

Some Place Like Home

by Gin Vane

Excerpt from Chapter One

Carver – Fairview, Louisiana, summer of 2019

“Y’all still open for business?”

Carver looked up and saw someone he should stop expecting to be done with. Hadn’t seemed to keep the man from popping up last year either. Everett Kane stood in the waiting room of his empty auto shop, both hands stuffed in the pockets of khaki pants. Carver sighed, stood from his chair, and turned down the narrow hall. He met eyes with Everett on his way to the intake desk and shuffled the first stack of papers he could find. “Needin’ the boat again, Law Man?”

The former detective snorted. “Not so much. More cheatin’ husbands than serial killers, of late.”

“A smaller sort of evil, then?”

“Honestly? It’s been a nice change of pace.”

Everett still smiled like he didn’t know it lit up the room. There was a reason they’d met how they did, years ago at Jeanie’s Western Night. Try as he might to change it, Carver had always been a sucker for a smile.

Everett pointed to the line of empty chairs against the wall, then back to himself. Carver tipped his head and watched him choose a seat by the cooler. Everett pulled a paper cup from the sleeve and pushed the blue plastic tab. Barely a swallow of water dribbled out. Without his planned distraction, he looked a bit lost.

For his part, Carver took his time “filing” that random stack of papers. After a too long day of too few customers, he didn’t have the energy for the light-stepping Everett always seemed to need. “That car in the lot looks fine to me,” he said. “What d’you want?”

The other man shrugged and stared at the cup in his hands. “Just...in the area. Thought I’d stop past.”

Carver walked to the front of the intake desk and leaned his back against it. He pushed the sleeves of his dark mechanic’s shirt up his arms before folding them over his chest. He could wait for Everett to get to his point, but it’d be easier to lead him to it. Easy was the name of the game, these days.

“Look, you don’t gotta worry. It’s obvious you and Colt are—”

“Water under the bridge, man.” Everett swept the rest away with a friendly toss of his hand. His blue eyes creased with embarrassment. “Though I think I still owe you an apology or four.”

Carver tried to fight it off but couldn’t help his grin—looking at Everett all contrite and shit. Their run-in years back hadn’t been *all* bad. He’d had plenty of worse nights. Before and since. But Everett seemed to want to know things were settled between them, and at the end of the day Ev was a decent guy. Carver could let him off the hook.

“Don’t mention it,” he said. “We’ve all been there.”

Everett nodded as the flush faded from his cheek. Like he didn’t know what else to say, he asked, “How ‘bout you? Doing well? You uh...seein’ anyone?”

The fact he’d even ask proved how little Everett knew him. Carver turned his gaze to the parking lot and tried not to think of the whopping *two customers* he’d helped today. “Nah. Work’s been too busy to think on much else. What I need to do is hire some help out here.”

He ignored the keen look Everett gave the empty waiting room. He didn’t contradict him, whatever his detective’s eye might’ve noticed. “Sounds like one of those good problems.”

“Maybe, yeah.”

Everett knocked back his swallow of water. “Well, if we hear tell of any mechanics worth a damn, we’ll send ‘em your way.”

“Same with any murderers I find. Send ‘em right over.”

“Hell no, man.” Everett’s laugh was bright as ever. “Life’s quieter on that front than it used to be. Thank God.”

Everett stood and fumbled in his back pocket. He opened his wallet and retrieved a business card, running his thumb along the edges as he spoke. "But really, uh...see, me and Colt run our own agency now. Help people lookin' for stuff. Investigative work, mostly."

He took a step towards the desk and pulled up short, like he'd reconsidered, and instead tapped the card against his thigh. "Don't know why you would, but if you needed something checked out or...I mean, you had our back before the cops even, so..." Everett shrugged and met his eye. "Just, don't have the second thought. Call. We'll give it a shake."

He didn't know what Everett expected him to say, but the other man seemed content to leave it at that. The bell chimed as Everett pushed the door open to leave, and without really meaning to, Carver found himself following after.

He braced his arm against the glass and asked, "You come here just to give me this?"

The former detective looked like he wasn't sure himself. He stopped on the sidewalk and shrugged. "Just tryin' to pay it forward, I guess. You..." He worked his jaw and considered his words. "You helped me back when. Whether you knew it or not. Didn't have to, but you did. So...same here, is all."

They held eyes for longer this time. Made it easy to notice how Everett's gaze darted to his bike in the garage – and quickly back again. The man's earlier flush returned to his cheek. Carver wondered how that night years ago looked from Everett's purview...

"Don't mind obvious myself."

"Dance with me some."

"What's it gonna be, Everett? Omelets or eggs?"

"Don't think gay's your problem, man. Heartbroken is."

Everett broke their staring match first and smiled at the pavement. He made a point to reach inside and leave his card on the low table. His eyes sparkled as he scanned the shop's magazine graveyard. "Besides, Colt will pitch a fit if he has to find a new bike shop. Got his heart set on some road trip, and he ain't gettin' no damn where on his own."

"Thought you didn't care for motorcycles."

"Yeah, well that ain't changed," Everett admitted. "But if I'm going, I'd rather know the thing's been looked at."

Colt could probably fix whatever was wrong himself, but whatever he'd told Everett, he couldn't afford to turn down the business. And if he was being totally honest, he didn't want to. Things

might be strange for a spell, but Everett and Colt? They seemed like decent people. Jeanie was always saying he could use more of those in his life.

“Tell Colt to bring the bikes over,” he said. “I’ll take a look.”

“Will do.” Everett turned to leave again, but Carver raised a hand to stop him. He circled back inside to the intake desk. He rummaged in a drawer for a moment, then jogged back to the door. May as well get all the awkward out in one conversation.

“Heads up.” He tossed a silver bolo tie at Everett’s chest. The man caught it, obviously surprised to see the thing again. But there was a fond sort of *thank you* in his wave goodbye, and Carver figured they were as square as they were like to get.

He watched Everett drive away, unsure why he was doing it. Wasn’t like the man held any attraction for him now, though Everett seemed to have gotten better with age – moreso since him and Colt got back together. It was strange to think of Colt as someone other than his partner in misery, but the whole *once* they’d seen each other since Foxland, he’d looked better than Carver had ever seen. And it was hard to begrudge someone like Colt a little happiness.

Colt had never talked much when Carver was slinging drinks at Jeanie’s. He’d visit mostly in the off-season, when the place filled with locals instead of college kids. The other bartenders didn’t like him, but Colt’s brand of nihilism fit well with his own views on relationships. People were nothing but tangled webs of need, and he’d never got a handle on being in someone’s life long-term. Wasn’t worth the bother. He’d been in too many systems to know what family felt like besides suffocating, and the one time he’d thought those days were over...

No. It was better not to get involved.

Still, Carver paused at the magazine table. One stilted conversation with Everett had him wondering on that blank space in his life, where words like *family* were supposed to go...

His phone chimed in his pocket and Carver flinched, startled back to reality. He pocketed the business card and groaned. He needed to close up soon or he’d be late for his shift again. He turned to grab his keys, but his eyes got stuck on a framed dollar bill and the photo mounted beside it.

It was the first money he ever made with this shop of his, but that wasn’t what stopped him cold. His eyes focused on the middle-aged woman with her arm around his shoulders, grinning proudly up at him, and he sighed. What he wouldn’t give for a business partner now.

Denise hadn’t been his mother, but she’d been close. Close because of the man he’d cropped from the other side of the photo, the *first time* Carver let himself think words like “home” might be made for him at all –

Shit. He needed to cool it. He never did well when he worked a shift in this mood. No one likes a sour bartender, and damn if he didn't need the tips.

Carver hit the lights, locked up, and pocketed the shop keys. He pulled a black button-up from his cherry red truck and deemed it suitable for a night in neon lights. As he drove, he tried not to run the numbers of the business in his rearview – how short things were getting, how hard it'd been to re-open in Fairview, how he loved and hated this bar job that kept him from investing in his shop how he'd like.

The photo of Denise flashed through his mind again – the way she'd pinched his side to get him to “smile for the camera”, how she'd organize the receipts at the end of the day so he could get home faster. He shifted in his seat. Maybe it was how *settled* Everett had looked that had him wondering...

Fuck. He knew where this train of thought would lead. As a boy, he'd spent equal time in foster houses and state-run group homes. Neither left much time to think on those *real parents* he must've had. He'd been too angry at them for dying, for only ever being a mystery. But lost as he was feeling with this favor in his pocket, maybe it was time to put those ghosts to rest. Like he'd done with Denise, with Derek, and the whole of the Patterson family.

Derek...

Even years later, the pain was a still-familiar ache. Carver turned the radio up as high as it would go and sped the rest of the way to Jeanie's. If some part of him needed family answers, then fine. Maybe he would take Everett up on his offer. But like hell was he bothering with *feelings* again. He'd found a work-around for that years ago and preferred to keep to routine.

He parked his truck in the lot and slammed the door, yanking off one work shirt to pull into another. He knew how tonight would go and that was comforting, in its own way. He'd work his shift. Keep an eye out. Find some company for a night – and wake to an empty bed, his or some other man's.

Another day in paradise. Just living the dream.

Carver pushed the door open and flipped on the neon lights. Alone behind the bar, he downed a shot of whisky and wondered when his life had stopped sounding like fun.

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