceful, happy even. Strapped to a stool covered in lube, dripping cum and saliva and he looked like there was nowhere else he’d rather be.

The same was true for me, so maybe I was projecting. I would have to mull that over when the blood flow returned to my brain. Pulling out, I didn’t wait to tuck myself back in before bending down to release the suspenders. They weren’t tight and in fact they only gave the illusion of him being tied down. At any moment he could have slipped them, but he didn’t. That little fact had my heart beating faster instead of slowing down like it should have now that we finished.

“Can you stand?” I asked, helping ease him into an upright position.

“Yeah.” Shane glanced down and I followed his gaze to the floor where the evidence of my victory lay in a pool on the floor. His gaze flicked to mine and his whole face lit up. “Looks like you won. Kind of feels like I won too.”

Unable to help myself, I rose on my tiptoes and kissed Shane. Briefly, because if I got

going, I'd want to keep going until we'd both recovered enough to go again.

I re-dressed Shane, pulling his pants up and tucking his cock away before doing up his fly. I left his shirt rumpled and untucked. After quickly tucking my own dick away, I unwound his suspenders from the stool.

"Tomorrow, before we open, I'll come up and see those drawings of yours." Shane leaned down and stole a kiss. "I should clean this up and finish closing."

"Want company?"

Shane laughed. "Tempting, but if you stay, I think we're going to get in trouble."

"Walk me to my door at least?" I hooked a finger through one of his belt loops and tugged him closer.

Shane smiled down at me. It meant something to me that he was the one to initiate the next meeting. Even though it would be strictly professional. Maybe. I'd try my best. I couldn't help myself where Shane was concerned. He was everything I'd ever wanted. Someone steady and reliable who'd let me fuck them. And tie them down with their own suspenders. Who knew I had that particular kink?

Shane walked with me to the door between the upstairs and the downstairs. Like the gentleman he was, he opened the door for me. "I have to relock this door."

"Well, don't be shy about unlocking it and slipping upstairs from time to time."

It was an ill-advised invitation. Cyrus would chop my head off if he found out I was fucking around with Shane. And despite the fact that we'd been getting on each other's nerves recently, I loved him and I hated the idea of him being mad at me. Still, that didn't stop me from wanting Shane as much as I did.

Shane dragged me close and brushed a kiss against my lips. I'd have clung to him and deepened it, but exhaustion was starting to creep in. I'd be lucky if I made it all the way upstairs and into bed before I fell asleep .

"You're trouble." The next kiss lingered longer than it should have and my tired cock gave a valiant twitch, but otherwise stayed down.

"What time should I expect you tomorrow?" I stepped out of Shane's grasp or I'd be there all night. It reminded me of being a teenager who'd discovered how much fun you could have leaning against a wall and making out.

"Noon? I'm not much of an early riser. I'll send you a text before I come up."

"Sounds good. Uh ... I had fun tonight."

The smile Shane gave me was bright enough to light up the universe. "So did I."

I pried myself away from him before I made an ass of myself. Already I was in deep and sooner or later Shane would decide it was too risky to keep fucking his tenant.

We said goodnight and I stood there until Shane reluctantly pulled the door shut. Once the lock engaged, I walked climbed the stairs and went straight to the bedroom. I stripped out of my clothes and dropped them into the laundry basket. I didn't used to be as tidy as I was now, but I blamed living on Cyrus and Marshall's couch. If I hadn't put my shit away, it would have cluttered up their clean and tidy existence and I was already imposing on them.

Crawling beneath the sheets, I tried not to think of Shane. I failed, of course. I could feel his presence downstairs. It was comforting to know he'd be there for a little longer.

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Chapter 17

Shane

Normally, I didn't hate going home alone. Even after a hookup I was fine to do my own thing. Tonight my house seemed emptier than usual. With the lingering effects of Archer's touch on my skin, I should have been fine. Scratch that. I was fine.

It didn't matter that I'd started to miss him the minute he went upstairs. He'd clearly stayed up to see me. Letting him go to bed without a fuss seemed the least I could do.

I hung my keys on the keyring by the door and toed out of my shoes. The last thing I wanted to do was to wash the vestiges of him off my body. But I was aware that I smelled like sex. Maybe one day soon I could convince him to come back here for the night.

That train of thought only made me want to kick my own ass. I already had no business fooling around with Archer, and I shouldn't make it worse by doing shit like bringing him home. But the fantasy was already taking shape in my head. Of course, there'd be the incredibly hot sex we'd have. But after, I could hold him and sleep next to him. It had been a long time since I'd woken up next to anyone.

I told myself that the odd ache in my chest was heartburn. Acid reflux caused by the mere thought of sharing my bed with someone else. And not a foolish man wanting more than he should. I'd already been given so many good things by life and luck. Asking for one more felt obscene.

Stepping into my bathroom, I turned the water on and adjusted it so that it was hot, but wouldn't peel the skin off my bones. The bathroom filled with steam as I stripped out of my clothes. I laid my suspenders on the counter and my stupid dick twitched at the sight of them.

Scrubbing my hand down my face, I let out a groan. "I suppose I'm going to get a hard-on now every time I see fucking suspenders."

As if to prove my point, my dick rose to half-mast. I ignored him. He'd done fine without any attention earlier; he could suffer.

I stepped into the shower and closed the door. Bracing my hands against the wall, I tipped my head forward and let the spray beat against my back. Hot showers were usually where I had some of my best ideas, but all I could think about was getting back in my truck, driving across town, and crawling into bed with Archer.

Having him sit at the bar and talk to me earlier was nice. Comfortable. He was naturally courteous of the fact that I was at work, and though he sought my attention, he didn't demand it. Mickey probably guessed that something was going on between us, but he wasn't the type to stick his nose in other people's business. But I didn't want to put him in a position where he'd have to lie to Cyrus. Cyrus had taken to Mickey like a duck to water. I still thought it was because Mickey thrived when people fussed over him, whereas Archer bristled.

Archer liked being the one calling the shots. Case in point, the tattoo he'd won earlier that night. I had no fear that he'd put something on my body that I'd hate. I trusted him, probably too much for someone I'd only recently met, but I couldn't help myself when it came to Archer Kinsman.

Water was wet. The sky was blue. And I trusted Archer with my body. The things he made me feel, the freedom he gave me, it was all more than I'd ever hoped to find. I

hadn't been kidding when I said people thought I was a top just because I was tall and could sprout a five o'clock shadow by ten in the morning.

Some men had accepted it, but we hadn't been a good fit. Or they told me they were fine with it, only to turn around a few weeks later and try to convince me to top. Just this once. The old anger was enough to kill my boner and I spent the rest of the shower scrubbing my body. I hated feeling like I was washing Archer's touch off my body.

Maybe we could get tested and go bare, and then I could keep something of him inside me. I reached back and gently prodded my rim. It was tender, but not in a bad way. It felt used, but Archer had been good with his hands and generous with the lube, and even with the punishing pace he'd fucked my ass with, he'd been careful not to harm me.

I turned the water off and got out of the shower. While I dried off, I tried to think of the best way to ask him about going bare.

Hey, so your art is amazing. I can't wait for you to tattoo me. How about we ditch the condoms so you can fill my ass because if I can't take all of you home, at least I could take some of you home.

Yeah, that wasn't weird at all.

I climbed into bed naked and sprawled out in the center like I always did. If Archer stayed over, I'd have to choose a side of the bed. Or not ... it was a big bed. There was room for me to sleep in the middle and Archer to take either side.

Sentimental was a stupid look on me, so I rolled over and let sleep come for me. I was one of those gross people who could lie down and fall asleep as if on command. My brothers hated me for it and growing up it hadn't seemed like much of a talent

when you were always the first one conked out at sleepovers .

The morning brought only sunshine, but no glowing moment of clarity. My feelings for Archer were still muddled with my need to be loyal to Cyrus and our friendship. Sleeping on it hadn't given me any answers, only a burning need to see Archer. I still wanted him despite knowing I shouldn't. That didn't matter to me. My brain and my body were both full steam ahead when it came to Archer.

Though I showered the night before, I had another. I also trimmed the scruff on my face down to a manageable length. I rarely took it off completely. I wasn't primping for Archer. If I were, I'd have worn another pair of suspenders. I splashed on some cologne my little brother Brodie sent me while on one of his travels and headed out the door. I had enough time to stop and grab coffee and breakfast for us before I texted Archer that I was on my way up.

He greeted me with a cocky smile and a hungry gaze. His eyes lit up when he saw the tray of drinks and the bag of food.

"Oh, you're a life saver. My coffee machine didn't survive storage."

I stepped into the apartment and Archer shut the door for me. I set our breakfast on the counter. "I didn't know how you take your coffee, so it's black. And I didn't know if you preferred sausage or bacon breakfast sandwiches, so I got both."

Archer stepped into my space and rose up onto his toes to brush a kiss against my mouth. He lingered for a moment. "Something smells amazing, and it's not breakfast. Why do you smell so good?"

"Brodie sent me cologne." I tried to pass it off like it was no big deal. Wearing cologne and bringing breakfast, but Archer's approval made me feel like I was walking on air.

He gave me a final onceover. “I like it,” he said before grabbing the black coffee and dumping two creams and two sugars into it.

I unbagged the breakfast sandwiches and Archer grabbed one of each .

“I’ve yet to meet a meat I didn’t like.” He unwrapped the sausage one first and took a bite.

We ate standing up in his kitchen. I hadn’t eaten since dinner the night before and I’d been starving. I should have had a snack after our activities downstairs, but I hadn’t thought of it. My mind had been consumed by him. It still was.

Once we finished eating, I finally looked around the space. More art hung on the walls and his tattoo station was set up on the other side of the room. Archer had stacked binders of his past work on his coffee table.

“It looks great in here.”

“Thanks. I have my first clients next week.”

“Really? That’s awesome.”

“It’s nothing huge, just a pair of sisters wanting small matching tattoos, but it’ll be good to be working again.” Archer motioned to the couch. “Have a seat and let’s talk tattoo.”

When I sat down, it didn’t escape my attention that he sat at the other end of the couch from me. That was fine. This was a professional appointment, after all. So what if he kissed me, and sniffed me, and told me I smelled good? That didn’t mean he wanted to climb into my lap to show me his ideas.

Archer cleared his throat and set his coffee down on the table. “First, I want to assure you that I don’t plan to hold you to the agreement from last night.”

“You could if you wanted. It’s just a tattoo.” It was more than a tattoo to me now, but I didn’t want to admit that out loud. Or otherwise. “I trust you, but if it makes you feel better, we can agree on some rules.”

He bit his lip, then nodded. “I think that would be best. ”

“Okay, so no names, nothing derogatory, and I don’t care where you want to put it, but I draw the line at having my dick tattooed.”

“A temporary tattoo could be fun for a dick tattoo, though.” He shot me a grin to let me know he was kidding and unstacked the binders on the table. “I have a ton of flash. The time away from the chair was put to good use at least. I have so many pieces that I can’t wait to do. Have a look at these and see if you like my style. There’s pictures of finished pieces in the red binder.”

“I’m okay with you choosing what you want on me. And where.”

Archer gave me a pointed look and I opened the binder.

His work was good. Better than good. But I knew that already from the pieces he’d hung on the walls in the space. He liked line work and had a great eye for detail. His shading was good and I loved the way he worked with color.

“I’m glad you’re choosing what to put on me because I have no idea what I’d pick. You’re really talented.”

“Thanks. But I’m still going to run the final design by you.”

“That’s okay by me.” I closed the binder and set it back on the table. “Where did you want to put it?”

Archer grinned at me and I could tell he wasn’t thinking about tattoos. “Well, I have some ideas about that.”

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Chapter 18

Archer

“Shirt off.” I noted the way his eyes flashed when I told him what to do. “Don’t get ahead of yourself. I just want to see my canvas. I have to know what I’m working with.”

Shane unbuttoned his shirt—God, I loved that he wore so many button-downs—and took it off. The bulk of Shane’s tattoos so far were on his forearms. He had a complete half sleeve on the left arm, and a mostly finished half sleeve on the right. His left arm was a collection of tattoos that gave off fantasy vibes. Swords and swirling colors that looked like magic. As it moved up his arm, the design morphed into something more galactic. The rings of Saturn were hard to miss.

The right arm was dedicated to flora and fauna. Flowers and bees and a badass dragonfly adorned Shane’s skin.

“Are you a ‘this tattoo represents this specific memory’ type of a person?” I asked him.

“Mostly I get tattoos because I like them and I have the money. What about you?” Shane asked, eyeing the transformer on my forearm.

“A mix of both. Some I got because you can’t get a tattoo from a guy who doesn’t have any tattoos. And some I got because they mean shit. Now show me that gorgeous back of yours.”

Shane arched an eyebrow at me, but did as instructed, shifting in his seat to offer me a better view .

“Relax, I’m not going to tattoo your whole back.” I traced my fingers down his spine and smiled when he shivered. “Though it is tempting. All this naked skin.”

Gently, my fingertips mapped the slope of his shoulder and moved down his bicep. “I have a lot to work with. How big did you want to go?”

“What were you thinking?”

“I have a million ideas, but maybe something that sits on your shoulder blade and sort of wraps overtop or around your arm or something. Or there’s a little space on your flora and fauna sleeve. I could fill in a little spider there for you.”

“No spiders.” Shane shuddered.

“So no tarantula on your back? That’s a shame.” I dragged my fingers down his spine again, following the curve down to the top of his pants. and along that stretch of soft skin. “What about a tramp stamp?”

A laugh roared out of him. “I don’t think so.” He turned his head to look back at me. “Not a permanent one anyway.”

“Oooh. A temporary tramp stamp. I could be down with that. Or I could get those tattoo markers and draw one on you myself.”

Shane looked like he wanted me to pin him to the floor and fuck him stupid right then. I wasn’t entirely against the idea.

The idea of marking him, temporarily or otherwise, appealed to my dick. I was so

hard I could pound nails. I reached for him, intending to kiss him silly, when my phone buzzed in my pocket.

I let out a sigh. “I have to get this.”

Now that I was trying to get my shop off the ground again, I could ill afford to ignore any calls in favor of hooking up with Shane. I wanted him to see how serious I was about this.

But it wasn’t a client. “It’s Cyrus. Maybe I don’t have to get it. ”

“Answer your call, Archer.”

I huffed out a sigh and did the grown-up thing. “Hey, Cy. What’s up?”

“I brought your mail.”

I had half a mind to tell him to leave it down in the bar and I’d get it when I was done with Shane. Instead I told him I’d be right down.

“How about you let me come up? I haven’t seen the space yet.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Yeah, sure. I’ll come let you in. Be right there.”

By the time I was ending the call and getting to my feet, Shane was redressing. Much to my dismay.

“If you think this is going to get you out of the whole tramp stamp thing, think again, because it’s happening.”

“I don’t think I can get out of here without Cyrus seeing me.” Shane stood, fumbling

with the buttons of his shirt. His nervousness was endearing, but unnecessary.

“You’re here for a tattoo consult. You don’t have to hide.” I reached for him and batted his hands away. He watched me as I re-buttoned his shirt. I wished that he didn’t have to hide at all. That we didn’t have to sneak around behind Cyrus’s back, but it wasn’t like Cyrus approved of any of the decisions I’d ever made. To him, this would be another screw-up in my long line of screw-ups.

“I’ll go let him up.” Before Shane could argue, I was out the door and thundering down the stairs. It made me happy that Cyrus didn’t have free access to the upstairs. There was no way we’d get accidentally discovered if we were upstairs in a compromising position. Not that it should matter if we were together.

Suddenly grumpy, I pushed the back door open and Cyrus stepped inside. “Shane’s truck is in the lot, but I had a look around the bar. He’s not there. ”

“He’s upstairs. We were talking about his next tattoo.” I grabbed my stack of mail from Cyrus and headed up the stairs. “Thanks for bringing this by.”

“Well, I thought you might invite me up to see the place, but I had to invent an excuse to come.”

Rolling my eyes, I opened the door to my apartment slash studio. “You could just drop by to say hello. You don’t need an excuse.”

Shane was sitting on the couch flipping through a binder of my work like he was actually seriously considering each piece and how it might look on his skin.

“See anything you like?” The question had the desired effect on Shane, though I doubted Cyrus noticed the way his boss ducked his gaze to avoid mine or the slash of color suddenly rising on his cheeks.

“There’s some killer work in here.”

“The place looks great,” Cyrus said, taking himself on a tour of the space. “Are these new?” He pointed to the moths that I’d drawn and framed. I’d done a variety of species all in black. Some had subtle shading in color.

“I did those recently, yeah.” What I didn’t say was that I did them while I was avoiding his house as much as possible. I’d drawn most of them while sitting in the park or the library. “When I was between shops, I had time to work on new pieces.”

That was an understatement. I had entire sketchbooks filled with rough ideas. The moths were some of the pieces that I’d refined and had stuck in frames. I wasn’t sure if I’d ever tattoo them on anyone. They were the things I’d been working on the day I met Shane. The fact that I was a sentimental idiot wasn’t lost on me. The moths felt like they belonged to us and not to the rest of the world. But Shane didn’t know that .

“I never thought much about getting a tattoo done, but these moths are really nice. Maybe you’d tattoo one for me.”

Immediate no. Absolutely not. I bit back my kneejerk reaction, though, and pretended that acid wasn’t burning a hole through my stomach. “If you want something, I’ll design something for you. Maybe something with knives.”

Cyrus nodded. “That’s probably a better fit.”

“There might be something you like over in the books Shane’s looking at.” I turned my attention to the stack of envelopes I’d been clutching. It was all junk mail, not a single bill or important letter or anything. Nothing Cyrus couldn’t have chucked into the trash. He really felt like he had to make up a reason to come see me.

Guilt twisted the knife in my stomach—I’d been a shitty brother. Cyrus had taken me

in and helped me when I needed him. And I'd repaid him by avoiding him as much as humanly possible.

"Hey, Cyrus, why don't you and Marshall come over on your day off? I'll order in and we can hang out. Maybe watch one of those movies you and Marshall love so much."

"Are they still obsessed with The Fast and the Furious ?" Shane asked. "Say it ain't so, Cyrus?"

Cyrus shrugged. "Paul Walker was hot. I'll run it by Marshall, but I'm sure he'd love to come. Shane should come too. I never get to see him outside of work. It would be nice to pretend we're real friends."

I wasn't sure if Cyrus's comment had meant to pierce through the bubble of happiness that had surrounded Shane and me, but I felt it burst and had to stop myself from flinching. The last thing I wanted was for Cyrus to remind Shane that they were friends, but the damage was done.

"You can't just invite me to other people's shit, Cyrus," Shane said .

"He can't, but I can. You should come. We can order food that Cyrus doesn't have to cook and if you come, they can't out-vote my movie choices."

"No one wants to see The Brave Little Toaster ."

I spun around and glared at Cyrus. "That movie is a masterpiece. Highly underrated."

"The what?" Shane asked, humor coloring his voice.

"It's movie from the 80s," Cyrus said. "When we were younger, Archer had a phase

where all he wanted to do was watch old movies.” Cyrus put air quotes around the word old.

“Anything produced before the year 2000 is ancient history. Besides, I haven’t made you watch that in years. The last movie I made you watch was ,*batteries not included , and you can’t tell me you hated it. You cried.”

“I haven’t seen that one,” Shane said.

“It’s these little alien robot things that help save a historical building from destruction and its residents from eviction.”

“I did not cry.” Cyrus rolled his eyes again. “And we are not watching that. Surely there’s a movie made this century that you have an interest in seeing?”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “ ,*batteries not included or no deal.” I was an expert at playing the part of the bratty younger sibling to get my own way.

Shane nudged my brother. “Come on, Cyrus. It’ll be fun.”

Cyrus looked at Shane. “You suck. You are officially uninvited. Fine, we can watch your silly alien movie.” Cyrus got to his feet. “I have shit to do before the bar opens. I’ll see you downstairs, Shane.”

Cyrus clapped my shoulder and gave it a friendly squeeze on the way by. Today was the first time in weeks when I’d been happy to see my brother and had actually enjoyed his company. Not living together was doing wonders for our relationship. I could tell he was trying hard not to put his nose too deep into my business and I appreciated it. Just not enough to sit through another viewing of The Fast and the Furious .

Shane got to his feet and shot me an apologetic look. “I’d like to stick around, but I should get downstairs.”

Stepping into Shane’s space, I tilted my head back and looked up at him. “Can I call you later?”

Shane leaned down and brushed his mouth against mine. “You can call me whenever you want, Archer.”

He kissed me again and it took everything I had in me not to beg him to stay.

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Chapter 19

Shane

I locked the doors of the bar and turned the lights off. It had been a crazy night and I was ready to go home, shower the stink of booze off my skin, and crawl into bed. I dealt with the closing duties, secretly wondering if Archer was going to come down and join me again.

My phone sat heavy and silent in my pocket. I wanted to text him, but he was probably sleeping. Most people were at this time of night, but a bar owner's hours suited me. I'd never been the type to get up early and that was never going to change.

I was about to slip out the back and get in my truck when my cell phone buzzed. The volume was always off, as if I'd hear it over a noisy bar anyway. I knew it would be Archer before I removed the phone from my pocket.

If Cyrus had suspected anything, he didn't show it. Working with him had gone like normal and he didn't seem at all surprised that I was upstairs getting a consult for a tattoo. Guilt tugged at the corners of my mouth, but when my phone buzzed again, I pushed it away in favor of answering.

"Hey," I said. Wow. Smooth. Go me. I managed a one-word greeting. Archer didn't mind.

"You said I could call. Is this is a bad time?" He sounded sultry and sexy in an effortless way that was just Archer. I found him irresistible. Archer Kinsman was my

catnip .

“It’s never a bad time for you.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” he said, clearly pleased with my response. It had been more truth than I’d been prepared to give away, but my mouth wasn’t on the same page as my brain. “Open the door, Shane.”

I took half a step toward the back door before realizing he meant the door that led to the upstairs. My keys jingled in my shaky hands as I searched for the right key. Why the hell was I shaking? It was just Archer. But that was a lie. Saying it was just Archer implied that he was unimportant. A passing fancy. Something that I could dismiss. Nothing was further from the truth. Even without his tattoos on my body, he was already under my skin.

The key slipped into the lock and I twisted it. A singular deep breath was all I managed to wrestle into my lungs before I opened the door. Archer stood on the other side, leaning against the wall. He pocketed his phone then crooked his finger, silently urging me forward.

Stuffing my keys and my phone in my pockets, I hurried to close the distance between us. He reached for me and cupped my face in his hands, then pulled me down to him.

His mouth slanted over mine and I let out a satisfied sigh that made Archer laugh before he deepened the kiss. I opened for him, following his lead, letting him devour me. Wrapping my arms around him, I mapped the shape of him with my hands.

Archer pulled away, but my hunger hadn’t been sated. I kissed the corner of his mouth, the sharp line of his jaw, the sweet spot under his ear that made him shiver against me.

“I could spend all night like this.” My confession was spoken into the curve of his neck. I had to stop myself from saying more. It was like I was under a spell. I wasn’t the type of guy to sneak around and keep things from my friends. Yet, that’s what I’d been doing since meeting Archer. I tried to feel bad about it, but Archer was a grown man. We weren’t doing anything wrong. The only reason we had to sneak around was because Cyrus could be an unreasonable mother hen where his brother was concerned. I wanted to say that it was sweet, but clearly Archer didn’t appreciate that dynamic between them.

He pressed himself against me. “Where did you go?”

“Nowhere. It’s been a long day, that’s all.”

Archer made a thoughtful noise before pulling me into another kiss. The intensity of it nearly knocked me off my feet. It was like he was pouring all of himself into a singular kiss. And as swiftly as it started, Archer pulled away.

“Go home and get some sleep.” He stepped out of my arms, leaving me feeling immediately bereft. Cold.

“Come home with me.”

Archer stepped back to me and brushed his mouth against mine. “Not tonight,” he said.

Disappointment slammed into me like a freight train, and it must have been written all over my face because Archer gave me the softest smile.

“I would if I could, but I have things I need to do in the morning. Which is why I’m going to go upstairs all alone and get some sleep when I would much rather go home with you and tongue-fuck you until the sun comes up.”

I reached down and pressed the heel of my hand against the base of my dick, hoping to get my raging boner to go the fuck away.

“You have such a way with words.” As good as that sounded—and don’t get me wrong, it sounded fucking amazing—I wanted to take him home so I could hold him after the promised tongue-fucking. Waking up next to him, burying my face in the curve of his neck and kissing him awake were things I wanted so much they made my chest hurt.

“It’s a gift.” Archer kissed me one more time. “Okay, get out of here. I need my beauty sleep. I just wanted to give you a kiss goodnight.”

I stole another one, quick but still soft, a tease of lips brushing against each other. It felt like a promise for things to come, so I did it one more time. And one more time, until Archer laughed and stepped away.

“You’re trouble.” His eyes flashed and I dragged my gaze down, noticing that he had the same problem I did. “Get home and get some sleep. If I don’t see you tomorrow, meet me here, same time.”

“It’s a date.” I glanced up at the door to his apartment. “Can I walk you home?”

He laughed again and started up the stairs alone. “Good night, Shane.”

“Good night, Archer.”

When he reached his door, he turned and blew me a kiss, then disappeared inside, closing the door behind him. As if it were the easiest thing in the world to walk away. I stood there unable to move for half a minute or more before finally forcing myself into action. I went back into the bar and locked the door, set the alarm, then slipped out into the night.

The temperature had dropped to unseasonably cold, and I hurried to my truck. Part of me wished that it wouldn't start just so I'd have an excuse to go back inside and upstairs. Archer was an addiction. If he'd have let me, I'd still be in that hallway stealing kisses. Turning the key, I started my truck and reluctantly drove home.

I'd have preferred it if Archer were with me. The disappointment didn't run quite deep enough to kill my raging boner, though. I'd never been the type of guy to jerk it while driving, and until this moment I never understood the appeal of doing that. But my dick throbbed and ached, demanding half my attention. It wasn't happy with the current position it was in, trapped in my jeans with no relief in sight.

Movie night with Cyrus and Marshall in attendance was going to be impossible. I'd have to be careful not to look too much at Archer, or for too long. Or at all even. Did my dick shrink at the idea of trying to hide my attraction to Archer in front of his brother? I fucking wish. My dick didn't have a brain, but it still wanted to do the thinking.

Frustrated with myself for being disappointed over Archer not coming home with me, for liking the idea of sneaking around under Cyrus's nose, I stormed into my house and locked the door. I barely remembered the drive home and that annoyed me even more.

Generally speaking, I was a laid back kind of guy. I did my best to do right by people. I worked hard, even after winning so much money that I wouldn't have to work again if I didn't want to. The thing with Archer had wound me up beyond reasonable comprehension.

After a few deep breaths, I was somewhat calm again. Still hard as nails, though, I noticed as I went into my bedroom and stripped down. On a whim, I pulled my phone out. Cupping my dick through my briefs I snapped a picture and sent it to Archer.

Looks like you have a big problem , he responded.

And no one to help me with it , I sent back.

The phone rang in my hand and I nearly dropped it as I fumbled to answer.

“Do you want help?” Archer asked.

I flopped down on my bed and stuck my hand down my briefs. After a couple cursory tugs, I decided it wasn't quite right. Putting Archer on speaker, I tugged my briefs off .

“I offered to let you help me earlier. But you didn't want to come home with me.”
Wow, that was petulant as fuck.

“It's not that I didn't want to,” Archer said, and I believed him. There was something in his voice that was real and honest. He had yet to bullshit me. Even when we talked about things he didn't necessarily want to share, he gave me the truth.

“What did you want?” I asked. I was fishing for compliments, I realized. Or maybe not compliments, but confirmation that I wasn't alone in the feelings I was developing. That whatever this was that had started off as great sex, had rapidly evolved into something more than that. Deeper than sex. I liked Archer. He was easy to be with. It's why I was angry. I was a child deprived of his favorite toy.

“Are you asking me to have dirty phone sex with you, Shane?”

Without answering, I turned and grabbed the lube off my nightstand. After squirting a generous amount into my hand, I rolled back over and grabbed my dick. The lube was cold on my skin and I sucked in a breath.

“Shane, are you jerking off?”

“You bet your ass I am,” I said.

“Tell me everything.”

I closed my eyes and pretended that Archer was in the room with me. Like he was standing in the doorway watching me. “The lube was cold, but it’s already warming up. I used a lot. I like it sloppy sometimes.”

“I like you all wet for me,” he purred in my ear. “How wet are you?”

I bit my lip to stifle a groan and spread my legs, bending them so the bottoms of my feet were on the mattress. I let my legs fall open, creating as much room as possible .

“I’m fucking soaked.” I tightened my grip, but it wasn’t enough. I wanted Archer here with me. Pretending was shit and it made me angry all over again.

I didn’t want to pretend with him. I didn’t want to act like he meant nothing to me. I didn’t want to treat him like nothing more than a friend. I wanted to bring him home and wake up next to him. I wanted him to walk into my bar and kiss me in front of everyone.

There was no way I could say any of that. For the time being, I’d take what I could get until I couldn’t take anymore. Eventually, one of us would have to walk away. But it wasn’t going to be me. I knew that already. I wanted Archer in any way that I could have him, even if it was only his voice in my speaker phone as I pressed two fingers against my hole.

“What are you doing now?” he asked. “Are you being a good slut for me?”

“Ye-es.” The word stuttered out of me. I’d borrowed some excess lube from my cock and teased my fingers into my hole. The stretch was too much too fast, but it was perfect for the way I felt. The burn in my heart now matched the burn in my body. It was tangible proof that I was absolutely fucked up over this man. I jerked myself faster, wet skin slaps echoing in the otherwise quiet room.

“Fuck, listen to you. You’re so hot.”

I huffed out a laugh. “You can’t even see me.”

“You’re always hot. But you’re especially gorgeous when you’re like this. All lusty and slutty for me. Close your eyes and listen to yourself. What do you hear?”

Lube. Skin slapping against skin. Harsh, heavy breaths. I pressed my fingers in deeper, trying to fill the spaces in me that I wanted Archer to fill. A whimper escaped my lips and Archer made an approving sound .

“That’s right. Let me hear you.”

It was like he had a Shane Taggart manual and knew what buttons to push, because I twisted my fingers, pushing them in deeper. I crooked my fingers and stroked against my prostate a couple times. The sounds I made were unreal. He was right—I did sound like a slut. I wished he was here to use me like one. I liked the way he said it to me, like it wasn’t an insult. When Archer called me a slut, he was giving me the highest of compliments. He always had this approving, appreciative look in his eyes when he said it.

I wished he was here so I could see it.

“I’m close.”

“Then come for me. Let me hear you. That’s a good boy.”

I cried out, arching off the bed, and my hips stuttered, fucking my fist. I came hard in ribbons that painted stripes up my chest. And I didn’t stop jerking. I kept stroking myself past the point of comfort until my noises went from gentle sounds of pleasure to tortured whimpers.

I stopped suddenly and yanked my hand away from my dick like it might fall off if I kept touching it. I’d already removed my fingers from my ass and I winced as I let my legs straighten out. There had been little lube easing my way and in the moment it had been incredible, but it might suck tomorrow.

There was a pause. A silence. No sound at all except for my harsh breaths and the blood rushing through my veins.

“If you ask me to come home with you again, my answer will be different,” Archer said, part confession, part promise. “Now get some sleep.”

I did as I was told.

Like a good boy.

Chapter 20

Archer

I gave partial credit for the sudden influx of new clients to Shane and Mickey, who'd been telling everyone about my shop. Bullseye Body Art was already making a name for itself. And though I wasn't exactly booked solid or anything, I had a good feeling about the longevity of my business. On days that I had client consults, I made sure to have fresh treats from the bakery down the street. I'd already booked my first repeat client.

It was two in the afternoon and already I'd done a tattoo that morning and wrapped the day up with a consult.

Shane was going to get a sign for the back of the building so the entrance to the shop was easier to find. I told him it wasn't necessary, but when he got an idea into his head, it was easier to let him run with it.

I still had to put the finishing touches on my sketch for Shane's tattoo. The hard part had been deciding what to draw. After several different ideas, I'd settled on a sunflower. It fit the theme of his current tattoos, and it was often thought to symbolize generosity. I'd chosen it for that reason, plus the fact that Sunflowers were large and impressive. They had a presence that commanded attention. Much like Shane.

I thought about putting the sunflower on myself to remind me of what I'd had once... because I didn't expect to get to keep Shane forever as much as I wanted that. If he'd

wanted to be with me for real, he 'd have said something by now, wouldn't he? I still wasn't sure how Cyrus would take a relationship between us, not that it was any of his business.

I was already asking Shane to risk his friendship with my brother, I didn't want to come between them for real. Tossing my pencil down, I pushed myself to my feet and refilled my coffee. It was quiet downstairs and would remain that way all night because The Anchor was closed. Which meant it was unlikely that I'd see Shane at all. I knew he'd come if I asked, but I also didn't want to monopolize all his free time.

The sound of my phone ringing jolted me out of my head and I sloshed coffee on my hand.

"Fucker." I set my coffee down and wiped my hand on my jeans as I fumbled for my phone. I'd used my cell number as my business number. I figured if I wanted a non-business phone, I could always get a different phone later on if things picked up.

"Bullseye Body Art, Archer speaking."

"Archer..."

White-hot rage shot through me at the sound of Clayton's voice.

"You have a lot of fucking nerve, Clay."

"I'm sorry, okay. I was stupid."

"Whatever you want, the answer is no. It's no and fuck you. You ruined my fucking life, Clay. What the fuck, man. You were my best friend." I hated the way my voice cracked giving away just how much I still gave a shit. The wounds he'd inflicted

hadn't really begun to heal. I thought they had, but the sound of his voice took the strength from my knees and I had to hold onto the counter to stop myself from crumpling to the floor.

"You managed to land on your feet." Clayton dismissed my suffering, the shit he'd caused, as though it were nothing and no big deal. Clayton had always been like that. If the end result was fine, then nothing that happened before that mattered. I used to find it charming, how he could go with the flow like that, but there was nothing charming about the way I wanted to tear his head off and shit down his neck.

"How fucking dare you. I lost everything. No, I didn't lose it—you stole it from me. The shop. My fucking income. I had to move in with Cyrus and Marshall." The one decent thing he'd done was not steal my equipment when he took off.

"Turned out okay, though." Clayton's voice wavered.

"Why are you calling, Clayton?"

"I need help."

I scoffed. "You called the wrong person. You really think I want to help you after all the shit you pulled?"

"Archer, they're going to fucking kill me, okay. I—I fucked up."

"No shit. But you expect me to believe someone is going to kill you? I fucking might if I ever see you again."

"Archer, please!" Only the frantic tone in his voice had me pausing. "I'm not lying. Or exaggerating. I need money or a place to hide. Something."

I abandoned my coffee on the counter and went to sit in front of the window. “Who wants to kill you and why? Did you rip them off too?”

The silence gave me my answer.

“You’re fucking joking, right? You rip me off. Then you turn around and rip off someone else, and not once did you ever stop to think, gee, maybe this will make people mad? You’re a piece of shit, Clayton.”

“It was a loan shark, okay?” Clayton blurted. “I got a hot tip on a horse and I was going to make a mint, okay? But it didn’t work out. And I lost my shirt. And the more I tried to fix things, the bigger mess I got in, okay?”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Clayton. You don’t do shit halfway, do you? And what kind of money do you think I have? I’ve had to start from scratch.”

“Archer, please.” Clayton was near tears and part of me ached. I’d never heard him so upset, but it all sounded like just another con job. He’d fooled me once already by pretending to be my friend.

“I don’t doubt that you’re in some kind of trouble, Clayton, but if you’d really wanted my help, you should have asked before you cleaned me out and walked away. I have nothing left to give you.” Without another word, I ended the call and blocked the number.

The conversation left me feeling weak and shaky. Had I done the right thing? My phone buzzed in my hand and my stomach twisted until I saw Cyrus’s name flash up on the screen. Relief washed over me so fast I nearly cried. Cyrus would know if I’d done the right thing. It didn’t feel like I had, but that might be nostalgic feelings for someone who’d been my best friend poking at my conscience, making me feel guilt when I had nothing to feel guilty about.

It dawned on me that I'd forgotten to answer the phone when it stopped buzzing in my grip. I quickly called him back.

"Hey, are you busy tonight?" Cyrus asked when he answered.

"Clayton called."

"That son of a bitch!" Cyrus spat. "Okay, I was going to ask if you wanted to come out tonight, but now you're not getting the option. I'll be there in ten minutes."

"Okay."

"I'm on my way. "

I heard Cyrus cover the phone, and there was some mumbling in the background that I couldn't make out. He must be talking to Marshall. "Archer?"

"Here."

"Ten minutes."

Cyrus pulled up behind the bar eight minutes later and I climbed into the passenger seat of his car.

"You look like shit. I can't believe that little fuckwad called you. What the hell did he want?"

"Money." I buckled my seatbelt and melted into the seat. I was suddenly exhausted and not at all in the mood to be around people, but I knew I'd be better off if I hung out with Cyrus for a while and let him do his mother hen routine. He'd always looked after me like that. Our parents weren't the best. They tried, but it was like they didn't

know what to do with a kid once they had it. Let alone two kids. Cyrus had been planned, but I was an accident. Something that wasn't lost on me.

Growing up, I'd tried to be as invisible as possible. I buried myself in my art and took up as little space as I could manage. Cyrus did his best to make sure I knew I was loved, but it wasn't his job to raise me—even though he basically did. It was Cyrus who gave me my first sex talk. He taught me to ride a bike. He cleaned the road rash on my knees when I fell off my skateboard.

In a lot of ways, he was more of a parent to me than our parents. Which was probably why it was hard for him to switch from dad mode into brother mode. We'd never had a chance to be brothers.

“Why does dick-face think you'd give him money? What could he possibly need it for?”

A cold shiver tore through me when I recalled the fear in his voice. “He got in deep with a loan shark. Something about horses. ”

“Jesus fuck. A loan shark? Do they even exist outside of like mafia movies and shit?”

I shrugged. “Apparently he lost his shirt and then borrowed money trying to dig himself out of his hole. It's why he cleaned me out and disappeared. He says they're going to kill him.” I cut my gaze over to Cyrus and watched the way he white-knuckled the steering wheel.

“Better them than me.” Cyrus looked at me. “I know he's your friend, and that means a lot to you, but there were a million ways he could have handled his shit, and he chose the way that fucked you over. I'm not inclined to be very sympathetic.”

“Clayton was my friend. And I feel bad for him, but he's not my responsibility.” I

turned away and leaned my head against the window. Saying that out loud made me feel like a monster. Like I was a bad person for not wanting to get involved in someone's tough situation, even though there wasn't anything I could do about it.

We were fast approaching Cyrus's house. In a weird way, it felt like going home. The bar also felt like home, as did the little space above it that I'd been allowed to turn into my own space. But Cyrus's house felt like home in a different way. In a nostalgic kind of way. Like visiting your parents and enjoying the cozy feeling of being taken care of again, but also liking that it wasn't permanent.

A familiar truck sat parked in Cyrus's driveway.

"Shane's over?"

Cyrus cut his gaze to mine, then glanced away to pull into the driveway. "I thought we could have that movie night we talked about. Marshall is making snacks for everyone and I'm going to take a night off and order dinner. We're going to watch a bunch of those ancient 80s movies you love so much and we're going to forget about Clayton and his bullshit. He's not your responsibility."

Cyrus parked the car and killed the engine .

"Cy?"

He looked at me and I saw nothing but love and understanding in his expression. No matter what, he'd be there to catch me if I fell. I knew as bad as I had it, or thought I did, Clayton had it worse. He'd never had anyone there to catch him.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

Cyrus's eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled and he reached over and ruffled my hair. Something he knew I didn't like, but tolerated because it was him. Today, though, I didn't mind it. It was achingly normal and made me believe everything was right in the world.

"Get your ass in the house. Marshall is making all your favorite snacks."

Cyrus got out of the car before me and I followed along behind, quietly reaching for my phone to unblock the number Clayton had called from. My finger hovered over the button, but I didn't do it. Not yet. I'd unblock him tomorrow. I didn't want him to call tonight while I was with Cyrus. Maybe it was stupid. There wasn't anything I could do to help him, but it felt wrong to cut him off like that.

I tucked my phone away and stepped into the house, and was yanked into a hug by Marshall, who wasted no time hauling me into the kitchen and telling me all about the treats he was fixing. His words were going right over my head, in spite of how hard I was trying to pay attention, because Shane was there and I couldn't kiss him and burrow against him the way I wanted to. I couldn't reach for the comfort I knew his arms would give me.

Tonight was going to be torture.

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Chapter 21

Shane

I arrived as Cyrus was pulling out of the driveway. I didn't bother knocking because they'd been expecting me, but I called out when I stepped inside. I brought a case of beer from a small brewery that wanted me to carry their product and I was going to have Marshall and Cyrus help me test it out.

"Hey, man. Where's Cyrus going? Is he skipping out on us?" I knew Cyrus had planned to invite Archer, but I didn't want to come across as too eager to see him.

"He went to get Archer." Marshall was in the kitchen constructing some kind of charcuterie board that would please most twelve year-olds. It was nothing but junk food. Chips and cookies and frosting to dip them in.

"What's this?" I asked, motioning to the sugar platter as I passed by on my way to the fridge to store the beer.

"Archer's favorites. Some of them. I'm going to make the little hotdogs he likes too." Marshall looked at me with a pinched expression. "When Cyrus called to invite him over, he'd just gotten off the phone with his old business partner."

"The one who ripped him off and then disappeared?"

"That's the one. Cyrus said Archer sounded upset."

“I wondered why he was backing out of here like his ass was on fire.”

Worry snaked through me. My phone remained silent in my pocket. I was annoyed that Archer hadn't told me, even though it had clearly just happened. Knowing that I could check in with him later made me feel a little better.

“If I ever see Clayton the creep again, I'm going to gut him like a fish,” Marshall said. I could tell from the look on his face that he wasn't exactly joking. Not that he would do it, but he wouldn't mourn Clayton if it actually happened.

“I'll be your alibi.” I eyed the various snack trays that Marshall had put together. “Do you need any help?”

“No, I think that's good.” He folded his arms over his chest. “I worry about him like he's my own brother, you know. Cyrus and I have been together for what feels like forever, and I've always liked Archer. I'd move heaven and earth to help him.”

I knew the feeling all too well. I had half a mind to dig around and find out who exactly this Clayton guy was. If money made him leave the first time, then money surely would make him leave again. Only... I knew types like Clayton. If you gave in once, they'd be back again. They circled money like sharks sensing blood in the water.

“Archer's going to do a tattoo for me.” I told Marshall out of desperation to change the subject. If Archer walked in and we were talking about him, I wanted it to be good things. Things that wouldn't make us clam up when we saw him.

“Oh yeah? He did one for me when he was apprenticing. It turned out amazing.” Marshall lifted his pant leg to reveal a phoenix on his calf.

It wasn't like I'd never seen it before, but knowing Archer did it years ago made me

see it in a new light. He was talented even as an apprentice .

“I’ve been thinking about getting another, but I haven’t decided yet. I’m not a fan of the healing process to be honest. What are you getting?”

Leaning over, I snatched a cookie from the tray. “I don’t know. He hasn’t told me yet.”

“He hasn’t told you?” Marshall asked, visibly confused.

“I lost a friendly bet.” A very friendly bet, but the less Marshall knew about that, the better. “And as the winner, he gets to design my tattoo.”

“You’re insane. I love Archer, but I’d never let him do that to me.”

I shrugged and stuffed the cookie in my mouth to prevent me from confessing that I loved Archer too, just in a different way than Marshall loved him.

“I trust him. It’s not like he’d do a bad job or give me a stupid tattoo. He’s really talented.”

Really talented was a shitty way to describe how skilled he was. How hard working he was. I saw the way he threw himself into his work. The way he was always trying to hone his skills and learn new ones. For the first time, I wondered if tattooing had been his first choice of careers, or if it had been one to better guarantee him an income.

An idea formed in my head, but Cyrus and Archer walking in the door made me push it aside. I’d think about it some more and if I brought it up, it wasn’t going to be around Cyrus and Marshall.

As nonchalantly as I could, I greeted Archer. Already I hated that I couldn't cross the room and cradle his face in my hands and kiss his sadness away. I had to stand on the other side of the room and act casual. My feelings for Archer were anything but.

"There's beer in the fridge. It's from a micro brewery. They want me to carry it, and you're my panel of testers. "

"He means we're his guinea pigs," Cyrus shot, his lip curling. "If it's anything like that last swill, I'm going to end you, Taggart."

"This is why I need your help. Your palate is much more refined than mine."

Marshall covered a laugh with a cough. "Anyway, uh, the snacks are ready and the movie is waiting. We can order dinner after the first movie."

Cyrus reached for Marshall and pulled him into a kiss. "My husband is the best host. That sounds wonderful."

Seeing the way they gazed at each other had me glancing at Archer. He caught my stare and looked away sullenly. I read him loud and clear. This sucked. It sucked a lot. Archer grabbed a tray off the counter and went to the living room.

"We didn't come here to watch you two suck face. Come on, Cyrus said I could pick the movie." Archer set the tray on the coffee table and flung himself down on the couch. He bounced a couple times, then patted the spot next to him. "Please sit next to me, Shane. Cyrus and Marshall need to be separated. I don't want to hear their gross kissy sounds."

"We do not make gross kissy sounds," Cyrus argued. "They're the sound of true love."

“Then true love turns my stomach,” Archer shot back, but he scooted over as if he needed to make room for me. I tried not to sit too close. Every little move I made I examined from every angle, wanting to make sure I wasn’t doing anything that would give us away. Sitting too far away would look equally suspicious. My current train of thought made me want to kick myself. It was just sitting. How complicated did I have to make it ?

As soon as I sat down, Archer inched closer to me. A motion that went unnoticed by Cyrus and Marshall. With the remote in hand, Archer got the TV going and the streaming service open.

“What are we watching?” I stole another cookie, even though they were too sweet for my liking.

“ Batteries not included .”

“It’s his favorite.” Cyrus dropped into the chair and tugged Marshall down onto his lap. They were about the same size, so I wondered if Cyrus was going to make it through the whole movie like that. It also left the entire other end of the couch unoccupied. I should move over and give Archer space, but that would be weird. Wouldn’t it?

Fuck. When did everything get so difficult? I needed to relax, but for the first time in my life, I had something to hide, and I didn’t like it. I didn’t want to hide that I was with Archer. Except I wasn’t with him, was I? We were friends with benefits. Never once had we agreed on more.

Maybe it was time for that to change. And if we were more, we could tell Cyrus. If we told Cyrus, Archer and I wouldn’t have to sneak around behind his back.

“Alexa, movie lights,” Marshall said. Instantly the lights dimmed.

“You and your silly toys,” Cyrus teased him, but he pulled him closer, his lips brushing against the shell of Marshall’s ear. He caught me looking so I held his gaze and made kissy noises at him. “You’re an ass, Shane.” Cyrus laughed.

“And that’s my cue.” Archer hit play on the remote and the movie started. I’d looked the movie up online after it had been mentioned the first time, but I hadn’t watched it. I’d wanted to watch it with Archer.

The synopsis online didn’t prepare me for how cute the movie was. And how moving. The people in the building had created a family. And when the aliens came, they were welcomed .

Throughout the movie, Archer snacked, but his attention remained glued to the screen. I doubted he realized how many cookies he’d eaten until he went for another and they were gone.

“Oh, God, take that away from me.” Archer gave the tray a little shove and I moved it to the far end of the coffee table. He leaned back and got comfortable. “Watch this.” He motioned to the screen where suddenly the little flying saucer robots were having babies.

“I’m sorry, but that’s the cutest shit I’ve ever seen.”

The movie took a tragic turn when it looked like one of the little robots wasn’t going to make it, but he was saved by one of the characters and reunited with his family. I’d never admit to the tears I wiped away when I thought the baby robot was a goner.

“Hah, you got Shane too.” Cyrus crowed, because of course he noticed.

“Anyone with a heart would tear up at that,” I threw back.

“I have a heart.” Cyrus pretended to be wounded and he might have kept going but Marshall gently shushed him.

I tried my best to pay attention the movie after that. For the most part, I was successful, but I was still keenly aware of the way Archer was close to me, but not close enough. I wanted to wrap him in my arms and enjoy being with him. The thing was, I could imagine a future like this. The four of us watching movies together and eating a horrific array of sugary goodies, which were apparently Archer’s comfort foods.

When the movie ended, Cyrus ordered dinner and I helped Marshall put the remaining treats away. Cyrus ordered pizza from a local mom and pop joint that had been around since the dawn of time. The original owners were retired, but their grandson ran it now and the food only seemed to improve as time went on .

The beer was a hit, but I had to drive home so I stopped at one. As did Archer. Cyrus and Marshall had a couple with dinner while we watched another 80s movie, one I’d actually seen before. Kieran had been a huge Stephen King fan growing up. Therefore, I’d seen every King movie in existence. Maximum Overdrive was cheesy, but the cheese helped lighten the mood.

When the movie was over, it was clear that Cyrus and Marshall were in no state to drive anyone home, even if they’d wanted to. I’d known them long enough to know the look of heat that simmered between them.

“Did you need a ride home, Archer?”

“You can crash on the couch if you want,” Cyrus offered. He probably meant it. Somewhere, deep down under his raging libido.

“No fucking thank you.” Archer hopped to his feet so fast it had Cyrus cackling. “Are

you ready to leave? I'm ready to leave. We should leave."

He looked to be one step away from sticking his fingers in his ears, closing his eyes, and chanting la, la, la, la I can't hear you.

"I guess we're leaving." I got to my feet. "Drink the rest of those beers and tell me what you think."

"I think you should bring it in," Cyrus told me. He was always honest with me about potential product and he had a good palate. I trusted his opinion.

"Okay, good. See you tomorrow."

We said our goodbyes then stepped out into the fresh air. The sun was just starting to set and the heat of the day lingered. It had been a beautiful summer, but the days were getting shorter now and the weather was starting to turn.

Archer climbed into the passenger seat and I turned the key.

"Am I taking you to your home... or my home?" I asked him .

When he looked at me, I knew what he was thinking. That we shouldn't. We'd spent the whole evening sitting next to each other, pretending to be nothing but friends. I'd loved spending the day with him, but I wanted more. Being near him, but not being able to touch was torture. And I still wanted him to confide in me about Clayton. Even if I couldn't offer solutions, I wanted to be supportive.

"After the day I had..." Archer let out a sigh and leaned back, closing his eyes. "I want to go home with you."

Without another word, I backed out of the driveway.

Chapter 22

Archer

“Don’t people who win obscene amounts of money generally buy obscenely large houses?”

Shane didn’t seem offended by my comment. All he did was smile at me and unlock the door of his modestly-sized home.

“It’s just me here. Why would I need more space? I already have more space than I use most of the time. Come on in and I’ll give you the tour.”

Shane’s house was a simple two bedroom with a basement and an attic that could be converted into another bedroom if he wanted. So far he hadn’t wanted evidently. Shane’s house was everything I’d expected it to be, really. A wall of pictures in the living room showed off his family and friends including a group photo with him, Cyrus, and Marshall.

“That was taken at their five year anniversary.”

“They’re disgusting,” I said with no malice and only a hint of jealousy. I’d never had a serious relationship. Nothing long-term anyway. I’d been serious about a couple of people, but they were never serious back.

“Can I get you anything to drink?” Shane wrapped his arms around me from behind and I leaned against him, luxuriating in the attention.

“I’m good. What was it like?”

“What was what like? ”

“Winning all that money.”

“Terrifying. Liberating. Confusing. Amazing. You name it, I felt it. I’d been dead broke before. Like, deciding which bill to pay based on who was going to cut you off, kind of broke.” Shane huffed out a breath. “Sometimes it still doesn’t feel real. Did you want to see my one big indulgence?”

“Of course I do. Especially when you use words like big.”

I turned and waggled my eyebrows at him. Shane shook his head, but he’d cracked a smile. He led me to his bedroom and pushed the door open before tugging me inside.

“It’s a giant sex toy, isn’t it? One of those dildos as big around as my head. I’m well-endowed, but even I can’t compete with that, Shane.”

“You’re impossible,” He laughed and half steered, half shoved me into the en suite where I laid eyes on the world’s largest bathtub.

“Jesus fuck, man. How many people can you fit in that thing?”

“Well, I was hoping for at least two.” Shane whipped his shirt off and started the water. Even if I hadn’t wanted to lie around in a bath—which I did—I definitely wasn’t going to say no to lying around naked with Shane. The man was so beautiful he made my chest ache.

Taking my shirt off, I discarded it and watched as Shane checked the temperature of the water.

“Your big indulgence for yourself was a bathtub?” I wanted to understand him. Shane didn’t do anything without a reason and his reasons were what made him so goddamned appealing. I wanted to know everything about him.

“My last place didn’t have a bathtub. Only this little shower that was so small it was hard to wash my hair because my elbows would bump against the sides of the shower. It was like showering in an upright coffin.” Shane motioned to the other end of the sizeable bathroom. “That’s why my shower is also huge. It’s the one thing I wanted for myself. No more tiny bathrooms.”

Popping the button on my pants, I shoved them down. Keenly aware of the way Shane watched me, I gave my ass a wiggle. What I didn’t expect was for Shane’s hand to shoot out and crack against the cheek of my ass. The sting shocked me, and I blinked at him for a moment before grinning from ear to ear.

“You’re going to pay for that.” I straightened and kicked my pants to the side. Like a tiger hunting its prey, I stalked toward Shane. He had a way of looking at me that made me feel like the biggest person in the room. Like it didn’t matter if there were three, or three hundred, people around us, he’d still pay attention to me because I was the only person he saw.

“Oh no,” he deadpanned. “Don’t punish me, please. I’ll do anything.”

When I got closer, he wrapped an arm around me and tugged me close to him. I had to tilt my head to look up at him and the way his eyes shone down at me stole my breath. “You fell for my most vilest of plans.”

“And what was this evil plan?” My heart slammed against my ribs. We’d gone from serious to playful and somehow, in the space of a blink, we were back to serious again. If Shane’s evil plan was to get me to fall in love with him, then it was a resounding success. I’d been addicted to him since we met. From that first day, that

first time, I knew he fit me like no one else ever had. Or ever would. There was something singularly wonderful about Shane Taggart that made me think he'd been built just for me. Created out of my dreams or something else equally impossible.

I didn't want to play anymore. Didn't want to pretend that the things fluttering around inside me weren't serious. I grabbed Shane, wrapping my hand around the back of his neck, and I pulled him down into a kiss.

It was ferocious at first. Needy in a way I'd never been. Desperate too, like I'd actually die if I didn't get my tongue into his mouth, or if I didn't share the same oxygen as him, I might fade out of existence altogether.

It was Shane who slowed the kiss, who eased it off from this frantic, stunningly needy thing to a slower, sweeter kind. One filled with raw affection and so much tenderness that I worried I'd shake apart from all the things vibrating inside me.

Somehow, between that first meeting and being led into his bathroom, I'd fallen in love with him. Head over fucking heels. Shane Taggart had won me over with his bright smile, his easygoing way of being, and the generosity of his spirit. When he looked at me, I felt like he saw me. Like I could tell him anything, show him anything, and he'd still think I was the best person in the room.

Terror clawed at my insides. I couldn't love Shane. He'd never love me back. This was supposed to be a casual thing. Something to scratch our mutual itches until ... until what? Until something better came along? That was impossible because Shane was the something better. He was the best thing. The brightest thing in my life. He'd quickly become my biggest supporter, my loudest cheerleader. Three quarters of the clients I'd landed so far were because Shane had referred them to me. He'd sang my praises, telling people to come check out my work.

He cupped one side of my face and his thumb brushed over my cheekbone. Without

saying anything, he leaned in again and kissed me. His lips were softer than anything I'd ever kissed and his eyes were deep pools of emotion. Maybe I wasn't alone in this terror, this love, this wonderful-awful feeling of flying and crashing all at once.

Wrenching my gaze away from Shane's, I climbed into the bathtub .

"This thing is fucking huge. Like six of me could fit in here."

"I don't ever plan on having six people in my bathtub." Shane stripped the rest of the way and climbed in behind me. I didn't miss the way his cock swung heavy and half-hard between his legs. Later I'd do something about that, but for now I wanted to luxuriate in the bath with him. I wanted to let myself enjoy this.

"You better not," I said as I let myself be pulled into his embrace. I leaned back, enjoying the way his body fit perfectly around mine. The way his legs cradled me between them and the way my head rested comfortably against his chest. Did I love fucking him through the floor in increasingly filthy ways? Absolutely I did, and I'd continue to do so for as long as he'd let me. But there was a sweetness about Shane that I couldn't deny being attracted to.

I liked that he was nice to people. That his first and last intention was to help people. I liked that he wanted to help people find a solution, not just throw money at a problem and walk away from it. Maybe that's why I opened my mouth and started telling him about Clayton.

Shane sat quietly behind me, sliding his fingertips up and down my arm as I talked. I told him everything Clayton had told me in the phone call. That he was in trouble. That he'd lost money, and then more money, and had stolen to try and make good, only to lose that too.

"I never knew about his gambling problem. I'd have helped him if I had known." The

words felt like the truth when I said them, but deep down I wondered if I would help him now that I did know. I was still hurt from what he'd done, regardless of why.

“Addiction is a beast of a thing. It's not easy to deal with. I'm sure you'd have done everything you could.”

“I don't even know how I could have helped him, to be honest. I don't know shit about helping people with that kind of problem. ”

“It's okay to not have the answers.” Shane's hand skimmed down my chest. The water was still warm, but all I wanted now was to lay in bed with him. Talking to Clayton and avoiding the way it had made me feel sharp inside, like I was full of broken glass, had tired me out.

I didn't ask to get out, though. I burrowed closer to Shane and closed my eyes. He didn't ask anyone for anything, so giving him a few more minutes of this wasn't a hardship.

“I like your bathtub, by the way,” I told him. It was an awkward segue, but he let me get away with it. I didn't want to talk about Clayton anymore, or addiction, or how my best friend had betrayed me and had only returned when he thought I could do something for him.

“You'll have to test out the shower in the morning,” Shane purred in my ear.

I liked the idea of waking up next to him. There wasn't a part of me that didn't want to know what it was like. What kind of person was he in the morning? What side of the bed did he sleep on? It was dangerous to want to know these things about him. Wanting them made it impossible for me to pretend that I wasn't in love with him.

And I had to pretend that it was still casual. There was no way Shane had the same

feelings for me that I had for him. And yet, I felt safer here than I'd felt at Cyrus and Marshall's. More settled. Less fatalistic. Clayton's reemergence reminded me of the harbinger of doom and it wasn't until Shane and I stripped bare and he held me that I was able to shake off that particular feeling.

"Let's go to bed," he said.

It was the easiest yes I'd ever said.

Chapter 23

Shane

Something had changed between us. A new connection had slotted into place like the final piece in a puzzle. After drying off, I threaded our fingers together and led Archer to my bed. Sometimes, in the middle of the night when I was alone, I'd questioned the need for a king-sized bed, but I was glad to have it now because I saw the fire flicker in Archer's eyes when he looked at it.

It was a sturdy bed with a heavy wood frame and deep purple, rumpled bedding. I threw the covers back and climbed in. I stretched out on my back and smiled at Archer when he crawled in after me and snuggled up close. I ignored the way his proximity made my cock throb and twitch. If Archer needed that from me, I'd happily provide, but tonight I assumed he needed something else.

"Have you decided on my tattoo yet?"

"Mmhm," came Archer's reply.

I shivered when he started tracing patterns on my chest with his fingertips.

"I need to work on it. It's not ready yet." Archer's fingers wandered lower, skating over my stomach. Shifting around, he nuzzled in against my neck. Hot breath ghosted over my skin. My name tumbled from his lips as his hand slid further down, inching closer to my eager dick.

“Shane,” he said .

Something in the tone of his voice had me tilting my head so he could capture my mouth in a kiss. His tongue flicked over the seam of my lips and he gasped a little, like he was shocked by something.

“Shane,” he whispered my name reverently then sealed his mouth over mine.

I’d never kissed anyone the way I kissed him, like he was oxygen. Like if I died right then, it would be okay because nothing in my life that came after could ever be as perfect as that moment.

Archer kissed me like we had all the time in the world. Like we were all that was left in the universe. We kissed like we were the universe.

Archer pulled away, breathless. His eyes sparkled like stars as I watched him lick the seam of his mouth, and then I captured the back of his head in my hand and it was my turn to pull him into a kiss, but this wasn’t slow or sweet. Archer answered the ferocity of my kiss with a growl and flung his leg over me. Once he was on top, he kissed me deeper, harder, almost in a punishing kind of way. Like he hated that he liked kissing me so much. His cock was hard as fuck and hotter than hell pressed against mine and I gave my hips a little thrust, grinding our cocks together in the tight space between our bodies.

“Fuck,” Archer gasped. “Lube?” he asked, even as he spotted it on my nightstand. He scrambled off me to retrieve it, but returned before I had a chance to miss the weight of him on top of me.

“How do you want me?” I asked, putting my hands on his thighs. I slid them up to his ass and grabbed a handful of his perfectly round peach.

Archer spread a liberal amount of lube over his cock, then mine, before leaning down and ghosting a kiss against my lips. He didn't answer with words, just settled his mouth over mine, licked his way into me, and started grinding against me. Our cocks slid together and I pulled him closer. Tighter. Wishing I could fuse us together like this .

He rocked against me and the silky glide of his cock against mine pulled a needy sound out of me. Archer answered by rocking faster. The urgency of his kisses increased too. The sensations were overwhelming. Slick cocks and blunt fingers digging into my chest as he rocked forward again.

Collapsing down on top of me, he pressed his mouth against mine. The kiss was sweet, soft, different than the other times he'd kissed me during sex. The sex was different too. An undercurrent of energy ran through me, thrummed, throbbed, making every nerve in my body answer to his slightest movement.

Even this softer version of Archer was a force to be reckoned with. Softer didn't mean less intense. His movements were long and languid. Sounds that I'd never heard him make tumbled out of him. Moans and whimpers, little gasps, and then a guttural groan as Archer wrenched his mouth away from mine. His forehead against mine, he started to babble.

"Shane, fuck. God, this is ... you're ... I need ..."

"Take what you need. I'm yours. I'm yours." I sank my hands into his hair and held him in place. We were so close his features were blurred and all I could see were the colors of his eyes, the length of his lashes, and the gentle furrow between his eyebrows.

"I'm yours," I repeated, unable to stop saying it now that it had come out of me. I'd been his since that first day we met. Since that first time he looked at me and gave me

what I wanted and took what he needed. I'd been his all along.

Archer shut me up with a kiss. His thrusts had grown frantic, his easy pace lost to passion, and he rutted against me until he was crying out into my mouth, coming against my skin, all over my cock, like he was marking me as his. Snaking a hand between us, Archer grabbed my cock and jerked hard and fast, yanking the release out of me in such a sudden way that my head swam. My lungs couldn't keep up with the demand for oxygen and I whimpered breathlessly when my dick became too sensitive to be touched.

Archer collapsed on top of me and buried his face in the crook of my neck. Winding my arms around him, I kissed his hair and smiled when he made a happy, rumbling noise.

With a final kiss to Archer's head, I rolled him off me and climbed out of bed. He propped himself up on his elbow and watched as I padded back toward the en suite.

"What, no cuddle?"

"If we cuddled like that much longer, they'd need the jaws of life to pry us apart." I gave myself a quick wipe down in the bathroom and returned with a cloth. I'd intended to do it for Archer, but he smirked at me and took the cloth, wiping off his own junk before returning the cloth to me. I tossed it into the laundry pile and told myself that I absolutely would not forget to deal with it properly in the morning.

Climbing back into bed with Archer was strange in the best way. Previously when we'd hooked up, it was the main event. Now, though, the best part of the night was yet to come. I pulled Archer into my arms and kissed him, taking my time to map the contours of his mouth.

Eventually, he pulled away and pressed himself into my side, using my chest as a

pillow. Now that we'd had sex, I wanted to tell him how I felt, but it was awkward without my walls down the way they were when Archer was rutting wildly against me.

There had been some serious relationships when I was in my twenties, but nothing that lasted for long. For one reason or another, things never worked out. I'd thought myself to be in love each time, but nothing I felt back then compared to the way I did now. Like Archer was my heart walking around outside of my body .

"Thanks for letting me come over," Archer said, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"You don't have to thank me. You're welcome here any time. All the time. I'd probably never let you leave if I had it my way."

Archer snorted. "How very Misery of you. Are you going to hobble me and make me draw for you?"

"I'd never hurt you like that. But I might bribe you with your own art studio in my unused attic space and infinite orgasms."

Next to me, Archer went still. "I suppose that's better than being hobbled with a sledgehammer. I mean, who doesn't want infinite orgasms?"

"Probably lots of people," I answered honestly. "But I want that with you. I want a lot of things with you."

Nothing good ever came from not being brave. For better or worse, I wanted Archer to know about the feelings that had taken root in my heart. About how I couldn't make it through a day now without talking to him. Through an hour without thinking about him. I wanted to tell everyone we were together, starting with his bullheaded, overprotective brother.

I shifted around until we were on our sides, facing each other. Archer naturally moved closer to me, but I stopped him from hiding his face in against my chest, or from initiating that kiss I saw him telegraph a mile away.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve told anyone this, and I’ve never meant it the way I mean it with you.”

Archer bit his lip like he knew what I was going to say and wanted to interrupt, but had to hold himself back. I prayed it wasn’t a rejection.

“I’m in love with you, Archer. I want more nights with you. Mornings with you. Dates, in public. I want to kiss you and hold you and watch movies with you. I want to give you everything. ”

Silence met me. I watched his lip slip free from his teeth, and watched his tongue poke out and wet the surface.

“You don’t have to say anything.” I rushed to fill the deafening silence, but Archer only smiled at me.

“It’s not that I don’t know what to say, or that I don’t have anything to say. It’s that I have too much to say. I didn’t want to like you as much as I do. I didn’t want to keep seeing you, but you made it impossible to say no. I couldn’t get enough of you. Can’t. Probably won’t ever, if I’m honest. But ... I have nothing to give you. I’m barely getting back on my feet and it’s all thanks to you.”

Unable to help myself, I closed the distance between us and kissed his cheek. The corner of his mouth. The tip of his nose. “I have more than a lot of people. Does that mean I should only be with someone who has more than me? Who can give me things? I don’t want things. And the things I do want, I have. You’ve given me something money can’t buy. You see me how I am, not now you want me to be, and

I've never had that."

"Never?" Archer looked incredulous. "Surely there was someone—"

"Never," I cut him off. "Not one person has accepted me the way you do. Has let me be free to be myself the way you let me. I'd give all my money away if it meant keeping you."

He laughed and stole a kiss. "Well, you don't have to do that to keep me. You're already doing a pretty good job of that."

It wasn't quite the declaration of love I'd hoped for, but the last thing I wanted was for Archer to confess to things he didn't feel. That I didn't scare him away was a big enough win.

"Do you really want to take me on dates?" Archer asked .

"Why wouldn't I? We have fun together. I like talking to you. I'd like to do it in public, over dinner maybe. Or ice cream. Or a drag show. Whatever you want."

"Even karaoke?"

I suppressed a shudder. "Even karaoke."

His face lit up like the sun. "I'd never make you go to karaoke."

Archer moved in closer, his lips brushing against mine. My eyes fluttered shut as he teased another kiss against the seam of my lips. "I love you too much to subject you to such a cruelty."

He kissed me and I couldn't respond to anything but the way his mouth fit perfectly

against mine. The way his breaths mingled with mine and how it felt when he slid the rest of the way over to me, pressing our bodies together again.

We kissed.

And we kissed.

And we kissed until there was no more breath in our lungs and we were forced to pull away. Even then, we lay tangled together, sharing gentle touches as we whispered about our plans for the future. We weren't planning far ahead yet, but someday we would. Someday we'd be planning forever.

Chapter 24

Archer

The day before was a dream. I woke in Shane's arms with birds singing outside the window, serenading us awake with their sweet songs. Okay, so I woke up sprawled out on the other side of the bed, far away from Shane's arms, and it wasn't the sound of birds that woke me, but the sun slicing through the window and straight into my brain that stirred me out of my sleep.

Shane, however, slept like the dead still. I stared at him for a minute, fairly certain that a bomb could go off and he'd sleep through it. Slipping out of bed, I made quick use of the bathroom before returning to slide in next to him and press myself close to his side and pretend that we'd woken up like that, all tangled together. The truth was that sleeping next to another person was great. Sleeping in their arms was sticky and uncomfortable and Shane and I had quickly stopped trying to be comfortable like that.

It was different post-orgasm, when we were still blissed out and craving that residual connection. We'd fallen asleep facing each other, hands tangled in the space between our bodies. In the dark, we'd whispered secrets to each other. Confessions had fallen from our lips so much easier than they would have in the light of day.

Reaching out, I traced the line of Shane's jaw with my finger. His scruff was longer now, and soft. Last night, we'd kissed until I was sure my jaw was going to fall off. The muscles in my face had protested long before I was willing to stop.

Waking up next to someone was a novelty to me. I'd had a few relationships, but not for a while. I'd been focused on getting my shop off the ground, and then I'd been dealing with the mess Clayton left behind. My shop was my life. My livelihood. My soul. But Shane had become my heart. My light.

"I could get used to this," I whispered to him. It was harder to confess things in the daylight.

"To which part?" Shane asked.

His voice was hoarse and gravelly. I loved the way it sounded and I loved that I was lucky enough to hear it. Sex with Shane was amazing. Explosive. Everything I'd ever wanted and never been able to find. But this quiet intimacy, this tender moment, was a gift.

"All of it," I answered, burrowing closer. Was I horny? Absolutely. But this moment felt far too soft and precious. I wanted to exist in it on its own and absorb the easy affection that thrummed between us as Shane wrapped his arm around me and kissed my head.

"What time is it?" he mumbled some minutes later. "Shit."

He kissed my head again. "I have to get up. It's delivery day and I need to be there to sign."

So much for the bubble we lived in. I tried not to be disappointed, even though I knew we'd have to leave eventually.

"Sorry," Shane apologized as he crawled out of bed. I watched him tug clothes on, doing nothing to hide my admiration for his body. He was tall and strong, and I knew from experience how firm he felt under that top layer of padding.

Shane caught me staring. “What?” He pulled a shirt on over his head .

Sliding out of bed, I walked over to him and rose on my toes. I stole a kiss, smiling as I pulled away. “Nothing. You’re hot, that’s all.”

I raked my gaze over his body, letting him see me appreciate him before meeting his eyes again. “You should wear suspenders today.”

Shane’s nostrils flared. “That’s cruel. I’ll be hard all day long. I can’t even think about suspenders without getting a raging boner.”

“I’ll make it worth it.” I slid my finger down the center of his chest before spinning away. My clothes were in the bathroom where I’d left them, in the state that I’d left them in. Rumpled and crumpled, but they’d have to do. Shane came into the bathroom as I was zipping my fly. Of course he was wearing suspenders like I’d asked.

“Good boy.”

He huffed. “That shouldn’t be nearly as hot as I find it.”

“Why not? Don’t you like being my good boy? Good boys get rewards.”

Shane’s lip curled. “I can’t have this conversation right now. But we can pick it up later, say after work.”

I took pity on him as he had to steady himself with a few deep breaths before he could get his dick to cooperate and let him drain his bladder. He told me the secret location of the spare toothbrushes and I made use of one. The whole thing was startlingly domestic, intimate in a different way than I’d ever experienced.

“I’m sorry I don’t have time to make you breakfast,” Shane apologized as he shoved his feet into his shoes and grabbed his keys.

“I didn’t come over for the food. Besides, I’m hoping there will be many more opportunities for you to serve me breakfast in bed.”

“Oh, now it’s breakfast in bed, is it?”

“I think I’m worth spoiling.”

“If it’s spoiling you want, I’ll take you to Bennett’s for breakfast. Their waffle stack is a sin. ”

“I like sin.” I flashed Shane a smile and waited for him to unlock his truck before I climbed inside.

It was easy to indulge myself where Shane was concerned. I wanted to make him happy, and if the idea of taking me for waffles did that, then who was I to argue. The way I saw it, Shane did so much for everyone else for no other reason than he could and he wanted to. He was like the little alien robots in ,*batteries not included the way he ran around fixing things for everyone.

Suddenly the sunflower didn’t seem like the right idea for his tattoo anymore. My fingers itched to get ahold of a sketchbook, but I’d left everything at home yesterday. Shane pulled up behind the bar and I unbuckled my seat belt.

“You don’t mind if I abandon you with your delivery, do you? I have a hot date with my sketchbook.”

Without glancing around, he leaned across the seat and stole a kiss. It was a risky thing to do and my breath caught in my throat. It was one thing to declare our feelings

in the safety of his bedroom. It wasn't dangerous to reach for me where no one could see. But here, anyone could see.

"So long as you promise to come see me later."

"Yeah, of course." I licked my lips in a vain attempt to try and taste him again. Before I did something reckless, like climb into his lap and rut against him, I slipped out of the truck and used my keys to open the back door. We agreed to meet up after the dinner rush and I darted upstairs, eager to get to work.

I usually never left home without a sketchbook of some kind, but yesterday's call from Clayton had thrown me off kilter. Though I'd originally intended to unblock his number, in the light of a new day, I found myself changing my mind .

Not only was I not in a position to be able to help Clayton, but I wasn't as good of a person as Shane was. I didn't want to help him. Someone better than me might have found a way to justify it. Like if it weren't for Clayton, then I wouldn't have had to live with Cyrus. If I hadn't been living with Cyrus, I wouldn't have met Shane.

As good as my life was now, and as much as I loved Shane, I was still pissed at Clayton for what he'd done. He acted like he didn't have a choice, but it was his choices that put him in that position in the first place.

I wasn't sorry to have an amazing window to curl up next to and sketch. The natural light that poured in was great for my mood and for drawing. It was indulgent of me to draw Shane a tattoo inspired by my favorite movie, but he reminded me of those helpful little robots flying around. Indulging myself further, I surrounded Robot-Shane with sunflowers, meshing machine and nature together in a way I hadn't thought to do before.

Bringing my things out of storage had done wonders for my attitude. I hadn't realized

how much I'd missed having access to all my art supplies until I was sleeping on Cyrus's couch. Over the years, I'd collected all kinds of media to work in. I'd attempted lithography a few years back but it was something that came less naturally to me than painting. I'd toyed with the idea of taking classes, but by the time I wanted to do that, I was trying to get my shop off the ground.

Mostly I worked in pencil. Sometimes I did something in charcoal or pen. Today I went to my room and opened the top drawer of the dresser. My clothes all hung in the closet and I'd used the dresser that was in the room as my giant art storage unit. One day I'd have my own space. A studio that I could arrange how I wanted. With comfy chairs and the best lighting money could buy. I'd have all my supplies organized so I never had to hunt or dig or wonder where something was.

I found the markers I was looking for in the second drawer and returned to my seat by the window. The light had moved on, indicating that I'd been at it longer than I'd originally thought, but I still had time yet before I had to meet Shane.

I started with the sunflowers first, filling the centers in before adding the bursts of yellow and orange to their petals. Already I saw tweaks that I'd want to make before putting this on Shane's body, but I still wanted to finish this piece. I wanted to bring my vision to life, hoping he'd like it.

If he didn't, it wasn't a total loss. I'd still look at him and see the most generous person on the planet. I'd still look at him and see the person I'd fallen for. And I'd have an adorable one-of-a-kind piece of art to hang in my bedroom. No way in hell did I want to risk some random person seeing it and wanting me to tattoo it on them. I was possessive, sue me.

I looked up from my work to find that another huge chunk of time had passed. I'd put far more work into this piece than I'd intended, but the minute I got going I'd been unable to stop. The raging perfectionist in me kept wanting to tweak it, but I was at

the point now where if I didn't stop, I'd risk overdrawing it and ruining the whole thing.

Flipping my sketchbook shut, I stood and rolled my shoulders, then my neck, working the kinks out. I promised myself that I'd put my stuff away later and I went downstairs, eager to show Shane what I'd spent the afternoon working on.

Chapter 25

Shane

Work was immediately a shit show. The delivery was wrong. The driver was new and didn't know shit. My morning with Archer had lifted my mood, but for the first time since I opened the bar, I found myself wondering why I didn't hire a manager to do all this stuff for me. At first, I'd wanted to work. I'd craved the normalcy that a steady job offered. Something where I called the shots. But a few years in and I was learning that normal was overrated.

If I had a manager, I could let them do all this shit and just show up when I felt like it. I could do the fun part like hanging out behind the bar. Or better yet, I could hang out upstairs with Archer. It made me feel like a lovesick teenager, but I was beyond caring. I'd done so much for other people, I deserved a little daydream of my own.

Cyrus breezing in and greeting me with his usual grin pulled me out of my thoughts.

“Hey, Cyrus, quick question.”

He turned the water on and started washing his hands so he could dive into prep.

“What's up?”

“If I hired someone to run this place for me, would that be a job you'd want?” Cyrus had been with me from the beginning. It only seemed fair to offer it to him first. He'd been there the longest and he knew the place better than anyone .

“Hell, no.” Cyrus didn’t have to think about his answer. “Why? Are you quitting?”

“I’m thinking of taking more time away from here.”

“Good. You work too much. You’re either here looking after this place, or you’re at your mom’s looking after her place. Mickey is too green to run the show. What about Vivian? I know you gave her time off so she could get her mom’s affairs in order, but I don’t hate her.”

Coming from Cyrus, that was a ringing endorsement. He had never been shy about letting me know what he thought of some of the staff I hired. It was why I’d put him in charge of the kitchen staff, of which there currently was only him.

“Why don’t you hire someone to help you in here? I thought we had this conversation months ago.”

“I like doing all this, Shane.” Cyrus waved me off. “Now let me do my job and go find someone to do yours.”

“Yes, boss.”

I ducked into my office to call Vivian and offer her the job if she wanted it. Starting immediately. Vivian jumped at the offer, and though I said she could come in the next day, she wanted to come in tonight and start getting her feet under her. I wasn’t going to abandon her on the first day, but Vivian was smart as a whip and she’d have the hang of things in no time.

By the time people started to trickle into the bar for dinner and drinks, my mood couldn’t have gotten any better. The delivery shit from earlier was all but forgotten. The bar was busier than usual so I was doubly glad when Vivian showed up and stepped behind the bar.

“Good to see you, boss,” I said to her and her eyes sparkled.

“Oh, I like the sound of that.”

Vivian greeted Mickey and he seemed enthusiastic about her return and her promotion. She stepped in like she’d never been gone. The customers were happy to see her return. She’d always been popular with the regulars here. Their warm greetings proved that I’d made the right decision.

Sometime after dinner, Vivian sent me away. “You need a break, Shane. Knowing you, you haven’t stopped since you got here.”

“You got me there.” I wondered what Archer was doing. I could go up and see him. And if anyone got suspicious, it no longer mattered because we were going to have to tell everyone eventually.

Vivian pushed my shoulder. “So get out of here. Let your manager manage. I can close up tonight. I happen to remember how.”

When I didn’t move, she rolled her eyes. “Shane, I’m sorry, but you’re fired. Get out of my bar.”

“Fine. I know when I’m not wanted.” I tugged at the apron strings and pulled it off. “If you need me—”

“I won’t.” Vivian glanced at Mickey, who’d been doing his best to ignore the exchange, but had laughed at her most recent statement. “You’re distracting my staff, Shane.”

“Okay, okay. I’m going. I’m gone.” I slipped through the back, exchanging a quick greeting with Cyrus, who’d made it through the dinner rush seemingly unscathed.

“I think you should hire someone to give you a hand back here. Or see if Trev wants to learn some basic kitchen shit.”

Trev was the food runner slash dishwasher. I’d offered to teach him to work behind the bar, but he said that he didn’t want to deal with people as much as that and he was fine with his current position.

“Are you trying to get rid of me?” Cyrus joked, but I wasn’t laughing.

“The opposite, actually. I don’t want you to burn out.”

“Ugh. Stop being so annoyingly nice all the time. Get out of my kitchen. ”

“Wow, first Vivian kicks me out of the front and now you’re kicking me out of the back. Of my own bar. Maybe I should go home.” Or upstairs to see Archer. Or upstairs to get Archer and then home.

“Take the hint, then.” Cyrus motioned to the back door. “Get out of here. Go have a life or something.”

“Love you too, Cyrus.” I made my way to the back door and pushed it open. Daylight was quickly fading and the heat of the day was slipping away with it. The air smelled like dust and hot asphalt. The last of the day’s fading sunlight glinted off chrome and I squinted. Before I could think about going upstairs to see Archer, the back door opened like I’d conjured him up.

“Hey, I was just going to come see you. I have news.”

“I have a tattoo. Well, it’ll need to be rendered properly and... whatever. Here. Look.”

He flipped his sketchbook open to a full color picture of a little flying saucer robot surrounded by sunflowers. “It’s you. You’re the robot who flies around fixing shit. The sunflowers mean generosity, because that’s you too.”

Archer snapped his mouth shut and looked at me, pink slanting across his cheekbones.

“It’s amazing.” I couldn’t think of a better way to describe it, even though amazing seemed lame and flimsy, not nearly enough. “This is how you see me?”

He shrugged a shoulder, looking embarrassed. Clearly it had taken guts to reveal these things to me. It was like a private window into the very heart of him.

“I want it. When can we do it?”

“Yeah? You do?” Archer cleared his throat and took the sketchbook back. Flipping it shut, he tucked it in against his side. “I mean, of course you do. And whenever you have time is fine by me. ”

“That reminds me of what I wanted to tell you. I’m about to have more time because I just hired a manager.”

Archer’s eyes lit up and he stepped in closer to me. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. It’s selfish, but I want to spend more time with you.”

“I don’t hate that.” Archer stepped into my space and ghosted a kiss against my lips. Then another. And a third. I reached for him, sinking my hand into his hair. As much as I loved The Anchor, I didn’t want it to be my entire life anymore and I had the luxury of stepping back and not suffering for it. I didn’t want to schedule seeing Archer around both our jobs. Hell, he wouldn’t have to work ever again if he didn’t

want to, but I doubted that he'd want to give up his job. It was part of him. I'd seen firsthand how happy he was when he was working on a piece. Taking that from him, or asking him to give that up was the furthest thing from my mind.

He deepened the kiss, sliding his tongue into my mouth to dance around mine for several drawn-out moments before he pulled away.

"Holy shit," he exhaled.

"Yeah, I'll fucking say." Cyrus's angry voice cracked through the atmosphere like a whip. Archer and I spun around and it was impossible not to feel a flash of guilt at the look of total betrayal on Cyrus's face.

"What the fuck, Shane?" A bag of trash landed on the ground at Cyrus's feet and the back door of the restaurant banged shut. "What the entire fuck is going on here?"

"Cyrus, calm down," Archer said, but Cyrus paid him no attention.

"Archer's been through a lot of shit. The last thing he needs is his fucking landlord putting the moves on him. What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Jesus Christ, Cy, calm down." Archer stepped closer to him. "I got ripped off. I didn't have some sort of trauma. "

"You're in a vulnerable position." Cyrus folded his arms over his chest. The muscle in his jaw ticked and throbbed and I thought the vein in his forehead might burst. "You don't need this shit."

"What shit, Cyrus? Someone who fucking cares about me?"

"I care about you!" Cyrus shouted.

Watching them fight was like watching a train wreck. I'd never had an out-of-body experience before, but it was sort of like I was outside of everything, watching it go down.

"Cyrus—" I wanted to tell him that Archer was it for me. That I'd rather chop off my own arm than ever hurt him. That I'd do whatever it took to keep him happy and safe. Forever.

"And you. You fucking asshole. The whole goddamned town of people and you have to go after my little brother? That's like... illegal."

Archer snorted.

"Okay, not illegal, but immoral. It's against bro-code."

"He's not a child, Cyrus. And neither am I. Whatever problem you have with this, I suggest you find a way to get over it."

"I don't have to do anything." Cyrus tugged at his apron and shoved it at me. I stood there, slack-jawed and stunned as Cyrus stormed toward his car.

"I'll deal with him." Archer shot me an apologetic look and handed me his sketchbook, then took off running after Cyrus. Left holding Archer's sketchbook and Cyrus's apron, I watched the brothers stand by Cyrus's car and bicker. Cyrus was clearly pissed about the whole thing, but I didn't quite understand why. So long as my brothers were with people who cared about them, people they were safe with, I would be happy for them. Instead, Cyrus had thrown a temper tantrum .

Fuck. Did I still have a cook? I had to get inside and get shit under control. I'd close the kitchen for the night if I had to, but I hoped that Cyrus just needed a few minutes to get it together.

I took the trash to the dumpster and caught a few curse words carrying through the parking lot from where Archer and Cyrus were still fighting. As much as I wanted to go over there, I doubted my presence would help matters much.

Making my way back into the bar, I went out front and waved Vivian over to me.

“Houston, we have a problem. Cyrus walked out.”

“What?” Vivian’s eyes went wide. “Where? Why?”

“Long story short, he found out that I’ve been seeing his brother.”

Vivian sighed dramatically. “I can’t even begin to understand any of this and I’m not sure I want to. What are we going to do with all the food orders?”

“Cancel them, I guess.”

Mickey appeared a second later. “Sorry, but I overheard and maybe there’s a solution. A temporary one.”

“What’s your solution?” Vivian asked Mickey.

He turned his head and pointed at Ethan, who had come in sometime in the few minutes since I’d stepped out back. Mickey waved Ethan over before Vivian or I could protest.

“Ethan, there’s a bit of an issue and Cyrus had to step out so there’s no one in the kitchen.”

“There’s me, but the kitchen was never my domain.”

Ethan reached out and took the apron from me. He stole a kiss on the way past Mickey.

“Come on,” Ethan said to me. “I’m sure between the two of us we can manage to put out a few fires.”

I wasn’t so sure about that, but I was willing to give it a try .

“It’s a damn good thing I’ve eaten just about everything on your menu.” Ethan slid the apron over his head and tied it behind his back. “I’m sure I can fudge my way through a couple of orders. Can I ask what happened?”

He went over to the grill and cleared off the few items that were there, burning away. He tossed them in the trash, started new burger patties, and went to read the orders to see what he needed to be doing after that.

I gave Ethan the simple honest answer. “I fell in love with his brother.”

Chapter 26

Archer

I chased after Cyrus, who already had his keys out of his pocket. He was hell-bent on getting out of there, but no way was I going to let him throw a tantrum and bail.

“Cyrus, if you get in that car, this conversation is over. Forever. And you’ll be lucky if I talk to you at all.”

He spun around so fast his shoes scraped against the dirt on the parking lot. Fury still radiated out of him, but it had been a long time since Cyrus scared me.

“Why the hell are you so mad? Shane’s a good guy. I thought you’d be like happy, or something. Is it because he’s too good for me?” Cyrus’s reaction had shocked and angered me all at once. I didn’t think he’d do a happy dance, but I also hadn’t expected this emotional outburst from him.

Cyrus flinched like I’d slapped him. “Are you insane? You’re too good for him. You’ve been through too much to have someone just swoop in and take advantage,” he sneered.

“Excuse you?” Clenching my fists, I kept my hands by my sides because if I didn’t, I was going to punch him right in the mouth. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Clayton tore your life apart. Then Shane swoops in and makes it all better. And now

he's kissing you? How is that not taking advantage?" Cyrus's hand cut through the air as he ranted .

"Do you even hear yourself? I get that seeing Shane and me might have been shocking, but you're acting like a douche bag about it."

"I'm trying to protect you!" Cyrus was so mad his hands shook. He folded his arms over his chest and glared at me. "Clayton just got done fucking you over, you're finally getting back on your feet, and now Shane's putting the moves on you. You need time to heal."

I put my face in my hands and screamed, not as loud as I could, but enough to vent some of my frustration before I lost my temper.

"Cyrus, listen to me very carefully." I sucked in a deep breath and stared him down. "Are you listening? Because we're not having this conversation more than once."

"I'm listening." His facial expression was pissy and petty and I wanted to slap it off him, but at least he seemed to be paying attention now.

"The thing with Shane and me is not your business, but I'm going to tell you about it anyway. I've been seeing him since before he offered me the space above the bar. It started out casual, and now it's not. It's very not casual. And considering that I came into the relationship with fifty bucks in my savings account and a storage unit worth of baggage, it's safe to say that if you're worried about anyone taking advantage of anyone, you should be worried about me taking advantage of him. But that's not what this is."

"Then what is it? Because all I see is my little brother and my boss. Clayton—"

"Oh, for the love of God, Cyrus. Let it go. Clayton isn't even fucking here. You can't

use that for an excuse to baby me and try to run my fucking life. Who I'm with and who I love, it's not any of your business."

Something like hurt flashed across Cyrus's face, but as quick as it came, it was gone again .

"You're being unreasonable," I continued. "Shane's not taking advantage of me and it's a shitty thing for you to think."

"Then what am I supposed to think?"

Right now it was hard to tell that Cyrus was my older brother for the way he was acting. It was like he was younger and more immature than me all of the sudden. Like the shit I'd been through recently had aged me and him watching me go through shit had spun him around somehow. Our perspectives had shifted and clearly we weren't seeing eye to eye.

After another deep breath, I let the fight drain out of me. "You're supposed to think that I'm your brother, not your kid. That I'm capable of making my own decisions and even if you don't like them, you're supposed to understand they're not your decisions to make. They're mine. And—" I sighed. "You're supposed to be happy for me."

"I've only ever wanted to help you, Archer." Cyrus sounded dejected, still angry, but also sad. For as hot as his temper could run sometimes, it always did cool quickly.

"I know that. I know it was you who taught me to drive. It was you who didn't miss my graduation. You were the one there when I broke my collarbone in the tenth grade. I know all of that was you. And yeah, you were there when Clayton fucked me over. You've been there for the good and the bad, but you can't keep holding on to bad shit that happened to me, Cyrus. It happened to me, but you're the one who can't

let it go. And it's not fair. It's too fair to me; it's not fair to Shane. And it's not fair to you. If you'd have let shit go for five minutes, we might have been having a whole different conversation right now."

Cyrus stared at me like he wasn't sure what to say. And, honestly, neither was I.

"I need to go home," he said. He seemed calmer now, but he barely looked at me before turning and getting in his car. I'd hoped to talk him back inside to finish his shift. Hell, I wondered if this was the end of his friendship with Shane. I hated to think that I was somehow responsible for that.

Guilt was a stupid, useless emotion. Especially when I knew we'd done nothing wrong. Nothing to warrant Cyrus's wrath. He backed out of his parking space and drove away. He didn't roar out of the parking lot like a bat out of hell, but still my legs quaked as the adrenaline wore off.

I pulled my phone out and texted Marshall, warning him that Cyrus was on his way home. I didn't say why. Cyrus would want to fill him in. Turning back toward the bar, I saw Shane had gone inside. I didn't feel like going around the front so I sent a text telling him to let me in.

Slipping through the door, I found the kitchen in a state of... well, disaster was a good word for whatever was going on.

"Who?" I motioned to the middle-aged guy who was rummaging around in the kitchen. Seeing someone who wasn't Cyrus bashing around back here struck me as inherently wrong. This space belonged to Cyrus and watching some other guy mess it up irked me. But Cyrus had done it to himself.

"Archer, I'd like you to meet Ethan Bennett."

“Like the diner?”

Ethan turned at the sound of my voice and shot me a smile. Now I recognized him. “It’s been a few years since I had to do any of this stuff and I’m a bit rusty. But, with any luck, I can get these orders out without burning the place down.”

Shane draped his arm around me and tugged me close. Out of nowhere, my sketchbook appeared and I took it from him. He told Ethan he’d be right back and he whisked me around the corner where the walk-in fridge was. It wasn’t any more private here, but it felt like it.

“I’m going to stick around and help Ethan. We’re shutting the kitchen early if you want to wait here, or upstairs. Or out front. Are you okay?” Shane cupped my face in his hands. His brows pinched together and he looked at me with the softest eyes I’d ever seen. He looked at me like I was important, and so was my happiness. Despite the fight I’d had with Cyrus, I found that... yeah, I was okay.

Unable to find words to express myself, I nodded. “I’m fine. Cyrus will come around. I’m not worried about it.”

“I am. He had no right talking to you like that.”

“He’s my brother.” I shrugged.

“I have two of those myself, and we’re giant pains in each other’s ass sometimes—especially Kieran in mine—but family doesn’t get a free pass to be an asshole to you.”

“Cyrus practically raised me. Did you know that?”

Shane glanced at the kitchen, but Ethan seemed to have things in hand. “I didn’t

know that.”

“Yeah. Our parents weren’t planning on my arrival and though Cyrus isn’t that much older than me, they were done with kids, you know. But they didn’t believe in abortion, so... baby number two came along. I don’t remember a lot from my childhood, like not about being really little, but what I do remember is Cyrus. Cyrus walking me to the bus. Cyrus helping with my homework. Taking me to the ER when I broke my collarbone. And then the shit with Clayton went down and again it was Cyrus to the rescue.”

“It doesn’t sound like any of that is your fault.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but I couldn’t because Shane was right. None of those things had been my fault. Maybe Clayton, in some ways, but even then I hadn’t known about his gambling problem when I’d agreed to go into business with him or I never would have done it.

“When things aren’t your fault, you shouldn’t be treated like they are.”

“He’s protective.”

Shane looked like he wanted to say something else, but he didn’t. Could he tell that I’d had more than I could take for the day? I wanted to go home, but home was standing right in front of me.

“I’m going to check in with Ethan and touch base with Vivian and Mickey, and then I’ll take you home, okay?”

Nodding weakly, I leaned against the cold door of the walk-in and let out a sigh. Shane was worth every last shred of angst and tension between Cyrus and me. It was a shame that it was necessary at all. Cyrus could have taken the news better, and

maybe he would have if we'd have told him about us from the beginning instead of sneaking around. No matter which way I looked at it, Cyrus was pissed at me and I hated it. But not enough to let go of Shane.

For as long as I could remember, I'd been jealous of Cyrus. He was the kid our parents wanted. He found Marshall when they were both young. Barely out of high school, they'd been together ever since. He had a job he loved, and he owned his own house.

And I was a nobody tattoo artist who was starting all over again. I still only had a few bucks to my name. But now I had Shane. I had someone who looked at me the way Marshall looked at Cyrus. Someone who wanted me. Someone who loved me.

If Cyrus wasn't going to be happy for me, I decided that I had nothing to say to him. My heart fractured at that thought, and I sucked down a shaky breath. All I wanted now was to get the fuck away from here with Shane and curl up in his arms. I wanted him to look at me with his soft, soupy eyes and tell me everything would be okay. And I wanted to believe him.

Chapter 27

Shane

Archer needed a few minutes to gather an overnight bag. Normally, I'd have given him the choice of where he wanted to spend the night, but my house was quieter and far more private. And it had the massive bathtub he seemed to enjoy. I planned to make use of it again.

Cyrus's reaction to everything had caught me completely off-guard. I'd expected a little bit of grumbling, but nothing could have prepared me for how angry he'd been. He could be grumpy, everyone who knew him was aware of that. But this was next level... and it was bullshit.

Archer came downstairs with a backpack slung over a shoulder. The circles under his eyes were so dark they looked like bruises. For the past few years, if I saw a problem, I fixed it. A friend needed something, I stepped in and gave it to them. Mom's house needed a new roof? No problem. I could fix that.

But this wasn't something I could throw money at and make it go away. There was no amount of money in the world that would patch the rift between Archer and Cyrus. They had to do that on their own. Knowing this left me feeling restless. Helpless. It wasn't a feeling I was used to anymore.

"Are we ready to go?" Archer asked, sliding in next to me and wrapping an arm around my waist. I draped one over his shoulder and held him tight.

“Yeah. Vivian’s got everything in hand. ”

He glanced around the kitchen. “Cyrus is going to shit if he sees the kitchen like this.”

I had to agree. It wasn’t messy, but it wasn’t how Cyrus would have left it. Trev had done his best after Ethan finished up the last of the orders.

“Well, if he wanted it done his way, he should have stayed. I can come in tomorrow and get it straightened out.”

“You don’t need to fix it for him,” Archer told me as he tugged me toward the back door. “He’s not going to quit or anything.”

“I wish I was sure about that.”

We left the bar hand in hand, his slender fingers looped loosely through mine. We drove home that way too, our hands linked in the space between us. Archer rolled his window down and the breeze rushing in made me think of the road trips I’d been on as a kid before Dad died. Trips through mountain passes and dusty gravel roads. Getting lost. Getting found. Dad’s unflappable nature.

“We should go on a road trip some time,” I told Archer.

“I’ve never been on a road trip.”

“Then we definitely need to. We can take short ones to start with. A weekend here or there.”

I stole a glance at him. He stared out the window, trouble still lingering in his expression.

“Hey, it’s going to be okay.”

Archer heaved out a sigh. “I wish I had your faith in that. I’m not used to things going my way.”

The rest of the drive was quiet. Archer didn’t seem to be into entertaining the idea of a road trip so I’d have to find some other way to get his mind off of the fight he’d had with his brother. I never realized that Cyrus had been such an important figure in Archer’s upbringing. It was clear to me now that his emotions weren’t that of a protective older brother, but more like a worried father.

Coming home with Archer next to me gave me a light, tingly sensation in my stomach. I could imagine a future here with him. Now that I hired Vivian to step in as manager, I’d have more free time. I wanted to help Mom out with the house more often. I also wanted to fix up the attic space for Archer. Hiring someone would be easier, but I kind of wanted to do it myself.

Archer followed me inside and kicked off his shoes. Wrapping my arms around him, I pulled him close and slanted our mouths together.

Unlike other kisses we’d shared, there was no urgency in this kiss. It was slow and lacked the heat to lead anywhere. It was comfort and reassurance and I was glad I could be that for him. I knew this wasn’t a problem I could solve, but I hoped it was solvable. The thought that I could’ve come between the brothers was a knife in my gut.

Archer pulled away and curled into me, resting his forehead against my chest. He took a deep breath.

“Did you want to call him?” I asked.

“No. I don’t.”

“Maybe he’s had time to calm down and we can explain.”

Archer stiffened in my arms. Lifting his head, he looked me in the eyes. His brow was pinched and he looked irritated.

“This thing with Cyrus isn’t only about you and me. It’s about him acting like a parent instead of my brother. It’s about a lot of things that don’t have anything to do with you. We were just the catalyst. The proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back.” Archer’s frustration overflowed, pouring out of him. I’d never seen him in a state of irritation quite like this one.

“Why are you smiling?” he asked.

“You’re going to be mad if I tell you. ”

Archer reached for me. Wrapping a hand around the back of my neck, he pulled me down to him. Fuck yes, I could get behind him using me to vent his frustrations on. My dick throbbed, suddenly very interested in what was going on.

“Tell me.”

“I was just thinking that when you’re mad—”

“I’m not mad. I’m annoyed,” Archer clarified.

“Okay then, when you’re annoyed, you remind me of a hedgehog. All cute and spikey.”

Archer narrowed his eyes at me and the hand on my neck moved to my shoulder.

With the slightest bit of pressure, I let him guide me to the floor. On my knees for him was exactly where I wanted to be. Sliding my hands up his legs, he nodded when I reached for his fly.

“I don’t look like a hedgehog,” Archer protested, glaring down at me.

“The cutest, angriest hedgehog.”

He gripped the back of my head and ground his cock against my face. I hadn’t freed him from the confines of his briefs yet. I opened my mouth, doing my best to try and taste him through the fabric.

“You need to talk less.”

“Do you have a specific way you plan to shut me up?” I looked up and watched Archer’s eyes flash.

“You have three seconds to get my cock in your mouth.”

I’d like to think that I did it in one second, because the minute he spoke, I yanked his briefs down and took him in my mouth. Archer swore. His hips bucked forward, forcing more of his length into my mouth.

“That’s right,” he encouraged me as he sank his hands into my hair. “Not so mouthy now, are you?”

Taking that as a challenge, I swirled my tongue around the head, then flattened it against the underside of his cock and took him as deep as I could go before pulling back to do it again. Archer’s grip in my hair tightened and his hips thrust gently. But I didn’t want him to be gentle. I wanted him to own me.

I pulled back and looked up at him again. His cock bobbed in the air in front of me, glistening and wet. Silent, I opened my mouth and didn't move. It took all of two seconds for him to understand what I wanted him to do.

He grinned at me, looking feral, like a predator looming above me. My scalp stung when he shoved his fingers into my hair and tugged, yanking me closer. His cock slid into my mouth like it belonged there and the groan that tore out of Archer had me pressing the heel of my hand against my dick, urging it to behave.

“God, Shane. Your mouth was made for this.” He thrust forward, burying his cock into my throat. Tears stung my eyes and they fluttered shut. “Eyes on me,” Archer said. Commanded.

I obeyed, opening them and gazing up at him like he was a god that I was worshipping. A deity whom I'd gladly kneel for. He clung to me as his cock slid in and out of my mouth at a steady pace. Tears pooled and spilled, running down my cheeks. Archer swiped them away with his thumbs. The sharp predatory gaze was gone from his expression, leaving a softer look. Something fond and sweet and just for me.

“I need to fuck you,” Archer said. “Need to be inside you.”

I fucking whimpered because I needed that too. The turmoil with Cyrus had left me feeling shaken, I realized. And now that Archer had voiced that he wanted me, I needed him inside me. Needed to feel like he was choosing me, even though I'd never ask him to make that choice .

His grip tightened. My scalp sang, screaming as he tugged my head back. His cock came out of my mouth, but before I could protest, he'd replaced it with his tongue. His body curled around mine like a comma as he licked his way inside my mouth. I hoped I tasted like him. I wanted him to kiss me and know who I belonged to. I was

irrevocably Archer's.

“Get to the bedroom, get naked, bend your ass over that bed, and wait for me.” Archer released me and I scrambled to obey. Getting awkwardly to my feet, I half stumbled through the house to my bedroom, shedding my shirt on the way. By the time I was entering my room, I was flicking my pants open and shoving them off. Kicking them aside, I bent over and folded my arms on the mattress. I used the crook of my elbow for a pillow and looked over my shoulder at the door, waiting for Archer.

Seconds felt like an eternity, but Archer appeared, gorgeous and rumped. His fly was still open and he'd lost his shirt on the way to the bedroom. Instead of making a beeline for me, he went to the nightstand and grabbed the lube and a condom.

“We can ditch those,” I said suddenly, not wanting any barriers between us. Not tonight. And if we were going to keep doing this, not ever again.

“Are you sure?” Archer asked. “Because I don't mind if you don't mind.”

“I was tested recently.” Heat rushed to my cheeks, even though there was no reason to be embarrassed. “I hoped—”

“I've only been with you since I was tested last. But it has been awhile.”

“I trust you. ”

Archer examined my expression for any hesitation before tossing the condom back in the drawer. He circled around behind me, dropping the lube on the bed before running his hands down my back.

“Fuck, look at you.” He sounded awestruck. “So broad and gorgeous. This fucking

back. I could come just fucking looking at you.”

“No offense, but that sounds a lot less fun than what I’d had in mind.”

Archer laughed and grabbed my ass in a punishingly hard grip. “Yeah, and what did you have in mind?”

He let go and smoothed his hand over the same spot.

I stretched my arms out and went pliant. Boneless. His willing subject, ready to do as commanded.

“Whatever you want,” I told him. And because I hadn’t said it in a while, I held his gaze with mine, hoping he saw the truth there. That he was it for me. I was his for however long he wanted me to be. Nothing short of forever would be long enough. “I love you.”

Archer grinned at me, and his eyes sparkled with affection and mischief in equal measure. “I love you too.”

I wiggled my ass at him. “Do you? You better show me.”

A sudden strike had my ass cheek singing with pleasure-pain. I sighed when he did it again on the other cheek. His touch turned gentle and he soothed the sting away.

“I wasn’t aware that you were into being spanked.” Archer looked pleasantly surprised by this turn of events.

“I think it’s you I’m into.”

Something glimmered in his eyes as his fingers dug into me, sharp and sudden. “Let’s

find out, shall we?”

Chapter 28

Archer

Was it wrong of me to want to take my frustration out on Shane's body? Maybe. But right or wrong, he didn't seem to mind. I'd never entertained the idea of spanking someone, not really, but now with him bent over for me and the warmth from the first two stinging slaps still tingling through my palm, I wanted more of it.

Tracing the curve of his ass with my palm, I chose my next spot carefully. I wasn't yet sure if how into this he was, but my dick was on board with it. The sound that shot out of Shane when I spanked him a third time prompted me to spank him a fourth and a fifth before pausing to rub the spot I'd struck.

"Good?" I asked.

Shane arched his back, pressing his ass into my hand. His arms spread across the bed and he let out a sigh. "Fucking fantastic."

My hand already stung from the first round, so I didn't want to go too overboard with it. I didn't want to rush into anything, especially with the way my emotions simmered near the surface.

Shane hummed in pleasure, his hips thrusting against the bed with each strike I gave him. I stopped somewhere around ten or fifteen because my hand was hot and stinging and Shane had a beautiful red handprint on his ass. I wanted to tattoo it exactly like it was so he'd always wear my marks.

Shane wiggled his ass. "Please, Archer," he whined .

"Someone's impatient." Going to my knees behind him, I spread his ass open and dove in. Shane bucked when my mouth came into contact with his hole, but his surprise quickly faded as he pressed against me, urging me to go deeper.

Spreading his cheeks wider, I licked from taint to hole. Teasing his rim with my tongue made my entire body throb with the urge to bury myself inside him. Every move I made elicited another delicious sound out of Shane. He pressed against me, riding my face. I circled his rim with my finger, then eased it in. Shane keened and rocked back on my finger, whimpering in protest because it wasn't big enough. I didn't stop until Shane begged for me to be inside him and then I suddenly couldn't wait another second.

Reaching for the lube, I squirted a liberal amount into my hand and worked it over my dick, coating it from root to tip. I spread some around Shane's hole, loving the way the already dark hair that surrounded it turned a shade or two darker as it became slick with lube.

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about you all day."

Shane's confession was an arrow to my heart. Sometimes I felt like I was obsessed with him, the way he connected with my thoughts so often. Nearly every moment of the day. It was the best kind of distraction, but hearing that he did the same thing had me smiling.

"Yeah? What were you thinking about?" I took hold of my cock and lined it up with his hole. Shane inhaled sharply as I pressed inside. I watched my bare cock slide into his body. Enraptured didn't begin to describe what I felt. It was better than anything I'd ever experienced. Tight and hot and just for me.

Shane took a deep breath and bore down, practically sucking me into him. Clamping my hands to his hips, I drove forward, sinking fast into him. He felt like he was made just for me. That this space in him had always been mine to fill.

Shane reached for me, his fingers scrabbling at my legs as he tried to pull me closer. I pulled him back as I pressed deeper, rocking into him as hard and deep as I could go. Shane let out a whine and I slid my hands up to his shoulders. Gripping him tight, I thrust into him hard and fast. My pace was punishing, but it was meant to be.

Already I was sweating and out of breath. Wound tighter than a spring, I was ready to snap. Right from the beginning, I'd loved the way Shane gave himself over to me. The way he let me play with his body, guide him, order him around was almost as good as the way he looked at me when I was doing it. Shane made me feel powerful. But it didn't stop at the bedroom door. He looked at me like he believed in me, and he treated me like he did. And it was hard to imagine failing at anything when he was convinced that I'd succeed.

I bent over, pressing my forehead against his back. I slowed my pace until I was gently rocking into him. Beneath me, he wriggled and babbled, pressing into me, meeting every thrust with naked enthusiasm. The sounds he made were mine and mine alone. Forever. It didn't matter to me what Cyrus thought about it. He could get over it, or not. Either way I wasn't giving Shane up. I'd already lost my best friend and my business.

"Archer—please."

"What do you need?" I straightened to look at him when he spoke.

"Need to kiss you." His cheeks were either pink from embarrassment, or exertion, but either way I found it endearing.

He whimpered when I pulled out, and I smacked his ass just because I could. “Behave. You wanted to kiss.”

I didn’t hate the idea either. I went around the bed and up to the headboard where I leaned against a couple of pillows. Shane was standing now, staring at me as I took my cock in hand and stroked it slowly.

“Get on.”

“What?” He looked confused.

“Ride me.” I stroked my dick again.

“But—I’ve never—”

“I don’t care that you’re taller and outweigh me. I want you to get up here and sit on my dick. Do you want that?”

Shane knelt on the bed and climbed up, still looking uncertain.

“Be a good boy and sit on my cock. Show me what a good little slut you are.”

The pink on Shane’s cheeks turned crimson, but he did as he was told. Throwing one leg over me, he reached behind himself and lined my cock up with his hole.

“That’s right. There you go.” I put my hands on his hips and pulled him down as I thrust upward, sinking my whole length into him. He wound his arms around me and slanted his mouth over mine.

I tasted his whimpers as he started to rock back and forth. Fuck, he was so beautiful like this, on the border between wild and contained. Shane’s pace increased. His

tongue battled against mine as he fucked himself on my dick. We kissed until Shane pulled away, gasping and panting.

“Please—” he said.

I don’t think he knew what he was asking for anymore. He was like me, so full of want and need that it drove him a little crazy.

I wrapped my hand around his cock and gave it a slow stroke, watching his body twitch and shake as his ass clamped tight around my cock.

“I—I—” Shane lost all ability to speak. His hips suddenly had a mind of their own and he rocked back and forth, faster and harder. He was heavy and solid, and I loved the way it felt to have him on top of me, but to still be buried in his hot ass. I still didn’t want to bottom, but I loved how much bigger Shane was. Broader and thicker in all the ways.

His cock leaked a steady stream of precum and his breaths had turned choppy, staccato little puffs that increased in intensity as he neared his climax. Shane’s mouth ghosted over mine, but he seemed incapable of doing anything except for breathing and writhing on my cock.

“Look at you,” I whispered to him, letting my lips dance against his when I spoke. “You’re gorgeous like this.”

I swept my free hand up his body and cradled his face in my palm. “You’re going to make me come, Shane. Do you want that?”

He nodded, his motions turning more frenzied as he rocked, fucking himself harder and harder. I jerked him faster and he slammed his mouth down over mine as he came in jerky motions, lacking any sort of finesse or grace. Shane was a mess. A

needy, sweaty, slutty mess and he was all mine.

Shane coming apart was my undoing. A shout tore out of me and I came, buried deep inside him. He was deep inside me too. In my heart, my soul. Shane Taggart was an essential part of my survival.

Shane kissed the corner of my mouth, then my neck, and finally he rested his head on my shoulder, his chest heaving as he tried to catch his breath.

I smoothed my hand up and down his back. My other one rested between us, covered in cum. I didn't want him to move, but he shifted off of me.

"Lay next to me," I told him.

"I'm just—" He pointed at the bathroom. "For your hand. "

I looked Shane dead in the eyes and raised my hand to my face. Staring at him, I licked his cum off my fingers, being diligent and cleaning out between each digit while he stared at me in aroused fascination. "Lay next to me." I said again.

He rolled his eyes, but conceded and returned to the bed. Stretching out next to me, I rolled over and wrapped myself around him.

"I fully intend to do that at least one more time tonight."

Shane laughed, but didn't argue.

"Were you okay being on top like that?"

"No one's ever wanted me like that. I was confused at first, but I didn't hate it."

“I don’t want to ask you for things you don’t like.”

“I was just—I’m bigger than you. I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“I know you’re bigger than me. I like that you’re bigger than me. And I like the way it felt when you were on top of me. But if you weren’t comfortable, I won’t ask you to do it again. There are ten thousand ways for me to be inside you.”

Shane took a deep breath and let it out all at once. “I liked it. A lot. It was unexpected.”

“What about it was unexpected?”

Shane was quiet for a while. I started to think he wasn’t going to answer me, or maybe he didn’t know how to answer. But then he started to speak.

“I’ve topped before and I hated it, and I don’t want to do it again. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for what you like. I won’t apologize for loving your ass and not wanting you in mine. Why was my request unexpected?”

“It wasn’t the request but like—it doesn’t even make sense in my head. How am I going to explain it to you? ”

I propped myself up on my elbow and looked at Shane. His brow was creased in frustration and I smoothed out the creases with my fingertips.

“I’ve either topped and it sucked, or bottomed, but never had any control over it. Not the way you gave it to me when you told me to ride you. And it was terrifying at first, having to worry about fucking it up.” Shane opened his eyes and stared up at me. “But you made me feel safe. Like I couldn’t possibly fuck up.”

“You can’t.”

“Neither can you.” Shane dragged his hand down my arm.

“I fuck up on a daily basis.” I bit back the urge to say “ask Cyrus,” but it was like Shane knew what I’d almost said.

“You haven’t fucked up with me. And you won’t.”

“I’m not perfect, Shane. I’m going to fuck up eventually.”

“Yes, and I won’t care. Because I love you. You are not your mistakes. Making a mistake doesn’t mean you are one. Making a wrong decision doesn’t make you wrong. It means you learned and now you get to move on and make different decisions. And maybe the next ones will be better. Maybe they won’t. But you’ll still be you. You’ll still be a good person, Archer. You’ll still be worth loving.”

I wanted to believe him. More than anything. But I wondered if Cyrus would still find me worthy of loving or if he’d grown tired of me. To me, seeing Shane wasn’t a mistake. It wasn’t worth Cyrus being angry about. I was happy, and for the life of me, I couldn’t understand why Cyrus wasn’t happy for me. Unless he wanted me to be a perpetual fuck-up?

I huffed out a sigh and flopped back down on the bed, tucking myself tight up against Shane. I thought about what he’d said to me and closed my eyes, nestling tighter against his side .

“You make me feel safe too.” No matter how things went with Cyrus, I wasn’t giving this up.

Chapter 29

Shane

If I thought we were going to lie in bed all day, I'd thought wrong. Because the minute Archer's eyes opened, he looked up at me and smiled, saying, "Do you want to get a tattoo today?"

He was impossible to say no to. So I showered and dressed, and Archer made us coffee and rummaged in my fridge for something to eat.

"I don't see anything I want." Archer pouted at me.

"We can go shopping later and stock my cupboards with all your favorite things," I promised. Archer smiled at me over top of his coffee cup.

"Careful, you might spoil me."

"You're worth spoiling."

He didn't have a response to that.

"The fact remains that I don't want to tattoo you on an empty stomach."

"Then we'll go for breakfast. I'll take you to Bennett's."

Archer smiled at me again. "Ethan's probably sick of you by now," he teased.

“He may be sick of me, but Taylor makes a mean waffle.”

Archer retrieved his sketchbook and drained the rest of his coffee in a couple big swallows. The way his throat bobbed when he swallowed was obscene and I was tempted to drag him back to bed to have my wicked way with him again, but his enthusiasm about the tattoo was contagious.

We were just sitting down in a booth at Bennett’s when I realized that this was the first time we’d been out together as a couple. Our other rendezvous had been secret. Casual hookups and stolen moments. I reached across the table and tangled my fingers in Archer’s.

“This is our first official date, you know.” Archer’s face lit up at my words. He acted like me declaring it was a date was the single best thing he’d ever heard. “I never should have agreed to hide us from your brother. We could have done this so much sooner.”

He squeezed my hand. “I think things will work out the way they’re meant to. I’m not sad that we had that time to ourselves. It was kind of nice to feel like I had something that was just for me, you know.”

“I know.” I squeezed his hand back. Hiding from everyone, seeing Archer on the sly, had been fun. I liked the way that it felt when we were together. Like we existed in a bubble. But it was the fate of a bubble to pop eventually, and that’s what had happened the night before. Our bubble finally burst.

Ethan appeared with a pot of coffee. “Good morning. Coffee?”

“Please.”

Ethan filled two cups. “Can I get you anything else?”

“Two waffle stacks.”

“Bacon or sausage?”

“One of each,” Archer said. He caught my gaze and grinned at me. “So we can trade.”

Ethan promised to be back with our food in a few minutes.

“Why have I not ever been in here before?” Archer asked, looking around at the decor. The diner was brightly decorated in chrome and red. A wall of photographs highlighted the journey of the Bennett family through the years. Ethan’s family had run the diner before him. Then Ethan and Sarah, briefly. And the rest of the pictures were Ethan and his kids. The town had watched Jonah, Colby, and Taylor grow up here.

“We’re here now, that’s all that matters.”

Archer spied the wall of photographs. “Is that like the celebrity wall or something? Do they get famous people here?” He stirred a couple sugars into his coffee.

“Those are pictures of Ethan and his kids. Taylor still works here in the back as a cook, but Jonah went on to become a teacher at the high school and Colby is the manager of a gym here in town.”

“You and Ethan must be close.”

“I’ve been to his house a few times for what he calls ‘fire night.’”

“Fire night?”

“It’s exactly what it sounds like. Food, a fire, and music.” I further satisfied Archer’s curiosity by telling tales of Ethan Bennett and his infamous fire nights. I hadn’t been to one in a while because life tended to get in the way, but now that I was taking a less active role at the bar, I hoped to change that.

Ethan arrived with the waffles and told us to enjoy our breakfast before disappearing to deal with more tables.

“This place is busy.” Archer looked around. “Is it always like this?”

“Taylor’s a good cook.” Using my fork, I sliced into the waffle stack. Cutting out a small triangle, I speared it and stuffed it in my mouth.

Archer did the same, but his eyes rolled back and he moaned. “Holy fuck,” he said around a mouthful of waffle. “These are delicious.”

Archer tucked in like waffles were going extinct, and they might the way he devoured them.

Over breakfast, we talked about surface shit. Archer walked me through the ideas he had for my tattoo once more. By the time we were finished eating, I was ready for a nap. I paid for breakfast and left a nice tip, and then we went back to Archer’s space above the bar. The parking lot was deserted, which I expected this early in the day, but I still hoped to see Cyrus waiting for us. He owed Archer an apology.

“Stop frowning,” Archer said as he thrust his key into the lock and twisted. “Today is a great day for a tattoo.”

“Says the one not getting a tattoo.” I followed him inside and up the stairs.

“I could tattoo myself. It’s nothing I haven’t done before. The transformer tattoo on

my left forearm was one I did myself.”

“No shit?”

“No shit. The eighties had the best cartoons.” Archer opened the door to his apartment and strode inside, making a beeline for his tattoo station. “Take your shirt off. I need to get an idea of what I’m working with.”

He pointed to a stool he wanted me to sit on, and like a good customer, I obeyed. I didn’t miss the way Archer’s gaze lingered when I pulled my shirt off and tossed it over to the couch.

He was all business, though. Completely professional as he mapped out where the image would fit best.

“I could freehand the artwork on you.”

Archer seemed to be talking to himself, so I stayed quiet. I was happy to go with the flow and let him work his magic.

“Yeah, I think I’ll freehand it.” He got up and snapped on a pair of black gloves. He rummaged around in his cabinet and returned with a razor.

“I do not have back hair.”

“Hush. I need a pristine surface.”

Archer’s touch was gentle and, unfortunately, still completely professional. The area he wanted to ink was my right shoulder. My right forearm had some stunning floral work, so continuing that motif on my right shoulder felt natural. The robot was different, but I loved the idea of having something that meant so much to Archer on

my body. It made me feel like he was claiming me.

He had me move my arm around to make sure the tattoo wouldn't do anything weird when I moved my body. He made some small adjustments and afterward waved me over to the chair.

"Make yourself comfortable. I have to get everything prepped."

Flopping down, I stretched out with my chest pressed against the back of the chair and watched him. Archer at work was quietly intense, but also peaceful. It was like the stress fell away the longer he worked. He held himself looser, his shoulders relaxed, and he smiled more. Archer at work was a happy Archer, and I was content to lie there and be his admirer. Lying on the couch watching him work could be my new hobby were it not for the fact that he would kick me out after ten minutes.

Every so often, Archer would glance up and catch me looking at him. We'd share a smile, and he'd get back to prepping his machine.

"This is the nicest morning I've had in a long time," I told him. Archer looked up and grinned at me.

"You're going to wish you didn't say that soon enough when I'm doing the line work on this."

"I can handle it." Closing my eyes, I rested my head and let myself drift away. Getting up with Archer had made the morning bearable, but I still disliked the early hour. I wasn't sure how much longer it was before his voice roused me.

"Hey, sleepyhead. You with me?"

I opened my eyes, blinking at Archer who had appeared next to me with his rolling

tray covered in little pots of ink and paper towels.

“I’m with you. ”

His smile was blinding. “This is going to hurt you more than it hurts me.”

“Will you kiss it better after?”

“Uh, I’m going to go with no, but I’ll kiss something else.” Archer waggled his eyebrows at me, then slid in closer. The machine buzzed to life and the first brush of needles against skin made me flinch.

Archer stopped the machine. “If you sit still, I’ll give you a sucker when you’re done.” He pointed to a jar on the counter that was filled with suckers.

“For real? You give people suckers?”

“If kids get them after the doctor, why can’t adults have them after a tattoo? Now, sit still. This will only hurt a little.”

He was a liar. It hurt a lot. Tattoos felt like being stabbed with acid, over and over again. I wasn’t much of a talker when I was getting ink, and that was no different with Archer working on me. He was content to sit and concentrate on what he was doing and I was happy to sit there and concentrate on staying still. After what felt like forever, he moved on from line work to fill in the colors. Color went faster, but it was no less painful.

“You’re doing so good,” Archer praised me out of nowhere. “But you’re looking pale. Do you need a break?”

“How much longer?”

He wiped a paper towel over the piece, sopping up blood and ink. “Probably an hour.”

“Then we push through.” I grit my teeth. “I want my sucker.”

Archer’s laugh was joined by the buzzing of the tattoo machine. I’d never been the type to fall asleep on the chair—pain wasn’t my kink—but I didn’t hate having Archer’s focus on me. He was intense to begin with, but when I was in his chair, it was a whole new level. If my shoulder didn’t hurt so bad, my dick definitely would’ve been hard.

The machine stilled and Archer gently wiped the area down. “Okay, want to have a look?”

“Hell, yes.” My body creaked and groaned when I climbed off the chair. All in all, it hadn’t taken too long for Archer to work his magic, but when you spent a few hours concentrating on not moving, doing the opposite of that took a herculean effort.

Archer ushered me over to the full-length mirror he had on the outside of the bathroom door. He grabbed a hand-held mirror and moved it around to reflect the image where I could see it.

“What do you think?”

The tattoo turned out better than I’d thought it would. Vivid sunflowers surrounded the little 80s movie-inspired robot.

“I shaded him to match your eyes. Well, as close as I could get.”

I turned and swept Archer into my arms. “I love you. It’s perfect.”

He melted against me. “Did you want your sucker now?”

“I—”

A knock at the door stopped me dead. “I guess I’ll take a raincheck.”

Archer padded over to his door and yanked it open. Cyrus stood on the other side, his arms crossed over his chest.

“Vivian let me up. I don’t have a lot of time before my shift starts and my kitchen is—that doesn’t matter. Can I come in?”

Archer stepped aside and let Cyrus through. He spotted me standing there, shirtless. “Did I interrupt something?”

“Just a tattoo, Cyrus.” I didn’t want to show him, but I did anyway. I wanted him and Archer to make up as much as I wanted to smooth things over between the two of us .

“Come have a look,” I said, extending the olive branch, hoping like hell that he’d take it.

Chapter 30

Archer

Cyrus had clearly been taken down a few pegs since our fight yesterday. Either he saw the light on his own, or he'd had a little bit of help. I made a mental note to send Marshall a thank-you card or something.

I wasn't going to be swayed so easily. Folding my arms over my chest, I watched Cyrus slowly approach Shane to take a look at the work I'd done. Cyrus muttered appreciatively and I snapped out of my stupor. It didn't bother me that Shane and Cyrus were going to be quick to bury the hatchet. They were allowed to deal with things between them their own way. Shane and Cyrus had been friends for years. Besides having a great working relationship, it would be a shame to lose that.

"I need to put a dressing on that now." I crossed the room and motioned for Shane to sit on the stool again so I could take care of him.

The silence was thick and oppressive, and I was annoyed that Cyrus had crashed into what felt like a private moment between Shane and me. Aware of Cyrus's eyes on me, watching my every move made me feel antsy. Any animosity I might have felt toward Cyrus about his reaction had faded overnight. Now I was tired of how heavy the aftermath made me feel. I wanted this over with so I could curl up and sleep and forget it ever happened.

The last of my patience evaporated and I looked at Cyrus. "Are you going to stare at me all day, or are you going to say what you came here to say?"

I tried to keep the acid out of my words, but it was a lost cause. Cyrus had that effect on me sometimes. I flicked my gaze up to meet his. “We were going to tell you.”

“When?” Cyrus asked.

“When it was worth telling,” I shot back. “We weren’t serious to begin with. It was just chemistry at first... then it was more. And when we decided to let it be more, we knew we’d have to tell you.” It truly wasn’t serious at first, but it hadn’t taken long for me to realize that I was all in with Shane and now I couldn’t imagine being without him. Shane filled so many gaps in my life and my heart without even trying. Being with him was the easiest thing I’d ever done.

Cyrus quietly mulled over my words and I took my sweet-ass time dressing Shane’s shoulder. Warmth blossomed deep inside me upon realizing that, no matter what, part of me would forever be carried with Shane on his body. The satisfaction it gave me nearly made me dizzy. Were it not for my brother’s interruption, I’d definitely have marked Shane in a different way by now.

“Marshall seems to think I overreacted.” Cyrus finally unfolded his arms and tucked his hands into his pockets instead. Marshall was the key to getting Cyrus to loosen up. But I already knew that. Cyrus and Marshall had always been opposites. Hot tempered Cyrus and level-headed Marshall. They were good together, and more than once over the years I’d been thankful for Marshall’s influence on Cyrus.

“And what do you think?” I asked, not willing to let him off easy. I wrapped my arms around Shane from behind. He reached up and grabbed my arm, holding me there, lending me strength and quiet solidarity as I stared Cyrus down .

“I think that I’m probably an asshole.”

I’d intended to make him sweat a bit, but Shane laughed. His laughter broke through

the thin veneer of my anger and I cracked a smile.

“Probably? Marshall didn’t yell at you enough if you think you’re only probably an asshole. Come on, Cyrus. I thought you were more self-aware than that,” I teased. Letting go of more of the anger I had toward him relaxed the lingering tension in my shoulders.

Cyrus rolled his eyes. If Marshall was good for Cyrus, then Shane was good for me. Our men didn’t want Cyrus and me to stay mad at each other for long. Without Shane to lighten the mood, Cyrus and I would probably be arguing.

“Okay, I was definitely an asshole.”

“I like where this is going.” I grinned at Cyrus. “Continue.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You’re enjoying this way too much.”

“Of course I am. You’ve been the perfect older brother. The perfect son to our parents. The perfect husband. The best employee. It’s nice to see that you’re human. For the record, it was a stupid thing to be mad about.”

Cyrus had the decency to look properly chastised at that and he ran a hand through his hair the way he did when he was upset.

“I know, okay. I didn’t at first, but I see now that I might have been a dick.”

“You were,” Shane said to Cyrus. “But I won’t hold it against you. And I want you to know that you owe Ethan Bennett a huge thank you. He stepped in after your tantrum last night.”

Cyrus nodded. “Noted.”

Something passed between them and whatever it was, it appeared to satisfy them both. Hatchet buried, friendship saved, status quo returned .

“I’m going downstairs to check in with Vivian. Come get me when you’re done here.”

Shane twisted in my arms and stole a kiss. If I thought for a second that he would hold back because Cyrus was here, I was quickly proven wrong when he licked at the seam of my mouth and demanded entry. Maybe he was proving a point, but even if he was, who was I to stand in his way?

He pulled away and made his way toward the door, clapping a hand on Cyrus’s shoulder on the way by and giving it a squeeze. All was forgiven between them and it would be water under the bridge.

The door clicked shut behind him and I listened for the sound of Shane’s footsteps retreating down the stairs before I turned back to my work. I tossed the used paper towels and wiped down the chair and the stool with sanitizer.

“Sometimes I think I forget that you’re an adult,” Cyrus said, prompting me to look at him in disbelief.

“I don’t think that sentiment hit the way you intended it to.” I shook my head and went back to work, meticulously cleaning my machine. “Gonna try again?”

“You’re not going to cut me even the smallest of breaks, are you?” Cyrus held himself with the same confidence he’d always had. Growing up.

I’d tried to be more like him, to emulate that level of self-assuredness he had. I’d admired it in him. I still did, even when it was that exact quality that drove me nuts.

I yanked my gloves off and threw them in the trash, and then dropped down onto my stool. “Should I? Did you cut me a break after the whole thing with Clayton? Or did you bring it up at every opportunity to drive home what an idiot I was for trusting someone who was supposed to have been my best friend? ”

Losing Clayton had left a hole in my life that I wasn’t sure how to fill. Even months later, his betrayal still burned. But the sense of loss lingered like a gaping gunshot wound that I’d packed with gauze and ignored. Shane’s presence in my life had slowly but surely started to stitch that wound closed.

Cyrus at least had the decency to look properly chastised. “That’s a fair point. Look, Marshall had a very long discussion with me and I know you don’t want to hear the twenty reasons I thought I was justified in acting like an asshole. It was wrong of me to treat you and Shane that way.”

“I’d like to hear one of the reasons, Cyrus. Enlighten me. Why was it such a big catastrophe for Shane and me to be together?”

Cyrus was quiet for a long moment, to the point that I thought he might not answer me at all. Then he took a deep breath and let it out all at once.

“It’s selfish and stupid, and Marshall told me I should be ashamed of myself—and I am. But I was worried that you wouldn’t need me anymore. I was afraid that Shane was taking you away from me. I’d hardly seen you since you moved out and I was worried about you, about what would happen if this new shop didn’t work out. I was inventing problems that didn’t exist.” Cyrus looked small and sad and miserable and it struck me that I hated seeing him that way. Even if it was his own doing.

“Okay. I forgive you.” I spun around on my stool, going in a full circle as Cyrus gaped at me.

“Just like that?”

“Just like that. Why, would you rather I insist on making it a big deal until the end of time?”

“No,” Cyrus scoffed. “I’m surprised, that’s all. ”

He let out a breath and I watched the tension he held bleed out of him. I’d been irate at the time, and rightfully so, I thought. But it wasn’t worth dragging out and losing someone else I cared about.

“Well, I have two options.” I told him. “Either I get over your bullshit, or I let it suck me down. Shane is your best friend and your boss and I’m not willing to come between that by acting like an immature child. But, Cyrus, it would be nice if after all this, you could just be my brother again. Not my parent or my keeper or my protector. Just... my friend. Can you manage that?”

“I’d like that, Archer.” He glanced at the time and grimaced. “Are we good?”

“We’re good.”

Cyrus exhaled and shot me a smile that still looked guilty. “I have to get to work, but we’ll catch up soon? I feel like I never see you.”

“That’s because I avoid you.” I cackled, but closed the distance between us and wrapped my arms around him. We hugged tight for a second, then shared some brotherly slaps on the back until we pulled apart.

“If you promise to stop avoiding me, I promise to stop being an overbearing asshole.”

“Deal. Now get out. I have shit to do.”

Cyrus nodded, then walked out. I waited until I couldn't hear him anymore before throwing myself face down on the couch. Though I was glad to have smoothed things over with my brother, that didn't mean I wasn't exhausted by the emotional turmoil of the last twenty-four hours. But at least I wasn't alone. Whatever Marshall said to Cyrus had done a number on him. I made a mental note to thank Marshall for being the voice of reason where Cyrus was concerned.

Chapter 31

Shane

Sitting in my bar being superfluous made my skin itch. Or maybe that was the fresh ink on my shoulder. Either way, it was clear that I wasn't needed down here. Vivian had the shit in the front handled, and Cyrus was in the kitchen cursing under his breath as he set everything to rights.

I leaned against the wall and watched with perverse satisfaction as Cyrus shuffled around. In truth, the kitchen hadn't been that bad. Ethan had done a great job. given the circumstances.

Cyrus turned to me suddenly. Putting his hands on his hips, he looked exasperated.

"I know this was my own doing, but now you see why I don't want help in here. People touch my shit and they don't put it where I put it, and then I can't find it."

"Or, hear me out, you could train someone to do things your way. But you're possessive, Cyrus."

He narrowed his eyes. "You suck. I thought you'd forgiven me."

"I have, but that doesn't mean I can't tell you that you're only hurting yourself with your little possessive caveman routine."

"I am not a caveman," Cyrus protested.

“I see you didn’t argue with the fact that you’re possessive.”

Cyrus rolled his eyes and turned away from me. “We’ve established that already. ”

I watched Cyrus for a few minutes, not offering to help because I knew he didn’t want my help. He was probably secretly glad his kitchen hadn’t been left to his standards because it gave him something to focus on.

“You better not hurt him, Shane.”

“I won’t. Don’t worry about that.”

“Well, I’m used to worrying about him. Someone had to. Our parents fucking ignored his existence most of the time. Besides, I won’t be able to work here if you fuck him over.”

“Vivian is the manager now. I’m not going to be here as often.” Taking my chances with Cyrus’s wrath, I crossed the kitchen. “You’re still my best friend, Cyrus. You’re still important to me, even though Archer is also important to me, just in a very different way. If I have it my way, I’m not ever going to hurt either of you.”

“Your tattoo is pretty great.”

“Thanks. You should ask Archer to show you the concept art he showed me. I wonder if he’ll let me frame it.”

“Archer would gladly frame it for you.” Archer’s voice came at me from the entrance to the kitchen. He crossed the distance and slid his arm around me. It was a statement to his brother that he wasn’t going to shy away from me to make Cyrus comfortable.

“The two of you are both possessive little cavemen.”

Archer's hand wandered south and he pinched my ass. "Don't you forget it."

"How about you and Marshall come over for dinner, say... next week?"

"So long as Archer isn't cooking," Cyrus teased.

"Hey. I've gotten better. I lived alone for years. How do you think I managed? "

"Takeout and microwave meals," Cyrus said without missing a beat.

"I'm going to handle the food. It was my idea, so it'll be my labor." I draped my arm around Archer and pulled him close. My shoulder twinged, but it wasn't anything I couldn't tolerate.

"See, he's the literal perfect boyfriend." Archer's fingers flexed against my side, digging their blunt tips into my flesh. "We should get going, though."

He suddenly produced a bright red sucker. He tore the wrapper off with his teeth and held it for me, waiting for me to take it.

"Dinner next week," I said around the sucker. "Just the four of us out at my place." It was about time I started to live in my house instead of using it for a place to crash between shifts. The dinner, more than anything, felt like the real olive branch.

We'd sit around and I'd grill some steaks. We'd drink a few beers and play corn hole or something. Cyrus and Archer would act like brothers instead of parent and child... and all would be right in the world.

It made me want to invite Kieran and my mom too. I'd invite Brodie if he was in town—or the country, for that matter. Maybe I could convince him to come home for a visit so he could meet Archer.

“I’ll text you the details.” Steering Archer toward the back door, I shoved it open and tugged him out of the bar into the fresh afternoon air. There was still daylight left, but I had the urge to take him home and curl up in bed with him for the rest of the day.

“Do you have to stick around or can you come home with me?”

“Business is still pretty slow. I don’t have anything booked, but I was hoping to get to a store today.”

“What kind of store? Grocery? Sex shop? Pet store?”

Archer walked with me to my truck. “Art supplies. I had an idea for a new piece for my wall. But I don’t have the materials I need. ”

“Then I guess we’re going shopping.” Unlocking the door, I pulled it open for Archer. Heat flared in his eyes when he looked at me. It was almost enough to tempt me to take him straight home and let him have his way with me, but I wanted to know everything about Archer.

He told me where he wanted to go, which turned out to be a stationery store that I had no idea existed. It was near the library and it wasn’t like it was hidden, but I simply didn’t have a reason to notice it before now.

“You can wait here. I promise I won’t be long.” Archer undid his seatbelt and got out of the truck. When I followed him inside, he looked at me and quirked an eyebrow questioningly. “You didn’t have to come inside. You’ll be bored. It’s just art stuff.”

“I wanted to see you in your element.” I loved the way his face turned red when I said that. “This place is clearly your version of a candy store, so show me your favorite candies, Archer.”

He shoved me gently and playfully, but his eyes crinkled the way they did when he was pleased with something. He grabbed a shopping basket and set off toward the art supplies. I followed, trying to watch for the things that caught his interest. He spent a few minutes checking out the stretched canvases before pulling out a few of various sizes.

“I can take those for you if you want. Might make it easier to keep looking.”

Archer surrendered the canvases to me. “I need some new paint.”

“Lead the way. I am but your humble servant.”

“Oh, my God, shut up.” Archer turned away, but even the tips of his ears were red now.

“Did you always want to be a tattoo artist?”

He scoffed. “Not especially. Don’t get me wrong, I like what I do. But...” Archer stopped and took a breath. His fingers danced over the rack of acrylic paints. “My parents weren’t supportive of me. Cyrus could do no wrong, but I could do no right. They were convinced art was a waste of time. That it could never be a career. So I became a tattoo artist. Because if you’re good, and I am, you can make a decent living.”

Archer deserved more than a decent living. He deserved the world and I wanted to be the one to give it to him. Which meant I was going to hire someone to help convert the attic space into a studio for him so it could be completed faster. The idea of Archer having a space in my home settled the flutters in my stomach. This was it. Archer was the one for me. Forever.

It was too early to make those kinds of promises. He deserved time to get on his feet.

Once his life was sorted, with his business off the ground and working steady, I could bring up the idea of him moving in with me. He could keep the space above the bar for his business, but I wanted my home to be his home too. Which meant paying attention to the kinds of supplies he worked with so I could deck out his studio with everything he could ever want or need.

Turning my attention back to Archer, I watched him look at different colors. He picked a few and put them in the basket and seemed to be trying to decide on what else to get.

“Why don’t you get one of everything?” I asked.

Archer made a choking sound. “I can’t afford that. I’ll just get the basics for now.”

“What if it was my treat?”

Archer turned and looked at me. Instead of a happy expression, his brow was pinched and he seemed annoyed. “You don’t have to do that, you know.”

“I know I don’t have to buy you things, Archer. But I want to. I like being the one to give you what you need. But if it makes you uncomfortable, I can try to rein it in.”

Archer ran a hand through his hair, making it stick up. “I don’t want you to think I’m like taking advantage.”

Turning to the rack of small bottles of acrylic paints, I started at the top row and, one by one, grabbed a bottle and dropped it into his basket.

“I’m offering,” I said, moving down to the second row. “You’re not taking advantage of me. Anything I want to do for you, I want to do it because I love you and making you happy makes me happy.”

I dropped in more bottles of paint. “Some people might think I took advantage because I never paid you for the tattoo.”

“You don’t have to pay me. It was my idea.”

“And this is my idea. If you need to, you can consider it payment for the tattoo. Though I’m still getting the better end of the deal.”

Archer adjusted his grip on the basket. “I’m not going to win this argument am I?”

“Who’s arguing? I’m not. I’m just telling you that I’m allowed to buy you things and do nice things for you. It didn’t stop me before we were together and it’s not going to stop me now.” Ducking down, I kissed him before I could think about whether or not he was into PDA. By the way he chased my mouth, he clearly wasn’t against it.

“I guess I’m going to have to get used to this.” Archer stared up into my eyes.

“I plan to spoil you for as long as you’ll let me.” It wasn’t quite the promise of forever that I’d wanted to make, but it was close enough for now.

Chapter 32

Archer

Shane never hid his interest in my art, which I sort of loved. A lot. It was like he looked at my work and saw the bits of me that I put in it. Like he studied it for the keys to unlock my heart, but the joke was on him because my heart already belonged to him. I think I gave it to him that first day we met and each day since I've only fallen deeper.

I hadn't painted since before I opened the first tattoo shop with Clayton. It hadn't been necessary at the time and it got shoved to the side in favor of me grinding away on a dream that had been so easily shattered.

My first attempt was shit and I painted over it and tried again. And again. I could tell that not looking at it takes all of Shane's effort, but he's a good boyfriend. I promised to show him when I had something worth looking at.

The new attempt is going well. My rusty skills were slow to reawaken, but now they were pouring new life into me. I think I was lost before Clayton ripped everything away from me. I think I'd been lost for a long time. Or maybe I was different now. The person I am now doesn't want the same things that I used to want. What I'd wanted the first time around was to have a fully booked schedule all the time. I wanted to do nothing but bury my head in work. I wanted to make a name for myself .

Now I didn't care about that although I still loved tattooing people. Whether it's a

special memorial tattoo, or a piece of flash they got on a whim, it was still an important part of me. But Shane's enthusiasm for all things Archer has rekindled some of the things I thought I didn't care about anymore. Like painting.

Shane's only complaint about his tattoo was that it wasn't where he could see it. So the painting was for him. His house could use some art on the walls and giving this to him made me feel like I had something to contribute to our lives besides my baggage.

I tried not to think about Clayton when I was painting because he made my blood boil, but that wasn't the worst of it. The worst of it was that I missed my friend. I missed the person he was before his gambling addiction made him someone else. I'd unblocked his number, but he hadn't called and I didn't want to reach out. Reaching out felt too much like forgiving him and I was not ready for that.

The good light was gone and I stopped painting before I ruined yet another attempt. This was the closest one yet and if I didn't fuck it up, it might be something special. A smile tugged at my face like the sap that I was. That was how I felt about what I had with Shane. Like it was something really special and now I just needed to not fuck it up. But I had a good feeling about Shane and me.

I cleaned my brushes and tidied up my mess. I'd turned the bedroom in my apartment into a makeshift studio. The truth was I hadn't been sleeping here at all. Ever since Cyrus found out about Shane and me, I'd spent every night at Shane's house. To the point that a good chunk of my wardrobe had made it over there. It felt like home in a way that the apartment didn't and probably never would. The apartment was temporary. When I could afford it, I wanted a shop that was street level and easier to find.

The new me still wanted a tattoo shop, but he also wanted a life outside of it. I washed up in the sink, locked up behind me, and bounded down the steps and out into the parking lot just in time for Shane to pull in to pick me up and shuttle me home for

dinner with Cyrus and Marshall.

It had been two weeks since the big reveal. We were supposed to have met up sooner, but Marshall got the flu and they had to cancel. The extra week didn't hurt my feelings. Even though I'd forgiven him, I'd still been pissed about the whole thing. But now I was ready to let it go and move forward. Cyrus and I had texted back and forth a few times since then, though, and we both agreed that our relationship was a work in progress. He'd work on being less overbearing and I'd work on not shutting him out.

Shane turned the music down when I got in the truck. Leaning across the seat, he angled for a kiss, his eyes sparkled with affection.

"Purple today," he said, grinning like an idiot. He stole his kiss and I buckled up before glancing at myself in the mirror.

My cheek was sporting a smear of eggplant purple and I rubbed it away. "I need to learn to check the mirror when I'm done for the day."

"I don't know; I think it's cute."

"You just like thinking you're getting secret information."

"Well, you won't let me see what you're working on, so I'll take what I can get."

"You'll see it when it's done and not before." Satisfied that I'd gotten that streak of paint, I examined my face in the mirror for any other stray patches of color. Finding none, I leaned back in the seat. "Excited for dinner tonight?"

"Could be fun." Shane was unflappable. Steady as a fucking rock. I wasn't. And it was stupid of me to be nervous because it was just Cyrus and Marshall. But besides

Shane, they were all I had. I needed things to be okay between us. This was a test of that and if it failed, I wasn't sure what I was going to do.

"Could be a disaster," I muttered, shifting my gaze out the window.

Shane's hand found my knee and he gave it a comforting squeeze. "It's going to be fine."

"Have you heard back from brother dearest?" Shane was actively trying to convince his younger brother to come home for a while.

"I threw the idea out there. Whether he listens or not is a different story. Maybe I'll sic Kieran on him."

I'd met Kieran and Shane's mom, but only briefly. Shane was trying to get his brother to town so he could throw a big, meet the family thing with all the important people in his life. So far his younger brother had ignored any comments about coming home. Shane was starting to think it was a lost cause. He tried to hide it, but it was easy to see he missed his brother.

Shane had been busy while I was gone. The house was sparkling clean from top to bottom, not that it was ever dirty, but today it gleamed. The scent of fresh baked bread hung in the air and I breathed deep.

"You can bake bread?" I asked, spying the rolls cooling on a rack on the counter.

"I can read a recipe and watch tutorials online. And then I can call my mom and beg her to help me. But don't tell Cyrus that I didn't bake them."

I reached out and gently poked one of the rolls. The crust was soft and warm to the touch still. "He's so mad that he can cook anything and everything, but can't bake a

loaf of bread to save his life. He might murder you if he finds out you lied about the bread.”

Shane wound his arms around me and tugged me against him. “Then you’ll have to keep my secret. ”

He mouthed the shell of my ear, sending a tidal wave of goosebumps down my spine. “Keep me safe.”

We did not have time for any of the dirty, delectable things I wanted to do to him. But we did have time for me to twist my body to loop my arms around his neck. Time for me to slant our mouths together and lick my way inside him. To pull him down to me, against me, so I could relish the solid weight of him pinning me against the counter. I loved the heft of Shane’s body. The bulk. The way he was bigger than me in every way, but bent to my every whim. Even this one, to have him press against me, making me feel trapped, even if it was a snare of my own invention.

We kissed until my face ached from it. Until my dick was impossibly hard and my heart hammered against my ribs like it was trying to get out and jump into Shane’s chest to curl up with his. I wasn’t sure what I’d done to deserve a man who made me feel that way, but I wanted to keep on deserving him. Living without him wasn’t an option.

Shane rested his forehead against mine and took a few deep, even, breaths. “My dick is so fucking hard right now I can barely see straight.”

“Well, you better get it under control. Cyrus will be here soon.”

Shane rocked forward, pressing his thigh against the bulge in my pants. It dragged a shameless groan out of me, earning a laugh from Shane. Sadistic bastard.

“You’re one to talk. And you started it.” He pulled away and pressed the heel of his hand against the base of his dick to try and get his cock to behave. All I ever had to do to lose an erection was to think about that time my mom almost caught me jerking off. That was a never-fail boner killer.

“Did you need any help getting everything finished?” I wanted to be useful, but I’d had a tattoo that morning and then I’d wanted to work on my painting. I should’ve stuck around and helped Shane with dinner, but he’d claimed to have everything handled. I still couldn’t resist asking, though.

“I told you, everything is covered. If you wanted to help, you’d tell me what you’ve been working on.”

I did my best to scowl at Shane, but it was impossible when he looked at me with that sappy expression of his. The one that made my insides go all warm and gooey. The one that made me want to crawl up into his arms and stay there forever. Shane Taggart saw me in a way that no one else had seen me before. Maybe they hadn’t been looking, or maybe it was just who he was.

Part of me wanted to cancel dinner with Cyrus and Marshall and take Shane to bed for the rest of the day, but he had been looking forward to this and I didn’t want to take it from him.

“One more kiss and then I need to shower.” I looped my arms around Shane’s neck again, but I didn’t stop at one kiss. One would never be enough.

Chapter 33

Shane

It should have been awkward when Cyrus and Marshall showed up. But they walked in together, Marshall trailing slightly behind Cyrus, carrying a pie. I took it for the peace offering it was. It was by some unspoken agreement that none of us mentioned the angst of the previous weeks. It was water under the proverbial bridge now. The brothers were working on getting past their differences.

Archer had filled me in more on how much Cyrus had done for him growing up. I appreciated how hard it could be to let go of old habits. Marshall and Archer were in the living room while Archer explained this new painting technique he wanted to try. Each and every day, he opened up more. It was like watching a sunrise, the way he slowly came into himself, rediscovering old loves. He was happiest when he was covered in paint. Or other substances I couldn't think of with his brother standing next to me, peering over my shoulder.

Cyrus couldn't help himself. He truly thought food was better if he had something to do with the preparation of it. Glancing at him over my shoulder, I raised an eyebrow.

"Did you want to take over?"

Cyrus exhaled and almost shoved me out of the way. "Yes, I do."

I didn't mind. I was used to Cyrus's bossy kitchen habits.

“Do you want a beer?” I asked as I grabbed one from the fridge for myself .

“What kind is it?” Cyrus asked, knowing that I usually had some variety of craft beer in my fridge. I was always on the lookout for new things for The Anchor. There was a local micro brewery that I often worked with.

“It’s a pale ale.” Grabbing a bottle opener, I cracked the caps off and handed one to him.

Cyrus took a sip of the beer and nodded his approval. “This is nice.”

“It’s one of my recent favorites.”

He cut his gaze over to me, then looked at Marshall and Archer, who were still deep in conversation in the living room.

“I don’t hate that you’re together.” Cyrus delivered the peace offering with a strained smile. I’d already moved on from Cyrus’s temper tantrum, but he clearly had things to say.

“I don’t hate that we’re together either.” I clinked our bottles together and took a sip. “I have two brothers. I understand your urge to protect Archer.”

“Doesn’t make me less of an asshole, though.”

“No, it doesn’t.” I grinned at him. “But don’t worry, I’ll forgive you. I hired you knowing you were an asshole and I was your friend for years knowing you’re an asshole. I happen to think you’re good people, Cyrus. And one hiccup in the history of our friendship isn’t enough to change my opinion of you.”

Cyrus narrowed his gaze at me and scowled. “So basically I’m still an asshole.”

“Yep.”

He cut his gaze over to Archer and Marshall again, then turned his attention back to messing with the food. “You’ve been good for him. He’s happier. Lighter. He’s painting again. ”

“He won’t let me see what he’s working on and it’s driving me insane.”

Cyrus just laughed at me and my annoyance. “He’s like that a lot. He’s very particular about who sees what. Always has been.”

I didn’t mention the way Archer had stopped hiding his sketchbook from me when I walked into a room. Or how he often let me look through it if I asked. And when he didn’t want me to look, I didn’t press. I’d like to think that it made him want to share with me more. The painting, however, was driving me nuts. Archer was so clandestine about it, and I might not be half as curious but whenever he came out from working on it, he had the look of a man who was keeping secrets and enjoying every minute of it.

“Do you know what he’s working on?” It was shameful to try and pump Cyrus for information, but I couldn’t help myself. Curiosity overtook my common sense.

“I don’t. And if I did, I wouldn’t tell you.” He grinned at me when he said it. Clearly he was enjoying my torture and wasn’t about to end it early.

“Are you trying to get information out of my brother, Shane?” Archer came up behind me and slid an arm around my waist, attaching himself to my side. Reaching for my beer, he plucked it from my grasp and took a drink before handing it back.

“I was trying, yes. But your brother is both clueless and loyal. He wouldn’t tell me anything even if he knew.”

“Cyrus might be a pain in my ass, but he’s not stupid,” Archer said smoothly and not without affection.

I wasn’t sure how their dynamic had been before everything went down because I hadn’t seen them together a lot, but according to Archer, things were actually getting better between them. After their fight and their heart-to-heart, they’d done a lot of work in a short amount of time to let go of things that were getting in the way of them having a better relationship. Archer still expressed frustration about Cyrus on a regular basis, but part of his complaining was just an old habit. Sometimes he stopped himself, and other times he looked at me with an impish smile and admitted that he knew he was being childish, but didn’t want to stop at that moment.

“He would gut me in my sleep if I revealed his secrets.”

“I wouldn’t gut you, but I’d definitely draw you with a shitty porn-stache like they had in the 70s.”

Cyrus shuddered. He’d always been clean-shaven. I’d never seen him with more than a five o’clock shadow. “He would too, the cretin.”

“Oooh, dragging out the insults. He must be feeling threatened. Make that a porn-stache and a bowl cut.”

Cyrus looked at Archer and scowled. “You wouldn’t.”

Archer grinned and reached for my drink again, which I relinquished. When he tried to hand it back, I shook my head. My arm was looped around him, my hand resting on his hip, and I felt the slight vibration of his phone buzzing to life in his pocket.

His brow furrowed as he fished it out. “Sorry, give me a second.”

Archer paused as he looked at the screen. “It’s a hospital.”

He went rigid and answered on speakerphone, probably because it would stop the zillion questions Cyrus would pepper him with after. “Hello?”

“Hello, is this Archer Kinsman?” a soft-spoken woman asked.

“Speaking.”

“My name is Janette and I’m a nurse at G.R. Stanton Memorial Hospital. We have you listed as the emergency contact for Clayton Cross. ”

Archer reached for me, grabbing my arm with his free hand. I put my arm around him, offering him support both physical and emotional.

“Is he...”

“He’s been injured, but he’s stable.”

Archer let out a deep breath.

“Mr. Kinsman, your friend is going to need some support once he’s released from our care.”

“What happened?”

“I’m afraid I can’t disclose that. All I can tell you over the phone is that he’s here and he’s stable.”

“What room is he in?” Archer was trembling now. Whether it was fear or anger or shock, I had no idea.

Cyrus was already shutting the stove off and digging around in my cupboards for containers to store the food in. Marshall took everyone's drinks and dumped them down the sink. None of us had drunk very much, but it was like all of us knew where this night was going to end up.

"He's still in the emergency room."

Archer sagged against me, the strength going out of him as he promised to be there as soon as possible. Clayton didn't live in our town. He was a four-hour drive away.

Archer ended the call and stared at the phone. "Clayton doesn't have anyone else." Archer sounded small and scared. A little angry too, but at what? Clayton or the situation in general?

"We'll leave right now," I said, pulling Archer into a hug.

"We'll come with you," Cyrus said.

Archer shook his head. "It's too far away and Cyrus has work tomorrow. I don't want Shane's business to suffer because of my baggage."

"Archer, you don't have to go." Cyrus clenched his jaw and I could see the monumental effort he was putting in to bite his tongue.

"I do, though. I'm not like him, okay. I'm not going to abandon him when he needs me. I don't know exactly how I can help, or what he even needs, but I know I'll regret it if I don't do something."

"We'll leave now and we can get a hotel. I'll pack us a bag. Cyrus, can you take dinner home with you so it doesn't go to waste" I brushed a kiss against Archer's forehead.

Cyrus nodded. “And I’ll pack you two something to eat on the drive.”

I met Cyrus’s gaze and gave him a nod. Archer didn’t want him along for whatever reason, and Cyrus was doing his best to accept that even though he clearly hated it. Marshall steered Archer to a chair to sit while Cyrus dug in my fridge.

Because Archer had been spending so much time here, he had his own drawer in my dresser and a section in my closet. I grabbed a small duffel bag and packed a change of clothes for us and toiletries. If we were gone longer, I could always buy us whatever we needed.

I sent a text to Kieran to let him know I was heading out of town, and why, and where Archer and I were going. I promised to update him when I had more news. Knowing what Clayton had put him through, I was tempted to try and talk Archer out of going to see him. But it was clearly important to him, which made him a better person than I was. I wasn’t prone to violence, but in certain cases I’d be willing to make an exception. Like in Clayton’s case.

I knew little about him. Archer didn’t talk about him a lot, which was understandable. All I knew was that, once upon a time, he’d been Archer’s best friend, and then he’d fucked him over. His gambling addiction had only come to light recently, which explained his past behavior, but that wasn’t an excuse .

Plain and simple, if someone had fucked me over the way they did to Archer, I wouldn’t be driving four hours to go make sure they were okay.

A couple of deep breaths helped calm me a little. I didn’t want Archer to see how angry I was. It was important to me to be supportive of him and his decisions, even ones I thought were stupid. This was important to him, therefore it was important to me.

Clutching the handles of the duffel, I went back to the kitchen where Archer sat. He'd put his shoes on and there was a bag of snacks next to him. Marshall was busy loading the dishwasher when he looked up and saw me.

"Drive safe. Text us when you get there."

"Yes, Dad." I tried for humor to lighten the mood. It didn't work, but I'd like to think that I got bonus points for the attempt. "Can you lock up on your way out?" I asked Cyrus.

"Of course," he said. "Call if you need anything."

"We will," Archer promised Cyrus before I could get a chance. The gesture was small, but it made the furrow in Cyrus's brow ease up. Despite things with dinner not going as planned, it gave me hope that the brothers had found a way to exist in each other's lives without going insane. Cyrus had learned to ease up, and Archer had learned to let him in. Even if the steps were small, they were still going in the right direction.

Now we just had to deal with Clayton. I wasn't looking forward to it, but I didn't think Archer was either.

"Are you okay?" I asked him once we were in my truck and on the road. Archer had been quiet the whole time. Quiet and rigid and far away. He dragged his gaze over to me and let out a deep breath.

"Honestly, I have no idea."

Chapter 34

Archer

Clayton had been moved up to a bed by the time Shane and I arrived at the hospital. On the drive, Shane had urged me to eat something, but that was a regrettable decision. The contents of my stomach churned the moment we walked in the doors. I didn't have a particular aversion to hospitals, but I didn't feel prepared to see Clayton. In my mind, I'd never see him again. He'd ruined our friendship and my life. Though, with Shane's hand linked with mine, it was hard to feel that way.

Not that I'd say I liked having my livelihood ruined and being forced to move in with Cyrus was a particularly good thing, but it had given me Shane. He was my rock in all of this. In all things. Sometimes I thought he was superhuman. But that was just who he was. Shane's love language was doing things for people. Big things or small things. The same way that I created art to show people I loved them, that was Shane with everyday deeds. And then not-so-everyday deeds like driving four hours to take your boyfriend to see his ex-best friend in the hospital.

Shane tracked him down to a room on the third floor and I followed along, shaking and unable to speak. I clung to Shane like he was a life raft and he navigated the hallways, taking us up to a room with two people inside. The curtain between them was drawn and we couldn't see who was on the far side of it, but closest to the door was Clayton .

My hand tightened on Shane's. The last time I saw Clayton he had been smiling and happy. Hadn't he? Maybe it had all been a facade. Maybe the man lying in the bed

with the shaggy brown hair, overdue for a cut and caked with blood, had been the real Clayton all along.

He looked like he was sleeping, or maybe he was just drugged out of his head.

“Do you need me to go in with you?” Shane asked.

“I can’t do any of this without you,” I told him. “Come on.”

Using a strength I wasn’t aware I had, I walked into the room. The closer I got, the worse Clayton looked. Not ready to look at his face again, I looked at the rest of him. His right leg was elevated and covered in a cast from the knee down.

The contents of my stomach rolled like an angry sea and then I saw his right arm. It was covered in a cast the same way his leg was. His left arm appeared to be uninjured, but it had an IV going into it.

Up close, his face hadn’t fared too well. He had two black eyes, a split lip, and a small gash in the side of his head, near his hairline. That was the source for all the blood that was still caked in his hair.

“Clayton?” My voice cracked and I cleared my throat. “What the hell happened to you?”

Clayton’s eyelids fluttered and it looked like it took all his energy to drag them open. “Archer?”

“Yeah, it’s me. What the hell happened to you. You look like you got hit by a bus.”

Clayton’s small huff of laughter was cut off abruptly when he winced. He panted a few times, screwing his eyes shut. “Hurts. Sorry.”

I didn't want to be here looking at him like this. I didn't want to be looking at him at all.

"What happened?" My voice was harder than I'd intended, but I felt like I was barely hanging on. Clayton was supposed to have been in the past. My ex-best friend. He'd once known everything about me—which was how he'd known exactly how to rip me off.

"That guy I owed." Clayton sighed. "Doesn't like being owed."

"What the fuck?"

"Yeah. They said they didn't kill me cuz they can't collect from a corpse. But he wanted me to know he was serious."

"What did the cops say?"

Clayton looked at me with his swollen eyes and his half-doped expression. "Nothing. I didn't tell them what happened."

"Clayton..." My fingers tightened on Shane's. "You have to tell them."

"I have to do nothing but find ten grand to pay him before he breaks my other leg, or decides to make a real example of me and dump me in a river somewhere."

"Call him."

My head whipped to the side so fast I swear I gave myself whiplash. "Shane, no."

Shane looked at me, his face etched with sympathy and determination. Already I knew I wasn't going to win this battle. Fuck, did I even want to win it? I didn't know

anymore. I didn't find it hard to still be angry with Clayton, even though he'd been worked over and probably left for dead. He'd been through his own kind of hell, but he'd brought it for himself.

"Archer, yes. I have it; he needs it."

"It won't stop here, Shane. He'll want more and more." Panic clawed at my chest when I thought about Clayton inserting himself in my new life, taking everything good about it away from me. Again. Leaving me with nothing. Again. I didn't want Shane to hate me and he would if Clayton ruined his life too .

"It will stop here." Shane let go of my hand and cradled my face. He looked me in the eyes. "Listen to me. It will stop here. All of it. The gambling and the bookies and the fucking you over and dragging you hours away because he got the shit kicked out of him."

"How? You can't just give him ten grand to give some shady asshole."

"He's right." Clayton interjected from his bed. "You can't fix this for me. No one can."

A nurse bustled in to tell us that visiting hours were over, but that we could come back in the morning and that Clayton would likely be discharged.

"We're going to get a hotel nearby, and we'll be back in the morning," Shane informed Clayton. He slipped his arm around me and held me upright. "Get some sleep."

Shane steered me out of the room and down to the lobby.

"What are we going to do?" I asked him. Fuck, I felt so lost. I didn't want to see

Clayton, but I also didn't like the idea of him being in trouble. But the thought of Shane throwing money at him didn't sit right with me. I felt like there were no good answers, no good solutions.

"We're going to get a hotel room. I'm going to draw you a bath and you're going to soak until you're a prune while I call Kieran and get his advice."

I liked Kieran. Shane's brother was a lot like him, both in looks and personality. They were both tall and broad, thick in all the right places. Kieran's hair was darker than Shane's chestnut, so dark it was almost black. Like Shane, he was a thoughtful person, but more reserved than Shane was .

"I already want tomorrow to be over." I confessed, leaning on him as he walked me to the passenger side of his truck and opened the door for me. "I'm already exhausted just thinking about it."

Shane closed the door and went around to the other side. I buckled my seatbelt and leaned my head against the window, closing my eyes and thinking about painting, brushstrokes, color theory, anything to keep Clayton's battered image out of my mind.

It didn't work.

By the time we got to a hotel and into a room, I was a ball of anxiety. I stood there, fretting inside as Shane went about his business as cool as a cucumber. He poured me the bath he promised and even helped me strip down and get in.

Sitting in the water, looking up at Shane, who already towered over me, I felt small. He sat on the edge of the tub and grabbed the wash cloth. He got it wet then gently cupped my chin and wiped my face.

“If you want, I can deal with Clayton for you. Though I can’t promise to do things your way, Archer.”

“I don’t want you to give him money. He’s got a problem, Shane.”

He nodded. “I don’t think Kieran would be too happy with that either. I’m going to call him and see what he thinks. When you’re out of the bath, your sketchbook and your pencils are in the side pocket of our bag.”

Shane brushed the hair off my forehead with the wash cloth, then washed the tip of my nose. “Boop.”

I wrinkled my nose and scowled. Well, pretended to scowl. It was impossible to stay miserable when Shane was doing his best to be adorable. Even adorable, he was still serious. I could practically see the wheels turning in his mind as he tried to figure out what to do. He was like that with everyone he cared about, not just me. That actually made me feel better about leaning so heavily on him. And also worse. Because if everyone leaned on him, he’d eventually crumble. I didn’t want that to happen.

“Maybe I should handle this myself,” I blurted. “You do so much for everyone. I don’t want you to think you have to solve my shit for me. And—”

Shane put his hand over my mouth. I blinked at him a couple times in disbelief.

“Do you trust me?”

Shane didn’t move his hand, so I nodded.

“Then trust that I only take on things I think I can handle. I don’t have an emotional attachment to Clayton. I’d walk away and leave him there to rot if I thought that’s what you wanted. But it’s not, is it?”

It took me a minute to get myself together enough to shake my head. For better or for worse, Clayton had once been one of the most important people in my life. And though it was his own fault he struggled, I still didn't want to abandon him, no matter what he'd done to me. But I was too close to the situation to see a solution that didn't make me want to dive headfirst into a trash compactor.

Reaching up, I gently tugged Shane's hand away from my mouth. "You really are like those little fix-it robot aliens. Just zooming around solving problems and shit like it's your destiny or whatever."

"Does that mean you trust me?"

Giving him the nod of approval took the rest of my strength and I let myself ease back and lean against the sloped wall of the tub. I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths. When I opened my eyes, Shane was looking at me with that soft gaze of his. Sometimes I swear he was part heart-eyed emoji.

"I trust you." I waved him away like royalty dismissing a loyal subject. "Let me soak. Or drown. Something. One or the other. "

Shane booped the end of my nose again. "No drowning. I'm going to call Kieran."

"Shit. I didn't text Cyrus."

"I did. Don't worry about it. They send their love. Did you need anything before I call Kieran? He's probably going to talk my ear off."

"Can I have a kiss?"

Shane dazzled me with a smile then leaned in and brushed a kiss against my lips. "Always."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:23 am

Shane

“Hold still.”

“I don’t like the dark,” Archer pretend to complain as I tied the blindfold over his eyes.

“It’s only for a minute. You’ll just have to trust me.” I went around to the front of Archer and took his hand.

He did his best to scowl at me, but I could see how excited he was trying not to be. He didn’t know what I’d been up to, but he knew I’d been up to something. It had been easier than I first thought to get his art studio space in my attic up and running. The previous owners had once thought about expanding their living space upstairs and had done some work already to prepare for the sheetrock.

Clayton had been dealt with, and business at the shop had picked up pretty steadily since I made it my mission to go from mostly-retired bar owner to social media manager for my hot, talented boyfriend, bringing an influx of customers. Ethan and Archer had also come to an agreement to let Archer hang paintings in the diner that people could buy. He’d already sold a handful, and he still claimed to not be finished the one he was working on for me. Maybe the new space would inspire him .

I led him up to the attic. Navigating the stairs was the tricky part, but we managed to go up with me following close behind to protect him if he stumbled. The space still smelled faintly of fresh paint, which was an improvement from the dusty odor that had previously filled the space.

I tugged him into the center of the room.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

“No. I think I’d like to stand here in the dark for another ten minutes,” Archer snarked, but a smile curved his mouth and I wanted to kiss it. “Yes, can I please see now?”

I gently removed the blindfold and watched his expression as he opened his eyes. “What...”

I saw the moment he spotted the easel and the cupboard of art supplies. I’d practically bought out the entire store. I’d had a counter installed with storage below and above. I’d bought a comfortable-looking stool for him that came highly recommended and a chaise lounge for when he wanted to curl up and sketch.

“What the fuck?” Archer gaped at the space, slowly turning in a circle.

“It’s yours.” I pulled the second surprise out of my pocket. We hadn’t made it official yet, but he spent practically every night here, only staying over at his place once in a while when he stayed up too late working. And even then I tended to drive over and drag him home. I took his hand and dropped a keychain into it. There were keys to the house and the garage, even the shed out back.

Archer looked at them, then up at me. “Keys?”

“To my house. You basically live here already. I want you to live here for real. ”

“Keys. And a studio. Shane... I...” Archer threw his arms around me and buried his face in the curve of my neck. “I told you to stop giving me shit.”

“And I told you that I’d never stop doing my best to make you happy.”

He kissed my throat. The side of my neck. The little spot below my ear that made my knees want to give out and my back shiver.

“You make me happy without all this stuff, you know.”

“I know.”

“I don’t need any of it, but I love you for giving it to me.” Archer forced himself away from me and took a slow walk through the room. He ran his fingers over the countertop as he passed. He opened the cupboard and had a look at the supplies, brushing his fingers over the labels like he needed to touch everything to make sure it was real. He sat on the stool and slowly swiveled in a circle before stopping when he faced me again.

Archer looked at me and crooked his finger. “Come here.”

When I was close enough for him to reach me, he looped his fingers around my suspenders and yanked me closer to him. He stood, getting into my space. So much so that he had to tilt his head back to look at me.

“Have I told you lately that you’re everything to me? And that I really fucking love these suspenders?”

“Just the suspenders?” I quirked an eyebrow and he rose up on his toes to kiss me.

“And the man wearing them. I’ve been too nervous to give it to you, but your painting is done. We’ll go get it after.”

“After what?”

Archer slid the suspenders off my shoulders. “After. ”

He undid my suspenders from the front of my pants. Leaving them attached to the back, I let him position my hands, one by one, behind me so he could bind them there. It had become one of his favorite things to do when I wore them and, truthfully, I wore suspenders now just to see what new ways he'd find to use them.

I watched with hunger as Archer slid to his knees and tugged my zipper down. He stared up at me with his dazzling hazel eyes. The tilt of his lips told me how pleased he was to be in close proximity to my cock, which had gone from zero to three hundred in two-point-two seconds.

"Be a good boy and stay still for me." He tugged my briefs down just enough to free my cock. His pretty pink tongue flicked out and he lapped at the head of my dick, cleaning off the precum that was already leaking for him.

I liked being Archer's good boy. We weren't kinky, not exactly. I liked a spanking now and then, and I didn't mind some light bondage and dirty talk, but that was as far as we were comfortable going.

Archer was also comfortable going down to the fucking root of my dick, taking my length into his mouth in one talented move that had me nearly crumpling down on top of him as my legs quaked from the shock of it. Gentle, talented fingers toyed with my balls, cradled them as he sucked, hollowing his cheeks. Archer's tongue swirled around the head of my cock as he jerked me with his other hand.

I wanted to sink my hands into his hair. I loved the way the strands felt between my fingers. How he looked devious and delightful on his knees with my cock buried in his throat. But he loved running the show and I loved letting him. I loved that no matter how many times we had sex, it always felt like each time got better than the last. I especially loved the way he never asked for me to fuck him and I'd finally stopped secretly waiting for him to ask me. Being with him, knowing he'd never want something from me that I wasn't willing to give made me want to give him everything that I could.

His mouth was hot and skilled. The suspenders bit into my wrists as I tugged, wanting to be free so I could grip his head in my hands. Not to fuck his face, but so that I could anchor myself to him.

“Archer—”

Whatever I’d meant to say died on my lips when his fingers slid between my cheeks and probed my hole. Archer gently traced the outline of it before pressing inside me. Without lube, it wasn’t the most comfortable thing on the planet, but the bite of discomfort had a strange effect on me. I didn’t want to hurt, but I liked feeling him later. I liked knowing he’d been inside me. It was that thought that had my release lighting me up, pulling everything inside me until it was hot and tight and ready to explode.

“Fuck. Your mouth is a fucking miracle, Archer. Oh—God. Fuck.” I squeezed my eyes shut and sucked air into my lungs through clenched teeth. “Archer. I’m close. So close—”

He released his hold on my cock and balls and instead wrapped his arms around me, grabbing my ass and holding me still.

I saw white. And stars. And maybe my life flashing before my eyes as I shot down Archer’s throat. A life with him. One where we would grow old together, like the people in that movie we’d watched together at least a half a dozen times since the first time we’d watched it. I wanted that with him. Maybe not the restaurant and the crumbling building, though the cute alien-robot-things would be welcome.

I opened my eyes and blinked Archer into focus as he leaned back and wiped a stray drop of cum off his lip with his tongue. He smiled at me like it was the best flavor on the planet. He looked satisfied with himself. And happy.

I wanted to reach for him and kiss him until he understood that he was everything to

me.

Archer rose to his feet and unbound my wrists. He even went so far as to redress me. Righting my suspenders and tucking my dick back into my pants before zipping them up carefully.

“Does that mean you’re moving in?”

Archer rolled his eyes. “I already live here. I’ve just been stubborn about it.”

“Were you going to tell me?” I laughed and reached for him, intending to return the favor, but he twisted away from my touch.

“I was going to tell you before Brodie gets here next week. Now, let’s go to The Anchor. I have a gift for you and then we can eat. I have a craving for one of Cyrus’s bacon double cheeseburgers.”

“I hope you pencil in some time between those two activities for me to properly thank you for the gift.”

“You might hate it.” Archer said, giving his studio one final glance before tearing himself away from it and leaving the room.

I didn’t hate it.

Not even a little.

Archer had done the same thing to me and had blindfolded me and led me into his room above the bar. He’d tormented me for a few minutes, straddling my lap and kissing me softly, asking if I would love him even if his painting was ugly.

It was the furthest thing from ugly that I'd ever seen. Archer had painted the bar. More specifically, me behind the bar downstairs. I was smiling and pouring a beer. Glass bottles of liquor sparkled behind me. He even painted my tattoos in vivid detail.

"He's hotter than I am," I told Archer, dragging him in close to me.

"You're hotter in real life." Archer circled his arms around my shoulders. "I didn't know if you'd like a portrait of yourself. I almost didn't paint it, but I couldn't help myself. I started out with that one over there, but changed my mind."

I glanced over to where another canvas leaned against the wall. "My tattoo."

Archer had painted a huge version of it. Bigger than my whole torso, it was bright and colorful. A stunning rendition of my most beloved tattoo. "Archer, it's incredible."

"I was going to paint over it."

"Don't you dare. I want both paintings. Can I have both?" I almost couldn't look away, but I dragged my attention back to Archer.

"You can have anything you want," he told me.

"Anything?" Dipping my head down, I ghosted my lips against his.

"Anything," Archer promised.

"Even forever?"

Archer answered me with a kiss.

"Forever," he promised.