

FRONT RANGE MOTORCYCLE COLLECTIVE BOOK ONE

Egg Me On



AN M/M OPPOSITES ATTRACT ROMANCE

EZRADA0

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An M/M Opposites Attract Romance

Ezra Dao

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This book is to everyone who hopes to find that one person who truly sees you, and to everyone who already has.

Like many of my books, **Egg Me On** deals with some sensitive topics that neurodiverse people face. As an ADHD person, it's often neurodiverse people who I find most relatable. And even though this book is light-hearted, fun, and more than a little bit smutty, I hope that I've done justice to the specific struggles that one of the character faces. The story by no means is meant to represent the experience of every person with an anxiety disorder, but one of the characters in this books deals with an issue specific to anxiety disorders that's very close to my heart. Someone in my family struggles with the same issue. In a way, I think I wrote this story to give myself hope that my family member might find someone who can really see them the way Aiden sees Cash.

I hope everyone finds that, really.

-Ezra

CHAPTER 1

Aiden

THE FRONT RANGE MOTORCYCLE Collective's parking lot shouldn't have been intimidating. It was just a parking lot. But the anxiety coiling in my gut had nothing to do with the concerning rattle coming from somewhere in the depths of my shitty Subaru—that was a problem for Future Aiden—and everything to do with my mission for today: finding a new place to park my food truck. At a motorcycle... club? Gang? I wasn't sure.

I'd spent the past three years building my brand, my customer base, my entire fucking life around 'Egg Me On'. I had budget projections, growth spreadsheets, the whole nine yards. And I was supporting both myself and my college-aged sister, to boot.

There was only one variable I hadn't accounted for: real estate sharks. Specifically, the one who'd swooped in and made the owner of my old food truck lot an offer he couldn't refuse.

So here I was, back to square one. And considering parking my rainbow-splashed food truck in the middle of what looked like the set of Sons of Anarchy. Great plan, Lockhart. Absolutely stellar.

I killed the engine and sat for a moment, watching dust motes dance in the sunlight streaming through my windshield. What looked to be a converted warehouse loomed ahead—all industrial chic with its gunmetal gray paint job and orange accents. Roll-up garage doors lined one side, and I could see motorcycles of every imaginable style parked in neat rows. My food truck would stick out like a drag queen at a church picnic. Or someplace less churchy, with more bikers.

But what choice did I have? My current location was being bulldozed next week for a luxury apartment complex, and finding affordable, profitable spots in Denver was nearly impossible.

I exhaled, fogging up my window slightly. "You're Aiden fucking Lockhart," I whispered to myself. "Your huevos rancheros made an uptight investment banker cry actual tears of joy last week. You got this."

Straightening my back, I pushed open my car door and stepped out, immediately feeling underdressed in my skinny jeans and faded "Rise and Shine, Bitches" t-shirt. The mid-morning sun beat down on the pavement, and the air smelled of motor oil, metal, and possibility. A distant rumble of engines vibrated through my chest like a second heartbeat.

"Aiden!" A deep voice called from the entrance, and I spotted Silas Halden's imposing figure standing in the doorway.

Even knowing he was a regular customer didn't stop me from feeling intimidated. He was six-foot-something of solid muscle with steel-blue eyes that missed nothing. My grandma would've called him "sturdy as an oak" before pinching his ass when no one was looking.

"Thanks for making time," I said, extending my hand and immediately regretting how clammy it felt. Silas didn't seem to notice, his grip firm but not aggressive as we shook.

"Appreciate you considering us," he replied, the hint of a smile softening his otherwise stoic expression. "How's business?"

"Still egging people on," I quipped automatically, then winced at my own terrible pun. "Sorry. Shop humor. It's, uh, good. Steady. Or it was until my landlord dropped the redevelopment bomb."

Silas nodded, understanding in his eyes. "Bad timing. But maybe good timing, too." He gestured toward the building. "Let me show you what we're working with. The space we're using is the warehouse's old loading dock, around the side."

I tried to peek through the windows as we walked past, catching a glimpse of a half dozen motorcycles in various states of repair, and a few people milling about, mostly men as intimidating as Silas.

"I should warn you, I don't know shit about motorcycles. And I'm probably not what your customers expect in terms of, you know..." I gestured vaguely at my entire colorful self.

"You don't need to know motorcycles, only food." Silas raised an eyebrow, amusement flickering across his face. "And I can't imagine they'd care about your choice of outfits."

"What if I say something stupid about their bike or whatever and get my ass handed to me?" I worried. "Not gonna lie. When I think biker bar, I think of places where guys like me get used as dart boards."

Silas stopped walking, turning to face me fully. "This isn't a biker bar. No one is going to bully you. That's not what we're about here, Aiden. The Collective isn't just a name—it's the whole point. We've built this place specifically to be a community for everyone who loves motorcycles, regardless of who they are. There are women here, trans people, queer people. People of color. It's not just the stereotypes who like to ride motorcycles."

"You... kinda look like a stereotype, though?" Shit, I shouldn't have said that.

Silas burst out laughing. "Harsh, but probably true."

"Well, that's a relief," I said. "Because the rainbow stickers on my truck are pretty permanent at this point."

That earned me another laugh. "We don't care about your paint job. We only care that you serve amazing brunch all day." He rubbed his flat stomach, grinning. "Hell, I'm hungry even thinking about you being right outside cooking up that yummy eggs Benedict. Or the Nutella stuffed French toast?" He groaned.

"Okay," I said, blushing. "I'll bite. Show me what you're thinking."

"So you're warned, the lot is kind of a work in progress, so don't judge too harshly."

He turned and led me around the corner of the building, talking as we walked.

"This whole place is a work in progress, really. We started small," Silas explained as we walked, his gait slightly uneven with what I now noticed was a subtle limp. "Just a shared garage space where riders could work on their bikes without annoying their landlords or freezing their asses off in winter. Then Marcus—my business partner—convinced me we could be more than that."

"And now?" I asked, taking in the professional-looking service bays on one side and a retail area displaying parts and gear on

the other.

"Now we've still got the garage. And a lot of our core members pay monthly for garage access and tools. It's tough to work on your motorcycle if you live in an apartment or shared house. But we also sell parts, offer professional repairs, teach classes, lead group rides..." He shrugged, but I could see the pride beneath the casual gesture.

"Impressive," I said.

"We've grown as the community has grown, listening to what they needed and trying different things. But the heart of Front Range Motorcycle Collective has always been giving people a place to belong. And I think having food here could help that. Gives them a reason to hang out even if they're not taking a class or working on their bike, you know? And that's what the Loading Dock is all about." With that, he turned and gestured towards it.

You could still see the bones of the old loading dock, the ramped concrete, and big overhead doors, but someone had taken the time to make it into a comfortable space. Wooden picnic tables dotted the concrete pad, and string lights were strung overhead between metal poles. The dock platform itself had been transitioned into a wide, large bench, and planters filled with hardy greenery softened the industrial edge. The loading dock doors were glass now, and beyond the concrete was a large, empty asphalt area that could easily fit several food trucks.

"It's not much yet," Silas admitted, gesturing to the space. "But we've got plans. I want to add more seating, heat lamps for winter, maybe a permanent awning structure with some overhead doors that pull down if it's really cold. A fire pit would be cool, too. And of course, I'm open to your ideas." He turned to me, eyes alight with the kind of vision I recognized from my own late-night planning sessions. "I want this to be a place where people come to hang out. Somewhere you can grab food, talk shop, make friends."

I gazed out at the empty lot, trying to picture my truck parked there. The familiar battle between my business sense and my anxiety raged in my head. On one hand, foot traffic from the Collective could be huge—this was a place that had people coming and going all day. Even in the few minutes we'd been here, I'd seen several motorcycles drive up. On the other, I'd spent three years building relationships with my regulars at the current spot. Would they follow me here? It was only a few blocks away—close enough that they might.

"Heat lamps would be nice," I said, stalling while my brain worked overtime. "Denver winters are brutal on the food truck circuit."

"We've already ordered a few," Silas replied. "Along with more tables, some weather protection." He paused, watching me carefully. "We're serious about building this out, Aiden. I wouldn't have reached out otherwise."

The sincerity in his voice was impossible to miss. Whatever his vision was for this place, it wasn't a half-assed side project. The man had built something real here—something with heart—and was offering me a chance to be part of it.

"And you're serious about your brunch," I teased.

He laughed. "Can't live without it. Come on, don't leave me hanging. What will I do without your breakfast burritos?"

I turned and stared at the lot again, looking around at the nearby buildings, trying to determine the potential customer base. The location was close to my old lot, and the visibility was good, though maybe not quite as good as the old lot.

"What's that building over there?" I asked, pointing to another converted warehouse across the street.

"It's a co-working space. People rent offices, hold meetings, that sort of thing. Possibly a nice source of customers? I don't know it that well."

Oh. That was good. Lots of foot traffic to that, too. I turned back to him. "How much are you charging?"

Silas crossed his arms over his broad chest, the movement pulling his black t-shirt taut across muscles that definitely didn't come from pushing pencils. "Here's what I'm thinking," he said, eyes focusing on the empty lot before us. "Six months rent-free while we build this out. You'd be our first truck, so I want to make it work for you. Make sure you can turn a healthy profit." He turned those steel-blue eyes on me, and I struggled not to fidget under his direct gaze. "We give you time to establish yourself here without financial pressure. And in return, your truck will help us attract customers, create the vibe we want, and you can give me some ideas for how to lure in a few more trucks."

My brain short-circuited momentarily. Six months rent-free? In Denver's food truck market, that was like being offered a unicorn that shat gold coins.

"That's... generous," I managed, trying to sound professional instead of desperate. "Really generous."

"It's mutually beneficial," Silas replied with a pragmatic shrug. "What are you paying at your current location?"

I told him the monthly figure that had been slowly strangling my profit margin, the number that kept me awake at night.

Silas's brow furrowed. "That's robbery. You're just parking in a parking lot and using some electricity and water, right?"

"You'd think, but that's the urban food truck market."

"We'll come up with a lease," he continued, "and we'll set your rate for after six months so you don't have to worry about surprises. I was thinking less than half that, mostly to cover utilities and use of the restrooms."

I laughed, a short, disbelieving sound. "Are you for real? Because if this is some elaborate punk'd situation where I get excited and then you pull out the real terms, I'm going to be genuinely devastated."

His mouth twitched in what might have been amusement. "No hidden cameras. Just business sense. We want to keep our membership happy and paying their dues to hang out here. You need a location. Win-win."

I did some quick mental math. The reduced overhead would mean I could finally pay my sister Mira what she deserved for helping out on weekends. Maybe even set aside something for emergencies instead of praying my ancient car and even more ancient house didn't need major repairs.

"Let me show you the rest," Silas said, leading me back toward the building. "You'll want to know what kind of facilities you're working with."

We entered through a different door than before, stepping into a hallway with polished concrete floors. "Bathrooms here," Silas indicated, pointing to clearly marked doors. "Clean, always stocked, maintained daily. Your customers are welcome to use them, and part of why I want to charge rent is so I can have the cleaner come in more often as it gets busier."

We continued down the hall, emerging into the cavernous main space I'd glimpsed earlier. From this angle, I could see it was divided into different sections. Nearest to us was an open area with several motorcycle lifts, tool chests, and people working independently on various bikes.

"This is the co-op shop," Silas explained. "Members pay monthly for access to space, tools, and occasional advice. They do their own work, but in a proper facility, with all the tools they need, and classes on various types of maintenance and improvement projects. A lot of bikers really love that side of it, tuning their bike exactly how they want."

I nodded, watching a woman in her fifties meticulously polishing chrome while a skinny guy with a full beard nearby struggled with something on his bike's engine while another guy stood by, pointing something out to him. The atmosphere wasn't what I'd expected—no aggressive music, no posturing, just people focused on their tasks with occasional conversation floating between them.

We moved past the co-op area to a more organized section with professional-looking service bays.

"This is our pro shop. I'm sure you'll get to know them. Customers pay us to do the work that's beyond their skill level, or the stuff they don't have time for," Silas said. "Professional repairs, customization, the whole nine yards. Down the road, we're hoping to add a few more staff for custom fabrication and painting, too."

My attention was caught by movement in the first bay, separated slightly from the others. A tall Black man worked alone, his back to us, broad shoulders moving with controlled precision as he manipulated something on the engine in front of him. Even from behind, there was something magnetic about his focus—the way his hands moved with absolute certainty, the flex of muscle under his dark skin as he reached for a tool without looking.

Silas noticed my gaze and changed our course to head toward this solitary figure. "That's Cash Upton, one of our best mechanics. He's got a skill for rebuilding engines that's just... perfection."

As we approached, I got a better look. He was tall, at least as tall as Silas, with close-cropped dark hair and the kind of build that suggested intimidating strength. His arms were covered in intricate tattoos—geometric patterns flowing into mechanical designs, the details too fine to make out from a distance.

"Cash," Silas called. "Got a minute?"

Cash didn't startle or rush. He finished whatever adjustment he was making, then straightened slowly, wiping his hands on a rag before turning to face us. His expression remained neutral, light brown eyes flicking from Silas to me and back without revealing anything.

Jesus. His face was like something carved by a sculptor who really understood the concept of "ruggedly handsome"—strong jawline, full lips, stubble that looked deliberate rather than lazy. And he was just... staring at me. Not hostile, not friendly, just observing.

"This is Aiden Lockhart," Silas continued. "Owns the 'Egg Me On' food truck. Considering moving to our lot."

Cash grunted, gave me a terse nod, then turned back to his work without a word.

Okay then. Mr. Personality he was not.

"Cash doesn't waste words," Silas said as we walked away, his tone apologetic. "But he's a good guy."

"I'm sure he's very impressive once you get to know him," I replied, unable to keep the hint of sarcasm from my voice.

Silas chuckled. "He grows on you. He's a very talented mechanic, and he has a good heart. You just don't always know what he's thinking. Or ever."

We approached the other bay, where two mechanics were working on the same bike, and looked up as we neared. Unlike Cash, they both broke into immediate smiles.

"Guys, this is Aiden. He runs 'Egg Me On' food truck. Might be joining us out back."

"Holy shit, really?" The first mechanic was a handsome Asian man about my age. He stepped forward, wiping a hand on his pants before extending it. "I'm Dylan. Please tell me you still make those chorizo breakfast burritos that Silas brought us the other day. Because I would kill a man for more of those."

His enthusiasm was infectious, his smile dimpling his cheeks and softening his angular features. I shook his hand, feeling my first genuine smile since arriving.

"The chorizo is our bestseller, yeah. Along with the Nutella French toast."

"Oh my god," the other mechanic groaned, setting down her socket wrench and joining our conversation. Her asymmetrical dark hair framed sharp features and intelligent eyes. "I'm Liv. I'm going to get so fat if you park here, but I don't even care."

"Liv's our electrical genius," Silas explained. "And lead mechanic. Dylan teaches our riding classes when he's not fixing bikes, and focuses on customization."

"So you'd really set up here?" Liv asked, eyeing me with open curiosity. "That would be awesome. We've been dying for food options. I hate to drive somewhere when I'm deep in the zone. I come back and I can't remember what I was doing."

"And she gets hangry," Dylan said in a stage whisper, earning a playful punch in the shoulder.

"Better than you. You just skip eating until you're woozy and start making mistakes!"

"Silas! There you are!" A new voice called from across the shop. "Tess called about the parts order and—oh, hello!"

The man who approached moved with the kind of energy that filled a room. He was shorter than Silas but carried himself with effortless confidence, his fade haircut immaculate, his clothes stylish despite the shop environment. The moment our eyes met, I felt the instantaneous gay radar ping—a subtle, wordless recognition. There were queer people here.

"Aiden, this is Marcus Bautista, my business partner," Silas said. "Marcus, this is the chef I told you about."

Marcus's handshake was accompanied by a brilliant smile. "The food truck guy! Finally! I've been begging Silas to get someone in here before we all starve to death. What's your specialty?"

"Brunch all day," I replied, relaxing further. "Sandwiches, burritos, some sweet options."

"Wait, from 'Egg Me On'? I didn't know you were so cute," Marcus exclaimed with a flutter of his eyelashes, confirming my guess about his sexuality as he leaned in, his voice turning flirtatious. "I would have done the food runs if I'd known."

"No, you wouldn't. You have never once done a food run in all the years we've worked together," Silas muttered, and Marcus burst out laughing.

"He's probably right. But only because he gets hungry first. But with you right here in our parking lot, I'll be spending all my time out there! When can you start?"

I laughed, glancing at Silas. "We haven't actually finalized anything yet."

"Oh, please," Marcus waved dismissively. "Silas wouldn't have brought you in if he wasn't serious. He's been talking about your food truck for months."

I looked around the shop, taking in the diverse group of people, the comfortable atmosphere, the genuine enthusiasm. This wasn't at all what I'd expected. Instead of finding a stereotypical biker haven full of toxic masculinity, I'd discovered... a community. One that apparently really wanted breakfast food.

The free rent offer was too good to pass up. The location was close enough to my old spot that regulars could still find me. And everyone else seemed welcoming as hell. My eyes darted towards Cash.

Well, mostly everyone.

"You know what?" I said, making my decision. "I think this could work. Six months free with the option to renew at the rate you mentioned sounds fair." I extended my hand to Silas. "You've got yourself a food truck."

I was riding high as I climbed back into my car and swiped open my social media, snapping a quick shot of my new location. I'd been sharing the saga of the lot closing on social media, and many of my fans and regulars had been suggesting locations. That's how the meeting with Silas had come about.

I posted the photo, sharing the address of the Front Range Motorcycle Collective, trying to sound excited about the move. New location! New customers.

Still, dread washed over me as I thought about the tasks involved in moving my truck. I had to rent a truck to tow it with, gather everything, pack it, and fold up all of my signage. I pulled open a notes app and started making a list. One week to move. One week to tell as many of my current customers that my new location would be only a few blocks away. Coupons, maybe? A freebie for anyone who stopped by on opening day? I added that to my notes app, then started my car.

It stuttered a few times as I shifted into reverse, but finally got going, and as I drove home, I wondered how many days I could stretch whatever this issue was before going to the shop.

CHAPTER 2

Cash

I GUNNED THE HARLEY'S engine harder than necessary as I pulled into the food truck guy's short driveway. I wasn't sure why. Maybe I was hoping to irritate his neighbors. He lived in Congress Park, an older neighborhood not too far from downtown, filled with modest one-story homes that probably cost way more than they looked like they cost. I wondered if the food truck business was that lucrative, or if he had roommates.

Silas's adorable breakfast chef had only been in the FRMC's parking lot for a week, and already several of the guys were addicted to his food, which was why I was picking him up.

I was definitely not picking the kid up because of the cute, cheerful smiles he gave me every morning when I stopped by for a bagel. Or because of those freckles on the bridge of his nose.

Nope. That would be insane.

I was just doing the kid a favor because I hoped it'd keep the peace in the shop. No one wanted to see Liv or Silas hangry.

Besides, he only lived four blocks from Colfax, just a little ways down from where I rented a loft. It was practically on my way.

The Harley wasn't my usual commuter bike. My café racer was sleeker, faster, more my style—but it didn't have a passenger seat, and today I needed one of those. Fucking Silas and his fucking obsession with breakfast food.

I silently wished I hadn't looked at my text messages this morning. Like I didn't have engines to rebuild, custom jobs piling up. But here I was, rolling up behind the most pathetic Subaru I'd ever seen. And Denver had a lot of Subarus.

No wonder this guy needed a ride. The car was more rust than metal, with a dent in the rear quarter that had probably been there since before Aiden could drive. I cut the Harley's engine and swung my leg over, boots hitting the pavement with a satisfying thud, wondering how this guy could run such a successful food truck when he couldn't even maintain his car.

I checked the address on my phone again. Yep, this was it. Small brick bungalow, weathered but tidy, with a sad attempt at a garden out front. Grandma chic, complete with those lace curtains in the windows. Not what I'd pictured for Aiden, who was almost aggressively cheerful and upbeat.

One week of parking his truck at Front Range Motorcycle Collective, and everyone was drooling over him—or his food, anyway. I didn't get what the big deal was. I mean, sure, his bagel sandwiches had a perfectly cooked egg, but that wasn't that hard, was it?

Before I could knock, the front door swung open, and a petite blonde in yoga pants wandered out. She was staring at the phone in her hand, not paying attention to where she was going. I cleared my throat before she could collide with me, and she startled, fumbled her phone, and backed up like I was there to rob her. Which, on one hand, I mean yeah, maybe it was a bit intimidating to find a huge guy dressed in leather on your front porch.

"Who are you?" she demanded, her slightly overdone eyebrows shooting up toward her hairline. "If you're selling something, we're not interested."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "I'm here for Aiden."

Her eyes widened further, darting from my face to my tattoos to the Harley at the curb. "Why? What did he do?"

Jesus Christ. "Um, I'm his ride."

"His ride?" She clutched her phone tighter, eying my motorcycle, and possibly calculating whether she needed to call 911. "To where exactly?"

I exhaled slowly through my nose, counting to five in my head. "To the motorcycle shop. Someone said his car's fucked, so I came to get him."

"Mira, it's fine!" Aiden appeared in the doorway behind her, looking flustered. He was wearing a tight blue t-shirt with SUNNY SIDE UP across the chest and jeans that hugged every curve. Not that I was looking. He looked up at me and froze for a beat, possibly long enough for his sister to notice. "Oh, hey! Er, Cash, right?" he said, voice full of false cheer.

"You don't even know his name?" the girl yelped.

"It's not a big deal. Just a ride to work. And you're going to be late to class if you don't leave right now."

The blonde—Mira, apparently—whipped her head around, pocketing her phone and planting her hands on her hips. "Aiden, you can take a day off if the car trouble is that bad. Or I can drive you in after class."

"Yeah, but then I'll miss the breakfast rush, and my ingredients will go bad, and it'll all snowball. Then who would pay your college tuition?"

I huffed out a breath, trying to show my impatience with their arguing, but neither one of them noticed.

"I don't think one missed morning is going to bankrupt us," she protested. "Besides, if it does, I can take student loans."

He grinned and kissed the girl on her cheek. "It's fine, Mira. I want you to get started on the right foot. It's just a few more years of hard work."

"But... but... this is your ride? A motorcycle? With a complete stranger?"

"He's not a stranger, he's a regular customer. Likes his bagel sandwiches with avocado and runny eggs, and takes his coffee with two sugars." Something about the fact that he almost forgot my name, but knew my exact order, made me smile. On the inside. I didn't like to smile on the outside. "He works at the shop. Doing motorcycle things."

She whirled back to me, eyes narrowed. "You work at the motorcycle shop?"

"Yeah." I shifted my weight, already tired of this conversation.

“What motorcycle things?”

“Mechanic,” I said.

Aiden was eyeing me, an apologetic smile playing at the corners of his mouth. His hair was slightly damp, like he'd just showered, curling at the temples in a boyish way that was kind of cute. I looked away.

"Sorry, my sister's a little protective," Aiden explained, edging past Mira onto the porch and planting himself in front of me. He was short enough that I could see over his head. Or rest my chin on his head, but I liked that he thought he could defend me from the terrifying girl. "Mira, this is Cash. Cash, my younger sister, Mira."

Sister. That made sense, and I supposed they did have the same pretty hazel eyes, though Mira's were scary fierce while Aiden's were warm and kind. The sort of eyes I could stare into for hours, examining the play of green and gray around his irises.

Not that I planned on staring into Aiden's eyes. That would be weird.

Mira crossed her arms, mirroring my stance. "Do you know how many motorcycle accidents happen every year? Especially in states without helmet laws? And how many are caused by cars not seeing motorcycles? I'm in pre-law, Aiden. I know how to do research—"

I cleared my throat and held up the spare helmet I'd brought.

"Mira, please." Aiden sighed, stepping fully onto the porch. "My car's dead, and I need to get to the FRMC. I bought a ton of ingredients yesterday, and they're sitting in the truck, and they'll go to waste if I don't open. Besides, Cash drove all the way here to do me a favor."

I grunted. "Silas sent me."

Aiden's face fell slightly, and I felt a twinge of... something. Not guilt. I don't do guilt. But whatever it was, I didn't like it.

Mira didn't look convinced. "Why can't you just call an Uber?"

"Because it's rush hour, and it would take forever, and we're broke, remember?" Aiden's voice had an edge to it now.

She rolled her eyes, then met mine over Aiden's head. "Fine. But if you let him die, I'll never forgive you. He's my only family. Understood?"

I nodded.

"I won't die." He turned to face me as if the problem was solved, his usual megawatt smile returning. "Sorry about that, Cash. Thank you so much for picking me up! Let me just grab my jacket."

He ducked past his sister and darted back inside, leaving me alone with the human embodiment of helicopter parenting. Mira gave me a once-over that felt like a TSA pat-down.

"So you're a mechanic?" she asked, as if confirming my cover story. "But you're not his friend. Why pick him up?"

I shrugged, not really in the mood to explain myself. Honestly, I didn't think I'd ever been in the mood to explain myself.

"Have you ever crashed a motorcycle?"

"Not recently."

She was not a fan of that answer at all, but Aiden chose that moment to reappear wearing a denim jacket that looked about as effective as tissue paper for motorcycle riding. He had a small leather messenger bag slung across his body and was nervously fidgeting with the strap.

"Ready!" he announced, with forced cheerfulness.

"Bag," I said, holding out a hand, and he handed it to me, eyeing me nervously.

I opened one of the Harley's saddlebags and shoved his bag in, then handed him the helmet. It was matte black, no frills, just something I kept around in case I wanted to impress a Tinder hookup. I tossed it to him, and he caught it with surprising deftness.

"Put that on." I waited as he fumbled with the straps. "Tighter." I demonstrated, grabbing his chin and cinching the strap down. It didn't fit perfectly, but it would have to do for now.

"I've never been on a motorcycle before," he admitted.

"No shit."

Mira stepped forward, car keys in hand. "Are you sure about this? What if—"

"Mira. Go. You're already late for class. I'll text you when I get there."

Aiden's tone left no room for argument. She finally retreated, climbing into a Jeep that was only in slightly better shape than Aiden's car.

I swung my leg over the Harley and settled into the seat, kickstand up. "Get on."

Aiden approached like he was facing a wild animal. "Just... climb up?"

"Yep." I revved the engine once, partly to hurry him along and partly because I knew it would annoy the nagging sister, who was eyeing us as she loaded up her own car.

Mira stopped her Jeep before pulling past us, frowning until Aiden waved her on. Once she was gone, he circled the bike twice, as if trying to figure out where he was supposed to sit. Then he reached for the seat, gingerly placing a hand on a few inches away from my ass, then awkwardly tried to mount the bike without touching me at all. It was like watching a baby giraffe attempt ballet. One leg swung over, then he wobbled, hands hovering an inch from my shoulders as if touching me might electrocute him.

His laugh came out as a nervous hiccup. Finally, he managed to perch on the very edge of the passenger seat, his body rigid.

"Hold on," I told him.

"Where, um, do I...?"

I exhaled sharply. "Your choice"

He placed his hands lightly on my shoulders, fingers barely making contact. This was going to be a disaster.

"You good?"

"Yeah, I think—"

I twisted the throttle and the Harley lurched forward. Aiden let out a startled yelp, his pretense of maintaining distance instantly forgotten as his entire body slammed against my back, arms wrapping around my waist in a death grip. His chest pressed firmly against me, thighs suddenly bracketing mine.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" he gasped into my ear. "A little warning next time?"

I almost smiled. On the inside.

As we pulled away from the curb, I felt his body gradually begin to relax against my back. His grip loosened slightly, but he stayed close, his warmth seeping through my leather jacket. I tried not to notice how perfectly he fit against me, how naturally he began to follow my movements as we navigated the residential streets.

Most first-time passengers were terrible—they leaned the wrong way in turns or sat stiff as boards, fighting the bike's natural motion. Not Aiden. After the initial shock, he instinctively seemed to understand the rhythm, or sense my motions, his body moving with mine as we leaned into a curve, shifting his weight just right.

I guided the Harley onto a main thoroughfare, increasing our speed. Aiden's arms tightened slightly around my waist, but there was no panic in it. When I glanced in my side mirror, I caught a glimpse of his face—eyes wide but bright with excitement, not fear.

"This is amazing!" he shouted, the wind carrying his voice. "Why doesn't everyone do this?"

Something warm and unwelcome unfurled in my chest. I pushed it down, focusing on the road ahead. The shop was only fifteen minutes away, in an industrial area West of I-25. Fifteen minutes of this stranger pressed against me, his hands tight against my jacket.

This was fine. This was nothing. Just helping Silas out.

I took a sharper turn than necessary at the next intersection, partly to test Aiden's unexpected aptitude for riding, partly to distract myself from my own bullshit thoughts. He responded perfectly, leaning with me, a surprised laugh vibrating against my back. His thighs tightened around mine as we straightened out, and I swallowed hard.

Fifteen minutes. I could manage fifteen minutes without losing my mind over some pretty boy with a food truck and an intuitive grasp of motorcycle physics. I'd dealt with worse. Probably.

I wasn't even attracted to men.

"The light's changing!" Aiden called, pointing ahead unnecessarily.

I downshifted, slowing for the red light. When we came to a stop, Aiden didn't pull away as most passengers would. He stayed molded to my back, his chin nearly resting on my shoulder.

"This is seriously cool," he said, his voice close to my ear. "Thanks for picking me up, even if Silas made you do it."

"Whatever." I stared straight ahead, refusing to turn and meet his eyes, which I could feel on the side of my face.

"I can't believe I'm on a motorcycle. Who knew it'd be such a rush?"

The light turned green, and I accelerated perhaps a little too aggressively, cutting off his cheerful chatter. Aiden laughed again, the sound vibrating through both our bodies as he clung tighter.

"Am I sitting too close?" he asked.

"You're perfect." Shit, that had come out awkwardly. Maybe he wouldn't notice.

"Yeah?" The pleased surprise in his voice was almost childlike, and I cut off any more questions with a loud rev of the engine as the light turned green.

We merged onto the highway for a brief stretch, and I opened up the throttle. The Harley responded with a satisfying roar, eating up the asphalt beneath us. Aiden whooped with delight, his body pressed impossibly closer now. His hands had found their way to my abdomen, splayed wide against my stomach. I focused on my breathing, on the road, on anything but the way his fingers seemed to burn through my t-shirt. Should have worn my gear. My leather jacket with its protective pads would have been hot as hell in this weather, but it would have dulled this sensation.

The exit for the shop approached, and I took it smoothly, guiding us through the final few blocks. As we pulled into the FRMC parking lot, I felt a strange reluctance I hadn't anticipated. I cut the engine and lowered the kickstand, and Aiden's arms slowly unwound from around my waist.

"That was incredible," he said, climbing off the bike with noticeably more grace than when he'd gotten on. He removed the helmet, his hair adorably mussed, cheeks flushed with excitement. "Thanks again, Cash. I know Silas forced you, but I really appreciate it."

I grunted, avoiding his gaze as I secured my own helmet.

I watched him walk toward the entrance closest to the FRMC's kitchen, messenger bag bouncing against his hip, that same energy in his step I'd noticed yesterday. Only when he disappeared inside did I allow myself to exhale fully, running a hand over my face.

CHAPTER 3

Aiden

THE RUMBLE OF CASH'S Harley died beneath me as we pulled into my driveway, my arms still wrapped around his waist, fingers splayed across the hard plane of his stomach.

Despite acting grumpy about the rides, he'd shown up day after day, always there to pick me up, though I'd texted him more than once that Mira and I could figure out how to share her car. He'd responded curtly, saying it was fine, and then let me know when to be ready. My car sat neglected in the driveway, waiting for me to work up the courage—and the funds—to take it into a shop.

And the thrill of riding on the back of Cash's bike, pressed against his muscular body, wasn't really motivating me to hurry up the repairs.

Because, despite his obvious personality defects, I was enjoying the rides. After a week on the back of his motorcycle, my body knew the drill—knew when to lean with him, move with him, when to try not to pop a boner pressed against his back. That last one was impossible, because Cash was a walking sex god, tall and handsome, with thick muscles rippling under glistening warm brown skin.

But if I angled my hips right, I was pretty sure he couldn't feel how horny squishing myself against his back made me.

At first, I'd told myself I'd take the Subaru into the shop when I got tired of riding on the bike, or when I'd saved up a little more money, but the thrill of it still hadn't faded, and money, was, well... always tight. So here I was, back on his bike again, kinda wishing I'd asked him to take me for a longer ride so I could spend a little more time with him.

There was no good excuse for that, though, so I reluctantly peeled myself away, swinging my leg over the seat, way less awkwardly than my first few attempts at dismounting the bike, one of which had resulted in a caught shoelace and me on my face on the pavement.

"Thanks for the ride," I said, removing my helmet and running a hand through my hair. The late afternoon sun accented Cash's high cheekbones as he stared at me for a long moment, saying nothing.

Silas had been right — Cash was a man of few words. Almost none, really.

He grunted, and instead of backing out of my driveway, he dismounted, swinging his leg over the bike with a grace I found stupidly hot. For a minute, I wondered if he had to pee, but his gaze shifted to my piece-of-shit Subaru, which somehow looked sadder by the day.

"We're fixing that," he announced, the words not a question but a statement of fact. I wasn't sure Cash knew how to ask questions.

I blinked. "We're what now?"

"Your car." His jaw tightened as he stared at my rusted baby. "It's a fucking embarrassment."

"Hey now," I protested, feeling oddly defensive of my vehicular disaster child. "She may not be pretty, but—"

"Where's your garage?"

I pointed to the small detached garage at the edge of our property, a structure nearly as ancient as the bungalow itself. Usually, Mira parked in the garage, because her car was nicer, but it was empty now.

"Open it."

I unlocked my car and reached for the visor, pushing the opener button and watching the garage door slowly rise. "But how do we get it in there?"

Cash ignored me and strode over to my car, grabbing the keys from my hand and opening the door. When he looked like he was about to climb in, I dove in front of him.

"Hold on," I said, hurrying ahead of him. "Let me just..." I frantically gathered the fast food wrappers, orphaned napkins, and random receipts littering the front seat, stuffing them into an old grocery bag I found in the back. "Sorry about the mess." I was meticulous about my kitchen, but somehow, everywhere else in life, the messes got away from me.

Cash watched me with something between amusement and judgment. "You live like this?"

"Not all of us can be meticulous gearheads," I shot back. "Some of us embrace the chaos."

His expression softened imperceptibly. "Open the hood."

I reached in and pulled the hood release, feeling suddenly self-conscious about the interior of my car. The hood popped with a sad little creak, and Cash raised it the rest of the way, propping it open.

But instead of immediately diving into the engine, he returned to the driver's side and waited for me to get out, then slid into the seat and connected something to a wire under my steering wheel. It was a small electronic device with a screen that lit up when he turned the key partway.

"What's that?"

His eyes fixed on the screen as numbers and codes flashed across it. "Diagnostic codes."

I leaned against the garage doorframe, trying not to stare at the way his broad shoulders filled the space of my driver's seat, or how his large hands looked wrapped around my steering wheel. Why was that so fucking hot? A guy's hands on a steering wheel? I was losing it.

"So," I ventured, "did Silas put you up to this?"

Cash's eyes flicked to me briefly, but he didn't answer. His attention returned to the device. "Your transmission's fucked. PCM's throwing a bunch of codes." He rattled off a bunch of numbers I didn't understand. "When's the last time you changed the fluid?"

"Uh... what fluid?"

Cash closed his eyes briefly, as if praying for patience. "Transmission fluid."

"Oh. That." I shuffled my feet. "Never?"

"Jesus." He shook his head, then continued reading codes, then typing them into something in his phone. After a moment, he pocketed his phone and disconnected the diagnostic tool, standing.

"Is that like a universal tool thingy and it works on motorcycles and Subarus, or what?"

He didn't answer. "There are a few other problems. Possible vacuum leak. Running lean."

We'd been riding to work together for over a week, and this was more than he'd said to me in all that time. Too bad I only understood about ten percent of it. His knowledge was weirdly sexy, though, the way he innately understood something that was too complicated for me to even imagine the workings of. I stood awkwardly by as he leaned over the engine, poking something.

"It's been a great week at the shop," I said, trying to fill the silence. "We've been selling out by two most days. Turns out bikers really love breakfast burritos."

Cash grunted, which I'd come to recognize as his version of acknowledgment.

"The members are actually really cool," I continued. "Not what I expected at all. There's this older lady, rides a vintage Honda, she comes by every morning for French toast. And the group that works on customs on Thursdays? They pre-order like twenty sandwiches. Tipped me fifty bucks yesterday."

"Mmm," Cash responded, checking something on his phone again, cross-referencing the codes, maybe.

"And Dylan keeps trying to set me up with his cousin, which is sweet but awkward. I'm pretty sure his cousin is straight, anyway."

At this, Cash's head snapped up. "What?"

I shrugged. "Yeah, he thinks I need to 'make time for some fun.' His words. Says I work too much."

Something flickered across Cash's face. It was gone before I could decipher it, and I told myself it was my imagination. I always read too much into people and situations. Mira was always telling me that.

"Your O2 sensor's shot too," he announced, moving to the front of the car. "This thing's a fucking death trap."

He leaned over the engine, and I was treated to the magnificent view of his ass in those worn jeans. The fabric stretched tight across his backside as he bent forward. My mouth went dry.

I forced myself to look away, remembering how he'd stiffened when I'd touched his arm that first day. Straight guys didn't generally appreciate being ogled by gay dudes.

"What?" Cash muttered without looking up.

"Just... wondering why you're helping me. You don't seem to like me much."

His hands paused on the engine. "I don't dislike you."

"High praise," I laughed. "But seriously, you've been driving me to and from work all week, and now you're fixing my car. I'm not complaining, but... why?"

Cash straightened, wiping his hands on a rag he'd pulled from his back pocket. His eyes met mine, dark and unreadable, but he said nothing. Didn't answer my question at all.

I didn't know what to do with that.

He turned back to the engine, reaching in to check something. "You need a new PCV valve. And an air filter. Transmission rebuild. And about fifty other things."

I winced. "Sounds expensive."

"I can get parts at cost," he said, still not looking at me. "Labor's free." He slammed the hood and locked the door. "Tow will be here in an hour."

My heart did a stupid little flip that I immediately suppressed. He wasn't being nice because he liked me. He was being nice because he was friends with Silas and Marcus, and I was their new pet project or something.

"I really appreciate it," I said earnestly. "But you don't have to—"

"Aiden," he cut me off. "Shut up."

I grinned at his gruffness, finding it more endearing than intimidating after a week of his silent protection. Because that's what it felt like—protection. The way he waited until I was inside to ride off, and always scanned the parking lot before he let me walk to my food truck. The coffee that mysteriously appeared at my food truck window every morning.

"I don't need a ride tomorrow. I need to do grocery shopping," I said, changing the subject. "For the truck. I can just Uber to the store and pay the driver to wait..."

Cash sighed deeply, like I'd just suggested we rob a bank together. "What time?"

"I need more than your motorcycle can carry."

He eyed me as if I were an idiot, his lips twitching, like he was about to laugh.

"You have a car? This whole week of motorcycle rides, and you have a car?"

He finally looked up, a hint of amusement tugging at his lips. "Truck."

"Of course," I laughed. "Let me guess. It's vintage, runs perfectly, and you restored it yourself?"

"1982 F150," he said, with the first hint of genuine pride I'd heard in his voice.

"I'd love to see it," I said, too enthusiastically. Then, trying to sound more casual: "For the grocery run, I mean. But also, you don't have to drive me, I can just get a rideshare. Or borrow Mira's Jeep before she leaves for school." I eyed Mira's empty parking space, wondering if she was staying over with a friend tonight.

Cash turned back to the engine, but not before I caught the smallest quirk of his lips. "Seven okay?"

"Yeah, but are you sure?"

He rolled his eyes. A muscle in his jaw twitched.

"Fine. Seven."

CHAPTER 4

Aiden

THE LOW, MORNING LIGHT painted my yard in long shadows as Cash's F150 rumbled into my driveway at precisely seven o'clock. I'd been waiting on the porch, nursing a travel mug of coffee and pretending I wasn't jittery with anticipation. The truck was exactly what I'd expected—vintage black with a thin red pinstripe running its length, meticulously restored and gleaming even in the dim light. Just like its owner, it radiated quiet power and controlled precision.

Cash killed the engine and stepped out, all fluid grace and raw strength in a simple black t-shirt despite the morning chill. My mouth went dry as he approached, and I took a quick sip of coffee to hide whatever embarrassing expression might have crossed my face.

"Morning," I called, well aware that my voice had come out far too cheerful for the hour. "Thank you so much, I really appreciate this, you have no idea."

He grunted in response, eyes scanning my porch as if taking inventory. "Ready?"

I brandished my phone with its meticulously organized grocery app open. "All set. Thanks again for doing this."

Cash merely nodded, gesturing toward his truck with a tilt of his head.

The inside of the cab was immaculate—worn leather seats that had been carefully conditioned, a spotless dashboard, not a single wrapper or receipt in sight. It smelled like leather and something distinctly masculine—Cash's cologne, maybe, or just Cash himself. I sank into the passenger seat, acutely aware of how close we'd be sitting. The bench seat left no center console between us, just a small space that would disappear if either of us shifted even slightly.

"Where to?"

"The Restaurant Depot on Colfax. Then the Saturday farmer's market. Is that okay?"

He nodded once, then put the truck in gear. The engine rumbled beneath us, vibrating through the seat and up my spine in a way that felt oddly intimate.

Restaurant Depot was quiet this early, just a few other food trucks and restaurants getting their supplies for the day. Cash grabbed a flatbed cart without being asked and followed me through the aisles, pushing it with one hand like it weighed nothing. I tried not to stare at the way the movement made his bicep flex beneath his t-shirt sleeve, or how the fluorescent lights caught the edges of his tattoos, hinting at intricate designs I couldn't quite make out.

"How many of these?" he asked, hand hovering near a stack of egg flats.

"Six cases," I replied, rambling aimlessly about my planned recipes for the week, even though I was pretty sure he didn't care. I watched as he effortlessly lifted the stack and placed it on the cart. I would have been struggling, but he handled them like they were feather light.

As we moved through the store, I found myself filling the silence with details about my life, my business, everything. He didn't say much, but I kept stealing glances at his profile, and I was pretty sure he was listening. He had an expressive face—the strong line of his jaw, perpetually shadowed with stubble; the slight furrow between his brows that deepened when he was concentrating; the fullness of his lower lip that he occasionally caught between his teeth when considering something.

"We need bacon," I said, directing us toward the meat section. "Like, a lot of bacon."

Cash raised an eyebrow, and he eyed the shelf of bacon.

"Enough to give a cardiologist nightmares."

The corner of his mouth twitched in what might have been the ghost of a smile, and my heart did a stupid little flip. Making Cash almost-smile felt like scoring a touchdown in the Super Bowl.

In the meat section, I loaded twenty pounds of thick-cut bacon onto the cart, followed by sausage, ham, and a variety of cheeses. Cash watched me with something like amusement in his eyes, as I told him about how popular the new breakfast burrito recipe I'd tried was, and how I was considering adding it to the regular menu.

"What?" I asked, suddenly realizing he was staring. "Sorry, am I talking too much? I tend to do that. We're an odd couple, you know, I talk too much, you not enough... not that we're a couple, I mean, just, you know." I laughed awkwardly, wishing I could have stopped that verbal diarrhea a little sooner.

He didn't reply, just shrugged.

"Don't worry, I'm going to let you sample everything to make up for this. As much as you like, free of charge."

There it was again—that almost-smile, gone as quickly as it appeared. But this time his eyes lingered on mine for a beat longer than necessary, and heat crawled up my neck.

Next came the heavy items—fifty-pound bags of potatoes, flour, sugar, cases of milk and cream. Cash lifted each one with a fluid economy of movement that was mesmerizing to watch. The muscles in his forearms shifted beneath his skin, veins standing out slightly with the effort. When he reached for a particularly high shelf, his shirt rode up, revealing a strip of taut abdomen and the edge of what looked like a geometric tattoo disappearing beneath his waistband.

I swallowed hard and pretended to study my shopping list.

The farmers' market was our last stop, where I carefully selected fresh produce—tomatoes, avocados, peppers, herbs—while Cash trailed behind, carrying the increasingly heavy boxes without complaint. The morning sun had fully risen now, bathing everything in golden light, including Cash. It caught in his dark eyes, warming them to amber, highlighting the angles of his face.

"These need to go on top," I said, holding up the cartons of berries I'd selected for my special French toast. "They'll get crushed otherwise."

Cash nodded, rearranging the boxes in his arms to accommodate my request. I couldn't help but notice how his shirt stretched

across his chest as he did so, the fabric pulling taut over muscle. My fingers itched to trace the lines of the tattoo visible on his bicep—some kind of mechanical design interwoven with geometric patterns.

"What?" he asked, catching me staring.

"Nothing," I said quickly. "Just... thanks. For all this. I really appreciate how much you've been doing for me, when you don't even need to. I promise I'll keep you well-fed all week."

He stared at me for a long moment, and I was sure he was going to say something, but then he turned and headed back toward the truck, leaving me staring after him like an idiot. Why did he keep doing that? Was he messing with me?

Hell, maybe he didn't even like my food. Though he did show up like clockwork for his bagel sandwiches. I would add more of his favorite bagels to the order with the baker.

I walked over to where he was neatly stacking boxes in his truck, and started to help. By the time we finished, the truck bed was filled with most of what I needed for the next week at the food truck—eggs, meat, cheese, produce, and specialty ingredients. Usually, I shopped a bit more often, and got fewer things, but without a car, I'd been running short on pretty much everything. I might need to run to the local store in Mira's Jeep a few times during the week to stock up on fresh produce, but the rest of this would get me through until my car was fixed.

Cash secured everything with practiced efficiency, tying down the load with straps he'd produced from somewhere in the truck bed.

I watched his hands—strong, capable, calloused from years of mechanical work. More and more, I'd started to imagine those hands on my body. And this time, while he was doing something so unbelievably kind, the thought hit me with such force that I had to look away, heat flooding my face.

We climbed back into the cab, the worn leather seats creaking beneath our weight. The space felt smaller now, charged with something I couldn't quite name. Or maybe didn't want to name.

As he pulled away from the curb, his hand brushed mine on the seat between us, just barely—a whisper of contact that sent electricity racing up my arm. He didn't acknowledge it, eyes fixed on the road ahead, but I could have sworn his knuckles whitened on the steering wheel.

He stayed silent as always, and as always, I got nervous and started filling the air with inane chatter about my meal plans for the week — the new special I was making with all those berries, and the Benedict that I knew was his favorite, though he never actually said so.

As I talked, Cash remained silent, and I couldn't tell if my chatter was annoying him, but couldn't seem to stop myself from talking, either. He shifted gears with practiced precision, his large hand wrapped around the gearshift in a way that made my mouth go dry. I pretended to watch the morning traffic while actually stealing glances at his profile, the strong line of his jaw working slightly as if he was chewing on words he wouldn't say.

Cash's phone, sitting face-up on the seat between us, lit up with a notification. Then another. And another. The blue light illuminated the leather briefly before fading, only to glow again seconds later. I tried not to look—really, I did—but it was like telling someone not to think about elephants. My eyes kept drifting toward the screen.

Social media notifications. A lot of them. In the quick flashes of light, I caught glimpses of usernames, heart emojis, comments.

"Popular guy," I said lightly, nodding toward his phone.

“Social media,” Cash grunted and rolled his eyes, reaching over to flip the phone face-down. His fingers brushed against my thigh as he did so, a brief, electric touch that sent heat spiraling through my body. If he noticed my sharp intake of breath, he didn't show it.

He reached for the radio, turning the dial until he found something with guitars and a driving beat, a song I instantly recognized and started singing along with, earning me a raised eyebrow and a half smile.

“What? I like your taste in music!” I said. He reached over and turned it up. The movement stretched his t-shirt across his chest, revealing the definition of muscle beneath thin cotton. My fingers itched to trace the contours.

When his phone lit up again, this time with a call, he glanced down at it and silenced it without answering. But not before I caught the social media notifications, and the username displayed on the screen.

The name burned itself into my brain as we stopped at a red light. Cash tapped his fingers against the steering wheel in time with the music, his silver ring catching the morning sunlight. I forced myself to look out the window, counting streetlights to distract myself from the urge to grab his phone and see what kind of content would generate that many notifications.

"Need gas," Cash announced as we approached a station. He pulled up to a pump and killed the engine.

“No problem. Do you want me to cover it, since you’re driving me?” I held out my credit card.

Cash shook his head and stepped out, the door closing behind him with a solid thunk. Through the windows, I watched him insert his credit card at the pump, then lean against the truck as it filled. After a few minutes, the gas pump finished, and he headed into the convenience store.

Alone in the cab, I stared at his phone on the seat between us. The little voice of conscience in my head was screaming that this was an invasion of privacy, completely inappropriate, absolutely not something I should do. But then his phone lit up again with another notification, another comment from someone with a username that was just a string of fire emojis.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I grabbed my own phone and opened social media, my heart pounding against my ribs like it was trying to escape. My fingers felt clumsy as I typed @MotoCash into the search bar, half expecting nothing to come up. Maybe it was a private account. Maybe it wasn't even him.

The profile loaded, and I nearly dropped my phone.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

It was definitely Cash. But not the Cash I knew—the gruff, taciturn mechanic who communicated primarily in grunts and monosyllables. This was... something else entirely.

The profile picture showed him leaning against a motorcycle, head tilted slightly, the hint of a smirk on his lips. Whatever he’d used for lighting made his brown skin glow, the angular planes of his face as handsome as ever. His bio was simple: "I build things. Denver, CO." Followed by a wrench emoji and "DMs open for business inquiries only."

Business inquiries. Right. Because there were over 200k followers looking for motorcycle advice.

I scrolled through the feed, my mouth growing increasingly dry with each swipe. There were photos of his bikes, of projects he was working, and of rides through the mountains.

But there were also photos of Cash with his shirt off, torso glistening with sweat and motor oil as he worked on a bike, tattoos

on full display. Cash in a tight tank top, crisp white that contrasted with his gorgeous, dark skin, arms flexed as he lifted something heavy. Cash in low-slung jeans and nothing else, his cum gutters on full display, standing in what looked like his industrial loft, the early morning light casting shadows across the ridges of his abs. The captions were minimal, often just parts of the builds he was working on, or the occasional wry comment like "And my parents said I'd never amount to anything."

The comments section below each photo was flooded with thirst—both men and women expressing in explicit detail exactly what they'd like to do to him. And he had a verified checkmark. Cash was a fucking social media model.

I clicked on a video where he was demonstrating something about engine tuning, but I couldn't focus on his words, just the way his forearms flexed as he worked, the deep timbre of his voice explaining technical details, the way he occasionally glanced up at the camera with those intense eyes. It didn't seem like he was trying to be a social media model—the videos mostly seemed to be designed to help people. The model part? That was just a natural side effect of his insane hotness.

And he didn't seem to be afraid to show off a little to bring in the attention.

My cock strained against my jeans, and I shifted uncomfortably in the seat. Heat crawled up my neck and flooded my face. I imagined those hands on my body, those forearms flexing as he pinned me down, those full lips trailing down my stomach...

The bell above the gas station door chimed, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. Cash was coming back. I fumbled with my phone, closing social media and shoving the device into my pocket just as he approached the truck. My heart thundered in my chest, guilt and arousal mixing into a potent cocktail that made it hard to breathe normally.

The driver's side door opened, and Cash slid in, handing me a coffee.

"Thanks," I managed, hoping my voice sounded normal and not like I'd just been caught with digital porn of the man sitting next to me. I took a sip, grateful for something to do with my hands. How did he know how I took my coffee? Had I told him? Probably. "That's really thoughtful."

"You're going to be busy today," he said vaguely.

And for the life of me, I couldn't remember if I even had plans today, couldn't remember anything but what his abs looked like under that soft studio lighting he seemed to prefer. Not until he pulled up beside my food truck and I realized it was a work day.

He walked around to the back and opened his truck, grabbing a box. "Where do you want this?"

I blinked, rushing to jump out of the truck and rush around to meet him. "Oh, I can carry that. Silas is letting me store and prep stuff in the commercial kitchen inside. He said he only uses it when you guys host events. I mean, I need some of it in the truck, too, but I can't fit it all in the little fridge I have in there." I was rambling, and I couldn't stop. "Don't you have to work or something? It's really not a big deal."

"Not today," he said, and I froze where I was standing, watching him carry the box into the FRMC. What? He was driving me around to food stores on his day off? I grabbed a big bag of onions and jogged after him, trying to make sense of it.

CHAPTER 5

Cash

AIDEN'S CAR WAS FINALLY finished, sitting in bay three. After three days of work, its transmission was purring like a satisfied cat. Three days I didn't have to give, because I already had more real jobs stacked up than I had time for. So I'd spend three days dropping him off at home and then coming back to the shop to work an extra ten hours.

I should have been pissed off, but here I was, thinking about the way Aiden's face would light up when I told him it was done. I opened the bay door and pulled the car out, the transmission purring like a cat. It had needed a new clutch, and quite a few other things, but I wasn't going to tell him the full extent of the repairs I'd done. He squealed as I parked the car beside his food truck, clapping excitedly.

"You're a miracle worker, Cash!" He was practically bouncing on his toes, as if the piece-of-shit Subaru was the greatest thing he'd ever seen.

I just grunted, fighting the warmth spreading through my chest at his praise. And then he threw his arms around me in an impulsive hug, promising me free breakfast burritos for the rest of my life, which didn't seem like a fair trade. Not if you did the math. I mean, a man could eat a hell of a lot of breakfast burritos.

But I didn't know how to argue with him when he was hugging me, yammering on about how awesome I was. Eventually, he realized I wasn't hugging him back and stepped back, telling me I must be super relieved that I didn't have to drive him home from work tonight.

My heart dropped as I realized that was most definitely not true. My throat went tight, and I took a step back, trying to look casual, when it felt like my world was spiraling out of control. How had I gotten this used to having Aiden around this quickly?

I was being an idiot. His food truck was in the parking lot at my work. I could stop by and leave him a coffee and collect my free breakfast burritos every day.

But there'd be no more of his chest pressed against my back, arms wrapped around my waist as we leaned into curves together. No more of his laugh vibrating against me when I accelerated too quickly. No more of his scent—citrus and coffee—surrounding me each morning.

He was still talking, and I had no idea what he was saying. Something about my brilliant mechanical skills.

This was getting ridiculous. I'd never been attracted to a man before. Never looked at another guy and thought about getting him naked, about touching him, tasting him. But with Aiden? Christ. I couldn't even look at his fucking lips without imagining them wrapped around my cock. Couldn't watch him reach for something without wanting those elegant fingers on me as I drove into

his tight hole. Couldn't hear his laugh without wanting to discover what other sounds I could draw from his throat.

What the fuck was wrong with me?

I'd dated women my entire life. Had even come close to something serious once or twice. I wouldn't call myself strictly heterosexual. I'd noticed attractive men before in an abstract way. But this? This constant distraction, this need that gnawed at my insides? This was new territory, and I had no goddamn map.

Aiden eventually ran out of steam and gave me one last hug before rushing to help a customer, and I walked in a daze back to the garage, not entirely sure what had happened.

The transmission on the GSX-R750 sat in pieces across my workbench, a mess of gears and springs that should have been therapeutic to rebuild. Usually, losing myself in the precise mechanics of motorcycle repair cleared my head, silenced the noise.

I picked up my wrench, inspecting the transmission casing that I had been working on all morning with forced concentration. The shift drum needed to be properly aligned with the fork before reassembly. Simple procedure. Mindless. Just like I needed right now.

Three minutes later, I realized I'd installed it backward.

"Son of a bitch!" I tugged it back out, fumbling it and dropping the part onto the bench where it scattered smaller components across the battered surface. What the hell was wrong with me?

I braced both hands against the workbench, head hanging between my shoulders, and took a deep breath. The memory of Aiden pressed against me on the motorcycle flooded back—the way his thighs had bracketed mine, how perfectly his body molded to my back, the heat of him seeping through my clothes. The way he'd trusted me instantly, moving with me like we'd been riding together for years instead of minutes.

I shouldn't miss it, though. It was a hassle. An inconvenience.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, probably more social media notifications. Women I didn't know leaving thirsty comments. Hollow attention from strangers who, for some bizarre reason, found my boring motorcycle mechanic lectures sexy.

Okay, fine, it was probably because I'd started doing them shirtless. Bought some sexy lighting, and occasionally oiled my chest. It was embarrassing, but the rush of anonymous praise and attention was addictive, and for a while, I'd chased that.

But none of it compared to the electric jolt I felt when Aiden's fingers accidentally brushed mine. None of it made my heart slam against my ribs like the sight of his smile. And none of it scared me half as much as the realization that I wanted him in ways I'd never wanted anyone before.

"Transmission giving you trouble?"

I jerked upright at Silas's voice. He stood in the doorway of my bay, arms crossed over his broad chest, watching me with that irritating knowing look he'd perfected over the years.

"It's fine," I muttered, turning back to the scattered parts.

"Doesn't look fine," Silas replied, stepping into my space.

I grunted, picking up a bearing and inspecting it as if it were the most interesting thing in the world. "Need something?"

"Staff meeting in ten. Conference room." He leaned against my workbench, entirely too comfortable in my territory. "Aiden's joining us to discuss the weekend campout."

My fingers tightened around the bearing until my knuckles turned white. Just the mention of his name and my body betrayed me.

"The food truck guy?" It took all of my focus to force my voice to sound neutral. The effort made my jaw ache.

"He's part of the Collective now," Silas said simply. "And because Marcus wants him to cater breakfast at the campout."

I could picture it too easily—Aiden around the campfire, golden in the firelight, laughing with the others while I sat apart, wanting him and not knowing what the fuck to do about it.

"Whatever," I said, reaching for a clean rag to wipe the grease from my hands. The motion was jerky, aggressive, betraying my irritation.

Silas watched me for a long moment. "You know, it's okay to admit when you give a shit about someone."

I shot him a glare that would have sent anyone else running. Silas just raised an eyebrow, unimpressed.

"Conference room. Ten minutes," he repeated, then turned to leave. He paused at the doorway. "And Cash? Maybe try not looking at him like you want to eat him alive. It's making the rest of us uncomfortable."

The rag in my hands ripped in half. Silas chuckled as he walked away, the bastard.

I took a deep breath, forcing my hands to steady as I set the destroyed rag aside. A half-hour in a confined space with Aiden and the entire staff watching? That wouldn't go well.

The conference room was already half-full when I stalked in, the familiar faces of my coworkers barely registering as I scanned for one in particular. I claimed a chair at the far end of the table, positioning myself with a clear view of the door. Let them think I was being antisocial—wouldn't be the first time. Truth was, I needed to see Aiden the moment he walked in. Needed to prepare myself for the sucker punch his presence had become. I drummed my fingers against the scarred wooden table, counting seconds like they were prison sentences, waiting for the inevitable moment when he'd appear and make the air in my lungs feel too thick to breathe.

Silas caught my eye from across the room, his knowing smirk making me want to punch something. He'd taken the seat at the head of the table, Marcus beside him already gesturing animatedly about something. Dylan and Liv sat together, heads bent over a tablet, probably discussing some electrical nightmare they were tackling. I tuned them all out, focused solely on the empty doorway.

Then he was there, and fuck, it shouldn't have hit me like this. Shouldn't have made my heart slam against my ribs like I was redlining an engine. But there he was, leaning against the doorframe, all hesitant smile and lean lines in those stupid skinny jeans that hugged his thighs like they were painted on. His hair was slightly damp at the temples like he'd rushed over from the food truck, and his t-shirt today read "EGGS-ACTLY WHAT YOU NEED" across his chest. Ridiculous.

Fucking ridiculous how much I wanted him.

Our eyes met for a brief second, and his smile faltered before brightening again. He gave a little wave, and I nodded once, sharply, trying to ignore the heat crawling up my neck. I slouched deeper in my chair, forcing my face into its usual neutral

mask. The chair beside me was empty—the only empty one left in the room besides the one at the far end near Marcus. For a moment, Aiden hesitated in the doorway, his eyes darting between the two available seats.

Choose me, I thought, the intensity of my own desperation scaring the shit out of me. Sit your ass down here where you belong.

But Aiden, after a moment's hesitation, moved toward the other end of the table. Toward Silas and Marcus, sliding into the empty seat with a casual, "Hey, guys," like he hadn't just put a knife between my ribs.

My jaw clenched so hard I thought my teeth might crack. Of course he didn't want to sit next to me. I'd spent the past week alternating between grunting at him and pretending he didn't exist. Why would he choose to sit beside the surly asshole when he could bask in Marcus's charismatic glow and Silas's steady attention?

"Maybe he would have sat next to you if you hadn't been glaring at him like you wanted to murder him," Liv whispered, elbowing me.

She probably had a point. But I didn't want to murder him at all. I wanted to bend him over the table and fuck him until he was a quivering mess of need beneath me.

Marcus clapped Aiden on the shoulder, leaning in to say something that made Aiden laugh—that full-bodied laugh that made his eyes crinkle at the corners and his head tilt back, exposing the long line of his throat. I watched the movement, transfixed by the bob of his Adam's apple, the flash of white teeth. He had a tiny mole just below his left ear that most people wouldn't notice. I'd noticed. Had cataloged every fucking detail about him like some obsessive stalker.

"Alright, let's get started," Silas called, bringing the room to attention. I forced myself to look away from Aiden, staring instead at the scarred tabletop, tracing a deep groove with my thumbnail.

Marcus launched into a rundown of upcoming events. I barely registered the words, too aware of Aiden across the table, the way he leaned forward with genuine interest, occasionally asking questions that showed he was actually paying attention to the business side of things. He cared about more than his shop. He cared about us.

"And that brings us to the big one," Marcus said, his excitement palpable. "The annual FRMC campout is next weekend. Three days in the mountains, great riding, great company. Last year was epic, but this year's gonna be even better. I need all hands on deck, full staff is required to attend unless you have a very good excuse. That includes you, Cash."

Murmurs of agreement echoed around the table. I'd skipped last year's campout, claiming a deadline on a custom build. Truth was, I didn't do group activities if I could avoid them. Too many people, too much forced socialization.

"So, Aiden," Marcus continued, turning to him with that megawatt smile. "Here comes the real reason I invited you to this meeting. I'm hoping you'd be willing to cook for us at the campout. We usually pay a caterer, so why not the chef in our own backyard?"

"Me? Really?" Aiden looked startled, but pleased.

"It's nothing fancy, just your breakfast magic for a bunch of hungry bikers, and something for lunch and dinner that'll feed a crowd. Brats and chili, that sort of thing."

I watched Aiden as Marcus went over the budget, saw the way his face lit up like someone had flipped a switch, all eager enthusiasm and genuine pleasure at being included. My chest tightened at the sight.

Why was he so damn cute? And why the fuck did it make me want to cuddle him... while also fucking him. Cuddlefuck him?

"That sounds like fun! I'd love to," he was saying, already nodding. Even from across the room, I could see the wheels turning in his head, and was willing to bet he was planning meals already. "I've got these Dutch oven recipes I've been wanting to try, and I make a mean campfire hash—"

"Yum, I love a good hash," Marcus interrupted, looking like he might ask Aiden to go cook him one right there. "Seriously, you're saving us. Last year, the guy Silas hired burned everything."

A groan went around the table, and everyone started talking at once, sharing stories of how bad the food had been.

"You can ride with me in the sidecar if you want," Dylan offered, leaning forward with a grin that was too fucking friendly. Almost flirty. "And we can fit all your cooking gear. I'll even let you wear my spare helmet."

I watched Aiden's face brighten at the offer, watched his lips part to accept, and something inside me snapped like an overworked chain. The possessiveness that had been building all week surged through me, hot and urgent and completely beyond my control.

My chair scraped loudly against the floor as I stood abruptly. All eyes turned to me, but I only saw Aiden's, wide with surprise.

"No," I growled, the word emerging rougher than I'd intended. "Aiden rides with me."

The room fell silent. I could feel Silas and Marcus exchanging looks, could sense Dylan's surprise and Liv's poorly concealed amusement. But all I cared about was Aiden's reaction—the way his cheeks flushed pink, the slight parting of his lips, the quickening of his breath that only I seemed to notice.

"So Cash is coming, great!" Marcus said, drawing a laugh from the group.

Without another word, I stalked out of the room, my heart hammering against my ribs like it was trying to escape. I needed air. Needed to get the fuck away from the intensity of whatever this was before I did something I couldn't take back.

Footsteps hurried after me. "Cash, wait," Aiden called, catching up to me in the hallway.

I stopped but didn't turn, my hands clenched at my sides, every muscle in my body tense with the effort of not grabbing him.

His hand landed on my shoulder, light but unmistakable, sending heat spiraling through me from that single point of contact. I finally turned, meeting his eyes.

"You're the only one I'd ride with, okay? The only one I trust," he said quietly, his gaze steady on mine. "You don't have to be angry."

My voice caught in my throat, words that wanted to get out slamming up against each other, forming a dam that seemed impenetrable.

He kept talking. "Did you want me to sit next to you? You looked a bit irritated, that's all, so I was trying to give you space. But I definitely would have sat next to you if I'd known it would hurt your feelings."

Fuck. Had my feelings been hurt? That sounded so...

"I'm so excited to go on a longer ride with you. Is it a rush? Riding through the mountains?"

The sincerity in his voice, the open trust in his expression—it was too much. I wanted to slam him against the wall and kiss him until he never looked at another man again. Wanted to mark him as mine in ways I'd never felt compelled to do with anyone before. The intensity of it terrified me.

Before he could wreck me even more with his adorable excitement, I gave him a curt nod, then turned and stalked toward the garage, needing the familiar sanctuary of engines and tools, things I understood, things I could control.

Dylan was already there when I entered, looking up from the carburetor he was cleaning with that knowing smirk that made me want to break something.

"Fuck off," I growled, heading for my bay. Oh, great. So now my voice worked again. Kind of.

"I didn't say anything," he replied, the smirk growing wider.

"And leave Aiden alone," I added, knowing my tone was too harsh, too revealing, but unable to stop myself.

Dylan raised his eyebrows, amusement dancing in his eyes. "Relax, man. I'm not after your crush. Just offering the guy a ride."

"He's not my—" I started, then stopped, the denial dying on my lips. Because what was the point? Dylan had seen right through me, just like Silas. Just like probably everyone except Aiden himself. "Just back off," I finished weakly.

"Whatever you say, boss." Dylan held up his hands in mock surrender. "But for what it's worth? I know he's yours. I see the way you look at him, and he looks at you the same way. Well, the same way, but a lot less cranky. It's kind of cute, how he's all cheerful and chipper and just rolls with your grumpy scowls."

I turned away, unwilling to let him see the hope that flared in my chest at his words. Because even if it was true—even if Aiden did want me—I had no fucking idea what to do about it.

CHAPTER 6

Aiden

WHEN THE LOW RUMBLE of a motorcycle engine vibrated through the windows, my stomach performed an Olympic-level gymnastics routine. I swallowed hard, shouldered my bag, and headed for the door, grabbing the bag I'd packed for the campout. I'd tried to be efficient, knowing space on the motorcycle was limited, but it still seemed like a lot.

"Is that him?" Mira appeared from the kitchen, coffee mug in hand, her expression halfway between concern and resignation.

"You know it's him. He's been driving me to work for two weeks."

"Yeah. That's weird. He keeps giving you rides, even after he fixed your car. Why is that?" Mira asked. "Is it because you're part of a motorcycle gang now?"

"They're not a motorcycle gang, Mira. Just a group of people with the same hobby." I couldn't actually explain why Cash was still driving me to work, why he showed up like clockwork every morning at 7 am, sometimes when I wasn't even sure he had to be at work himself.

She rolled her eyes. "Well, have fun sitting on the back of a death machine with Mr. Personality."

"He's a good rider," I defended, feeling heat creep up my neck. "And he's... not that bad."

"How would you be able to tell? He doesn't do anything but grunt." Her knowing smirk made me want to disappear through the floor.

I flipped her off affectionately. "You're always telling me I need a life outside the food truck. Now I get one and you're mad?"

"I didn't expect it to be a motorcycle gang!" she said. "I meant, like, go to some gay bars or something. There's one that does line dancing!"

"I'm not into line dancing. I'm into camping." That was a lie and she damn well knew it. "Besides, they're paying me to be there. Best of both worlds—a job that's fun! Deal with it." I stuck my tongue out at her, then stepped onto the porch, whatever I was about to say dying on my lips as I caught sight of Cash and his motorcycle.

Holy. Fucking. Shit. Why was that sight always so sexy?

He'd driven me to work just two days ago, but today, his Harley looked different, and it took me a minute to realize it was a

different bike. This one had bigger hard-shelled saddlebags on it, and a backrest on the passenger seat. Tucked behind it, there was another luggage box. He was ready to carry a lot of stuff.

He often wore a half-helmet while commuting to work, but today he had a matte black full-face helmet that made him look like even more of a badass. He tugged it off and hung it on the handlebars, then looked my way, his expression as inscrutable as ever. He wore full gear — protective gloves, black motorcycle pants out of some techy-looking fabric, and heavy boots. His protective leather jacket was zipped halfway up over a black t-shirt. The morning sun caught in his dark stubble, highlighting the strong line of his jaw.

I swallowed hard and tried not to trip down my own steps.

"Morning," I called, aiming for casual and missing by about a mile. My voice came out an octave too high.

Cash nodded once, his eyes taking me in with that laser-focused intensity that always made my skin tingle. Without a word, he reached into the box on the back and pulled out a sleek, full-face helmet—it was dark purple with a subtle shimmer, with a thin rainbow stripe running down the middle. It looked brand new and expensive as hell. And perfectly my style.

He held it out to me.

"You bought me a helmet?" I took it, running my fingers over the smooth surface, something warm unfurling in my chest. "Or like... for all your passengers to share?"

He rolled his eyes, already turning back to the bike. He pulled a leather jacket from beneath it, holding it out.

The jacket was gorgeous—supple black leather with subtle pockets that held protective pads on the back, shoulders, and elbows. When I took it, our fingers brushed briefly, sending an electric current up my arm. I held the jacket to my chest, suddenly overwhelmed by the gesture.

"Cash, this is too much. You didn't have to—"

"For safety," he cut me off, but he wouldn't meet my eyes, and I could've sworn I saw the faintest hint of color on his cheeks.

Right. Safety. Not because he cared or anything. Except for my safety. I bit back a smile and shrugged into the leather jacket, inhaling the rich scent of new leather and something distinctly Cash-like that clung to the collar. It fit perfectly, hugging my shoulders and tapering at the waist like it had been custom made.

"How did you know my size?" I asked, flexing my arms experimentally.

Cash's eyes followed the movement, lingering on where the leather stretched across my chest. He didn't answer.

I stepped closer to the bike, admiring the imposing machine. "Different bike," I observed, running my fingers over the padded leather. "Is this one the one you use for longer rides? It's fucking comfy looking. I could see how it would be good for a long ride. I could change position with this backrest." I grinned up at him. "Thank you for wanting me to be safe and comfortable. I'll be sure to pay you back, okay?"

Cash shrugged but said nothing. The silence stretched between us, charged but not uncomfortable.

I stood on my tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. "I'm serious. Thank you, Cash. For taking care of me."

When he said nothing, it got a little awkward, so I stepped back and lifted the helmet, sliding it over my head. The interior was

plush and perfectly sized, cradling my skull without pressure points. The visor locked into place with a satisfying click, and suddenly the world was muted, my breathing loud in my ears.

Cash stepped closer, his hands lifting to adjust the chin strap, fingers brushing against my neck. Then he fiddled with something on the chin of the helmet, an air vent, maybe?

He stepped back and raised an eyebrow, silently questioning, and I knew what he was asking without him needing to say anything.

"It fits perfectly," I said, my voice sounding strange to my own ears. "Like it was made for me."

Something flickered across his face—satisfaction, maybe? He nodded once, then motioned toward the bike with a tilt of his head.

Mira hovered in the doorway, arms crossed. "Take care of my brother, motorcycle man, or I'll hunt you down." Her tone was light, but the threat was real. "I'm going to law school."

"She watched Legally Blonde one too many times, and somehow thinks the message was vigilante justice," I muttered. "But she's my only family, so I tolerate her."

Cash's eyebrows shot up as he glanced inside the house.

"My grandma raised us, and she passed last year. This was her house. Ours now. In case you wondered about the curtains."

"He won't change them. Says it dishonors her memory," Mira grumped. "Even her ghost knows they're like 70 years out of style."

Cash's lips twitched like he was holding back a laugh, then he turned and met her eyes. "I'll keep him safe," he said with a certainty that made my knees weak.

"Make sure he takes a break to have some fun, too. He's convinced he's not allowed that," she added before turning back inside and slamming the door.

Then, with a fluidity that spoke of years of practice, he swung his leg over the bike and settled into the seat, the machine dipping slightly under his weight.

While he adjusted his helmet and pulled on his gloves, I secured my bag in the luggage case the helmet had been in, then stood beside the motorcycle, suddenly nervous. This wasn't like the quick rides to and from work. This was hours on the road, my body pressed against his the entire time. My mouth went dry at the thought.

This was going to be a long ride. A very long, very enjoyable ride.

With a deep breath, I swung my leg over the bike, settling into the passenger seat behind him. The backrest pressed reassuringly against my spine, and Cash's broad back loomed before me, solid and warm. I tentatively placed my hands on his shoulders, suddenly unsure where they should go.

He sighed loud enough that I could hear it in my helmet, and reached back to grab me, hauling me close and pulling my arms around his waist, settling my hands against his stomach.

"I know, I've been riding with you for long enough that I should have known that," I said, laughing. "But this is different."

My chest was now pressed fully against his back, my thighs bracketing his. Even through the layers of technical gear, I could feel the heat of him, the solid strength of his body. I swallowed hard, grateful for the helmet that hid my flushed face.

“Fuck, I’d better not have a hard-on for this entire ride,” I muttered, sure he couldn’t hear me through our helmets.

Cash kicked the bike to life, the engine rumbling beneath us like a slumbering beast. The vibration traveled up through my core, settling in places that made me bite my lip. He glanced back at me once more, like he always did when he wanted to know if I was ready.

“Ready!” I yelled, tightening my arms around his waist, and we pulled away from the curb with a smooth acceleration that forced me to tighten my arms around him.

The city streets gave way to wider roads as we headed toward the outskirts of Denver. The roar of the engine and the rush of wind made conversation impossible, forcing me into a bubble of sensation—the vibration of the bike, the occasional lean into curves that made me cling tighter, Cash’s body solid and steady beneath my hands.

I shivered involuntarily—not from cold, but from the sheer sensory overload of being so close to him, smelling the leather and faint cologne that clung to his jacket.

"Cold?" he asked, voice carrying through the helmet better than I expected.

"No, I'm—" I started, but he'd already grabbed my hands.

On a straight stretch, he grabbed my hand in one of his and tugged it lower, sliding it beneath the hem of his jacket. I slid my other hand under it, feeling him shiver.

“Is that because you like me touching your abs or because my hands are cold?” I asked, though I was pretty sure he couldn’t hear me. When he didn’t answer, I giggled and took the opportunity to tease him about whether or not he’d want these cold hands on his dick. It was kind of fun, taunting him when he was right there next to me but couldn’t hear what I was saying. Between the helmets, the wind, and the engine noise, there was no way my voice carried to him.

And it was super fun, touching him. My palms flattened, sneaking under the thin cotton of his t-shirt, feeling the ridged muscles of his abdomen beneath. Heat bloomed where we connected, his skin burning through the fabric. I gasped, the sound lost in my helmet.

The highway stretched before us like an invitation, concrete yielding to the mountains that rose in the distance, hazy blue against the morning sky. With every mile, Denver’s sprawl fell away, replaced by open spaces and the promise of wilderness. I was acutely conscious of my hands against Cash’s stomach, directly on his warm skin, the defined ridges of muscle flexing beneath my fingertips. Even through two layers of leather and the constant vibration of the engine, I felt every subtle shift of his body, every breath, every minute adjustment as he handled the powerful machine between our legs.

Cash rode with an effortless confidence that made something primal curl deep in my belly. His body telegraphed every move before he made it—the slight lean before a curve, the minute tension before acceleration. After the first few miles, I found myself following his movements instinctively, my body melding to his like we’d been riding together for years instead of weeks.

He’d told me I was good at that, and I tried my best to pay attention to every flex of his muscles, every shift of his body.

“Kinda easier to figure out what you’re about to do with my hands on your abs,” I commented to no one but myself. “Maybe when you won’t talk to me, I can just grope you and try to guess what you’re thinking.”

I let my thumbs move slightly, tracing the contours of muscle beneath his shirt. I felt him tense momentarily, then relax into the touch. Emboldened, I spread my fingers wider, exploring the landscape of his torso with cautious pressure. His skin was furnace-hot against my palms, and I swore I could feel his heartbeat quickening beneath my touch.

"I keep telling myself there's nothing there, that you're straight, but why do you keep showing up? Why did you want me to ride with you and not Dylan?" I asked into the void. "I wish you would just talk to me. I swear I won't judge you by what you're thinking, or by what you have to say."

He said nothing, of course, because he couldn't hear me, but my hands remained tucked under his jacket, fingers splayed across his abs. When we hit a straight stretch of highway, Cash surprised me by briefly covering my hands with one of his, pressing them more firmly against his stomach before returning to the handlebars. The gesture was possessive, intimate in a way that made my breath catch.

It felt like a response to what I'd said, but I told myself maybe it was some sort of secret motorcycle rider signal. Like telling me he had to pee. Because it wasn't like he could hear me.

After nearly an hour of riding, Cash signaled and pulled off the highway into a gas station that seemed to have materialized from nowhere. The lot was already occupied by several motorcycles I recognized from FRMC—Silas's custom cruiser, Liv's sleek sport bike, Dylan's vintage bike with its distinctive sidecar, stuffed with supplies. Marcus was there too, leaning against his bike while animatedly talking to a group of riders I'd seen around the shop but didn't know by name.

Cash pulled up to a pump and cut the engine. The sudden silence felt strange after the constant roar, leaving my ears ringing slightly. He stood, supporting the bike as I carefully dismounted on wobbling legs, then took off his gloves and helmet, stretching his legs.

"I'd like to stretch those legs a bit myself," I muttered into the helmet.

"You good?" he asked, those amber eyes scanning my face as I flipped the visor up on my helmet.

"Yeah," I said, working to keep my voice steady despite feeling like I'd been vibrated to pieces in the most delicious way. "Just getting my land legs back."

The corner of his mouth twitched in what might have been the ghost of a smile.

He swung his leg over the bike with that fluid grace that made my mouth go dry, then began filling the tank. I tugged my helmet off and raked a hand through my hair, then took the opportunity to stretch, painfully aware of how my body had stiffened from holding one position for so long.

"Aiden!" Marcus called, spotting me from across the lot. "You made it!" He bounded over like an enthusiastic puppy, eyes bright with excitement. "How's the ride with Mr. Sunshine here?"

"Amazing," I admitted, unable to keep the smile from my face. "I had no idea what I was missing."

Marcus grinned, glancing between me and Cash with poorly disguised interest. "You look good in leather. Doesn't he, Cash?"

Cash grunted noncommittally, focusing intently on the gas pump as if it required his complete concentration. Marcus winked at me, clearly enjoying Cash's discomfort.

"Come say hi to everyone," he said, dragging me toward the group by the convenience store. "Silas was taking bets on whether Cash would actually show up this year."

I let myself be pulled away, conscious of Cash's eyes following us across the lot. Silas greeted me with a nod, his usual stoic expression softened by the relaxed atmosphere of the trip.

"Surviving the ride?" he asked.

"Loving it, actually," I replied honestly. "Cash is a great rider. And pretty sexy. I'd spend all my time curled up against his back if I could."

Dylan laughed and clapped me on the back. "I feel that. Man, he's got muscles for days. I'm glad he hasn't scared you off yet."

"He's not so scary, just quiet," I said. "And I enjoy riding with him. Though I might not be able to walk straight after all this vibration."

Liv snorted from where she was adjusting something on her bike. "Now there's an image I didn't need."

Heat rushed to my face as I realized the unintentional double entendre. "I didn't mean—"

"Sure you didn't," Dylan teased. "Nice helmet, by the way."

"Cash got it for me," I said. "Or... I think it's for me? He didn't actually say."

"Helmets are kind of personal," Marcus said. "I'm sure it's for you. That spare you were wearing didn't fit too great, and it didn't have the communication device."

I blinked. "Communication device?"

"Yeah. This button right here." He tapped the part of my chin that Cash had been fiddling with earlier. "Looks like it's set to switch on when you talk."

"Oh," I yelped, thinking about the way I'd been teasing Cash on the bike. And talking about my erection. Oh shit. I glanced his way, but he wasn't looking at us. Wait, had he heard that entire conversation? I frantically tried to remember what I'd said.

Unaware of my panic, Marcus handed me a bottle of water from the small cooler they'd brought. "Take off that helmet and drink up. Dehydration's a bitch on long rides. And make sure to run inside and use the bathroom. Give Cash a water, too."

I accepted the water gratefully, then went inside and grabbed a few snacks for both of us and used the bathroom, still wondering if my radio had been on that whole time.

By the time I got outside, some of the group had left, but Cash didn't seem to be in a hurry. He'd finished refueling and was now checking something on the bike, strong hands moving with practiced precision over the machine. I gave him the water, and he chugged it, his throat working in a way that was almost pornographic.

"Um, so we have radios on our helmets?" I asked, fiddling with mine.

His mouth tilted up, and he nodded.

"You could maybe just forget about all that stuff I said about you giving me a hard-on. You know. Like... I was babbling and teasing you because I didn't think you could hear me."

Cash's smile only got wider. Wider than I'd ever seen him smile, and Cash smiling was a thing of true beauty. It made butterflies take flight deep in my stomach. As I secured my helmet, he reached out and flipped the mic on once again.

"I mean, you don't really need to hear everything I say, do you?" I asked.

He gave a sharp nod, his lips still twitching, and climbed onto the bike, hauling me against him once again as I climbed on behind him. Did he like my random yammering?

Did he like knowing he made my cock hard?

"Fuck, I'm so confused," I grumped into the helmet.

He reached back and rubbed my thigh, in a gesture that felt possessive. And intimate.

The engine roared to life beneath us, and we pulled out of the gas station behind the others, joining the caravan of motorcycles heading toward the mountains. I surrendered to the sensation of being wrapped around Cash, my front molded to his back, hands warm against his stomach. My fingers traced small, tentative patterns against his abs, testing boundaries, and I felt a shudder run through him that had nothing to do with the bike's vibration.

CHAPTER 7

Aiden

DINNER WAS A RESOUNDING success—I'd prepped big foil packets of sausages, veggies, and potatoes in advance, and cooking them over the campfire had been fun and simple, resulting in a savory mix of flavors that the crew had wolfed down. I'd paired it with Dutch oven cornbread soaked in honey butter, and they'd praised it like it was ambrosia from the gods.

And the group campground even had a shower. It was basic, but felt luxurious as I washed the dirt and grime of the day off my body, paying close attention to the parts of me Cash might want to touch.

Was that silly? Maybe he wasn't into me at all. But something had shifted between us today. I was sure of it. Mostly. Kind of.

Okay, not really sure at all, but hopeful.

As night descended, wrapping the clearing in velvety darkness pierced only by the crackling fire that painted everyone's faces in dancing amber light, I started to question that more and more.

Everyone had been welcoming, cheerful, and fun. Everyone except Cash, who had been avoiding me. Or perhaps avoiding the entire group, staying on the fringes of the crowd, never quite engaging. He'd set up a tent for the two of us to share, and it was difficult for me to focus on anything but the thought of spending two nights in that tent with him. Still, I tried to enjoy the company of the rest of my new friends. Tried not to focus solely on Cash.

I wasn't sure what he wanted,

A little away from the crowd, Cash sat on one of the picnic table benches, with one boot propped on a rock, his posture relaxed but alert, like a predator at rest. Firelight played across the angles of his face, catching in his eyes when he occasionally glanced my way. Each time our gazes connected, something electric shot through me, only to be broken when he'd look away, taking a measured sip of his beer.

"So there I was," Silas was saying, hands gesturing to emphasize his story, "bike dead in the middle of nowhere, no cell service, and this bear just wandering out of the trees like he owns the place."

"Bullshit," Marcus called out, laughter rippling through the group. "It was probably a large dog."

"I know a fucking bear when I see one," Silas defended, though his eyes crinkled with good humor. "Ask Cash. He had to come get me."

All eyes turned to Cash, who shrugged one powerful shoulder, then nodded, taking a sip of his beer.

“When he got there, I was up a tree.”

“Bro. What were you doing? Bears can climb trees!” Dylan gasped.

The group erupted in laughter, someone passing Silas another beer as consolation for his embarrassment. I laughed along, feeling oddly privileged to see this side of the FRMC crew—relaxed, playful, sharing stories that built the foundation of their friendship. For all their tattoos and motorcycles and tough exteriors, they were a family.

Dylan was on the log beside me, close enough that our shoulders brushed. As he leaned in and cracked another joke about Silas and the bear, his breath brushed across my cheek. But he wasn’t the one I wanted to be touching.

Across the fire, Cash's posture had changed, spine straightening, shoulders squaring. His eyes flickered to Dylan's knee where it nearly touched mine, then back to my face. I could see his jaw working, the muscles there tightening and releasing like he was grinding his teeth.

"The food truck must bring in all kinds of interesting people," Dylan said. "Ever had any celebrities come through?"

I launched into a story about the time a minor reality TV star had ordered every item on my menu, grateful for the easy topic. Dylan was attentive, laughing at all the right moments, occasionally offering a quip that kept the conversation flowing. He was charming, attractive in his own right, and under different circumstances, I might have been interested.

But every few seconds, my eyes would drift across the fire to Cash, who was now gripping his beer bottle so tightly I feared it might shatter in his hand. His knuckles had gone white, and though he seemed to be listening to Marcus's newest story, his eyes kept returning to Dylan and me with unmistakable intensity.

"So why a food truck?" Dylan asked, his shoulder now firmly pressed against mine as he leaned in to be heard over the raucous laughter erupting from another part of the circle. "Why not a regular restaurant?"

"Freedom," I answered honestly. "I didn’t like working under a chef at a big restaurant—I wanted to make my own recipes—and I like being able to move, to bring food to different places, different communities. Plus, the startup costs were way lower."

Dylan nodded, looking genuinely interested. "Smart. Mobile business model, lower overhead. And then you get to meet people like us," he grinned, gesturing around the campfire. "Lucky you."

"Lucky me," I agreed, returning his smile.

Cash abruptly stood, the movement drawing my attention immediately. He stalked over to us and stopped directly in front of us, looking down with barely contained... something. Anger? Jealousy? His chest rose and fell with slightly too-rapid breaths, fists clenched at his sides.

“Hey, Cash,” I said, grinning up at him.

He reached down and wrapped strong fingers around my wrist, tugging me to my feet with surprising gentleness despite the obvious tension radiating from him.

"You want to go to bed? So soon?" I asked, bewildered but undeniably thrilled by his touch, by the possessive way his fingers encircled my wrist.

He was already pulling me away from the fire, from Dylan, from the curious eyes of the FRMC crew.

"Don't mind us," Dylan called after us, laughter in his voice. "Just pretend we're not even here."

A few chuckles followed us as Cash led me across the clearing toward our tent, his grip on my wrist never loosening. My heart pounded so hard I was sure he could feel my pulse beneath his fingertips. What did he want to show me? And why the urgency, the barely contained emotion that seemed to vibrate through him?

"Cash," I began, confused but exhilarated. "What are you—"

Cash unzipped our tent and guided me through the tent flap, the nylon rustling, and his hands gentling as he helped me inside. The small space was illuminated only by a battery-powered lantern hanging from a hook in the center, casting everything in a soft, amber glow. I stumbled forward, thrown off balance by his urgency and the awkward crouch needed to enter the tent, and my foot caught on something solid—Cash's duffel bag, sitting open on the tent floor. I pitched forward with a startled yelp, arms windmilling uselessly as gravity took over.

My hands hit the sleeping bags first, breaking my fall as the duffel tipped onto its side. Items cascaded out across the tent floor—a toiletry kit, a folded t-shirt, and then... oh.

Oh.

Three foil packets skittered across the nylon floor, followed by an unmistakable bottle that rolled to a stop against my knee. Condoms. And lube. High-end stuff, too, not the cheap shit from gas station bathrooms.

The tent filled with thick, stunned silence. Cash froze in a half-crouch at the entrance. He'd just finished zipping the door closed, and one hand sat on the zipper, eyes wide as he stared at the scattered evidence of his... preparations. I stared too, my brain short-circuiting as it processed what this meant.

Cash had brought condoms. And lube. To a tent he knew we'd be sharing.

Slowly, I reached out and picked up one of the foil packets, turning it over between my fingers. It caught the lantern light, shiny and new and full of possibilities.

"Planning ahead for something?" I asked, trying for casual but hearing the slight tremor in my voice. I looked up at Cash, finding his face flushed dark beneath his stubble, jaw clenched so tight I could practically hear his teeth grinding.

He moved suddenly, dropping to his knees and scrambling to gather the items, shoving them back into his bag with uncharacteristic clumsiness. His movements were jerky, almost panicked, so unlike his usual precise control.

"It's okay if you are."

Cash's head snapped up, his eyes locking with mine. The raw hunger there stole my breath.

"You've been staring at me all night. You nearly broke that beer bottle watching Dylan flirt with me. Maybe you should have been flirting with me instead."

Cash's nostrils flared, muscles in his forearms flexing as his hands curled into fists against his thighs.

I twirled the condom between my fingers, watching his eyes track the movement. "And then you marched me to our tent like you were staking a claim."

A muscle jumped in Cash's jaw.

"I'm not complaining. I'd rather be here. With you."

Cash exhaled sharply, running a hand over his face. When he dropped it, his expression had shifted from embarrassment to something darker, hungrier. But he didn't move. What was he waiting for? Another month of quiet touches and hungry glances?

Fuck subtlety.

I lunged across the tent and kissed him, hands gripping his shoulders for balance. The first press of our lips was clumsy, off center, tinged with desperation. Cash stiffened against me, body going rigid. For one terrifying heartbeat, I thought I'd misread everything. That he'd been fucking with me. The condoms and lube were all a joke.

Then he growled—actually growled—deep in his throat, and suddenly his hands were in my hair, angling my head, lips crashing back against mine with bruising force. He kissed like he did everything else—with precision and intensity that left no room for half-measures. His tongue swept into my mouth, claiming, exploring, telling me exactly how thorough he'd be with the rest of my body.

I moaned into the kiss, fingers digging into his shoulders, feeling the solid muscle beneath his t-shirt. Cash responded by shoving me backward onto the sleeping bags, following me down without breaking the kiss. His weight settled over me, delicious and heavy, one thigh pressing between mine. I arched up against him, desperate for friction, for pressure, for anything he'd give me.

He broke the kiss, pulling back just enough to stare down at me, eyes dark with desire. His breathing came in short, harsh pants that matched my own. One large hand framed my face, thumb tracing my lower lip with surprising tenderness.

There was a question in his eyes that he didn't ask out loud.

I reached up, fingers tracing the edge of his stubbled jaw, making absolutely sure he understood. "If you're asking, the answer is yes. I want you to fuck me, Cash. I've been fantasizing about you since the day we met," I confessed. "Lots of very dirty fantasies, and you know, maybe I shouldn't be sharing so much? I don't know. Oh, and I'm a bottom, but I don't mind topping if you want to try that, but if you want to stick your dick in me, I'm all for that. My mouth is available—"

Something fierce and possessive flashed in his eyes as he cut me off with a hungry kiss. Then he dipped his head, lips brushing my ear, nibbling down my throat, hungry and wild, communicating everything with touch instead of words.

His teeth grazed my earlobe, sending sparks cascading down my spine. I gasped, arching against him as his mouth traced a burning path down my neck. One of his hands slid beneath my shirt, calloused palm hot against my skin, and I shivered against his touch, reaching between his legs to cup him, finding him rock hard. And very, very big.

"Okay, you're going to need to do some prep to fit this inside me," I said, grinning.

CHAPTER 8

Cash

MY HANDS SHOOK AS I yanked at Aiden's shirt, desperate to see more of him, to feel his skin against mine. His monologue, while we'd been riding, had been ninety percent about how horny I made him, at least until he'd realized I could hear him.

Technically, I should have told him there was a radio on the helmet, but seeing him in the leather jacket I'd bought for him, stole all my words. Once again, he managed to be both sexy and cute and a little ridiculous, but in the best possible way.

And on the ride, I'd learned that he had a horny mind and a filthy mouth. That he wanted me to bend him over the Harley and fuck him on it, to shove my dick deep into his hole. That he loved riding with me. The last one he'd said toward the end of the ride, after he knew I could hear him. Like he wanted to make sure I knew.

For now, he was going to have to settle for being fucked in the tent, instead of on my Harley, though. And under the lantern light, he was fucking gorgeous—all smooth skin and subtle definition where I was rough edges and bulk—and I wanted to devour every inch of him. I'd been attracted to men occasionally before, mostly men like him. Lean, slim, and cute.

He'd told me to prep him, and I wasn't entirely sure how to do that. And I was kind of frozen. My words weren't coming. He was so damn beautiful that I couldn't find words—literally. My voice caught in my throat, and nothing would come out.

Not that that was unusual for me, but with him, I wanted desperately to fix it. Wanted to say all the things that I couldn't get out.

And my body didn't want to move.

"I want to see you, too," he whispered, tugging at my shirt, eyes dark with hunger.

I let him pull it off, feeling strangely vulnerable as his gaze raked over my tattoos, my chest, the trail of hair disappearing into my jeans. His fingers traced the geometric patterns inked on my bicep, following the lines down to my forearm, touch feather light but leaving fire in its wake.

The way he pressed forward, doing enough talking for both of us, made me hope he'd gotten accustomed to my problem with words. If I waited long enough, he'd get impatient and start doing the talking for both of us, asking me questions I could answer without words.

I fucking loved that about him.

"I've wanted to do this since I first saw you," he confessed, leaning forward to press his lips against a gear design over my heart. "At that point, I was pretty sure you were straight, but I suppose, given the size of your erection and the lube you packed,

that you must at least be bi.”

I nodded, and he smiled, kissing his way lower. The wet heat of his mouth sent electricity racing through me, cock hardening painfully against denim that was suddenly too fucking tight.

I fumbled with the button of his jeans, cursing under my breath when my fingers—usually so precise with engines and tools—became clumsy with want. Aiden laughed softly, the sound vibrating against my skin where his mouth still explored my chest. He reached down, helping me, our fingers tangling as we worked his pants down his hips.

I growled, shoving at fabric, desperate for more skin, more heat, more Aiden beneath me. He lifted his hips, letting me drag his jeans and underwear down in one rough motion. My breath caught as his cock sprang free, hard and flushed against his stomach and bigger than I’d imagined it. The sight of another man’s cock should have been a turnoff, but instead sent a molten surge of desire straight to my groin.

Aiden kicked his pants away, now completely naked in the amber glow of the lantern. He gazed up at me for one heated moment, then in a fluid motion that stole my breath, he rolled onto his stomach and pushed up onto his knees. His back arched like a fucking masterpiece, the elegant curve of his spine leading my eyes down to where he reached back with one hand, spreading himself open and bit his bottom lip.

"I’ve imagined having you like this," he said, voice rough with want, looking back over his shoulder at me. "Want you inside me. I think about you riding me like you ride that bike. All that power and drive."

I froze, blood roaring in my ears. His hole fluttered as he spread himself wider, pink and tight, and suddenly the most terrifying and most sexy thing I'd ever seen. Engines, I understood. Motorcycles, I could take apart and rebuild blindfolded. But this—a man's body, Aiden's body, waiting for me to know what to do—this was uncharted territory.

"Cash?" Aiden's voice cut through my panic, his brow furrowing, his cheeks turning pink. "Is there something wrong? Did I do too much? I do tend to get a little bold when I’m horny."

Heat crawled up my neck, embarrassment warring with desire as I knelt there, still half-dressed and fully out of my depth, trying to force my words out, but they wouldn’t come. How did I tell him I wanted this without speaking?

I could show him. Show him how hard he made me, show him how much I wanted this. I tore at my jeans, desperate to show him just how hard he made me, and he watched, eyes widening as I bared my cock to him, hard and leaking.

Instead of laughing or pulling away, Aiden's lips curved into a smile that was pure sin, and he licked his lips, reaching out to stroke me, his fingers trailing delicately up and down my shaft in a rhythm that made my whole body quake.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous. But, yeah, I need to prep for something this big.” He glanced at me, and I gave one curt nod, throat tight, words stuck inside. I wanted to tell him how good it felt, how beautiful he was, how desperately I wanted to fill him up and wreck his tight little hole, but instead, I just sat there, silent like an idiot.

But Aiden, being Aiden, saw something in my silence that prompted him to keep going. Biting his bottom lip, he sat back on his knees and reached for the bottle of lube, then squeezed clear gel onto his fingers, slicking them thoroughly. “Do you want to watch? I can show you how I like to prep myself,” he said. “I’m really glad I took a shower when we got here, because I’m all pretty and clean for you. Is that okay, me showing you?”

I met his eyes and nodded.

I couldn't tear my eyes away as he leaned forward again, exposing his tight pink hole to me. With slick fingers, he circled his entrance, teasing himself with slow, deliberate strokes. He dropped his head to the pile of sleeping bags beneath him and his

eyes fluttered closed, lips parting on a soft moan that shot straight to my cock.

"Like this," he breathed, pushing one finger inside himself. "Start slow and gentle. Stretch me open. Coax my body to relax so it can accommodate your size. Feels so good."

Jesus fucking Christ. I'd never seen anything so erotic in my life—Aiden on his knees before me, back arched prettily, working himself open, pleasure washing over his features as he added a second finger. His cock hung heavy between his legs, leaking onto the sleeping bag. My own ached in response, straining painfully against my jeans.

He was so fucking beautiful, so bold and open with his sensuality, and I hoped like hell that he knew that, because I couldn't seem to find the words to tell him. I reached out and massaged his ass, watching him fuck himself on his fingers, body undulating with pleasure.

His eyes opened at that, pupils blown wide with desire. "Touch me," he begged. "Please. Use your fingers on me. Just like I'm doing."

The panic receded, washed away by something hotter, more primal. I shoved my jeans and underwear down, kicking them off with more urgency than grace, then reached for the lube. I gripped his wrist, gently pulling his fingers from his body. He moaned and wiggled his ass looking over his shoulders at me.

"Fuck me with your hand, Cash," he breathed. "Please?"

I pressed my lips to the knob at the base of his neck, tasting salt and skin as I kissed my way down the elegant curve of his back. My hands spread his cheeks wider, exposing him fully to my gaze. Heat poured off him in waves, and I could feel the subtle tremors running through his thighs as he held the position.

I wanted to tell him how perfect he was, but without words, I only had my hands, my lips, my tongue, and I did everything I could to make him feel delicious. I took things slow, exploring every inch of him. I traced his entrance with one finger, marveling at the tight ring of muscle, at how it quivered beneath my touch. Aiden gasped, pushing back against me, silently begging for more. I obliged, pressing one finger slowly inside him, groaning at the tight heat that gripped me.

"Fuck, yes," Aiden hissed, head dropping forward between his shoulders. "More, Cash. Please."

I worked him open carefully, adding a second finger when his body relaxed around the first. The sounds he made—breathy whimpers and broken moans—drove me wild, made me want to replace my fingers with my cock so badly I could barely think straight. But I forced myself to go slow, to stretch him properly, curling my fingers experimentally until—

"Holy fuck!" Aiden cried out, body jolting. "Right there. God, right there."

I pressed against the spot again, watching in fascination as he writhed beneath me, completely undone by my touch. Power surged through me, heady and intoxicating. I could do this. I could make him feel good. It didn't matter that he was a man. It didn't matter that I couldn't find the words that I needed, only that he was sexy as hell to me, and that I could take him apart with my hands, my cock, my mouth.

"Need you," he gasped, pushing back hard against my fingers. "Now, Cash. Need your cock inside me. Please, baby."

I reached for a condom with my free hand, tearing the packet open with my teeth. My hands trembled as I rolled it onto my aching cock, slicking myself with more lube.

Aiden pulled away and rolled onto his back. He spread his legs wide, knees drawn up to expose himself to me. "Want to see

you," he explained, eyes burning with intensity. "Want to watch your face the first time you fuck me."

Christ. My cock twitched at his words, at the sight of him spread out before me like a feast. I grabbed a spare t-shirt from my bag, rolling it up and shoving it beneath his hips to lift him to the right angle. Desperation warred with the intense need to take care of him—the same need that had driven me to buy protective gear, to fix his car, and in the end, care won, and I took my time, making sure he was comfortable.

I crawled between his legs, bracing myself on one arm above him. With my free hand, I guided the head of my cock to his slick entrance, rubbing against him teasingly. His hands clutched at my shoulders, nails digging into my skin as he whimpered, actually fucking whimpered, with need.

"Please," he begged, eyes locked on mine, pupils so dilated they nearly swallowed the color. "Need you inside me."

I pressed forward slightly, watching his face for any sign of discomfort. The tight ring of muscle resisted momentarily, then gave way, allowing just the head of my cock to breach him. We both gasped—me at the incredible tight heat, at the visual of my cock disappearing inside his hole as his own cock lay hard and leaking against his flat stomach. He let out a soft sound—pain and pleasure combining, his eyes wide with wonder. And like this, maybe I didn't need to worry about talking at all. Our connection was intimate, primal, and real.

I found myself wanting to touch and taste his cock, wanting to make him come with my hand wrapped around him.

A dark, familiar voice crept in, chastising me for wanting it, for letting myself be different. But this time, I pushed it away. Nothing this good could possibly be wrong.

I inched forward, sinking into Aiden's tight heat with excruciating slowness. Every nerve ending in my body screamed for me to thrust hard, to bury myself to the hilt, but I held back, watching his face for any sign of pain. His eyes were half-closed, lips parted, breath coming in short gasps that matched my own. When I finally bottomed out, fully seated inside him, the sensation nearly undid me—hot, tight perfection gripping my cock like nothing I'd ever felt before.

I stayed like that, my cock impaling his body as I crashed my lips against his, trying to pour everything I was feeling into a wildly desperate kiss. He arched up, threading his fingers through my hair as he devoured my tongue, moaning against my mouth. And gently, I started to rock inside him.

Aiden's eyes fluttered open, his gaze locking with mine. That familiar smirk played at the corners of his mouth—the one that had been driving me crazy for weeks.

"You're really big," he whimpered, and I stiffened, worried I was hurting him. He soothed a hand down my back. "In the best possible way. It feels so good, Cash, like you're filling all of me. Like I don't know where you end and I begin," he whispered, voice wrecked. His legs wrapped around my waist, pulling me impossibly deeper. "Fuck me hard, Cash. I want you to wreck me, to make me feel you tomorrow."

Something snapped inside me at his words—the last thread of control I'd been clinging to. I drew back slowly, then slammed forward, driving into him with a force that made the tent's walls shudder. Aiden arched beneath me, a broken cry tearing from his throat, his fingers digging into my biceps hard enough to leave marks.

"Yes," he hissed, meeting my thrusts with an upward roll of his hips that made stars explode behind my eyelids. "Just like that. Don't stop."

I fucked into him with abandon, all my earlier hesitation evaporating in the heat between us. Each thrust drove me deeper, my balls slapping against his ass, the obscene sounds of our bodies joining, filling the tent. The sleeping bags bunched beneath us, my knees digging into the thin barrier between us and the hard ground, but I didn't care. Nothing mattered but Aiden—the tight

clutch of his body around my cock, the broken moans falling from his lips, the way his fingers scrabbled for purchase on my sweat-slicked back.

Our lips found each other in another messy, desperate kiss—all tongue and teeth and shared breath. I devoured him, claiming his mouth with the same intensity I claimed his body. He tasted like beer and desire and something uniquely him that I couldn't get enough of. My tongue traced the seam of his lips, demanding entry that he eagerly granted. The angle pushed me deeper inside him, and he whimpered into my mouth, the sound vibrating through both our bodies.

"So good," he gasped against my lips. "So fucking good."

I drove into him harder, angling my hips on instinct, searching for that spot that had made him cry out earlier. When I found it, his whole body jolted, back arching off the sleeping bag, a strangled moan ripping from his throat, and his fingers dug into my back, as if he could haul me closer, deeper.

"There," he panted, eyes wild. "Right there. Don't stop."

I pounded against that spot relentlessly, watching his face twist with almost unbearable pleasure. His cock bounced between us with each thrust, angry red and leaking onto his stomach. Aiden reached down, wrapping his fingers around himself, stroking in time with my thrusts.

"No," I growled, surprising myself as I grabbed his wrist, pinning it beside his head. "Mine." Were those the first words I'd spoken all night? I wasn't sure.

His eyes widened, pupils blown black with lust, as I wrapped my own hand around his cock. The feel of him—hot, hard, silky skin over rigid steel—sent a fresh wave of arousal crashing through me. This should have felt strange, foreign. Instead, it felt right, natural, like I'd been meant to touch him this way all along.

"Cash," he whimpered, hips bucking up into my hand, his body shaking beneath me as he lost control, writhing wildly against each thrust, his hands searching for purchase on my back, my ass, and finally the floor of the tent. "Please. Oh god, I'm going to come. You fuck me so good."

I stroked him in time with my thrusts, my grip firm but not too tight, my thumb swiping over the sensitive head on each upstroke. Pre-cum leaked from his slit, slicking my movements. The dual sensations—his cock in my hand, my cock in his ass—was driving me toward the edge faster than I wanted.

Aiden writhed beneath me, caught between my hand and my cock, completely at my mercy. The power of it, the raw intimacy, was intoxicating. I'd never felt this connected during sex, never been so aware of my partner's every reaction, every breath, every flutter of eyelashes.

"Going to come," he gasped, body tensing beneath me. "Cash, I'm—"

I met his eyes and increased the pace, needing to watch him experience this intense pleasure, to feel his body around me as he came.

His body bowed off the sleeping bag, muscles going rigid as his orgasm crashed through him. Hot pulses of cum spilled over my fingers, striping his stomach and chest. His ass clenched around my cock in rhythmic waves, so tight it was almost painful. The sight of him—completely undone beneath me, my name on his lips as he came—pushed me over the edge.

My orgasm hit like a fucking freight train, pleasure slamming into me with brutal force. I buried my face against Aiden's shoulder to muffle my groan as I emptied myself into the condom, hips stuttering against his ass. Wave after wave of ecstasy washed through me, more intense than anything I'd ever experienced. I bit down on the slope where his neck met his shoulder,

marking him without conscious thought.

As the aftershocks subsided, I became aware of Aiden's arms wrapped around me, his heart pounding against my chest, his breath warm against my hair. We fit together perfectly, like we had on the motorcycle—two bodies moving as one, finding a natural rhythm that couldn't be taught or learned, only discovered.

I kissed him softly, a stark contrast to the frantic coupling of moments before. His lips yielded beneath mine, gentle and pliant. When I finally pulled out, he winced slightly, making me instantly concerned. I reached between us and tenderly stroked his hole, swollen from my violent fucking. I backed up, removing the condom and tying it off, rooting in my bags for some kind of salve.

He shook his head, a satisfied smile spreading across his face. "I'm okay, baby. Don't look so worried. I think that was the best fuck of my life. "

I rummaged through my bag for a packet of face and body wipes I kept for cleaning up while camping. With tender care, I cleaned the mess from his stomach and chest, then between his legs. The intimacy of the act—more intimate, somehow, than the sex itself—made something warm unfurl in my chest.

When I'd finished and tossed the trash in a bag, Aiden reached for me, pulling me down beside him on top of the air mattress. Without hesitation, I gathered him against my chest, one arm wrapped around his waist, his head tucked beneath my chin. He fit against me like he belonged there, his back to my front, my knees tucked behind his. He shivered, and I straightened the tangled mess of air mattresses around us.

"Mmm, thank you for that. I've been wanting you for so long," he murmured sleepily.

I buried my nose in his hair, inhaling the scent of him—sweat and sex and something citrusy from his shampoo. Outside our tent, I could hear the distant sounds of the campfire gathering—laughter, conversation, the occasional clink of bottles, and I wondered how much of his shouts everyone had heard. But I couldn't bring myself to care. Maybe I liked that they knew he was mine.

Terror and elation battled within me as I held him. I'd just crossed a line I'd never imagined crossing, done things I'd never thought I'd want to do. I didn't know what my next move should be—whether to retreat behind familiar walls or lean into this terrifying new reality. All I knew was that right now, with Aiden's warm body pressed against mine, his heartbeat slowing to match my own, I didn't want to be anywhere else.

"What are you thinking?" he asked softly, his fingers lacing with mine where they rested on his stomach. I wished I could tell him, but the words didn't come, never came when it mattered. So I just hauled him close and kissed the side of his neck.

CHAPTER 9

Aiden

I WOKE TO THE gentle press of Cash's chest against my back, his arm a heavy anchor around my waist, his breath warm against my neck. Morning sunlight filtered through the tent's fabric, casting everything in a soft amber glow that made the moment feel almost dreamlike. Two nights in his arms. Two nights of his hands mapping every inch of my body, his lips claiming mine with a hunger that left me breathless, and I still couldn't quite believe this was real. That Cash Upton, who'd barely spoken more than ten words at a time to me before this weekend, had taken me apart with his hands and mouth and cock like he'd been studying my body for years.

He'd still barely spoken, but it hadn't mattered, not when he'd looked at me like he had—kissed me and fucked me like he was desperate for me.

I shifted slightly, testing the soreness that radiated from my ass and thighs—a delicious reminder of how thoroughly he'd claimed me last night. Behind me, Cash stirred, his arm tightening briefly around my waist before relaxing again. I felt him wake, his breathing pattern changing subtly, body tensing then settling into wakefulness.

"Morning," I murmured, turning my head slightly toward him.

His lips brushed the nape of my neck—not quite a kiss, more like an acknowledgment, and he made a quiet, content sound.

Just that. No endearment, no teasing, none of the playful banter I'd imagined might follow our passionate night. I waited for more, but Cash just disentangled himself and sat up, leaving cold air rushing into the space where his warmth had been.

I rolled onto my back, watching as he rummaged through his bag, muscles shifting beneath tattooed skin. His shoulders looked tight, the easy fluidity I'd come to associate with his movements replaced by something stiffer, more contained. My chest tightened with uncertainty. Had I done something wrong? Was he regretting this already?

He tugged on a shirt.

"Do you want to sneak up to the showers?" I asked, desperate for an excuse to get him naked again. "The guys shouldn't be awake yet to tease us. I heard them up late."

He nodded once, then reached for a small toiletry bag I hadn't noticed before. As he unzipped it, I caught a glimpse of travel-sized bottles, a razor, and something that looked suspiciously like more condom packets. My pulse quickened despite my uncertainty.

"You look prepared," I observed, aiming for casual but landing somewhere closer to hopeful.

Cash's eyes finally met mine, something unreadable flickering in their amber depths. I wished I knew what he was thinking — wished he would say what he was thinking. He could talk, so why didn't he right now? Why not when my heart was aching to hear something—anything to show he cared.

We dressed in silence, maneuvering around each other in the confines of the tent. Our hands brushed once as we both reached for the tent flap, and Cash froze momentarily, the muscle in his jaw ticking before he gestured for me to go first.

Outside, the campground was bathed in early morning light, dew glistening on grass and tent fabric alike. A few embers still glowed in the central fire pit, but most of the camp remained still, tents zipped tight against the morning chill. The air smelled of pine and woodsmoke and the crisp promise of another perfect day in the mountains.

Cash walked slightly ahead of me toward the shower building, a simple cinder block structure at the edge of the campground. His shoulders remained rigid, steps purposeful, and I trailed behind, trying to puzzle out the shift in his demeanor. Last night, he'd held me close, fucked me deep, his body making promises that his words couldn't. He'd looked at me with naked hunger and something that had felt almost like tenderness. This morning, he was all hard edges and careful distance once again.

The other tents were still quiet, and the shower building was empty, just four basic stalls with plastic curtains and concrete floors. Cash led the way to the farthest one, turning on the water to let it heat up before stepping aside to undress. I wasn't even sure if he wanted me in the same stall as him, not until he grabbed my arm and dragged me inside. I stripped, hyper-aware of his eyes tracking my movements as I peeled off my clothes.

When we were both naked, Cash pulled me under the spray with him, the stall barely big enough for our bodies. Water cascaded over his shoulders, tracing the contours of his tattoos in glistening rivulets. Without warning, he backed me against the cool tile wall, one large hand cradling the back of my head to protect it from the impact. He dipped his lips to my throat, his motions hungry, edged with a certain level of desperation.

"You still want me," I whispered, and he groaned against my skin, sucking hard enough to leave a mark.

My body responded instantly, cock hardening at his commanding tone. I turned, bracing my hands against the tile as warm water beat against my back. Behind me, I heard the snap of a cap, then Cash's hands were on me, slick with soap, sliding across my shoulders and down my spine with deliberate pressure, massaging the soreness out of my body one muscle group at a time.

"Mm, that feels nice," I said, coaxing him to do more. I was coming to realize that I sometimes needed to do the talking for both of us, which was a bit daunting, but worth it if it got me to where we'd been last night.

He washed me with meticulous care, strong fingers massaging soap into every inch of my skin. It was oddly intimate, more tender than I'd expected given his morning distance. When his hands dipped lower, sliding over the curve of my ass, I couldn't help the soft gasp that escaped me.

"Want you inside me again," I murmured. "I don't even care if I'm sore."

I felt more than heard his chuckle, a brief rumble against my back as he pressed closer. One soap-slick finger traced the cleft of my ass, circling my entrance with teasing pressure. I arched back, silently begging for more.

"Yes," I hissed, pushing back against his exploring finger. "Fuck yes. You can have anything you want."

The tear of a foil packet made me glance over my shoulder. Cash was rolling a condom onto his already hard cock, his eyes dark with desire as they met mine. Next came the distinct snap of a lube cap—not soap, actual lube—and I realized with a jolt that he'd planned this, had brought protection and lube to the shower with the explicit intention of fucking me again.

"You came prepared," I said, looking over my shoulder at him. I reached back and stroked a hand down his condom-covered

cock, wishing I'd thought to suck him off before he'd rolled the condom on.

Cash's lips quirked in what might have been a smile as he slicked himself with lube, but he offered no explanation.

He pressed against me, and I guided him to where I needed him, the blunt head of his cock nudging my entrance. My body still felt open from last night, and my hole yielded to him, stretching with only the slightest burn as he pushed inside with aching slowness. I gasped and pressed my fingers into the slippery tile for support.

"Fuck, your cock feels so good," I whined, reaching back for his hips, trying to pull him deeper. "Cash. Please."

He gripped my hips with bruising force as he began to move, setting a rhythm that had me seeing stars. Each thrust drove me against the tile, the contrast of cool wall and hot cock overwhelming my senses. Water cascaded over us both, turning our skin slippery, adding another layer of sensation to the already mind-bending pleasure.

I reached between my legs, wrapping my fingers around my straining erection. The dual stimulation of Cash's thick length pounding into me and my own hand jerking my cock rapidly pushed me toward the edge. Through the steam and spray, I caught our reflection in the small, fogged mirror on the opposite wall. Cash's powerful body was curved over mine, his expression a mask of concentrated pleasure, his thick muscles rippling under dark skin.

"So good," he bit out the words—his first all morning, I thought—sinking his teeth into my shoulder as he curled his body around mine, pushing my hand out of the way to stroke my cock.

It was good, so good, but I wanted to show him everything gay sex could be, wanted to straddle his hips and grind my cock against his until we came together. Wanted to suck him so good he'd never get a blow job without thinking of me. But if this was all he wanted, I'd take it, because it was so damn sexy to have his big cock inside me.

My orgasm hit like a thunderclap, pleasure spiking through my body in waves that had me crying out, not caring who might hear. My cum painted the shower wall in thick streaks as Cash continued to fuck into me relentlessly, his rhythm faltering as my body clenched around him.

"Aiden," he groaned, the sound of my name on his lips sending a final aftershock through me. His hips stuttered, pressing deep as he came, his chin dropping to rest on the back of my head.

For a long moment, we stayed like that, joined and panting, the shower's spray washing over us. Then, with surprising gentleness, Cash eased out of me, turning me to face him. He removed the condom, tying it off and setting it aside before reaching for the soap again.

With the same careful attention he'd shown earlier, he washed me clean, paying special attention to the sensitive areas between my legs, his touch clinical yet somehow deeply intimate. There was something almost reverent in the way his hands moved over my body, a tenderness that contradicted the morning's distance.

When he finished, he pressed a quick, almost shy kiss to my shoulder before turning to wash himself. I wondered if he wanted me to touch him the way he had touched me, to skim my hands over the hard planes of muscle that made up his body and massage the soreness out.

Now that the heat of the moment was gone, I was too afraid to do much of anything, so I watched, water dripping from my lashes, wondering how a man could fuck me with such passion and then retreat behind walls so quickly. Wondering what any of this meant to him. Wondering if I was just a weekend experiment or something more.

But as Cash methodically washed himself, his expression unreadable once more, I realized I didn't have the courage to ask. Because what if he gave me the wrong answer? What if this was all he had to give?

CHAPTER 10

Aiden

I SHOULD HAVE BEEN thrilled to be back home in my own bed, but I hadn't slept. Not really. Just tossed in sweat-damp sheets, replaying every touch, every kiss, every moment Cash's body had pressed against mine in the darkness of our tent. Three days of hot sex, riding motorcycles, and cooking food for his friends. And not much else. Certainly no talking.

No whispered confessions in the dark about how I made him feel, about how much he wanted me to be his.

I was so damn confused by the strangely possessive silent act he'd been giving me.

The ride home had been as beautiful as the ride up, but he'd been stiffer. Marcus had teased us, called us boyfriends, and maybe that was why. Maybe he didn't want to be my boyfriend.

Cash hadn't said anything as he'd dropped me off, either. He'd revved his engine and disappeared down my street without looking back.

I'd kind of expected that he wanted to crawl into my bed and fuck me again. Why hadn't I asked? Maybe he would have if I'd asked.

Around 4am, I gave up on sleep entirely, showered away the phantom scent of his skin, and made coffee strong enough to burn through the hollow ache in my chest.

And I got ready early, determined to drive myself to work. I was on the road before six, dropping by a store to pick up some supplies before heading to Front Range Motorcycle Collective. The road was empty this early, and I missed arriving on his bike.

I swallowed against the tightness in my throat, forcing myself to loosen my death grip before I snapped the fucking wheel off.

"Just another day," I muttered to myself, the words ringing false even to my own ears. "Nothing happened."

But everything had happened. Cash's hands gripping my hips hard enough to bruise as he pushed inside me. His voice, rough with desire, whispering filthy promises against my neck. The surprising tenderness of his fingers washing my body in the shower.

Then nothing. Radio silence. Not even a text checking if I'd had a good night's sleep. Or if I wanted a ride to work today.

I waited for at least two minutes before I checked my phone again, disappointed to see that the screen was still blank, with no new notifications. Should I text him? Maybe he was waiting for me to beg him to come over and drill me hard. My sweaty palm left a smudge on the glass as I tossed it onto the passenger seat. Pathetic. I was twenty-six years old and pining like a goddamn teenager over a weekend hookup.

The parking lot at FRMC was deserted when I pulled in, my headlights sweeping across the empty asphalt. The morning breakfast rush didn't usually hit until around eight, and I had more time than usual to prep.

I told myself it was because I needed to catch up after the campout, but if I was being honest with myself, I'd have admitted that it was because I was afraid Cash wasn't going to show up to give me a ride on his motorcycle.

Afraid that his absence would crush me.

So I drove my own car. He'd fixed it, after all... and the engine had never run smoother.

The food truck sat in its usual spot, a familiar beacon in the dim morning light. I grabbed my prep list, supply bag, and phone, fumbling with the door handle before practically falling out of the car in my haste. The morning air bit through my thin jacket, raising goosebumps along my arms that had nothing to do with the temperature.

My hands shook as I unlocked the food truck, the key scratching against the metal before finding its mark. Inside, the familiar space calmed me slightly. There was the grill, the compact prep area, and all the other equipment I'd spent years saving for. This, at least, was within my control.

I started unpacking supplies, the routine movements soothing my frayed nerves. Until I dropped a carton of farm-fresh eggs, watching in horror as they splattered across the floor in an explosion of yellow and translucent white.

"Fuck!" I hissed, grabbing paper towels. My eyes burned with tears that had nothing to do with broken eggs. Get it together, Lockhart. Cleaning them up took more time than it should have as I gave in and let myself cry, just a little.

"Morning, man."

I jerked upright, cracking my head on the underside of the counter.

"Oh fuck, that hurt," I groaned, hoping it excused the tears still in my eyes.

I stood and found Dylan in the doorway of the food truck, two steaming mugs of coffee in hand, eyebrows raised at the mess of paper towels. His expression was casual, but something in his eyes made my stomach drop.

"Jesus, Dylan. Make some noise next time." I gathered up the egg-covered paper towels, feeling grumpy.

"Didn't expect to see you here so early." He leaned against the doorframe, extending one of the coffee cups like a peace offering. "I was making coffee, so when I saw you were here, I thought I'd come with a peace offering... and see what the specials were."

I took the coffee. "Just thought I'd get a head start today," I explained too quickly. "Busy weekend, lots to catch up on."

Dylan's gaze was steady, assessing. He didn't believe me for a second.

"Camping was good," he said, taking a careful sip from his cup. "Food was great."

"Thanks." I busied myself with the egg cleanup, willing my face not to betray me. "It was fun. Haven't done much camping before."

"Seemed like you enjoyed it." His voice held an undercurrent I couldn't quite place. "You and Cash seemed pretty tight out there."

My hands froze, egg yolk seeping into the paper towels. "Yeah, well. He was nice enough to give me a ride." I forced a laugh that sounded hollow even to my own ears.

Dylan watched me struggle for a moment longer before his expression softened. "Cash is... complicated. I think there's more going on under the surface than he's able to get out. Not sure why."

"Nothing complicated about it." I tossed the soiled towels into the trash with more force than necessary. "Just two guys who had some fun. No big deal."

Dylan opened his mouth to respond, but was cut off by the distinctive rumble of a motorcycle engine. My head snapped up, heart lurching painfully against my ribs. I knew that sound.

"You know, it's funny he didn't ride his cafe racer to work, if you didn't need a ride," Dylan said. "You did tell him you didn't need a ride, right?"

I frowned, trying to think back to what Cash used to ride to work, but I couldn't quite remember. "What do you mean? Cafe racer?"

"He has a bike he likes for city commuting. Usually saves the bigger Harleys for longer rides. Or, lately, when he needs a seat for you."

I swallowed. Hard. Had he stopped by my house? Why hadn't he texted when he'd found out I'd already left?

I moved to the food truck window, unable to stop myself from looking. Cash pulled into the lot, his broad shoulders silhouetted against the rising sun. He wore the same leather jacket from the weekend, his helmet the matte black one that matched the glittery one he'd bought for me. My throat tightened.

He cut the engine, swinging his leg over the bike with that fluid grace that still made my mouth go dry. For a brief moment, he glanced toward the food truck, his eyes meeting mine across the parking lot. Something flickered across his face—too quick to identify—before his expression shuttered closed.

Dylan had moved beside me, watching the exchange with interest. "Huh," he said quietly.

"Do you think he's upset?" I whispered. "Like, I mean, if he came by my house and I wasn't there."

Cash removed his helmet, tucking it under his arm as he strode toward the shop entrance. His steps were purposeful, shoulders rigid with tension. Not once did he look back at the food truck.

"He's not great at talking," Dylan offered, though his tone suggested he didn't believe it either.

"Right," I agreed, turning back to my prep area with forced nonchalance. "But it's not like we had anything to talk about, anyway."

Dylan's skeptical expression said he wasn't buying what I was selling. He finished his coffee in one long swallow, then set the

empty cup on my counter.

"Breakfast sandwich when you're up and running?" he asked, changing the subject with merciful tact.

"Sure thing. The usual?"

He nodded, moving toward the door. Then paused, glancing back at me with an uncharacteristically gentle expression. "For what it's worth, I've known Cash for years. Never seen him share his tent before. Or let anyone within a million miles of his bike. He rides alone, does everything alone. It's kind of nice to see someone break through."

Before I could formulate a response, Dylan was gone, the food truck door swinging shut behind him. I stood frozen, spatula gripped in my fist, his words echoing in my head.

I turned back to my grill, focusing on the familiar routine of heating it to the perfect temperature. I wouldn't cry. Not here. Not now. Not over a man who couldn't even look me in the eye after fucking me senseless all weekend.

But as I cracked fresh eggs into the sizzling pan, I couldn't help glancing toward the shop, hoping for a glimpse of tattoos and amber eyes that had seen me at my most vulnerable—and walked away.

The morning rush hit like a tsunami. Mondays were like that sometimes, and the line stretched across the parking lot by eight-thirty. I threw myself into the rhythm of cooking with manic energy, cracking eggs with enough force to make yolks explode, chopping vegetables like they'd personally offended me.

"Careful there, chef." A regular customer—older guy with a gray beard who always ordered the Western with extra hot sauce—nodded toward the grill where my omelet was starting to smoke.

"Shit, sorry." I flipped the ruined eggs onto a plate and started fresh. "Head's not in the game today."

"Don't blame you. I'm tired after the campout, too," he said, grinning. "Good times."

"Something like that," I muttered, sliding his correctly cooked breakfast sandwich across the counter. "Extra hot sauce."

My hands wouldn't stop trembling. I'd already broken three eggs, spilled an entire carton of milk, and burned myself twice—all things that never happened when I was working. The food truck was my domain, the one place where I was completely in control. Until now.

I kept glancing toward the shop, heart skipping painfully every time the door opened. A few times, I caught glimpses of Cash—his dark head bent over a motorcycle, his distinctive silhouette as he crossed from one bay to another. Each sighting was a sucker punch to my solar plexus, leaving me breathless and dizzy.

The line finally thinned around ten, giving me a moment to breathe. I leaned against the counter, pressing my forehead to the cool metal surface. My skin felt too tight, like I might crawl out of it at any moment.

"You look like shit."

I jerked upright to find Silas leaning in the service window, arms crossed over his broad chest. His expression was neutral, but his eyes were sharp, assessing. Was everyone in the damn FRMC going to stop by to check on me?

"Thanks," I replied dryly. "Just what every food service worker wants to hear."

"Rough morning?" he asked, though the quirk of his eyebrow suggested he already knew the answer.

I shrugged, busying myself with wiping down the already-clean counter. "Nothing unusual. What can I get you?"

"The usual." He drummed his fingers against the counter. "Cash is having a hard day, too."

The egg carton I'd been reaching for tumbled from my hands. I managed to catch it before it hit the floor, but not before Silas noticed my reaction. I felt heat flood my face, betraying me further.

I cracked an egg with too much force, shell fragments falling into the bowl. "Fuck," I muttered, fishing them out with trembling fingers.

"He's been watching you all morning," Silas said quietly.

My head snapped up. "What?"

Silas nodded toward the shop. "Every time the door opens. Every time someone approaches your truck. He's watching. Maybe he's waiting for you to do something at the same time that you're waiting for him to do something, you know? And you're both left waiting."

I followed his gaze across the lot. Through the large windows of the garage, I could see the shadow of Cash standing beside a dismantled motorcycle. As if sensing our attention, he looked up and turned our way.

For one breathless moment, everything else fell away—the noise of the food truck, Silas's knowing presence, the entire parking lot. Just me and Cash, connected by a look that contained all the hunger and heat of our weekend together.

Then he turned away, shoulders stiffening as he bent over the motorcycle, the connection broken as suddenly as it had formed.

My chest ached like he'd reached across the lot and physically ripped something out of me. I turned back to the grill, blinking rapidly against the stinging in my eyes.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, voice a little too high-pitched.

Silas's expression softened. "Cash isn't great with... feelings. Or people, generally." He accepted the wrapped sandwich I handed him. "But he doesn't share his bike. With anyone. Ever."

I swallowed hard. That was the second time someone had told me that this morning. Had they planned the meddling together? "Well, there's a first time for everything, right? And probably a last."

I busied myself with cleanup, unable to meet Silas's eyes. After a moment, he sighed.

"Don't give up on him so quick," he said before pushing away from the window. "He's worth the effort."

I didn't respond, continuing to scrub at a spot on the counter that was already clean. When I looked up again, Silas was gone, and the parking lot had emptied of the morning rush crowd.

I leaned against the counter, suddenly exhausted. My bladder protested, reminding me I'd been mainlining coffee since 5 a.m. without a bathroom break. Usually, I used the facilities in the shop rather than the tiny, cramped toilet in the food truck.

Which meant potentially running into Cash.

I debated holding it, but my body had other ideas. With a resigned sigh, I flipped the "Back in 15 Minutes" sign onto the service window and locked up. The walk across the parking lot felt like marching to my execution, each step bringing me closer to the possibility of an encounter I wasn't prepared for.

The shop was quiet when I entered; most of the mechanics busy with repairs in their individual bays. I kept my head down, making a beeline for the restroom at the back. Just get in, take care of business, get out. No need to—

I slammed into a solid wall of muscle as I rounded the corner, the impact knocking the breath from my lungs. Strong hands gripped my upper arms, steadying me before I could stagger backward.

"Shit, sorry, I wasn't looking—" The words died in my throat as I looked up into familiar amber eyes.

Cash stood frozen, his hands still on my arms, his face inches from mine. This close, I could see the shadows under his eyes, the tension in his jaw, the slight chapping of his lower lip where he'd been biting it—a nervous habit I'd noticed during our weekend together.

He smelled the same—motor oil and that subtle cologne that had clung to my skin for hours after we'd parted. His fingers were warm through the fabric of my shirt, the same fingers that had mapped every inch of my body with devastating precision.

"Aiden," he said, my name emerging rough and low, like it had been dragged across gravel.

"Cash," I replied, hating how breathless I sounded, how my body instinctively leaned toward his.

We stood like that, suspended in the narrow hallway, neither moving away nor stepping closer. His eyes searched mine, looking for something I couldn't name. My heart hammered against my ribs, so loud I was certain he could hear it. The urge to reach up, to touch his face, to reclaim what we'd had in the mountains was nearly overwhelming.

I waited, holding my breath, wanting—needing—him to say something, anything, that would explain the distance he'd put between us. That would tell me the weekend had meant something to him, too. That would make the ache in my chest subside.

But as the silence stretched between us, his hands slowly dropped from my arms, leaving cold spots where his warmth had been. And I turned and walked away. If he couldn't even tell me what he was thinking, how could this ever work?

CHAPTER 11

Cash

I KILLED THE HARLEY'S engine outside Aiden's house, the sudden silence ringing in my ears like an accusation. I'd arrived 12 hours early for our usual pickup time because I couldn't fucking stand another day of watching him through the shop window, pretending I didn't want to cross that parking lot and drag him into my arms. The morning's encounter in the hallway—his expectant face, my paralyzed tongue—replayed in my head on an endless loop. Words had failed me then. They always did. But I knew other ways to tell him what I couldn't say.

The lights were on, warm yellow squares against the darkening sky. I sat astride my bike for a moment, wrestling with the unfamiliar tightness in my chest. He'd driven to work without me. Left early, deliberately avoiding me. The thought burned like acid, feeding the possessive hunger that had been growing since that first night in the tent.

I stalked up the walkway, each step fueled by a desperation I'd never felt before, and knocked on the door.

Footsteps approached. Not Aiden's—too light, too measured. The door swung open to reveal a younger woman with Aiden's eyes and none of his warmth. His sister. Mira.

She crossed her arms, blocking the doorway with her slight frame. "Can I help you?" She knew exactly who I was, but was pretending not to.

"Aiden here?" My voice emerged rougher than intended.

"He's been weird since he got back from that camping trip," she said, eyeing me like I was something dangerous she'd found on her shoe. "Something to do with you, I assume? Were you an asshole?"

I met her glare with one of my own. "I need to talk to him."

She snorted. "Talk? That's a first."

The barb struck home with painful accuracy. I clenched my jaw, refusing to flinch. Her eyes swept over me—taking in the leather jacket, the boots, the tension radiating from every line of my body.

"He's in his room," she finally said, stepping aside reluctantly. "Down the hall, last door on the left." As I brushed past her, she added, "Hurt him again and I'll key your precious motorcycle."

I didn't respond, already moving down the hallway, drawn toward him like metal to a magnet. The last door stood slightly ajar, a thin slice of light spilling into the dim corridor. I didn't knock. Couldn't wait that extra second. Just pushed the door open and

stepped inside.

Aiden lay sprawled across his bed, phone held above his face, legs stretched out in sweatpants that hung low on his hips. His t-shirt had ridden up, exposing a strip of skin I'd tasted just days ago. His head snapped toward me, eyes widening with shock.

"Cash? What the fuck—"

I froze, eyes locked on his phone screen. My social media profile. My latest post was on the screen, the motorcycle silhouetted against the mountain sunset from our weekend. He'd been looking at my page.

Something primal and possessive surged through me, hot and urgent and completely beyond control. In three strides, I was at his bed, one knee on the mattress as I loomed over him.

He sat up, phone clutched in his hand, defiance flashing across his face. "You wouldn't even look at me yesterday. Barely said two words in the hallway. You can't just show up and—"

I swallowed the rest of his sentence with my mouth, crashing into him with a hunger that bordered on violence. He stiffened beneath me for one heart-stopping moment, then his hands were fisting in my jacket, pulling me down on top of him with equal force.

The kiss was all teeth and desperation, nothing like the careful exploration of our first night together. This was claiming, marking, punishing. I bit his lower lip hard enough to make him gasp, then soothed the sting with my tongue. His phone clattered to the floor as his hands slid beneath my jacket, fingers digging into my shoulders through my shirt.

"Goddamn you," he breathed against my mouth, voice cracking with emotion. "You fucking asshole. Why do you have to be so hot and cold? Why can't you just fucking talk to me and tell me what you need?"

Because I couldn't fucking talk to him, because it was getting harder and harder the more he mattered, I responded by shoving my hand under his shirt, palm sliding over the warm skin of his stomach, feeling the muscles jump beneath my touch. His head fell back, exposing the line of his throat, and I attacked it with teeth and tongue, sucking hard enough to leave marks.

Mine. The word pounded through my veins as I tore at his clothes, needing to feel his skin against mine. He was just as frantic, shoving my jacket off my shoulders, yanking at my shirt until I had to break away to pull it over my head.

The moment of separation was too much. I dove back into him, reclaiming his mouth as my hands worked his sweatpants down his hips. He was already hard, cock straining against his boxers. I palmed him roughly, swallowing his moan as our tongues battled.

"Fuck, Cash," he panted, pushing at my chest until I allowed him to sit up. "Wait—um can I have you bare? Do you get tested? For STDs and stuff?"

The question cut through the red haze of want. I sat back on my heels, chest heaving, fighting for the words to tell him he could have what he wanted. I nodded, hoping he knew what I meant.

"Same." His eyes were dark with hunger, lips swollen from my kisses. "No condom then. Want to taste you."

Before I could process his words, he was shoving me onto my back, hands making quick work of my belt and jeans. Cool air hit my cock as he freed it, then disappeared in the wet heat of his mouth closing around me.

I buried my hands in his hair and groaned, hips jerking up involuntarily, because holy fuck, his mouth was warm and wet and so

damn delicious.

His hands pinned my hips to the mattress as he took me deeper, tongue swirling around the head before sliding down the shaft. The sight of him with his eyes closed in concentration, cheeks hollowed, those perfect lips stretched around my cock, nearly undid me right there.

His technique was flawless, a devastating combination of suction and friction that had me seeing stars and wondering who'd taught him to suck cock like this. I wanted to find them and thank them and make sure they knew they couldn't have him anymore. When he pulled off to lick a broad stripe from base to tip, I couldn't stop the desperate sound that escaped me.

"Like that?" he asked, voice wrecked and beautiful. His hand replaced his mouth, stroking me with just the right pressure.

"Fuck yes," I managed, unable to tear my eyes away from him.

"I know what you like, don't I?" He grinned, and it was that same smug grin that had driven me crazy from day one, all brash confidence and cuteness. Then he took me in his mouth again, deeper this time. The head of my cock hit the back of his throat, and he swallowed around me, the muscles contracting in a way that tore another groan from my chest.

No one had ever sucked me like this—like they were savoring a favorite treat, like they couldn't get enough. His enthusiasm was as arousing as his skill, the little hums of pleasure vibrating around my cock telling me he was enjoying this almost as much as I was.

I was getting dangerously close to the edge when he pulled off with an obscene pop. His lips were red and slick, eyes glazed with lust as he crawled up my body.

"Want you inside me," he whispered, hot breath against my ear. "Need you to fill me up."

He reached for his bedside drawer, pulling out a bottle of lube while I kicked my jeans the rest of the way off. When he straddled my thighs, pouring lube onto his fingers, I realized what he intended.

"Let me," I said, reaching for him.

He shook his head, pupils blown wide with desire. "Watch me."

Fuck. He reached behind himself, his lip caught between his teeth as he worked his fingers inside. His cock stood rigid against his stomach, leaking at the tip. I ran my hands up his thighs, feeling the muscles tremble as he opened himself up. I skimmed the pad of my thumb over his cock, watching it jump in response, watching his eyelids droop as he moaned softly.

"You know how to touch me, too," he said.

When he finally deemed himself ready, he slicked my cock with lube, positioned himself above me, and began to sink down. The tight heat of him enveloped me inch by agonizing inch, and the view was the sexiest I'd ever seen, his body graceful and slender as he forced my dick into his tight hole until he was fully seated, ass flush against my hips.

I hissed, hands gripping his waist. He looked so beautiful straddling me, impaled on me, his cock dripping pre-cum onto my stomach.

His head fell back, throat working as he adjusted to the stretch. Then, with a slow roll of his hips that made me see stars, he began to move.

The sight of him riding me, his body flushed with arousal, cock bouncing against his stomach, face slack with pleasure, was the most erotic thing I'd ever seen. I wrapped one hand around his shaft, stroking in time with his movements, determined to make him fall apart.

He increased his pace, hips working in a rhythm that had us both gasping. My other hand gripped his thigh, feeling the muscles strain as he lifted and dropped himself on my cock. The wet sounds of our bodies joining filled the room, punctuated by his breathy moans and my deeper groans.

"Cash," he panted, rhythm faltering as he approached his peak. "I'm close. Fuck, your cock is so good."

I tightened my grip on his cock, thumb swiping over the sensitive head.

His entire body tensed, thighs trembling as his orgasm crashed through him. Hot pulses of cum coated my chest and stomach as he threw his head back, a broken cry tearing from his throat. His ass clenched around my cock in rhythmic waves that pushed me over the edge.

I came with his name on my lips, hips driving up into his tight heat as pleasure ripped through me. Wave after wave of ecstasy washed over me, more intense than anything I'd experienced before. When the aftershocks finally subsided, Aiden collapsed onto my chest, uncaring of the mess between us.

Our lips found each other in a kiss that was surprisingly tender after the frantic coupling. I could taste myself on his tongue, the intimacy of it making something warm unfurl in my chest. His heart hammered against mine, our ragged breaths slowly synchronizing as we came down from the high.

Aiden flopped onto his back beside me, our shoulders touching, skin cooling in the aftermath. His breathing had almost returned to normal, but I could feel tension rebuilding in the slight distance he'd put between us. My body still hummed with satisfaction, but my mind was already racing ahead to all the ways I might fuck this up. When his finger started tracing patterns on my chest, connecting the dots of my tattoos like constellations, I knew questions were coming. Questions I didn't have good answers for.

"Why don't you talk to me?" he whispered, finger pausing over my heart.

The question hung between us, deceptively simple yet impossibly complex. I'd known it was coming—had seen it in his eyes that morning in the hallway, had felt it in the desperate way he'd kissed me minutes ago. I'd come here tonight to fix things, but words were still trapped inside me, tangled and useless.

I sighed, pulling him closer until his head rested on my shoulder. His hair tickled my chin, and I buried my nose in it, buying time as I breathed in the scent of him, wishing I could find the words to explain it, but a cold sense of dread clamped down on my vocal chords. What if I said the wrong thing?

What if he didn't want me like I wanted him?

His finger resumed its path across my chest, gentle but persistent, like he was trying to decode me through touch. "You seem to do okay talking to customers. With Silas. Maybe not with strangers, but why am I hard to talk to? I don't get it."

I chewed on my bottom lip, staring at him, willing the words to come out, but they were frozen there, stuck the way they got sometimes, when something really mattered.

He said nothing for a long moment, just continued tracing patterns on my skin. I counted his breaths, trying to gauge his thoughts from the rhythm of his chest rising and falling against mine. Ten slow inhales, ten measured exhailes, then he lifted his head to study my face.

"I suppose the sex is good enough that I'll take it even without the talking. Want to see something?" he asked, already tapping at the screen.

The abrupt change of subject left me disoriented but relieved. I nodded, watching as he pulled up social media and navigated to a hashtag search.

"People are shipping us," he announced, turning the screen toward me. "Someone caught a photo of me riding with you. It's kind of sexy."

The picture showed us from behind at a stoplight—me on the Harley, Aiden pressed against my back, his arms wrapped around my waist. The angle was such that our faces weren't visible, just the distinctive outline of my bike and Aiden's glittery black helmet with its rainbow stripe. A dozen comments filled the space below, speculating about "Spotted @MotoCash the hot motorcycle mechanic and a mystery passenger. Boyfriends?"

My entire body tensed. I knew that hashtag. Knew who followed it. I'd started the account to help the shop, but somehow it had taken a life of its own, and I'd been stupid enough to play into the whole thirst trap thing. Hell, I'd enjoyed it, even done a few shoots with guys at the shop, hoping to blow it up more.

But I'd started toning it down since my family had found it. My brother Leo religiously tracked all my social media activity, constantly looking for evidence that my "motorcycle phase" was just that—a temporary detour before I came to my senses and returned to Kansas to join the family business.

"What's wrong?" Aiden asked, shifting to see my face better. "You look like you're about to throw my phone through the wall."

I scrubbed a hand over my face, trying to relax muscles that had suddenly gone wire-tight.

Aiden's eyes narrowed. "You went from zero to pissed in half a second." He pulled back slightly, studying me. "Are you embarrassed? To be seen with me?"

"No," the word ripped from my lips before my brain could stop it.

"Then what?" His voice had an edge now, the playfulness evaporating. "What's so wrong with people shipping us? I mean, we're kinda... not that you're my boyfriend, but..."

Heat crawled up my neck as I struggled to articulate the complicated tangle of family history, expectations, and my own inadequacies. My brother's voice echoed in my head—"Just a phase, Cassius. You'll get tired of playing with bikes and come home where you belong."

"I don't know what to do, Cash," he whispered. "Sometimes, it's so intense with us, but then you shut down. I'm starting to think this whole 'I'm not good at talking' thing is just a convenient excuse."

The accusation stung, partly because there was a grain of truth to it. It wasn't intentional, but words failed me when I needed them most. They had always failed me when someone needed something from me, from the time I was a kid trying to explain to my father why I'd rather be in the garage than learn the family business.

And Aiden was so vibrant, so full of life and great at communicating and at noticing people. He deserved someone who could give him the words he needed. But I was greedy and I hugged him close anyway, my hand sliding up and down his back until he relaxed, soothed by my touch.

"Is the way you touch me your attempt to communicate something?" he whispered, and the hope in his voice almost broke me.

I nodded, throat too tight for words. My hand found his between us, fingers lacing together in a grip that conveyed what I couldn't say: I'm trying. I want this. Please be patient with me.

CHAPTER 12

Cash

RIDING IN TO WORK together felt right. Natural. His arms wrapped around my waist, body melded to mine like he belonged there. We'd fallen back into the rhythm we'd found in the mountains, moving as one through the curves of Denver's morning traffic. It was easier to communicate this way, with the press of his chest against my back, the tightening of his fingers on my stomach when he wanted me to slow down, the weight of his head resting between my shoulder blades when we hit a straight stretch.

The kiss he'd planted on my cheek when I'd dropped him at the food truck.

The shop was quiet when I walked in, just Dylan whistling as he tore down a carburetor and Liv cursing softly at something under a Triumph. Normal. Except nothing felt normal anymore. I could still smell Aiden on my shirt, could still feel the imprint of his body against mine. I set my helmet on the workbench and pulled out my phone to check the day's appointments.

Thirty-seven social media notifications. What the fuck?

I swiped open the app, stomach dropping as I saw the tagged photo at the top of my feed. The same one Aiden had shown me last night. Only now it had hundreds of likes and dozens of comments.

@RiderGirl69: Who's the mystery passenger? @MotoCash finally find someone who can handle those curves?

@DenverMotoClub: Cash Upton with a passenger? Never thought I'd see the day. Lucky SOB whoever they are.

@BikerBabe303: OMG is that a rainbow stripe on the helmet? Cash has a boyfriend?!

Fuck. Fuckfuckfuck. I scrolled faster, heart pounding in my throat, well aware that my parents and brother would be watching. It wasn't a secret. I'd shared it with too many people before the thirst trap explosion.

My brother. Who was running for state senate in Kansas on a "traditional family values" platform. Who had never fully understood why I left home to "play with motorcycles" instead of joining the family business.

"Whoa, someone's popular today." Dylan's voice made me jump. He peered over my shoulder at my phone, his usual grin widening. "Is that you with Aiden? Man, the internet has opinions."

I shoved my phone in my pocket, heat crawling up my neck. "It's nothing."

"Doesn't look like nothing." Dylan waggled his eyebrows. "Looks like you finally got your head out of your ass and told Aiden you wanted him. About time."

Liv appeared at my other side, wiping grease from her hands. "Did I hear correctly? Cash Upton's love life is trending?" She plucked my phone from my pocket before I could stop her—personal boundaries had never been Liv's strong suit—and whistled low as she scrolled. "Damn, you two look good together. Very social media-aesthetic."

I snatched my phone back, scowling. "Don't you have work to do?"

"This is more interesting," Dylan said, leaning against my workbench. "Tell us more about what happened. I knew it, though. The way you looked at him at the campout? Like a cartoon prince gazing at his one true love."

"Fuck off," I growled, but there was no real heat behind it. I couldn't summon genuine annoyance, not when my body still hummed with the memory of Aiden's hands on me, his lips against my ear, whispering that he wanted me just as I was.

"Oh, I've got a shot of that from the campout," Liv said, pulling out her own phone. "Didn't realize I should be documenting the romance of the century, or I'd have taken better ones."

She tapped at her screen, then held it up triumphantly. "Sent them to you. You're welcome."

My phone buzzed with the incoming message. Against my better judgment, I opened it.

The photo punched the air from my lungs. It was of Aiden and me by the campfire, his face animated mid-story, hands gesturing expressively. And me... fuck, I was smiling. Actually smiling. Not my usual tight-lipped grimace, but a real smile that softened my entire face, eyes fixed on him like he was the only person in the world. I remembered that moment. Aiden had been telling everyone about how he'd accidentally driven his food truck down a one-way street his first week in business, had to be rescued by a friendly cop who ended up becoming his first regular customer.

"You two are disgustingly cute," Liv said, misinterpreting my silence as embarrassment rather than the emotional sucker punch it really was. "I thought you were going to spontaneously combust every time he touched you."

Dylan piped up. "You literally dragged him away from the campfire the second I tried to flirt."

I felt heat crawl up my neck. "I was just—"

"Marking your territory?" Liv suggested with a smirk. "Yeah, we noticed."

"He makes the best fucking breakfast sandwiches I've ever had," Dylan said, changing the subject slightly. "You're a lucky man, Cash. Just saying."

I stared down at the photos again, lingering on the one of us by the fire. I hadn't known I could look like that—soft, open, almost... happy. It was a stranger's face reflected back at me, but one I recognized somewhere deep in my bones. The person I might be if I stopped fighting so hard against my own nature.

"Yeah," I said quietly.

The admission hung in the air, surprisingly easy to voice. Dylan and Liv exchanged glances, clearly not expecting me to agree so readily.

"Well, shit," Liv grinned. "The apocalypse must be coming. Cash Upton admitted to having feelings."

"Fuck off," I muttered, but couldn't stop the slight upturn of my lips. I tucked my phone away, the images burning into my memory. Aiden's animated face as he'd told that story about his first week with the food truck. How he'd laughed at his own mistakes, completely at ease with his imperfections in a way I'd never managed to be.

I ran a hand through my hair, unaccustomed to talking this much, especially about someone I was—what? Dating? Was that what we were doing? Whatever it was, it felt too new, too fragile to name.

The shop door swung open, and my heart did that ridiculous leap it always did when Aiden walked in. He was carrying a brown paper bag that smelled like heaven, his hair still damp from a shower, cheeks flushed from the morning chill. He spotted me and his face lit up in a way that made my chest ache.

"Breakfast delivery," he announced, crossing to my workbench. "Triple bacon with extra cheese and that hot sauce you pretended not to love but definitely went back for seconds of."

Dylan whistled, backing away with his hands raised. "And that's my cue to give you lovebirds some privacy."

Liv followed, but not before wiggling her eyebrows suggestively. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do on that workbench."

Aiden's cheeks flushed darker, but he was grinning as he set the bag in front of me. "They know, huh? It's kind of hot," he said, leaning closer. "Knowing I can make the stoic Cash Upton lose his cool."

Something warm uncurled in my chest at his teasing. I took a step toward him, close enough that I could feel the heat radiating from his body. I lifted a hand and brushed that stray curl off of his forehead.

His eyes widened slightly, lips parting on an indrawn breath. "That was almost romantic, Upton. Be careful, or I'll start thinking you like me."

I more than liked him, I just didn't know how to say it.

The shop door banged open again, shattering the moment. The sound was followed by heavy footsteps and a familiar voice that turned my blood to ice.

"Cassius! I knew it," Leo spat, striding across the shop floor like he owned it.

"Your full name is Cassius?" Aiden said, laughter in his eyes. "I kinda like it!"

"Jesus Christ, right out in the open? Are you fucking kidding me?" Leo continued, undeterred by Aiden's cheer.

I pulled back from Aiden instinctively, years of conditioning kicking in. Leo stood before us in his perfect suit, perfect haircut, perfect campaign-ready appearance, face contorted with disgust as his eyes flicked between Aiden and me.

"Leo," I managed, voice tight.

"I'm here for damage control," he snapped. "Though it might be too late for that. You know your little photo is all over social media, right? With your full name tagged? Do you have any idea what this could do to my campaign?"

Of course. The campaign. First, it had been the business, their customer base, wholesome, Christian folk from the heartland who just wanted me to behave like I should and not make a fuss. But lately, my brother had shifted his focus to bigger goals. To politics.

"What are you doing?" Leo's voice rose. "My opponents will jump on this, and trash me in the headlines. 'Senate candidate Leo Upton's brother caught in homosexual tryst.' You couldn't keep it private, could you? Had to flaunt it all over social media."

Aiden straightened beside me, his easy smile replaced by something sharp and dangerous. "Excuse me," he said, voice deceptively calm. "But who the fuck are you?"

Leo barely spared him a glance. "I'm his brother. And you need to back off."

"His brother," Aiden repeated slowly. "I didn't even know he had a brother."

"This doesn't concern you," Leo dismissed. "This is about the way my little brother is hell-bent on ruining my political career."

"Political career?" Aiden scoffed. "You must be a huge deal. I've never even heard of you."

"Just because I'm starting small doesn't mean it doesn't matter. State Senate in Kansas is my path to the US Congress. It's all mapped out. And I won't let Cassius ruin it."

Aiden tilted his head. "I don't get it. Why would having a queer brother ruin a political career?"

"Because it goes against the will of God!" Leo thundered. "My campaign is all about getting back to our roots. Family values."

"You drove here from Kansas?" Aiden asked, looking baffled. "To yell at him? They have this newfangled technology. It's called a phone."

"This was a conversation that needed to happen in person. So he could see exactly what he's done wrong."

Aiden blinked. "You should be happy as hell that your brother found someone to care about him. Someone with real family values wouldn't drive all the way from Kansas to come yell at their brother like some asshole."

"What does it matter to you?" Leo was roaring now.

Aiden stepped closer, putting himself slightly between Leo and me. "I'm the one he's been with. The one you're so worried about ruining your precious campaign."

I should say something. Anything. But words died in my throat as Leo's face flushed with anger.

"Do you have any idea what you're doing to this family?" Leo hissed at me. "To Mom and Dad? To the business? Thirty-five years building a reputation in that community, and you might destroy it."

"He's not doing anything to anyone," Aiden's voice cut like glass. "Except living his life. Which, last time I checked, he has every right to do without getting permission from his asshole brother."

Leo's head whipped toward Aiden, finally giving him his full attention. "Again, this is a family matter."

"Family?" Aiden's laugh was without humor. "That's rich. Family supports each other. Family accepts each other. If you're behaving like this, you're not his family."

"Don't think this is love. It's a phase. Another rebellion. Like the motorcycles, like dropping out of business school. Always looking for ways to embarrass the family."

"Or maybe," Aiden continued, voice rising with conviction, "maybe it's not about you at all, but about Cash living authentically. Maybe it's about him finding happiness on his own terms instead of following some bullshit playbook written by people who care more about appearances than actual human connection."

I stared at Aiden, something fierce and protective swelling in my chest. He was magnificent in his anger—all righteous fury and articulate defense.

"And while we're at it," Aiden continued, warming to his subject, "let's talk about your erasure of bisexuality. Because Cash isn't gay, he's bisexual. And your inability to recognize that is just another example of how you're trying to force him into neat little boxes that make sense for your narrow worldview."

Leo's face had gone from red to purple. "I don't need a lecture on sexuality from some—"

"Some what?" Aiden challenged, stepping closer. "Go ahead, say it. Show your true colors right here in front of your brother and his coworkers. I'm sure that'll play great for your campaign."

"Get out of my shop," Silas's deep voice rang out across the shop. I hadn't even heard him come in, but he was flanked on both sides by Marcus and other members of the crew. They looked tough and dangerous, but they had nothing on the fierce little Aiden.

"This is private property, and you are not welcome here," Marcus added. "Bigotry is not welcome here."

Leo's mouth snapped shut, jaw working as he visibly struggled for control. His eyes darted around the shop, where I now noticed Dylan and Liv watching with undisguised interest from their workstations.

"This isn't over," Leo said finally, jabbing a finger toward me. "We'll discuss this privately. Without your... friends... present."

"No," I found my voice at last, the single syllable feeling like liberation. "We won't."

Leo stared at me for a long moment, as if seeing me for the first time. Then, without another word, he turned on his heel and stalked out of the shop, the door slamming behind him.

The silence that followed was broken by a low whistle from Dylan.

"Holy shit," he said. "Aiden's got teeth. Remind me not to cross him!"

Aiden was still vibrating with tension beside me, his chest rising and falling rapidly. I reached for his hand, threading our fingers together without hesitation.

"You okay?" he asked, squeezing my hand, his anger immediately giving way to concern.

I nodded, then looked down at him, smoothing a hand over his cheek.

I wondered if Leo had really driven all the way from Kansas just to confront me about the photo. Probably. It would be just like him—impulsive when it came to protecting the family image, calculating in everything else. But as I stood there, surrounded by the familiar smells of motor oil and metal, Aiden's hand warm in mine, I realized something profound.

I didn't care. I just needed to thank him. For every single thing he'd said.

CHAPTER 13

Aiden

CASH'S FINGERS CIRCLED MY wrist like a vise, his grip just shy of painful as he dragged me across the shop floor. His face was carved from stone, jaw clenched, eyes burning with something I couldn't name—anger, desire, fear, all of it swirling together in a storm I wanted no part of. Or maybe I wanted all of it. I was suddenly certain Cash blamed me for the confrontation that had just unfolded in front of his coworkers.

"Cash, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—" I started, stumbling over my words as he shoved open the bathroom door.

He didn't respond, just pulled me inside and kicked the door shut behind us, the heavy metal thudding with finality, then reached out and turned the deadbolt.

The overhead fluorescents flickered and buzzed, casting harsh shadows across the angles of his face, making him look dangerous in a way that sent a forbidden thrill through me despite my fear. The bathroom was all industrial concrete and metal, the cold efficiency of it amplifying the echo of our breathing—mine quick and shallow, his deep and controlled.

When the lock clicked into place, I braced myself for the explosion, for harsh words, for blame. Instead, Cash turned to me, his eyes dark with an emotion I couldn't read, and dropped to his knees on the hard concrete floor.

"What are you—" The question died in my throat as his hands went straight to my belt, fingers working the buckle. Understanding crashed over me in a wave of heat that left me dizzy. "Oh. I mean, yeah, I feel a bit fired up, too. But do you want to talk?"

He didn't look up, didn't speak, just tugged my jeans and boxers down in one rough motion. My cock sprang free, already hardening from the mere proximity of him, from the shocking reality of Cash Upton on his knees before me. He finally looked up, holding my gaze for one breath-stealing moment before leaning forward and taking me into his mouth without hesitation.

"Fuck," I gasped, my head falling back against the tile wall with a thud I barely registered. The wet heat of his mouth engulfed me, inept but eager in a way that made my knees weak. His technique was clumsy—too much suction, then not enough, teeth occasionally scraping in a way that walked the knife's edge between pleasure and pain—but what he lacked in skill he made up for in raw enthusiasm.

His hands gripped my hips, pinning me against the wall, thumbs digging into the hollows beside my hip bones with bruising force. The slight pain only heightened the pleasure, grounding me in the moment, in the impossible reality of Cash Upton sucking my cock in the FRMC bathroom.

"Jesus, Cash," I breathed, one hand finding his hair, fingers threading through the dark strands. He made a sound—not quite a

moan, something deeper, more primal—that vibrated around my length, sending shocks of pleasure up my spine. “You could just say thank you.”

He started to pull back, and I grabbed his hair, keeping him on my cock.

“This works too. Will never complain about this,” I said with a breathy laugh that dissolved into a moan as his tongue swirled through my slit.

I tugged gently, trying to guide him, to slow the frantic pace that threatened to end things embarrassingly quickly. "Like this," I murmured, showing him with slight pressure how to bob his head, how to use his tongue along the underside. He was a fast learner, adjusting his approach immediately, finding a rhythm that had me biting my lip to keep from crying out, hoping no one could hear us.

They probably guessed what we were doing.

Cash hollowed his cheeks, sucking harder as his hand wrapped around the base of my cock, working what he couldn't fit in his mouth. His eyes flicked up to mine, dark with determination and something that looked almost like reverence. The sight of him like this—this man who barely strung three words together, communicating everything he couldn't say with his mouth and hands—pushed me dangerously close to the edge.

"I'm gonna come if you don't stop," I warned, voice strained.

He pulled off with an obscene pop, lips slick and swollen, chin wet. "Not yet."

He stood in one fluid motion, shoving my jeans down and lifting me so my thighs wrapped around his. He pressed me into the wall as he reached into his pocket for a small packet of lube, ripping it open with his teeth.

"You came prepared," I observed, breathless with want and the realization that he'd planned this—or at least hoped for it.

His lips brushed the shell of my ear, breath hot against my ear as he nibbled at my throat. Then his slick fingers were probing between my cheeks, circling my entrance with surprising gentleness given the urgency thrumming through both our bodies. One thick finger pressed inside, stretching me with careful precision.

He moaned, adding a second finger alongside the first, working me open with efficient strokes that made my cock jump and leak against my stomach.

I pushed back against his hand, greedy for more, for all of him. "Please," I gasped, beyond pride or pretense. "Need you inside me."

Cash nipped at the junction of my neck and shoulder, the slight pain drawing a whimper from my throat.

A third finger joined the others, stretching me wider, brushing against that spot inside that made stars explode behind my eyelids. My legs trembled, threatening to give out entirely as pleasure coursed through me in hot waves.

"Now," I demanded, pushing back against his hand. "Cash, please, now."

He withdrew his fingers, and I heard the rustle of another lube packet being opened, the rasp of his zipper lowering. Then the blunt head of his cock pressed against my entrance, hot and insistent. He pinned my legs high and wide as he drove slowly up into me from below, breaching me in one long, slow thrust that burned and stretched and filled me so completely I forgot how to breathe.

The pain gave way to pleasure as he bottomed out, his hips flush against my ass, his cock throbbing inside me. He paused, giving me time to adjust, his breathing ragged against my neck. I could feel the tremors running through his body as he fought for control.

"Move," I gasped, pushing back to take him impossibly deeper. "Please, Cash, fuck me. Show me you don't believe him. You don't think this is wrong."

Something in him snapped. He pulled back almost to the tip, then slammed forward with enough force to drive me hard against the wall. The sound of skin slapping against skin echoed obscenely in the tiled room, but I was beyond caring, beyond anything but the perfect rhythm he found—hard and deep and relentless.

His lips crashed against mine, and I wrapped my arms around his neck, unable to do anything but cling to him as he fucked me wildly.

His breathing punctuated each thrust, occasionally breaking on a low, possessive growl that sent electricity racing through my veins. One hand left my hip, snaking between us to wrap around my neglected cock, stroking in time with his thrusts.

I spread my legs, taking him deeper, harder, my body singing with pleasure so intense it bordered on pain. The dual stimulation of his cock hitting that perfect spot inside me and his hand working my shaft drove me rapidly toward the edge.

"Close," I warned, voice breaking on the word. "So close, Cash."

His pace became punishing, his hips snapping against mine with enough force to drive me up onto my toes. His hand tightened around my cock, thumb swiping over the sensitive head on each upstroke.

The tension inside me snapped like an overstretched wire. I came with a muffled cry, spilling over his hand and onto the tile wall in hot pulses that seemed to go on forever. My body clenched around his cock in rhythmic waves, drawing him deeper, my fingers digging into his shoulders.

Cash thrust once, twice more, then buried himself to the hilt with a strangled groan against my neck, his body going rigid as he followed me over the edge. I felt the pulse of his release deep inside me, hot and slick.

For long moments, we stayed like that, joined and panting, his weight pressed against my back, pinning me to the wall. His heart hammered against my spine, his breath hot and damp against my neck. Slowly, the world began to reassemble itself around us—the hum of the fluorescent lights, the distant sounds of the shop, the cold press of tile against my overheated skin.

Cash eased out of me with surprising gentleness, one hand steadying me as he dropped my legs to the ground and I winced at the emptiness he left behind.

Our eyes met, and for one suspended moment, everything else fell away. Leo's anger, the shop, the world outside this bathroom. Just us, and whatever this was between us that defied easy definition.

Then Cash looked away, breaking the spell, and the cold reality of what we'd just done came rushing back. He still hadn't explained things to me. He just kept shifting gears from the intense sexual closeness to this cool silence so fast it gave me whiplash.

The water ran cold over my hands, numbing my fingers as I mechanically washed away the evidence of what we'd just done. The mirror above the sink reflected our awkward choreography—me at one basin, Cash at another, both of us focused on the mundane task of cleaning up as if the world might end if we acknowledged what had just happened. The space between us, barely two feet of industrial bathroom tile, felt wider than the Grand Canyon. I sneaked glances at him through the mirror, searching for any hint of what he was thinking, but his face had returned to that unreadable mask, jaw set, eyes downcast,

shoulders rigid with tension I longed to ease but didn't know how.

I adjusted my clothes, wincing slightly at the pleasant soreness that reminded me of his urgency, his need, his possession. My shirt was rumpled, hair a disaster from where his fingers had gripped it. Cash looked equally wrecked—lips still swollen, a flush lingering high on his cheekbones, stubble burn reddening his jaw where I'd rubbed against him. Physical evidence of our connection that stood in stark contrast to the emotional chasm widening between us.

Minutes earlier, he'd been inside me, gripping me like he never wanted to let go. Now he wouldn't even meet my eyes.

The soap dispenser wheezed as Cash pressed it again, working up a lather with methodical precision. His movements were measured, controlled, nothing like the desperate urgency that had possessed him before. I watched his hands and tried to reconcile their tenderness with his current distance.

"That was..." I started, then faltered, unsure how to finish. Intense? Amazing? Terrifying in its implications? "Hot."

Cash grunted, a non-committal sound that could have meant anything or nothing. His eyes remained fixed on his hands as he rinsed them, watching the water swirl down the drain as if it contained the secrets of the universe.

The silence stretched between us, broken only by the steady drip of the leaky faucet and the distant sounds of the shop floor. I could still hear Liv's laugh, Dylan's deeper voice responding. Life continued outside this bathroom as if nothing world-altering had happened inside it. As if Cash hadn't just fucked me against the wall with an intensity that had made my knees buckle and my heart crack open.

"Your brother's an asshole," I said finally, desperate to break the silence with something, anything.

Cash's lips twitched, almost a smile but not quite. "Yeah."

One word. Just one. But it felt like a victory after the wall of silence he'd erected. I pushed further.

"You okay? After what he said?"

His shoulders tensed slightly, the movement barely perceptible. Then he shrugged.

I turned off my faucet, grabbing a paper towel to dry my hands. My reflection stared back at me, cheeks still flushed, eyes too bright, looking altogether too vulnerable for a man my age. Cash continued to wash his hands, the water running long after all traces of soap had disappeared.

What the hell were we doing? Was this just some adrenaline-fueled response to his brother's appearance? A way to stake his claim, to rebel? Or was it something more, something deeper that he couldn't articulate?

I studied his profile in the mirror—the strong jaw, the slight furrow between his brows, the tight set of his mouth. He looked... troubled. Conflicted. And suddenly I needed to know, needed words where actions weren't enough, needed confirmation that I wasn't just a convenient body, a warm mouth, a tight ass for him to lose himself in when emotions ran high.

"Is this just sex?" The words emerged softer than I'd intended, small but steady in the quiet bathroom.

Cash froze, water still running over his hands. I watched his reflection, saw the subtle stiffening of his spine, the slight widening of his eyes, the way his jaw clenched and unclenched as if physically chewing on my question. For one heart-stopping moment, I thought he might actually answer, might give me something real to hold on to.

But the moment stretched, seconds turning to eternity as he stood there, unmoving, silent. The only sound was the steady rush of water over his motionless hands, washing away nothing, just running and running as the silence between us deepened into something painful and raw.

My throat tightened, eyes burning with the threat of tears I refused to shed. His silence was becoming its own kind of answer, one that hollowed out my chest and left a cold ache where warmth had been. I'd handed him my vulnerability on a silver platter, and he couldn't even look at me.

"Right," I said finally, the word catching on the edge of a laugh that held no humor. "Stupid question."

Cash's eyes flicked to mine in the mirror for one brief, unreadable moment before dropping away again.

I felt myself shrinking, folding inward around the wound his silence was carving into me. This man who had held me through the night, who had shared his tent, his bike, his body with such unexpected tenderness couldn't—or wouldn't—tell me if I meant anything to him beyond a convenient fuck.

And I turned and walked out of the room, not looking back.

CHAPTER 14

Cash

I STARED AT THE parts spread across my workbench like a mechanical autopsy, but my hands wouldn't move. They knew what to do—had rebuilt this exact model a hundred times—but the circuit between brain and fingers had short-circuited, fried by the memory of Aiden's face in that bathroom mirror.

The way hope had drained from his eyes when I couldn't answer his simple fucking question. Is this just sex? It was days later, and I still hadn't found the words, still felt them stuck in my throat like engine parts too big to cough up. I picked up a screwdriver, then set it down again. Across the parking lot, the spot where his food truck should be gaped empty, another reminder of how badly I'd fucked up.

He'd driven himself to work. Again. For the third time this week.

My mind replayed our bathroom encounter on an endless loop. The way he'd yielded against me, all that bright energy and chatter silenced by my hands, my mouth. How his body had told me everything his words couldn't. The broken sound he'd made when I'd pushed inside him. And after—the question hanging between us, his eyes searching mine for an answer I couldn't give, not because I didn't know it, but because the words wouldn't come. Never came when it mattered.

The screw I'd been holding slipped from my fingers, clattering to the floor. I cursed, dropping to one knee to search for it under the workbench. A pair of worn boots stepped into my line of sight, and I looked up to find Dylan watching me, that perpetual half-smirk on his face.

"Wow," he said, leaning against the bench. "You look like absolute shit."

I grunted, spotting the needle and snatching it up before standing. "Fuck off."

"Original comeback, man. Really devastating." Dylan's smirk widened. He glanced at the disassembled carburetor, then back at me. "That's the third time you've taken that apart today. Either you've discovered a fascinating new mechanical principle, or something's eating at you."

I set the needle down with more care than necessary, arranging it in perfect alignment with the other parts. "Just doing my job."

"This have anything to do with your food truck boyfriend not showing up today?"

My head snapped up. Aiden wasn't here today? "Not boyfriend."

Dylan waited patiently, eyebrows raised. When I didn't continue, he sighed. "Right. Well, your not-boyfriend has gone to that

new brewery down on Spears today. Told Silas he was 'considering a new location.'"

Something cold and heavy settled in my gut. Aiden was looking for somewhere else to park his truck. Away from FRMC. Away from me.

He pulled out his phone, tapped a few times, then glanced up at me. "Check your notifications."

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I ignored it.

"It's a cloud folder," Dylan continued, undeterred by my silence. "Noah put together all the photos from the campout for the page he's building on the website. Asked me to see if there were any you wanted for your little thirst trap project on social media. Says it's bringing in good business."

"It's not a thirst trap project, it's just about bikes."

"Sure, man... that's believable. Just look."

I reluctantly pulled out my phone, swiping open the notification. A folder appeared, filled with thumbnails—campfire shots, group photos, bikes lined up against the mountain backdrop.

"There are some good ones of you and Aiden in there," Dylan said casually, too casually.

I glared at him, though I made no move to put the phone away.

Dylan's expression softened fractionally. "Look, I've known you, what, four years now? Seen you rebuild engines most mechanics wouldn't touch. Seen you work thirty-six hours straight when a client needed their bike for Sturgis. Never seen you look at anything or anyone the way you look at him in those photos." He pushed off from the workbench. "Just thought you might want to see it for yourself."

He walked away, leaving me with my phone and the hollow feeling expanding in my chest. I wanted to call him back, ask him what he meant, what he saw that I didn't. Instead, I stared at the thumbnails, thumb hovering over the screen.

Fuck it.

I tapped the first photo. It was from the first night, taken at the campfire. Me sitting on a log, looking off-camera, my expression unreadable behind the usual mask I wore. Next photo. Group shot, everyone holding beers, Aiden standing slightly apart, eyes finding the camera, smile not quite reaching his eyes. Next. Aiden cooking breakfast, spatula in hand, laughing at something someone had said. The morning sun caught in his hair, turning it to burnished gold.

I swiped faster, pulse quickening. Aiden and me by my bike, him adjusting the glittery helmet I'd bought him, my eyes—Christ, my eyes were fixed on his face, not the helmet. Another campfire shot, Aiden mid-story, hands animated, everyone around him laughing.

And then.

The photo stopped my breath. It was from the second night, after I'd fucked him so thoroughly neither of us could walk straight. We sat around the fire, slightly apart from the others. Aiden leaned toward me, saying something no one else could hear, eyes bright with mischief. And I was smiling, my eyes soft. I looked younger. Lighter. Like someone had removed a weight I'd been carrying so long I'd forgotten it was there.

Like he had removed that weight.

But it was my eyes that shocked me most. They were fixed on Aiden with a tenderness I'd never seen in them before, had never felt capable of. It was naked, that look. Raw. Unguarded in a way I never allowed myself to be.

But it wasn't just me. He was leaning in, staring up at me as he talked, like I had him captivated. Like he was feeling it, too. And somewhere, deep down, I had started to hope he did. Was it just that I was too afraid to ask? That anxiety coiled in my throat too tight that the hard questions and the revealing answers couldn't work their way out?

I could remember that moment, the story he'd been telling had been a funny one. It was just a silly story from early in his food truck days that made everyone laugh. But Aiden always made everyone laugh, even me. Especially me.

And Dylan was right. It was all there on my face, plain as fucking daylight. What Aiden did to me. What he meant to me.

I swiped again, faster now, hungry for more evidence of this person I became around him. More evidence that he wanted me as much as I wanted him. More campfire shots. Aiden teaching Liv how to flip an omelet. Me watching from nearby, that same softness in my expression. Aiden stretched out on a camp chair, beer in hand, head thrown back in laughter at something Dylan had said.

Then the one that stopped me cold. Us on the Harley, coming around a bend in the mountain road. Someone—probably Marcus, who'd been riding ahead and stopped at a pull-off to photograph the group—captured it perfectly. My body leaned into the curve, Aiden molded against my back like he'd been built to fit there, his glittery helmet visible in profile. His arms were wrapped around my waist, face turned toward the view, and I felt the pure joy of the moment bleeding through the photo.

The joy he expressed every time he was on the bike with me, even that very first time, when he'd been scared shitless. Joy that I gave him, that I shared with him. My face wasn't visible behind my visor, but I'd let go of the handlebar to touch him, and there was something in the way my hand covered his on my stomach, something protective and possessive and strangely gentle. Something that made me feel the way he'd pressed even closer and told me that he loved riding with me.

"He looks good on the back of your bike. Like he belongs there. Like he wants to be there."

I jerked my head up to find Dylan had wandered off, and now Silas was standing beside my workbench, arms crossed, expression thunderous. I hadn't heard him approach, too lost in the photos, in the evidence of something I'd been too stubborn or scared to acknowledge.

"Thought you were at the supply run," I managed, lowering my phone.

"Just got back." Silas's eyes flicked to the disassembled carburetor, then back to my face. "Saw Aiden at that new brewery."

My stomach clenched. "And?"

"Said he's considering relocating. Permanently."

The word hit like a physical blow. I set my phone down carefully, afraid I might crush it in my suddenly white-knuckled.

Silas stepped closer, lowering his voice. "Look, I don't know what happened between you two in that bathroom yesterday—"

"Nothing." The lie tasted sour on my tongue.

"—but whatever it was, you fucked up." Silas continued as if I hadn't spoken. "And I don't care about your love life, Cash. If

you want to be single and fuck around, that's fine by me. But I do care about those breakfast sandwiches, which are the best goddamn thing to happen to this shop since we installed the espresso machine. So fix whatever you broke, because there's no way I'm giving up my breakfast because you can't get your emotional shit together and tell that adorable boy that you're head over heels in love with him."

He was right. I knew he was right. But admitting it felt like swallowing broken glass.

Silas crossed his arms, studying me with the same critical eye he used on engines. "Look, I know you have some kind of trouble with talking. But if a person you like asks you all kinds of questions and you don't answer, he thinks it means you don't care. And I think you do care."

I swallowed, not sure how to explain that I couldn't fix it.

"Maybe you're so afraid of saying the wrong thing that you say nothing at all. It's too bad, because, in the end, silence is its own kind of answer."

The words hit too close to the truth. I looked down at my phone, at the photo still visible on the screen—Aiden and me on the Harley, fitting together like we'd been designed that way. The evidence of what I felt for him, what I'd been too afraid to name.

"He asked if it was just sex," I said finally, the words scraping my throat raw. "And I couldn't—I didn't know how to—" I broke off, frustrated at my own inability to express what was trapped inside me.

"Couldn't say it was more?" Silas finished for me. His voice softened fractionally. "Even though it obviously is."

I nodded once, sharp and jerky, the closest I could come to admission.

Silas sighed, running a hand through his hair. "If it's more, maybe you need to find a way to say that. Maybe there's another way than talking to him. Maybe you can write him a fucking love letter. I don't give a shit what you do, just fix this. And that's me as your boss talking. I won't be happy if I lose my snacks. And clearly that boy needs someone to look out for him. He told me the other day he'd just learned that you could replace windshield wiper blades when you did it for him. Apparently, his window has never been so clean."

I choked on a laugh, rubbing my hand over my eyes. "That tracks."

The thought of Aiden gone—his truck missing from the lot, his laugh no longer echoing through the shop when he brought me coffee, his body no longer pressed against mine on the Harley—created a hollowness in my chest I couldn't name.

I'd probably still show up at his place and replace his windshield wiper blades, though, because fuck.

But I knew I wanted more than that. And it wasn't just about the sex. Wasn't about the convenience of having him near. It was about the way he made the shop brighter just by being in it. The way he made me feel like a better version of myself, someone who could laugh, who could touch without hesitation, who could dream of something beyond engines and chrome.

"Fuck," I breathed, the word inadequate to encompass the storm building inside me.

"Eloquent as always," Silas said dryly.

I stood abruptly, the stool scraping against concrete with an ugly screech. My mind raced, replaying every moment with Aiden—the tent, the mornings in his bed, the rides through the mountains. His face in that bathroom mirror, hope draining from his eyes when I couldn't answer his simple question.

Is this just sex?

No. It wasn't. Had never been. Not from that first ride to the campground, maybe not even from that first day when he'd shown up with his truck, all sunshine smile and terrible egg puns.

"Where are you going?" Silas called as I strode toward the door.

I didn't answer. Couldn't spare the breath for words when every second was driving Aiden further away, when he might be signing a new agreement right now, making plans that didn't include me or FRMC or mornings on the back of my bike.

The Harley waited in its usual spot, chrome gleaming in the afternoon sun. I swung my leg over it, keys already in hand, my body moving with the focused precision I usually reserved for high-pressure mechanical work. The engine roared to life beneath me, the vibration familiar and steadying. I pulled my helmet on, adjusted the mirror, and saw my own eyes staring back at me—determined in a way they hadn't been before.

Aiden had asked for words. I didn't know if I could give him that. But I could show him—had been showing him all along, if the photos were any evidence. Now I just needed to make him see it too, make him understand that whatever was happening between us, it was anything but "just sex."

I threw the bike into gear and tore out of the lot, heart hammering against my ribs, mind already searching for the words I'd need when I found him. They wouldn't come easily. Maybe wouldn't come at all. But I had to try. Had to find some way to tell him what the photos had shown me—that he'd cracked something open inside me, something I'd kept sealed shut for so long I'd forgotten it existed.

Because the thought of him gone—of that empty space in the parking lot becoming permanent—was a weight heavier than anything I'd carried before. And if there was one thing I'd learned from motorcycles, it was this: sometimes the only way to fix what's broken is to tear it all the way down and rebuild from scratch.

CHAPTER 15

Aiden

THE RENTAL AT COPPER Kettle was highway robbery—three times what I'd budgeted when I'd first bought the food truck, when I'd still thought business ownership was all creativity and freedom instead of spreadsheets and panic attacks. I gripped the steering wheel, knuckles white as I navigated afternoon traffic, the taste of disappointment bitter on my tongue. Four thousand a month for a spot in their "artisanal food corridor." The owner had said it with such pride, like I should be grateful for the opportunity to bleed myself dry for the privilege of selling breakfast sandwiches to craft beer enthusiasts.

Fuck that. My bank account was already anemic, gasping for oxygen between equipment repairs and ingredient costs. The only reason I'd stayed afloat these past months was Silas and Marcus letting me park at FRMC for free, bringing in steady breakfast and lunch crowds of hungry mechanics and motorcycle enthusiasts.

But staying meant seeing Cash every day. Meant catching glimpses of those tattooed arms that had held me with such surprising tenderness, that mouth that had mapped every inch of my body, those amber eyes that said everything his voice wouldn't. Meant remembering him frozen in that bathroom, silent when I'd asked the simplest fucking question. Is this just sex?

I flipped on my turn signal, muscle memory guiding me toward FRMC despite my conflicted heart. My Subaru's engine protested with a whine as I accelerated, but at least it was running—another gift from Cash, who'd fixed it when I couldn't afford to. One more complication in the tangled mess between us.

The screech of tires jerked me from my thoughts. A motorcycle tore out of the FRMC lot, engine roaring like a beast unleashed. Even from a distance, I recognized the rider—the broad shoulders, the distinctive black helmet, the fluid grace of his movements as he leaned into the turn. Cash.

He gunned it toward the intersection, weaving through traffic with a recklessness that made my breath catch, then suddenly, he looked my way, as if he'd only just noticed my car and braked hard. He threw the bike into a tight U-turn that had cars honking and swerving. My heart lodged in my throat as he cut across two lanes, ignoring the blaring horns, and raced back toward me.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I yelled, watching as he pulled alongside my car, gesturing for me to pull over. I shook my head, pointing toward the lot ahead. Whatever dramatic bullshit he was pulling could wait until I was parked and he was safe and out of traffic.

I pulled into my usual spot, next to my food truck. Cash screeched to a halt beside me, kicking down the stand and dismounting in one fluid motion that still made my traitorous body respond despite everything.

I climbed out slowly, giving myself time to build walls against whatever this was. When I glanced up, Cash stood directly in my path, helmet in hand, jaw set, eyes burning with an intensity that would have knocked me back a step if I weren't so damn tired of his hot-and-cold routine.

"You're not leaving," he said, the words emerging more command than statement.

Something snapped inside me—all the confusion, the hurt, the desperate need for clarity crystallizing into sharp-edged anger.

"Fuck you," I spat, heat rising to my face. "You don't get to decide that. You don't get to fuck me senseless one minute and treat me like a stranger the next, then tell me where I can and can't take my business."

His expression faltered, but only for a moment before that familiar mask slipped back into place. But instead of walking away or shutting down like I expected, he reached for his phone, swiping the lock screen away. After a moment, he held it out to me, his expression unreadable.

"What?" I demanded, not moving to take it.

He swallowed hard and pushed it towards me again.

I hesitated, then took the phone, curiosity overriding my anger. The screen showed a social media post—Cash's account, I realized, recognizing his username. A series of photos filled the grid, and my breath caught as I realized they were all of us. Together.

The first was from the campout. It was me laughing by the fire, Cash watching me with an expression I'd never seen on his face before. Soft. Open. Almost... reverent. The next showed us on his Harley, coming around a mountain curve, my arms wrapped around his waist, my rainbow-striped helmet gleaming in the sun. Another captured us at breakfast, me flipping pancakes while Cash leaned against a tree nearby, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth as he watched me.

My heart hammered against my ribs as I swiped through them. Each photo told the same story—me, animated and talking; Cash, still and watching, something naked and vulnerable in his eyes that the camera had captured but I had somehow missed.

And then I saw the caption.

There's a lot of speculation about the guy who's been spotted on my bike, and, well, you guys were right. We kind of have a thing going. Nothing's been decided, and he's sort of pissed off at me right now, but I'm so fucking into him.

He's this amazing guy who fits me like no one else ever has, on the bike and off. He talks to me, even when I'm grumpy. Tries to guess what I'm thinking when I can't get the words out. And he's put up with a lot. I'm pretty much head over heels for him so I want to fight for him.

My friends say you can see it when I look at him, but somehow when he asks me, I can't ever find the words. I guess I start to feel afraid he might not love me back. Might not feel the way I do. And the words get stuck.

For as long as I can remember, I've had that problem. Sometimes I can talk just fine. Mostly when I feel comfortable, when I know how things will go. Other times, fear and anxiety take over, and I can't say what needs to be said. Even when it's the most important fucking thing on Earth to me.

So I'm putting it into words here, where he can read them, where you all can know I'm taken. And it scares me shitless, but looking at these photos gives me courage. Because he's the most beautiful man. He sees me, he stands up for me, he makes me laugh harder than anyone ever has. And when he's on the back of my bike, it's like he's a part of me.

I love him so much, and I hope that one day he can see that. Hear me say that.

I read it again. And again. My vision blurred, throat tightening as the words sank in. Head over heels. Beautiful. Love him so

much. Words Cash had never said to my face, never even hinted at—yet here they were, declared publicly for anyone to see.

I looked up from the phone to find Cash watching me, his usual stoicism fractured by unmistakable anxiety—a muscle ticking in his jaw, fingers fidgeting at his sides, eyes darting between my face and the ground like he couldn't bear to look directly at me but couldn't look away either.

"You posted this?" I asked, voice embarrassingly unsteady. "For everyone to see?"

He nodded once, a sharp, jerky movement, his eyes darting around like he was nervous.

"But you..." I swallowed hard, struggling to reconcile the man who'd written those beautiful words with the one who'd stood silent in that bathroom, who'd let me think I meant nothing. "You never said anything. Not when I asked if it was just sex. Not when I practically begged you to tell me what I meant to you. Is this why? You really just can't get the words out?"

His throat worked, Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed. He opened his mouth, closed it again, frustration flashing across his face.

"I kept thinking you cared," I continued, the words spilling out now that the dam had broken. "The way you touched me, how you held me at night, how you'd look at me sometimes when you thought I wasn't paying attention. The way you take care of me. But then you go silent, shut me out completely, and I think I'm going crazy. Making it all up in my head because I want it so badly. Want you so badly."

Cash reached for the phone, his fingers brushing mine, but then he dropped his hand and let me keep it, his eyes on the words he'd written. For a moment, I thought he might retreat again, might run from this conversation like he had in the bathroom. Instead, he looked down at the screen, at the photos of us together, and something in his expression shifted, softened into a vulnerability I'd only glimpsed in unguarded moments.

And for the first time, I started to understand that his silence wasn't about indifference or fear of commitment or any of the other explanations I'd tortured myself with. Maybe it was something else entirely. Something I'd been too wrapped up in my own hurt to see.

I looked back at the phone, swiping back to his love declaration, noticing for the first time the hundreds of comments beneath Cash's post. Most were supportive—friends and followers cheering him on, telling him he could win me back, that he just needed to be brave. But scattered among the well-wishes, another phrase kept appearing: selective mutism. The words jumped out at me, repeated by several commenters who seemed to recognize something in Cash's description of being unable to find words. Something familiar. Something with a name.

"Can I...?"

I scrolled through the comments, my pulse quickening with each mention of those two words.

@MotoLifer789: I recognize those feelings man. You should talk to someone about your anxiety. You may even explore a selective mutism diagnosis.

@RiderChick303: My brother has selective mutism and this post made me cry, because it reminds me of him. Some people don't get that the words just won't come sometimes. But it's worth it to try and make him understand. I believe in you, Cash.

@GearHead_Alex: As someone with severe anxiety and selective mutism myself, I feel this post in my bones. The words are there but they get stuck. Writing them down is so much easier. Hope he understands.

My hands trembled as I opened a browser and typed "selective mutism" into the search bar. The definition appeared at the top of the results:

Selective mutism is an anxiety disorder characterized by a person's inability to speak in specific social situations, such as with classmates at school or relatives they don't see very often. It typically starts in childhood but can persist into adulthood. People with selective mutism can often speak normally in some situations, but struggle in others, and it's important to remember that it's an inability to speak, not a choice they're making.

I scrolled further, scanning through articles, reading things aloud. "Is this what happens to you?" I asked, meeting Cash's eyes. "It says adults with selective mutism experience intense anxiety in certain social contexts that prevents them from speaking, despite having normal language capabilities. The words feel physically 'stuck,' creating the experience of a 'blocked throat' or 'frozen vocal cords.' Many describe knowing exactly what they want to say but being physically unable to produce the words."

He nodded, looking a little embarrassed.

My vision blurred with tears as pieces fell into place. Cash wasn't cold or indifferent. He wasn't playing games or stringing me along. The words were there, but something—anxiety, maybe—prevented him from saying them in the moments when it mattered most.

I remembered all the times he'd gone silent when I'd asked direct questions about his feelings. The way he'd freeze up in emotional situations. How he could talk endlessly about motorcycles and mechanics but clam up completely when the conversation turned personal. The pained frustration in his eyes in that bathroom when I'd asked if it was just sex, like he was fighting against an invisible barrier.

I stood on my tiptoes, reaching up to cup his stubbled jaw, and kissed him gently. A tear slipped down my cheek, landing where our lips met, salt mingling with the familiar taste of him.

"I'm such an asshole," I murmured against his mouth. "I should have realized. I should have seen it wasn't that you didn't want to tell me, but that you couldn't."

He shook his head, one large hand coming up to brush the tears from my face, and he leaned in to kiss my forehead, my cheeks, my lips.

I pulled back slightly, studying his face. The strong jaw, the warm brown eyes that had watched me with such tenderness in those photos. This man, who looked so tough, whose tattooed exterior and taciturn nature made him seem unapproachable, untouchable. And all along, beneath that carefully constructed armor, was someone who felt so deeply he couldn't put it into words.

"Is it easier to type?" I asked softly. "When you need to tell me something important?"

Cash sighed, teeth worrying his bottom lip in that way I'd come to recognize as a sign of his internal struggle. After a moment, he nodded and took the phone back. His fingers moved quickly over the screen, typing out words he couldn't voice.

He turned the phone toward me, and I read:

The words get stuck sometimes, especially when I'm nervous or anxious. Especially when it matters. And you matter more than anyone. I never wanted to hurt you, I just need to find a way to say how I feel. And I'm scared I can't give you what you need.

Something broke open inside my chest, a dam bursting to flood me with so much emotion I could barely breathe. All this time, I'd interpreted his silence as rejection, as indifference, when it had been the opposite.

I flung myself at him, arms wrapping around his neck as I kissed him with all the pent-up longing and newfound understanding coursing through me. His arms encircled my waist immediately, lifting me slightly as he returned the kiss with equal fervor. When we finally broke apart, both breathing hard, I stared into his eyes, seeing clearly now what had been there all along.

"You have nothing to be nervous about with me," I said fiercely, cupping his face between my hands. "Because I love you too, Cash. More than anything. More than I've ever loved anyone. That's why it hurt so much when you wouldn't say anything."

His eyes widened, pupils dilating as the words landed. I felt a tremor run through his powerful body, a slight shaking that revealed the depth of his emotion more eloquently than any words could have.

I kissed him again, slower this time, pouring everything I felt into the connection of our lips, the slide of my tongue against his. His hands tightened on my waist, pulling me closer until there was no space between us, just shared heat and the thundering of our hearts in perfect sync.

"You can communicate however works for you," I whispered when we parted, foreheads still pressed together. "You can write words down, or text me, or just look at me the way you do in those photos. Or you can just hold me and kiss me. Buy me sparkly helmets. I don't care, as long as you don't shut me out. As long as you let me understand."

I peppered his face with kisses—his cheekbones, his eyelids, the corner of his mouth. "I love you," I repeated, hoping that saying it might somehow ease his anxiety, might make it easier for him to believe it. "I love you so much, Cash. And you give me everything I need. As long as I know what's going on."

He buried his face against my neck, his breath warm against my skin. His arms tightened around me, holding me like I might disappear if he loosened his grip. I felt the slight tremor still running through him, the physical manifestation of emotions too big for his body to contain.

He said nothing, but this time I understood what the silence meant. Not rejection or indifference or uncertainty, but a different kind of communication—one expressed through the press of his body against mine, the racing of his heart, the way his hands cradled me like something precious.

"It's okay," I murmured, running my fingers through his hair, savoring the silky texture against my skin. "I hear you. Even when you don't speak, I hear you now."

He exhaled shakily against my neck, and I felt the wetness of tears—his or mine, I couldn't tell. Maybe both. His hands moved up my back in a caress so tender it made my heart ache, and I knew with absolute certainty that this man loved me more deeply than words—spoken or written—could ever express.

CHAPTER 16

Cash

AIDEN'S LAUGH VIBRATED THROUGH me as he pressed against my side, the ancient springs of his grandmother's floral monstrosity of a sofa creaking beneath us. Pizza boxes littered the coffee table, and some movie about zombie cheerleaders flickered across the screen, casting blue-tinged shadows across his face. His body fit against mine like it had been designed for that purpose, the warmth of him seeping through my clothes, anchoring me in a way I still couldn't quite believe was real. One week since that moment in the parking lot, since I'd laid myself bare through a fucking social media post because my throat closed up whenever I tried to tell him how I felt. One week of falling asleep with his head on my chest, waking to his morning-breath kisses, learning the rhythm of his life. And still, part of me waited for the other shoe to drop.

"Oh my god, look at her face," Aiden snorted, pointing at the screen where a blood-spattered cheerleader shrieked in B-movie glory. "That's not fear, that's constipation." He tilted his head back, eyes crinkling with laughter as he glanced up at me. "Am I ruining the cinematic masterpiece for you?"

I shook my head, lips twitching into what felt like the thousandth smile he'd pulled from me today alone. Words weren't necessary—he'd grown fluent in my silences, reading the slight shifts in my expression that most people missed. My fingers traced idle patterns along his shoulder, mapping the topography of him through the worn fabric of his t-shirt.

"The director definitely thought he was making high art," Aiden continued, reaching for another slice of pizza. Grease glistened on his fingers as he gestured at the screen. "Look at those camera angles. Very avant-garde zombie apocalypse. Much deep. So horror."

I snorted, taking a bite of my own slice. Supreme with extra cheese. It was Aiden's favorite, not mine, but I was discovering I'd eat cardboard if it made him smile that particular smile, the one that crinkled the corners of his eyes and made something in my chest contract painfully.

Boyfriend. The word surfaced in my mind without warning, bringing with it a jolt of uncertainty. Was that what we were now? We hadn't discussed labels, hadn't formally defined whatever this was between us. Just fallen into a rhythm of shared nights and stolen kisses and my motorcycle parked more often in his driveway than at my apartment.

His sister wandered in. "Hey, dorks," she said cheerfully. The cushions dipped she flung herself onto the opposite end of the sofa, her designer leggings and perfectly highlighted hair a stark contrast to Aiden's rumpled comfort. She reached over me, snagging a slice of pizza without asking.

"We're the dorks? Really?" Aiden asked, lobbing a napkin at his sister.

"Don't tell me you're indulging his love for 2-star horror movies?" she asked, folding the slice in half and taking a bite that was somehow both dainty and aggressive.

"Vampire Stripper Zombie Hunters! It's a classic," Aiden protested, not bothering to sit up from where he was nestled against my side.

Mira rolled her eyes, chewing thoughtfully before her gaze settled on me with unnerving directness. "So, Cash, I saw your brother lost that senate race."

Aiden stuck his tongue out at her. "We don't talk about Cash's brother. Not until he apologizes."

Leo wouldn't apologize, but not talking to my family hadn't been that difficult.

Mira rolled her eyes. "He's an ass-hat anyway. And how was therapy today? Learn to talk yet?"

The question landed like an unexpected punch, stealing the air from my lungs. My body tensed, pizza slice hovering halfway to my mouth. The words to respond, to deflect, explain, or tell her it was none of her fucking business, jammed in my throat, trapped behind the familiar wall of what I now realized was anxiety. Anxiety that therapy was supposed to help dismantle.

I glanced at Aiden, finding his eyes already on me, warm with understanding.

"Jesus, Mira," he said, poking his sister's thigh with his sock-covered foot. "It was his first session with the therapist, not magical fix-it hour. Besides—" His hand found mine, fingers interlacing with deliberate purpose. "I love Cash exactly how he is."

My chest tightened at the casual declaration, at how easily he said the words that still lodged in my throat like shrapnel. I squeezed his hand, hoping he could read under the pressure what I couldn't say aloud.

Aiden grinned and kissed me on the cheek.

Mira glanced at me, then at him. "Okay, so I get that Cash is stupid hot, and does that growly, possessive, caveman thing. Which I dig. But are you sure you couldn't do better?"

Aiden gasped and jabbed her with his elbow. "Mira! He's sitting right here!"

"What? I just have to ask. Obviously, I can see why he'd love you, Aiden, because you're related to me, and so... clearly lovable. But what does he bring to the table? Presumably a big dick?"

I choked on my beer.

Aiden rolled his eyes. "He brings adventure. Gets me to look around, enjoy life. Holds my hand, makes sure I'm safe, and then takes me for a wild ride up into the mountains." He lowered his voice. "And he has a big dick."

Mira burst out laughing. "God, I did not need to know that." Mira patted my knee. "You know, I'm glad you found each other. Just try not to be too corny around my friends."

Aiden threw a wadded-up napkin at her, which she batted away with impressive reflexes. "You're just jealous because the frat boys you date have the emotional depth of a kiddie pool."

"At least they can string more than three words together," she shot back, then immediately winced. "Sorry, Cash. That was bitchy." She reached out and touched my hand, an unexpected gesture. "You are a sweetheart, and I do love everything you do for my brother. Well, maybe not the motorcycle rides—"

“Quit while you’re ahead,” Aiden grumped, elbowing his sister. They had this antagonistic, teasing way of communicating, but it was clear they loved each other beneath it all. It was clear that Mira cared a lot about Aiden, and that was what mattered in all of it.

Besides, it wasn't an inaccurate observation, just a blunt one, and there was something refreshing about her lack of pity, the way she treated me just like she treated her brother, as if she expected that one day, I might see her as a true sister.

"Anyway," she continued, standing in one fluid motion and snagging another slice of pizza, "I'm headed out. Brunch planning committee for the sorority fundraiser." She grabbed her keys from the hook by the door, stuffing them into her purse. "Don't wait up. And maybe disinfect that couch when you're done making out on it. Grandma's ghost doesn't need to witness whatever happens next."

The door slammed behind her, leaving a sudden, expectant silence broken only by the screams of zombie victims on the television. Aiden's thumb traced small circles against my palm, each movement sending ripples of heat up my arm.

"Sorry about her," he said, reaching for the remote to pause the carnage on screen. "She means well. Usually. Sometimes. In her own prickly, boundary-challenged way, she approves of you. I think she even likes you."

I made a non-committal noise. In truth, I found Mira's abrasiveness easier to handle than the forced politeness I'd gotten from families of past partners. Mira was treating me like she treated everyone in the family. Like I belonged.

Aiden flipped off the movie, then shifted, turning more fully toward me, his eyes searching mine. "You okay, though? Do you want to talk about therapy? I was waiting for you to broach the subject, but I'm realizing now that might not work with you."

I nodded, letting out a slow breath. The session had been... not terrible. Just an initial consultation, more about establishing a baseline than diving into the messy tangle of my communication issues. The therapist had been surprisingly straightforward, no coddling or pressure, just practical questions, and observations. She'd left me with a packet about how to use non-verbal cues with people in my life.

Outside, I could hear the distinctive screech of Mira's overly aggressive exit from the driveway—she probably went through more tires than a race car driver—and relaxed a little, knowing that we were alone.

"It was fine." The words were coming more easily the safer I felt with him. "She was nice."

Aiden's smile bloomed, slow and sweet, the kind that still made my breath catch weeks after I'd first seen it. "Yeah? Did she have ideas?"

I nodded again, swallowing against the tightness in my throat, wishing I could tell him more about the relief of having someone take my silence seriously, and about the hope that maybe I could learn to navigate the gap between what I felt and what I could express. Instead, I handed him the packet the therapist had given me, and as he flipped through it, I pulled him closer, burying my face in his hair and breathing in the scent of his shampoo, letting my body say what my voice couldn't.

"This is good stuff," he said, as he scanned the words. "Non-verbal cues. Why didn't we think of this before?"

Aiden set the paper aside, and his eyes met mine, mischief dancing in their hazel depths as his lips curved into a smile that promised trouble. The moment stretched between us, charged with possibility now that we were finally, gloriously alone. My fingers twitched with the need to touch him properly, to reclaim the intimacy that his sister's presence had interrupted.

He swung his leg over my thighs in one fluid motion, straddling me with a grace that still caught me off guard. His weight settled against me, warm and solid, hands coming to rest on my shoulders. "So," he said, voice dropping to that particular pitch that sent heat pooling in my groin, "I think we need to invent some special non-verbal cues for when you're struggling with your

words." His fingers traced idle patterns along my collarbone, each touch igniting nerve endings I hadn't known existed before him. "Maybe we could review some options? For example," he tilted his head, eyes sparkling with challenge, "What will you do when you want to express that you're feeling content?"

Smiling, I leaned forward and planted a gentle kiss on his cheek.

"And what about if you want to spend some time with me?"

I hauled him closer, wrapping my arms lightly around my waist.

"So cuddling me means you want me there, and pushing me away means you need some space?"

I shook my head. "I won't need that."

"Everyone needs alone time sometimes," He said. "What if you rub my shoulder and then step away? That says that you care about me, but you need a minute."

I nodded, still not sure I'd ever use a gesture like that. I wanted to be close to him almost always, and Aiden was already so aware of my non-verbal cues that he naturally gave me space when I needed it, the same way he naturally moved with me when we rode my bike together.

He chewed on his bottom lip, studying me. "And what about the tough one... the one that says 'I love you'?"

My chest tightened at the casual way he referenced those three words. Words I'd typed easily enough a week ago, for strangers on the internet but still struggled to voice directly to him. Instead of answering, I leaned forward, brushing my lips against the sensitive spot just below his ear, then gently caught the lobe between my teeth.

Aiden's breath hitched, his body instinctively arching into mine. "Oh," he breathed, fingers tightening on my shoulders. "That works. Definitely works. It's specific enough of a gesture that I know you mean something different than just simple affection. Plus, it makes me all warm and tingly, so I like that, too."

I grinned against his skin, emboldened by his response. My hands slid higher under his shirt, mapping the topography of his back—each knob of his spine, the subtle shift of muscle beneath smooth skin. I traced my lips down the line of his chin, nibbling and licking the skin until I found the spot that made him giggle.

"That one too?" he asked, voice slightly unsteady. "Or maybe that means you love me very much."

"No." That one was me getting distracted by how pretty he was. I thought for a moment about what I'd do if I wanted to show him big love.

Then I wrapped my arms around him, pulling him flush against my chest in an embrace that left no space between us. His heartbeat thundered against mine, our rhythms syncing as they always seemed to do when we were this close. When I finally released him, his eyes were softer, more serious.

"That's my favorite," he admitted quietly. "When you hold me like you're afraid I might disappear. And now that I know everything, it hits different. Better." He snuggled closer, wrapping his arms around my waist. "Good choice. I love you very much, too."

Something in my chest unraveled at his words, at the easy way he accepted my silence and translated my touch. I cradled his face between my palms, marveling at how perfectly he fit against me, and kissed him properly—deep and thorough, pouring

everything I couldn't say into the slide of my tongue against his.

When we broke apart, he was breathless, beaming at me. "See? Nonverbal cues. You were probably giving them to me all along, weren't you?" He threaded his fingers through mine, squeezing my hand.

"Yeah," I said quietly. "Maybe."

"I'm sorry it took me a while to catch on. To realize that you love me just as much as I love you. You just have a different way of showing it."

He kissed my cheek, studying my face for a moment, and I wondered if he could tell I was on the verge of tears, that emotions were threatening to overwhelm me. Maybe he did understand, because he sighed happily and settled more comfortably in my lap and shifted to a safer topic, talking about a weekend ride he'd been planning.

"There's this route through the mountains I found on a motorcycle forum," he explained, hands animated as he described sweeping curves and scenic overlooks. "The weather's supposed to be perfect this weekend. It might be the last good riding days before it gets too cold. We could pack a lunch, make a day of it, or stay overnight at this little B&B I found online. I just want to drink it up, that time when we can road trip on the bike, before it gets all cold and snowy."

I listened, content to watch the play of expressions across his face, the way his entire body participated in the telling. With each word, each excited gesture, I felt something inside me loosen further. The knot of tension I'd carried for years was slowly unraveling in the face of his unflinching acceptance. He didn't need me to respond with elaborate plans or enthusiastic agreement. My attentive silence, the occasional nod or squeeze of his hand, was enough for him.

"Oh," he said suddenly, changing gears with that mercurial energy I'd come to adore, "we should probably establish some basic signals too. Like for yes or no. What should those be?"

I rolled my eyes, the corner of my mouth quirked up. "I can say yes," I pointed out, enjoying the way his eyebrows shot up at the dry delivery.

"Well, sure, when it's easy stuff," he conceded, shifting his weight in a way that sent sparks of pleasure through my groin. "But what about for the hard questions?"

I raised an eyebrow at him.

His expression shifted, playfulness giving way to something more vulnerable as his eyes locked with mine. "Like, for example, there's a question I've been thinking about for a few days now. We'll use it as a test."

"Okay," I said.

"Will you be my boyfriend, Cash?"

The question knocked the air from my lungs, even though we'd been living in each other's pockets in the week since I'd made my grand declaration, even though I'd all but declared my love in front of several hundred thousand people on social media. Boyfriend felt simultaneously too juvenile and too significant, inadequate to encompass what he meant to me yet loaded with expectations and obligations. My throat constricted, the familiar paralysis creeping in as I searched for words that wouldn't come.

Aiden watched the struggle play out on my face, his own expression softening with understanding. Then, unexpectedly, he poked me in the ribs, breaking the tension with a laugh.

"See? This is why we need non-verbal cues," he teased, but without malice. "Just in case there's a more challenging question."

Something fierce and possessive surged through me at his teasing acceptance. In one fluid motion, I stood, lifting him with me, then hauled him up and over my shoulder, my hand resting on the firm globe of his ass.

"Is that a yes?" he called, kicking his feet I carried him down the hallway. "This is a weird way to say yes! Like, I'm not sure it will apply in all situations."

I kicked the bedroom door shut behind us, then tossed him onto the mattress with enough force to make him bounce. His eyes widened, pupils blown with desire as I yanked my shirt over my head, revealing the tattoos he loved to trace with his tongue.

"Can you really strip every time I ask you a yes or no question?" he asked, tilting his head. "I mean, on one hand, okay. I'm here for it. On the other... it may get us arrested."

Laughing, I stayed deliberately silent as I tugged his t-shirt over his head, then worked his jeans down his legs, dragging his boxers along with them. His cock sprang free, already hard and leaking, a sight that never failed to make my mouth water.

I shed my own jeans with brutal efficiency, then crawled up his body, pinning him to the mattress with my greater weight. His legs fell open, inviting me into the cradle of his hips, his erection rubbing deliciously against mine.

"God, yes," he moaned, arching up into me. "But you can't—" his words dissolved into a whimper as I rolled my hips deliberately against his, "—can't possibly use sex as a non-verbal communication technique. Can you?"

I reached for the lube in his bedside drawer, slicking my fingers with practiced efficiency. When I pressed the first finger into his tight heat, his protest died on a gasp, body arching off the bed. I worked him open with single-minded focus, adding a second finger, then a third, watching his face contort with pleasure as I brushed against that spot inside him that made his cock jerk and leak.

When I finally pushed into him—one long, slow thrust that had him clawing at my back—I leaned down, lips brushing his ear. "It's a yes."

"Yay... oh shit...Cash! We're... baby. Fuck... we're boyfriends! Stop... Cash! Stop thrusting when I'm trying... oh god. I'm trying to talk." His words poured out in a wild jumble as I slammed into him again and again, not able to stop, especially not when his head fell back, his eyes going hazy as his body trembled beneath mine.

He wrapped his legs around my waist, pulling me impossibly deeper, taking everything I had to give and demanding more. I set a rhythm that had us both gasping, knowing I'd found the perfect way to tell him what words couldn't express—with every thrust, every kiss, every shared breath: You're mine. I'm yours. Always. What better way to make sure he knew that than bringing him to orgasm around my cock?

He whimpered, slamming his hips up into mine as I stroked his cock, making sure he came as hard as he always did, panting my name as his inner muscles milked me dry.

Afterward, as we lay together, panting, in each other's arms, I leaned in and nipped at his ear, sucking on his earlobe for a moment to make sure he knew what I was saying.

"I love you, too," he whispered, his cheeks pink. "I love you so much, Cassius Upton."

I lifted my head and stared down at him for a long moment. "This always meant that I need you. Sex always meant that," I whispered, the confession tearing from somewhere deep inside me. "Since the beginning."

His eyes flew open, locking with mine as understanding dawned, and I could practically see his brain turning as he rewrote our history with this new knowledge, a smile spreading across his face as he held me there, inside him, and I nipped his ear again.

I love you.

EPILOGUE

Cash

MIRA WAS BOUNCING IN her chair as she flipped through the stack of documents, scrawling signatures boldly on each line. "So exciting," she trilled.

"Initial here... and here," the realtor murmured, her finger tapping each designated line.

After what felt like an eternity of legal jargon and signatures, Mira slapped the massive stack of documents closed with a dramatic flourish.

"That's it, Cash. You're the proud owner of my half of our grandma's house," she announced, her voice carrying the theatrical flair she'd perfected through years of sorority leadership. "And I am free!"

My stomach turned a little bit. Not from regret, but from the sheer magnitude of what we were doing. I'd spent most of my adult life keeping people at arm's length, answering to nobody. Now I was legally tethered to this sunny, chaotic family that had somehow broken through every defense I'd carefully constructed.

I looked toward Aiden, finding his eyes already on me. He grinned that fucking sunshine smile that still made my chest tight, then reached out and squeezed my hand. His palm was warm against mine, slightly rough, the way it always was.

Even after a year, Aiden still gave me butterflies. Not that I'd ever admit that out loud, even if I could get the words out more and more these days.

"I'll file these with the county today," the realtor said, gathering up the papers. "Congratulations to all of you."

Mira beamed at both of us. "Aiden, if I'd known all I needed for financial freedom was to get you a boyfriend, I would have started working on it sooner."

Aiden snorted, shaking his head. The dimples in his cheeks deepened, just visible beneath his perpetual stubble. "Working on it? I got a boyfriend all by myself, thank you very much." He elbowed me gently in the ribs. "And apparently a rich one at that."

I cleared my throat, stumbling over my words a little bit as usual. "Not rich," I said, after pausing a moment and taking a breath, the way my therapist had me do. *Let the words come in their own time. There's no rush.* "Just a small inheritance from my grandmother."

The inheritance had been a final gift from my paternal grandmother who'd never quite fit in with the rest of the Uptons. While my parents ran their chain of Kansas farm supply stores with rigid pragmatism, Grandma Eliza had been the black sheep,

divorcing my grandfather to run away, riding motorcycles and traveling the country well into her seventies. She'd been the only person in my family who'd ever really understood me, and even all these years later, I still felt like she was the only person who cared to understand me. Maybe that's why she'd left her estate to me when she passed. It had included an apartment in Lenexa, which I'd sold, a vintage Indian chopper, which I'd kept, and five hundred thousand dollars.

Spending time with Aiden and Mira, and with all the people at FRMC had given me a new perspective on what family should be, and I smiled, knowing Grandma Eliza would have approved of my sweet boyfriend, even if no one else in the family had come around. Family wasn't just about blood, and I knew Grandma Eliza would have been happy with the way I was spending my inheritance money.

These days, Mira felt more like family than my own brother, and she needed the money for grad school tuition. She also didn't want to be tethered to her grandmother's house in Denver, so it worked out perfectly.

Mira whooped, throwing her hands up victoriously. "I have my law school tuition covered now, and then some." She flipped her hair over her shoulder. "Legally Blonde, here I come."

Aiden cleared his throat, one eyebrow raising. "Except, not Harvard. University of Colorado, right?"

"Yeah, yeah," Mira grinned, rolling her eyes at her brother. "I couldn't get into Harvard, anyway. Not that I'm not smart enough, I just partied a little too hard in undergrad, if you know what I mean." She winked. "Anyway, I'm going to apply to CU Boulder and Colorado State. Maybe a few others, but nothing too far away. Can't leave you two idiots completely unsupervised. Either Cash will stop talking or Aiden will stop taking days off."

Aiden's eyebrows shot up. "So. You're taking credit for our personal growth."

"Naturally. You'd be nowhere without my sage advice."

A year ago, I would have bristled at her words. Now, I leaned back in my chair, smiling despite myself. My heart felt full in a way that was still unfamiliar, and still occasionally terrifying.

"Congratulations again," the realtor said, standing and extending her hand. "You all already have keys, so you're all set."

As we walked out of the office into the bright Denver sunshine, I watched Aiden stroll ahead, talking animatedly with the realtor about the farmers market happening that weekend. I'd spent years watching my bikes, my parts, my tools—never people.

"You're looking awfully serious for someone who just got a house," Mira said, falling into step beside me.

I shoved my hands into my pockets, fingers brushing against the velvet box. "Just processing."

"Bullshit," she said cheerfully. "I know that look. You're panicking about the ring."

"Am not."

"I have a secret, and it's just too good to keep. Especially considering how freaked out you look." She clapped gleefully, glanced at her brother, then leaned in. "Aiden bought you a ring, too."

I glanced at her, surprised. Mira and I had developed an unexpected friendship over the past year. At first, I'd found her exhausting. I'd taken her to be the stereotypical sorority girl: too polished, too concerned with appearances, and too different from her brother. But beneath the carefully curated exterior was someone fiercely intelligent and unexpectedly kind.

“He can’t!” I protested.

“Why? Because you’re the top?”

“Mira!” I gasped, poking her, and she burst out laughing, drawing Aiden’s eyes to us.

“He bought you a ring, you bought him a ring, just get engaged! What’s the big deal? You already own a house together.”

Aiden was staring at me, eyes wide. “You bought a ring?”

Mira grinned. "And that's my cue to leave. I'm taking an Uber to meet my study group." She kissed her brother's cheek, then surprised me by doing the same to mine. "Congratulations, homeowner."

We watched her stride away, already on her phone, arranging her ride.

"So," Aiden said, turning back to me. "I hear you bought half my house."

"I did," I agreed, pulling him closer by his hips. "Regretting it?"

"Regretting living with a grumpy mechanic who wants to put his motorcycles in our living room?" His eyes crinkled at the corners. "Not a single one. Except that my sister ruined my surprise proposal plan."

“My plan.”

“I seriously doubt you planned to hire a hot-air balloon and a skywriter for a coordinated, masterful aerial declaration of love.”

I blinked down at him, at a loss for words.

He beamed up at me. “There were going to be fireworks, too.”

I narrowed my eyes, starting to suspect he was making this all up to fuck with me. He leaned in, and kissed me on the tip of my nose.

“Will you marry me, Cash Upton? I have a ring.” He whipped out a matte black box, flipping open the lid to reveal a wide ring in dark gray tungsten, subtly molded with the texture of a motorcycle tire. Smiling, I slipped the box I’d gotten him out of my pocket. Vintage white gold, pretty, and just his style.

He gasped, beaming up at me as he slipped it on.

“Yes, of course, yes,” he said, then stopped, frowning. “Wait. I just did the proposal and the acceptance. I feel like we missed the part where you talk.”

I burst out laughing, shaking my head, because that was pretty much how things went with us, and I was totally okay with it.

“You’ve gotten so much better with the help of your therapist. Do you want to try? It’s okay if you don’t.”

“Okay.” I swallowed, taking both of his hands in mine. “I love you, Aiden. So much. Everything about being with you changes

my life for the better. And I want to marry you, if you'll have me."

"Holy shit. Yes. Of course yes! Oh my god, we're getting married! And we have a house. Best day ever."

He threw his arms around me and hugged me tight, and I leaned down and nipped his ear. Because even though I could say it out loud now, there was still something special about our own little language.

"I love you, too," he replied, beaming up at me.