



You've Got Male (Rom-Com Reboot)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: My friends are all about the romance. Me? I've got other things to worry about.

Carrying on my uncle's little record store—his legacy—means everything to me.

Too bad a big entertainment store is opening across the street. The owner, Chase Fox, is too friendly, too smooth—too annoying. He knows I'm straight, and his competition besides, and still he flirts with me.

My only comfort is the new friend I met on the SeattleLife site. We never exchanged real names, and I don't know if they're a guy or a girl, but there's a freedom in that. I can say anything to them without holding back.

But as time goes on, I get more curious. And more confused.

Could my online pal be more than a friend? Even if they're not a woman?

And why are Chase's flirty smiles suddenly giving me flutters and making me wish for the impossible—that my business rival and my closest online friend might actually be the same guy.

A guy meant to be mine.

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“If I haveto listen to that song one more time...” My voice was strained as I hefted a crate of records onto the workstation behind the checkout counter. “No jury in the world would convict me.”

“I like it,” Briar said with a pout. “Here. Drink some coffee before you do murder, you grump.”

I accepted the cup of coffee because I’d never been a morning person, and Briar and I both knew it.

“What do you want me to put on?” she asked, removing the Ariana Grande album from the turntable, which had been good the first dozen times I heard it but had since lost all meaning.

“Put on some Sleater Kinney,” I said.

“Of course,” Briar mumbled.

“What was that?”

“Nothing!”

Briar wasn’t a fan of the female indie rock band, which seriously made me question her taste, but she was still young at seventeen. She’d learn better. Sleater Kinney was an awesome band that got its start in Olympia, Washington, and I liked to show appreciation for music that originated in our area, not just the mainstream hits. I had a whole section of the store devoted to it.

I gulped some more coffee and gestured to the crate of records I'd brought out from storage. "Make yourself useful and sort this into genres so we can get them cleaned and priced."

Briar sighed mournfully—not exactly a fan of cleaning records, which could get tedious—but began making stacks of albums while I headed to the front window to turn on the Open sign.

It brought me less satisfaction than it should have. No one was waiting outside. The trickle of customers had been getting slimmer lately, even with vinyl making a comeback. This neighborhood had changed with redevelopment, pushing out many small businesses, and as a result, it lost some of its quirky indie personality.

Tech firms and upscale boutique shops had been moving in. But that I could handle, even if my margins were running lean. The mega entertainment store moving in across the street and half a block down? That made me nervous.

Fox Entertainment Zone promised to be a one-stop shop for books, music, and gaming. They could sell all the Xboxes they wanted; it was that little M word that worried me. If they carried vinyl records to go along with their varied merch, what was to stop someone from bypassing my little shop with its small, unobtrusive signage and heading straight for their obnoxious four-door entrance?

"Did you at least pre-order the new Taylor Swift album?" Briar asked.

I glanced over. Today, she wore her hair pulled into two Princess Leia-style buns with chopsticks shoved through them, not that I'd be dumb enough to compare Briar to a princess. Her style spanned the gender spectrum, and she'd mixed combat boots and a band T-shirt with three bead bracelets and eight sparkly rings.

"You know I did," I said.

Swifties were basically keeping the store alive, popping in while they did their boutique shopping. They weren't exactly the record store clientele of the eighties, but I appreciated their enthusiasm. Unfortunately, all of Taylor's records were new, meaning my profit margin was a lot smaller than it was for sales of older, used records.

The metal door of the shop swung open, and I perked up, but it was just Martha again. She came in with a tote bag that dwarfed her short, scrawny body. I hitched on a smile, even though I knew she wouldn't be buying anything.

"Got some records for you to buy," she rasped.

"Let's see them," I said gamely. Martha rarely had good records, but seeing as she didn't have more than a couple of dollars to her name, I usually bought them anyway.

She set the bag on the checkout counter, which doubled as a glass display case for some of the most expensive records in the shop, and I pulled out the albums.

The problem wasn't the music she was bringing me, but the condition of it. The covers looked worn at the edges, and a few were moldy. The records inside didn't fare much better, many of them scratched. Still, I dutifully sorted through them, resolving to toss them all in the trash bin later.

"I can give you five bucks."

"That's all?" she asked plaintively.

"Highest I can go is seven," I said, knowing she probably needed the cash. "I can't really sell these for much."

Or anything at all.

She brightened. “I can take seven.”

While I opened the cash drawer and retrieved the bills, Martha rambled about the music collection she’d started thirty years ago and some of her favorite concerts over the years.

“I bet that was something,” I said, only half-following the story.

“It sure was!”

Eventually, she ran out of steam and left with her money, which would hopefully buy her a hot meal.

Briar shook her head. “You’re a real softie, huh?”

“Me? Nah. I figured you could use some more records to clean.”

Briar eyed the moldy records with trepidation. “You wouldn’t! That’s probably a health code violation.”

I smirked. “No, but I could. Remember that before wrinkling up your nose at good music.”

“Sleater Kinney is great,” Briar said quickly. “The best!”

I laughed. “Don’t worry. These are going in the big filing cabinet out back.” At her blank look, I explained, “The garbage bin.”

“I don’t know how you do it.”

“What?”

“Stay in business. I don’t know much, but even I know you’re supposed to sell more than you buy.”

I swatted her on the way by. “Shut it, kid, or we’ll be discussing how I need to make money in order to pay employees.”

Briar quickly mimed zipping her lips, but the truth of what she said weighed on me the rest of the day. This record store had been my great-uncle’s pride and joy, a legacy he’d wanted me to carry on. Somehow, he’d weathered the years when CDs were all the rage, and I’d be damned if I couldn’t do the same during a vinyl revival period.

Yes, the pandemic had killed my reserves. Yes, the neighborhood had been shifting, changing the customer demographics.

Yes, there was more competition than ever with dozens of Seattle record stores.

But this was my great-uncle’s legacy, and I would find a way to keep it alive.

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“I’m bored,” Lacy complained, her rosebud mouth sagging along with her ponytail as she gazed up at me with big brown eyes that rivaled my Bennie’s.

Bennie being my dog. Sadly, I wasn’t on possessive terms with any men. Given how much time I’d sunk into launching this new store in my family’s small chain of Washington businesses—not to mention the energy it took to persuade my grandmother it was a good idea to expand our brand from books to broader entertainment—there was no time for romantic pursuits.

“Did you check out the games inventory?” I asked. “We’re not just a bookstore anymore. It’s pretty cool. We’ve got some Fortnite Funko Pops.”

“I already looked at everything,” she said flatly.

“Dang, you’re a tough customer. Let’s hope the people who come in when we open are more excited, huh?”

She blinked up at me, waiting for me to cave to her wishes. And cave I did.

“All right, let’s go for a walk.” I grabbed my leather jacket off the back of the office chair where I’d been checking spreadsheets, which was about the most action I got in any sheets these days. Most nights, I was too tired for much more than a conversation anyway. “We can explore the neighborhood.”

AKA check out the competition.

Not that I’d tell Lacy that. She’d be even less impressed with me than she already

was after an hour spent in a half-filled department store. I loved taking her for a day here and there to give my sister and her husband a break, but there was just so damn much to do.

My grandmother made it clear I'd have only one shot at turning around the business. If the experimental shift from books to broader entertainment failed, she'd sell the whole chain and start her retirement.

But that wouldn't happen, because Fox Entertainment Zone would open in two weeks, and it would be a success. I'd chosen the location carefully, a spot that brought in retail shoppers in the right income bracket. It had nothing to do with the fact that this little Union Heights district was just a few blocks removed from the queer-centric Capitol Hill and I wouldn't mind a little more eye candy in my life.

Lacy and I headed outside, and I wasn't an irredeemable workaholic. I let her take the lead, skipping along the sidewalk, venturing into a little mini-park between buildings, and eventually checking out a tween boutique filled with short, slinky dresses that looked far too grown up, dressy heels, tiara headbands, and bottles of sparkly nail polish.

I supposed it was fair payment for all the time I'd kept Lacy in my store that I now had to take my niece on a shopping spree. I just thanked my stars that she was six and none of the expensive clothes would fit her. She wore a Taylor Swift bracelet made of teal-and-pink beads out of the store. I thought for sure she'd go for the tiara, but Lacy had informed me, in a snooty aristocratic tone, that she wasn't interested in being a princess. She wanted to be a pop star.

Duh.

We explored the rest of the block then crossed the street and headed back the other direction. I almost walked right past the record store, but even through the tinted

window, my gaze caught on the guy inside, struck by the wide grin on his face.

The door was a simple metal but plastered with stickers—so many that there were probably ten layers of them placed there over the years. A decal on the window read Black Hole Records, but otherwise there were no signs.

“Let’s go in here,” I suggested.

Lacy followed me in. I thought she might drag me back out as soon as she saw the record bins, but she spotted a glass case full of stickers and made a beeline for it—and the gorgeous man I’d glimpsed through the window.

He was still laughing at something his employee had said, a dark-headed teen with an eclectic style. His style, though, was a classic record store look: black jeans, tight black T-shirt, tattoo peeking out from under one short sleeve, and a leather bracelet on his left wrist. Yum.

“Hi, welcome,” he said. “Let me know if you need help finding anything. We’ve got new and used vinyl, CDs, cassettes, and—as your little girl has already discovered—lots of stickers.”

“Oh, she’s—”

“He’s not my dad! He’s gay!” she exclaimed, having no filter.

I winced. “TMI, Lacy. We’ve talked about this.”

“Oops, sorry, Uncle Chase.”

“That’s okay, kiddo.”

The store clerk—store owner?—chuckled, and I watched his expression to see if there was any telltale flare of interest in the fact I was gay, but sadly, there was not. Probably straight, then.

It was for the best. I really didn't have time to start something. But even a quick hookup instead of porn and my right hand would have been a nice change of pace.

Ah well. Time to focus on what I'd come to see: not the gorgeous, twenty-something clerk or his teenage assistant, but the store itself. It carried a great selection of music, both new and used, far better than anything Fox Entertainment Zone would have.

Maybe I should add to our inventory...

We didn't carry anything used, and clearly Black Hole Records would always have a more eclectic selection than us. I spotted a great indie section of regional musicians, jazz and blues, even spoken word. But their new stuff was sparser, and that was something I could capitalize on.

But not yet. I'd already hit my budget for the opening.

"You have a Taylor bracelet too!"

Lacy's squeal jerked me out of my mental reverie. I turned, a Tom Petty album in my hand. Lacy was chattering with the teenager store clerk, and gorgeous record store man? He was right in front of me.

Damn, he smelled good too. Earthy and fresh, with hints of citrus and sandalwood.

"That's a great album," he said. "I love Tom Petty."

"Oh." I glanced down. "Yeah. You've got a great selection here. I don't see a single

thing I don't want."

I brazenly stared at him, eyes stuck on that amazing smile.

"Uh, thanks," he said. "We do what we can."

I grabbed a second album, ignoring the puzzled look he gave me when I picked up a metal band. I took them both to the checkout. "I'll take these."

"Okay, great." He went behind the counter to work the credit-card machine.

"I didn't catch your name," I said, trying on my best flirty tone as I handed him my credit card. "Pretty sure I can't leave here without that piece of information."

"Oh, sorry. I'm Austin Kelly, the owner of this little place." He glanced down at my card. "And you're...Chase Fox."

His smile disappeared. Uh-oh. Maybe I should have paid with cash. His smile had dazzled me too much to consider that he might recognize my name.

His eyes narrowed on me. "Chase Fox as in...Fox Entertainment Zone? Opening right across the street and threatening to put me out of business?"

"Uh...well, I wouldn't put it that way," I said, squirming like a naughty schoolboy even though putting this place out of business had never entered my mind.

Surely, we could co-exist. There had to be enough business for a retro vinyl store and an entertainment hub. Yes, we might undercut him on new vinyl, but he had all these used records, this amazing atmosphere, a quintessential feeling to the place that Fox Entertainment would never have.

He finished the transaction and handed my card back to me. “You should get going. Do you need a receipt?”

“No, but thanks.” I turned to Lacy. “Come on, let’s go get some ice cream.”

“Ice cream!” she exclaimed, streaking toward the door.

I chuckled and glanced at Austin, but he was grinding his teeth too much to give me another smile, so I hightailed it for the exit like a coward.

I tried to step out too quickly, caught the bag of tween accessories in the door, then sheepishly glanced back to see Austin watching me.

“Good thing we don’t have the ice cream yet. That would really be a mess.”

“Yeah,” he echoed. “A mess. Don’t want that.”

I closed my eyes for a moment, sighing. I certainly had made a mess of this first meeting, hadn’t I?

But Lacy was speeding down the sidewalk and I couldn’t linger and try to repair the damage I’d done.

Even if Austin’s smile was the most enticing thing I’d seen since setting out to prove the Fox brand could survive in changing times.

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I surveyed the selection of snacks available in Zach's pantry. He had the usual bag of Doritos and box of Cheezits, along with microwavable bags of popcorn. But I'd had a rough few days. I needed something sugary.

"It's your week to choose the movie, Austin," Jordan called from the living room.

"You choose. I don't care!" I shouted back, intent on finding the good stuff, which Zach had probably hidden in the hopes I wouldn't eat it.

Ah, there!

I shoved aside the bag of pistachios that had moved in when Tristan did and seized the cookies. I snatched the whole bag and headed for the living room, where the rest of my friends had settled into the best seats.

I looked at Tristan, settled into the corner of the sofa—my corner before he came along—and internally grumbled about boyfriends invading the friend zone. Correction: Tristan was a fiancé now. Zach was gazing down at their linked hands, his engagement band catching the light, a goofy grin on his face.

But then, I'd grin too if I had someone that special in my life. My last girlfriend hadn't lasted long enough to even meet my friends. She was more interested in a guy who could "provide" for her than an emotional connection. Considering I ran a small store with thin margins, I was not that guy.

I took a seat on the floor in front of the sofa, leaning against Becca's legs. We'd thought about dating for a hot minute, but one kiss had told us the chemistry just

wasn't there. She was too wholesome and sweet for me; I usually ended up with women who had more attitude.

Though maybe I should try to break that cycle...

"Hey, when did Oreo make a bisexual cookie?" Jordan asked, eyes on the bag in my hand.

I glanced down at the cookie stuffed with pink and blue cream filling. Then the front of the package. "It's some sort of space edition."

"Sure it is," Ellis said with a giggle.

I glanced at the other new addition to our friend group. He sat on the footstool by Jordan, and as usual, I couldn't tell if they were just friends or something more. Jordan wasn't much for dating, but Ellis was so pretty he almost made me look twice, and I wasn't into guys. I grew up with a gay great-uncle, had lots of queer friends, and had even kissed a guy a time or two while drunk, usually at the urging of some woman I was into, but there were never any sparks.

I shrugged and took a bite of cookie then moaned at the crackle of Pop Rocks hiding in the cream. "Amazing," I mumbled.

"That's what he and she said," Becca joked.

Zach pulled up the movie screen and went to click on You've Got Mail. "Okay, time for Austin's favorite—"

"Wait," I said. "Anything but that."

All my friends looked at me in surprise. And no wonder. I usually didn't care what

movie we watched, but when it was my turn, I always picked *You've Got Mail*. Mainly for Meg Ryan. She was in other movies, of course, but something about her chemistry with Tom Hanks as they sniped at each other did it for me.

"Do you feel okay?" Becca asked, lowering the back of her hand to feel my forehead.

I pushed it away. "I'm fine. Just not in the mood to watch this."

"But it's like the only rom-com you like," Zach said.

I shrugged and shoved another Oreo in my mouth. My friends exchanged looks.

"Okay, spill," Jordan said. "What's up with you?"

"You've been moody all night," Zach added.

"I'm not moody," I mumbled through my mouthful of cookie.

Becca nudged me with her foot. "Liar."

"Fine." I swallowed. "It's not a big deal. I'm just having a bit of business angst, and this movie will only make me dwell on it."

"That store across the street?" Zach asked. I'd told him about it the night he and Tristan got engaged.

"Yeah." I ran a hand through my hair. "The owner came in yesterday. I guess to scope out all my inventory so he can more effectively wipe me out."

"Surely that's not why he was there," Ellis said, looking horrified.

I shrugged. “Dunno. He didn’t exactly announce who he was. I saw his name on his card when he was checking out, and once I put it together, he left in a hurry.”

“So he bought something? Maybe he was just shopping,” Becca said, but then she was always looking for the best in people.

“He bought two albums that were nothing alike. He either has very eclectic taste or he just used that as a cover to spy on me.”

“Well, you like all kinds of music,” Becca pointed out.

“Yeah, but he’s a record store owner,” Jordan said. “It’s kind of a requirement of the job.”

“Thank you,” I said. “But it’s true I’m not the only polyjamorous guy out there.”

Jordan snickered. “Aw, cute, you’re trying to be queer with us.”

I flipped him the bird and carried on. “But this guy grabbed the second album without really looking at it. Pretty sure he didn’t care what he picked up.”

Because he was staring at me.

I wasn’t going to say that part, but I had definitely noticed the way Chase Fox’s gaze had latched on to me and lingered. His niece had announced he was gay, so it wasn’t totally surprising. I was a decent enough looking guy. But there had been an intensity to his interest that I hadn’t experienced from anyone before, male or female.

“Well, damn. Do you really think that store will put you out of business?” Jordan asked.

“I don’t want to believe it, but business hasn’t been great for a while. The last thing I need is some mega entertainment store moving into the neighborhood.”

Becca squeezed my shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” Zach said.

“Yeah,” Ellis echoed. “That sounds so stressful.”

“I know someone who writes for a Seattle business blog,” Becca said. “Maybe they could write something that would drum up support for indie businesses.”

“And I could research if there’s any legal regulations they’re violating,” Ellis added. “My ex-boyfriend has access to a whole legal library. Maybe he’ll help.”

Jordan rolled his eyes. “Don’t count on it. He’s pretty busy dating that snobby rich chick, Blaire. I take Business Law with her, and she’s so pretentious.”

Jordan was taking business and law courses, with the plan to go into corporate law. It sounded godawful to me, but he thrived on brainiac stuff that required burying his nose in a book.

Ellis looked pained. “That’s temporary. Once I get into law school with you guys, he’ll see that I can be the right partner for him. I can be more than a personal trainer with a hot bod.”

“It’s a very hot bod though,” Becca said. “No shame there.”

Ellis smiled. “I want a hot brain too.”

“You’ve got one,” Jordan said, scowling. “You shouldn’t have to prove it to

Clayton.”

He said the name like it was something disgusting on the bottom of his shoe.

Ellis shrugged. “Enough about me. Let’s see what we can do to save Austin’s store.”

“My firm specializes in business ad campaigns,” Tristan volunteered. “Maybe we could take you on pro bono, sponsor some sort of event that could make a splash.”

“That would be amazing,” I said, surprised. “Do you think your boss would go for it?”

“If not, I’ll just get Celeste and Levi to help me on the down-low. They’d be the ones doing the work anyway.”

His offer warmed me. Tristan was here for Zach, not because he was my friend, and he could have easily sat back in my spot on the sofa and offered nothing but condolences on my dying business. “Thanks, man. You earned that spot on the couch. I want you to keep it.”

“What?” he asked, puzzled.

Zach rolled his eyes. “Ignore him.”

“Seriously, though, thank you all. I don’t know what will happen once they open, but it’s good to know I’m not alone. This store isn’t just a job to me, you know? My great-uncle Charlie was the only reason I got through my teen years. My mom married a bigoted dickhead, and we couldn’t stand to be in the same room. Charlie opened his home to me, taught me his love of music, and entrusted his business to me when he died. I don’t want to let him down.”

“You could never let him down,” Becca said.

“Yeah, he didn’t leave it to you because you’re a great businessman,” Jordan added.

“Thanks,” I said wryly.

“No, I’m just saying, he left it to you because you love it as much as he did,” he said.

“No matter what happens, I think he’d be proud of what you’ve done with it.”

“I hope so,” I said.

But what I really hoped was that I could carry on his lifelong legacy for more than five measly years.

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“I wantto come out and see how you’re doing.”

My hand tightened on my cell phone but I kept my voice even as I gazed at the Seattle skyline from my high-rise condo. “There’s no need. Everything is going smoothly.”

My grandmother made a scoffing sound.

She didn’t mean to be a hard-ass. Georgina Fox was just used to running the business with a firm hand. So firm, it’d made it damn near impossible to convince her Fox should change to serve a new market.

It’d taken no small amount of research, persistence, and determination to get her to let me take on this project, and I didn’t want her hijacking it in the eleventh hour.

“Maybe it’s going too smoothly,” she said.

“You’d prefer there to be problems?”

“Are you getting smart with me?”

“No, I’m sorry.”

I usually knew when to bite my tongue with her and when to push, but I was tired after a long day overseeing deliveries at the store. Despite what I’d told her, not everything was smooth sailing. We’d hit some shipping delays that had required rearranging an entire department so that we wouldn’t have bare shelves when we

opened our doors.

“I’m just saying that we’re in good shape, Gigi. You don’t need to worry.”

“I’ll always worry,” she said, her tone softening. Georgina would never tolerate being called Grandma, but she secretly loved the nickname I’d unwittingly created as a toddler. “But all right. I’ll let you keep the lead on this one. Just remember, if you’re going to stand on your own—”

“I’m going to fall on my own,” I finished, all too familiar with this mantra. “I know. Win or lose, it’s my ass on the line. But this is going to be a win.”

She chuckled. “You’ve got some of that Fox fight in you, after all. Goodnight, Chase.”

“Night, Gigi.”

I tucked my phone away and went into the kitchen to reheat some leftovers of the chicken mac I’d made for Lacy a couple of days ago. Bennie followed me around the kitchen despite already gobbling his dinner when I first got home.

I warmed up a bowl full of the leftovers in the microwave then ate it while leaning against the counter. I had a table, but what was the point when I’d be sitting alone, anyway? I scraped up the last bite, rinsed the bowl, and grabbed a shower.

Then I crawled into bed with my phone—Bennie settling over my lower legs—and finally gave in to the temptation I’d been resisting all day. I pulled up my SeattleLife app and checked my messages.

There was one from ShopGuy24. Like a hit of crack, it made my pulse spike and endorphins flood my bloodstream. This was the closest I came to a relationship—an

anonymous guy on the other side of a screen somewhere in Seattle.

Not for the first time, I wondered who he was. We'd started chatting one day over an impassioned chat stream about the Seattle music scene, and somehow we'd ended up continuing to talk day after day. By some unspoken agreement, we never talked about personal details like name or age.

Or sexual preferences.

Obviously ShopGuy was a guy. I'd figured that out from his name. But his profile alluded to little else on the Seattle platform, which wasn't unusual. Because this was a local-based site, most of us didn't list details that would too easily identify us. No one wanted a stalker showing up at their house.

As Wash972, my name gave away even less than his did.

ShopGuy24:

You around? I could use some good news. This week has sucked.

Wash972:

Well, Bennie made friends with a bunny today. It was the most precious thing I've ever seen. He didn't chase him like most dogs, just nuzzled his ear.

ShopGuy24:

Bennie sounds like a very good boy.

Wash972:

Oh, he's the best boy and he knows it. But why has your week sucked? If you want to tell me, that is.

ShopGuy24:

I'm worried about my store. Times are tough, you know?

Wash972:

I know all too well. My family's business has really been struggling too.

ShopGuy24:

So what are you doing about it?

Wash972:

Anything and everything we can. We're not going down easy.

ShopGuy24:

Yeah, you're right. I can't just give up.

Wash972:

That's the spirit. We've got to fight for what matters. If we don't stand up for ourselves, no one else will.

ShopGuy24:

Thanks for the advice. I feel better.

I smiled down at the phone, warmth spreading through me. I didn't even know this guy, but the idea of helping him in some small way filled me with pride.

Me too, ShopGuy. I might actually sleep well.

It would be the first good night of sleep I'd gotten in weeks, but with the store just days from opening and my grandmother agreeing to let me handle the launch, I could see the light at the end of the tunnel. Soon, I'd be able to stop working twelve-hour days and reap the rewards of all my hard work.

Bennie wormed his way up the bed to lie beside me, and I carded my fingers through his silky chocolate hair.

"Well, Ben, at least I won't be alone for all those rewards, huh?"

The sweet-faced cocker spaniel had become my best friend. But I couldn't help wishing, just for a second, that ShopGuy could be the warm body beside me, ready to share the success with me when I proved to Gigi that with new direction and focus, we could keep the Fox company alive.

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Wash972:

Go to the mattresses!

ShopGuy24:

What? I'm not that kind of boy. I barely know you.

Wash972:

No haha. Go to the mattresses is a quote from The Godfather. It means to fight your enemies!

“Fight your enemies.” I grinned down at my phone. “I like that.”

“Talking to yourself again?” Briar asked from the kitchenette. She was going through the cabinets, but the record-washing fluid had already been changed.

I pocketed my phone. “What are you looking for?”

Briar leaned out of the break room, a guilty expression on her face. “Nothing. Just...organizing.”

I raised an eyebrow. “We're out of Rice Krispies Treats.”

“I wasn't looking!”

“Briar,” I said, exasperated, “you can tell me when you’re hungry. I remember being a teen. I was like a black hole.”

“It’s not that. I just kinda...” Briar ducked her head and mumbled.

“You what?” I asked.

“I missed dinner last night, and I didn’t eat breakfast.”

“Do I need to be worried?”

“No,” she said defensively. “I’m fine. Mom and I aren’t seeing eye to eye right now, so I stuck to my room.”

“Is this about you coming out again?” I asked, wondering if I needed to step in. Briar hadn’t had the easiest time at home. Her dad was trying to accept her sexuality, but her mom was having a harder time with it.

“No, we just argued over my stupid curfew.”

Ah, normal teen stuff. That was a relief.

“All right.” I rounded the counter. “I’ll swing by the coffee shop around the corner. Breakfast sandwich?”

“You’re the best boss ever!”

“Yeah, yeah.” I grabbed my jacket off the hook by the door. “There better be fifteen records in the drying rack when I get back!”

I stepped out into a bitterly cold wind. Damn. Spring couldn’t come soon enough. I

tugged my green bomber jacket a little tighter around me and hurried down the sidewalk.

There were a handful of coffee shops within walking distance—ranging from bougie to artsy—but the closest one had a mellower vibe I preferred. I popped into Muddy Waters, which was little more than an ordering counter and one cozy seating area.

There was no line, so I stepped up to order myself a coffee and Briar a breakfast sandwich. I hesitated, then threw in a cinnamon muffin because I suspected she could use a treat. It wouldn't be as good as the giant chocolate muffins at Roasted, where Zach worked, but it would give a nice sugar boost.

“I guess you missed breakfast this morning too, huh?”

I turned to see Chase fucking Fox lift a coffee cup in salute. He sat alone on the purple park bench that had been repurposed for the shop along with a few mismatched chairs, his phone resting on one knee.

I sighed and tipped my head back, getting a good look at the water stain in the shape of a baseball bat on the ceiling. “This neighborhood is going to shit.”

Chase laughed. “Ouch. Is it me or the cock-shaped stain on the ceiling making you say that?”

“That's not...” I frowned as his words changed the shape I was seeing, and I lowered my head to scowl at him. “Aren't they one and the same?”

“Oh! He's got jokes!”

I turned back to the front counter where Rosita was putting the finishing touches on my drink. “Who says it's a joke?”

Chase clearly didn't know when to leave well enough alone. He stood and approached me.

"Thanks, Rosita," I said, lifting the cup to take a sip and humming in appreciation. "You serve the best coffee, but don't tell Zach."

Rosita chuckled and swatted my arm. "Oh, you charmer! I'm sure you say that to all the baristas."

"Nope." I winked, doing my best to ignore the fact Chase was hovering by my side. "Only you."

Chase followed me out of the shop, apparently determined to dog my steps. "So, who's Zach?"

I took another gulp of my coffee in the hopes caffeine would temper my homicidal tendencies.

"He's obviously someone you know well enough you've taken him to Muddy Waters to meet Rosita," Chase mused. "Maybe a brother?"

I didn't answer.

"You're too young to have a kid, surely."

I slanted him a look against my better judgment. Chase tapped a finger to his lips. "Gotta be a boyfriend, right?"

"I don't have a boyfriend," I gritted out, though it was none of his business.

He perked up. "Ex-boyfriend?"

“No, no boyfriends. As in, I don’t—” I caught myself and gave him a flat look. “Why are we talking about my personal life?”

He shrugged. “Just trying to get to know my neighbor. Isn’t it what people do?”

“Maybe when the new neighbor isn’t a corporate asshole about to undercut hard-working indies.”

“Indies, plural? Or just you?” he asked, cutting right to the heart of the matter.

I picked up my pace, but the fucker had long legs, and he kept up just fine. It wasn’t until we reached my shop that I realized I hadn’t noticed the cold weather once during the walk back.

“Maybe it is just me,” I said before opening the door to my store. “I don’t know all your inventory. Maybe you’ll add a coffee shop and do poor Rosita in too.”

“Don’t worry, Austin.” Chase followed me inside. “Rosita is safe from the likes of me. I’m just a guy trying to keep the family business going.”

I scoffed. “Sure. The family business being a big regional chain. I’m sure you’re all suffering.”

“You really have no idea,” he muttered, giving me a second’s pause.

I dismissed the flicker of doubt. The man was opening a massive store with ten times the amount of inventory I was selling in my little shop. No way he could be doing that badly.

Briar placed a record in the drying rack to drip dry then turned to me with grabby hands. “Oh my god, that smells so good. I thought you’d never get back!”

I crossed the floor and handed off the breakfast bag. “Try not to skip meals just to avoid your mom, okay? It’s not healthy.”

Briar nodded. “Yeah, you’re right. You can take this out of my pay.”

“Nah, kid. You’ve earned a breakfast sandwich. It’s no big deal.”

Briar beamed. “You’re the best! Okay if I take a break to eat this?”

I nodded. “Sure. Chase is just here to spy some more, so don’t worry about him.”

“Hey, I’m not spying,” Chase protested. “I’m just trying to make new friends. It’s lonely being a corporate asshole.”

Briar choked on a bite of sandwich, and I fought a twitch of my lips.

“Tell you what, Chase. Since you want to make friends, how about you give me a sneak peek at your monstrosity of a store?”

“Well, I could, but then I’d have to kill you.” Chase smiled sweetly. “And you’re just too pretty to kill, Austin.”

Briar’s eyes rounded as Chase went out the door, and I gaped after him like a fish out of water.

“Oooh,” she crowed. “The corporate asshole is flirting with you.”

I scoffed. “More like fucking with me. He knows I’m straight.”

“That probably makes it more fun,” Briar mused.

I rounded the counter and sat my ass down at my desk to pull up payroll. “Get busy eating instead of talking or I’m going to steal your cinnamon muffin.”

Briar squeaked. “I’m eating, I’m eating!”

I smiled to myself, but I couldn’t escape the heat creeping up the back of my neck. It wasn’t embarrassment that he was trying to flirt, but irritation.

Even if I went for guys, I’d never go for a man about to put me out of business—and Chase had to know that. The fucker was playing mind games with me, and I didn’t appreciate it.

I pulled out my phone and re-read my last text exchange with Wash972.

It was time to go to the mattresses.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:35 pm

Austin came into the coffee shop while I was there again.

He scowled as soon as he saw me on Rosita's bench with my breakfast bagel. For some sick reason, my blood heated at the sight.

I liked needling him. Playfully. Getting hard for the guy was taking it a bit far. I was pretty sure he was straight—or at least, anti-Chase.

I still rose and wandered over to him while he waited on his order from Rosita because apparently I was a boy who liked to pull pigtails.

“Good morning!” I said brightly.

Austin grunted and lifted his phone into his eyeline. But I wouldn't let him ignore me.

“Tell me, is it a good day for record sales? How do you tell something like that? I'm taking notes because I'm a spy.”

“Not a very good one.”

“What?”

Austin turned his phone toward me, and my gaze caught on the news blog with the headline: Is the big bad Fox preying on indie business? There was a photo of my store with the sign Opening Soon in front of it.

“Son of a—” I made a grab for his phone, but he tucked it into his pocket.

“Look it up yourself. Shouldn’t be hard. It’s already being shared all over Facebook.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Are you behind this?”

He shrugged. “Like I said, you’re not a very good spy.”

My heart sank. I’d thought our rivalry was friendly. I’d thought Austin was more bark than bite. I’d been sure we’d find a way to co-exist in peace.

I was wrong.

My throat grew tight, straining my voice. “I was never trying to be a spy. I like you, Austin.”

He dropped his gaze and shifted. Guilty conscience? Or merely uncomfortable at being called out?

“You like me so much you’re going to put me out of business,” he said, gaze rising to meet mine, defiant now. “But I’m not going down easy.”

“I don’t want you to go down at all.” I paused. “Well, in a business sense. But on a more intimate level...”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m not a homophobe, so you can flirt all you want, Chase. I’m not going to run scared.”

Well, in that case...

I let my gaze drift down his body, taking in the T-shirt that clung to broad shoulders

and a narrow torso, the ripped jeans that encased slim but long-as-fuck legs. Yum. He was the emo boy of my teenage fantasies.

“You’re hot, Austin,” I said. “But this was a dick move.”

His face reddened. “W-well, you have a dick too.”

“I noticed. Not what I meant.”

He opened his mouth then closed it again, at a loss for words.

So, I’d flustered him. That was satisfying.

But it didn’t fix the PR nightmare he’d thrust me into. And not just me, but the whole Fox brand. There would be no stopping Gigi now. She’d come here to oversee the situation, making the predator narrative more true than I’d like. Only I’d be the prey, not indie business.

“Stop playing the victim,” I said. “If you want to stay in business, then come up with a way to bring in customers. Don’t turn me into the monster. I’m just a guy trying to keep his family business thriving. We’re really not so different.”

I threw my half-finished sandwich into the trash, no longer hungry, and stormed out the door.

I spent the rest of the day fielding calls from my grandmother, our lawyers, our PR manager, and several mid-level business execs, getting a thorough coaching in what I should say to the media.

Those calls were flooding in, as well. Too bad they hadn’t tried to get my side of the story before printing that first one. Technically, it had been an opinion column in a

business blog, so apparently, that made it okay to speculate about the consequences Fox Entertainment Zone would wreak on the Union Heights neighborhood and especially the indie record store owned by Austin Kelly.

Fox was far from the first chain business to move into the neighborhood, though. A fact they hadn't mentioned until several paragraphs in, and certainly not in the headline. The neighborhood had been shifting dynamics for a while. Understandably, not everyone was thrilled about it.

With redevelopment, many indie business owners had been pushed out. But that wasn't what I had done. I'd merely filled an empty spot in an old building. I was not the enemy Austin thought I was. If anything, Fox Entertainment could bring more business to this block, more customers who'd venture across to Austin's store. I just had to figure out how to make him see it that way.

On the plus side, I'd learned a little more about Austin from the article. He'd inherited the store from his great-uncle, who was a queer man who'd helped shape this district. He'd run his store for fifty years, somehow surviving even the decades when no one was interested in vinyl by selling CDs, collectibles, and other merchandise.

Austin's final quote in the story made my gut clench.

"I want to uphold my great-uncle's legacy. Closing the store would break my heart."

That didn't have to be the outcome of our grand opening, did it? I didn't want that.

When I got home, I walked and fed Bennie, but there was a churning in my stomach, an itch to my skin that just wouldn't quit. I skipped dinner, picked up my phone, and messaged the only person who would understand.

Wash972:

Sometimes I hate making the hard choices for my business.

ShopGuy24:

Me too. I took your advice. Got tough on a rival.

Wash972:

How did it go?

ShopGuy24:

Honestly? I thought it'd feel better than it did. Maybe I'm too nice.

Wash972:

There's nothing wrong with being nice.

ShopGuy24:

I thought nice guys finished last?

Wash972:

Not with me ;)

ShopGuy24:

I knew there was a reason I liked you.

I smiled at his response, but there was an odd parallel to his life and mine. We both had a business rivalry. He'd taken my advice and gotten tough, just like Austin had—

I sat up, heart skipping. Could it be?

Surely not. There were millions of people in the Seattle metro area. What were the odds I'd befriend someone running a business on the same block? It had to be a coincidence.

Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that the guy on the other end of this screen might be Austin.

I could simply ask. That'd be the easy solution. But what then?

If he was Austin, I'd lose the only friendly voice keeping me sane. Maybe it was better that I didn't know.

We'd gone into this friendship anonymously for a reason. No expectations, no pressure.

And fuck knew I needed that right now.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:35 pm

I got out of the shower, wrapped a towel around my waist, and grabbed my phone to check the time. Six-thirty. I didn't need to be at Zach's until closer to eight. Plenty of time to check in with my favorite online gal—or guy. I still wasn't sure.

I dropped onto the edge of my bed and re-read our last text stream. Damn, Wash972 had mentioned making tough business decisions, and somehow I'd made the conversation all about me.

I fired off a quick text.

ShopGuy24:

Hey, you mentioned making some tough choices for your business. Everything okay?

Wash972:

Not really. I'm stressed, and my grandmother will be here tomorrow.

ShopGuy24:

Not the type to hand out hugs and freshly baked cookies, I take it?

Wash972:

No. She's a businesswoman on the verge of retirement, and she's not pleased that I've created a mess.

My brows drew together. Wash had mentioned tough decisions, but this sounded like a bigger problem.

ShopGuy24:

A mess? That sounds serious.

Wash972:

I don't want to talk about it. I've been trying to read my copy of *Pride and Prejudice* to distract myself, but no luck.

ShopGuy24:

Ah, yeah, I've seen the movie.

Wash972:

Not a reader?

ShopGuy24:

I read! News articles and whatnot. Guess I'm more of a movie guy though. My friends and I get together every week. They love romance, so I'm well acquainted with Colin Firth in a wet shirt.

Wash972:

Is that right? Do you enjoy that scene?

ShopGuy24:

You'll never know ;)

Actually, I'm there mostly for the snacks. Last week I had some bisexual Oreos. That's what my friends called them because they've got blue and pink cream.

Wash972:

Do you often put your mouth on bisexual things?

I gave a startled laugh at the text. Was Wash972 hitting on me? Sussing me out as straight or queer? Did that mean they were a man...or not? It still didn't give me the clues I needed.

I flopped back onto my pillows. My hair would probably dry into weird shapes, but I was too invested in this chat to care.

Wash972:

Sorry, just teasing. Didn't mean to cross any lines.

ShopGuy24:

It's okay. A little flirty banter never hurt anyone, right? Or even sexting?

Wash972:

It would be a nice distraction for me...if you were interested. Just for fun.

Heat flooded my body and my cock rose, pushing the towel up. Okay, so part of me was very into the idea of sexy chat with Wash972. But...I still didn't know who was on the other end of that screen. Was I really okay getting off with a guy, if in fact,

Wash wasn't the woman of my dreams?

My body didn't have any reservations, my nerves tingling in anticipation. It wasn't really any different than masturbating, right? I'd just have a partner.

ShopGuy24:

All right, but this is your show. Take the lead.

Wash972:

Gladly. Tell me what I'm seeing right now.

I groaned quietly. I'd never been so turned on by words on a screen. It had clearly been too long since I'd had a satisfying sexual relationship. Before answering, I tugged open my towel and exposed myself to the room. Cool air brushed my cockhead, making me tremble.

ShopGuy24:

Just took a shower. I'm lying on my bed, my towel open, my cock already hard. You can see everything.

Wash972:

Fuck, you don't hold back, do you?

ShopGuy24:

Moving too fast?

Wash972:

No, just right. I want to taste the shower water still damp on your skin. I'm very good with my mouth.

ShopGuy24:

Yeah? Would you suck my cock?

Wash972:

Slow down, cowboy. There's this little thing called foreplay. First, let's pinch your nipples. I want you to tug and twist until they're red and aching, just like I would.

Fucking hell. I laid my phone on my stomach so I could grab both nipples. I wasn't really a nipple guy, per se. I didn't mind if my sex partners skipped straight to a blow job. Generally, I focused on them more because women needed a little more warming up than I ever would. But...this focus Wash972 was putting on me, on my body, was hot as hell.

The moment I pinched my nipples, pleasure flared. I rolled and tugged them hard, wanting to give Wash exactly what they'd asked for, and holy shit, it set off sparks that shot straight to my cock.

When I picked up the phone again, Wash was waiting.

Wash972:

You there?

ShopGuy24:

Sorry, got carried away. It felt so good.

Wash972:

Mmm. Yes. It feels good for me too. I'm imagining you undressing me and touching me, kissing and licking my nipples too.

My cock throbbed insistently enough I reached down to squeeze it. If Wash continued to move so slowly, I was gonna blow early.

ShopGuy24:

That's really hot. I don't know how long I can last at this game.

Wash972:

LOL. Eager much?

ShopGuy24:

Hell yes. You've got a way with words.

Wash972:

I'll take it as a compliment. If I was there, I'd sink to my knees. Why don't you grab some lube so you can feel just how good I am with my mouth?

I fumbled with my bedside table drawer and impatiently rifled through the junk mail inside it. My place was small, and there weren't any separate rooms. Everything mingled together, meaning my side drawer was a catch-all for the whole house.

Finally, my fingertips landed on the small tube of lube and I pulled it out with a triumphant cry.

Wash972 had continued without me.

Wash972:

My hand is down my pants. Imagining your mouth. Are you touching yourself too? Tell me you are.

I hurriedly squirted some lube into my left palm so I could keep texting with my right hand. Normally, I wouldn't jerk off with that hand, but something about my awkward fumbling made it feel more like the touch of a different person, heightening the pleasure when I touched myself.

ShopGuy24:

Yes

Wash972:

LOL too busy for words? How about you give me a little something?

ShopGuy24:

Fuck, sorry. I'm not a selfish lover, I swear. I would use my tongue and lips to reduce you to a quivering mess. I wouldn't stop until you were screaming with pleasure.

Wash972:

I'd suck you deep into my throat, let you gag me, until you couldn't stand it and you

grabbed my hair and face fucked me until you came in a rush over my tongue.

Holy fuck. I stroked my cock fast and hard, imagining the incredible blow job Wash was describing. Images tumbled through my mind. Lush lips. Long hair.

What would it be like to grab a guy's hair though? If Wash was male...

I shook my head, trying to brush the thought away as my stomach tightened and my balls drew up. Whatever their gender, Wash was about to make me come.

Maybe there was a guy on the other side of that screen. Maybe Wash was stroking a cock instead of...

I bit my lower lip, moaning as my body went rigid.

My back arched, my breath caught, and my orgasm hit hard. My cock spurted over my fingers, onto my stomach, and I stroked myself through it, drawing it out, draining my balls dry.

Had a man just made me come? I tried to imagine what Wash would look like, but Chase's face came to mind.

I sucked in a sharp breath, my cock twitching in my hand.

Oh, hell no. That was just wrong.

It was only because I was trying to picture a guy, right? And I'd just talked to him today. Plus, he was gay, and he'd looked me over like he wanted to devour me.

Kind of like Wash972 just had.

Oh, shit. I grabbed for the phone to check the screen.

Wash972:

Oh, damn, you made me come so hard.

Wash972:

You there? Okay, well I'm choosing to believe you're lost in the throes of pleasure and not ghosting me...

ShopGuy24:

Sorry, sorry! Absolutely came my brains out. I'd never ghost you.

Wash972:

Never? You don't even know who I am.

That was true. And I was more than a little curious. I wanted to know who I was talking with, and not just because I'd come to their words. Wash had become my closest confidante recently. The first person I wanted to talk to when I woke up. The last I wanted to check in with before bed. The person who offered a listening ear and helpful advice anytime I asked.

Flutters broke out in my stomach.

Meeting would be a big step. If it went badly, it could ruin everything we had. But I needed answers.

I could ask Wash about their gender. Find out right now if I'd just come with a man

or woman—or hell, maybe someone nonbinary. I wasn't counting out any possibility. But asking now would be taking the easy way out, and it would only leave me with more questions.

Because thinking that Wash might be a man? That hadn't turned me off. One bit.

Maybe it would be different in person. I'd never been attracted to a man. Or maybe it wouldn't. Maybe our connection would go beyond the superficial construct of our bodies.

We had to meet before I could figure out if I'd met the one.

And that was romantic enough drivel it would make Zach proud.

I rolled my eyes at myself and bit the bullet.

ShopGuy24:

Wash, what do you say we finally meet? I want to know you for real.

Wash972:

I don't know. What if you don't like what you see?

ShopGuy24:

It's a risk for both of us, right? But look, we don't have to go into this looking for a romantic partner. We can just meet as friends. It'll take the pressure off, right?

Wash972:

Friends... Yeah. I could do that.

ShopGuy24:

There's this coffee shop I like, called Roasted. Know where that is?

Wash972:

I can find it. I'll, uh, bring a copy of Pride and Prejudice, and you bring those bisexual cookies. So we can find each other.

ShopGuy24:

Good idea. Tomorrow afternoon?

Wash972:

My grandmother will be here by then. Can we make it Friday evening?

ShopGuy24:

Sure. See you then.

I tossed my phone to the side, exhaling a shaky breath. Well, there was no going back now. I'd find out who Wash was at a friendly coffee date, and I'd see how I reacted to him or her.

I looked down at the mess on my stomach and smirked. If Wash could make me come like this in person, I didn't care if they were a freaking purple alien.

Bring it on.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:35 pm

My grandmother swept into my office at Fox Entertainment Zone like an elegant but deadly storm the next morning.

I didn't hear her coming, not now that she'd given up wearing the heels I'd heard click-clack across floors for all of my childhood. At seventy-six, Georgina Fox had put comfort over fashion, but she still looked immaculate in her black slacks, lavender blouse, and white cardigan. She wore a chunky silver-and-turquoise necklace and carried a handbag the size of Nebraska.

"You've really stepped in it this time, Chase." She followed the statement with a swift kiss to my cheek. "Let's fix this mess, hm?"

"You didn't need to come all the way here. I have it under control."

She arched an eyebrow. "Do you? Because the Associated Press picked up the story. This could do some real damage to our brand."

After years of studying my grandmother's every move, I knew how her mind worked.

"That must make our competitors nervous. Knowing we're such a powerhouse..."

She chuckled and shook a finger at me. "Oh, you're good."

I shrugged. "I learned from the best. Want a tour while you're here?"

She nodded. "Just a quick one. Then we need to sit down and get this situation in hand."

“I’ve got a plan for that.”

I had a half-baked idea at best, but I intended to bluff my ass off in the hopes Gigi would let me handle it. If she pulled the plug on this store, we’d be done. She’d sell our chain of stores as planned, and our family legacy would retire with her.

She didn’t really want to go out that way, though. She was a young seventy-six, and a two-week vacation bored her, much less retiring for good. She needed to see we could adapt and survive in a modern market, and that she didn’t have to manage it all on her own.

Easier said than done with a woman who was certain she always knew best.

To be fair, she very often knew best.

We stepped out of my office, and I guided her down the aisles, pointing out where we’d stocked games, movies, music, and collectibles.

“Wait, why are you putting these small collectibles here?”

“Well, because—”

She waved a hand, cutting me off. “No, no. You need to put these by the checkouts. What have I told you before about upselling? Call over your store manager.”

“We’ve already got plans for the checkouts. We have a variety of movie night snack packs...”

Gigi moved away, waving toward my store manager, Don. “Hello? Could you come here, please? Yes, you!”

“His name is Don,” I muttered.

“Don! Yes. Over here.”

I inwardly groaned as my grandmother called Don over and dismissed our carefully strategized plans in favor of her whims. It was even more annoying that she was right. Smaller collectibles were more likely to be passed over in an aisle full of merchandise. But next to the registers, a small impulse purchase made on the way out? That would move more product.

Damn it.

I watched the master at work, and mentally rehearsed how I was going to convince her I wasn't in over my head.

One small change to our store layout turned into three more. By the time that was done, it was nearly lunchtime, so we walked a couple of blocks to a small bistro-style cafe.

“You've done good work on the store.”

That was high praise from my grandmother. I chuckled. “Really? Is that why you played rearrange the store all morning?”

She took a sip of water and rolled her eyes. “Always so dramatic, Chase. It was just a few tweaks.”

“Well, thank you.”

“But this narrative that you'll put the little guys out of business...”

“It won’t happen,” I said.

“It could happen,” she corrected gently. “This neighborhood is an odd mix of mom-and-pops and high-end boutique businesses. I don’t envy those indies. They have their work cut out for them.”

I nodded, inevitably thinking of Austin. His actions had hurt me, but my very presence threatened his livelihood, so I couldn’t really blame him for fighting to survive.

I just hoped when I offered a carrot instead of a stick, he’d accept.

“I don’t want to run anyone out of business. In fact, I think Fox could help them. I’ve got some ideas that I think could benefit us all.”

And especially Black Hole Records.

“All right.” She took a bite of her salad and waved her fork at me. “I’m listening.”

“So, here’s what I’m thinking...”

While we ate, I outlined a plan that would transform Fox Entertainment from a predator to a friend. My grandmother wasn’t one to accept half-baked ideas, so I embellished a little.

Or a lot.

“Hmm.” She pushed her mostly empty plate to the side. “You’re sure you can get the business owners on board? Even the one quoted in the article...Andrew or Anthony or—”

“Austin. Yes, even him.”

She tilted her head, a calculating look in her eyes. “All right. You wanted to run this project, so it’s yours. Just don’t ram it into any icebergs. We’re already trying not to drown.”

“I’ll make this work, Gigi. I promise.”

“I don’t need promises. Just results. I let you go out on a limb with this one because you’re smart and driven, Chase. I just worry you have a little too much heart.”

“Is having a heart such a bad thing?”

My grandmother smiled and reached across the table to pat my cheek the way she’d done when I was much younger. “Ah, honey. No, it’s not. A compassionate leader can still be a good leader. As long as he knows when to cut his losses.”

Her message came through. She’d give me enough rope to tie up loose ends, but if I inadvertently hung myself, she’d cut me and Fox Entertainment loose.

I wouldn’t expect anything else.

My grandmother wasn’t a heartless businesswoman, but she would always lead with her head.

I had to convince Austin that wasn’t me. That I could lead with my heart. That this Fox was going to guard the henhouse, rather than raid it.

As my grandmother had pointed out, it would be easier said than done.

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Jordan flicked through the new inventory while humming under his breath. “Cool, you got some new metal in.”

He held up the Motorhead album with a Cheshire cat grin. “This is awesome. Thanks for giving me a heads-up.”

I chuckled. “I knew you’d want your fix.”

Jordan didn’t look like a metalhead. He had more of a book nerd vibe. Music was his only vice. The kid worked his ass off at college, studying 24/7 to double major in business and law.

And he did it to some banging music.

Jordan selected two more albums and set them on the checkout counter. Instead of pulling out his wallet to pay, he moved to the cozy armchair I’d set up near my desk and dropped into it.

“So, how are things going with the business? Did the article help?”

“Yeah, a little.” This week had been one of my best, with an uptick of my regulars, plus a few new customers stopping by to check out the store. It was more of a creek than a raging river of business, but I’d take it.

“Why the face?” Jordan asked.

I was grimacing. Couldn’t help it. The whole thing left me with a bad taste in my

mouth.

“I didn’t know it would be such an attack piece. I just wanted to drum up some support for little businesses.”

“Yeah, I guess the best way to do that is to highlight the big guy about to step on them, right?”

“Maybe.” I didn’t want to dwell. It was done, for better or worse. I wasn’t sure the benefit was going to be long-lasting, but hopefully that meant any damage done to Fox’s reputation would also be short-lived. I wasn’t made for this cutthroat behavior.

But I hadn’t given Jordan the heads-up about those metal bands so we could talk business. I couldn’t stop thinking about what had happened with Wash972 and our upcoming meeting.

“Hey, can I ask you something...personal?”

“If I can have one of those cookies.”

I’d purchased the Oreos with the pink-and-blue cream to take to my date with Wash972. I supposed the package didn’t have to be sealed. I opened it and handed one to Jordan.

He shoved it into his mouth and waved for me to talk.

“Um, I was just wondering if you’ve ever, like, questioned your sexuality.”

Jordan’s eyebrows flew up as he chewed. I shifted restlessly until he swallowed.

“I guess when I was younger. Doesn’t everybody?”

“I don’t think so. I never have before.”

“But you are now?”

“I don’t know.” I raked my hands through my hair. “It’s just that I’ve met this person online...”

“A guy?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know their gender. It’s kind of our thing. We haven’t shared any identifying details like that. We just...talk. It was never supposed to be anything more than that.”

“But I’m guessing it is.”

“Yeah. We sorta...flirted,” I said, because I didn’t want to get into the details about how I’d managed to sext with someone and still not figure out their gender. Clearly, I’d selfishly focused on myself. Something I’d like to rectify...assuming I could be attracted to Wash972 in person. And that was the question, wasn’t it?

I wasn’t a hugely superficial guy. I liked to think I could see beyond the surface. That personality and heart were important elements for me, too. But I didn’t know if that could apply to a man.

“So, you’re flirting with someone who might be a guy or might not,” Jordan said.

“Why not just ask?”

“I don’t know. I guess I feel weird about asking after we already—”

“Already?”

Sexted and came together.

“Uh, agreed to meet.”

Jordan’s eyes went wide. “You’re going to meet, and you don’t even know if it’s a dude or not?”

I blew out a breath. “Yeah.”

Jordan tilted his head. “You know what I think?”

“No...”

“I think you’re curious,” he said. “Maybe you even want Wash972 to be a guy. Your relationships with women have been sort of lukewarm, haven’t they? I can’t even remember the last time you mentioned a girlfriend.”

I wrinkled my nose. “I haven’t had the best luck. That doesn’t mean I can magically change my sexuality to men.”

“No, but you’re open to the idea, right? The thought that you might have been chatting and flirting with a guy didn’t stop you from agreeing to meet up.”

I wet my lips. “Uh, yeah. I’m...intrigued, I guess. But also a little worried.”

Jordan nodded. “That’s fair.”

“I feel something for them. At least through a screen. But I don’t know how it’ll be in person.”

Jordan looked thoughtful. “You already have a connection. Maybe that’s what you

really need for attraction? Your long-running relationships were back when you were in school, with people you knew a long time before you hooked up.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“There’s only one way to find out. When are you meeting? And how will you recognize each other?”

I tapped the cookies. “I’m bringing these. And Wash is bringing a novel. *Pride and Prejudice*.”

“Good reading taste,” Jordan said. “Wash is probably a woman, and this angsty thing you’re doing is for nothing.”

I laughed. “Probably. I’m going to get there and feel like an idiot.”

The door chimed, and Chase walked in. I tensed, unsure of what to expect from him. He was usually quick to charm, but he’d seemed shocked and disappointed that I’d put that article in motion.

My gut twisted at the memory.

“Who’s the hottie?” Jordan murmured under his breath.

I ignored him, my eyes glued to Chase. He looked immaculate in his tailored suit, and of course Jordan would think he was hot. On top of carefully styled dark hair, bright blue eyes, and a strong jaw, he exuded a confidence that couldn’t be faked.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

He held up his hands. “Don’t worry. I come in peace.”

“Chase Fox?” Jordan guessed, gaze darting between us.

“I see my reputation precedes me.” Chase smiled crookedly. “Should my ears be burning? Are you saying sweet or evil things about me?”

“Neither.”

“Ah. Well, that’s too bad. I’m a slut for attention.”

I rolled my eyes. “Just tell me what you want.”

“So many things.” Chase braced a hip against the counter, and his gaze dropped to the package of Oreos. He blinked and licked his lips. “Maybe I want a cookie.”

“Those aren’t for you,” I said.

He raised an eyebrow. “Saving them for a special occasion?”

Shit, no way I wanted to tell Chase Fox why I bought those cookies. I shot a look at Jordan, and he quickly came to my rescue.

He picked up the package. “They’re mine.”

“Oh.” Chase sounded thrown. He eyed Jordan. “Do you own a store, by chance?”

“Uh, no.” Jordan stood. “Just a college student, and I’m running late for a study session. Catch you later, Austin?”

“Yeah.” I handed him the albums he wanted. “Take these on the house. Thanks for the talk.”

“No problem. You definitely made it worth my while.”

I watched him go—with my cookies. Damn. Now, I’d have to buy another package before my coffee date with Wash972.

“Okay, Chase, why are you really here?”

Chase turned and propped his elbows on the counter, leaning in toward me. “I’ve got a proposition for you. Something that could be good for both of us.”

“Just spit it out.”

“I never spit,” he said. “Just for the record.”

“Chase, I swear to—”

“Okay.” He straightened. “Time to get serious. I get it, Austin. When Fox moved in, you saw me as a threat. And I admit, I didn’t make the best impression. I should have introduced myself immediately when I came in with my niece. That’s my mistake. But I’m not here to run you or anyone else out of business. That’s not what I want.”

“Even if it’s good for your bottom line?”

“We all have a bottom line,” Chase said. “That doesn’t mean we have to sacrifice each other to reach it. We can raise each other up. Be colleagues.”

“I don’t know how that can work.”

“I have a few ideas for how we can cooperate. But to start with, how about a neighborhood-wide event that could bring in customers for all of us?”

Tristan had suggested something similar with the help of his marketing firm, but I wasn't ready to let Chase off the hook.

"Sounds like damage control for you and a Band-Aid for me."

"It's just a first step," Chase said. "With time, I'm sure we can co-exist, Austin. I don't want to be your enemy. All I ask is that you give me a chance to put together some plans. Give me the benefit of the doubt. I'm not here to hurt anyone. I'm just trying to keep my family legacy alive. Just like you."

He knew all the right things to say. But did I really want to trust him?

Words were on the tip of my tongue.

We're not the same.

Don't compare your corporate chain to my last remaining piece of my uncle.

But instead, something else came out. Something better, maybe. Because Chase was right about one thing. We had to co-exist if we were both going to survive.

"I'll hear you out," I said. "That's all I can promise."

He smiled brilliantly, and damn, it lit up his whole face. My heart gave a weird flutter. Probably just the shock of seeing how damn happy he looked at my answer.

"You won't regret this, Austin. Thank you."

"I hope not," I muttered.

He sounded so sincere. If he was playing me, he was a damn good actor.

Chase glanced at the clock. “Gotta run. I’ll get a more detailed plan together after the grand opening. We’ll revive this neighborhood and make it great for all of us!”

He dashed out the door, leaving me reeling.

My phone buzzed with a text.

I half expected it to be Wash972. It was nearly time for that coffee date. But it was from Jordan.

Judging by the sparks between you and Chase Fox, I don’t think you need to worry about being attracted to a man.

Wait, what?

Another text popped in.

Unless, of course, you can’t dig your online buddy because you’re already hot for your business rival.

I gaped at the phone. That wasn’t... I wasn’t into—

Chase Fox? No. Absolutely not.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:35 pm

When I reached Roasted, I almost didn't go in. ShopGuy24 was the one thing in my life going well. What if this meeting ruined everything?

I'd become convinced he might be Austin—with very little evidence other than a few coincidences—and if I walked in there and he was someone entirely different, was I going to be disappointed?

Then again, if I walked in there, and he was Austin, wouldn't he just reject me? Austin wasn't my biggest fan right now.

I should have waited longer. Been surer of the outcome. As a businessman, I took risks, but calculated ones, not emotional.

I adjusted the copy of *Pride and Prejudice* under my arm and wiped my sweaty palms over my jeans.

I should leave. Right now.

"Excuse me," a voice said over my shoulder.

I shuffled aside as a couple went into the shop. The scent of coffee and chocolate billowed out, reminding me of my visits to Muddy Waters. Of seeing Austin there.

I had to know who ShopGuy really was. It was too late to turn back. The curiosity would torment me if I did.

Before the door swung shut, I caught the handle and walked inside. A quick glance

around the coffee shop revealed a sprinkling of people at the glass-and-chrome tables. No packages of bisexual cookies.

Maybe ShopGuy wouldn't even show. Wouldn't that be fitting after my mini panic attack?

I went to the front counter where a cute redhead was taking off his apron, clearly finished with his shift for the day. His name tag read Zach. The name pinged something in the back of my mind, but I wasn't sure why.

"Hi." He flashed a wide friendly smile, and that, combined with his freckles, was adorable. "I'm on my way out, but I'll grab your order real quick."

"Thanks. I'll take a raspberry mocha."

"Good choice." Zach gave the order to another employee who was working the espresso machine. "It should be ready in a minute. Name?"

"Chase Fox."

"Chase—" Zach stopped suddenly, eyes widening. "Chase Fox?"

"Uh, yes..."

"As in, opening a big entertainment store right across from my friend's record store, Chase Fox?"

"You know Austin."

"Yeah."

That's when it came back to me. Austin had stood in front of Rosita, joking that her coffee was better than Zach's. This Zach. It had to be. And ShopGuy24 had chosen this coffee shop of all the coffee shops for us to meet.

The coincidences just kept piling up, impossible to ignore.

"Zach, listen, I like Austin. A lot." I held eye contact, wanting to show him I had nothing to hide. That this was my truth. I lifted my copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. "I'm here to meet someone tonight, and truth be told, I'm hoping it's him."

Zach glanced at the book under my arm, brow creasing with confusion. "Why would you..."

"I'm meeting an online friend," I said. "A good one. Tell me, does Austin like bisexual Oreos?"

The answer was written all over Zach's face. But he didn't have to say anything. Behind me, Austin spoke.

"Oh, hell no. Tell me that's not a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*."

Zach's employee slid a coffee cup across the counter as if Austin wasn't glaring at me with the hatred of a thousand suns. That look was hot as fuck, and I knew instantly that we'd burn together if he let us.

I grinned. "ShopGuy, I've been looking forward to meeting you."

He shook his head. "No, this can't be happening."

"Can I buy you a coffee to go with those cookies?"

He thrust the package at me. “Not a chance, Fox.”

Austin stormed off, and shit, I hadn’t even paid for the coffee. I searched my pockets for a ten dollar bill and tossed it out on the counter. Then I darted after him.

“Wait, Austin!”

He didn’t wait.

I had to sprint, but I caught up to him halfway down the block outside. The wind was biting cold, but my lungs were on fire. I needed more exercise, clearly.

I clutched his coat sleeve. “Can we...” I gasped for air. “Talk about this.” Gasp. “Please?”

Austin pulled away, but he stayed put. “There’s nothing to talk about, Chase. This was just one of those cosmic jokes. Bad karma, I guess. I don’t know why I deserve this?”

“Okay, ouch.”

His face tightened. “I’m not trying to insult you, but come on, we’re enemies.”

“I keep telling you I don’t want to be your enemy.” I stepped forward, crowding him back against the side of the brick building. “I like you. I always have.”

He scoffed. “You like a fantasy man you met online. Not me.”

“Wrong. I hoped it was you.”

His green eyes widened and his pale skin flushed a delicious rosy pink. Such a pretty,

pretty man. I raised a hand to cup his jaw. I half expected him to shove me away, but he didn't.

His breath quickened, and that gave me the courage to push.

"I know you like Wash972," I murmured into his ear. "Remember how good it was when you imagined my mouth on your cock? Just think how much better it would be in person."

"Fucking hell." He shifted between me and the wall, and oh yeah, Austin remembered, all right.

I put one hand on his chest and slowly, slowly, slid it down his stomach. All the way to the cock that was growing hard in his jeans. I gave him time to stop me, but he didn't.

When our eyes met, he looked conflicted.

"This is a terrible idea."

"Maybe, but aren't you curious?" I cupped his dick through his pants, and he gasped. "I know you like Wash972. So don't be with the business rival across the street. Be with the person you came here to meet."

He bit his bottom lip, and it looked so delicious I had to fight the urge to take his mouth without permission.

He gave me the tiniest of nods.

"Yeah?"

“One night only,” he said. “With Wash972. Just to see if it can be as good as I imagined.”

“Fuck yeah.”

I swooped in, catching his mouth in a fiery kiss, no longer holding back. Pride and Prejudice fell to the ground, and the damn bisexual Oreos were crushed between our chests.

Austin tensed, and for a moment, I wondered if he’d change his mind.

Then he threaded his fingers into my hair, opened his mouth, and met my tongue with a filthy groan.

Sweet, sweet surrender.

His body melted into mine, hot even with all the winter layers of coat between us. I wedged a leg between his, grasping his hips to rock his rigid cock against my thigh, greedily drinking down every desperate sound he made.

He tore his mouth away. “Wait, stop.”

I froze, heart tumbling. I didn’t know how I’d bear a rejection now.

“Let’s go back to my place. It’s too cold and too public out here.”

I glanced around, suddenly aware that we were on a public sidewalk. Not even a fucking alley. Damn, but this man had me spun up.

I breathed out a laugh. “Yeah, good thinking. You blew all my brain circuits.”

Austin ducked his head as he grinned. Bashful was an adorable look on him. “I guess we have that effect on each other. But uh...I do want to take this somewhere more private. If you do?”

“You don’t even have to ask, Austin. I want to get you naked and re-enact our sexting session in vivid detail.”

He shuddered. “Yeah, let’s go.”

I laughed as he started speed-walking down the sidewalk. But then, I was right there with him, urgency burning as the taste of him lingered on my lips.

Damn, I was glad I’d gone into that coffee shop despite my doubts. It would be a shame to have missed all of this.

ShopGuy24 really is Austin.

What were the odds?

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:35 pm

Chase—No, Wash972—was like a force of nature, sweeping me up in a whirlwind of lust. My head spun as I took the stairs up to my apartment two at a time, Chase so close behind that his panting breath heated my neck.

I wasn't sure how I'd gone from not a chance to let's go to my place. When I'd seen Chase holding that book, I'd stumbled to an abrupt stop and squeezed my eyes shut in the hopes I was hallucinating. But no. When I opened them again, Chase was still fucking there, shattering the fantasies I'd created.

All my worries over whether Wash was a man or woman, whether I'd be attracted to them in person, flitted away. Because Wash was Chase fucking Fox, and that was an avalanche of dismay compared to those small winds of change.

This was the guy I'd been sharing my heartache with—the very one causing it?

I should have been furious, especially when Chase turned that big grin on me like this was all a great surprise. But when he'd caught up to me on the sidewalk and crowded so close I tasted his breath, my body crackled to life. When he touched me? A charge traveled through me, like I was the conduit for his electricity.

Sparks danced over my skin even now where Chase's fingers squeezed my hips while I fumbled for my key to unlock my apartment door above my record store.

“Hurry,” he murmured. “I want you so bad I'm about to lose my mind.”

That made two of us.

Which...was not usually the case for me.

I enjoyed sex. Getting off was cool. The intimacy it helped create in relationships was important. But it had never been cataclysmic for me. The sexting I'd done with Wash972 had been more powerful than most of my sexual experiences.

When I got the door open, Chase shoved me inside, making me stumble before catching me. He spun me in his arms and kissed me like a ravenous beast. And fucking hell, how was this so good? Why him? Why now?

I gripped his shirt and pulled him harder against me, reveling in the feel of our bodies colliding. His teeth cut into my lip as we staggered, but that sharp bite only added to the lust roaring through my veins.

"Gotta make good on my promises," Chase murmured, reaching for the button on my jeans and popping it open.

I shuddered hard as he drew down my zipper and slid his hand beneath my waistband.

"You still want this, baby?"

"Not if you're gonna call me that."

He stilled and met my eyes with a sheepish grin. "Sorry, heat of the moment. You still want it, Austin? My mouth on your cock?"

He curled his fingers around my shaft and stroked, making me damn near incapable of speaking.

I nodded. "F-fuck yes."

He kissed me once more, a hard, bruising press of lips, then dropped to his knees on my wood floor. He winced as his knees hit, but he didn't let it stop him, tugging my jeans down over my hips and leaning forward to blow lightly over the tip of my already glistening dick.

I throbbed with desire, little more than one big pulse of need. Yet, Chase slowed down instead of speeding up, the asshole. He nuzzled my balls and placed small kisses on my inner thigh. He slid his hands from my hips to my ass and squeezed.

I slipped my hands into his hair. "You going to fondle me all day or fucking suck my dick?"

He looked up at me, a smirk tipping his lips. "Why don't you make me?"

Heat flared. Did he mean...

"Go on, Austin. I know how I've infuriated you since I arrived. Punish me with your cock. Make me take it. Make me choke on it—"

With a strangled sound—half lust, half rage—I grabbed his jaw and pulled, forcing his mouth open. With my other hand, I guided my cock between his lips.

We both groaned as I slid over his tongue.

Chase's eyelids slipped shut, as if he was savoring the taste of me, and it only fired me up more. I grabbed his head and thrust deeper into his hot, wet mouth. This wasn't how our sexting had gone. Chase had taken charge, had guided me to orgasm.

But Chase had provoked me into fucking his mouth, and now I was mindlessly rutting into his wet heat, relishing the gagging sounds he made, the squeeze of his throat.

“You fucking dick,” I gasped. “It wasn’t supposed to be you.”

He pulled back, and I let him catch his breath. “S-sorry, but I’m glad it’s you.”

He dove back on my dick before I could process a reply, and I groaned as he relaxed his throat and took me deep. I let him take over, some of my anger fizzling out as pure pleasure swamped me. Chase really was good with his mouth, using his tongue to tease my slit, before sucking me in and swallowing around my shaft.

He slipped a finger into the cleft of my ass, prodding at my hole. I clenched up in surprise. “Going right there, huh? That wasn’t part of the sexting.”

Chase chuckled around my cock, sending vibrations dancing up my shaft, but he pulled his hand away.

I wasn’t freaked out by the idea of ass stuff, but I wasn’t experienced with it either. I didn’t want to stop and explain all that.

“Get your dick out,” I ordered instead. “When we sexted, you touched yourself too.”

Chase moaned and lowered his right hand to fumble his pants open and draw out his cock. It was thicker than I’d expected, a fairly average length, and a dark, angry red that told me he had to be aching for release.

“Stroke it,” I murmured, not even caring that Chase’s blow job got sloppier when he split his focus between my pleasure and his. “Wanna see you blow with my dick in your mouth.”

He groaned and tipped forward, nearly choking himself on my cock while he jerked himself.

I didn't think it would be so hot, watching a guy stroke it out. Maybe it was the fact my dick was in his mouth at the same time. Or maybe it was because the guy was Chase, who'd always brought out the fire in me, even if it was through snarky banter. Or because he was also Wash, who I'd gotten so close to after weeks of conversation.

Whatever the reason, it fucking worked for me.

"I'm close." I gasped for air. "Fucking come before I shoot down your throat."

Chase groaned, movements stuttering, and cum erupted from the tip of his cock. It streaked over his knuckles and dripped onto my floor, just missing his pants.

We were both fully dressed, only our cocks out, and somehow that struck me as hot as fuck.

I came hard, unable to resist thrusting in deep, choking him a little as pleasure overwhelmed me. My cock pulsed once, twice, three times, and then I fell back, my legs giving out, and landed on my ass.

Chase looked utterly wrecked. His carefully styled hair stuck up in weird directions thanks to my hands, his eyes watered, and his lips were red and puffy. His face glistened with saliva, and cum trickled from the corner of his mouth.

It was fucking filthy.

And so hot I lurched forward to kiss him again.

It was disgusting, wet and slimy and tasting of my cum, and incredibly erotic. I'd made a mess of him, the immaculate Chase Fox. I'd had him on his knees, choking on my dick, eating my cum.

But now it was done.

I pulled back. “You can clean up in the bathroom.”

He swiped a hand over his face and drew a breath. “Austin, should we talk?”

“There’s nothing to say.” I stood on shaky legs and pulled my jeans up, tucking myself away. “We agreed this would be a one-time thing.”

“It doesn’t have to be though.” Chase rose to his feet, not bothering to pull up his pants. His eyes were fixed on mine, imploring. “The kind of chemistry we have... You don’t find that every day.”

“It was surprising,” I agreed. “But we’re the last people who should be together. I hate you, remember?”

His lips tugged into a sad smile. “I don’t think you do.”

I sighed. “Chase...”

“It’s okay. I get it. It’s a lot to process, especially because you haven’t done this before, right?”

“What? Hooked up with an online friend, or face fucked my business rival?”

He chuckled. “Hooked up with a man.”

I winced. “That obvious?”

“The aversion to my fingers near your asshole was a clue, but I already suspected as much from our previous interactions.”

I nodded. “Right. Well. I came out tonight to meet Wash972, and I’d already decided I didn’t care if I was meeting a man or a woman because that connection felt so real, you know?”

“I do,” he said. “I feel it too.”

He tugged up his pants and headed to the bathroom I’d pointed out. I stumbled to the bed and sank onto the edge of it, exhaling noisily. The sex had been good, really good. But it would be a mistake to continue, given the positions we were in. Even if we weren’t enemies anymore, we’d always be competitors.

Chase had answered a lot of questions for me. I was bisexual or pansexual. Maybe demisexual too? I’d have to ask Jordan for some clarity on that, but it was obvious now that my attraction stemmed from the connection we’d created as ShopGuy24 and Wash972—and maybe even a little from the connection we’d formed as Chase and Austin, contentious as it was.

What Chase kept in his pants had been irrelevant.

He emerged from the bathroom, looking more like his perfectly groomed self, though his shirt was untucked. “I guess I’ll head out.”

I nodded. “You said earlier tonight that you thought ShopGuy might be me. How did you know that?”

His smile turned rueful. “Well, you used some of my advice against me. The parallels were hard to ignore. Kind of a funny irony, right? Maybe I’m the one with bad karma, giving my rival the advice to fight back and getting burned because of it.”

“Ah. Yeah. I didn’t think about that...”

Chase shrugged, as if to say, what can you do? He never seemed ruffled. He had me way off-balance, but he was smooth as fuck.

“For what it’s worth, ShopGuy24, I really like you,” he said. “Both versions of you.”

When he was warm and sincere like this, I could see Wash972 in him. The good listener, the reassuring guy who’d given me advice to stay strong in the face of my fears.

But I couldn’t forget who he really was.

“This was really...”

“Yeah, it was.” He brushed a kiss to my cheek, and to my surprise, he didn’t push again for a repeat even though I could tell that he wanted one. “Goodnight, Austin.”

“Goodnight, Chase.”

He walked out, and the door shut behind him with a soft click. I showered and stripped down for bed and slid under the sheets. Out of habit, I picked up my phone to reach out to Wash972 before bed.

Then I remembered. Wash972 was gone. The man on the other side of that screen was Chase Fox.

There were three messages from Zach.

What happened with Chase Fox?

Are you okay?

Give me a sign he hasn't murdered you...or vice versa. I don't want to help bury any bodies!

I laughed and sent him a quick reassurance that Chase and I were both alive. He had more questions, but I wasn't ready to answer them for myself, much less for Zach.

I set my phone aside, but it buzzed again. With a huff, I grabbed it, intent on telling my friend to leave well enough alone. Only this message wasn't from him.

Sweet dreams, ShopGuy24. And by sweet, I mean, sexy AF dreams about me.

I rolled my eyes and set the phone aside without answering, lips twitching as I fought a smile.

Chase fucking Fox.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:35 pm

Wash972:

Morning, sunshine! Maybe I'll see you at the grand opening today?

ShopGuy24:

Don't count on it.

Wash972:

You break my heart.

ShopGuy24:

Oh, is there a heart in there?

It was the third time I'd messaged Austin since our hookup, and the third time he'd brushed me off. I guess I was a glutton for punishment, because even his rejections made me smile. Austin tried to be tough, but it was all a defensive shell I'd nearly cracked.

Eventually, I'd get through to him. Maybe.

Today, I had other things to worry about, so I pocketed my phone and swung by Muddy Waters for a morning caffeine hit before a big Grand Opening day at Fox Entertainment Zone.

I arrived early to find my grandmother on the premises, directing the two men hanging the Grand Opening banner over our four-door entrance.

“A little higher. No, not that high! A little—ah, yes. That’s it. Right there exactly.”

I came up beside her. “I thought this was my store.”

“Oh, it is.” Her eyes brightened. “I’m proud of you, Chase. And not just about all this.” She waved a hand toward the entrance. “I saw the interview you did about the Fox brand, our desire to be a good neighbor, and the plans you have in the works for the Union Heights neighborhood. You spun that story like a gem, and you gave our grand opening some fabulous PR.”

“I wasn’t spinning...”

“Take the compliment, dear.” She patted my face then turned. “No, no. Move those balloons!”

Gigi charged across the front lawn, clearly in her element, while my stomach churned. She saw that article as damage control, just as Austin had suggested. But I hadn’t made the rounds to every little business in a four-block radius just to spin public opinion before our grand opening.

I intended to follow through.

I didn’t have time to dwell on it. Cars began to clog the street, arriving early thanks to our plans to hand out gift bags to the first fifty customers. They parked in every available spot, including those in front of Black Hole Records and probably many other stores. I winced, thinking of what Austin’s sharp tongue would say about that. Thankfully, we had extra parking behind the building.

I hurried inside and took up my station on one side of the entrance to greet customers and hand out gift bags. My grandmother took the other side, something she hadn't done for a Fox store opening in at least ten years.

When the first customer stepped through, I hitched on a smile. "Welcome to Fox Entertainment Zone," I said, extending a gift bag with a few small tokens of merchandise. "In addition to books, you'll find gaming, music, and collectibles in this Fox store."

"Welcome!" Gigi said, addressing a mother with three kids. "You're going to find all kinds of goodies here. We're a one-stop shop for entertainment."

"Hear that, kids? Everything we need in one place."

I thought of Austin and all the other small business owners.

"This is actually a great little shopping area," I said as our first customers moved on and the next stepped forward. "I encourage you to explore the neighborhood if you haven't been down this way before."

"Oh?" A middle-aged guy paused. "Any recommendations?"

"Black Hole Records," I said without missing a beat. "They've got a great selection of used vinyl. We carry new albums here, but if you don't find what you're looking for, they've got quite the collection."

"What about breakfast? We got up early to be here."

I chuckled. "Muddy Waters is a great little coffeehouse with baked goods and breakfast sandwiches. You can't go wrong."

We exhausted our gift bags in the first hour, and my grandmother pulled me aside. “What was all that nonsense about talking up other stores in the neighborhood?”

“Just being true to my word. I said Fox would be a good neighbor, and that wasn’t just PR. I meant it.”

She pursed her lips. “You should be selling people on Fox today, not some silly little record store.”

My gut clenched. “That silly little record store has survived decades. Maybe they don’t have a chain of stores like Fox, but they add a special touch to neighborhoods like this one. I don’t want to squash them.”

“No one is saying you should squash them,” she said, irritated. “You know how important this store opening is. You’re the one who sold me on doing it. Don’t go sabotaging it now.”

“Look around? This is the best grand opening we’ve had in years,” I said. “We’ll bring in more sales in one day than the downtown location has brought in all month.”

“Very likely, but this is a long game, Chase. You have to get these customers to come back.”

“And encouraging them to explore the neighborhood might bring them back. It’s a win-win.”

“Well, I hope so. You know our deal. This store performs at least thirty percent better than our bookstores, or we close up shop for good.”

My chest tightened. “I remember.”

“Gigi! Uncle Chase!”

My niece, Lacy, came barreling toward us, ending the conversation. I bent over and scooped her up, spinning in a circle as she clung to me with a giggle. “What are you doing here, squirt?”

“I came with Mommy.”

My grandmother smoothed Lacy’s hair. “Look at this rat’s nest. Have you been wallowing in the dirt?”

“I was fighting demons!”

“Demons?” My grandmother laughed. “What on earth...”

My sister, Camille, came strolling into view, an exasperated smile on her face. “Lacy was excited to see you. Both of you. It’s been a while since we all got together.”

“See?” I turned to my grandmother. “We need our stores. How else will we have a Fox family reunion?”

Her lips twitched. “Hush, you.”

Lacy squirmed to be put down. “I want to go look at stuff. Can I buy something?”

“I’ll take you,” Gigi said. “You can pick out one thing, but just one.”

Camille sighed and leaned her head on my shoulder as they strolled out of sight. “How’s it going?”

“As good as it can be when Granny is hovering.”

She snickered at the term that I'd never ever use in my grandmother's earshot. "Well, I'd take Granny over Lacy. She's been running me ragged."

"Sorry. I've been so preoccupied with the opening." Not to mention Austin. "I could take her off your hands on Saturday."

"You'd do that? I know you've been crazy busy. I saw that news report about Fox preying on little stores." She huffed. "See if I shop at any of those places now!"

Her loyalty was sweet but unnecessary. "You were planning a shopping spree in this neighborhood before that article?"

She chuckled. "Well, no."

"Seriously, they're all good people. I've gotten to know most of them. They're just intimidated. Fox is a threat to them."

She frowned. "Fox is less of a threat than it used to be. Think Granny will really let any of us succeed?"

"What do you mean? It's not her fault the stores are struggling. Today's readers can click a button and get an ebook in seconds. Anyone would struggle to compete with that."

"We've proposed scaling back to fewer stores, but she won't have it. She'd rather end the family legacy completely than admit it can't be what it once was."

Camille wasn't wrong. I'd sold my grandmother on this store because it was an opportunity to expand our brand and our revenues, rather than cut it back.

She was a savvy businesswoman who successfully led the Fox brand for decades, but

she was blinded by pride. She'd built Fox from a single location to what it was now, and she'd sacrificed her marriage and family to succeed.

My father had wanted nothing to do with Fox, going into teaching instead. My aunt had moved to the Midwest a few years ago with her husband. It was up to the grandchildren—me and Camille and our cousin, Reggie—to carry Fox forward.

If Gigi let us.

I hadn't seen her so excited about a store opening since I was a young child. But one wrong step and she'd take it all away.

Not just this store, but all of them.

That night, when I got home, I reached for my phone, wanting the comfort of a text exchange with ShopGuy24. He'd understand the importance of family legacy.

But he was also Austin and wanted nothing to do with me...

I dithered for a moment but couldn't handle being alone with my thoughts.

Can we pretend for a minute that we're just Wash972 and ShopGuy24?

I held my breath, eyes locked to the screen as three dots appeared, indicating he was typing.

ShopGuy24:

I don't think that's possible. Now that we know each other, it changes things.

Damn. I exhaled hard, disappointment settling heavy in my gut. My night with Austin

had been incredible, but I missed his friendship.

I started to lower my phone when another message popped in.

Is everything okay? Your grand opening looked like a success.

I dropped onto my bed, legs weak with relief. It was a small olive branch. He might not want to resume daily chats, but right now, I'd cling to anything I could get.

It did go well, but it was exhausting. My grandmother hovered all day, and the pressure is starting to get to me.

ShopGuy24:

You don't need to worry. You're the big fish in this pond.

Wash972:

Everything is riding on this store. If I fail, she's going to sell the whole chain.

ShopGuy24:

Whoa, seriously? It's all on your shoulders?

Wash972:

Pretty much. I can't complain though. I pitched the idea for Fox Entertainment. I wanted to prove we had a viable path forward.

ShopGuy24:

It's still a lot to carry. I have just one small store, but my great-uncle's legacy means everything to me. That's why I freaked out when you showed up.

Wash972:

I don't want to hurt your business, Austin. I never wanted that.

ShopGuy24:

I guess we're all fighting to survive in our own ways. I imagine the Fox legacy is quite a bit heavier than the Black Hole Records one.

Wash972:

But no less important.

ShopGuy24:

Now you're just trying to get back in my pants.

Wash972:

Is it working?

ShopGuy24:

Nope. Get some rest, Chase. You can't squash us little guys if you're too exhausted to work.

Wash972:

The next time I squash you, it'll be under my hot body.

ShopGuy24:

Signing off now. Goodnight, perv.

Wash972:

Eh, I had to try. Night, Austin. I'll be dreaming of you ;)

I set aside my phone with a smile. Austin had rebuffed my attempt to flirt, but he'd talked to me again. Not only that, he'd comforted me, the guy he'd called his enemy not so long ago.

If our friendship could survive the truth of our identities, then maybe there was still hope for us.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:35 pm

“Why the fuck won’t the new albums show up?” I growled, jabbing at my mouse as if that would help.

“Language!” Briar exclaimed. “My innocent ears are being violated.”

I cast a glare over my shoulder. “If Fox steals all our customers, we need to make sales online, only it won’t fucking— Hey!”

Briar pushed me out of the way and began navigating menus. “You didn’t update the category when you put the inventory in.”

I huffed. “I did that.”

Briar navigated to a separate inventory menu than the one I’d used, hit edit on a product, and sure enough, it was missing the category. “You have to do it here.”

“Why the...I swear to fuck I’m tech literate.”

She laughed. “This is so dumbed down for users it’s more confusing.”

I squinted at her, unsure if I was being insulted. The website management system infuriated me, though, so I stood and waved her into my seat. “Please fix it, oh wise one.”

The store phone rang, and I picked it up, grateful for a distraction.

“Black Hole Records. This is Austin speak—”

“You’ve been dodging my calls.”

I cringed as my best friend’s voice came through the line. Aside from a text reassuring him I hadn’t killed Chase, I’d been avoiding this conversation.

“Sorry, man. Been busy.”

“Really?” Zach said. “So, then, you were worried about Fox Entertainment for nothing?”

“Um...”

“I mean, it might explain why Chase Fox was meeting you for a coffee date. Except that I thought you dated women?”

I groaned. “That’s kind of hard to explain.”

His tone softened. “So, there is something to explain?”

“I’m...not ready to talk about it, but I promise you, Chase Fox is not anything except my business rival.”

“Hmm. Okay.” He didn’t sound convinced, but he also didn’t push it. “I really just wanted to make sure you were okay. You know I’m here when you’re ready to talk.”

“I do, thanks.”

“So is business really going well?”

“No.” I sighed. “It sucks balls this week. Everyone is flocking to the new shiny store across the street.”

“Sorry, man. Maybe it’ll pick up once the newness wears off?”

“Maybe.”

“Well, my break is nearly finished. I should get back to work.”

“Sure, see you at movie night.”

The doorbell chimed a few minutes later, signaling my first customer of the day.

I mustered up a smile. “Hey, there. Can I help you find anything?”

“Well, I don’t know.” The customer was an older guy with salt-and-pepper hair and silver stubble. “The guy over at Fox told me about your store.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, their vinyl selection is kind of limited.” He tucked his hands into his pockets. “I’m an old blues guy. You don’t find those in newer stores.”

I chuckled. “No, you don’t. I have a few good albums. My selection isn’t large, but it’s quality.”

His eyes brightened. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, I’ll show you what I’ve got.” I led the way to the bins on the far wall. “I have Buster Brown. Not mint, but a nice player copy.”

“Now you’re speaking my language. Looks like it was worth the trip over to let my wife spoil the grandkids with gaming nonsense.”

I laughed. “Glad to hear it.”

“I’m Gerry.” He held out a hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Austin,” I said, then nodded toward my desk. “The computer slave is Briar. We’ve got a website, so if you don’t get back this way, you can also check out our offerings there. We’re trying to add more of our used inventory every day.”

Gerry flipped through the rack, pausing on a Tousan album. “This looks interesting.”

“Yeah, it’s a great album of Louisiana rhythm and blues.”

He turned it to read the back then nodded and tucked it under his arm alongside Buster Brown. Score. Together, those would bring me more than a hundred bucks of almost pure profit. I’d acquired both as part of a large collection, so I’d paid pennies on the dollar for the records’ value.

I left Gerry to his shopping and rounded the counter.

“Your boyfriend is looking out for you,” Briar said without turning from the computer screen.

“Chase Fox is not my boyfriend.”

She snickered. “But he loves you!”

“Unlist Buster Brown and Tousan from the website. Gerry is gonna buy them.”

“Thanks to the Fox across the street.”

“That’s enough out of you,” I muttered, the back of my neck growing hot.

If Briar knew how up-close and personal I'd gotten with Chase Fox, she'd never let up on the teasing.

Gerry found three more records and checked out with a total that broke three hundred dollars, saving the day from being a total loss.

The following day was slow too, and the next one only moderately better. A trickle of customers continued to find their way to my store, thanks to Chase, but I couldn't expect Fox castoffs to support me.

On Saturday afternoon, just as I was about to close up, Chase stepped through the door with his adorable niece in tow.

"Run out of customers to send me?" I asked.

"No, just doing some shopping with the munchkin." He tugged the little girl's pigtail, making her giggle. "How has business been?"

"About like I expected."

He winced. "I thought maybe with the referrals..."

"It helped," I said grudgingly. "I got a few new customers who'd probably have never checked out the store."

"But?"

I shrugged. "Business is slow. Everyone's focused on the shiny new Fox store."

Chase's niece, oblivious to my concerns, bounced on her toes. "It's a really cool store. Have you seen it? It has just about everything you could want!"

Chase winced. “Not everything.”

“Close enough,” I grumbled.

Lacy approached my glass display at the front of the store. “It doesn’t have cool stickers like these though.”

Chase’s expression turned thoughtful. I pointed a finger at him. “Don’t you dare.”

“What did I do?”

“I can read your expression. You’re wondering if you should add a line of stickers.”

He smiled sheepishly. “Sorry, it’s just how my mind works. I study customer behavior, and Lacy was giving me ideas.”

I glared.

He raised his hands. “Ideas I won’t be implementing.”

I sighed. “Oh, go ahead. It’s not like a few stickers are going to save me.”

Chase crouched down to say something quiet to Lacy, and she nodded with a serious expression. A moment later, she skipped over to my display of posters and began looking through them.

“Austin, I know you’re worried.” He held my gaze. “But I’m not going to let you lose this store.”

“Let me? You’re probably going to be the cause.”

“No,” he said firmly. “I refuse.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but I couldn’t find the words. His gaze was intense.

“I know sending customers your way here and there is small potatoes. But if we put a true cross-promotion marketing campaign to work, maybe we’ll both get something out of it.”

“What can I possibly offer to Fox?”

“Are you kidding? You and Rosita and the other little indie around here give this neighborhood character. You bring a life to it that a chain store like Fox never could. Together, we could revive this area, turn it into a place people want to visit. That’s good for all of us.”

“That’s not exactly how big box stores operate, though, is it?”

Chase smiled charmingly. “Fox isn’t your typical big box store. For one thing, we’ve had our own struggles. For another...” He let his gaze sweep over me and bit his bottom lip. “Change isn’t always bad, Austin. Maybe we could both embrace something new. Together.”

Heat swept through me, memories unfurling of other new things I’d done with Chase. Seductive memories that were supposed to remain hidden, just one sweaty night of bliss that could be left in the past.

“I’m taking Lacy back to her mom in a few minutes. How about I pick up some takeout? We can brainstorm some of these plans for the neighborhood I brought up last week?”

I hesitated. It would make more sense to set up a meeting with Tristan and his

marketing team. They were experts in the field.

“Please?” Chase added. “I know this week hasn’t been great, but when the fanfare dies down, things will normalize. We can co-exist, Austin. Maybe more than co-exist.”

“What would be more than that?”

“We could be wildly successful together.”

I barked a laugh. “You don’t give up easily, do you?”

His eyes brightened. “Never.”

I groaned and ran a hand through my hair. “Fine. You can come over, but just for food and strategy. Nothing else.”

“Absolutely.” He nodded, lips curving. “I’ll pick up Thai food.”

“Now you’re just trying to get in my pants again.”

“Is it working?”

“For some panang curry?” I joked. “Maybe.”

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:35 pm

Austin's recordstore was closed, the windows dark, when I returned with my arms full of Thai takeout bags.

Austin opened the door for me. "What did you do, order one of everything?"

"Almost." I smiled sheepishly. "The better to fuel us for the brainstorming, right?"

"Right." He took one of the bags from me and carried it to the front counter.

"Assuming it doesn't put us into a food coma."

"Are we not going up to your apartment?"

He shot me a glance over his shoulder. "Might be safer to stay down here."

I came up behind him, allowing my body to press against his as I set my bags on the counter. "Are you afraid of what you might do with me?"

He shivered. "N-no, of course not."

I braced one hand on either side of his body and grazed my lips over the nape of his neck. "You want me again, don't you?"

Austin's breath stuttered. "You wish."

He craned his neck, giving me more room to kiss and nibble his skin, gasping quietly when I rolled my hips against his ass.

I stepped away. “So, about this special event for the neighborhood...”

“What?” He sounded indignant as he whirled to face me. “You want to talk strategy now?”

“That’s what you said you wanted.”

“Well, yeah, but that was before...” He waved to the tent in his jeans.

“Before what?”

“Before you teased me!”

“I’d never tease you,” I said softly. “If you want me, just say so.”

With a frustrated growl, he grabbed the front of my coat and yanked me into a hard kiss. As soon as I parted my lips, it turned filthy wet and so, so good. Austin swept his tongue in and claimed me with an urgency I met wholeheartedly. For the past week and a half, I’d done nothing but crave the man.

“I fucking want you, okay?” Austin rasped between kisses. “I want you even when I shouldn’t.”

I slipped my hands under his T-shirt, gently massaging his hipbones with my thumbs. “Why shouldn’t you? You deserve whatever you want.”

He made a noise in his throat then shoved me into one of the armchairs arranged around the shop for customers.

“Tell me if I do this wrong,” he said, lowering himself to his knees and reaching for the button on my pants.

Oh, fuck. The idea of Austin's mouth on my dick just about blew my mind.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "I mean, it's one thing to receive..."

"I've wanted to ever since last time," he admitted, cheeks going pink. "You'd done all the giving. I'm not a selfish fucker."

"Of course you're not," I said, surprised.

It had never once entered my mind that he was selfish. I'd gotten off with great pleasure to his commanding voice ordering me to touch myself while his dick filled my throat.

"Besides," he said, "you looked so turned on while you sucked me."

I chuckled. "Oh, I was."

Austin shoved my thighs farther apart and drew my zipper down. "My turn."

My dick was already hard and ready to party, popping free when Austin tugged my underwear down. He curled his fingers around my shaft, and I threw my head back, eyes slipping closed.

His lips brushed the tip of my dick in a gentle kiss that made my toes curl. Then he licked me, teasing little flicks against my cockhead and then longer strokes down my shaft and back up again.

He got me nice and wet, and by the time he wrapped his pretty lips around me, I was so slippery I slid right into the heavenly heat of his mouth with no resistance. Over his tongue, straight to his throat, where I hit his gag reflex.

Austin jerked back, coughing. “Fuck, sorry.”

“It’s all good.” I stroked my hands through his hair. “Take it at your own pace.”

He glanced up, holding my gaze as he ran his tongue around the crown of my cock before sucking me in once more. I groaned throatily, the sensations more intense with the eye contact between us.

Austin bobbed his head and found a rhythm. He was a little sloppy with it, but fuck if I cared. If anything, I was worried he’d push me over the edge too soon.

I didn’t know if or when Austin would allow me to have this again, and I didn’t want to miss the chance to get my hands on him.

“Okay, stop.” I pushed his shoulder, gently nudging him off my dick. “Let’s take this upstairs.”

His lips glistened. “Why?”

“Because I want to get you naked this time.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed with his hard swallow. “Yeah, okay.”

I stood on trembling legs, and Austin led the way to the stairs, the Thai takeout abandoned on the counter behind us. Well, we could eat after we’d both come.

Austin pulled his T-shirt over his head on the way up the stairs, and I followed suit. By the time we reached his bed, we were half naked and in no mood to make small talk.

I shoved him down onto the mattress then reached for his waistband and pulled his

tight jeans over his hips. He helped me strip him, shoving down his underwear too and wriggling out of the clingy fabric until he was completely nude.

I drank in the view. The streetlight seeped through the curtains, illuminating him in the dark room. His skin glowed, contrasting with the deep magenta of his nipples. The hair on his chest glinted like gold then narrowed into a delicious trail to the cock curving up from between two slender but toned thighs.

He was gorgeous.

“Come on, Chase. I showed you mine. Now you gotta show me yours.”

I huffed a laugh. “Sorry, I got distracted by how hot you are.”

Austin smirked. “What, this old body? I just threw it on this morning.”

He deflected from the compliment because he was humble. Modest. I liked that about him.

I shoved off my jeans and joined him on the bed, going in for another kiss. Austin opened his arms and legs, turning his body into a cradle for me.

Our cocks brushed, sending sparks through me as our tongues met.

“Fuck,” Austin whispered, lifting his hips to rub against me.

I indulged him for a few minutes, too obsessed with his mouth to move, but eventually I broke away to slide down his body. I tweaked both his nipples, tugging lightly while I kissed my way toward his navel.

Austin’s small sounds of pleasure drove me on.

“I was— Ohhh.” I trailed the tip of my tongue down the underside of Austin’s cock to his taint, making him groan. “I was supposed to be getting you off.”

“Oh, you are, trust me.”

“But...”

I parted his cheeks and swiped my tongue through the cleft of his ass.

He went rigid. “Oh, god, what the fuck?”

“Is this okay?” I asked, pausing.

“Uh...”

I pulled back. “It’s fine. We can do something else.”

“No, don’t stop,” he said, seeming to have wrapped his head around this new boundary coming down. “It feels good.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.” He gazed down at me, eyes dark. “Do whatever you want to me. I want to know what it’s like. All of it.”

With a groan of desire, I dove back in, zeroing in on his hole, making Austin gasp. I licked and kissed, sucking at his rim, getting him slick with my saliva before pushing my tongue inside him.

“Fucking fuck,” he groaned.

I folded his body nearly in half while I had my way with his sweet hole. His cock pointed directly toward his mouth in this position, which gave me all kinds of dirty thoughts.

“Stroke it,” I ordered. “I want to see you come all over yourself.”

Austin grabbed his cock, jerking it fast. This wasn’t going to take long.

I used my spit to get his hole even wetter then pressed a finger inside, watching his face for any signs of discomfort. Austin groaned and arched as my finger filled him, then bore down to take it deeper.

I began to fuck him with first one finger then two, not going too hard because saliva could only go so far. This was more of a teasing imitation of fucking, but it was enough for Austin’s first time.

His eyes rolled back and he began to shake. A cry tore from his mouth.

Then his cock spurted, white drops spraying across his open lips and down his chin into the hollow of his neck.

It was the hottest, dirtiest thing I’d ever seen, and when Austin swept his tongue over his lips, tasting his own cum, I reached for my dick.

It only took only a single tug, and I came across his ass with a gut-wrenching shout.

Pleasure swept through me, so intense my brain short-circuited and I lost the plot. When I blinked back to awareness, I was lying on top of Austin, lapping at the cum pooled in the hollow of his throat.

“You’re a lot dirtier than I expected,” Austin said mildly.

I laughed sheepishly. “I guess you bring it out in me. Is it too much?”

“No, I kinda like it,” Austin said. “Makes me feel really wanted.”

I met his gaze. “You are really wanted, Austin. Incredibly wanted.”

He rolled his lips in, as if he were holding back words.

“What?” I asked. “Say it.”

“Why do you want me? I was never friendly to you at all.”

“Austin wasn’t, but ShopGuy24 was the sweetest. Talking to him every day got me through a grueling work schedule. Those little chats we had, even the early ones about nothing too important, made me feel less alone.” I rolled off his body. “That sounds kind of pitiful when I say it out loud.”

“No, I get it.” Austin turned toward me, placing a hand over my heart. “I was half in love with Wash972, and I didn’t even know if they were a man or a woman.”

Half in love? My heart skipped. “Are you sorry I turned out to be a man?”

Austin didn’t hesitate. “Not at all. I’m not sure why, but I had this feeling you would be. I don’t know that you said anything specific, but...” He shrugged. “Maybe it was my imagination, but it helped open me to that possibility.”

I wet my lips, more nervous about my next question and yet unable to hold it in.

“And are you sorry Wash turned out to be me?”

Austin grimaced. “That’s a complicated question.”

“Is it?”

“Part of me was disappointed, yes.”

My heart fell. “Of course,” I whispered.

Austin pressed a lingering kiss to my lips. “Part of me was ecstatic.”

My eyes flew open. “You’re just trying to make me feel better.”

Austin smiled, looking rueful. “No, I’m serious. I didn’t think I should be with you, but I already felt the tug of attraction. Knowing you were Wash972, that you were this amazing person I’d been talking to every day? It made you impossible to resist. Even when I knew I should.”

“Then why have you been brushing me off ever since?” I asked, pushing my lower lip out in a pout.

“Because what future can there be for two business rivals?”

“I don’t know, but I’m pretty sure that there could be one for two business colleagues.”

Austin raised an eyebrow. “You really think we can be equals? You’re the big bad Fox, and I’m the little Black Hole Records.”

“I like your tight little hole.”

Austin slapped my chest. “I’m being serious!”

“Sorry.” I laughed. “You made that too easy. Besides, it’s hard to take you seriously

when you say we're not equals. I admire the hell out of you, Austin. You run a small indie shop. That's not easy. Your great-uncle kept that shop alive through all sorts of ups and downs. We've both thrown around the word legacy, but your shop deserves it far more than the Fox store chain."

Austin's eyes warmed. "You make it very hard to dislike you."

I grinned. "I know. It's just one of my great qualities."

"It's annoying is what it is." He tried to hide his smile as he rolled out of the bed, but I caught a glimpse. He liked me. "Come on, let's clean up and then eat that Thai food. I'm starving."

"Good thing I bought enough to feed an army."

Austin chuckled. "More leftovers for me."

"For you? What about me?"

He grinned. "My place, my rules. You want leftovers, then you'll just have to invite me to your place."

I got out of the bed and caught him around the waist. "Consider yourself invited then. Anytime, all the time. I'm not even close to done with you."

"We can finally get this strategy planning done, I suppose."

"We can fuck in a king-size bed," I countered.

"It's all about sex with you, huh?"

“No.” I brushed a kiss to his forehead. “You can finally meet Bennie.”

“Your dog,” he said in a soft voice. “I would love to meet that guy.”

I drew back. “See? Wash972 lives inside me, ShopGuy. No matter our names, we were meant to meet. Don’t you think?”

“Like fate?”

“Maybe. Do you believe?”

His lips twitched. “I don’t know. If it’s fate, I think she has a sense of humor.”

I chuckled. “Maybe she does.”

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:35 pm

Wash972:

Morning, sunshine! Looks like another dreary day in Seattle. Wear your raincoat.
(And no, that's not a euphemism for sex, you dirty boy.)

ShopGuy24:

It's way too early to be dealing with your nonsense.

Wash972:

Aw, did someone stay up too late?

ShopGuy24:

Somebody kept me up too late.

Wash972:

Poor baby. I'll make it up to you by buying you a coffee.

ShopGuy24:

Still angling for that date, huh? It's not happening.

Wash972:

Fine, we can just bump into each other at the usual time at Muddy Waters. By total accident.

ShopGuy24:

We do work in the same neighborhood. It's bound to happen.

When I gotto Muddy Waters, Chase was waiting with an Americano for me and a raspberry mocha for him.

"We should really stop meeting this way," he teased.

"It's annoying how small the world is sometimes," I agreed as I reached for the cup.

He held it out of my reach. "What do you say?"

"Thank you." He relinquished the cup, and I muttered, "Asshole."

"So cheery," he said. "I thought you hated me when we met, but now I'm wondering if you're like this every morning. You certainly like me much better at night." He wiggled his eyebrows.

I took a swallow of coffee to hide the pulse of desire his flirty banter inspired.

Chase had come by the store for several more "strategy" sessions. Each time, despite my good intentions, I fell into bed with him. And when he wasn't getting into my pants, he was texting me morning and night, reminding me that beneath that tailored suit, styled haircut, and snarky tongue was the guy I'd started falling for online before we ever met in person.

Chase held out a bag containing a breakfast sandwich. "For you and Briar."

I opened the bag and inhaled the scent of bacon and egg. “You sure you don’t want one of these?”

“Oh, I ate my usual bagel while I waited for you. Got here a little early.”

“Thanks for thinking of Briar,” I said, touched by his thoughtfulness even though sometimes I wished he’d be the villain I’d cast him as when we first met. It’d be easier to blame him, rather than myself, for the struggles at my store.

“Of course. She’s a good kid.” He opened the door for me and we stepped outside, where a drizzling rain was coming down. “I should thank you for letting me vent about Gigi last night, too.”

“No problem. I’ve vented to you enough...about yourself.”

He snorted a laugh and reached over to flip up the hood of my coat, covering my hair from the rain.

“I’m glad you didn’t know it was me back then.”

“Why?”

“You wouldn’t have talked to me. And you needed someone to talk to. I needed you too.”

“Past tense?”

He smiled wryly. “Would you let me say it in present tense?”

My heart twisted. “Wash972 and ShopGuy24 will always be friends.”

“And what about Chase and Austin? Think they can ever be friends?”

“They’re getting there.”

When I got back to the store, Briar was waiting on a customer, one of our regulars. Three more came in before noon. It was shaping up to be a decent sales day.

Business had been up and down since Chase’s store opened. I saw fewer people coming in to browse new vinyl—especially those Swifties who’d been padding out my sales by buying every variation of her albums—but on the flip side, Fox Entertainment Zone brought a new clientele to the neighborhood, and a few of those customers made it across the street.

Chase could hurt Black Hole Records if he wanted. All he had to do was expand on his new inventory to make mine redundant and stop sending people my way. But he wasn’t the heartless corporate shill I’d expected when Fox opened.

He really wanted to be a good neighbor to me. Maybe even more.

Which made it all the harder to resist when he texted me that evening.

Wash972:

When should we get together to strategize again? And why does the word strategize make me horny?

ShopGuy24:

Cuz you’ve got a one-track mind.

Wash972:

Guilty.

ShopGuy24:

We really should stop meeting this way.

Wash972:

We've gotten some great brainstorming done, along with...other things. Why end the streak now?

ShopGuy24:

Fine, but I'm coming to your store so we stay on track. I never did get around to spying on you, so fair is fair.

Wash972:

No spying necessary. I'll give you a tour =)

I headed over to Fox Entertainment Zone after my shop closed at six-thirty. The larger chain store kept later hours, which meant it would be open another hour and a half.

Plenty of time for a tour and brainstorming session that didn't include any dicks.

It was my first time in Chase's store, and it was about what I expected. Large, airy space, aisles of colorful merch, hanging signs directing shoppers toward Books, Games, Movies, Music, and Fandom. Two clerks worked the checkouts and another stood on a ladder, rearranging stock on the top shelves.

It wasn't entirely the giant I'd blown it up to be in my mind. It was just one floor, and I could see the back wall from where I stood, reminding me that while Fox was a chain, it was a regional one that had started with a single store to its name.

Not so different from the rest of us.

Or maybe the orgasms with Chase had softened my brain. Also possible.

"Hey!" Chase strode toward me from the right, looking delicious in a tightly fitted navy blue suit. "You should have texted me that you were here."

I tucked my hands into the pockets of my distressed jeans, suddenly feeling outclassed in my black T-shirt and leather jacket.

"I hadn't seen the place yet. I wanted a minute or two to take it in before you worked your charm."

"So you admit I'm charming," he said with a grin.

"I admit you're annoying."

He laughed before turning and sweeping his gaze over the store. "So what do you think?" His smile went tight at the edges. "Is it as horrible as you thought?"

"Nah." I pivoted on my heel to take it in. "I've only seen this view, but I'm sure I'd shop here if it weren't for you being my competition."

"There you go again with that dirty word. Come on, let me give you that tour."

We breezed past the aisles with collectibles, including more Funko Pops than I ever thought I'd see in one place. I didn't recognize many of the characters, but there was

a Sonic in the mix. The movies section was more memorabilia than actual movies, but that made sense. Most people streamed these days. And the gaming department? Well, there was everything from game consoles to controllers to headsets, plus a large library of video games and board games. And to top it off, a couple of gaming chairs sat in front of a TV, with a demo game ready to play.

A kid with a mop of curly brown hair was kicked back, punching the controller's buttons like a pro.

"These graphics are wicked good, man," he said, clearly recognizing Chase.

"They get better all the time," Chase said. "We close up soon. You got a ride home?"

"Yeah, yeah. My mom said she'd pick me up."

He nodded. "All right. Come find me if she doesn't show like last time. I don't want you walking home in the dark."

The kid, who had to be about fourteen, dragged his gaze from the TV, hero worship in his eyes. "Thanks. You're the best."

"You've got your own Briar, huh?" I joked when we'd left the aisle and started toward the music department.

"He's a good kid. He doesn't do any harm. We have an understanding that he'll take a break if any other customers want to test out the gaming setup."

"Still, not a lot of stores stand for loitering."

Chase shrugged. "He buys things...now and then. Small little bits of merch." He gave me a sheepish smile. "Just don't tell Gigi."

I laughed. “Okay, you got it.”

Chase led me toward the music department, and my gut tightened with nerves. I didn’t know if I wanted to see just how badly this store put my little shop to shame.

When we arrived, Chase swept his arm out like a game host. “This is it. Our entire collection.”

It was a good deal smaller than the gaming department. Band T-shirts covered the back wall. Framed concert photos, home décor-like signs that read Now Playing and clocks shaped like records filled a shelf. But none of that concerned me. There wasn’t a good profit margin for me in selling accessories.

I focused on the two record bins positioned back-to-back in the center of the space. They held new music and mostly only the best-selling artists.

I flipped through the albums, making mental note of what both stores had and where we didn’t overlap. “Hmm. Lots of Taylor Swift.”

“Well, of course,” he said. “Taylor sells.”

I nodded. Taylor would sell anywhere, but she’d probably sell even better here than in my store. Maybe I could scale back my orders to avoid any overstock.

“I see that brain whirring. Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

I glanced sidelong at him, wary. “What?”

“We could coordinate, Austin.”

I scoffed. “You going to stop ordering Taylor to help me out?”

“No, that wouldn’t make sense. But we could share our plans with each other, strategize in how much we order. Maybe...” He hesitated.

“Say it.”

“You must make a lot more profit on your used collection.”

“True.”

“And I can send customers to you when they don’t find what they want. Tell them there’s a much larger catalog across the street.”

I wasn’t sure where this was going. “You’ve done that already, but—”

“But what if you let us take the risk of ordering and stocking the newest albums, and then when we have stock that hasn’t sold, we pass it on to you at a discount?”

I considered the idea. It was getting tougher to find the funds for new vinyl. A lot of distributors had minimum ordering requirements, meaning I had to stock more than I really needed. Without that pressure, I could invest in more personal collections of older records, find more gems that were worth the bigger bucks.

True, I might not always have the walk-in business to support that, but Briar had been working on adding more of our inventory to an online marketplace of record enthusiasts. We could expand online sales.

“It’s an interesting idea,” I admitted. “I don’t know if I want to give up on new releases or best sellers like Taylor though. That brings people to the shop.”

Chase nodded. “You still have to serve your customer base, and I have to serve mine. All I’m suggesting is that we could meet in the middle. Work a bit more

collaboratively instead of competitively.”

My lips quirked. “Are you trying to get in my pants again?”

“Always. But I remember promising you a true strategy session. Shall we head to my office?”

“Lead the way.”

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ShopGuy24:

I sent Tristan our ideas, and he wants to meet up tonight to discuss some marketing plans.

Wash972:

Okay, when? I've got to run home after work to feed and walk Bennie.

ShopGuy24:

After that then? I can come with you. Might as well carpool.

Wash972:

Are you angling to see my place? I'm touched.

ShopGuy24:

Nope, but you'll be meeting some of my friends. I hope you're ready for a grilling.

Wash972:

Meeting the friends? This is getting serious!

ShopGuy24:

As long as I get to meet Bennie, we can call it even. =)

Wash972:

He'll love you.

I left my office before eight for the first time since the store opened. The staff had the floor covered. I still felt a little like I was playing hooky when I picked up Austin and drove the fifteen minutes to my place.

"972 Washington Drive." Austin glanced sidelong at me as we approached my building. "You used your address for your screen name?"

I punched in the code on the keyless entrance and led him across the lobby to the elevator. "It's not very creative, but then is ShopGuy24?"

"No, but it doesn't give away where I live to all of the Internet."

"Did you ever guess it was my address?"

"Well, no..."

"There you go then."

When we got to my condo, Bennie greeted us at the front door, toes clicking over the hardwood floor and tail wagging so hard it wiggled his whole body.

"Aww, he's so cute." Austin dropped to a knee and ruffled the hair behind Bennie's floppy ears. "I've been wanting to meet you, Bennie."

"You weren't nearly so excited to meet me," I pointed out.

Austin rose, lips curved in a smirk. “Jealous?”

I slipped my arm around his waist and tugged him into a kiss. “Incredibly jealous.”

Austin smiled, eyes crinkling adorably. “Maybe you should show me how much.”

I dove in for a deeper kiss, happy to comply, but Bennie had other ideas. He jumped up, putting a paw on each of us, and barked sharply.

“He wants to go outside. Sorry.”

“Eh, don’t be. That’s why we’re here.” Austin patted Bennie’s head. “I’d want out too if you kept me locked up all day.”

“Tempting,” I teased as I grabbed Bennie’s leash. “But I pop by on my lunch breaks, and I pay a dog walker to take him out in the late afternoon.”

“Aw, you’re a good dog daddy.”

“If I knew being a pushover for this guy would impress you, I’d have brought you over before now.”

I opened the door and Bennie raced out, straining toward the elevator that would take us to the ground floor. “We’ll just circle the block,” I said. “You can stay here if you want.”

“Tempting. I could snoop through all your things.

“Who’s the spy now?”

To my surprise, Austin reddened and ducked his head as he followed me out of my

condo and closed the door.

“I was a jerk when we met.”

Bennie tugged at the leash, yipping, and I relented and started down the stairs with Austin at my heels. When we exited the main entrance, Bennie slowed and sniffed around in the grass to find a spot to do his business.

“I didn’t make the best first impression on you either,” I told Austin. “We both could have handled it better.”

He shrugged. “But you weren’t a dick to me. Truth is, I had a lot of frustration about my business, and I took it out on you because I was afraid you’d be the last nail in my coffin. But that didn’t mean you put me in that box. The pandemic, the poor economy, the changing neighborhood...those all contributed just as much. More, even.”

I smiled. “So, what I hear you saying is that you like me.”

“Shut up.”

“Stop being so forward. You’ll make me blush.”

Austin laughed. “You’re an idiot.”

He looked so damn beautiful when he was happy, and as much as I’d taken a perverse pleasure in provoking him when he’d seemed determined to hate me, this was so much better.

If Austin could see we weren’t enemies—or even rivals—then maybe there was hope for a future with him. Between the online friendship we continued and the hot

hookups we couldn't seem to resist, this was already the most intense, satisfying relationship I'd had in years.

Bennie took off for the sidewalk. I had doggy bags to scoop up his mess, but I'd get it on the way back in. For now, I let him run. Luckily, he wasn't an overly large dog, so we could take a leisurely stroll while he got the exercise he wanted.

When we got back inside, I unleashed Bennie and followed him to his food bowl in the kitchen. Austin watched quietly while I fed him, a soft smile on his face.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"You're all starry-eyed. Do you have a weird pet fetish or something?"

He picked up a spare piece of junk mail on my counter and flicked it at me. "No! Don't be ridiculous."

"What is it? Seriously?"

He groaned and averted his gaze to my dog, happily munching on dry kibble. "It's just...I tried to picture this scene so many times. You and Bennie, living your life somewhere in the same city. You sent me a picture of him, so I knew what he looked like, but..."

"Not me." I took a step closer and grasped his chin, lifting it so I could press a quick kiss to his lips. "That's sweet."

He rolled his eyes. "It's just human nature. I was curious."

“Hmm. Is that all this is between us? Curiosity?”

“I...don't know.”

I nodded, disappointment weighing me down. We hadn't gotten the best start, but Austin was the person I wanted to talk to morning and night. The guy I wanted to fuck, badly, but also the guy I wanted to finally sleep beside.

Getting past his walls wasn't easy, but chip by chip, I found openings in his defenses. I didn't want to force my way in, though. I wanted to be invited.

“Oh god, don't look like that,” Austin said. “It's not just curiosity, okay? But being with a guy is new for me.”

“Okay, I understand.”

The silence drew out, and I thought about ending it with a kiss. Maybe dragging him to my bed to show him how much we belonged together.

But Austin's friends were waiting for us, and it was going to be a tough enough audience without blowing them off.

“Should we go?” I asked.

“Yeah, we should,” Austin said, expelling a big breath.

“Don't look so relieved,” I said with a chuckle. “I'm not expecting you to confess your love for me, Austin.” I winked. “Not yet, anyway.”

He laughed and shoved me toward the door. “I see the ego is intact. Let's go see if it can withstand my friends' questions.”

I glanced back over my shoulder, concerned. “How intense is this going to be?”

“Well, Zach has been trying to pry answers out of me ever since the night we met at Roasted, so...”

“Intense, then.”

“Oh, yeah. They’ll be like sharks smelling blood in the water.”

“As long as you’re the only one who bites me.”

Austin’s eyes heated. “Maybe later, if you’re lucky.”

I grinned, willing to take those odds. If I played my cards right, maybe I could finally get that sleepover I’d been wanting. I reached for Austin’s hand, and he let me entwine our fingers.

Our eyes met, a thousand unsaid words passing between us.

And I knew.

Austin might not be ready to tell me everything I wanted to hear, but he felt it too. The hope, the fear, the swell of growing affection.

I wasn’t alone in this scary place.

We were in it together.

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Chase was a smooth operator, projecting a charm and confidence in difficult situations, but I was getting to know him better. Which meant I could sense the nerves he tried to hide as we headed toward Zach's place.

"We'll do our best to keep the conversation focused on the plan," I assured him. "If they get too pushy, tell them to back off."

He flashed me a distracted smile. "I just want to make a better impression on them than I did with you."

"Well, that might be difficult." I grimaced. "I sorta talked a lot of shit when Fox first moved into the neighborhood."

He chuckled. "That's oddly reassuring. I guess I can't make it any worse."

"You can only go up from here," I agreed, my own nerves ramping up.

I'd cast the die in how my friends perceived Chase, and my guilty conscience nipped at my heels. It would be up to me to undo the damage, because regardless of what happened between us, Chase wasn't the bad guy in the story.

No one was—which was the hardest truth in life. As much as I wanted a villain to blame, the only baddie in this story was an economic market out of my control.

Tristan opened the door when we knocked. "Hey, come on in. But brace yourself. The whole gang is here."

I winced. “I was afraid that would happen.”

“Sorry. Zach told Jordan, who told Ellis and Becca, and everyone wants to help with the plan, so...”

He shrugged helplessly and stepped back to allow us in. Zach pounced almost immediately. “Austin, finally! Everyone’s waiting in the dining room.” He eyed Chase. “And I remember you. The guy who chased Austin out of my coffee shop.”

“Uh...” Chase shifted and cleared his throat, the most flustered I’d seen him. “Yeah, sorry for the dramatics that night.”

Zach gave him an assessing look. “That’s all right. You had your priorities. I just hope you have them straight when it comes to Austin.”

“Zach,” I said with a head shake. “Let’s just focus on the marketing plan.”

“My laptop is set up on the dining room table,” Tristan offered.

“There’s good snacks too,” Jordan said, poking his head out from the other room with an Oreo in his hand.

Chase perked up beside me. “Oh, the bisexual cookies? I’ve been curious about those.”

The package I’d brought the night of our first hookup had been irreparably crushed in the throes of our lust.

“Maybe.” Jordan narrowed his brown eyes at Chase. “If you prove you’re worthy.”

“Don’t listen to him,” I said. “He just wants all the cookies for himself.”

“Cruel lies,” Jordan said before stuffing a whole cookie in his mouth.

“I’ll tell them to behave so you all can focus on your work,” Zach said. “But I can only hold them off for so long. You know what they’re like.”

Chase and I exchanged a wary look then followed Zach and Tristan into the dining room.

“Becca, Ellis, this is Chase Fox,” I said. “Chase, these are all my friends.”

“We’re more like family,” Becca said with a smile, though there was a hint of warning that I’d never heard in her voice. “We look after one another.”

“Well, it’s really nice to meet you all,” he said as we took our seats. “Thanks for helping us with this plan.”

“We’re here for Austin,” Jordan said, sitting back with his arms crossed. “Everyone here loves him.”

Chase nodded. “With good reason, I’m sure. I’m here for Austin too.”

A tension gathered in the room as my friends exchanged looks. I could feel an intervention of some sort coming on. Chase could too, judging by how stiffly he was holding himself beside me.

I rushed to head it off, a protective surge welling in me.

“Everyone’s friends here, Chase included.” I put my hand on his thigh under the table, squeezing to convey reassurance. “So, how about we get to work?”

Tristan nodded. “Good idea. I’ve been over the demographics, and the good news is

that you're really close to the Capitol Hill area."

"Why is that good news?"

"Well, it's more lively, and they already hold a number of events. With your proximity, you can piggyback on some of what they've done."

"How does that work?" Chase asked. "Wouldn't we be competing?"

"If you held your events at the same time, yes. But if you target their existing audience, an audience that already participates in street fests, pub crawls, and art walks just a few blocks away, they're going to be more likely to convert."

"I didn't think about that," I murmured. "So, how do we target their audience?"

"There are a lot of ways, from social media advertising to getting yourself or other business owners a vendor spot in one of their events to talk up Union Heights. They have a huge Pride event there, and if they know you're queer-friendly..."

"That's really smart, Tristan," I said. "You don't think it's wrong to try to capitalize on the queer thing? I mean, I'm not—"

I stopped short. Everyone looked at me expectantly. Shit. Could I really say I wasn't queer? I'd been having sex with a man. I wanted to have more sex with him.

But more than that, I liked him. I'd jumped to his defense far too quickly for me to continue to deny it. They were judging him based off my biased accounts before I really knew the man Chase was inside. Before I knew his heart.

But I knew his heart now, and I was growing more attached to it by the day, wasn't I?

“It’s not wrong if it’s true,” Tristan said gently. “Whether you’re queer or a straight ally, you’re open-minded, and a lot of people like to support business that supports them.”

I licked my lips. “Right. That, uh, makes sense.”

Tristan went over a few more statistics with us then pulled up a few advertising concepts to review. My other friends contributed ideas here and there. The food trucks was a big hit with Jordan—enough that he finally pushed the package of Oreos over to Chase.

He pulled one out and took a bite, his eyes on me, and I squirmed in my seat, remembering all too well the first time I’d told him about these cookies.

Once we wrapped up the business talk, though, the conversation returned to Chase and me.

“So, why are you helping with this?” Jordan asked Chase. “I mean, you’re the big store threatening Austin’s business. How does any of this benefit you?”

It was a question I’d asked myself more than once.

Chase leaned forward. “We all start somewhere. The Fox brand started with one store. Now, we have eight, but we’re hardly in league with Barnes Noble. We’ve had our struggles, and maybe I just want to show everyone that we’re not so different. That we can all be stronger together, if we try.”

Becca beamed. “I like him.”

“Me too,” Ellis said. “Kinda makes me feel bad you got that mean news article written.”

Becca winced. "I'm sorry. I had no idea it would be so aggressive."

"Ah, that was you. Well, I knew it came from Austin somehow. Not gonna lie, it kind of hurt, but I understand why he did it."

I cringed. "I may have...overreacted a little. I definitely misjudged Chase a lot."

He grinned at me. "Think you could say that again so I could record it?"

I shoved his arm. "Not a chance."

"Okay, I'm just going to ask," Becca said. "What's going on between you two?"

Chase glanced at me, clearly letting me decide what to say. I bit my lip. "I'll let you know when I do."

"Safe to say they're fucking like bunnies though," Jordan said.

"Jordan!" Zach exclaimed.

"What? It's true. I saw them at the store together, and they were sparking hard. And that was before they even realized they'd already sexted each other online."

"Sexted?" Becca said. "Seriously?"

"I never said we sexted," I countered. "I said we flirted."

Chase leaned forward. "But we totally sexted."

"How did you not know he was a guy if you sexted?" Tristan asked.

I rolled my lips in. “No comment.”

Zach giggled. “Oh my god. You had gay sex and didn’t even know it. I thought I was the naive one in the group!”

“I suspected,” I said. “I just didn’t... There were certain words he didn’t say, and...”

My friends continued to laugh at me, and Chase’s lips twitched, his eyes filled with mirth.

“Oh, fuck you all very much. I think we’re done with work, so I’m taking my leave. Chase, stop smirking, or I’ll be going home instead of to your place.”

Chase hopped up, looking contrite. “I’m not smirking. I’m just trying to make friends with your family.”

He gave me puppy dog eyes, and they should not have worked. But they did, damn it.

Zach followed us to the front door and pulled me into a quick hug. “He’s totally smitten with you.”

“Whatever,” I mumbled.

“Maybe you’re smitten with him too, huh?”

I pulled back, my face hot. “Tell Tristan thank you again.”

“Oh, you can tell himself yourself on the next movie night.” He gave me a stern look. “No more skipping out to avoid us.”

I chuckled. “Sorry.”

“You’re invited too, Chase.”

“Thanks,” he said, surprised. “I really appreciate how caring you all are.”

Jordan came up behind him. “Mm-hmm, we are. Which is why we’ll be keeping an eye on you until we know you better.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

We said our goodbyes, and Chase let out a gusty sigh as we started down the sidewalk to the car, his breath puffing out in a cloud of vapor.

“That bad?” I asked.

“No, they love you a lot, and I’m glad you have that. Makes me a little jealous. My family is so tangled up in business that I never know if I’m talking to my grandmother or my boss.”

“That must be hard.”

“Sometimes. I’m not sure us Foxes know any other way to be.”

“Well, stick around,” I said as casually as I could. “Maybe you can learn a trick or two from us.”

He smiled and slipped his arm around my waist. “Just try and get rid of me.”

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We barely made it through the door before Austin pounced, shoving me against the wall and crushing our mouths together. Bennie barked excitedly, dancing in circles, while my head spun.

“Want you so bad,” Austin muttered, his hands tunneling into my hair and tugging.

He pressed me harder against the wall, his cock fully hard and grinding against my thigh.

I groaned at the thought of what else he could do with that dick.

“I want you to fuck me.”

“Really?” He pulled back a fraction. “I kind of thought you’d want to fuck me.”

“You’d let me do that?”

“I’ve told you I want to try everything.”

I grinned, lust surging. “Good thing there’s enough cock to go around. Everyone can get fucked.”

He laughed nervously. “What did you have in mind?”

“Well—” Bennie’s yips cut through my lust fog, and I bent down to greet him.

“Sorry, boy, I see you there. You’re a good boy.”

Austin laughed. "Cock-blocked by Bennie?"

"Not happening. I'll just get him settled with a treat. Wait for me in the bedroom?" I pointed behind him. "It's just over there."

"Okay. Don't keep me waiting too long. My cock is so hard it hurts."

I reached down to squeeze my throbbing shaft. "Ditto. I'll hurry."

I gave Bennie one of his favorite rawhide chews in the kitchen then stripped off the rest of my clothes to save time. Austin must have had the same idea. When I got to the bedroom, he was already sprawled in the center of my king-size bed, entirely naked, slowly stroking his rigid cock.

"Fucking hell," I muttered.

"Get over here before I come without you."

I wasted no time. I yanked open the bedside table, grabbed supplies, then climbed between Austin's legs. I leaned forward to kiss him, getting lost in his sweet mouth until my aching cock urged me to move on.

I sat back and squeezed some lube onto my fingers before lowering my hand to slick his hole, slowly prepping him for my cock.

"Since it's your first time, you're not as likely to come easily. You might not even like it."

"Way to sell me on it."

I chuckled. "That's why you're going to come in my ass."

“Uh, not sure I follow.”

I slipped my middle finger inside him, and he hissed a sharp breath. “You can take it. You were begging for more the other night.”

“You sucked my cock the other night,” he said, almost petulantly.

“Well, I aim to please...” I ducked down to suck the tip, teasing him with my tongue while adding a second finger.

Austin moaned softly and rocked his hips, taking my fingers a little deeper. When he fully relaxed and loosened, I rolled on a condom and covered it with lube.

I opened a second condom packet and rolled it over his cock, also slicking it up.

“For later,” I said with a wink.

Austin’s eyes widened as he finally understood my intention.

“Fuck,” he murmured.

“So much fucking,” I agreed playfully as I lined up my cock and gently pushed it against his hole.

Austin went rigid.

“Easy,” I crooned. “Just breathe out. Relax. You can take me.”

“Easy for you to say,” he muttered, but he sank back into the bed, muscles going lax. I spent a few minutes rubbing my cockhead over his hole, just teasing him with entry, until he huffed and said, “Just do it, Chase!”

I pushed inside and his body stretched around me, tight but yielding.

“Fuuuuck,” he groaned as I sank into him.

He trembled beneath me and I stilled, waiting for him to adjust. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” he rasped. “It’s just...”

“I know it’s a lot.” I dropped a kiss to his parted lips, then nuzzled into his neck.

“You’re so tight and hot. It’s fucking heaven. Soon, you’ll feel it too. My insides.”

He moaned softly.

“You want that? Your dick in my ass?”

He shuddered and bucked under me, causing my cock to sink deeper. “Fuck yes. Move. Please?”

I gently stroked in and out of him a few times. He made soft, broken sounds, part pleasure, part pain.

His ass was too perfect. My climax started to creep up on me, and I had to stop.

“Time to switch.”

I pulled out, and he winced, but before he could dwell on the stinging, empty void of his ass, I straddled his body and sank down on his cock.

I hadn’t prepped myself, the one downside of this plan. It burned like hell going in, but I was too far gone to care. I stripped off my condom and threw it aside, then braced a hand on his shoulder and began to ride him.

“Oh my god,” Austin gasped. “Ch-Chase!”

My thighs and abs burned as I worked my body up and down his cock, going hard and fast, knowing it wouldn’t last long for me and wanting to get Austin there too.

He grabbed my hips, squeezing hard while he bucked up. “Fuck fuck fuck. I’m gonna—”

“Yes, do it!”

He cried out hoarsely, shuddering as he came inside me.

I let go of my last restraint, reaching for my cock. One rough stroke sent me spiraling into bliss, the pleasure magnified by Austin’s dick stretching me wide. My balls emptied and my cock pulsed cum across his stomach and chest.

“Ah god.” Austin quivered beneath me with an aftershock. “Your ass is strangling my dick.”

I collapsed over his chest, laughing softly into his neck. “My ass likes you there. Doesn’t want to let you go.”

“Same,” he said, wrapping his arms around me and bucking his hips, making me hiss as his semi-hard cock nudged my prostate one last time.

When we’d both stopped shaking and cursing, I eased off his cock and let him deal with removing the condom. Then we both flopped onto the pillows.

“So, what did you think?”

“Of you fucking me, or me fucking you, or...”

“Any of the above.”

“I liked it.”

“All of it?”

He rolled his head to the side, a smile on his face. “Yeah. Having you inside me was intense, and I won’t lie, it hurt a little.”

“It’s an acquired burn,” I acknowledged.

He chuckled. “But it felt good too. You hit these places inside me...”

“Like your prostate.”

“Yes, that, but I don’t know. It felt like it went deeper than that.” He bit his bottom lip, looking almost shy. “Like you were waking up a part of me I didn’t know existed.”

I kissed him gently. “No regrets?”

“No, none.”

I searched his gaze for reservations, but I didn’t find any. “It’s quite the 180, huh? Going from hating me to worshipping my cock?”

He laughed. “Oh, shut up, you smug bastard.”

I grinned and leaned in for a kiss, only to jerk back with a hiss when he bit me. Austin drew me down and ran his tongue over the sting.

I melted against him, reveling in the kiss, until Bennie's snuffling wines could no longer be ignored.

"We should clean up and console your poor Bennie," Austin said.

"Yeah." I hesitated, not ready to let him go. "Will you stay the night with me?"

I held my breath, sure he would refuse.

"I guess it's already late," he said.

"True."

"And we work in the same neighborhood..."

"That we do."

"Carpooling is more efficient."

"So, have you justified it enough to say yes?"

He chuckled. "Yeah, why not? Bennie would probably miss me."

I rolled my eyes. "Had to get one more reason besides liking me in there, huh?"

Austin licked his lips, looking suddenly nervous. "I like you."

"Yeah? Enough to stay for me and not my dog?"

He smiled reluctantly. "Yeah, Chase. I'll stay for you."

“Good.” I smirked. “I knew you secretly wanted to spoon with me.”

We showered, grabbed a late dinner, and cuddled Bennie in bed—and it was fucking perfect. Having someone else in my space had never felt so comfortable. Austin and I didn’t make conversation for the sake of it. We just existed in the same orbit.

Just before bed, I sent a quick text on my phone. Austin’s phone dinged.

He checked it, then chuckled as he typed a response.

Wash972:

Sweet dreams, ShopGuy. Try not to grope me in your sleep. (But it’s okay if you do. I’m hot AF.)

ShopGuy24:

Sounds like you’re the one dreaming. But then, having me in your bed is a dream come true, so I understand ;)

“You have no idea, ShopGuy,” I said out loud with a wink.

We turned out the lights and settled on the pillows with Bennie between our shins. I lasted ten seconds before I rolled half on top of Austin and aggressively spooned him until he laughed and begged for mercy. I relaxed my hold and breathed him in.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I whispered as sleep tugged at me.

“Me too.”

The next morning, I got up early to feed and walk Bennie, and when I returned,

Austin was sitting up in bed, hair adorably tousled and eyes still droopy.

“Morning, boys,” he said as Bennie trailed me into the bedroom.

My heart swelled at the thought of this sight greeting me on a regular basis.
“Morning, gorgeous.”

A little pink crept into his cheeks. I slipped back into bed and nuzzled into his throat. He was still bed-warmed, and I couldn’t resist slipping my left hand under the blanket to caress his bare thigh.

He yelped. “Holy shit, your hand is cold!”

I laughed and retracted it. “Sorry, it’s chilly outside.

“Damn, give a guy some warning.”

“You could warm me up,” I crooned.

He gave me major side-eye. “Or we could get coffee at Rosita’s place like usual.”

I perked up. “Are you finally willing to date me?”

“I didn’t mean like a date.”

I’d only meant to tease, but my longing got the best of me. “Why not, though? This is more than sex for me. I mean, how could it not be when you’re ShopGuy? I was falling for you before we ever met.”

“Chase...”

I swallowed hard. “Unless...you don’t want more?”

“I’m not sure what I want. I went from hating you to wanting you and now...”

“Now what?”

“I like you more than I ever expected, but this has been a roller coaster, you know? I’m still getting my bearings.”

I swallowed down my disappointment, resisting the urge to rush him. I wanted to convince him that dating me would be incredible. Remind him of how explosive we were together. Express again the potential I could see so clearly for a relationship.

But hell, I’d practically offered my heart on a platter already.

Austin had to come to those decisions himself.

“Okay, I understand.”

Austin lurched forward, pressing a hard kiss to my lips, and I was far too greedy not to indulge in it, even if I worried it was just a consolation prize.

As always, heat simmered between us, quick to reach a boil, and Austin rolled on top of me and pinned my wrists on either side of my head. “We’re not done here,” he said. “We’re just getting started. Okay?”

“Okay,” I whispered, eyes slipping closed as he moved his lips to my jaw, then my throat. Austin couldn’t say the words I wanted, but his lips caressed me so softly, his hands held me so securely, that as he explored my body, I couldn’t feel anything but love between us.

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Wash972:

Dinner at my place? I'll cook.

ShopGuy24:

You're not going to give me food poisoning, are you?

Wash972:

I guess you'll have to live dangerously and find out ;)

ShopGuy24:

Well, I've barely eaten today, so sure. If I'm gonna go out, let's make it a blaze of carb glory.

Wash972:

That's the spirit!

I groaned as Bennie plopped his furry, compact body right over my gut on Chase's leather couch. I'd eaten far too much chicken parmigiana. Chase was a surprisingly good cook when he put his mind to it. So far, aside from a stomachache from overindulging, there were no signs of poisoning.

Chase emerged from the kitchen with a bottle of white wine. "Bennie likes you

almost as much as me, huh?”

I stroked his silky ears and shifted him to a slightly more comfortable position on my lap. “He loves me so much it hurts,” I joked.

“Touche,” he murmured.

My heart skipped. I wasn’t ready for what that comment might mean, though I had my suspicions. Since our talk about dating the other morning, Chase hadn’t pushed me to talk about where we stood.

But my head wasn’t so deep in the sand that I didn’t know this was more than just hooking up.

If I was honest, it had always been about more.

About Wash972 and ShopGuy24 and dozens of conversations that had brought us together.

But it was a lot of change very fast, and I was still navigating the new dynamic between us as we transitioned from rivals to lovers.

“Want more wine?” Chase asked, bottle at the ready.

I was normally more of a cheap beer guy, but it had gone well with dinner. “Sure.”

He topped off my glass then his own before setting the bottle on the coffee table and taking a seat next to me. He sat lengthwise on the couch, putting his feet into my lap, nudging Bennie a little out of the way.

His dog gave an annoyed huff.

“Now, boys,” I teased, “don’t fight over me. There’s enough Austin to go around.”

“I saw you first,” Chase said with a pout, as if he was actually jealous of his dog.

I smirked. “I remember. You weren’t exactly subtle.”

“I never am.” His eyes grew hot. “When I want something, I go after it.”

“Oh, how flattering. I’m a thing to pursue.”

“No, no.” He kicked my thigh playfully. “You’re a hot guy to pursue. Totally different.”

I snorted. “You’re such a romantic.”

He eyed me over the rim of his glass. “As soon as you want romance, I’ll give you all the romance you can handle.”

It sounded like a promise, and a flutter started up in my gut. I took a big swallow of wine. Maybe I should just take him up on it. Admit I wanted it. I’d just let the man wine and dine me. Why hold back now?

Before I could find the words, his phone rang.

“Damn, it’s Gigi. She probably wants another sales report.” He rolled his eyes. “The hovering is driving me batty.”

“Take it. I’ve got Bennie to keep me warm.”

He gave me a mock scowl. “Just for that, you can suffer along with me.”

He accepted the call and hit the Speaker button. “Hey, Gigi. What’s up?”

“I tried reaching you at the office. Why aren’t you there?”

He cut his eyes my way as if to say, See what I have to deal with?

“The store is closing in the next hour. The staff can handle that.”

“Hmm. I suppose if you trust them to run things...” Her tone said very clearly that she wouldn’t. “I guess I can’t expect everyone to be as driven as I was at your age. Of course, that ambition did build Fox from one store to a regional chain of stores.”

He sighed. “Gigi, you know how committed I’ve been to this store launch. I know we don’t have the official three-month profit percentages you want to use for projections yet, but it’s gone really well so far.”

“Yes, it has, dear. You exceeded my expectations.”

“So, what’s going on? Did you want another sales update? I’ll send a report first thing in the morning.”

“No, that’s all right. I need you to come to headquarters first thing in the morning.”

“Is there something wrong?”

“It’s not wrong, no. It’s just something we need to discuss,” she said. “I’m calling all the kids in.”

“What is it?”

“You’ll find out in the morning,” she said firmly. “I don’t want to repeat myself three

times. Just be here at six a.m., all right?”

I winced in sympathy. Six was awfully early to get downtown.

“Okay, Gigi. I’ll be there. Do I need to bring anything?”

“Just yourself,” she said. “I’ll call out for coffee and croissants.”

“All right. See you then.”

Chase frowned down at his phone for a solid minute after they’d disconnected.

“Are you worried?”

“Hmm?” He blinked and glanced at me. “A little. Gigi never caters breakfast unless there’s bad news on the horizon.”

“But she said nothing was wrong.”

“It’s not what she said so much as how she said it.” He shook his head. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m just tired.”

I nudged Bennie off my lap to stand and extended a hand to him. “Come on. Time for bed.”

Chase clasped my hand and stood with a groan. “Six is going to come awfully fast.”

“Yep,” I said. “I can feed and walk Bennie though, so you have a little more time.”

“I appreciate that.”

“It’s the least I can do for my favorite guy.”

Chase started to smile.

“Bennie, I mean.”

“You’re an asshole,” he said.

I laughed. “Yeah, I know.”

“Stop teasing me,” he growled and pulled me in for a possessive kiss, his tongue still sweet from the wine. “You’re mine, aren’t you? Tell me you’re mine.”

He sounded oddly vulnerable, and I couldn’t deny the truth that had been building since the first time he kissed me.

“I’m yours, Chase. I always have been.”

He kissed me again, deeply, as my heart pounded hard at what these words between us would mean.

There was no going back, but then, I don’t think there ever had been.

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A beautiful breakfast sat in the center of a conference table in the Fox offices when I arrived at precisely six a.m. Gigi was sitting at the head of the table, nibbling on a chocolate éclair as she chatted with a couple members from the accounting team.

I joined Camille at the side table where carafes of coffee and juice had been set out.

“Tell me you know what this is about?” I said under my breath.

“Can’t be anything good.”

Gigi burst into laughter, startling half the room into looking her way. My grandmother was a lot of things, but chipper wasn’t usually one of them.

“She’s in an awfully good mood.”

“That’s what worries me,” Camille said just as her husband, Joel, joined us.

He nodded and thrust his empty coffee cup under the carafe spigot for a refill. “We must be in big trouble.”

“Bigger trouble anyway.”

Not like the Fox company had been chugging along smoothly. The last few years had been a roller coaster of ups and downs, with Gigi challenging us to find solutions to falling revenues, all while refusing to implement the changes that would make the most impact.

“Let’s get started everyone,” Gigi called. “We’ve all got places to be, I’m sure.” She nodded toward our cousin, Reggie. “The commute to Spokane isn’t an easy one.”

He chuckled. “Heck, this is like a school field trip for me. It’s nice to get a chance to see you all.”

Reggie managed the two Spokane stores, while Camille and her husband oversaw the Seattle, Tacoma, and Olympia locations. I’d worked with Gigi to oversee everyone else. She’d been grooming me to eventually succeed her, but that was before she’d started making noise about selling the whole operation.

Camille and I exchanged one last glance, her eyes reflecting the same foreboding I was sure mine did. I picked up my coffee cup and went to the seat at Gigi’s left hand. Camille and Joel took seats beside me. Reggie sat on the other side of the two accountants, always the odd man out.

“Good morning. Thank you all for clearing your schedule for me.”

We all nodded. When Gigi asked you to show up, you showed up.

“Pleasure to be here, Gigi,” Reggie said before taking a huge bite of his jelly roll, resulting in a glob of purple falling directly onto his tie.

“Yes, well, obviously this is not a social visit,” Gigi said, “though I’m glad you enjoy the pastries.” She swept her gaze over the table, but it was me she watched most closely. “I’ve had a look at the latest revenue reports. Our projections were off, and not in the right direction.”

“How bad is it?” I asked.

“Bad enough it calls for drastic action. We cannot sustain these losses any longer.”

Camille leaned forward. “You’re ready to talk about scaling down, then? If we close our worst performers—”

“That won’t cut it,” Gigi interrupted. “All it will do is tarnish our name. Fox will be known as a dying company. No, thank you.”

I straightened in my seat. “The Fox Entertainment launch went well. We don’t have enough data for long-term projections, but I feel confident the numbers will support a plan to rebrand and relaunch.”

Gigi sighed and shook her head. “It’s just not feasible.”

“What do you mean? That’s the plan we agreed on. If my launch was successful, you’d consider it for a new path forward for all our stores.”

“Yes, and I meant that.” She patted my arm. “But that was before these new sales reports came in. We simply don’t have the capital to close down stores while we retrofit them with new inventory and advertise the changes. Rebranding existing stores will be much more difficult than launching a new store, as you did. We’d have to train customers to think of an existing store differently, and some of those stores have been there for a decade. It’s an uphill battle.”

“So, what’s the solution?” Reggie asked.

Ah, my sweet, innocent, naïve cousin. I knew where this was heading. I could tell by the grim set to Camille and Joel’s faces that they did too.

“We have to sell.”

“Oh, Gigi,” Camille said, voice sad. “Surely there’s another way to give Chase’s plan a shot. If we don’t have the capital, sell the Olympia stores and use that money to

relaunch another Seattle location.”

“I didn’t bring you all here to argue about possibilities. This is happening. If we’re lucky, one of the larger book retailers will absorb our holdings. If not, we’ll have to liquidate.”

“That’s it?” Camille said, voice sharp. “Our whole careers are just over?”

Gigi sighed and rubbed her temples, looking old and tired. “I’m sorry, dear. I wish it could end differently, but this is best for all of us. We’ll get some money back out of the business this way, and you all have a small bit of equity built into your employment contracts. Along with a generous severance, you can start over.”

“I don’t want to start over,” Camille said, sounding forlorn.

“I’ve got another meeting.” Gigi pushed back her seat and stood. “Phil will go over the numbers with you. Sorry, loves. We had a good ride while it lasted.”

My stomach dropped. This was really happening.

“Gigi...”

She placed her hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently. “I’m sorry to renege on our deal, Chase. It was a good effort. It just came too late.”

She walked out of the room, leaving a stunned silence behind her.

“Wait,” Reggie said. “Does this mean I’m out of a job?”

“It means we’re all out of a job,” Joel said shortly.

My stomach turned, my bagel sitting like a concrete block in my gut. “I’m sorry, you guys. I really thought if I could make this new store a success, I could set us on a different path.”

“You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make her drink,” Camille said. “It’s not your fault.”

“I should have pushed harder sooner. Done something more.”

Camille stood and rounded the table to hug me. “It’s going to be okay. We’ll figure something out. We’re smart, capable people, and we will rise from this mess, right?”

I patted her back. My sister had a young daughter. She and her husband had both dedicated their entire adult lives to Fox. Of all of us, I would rebound the easiest.

I wasn’t disappointed for me. I was disappointed I’d let my family down.

“Don’t worry about me,” I said. “Take care of your family, Camille.”

She sniffed and nodded, drawing back, eyes glimmering. She tried for a smile. “One day, maybe we’ll be glad this happened. Gigi held us back in so many ways.”

“Speak for yourself,” Reggie said as he headed for the door. “I’ve got a good thing going in Spokane, and now I’m fucked.”

He slammed the door behind him.

Camille, Joel, and I all exchanged wide-eyed looks. Reggie was usually so even-tempered, verging on annoyingly cheerful in a silly puppy sort of way.

Phil, the sole accountant remaining in the room, cleared his throat. “Uh, did you all

want to go over the numbers?”

“Just leave the information with us,” I said. “I know how to read a spreadsheet.”

Phil nodded and got to his feet, in no hurry to stick around for this drama fest.

“I’ll go make sure Reggie’s okay,” Joel said, even though he looked like he wanted to do nothing of the sort. “Just fill me in on the ugly details later?”

“Sure. Thanks for falling on the sword. I’ve got to get over to Union Heights, though I don’t really know what point there is...”

Camille sighed. “Maybe you can open an independent store?”

I thought of Austin and smiled a little. We could be struggling indies together. Maybe it would bring us closer together.

A silver lining on this shitty storm cloud.

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“Cha-ching!” Briar called from her seat in front of my computer.

I glanced over from where I was adding inventory to the record bins. “Cha-ching?”

“We just sold that huge Beatles set,” she said, eyes bright. “The one that was over nine hundred dollars.”

“Holy shit.” I went to look over her shoulder so that I could see it for myself. “That’s the second sale this week.”

“Mm-hmm.” She grinned up at me. “We’ve gotten great feedback on this new marketplace. I think this might really take off!”

The thought was an alluring one. With stronger online sales, I wouldn’t have to rely on walk-in traffic and stores like Fox Entertainment wouldn’t be such a threat.

“I really should have started working on this sooner,” I mused.

“Well, it’s not like we just started,” Briar pointed out. “It just takes time to build up.”

“True. Uncle Charlie never got into online sales, but he didn’t need to. His customers loved him.” I chuckled. “I remember, he used to sell albums not only at the store, but at swap meets. Hell, he even sold a few out of the back of his car once. He loved sharing music so much.”

“And now you’ll be sharing it with even more people,” Briar said.

She put my thoughts into a different perspective. Uncle Charlie really hadn't cared about money or profits. He'd run his store successfully, but he'd weathered a lot of tough times, too. What kept him going was his love of music and the connections he made.

That was the true legacy he passed on to me, and one I could carry forward no matter how I ran my business.

No big-box store could ever compete with that. If I'd seen that sooner, I'd have realized the amazing guy Chase was a lot sooner.

"Do you have some more records you want me to add?"

"Heck yeah, I'll go through the bins for the albums that will have the most appeal." Online shoppers were more likely to go for hard-to-find records, like the Beatles set that had a limited production run. I didn't have any other gems that impressive, but I had some relatively rare vinyl that you couldn't find just anywhere. "I'm going to have to hit more auctions if all these sell though."

She laughed. "Sounds like a good problem to have."

The door chimed, and I turned to see Chase entering. He was dressed immaculately, in full business attire for his grandmother's meeting. He always looked sharp, dressing in a blend of business and casual that gave him a young but sophisticated air. But today, he was in navy blue suit that fit his body like a glove.

I wanted to peel him out of it and lick him all over.

"Hey, you," I said, my voice warm. "How did your meeting go?"

He smiled tightly, and my alarms instantly went off. That meeting had not been good

news.

“It went,” he said. “Can you spare time to grab a coffee with me?”

“Sure.” I glanced toward Briar. “Can you hold down the fort?”

“Yeah, I’ll just slave away here, adding content to this online site for you. We can talk about giving me a raise anytime you like.”

I chuckled. “We can see how these records sell and then talk about that. For now, though, how about a coffee from Muddy Waters?”

“Deal!”

Chase held the door open for me, and the moment we stepped outside, his smile fell. We walked down the block in tense silence, but I could only take the suspense for a few minutes.

“What happened?” I prompted.

“Fuck, Austin,” he rasped. “It’s over.”

My heart jumped at his words. “What do you mean?”

“Fox. My store. All the stores. Gigi is going to sell if she can find a buyer, and if not, we’ll close the stores one by one, liquidate all the assets. This is the end.”

“But you’ve put so much work into the store, and it’s doing great!”

He nodded. “Too little, too late, she says.”

I slipped my arm around his waist and moved in closer as we walked, trying to offer support. “Surely, there’s something we can do?”

He barked a laugh. “That’s what my sister said too, but Gigi’s made up her mind.” He sighed. “At least, there’s one upside.”

“What’s that?”

“We won’t be business rivals,” he said.

I scoffed. “You’re the one who always says we’re not really rivals now.”

“Eh, you didn’t really believe it.”

“But I do now,” I said.

I’d just come to that conclusion in the store, hadn’t I? Maybe I’d been too slow to adapt because I’d been stuck on the idea of preserving Uncle Charlie’s memory, but he wouldn’t care about my business model or a brick-and-mortar building. He’d given me a path to follow, but where that path went was my choice.

“I’m just sorry I can’t say what will happen with Fox Entertainment. If a buyer rebrands it and keeps it open, it could be worse for the neighborhood.”

I pulled him to a stop and turned to face him. “I don’t care about that, Chase. This isn’t about me. You’ve worked too hard to go down like this.”

“It’s out of my control, Austin. Gigi has made up her mind. The revenues are down further than expected, so our deal went out the window. There won’t be a future for Fox Entertainment because Fox Books will be gone. All of it. Our entire family business, years of work and dedication, just done.”

He sagged forward, as if that speech had taken his last bit of composure, and I opened my arms to catch him. He pressed his face against the side of my neck, breath ragged.

“Maybe if I’d acted faster,” he mumbled. “Maybe if I’d convinced her sooner.”

“Sweetie, no,” I said. “Stop beating yourself up. You did everything you could.”

“Did I, though?”

I hesitated. “Well, no.”

Chase looked back, a wounded expression on his face. “No?”

“What did Wash972 tell me when I was freaking out over a new business rival?”

“Gigi is not my rival.”

“She is now,” I said firmly, “and I’m going to tell you what you told me. It’s time to go to the mattresses.”

A surprised laugh burst from him. “Seriously?”

“You have to fight for what you built, Chase. Maybe the Fox chain is Gigi’s, but she didn’t launch that store.” I jabbed my finger across the street. “The concept was yours. The planning and execution. She told you it was a test, and you passed, and now she’s changing the rules? No. Fuck no. You can’t give up so easily.”

Chase looked skeptical, but some life was returning to his eyes. “I don’t know how to change anything when she has all the power.”

“How did you convince her to let you launch a store with a whole new concept?”

“By being very, very persistent.” He smiled at me, a more genuine one. “You might recognize the trait.”

I grinned. “I might. So go take that persistent ass back to Gigi and annoy her into giving you what you want.”

He laughed. “I don’t know that it’s that easy.”

“I know.” I cupped his face and kissed him. “But you’ll regret it if you don’t even try, won’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess I will.”

“Good, because your store is too successful to be collateral damage, and so are you.”

“That might be the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

I laughed and smacked his arm. “Come on, let’s get you that coffee. You can use the caffeine boost to brainstorm some ideas for how to change Gigi’s mind.”

“Will you strategize with me?” He wiggled his eyebrows.

“Nope, sorry. Pretty sure you don’t have time to screw around with me. Call your sister, put your heads together. Think out of the box for solutions you haven’t considered.”

“Go to the mattresses would be a lot more fun if it involved screwing around with you, though.”

“Well, consider it a reward for later. No matter what happens, I’ll be here, okay? You have me. I’m yours.”

Chase blinked. “Sorry, did I fall asleep? I thought you actually just said you were mine.”

“Shut up. I already said it last night.”

“Yeah, but only after I asked. I thought you were just placating me because I was stressed. If this is pity—”

I grabbed his face and kissed the stupid words off his lips.

“I love you, idiot. I’m in love with you. I’ve been falling hard for weeks, and yeah, okay, I had to wrap my head around some things, but I want this, us. I want us to be boyfriends, okay? There. I said it.”

The wide smile spread slowly across his face. “How painful was that to admit?”

“Very,” I said shortly.

He kissed me, taking his sweet time even though we stood on a sidewalk in plain view of three shop windows.

“I love you too,” he said.

“Well, I knew that.”

He laughed. “And you were doing so well, too.”

I grinned. “Confidence is sexy, right? But...I still like hearing the words. This is the real deal, Chase. You and me. We can get through anything together. No matter what your future holds, I’ll be here.”

“That means a lot.”

“But I still want you to go kick Gigi’s ass.”

Chase laughed and pulled me close. “And this is why I love you. You’re so damn feisty.”

“I’m not feisty,” I said. “I’m a rebel.”

He laughed. “Right, sorry. Wouldn’t want to tarnish your street cred. You’re so rock-n-roll, babe.”

“Damn right. I’m metal.”

Chase laughed at me, so I shut him up with another kiss, got him a coffee at Muddy Waters, and sent him on his way to do battle. Gigi was a formidable opponent, but Chase was smart, resourceful, and hella charming. If anyone could change her mind, it would be him.

And if he couldn’t, at least he’d always know he did everything he could.

Because no matter what happened, Chase was anything but a failure.

He’d find another way forward. He’d rebuild and prove himself in new, amazing ways.

But I knew how much this family business meant to him. How much he wanted it, not just for himself, but for his sister, too.

Family legacy could inspire us, but it could also break us down. Nothing lasted forever in its exact state. Sometimes, to survive, you had to change.

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“We’re never going to change her mind.”

Camille slumped dramatically over the folder of data Gigi’s accounting team had left with us at the meeting this morning.

Joel patted her back, forehead creased with a frown. “The situation does look grim. Gigi won’t close down half the stores. We know that. So, what are our options?”

I dragged a hand over my face. I’d called them both to my office so that we could go over the accountant’s report and devise a plan to change Gigi’s mind, but it wasn’t going too well. Despite Austin’s belief I should fight, I had no ammunition.

“There are things we could have done, if only we’d made a move sooner,” I said.

We could have closed two or three of our struggling locations, then used the money from the close-out sales to help finance expanding others into Fox Entertainment stores.

Camille finished my thought. “The way finances stand now, it’s too late.”

“I put all my energy into proving this business model, and I should have been thinking bigger than one store.”

“Gigi never would have gone for bigger,” Joel said.

“He’s right,” Camille said. “We can’t blame ourselves. I just wish we could buy the dang chain ourselves.”

Joel snorted. “Yeah, our pockets aren’t that deep. If we combine our resources, we could buy one or two stores, but not a whole chain.”

“It’s just not fair,” Camille said with a pout, reminding me of our childhood days. “This store launch has been an incredible success. It shouldn’t end this way.”

Wait a second. I straightened in my chair, excitement jolting through me. Perhaps there was a way to preserve our family business if we thought outside the box.

“What if we didn’t have to buy the whole chain?” I asked. “What if we only had to buy one store?”

Camille’s eyes shone as she caught on. “Do you think she’d go for it?”

“Only one way to find out.”

Joel chuckled nervously. “Yeah, but guys, I was kidding about us buying a store. It’s a pretty big gamble, and if it doesn’t pay off...”

“Not necessarily,” I said, tapping the papers in front of Camille. “We all have some equity. If we can talk Gigi into putting our equity into this store and only have to make up the difference...”

Camille nodded. “It’s not an unreasonable risk.” She glanced at Joel. “What do you say, hon? It’s your money too.”

Joel let out a breath. “What the hell? If we’re gonna go down, let’s do it fighting.”

“I knew I loved you!” Camille said with a wicked grin, excited now that we weren’t just wallowing in defeat. “I’ll call the bank and take stock of our finances.”

“I’ll do the same,” I said. “And I’ll call Reggie. He’ll want in on this too.”

Joel looked between us, bemused. “What should I do?”

“Go grab us some coffee from down the street?” Camille asked. “We’re going to be here for a while.”

It was late by the time we’d gotten our finances in order, talked to Reggie and our bank and stockbrokers, and assembled an offer we could take to Gigi. So, we waited until the following morning to meet up at headquarters again—but this time we were a united team. Reggie had even driven back from Spokane to join us.

Liam, Gigi’s personal assistant, looked alarmed when he saw the whole group of us enter the waiting room outside my grandmother’s office.

“Ms. Fox has asked not to be disturbed this morning.”

“We need to speak to her.” When he hesitated, I added, “If she sells, you lose your job too. We’re trying to prevent that.”

His eyes gleamed. “In that case, follow me.”

Liam opened her door and led us in. “Your first meeting of the day is here.”

“I didn’t schedule—” Gigi cut off as she looked up and saw us. Her lips twisted. “I wondered when you’d show up to protest.”

“You expected this?” I asked.

“You took longer than I expected.” Her expression softened. “I know this is hard. It’s not easy for me either. Fox has been my life. But it’s time to stop beating a dead

horse.”

“This horse isn’t dead yet,” Reggie declared hotly.

“Close enough,” she said.

I cringed at the metaphor that was going too far. Behind me, Camille shushed our cousin, advising that I do the talking. They all thought Gigi would listen to me.

Nerves tightened my gut and my hands broke out in a sweat. If I let them down, it would be the end of our family legacy. We’d carry on, but we’d lose the bond that tied us so closely together.

But when it all threatened to get overwhelming, I remembered Austin’s fierce belief in me the day before. Remembered his assurances that no matter what my future held, he’d be part of it.

My whole life was waiting beyond this moment, and with that clarity, came calm.

“I’m not here to talk you out of closing the Fox chain,” I told Gigi.

She looked surprised for the first time. “Really?”

“We went over the financials Phil gave us. We can’t continue this way.”

Sadness seeped into her expression. “Times kept changing, and we didn’t adapt enough. That’s my fault. As your leader, I lacked vision.”

“No, you were proud of the vision you had when you built Fox,” I said. “But I have a vision now, and I want to build something too.”

Her brow creased. "I'm not sure I follow."

"Gigi, when I proposed launching Fox Entertainment, you told me I'd have to do it on my own, remember? From start to finish. I'd stand on my own and I'd fall on my own. You said that, remember?"

She hesitated a beat. Gigi was as sharp as they came, and no doubt she'd figured out where this argument was heading. "Yes."

"I worked hard to make it a success, and though it's early, I'd bet my life savings on it."

"So would we," Camille said.

"And me," Reggie added.

Gigi eyed us through the square frames of her reading glasses. "Don't beat around the bush. Tell me what you want."

"We want to buy Fox Entertainment," I said. "You can sell the rest of the chain off as planned. Just let us buy this one store, this one hope for the future, and transfer our accrued equity over to it when you close on your sale."

She frowned. "That'll impact the how much I can get out of a sale."

"I know," I said. "But we'll offer you the premium price for Fox Entertainment. You know you can't get that for the rest of the chain."

"True," she allowed.

"You built a legacy out of one store, and you passed it on to us. We just want the

chance to do the same.”

“Well, I admire your passion, Chase. You’ve always shown so much promise.”

“Then say yes, Gigi,” Camille implored. “He’s already proven this business model works.”

“Well, the launch went well, but don’t count your eggs before they hatch. If you’re going to run a business, you can’t let hope blind you.”

“Does that mean you’ll do it?” Camille asked. “You’ll let us buy Fox Entertainment?”

She tapped her pen on the open ledger in front of her.

“I agreed to let Chase prove a viable future existed for Fox. If we still had the resources, I’d make good on that deal and adapt our chain. But maybe this is better. You can reinvent Fox, give it fresh life, while the old one retires with me.”

“Thank you, Gigi!” Camille exclaimed. “We won’t let you down.”

Reggie let out a bellow of excitement and grabbed Joel in a bone-crushing hug. I winced in sympathy for my sister’s stoic husband.

“Don’t worry about letting me down,” Gigi said. “You answer only to yourselves now.”

“We stand on our own, and we fall on our own,” I said, “but we’re still family and business is in your blood, Gigi. When you get bored with retirement, I’ll be happy to talk shop anytime.”

She laughed. “Oh, you know me too well. But first, I’ve got a tropical island and a drink with an umbrella waiting for me. I’ve got a lot of missed vacations to make up for.”

“You do,” I said. “Enjoy them, Gigi. You’ve earned some time off.”

“You know, I think I have,” she mused.

For the first time in years, Gigi looked relaxed and happy. Like she was looking forward to the future.

So was I. But not only because I had a business to rebuild. But because I had the perfect man to support me while I did.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:35 pm

Chase charged through my shop door around 11 a.m., a manic look to him.

“What happened?” I asked, heart skipping.

“We did it!” He grabbed me and spun us clumsily, nearly knocking us down in the process.

I laughed as I caught myself against the counter while Briar watched with wide eyes.

“Gigi isn’t selling?”

“Oh, she is, but she’s letting us buy Fox Entertainment. My sister, her husband, and my cousin are all going in with me, so we can build on what I started. This is a real future for Fox. It’s not the same as saving the chain, but...”

“You get to build it your way. You’ll have a lot more freedom.”

“Yeah,” Chase said. “It’s a fresh start with a bright future. Kind of like us?”

“I don’t know. You have your store again. You might have to take me to the mattresses.”

“I hope you mean a real mattress, because I’m high on endorphins and horny as—”

“Briar, can you watch the store for a few?”

My teenaged employee laughed. “I think I can manage, yeah.”

“We’re going to...talk about this latest development.”

Briar’s eyes sparkled. “Mm-hmm. I’ll turn up the music.”

We raced up the stairs, opened my apartment door, and flung ourselves at each other before the door had even clicked shut.

Chase kissed me so hard it hurt. His lips crushed mine, his teeth slicing at my bottom lip, and it only served to fuel the inferno burning inside me.

“I never want us to be competitors again,” he gasped when we parted. “Whatever happens with our businesses, you’re the future I want.”

“Me too, but how will we ever decide who tops?” I teased.

He grinned and yanked up my T-shirt, tangling it around my arms and head, then yanked open my jeans and sank to his knees to swallow my cock before I could so much as think.

I gave a strangled moan, caught and exposed and more turned on than I’d ever been in my life.

I untangled the shirt and tossed it aside then looked down at Chase’s lips stretched around my cock while he worked a wet fingertip into my hole, making me crave more.

“Fuck, that feels good,” I muttered.

Chase sat back, pulling away, and I fucking whimpered with need.

“This is how we know who tops,” he said in a husky voice. “You love taking my

cock.”

He wasn’t wrong. I’d bottomed a few times and topped a few too, but there was no comparison to the way my body ignited when Chase was inside me.

His dick stretched me, filled me, tested my limits with pain and pleasure, and I fucking loved it.

Not that I would admit it to him.

“Shut up and fuck me.”

He rose to his feet and shoved me down onto the bed, following to pin me down. “I’m not going to fuck you.”

“What?” I exclaimed, my hole aching at the thought of being denied.

“I’m going to make love to you.” He looked into my eyes. “Because you love me. You said so, and you can’t take it back.”

I spluttered a laugh. “I’m not going to take it back.”

“Good.” He kissed me again, but this time it was long and deep. It was still filthy. Chase thrust his tongue in, meeting mine, then retreated, then thrust in again, slowly fucking my mouth. But there was an intensity behind it, not one borne of passion, but a deeper emotion.

He slid his right hand into my hair, gently caressing me. Like I was the greatest treasure.

My chest grew too tight, my love for him almost too much to hold inside me.

“Please...”

“What is it, babe?”

I squirmed beneath him, unable to put my feelings into words. The fabric of his slacks rubbed against my raging hard-on, bringing my focus back to the physical. I gasped against his lips. “I need you in me. Now.”

He groaned against my mouth. “Fuck yes.”

His hips jerked against me, giving away his own need, before he pulled away to throw off his clothes. I stripped my shoes and jeans the rest of the way off while watching Chase unbutton his dress shirt, baring his chest inch by inch. It was a distracting tease that sidetracked me.

He slipped the fabric from his shoulders, his pecs flexing, and dropped his hands to unfasten his belt. I licked my lips as I watched him unzip himself.

He kicked off his shoes, dropped his pants, and shoved down his black briefs. His cock swung forward, looking too big for those tiny briefs to have contained.

Too big to fit inside me, too.

But somehow it would. I’d stretch around him, just like the fabric of his briefs, and try to contain him for as long as he’d allow me.

Chase cleared his throat, and I dragged my eyes up to his smirk. “Did you forget something?”

He nodded to my briefs, still on my body.

“Oops.” I shoved my boxer briefs down, wiggling my hips, and Chase helped drag them down my legs. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for appreciating my dick,” he said with a grin. “I’m really glad you do.”

There was a layer of subtext to his words. Chase hadn’t known the first time he met ShopGuy if I would want a man. I hadn’t really known either, though I’d been open to the idea.

But there was no doubting it now. I spread my legs and pulled him against me. “Love you in me, on top of me, around me. Any which way, Chase.”

His eyes grew warm as he looked down at me. “I love you. So much. I love how you believed in me even when I didn’t believe in myself.”

“Seems only fair. You always believed in us, no matter how stubborn I got.”

“Damn, that’s sweet.”

“Yeah, well, I’m out of my head with lust.” I squeezed my thighs around his hips. “Does this making love thing involve putting your dick into me anytime soon? I’m dying here.”

“Challenge accepted,” he said with a chuckle and sat back to reach for the lube.

Prepping me didn’t take long. Not now that my ass was better trained for a fucking down. After a couple minutes of fingering, Chase lined up his cock.

“Ready?”

“I’ve been ready for a lo—” He shoved his dick inside, not holding back. “Fuck!”

As always, the entry burned. The pain fed the flames of my arousal, though, rather than diminishing it. I tilted my hips up to take more of him, and Chase continued on, stretching and filling me just as I’d craved. The intensity of it was almost too much, but when he pulled back, I felt the loss. His next thrust in tore a groan of relief from me, and the next one, pure pleasure.

“There you go,” Chase murmured between thrusts. “My little cockslut.”

“Fuck me harder,” I ordered, shameless in my need now that I’d adjusted to the intrusion. “I need more.”

“Damn, okay.” He moved faster, thrust harder, but it still wasn’t enough.

I reached for my cock, but he caught my wrist. “Wait. Just wait.”

To my horror, he pulled all the way out, leaving me empty. That’s not what I wanted. Not at all.

Chase kissed the protest from my lips, then grabbed my waist and flipped me onto my front. He lifted my hips, and I scrambled to get my knees under me.

I started to rise up on my arms too, but Chase grabbed the back of my neck and shoved me down. His cock entered my hole fast and hard, making me gasp in shock.

He went deeper in this position, ramming my prostate.

I wailed with pleasure, hoping for once that there were no customers in my store and Briar had turned the music up really fucking loud.

“How’s this?” Chase punched his cock into me again and again, giving it to me so hard I was scooting up the bed.

I groaned as he ground against my prostate, swiveling his hips, before drawing back and thrusting hard again.

“So good,” I slurred into the pillow.

“You’re gonna come like this,” he said with a commanding tone that made a shiver dance down my spine. “No touching your cock.”

“Wh-what? I can’t...”

“You can.”

He shoved my hips just down enough that my cock tip dragged across the sheets with the movement of our bodies. It was a terrible tease, but combined with the pounding to my prostate I was on the edge in seconds.

“Chase!” I gasped.

He groaned, his hips losing rhythm. “You feel so good. I gotta come.”

I shoved my ass back against him, even though it meant giving up stimulation to my cock. But I didn’t need it. He bit down on my shoulder, muffing a shout, and that added spark of pain sent me flying.

A wave pulsed through me, and it wasn’t like the other orgasms I’d had before. It felt as if my entire body was coming, rather than just my dick. Cum flowed from my cock as if a tap had been opened, and my muscles contracted.

I shook and trembled, my vision whiting out.

When I blinked to awareness, I was still quivering, my face buried in the pillow, and Chase was beside me with a very satisfied smile. “You doing okay?”

I unstuck my tongue from the roof of my mouth. “Wow.”

“Yeah.” He chuckled, eyes warm. “You just had your first PO.”

“PO?”

“Prostate orgasm.”

“Holy shit. We should celebrate your achievements more often.”

“I was fired up and feeling ten feet tall,” he admitted sheepishly. “I didn’t really mean to fuck you like such a beast, though. I meant for us to make love.” My lips quirked, and he rolled his eyes. “And yes, I know it sounds corny, but I mean it.”

I cupped his cheek. “Chase, it’s all love between us now, right? And trust me, you treated my ass with a lot of love. Tough love, maybe, but holy hell, so much love.”

He laughed, eyes crinkling, before he kissed me. This time gently, softly, with reverence.

“You’re just so fucking perfect, Austin Kelly.”

“So are you,” I said seriously. “Ugh. We’re sappy as fuck.”

“We’ve earned it, don’t you think?”

I smiled, thinking of how far we'd come from our first snarky exchanges and the sweet text messages I thought came from a random stranger.

All my fears over the survival of my store, only to realize there was more than one path forward. All Chase's fears for his family legacy, only to create a new one.

So much had gone differently than planned.

But I wouldn't change a thing.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 2:35 pm

ShopGuy24:

Where are you? All the good snacks will be gone if we're late!

Wash972:

Be there in 5. Had to pick up something.

ShopGuy24:

Ok, good. Bennie is raring to go!

I pulled up in front of my condo a few minutes later. Austin and Bennie emerged from the front door, my dog pulling at the leash excitedly.

"Honey, I'm home!" I called playfully.

Austin grinned. "You're home late!"

"Sorry, babe. Turns out running my own business is a bit more complicated than managing my grandmother's."

He chuckled. "Welcome to being an indie."

Bennie watered the grass, then barked a greeting to me. I leaned in to kiss Austin, savoring his sweet taste. He'd taken to coming over to my place to feed and walk Bennie while I worked long hours.

It had been a busy week getting all the pieces in place to officially close on the sale of Fox Entertainment and collaborate with my family about their roles moving forward. Working without Gigi's oversight was scary but exhilarating.

But coming home to Austin was the best part of my day by far.

Tonight, we were overdue at Zach's place for movie night. My first movie night as an official boyfriend.

And Bennie's first night as a guest, too. Once Zach's brother found out about my dog, he'd insisted I bring him along to play.

I opened the car's back door so that Bennie could jump in, then the front door for Austin before rounding the car to get behind the wheel.

Austin carded his fingers through the hair at the nape of my head, and I sighed and sagged in the seat, my eyes closing.

"You're tired," he murmured. "If you'd rather stay home, my friends will understand."

"No way." I turned, reaching over the backseat and picking up the grocery bag. "I got all these great snacks."

Austin took the bag from me and peeked inside, then laughed. "Bisexual Oreos. A must."

"Most couples have songs. We have cookies."

Austin smirked. "I'm a record store owner. We've got to have a song."

“I Will Always Love You by Whitney Houston?”

“Too sappy.”

“Died in Your Arms?”

“Too cheesy.”

I laughed. “Okay, Love Shack it is.”

Austin smacked my thigh. “We’ll keep working on that.”

I threaded my fingers with his. “We’ve got plenty of time. I’m not going anywhere.”

Bennie barked his agreement from the backseat. Austin smiled at us both. “Don’t worry. I’m not either.”

When we arrived at Zach’s, the driveway and front curb were crowded with cars. Austin hustled me up the walk, muttering about getting stuck watching *Sleepless* in Seattle again.

Apparently, Zach credited the movie for being the inspiration behind his relationship with Tristan and picked it to watch whenever someone wasn’t ready with another selection.

“How was a movie behind their relationship?” I asked as we approached the front door. “Did they meet at a screening of it or something?”

Austin’s lips twitched. “No, his brother heard us talking about Zach’s lack of a love life, decided to play matchmaker, and reached out on the SeattleLife social media channel. He set them up, kind of how the kid in the movie set up his dad with a new

love interest.”

“Huh.” I leaned in. “That’s a pretty sappy way to meet.”

Austin smirked. “I know, right?”

“I like our love story. We’re feisty.”

“Damn right.”

Bennie barked.

The door opened, and a young teen grinned wide. “Hey, Bennie’s here!”

“Just Bennie?” Zach’s voice asked, amused.

“Oh. Austin and his boyfriend too!” He stepped back, waving us in. “Come in. Can I pet your dog?”

“Of course, that’s why he’s here.”

Bennie was ecstatic to have a playmate who wanted to do more than sit like a lump on the sofa. He bounded after Eric, chasing him around the sofa.

“Can we go in the backyard?” he called.

“Just for a while,” Zach said. “If Chase doesn’t mind?”

“Go. Bennie will love it.”

The rest of the friends were already seated around the living room. Tristan was in the

corner of the sofa, Becca on the other end, with a space in the middle that Zach must have left to answer the door. Ellis sat in an armchair, and Jordan on the footstool.

Between the dining room and living room, there was a new love seat.

“Hey! You got more furniture,” Austin said, throwing himself into the left corner.

“It seemed like I needed it,” Zach said. “The friend group keeps growing.”

“Sorry,” I said with a sheepish smile.

Austin reached for my wrist, tugging me down beside him, and immediately dug into my bag to pull out the Oreos. “Don’t apologize. You brought your own snacks, which makes you a better friend than the rest of us.”

Zach laughed. “That’s true.”

Austin wiggled on the cushion, getting cozy, and pulled my arm around him. “Yeah, this is good. Tristan, you can have my old spot on the sofa. This is better.”

Tristan looked confused. “Your spot...”

“Don’t listen to him,” Zach said with an eye roll as he picked up the remote. “What should we watch tonight? Skylar isn’t going to make it. Apparently he’s too busy having a life, so how about Sleepless—”

“No!” a chorus of voices called.

“You’ve Got Mail?” Becca suggested.

“I’ve had my fill of rivals to lovers,” Austin said, giving me a playful nudge. “I’m

ready for something sappier.”

“Ooh, Legally Blonde?” Ellis asked.

Jordan groaned and shook his head.

“What? You don’t like it?” Ellis asked, sounding hurt.

“It’s more that I think you like it for the wrong reasons,” Jordan said, a frown creasing his forehead.

“Do you have a better suggestion?” Zach asked.

Jordan sighed. “Not really. My Best Friend’s Wedding seems appropriate.”

I sensed an ironic subtext to that suggestion.

“Bzzt!” Austin said. “I hate that movie.”

“Fine,” Zach said. “Chase, why don’t you pick?”

“Geez, that’s a lot of pressure. You guys take your romance seriously. Um... How about Red, White, and Royal Blue?”

“Ooh, bringing the gay spice!” Becca exclaimed. “I love it.”

“I could watch that again,” Zach agreed.

“And again and again,” Ellis joked, fanning himself.

“Usually, we wouldn’t subject Austin to it, but...I guess a little man-on-man action is

no longer out of the question, hmm?”

“Nope,” he said. “This man was just impossible to resist no matter how hard I tried.”

“The words of love every boyfriend wants to hear,” I joked.

He elbowed me. “Aw, you know I love you.”

“I love you too, pookie.”

Austin’s friends laughed at the face he pulled. “Never call me that again.”

“Snookums?”

“No.”

“Cookie?”

He tilted his head, considering. “Maybe. As long as you keep feeding me snacks whenever I require.”

I kissed his cheek. “It’s a deal, my little bisexual cookie.”

“Excuse me while I go vomit,” Jordan said.

Ellis sighed. “Well, I think it’s adorable. True love is a great thing. I remember when I was with my boyfriend. He called me the sweetest names.”

Jordan’s face tensed, and I could see the subject was no small source of pain. But he didn’t say a word. He forced a smile and nodded. “You deserve that, El.”

Ellis glanced over his shoulder, flashing an oblivious smile at his friend. “Yeah, we all do.” He shrugged. “If Austin can find it when he’s not even looking, then I guess there’s hope for the rest of us.”

“There’s always hope,” I said. “Even when it seems hopeless, you have to keep believing.”

Austin looked at me, his eyes knowing. “I’m glad you kept believing.”

“I always will.”

He snuggled into my side, a smile on his face as the movie began to play. “Me too.”

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Three Years Later...

“Can I get my face made up? Please?” Lacy bounced up and down, her trademark ponytail bouncing with her.

“Uh, I don’t know. Is your mom cool with you wearing makeup?” I asked. “Maybe I should text her and check.”

“I don’t want makeup!” Lacy said with a scoff. “I want to look like a fierce dragon! It’s costume makeup.”

“Oh, of course. Well, in that case...”

“Do you think they do gruesome monsters?” Eric mused between bites from the tacos Zach and Tristan bought him at the food truck stationed in front of Fox Entertainment. “That would be awesome.”

The live band performing in front of my store hit an enthusiastic riff, blaring over our voices, so I started corralling the kids toward the makeup booth outside a cool little costume shop that had moved in recently. They were a fun addition to a neighborhood that was starting to see new life after a dozen events to celebrate small indies, music, and art.

“When is Chase getting here?” Zach asked once we were far enough from the music to hear each other better and Eric and Lacy had gotten into line for makeup.

I pulled out my phone. “Any minute. He had to drive back from Olympia.”

“Oh, how is his cousin’s store launch going?”

“It’s going really great,” I said.

“Wow. That makes three stores now, right?”

“Yep! Fox Entertainment was a brilliant idea.”

There was a happy bark behind me. When I turned, Chase was there with Bennie, a too charming smile on his too handsome face. “That’s not what you said about my store when you first heard of it,” he teased.

“Well, I had to make you work for it, didn’t I?”

He drew me into a warm kiss, just a sweet brush of his smile against mine and a nose nuzzle. We could still bring the heat like nobody’s business, but we’d save that for when we were alone. I treasured these small tokens of affection, too, because they reminded me of just how much we meant to each other, even if we gave each other a hard time.

“Such a little tease,” he murmured in my ear before pulling back.

“You know it,” I said with a grin.

“It’s a madhouse at the Olympia store. I almost didn’t make it back in time. They’re swamped.”

“I would have been okay if you didn’t,” I said. “I’m a big boy, and this event practically runs itself these days.”

It had taken a lot of work, but the idea Chase had when he wanted to prove he was a

good neighbor, our many “strategizing” sessions, and Tristan and his colleagues’ expertise had all come together to revive Union Heights with a series of events that brought people to our little corner of Seattle.

There was no magic solution for small indies like me, though. The events brought more traffic to my store, and I got a cut of all the merch local bands sold at the events, but there were always some slow periods too. Cold, gray winter days were tough. Business was a shifting landscape. I continually tweaked my approach, working to build my online sales while adjusting my investment in new and used records to find the best balance.

I still had my ups and downs. That was unavoidable. But the roller coaster no longer scared me. With a partner at my side, willing to give me advice—just as Wash972 had done in those early days—nothing was too much to handle.

It also helped that I had a great employee in Briar, who was running the store for me now, and who’d rented my apartment above the store when I’d moved in with Chase.

Step by step, Chase was rebuilding his family’s legacy while I upheld mine—but most importantly, we were doing it together.

I’d made peace with the fact that there was no success or failure, only the energy and enthusiasm we poured into our passions.

I was proud of us, and I knew in my heart that Uncle Charlie was proud, too. No matter what.

“Uncle Chase!” Lacy cried. “Look at me. I’m hideous!”

Bennie growled in surprise, not recognizing her, and Chase laughed so hard he bent over, eyes crinkling at the corners.

My heart expanded, so full I thought it might burst.

I had everything I'd ever need. And it all started with the worst day of my life.

Maybe fate really did have a sense of humor, but I wasn't laughing. I was too damn busy loving my man.

Thanks for reading! Want more Chase and Austin? Sign up for free access to my bonus scene, You've Got Mankini!

Next up? You guessed it! Elle will be heading to law school to win back his ex while Jordan waits not-so-patiently for him to figure out who really deserves his heart! Read their story in Legally Brawn!

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Rom-Com Reboot

Sexless in Seattle:After my parents died, I took custody of my kid brother. I've got no time for romance. But when my bro decides to post on a social media site and play matchmaker, everything changes.

You've Got Male: Carrying on my great-uncle's little record store means everything to me. Too bad a big-box store is opening on my block. The owner, Chase Fox, is too friendly, too smooth--too flirty. My only comfort is the new friend I recently met online...

Legally Brawn: I'm devastated when my boyfriend dumps me to find someone with brains as well as brawn. I go to law school to change his mind, but it's my best friend Jordan who makes me review the evidence. Verdict? I've been pursuing the wrong man.

Swallow Cove

Dock Tease: I've been in love with the man my dad hates for years. He resists because I'm young and a virgin. But I'm not giving up. I'll find a way to lure in my man.

Pretty Buoy:After leaving my toxic ex, I flee to Swallow Cove, where I meet Brooks Riggins. He has a surprising protective streak. When my ex turns up, Brooks offers to play fake boyfriend, but our kisses feel all too real.

Knockin' Boats:Sawyer's story. Coming fall 2024.

Rules We Break

Don't Date A DILF: As a teacher, I live by this rule. But when matchmaking drives me to fake date Hunter Rhodes, resisting this man may be the one test I can't pass.

Don't Mess With The Ex: I've lived by one simple rule for the last twenty years. But when Laurence Kensington III shows up to tell me we're still married, we'll both be put to the test.

Don't Bang Your Stepbro: I'm not one for rules, but not hooking up with your stepbrother is kind of a no-brainer. Until I wake up with him in a Vegas hotel wearing nothing but a wedding ring.

Games We Play

Two Truths and a Lyle: When our friends use a party game to drop a truth bomb that my BFF and I are in love, the drunken kiss that follows opens my eyes to feelings I never thought possible.

Never Have I Evan: When a party game reveals I still have my V-card, it's embarrassing. But when the sexy new guy in town wants to coach me in the art of flirtation, it's game on.

Truth or Darren: When I push my ex-girlfriend's brother too far with a dare, I'm the one to pay the price. A very sexy but utterly confusing tongue kiss with a guy.

7 Minutes in Kevin: When my dream man steps into the closet during a make-out game, I jump at the opportunity to get my hands on him. It might be a terrible idea, but how often will I get a chance to kiss my friend's sexy dad?

Mistle-Joe Kisses: A bit of mistletoe sparks an amazing night between coworkers. But will the prickly office manager Augustus bend his rules for love? A Games We

Play/Rules We Break cross-over novella.

Thrust Into Love

Swiped By My Dad's Best Friend: Cooper is a frat boy, general screwup, and...Daddy's boy?

Matched By My Rival: Simon is an ex-football star, a bitter rival, and...falling for the enemy?

Tapped By My Roommate: Ethan is a shy geek, newly bi-curious, and...propositioning his gay roommate?

Sexted By Santa: Christian Kringle is a college professor, reluctant Santa, and...fake dating his neighbor?

Marital Bliss

Surprise Groom: Caleb is shocked to learn his family could lose Bliss Island Resort—unless he can pull off a marriage of convenience with an investor's gay, go-go dancing son.

Wrangling a Groom: Wyatt and Diego made a childhood pact to get married one day. But they grew up, life got messy, and young love wasn't enough. When Diego visits the ranch, they have one more chance...Can they get it right in time to fulfill that marriage pact after all?

Nobody's Groom: A sexy ranch hand and a naïve country boy ignite each other's tempers—and passions—in this bisexual awakening, cowboy romance.

Faking a Groom: Avery Kinkaid has been repressing his deepest urges for as long as he can remember. But when his father pushes him too far, he's ready to call his bluff.

All he needs is a groom, and his first love is the perfect man for the role of fake fiancé.

Hearts and Health

Heart Trouble: Nurse Ben Griggs is leery of trusting his heart to anyone, let alone a thrill-seeking patient, but he agrees to a series of dates, if only to prevent more injuries!

Bedside Manner: Zane Kavanaugh is still recovering from a traumatic coming out, but he finds himself drawn to the calm, collected, much older ER doctor who treated him.

Urgent Care: Surgeon Trent Cavendish returns to his hometown—and his first love. Xavier isn't the kid he remembers, but a sexy man in lace and a competent nursing student. And neither version of the man is going to make it easy for Trent to find his second chance at love.

Room for Recovery: When Beau is bullied, teen heartthrob Wade comes heroically to his rescue. But their growing attraction won't come without painful truths.

Surprise Delivery: A thrill-seeking doctor teaches a workaholic administrator how to live in the moment before the responsibility of a baby arrives, and in return he finds love after loss.

Orderly Affair: A bi-curious orderly explores with a geeky lab tech, but between Ian's reluctance to come out and Callum's annoying ex, they'll have to work for their HEA in this hookups-to-lovers romance.

Operation Makeover: A cute but insecure X-ray tech and a gorgeous hairdresser join forces for a makeover that brings them both a love they never saw coming.

Rapid Response: A firefighter discovers a new side to his sexuality with a bossy male paramedic. Their chemistry is red-hot, but Sean will have to come to terms—not just with his attraction to a man, but with his desperate need to please.

Standalone Romances

Grinch Kisses: Griff is a festival planner who has lost his love for the holidays, but that all changes when his sister brings him an unexpected gift, one that is tall, brand, and handsome...

Yours for the Holiday: Remy loves to hate his brother's best friend. Or maybe he hates to love him. Either way, sparks fly when the two share a room during a holiday vacation.

All I Want is You: One kiss under the mistletoe destroyed a friendship. Will another Christmas kiss remake it into something better?

Five Fake Dates: How many fake dates will it take to decide if your best friend should be your boyfriend, and whether one kiss was a fluke or only the beginning of a bisexual discovery? Five, obviously!

Love by Number: Aidan doesn't have the best record with relationships, but he's had a lifelong love affair with baseball. When he needs a ride to the World Series, though, he must rely on a sexy artist who is as spontaneous as Aidan is rigid. Will their differences add up to love?