

a second slice

Delicious

AN LGBTQ+ FOOD THEMED ROMANCE ANTHOLOGY

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Delicious: A Second Slice

An LGBTQ+ Charity Anthology

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Thank You

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Content Warnings

Your mental health is important and for that reason some of the stories will have content warnings displayed.

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Ripe For Romance

Lee Blair

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Chapter One

Winter

Wilson

"What problem did you find with *this* guy?" my best friend Finn asked from the other end of our phone call. There was some tapping sound in the background I couldn't place.

"What's that sound?" I asked as I followed my GPS toward the plant nursery for my one-off Gardening 101 class.

"I'm chopping vegetables for breakfast omelets. Stop dodging."

My stomach growled. The protein bar I'd grabbed on the way out the door paled in comparison to Finn's omelets.

I was only halfway between Finn's place and the nursery, and he wouldn't mind if I invited myself over for Sunday brunch. Finn and his husband Morgan always welcomed my third-wheeling, but something in my gut kept me heading toward the class. I'd wanted to start a garden ever since I moved into my rental house late last summer, but I didn't know where to begin. It was almost an hour's drive from my small town of Dahlia Springs to the nursery in Portland. I'd come too far to turn around.

"What makes you think there was a problem?" I braced for impact.

"Because you always find one."

"Behave," Morgan lovingly scolded in the background. A smooching sound came through my car's speakers.

"It's Wilson you've got to worry about," Finn argued.

I'd known Finn for twenty years, and he'd never been happier than since he met Morgan. Now they were the married picture of bliss.

"I don't always find an issue."

Finn sharply clucked his tongue.

"Okay, so he ordered for me at a restaurant. Who does that?" Even I knew it was a weak argument.

"Did he ask if he could order for you, or did he just do it?"

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. "He said he thought I'd like his favorite dishes and asked if I'd do family style. But what if I only wanted the chicken souvlaki? I *love* chicken souvlaki. The whole thing was presumptuous for a second date."

His loud sigh made me wince. "Wilson…"

"And he said he just got out of a long-term relationship. I don't want to be a rebound."

"You're assuming he's not ready to date." Finn always had a comeback for my bullshit.

"Oh! And he didn't thank the server when he brought our meals."

"He ignored the server entirely?"

I huffed. "He smiled at the server because he was in the middle of a story, but what if the server didn't see him smile?"

Finn's silence worried me.

"What if you take a break from dating for a while?"

"Why?" Was he trying some reverse psychology?

"Speaking as your *friend*, not your *therapist*, you could benefit from focusing on yourself and what you want from dating."

He left his suggestion to see a therapist unspoken. We'd had that conversation countless times since he'd gotten his counseling license years ago. I wasn't against therapy, but bad experiences when I was younger meant finding a new one never made it to the top of my to-do list.

"It might do you wonders to pour your energy into gardening and the dog you're going to foster."

"Babe," Morgan said in his voice-of-reason tone. "It's obvious something needs to change. Maybe a break will help you reset and get out of your rut."

They must've rehearsed this little double team.

"What kind of break? Like a week?"

“Hardly enough time for any major impact. Again, saying it as your friend, not your therapist,” Finn said.

“Yeah, yeah, I know the disclaimer. Two weeks?”

“I think you should consider a month. Maybe find a therapist.”

“Why when I have you?”

“I hate you,” he muttered with laughter in his voice.

I turned off the freeway for the last leg of the drive, and a sinking feeling settled in my gut. I couldn’t ignore the common denominator in my dating fails: me.

“Okay, I’ll try it.” How hard could a month be? Maybe two weeks would be enough to notice a difference. I could do at least a week for sure. “On that note, I’m almost there. I’ll let you guys know when I pick up the dog so you can come meet him.”

The sun broke through the clouds and shone on the nursery as I pulled into the parking lot. My mood quickly lifted at the rare sunshine. There was nothing like a clear winter day in Oregon.

Shit. Class started in less than ten minutes. I walked quickly into the nursery, but my pace slowed as I took in the smorgasbord of plants. While following signs directing me to a greenhouse for the class, I stopped to take photos of at least half a dozen trees, shrubs, and flowers. As though taking this introduction to gardening workshop would make me an expert landscaper.

My steps faltered at a display of flowering shrubs—bushes?—waiting for a new home. They’d be perfect outside. Pinks, whites, peaches, yellows, even speckled ones. Petals in swirls, clusters, or spread apart with yellow things sticking up from the center. So many to choose from. My bank account was the only thing standing between me and a backyard full of flowers in the colors of my favorite tropical cocktails. My landlord had given me permission to plant things, but he probably meant seasonal vegetables, not trees.

I approached one, and the tag read camellia. I’d always appreciated flowers, but the nursery proved I’d barely scratched the surface.

“Wow.”

The low, husky voice startled me, and I tore my attention away from reading about the coral-pink camellia of my dreams to stare into the mahogany eyes of the man of my dreams. I’d always been attracted to guys bigger than me, and this guy had the kind of physique that would make for

stellar hugs, not to mention great cushion for the pushin', as my grandma used to say. His thick, nearly black wavy hair was still damp, and I couldn't tell if the hint of lemon was from him or some plant.

"You can say that again."

A smile bloomed on his face as he scratched his cheek. I liked his trimmed beard and mustache. "Wow?"

I stared a beat too long. "I didn't know so many things bloomed in March."

He probably did. With his denim jacket over a flannel, he appeared at home in the nursery. I bet the guy had a long driveway lined with camellia bushes in every color of the rainbow. Did they come in every color of the rainbow? Speaking of rainbows, was that a Pride pin on his jacket? Hell, yeah!

The sound he made was half exhale, half laugh. "I'm so glad I'm not alone. I want two of everything, but I have no clue what I'm doing. There's a fifty-fifty chance I'll end up with a crowded apartment balcony full of trees growing out of buckets, so I can stare at the blossoms from my desk. Until they die in said buckets and I do it all again next year."

Welp. I was smitten after one adorable ramble. Finn's voice echoed in my head, reminding me of the challenge I'd *just* accepted. A month without dating, which included not asking for cute guys at plant nurseries for their phone numbers. I might not make it a month, but I couldn't fail literal minutes after agreeing. How hard could it be to meet someone, be attracted to them, and walk away? People did it all the time. Even if a warning bell in my brain clanged at the thought.

"It's like you're in my head. Clearly, these plants thrive in our climate, but I suspect my home is a different climate, where nothing can survive. Like the Thunderdome. How am I supposed to help a plant thrive when it can't answer me when I ask what it wants?"

"Right? This is so healthy now." He stroked his long fingers along a delicate petal. "A month with me and it'll look like it was abandoned on the side of the road in the desert in the heat of summer."

Why did I have to meet an attractive guy with the right amount of self-deprecation today of all days? "It takes a lot of skill to be so bad at this."

His laugh was sweet as honey. It wouldn't be the worst thing in the world to ask for his phone number. We could be platonic gardening buddies and put our brains together to keep our plants alive.

As I opened my mouth to suggest it, the nearby speaker crackled.

“The Introduction to Outdoor Gardening class is about to begin. Head to greenhouse two if you’re registered.”

His eyes widened. “I’d better go.”

“You’re here for the class too?”

There was something shy about his smile, which drew me like a bee to a flower bursting with pollen.

“Shall we go see if we can learn how to keep the plants alive long enough to feed more than slugs and squirrels?” I asked.

He chuckled. “Let’s do it.”

He moved ahead of me when we had to pass through a narrow aisle lined with potted flowers, and I took the opportunity to check out his ass and thick thighs. His body was just as thick on his backside. I’d always been an ass guy, and his would be one hell of a handful.

“Anything you’re particularly excited to grow?” I asked.

“Tomatoes and basil. Maybe potatoes too. I saw a video of a gardener digging potatoes out of the ground, and it looked fun.” He glanced back over his shoulder. “What about you?”

“Tomato and basil for me too. I could eat my weight in bruschetta and Caprese salad. I wonder how hard it is to grow garlic.”

“Careful, or you’ll start making your own sourdough and mozzarella too.” His grin made my chest flutter.

We entered the greenhouse, passed tables of pretty flowers, and approached a check-in table. Tall space heaters stood as bookends outside the rows of seats forming a half-circle. The teacher stood at the front, bundled in a crocheted beanie and matching scarf that threatened to engulf her face.

“Hi, can I get your names?” An employee wearing a nursery hoodie and a walkie-talkie positioned their pen over their clipboard.

“Wilson.”

“Remy,” he said at the same time.

Remy. That suited him. I liked it.

The employee crossed off our names, then gave us handouts. “She’s about to get started, so go ahead and find seats.” They scanned the crowd. “Looks like there aren’t two together.”

“No problem. Thanks.” I turned toward Remy and shrugged. He responded with a lopsided smile.

There goes my chance.

"Good luck." He saluted me before moving toward the seat in the second row on the right.

I took the open seat in the left front row and hoped the curve of the seats might put Remy in my line of sight. My month of dating celibacy prevented me from sampling any goods, but that didn't mean I couldn't admire them.

As I sat, I tested my hypothesis about seeing him. I bit back a grin when we locked eyes before he glanced away. Adorable.

The teacher rang a tinkling bell and introduced herself. Her wide-framed glasses had vegetables on them.

"I like to start these classes by gauging how much experience everyone has so I can cater the class as best as I can. Raise your hand if you have never gardened before." She scanned the crowd. "Now, raise your hand if you've tried it but could pave your journey to the underworld with the corpses of the plants you've killed? So many of you."

Among the laughter, I caught Remy's eye, and we shared a smile.

"I love when the class is full of newbies. By the time we're done today, you'll have the skills to save yourself a few trips to the farmers' market this year. Not to mention a new tool in your toolbox for your mental health and well-being. Gardening is my favorite form of therapy." She smiled softly. "Trust me, it can heal a lot of wounds."

Hey, to-be-established garden, no pressure, but my mental health is riding on you.

The teacher was engaging and informative. I was so focused on taking furious notes on my phone that I almost forgot about Remy. *Almost*.

By the time the class wrapped up, a more practical vision of my perfect garden had taken shape, and I was itching to buy seeds and soil. I was nothing if not good at spending money on new hyperfixations. I'd been dreaming of a garden since I'd first seen my rental house listed last year, and it was time to make it happen.

"Thank you all for coming! Here's a coupon for anything you buy here today." The teacher moved down each row and passed out a stack. "And for those of you interested in learning more about community garden plots, come talk to me at the table."

I sought Remy's attention, but he hustled to the table. He must be in the market for a coveted community garden plot. As a small crowd joined him, my chances of casually resuming a conversation dwindled. Another sign to

accept I'd enjoyed a conversation with a cute guy and move on. It didn't need to lead to anything. Bummer it was a one-day class.

Or I could scribble my number on a piece of paper and slide it into his hand while walking away.

I grimaced. Okay, maybe Finn was onto something. If I was already resisting the dating break this much, it might be necessary.

Morgan would suggest it was the universe making its voice heard, and I was inclined to listen for once. So I moved toward the exit, smiled at Remy when our eyes met, and moved inside the main building to do my shopping. Alone.

Less than ten minutes later, my cart was full of seed packets, lettuce starts, anemones, ranunculuses, and a few outdoor pots to put them in. My garden would be dope as hell for some busy bees.

After checking out and loading my car, I pulled out my phone and began tapping a text to Finn.

WILSON:

I met a hot guy at the gardening class, had a conversation, and DIDN'T ask for his number. I have the restraint of a saint.

FINN:

Good job. Only 29.75 more days to go.

WILSON:

[GIF of a bubble bursting]

Remy

"You can't be serious." My roommate Henry had me laughing so hard that I nearly tripped over the curb.

"The sound of a toilet flushing is pretty unmistakable." Henry shook his head. "People are getting way too damn comfortable with remote work."

The best part of living with my best friend was our lunchtime walk and Friday stop at our favorite coffee shop in town, A Whole Latte Love. It was the only sit-down coffee shop in Dahlia Springs, and fortunately, it was within walking distance of our apartment and had amazing coffee that would rank as top-tier even in Portland.

It’d taken time to get used to working from our small apartment since we both worked remote jobs, but we’d ironed out the kinks.

“That’s worse than the time your coworker didn’t blur her background, and you could see her boyfriend doing laundry in his boxers behind her.”

“I swear, people are feral. They need to get outside and touch grass.” Henry shook his head.

I laughed. “Says the guy who plays cell phone games where you mow lawns.”

“It’s relaxing.” He rolled his eyes. “Speaking of touching grass, how’d your gardening class go the other day? Whoa, what’s that smile about?”

Wilson—if I’d caught his name correctly—had been popping into my mind off and on all week. It was silly, really. We’d only chatted for a few minutes, but he’d made quite an impression.

“Nothing.”

“Uh-huh. You look like I did after meeting Emma. Spill.”

And now he was in a long-distance relationship with his British girlfriend. Henry and I had been through a lot together since meeting as roommates our freshman year of college, and I loved seeing him so happy. Except he was progressing in his career, in a committed relationship, adding to a retirement account, all while I treaded water. I still barely cobbled together enough to cover my bills through freelancing instead of a W2 job, dating and I weren’t on speaking terms, and retirement? With my student loan debt and this economy? Not likely.

“It was a guy at the gardening class. We had a little conversation, that’s all.”

“Did you get his number?”

I held open the coffee shop door and gestured for him to go in. “No.” And I’d regretted it.

“When are you going to stop being a chickenshit?”

“Great pep talk. Thanks, bud.” I got in line behind an older woman.

“You’re a great-looking guy with a stellar personality. I don’t understand why you don’t own that.”

The older woman turned around and eyed me up. “Amen. I’ve always liked a man with meat on his bones.”

“Um. Thanks.” My cheeks flamed.

Dating apps for men who liked men indicated otherwise. It was a sea of washboard abs and profiles specifying “no fats.”

The woman smiled encouragingly.

“Right? He’s such a catch.” Henry grinned. “If I liked men, I’d totally go for this big ol’ teddy bear.”

If I had a dollar for every time I’d heard that in my life, I could take myself to a nice dinner. Where were the queer dudes who’d totally go for me? Guys who were honest, kind, and didn’t mind my love for shitty horror movies.

“And if I were a man twenty years younger.” She winked. “You need to own it, honey. Life’s too short not to go for what, or *who*, you want.”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself. So, Remy, tell us all about this cutie you let slip through your fingers.”

Fortunately, it was the woman’s time to order.

“There’s nothing much to say. We chatted, and he was nice. I attended the class and stayed after to get a plot at a community garden. By the time I was done, he wasn’t there. The end.”

“You mean you had an opportunity to ask for his number and found excuses not to?” Henry arched an eyebrow. At my silence, he clapped my shoulder and sighed. The kind that said we’d been here before and would be again.

The woman turned around. “Don’t let the next one get away. I did that once, and it was ten years before I found him again. Longest ten years of my life.”

All I could do was smile. What was there to say? Thanks for oversharing? I appreciate you unlocking a new fear for me? Sorry that happened?

She moved to the pickup end of the counter. Henry and I ordered, then moved to wait for our drinks.

“You’re making too big a deal of this. It was a guy I had a moment with. Moments happen. Moments pass.” Even if they lingered in my mind for far too long afterward.

He clapped my shoulder. “I’m worried you’ll keep letting moments pass. You’ve got to put yourself out there if you want a relationship. You can’t blink and land several years into a long-term relationship.”

“Why not?” I whined.

That was the dream, honestly. I’d never been good at dating, and the apps were super awkward. It was impossible to try to build a connection with a guy when he wanted to get physical right away, and I needed time to

figure out if I even wanted to. Being plus-sized and demisexual was the kiss of death on dating apps for queer men.

I wasn't immune to noticing attractive men. Henry was classically handsome and Wilson, well, he was the red-haired, green-eyed version of an All-American guy. I'd always had a soft spot for redheads. But most of the time, I didn't *feel attracted to men* in the kind of where where I wanted to get physical until my frikkin brain and emotions got involved. So annoying.

"It'll work out, bud."

Henry always said that, and it wasn't as reassuring as he intended it to be. With each passing year, my destiny as his sidekick seemed more imminent. What would happen when his girlfriend finally moved here? Don't get me wrong, she was great, but it wouldn't be long until they moved in together and I'd lose my roommate, day-to-day social network, and the person to split bills with. I'd need to get a studio or rent a tiny room in a house with even more roommates, like I had back in college. That would suck so much.

Fortunately, we shifted topics, letting me off the hook as we walked back to our place with our coffees. Once we got home, I settled at my desk and checked Slack. While scanning through the dozen notifications that came through over lunch, I saw one name and smiled. Wil.

I had over a dozen graphic design clients, but Wellspring Medical Supply was my favorite because I got to work with Wil. Out of all my contacts as a freelance contractor, he was the most easygoing. A lot of my clients made vague graphic design requests and gave even vaguer feedback. Wil was different. He could articulate what he wanted or didn't like while also knowing when to give me creative freedom. Plus, he was sweet and funny.

Even though I'd been working with him for months, I didn't know what he looked like. His Slack profile photo was of a beach sunset, and mine was a simplified line drawing I'd done of myself years ago. Nothing identifiable for either of us. He could be twenty or seventy or anything in between, but given the way he talked and his pop culture references, I suspected we were closer in age than not.

Conversations with Wil were the highlight of my week. We chatted about silly things and vibed on the minutiae, but I didn't even know what state he lived in. I'd never disclosed that either. There hadn't been a need to

when we'd started working together, and now it seemed too late to ask. I often responded to work messages outside of business hours, and Wil seemed to struggle with the same boundary issues. I wasn't even sure what time zone he worked in since it was a national company with most employees working remotely.

It was a shame we never needed to video chat since the projects were so straightforward. I was curious what he looked like, but I'd never searched him online. Honestly, I liked the mystery. If we kept our conversations on Slack, then no one—meaning me—could be disappointed.

WIL:

Hey Jeremy! I've got a new project for you. Specs are attached. No rush.

Ignoring the other notifications, I responded to Wil.

JEREMY:

Hey Wil! Awesome, thanks so much. I'll get you a mockup by the end of next week. How's your day going?

WIL:

["This is fine" dumpster fire GIF]

JEREMY:

That good, huh?

WIL:

Oh, the usual. Other people's emergencies have become my emergencies. Three virtual meetings that could've been emails.

JEREMY:

And a partridge in a pear tree?

WIL:

[laugh-cry emoji] Exactly! Mercury must be in retrograde. I lost my keys this morning and had a brain glitch where I couldn't remember my computer password for a good three minutes.

JEREMY:

Sounds like you're stressed.

I immediately wished I could snatch back the overfamiliar words.

WIL:

That obvious, huh? I need to meditate or something.

JEREMY:

I hear gardening is a good hobby for that. Mindfulness and movement, or something like that.

WIL:

Funny you say that. I’m putting all my mental health expectations on gardening this year. I heard it’s cheaper than therapy, but given what I’ve spent on supplies so far, I’m starting to wonder.

JEREMY:

Health insurance should cover hobbies.

WIL:

Wouldn’t that be amazing?

WIL:

Have you gardened before? Any tips for a newbie?

JEREMY:

I’m brand new to it myself. The main takeaway I learned recently was to give up my dreams of cauliflower and brussels sprouts unless I’m a masochist.

WIL:

You should follow your dreams, even if that means growing cauliflower the size of your fist. Tiny things are cute. What are you planting?

JEREMY:

Lettuce seems like a safe bet. It’ll be good practice until I can plant tomatoes and basil. You?

WIL:

What don’t I want to plant? If I had the knowledge, space, and money, I’d have the garden of a homesteader.

JEREMY:

A pantry full of canned goods from your produce.

WIL:

The dream!

WIL:

I’m glad to have a gardening buddy.

JEREMY:

Me too. [smiley face emoji]

My cheeks burned, and I shifted uncomfortably as though Wil could see me.

WIL:

Well, I'll stop wasting your afternoon. Ping me if you need anything. Talk soon!

JEREMY:

Have a good one!

"Got a message from Wil?" Henry asked.

"What makes you say that?"

He waved his finger around my face. "That's your Wil smile."

"I don't have a Wil smile." My smiles were professional in nature, thank you very much.

"Sure, Jan."

Okay, fine. So I kind of, sort of, maybe had a *teensy* crush on Wil. He was kind and funny. Best of all, he was just an icon on my screen, which made him nonthreatening. My favorite type of crush were the ones where I didn't need to act on them.

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Chapter Two

Spring

Remy

"Hi! Welcome! Is this your first time at the Northwest Community Supported Agriculture Fair?" a bubbly woman with curly hair asked as I entered the community center in inner southeast Portland.

"Hi, it is." I must've looked like a deer in headlights as I took in the long, narrow space packed with rows of tables and narrow walkways in between. It was the place to be on a sunny Portland afternoon, apparently. The hour's drive from home had been gorgeous. Nothing like a beautiful spring day with blooming flowers and the feeling of renewal in the air.

"Great! Do you have an idea of what you want? Vegetables, meat, eggs, flowers?"

"Vegetables mainly, but eggs would be nice too."

Before falling down the gardening rabbit hole, I'd had no idea that CSAs were a thing. Boxes of fresh local produce every week or two? Sign me up! I was excited to try some things I'd never had before and expand my cooking repertoire. Henry, however, was more skeptical. He'd eat steak and potatoes every day if he could.

She led me over to a wall with a giant chart.

"What area are you in?"

"Dahlia Springs, near McMinnville."

She dragged her finger west on the chart and highlighted farms on the map pamphlet that carried vegetables and eggs. “These farms either deliver to addresses in your area or you can pick up at the McMinnville Farmers’ Market. If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to grab any of us with the hi-vis vests.”

“Thanks.” I smiled and made my way to the closest vendor she’d highlighted.

It only took minutes before my head began spinning. Did I want a box every week or every other week? Eggs? Definitely. They cost more than the grocery store, but I bet they tasted better too. Meat? Maybe, but what kind? Chicken, beef, or pork. I was a chicken breast-and-ground-turkey kind of guy. Would I use other cuts? Delivery or pickup at a farmers’ market? Did I want the add-on for fresh greens at each farmers’ market pickup? What about fresh-cut flowers? The options were endless.

I moved to the next one, which had a better price and offered eggs, but no home delivery. Though it might be nice to visit the farmers’ market regularly. The third didn’t have eggs and only weekly shares. I’d learned from talking to people at the first two booths that every other week would be more than enough since Henry had no interest in splitting it with me.

I approached one of my last options and smiled at the guy behind the table. “Hi, I’d like to learn more about what you’re offering.”

He was cute in an *I’m going to show you my affection by keeping you supplied with cucumbers and tomatoes all summer and will pull your weeds while you sleep in on Sundays* type of way. The flannel shirt and tuggable beard worked for him.

He returned my smile.

“I’ve got lots to offer.” He—Jake, according to his nametag—gestured to the laminated signs on the table with funny chat bubbles next to pictures of chickens saying things like, “*My name’s Petunia, and I hog all the mealworms*.” It was like an episode of *Portlandia.*

Something about the way Jake said it made me wonder if he was flirting. It was so hard to gauge innuendo, particularly when potentially aimed at me.

I told him what I was looking for.

“We’ve got you covered. I deliver the Yamhill County route.”

Was that a wink? Probably blinking away pollen or something. Western Oregon in spring could be brutal.

Jake leaned forward. “I’ll let you in on a secret. The eggs are the first to sell out, but if you want to think about it, I can hold a share for you.”

I heard him say something about getting my number so he could text me about the eggs, but my attention zeroed in on a familiar face over the guy’s shoulder. I blinked a few times to make sure I wasn’t imagining things, but no, it was Wilson from the gardening class talking to someone at a booth in the next row.

“Sorry, I missed what you said.”

His face fell slightly, then he handed me a brochure. “This has all the details you need.”

“Awesome, thanks.” I was already moving toward the next aisle.

I just needed to look like a normal, casual person browsing for a CSA. No big deal. If Wilson recognized me, great. If not, I would finish my browsing, then go cry in my car like a normal person. Or I could run out of here because the thought of talking to him made my heart beat faster and made me want to puke. Super normal reaction. My new therapist would probably nod her head and ask me to stay present in the moment instead of ruminating over what might happen.

I scanned the crowd but didn’t see Wilson in the row, so I stopped at the nearest booth to regroup.

“Big fan of mushrooms?”

Out of reflex, I scrunched my face. But when I registered who spoke, my eyes widened.

“Can’t stand them,” I managed after an awkward pause.

“You might want to pick a different farm.” Wilson’s smile was full of mischievous charm.

It took me several long seconds to pull my attention away from him and take in the booth. Shaggy Mane Farms, with pictures of a dozen types of mushrooms.

“Oh. Oops.” I shrugged and scratched the side of my head while giving him an embarrassed smile. “Sorry,” I said to the woman behind the table.

“Remy, right?”

He remembered my name! “Yeah. Wilson?”

His easy smile slid up a few notches as he nodded. “Giving up on your garden already?”

“Since you’re here, I could ask you the same thing.”

We moved to the side when someone else approached the booth.

“Not to brag, but I’ve harvested a handful of snap peas and enough spinach to accentuate a store-bought salad.”

I laughed. Now that I was talking to Wilson, the urge to flee released its chokehold. “Impressive. So far, I’ve mostly managed to feed the neighborhood rabbits and squirrels with my puny lettuce leaves. I’d love to grow peas, but I don’t have a trellis.”

“Me neither, but I’ve made do with chicken wire. Maybe next year I can have one of those arches that stuff can climb while growing, but I’m not handy with building things.”

“I love building things, but it’s hard in my tiny apartment. You’re not worried about spiders hanging from an arch?”

The crinkled skin at the corners of his eyes as he laughed was adorable. Double dimples. Double deadly.

“You’re getting into gardening but have a thing about spiders?” Wilson shook his head as he tucked an amused smile to one side of his mouth.

I shuddered involuntarily. “Why do they need so many legs? If you were as big as Godzilla and saw a bunch of human-sized spiders hanging from an arch at face-height, wouldn’t you be scared?” I shuddered again as I remembered the spider that crawled up my arm a couple of weeks ago while weeding. The people at the community garden promised I’d get over my fear with exposure, but I remained skeptical.

His mouth dropped open as he blinked at me.

“Did I break you with the image of human-sized spiders?”

Wilson swallowed. “Yeah. That’s going to give me nightmares.”

“You’re welcome.” Teasing him was surprisingly easy, like with Henry, except I kept staring at Wilson’s lips. “What are you looking for in a CSA?” I asked

He hummed as we took slow steps toward another booth. “I have an idealized version of myself where I get a bounty of picture-perfect produce and learn how to cook vegetables I didn’t know existed. Wowing and impressing everyone with the dozen ways I can prepare kohlrabi.”

My cheeks ached from smiling so widely. “The first booth I visited mentioned kohlrabi, and I had to Google it as soon as I walked away,” I admitted.

“Me too! Same with parsnips. I’ve heard of them but never had one. Have you?”

I grimaced. “I don’t think so? Is it like a potato?”

“I think so.” He leaned in close, giving me a whiff of his citrus and earthy body wash. “What if I hate kohlrabi and parsnips?” he whispered.

“I promise not to tell anyone,” I whispered back.

For a moment, I lost myself to his kale-green eyes. I wanted to progress our conversation somehow, but it was like my body wouldn’t let the words out.

He opened his mouth to speak, but before words came out, he turned his head to his left.

“Wilson! Didn’t you hear me? Hey! What are you doing here?”

“Jessie?”

A blonde woman about his age but a few inches shorter approached with a big smile and a couple of kids holding on to her hands.

“Cuzzy Willie!” A boy probably no older than five or six booked it toward Wilson.

Wilson crouched and caught the kid in a hug. “How’s my favorite cousin?”

“Cuzzy!” The even younger girl pushed her way in. “I favwit!”

“How’s my other favorite?” He pulled the little girl into the hug, and both kids giggled in his arms.

My heart ping-ponged in my chest.

“I’ve got a few decades on you both. Sorry, squirts. I’m still the favorite.” The woman, Jessie, ruffled Wilson’s hair.

I’d always envied people with large families. At least I had a sister, but my parents were both only children, and our holidays only occasionally included extended family. I’d never had close-knit cousins to play with, and my sister had no interest in kids, which was a shame because I’d make a damn good guncle.

“*You’re* signing up for a CSA?” The woman’s tone was skeptical. “You used to pay me in candy to eat your broccoli at family dinners. Now you want a vegetable subscription? I don’t even know you anymore.”

Wilson darted a glance toward me. “*Jessie*. My god. Shut up.”

“Cuzzy! That’s a bad word,” the little boy admonished.

I managed to cover my laugh as Wilson sincerely apologized.

“Look! Stickers!” The boy shoved a wad of them in Wilson’s face.

“Whoa, buddy! That’s awesome!”

Jessie noticed me at that point. She offered one of those closed-mouth stranger smiles like she couldn’t tell if I was with Wilson or just loitering.

Crap. If I lingered any longer, Wilson would have to introduce me. What would he say? “Here’s a guy I had one-and-a-half conversations with who’s lingering like a turd on a dog’s butt hair.”

“Okay, cuzzy Willie, you can have *one* of my stickers. You can pick this one or that one?”

“Seriously? That’s so nice of you. That dancing carrot is pretty cool, but so is the celery doing a cartwheel. Which do you think I should have?”

I took one last look at Wilson beaming at his little cousins, then stepped back. Before I consciously realized what I was doing, my feet carried me to the exit.

Wilson was with family and didn’t need me, a stranger, loitering nearby, begging for scraps of his attention. It wasn’t healthy to blow the moment up to more than what it was. We saw each other again, had a fun conversation, but it was time to move on.

Or maybe it’s not healthy to assume he’s not interested. He remembered you. That means something.

I’d always clung to the excuse that my issues were about anti-fat bias in the dating scene and me being a demisexual, queer man in a sea of guys wanting to fuck as a vibe check. The uncomfortable realization was sinking in that it might have more to do with my attitude and confidence than I’d realized.

Hopefully I won’t regret this tomorrow.

Wilson

As soon as I got out of my boring Teams meeting, I opened Slack to message Jeremy about the new projects for him. Could I have waited until after I responded to some timely emails? Yes. Had it been a couple of weeks since I’d had a reason to message Jeremy and I wanted to talk to him? Also yes.

It’d been over two months since I’d been out with anyone, and I relished the minor, low-stakes opportunities to flirt. Breezy GIF exchanges with Jeremy and conversations with the barista at my favorite coffee shop, the vet tech where I took my foster dog Kevin, Remy the gardening guy. I was having fun without expectations or, as my new therapist said, without “creating stories” about other people or situations.

The bright late-May sunshine and fresh air from my open window teased of the impending summer. Birds chirped from a nearby tree as I typed out a message to Jeremy.

WIL:

Hey you! How are things going? Good news. We have some projects for you!

I typed out the details and attached the specs. It only took two minutes to hear back from him.

JEREMY:

You just made my day. Whoop!

A wide smile spread across my face as we talked through the projects. As usual, our chat branched off into random topics.

JEREMY:

Wait, your new client sells buttons where you can record words to teach pets how to communicate?

WIL:

You've never seen those videos of dogs pressing buttons, where a recorded voice says the dog wants to go outside or get treats?

JEREMY:

Clearly my algorithm has failed me. It's full of dogs, but I've never seen this.

WIL:

[link to a video of a dog asking to go outside through buttons]

WIL:

You're a dog guy?

As if I needed another reason to like the guy.

JEREMY:

Oh yeah. I really want to adopt one, but I don't have the space. Even if my apartment weren't so small, the property management company doesn't allow pets. Not even goldfish.

WIL:

That sucks. That's one of the worst things about being a renter. I finally found a place to rent that allows pets, so I've been fostering dogs.

JEREMY:

That's so cool! Got any dogs now?

WIL:

Yeah, a giant teddy bear. He's a mastiff-lab mix.

JEREMY:

A mastador? Cool! I love those! There's one up for adoption near me, but my landlord would evict me faster than I could say "who's a good boy?"

WIL:

Not you too! It's a mutt! The designer names are so weird [laughing emoji]

JEREMY:

You're telling me goldendoodles are just mutts? Maltipoos? Pomskies! No!

I laughed so loudly at his exaggerated tone that a pair of birds flew out of the tree outside my window.

WIL:

What in the world is a pomsky?

JEREMY:

Pomeranian and Siberian husky, obviously.

WIL:

Wait. Is it big like a husky or small like a Pomeranian?

JEREMY:

Small. They look like miniature huskies.

JEREMY:

[photo of a pomsky]

WIL:

That's both genetically terrifying yet adorable.

JEREMY:

I've always wanted a big dog. How long have you been fostering yours?

WIL:

About five months. He's an absolute angel and a bed hog.

I'd adored each dog I'd fostered since moving into my house over a year ago, but Kevin was my favorite. Thank god my landlord hadn't given me size restrictions on animals.

I scanned through my camera roll to send Jeremy a photo of Kevin. Aww, the one with Kevin lying on my pillow was adorable. I went to attach it, but hesitated. We'd never swapped photos before. GIFs and videos? Sure. But photos might change the dynamic. A dog photo might lead to garden photos, then pictures of our homes, then I'd see a photo of him and his partner on vacation somewhere warm near the ocean. My perfect work flirtation would disappear, and some days, my meaningless chats with Jeremy were the highlight.

With him, there was no pressure. No obligations or expectations. No chances for me to fuck things up.

JEREMY:

Why hasn't anyone adopted him yet? His size?

WIL:

Any time I take him to meet potential adopters, he starts acting out. Usually, he won't stop barking, but one time he pissed on someone's shoes. Another time, he waited for the couple to get close and reach out to pet him, then he crouched and took a giant shit while holding eye contact.

Jeremy sent a string of laugh-crying emoji.

JEREMY:

Eye contact? Seriously? Oh my god.

WIL:

He never does any of that at my place.

Kevin, the canine Jekyll and Hyde.

JEREMY:

It sounds like he's trying to stay with you.

WIL:

That's what my best friend says too.

JEREMY:

Best friends are such a pain in the ass.

WIL:

Sounds like you have one of those too.

JEREMY:

I do. We live together, and he also works remotely.

WIL:

He works remotely too? Didn't you say your place was small?

JEREMY:

Yeah. We make it work though.

WIL:

If I had to live and work in the same place as my best friend, only one of us would make it out alive.

JEREMY:

Who do you think would win?

WIL:

I'd like to say me, but he's scrappy as hell.

JEREMY:

My best friend is the same.

Speak of the devil. My phone pinged with a text from Finn saying that if I didn't bring Kevin to happy hour, then he wouldn't show me pictures of Morgan in a Speedo during their tropical vacation last week.

JEREMY:

I'd bet on you.

I wished I could bottle the fizzy sensation in my stomach.

WIL:

Thanks. [smiley face emoji] Well, I've taken up enough of your afternoon. Sorry about that.

JEREMY:

Don't be. It's always nice talking to you. And thanks for the projects. I'll get started on them tomorrow.

WIL:

Sounds good. Don’t forget to watch those talking dog videos.

JEREMY:

[laughing emoji] I won’t.

I smiled at my screen for long moments. I’d never felt butterflies like this before. Jeremy was so easy to talk to, and it seemed like we flirted, but how could I really tell? We were basically coworkers, and it was so hard to know over text. Not like it mattered anyway. He probably lived somewhere like Duluth or Orlando.

An hour later, I had Kevin on a leash, and we were walking to meet Finn at Tap That Brewery, nearly two-miles from my house. Kevin deserved to stretch his legs while the weather was so great. Odds were, Finn would drive us home because Kevin would be pooped. Not me, of course.

Kevin’s tongue lolled out the side of his mouth as he happily scanned our surroundings. As usual, slobber strings hung from his jowls, and his black coat shone in the sun.

“Whoa, Kev, check this one out. Might take a few years to grow, but it would look great underneath the dining room window, don’t you think?” I snapped a photo of a bush in the early stages of blooming so I could ID it and research later.

Despite the temptation to drop a ton of money at the first sign of pretty trees, shrubs, and perennial flowers, I wanted to take my time, learn my options, and notice what I liked at other people’s homes over the seasons.

Honestly, I’d never been patient about anything, so this was good practice. Some of what I would’ve bought at the nursery after my gardening class only bloomed for a couple of weeks. It would’ve been such a bummer to plant something only to be disappointed.

I could hear Finn’s voice in my head, praising me for being intentional. He’d been quite verbose with his praise. I’d somehow made it through the month of dating celibacy, and…I’d kept going. Surprisingly, the break was helping me figure some shit out. The gardening helped too, in its meditative way.

For some ridiculous reason, that guy Remy popped into my head. Despite only having had a brief conversation a couple of months ago, I still thought of him from time to time. A symptom of my dating detox, probably. Finn suggested I was idealizing the guy I hadn’t gotten anywhere with.

Sometimes it was a pain in the ass being best friends with a therapist. Especially when he was right.

“Alright, Kevin. Let’s pick up the pace. Finn is waiting for us.”

As though he were fluent in English, Kevin’s long legs moved even faster, and I had to work hard to keep up.

I stopped myself from snapping photos of all the pretty plants on the way to the brewery by promising myself I’d come back. I had my usual route with Kevin, and we hadn’t walked much beyond it. Now that the weather was improving and flowers were in full bloom, I needed to explore. We even passed an awesome community garden that filled a large lot between two homes.

When Kevin and I made it to Tap That Brewery, he nearly yanked my arm from its socket when he spotted Finn sitting near the street in the outdoor seating area. He’d managed to get a table next to an empty corner big enough for Kevin to sprawl out. The place was as busy as expected on a gorgeous spring day.

“Kevi! Baby! How’s the love of my life?” Finn crouched and held his arms out. He’d loved all my fosters but, like me, had a soft spot for Kevin. “It’s about time your silly human brought you to me. I’ve been waiting for *hours*.”

I rolled my eyes and took the other seat. “We’re five minutes late.”

“And I’m sure that’s not your fault.” Finn scratched behind Kevin’s ears.

“He kept stopping to sniff tree trunks and flowers.”

“You mean you kept stopping to take pictures of plants.”

“Guilty.” I grinned.

“Oh! That reminds me. How was the vegetable fair you went to last weekend?”

“It went well,” I hedged.

“What happened?”

The man was a human avoidance detector.

I hadn’t told him I’d run into Remy again, but I hadn’t examined why.

It surprised me when I’d turned to introduce Remy to Jessie and discovered he’d left. I understood though. I’d basically ignored his existence for a few minutes while chatting with my tiny cousins, and he’d probably, understandably, felt awkward or annoyed. Instead of searching for

him, I'd finished going through the fair with Jessie and the kiddos while hoping I'd run into him again.

Sighing, I spilled.

"You saw him a second time? Interesting. How do you feel about that?"

"Like I wish I'd gotten his number this time."

If I were honest with myself, I hadn't faced much *real* temptation the past two months. I'd uninstalled the dating and hookup apps from my phone and had only been at bars with friends. Running into Remy had been the first real test of whether this dating break had done me any good. He made me both want to court him with slow intention and find the nearest hotel to discover what sounds he'd make when buried deep in my throat. He made me curious rather than coming up with reasons it wouldn't work. That seemed like a good sign, but I still didn't trust myself yet.

Finn nodded. "Were you glad he remembered you?"

"Are you kidding? I'm still riding that high."

We laughed as our server approached. I inwardly groaned when I realized it was one of my exes, Ethan. It wasn't a surprise since he co-owned the brewery with his three best friends, and Ethan ran the taproom and was the primary bartender. It was also the reason I didn't come here as often as I'd like. Finn loved it though, and since they'd added this outdoor seating area, it was perfect for Kevin.

Ethan and I had only gone on a few dates when I'd moved to town, but when he'd expressed being really into me, I'd run. Like I so often did.

"Hey, guys. Wilson, good to see you. What can I get you?" Ethan set a fresh water bowl next to Kevin.

He was as friendly and charming as always. He never made me feel like I'd hurt him—not that three dates were a big deal, but he had a heart the size of Kevin. From what I heard, he was also deliriously in love now. Good for him.

"Hey, Ethan. You too. Lipstick Lesbi-Lager for me and one of your cheese plates, please."

"Lager for me too, thanks," Finn said.

Ethan said as he crouched to pet Kevin. A slut for belly rubs, Kevin rolled onto his back for more affection. "I'll go grab your drinks and get the food started."

I watched him walk away. He was always cheerful and friendly, but there was a lightness about him now. Was that because he'd found love? I'd

seen a similar change in Finn.

“I didn’t give Ethan a real chance.” At the booming silence, I turned to Finn.

His eyebrows shot up to his hairline.

“Where’s that coming from?”

“A conversation with my therapist last week. She asked me some pointed questions, and I’m beginning to see the pattern.”

Ethan was a perfectly nice guy. Attractive, generous, attentive. There was no good reason *not* to exceed three dates with him, except I’d looked for every tiny reason to pull away. I still wasn’t sure why, but I had a ways to go in therapy yet.

Hi, I’m the problem.

“Excuse me. *Therapist?*”

Kevin lifted his head at Finn’s loud voice.

“Oh. Um. Yeah. I started seeing one a couple of weeks ago. Going great, by the way.”

“Are we in *The Twilight Zone*?” Finn muttered as he scrubbed his hands over his face. “It sounds like you’re already getting benefit.”

I nodded, though I was nervous about the revelations to come.

He smiled like a proud papa as I gave him the *CliffsNotes* version of my progress to date.

“Well, I’ll be damned. I’m impressed.”

I brushed him off as my cheeks flushed. “It’s not a big deal.”

“Actually, it is. You’re putting in the work, and I’m proud of you. Next up, you’ll finally adopt Kevin.”

“I’m not adopting him.” We’d already had this conversation numerous times.

“He loves you. So much.”

As if on cue, Kevin looked up at me with the sweetest expression before resting his head on my feet and letting out some seriously rank gas.

“Dude, you haven’t even eaten the cheese.” Finn wafted the air, stank-faced, like a Millennial vibing to an early 2000s hip-hop song. “Can you seriously inflict that gas on someone else? It’s your duty to live with it.”

“Dickhead.” I laughed. “I’m just not ready.”

“What makes you think that?”

Blowing out a breath, I stared into the distance to collect my thoughts. “If I can’t handle sticking around for more than a couple of dates with

someone”—I glanced around and lowered my voice. The words were almost too painful to utter—“how do I know I won’t regret adopting him?” A sharp pain radiated through my gut at the admission. “Kevin needs someone reliable and patient. I am neither of those things.”

“You’re more reliable than you give yourself credit for. You rent a gorgeous house on a year-long lease, you’ve had the same job for two years, and you’ve almost consistently had a foster dog for most of the past year.”

“Your words make sense to my brain, but they feel wrong.”

“Trust me, I get that. I hear that every day at work.” His smile was kind. “Articulating what you’re worried about is the first step in addressing it. Seriously, so proud of you.”

“You’re an influence.”

“Good or bad?” He grinned.

“Undecided.”

Finn kicked my foot. “I’m glad you’re seeing someone. Be sure to tell them about the nursery guy.”

I frowned. “Why?”

“They just might find it interesting, is all.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“One who loves you very much and wants what’s best for you.”

I flipped him off but smiled. “Love you too. Now show me Morgan in his Speedo glory.”

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Chapter Three

Summer

Remy

I closed my eyes and tilted my face toward the sun. I'd always been an autumn guy, but ever since I'd started gardening, I had a new appreciation for the bold summer sun.

"What do you think of this one? Mom would love the orange and peach flowers." I turned toward my sister Emily.

There had to be nearly two dozen of them hanging from the McMinnville Farmers' Market booth with flowers in every color of the rainbow. I was tempted to get one for my apartment balcony.

"If you get Mom another hanging basket, Dad will cut your brake lines." Emily laughed as she perused a basket of nectarines. "Plus, it's hot enough in the car to kill plants while we're on the river cruise. Why do we always buy her a birthday gift at the literal last minute?"

"You raise a good point. Hmm, I think there's someone who sells ceramics around here. Let's check that out before we go."

Emily arched her brow mockingly. "Don't you want to buy some vegetables first?"

"I sense you're about to give me shit for something."

She picked up a head of cauliflower. "If you rely on your gardening skills for sustenance, you'll starve."

"Good thing I have a CSA subscription box then, smartass."

“A whosa-whatsa subscription box?”

I briefly explained it.

She stared at me and tilted her head. “Are you my brother or a body snatcher?”

“I’m thirty, flirty, and thriving.” I mimed tossing back my hair like we used to do when we’d watched *Thirteen Going on Thirty* on repeat when we were young.

“You’re ridiculous.” She laughed and set the cauliflower down. “I’ll check the ceramics while you pick up your fancy box. We’ve got to get going soon.”

“It’ll only take a minute.” I wove my way past the dense lines at the gluten-free bakery booth toward the farm in the back corner of the market.

I enjoyed the CSA subscription, though I’d given away as much as I’d eaten. A surprising discovery was that shaved fennel tasted pretty damn good in salad. Idly, I wondered what Wilson had ended up liking, if he’d signed up for one.

“Hey, Remy! You’re here early.” As always, Jake greeted me with a warm smile.

“Hey, Jake. I wanted to swing by before a family thing.”

“I saw the note that you’ll be gone for the next two pickups. We’re all set to donate your shares to a local food bank. Going somewhere fun?” He leaned against the table and crossed his arms over his chest. The T-shirt fit snugly around his defined biceps.

I had to admit that Jake was a highlight of my CSA pickups. Nothing like some farmer eye candy to go with the fresh produce. He was flirty, I could admit that now, but in a nonthreatening way. My therapist had suggested I flirt with multiple people, like keeping things simmering on several burners simultaneously to keep the pressure low. Flirting with Wil, Jake, the part-time barista at A Whole Latte Love, even Wilson the two times I’d seen him. All of it was good practice, but I wasn’t quite ready to put the theory to the test.

“I’m heading to the UK for a month with my best friend.” Hopefully I’d get some more flirting practice. My plan was to come home and earnestly try dating.

“Wow. Trip of a lifetime. I’m jealous.” He straightened. “You’re going to love what we’ve got this week. Have at the salad greens while I grab your stuff.” He handed me a paper bag.

Bountiful baskets overflowing with red and green lettuce filled most of the table. I grabbed a little of everything, even though I still couldn't name most of the varieties. It all tasted better than anything I could get in the grocery store.

Jake set a crate full of produce on the table near me. "Here's your box. You've got to try making tea with the calendula."

"Calendula? Like that horny seventies film?"

Jake laughed. "I think that's *Caligula*, the Roman emperor. Calendula is like a marigold. It makes a fancy salad garnish too." He moved to help someone else.

Calendula tea wasn't in my future, but I'd try it on a salad. That was the whole point of this—trying new things, pushing my comfort zone, and getting out of my rut.

The crate was full of eggs, summer squash, beets, broccoli, garlic, kohlrabi, carrots, cucumbers, parsley, and a small bundle of what must be calendula flowers. I began moving my bounty into my grocery tote bag.

"Hey, Wilson! I hope you're in the mood for more kohlrabi." Jake teased.

"Are you going to do me a solid and let me swap it for broccoli or radishes? Pretty please?" The other person—Wilson—said.

Jake laughed. "I'm sure we can make that happen. Let me grab your box."

I spun around so fast that I knocked over my lettuce bag.

Wilson's attention locked on me, and his mouth curved into a wide smile. "We have to stop meeting like this."

It's actually him! My heart pounded as I basked in his attention for a moment before picking up my lettuce and collecting myself.

"Not a fan of the kohlrabi either?" I managed.

He blew out a breath and waved his hand. "I *tried*, believe me. Shaved on salads, roasted, sautéed, and mashed. But if I want something cabbage-y, I'll use cabbage. You know?"

"That's exactly it. I don't love cabbage as-is, but when I use it, I want that flavor. The kohlrabi is a bit plain."

Wilson fanned himself. "I love it when a man tells me I'm right."

I took a step closer to him as nerves danced beneath my skin, but this time, I wanted to flee about twenty percent less than before. Progress.

No charming or quippy comebacks came to me, so I went with the first thing that popped into my head. “So, you picked a CSA.”

“You picked the same one. Small world.”

I shook my head in disbelief. Did he live nearby? I shifted to the side so Wilson could join me in collecting greens.

“How’s the gardening going?”

Wilson let out a self-deprecating laugh that warmed me like sunshine on a hot August afternoon.

“The question of the century. Let’s see. My snap peas did okay. I’ve planted cilantro several times, and it keeps bolting faster than avocados go from ripe to brown on my counter. But I’ve got tons of tomatoes in various stages of ripening, and my cucumber plants are full of blossoms.”

“I’m impressed.”

“Didn’t the teacher of that class tell us that lettuce was a great beginner crop? I could *not* make lettuce work, but I suspect the squirrels had a hand in that. I’ve been taking advantage of this, that’s for sure.” He shoved a handful of lettuce into his bag. “How about you? Any Caprese salads yet?”

“I had it for lunch every day last week,” I said proudly.

“Incredible! Can you imagine how much better we’re going to be at this by next year?”

I stared a beat too long at his smile, and he licked his lips.

“You know, I’m starting to think the universe is throwing us together. Gardening buddies or…” Wilson trailed off but kept his eyes on me.

“Or?”

“Hey, Wilson, here’s your box.” Jake set it on the table. “Want to come pick something out to swap with the kohlrabi?”

“Sure.” Wilson turned to me. “Be right back. Don’t you dare move.”

“Okay.” My feet may as well have been encased in cement with how little I wanted to leave.

Wilson glanced back at me as Jake chatted with him.

Moments later, Emily moved into the space Wilson had vacated with her phone pressed to her ear. “We’ve gotta go. Dad’s tire is flat, and we’ve got to haul ass to pick them up before catching the boat.”

I heard Dad cursing and Mom giving him shit in the background as I tried to process Emily’s words. “Huh?”

“We’ve got to *go*.” Emily picked up my produce bag and shooed me along. “If we don’t hurry, we’ll miss the cruise.”

I wanted to stomp my feet and throw a tantrum. Not this time. Not when I'd found Wilson again.

"Are you on your way yet?" Mom yelled through the phone. "I told your father to take the car to Les Schwab when the low tire light came on the other day. Did he listen? No. I swear, your father is sabotaging my birthday. It's like 2008 all over again."

Emily rolled her eyes. "You ready?"

"I—" I watched Wilson laughing at something Jake said. It was Mom's sixtieth birthday, and she'd been wanting to do one of the river boat cruises for years. It'd taken her forever to talk Dad into it.

"Squirts, we're going to be cutting it close to cut-off time. Are you on your way? Sorry about this," Dad said.

It would add nearly forty minutes to the trip to swing back and pick them up. Emily was right. If we didn't leave now, we'd be too late. *It's Mom's birthday. You can't mess this up just to talk to a guy*.

"Yeah, we're on our way," I said into the phone while gripping the salad bag until my knuckles turned white.

Emily nudged my shoulder. "Come on. If we miss this, we'll hear about it for the next decade."

I let her pull me away from Wilson and toward the car, despite everything in me wanting to stay and at least explain to him. We didn't have time, and Mom's birthday mattered more than a few extra minutes of conversation. It wouldn't be a fun milestone birthday if all her extended family was on the cruise without her, not to mention the shit Dad would—deservedly—get for years.

After a few steps, I looked back at Wilson. He turned my way and frowned. I pointed to my sister and mouthed "family emergency," hoping that would be enough and we'd get another chance.

I struggled to keep up with Emily's speed-walking.

"I got Mom a tea set at the ceramics booth. We can give it to her after the cruise, so she doesn't have to haul it around the ship."

I tossed my produce in the cooler I'd packed and climbed inside the driver's seat.

"Damn-near cost me my firstborn, but I love handmade stuff," she said, chatting away as I started the car. Her stare hit me like a heavy weight. "What happened? You were chipper as hell ten minutes ago, and now you look like you ate one of Dad's pickled eggs."

“It’s nothing.”

“You’re literally the worst liar I’ve ever met. Did someone steal your cucumbers from your YMCA box?”

If I didn’t tell her, she’d harass me the rest of the day. Emily always had a knack for dragging my deepest and darkest secrets out of me.

“It’s the guy I was talking to. Wilson.”

“I didn’t see you talking to someone. A guy you know?”

“Sorta. Not really. I’ve bumped into him a few times.”

“Okay…”

I explained the weird series of interactions as I pushed the boundaries of the speed limit.

Emily went silent for a long moment. “Is this why you finally started therapy?”

“I didn’t start it because of a guy.”

“Don’t be obtuse. You know what I mean. You started it because you didn’t take advantage of running into a guy, and you’re finally realizing there’s some deeper stuff to deal with.”

She had me there. “Basically.”

“Turn the car around.”

“What?”

“Go give that man your number!” She reached for the steering wheel, but I batted her hand away.

“You’ll make us crash! We have to pick up Mom and Dad.”

“If you give him your number, maybe you’ll have a date for Thanksgiving! Mom will forgive this if you have a date for the holidays.”

“It’s her sixtieth. It’s a big deal.”

“So is her having a son-in-law to fawn over.”

“Whoa. Slow down.”

Emily slumped in her seat. “This is the *third* time you’ve run into each other this year? That’s got to mean something.”

“It’s not a big deal. We’ve run into each other a few times, and there’s a spark, but the spark doesn’t have to mean anything.”

“Jeremy Ray Gustafson, you had better give that man your number the next time you see him, or I’m going to tell Mom you broke her vase sophomore year.”

“You wouldn’t!”

“I absolutely would. The changes over the past couple of months haven’t gone unnoticed. These encounters are special.”

I blew out a breath. “They feel that way.”

Even if nothing came from it, I was grateful to Wilson for sparking something that finally pushed me to face how I’d been holding myself back.

“Oh! Go back to the farmers’ market at the same time when you pick up your box thingie next time.”

That was a great idea. I’d camp out all day if I had to. As I began mapping out my plan, my gut sank. “Except when it’s time to pick up my next box in two weeks, I’ll be on a plane to England. I’m missing the next two pickups.”

“Shit.”

“He’ll think I’m not interested, assuming he even is.”

“It’s obvious he’s flirting with you.”

“Obvious how? You weren’t even there.”

“Because it’s always been like that. You’re a catch, but you’re oblivious. Time for you to realize that guys want you.”

I scoffed. “You’re my sister. You have to say that.”

“Say that to my gay friends in college who wanted a chance to debauch you. It was exhausting protecting your honor.”

I pouted. “What if I’d wanted to be debauched?”

“Ew, Remy. Ew.”

Her college friends were into me? Huh.

“When do the box pickups end?”

“They go through October.”

She swatted my arm. “Perfect! You’re back in late September, right? That gives you chances to see him again.”

“I promise I’ll give him my number next time.”

“Atta boy.” She patted my leg. “We’ll get you laid yet.”

“Ew, Emily. Ew.”

Wilson

“Venti iced latte for Wilson,” the barista called.

I collected my well-earned drink from the counter. This coffee shop turned out to be a gem around the corner from my therapist’s office.

Rewarding myself with a coffee after each session helped ease the sting from my sometimes brutal revelations.

While walking back to my car, I pulled out my phone and texted Finn.

WILSON:

My therapist can't believe we ran into each other again.

FINN:

That makes four of us. Morgan thinks you need to visit a psychic.

WILSON:

That's a great idea! Does he work with anyone?

FINN:

What do you think?

WILSON:

LOL, I'll text him.

WILSON:

It's wild, right?

FINN:

Yes. He spends so much money on that stuff.

WILSON:

[eyeroll emoji] I mean, it's wild running into Remy again.

FINN:

I'll admit, the first time seemed like a coincidence. It's an easy logic jump to assume someone you met at a gardening class might also be interested in a CSA. But there are almost fifty farmers' markets in Portland Metro, let alone the ones farther out here in the valley. The odds of running into him at the same market at the same time are…surprising.

I stopped at the hood of my car and stared at my phone.

WILSON:

You looked up how many farmers' markets there are?

FINN:

Morgan did. He's such a weirdo, but I love him.

I rubbed at the ache in my chest, and not for the first time. Lately, the yearning for my own version of a relationship like theirs had settled deeper, filling the cracks in my being. There had to be someone who loved my quirks as much as my charm. Something meaningful with a person who pushed and supported me. A partner willing to be patient as I worked to get out of my own way.

I rolled down my windows and sat in my car while finishing my drink. The warm air melted the ice quickly, but the tree next to my car provided shade from the direct sun.

Since seeing Remy on Sunday, I hadn't been able to stop thinking about him. The palpable chemistry was different from anything I'd ever experienced. I'd had the distance now to realize that. It wasn't simply that I found him attractive. My curiosity about him had grown. Between my therapy and the self-help content I'd been binging to develop my relationship and dating skills, I'd learned that curiosity was crucial.

As my therapist helped me understand, I'd always been quick to fall for people who I knew, deep down, wouldn't work out. When I'd proved my subconscious right, I'd been even quicker to run. Or I found the smallest reasons to leave.

I'd felt *almost* ready for Remy's number when I saw him. Part of me was relieved he'd had to run off for a family emergency because I wasn't quite there yet. Maybe a few more therapy sessions would give me that last big breakthrough.

In two weeks, I'd have another chance. I'd park my ass at the market all day if I had to. Picturing the meeting, I smiled and hummed along to an upbeat pop song playing through my speakers as I drove home. The slowness of this thing with Remy was addictive. The cosmic equivalent of gooey, under-baked brownies cut from the middle of the pan.

Once home and blissfully back in my air conditioning, I poured myself a cold drink and sat at my computer. While scanning Slack notifications, I smiled when Jeremy's name popped up.

JEREMY:

Hey! I've got mock-ups of the product flyers for you. It was tempting to add text that the monitor can do everything except pay your bills, but I practiced restraint.

WIL:

Frankly, it wouldn't surprise me if that's the next evolution of the equipment. Self-service vitals while waiting for the AI doctor.

JEREMY:

Too bad you're not in research and development. You'd be rich. [GIF of someone swimming in money]

WIL:

[laugh-cry emoji] It's a shame too. Papa needs money for car repairs.

JEREMY:

Adulting is so rough. It's never Papa needs money for a chocolate fountain, or Mama needs cash for an adult-sized bouncy house.

WIL:

An adult-sized bouncy house would be so much fun! Have you ever been to one of those trampoline places? I went for a kid's birthday party. I have to say, it was pretty fun.

JEREMY:

Sounds awesome. They should have adult-only hours at those.

WIL:

Who's got the million-dollar idea now?

I opened the design draft he'd sent, and it was great, as usual. Jeremy managed to make marketing and sales collateral for medical equipment interesting. We swapped a few messages about tweaks to the design and talked through another project.

JEREMY:

How are things going with the dog you're fostering?

Kevin lifted his head from where it rested on his paws. He was curled up on the large cushion I kept in my home office.

WIL:

Aside from his weapons of mass evacuation farts? He's wonderful.

JEREMY:

[laugh-cry emoji] Still causing trouble with potential adoptions?

WIL:

He peed on another guy’s shoe last week.

JEREMY:

Clever dog. He must really love you.

I smiled at Kevin and his slobbery jowls.

WIL:

I love him too. I think I’m going to adopt him.

Finn and Morgan didn’t even know that yet, but typing it out let me test the idea. My therapist had cautiously asked me about my plans once or twice, but I hadn’t offered a solid answer. Now the truth of what I wanted settled deep in my gut.

JEREMY:

That’s amazing! Congratulations!

WIL:

Thanks. It would be a big change.

JEREMY:

Will it? It sounds like you’ve basically been his dog dad for a while.

I poised my fingers over the keyboard to argue, but I couldn’t. Finn and my therapist had said the same. How could I argue when everyone else agreed?

WIL:

You’re right. Thanks. That helps.

JEREMY:

Sure. [smile emoji] I can’t wait to hear what you decide. Keep me posted?

JEREMY:

That reminds me—my hours will be different starting next week for the next month. I leave for my trip this weekend.

WIL:

Wow, that snuck up!

JEREMY:

You're telling me.

WIL:

You're going to the UK, right?

JEREMY:

Yup! I fly into London and work my way to Scotland, then Ireland, then Wales before heading home. I'm packing binoculars because I'm determined to spot the Loch Ness Monster or a leprechaun.

WIL:

[Nessie GIF] You're living the dream! I want all the details when you're back.

I almost suggested we do a video chat or something, but I hesitated. That would permanently change our dynamic, and I wasn't sure I was ready for that. Aren't you, though?

JEREMY:

When I'm back, we could catch up, and I could tell you about it. Over video, maybe? I could share my screen and show photos.

My lips spread into a wide smile.

WIL:

I'd love that. I've wondered if you have a mustache.

JEREMY:

[laugh-cry emoji] Do you want me to tell you, or should I keep the mystery going?

I leaned back in my chair. If we were talking on the phone via an old landline phone, I'd be twirling the cord like a high school girl talking to her crush.

WIL:

Hmm. Don't tell me. I'm picturing you with a handlebar mustache. No! A goatee. Wait, a long, grizzled beard but with beads in it.

JEREMY:

Beads?

WIL:

Yup. Lots of them. Glittery ones. [GIF of a guy with beads in his beard waggling his eyebrows]

JEREMY:

[laugh-cry emoji] That's ridiculous.

WIL:

Shame. I was really digging the vibe.

JEREMY:

Not sure my genetics could make that happen. For you, I'm picturing Bieber bangs and frosted tips. [GIF of Justin Bieber with his iconic hair]

A snort-laugh bubbled out of me.

WIL:

You should've seen my emo phase. Eyeliner and everything.

JEREMY:

No way.

WIL:

I'll try to find some photos to show you when we chat.

JEREMY:

Looking forward to it.

I started typing, but hesitated. Did I really want to ask this? Yes, yes I did. It was time to face things head-on.

WIL:

You never looked me up?

JEREMY:

No. Is that weird?

WIL:

No. I haven't either.

JEREMY:

You sure you're ready to end the mystery?

WIL:

Yes.

JEREMY:

[smile-blushing emoji]

WIL:

I hope your flight goes well!

JEREMY:

Thanks! Me too. I don't love flying, and I've got two layovers for this one. I fly down to LA, then another in New York.

WIL:

Two? That's the worst. At least you'll get to stretch your legs.

JEREMY:

True. Well, I'm going to sign off and finish packing. Talk to you soon, Wil.

It wasn't until late that night while replaying the conversation for the dozenth time that I realized he'd typed "down." *I fly down to LA.* That had to mean Jeremy lived on the West Coast!

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Chapter Four

Fall

Remy

It was so fun being in the same time zone as Wil again. The occasional asynchronous messages while I was traveling were better than nothing, but nothing beat a live chat.

WIL:

We got a request to sell vital sign monitors in Barbie pink. Love it. Pink blood pressure cuffs? Matching pulse oximeters? We'd sell the hell out of those.

JEREMY:

There should be a pastel line. I'd love to design materials for those.

WIL:

What if they were scented? Bubble gum pink. Peppermint green. I know my blood pressure would lower if someone busted out a lavender-scented cuff.

JEREMY:

That's something else we agree on.

WIL:

I'm beginning to wonder where we disagree. [smile-blushing emoji]

My cheeks burned brighter than the emoji.

JEREMY:

Pineapple on pizza. Yay or nay?

WIL:

Oh hell yeah. Extra pineapple.

JEREMY:

Same. BBQ sauce instead of marinara?

WIL:

Not my favorite, but I'll allow it. Alfredo as the base? An abomination.

JEREMY:

No way! Garlic chicken and alfredo pizza with lots of green peppers? Hell yes.

WIL:

You're one of those? Nooooo!

Despite not knowing what he looked like, I could picture him dramatically pressing the back of his hand to his forehead. He struck me as the kind of guy to make dramatic gestures. I'd always been drawn to expressive people.

JEREMY:

No one's perfect, Wil.

WIL:

Trust me, I know. I dated a guy once who loved anchovies AND pineapple on pizza.

My breath caught. He was gay! Or bi or pan! Queer! Wait. This was my chance to let him know I'm gay. I eagerly typed a response as my excitement for our upcoming video chat grew.

JEREMY:

If any of the guys I'd dated liked that, it would've been cause to call things off.

WIL:

Thanks for the validation. [grin emoji]

WIL:

So you date guys? Another thing we have in common. [smile-blushing emoji]

I might not be able to accurately picture his smile, but I knew he wore a big one.

WIL:

Well, I've got to run to a meeting, but I'm very much looking forward to hearing more about your trip and finally meeting you on Friday.

JEREMY:

See you then! [smile emoji]

My stomach felt topsy-turvy. For once, it wasn't the "omg I'm going to barf" kind I was used to, but…anticipation? Excitement? Still nervous, but like, a manageable amount of anxiety. Well damn, therapy works. I smiled wide enough that my molars were probably visible from space.

Forty-eight hours until I finally got to meet Wil and practice flirting in person. I liked Wil a lot and wanted to get to know him better outside of work, but there was still a geographical barrier between us. One I didn't even know the scope of yet.

Wil simmered at medium-low on my front burner with the smaller coils. Wilson though? I had him at medium-high on the big burner, waiting until Sunday when surely I'd see him at the CSA pickup.

Standing, my body creaked and popped as I stretched.

"Talking to Wil?"

I turned to Henry. "What makes you say that?"

Henry's eyebrows lifted. "You giggled. *Several times*."

"Am I not allowed to giggle?"

"The tone of the giggle was different, that's all. So, what did Wil have to say?"

I huffed in defeat. "I learned Wil dates men."

Henry punched his fist in the air. "Hell yeah! I knew there was something there! Do you know where he lives yet?"

I shook my head. "I'm sure I'll find out Friday."

He took a drink from the Union Jack coffee mug he'd brought home from our trip. "Friday?"

"We're video chatting after work to talk about my trip."

Henry dropped the mug on his desk. Luckily, it only sloshed out a bit of coffee and didn't break. "You're *what*?"

"Going to meet. Well, virtually meet. Finally."

"I'm so fucking proud of you, man. You've been crushing on this guy for ages, and you're making a move."

"It's just a video chat, not a marriage proposal."

"That's not the point. You're putting yourself out there and taking risks. Don't forget the English guy you let buy you a drink in York," he said.

Even I had been proud of myself for that. I'd not only made eye contact with a guy across a pub, but I'd accepted his drink offer *and* spent an hour talking with him without breaking into hives or texting Henry to bail me out.

"You're planning to wait for that guy at the farmers' market Sunday, right?" He shook his head in disbelief. "You've made a hell of a lot of progress, bud. You're finally blooming into the man I always knew you could be."

"Blooming? Shut up." I shifted uncomfortably on my feet but couldn't fight my smile.

"Blossoming? Ripening?"

"God. Stop." I covered my face and laughed.

"Seriously though. You've put in a lot of work, and you're finally taking steps toward the life you want. You're going to make a great partner for some lucky guy. It might be one of these guys, or it might not, but it'll be someone. I'm sure of it."

I pulled my best friend into a hug and clapped him on the back. "Thanks, man. I appreciate all your support as I faced my shit."

"Anytime. You've been there for me plenty. Now, what do you say about ordering some takeout tonight and watching a shitty movie?"

"Raincheck for tomorrow? I've got that canning class tonight."

"Canning for your abundance of three tomatoes?"

"Dick." I laughed and filled our mugs. "I'm thinking ahead for next year. My canning skills will bring all the boys to the yard."

Wilson

FINN:

You're one hobby away from becoming my grandmother.

I laughed while closing my car door behind me. Finn wasn't wrong. I decided not to admit that I'd fallen down a crochet rabbit hole on TikTok.

Wednesday night in downtown McMinnville was hopping, and I had to park a few blocks away from the canning class. Shit. It started in five minutes. Good thing I walked fast.

WILSON:

I'd be so lucky to be as cool as your nan. She's got Betty White energy.

FINN:

I won't tell her you said that, or you'll become her favorite.

WILSON:

I'm going to can some bomb-ass jam and give it to her for Christmas. Position as favorite: secured.

FINN:

Am I going to get any bomb-ass jam for Christmas?

WILSON:

That or coal. I'm undecided.

FINN:

You're such an ass. Can't canned food be poisonous?

I picked up the pace. I would've gotten here earlier if I hadn't gotten stuck in a row of cars behind farm equipment going ten miles an hour down the back roads. The joy of living in a rural area.

WILSON:

Can it?!

WILSON:

Pun not intended!

Well, shit. I didn't know that. My neighbor and I had a bunch of tomatoes at the end of summer, and when googling what to do with them, canning kept coming up. I figured it might be nice to make some sauce to can for winter. Then I learned about all sorts of other cool things I could make, like buying green beans from the store and pickling them.

FINN:

Let’s hope your teacher tonight tells you.

WILSON:

You and me both. Okay, heading in.

FINN:

Call me when you’re driving home. Morgan and I want to hear your plan for Friday.

WILSON:

You’re allowed to listen to the plan without comment.

FINN:

Deal.

I didn’t have a plan beyond finally putting a face to Jeremy’s voice. Flying “down” to LA didn’t necessarily mean he lived within reasonable driving distance. Jeremy might live in the panhandle of Idaho for all I knew.

At least it gave me something to look forward to since I hadn’t seen Remy at the farmers’ market in the past month. I’d hung out the *entire* day when I’d gone to pick up my box two weeks after running into him the previous time. The barista at the coffee shop with a view of the CSA booth probably thought I was a private investigator on a stakeout.

In my weak moments, I worried I’d scared him off, and he now had someone else picking up his box. Though, most often, I worried the family emergency he’d had was serious and ongoing. If that was the case, of course picking up a CSA box would be the last thing on his mind. I nearly asked Jake about him last time, but I stopped myself. I didn’t need to drag anyone else into this.

The kitchen store had tall windows filled with displays of kitchen gadgets and cookbooks. I pulled open the door to jazzy music and the enticing aroma of tomatoes and garlic, which made my stomach grumble. The front half of the space was a retail area with pots, pans, cookbooks, kitchen gadgets, dishes, tea sets, and more. A mix of modern, eclectic, new, used, and vintage.

“Hi! Here for the canning class?” An older woman with short, gray hair, a round figure, and a warm smile approached.

“Hi, yes, I’m Wilson.” I shook her hand.

“Perfect. I’m Ruth. You’re our last student. Go ahead and grab the empty seat, and we’ll get started.”

“Thanks.” I looked over her shoulder toward the back half of the space where people sat in pairs at several tables arranged in a rectangle. I spotted the empty seat next to a familiar face staring at his phone. I stood frozen, unable to comprehend my luck.

He looked up as though he felt the weight of my gaze, and the phone in his hand clattered onto the table. His smile bloomed into something that gave sunshine a run for its money.

I rolled my shoulders and strutted to him. This time, he wasn’t getting away. I would ask for that man’s phone number, even if it killed me.

He didn’t take his eyes off me as I navigated the tables to his. Ours. I barely noticed the other pairs chatting around us.

“Well, well, well. Remy. We meet again.”

“How?” he said after a long pause.

“Let’s cut right to it. You’re not allowed to leave until I ask for your phone number.”

Delight sparkled in his eyes. “You want my number?”

I took the seat next to him and leaned close. “Remy, I care more about knowing your phone number than my own Social Security number at this point.”

Before he could respond, Ruth spoke. His overjoyed would tide me over until we could speak again.

Ruth introduced herself. “Tonight, you’ll learn the basics of water bath canning. We’ll cover the process, safety, recipes, and even get some hands-on practice so you can take home goodies with you.”

Movement caught my peripheral vision. Remy slid a piece of paper in front of me with a phone number and a social media handle. A giggle slipped out when I noticed an address too. In Dahlia Springs, of course. Serendipity.

Remy

Wilson was here. In my class. Sitting inches from me, for the next two hours. I couldn’t believe my luck.

Everything Ruth said about canning safety went in one ear and out the other. If I wanted to do this for real, I’d need a repeat because at this rate, I’d end up with botulism.

“While you chop vegetables, I’ll start a batch of blueberry jam so you can take home jars of that too. When you’re done chopping, feel free to peruse the store. I’ll open the register after class.” Ruth turned to the large pot in front of her.

Wilson chopped carrots as if this were any old Wednesday. Meanwhile, I’d forgotten how to hold a knife. Hell, I’d forgotten how to breathe.

“Did your gardening go well? Or are you learning to can as a clever manifestation technique for next year?” he asked.

“I only have one raised bed, so not enough to can, but I got to thinking that I could can stuff from the farmers’ market. My goal next year is to make pickles. The refrigerator ones only last about six weeks, but I want year-round pickles.”

“You deserve year-round pickles,” he said while fighting a smile. “I’m picturing you with a pantry full of dozens and dozens of pickle jars.”

“If I had a pantry, you bet your ass it would be full of pickles.”

Wilson’s lips twisted into a smirk. “Big fan of pickles, huh?”

“Oh yeah, I *love*—” I squeezed my eyes shut and my cheeks burned. “Yup. Okay. I see what I did.”

“Nothing wrong with that. I’m quite fond of them myself.”

The slow once-over Wilson gave me made heat rush to my groin. I couldn’t even talk myself out of Wilson flirting with me. There was no misunderstanding or brushing off that look or how it made me feel. I *wanted* him. Badly.

“Is everyone finished?” Ruth asked as she wandered around the tables.

“Almost.” I sliced the top off the bell pepper and de-seeded it.

“You can finish while I’m talking.” She winked at me.

“Teacher’s pet,” Wilson whispered in a playful tone.

Ruth talked us through filling our canning jars as she boiled the liquid for them.

“This is a headspace tool that will help you remove bubbles and tell you how much space to leave at the top.” Ruth went into the science of it, but I was too distracted by the way my shoulder brushed Wilson’s while we worked to listen.

Over six months in the making, I finally had my chance with him. March seemed like a lifetime ago.

We didn’t get to chat much privately during class, but sending each other eager smiles was enough. He’d already texted me his number, so I

could relax.

Ruth gathered us around one table. “Let’s look at your jars. Remember, don’t press on the lids or shake them. We want to keep them upright for twelve to twenty-four hours.” She spoke more about the dangers of botulism.

She had me scared to death of it. The appeal of canning faded the longer the class went on. My number one takeaway from class was that I’d never accept canned goods from strangers. Maybe not even friends. Except for Wilson. If he gave me his canned green beans, I’d eat them with a smile on my face and die happy if they were tainted.

“Thank you for a wonderful class. Check our website for our upcoming classes. The pasta-making class is one of my favorites. I’ll be at the register if anyone would like to purchase anything on your way out.” Ruth set two jars of blueberry jam on our table.

“Did you plan on doing any shopping?” Wilson asked after we finished cleaning our station.

“Nope. I’m ready to go.”

He smiled, and I followed him to the front door, my heart threatening to beat out of my chest with each step. The cool late-September air did nothing to mitigate the flush creeping up my neck once we stepped outside.

“Which way are you parked?” I asked.

“A few blocks that way.” Wilson pointed ahead of us.

“Me too.”

“Another lucky coincidence.” He grinned. “It’s pretty bananas that we’ve continued running into each other this year. Don’t you think?”

I shook my head in disbelief. “I guess the universe really wants us to be gardening buddies.”

Wilson’s steps faltered as I mentally slapped myself in the face.

“Gardening buddies?”

Make it clear you’re interested. Don’t let this chance pass you by. Again.

“I don’t want to assume anything. I’m single, by the way,” I blurted like a complete fool.

His smile grew once again. “Me too. *By the way*.”

“This is me,” I said as we approached my Prius.

“Can I ask you something?” Wilson’s tone had changed to something hesitant.

“Anything.”

“I tried to find you again at the CSA. Is everything okay? You mouthed something about a family emergency?”

If my hands hadn’t been full of jars, I would’ve smacked my face. “Shit. Sorry! I figured I’d see you when I got back, but it didn’t occur to me that you might think I was dodging you or something.”

I explained my mom’s birthday cruise and the car issue.

“So, everything’s fine except my dad will be in the doghouse until Thanksgiving, at least. I’ve been on vacation. I spent a month in the United Kingdom.”

He clucked his tongue. “Everyone’s doing that! Ugh. So jealous. Where’d you go?”

“I flew into London with my best friend. His girlfriend lives in London. We stopped in a few places on the way to Scotland. I split off from them and spent nearly two weeks in Scotland, then some time in Ireland, and finished in Wales. I didn’t see the Loch Ness Monster or any leprechauns, unfortunately.” At Wilson’s shocked expression, I stopped rambling. “What?”

“Is Remy short for Jeremy?”

“Yeah. I go by Jeremy professionally, but everyone else calls me Remy.”

Wilson searched my face as he took a step toward me. “I go by a different name at work too. Wil. Where I work with this sweet and funny freelance graphic designer named Jeremy, who has atrocious taste in pizza. I mean, alfredo? Come on.”

My breath caught. “Wil?”

His eyes sparkled with unshed tears. “It’s me.”

My eyes burned. “All year, it’s been you? How is this possible?”

“My best friend’s husband would say it’s written in the stars,” he said dreamily.

Wilson—Wil—was as expressive as I imagined. I fought the urge to pull him into a kiss. We didn’t need to rush because we’d found each other, for real this time.

“I can’t argue with that,” I said breathily.

“So, Friday.” He took a step closer. “Idea. What if we meet up in person and you can tell me all about your trip? Like a date where we both plan to show up and nothing stops us from having a full conversation?”

I closed the distance between us. “I’d love that.”

He leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to my cheek. “I’m so glad it’s you, Remy.”

Wilson

I stared at Remy’s apartment building from my car and wiped my sweaty palms on my thighs. It was happening. An official date. My stomach rivaled a butterfly habitat. Flutters before first dates weren’t new, but the reason was new this time. It wasn’t because it was my first date in months or because I was going into the date bracing for turn-offs and red flags. Surprisingly, I was in a good place about that because I’d been doing the work. And to Finn’s credit, he was right that having a therapist in the wings helped.

This time was different because I knew this could turn into something, and for once, I was going into a date hunting for green flags. I wanted to both savor every moment and fast-forward six months to us lounging together on my couch, planning my garden for next year. That thought didn’t scare me because I was ready to navigate the bumps along the way between now and then, and I knew him better than anyone else I’d gone on a first date with.

It’s time to start the next chapter of my life.

As I climbed out of my car, the cool evening air was a welcome balm to my flushed skin. I quickly found his apartment, and the door swung open after my first knock. I’d expected to find Remy, but it was another guy about our age.

“You must be Wil or Wilson.” He tilted his head. “What should I call you?”

“Wilson’s great. I go by Wil at work because there used to be another Wilson, so the nickname stuck. You’re Henry?”

“Sorry. Yeah. I’ve heard a lot about you. Both versions of you. Come in. Come in.”

As soon as I made it inside and Henry closed the door behind me, he pulled me into a hug.

“Thank you. You’ll never know how grateful I am to you for how you’ve helped Remy come out of his shell.”

My eyes stung as I returned the hug with equal intensity. “Trust me. He’s done the same for me.” I was sure Finn would give Remy similar treatment when they met.

“What the hell, Henry? You’ve hugged him before I have.” Remy’s tone was playful.

Henry and I both broke apart, laughing and wiping our eyes. A concerned expression crossed Remy’s face.

“It’s all good, man. Just a lot of emotional buildup. You know?” Henry said.

Remy rolled his eyes, but his pleased smile grew.

Damn, Remy looked *delicious* in tight-fitting black jeans and a pale-blue button-up rolled to his elbows. I couldn’t wait to see what awaited me under his clothes. It might not be tonight, or next week, or next month, but I could be very patient. I loved his round belly and thick thighs, and I was sure those jeans worked great for his ass too.

I strode toward him, holding out my arms, and he melted into me. As I breathed in him and his lemon-verbena soap, my body relaxed. One hug from this man could regulate my nervous system for days. He squeezed tighter when I rested my head in the crook of his neck. Footsteps disappeared down a hallway. His smile was bashful when we eventually pulled apart.

I reached out and grabbed his hand. “It’s just the start of the date, and I’ve already gotten two hugs. Loving this.”

He returned the squeeze. “Thanks for being a good sport about it.”

“Are you kidding? I feel so much better because I know my best friend Finn will be worse.”

His relief was palpable. Without dropping my hand, he gave me a brief tour of his place, including the desk where we chatted through work.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Wait up, guys,” Henry hustled over. “A little first date gift.” He handed Remy a slip of paper. “It’s a lottery ticket. You guys have had so much luck already, and I figured why not.”

“If we win, we’ll split it with you,” I said, laughing. He wasn’t wrong. We *did* have a ton of luck.

“You’re ridiculous, and I love you.” Remy shook his head fondly as he slid on his shoes.

Henry shot me a wink.

It only took a few minutes to drive us to Tap That Brewery.

“Do you come here often?” Remy asked as we approached.

“A couple of times a month, at least,” I said. “I usually sit outside, though, because I can bring a dog.”

Remy nodded in understanding. “Henry and I come for trivia nights, but we always sit inside. That explains why we haven’t run into each other here.”

We’d texted almost constantly over the past two days and had learned that we only lived five minutes apart. There were a million different ways we could’ve eventually run into each other.

“Inside or outside?” I asked as we approached. Both were equally busy, which was to be expected for a Friday night.

“How about outside? It’ll be nice to soak up as much warmth as possible before the temperature turns,” he said.

We found a table for two and sat.

“Kevin loves it out here. We usually sit at the edge because he’s so big. He’d get in the way at any of the middle tables.”

“I wanna see pictures.” Remy made grabby hands.

Laughing, I pulled out my phone, navigated to the feature that filtered photos by person or animal, and handed it over. “I submitted my official adoption application for him today. It felt like it was time. Like everything’s finally coming together. You know?”

When I’d gone to bed last night, rubbing Kevin’s belly and thinking over all the wild stuff that had happened, a part of me was still waiting for some sort of cosmic billboard to tell me I was ready for the baby steps and the leaps. That I’d done enough required work to trust myself to move into the next phase. But it hit me that I could only do so much on my own. The rest of my progress required taking risks like dating Remy and adopting Kevin to prove to myself that I could handle whatever I was afraid of.

Remy stared at the phone with an expression I couldn’t place. When he looked up at me, his eyes glistened with unshed tears. “This is Kevin?” He reached out and grabbed my hand.

“Yeah. Isn’t he a sweetie? It’s a weight off to have decided, even though Kevin’s been nudging me toward it for months.”

The director of the rescue organization had recently jokingly threatened that she wouldn’t approve any more foster dogs for me if I didn’t adopt Kevin, though she probably *wasn’t* joking.

“This is...” Remy shook his head, and a surprised laugh bubbled up. “Do you remember me telling you there was a dog I wanted to adopt, but he was too big? It was Kevin.”

I gasped. “How is that possible?”

“I still look at his listing at least once a week to motivate me to save so I can try to move into a bigger place that would allow me to adopt Kevin or a dog like him.”

“Well, now you can visit him as often as you’d like. You’ll get the benefits of having a dog with all the slobber, cuddles, and affection without having to clean up his monster shits in the yard. Truly a win-win situation for you. But I have told you about his farts, right?”

Laughing, Remy squeezed my hand, and I regaled him with stories of Kevin’s gas. Truly, scientists should study its toxicity levels.

“Wilson, Remy. Good to see you both.”

I startled at Ethan’s voice. When he noticed Remy and I holding hands, his smile widened.

He gestured between us. “You know, you two make a lot of sense. Does this mean we’ll start seeing you at trivia?” Ethan asked me.

At Remy’s hopeful smile, I nodded. “I know a weird amount about nineties sitcoms.”

“All right! What can I get you two?”

We enjoyed our drinks, a cheese plate with almonds arranged into a heart—subtle, Ethan—and the easiest conversation I’d ever had on a date. We had a lot to build on, but I couldn’t get over how curious I was about him. For once, I wasn’t searching for red flags in the wings.

Remy entertained me with stories about his trip and showed photos of scenery and historic buildings I’d only dreamed about. As he talked about where he wanted to go on his next trip there, I let myself imagine us going together. For the first time on a date, I was thinking about all the ways it could work out instead of the ways it wouldn’t.

When I couldn’t ignore the screams of my bladder any longer, I reluctantly excused myself to go to the restroom. On my way back to the patio, I paused and turned toward a table to my right and found a familiar face conspicuously staring at his phone. The table offered a prime vantage point of my date through the windows.

I marched up to the table. “Morgan, I’d ask what you’re doing here, but I suspect I know. Is Finn outside?”

Morgan sighed as he set his phone on the table. “He made me come. I’m sorry.” He had the grace to look apologetic. “You know how he is. He just gets that look on his face, and he talks in circles in that convincing way, and I just can’t help myself. I agree to anything.”

“It’s fine. Might as well rip the bandage off. Do you want to meet him too?”

Morgan rose from his chair with alarming speed. “We agreed that both of us ambushing him wouldn’t be fair.”

“That makes sense. An ambush of one on a first date is totally acceptable,” I said sarcastically.

Once outside, I caught Finn and Remy pulling apart from a hug. As Finn wiped his eyes, Remy noticed us. The unfiltered affection in Remy’s smile made my chest swell.

“Hello, Finn.”

He raised his hands apologetically. “We came for moral support from afar, I promise. But then I saw an opportunity and acted impulsively.”

I draped my arm over Finn’s shoulder. “It’s fine. The same thing happened with his best friend when I picked him up.”

“I need to meet this guy so we can swap stories from the trenches.”

After Morgan got his opportunity to meet Remy, they left us alone. When we sat down, we stared at each other and then broke into laughter.

“If you hadn’t met Henry when you picked me up, I wouldn’t put it past him to do this too. I’m half tempted to text him to come hang out with Finn and Morgan.” He grinned.

“God, they’d love that.”

Remy placed his hand over mine. “We’re really lucky to be surrounded by such great people.”

I turned my hand over and interlocked our fingers. “And we’re really lucky we found each other.”

Remy

We closed the brewery down and then some. One of the owners—who Wilson had gone on a few dates with—told us we could linger while he finished his closing duties. Holy cow. Wilson and I had been there talking

for over six hours, having swapped from beer to soda hours ago. Frankly, I could have stayed another six without batting an eye.

I felt things with Wilson that I'd never experienced. The nerves were there but more effervescent, like the perfect glass of champagne. What excited me most was learning how we were different from each other. His extroverted nature filled in the gaps when my introvertedness wanted to listen. There were hints of things to discover that seemed like they would keep a relationship interesting because I didn't want to date a carbon copy of myself.

Ethan waved as we left with a knowing smile, then we walked back to Wilson's car hand in hand. It was late, but I wasn't ready for the night to end. Judging by Wilson's moseying pace, he felt the same.

When we reached his car, I faced him and used our connected hands to pull him close. "I've been wanting to do this for so long." I cupped his cheek and brushed my thumb across his soft skin. Our breaths were visible in the cool air.

"You and me both."

We met in the middle for a gentle kiss, our lips brushing against each other in slow passes that sent zaps of electricity skittering across my skin. When our tongues touched, Wilson pushed me against the car. I clutched him so I didn't float away as we poured months of anticipation into the kiss. He pulled back and pressed his forehead to mine.

"I like you so much," he confessed.

I gripped his chin and kissed him once more. "I bet I like you more."

God, I loved his giddy smiles.

"It's late, but I'm not ready for the night to end."

I was relieved that we were on the same page. "You could introduce me to Kevin." It was that or tell him I wanted to get him naked, but I wasn't that bold.

"As long as you don't hold his gas against me."

"I would never do such a thing."

He gave me a quick kiss before unlocking his car. We held hands on the drive to his place, and I shook my head as soon as I recognized the house from a listing I'd found last year. The neighborhood was charming, and if I remembered correctly from the rental listing, it had a gorgeous backyard with a covered patio.

"Is the little shed full of spiders?"

There was an adorable crease in his brow when he looked at me after backing into the driveway. Understanding dawned. “Let me guess. You considered renting this place?”

“Henry and I loved it, but we decided to stay in the apartment for another year so I had more money to throw at my student loans and he could visit his girlfriend in London more frequently. He also thought the shed would have too many spiders.”

“There’s firewood in there that I don’t touch because it belongs to the spider kingdom, yes. It takes all my courage to pull the lawnmower out.”

“I’ll be sure to tell him he was right.”

The number of coincidences was dizzying, but it was hard to ignore so many cosmic nudges into each other’s paths.

We entered the house through a garage door that led into the kitchen. I only had a few moments to kick off my shoes before a thundering of nails hitting hardwood echoed through the room as Kevin barreled toward us. He skidded to a stop when he saw me. Kevin’s large head swung between me and Wilson, drool flying. I crouched and opened my arms. Kevin gave me the furry hugs and slobbery kisses I’d wanted.

“Who’s a good boy? You’re such a good boy. You’re so smart for peeing on all those shoes until your daddy decided to adopt you. Who’s the smartest boy?”

Wilson leaned against his kitchen counter and watched us with an expression that had my heart skipping a beat. “I was thinking of throwing an adoption party with Finn and Morgan. I’d love to invite you and Henry.”

“Yeah? That would be great.” I stood and gestured to the sink. “Mind if I wash my hands?”

He shook his head, then let Kevin outside as we washed. I wanted to get more intimately acquainted with Wilson and didn’t want to smell like dog fur and slobber while doing it. After I dried off, his hand found mine as he gave me a tour of the downstairs.

“Want to see the upstairs?”

I licked my lips. “I do.”

His bedroom was cozy like the rest of his house. Plush pillows and a fluffy navy-blue comforter covered his queen-sized bed. Judging by the indent and fur, Kevin had his own side. I turned to make a comment to Wilson, but the words died in my throat at the desperate hunger in his eyes.

The next seconds passed in a blur of movement and need. He pulled me close as my hands searched desperately for the hem of his shirt. I gripped the fabric for stability. Wilson kissed me deep, deliberate, and I wobbled on my feet as blood rushed from my head. His touch set me ablaze.

I drank in each sound Wilson made as I slid my hands under his shirt and reveled in the warmth of his skin. He pushed me back onto his bed and climbed on top of me, his legs slotting between mine. Wilson rolled his hips, teasing me with the friction as I arched into his touch.

Wilson. Here. With me. I couldn't believe we were finally together. The man who'd occupied my fantasies for months was grinding his dick into mine, making me ache with a need I'd never felt before.

"Can I touch you?" he asked as he kissed along my jaw.

"Please."

We fumbled with unbuttoning our pants and working them down our thighs, laughing when we knocked our heads together. The laughter dissolved into kisses and soft moans as he unbuttoned my shirt and pressed kisses along my sensitive skin. I gasped for air as his tongue twirled around my nipple at the same time he wrapped his fingers around my dick. It wasn't the touch that made my mouth go dry. It was him. A man who made me feel safe, who encouraged me to push myself, and who made me feel like the most desired man in the world.

"Look at us," Wilson said with awe once we were fully naked, and he took both of us into his hand and stroked.

I lifted onto my elbows to see over my belly. Wilson leaked more than me, and he spread his precum over our shafts. My mouth watered, and I ached to taste him.

He jerked and strained with each stroke, and I couldn't take my eyes off the way he watched us, his mouth slack with pleasure. The sensation of his shaft rubbing against mine and the pressure of his hand made my toes curl.

"Wilson, *Wil*…" I clutched the comforter as he rubbed his shaft along mine, dragging his cockhead over my balls and pressing into my taint.

He dropped onto his hands on either side of my head, and I stretched up to sweep my tongue into his mouth, eating each of his gasps.

I wanted to feel the weight of his cock on my tongue, but I loved the weight of him on my body. There was so much to experience, to explore, but I couldn't get ahead of myself. We had plenty of time to try everything.

"I won't last long. It's been a while," he admitted, panting into my ear.

“Same for me.” I kneaded his ass as he thrust against me.

He’d told me about his dating celibacy at dinner, but it had been even longer for me. There was no chance of holding out for a respectable amount of time with Wilson, especially not our first time.

“Remy. *Remy*, god. You’re so—” His broken moan exploded the last of my resolve.

“I need to feel you.” I urged him faster.

There was no stopping it now. My muscles ached with the need to release as we panted into each other’s mouths, grinding faster. Wilson stilled as his warm release hit my skin. I followed moments later—the orgasm hitting me so hard I saw stars.

I captured his lips to show him the things it was too soon to say. Wilson was it for me. I knew it in my bones. Our kissing slowed, gentled, until he rolled off me. My hand found his, and we intertwined fingers.

“Next round, I’m going to take my time with you,” he promised.

“What are your thoughts on morning sex?” I asked.

He grinned. “Quite favorable.”

“I’m glad that’s another thing we have in common,” I said.

After cleaning up and climbing into bed, the mattress dipped with Kevin’s weight as he pushed between us and into my heart, right next to the space carved out for Wilson.

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Epilogue

One Year Later

Wilson

"Sweet cheeks, you've got to try this mozzarella. It'll go perfect with the bruschetta." Remy held out a slice of cheese.

My fingers dripped with tomato guts, so I opened my mouth and Remy fed it to me because he was the sweetest boyfriend of all boyfriends.

"Damn. That *is* good. We'll have to go back for more."

Remy grinned as he washed the basil remnants off another cutting board. "I grabbed an extra for us."

"Have I told you how much I love you?"

He placed the cutting board next to me at the kitchen island, then bumped his shoulder against mine. "It's been at least two hours, so I was beginning to wonder if you still did."

I puckered my lips and smiled into his kiss. The kiss deepened, as it often did, and I turned into him. He jumped back.

"Keep those tomato hands away from me. I'm wearing my good shirt, and you know Finn and Morgan will be here early to get quality time with Kev before everyone else shows up."

I pouted. "I hate it when you're right."

"I know." He kissed my cheek, then sliced the mozzarella logs into perfect disks.

We worked efficiently in the kitchen. It was a skill we'd perfected over the past year, which had gotten even easier since we'd bought a house together in May, with plenty of room for both of us to work.

Pooling our resources to buy had been the easy part since, miraculously, Henry's lottery ticket had been a winner. Not a lifestyle-change, new-money riches kind of winner, but enough to split three ways to help us buy a house and help Henry move Emma here and start the expensive citizenship process.

Remy and I were able to make a sizable down payment, which lowered the mortgage to less than what he and I had been paying to rent our own places. Plus, we made a dent in his student loans. It felt like a reward from the universe for leaning into its nudges.

By Halloween last year, he slept at my place most nights. By Christmas, he'd set up his home office in my spare room. Henry had gotten a promotion at work and needed more privacy for calls since he'd started managing people, so it had worked perfectly.

The hard part had been worrying that *other* people thought we were moving too fast. Thankfully, our couples therapist helped us understand the only thing that mattered was what we wanted.

And I knew I wanted Remy by my side for the rest of my life.

As Remy explained to Kevin that he wasn't getting cheese so he wouldn't gas out our end-of-summer garden party, my heart swelled to three times its size. I'd accepted that Kevin loved Remy more than me. Why wouldn't he? Remy was the best person in the world.

How had I gotten so lucky to have this life? To have Remy in it, loving me just as hard as I loved him.

"We're so close to this entire party menu being stuff we grew. Next year, we can get a cow and make our own cheese." Remy batted his lashes at me.

"Trying to sell me on the hobby farm again, huh?"

He'd already sold me. Beyond the giant backyard with perfect light for the garden of our dreams, there was a pasture if we wanted chickens and maybe a goat. But a cow? I wasn't sure. Though I could be convinced to get a Highland cow. I'd already scouted some places to see them if we went to Scotland for our honeymoon.

Remy had no idea that I planned to propose tonight. He also didn't know that I'd accidentally seen the ring he'd hidden in the box of Triscuits.

Joke was on him for thinking I'd never be desperate enough to eat them.

There was a knock at the front door, followed by the door opening.

"Kevie! Where are you, baby? I brought your favorite cheese!"

Remy groaned.

Kevin gave Remy a triumphant side-eye before trotting to the living room.

"Everyone's intimately acquainted with Kevin's gastrointestinal proclivities. You know Henry and your parents are bringing him treats too. Your sister is the only one who won't."

Remy laughed. "You're right, but I think she bought him a new toy."

"How did we get so lucky?" I kissed him.

"I ask myself that every day."

The best decision I'd ever made was letting my feelings for Remy ripen into a more bountiful life than I could've ever dreamed of.

* * *

Want to meet Ethan and the rest of the Tap That Brewery guys?
Check out *Pitcher Perfect*, book one of the Tap That Brewery series, for more low-angst, small-town goodness!

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About the Author

Lee Blair is a queer author and screenwriter from Oregon who writes low angst queer contemporary romance full of sweet, steam, fun, and laughs. She loves writing stories that leave readers grinning, kicking their feet, and feeling emotionally satisfied.

Learn more about Lee's books at LeeBlairBooks.com.

Connect with Lee on Instagram at @LeeBlairBooks or join her Facebook group, Lee Blair's Buddies.

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Fondant Kisses

K.C. Carmine

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About the Author

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Chapter One

Latif AKA Lucy Fondant

The Diva Fever drag concert was going great—The Spicy Gurls delivered, and the crowd cheered and ordered drinks right and left. The booze income would be fantastic for the night. When Mat, the son of the owner of The Golden Handcuffs, noticed how much the parties Lucy hosted were racking up, he gave her even more freedom over the event planner. During the eight years Lucy had worked at the inclusive BDSM club in London, she's come from being a drag queen behind the bar to managing alcohol supply and organising events. When the big shots were out of town, keeping the club in order was up to Lucy.

One of the many things Latif loved about being in drag as Lucy Fondant was showing off his legs.

A sharp, needle-like pain dug right under Latif's shoulder blade. He didn't flinch, but it took an effort not to react to the feeling that something was off with the outfit.

Tonight was as much work as it was fun. Lucy was on the stage introducing the next act, who was in the wings, frantically waving that they needed more time. Which was fine. But it meant Lucy had to fill the gap with something silly to keep the buzzed people engaged.

"This is one of the very few places that celebrates a variety of relationships and embraces synonyms." Lucy strutted along the stage in her ridiculously high black sparkly pumps that went great with the Jessica Rabbit dress she had on. "Are the words 'dad' and 'father' synonyms?" She

turned the mic to the crowd, which replied with a chorus of the affirmative. “And ‘body’ and ‘figure’ are synonyms too, right?” A similar reply followed, with a few snorts here and there from those who’d already caught where this was going. “And yet ‘dad bod’ and ‘father figure’ are not the same.” Laughter and low chuckling erupted as partners elbowed each other. “Here, at the Golden Handcuffs, we don’t judge which one you’re into more.” Lucy glanced stage left, where the young drag queen was indicating her readiness. “Now let’s give a warm welcome to Missy Donna!”

Lucy stepped to the side, making space for the gorgeous performer in a classic Madonna outfit complete with a spiky bra.

Then, she ducked behind the curtain.

“What’s wrong?” Jared’s voice washed over Lucy like warm honey. Her best friend since childhood stood with a worried expression, all six-foot-three of solid muscle emanating nervous energy. His dark navy chinos accentuated his sculpted ass, and the waistcoat over his bare chest let him show off his strong arms. Even the dim light behind the curtain couldn’t dull the gold strands of his shoulder-length hair.

“Fuck. Was it obvious?” Lucy grabbed the back of her dress to tug it down, but it wouldn’t move, and neither did the thing that was poking her.

“Not at all! None of the others noticed.” Jared focused on the fabric. “How can I help?”

Lucy’s brother and ex-wife were in the audience tonight, along with their respective partners. Yet only one person from the gathered would notice a slight malfunction during Lucy’s performance. Her best friend since childhood, Jared.

“Under my left shoulder blade,” she said.

“I see it. The zipper broke and got stuck on your breastplate. It’s pulling so hard it’s broken your skin next to the silicone.”

“That explains the needle pain. Thanks, but I’ll have to go out there and hope for the best.” She tossed back her long, red hair.

“I'll fix it. Where’s your bag?” Jared’s head darted from left to right.

“On the speaker.” Lucy pointed to the side. “But you’ll need to hurry. She’s only doing two songs, so I’ve got eight minutes tops before I have to be out there again.”

“Noted.” Jared found the sewing kit and plasters, then made quick work of protecting Latif’s skin and securing the dress in place. “You’re ready to go.”

Lucy grinned. “Thank you. I could kiss you, but—”

Jared brushed a stray hair off Lucy’s forehead. “Makeup needs to be perfect, I know.”

Lucy turned, and the bottom of the dress caught on a mic stand in the corner, letting out a loud rip.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Lucy sighed. “I now have under five minutes to change.”

“Just tell me what to do.” Jared lifted the hem of the dress and followed Lucy into the dressing room.

“Wait a sec,” she said and popped her head through the cracked-open door. “Is everyone decent? I’m bringing Jared in.”

The gossip circle all turned to the door. Lucy rolled her eyes. “I have no time to change, so he’s going to help me. Jared, you know Titti, Longlash, and Brad.” She waved a hand at her friends and proceeded to shimmy out of the dress. “The rest can introduce themselves.”

“It’s nice to see you up close, *Jared*,” Titti simpered, then gave Lucy an eyebrow wiggle as she continued brushing the wig in her hands. Her makeup and dress were still in place, even though she’d come off the stage half an hour ago. Her husband was sitting in the audience, so she was changing to stay at the club for the rest of the evening.

The remaining three queens twittered their names, and Jared acknowledged everyone, nodding in that frenetic way he always did when he was trying to remember a barrage of instructions.

“Help me get out of this thing.” Lucy wrestled with the broken zipper. “Then hand me the golden dress.” Lucy pointed to a hanger in the corner where a sequined beauty shone in the dressing room lights.

Lucy was as much Jared's creation as she was Latif's. After all, they'd dreamt her up together way back when they were teenagers. And now, even after years apart, the two men easily fell into their old rhythm—no pleasantries needed.

Jared had always followed instructions well and listened intently, which made him a great Dom and gave him instant popularity with the subs and staff alike. Including Lucy.

Given their innate power to communicate with nothing but a gesture and a glance, Lucy was ready to go back on stage with ten seconds to spare. Her off-the-shoulder gold-sequined dress glimmered in the stage light, moving flawlessly with Lucy’s sure but careful steps. She knew all too well that a

floor-length dress could become a death trap with one step on the hem at the wrong moment.

Love you, Lucy mouthed, blowing Jared a kiss, then faced the audience.

"Closing the night will be yours truly." Lucy curtsied to roaring applause. She nodded at Mark, the music supervisor, and began singing Nina Simone's *Sinnerman*, followed by *Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood*, ending with *Man! I Feel Like a Woman* by Shania Twain.

When Latif and his brother Ernesto were little, Ernie signed up for all the computer and gaming classes he could get his hands on, while Latif learned to sing and dance every spare moment of the day.

It had paid off for both of them, as they were lucky to use their skills at work.

Applause erupted, and Lucy wrapped up the evening with a joke, pulling several members of the audience from the first row to participate, then encouraged everyone to visit the bar.

As she stepped off the stage amidst roars of applause, she found Jared waiting for her, wearing a smile warm enough to melt even the coldest of hearts.

A slew of mixed feelings overtook Lucy. She was elated that Jared was here, helping her, supporting her, and being the best friend he'd always been.

Except when he'd left for seven years and returned only a few months ago.

He left mere months after Latif's amicable divorce from Sadie, and only a week after he and Latif had slept together for the first time. Latif had been furious about his leaving, but couldn't stay mad long when Jared kept sending adorable postcards from his travels.

Then he'd texted: "If the cards annoy you, I can stop."

"Don't stop." Latif had still been miffed, but being apart wouldn't erase years of friendship, trips together, and being each other's wingman at parties. Jared had been there when Latif finally kissed the boy he'd been crushing on, then helped him romance a girl at a party; he'd been at the club when Latif met his future wife.

Jared's openness and confidence in his own skin had enchanted Latif from the moment he'd seen the twelve-year-old boy moving next door. But all the time spent with openly pansexual Latif and his queer friends had

never made a dent in Jared, who had remained steadfastly straight as the pole supporting the rainbow flag.

He’d been the first to the hospital when Sadie gave birth to her and Latif’s twins, and had brought a cake and a large bottle of whisky to drink with Latif and Sadie when they both decided they’d get a divorce. They still loved each other, but they worked much better as friends than as a couple. The same as Latif and Jared always had.

Until that had changed.

One fateful night after a few drinks, they had rolled into bed together. Latif had still been in drag as Lucy until his clothes had come off, leaving only a wig and makeup on. Jared had been eager but gentle, and they’d looked into each other’s eyes as they’d climaxed.

That pivotal moment had felt like the beginning of something new, or the end of everything they had.

It had been neither, but Jared had left soon after. Jared’s cute postcards had quickly turned into video calls, which went from every few days, to daily, to twice a day—regardless of what time zone Jared had been in.

Now Jared was back. Not just in Latif's life, but at his work too.

He’d asked for a position as a Dom at the Golden Handcuffs and, after presenting vetting paperwork from clubs and Doms from all over the globe, he got the job. That was the only thing that had changed about him. The absolute sunshine of a man made of solid muscle and sun-kissed blond waves flowing around his face had never told Latif that he was into BDSM until he’d announced his plans to travel the world.

But where did this leave Latif now? He had no idea where they stood. They desperately needed to talk, but the mere thought of it filled Latif with dread.

“Do you need help getting out of that dress?” Jared’s voice brought Lucy back to the dressing room where she’d been staring into the mirror at his crooked boob.

“Yeah.”

Jared was a pro at assisting him. After all, he’d been doing it since Latif discovered drag in year six.

“I’ll hang around with the fam for a bit, but I want to go home early,” Latif said. “Do you have any plans tonight?”

Jared met his eyes in the mirror. “Not unless you invite me over.”

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Chapter Two

Latif AKA Lucy Fondant

"Did you bake a cake and bring it to the club?" Latif lifted his makeup-free eyebrow at the box Jared was holding while standing in the otherwise empty dressing room.

"Yes. I wanted to give it to you to celebrate your fantastic performance when you'd be knackered after it." He leaned against the frame of the dressing room door like a hero from a romantic comedy poster. "I stored it in the club's kitchen so no one would find it in the staff room fridge."

"Really? Rowland let you into *his kitchen*?"

"Yup." Jared set the wrapped cake on the dresser.

Latif shook his head. "Everyone loves you here already."

He packed his platforms next to the pumps in the side pocket of his pink-striped hockey gear bag. It fit all his drag necessities and was roomy enough for three wardrobe changes.

Jared spread his arms. "What can I say? I'm lovable."

Yes, he was. And that had been Latif's problem since the first time Jared offered him his megawatt smile. "Will you help me eat it at my place?"

Jared grinned. "Yup."

"Let me shower and change, and I'll be ready to go."

Latif headed to the performers' bathroom. Even when he wore drag for bartending at The Golden Handcuffs, he rarely left at the end of the day in full drag. He could handle himself against homophobes if things got physical, but attracting attention outside of the club was never his goal.

With the tense political climate in the UK, even London's queerest neighbourhoods were no longer safe, but a tall bloke with short-cropped hair and a large bag wouldn't stand out, even if he was mixed-race.

Their long legs ate the distance to Latif's place in twenty minutes, and they entered his three-bedroom flat.

"Make yourself at home." Latif parked his bag by the door. "The plates are—"

"I remember where everything is." Jared said, as if he hadn't been gone for seven long years. "I'll cut the cake."

Latif pulled out two beers from the fridge "to balance the sugar", and got the forks. Jared went to the living room with their plates and set them on the coffee table in front of the sofa. His being in Latif's home again brought back memories of the night they'd moved beyond friendship.

"I'll be back." Jared headed to the bathroom, giving Latif unnecessary time to think.

Oh shit. He'd left his dildo in the shower. Latif jumped to his feet, then plopped back down. It was too late anyway. And it wasn't anything Jared wouldn't have seen before.

Jared's smirk was telling when he returned to the sofa.

"I'm assuming you saw it."

"The dildo stuck to the wall? Yeah." Jared took a seat next to Latif and dug into his cake with a fork.

"Sorry, the girls won't be coming over until Saturday, so I haven't cleaned up yet."

"I'm not shocked. You left much worse in our shared bathroom at uni."

"Shut up!" Latif poked his cake, his stomach unnerved by the familiarity of their banter even after so many years. "You know, some days it's like you never left me." He let the words hang for a long moment, allowing them to sink in as he gathered his thoughts. "But then I have to remind myself that you're actually in the same time zone now. That I can text you and you'll reply. You can come over. I can actually be there for you."

Jared swallowed a bite and turned serious. "You don't need to make space for me in your life."

"That space was always there. It stayed empty when you were gone." Latif took a sip from his beer bottle, letting the bitter liquid tickle his taste buds.

Jared released a long breath. “I’m sorry. I had to.”

“I get it. But I also had a right to miss my best friend.”

“Fair.”

Latif had so many more questions. But he wanted to enjoy the evening, not interrogate Jared. He ate a forkful of the cake and a balanced sweetness exploded on his tongue. “This is delicious.”

“Thanks. I picked up a skill or two when I was travelling.”

Like wrenching orgasms out of subs at the club. “I can tell.”

“How was the twins’ school performance yesterday?”

“They both did great.” Latif sat back, recalling the event with a smile. “Chloe broke the sword during her passionate monologue, but the armour survived until the end. Matilda had everyone enthralled, and now she wants to wear medieval dresses every day.”

“She’s eight. She should be allowed to.”

“On the weekends, yes. But the strict uniform policy is killing their individuality at school.” Latif sighed. “You know how it is.”

“I remember you wearing a skirt to class and arguing with the teachers that it was part of a uniform and that they shouldn’t be gendered.”

“I stand by that statement.”

“You were a sassy twelve-year-old. And so brave.” Jared patted Latif’s knee.

“I had you so I didn’t need to care what everyone else thought of me.” Latif bumped Jared’s shoulder with his. “I took some videos if you want to see them. After all, Uncle Jared helped them practise the lines.”

“Of course.”

To his credit, Jared had never neglected his role in the twins’ lives. His video calls and thoughtful gifts had been constant during his absence, to the point where the girls had grown up knowing their uncle for as long as they could remember.

“They asked if you’d come next time. Chloe has her karate tournament on Wednesday, and Matilda’s ballet performance is on Friday.”

“I’d love to. I wasn’t sure if you’d want me there. Or if it would make it weird.”

Latif took Jared’s hand. “We would all love for you to attend. Sadie is bringing Barb with her, and uncles are also allowed as long as we buy you a ticket.”

“Thank you.” Jared pulled Latif into a hug.

Latif relaxed into his friend's embrace. "For what?"

"For letting me back into your life."

"You were always here, just not in person." Latif inhaled the scent of Jared's minty shampoo and fought not to nuzzle his face into Jared's neck. He wasn't sure whether Jared regretted their first and only hookup all those years ago, and he wasn't about to push for another one now. Not unless Jared initiated it.

"Now I'm happy I can finally see you on stage live again." Jared pulled away, showing off his sunshine smile.

"And save me from a wardrobe malfunction."

"And watch you be amazing out there. And hot as hell." Jared fanned his face with his hand.

Latif smacked his chest and snorted. "Shut up."

"About you? Never. You were so sexy and confident tonight. A wet dream."

"Your dream?" Latif lifted an eyebrow.

Jared swallowed, turning serious. "Yes. You're my dream." He kissed Latif's knuckles then up his arm, pausing at his neck. "Do you mind?"

Latif's pulse jumped, and he slid his hand into Jared's silky hair at his nape. "Not at all."

Jared placed a kiss behind Latif's ear, then his cheek, and hovered nose-to-nose with Latif.

Kiss me.

Would they jeopardise decades of friendship? Last time they hooked up, Jared ran away and didn't return for seven years. Every one of which Latif simultaneously regretted their night together and remembered it as the best sex he'd ever had. Not because of what they'd done, but because it happened with Jared, his best friend and the man he'd been in love with his entire life.

Latif closed the gap and linked their lips together. Heat spread through him in a way that coming home on a rainy day felt when someone you loved waited for you there.

Jared hissed and pulled away. "My hair's caught on your shirt."

"Fuck. Let me." He unwound Jared's hair from his top button. "There." Sitting up straighter, Latif kicked the table, sending the bottled beer rattling.

Jared caught one just in time, but the other toppled over, spilling the leftover contents on Latif's jeans.

“The carpet is fine. But your clothes need a wash.” Jared knelt on the floor between Latif’s parted knees and looked up. He slid his hands slowly up Latif’s thighs to the zipper of his jeans.

“What are you doing?” Latif fully expected Jared to say something about saving his clothes.

“Attempting to blow you.”

Well, okay.

Eagerness mixed with dread. *Was it a good idea?* “We should talk.”

“After.”

“But—”

“We will. But now, lift your ass up so I can get rid of your trousers. Would you do that for me, doll?”

Latif nodded, heat swirling through his body. He needed Jared’s touch more than an explanation right now. “Yes.”

“Very good.” Jared made quick work of stripping Latif completely and taking his shirt off in the process. “Now link your hands behind your head and don’t move.”

“Okay.” Latif’s voice came out breathless. Being naked in front of Jared was nothing new, but having his friend’s face so close to his cock was. The sight was beautiful, and straight out of Latif’s dreams.

Jared traced kisses up Latif’s thigh. “You taste of beer.”

“Asshole.” Latif snorted, parting his knees wider.

“You like it.”

“I like many things that are not good for me. Like that cake you brought.”

“Don’t be so harsh. It can be useful too.” Jared dipped a finger in the frosting and spread it over the tip of Latif’s cock. Meeting Latif’s gaze, he licked the underside of his cock and wrapped his lips over the head.

Latif inhaled sharply and gripped the backrest behind his head. “Fuck, Jared. So good.”

Jared sucked with finesse, as if he was savouring it, swirling his tongue on the way up then sucking back down. His golden waves bounced along with his movements, falling off his shoulders and tickling Latif’s bare thighs.

Moaning, Latif slid his fingers into Jared’s hair.

Jared let go of Latif’s cock and sat back on his heels. “So you don’t want me to continue?”

“What?”

“Hands behind your head.” The command in his tone weakened Latif’s knees. Thankfully, he was already sitting.

Latif was far from new to submitting. He’d even taken part in sessions at the club, most famously with Master Kage, but this was different.

Being with Jared was personal, and the added layer of his commanding tone filled a hole in Latif’s needs he hadn’t known was there.

Dutifully, Latif linked his hands behind his head.

Jared’s smirk was diabolical. He gripped Latif by the calves and pulled, positioning him on his back, then swivelled him sideways on the couch with his legs up in the air.

Latif gasped and released a giggle. Even though he wasn’t sure what this seemingly casual hookup meant to Jared, he wasn’t about to put a stop to it. He’d been wanting Jared to take him hard and fast at each party they’d gone to, and slow and gentle after every cosy evening of watching movies. For nearly two decades.

He had no courage to rob himself of whatever Jared would do next.

Which happened to be licking along Latif’s ass crack.

“Holy fucking shit!” Latif grasped the armrest behind his head and held onto it for dear life.

“Mmhmm,” Jared murmured, then slid his tongue over Latif’s pucker, circling it.

Latif didn’t hold his moaning in, letting his voice fill the room. Jared moved up to suck his sac while teasing Latif’s hole with his finger.

Fuck me, Jared.

The words were threatening to spill out of him, so he bit his lip until he tasted blood.

“Do you have lube around?” Jared kissed the inside of Latif’s thigh.

“Use the cake for all I care.” It was far from a safe lubricant, but he’d clean up thoroughly later.

“I was hoping you’d say that.” Jared grinned and dipped his fingers into the cake in a move so erotic that Latif would never look at a cake the same way again.

Jared’s expression turned focused as he spread soft cream over Latif’s pucker: the master baker decorating his cake.

And he wasn’t even a fucking baker, though his sweet creations were exceptional. Not a shocker. He’d always excelled at everything he put his

mind to. Which apparently now was giving head. Jared wrapped his lips around Latif's cock and sucked with a balance of eagerness and skill. Skill? Jared had been gone for seven years and clearly practiced giving head during that time. Latif was expecting to feel jealous, but didn't. Not when Jared was sucking all the problems of the world along with Latif's soul through his dick.

Jared's cream-coated fingers still teased Latif's rim. Latif rolled his hips slightly, just enough to send Jared a message that he received, logged and wasted no time executing.

Jared released Latif's cock. "Open up for me, doll." His low voice was a balm and a command at once.

Latif released a breath and let Jared's finger in, then another. They moved inside him slowly, deliberately, stretching him enough to drive him crazy as Jared returned to sucking his cock.

"I'm coming, Jared. Move or I'll—Ah, fuck."

Jared kept going, pulling a shattering orgasm from Latif by the sheer force of his skill.

Latif shot into Jared's mouth over and over, his body tensing then dissolving into a trembling mess.

Jared released Latif's spent dick, then kissed Latif's hip and belly button.

With a flushed face and red lips, he looked like the flirty, carefree teenager Latif used to know. Then his expression grew heated even more as he raked his gaze over Latif's body.

His other hand was inside his opened jeans, working his cock.

"Do you need help with that?" Latif asked, eager to reciprocate.

"Stay like this." Jared swallowed. "You're perfect."

Whoa. Okay. "Let me see." Latif nodded at the show in Jared's boxers.

Jared pushed his jeans to mid-thigh and moved his hand in long strokes, flicking his thumb over the head, smearing the impressive amount of pre-cum over it.

Latif wanted to taste it, to suck Jared off, to feel him shatter.

Jared scooped cake from his plate and brought it to his dick, spreading it with movements that grew more frantic with every second. He grunted between short, jagged breaths, then tensed. In a superhero-fast move, he grabbed a plate from the table and came all over the cake, decorating it with his release.

Latif lifted his eyebrow, holding the grin in. “I’m questioning now what was in that cake in the first place.”

Jared dipped a finger into the soft cum-splattered dessert and brought it to his lips. “I like my icing with protein.”

Latif barked out a laugh. “Shut up.”

“I thought you wanted to talk.”

“Fuck you. Now I need a nap. Come here and hug me.”

“Like old times?” Jared set the plate aside and pulled himself up to the couch next to Latif.

“Yes.”

“But can I kiss you this time?”

Latif’s breath hitched, his heart still pounding after the orgasm. “Yes.”

Jared leaned over and linked their lips in a soft kiss, then one more. He then nipped Latif’s jaw and rested his face in the crook of Latif’s neck.

The kisses were new and so was the sex, but wrapping his arms around Jared and holding him close was like breathing—easy and necessary to survive.

They fell asleep cuddling, but made their way to Latif’s bed in the middle of the night and drifted off in each other’s arms.

In the morning, Jared was gone. But the note he left spoke volumes.

Thank you for a great evening. You’re beautiful even when you’re asleep.

Below it was one tiny, solitary little heart.

Latif shook his head. “What are you playing at, Jared?”

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Chapter Three

Jared AKA Best Friend Turned Lover

Despite being Sunday, Jared had to wake up early to meet with Jamie, a leather artist known for his floggers and harnesses, at the London Alternative Market.

He hated leaving Latif while he was still asleep, but his best friend needed the rest. The meeting with Jamie resulted in Jared leaving with an armload of sex toys and commissioning a custom leather vest and shorts, with a promise to order more.

The flat he was renting was in the heart of Camden, which gave him access to the wonders of the market there, but the place itself needed serious freshening up. He would be ignoring that fact since he was mid-search for a modest end-of-terrace house to buy, saving his renovating energy for his own place.

He organised the morning's bounty into boxes and went through the emails and forms from The Golden Handcuffs. Every BDSM club had its own rules about how much freedom it would give its Doms when it came to the scenes happening at the club. Jared had discussed the options with Jagoda, the owner, then with Kage, the rockstar of all Doms at TGH. He had his strict system and had free rein of utilising it.

Jared had to use the official club website and email to vet and pick the subs for his scenes, which suited him perfectly. His next shift was tomorrow, during which he'd demonstrate flogging and be open to casual

play in the designated area. Closing the laptop, he set it aside on the table in front of him and grabbed his phone.

He loved his job and the community that had welcomed him with open arms. But more importantly, he was happy to be back and close to Latif. He meant more to him than anything else in the world.

He sent him a quick text:

JARED:
What are you up to?

The reply arrived within three minutes:

LATIF:
About to try on a new outfit for Lucy.

JARED:
Need help?

LATIF:
Yours? Always.

Jared stood up and grabbed his keys and wallet from the bowl on the coffee table.

JARED:
Mocha frappuccino?

The cafe on the way to Latif's place served a great pick-me-up, and Latif had a sweet tooth for coffee as well as cake. Jared grabbed the cake that was sitting in his fridge and headed for the door.

LATIF:
Are you asking if I want coffee orgasm in my mouth?

Jared snorted and typed back, sliding his feet into his trainers.

JARED:
I'll be there in 30min

LATIF:
Love you

JARED:
Love you too

“Coffee and cake?” Latif grinned, holding the door open for Jared to come in. He had his red-haired wig on and impeccable makeup, but was wearing only boxer briefs, showing off his leanly muscled body. “You want something from me.”

Probably too much. “Yes, for you to forgive me for leaving so early in the morning.” *And for you to kiss me again, and let me suck you off, and be with me.*

Latif narrowed his eyes. “Come on, I need help with this corset.”

Jared put the cake in the fridge and ventured into the third bedroom that Latif had converted into one big wardrobe and makeup station. He was touching up his eyebrows, sitting at a dressing table with a mirror that faced the window. Sunlight streamed through it and onto Latif’s face, bathing him in an angelic glow.

“You look gorgeous.” *Can I kiss you?*

“I’m half-naked and this wig is not properly styled. I’ll have to ask Titti to fix it. But thanks.” He turned his head from side to side, comparing his eyebrows. “The natural light in this room is great, but only on the days we actually see the sun in between the rain.”

“You complained about it when we hauled the dressing table in.” A little over seven years ago, Jared had driven with Latif from flat to flat looking for a good place for Latif to buy after his divorce. He’d needed one bedroom for himself, one for the girls, and space for his drag clothes. When they’d seen a flat that could use some TLC and fresh paint but with enough room, Latif had put down the deposit.

And Jared had been hit with the realisation that he’d wanted to have a place in Latif’s new flat. Not to change their friendship, but to add to it.

They’d kissed, then slept together.

But back then, Jared hadn’t been ready for what might come next.

He was ready now.

Jared had helped Latif prepare for shows a million times over the years, but now he let himself see his best friend through a new lens. He understood his attraction to Latif, and drank in the sight of every ridge and muscle in Latif’s arms and back, as well as the curve of his ass.

Latif turned around and caught him looking. “I will need a breastplate to try on the dress.”

“Which one do you want?” Jared looked at the four mannequins adorned with silicone boobs.

“Over the head will fuck up my hair and makeup, so I’ll go with the corset.”

Jared took off the piece that was a brown, skin-toned top with a sparkly finish on every edge and held it up. “This one?”

“Yes.” Latif stood up, clasped the silicone to his chest with one hand and lifted his long crimson hair up with the other. “Can you do the back?”

“On it.” The piece fastened at Latif’s nape and from mid-back down, creating an illusion of him having ample boobs and black straps from a sparkly dress or a top.

Latif adjusted it and rolled his shoulders, then pulled a black petticoat over his boxers, followed by a red satin skirt. “Now, the corset.” Latif held a crimson corset with black detailing to his chest and Jared tied it up. The piece matched in colour with the straps from the breastplate, completing the transformation into Lucy.

“That’s for the vampire night next week, but if it’s comfortable enough, I’ll wear it for regular bar shifts at work too.” Latif twirled slowly, letting the skirt flow. “How does it look together?”

“Fuck, you look so hot.” Jared didn’t even try to hide the awe in his tone. “But the outfit is great too.”

Latif tossed his fake hair over his shoulder. “Why, thank you.”

“Good enough to eat.” *To lick and worship.* Fuck, he was losing it.

“Like your cake.”

“Exactly.” Jared met Latif’s gaze in the full-length mirror on the wall.

“What is it this time?” Latif slipped his feet into insanely high pumps and strutted around the room.

“A rainbow gateau.” A list of ideas unrolled in Jared’s mind like a scroll the length of a room.

“I know this look. You’re up for something fun. I’m assuming it’s not a keg stand this time.”

Jared snorted, recalling their wild times from back in the day. “We’re not nineteen anymore.” He leaned against a chest of drawers. “The list of parties you’ve organised at the club includes cake sitting. Did you ever participate?”

Latif smirked. “No. I’d need practice first.”

“I have no plans.”

“Other than watch me sit on your cake?” Latif put his hands on his hips.

“Would you?”

“Wouldn’t it be a waste?”

He couldn’t back away now. “Not if I lick it off you.”

Latif closed his eyes and released a shuddering breath. “Fuck, Jared.”

“And I’ll make a new one for you later. I promise.”

Latif hesitated, swallowed, and took two long strides, stopping inches from Jared.

He searched Jared’s face with his gaze, silently asking what the fuck they were doing. Neither of them gave a reply.

Unless a heated kiss counted as one.

Latif’s lips were soft on Jared’s, but not hesitant. Jared slipped his tongue into his best friend’s mouth and searched for answers. Would they work together as a couple? Would Latif want that?

He’d ask soon, but now he wanted to spend a fun and sexy evening with the man he’d tried to fall out of love with for seven years.

And failed.

Latif pulled away and licked his bottom lip.

“Good thing I didn’t tuck.” Latif wiggled out of his skirt, letting it pool to the floor, then slid his boxers off, releasing his semi-erect cock. He liked the idea too.

Jared swallowed. Would it be weird to ask Latif to stay in drag? “It’s not going to be too messy?”

“The floor panels in the living room are waterproof and easy to clean. This flat has seen a party or two.” Latif winked. “Do you want me in drag for this?”

“Would you mind?”

“I wanted to test the clothes. Let’s do it. Would you like a performance or—?”

“Just you. Whatever you feel like.” Jared had been the first audience for every show Latif had prepared for since they were teenagers. But this was very different.

“I feel like Latif. But I’m wearing make-up and a corset.” He stepped out of the boxers, leaving the corset and everything above the waist on.

Jared nodded, understanding that this was Latif dressing up, not Lucy. To him, that made perfect sense, and Latif knew it. “I’ll bring the cake.”

Jared had every session with a sub planned out and scheduled at the club. But with Latif, he wanted to go with what they felt like in the moment. Hopefully, Latif would feel the same.

By the time he’d been to the fridge and back, Latif had moved the coffee table and couch to the side, making space in the middle of the room.

“I could have helped you.”

In three-inch heels, Latif was Jared’s height, even slightly taller. He met his gaze with ease, conveying his eagerness to play with a sprinkle of something else. Not hesitance. Worry?

Latif kissed Jared's cheek, the way he always had, then paused, tilted his head and kissed Jared on the lips. Was it possible to have butterflies in your stomach when your best friend kissed you?

Yes. Yes, it was.

“Save your muscles for when you carry me to the shower after this.” Latif smirked, taking the cake off Jared’s hands. He got rid of the box and inspected the flat cake board. “One more thing.” He put a piece of double-sided tape at the bottom of the board and set the dessert in the middle of the floor.

“Wait.” Jared took Latif’s hand and knelt in front of him. He looked up the corset to Latif’s impeccable make-up, then took his cock into his mouth.

It was half-hard and thickening with every lick and suck.

“Fuck me, Jared, holy shit.” Latif brushed Jared’s hair back and watched him with parted lips. “You suck cock like it’s your vocation.”

Jared released his dick with a pop. “I just wanted a taste.”

Latif nodded. “A minute longer and I’d give you a bit more to taste.” He took a step back and put his heeled foot on Jared’s chest. “Sit back.”

He wanted to lick his leg, but he remained on the floor, leaning against the couch.

Latif looked gorgeous in his flowy red hair, elegant corset, and with the most pert, round ass Jared had ever seen. He knelt with his legs on either side of the cake and tossed his hair over his shoulder.

“Here goes your cake.” He lowered himself slowly, squishing only the top layer.

“You’re improving it.” Jared pulled his T-shirt over his head and tossed it aside. It was hot in here. Latif’s fault. “How does it feel?”

“Cold. It’s getting into every crevice.” Latif wiggled his ass down, burying his balls into the cake and resting his cock over it. “The texture is soft and creamy.” He lifted himself off, scooped a piece of messy cake onto two fingers and offered it to Jared.

Jared dropped to all fours and licked Latif’s fingers clean, tasting his own cake. He met Latif’s gaze and sucked, then let the digits out with a pop.

“Let me lick it off you.” He crawled behind Latif and guided him by the hips to present his ass to him.

Latif’s entire backside was smeared with white cream and colourful layers from the cake. Jared slid his hands into the dessert that covered Latif’s hamstrings and licked along the crease between Latif’s pert cheeks. He got a mouthful of cake, but didn’t get through to the centre he aimed for. Now his face must have looked as if he’d taken part in a pie-throwing competition. He dug his fingers under the layer of dessert, moving it out of the way, and circled Latif’s rim.

“Tease.” Latif rocked back, impatient.

Jared grabbed him by the thighs and buried his face between his cheeks, reaching his hole with his tongue.

Latif groaned and thrust his ass at Jared. Fuck, he was eager.

That makes two of us.

Jared lapped with need, relishing the texture of Latif’s pucker and the taste of his cake. He wiggled his tongue into Latif’s ass, and Latif rewarded him by moaning his name. Jared knew he’d gladly eat him out for hours, until his jaw cramped, just to hear the noises he was making.

“Jared, ah!” Latif cried out. “Fuck me.”

Jared wiped his face with the back of his hand. It didn’t help much. “Can I really?”

“I just fucking asked, didn’t I?” Latif reached into the bag on the floor and threw a condom over his shoulder.

Jared snorted and caught the packet mid-air.

“Lube?”

“Is the icing not enough?”

Jared chuckled. “It does nicely for ass eating, but not for penetration, no.”

“Fine. There’s a bottle in the bowl on the top shelf there.” Latif pointed to a packed bookcase with several decorations in front of the books.

Jared scrambled to his feet, slipped on the cake, but regained his balance, catching himself on the bookcase. Thankfully, it was secured to the wall. The black decorative bowl had an inscription rewarding Latif Grant for running a kink pride event that gathered the most money for charity.

Jared reached into it and pulled out a bottle of lube, poppers, and condoms. He kept the first and tossed the rest back.

“I need to kiss you.” Jared dropped to the floor and kissed Latif briefly.

He returned the kiss but pushed Jared away. “I know where your mouth has been.”

“You’ve had worse.”

Latif snorted. “Fuck you for being right.”

Jared kissed Latif’s shoulder, then his hip at the edge of the corset, then crawled behind him. He licked Latif’s rim once more, then dripped lube over it, spreading it with his fingers, pressing for entry.

“That’s it, doll. Let me in.” His words came out low, sounding as desperate as he felt. He breached Latif’s hole and spread the lube inside, sliding in and out.

Latif whimpered, reached behind himself and flicked cake at Jared. “Don’t make me ask you again.”

Jared licked the cream off his face and grinned. He slid his fingers out, slipped on the condom, and repositioned, teasing Latif’s rim with the tip of his cock. “What if I want to hear it?”

Latif groaned. “Fuck me, Jared, or I swear—”

Jared breached Latif’s hole, interrupting his threat. “What would you do?” Jared thrust an inch in and stopped. With his dick halfway in Latif’s hole, he traced the stretched rim with his fingertip.

“I’d flip you on the cake and straddle you.”

Yes, *please*. “Promises, promises.” Jared pulled out, then slid back in further, rocking his hips until he was fully seated.

“Yes, don’t stop.”

“You take me so well. I could stay like this for an hour.” Jared laughed inwardly at his bald-faced lie. He knew his dick was liable to spill into Latif any second if he lost control.

“Don’t you fucking dare!” Latif glared over his shoulder.

“How do you want it then?” Jared was ready for hard and fast, but he’d love to prolong this moment too.

“Wreck me.” Latif grabbed a cushion from the couch and set it on the floor at his chest level. “You can cuddle me later, but now show me what you got. I need to come now.”

“As you wish.” Jared spread Latif’s cheeks, smearing the cake there, then gripped his hips. “Stroke yourself for me, doll.”

He let go of his restraint and fucked into his best friend like he wanted to ruin him for anyone else. Because Jared was already done for. Now that he had Latif again, he wouldn't be able to let him go again.

Jared's body slapped against Latif's round cheeks, sending ripples through them that caused the cake to splatter around. His orgasm built fast, curling inside him in waves of heat.

"Latif, you feel so good. Too good. Oh, God."

Latif was stroking himself with one hand and holding onto the cushion with the other. "I'm coming. Ah, fuck!" His body shuddered, and his cum joined the cakey mess on the floor.

Jared dug his fingers into Latif's muscled ass and stilled, letting his cock pulse inside Latif's tight channel. He shuddered and leaned over to kiss Latif's shoulder. *I love you so fucking much.*

"Next time I make a cake for you to sit on, I'll put a dildo in the middle," Jared said, stroking Latif's hip.

"I have next weekend off." Latif squeezed his ass muscles around Jared's deflating cock.

Jared hissed and pulled out, holding onto the condom. "I'll make sure I do too." He'd just come, but watching Latif's hole closing made him want to lick into it again. "And I'll bring cake lube."

"It's popular at parties." Latif rolled to his side and grimaced at the cake-squishing sound.

"Now, what was all that about cuddles?" Jared grabbed a handful of cake, slapped it on his chest and lunged at Latif, who scrambled away with a squeal.

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Chapter Four

Latif AKA Lucy Fondant

"I have to do this, but I'll be back when I'm ready."

"I hate you. But I won't stop you." Latif sighed. "Have a safe flight."

Latif startled from his recurring dream and found Jared next to him in his bed. That heartbreaking moment from seven years ago had been plaguing his nights even more often since Jared's return. Weird. He was here now—so close, with his arm over Latif, his warmth seeping through Latif's skin.

This is everything I wanted.

And yet an unsettling feeling lay heavy in Latif's stomach. He turned in Jared's arms, letting the duvet slip to their waists. Jared smelled of Latif's shower gel and a future that Latif wasn't sure was in Jared's plans.

The light streaming from under the partially-lifted curtain played on Jared's peaceful expression. He wasn't having a nightmare like Latif. He blinked his eyes open and a corner of his lips lifted in a lazy, sleepy smile.

Fuck, he was beautiful. He always had been. But he'd always been so... unavailable. Were things really different now?

Jared traced his knuckles over Latif's cheek in the softest of touches, sending shivers through him.

Surely Jared didn't think this was just a casual fuck between friends. Did he?

Latif was well used to casual hookups. Whether it was sex at the club, or a booty call with someone from an app, he knew the score. But Jared was his ride or die. If Latif was going to have his heart ripped out, he needed to know now.

Jared licked his bottom lip and traced his fingertips over Latif's ear.

"I love you," he said in a groggy voice.

"I love you too. Always have."

They'd said these words to each other since high school. Their friendship conquered all. They knew they'd always have each other's backs, no matter what.

Jared frowned. "No."

"No?" Latif startled, dread filling his bones. *Here we go.*

"I mean…" Jared sat up, exposing his distractingly chiselled abs. "Latif, I'm in love with you."

The sick feeling in his stomach ebbed, but he didn't settle yet. Latif closed his eyes and let the words wash over him. The sentence he'd dreamt of hearing for more years than he cared to admit.

"Since when? What changed?" Latif propped himself up on his elbow.

Jared pursed his lips. "Everything and nothing."

"That's the best non-reply I've ever heard." He couldn't hide the annoyance in his tone. Well, this was fucking difficult.

"I can explain. Can I make coffee first?" Jared rubbed his eyes and rolled his shoulders.

"I want to say no," Latif quipped. "But I think we both need it right now."

"I'll be right back."

By the time Latif finished his morning bathroom routine, Jared had returned with two mugs.

Coffee in bed would be romantic, if only Latif's stomach weren't in knots.

"Thanks," he said, accepting the mug. *I don't want to lose you.*

They sat on the bed wearing only underwear, but Latif felt more naked than ever.

"Is it Lucy you want?" Latif tightened his hands on his mug. He'd been with men who wanted only his drag alter-ego in bed and nothing to do with Latif. It was hard to believe Jared would think that, but he had to know for sure.

“No. Well, yes. But not just her.”

Latif’s hands trembled. “Our first time was when I was in drag, and last night—”

“Latif, please.” Jared took Latif’s coffee and set it aside. “I love all of you.”

“We can’t ignore the elephant in the room forever. Why are you back? Why are you here?”

Jared reached out but retreated, giving Latif space. Smart man.

“Ask me why I left in the first place,” he said evenly, but he looked as anxious as Latif felt.

“Don’t be smart with me now. Tell me.” Latif bore his gaze into Jared.

“When you got married, and I was standing there in my best man suit, I finally placed the feeling inside me.” Jared’s words came out calm, collected. As if he couldn’t feel the storm between them. “I wanted to be the one holding your hand.”

“What?” Latif squeaked.

“It hit me like a ton of bricks, but it was too late to do anything. Sadie was so good for you. She made you smile. Then you had the twins, and I was so happy for you. You know I adore the girls.”

Latif’s head swam. This made no sense. “But we divorced, and you still left. I thought for years it was because we fucked. Once.”

Jared shook his head. “It only confirmed what I suspected then.”

“Enlighten me.” Latif crossed his arms.

“That I wasn’t ready. I wasn’t good enough.”

“Bullshit excuse.” Latif forced his voice not to break.

Jared looked at his hands. “I thought that maybe if I stayed away long enough, I could go back to loving you as a friend.” He swallowed. “I wasn’t ready to match you in the bedroom and outside of it. I couldn’t be what you needed—a steady partner in life, if you’d even want me.”

“You could have been there for me as a friend. I would never ask for more. I never did.” Latif smacked Jared in the chest.

Jared caught his hand and kissed each knuckle. “I know. But I wanted to be everything.”

Latif scoffed. “Oh, don’t tell me that your Dom training—”

“Was for you, yes. I loved it, don’t get me wrong. But I’d never have discovered it without you.” He placed Latif’s hand on his cheek. “Please, let me learn how to take you apart and put you back together.”

Latif pursed his lips. Warm fuzzies pushed the anxiety out of his system. But he wasn't done. "And then what? You want a future together?"

"Only if you do." Jared said with utmost seriousness.

"Jared, you fucking knob." Latif caressed Jared's cheek with his thumb. "I've been in love with you since we were twelve."

"Oh."

"Yes, oh."

Jared frowned. "You watched me with women."

"It never bothered me." Latif shrugged. "Turned me on though."

"And now?"

"I love watching you on stage as a Dom. You're damn good at it." *And so fucking hot.*

"I can stop if you want me to." Jared's big blue eyes and open expression said he'd agree to anything.

But that was not what Latif wanted.

"I wouldn't. Seeing you out there, with all those subs who worship you, is a thrill. Even better if after that you'd be going home with me. That's the kind of dream I never even dared to have until you showed up with your new credentials."

Jared took both of Latif's hands in his. "Our lives could remain as they are, but we could be together. We don't have to make drastic changes if you don't want to."

"Well, you could move in."

Jared snorted in disbelief. "Could it be that simple?"

"We're adults, and you're my best friend. We can give it a shot. If seven years apart didn't destroy our bond, I don't know what could." Latif swallowed the lump in his throat, then smiled. They were going to be okay.

Jared pursed his lips in thought. "My snoring?"

Latif gasped, then covered his mouth with his hand. "That may be a deal-breaker." He rolled his eyes. "I slept next to you in a tent you filled with farts. Snoring won't scare me."

Jared slid a hand down his face, groaning. "You were my first experience with a man."

"Lucky me." Latif couldn't contain the smile that took over his face.

"And I want you to be the first to fuck me."

"That can be arranged." The pure joy filling Latif was like a drug. He was dizzy and drunk on happiness.

Jared cupped Latif's face in both his hands and bit back a grin. "We still need to wash the floor."

Latif groaned, then sat up. "Oh, shit."

"What? Even if it dried, we'll clean it."

"Sadie is bringing the girls today. Fuck." He sprang off the bed and pulled on his briefs.

They were both on all fours scrubbing the floor when someone knocked at the door.

"They're here." Latif pulled to his feet and opened the door.

"Daddy! Uncle Jared!" the twins yelled in unison and ran into the house.

"Are we too early?" Sadie asked, kissing Latif's cheek.

"Nope. Jared was helping me with some deep-cleaning."

"Ah." She glanced between them and lifted her eyebrows. "I see."

"We'll get cookies," Chloe said.

"And juice," Matilda added, and they both ran to the kitchen.

Latif's smile grew wider at the smirk on Sadie's face. "Yes. It is what you think."

"Oh, thank fuck." She let out a long sigh. "Finally."

"What? You knew?" Latif gasped.

"I have eyes." She pointed at Jared. "And this one couldn't hide his infatuation very well."

"I wasn't trying. Not since I came back." Jared pulled to his feet and offered Sadie his cheek to kiss.

"I see you got some things out of your system for now. I don't need to know what happened here." She motioned to the floor. "Are you still okay with having twins for today?"

"Yes," Jared replied first.

"I'll pick them up tomorrow." She waved, and her black ponytail swished as she turned around and left.

The thunderous sound of socked feet grew near as the twins reappeared with crossed arms. "Daddy, did you have cake without us?"

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About the Author

K.C. Carmine loves writing about people falling in love, with a focus on characters and their (very spicy) journey to HEA. As a member of the queer community, it is important to her that her writing reflects the diversity of voices around her.

To read more about Lucy at The Golden Handcuffs, and meet Latif's friends and family, read Pursuit of Love - a series of five standalone books in the same universe.

To browse all books, special editions, audiobooks, and freebies, go to: https://kccarmine.com/

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Nothing Tastes As Good

E.M Denning & Kate Hawthorne

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Chapter One

Devon

The best part about being back in Edgewood was that I'd been gone so long, nobody even recognized me. I left home at eighteen for college and never came back, instead pursuing an internship in the city, accepting a job at the same firm, and making a perfect life for myself in New York.

In the ten years I'd been gone, I'd packed on about fifty pounds of muscle, which made my six-foot-two frame look much more imposing than it should have, I'd gotten contacts, and I'd finally found a haircut that didn't make me look like a teenager. The struggle of maturing on my own in city that wasn't mine had been a rough one, but worth it in the end. Even if the end meant quitting my job, divorcing my husband, and moving back to Edgewood.

My tail was far from tucked between my legs, though. I'd been home for two days, and I'd still managed to remain unnoticed. The anonymity gave me a chance to unpack my things into the house I'd rented—sight unseen—and settle in. But it was Saturday night, I was tired of cold Chinese takeout, and I wanted a change of scenery.

Edgewood had changed a lot in the ten years I'd been gone, but it was also very much the same. There was what looked to be a little night market in the park, a couple of food trucks, some pop-up tents laced with market lights. Someone played a guitar and sang into a microphone. The bar on the corner across from the Episcopal church was new too, and it was the

laughter and neon glow from beyond the open door that beckoned me inside. Dinner could wait. The bar itself was pretty empty, but the dance floor had a fair number of people. Most of them had drinks in hand; all of them seemed like they knew each other.

Curse of a small town, I imagined.

I was going to get noticed eventually.

Climbing onto a vacant seat at the bar, I nodded gratefully when the bartender slid me a little brown bowl full of trail mix. It was mostly rye chips, which I didn't mind. Objectively, I found them to be the best pieces in the mix. I popped one into my mouth and ordered a beer, shoulder relaxing at the first explosion of hops on my tongue.

It wasn't long before someone bustled up behind me, knocking into my shoulder before perching on the empty stool to my left. They were wet, I realized, with sweat. Hair damp and matted to their forehead, but their eyes were familiar in their brightness.

"Shanna!" he called out, flagging down the bartender. "Can I get another beer?"

I took another drink of mine, grimacing slightly when the man shoved his sweaty fingers into the bowl of trail mix and pulled out three rye chips at once. He shoved them into his mouth and groaned as he chewed, giving his hips a little shake. The bartender—Shanna—brought him a beer.

"On your tab, Liam?"

Liam raised his beer in agreement before turning toward me. He clanked the neck of his drink against mine and went back in for the trail mix.

"I'll eat the rye chips so she'll refill them for you," he said. "I think they're the best, but nobody else seems to agree."

"I like the rye chips," I said, to which Liam looked like he wanted to open his mouth and spit them back into the bowl for stealing them from me.

"Sorry."

"It's alright," I assured him. "Like you said, I'm sure she'll refill it soon."

Liam squinted at me, eyes narrowed behind a pair of gold-framed glasses. He was young, I thought, but obviously not too young to drink. With wavy brown hair and a thick but short brown beard, Liam was objectively attractive. Shorter than me, as most people were, more athletic, like he ran instead of lifting weights like me. He was also the physical

opposite of my ex-husband, which pinged every single radar of interest that existed in my body. Maybe I should have just stayed home, because picking up a stranger at the only bar in a small town was not how I wanted to get reacquainted with life in Edgewood.

“What’s your name?” he asked, but before I could answer, a woman with curly black hair and dark eyes wrapped both of her arms around Liam’s waist and hauled him back to the dance floor. He laughed and looped one of his arms around her shoulders, raising his beer in the other so it didn’t spill.

I swallowed my name back down into my throat, chasing it with another drink of my beer and two of the five remaining rye chips. I didn’t see Liam again for the rest of the night. He stayed on the dance floor, but the woman with him came to get two more rounds of drinks before I gave up and called it a night. It was just shy of midnight, and I hoped I hadn’t stayed so long that I’d miss the night market. Even though Shanna had refilled the trail mix, it was far from enough to sate either of the hungers currently raging in my belly.

“I told you it’s my treat tonight!” Liam yelled, shoving the curly-haired woman off of him. She protested, but laughed, finally conceding and letting him close out their tab.

“You’re the *best* best friend a girl could ask for,” she said, smashing her lips against the side of his neck.

Liam chuckled and kissed the top of her head at the same time he signed the credit slip. Shanna slid mine over to me and I did the same, leaving her thirty percent on top of the drinks. I fed another handful of trail mix into my mouth and chased it down with the last drink of beer in my bottle.

“Do you want to get crepes?” Liam asked his friend.

“Absolutely not.” She gave him a squeeze but shrugged her shoulders. “You know I hate breakfast.”

“They make savory crepes,” I interjected, and Liam’s stare snapped to me, his eyes still sparkling.

“She doesn’t hate breakfast,” he corrected. “She hates all the things I love, which is why she’s a good friend to have because I never have to worry about her stealing my pickles or my hoodies.”

“Or your rye chips.”

Liam’s mouth quirked up into a smile, and it was like being caught in a tractor beam.

“Or your men,” she said, slipping out from the small space between us. “Have a *safe* rest of your night, Liam.”

He ignored her, stare still locked on mine.

I swallowed hard.

“Are you new in town?” Liam asked.

“I grew up here, but I’ve been gone awhile,” I said.

Liam made a thoughtful sound and tilted his head to the side. “Did *you* want to get crepes?”

It felt like he was asking me for a lot more than midnight treats.

Or rather, he was actually asking me for a very different *kind* of midnight treat.

The hunger from before pooled in my belly, sending a burst of heat up my spine that made it impossible to say no.

“Yeah,” I told him. “I’d like to get crepes.”

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Chapter Two

Liam

Tessa had been the one to drag me out of my house and had it not been for the delicious man in front of me, I might have been miffed that she'd abandoned me in my time of need. After hours on the dancefloor and several beers that I'd danced off the effects of, my stomach was hollow to the point of pain. I thought maybe I might have to turn to cannibalism and bite off a chunk of my arm to survive.

Or maybe a chunk of tall, broad, and dreamy over there.

"Savory crepes?" he asked, his brow furrowed.

"They're better than rye chips." I waved my hand toward the food trucks. The night market had slowly developed over the past few years. It started when the owners of a food truck decided that bar hours would be the perfect time to set up shop. Soon, another food truck followed. Then other vendors. It was now a big draw for people, local and tourist.

If the guy next to me hadn't explained that he had just moved back, I'd have pegged him as a tourist. He looked around at Edgewood as if he'd never been here before. Like everything was new to him. And maybe it was.

"How long were you gone for?" I asked, leading him toward the crepe truck. There were small folding tables and chairs set up where the food trucks were. When I'd gone into the bar, more than half the tables had been occupied, but now there were a few stragglers. Some were far more intoxicated than others.

I shot Tessa, my MIA best friend, a text demanding she let me know when she got home safe. Not that there was much crime around here. As far as small towns went, it was a pretty safe place.

“About ten years.”

“That’s a long time.”

“Long enough for everything to be different.”

“Some things never change, though.”

The town might have new features, like a night market and a brand new movie theater with three theaters, one boasting 3D capabilities. *Yay progress*. But deep down, Edgewood was still the same sleepy, slow-paced small town. Nothing was open on Sundays until noon, if it was open at all. Rush hour still only lasted forty-five minutes at the most. Growing up, I’d often imagined leaving, but Edgewood felt too much like home for me to contemplate leaving. Plus, with my older brother not around much in the last few years, it was up to me to keep my dad company now that Mom had passed away.

“Is Whitmore still mayor?”

“Not Whitmore Senior, but his daughter has the job now.” I was about to ask his name again when it was suddenly our turn to order. “Two breakfast crepes and two Nutella banana ones, please.”

I pulled my wallet out and handed over the cash.

“That sounds like a lot of food.”

“I’ve been dancing for hours. Whatever you can’t eat, I will. Don’t worry. Nothing will be wasted.” To prove my point, my stomach growled. Being out in the open air surrounded by the scent of food was torture on my cavernously empty stomach.

“Do you dance a lot?”

“Today, yes. In general, not as much as I’d like. What about you? Do you often sit in bars and eat your weight in rye chips?”

“Only when there’s cute men on the dance floor to keep my attention.”

Well, *helloooo*. I did believe I was being flirted with. Sometimes, if a man was too subtle, their intent went right over my head, but there was no mistaking his interest in me. I mean, he called me cute. He practically ate me alive with those sexy as fuck eyes of his.

“Flattery will get you everywhere.” I forced myself not to wink, because according to Tessa, it made my face do weird unsexy things. Speaking of Tessa, a text came through from her, letting me know she made it the four

blocks home unscathed and was going to bed. I tucked my phone away as our order was called out, and we collected it before making our way over to a table.

“Did you want to sit?”

“I think I better not. If I sit down, I might not get up again. If I don’t rest my legs they have no idea how tired they are. You don’t mind, do you? We can sit if you want.”

“I’m fine walking.”

Again, I was going to ask his name, but he bit into his breakfast crepe and let out a moan that went straight to my dick and obliterated all my brain cells.

“Good, right?” I took a bite of mine and managed to keep my moaning down to a minimum.

“Holy shit. This alone was worth moving back for.”

“Why *did* you move back?”

He cut his gaze my way, glancing at me, like he was measuring me up and trying to decide how much of himself he was going to trust me with.

“Divorce.”

“Man or woman?”

That made the corners of his mouth curl up in amusement. “Man.”

“So you’re saying I have a shot?” I stuffed a bite of crepe in my mouth so I wouldn’t continue talking.

My hot stranger only laughed. “I already said you were cute; you don’t need to go fishing.”

“Maybe I like fishing.”

“Do you?” His eyebrow arched, and a smile tugged at his lips.

“Are we still talking about flirting or have we diverted into actual fish?”

“You tell me.”

“Yes, we’re flirting. No, I don’t like actual fishing.” I stuffed another bite of crepe into my mouth. We strolled through the night market as we ate. We passed each booth, and I watched the way he took in every detail about our surroundings.

“Something wrong?” I asked when he’d been quiet for a minute. He might have just been enjoying his Nutella banana crepe more than the egg and bacon breakfast one though, judging by the smear of hazelnut spread he had on the corner of his mouth.

“Just getting this feeling of déjà vu, that’s all.”

“For a second I was worried you were going to complain about the crepes after all.” I reached for him without thinking and swiped the chocolate away from his lip with my thumb. He stilled, and I leaned closer, emboldened by a night of dancing and drinking on top of the sugar rush. Though I was close to sober now, I was loose-limbed and too exhausted to overthink everything, which is why I didn’t stop myself from closing the space between us and kissing him.

His mouth was soft and tasted of chocolate with a hint of salt from the rye chips at the bar. He stepped closer, moving his body to press against mine. My hand tightened on the cardboard container holding my crepes. My other palm cradled his cheek as I held him still and deepened the kiss. From the way my heart thundered in my chest, I’d expected the same kind of wild energy from the kiss, but it was soft and sweet instead. It was the kind of kiss that you wanted to mean something. So I kissed him until my heart thrashed wildly against my ribcage, my lungs screamed from lack of oxygen. I stopped only when I had to. He pulled away, and his gaze was soft, and the world was gauzy around the edges.

Everything tasted like chocolate now, and it was good, but nothing tasted better than my brother’s best friend.

“I just…what is your name?” I asked him finally, my head still spinning from that mind-blowing kiss. I prayed we wouldn’t get interrupted before he could tell me this time. If he disappeared like Cinderella, I wouldn’t even have a glass slipper to track him down with and I’d need a name.

“Devon,” he answered, and my heart screeched to a halt.

I used to know a Devon. He’d been my first crush and the reason I’d discovered that I was gay. But Devon had moved away years ago. He’d been best friends with my older brother, Zane, and I hadn’t seen him since he and my brother left for college ten years earlier.

There was no way he was the same Devon.

“Devon Michelson?” I asked just to be sure.

His brow furrowed, and I could tell he was struggling to place me.

“You were best friends with my older brother, Zane,” I croaked.

Devon’s eyes widened. “Oh shit. You’re Little Willy Bowman?”

I grimaced upon hearing my old childhood nickname. My dad was also named William, so everyone had called me Willy right up through high

school graduation. It was only in recent years that I'd put my foot down and forbidden it. But I didn't hate how it sounded coming from Devon.

"Yeah. But it's Liam now."

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Chapter Three

Devon

My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, and I almost dropped my crepes onto my shoes.

"Willy," I choked out the affectionate diminutive of my former best friend's baby brother, correcting myself when he raised a thick brow at me. "Liam. I…I didn't realize."

He chuckled, tongue darting out to lick the corner of his lip.

I could still feel his beard against my mouth, the burn of it against my jaw.

"I don't imagine you would have kissed me back if you had," he said.

"Of course not," I said quickly, immediately regretting it.

"Probably better then that you didn't know." Liam looked down at his crepe and pulled burnt chunk off the edge, popping it into his mouth casually, like he wasn't someone I'd known since before his eyes even worked well enough to narrow on me the way they just had. Before he could walk, before he had teeth.

"You're oddly non-chalant about this."

"You're oddly chalant about it," he countered with a shrug. "You're a single man, I'm a single man, I think we both find the other attractive…"

He trailed off, and I blinked back my embarrassment over flirting with my high school best friend's baby brother. Willy—Liam—was at least ten years younger than me, which put him at barely old enough to have been at the bar with a beer in his hand. He hadn't even hit puberty the last time I

saw him, and it hadn't been much longer than that since his brother and I had gone our separate ways. There wasn't any animosity there, just a lingering tension I couldn't make sense of, and I'd always assumed it was the distance between us after I left for school in New York and he headed to Washington state. The hesitation must have been clear on my face, because Liam frowned and took a step back from me.

"If you're worried about what Zane would think—"

"I'm not," I interrupted.

"What then?"

It was a valid question.

I knew at the bar Liam was younger than me, though I hadn't realized by how much. I found him attractive, and that definitely didn't change just because I knew we had a family history together. He'd clearly changed since the last time I'd seen him, and I'd changed too. We were adults now, like he'd said, very different people from the children we used to be.

"I'm just…" I glanced around, finding a bench alongside the curb so my knees didn't give out. "You don't have to sit, but I do."

I sank down onto the weathered wood, and Liam sat down beside me. He took all of our crepes and set them down in the grass, angling his legs toward mine and folding his hands together neatly in his lap, knuckles white.

"I'll risk it."

I wondered if the tension rolling off of him was restraint, because even though I was more than surprised by the late-night revelation, the soft glide of his mouth against mine was absolutely the most pressing matter in town. Something that was in urgent need of replication, duplication, triplication even. Smoothing my hands down the tops of my thighs, I gave my leg a shake and knocked our knees together because I was suddenly very shy and didn't know what to say.

Thankfully or not, Liam broke the silence for me.

"Divorce, you said?" he asked, shoving his hair back from his face. His sweat had long since dried, and his dark brown waves had settled around him like a plush halo.

"Divorce," I confirmed.

"Contentious?"

I gave myself a fleeting moment to think about Jeff and the way we'd packed our apartment up side-by-side, splitting the record collection and

our wedding china. The way he'd cried and cursed both of us as we loaded the last of his boxes into his trunk and mine into a moving van.

"As amicable as it could be," I said.

"How long have you been back in Edgewood?" he asked.

"Two days."

Liam grinned at that, leaning back a little more comfortably beside me.

"Have you ever left?" I asked him back.

He shook his head, some of the light leaving his eyes. "Zane never came back, and someone needed to take care of Dad."

I licked my lips, swallowing hard. "Your mom?"

"She passed four years back."

"I'm sorry." Without thinking, I put my hand on his leg, squeezed his thigh. "If I'd known, I would have come home."

Liam looked down at my hand. "It's…it's…you didn't know. It's fine. Besides, you're here now and we're…"

He trailed off, and I turned my stare toward the sky, then down to the center of the market. Vendors were packing up and calling it a night, which meant Liam and I should probably do the same. But I wasn't ready for that. I didn't want to talk about Jeff and I didn't want to talk about Zane and I didn't want to talk about getting out of Edgewood or staying here. I wanted to know more about what kinds of food Liam liked now that he was Liam, not Willy, and I wanted to know how the night would have ended if we were anyone other than who we were.

"Does the park behind the Catholic school still have that big old rocket ship?" I asked.

"It's somehow still standing."

"Did you want to take our crepes up there? Maybe we can talk some more."

The rocket ship had never been for talking, but I didn't know if taking people up to the top for a hookup was something exclusive to my generation or something that had passed down to Liam. It was too dark for me to get any read on the color of his cheeks, which meant he couldn't see the burning flush on mine either. He stretched out and picked up the cardboard boats of crepes and consolidated what was left down into one tray and stood up.

I joined him and took the empties out of his hand, tossing them into the trash without a word. He watched me move, eyes thoughtful behind the

lenses of his glasses, and without another word he took my hand in his and headed for the park.

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Chapter Four

Liam

Devon Michelson let me hold his hand. Preteen me would have been half dead from lack of blood to his brain. Adult me wasn't far behind. Before Mom passed, she'd wanted me to find some nice boy who'd let me hold his hand. And I tried not to attribute good things or bad things in my life to planets and stars, or dead relatives, but it kind of felt like he'd been sent here specifically for me.

Delusional? Maybe.

The fact was that Devon and I were basically strangers. But his hand was warm and soft in mine, and he didn't mind when I squeezed it when tugged us around the church toward the rocket ship that was still a teenage make-out spot. And though we were both beyond being that age and needing to hide that kind of thing, the hour was late enough that the rocket should be free and clear for a couple of idiot adults, high on crepes and maybe each other for a little while. And though I did not know what would compel Devon to want to go up to the top of the Rocket with me, I wasn't about to say no. The rocket in question had seen better days. The paint had long ago worn off, leaving the metal surfaces to face the elements unprotected.

"Are you sure that thing will hold up actual adults?" Devon eyed the structure with suspicion.

And I didn't blame him.

“If we die, we die together.” I tugged him toward the rocket, but when we reached it, instead of climbing up, he trapped me against the side. His wider form bracketed mine. Broad shoulders swallowed me. He pressed up against me, dragging his mouth up the side of my neck. I bit back a moan. My neck had always been one of those places that took me from zero-to-sixty in two-point-two seconds.

“I don’t plan on dying tonight,” Devon’s voice was smooth and low. The hunger that I felt in his timbre sent a shiver through me. He kissed my neck again, proof that if he didn’t have plans on dying, it was so he could be the death of me.

I turned, desperate to kiss him again. He still tasted like chocolate, and his mouth was still impossibly soft, even though the rest of him was as hard as a rock. I let my hands roam over his body. I had no idea what he did for a living and why he was so muscular now, but I loved how much bigger than me he was. I loved it made me think he could squash me like a bug, but really, he was putty in my hands. Especially when I broke the kiss and went down on my knees.

Devon sucked in a breath and placed a hand on the iron bars behind me as I fumbled with his jeans. Stupid invention, if you asked me. Track pants were so much easier to deal with. But there was something to be said about the victorious feeling of besting the zipper and tugging his fly open to reveal a sizeable bulge.

Leaning forward, I put my mouth on him through the fabric of his briefs. Yet another barrier between us, but I was getting closer to my prize. Chancing a glance up at Devon, I found him looking down at me, his face unreadable in the shadows, which was probably for the best, because that meant he probably couldn’t see mine.

Devon had been my first and most persistent crush. Even after he was long gone, I never got over the way he made me feel. The rush of butterflies storming my stomach whenever he was near. The way I couldn’t keep my eyes off him to the point that I worried that I’d give myself away before I really grasped what it meant that my eyes found him whenever he walked into a room.

Hero worship? Me? Never.

Maybe a little.

His hand sank into my hair, fingertips scraping my scalp, sending delicious shivers through me. I tugged pants down with his briefs, just

enough to free his cock. God, it was thick, just like the rest of him.

The only sound in the park was Devon's gasp when I took him in my mouth, and my heart thrashing in my ears, my blood rushing through me like white water rapids. Fuck, I loved the way I had to stretch my mouth to take his cock inside. I toyed with the head of his cock, circling it with my tongue, teasing him as I worked up the courage to take him deeper. I'd sucked cock before, but never one so thick. Never one that mattered as much as this one. Never one that tasted as good as this. Like hazelnuts, and salt, and forgotten dreams coming true.

Devon's hand cradled my head, and I realized how big his hands were, too. My body heated as I imagined them elsewhere. Never in a million years did I think I'd end up here. How could I possibly have prepared myself for this?

Gravel dug into my knees, but I paid the mild discomfort little attention. I was too busy falling in love with the taste of my brother's best friend. Former best friend? Either way, that didn't matter. Nothing did except Devon and the way he cradled my head in his hand, enjoying the pleasure I was giving him, but without demanding more from me.

"Get up here," Devon said, his voice gruff.

I pulled back and took a deep breath. I was almost loath to stand up and abandon my prize, but Devon grabbed my arm and gently encouraged me to stand. He took my face in both his hands and crashed his mouth down over mine. I was swept away in the intensity of it. I was so distracted that I almost didn't notice when he reached down and popped the button of my jeans open. He shoved my pants out of the way and laughed into our kiss.

"Those were tighter than they looked." Before I could even formulate a response, his mouth was on me again. He wrapped his arms around me, and I did the same. He pulled our bodies together, and with a slight bend to his knees, positioned us so our cocks lined up. There was no way in hell that we should have been doing this out here, but we were in too deep to stop now. The best we could do was ride it out and hope we didn't get caught.

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Chapter Five

Devon

It was painfully easy to get lost in Liam's mouth. I could taste myself on his tongue, the flavor tangled around the rich hazelnut of the crepe we'd shared, and the flavor was addicting. With my hand shoved between our stomachs, I stretched my fingers to curl around both of our cocks at the same time, and the needy groan Liam loosed into my mouth was almost enough to make me come on the spot.

"We should definitely not do this here," I lamented, giving our shafts two tight strokes before forcing space between us. He understood the assignment, tucking himself back into the pants I'd only just fought my way into. I did the same, sucking in a breath that was nowhere near enough to make me less dizzy. "In my head, I thought we'd go up to the top of the rocket and make out, but I see we're already pretty far past that."

Liam wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and stared hard at me. He was so much more than met the eye, dominant in conversation, but pliant when it came to sex. The way he'd gotten onto his knees just now, the way he'd moaned and groaned when I fisted his hair and moved his mouth where I wanted him to go. It was decadent, and it was exciting, if not uncharted.

"We can make out if you want," he murmured.

"I think we both want more than making out, but I also…" I trailed off, letting my stare rake over the way his slender muscles stretched against his clothes. "Would like to maybe do that naked, where I can see you better."

Liam hummed. “So you’re a lights-on kind of guy?”

I’d never thought much about it, but…

“Yeah.”

“I live with Dad, so my place probably isn’t the best,” he said.

“I’ve barely unpacked, but there’s sheets on the bed and lube on the nightstand.”

His lip twitched into a smile. “The essentials, then.”

“I don’t have condoms,” I admitted. I hadn’t planned on moving back to Edgewood to randomly hook up with the no longer adolescent little brother of my former best friend, or anyone for that matter.

“I have some in the car.”

“It’s like that, then?” I teased, taking a step backward. We needed to get out of the park, back to the bar where I imagined both our cars were parked.

“Very much like that,” he said, following after me. “But I’m probably not in a state to drive, so…”

“I’ll take you,” I said, before there was any possibility for Liam to change his mind. “You can stay the night if you want; I’ll bring you back in the morning.”

“Do you have food?”

“I have something you can eat,” I teased, grabbing my bulge and thrusting my hips at him. Immediately after that, I tripped over a curb and fell flat on my ass, legs and arms splayed like a spider. The embarrassment was real, a loud reminder to act my age. Instead of offering me sympathy, Liam laughed, stepping over me and holding out his hand. I accepted the help up, brushed grass off my ass and hoped there wouldn’t be a bruise.

“I do have food at home,” I assured him. “It’s leftover takeout from that strip mall Chinese place.”

“Coffee at least?” he asked, grabbing my hand. “For the morning.”

“I’ve got coffee.”

His fingers were warm against mine, steady and sure. He was definitely the kind of man who kept condoms in his car and was not intimidated in the slightest by going home for a hookup. Just his presence beside me had me feeling at ease, even when he laughed nervously and stopped our progress on the curb across the street from the bar.

“I have to be honest.” Liam unlocked the car behind us and bent in over the passenger side. The sight of his ass was a dream, but he was only there

to rifle around in the center console for condoms, which he tucked into his pocket before turning back to face me.

“Always.”

“I had the hugest crush on you when I was younger.” He licked his lips, pink tongue darting out from the dark hairs of his mouth-framing beard. “Even after you moved away, I would think about you.”

“Think about me how?”

“You know.”

Heat burned in my cheeks. “Tell me anyway.”

“I jerked off thinking about you…a lot,” he admitted, jerking his chin toward the bar. It was a sign it was time to head to my car and then my house, which I took at face value. I’d parked around the other corner, so it wasn’t long for us to get there at all. I unlocked the car, and Liam slid into the passenger seat, buckling himself before I’d even had time to make it around to the driver’s seat.

I turned on the car and grabbed the wheel with both hands, knuckles white.

“Did you really?”

Liam nodded, thumping his head against the headrest with a fond sigh.

“I think I’m flattered,” I said, pulling away from the curb. Edgewood was still alive, a few remaining vendors packing up from the market and some noise still filtering out from the bar. It wasn’t anything like the town I’d grown up in, and I wondered if, for the first time, I might be happy staying here.

“Do you want me to tell you more?”

I swallowed hard, grateful that I didn’t live far out of town. It was less than a ten-minute drive to get to my rental. That it would be less than eleven minutes until I had Liam somewhere bright and locked, where I could take his clothes off and see him for the first time.

“Okay,” I rasped.

He angled his body toward mine, the weight of his stare the only thing I could feel. The best thing I’d ever felt. Well, best thing after signing divorce papers in an overpriced attorney’s office in Manhattan at least.

“I used to think about sucking your cock. I wondered how long it was. If it curved.”

“And how does it live up to the fantasy?” I asked. “Now that you’ve had the real thing.”

“My fantasies never involved the rocket ship. I’ll have to get you home to try it out.”

“Tell me more, Liam.”

He hummed again. “I like the way you say my name. I didn’t even hate when you called me Willy earlier.”

“Tell me,” I whispered.

I turned onto my block and pressed the gas pedal a little harder than necessary.

“I used to imagine it being late one night while you slept over. My parents were upstairs, and Zane was in the shower. I’d come to find you in the kitchen. You were making a midnight snack—”

“This is extremely detailed,” I teased.

“I like my porn with plot, alright?” Liam huffed out a laugh, smiling as he sank back into the fantasy. “Anyway, you were in there in just your boxers. You’d hear me and turn around, surprised to find me up so late. You’d offer me a snack, and I’d say yes, but instead of food, I wanted you.”

“So my joke earlier was true to your imagination.” I pulled into the driveway of my rental house and cut the engine. Liam flung his seatbelt off and was out of the car in a flash. I chased after him to the front door, boxing him in and kissing the side of his neck. If he wanted to give way to me in the bedroom, I definitely wouldn’t argue with that.

“What next?” I asked.

“I’d suck you off in the kitchen, but you’d never come in my mouth,” Liam whispered. “You’d always pull me up and turn me around, press me against the fridge, shove down my pants, and mount me.”

I managed to key my code for the door in without moving my body away from Liam’s, relief rolling through me when the lock disengaged and I pushed the door open. The hallway was dark, and Liam fumbled around for a light switch, which I appreciated. I’d meant it earlier about wanting to see him, but if he wanted me to take him in the kitchen, I didn’t see a reason why both of our wants couldn’t be made real tonight.

“What then?” I asked.

“That’s as far as I ever got.”

In the entryway, I could see the pink of Liam’s mouth, the dark want in his eyes…the thick bulge between his legs.

“I’ll tell you then.” I took a step toward him, and he took a step back, and we went like that until we found ourselves in the still empty kitchen

surrounded by takeout containers and unpacked boxes. “After I get inside you, I’ll fuck you until you come. I’ll fuck you until I come, and then I’ll get you that snack you’re after, take you to bed, and maybe if I’m lucky…”

“Fuck me again?” He popped the fly on his pants and, shoving them down at the same time, he went to his knees. Liam had my cock in his mouth before I could put two and two together, and I threaded my fingers into his hair, throwing my head back with a groan.

“Yeah,” I rasped. “I’ll fuck you again. Oh, shit, Will…Liam. Don’t fucking stop.”

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Chapter Six

Liam

After Devon let me live out my longest-running teenage fantasy, he shoved a freshly unpacked fork and white cardboard container of chow mein into my hands. It was both too early and too late for anything fresh to be open now, and I was still half-starved. I'd like to blame the dancing, but in truth, drinking always made me ravenous afterward, and the crepes at the park didn't come close to quenching that need. It was as if the alcohol awakened my inner competitive eater.

Look out, bottomless pasta at *Olive Garden*, Liam had drinks and is on the loose.

What Devon lacked in decor, he also lacked in furniture, and I found myself perched on his counter, my underwear pulled back up, but my jeans discarded. I was in no mood to wrestle my body back into those after the out of this world fucking he'd just delivered me against his fridge. My knees hurt from the tile floor, my jaw from sucking his thick cock, and my ass from the rest of it. Devon was more of a powerhouse than I'd ever imagined, and putting my underwear back on after he came into a condom was the worst part of my entire night. I very much wanted to eat, but I also really wanted to get naked with Devon… again.

"So why'd you move back? Not that I'm complaining now. I'm just curious."

"Maybe I came back for the food." Devon sidestepped my question in such a cute way that I almost didn't mind that he'd done it at all. Later I was

sure that I'd find some reason or another to be annoyed by him, but right now I was riding the dreams-do-come-true high of getting railed by my brother's best friend. Well, former best friend. There was a story there that I'd get to one day. Not today, however.

"The food is worth coming for." I said with a smile.

"Those crepes alone were pretty orgasmic. And then there was the rest of the evening."

"I'll be sure to tell Tessa you think the crepes are orgasmic."

"Speaking of which," Devon moved closer, slotting himself between my legs. He set his food aside and put his hands on my legs. His thumbs brushed back and forth against my bare skin, and I tried not to tremble apart as all the blood in my body rushed back to my cock. "Now that we've made good on that late-night kitchen fantasy of yours…did you want to hear one of mine or…?

"Or?" I cleared my throat when the word came out sounding strangled. "Or?" I asked again, this time my voice clear and steady even though I was distracted by the desperate need to know what sorts of things Devon fantasized about.

"Or you could tell me more of the things you fantasized about when you were jerking off about me."

"What makes you think there are other fantasies? Maybe that was the only one?"

Devon merely raised an eyebrow and waited.

I took a deep breath and let it out as a sigh, setting down the half-eaten container of chow mein. The appetite in my stomach would have to wait until my other appetites in my body were sated more fully.

"Okay," I said, covering his hands with my own. "So there's this one where it's dark and I can't find my glasses…"

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About the Authors

EM Denning has more than twenty romance novels under her belt and has become an author you can rely on to bring you emotionally endearing, soft and fuzzy, stories. She is well known among her friends for her love of naps and sarcasm. She spends her free time reading as many romance novels as she can get her hands on.

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Kate Hawthorne is an author of character-driven LGBT romance, known for crafting emotionally intense stories with high heat and a kinky twist. Creating worlds where passion and angst collide, Kate's books bring you complex protagonists in fearless pursuit of self-exploration and happy—if not sometimes unconventional—endings for everyone.

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Saving Throws & Cinnamon Rolls

Rhys Everly

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Chapter One

Benji

Chocolate drips down the side of my mouth and I let out a soft orgasmic moan that sends a shiver down my body, but I don't even care. How could I when I'm in literal heaven?

"What do you think you're doing?" a deep, electrifying voice says, and I freeze.

Are my eyes closed?

Shit. I got carried away.

I open them slowly and find everyone around the table staring at me. Especially him.

His glasses reflect the orange light from the LED screen lying flat on the table between us, and I can't help but swallow the bite I've been chewing along with the knot in my throat.

Denver. Gorgeous, sexy Denver.

"Uhm…sorry," I say and put down the gooey chocolate cupcake and wipe the chocolate off my fingers.

I was planning on licking my hands clean, but I didn't think the others would appreciate that after watching me salivate over a damn cupcake.

"What for?" he asks and cocks his head to the side.

I bite my bottom lip and lower my head a little, but I can't look away from him despite my shame.

"For…for being so…about the cake," I say, and his forehead creases as if he's confused.

“What about the cake?”

“Uhm…I thought…you asked me what I was doing?” I explain.

He narrows his eyes and his lips quirk to the side. “That was the guard. You think I was talking about you eating?” He laughs.

I shrug with uncertainty.

“You weren’t paying attention, were you?” he says, and his smile turns into a smirk.

I shake my head and feel my cheeks get warmer.

“Sorry. I…got distracted, I guess.”

Denver chuckles, and I catch the others laughing from the corner of my eyes.

“You don’t need to apologize. You like the cupcakes?”

“How could he not? They’re fucking delicious,” the guy across from me says.

His name is Hwan, a Korean guy who runs the local bubble tea shop. Just like his shop he’s got bubbly colorful personality. His hair always changes color, though he has a soft spot for pink. He always dresses up in pink to go with his hair and he even has a set of fake horns to match both his personality and his barbarian character.

As he speaks, he takes a cupcake from the center of the table, leaving only eight on the platter.

Shoot.

“How much will it take to convince you to bake these for my shop?” he adds after a bite.

Denver sits back, and I can’t help but sneak a glance at him. It’s hard not to. He’s got the kindest eyes and the most gorgeous smile I’ve ever seen, and I’m not just saying that because he so generously let me in the group.

“I wouldn’t do it for all the money in the world,” he says. “I just love baking for friends and seeing them enjoy my food.”

I bite my tongue. I wonder what he’d say if he knew I only signed up for these game nights because they came with free food. I bet he wouldn’t like that no matter how much he enjoys baking.

“So I guess Benji’s orgasm must be music to your ears.” Hwan smirks, and the others laugh.

“Oh hell yeah,” Denver replies, and he turns to me.

“Sorry,” I say again.

“You don’t need to apologize. Hell, it’s a compliment, if I’m honest.” He runs his hand through his silky-smooth hair, and my cheeks feel a little hotter.

I hope they don’t turn red. The last thing I want is to embarrass myself further. Though it’s probably too late for that.

We have been playing Dungeons and Dragons for a little over two months now and frankly I’m surprised they’ve put up with me this long.

Especially since I don’t know how to play the game and they’ve had to slow down everything to show me things. I was sure it was going to happen sooner or later.

“Should I continue? We can take a break if you want?” Denver asks, and I shake my head before he’s even finished.

“Oh no. No, that’s okay. I’ve…I’ve already taken enough of our time. Would you…mind repeating what just happened?” I mumble, and I can feel everyone’s eyes roll even though they didn’t let it show.

Denver clears his throat, leans a little forward, and joins the tips of his fingers in front of his face.

“So, as you guys come up to the gate, there is a guard standing in your way. You know everyone in the area is on high alert because of all the recent attacks, and he looks threatened. Your fellow companions are injured, hanging on for dear life. You’re the only one who can grant your team safe passage. The guard puts his hand up and tells you, ‘What do you think you’re doing?’ What do you tell him?”

His eyes light up as he speaks, as they so often do on Tuesday nights when we gather around to play pretend. Not that it matters. I might have started this whole thing to have food and shelter for a few hours every week, but I’m so taken by the game—and him—that I can’t look away.

I knew of roleplaying games before I joined, but I never had the chance to play them.

It’s so weird. I never thought it’d be for me, that I am more of a writer than a gamer, but I almost instantly fell in love with it.

I’ve got an unhealthy obsession, some might say, considering I’m constantly thinking about the game and my character and all the cool things I could try in different scenarios, or backstory stuff that would give my character some cool powers and motivations.

“Right!” I say and lean forward too, pinching my miniature’s head and look at my character sheet. “I…I…” I take a deep breath and continue. “I

tell him, ‘We require a bed for the night if you would be so kind.’”

Denver nods.

“Great. Roll me Persuasion. If you roll a twelve or above, the guard will hear your case and will react based on that. If you roll a sixteen or above, whatever you say to him will convince him to let you into the city. A natural twenty will get you shelter and a long rest.”

I bite my lower lip, grab the twenty-sided die, and fiddle with it in my palm before I roll it on the dice tray.

The purple die lands on eight, and I let out a huff.

“Damn. Eight, plus four for my persuasion. So twelve,” I groan.

Denver smirks.

“Great. Make your case,” he says.

I let out a sigh and ponder my choices. I’m all out of inspiration, so I can’t reroll, and I don’t think I have any feats that can help me.

“I guess I’ll…I’ll tell him the truth. So I’ll say, ‘Hello, kind sir. We…we are weary from…from our travels.’” I pause and look up from my sheet to my Game Master, Denver, who’s staring right back at me, as if I’m the only person in the room.

My throat dries out. These past few weeks since we started playing, I’ve managed to avoid taking the spotlight and monopolizing the game, partly because I’m new to roleplaying games, and partly because I hate being the center of attention. But I guess my luck has finally run out.

It’s my fault, really. Why did I choose to play a bard when I’m not much of a talker. Bards are the epitome of a leader, using their social skills to lie, deceive, and charm foes and aid allies. I’m the exact opposite of that. I should have chosen a barbarian. They’re usually characters of a few words. Though that’s not how Hwan is playing his demonkin barbarian, Glam-Glam.

“Are you okay?” Emily asks beside me, putting her hand on top of mine.

I blink and without looking at her, I nod.

Focus, Benji. You can do this. You need *to do this.*

I can’t get kicked out of the group. It’s the one night a week when I have somewhere to be, something to do, something decent to eat. This group is my lifeline. I can’t fail now.

I take a deep breath, stare back at Denver, and think of everything our characters have been through leading up to this point.

“Pardon us, sir,” I say. “We have traveled far and high to get to you and offer our aid in your repeated battle against the nightmares that threaten your kingdom. My friends are injured and worn from our journey and we’re all desperate for a little bit of food and a bed for the night. If you would be so inclined, perhaps I can repay you with a song of our adventures and the bravery of my friends. They are the heroes you’ve been waiting for to save you, and I’m but a humble bard in awe of their spirit and courage.” I look down for a second and my eyes land on a line of my character sheet and I get an idea. “As I say that, I will take out my guitar and strum the strings a couple of times. Give him a few lyrics that boast about our latest combat, but I will also use my Muse feat to add a magical undertone to my song. You need to roll a Charisma Saving Throw, DC is fourteen.”

Denver doesn’t respond, he just keeps on staring at me, and I feel my cheeks get warm. His eyes seem to glow again, although I’m not sure it’s just the lenses of his glasses reflecting all the light around us. Even so, he looks majestic. Sweet but with an edge to him.

It might have been the free food and the promise of a five-to-six-hour game in the dead of night that brought me and kept me here, but he is another reason I keep coming back. He’s a work of art and I can’t lie. I have the biggest crush on him.

Not that I’d ever have a chance with him. I bet he barely even notices me. He probably doesn’t even waste a thought on me unless it’s to begrudge adding me to this campaign.

“Uhm…Denver?” I say, realizing he still hasn’t said anything.

I glance around the table, and my cheeks get all tingly when I notice everyone else is also staring at me.

“Oh crap,” I mumble.

Did I screw up? I screwed up, didn’t I? Did I say something inappropriate or did I make the wrong move? Should I have attacked the guard instead? If I had attacked him, I ran the risk of getting injured myself or putting the other characters in danger, and they were all already on the brink of death.

Oh god. I knew this day would come. The day they’d realize I’m a good-for-nothing freeloader.

“Right. Charisma Saving Throw,” Denver repeats, and I turn back to him so disappointed with myself.

I knew I would ruin things somehow.

“What was the DC again?” he asks.

“Fourteen,” I reply.

He grimaces apologetically. “It’s fifteen. The guard passes it.”

I nod and look down at my sheet again.

Great. Not only did I screw up, I also ruined the game for the other players.

I mark the Muse ability so I don’t forget I’ve used it in between sessions, but as I do, I notice something else in the text.

“Uhm, one second,” I say and reach for the d6 die and roll it. “I can use my Muse feat to deduct from your roll too. So it’s a ten. The guard fails and is Charmed by me.”

Denver stares at me. Everyone is. Again.

“God, I’m so sorry. Did I fuck up? You had an encounter planned, didn’t you?” I say when they don’t react after a few seconds. “I’m sorry, guys.”

“Why are you apologizing?” Denver asks. “That was brilliant. And since the guard is Charmed…”

He smiles and his eyes linger for a moment. A moment that makes my heart flutter as if butterflies have taken shelter in my chest.

“...he will not only take you in, he will offer you a bed for the night and a hot stew. And with the promise of more songs tomorrow, you can close your eyes in the safety of the guard’s quarters. Everyone take a long rest, restore your HP, spell slots, your feats, and half your hit dice.”

Hwan does a little happy dance as he reaches for his—pink—eraser and the others also start resetting their character sheets, but I can’t help but feel like I’ve done something wrong.

Then again, no one seems upset we didn’t start combat, or glaring at me for ruining the moment, so maybe I did all right after all.

As I start to erase things on my own character sheet, I reach for the half-eaten chocolate cupcake. The explosion of flavors in my mouth makes me literally drool again, and I can’t help but focus on the platter of eight cupcakes in the middle calling my name.

God, I hope no one eats more so I can take the rest with me. I wouldn’t mind having them for breakfast, lunch, and dinner tomorrow, though I have no idea how I could sneak them into my backpack without anyone noticing.

Just as I try to figure out the logistics of that, I catch Denver’s gaze.

He doesn’t say anything, but he offers me a faint smile that makes me freeze on the spot. As if he knows what I’m thinking and I’ve been caught red-handed.

Surely that isn’t possible, though.

Unless I make it that obvious. Maybe I should chill on the food for a while. The last thing I need is to get kicked out of the group. Especially when it finally feels like they’re all warming up to me, though that might just be in my head.

After all, I’m sure I won’t be so welcome if they find out I’m a major loser who sleeps in his car.

No. This group is my lifeline beyond the food and the shelter. And the last thing I need is for any of them to find out the truth about me.

So even though it breaks my heart, I decide I’ll only take one more cupcake and savor it until next week.

That is until Denver’s announcement at the end of the night sends a cold shiver down my spine.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to take a rain check for next week. I’ve got a deadline at work and I’ll be burning the midnight oil. So see you again in two weeks.”

Well, shit!

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Chapter Two

Denver

The enigma of Benji continues.

He's been coming to my games for close to two months now, and just when I think I've got him all figured out, he does something and I see a whole new side of him.

First, he started as a complete roleplaying-games novice, so I'd made sure to slow down, but even with all that support both from me and the other players around the table, he seemed far more interested in the food and drinks than the actual game.

So I made adjustments. I tried to make my sessions more engaging and tested the waters with different balanced sessions. The storytelling got his attention eventually, but I figured he wasn't all that much into roleplaying.

So I made sure to give the team enough encounters to keep them all satisfied, including Benji. Which is probably why I put them through so many combats in such few sessions. And probably why all of them ended up in critical condition except for Benji.

Which is why I didn't really plan anything in particular for tonight other than a session focused on downtime and recovery, even if it wasn't Benji's forte. After all, I couldn't focus on one player's needs when I had three others who were also here to have fun.

I guess I thought it'd be fun to see if after weeks of never-ending combat Benji would like the opportunity to roleplay a little. The guard was never going to hurt them. In fact, they were going to welcome them with

open arms and take them to safety. What better way to test the waters than a little safe fun encounter.

Truly, I didn't think anything would happen. At this point, I didn't even expect Benji to speak as his character, rather explain what he does or says in third person—which was also a valid way to play the game—but he shocked me.

He didn't just roleplay, he chewed the scene the fuck out. I didn't even know he could be so eloquent. And he even used his abilities to change things to his favor like a true bard would.

I couldn't help but look at him throughout the rest of the evening and try to crack the code.

Who is Benji?

It's such a shame we won't be playing next week because now I'm eager to see if it tonight was a one-off or if it's truly him getting more confident with the game and the group.

"No!" he cries out when I tell them we won't be meeting next week.

I turn to him and purse my lips.

"I'm so sorry. I know it sucks, but I can't help it. I'm vying for this promotion and it's already kicking my butt."

Benji opens his mouth and his cheeks turn red. He bows his head and shrugs while fiddling with his miniature.

"Oh no. It's okay," he says as if embarrassed by his outburst.

Not sure what he would have to be embarrassed about. If anything, it's the best compliment as a game master.

"We understand. Good luck with the promotion," Isla says, and I smile, but my gaze drifts back to Benji who's still playing with his miniature while everyone else is packing their dice and sheets.

He's the only one without his own dice, though I have so many sets I really don't care. That's what they're for. To be used. In fact…

"Why don't you hold on to those?" I glance at the purple dice in front of him, and he raises his eyes to meet mine.

"What? Are you sure?"

I smile at him. He's so sweet. A little insecure. I don't know what he's got to be insecure about. He's young, handsome, and freaking adorable, though I'd never tell him that. I wouldn't want him to think me a creep and ruin the game.

“Of course. You seem to gravitate toward them every session, and I really have more than enough dice to last me a lifetime. Keep them. But I have one rule.”

His eyes go wider, and I almost lose my composure, but I bite my tongue and point my finger at him.

“Don’t go cheating on me and use them in another game,” I say and Benji nods his head.

“Okay. Promise,” he mumbles, and I hear Hwan bursting into laughter, and I break character too.

Benji glances at Hwan then at me, and I feel bad for the guy. He seems to take it seriously which means I need to work on my comedic timing.

“I’m kidding, of course. Please, feel free to use them whenever or wherever you want.”

“Oh,” he says and then smiles too. “Th-thank you.”

“Anytime.” I wave him off and push my chair back. It’s almost two in the morning and I definitely need to go to bed.

The others follow my example, and as they help tidy up, I duck into the bathroom. When I come out, I walk them all to the hallway.

Just as Hwan is about to open the front door, he stops and jumps on the spot.

“I almost forgot. Did you check out the homebrew stuff I sent you?” he asks, and everyone forms a circle around me.

“I did. It might be a little overpowered, but I’ll send you some adjustments that would make it suitable. But it won’t be until after next week.”

Hwan nods and starts waffling about his inspiration behind his homebrew Barbarian subclass, aptly called The Path of Glitter, because I wouldn’t expect anything less from the effervescent bubble tea barista.

My gaze drifts to Benji who’s putting his shoes on. He’s still wearing the same socks with the holes on his toes, and I know they’re the same ones because they have the exact same number and placement of holes as the last time and the time before that. He’s also still wearing the same almost-broken-down shoes, and I wonder, not for the first time, if he only has the one pair.

“That’s so cool,” Emily says to Hwan. “I’ve got to go. My boyfriend is waiting for me downstairs. Does anyone need a ride?”

She ties her long brown hair up in a ponytail, and Isla raises her hand.

“If you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” Emily replies, and the two get out the door.

Even so, I can’t stop looking at Benji. I want to ask him so many questions, but he’s always so closed off, I don’t want to offend him or make him feel bad.

I wish he’d stay. But why would he?

Oh well, even if he did, it doesn’t mean I can probe him about his life and his situation.

“Oh, before you go, any progress on the backstory?” I ask him, as if that would make him stay behind.

Benji puts down his tote bag, and unlike the last few times, it doesn’t fall over from the weight of my pastries.

Hm…didn’t he take any this time? If anything, I’ve started making more just so he can take some home. He’s been stuffing his bag since the first session when I was busy with other things, and while at first I was a little annoyed, I’ve come to realize if he’s doing it, he must have a reason.

Maybe he didn’t like the flavor of the cupcakes. Though it didn’t look like it earlier when he was scoffing them down.

I wonder what’s going on.

“Oh yeah. I’m sorry. I’m working on it, but my laptop…well, it’s ancient and needs therapy, so it’s taking me a little longer than I expected.”

“Oh,” I say and focus on the man and not the bag. “I don’t mind if you want to handwrite it.”

Benji’s eyes go a little wider. “Trust me. You don’t want to have to interpret my scribbles. My handwriting is awful.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Benji-boo.” Hwan drapes an arm over Benji’s shoulders and pinches his cheek with his other hand.

Not for the first time, I have to admire Hwan’s forwardness. He’s so comfortable in his own skin and so open with everyone. Even Benji has been more friendly and forthcoming with him than the rest of us.

I wish I had just a smidge of his courage, but seeing as I don’t, I simply stare at them and sigh.

“You did great today, sweetie. You saved our asses,” Hwan says, and I nod.

“You did. Excellent roleplaying. I can’t wait until our next game.”

Benji’s cheeks turn red as they so often do, and I feel a flutter in my chest. He really is adorable. I don’t allow myself to think how cute he is

very often, but when he turns beet red at a hint of a compliment, I can't help myself.

"About that. Are you sure we can't do next week?" he asks.

He seems to be scratching the back of his elbow, and he bites his lip over and over again as even his neck turns red, and I hate myself when I have to tell him no.

"Trust me. If I could, I would. I'd rather spend a few hours with you guys than in front of my computer coding, but I really want this promotion."

"It's okay," he mumbles.

Hwan takes his arm off Benji and adjusts his bag, turning to me. "Why on earth do you want that promotion? It sounds like you hate your job."

I shrug. "Because I like things like paying the rent, my bills, buying miniatures. You know."

Hwan pouts and puts a hand to my chest. "Well, honey, it seems like you need to find something you're passionate about because if you hate your job now, you'll hate it even more when you have more responsibilities."

I let out a long sigh and press my lips together. "You're not wrong, but there's nothing else I'm good at, so I guess I'm stuck."

"You're good at games," Benji mumbles, and Hwan smiles.

"Exactly. You're a great GM."

"Well, yeah, but I can't exactly make a living from that. Not unless I charge everyone a hundred dollars a game, and that's fucking wild, so…"

Benji's eyes almost pop out of their sockets when I mention money. He always seems to have an odd reaction to money or prices. Yet another nail in the coffin that makes me more certain by the day that he's struggling. If only I could ask him. Or help him. But unlike Hwan, I'm a wuss.

Maybe I should mention it to Hwan. He would certainly not have any qualms about asking Benji all the burning questions I have so we can figure out if we can help him somehow.

"I should go," Benji says and turns to leave, but I see his almost empty bag and stop him.

"Have you taken some cupcakes home? There's loads left over."

His cheeks turn red again, and in order to take the pressure off him, I also address Hwan.

"I'm okay," Benji says.

“I wouldn’t mind a couple. If they’re going to waste. My son would appreciate them,” Hwan says.

I bite my lip since I can’t tell Hwan to back off and retreat to the kitchen where the platter full of chocolate cupcakes is sitting on the counter.

When I return with a bag for both of them, Benji is no longer there, and my stomach drops.

“He said he was in a rush,” Hwan says. “Are you okay?”

I turn to look from the door to Hwan and sigh. “Yeah. Just…he didn’t take his cupcakes,” I say.

Hwan’s eyes narrow, and he extends his hand toward me. “Give ‘em to me. Maybe I can catch up to him.”

I hesitate for a moment, but I give him both bags in the end. After all, Hwan is a good guy. He wouldn’t keep all eight cupcakes to himself. But that’s not what worries me.

It’s Benji.

And I don’t know why but I can’t shake the feeling that I did something wrong and offended him.

I guess I’ll find out in two weeks. If he doesn’t turn up, I’ll have my answer.

Now why does that feel like years away?

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Chapter Three

Benji

"Are you okay, honey? You're very quiet today," Lilian says, and I blink, bringing the café back into focus before I turn to my boss and nod.

She narrows her eyes at me as if trying to dig into my mind and get the truth, but she's not a witch, so of course it doesn't work. Though I don't know if I'd ever have the guts to say that aloud.

After all, Lilian's whole shtick with the Happy Witch Café is that she's a witch and she sells enchanted cakes.

I also don't have the heart to tell her that despite eating her money cakes and good luck puddings, nothing has changed in my life.

"Are you hungry? Do you want some food?" She continues to study me, not giving up, and I'm not sure what kind of vibe I'm exuding to make her focus so much on me today.

Maybe it's my disappointment with the game being canceled next week. Or maybe it's the fact that I'm just about ready to give up.

Pfft.

As if I have the luxury.

I don't know how long I can keep doing this, though. It's been four months. Four months of wet wipe baths and eating scraps, counting every quarter and not staying in one parking lot too long and raising suspicions. But I'm getting tired and I'm nowhere near to getting back on my feet. Definitely not with the rent prices on this island going up every month.

“I’m okay, Mrs. D’Agostino. I’ll eat when I’m home,” I lie.

She doesn’t persist. She smiles and nods, wiping her hands, which are always dusty with flour, on her apron.

“Okay. I have a delicious basil and tomato chicken pasta in the back if you change your mind,” she says and turns her attention to a customer that steps up to the register.

At the mere mention of food my stomach decides to growl and twist just to toy with me, and I get back to work. I clear each table and wipe down the surfaces one by one. Next, I move to the outside tables, clean the ashtrays, and sweep the floor.

It’s easy to forget my hunger when I get in the zone. But as soon as I go in the back and start washing up, I can smell the rich tomatoey aromas of Lilian’s food, and I crack.

It’s fucking heaven.

The chicken is so tender it melts in the mouth. The richness of the fresh basil and tomato cause an explosion of flavors, and the touch of chili makes my tastebuds light up. To top it all off, the cheese is savory and buttery enough to make me salivate more with every bite. It’s pretty close to an orgasm, not that I have any experience in those.

“There you are!” someone exclaims behind me, and I jump out of my own skin.

I turn, feeling my lips coated with tomato sauce, and face Lilian who’s got her hands on her hips.

“I’m…I’m sorry,” I mutter, and she cocks her head.

“It’s okay. No need to apologize. I told you to help yourself, didn’t I? You like it?” Her eyes soften and her lips quirk into a smile, but god only knows what she thinks of me.

I never used to be like this. I mean, I always struggled with social interactions and small talk, but I was never this fucking awkward. Or this fucking hungry that I humiliated myself eating like an animal.

“It’s amazing,” I say, and Lilian puts her hands together, smiling brighter.

“Oh, I’m so pleased you like it.”

“Did…did you need me?” I ask.

“Oh yes, but it’s okay. You finish eating and I’ll take care of the tables—”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll take care of it.” I approach the door to the front of the café and Lilian, but she puts her hand to my chest before I manage to get out.

“Stay. It’s nothing I can’t manage. Finish your food. Just, next time let me know where you are so I don’t worry. Okay?”

She pierces me with her gaze, and I feel the heat of her handprint on me like a brand.

I slowly step back and lower my head, feeling like the biggest idiot in the world. I don’t know when she will realize I’m useless and fire me. I’m not exactly helping my case with my actions. But I can’t lose this job. It doesn’t matter that I don’t work enough hours or make enough to afford a house, but I can at least buy food and drink and fill up my tank so I’m never out of gas.

If I get fired, I don’t know what I’ll do.

“Right. Back to your lunch. I’ve got this. Okay, sweetheart?” Lilian cups my face with both hands and gazes into my eyes for a moment before she plants a kiss on my forehead and goes back out front.

I let out a sigh and bring my hand up to my face, a little dustier with flour now than before, and take in a deep breath.

Why couldn’t Mom be more like her? Why couldn’t they just accept me for who I am?

My stomach growls again, so I shake my head and return to the plastic container and the delicious food lying inside.

I have to fight myself not to finish the entire thing and physically remove myself from the kitchen to resist the temptation.

Half an hour later, my shift is done and I can go home. Not that I want to.

“Here you go,” Lilian says and hands me a few bills rolled up and tied with an elastic band, and I thank her, feeling a little lighter.

The feeling doesn’t last long, however, after I’m done filling up the tank and going to the grocery store. But I shouldn’t be ungrateful. The provisions should last me until my next shift on Friday. Hopefully, one day I’ll make enough money to at least buy a cooler I can plug in so I don’t have to rely on ready-made foods and tinned stuff. But today is not that day.

As soon as I come out of the store, I move my car to the back of the parking lot, put up the privacy screens, and move to the back seat where I

spend the rest of my evening scrolling through social media and eating chips.

I'm about to nod off when my alarm goes off, and I sit up. The store closes in half an hour, so I put my shoes on and go back inside to use the bathroom before I miss my chance.

It was hard when I first started living in my car, but four months later, my whole body has adjusted to the schedule of the grocery store. I'll take my blessings where I can find them at this point. Let's just hope I don't get a stomach bug any time soon.

"Benji? Is that you?" someone says as I walk out of the store, and I instinctively hunch my shoulders before the person who spoke steps into my field of vision.

"Denver?" I ask, and my cheeks turn red as soon as I recognize him.

"The one and only. I knew it was you. How are you? Last-minute shopping for the evening?" he asks and looks down at my empty hands.

He bites his lip.

"Oh, I was on my way home and desperate for the bathroom," I say with far more confidence than I actually feel whenever I'm caught in the wild by anyone I know.

"Oh, do you live close? Where about?"

I open my mouth and look to my car then turn to the other side and wave in the general direction.

"Just down the road. I…I really should go now. I don't want to be late."

Denver adjusts his glasses on the bridge of his nose and takes a step back. "You've got plans for the evening. That's great," he says, and I just press my lips together and make my escape.

When I get in my car, I hole up in the back again and replay the encounter in my head over and over again.

Gosh. I'm so embarrassing. I don't know how any of these people put up with me.

I take a sip of my water—just a sip, so I don't have to go to the bushes in the middle of the night—and lie down, closing my eyes even though it's too early to sleep. After a while, I realized the more I stay awake the more food I consume, the more I need to go to the toilet, so it's better to just… sleep.

Knock, knock.

I jump, and my heart thumps so loud it feels like an earthquake.

Knock, knock.

Shit. It must be the security guard. They must be turning vigilant which means I need to find a new place to park. Fuck!

I lift one of the privacy screens and almost have a heart attack when I find Denver staring back at me.

No. No. No. Not him.

“Are you okay?” his asks, his voice muffled from the whole window separating us.

I turn my engine on and roll the window down, trying to look as normal as possible, though the car must stink and it probably looks like a pigsty, so…

“Hi,” my voice comes out trembly.

“Car trouble or…” he starts and then takes a look around.

“Oh, I was just…uhm…I was about to…”

What do I fucking say? What kind of excuse could I possibly give for having all this crap in my car without admitting that this is my house.

“Benji?” This time he speaks softer and looks me dead in the eyes.

A knot forms in my throat.

“Benji, do you live in your car?”

And there it is. Caught red-handed.

Fuck my life.

“Uhm…no…uhm…I…” I’m so stuck for ideas. I don’t know what to say. “Yeah,” I admit, and I hate myself for it.

Denver gasps and puts his hand in front of his mouth. The knot in my throat bulges, and I can barely breathe.

I knew one day I’d be found out and I’d have to explain myself, but not by him. Why couldn’t it be anyone else? The last person I wanted to find out about me was Denver.

I don’t know why, but…I hate it.

“My god, Benji. Why didn’t you say anything? How long has this been going on for?” He sounds astonished. Can’t say I blame him.

“Uhm, something like four months.”

He gapes at me. “Benji! You should have said something.”

“I didn’t want to get kicked out of the group. I enjoy our games.”

Denver steps back and frowns. “Why would you get kicked out? What are you talking about?”

I shrug, and I’m lost for words. This is my worst nightmare coming to life.

“Benji. You should have said something. I wouldn’t have let you go sleep in your car every Tuesday if I knew.”

“It’s okay. I’m used to it.”

Denver grimaces again. “Is this by choice or necessity."

I take a deep breath. I wish it was a choice.

“My parents…they kicked me out.”

“What? Why? You know what, you can tell me at home. Come on. You’re coming with me.”

“What? Why? Where?”

I grab my keys on the ignition, and I’m ready to drive off if he decides to report me or…something.

“What do you mean? My home. I can’t let you sleep in your car.”

“You don’t have to…I’m okay.”

“Like hell you are. You’re coming home with me, and I’m not taking no for an answer.” He grabs onto my car door and glares at me all business.

He’s definitely not bullshitting me.

“What’s the point? It’s not like I can stay with you until I’m back on my feet. I’m fine here.”

“Says who?”

“Huh?” I ask.

“Who says you can’t stay with me until you’re back on your feet? I live on my own. I can do what I want. And I want to help you. So come on.” He taps the door again. “Follow me home. Or I can drag you home. Your choice.”

I sigh and accept defeat.

I take down my privacy screens and drive behind him, and when I get upstairs, he’s already placed a blanket and a pillow on the sofa bed which is double the size now that he’s opened it up.

“Are you sure about this? Please tell me if you’ve changed your mind. You don’t have to do this.”

Denver grimaces and shakes his head. “You’re my friend, Benji. Of course I want to do this. Now do you want to go to sleep or have a shower first?”

The promise of hot running water washing down my body is making my skin shiver at the mere thought.

“Shower,” I say.

He smiles and excuses himself before he returns with a clean towel that’s softer than anything I’ve ever touched.

“Go on. I’ll make us something to eat and we can watch a movie. Or we can play a card game. Unless you’re tired, in which case I can leave you alone to sleep.”

Is he being serious or playing with me? Why is he being so nice? And why does it feel like my luck has changed?

“I wouldn’t mind a card game,” I say, and his smile deepens.

Yeah. My luck has definitely changed. I just hope it’s for the better.

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Chapter Four

Denver

"What would you like for dinner tonight?" I ask Benji.

He's curled up on one side of the couch, a fleece blanket covering the lower half of his body and far too preoccupied by writing in his notebook to hear my question. But it doesn't matter. The mere sight of him all safe and sound warms my heart.

Finding him all holed up in his car was…shocking. I was still in disbelief, but as it slowly washed away, it left me feeling all kinds of guilty.

I've known there was something off about Benji since the start. The more sessions we had, the more certain of it I became, and still, despite all the signs being there, I ignored them. And poor Benji had to sleep in his car for two more months than he had to before I acted. I'm such an idiot.

"Benji?" I put my hand on his shoulder as gently as possible, and he stops writing.

"Sorry. I was distracted. Did you say something?"

I smile at him and sit down next to him. "What are you working on?" I ask, glancing at the notebook.

Benji presses his lips together and beams at me. "I'm finally writing Eldrin's backstory."

It's such a small thing. An unimportant thing to most people. Especially in the larger picture of all his problems, and yet he seems so…pleased with himself. So happy. It's infectious. And so darn adorable.

"That's great," I say. "I can't wait to read it."

He hugs the notebook closer to his chest and nods. “I hope it’s not bad,” he says.

“Why would it be? I’m sure it will be great. And even if it isn’t, who cares? Nothing bad is going to happen if you write something bad. Though, I re-iterate, I’m sure it won’t be.”

He presses his lips together and pushes some hair behind his ear even though it’s too short for it. “Well, I’d wait to read it first,” he mumbles, and I chuckle.

“Okey-dokey. Anyway, what would you like for dinner? Any preference?”

“Oh,” he says, and he shoulders loosen up for a moment. “You don’t have to…you really don’t have to go through all the effort. I can get something to eat. I’ve got some money.”

“Nonsense. I need to eat too. Might as well feed both of us. So. What would you like?”

“Uhm…” he starts, and his gaze drops to the coffee table. “I…uh…I don’t know. Anything.”

He looks overwhelmed. I can’t blame him. I can’t even imagine what it must be like living in your car for four months and having to count every dime. No wonder he liked loading his bag with my cakes after game nights.

“Right,” I rush to add before he starts panicking. “I make a mean bolognese, but also, I make a fucking awesome marry me chicken. And the best part is I have ingredients for both, so take a pick.”

Benji looks at me again and opens his mouth but doesn’t say anything. Instead, he bites his lip and ponders over the choices.

I look away to take the pressure off him, and my gaze lands immediately on the set of the dice on the coffee table. They’re there as decor, mainly, but that doesn’t mean they’re not rollable.

“I have an idea,” I tell him and reach for the d20.

It’s a chunky die, almost as big as my palm, but it’s 3D printed, so it’s lighter than it looks. I pass it to Benji and he frowns, looking confused.

“Let’s leave it to luck. If you roll ten or under, we’ll have bolognese; eleven or above, we’ll have the chicken.”

His lips quirk to the side in a discreet smile that still doesn’t fail to make my chest flutter, and he nods in understanding.

He cups the dice with both his hands and shakes it for a few moments then lets it fall on the coffee table. It almost rolls over the far edge but stops

at the last minute.

It’s a nat twenty.

“I guess it’s marry me chicken,” Benji says, and his eyes light up.

So does my heart.

It’s so good to see him safe and happy. Even better to see some confidence in him, however fleeting. If all it takes to make him forget what’s happened to him and focus on getting back on his feet—and self—is to roll some dice and make easy decisions even easier, then so be it.

“Marry me chicken it is!” I declare and head toward the kitchen to start cooking, when I have another idea. “Do you want to give me a hand? Or would you rather focus on the backstory?”

He shrugs and puts his notebook down. “I don’t mind helping. Though I don’t know what I’m doing.”

I laugh, and as he approaches me, I put my hand to the small of his back to guide him into the kitchen.

As soon as I touch him, he freezes. Heat pools on my fingertips and shoots down my arm and the rest of my body before I can pull away.

He looks down at my arm for a moment and bites his lip.

“Sorry,” I mumble an apology, but I still can’t pull away.

He takes a deep breath, and as he exhales, he shakes his head. “It’s okay,” he replies, his eyes still glued to my arm.

Gosh. Pull yourself together, Denver. What the hell is wrong with you?

I yank my hand away and try to compose myself but fail. Miserably. Though that’s not entirely my fault since my body is still on fire despite not being in contact with him.

“Uhm…cook. Yeah. Let’s.”

Benji smirks and walks into the kitchen, seemingly taking my breath and mind with him.

Focus, Denver. Fucking focus.

“Okay. Let’s grab our…our ingredients,” I say when I manage to drag myself into the kitchen.

Benji nods and opens the fridge to retrieve the chicken, cream, and butter, and after a few moments of still trying to pull my shit together, I grab the dry ingredients.

“First, we should season the flour.”

He scoops some flour into a flat plate and sprinkles some salt, pepper, and paprika on it before stirring it with a fork.

“Do you like spicy food? Do you want to add some chili?”

“Sure. But not too spicy,” he replies. “My stomach gets all funny.”

“Sure. We can add some chili to the flour, and we won’t put any in the sauce, so it’ll be mild.”

“Sounds good,” he says and claps his hands together before I pass him the dry chili container.

His fingers sizzle against mine, and I fully expect to see sparks where we touch, but there’s nothing there. Of course not. Because this is real life, not a fantasy world. Skin contact doesn’t cause sparks.

And yet he pulls away as if he was struck by them.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“Yeah.” He rubs his palm. “Static shock, I think,” he says, glancing at my hand. “You didn’t feel it?”

I open my mouth to answer, but I don’t find the right words.

“No,” I say instead, even though I still feel the effect of his fingers on me and the hairs on the back of my arm are still standing.

“Weird,” he mumbles and turns back to the flour to season with chili, and for a moment, I have to actively remember how to breathe.

Before I can embarrass myself any further, I turn the stove on and grab the frying pan and butter. Benji tosses two chicken fillets into the flour and turns to watch the pan.

We both stare as the stick of butter melts into a golden liquid as if mesmerized by it, but all I’m doing is distracting myself. Distracting myself and trying to shake the goosebumps that have awakened all over my body.

It’s only when Benji throws the chicken in the pan that I manage to find my composure and take over.

“Do you want to chop some garlic while these are cooking?” I ask him, and he offers me a warm smile.

I watch him for a few seconds, him peeling the cloves, pressing them with the flat side of the knife, before I take over coating the rest of the chicken and adding it to the pan.

Once the fillets brown enough, I take them off the heat and toss in the garlic. It gets so quiet that the sizzle of the butter is almost deafening, and yet I don’t feel uncomfortable. Confused? For sure. But not uncomfortable. And neither does Benji, who’s far too preoccupied with following my instructions to be flustered.

Not that he has any reason to be. In fact, I don't know why *I* am. It's not as if I don't know Benji or I've not been around him before, though even as I think that, I realize I haven't ever been alone with him.

It's quite intimate, come to think of it. Sharing my house, sharing a moment cooking together. I can't even remember when I cooked with someone else. I don't think I ever cooked with Elena in the four years we were together.

Somehow it feels almost natural doing it with Benji.

"Mmm," he groans when we're sitting at the dinner table half an hour later with our dinner and a glass of wine. "This is so good."

I smile a little brighter at him and take a sip of my wine. I take great pleasure seeing him enjoy our food, or when he drinks his own glass of wine and savors it like it's the most precious thing in the world. It makes my chest flutter.

And the more I get lost in those feelings, the more I watch him. The more I watch him, the more intense I feel, and by the time he turns around and says, "Aren't you going to eat?" I realize something.

I like Benji. I like *like* Benji. As more than a friend.

"Uhm…" I start and shove everything else down before it completely overwhelms me. "Yeah. Yeah."

I grab my fork and stuff my mouth. My mind goes back to when we first met at Hwan's bubble tea store. He came up to us and practically whispered his name, and yet even then I'd noticed how handsome he was.

The more I got to know him, the more I liked him as a person, which is probably why I had tried so hard to get him to engage with the game and be part of the group.

What I hadn't realized was how much I like him. As a man.

It's not as if it was the first time I found a guy attractive. I mean, I'm bi for crying out loud. Not that I've ever done anything about it. Partly because by the time I realized I'm attracted to both men and women, I was in a relationship, and even when that broke off, I got involved with Elena, so I never had a chance to explore that side of me.

Which is probably why it took me by surprise just now, when I came to the realization that I like *like* Benji.

My gaze drifts to his lips. They look so soft. I wonder what they'd feel like kissing me. Or what it'd feel like to hold his face and look into his eyes. Or how he looks naked.

A knot forms in my throat and I cough, trying to clear it.

God, stop being such a perv, Denver.

The last thing this guy needs is me lusting after him when he's got bigger fish to fry. Besides, he's going to be living here for the foreseeable future. How inappropriate would it be if I hit on him and he turned me down. Or what if he goes along with it because he doesn't want to lose the roof over his head.

No. The power dynamics at play are atrocious. It doesn't matter if I like him, I can't act on it. No matter what.

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Chapter Five

Benji

"OMG, Denver. These cinnamon rolls are fucking delicious! You better hide them before I demolish them all," Hwan groans from across the table, and I bite down a smirk, feeling my cheeks turn red.

Denver stops mid-bite and turns to Hwan before he says, "Oh, I didn't make these. This is all Benji's work."

And just like that four pairs of eyes all turn to me.

"Really?" Emily asks and nudges my arm beside me.

"They're really good," Isla adds, and her lips are coated with cinnamon when she takes her next eager bite.

I mumble a thanks under my breath and steal a glance at Denver, who's watching my every move as if I mean something to him. Of course, I know that's all in my head. Just because he saved me from the streets doesn't mean he likes me. Not that way, anyway.

It's been…such a wild couple of weeks. Even if at first I felt bad for imposing on him, the more we hung around each other, the more at home he made me feel. Even this silly little thing he has me do every now and again —roll some dice—when I'm overwhelmed by decisions has helped soothe the storm in my mind.

Denver has done everything for me. More than anyone in my life has ever done or wanted to do. From buying me new clothes and bedsheets to

rekindling my love of cooking, something I haven't been able to do since I started living in my car.

Somehow my luck has changed since I met him, in more ways than one. Even Lilian has offered me more shifts which means that soon enough I'll be earning a normal wage so I can contribute more to the household. I hate how much Denver has spent on me so far.

"Please, I can only accept these if it's a loan," I told him the other night after he came home with drawing pads, coloring markers, and sketching pencils that must have cost a fortune.

It was my fault for telling him I used to draw after he caught me doodling on a notebook. But how could I have ever imagined he'd come back with a whole box worth of stuff?

"I don't need you to pay me back, Benji. Don't be silly. I just want you to be happy."

And boy oh boy did he make me happy. But I couldn't exactly tell him I didn't need all his gifts to be happy because he alone made me feel like I was floating on cloud nine.

"I can't. This is…it's too much, Denver. You don't have to do all this for me. You've already allowed me to take over your couch. That's enough for me."

And even as I said those things, he grabbed my hands, shaking his head.

"Trust me, Benji. I'd rather spend all my money on helping you reclaim your life than buying more paint for my minis and rulebooks for all the indie RPG games out there. At least this way my money has an impact," he said and almost made me melt into a puddle right at his feet, but I stood my ground.

"I will only accept these if we agree it's all a loan until I can pay you back for everything you've done for me."

"No," he repeated, and I huffed.

I grabbed the d20 from the table and turned to stare him in the eyes. "If it's ten or above it's a loan."

"Fourteen or above. Seems a more fitting difficulty class," he cut in, and I rolled my eyes before rolling the die.

It landed on a natural twenty.

"I win," I told him, though it didn't seem to deter him.

If anything, he bought me even more stuff. Like a blank canvas and pastel oils. Paintbrushes. He even got me a laptop.

And somehow, life seemed almost normal again. As if I'd never been kicked out. As if I'd always been here.

"Oh, did you?" Hwan asks, and I shake my head along with my thoughts to turn to him.

"Sorry?" I ask.

He smirks. "So what's going on here? Did you come earlier just so you can bake for us?"

I grimace. "No. I…I made them at home," I tell him.

That was another thing I asked Denver to keep between us. The state of our co-habitation.

"Why would I make them here?"

Hwan shrugs and looks behind me. "I don't know, I don't know. I saw a couple pairs of shoes in the hallway that are definitely not Denver's size, and there's two toothbrushes in the bathroom.

"Are you asking me if I came in a little early to make these rolls or if I live here?" I raise an eyebrow at Hwan.

He purses his lips and with a hint of glee shrugs his shoulders. "I asked no such thing."

Denver laughs. Hwan glances at him, and his pursed lips turn into a smirk.

"Come on. Are we playing or what?" I ask Denver, begging him with my eyes to continue with the game and change the subject.

"Uhm, yeah. Sure. As you…erm…" he starts and puts his roll down.

My heart's going a thousand miles a minute, especially when I feel Hwan's stare on me, and I'm afraid to even flinch in fear of giving anything away.

"As you walk up the palace steps, you feel unsettled. As if someone or some*thing* is watching you. It gives you goosebumps and has you all on high alert," Denver continues.

"Wait. We don't need to roll perception or anything?" Emily asks.

Denver shakes his head. "No. Everyone feels that. No rolls needed."

"What do you think it is?" Emily turns to us.

I'm still afraid of moving. I'm staring at Denver as if he's still speaking. And I feel goosebumps all down my body. And I feel someone watching me. Hwan.

Damn it. Pull yourself together, Benji.

I snap my eyes away from Denver and grab my cinnamon roll to stuff my mouth. At least that way I have an excuse not to speak. Not that it's punishment considering how good they came out. Lilian's recipes never fail me. Which is why I saved some for her, and I couldn't wait to give them to her tomorrow.

They have the right amount of sugar and spice that makes your mouth water, and they're fluffy enough to feel like you're eating a cloud. They're addictive.

Just like him.

I can't stop staring at him. I catch myself doing that a lot. When we're eating, when he's washing up the dishes, or working. Sometimes, I feel like he stares at me too. Especially when I'm writing something or drawing, but whenever I find the guts to look at him, he always seems busy with whatever he's doing.

Same as I feel now. And when I turn, he's not even looking at me, but he's busy staring and chewing his own cinnamon roll.

"I cast detect magic," Emily, our sorcerer, says, and it takes Denver a moment to notice before he focuses on her.

"With uhm…with detect magic you can feel the tingle of Illusion magic on your fingertips."

"Wait. Is it…is it coming from me?" Emily asks.

Denver shakes his head. "It's as if it completely surrounds you. As if you're swimming in an ocean of illusion magic."

"Oh." Emily flinches, and we all look at each other, and it's not long before I forget about real-life woes and get completely distracted by the game mystery.

"I'm all out of spell slots. Does anyone have Dispel magic?" Isla, our cleric, says after a while of trying different things and failing.

"I do." I raise my hand. "I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and reach for my flute. The first note sends chills down everyone's spines, and I play a familiar melody, infusing it with my spell and visualize the effect I need it to have."

Denver smiles at me. "Which is?"

"To cast a wind so strong and magical that any illusion is blown away like straw in a tornado and cleansing this spot from whatever is tormenting us."

His smile deepens, and he starts nodding.

“As you do that and the spell takes effect, you feel something on your chest. It’s a long piece of steel that digs right into you, barely missing your heart, and it drains the life out of you. It causes…” he starts and rolls something behind his screen that causes him to grimace, “Twenty-five hit point damage?”

I hiss. “Yeah. I’m dead,” I say.

The others groan.

“What? What the fuck happened? How could this be?” Isla shouts.

“Yeah. So not fair. Where the fuck did that blade come from?” Hwan adds.

I swallow a knot.

Have I…done something? Is this his way of punishing me for overstepping? Or overstaying my welcome? If my character dies, does that mean I’m out of here too?

“Guys! Guys! Relax. This was going to happen no matter who cast the spell. You’ll see why once you’re out of this place, but…” Denver explains and looks at me, “Benji’s character isn’t dead. Not yet, anyway. Roll a death saving throw.”

“Death saving throw?” I ask, showing my inexperience with the game once again.

“Yep. It’s our first, isn’t it? So, a death saving throw is a plain d20 roll. If it’s ten or over you pass, if it’s nine or under you fail. With three passes, you are stabilized, unconscious, and remain at 0 hit points until you are healed or rest. With three fails you die. Nat twenties count for two successes, and nat ones count for two fails.”

“Great,” I whisper.

“Don’t worry. You can always create a new character. Or…they can try to bring you back to life. If you die, that is,” Denver says.

I nod and reach for my die, the knot in my throat getting larger and more asphyxiating.

“Here goes, I guess,” I say.

“Oh, uhm, can you roll it here, behind the screen? So the others don’t know what’s happening yet.”

I bite my lip and push my chair back. Then I go stand next to him and roll my die.

It’s a twelve.

“Great.” Denver smiles discreetly, and I move to return to my seat, but he grabs my hand and stops me. “It’s okay. Stay,” he whispers.

His words cause a flurry of shivers up my arm as if I’ve put my hand in an outlet. But I like it.

It’s hard to concentrate on the others as they try to revive me or get us out of the situation. No matter what they do it seems luck isn’t on our side. All their dice rolls fail, and then it’s time for my next saving throw.

I have to fight with everything I have not to let my disappointment show when the die rolls on one.

One more fail and my character is dead.

“You should know. If we don’t make it out of this alive, I’ll hate you for life,” Hwan declares and attempts to punch his way through this trap we’ve found ourselves in the middle of.

It doesn’t go well, at all.

In fact, they all take a beating from a barrage of spells, and their hit points go down little by little with everything they do. And while everyone is trying to make sense of what’s happening, I’m trying to figure out what will happen to me, Benji, the real me, if my character dies.

“Benji. It’s your turn,” Denver says.

I clear my throat and shake my hand, feeling the heat of all their glares on my face. I can barely breathe. I can barely keep my eyes open as I throw the die. But when I peek at the number it lands on, I almost explode.

Natural twenty.

I live.

I’m still here. I’m not going anywhere. I don’t have to find out what the repercussions are for my character dying. Not now. Not yet.

Denver launches himself off the chair and celebrates with me as I let out a screech of glee.

“You pass? What is it? You pass, right?” Emily asks, but we’re too busy jumping up and down.

And then he hugs me.

And he’s so close to me and so fucking handsome looking back at me with his beautiful brown eyes that I can’t help myself. I kiss him.

And he tastes good.

With hints of sugar and cinnamon lingering on his lips that make his kiss sickly sweet.

And that electric current that’s already coating my skin from his mere touch, grows tenfold and seeps right into my veins.

He leans into me, kissing me back, and my heart fills with warmth.

But soon realization hits me. And I pull back to find everyone staring at me. Even Denver.

Shit. I’ve fucked up. I’ve fucked up so bad.

Good job, Benji. You’ve gone and ruined everything.

“I…I’m so…I’m so sorry,” I mumble as I stumble backward, grab my keys, and run.

Run away from the disaster I’ve caused and away from the only place that ever came close to being home.

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Chapter Six

Denver

It only lasted for a moment, but I can still feel him on my lips, I can taste him on the tip of my tongue. And I'm still standing like an oaf in the middle of my living room staring at the door, even though it's been a few minutes since Benji closed it behind him.

"Denver, are you okay?" Emily asks and reaches for my hand, and the tiny little movement seems to jolt me back to life, and I jump, turning to look at her.

"I…uhm…I don't…"

"What are you waiting for? Go after him, for crying out loud," Hwan says, and I put my fingers to my lips as if on instinct.

"Wh-what?" I ask him.

He narrows his eyes and seems to study me for a moment before he declares, "You're obviously as into him as he is into you, so what are you standing around doing nothing for? Go after him."

I don't mean to, but I lick my lips and I can taste him. I can taste the sugar and cinnamon from his delicious rolls, and my heart thumps in my chest.

All this time, these past few days, I thought it was all in my head. The lingering looks, the accidental touches that ignited my skin and the nerves underneath, the morning coffees he'd bring me in bed before I had the chance to wipe the sleep off my eyes.

I thought it was his way of showing his appreciation to me for offering him a place to stay and a little support, but maybe it was more than that. Maybe Hwan is right and Benji likes me too.

They're all staring at me, waiting for my response, but I don't know what to say. Or what to do.

"Are you just gonna stand there?" Hwan asks.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Isla adds.

"What's there to talk about? He needs to go after him before it's too late," Hwan tells her.

It's then I collapse back on my chair and bury my head in my hands. "I…I don't know, you guys."

"You don't know what?" Emily asks.

"Anything," I mumble. "What to do, how to feel."

"Hang on. You didn't know he felt like that for you?"

I shake my head, and she cocks her head. "But do you like him?"

I nod. "At least I think I do. I've always been with girls, but I know I'm bi, I just don't know if I like him because of him or if I feel bad for him."

"Feel bad for him why?" Isla asks and covers Hwan's mouth before he can say anything.

I glance at all of them, battling with myself on whether I should tell them or not.

"Benji is homeless," I say after a few moments.

After all, it's not his fault he doesn't have a house, and there should be nothing to be embarrassed about. There's nothing shameful about being handed a bad card by life and trying to survive.

"Please don't say I said anything, but…it's true. I found him sleeping in his car after our last session, and I brought him home."

"He's what? Why?" Emily asks.

"I don't know. I haven't asked him. I figured he'd tell me when he's ready, but he hasn't told me yet."

"So he's been staying here for two weeks?" Isla asks.

"Yeah. And it's been nice having him around. It's been nice getting to know him better. Did you know he's incredible at drawing?" I get up and put my hand behind the couch to retrieve the canvas he hid before everyone got here. "Look at this! Isn't this amazing?"

Everyone leans in closer to study the painting. It's a painting of us. Or, more accurately, their characters in our campaign, and I'm on top of

everyone like a divine figure since I don't have a character but I control everything.

"Our likeness is phenomenal," Hwan says who, even though he's playing a demonic-looking character, Benji has found a way to make his character look like a spitting image of Hwan, just with pink skin.

"Right? He's a great writer too. You should read his character's backstory. I usually hate it when I'm given pages upon pages of backstory, but I'm not gonna lie, I stayed up reading his because I was so enthralled."

"Okay. So clearly he's talented. And clearly you have a crush on him," Emily says.

"But that's just it. I don't know if I'm just taken by his talent and his situation or if I really do like him—"

"Does it matter?" Hwan asks, and we all turn to him. "What? Why does it matter if you feel like this because he's talented or because you feel bad for him? The thing that matters is that you like him as a person. In the end, we all fall in love with the parts of someone that appeal to us, and it's through time and togetherness the real love blossoms. So why does it matter if you're awestruck by his talent and feel sorry for him. The important question to ask yourself is this: Do you want to spend all your time with him? And is he your every waking thought?"

"Technically those are two questions," I point out, but Hwan pierces me with his gaze. "You…you're right. I do want to spend all my days with him, and he is my every waking, and sleeping, thought. But…"

"But what?" Hwan groans.

"I'm older than him. And he's staying at my house. And I'm your GM. The optics are not…they're not great."

Hwan exchanges a look with the others and with frustration in his face he says, "All right, Mr. Important. Optics? What optics? You're not a company. You're a person trying to live his life. What fucking optics?"

"But my age—"

"He's twenty-one. He's not a baby. And you're not a fucking grandpa. Nine years is nothing if you've got things that bring you together."

He does have a point. After all, I barely had a year age gap with Elena and that hadn't worked out.

"But I'm his—"

"Don't you start with that GM bullshit. You're the game master in a fun game between friends. You're not our boss. Jeez, man. Stop finding excuses

and go get him back."

Damn it, Hwan. Trust him to talk sense and break down any kind of reservations I might have. But that's Hwan for you. He's a whole fucking storm of good intentions and kindness. And that isn't even counting that time when he caught a bunch of criminals live on Instagram and used that to protect himself from their wrath.

He's a force to be reckoned with. And he's right. I like Benji, and if he likes me back—and how could he not after that kiss—then there's nothing stopping us from exploring those feelings.

As if he can sense my resolve melting away, Hwan's lips curve into a smile, and both Isla and Emily are beaming when I turn to look at them too.

My heart thumps louder again, and I shoot up from my chair, a giddy feeling rising from my stomach and energizing my whole body.

"Okay. I'm going after him."

"That's my boy!" Hwan fist pumps the air. "We'll be here, waiting."

Emily glares at him and clears her throat. "No, we won't. We'll wrap up here so you can have the place to yourselves," she says, but before Hwan can argue, I just leave them to it and I go after him. I go after Benji.

His car is no longer parked across the street, so I jump into my own and I go searching for him. I also try his number, but it goes straight to voicemail. I don't even know if he had the chance to grab it before he left.

I go to the nearest grocery store, but his yellow Ford Fiesta is nowhere to be seen. I try a few more. My throat tightens a little more every time I drive into a parking lot and don't find his distinct car.

What if something happened to him? What if he decided to do something silly?

Damn it!

As a last ditch effort, I call Hwan so he can give me his employee's number, who in turn gives me his mom's number.

"Hello!"

"Hi, Mrs. D'Agostino. I'm sorry for the late call, but I'm looking for—" I say.

"He's here," she whispers.

"He…who is there?"

"Who are you looking for?" she replies, still whispering.

"Benji."

“Exactly,” she says. “You must be Denver.”

“I am,” I say, unsure how she knows my name.

Not that I don’t frequent the Happy Witch Café, but I haven’t been there much since I started playing with Hwan and the others and since his drinks come with a great smile and a lot of enthusiasm for D&D, I haven’t been around Lilian’s as much.

Which explains how I didn’t know Benji worked there. But since he moved in with me and told me, I’ve spent some time at the Happy Witch Café, mainly on the weekends.

“How do you—”

“Oh darling. Benji won’t shut up about you. You should see him at work. Denver this and Denver that. The boy is smitten. Are you?”

“I am. And I need to talk to him. Can you…would you mind telling me—”

“6 Portman Road,” she says and hangs up.

I sit there staring at my phone for a few seconds before I set off again.

God, I hope this isn’t overkill.

I really, truly hope he’s not creeped out by all the effort to find and talk to him.

The light on the front porch is already on, and the door opens as soon as I step up and brace myself to knock.

Lilian D’Agostino appears with her signature warm smile and fiery red hair and steps outside.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

She nods. “I just…I want to ask. Did you know he’s been living in his car?” she asks.

“I only found out two weeks ago, and I took him home.”

Her smile disappears for a moment, and she curses. “Why didn’t he tell me? If I’d known I’d have told him he can stay with me a long time ago. I don’t have a spare bedroom for nothing.”

“I don’t know, Mrs. D’Agostino. He didn’t tell us either.”

She reaches out for my hand and gives it a squeeze. “Go on. I haven’t told him anything, but he’s still up. I’ll stay out of your way.”

I open my mouth to thank her, but she puts her hand to my lips and shushes me. Then she takes me inside and shows me to the guestroom.

I knock, and my breathing gets harder. Heavier.

The door opens a crack and Benji appears, looking all wonderful and handsome. But his eyes are puffy and red.

“You’ve been crying,” I say before I can help it.

“Denver, what are you doing here?”

“I came to find you,” I tell him.

“How did you—”

“It doesn’t matter. Benji, why did you leave?”

“I…I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—”

“Why did you kiss me?” My voice comes out a little more aggressive than I mean it, but I can’t breathe normally enough to sound as vulnerable as I feel standing in front of him trying to vocalize everything I feel.

“I didn’t…I’m sorry. You should go.” He tries to close the door, but I block it with my foot.

“Don’t, Benji. I’m not mad. I’m…I’m asking because I think…I think we both feel the same way.”

Benji lets the door go and he takes a step back, staring at me as if in disbelief.

“What do you mean?”

Pushing the door open, I close the distance between us and lift my hand to cup his face and smile. “What do you think I mean?”

He swallows again, and I chuckle.

“You’re so sweet. And we’re both idiots.”

His gaze snaps from me to my hand on his cheek and back to me. “We are?”

I nod and lean my forehead against his. “I like you, Benji. I like you as a boy—a man.”

“You do?”

I slow-blink as a response.

“I…” He bites his lip. “I like you too. As a man, I mean.”

I don’t know what it is. If it’s being honest with him or the silliness of our statements—I mean, who says “I like you as a man”—but it feels like I can breathe again.

And so I take in a deep breath.

And I kiss him.

I lock lips with Benji and get a taste of him like I’ve wanted to do since he kissed me back at my house.

Only this time there’s no hesitation, or fear, or hold-backs.

It’s just us being true to ourselves.

“Please come home with me. Please,” I beg him when I pull back long enough to refill my lungs.

Benji’s eyes look so wide and beautiful up close. I could get lost in them forever. I can’t believe I ever doubted how I feel about him.

“Okay,” he whispers, and my heart starts racing in anticipation of holding him in my arms and kissing him all night long.

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Chapter Seven

Benji

I can't stop staring at the side of his face as he drives me back to his place, and I can't believe it.

Denver is interested in me. Denver, who I've been swooning over ever since I met him. Denver, who has been in one too many dreams for it to be healthy. Denver, who rescued me from the streets and gave me the courage to admit I can't do this alone.

That's why I went to Lilian after I ran off. Because after living in warmth and safety for over a week, I knew I couldn't keep doing it. I couldn't go back to sleeping in my car.

Denver helped me realize that asking for help isn't bad. It isn't shameful or embarrassing. It's human nature. Sometimes we need help. Sometimes we give help. That's the whole purpose of community, even if it has been perverted over time.

"Are you okay?" he asks me at some point when he's stopped at a traffic light.

I focus my vision on his eyes, his beautiful brown eyes, and I can't help but smile.

"Yeah," I tell him, and he responds in kind, before turning his full attention back on the road.

I can't turn away, though.

Because he likes me. *He* likes *me*.

And all this time I thought it was all in my head. I thought I was projecting because I wanted him so bad. I thought I was misinterpreting things because I've got a crush on him.

And yet I was as right as rolling nat twenty on an Insight check.

"Come on. Let's go," he says.

I shake my head and realize we've reached his apartment complex and he's holding the passenger door open and he's offering me his hand.

"Oh," is all I can manage to say before I'm swept away.

His hand is a little hotter and slippery than usual, and even though he's not showing it, I can tell he's nervous. Why else would he be sweating?

My own temperature rises the more we touch, and I can barely breathe by the time we reach his front door.

I watch him as he unlocks the door, and when the light from his apartment hits his face, I can confirm he's in fact turned beet red. It's nice for someone else to blush for a change.

"Are you okay?" I ask him and reach for his cheek.

"What? Yeah. Oh. I'm fine," he says, clearing his throat. "Are you hungry?"

I chuckle and shake my head.

"Are you nervous?" I ask, not even sure where I found all this courage to be this forward.

"I…no. I'm good. Why, are you?"

I bite my lip and take my shoes off, walking into the apartment.

Denver does the same, and he retreats into the kitchen only to return a minute later with sodas for both of us.

"Where did the others go?" I ask him as he settles down next to me.

"Oh, they…they packed up after you ran off."

"I'm so sorry I did that," I say.

"It's okay." Denver presses his lips together. "I'm just glad you're okay."

He puts his soda down and cups the side of my face. I lean into his touch and close my eyes only for a moment.

"Did you mean what you said? Back at Lilian's?" he asks.

I blink. I blink again.

"Of course. Why? Did you…did you not?"

Denver laughs and shakes his head. "No, I did. I just…I can't believe we both feel the same way and we didn't realize."

I shrug. “I guess that’s how it usually works. With friends.”

He nods and gazes into my eyes. It only serves to make me hotter.

“I like you, Benji.”

“I like you too,” I chuckle.

No idea why, because it’s not funny. It’s everything I’ve ever dreamed of.

“I want to kiss you again. Is that okay?”

I don’t say anything. I just lean forward and reunite our lips and hold my breath as if I’m about to take a leap from atop the highest building.

I’ve never been intimate with anyone. Never even kissed anyone, and this…this is all too real. Too intense. Too fucking breathtaking.

But as soon as he deepens our kiss, I forget all that. I forget everything that’s been going through my head. All the worries, the stress, the insecurities and just…just kiss him back.

I put my hand on the back of his head and hold him close. Closer still when our tongues intertwine and a moan gets trapped between our lips.

His hand travels down to my nape, causing a flurry of goosebumps to ignite all over and then continues down to the small of my back before he pulls back and all out of breath asks me, “Is this…okay? I…don’t want to do something you’re not ready for.”

I bite my lip and compose myself before I reply, though that’s impossible because every part of me is alive.

“Do you mean…ready for…”

“Sex. What do you think I meant?” He narrows his eyes, and I shrug.

“I…I’ve never been with anyone,” I mumble and wait for his reaction.

“Phew,” he lets out, and I have to take pause because that’s the last kind of response I was expecting. “That’s a relief.”

“It is?” I ask.

Denver’s eyes go wide open as if he’s realized a mistake and cups my cheek again.

“No. I meant…I’ve never been with a man either, so I’m just as scared as you.”

“I’m not scared,” I say.

That’s a total lie. I was a little, of course. But I’ve waited long enough, and having the man I’ve been crushing on for months now be my first is a dream come true.

“You’re not?”

I shake my head. “I’m not a teenager. I know I act younger than my age and I’m more inexperienced in life, but…I like sex. I just haven’t had the chance to do it. But you said…are you straight? Or…”

“Bi. But I’ve always been with women. God, that sounds like I’m a player. I mean, I’ve been in relationships with a couple of women, so I never had the chance to do it. With a man.”

“So you want to slow down?” I ask, putting my hand over his against my face and look him in the eyes.

A shiver runs down my spine and my cock jerks at the tension between us and the promise of what’s about to come.

“No. I just thought maybe you—” he starts.

Before he can finish his sentence, I climb on top of him and sit on his lap, kissing him deep and passionately, making it clear that I’m not a wallflower he needs to be delicate for.

My cock jolts in my underwear, and I press my body against his so he can feel my erection.

I feel his prodding at my taint, and I let out a soft moan that he gobbles up all too eagerly.

“See. I want this,” I whisper in his ear and then move down to his neck and lick and suck until I can feel his goosebumps against my tongue.

He wraps his hands around my waist and bucks his hips so I can feel more of his cock against my legs. My dick is painfully hard, and I’m all out of breath before we’ve even begun.

I hold on for as long as I can and then push myself off him and slide down his body, working diligently to unzip him and free his cock.

I have to swallow a knot in my throat at the sight of his long, slender erection that feels like lava in my hand, and I salivate at the sight of him.

“Fuck, Benji,” he groans before I’ve had the chance to taste him, and I look up to see the same fire in his eyes as I feel inside.

Knowing he feels as intensely as I do makes every muscle in my body tighten, and I can’t wait any longer.

I guide his cock to my mouth and wrap my lips around his pink, swollen crown, and a groan climbs up my throat.

It’s unlike anything I thought it would be. It’s so alien. No sex toy or finger-sucking could have prepared me for the joy of being so intimate with another man’s cock, but fuck, this feels intoxicating.

Despite this being the first time, I instinctively know what to do. What feels good, both for me and for him. All those years of porn consumption weren't for nothing.

Denver shakes and squirms under me, and I take great joy knowing I make him feel weak at the knees. He gasps and moans, sending shivers down my spine and all the way to my own cock, but before I can make him spill his seed, he puts his hand on my shoulder and pushes me off him.

"What happened?" I ask, my voice low and hoarse.

"Nothing happened," he replies with a deep breath and a smile. "But I'm about to come, and I want to taste you too before that happens."

He lifts me up and pins me to the couch as he returns the favor.

He unbuttons my jeans, taking them fully off, before he does the same with my sweater and my underpants.

Then I lie back and watch him take his clothes off completely, and I have to bite my tongue before I let out an embarrassing groan at the sight of his abs and his perfect pecs.

I never expected him to be athletic or fit, but he's fucking ripped. And he looks like the sexiest nerd in the world with his glasses on.

"I didn't know you work out," I tell him.

He smirks and sits by my feet then starts to crawl up and stops short at my hips.

"I hit the gym before work," he replies.

That would explain the seven in the morning departure from home when usually offices don't open until nine or ten.

Whatever. I don't have the wherewithal to even think about that as he wraps his hand around my cock and strokes me a few times while staring at me.

I can barely breathe under his watch or even move. I'm sure I should be doing something or at least saying something, but I'm lost for words.

He tugs me a few more times before readjusting his position, and I feel his still-hard cock rub against my feet as he puts me in his mouth.

Correction. *Now* I'm lost for words.

I suck in a deep breath and grab on to the couch covers for dear life.

The wet heat of his mouth and the tightness of his lips around my cock send me reeling, and I have to fight with everything that's holy in me not to let go.

I can’t believe this is happening. That any of this is happening. All this time I’ve been made to feel like less than. Like I could never be desired or wanted in this way. Or in any way, really, and here Denver is proving me wrong with every suck, every stroke, every lick.

“Stop. Please. Den,” I whimper, and he freezes for a second. “I’m gonna come.”

With a smirk, he resumes the blowjob, if anything with even more rigor than before, and I writhe under him trying to tame the imminent explosion.

It’s inevitable, though. Even if he stopped now.

Something tugs at the pit of my stomach, and it makes me lose complete control over my body. I twitch and shudder and shoot my load over Denver’s face and chest, my stomach. It goes all over. Even the couch, but I’m too numb from the tempestuous ocean inside me coming to a euphoric stop to care.

Denver climbs up to me and pecks me on the lips.

“Are you okay?” he asks, and I can only answer in groans and humphs.

He lies down partly on top of me and partly next to me and wraps his arm around my stomach, but I can still feel his cock hard against my thigh.

So even though my limbs feel like jelly, I reach for him and jerk him off.

“You don’t have to,” he whispers in my ear, but it only makes me go faster, and he lets out a soft breath against my neck that gives me goosebumps.

I swipe some of my cum with my fingers before I go back to stroking him, and he has to press his face to the crook of my neck to muffle his grunts.

His hot seed splashes all over my forearm and belly, hot, white, and sticky and so delicious that I can’t resist a swipe and a taste.

Denver stares at me as I suck on my finger and smirks, so I let out a moan for his benefit.

“What’s the verdict then?” He chuckles.

I take the finger out of my mouth and purse lips for a moment. “Sweet, syrupy, sharp. Tastes like lemon meringue pie. I approve,” I say, and he laughs out loud.

“Shut up.” He buries himself into the crook of my neck again.

I wrap my hands around him and try to catch my breath.

“That was so much better than I could have ever imagined,” I say, and it makes Denver re-emerge to look at me.

“Yeah?”

I nod.

“For me too. I…” He sucks in a breath. “I don’t think I’ve had such a good orgasm ever.”

“If blowjobs and a handjob feel like this, I don’t think I can imagine what fucking will feel like.”

Denver gasps and slaps my chest gently then lies his head next to mine. “We’ve got all the time in the world to find out. There’s no rush, right?”

I shake my head. “No rush at all.”

Denver takes in a deep breath, and I can feel his face twist. For some reason I know it’s because he’s smiling. Probably because I am too.

“I’m so happy I met you.”

I let out a chuckle.

“What?” he asks.

“Nothing.”

“Tell me,” he insists.

“It’s just funny, that’s all. If you think you’re happy you met me, I don’t know what I should say. You saved me. In more ways than you can imagine.”

He lifts his head and looks back at me. He strokes my face. “What do you mean?”

I sigh and take a deep breath. Drudging up the past is the last thing I want to be doing right now, but he has a right to know.

“After my parents kicked me out, I thought I was never going to get anything good. Even before that, to be honest. I just… I thought being gay meant living a life full of misery and sadness. I knew I’d have to hide forever because my parents were…are too religious to accept a gay son, but even after I accepted that I am gay and I can’t change it, I just thought it meant I’d be alone forever.”

Denver shakes his head before I even finish and gives me a soft kiss on the lips. “You’ll never be alone. Never say that. You can be happy and fulfilled all your life. With or without me.”

I cup his face and smile. “I’d rather be with you, though. If that’s okay.”

Denver laughs and nods. “I think we can swing it.”

I kiss him.

And I kiss him again and again. Until my lips are raw and red. But I still kiss him more and more. I don’t think I can ever stop. As long as he doesn’t want to either.

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Chapter Eight

Denver

I can't believe what just happened. And I can't believe that it felt so much better than it ever had with anyone I've been with before. Not that I have much experience with sex and relationships. In fact, sex has never been something I was desperate for with any of my past girlfriends, but with Benji, it feels different. It feels fated, although that's very melodramatic.

Maybe it's because he's a man, but that can't be all of it. I mean, I know I'm bi because I fucking love women and their bodies too. But there's something else. Maybe it is fate. Maybe it's not. The truth is I don't know why I feel different with Benji. And it doesn't matter. I just know that he makes me feel good about myself. He makes me feel good, full stop.

I hold him closer to me for what feels like forever, and he hugs me back. I feel safe in his arms. I feel at peace. Who could have told me two months ago that I'd be head over heels about this meek little guy that walked into my first session and barely said a word.

And yet, a whole different side of him came out tonight. And it was gorgeous. I don't know exactly the number his parents did on him, but I know now that it affected Benji more than he ever let on. But little by little, I'm sure I can drag the real Benji back to the forefront. And he'll never have to hide himself again.

My stomach croaks, breaking the quiet in the apartment, and I grimace. "Sorry. I guess I'm hungry."

“I’m hungry too. Should we make something to eat?” Benji asks, and I smile back at him.

“Sure. What do you want?”

“Lemon meringue pie, maybe,” he says with a shrug and pretend-innocence, but I shove him anyway.

“Cheeky.”

“What? For some reason I’ve got a craving for it now.”

I chuckle and sit up, and with a shake of my head, I try to get off the couch only for Benji to drag me to his lap, and he swipes my finger over his stomach and guides it to his mouth.

My cock twitches, and I bite my lip from letting out a groan.

“Hm. It’s all dried out. I’ll have to get a fresh supply.”

I roll my eyes and groan. “Jesus. I awakened the slut inside you.”

Benji gasps, and I laugh.

“What? It’s true. Come on. Get up, Pretty Woman. I’ll make us some real food.”

He huffs but takes my hand, and I lead us into the kitchen where I put an apron on him and me, and we get to work to make our late dinner.

“You chop the leeks, scallions, and mushrooms,” I say and put a pot on the stove.

“What are you going to do?” he asks.

“Look at your pretty bum,” I reply and slap his naked butt-cheek. Benji does a little jump on the spot, and his skin turns red all over.

“I like this naked cooking thing,” he says.

I press my body behind him and kiss the back of his neck in response. Benji leans against me for a moment, but I pull away when my cock starts growing hard against his ass.

“Hey! Unfair,” he mumbles, and I shake my head with a chuckle.

I turn my attention to the pot. I bring half a liter of water to boil before I throw two chicken stock cubes into it and bring the temperature all the way down to simmer. I whisk the water until the stock cubes have dissolved and then grab another pan and put it on the second burner.

When the olive oil has heated up, I add the leeks, scallions, and mushrooms, and I tell Benji how much risotto rice to pour into a cup and mix the rice in.

“It smells so nice already,” Benji hums, and it makes my heart skip a beat.

It’s already so natural being with him. Maybe it’s because we’ve shared the same space for over two weeks or the fact we’ve just seen each other naked, but I feel like we’ve been doing this “dance” forever.

I can imagine us cooking together, butt naked with only an apron on all for the rest of our lives, and I’m not scared. If anything, I’m excited. Like I want to skip ahead to our best years already.

Which is weird because we’re not even together yet. We haven’t even talked about what we are. We’re definitely something. It just hasn’t been defined yet.

“Can you grab the ladle from the second drawer?” I ask him, and I pour a little wine in the pan to finish off the rice.

When I turn to look at Benji he’s all bent over the drawer, giving me a perfect view of his round butt, and my cock jerks again.

This guy is a walking sin. And to think all this time I’ve been worried about taking advantage of him.

“Why so tense?” he asks with a sultry voice as he hands me the ladle, and I take it off him, biting my tongue.

As if that can stop me from going all hard at the sight of him.

I don’t answer him. Instead, I focus on pouring the stock water in the pan before the rice burns, a little at a time.

“I’ve never made risotto like that. It’s so slow,” Benji says ten minutes later when I pour the last few spoonfuls of stock water in the risotto, and I shrug.

“That’s the proper way to make risotto,” I tell him, and he makes a face.

“Huh. I never knew,” he replies and stares at me as if I’m his everything.

Several minutes later, I’m the one staring at him as he seems to be having a risotto-induced orgasm.

“What?” he asks.

“Nothing.”

He kicks my foot, and I chuckle.

“Tell me,” he says.

“You’re so pretty,” I tell him.

“Shut up,” he replies, taking a big mouthful of rice, blushing as he chews.

“You are, though. And apparently a bit of a ho.”

That makes him choke. He starts coughing, and I help him by patting his back.

“Sorry. I can stop if it’s making you feel awkward.”

“No. Stop? I like it.” He blushes even more.

“Yeah?”

He nods, and I lift my leg under the table until my foot is pressed against his cock that goes hard in seconds under my touch. I’m so glad we never got dressed to eat.

“Fuck!” he groans and almost drops his spoon.

“Sorry. Is this okay?” I ask.

Benji smirks and shakes his head. “Why wouldn’t it be? Food and entertainment, all at once. What’s not to like?”

I laugh, but I don’t stop stroking him. He doesn’t stop eating and moaning, though I’m no longer sure if it’s because of the food or the foot job.

The harder he gets, the harder he makes me, so I end up touching myself at the same time, and I don’t stop until I shoot my load again. Even then I keep going until I see Benji squirm and feel his seed run down my foot.

“Now who’s the slut?” Benji asks when he’s composed himself, and I simply shrug and get up.

I go stand next to him, and he raises an eyebrow, staring back at me.

“Dessert is served,” I tell him and point to my stomach, all sticky with his favorite treat.

He gasps as if shocked by my words, but that doesn’t stop him from licking me clean.

“I can’t believe you just did that,” he says moments later and buries himself on my crotch. His breath against my limp cock gives me goosebumps.

I wrap my arms around him and kiss the top of his head.

“Are you okay?” I whisper.

He nods. “I wish I didn’t have to go,” he says.

I frown. “Who says you have to go? Go where?”

“Lilian’s.”

I pause and drop to my knees so I can look into his eyes. “Why would you go back to Lilian’s?”

Benji glares at me. “Come on, Denver. I don’t want to be a burden to you. And I’m sure the last thing you want is to live with your boyfriend from the first date.”

“Is that what we are?” I ask him and cock my head with a smirk, though it seems Benji interprets it a different way because immediately he apologizes. “You didn’t say anything wrong. I was just…checking. Because I wasn’t sure.”

“I mean…I guess. If you want.”

I grab him with both hands and plant a juicy kiss to his lips, and this time I can taste myself on him.

It is a little sweeter and a little tart, just like I remember from the last time I tasted my own cum, but…I quite like it for a change.

Lemon meringue pie indeed.

“Are you kidding? I love it,” I tell him, and his smile reaches his eyes.

My heart thumps out of sync in my chest, and I feel all heavy and light at the same time.

This guy.

“You mean it?”

“Are you kidding? You make me so happy, Benji. Of course I want to be your boyfriend.”

Benji pulls me into his arms, and I hug him back.

“See? You don’t have to go. I’d love to live with my boyfriend from the first date,” I say when his earlier statement comes to mind again.

I don’t want him to go. I don’t want him to leave. I don’t want him to think he’s not welcome here.

“Are you sure? It’s a lot. And very fast.”

I grab him by the chin and rub my nose to his before I reply. “Of course. Let’s try it out. If it’s too much, we can figure something else out. But you’ve already lived here for two weeks, and it’s been the best time of my life.”

“For me too,” he says.

“Exactly. So what’s there to be afraid of?”

He gazes into my eyes for a long, beautiful moment and then finally nods. “You’re right. I’ll stay.”

“Yeah?” I ask, and when he confirms it again, I give him my hand. “Well, let me take you to our bed then. I’ve got a hundred things I want to do to you, and they require pillows and bedsheets.”

Benji laughs but follows me into my bedroom, and we spend all night tangled in each other's arms. Hell, even in the early morning, before I fall back to sleep.

When I open my eyes again, he's not there. I sit up in full panic.

Did I dream last night? Did I have the longest, wettest dream of my life? Or did Benji run back to Lilian's this morning?

I start climbing out of bed when the door opens and Benji walks in wearing nothing but his underwear and carrying a tray.

"Oh my god! You're here!" I sigh in relief and reach for his face.

His eyebrows crease with worry. "Are you okay? What happened?"

I shake my head. "I thought it was all a dream. Or that you went back to Lilian's."

Benji sets the tray next to me and takes my hand. He kisses the back of it and holds it tight with both his hands. "Definitely not a dream," he says. "But I did go back to Lilian's."

I freeze and glare at him. "You did?"

"Yeah." He laughs, though I'm not sure what's so funny about that. "To pick up the rest of my stuff and my car?"

I let out a sigh of relief I didn't know I was holding and relax against the pillows and headboard.

"What's all this?" I ask.

"Breakfast. I wiped you out last night. Thought you'd be hungry."

He glides a hand over the tray and there's a plate full of cinnamon buns glazed with cream cheese, a stack of chocolate chip pancakes with maple syrup and blueberries, and a pot of coffee.

"This is heaven," I tell him and pull him in for a kiss before I dive into one of his delicious buns.

He grabs the other one, and we sit in bed, quietly eating and gazing into each other's eyes when my phone buzzes.

I read the incoming email, and even though I have every reason to feel dejected and frustrated I feel…lighter.

"What was that?" Benji asks.

"Nothing. Just a work email," I tell him and pour coffee for both of us.

"Everything okay?" Benji asks with a narrow gaze, and I reassure him with a warm smile.

"Just an update on the promotion."

"Did you get it?"

“Nope,” I say, and I feel even lighter.

“I’m so sorry,” Benji says and caresses my face.

“I’m not. I didn’t even want it if I’m honest. Life’s too short to waste time on things you don’t enjoy. I’d rather focus on everything that makes me happy.” I cup my hand over his hand resting on my face and pin him with my gaze. “Like you.”

He lights up. His eyes get larger and even more beautiful, if that’s even possible. And I can’t help but drive his lips to mine, surer than ever that things are going to be okay.

As long as I have Benji in my life, as long as we both have each other, we will be okay.

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Chapter Nine

Benji

Two And A Half Months Later

"I use my very pink and very cute lute to sing to the Chaosholder," Hwan says, twinkling his fingers under his chin and batting his eyelashes as if he can do the same thing in real life to me.

"Okay." I lean forward and narrow my eyes, pressing the button to make the lights pink. "What are you trying to do with your song?"

"I'm trying to charm him so bad he falls in love with me and turn this floating big, giant eye alien into a puppy dog that will do my bidding."

The girls laugh, but Denver scoffs, and I turn to look at him.

He looks so cute. He's wearing his elf ears and leaf crown, and his face is all painted with gold to imitate his origin story as a half-elf half-angel druid. I smile at him before I turn to Hwan.

"Okay. What do I need to do?"

"Roll a charisma saving throw, please and thank you," he replies.

I smirk. "I will roll a charisma saving throw, but I want you to roll a Persuasion check first. It's gonna be a toughie. DC is, hm…twenty-six."

Hwan gasps then pouts. "That's so unfair."

I shrug. "You are dealing with a Chaosholder."

"Fine," he huffs and rolls his d20. His frustration turns into a smile. "Twenty-eight. Now drop to your knees, puppy."

My jaw drops open, but I lean back on the game master's chair that Den has so graciously lent me for the night's session and laugh out loud.

"What a pretty song," I say in my deepest voice with a tinge of sap and bat my lashes back at Hwan. "Sing another, handsome."

Everyone laughs, and Hwan takes the spotlight, singing crap about valiant heroes and facial care routines, but I let him waffle and turn to look at Den.

He's staring at me, grinning from ear to ear. No doubt proud of how well I'm doing as a game master.

And it's not just my roleplaying skills that have improved. It's everything. Everything in my life is going better than I could have ever dreamed.

Lilian has promoted me to supervisor. I signed myself up to a private art studio, and I'm working on some adventures for Dungeons and Dragons that I want to publish eventually, even though I'm nowhere near an expert yet.

It's a whole different life than I ever expected to have. But most of all, it's him, Den—Denver—being in my life that's that most unexpected.

He's given me a new lease on life. He lent me a hand at my lowest and helped me succeed on my saving throw, but he didn't stop there. He's also loved me and cherished me more than I ever thought a person would or could.

He's taught me what it's like to be wanted. What's it like for someone to care about me.

He's also taught me something else. Something meaningful. Something that I will carry forever no matter what may happen to us.

"I love you," I mouth at him.

He shapes a heart with his fingers and puts it on his heart, and I can't help but smile back at him and breathe a little easier.

This. This is what he taught me. What it's like to belong.

What it's like to find home in other people.

With my face all achy from smiling and my heart full of love I turn and address the others: "okay, who wants pizza? My treat."

* * *

Read the bonus epilogue and what Benji and Denver are up to two years down the line right here:
https://www.rhyswritesromance.com/bonus-material-signup

And if you're looking for Hwan's story, check out *Mother Parker* (Mayberry Protectors #2)
Read now: https://readerlinks.com/l/5607050

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About the Author

Rhys Everly-Lawless is a hopeless romantic who loves happily-ever-afters.

Which would explain why he loves writing them.

When he's not passionately typing out his next book, you can find him cuddling his dog, feeding his husband, or taking long walks letting those plot bunnies breed ferociously in his head.

He writes contemporary gay romances as Rhys Everly and LGBTQ+ urban fantasy and paranormal romances as Rhys Lawless.

You can find out more about him and his works-in-progress by joining his Facebook group or visiting his website rhyswritesromance.com

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On A Pucking Whim

J.R. Gray

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Content Warnings

Parents

Parental drug use mentioned (No details)
Parental poverty mentioned
Parental abuse hinted at but not shown
Assumption of parental homophobia mentioned but not shown

Sex

Semi public sex
Dangerous sexual activities while driving
Semi public masturbation mentioned

Other

Poverty and job stress
Mentions of religious based homophobia
Nicotine use off page (ZYN)
Threats if gun violence (Affectionately)
Fantasies of violence against abusers

Body Image

Body dysmorphia/body shame
Discussion about fat-phobic body expectations in the gay community (Disapprovingly)

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Chapter One

Raven

The Waffle House at three AM is a special kind of place. It's almost like a space between worlds where reality is suspended for a while. I'm sober at a time no one else at Waffle House is sober. But the yellow lines started to blur, so I stopped for a much-needed coffee break to not be another car on the road.

I stayed for the dark eyes that kept meeting mine through the kitchen window. He's working. What am I doing? I have eight more hours to drive and a summer to get through.

Making up fantasies in my head about a beautiful man in the middle of nowhere Tennessee means I probably need sleep. I've been up for almost twenty-four hours. Maybe I should nap. I'm not in a hurry to get home. I still have miles and miles of my drive to go, and I need to get on with it sooner rather than later.

Summer break from college means getting back to all-night-grinds to earn enough money for next year. It will be my life until I go back. But I'm lucky because I have a job to return to, with flexibility for training and hockey. Family politics and drama aside, it's better than a lot of guys have.

"More coffee?" Dark eyes meet mine across the counter. It's the guy from the kitchen.

"Sure." I don't know what else to say. "Can I buy you a cup?"

"I have to get back to the kitchen," he says, but lingers.

“Right. I’m an idiot.” I pour another sugar in my mug to soften the harsh brew.

He goes back to the kitchen and I want to kick myself for not asking when he’s off.

I don’t know why I’ve spent so long at this exit just to peer into a pair of dark eyes. I’m wasting time. I should be driving until I can’t keep my eyes open any longer, powering through the last eight hours, or at a rest stop, catching a few hours of sleep. It’s not worth the money to rent a room when sleeping in my car works well enough.

Despite it all, I’m anxious to get home. I miss my mom and siblings. My dad, if he’s sober, even if I have to hide who I am while I’m there. He can be great.

Home comes with a complicated set of rules I adhere to when I return for the summer. Culture is laced so tightly with religion there, it’s impossible to escape. Maybe that’s why I’m sitting at this mostly empty rest stop, clinging to the last parts of myself I have to give up for the next few months. I’m holding onto the fleeting moments of my queerness before I have to pack it down inside myself. Or maybe it’s the idea of one last hookup before I delete my apps and pretend to be the saint saving himself for the right girl.

I should go, but the line cook catches my gaze again and he almost smiles. It’s silly, but I want to keep watching him for a while longer. He’s doing his job with a kind of infectious happiness I’ve never seen from any line cook at a run down Waffle House. He seems to be in his own world except for those moments he looks up and meets my eyes.

“Can I get you anything else before I clock out.” He’s back, almost hesitant but still happy. “Sure you don’t want anything to eat?” He’s cute. Maybe a year older than I am, but he’s still got this innocent look to him, one I can’t even remember when I lost.

“Weird time to finish your shift?” I check my watch, wondering if more time passed than I thought. Maybe I can convince him to come take a drive with me before he goes home.

“I have to be at the bakery to get the pastries going.” He says, dashing all my plans of stealing away for a few hours.

“You go from this job to another?” I don’t know why I’m surprised. Most everyone I grew up with worked two jobs and the tips at Waffle

House overnight cannot be great. I cringe, realizing I am part of that problem with my meager $1.95 cup of coffee with a dollar tip.

“It’s a living.” He plays with a tiny hole in the cuff of his sleeve and I’m dying for him to look at me again. “For now.” He pauses like he wants to say something else.

“For now?” I ask, desperate to keep the conversation going.

“At least until I can afford culinary school.” He’s nothing like the guys I normally go for. Soft and sweet. It makes me want to protect him.

“Culinary school? You already work at a bakery…?” I’m not a chef. I guess I don’t know how any of that works.

“I don’t want to make dough forever.” He finally looks up, full lips slightly parted as he tongues over one of his snake bite piercings. “I want to have my own kitchen.”

Lofty dreams to go with my own NHL ones. Poor boys scraping by dreaming of bigger things.

“Are you going to do like pastry school or like top chef type stuff.”

Is there a difference?

“I wish I could go to pastry school, but there isn’t one around here. I’m lucky there’s a culinary school I can commute to in the city.” He picks up my paid check and puts it on the ticket skewer.

“There isn’t a pastry school around here?” I bet there is one in New Orleans. They love desserts and pastries. One of the best parts of working a night shift is getting off work just in time for the fresh beignets.

He laughs, and it’s musical, but his dark eyes cloud with sadness. It makes him even sexier. “In Tennessee? No. I’m lucky there is anything nearby.”

I guess he’s right. There isn’t much around here. I’ve driven this way a few times to and from college for breaks.

“How long do you have before you have to be at work?” I ask, not wanting him to leave and hoping he’s lingering because he’s interested.

He surveys me before answering. “Not long… and it’s kind of a long walk, so I need to get going…”

Walk! That gives me an in. A way to eek out a few more minutes with him.

“Can I drive you?” I can’t pass up the perfect opportunity he’s laid at my feet.

His gaze drops and he's back to his sleeve and the hole. "I'm sure you have someplace to be."

I shake my head. "Just more driving alone and this sounds better…"

Too forward? Maybe—I don't care. Three AM is a time to be who we're too scared to be in the daylight.

He bites his lips but puts his elbows on the counter, leaning forward. "Where are you heading?"

"New Orleans."

"I'm sure people are expecting you." He's cagey but not saying no.

"They can wait." I lean forward brushing my fingers against his. "What's your name?"

He jumps, almost scared of the contact, but doesn't pull back. "Camren—Cam—what's yours?"

"Everyone calls me Raven." It's not even my last name, but it started when I decided to befriend all the crows near campus and just kinda stuck.

"Do you like it?"

"Most of the time." I like it better than my father's name, but that's a long story, and I don't want to bring the mood down.

We are silent for a moment.

"Let me drive you…please." I guess I'm not above begging in the middle of the night.

"Are you sure?" His gaze flick back to mine and there is something there, so I brush my finger tips against his, reinitiating the contact.

He flinches again, but this time it's less, and it's followed by a bright smile, revealing dimples and fuck, it makes him hotter. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. If you don't want me to drive you, I won't push, but even if you don't want—anything—please let me, just so I know you get there safely." I'd know that flinch anywhere. I'd seen it far too many times in far too many people. I'm careful with my touch because of it. Just the gentle stroke of a finger over his.

He bites his lip again then says, "Okay. Let me get my stuff."

I wait for under a minute until he returns without his apron and a small bag. "Ready?"

"Yes."

I lead him out to my beat up Crown Vic. It's impossible to miss with the red passenger door while the rest of the car is black. My cousin helped me

replace it after I bought the car at auction. He helps me keep the car tuned up too between the drives to New York and back.

I open the door for him, and he slips into the pristine interior. Just because she's not worth a whole lot doesn't mean I don't take care of her. Cam buckles himself while I get in the other side.

"Where to?" I ask turning slightly in my seat to look at him.

"I'll show you."

I start the engine and pull out of the mostly empty parking lot, following his directions away from the highway. "How long have you worked at the bakery?"

"Four years. I'm trying to get as much experience before I apply to school as I can. So I started as soon as I turned sixteen."

"You're twenty?" I ask.

"Yeah. You?"

We're the same age.

"Same actually." I glance over at him.

"Where are you coming from, heading to New Orleans at this hour?"

"New York."

He looks shocked. "What is in New York?"

"I got to school up there." I turn down a side street as he directs and glance over to gauge his reaction.

"That's a long ways to go to school." He says it almost like he wishes he could run away like I did. I don't blame him.

"Hockey, I took the money and ran. It's easier to be myself that far away." I hope he'll catch what I'm implying.

"I know what you mean." His elbow nudges mine on the arm rest. "So you play college hockey, like at one of those big schools?"

"I do." I lean into the contact, wanting more.

"Aren't those guys all—" He doesn't have to say it. I know what he means.

"It's not so bad on my team. But I don't really tell anyone." I want to touch him more, but I don't want to scare him away. So I settle with just putting my hand on his.

He hesitates then turns his palm over lacing our fingers. "That sucks."

"I'm used to it. It's not any different than how I grew up. You know?" I watch for his reaction assuming his was similar.

“I’m very familiar.” He forces a smile but there are no dimples, so I know it’s not real. “This is it up here.”

I slow the car, not ready for him to leave, rubbing my thumb over his. Then on a whim I ask, “What are you doing when you get off work?”

“You’re not going to wait around all morning for me to finish.” He gives me a look like I’ve lost my mind.

“Why not? I could use a nap, and then I have something to look forward to. What time do you get off?” I tighten my grip on his hand like it will make him stay.

“It depends on how much there is to do. But sometimes I don’t get off until like eleven. You can’t wait eight hours.” He looks at our joined palms.

I park on the side of the bakery, leaving us out of sight of the windows and lean towards him, dropping my voice. “Why not?”

“Because it’s insane. You’ve barely known me half an hour.”

“So?” I bring his hand to my lips, side-eyeing him.

He groans softly. “So…it’s not what people do.”

“What will you do if I wait?” I tease my tongue over the pads of his fingers with a silent promise of more.

“I don’t know.” He teases his finger in and out of my mouth.

I can’t resist the urge to kiss him so I close the distance, and softly brush our lips together. “I want to find out.”

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Chapter Two

Cam

I nearly jump at Raven's kiss, not at all expecting him to be soft. I lean into it, sliding my tongue over the seam of his lips. He parts them for me, and welcomes me into his mouth. I groan softly getting my first taste of him. There's coffee and zyn, but under that there's cinnamon and brown sugar. Exactly how he'd taste if I baked him myself.

He slips his fingers around the nape of my neck and my skin tingles. Everything in my body screams to run, but I fight past the trauma and let myself enjoy the softness. It's easier when they are rough. Every other guy I've picked up after a shift has been. I know what to expect when they are like that, but I so badly want his gentle nature to be real. I'm willing to do almost anything to chase it.

He breaks the kiss and I wait for him to unzip. But he shocks me again, kissing one of my dimples then the other. "I like these." His words all sound better in the slight French accent he has. It's hot as fuck.

"I grew them myself." I can't help but blush like a fucking idiot.

"I like when you smile, too." He doesn't stop kissing me, like he'll die if it goes too long between.

We just met. How can a connection be so electric?

"The smile is your fault." Raven brings his lips to mine again, still so gentle but not at all hesitant like a guy doing this for the first time. There's confidence there, but he's soft because that's who he is and he owns it. It's sexy. "I want more time."

I do too, but I'm scared to say it out loud. If I admit it to myself I'm leaving myself open to the disappointment. This is insane. He's not going to wait. I really thought we'd hook up and he'd be on his way.

It wouldn't be the first time I've hooked up with someone just passing through. It's easy working right near the truck stop like I do. But when he just drove me to work, I wasn't sure what he wanted.

The guys I pick up try to fuck me the minute I'm alone with them. I know what to expect. It's weird.

Raven is completely different, which I wasn't expecting. He's built like a straight guy who uses guys like me for blow jobs and then goes back to his straight life. So the hockey made a lot of sense, but then we got in his car and he's nothing like those guys.

"I like how you taste," he whispers between kisses.

"How is that?" My instinct is to roll my eyes at the clear flattery, but I just get redder.

"Like the rhubarb pie my nana used to make." His fingers slip into my hair, keeping me close. "I want to taste every inch of you."

"Not before I shower." I'm suddenly overly aware that I worked all night in the grease laden kitchen, and I'm letting him kiss me. I must smell atrocious.

"Yes, before you shower, and then after your shower too. I want to taste all of you."

I groan again, getting hard. Most of the guys I hook up with do not want to reciprocate. Which is fine. I'm in it for the love of the game, but I crave touch—love—something more.

"I promise it will be better after a shower." If I can figure out how to sneak home and back out without my mom or step dad asking questions.

"I promise it won't be." He grips my shirt like he wants to pull me into his lap, but restrains himself. "Fuck. I want to tell you to call in sick."

"I can't this late." I can't risk losing my job over a guy I'll never see again, no matter how much I want to. Jobs are getting harder and harder to come by.

I'm lost to his mouth. Soft touches and gentle pulls, both of us getting more and more worked up but neither crossing the line to take it further. The edging is killing me, but I don't want it to stop.

"I have to go." I don't know how much time has passed, but if I don't cut it off here I won't be able to.

He nods but still doesn’t release me. “I want you.”

“I want you too.” I cannot believe this guy wants to fuck me. He’s so out of my league it’s not even funny. He’s not only conventionally attractive but he’s also fit in a way regular people aren’t. He could have anyone he wants. I have no idea what he’s doing with a guy like me.

“Can I wait here? Or should I go park somewhere else?” He presses his forehead to mine, breathing hard, not releasing either grip he has on me.

“You can park around back. No one will bother you. There are only two of us in this early.” I pull back, and he lets me reluctantly.

Regret hits me in the chest. I never want to see the disappointment on his face again. I’d say yes to anything he asked to avoid it.

“So eleven?” he asks looking into my eyes with his beautiful green ones.

“Maybe before.” I know he won’t stay, and I won’t let myself get my hopes up. “I’ll try to get off earlier if I can.”

Usually I stay every minute they’ll let me so I can save as much as possible, but a few less hours won’t make that much of a difference.

“Just knock on the window if I’m asleep.” He searches my face, clearly wanting a confirmation.

“Okay.”

He’ll probably find someone way hotter and easier on an app the second I go inside. And that’s fine. “Show me where to park.”

Before I can say anything, he kisses me again, deeper and all consuming. My head is spinning when we break apart.

He releases me, and I want to tear his clothes off and call out of work. But I sit back and direct him to the back corner of the lot, under the shade of a big tree that will keep his car cool when the sun rises, so he doesn’t have to keep the engine on.

“I should go in,” I say not ready to leave.

“Not yet.” He grabs me and our clash is no longer soft. We’re biting and pulling and tugging each other across the divider.

He has me nearly bursting out of my jeans with how hard I am. If only he knew how I’d worship his cock.

Why did I waste so much time kissing him and not offer?

Now I probably won’t get the chance.

He stops like he’s going to say something, but then goes back and forth, at war with himself. Finally he moans into my mouth. “Fuck. You better go

before I can't stop."

Butterflies fill my chest as I make myself get out of his car. I look back after I unlock the door, expecting him to be leaving, but his car is off and his seat is all the way back and reclined as he watches me.

I give him a small awkward wave before I duck inside. "Stop thinking he'll stay. He's going to leave," I tell myself.

He's horny, and it's only a matter of time before that takes over.

I know how men are. I've been disappointed by enough of them for a lifetime.

"Who's going to leave?" Hannah asks.

Hanna is old enough to be my mother. But she doesn't have any kids. She said she never trusted herself enough not to make the mistakes her parents did, and I can't blame her. There's so much generational trauma woven deeply in my community, and it's only exacerbated by poverty. We can't escape it, but I'm trying.

"No one…a guy I met."

"A guy?" She gives me a knowing look. "This another trucker? I told you to stay away from the truckers or the next one I'm pulling the shot gun on."

"He's not a trucker!" I say before she gets any ideas to confront Raven with a gun.

She narrows her eyes like she doesn't believe me.

"I promise! He's my age, actually! And driving home from college."

"Really?"

I cross my heart. "I promise."

"Hmmm. Why do you think he's going to leave?"

"Because he's driving from New York to New Orleans."

"So you two…?"

"No! I barely have time to get over here on time leaving the Waffle House." I decide I might as well explain because she's going to ask me twenty questions if I don't. "He said he's going to wait for me to finish here. But I'm sure he won't."

"Wait huh?" She smiles knowingly.

"It's not going to happen. I'm sure he'll get on an app and find an option he won't have to wait for and be gone by the time I'm done. He's probably already left."

“He’s out there waiting? Like here?” She looks around me like she can see through the wall.

“No, like I said, he’s probably already left.” I step back to block the door. “You’re not going to harass him.”

She moves to the back window, leaning over the stainless steel prep table to peer through the blinds. “That Crown Vic over there in the corner?”

“He’s still there?” I join her, half surprised half hopeful.

“Yes.” She side-eyes me with a smirk. “We better get started so you can finish up early.”

“He’s probably just looking for a better option.”

But we get to work, and every time one of us checks he’s still there. First light sneaks up on us, and I check again for his car. He hasn’t moved.

“Get this batch finished and I’ll do the rest.” Hannah nods at the mixer.

“You know I can’t do that. Martha will be annoyed if I leave before nine.”

“I’ll clock you out before she gets here. Finish up and go.”

We get the last batch done in double time and Hannah holds out a box. “Take him some breakfast.”

I hug her before accepting the box. “Thank you.”

“We have to take happiness where we can get it, child.”

I tentatively walk over to the car, not sure how to wake up Raven without scaring him. When he comes into view he’s curled on his side, laid back on the seat, dark hair a mess like he tossed and turned for a while before he fell asleep. I finally decide to try the handle and it’s unlocked.

I slip into the car and he stirs, blinking before turning towards me, lips curling into a smile.

“Hi,” he says in a cute, sleepy voice.

“Hi,” I whisper back, reaching to brush the hair off his brow.

He picks up his head and kisses my wrist. “It’s way earlier than eleven.”

“My friend let me leave early.”

His smile widens. “Come here.”

I lean toward him brushing our lips together. “Here?”

“Closer.” He slips his tongue into my mouth, twirling it with mine.

I press across the center console, slipping an arm around him. “Like this?”

“No, closer.” In a surprisingly swift move, he drags me into his lap.

My knees straddle his hips, and I barely fit between him and the steering wheel, but somehow we make it work. His erection presses into my ass as I settle over him. “Fuck.”

“Mmmm. You feel good on top of me.”

I rock my ass subtly. “You’re happy to see me.”

“Exceptionally.” He grinds his impressive girth into my ass. “I was dreaming about you.”

“Liar.” I suck on his tongue, my entire body coming alive. I want him to fuck me right here, but the last thing we need is to be caught by one of the bigot cops.

“I’m not lying. Why do you think I was already hard?”

“Were you?”

He nods, not breaking the kiss.

“We shouldn’t be doing this here.”

“Can we go to your place?” he asks, not at all stopping.

“Er…” I could probably sneak him into my room while my mom and step dad are passed out, but if they wake up… “It’s not worth the risk.”

Raven seems to understand immediately. “Okay, where else can we go? Is there a good cruising spot…” he sounds desperate, and it’s making my cock throb.

I know plenty of spots, but it doesn’t feel right. I don’t want to do this some place meaningless. It feels wrong even if I’ll never see him again.

He cups my face, bringing me back to the moment with his lips on mine. “Why are you in your head?”

I don’t want to tell him, but his green eyes are so genuine I think I have to. “I don’t want to just go to a cruising place. This doesn’t feel like that.” I’m immediately red, regretting saying it. He’s going to think I’m some fucking weirdo. “I’m sorry.”

He kisses my cheek again, keeping my face close, not letting me look away. “It really doesn’t.”

“You don’t have to patronize me. I’m going to sleep with you either way.” I need the attention off my words so I reach between us to open his pants while claiming his mouth again. I only get the button undone before grabs ahold of my wrist, stopping me.

I’m shocked, and don’t know what to do. I’ve never had a guy stop me from taking his dick out.

“You could come home with me.”

I laugh. Because honestly, he's got to be joking. "We're going to drive how many hours to fuck and then what… you drive me back…" I trail off because I catch his face. He's serious. Or he's really fucking good at bluffing. "Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?" he asks quietly.

"Like you're serious."

"I am."

"How would I get back here? I'll miss work tomorrow." So he's crazy. That's why he's interested in me. I'm still going to fuck him, but now I know.

"There's a pastry school in New Orleans."

"I can't afford it."

"My aunt owns a bakery. I'm going back to work for the summer. Come with me."

"Now I know you've lost your mind. That or you're trying to lure me off to my death." I hate that I want to believe him.

"I'm not kidding. My dad's an asshole, and kind of a deadbeat, but his sisters own their businesses and let me work for them for the summer. I've been doing it since I was like ten. I've never worked in the bakery. Marie is a bit of a tyrant, and I'd rather clean offices with Nalda than work like a dog from three AM to eleven. But you could. She went to pastry school there. She could help you." He's talking too fast, and I can't keep up. It can't be real. I refuse to believe he just fell into my lap with this offer. No one would do this for another person.

"Why?" I ask when he finishes.

"Why what?" he's confused by my question.

"Why would you offer all this? Why would you even want to help me?"

"I don't know. I just do." He looks away, and I can't figure it out, but he seems so genuine. "You don't have to fuck me. I'm not trying to lure you eight hours away from your home just to sleep with you, and I don't know, maybe it's crazy or I'm reading the situation wrong, but it seems like you aren't happy and you don't want to be here."

How could he possibly have seen that in just a few hours? Am I so transparent?

"I thought so." He rubs his thumb over my cheek.

It's too much. Too deep and too exposing. I hate that a fucking stranger can see how miserable I am working two jobs just trying to escape.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?” he asks.

“Because it’s fucking nuts. No one just offers a guy they are trying to hook up with a job at his family business. And no one is going to leave everything they know on a fucking whim. I’ll be fired if I don’t show up tomorrow, and then what? I’m just stranded in New Orleans? It’s just not what people do.”

“So what if it’s not what people do? We don’t have to live by their rules. We can do whatever we want. I don’t care how other people act, or expect, or what’s normal. This feels right. And if you hate it, I’ll drive you back. You don’t have to fuck me or do anything for me. Get out your phone and record me saying it.” He feels around until he finds my phone in my hoodie pocket and pulls it out. “Turn it on.”

I do what he asks. “I promise if my aunt Marie won’t hire you, I will drive you back here and personally tell your jobs it’s my fault you missed work. That I got you sick or kidnapped you or whatever you want me to say, and I will cover any lost wages.”

I misread things with his car. So he’s a rich kid that just thinks he can make this happen for me. I understand his delusion now. “I can’t accept their money, and they won’t like me. They won’t like you bringing someone like me around. Especially if they have money.”

“Hold up. I’m not rich. My dad is a deadbeat and is only around when he’s sober. My mom started working for my aunt when my dad decided he liked doing drugs more than being a father. He disappeared and my mom went to my aunt and had to beg her for a job. She had just started her business and could barely pay my mom. No one is rich. They’ve worked hard for everything they’ve had, and my aunts stepped in when my father left. But that doesn’t make any of them wealthy.”

“You said one of them owns a bakery?”

“Kind of. She owns a bakery business. She makes pastries for some of the local hotels out of her kitchen. Then delivers them all herself. They all work really hard and have been to drag us out of poverty. Marie is trying to get a bigger space but can’t afford it. She’s still got debt from going to pastry school, and it’s hard to expand with the limited space she has. There’s no one to help her either, because none of the rest of us can do it, but you could. I bet she’d love it. She could finally grow if she had help.

You’d be doing her a favor since you already know what you’re doing.” He looks so excited, and I want to believe him. I just don’t know if I can.

“This is insane.”

“All the best things are.” A smile starts to spread over his mouth. “You’re going to come, aren’t you?”

“I can’t. I really can’t…”

“You said your mom and stepdad are sleeping. Can you get your stuff if I stay in the car?”

Was I really about to do this?

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Chapter Three

Raven

The sun is setting, and New Orleans is on the horizon. Cam is curled up sleeping in the passenger seat, his hand still in mine. No one in my family even knows I'm gay, and I'm bringing a man I just met home.

What have I done?

I'm reeling, but not once have I wanted to turn around, and that tells me enough to keep going. I believe the universe makes plans for us, and if we listen, it leads the way. Never have I been so happy to have trusted my instinct to sit inside for a coffee instead of going through a drive through. Too often our lives are rushed through and not lived. I want to be an active participant in my life.

Maybe he's a reward for living. Or maybe we'll be a fleeting meeting, left with only memories of this summer, but either way, I'm going to hold on to this memory to trust the journey.

He stirs slowly, blinking awake. I squeeze his hand, and he gasps and jumps, trying to pull his arm back.

I release him, but place my hand on his knee, rubbing softly. "You're safe."

He sucks in a breath, looking around. Slowly, he comes back to himself and relaxes, laying his palm over mine. "I'm sorry. It's not usually that bad." He puts a arm over his face hiding himself.

I rub my thumb over his leg, trying to soothe him. "You're not allowed to be sorry. Is there anything I can do to help?"

He shakes his head, pulling into himself a little, clearly embarrassed, but he doesn't unlace our fingers. "No. It's just how I wake up. It can be worse with someone touching me. It felt like—it's my fault—I…"

I have a pretty good idea what the reaction is, and I don't need details. "It's okay. You're not going to scare me off. If it's easier, I can stop touching you after you fall asleep. I sleep in my brother's room when I'm home because he doesn't need it during the day and we don't have enough space for me to have my own, but I can take the sofa, and you can sleep in there alone…whatever you need."

I want to wrap my hands around the throat of whoever did this to him.

His lips form a soft smile. "Maybe. I don't want it to be that. It just might take some getting used to." He cups my face.

I turn to kiss his wrist before forcing my attention back to the road. "Whatever you're comfortable with. I have no expectations of…anything"

"No expectations… are you going to object when I wrap my lips around your cock?" His innocent smile turns into a smirk.

"If you think it's possible for me to turn you down, you have no idea what you look like." My dick instantly comes awake, not at all deterred by only a few hours of sleep.

"What I look like? Have you seen you? I've been dying to see you naked since you sat down at the counter last night." He brushes his fingers over my chest.

"I've been thinking about getting you alone since I saw you too. I had to go jack off in the bathroom."

"Are you serious?!" He bites his lip.

"Why do you think I sat there so long? I kept hoping you'd look at me so I could picture your lips around my cock." I shift, needing to adjust my seat because my pants are too tight.

He drops his attention to my lap. "Are you hard?"

"Painfully."

He brushes over the bulge in my jeans. "I want to see it."

"Fuck…" I fight, my eyes closing. "I have to drive."

"You can drive while I play a little." He's already popping my button.

My heart rate accelerates. "You're going to distract me."

"All these cross-country drives and you've never had road head?"

I shake my head, glancing down quickly as he unzips my jeans. "Cam… Jesus…road head…this is not a good idea."

I can barely handle his hand. I'm not sure I will be able to focus with his mouth anywhere near my bare skin.

He giggles and dips his fingers under my briefs. "Fuck you are thick." He leans over using his other hand to help free me. I lift my hips letting him adjust the fabric to fully expose me. "And long. Holy shit." He stacks his hands, like he can measure me with his palms.

"You're killing me."

"Am I?" He leans across the console and flicks his tongue around the ridge of my head.

"Cam….fuckkkkkk." I can barely breathe.

"Do you know how bad I want you in the back of my throat?" He blows his warm breath over my cock, sending a shiver up my spine.

"You're going to kill us both." I squeeze the steering wheel, just trying not to die before I come.

"Just focus on the road." He takes me into his warm mouth, toying with my tip.

"You know that's impossible, right?" I whine, eyes trying to roll back.

He hums over my cock, taking me deeper.

I grab his hair, attempting to pull him off. "Cam fuck."

But he only swallows me deeper.

My hips buck off the seat, forcing my tip to the back of his throat. His lips tighten and he almost gags, but soon settles, swallowing me further. I almost lose it right there.

He sucks me down with fervored enthusiasm, giving an expert blow job, showing me I've never known the ecstasy before.

"Fuck, Cam. Jesus…you're going to make me come!" I tug his hair again, but he keeps going.

I only last another thirty seconds before I blow my load deep into his mouth. I don't know how I stay on the road as pleasure takes over every synapse and nerve ending, resulting in the best orgasm of my life. I can barely speak as I pump my seed over his tongue. He licks me clean, drinking down every drop.

When he finally comes off, I'm still reeling.

My chest heaves, and I look over at him. "Wow."

"Wow?" He fights a smile.

"I don't think I've ever come that hard." I veer towards the rest stop exit.

His skin heats and turns pink. “I don’t think I’ve ever taken a dick that big. I wasn’t sure I was going to be able to get it all in my mouth.”

I speed into a spot as far away from any other car as possible and throw my belt off, half jumping over the console into his seat with him.

“What the hell?” He’s laughing, kissing me back. “What are you doing?”

“Payback!” I grab the lever to push his seat back, then the one to lay it down, before kissing down his throat.

“You don’t have to!” He tries to pull my mouth back to his, but I shake my head.

“I need to.” I rip open his pants, squeezing myself into the limited floor space.

He allows me pull out his cock, hands falling away to let me do what I want.

“Is this okay?” I ask, remembering how he wakes up.

He nods, smiling. “Only if you want to.”

“Oh, I want to. You are so fucking sexy.” I lick off the bead of pre-cum pearling at his slit. “I just want to make sure you don’t feel forced.”

“I’m not used to guys wanting to return the favor.” He shrugs like it’s not a big deal, but it is.

“I want to have you in my mouth as much as I wanted to be in yours. Getting you off is so fucking sexy.” I wrap my lips around his tip looking up at him as I lightly suck.

“Raven! Holy shit.” He grips my shoulder tightly. “This is embarrassing! I’m not going to last…”

I take him deeper, loving his reaction to me.

“I’m not kidding!” He’s pulling my hair now. “You’re going to make me come if you keep doing that.”

I smile, bending to my work. He’s not as big as me, but still good sized, and I struggle to take him into the back of my throat, not as good at head as he is, but driven by needing to give him as good as he gave me. I want him to feel good.

“Raven!”

I ignore his pulls, bobbing up and down over him and quickly I’m rewarded with his cum. I lap up every fucking drop until he collapses into the seat.

His arms are draped over his face when I come off him.

“Why are you hiding?” I crawl over him, nudging his arm aside with my nose so I can find his lips.

“Because I basically came as soon as you touched me, like a fifteen-year-old boy.” He’s bright red, and it’s so damn cute.

I kiss his dimples, then his lips. “I liked it.”

“Why would you like it?” He doesn’t sound like he believes me.

“It’s hot that you can’t hold back. It gets me off knowing I get you off.”

“Really?”

I pull his arm off his eyes so he can see mine. “Really.”

“You’re not like other guys…”

“Good. I don’t want to be like them. I don’t think they treated you well.”

We tuck ourselves back into our clothes and make out for a while.

“We should get back on the road. Less than an hour to go. My mom will be at work, but maybe I can bribe my brother to take the sofa tonight so we can be alone.”

“I’d like that—” he hesitates.

“What?”

“Will your brother be okay with…” He searches my face.

“I don’t think he’ll care. I’ll have to tell him, but if he cares we’ll figure something else out.”

“I don’t want to cause an issue with your family.”

“If they have an issue with you, they have an issue with me. I can’t hide who I am forever.”

“You just met me. I don’t expect you to tell them.” He finds the hole in his sleeve.

I grab his jaw, bringing his face to mine. “I’m gay. I never had a reason to tell them before, but it doesn’t change this is who I am. If they don’t want to accept me, that’s on them. Who cares if I put it off six months or ten more years? It’s still the same. I’d much rather rip the band-aid off.”

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Chapter Four

Cam

The whole ride made me like him more than I already did. We talked for hours between my naps. And it felt like a fantasy, but it all came crashing down when he parked.

"This was a mistake." I'm sick to my stomach sitting out front of a robin's egg blue double shotgun style house with a porch. It's a little run down and could use some paint, but it's cute. It's tucked under the shadow of the highway, in a neat row of brightly colored houses.

"What's wrong?"

"What if your family freaks out?" I pick at the hole in my cuff.

He leans across the console kissing my cheek. "Then we'll figure something else out. I told you I'm done hiding."

"You'd do that for a guy you just met," I say, panicking.

"It's not for anyone but me. I've already decided. If you are here or not. I am telling them. If you tell me you want to go home right now, I'll drive you, but I'm still telling them."

"Why?" I ask, not understanding what would make him cause issues like that.

"Because it's time." He just smiles and kisses me again before getting out of the car. "Come on."

I get out of the car and it's humid even this late in the evening. I pull at my shirt as we walk around the trunk to retrieve our meager belongings.

Between us we don’t even fill his trunk. I didn’t take that much, not really wanting to remind myself of where I escaped from.

Raven grabs my hand right out in the open, catching me off-guard, and pulls me behind him as he climbs the porch stairs. He leads me to the yellow door on the left and uses his key.

“Sam?” he calls as he steps inside and takes off his shoes.

I follow suit.

“Finally!” A voice replies. “I’m in the back.”

Raven leads me through the living room we stepped into, through the kitchen, around a corner, past the door to the backyard, and into a dimly lit bedroom.

A guy who looks like an older carbon copy of Raven shoves back from a screen and jumps to his feet, coming over to wrap his arms around Raven. I try to let go of Raven’s hand, but he keeps our fingers tangled, wrapping one arm around his brother.

It’s pretty clear the exact moment Sam notices me.

“Who is this?” he asks in a much more pronounced accent than Raven has.

Raven drags me forward by the hand so we are standing next to one another. “Camren, this is my brother Sam, Sam this is…Cam.” His hesitation makes me laugh internally.

Sam glances between us. “A friend from school?” he asks when Raven doesn’t say anything more.

“No.” Raven laughs, reminding me why I liked him immediately. He glances at me. I shrug. Neither of us knows what this is, or even how to explain it. “I met him this morning, actually.”

Sam blinks, then laughs with his brother. “Bringing a stranger home seems right for you. You have always been sure the minute you decided and never backed down from it.” He winks at me. “It drove our mother crazy.”

Raven shrugs. “I don’t think following through is a bad quality.”

“Not at all.” Sam inspects me. “Can I be forward?”

“Always,” Raven replies.

“Boyfriend?”

Raven side-eyes me. “I hope so, eventually.”

I am bright red at this point and thankful for the low light.

Sam returns to his gaming system and does something on the controls before he begins unplugging everything.

I give Raven a questioning look.

“Thank you for the room for the night.” Raven releases my hand, sliding an arm around my middle instead.

“Change the sheets in the morning, ya?”

“Ya, I will.” Raven and I shuffle to the side to let Sam out of the room.

“And get up to tell mom yourself. She’s going to know.” Sam carries the system past us.

“Mom always knows,” Raven pauses. “Think she’ll be upset?”

Sam hesitates in the hall, rocking foot to foot. “I don’t know. I’d like to say she’ll love you no matter what because I know that’s who she is as a person, but her generation sometimes gets caught up with God and the details.”

“I know.”

“If she doesn’t take it well, just go next door. Marie will let him stay.”

“Your aunt lives next door?” I ask when we’re alone.

“She does. And my other aunt lives down the street. No one goes far if they move out at all. This is the house my grandparents grew up in.”

“Really?” I can’t imagine wanting to live with my parents a minute longer than I had to.

“Yes. But enough about them. We have hours before mom is home.” He takes my bag out of my hands and tosses it on the floor. “I want to taste the rest of you.”

I’m about to tell him he can taste whatever he wants when he pulls off his shirt and I get a view of his sculpted chest and abs for the first time. My mouth drops open. “Wow.”

He pushes his hands under my tee. “Wow?”

“You’re way out of my league.” Lack of sleep has fucked my filter.

He frowns. “What are you talking about?”

“I am not that.” I stop him from lifting my shirt, suddenly insecure as fuck.

“Not what?” He stops and lifts his hands to my face.

“Not a fucking Greek god.” Tears burn in my eyes.

What have I done? What if he’s not attracted to me? I came all the way here with him and he hasn’t even seen me naked. How the fuck would I explain leaving to my mom? They are going to freak out. And I don’t know what’s worse, me staying away or returning. I’ll go back to no jobs, and my

step-dad won’t let me live there without paying rent. I’m going to be homeless and stranded in New Orleans.

“Hey, why are you freaking out?” Raven tilts my jaw up, so I’m looking at him. “What happened?” To his credit, he looks lost.

“You could have anyone you want.”

“Okay?” He still doesn’t get it.

I squeeze my eyes shut, really not wanting to have to say this out loud. “I am not.”

“Not what?” He whispers over my lips.

“Not fit. Not in shape. Not skinny. Not a Greek God. I’m squishy.” It pours out of me and I slump in defeat, letting reality crash into me. This was a stupid dream.

“You are so sexy. Exactly the way you are.” He wraps around me, holding his body to mine.

“You haven’t seen me—”

He cuts me off. “I might not have seen you naked, but I’ve touched a lot of you and had your dick in my mouth. I know what I like.”

“You are way out of my league. Why would you want to settle?” I know how guys on apps are. They want other guys with six packs.

“In no world is being with you settling.” He takes my hand and puts it on his dick. “Would I be this hard, not attracted to you?”

“We are twenty-year-old guys.”

“I brought you to my house.”

“It was dark.” I know it’s going to click with him eventually and hopefully not after I take my clothes off. I don’t think I can take the humiliation.

“You were in my lap. I had my hands all over you while we were making out.”

I blush, remembering and try to hide my face.

He drops to his knees, ducking his head under my tee. He kisses across my stomach. “I’m attracted to you. Not a body type. I wanted you the minute I saw you and after hours talking to you today, I only want you more.” Raven pushes my shirt up, kissing over my hips and then drifts up to my ribs and then up my sternum. He finds my nipple and flicks his tongue over it.

I gasp, threading my fingers into his dark hair. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. Can I take this off?” He tugs at my shirt.

“Okay.”

He continues teasing me with his tongue while he drags my tee off. His lips drift across my collar bones and then up my neck. He has my pants open before I realize what he’s doing and he’s back on his knees with his face buried in the neatly trimmed hair above my dick while he helps me step out of my jeans. Raven sucks my balls and nips my inner thighs until I’m fucking desperate for him to touch my dick. But he pulls back, looking up at me.

“Come to bed.” He stands, toeing off his shoes then shoving out of his jeans, leaving him fully naked.

I would have done anything he asked just then. He curls a finger at me and we collide, falling backwards into bed. He drags me further up the mattress, pulling my knees around his hips so I’m straddling him. His hands are all over me as we make out, but it doesn’t feel like he’s trying to prove a point. I feel wanted.

We grind together, and I’m close and gasping into his mouth when he rolls me under him. “Don’t come yet.”

“I’m not going to have a choice if you keep this up,” I barely get out.

“I have an idea.” He gets off me and flips around, straddling my head.

“Fuck.” I moan, wrapping my fist around his girth as his cock presses into my face.

I welcome him into my mouth as he does the same to me. He swallows me down, not giving me a minute to even build up to the feel of his mouth again. I fight off my release, wanting this to last forever. To have him in my throat while I’m in his, may be the hottest thing I’ve ever experienced. He releases my cock to focus on my balls again, edging me, and I’m grateful. I want time to make him feel good.

He then spends an eternity just teasing my tip. I’m leaking like crazy.

“You’re so fucking wet for me,” he says between licks.

I come off him just to say, “You are so good at that.”

“I can’t get enough of your cock.” He takes me into his throat again, and I’m coming before I can stop myself.

He swallows like I’m the best thing he’s ever tasted. He licks me clean through all of my bucks and gasps, milking out every last drop.

I collapse into the mattress fully spent with just his tip between my lips, a groaning mess.

“I’m going to fuck your lips, baby.”

“Please,” I moan around him.

He thrusts forward and I open my throat, allowing him as deep as he can go. I fight my gag reflex, tongue dancing over his thickness. He stays deep for a long moment before pulling back to do it again. I swallow around him as he shoves every single inch of himself into me. I’m in heaven, drowning in his cock. I grab his ass, keeping him there as I work my throat around him.

That pushes him over the edge. He grunts and loses it, pumping erratically as he unloads inside me.

I chase him when he rolls off me, licking him clean. Finally, he fights my grip and gets up, coming to lie alongside me. It’s not even a question. He pulls me into his arms and we both pass out.

I don’t wake until he slips out from underneath me.

I blink my eyes open as he gets dressed and slips out of the room in the dawn light.

I hear low voices in the hall and my heart stops.

Is that his mom?

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Chapter Five

Raven

I slip out of the bedroom when I hear ma open the front door. I'm used to getting up early because of hockey, and I've never slept much anyway.

"I was just going to say, if you made your brother sleep on the sofa and don't even come out and say good morning." She pulls me into a hug and kisses my cheek. "I've missed you."

"I missed you." I wrap up around her much smaller frame. "How tired are you? Can we walk to the corner and get a coffee?"

"You've got coffee money?" she teases. "College making you rich already?"

"Not yet, but one day. Yes?" I meet her eyes.

"Let me light the candles first." My mom moves through her morning rituals. Opening the house up before lighting her candles sitting on her little altars and religious icons while she mutters her prayers.

I wish I believed in anything like she does. But God has disappointed me too much to hold faith in something I've never seen the influence of.

And maybe that says more about me than God.

She brushes her hands off on her pants when she finishes and nods for me to head out. We walk shoulder-to-shoulder towards the corner as the sun is just rising.

I pay for our coffees and we're back out in a couple of minutes.

"Are you going to break my heart?" she asks when I don't start our walk home. But she knows what this is. Traditionally, I've only asked her to walk

with me to get coffee when I've needed to tell her something hard.

Starting with maybe the worst when I was barely in first grade and told her my father had relapsed. Followed up by when I told her I wasn't going to go to church anymore a year or two later. I wasn't the first child to pull that one, just the most dramatic about it. And the most recent when I told her I was leaving the state to go play hockey in college. I'm the first in the family to leave the state.

All of them had chipped away at her. I knew it. And maybe having kids was a lifetime of little deaths when they chose directions that break their parents' hearts. Or maybe life is just a series of disappointments intermixed with our joy to remind us to savor those moments.

"I hope not." Tears well in my eyes, because I'm worried this will be worse than all of the rest of our walks combined.

"Spit it out so we can deal with it."

I wince at her choice of words, but say it anyway and brace for her fury or worse, disappointment. "I'm gay."

"Did you drag me all the way out here after work, expecting the worst, like what could this boy possibly have left to shock me with, just to tell me something I've been knowing since you were a child?"

Did she just?

I stare at her. "You know?"

She backhands my shoulder lightly. "Of course I know. The act you put on with the family about saving yourself for the right girl, like those words have ever come out of any teenage boy's mouth. You don't even go to church, child. Ain't no one thinking you like women."

I hold up my hands. "God forbid a guy try to keep anything to himself in this family."

"Yes, God forbid you try to give your momma another heart attack by walking her down to coffee. I swear you are my most dramatic child." She starts walking back towards the house.

I shrug, fighting a smile. "There's one other thing."

She stops in her tracks and turns on me like we're in a horror movie and I'm about to die. "Matthew James, don't play with me."

"I brought a guy home."

"You're dating someone and you brought him home?!" Her entire face lights up and then she turns to speed walk her ass back home.

I barely get in the door behind her to say, "He's sleeping!"

“Get him up. I want to meet this boy you finally decided was worth coming out over.” She waves me inside.

I take off my shoes laughing. “Okay.”

I’m smiling as I duck back into the bedroom to wake Cam, but he’s already awake, pulling at his sleeve nervously.

“Do I need to go?”

I dive at him, kissing his face. “No.”

He takes a needed deep breath between my assaulting mouth. “Are you sure? She’s not mad?”

I start laughing. “She apparently has always known I was gay. I was not a convincing actor.”

He smiles, cupping my face to breathe me in. “I can stay?”

I nod, climbing off him and pulling him up. “Yes. Get dressed. Come meet her. We can talk to her about jobs.”

He blows his cheeks out, nodding. “Okay.”

Five minutes later, we’re sitting around the kitchen table with a fresh pot of coffee mom brewed and even Sam is up.

“I can’t believe you knew he brought a boy home, and you didn’t call me,” Mom scolds Sam.

“I was not about to get involved. Don’t get mad at me!”

“You’ll just let your mother walk straight into the fire!”

I laugh behind my coffee, then whisper to Cam, “Everyone is dramatic. Sorry.”

“It’s so different than my family,” he whispers back. He’s smiling, enjoying this, I think.

“We are a special bunch.” I feel like a weight I’ve been carrying for years has come off my shoulders. I wrap an arm around him. “Can we talk about a job?”

“What were you thinking?” Momma asks.

“I was hoping he could help Marie. He’s worked in a bakery for four years…”

Momma gasps and looks at Cam again. “We better go over there and tell her. She’s been wanting help for awhile, but it’s hard to find anyone who has experience she trusts and isn’t trying to move up. Let alone the hours.”

“I’m used to the hours.”

“He worked at waffle house too. So he’s done the night shift for a long time.”

Momma waves us up. “Let’s go over there. She’s going to be in the middle of it but we can help her load the van.”

We go next door and find Marie packaging things up.

“I’m late. I don’t have time.” Marie holds up her hand, looking stressed.

“We can help,” Ma says. “Tell us what to do.”

Cam washes his hands, pulls on gloves and jumps in before Marie can say anything.

When Marie realizes a stranger is helping, she looks between Ma and I for an answer.

“Your new help,” Ma says, getting in beside Cam to help.

“He knows what he’s doing…” Marie stares at him.

“He’s worked at a bakery,” I supply.

“What can you make?” Marie asks him.

Cam lists out a whole mess of things, impressing Marie immediately. He then smiles softly, meeting my eyes.

“Where did you find him?”

Ma nods for me to tell her.

“He’s my boyfriend.” I brace for Cam to refute it and for Marie to have a bad reaction, but it was the easiest way for me to explain it quickly.

“Finally!” Marie claps her hands. “We were wondering if you were ever going to bring a boy home.”

“Worst kept secret in the family, I guess.” All I can do is laugh.

“Can you two go deliver these while I finish up the rest? Otherwise, it’s all going to be late. You can show him the route.”

“Of course we can.” I pick up boxes to load the van. “So he’s got the job?”

“If he can really do all of what he says he can, and get here on time, he can have the job as long as he wants it.”

“You can come over and drag him out of bed yourself if he’s late.” Ma laughs.

“I can. I promise. Thank you.” Cam picks up more boxes following me out.

I get in the driver’s seat because New Orleans traffic can be a lot.

“This is really happening,” Cam says softly as I pull the van out.

“I told you it would work out.”

“It’s still hard to believe.”

“Believe it.”

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Chapter Six

Cam

Two Months Later

I'm putting the last load of boxes into the truck when arms wrap around me from behind. "Baby." I turn and press into him.

"Good morning," Raven says between kisses.

"Good morning. What time is it? You got off early?" I slip my hands under his shirt, needing to feel him.

"We were quick and done, so I figured I'd rush home and see if you wanted company for your deliveries." He grabs my ass, rocking us together.

"Yes… always…but don't start that!" I slide my hands further up his torso because I'm part of the problem.

"Why not?" He smirks, acting like he doesn't know.

"Because I have to drive!"

"If I recall, you made me drive while you had your way with me the first day we met." He kisses me once more before releasing me. "Let's go, so you're not late."

I grumble because there is never enough of him. Even living with him for a couple of months hasn't satisfied my need. I don't think there will ever be a time when I get enough of him.

He helps me get through the deliveries, which have increased just since I started helping Marie. With essentially double the time and not having to stop baking to make deliveries, she's already increased her business a lot.

She tells me daily how grateful she is that Raven brought me home with him. We haven't told anyone but Sam we only met that day, and surprisingly, no one has asked how long we've been dating. I spent the first few weeks waiting for the other shoe to drop. But it's only gotten better.

We finish up, and Raven slides his hand up my thigh.

I shiver, knowing where he's going. "I have to get back."

"I can be quick." He brushes his fingers over my confined length.

I barely keep my eyes open, fighting a groan. "You're bad. You can wait until we're in bed."

"But I don't want to." He roughly strokes me over my pants. "I want you now."

I park and lift my hips into his touch, letting myself enjoy a minute of fondling before I grab his wrist and bring his hand to my lips. "Later."

"I'll come in and help, so you'll be done quicker."

Raven does this most mornings unless he's really tired. Then I get to crawl into bed with him and wake him up with my mouth before we both sleep.

As we're finishing up Marie says, "I've been thinking…"

Both of us look at her.

"Since you're still juggling sharing a room with Sam, I was thinking about cleaning out my guest room and offering it to you both. Cam will need some place to stay when you go back to school, and I'm assuming you'll return more often with him working here so a room would be nice." Marie folds her hands and looks at us both.

I don't know her well enough, but this might be her subtle way of asking if I'm going back to school with Raven when he leaves in the fall. We haven't talked about it at all. Will Raven want to keep dating when he leaves? There's no way I can go with him. He lives in dorms. We could never afford to live there even if we both worked, and he doesn't have time with hockey.

I chew my lip and look at Raven. I don't know why I ever doubt him. He smiles immediately, slipping an arm around me.

"We'd love a space of our own. I'm going to be back here as much as hockey allows me, and I'm hoping Cam can have the occasional weekend off to come see a game." Raven presses his lips to my shoulder. "It would be wonderful if you'd do that for us. At least until I get signed to a pro team, then I'll have to steal him away."

“Only after he finishes pastry school! He’s too good. And I won’t let him give that up to be a WAG.” Marie smiles, which she rarely does. “I’ll get the junk out of the room this week, but you two can start moving your stuff over tonight.”

“Thank you.” Tears fill my eyes.

It’s a busy few days moving our stuff, then buying a few odds and ends to make the space our own, but it’s worth it when I finish up work and walk down the hall to Raven curled up in our bed, in our own room.

I slip into bed with him.

He’s already half asleep, but he hooks an arm over me, dragging me closer. “I want to be inside you.”

“Sure you’re not too tired?” I ask already slipping down his body, pulling his boxers lower.

“Not your mouth.” He hauls me back face-to-face, and rolls on top of me. “I want to fuck you.”

My knees part, welcoming him closer. “I was starting to think you weren’t into that.”

“I’m into everything about you. I didn’t want to push when this was all so new, because I didn’t want you to think anything was conditional.” He slips his tongue past my lips.

I open up for him, shoving off his boxers, then mine. “Do you really want to do long distance?”

“I want to do whatever it takes to be yours.” He brushes the hair off my forehead. “Whatever I need to do to make you happy.”

“I am happy, and it’s all because of you.”

“It’s because of us. Not just me.”

“It’s your family and you inviting me into it.” I lift up, rocking our cocks together. “If I’d have stayed, I would have never come this far.”

“You just needed a place to flourish.” He drops his face to my throat, groaning. “Fuck. You have no idea how good you feel.”

Our bodies move together for a few moments before he leans over to grab the lube out of the nightstand.

“If it’s anywhere near how good you feel, I have an idea.”

“I don’t have any condoms. Is that okay?” He kneels between my thighs, pouring the slick fluid over his fingers, before brushing them over my opening.

“I’m not seeing anyone else, are you?”

“As if I’d have time when I spend every free second naked with you.” He pushes two fingers into me.

I groan. “I don’t need prep. I just want you.”

I’m an experienced bottom, and love the burn.

He rubs more lube over his cock, then drops over me, pressing his tip against my hole. He’s bigger than most, and I push out, allowing his tip to break through my tightness. I arch and moan. “You are so big.”

“Want me to slow down?”

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About the Author

Gray is a cynical Chicago native, who drinks coffee all day, barely sleeps, and is a little too fashion obsessed. He writes romance sprinkled with kink, and hot as hell, dark and angsty characters because everyone deserves a happily ever after.

J.R. Gray uses He/Him/His pronouns.

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Oh, Snap!

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About the Author

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Chapter One

Marti

With a skip in my step, I hurry along the sidewalk toward French Press. So far, I've planned things perfectly, which means I have just enough time to grab a much-needed beverage before getting back in my car to get to my co-worker's wedding. The ceremony is at a restaurant, so there will be coffee, but not the kind or quantity that I want. Frilly. That's what my best friend Jeremy calls my drink choice. If a drink can be frilly, then the description's accurate. That just makes me love it more.

As I near the café, I get my first whiff of ground beans and inhale deeply. So does the guy in front of me, and I can't help grinning. "It smells delicious! Right?"

He turns around and smiles. "It does. Are you headed in?"

I nod, and he grabs the door handle to the cafe and opens it, waving me inside. Such a gentleman. "Why, thank you."

"You're welcome."

I sweep past him with a warm smile of thanks and step up to the counter. There's a lovely person behind the register with a name tag that reads 'Xan.' Rather than pouncing the moment I walk up, they allow me a chance to look over the menu before asking for my order. It only takes a moment to know they don't have exactly what I want, but they do have the ingredients for it. When I drop my gaze back to them, they smile. "Welcome to French Press. What can I get for you?"

Now comes the true test of how lovely this person actually is. “Would it be possible to get a latte with coconut milk, a shot of vanilla, a squeeze of honey, topped with toasted coconut? To go, please.”

“Absolutely. What name should I put on the cup?” For a moment, I just blink at them because they don’t even flinch at my order, and that’s rare. It’s caused no little kerfuffle at several places I’ve gone to. Baristas have called my order pretentious and excessive. I call it delicious, so I don’t care. Hands down, Xan wins the unfazed award.

“Oh, you’re a doll. Thanks. And it’s Marti with an i.” I pay for my drink and step to the side so the sweet guy behind me can place his order. As I wait for my drink, I take the time to glance around the café. It’s cute, in an airy but still cozy way. There are the usual tables and chairs, which cover most of the space, but there’s also a gas fireplace with a cozy seating area filled with overstuffed furniture. And that’s where I see her. Soft blue eyes, peaches and cream skin to die for, and long red hair that glimmers in the sunlight like fire. But that’s not even the best part. She has the most beautiful freckles sprinkled across her nose and cheeks, and I can’t stop staring.

She turns my way, and our eyes meet. Sweet mother of god, I swear her gaze has my skin buzzing with electricity. The fine hairs on my arms are actually standing on end, and I have to fight the pull to walk across the room, sit at her feet, and tell her that I’m hers to do with as she pleases.

She keeps stealing glances at me, so the attraction seems to be mutual. She’s so fucking adorable, trying to pay attention to her friends, one of whom is the guy who held the door for me. He looks at me, then leans in, whispering something to her, and her cheeks pink. When she looks my way again, I wink at her, which earns me another of her smiles. But this time she bites her lower lip. Oh god, that lip. My insides feel all swoopy, and I really want to say hi. Do I have time? I glance at my phone. Shit. No, I don’t. And if my latte doesn’t come quickly, I’m going to be late. I’m going to be latte? I groan internally at my own bad pun.

“Marti.”

I spin around to see Xan holding out my drink. “Oh, thank you. Hey, those customers over there.” I tilt my head in the direction of the fireplace. “Do they come here a lot?”

Xan nods. “Fairly regularly.”

“Great. Would you do me a favor?” I glance into the pastry case and immediately spy the perfect dessert. I point at it. “That. The chocolate cake.” It has pink strawberry frosting and a huge chocolate-covered strawberry on top. “Would you deliver a piece of that to the gorgeous redhead and tell her it’s from me and that I hope to see her around here again?”

Grinning, Xan rings up my additional purchase. After paying, I look back one more time and wink at her before hurrying out the door so I’m not late.

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Chapter Two

Lee

"Hey Angus. Have a minute?" I lean against the porch railing and wait for my brother to let his dogs out of his pickup truck.

"Sure. What's up?"

"I had an idea for an event the farm could host and wanted to run it by you." Mom and Dad still have a hand in major decisions on the farm, but Angus has had the day-to-day management of it for almost a decade. It's what he went to school for, and I can honestly say it's his passion. He devotes all his time and attention to keeping it running, and he wouldn't have it any other way. Thank god, because none of my brothers or I wanted the farm to be a full-time job. I help out on weekends, and my other brothers pitch in when they're here, but our professional interests definitely lie elsewhere. For me, that's in cost reduction. I'm happy to apply my skills here on the farm, but I like working in an office where I know I can walk away at five o'clock and leave the job behind until the next day. It makes the time I do spend on the farm something I love rather than an obligation.

Angus opens the passenger door of his truck, and Skye, his white Great Pyrenees, jumps out of the cab and turns, sitting right behind Angus's left leg. He reaches into the cab and picks up his other constant companion, a Jack Russell Terrier he so very cleverly named Jack. He cuddles the dog against his broad chest and scratches under his chin. "Go check out the barn and make sure Uncle Tink is okay, then come back." Jack licks his cheek, and Angus sets him on the ground. The terrier takes off at breakneck speed

towards the tractor barn, and grinning, Angus turns back to me. “You wanna talk in the house or is here fine?” He gestures to the porch steps of our parents’ farmhouse.

“Here’s good. I had an idea based on a comment I overheard from one of our market customers.” Angus drops onto the top step, leaning his broad shoulders against the porch railing. Skye climbs the steps and plops down between us, lounging against Angus’s side.

Angus slings an arm around Skye, and I run my fingers through his soft coat as the spoiled pup basks in all the attention. “So, what’s your idea?”

“A customer mentioned they had no idea what to do with our snap beans besides making that mushroom soup and onion straw casserole.” The comment is one we hear time and again. “They said they love buying fresh vegetables and fruits, but they get them home and don’t know what to do with them. I thought it might be fun and educational to set up a demonstration and show them what to do with some of the things they can buy here. The demonstration could focus on not-so-typical recipes.” I gesture to the free area behind the building we call the market, where customers pay for the produce they’ve picked themselves. “Maybe over in that area. It’s near the parking and close to the market, which would be convenient for the participants, but still out of the way so we wouldn’t interrupt the flow of the farm.”

Angus nods slowly and surveys the area I indicated, considering my proposal. It’s one of the many things we all love about Angus. He’s very open to other people’s ideas. He may not always agree with them, but he gives them fair consideration. And never makes snap decisions or gets upset if someone has a suggestion that differs from his. “We could do that. Are you planning for customers to get involved or just watch? It might be more fun for them to actually participate.”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “What do you mean?”

He shrugs a big shoulder. “So, we’d have to set up a tent and a hot plate for you to do the demo, which would require running electricity out there. But it’s doable. So, what’s a few more hot plates, or whatever? That way, you could get people involved. Uncle Tink could make it happen.”

“I could make what happen?”

Jack bounds across the grass and up the porch stairs, jumping right into Angus’s lap and snuggling in against his big body as Uncle Tink strolls toward us at a more leisurely pace. With the fondest look, Angus strokes

Jack’s fur and scritches behind his ears. “Electricity. Well, you could figure out how to run it to a tent set up over there.” Angus jerks his chin to the area I proposed. “Lee had a great idea for a cooking demo class kind of thing. Something to show customers how to use some of the fruits and veg they pick.”

Uncle Tink turns around and stares at the area, arms crossed over his chest in his thinking pose. “How many people are we talking about?”

I shrug, because Angus and I were just brainstorming the idea. “Maybe five or six participant tables and one for me?”

Continuing to stare at the empty space, he nods. “We have a couple of portable generators we could use. They’re the quiet kind.” He turns to look at us over his shoulder. “Your mom insisted on that, and I always listen to my elders.” Angus and I laugh because our mom is only a few years older than Uncle Tink, but he never lets her forget it. She gives it right back to him, though, and they adore each other. “We could rent one of those party tents, get you some tables, whatever appliances you need.” He squints at the area again. “Yeah, I can make that happen. Speaking of generators—” Angus and I both groan and prepare ourselves. We know what’s coming, and there’s no point trying to stop the inevitable. “What did the light bulb say to the generator?”

Angus takes a deep breath and squares his shoulders, like he’s ready to take a hit. “What?”

Uncle Tinks grins like a fiend. “I really get a charge out of you.”

We groan, and Uncle Tink laughs at our reaction, then leans down, giving each of us a hug before wandering off toward Uncle Danny and his house. I shake my head. “I suppose it could have been worse. We got away with only one pun.”

Angus chuckles and kisses Jack on the top of his head. “He’s either off his game—”

“Or Uncle Danny decided to call it an early day.” I look at Angus, and we both wince. “Eww. Sorry.” I’m no prude, but thinking about Uncle Tink getting naked with his husband is like thinking about my parents getting naked together. And that’s a big N-O. Thank you very much. My brothers and I agree that every single one of us was a spontaneous conception. I will swear to that in a court of law. “But I hope I’m still that in love and still want to get naked with my partner when I hit my sixties.”

Angus nods but doesn't say anything. Before things can get too awkward, I take the conversation back to the cooking class. "So anyway, we should probably keep the group small. Especially now that we're considering letting the customers actively participate. What do you think? Four or five pairs?"

"I wouldn't go any more than that. Are you going to get Jake or one of the market workers to help wrangle participants while you're demonstrating?"

I shake my head. "Not for this first one. If it's successful, and I want to keep doing them, then I'll think about expanding the class size and having an assistant."

"Makes sense. I think next steps are looking into permits and health code requirements, but that shouldn't be too difficult to figure out."

It's not something I considered, but Angus is all over stuff like that. "I can look it up online, and if I can't find what we need, I'll call the Marion County courthouse tomorrow and see what's required."

Angus scratches Skye's head and stands with Jack now cradled in his arms. "Sounds like a plan. Let me know what else you need from me to make it happen. I think it's a great idea."

"Aww. Thanks, Angus." I slip my arm around his waist and side-hug him. "You're the best little brother a girl could ask for."

His chuckle rumbles through his chest. "I'm telling Hay and Clay you said that."

I pull back and give him an affronted look. "Low blow. You are now *not* my favorite little brother."

He pulls me into a hug, with Jack sandwiched between us. "I'm just teasing. I won't tell them."

"Yet. Right?" I grin up at him. At five feet, ten inches tall, I'm not short, but every one of my four brothers is at least six feet tall, and Angus towers over us all at six feet four-inches. But he's the biggest teddy bear ever.

He kisses the top of my head and lets go, meandering down the steps toward his truck with Skye close on his heels. "C'mon guys. Let's go drop these frames off in the barn, and then we'll go home and make dinner. I'm feeling like burgers. What do you guys think about that?" Skye gives a loud bark, and Jack wiggles like a live wire in Angus's arms. Skye leaps in as soon as Angus opens the truck door, parking himself in the passenger seat, staring out the windshield at me, and I swear he's grinning. Angus sets Jack

next to him and closes the door before walking around the truck to the driver's side. "See you tomorrow, Lee."

"If you're lucky!"

He smirks and pulls himself into the driver's seat. With a final wave, he pulls away, and I gaze at the area where we're going to hold the cooking class, excitement building for this new venture.

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Chapter Three

Marti

With a cursory knock on the doorframe to my bestie's office, I waltz in and drop into the barely padded armchair in front of his desk, wincing slightly. "You have the most uncomfortable guest chairs."

"It's by design, so people who come to visit don't stay long."

My mouth drops open and I gawk at him. "That is *genius*! What kind are these?" I look for any identifying brand tag. "I need some for *my* office."

That makes him snort. "Is there something I can help you with?"

I stop searching and turn my attention back to Jeremy. "How do you feel about butting your nose in where it doesn't belong?"

He finally looks away from his laptop and leans back in his chair, utterly unfazed by my sudden appearance or my question. He's known me far too long to be bothered by my random interruptions. This is why he's my bestie. "That would depend on the who, where, when, and why of the butting. Whose business are we potentially butting into?"

"Seb's." Jeremy nods, probably already figuring that was the case. My cousin Seb's been back from France for a few months, staying in my apartment with me until he figures out what his plan is.

"And the why?"

I roll my eyes. "Because Seb is too nice and won't do it himself."

Jeremy frowns. "Wait. He won't butt into his own business?"

“He won’t butt into *Rick’s* business.” As my best friend, Jeremy is well aware of the long-distance romance Seb had with Rick MacDougall, his absolute soulmate and other half. They’d dated a few years ago, before Seb went to France to study art. They were perfect for each other, and Seb was so into Rick it was sickeningly sweet. Based on things Seb shared with me at the time, Rick felt the same. But like an altruistic dumbass, Rick convinced Seb to chase his dream and study art. Okay, it wasn’t dumb to encourage Seb to follow his dream, but it was freaking monumentally stupid to agree with Seb’s suggestion that they break up and date other people while he was gone. “I keep trying to get Seb to reach out, even just through social media, and let Rick know he’s back in the States for good. Not only in the States, but here in Monmouth! Jesus, Jeremy, we’re twenty minutes from Salem. Rick is right there!” I gesture out the window in Salem’s general direction. “And I will bet lots and lots of money I don’t have that the minute Rick finds out Seb’s here, he’s going to be in the car and driving to see him.”

Jeremy nods, following everything I have and haven’t said out loud. “Seb doesn’t want that?”

I snort. “Oh, Seb wants that. He wants it so badly he’s practically sick with it. But he won’t *do* anything about it.” More altruistic bullshit, if you ask me. Having seen picture evidence of the heart eyes those two made at each other, I’m sure there’s still feelings there.

“And that’s what you want to butt in on? You want to contact Rick?”

I can tell from the frown on Jeremy’s face that he’s not in favor of that idea. “No. Not contact him. But maybe snoop a little. Do a little recon.” The smirk on Jeremy’s face encourages me to go on. “So, I may have done a little advanced snooping online. Rick has his social media pretty locked down, but I did see the same few pics from the MacDougall farm account that Seb did. Rick was with some blond guy who looked like the spoiled son of a red-state senator.” I try not to gag. “You know. Shoulder sweater, dress shirt and fancy shoes, absolutely styled hair, looking completely uncomfortable and out of place standing in the middle of a farm. I want to see if I can learn anything more. Like, were they truly a couple like it appeared in the pictures? And are they still together? Because again, I’d bet money—”

“That you don’t have.” Jeremy grins.

“—that I don’t have—that the minute Rick knows Seb’s back for good he’ll reach out.”

Nodding, Jeremy leans forward. “How do you propose to conduct said snooping? I’m assuming this is all without Seb finding out. And how does it involve me?”

Ha. I have him now. “Well, while I was doing my online recon, I found a post on the MacDougall Farm page offering a cooking class on-site. They show attendees how to cook stuff the farm sells.”

“Stuff?”

I roll my eyes and sigh because Jeremy knows he’s being a shit. “Yes, stuff. Produce. It’s a pick-your-own fruits and vegetables farm. Anyway, the class is two weeks from tomorrow at three in the afternoon, and I want us to sign up.”

He doesn’t even blink. “Okay.”

“You sure? Don’t you have a boyfriend to consult?” My tone is just slightly bitter, and I wince. It’s not that I don’t love his boyfriend, Gus. I absolutely do. And I especially love his boyfriend’s dog. But in my experience, it really seems like all the good girlfriends were snatched up long ago. I’ve had a handful of dating experiences that lasted longer than a few dates. I’ve even had what might be considered short-lived relationships. None of them amounted to much, and a lot of that was on me. I wasn’t happy with myself, so how could I be happy with someone else? And now that I’ve worked on myself and am absolutely happy with who I am and where I am in life, it’s no one’s fault that most of the good women are taken. Most especially not Jeremy. “Sorry.”

He winks at me. “Don’t sweat it.” He clicks his mouse a few times and gestures to the laptop screen. “See? I’m totally free that Saturday. My sweet August has his book club earlier that afternoon, so no problem.”

“Perfect. And since you’ve agreed to indulge me on this, I’ll go sign up for the class and email you the details.” I push to my feet and wave as I walk toward the door.

Jeremy grins. “Can’t wait.”

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Chapter Four

Lee

I’m nervously excited as the first set of attendees walk toward the event tent where we're having our cooking class. In moments, my heart is beating like a jackhammer and my stomach is doing Cirque du Soleil-worthy flips. I grab Angus’s arm and squeeze. “Oh. My. God.”

He glances down at my grip on his forearm and then looks around the tent. “What? Did we forget something? Is something on fire already?”

“What?” I shove him. Not that he moves in the slightest. “No!” I lean in and whisper. “It’s her!”

Thankfully, Angus is an intelligent man and keeps his cool, casually scanning the space like he’s just making sure everything is in order. “Her who?”

“Marti! The woman from the coffee shop! With the cake?” I’ve told him all about the stunningly beautiful woman who oozed confidence and bought me the most decadent piece of chocolate cake. Jake and I have been back to French Press several times since then, purely to get coffee, of course, but I haven’t run into her again. Until today.

“Which—” He stops asking the moment he sees her. “Oh.” He assesses her tall, willowy body, dressed in slim-cut blue jeans and a short-sleeved, cream-colored mock neck T-shirt, with her artfully tousled curly black pixie cut hair. “Yeah, I get it now. She’s very pretty.”

“Very pretty?” I practically hiss it at him. “*Flowers* are very pretty. The *beach* is very pretty.” His eyes widen, and he takes a step back. *I* take a

breath. “Sorry. But look at her, Angus. She’s stunning! Like the aurora borealis or— or— I don’t know. Something really stunning! And what the hell is she doing in my cooking class?”

He gives a one-shoulder shrug. “Learning to cook snap beans?”

I roll my eyes and backhand his bicep. “Thanks for that.”

“You’re welcome.” His grin is infectious, and despite my near panic, I feel my shoulders relax and my heartbeat slow to a somewhat normal pace. Angus is a very grounding influence. Not much ruffles him. He’s like our Da and his older brother, Uncle Fraser, in that and many other ways. “Who’s the guy with her?”

Casually, I glance over at them. They’re joking and smiling at each other, but while the body language says they’re very familiar with each other, it doesn’t scream intimacy. “Don’t know. A friend?” I lean into Angus. “What do I do?”

He slings one of his very large arms over my shoulders and gives me a gentle squeeze. “How about you walk around and introduce yourself to the participants. Start with the two women to our right and make your way over to your girlfriend.”

“She’s not my girlfriend.” I hip-check him, but again, it doesn’t have any effect on him.

He pulls me in for a hug, and I relax against him. “Yet. But I have faith in you.” He drops his arms and turns in a slow circle, this time actually checking for anything we’ve missed. “Okay, in the *bean* time, I’m gonna go do farmer things.”

“Oh, that was bad. You’ve *bean* waiting to use that all day, haven’t you?” His grin says I’m right. “Uncle Tink would be so proud.”

He snorts and nods. “*Bean* nice chatting with you. Text if you need anything.”

I watch him leave and then take a deep breath, letting all my tension out with the exhale before heading for the couple on the right. Smiling, I hold out my hand and introduce myself. There are four pairs signed up for the class. I specifically didn’t make it a couples’ thing but figured people would probably sign up in twos anyway. Based on my own experience with classes on new topics, I don’t like going by myself. And the idea of being paired up with a stranger who could turn out to be nice or a pompous ass makes me nervous. I much prefer going with someone I know. It makes new ventures a little less anxiety inducing.

I'll be fine once I start the class. I just want everyone to have a good time. If they learn something or just get a new, tasty recipe out of the experience, that's good too. But right now, I wish my bestie, Jake, and his boyfriend, Matt, had been able to be here today to reduce some of my anxiety. Especially as I walk toward Marti. I take a breath, try not to smile manically, and hold out my hand to her. "Hi. I'm Lee MacDougall." In a split-second decision, I decide to point to the elephant in the room. Or *tent*, in this case. It's easier to get it out there. "You're Marti, right?"

Her sexy brown eyes are fixed on me as I approach, and when she takes my hand, her cherry-red lips quirk into a grin. My pulse races in my chest. "Hello, Lee. It is so good to finally meet you. And yes, I'm Marti Hart." Oh my god, she remembers me! If I kept a diary, this would definitely go in it. Her handshake is firm but not crushing, and I definitely don't mind that she doesn't let go. "This is my best friend, Jeremy Winters." She waves at the tall, very fit man with sandy blond curls and piercing blue eyes. He's wearing jeans and a heather gray Monmouth Dolphins T-shirt.

Since my dominant hand is still in Marti's, and I have zero intention of altering that fact until I absolutely have to, I wave at Jeremy with my left. "Hi. Nice to meet you. I'm Lee."

His gaze briefly drops to our still-held hands, and the amusement is clear in his gentle grin. "It's so nice to meet you, Lee. Marti's told me a little bit about you already."

"A little bit only because I know practically nothing. We should fix that immediately." Laughter from another group pulls our attention, and Marti squeezes my hand. "Well, after class, of course."

My entire body swoons, and it's as epic as it is ridiculous. I'm not typically a swooner, but then again, Marti is pretty swoon-worthy. Before I lose the chance, I seize the moment. "If you don't have someplace you have to be after this, I'd love to talk to you. I'd give you my number now, but I need to start the class." Reluctantly, I take a few steps away and let go of her hand. She winks, and god, my responding rush of adrenaline has my skin tingling, and there's no doubt my cheeks are red. With one final look at her beautiful face, I hurry to the front of the tent to get everyone's attention. "Hello! Welcome to our first ever 'What to do with this stuff now that I bought it' class." Everyone laughs, and I feel my sense of self settle into place. I'm good with people. I enjoy talking to them. This is just more of that. "Since you've all picked a workstation, we'll get started. Each setup

should have everything you need, but if for some reason we've missed giving you an ingredient or cooking utensil, please let me know immediately. I want to make sure you don't have any trouble following the recipes."

I walk behind my worktable and pull the basket of snap beans toward me. "Today we'll be working with snap beans and cherries. While these two produce items are really common, they're probably the ones we get the most questions about. The most frequently asked are, how can I branch out past bean salad or bean casserole, and what can I make with cherries besides a pie? So I figured we'd start there. If this goes well, we're planning to do a few other classes this season involving the dreaded turnip, as well as beets, and raspberries. Please definitely let us know what you thought of the class after we're done. You can do that by filling out the survey that's on your workstation with your recipe cards. All are yours to take home with you. You can also log on to our website for more recipes as well as give us feedback there."

Reaching for my basket of beans, I risk a quick glance at Marti, who is munching on them like they're candy. It's endearing and hot, and I'm not really sure what to do with that. Laughing to myself, I pull my attention back to the class. "Snap beans, also known as string beans, or green beans, originated in Peru and spread through North America by Native Americans. And no worries, that's the last of the history lesson about beans." There're a few chuckles at that. "So, what can you do with a fresh green bean? These year-round veggies can be sauteed, steamed, boiled, baked, grilled, eaten cold in a dip, or chopped into a salad. They make a lovely side dish, which is what we're going to prepare today. This recipe doesn't overpower the taste of the beans, but trust me, if you make this properly, you'll enjoy that flavor.

"First thing to remember when buying beans, even from us, is to make sure you're looking for ones that are perky and free of bruises, wrinkles, or shriveled spots. When you get them home, keep them in a perforated plastic bag in the refrigerator until you're ready to use them. But don't wait too long." I glance at Marti, who is watching me intently, and I grin right at her. "Like any relationship, fresh produce will eventually start to wilt without the proper attention." She salutes me with a bean, and I laugh. "Remember to rinse the beans with cold water. And in case you were concerned, we only use natural pest deterrents and soil treatments, so there's no worry

about chemicals. But dirt is still dirt, so all your produce has been rinsed in advance and is ready to go into your recipe. Also, at each workstation is a bottle of hand sanitizer. Frequent and liberal use is encouraged."

I tap the recipe card with my index finger. "If you look at your recipe card, you'll see we're making green beans amandine. It tastes incredible, and it's an inexpensive dish that is easy enough for weeknight dinners but fancy enough for the holidays. You can very easily adjust the recipe for a few people or a crowd. But my favorite part? It all comes together in one skillet, so not a lot of cleanup."

With that, we're off. I walk them through making the green beans amandine without incident and give them a bonus recipe for a Dijon- and garlic-based summer bean salad that they can try at home. Then we move on to the cherries, and I somehow manage to keep my glances at Marti to four or so minute intervals. We spend the rest of the class making a spiced cherry chutney that can be served over pork or as a goat cheese garnish. They also have a take-home bonus recipe for cherry barbecue sauce, which tastes amazing on ribs or chicken.

"Thank you all for coming today. It's *bean* great having you here for our first class."

"Oh, *snap*!" Everyone laughs and glances over at Marti, who's grinning, proud of her punny contribution. I'm proud too, because if I'm honest, it kind of makes me feel like she'd fit in with my family. But that's putting the cart waaaay before the horse.

"I hope you enjoyed yourselves and found some new ways to use these familiar fruits and vegetables. There are jars on your tables for your chutney, as well as to-go containers for the beans. Feel free to take any of the fruits and veggies at your stations that didn't make it into your recipes, as well. Remember to fill out those review forms, and be sure to watch for our next class. If you enjoyed yourself today, consider telling your friends and family about it, as well. I hope to see you all again at the next class. Have a great rest of your afternoon!"

As everyone begins to collect their take-home samples and recipes, Angus strolls into the tent. "They're all smiling so I guess it went well. Yeah?"

I nod, even as I glance over to see if Marti is going to stick around. She's leaning against her workstation, watching me. And when our eyes meet, she smiles, and my breath catches in my throat. Angus's quiet chuckle

refocuses my attention. “Oh, um, yeah. It went great. People were asking about next classes, and everyone was laughing and seemed to be having a great time. So I’d call this a success.”

He crosses his huge arms over his chest and nods, looking around the tent. “Okay, well, why don’t you go chat up your girlfriend. Uncle Tink, Uncle Danny, and I will clean up in here and tear down the tent.”

“She’s not my girlfriend.” Yet. “And I can’t leave all of this for you guys to clean up. That’s not fair.” It’s really not, but I also really, *really* want to take him up on the offer.

He huffs a small laugh and jerks his head toward Marti. “Go. Next time I need a favor, you can pay me back.”

I probably should argue with him, but I’m not going to. “Thanks Angus!” I lean up and kiss his cheek. “Love you.”

“Love you too.” He gently nudges me toward Marti and Jeremy, and that’s all the dismissal I need.

I try not to rush, but I’m grinning the entire walk across the tent. “Hey. So, I promised you a phone number, if you’re still interested.”

“Hey yourself. Great class. And yes, please on the phone number.” My cheeks heat, and Marti grins. “Good god, I love that peaches and cream complexion. It hides nothing.”

I groan, because she’s right. I could never get away with anything as a kid. The truth was always right there on my cheeks. “It’s a curse.”

“It’s beautiful.”

Jeremy clears his throat and jerks his thumb over his shoulder. “I’m gonna step out and call Gus. I told him I’d let him know when this was over. Lee, it was a wonderful class. Gus is going to love these recipes. And I’m sure I’ll be seeing you around.” He waves and strolls from the tent, leaving me alone with Marti.

“So.” My heart races, and I can’t stop smiling. Why is she flustering me so badly? I’m not normally like this.

Grinning, she leans in. “So. I’m not one to play coy. Ever since I saw you at French Press, I’ve been hoping to run into you again. Would you like to go on a date with me?”

My mouth doesn’t even wait for my brain to think about it. Good thing they're both on the same page. “Yes. I would love to go out with you.” My heart is jackhammering in my chest, and I have to fight the urge to laugh for

no apparent reason. “I’ve been thinking about you since that day, and I’d love to get to know you better.”

The smile she gives me lights up the whole tent. “Fantastic. How about now?”

My eyes widen with shock. I guess she’s not one to let moss grow under her feet, as my gran used to say. “Oh.” I glance around the tent. “I’m working right now.”

“Nope. No, you’re not. You’re officially off the clock.” Angus doesn’t stop cleaning up but waves toward the open tent flap. Nice to know he’s eavesdropping.

Uncle Tink nudges Uncle Danny and then winks at me. “When a pretty lady asks you out, you don’t say no.”

“I didn’t say no!” But I can’t help grinning back at him.

He pulls Uncle Danny against him and presses a ridiculously dramatic kiss against his lips. “It’s how I got your uncle. Immediately asked him out after he stole my seat at a hockey game.”

“Stole your seat and then your heart. That’s how I roll.” Uncle Danny leans in and softly kisses Uncle Tink on the lips, and they smile sappily at each other. “Best day of my life.”

I sigh, still grinning. They’ve always been this way. As Uncle Tink calls it, he’s very ‘in your face’ affectionate with his husband, because when they were growing up, you couldn’t be openly gay without threat of bodily harm. All I know is that I want what they have.

“They’re very sweet.” Someday I’ll find my person and have that, too. I turn to find Marti watching them with the same longing look I’m sure is on my face.

And suddenly, I don’t want to argue with them about staying and helping. “They are absolutely adorable. And sickeningly in love.” I grin at her. “Have been for decades.” Her eyebrows rise. “Yup. I’ll tell you all about it over coffee?”

She pushes off the table and holds out her hand. “Sounds perfect.” When I put my hand in hers, the fluttering in my chest steals my breath. “Now I just have to let Jeremy know.”

I turn around and wave to my incredible family members. “Okay, I’m leaving. Be back later.” Uncle Tink shoots me two thumbs up, and Angus waves before turning back to the cleanup. I feel a *little* guilty, but not enough to stay.

Marti and I exit the tent and find Jeremy just outside, slipping his phone into his pocket. “Let Jeremy know what?”

“Lee and I are going for coffee.”

He doesn’t seem surprised. “Good thing my boyfriend is two minutes away.” He grins at Marti. “What? Did you think I didn’t notice all the furtive, and not so furtive, glances you two were throwing at each other during the demonstration? I texted Gus about halfway through and asked him to come pick me up so you didn’t have to drive me back to Monmouth.”

“You didn’t pull him out of the book club meeting, did you?” Marti looks worried, and I’m beginning to feel bad for interrupting her time with her friend.

But Jeremy shakes his head. “Nope. He was done half an hour ago. He went home, let Chip out for a bit, and then hopped in the car to come pick me up.” The high-pitched beep of a car horn interrupts us, and we all turn to look as a yellow VW Bug pulls up. A dark-haired man with tortoiseshell-patterned glasses and a short beard and mustache rolls down the window and smiles at us. “Hey handsome. Want to come home with me?”

“With a gorgeous hunk of man like you? Absolutely.” Grinning, Jeremy turns back to Marti and me. “Lee, it was very nice to meet you. Hopefully, we’ll be seeing more of you in the future. Marti, it’s been great, but I got a hot guy waiting in the car, and I need to get him home and do very dirty, dirty things to him. Repeatedly.” He leans in and kisses her cheek. “See you at work on Monday.”

He waves, then turns and jogs to the car, gets in, and leans across the center console to kiss his boyfriend. I snort. “Nice to see there are people in your life who are equally as sickeningly in love as my uncles.”

“So sickening. And I couldn’t be happier for them. They’re adorable.” She turns back to me and swings our hands between us. “Coffee?”

I nod. “Yes, please. Shall we go back to where we first almost met?” French Press is my favorite coffee shop, and it’s just a few-minute car ride away.

A very complicated and undecipherable look crosses her face. “We could. But I was hoping for something a bit more private.” She throws her free hand up in a stop gesture. “Not for any reason other than getting to know each other. I promise. Sometimes conversations go in unanticipated

directions, and when that happens, I feel like coffee shops aren't the best place for that sort of discussion."

That's a fair point. And although I wasn't necessarily thinking we'd get to those kinds of conversations yet, I'm not opposed to it. I'm pretty open about things. And if she means conversations about intimacy, *talking* about it doesn't mean that *doing* anything with the information is imminent. Then again, if things go well, I'm not opposed to a little physical intimacy. "Okay. How about coffee at my house? I live about ten minutes from here. You could follow me over, and then when you're ready to leave, you'll have your car right there."

"Sounds good." We walk hand in hand to a hunter green Subaru Outback. I raise an eyebrow, and she throws back her head and laughs. "So cliché, right? But I love it."

I gesture toward the driveway that leads to my parents' house. "I'll get my car and drive back this way. You can follow me from here."

"Perfect."

She gets into her car, and I turn and jog back into the tent to find Angus. "Hey, I wanted to let you know that Marti and I are going back to my house for coffee."

Angus raises his eyebrows, but that's the only indication of his surprise. Bringing strangers home isn't my usual thing, but I feel like I can trust Marti. Though you can't be too careful. And I'm sure Angus knows why I'm telling him what I'm doing. He immediately proves that we're on the same page. "Noted. If I don't hear from you in a few hours we'll know who to hunt down and arrest."

I kiss his cheek and dash out of the tent, jogging down my parents' long driveway to my maroon Honda Civic. With a deep, calming breath, I shake out my hands, get in, and drive back to where Marti's waiting. We wave to each other, and I pull forward with Marti following close behind. I don't even care that I'm being reckless by having a total stranger in my house. There's something between us, and it's clear she feels it too. So I'm taking my cue from Uncle Tink and Uncle Danny, and I'm going for it. We may fizzle out quickly, but maybe, just maybe, this'll turn out to be something special.

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Chapter Five

Marti

The car ride to Lee's house is a quick trip, but it's more than enough time to get the butterflies in my stomach fluttering. She's just as pretty as I remember, and from what I saw of her personality in class, she's funny and good with people. All green flags with me, and I'm excited to get to know her better.

I pull into her driveway and park behind her Honda, staring up at the two-story, absolutely adorable, old farmhouse. It's in amazing condition and looks well cared for, from the recently painted sage green shutters and front door, to the well-tended flower beds that follow along the edge of the wraparound porch. It's traditional, but beautiful and I have a strong feeling it reflects its owner. I get out of the car and follow Lee up the front steps. "Can I get you something to drink? I do have coffee, but I also have beer, wine, iced tea, and water." She opens the front door and waves me in.

"Since I tend to drink complicated coffee drinks, and I don't want to put you through all of that, how about an iced tea? No sugar, lots of ice?" She nods and leads me from the entryway through a cute, country-style, pale blue dining room and into a small but cozy kitchen. This room is a bright pale yellow, with white appliances and a four-seater square oak table, where I sit while she pours our drinks. The sun shines through a large window over the sink, making the room cheery. "You have a lovely house. It has a nice, comfortable vibe."

“Thanks. I decorated it myself. It belonged to my grandparents, but when they got too old to stay by themselves, they moved in with my folks, and I moved in here.” She hands me a glass of iced tea and gestures through another door. “Let’s go into the living room where it’s more comfortable.”

I stand and follow her into a cozy living room with warm leaf green walls and a traditional club-style sofa upholstered in a dark taupe fabric. There are two matching club chairs and an oak coffee table. The walls are lined with shelves filled with books and photos of people who must be relatives. They all look too similar for them to be anyone else. I also recognize Lee and her brother Rick in several of them. We have a seat on the sofa, and she sits near me, close, definitely within touching distance, but not intimately so, and I suppose that’s fair. Even though she’s edible, we’re still at the getting to know you stage, and we don’t need to rush things. Plus, we need to talk. “So, I have a confession.”

She raises an eyebrow. “So soon?”

I snort. “Unfortunately, yes.” She rolls her hand, gesturing for me to continue. “I’m going to start by saying that I didn’t know you were teaching the class today. Not that it would have stopped me from taking it. In fact, I’d probably have signed up sooner if I’d known.” I wrap both hands around my glass so I don’t reach out and grab her hand. “I just don’t want you to think I was stalking *you*.”

She laughs and sips her drink. “Me? That makes it sound like you were stalking someone else.”

I grimace. “Weeeeeell, not stalking, but I was snooping. But not for me!”

This earns me a double eyebrow raise. “Okay, I’m going to need you to explain that.”

“Fair. So, do you know Seb Hart? Sébastien.”

Lee blinks at me. “Yes. I met him a few times, mostly in passing. But I haven’t heard that name in about two years.”

I nod. “He’s been studying art in France and just moved back a few months ago.”

“To the States?” She looks confused.

“Actually, in Monmouth. He’s my cousin, and he’s living with me until he gets on his feet and finds a job and a place of his own. Not that I’m in a rush for that to happen. I’ve missed him and am happy to have him living with me.”

Lee’s eyebrows have disappeared into her hairline. “Seb’s your cousin?” I nod again. “And he’s here? In the area?” Like a bobblehead, I nod yet again, and her face breaks into a huge grin as she leans toward me. “That’s fantastic news!” Laughing, she sits back. “Sorry. I got a little carried away. But that’s great news. Really. So, you obviously know he was dating my brother Rick.”

“Yeah.” I fiddle with my drink. “That’s kind of my real reason for coming to the class today. I was trying to see if I could find out anything about Rick’s situation.”

“Aaah. I get it now.”

Before she can come to the wrong conclusion, I attempt to explain. “So, while I wasn’t intentionally coming to see you—which I would have done if I’d known you were teaching the class—I’m very glad I ran into you.” I reach for her hand and stop halfway there. “Can I hold your hand? I should have asked before. Back at the farm.”

Her cheeks turn a lovely shade of pink, and she nods, actually taking my hand and giving it a squeeze. I lace our fingers together and she smiles. It’s a beautiful smile and makes me feel all warm and gooey inside. “I’m glad you came snooping.” This time, her cheeks turn a deep red, and she bites her lower lip. Oh, god, I want to bite it too. “I may have been going to French Press more than usual, hoping I’d run into you.” Her eyes go wide, and she squeezes my fingers. “Oh! Thank you so much for the piece of cake you sent over that day. It was delicious.”

“You enjoyed it?”

She nods, making a little moaning noise that gets me tingly. “It was decadent, and I refused to share even a single bit with Jake and Matt.”

“Those were the guys you were with?”

“Yup. My best friend Jake and his boyfriend Matt.”

I kick off my shoes, tuck my legs up under myself, and lean toward her. “Sorry I ran off so quickly that day. I was on the way to a friend’s wedding and was cutting the timing close. I stopped back frequently, too, hoping to run into you. But we never connected. Though I guess it all worked out in the end.” I wink at her. “And here we are. So, tell me all about you. Do you work full-time at the farm?”

She shakes her head. “No. I’m a cost reduction analyst for an ag-chem firm in town. I just help out at the farms on weekends.”

“Wow, you work seven days a week? That must be exhausting.” It also severely limits my opportunities to see her, which is a bit discouraging.

She shrugs. “It’s more like I volunteer to work on the farm on weekends. I don’t have to be there if something else is going on or if I just don’t feel like it. I mainly work the market—that’s the building where customers pay for what they’ve picked. We also sell the most beautiful bird baths and vases and lots of home garden things. Anyway, my Uncle Danny and I run the market for the family, but there’s more than enough staff to cover all shifts. We just iron out the wrinkles when they happen.”

“So, then, if I wanted to ask you out for next Saturday, you’d be free?” I hold my breath, never wanting someone to say yes to a date more than I want Lee to say yes now.

She bites her lip again, and my pulse kicks up another notch. “Yes. What would you like to do?”

Damn. I hadn’t thought that far. I scramble for an idea, and then it hits me. “You like wine?” She mentioned having some, so it’s probably a safe assumption.

“Very much.” She nods enthusiastically, then laughs. “Wait, that makes me sound like I have an unhealthy relationship with alcohol. Which I don’t. But I do love a glass or two now and then.”

Oh my god, she’s so freaking adorable. “How about a bike ride through the local vineyards. We could even do one of the wine tasting bike tours, if that interests you. Or we can just do our own thing, grab a few bottles of wine along the way, and see where things go.”

Her eyes widen. “That sounds like so much fun. I love a good bike ride. And wine.”

“That’s a yes?” Please say yes.

“Absolutely. I’ll let Uncle Danny know he’s in charge.”

I set my drink on a coaster and hold out my free hand. “Here, give me your phone. I’ll put in my number, and we can text this week and formalize plans.” She hands over her phone and I quickly add my contact info then hand it back. “I didn’t want to assume it was okay, so I’ll let you text me. In case you’re feeling pressured to say yes to our date and would rather think about it, or say no. This way only you have my number, and the choice is up to you.”

The shock on her face is quickly replaced with a smile. “Thank you. That’s *so* considerate. You’re very sweet.” She types on her phone, and

mine vibrates. “There. Now you have my number too. Feel free to text whenever the mood strikes.”

“Thank you. And I promise, I will.”

Setting her phone on the coffee table, she leans toward me. “So, you work with Jeremy? Doing what?”

“We’re accountants, and we work for the college.”

She smiles as she raises her eyebrows. “Oh, that’s nice.”

“Your attempt at interest is noted but not necessary. I know it’s unexciting, but I enjoy it, and it pays the bills. It’s also a college, so even though it’s not the size of some of the big universities in the area, it’s still pretty open-minded, and I don’t have to hide that I’m part of the LGBTQ plus community.”

Lee nods in understanding. “My company is pretty good about that too. We have a sprinkle of disapproving employees, but they’re very outnumbered and know to keep their opinions to themselves. Our HR department takes DEI very seriously.”

“That’s good! It’s such a relief to be able to go to work and not have that negativity and fear hanging over your head.” We sip our drinks, and I watch as she presses her lips to the edge of her glass. I wish I was that glass. “So, you mentioned your uncles were two of the guys helping you clean up. Who was the really big guy? I’m assuming he’s related in some way, because you have similar features and coloring.”

“That’s my brother Angus. There’s Rick—he’s the oldest—and then me, then Angus, and then the twins, Hay and Clay.”

I almost choke on my drink. “Hay and Clay? Please tell me those are short for something else.”

She laughs and nods. “Yes, Hamish and Barclay.”

Holding up a hand, I stop any further conversation because I need some clarification. “So, we have Richard, Lee, Angus, Hamish, and Barclay? Did your parents decide to be creative *after* the first two children?”

Lee’s bright laughter fills the room. “Actually, my grandmother—that’s my dad’s mother—named all of us. It’s some kind of MacDougall family tradition. She named most of my cousins too. The ones who live on this side of the country, anyway. But not Luke and Alex, my cousins who live in Vermont. But, to answer your question, Rick’s full name isn’t Richard. It’s Kendrick. And my full name is Ainslee. Ainslee Sìne MacDougall. And yes, all of our names are *that* Gaelic.”

“Why don’t you go by Ainslee?” It’s enchanting, just like her, and to my mind, it suits her better. “Not that there’s anything wrong with Lee as a name.”

She shrugs. “I used to, when I was little. But with four brothers, three of whom are younger, the name just got shortened, and it stuck.” She grins impishly. “Like Hay and Clay. That was my doing. Payback’s a bitch.”

I laugh and raise my glass to her. “The closest I came to siblings was Seb, and even that was long distance. But we were both queer kids without siblings, so we bonded over that.”

“Are you close with your parents?”

“Yeah. They’re great. I’m not as close as you obviously are with your family, emotionally or proximity-wise, but we do holidays together, and I see them a few times a month. They’re pretty active, so they’re always out and about, which makes scheduling visits a necessity. No just dropping in. But we make it work.” Lee seems genuinely interested, so I offer a bit more. “They don’t live far. They’re about half an hour toward Portland.”

“And how did you end up in Monmouth and not Portland.” She eyes me skeptically. “You don’t seem like the small-town girl type.”

I laugh. “Do you mean… as in dating one or in being one?”

“Both.” She grins and squeezes my hand. “You seem all kinds of put together.”

Oh, if she only knew. “It’s by design. I wasn’t always this fabulous.”

She raises her eyebrows curiously. “Oh?”

I take a breath as I smile. I guess it’s now or never. “Yup. I’ll let you in on a secret.” I lean closer. “Okay, it’s not *really* a secret, but it’s not something I go around announcing to everyone. I’m trans.” She blinks, and her eyebrows get a bit higher, but that’s her only reaction. I wait for a moment to see if she’ll say anything, and when she doesn’t, I continue. “But I like you, and this”—I gesture between us—“seems to be going well. Well enough that I’d love to see you again. I don’t normally tell people this early in the dating process because why bother if things aren’t clicking anyway? But with Rick and Seb being close and all…” I let my words trail off and release her hand as her face does some complicated gymnastics. “It’s okay if you’re not comfortable with that.”

She rears back, mouth open, eyes wide and flashing with anger. “*Excuse me*? It is *not* okay if I’m not comfortable with that. It’s not okay if *anyone* is not comfortable with that, although I know there are those assholes out

there!” Her pitch is rising, and the volume is increasing, and she must notice it too. She takes a breath and exhales slowly. “Sorry. Please don’t ever say, or think, that it’s alright for someone to not be okay with who you are. Because that’s bullshit. I mean, obviously not everyone is going to like everyone else, but to dislike someone, or change your mind about liking someone, because they are transgender is—” She flails her arms around. “It’s just wrong!”

I blink, shocked at the intensity of her reaction. Not because I’m worried about it, or upset, but because it’s so obviously heartfelt and genuine. This is not performative at all. “Thank you. That really means a lot.”

“Well, you’re welcome.” She flops back in her seat and frowns at me. “I’m sorry. My cousin Alex is trans, and my brain had to work through what you said because I wondered if you were making a joke or being anti-trans in some way. Some people think that’s funny.” Unfortunately, I know exactly what she means. People joke about being gay or trans, using the terms as some kind of slam. So I get it. “My brain had to process what you said. And now I’m embarrassed.”

I take her hand again. “Please don’t be. You had a momentary reaction. You’re only human.”

She wrinkles her nose, and it’s the cutest thing I’ve ever seen. “Yes and no. I’m sorry that I hesitated and made you feel like I wasn’t okay with who you are. I promise it had nothing to do with your being trans or with you at all.”

The urge to laugh is at war with an urge to weep in relief. “I truly do thank you for that.”

Her grip on my hand tightens. “You don’t need to thank me. Acceptance is the very least I can give you. I’m sorry you have to come out twice to people. Alex says it’s the worst thing about meeting new friends.” I raise an eyebrow, and she shrugs. “We have to come out to people as queer because we get the inevitable questions about who we’re dating or if we’re married. Then trans people have to do it again. Luckily, Alex transitioned early, and lives in a small town that is very inclusive. But he’s told me some pretty awful stories from his time at college. And I can’t imagine all the inappropriate and nosy questions you have to put up with. You don’t see cis heterosexual people going around saying, ‘Just so you know, I was born a certain gender, and I’m also straight. In case that makes a difference.’ I

snort, and she grins, showing off a delicious dimple in her left cheek. “And I know how scary it is sometimes just telling people I’m a lesbian. Most are fine with it, but some aren’t. I can’t imagine how frightening it would be to tell someone I was transgender and have them react badly.”

I nod. “I had one incredibly bad reaction. Once. Honestly, I signed up for karate the next week.”

Her eyes go wide again, this time with excitement. “Really? Do you still do it?” She frowns. “Take it?” Wincing, she waves her hand in the air like she wants to wipe the words away. “What do you call it?”

“Study it. And yes. I still do. My dojo is in Tigard. It’s an hour drive, but I love it.”

Her pleased shock does funny things to my insides. “Do you have a black belt?”

“I’m *ni-dan*. That’s second degree. I got it last year.”

Lee looks impressed, and I can’t say I hate it. “You’re gorgeous *and* a badass.”

I laugh. “Well, I’m not sure about either of those, but I’m very glad you think so.” I meet her gaze and frown a little. “So, after all that, I have to ask you something. Give me your gut reaction.” She nods, and I lay it out there. “Are we going to be great friends or romantically inclined?”

“Can’t we be both?” I sag with relief because there’s no hesitation in her response. “I mean, things might not click romantically in the end. And I don’t mean because you’re trans. I just mean, this is new. We’re still getting to know each other. It’s just as likely that you’ll decide there’s something about my personality that you don’t like as it is for me to decide that about you. Or we could start out romantically, and things just run their course and we end up friends.” She shrugs again. “But I’d like to go into this assuming we’ll hit it off and be romantically best friends.”

I laugh and blink away my watery eyes. “That sounds like a plan.” I take a deep breath and exhale. If we’re going forward assuming we’ll be romantically involved, there’s another discussion we need to have. “So, that brings up other things. Have you ever dated a trans person?” I assume she hasn’t, or she probably would have mentioned it by now. “Because if the answer is no, then there are a few things you might need to know. Again, I don’t normally have this conversation this early, but I’m incredibly attracted to you, and I think you’re feeling it too. And in my opinion, it’s best to have

this discussion with clothes on and brains functioning properly, rather than when our brains are fuzzy with arousal."

"Absolutely." Her cheeks are pink, but she moves a little closer and sets our linked hands in her lap. I'm taking that as another great sign. "Is this okay?" She raises our linked hands. "Or would you rather I not touch you right now? I want you to be comfortable."

Oh my god, she's the cutest thing ever. "I like being close and holding hands." She smiles and nods for me to go on. "Okay. So, I'm one hundred percent woman. Right?" She nods again. "Except I do still have some not-female parts." I laugh. "Wait, you grew up on a farm. I'm assuming you know all about the birds and the bees, so I'm just going to be frank."

She laughs. "Well, it's a produce farm, but we do have some horses. And I'm also thirty-six years old and have had intimate relationships before. So I'm quite familiar with how things work."

"Have you been with a man before? As a sexual partner?"

"No. Does that matter?"

Okay. If we get past this next part that kind of works in my favor. No preconceived notions of what to do or how to treat me. "I'm a trans woman on HRT, but I haven't had, nor do I plan to have, bottom surgery."

Lee's eyes widen a little. "Ooohhh. I see." She frowns, but I can tell it's in thought and not in disapproval, thank god. "Forgive me, because even though I have a cousin who's trans, he lives across the country, and we're not as close as I am with my cousins in Seattle." She waves her hand. "Ignore that. I'm babbling a bit." She grins sheepishly. "I'll admit I'm a little nervous. Not because you're trans, but because I don't want to mess this up. Even though I know I'm going to. I'm going to try my best *not* to, but if I get something wrong, please correct me. Okay?"

I nod, thankful that she's being so open-minded about this. I wonder if Seb knows about their cousin in Vermont.

"So, you have parts I don't." I nod. "Right." She exhales slowly. "I'm nervous."

That worries me. "Why?"

Wide-eyed, she gazes at me earnestly. "I like you. I think we have a connection. And I don't want to inadvertently insult you or do something wrong. I want to get this right."

I take pity on her, because I'm too brash for my own good and I've sprung this on her. Plus, she's trying. "Let me make it easier for you. I have

a lady dick, and the dangly bits below it I call my balls. I don't have much body dysphoria since I started HRT seven years ago, and I like having a lady dick and balls. But sexually, they function differently now. I don't get fully hard very often. Most of the time I'll get half-hard or not hard at all. But that doesn't mean I don't enjoy sex, or that I can't have orgasms. It's all just different."

"I, um, know anecdotal facts about male-female sex. I've read romance novels and seen mainstream media and porn." She makes a face. "Most of that is meant for the het male gaze, but I get what it's supposed to be like."

"Good. Now, throw all of that out the window because it almost never applies to me." She grins, and god, that's such a relief. "Think of my lady dick and balls as a clit and labia. They're extra sensitive now, but what I'm assuming the average female enjoys having done to their clitoris is what I enjoy having done to me. I do enjoy that whole area being played with, including my ass, but ass play's not gender specific anyway. I've been with women who enjoy that and women who don't, and honestly, I'm pretty flexible in the bedroom."

Lee's eyes light up, and she nibbles at her lower lip. "So, you like toys?"

"Sweetheart, I *adore* toys of all shapes and sizes. Both giving and receiving. And to be honest, I love giving more than receiving in most cases. Not because it's uncomfortable or dysphoric. I get off on my partners getting off."

"Me too, although I love receiving as much as I love giving." She pauses, and I can see her mind whirling. "If you orgasm, does that mean you can make your partner pregnant?"

And there it is. "Technically, yes? I mean, on those rare occasions where my lady dick comes in contact with someone's vagina, yes, there's a chance she could get pregnant. But that's not something I need in my sex life. I'm happy to use other parts of me to stimulate a lady's bits, and will gladly penetrate or be penetrated with toys or dildos. Plus, when I come, it's not a whole lot anymore." I grin and waggle my eyebrows. "But I can have multiple orgasms. And damn, those are fun!"

Lee laughs and nods. "Right?" Her pupils dilate, and she squeezes my hand. "Is it alright if I get closer?"

"Of course."

She bites that delicious lower lip again. "How close?"

Oh. Well. “How close did you want to get?”

“Very. But still fully clothed.” With my free hand I wave her closer. She grins, untwining our fingers before crawling into my lap and straddling my thighs with her knees. She wraps her arms around my neck, and I settle my hands on her hips and look into her beautiful blue eyes. “This okay?”

It’s so much more than okay. The weight of her in my lap, the curve of her hips under my hands, the strength in her hands as her fingers play with the hair at the nape of my neck. “Very.” She grins at my echoing of her word choice.

“Good. Thank you for sharing that with me. Like I said before, I’m sorry you need to have what I’m sure has become ‘the talk’ with partners. That’s just crappy. And for the record, I’m still very much attracted to you. You seem like a cool, fun person, and I’d love to go on a date with you. If you still want to go on a date with me.”

My belly swoops, and I slide my hands up and down her back, though in a way that’s more soothing than sexual. I like Lee. I want her to be comfortable around me. And there’s a decent possibility of that happening. “Yes, I definitely would love to go on a date with you.”

When she leans closer, I meet her halfway. The tension in the air ratchets up to about a nine, and I can’t stop staring at her lips. “Yeah. I definitely want to see you again.”

“Marti?”

“Yeah?”

“Kiss me.”

I do *not* need to be told twice. I lean in and press my lips to hers, and my entire body lights up like the night sky on the Fourth of July. She takes the lead, slowly parting her lips, and I moan as our tongues lightly glide together, as a wonderful ache spreads through me. Gently, she cups my cheeks with her small hands, and I squeeze her ass, though I’m trying to keep things mostly PG-13. But damn, I want to feel more of her. With a gentle bite to my lower lip, she pulls away and I groan, not ready for the kiss to be over. She grins wickedly at me and waggles her eyebrows. “That was hot.”

“So hot.” So hot that I want to keep going.

She sighs and slides off my lap. “Too hot. You’re too tempting, and we just met and haven’t even had the STI talk yet.” She pulls her legs under herself but stays close and takes my hand again. “I got tested for STIs after

my last girlfriend fucked off with some blonde from Saskatchewan. I haven't been with anyone since."

"It's been almost a year for me." Lee raises her eyebrows, and I nod. "Mutual breakup, and no real heartbreak on either of our parts, but it's difficult to go through this whole conversation every time. Like you said. So I have to be very motivated to do that. I mean, I have toys and romance novels. I can take care of my own sexual needs. There has to be a real connection with someone for me to want to be intimate with them. And you're the first person in a very long time who's made me take notice. But I'm happy to be tested again if it will ease your mind."

Lee considers and then shakes her head. "No, that rings true. It may be foolish, but I trust you on this."

"Thank you. And I do really want to get to know you first. I'm a bit of a romantic that way. So please don't think that I'm not sexually attracted to you, because oh lord, I am. I just want to know you before I *know* you. You know?"

She laughs and squeezes my hand. "I do. And I want that too. And on that note, what's your favorite color?"

We spend the next two hours chatting about things we like, things we don't, and funny childhood memories. By mutual agreement, we don't discuss Seb and Rick, wanting to focus on getting to know each other first. But I can tell it's a conversation we're going to have at some point. We also avoid any more discussions about me being trans, which I'm eternally grateful for. The rest of today is about getting to know each other outside of our sexuality and gender identity. And from what I'm learning about Lee, I think she's incredible.

She gestures to my empty glass. "That was the last of the tea, but I can get you something else, if you'd like."

I look at my phone and sigh. "I really should get going. Seb's going to wonder what happened to me, and he doesn't need to know that I was snooping around your farm."

Lee grins. "Rick and Seb are a conversation for another day."

"Or date? Saturday?"

She nods. "Definitely. I think the wine tour on our own sounds lovely."

"Then that's what we'll do. Let's text this week and figure out the when and where."

Lee takes my hand and walks me to her door. “Aren’t we supposed to be on the other side to do this?”

She laughs. “This side works just as well.” She slips her arms around my waist and I do the same to her, leaning down until my lips brush against hers in a soft, sweet kiss.

“I had a lovely time. Thank you for inviting me over.”

“Thank you for coming over.”

I rest my forehead against hers. “Please don’t wait for the perfect time or anything. If you feel like it, text.”

“You do the same.” I nod as she reaches for her door handle. “Be safe driving home.”

“I will.” Leaning down, I kiss her one more time, then she opens the door, and I float out to my car on an emotional high I haven’t felt in ages. Even if we don’t manage to get Rick and Seb back together, I’m so freaking glad the attempt connected me with Lee.

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Chapter Six

Lee

As my rideshare pulls up to the curb, I immediately spot Marti. How could I not? She's captivating, even sitting on a bench scrolling on her phone. My heart races and I pause to take her in. She's absolutely gorgeous. Tall, oozing charisma, and looking just as put together as always. Today's outfit is a beige seashell print oversized button-down shirt with a white form fitting tank underneath that hugs her torso. There are matching seashell print shorts that do *everything* for her long, tanned legs. Completing her ensemble are oval-shaped white sunglasses, and a pair of white low-top Converse.

I take out my phone and send her a text, then exit the car.

ME:

Hey. Look up

Marti glances up from her phone, scanning the area, and when her gaze lands on me, her smile is spectacular. I can't even move. How is it that this put together, outgoing, charming woman wants to spend her time with me? Whatever the reason, I'm not going to miss the opportunity. Marti jumps up and hurries over. "Hey there."

"Hi." My voice is breathy, like I've jogged here instead of riding in a car. "You look amazing as always."

She takes my hand and leans down to kiss my cheek. It's romantic and sweet, but honestly, I've been thinking about our first kiss all week, and at

some point today, when the moment is right, we're going to do that again. This time, I'm perfectly willing to let the moment take us wherever it wants.

"Thank you. I'm always a sucker for compliments. And you look wonderful. Very summery in your strappy sundress and white canvas lace-ups. Cerulean is a wonderful color for you. It makes your beautiful eyes pop."

I do a little twirl, and the cotton skirt flares out, showing off my matching bike shorts beneath. "And I'm ready to ride. No flashing passers-by."

She laughs and takes my hand. "Shall we rent some bikes and get this show on the road?" I nod and follow as she leads us over to the rental counter. "How about I get the bikes, and you can get the first round of wine?"

"Perfect." Five minutes later, we have our bikes and are pedaling side by side toward the first winery. "So, is today the day we talk about the elephant in the other room?"

Her grin is infectious, and I can't help but smile back. She makes me feel so incredibly light inside. "What elephant is that and which other room?"

I shrug. "There's never enough room in a kitchen for an elephant, so maybe the living room. And the elephant is Rick and Seb. Or, *not* Rick and Seb, since they aren't together."

Marti's expression changes to one of utter exasperation. "You know, when those two broke up, I wanted to smack them both. Idiot boys."

"Total idiot boys. Rick was miserable for months, even though he kept telling everyone he was fine."

"Don't even get me started on Seb. Seriously, I could feel the ennui through the phone every time I spoke with him. He struggled the first six months of classes because he was uninspired to create and had to do it anyway or risk failing." She rolls her eyes. "And even if he didn't admit it, he knew it was a mistake breaking up with Rick." She presses a hand over her heart. "Excuse me. He didn't break up with Rick. It was a mutual decision." She rolls her eyes again. "I repeat: Idiot boys!"

I snort. "Rick said it was mutual, but it was easy to see that he was only going along with it because he thought it was what Seb wanted." I shoot a

quick look at her. “He never said those exact words, but I could tell. And he never said anything bad about the breakup. Or Seb, actually.”

“Seb never said anything bad about Rick either. I think he was hoping Rick would wait for him. Which is just dumb. If you tell someone to move on with their lives, you can’t be heartbroken when they do.”

In theory, she’s not wrong. But I honestly don’t think that’s what happened. “What if he didn’t?”

She glances at me. “He who? And didn’t what?”

“He being Rick, and didn’t move on. What if Rick hasn’t?”

Marti’s eyebrows shoot into her hairline. “Reeeeally? How interesting. Wait, doesn’t he have a boyfriend?”

It’s my turn to roll my eyes. “Steven. What a twat.”

Marti snorts adorably. “Tell me how you really feel.”

“Seriously, though. He’s so pretentious.” She quickly glances my way, which is all the encouragement I need to go on. “He’s a commercial real estate agent.” Marti gags, and I nod vigorously. “Exactly. He comes to the farm wearing dress slacks, a button front shirt with *cufflinks*, dress loafers…” Marti’s head whips around, and she gawps at me. “I *know*! Sorry, but men should never wear loafers.” She nods in agreement. “But the worst is that he thinks farming is what poor people do or some shit like that.”

She stops pedaling and sits up, turning to me as she coasts along. “Excuse me? Has he heard of Ted Turner? John Tyson? The Resnicks?”

My farm girl heart skips several beats because she knows her farming families. Or at least some. And that hits a girl right where she lives. “I just want you to know it’s freaking *hot* that you rattled that off so quickly, and if we weren’t riding bikes right now, I’d kiss you.”

She waggles her eyebrows. “Hey, I can pull over.”

It takes me less than a second to swerve toward the berm of the road and stop my bike. Marti pulls in right in front of me, and I walk the bike forward until we’re side by side. With a cocky sparkle in her eyes, she leans toward me, her beautiful red lips pressed into an exaggerated pucker, and I copy her. Our mouths meet and the kiss goes from slightly playful to incendiary in a heartbeat. Her lips are warm and soft, the pressure enough to let me know she’s kissing me but gentle enough to let me kiss her back. Her hand cups my face, her thumb stroking my jaw, and even though it’s a warm, sunny day, I shiver with arousal.

A car horn honks, and someone whoops out the car window at us. Reluctantly, I pull back, ending the kiss. She's standing perfectly still, her eyes closed and a sweet smile on her lips. With a small flutter, her eyes open and she grins at me. "Well. That was definitely worth the stop. Just for informational purposes, are there any other topics of conversation that you find particularly arousing? Or is it just farming?"

"Probably just farming. But I do find confident women incredibly sexy." I grin and teasingly eye her up and down.

She smirks. "Oh, sweetheart, that's one area where I am *not* lacking."

I shrug one shoulder. "Good news for both of us." I lean in and kiss her quickly, then set my foot on the pedal again. "Okay, winery ahead. Let's do this!"

Laughing, she takes off right after I do, and we race for a few hundred feet before reining in our exuberance. Several minutes later, when we're finally seated in the winery with glasses of pinot gris, Marti brings the conversation back to her cousin and my brother. "So, how serious is Rick about Steven?"

It takes me a minute to reply, because although I want to say they aren't serious, I'm not actually sure about that. "From an outsider's perspective, they're all wrong for each other. Steven is pompous and does a very bad job of hiding it. Rick is a keep-the-peace kind of guy, and I think Steven uses that to his advantage. They don't have a lot of similar likes and dislikes, as far as I can tell." I shake my head. "They quiet argue constantly when they're around the family."

"Quiet argue?"

"Yeah. You know, heated but whispered discussions. Looks that speak volumes. But not the lovey-dovey kind. Rick showing up solo for family functions. That kind of thing."

Marti sips her wine. "Do they live together?"

I shake my head. "No. Although they've been dating for a year. They aren't even talking about it."

"So maybe not that serious a relationship." Marti's lips quirk into a mischievous grin. "Perhaps we should test that."

I lean in conspiratorially. "What do you have in mind?"

"Nothing bad. At least, I don't think it's bad. What if we happened to have Rick and Seb in the same place at the same time. You know, just to see what happens. If there's no chemistry, no spark, then no worries."

It’s not a horrible idea. And like she said, if there’s no spark, then they say hello and goodbye and move on. “And if the attraction is still there, then it was meant to be.” We raise our glasses and toast to our plan.

A few hours and about a dozen miles later, we’re sitting at our fourth winery. We did a wine tasting at the first location and had only one glass apiece at the other two. Like responsible grownups, we ordered appetizers at each location to keep from getting too buzzed. This time, we order a charcuterie board with our wine, and then Marti excuses herself to use the restroom. While waiting for her to return, I enjoy my lovely glass of pinot noir, feeling just a little tipsy, and admire the stunning view from the stone patio that overlooks the vineyard.

“Okay, here you go. Can I get you anything else?”

I glance up at the server and smile, shaking my head. “No, thank you. I think we have everything for now.” She nods and walks away, and I get my first look at the charcuterie. And I can't stop my chuckle. The chuckle becomes a snort, and the snort turns into a fit of giggles. By the time Marti comes back to the table, I’m gasping for air and wiping the tears from my face.

She grins, one eyebrow raised. “What did I miss? Something good, apparently.”

Shaking my head, I try to speak, but that isn’t happening. So I gesture at the appetizer and start laughing all over again. She follows the direction of my finger and snorts. “Oh my god.” Thankfully, she seems to appreciate twelve-year-old humor, because she starts to chuckle. “Do you think they know? Surely that’s not intentional.”

I glance at what I’m assuming is meant to be a lovely rose made out of roast beef. It is *not* a rose. It is, in fact, a roast beef vagina, proudly placed in the center of the rest of the meat arrangement. I take a deep breath and manage to make words happen. “I don’t think anyone else noticed. This place doesn’t give the kind of vibe necessary for an intentional genital meat display.”

That makes Marti snort again. “Definitely not, though the wine is nice.” She raises her glass of pinot and takes a sip before leaning close and smirking. “Do you mind if I eat your meat rose?”

Heat washes through me, and I feel my body responding to her proximity. “Depends on which meat rose you mean.” I shake my head.

“Actually, no it doesn’t. The answer is yes. God yes. Eat my meat rose.” There’s a pause where we lock eyes, and then we both burst into giggles again. “Oh my god, I’m sorry. That was *so* not as sexy as it sounded in my head.”

“Sweetheart, that wasn’t sexy at all, unless you’re a delusional author writing really *bad* smut.” She cups my jaw and leans even closer, softly kissing my lips. “But I very much like the intent behind it.” She grins naughtily. “And I’d very much like to eat your meat rose.”

I kiss her this time, lingering a bit. “Nope. Not even you can make that sexy in any kind of serious way. And that’s saying a lot.” I meet her gaze. “Because I find you *very* sexy. Generally. You know, when you’re not talking about my meat rose.” We snicker and lean back in our seats. “Go ahead. The rose is all yours.” I wink at her like she does so often to me. “Both of them.”

Without dropping my gaze, Marti picks up the roast beef rose and somehow manages to make eating it an erotic experience. “Mmmmm. Delicious.”

I squirm in my seat, quickly becoming very done with our outing. “I have a suggestion. Would you like to hear it?”

She nods, still chewing, which makes me giggle. “Let’s enjoy our wine and charcuterie, then return the bikes and get a rideshare back to my house.”

Marti’s pupils expand, and her wicked smile reappears. “Oh? What would we do at your house?”

“Um—” I watch her lips as she takes another slice of meat from the tray and nibbles on it. “Nibbling is good. We could definitely do nibbling. And so, so much more.”

“So much more is my favorite. Sounds like a plan.”

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Chapter Seven

Marti

The trip from the winery is only twenty minutes, but I'd swear the rideshare to Lee's house takes hours, and I'm equal parts excited, turned on, and nervous as hell. Not only is this the first time we'll see each other at least partially nude—I don't want to make assumptions about how far we'll take things—it's potentially the first time Lee will see me as I truly am, without clothing covering the parts that reveal my transness.

We exit the rideshare and I follow Lee up the front steps. She digs her keys from her pocket and smiles at me over her shoulder. "Do you want something to drink?" Turning the key in the lock, she opens the front door and steps inside.

"Is this something you do? Offer beverages to your guests as they enter your home?" Laughing, I follow her in and close the door. "And no, thanks. I'm all beveraged out."

Once we kick off our shoes, she turns to me, taking my hand. "I feel sweaty and unattractive after all that biking."

I pull her against me and kiss the tip of her nose. "You actually look edible, all sun-kissed and slightly sweaty."

Wrinkling her nose adorably, she shakes her head. "No way. I think I'm going to take a quick shower." She squeezes me. "Feel like joining me?"

Yes! But no? "I don't have anything to change into."

She gives a one-shoulder shrug. "I have a T-shirt and some cutoff sweatpants you can borrow."

“Are you sure? About the shower. Not the clothes.”

With a reassuring smile, she pushes up onto her toes, placing a gentle kiss against my lips. “I am. I’m attracted to you romantically, physically, sexually, mentally, all the -lys. But if you’re not ready, I can wait. We’re in no rush.”

That, more than anything, puts me at ease. I smile down at her and nod. “Okay, then. Yes. I’d love to wash off the sweat of the day. And be naked with you. Even if we don’t do anything but end up rubbing shoulders or whatever.”

“Well, I’m hoping for some whatever, but I promise you I’m fine if that doesn’t happen.” She steps back and gently tugs my hand, so I follow her into the bathroom.

It’s not a huge space, but it’s a decent size, especially for a house this old. The walls are painted a medium blue and white striped pattern, with delft-patterned soap and toothbrush holders on a small shelf above the white pedestal sink. The tub is an old white cast-iron model with blue and white tiles covering the tub surround. There’s a showerhead, and it’s actually high enough that I can stand under it and wet my hair without contorting myself into odd positions. Both the shower and the usable height are rare in houses this old. “This is so cute. I love the decor.”

“Thanks. Mom and I designed it, and Dad and Angus did most of the work. Uncle Tink made sure the electricity and plumbing were up to code in the house before I moved in so all of my electronics didn’t blow a fuse.” Lee laughs as she makes air quotes around ‘all of my electronics’, like that’s something her uncle actually said.

She turns on the water and then pulls her sundress over her head, leaving her standing there in only her nude lace bra and blue bike shorts. God, she’s beautiful. Her peaches and cream skin is dotted with the most beautiful freckles, and her breasts are perfect handfuls. Her body isn’t skinny or muscular, but that’s not something I’m necessarily attracted to. She’s sturdy. Solidly built. A farm girl through and through, and I want to caress every part of her. She reaches for the placket of my button-front shirt and raises an eyebrow. “May I?”

I nod, shrugging out of it as she pushes the fabric over my shoulders. The tank I’m wearing under it goes next, and then I push my shorts to the floor so we’re both in bras and panties. My stomach does a nervous flip, but I force a smile. “Moment of truth.” With a breath for courage, I pull my

beige cami bra over my head and shove my satin tucking bikini briefs to the floor.

Lee's gaze roams over me, and I watch her eyes, relaxing as her pupils dilate and she exhales a lovely 'oh' sound. "You're beautiful." She steps closer and meets my gaze. "Can I touch you?" I nod, a bit too overwhelmed with relief to say anything yet. She reaches out and brushes her fingertips along my shoulders and down my arms before moving back up and tracing lightly over my chest. Her fingertips brush over my nipples, and I breathe in, letting my eyes slide shut for a moment. "Sensitive?"

I nod quickly. "In a good way, but yes. Everything is sensitive in a good way."

"Noted." Her voice is husky as her fingertips tease across my torso.

A rush of steam coats my back, and I glance at the tub faucet. "Looks like the water's warm enough. Shall we shower?"

She wrinkles her cute nose and nods. "Yes. I really want to keep touching you, but the thought of you touching me before I wash off the grime is a mood-killer." I laugh and move out of the way so she can turn on the shower. Carefully, I step into the tub as Lee takes off the rest of her clothes and follows me in, pulling the shower curtain closed. The water is the perfect temperature, just this side of scalding, and in no time, the space is filled with steam. We alternate stepping under the spray, and it feels good to rinse off the sweat and road dirt. Lee pours some shampoo into her hand and passes me the bottle. It's a clean citrus scent and reminds me of a summer morning. The rich lather is luxurious, and the scent is lovely, so I make a mental note of the brand to get some for myself. In another few minutes, we've washed head to toe, and I reach to turn off the water. Lee has other plans. She leans into me and stares at my face. "You're beautiful. Your body is beautiful. And I'd like to take you to bed, if that's alright. We don't need to, if it's too fast or makes you uncomfortable. But if you say yes, we won't do anything you're uncomfortable with." She puts her hands on my waist and looks up at me. "But I'd like to continue what we started in the entryway, if that's something you'd enjoy."

I lean down and kiss her. It's supposed to be a sweet kiss like the ones we shared before, but it quickly turns steamy, and I'm very on board with further exploration. "Yes, please. I'd love that."

Grinning, she reaches behind me, shuts off the water, and throws open the shower curtain. She grabs two towels from the hanging bar and hands

one to me. We dry in record speed and wrap our towels around ourselves before hurrying across the upstairs hall to her room. It's an understated girly-girl room. The walls are a light pastel pink, and the dressers and bookshelves are white. The lamps are silver, with medium pink shades, and the queen-sized bed is covered in a geometric-patterned bedspread of pink, mauve, and maroon circles. There's a maroon padded headboard, and the curtains are white, letting in the late afternoon sunshine. It's a cheery, soft room and completely fits what I know about Lee's personality.

She closes the door behind us and drops her towel before taking my hand and pulling me toward the bed. "You're not worried about wet hair on the pillows?"

Her laughter fills the cozy room. "I'll have a gorgeous, naked woman in my bed. Do you honestly think I'm going to be worried about a little dampness on my pillow? I won't even be thinking about it." I let my towel drop to the floor as she pulls me onto the mattress. "Tell me what you like. What will make you feel good?"

I pull her close. "Besides having your skin against mine?" I nuzzle into her neck, inhaling the citrus scent of her body wash. "I love all of the usual things. Cuddling, kissing, soft touches." Lee moans as I kiss down her neck. "Do whatever you think I'll enjoy, and if I don't, I'll let you know. I promise." I nibble along her shoulder. "And I hope you'll do the same."

"Yes. I will. Promise." She falls back onto the pillows, and I slowly kiss down her body, stopping at her wonderfully pert nipples. I suck one into my mouth and gently increase the pressure, flicking it with the tip of my tongue. "Oh, god, yes." Her fingers slide into the curls at my nape, massaging the back of my head with the same rhythm as the gentle pulses of my mouth. "I love having my nipples played with." I slide my hand up her torso and cup her other breast, squeezing gently before lightly pinching the nipple between my finger and thumb. "Oh, god."

With a slight pop, I release her nipple from my mouth and watch her expression. "Feel good?"

She nods, gazing at me through half-lidded eyes. "Pull harder." So I do. Gradually tugging with more intensity, I only stop when her eyes widen and she nods. "God, it's like they're directly wired to my clit. That feels so good."

I adore a vocal partner, especially when they indicate what they like and don't like. And Lee is giving me the roadmap with lots of neon arrows

pointing the way. Sucking her nipple back into my mouth, I slide my hand down her torso, teasing over her hip and gliding my fingertips along her inner thigh. She spreads her legs, giving me more room and possibly encouraging me to touch elsewhere. I have every intention of doing just that, but not yet. Instead, I skim my fingers over her other thigh, drawing small circles on her warm skin. “Marti.”

“Mmm?” I suck a little harder, and she inhales sharply.

“You’re teasing me.”

“Mhmm.” I nibble lightly, and she arches off the bed.

“Marti.” Her tone is firm, and I grin against her skin. “Marti, touch my clit right now or be ready for payback when it’s my turn.”

I’ve probably teased her long enough, so I do as she asks, lightly ghosting my fingers down through the trimmed hair, easily finding my target. I brush the tip of her clit with the pad of my finger, keeping the strokes light, teasing her just a bit more. She gasps and closes her eyes, rolling her hips as she chases my touch. “Marti.”

It’s a half groan, half command, and I laugh, rubbing more firmly. “This what you need, sweetheart?” She bites her lower lip and arches into my touch, and it’s the most erotic thing I’ve seen in a very long time. I pull my gaze from her face and look down her body, watching my fingers tease and play, fascinated as her clit turns a dark pink. “I want to taste you. Can I?”

“Oh god, yes, please.”

Eagerly, I kiss my way down her body, continuing to caress her. When my lips brush against her clit, I slip my fingers lower, stroking her open. She’s wonderfully slick, and I easily slide two fingers inside her and suck her clit into my mouth. With my fingers and tongue, I caress her, keeping the pace slower but the pressure firm.

“Oh my god!” Lee arches off the bed, pressing herself against my mouth, rocking her hips against my hand. “So good. So, so good. God, don’t stop. Please!” I curl my fingers and find the spot that should light her up, rubbing gently until she gasps. When I press more firmly, her eyes practically roll back in her head as her hips lift off the bed again. Her entire body tenses, her legs shaking as I keep rubbing. Her hands grab fistfuls of bedspread, and she pulls as her body coils and she comes against my hand, shuddering again and again as I continue to rub. Mercifully, I slow my stroking and gently withdraw my fingers as her hips hit the mattress and she

gasps for air. I brush tender kisses along her torso and look up at her as she finally opens her eyes. “Holy shit.”

I chuckle. “Good?”

“What do you think? Holy moly, what was that?” She drags a hand through her still damp hair and shoves up onto her elbows. “Seriously, what was that? What did you do?”

I blink. “Sweetheart, has no one found your g-spot before?”

She shakes her head. “Not if that’s what that was. Holy shit. We’re so doing that again.”

That makes me laugh. “Absolutely we will.”

She sits up the rest of the way and places her hands on my shoulders, pushing me back until I’m lying down with my head on the pillows. “Your turn. What do you want?”

“Honestly, the same things you do. I love my nipples played with, my lady dick sucked gently. Both, either, whatever you want to do.”

Lee brushes her lips against mine, nibbling gently then lightly licking over the spot as her hand glides down my torso. “I want to do it all.” Her mouth follows her hand, stopping at my breast, sucking a nipple into her mouth. With the perfect amount of draw, she suckles and teases my breasts while she brushes feather-light strokes over my lady dick with her fingertips. It feels good, but I can’t completely concentrate, as I’m a bit concerned that she might try to stroke me too exuberantly. When it becomes clear that she isn’t planning to use any more pressure than she already is, I finally relax and really start enjoying what she’s doing.

“That feels good.” I rock my hips against her fingertips, the gentle strokes sending little shocks of pleasure up my spine. “Just the right touch. So good.”

“Mmm. I’m glad. I want it to feel good.” She slowly licks her way down my body until her mouth is just above my lady dick. She looks up. “This okay?”

I nod. “Yes. Just do what you normally would.”

Gently, she licks my tip, spreading pre-cum over the head. I groan and slide my fingers into her damp hair, lightly massaging her scalp. “Fuck. Yes. Just like that. God.” I spread my legs wider. “You can suck me into your mouth, but—” My words are cut off by my own gasp as she does just that, resting the tip between her lips and swirling her tongue around while softly pulsing a light suction. “Fuuuck. That’s perfect.” Her fingers continue

to tease my nipple as her other hand slides between my thighs. She presses a knuckle against the skin between my balls and my hole and rubs gently, and I swear I see stars. “Oh shit!” My legs start to shake, and my whole body coils as the pleasure skyrockets. “Oh fuck, Lee—” I shove at her shoulder, and she pulls off. Pressing down against her knuckle, I arch off the bed in a whole-body clench as my orgasm slams into me. Warm fluid trickles down my thigh as I spurt a bit before collapsing back against the pillows, staring glassy-eyed up at the ceiling. “Fuck. That was incredible.”

Once I get my bearings, I glance down my torso at Lee, who is grinning up at me like the damned Cheshire Cat. “Good?”

“So good.” I hold open my arms. “Get up here and let me snuggle you.” She crawls up the bed and slides against my side, throwing a leg over mine and resting her cheek on my shoulder. With a happy sigh, I settle my arms around her and press my lips against her hair. “Where did you learn that little trick with your knuckle? I thought your only experience was with people who have vaginas?”

She nudges me in the ribs, laughing. “It is. But I do happen to read, and know how the internet works.” I lean back and look at her. She shrugs. “After our conversation last week, I figured I should do my homework. If I wanted to be a responsible person dating you, then I owed it to both of us to educate myself. Right?”

Amazed, I stare at her. Does she realize how not normal that is? My chest fills with so many emotions—gratitude, affection, hope—and I have to clear my throat to get words out. “Right. Yes.” I lean in and kiss her softly on the lips. “Thank you. For an amazing afternoon, for the mind-blowing sex, and for being an incredible human being.” I wrap her in my arms and bury my nose in her hair. I can’t recall a single partner who ever took the time to try and understand more about me, without making me tell them everything they should know. Not before we started dating, and not after. Mind blown and emotions ready to ooze all over us in very sickening sweet fashion.

“You’re welcome.” She snuggles deeper into my side. “I’m hungry.”

Laughing, I squeeze her tightly. “How about if we order in and have a picnic in your living room? You can get whatever you want. I’m buying.”

She pinches my arm. “I’m buying. It was my suggestion. And a picnic in the living room sounds wonderful.” She brushes her fingertips along my

side. “I think *you’re* pretty wonderful too. I’m so glad you took my cooking class.”

“Mmm.” I kiss her hair. “I’m glad I did too.”

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Chapter Eight

Lee

We eventually roll out of bed, and I give Marti a light blue T-shirt and a pair of cut-off sweatpant shorts, which make her ass and legs look sexy as hell. I pull on a pair of denim shorts and an old faded gray T-shirt with the MacDougall Farm logo on the front pocket. Once we're downstairs we weigh our food options, settling on Chinese delivery. When the food is ordered, Marti sits at the kitchen table while I make more iced tea. Meaning I put a pot of water on to boil and open eight Lipton tea bags. Once that's done, I get plates and utensils together for our living room picnic, then sit at the table with her. "I know we're having dinner together tonight, but I'd really love to see you again. And again. I don't want to get ahead of myself, but I do want you to know that I really like you." I take her hand in mine and squeeze it. "You're funny, and smart, and so beautiful. And I have fun hanging out with you. And I'd like to do that more."

Her smile takes my breath away. "I'd love that too. I've had the best time with you. And we obviously have chemistry."

I can feel my cheeks turn red, but she's not wrong. "We definitely do."

"And I'd love to do that again. But I'd also just love to hang out with you and do fun things. Even if it's taking one of your cooking classes at the farm."

A thought pops into my head, and before I can second-guess myself, I blurt it out. "You could help me teach them."

She raises an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

“You could be my sous chef. Hand me ingredients or find bowls that I’ve set aside but forgot where I put them. That kind of thing. Or demonstrate what I’m instructing while I walk around the class and make sure everyone is following instructions. But only if you want. If that’s not fun for you, then forget I mentioned it.”

She’s nodding before I even finish speaking. “Yes! That would be *so* much fun. I’d love that.”

“Maybe you could drag Seb to one?”

Marti snorts. “I doubt it. Not when the possibility of running into Rick is looming. Besides, he doesn’t even know about these classes. Not that they’re a secret.”

I brush my fingertips over the back of her hand. “So, how are you going to tell him we met?”

“Hmm. I suppose I’ll tell him exactly what happened. I mean, I did tell him about our non-meeting at French Press. He just doesn’t know it was you, because I didn’t know who you were. And I suppose I could tell a teeny-weeny white lie and say Jeremy wanted to go to the cooking class, and Gus couldn’t go, so he asked me.”

“And you didn’t mention it to him because you knew he’d think he was obligated to feel some kind of way about it.”

Marti nods. “Good! Yes. And we saw each other, went for coffee, hit it off, and the rest is history. Or the start of history.”

Oh, I love that. Yes, please. “The start of what will hopefully be a very long history.”

“Mmm.” It’s her turn to squeeze my hand.

“Do you think we’ll be able to get the two of them in the same place, let alone talking to each other?” God, I just want Rick to dump his bonehead boyfriend and get back together with Seb. It’s so obvious the two of them are meant for each other.

Marti bobs her head back and forth. “Maybe. If what you’ve said about what’s-his-name, the boyfriend, is true, they can’t last forever. They sound like complete opposites.”

I nod, but change the subject, not wanting to spend my time with Marti talking about my brother. Time flies, and before I know it, there’s a knock on the door. Marti slides from her seat. “I’ll bring in the dishes while you grab our food.”

Marti sets out the plates while I open the containers, moving around each other like we've been doing it forever, and it's really nice. We sit down and dish out food, then dig in. Silence reigns while we dish out the food and take the edge off of our hunger. Then Marti holds out a Chinese garlic green bean with her chopsticks. I take the offered bite and grin. "Delicious."

"You could make these in one of your classes. They must be incredibly simple. Garlic and beans, right?"

Out of habit, I let the pun fly. "*Bean* there, done that."

She doesn't miss a beat. "Not right away, but maybe a second round of classes. After it's *bean* awhile." She grins impishly, and oh my god, I could fall in love with this woman.

I press my hand to my heart. "Where have you *bean* all my life?"

"We had to wait for the right moment to meet."

Warmth fills my chest, and the way she's looking at me makes my stomach swoop. "Is this the right moment?"

She winks. "It is. But it would have happened eventually. I have a feeling you and I were meant to *bean*."

Yup. She's definitely a keeper.

* * *

Want to know what happens with Rick and Seb? Stay tuned for *Forbidden Fruit*, Book 1 in the Love by the Bushel series.

Want to read the story of how Rick and Seb first met? *The Meet Cuke* is yours for free if you subscribe to my newsletter!
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About the Author

Beck is an author of LGBTQ+ lower-angst romance, writing inclusive happily ever afters, because we all deserve to see characters like us find happiness. Incognito worker bee by day, Beck spends evenings and weekends devoted to writing stories involving hot characters, favorite tropes, and happy endings. If you love character driven stories that feel real, without the heavy trauma, you've found your place. Welcome.

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Gingerbread Boy

Helen Juliet

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About the Author

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Content Warning

This story mentions the day our boy Roux considered taking his own life at a train station. Obviously, he didn't, and now he's here to find his happily ever after.

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Chapter One

Roux

I’m so hungry.

You’d think by now I’d be used to the gnawing ache in my belly. I learned a long time ago that food was an easy place to save money. Every penny has to go on rent before anything else, then my second priority is keeping my car going. That way, in the times where I don’t have a roof over my head, I’ll always have four wheels to get me out of trouble.

I can’t remember the last time I *wasn’t* in trouble.

Rubbing my tummy, I try and make myself as small as possible. I’m lurking around the sun-drenched market square of the little town my engine managed to get me to before my red light came on. I had enough loose change to pay for parking, but I’m not sure what I’ll do when that runs out.

What’s new?

I never know what I’m going to do next. I just wait until I fuck up so badly that I have to split and run from wherever I’ve been living or working. Or both. It been that way since forever. Well, at least since I moved out of my nan’s house. Which might as well be forever ago, it feels that distant to me.

A familiar pull urges me to dwell on all the mistakes that tore me from the comforts of home and led me to this town whose name I’ve already forgotten. I can’t deal with the inevitable heartache on top of the hunger cramps already distracting me, though, so I shove those thoughts away. I

can run away from the problems in my mind just as easily as the physical ones, you see.

It helps that I'm already preoccupied. Because this place that I tripped and fell into is apparently having some sort of spring fête. Or perhaps they have markets every weekend? That seems like the kind of thing picturesque little towns in the Cotswolds would do. Whatever the reason, instead of looking for some way to make a quick bit of money with the delivery apps I work for, I'm transfixed by one stall in particular.

In between tables selling crafts and flowers, there's a stand with a white tablecloth inscribed with the words 'Fox's Bakery'. Above that, a cute cartoon fox is wearing an apron, holding a tray of cakes.

However, that doesn't do any justice whatsoever to what's actually on display.

My whole body trembles and my mouth waters as I obsessively stare at the slabs of fudge and brownies, piles of cookies as big as my fist, an array of colourful cupcakes and glistening fruit tarts, and neat rows of jam jars layered with sponge and frosting, decorated with what I think are mermaid tails made of chocolate.

Everything is lavish and I wouldn't say no if someone handed me anything from the groaning table display. But what's truly ground my brain to a halt is perhaps the simplest item of them all.

The gingerbread men.

I think it's better to call them gingerbread people nowadays, which I get as it means no one feels left out. But my nan used to bake gingerbread men. It was her speciality, and as that's what she called them, that's what is on my mind as I gape shamelessly from across the square at the ones on sale this morning.

It doesn't matter what they cost. I know I can't afford them. But the stall is busy, and every time one gets sold, my heart tightens in my chest. Plenty of other items are being bought as well by the constant stream of customers that never stop flocking to the table. Where I'm standing to the side, I have a good view as the goods deplete. Surely this can't be all they came with today? If it is, they're going to sell out within half an hour, for sure.

The idea of someone else getting the last bit of gingerbread makes me eyes sting and my tummy ache even harder. All that sugar would probably make me sick, but my heart doesn't care.

In this moment, the pain of missing my grandmother—the only family I ever really had—hurts more than any hunger pangs.

Why didn't I hold back even just a little money instead of putting as much petrol into my car as I possibly could? I should have known I couldn't make it to Bristol anyway and would have to stop somewhere along the way. At the time, I told myself I'd be fine with the slightly stale loaf of bread and dregs of peanut butter I have left in the boot of my car. But the thought of eating that yet again makes my insides churn.

If it wasn't a Sunday, I could pick up some work and get paid immediately. But my stupid bank won't let me access any funds until tomorrow, so anything I earn today isn't going to help me until then. My plan had been to tough it out and sleep in my car like usual.

But that was before the gingerbread.

Even from where I'm standing, I can see that all the figures are decorated differently, almost like they've been given personalities for the short time they'll exist before getting devoured. As I watch on, a woman picks up one wearing a football uniform, pays, then hands it to the little girl waiting patiently by her side.

"Thank you, Mummy!" the child cries, before gleefully chomping the head off.

That's how Nan and I always used to eat them. She told me it was so the gingerbread men didn't suffer, and I would laugh every time, no matter how often I'd heard her say it.

What I wouldn't give to hear her say that silly joke again.

To my horror, I realise with that purchase, Fox's bakery only has one lonely piece of gingerbread left. It's a baby with a dummy in their mouth, wearing a nappy made of icing, which doesn't seem to appeal to the guy in the suit currently more interested in making one of the salesgirls laugh than buying anything. But there are plenty of people behind him, and my heart hammers in my chest.

I can't quite manage to make myself listen to reason. The world isn't going to end if I don't have that gingerbread. However, my breath is shallow, and my skin is prickling like I'm convinced it will. I'm lightheaded as I creep closer, paying attention to everything going on around me but also focused obsessively on the gingerbread baby.

And for a moment, it looks like the universe might actually be on my side for once.

The band that was setting up suddenly bursts to life, pumping out an old nineties rock song through the speakers that makes the whole square turn to look, smiling and cheering as the singer gets going.

This is my chance.

As sneakily as I can, I quickly approach the bakery stall, saying a silent prayer of thanks that the gingerbread is on display at the very end of the table. With a flick of my wrist, I snatch up the baby and start backing away.

That's when I look behind the stand and see the most gorgeous older man with an enormous tray of fresh baked goods walking this way.

He's looking directly at me. Our eyes meet, and for several seconds, it's as if I can't breathe. Wow. He really is stunning. Bright blue eyes with just a few lines around them. Strong jaw and even stronger looking hands. Salt and pepper in his brown hair and an amused smile on his full lips.

For some unknown reason, this silver fox seems as captivated by me as I am him. But then everything goes wrong—as usual—when he casts his gaze down to the stolen gingerbread. His feet falter and he frowns before looking back up at me.

I could pretend I was just looking at it. I could put it back. I could apologise. I could even try and blag that I paid for it and slip away before he verifies that with anyone at what is clearly his bakery stand.

Instead, shame burns through me faster than wildfire. I can't offer to pay for it because I literally don't have the fiver it costs in my bank account. But now I'm holding it, a voice in the back of my head is screaming that it's mine. I just *have* to have it. As the moment stretches out, it feels like life won't be worth living if I don't get to taste some soft, delicious gingerbread right fucking now.

So I do what I always do when things get tough.

I run and don't look back.

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Chapter Two

Renard

I love the markets we have on the first weekend of every month, but I'd be lying if I said they weren't long, hard days.

Opening my own bakery before I was forty has been the greatest accomplishment of my life. It's moments like this, however, that I wonder if *keeping* it open is the greater feat. No matter how you look at it, the cost of living is hitting almost everyone, and that doesn't always leave much room for splurging of naughty treats. I'd argue that cake is important for mental health and therefore essential. What is life without joy, after all? But over the last couple of years, I've noticed a slow but steady decline.

It scares the shit out of me.

So when the sun is shining and our stall has a non-stop queue of at least five people at any given time, the only thing I'm going to do is count my blessings. It doesn't matter that I've been awake since three in the morning or that I've lost count of how many cupcakes I've personally frosted by hand since then. It's events like this that mean I can afford to pay my loyal staff and keep the door of Fox's open another month.

The spring markets are my favourite. Sometimes we get sunshine in autumn and winter, but being warm as well makes such a difference. But not too hot like it can get in summer. It's trickier to ensure everything stays fresh when it's boiling, even if we're selling fast. No, days like today are the very best. I'm already more than happy with the sales we made on Friday and Saturday, and we're only just getting started today.

So despite my aching feet, my spirits are light as I push my way through the bakery door into the fresh air again, the next load of gingerbread people on a tray ready to put out. I had particular fun icing this batch, and glancing down at my handiwork makes me grin as I weave my way through the crowd to reach our table. There are designs I do almost every time, like the ghost, the builder, the zombie, and the one that definitely doesn't resemble any princess in particular for copyright reasons.

But this round, I had a little extra dough, so made some additional ice hockey sticks to create several players from certain—very gay—fictional teams I enjoy. Chances are, no one else will get my inside joke, but that's okay. I'm sure they'll sell regardless. The band has just started their first set, drawing a lot of attention. However, I can see as I approach that my sales assistants still have plenty of people eagerly waiting to be served, and they're not going to be distracted from their tasty treats.

Speaking of tasty treats…

My gaze lands on a young man hovering by the side of the table with striking red hair. What looks to be the last of the current gingerbread is clutched in his hand. It's his body language that snatches my breath, though, and causes my feet to slow to a halt.

Every Daddy instinct I have is screaming at me right now.

His frame is a medium build but even through his clothes I can tell how skinny he is. His shoulders are hunched and his jaw is clenched as he starts backing away from the stall.

It occurs to me that he obviously hasn't paid for the gingerbread. But rather than be angry, all I wonder is, why not? He isn't exactly a teenager, doing something rebellious just for the thrill of it.

No.

He looks desperate.

And then he looks at me.

For several agonising moments, we just lock onto each other's gaze, something tangible transferring between us. But before I can call out or even smile at him, he bolts.

Without thinking, my feet sprint into action. "Sorry!" I cry as I thrust the fresh tray of goods at one of my baffled assistants, but I'm not going to stick around to apologise.

I don't give one flying fuck about some stolen gingerbread. But the terrified look on that boy's face will haunt me if I just let him run away

from me.

And, yes, it's probably wrong to think of him as a boy when he's clearly an adult and I know absolutely nothing about him beyond a handful of assumptions based on five seconds of a first impression. But on the other hand…

I'm very rarely wrong. If that young man isn't desperately in need of some TLC from a doting Daddy, I'll eat my baker's hat.

"Whoa, hold up!" I yell as I chase him around a corner into one of the side alleys that leads to the big car park. I make it just in time to see him trip on his own feet and pinwheel his arms as he threatens to go flying.

I'm there in a flash, catching around his waist and hauling him upright before he can smash his pretty face into the pavement.

Unfortunately, I don't get much of a chance to admire his smattering of freckles and long, strawberry blond lashes. Because as soon as he gets his feet under him again, he's whimpering and cowering away from me, protecting his head with his hands, still clutching the gingerbread.

My heart breaks clean in two. "I'm not going to hit you," I cry, but he doesn't seem to hear me.

"I'm sorry!" he shrieks pitifully. "I didn't mean to—I mean—I'll pay for it! I swear! Please don't call the police!"

"Hey, hey, hey," I say urgently, hugging him tighter to me. "Calm down. Nobody's calling the police, okay?"

After a few more ragged breaths, his body goes limp against me. I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd pulled away. I am a stranger, after all. One he thought was furious with him. But instead, he leans in fractionally, panting and trembling like a scared animal.

I wonder how long it's been since anyone held him.

Somehow, the gingerbread baby he swiped is still intact. The fact that he carefully held onto it despite doing a runner tells me a little more about him and his situation. This wasn't some frivolous theft. There's a story to be told here.

"I'm sorry," he utters again, but this time only in a whisper.

"It's fine, I promise." As much as I want to keep holding him close, I figure we need to have a proper conversation. So I gently release him and wait until he meets my gaze again, then I smile in what I hope is a reassuring manner. "I think we got off on the wrong foot," I joke lightly. "I'm Renard. I see you're a fan of my baking."

The redhead boy swallows and glances about skittishly, then he licks his lips and looks at me again. “I’m Roux,” he croaks. He clearly needs a cup of tea and to catch his breath, but I don’t think he’s going anywhere until I’ve made my feelings clear. Most importantly, that I don’t care about a stolen gingerbread baby. I care that he’s all right.

“Roux,” I repeat, enjoying the unusualness of it. “Like the sauce.”

He shrugs and points to his gorgeous ginger mop. “Roux like red. My mum was a bit…well…I’m just glad she didn’t go all out and call me Rouge.”

I laugh and nod. “I’m one to talk, I suppose,” I tell him with a wink. “Renard means fox in English.”

For a second, he merely stares at me. Then he slowly blinks down at the logo on my apron and lets out a little gasp.

“Oh my god, it’s *your* bakery,” he moans in distress. Then he tries shoving the gingerbread baby into my hands. “I’m so sorry, I don’t know what I was thinking, I—”

“Hang on,” I say with as much kindness and patience as I can, stilling his frantic attempt to reunite me with a cookie I stopped thinking about the second I finished icing it. “Roux, stop. You can have the gingerbread. I don’t care about that.”

He pauses and looks suspiciously at me through his long lashes. “But… you ran after me?”

I nod and smile warmly. “Now I’m the one that’s sorry. I probably scared you, and that wasn’t my intention. I thought you might be in trouble.”

He shrinks away from me, and even though I don’t want to, I let him. “Yeah, because I broke the law,” he says mulishly.

“This isn’t Les Misérables,” I joke with a grin. When he looks at me blankly, I take pity and explain. “No one is locking you up for pinching a loaf of bread or a gingerbread baby. I meant you might be in trouble before now. What led to this moment? Is everything okay, Roux?”

“Why would you care?” he asks, but there’s no bite to his words. He sounds genuinely confused.

I simply shrug. “Because I do. Are you having a bad day?”

He nibbles on his lower lip and doesn’t meet my eyes. “Um, I guess so. I’m…I guess I’m just so hungry and I can’t get paid until tomorrow. But that doesn’t mean I get to steal from someone else! I’m so ashamed.”

The quiver in his voice breaks my heart even more, but not as much as the tears shimmering in his eyes when he glances back at me.

“No one should ever go hungry,” I tell him softly, then carefully touch his elbow, trying to reassure him that he’s all right with me. “Please eat your gingerbread.”

His eyes widen at me, then flick down to the baby in his hands. “Are you sure?” he rasps.

“Of course,” I say firmly. “Why don’t you walk back to the market with me so I’m not just standing here making you awkward whilst you enjoy it. At least, I hope you enjoy it. They’re rather good, if I do say so myself.”

I laugh. He doesn’t give me much more than a weak twitch of his lips, but he does lift the gingerbread up to his mouth as we begin slowing walking. However, he pauses before he can take a bite and considers his prize. Then he snaps off one of the legs.

He offers it to me without quite meeting my gaze.

I want to insist he eats every crumb as he’s clearly starving. But the gesture is so kind I’d be a monster to rebuff it. “Thank you,” I say softly, our fingers brushing as I take the piece from him.

I’m not particularly hungry myself, but I chomp off a bite. Like I hoped, that seems to encourage him, and he starts nibbling on the baby’s head. His eyes flutter closed and he lets out a tiny moan that sends shivers down my spine. “So good,” he mumbles, daring to help himself to a slightly bigger mouthful this time.

“Glad you like it,” I say sincerely. He’s apparently so preoccupied with not eating his treat too fast that he doesn’t seem to notice me studying him. We might only have just met, but I’m already captivated by him.

The walk back to our stall at the market isn’t long, but my mind is whirring over the few bits of information I’ve been able to glean from him.

Only one thing seems to matter right now.

If he had to resort to nicking some sodding gingerbread, I’m guessing that means he’s broke, and starving himself to boot. It makes me furious to see him wolf down the rest of that biscuit baby like he hasn’t eaten properly in days.

I have a feeling he hasn’t.

Before I can analyse my emotions too closely, I change the direction I’m walking and get a little thrill when he naturally falls into step with me. I’ve been so focused on running the business that it’s been a while since I

had a serious relationship, an arrangement, or even a hook-up with anyone, and my inner Daddy is already preening.

At least I have enough sense left not to get ahead of myself. Just because Roux seems like a boy, or maybe even a little doesn't necessarily mean he's into the lifestyle. If he'll let me take care of him for a bit, though, I think that will make us both happy.

"Oh," he says, eyes widening as we approach the bakery's front door. "I was wondering if you had more stock somewhere nearby because you were selling out so fast. This makes sense."

Clever boy, I think to myself. I refrain from saying it out loud as I'm not sure if he'd take it as a compliment or as me being patronising.

"Yep, this is my place," I say as I open the door for him. Without explanation, I lead him through the shop front where a couple of my guys are serving the lunch crowd and into the empty kitchen. "Brown or white?" I ask him.

He frowns and looks around before raising his eyebrows at me. "Um, brown or white what?"

"Bread," I tell him kindly, holding up a loaf of each. "To make you a sandwich."

To my disappointment, he looks horrified. "I-I-I don't need a sandwich, thank you," he splutters quickly. "You've already been too kind. I'm full from the gingerbread. I'll—"

"Roux," I say firmly and put the bread down. He clamps his mouth shut and regards me warily. "Please let me make you a sandwich. You can have whatever you want in it. We've got loads of fillings. Then I would like to offer you an opportunity."

His wary look only deepens. "Um, what kind of opportunity?"

Part of me is glad he's asked for details before agreeing to anything sketchy just for a sandwich. But I hate how he expects there to be a horrible catch to my proposition. It makes me feel like he's been tricked a lot in his life, which boils my blood. So I lay out my idea as quickly as possible for him.

"If you spend the rest of the afternoon working for me," I explain, "I'll pay you cash in hand, and you can eat as much gingerbread as you want."

For several seconds, he just stares at me like I'm mad. "I tried to steal from you…" he eventually says, "…and your response is to offer me free food and paid work. Have I got that right?"

I shrug. “You only stole because you couldn’t afford it, yes?” He nods. “So what good is calling the police or even letting you have one piece of gingerbread? I’d rather do something to fix the root cause.” I raise my eyebrows, wondering if his pride is the issue. “It wouldn’t be a handout. You’d actually have to work.”

Perhaps I’ve misjudged him and he’s a lazy little sod. But he quickly shakes his head. “Of course I’d pull my weight, that’s not a problem. It’s just…*why?*” he asks, clearly baffled. “That would cut into your profit margins for the day.”

I’m struck once again by his intelligence. That wouldn’t occur to many people. They’d just see the pound signs and jump at the offer. So if he’s clever and hardworking, why’s he in so much trouble?

That’s probably not something I can fix today or should even pry into, so I focus on the immediate issue, which is getting some food in his belly and some money in his pocket.

“Because that’s just who I am,” I answer his question gently. “And I think who you are is not a thief. You only need someone to give you a chance. Let me give you that chance, Roux.”

The seconds stretch out as we stare at one another. Then his eyes start filling with tears and his bottom lip trembles.

That’s all the warning I get before he launches himself forwards and flings himself into my arms.

I hug him with everything I have.

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Chapter Three

Roux

"This is too much," I whisper hoarsely as I stare at the stack of twenties Renard has pushed into my hands. When I finally glance up at him, he just shrugs.

"It's minimum wage with a little on the top." He winks at me and my insides turn to jelly. "You worked hard today, Roux. You earned that. Don't sell yourself short."

I don't want to count it in front of him, but I swear I'm holding about two hundred quid right now, and it's making me feel a bit dizzy. When I agreed to help out at the bakery today, I thought I'd maybe get another gingerbread person and a couple of notes in exchange for not getting turned over to the police. And believe me, that would have been more than I deserved, not to mention much appreciated.

But this?

Part of me wants to refuse and hand some back. That would be foolish, though. I desperately need the cash for so many things. This means I might actually be able to get a room for the night, fill up my car, and make it to Bristol tomorrow.

What I'll do once I get there is still a mystery. Start working deliveries immediately and look for a dirt-cheap place to rent, probably. I can sleep in my car until I'm able to save up enough for a deposit. But after so long suffering on my back seat, the idea of a real bed tonight makes me want to cry.

“Thank you,” I manage to whisper thickly. I’m glad Renard waited until the rest of his staff headed home to pay me. They’ve been so kind all day to me and I’d have been embarrassed to get upset in front of them. “For everything,” I add, rubbing my eyes so I can look at him unblurred. “You really didn’t have to help me today. It means more than you’ll ever know.”

He smiles warmly, little crinkles appearing around his eyes. I know he’s got grey in his hair, but I don’t think he’s that much older than me. I’m twenty-six, and he’s maybe late thirties or early forties? Certainly young enough that when he reaches and squeezes my arm, it doesn’t feel fatherly in the slightest.

I’m perfectly well aware that I’m just being a little lost puppy, latching onto the first guy who’s been nice to me in a very long time. But it doesn’t matter that my life is a complete mess. I’ve still got eyes. Renard is hot as fuck, and I can’t stop my heart from fluttering as his thumb rubs comfortingly against my bare skin.

“You’re welcome,” he says, then lets me go.

It’s best that he does before I do something mortifying, like lean into kiss him. I still can’t help but morn the loss of his warm touch. Who even knows how long it’s been since I’ve been held by somebody.

There’s a reason for that, though, and I would do well not to forget it.

When I tripped earlier and almost fell, it was almost as if he was poised, waiting to catch me. It felt so incredible to be wrapped in somebody’s arms like that, even if only for a moment. But that was nothing to how he hugged me after he offered me work and food for the day. The first time had been an accident. When I ended up in his embrace again, though, it was because I hurled myself at him, and he just let me do it. In fact, he seemed to want to let go even less than I did.

That was probably something I imagined, I’m sure. We’d only just met, and normal people don’t go around cuddling strangers like their life depends on it.

Even though that’s what happened. And I loved it.

I’m pulled from my dangerous thoughts when he speaks again. “So are you headed home now?” he asks as he puts the last few bits away in his kitchen. His words are casual but it’s hard to miss the implication of his question.

He’s worried about me.

The temptation to lean into his concern is strong, but I can't let myself be vulnerable like that. He's already done more than enough for me and now I need to be on my way.

Except my feet aren't moving.

"Oh, I don't live around here," I reply, also trying to come across casual but most likely failing. "I'm just passing through."

He raises his eyebrows as he dries his hands on a hand towel. "You staying at the bed and breakfast?"

I shrug. I should just lie and say yes, but the truth comes out before I can stop it. Apparently, I can't resist letting him fuss over me just a little. Because, no I haven't sorted out any accommodation yet. I was fully expecting to be roughing it in my car again. What he's given me is like an unexpected gift from the heavens.

"Probably. That looked like the only place around," I say with a shrug.

Although, I guess now that I have petrol money I could drive on this evening and find somewhere closer to the city. But that'll probably be more expensive and…I realise the idea of leaving this cute village so soon makes me sad. I didn't even really get to see it.

There's nothing here for me, though, is there? So leaving sooner rather than later would be for the best.

Except Renard is grimacing. "Um, sorry, hun. If you haven't already booked a room, I doubt you'll get one now. Big Wave is going on until Monday—it's this big cider festival that's also turned into a music thing over the years. Very popular. All the local towns will have sold out of rooms months ago, and any last-minute cancellations will be going for extortionate rates."

He glances at the money I'm still clutching in my hand and my heart sinks. He's right. Even if I somehow manage to find somewhere available, I'll probably just waste everything I earned today on a bed when I could just sleep in my car.

Again.

The sob escapes my throat before I can stop it. Horrified, I try and cover it up with a cough and don't meet Renard's eyes. "I'm sure I'll work something out," I mumble, stuffing the cash into my pocket and begin stumbling towards the door. "Anyway, I've bothered you enough for one day. Thanks again for the work and all the food."

No matter what happens, at least I've got a full stomach. Renard was true to his word and made me a huge cheese sandwich earlier that he insisted came with a packet of crisps and a cold drink as well. Then, whilst I helped him by loading the dishwasher and ferrying trays of goods to the market table, he kept offering me hunks of gingerbread, claiming they were broken bits they couldn't sell anyway. I had a sneaking suspicion he was snapping the poor gingerbread people on purpose, but they tasted so good, I pretended not to notice.

So I can cope with yet another night trying to catch some shut eye on the back seat even though I'm always terrified I'm going to wake up and find someone creepy staring at me. Or worse, breaking into my car. That only happened once and I screamed and scared the guy off. But I don't know if he was just trying to steal my ride or…something worse. Next time I might not be so lucky.

And my back twinges as it sinks in that I'm not going to get a mattress tonight. Now I've realised going to a hotel would squander my unexpected earnings, it doesn't seem worth it to splash out when my car is free, even if I am lucky enough to find something that's available.

I'm just so fucking tired, though.

"Wait!" Renard calls out before I can take another step. My reluctant feet don't need any more encouragement to freeze in place. Pathetic hope flutters in my chest even though it shouldn't.

Tentatively, I peek over my shoulder at him.

Renard opens and closes his mouth a couple of times, clearly wrestling with whatever he's about to say. It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him don't worry about it. As much as I've loved his kindness today, I know I'm really not his problem.

But then he blurts out, "I have a spare room," and all my resolve vanishes.

Slowly, I turn back around and lick my lips, my heart thumping in my chest. "Yeah?" I rasp noncommittally, trying not to jump to any conclusions. But if he's offering what I think he is…

Another sob almost shakes my chest, but I manage to swallow it down.

"Yeah, I do," he confirms, standing up a little straighter, like he's made his mind up. "It doesn't make sense for you to throw your money away on an overpriced room when you could kip at mine for free, right? What do you think?"

I bite my lip and try to maintain my composure. “You’ve already done so much for me, though,” I manage to whisper without my voice wobbling too much.

“It’s my pleasure,” he says so earnestly it feels almost like a physical touch. “So long as you’re not allergic to dogs?”

That wasn’t what I expected him to say, and it startles a nervous laugh out of me. “Um, no. What kind are they?” I’d put up with something big and scary or even tiny and yappy if it meant a proper night’s sleep and…oh, dear god…maybe even a hot shower that isn’t at a gym.

He beams at me. “An Old English Sheepdog, emphasis on the old. Banksy. He’d be thrilled to have a visitor.”

“Well…” I say slowly.

There’s a voice in the back of my head screaming at me to run. That this is dangerous, and I shouldn’t trust a stranger, especially not a charming, handsome one. Guys like that are what got me in this position in the first place.

But I’m not strong enough to resist. Being constantly on the move for so long has left me running on fumes just as much as my car.

“I guess…I could?” I say. “If it would make Banksy happy…?” A tentative smile tugs at one side of my mouth.

Renard grins like I’ve just told him he’s won the lottery. “It would make him ecstatic. His Daddy here is so boring.” He jabs his thumbs at his chest and waggles his eyebrows at me. Meanwhile, I try and ignore the fluttery feeling hearing him call himself ‘Daddy’ gives me.

That’s weird.

Yeah, Renard is gorgeous and older than me, but I’ve never been interested in playing games like that before. But if I were to think about someone being a Daddy in a sexy way…yeah, I guess Renard would be the dictionary definition. Older, handsome, firm but caring—the perfect silver fox.

“So we can’t let an old mutt down now, can we?” he continues, not giving me a chance to dwell too hard on my strange reaction. “Best you don’t overthink it and simply come home with me.”

Home.

That word breaks the last of my resolve. Maybe this is a terrible idea and I’m willingly putting myself in the path of a psycho. I really hope not,

though. It just feels like Renard wants to help me because he's a good person, and lord knows I desperately need a bit of help right now.

I can't keep running. I don't have anything left to keep me moving forwards. I need to rest, and whether I'm making a mistake or not, I can't help but trust that I'll be safe with Renard and his Old English Sheepdog watching over me.

"Okay," I tell him, a relieved smile taking over my face. "That sounds amazing. Thank you."

I'm not sure which of us is happier about my decision.

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Chapter Four

Renard

It's as if I'm watering a part of me that has been dried up for far too long. Like a neglected plant that's been placed in the sunshine, turning itself to bask in the warm rays. When Roux agreed to spend the night at my place, it felt like something bright and colourful bloomed in my chest.

I love taking care of people. Family, friends, colleagues—their wellbeing is often what pulls me out of bed when my alarm goes off at an ungodly hour. I chose to open a bakery because there's a lot to be stressed or sad about in the world right now, but sweet treats make people happy, even if only for a moment.

However, there's nothing like being a Daddy.

And yes, I'm still very aware that I have no idea about Roux's preferences. All day, I've made sure to watch him like a hawk to ensure nothing I've done has truly pushed him past his comfort zone. There's a big difference between nudging him to understand that it's okay to accept help and making him feel awkward by overstepping his boundaries. A lot of people don't want an older man to swoop in and take care of them.

I just had a feeling from the moment I laid eyes on him that Roux wasn't one of those people.

When he realised I was serious about hiring him for the day and paying him in cash, I physically saw the tension leaving his shoulders. Same with just now after he accepted my offer to stay over. I'm not sure where he was planning on spending tonight, but I was getting a bad vibe. He doesn't look

or smell like he’s sleeping rough. However, I can’t say for certain that he hasn’t been. Then we swung by his car to collect his stuff before going to my place, and I strongly suspected he was just planning on spending the night there.

Slightly better than a park bench, but not much.

The idea of him cramming himself into that old Nissan Micra where any pervert or nosey parker can snoop on him makes me feel sick. I try not to dwell on how many nights he’s most likely already spent in that thing and just feel grateful that—for tonight at least—he doesn’t have to worry about toughing it out, alone and vulnerable.

Rather than pay for more parking, I insist that he moves his car to my driveway. I’m itching to take the wheel and let Roux relax, but the journey is only a few minutes and without insuring me it doesn’t seem worth the risk. Besides, it’s obvious that Roux is struggling to let himself be taken care of already. Insisting I drive might be the last straw that freaks him out and sends him running.

I definitely don’t want that.

“That’s perfect, thank you,” I tell him as he carefully eases his Micra alongside my Range Rover. It doesn’t escape my notice that he blushes at the simple praise, information I tuck away for possible future reference. Hey, it doesn’t have to be anything sexual or kinky. If dropping a couple of compliments is going to make him happy, then it’s not a big deal if I find moments to do that whilst he’s staying over.

I wonder not for the first time how long he’s potentially going to crash with me. However, I quickly remind myself that we need to tackle one issue at a time. Simply getting him here for one night feels enough of a feat. If the vibe is right tomorrow, maybe I can gently pry and see what his long-term plan is.

We exit the car and he stares in awe at my modest two storey house. It’s made from the standard Cotswold cream stone with a warm slate roof. Having lived in this region my whole life, sometimes I forget how picturesque and charming it really is. Vibrant purple Wisteria grows on a trellis around my front door. Birds sitting in the bushes and flitting around the bird bath try and sing louder than the noise my feet are making as I crunch on the gravel, going to the boot to collect all of Roux’s things.

“This is your place?” he asks incredulously. Then he notices what I’m doing and jumps to try and help.

“I’ve got it,” I assure him cheerfully, waving him off. He has a disturbing lack of stuff, but I tell myself that’s only because he’s travelling.

Not because these are all of his worldly possessions.

“Yeah, I’ve lived here for five years,” I reply to his question. I don’t want to boast considering he’s clearly hugely preoccupied with money, and I never would have been able to afford the deposit without the help of my parents. But I bloody love my little house.

And my not so little dog.

A couple of booming woofs sound through the door as we approach. I glance at Roux to see if that’s spooked him, but he just smiles when I catch his eye. “Banksy?” he asks.

“The one and only,” I say with a grin. It takes a second to juggle Roux’s things to get my key out, but then I turn it in the lock and pause with the door open only a crack. “Banksy, back up,” I command in my Daddy voice that I’ve used far more on my dog than any boys I’ve played with. I like them sweet and good, not bratty. Banksy, though, sometimes needs reminding who’s in charge so he doesn’t get overexcited. Roux is doing so well. The last thing I want is for my dopey pooch to scare him off.

To be fair, I wait a second before letting the door swing inwards, and find my old pup is sitting politely on the other side of the mat at the foot of the stairs. His fluffy tail is thumping on the carpet, and his tongue is hanging out as he pants excitedly. That’s fine. I want him to be happy…just not a jumpy, knock our small new friend on his arse kind of happy.

I usher Roux inside and close the door. “Good boy!” I cry, and it’s like flicking a switch, bringing Banksy back to life. He woofs again and scrambles to his feet as fast as his old joints will let him, ambling over to headbutt both Roux and I. Then he immediately starts sniffing every single strange item I’ve just brought into his domain.

“Oh, he’s gorgeous,” Roux says breathlessly, his eyes wide as he strokes Banksy’s back. Then he groans. “*Banksy,*” he says, sounding like the penny’s just dropped. “He’s like the dog on the paint cans, and Banksy is an artist. That’s clever.”

“I thought so,” I say, puffing my chest out and making a joke out of preening at my own genius. Roux laughs, a beautiful, light sound I haven’t heard before. It not only flatters my ego, it makes my heart soar.

In the short time since we met, I’ve decided that Roux should be relaxed and carefree as much as possible. Not looking so stressed that he might

throw up.

I place the rest of his bits and bobs down and simply observe him looking around for a second. His eyes are shining with wonder as he takes in my open plan living room with its oak wood furniture and overhead beams. It's certainly cosy rather than cool, and I consider how it might measure up to other guys' homes he's been in.

Not that this is a date and I'm trying to impress him or anything. Nuh-uh.

"You have a lovely home, Renard," he says softly, and he looks almost tearful when his gaze meets mine again. "Thank you so much for inviting me here. I feel like I'm on holiday or something."

If I knew him better, I'd brush off the compliment and crack a joke about him writing me a good review on Yelp. But his sincerity is infections, so instead I just touch his shoulder and give him a smile.

"You're welcome, Roux."

The moment stretches out as we look at each other before I have the sense to pull away. Whatever chemistry I think I'm sensing is irrelevant. He's my guest and he's in some kind of trouble, that much is obvious. It's one thing to Daddy him by providing food and shelter. But anything more would be crossing a line when he's vulnerable and that's something I refuse to do.

"Would you like a tour?" I ask.

He giggles shyly. "Um, sure. Can Banksy come too?"

I scoff. "Try and stop him. We all know who's really in charge around here, and it's not me."

The house isn't huge, so I begin by taking him through the living room and show him the kitchen with the sturdy, rustic dining table, then we head upstairs. I gloss over my room, not wanting to insinuate I expect him to spend any time in there.

Thankfully, I always keep the spare room made up in case of visitors, so I hope he feels immediately welcomed. The décor is mostly neutral as it's a space I want any of my friends and family to be at ease in. So there are landscape prints on the walls and photos of Banksy, as well as shells from the beach and other harmless nicknacks.

The main personality I've injected is having a large, folded over rainbow blanket stretched across the foot of the bed that my mum crocheted for me as a housewarming present. That, and the big teddy bear who I won

at a fair a while back. Most people laugh when they first see him sat against the pillows and put him on the floor when they go to bed. I can't help but notice the way Roux's gaze lingers on him and then he doesn't say anything. Like he's curious but embarrassed to admit it.

Oh, sweetheart. There's nothing to be embarrassed about here with me.

Now doesn't seem to be the time to discuss it, however. So I change the subject. "If you don't want to risk a big lump sharing the bed," I warn him, "you'd better keep the door closed. Banksy usually sleeps with me, but the novelty of a guest has been known to draw him in here."

Roux laughs and ruffles my dog's fluffy head. "That's okay, I wouldn't mind."

It's silly, but hearing him welcome Banksy makes my heart all gooey. I have no interest in people who get precious about sharing space with a creature that only wants to love and adore you. Unless they're allergic, in which case, fair enough. My old man is made of pure fluff.

"Finally, here's the bathroom," I say, showing Roux across the hall. "Did you want to shower whilst I throw some dinner together?"

It was just a hunch that he might, but the way he does that grateful almost-sob again breaks my fucking heart. "That would be incredible," he whispers.

I grab a big, soft towel from the linen cupboard. "Take your time," I tell him sincerely as I hand it over. "Use whatever products you like, too. I'll bring up your bags and leave them in your room. Come find me in the kitchen whenever you're ready."

It's important to me that he knows I won't bother him or worse, be lurking out in the hall when he's getting naked.

Roux looks like he's debating over what to say, but then he just shyly whispers, "thank you," before vanishing into the bathroom.

Sensibly, he shuts Banksy out. But now that means I have the big lug under my feet as I fetch Roux's belongings from downstairs, so it takes me two trips to run everything up. I manage not to twist an ankle or stand on any of his paws, though, so I call that a win.

This morning, I'd had it in mind to use up some vegetables by making a stir fry for dinner tonight. But as I pause and inspect the contents of my fridge now, I'm not so sure. If one of my mates had come over for an unexpected visit, that would be absolutely fine. I'd crack open some beers

and maybe bulk out the meal with some prawn crackers and spring rolls I undoubtedly have hiding in my freezer from the Christmas party season.

Something in my heart is strongly urging me against that, however. It could be a huge risk, but my gut instinct is screaming that if Roux really wants to let his troubles fade away for tonight, he needs a little more help.

Emphasis on *little*. My thoughts drift back to the longing look he gave the teddy on the spare bed. I'm not imagining these micro hints I've been reading, I'm sure.

Making a snap decision, I close the fridge door and go rummaging around in the freezer instead, thrilled when I find what I'm looking for. If I've totally misjudged, I can make an excuse about wanting to throw together something quick and easy and this being all I could find. But hopefully, me preparing food like this could be just the ticket for Roux letting go.

Daddy's here for him whether he knows it or not.

I turn the oven on and hope he doesn't take forever to come down. I need a bit of time to get dinner ready, but I'd hate if it got dried out or cold. I tell myself to cross that bridge when I come to it, and that I can always nuke things in the microwave if necessary. So I just proceed as if we'll be ready to eat whenever it all comes together.

Something tells me Roux is going to be grateful for being made dinner no matter what. But luck is on my side as I hear his feet coming down the stairs with only a couple of minutes left on my countdown. I cancel the alarm so it doesn't startle him, confident I can manage the rest simply using the digital clock on the oven.

"Perfect timing," I greet him cheerfully as he appears at the kitchen's threshold. His hair is damp and he's changed into different, clean clothes. What I love most though is that he smells like my shower gel, and something purrs contentedly inside my chest. "Would you like to take a seat? Everything will be ready in just a sec."

"It smells amazing," he says breathlessly, making me hopeful that I picked correctly by not doing the stir fry. Then his eyes dart to my large table. "Um, where do you normally sit?"

I both love that he was considerate to ask and hate that he's clearly nervous about making a mistake. Does he think that if he parks his arse in the wrong chair I'm going to explode and kick him out?

Maybe he does.

So I smile reassuringly and tap the back of the nearest seat. “If I take this one, it’ll make it easier to dish up. Why don’t you go for that one?” I indicate the chair around the corner next to mine that’s closest to the door. I’m hoping he’s not actively logging the exits in case he has to flee. But just in case, that open feeling should help him relax, even if it’s subconscious.

“Okay, thank you,” he says, sounding relieved. “Um, is there anything I can do to help?”

My heart melts just that little bit more for him again.

“I think I’ve got it all under control,” I assure him with a casual air. Even if the bloody hob was on fire right now, I would still tell him to sit back and chill out. This is what I’m good at, and I’m very sure it’s what will make us both happy.

For me to fuss over him for a bit.

“It’s only a quick and easy dinner,” I say as I finish up with the potatoes. I imply a hint of an apology in case I have messed this up. That way, if he doesn’t like it, it’s not a big deal. “I figured after a good day’s work, we might just want something filling.”

“I’m sure it’s brilliant,” he says earnestly. “Um, I know I’m probably already getting irritating and repetitive but…thank you so much. You’ve been incredibly kind to me today when I didn’t really deserve it.”

My brow creases as I turn off the oven and use a mitt to pull out the tray from inside. “Everyone deserves kindness,” I say firmly.

However, I make sure to smooth out my frown before I face him again. I don’t want him to think he’s done anything wrong. I do believe kindness is a human right, though, as much as having a full belly and somewhere safe to sleep. Hopefully, we can move past the almost theft from this morning sooner rather than later. After all, there was no harm done in the end, was there?

When I put our plates down on the table, his eyes go wide. I give him a second to decide how he feels about my offering by fetching cutlery from the drawer. But when I turn back around, he’s beaming at me.

“Dinosaur chicken nuggets?” he cries in delight.

A smile creeps onto my face too as I sit down, handing him a knife and fork.

Nailed it.

“They’re so much better than the regular shaped ones, don’t you think?” I say.

“Absolutely,” he agrees. “And is this homemade mashed potatoes?”

“Technically, it’s colcannon,” I inform him. “Which is just a way to sneak some cabbage and spring onions in with the potatoes, then I smashed it all up in the pan with butter and cream. Proper comfort food.”

“And sweetcorn and carrots on the side,” he observes, maybe slightly less keen.

I chuckle. “Everything a growing boy needs.”

He rolls his eyes at my joke but doesn’t exactly reject the idea that he’s a ‘boy’ outright.

That creature in my chest purrs happily again. It seems like I’ve smashed this ‘little’ dinner out of the park, which feels more important than it probably should considering it’s only nuggies and veg, for heaven’s sake.

But Roux is practically bouncing in contentment as he starts to eat, and that’s all I really care about.

Banksy lays at our feet whilst we have our meal, perfectly well behaved. Roux surprises me by asking how I got into baking, so I tell him the relatively simple story of how it was always an interest of mine, and how after I left school I worked in a few different places until I saved enough to make the truly terrifying leap of starting out on my own.

“My parents were immensely helpful and supportive,” I say honestly. “I would never have made it without them, and I certainly wouldn’t have been able to get this house. I’m very lucky.”

He swallows and looks down at his almost empty plate, glistening with melted butter. He licks his lips and looks back at me with a smile but there’s no missing the pain in his eyes. “That’s amazing,” he says sincerely.

It is. And obviously not the kind of support he’s had in life.

Before my protective Daddy can rise up and get growly, I focus on the fact that I’m supporting him right this moment, and that’s all that matters now. It’s certainly all I can control.

Seeing as we seem to have finished the savoury part of dinner, I raise my eyebrows at him. “Dessert? Or are you sick of sugar for today?”

“Um,” he says shyly, that faint blush rising on his cheeks. Damn, I love it. “I might have room for a tiny bit more sugar if you have something sweet in mind?”

Oh, I’ve definitely got something sweet on my mind. But I can’t admit exactly what to him.

“Ice cream?” I suggest. “That’s a different food group to cake, after all.”

He snorts and grins at me. “Of course,” he agrees.

Before I can stop him, he’s clearing the plates. As much as I want to coddle him, I do like that he’s not lazy, so I figure he can cope with a task like that this evening. I stop him when he starts filling up the sink with water, though.

“If you just give them a rinse, they can go straight into the dishwasher,” I explain, pulling the handle and showing him where it is.

“Oh,” he says bashfully. “Sorry, I’m not used to having one of those.”

“Well you can enjoy mine while you’re here,” I say jovially, wondering to myself how long that might be.

The urge to insist that he tells me all his problems and stays in my spare room until they’re all fixed is strong. Instead, I make us up two bowls of chocolate ice cream with chopped strawberries, mini marshmallows, and a squirt of whipped cream.

He hums as he devours it like he didn’t gorge on gingerbread all day. Seeing him well fed and content makes my heart sing, especially when exhaustion clearly hits him like a brick wall. One second, he’s asking questions about Banksy, the next, he’s yawning behind his hand and swaying in his chair.

“If you want to head to bed, I’ll tidy up here,” I assure him gently.

“Oh no, I should…”

He blinks and looks around, perhaps not sure what he wants to offer to do before going to sleep. But seeing as he’s clearly about three seconds from passing out, I chuckle and shake my head.

“I can manage putting a couple of bowls in the dishwasher,” I promise. “And I’ll leave the pan to soak overnight. Tomorrow’s a day off, so we can both get up whenever we feel like, all right?”

“Um, okay.” He seems nervous again. I suspect he’s worrying that I’m going to change my mind at any second, tell him he’s being a horrible imposition, then chuck him out onto the street. All I can do is keep proving to him that’s not going to happen.

“I for one am looking forward to a nice lie-in after the weekend I’ve had,” I say casually. “You’d be more than welcome to stick around for breakfast and even walk Banksy with me, if you fancy? There are some lovely paths around here.”

At the mention of his name, my dog raises his head and wags his tail hopefully. That appears to break some of the tension Roux was holding again. “I guess I could stay for a walk, if Banksy would like that?”

“He’d love it,” I assure him, definitely only talking about my dog. “You can decide in the morning, though. No pressure.”

I mean it. But at the same time, I know I’m going to be very sad if Roux disappears on me.

He’s here right now, though.

Once he bids a sweet goodnight, I make short work of tidying up and ensuring the house is secure for the night. Confident I’ve given him enough time to brush his teeth and whatever else he might need to do before bed, I creep up the stairs with Banksy at my side. It’s still and quiet on this floor, with all the lights turned off except for a lamp on the sideboard. I go to flick the switch, then curiosity gets the better of me.

Hoping I’m not being a weirdo, I peek around the door he’s left ajar to the spare room. If he’s still awake, I’ll just check one last time he has everything he needs. But even in the shadows I can tell he’s already sound asleep.

My big teddy bear wrapped tightly in his arms.

The way my heart flip-flops in my chest is dangerous. But he looks so perfect and sweet it takes my breath away. I only allow myself another couple of seconds to take in the unfairly adorable scene, then tiptoe away once more.

I don’t know what circumstances have brought this young man to me today. I suspect they range from not great to downright terrible, and I hate that for him. However, I can’t help but feel grateful that they did, because as I turn off the last few lights, brush my own teeth, and fall into bed, something seems frighteningly yet blindingly obvious.

Roux is fitting perfectly into my life after only a matter of hours.

What’s going to happen if he gives me more than that?

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Chapter Five

Roux

Slowly, consciousness is creeping back to me. At first, all I can tell is that I'm so comfortable it should be illegal. Then, I simply feel happy. The kind of bone deep contentment that's more about being safe than anything else.

It only takes another few seconds for my brain to remember how completely wrong all those feelings are, and then the familiar panic comes crashing down, startling me awake.

Where the hell am I? I was so dead asleep, it's like my brain is wading through treacle.

Treacle?

For some reason, baked goods flash before my eyes and it's almost like I can smell cinnamon or nutmeg or…

No. Wait. I *can* smell sweet spices.

Renard.

I force myself to stop spiralling and breathe slowly in and out, getting some oxygen into my system. Everything from yesterday comes flooding back to me, including the fact that I've woken in Renard's spare room after he…after I…

Oh.

Shame envelops me. I tried to *steal* from him. And not even something I desperately needed, just some fucking gingerbread. But…

I lick my lips as more of my surroundings come into focus around me. It's like my brain is working at quadruple speed but my eyes and other senses are still at half pace. But…

That gingerbread was so worth it. Especially as I didn't try it until Renard gave it to me fair and square.

And then he gave me paid work for the day. And lunch. And then he went completely out of his way by giving me a place to crash, free of charge. And dinner, also free of charge, and that was…

Bloody hell.

More memories cut through my slow and sticky thoughts. For dinner, he gave me chicken nuggets shaped like little dinosaurs. I should have been horrified or embarrassed or…something probably other than utterly delighted.

That's weird, right? I'm twenty-six years old. I should have laughed that off and demanded…what? An eye-wateringly hot curry? A steak? Something I'm supposed to like better to prove I'm a real man?

I don't know. Renard makes me feel like I can just ask for what I want, which is insane considering we've known each other less than twenty-four hours and our meet-cute was me trying to rob him.

The way I slept last night is undeniable, though. Like the dead. Like I didn't have a care in the world when my life is literally made up of cares and troubles and woes. All I do is keep going, keep running, moving from one crisis to the next, trying to stop my past from catching up with me. It's like if I keep myself as busy as possible and never settle for a minute, I won't have the time to dwell on all my fuckups.

Well, I certainly stopped last night. When I was finally alone again, in the shower with the blissfully hot water pounding against my skin, it was as if the flood gates opened. I just stood there and sobbed for I don't know how long. Like all my fear and stress and loneliness from the past several months—years, even—came pouring out.

But then it was as if all those emotions washed down the drain with the suds, and when I caught my breath, I felt like a great weight had been lifted from my shoulders. Even better, after I dried off and went down for dinner, Renard didn't ask me any difficult questions or expect me to make any decisions at all.

Instead, he almost treated me like a kid. And rather than find that insulting, I realised it's the most liberated I've felt in forever.

I’m aware it was only for one night, and I try not to let dread creep into my belly as that familiar uncertainty comes back to me like an old, toxic friend. I might not know where I’m going to sleep tonight, or when Renard is going to want me to leave, but at least I got to have this much. It was as if—just for one evening—I was allowed to step back in time and be a little boy once more, with someone taking care of me and keeping me safe.

Like the dinosaur nuggets, I know that isn’t something a grown man should want. No wonder I’m such a fucking disaster. I run away from responsibility at every turn. The problem is, I know how bad I am at making decisions. If there’s a wrong choice, that’s the one that always seems the most logical to me in the moment. It’s only afterwards I tend to realise what a terrible mistake I’ve made…again.

So, no. I’m not going to deprive myself of the comfort Renard’s given me for a few measly hours. Nor am I going to question how he seems to know just the right things to offer me to make me feel this good, such as…

Oh, yeah.

I blink and shake the last of my groggy mind clear before rubbing my clumped-up lashes free so I can see properly.

Technically, I’m not alone in the bed. But it’s not in a way I’m used to, not by a long shot.

My left arm is clutching a massive teddy bear that I recall was sitting peacefully on the bed when I fell into it last night. It seemed a little strange to me that a grown man as cool as Renard would have a teddy just hanging out in his spare room. But he also had dino chicken nuggies on hand for dinner, so I figured I didn’t care to examine the psychology behind those choices too deeply. Instead, I clung to the teddy like a life raft, and passed out almost immediately, sleeping all the way through the night.

Even now, I hug him tighter despite knowing how embarrassed I’d be if Renard saw me this way. But I haven’t been held by another human in so long, I can’t help myself. This is the next best thing.

Collapsing into Renard’s arms and sobbing yesterday doesn’t really count. Because that was a terrible low point for me. It doesn’t matter how strong and comforting his embrace was, or how amazing he smelt, or how I could have stayed clinging to him all day just to feel safe for once in my life. No, none of that counts. It was a rock bottom kind of moment.

Not something to be remembered fondly.

Anyway, he's not going to see me with the bloody bear right now, is he? I have this whole room to myself. It was so glorious to be confident that no one could snoop on me while I was sleeping. I'm sure that's another reason why I passed out like I did.

Except…when I shift in the bed, something else moves beside me, and I startle as I realise it's not only me and the bear here.

I snap my head around. Banksy responds by raising his head as well as his eyebrows, then he drops his jaw to pant happily at me with a smile.

Something horribly vulnerable swoops in my tummy. I think it's delight. Maybe even pride. Banksy picked *me* to watch over last night.

No one ever picks me.

But dogs don't lie or have hidden agendas. They just do what they want, and apparently what this one wanted was to keep me company, even if I didn't realise it. I know it's such a small and probably silly thing to be chuffed about, but it's not like I have a whole lot else going for me today. This just feels so pure and wonderful. Like I was worthy of something good for once.

"Morning," I croak.

He woofs in response, deeply and gently, then licks my nose.

Briefly, I wonder if this might be what heaven feels like. Somewhere peaceful and calm with a loyal friend who just wants to love you.

Then I'm overwhelmed by the urgent need to pee, and that somewhat shatters the illusion.

As much as I don't want to move, now I'm aware of my body's need and I have to do something about it immediately. Otherwise, I'm going to have a talk with Renard about his bedsheets that will be way more mortifying than if I'd got caught hugging the teddy bear.

My door is already ajar as I tiptoe over to it and listen. I can hear sounds coming from the kitchen and figure Renard is probably down there already. From here, I can smell better whatever food he's cooking, and it's making my mouth water. Guiltily, I look around for a clock and then feel even worse when I realise it's already nine thirty. I slept in for *ages*. Great. Now Renard probably thinks I'm an ungrateful layabout on top of my terrible behaviour yesterday.

The pressure on my bladder cuts through my thoughts enough for me to put a lid on my shame for a moment and skuttle out into the hall. Once I've

relieved myself and washed my hands, I creep back to find Banksy still on the bed. His tail thumps softy as I crawl back under the duvet.

“Good boy,” I murmur, stroking the top of his head.

I really should be throwing clothes on and hurrying downstairs to beg Renard’s forgiveness for being such a rude and lazy guest. But there’s a voice in the back of my head telling me he won’t mind that much if at all. It’s been so long since I felt truly at ease anywhere, like I could let my guard down, and the pull to enjoy the peaceful solitude just another minute is too strong.

But then I wonder where I last felt this safe, and I realise the answer is probably when I was young. More specifically, when I was still living with my nan.

A hundred regrets slither through my belly at that revelation, mixing in with the shame already lingering there. Not wanting to lie in silence with only those unpleasant thoughts for company, I sigh and drag myself back out of bed again to dress and brush my teeth.

Dread has joined the shame and regret by the time I’m hovering at the top of the stairs, too afraid to go down. My heart is hammering in my chest and my palms are sweaty. The indecision of what I’m going to say once I see Renard is crippling me. ‘Good morning’ doesn’t seem like enough, but what else is there? ‘How did you sleep?’ That seems incredibly personal. ‘When do you need me to leave?’

I don’t want to know the answer to that.

Just as I’m debating turning around and simply hiding under the covers, praying to disappear, something solid nudges the back of my knee. I look down just as Banksy gently headbutts me again, then he looks up and smiles at me, his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth.

“You’re going to come with me?” I murmur hopefully.

He woofs, his tail wagging, and gives me another little push. My toes curl over the top step and I inhale deeply.

I can’t stay up here forever. And really, what’s the worst that can happen?

Well, I can actually think of several horrible things, like Renard having the chance to sleep on how much of an imposition I’m being and angrily chucking me out of the house on my arse. But…I’m fairly confident he wouldn’t get violent with me. He might ask for his money back, but I could live with that. Even if he asked me to pay retrospectively for the food and

accommodation, I could probably whip that up quick enough with a few days' work.

I puff out my cheeks and rub my chest bone. No matter what, hiding under the duvet isn't a long-term solution. I have to face the music. And if he's pissed off at me, I can just do what I always do.

Make a run for it.

"Okay," I say to myself, but Banksy apparently takes that as his cue, and shoves past my legs to thud his way down the stairs. I laugh in spite of my nerves and follow him. If I simply focus on putting one foot in front of the other, I won't have time to worry about what will happen once I reach the kitchen.

As it turns out, I don't even have to reach the kitchen.

I'm still walking down the hall when Renard pokes his head around the doorframe and beams at me. "Good morning," he cries cheerfully. *See,* I tell myself, *it's that easy. What were you worrying about?*

"Morning," I say back, shyly. I want to add that something smells good, but I stop myself just in time. What if he's cooking himself breakfast and the food isn't meant for me? I'd die of embarrassment.

"Did you sleep well?" he asks as he vanishes back into the kitchen. I take that as an invitation to join him there and pray I'm not making a faux pas.

"Uh, incredibly well, thank you." I'm tempted to once again gush in appreciation of his apparently limitless kindness to me. But I'm worried more of that would annoy him, if it hasn't already. So I bite my lip and enter the kitchen.

There are two places set at the table, just like last night. My heart swoops, but I still try not to get my hopes up too much.

"Sorry about the mess," he says, glancing at the counter where several cooling racks are holding dozens of muffins.

"You're baking on your day off?" I ask in amusement, then belatedly realise how rude that might sound. Luckily, Renard laughs before I can start to spiral.

"I know, I know," he chuckles, rinsing out a mixing bowl. "It's instinctive, I can't help it. I think I was still asleep for the first two batches. After running the bakery for the past few years, my body clock is set to early even on days off. So rather than fight it, I whip up something easy like

this then drop them off at a few places around town like the dog kennel and the doctor's surgery."

"You look after everyone," I murmur in wonder.

In my experience, there are a lot of selfish people in this world who'd take everything they can get from you in a heartbeat. Maybe Renard got all their kindness instead.

He smiles bashfully at me, making my tummy flip. He's so gorgeous as well as being nice. I didn't think men like that existed outside of fairy tales.

"I like making people happy," he concedes. "Luckily, I happen to be good at making stuff that helps do that. Speaking of which, there are loads if you want to help yourself. These banana ones have only just come out of the oven, but the chocolate and the blueberry batches should be cool by now. I could also make us some savoury breakfast? I usually do a full English on my days off, but I also have cereal or fruit if you'd prefer?"

He looks at me hopefully, like he's determined to feed me something if it kills him. I don't want to take advantage of his hospitality too much, but it feels like he really wants me to join him for a cooked breakfast.

"A fry up sounds amazing," I say tentatively, relieved when he grins.

"Excellent, I'll crack on with that, then. Do you want to flick the kettle on for some tea?"

Happy to have something useful to do, I nibble on a muffin while I set about getting us mugs and milk from the fridge. He begins throwing together eggs, bacon, beans, and toast, as well as fried mushrooms and tomatoes. In between juggling all the timings for that, he also manages to feed Banksy a pouch of his dogfood in a bowl on the floor.

It's quiet while we work. Usually, that would make me uneasy, but something about Renard puts me at ease all the time. I don't know how he manages that, especially when we haven't even known each other twenty-four hours and I have the nervous system of a traumatised squirrel. Anxiety about when he's going to want me to leave and where I'm going to head next keeps threatening to worm its way into my thoughts. But so long as I focus on simply doing the tasks that Renard sets me, it's like I'm in a bit of a trance and there isn't any room to fret.

I love it. I wish I could tell him how grateful I am for this little dance we're doing right now. However, I'm not sure how to say that without sounding really weird and clingy. So I just project my gratitude into the universe and hope he feels it.

When we sit down to eat, though, I know the quiet won't last. Renard smiles as he indicates the selection of condiments he's put out on the table. "Did you have a chance to think about your plans today?" he asks as I select the ketchup bottle. But I freeze before I can do anything with it.

This is when he kicks me out, then.

Expect he doesn't seem to notice my awkwardness. Instead, he pours maple syrup all over his plate, then sets about cutting up his food, piling some eggs and meat onto a corner of toast. "The forecast looks good, so I'm still thinking of taking Banksy for a nice long stroll if you fancied joining us. You'd be more than welcome."

I finally remember to breathe and look at him uncertainly. That sounds like the opposite of kicking me out. "I'm not sure what I'm doing today," I tell him truthfully.

He shrugs and finishes his mouthful. "No pressure either way. But seeing as my old mutt chose you over me last night, I'm pretty sure Banksy would very much enjoy having you around a little longer."

Ah. So he's just delaying getting rid of me. I knew deep down that I'd have to be on my way sooner or later, but for once in my life…

I really don't want to run away.

A lump rises in my throat, and I place the tomato sauce down without squeezing any out. My breakfast looks absolutely delicious, but suddenly, I can't bring myself to eat a bite.

Mortifyingly, Renard apparently notices there's something wrong before I can get my shit together. "Roux?" he asks, sounding concerned. When I look up from my plate, I see he's also looking troubled. To make matters worse, I realise my eyes are filled with tears, which apparently kicks us both off. "Roux, what's wrong?" he cries in alarm.

"I'm sorry," I manage to utter. "I've been a horrible imposition. I can leave right now if you want. Let you enjoy your day off in peace."

"What?" he blurts out. He puts his knife and fork down and wipes his hands on some kitchen roll. Great, now I'm distracting him while his breakfast goes cold. "I don't want you to leave, Roux, especially not before you've had your food. But if I'm being honest…"

I brace myself. Here we go. I just hope he's going to ask for some money instead of telling me I'm lazy and selfish and need to sort my life out.

He takes a deep breath in and appears to steel himself. “Roux, I know we’ve only just met and it’s probably none of my business. But I’m worried about you. Do you have somewhere to stay later or are you sleeping in your car? Because if you are…” He bites his lip for a second before seemingly deciding to plough on. “That makes me feel sick. It’s not safe. You could stay here another night.”

None of that was what I was expecting. Hearing him say he’s worried about me almost knocked me out of my chair. But the offer of staying another night—of getting to rest in this haven for another whole day—shatters something inside me, and the response isn’t metaphorical.

It’s completely physical as I burst into messy tears and throw myself into his arms.

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Chapter Six

Renard

I don’t even hesitate. I pull Roux across my lap and cradle him against me as heartbreaking sobs rake through his body. As I hug him, I can just about feel his ribs through his clothes, and I hold him even tighter. My emotions are all over the place, from rage at how he got into this position to righteous indignation as I swear to do something about it. But he doesn’t need any of those thoughts just now. He needs to be cared for.

To be loved, even if only for a moment.

“It’s okay,” I murmur as I stroke his hair.

But he shakes his head. “No it’s n-n-not,” he stammers, his breathing ragged as he chokes back tears. “I d-don’t deserve all this k-kindness. I’m greedy to ac-cept it.”

I scowl, knowing he can’t see me from where he’s tucked against my chest. The way his delicate hand is gripping my T-shirt material—like I’m a life ring he’s afraid to let go of—rips me up inside.

“You’re not greedy, Roux,” I insist softly. “You’re hungry. Starving, even. There’s a big difference. And it’s my choice. I *want* to help you. I have more than enough food to go around and a spare room. It’s my decision to share these things with you. Nobody is making me, least of all you.”

He hiccups and seems to mull over my words for a few moments. “I’m not a good person,” he whispers eventually, his eyes firmly on where his fingers are gripping tightly onto my T-shirt.

Obviously, I've only just met this young man. He could have all kinds of skeletons in his cupboard that I have no idea about. But to say he's a bad person simply doesn't ring true to me.

"From what I've seen," I begin cautiously, "you're hard working, thoughtful, sweet, and joyful. Is there something I'm missing?" I'm not being facetious. I genuinely want to know.

Roux sniffs and wipes his damp face with his hand. Wordlessly, I pluck a sheet of kitchen roll from off the table and pass it to him. He gives me a shy, grateful smile, and mops his eyes before blowing his nose. With a shuddery breath he leans away from me, apparently enough to realise that he's wound up in my lap. I see the panic light in his eyes, but I subtly squeeze him a tiny bit tighter, encouraging him to stay exactly where he is.

This boy desperately needs some Daddying, and I'm not going to let him get in his own way about that. It would be different if I thought this wouldn't help him. But I'm as certain as I can be without openly discussing it that our interests lie on the same page.

When he melts back against me, it only helps in confirming my suspicions.

"Trust me," he mumbles bitterly. "You don't want me around. I cause nothing but trouble."

"Why don't you let me be the judge of that," I say firmly but kindly. "Now, is there anything important I should know about your situation?"

"Like what?" he asks with a little frown.

I shrug. "Anything serious. Like…are you on drugs?"

"What?" he yelps, shoving himself away and looking at me in horror. "No! Absolutely not!"

"Okay, good," I tell him, relieved and believing his earnest reaction. If he was having a problem with substance abuse, I'd still want to help him. But from what I understand, addiction is a long hard battle to overcome, and I'm glad if that's not the path he's looking at.

There's definitely something that's got him into this state, however. I'm not so naïve that I'd commit to helping him in a serious manner without first finding out what it is. And if he refuses to tell me…well, that would be an issue I'm not sure we'd be able to work around.

We'll cross that bridge if we come to it.

"I'm sorry, I had to ask," I assure him. He still looks a little shellshocked that I'd accuse him of bringing drugs into my house. "I'm just

trying to understand how you got to this point, Roux." I pause, giving him a chance to start filling in the blanks for me, but he just looks at his hands, tension in his shoulders. "Have you done anything illegal?" I try again.

His face flames as he glances my way before quickly looking down once more. "You mean other than trying to steal from you?" he mutters.

"Yes, other than that," I say patiently with a small smile. "I told you, this isn't revolutionary France, and I'm not sending you to jail for nicking some gingerbread. But if you've robbed a bank…"

That actually gets a laugh out of him. It might be stilted and awkward, but it warms my heart nonetheless. "Then I'd be rich and I wouldn't be relying on your charity, would I?" he says, coming very close to making a joke.

Delighted, I smirk back at him. "How do I know you haven't already blown through all the cash and aren't now living a life on the run, always one step ahead of the law?"

He shakes his head and laughs again, but it's mirthless this time. "Not on the run from the police, no."

I raise my eyebrows. "But…running from something?" I guess. "Or someone."

He shrugs and refuses to meet my gaze. "I told you," he says mulishly. "I'm trouble. You don't want me around."

"And *I* told *you* that I can make my own mind up about that," I inform him with just a touch of disappointment.

The way he keeps deciding how I feel about him isn't just inaccurate. It's irksome. I happen to know for a fact that I want him around far too much. Probably for far too long, as well.

"What are you running from, Roux?" I ask softly.

He doesn't answer for a moment, but he does carefully try and make himself smaller as he leans against my chest again. "I don't think I've done anything illegal," he says in a small voice. "But I've made a lot of mistakes. And a lot of them…probably most, actually…I guess they all lead back to…"

The pause is so long I start thinking he's going to need help to carry on. But then he takes a deep, shaky breath and nods, like he's agreeing with himself that he can do this.

"Him," he utters grimly. "All this shit leads back to him."

“Him?” I repeat, not wanting to make assumptions. Roux could be referring to a family member, a social worker, a police officer, anyone. But my gut already knows the truth before he confirms it.

“My ex,” he says through clenched teeth. “My nan tried to warn me, but I wouldn’t listen. I’d done stupid stuff before, but that was the beginning of the end.”

Everything in me is screaming to demand to know what happened. I want every detail. But Roux is fragile right now, so I need to tread lightly.

“I’m so sorry,” I murmur.

He sniffs and blows his nose again. That paper towel is looking soggy, so I wordlessly give him a fresh one. He takes it gratefully and deposits the used one on the table.

Belatedly, I realise our breakfast has probably already gone stone cold before Roux even took a bite. I don’t care about food waste—I have a compost bin for that. But I do care about those ribs of his. A single muffin isn’t enough to start getting some meat back on his bones. Once he’s calmed down, I vow to reheat what I can, remake anything he wants, and fill up any space left in his tummy with as many muffins as possible.

After a few moments of quiet, he exhales and nods, as if he’s fortifying himself to go on. “His name was Tony. I was sixteen. He was thirty-eight.”

Before I can stop myself, I gasp sharply. That’s only a few years younger than I am now, but I don’t think I would have ever considered dating a teenager since I was one. Yes, I’m a Daddy and the boys I’m drawn to are typically in their twenties and thirties. But age play relationships are about state of mind. Of course there are younger Daddies and Doms, and older boys and subs.

What Roux just described isn’t the same thing.

That’s illegal.

“I know,” Roux says, wincing against me. “Well, I know *now.* It was completely fucked up. But at the time, I really thought I was in love. Tony treated me like I was his whole world, so he became mine. I didn’t understand how insidious it was. He isolated me from everything, everyone. I stopped speaking to any of my other friends, I dropped out of school before doing my GCSEs and…”

He cringes and another sob shudders through his body. “It’s okay,” I whisper, even though it really isn’t, and rub his back.

“I lived with my nan,” he soldiers on, his voice quivering. “My mum was always away with the fairies and even she didn’t know who my dad was. So when it was clear she wasn’t fit to be a parent, I moved in with her mum when I was little. It was always just the two of us. But Nan *hated* Tony. She saw him for exactly what he was. A predator. I was completely blinded by what I thought was love, though, and didn’t want to hear it. Every time she told me to break up with him, it made me hate *her*. So…so I ran away.”

His emotions overwhelm him again, and for a while, I simply hold him as he cries.

“Oh, baby boy,” I murmur without thinking. “I’m so sorry.” As soon as my brain catches up with what I’ve said, I hold my breath, straining to sense any tiny reaction from the young man in my arms.

Good or bad.

He seems to have stilled as well, neither of us breathing. Then he inhales shakily and turns his damp face a little closer into me, his forehead resting on my shoulder, his tears leaking onto my T-shirt.

“Thank you,” he utters eventually, and I make myself relax.

I’m genuinely not trying to force anything on him. It’s more like I’m determined to open a door that I’m convinced he already wants to walk through. Don’t get me wrong, I’m already very sure he’d also benefit from seeing a good therapist. But everything from my experience of being a Daddy is screaming that he would find a lot of comfort and healing in age regressions as well. Not to mention letting go and simply allowing someone to take care of him.

Instead of manipulating him and destroying his life.

“How long ago was this?” I ask, attempting to get the conversation back on track. There are still a few details I’m sure I’m missing.

Roux sighs and rubs at his face again, but he seems more composed now. Perhaps telling me his sad story is helping to lift a burden from his young shoulders. “About ten years ago,” he says miserably. “I…I haven’t spoken to my nan since. Tony made me change my number when we moved to London. At first, it was amazing. I got a job in a coffee shop, but Tony basically took care of everything as he earned so much more, so he said I didn’t need my own bank account. My wages got paid into a joint one we opened.”

He winces, and once again, I sense where this is headed. However, I'm positive this is something he needs to admit in his own words at his own pace, so I remain quiet. Sure enough, he continues after a few moments.

"After about a year, the red flags were already there, but I wouldn't let myself believe them. I didn't have anyone else to turn to or anywhere to go to."

Of course you didn't, I seethe silently. *That's what abusers do.*

Roux carries on with more determination, as if he's afraid if he doesn't get everything off his chest now, he'll never get the chance again.

"He started getting mad at me for the slightest little thing, acting like I was selfish if I didn't put his feelings or opinions before my own. He took my bank card away and deleted the app from my phone, saying I was irresponsible with money. Every time I got to the point I thought I couldn't take any more, he'd always surprise me with something lavish and tell me how much he loved me, and I'd convince myself everything was actually fine." He grimaces and shakes his head. "Idiot."

"You weren't an idiot," I immediately retort, wanting to defend his younger self fiercely. "You were a victim. And you obviously did leave eventually, because you're here now."

Roux laughs, but it's hollow. "Eventually is the right word. I stayed for over seven years all in all. By that point, the only thing I had left that was truly mine was my car. The one Nan bought me for my sixteenth birthday. We lived far enough out of central London that I'd been able to keep it without Tony complaining too much. Luckily it was always in my name. But he'd just had to fork out a small fortune when it failed its MOT to get it roadworthy again, and he was furious. His bad mood went on for weeks. You must think I'm so pathetic," he snarls bitterly, wiping his eyes and scowling.

The comment startles me and takes a moment to register. "What? Of course not, Roux. I'm incredibly sad this happened to you, but I understand the hold he had over you. He'd been manipulating you and breaking you down since you were a defenceless child."

"But I wasn't a child by that point," he protests. "There wasn't anything stopping me from leaving, not really. It's not like he ever hit *me*. He would slap the walls and furniture right next to me, though, and lob stuff by my head or my feet. It felt like one day he'd cross that line, and I swore to myself if he ever did I really would leave. But it never happened."

I remember how he cowered from me in the alley yesterday when he thought I was going to call the police. I'm not a violent person, but I think if I ever run into this Tony fellow I'll have more than just harsh language to throw his way.

"Maybe he knew that would be my last straw," Roux muses sadly. "So he made sure to keep his abuse emotional. He didn't even need to give me bruises to keep me in line. His presence was enough. It was like he was this huge ogre taking up all the room in the flat and I was a tiny mouse, always trying to stay out from under his feet. I still don't get why he didn't just want to break up when he clearly hated me so much."

"He got off on controlling you," I say softly. Roux's eyes go wide as he processes my words in real time. I hate to be the one to tell him the truth, but he nods and rubs his chest.

"Wow, yeah. I guess so. He controlled every little thing in my life, like I was his puppet. It was more than the money. The only clothes I was only allowed to wear were the ones he bought for me. I was too afraid to talk to anyone because he wouldn't let me lock my phone and monitored all my messages. Any social media accounts I'd had he'd made me delete by that point. He prepaid for my travel and tracked where I went, so he always knew where I was. He was obsessed with what I ate, even when I wasn't home. He called it healthy living, but it was more like rationing. I was basically starving all the time and had no energy. That was probably the point, wasn't it? I was too weak to fight back."

I nod as rage and heartbreak swirl inside me. The theft of a bit of gingerbread is making more and more sense. I wish I'd given him more. I'll bake him gingerbread babies every day if he wants. If I had my way, he'd never know hunger again.

There's a detached look in his eyes as he stares down at Banksy, who's protectively lying by his feet. My old mutt might not know why Daddy's friend is sad, but he he's going to stay close and do his best to ward off the bad vibes anyway.

"I was constantly on edge and barely slept," Roux continues. "I was completely alone. I had nothing. In the weeks after the MOT, it felt like it was never going to get better again. That was the worst he'd ever been. Every day, I was thinking about my nan but I didn't know her number anymore. If I showed up on her doorstep, I was convinced she'd hate me and I couldn't bear that. In the end, I didn't see the point of anything. That's

how I ended up standing too close to the platform edge at West Ham station one day."

Pain slices through my chest, so bad it feels like I've been physically attacked. "Oh, Roux," I utter, my voice cracking. "I'm so sorry. I'm so fucking sorry you felt like that was your only option. I'm so glad you didn't step off."

What stopped you? I ask silently.

He answers me anyway.

"I was close," he whispers. "I was thinking about my nan. About her smile and how she loved singing along to her old CDs even though she was tone deaf. How she'd smack the back of my head when I was naughty but how she'd patch up my knees and elbows with rainbow plasters when I got into scrapes. How we made gingerbread every Christmas even when I was too old for things like that. I hoped she'd forgiven me for not listening to her and for leaving without a trace. In my head, I was saying goodbye to her. Then…" He breaks into a watery smile and manages a small, incredulous laugh. "Then something blew against my ankle, and I snatched it up without even thinking." He looks me in the eyes again and shakes his head. "It was a twenty-pound note."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, I bark out a relieved laugh of my own. "No way?"

He nods. "It sounds so silly to say out loud, but in that moment, I was utterly seized by the idea that Nan had somehow sent it to me like a carrier pigeon. That she was still trying to help me, but this time…this time, I listened." His eyes shine with determination, and my heart aches with pride for him. "It was like I was on autopilot. Instead of stepping in front of the train, I got on it. I knew Tony was at work, so I went back home, but I didn't go inside. He had cameras everywhere and I knew I needed a head start before he noticed anything was wrong. Besides, when it came down to it, I realised there was nothing I wanted from the flat anyway. It all belonged to him. So I posted my phone through the letterbox so he couldn't track my location, as well as my door keys. I wanted him to understand that I had no intention of ever coming back. Then I got in my newly fixed-up car and just started driving."

"You fucking legend," I blurt out, throwing my arms around him and squeezing as tightly as possible. By our feet, Banksy whimpers and

headbutts our legs before resting his chin on Roux's thigh, making it a proper group hug. "You escaped."

Unsurprisingly, Roux's crying again, but not sobbing. There's also a shaky laugh lurking under the tears.

"It was terrifying and that twenty quid didn't last long," he admits. "But long story short, I stumbled on a homeless charity who were able to get me back on my feet with a new phone and a basic bank account that didn't require a fixed address. I got a room in a halfway house and started working for a local shop, then eventually I moved into a flat share in Stevenage with some other guys. It wasn't much, but it was mine. Then…"

I knew it had to be coming, but it still hurts to hear.

"Then?" I prompt.

"Then Tony found me," Roux continues with a heavy sigh. "He sent me a package with a bunch of nice things and a note saying how worried he'd been and that the gifts were to make up for the Christmas and two birthday's he'd missed. He also hinted in so many words how much money I owed him, even though I'd left with nothing but that twenty quid. I knew it was only a matter of time before he showed up at the apartment or my work and tried to drag me back into his life, so I do what I always do." He grimaces and shakes his head. "I ran away. That was the second job I'd walked out on, and our landlord wasn't just after *me* for my security deposit. He laid into the other guys as well, demanding they cover what I owed, which was fair enough, but the guilt was awful. I knew I couldn't risk going back, though."

"Of course," I murmur, hating how that arsehole couldn't simply let Roux get away from him.

"I started living out of my car," he says, "and signed up to the delivery apps to pay him back as fast as I could, afraid to stay anywhere too long in case Tony found me again. But I started heading for Bristol. I'd visited there once as a kid with my nan, and it seemed cool, so it seemed as good a destination as any." He takes a shuddering breath in before nodding once at me. "Then I stopped in a little town in the Cotswolds when my car ran out of petrol, and saw some gingerbread people I didn't have the strength to resist, got chased by a silver fox, but when he caught me, instead of punishing me, he saved me."

"You think I'm a silver fox?" I ask playfully.

He rolls his eyes. “You know you are,” he retorts. I’m so happy that despite all this heartache, there’s still a spark of joy in Roux’s heart. He just needs more chances to let it out.

Throwing all caution to the wind, I cup my hand to the side of his face. He nuzzles against my palm, looking exhausted and all cried out, but ever so slightly less burdened than he was before.

Only slightly.

“So, you see?” he rasps, blinking his red-rimmed eyes at me. “I’m nothing but trouble. I’ve fucked up everything I can in my life at every given opportunity. I let people down and I’m broke. You’ve already done far too much for me. I can’t stay another night, it’s not fair.”

“You can absolutely stay another night,” I practically growl. “In fact…”

And then I keep talking. Even though it’s crazy and I should probably think this through for more than two seconds. But I know it’s the right thing to do, so what’s the point in arguing with myself? Roux needs someone to give him a chance. I’m that man, I’m certain.

“You can stay here as long as it takes to get back on your feet,” I tell him firmly. “My spare room is yours if you want it, and so is a job at the bakery.”

“W-what?” Roux stammers, going even paler than before underneath his freckles.

I nod. “I’ve got someone on maternity leave and we could do with the extra pair of hands. You worked hard yesterday, so I’m confident offering you a position, even if it’s only temporary. Unless you’d like to look for something else?”

“No, no, that would be incredible,” he splutters, his eyes wide. “What about rent?”

An important question, but one I feel we don’t have to answer right away. My hand is still cradling the side of his face, and I brush my thumb against his cheekbone. “Why don’t we clear up any outstanding debts first, then we can work out something modest, okay? I mean it, Roux. I want to help you.”

His eyes are shining again as he searches my face, looking for answers that he obviously doesn’t get. “Why?” he croaks out in the end.

“Because I like you,” I say simply. “I’d like to be your friend, and I can’t do that if you disappear off to Bristol. I think you got a rough deal and deserve a chance to turn your life around without some dickhead trying to

crush your spirit. If he finds you here, he'll have to get through me to get to you. More than that, he'll have to get through Banksy."

At the mention of his name, my dog wags his tail. Roux looks down at him with a little laugh, then for several long seconds, he merely stares at me. I can understand that he's overwhelmed, but I'm praying he can find it in himself to trust me and not run away. Something tells me he's convinced he's not worthy of good things or kindness.

Which is why he needs a Daddy to prove to him that's not true.

"Okay," he finally agrees in a tiny voice, and relief surges through me.

"Okay?" I repeat, wanting him to be absolutely certain. As desperate as I am for him to stay, it has to be his choice.

"Okay," he says again with more conviction. "If you really mean it, I… I'll take the room and the job and…and the friendship." He blushes and ducks his head, making my heart swoop in my chest. "I like you as well, Renard."

When he peeks back at me, I grin and pull him into another reassuring hug, rubbing his back as he tucks his face against the side of my neck. It's like he fits perfectly against me. "That's settled, then," I tell him, immensely thankful that my crazy gamble paid off.

Banksy barks, startling us both and making us laugh as we look down at him. He wags his tail hopefully and dances on his paws.

"We better walk him soon before he mutinies," I say with a chuckle. "What do you say to flinging together some breakfast sandwiches to go and a flask of tea so we can all get some fresh air?"

Roux studies me for a moment, something shining in his eyes I haven't seen until now.

Hope.

"That sounds amazing," he says shyly.

I want to tell him he's amazing for overcoming everything he has, but I'll save that for another day when he might believe it's true. For now, I can relax. He's going to stay. He's going to let me help him. He's going to be my friend. I wonder if we give it time, if he could become something more.

My gingerbread boy.

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Epilogue

Roux

Three Months Later

"This is a bad idea," I say for the hundredth time.

Renard squeezes my shoulder as we stand in front of the door I know so well but haven't seen in over a decade. "Why is it a bad idea?" he asks patiently, also for the hundredth time.

"What if she doesn't live here anymore?" I protest feebly.

What if she does and she hates me?

"Then we'll ask for a forwarding address," Renard answers. There's only kindness in his eyes as he looks at me, and I know with absolute certainty that if I really wanted to leave, he'd let me.

No, he wouldn't *let* me. He'd support me. Because that's what he does. That's what he's done since the moment we met.

Rather than agonise over the 'what if?' any longer, I grit my teeth and ring the bell. I've spent the last ten years torturing myself with the infinite ways this moment could play out. It's time to find out once and for all.

When the door opens, I still inhale and flinch back, even though I was prepared. But Renard is there to steady me. To make sure I don't run away.

The woman stares at us both, her eyes growing wider. There's more grey in her hair and a few more lines on her face, but I'd recognise her anywhere in a heartbeat.

“Nan?” I manage to utter, my voice breaking as tears spill down my cheeks. Even if she tells me she’s furious with me and sends me away, I know I’ve done the right thing by coming home. I had to see her, even if it’s just one last time.

“Roux?” she says, her voice equally wrecked.

A sob escapes my chest and I shake my head, completely unequipped to tell her everything I should have said from the moment I broke her heart. I start the only way I know how.

“I’m so sorry,” I whimper, my knees threatening to go from under me. But they don’t, because I have Renard standing beside me, giving me his strength.

Giving me the love I still don’t think I deserve.

It seems like he’s not the only one who loves me in spite of all my mistakes.

“Oh, Roux!” my nan cries, launching herself forwards and enveloping me in her arms. “Oh, my sweet boy! It’s really you! I never gave up hope, not ever.”

We separate and she holds my shoulders, her tearful gaze searching mine as if that might explain the past ten years faster and less painfully. “You’re not angry with me?” I ask timidly, petrified of the answer.

She scoffs and wipes her damp cheeks. “Angry at you? Never, poppet. I’ve been scared and bitter and sad beyond belief, worrying where you were and if you were okay. But I kept all my anger for that what-I-won’t-say man who bewitched you.” She suddenly seems to notice we’re not alone and narrows her eyes at Renard who’s hovering just behind me. “This isn’t him, is it?” She never actually met Tony, after all.

“No, Nan,” I say hurriedly, feeling dizzy with relief. She’s really not mad at me? She never was? Renard was right. I’ve wasted so much time.

But I’m here now. And I’m not alone.

“This is Renard. He’s with me. He’s my…my friend.”

Of course ‘friend’ doesn’t cover a fraction of what we’ve become to each other, but that’s not a conversation for right this second. I’m anxious that my nan is going to have strong feelings about me showing up after all this time with another older man in tow. However, Renard couldn’t be more different to Tony in every way. I just hope she gives us a chance to prove that to her.

“It’s lovely to meet you,” Renard says warmly, sticking his hand out to shake.

But my nan lets me go, bats it away, and drags him into a determined hug instead.

“You helped bring my boy home?” she asks thickly.

“I did,” Renard says, smiling at me over her shoulder. Those two words don’t come close to explaining everything he’s done for me these past couple of months, but that’s so typical of him to be humble.

My nan slaps his back a few times, then sniffs and lets him go. “Good man,” she grunts, like that’s all she’s able to say on the matter, at least for the time being. I’m sure she’ll have questions, but the fact that she isn’t immediately comparing him to the worst person I’ve ever met simply because of their age makes me hopeful. She rubs her eyes clear then jams her fists on her hips. “Well don’t just stand there cluttering up the place. Come on in and we’ll get the kettle on. As luck would have it, I’ve been baking.”

As I step into the familiar front hallway and smell the delicious spices, I already know the answer to my question. But I still turn to her with an excitement that makes me feel like a little boy again. “Gingerbread?”

She closes the door behind Renard and takes our hands, one in each of hers. “I haven’t made gingerbread for years,” she says softly, like this is a secret she’s afraid to admit out loud. “But something in the wind told me I had to this morning.”

I wonder if it’s the same wind that brought me a twenty-pound note on the worst day of my life. Or the wind that took me to a village market where a kind-hearted baker and his loyal four-legged companion were apparently just waiting for me to arrive.

Something tells me that wind has finally blown itself out. For the longest time, it was the force under my feet that kept me running as fast as I could so my troubles couldn’t catch me. But I don’t need to run anymore.

I’m finally home.

* * *

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About the Author

Helen Juliet is a British author of contemporary MM fairy tale adaptations, including the international bestselling Beauty and the Beast retelling, Thorn in His Side. She lives just outside of London with her husband and three balls of fluff that occasionally pretend to be cats.

She began writing at an early age, later honing her craft online in the world of fanfiction on sites like Wattpad. Fifteen years and over half a million words later, she sought out original MM novels to read. By the end of 2016 she had written her first book of her own, and in 2017 she achieved her lifelong dream of becoming a full-time author.

When she's not writing she's usually singing, dancing, filming music videos, taking long walks, working on jigsaw puzzles, drinking prosecco, or talking about Taylor Swift.

She also writes contemporary American small town and found family MM series as HJ Welch, including Redwood Bay Fire and Paddle Creek Daddies.

If you'd like to discover the rest of her back catalogue, you can find all 45+ of my titles on her **website,** and you can also follow her on **Instagram** and **TikTok**.

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Eat Crow

Rory Maxwell

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Chapter One

Sky

Sky opened the oven door, hot, dry air prickling his skin as he slid the baking sheet onto the middle rack. “I’m sorry about last night. Ron got held up in Raleigh, and Dima couldn’t cover for him. He promised his wife he’d finally put the crib together. Ron called him in on his last two days off, and he’s all for the extra money, but the baby is gonna need somewhere to sleep when it gets here.”

His grandma sipped her sweet tea, the clink of the ice cubes somehow judgmental.

Sky shut the oven, set the timer for ten minutes, and busied himself with the bench scraper. “I couldn’t just leave Phoenix on his own in the kitchen. I mean, I’m sure he would have been fine. Except, with Art in the Park this weekend, it could have gotten busy, and it would be unfair to leave him without any backup.”

His grandma hummed in acknowledgment. She’d only sold the restaurant to Ron two years ago. Things might be different with the new owner and executive chef, but they hadn’t changed *that* much.

Sky pressed on. “It ended up being good I was there. The Ellises came in for their anniversary. They send their love, by the way.” He scraped the last of the sticky dough off the counter and into the trash. “They still ask for your biscuits all the time, so I surprised them and threw together a batch. The garlic and rosemary ones that Mrs. Ellis loves. They were over the moon.” Sky smiled at the memory of Mrs. Ellis’s eyes lighting up when he

set the basket of steaming hot biscuits on their table. It almost made up for missing his grandma's birthday dinner. Ron wouldn't have allowed Sky to go off-menu if he'd been there—he hated that people still asked for Sky's grandma's recipes.

Sometimes, Sky wondered why Ron bought the restaurant if he didn't want the decades of history that came with it. The High Country Café had been a Split Rock institution for decades, and turning it into a "fine-dining experience" was, in Sky's opinion, a mistake. Not that Sky would *ever* say that out loud. For one thing, he wasn't an asshole. And for another, disagreeing with Ron was a sure way to get himself fired.

None of that made him feel better about canceling on his family.

He dried his hands and leaned back against the counter, meeting his grandma's eyes with as much confidence as he could. "I know my responsibility to my job needs to come first, but I'm still sorry I missed your birthday."

At seventy-five, she'd slowed down a little, but his grandma was still sharp as a tack and had more energy than Sky did most days. "It's your mama you need to apologize to," she told him. "She's the one who did the cookin' all by her lonesome."

Sky winced. "Yes, ma'am." He'd texted his mom to cancel once he was sure Ron wasn't going to show. She'd said it was fine, but Sky should have known better. He would have to make it up to her.

"So, does this mean Ron's finally fixin' to make you GM and pay you for all that extra work you've been doin'?" Ugh. She sure knew how to twist the knife.

"He's thinking about it. Maybe after the holidays—"

"Honey," she interrupted with all the patience in the world, even though Sky knew he didn't deserve it. "You gotta quit auditionin' for people who already decided you didn't get the part."

"That's not what I'm doing," he argued, his protest as weak as it had been the last few times they'd had this conversation. "It's just that it's an important job, and he wants to be sure I'm ready for it. He'll make a decision soon."

His grandma eyed him over the rim of her glass as she took another long, judgmental sip of sweet tea. "I'd agree with you, Honey, but then we'd both be wrong."

Ouch. Another point for Grandma. Sky never stood a chance when it came to matching wits with the Appalachian dame.

Sky didn’t even get a full day off, but while he was gone, Ron hired a new expediter for the kitchen.

It was a good thing, Sky reminded himself. Really. They’d been trying to fill the position for six months. Even though Sky was technically just the bartender and backup line cook, Ron let him handle the hiring. Sky was happy to do it. Never mind that if he didn’t, it probably wouldn’t get done.

The problem was finding someone experienced—or at least trainable—who could handle the assortment of personalities in the kitchen. Cyrus, who’d been with his grandma for years, had finally had enough of Ron’s bullshit one day and walked out mid-shift. No one Sky tried to replace him with had lasted more than a week. Either Ron fired them, or they just stopped showing up. They also had two open server positions, and they could really use a busser. Unfortunately, working at the renamed and reimagined High Country *Cuisine* took a special type of person, and Split Rock wasn’t a big town.

Thank god for the rest of his staff. Sky didn’t know where he’d be without them.

The old-timers were Rebecca, Dima, and Walter. Rebecca—Becks—had been there since Sky was a teenager. She was a single mom to a thirteen-year-old and the big sister Sky’d never asked for but loved anyway—when she wasn’t in his business and driving him crazy. Dima had been second-in-command of the kitchen for years and somehow the Russian man rolled with the adjustment from Sky’s grandma’s Southern comfort food to Ron’s elevated, Southern-inspired fine dining. And, last but not least, Walter, their dishwasher. He was pushing eighty, and this was his retirement gig. He was as much of a High Country institution as the restaurant itself. Sky couldn’t imagine the place without him.

Though, he’d thought the same thing about his grandma.

The other two servers, Jerome and Liam, hadn’t been around as long as Becks or Sky. Jerome didn’t come across as the friendliest guy, but he was the most dedicated, reliable person Sky knew. Liam, on the other hand, had *all* the charisma but wanted to keep his options open, so he’d only commit to shifts a few weeks at a time.

Phoenix, their line cook, was a newer addition to the staff, hired just before the sale. Sky's grandma said Phoenix stuck around because the guy was "crazier than a soup sandwich," but Sky privately thought he was just too stoned to take offense when Ron lost his temper.

Sky was the final member of the team, in charge of running the bar but also willing to jump in where he was needed.

They were an eclectic bunch and had their flaws, but they were also his friends. Sky did everything he could to make their jobs easier. An expo who knew their job could be a game changer.

He eyed the new kid, Brandon. Ron had been vague about his experience, but Brandon assured Sky he'd done the job before and could handle anything they threw at him.

Sky's mental fingers were crossed hard. They'd made it through Brandon's first shift without too many problems. Despite Sky getting less than an hour to train the poor guy, Brandon pulled his weight and didn't fall apart when Ron got a little worked up halfway through. Luckily, Sky had been able to smooth things over before the executive chef really went off.

Like most nights, Sky split his time between running the bar and filling in the gaps everywhere else. It was as easy as breathing to jump from mixing drinks to taking orders to bussing tables—all while smoothing ruffled feathers and making customers feel welcome. Liam had accused him of being psychic more than once because Sky always seemed to be where he was needed. Sky had laughed when Liam said it, but secretly, he didn't think Liam was wrong. When you grew up in a place, it was as if you absorbed its energy. Usually, he could feel the ripples before they got big enough to cause damage.

They were gathered in the kitchen, finishing up side work, when the metallic clang of a spoon rapping against the stainless-steel prep counter made Sky straighten. Dima did the same, and Phoenix followed a beat slower. The front-of-house crew jumped, not as used to Ron as the kitchen staff.

"Listen up," Ron said. He was still in his chef's coat, which was rumpled but clean enough to be notable at the end of the night, and spots of color were visible high on his cheeks. "I need everyone here bright and early tomorrow, and if that's a problem, don't bother crawling back on Monday. You're all replaceable."

The decree went over as well as could be expected. Low grumbles started immediately. The schedule had been posted for two weeks. They had lives and responsibilities. Becks's daughter had a game. Dima's wife was days away from delivering their first baby. Even Jerome, who Sky was half convinced powered down in his car between shifts like some kind of hospitality robot, looked put out. Sky was probably the only one who wouldn't need to adjust his schedule. He was always in early—but that was voluntary. This was completely unfair.

After a minute, he realized Becks was giving him "you say something, or I will" eyes. He groaned internally. He couldn't let her do that. She needed this job.

"Ron," he started, trying for earnest. "The schedule—"

Ron cut him off. "Shut the fuck up, Sky. I don't want to hear any excuses."

"Yes, Chef," Sky replied, trying to placate the other man. Ron was a big fan of kitchen hierarchy. "But—"

"It's all hands on deck for the next two days," Ron said over him. "No excuses." He leveled Sky with a look that made him avert his eyes. "And I have NDAs for you to sign before you leave tonight."

Sky blinked. What the…? What was Ron planning?

"Get your shit together, people, because High Country Cuisine is going to be featured on the next season of *Restaurant Rehab*."

Sky exchanged a wide-eyed look with Becks. *What the actual fuck?*

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Chapter Two

Corbin

Eric Corbin folded his arms across his chest, his gaze narrowed on the flat-screen TV mounted to the converted van's wall. The CCTV feeds from inside High Country Cuisine were tiled along one side of the screen. Leah had it set to flip between views—including the front entrance, dining room, bar, kitchen, and office—every few seconds.

The feed was silent since audio recording had stricter privacy requirements than video, but the picture was high-definition enough to read Sharpied dates on the prep containers. Once the employees signed release forms, they could turn on the audio. In the meantime, they had something else in place for tonight's sound.

It was late, the kitchen in shadow, apart from a wedge of light spilling from an off-camera office door and reflecting off the stainless-steel bench tops. Ron was long gone, having dropped the reality TV bomb on his way out. Surprising the staff with a new schedule wasn't Corbin's preference, but Ron had ignored Amanda's pointed suggestions. The only person left in the building was the bartender who'd locked the door behind the last of his coworkers and was currently in the office, hunched over the schedule.

Corbin had a mental flash of his grandfather doing the same thing—working late into the night to make sure everything in his restaurants ran like clockwork. Corbin had been the same way with his first spot, before he'd learned to surround himself with competent people who cared about their jobs and their coworkers.

The Corbin Group controlled a restaurant empire that went back three generations, starting with his great-grandfather's Atlantic City diner. The service industry was in Corbin's blood, and, at thirty-three, he was the proud owner of two restaurants of his own and had purchased and flipped a dozen more before turning the concept into a show. His talent lay in both the business of food and working with the people drawn to the industry. In a week, he could take a failing business model, identify every broken system and missed opportunity, and implement a fix. He was also smart enough to know he couldn't do everything.

Four people made up the core of his team. They each worked on the production side of the show but also needed to be comfortable on-camera for scenes like the one they were filming now.

Leah was a cinematography genius and an absolute sweetheart. She always knew where she needed to be to get the shot and had a knack for getting people to relax and open up on-camera. She was also beautiful, which meant she'd had to fight to be taken seriously early in her career. Now that she worked for him, Corbin, who acknowledged his own privilege as someone whose looks had only advanced his career, didn't let that shit fly on his set. He gave credit where it was due and held everyone—crew and participants alike—to the highest standards. Anyone who wasn't on board was dealt with swiftly and mercilessly.

His visual designer, Aiko, made magic with restaurant interiors, turning dives into destinations in an implausibly short amount of time. Corbin could match his shirt to his shoes, but Aiko could somehow take a pile of scrap fabric and turn it into a design concept that made customers gawk and upload photos to social media. She was also Leah's wife. They'd met on the show—back when Aiko still thought she was straight—been dating by the time they finished filming episode two, and married right after the season one finale aired. Corbin wasn't allowed to make U-Haul lesbian jokes because the filming schedule meant nine months between their meet-cute and "officially" moving in together. He'd been informed that was a reasonable amount of time. Corbin would argue that they were sharing a hotel room by episode three, but he knew better than to open himself up to retaliation.

Corbin's producer, Amanda, rounded out their original group and somehow transformed their individual skills into highly watchable

television while keeping them on time, on budget, and occasionally—as she liked to say while glaring at Corbin—out of jail.

Which, Corbin argued, was only once.

She was also his best friend. They met when he bought his first restaurant, one of the two he still owned, where she'd been hating her life as general manager. One night, they were at the restaurant late, drinking and chatting after a rough shift. He'd enjoyed her company so much that he'd had a moment of panic, afraid she would mistake his attention for flirting, and blurted out that he was gay. She'd laughed in his face and informed him that as a Black woman growing up in Hollywood, she was very aware of when a man was interested in her and when he wasn't. The conversation turned to the challenges of growing up in the family business and led to Corbin outlining his idea to turn his restaurant-flipping business into a TV show. She had offered to make a few phone calls, and their friendship had evolved into an amazing partnership as well.

The side door of the mobile studio that doubled as Corbin's home away from home slid open, and the newest member of his crew climbed in. Bran unhooked his mic and handed it off to Leah, who tucked it away.

"Well, that was an *experience*," Bran announced as he dragged the door shut behind him. He crossed to the bed, the only open seat in the rig, and flopped down with an explosive sigh, his legs dangling off the side of the platform.

Corbin made a face. Bran had been working the expo line all night, and Corbin had to sleep on those sheets. Who knew what was on his clothes? Well, Leah probably did. She'd watched the feeds more closely than Corbin, who had been focused on the overall operation of the restaurant.

Bran was the new addition to his team. After season three and their second Emmy win, they all became too recognizable for pre-filming recon. It was easier to learn what a restaurant's issues were when no one—apart from the owner—knew they were coming. Bran, like Corbin, had grown up in restaurants, but he had gone into acting. He was ideal for the position of spy and had quickly become invaluable.

Keeping things intimate had worked well for three seasons, going on four. Too many cooks in the kitchen was an idiom for a reason. But as much as Corbin wished otherwise, once production got underway, they'd bring in almost forty additional crew members who would handle the majority of what went on behind the scenes.

“What was the deal with the ladies at the four-top?” Amanda asked Bran. She was on the far end of the couch from Corbin, her long legs crossed and her tablet balanced on her knee, jiggling slightly as she bounced her foot.

Bran groaned and threw an arm over his eyes, his shirt riding up to reveal a narrow strip of skin. “They weren’t local, and I guess they didn’t get the memo that Ron doesn’t do substitutions.”

Without prompting, Leah flipped the CCTV footage to the dining room and jumped back in time to the group peppering their waiter—the efficient guy with the ramrod-straight posture—with questions as they pointed to items on the menu. Corbin was going to need more names soon, but for now, it wasn’t important.

“Walk me through it,” he requested as he crossed his ankle over his knee and draped his arm along the back of the sofa. The position kept him in frame for the camera mounted above the van’s kitchenette. The compact space made angles tricky, but their viewers loved what the internet had affectionately dubbed the “mission briefing” portion of each episode.

As Bran explained the drama with the multiple menu requests, Corbin fought not to roll his eyes. Yes, as a chef, alteration requests could be frustrating, but accommodating guests was part of the job. “Ron ignored them completely. When I pointed it out, he flipped his lid, but I think he only got three words out before Sky distracted him.”

“Sky?” Corbin asked.

“Skyler Daniels, the bartender,” Amanda supplied off the staff list on her screen. “He’s twenty-eight, but he’s been working there since he was a teenager. Well before Ron bought the place.”

Interesting.

Leah brought video of Skyler back up on the monitor. He was attractive in a boy-next-door way, tall and trim, with dark-blond hair that tumbled in his eyes and a clean jawline. Even from awkward CCTV footage, Corbin could tell the camera loved him, and it seemed like the other employees did too. Corbin would withhold judgment, but in his experience, an employee with that much unofficial power was either an untapped asset—or a major problem. He only had a few days to figure out which one Skyler would be.

“What can you tell me about our dear friend, Ron?” Corbin asked, setting thoughts of the intriguing bartender aside for now.

“Ron Crawford is the owner and executive chef of High Country Cuisine. Three years ago, he was a hedge fund manager in Boston,” Amanda said, handing over a second tablet with Ron’s bio filling the screen. Corbin scrolled through, knowing the editors would insert it as a cutaway later.

“I don’t want to call it a midlife crisis,” Amanda continued, her amusement only discernable if you knew her. “But he turned forty and decided to go into the restaurant business.”

“Did he have service industry experience?” Corbin asked.

“He did the accelerated culinary program at CIA, then worked in a New York City restaurant for a couple of months. He bought this place two years ago from the original owner.” Though she kept her voice professional, she wasn’t fooling any of them.

“So, no?”

Amanda pursed her lips and shook her head, her signature dramatic earrings swaying.

Bran perked up. “Do you think this is going to be like the episode where Corbin pissed off the owner so bad that the guy fired everyone and shut the place down on day two? JJ’s, right?” he asked, swinging his feet like he hadn’t just lobbed a conversational hand grenade.

Corbin blew out a breath as he and Amanda exchanged a look. This setup did bear a passing resemblance to the JJ’s fiasco—at least, the parts they’d been able to show on TV. But as much as he hated thinking about JJ’s, the episode had earned them their first Emmy nod, and two years later, it was still their most-watched.

“It was,” he said, answering Bran. “But there were other factors at play there.” The average viewer would never know, but even if Ron and JJ shared a similarly abrasive personality, this situation was fundamentally different. And *hopefully* wouldn’t require nearly as many lawyers.

He pushed the thought from his mind and turned back to Amanda. “Who’s the GM?”

Amanda sighed. “There isn’t one. Ron’s made himself owner, executive chef, and general manager. He’s quite proud of the fact that he ‘does it all.’”

Bran scoffed at that, earning a look from Amanda for interrupting. “Sorry,” he said, hands lifting in apology. “But that’s some bullshit right there. If anyone is running that place, it’s Sky.”

Corbin arched an eyebrow. “How is he managing that? I thought he was the bartender?”

Bran shrugged. “Becks said he also does all the training, the scheduling, most of the supply ordering, and covers shifts if someone needs a day off. When I had a question, the answer was always, ‘ask Sky.’ I don’t know if the guy ever sleeps.”

Interesting. Again.

On the monitor, the aforementioned bartender was back in the kitchen, leaning against the expo counter. Most of the light came from his phone; the cold blue glow sharpened his features into something striking as he tapped at the screen. Suddenly, he looked up, and his narrowed eyes locked on their CCTV camera, mounted high in the corner of the room.

Corbin smiled.

This might be fun.

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Chapter Three

Sky

This was Sky's nightmare.

Restaurant Rehab called it "The Pressure Cooker." The plan was to flood the restaurant with customers, more than they'd had at once in years, and see how the staff handled it. Or didn't. Amanda, the producer, said it was actually called a stress test.

Sky was calling it *fucking successful* because he was beyond stressed. They were already understaffed. Two servers and the backup bartender had walked out in the last month, and Ron hadn't let Sky replace them. Sky should have pushed. Now, he had to find a way to cover the entire floor with only Becks, Liam, Jerome, and himself. Except he also needed to be behind the bar. Oh, and he needed to be in the kitchen too, because if Ron was pressured, he'd start to take it out on Dima and Bran—Phoenix, too, technically, but Sky didn't worry about him as much since he never seemed to notice Ron's moods.

It was too late to call in sick, wasn't it?

So, yeah. Sky'd had this nightmare before. More frequently than he wanted to admit. He'd sweated through his dress shirt, and the doors hadn't opened yet. The cameras—actual cameras, not the secret ones that had apparently been filming them for days—and the big lights the crew installed that morning weren't helping his anxiety. He suddenly had a lot of sympathy for zoo animals.

Ron had been bustling in and out all day, pleased as punch over what he was calling free advertising. The upbeat attitude only confirmed that he'd never seen an episode of Eric Corbin's show. Of course he hadn't. Ron thought being confident and loud about it was the same as being right. It made him do a lot of things without thinking them through. For example, buying a popular small-town restaurant, stripping out the charm, and reconceptualizing it as a fine-dining "experience." Or signing a contract for a reality TV show—known for its explosive drama—to come in and, over five days, remodel the space, redesign the menu, and retrain the staff.

Jackass.

Ron, not Corbin.

Well, actually, that remained to be seen. Corbin had a reputation after all.

Thirty minutes until the doors opened and Sky was still in the kitchen. He needed to finish prep and verify the stations were stocked before Ron got back from wherever he'd disappeared to. If Ron's station weren't just so, it wouldn't matter how many cameras were pointed at him. The meltdown would be epic. Of course, that was when Leah, one of the camerapeople, said they needed footage of Sky setting up behind the bar.

Seriously? Right fucking now?

Sky smiled at her and tried to remember how box breathing worked.

In for four. Out for four. Hold for four. Repeat. Losing his shit would only make him look unhinged on national TV, right? How bad would it be if he locked himself in the walk-in until this was over?

A quick scan showed Ron's station was still unfinished and no one else looked like they would get to it. He sent Dima an apologetic grimace, then tried to act normal as he gave Leah a thumbs-up. Hopefully, he'd have time to finish before the doors opened.

Sky might vomit.

Would they put that on TV?

He passed Brandon—or Bran, as they'd been told to call him—on the way to the bar. He could sense the kid's eyes following him but didn't look over. He wasn't feeling very charitable—or capable of faking it—at the moment. Finding out their new expo was a plant and had been spying on them the whole time had been great. A stellar start to the day. At least production wasn't going to sabotage the stress test by pulling him. They didn't need to. Sky's nightmare was barreling toward them like a semi on a

mountain highway. It had ignored the “Use Low Gear” signs, burned through its brakes, and no emergency escape ramp was in sight.

The box breathing wasn’t working, was it?

Sky was still behind the bar, Leah’s camera in his face, and locking himself in the walk-in was feeling like more and more of a solution when Eric Corbin, celebrity chef and reality TV host, finally made his grand entrance.

Objectively, Sky had known the *Restaurant Rehab* host was hot—and famously ripped—but the camera did *not* do his shoulders justice. Or his biceps. *Holy hell.* His shirt sleeves were pulled so taut the seams looked like they were begging for mercy. *Sky* wanted to beg for mercy. He wasn’t a small guy either, but Corbin could probably fold him in half.

So hot.

Corbin was turned away, talking to Amanda, so Sky couldn’t see his face. But that also meant Corbin wouldn’t catch Sky ogling. The grown-up professional side of his brain was shouting at him to knock it off. Unfortunately, the horny, single side that had a thing for snarky assholes also had selective hearing.

This was going to be a problem, wasn’t it?

Before he could get too far down the rabbit hole, Ron finally rolled in. Even from across the room, Sky could tell he was putting on a show. His big, friendly smile and jovial laugh as he shook Corbin’s hand set Sky’s teeth on edge. He was, bizarrely, wearing a dress shirt and tie. He was also a big guy, but the button-down—probably a relic from his former life in Boston—was straining the unhealthy way. While Ron was taller than Corbin, he had none of the celebrity chef’s presence. Corbin’s hotness was multiplied by his competence. Ron was just a typical, middle-aged white asshole with enough money to buy himself some power.

At least being disgusted by his boss would distract Sky from the walking perfection that was Eric Corbin. It was hard to be grossed out and turned on at the same time.

Some days, he wished he had some of whatever made Phoenix the way he was. His life seemed a lot simpler than Sky’s.

“Um, Skyler?”

Sky jerked his attention back to Leah and her camera, his skin prickling with heat. Goddammit. Hopefully his face was already too flushed for the camera to pick up on his embarrassment.

“I know filming B-roll isn’t much fun,” she continued. “But what did the limes ever do to you?”

Skyler looked at the cutting board and the lime that he’d unconsciously reduced to pulp. He forced a laugh, but it came out choked. “Sorry,” he said, swiping his sleeve across his damp forehead. “Long day.” He tried not to notice Ron disappear into the back with Corbin and Amanda, a companionable hand on Corbin’s shoulder. Gross.

“No worries.” Leah smiled at him. “We call it the Pressure Cooker for a reason.” She raised the camera again. “It’ll be fine. I promise.”

Sky scraped the mangled lime into the trash and grabbed another. “Sure. Easy peasy.” He huffed and rolled his eyes. “Understaffed and with more reservations than we’ve had since my grandma’s retirement party. I’m sure it’ll go off without a hitch.” He regretted the complaint immediately and forced an awkward laugh as he scrambled for a deflection. Too late.

“So, you’ve been working here a long time?” Leah asked.

The last thing Sky wanted to do was dredge up the past in front of the whole world. Okay, fine. Second to last. The Pressure Cooker itself was still winning.

“Yeah,” he hedged. “I grew up in Split Rock.” His smile felt painted on.

“What’s changed over the years?”

He scoffed. “What hasn’t changed? When my grandma retired, she—” He cut himself off to swallow down the lump in his throat.

“She?” Leah prompted when he’d hesitated for too long.

Dammit. Sky reached for a response that wasn’t the raw one he’d been about to give. “She sold the place to Ron a couple years ago. We used to be the High Country Café, so the whole fine-dining thing has been an adjustment. It’s not exactly the biscuits and gravy I grew up with.” He laughed, and it sounded fake, even to him. Why was he still talking? He blamed Leah. She had a kind of girl-next-door energy that made a person offer up their secrets. Giving her a camera was unfair—and probably genius for ratings.

“You didn’t want to take over?”

Sky’s heart just about stopped and his face must have done something complicated because Leah, who was apparently an angel in disguise, took pity on him.

“You know what? Hold that thought. I think Corbin’s ready for us in the kitchen.”

Sky could have kissed her—if he swung that way. He didn't though, so instead, he took a shaky breath and let it out slowly. He had this. He was a likable guy. He could hold it together for five days. *Just don't make a fool of yourself. And don't get fired.*

Easy peasy.

Would asking Corbin to meet him in the walk-in later count against his "don't get fired" efforts? Because up close? The smirk was deadly, but those blue eyes, glittering with amusement, made him want things that weren't network-television appropriate.

"Skyler," Corbin said. "Good to meet you." His handshake was confident, and his voice sent pleasant shivers down Sky's spine. How was it fair for one person to look like that *and* sound like that?

Was the handshake lingering, or was Sky's libido doing some heavy lifting?

He should say something, right?

"Just Sky," he managed, mouth a little dry. "People only call me Skyler when they're mad at me."

"Sky," Corbin repeated, tone a little too pleased.

His thumb dragged along Sky's palm as their hands separated. Sky's breath hitched. God. *Do not get fucking hard on-camera, Skyler.*

Did he imagine Corbin's smirk deepen before he stepped back?

Sky's blush was probably visible from the other side of town. No hiding it this time. And there was a camera trained on him. Fantastic. His blush was *definitely* visible from the other side of town, not to mention the state and the country. Anyone with a TV or an internet connection would be able to watch Sky turn into a tomato the first time he met Eric Corbin. He was never living this down.

Corbin gave the assembled group a measuring look. "Thank you all for agreeing to work with us this week," he said.

Sky bit the inside of his cheek to keep his expression neutral. *Agreeing*. Right.

"We know these are long, exhausting days," Corbin continued. "Change is difficult, and being on-camera is stressful." His gaze paused on Ron, who stood to the side with his arms crossed over his big barrel chest and a calculating gleam in his eyes. "My first request is that, whatever happens, you try to react naturally. Ignore the cameras. My crew have years of

service industry experience between them, and they've been with me for a long time. They know how to stay out of your way."

Sky took in the full extent of the production for the first time and realized the strangers in the room outnumbered the staff. He counted three cameras besides Leah's and a half dozen other people all moving with purpose, though Sky had no idea what they were actually doing.

"If there's a problem," Corbin continued. His eyes met Sky's this time, and Sky fought to keep track of what he was saying. "Let Amanda or me know, and we'll handle it."

Sky was more than willing to be handled by Corbin's big, capable hands. Anytime. To a probably parasocial extent.

Corbin moved on, and his tone hardened, finally putting a damper on Sky's libido. "You are going to be under an unusual amount of pressure tonight. Do *not* take your emotions out on my crew. You will not like what happens if you do."

Sky wished Corbin had directed that part at Ron, but unfortunately, Corbin was pacing along the hot line and had his back to the owner when he said it.

The remainder of Corbin's speech was reminding them to treat the Pressure Cooker like a normal, if exceptionally busy, night. Figuring out where the weak spots were was the point, and mistakes were expected. He then turned the kitchen back over to Ron, who immediately launched into his own, overly enthusiastic speech. It felt like a flashback to the locker room during Sky's one disastrous attempt at playing high school football.

He was much better with a stained recipe card than he was with a list of plays.

While Ron ranted about doing as they were told, Becks elbowed Sky until he looked over. "This is fixin' to be a big ol' mess, ain't it?" she said, laying on the mountain talk.

Sky grimaced instead of giving her the laugh she wanted. He meant it when he said he still wanted to have a job at the end of this. They needed to keep the snark to a minimum. "Not now," he hissed back.

Becks grinned, wide and knowing. "Corbin's cute, huh?"

Sky tried to shut her up again with a wide-eyed stare. Seriously?

"I'm just sayin'," she pressed. "He's your type. And I bet he knows his way around a hookup. You should be all over that."

"Oh my *god*, Becks," Sky whisper-whined.

With perfectly terrible timing, Corbin stopped in front of them, mouth pressed into a disapproving line. Without taking his eyes off Sky, he raised his voice enough to be heard by everyone in the room. “Five minutes to opening.”

“Yes, Chef!” came the chorus of replies.

Sky cringed. Shit. He needed to finish setting up. Before he could turn thought into action, Corbin’s hand was barring the way. Sky looked past him but couldn’t figure out why he’d been stopped.

“Tell me, Sky,” Corbin said, his voice deceptively smooth. “What’s your job title here?”

Sky eyed him, sure this was a trap. “Technically? I’m the bartender, but I help out where I can. I’ve worked here a long time, and I know what needs to be done.” He fought to keep his eyes on Corbin as the time left until opening ticked away.

“I see,” Corbin said. The corner of his mouth curled, movement so slight Sky would have missed it if he hadn’t been staring. “Well, tonight, I’m going to insist that you do your job.”

Sky drew back, not sure if he should be offended. “I was planning to…?”

“And *only* your job,” Corbin finished.

Wait. But— Sky blanched. “But the—”

Corbin’s hand was shockingly warm through his sleeve when it wrapped around Sky’s bicep. Before he knew it, he was turned and redirected toward the bar. “Run along, and leave the kitchen to the chefs.”

Sky’s jaw dropped, and it took everything in him to snap it shut again. There were way too many things he wanted to say, starting with, “I’m more of a chef than fucking *Ron*,” and ending on “This will be a shitshow if you don’t let me help.” But amused blue eyes made it clear Corbin wasn’t going to budge.

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Chapter Four

Corbin

It might come as a shock to the viewers of *Restaurant Rehab*, but Corbin knew he wasn't infallible. Sometimes he got it wrong and people surprised him.

This wasn't one of those times.

He found the problems at High Country Cuisine exactly where he expected them to be.

When the doors opened, everything was clicking. Orders flowed in. Dima and Phoenix knew their jobs and could compensate for an executive chef who didn't know his, but it only got them so far.

Corbin wasn't cruel about it. He gave them thirty minutes to warm up before signaling Amanda to slam the kitchen.

When orders for three tables came through at once, Dima exchanged a concerned glance with Phoenix. Then Amanda sent through four more. Both men put their heads down and picked up the pace.

As they got busier, Ron got sloppier, making basic errors that he tried to blame on whoever was close enough. He didn't have the skill or experience to prioritize orders and, despite Bran's best efforts, he kept ignoring the person who could do it for him. When they started to crash and burn, Ron did exactly what Corbin predicted and turned his frustration on the most convenient target. "Tell Skyler to get his ass back here or he's fucking fired," he snapped.

Bran's eyebrows went up. He may have been a *Restaurant Rehab* newbie, but he came from a food service family and knew more about professional kitchens than guys twice his age. "Are you sure? Last I checked, he was in the weeds."

The editing team would have fun bleeping out the stream of abuse Ron unleashed at that. Kitchens were notoriously not PG, but Ron was pushing the limit of what Corbin would allow on his show or directed at his people. One look from Bran and he would put a stop to it.

Bran rolled with it. He lifted his hands and backed away from the pass. "Got it, Chef. I'll tell him."

Corbin suppressed a huff at the muttered, "Can't wait for you to take this guy down," when Bran hurried past him. Seconds later, he returned, Sky in tow.

Sky winced when he caught sight of the tickets hanging off the rail and the chaos behind the pass. He opened his mouth.

Corbin stepped in front of him, cutting off his view. "No."

Sky gaped. "But—"

Corbin planted a hand in the center of his chest and walked him backward, out of the kitchen, absently noting the defined pecs hidden under the thin white button-down. Leah—whose superpower was always being exactly where she needed to be—was in his periphery, her camera trained on them. Corbin was well aware he needed to stay in character, so instead of explaining his plan, he kept his tone unyielding. "What's your job?"

Sky's mutinous glare was there and then gone again, replaced by fake pleasantness. "Bartender," he replied, then flinched at a huge crash from the kitchen, followed by more swearing from Ron. "Fuck," he hissed, eyes darting past Corbin, his breath picking up and his shoulders tight. "Corbin, they need—"

Oh. He liked the sound of his name on Sky's lips. Sky leaned into Corbin's touch as he tried to see past him. "The kitchen is not your job tonight, Skyler," he repeated.

Sky's nose wrinkled, either at the statement or at the use of his full name. Corbin hid a smile that he didn't want to be interpreted as mocking. He shouldn't find the frustration cute but couldn't help himself. He wanted to kiss the pout off Sky's lips.

When Corbin didn't relent, Sky slumped. "Yes, Chef," came the grudging agreement.

Heat flashed through Corbin, and he sucked in a breath that made Sky's gaze jump to his. Okay. That was new. And hopefully limited to cute, pouty bartenders. Otherwise, his career could get awkward quickly.

It took too long, but Corbin forced himself to ignore temptation. Filming was already a balancing act of power and egos. Personal lives were the last thing they needed in the mix. Except Sky's cheeks were flushed, and when his warm brown eyes dropped to Corbin's mouth, Corbin bit back a groan. It was possible his self-imposed boundaries were too little, too late.

Corbin pressed his palm to Sky's chest more firmly, despite himself. "Get your ass behind the bar," he murmured. "I don't want to see you in the kitchen again." He gave Sky a little push that finally got him moving, though his reluctance was evident.

Things had deteriorated further when Corbin returned to the kitchen. Ron was in Phoenix's face, spit flying, a vein in his forehead bulging as he laid into him. Phoenix, in a bizarre show of calm, stared back, unmoved.

The crash had been a bowl of what looked like the tomato basil soup. It was splattered against the wall in a dramatic arc, the bowl in pieces on the tile floor.

Half a dozen tense crew members hovered near the edges of the room. Most of them had been with Corbin since season one, had been there for the JJ's fiasco, and would step in at his signal. Bran hadn't moved, and he was closest to the confrontation, his eyes darting from Ron to the smashed bowl and back again. Protective anger flared in Corbin's chest.

"—fucking waste of space," Ron was snarling, his extended pointer finger jabbing Phoenix in the chest with enough force to bend the joint back. "I didn't hire you to think, so the next time I say 'No,' you nod your empty stoner head and say 'Yes, Chef.' You get me?"

Absolutely *not*.

Corbin pressed his tongue to the back of his teeth and whistled, loud enough to make the people who hadn't seen him return jump. "Everyone take a step back," he snapped.

Ron jerked away from Phoenix and turned on Corbin. His eyes were wild, his chest heaving, and his face a splotchy red. "This has nothing to do with you," Ron spat.

"It has everything to do with me," Corbin shot back, gesturing to Leah and her camera. Corbin had two options. The first was to use his years of experience to take control of the situation, calm everyone down, and get the

kitchen back on track. The other meant letting his temper have free rein. One of those was better for their ratings.

"This is my kitchen," Ron sputtered. "I don't have to put up with this… this *insubordination*," he said, flailing his hand in Phoenix's direction.

Phoenix remained unfazed.

Corbin turned to Bran. Now that he was closer, he could see the barely masked anger in Bran's eyes. Corbin raised an eyebrow and waited.

Bran folded his arms over his chest, shoulders back, chin up. "That soup is labeled gluten-free on the menu, but Ron just added a roux. Phoenix noticed."

Ron scoffed. "Barely. And I wouldn't have had to if these idiots could do their jobs."

"It's gluten-free, and you added flour," Phoenix said in a bored tone.

"Who cares? It's a fucking fad diet anyway."

Bran's hands, tucked into his armpits, curled into white-knuckled fists. "Gluten intolerance isn't a *fad*," he bit out, shaking with the effort to maintain his composure. "Neither is *celiac disease*."

Ron rolled his eyes.

Over the years, Corbin had heard infuriating bullshit from people at every level of the service industry. Ron wasn't even that original in his stupidity. It was almost more exhausting than anything, but showing that wouldn't make for good television. "Eighty-six the soup," Corbin told Bran with measured calm.

Ron straightened, indignant. "Absolutely not! That's absurd. I'm not throwing away money because some whiny little bitches have imaginary allergies."

With long strides, Corbin rounded the expo counter. He took immense satisfaction in the way Ron read the violence in his movements and flinched out of his way. Corbin snagged a towel and lifted the bubbling, contaminated soup off the burner, took three steps, and dumped it into the nearest trash can. Pot and all. Then he flung the towel at Ron's feet. It wasn't heavy enough to be satisfying, but it still made Ron scramble back.

"Okay, then," Phoenix said in a bored drawl. "Soup's eighty-sixed."

Someone among the crew choked on a laugh.

"Is there anything else," Corbin asked Ron, low and hard, "anything at all, that has ingredients the servers don't know about? Because if I find out

you poisoned someone tonight, my first call is going to be to the health department, and the second will be to my lawyers."

"Why—" Ron started.

Corbin didn't let him finish. "So I can tell them I'm paying the legal fees for every single person who files a lawsuit against you."

That made Ron pause. His mouth opened and closed like a dying fish before he finally said, "No. No other changes."

Corbin stared him down until he was satisfied the worthless excuse for a chef was telling the truth. "Good," he said. Then he crossed to the sink, scrubbed his hands, and grabbed a spare apron from a nearby hook. "Now, stay out of my way so I can fix this mess—and hopefully save your restaurant."

Ron grumbled under his breath, but he got out of the way.

Corbin loved his job for many reasons, but his favorite was the days he got to take over a struggling kitchen, fix seemingly insurmountable issues on the fly, and bring all of that chaotic energy under his control. He loved the adrenaline, the challenge, and the satisfaction of things being done right.

"How's your rail looking?" he asked Bran.

Bran straightened, a little smirk forming, and ran his hand along the tickets hanging in front of him. "Better than it did a minute ago, Chef," he shot back. Then he starting reading off the orders.

Corbin got to work.

After sending dessert to the final table of the night, Corbin set about cleaning and breaking down his station. It earned him appraising glances. Corbin added leading by example to the list of things he'd be discussing with Ron. Assuming Ron came back at some point. Corbin hadn't seen him since taking over the kitchen.

He was almost done when Sky came through the swinging doors with a tub of dirty glassware, saw him working, and did a cartoonish double take. Corbin pretended not to notice. Eventually, Sky seemed to remember himself and turned to drop off the tub with Walter.

Corbin finished wiping down the counter, tossed the rag into a nearby laundry cart, and waved Sky over before he could escape again.

"Yes, Chef?" Sky asked when he was close enough. He was tense and trying not to look it.

With his hip against the counter, Corbin folded his arms over his chest and met Sky's eyes. "You good?"

Sky's eyes narrowed. He opened his mouth, then caught sight of a camera swinging their way and swallowed back whatever he'd planned to say, smiling instead. "Yeah. I'm fine."

Corbin waited, but Sky wasn't giving him anything else. He nodded. "Can you ask everyone to meet back here in ten? I want to go over what the rest of the week is going to look like."

Sky still looked as if he had something to say, but he nodded instead and went to do as Corbin asked.

As everyone gathered, Corbin noted that Ron was back. He'd chosen to stand with Corbin and his team, facing the rest of the staff. Amusingly, Ron had put Amanda between Corbin and himself, mistakenly believing she was some kind of shield. Corbin left him to discover how wrong that assumption was.

Once everyone was there, Corbin explained the remainder of the week. The restaurant would be closed while Aiko and her team worked their magic on the interior. Meanwhile, the staff would go through Corbin's "Service Boot Camp" that aimed at fixing bad habits and improving their functioning as a team. Then, they would host a grand reopening for the community to show off all the changes and drum up some word-of-mouth publicity.

He was pleased to see a mixture of nerves and excitement. Even the ever-stoic Phoenix made a face. Corbin had a good feeling about this one. The trickiest part was going to be getting Ron on board.

"You too, Ron," Corbin said, catching the man off guard. At Ron's blank look, he continued. "Boot Camp isn't just about skills. It's also teamwork. That means we expect participation from all of you."

"It's my day off. I have—" Ron started.

Bran didn't let him finish. "Days off are canceled. No excuses. Right, Ron?" he quoted with an almost violent grin.

Ron stammered, red spreading up his throat.

"Don't forget, you agreed to be an active participant when you signed the contract," Amanda reminded him. "I'm sure you remember what the consequences are if you don't uphold your end."

That shut Ron up fast, and he decided he'd *see what he could do*.

The staff did an impressive job of keeping their amusement to themselves. Corbin caught Sky looking his way and winked. He was rewarded with a blush and a smile Sky couldn't fully suppress.

Soon after, they wrapped filming for the night and the crew headed out. Usually, they would be booked at the closest hotel, but Split Rock had an ordinance against them, so most of the crew had a room block one town over. Corbin's team had splurged on rooms at a local bed-and-breakfast called the Rainbow Inn. Corbin had debated joining them, but in the end, he'd decided his van would be more practical. It was what it was built for, and he enjoyed the convenience of staying on-site.

He'd set up at the back of the parking lot next to the restaurant. He had easy access to water and electric, which was all he needed for a short stay like this. Even though the space was secluded and he was unlikely to have any nighttime visitors, he still put up the window covers. Then he took advantage of the cramped shower cubby tucked in next to the kitchen to scrub off the day. The shower was something he'd insisted on in the build, and, despite the naysayers, he'd never regretted it. Still, it was small, so he didn't linger.

He was lounging in bed a few minutes later, his laptop on his thighs, when he heard the dreaded cop-knock on his side door. Dammit. He had a permit *and* permission from the lot's owner. If some small-town officer tried to make him move, Corbin was getting an executive out of bed to deal with it.

He stepped into his sleep pants and dragged them up over his hips. They hung low, but he didn't bother with the drawstring. Let the cop have a free show. Maybe he'd be flustered enough to leave Corbin in peace.

Except, when he slid open the door, Corbin didn't find himself staring down a flustered cop. Instead, he found an equally flustered, but much more desirable, bartender.

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Chapter Five

Sky

It was possible they had miscalculated.

When Becks and the others pitched tracking down Corbin's famous van and having a word with him, chef to chef, Sky had agreed, reluctantly. Looking up at the shirtless man silhouetted in the open doorway, all of their hastily planned talking points emptied out of Sky's brain. Along with most of his blood.

"Skyler," Corbin said, drawing his full name out into something indecent. He braced his arms against the top of the doorframe, leaning forward. It was an underhanded move, calculated to show off a body that had no business belonging to someone whose life revolved around food.

Sky fell for it completely. He had no control over his eyes as they tracked their way down perfect abs to where dark, neatly trimmed hair was visible above the waistband of Corbin's indecently low-slung sleep pants.

"Is there something I can do for you?" Corbin asked. He sounded like the cat who got the cream, and Sky wasn't sure if he was annoyed by that or really fucking into it.

Sky dragged his gaze back up, his cheeks hot and his mouth dry. He licked his lips so he could speak, then blushed harder when Corbin tracked the movement. "I—" he started, then had to pause and clear his throat. "Sorry. I was hoping you'd have a minute to talk. But it's late. It can wait until tomorrow."

“I can set aside a few minutes in the morning,” Corbin offered. Then his gaze dipped, and Sky suddenly felt like the almost-naked one. “Or,” he said, letting the pause linger until there was no ambiguity about what he was offering. “You could come in. Have a drink with me.”

Sky’s dick hardened so fast he got a little light-headed. Was the hottest man he’d ever seen propositioning him? What the fuck was his life right now? He found himself nodding before the decision fully computed. “Um, yeah. Okay. That sounds…nice?”

Fucking “nice,” Skyler? Oh my god.

Corbin’s lips quirked up, and Sky got the impression he was being laughed at. But he couldn’t bring himself to care when Corbin pushed off the doorframe and held out his hand.

Sky took it, his whole body prickling with anticipation as Corbin helped him step up into the van. He stumbled over the lip of the flooring, and Corbin pulled him close to steady him. Sky’s free hand landed on Corbin’s ribs as Corbin’s slid to the middle of Sky’s back.

“Just to be clear,” Corbin murmured, his breath hot against Sky’s ear. “There’s no pressure.”

Sky appreciated the reassurance, but it was *so* unnecessary. This was like a fever dream, and he still wasn’t convinced any of it was real. There was no chance he’d be changing his mind. Instead of saying all that, what he blurted out was, “I really want to suck your cock.” Then he squeezed his eyes shut, burning with embarrassment.

Corbin’s chest shook with a silent laugh, then Sky’s back was pressed to the wall dividing the front of the van from the back. Corbin released him long enough to shut the door, then he was back, his hand on Sky’s jaw.

Their lips came together in a kiss that Sky felt all the way to his toes. He gripped Corbin’s sides as Corbin devoured him, his mouth insistent and Sky’s unresisting. Their tongues met, sliding together. Corbin tasted of toothpaste and smelled like soap. His skin was shower-warm under Sky’s palms, and the damp ends of his hair brushed Sky’s forehead when he adjusted the angle of the kiss.

It made Sky painfully aware of his sweaty, unwashed state, and he pushed Corbin back, breathing hard. “Sorry,” he panted. “I—”

Corbin’s brow furrowed, and he eased away, putting some space between them. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m disgusting.” If Sky sank through the floor from embarrassment, could he make a run for it?

That just made Corbin’s frown deepen. “What?” he asked again.

Fuck, what was wrong with him? Sky pushed Corbin back a little farther. “You smell so fucking good,” he said, his heart pounding and his stomach flipping unpleasantly. “And I smell like stress-sweat and stale liquor.”

He shut his eyes and turned his face away, cringing with mortification, so he didn’t see Corbin press back in, hands against the wall to bracket his shoulders.

Sky jolted when warm lips brushed his throat, then gasped when they trailed their way up to the soft spot below his ear. “Like I said,” Corbin murmured, “no pressure.”

Then he stepped back until he was leaning against the small table in the dining area and braced his hands on the surface. His eyes were heavy lidded as he took Sky in.

Sky fucking *whimpered*. He wanted to bang his head against the wall until the world made sense again. What the fuck was wrong with him? Was he seriously turning down potentially the hottest hookup of his life because he wanted to shower first?

Corbin nodded toward a boxed-off area of the van. “You’re welcome to my shower. It’s small, but functional.”

Sky didn’t know if that would be better or worse. He was supposed to come here and talk to Corbin, professional to professional. To explain that he needed to back off Ron before he got them all fired. How did they wind up here instead?

“I should go,” he heard himself say.

Corbin nodded, his expression losing the hungry edge. “Of course.”

Sky wished he could pack it away that easily. He was still achingly hard. “Maybe some other time?” he offered, hoping he didn’t sound like he was begging. He was absolutely begging.

“I’m here all week,” Corbin replied with the ghost of a grin. “You know where to find me.”

Sky climbed out of the van on shaky legs and turned to look at Corbin one last time, still shirtless, still gorgeous. “I really did come here to ask you something.”

Corbin waited.

“I know that we’re just ratings to you, but this place…” Sky looked away, up at the clear night sky, and dragged a hand through his hair, then made a face at how gross it was. “Look,” he sighed, meeting Corbin’s silhouette again. “This is my home, and these people are my family. I need them to still have jobs after you leave. So I get that you have a show to do, and drama is good for ratings, but I’d appreciate it if you didn’t ruin our lives in the process.”

Sky woke up with his chest tight. He spent the walk to work rehearsing what he would say if Corbin was weird about the previous night. As soon as he walked in, he realized it hadn’t been necessary. Corbin didn’t seem the least bit bothered. He was busy over by the bar with Amanda and didn’t see Sky at first, but as soon as he did, he flashed Sky a smile and a once-over that washed away any lingering doubts. Everything was fine.

Once everyone arrived, they started Boot Camp, which turned out to be more fun than it sounded. Corbin’s team—who Sky was beginning to understand were different from the crew—had divided the restaurant into stations. Each one had a skill challenge that they’d turned into a competition. The only prize was bragging rights, but that didn’t make any of them less competitive. Sky could almost forget about the cameras following them. It was harder to forget about the presence of the man who’d kissed him within an inch of his life, up until Sky lost his mind and turned him down.

They started at the bar, where Amanda was showing them tips for drink-mixing. None of it was new for Sky, but it was fun to see everyone else try to do his job. They finished the station with a speed competition, which he won, though Becks came in a surprisingly close second. Ron grumbled about the whole thing, rolling his eyes and repeating that he wasn’t a fucking bartender to anyone who would listen. The unimpressed look Corbin gave Ron when he overheard had Sky turning his back on the group to hide his amusement. Corbin caught him and winked. Sky rolled his eyes and made a face. It was that or kiss him again.

At the next station, the lesson was about knowing your section. After a brief lecture from Bran, they were sent to take orders from imaginary customers—played by a handful of crew members—and enter them into the POS, making sure everything would come out correctly and to the right seats.

It was basic stuff—Server 101—but Bran upped the challenge by not letting them write anything down and, again, by adding “distractions.” The customers could change their orders partway through or stop them with requests on the way to and from the kitchen. One table tried to trip them up by making about a thousand substitutions.

Sky would have been great at that one, except Corbin was cheating.

At first, Sky thought it was unintentional when a hand on his arm made him lose focus in the middle of his sentence. Or that everyone was facing similar distractions and Sky was reading something into it that wasn’t there. Then Corbin eased past him at a table, and the warning hand on Sky’s lower back as he murmured “behind” slid a little too low and lingered a beat too long to be anything *but* intentional.

It was just Sky, wasn’t it?

When Corbin walked up to him at the POS, way too close to be innocuous, Sky hissed at him like an angry cat. “What are you *doing*?” he whispered, hoping the mics wouldn’t pick it up.

Corbin’s low chuckle made goose bumps break out across Sky’s skin. Or maybe that was the body heat radiating against his back from how close the other man was standing. “Just part of the game, sweetheart,” he said. He reached past Sky to grab extra napkins from the shelf above the POS. His lips brushed the shell of Sky’s ear, setting off a full-body shiver and a furious blush.

“What if someone notices?” Sky asked, ignoring the endearment as he fought the instinct to lean into Corbin’s warmth.

Corbin’s free hand landed on Sky’s hip, ostensibly for balance. “It’s my show,” he replied with a firm squeeze, sounding smug about it.

Sky narrowed his eyes and elbowed him none too gently, biting his tongue as he came into contact with all that hard muscle. God, why hadn’t he licked the man’s abs when he had the chance? He turned to show Corbin the force of his glare, and the asshole grinned in his flushed face.

“Do you want me to stop?” he asked, arching a teasing eyebrow.

Sky huffed, thrust out his jaw stubbornly, and pushed past him without answering. Corbin’s laugh followed him across the dining room.

Goddammit. No, Sky didn’t want him to stop. That didn’t mean he wasn’t so horny by the end of the round that he had to hide in the walk-in until he was shivering with cold instead of heat.

When he got back, he gave Corbin a look that promised retribution. Corbin, the asshole, didn't seem bothered.

In the end, Jerome won the round handily, even beating out Becks. Sky didn't embarrass himself, despite the sabotage. Ron, however, was as much of a disaster as expected, considering he'd never waited tables a day in his life, and he refused to participate in any more challenges outside of the kitchen. No one argued with him.

Once they'd done bussing tables, won by Becks, who edged out Jerome to lots of fanfare, they moved on to loading the dishwasher, even though no one stood a chance against Walter. Sky wasn't even trying to win. He was having too much fun to care.

When Corbin made the mistake of mocking Sky's dish-loading technique, Sky held up the sprayer, which experience told him could nail someone at twenty feet. "Are you sure you want to go there while I'm armed?" he asked, fighting to look serious when laughter kept bubbling up.

Corbin scoffed. "Sweet Skyler Daniels would *never*." He was good at keeping a straight face, but Sky could feel Corbin's amusement like hands on his skin.

Sky narrowed his eyes and aimed the sprayer. "I'll plead self-defense."

"It'll never hold up in court. You're surrounded by witnesses." He stepped closer, his hands in his pockets.

Sky stepped back. "Are you sure they're on your side?" He made the mistake of looking to the others for help, and in a flash, Corbin closed the distance. He caught Sky's wrist and forced the sprayer toward the ceiling as he planted the other hand on his sternum and pressed Sky back until his thighs hit the edge of the counter.

Sky's friends egged him on, calling out encouragement, while Corbin's team booed their boss. Sky's pulse hammered and his breathing was too fast for the situation, but he didn't care. He'd never felt like this before, and he didn't want it to stop. He pulled the trigger. The spray hit the ceiling and rained down on them. Sky laughed at Corbin's shock, while everyone else in range cursed and scrambled out of the way.

He locked eyes with Corbin and knew if it weren't for the cameras, he'd be getting kissed within an inch of his life.

After a break to clean up and dry off, they reached the station Sky was both anticipating and dreading. The cooking.

Since space was limited, they weren't forcing the front-of-house crew to participate. Instead, it was Dima, Phoenix, Ron, and Sky lined up along the counter. Ron looked way too smug, until Corbin announced the competition.

Who could set up their prep station the fastest.

Sky bit the inside of his cheek to keep from breaking down in a fit of hysterical laughter and getting fired on the spot. A glance around the assembled restaurant staff showed him he wasn't the only one struggling to contain their amusement. Everyone knew Ron didn't do prep work. Sky wanted to be pissed since Corbin was ignoring his "back off Ron" request, but watching the executive chef's rising panic was too satisfying.

The race was no contest. Dima was the clear winner, but Sky came in second. Phoenix, despite being the least competitive person on earth, with only one apparent speed, wasn't far behind.

Ron was a fucking disaster. He had to ask where simple things, like the onions, were stored. His knife skills were sloppy, and his spatial awareness was crap. He couldn't get from his station to the walk-in—which he had to do multiple times because he kept forgetting things—without running into someone. Though Sky did question if the crew had to be quite so in his way. Sky almost felt bad for him when the rest of them finished and Corbin made Ron keep going. The feeling didn't last because Ron threw in the towel, literally, insisting prep wasn't his job and calling the whole competition a bullshit waste of time.

Corbin watched Ron fume and storm off with a satisfied expression that Sky refused to admit was sexy. Not even to himself.

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Chapter Six

Corbin

Corbin's team was relentless in their teasing.

Corbin let them have their fun. He knew it came from a place of love. And they weren't wrong; his behavior was completely out of character, both the caricature of himself he played on TV and the man he was behind the scenes. All thanks to his irresistible bartender.

The fact that he was thinking of Sky as "his" was evidence enough. In three-plus seasons of *Restaurant Rehab*, Corbin had never been tempted by a participant like this. Sure, he'd met a few who'd registered as interesting, more who'd been interested, but he'd never felt the urge to pursue them. Not like this. Less than forty-eight hours, and Sky had Corbin down bad. Hell, he'd been obvious enough that Amanda pulled him aside to warn him to cool it before he ended up on the wrong end of a sexual harassment complaint. Or, more concerning to her, they were forced to scrap half their footage.

He promised he'd be good. He didn't tell her about Sky's visit to his van or the kiss that was still looping in his head.

He had the best intentions, and then Sky threatened him with the dish sprayer.

Corbin insisted this was the definition of extenuating circumstances. One look at those expressive brown eyes and he couldn't possibly be held responsible for his actions. He should be congratulated for not succumbing

to temptation and kissing Sky up against the dish counter in full view of the cameras and both sets of coworkers.

Once they had wrapped for the day, and Corbin was satisfied the crew working on the renovation knew what needed to be done, he and the team indulged in one of their favorite evening-off activities. They found a hole-in-the-wall for a late dinner, then transitioned to whichever bar or club the locals recommended.

In Split Rock, the Lookout came with positive reviews. That it was a queer-owned bar with prominent rainbow flags out front made it even better.

He also hoped, since they hadn't kept their plans for the evening a secret, that a certain bartender might track him down and follow through on his offer of "some other time."

They entered the Lookout to energetic music and colorful lights. A dark-wood bar spanned the back wall. Half of the remaining space was taken up by tables and booths, and the rest held a decently sized dance floor. For a Monday night, the crowd was robust but not uncomfortably so.

Corbin crossed the room toward an open booth, Amanda's arm looped through his. She was wearing a slinky gold dress that set off her dark skin beautifully and picked up the warm highlights in her hair. She was also almost as tall as him, thanks to her towering heels. Corbin was styled more simply in a fitted black T-shirt that hugged his pecs and biceps and was tucked in to tailored black slacks. He enjoyed the double takes that followed them across the room, not concerned if they were due to their objectively good looks or Corbin's fame. On Amanda's other side, Bran was picking her brain about the more technical aspects of her job, while Leah and Aiko trailed behind them, hand in hand.

After dropping the girls at a large circular booth, Corbin and Bran made their way to the bar. Two bartenders were working, a bearded man who looked like he was in charge, and a cute younger guy who was vaguely familiar. Corbin had an excellent memory for faces, but he couldn't place this one. He didn't worry about it for long, distracted when a more familiar figure walked through the front doors.

Sky paused briefly and scanned the bar until his eyes found Corbin. Then he smiled and started toward him, trailed by one of his coworkers.

High Country Cuisine's boring white button-down and black pants uniform was a travesty if this was what it was hiding. Sky looked absolutely

edible in a white tank and dark jeans that clung to his long legs. The tank was tight enough that it rode up a little, showing off a narrow strip of skin above his waistband. As he got closer, Corbin could make out the tight peaks of his nipples through the thin fabric. He was fit but wasn't as muscular as Corbin, who came by his physique through hours in the gym—looking the way he did was part of his job after all. Sky looked like a runner or maybe a swimmer. He was tight in all the right places, and Corbin's palms itched to map out the curves and planes of his body.

Sky came to a stop in front of him, his fingers hooked casually in his back pockets in a way that pushed his chest forward. "Hey," he said with a smile caught somewhere between teasing and uncertain.

Corbin didn't bother to hide his lingering once-over, but he did nearly embarrass himself when his eyes snagged on Sky's chest again. The fucking tease had his nipples pierced.

Corbin relaxed back against the bar to hide the way he went a little light-headed at that revelation. Fuck. He needed a drink, but ordering one would mean looking away from the visual feast in front of him, and he couldn't make himself do it. Sky seemed equally affected, taking Corbin in just as slowly, with just as much hunger.

With a huff, the man with Sky—Liam, Corbin's distracted brain supplied—stepped around them both to reach the bar. Corbin thought Liam said something to Bran, but he couldn't be sure and didn't waste time wondering.

He lifted a finger with a "come-hither" motion and smiled when Sky didn't hesitate, stepping forward until the toes of his shoes were almost between Corbin's feet. Corbin snagged two fingers into his belt and pulled him in another step until their knees were knocking. Then he didn't let go.

Sky's cheeks were pink with pleasure. His hands came up to rest naturally on Corbin's ribs, as if they did this all the time.

Corbin had yet to say a word to the man who was now almost in his arms. He gave another light tug on Sky's belt, just because he could, and he wanted to purr when Sky swayed closer, so damn eager for it. "Want to get out of here?" he asked.

A smile split Sky's face, and his hands tightened on Corbin's sides. "Not even going to buy me a drink first, Mr. Celebrity Chef?" he asked, tone warm with teasing. "That's a little presumptuous of you."

"I'll buy you the whole damn bar if you want," Corbin blurted.

Sky let out a startled bark of laughter. “I don’t think it’s for sale.” He glanced over Corbin’s shoulder. “Right, Hunter?”

A glass thumped against the wood near Corbin’s elbow, and he glanced over his shoulder at the bearded bartender—Hunter—who luckily looked amused rather than offended. “Not even for Eric Corbin,” he said with a chuckle. “And the first round is on the house, so he’ll have to buy you the second.”

Corbin accepted the beer—something local, by the looks of it—with a gracious nod and a mental note to leave a generous tip. “In that case, I guess I can be patient.” He took a long pull from the beer and turned back to Sky. “Booth or dance floor?” he asked, thumb tracing the warm skin above Sky’s belt.

Sky dragged his gaze up from Corbin’s throat. “Dance floor,” he said after a pause. “Because I clearly want to torture myself for however long two drinks takes.”

Two hours later, Corbin pinned Sky to the mattress in a tidy home a few blocks from the bar and swallowed his cock to the root.

Sky arched under him with a surprised shout, already rock hard and beautifully desperate thanks to the hours it had taken them to escape their friends. Now, Corbin had him right where he wanted him, spread naked across the sheets, his skin gleaming in the lamplight. Sky threaded his fingers into Corbin’s hair, tugging rhythmically as he rocked against Corbin’s hold. “God. Corbin. Fuck,” he groaned. “So good at that.”

Corbin released him with a pop, then caught him behind the knees and pressed his legs back toward his shoulders. The new position gave Corbin room to kiss, lick, and occasionally bite his way up Sky’s bare torso until he could reach the nipple piercings he was already obsessed with. The nubs were wet and swollen from Corbin’s relentless teasing. Sky hissed and tried to squirm away when he sucked one hoop into his mouth again.

Corbin didn’t ease off. Sky had made it clear he got the piercings for a reason, and Corbin was taking every bit of advantage. While he did, he ground his still-clothed cock against Sky’s bare ass, loving the disparity of it. His pants were almost painfully tight now, and they couldn’t be all that comfortable against Sky’s delicate skin, but despite the overstimulation, Sky remained rock hard and dripping. That told Corbin everything he needed to know. When he had time to think about it, he’d be amazed at how

well-matched they were. For now, he closed his teeth on Sky's nipple and tugged, just hard enough to make Sky's back bow off the bed.

"*Shi-iiit*," Sky whined, voice cracking as he gripped Corbin's hair hard enough to hurt. "Corbin, fucking *please*."

Corbin grinned around the flesh he was torturing and released him with a final sharp suck. "What do you need, sweetheart?" Even as he asked, he rooted through the sheets for the lube with his free hand. As much as he was enjoying their game, he would lose his mind if he didn't get inside Sky soon.

"Fuck me. Fuck me. I need you to fuck me," Sky chanted, watching Corbin with wet eyes and flushed cheeks.

Corbin's fingers closed on the bottle. Keeping Sky spread open using the leg draped over his shoulder, Corbin got his fingers slippery and didn't hesitate to slide the first one into Sky's eager hole.

Sky groaned, long and low, his thigh trembling in Corbin's grip. "Yes, yes, yes," he hissed, eyes rolling with pleasure. He grabbed his other knee and drew it in, giving himself over to Corbin.

It was Corbin's turn to groan. "Gorgeous," he said, not worried about the words spilling out of him. Sky was so far gone he probably wouldn't hear them anyway. "So fucking perfect. Made for this. Made for me." He turned his head to kiss the knee draped over his shoulder.

It took some dexterity and a lack of concern for his dry cleaning bill, but he got his pants open and shoved out of the way, rolled on a condom, and lined himself up with Sky's shiny, softened hole. He pressed himself there, then paused, savoring the moment of anticipation.

"What," Sky gritted out through clenched teeth, eyes wild, strands of hair clinging to his damp temples. His legs shook as he tilted his hips up in invitation. "Are you wai—hnngh…" His question dissolved into a broken moan as Corbin sank into him.

Oh fuck. He was so damn tight. The perfect amount of pressure. Corbin lost track of the rest of the world for a minute, every molecule of his being focused on Sky. Gorgeous Sky, gasping and arching under him, body begging Corbin for more. He stopped when he bottomed out, one hand palming the smooth skin of an ass cheek, the other keeping Sky's knee pressed up toward his shoulders. When he was sure he wouldn't come on the spot, he drew back and started a rhythm that sent sparks bursting across his senses.

He wasn’t going to last. He adjusted his hips, searching for the right… *There*. He was rewarded with a shout, followed by babbled encouragement when he found it. He repeated the movement until Sky was almost sobbing under him, and then he ordered, “Touch yourself. Come for me, baby.”

Sky’s hand groped between them until he could fist his cock. It only took a few strokes before he cried out and clenched around Corbin like a vise, spilling in pulses that went on and on.

Corbin swore and sped up his thrusts. “Good boy. So fucking good for me.” Hot pleasure surged through him as he pumped his hips deep. He wanted to—needed to—get closer, to be so far inside that Sky was feeling him for days, no matter how implausible that was.

Finally, he sagged, catching himself on one hand. It took a minute to get Sky’s legs unfolded from between them and wrapped around Corbin’s waist instead. Then he could run his hands over Sky, touching everywhere the way he wanted, as he came down from the high. Corbin pressed a kiss to the center of Sky’s heaving chest, letting it linger as he breathed in the scent of clean sweat and sex. “How are you so goddamn perfect?” he murmured.

Sky’s breath hitched, and his brown eyes were wide when Corbin glanced up.

Fuck.

That was too much, wasn’t it?

Determined not to make this into something it wasn’t, Corbin grasped the base of the condom and eased himself from Sky’s heat. Sky wrinkled his nose but unhooked his legs and let him go. He didn’t call Corbin out on the gaffe.

After disposing of the condom and cleaning himself up, Corbin did the polite thing and cleaned Sky up as well. If his attention lingered a little, who could blame him?

As he rinsed out the cloth and hung it to dry, Corbin debated the virtues of spending the night wrapped up with a gorgeous bartender—and the possibilities of waking up with one—versus the familiarity of sleeping in his own bed.

The debate lasted until he exited the bathroom. Sky was curled up under the covers on one side of the bed. The lights were off, but the corner of the blanket was flipped down in silent invitation.

Corbin took him up on it.

He woke the next morning to the mouthwatering scent of coffee mixed with baking. He was smiling before his eyes were open all the way. He couldn't remember a hookup ever feeding *him*. If cooking was involved at all, most people expected the reverse.

He inhaled again. Fuck, that smelled incredible. It was too buttery to be bread and not sweet enough for something like pancakes.

Biscuits, then. Southern biscuits. His grumbling stomach seemed to be in agreement. He swung himself out of bed and located his boxer briefs. After a quick trip to the en suite, where he stole some of Sky's mouthwash, he made his way downstairs.

Sky was on a stool at the kitchen island, hunched over his phone, a cup of black coffee steaming in front of him. The double oven on the other side of the island ticked with heat. The kitchen was dated but thoughtfully laid out. If Corbin had to guess, he'd say whoever designed it was a cook or a baker. Despite the clear evidence of food preparation, the space was spotlessly clean other than a mixing bowl in the sink and a stick of butter softening on the counter.

Corbin wondered if anyone else found a clean kitchen as sexy as he did.

Sky glanced over his shoulder when he heard Corbin on the stairs, an unsure smile on his lips. "Morning. There's coffee. And breakfast will be ready in a few if you want to stay?"

Corbin was doing something wrong if Sky didn't know the answer to that already. He crossed the kitchen and slotted himself against Sky's back, arms around his waist. He squeezed Sky close and dropped a kiss to his throat. "Good morning," he murmured against warm skin. Then he sneaked one hand up, caught a nipple piercing between his fingers, and gave a gentle tug.

Sky let out a noise that started as a laugh and turned into a moan. "What the fuck?" he asked, breathless and not trying to stop Corbin's groping.

"Just making sure you're real." Corbin pressed his teeth to the sensitive spot below Sky's ear that he'd found the night before, earning a gasp.

"*Fuck*," Sky groaned, his head falling to the side to give Corbin room. "Are *you* real?" He reached back and grabbed Corbin's ass, dragging him closer.

Corbin pressed against him. He wasn't hard, but he could be with a little more encouragement. He briefly fantasized about folding Sky over the island counter and sliding back inside him. Maybe he'd still be wet and

loose from the night before. Maybe Corbin would need the cold-pressed olive oil he'd spotted on the counter. Lube of convenience was always sexy, as long as it did the job. He scraped his teeth along the column of Sky's throat, ending the trail with a wet kiss. "Very," he responded.

Sky laughed, breathless and squirming. "You don't need to eat me. I'm gonna feed you."

Corbin wasn't sure he could stop.

Unfortunately, the oven timer pulled rank and chose that moment to go off.

Corbin's arms tightened, reluctant to give up Sky's heat or the perfect way they fit together. However, he wasn't self-sabotaging enough to stop Sky from elbowing him away and going to retrieve the baking sheet from the oven.

Baking *sheets*. Because there were several. He followed as Sky slid them onto the counter. His professionally trained nose had been right about biscuits. What it hadn't been able to tell him was how perfectly crisp and golden brown they would be. Or that each one was the size of a softball.

"Wow," he said. So eloquent.

Sky chuckled. "They're cathead biscuits. My grandma's recipe." He nudged Corbin away. "Get yourself some coffee while they cool a little. Mugs and sugar are in the cabinet over the machine. Creamer's in the fridge."

"Yes, Chef," Corbin replied with a teasing salute. He didn't miss Sky's breath catch but didn't call him on it. If he had his way, they would refuel and then go back upstairs for round two.

The coffee was excellent, and the cream in Sky's fridge was local. It was what he'd used in the biscuits, which Corbin was shocked to hear contained only three ingredients, and none of them was butter. He was even more surprised when he finally broke a chunk off one and popped it into his mouth.

Corbin let out a groan that would have made Amanda demand a retake. The biscuits were perfect. Fluffy and creamy inside, with an outer crust that was crisp and just salty enough to balance the sweetness of the cream. They melted in his mouth, and Corbin shut his eyes to focus completely on the experience. When he opened them again, Sky was grinning at him.

"Wait until you try them with the raspberry jam this local guy makes."

"They don't need it," Corbin told him seriously. "These are incredible."

A pleased flush bloomed on Sky’s cheeks, and he turned away to hide it, busying himself with transferring the biscuits to a cooling rack. “Thanks.”

“Why aren’t you selling these?” Corbin asked as he took Sky’s advice, slathering half of it with butter and jam. This time, he moaned when he bit into it, loudly enough that if he weren’t enjoying himself so much, he might have been embarrassed. “Fuck me, that’s good.”

“I didn’t get the sense you swung that way,” Sky joked. The words were light, but there was something uncomfortable in his posture.

Corbin’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t usually. But I would for more of these biscuits.”

Sky huffed a quiet laugh. “No payment necessary. Trust me, bottoming for you wasn’t exactly a hardship.” The back of his neck was still pink, and Corbin could feel his discomfort from the other side of the kitchen. He wasn’t positive about the cause, but he was pretty sure it didn’t have anything to do with sex.

“You didn’t answer my question. You could base an entire business model around these. So why are you working for an asshole like Ron?”

Sky heaved a sigh and turned to face Corbin. He leaned his hip against the counter and folded his arms over his chest. Corbin wished said chest weren’t covered by a T-shirt, but he forgave Sky since he knew from experience that being shirtless while cooking did not always end well. “Did you know my grandma used to own High Country Cuisine?”

Corbin paused and held back about a dozen questions that would have been more “Eric Corbin of *Restaurant Rehab*” and less “Corbin, guy sitting mostly naked in Sky’s kitchen after the best hookup of his life.”

“No. I didn’t,” he said instead.

“Yeah, well.” Sky shrugged. “It was a lot different then. It was the High Country Café, for one. We did mostly Southern-style breakfast and brunch. The biscuits were our best seller.”

That was news to Corbin. “So you’re telling me Ron bought what I’m assuming was a successful brunch spot and turned it into a fine-dining ‘experience.’” He added the air quotes just to make it clear how pretentious he found that marketing term.

“Yep,” Sky said.

“Why didn’t she sell it to you?”

As soon as the question left his mouth, Corbin knew it was a painful one. He would have taken it back if he could. He wished Sky weren’t out of

reach across the island.

Sky's jaw was set, his shoulders tight, and his eyes trained somewhere in the middle distance. He was gripping the counter hard enough that his fingers blanched white. "I turned her down."

Corbin frowned, but Sky didn't make him press.

"She wanted me to take over. Everyone did. But the more I thought about it, the more I knew I couldn't." He laughed, and the pain in it made Corbin's heart ache. "I was twenty-five. I didn't even go to college. I couldn't afford to buy the place from her, and she wouldn't have let me anyway. But if I took over and I fucked it up, she and my grandfather could have lost their retirement. I wouldn't let them take the risk." He shrugged, a humorless smile curling his lips. "So, I told her I didn't want the responsibility, and she sold it to Ron. And I've regretted it every day since."

Corbin understood Sky's dilemma more than most ever could, and he felt for him, but what he was doing wasn't healthy. A business couldn't love you back. And people who *did* care about you wanted what was best for you. Ron wasn't best for anyone. "Did your grandmother include her recipes in the sale?" Because, as much as the thought made Corbin want to go back in time and scold a woman he'd never met, it would explain a few things.

Except Sky was shaking his head. "No, she gave them to me." His lips curved up in a shadow of a smile. "I'd love to use them, but Ron won't let me."

Corbin pinched the bridge of his nose. This was going to give him a headache. "Of course he won't. He probably thinks they're 'lowbrow.'"

Sky chuckled. "Good guess." His shoulders were looser, and he made his way back around the island to snag his coffee. "Don't tell Ron," he said with a secretive smirk. "But I still make biscuits for the regulars when he isn't paying attention."

"Which is how often?" Corbin asked, arching an eyebrow in mock seriousness.

That made Sky grin. "Pretty much every day. They ask the servers if they can order off the 'black market menu.' Becks and Liam are totally on board. And Jerome frowns at me, but he's never said anything."

Corbin shook his head. Unbelievable. "And here I thought you were such a good little rule-follower."

Sky snorted and shoved Corbin lightly. “I just hate disappointing anyone when the solution is so easy. I guess I’m too much of a people pleaser.”

Corbin caught Sky’s hand and used it to draw him in until he was standing between Corbin’s knees. Then Corbin trapped him against the counter with hands braced on either side of his hips. “Why haven’t you opened your own restaurant?”

Sky’s smile fell. He turned his face away, avoiding Corbin’s eyes, and shrugged. “Same reason, I guess. I hate disappointing people. Besides, I can’t abandon my friends. The restaurant would shut down inside of a month if I left.”

It was the first time Corbin had heard him speak with any confidence about his skills, and Corbin couldn’t argue because he was right. He could say something about Sky keeping a worthless waste of space in business out of misguided loyalty to people who he would never expect the same from, but what would it accomplish? Besides pissing Sky off and proving that Corbin really was the asshole everyone claimed.

Instead, he caught him by the jaw and drew him in for a kiss that tasted of coffee and raspberries. “I need to swing by the restaurant and check on the reno crew.”

“I know,” Sky said, his eyes still on Corbin’s lips. “And Leah needs footage of you making snarky comments while you do it.”

Corbin grinned and let all his smugness into his voice. “Are you a fan of my show, Skyler? You never mentioned that. Would you like an autograph?”

Sky’s expression twisted into a disgruntled scowl that didn’t hide the color flooding his cheeks. “Fuck you. No.” He tried to pull away, but Corbin still had him trapped against the counter.

“Are you sure? I’m pretty famous, you know. Some people would be willing to do a lot to get an autograph from me.” Corbin stood, pressing himself flush against Sky’s squirming form.

He could almost pinpoint the moment Sky’s attempts to get away switched from embarrassed avoidance to intentional teasing. “God, you’re such an asshole,” he said with no weight behind it. The fight left him when Corbin reached into his loose sweats, got two handfuls of his perfect ass, and squeezed. A moment later, Corbin had the pants around his knees and

lifted him, bare-assed, onto the counter. “Fuck, this is so unsanitary,” Sky complained, much too breathless to be believed.

Very. But Corbin wasn’t hearing a “No.”

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Chapter Seven

Sky

Sky had been dreading the days the restaurant was closed for remodeling. He wasn't good at sitting around, and he wasn't sure he remembered how to keep himself entertained when he wasn't doing three people's jobs on top of his own. Except when Corbin heard that, he took it as an invitation to keep Sky busy. Very busy.

When he wasn't wrapped up in getting to know Corbin, he found himself helping out Corbin's team.

Aiko, the visual designer, was really fucking cool. She was Leah's wife, and when he met her at the Lookout, she'd asked for his number, just in case. Just in case ended up being about an hour after Corbin left his house. Sky was still sprawled naked in bed, tangled in the sheets, and grinning at nothing. She had questions about how they used the bar portion of the restaurant, and no one could track down Ron. How typical was that? Sky finally had a day off, one he didn't even want, and instead of finding something to do, he was at work, doing Ron's job. Unpaid, too.

Except it turned out to be fun. Sky had about fifteen years' worth of ideas for improving the space, and somehow, Aiko thought they were good ones. He just hoped Ron wasn't too pissed when the show aired because Leah was getting a lot of footage of Sky acting like he was in charge.

When he wasn't playing designer with Aiko, he was being interviewed by Leah about the history of High Country, Bran was asking his opinion on

their reservation system, or Amanda was sitting him down to ask questions about their inventory and ordering.

At one point, he caught Corbin pouting because his team was ignoring him and monopolizing Sky, which Sky found incredibly amusing. He fixed the problem by leading Corbin to his van and riding him until he was swearing, his fingers pressing bruises into Sky's hips. When Sky's thighs gave out, Corbin rolled him over and pounded him into the mattress until he was fuck-drunk and drooling into the sheets.

When they found their way back inside after taking turns cleaning up in the van's shoebox of a shower, Sky had to blush his way through a dozen teasing questions about his intentions before Corbin told them all to fuck off and leave Sky alone.

By the time Thursday evening rolled around, the place was starting to come together. The team, Corbin included, would be working through the night to get the final touches done. Sky offered to help, but to his chagrin, they kicked him out, insisting the reveal be a surprise. Corbin softened the blow by kissing him goodbye at the door, ignoring the hooting and hollering of his team and crew.

Sky went home by himself. It felt weird. And it felt weirder that it felt weird. He'd met Eric Corbin four days ago, hooked up with him a day later, and was missing him seventy-two hours after that.

It was stupid, right? As soon as the grand reopening was done, Corbin and the rest of them would be gone. On their way to the next job—and for Corbin, the next hopeless fanboy who caught his eye. Sky hadn't been brave enough to ask, but he assumed Corbin found a hookup at every stop. Looking like that, how could he not? There were probably message boards online dedicated to his many conquests. Sky knew better than to imagine he was special. Still, he couldn't help wishing for more. Even if *more* was an offer to meet up if their paths ever crossed again. Sky didn't care if it was pathetic. He was more than willing to be Corbin's High Country booty call.

He rolled to his side and glared at the glowing numbers on his phone, suddenly furious with himself and a little pissed at Corbin too. If only for being so good at this that watching him leave was going to feel like losing something he never asked for but didn't know if he could live without.

Sky arrived back at the restaurant while it was still dark, running on too much caffeine and not nearly enough sleep. He entered through the kitchen,

avoiding the crew that was still hard at work finishing the dining room. Firing up the oven as he passed, he dropped his load on the counter and started sorting through ingredients. Then he put on his headphones and got to work.

He knew he'd been seen, but he kept his head down, losing himself in the repetitive mixing, folding, and cutting of dough. He'd probably gone overboard, but he didn't care. Doing nice things made him feel good, and he really needed to feel good this morning.

He was loading the last of the bowls into the dishwasher when a familiar body pressed up against his back and arms the size of his thighs wrapped around him, pinning his arms to his torso.

"Looks like I caught a black market baker," Corbin said, his lips against Sky's throat setting off an almost Pavlovian response. "I wonder what I should do with him."

You could keep him. Sky closed his eyes, ignoring the little voice that wanted too much and let himself sag. Corbin was strong enough to take his weight; he'd proven that several times over.

Corbin just held him tighter, his breathing a steady rise and fall against Sky's back. Sky soaked in the moment, letting it pull all his scattered pieces back together.

"I'm innocent," he replied, a beat too late. "If you want a confession, you'll have to torture it out of me."

Corbin chuckled. His teeth grazed Sky's throat and raised the hairs on his arms. "I'm sure that can be arranged." One of his arms loosened but only enough to slide up, find one of Sky's piercings, and give it a tug.

Sky's brain glitched, his ears ringing as his blood rushed south. "Cheater," he managed to say through a groan. Thirty seconds and he was ready to let Corbin have anything he wanted as long as he didn't stop. Sky didn't want him to *ever* stop.

Instead, Corbin helped him straighten, then gave his ass a little smack that had the bonus result of startling him out of his half-asleep baking-fugue. "Your timer," he said as he walked away.

Sky stared after him. "What?"

Corbin shook his head, grabbed a side towel, and opened the oven.

Oh. Fuck. His timer. He grabbed his phone to silence the ringing that he'd assumed was in his head, then hurried after Corbin, hip checking him out of the way so he could test the biscuits. Determining they were done, he

pulled the trays from the oven and loaded them onto one of the tall cooling racks.

“How did you know?” Corbin asked.

“Hm?” Sky set the final two trays on the pass, then went to retrieve butter and jam from his bag. Hopefully the crew would enjoy the spoils of his insomnia.

“How did you know I put your biscuits on the new menu?”

Sky froze. “You what?”

Corbin caught his chin and tilted his face up, searching his eyes. Then he frowned. “Why do I feel like I’m the only one of us who got any sleep last night? And I was here until two a.m.”

Sky shrugged. “I’m fine. I slept.”

Corbin arched a brow. “More than me?”

This was ridiculous. It was just a random rough night. They happened. He took a step back, out of Corbin’s reach, and stretched his arms over his head, then bounced on his toes a little. “It’s not a big deal. I’ll catch up tonight.” Corbin looked skeptical, so Sky pressed on. “Now, explain. What do you mean, you put the biscuits on the menu?”

Corbin grinned. He checked to make sure no one was listening, then leaned closer, like he was imparting a secret. “You fed me the second-best thing I’ve ever put in my mouth, and you think I wasn’t going to take advantage of that?”

Sky scoffed. “Second-best?” This guy had eaten in some of the top-rated restaurants in the country, probably in the world.

“Well, I can’t exactly put the best on a menu,” he said. Then his gaze dipped in a blatant leer.

Sky let out an outraged sound and threw his towel at a laughing Corbin. “Oh my god, you absolute asshole,” he shouted, though he was laughing too hard to make it very convincing.

The noise they were making drew more of the crew, and soon they were loading up biscuits with butter and jam. The moans and exclamations as they bit into them made something in Sky light up. It only got better when Corbin draped an arm around him and drew Sky into his side.

“I’m not sure I like you making people who aren’t me moan like that.”

Sky choked on a laugh. “I don’t know if I agree.”

Corbin’s lips brushed his temple. “I guess I’ll have to try harder to convince you.”

Sky knew Corbin wasn’t implying what it sounded like he was implying, but Sky was going to enjoy the feeling anyway.

Sky was still floating from the crew’s compliments when the rest of the staff finally arrived. Ron was already looking sour, like his throwback tie was too tight and his fancy shoes were pinching his feet. Sky just hoped he had a change of clothes in his office, because there was no way he could work in wingtips.

The lights had been adjusted so that Corbin was standing under a dramatic spotlight, while the rest of them stood before him in an awkward semicircle. He looked like he was about to announce the next act in the three-ring circus, and Sky was fighting not to laugh. Corbin didn’t help things when he caught Sky’s eye and winked. “I’ve enjoyed getting to know all of you this week,” he began, his gaze still locked on Sky.

“All of us,” Liam whispered, amused.

Sky elbowed him to shut him up.

“I think the concept my team and I came up with for the next iteration of the High Country Café is going to resonate with your customers, as well as all of you.”

Sky’s skin prickled with an uncomfortable surge of adrenaline when he caught the name change. What did Corbin mean by that? He glanced at Ron, who looked thrown and none too happy about it.

“Before we show you what we’ve done in the dining room, Ron has something he’d like to say.”

Ron looked like he’d rather chew his arm off but straightened anyway when the cameras turned to him, and he pulled a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket. “Chef Corbin and I spoke a lot this week, and he pointed out a few things we could be doing better,” he said, sounding a little like he was being held at gunpoint.

Sky exchanged a look with Liam. Corbin and Ron talked? That was news to Sky. He wondered when Corbin had had the time, in between working on the transformation and fucking Sky through two different mattresses.

“I’m pleased to announce that, effective immediately…” He paused, his face doing something unpleasant. “I’m promoting Skyler to general manager.”

Sky's jaw dropped. He barely heard Becks's squeal of excitement or felt Liam grab his shoulders to shake him. His eyes sought out and found Corbin. *Really?* he mouthed.

Really, Corbin mouthed back with a smirk.

Sky let a smile spread across his face, even though his mind was spinning and he wasn't at all sure how to feel. GM. Wow. Fucking finally. "Thanks, Ron," he managed. He crossed the open space to shake Ron's hand. He wasn't surprised when it was like holding on to a dead fish.

"Yep," was Ron's clipped reply. He released Sky's hand as quickly as possible.

Well, that didn't bode well, but Sky would worry about it when there weren't half a dozen cameras pointed at him.

"Now," Corbin called, cutting through the chatter. "In a few short hours, we'll have over one hundred guests here for the grand reopening, and there's plenty of setup left to do. But before we get to that, who would like to see the new dining room?"

The assembled group cheered as the lights came up, and people hidden on the other side of the swinging doors pulled them open with a dramatic flourish. It was a little comical and over the top to Sky, but it would probably look better on TV.

He was the last one through to the dining room, and as soon as he saw the renovated space, his eyes stung. It looked exactly like he'd imagined it could, back when his grandma was still the owner.

The formal, white-draped tables and heavy leather-padded seating was gone. They'd been replaced by rustic wood tabletops with clean metal legs and matching chairs. The walls had been repainted their previous warm white, and the carpet, there since his grandma's time, had been pulled up and replaced by clean gray slate. They'd opened up the ceiling, too, revealing the original joists and planks, stained to match the rest of the furniture. Reupholstered booths lined one wall, and down the center of the room was a long, double-sided bench. The seat and tufted back of it were done in a warm, caramel-brown leather. The bench was massive and divided the dining room from the bar.

The bar itself was a million times brighter and more welcoming. The liquor wall had been replaced by something more modern, and the old, heavy chandeliers Ron had insisted on were gone. In their place were industrial-looking metal starbursts capped with milk-glass orbs.

Aiko had transformed it into the restaurant of Sky's dreams, and he was going to hug her until she made him stop the first chance he got. As soon as he could do it without bursting into tears.

Becks crashed into his side and clung to him, half giddy and half sobbing. "Sky, did you see the name?"

Sky had to swallow a few times. He shook his head. The next thing he knew, she was waving a leather-embossed menu holder in his face, too fast for him to focus on it. "Becks, slow down," he said as he grabbed her arm to still it.

Fuck. He sniffed to fight the burning in his sinuses. Corbin renamed the fucking restaurant. There it was, in clean lettering beneath a modern logo of the sun rising over stylized mountains.

The Cat's Head.

Sky lost the battle with his tears. Goddammit. He didn't want to be the guy who cried on national television.

Familiar arms wrapped around him, and he leaned into the comfort, even though they weren't the arms he wanted. "Don't cry, Honey," Becks said, his old childhood nickname, something everyone had picked up from his grandma, making him laugh wetly.

"Underhanded," he complained, accepting a napkin to wipe his eyes.

"I can't help it," she chirped back. "You've always been sooo *sweet*."

Sky shoved her away lightly. "Leave me alone, Becks," he whined, knowing he probably looked ridiculous, grinning through his tears.

Dima and Walter came over next. "Your grandma is going to be over the moon when she sees this place," Walter said, squeezing Sky's shoulder, then pulling him into a quick hug. "She's always said her biscuits were the best thing on the menu."

Dima made a sound of disagreement and reached up to pat Sky on the cheek in a way that would have been condescending from anyone else but came across as affectionate from the Russian. "No, no. Not best. Sky makes them best."

Walter chuckled. "That's fair, I suppose."

Sky shook his head, bemused, but returned Walter's hug and clapped Dima on the shoulder. "Thank you. Both of you. I don't know where we'd be right now without you. I mean it."

They started reminiscing about the "good old days," so Sky took the opportunity to break away. He scanned the crowded room, but he didn't see

the person he wanted to talk to the most. Plenty of crew members were milling around, but no one from Corbin's team, and no sign of the man himself. He decided to try the kitchen, but was intercepted by Jerome.

"Congratulations on the promotion," Jerome said, holding his hand out for Sky to shake. "I look forward to working with you."

Sky accepted the handshake with a chuckle. It was firm and dry, unlike Ron's. "I don't think it'll be all that different from what we've been doing."

Jerome shrugged. "Still. You've earned it. None of us would be here if it weren't for you," he said in a mirror of what Sky had just told Walter and Dima.

It drew Sky up short. "I don't know about that. You're fantastic at your job. Ron might be…difficult. But he's not stupid enough to get rid of you."

"We all have our reasons for staying," Jerome said enigmatically. Then he smiled, an expression Sky didn't think he'd ever seen on the normally stoic server. He was a good-looking guy when he wasn't all blank-faced and serious. He should smile more. Not that Sky could ever be rude enough to say that out loud.

Sky decided he'd leave that one for another day. He was about to excuse himself when he heard a massive crash from the kitchen, followed by the familiar sound of Ron losing his shit. Sky exchanged a glance with Jerome, then took off toward the noise with the other man right behind him.

Sky pushed through the swinging doors into absolute chaos. The entire cooling rack, all six and a half feet of it, was on its side, the wheels still spinning. The dozens of biscuits Sky had spent the early hours of the morning making were smashed and scattered across the floor.

Ron was a few feet away, his face flushed a blotchy purple, his raised finger jabbing at Corbin as he ranted. "I won't stand for this-this… sabotage!" he raged. "This is my restaurant! Mine! And I'm not going to let you get away with destroying it."

Sky froze in the doorway, staggering a little when Jerome ran into his back. Fuck. *Fuck*. He didn't know what to do.

Corbin was facing Ron, his arms folded over his broad chest as he stared down Sky's boss. On the surface, Corbin looked calm, but Sky could feel the anger radiating off him.

The rest of his team was spread out behind him in a half circle, as if they'd blocked it out ahead of time—with the exception of Leah, who was

closer to the pass, probably for a better camera angle on the confrontation. No one looked pleased.

The only person moving was Phoenix, who was setting up for dinner service like the next Revolutionary War wasn't about to break out around him.

"Destroying it? Is that what you think?" Corbin asked, his tone mocking.

Ron stepped toward him, hand closing into a fist.

"Ron!" Sky called, breaking out of his freeze. Distraction. He needed a distraction. He really didn't want Corbin to get punched. And as much as he'd like to be rid of Ron, he didn't know what would happen to the restaurant if the owner went to jail for assault.

Before Sky could get any further, Ron spun on him. "You," he spat.

Sky stumbled to a stop, his hands automatically raised in surrender. "Um…" he said. "What did I do?"

Ron's fist was shaking. "Don't play dumb with me, you little shit. I know you were in on this." He made a gesture that seemed to encompass the entire building, then he kicked the cooling rack. It only moved a few inches, but the clang and scrape of it was horrendous. Sky cringed as more biscuits tumbled from the racks and rolled across the floor, only to get smashed under the heels of Ron's fancy shoes. "I don't know what you're trying to pull with your cheap little rolls, but you're not doing it in my restaurant."

"Biscuits," Sky said. He wondered if this was what shock felt like. He'd had about an hour of sleep, and the day had been a roller coaster of emotions. It seemed like he'd reached his limit for processing them. Instead of reacting to Ron, he couldn't stop staring at the crushed biscuit under the man's shoe. It had been one of the new cheddar-jalapeño ones—Sky could see the little flecks of bright green. No one had even tried them, and now they were ruined.

"What?" Ron snapped.

"They're biscuits. Not rolls. How do you not know that?"

Corbin laughed.

Sky looked over, a beat too slow.

"You think this is fucking funny?" Ron asked, rounding on Corbin again.

“No,” Corbin answered, his tone completely lacking humor, despite his smile. “I don’t think it’s funny. But do you want to know what I *do* think?”

Sky held his breath, the blood rushing in his ears making everything sound a little far away.

“I think you’re an egotistical hack who wouldn’t know a good business plan if it bit you on your lazy ass.”

Oh *shit*.

Sky had seen every episode of *Restaurant Rehab*. He could also admit to looking up Eric Corbin, Eric Corbin recipes, Eric Corbin gym routine, Eric Corbin top takedowns, and Eric Corbin hottest scenes. Some of those more than once. The guy was smoking hot, a chef, gay, and gorgeous. Could anyone really blame Sky for being into it? For a while, his algorithm had seemed intent on showing him compilations of Corbin telling off idiots for their stupid decisions. On his laptop screen, it was hot. Before he’d ever met the man, Sky had fantasized about Corbin saying some of the things to Ron that Sky thought on a daily basis.

But in all of those episodes and clips, he’d never seen Corbin this angry. And while it was still kind of hot, it was also terrifying. Sky didn’t think there was any coming back from this.

He was right.

“*Get out*!” Ron screamed, spit flying. “Get out of my restaurant. You’re done!” He turned on Leah with her camera, and Sky’s heart leaped into his throat.

Before he could move, Aiko, who was all of five-foot-nothing, was there, a solid wall between her wife and Ron’s temper.

Sky wasn’t sure that would stop Ron, but apparently the look on Aiko’s face was enough to impede him. Ron jabbed his finger at the camera instead of moving any closer. “I want all these fucking cameras off my property right fucking now.” He spun back to Corbin. “If you aren’t out of here in the next five minutes, I’ll have you arrested for trespassing!”

Sky’s breath hitched when Corbin’s face went blank. He made a circular gesture. “Wrap it up,” he said.

Then he turned and walked out.

It took just under five minutes for the crew to vacate the building, Ron stalking behind them the whole time. Once they were gone, Ron rounded on the staff. “Don’t you idiots get any ideas,” he spat, threatening pointer

finger out again. “I’m done being fucked by cocky, know-it-all prima donnas.” He aimed that one at Sky, who’d never in his life earned the title. “This is a *fine-dining establishment*. So find some fucking tablecloths and start prepping for dinner.” He paused to give Dima and Phoenix a deadly glare. “The actual menu. Not this diners and dives shit.”

Sky swallowed down his self-preservation instincts. “We don’t have the inventory for the old—I mean, the real menu,” he stammered, cursing the slip that only made Ron’s glower darken. “We physically *can’t* make most of those dishes tonight.”

“Figure it the fuck out, or you can get out.” He gave Sky an up-and-down look that made him want a shower, and then he sneered. “You may have fucked your way to a title you don’t deserve, but that egotistical bastard doesn’t have any real power here. I may have agreed to make you GM, but I can take it back just as fast.”

It took everything in Sky not to react. He swallowed down the bile that tried to crawl up his throat and gave Ron a sharp nod. “Yes, Chef.”

The buzz of a cell phone cut through the sudden silence, and Ron whirled toward the line.

Dima’s eyes were wide. He hesitated but pulled his phone from his pocket on the second ring. He looked at the screen, then answered in rapid Russian. A pause, and then another stream of words Sky didn’t understand but recognized as a mixture of concern and excitement. Seconds later, he ended the call, his eyes shining.

“What the fuck was that?” Ron barked.

“My wife,” Dima said, a smile breaking out across his face. “She is having the baby.”

Any celebratory exclamations and urges for him to “Go, go,” were cut off by Ron’s, “Absolutely the fuck not.”

Dima looked like he’d been slapped. “I cannot stay.”

Ron gestured to the door, his face twisted into something hateful and ugly. “Then leave. But don’t think you can come crawling back tomorrow. You walk out that door, and you’re fired.”

Anger welled up in Sky, and he straightened. “You can’t do that. You can’t make him choose his job over his wife and baby. That’s insane, Ron.”

Ron’s eyes were too wide and too bright when he turned on Sky. “Why don’t you go with him, then? Good riddance to both of you. I refuse to accept disobedience in *my* restaurant.”

Sky took a steadying breath, squared his shoulders, and called Ron's bluff. "Fine." He pulled off his apron, hoping Ron couldn't see the way his hands were shaking.

"In that case," Jerome said from the doorway, "I'll be forced to quit as well. I'm not interested in working for someone who doesn't value his employees or their families."

Phoenix spoke up next. "Guess that's my cue too."

Ron was starting to look panicked. "What are you talking about?"

Phoenix shrugged. "As Ro goes, so goes my nation."

Sky's jaw dropped a little. Dima was looking a little teary but also glancing repeatedly at the exit.

"Wait," Becks said, way too delighted for the current tension. "You two are together? Since when?"

Jerome, or Ro, apparently—were they allowed to call him Ro?—gave another of those secretive smiles but didn't answer.

Ron's face had lost color so rapidly that Sky had a moment of concern for his blood pressure, then decided he didn't actually care that much. "Looks like you might have a problem, Ron. It'll be hard to open the doors with two servers and no chefs." He didn't try to keep the smugness from his voice.

"And no dishwasher," Walter added, his wiry arms folded over his chest. "It's not like I need the money. I just like washing dishes. It gives me time to think, but I can do that anywhere."

"You're down to two," Sky said, amazed his voice was still steady.

Ron tried to rally. "I'm still the owner. Or were you so busy sucking your boyfriend's cock that you forgot who's really in charge here? You're all replaceable."

Liam snorted. "I'm out of here in like, two weeks, no matter what. Amanda set me up with a friend of hers who's an agent. Looks like my acting degree might get some use after all."

Sky choked on a laugh. "Good for you, Liam," he said. "You're gonna kill it."

"Me too," Becks piped up. Her voice trembled, but her jaw was set. "You fire Dima and Sky, and I'll quit too."

"Becks," Sky said in quiet warning. Out of all of them, she needed the job the most. She had a kid to support on her single income.

She glared at him, eyes blazing, then turned back to Ron. “If you think I’m sticking around after this, you’re more of an idiot than I thought.”

Ron’s eyes moved from one person to the next with the slow-dawning realization that he had no friends here. “Fine,” he spat finally. “Do whatever the fuck you want.” He turned and kicked the toppled cooling rack again, then limped to the office, cursing the whole way, slamming the door behind him and making them all—barring Phoenix—flinch.

Silence descended as they stared at one another, no one sure what to do next.

“Well,” Phoenix drawled as he used his knife to sweep a perfectly diced onion into a prep tub. “I thought being a marine was stressful, but the USMC has nothing on restaurant kitchens. Am I right?”

Sky blinked and actually felt his brain grind to a halt, then slowly reboot.

Liam was faster. “You were a fucking *marine*?” he exclaimed. “What the fuck? Did you know that?” he asked Jerome, not waiting for an answer. “That explains *so much* and also absolutely *nothing*.”

Phoenix gave a one-shoulder shrug, like lifting both would be too much effort. “I mean, there was a lot less fucking when I was still in.” He winked at Jerome, whose lips curved into that same smile in return. “But sure. Eight years and three tours. Ooh-rah!”

Dima was the only one, other than Jerome, who didn’t look surprised. “Yes. Yes. Military makes you very tough. I know. But back to work. We have much to do before dinner.”

“Yes, Chef,” Phoenix said with a grin at Dima, who shook his head fondly in reply. “Time to grind.”

Sky shook himself. The line cook—and, apparently, former marine, what the fuck?—was right. They needed to get to work. Sky was the GM until Ron told him otherwise, and they had a restaurant to open. People were depending on him, customers and friends alike, and he refused to let them down.

That didn’t mean Dima was missing the birth of his baby. “Go,” he told the soon-to-be new dad. “We’ve got it.”

Dima was smart enough not to argue. He gave Sky a brilliant smile and a kiss on the cheek, then he was gone.

Sky took a moment to breathe and get his head on straight. Time to focus.

He had a job to do, and even if this was the only night he had it, he was going to do it well.

He sent Jerome to the front to get an idea of their reservations for the night. Becks was tasked with setting up the bar since she'd proven capable there during Boot Camp. Phoenix was poring over the new recipe book and muttering to himself.

Sky's first task was putting the kitchen back to rights. Liam helped him lift the cooling rack, then took the broom and dustpan from him because all of a sudden, Sky's hands were shaking too hard to sweep up the mess.

Walter appeared out of nowhere—or maybe Sky was just that out of it—took his elbow, and marched him into the walk-in. Refrigerated air rushed over Sky's skin, making him shiver. Walter let the door shut behind them. "Deep breaths, Skyler."

Sky obeyed automatically. The cold air filled his lungs, steadying him.

"You've got this," Walter said, hands gripping Sky's shoulders hard enough to ground him.

Sky closed his eyes and felt himself settle, his thoughts finally coming into focus.

Yeah. He did.

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Chapter Eight

Corbin

Corbin had never been a violent man. Sure, he was famous for getting into heated arguments with restaurant owners and their employees on TV, but that was part of the character. Half the time, they were in on it and happy to play along for the ratings.

In the last three years, he'd only truly lost his temper once, and that had been JJ's.

JJ's had been a strange episode from the get-go. The staff was more awkward on-camera than expected, and the eponymous JJ made Ron look like a reasonable guy. Leah had been the one, with her charm, to figure out what was actually going on.

JJ's had a kitchen staff of immigrants, and JJ had been holding his employees' work authorizations hostage, forcing them to work long hours for next to no pay under threat of deportation. How he thought an entire TV show was going to film there without anyone finding out the truth, Corbin would never understand.

The plan had been for Corbin to play it cool while the lawyers figured out what to do. That had lasted approximately six hours.

Even at his angriest, Corbin never got violent. Instead, he'd antagonized JJ until it turned physical. It was easy to file assault charges when they had the whole thing on-camera. A broken nose, two black eyes, and busted knuckles were a small price to pay for ten people's freedom.

Once JJ was behind bars and they'd been able to retrieve the staff's documents, Corbin's lawyers had let the FBI know what had really been going on. By then, Corbin had filed the paperwork to sponsor every employee who wanted a job and purchased plane tickets home for the ones who didn't.

Once everything settled, he'd quietly purchased a different restaurant in the same town and staffed it with the former JJ's employees, plus several family members who had joined them by then. He still owned the place, and his employees were thriving. A few had even received their green cards and were in the process of bringing the rest of their families over.

For legal reasons, they hadn't been able to reveal the full story to the public. Most people thought Corbin lost his temper with an asshole.

They didn't know Corbin lost his temper with an asshole who was also a human trafficker.

By comparison, Corbin felt a little stupid for how much he wanted to punch Ron. He didn't care about the consequences. Seeing Ron push over the cooling rack in the midst of his temper tantrum, destroying Sky's work, had made Corbin go off. He couldn't bring himself to regret it.

Now, though, he was back in the van, restricted to soundless CCTV feeds while the argument in the kitchen continued. "What is he saying?" he asked Leah for the third time. Near the door, Amanda was on the phone speaking rapidly, probably to someone at the network. There would be lawyers to deal with after this. Corbin didn't care about the network or the lawyers right now.

He only cared about the man he'd just walked out on. He hadn't even been able to look at Sky for fear he'd lose the last of his restraint and punch Ron in his vile fucking mouth.

"Just give me another minute," Leah said with more patience than Corbin deserved. "I couldn't have the audio on when we didn't have signed release forms."

"But now we do," Corbin said, despite not needing to.

"And now I'm turning it on. It just takes a while to refresh."

"Leah," Corbin gritted out.

On the monitor, Sky looked like he was bracing for a blow, and Corbin was seconds away from going back for him. He needed to hear what was happening. He needed to know Sky was okay.

Then Ron's voice filled the van.

…may have fucked your way to a title you don't deserve, but that egotistical bastard doesn't have the real power here. I may have agreed to make you GM, but I can take it back just as fast.

Corbin saw red. The only thing that stopped him from charging straight inside was Amanda physically blocking the door. "No," she said, one hand on her hip, the other still holding her cell phone to her ear. "I'm sorry, but you can't."

Corbin tried to reel in his anger enough to appear reasonable, without much success. "I can't just—" He stopped, then tried again. "I won't let—" He didn't even know what he was trying to say.

"I know." She gripped his forearm, nails digging in hard enough to hurt. "But I'm telling you that you need to wait." She glanced over his shoulder. "Look at the monitor."

Corbin turned back in time to watch Sky's coworkers step up to defend him and Dima. His anger slowed to a simmer as each and every one of them told Ron that if he followed through on his threats, they were gone. Ron's limping retreat to the office was the icing on the cake.

In the end, Sky hadn't needed Corbin's protection after all. He had plenty of people who cared about him and wanted him happy. He found himself cracking a smile at Phoenix's military reveal that only grew with pride when Sky sent Dima to be with his wife and took control of the restaurant, efficiently delegating tasks.

Sky really was going to be fantastic at his new job. If he got to keep it.

"You good?" Amanda asked, dragging Corbin's attention from the monitor.

"Yes," he said, meaning it.

"Good. Because I have several very unhappy network execs on the phone. Ron didn't just choose to fuck over the opening, he also violated his contract six ways from Sunday," she continued with a sharklike grin. "He's about to get a very interesting phone call from some very expensive lawyers."

Corbin matched her grin. It sounded like Ron was going to be very busy. And maybe in the meantime, Corbin could do something to help Sky after all.

He pulled open the door to the van and stopped.

A backlit figure was leaning against a nearby car, tossing something that glinted metallically into the air over and over. "So," Bran said as he pushed

off the car and wandered into the light. “I was thinking about this prank my brothers and I used to play on each other.” He tossed the object in his hand to Corbin, who caught it out of reflex.

“What’s going on?” Leah asked, unable to see around Corbin in the doorway.

Corbin looked at the piece of metal in his hand without comprehension.

“Turns out,” Bran continued, “when you take the spindle out of a doorknob, it looks totally fine, but when you go to open the door, it just spins and spins.”

Inside the van, everyone’s eyes went to the monitor showing the inside of the restaurant manager’s office. Ron was on the phone, probably talking to the network lawyers by now. The door was firmly shut and looked completely normal.

Corbin pocketed the metal rod. “I like this kid,” he told Amanda. “Maybe we should keep him.”

Bran grinned. “Damn right you should.”

At the far end of the parking lot, out on the street, a crowd was beginning to gather. Corbin checked his watch. Thirty minutes to the grand opening of The Cat’s Head. They could still make this happen. They just needed reinforcements.

Corbin knew exactly where to find them.

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Chapter Nine

Sky

Sky wasn't sure how he was going to pull this off. He looked up at the clock. The first wave of reservations would be there in thirty minutes.

Since they were down Dima and it was unlikely Ron was coming out of the office any time tonight, Sky had done some quick reworking of their duties. He would take over for Dima in the kitchen, while Jerome ran the front of house. Becks would handle the bar as well as her normal section, while Liam and Jerome split the other twenty tables between them. On a typical night, they could manage it, but this wasn't a typical night. Word-of-mouth about the *Restaurant Rehab* episode had drawn three times their typical reservations. They were completely booked for the first time, maybe ever. Even the Pressure Cooker hadn't been this busy.

Sky had gone over the new menu with Phoenix. He'd never realized how methodical the guy was beneath his lackadaisical facade. Because of the timing, the crew had pre-prepped a lot of what they needed. The one thing that really sucked was the loss of the biscuits. He understood now why Corbin had been so surprised. Half of the new menu called for them, and they didn't have any ready to go.

Which was why Sky was currently up to his elbows in extremely wet and sticky dough while he watched the time drain like someone had put a timer on 2x speed.

"Well, I'll be," chirped a familiar and much-loved voice. "If it isn't my grandson, brand-new general manager of The Cat's Head. You know,

Honey, when they put you in charge of the place, you're supposed to leave the cooking to the chefs." Sky caught a glimpse of rainbow colors as his grandma leaned in and kissed his cheek.

"Grandma, what are you doing here?"

She scoffed, already tying up her rainbow-dyed hair as she made her way to the sink. "What do you mean, what am I doing here?" she asked as she washed her hands. "It's my grandson's big night. Where else would I be?"

Sky made an exasperated sound that only family—and apparently Eric Corbin—could draw out of him. "I mean *here*, as in the kitchen. Why aren't you out front?"

His grandma shot him a look that had him shutting his mouth real quick. "Because, Honey, your mama is out front. I'm a lot more useful back here where I belong."

Sky paused then, careful to control his tone, asked, "You mean Mama is out front with the other guests, waiting to be let in, right?"

His grandma winked and tied an apron on over her dress. It was black and covered in rainbow cats. She'd ordered it for the Pride festival last year. "When have you ever known your mama to wait when there was work that needed doing?" She walked over to Sky and hip checked him out of the way, reminding him where he got that move. "Now, git," she said, tone brooking no-nonsense. "Find that handsome man of yours and let me do what I do best."

"Yes, ma'am," Sky said automatically. "Wait. What man?"

Instead of answering, she dipped her hands in water and started expertly bringing the dough into shape.

Sky knew when he was beat. He hurried to the sink to get the rest of the dough off his hands. "I was gonna do four mix-ins," he told her over his shoulder. "Cinnamon chip, parmesan-herb—"

She cut him off. "I can read a recipe card, Skyler."

"Yes, ma'am," he said again. "But if you—"

She leveled him with a look that made him snap his mouth shut and hurry out to the dining room. There, he found Corbin, talking to his mother at the host stand.

"What are you *doing*?" he asked as he latched on to Corbin's arm, then had to force himself to ignore the size of the bicep in his grip. "And what are you wearing?" he continued, bewildered as he took them both in.

They were both dressed in black T-shirts with the new logo on the front. Hers fit normally, while Corbin's looked as if it had been painted on. Sky averted his eyes and trained them on his mother as she turned, showing him *The Cat's Head* printed across the upper back. "Aren't they wonderful?" Mama gushed, unfazed as always by stressful situations. She was a difficult woman to upset. "Eric got them. There's one for you too."

"Eric?" Sky repeated, bewildered.

Corbin gave him a little wave, and Sky coughed through a laugh. Oh. Right.

"Here," she said, pulling the shirt out from under the host stand and thrusting it at him.

Sky needed a minute. "I'll just—" he jerked a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the bathrooms "—go get changed."

She gave him an odd look. "Don't be silly, Honey. Ain't nothin' I haven't seen before."

Corbin had seen it all before too. Sky side-eyed her, wondering how much she knew. "We *are* short on time," Corbin said in a half-laughing tone that made Sky narrow his eyes. "So, don't be silly."

Sky resigned himself to his fate and started unbuttoning his dress shirt. He wasn't sure how many questionable marks he was still sporting from their enthusiastic…sleepovers. But if Mama got an eyeful it was her own damn fault.

"Did Sky tell you he grew up in this place?" she asked Corbin. Crap. She was gonna pull out the baby photos, wasn't she? How did she even know he and Corbin were…something? Sky, being intimately familiar with the workings of small towns, assumed someone spilled the beans to Jean—otherwise known as the power behind the local rumor mill. "He used to set right here under the host stand while I was workin'," Mama continued. "And draw little menus on the backs of the old ones. He couldn't spell for shit, of course, but he had the cutest ideas for what his grandma should be cookin'."

Sky's cheeks were on fire, half from embarrassment and half from the way Corbin was staring while he fumbled with his buttons.

"Knee-high to a grasshopper and with *such* a sweet tooth," Mama continued, somehow oblivious to the celebrity chef currently watching Sky like he was the one on the menu. "Everyone started callin' him Honey

‘cause he would sneak into the kitchen and steal spoonfuls of it when his grandma wasn’t lookin’.”

What the fuck? Was she trying to tell Corbin every mortifying moment from Sky’s childhood before the doors opened?

“Turns out, we called him Honey so much that he thought it was his name until he was four,” she said with a bright, infectious laugh that Corbin, the traitor, joined in on.

Sky shrugged off the dress shirt and pulled on the tee as fast as he could.

Not fast enough.

“*Skyler Daniels*!” his mother gasped. “Are those real?”

Sky froze, then slowly pulled on the shirt the rest of the way, wide eyes finding Corbin’s.

Corbin looked between Sky and his mother like he wasn’t sure what she was going on about.

“Ma’am?” Sky asked, dreading having to explain whatever incriminating marks she’d noticed.

“Why on God’s green earth would you pierce your *nipples*?” she asked, looking more confused than upset. “What’ll your grandma think? You’ll have to wear a shirt when we go to the lake.”

Oh, fucking hell. He started to laugh and then he couldn’t stop. Of all the things to forget he was hiding... He ended up bent over and gasping for breath. This day had been too much.

A big, broad hand landed on his back and rubbed circles until he calmed enough to speak. “She already knows,” Sky finally managed. “She noticed months ago, and she thinks they look great.” He didn’t tell her that Grandma had seen them because they’d gone to the Pride parade together and Sky had been wearing a mesh shirt. Some things were just easier when it came to Grandma. His parents loved and supported him to the ends of the earth, but Grandma was his fiercest ally starting when he was thirteen and her reaction to his coming out was dyeing rainbows into her wild gray hair. When she’d sold the restaurant and opened her bed-and-breakfast, she’d named it the Rainbow Inn. She was also on the Pride Week planning committee. Everyone in town knew not to question Miss Crystal’s devotion to her grandson or her outspoken allyship.

He looked up at his mama’s bemused smile and Corbin’s warm gaze. He really was a lucky guy in the grand scheme of things.

With his grandma throwing together biscuits in the back and his mom running the host stand, Sky felt like he could breathe again. He learned from Corbin that Ron was tied up arguing with lawyers, and even if he did make an appearance, he knew to stay out of the way, lest he get himself into even more legal trouble.

The *Restaurant Rehab* crew had returned, along with the rest of Corbin's team. Bran was back working expo, Amanda relieved Becks at the bar, and Aiko put on an apron to help out in the dining room. Sky was in the kitchen, finishing some last-minute things, when Corbin stopped him. "You shouldn't be back here."

Sky frowned and planted his hands on his hips. No way. "Are you seriously trying to kick me out of my own kitchen? Again? What the fuck, Corbin?"

Corbin laughed, and the next thing Sky knew, he was arched back over Corbin's arm and being kissed within an inch of his life. He clung to Corbin's shirt, not caring if he stretched the logo even further out of shape, and kissed back. Dimly, he registered laughter, cheers, and one very familiar wolf whistle from his grandma.

He was a little light-headed when the kiss finally broke. "I'm not kicking you out of your kitchen," Corbin said, their foreheads pressed together, his hand cupping Sky's cheek to keep him close. "I'm just saying, this is your night. You should be out there where everyone can see how incredible you are."

Sky grinned despite the flush burning his cheeks. "I would, but I can't exactly leave Phoenix and my grandma on their own back here. And, if you haven't noticed, I'm down two chefs at the moment."

"What if I offered you another one?"

Sky's brow furrowed in confusion. "What? Who?" He looked around like Corbin was going to pull a chef out of the woodwork.

Corbin chuckled and caressed his cheek. "Me, sweetheart. I'm talking about me."

Oh. Sky was really slow tonight. "You," he repeated. "You're gonna work for me?"

Corbin straightened, his eyes warm. "If you'll have me."

Sky had a feeling they might be talking about more than just a dinner shift, and he couldn't have stopped the delighted laughter that burst out of

him if he tried. “Okay,” he told Corbin, his eyes hot and his smile hopelessly fond. “Then I guess you better get to work.”

Corbin winked and snuck in one more kiss. “Yes, Chef.”

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Epilogue

Sky

It was opening day for Black Market Biscuits, and Sky was trying not to panic. He'd been awake since three a.m. The biscuits were ready, all eight varieties of them. So were the basic toppings—whipped butter, honey butter, two kinds of jam, Nutella, and vegan dark chocolate spread. The only things that needed to be made to order were the hot toppings. Fried eggs, bacon, crispy chicken, and, of course, sausage gravy. All he was waiting on was his sous-chef.

The door of the truck opened, and Phoenix climbed in, oblivious to the fact that they opened in thirty minutes. He looked Sky up and down, then hooked an eyebrow upward. "You good?" he asked.

Sky groaned and scrubbed his face. "Yes… No. I'm fine. Just panicking a little." He looked at Phoenix from between his fingers. "This isn't going to be a disaster, right?"

Phoenix gave him a *look*. "If it was, do you think I would have signed on to help?"

No. Probably not. Phoenix was really fucking smart, for all that he acted like a stoner. According to Ro, and contrary to popular opinion, Phoenix didn't do any drugs—not even prescription ones—he was just "like that" and it was "really fucking annoying" because Ro was decidedly not.

Sky just wished some of Phoenix's calm would rub off. He checked the time. Twenty-nine minutes to opening. Fuck.

Six months ago, he'd never dared to dream any of this was possible. Just went to show how wrong someone could be. And how much easier the world was when you reached out to the people who loved you for help.

Now, Sky had a day job he loved, a brand-new food truck ready to open, and a boyfriend he was head over heels for, who he was pretty sure felt the same about him.

It would have been nice if said boyfriend could have been there that day, but he was in LA, meeting with the studio execs about a new show they wanted him to host. It was extra annoying because he had to go, even though he was going to turn them down. They both liked his schedule just how it was, with a few days of travel every month or so and the time between shooting in Split Rock, with Sky.

He and Phoenix finished setting up with fifteen minutes to spare. He really should start trusting the guy when he said they'd get it all done. He'd proven to know what he was talking about. Sky stepped out of the truck and into the crisp mountain air, pulling in a calming breath and letting it out slowly. It was going to be fine. Corbin had said so repeatedly.

"What time do you open?"

Sky turned, a smile already splitting his face as his boyfriend swooped in and kissed him, gripping Sky's jaw to keep him right where he wanted him. He laughed when Corbin didn't stop there, tightening his arm around Sky's waist and lifting him off the ground until Sky gave in and wrapped his legs around Corbin's waist. Only then did he let Sky up for air.

His free hand moved to palm Sky's ass like they weren't in semi-public. Okay, so there was no one in sight, but Phoenix could come out of the truck at any moment and catch them. Again.

Yeah. Sky was probably overthinking it. He leaned down to kiss Corbin again and lost himself in it, the remaining tension draining out of him. Corbin was so fucking good at that. He always seemed to know exactly what Sky needed and was eager to give it to him.

His boyfriend might have a reputation as an asshole, but Sky knew that it was mostly an act. Not all of it. He liked to push people. He said pressure was the quickest way to find out who someone truly was. Maybe that was why the two of them had come together so easily? Sky, for one, had been under a ton of pressure. It was amazing how much easier things were once it was gone. And by it, he meant Ron.

The clusterfuck opening for The Cat's Head had been insanely successful in the end. The biggest shock of the night had been his grandma announcing that she was going to unretire and take back the restaurant from Ron. Apparently, unbeknownst to any of them, even Sky's mom, Ron had been paying for the restaurant in installments, and he'd fallen behind. It took a little time for the lawyers to sort through it, but it meant his grandma got her restaurant back and Ron was out on his ass. He'd complained the whole way to anyone who would listen but found that no one felt bad for him.

As Sky's grandma liked to say, "That man's living proof that volume don't equal value."

She'd kept Sky on as general manager—when he was in town anyway. Sometimes he traveled with Corbin and the team to help them rehab other restaurants. Compared to getting the food truck off the ground, it was practically a vacation.

It was still a mindfuck when people recognized him, though. The Cat's Head episode of *Restaurant Rehab* had replaced JJ's as the show's most-watched. Ron being a complete disaster who got his comeuppance was a big part of that. But the real reason—at least as far as the internet was concerned—was the way Corbin looked at Sky. Despite Amanda's threats, the editors had left Corbin and Sky's budding attraction in the episode. At times, it overshadowed the actual renovation. They'd kept how quickly things had moved private, of course, but once the episode aired, the speculation had been immediate. Sky had agreed to hard-launch their relationship, and the fans had eaten it up. It had been great for The Cat's Head too, even if things sometimes got awkward when people who were more interested in Sky than the food stopped in. But as Grandma said, the restaurant got their money either way.

Sky honestly didn't mind that much. He loved the fact that everyone now knew Corbin was his.

Eventually, he convinced Corbin to put him down, reminding him that they needed to move the truck to its designated spot in front of The Cat's Head, where they would be holding the grand opening. Everyone was going to be there. The whole staff from the restaurant, of course. Dima said his wife was bringing the baby—who'd been born, fast and healthy, within thirty minutes of their reaching the hospital. Even the two servers who'd left because of Ron were stopping by. Cyrus was still local, but Charlie

lived in California with his boyfriend now—not that he was flying in just for this.

And now it was perfect, because Corbin was *there*. Hopefully, whatever magic he'd worked didn't result in a bunch of pissed-off executives waiting in LA. Corbin could be impulsive when it came to the short list of people he cared about. It was something they had in common. Sky couldn't fault him when he knew, if their positions were reversed, he would do the same.

"What are you thinking, sweetheart?" Corbin asked, his warm blue eyes searching Sky's face.

Sky leaned into him, trusting Corbin to hold him up, as always. "That I love you."

That statement got him hauled back into Corbin's arms for another, messier kiss. When they finally broke apart, Corbin was grinning. "Well, that's good to know. Because I love you too."

Okay. It didn't matter how the food truck opening went after all. Because it was already officially the best day of Sky's life.

He didn't know how long they stayed like that, Sky, wrapped up in Corbin, smiling sappily at the man he loved, who loved him back.

A honk startled them apart. Sky slid back to his feet, and they turned in unison to look at Phoenix, who was leaning out the driver's window of the truck. "Weren't you the one who was worried about being late?"

"Oh shit," Sky laughed, then gave Corbin a quick, parting kiss before jogging to the passenger side of the truck. "I'll see you there?"

Corbin smiled. "I wouldn't miss it."

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“Miss Crystal’s” Cathead Biscuits

(Makes about 8 biscuits the size of a cat’s head.)

Preheat the oven to 400°F and spread some oil or melt butter in the bottom of a round baking pan with sides. The sides are what’s going to make the biscuits rise up instead of out.

Ingredients:

- 3 ½ cups of self-rising flour (White Lily Self-Rising Flour is a popular choice)
- 1 cup of heavy cream (also called whipping cream or thickened cream)
- 1 cup of 7-Up (or another clear lemon-lime soda. If you’re in Australia, it’s “lemonade”)

1. Combine the ingredients in a bowl and mix lightly until the flour is almost combined. Don’t over mix it. Less is more! It will be soft and sticky.
2. Turn it out onto a floured surface and knead 3-5 times until it mostly stays in one piece.
3. Gently pat the dough into a circle that’s about 2 inches thick.
4. Use a round cookie cutter or a knife to cut the biscuits out. Push straight down, do not twist or you’ll seal the edges and they

won’t rise as much.
5. Use a knife to scoop them up (don’t touch the edges) and lay them into the pan with the sides *just* touching. This will make them taller. (Optional: Brush the tops with salted butter to help them brown.)
6. Bake at 400° for 15 - 20 minutes, or until the tops are golden brown and a toothpick inserted into the center comes out clean.
7. Let them cool slightly, then serve with your favorite toppings! Butter and jam are always a favorite, but I’m partial to sausage gravy, or my dad’s favorite, creamed chipped beef.

Bonus Tip: Cathead biscuits get their name from the size, not the ingredients. If you want to make normal sized biscuits, pat these a little thinner before cutting and cook them about 2” apart on a parchment lined cookie sheet. They’ll still be delicious!

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About the Author

Rory Maxwell (she/her) grew up outside of Washington, DC, moved away, and then came back for reasons she doesn't fully understand. An artist and writer, she always has too many exciting ideas and not nearly enough free time. One day, she hopes to escape to the mountains (Blue Ridge or otherwise) where she can work from home and write as much as she wants. Until then, she'll continue to split her time between her day job, her MM romance writing, and—like most creative types—a million and a half other projects.

Get the book that started the Split Rock Ranch series here: https://mybook.to/Nr3nAr

Or check out the links here for even more: https://linktr.ee/rorymaxwellwrites

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The Break-Up Burger

Katherine McIntyre

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Chapter One

Thom

Thursday nights were always slow.

I wiped down the counter of the bar for the thousandth time, even though it didn't get nearly as much traffic as the tables at Zodiac Brewery. In a small town like Kennett, we didn't pull the volume like a Philly bar, but this place had been around for the past five years, and it was starting to grow a dedicated following.

For me, Zodiac Brewery had just been a soft place to land when I'd been fired from my job the same weekend I caught my ex cheating on me last year. Glamorous city-living dreams gone. I ditched the rag I was using and grabbed another one, as if it would make things even cleaner or maybe summon some customers. No one was hanging out at the bar right now, and the booths were only half filled with couples and families—with barely any drinks ordered.

Jessie zoomed around from one table to another, her black and purple hair tugged back into a messy bun and heavy eyeliner tilting her into goth territory. She offered a head nod my way, and I gave a light wave. The dim lighting was making me feel more tired than I really was, even though it fit the vibe for the space, with constellations painted on the ceiling and zodiac signs hand-painted along the walls and even carved into the wooden fixtures.

I leaned against the counter and skimmed my email on my phone. Nothing new, even though I'd done *the thing* last night. Damn, I needed a

distraction right now.

Logically, my massage school application wouldn't be reviewed overnight, but part of me wanted an answer this second. I'd wanted one the moment I hit send. This bar was great, but I'd been getting restless the past year. I was ready for change.

The door creaked open, and I looked up.

A guy walked in, his trim gray peacoat and green scarf complementing his black hair and sepia skin. His brows were thick, his deep brown eyes serious, and his lips tugged down into a firm line. With the sharp jawline and prominent nose, he was attractive as fuck, and my interest was piqued.

He headed straight over to the bar.

I stood a little taller and pretended I wasn't checking my email for the millionth time tonight. "Hey, what can I get for you?"

"Anything that'll make me forget the last twenty-four hours?" he asked.

"Well, there's the blackout shot, but I wouldn't recommend it on an empty stomach," I said.

The guy's stomach grumbled on cue. "Uh, yeah, I'll take recommendations for food too."

"Burgers," I said. "We've got a rep for the best burger in Kennett Square."

"Okay, give me…fuck, whatever you think is best. I'm not usually this indecisive," he mumbled and then scrubbed at his face.

"Rough day?" I asked. This was the part I loved about bartending, connecting to people. I set to making him his blackout shot in the meanwhile, grabbing the vodka, the tequila blanco, and the grenadine.

"I walked in on my boyfriend blowing another guy," he blurted out, then he looked up, eyes wide, as if surprised he'd said it.

My hands kept moving as I poured the liquors, though my chest squeezed in sympathy. "I'm sorry. Breakups are hard."

"Yeah, ugh," he said. "At least we didn't live together, but fuck."

"Well, no more fucks for him," I said as I finished the shot and pushed it in this guy's direction. "And let me pop in the breakup burger for you." I whisked over to the system and placed the order for the kitchen.

When I glanced back, the guy was sipping at the shot. I pressed my lips together to hide the laugh, because it looked like a fully grown man with the tiniest pint glass, but to each their own.

“Sorry for dumping on you like that…” He paused as if waiting for me to supply my name.

“Thom,” I said. “I’ve been working here the past year, ever since a breakup of my own, so it’s not unfamiliar territory.”

“Amir,” he said as he swished around the miniscule contents of the shot. Maybe I should’ve just given him a beer. “Fuck, how do I get that mental image out of my head? I wish I hadn’t walked into his place.”

“Then you might not know,” I said. “Want to talk about it or do you want distraction?”

“I don’t want to keep you from your job,” he said, running his fingers through his thick black waves. Damn, he was pretty as hell.

I laughed and gestured to the empty bar. “Clearly, there are so many people clamoring for my attention.”

“Just you wait, the rush will be coming through the door the moment I open my mouth,” he said with a half smile.

“C’mon,” I said, leaning forward. “Before this elusive rush busts down the door.”

Amir shook his head. “You don’t mind a stranger dumping all this on you?”

“Talking to folks is one of the more interesting things about my job,” I said, wiping down the surface of the bar again.

Amir took another tiny sip from his shot and let out a sigh. “Fine, David and I weren’t perfect, but we’d been together for a year. I thought we were going…well, somewhere better than cheating.”

“I’ve been there,” I said. Truly, I had. My ex, Nate, had dumped me out of the blue, when I’d been planning a future with him—and we’d been living together. Hence why I’d moved out here, closer to where my parents lived in West Chester but affordable. “It sucks.”

“It does,” he muttered. “How are you supposed to find the good ones?”

“Please tell me when you figure it out,” I said. “A year later, and I’m still wading through the cesspool.”

“At least the hookups are plentiful in the cesspool,” he said, scrubbing at his face again. His fingers were elegant, and I wasn’t sure why the fuck that was what my brain seized on, but he was hot as fuck. And hurting. And at my workplace. Down, boy.

“You’re not wrong,” I said, trying to keep things light. “And a gorgeous guy like you won’t have a problem finding any.”

Amir glanced up, and his eyes widened. Had I overstepped? He took another sip from his shot glass. “Thanks. I mean it,” he said quietly. “You have no idea what an ego blow it was to walk in on David earlier…”

“His loss, for real,” I reassured him, meaning every damn word. I didn’t know what David looked like, but Amir was like…damn, yeah, he was the hottest guy I’d seen in a long while. The dark doe eyes, the sharp jawline with scruff, those pouty lips and thick brows. Definitely my type.

“So, are you from around here?” he asked and then wrinkled his nose. “Probably a dumb question since you work here.”

“I live up the street right now, but I’m from West Chester originally. Moved to Philly for a stint and then back to the burbs after the breakup,” I said. “Looking for a change of pace. How about you?”

“Technically I’m in Delaware, but it’s right over the border in Hockessin,” he said. “I grew up in Wilmington, though. My folks are both still there.”

I glanced down to the order and saw how much time had passed. “I’ll be right back.” I headed to the kitchen to check on his burger, which was finished. I hadn’t been lying—Zodiac Brewery had an unofficial competition for best burger in the area with Red Square Diner, and both were damn good.

I slid the plate in front of Amir.

“Oh, damn, that does look amazing,” he said, picking up one of the fries and popping it into his mouth.

“So, what do you do for a living?” I asked, curiosity bubbling inside me. With some clientele, I let them drink in their quiet, and with others I gave casual chatter, but all of that was customer service. This was selfish, because Amir was ridiculously hot and seemed utterly adorable.

“Yoga teacher,” he said. “I’m at a wellness studio a few minutes from where I live.”

My heart thudded a little faster, my curiosity piqued even more. A wellness center was the exact sort of place I’d love to work if I got into massage therapy school and could make that work. I loved connecting with people, but I’d rather help them feel better in a different way than serving them alcohol to numb the pain. I couldn’t help the way my gaze traveled down. In his thick coat, I couldn’t see the rest of his body, but I could guarantee he was fit as fuck.

“That’s so fucking cool,” I said.

“You’re not giving me the eye roll?” he said, tilting his head. “David was always asking when I was going to get a real job. And my folks were not thrilled in the slightest. I’m second gen, and according to my mother, she didn’t emigrate over from Iran for me to become a yoga instructor.”

“Can’t say much on the parental front. Mine definitely wish I was a doctor not a bartender,” I responded. “But fuck David. He sounds like an asshole.”

Amir’s lips twitched with a hint of an earnest grin. “You’ll find no argument from me.” Then he took a bite of the burger, and a pornographic moan came from his lips. Goddamn. I swallowed hard, trying to not be a creep and stare at him while he was having a private moment with his burger. But it had been awhile since my last hookup, and I could only imagine how flexible he would be in a different setting.

“So, what do you do when you’re not here?” Amir asked once he set the burger back down. “Or do they keep you in a cage here and let you out during opening hours?”

“Psh, the owner’s not nearly that kinky,” I said, amusement bubbling in me. “I’m in the local mixed-gender roller derby league, so that’s kind of where I get my kicks in. A bunch of bruises too, but that’s part of the fun.”

“Shit, really?” Amir asked, his eyes gleaming with curiosity. “I’ve always wanted to watch a bout but never ended up making it out to one.”

“You should come,” I said. “It’s a good time.” Internally, I winced. That wasn’t my usual protocol of keeping things at a distance with customers, but this guy’s hotness had addled my brain. Not like he’d show up beyond tonight, though, even if I wouldn’t mind him becoming a regular.

“Maybe I will,” he said, the glint in his dark eyes a bit different from the sadness he’d arrived with. He took the last sip from his shot glass and pushed it in my direction. “The blackout shot was interesting, though I’m not a shots guy.”

“That why you sipped at it like it was the world’s tiniest drink?” I asked, my lips tugging with a smile.

“Next time I’ll just order the beer,” he said with a soft laugh. “I wasn’t thinking clearly when I got here.”

“I can imagine,” I said. “The burger help?”

He bobbed his head. “Honestly? Yeah, that was delicious, and the conversation wasn’t bad either.”

“That’s because we detoured away from awkward conversations like my taxidermy collection,” I said.

Amir lifted his brow. “I can’t tell if you’re joking or not, but I’m not shaken either way.”

I let out a low whistle. “I think it’s cool, but I wouldn’t have the space in my apartment for a collection of squirrels at a tea party or some shit. Though, it’d be hilarious to stage them in the window on a daily basis to see who noticed.”

“And some people collect Barbies,” Amir said, his eyes twinkling in amusement. “That’s weird as fuck, but I’m finding your hobby somewhat charming.”

“Sounds like your judgment might be compromised. Let’s blame the breakup,” I teased back. The weight that settled between us, the loaded glances, the hesitant smiles, I recognized. I knew chemistry when I felt it, and on any normal night, I’d slip the guy my number to see if he wanted to roll in the sheets. But he’d been dumped earlier today, and that would be an asshole move.

“Hey, I’ve got no stones to throw,” he said. “I’ve got a radioactive rock collection.”

“Is that legal?” My brow scrunched.

“As legal as taxidermied squirrels,” he responded with a smirk. The sight lobbed straight into my chest, so different from the defeated way he’d slumped in here when he’d arrived, sadness in his eyes. Like this, he was even sexier, just charisma and a calm yet infectious energy I liked being around.

An older guy with a floppy cabbie hat stepped inside Zodiac Brewery and made his way to the bar. I bit back my sigh. Time to do my job, rather than flirt with the brokenhearted hottie. I gave Amir a nod before I slipped over to where the old guy hunched at one of the stools.

“Want something on draft?” I guessed.

He grunted. “Aries.”

I nodded, grabbed a glass, and pulled the beer. The entire time, I could feel the press of Amir’s eyes on me, and I didn’t hate it. I straightened up a little under the attention. I wasn’t in marathon shape or anything, but I exercised and stayed active enough. And I wasn’t immune to the heady rush of a gorgeous guy like him looking my way. I slid the beer over to the older

man, who passed me a few crumpled bills, then I gave him his change and returned to Amir.

When I slid back, he was finishing the last bites of his burger, and his shot glass was empty as well.

“I should get going,” he said, offering me a grin that showed off white teeth. “Mind getting my check?”

Disappointment thundered through me. Damn, he was the most interesting thing to happen all night. And if I were being honest, he was one of those people who walked in that I instantly wanted to talk more with. The situation happened on occasion, just rarely the double whammy of easy conversation and attraction.

“Did the breakup burger help?” I asked, slipping back into job mode as I passed him the card reader and he finished paying. At the end of the day, he hadn’t come in here to entertain me. He’d been looking for a temporary reprieve from a breakup, and I’d been a stop along the way.

“Absolutely perfect,” he said with a wink. “Thanks for the conversation.” He rose from his seat, shrugging his peacoat back on as he patting down his pockets to make sure he had everything. The dim bar lighting sharpened his gorgeous features, and I fidgeted with an empty glass to keep from slipping him my number. He flashed me another dazzling smile.

I nodded and couldn’t help but watch his ass flex as he walked out the door. An involuntary sigh slipped from me, and I sagged against the back counter.

Maybe it was time to get back on the dating apps.

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Chapter Two

Amir

My heart thudded faster than normal as I walked up to the door of Zodiac Brewery.

A week had passed since my boyfriend and I had broken up, and the stop here had been the only comfort I'd seen since. Everything else was filled with the shitty logistics of breaking up with someone you'd been dating for a year. Thank fuck we hadn't been living together.

Was I hoping hottie bartender from that night would be here? Yes, though I wasn't about to admit it. He'd just been doing his job and taking pity on me in my misery, but I'd become so enmeshed in David's friend group that I'd neglected my own, and… shit, I'd liked having the outlet. No one else was willing to listen to me mope about these big life changes.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

I focused on the rise and fall of my chest as I grabbed the door handle and tugged.

When I zeroed in on the bar, a blonde woman with a ponytail stood behind it, and my chest sank. Of course he wasn't working around the clock here. Expecting to find Thom had been completely unreasonable.

My phone buzzed, and I checked it. Ugh, David was trying again. I took a seat by the bar, and the blonde woman gave me a nod.

"One moment," she said with a smile.

I fell into temptation and checked the message.

He doesn't mean anything to me. You've got to believe me.

I sighed and shoved my phone back into my pocket. David had been giving me iterations of this all week, trying to get me to take him back, and the more he tried, the more he strengthened my resolve to stay the fuck away. None of the normal meditations and yamas and niyamas that I discussed with my classes helped right now, even though these were the times of hardship they were meant for. Definitely made teaching tougher this past week. A few of my clients had approached me after class, asking if everything was okay, and I'd had to put on a straight face.

I looked up, ready to flag down the blonde to grab a beer at least, but she'd disappeared.

My stomach growled. Apparently I was hungry too. Damn, I was such a mess. I should visit my folks and break the news to them, but I was embarrassed. Last time I'd been home, I'd babbled on to Mama about how we'd just hit our one-year anniversary. I hadn't lived up to expectations with my career choices, but they'd both liked David—or at least that he was one of my longer-term boyfriends. I'd spent the past week peeling away layers of our relationship, wondering why I'd even felt that way about him in the first place.

"Back again?" A sinfully rich voice traveled right through me.

Thom stood behind the bar, a crooked smile on his lips. Today he wore a fitted white tee and black jeans. His tight curls were cropped close to his head with a fade down the sides, and his full lips twitched with a grin. His eyes were soft, warm, and I couldn't stop staring at them.

"Couldn't resist another breakup burger," I said, my heart thumping a little harder. This pulse of attraction felt kind of crazy, the way it flickered through me when I was around him. Especially since David and I had been together for a year, and apart from our relationship growing stale, I hadn't realized anything was wrong.

That David had isolated me more and more from my friends. That he'd tried to get me to quit my yoga career and find a different job.

"You've got it," he said with a grin. "Want our Aries beer this time?"

"Yeah, that sounds great," I responded, rifling my fingers through my hair. I hoped I didn't have a stray curl sticking out or something.

Thom pulled the draft in a fluid motion and then brought the beer over. Our fingers brushed when I reached for it, and a silent little thrill rose up inside me. Sure, I was still wrestling with a nauseous feeling when I thought of David, when I considered I'd spent a year trying to make myself different

for him. Ate and cooked his vegan food, even though I loved steak, left the pinball league I'd been a part of because he acted like my hobby was juvenile. His judgments had seeped in through me, and I hadn't even realized.

"How're things going post-breakup?" Thom asked, and warmth curled in my chest that he'd remembered me. He had to see tons of customers on any given night, but the idea that I hadn't just faded into the background meant something.

"Is this a 'how are you doing' trap?" I asked. "Where the expected answer is 'fine' and not me verbally vomiting up my problems?"

Thom shook his head and laughed, the sound filling the space between us. "Genuine. People's stories don't bother me."

"David's desperate to rekindle our relationship, but the more he tries, the more I realize we weren't right for each other," I admitted.

"How so?" Thom asked. His eyes were magnetic, a soft pressure there that I liked. A shiver rolled through me.

"I don't know, maybe I'd been dicknotized," I muttered, scrubbing at my face.

A raw laugh burst from Thom. "Oh god, that's fantastic. I need to save the term. Not a one-night stand kind of guy?"

"What gave me away?" I asked with a wince. "Serial monogamist is a way of life, thank you very much."

"Having a relationship with a guy just because he's got a solid package?" Thom teased, his eyes sparkling. Fuck, he was so damn pretty, and his energy was calming, pleasant to be around. "Not that I haven't been guilty of it before, but I've learned to let go a bit more over the past year. Otherwise I'd be celibate."

"So your breakup advice is to play the field?" I asked, taking a sip of my beer. It was delightfully crisp and hoppy.

Thom shook his head, leaning back against the bar. He crossed his arms over his chest, which showed off strong, corded forearms. His light brown skin gleamed under the dim lighting of the bar, looking invitingly smooth. "Every breakup is different," he said. "I'm not here to tell you what to do. If I knew what to do, I'd be happily in a new relationship, not stumbling through a year later."

My chest warmed. "Thanks for making me feel less alone, at least."

“Thanks for making a boring night livelier,” he responded with a grin. Being around him was like drinking a cup of hot chocolate after an hour out shoveling in the snow. Something kept drawing me in. “I was about to fall asleep at the bar.”

“Not going to stage elaborate setups with taxidermied squirrels?” I teased.

“Don’t tempt me.” He grinned, the light reaching his eyes. “Not sure the owner would appreciate the takeover here. Let me go grab your burger.”

I nodded, even though I wasn’t in any rush. Honestly, just being outside my apartment felt good. Being around him. Guilt flushed through me at how fast my gaze strayed. Was it normal to start moving on from a year-long relationship this quickly? The thought of David still left my gut in a tangle of knots, but visually seeing him with someone else had…severed anything we had. A clean slice, and those cords to our relationship had been cut.

Maybe because I’d been twisting myself into eight-angle poses for him, and none of my efforts had mattered in the end.

Thom returned with the burger, and I wasn’t sure what made me salivate more, the sight of it or the gorgeous man before me. His movements were so fluid and graceful, and damn, I’d love to see him in one of my classes, just to watch the curve of his spine, the flex of his defined arms.

“Here,” he said as he placed the burger in front of me. “Hey, do you mind me asking a question?”

I arched a brow. Wow, had I been that selfish? “Please. I’ve been blathering away at you about my breakup this whole time.”

“I don’t mind,” he said with another rich laugh. “I like learning more about people. Probably why I work this job. But you said you work in a wellness center, right?”

My shoulders tightened.

You should find a better job. Something more successful. No one needs another random kumbayahing at them.

Over and over, David had snuck little barbs in about my work, and my folks never failed to send job listings for positions in corporate businesses they felt would be better. However, Thom just stared at me with open curiosity in his gaze. I shouldn’t assume the worst. I sucked in a deep breath. “Yeah, I’ve been there about five years now. Why?”

“Do you like the environment? I, uh…” He squeezed his nape and ducked his head, a shyness to his movements that had me sitting up straighter. “I just got into massage school, so it’ll be a while before I’m even looking for jobs in the industry, but I don’t know anyone else who works in the field.”

Warmth bloomed even stronger in my chest. So, he hadn’t been judging. “Wow, I can see it.”

Thom blinked and stared up at me, eyes slightly wider. “See what?”

“You as a massage therapist,” I responded. “Your whole demeanor here, how you try to connect with people, you’ve got the perfect temperament for it.”

“Oh, god, I’m going to hide under the bar now.” He licked his lip, the gloss on that plump lower one demanding my attention.

My heart thumped wildly. He was so fucking cute. This attractive, charming man getting a little vulnerable with me was addictive. After so much defensiveness with David and watching what I talked about, being able to shed some of that soothed over some of those old hurts.

“No need to hide,” I said. “Remember, I’m a yoga instructor. I work with massage therapists. You’ll do great in school.”

“Thanks,” he said. “You have no idea how much I needed to hear that.”

I didn’t have to ask to understand why after dealing with constant jabs over my own profession. “And as for the environment, it’s not so different from the vibe here, though without food involved. You’re working heavily with clients, with other staff but independently. I think you’d like a wellness center.”

“Cool, cool, cool,” he said, those nerves visible again. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

“If you need someone to talk to about those changes, I’m happy to help,” I offered. Selfishly, I wouldn’t be sad talking to him more.

“Guess you’ll have to come to the bar regularly,” he teased.

“Or, you know, I could give you my number like a normal human,” I responded and snagged the bar napkin. “Do you have a pen?”

“Yeah,” he said, his smile bright and brilliant. My heart thumped hard, and my mouth dried. Damn, he was so fucking attractive it was unfair, but I couldn’t tell if he was interested or just doing his job. Either way, I didn’t mind being a contact in this sphere. I definitely didn’t mind giving him my number. He passed me a pen, and I jotted down my number and handed it

back over. Thom slipped it into his pocket, and my heart did a little backflip.

“So, how bad is the dating scene?” I asked, wrinkling my nose. “Not that a year is a long time away from it, but I’m not looking forward to getting back on the apps.”

Thom heaved a sigh. “Not great for anything but hookups,” he said. “And I’ve been hesitant to put myself back out there for much more.”

“Why?” I asked, curiosity burning inside me. I wanted to know so much about this man.

“All the changes coming up, that I’m considering a job shift, everything,” he said. “What about me says boyfriend material?” His eyes widened, those pretty lashes on full display, and then he shook his head with a laugh. “Not like you need the bartender yammering at you about his problems. Supposed to be the opposite way around.”

“Nuh-uh,” I responded. “I asked and wanted a genuine answer. And I think basing boyfriend material on some societal checklist is bullshit.”

“Okay, so if you’re going on not-societal stuff, what’s the checklist?” His gaze burned into me, and my skin simmered. Maybe I hopelessly fantasized that he was checking me out, but the attention felt so good right now while I nursed the wounds my ex had left.

“Wow, going straight for the heavy-hitting stuff,” I said, even though my adrenaline was pumping. “I guess this is the sort of thing I’m going to have to start thinking about anyway.” My chest twinged. David had given me plenty of fodder for what I didn’t want in a relationship. “No cheaters, in case that wasn’t obvious. So I guess…good at communicating. And kind. Not judgmental.” I took another sip of my beer, focusing on the surface of the liquid. “To be honest, when you were asking about my work, I was bracing myself for comments, because David always made them.”

“Fuck that guy,” Thom said, storms brewing in his eyes. “He had a hot, funny yoga-teacher boyfriend and let that go? Clearly, he’s in the wrong here.”

My body heated up at the compliments, like I was parched for them. Ever since I’d walked in on David blowing another guy, my self-esteem had been flushed down the toilet. Yet Thom built it up, and I basked in the feeling. “Man, if only more people felt the way you did.”

“Obviously, my opinion’s the only one that matters,” Thom said, offering a sexy wink. My heart fluttered.

Crushing on the bartender was a terrible idea. He was just being personable and polite, and yet, I couldn’t seem to stay away from him.

For the time being, I’d enjoy my visits to Zodiac Brewery and the hot-as-hell guy who soothed the ragged edges of this breakup.

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Chapter Three

Thom

I slid behind the bar. Tonight was already looking busy as hell, and while I was glad for a quick shift and more money than usual, I could admit I liked the slower shifts now.

Mostly because a hottie yoga instructor had been coming by nightly.

It'd been three weeks since the first night he showed up at the bar, and a week since he'd given me his number, and while I'd worked up the nerve to send him a text, that was the extent to which I'd tried. He wasn't pining over his ex-boyfriend or anything, but I also didn't want to get pushy or scare him away. I liked talking to him whenever he stopped by for a beer and a burger, and I wasn't lying when I said he was the highlight of my night.

Conversation with him was easy in a way it wasn't always with others—not customers, and not even guys I'd gone on dates with—and he radiated this presence I was just drawn to.

"Wake up, babe," Jessie said, waving her hand in front of my face. "I need three beers for the table over there."

"Right," I said, blinking a bunch as if that would snap me out of my incessant daydreams over Amir. Who wasn't here yet, but that was probably a good thing. Not like I'd have the extra time to wander his way tonight. I poured the drafts of beer, moving on reflex, and passed them over to Jessie. Then I pivoted when a couple flagged me down for gin and tonics. My

movements flowed on automatic, and I lost myself in the rhythm of working behind the bar.

When I glanced up from getting another two beers for folks who'd just taken seats by me, I caught the door opening.

Amir stepped inside, shaking his head slightly, as if to shed the coolness from outdoors, and my heart thumped harder.

He looked up, his eyes met mine, and a brilliant smile spread on his face, the sort that stopped me in my tracks. With his tousled black hair, his sharp features, and his lithe body, I couldn't look away.

"You going to bring our drinks over, or what?" the guy by the bar asked, his brows drawn together. Right. I was at work. Not getting paid to moon over Amir and wish I had the courage to ask him out.

"Got 'em here," I said, bringing over the full pint glasses and placing them in front of the guys. Amir slid into an empty seat by the bar, but before I could swing over his way, Jessie stopped by again.

"A Jack on the rocks, a rum and coke, and a beer," she rattled off to me.

"No problem," I said, switching into go-mode, even as I met Amir's eyes and offered him an "I'm coming" nod. My pulse quickened at the knowledge he was here, that his gaze remained on me the whole time I worked. Heat trickled through me, entrancing, addictive. I wasn't used to being anyone's sole focus, more of a background character, which was what my PhD in literature, elitist ex said about me.

One of the many reasons we were better off not dating.

I finished the drinks for Jessie, who swept them away, and then I headed over to Amir, who waited patiently.

"The usual?" I asked.

"Please," he said, a rasp to his voice that sent another furl of heat through me. Damn, I hadn't gotten laid in far too long, but the idea of bending him over, bending over for him—damn, anything really—sounded like a dream.

I didn't take my eyes off him as I slid to the side, grabbed a glass, and poured his draft. When I brought the beer his way, his fingers brushed against mine. Electricity trilled through me. This wasn't the first time we'd had an accidental touch, and at this point, it almost felt purposeful. Obviously, Amir was way out of my league, though. He was a sexy as fuck yoga teacher, established and solid. Plus, if anything did happen between us, it'd just be a rebound.

Still didn’t stop the fantasies, though.

“Here,” I said. “You getting the burger too?”

“Just a beer tonight,” he said. “Bit too crowded for me to stay long.”

“What, you don’t like elbowing people and accidentally getting beer sloshed over you?” I teased, even though disappointment pulsed through me. I’d been hoping to work up the nerve to ask him about this Sunday. I happened to be off, and I’d gotten the idea into my head that maybe today would be the day I nutted up and asked him out.

Maybe not, though.

Not while the restaurant was busy and chaotic, and this might be the last time I saw him if I scared him away.

“When do classes start for you?” he asked.

I licked my lips. I hadn’t even told my parents that I was starting massage school, let alone my local friends. I’d started hanging out more with Rory from Alchemy Ink—who’d given me a bellybutton piercing a few months ago—and his boyfriend, Wyatt. Plus, I still visited my friend Kell in the city for a night out at the queer bars. But I missed having close connections like I had before the breakup when I’d lived in the city.

Maybe that was also what drew me to Amir so readily. His deep understanding of the loneliness that happened in the wake of everything falling apart.

“Hey, I—” I started to answer.

“Yo, man, I’ve been waiting for ages for a beer,” another guy said a few down from Amir. “Hurry it up.”

My stomach flipped, and a slight frisson of anxiety rippled through me. “Yeah, what can I get for you?” I said, shifting away from Amir. I had his number and could send him a message at any point, so I didn’t have to wait until he showed up at my work. I just liked being around him, talking to him whenever I could.

The guy rambled a few beer orders, and I hustled to get them completed, rang him up, then slipped back to Amir.

“I’ve got a month before classes start,” I mentioned. “Then between here and school, life’s going to get pretty insane.”

“I can imagine,” he said, his dark gaze on me. Was I imagining the heat there? A shiver rolled down my spine. He took a sip of his beer, and I skimmed the crowd real fast. No one needed me quite yet. The gloss of liquid on his lips sent a pulse of need through me, and I was so tempted to

lean in and claim his mouth. Except I was at work, and I couldn't give in to that urge, not here.

"How about you?" I asked, needing to deflect before I said something stupid.

"Oh, I'm just ignoring my ex's desperate 'let's get back together' texts," he said.

"Still?" My brows rose in disbelief.

"Yeah," he replied. "I'd much rather hang with the cute bartender right now than think about my shitty ex."

My heart thudded. He called me cute. Was that just a casual comment, or did he mean it? My throat went dry. Amir was so easy to talk to, and his calm smiles made my pulse quicken.

"What are you doing this Sunday?" I blurted out.

"I'm free after a morning class I'm teaching," he said, skimming me up and down. "Why?"

Why had I decided to ask him now? Nerves pulsed through me. Amir would never want to come in here again. God, this was the worst time to ask him. Maybe I could pretend I was invisible or just curious about his schedule.

"There's, uh, a rock show in Oaks," I said, my palms bursting into a sweat. "Wasn't sure if you'd want to join…"

Amir's brows lifted, and fuck, of course that had been too forward. He'd recognize in an instant I was asking him on a date.

"Hey, barkeep," the annoying guy called again. Ugh, worst fucking night to do this. Why I hadn't texted like a normal human being was beyond me. I caught Amir's eye before I headed over to the asshole and his friends who wanted more beer. I pulled the taps for them and then passed over their drinks, but before I could return to Amir, another party entered, and they called over for me to get them shots.

Jessie swung back in with a table of four who all needed beers, and my head whirred, my heart thumping wildly. I glanced at Amir a few times in the chaos, who just sat there sipping his beer, but my gut squeezed. I wanted to be able to talk to him, to ask him what his answer would be, but I was also at work, and Zodiac Brewery hadn't been this busy in a long while.

"Hey, man," another guy called out, this time for a beer. I finished his drink, scanned the bar for anyone trying to flag me down, and then pivoted

on my heel to return to where Amir was sitting.

Or at least where he had been sitting.

My stomach sank like a stone had dropped into it.

He was gone. Of course. I'd asked him out, freaked him out, and then he'd jetted. God, I'd fucked up. All those endorphins swirling around inside me flushed down the drain. The past few weeks, having Amir's attention had lit me up like nothing had in a long, long while. Made me feel appreciated in a way I'd forgotten after my last breakup, even though I'd been comforting him through his.

But I'd acted too soon, and now I wouldn't have the little thrill of seeing him most nights while I was working.

I heaved a sigh and went over to clear up his glass, where he'd left the crumpled bills. The bar napkin had something scrawled onto it, and I glanced at the writing.

The answer is yes, I'll go out with you on Sunday. Text me the time and place.

My mouth dried, and I almost dropped the napkin. Instead, I stuffed it into my pocket as a grin tugged at my lips unbidden.

We were going to go to the rock show together on Sunday.

For the first time in far too long, I had a date.

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Chapter Four

Amir

Even though a month had passed since David and I broke up, the feeling of getting ready for a date was foreign to me. I checked my face in the rearview mirror of my car to make sure my hair wasn't too much of a mess. I'd patted on cologne, tossed on a cute red cowl-neck sweater and gray slacks, and I would probably look so out of place at a rock show. Not like I'd been to many before, but I couldn't fucking wait.

The fact Thom had thought to ask me to this, because he'd listened to me blab about my geeky hobby, made it even clearer what a bad boyfriend David had been. And the date idea only deepened my attraction for the gorgeous bartender with the winsome smile and charming eyes who'd become somewhat of an obsession for me as of late.

I wrinkled my nose. What if this wasn't a date? Had we stated that at any point?

My phone buzzed, and I checked it. Thom.

I'm waiting out front.

I sucked in a breath. Game time. Even if this wasn't a date, I wouldn't pass up a chance to look at unique rock specimens with the hottest guy I'd met in a long while. I hopped out of my car and strode to the front of the Oaks convention center. Thom formed a clear silhouette out front, his leather jacket clinging to those sexy shoulders, his hands in his pockets. His black lace-up boots with the tight jeans were scorchingly hot and showed off his muscular legs. Was I going to survive today being up in his space?

Probably not. At least at the bar, the literal bar between us kept me from leaping over and jumping his bones.

That and the fact I still wasn't sure if my attraction was returned.

"You look good," Thom said as I approached. The slow perusal he gave me sent a shiver up my spine. I licked my lips. So, maybe he was interested. "Let's head in." He slipped his arm around my shoulders and guided me in, and my whole body immolated at the casual touch. Then he glanced my way, and his eyes widened. "Sorry if that isn't—"

"No, I like it," I admitted, heat rising to my cheeks. The little bit of guilt rose up on occasion, a reflex from my relationship a month ago, but I was moving on faster than I believed I would. Turned out, there was a whole lot about David I didn't miss.

Thom's arm tightened around my shoulders, and I basked in the feel of him. His touch was confident and sure, even when he stumbled, and the idea of that applied in other directions made my eyes roll back. My fantasies over him had abounded this past week, and if I had any say in the way today ended, I wouldn't mind indulging in just about any of them.

When we stepped inside the convention center, Thom handed over the tickets to be scanned.

"You didn't have to," I said half in protest.

"I invited you out," he said. "Next time, you can pay."

Next time. My heart pounded harder. "I like the sound of that."

My attention shifted to the loud chatter echoing all around the crowded room with its vaulted ceilings and bright overhead lights. The vendor tables created aisles through the place, covered in so many specimens of rock and crystal that my head swirled.

"You know I'm going to be insufferable here," I warned as we started down one of the makeshift aisles. Excitement fluttered through me. Thom's arm left my shoulders, but his hand slid down until it hovered against mine. He met my eyes, and I nodded, twining my fingers with his. My heart was careening out of control. I would already be a sweating mess, but I didn't want to draw my hand away from his. Not with how good the warm clutch of his fingers felt, his palm pressed against mine.

The fluorescents glared down from overhead, and I caught the glint of familiar-looking gems at the first table we passed. I gave Thom a light tug, and we walked over to where the guy behind the table had them on display with cards. The space was covered with a beautiful array of labradorite in

every size and shape, and I couldn’t help but scan them all, the iridescence alluring.

“Do you have a favorite rock?” I asked Thom, so aware of his hand in mine that my head swirled a little.

“I’m hoping to find one here.” He flashed me a gorgeous grin that sent my pulse fluttering. His response told me all I needed to know—he’d planned this date for me, not because he was already going to the rock show.

“We’ll find you one.” Determination fluttered through me. How was I on a date right now? This whole situation felt surreal, considering a month ago I was still waking up in David’s bed. And this wild thump in my chest was something I’d forgotten. Had I even experienced this intense draw toward David? We’d met at a bar, gone home together, and then repeated the pattern until we threw a label on it. Nothing like the pull I felt toward Thom, where I continued to show up at Zodiac Brewery night after night just for the chance to talk.

We stepped over to another table with a full array of different types of crystals.

“Okay, just point at what looks interesting to you,” I said.

“Wait, is it that simple?” Thom teased. “No secret metrics or checklist involved?”

“Don’t get me wrong, there are if you’re collecting, but finding a favorite rock is as simple as whatever one you’re drawn to the most often. For me, moonstone’s been a long-time favorite. For some reason, the sheen of it, the delicateness, lures me in every time.”

“Okay, so show me a specimen,” Thom said, giving my hand a gentle squeeze. This near, I could smell his cologne, a bergamot and spice that sent my pulse humming. He was so close to me that I could barely think straight, what with his hand in mine, his body mere inches away. I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to touch him. I wanted to lose myself in his body, but this wasn’t the time or place.

I bit down on my lower lip and guided him over to where a small collection of moonstones sat.

“Pretty,” he said. “I can see why you like it.”

“But it’s not jumping out at you,” I said, my lips twitching. His eyes were contemplative as he glanced all around at the varied displays. “Let’s go to the next table.”

The next one featured a wide variety of quartz in different shapes and sizes and colors.

“This is all the same type of stone,” I commented as Thom soaked the display in. Seeing him absorb this, how he took his time and appreciated the smaller details, made my heart beat faster. I really liked being around him. He was funny and kind and charming, and I loved the bits of vulnerability he’d shared with me so far.

“That’s pretty amazing,” he said. “How have I been sleeping on all of this?”

“You’ll have to take me to a taxidermy show sometime,” I offered. The idea was a little odd, but I could admit a curiosity.

Thom gaped at me. “You can’t be serious.”

“I absolutely am,” I replied, and my tone softened. “I want to know everything I can about you.”

“I’m not interesting,” he muttered, ducking his head. “Just a bartender.”

“Nuh-uh,” I said, giving his arm a tug. “No defining yourself by your job. That was the first thing we did in yoga teacher training—we had to talk about ourselves free from labels.”

Thom’s forehead wrinkled. “That sounds fucking impossible.”

“It wasn’t easy, that’s for sure,” I responded, warmth humming in my chest at the memories. “Most of the class cried.”

“You?” Thom teased.

“Oh yeah,” I responded with a grin. “Then, somehow, I lost that person along the way. Just kept trying to change myself to fit David’s expectations and forgetting who I was deep down.”

“Well, that person’s the one I want to get to know,” Thom said, swinging our hands. “The deep-down person you forgot.”

“He’s coming back,” I responded, warmth spreading from my chest all the way to my extremities. “Bit by bit.”

Thom’s eyes lingered on me, a softness in his gaze that made my heart unfurl further. The urge to kiss him rose up strong and fierce again.

“Okay,” I said, drawing him to another booth. “What about the stones here? Anything jumping out?”

“What’s that one?” he asked, pointing to a collection of malachite, in shades of vibrant green. “It’s so neat.”

The spark in his gaze was telltale, as was the way his feet drew him closer. He picked up a few pieces and examined them, and I loved seeing

his curiosity on display here.

“Malachite,” I said, picking up a rounded one with lighter whorls. “Pretty, right?”

“This,” he said. “I think this is my favorite so far.”

I let go of Thom’s hand and brought the round marble of malachite I’d found over to the dealer. The purchase was quick, and then I dropped the orb into Thom’s palm and wrapped his fingers around it. “For you.”

“Me?” he asked, his eyes wide. This close, his thick lashes were on clear display, and his breath puffed against my face. I licked my lips, the tension growing between us as neither of us looked away.

Someone elbowed into my side. “Sorry!”

Right, crowded convention center wasn’t the best place to kiss the guy I was crushing on. I slipped my hand in his again and gave it a squeeze.

“What are your plans later?” I asked, my heart thumping hard. I didn’t want us to go our separate ways, but I knew better than to ask a bartender out to a bar.

“I’m off tonight,” he said, staring at me with an intensity that made me shiver.

“Want to come to my place after?” My mouth dried from the ask, the nerves roiling inside me. Maybe I was moving too fast, but I didn’t care. Something about Thom had drawn me in from the start, and I had a gut feeling that if I passed up this chance, I’d regret it.

“Hell yeah,” Thom said with a slow, hungry smile. “I can’t fucking wait.”

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Chapter Five

Thom

By the time we'd walked the length of the rock show for a few hours, I'd seen more gems and minerals than I thought I had in a lifetime. However, I hadn't gotten tired of seeing Amir light up, how his whole countenance changed when he found one he liked, and the malachite he'd bought me sat in my pocket, the weight of it there making my heart warm.

The fact he'd bought it for me to try to share his hobby made me realize how much I'd been missing out on. Not only over the past year but with my ex, Nate, too. We'd gotten along, we'd lived well together, but we hadn't been much more than that.

Amir and I kept our hands entwined through most of the show, even when our palms grew sweaty. I didn't care. The shift of skin on skin sent tingles through me. I'd had the occasional hookup over the past year, and the odd date, but nothing that felt like it had half the promise this did.

One worry remained. Was I a rebound? Just a way for Amir to get back into the dating scene?

"You ready to go?" he asked, and I startled. He'd been looking at a geode collection while I'd gotten lost in my thoughts.

"To your place?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said, flashing me a sexy-as-fuck grin. "I'll walk you to your car first and give you the address."

My heart thumped fast and out of control. Fuck it, rebound or not, I wanted him.

We headed in the direction of the exit, past the throngs of people and the bright, glaring lights beaming down from the ceiling. When we stepped out of the convention center, I could breathe a little easier. I didn't mind crowds, but the rebounding chatter after a little while made finding my bearings difficult.

"Thank you," he said. "That was the most thoughtful first date I think I've ever been on." His shoulders scrunched up. "I mean, if this was a date. I don't know, we never really confirmed."

"It was a date," I said with a surprising gravity. Maybe seeing him fumble settled me, but realizing I wasn't the only one with nerves helped. "Honestly, I wanted to ask you out the first night you walked into the bar, but timing and all."

"Yeah, I might not have been in the right headspace then," he said, a wry grin on his lips. "But something kept me coming back to Zodiac Brewery."

"The burgers, right?" I joked.

We walked along the rows, heading in the direction of my car, and I didn't mind this slow stroll through the lot, the sunlight coasting down on me despite the slight chill in the air.

"You're just so open," he said. "So fucking warm and kind, and I'd forgotten what that was like."

My chest swelled, as if my heart expanded inside it. When he looked up at me, his dark eyes had me arrested, and I stopped in my tracks. "Who's this person you see?" I asked. "I'm a mess, working at a bar in a different town than I was a year ago, heading to school in my late twenties for a career change…none of these things scream dateable."

"Remember? Not on my checklist. You're able to support yourself and make it work, and that's all that matters to me." Amir reached up and cupped the side of my face, his palm warm. "You listen. You make me feel like I matter. It wasn't until David dumped me and I started coming to Zodiac Brewery that I realized how much I'd been starving for that."

My lips grew dry. "So this isn't just a rebound?" The words hung stark in the air, the fear I'd been clinging to.

Amir shook his head, a tenderness in his eyes that made me melt. "No, not a rebound. If I have my way, I'm hoping this is the start of something."

"Then let's start with this." I leaned in and pressed my lips to his.

We stood by a random car in the parking lot, but our surroundings faded away as I sank into the feeling of what was tangible and real in front of me. Amir tasted sweet, and his mouth was hot, tantalizing. As it caressed mine back, the sparks that burst through me were what I'd been searching for. This was the anticipation of opening the email to my massage school acceptance. This was the dive into the dark when I'd moved to Kennett. This was the sense of fate that walking in the door to Zodiac Brewery had brought when I'd first approached for a job.

All those pieces settled into place to pave the way for this.

Amir moaned against my lips, the sound reverberating through me, and I drove my tongue into his mouth, deepening the kiss. The sun gleamed down on us despite the chill, which was banished by the heat of the kiss, the heat of our bodies. I gripped his hip tight and lapped at him hungrily, needing to consume this man. Fuck, I needed him now.

His hands slid around me too, resting on my back as my groin plastered to his, my cock stiffening. I could feel the firmness of his length grinding against my thigh, and goddamn. My head swirled with need, with the endorphins running rampant through me, with the intensity of this kiss.

Amir moaned into my mouth, delicious and warm and real. I licked into his mouth again and again, savoring the taste and feel of him. My whole body erupted into fireworks from the contact, from the kiss.

When I broke for breath, we both panted, our shoulders heaving, and stared at each other. Amir's eyes were hazed over with desire, his lips swollen, and the sight amplified my need.

"How far is the drive to your place?" I asked.

"An hour," he mumbled. "I'm regretting the distance right now."

"Think of it like an exercise in edging," I teased, nipping him on the ear. "It'll be even better by the time we get there." I squeezed his round ass, and lust pumped hot and fierce through my veins. "We never discussed any of this, did we? Do you have a preference?"

"Vers, though right now, I'd love if you wanted to sink your cock inside me," he said. The sheer filthiness of his statement sent a silent thrill rippling through me.

"Okay, okay, let's get on the road," I said. "Because if we keep talking about this, I'm liable to bust, and I very much want to fuck you until you're screaming."

Amir’s breath hitched, and he licked his lips, making them even glossier. I leaned in and kissed him again, just because I could. When he pulled back, he tugged his phone out of his pocket and typed something out. My pocket buzzed.

“You’ve got my address,” he said. “See you in an hour.”

With that, he pivoted on his heel and walked in the direction of his car. I wasn’t embarrassed to watch his ass flex the entire way. Once he disappeared around the corner, I set into motion, heading the short distance to my car.

Amir wanted to be with me. My chest exploded in butterflies.

Once I got to his house, I’d show him viscerally, carnally, exactly how much I wanted him too.

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Chapter Six

Amir

I pulled up to my apartment first, which didn't shock me given that I knew the backroads and shortcuts. Still, the hour drive had amplified the need rising inside me. Thom's words whirled around in my head, building in momentum like a flurry to a snowstorm.

My place hadn't been cleaned, but I kept a minimalist approach in the main spaces. The side room, where I practiced yoga, was also where I unleashed my hoarder side, the bookshelves there filled with crystals and rocks. My collection was a calming force, and I liked the feel of them in the room. I had a few new specimens to add after the rock show today. I unlocked my door and walked inside, then scurried around, tidying up a few papers I'd left out, and did some dishes while I waited.

My lips tingled from the kiss, even an hour later, but maybe because I kept brushing my fingertips over them. It was hard to believe that in the month after finding out I'd been cheated on, I'd met a guy who far surpassed David and gentled a lot of the sting after the breakup. I didn't miss David or what we had. The only thing that still lingered was the feeling of shame that I'd changed myself so much for him, that I'd put up with more than I should, just to ultimately get cheated on.

And maybe that was why I'd been so ready to move on.

When I'd entered Zodiac Brewery, Thom had been standing there with an ear ready to listen and the kindness I'd needed to heal.

But he’d also intrigued me from the start. I could see the warmth of a massage therapist in him already, an openness I was drawn to like a moth to flame. And that was a future I wanted to stride toward—one where I didn’t have to hide myself and could just…be.

A knock sounded at the door, and my heart took off.

I drew it open, and Thom waited in the doorway. His chest heaved slightly, like he’d jogged up the steps to my second-floor place, but otherwise, he looked the same as when I’d left him. His dark eyes were wide, his full mouth open, and I leaned in to claim his lips again.

He kissed back with a fervor I was fast getting addicted to, and I savored the plush feel of his mouth, the sinuous glide of his tongue against mine. My body was a live wire that hummed with tension. I needed him so badly I could explode.

I drew back and grabbed his hand to guide him in. “Come on.”

“So the hour’s drive of edging worked?” he asked, his eyes glinting with amusement.

“Oh, fuck yes,” I said. “I want you deep inside me now.”

He reached into his pocket and drew out a condom and packet of lube. “Luckily, I came prepared. Sure you don’t want to sit and chat a little? Have a drink?” The teasing note in his voice was infuriating and sexy in the same breath.

“No,” I said, licking my lips. I began to tug my sweater over my head. “I want you bending my legs back behind my head and fucking me until you leave bruises.”

His nostrils flared, and his eyes all but glowed. “Mind getting your furniture dirty?” he asked. His gaze traveled over to my couch, a plush deep blue.

“What else is cleaner for?” I teased as I tossed my shirt off. I then unbuttoned my slacks and shunted them down too. My cock had grown fuller, the bulge prominent against the fabric of my boxer briefs, and I rubbed my palm against it.

Thom’s expression turned feral, a heat in his gaze that incinerated me. He closed the space between us and dipped in to press a kiss into the crook of my neck before he hooked his fingers in the waistband of my boxer briefs and pulled them down. “Tease,” he murmured against my skin, and a shiver rolled through me. “You’re so fucking beautiful.”

This. I'd sorely needed this. The way my body bloomed under his attention healed some of the hurt my ex had left—not just from cheating but from his constant disapproval.

"You're a bit overdressed," I commented, tugging at the hem of his T-shirt.

He offered a slanted grin that sent my heart off-kilter, and then he yanked it up and over his head. His smooth chestnut skin gleamed in the light of my house, his nipples a few shades darker, and the bulge at the groin of his jeans promised he'd fill me up in the best way.

Thom drew his briefs and jeans down in one go, then toed off his shoes and socks. He stood before me completely naked, and I couldn't take the sight of him in all at once, as if it would overwhelm me. His thighs were strong and corded, his arms defined, and those hands were one of his sexiest features, big and competent. His cock jutted out between his legs, thick and long with a darker brown head and heavy balls dangling beneath. He looked delicious, and fuck, I needed a taste.

I dropped to my knees on the carpet, which bit into them as I settled between his legs. I wrapped my hand around his base and licked at the slit of his pretty cock. The burst of salt on my tongue sent a frisson of pleasure through me, my own length growing fuller, my balls heavier. I lapped at his slit again, savoring the taste of him. He was musky down here in the best way, and I drank in the sweat, the heat, the feel of him.

"God, that mouth," he moaned out. His fingers tangled through my hair.

I sucked him down an inch, playing with the tip in my mouth, the sort of thickness that would fill me up in the best way. I swallowed him a little deeper, and another long, low groan came from him. I started to bob my head, drawing him in further and further with each pass. I breathed through my nose as I took him halfway, the spit dribbling down the sides of my mouth. He tugged hard at my hair, pulling me back.

"I won't be able to last if you keep that up," he gasped out. "I'm on the edge as it is. Get on the couch for me and spread your legs."

I slowly drew back, but not before licking at the tip of his cock again. A visible shudder rolled through him, sending a jolt of satisfaction through me. Thom was so fucking sexy, looming over me like this. I wanted to sink my teeth into those thighs, and I rubbed my face into his groin, soaking in the scent of him, the sweat and the musk there, before I rose.

I pressed a quick kiss to his lips before I strode the few paces to the couch and settled on my back, spreading my legs open.

Instead of climbing onto the couch with me, Thom knelt in front, grabbed my legs, and drew my body toward him. I barely had a moment to process how he manhandled me, the burst of lust flowing through me as he hooked my legs over his shoulders then buried his face between my cheeks.

“Oh fuck,” I gasped out.

His tongue lapped at my hole with a voracious hunger, and pleasure rolled through me, hot and fierce. Thom nipped and sucked at the sensitive skin between his desperate licks, and my thighs tightened at the onslaught of sensation. If anything could prepare me for his cock, this would. I loved getting eaten out, and it had been so damn long. His spit dripped down my crack, tickling as it traveled, and I was getting fucking soaked from his attention.

I writhed in place, my nails scrabbling against the couch cushions but unable to find purchase. Thom held my thighs steady, my legs hooked over his shoulders as he kept me lifted up off the couch and plunged his face between my cheeks. I wasn’t even sure if he paused to breathe with the incessant rhythm of his tongue. My eyes fluttered shut, and I basked in the sensations, in the feel of his strength holding me aloft. My cock leaked, so hard I could barely stand it, but I kept myself in place, surrendering to the way Thom took me apart.

He drew back at last, his breaths coming out in heaving gasps. “God, you taste so good. I could eat you out all night.”

“Maybe later,” I said, my voice raspy. “I need you to fuck me hard now.”

“Yeah,” he murmured as he lowered my legs and pushed up from his kneel. “I think I can handle that.” He snagged the condom packet, ripped it open, and rolled it onto his cock. His gaze skimmed over me, and my heart fluttered at the sheer need emanating from those molten eyes. “How are you for real? You’re so fucking pretty.”

I swallowed hard, ignoring the slight sting in my eyes. Hearing those words from him, seeing and feeling how he showed his care, brought me a little closer to myself one step at a time. “Look who’s talking,” I said. “You’re so damn sexy.”

Thom’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he dipped his head, and the slip of vulnerability just made him hotter. “I’m going to make you feel so good,”

he murmured, his voice growing low and husky.

“I believe you.” I didn’t bother waiting for him to maneuver me around. Instead, I spread my legs and drew them back, until my feet were by my ears. I might not be able to hold this position the entire time, but I didn’t mind showing off a little bit.

“Fuuuuck,” he swore. “You weren’t kidding about the flexibility.”

My chest heated with pride, and I squeezed my hole tight, the desperation to be filled mounting inside me. My cock jutted forward, nudging against my stomach and leaving a small stain of precum.

Thom settled in front of me and ran his big, warm palms across my hamstrings until he circled the globes of my ass. “Do you need to be prepped?” he asked.

“Usually eating out relaxes things enough, and I like a little sting,” I admitted.

“Sounds perfect to me,” he said, his deep voice such a turn-on. He gripped me by the ass cheeks to position me a little higher, and then he nudged the tip of his cock in. The thickness brought a bit of a sting, but I breathed through it, deep yogic breaths that filled my chest and relaxed me. His hands held me tight, and he inched his cock inside me, giving me the moments I needed to adjust.

“God, you feel like sin,” he groaned as he thrust the rest of the way in. My breath left my chest as I adjusted to the sting, to the fullness, to the fucking decadent slide of his cock. I hadn’t taken anyone as big as him in a while, but I craved the fullness something fierce, and he definitely delivered.

“Fuck me rough,” I begged. “I want to feel you for days.”

“I’m planning on being around a lot longer than that,” he said, a tenderness in his gaze that pierced right through my heart. Fuck, I needed him to take me. I wanted to feel him move inside me, to claim every inch of me.

He drew back and then fucked into me hard. The smack of skin to skin echoed around the room and slightly stung. Pleasure shuddered through me in a fast sweep. Oh fuck, fuck, fuck. Then he pulled back again, changed angles, and oh *damn*. He brushed against my prostate as he thrust in, and the fireworks exploded inside me, those intense sensations putting me into a chokehold.

Thom drew my legs over his shoulders one by one, and I pushed up on my elbows to brace myself. Then he began to fuck into me in earnest. The sting of the collisions mingled with the euphoria each time he slammed home on my prostate, and I gasped for breath, barely able to process anything other than the fierce way he fucked me.

“Ohhh,” I moaned out, tilting my head back. Sweat beaded on my brow, and my cock was so hard it could punch through a wall. My balls hung heavy, the tension and ache building, building, building.

Thom’s low grunts and groans rumbled from him, mixing with the smack of our skin over and over as he continued to thrust into me with inexorable force. I surrendered to it, to the brutal fucking he delivered, which was everything I’d hoped for.

We became just shattered breaths, sweat, and skin against skin. The pleasure built inside me by the second, the ache in my balls growing so intense I couldn’t focus on anything else. With how I was braced, I couldn’t touch myself, but I’d been humming on the edge for over an hour now, so I was reaching the precipice faster and faster.

“Fuck, the way you’re squeezing around me,” he swore. “I’ve never felt anything so good.”

My heart thrummed, and warmth mingled with the pleasure, with the slickness of our limbs as drops of sweat flew from him with each thrust. His cock was so thick and perfect, and the way it tagged against my prostate robbed me of sense, of the ability to assess up from down. My hands balled into fists, nails pricking into my palms as I focused on holding myself upright, unable to do anything else as he held me aloft and fucked into me with a deliberateness that turned my world upside down.

The ache in my balls grew so intense the breath lodged in my throat, and the telltale tension bloomed there. Drops of sweat prickled all over my body, from holding myself upright, from the relentless way he fucked into me. The shlick, shlick echoed through the room, the sloppy sounds when we came together, and my pants mingled with his cries.

“Oh, fuck,” I cried out.

All at once, my balls drew up, and the cum shot out of my untouched cock. My release thundered through me, and I howled. My hole spasmed from the force of it, and I sailed on the riotous sensations that paraded through me.

Thom curled over me, and his body locked up as he groaned, long and low. His cock pulsed inside me, and I slumped back on the couch, not holding myself upright anymore. Fuck. My head spun, my heart thumped out of control, and the breaths that sawed out of me were noisy and desperate.

Thom drew himself out and then lowered onto the floor, still between my legs. He leaned in and licked at my sensitive hole, and I shivered.

“Wish my cum was dripping from it,” he murmured.

“Me too.” I could only imagine how good that would feel. I hadn’t gone bare with partners before, but maybe down the line…

“Though, this was sexy,” he said, dipping his fingers into the puddle of my cum. “I’ve never been with someone who’s shot untouched.”

“I’ve come close, but I’ve never done it before,” I admitted, heat rising to my cheeks. That had been hot as fuck, and I credited the man before me, who’d fucked me so thoroughly I couldn’t help myself.

Thom stayed between my legs, pressing kisses to the inside of my thighs, one on my flaccid cock, and fuck, that intense feeling welled in my chest again. I wanted to keep him. He was sweetness mixed with charm and sex, and fuck, I liked everything about him.

“We’re dating now, right?” I asked, my voice coming out a little hesitant.

He looked up at me, his deep brown eyes earnest. “I’d be lucky as hell to call you my boyfriend.”

A laugh rumbled out of me, and I carded my fingers through my hair. “You know that’s not an answer.”

He smirked and rose from his kneel to lean over me. His hands pressed into the couch on either side of me, and he brought his forehead to rest against mine. “The answer is yes, Amir. You’re my boyfriend, and I’m yours, for as long as you’ll have me.”

Then he closed the rest of the gap to press his lips to mine in a sweet, lingering kiss. A frisson of joy, of lust, of sheer energy rippled through me, and I let it. I let it course through my veins, filling me up until I overflowed.

We were early days, just starting out on this journey, but I could definitely, wholeheartedly find myself falling in love.

He drew back for a moment, but I wrapped my hand around his neck this time to pull him back in for another kiss.

We had all the time in the world.

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About the Author

Katherine McIntyre is feisty with a big attitude despite their short stature. They write stories featuring snarky women, ragtag crews, and men with bad attitudes—high chance for a passionate speech thrown into the mix. As a genderqueer geek who’s always stepped to their own beat, they've made it their mission to write stories that represent the broad spectrum of people out there. Easily distracted by cats and sugar.

Find out more at: https://www.katherine-mcintyre.com/where-to-find-and-support

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Breakfast Sandwiches

Charlie Novak

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About the Author

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Chapter One

Bacon

The next person who told me running a pub was easy was getting banned for life.

I meant it too. Picture up on the fucking wall and everything.

So many people seemed to think being a landlord was just pulling pints, watching the football, and eating roast potatoes. But none of them had ever dealt with the bills, the taxes, the regulations, and every other bit of bloody red tape the government insisted on putting on the hospitality industry.

And then there was the stock, the food, the drinks, the building repairs, the broken toilets, the cigarette butts clogging up my fucking outside drains, and the patrons themselves. God help me, if I never had to deal with another fucking teenage boy demanding pints and football matches while drowning in cheap deodorant and parading around an attitude so big you could see it from fucking Mars.

They all thought they were the absolute shit, and why any woman on earth thought they were attractive was beyond me.

Mind you, from the way the lads complained, it seemed like most of the local women had some common sense and usually sent them, and their shitty attitudes, packing.

“Bacon, have we got any more of that berry Rekorderlig?” yelled Ravi, his head appearing in the small blot of light at the top of the stairs to the cellar. “And, er, some more Smirnoff Ice?”

“Yeah, think so,” I said, casting my eye around the cellar to see what we had. I could see the familiar bottles of Smirnoff and there was definitely some Rekorderlig, although I’d have to get closer to check the flavour. And that was a bit difficult right now because I was in the middle of changing a keg.

“Awesome, can you change the Coke over too, please? It’s running out.”

“Will do. There’s some bottles in the fridge if you need them now, though.”

“Cheers, thank you.”

His head disappeared and I smiled to myself as I finished changing the keg. Ravi was a good lad, a bit softly spoken at times but most of the patrons seemed to have adopted a brotherly approach to him. He was twenty but still had a round baby face and looked about twelve, and if I hadn’t known it was something he’d never consider, I might have wondered if he’d lied about his age.

Then again, faking your ID and details just to get a part-time bar job at a pub like The Nag’s Head was a bit extreme. We weren’t exactly the fucking Ritz.

I changed the Coke, grabbed several cases of the drinks Ravi had requested, and climbed the old concrete steps back to the surface. “Here you go,” I said, putting the cases on the end of the worn, polished wooden bar top and glancing around the bar to double-check everyone was behaving themselves. It was a warm-ish Saturday afternoon in late April, the first of its kind this year, and in my experience the appearance of the sun after a long period of cold and wet tended to make people stupid.

“Thanks,” Ravi said, shooting me a small smile. He was avoiding my eyes, though, looking at a spot on the wall just over my shoulder.

I frowned. “Everything all right? Did something happen while I was downstairs?”

Ravi shook his head. “No, it’s fine.”

“Doesn’t look like it.”

“It’s… fuck, I was meant to talk to you about this after my shift.” He sighed, reaching for the Smirnoff Ice and cutting the plastic wrap open so he could start putting the bottles in one of the small fridges behind the bar. I gave him a minute to think, cautious about pushing before he was ready. “I,

er, I got an internship for the summer. In London. I'll be there for most of June, July, and August."

"Fucking hell! Congratulations!" I clapped him on the shoulder and grinned, ignoring the immediate sinking feeling in my gut. Ravi had been trying to get an internship for months, and I was glad all his work had finally paid off. He was in his second year at Leicester uni, studying something to do with economics and analytics. He'd tried to explain it to me several times, but I still couldn't wrap my head around it.

All I knew was it was bloody complicated and Ravi was smart as fuck.

"Thanks," he said, still smiling nervously. "I'm… yeah. I'm glad I finally got one, but I'm so sorry I'm not gonna be here. Since it's full time, I'm going to stay with my auntie. My mum doesn't want me living on my own, and that way I'll be able to save a bit of money, and—"

"Ravi, it's fine," I said, squeezing his shoulder tightly. "You're a smart guy and I'm really bloody proud of you. I don't expect you to stay here. Just remember not to let them posh city pricks intimidate you. You're better than all of them put together and then some. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Good. Just let me know when your last day is gonna be and I'll find someone else to fill in over the summer. Then if you wanna come back in September, just drop me a message."

"Will do." He nodded, the colour starting to return to his cheeks. Bless him, he hadn't needed to be that nervous about it. Ravi wasn't the first student I'd employed, and he wouldn't be the last either. I'd always known he'd be temporary, and if I sent him off into the world with a bit more experience and a few life lessons, then I'd consider it a job well done.

"You know, I might actually know someone looking for a job," he said a few minutes later, when he'd finished putting the Smirnoff into the fridge.

"Oh yeah? Who?"

"My cousin, Frankie. He's just finished his degree and he's looking for something to tide him over for a bit."

"Sounds good. Has he done any bar work?" I asked. Another temporary staff member wasn't the ideal solution, but it'd be better than nothing. And getting a recommendation from Ravi would stop me having to go through the whole palaver of advertising the role, reading applications, and doing a ton of interviews. I mean, I still might have to if Frankie turned out to be a dead end, but it was a start at least.

“Yeah, I think so. Last time I checked, he was working at a nightclub in Manchester.”

“What sort of club? The posh kind? ’Cos if it’s a fancy place, he’ll be in for a rude awakening here.”

Ravi chuckled and shook his head. “Nah, definitely not. He said it’s alright, better than some, but it’s the kind with sticky floors, cheap drinks, and tons of student nights.”

I knew the sort he meant. I might not have been to uni myself, but I’d snuck into plenty of student nights in my day. It helped that I was friends with half the bouncers in Leicester. “All right, give me his number before you go and I’ll drop him a message. And tell him to answer me.”

“Will do.” Ravi paused for a second, the empty Smirnoff Ice packaging in his hands. “There’s, er, there’s just one more thing you should know. About Frankie.”

“Yeah? What’s that?” Usually when people said that, they had bad news. I braced myself for the worst.

Over the years I’d developed a pretty tough skin, and I could brush off a lot of shit, but even I had my limits.

“He’s, er, well, he’s gay, for one. And he’s quite… I don’t know. My family say he’s a bit dramatic, but I don’t think that’s true. He’s just fierce. He knows what he wants. He doesn’t take shit from anyone about anything,” Ravi said, chewing his bottom lip as he spoke, like he was trying to figure out how to put things into words.

I frowned. Had I missed something? None of that sounded like a problem to me. I needed someone with a bit of attitude around here, especially with the type of patrons we had. Summer was always worse too, because get a bit of sun into some of these twats and their behaviour got a thousand times worse.

“Jesus Christ, Ravi, is that it?” I asked. “I thought you were gonna tell me he was a fucking serial killer or voted Reform. Mind you, I’d take a serial killer any day over someone who didn’t think Nigel Farage was a massive knob.”

“I mean, I can’t say for sure that he isn’t a serial killer. You’ll have to ask him that yourself.”

“As long as it doesn’t affect my pub, what he does in his spare time is none of my business,” I said, giving Ravi another shoulder squeeze before releasing him. “And I can cope with an attitude. He’ll need it here.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Ravi looked around the bar, his eyes narrowing. Then he yelled, “Oi, Twiglet! That better not fucking be what I think it is! You know the rules. No fucking drugs in this pub.”

I swung around, eyes narrowing on Wayne “Twiglet” Smith, who was rapidly shoving a small plastic bag back into his jeans pocket. He was twenty-one and a bigger twat I’d never met. He was the sort of man who thought listening to shitty podcasts made him some crypto-alpha bro, when really he was a loser in an off-brand tracksuit whose biggest achievement was shoving fifty-six twiglets in his gob at once. “Out!” I snapped sharply. “I’m not joking, Twig. Get out of my pub. Now!”

“But I didn’t do anything,” Twiglet said, holding up his hands. “I wasn’t—”

He clammed up as I walked out from around the bar and stalked towards him, armed with nothing but a soggy bar towel and my anger. I knew The Nag’s Head was a shithole and I overlooked a lot of crap, but I still had rules. And I was very, very clear about them.

No bigotry. No physical altercations inside—you wanted to fight, you took that shit outside. No weapons. No hard drugs.

And no changing the channel when Leicester were playing.

“Do you like my pub, Twigs? Like coming here every weekend to drink the cheapest beer on tap and watch the football while you eat cheese and onion crisps and pork scratchings?” I asked quietly, knowing that everyone was watching us now and trying to pretend they weren’t.

“Yeah.”

“And you know all my rules, don’t you, Twigs?”

“Y-Yeah.”

“So then why are you trying to sell fucking cocaine in the middle of my bar?” I asked. “Get the fuck out. Now. And if you ever wanna set foot in my pub again, you don’t ever bring that shit in here again, all right? I’m not having you get me shut down ’cos you wanna play drug dealer.”

Twiglet muttered something under his breath, which I chose, magnanimously, to ignore.

“Still waiting, Twiglet,” I said, folding my arms and glaring at the door.

With a great sigh and a scrape of his stool, Twiglet finally stood and headed towards the door. I noticed his friends didn’t follow him. They were all drinking their pints and picking at their open packets of crisps, trying to avoid my gaze.

They all thought they were hot shit, but really they were just kids playing tough guy. It was still a pain in the arse to deal with, though. Still, the longer I ran The Nag's Head, the longer the locals' behaviour improved.

When I'd started working here, nearly ten years ago, we regularly found needles in the toilets, slurs were part of the general vocabulary, and fights were a nightly occurrence. At least one guy had gotten stabbed—although it really wasn't that bad, he hadn't died—and one wanker had tried to shove a broken bottle in my face.

Which was why there was now a golf club under the bar, which I'd nicked from the local golf course because there was no way I was paying for one.

But despite its flaws, The Nag's Head was my pub and I loved it. There was a strange charm in its run-down appearance, dated decor, dodgy vibes, and motley collection of patrons, and I wouldn't change it. I didn't want hanging baskets, screaming kids, pretentious beer, and blokes in red trousers talking about their investments and skiing holidays. The thought of that just made me nauseous.

Besides, at least with my lot I knew where I stood with them. They were hard work sometimes but there was a level of respect between us. The posh twats in the red-trouser brigade would only ever talk down to me, and I wasn't having that. Ever.

Still, occasionally I wished things were a little easier. Just a smidge. I wasn't asking for much, only a few small things.

Twiglet and his ilk remembering the rules would be a good start.

Enough money to replace the sign outside would be another. It was so faded you wouldn't even know there'd once been a horse's head painted on there unless someone told you.

I walked back towards the bar as the chatter slowly returned to normal, sliding behind the counter where Ravi was restocking the Rekorderlig I'd brought up. "So, tell me more about this cousin of yours," I said as I began to pull a couple of pints for the two guys who'd followed me up to the bar.

Lord knew I was going to need all the help I could get.

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Chapter Two

Frankie

The Nag's Head was a shithole.

And I didn't mean that as a compliment.

The whitewashed walls were chipped and flaking and in desperate need of a power wash, although a new coat of paint would be better, and the gold-plated metal letters that spelled out the pub's name had definitely seen better days. Especially since there were two missing. There was a sign hanging above the battered black front door that had probably had something painted on it once—about thirty years ago—but what it was I had no idea. I doubted anyone did.

It was the sort of place that looked like it should be actively avoided at all costs, and if Ravi hadn't assured me the owner was decent, I'd have turned around as soon as I'd gotten within fifty feet because I really didn't fancy getting stabbed in a car park this evening.

Not least because the blood would ruin my new jeans.

And defending myself might chip my nails.

This job had better be fucking worth it.

Although, at this point, I'd take anything. I'd been bored out of my mind since I moved back from Manchester and if I had to sit around all summer until my master's started in September, then I was going to be unbearable.

Squaring my shoulders and taking a deep breath, I pushed the door of the pub open and looked around at the sight that greeted me. The interior

was just as dated and dusty as the outside, with old wooden furniture, threadbare red and gold carpets that definitely hadn't been replaced since before I was born, and the typical tacky collection of beer ads and paraphernalia decorating the off-white walls.

It was like someone had Googled "dodgy British pub" and used the search results as inspiration.

Since it was a Wednesday night, the bar wasn't packed, but there were more than a few people shooting suspicious looks my way. I didn't know if it was because I was an unfamiliar face or because of my appearance, but I assumed it was a bit of both. After all, this didn't really seem like the place where you got many men in low-waisted, wide-legged, rhinestoned jeans and crop tops, with platform trainers, winged eyeliner, and hot pink four-inch stiletto nails.

They could look all they wanted, but the moment any of them said anything snarky, then we'd have a problem.

I strolled towards the bar, my eyes fixed on the man behind it who was staring at me with a mixture of shock and awe. It was an expression I was very familiar with and one I'd never get bored of seeing. He had a shaved head, broad face, and a broad body to match—definitely someone who spent time in the gym but also someone who'd probably pack away six pints of beer and a large kebab without blinking. There were a couple of tattoos on his forearms and faded lettering across his knuckles.

He wasn't the hottest man I'd ever seen, but there was confidant ease in the way he moved, like nothing fazed him, and I liked that.

Not that I was here looking for a fuck, but it never hurt to window shop.

"Can I help you?" he asked with a casual smile as I leant against the bar. It was the sort of smile designed to make someone feel at ease. And it also made him look younger.

Now I was closer, I doubted he was more than thirty.

"I hope so. I'm Frankie and I'm looking for Bacon. He told me to come down tonight to chat about a bar job."

The man's smile widened and he stuck out a large hand. "Nice to meet you. I'm Bacon."

"Hey," I said, taking his hand and shaking it. The gesture felt weirdly formal but his grip was warm and firm, so I didn't have any objections.

He glanced down, clearly noticing my nails for the first time. “Nice nails. You okay working with them? I’m gonna assume it’s a yes since Ravi said you’d done some bar work.”

“Yeah, don’t worry. They don’t get in the way.”

“All right then.” He nodded and let go of my hand, nearly sending me reeling. Of all the comments I’d expected him to make about my nails, a compliment and making sure I could work with them hadn’t been on my list. Bacon gestured his head at the end of the bar, where there were a few stools. “Plonk yourself down and we can have a chat. Sorry we can’t go somewhere more private. It’s just me tonight and I don’t like leaving the bar unsupervised.”

I glanced around the room. “Do you think someone would try something?”

“Maybe. I mean, they’d only try it once. But I get a better view of the room here.” He grabbed a pad of paper and a pen out from beside the till, and I noticed there was a list of questions scribbled on it. “What do you want to drink?”

“A lime and Coke, please,” I said as I hopped up on the stool. It wasn’t the most comfortable, but I’d sat on worse.

While Bacon poured me a pint, I took another opportunity to look at the bar. The drinks were all familiar to me, and it was interesting to see what was on offer. None of it was particularly fancy, bar a couple of mid-label spirits on shelves at the back.

The thing that interested me most, though, were the two small Progress Pride flags tucked into empty Absolut vodka bottles.

Bacon saw me looking and grinned. “Rule one of being in my pub: no bigotry. Anyone who doesn’t like it can sod off elsewhere.”

I nodded, a few things Ravi had said clicking into place. “Ravi said something about you taking down a crowd of twenty with nothing but a bar rag and a half-smoked cigarette over their shitty opinion on something. I’m guessing it’s that?”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t twenty.”

“More?”

He chuckled. “Much less. I’m not one to lie about size.”

I snorted. “I’ll remember that. How many was it then?”

“Just the one. I mean, a few have tried over the years, but usually if there’s more than one, the rest of them get the hint once I deal with the

leader.” He shrugged, like it wasn’t a big deal, and gestured to something at the other end of the bar. “Anyone who gets banned goes up on the wall so everyone knows who’s not allowed in. And if you see someone trying to break the rule, you can either call me or Billy—he’s our chef—and we’ll sort them.”

“Don’t worry, I can handle myself. I’ve kicked out more than a few dickheads in my time.”

Bacon looked me up and down and smirked as he slid my drink across to me. “Oh, I bet you have.”

“So, what other rules are there?” I asked, trying to drag the conversation back to the job before I did something I shouldn’t, like ask Bacon if he fancied a shag.

“Not many really. No bigotry, no fighting inside—if they wanna be dickheads, they can do it elsewhere—no weapons, no drugs, and if there’s a Leicester match on TV, then we’re watching it. Apart from that, if they pay their tab and don’t start shit, I’m pretty easy-going.”

“Sounds good.”

“Hours are flexible, but I’d need you at least Friday night, Saturday and Sunday lunch and afternoon. Maybe Saturday evenings too or afternoons and evenings—depends on the weather and what else’s going on. Then maybe one or two days during the week. Fifteen quid an hour, plus tips, although you might not get a lot of them because these wankers are tight.”

“That works,” I said with a nod. Fifteen was well above the minimum wage I’d been scraping along on at my last job, despite being there for several years. I’d kept telling myself I was going to find something else, but with uni work and my social life, I’d never gotten around to it.

Although something in the back of my mind idly wondered if the better wages were the equivalent of hazard pay.

“And I don’t have a lot of plans until September, so I’d be happy to work as much as you need me,” I continued. “As long as I get a couple of days off a week, then I’m good.”

“Ravi said you’d not long moved back but not much else,” Bacon said, idly rubbing a stubborn mark on the wooden bar top. “Tell me a bit about yourself.”

“Well, I’m twenty-three, an Aquarius, just finished my degree in art history and English literature at Manchester—so I’ll need a day off for graduation—and I’m starting a master’s in September at Leicester. I do heel

dance and the occasional bit of pole, although I fucked my shoulder last year, so I'm out for a bit. I spent two years after school working in my uncle's restaurant while I tried to decide what to do with my life, and I've always done bar and restaurant work because I'm a nosy bitch and I like people watching. I don't follow football but I do know the offside rule, and I've watched every episode of *Bridgerton* and *Llewelyn* because I love the costumes, and *Below Deck* and *Love Island* because they're so messy. I don't care which version it is, I'll watch it."

I watched him with interest as I spoke, curious to see how he reacted. Normally I wouldn't share this much about myself so early, but Bacon didn't seem like your typical dodgy pub owner, so I wanted to see if anything about me tripped him up. But he didn't seem to bat an eyelid and at the end he whistled and said, "A master's? That's pretty fucking cool. And don't worry, we'll make a Leicester fan of you yet."

"Hmm, if I'm going to be watching that much football, I feel like you owe me something in return."

"If you're gonna tell me to watch *Bridgerton* or *Llewelyn*, I've already seen them. My best mate Aiden loves them and he made me watch all of them last year." He leant a bit closer, almost conspiratorially. "And I bloody love *Below Deck*. If I'd known that was a job option ten years ago, I might've tried it."

"I can imagine you on a boat," I said. "I bet none of your crews would be that messy, though."

"Fuck no. I'm not having any drama." He fixed me with a long look. "That's another thing—I don't do drama. If the patrons are being shit, you can push back, but I'm not here for any staff drama unless there's a proper reason. And fucking your co-workers and then falling out with them isn't a legit reason."

I chuckled and sipped my lime and Coke. "Sounds like you're speaking from experience."

"Damn right. Worst six months of my life was when I had to work with two bar staff who shagged on and off and whenever they weren't shagging, they spent the rest of the time screaming at each other."

I winced. "Been there, done that." Bacon raised an eyebrow, a curious smile on his lips. I shrugged. "I hooked up with this guy at my old job a few times. It didn't end well. But in my defence, I didn't know he was going to be a massive knob once I started sucking his dick."

A burst of loud, deep laughter rumbled through Bacon's chest, but it didn't sound unkind. It was warm and full of joy, strangely comforting in a way. "Not surprised. All men are knobs."

"Even you?"

"Yeah, especially me."

I smirked and leant closer across the bar. "What about me?"

He looked me up and down appraisingly. "Probably, but that might be a good thing. I'll let you know."

"Please do." Dammit, what the fuck was I doing? I'd told myself after Mark that I wasn't getting involved with anyone I worked with again. Ever. And here I was flirting with my potential new boss.

I knew I liked trouble but this was ridiculous.

"That mean you're coming back then?" Bacon asked.

"If you'll have me," I said casually, because as much as I wanted the job, I didn't want to look desperate. I had some standards. They were just very low when it involved dick.

"I'd love to. Do you want a trial shift or do you just wanna dive straight in?"

I hummed teasingly. "A trial shift makes me think you're worried about something. Have you missed anything out? Apart from the knife fights in the car park, the dodgy patrons, and the disgusting bar rags."

"Hey! I'll have you know I wash these every day," Bacon said, waving the nearest bar rag at me. "I just need to get some new ones."

"Good to know, but you still didn't answer my question."

"Nah, I think that's about it." He looked around the bar, a strange fondness softening his hard features. "Look, this place isn't the best. I'll be the first to admit that, but it's mine and I love it. People can talk shit about it all they want, but at the end of the day, we're a safe place for people, somewhere to get away from the world and build community. Yeah, it's rough sometimes, and the people can be wankers, but I'd rather some of 'em were here instead of doing God knows what else. Plus if they're here, they're still paying my bills, and I like being able to afford food."

"I get that," I said, a strange feeling nudging under my ribs. I still thought the place was a shithole, but I knew where Bacon was coming from.

Ravi had always described The Nag's Head as having mostly good vibes, despite its appearance, and while I wasn't completely convinced, I

thought I could be.

"All right," I continued, draining the last of my drink. "When do you want me to start? Do you need a hand now or shall I come back tomorrow?"

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Chapter Three

Bacon

"Er, yeah sure, if you want," I said, struggling to get the words out as I stared at Frankie as he slid off his bar stool, hoping I didn't look like a complete twat. I just hadn't been expecting him to want to start now. Shit, I hadn't even been sure he'd want to start at all.

Although maybe that was more because I knew if he worked here, I'd be completely and utterly fucked.

I didn't know what I'd been expecting Frankie to be like, but it hadn't included a sharp, funny personality, four-inch stiletto nails, long lashes, crop tops, and low-rise jeans that I half expected to see a thong poking out of. I almost wanted to smack Ravi around the back of the head and ask him why he hadn't told me his cousin was hot as fuck.

Mind you, I doubted Ravi would've described his cousin that way.

My sexuality had always been somewhat fluid. I'd never really thought about labelling it. People were just hot, some more than others, but it'd never bothered me what people had under their clothes. Hot was hot, no matter what package it came in.

And now, the sexiest person I'd seen in months was ducking under my bar and shooting me a playful smile that rendered me fucking useless. This was my fucking pub and suddenly I couldn't seem to remember a single damn thing we served.

Jesus Christ, I needed to get my act together sharpish, or I was going to lose my newest member of staff before he'd even started.

Because that was all Frankie was: a member of staff.

And I had to remember that or this was going to be messy as shit. I'd get it tattooed on the palms of my hands if I had to. Then I could use them to slap some sense into myself as a reminder.

"So, do you have a price list around or is it all programmed into the till?" Frankie asked as he started looking around the back of the bar, picking bottles up, examining the shelves of glasses, peering into the fridges to see what we stocked in them, and opening the dishwasher, scrutinising it carefully as he checked the make and model.

"Er, it's all in the till, but I've got a physical list somewhere if you want it. There's a stock list too, but I can generally see it all off the till. Plus I've been here long enough to know how fast we get through shit."

"Sounds good. I'm guessing your orders are ninety percent beers? Maybe some cider and Guinness. Then some alcopops and mixers." He peered across the bar at the collection of patrons all nursing their drinks, nodding to himself as he analysed them with an experienced eye. "Occasional gin and tonic too. And then Cokes and stuff."

"Yeah, pretty much," I said, shaking my head when he turned away to snap myself to attention. "We've got food too. Menus are just on the ends of the bar." I grabbed one of the laminated pages to show him. "It's not the poshest shit, but it's good. And Billy does a fucking amazing Sunday roast. If you ever want feeding on shift, just tell him what you want and he'll get it for you."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, yeah. Why would I offer otherwise? I'm not gonna offer you food then take it back. That's just a dick move."

"Thanks," Frankie said. He seemed genuinely surprised at the idea of being offered a meal on shift, but I'd always assumed it was common fucking courtesy to feed your staff, even if it was only a bowl of cheesy chips and a bacon and egg sandwich.

"No worries," I said, finally feeling like I was starting to get my feet back under me. The ground had stopped moving at least. And I wasn't staring at Frankie's arse and wondering if he'd ever wear a thong.

That was so fucking wrong I didn't even want to think about it. Even if he had flirted with me, I needed to get my shit together and not be a knob. Besides, I'd already told Frankie I didn't do staff drama, and hooking up on the job was always more trouble than it was worth. No ifs, no buts about it.

Fuck, Aiden was going to have a bloody field day when I told him about this. And as my best friend since the age of thirteen, he knew me too well for me to hide it. We might see each other less since he'd moved away, but one slightly off message and he'd know something was up. I might as well try and hide nuts from a squirrel.

That was the thing about best friends, though. They might drive you fucking crazy with their insight and their nosiness, but one day you'd need that shit from them. Especially when you were thinking of doing something monumentally stupid. Then they'd be there with either a parachute, a shovel, or bail money, depending on what you needed.

Maybe all three.

I spent the next hour focusing on showing Frankie how things worked, where things were kept, and talking him through all the various cleaning, open-up, and shut-down procedures—most of which seemed pretty similar to how he'd done things before. A few patrons approached the bar, some for drinks and some just because they were really bloody nosy.

I was ready to send some of them packing, because I was sure at least one of them was going to say something about my gorgeous new barman. But nobody did… until fucking Dan Taylor.

Daniel "Top Man" Taylor was a world-class wanker who thought he was God's gift to the world. He was a fucking grifter and owed more people money than I could count, but he was also charming, charismatic, and had a knack of talking his way out of things. He was vaguely good-looking too, which didn't help, although I personally thought he'd look better if he stopped taking steroids and whitening his teeth so they were almost neon.

He homed in on Frankie with a shark-like smile, leaning against the bar with cockiness radiating out of him. "All right there, sweetheart," he said. "You're very pretty. Since when did Bacon start hiring people with such nice arses?"

I exhaled sharply, opening my mouth to say something. But Frankie just levelled Dan with the most withering stare I'd ever seen, looking at him like he was nothing more than dog shit on the bottom of his sparkling platform trainers. "Wow, is that what you're going for? Tell me, *sweetheart*, does treating people like a piece of meat ever actually get you anywhere or do you just get off on being told no?"

Dan pulled a face, seeming genuinely shocked as he spluttered out, "What the fuck? It was a fucking compliment."

“Ah, so it’s more you get off on making other people feel intimidated. Or was it supposed to be impressive? Hmm, either way it’s not working. Want to try again?”

“What the fuck? Bacon, who is this bitch?”

Frankie smirked. “I’m the new bitch behind the bar, so you better watch your fucking attitude if you ever want to get served again. Are we clear?”

“Why you—” He tried to lunge across the bar, and I was ready to grab my golf club when Frankie extended his hand sharply, resting the pointed tips of his nails against Dan’s throat.

“I said, are we clear?” Frankie asked, his voice almost saccharine but with a cold edge that frightened even me. And to make matters worse, my cock had started throbbing in my jeans. Holy shit, this should not be turning me on! What the fuck was wrong with me?

“Yes,” Dan said sulkily.

“Good boy. Now, my name is Frankie and you will say please and thank you whenever you want something from me. Are we clear?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, Frankie.”

“Thank you, now what can I get you? Oh, and to be clear, if you’re thinking about waiting for me after my shift to somehow put me in my place or teach me a lesson, I will happily shove my nails straight through your eyes while driving my foot into your testicles. Also, I’m sure any threats to my person will not be looked at kindly by my employer. Will they?” He smiled at me and I recognised my cue.

I swallowed and frowned, pulling my shoulders back and squaring up to Dan, trying not to think about how Frankie’s confidence was apparently the hottest thing I’d seen in months. Jeez, I needed to get laid. “No, they won’t. I’m warning you now, Taylor, you put one fucking toe out of line and you won’t have any left. You so much as look at my staff the wrong way again and the only pub you’ll be goin’ to will be in hell. And that goes for you and any of your fucking mates, do you hear me?”

“Yeah, fine. Jesus. Can’t say anything these days,” Dan said, pouting like a fucking toddler.

“You can say whatever you like,” Frankie said coolly. “You just have to accept the consequences. Or did you not learn that when you were five like

all the other children? Now did you want a drink or are you just here to harass me?"

Dan thought for a second, then pointed at one of the taps. "Pint of Carlsberg. Please."

"Of course," Frankie said, smiling sweetly like he hadn't just threatened a man. It didn't feel like an empty threat either, more like a warning.

I watched the rest of the transaction, stepping in only to show Frankie the knack for getting the card machine to work, because it was bloody temperamental at times and sometimes you had to tap the edge on the bar to get it to connect properly. One day I'd look at getting another one. Along with all the other shit that needed replacing in this dump.

"I'm sorry," I said quickly as Dan skulked away with his pint. "I should have said something earlier. Dan's a twat, but I've never seen him do that."

Frankie shrugged. "Apology accepted, but of course he hasn't done it before. I'm me and you're you. It's giving misogyny. And the whole compliment thing is bullshit. It's never a compliment, but sometimes it's hard to push back if you're worried men will get violent."

"Jesus, you shouldn't have to deal with that."

"No, I shouldn't. But it won't happen again. Or if it does, I'll deal with it."

"No, you won't. You'll tell me and I'll deal with it. I won't have them treating you like shit because of the way you dress. And you don't have to change either. Wear whatever you like, although maybe not crop tops just for health and safety reasons."

"Done," he said. He smiled, looking at me with something that might have been approval. Or maybe it was scathing? "And for the record, I wasn't going to change. Especially because I just got these nails done and they cost me seventy quid, and I'm not giving them up for any man."

"Seventy quid?" I asked, taking his hand and peering at them. They were hot pink with leopard print and zebra stripes painted on them, complete with silver charms and even some tiny rings piercing through the end of a couple of them. "Fucking hell, seriously? What are they plated in, gold? Are these charms real silver? The paint job is nice, though. Whoever did 'em's got a proper steady hand, especially for detail. How long do these take?"

Frankie giggled, letting me keep hold of his hand, which was so soft I almost wanted to stroke it. But again, I wasn't here to be a creeping fucking

weirdo. We'd had enough of those this evening. "About four hours," he said. "But my nail tech is a gem. I love her so much! I bring her bubble tea and we gossip while I get pampered. And no, they're not real silver or gold. I'm paying for her skill."

"Fair enough. I'm not gonna argue with that."

"Good. I wouldn't want to put you in your place too," he said with a wry smile and a wink. "Now, where do you keep your stock? Am I going to have to haul it up from some godforsaken basement?"

I swallowed, the ground once again falling out from underneath my feet.

Yeah, I was fucked.

Completely and utterly done for.

I didn't dislike the idea, though…

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Chapter Four

Frankie

Despite the initial teething problem of a man forgetting what manners were, I slid easily into my role at The Nag's Head, and within a couple of weeks it felt like I'd been working there for years.

The patrons were an interesting bunch and mostly fell into three categories: old men who'd been coming here for fifty years and were pretty much a permanent fixture, middle-aged blokes who wanted to hang out with their mates, watch the football, and escape their families, and young guys who wanted exactly the same thing as the middle-aged blokes but generally came with more attitude and reeking of cheap weed vapes and cheaper deodorant.

They weren't difficult to deal with and once they'd realised I both knew what I was doing and wouldn't take any shit, their attitude seemed to shift until I got the feeling I was viewed as one of their own.

One guy had even tried to set me up with his son, which was very sweet, and I didn't have the heart to tell him I'd definitely shagged his son at least twice in club toilets last summer when I'd been home. Not that I thought his son would remember me. We hadn't exactly spent a lot of time talking. Or looking at each other.

In truth, the only part of the job I was struggling with was Bacon.

Not because he was a bad boss or difficult to work for, but because every time I was around him all the blood seemed to drain from my brain at lightning speed.

The ease and confidence I'd immediately clocked on that first night hadn't been a joke, and being around it five days a week for hours on end rapidly destroyed every kind of barrier I tried to throw up against it. Nothing seemed to faze him, and the way he carried himself made me suspect that very little would. Yeah, he'd struggled that first night when Dan had hit on me, but fuck, the way he'd apologised for getting caught off guard had made me want to get on my knees behind the bar.

And considering the state of the floor, that was a pretty impressive statement.

The worst part, if that was even a thing, was that Bacon didn't know he was doing this to me.

He seemed totally fucking oblivious to the fact he made my dick hard every time he displayed any kind of competence. Because apparently I was so damn desperate that the bar for my attention was not being a wanker and good at their job, which shouldn't have been difficult to find but really fucking was.

Bacon was doing it again now, lying on the floor behind the bar fixing the dishwasher which had crapped out on us on the busiest Saturday afternoon of the year so far.

"You all right down there?" I asked, neatly stepping over his legs to pull more pints while Ravi ran down to the cellar to fetch more bottles of Rekorderlig. Because of course my cousin was here today as well. Although Ravi was sweetly oblivious, so there was a good chance he wouldn't notice me staring. Or he'd just chalk it up to me being me.

"Yeah," Bacon said, his voice slightly muffled. "I should be able to get it back working for now, but I'll have to order a new one. Piece of shit! I've only had it for five years."

"Nothing lasts these days," I said, glancing down so I didn't kick him as I shuffled down the bar to the till.

"What's the problem, mate?" one of the guys I was serving—Dave—asked, leaning over the counter. "I've got my toolkit in the van if you need it."

"Cheers, mate. Think I've got it, though," Bacon said as he poked his head out from the shelf it'd been under so he could reach the wiring.

"If it craps out on you before you can get another one, then give us a call," Dave said.

“Do you need new one?” Pawel asked, holding his pint carefully as he leant over next to Dave. “I can get you one for Thursday. Maybe Friday, depends on what they have in warehouse.”

“Yeah? What sort?”

He shrugged noncommittally. “Eh, maybe Blizzard. Maybe Classeq, depends. Might be second-hand but I make sure it works.”

“As long as it’s not a piece of shit and doesn’t cost me an arm and a leg, I’ll take it,” Bacon said, rolling onto his knees and climbing to his feet with a groan. I swallowed and focused on handing over the pints I’d been pouring, trying really hard not to look at Bacon on his knees or the way his arse filled out his jeans.

“It won’t, is not that,” Pawel said with a teasing laugh as he gestured at the hot-wired dishwasher.

“Hey! Be nice, it can hear you and I need it to last the rest of the night,” I said with a grin. “I’m not built for washing up.”

“It’s okay. Ravi can do it,” Dave said with a chuckle. He glanced around, clearly looking for my cousin, then lowered his voice. “We heard he’s heading to London for the summer. Thought we’d do a bit of a whip-round for him. London’s not cheap an’ he’ll need new suits and shit. When’s his last day?”

“End of next week, thirty-first of May,” I said quietly, immediately touched by their generosity. “Bacon’s making him work bank holiday weekend before he can escape.”

“We’ll bring it then, then,” Dave said, tapping the bar to reiterate the point. “Right, then, I’ll leave you to it.”

He and Pawel walked away, chatting about the football, and I smiled to myself as I went back to work, serving the never-ending line of customers while Bacon put the dishwasher on for a test run. We waited with bated breath to see if it worked.

And it did.

“That’ll do,” Bacon said with a pleased nod and a satisfied hum. “Right, where’s your cousin gotten to? Back in a second.”

I tried really hard not to watch him go, but it was impossible. For someone who’d vowed never to get involved with anyone at work again, I was doing a pretty piss-poor job of remembering that.

“Fuck me, what a day,” Bacon said as he threw the deadbolt across the front door and turned the key in the heavy lock below it. It was well past eleven and we’d finally managed to turf everyone out for the evening, spilling their drunken arses onto the streets of Leicester to do whatever they planned with the rest of their night.

My plan was to go home via McDonald’s and then fall into bed. I was completely knackered and my feet were killing me from being on them for twelve hours. I shouldn’t have agreed to do open to close, but it was really fucking hard to say no to Bacon when he asked.

At least the money would be nice.

“I’m surprised we’ve got anything left,” I said with an exhausted groan as I put my hands on the small of my back and stretched.

“How’s the washer doing? Still holding up?”

“Seems to be,” I said, bending over to open the dishwasher door and leaning back so the escaping steam didn’t catch my face. I reached inside to pull out a glass, holding it up to the light to scrutinise it for stains or marks. “The glasses are clean, so it’s doing something.”

“Thank fuck.” He sighed and started picking up the stools off the floor so we could hoover in the morning. “Has Ravi gone?”

“Yeah, and Billy too. I think it’s just you and me.”

“Lucky me,” Bacon said with a smile that he probably hadn’t intended to be as teasing as it was. Fuck!

“Lucky you,” I said, returning his smile before busying myself with emptying the dishwasher.

There was a moment of quiet. Then Bacon said, “I dunno about you but I’m fucking starving. Do you want something to eat?”

“If you’re offering. If not, I’ll just grab a Maccies on the way home.”

“Sod that, I’ll make you something better.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“A breakfast sandwich. Specifically, one of my own-brand Bacon special breakfast sandwiches.”

“What makes it so special?” I asked with a wry smile as I wiped down the bar for the last time. I was going to say yes to whatever Bacon offered because there was no way I’d turn him down, but I wanted to try and play a little coy at least. I mean, I was a slut, yes, but I wanted to give the illusion of making him work for it.

Not that he was giving me anything.

He’d offered a breakfast sandwich, not a blow job.

Unless breakfast sandwich was somehow a code… but Bacon didn’t seem like the type of guy to be shy about shit. If he wanted something, I imagined he’d ask for it.

Ugh, he was probably straight and simply being a decent guy. Didn’t even think he was flirting with me.

That shouldn’t disappoint me the way it did.

“You’ll have to wait and see,” Bacon said, beckoning me with an outstretched hand as he headed for the kitchen. I stumbled slightly as I followed him, tripping over my feet like I was on a lead that he’d suddenly tugged.

I wouldn’t be opposed to being on a lead for him… especially if it was attached to a sparkling collar.

The pub kitchen was dark, empty, and quiet, the counters clean and equipment shut down for the following day. It was strange seeing it like this, the small space seeming about three times the size without Billy and the other staff filling it with their shouting and singing.

Bacon headed over to one of the fridges and pulled it open, taking a load of stuff off one of the bottom shelves, which had a label stuck to the front of it with Bacon’s Shit printed on it in large red letters. A warning, not an invitation. He opened one of the freezers too, taking out a bag of frozen chips, the sort we didn’t usually use, and some part-bake bread rolls.

“Won’t be long,” he said cheerfully as he flicked one of the ovens on and stuck the rolls inside on a small tray. Then he grabbed a frying pan, putting it carefully on one of the hobs. “You okay with bacon and eggs? It’s pork bacon.”

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

“Cool. Any allergies or dislikes?”

“Not really. I mean, I don’t think you’re sticking shellfish in there.”

“Oh shit, you’ve got a shellfish allergy?”

“Yeah, but not a bad one,” I said. “It just makes me go a bit itchy. I don’t eat it, though, because I don’t want it getting worse. You never know when something could turn into full-on anaphylaxis.”

“That sounds sensible,” Bacon said, starting to put bacon into the sizzling frying pan, the smell filling the air and making my stomach rumble. He left the bacon to cook while he turned one of the fryers on, watching it carefully as it began to heat.

“Can I ask you something?” I asked, leaning against one of the counters out of his way as Bacon dumped a load of chips into the fryer basket, submerging them in the hot oil.

“Sure.”

“How did you end up running this place?”

“By accident.”

“How the fuck do you accidentally end up with a pub?”

He chuckled and shrugged. “I started working here at sixteen—it was only meant to be part time, but it just ended up becoming more. At eighteen I was here full time. Then Gaz, the bloke who owns it, started showing me all the other shit it took to run it. Then when I was maybe twenty, twenty-one, Gaz decided he wanted to retire to Spain with his missus, so he gave me the keys. Technically, it’s still his pub. At least legally, but my name is on pretty much everything.”

“That’s… a lot. I can’t imagine taking over a pub that young.”

“You’re only twenty-three.”

“Yeah, but that’s a fuck ton of responsibility.”

“I suppose. I’d rather do this, though, than work for someone else.” He smiled and gave the chips a shake before adding eggs to the frying pan beside the bacon. Then he went back to the fridge to get out some cheese slices. “Do you want cheddar or blue cheese?”

“Blue cheese? In a breakfast sandwich.”

“Yeah, that’s what I normally do.”

“Okay, fine. I’ll try it.” I wasn’t convinced but I was curious and that was enough to get me to try most things.

Bacon grinned, like I’d somehow made his night, and my heart did a funny little flip. I still couldn’t believe he’d taken over this place at twenty, but it explained why he was so at ease in this space. It was his through and through, and nothing could change that.

“Can I ask you something else?” I asked, sliding a little closer as Bacon grabbed the now cooked rolls and began to assemble everything on a chopping board. Hot rolls, lashings of butter, crispy bacon, fried eggs, chips, and slices of blue cheese, all topped off with what looked like barbecue hot sauce.

“What is this, twenty fucking questions?” he asked with another laugh.

“I mean, you can ask me shit too.”

“All right.”

“Is Bacon your actual name? I mean, I’ll call you whatever you want. I’m just nosy.”

He snorted. “You really fucking are. My surname is Bacon, but my first name is Dominic. Nobody uses it, though, only me mum and she calls me Nic. Dunno why she picked it to be honest. She’s never used it.”

“It’s okay, my legal name is Vaibhav and again the only people who use it are my mum and my aunties. Although even my mum calls me Frankie half the time.”

He tilted his head, almost in amusement. “Why Frankie? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“After Frankie from *Monster High*,” I said with a teasing smile. “She’s so fucking cool. I was obsessed with those dolls. Still kind of am.”

Bacon nodded, fondness softening the corners of his eyes. It was another thing that made him look younger. “It suits you.”

“Thanks, I think so too.”

“Here, get that down you,” he said, pushing one of the enormous sandwiches across to me on a plastic chopping board. It looked like the most delicious monstrosity I’d ever seen, sauce mingling with the bacon grease and dripping out the side as the cheese slices started to melt across the chips.

Bacon watched me closely as I leant over to pick it up, wondering how I was going to fit this in my gob without spilling half of it everywhere or getting it all over my face. Fuck it, there was no way to eat it elegantly, so I just opened my mouth as wide as I could and took the biggest bite I could, shoving the overflowing roll into my mouth.

Flavour and texture exploded on my tongue: sharp, salty, and smoky. Crispy and soft. The tang of the blue cheese against the crispy, smoked bacon, the gentle heat, warmth, and smokiness of the barbecue hot sauce against the gentle softness of the egg with its runny yolk, the chips that added extra crunch while absorbing all the flavours around them.

Maybe it shouldn’t have worked, but it did and I would never want another breakfast sandwich as long as I lived.

“Fuck me,” I said with a groan. “This is incredible! Fuck, Bacon, please tell me this isn’t a one-time thing?”

Bacon grinned, clearly satisfied with my reaction as he reached for his own sandwich. “For you, I’ll make them whenever you want.”

I returned his smile as I took another bite.

I wanted to ask why he was so willing to make them for me, but deep down I already knew.

Both of us could feel there was something here, even if neither of us wanted to admit it yet.

Instead, we let the tension hang comfortably in the air as we ate breakfast sandwiches at midnight.

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Chapter Five

Bacon

"I've monumentally fucked up," I said as soon as Aiden answered the phone. We weren't usually phone conversation people unless it was an emergency, but I very much viewed this as one.

"Oh? What did you do? Wait, do I get to gloat now because it's finally not me being the problem?" Aiden asked gleefully. Little wanker. He was far too happy at my suffering. Then again, he had a point. Usually I was the one fixing Aiden's mistakes, not the other way around, and it was fucking strange realising the shoe was on the other foot for once.

"You're a right twat, you know that?"

"Yeah, and? Tell me something I don't know."

"Dickhead," I muttered with a sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose. I was sprawled out on my bed after getting back from the gym, my legs burning from the intense workout I'd put them through. I should have gone to shower as soon as I'd gotten in because there was only an hour or so before I needed to be at the pub, but I'd made the mistake of sitting down and now I didn't want to get back up.

I'd been doomscrolling through Frankie's Insta for the hundredth time when Aiden had messaged me, so I'd immediately called him back, vaguely hoping he'd tell me to knock it off.

Of course, I had to admit to him what I was doing first…

"So, I hired this new guy at the pub, and, er, I think I like him," I continued, glad I couldn't see my best friend's smug expression.

“Is that code for I shagged my new bartender and caught feelings?” Aiden asked, said smug expression evident in his voice. “Because been there done that. Except swap the employee for two sexy-as-fuck rugby players. God, B, you should see their new shorts. Mmm, they make Hunter’s arse look—”

“I don’t need to know about your boyfriend’s arse,” I said. “And no, I haven’t shagged Frankie. Haven’t done anything except flirt, stare at his arse, wonder what he’d look like wearing a thong, and make him a breakfast sandwich every time we finish a close together.”

“Holy fuck! You made him a *breakfast sandwich*? A *Bacon* breakfast sandwich.”

“Actually, I’ve made him about ten now.”

“*Ten*? You might as well’ve proposed fucking marriage! Jesus Christ, Bacon.”

“I know! That’s the fucking problem.” I groaned and rubbed my face, hoping it might massage my brain cells into something useful. Not that they’d ever been much help in the past. Other people’s issues I could deal with just fine. My own, not so much.

“Okay, first of all, is he definitely into you?” Aiden asked.

“Well, yesterday he leant on the bar with his arse out, smirked at me, and asked what a boy has to do for me to make him a breakfast sandwich. And the day before, he asked me what I thought of his new jeans.”

“Fucking Christ, man. And you have done fuck all about this? When he is *clearly* trying to get in your pants.”

“Yeah, well, not all of us just walk up to guys and ask if they fancy a shag.”

“Oh my fucking god, that is literally what Frankie is doing,” Aiden said with an exasperated groan. “Come here, right now, I want to smack you.”

“I’m not driving all the way to Lincoln for that. You wanna smack some sense into me, you can come here.”

“Not sure it’d help with the sense thing,” Aiden muttered. “And I thought I was hopeless.”

“You are. Were. But you ran away from things. I just can’t seem to get them started.” I wanted to. Desperately. But I had no fucking clue where to begin, and every time I thought about it, I remembered Frankie telling me he didn’t want to get involved with people at work again and my own declaration about hating messy staff shit.

“Do you want to?”

“Yeah, I just… I don’t want things to get messy, y’know? Hooking up with people you work with pretty much always ends badly and I can’t afford for that to happen. I mean, I doubt that Frankie’ll be here much past the summer ’cos he’s starting a master’s, but still, that’s another three or four months. A lot can happen in that time.”

“It’s a valid fear, and I’m not going to dismiss it,” Aiden said, a softness in his voice which I knew meant he was taking it seriously.

“But? There’s a bloody but there, I know it.”

“But you’re making the decision for him when he’s clearly expressed an interest in you. And you’re both adults, so, I don’t know, maybe actually talk about this shit instead of making assumptions about what the other person wants. Relationships require communication, y’know.”

“Yeah? When did you realise this?” I asked teasingly, because until recently Aiden had bolted every time anyone had tried to get close to him.

“It’s a recent discovery,” he said. “And sadly, it works.”

“Sadly? I’ll tell your boys you said that.”

“You know what I mean, dickhead.”

“Do I?”

“Yeah, it works, so don’t waste your time running away from something you want because you’re afraid. Talk to him, communicate, and maybe you’ll realise you want the same things. And if you don’t, at least you’ll know for sure.”

I sighed because the bastard was right and we both knew it. Those words were something I’d said to him in the past, which Aiden seemed to be delighting in throwing back at me. “I suppose,” I said quietly, gazing up at my ceiling where little bits of Blu Tack clung to the paint, the last remnants of posters or glow-in-the-dark stars from long before I’d lived here.

“Only suppose?”

“Fine, you’re right.”

“And once more for posterity,” Aiden crowed victoriously and I groaned.

“Fuck off,” I said with a chuckle, because there was no way I was giving him any more satisfaction. Instead, I said, “So, how’s life in Lincoln?” hoping the subject change would be enough to get me out of the conversation.

Which it was.

But it still didn't change the fact I needed to talk to Frankie.

I spent the whole of my shift trying to pretend nothing was wrong, or different, and that I wasn't overthinking every single word that came out of my mouth. And I thought I'd done a pretty good job of it until the last drunken patron staggered out singing and Frankie immediately levelled me with a hard stare from behind the bar.

"What the fuck is wrong with you today?" he asked, waving a grubby bar rag in my direction in a vaguely threatening way.

"Nothing, I swear."

"Really? Want to try again?"

"I promise, nothing's wrong," I said as I finished locking the door and threw up some sort of salute. "Scout's honour."

"That's the Vulcan salute from *Star Trek*, dickhead," he said with a withering look. "And I can guarantee you're not gonna tell me to 'live long and prosper.'"

I glanced at my hand sheepishly then lowered it at speed, embarrassment and frustration swirling in my stomach and slithering through my chest. "Yeah, well, I got kicked outta Scouts, didn't I?"

"Did you?" Frankie said, smirking and leaning on the bar, looking at me with delighted curiosity.

"Yeah, for fighting."

"I bet you were a right little scrapper, weren't you?"

"A proper dickhead, but it was justified. Mostly."

"And you said the stories of you taking on a gang of drunken twats were all fake," Frankie said. He rested his elbow on the bar, curling his hand into a loose fist and propping it under his chin. He was having far too much fun with this, but I couldn't say I blamed him. My youth'd been a colourful one, and my adult life wasn't that different, although I considered myself to be a lot more relaxed these days.

"That particular one was," I said with a casual shrug.

"Hmm, well, as much as I want to continue this particular conversation, don't think I haven't noticed that you still haven't told me what's wrong. Because something is, don't deny it!"

I sighed, leaning against the door and rubbing one hand across my face. This was my opportunity to be honest, to tell Frankie what I'd been stuck

on for weeks, since the night he first walked into the bar, but the words were failing me. Fuck, why was this so fucking difficult?

“Fuck me, right… I like you, Frankie. And I know that I shouldn’t be thinking about shagging you, because fuck, we both know how badly that shit ends. But bloody hell, it’s all I can fucking think about! And it’s not just because you’re fit as fuck, but because you’re the most interesting person who’s walked through my door in years.”

Frankie looked at me for a long second, a smile curling the corner of his mouth, his eyes glittering hungrily in the low lights of the bar. He stretched out his fingers and beckoned me towards him. “You better get your arse over here then.”

I didn’t need telling twice.

Striding across the room, I leant across the bar and grabbed the front of his T-shirt, hauling him into a hungry kiss. He tasted like the lime and Coke he drank constantly throughout his shifts, and something sweeter, almost artificial. Probably the shiny pink lip gloss he always wore.

Frankie nipped my lip, drawing a rumbled groan from my throat. “No biting,” I murmured playfully against his mouth.

“Yeah? What’re you gonna do about it?”

“God, you’re a brat, aren’t you?”

“As I said, what’re you gonna do about it?”

I growled under my breath because there was nothing I could do from my current position unless I wanted to throw myself across the bar. And knowing my luck I’d fall flat on my face and break my fucking neck. “Stay there,” I said as I released his T-shirt, striding around the bar and ducking behind it.

Frankie was lounging against the bar watching me with a smirk, his hip popped to one side making his skintight T-shirt ride up, revealing a sliver of skin between the hem and the waistband of his low-rise jeans. I closed the gap between us, crowding up against him and putting my hands on his hips, fingers sliding across his warm skin as my mouth found his.

He grasped the front of my shirt, pulling me closer and spreading his legs slightly so I could push my thigh between them, the thick muscle pressing against his growing erection. Frankie gasped, mouth falling open. I pushed my tongue past his lips, claiming his mouth as I pressed harder against him, rubbing my thigh across his cock and making him moan.

Fuck, he sounded good.

“You’re so hard for me already,” I said, sucking his bottom lip and licking the last of the gloss off it.

“Yeah, well, competence gets me off.”

“Oh, trust me, darlin’, you ain’t seen nothing yet.” I’d learnt years ago that I might not be the hottest guy around, but if I wasn’t a dickhead, had something of a personality, and was funny, charming, and *really* good at getting people off, then I’d never do badly.

Frankie groaned, his kisses turning almost feral as he began to rut against my thigh. It hadn’t been my plan to get him off behind the bar, but then again, it wasn’t like I’d had a fucking plan in the first place. “Fuck, you need it, don’t you?” I murmured, trailing my mouth along his jaw and down his neck, licking his soft skin and sucking his pulse point, tasting the perfume he’d sprayed on there at some point.

“Y-Yeah. Fuck, you have no idea!”

I chuckled darkly, slowly lifting my foot up and down to rub my thigh over his dick. “Show me how much you need it. Get yourself off on my thigh. Then I’m gonna take you back to mine and make you come again and again ’til you can’t fucking breathe.”

“Shit. Is that a promise?”

“Yeah, it is. And I always keep them.”

Another groan filled the air between us as he rode my thigh, chasing his orgasm, fingers so tight in the front of my shirt I thought he was gonna rip it. Not that it mattered if he did.

He tipped his head to the side, giving me access to his throat so I could keep licking and sucking the sensitive skin. I was so fucking hard in my jeans there was a solid chance I’d come when Frankie did, simply from watching him fall apart. I’d had a sneaky wank before coming in today, but I didn’t think it was gonna do much good because Frankie was so much more fucking beautiful than I’d ever imagined.

“S-Shit, I’m… fuck, I’m getting close,” Frankie said with a broken moan.

“That’s it, darlin’. Want to watch you come. Want to see you make a mess in these jeans for me.”

“Want to know what I’m wearing under them?” he asked, gasping as he spoke, a teasing grin on his lips as he twisted his head slightly to look at me.

“Mmm, you got something pretty on under there for me?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “A lace thong.”

Shit the fucking bed.

It was a good thing he was holding on to me because he could’ve knocked me over with a feather.

“Fuck, you trying to kill me?” I chuckled, licking his neck again as he frantically thrust against me, chasing his release. “Can’t wait to see it. Mmm, gonna take it off with my mouth, suck your cum out of it, then eat your pretty arse until you’re crying for me.”

I didn’t know if Frankie was a bottom, but I assumed there was a fair chance. If he wanted to top, though, I wasn’t opposed to it. As long as I got to make him come.

“Ahh, fuck… I… Coming!” Frankie cried out, his body shaking as he came, wetness blossoming across my thigh as he soaked his thong and jeans. His mouth was open, head thrown back, pleasure writing itself over his face.

That was the sight I’d been waiting for, and it was every bit as stunning as I’d imagined.

“Beautiful,” I murmured, kissing him softly, caressing the side of his face with my thumb.

“Shit… I can’t believe I did that,” he said, a breathless laugh shaking his chest.

“I wanted you to.”

“Mmm, I’m going to need something to go home in tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got you.” I kissed him again. “Still want to come back to mine then?”

“Yeah, I’ve been promised a shit ton of orgasms. And you should have at least one. To keep it fair.”

“I’m not sure that’s totally fair, but I’m not arguing with you.” Another kiss before I stepped back slowly, taking his hand. “Let’s go, darlin’, I’ve got plans for you.”

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Chapter Six

Frankie

When I'd woken up that morning, I hadn't imagined that I'd end the day spread out on Bacon's bed with him tugging my soaked thong down my thighs with his teeth.

I mean, I'd hoped, hence sticking a thong in my bag to put on in the toilet just before closing, because I'd seen him staring at my arse for weeks and figured I might as well give it a shot. A boy could dream.

And fuck me, were my dreams coming true.

Bacon was sprawled out between my legs, clothes dumped somewhere on the floor beside the bed, a smirk on his mouth as he lifted my lace underwear to his lips and began to suck the cum from it. All I could do was stare because I hadn't expected him to actually do it, especially not as it had started to go cold and congeal on the drive back to his flat.

When the man said he kept his promises, he wasn't joking.

"Taste so good," he said, throwing the thong onto the floor and smirking at me. That fucking smirk was a damn weapon, making me want to drop to my knees whenever he used it. "Now, though, I want it straight from the source." He hummed hungrily as he kissed up my thighs, his tattooed fingers teasing my balls. "How many times do you think you can come for me, darlin'?"

"Again? Maybe twice more. Three if you're lucky."

"Three sounds good," he said, stubbled jaw brushing my inner thighs. "Once in my mouth, once on my tongue, and once on my cock."

“Fuck! You’re gonna kill me.”

“Are you complaining?”

“No.” I grinned and rolled my hips, thrusting my cock towards him. “I want you to get on with it.”

“Fucking menace,” he murmured fondly before licking a wide stripe across my balls, making me cry out.

It turned out Bacon wasn’t just competent at the pub. He was good at *everything*. And I was very happy to fuck around and find out.

I gazed down my body, watching as he began to tease my cock, licking up the shaft and flicking his tongue across the dripping head. Bacon’s body was thick and broad, a layer of fat over his gym- and pub-honed muscles. His thighs and arse jiggled slightly as he moved and it made me want to fucking bite them, after I’d kissed down his huge chest and round stomach, rubbing my face in the dark hair that covered his skin. There was a random selection of tattoos across his body too, some more faded and some clearly done better than others. Although given that I knew at least three or four had been done by a mate in his garage, that didn’t surprise me.

Bacon’s eyes met mine as his lips wrapped around my cock, still fucking smirking as he sucked me into his mouth.

That fucker knew exactly what he was doing to me, but I wasn’t going to fucking complain. Not when he was determined to wring another three orgasms out of me. None of my hookups had ever wanted to do that.

None of my boyfriends either.

Not with this level of staunch resolve, anyway.

There was a bloody good chance I wasn’t going to survive this encounter, but I’d take my chances. Death by sex wasn’t a bad way to go.

I moaned as Bacon bobbed his head, sucking his cheeks in and tightening his mouth around my shaft, taking me deeper with every pass. His thick fingers rolled and teased my balls, then slid down between my cheeks, spreading the saliva dripping from his lips down my taint and circling my hole.

And that was enough to have me spilling down his throat, my hips trying to buck up and thrust deeper into his mouth. But he simply put his hand on my hip, holding me down as he swallowed my load before pulling off with a wet pop.

“One,” he said smugly, kissing the oversensitive head of my cock.

“Technically, two.”

“Oh, are we going on technicalities now, darlin’?”

Fuck, I loved the way he said that. *Darlin’*. I was never going to be able to hear that word in the same way.

“Yeah, I mean, if you want to be accurate.”

“Mm, I guess. That is pretty important.” He kissed my hip, sucking a little mark into my skin. It reminded me of those girls I saw on TikTok who talked about the millennial trend of putting Playboy Bunny gems there or tanning the logo onto their skin. It would certainly be something to show off at the pub tomorrow.

He slowly began to move down between my thighs, large hands gently encouraging me to lift my legs for him. “Show me that pretty hole. Been dreaming about getting my mouth on it.”

“Y-Yeah? Been thinking about eating me out?”

“All the fucking time.”

I chuckled teasingly. “I knew you’d been staring at my arse.”

“I tried not to, but you make it fucking impossible. Sticking it out every time you lean on the bar, pushing it in my face every time you bend over to load the dishwasher.”

“Had to get your attention somehow,” I said. “And I’m a fucking slut, so…”

“A pretty fucking slut,” he said, the filthy words sounding almost sweet on his tongue. He groaned as he buried his face between my cheeks like he wanted to fucking smother himself. I gasped as he flicked his tongue across the sensitive skin of my hole.

That was all the permission he needed to start eating me out like my arse was his last fucking meal.

My cock throbbed valiantly against my hip, desperately trying to get hard again as Bacon turned his sexual mastery to my arse. I’d been eaten out plenty of times in my life, but fuck, it felt like Bacon was trying to go for a world record, Olympic medal, and porn award all at once. It was hot, filthy pleasure, and all I could do was let it overwhelm me.

I hadn’t thought it would be possible for me to come again so soon, but I clearly hadn’t factored in Bacon’s determination and skill.

My orgasm hit me like a fucking train, making my legs shake violently, nothing but strangled moans dripping from my lips as my cock shot dribbles of clear liquid across my abdomen. My balls were nearly wrung dry, but nothing was going to stop that man from getting what he wanted.

Or giving me what he'd promised.

"Three," Bacon said with a smug, self-satisfied smile, lifting his head for a moment to survey the blissful havoc he'd wrought on me.

"I… F-Fuck," I spluttered out, my chest heaving as I gazed up at the ceiling, waiting for it to stop spinning.

"You still with me, darlin'?"

"Just about. I think you're trying to murder me."

"Nah, got too many plans for that," he said, kissing my thigh. "Still want me to fuck you?"

"Y-Yeah."

"Sure?"

"Yes, I just… words are fucking hard, okay?"

"Mmm, so this is how I get you to shut up," he said teasingly, slowly kneeling up between my thighs and stretching, his fat cock hanging hard and heavy between his legs.

"Would you want that?"

"Never. Just good to know I can fuck the attitude out of you. Y'know, in case of emergencies."

I pushed myself up on shaking arms and leant forward to kiss him. "What sort of emergencies?"

"I dunno, sex ones?"

I chuckled. "Sounds plausible." I reached out and wrapped my hand around his cock. "Want to get my mouth on you before you fuck me. You can open me up while I suck you." I tipped forwards and lowered my chest, pushing my arse into the air and putting one hand on the bed in front of him to balance myself.

Bacon moaned as I kissed the tip of his cock, licking up his precum and using my tongue to push his foreskin back, teasing the sensitive vein on the underside of his head. "Fuck, darlin', such a pretty mouth. So fucking perfect for me."

I let out a pleased hum as I sucked him into my mouth, taking him as deep as I could and breathing in the scent of him as my nose brushed his pubes. There was the click of a lube bottle and the cool feel of thick liquid trickling down my crack, quickly followed by Bacon's thick, slick fingers brushing my already wet hole.

A groan rumbled through my throat and into his cock as he slowly pressed one inside me. Fuck, it felt good. But it was just a tease of what I'd

get from him when I was ready.

His dick was like the rest of him—short, thick, and fat—and I knew it was going to feel incredible splitting me open. I wouldn't be surprised if he could make me come again, because there was no question that Bacon knew how to use his cock.

I bobbed my head, sliding his dick in and out of my mouth, savouring the taste and feel of him but not trying to make him come. Next time, maybe before work tomorrow, I'd get to taste his load, but it wasn't what I wanted tonight.

Bacon prepped me slowly and carefully, although the pace might have been because of what I was doing to him, splitting his focus from his task. But I wasn't complaining. We weren't in any rush.

When he finally pushed a third finger into me, I knew I was ready. I pulled off his cock and kissed his stomach. "I'm ready. Please, Dom, give me your cock."

"Dom?" he asked softly as he gently pulled his fingers out of me, his other hand cupping my jaw and drawing me up towards him.

"Yeah, baby. I'm not calling you Bacon in bed." I grinned and kissed him. "Besides, you said nobody else calls you that. So, I'm taking it. Means you're mine."

It was probably too early to be so possessive of him, but fuck it, I didn't give a shit. I was staking my claim to him. And if he didn't like it, he could tell me himself.

"I like that," he said, kissing me again with a sweetness that was probably dangerous. But I was in too deep to care. There was no right or wrong way to pace a relationship, and if this was what we wanted, then who the fuck cared how fast or slow we went.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, I'll be your Dom."

"Kinky." I winked and giggled when he spanked my arse playfully.

"You deserved that."

"Oh, I'm not complaining. I like a good spanking."

"I can imagine." He kissed me hungrily, his tongue claiming my mouth and making me moan. "Turn around and put that perfect arse in the air for me. I want to fuck you."

He didn't need to tell me twice. It was a little awkward to spin myself around gracefully with the duvet tangling around my knees, but I managed

it as he grabbed a condom off the bed, the foil wrapping crinkling as he ripped it open.

Dom groaned as I lowered my chest to the bed, spreading my arms out in front of me and pushing my arse into the air, shuffling my legs apart to show off my waiting hole.

My cock was desperately trying to get hard, but even if he didn't manage to make me come again, this was still going to rank as one of the best nights of my life.

Dom's hand gripped my hip, slowly guiding me backwards, the thick head of his cock pressing against my pucker. Our moans coalesced in the air as he filled me, stretching my rim around him. Fuck, I couldn't remember the last time I'd been so full.

It was a heady, delicious feeling and I hummed happily, stretching like a cat and pushing back onto him, taking the last of him until my arse was pressed against his hips.

"Shit, darlin', you feel so good," Dom said, leaning down to press a reverent kiss to the middle of my spine.

"Fuckin'… move… please, Dom! Fuck me!"

"Mm, I like the way you say my name. Sounds good." He rolled his hips teasingly, making me groan. "Gonna need to hear you say it more often."

"Fuck me and I'll say whatever you want. Slut, remember?"

"You really are, aren't you? A pretty slut for my cock."

"Y-Yeah." I shoved my hips harder against him, demanding more. "Now fuck me!"

"Bossy too." He pulled back, until just the tip was barely inside me, then slammed back in with so much force it knocked the air out of my lungs. He started to fuck me hard and fast, pounding me like his life fucking depended on it.

I tried to cry out, to beg for more, but all I could do was grip the sheets as endless little *ah, ah, ahs* fell from my lips like a chorus. Dom angled his hips, hammering his cock into my prostate.

"Come on, you know what I want, baby," he groaned. "Give me four."

"I-I… I can't!"

"Yeah, you can."

He sounded so sure, and all at once my body tensed as a new wave of pleasure swept through me, my cock dripping as my hole clenched around

him. It was different to my normal orgasms, deeper and somehow more intense, emanating from deep inside me. From my prostate.

Oh holy shit, he'd made me come untouched and have a prostate orgasm.

Fuck me.

Literally in this case.

My body trembled, melting into the bed as I struggled to hold myself up. Dom's hands were still on my hips as he kept fucking me, changing the angle so he wasn't tormenting my prostate as he chased his own release.

He growled as he came, the deep, rumbling sound doing something primal to my insides, and I knew I'd never be satisfied if I didn't hear it again.

"Four," he said roughly, a satisfied hum rolling through his chest as he leant down to kiss my spine again. "Told you, darlin', I keep my promises."

"F-Fuck!" It was all I could manage as he released my hips, easing me down to the bed as he pulled out of me.

I twisted my head and watched as he slid the condom off, wrapping it in some tissues and putting it on the floor. Normally, I'd think that was gross, but I didn't want him leaving. Pouting, I patted the bed next to me, because I was getting a cuddle from him one way or another.

"Do you want something?" he asked teasingly.

"A fucking cuddle," I said, pleased as he stretched out next to me. I shuffled closer to him, throwing my arm across his broad chest and burying my face in his pecs. "I hope you're not expecting me to leave tonight. You fucked me to death."

"You're pretty talkative for a corpse."

"Twat."

"Yeah, and?" He kissed the top of my head. "Course you can stay. I'll make you breakfast too."

"Can I have a breakfast sandwich?"

"Yeah, if you want."

I thought for a second, my stomach rumbling at the thought of one of Bacon's perfect breakfast sandwiches. Tilting my head, I looked up at him and smiled sweetly. "Can I have one now? Please?"

He chuckled and leant down to kiss me. "Sure, darlin'. You can have whatever you want."

I grinned and stole another kiss.

There was a whole fucking list of things I wanted from him—not just today or tomorrow, but a week from now. A month. A year. Maybe ten.

We'd start with a breakfast sandwich, though.

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Chapter Seven

Bacon

We ate breakfast sandwiches in bed at one in the morning, sipping cold cans of Coke and talking about whatever random shit crossed our minds. We were both sweaty and there was grease on the sheets, but that could all be fixed once we woke up later.

And honestly, I had better things to think about than the state of my bedding.

Namely, the beautiful man stretched out next to me who'd strolled into my pub with the confidence of ten men and turned my whole world upside down with a single stunning smile.

The idea that this would only be a one-time thing was already unthinkable to me, as was the idea that it'd be something casual. Just thinking about Frankie seeing someone else made my stomach turn, my sandwich sitting heavily inside it.

I didn't know if I'd be able to cope with that.

I mean, I would, if that was what he wanted, but fuck, it would hurt.

"You look very serious for someone who just got laid," Frankie said, licking melted blue cheese and barbecue sauce off his fingers.

"Just thinking," I said casually, trying not to stare at his mouth, my cock giving an interested twitch as it remembered the feeling of Frankie's mouth wrapped around it.

"Yeah, what about?"

I shrugged. "Nothing important."

He looked at me shrewdly, then said, “Want to know what I’m thinking?”

“Yeah, go on then.”

“I’m thinking that I don’t want this to just be a one-night thing. I want more. In fact, I’m staking a fucking claim on you, Dominic Bacon. Fuck the fact you’re my boss or that we’ve only been working together, what, six weeks? I’m not going to mope around wondering if or when. I’m telling you what I want. And you don’t have to agree, but I’m telling you what I want in the hope you might feel the same.”

There was a fierce defiance in his face, daring me to laugh, to tell him to fuck off, to say this was nothing more than a quick, meaningless shag. But he wouldn’t get that response from me.

Because I felt exactly the same way as him.

“Good, because that’s what I want too,” I said, leaning close to brush my lips across his, tasting the smoky saltiness of the sandwich. “Who gives a fuck what we do when? It’s our lives. We can do whatever the hell we want.”

“Yeah?” he asked breathlessly, relaxing slightly, his eyes softening as it sank in that I wasn’t about to turf him out of bed.

“Yeah. Fuck it, I like you, Frankie. I’m not giving that up just ’cos we work together. That’d be bollocks.”

“It really fucking would.”

“I wanna give this a shot. A *proper* shot. Because you’re the most incredible person I’ve ever met, and I’m still fucking in awe of you. Like, shit, do you even realise how amazing you are?”

He laughed softly, resting his head against mine. “I’ve got an idea.”

“Good.”

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Do you know how bloody awesome you are?”

I shrugged. “I’m not too bad, I suppose.”

“Seriously? You run a fucking pub that’s the home of some of the biggest wankers in Leicester and nothing fazes you. I mean, you’re a fucking legend, Dom. Literally. And you’re doing it all by yourself. I don’t think you give yourself enough credit,” he said, kissing me and then nipping my lip like he was trying to prove a point.

“Hey, no biting,” I said with a chuckle.

“Eh, you like it.”

“Maybe.” I grinned then tackled him to the bed, falling between his legs and gently pinning his wrists above his head. He looked up at me with wide eyes, heat igniting in them again. “What about you, darlin’? What do you like? Apart from my cock, being spanked, being a brat, and maybe being pinned down. Oh, and wearing slutty little thongs in public and riding my thigh until you come in them.”

“Mmm, I’m not going to be able to look at the bar the same way tomorrow, you know? And it’s all your fault.”

“Maybe next time I’ll bend you over it,” I said, my cock hardening at the thought. Fuck, Frankie would look so good taking my dick while bent over the bar, fingers clutching the wood as I pounded him. “Couldn’t let you come, though, otherwise you’d have to wash all the glasses.”

“We’ll think of something,” he said, rolling his hips against me demandingly.

“How the fuck are you hard again?” I asked in disbelief, shaking my head fondly. “Horny little slut.”

“Yeah, and I’m all yours.”

“Yeah, you are.” I kissed him again, licking into his mouth and smirking.

Work tomorrow was going to be hell, but fuck it, I’d live. It was worth being exhausted if I got to make Frankie come again.

The whole pub figured out we were together within two weeks. Not that we tried to keep it a secret from them.

It was my fucking pub and if anyone had a problem with me having a boyfriend, they could piss off and find somewhere else to get their cheap, shitty beer and watch the football. But surprisingly, very few of them seemed to have an issue with it.

Most of them didn’t seem to give a shit as long as they got their drinks, their crisps, and their Sunday lunches. There were more questions about whether I was going to be showing the various England cricket tests and the World Cup than our relationship.

A few of them tried to show Frankie he was welcome in their own way, like Twiglet—God bless his heart—offering to sell him both cocaine and knockoff Viagra at a “hefty discount” in the carpark, before asking him not to tell me so he’d be allowed back inside, Dave volunteering to kick my

arse if I upset him, and Pawel trying to teach him about football, although that conversation quickly got sidetracked when they started talking about cricket.

Billy and the other kitchen staff hadn't been surprised, but Ravi had when Frankie had told him over the phone, and Frankie had immediately asked why.

"Can't you see Bacon's fit?" Frankie had said. "Who wouldn't want to shag him? Also, have you seen me?"

Poor Ravi hadn't been able to answer that. I hoped he'd come back in the autumn, though, because he was a reliable guy and I'd need the extra pair of hands with Frankie starting his master's. Frankie insisted he'd still be able to work as much as I needed because he was studying at Leicester, but I was ready to be stubborn because I wasn't going to let him risk his future for me. He'd worked hard for his place, and he was smart as fuck.

But, I supposed, if he wanted to work in the pub some nights while I manned the bar, I wouldn't be opposed to that.

Aiden, of course, had been smug as fuck about the whole thing and tried to take credit, while I'd reminded him I'd done the same for him, so we were even. Not that we kept score, but still, it was the principle.

He'd come down a week after we'd gotten together with his boyfriends, Hunter and Bailey, to meet Frankie and I'd immediately regretted letting them meet because Frankie and Aiden got on like a house on fire, and all I could see in my future was trouble. With a capital fucking T.

Not that I minded.

For the first time in my adult life, it felt like my feet were on solid ground. Like I had a partner beside me who saw me and my life for what it was and wasn't setting out to change it. He liked me and my pub just the way we were.

Well, apart from Twiglet trying to sell him dodgy Viagra.

I was a bit rough around the edges, swore like a fucking sailor, and wore my heart on my sleeve, and Frankie had still decided he wanted me. I was the luckiest bastard in the world because he was smart, sharp, and beautiful as the fucking sun.

We clicked in a way I'd never done with anyone else, working in perfect harmony together with teasing comments and the odd, playful arse slap.

The future might not be written down in front of me, but I could already see it.

Frankie and me, together come rain or shine, no matter what life threw at us.

With kisses every morning.

And breakfast sandwiches at midnight.

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About the Author

Charlie lives in England with her husband and two cheeky dogs. She spends most of her days wrangling her characters and hoping one day they'll tell her what the plan is before they set off.

She loves low angst stories with a healthy dollop of fluff, plenty of delicious sex, and happily ever afters—because the world needs more of them.

Charlie has very little spare time, but what she does have she fills with baking, Dungeons and Dragons, reading and many other nerdy pursuits. She also thinks that everyone should have at least one favourite dinosaur…

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Banter Over The BBQ

Toby Wise

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Prologue

The Frat House

"Okay, okay," Jeremy murmurs, running a hand through his hair. "I don't understand how we didn't think of this until now."

"Real bummer, bro," Peter says, nodding his head. "Can't have a fall BBQ party if none of us knows how to use a grill."

"Honestly? How hard could it be?" Seth says with a shrug. "I'm sure we could just like google it or something?"

Jeremy lets out a deep sigh, opening his laptop. He turns to his only hope; Reddit.

"Here's the deal," he says, starting to type out an ad. "We'll put out a search for the dad of all dads. Someone who can come and be our designated grilling guru for the fall celebration."

"You really think we'll be able to find someone on such short notice?"

"It's either that or we'll all be eating shitty burgers one of us overcooks because we'll be too drunk to notice."

The guys all look at each other before nodding, putting their heads together at Jeremy's laptop. At first, they just want a guy who can grill but as they workshop, their search becomes more and more specific. They have to be a dad so he can pass out wisdom. They gotta be willing to bring their own grill. They've gotta be okay with being paid in beer and frat fellowship. They gotta tell at least each of them a dad joke at some point during the night. Most importantly, they've gotta wear socks and sandals (that one was Jeremy's idea).

In the end, after hours of brainstorming, they come up with the perfect request.

ISO Generic Father Figure For Fraternity Fall BBQ Party

To the dads of the world,
We will be hosting a fall bbq party at our fraternity. Our one oversight: none of us know how to use a grill. We're searching for the perfect designated 'BBQ dad'.

Our generic dad will need to bring their own grill and equipment, be willing to dress the part, have experience sharing dad jokes throughout the night, and bestow fatherly advice on a group of guys in their twenties. We also have a few brothers who are vegan so any experience grilling soy dogs and veggie patties is an added bonus.

We will provide you with the food, beer, and frat fellowship as payment for your time.

Serious inquiries only please.

Jeremy pretends to wipe a tear from his eye. "It's fucking perfect."

Seth rolls his eyes but he can't help but agree. If this doesn't get them the generic dad of their dreams, he's not sure what will.

Now, they wait.

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Chapter One

Deli

"Thanks again for giving me a ride, Jason."

"It's fine, Dad. Don't worry about it," he says right away, getting out of the truck and heading towards the back. I can't help but smile. My son takes too much after me sometimes. A simple gesture of thanks leaves him all flustered.

I get out of the truck, making sure my backpack full of all my supplies is over my shoulder. Jason carefully rolls my grill to the back and I help him move it from the truck down onto the driveway. Then he leaps back down, tossing the gate back up with a loud thump.

"Probably should have double checked this was the right address," I say as I lean down, pulling up the socks I'm wearing.

The ad had a very specific dress code which I've done my best to follow. I stopped at Walmart this morning in order to pick up a pair of sandals I could wear. I've got the tall, calf height socks to go with them, khaki shorts, a white tee with a Hawaiian shirt with little winged pizzas on it. This one is a little big on me.

Jason just sighs at me but I can see the way he's hiding a little smile. I pull him into a tight hug which he returns.

"Tell Other Dad I say hello when you see him."

I grin at my son. "Will do! Have a great day at work."

That makes him grumble as he gets back into his little pickup truck. Then I grab the handle on my grill, tipping it back onto its wheels and

rolling it towards the backyard.

Before I can properly round the corner, a handful of guys are already walking towards the driveway. The group of kids, the frat brothers I assume, all stop in their tracks.

“Ah, shit,” one of them mumbles, his eyes locking onto my grill.

I should really be worried about why they all look so worried but it’s hard to focus on anything but the handsome man trailing behind them. He’s by far, the most handsome man I’ve ever laid eyes on. My heart skips a beat and I can feel the blood rushing to my cheeks.

“Would you look at that,” the guy says with a grin so wide it makes the dimple in his cheek pop. “They’ll let just anyone in here, huh?”

I can’t help but throw my head back and chuckle. I’m completely and utterly at ease, looking this guy up and down. He’s bigger than me in every way with dark hair that’s peppered with some sexy gray around his temples and in his short beard. He’s wearing sandals with socks, gray shorts, and a very familiar looking Hawaiian button up. Where mine is a bit too big, his is a bit too snug on him.

“Do you guys know each other?”

I look over at the kid asking before looking back at the man. He smirks as he holds out his hand for me to shake. I take it without a second thought.

“Never seen this man before in my life,” he says. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Caleb.”

“Deli,” I tell him, ignoring the shiver that runs through me as our hands touch. “Pleasure to meet you.” Then I gesture at our shirts. “Looks like great minds think alike.”

“Just something I found at the back of my closet,” Caleb confesses with a shrug. Funny, that’s where I found mine as well.

Just then, Jason honks his horn, letting me know he’s leaving. I give him a wave before turning towards Caleb. “He wanted me to tell his Other Dad hi.”

“Other Dad, huh? Cute,” Caleb says, waving at Jason as well. “I was just grabbing my charcoal out of my truck.”

“Don’t let me stop you.”

“I’m not really sure how this happened but apparently we told both of you to come,” one of the kids says, looking through his phone. “I hope that won’t be a problem? I know the ad said one ultimate father figure.”

“If he’s fine sharing the grilling duties then I’m fine with it,” I say with a little shrug. “We could even have a friendly little competition, see who’s grilling skills are better.”

“I’ll have you know,” Caleb says, suddenly behind me holding a bag of charcoal. “Charcoal grills are superior.”

I roll my eyes at him with a little huff. “My gas grill is just as good.”

“We’ll see,” he says with a smirk that makes heat flare in the pit of my stomach. “Why don’t we put a friendly wager on this? We’ll have the boys vote for whose meat is better at the end of the night.”

“What will I get when I win?”

Caleb looks at me for a moment before suggesting, “if I win, you let me take you out to dinner.”

I tsk before turning away and rolling my grill towards the backyard. “In your dreams.”

The frat brothers all go wild, ribbing Caleb for getting so thoroughly shot down. I can’t help but smile as I walk, feeling a weird confidence surge through me. It’s been so long since I’ve been hit on like this. It was a bold move, one I’m actually pretty impressed with.

But just because it’s impressive, doesn’t mean I’m going to give in so easily. I’m a man who wants to be pursued. I want to be persuaded. I want to be ‘rizzed up’ as the kids say these days.

And if Jason ever heard me say that, he’d probably disown me so I’ll make sure to keep that little phrase locked up where only I can ponder it.

I set my grill down beside the charcoal grill. There’s already a group of guys out here, all holding beers in their hands. When they see us, they crowd around, introducing themselves. It’s a lot of names rapid fire and I do my best to remember them all.

Jeremy is the head of this frat, he’s the one I met out by Caleb’s truck who apologized for the misunderstanding, which really is no big deal. There’s Seth and Peter, Alex and Adam. Next to them are Francis, Franky, and Max. Pike, Eddie, Bell, and Derek all introduce themselves as well.

“It’s nice to meet you all,” I say, shaking hands and patting shoulders.

I wasn’t sure about all of this when I read the ad but one of my New Year goals was to be a bit more outgoing. Now that Jason is living on his own, I’m having a bit of the empty-nester syndrome. I don’t know what to do with myself now that the kids are all grown. When my eyes caught this ad on Reddit, I couldn’t help but reply.

Chancing a glance over at Caleb, I can't help but think this was one of my more brilliant ideas.

I grab a beer from the cooler before sidling up next to Caleb, watching as he arranges a pile of charcoal inside his grill. He covers them with lighter fluid before lighting it on fire.

"If this was a gas grill, we'd already have the meat on the grill instead of waiting for your coals to heat up," I tell him, swaying back and forth on my feet.

Caleb looks up at me, narrowing his eyes. "Just because something is *fast* doesn't mean it's *good*."

"We'll see," I say with a smirk that makes his pretty brown eyes light up.

One of the guys brings Caleb a bottle of beer. As we wait for Caleb's coals to heat up properly, we break off into two groups, chatting.

"What's your majors?"

"I'm getting a teaching degree," Seth says proudly. "I come from a long family of teachers so I've been around it my whole life. It just felt right to keep the family legacy going."

"Right now I'm getting an English major but I have no fucking idea what I'm actually going to do with it," Eddie explains.

"That's alright," I say, patting his shoulder. "Just the fact that you're getting this degree is a huge step. Life is just a bunch of little steps that take you on the path that's meant for you and you alone. There's no wrong step because even if it's not the way you end up going, it still brought you further down the path."

"Shit," one of them murmurs, "that was deep."

"That's what she said," I say, making us all chuckle.

I listen to them talk about their degrees and their classes, adding in comments here and there. Man, I'm struck with how old I am all at once. It really wasn't that long ago that I was a young man, making my way out in the world for the first time. It was hard back then. I'd changed my name right out of high school. I cut my hair, changed my clothes, and talked to my doctor about starting testosterone.

It wasn't until that moment that I thought I would become an old man someday. Look how far I've come. Now I have a bit of gray in my hair, adult children, and a home that feels just a little bit more empty than it used

to be. I've carved out a life for myself when, as a teenager, I felt like living might not be all it was cracked up to be. I'm so fucking thankful I held on.

Throughout all of this, my eyes keep wandering across the yard over to Caleb. I watch him sip his beer, watching the way his throat works as he swallows. I watch him bend over and check on his grill, his ass looking fantastic in those shorts. I watch him laugh with the kids, throwing his head back and looking so carefree.

My stomach is warm with fondness. God, I really hope he hits on me again.

"Hey, Pat-- Sorry, Pike! Your turn."

I turn to look at Pike. He's about the same height as me which is a bit unusual because I'm usually the shortest person in a group. He's got a buzzed head, a nose piercing, and tense shoulders. Why do I suddenly have the urge to hug him?

"Sorry," Pike says with a shrug. "Trying out a new name and it hasn't quite stuck yet."

"Don't worry about it," I say, nudging his elbow with my own. "Took me a bit to settle on Deli," I tell him with a wink that seems to bring his shoulders away from his ears.

"My goal is to get into the social work scene. I wanna make some real changes for real people."

"Good for you, man. That's hard work and I've only known you for a day but I can see you'd rock at that."

"You think so?"

"I know so," I tell him with a grin.

"My grill is finally ready," Caleb calls out, bringing my attention back over to him.

"It's about time," I say, shaking my head. "In the time it took for your coals to heat up, I could have done a couple rounds." I pause before adding, "rounds of food on my grill, I mean."

Caleb raises his brow, a delighted smile on his face. "On your grill. Of course. I love a man who can do more than one round."

"And I love a man with a bit of stamina."

"Oh, I'll show you stamina."

Someone clears their throat, forcing Caleb and I to finally look away from each other. I feel my face heating, but do my best to keep my

composure. I sip at my beer, letting the cool taste chase the heat from my face.

I look at Jeremy. “So, which of you guys are vegan?” Alex and Adam raise their hands. “I’m gonna be your grillmaster for the night,” I tell them, giving them a silly little bow. “I thoroughly washed my grill this morning but I’ve used this grill for meat in the past. I can use tinfoil to cover the grill to be extra thorough if you’d like?”

“No, no,” Adam says right away. “Just washing it is totally enough.”

“Yeah, no worries. You can grill like normal. We just want to have veggie burgers and soydogs instead.”

“I’ve got you,” I tell them with a grin. I finally turn my grill on, allowing the fire to start up and heat everything up inside. I pull out my backpack, unpacking my apron and tying it around my waist. It says ‘king of the grill’ on the front. After getting my tongs out and setting them on the little tray on the side of my grill, I head through the backdoor towards the kitchen.

Caleb and Jeremy are already inside, dividing everything up between the two of us. I get the soydogs and veggies burgers while Caleb gets the regular burgers and hotdogs.

With our plates filled up, we head to our grills. Opening it up, I can see everything is warm enough and I can throw my meat on the grill. I look over at Caleb, watching him do the same.

“I like the way you handle your meat, Deli,” Caleb says, giving me a wink.

I roll my eyes. “Been a while since you’ve seen a man fondle his meat?”

“Longer than I’d like to admit,” he says playfully, sticking out his tongue at me. How immature! What a fucking dork.

Why the fuck do I want to fuck him so badly? Why do I wanna kiss that smug look right off his face?

I roll my eyes at him, closing the lid on my grill. I pick up my tongs, turning towards Caleb and giving them a couple of little clicks in his direction. In response, he picks up his own, doing the same right back at me.

“A real dad war,” someone says with a chuckle.

“How old are your kids?”

I look over at Caleb, waiting. He finally looks away from me, clearing his throat. “I have a son named Patrick. He’s 21. Graduated from trade

school and now he’s a full time plumber.”

“That’s awesome. What about you, Deli?”

“I have an 18 year old named Jason. He’s actually going to start school here next fall.”

“No fucking way,” Jeremy says in excitement. “Please tell him he’s welcome here any time!”

“I’ll let him know,” I say with a smile. “Although, he might be embarrassed to know my dad skills are what got him a bunch of new friends.”

I carefully check on what I’m grilling, rotating everything just right before closing the lid again. Caleb mirrors my actions. The smell of everything cooking fills the air, making my mouth water. Digging in my backpack, I pull out some of my homemade seasoning, adding it to the burgers and the soydogs. I made sure everything was safe for the vegan kids to enjoy.

It’s what’s going to give my food an edge over Caleb’s.

“So,” I say to the group of kids. “What do you call a cow with no legs?”

They all look at each other, trying to figure it out. Caleb catches my eye, covering his mouth and doing his best not to grin too wide. The sight sets my heart alight.

“Ground beef.”

“Oh my god.”

“That’s *terrible*.”

“Boo!”

I can’t help but laugh, my chest feeling so light from hanging out with these kids and especially, spending time with Caleb.

“Dinner is still on the table,” Caleb says to me.

“I don’t know, Caleb. I don’t feel very convinced. You’ve gotta make it worth my time.”

Caleb seems to ponder that for a moment before taking a sip of his beer. When he speaks again, it’s under his breath so only I can hear. “You talked about going round after round. Let’s just say, I have the stamina to keep up with you. I’ll leave you so exhausted the last thing you’ll be thinking about is leaving to get dinner.”

My breath stutters in my chest at his words, heat pooling in the pit of my stomach. Fuck. I love a man who knows what he wants and isn’t afraid to say it out loud.

“You’ve got a filthy mouth,” I tell him.

Caleb just smirks, that look sending a thrill down my spine. “Yeah, and I know exactly how to use it.”

I bite my bottom lip, trying to keep my composure but it’s hard when I’m suddenly hard and throbbing inside my boxers. I take another sip of my beer, doing my best to hide the way my hands are shaking. Finally, I give Caleb a shrug. “Guess we’ll have to see what everyone thinks of our grilling.”

“Oh, game on, Deli,” he says, turning back to his grill.

Excitement thrums just under my skin, leaving me feeling tingly and warm from the toes of my socked-feet up to the ends of my brown hair. I keep watching Caleb work, anticipation making me downright giddy. Is it bad that I want him to win just to see what that mouth will really be able to do tonight?

It doesn’t take long before I’m pulling my food off my grill, piling it high onto a plate that Jeremy has provided me. As I walk into the kitchen, I overhear Pike and Adam talking.

“I ship them,” Adam says with a chuckle.

Pike nods his head. “It’s hard not to. Their chemistry is hotter than their grills.”

I clear my throat as I step into the kitchen, setting the plate down. Both of the kids have blushes on their cheeks. I don’t tell them that I’ve overheard what they were talking about but their words set something alight inside my stomach, warm fluttering making me feel twenty years younger.

After setting down the food, I lean against the backdoor, calling out to Caleb. “My offering is already done. Your grill is taking too long, Caleb.”

“Someone is just impatient. Haven’t you heard of delayed gratification? The wait makes it better. More satisfying.”

I roll my eyes at him. “Quick and dirty has never left me unsatisfied.”

“I’ll make a believer out of you yet, Deli.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it, big guy.”

Caleb’s ears turn a wonderful shade of red at the nickname. My stomach swoops. Good lord, this man is beautiful. I could so easily grow addicted to making him blush, maybe I already have.

Caleb takes his meat off the grill, bringing it inside. As he passes me, he stops to hip check me, making both of us laugh. All the kids grab a plate, piling not only the meat onto their plates but also all the random sides

they've all created. There's baked beans, pasta salad, and a variety of flavors of chips. There's also the saddest looking bean dip I've ever seen. Not wanting the kid who made it to feel bad, I make sure to take a giant scoop of it.

We all sit in the back yard with our plates, eating while chatting. The camaraderie is infectious, leaving me feeling happy and content. I wish I could have had a brotherhood like this when I was younger. I think it would have helped with my transition into adulthood. I would have felt so much less alone.

A foot touches my ankle and I look over, seeing Caleb looking anywhere but at me. He's engrossed in a conversation yet that damn foot runs over my ankle in a maddening pattern. I feel my body heating up and I do my best to ignore him.

"Alright," I say, bringing everyone's attention to me. "I need a vote. For everyone who's tried both meats, which did you think was better?"

"This is probably the best soydog I've ever had," Adam says happily, having a third one.

"I'm not usually a big fan of veggie burgers but *fuck*," Jeremy says with a nod.

I revel in the praise, happy that my food was delicious. I had a burger from Caleb's grill and I have to admit, it was also delicious as fuck. I bite my bottom lip, listening to everyone talk, excitement welling up inside of me. At the end of it all, I get more votes than Caleb.

"I don't want to gloat but," I say with a grin in Caleb's direction. He gives me a disappointing look.

"I was really looking forward to talking you into my bed tonight," he says softly, so only I can hear.

My cheeks immediately flame. "The night's not over yet."

"So I have a shot?"

"You're growing on me," I admit with a roll of my eyes.

"Oh, fuck yeah!" Caleb says, standing up and heading over to the grilling area, already starting to put his things away. I can't help but shake my head in amusement. He's such a fucking dork.

Although he's a dork, I've already made up my mind. I am going to fuck the shit out of him tonight.

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Chapter Two

Caleb

With a grunt, I lift my grill up into the back of my truck. Then I make quick work of wrapping it in cords, making sure it'll be secure for the drive back home. Once that's all done, I look down at Deli, holding out my hands for his grill as well.

From this angle, I can look down into his pretty blue eyes. My stomach swoops just from looking at him. He's shorter and slimmer than me, with light, short hair. He doesn't have any facial hair but his jaw is strong and defined.

God, I want to get my hands on him. All of this teasing has left me desperate to finally have him.

Deli hums softly. "You're good with your hands."

I smirk as I finish tying his grill down. "This is just the appetizer to what I'll show you later."

"Big words, big guy."

I have to stifle a groan at the nickname. I don't know what it is but hearing him call me big guy has me throbbing. At the same time, I feel my ears heating with a blush, warmth surging through me.

I am so far gone that it's borderline embarrassing.

"Thanks again for tonight," Jeremy says as I carefully hop down from the back of my truck, careful not to hurt myself. I'm not as spry and young as I used to be, now I have to take care of this poor body.

“You’re so welcome,” I say, taking his hand and giving it a firm shake. “It was really great to meet you guys. I had a great time.”

“I did too,” Deli says, also shaking Jeremy’s hand. “If you ever need some pseudo dads in the future, please keep us in mind.”

“You’ve basically adopted an entire frat house, I hope you know that.”

Deli smiles wide, the sight stealing my breath for a moment. Jesus, how can someone be so gorgeous? I clench my hands against my button-up, keeping myself from reaching out and touching him the way that I want.

That can wait until we’re safely behind closed doors.

Deli and I get into my truck. Once we’re both buckled in, I throw my truck into drive and take off.

“So,” Deli murmurs, placing a hand on my thigh. A shiver runs through me at the simple touch. If he inched his hand a little to the left, he’d be touching my cock which is already starting to perk up with excitement. “You made me some big promises tonight, Caleb. Were you all talk and no bite?”

I suck in a sharp breath, trying to keep my racing heart steady. “I’ll give you everything you want and more.”

“Then you better get us back to your place.”

As I stop at a stop light, I throw my head back against the car seat, letting out a long groan. Deli just chuckles beside me, giving my thigh a squeeze. He moves his hand lower, letting his fingers touch the skin of my inner thigh.

“You keep doing that, I might have to pull over,” I admit with a pleased noise.

Deli laughs. “Oh? You kept talking about delayed gratification. Now you want it quick and dirty?”

“That’s how you like it, isn’t it?”

Deli squeezes my thigh before pulling his hand away. I let out a desperate whine at the loss of touch. That’s when the light turns green.

God, he’s such a fucking tease. My cock is fully hard, throbbing against the zipper of my shorts. I want him so desperately it’s making it hard to focus on the drive but I do my best to get us home without any issues.

I pull the truck into my garage. As soon as I turn the truck off, I turn, tugging Deli towards me by the front of his Hawaiian shirt that matches my own.

Deli makes a surprised noise as I kiss him but almost instantly, he falls into the kiss, giving me just as much as he's getting. When he opens his lips, I plunge my tongue into his mouth, groaning deep in my chest at the feeling of our tongues caressing.

I have been waiting for this since the moment my eyes landed on Deli. The wait was more than worth it.

"Fuck," Deli breathes out when he finally pulls back. "Fuck, Caleb."

"Yeah, that's the goal. Hopefully."

Deli giggles as he gets out of the truck. He walks around the front to where the door into the house is located. He turns back to the truck, gesturing towards the back.

"What about the grills?"

"Fuck it. I'll take care of them tomorrow."

"Someone's eager."

"You have *no* idea," I say, shoving him through the door and into the house. We stumble out of our sandals, tossing them beside the door before walking further in.

My back hits the wall and I let out an umph of surprise. Deli crowds against me. Despite the fact that he's smaller than me, he truly has a presence about him. I'm completely at his mercy. Exactly where I want to be.

Deli kisses me and it's all-consuming, leaving me breathless. His mouth moves against my throat and I whine, my hands gripping his shirt, holding on for dear life.

"Caleb," he murmurs against my ear, his voice making me shiver. "You promised to show me what that mouth can do."

"*Yes*," I say with a gasp, letting myself slide down the wall and onto my knees. Deli is already pulling the belt off his shorts, his hands working at opening the khakis. I hold his hips, keeping him steady as he allows his shorts and boxers to fall onto the floor, leaving his bottom half bare.

"Go on," Deli says softly, pushing his hips towards my face.

"Fuck," I whisper, my eyes taking him in. He has the prettiest bush and I allow myself to run my nose against it, breathing in the musky scent of his sex. Then I push two fingers against his lips, parting them so I can get my mouth on the bud that's hard, standing up proud for me.

"Caleb," Deli cries out with a gasp as I wrap my lips around his little dick.

He’s stiff against my tongue, warm and wet where my chin touches him. The smell of his arousal hits my nose and it makes my head spin. I lick through his folds, needing to taste his slick before going back to his dick, licking over the stiff nub over and over.

“Jesus,” Deli hisses out, grabbing a fistfull of my hair. He brings his knee up to my right shoulder, leaning his shin against me while holding the back of my head with his right hand. I’m pinned against the wall as he shoves his hips against my face, riding my tongue just the way he likes.

I hum against his cock, the vibrations making his thighs shake. My own cock hurts with how turned on I am. I’m so fucking desperate that everything fades into the background. The only thing going through my mind is making Deli come on my tongue. I want to feel him throbbing against me. I want to feel him grow impossibly wet. I want to hear him cry out my name.

I open my eyes, looking up so I can see Deli’s face morph with pleasure as I suck him off, too eager to make it past the entryway of the house. He’s so pretty it makes my head light with affection.

It doesn’t take long before Deli is moaning, long and low at the back of his throat. I feel his thighs tighten around my ears, his cock throbbing against my tongue. I’m careful as I lick him through his orgasm, not wanting him to get too sensitive and push me away.

“That was perfect,” Deli says softly, putting his foot back on the ground. He leans down, cupping my face. “You’re perfect,” he says before kissing my lips. I sink into the kiss, letting it wash over me.

“Come on,” I say against his lips, letting him help me stand back up. “Let’s go to the bedroom. I promised you round after round.”

I’m getting too old for this but I don’t care. I pick Deli up by the waist, hoisting him up onto my shoulder. He makes a delighted squeal, giggling all the way to the bedroom.

“Oh my god, Caleb! Put me down!” Deli says breathlessly.

“Your wish is my command,” I say, tossing him onto the bed. Deli scoots back until his head is against the pillows. He sits up in order to strip out of his shirt and button up. Then he finally takes those tall socks off, tossing them onto the floor. He’s completely naked and I can’t help but stare at him, marveling at how fucking sexy this man is.

His body is small and lean, yet strong. His bush is so pretty between his legs, a treasure trail leading up to his belly button. His chest is toned, with

thin scars across his pecs. I want to leave his skin covered in bite marks. I want to taste every inch of him.

God, I want so much.

“Are you going to just stare all night?”

“Would you let me?”

“Absolutely not,” he says with a chuckle. “Get your ass in bed with me before I start jerking myself off.”

“Not an ounce of patience,” I say, shaking my head at him. As much as I’d love to tease him all night, I make quick work of getting out of my clothes.

Once I’m naked, I crawl into bed. Deli sits up on my knees, meeting me halfway. He kisses me, shoving his tongue into my mouth, sweeping it against my own. I groan in pleasure. Before I can really sink into the kiss fully, he’s tossing me onto the bed on my back.

“Stay right there,” he says, getting on his hands and knees so he can rummage through the bedside drawer. I can’t help myself, I reach over and slap his perfectly pert ass. “I said stay there!” Deli says with a giggle.

“I haven’t moved,” I tell him seriously, squeezing his ass cheek just because I can. “Your ass is fucking perfect.”

Finally, Deli pulls out the supplies he’s been looking for. He crawls out of bed, tossing me the lube as he goes. I watch him step into the harness, shimmying it up onto his hips. Once the strap is in place, he gets back into the bed.

“I want you to finger yourself open while I fuck your mouth,” he tells me, his voice taking on a more dominant tone to it. It’s hot as fuck.

“Hell yeah,” I say, adjusting the pillows a bit so he can come straddle my face comfortably. I pour some lube onto my fingers before bringing them to my own ass, pressing against my hole.

Deli swings his thigh over my shoulder so that his strap is right in front of my face. Immediately, I open for him, allowing him to push the tip between my lips. I moan around the intrusion, hoping to put on a good show for him.

“Fuck,” Deli gasps out as he pushes deeper into my mouth. I start to finger myself open, getting myself ready for him. I want him to fuck me so badly that I ache for it, desperation clawing at my throat. “You really do know what to do with your mouth. Jesus Christ, Caleb. Look at you taking me so well.”

I let out a wanton whine at Deli's words. Warmth surges through me, making my toes curl. He fucks my mouth, always careful not to push too far. Drool drips from the sides of my lips down my chin but the wet, sucking noises seem to only turn Deli on further.

I watch as he shoves his hand between the strap and his pelvis, getting his fingers onto his cock. He roughly touches himself until he's trembling above me. He shoves the strap into my throat, making me gag.

"Fuck," he gasps out, pulling back. "I'm so sorry, babe. Are you okay?"

I clear my throat. "I'm fine. Make me gag on it, Deli."

"You sure?"

I nod my head, placing my free hand on his hips. If I need to, I'll be able to tap him and let him know I need a break. With that established, Deli goes back to fucking my mouth, making me gag on his cock.

By the time I have two fingers comfortably fucking my ass, Deli is crying out. He shakes as he comes on his fingers, his eyes never leaving my mouth which is stretched around his strap.

"Goddamn, Caleb. That was so good."

I clear my throat and wipe my mouth against the sheets. "Kiss me."

Deli adjusts until he's sitting on my hips, my cock snug against his wet and throbbing core. It makes my cock jump. Then he leans down and kisses my lips, holding my face between his hands like I'm something precious. My hands go to his hips, shoving him so that he's slowly humping my cock.

"You feel so good," I tell him, whispering against his lips.

"You too," he says, moaning into my mouth. "You're so hard for me. Are you desperate yet? Are you ready for me to fuck you?"

"You have no idea. Been thinking about this all fucking day, sweetheart."

A shiver goes through Deli. He grinds against my cock. "God, I want to sit on your dick so badly but I know you must be aching for me to finally fuck you."

"*Please*," I gasp out, my hands tightening around his hips. "I need it, Deli."

"I've got you," he says, sliding away from my dick. He taps my hip and I quickly flip over onto my stomach. I hear the squelch of the lube and my body thrums with anticipation. Thankfully, I don't have to wait long before

Deli is running the tip of his dick between my cheeks. With one, smooth thrust, Deli pushes into my hole.

“Oh god,” I whimper at the stretch. It feels so fucking good, so fucking perfect. He pushes until his hips are snug with my ass. “Needed this. Needed you to own me. Fuck.”

Deli’s hands run up my back and I feel like a cat, raising my hips up for him, desperate for his touch.

“You look incredible like this, hanging off my dick, begging for more.”

“Fuck.”

Deli pulls back and the slide of his dick against my insides makes my toes curl. He slams back in and I have to raise my hands and stop myself against the headboard. Deli does that a few times, pulling back slowly before shoving into me.

“Please,” I say with a whimper, my cock rubbing against the sheets below me. “Please, Deli. Fuck me properly. Please.”

“God, I love it when you beg,” he says through gritted teeth. He pulls my cheeks apart and I feel my entire body flush, knowing he’s watching his cock fuck my hole.

Finally, Deli picks up the pace, fucking me with long, hard thrusts. He finds the perfect rhythm, hitting my insides just right. Warmth pools in the bit of my stomach, pleasure surging through me with every thrust.

“Close,” I say through gritted teeth. “So close, babe.”

“You gonna come on my cock or do you want my hand?”

I shift slightly, getting on my knees so Deli can reach beneath me and reach my cock. He continues to fuck me as he strokes me. He knows exactly how to touch me to make me come.

“Fuck,” I cry out as my pleasure peaks. My cock spurts cum onto Deli’s hand and the sheets below. My orgasm seems to go on and on, leaving me breathless and dizzy with pleasure.

Finally, Deli lets me go and carefully pulls the strap from my ass. I fall onto my stomach, listening to him take the harness off, letting it fall to the floor to be dealt with later.

With great effort, I move onto my back. As Deli crawls back into the bed, I grab him by the waist, dragging him until he’s sitting on my face.

“Caleb, you don’t have to,” he starts to say but I cut him off with a slap to his perfect ass cheek.

“Shut the fuck up and sit on my face,” I tell him, my mouth already watering. “I told you I wouldn’t be satisfied until you were completely strung out and exhausted. Let me make you come one more time, pretty boy.”

Deli huffs with amusement but straddles my face. He reaches down, parting his folds before letting his cock fall onto my open and waiting mouth. I swirl my tongue around him before going lower, pointing it and shoving it into his wet hole.

“Fuck,” Deli says with a groan, keeping me right there. I flick my tongue against him, wanting to reach as deep as I possibly can. He tastes so fucking good. “That’s it. Just like that, Caleb. Fuck, your mouth always feels so good.”

Deli grabs his own cock, touching himself just the way he likes as I tongue fuck him until he’s squirming and whimpering. At this point, he’s gotta be oversensative, borderline on all of this being too much, but he keeps going, knowing I want one more orgasm from him.

I grab his ass cheeks, squeezing them between my big palms. He humps my face, pinching his own cock and eventually, I feel him come around my tongue. Before he can pull away, I lick him from crack to dick, wanting to clean him up and feel him twitch and throb just a little more against my tongue.

We both fall back into the bed, side by side, breathing heavily. Exhaustion pulls at me and from the soft sigh coming from my right, Deli is feeling the same way. This always happens, falling straight to sleep after fucking. I wish I could say it’s just because I’m getting older but I’ve always been like this.

I carefully grab the sheet beneath us, pulling it off the bed entirely and flicking it onto the floor. It’s covered in cum so I’d rather not keep it in the bed. Deli smiles at me before tucking himself against my side, resting his head on my chest. Affection and warmth flood me at being able to hold this man. I wrap my arms around him, running fingers up and down his spine while he plays with my chest hair.

“That was fun,” I tell him with a grin, kissing the top of his head.

“Hell yeah it was. We’ll have to do something like that again in the future. It was nice to get out and meet all those kids.”

“Maybe,” I say with a yawn. “You’ll just have to keep an eye on Reddit.”

“I can do,” Deli says right back, nuzzling against me. He’s already starting to fall asleep. We should probably get up and clean up before falling asleep, but a shower can wait until the morning. Just this once.

“By the way,” Deli says, his voice starting to slur from tiredness. “Jason says hi.”

I chuckle, squeezing Deli tight. “Yeah, I got that.”

“Can’t believe we wore each other’s shirts today,” he murmurs softly.

“I loved that we matched.”

“Yeah, me too,” he says softly. Then he adds, “I love you, Caleb. Good night.”

“Good night, Love,” I say before exhaustion pulls me under for the night, my husband cradled gently against my chest.

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About the Author

Toby Wise is a stay at home parent who hails from a tiny town in Wisconsin. Contrary to popular Wisconsin stereotypes, he's not a cheese-head who loves football but rather an introvert who spends all his time on the internet, drinking coffee, spending time with his kid, and cooing about his adorable cat, Pikachu.

In April of 2019, A Collection of Strays was born after the world of fanfiction drew him back into his love of writing. Now he's writing all things paranormal as long as it includes silly moments and found family.

Want more from Toby? Check out his Amazon where all his past books are listed!

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Thank You

Thank you so much for reading *Delicious: A Second Slice*, we really hope you enjoyed reading it as much as we did putting it together.

We'd like to say a huge thank you to all the authors involved with this project, and we're so grateful to them for crafting such beautiful stories.

All the profits from *Delicious* will be divided between two wonderful UK charities: Black Trans Alliance, and Galop. We're so excited to support these amazing organisations as they continue their vital work supporting the LGBTQIA+ community.

Thank you again for your support, it really does mean the world to us.

With Love From,
Charlie Novak & Ale Feijo
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